

Purpose for Elijah and Elisha in the Books of Kings

Richard S. Hess

Distinguished Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages

Denver Seminary

rick.hess@denverseminary.edu

Abstract

The study of 1 and 2 Kings often assumes that the division between the two books was an arbitrary one that was made about halfway between the beginning and end of the text of Kings. The investigation of this question reveals not only a rationale behind the division between the two 'books'; it also raises the larger question of the contrasting roles played by the kings who begin and end the text, and by the prophets whose central role in the books provides hope and life. By tracing major narrative arcs across the beginning and end of 1 and 2 Kings as well as across the appearances and departures of Elijah and Elisha, the themes of physical death and spiritual life set a dramatic tone in the pages of these accounts and provide hope in the midst of judgement.

1. Introduction

This paper will consider the role of 2 Kings and especially the roles of Elijah and Elisha as providing the conclusion, or, better, the greater and more lasting fulfilment, of what was begun in 1 Kings.¹ It is clear that the figures of Elijah and Elisha play key roles in the central chapters of the books of Kings, from 1 Kings 17 to 2 Kings 13. Their prominence and the centrality of much of their work are so key to this part of the text that it regularly interrupts the normal and expected sequence of the kings of Judah and of Israel.

The result has been a great deal of repositioning of the biblical text in order to fit everything in the manner that it supposedly should fit. Not only

1. Thanks to the editor and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. The work remains my responsibility as the author.

does this take place with modern scholarly research;² it has also occurred with both the Septuagint (as for example witnessed in Codex Vaticanus – LXX^B) and the Lucianic (LXX^L) recension.³ Indeed, ‘The textual history of the books of

2. The modern scholarly literature is enormous. Some of the longstanding cruxes include 1 Kgs 20, 22; 2 Kgs 8:7-15; 2 Kgs 1:2; 10:24,36; 11:10,15; 13:1-9,22,25. See, for example, the widely held view repositioning 1 Kgs 20 and 22 to the era of 2 Kgs 8:7-15, despite there being no textual evidence; so K. Lawson Younger, Jr, *A Political History of the Arameans: From Their Origins to the End of Their Politics*, ABS 13 (Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 582, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1g69w78>. Alternatively, cf. A. Jepsen, ‘Israel und Damaskus’, *AfO* 14 (1941–1944): 153–172; C. F. Whitley, ‘The Deuteronomic Presentation of the House of Omri’, *VT* 2 (1952): 137–152, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853352X00165>; J. Maxwell Miller, ‘The Elisha Cycle and the Accounts of the Omride Wars’, *JBL* 85 (1966): 441–454, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3264029>; Miller, ‘Another Look at the Chronology of the Early Divided Monarchy’, *JBL* 86 (1967): 276–288, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3263008>; Miller, ‘The Fall of the House of Ahab’, *VT* 17 (1967): 307–324, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853367X00042>; Miller, ‘The Rest of the Acts of Jehoahaz (1 Kings 20, 22:1-38)’, *ZAW* 80 (1968): 337–342, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zatw.1968.80.3.337>; S. Timm, *Die Dynastie Omri: Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Israels im 9. Jahrhundert vor Christus*, FRLANT 124 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 214; Wayne Pitard, *Ancient Damascus: A Historical Study of the Syrian City-State from Earliest Times until Its Fall to the Assyrians in 732 B.C.E.* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 114–125; Pitard, ‘Ben-Hadad’, *ABD* 1:663–665; Pitard, ‘Arameans’, in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred Hoerth, G. Mattingly, and Edwin Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 207–230; H. Weippert, ‘Ahab el campeador? Redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu 1 Kön 22’, *Bib* 69 (1988): 457–479; Baruch Halpern and D. S. Vanderhooft, ‘The Editions of Kings in the Seventh–Sixth Centuries B.C.E.’, *HUCA* 62 (1991): 230–235; Jeffrey K. Kuan, *Neo-Assyrian Historical Inscriptions and Syria-Palestine*, Jing Dao Dissertation Series 1 (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1995), 36–38; Shigeo Yamada, *The Construction of the Assyrian Empire: A Historical Study of the Inscriptions of Shalmaneser III (859-824 BC) Relating to His Campaigns to the West*, CHANE 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 311–315, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004496835>; Eduard Lipiński, *The Arameans: Their Ancient History, Culture, Religion*, OLA 100 (Leuven: Peeters, 2000); D. M. Stith, *The Coups of Hazael and Jehu: Building an Historical Narrative*, Gorgias Dissertations 37 (Piscataway: Gorgias, 2008), 62; Andrew Knapp, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East*, SBL Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series 4 (Atlanta: SBL, 2015), 277–283, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18z4h1f>; H. Ghantous, *The Elisha-Hazael Paradigm and the Kingdom of Israel: The Politics of God in Ancient Syria-Palestine* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 78–79, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315728919>; Gwilym H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, NCB, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984), 498–499.

3. For the early pre-Masoretic history see Philippe Hugo and Adrian Schenker, ‘Textual History of Kings’, in *Textual History of the Bible: The Hebrew Bible: Volume 1B Pentateuch, Former and Latter Prophets*, ed. Armin Lange and Emanuel Tov (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 310–318. For the Lucianic text, cf. Natalio Fernández Marcos and José Ramón Busto Saiz, *El Texto Antioqueno de la Biblia Griega. II. 1-2 Reyes*, *Textos y Estudios ‘Cardenal Cisneros’ de la Biblia Polígota Matritense* 53 (Madrid: Instituto de Filología del Consejo Superior

Kings (3–4 Kingdoms) is by far the most complicated one in the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint, only rivalled by that of the books of Samuel.⁴ While the assumptions that the Old Greek was based on a proto-Masoretic Text, as they have been traditionally understood, are probably not valid, the increasingly popular view that the MT and LXX versions are both significantly redacted has not been proven.⁵ In between is the view that the MT and LXX represent two recensions of the same proto-MT text where the LXX has more faithfully rendered it, at least in some places.⁶ This issue will not be resolved in this essay.

Given the need to take a position, study of the variants and arguments has convinced this writer that the MT provides a substantial connection to the earliest text preserved. Issues that may arise, such as dates and lengths of reigns for the kings, are often open to dispute, and, in any case, do not affect the texts and analyses presented here. Nor are the arguments for an earlier text consistently preserved in the Old Greek compelling. Therefore, this study will assume the MT as the foundational text, if only as a heuristic device.

The intent here is to trace the arcs of connection that tie together royal and prophetic accounts, as well as those of life and death, and to give contextual

de Investigaciones Científicas, 1992). For the relevant Old Latin material, particularly Old Latin manuscript 115 and marginal notes in early Vulgate manuscripts, cf. Timo Tapani Tekoniemi, *The Textual History of 2 Kings 17*, BZAW 536 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 2–29, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110720792>; and, more generally, Bonifatius Fischer, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Lateinischen Bibeltex-te*, AGLB 12 (Freiburg: Herder, 1986); Antonio Moreno Hernández, *Las Glosas Marginales de Vetus Latina en las Biblias Vulgatas Espanolas: 1-2 Reyes*, Textos y Estudios ‘Cardenal Cisneros’ de la Biblia Políglota Matritense 49 (Madrid: Instituto de Filología del Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1992); and the quotations by Lucifer of Cagliari as well as elements in the Armenian and Sahidic versions. Cf. Tuuka Kauhanen, Andrés Piquer Otero, Timo Tekoniemi, and Pablo A. Torijano, ‘Chapter 15: The Books of Kings’, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Septuagint*, ed. Alison G. Salvesen and Timothy Michael Law (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 238–239, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199665716.013.52>.

4. Kauhanen et al., ‘Chapter 15: The Books of Kings’, 225.

5. For the first view, cf. D. W. Gooding, ‘Problems of Text and Midrash in the Third Book of Reigns’, *Textus* 7 (1969): 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2589255X-00701002>; P. S. F. Van Keulen, *Two Versions of the Solomon Narrative: An Inquiry into the Relationship between MT 1Kgs. 2-11 and LXX 3 Reg. 2-11*, VTS 104 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047405511_002. For the second view, tending to privilege the Lucianic text over the Septuagint (e.g. as largely represented by Codex Vaticanus) and MT, cf. J. C. Treballe Barrera, *Textual and Literary Criticism of the Books of Kings: Collected Essays*, ed. A. Piquer Otero and P. Torijano, VTSup 185 (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Tekoniemi, *The Textual History*, Kauhanen et al., ‘Chapter 15: The Books of Kings’, 230–231.

6. Z. Talshir, *The Alternative Story of the Division of the Kingdom (3 Kingdoms 12:24a-z)*, Jerusalem Biblical Studies 6 (Jerusalem: Simor, 1993).

meaning to both the mundane and the extraordinary events in which the prophets are recorded as participating. For the purpose of this study, the term ‘arc’ describes a narrative or prophetic biography where aspects of its first appearance in the text correspond and illuminate special significance with its final occurrence. In between observations in the narrative may further the points being described.

Methodologically, the essay will begin by laying the groundwork with some suggestions as to the purpose for beginning the second scroll – that is, 2 Kings – at the particular place where it starts. This will comprise the longest part of the research because its presentation forms the foundation for the other arcs. Having proposed a motive for this break in the special significance of Elijah and then Elisha with respect to the kings, the focus will move to some of the most stunning and gruesome elements in these accounts, with exegetical and theological discussion as to how they might fit together. Themes of poetic justice and the manner in which the humble are exalted and the mighty are brought down enter the picture. Finally, a third arc will draw the narratives of the entire prophetic ministry into a single portrait with special consideration for the beginning and the end of their work as well as the manner in which it looks forward beyond the presentation seen here.

2. Why Does 2 Kings Begin Where it Does?

2.1 The Manuscript Evidence

The story begins, then, with the question of the division of Kings into two scrolls. The Septuagint, as represented by Codex Vaticanus, uses the beginning Hebrew clause of 2 Kings (1:1), **וַיִּפְשַׁע מוֹאָב בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אַחָאָב**, (*wayyipsha‘ mo‘ab beyisrael ‘akhare mot ‘akh‘ab*), ‘Moab rebelled against Israel after the death of Ahab,’ as a catchline attached to the end of 1 Kings. Codex Vaticanus has **καὶ ἠθέτησεν Μωαβ ἐν Ἰσραὴλ μετὰ τὸ ἀποθανεῖν Ἀχααβ** – ‘And Moab rebelled in Israel after Ahab died.’⁷

The division of 1 and 2 Kings (Septuagint 3 and 4 Kingdoms) is first attested in the Septuagint and only added to the Hebrew text with Daniel Bomberg’s 1516/1517 Rabbinic Bible.⁸ The absence of any division in the earlier MT might

7. The catchline is also found in some cursive manuscripts. For details see Alan E. Brooke, Norman McLean, and Henry St J. Thackeray, eds., *The Later Historical Books. I and II Kings*, vol. 2.2 of *The Old Testament in Greek According to the Text of Codex Vaticanus ...* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 298, apparatus.

8. Steven L. McKenzie, *1 Kings 16–2 Kings 16* (IECOT; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2019), 226 notes that this Septuagint catchline device also appears between 1 and 2 Samuel (1 and 2 Reigns), 1 and 2 Chronicles, and at the beginning of Ezra.

lead us to suspect that there is no rationale for it. However, the Septuagint was divided here despite the introductory regnal formula for Ahaziah appearing at the end of the first book, and the entire first chapter of the second book being devoted to an account about him. This seems odd and may reflect a particular purpose. Clearly, the two books of Kings belong together. However, they were divided early in the Septuagint tradition, presumably to fit more conveniently on two smaller scrolls. If so, then the division predates the fourth-century CE Codex Vaticanus, possibly by centuries. With this in mind, we may ask the question, is there a good reason for this division at this point?

Perhaps there is a reason in the LXX. The catchline, mentioned above, is the major difference between the MT and the LXX in the transition from 1 Kings to 2 Kings. The other variants are not significant in altering the sense of the narrative. For example, different readings in the first twelve verses include:

- v. 2: MT, 'Ahaziah fell through the lattice woodwork in his upper room in Samaria,' is in LXX^L (and Old Latin marginal notes and manuscript 115) 'Ahaziah climbed up the lattice woodwork of his upper chamber which was in Samaria and was injured when he fell through.'
- v. 4: At the end of the verse, LXX has the plus 'and he spoke to them'.
- v. 8: MT 'He is a man who is a lord of hair' is in LXX 'He is a hairy man.'
- v. 9: After 'The king sent to Elijah a commander and fifty troops,' LXX^L has the plus 'When they came to him'.
- v. 12: Where MT has 'fire of God', LXX has simply 'fire' (πῦρ).
- Of these, the most significant may be verse 8, where MT בַּעַל שֵׁעַר (*ba'al se'ar*) is different from LXX ἀνήρ δασύς.

Leithart notes that the name of Ekron's god who Ahaziah seeks, בַּעַל זְבוּב (*ba'al zebub*) 'lord of the flies', is similar in sound. The god that Ahaziah wants to find is the 'lord of the flies'. However, the royal search comes upon the 'lord of hair'.⁹ McKenzie finds in this wordplay an argument against the originality of the MT and in favour of the LXX, where the wordplay was not yet added.¹⁰ This is not convincing because the wordplay could as easily have been attributed to the original Hebrew author. There is no apparent difference between the MT and the LXX that would provide a basis for the division at this point, at least not one that is unique to the LXX.

9. Peter Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 168.

10. McKenzie, *1 Kings* 1, 127.

2.2 The Hebrew of 2 Kings 1 and Its Context Within the Books of Kings

Turning to the Hebrew of the MT, we may consider the first verse, which serves as the LXX^b catchline. Looking at the initial verse, one may note the alliteration that occurs in Hebrew. The initial preterite verb, וַיִּפְשַׁע (wayyipsha'), resembles the *yod* and sibilant (they differ slightly) in בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל (beyisra'el). Even closer is the second word, מוֹאָב (mo'ab), whose counterpart, מוֹת (mot), also relates by sound. If rebellion connects to Israel and Moab relates to death, the third alliterative word pair, אַחְרָי (akhare) and אַחְזָב (akh'ab), together express the postmortem era of Ahab's influence. That period begins here as the rebellious Israelite king casts his shadow of death upon what lies ahead. This theme contrasts the prophets with the family of Ahab. More importantly, the remarkable alliteration signals something new.

This opening section does more than complete the narrative of 1 Kings. In whatever way the need may have arisen for two scrolls to contain the books of Kings,¹¹ we discern an intention in beginning the second scroll with this text. It introduces the book, similarly to 1 Kings 1, with the approaching death of a king. In the first scroll, David remains alive long enough, perhaps due to the warmth of Abishag (although this is not explicit), to appoint his successor Solomon and to guarantee the succession.

Ahaziah (853–852 BCE)¹² of Israel is brought to an untimely death through an accident where his life hangs in the balance. In line with the note that he worshipped Baal (1 Kgs 22:53¹³), Ahaziah consults Baal Zebub of Ekron.¹⁴ It is this decision that guarantees his death as pronounced by the prophet Elijah. If David's decline and death in 1 Kings 1–2 foreshadow the same experience for the lives of kings in Israel and Judah, Ahaziah's worship of Baal and his death continue that theme. It also contrasts the weakness of the kings of Israel,

11. Most see the division between 1 and 2 Kings as arbitrary and without literary or thematic significance. This is possible, but, as will be noted here, the division serves to emphasise the fall of kings and the rise of prophets.

12. Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 216.

13. HB/LXX: v. 54.

14. Scholars are probably correct in identifying Baal Zebub ('lord of the flies') as a wordplay mocking the traditional title of the chief god of the thunderstorm as Baal Zebul or Ugaritic *zbl b'l* 'prince Baal', who is well attested in the mythological texts from thirteenth-century BCE Ugarit. W. Hermann, 'Baal Zebub', in *DDD*², 155–157; Volkmar Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 230, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1hqdhz2>; McKenzie, *1 Kings* 16, 234. See, however, Michael Pietsch, 'Beelzebul oder Beelzebub? Text-, religions- und literaturgeschichtliche Überlegungen zu 2 Kön 1,2–18', *UF* 49 (2018): 299–318.

despite all their armies, with the strength of the prophets of God, who often stand alone against the military and political power of the rulers.¹⁵

Verse 1 has a near duplicate in 2 Kings 3:5. It forms a resumptive repetition of 1:1 and, with 3:4, begins the account of the failed assault on Moab. In between lie two chapters that contrast the apostasy of Israel's king that leads to his death with the power of the prophet to pronounce death over kings (ch. 1)¹⁶ and over mockers from northern priestly towns such as Bethel (2:23-25). However, the concerns at the centre of this section address prophetic power over death so that the prophet Elijah does not die (2:1-18) and the prophet Elisha gives life by purifying the death-producing waters of Jericho (2:19-22).

Among the kings of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Ahaziah is the first name with a Yahwistic element. Such a name might have caused some Israelites faithful to Yahweh to anticipate the true God's blessing. If so, they were disappointed. That Ahaziah fell through the lattice in the upper storey of his palace has implications. On the assumption that this was an accident (and not an assassination attempt, which the author of 2 Kings would normally identify as such), we might note that this building construction of a second floor occurs in several places. The average Israelite house of this period had an upper floor which served as the private quarters for the family; a place for sleeping.¹⁷ The upper floor of the palace was connected with private rooms for the queen and female members of the royal family.¹⁸ There are various examples of this in the

15. The life of the prophets is not that of invulnerable superheroes (Daniel J. D. Stulac, *Life, Land, and Elijah in the Book of Kings*, SOTSMS (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 147, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108920018>). Rather, they stand alone, but are strengthened by divine power. Cf., for example, 2 Kgs 6:8-23.

16. The statement that the king died in v. 17 occurs after two forms of מוֹת in v. 16 and forms the third appearance of the root as וַיָּמָוֶת (wayyamot). There are three accounts of the message of death. The threefold occurrence of the verb 'to die' emphasises the judgement and registers its fulfilment. This threefold repetition is used in West Semitic poetry and rhetoric for emphasis and here emphatically connects the Israelite king with the theme of death. Richard S. Hess, 'Hebrew Psalms and Amarna Correspondence from Jerusalem: Some Comparisons and Implications', *ZAW* 101 (1989): 249-265, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zatw.1989.101.2.249>. On repetition in ch. 1, see Herbert Chanan Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 152-158. For repetition and parallelism in lists, letters, and the contribution of education, cf. William M. Schniedewind, *The Finger of the Scribe: How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 49-119, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190052461.001.0001>.

17. Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, LAI (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 28-36.

18. So Jezebel in 2 Kgs 9:30. For a description of the late tenth-/early ninth-century BCE King Katuwas of Carchemish who constructs upper floors in the palace

Hittite and West Semitic world.¹⁹ It is likely that Ahaziah fell from the private rooms in the palace. It is not clear what injuries these caused, but they must have been life threatening. The king sends messengers and armies; the injuries probably prevented him from travelling.

2.3 Elijah and Elisha Bring Life and Death

Elijah manifests the divine power through his word. He calls down lethal fire from heaven upon two groups that come to arrest him. When the third leader of his company begs Elijah to spare him, the prophet relents only to visit the king and announce Ahaziah's death. In 1 Kings 1 and 2 the first king of the Davidic dynasty also dies.

In contrast to royal death, in 2 Kings 2 the emphasis is on a double 'spirit'. The role of the spirit transfer between the prophets Elijah and Elisha contrasts with the passing of kingship, which is hereditary. Rather than the royal transfer of David, where the first king passes the kingdom to his son Solomon, in the case of Elisha, a non-dynastic prophetic succession is a matter of the spirit. As 1 Kings begins with the question of royal succession through hereditary means, 2 Kings begins with the question of prophetic succession through the spirit. Jericho's company of prophets witness Elijah's ascension. The prophetic ministry is life giving. While the fire of death in chapter 1 becomes a fire to draw the prophet to God in chapter 2, the warmth that David tries to find in Abishag dissipates from him in 1 Kings 1:1–2:10 and he passes from this world along 'the way of all the earth' (Josh 23:14). A king dies at the beginning of both 1 and 2 Kings. The prophet lives and does not die.²⁰

Again, the themes of death and life provide contrast between the opening chapters of 1 and 2 Kings. Not only does King David pass away in 1 Kings 2:10, but Solomon secures his throne through causing the deaths of Adonijah (2:12–25), of Joab (2:26–35), and of Shimei (2:36–46). In 1 Kings the succession following David begins in blood and death. The opposite is true for 2 Kings and the prophets. Not only does Elijah escape death completely, but Elisha

for his wife, cf. John David Hawkins, *Inscriptions of the Iron Age. Part 1: Text. Introduction, Karatepe, Karkamiş, Tell Ahmar, Maraş, Malatya, Commagene*, Corpus of Hieroglyphic Luwian Inscriptions vol. 1; Studies in Indo-European Language and Culture 8/1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 95–96 §§18–19, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110804201>.

19. Richard S. Hess, 'Katuwas and the Masoretic Text of Kings: Cultural Connections between Carchemish and Israel', in *New Inscriptions and Seals Relating to the Biblical World*, ed. M. Lubetski and E. Lubetski, ABS 19 (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 171–182, especially 177–178, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt32b2p2.18>.

20. For similar contrasts, other than the one suggested here, cf. Burke O. Long, *2 Kings*, FOTL 10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 15.

goes on to provide, as his first miracle to benefit others, the giving of life by restoring the waters of Jericho (2 Kgs 2:19-22). While Leithart is correct that this contrasts with Joshua's destruction of Jericho (Josh 6), it serves in the context of 1 and 2 Kings to contribute to the theme of prophets as life givers. Their work contrasts with the kings of Israel who bring death, as seen with David and Solomon (1 Kings 2), and with Ahaziah, who seeks to kill Elijah and himself dies in the end.²¹

We could go on with other illustrations. For example, there is Abishag the Shunammite who provides the already mentioned 'warmth', using the Hebrew root **חַמַּם** in 1 Kings 1:1-5, which in the end does not preserve David's life.²² Contrast this with Elisha, who is also given provision by another Shunammite woman. When her son dies, Elisha brings him back from death, described in 2 Kings 4:32-36 using the only other occurrence of this root for 'warmth', **חַמַּם**, in the books of Kings. This life-related miracle summarises the contrasts between the emphasis on the kings at the beginning of 1 Kings and the emphasis on the prophets at the beginning of 2 Kings. The story of David's inability to keep warm, which opens the books of Kings, represented the overall decline and final death of the monarchy that culminated with the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and the line of David taken into captivity. In contrast, the warmth of this boy, brought about by God's working through the prophet, represented the rise of prophetic faith and the work of the prophets as the means of salvation and life for Israel and Judah.²³

3. The Prophets Reverse Political Expectations

Two arcs remain. Although briefer in content, they reinforce the picture of the initial connection and contrast between the kings and the prophets.

A second arc brings us to consider the conflict between the family of Ahab, especially Jezebel, and both Elijah and then Elisha.²⁴ We may recall the great victory of the prophet Elijah against the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18). When

21. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 175.

22. Richard S. Hess, 'David and Abishag: The Purpose of 1 Kings 1:1-4', in *Homeland and Exile: Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Bustenay Oded*, ed. G. Galil, M. Geller, and A. Millard, VTS 130 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 427-437, <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004178892.i-648.115>.

23. Hess, 'David and Abishag'.

24. For a more complete discussion of the political and textual role of Ahab's dynasty, see Kyle R. Greenwood and David B. Schreiner, *Ahab's House of Horrors: A Historiographic Study of the Military Campaigns of the House of Omri*, Lexham Geographic Commentary Series (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2023).

Queen Jezebel learns of this, she sends a message to Elijah (1 Kgs 19:2) that he will certainly die by her powerful hand. Elijah escapes and is encouraged by God at Mount Horeb (1 Kgs 19). Yahweh proceeds to reverse the roles. Despite the apparent powerlessness of the prophet, Elijah ends his earthly life by ascending to heaven with a chariot of fire (2 Kgs 2:11-12). Far from dying, he becomes virtually the only person ever to ascend to heaven without death.²⁵ Yet, during all the time covered in the narratives from 2 Kings 2 through to and including chapter 9, there is no indication of conviction or remorse from Jezebel. In the final scenes of her life in 2 Kings 9:30-37, Jezebel confirms that she will oppose Jehu or any representative of Yahweh. The murder she planned for Elijah comes down upon her own head. In a divinely orchestrated turn of events, the most zealous Yahwist, Jehu, oversees her brutal death. As Elijah ascended into heavenly bliss, Jezebel descends from her window into a violent death upon the dirt (2 Kgs 9:33). Dogs, despised animals, consume her body and deposit her remains unburied as dung in the open fields. The themes of exaltation and humiliation, of life and death, are thoroughly reversed in a dramatic manner. The prophet is seen as stronger than the strongest of kings and queens in the most powerful Northern Kingdom of Israel. He achieves life over death in a spectacular ascent to heaven. However, the doomed house of Ahab, represented here by the queen, has not enough power to preserve its leader alive, let alone others, nor enough respect to provide a decent burial for her.

The kings and queens who appear in these texts are those who have the closest connections with the major prophetic figures of Elijah and Elisha. While some kings of Judah appear in prophetic narratives, notably Jehoshaphat, the rulers of the Northern Kingdom of Israel – especially those of the house of Omri and Ahab – dominate these stories. Their direct opposition to the work of the prophets leads naturally to their selection in the contrasts of this arc. Nevertheless, the prophetic contrast with David and Solomon of the opening chapters of 1 Kings anticipates the manner in which kingship as a whole remains subject to critique.

25. For observations on Elijah's connection with life and the contrast of Ahab's choice of Jezebel (instead of choosing Elijah) and of death, see Lissa M. Wray Beal, 'Dancing with Death, Dancing with Life: Ahab between Jezebel and Elijah', in *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Kings*, ed. Keith Bodner and Benjamin J. M. Johnson, LHBOTS 670 (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 103–120, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567680921.ch-007>.

4. The Prophets Give Life

A third arc brings us to the account of Elisha after his death and the effect of his bones on bringing back to life a corpse in 2 Kings 13:20-21. Elisha's death does not signal the end of his impact. He continues to bless the people of Israel, even in death and seemingly by accident. The blessing is the miracle of life beyond hope, of life after what appears to be death, and of life in the midst of mortal danger.

Elijah's first interaction with a mother and child results in the prophet's first miracle of giving life. In 1 Kings 17 the child dies and the mother appeals to Elijah, who proceeds to bring her son back to life. Actually, this is not quite accurate. In fact, Elijah cries to Yahweh and it is Yahweh who returns life to the boy. In 2 Kings 4:34-35, a similar account with Elisha also leads to a boy's revival to life, this time with no intercession to God. The divine power works directly as a result of Elisha's actions toward the boy, an example of the 'double portion' of Elijah's spirit that enables him to work more powerfully than his mentor. Nevertheless, the revival to life that Elijah exhibits at the beginning of his ministry provides an *inclusio* at the end of the life of the second prophet, Elisha.

These prophetic accounts have sometimes led to the identification of these prophets as shamans, characterised by deeds, rather than as prophets, often characterised by words. Resuscitation and the bringing back from the dead can characterise the role of the shaman. As noted by Faith Parker and others, these resuscitations are normally accomplished with children, who are more 'receptive'. Such may be the case of the young boys restored to life by both Elijah and Elisha.²⁶ What is not characteristic of shamanism is the return of life to an adult corpse. It is this act – accomplished through the touch of Elisha's bones – that challenges the characterisation of the prophets as shamans.

From his first recorded miraculous work toward others, that of purifying Jericho's waters (2 Kgs 2:19-21), until this act, Elisha repeatedly gives life in place of death. Here Elisha's body, more specifically his bones, take on the

26. Julie Faith Parker, 'The Force of YHWH Awakens: Social Scientific Methodologies and Children who Rise from the Dead', in *Children and Methods: Listening to and Learning from Children in the Biblical World*, ed. Kristine Hendrickson Garraway and John W. Martens, Brill's Series in Jewish Studies 67 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019), 143-163, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004423404_009; Michael Pietsch, 'Der Prophet als Magier: Magie und Ritual in den Elischaerzählungen', in *Zauber und Magie im antiken Palästina und in seiner Umwelt: Kolloquium des Deutschen Vereins zur Erforschung Palästinas von 14. bis 16. November 2014 in Mainz*, ed. Jens Kamlah, Rolf Schäfer, and Makus Witte, ADPV 46 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017), 343-380.

role of giving life. Those carrying the body of another man for the purpose of burial are interrupted by Moabite raiders. They ‘toss’ the body into the tomb of Elisha, where the corpse touches the bones of Elisha and returns to life. A key point to understanding the significance of this event is the use of the verb ‘toss’. In 2 Kings 17:20 and 24:20 the same verb (*hiphil* stem of Hebrew root **שׁלַח**) describes Yahweh tossing or thrusting the Israelites and Judeans into exile. There is a sense in which all God’s people are represented by this one dead man. The grave his body enters is like the exile. However, he is revived and restored by the lifegiving word of God in the form of the prophet.²⁷ In the same manner, through God’s prophetic word, there is hope for the deportees to return from exile to Jerusalem and Yehud and to worship again the lifegiving God. They will also return to life as a nation.

The narrative contrast of this third arc explicitly introduces the people of Israel, especially of the Northern Kingdom, as a third group who contrast with the royalty and with the prophets. Unlike the kings and queens who accomplish their goals with political power, the people of Israel have no resources to draw upon. They find hope with the prophets who demonstrate the true source of life and its flourishing in the call and response to Yahweh and his spirit.

5. Conclusion

Thus we see three arcs or representative beginnings and conclusions regarding Elijah and Elisha. The first highlights a book about kings who die and who will ultimately bring upon both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms the political death of complete defeat and exile. It contrasts this with Elijah and especially Elisha, whose stories begin the second book of Kings as Elijah spares the life of a commander and his company. Elisha gives life to the town of Jericho after the prophet Elijah receives life without death by ascending into heaven.

The second arc denies the vow of Jezebel despite her role as the most powerful of political figures. She vows death on Elijah, but God reverses this.

27. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 234; Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, SHBC (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 432–433; Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, NIBC OT Series (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 230–231. This is not to recommend reducing the episode to a fictional parable devoid of historical reality, as Richard Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1987), 218. Roy L. Heller, *The Characters of Elijah and Elisha and the Deuteronomic Evaluation of Prophecy: Miracles and Manipulation*, LHBOTS 671 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 205–206 regards the absence of an explicit connection with the exile and return as proof that this ‘strange and unsatisfying’ miracle ‘has no effect, and no consequence upon anyone in the book of Kings’. Given the linguistic connections as well as the presentation of events suggested here, this does not seem the most likely scenario.

Not only does Elijah escape death, unique among the prophets and virtually all peoples; he goes upwards to heaven in a chariot of fire. In contrast, the powerful Jezebel faces the ignominious death of being cast down to the ground and put to death by the force of the fall and the trampling of the horses. Her body is treated shamefully. All that she wanted for Elijah, she receives. And all that she hoped for herself, Elijah receives from Yahweh.

The third arc focuses on the key theme the others have already begun to highlight, that of life. Like Elijah and Elisha, who performed as their first miracle for others that of healing, and like both who brought dead children back to life, Elisha in death preserves the divine life so powerfully that even his bones bring a dead man back to life. Is this why Elisha was permitted to die rather than ascend to heaven like his mentor? Was it so that in a tangible manner and miracle, he could teach the Israelites of his day that the prophetic ministry and the divine lifegiving word lives on? Thus, the books of Kings argue that the kings are unable to bring life and security to their kingdoms. They ultimately bring death in the form of defeat, destruction, and deportation. However, the powerful lifegiving spirit manifest in Elijah and even more fully in Elisha looks forward to a restoration of that exiled community and even beyond that to the manner in which Yahweh will resurrect the dead to life.

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