2013

The Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories: a ring composition

https://hdl.handle.net/2144/14089
Boston University
BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

THE ELIJAH-ELISHA CYCLE OF STORIES: A RING COMPOSITION

by

MICHICLL L. BELLAMY
B.A., University of Hartford, 2002
M.A.R., Yale University, 2004

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2013
First Reader

______________________________
Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, Ph.D.
Professor of Hebrew Bible

Second Reader

______________________________
Jonathan Klawans, Ph.D.
Professor of Religion
to Dennis

אני לדודי ודודי לי
~ Song of Songs 6:3
Acknowledgments

It is with much gratitude that I acknowledge the many people who provided me with guidance and support throughout the course of my education. This journey began at the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Hartford. There, Dr. Richard Freund, director of the center and Greenberg Professor of Jewish History, first encourage me to pursue advanced studies. Throughout my years as an undergraduate and beyond, Dr. Freund has been a gracious mentor.

During my time at Yale my advisor, Dr. Carolyn Sharp, further nurtured my growing passion to explore the mysteries of the Hebrew Bible. It was a joy to study Hebrew with Dr. Victoria Hoffer; and Dr. Christine Hayes deserves special mention for the many hours she dedicated to tutoring me in Aramaic. Appreciation is also due to Dr. John J. Collins, with whom I first explored the Books of Kings; and Dr. Robert Wilson, whose work on the biblical prophets is so foundational.

At Boston University I have been privileged to study with the distinguished faculty of the Division of Religious and Theological Studies. Among these fine scholars, I am particularly indebted to my dissertation advisor, Dr. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, whose painstaking reading and insightful suggestions improved this work beyond measure. Dr. Darr is a consummate scholar and a passionate teacher, and I am exceedingly grateful for her guidance and support throughout this long process. My second reader, Dr. Jonathan Klawans, was thoroughly engaged in this project. He read numerous drafts carefully and critically, and always responded in a timely manner with substantive feedback. His dedication to his students, coupled with the intellectual rigor of his scholarship is a model
that I seek to emulate. I was most fortunate to have Dr. Steven T. Katz as my academic advisor, and chair of my dissertation defense. His consistent kindness and good humor will not be forgotten. I would also like to thank Dr. Alejandro Botta, and Dr. Abigail Gillman. Both generously made time in the midst of a busy semester to participate in my defense. Their thoughtful engagement with my work is much appreciated. The death of Dr. Simon B. Parker in 2006 was a devastating blow to all who knew him. His influence on my thinking is incalculable, and I am proud to call myself his student.

At the start of my graduate studies, Temple Beth Hillel in South Windsor, CT, made a generous financial contribution, for which I am truly appreciative. I am extremely grateful to the Elie Wiesel Center for Judaic Studies, for generously funding the majority of my graduate work at Boston University. I also received scholarship money from the Division of Religious and Theological Studies, for which I am thankful. The final stage of my dissertation was funded by the Ezratti Family Fellowship. This generous gift allowed me to focus my attention on writing; I extend my heartfelt thanks to Mr. Ezratti.

The love and support of many people sustained me through this process. I thank my parents, Edward and Carol-Ann Breton, as well as my siblings: Becky, Eddie, Terri, and Kit, and their families. I thank my friends at Temple Beth Hillel, especially my dear friend Mr. Herbert Shook, who years ago first taught me Alef-Bet.

My husband and our three children are the joy of my life. This journey has seen Dennis Jr., Alexander, and Kaitlin grow into kind and thoughtful young adults of whom I could not be more proud. My husband, Dennis, is my steadfast partner. His unwavering
commitment to my dream is breathtaking. With endless love and gratitude, I dedicate this work to him.
THE ELIJAH-ELISHA CYCLE OF STORIES: A RING COMPOSITION

(Order No.         )

MICHELLE L. BELLAMY

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2013

Major Professor: Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, Professor of Hebrew Bible

ABSTRACT

Ring composition is a literary form found throughout the ancient world. In it, a series of elements advances, one after the other, until it reaches a center point, whereupon the sequence is reversed and returns to its beginning in inverted order. Hence, the first element is paired with the last, the second with the second to the last, and so on, with the second half of the ring a mirror image of the first half. Although ring compositions occur throughout the ancient world, the practice of writing in rings fell out of literary fashion and faded from collective memory. Later readers, unfamiliar with its conventions, found ring compositions difficult to recognize, leading to misinterpretations of numerous ancient texts.

Such confusion is evident with the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories in 1 Kgs 16:23—2 Kgs 13:25. Biblical scholars have routinely maligned these stories as a nonsensical jumble of prophetic tales. This dissertation demonstrates that the stories are not disorganized. Rather, they have been redacted in the formal structure of a ring composition with six rungs. The dissertation follows the lead of the late Mary Douglas, who brought new insights to bear on the problems inherent in identifying and interpreting ancient ring compositions—most critically, in helping to establish what constitutes a
parallel correspondence. When we recognize the chiastic structure of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories, we discover a carefully crafted work of propaganda that promotes the religious, political, and social reforms of King Josiah of Judah (7th century BCE). These tales had their origins in the traditions of northern Israel, but they were later appropriated and recontextualized by a Judean redactor. Retold, transformed, and arranged in the form of a ring composition, the stories of Elijah and Elisha were employed to build northern support for a neo-Davidic kingdom ruled from Jerusalem. Championing the rallying cry of holy war, Josiah and his party sought to reunite the divided kingdom by capitalizing on the misfortunes of the Assyrian Empire. Under the leadership of Josiah, the chariots and horses of fire—the heavenly army of YHWH—would once again battle for Israel.
# Table of Contents

Dedication......................................................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgments.................................................................................................................................................. v
List of Tables........................................................................................................................................................ x
List of Abbreviations.......................................................................................................................................... xi

Chapter 1: Scope and Purpose of the Study............................................................................................................ 1
  Introduction............................................................................................................................................................... 1
  The Elijah-Elisha Cycle within the Deuteronomistic History............................................................. 9
  History of Scholarship on Ancient Rings....................................................................................................... 15
  Towards a more Empirical Approach to Ring Composition............................................................. 56
  The Elijah-Elisha Cycle of Stories as a Ring Composition........................................................................... 58

Chapter 2: Interpretation: The Prologue and the Mid-turn...................................................................................... 64
  Introduction............................................................................................................................................................... 64
  The Prologue: APOSTASY (1 Kings 16:23–34)............................................................................................ 65
  The Mid-Turn: RENT IN TWO (2 Kings 1–2).............................................................................................. 72
  Summary and Conclusions................................................................................................................................. 93

Chapter 3: The Six Intervening Rungs...................................................................................................................... 95
  Introduction............................................................................................................................................................... 95
  The First Rung: (UN)HOLY WAR...................................................................................................................... 96
  (1 Kings 22:1–51 // 2 Kings 3:1–27)
List of Tables

Table 1 ......................................................... 46
Parallel Rungs of the Book of Numbers

Table 2 ......................................................... 58
Parallel Rungs of the Elijah-Elisha Ring Composition

Table 3 ......................................................... 59
Key Words and Parallels of the Elijah-Elisha Ring Composition

Table 4 ......................................................... 66
Key Words and Parallels of the Prologue and the Mid-turn

Table 5 ......................................................... 73
Geographical Chiasmus of Elijah and Elisha’s Journey

Table 6 ......................................................... 98
The First Rung: (Un)Holy War

Table 7 ......................................................... 105
The Second Rung: Social Justice

Table 8 ......................................................... 112
The Third Rung: Holy War

Table 9 ......................................................... 117
The Fourth Rung: The Three Swords of YHWH

Table 10 ......................................................... 122
The Fifth Rung: Anti-Ba’alism

Table 11 ......................................................... 128
The Sixth Rung: Resurrection and Restoration

Table 12 ......................................................... 155
The Four Battle Narratives

Table 13 ......................................................... 187
The Fourteen Sections of the Elijah-Elisha Ring Composition
List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Anchor Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABD</td>
<td>Anchor Bible Dictionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABR</td>
<td>Australian Biblical Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFO</td>
<td>Archiv für Orientforschung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJSL</td>
<td>American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJSR</td>
<td>Association for Jewish Studies Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ArBib</td>
<td>The Aramaic Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT</td>
<td>Anthropology Today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AThR</td>
<td>Anglican Theological Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJS</td>
<td>Brown Judaic Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSOAS</td>
<td>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSac</td>
<td>Bibliotheca sacra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BYUS</td>
<td>Brigham Young University Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBQ</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ConBOT</td>
<td>Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CW</td>
<td>Classical World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dtr</td>
<td>The individual or group responsible for the Josianic edition of the Deuteronomistic History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DtrH</td>
<td>The Deuteronomistic History—the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EncJud</td>
<td>Encyclopedia Judaica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS</td>
<td>Hebrew Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSCP</td>
<td>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSM</td>
<td>Harvard Semitic Monographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTR</td>
<td><em>Harvard Theological Review</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEJ</td>
<td><em>Israel Exploration Journal</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td><em>Journal of Biblical Literature</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBR</td>
<td><em>Journal of Bible and Religion</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCS</td>
<td><em>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JHS</td>
<td><em>Journal of Hellenic Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JJS</td>
<td><em>Journal of Jewish Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JNES</td>
<td><em>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JR</td>
<td><em>Journal of Religion</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JRitSt</td>
<td><em>Journal of Ritual Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSOT</td>
<td><em>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSOTSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSPSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha: Supplement Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSQ</td>
<td><em>Jewish Studies Quarterly</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LB</td>
<td><em>Linguistica Biblica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTL</td>
<td>Old Testament Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTS</td>
<td>Old Testament Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBLDS</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOTSMS</td>
<td>Society for Old Testament Studies Monograph Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UF</td>
<td><em>Ugarit-Forschungen</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

xiv
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VT</th>
<th>Vetus Testamentum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WBC</td>
<td>Word Biblical Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZA</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZABR</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZAW</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für die altestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1 – Scope and Purpose of the Study

Introduction

The Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories in 1 Kings 16:23–2 Kings 13:25 has consistently been misunderstood because its arrangement in the form of a ring composition is unfamiliar to most modern readers. Ring composition is a literary form found throughout the ancient world in which a series of elements is advanced one after the other until reaching a center point, whereupon the sequence is reversed and returns to its beginning in inverted order. Thus the first element is paired with the last, the second with the second to the last, etc., with the second half of the ring a mirror image of the first half. Despite the once pervasive use of ring composition, it eventually fell out of fashion. As time passed, later readers, oblivious to the form’s conventions, came to regard texts composed in this manner as poorly organized and even incomprehensible.

We see just this confusion with the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories in 1 Kings 16:23–2 Kings 13:25, which biblical scholars have routinely maligned as a nonsensical jumble of prophetic stories. Alfred Jepsen,¹ C.F. Whitley,² and J. Maxwell Miller³ challenge the present order of these stories and propose a variety of explanations for the cycle’s supposed confusion. Mordechai Cogan notes that the redactor of this block of stories made little effort to erase the telltale signs of his individual sources, leaving the

narrative uneven to the point of blatant contradiction. Criticism of the Elisha stories has been particularly harsh. Yehuda Radday asserts that these stories lack inner unity and are wrongly placed. He argues that: “Its message—religious, national, or social—is practically nil and why it was included in the book is a problem that still has to be solved.”5 Gwilym H. Jones also remarks on the lack of unity of these stories,6 and Wesley J. Bergen notes a lack of coherence.7

This dissertation corrects such misreadings of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories by demonstrating its arrangement as a comprehensive ring composition. Towards this end we take an important cue from the late Mary Douglas, whose final work, Thinking in Circles,8 brought new insights to the problems inherent in indentifying and interpreting ancient ring compositions. The smallest form of ring structure is widely recognized to be in evidence in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in the form of chiastic sentences and paragraphs. The term chiasmus, which originated in nineteenth-century New Testament studies,9 takes its name from the Greek letter χ, whose crisscross shape aptly illustrates an inversion of elements in two otherwise parallel constructions.

---

5 Yehuda Radday, “Chiasm in Kings,” LB 31 (1974): 52-67. In this paper Radday attempts to identify an overarching chiastic structure in the books of 1—2 Kings. However, his analysis, which lacks precise criteria, is ultimately unconvincing.
Numbers 14:2 provides a very basic example of chiastic patterning within a single verse:

“If only we had died in the land of Egypt; or in this wilderness if only we had died.”

If only we had died in the land of Egypt;

Or in this wilderness if only we had died.

This simple construction is an example of an AB B′A′ chiasm.

A If only we had died
B in the land of Egypt;
B′ or in this wilderness
A′ if only we had died.

The parallelism in the lines is obvious: “if only we had died” is repeated verbatim, while “the land of Egypt” is synonymous with “this wilderness.” The chiastic arrangement of the verse emphasizes this analogy through the juxtaposition of “the land of Egypt” with “this wilderness.” Psalm 37:16-17 is similarly patterned:

A Better is a little that the righteous man has,
B Than the riches of many wicked.
B′ For the arms of the wicked shall be broken,
A′ But YHWH upholds the righteous.

Using the same AB B′A′ construction, this passage achieves the opposite effect—by beginning and ending with the righteous, it underscores their distinction from the wicked.

10 Jacob Milgrom, Numbers: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), xxii.
A variation of this pattern, AB C B’A’, likewise appears throughout the Hebrew Bible. In this construction, the inverted parallels of the chiasm are separated by a single, central element, as we see in Jer 2:27c-28:

A And in the hour of their calamity they say  
B “Arise and save us!”  
C But where are the gods you made for yourselves?  
B’ Let them arise if they can save you  
A’ In the hour of your calamity.12

This fifth element, located at the center, or mid-turn, identifies this chiastic structure more properly as a “ring.”

\[ \begin{array}{cccc}
A & A' & B & B' \\
\downarrow & & \downarrow & \\
& C & & \\
\end{array} \]

The repetition of the key words—“in the hour” and “calamity”—link the outer members of the ring, while “arise” and “save” stand on either side of the mid-turn, drawing attention to the sardonic question at the ring’s center. The same AB C B’A’ pattern structures the four verses that comprise David’s boast to Saul in 1 Sam 17:34-37:

A Then David said to Saul, “Your servant used to be a shepherd for his father’s flock, and if a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I would go after it and strike it and rescue it from its mouth. And if it attacked me I would seize it by the beard and strike it down and kill it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear: and that uncircumcised Philistine shall end up like one of them,

B for he has defied the ranks of the living God.”
C And David continued,
B’ “YHWH, who rescued me from the grasp of the lion and the grasp of the bear, he himself
A’ will rescue me from the grasp of that Philistine.”

Here, the chiastic structure of the passage directs our attention to David, located at the center of the ring, and underscores the fact that he is surrounded by enemies (the lion, the bear, and the Philistine). Situated between David and these enemies, the ring construction conveys that David is protectively encircled by “the living God…YHWH,” whom he confidently expects will rescue him from the Philistine Goliath, much as he once delivered David from the lions and bears of the field. Isaiah 60:1-3 demonstrates the same essential pattern, though extended to include six elements chiastically arranged around a central line:

A Arise,
B shine,
C for your light is come,
D and the glory
E of YHWH
F upon you is risen.
G For behold! Darkness shall cover the earth, and thick clouds the peoples,
F’ but upon you will arise
E’ YHWH,
D’ and his glory shall be seen upon you,
C’ and nations shall come to your light,
B’ and kings to the brightness
A’ of your rising.15

The vocabulary of first and second terms is not identical. A employs the Hebrew root קום to form the imperative “arise,” while A’ is a noun based on a different root ( المصرية), which implies the rising of the sun. In B, “shine” is an imperative from the root ראות, while B’ is a noun from a different root (נוגה), which refers to the brightness of daylight.

Nevertheless, the parallelism is unmistakable. Words emphasizing light and ascension dramatically frame the central member, which describes the present darkness covering the earth that will soon be overcome.

These short passages both demonstrate how the biblical writers used the structuring device of chiastic patterning and illustrate its compelling rhetorical implications. The extensive use of chiastic forms in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament can be inferred by the numerous studies devoted to their identification and analysis. Although now dated, the index of studies compiled by Robert F. Smith provides some indication of where chiasms most often appear. Within the Pentateuch, Smith lists 203 chiastic patterns for the book of Genesis, 144 in Exodus, 22 in Leviticus, 14 in Numbers, and 70 in Deuteronomy. In the Former Prophets, 14 chiastic patterns have been identified in the book of Joshua, 68 in Judges, 34 in Samuel, and 11 in Kings. In the Latter Prophets, 275 chiastic patterns are listed for the book of Isaiah, 148 for Jeremiah, and 38 for Ezekiel. The Book of the Twelve has a total of 140, with more than a third (48) appearing in the book of Amos. In the Writings, 441 chiastic patterns have

---

16 John W. Welch, ed., Chiasmus in Antiquity (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981), 287-352. This index has been updated and reissued as Chiasmus Bibliography (John W. Welch and Daniel B. McKinlay, eds., [Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1999]). This valuable resource includes studies on chiasmus from throughout the ancient world, cross listed according to author, category and passage.
been identified in the book of Psalms, 42 in Proverbs, 86 in Job, 29 in Song of Songs, 25 in Ruth, 15 in Lamentations, 9 in Qoheleth, 6 in Esther, 6 in Daniel, 2 in Ezra, 1 in Nehemiah, and 10 in Chronicles.

The vast majority of these studies address small chiasms that occur in single verses, or short passages. Some chiasms are much larger, however, extending beyond a single chapter, and even across several books.\(^{17}\) According to these tabulations, an overwhelming number of chiasms have been identified in the book of Psalms (441) and in the narratives of Genesis (203) and Exodus (144), as opposed to the books more commonly classified as historical, such as Samuel (34), Kings (11), and Chronicles (10). However, it is less clear whether this list of studies reflects an accurate picture of the dispersion of chiasms throughout the Hebrew Bible. The results of these calculations could be influenced by a number of factors, including where scholars are predisposed to find chiastic patterns (in poetry), and whether they are inclined to focus on small units of a verse or two, rather than more comprehensive patterns comprising entire chapters, or even whole books.

Scholars have long recognized small chiasms, but missed the large ones. Texts composed in the form of comprehensive rings are often dismissed as disorganized and needlessly repetitious. As we stated above, such misunderstanding has characterized studies of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories (1 Kgs 16:23–2 Kgs 13:25). I shall argue that these stories are not confused; rather, they have been redacted in the formal structure of a ring composition. When we recognize the chiastic structure of 1 Kings 16:23–2 Kings

\(^{17}\) For example the study by Yehuda Radday (“Chiasm in Tora,” *LB* 19 [1972]: 12-23) in which he attempts to demonstrate a comprehensive ring composition extending from Genesis–Deuteronomy.
13:25, an intricately constructed and well-ordered ring is revealed that guides the reader to the intended meaning of the text. While this cycle of prophetic stories exhibits a complex history of development, its present placement reflects the careful redaction of a pre-exilic editor. The intention of this editor(s) was to predict (after the fact) and explain the earlier destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, while at the same time foreshadowing and supporting the expected re-birth of a united kingdom under Judah’s King Josiah.

In the following section of this chapter, we will consider the place of the Elijah-Elisha stories within the greater Deuteronomistic History. We shall then survey scholarship on ring compositions throughout the ancient world, including studies of the Greek classics and ancient Latin literature, the Zoroastrian Gathas, the non-biblical literature of the ancient Near East, the writings of the first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, and biblical scholarship from Abraham Ibn Ezra (twelfth century CE) to the twenty-first century. Of particular significance for this dissertation is the work of Mary Douglas, who focused on the identification and interpretation of large scale ring compositions within the Hebrew Bible. Next, we will establish our own criteria for identifying ring compositions. Finally, we will sketch the broad outlines of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition. A detailed textual analysis of the Elijah-Elisha ring appears in Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 4 will consider the politics and theology of King Josiah’s reforms, and Chapter 5 will set out my conclusions.

This study focuses on the rhetorical aims of the biblical writer(s) within their historical context(s). We will discuss the intersection of “truth” and history in Chapter 4.
For now, however, it suffices to say that I do not presuppose that any of the events recounted in the biblical narrative actually occurred, or occurred as they are presented in the text. What matters for our analysis is only that the author(s) chose to tell his story in this way.

The Elijah-Elisha Cycle within the Deuteronomistic History

The connection between Josiah and the book of Deuteronomy entered modern biblical scholarship through a footnote in the 1805 doctoral dissertation of German scholar W.M.L. de Wette.\(^1\) Arising as a logical deduction from his larger argument for the late date of Deuteronomy relative to the other four books of the Pentateuch, de Wette suggested that the law book ostensibly found in 622 BCE during Josiah’s temple renovations (which fueled his subsequent reforms) might be the book of Deuteronomy.\(^2\)

This insight was the first step towards a theory of a Deuteronomistic redaction of the Former Prophets—a theory that reached its full expression more than a century later with the publication of Martin Noth’s magisterial Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien. While de Wette and those who followed him had argued for the Deuteronomistic redactions of individual books, Noth proposed that Joshua through Kings, together with the book of Deuteronomy, represent an originally unified history of Israel composed by a single,


exilic author/compiler. They constructed his history from an array of sources at his disposal, which he framed and linked together through reflective summaries and speeches delivered by key individuals. The purpose of this history, Noth argued, was to trace the events that led to the historical catastrophe of conquest and deportation, thereby demonstrating the failure of the monarchy and justifying YHWH’s punishment of his chosen people.

Noth’s recognition of the overarching unity of the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH) was paradigm changing. However, his thesis—though elegant in its simplicity—posited a pessimism on the part of the Deuteronomistic Historian (Dtr) that is at odds with passages such as 2 Sam 7:13-16, in which YHWH promises an everlasting dynasty to David. In response to this contradiction, Frank Moore Cross proposed a corrective to Noth’s initial thesis. Building upon the work of the nineteenth-century scholar Abraham Kuenen, who first suggested that the book of Kings was composed in the pre-exilic period before undergoing an exilic redaction, Cross countered Noth’s claim of a single,

---


21 Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, 142, n. 10.

exilic writer with a similar theory of double redaction for the DtrH. The key, Cross realized, lay with the book of Kings, where the first (pre-exilic) edition of the history could be expected to climax in the events of the writer’s own time. Cross identified the convergence of two major themes: the sin of Jeroboam in establishing rival shrines to Jerusalem at the ancient holy places of Beth-El and Dan (1 Kgs 12:26-30); and the faithfulness of David—a theme that culminates in the reforms of Josiah (2 Kgs 22:1–23:25). In this way, Cross identified the first edition of the DtrH as a propagandistic work produced in the time of Josiah and intended to support a reform that sought to consolidate worship at the Jerusalem Temple, with the ultimate objective of reuniting the former northern kingdom and the nation of Judah under a Davidic monarch. After the fall of Jerusalem, a second edition brought the history up to date, tersely recording the final events of the kingdom and adjusting the history to foreshadow its destruction.

Though the particulars of Cross’s theory are still debated, the underlying premise of a Josianic edition of the DtrH, which was updated in the exilic period, has withstood the test of time. Revisiting Cross’s proposal more than thirty years later, Richard D.


Nelson argues that the outlook and interests of the base text are unmistakably pre-exilic. Fundamental to this edition is the building of the Jerusalem Temple (1 Kgs 6:1-7:12), straightforwardly recounted as a temple-palace building project, and not as a nostalgic reminiscence from the exile or a utopian ideal for the future (Ezekiel 40-44). Moreover, a rehearsal of Josiah’s attempt to impose cultic centralization would be pointless in the wake of the Temple’s destruction, particularly for an audience exiled in Babylonia.27

Josianic interests are also apparent in the Dtr’s presentation of the northern kingdom of Israel. Unlike the author of Chronicles, the writer has meticulously recorded the history of the breakaway state. Foreshadowed by the conditional promises made to Solomon (1 Kgs 2:24; 8:25; 9:4-5), the temporary succession of the northern kingdom is justified by his sins (1 Kgs 11). However these same events set the stage for the coming of Josiah—the Davidic king whose northern advance to Beth-El (hinted at in 1 Kgs 11:39) reverses the wrongs of Solomon (2 Kgs 23:15-16), and prepares the way for reunification.28 A further connection is suggested by the Dtr’s depiction of Joshua in the image of Josiah. Both Joshua and Josiah are portrayed as having conducted covenant renewal ceremonies by reading the law to the people (Josh 8:30-35; 2 Kgs 23:1-3); and they alone are credited with properly observing the Passover (Josh 5:10-12; 2 Kgs 23:21-23). Upon the death of Moses, YHWH commands Joshua to “observe faithfully all the teaching…. Do not deviate from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful

26 As Baruch Halpern notes (The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996], 148-149), the thirteen years Solomon spent building a palace for himself and another for his Egyptian wife (1 Kgs 7:1-12) would hardly have been recounted out of piety.
27 Nelson, “The Case is Still Compelling,” 324.
28 Ibid., 325. See also Nelson, The Double Redaction, 126-127.
wherever you go. Let not this book of the teaching cease from your lips, but recite it day and night, so that you may observe faithfully all that is written in it” (Josh 1:7-8). This exhortation echoes the law of the king (Deut 17:18-20), which commands Israel’s rulers to have a “copy of the teaching written for him on a scroll…and let him read it all his life…to observe faithfully every word of this teaching….Thus he will not act haughtily towards his fellows, or deviate from the instruction to the right or to the left, to the end that he and his descendants may reign long in the midst of Israel.” The Dtr repeats the charge not to “deviate to the right or to the left” four times in the book of Deuteronomy (5:29; 17:11, 20; 28:14); and on his deathbed, Joshua makes the same admonition to the children of Israel (Josh 23:6). However, throughout the history of the monarchies—north and south—the Dtr recognizes only Josiah as having perfectly fulfilled this command (2 Kgs 22:2).

As Steven L. McKenzie notes, Cross’s theory of a propagandistic function for the material in Kings seems particularly appropriate. But McKenzie also raises a legitimate question: how do these northern prophetic tales fit within a work promoting a Judahite king?

McKenzie’s solution is to exclude the vast majority of these stories from a pre-exilic edition of the DtrH. However, Marvin A. Sweeney points out that the narratives concerning the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kgs 12–2 Kgs 17) are key to the Dtr’s presentation of both kingdoms. The bulk of this narrative consists of the Elijah-Elisha stories (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 13); and while these tales clearly originated in another historical

---

31 Ibid., 81-100.
context, their incorporation into the DtrH serves the Josianic author’s interests by chronicling the demise of the Omride dynasty. Ahab’s marriage to the Phoenician princess Jezebel introduced pagan religious worship to the people of Israel, in flagrant violation of the Deuteronomic injunction against intermarriage with the peoples of pagan nations (Deut 7:3-4; Josh 23:12-13; Judg 3:5-6; cf. 1 Kgs 11:1-8). This corruption soon spread south with the marriage of Ahab’s daughter to a Judean king. As we shall see below, the eradication of Ba’alism was of prime concern to the Elijah-Elisha ring master, who carefully balanced the accounts of its destruction in Judah and Israel on either side of his composition.

The catalyst for the northern kingdom’s apostasy was Jeroboam, who spurned the God who made him king by establishing the state sanctuaries of Beth-El and Dan with their golden calves (1 Kgs 12:25-13:10)—flouting the Deuteronomic injunctions against idolatry (e.g. Deut 4:25-26; 5:8-9; 7:5) and the demand for cultic worship at a single location (e.g. Deut 12:4-7, 13-14:26-27; 16:11). The hand of a Josianic writer is obvious in the account of the dedication of the Beth-El altar, in which an unnamed prophet is said to have foretold its destruction by Josiah (1 Kgs 13:1-3). The continued existence of the competing shrine at Beth-El was clearly of great concern to the Josianic reformers (the sanctuary at Dan was by then a moot point, as the Assyrians had razed it nearly a century earlier). However, there is no obvious reason why the Beth-El sanctuary would be of any interest to an exilic redactor. The Josianic author is known to have waged a literary polemic against Beth-El, insinuating its apostasy at every opportunity. We shall

---

32 Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah*, 77-78.
33 Ibid., 78-80.
demonstrate in the chapters that follow that this same anti-Beth-El polemic appears in the Elijah-Elisha ring composition.

The pre-exilic edition of the DtrH culminates with Josiah—the Davidic king whom the historian believes will soon realize God’s promise to David. With Josiah’s reforms, the sins of Solomon that precipitated the division of the united kingdom are at last set right (2 Kgs 23:13); and the shrine at Beth-El (the sin of Jeroboam) is leveled (v. 15). What is more, Josiah’s reforms tie the entire history together. Geographically these events (as recounted in the DtrH) encompass Jerusalem, Judah, and the north. Temporally, they stretch from the period of the judges through the histories of both kingdoms. The Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories is an essential piece of this Josianic redaction. In the following chapters, I shall demonstrate that a tightly knit ring structure binds these stories, testifying to the unity of the narrative and clarifying the Dtr’s propagandistic purpose. First, however, we must consider the relevant scholarship on ancient ring compositions.

**History of Scholarship on Ancient Ring Compositions**

Examples of ring compositions from antiquity are widespread—extending from the seventeen ancient poems that comprise the Zoroastrian Gathas in the east to the works of Homer in the west. We begin our survey of scholarship with the Greek classics: the

---

34 Nelson, “The Case is Still Compelling,” 327.
35 For a survey of the breadth of ring compositions in the ancient world, see the collection of essays edited by John W. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*. 
Iliad and the Odyssey, since the ancient scholarship on these two works provides our earliest extant comments on the presence of chiastic patterns.

The Greek Classics

As early as the third century BCE, Homeric scholars noted the presence of chiastic structures in both the Iliad and the Odyssey. Aristarchus of Samothrace (c. 216–c. 145 BCE), the sixth librarian of the ancient library of Alexandria,\(^36\) frequently called attention to Homer’s tendency to employ a narrative technique in which a sequence of two or more elements are repeated in inverted order in an AB B’A’ pattern. Aristarchus did not use a specific term in his description of this convention. However, modern classicalists often refer to it as “reverse order” or hysteron proteron \(\text{[ǔστερον πρότερον]}\)—“latter before.”\(^37\)

Similarly the treatise On Invention, long attributed to the Greek rhetorician Hermogenes,\(^38\) describes a literary structure that the author calls a “circle” \([χύχλος]\), formed when a sentence, clause, or phrase (or even an entire speech), ends with the same noun or verb with which it began (Inv. 4.8).\(^39\) The scholia (commentary written in the

---

\(^{36}\) The commentaries of Aristarchus have been lost, however his opinions were widely quoted by ancient scholars whose works have survived. See Eleanor Dickey, Ancient Greek Scholarship: A Guide to Finding, Reading, and Understanding Scholia, Commentaries, Lexica, and Grammatical Treatises, from Their Beginnings to the Byzantine Period (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5-6.


\(^{38}\) This ascription to Hermogenes is disputed in modern scholarship, however the present text of On Invention is likely based on a mid-second century CE work that was later adapted to complete the Hermogenic treatise Art of Rhetoric. See George A. Kennedy, Invention and Method: Two Rhetorical Treatises from the Hermogenic Corpus (Writings from the Greco-Roman World 15; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), xiii-xix.

\(^{39}\) Kennedy, Invention and Method, 174-175.
margins of ancient manuscripts) also note the presence of ring compositions in the Homeric speeches and explicate the rhetorical implications of their use. ⁴⁰

As centuries and then millennia passed, commentators ignored and ultimately forgot this literary convention, which was later rediscovered in the early twentieth century CE by Samuel E. Bassett. ⁴¹ Introducing modern scholars to the insights of the ancients, Bassett focused his analysis on small textual units (such as Homer’s tendency to have his characters respond to a volley of questions in reverse order, and narrative descriptions that advanced and then turned back in inverse sequence.) Others who followed Bassett attempted to discern the broader pattern of these works. J.T. Sheppard divided the Iliad into three symmetrical movements, with the poem’s ending coming back around to the beginning. ⁴² John L. Myres, and later Cedric H. Whitman, proposed more comprehensive chiastic structures. Myres maintained that both the Odyssey and the Iliad were composed as extensive ring compositions. ⁴³ Whitman focused on the Iliad, arguing that episodes and whole books “balance each other through similarity or opposition” around the central episodes of the Epic’s Great Battle (books XI–XV). ⁴⁴

Myres appears to be the first to note the fifth century BCE historian Herodotus’ use of ring composition. ⁴⁵ This insight redresses the sharp criticism of the Greek scholar

---

⁴⁵ John L. Myres, Herodotus: Father of History (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 81-134; see also Henry R. Immerwahr, Form and Thought in Herodotus (Cleveland: Press of Western Reserve University, 1966), 54-58; Ingrid Beck, Die Ringkomposition bei Herodot und ihre Bedeutung für die Beweistechnik
Plutarch (46-120 CE), who condemned Herodotus’ *Histories* as chaotic and contradictory (*On the Malice of Herodotus* 867b).\(^{46}\) Rather, as Carolyn Deward argues, Herodotus’ use of chiastic patterning allowed him to construct “a huge road-map of the known human world, past and present, in which everything is linked through story to everything else.”\(^ {47}\)

Chiastic units, large and small, occur throughout the *Histories*, Dewald observes; and Herodotus brings the entire work to a close by matching the end to the beginning.\(^ {48}\)

From Aristarchus of Samothrace living in the third century BCE to the classicalists of our own time, scholars have observed and commented on the literary convention of chiastic structuring in ancient Greek literature. They have noted its aesthetic value and considered its rhetorical significance.

*Ancient Latin Literature*

These same chiastic patterns have been identified in the ancient Latin literature. In his 1884 dissertation, Ewaldus Krause argued that the first century BCE poet Virgil framed the fifth poem of his *Eclogues* between four corresponding pairs of eclogues. Krause’s schema left the tenth and final poem unaccounted for; however, Paul Maury, writing in 1944, connected this last eclogue with the fifth, arguing that the shepherd Daphnis, who became a god (eclogue 5), stands in tension with the poet Gallus, who is depicted as a shepherd (eclogue 10). Arranged in this way, Maury argued, Virgil’s

---

\(^{46}\) Dewald, “Introduction,” xviii.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., xvi.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., xxiii.
literary architecture forms a “bucolic chapel.” At the center of this chiastic structure is the fifth poem—a shrine where Caesar is honored in the guise of Daphnis. The four pairs of eclogues stand like columns on either side. The tenth poem, Maury explains, represents the poet Gallus, poised forever at its entrance.\textsuperscript{49} E. Adelaide Hahn, writing in the same year as Maury, proposed an overlapping and complimentary pattern to the \textit{Eclogues}, arguing that the first nine poems are arranged in three triads, with eclogues 1-3 and 7-9 (in reverse order) framing the central triad of eclogues 4-6. The tenth eclogue, Hahn explains, “ties up all the treads together.”\textsuperscript{50}

A similar tripartite division has been suggested for the \textit{Aeneid}. Scholars have long recognized that Virgil’s epic includes two equal halves (books 1-6, and 7-12) that consciously recall the \textit{Odyssey} and the \textit{Iliad}. In 1930, however, John W. Mackail proposed the existence of a deeper, concomitant structure—three acts—with the triumphant conclusion of the intermediate act (books 5-8) enclosed and underscored by the first (books 1-4) and second (books 9-12) acts.\textsuperscript{51} Theodor W. Stadler brought further nuance to Mackail’s observation, noting the distinctive change in tone from dark to light and back to dark that marks each section.\textsuperscript{52} At the center of this trilogy, George E. Duckworth argues, are the patriotic and nationalistic themes of the speech of Anchises.

\textsuperscript{52} Theodor W. Stadler, \textit{Vergils Aeneis: Eine poetische Betrachtung} (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1942).
(book 6), which emphasize the Roman heroes and the achievements of Virgil’s own ruler and benefactor, Augustus.\(^{53}\)

Beyond Virgilian studies, the works of the first century BCE poet Catullus have also been identified as exhibiting the literary technique of ring composition. In his 1929 dissertation, Otto Friess contended that Catullus’ poetry was often built in a symmetrical framework around a central element.\(^{54}\) Clyde Murley, writing in 1937, focused on Catullus 64. Arguing against the supposed confusion of this poem, Murley outlined a comprehensive ring composition that points the reader to a tapestry lying across a bed and embroidered with scenes of the affair of Theseus and Ariadne—the poem’s true focus.\(^{55}\) Finally, Paul Claes has proposed that Catullus arranged even the poems within his collection in sets of concentric pairs around a central poem.\(^{56}\)

*The Gathas*

The study of ring composition in the Zoroastrian Gathas began in 1953 with Wolfgang Lentz’s analysis of the non-linear composition of Yasna 47. Through an examination of the placement of recurring words, Lentz noted that the poet repeatedly picks up and drops themes, only to return to them in an apparently unsystematic way.\(^{57}\)

This initial insight led Hanns-Peter Schmidt to conclude that within several of the Gathas,

---


these word pairs link stanzas across the poems in concentric arrangements. Martin Schwartz expanded and systematized Schmidt’s observation, arguing that in every Gatha, all of the stanzas are concentrically join through one of three basic patterns of symmetry. More recently, Almut Hintze has proposed that not only are the individual hymns arranged chiastically, but also the seventeen Gathas themselves form an extensive ring composition, with the Yasna Haptanahiti—the liturgical highlight of the ceremony—at its center.

Ancient Near Eastern Literature

The presence of parallelism in the literatures of the ancient Near East outside of the Hebrew Bible has long been recognized. The use of chiasm, however, seems first to have been noted by Edmund I. Gordon in his study of Sumerian Proverbs, published in 1959. After reviewing the four types of parallelism appearing in these ancient proverbs (antithetic, parathetic or synonymous, climax, and assonance), Gordon notes two additional categories that he regards as more complicated varieties of parallelism:

---

combinations of antithesis and assonance; and chiasm—what he termed “crossed” antithesis.\textsuperscript{63} In his 1965 \textit{Ugaritic Textbook}, Cyrus H. Gordon similarly identified examples of chiasm in the Ugaritic literature.\textsuperscript{64} Both of these studies focused on small chiasms of a verse or two. In 1974, however, Welch argued that in addition to these simple chiastic constructions, the Ugaritic texts also contained examples of comprehensive ring compositions.\textsuperscript{65} These include a wedding hymn entitled “Nikkal and the Moon” (Text 77), the entirety of which forms an AB C B’A’ ring composition, with the prologue (a ring within a ring) arranged as an ABC D C’B’A’ chiasm. Welch also explicates Ugaritic Texts 137 and 52 as examples of extended ring compositions.

In an essay included in Welch’s 1981 \textit{Chiasmus in Antiquity}, Robert F. Smith argued for the existence of several large scale chiastic structures in the Sumerian and Akkadian literature.\textsuperscript{66} Among the texts Smith identified as extended ring compositions are a Sumerian hymn entitled the “Exaltation of Inanna,” the “Epic of Gilgamesh,” and the Akkadian version of the “Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld.” This last work is particularly significant for demonstrating the author’s intentionality in creating a ring composition, because an earlier Sumerian version of the story containing the same elements is not chiastic. In the Akkadian edition, the goddess Ishtar’s descent into the Netherworld is preceded by the removal of seven articles: her crown; earrings; necklaces; breast ornaments; birthstone girdle; bracelets; and breechcloth. When the goddess rises

\textsuperscript{63} Gordon, \textit{Sumerian Proverbs}, 16-17.
\textsuperscript{64} Cyrus H. Gordon, \textit{Ugaritic Textbook} (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), 119; 137.
from the underworld at the story’s conclusion, these items are returned to her in reverse order. The earlier Sumerian version also lists these items twice. The repetition occurs before her descent, however; and the items are recounted in the identical order in which they were removed. The Akkadian author who retold this story seems to have relocated the repetition to the conclusion and reversed the order so as to frame the composition chiastically.

Victor Hurowitz makes a compelling argument for the chiastic structure of the Old Babylonian royal inscription of Samsuiluna, King of Babylon. He further contends that chiasmus is the defining structure of both the prologue and the epilogue of the Laws of Hammurabi. David P. Wright confirms this chiastic arrangement, noting that the biblical author of the Covenant Code (Exodus 21–23) based his own laws on this earlier work and intentionally reproduced its chiastic pattern.

Flavius Josephus

In 1929, H. St. John Thackeray first noted that Flavius Josephus’s Judean Antiquities falls into two, almost equal halves of ten books each. Per Bilde confirmed

this basic division, drawing particular attention to the centrality of Josephus’s telling of the Babylonian Exile in book 10. There, Bilde argued, the destruction of the first Temple seems to anticipate, predict, and describe the fall of the second Temple—an event clearly imminent in the closing passages of book 20.\footnote{71 Per Bilde, \textit{Flavius Josephus Between Jerusalem and Rome} (JSPSup 2; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 89-90.} Bilde also noted the compelling parallels between Josephus’s account of Herod the Great (bk. 14-17), and Israel’s first king, Saul (bk. 6).\footnote{72 Ibid., 87-88.} Building on these insights, Steve Mason has proposed that \textit{Judean Antiquities} in its entirety is a comprehensive ring composition.\footnote{73 Steve Mason, Introduction to \textit{Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary, Vol. 3 Judean Antiquities 1–4}, by Louis H. Feldman (ed. Steve Mason; Leiden: Brill, 2000), xx-xxii.} Additional pairings across the ring include Josephus’s account of Abraham, the first convert to the new religion (bk. 1.148-157), with the story of Queen Helena and her son, Izates’ conversion to Judaism in the first century CE (bk. 20.17-196). Both narratives are set in Mesopotamia, in or near Chaldea; and both families are persecuted for their beliefs by their countrymen. The story of Helena’s conversion also recalls Josephus’s telling of the flood account (bk. 1.89-103), in which the remains of Noah’s ark are described as a curiosity for visitors in Helena’s land (bk. 20.24-26). Moreover, Helena’s son, Izates, who is beloved by his father, and therefore hated by his brothers (bk. 20.17-23), constitutes an obvious parallel to the story of Joseph (bk. 2.9-10). Like Jacob’s son, the hatred of Izates’ brothers causes his father to send him to a distant land, where he marries and prospers in a foreign court; and both men are eventually reunited with their aged fathers (bks. 2.184; 20.24). Mason also cites Josephus’s discourse on the perfection of the Judean constitution (bks. 3-4)—high praise that stands in tension with his discussion of Rome’s constitutional crisis (bks. 18-19).
keeping with Thackeray’s original division, Mason locates the ring’s all important center in book 10. There, Mason explains, the main characters (the priest-prophet Jeremiah and the prophet Daniel) reflect the self-identification of Josephus. Like Jeremiah, who urged submission to Babylon, Josephus was regarded as a traitor by his own compatriots. And like a modern Daniel, whose prophesies to a king came true, Josephus served and prospered in foreign court due to his strict observance of Jewish law. As Mason himself acknowledges, these parallels are not always strictly ordered; however, the overall chiastic pattern of Judean Antiquities is quite persuasive. Mason has further proposed that both the Jewish War and Josephus’s autobiographical Life are arranged in the form of ring compositions.

As a first century Jewish writer living in Rome, Josephus’s use of ring composition clearly demonstrates his familiarity with this convention of Greek literature. His choice to employ this technique to structure his own epic histories, however, might also reflect his intention to emphasize similarities to between the two cultures to his Roman audience. Josephus was always concerned to show the sophistication of Jewish civilization; and as a member of the educated elite of Judean society, he was likely familiar with ring compositions in the writings of his own people.

74 Mason, Introduction to Flavius Josephus, xx-xxi.
Biblical scholars have long noted the presence of chiasmus in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Our survey of scholarship begins with Abraham Ibn Ezra (c. 1089–c. 1167 CE), whose comments (though rarely noted) afford us the first known remarks on ring composition in the Hebrew Bible. The early rabbinic sages are silent on the phenomenon of chiasm; however, the biblical commentaries of Ibn Ezra unmistakably refer to this literary convention. Similar to the Greek scholars who studied the Homeric epics, Ibn Ezra identifies a number of instances of AB B’A’ ring compositions within the Hebrew Bible, including this example in Exod 17:7.

A The place was named Massah (תִּשָּׂא) and Meribah (מריבא); B because the Israelites quarreled (ריב), A’ and because they tried (נסה)YHWH, saying, “Is YHWH present among us or not?”

Noting that the sequence of words creates an immediate repetition of “quarrel” at the mid-turn, Ibn Ezra remarks that when the biblical writer mentions two things, he always begins from the second. This, he explains, is the rule of the holy language: “For instance,

---

78 Of the scholarly literature in English that I examined, only Isaac Kalimi (The Reshaping of Ancient Israelite History in Chronicles [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005], 216) mentions the contribution of Ibn Ezra. Kalimi refers the reader to Ezra Zion Melammed, Bible Commentators (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 575-76. [Hebrew].
79 Melammed has collected nine examples of chiasm identified by Ibn Ezra: Exod 17:7; Num 6:16; Ruth 1:5; Isa 56:3; Joel 3:3; Amos 2:11-12; Ps 74:16; 94:7,9; Exod 25:22.
'And to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau;' and afterwards, ‘and I gave to Esau….’ (Josh 24:4). And so he mentions first Massah, and after that Meribah, and he returns to explain the reading of Meribah, in that the children of Israel quarreled with Moses, etc., and Massah, that they tried YH.'”80 Ibn Ezra further identifies a much larger AB C B'A' ring composition in Exod 25:8–26:37, in which YHWH’s instructions to build the tabernacle and its furnishings frame his command to build the ark. The contours of this ring are: A–Tabernacle (25:9); B–furnishings (v. 9); C–Ark (vv. 10-22); B’–furnishings (23-40); A’–Tabernacle (26:1-37). Ibn Ezra’s exegesis begins at Exod 25:22 (the last verse of the ring’s mid-turn), where the biblical text concludes its discussion of the ark’s construction. “There is a question here,” Ibn Ezra notes: “Why does God discuss the ark first?” His answer directs us to look to an earlier verse—“Because it is written, ‘the pattern of the Tabernacle, and the pattern of all of its furnishings’” (25:9). It is the custom of the biblical writer to begin with the second item first, Ibn Ezra reminds us; “Therefore he begins by explaining the furnishings of the Tabernacle, and he begins with the most important among them [the ark], and afterwards the table and the lamp, and after that: ‘And as for the Tabernacle you will make…’” (Exodus 26:1).81

Despite the early insights of Ibn Ezra, we find no indication of a modern biblical scholar addressing the phenomenon of chiastic patterning until 1653. Writing five centuries after Ibn Ezra, the English theologian Henry Hammond noted numerous instances in the New Testament of what he described as: “a going back, speaking first to

81 Ibid., 174.
the second of two things proposed, and then after to the first.”\textsuperscript{82} Although Hammond’s definition is strikingly similar to Ibn Ezra’s remarks, there is no evidence that he was aware of the medieval commentator’s work. He also points out, however, that this literary convention is frequently employed by the prophets of the Hebrew Bible.

The study of ring compositions is next addressed nearly a century later by the German scholar Johann Albrecht Bengel, who published \textit{Gnomon Novi Testamenti} in 1742 (translated from the Latin into English in 1858).\textsuperscript{83} With this work, Bengel appears to be the first to use the term chiasmus to describe the phenomenon of introverted parallelism in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.\textsuperscript{84} Besides noting numerous examples of chiasmus within the New Testament, Bengel includes an appended index of technical terms (the significance of which he stresses in the Book’s preface) in which he devotes nearly three pages to the entry on chiasmus.\textsuperscript{85} Bengel identifies and defines two types of chiasmus: direct and inverted.\textsuperscript{86} What he identifies as direct chiasmus (AB A’B’) more recent scholarship calls parallelism, as we see in Ps 114:1:

\begin{quote}
When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech,
\end{quote}

This verse is an example of what Robert Lowth, in his seminal \textit{Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews}, called synonymous parallelism: “. . . the same sentiment is

\textsuperscript{84} Welch, “How Much was Known about Chiasmus,” 53.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 5:397.
repeated in different, but equivalent terms.”

Thus “Israel” and “the house of Jacob” form a pair, as does “Egypt” and “a people of strange speech.” Lowth further explained that antithetic parallelism occurs when “a thing is illustrated by its contrary being opposed to it.”

Proverbs 27:7 provides an example of antithetic parallelism:

A sated person tramples honey,
but to a hungry person anything bitter seems sweet.

This verse follows the same AB A’B’ pattern; however, “a sated person” is paired with its opposite, “a hungry person”; and while a sated person “tramples honey,” to a hungry person, “anything bitter seems sweet.” Hence the term chiasmus is properly reserved for the inverted parallelism (AB B’A’) of Bengel’s second category. This distinction was explicated in 1820 by Irish scholar John Jebb in his volume, *Sacred Literature.*

Writing in response to Robert Lowth’s conflation of parallelism with Chiasmus, Jebb rightly insisted that chiasmus (what he termed introverted parallelism) was itself a distinct form of parallelism.

Jebb was also concerned with the rationale behind chiasmus, and he concluded that the rhetorical purpose of this convention was to begin and end with what should be emphasized.

As we shall see below, however, this point was later disputed by Nils W. Lund.

---

90 Ibid., 53-74; cf. 335-362.
91 Ibid., 60.
Thomas Boys built upon the work of these earlier scholars. But while Lowth had characterized parallelism as a feature of Hebrew poetry, Boys noted that parallelism appears throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in passages that cannot be identified as poetry. Like Jebb, Boys recognized chiasmus as an inverted form of parallelism. Moreover, he was convinced that parallel structures undergird much larger portions of text, as he explains in the introduction to his initial work on the subject, *Tactica Sacra*, published in 1824:

At a time, when, from the habit of reading the Bible with a very minute attention to the word and letter of the text, I was beginning to be satisfied that some mode of arrangement prevailed in the Sacred Writings, to which a strict regard to terms and phrases was the key, (though what mode I knew not,) a friend put into my hands that interesting and learned work, “Sacred Literature.” I was then but little acquainted with Bishop Lowth; and it is to “Sacred Literature” that I stand indebted for some of my first lights on the subject upon which I am now writing. Those principles which previous writers on parallelism have applied to short passages, are applied by me to long ones; and I arrange chapters and whole epistles as they arrange verses.

*Tactica Sacra* includes Boys’ analysis of the First and Second Epistle to the Thessalonians, the Second Epistle of St. Peter, and Philemon. His second work on parallelism, *A Key to the Book of Psalms*, applied these principles to the Psalter.

---

94 Ibid., 1.
95 Thomas Boys, *A Key to the Book of Psalms* (London: L.B. Seeley and son, 1825). A later edition of this book was released under the same title in 1890 (ten years after Boys’ death by), by E.W. Bullinger. Using notes Boys had left in the margins of his Bible, Bullinger expanded the work to include the entire Psalter. Bullinger went on to publish a six volume work entitled *The Companion Bible* (London: Oxford University
Contemporaneous reviews of John Jebb’s *Sacred Literature* were generally positive. In a two-part analysis published in *The British Critic*, an anonymous reviewer concluded that Jebb had “thrown more light than all the commentators, on the very obscure passage, Matt. xv. 3–6, by exhibiting it in the form of an introverted stanza.” The reviewer cautioned against the danger of extending such an analysis too far. However, he admitted that Jebb had by and large applied his system cautiously and accurately. In a review of both Jebb’s *Sacred Literature* and Thomas Boys’ *Tactia Sacra*, a critic for the *The British Review* offered similar praise for Jebb’s work, noting that he had brought Lowth’s doctrine of parallelism into “bolder relief,” and “elucidated with great skill” several very striking examples of introverted parallelism. In addition, Thomas Hartwell Horne’s 1825 edition of his encyclopedic two-volume *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* included Jebb’s more nuanced terminology of introverted parallelism as a corrective to the earlier conclusions of Lowth.

In contrast, Thomas Boys’ two volumes were met with skepticism. In reviewing *Tactica Sacra*, the same critic for the *British Review* who had praised the work of Jebb dismissed as far-fetched Boys’ claim of more comprehensive parallel structures. As the reviewer explains:

---

Press, 1909-1922), in which he set out the entire biblical text in symmetrical units. However, his analysis is too often forced and ultimately unconvincing.


We have so much difficulty in imagining, that the holy writers, whose active labours and whose sufferings in the gospel were incessant, should have formed their compositions upon a model so purely artificial, a model apparently more suited to a student in his cloister than to a ruler in Israel, withdrawing himself from the active cares of government to pen a dispatch of importance, that they should have thought it right to charge their memories with the precise order of the several topics, discussed in the early part of an epistle, only that they might be able to reverse that order in the close of it, that we cannot bring ourselves to receive Mr. Boys’ statement with implicit confidence.…

A second reviewer for the Eclectic Review issued similarly unfavorable critiques of both books. Regarding Tactica Sacra, he acknowledged the presence of the parallel constructions that Boys had explicated, but questioned their significance. And two years later in his review of A Key to the Book of Psalms, he called Boys’ findings “curious” and expressed considerable doubt that they had contributed at all to the “cause of truth.” But as the critic for the British Review himself noted, the essence of his objection was indeed a failure of imagination—a naiveté of the true sophistication of the biblical writers and their intentions. Contrary to his notions of the milieu of these writings, the epistles of the New Testament are not letters dashed off by a harried ruler. In fact, despite the occasional presence of epistolary openings and closings, they are hardly

letters at all. Rather, these documents are rhetorical treatises, artfully composed for oral
delivery and designed to persuade an audience.\textsuperscript{102}

Boys’ attempts to identify comprehensive chiastic structures are only partially
confirmed. Welch provides support for his analysis of Paul’s letter to Philemon, echoing
Boys’ conclusion that it is indeed “a very remarkable specimen of introverted
parallelism.”\textsuperscript{103} However, he disputes Boys’ identification of a chiastic structure to the
Second Epistle to the Thessalonians;\textsuperscript{104} and he finds only a limited concern for structure
in the Second Epistle of St. Peter.\textsuperscript{105} Nonetheless, Boys’ work was pioneering, even if his
methodology was not as precise as the task required; and his belief that small chiastic
structures could likewise be found in extended form has been demonstrated. A century
after Boys, Nils W. Lund revealed a well balanced chiasm in Paul’s first letter to the
Corinthians (1 Cor 12:31-14:1);\textsuperscript{106} and Welch argued further that the entire letter is
arranged as a comprehensive ring composition.\textsuperscript{107} Similarly, John Bligh proposed that the
epistle to the Galatians is an extended ring composition whose central member is a
smaller ring.\textsuperscript{108}

John Forbes’ \textit{The Symmetrical Structure of Scripture},\textsuperscript{109} published in 1854, was
the last work of significance in the study of ring composition of in the nineteenth century.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{104} Ibid., 213.
\bibitem{105} Ibid., 231-232.
\end{thebibliography}
Forbes’ stated purpose was to answer critics of the study of parallelism such as Joseph A. Alexander, who in his *Commentary on the Prophesies of Isaiah* had condemned the practice (common since Lowth) of printing translations of Isaiah in poetic stanzas.\textsuperscript{110} Forbes acknowledged the tremendous influence of Jebb and Boys; and he quoted numerous examples of chiasmus from their respective works, many of which he further nuanced and improved.\textsuperscript{111} The principle of chiastic parallelism was now firmly established in biblical studies. William Smith, in his *A Dictionary of the Bible* published in 1863, includes mention of Jebb’s “introverted parallelism” in his entry on Hebrew poetry,\textsuperscript{112} as does Charles A. Briggs’ *Biblical Study: Its Principals, Methods and History*, first published in 1883,\textsuperscript{113} and Richard G. Moulton’s *The Literary Study of the Bible*, published in 1895.\textsuperscript{114}

Despite the general recognition of chiastic parallelism in the both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, three quarters of a century passed before the field of biblical studies again picked up the topic of ring compositions. In January, 1930, two articles by Nils W. Lund were published simultaneously in separate journals. These twin articles, appearing in *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* and *The Journal of Religion*, addressed ring compositions in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, respectively.\textsuperscript{115} In each, Lund reviewed earlier scholarship on chiasmus in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{110} Forbes, *The Symmetrical Structure of Scripture*, 2-3.
\item \textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 35-46.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Charles A. Briggs, *Biblical Study: Its Principals, Methods and History* (3rd ed.; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1890), 261.
\end{itemize}
biblical texts before commencing his own analysis. In 1931, he published three more articles on ring composition: an article on the influence of chiasmus on the structure of the gospels; one that focused on the overall chiastic structure of the book of Matthew; and an article on the thirteenth chapter of Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians. In 1933, a sixth article was published on chiasmus in book of Psalms; and one year later a seventh article (with H.H. Walker) on the chiastic structure of the entire book of Habakkuk appeared. Lund followed these studies with two monographs: Chiasmus in the New Testament, published in 1942; and Studies in the Book of Revelation, published in 1955, one year after Lund’s death.

Lund built upon the work of Jebb and Boys. But he also attempted to systematize the identification and analysis of ring compositions by compiling what he termed the seven laws of chiastic structures, based upon recurring features. Five of these seven observations concern the center of the chiasmus. Contrary to Jebb’s belief that the center of a ring composition is subordinate to the units on the periphery, Lund recognized the importance of the mid-turn. Indeed, Lund argued, the very core of the message is

---

117 Lund, “The Literary Structure of Paul’s Hymn to Love.”
located at the center of the composition. To illustrate this principle, he analyzed the chiasm of Isa 28:15-18.

Because you have said, we made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we are at agreement;

A When the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us;
B for we made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves. Therefore, thus said the Lord YHWH,
C Behold, I lay in Zion a stone, a stone tried, a corner precious, a foundation well founded.
D **He that believes shall not be in haste.**
C’ And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plummet.
B’ And hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding-place; and your covenant with death shall be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol shall not stand;
A’ When the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then shall you be trodden down by it.

At the edges of the ring, A and B describe the rulers’ expectations of security; the parallel units B’ and A’ refute those hopes. As we near the midpoint, C and C’ contrast the futile refuge imagined by the rulers with the shelter provided by YHWH in his building of Zion. Finally, at the center, the crux of the message stands alone: “He that believes shall not be in haste.” Framed as it is by the outer members of the ring, the central message proclaimed in D is effectively brought to the fore.

---

David M. Scholer and Klyne R. Snodgrass noted in the preface to the 1992, fiftieth anniversary reprint of *Chiasmus in the New Testament* that Lund’s *magnum opus* received “meaningful reviews.”¹²⁵ Thomas S. Kepler, writing in the *Journal of Bible and Religion*, remarked that Lund had produced a “very patient, disciplined bit of research,” and that “its thesis regarding chiasmus as a form is sound.”¹²⁶ Floyd V. Filson called Lund’s argument “resourceful, and original,” concluding that “there is more use of chiastic patterns in the Bible than we usually realize.”¹²⁷ Henry J. Cadbury acknowledged that “some of the evidence is inescapable.” Yet like most of the reviewers, his praise was tempered. The “subjective character” of such analyses, Cadbury cautioned, demanded that “the reader should be warned neither to accept nor to reject the author’s sober contention without faithfully pondering what he has laid before us and subjecting it to every alternative explanation that is conceivable.”¹²⁸

Not all of Lund’s examples are equally convincing. As Scholer and Snodgrass point out, subjectivity on the interpreter’s part allows a sort of “slipperiness” that has yet to be addressed adequately.¹²⁹ We will address these issues of method below; nevertheless, the significance of Lund’s contribution to the study of ring composition cannot be overstated. If his methodology was not yet as refined as necessary, it was nonetheless an improvement upon the work of his predecessors. Moreover, Lund’s prolific work drew much needed attention to the rhetorical significance of chiasmus for

---

¹²⁹ Scholer and Snodgrass, “Preface,” xix.
the interpretation of biblical texts, renewing the effort initiated by Thomas Boys to identify large scale chiastic structures.

Since Lund, many scholars have tried to identify comprehensive ring compositions in the Bible. Some of these studies are methodologically sound and insightful—others less so. Between 1964 and 1981, Yehuda T. Radday produced an ambitious series of articles in which he attempted to demonstrate the presence of overarching ring compositions in the Hebrew Bible.\(^{130}\) These studies are seriously flawed, however, due to the subjective characterization of the parallel elements. For example, in his analysis of the proposed chiastic structure of the Elijah cycle, Radday pairs Elijah’s flight to the Wadi Cherith (1 Kgs 17:3-7) with the king’s officers sent by Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:9-16). He pairs the woman of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:8-16) with Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kgs 21), and the loyal Obadiah (1 Kgs 18:1-15) with the election of Elisha (1 Kgs 19:15-21), etc.\(^{131}\) Although the parallels Radday suggests are conceivable, they are hardly obvious and cannot demonstrate the structure of a ring composition.

Edward G. Newing has more precisely outlined a comprehensive ring composition stretching across the books of Genesis–Joshua.\(^{132}\) According to Newing, the Hexateuch is an artificially constructed “inversion” of seven paired sections that reach their climax in the events on Mount Sinai (Exodus 32—34). The perimeters of this

---


schema are broad, but the pairings are not forced. The symmetry of this composition is seriously marred, however, by the placement of the book of Deuteronomy.

A Introduction, Paradise Lost  
(Gen 1:1–Exod 1:7)  
A’ Conclusion, Paradise Regained  
(Josh 13:1–24:33)

B Egypt Judged  
(Exod 1:8–12:36)  
B’ Canaan judged  
(Josh 5:13–12:24)

C Exodus from Egypt  
(Exod 12:37–15:21)  
C’ Exodus into Canaan  
(Josh 1:1–5:12)

D Wilderness Wandering  
(Exod 15:22–19:1)  
D’ Wilderness wandering  
(Num 10:29–36:13)  
Covenant Renewed  
(Deuteronomy)

E Covenant Instituted  
(Exod 19:2–24:18)  
E’ Covenant Regulated  
(Exod 40:34–Num 10:28)

F Tabernacle  
(Exod 25:1–31:11)  
F’ Tabernacle  
(Exod 35:4–33)

G Covenant Broken  
(Exod 31:12–32:35)  
G’ Covenant Renewed  
(Exod 33:18–35:3)

H Promised Presence on Sinai  
(Exod 33:1-17)

Deuteronomy summarizes the events of Exodus–Numbers and concludes the Pentateuch, setting the stage for the possession of the land in the book of Joshua. But as Newing admits, it has no match in his ring; and it “causes the structure of the Hexateuch to bulge out and distort.”

133 Newing, “A Rhetorical and Theological Analysis of the Hexateuch,” 13. Jacob Milgrom (Numbers, xvii-xviii) later took up and slightly modified Newing’s chiastic arrangement of the Hexateuch; however his own arrangement does not entirely answer the problem of Deuteronomy’s place in the design, either.
George Savran has identified a very compelling ring composition that encompasses all forty-seven chapters of the books of Kings.¹³⁴

A  Solomon/united monarchy  1 Kgs 1:1–11:25
B  Jeroboam/Rehoboam; division of kingdom  1 Kgs 11:26–14:31
C  Kings of Judah/Israel  1 Kgs 15:1–16:22
D  Omride dynasty; rise and fall of Ba’al cult in Israel and Judah  1 Kgs 16:23—2 Kgs 12
C’  Kings of Judah/Israel  2 Kgs 13—16
B’  Fall of the northern kingdom  2 Kgs 17
A’  Kingdom of Judah alone  2 Kgs 18—25

The outer members of this ring, A and A’, pair the first king of the Davidic dynasty (Solomon), who ruled over a united kingdom, with the final years of the kingdom of Judah and the last Davidic king (Zedekiah). In section B, the kingdom is divided under Rehoboam; and Jeroboam’s apostasy in establishing the sanctuaries at Beth-El and Dan leads to the fall of the northern kingdom in section B’. Sections C and C’ provide a synchronized telling of the history of the divided kingdom, alternating between the reigns of the kings of Judah, and the kings of Israel. At the center of this ring (section D) is the Omride dynasty and the rise and fall of the Ba’al cult in Israel and Judah. As Savran notes, the length of this section in proportion to the period of time it covers (eighteen chapters for approximately forty years) demonstrates its significance in the books of Kings. In addition, as in our own analysis of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories, he identifies the midpoint of the ring composition as Elijah’s ascension to heaven in the

whirlwind (2 Kgs 2:11). According to Savran, the biblical author placed this story at the center of the ring to emphasize the prophetic parallel to dynastic kingship.

In his 1990 commentary on the book of Numbers, Jacob Milgrom argued that the main structural device of the book is chiasm and introversion—the term Milgrom employs for chiastic structures of more than two members.\textsuperscript{135} Milgrom notes that the form appears in nearly every chapter of the book of Numbers, from simple chiasms of a single verse, to larger rings extending across chapters, as in his structural analysis of chapters 13—14.\textsuperscript{136} The condensed chart below depicts the outline of this ring:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>The scouts’ expedition (13:1-24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>The scouts’ report (13:25-33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>The people’s response (14:1-10a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B’</td>
<td>God’s response (14:10b-38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A’</td>
<td>The people’s expedition (14:39-45)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The composition begins with YHWH’s command that Moses send an expedition to scout out the land of Canaan. Selecting one man from each tribe, Moses directs them to “go up into the hill country” [עלה ההר] (section A). The scouts report that the land is indeed a land flowing with milk and honey. But the size and strength of the inhabitants, they insist, makes the Israelites seem as small and weak as grasshoppers. Among these scouts, only Caleb professes trust in YHWH to lead Israel to victory (section B). Highlighted at the center of the ring is the people’s response to the faithless report of the scouts. They lament having ever left Egypt and call for an immediate return to the security of their

\textsuperscript{135} Milgrom, Numbers, xxii.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., xxvi; 387-390.
previous slave existence. Joshua and Caleb exhort the people to have no fear, however, since YHWH is with them. The people respond by threatening to stone them (section C). YHWH reacts to this sedition by promising to destroy all of the people except Moses. Although the Israelites are eventually spared on account of Moses’ intercession, YHWH decrees that none of the present generation—with the exception of Caleb and Joshua—will live to enter the land (section B’). Hearing this, the people are overcome with grief and now resolve to “go up into the hill country” [עלה ההר]. Ignoring the protests of Moses, the Israelites invade Canaan without the support of their God and are thoroughly defeated by its inhabitants (section A’).

Jacob Milgrom’s careful attention to chiastic structures in his analysis of the book of Numbers laid the foundation for Mary Douglas’s work on ring compositions. While she first approached Numbers to investigate ritual defilement and purification in connection with the ashes of the red heifer (Numbers 19),\textsuperscript{137} Douglas soon became convinced that the key to the book lay in its arrangement as a comprehensive ring composition. We turn now to consider her work.

\textit{Mary Douglas}

Mary Douglas received her training as an anthropologist at Oxford University in the years immediately following World War II. During her time at Oxford, she was fundamentally influenced by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, whose own thinking reflects the

looming presence of works by the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim. During her time at Oxford, Douglas was also deeply influenced by the Jewish Czech scholar, Franz Steiner, whose work on the subject of taboo informed her approach to the comparative study of religion. According to Douglas, Steiner first demonstrated the wrong mindedness of a bipartite theory of religion, which posits a distinction between advanced religion (which is civilized and enlightened) and exotic beliefs dominated by magic and irrational taboos. Steiner argued further that religion was a total cosmology, of which ethics was only one of many principles. The concept of sacredness is best understood as a relationship.

Douglas’s early work focused on the Lele people from the Kasai region of central Africa (in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). As her biographer Richard Fardon has noted, however, “If readers know of, or have read, only one book by Mary Douglas that book is likely to be Purity and Danger.” There, Douglas argued that ritual pollution is a symbolic construct used to maintain social boundaries. As part of her effort to illustrate this overarching theory, she analyzed the Mosaic dietary laws of Leviticus 11. Central to Douglas’s methodology was her conviction that these laws could not be explained in isolation; rather, a holistic approach that considered the total structure of classifications was required. Consequently Douglas proposed that the animals

---

139 Ibid., 82-83.
140 Ibid., 47-72.
141 Ibid., 80.
prohibited in Leviticus 11 are creatures whose physical constitutions defy classification. As anomalies, they confound perfection and so are incompatible with holiness.

The impact of this book has been astonishing. First published in 1966, the English edition of *Purity and Danger* has remained in print continuously for nearly half a century and been translated into a dozen other languages. Indeed, in 1995, *The Times Literary Supplement* included *Purity and Danger* on its list of the hundred most influential books since World War II. If Douglas’s contributions to biblical studies were not accepted by all, they could not be ignored. In the early 1990’s, however, Mary Douglas returned to the topic of the Hebrew Bible, publishing numerous articles, as well as two monographs, on the books of Numbers and Leviticus. In them, she summarily upended a major aspect of her thesis. She had, Douglas admitted, been mistaken—general pollution theory was sound, but the purity rules of Numbers and Leviticus are

146 Douglas, *In the Wilderness*.
unique in that they in no way serve as vehicles for social control. All Israelites are depicted as equally susceptible to the various states of ritual impurity, Douglas argued; and they are easily reversed. While it is true that the exceptional holiness of the Tabernacle was reserved for the priests alone, the egalitarian nature of both Numbers and Leviticus is further demonstrated in the way that both books emphasize that the stranger in the land is, welcome to participate in the cult.

Guiding Douglas’s reevaluation was her conviction that meaning in both Numbers and Leviticus is governed by comprehensive ring structures. In her analysis of these compositions, Douglas employs a literary critical application of structuralism that pays careful attention to cultural and historical context. The distinctiveness of her approach is best illustrated through a comparison with the methodology of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Analyzing the story of Asdiwal, a myth from the Tsimshian Indians, Lévi-Strauss artfully exposes the underlying structure of the story: oppositions of north, south, east and west; famine and plenty; patrilocal and matrilocal marriage; even heaven and earth. Douglas herself applauds these insights, though she protests that some of the oppositions have been imposed, rather than revealed. She rejects, however, his claim to have extracted the myth’s sociological significance (the Tsimshian tribe’s tacit admission of the paradox inherent in their tradition of matrilateral, cross-cousin marriage) from its

---

150 The theoretical assumptions of structuralism are borrowed from the field of linguistics, where the work of the Swiss philologist Ferdinand de Saussure revolutionized ideas regarding the nature of language and how meaning is constructed. Literary criticism took these insights and applied them to texts, arguing that literature is also a self-enclosed system with rules analogous to syntax. See Charles E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism: an Introduction to Theory and Practice* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 107-111.
formal structure. This concern, Douglas notes, is never raised in the myth itself. Against the universalism of Lévi-Strauss, Douglas asserts that while structural analysis has the potential to reveal untold depths of meaning, interpretation must rest upon the particulars of the culture that produced it.\footnote{Mary Douglas, \textit{Implicit Meanings} (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 153-172.} Although challenging Lévi-Strauss on this point, Douglas acknowledges that his structural analysis of myth and totemism provided the methodological insight for her own holistic approach.\footnote{Mary Douglas, \textit{Leviticus as Literature}, 22-24.}

Douglas’s concern with structural relationships is apparent already in her studies of the Lele, in which she considered the interconnections between politics, economy, religion, kinship, and marriage within the overall social pattern.\footnote{Fardon, \textit{Mary Douglas}, 52-71.} As she reminds us in the introduction to \textit{Thinking in Circles}, pattern perception is one of the basic skills of anthropology.\footnote{Douglas, \textit{Thinking in Circles}, xii.} In her careful, 1993 analysis of the book of Numbers, Douglas identified thirteen sections arranged according to an alternating pattern of narrative and law (see Table 1).

Table 1. The parallel rungs of the book of Numbers. Adapted from Mary Douglas, \textit{In the Wilderness}, p. 117.
Section I (the prologue of the ring) is linked to section VII (the mid-turn), with the intermediate sections of law and narrative paired with their respective complement on the other side of the ring. The thirteenth section brings the narrative to its completion, securing the end of the ring to its beginning. This arrangement, Douglas notes, recalls the Jewish lunar calendar of twelve months, with its optional thirteenth month added as need be to correct the seasonal drift that results from the 29½ day lunar month. The parallel between sections I and VII of the ring composition models the cultic calendar stipulated in Numbers 28—29. After delineating the regular daily, weekly, and monthly offerings, the text describes in great detail the festivals to be observed in the first and seventh months. Like the mid-turn of the ring, the seventh month of the Jewish year is both an ending and a new beginning. Douglas further suggests that the thirteen sections also represent the twelve tribes of Israel, plus the clerical tribe of Levites. Three times the prologue lists the descendants of Jacob tribe by tribe, meticulously ordering their placement in the camp: four sets of three at the cardinal points around the Tabernacle, with the Levites and their families forming an interior ring nearest to the sanctuary. This listing of all twelve tribes appears over and over in the book of Numbers, Douglas notes, emphasizing that all of the children of Israel are heirs to the promises made to Abraham.

In her article “The Forbidden Animals in Leviticus,” published that same year, Douglas first proposed that Leviticus was also arranged as a simple ring. In her 1999

---

156 Douglas, In the Wilderness, 102-122.
157 The two half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, descended from Joseph, are counted as individual tribes.
158 Ibid., 172-184.
book, *Leviticus as Literature*, however, Douglas substantially revised this initial thesis, arguing instead for the presence of a more complex ring structure in which three rings of decreasing size form an analogical representation of the three chambers of the Tabernacle. Chapters 1—17 represent the outer court; chapters 18—24 the inner court; and chapters 25—27 the Holy of Holies.\(^\text{159}\) Separating these three rings are two blocks of narrative (chapters 8—10 and 24:10-22), each corresponding to the screens in the Tabernacle that divided the outer court from the inner court, and the inner court from the Holy of Holies.\(^\text{160}\) Read in this way, Douglas maintained, the book of Leviticus is itself a three dimensional projection of the Tabernacle.

Mary Douglas’s final work, *Thinking in Circles*, appeared in print just a few months before her death in May, 2007.\(^\text{161}\) Having previously invoked ring composition in her analyses of Numbers and Leviticus,\(^\text{162}\) Douglas now sought systematically to set out the principles and functions of the form, with an emphasis on its exegetical purpose. As she explained: “A reader who reads a ring as if it were a straight linear composition will miss the meaning. Surely that matters! The text is seriously misunderstood, the composition is classed as lacking in syntax, and the author is dismissed with distain.

\(^{159}\) Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 218-231.

\(^{160}\) Ibid., 195-217.


\(^{162}\) Inexplicably, in *Thinking in Circles* Douglas amended her identification of Leviticus as a ring composition, instead classifying the book as an example of “figure poetry” (see pages x; 131-134). Her description of the book as representing the tripartite structure of the Tabernacle remained consistent, so whether this change was primarily an argument of nomenclature, or if she had indeed rejected her earlier conclusions is unclear. Her death soon after the book’s publication leaves this question unanswered, but we should note that Douglas never hesitated to scrap an earlier theory for a new one. See Jonathan Klawans, “Rethinking Leviticus and Rereading *Purity and Danger*.”
Surely, misinterpretation does matter.”

But since clarity of meaning is so important, why would an author deliver his message in such a complex poetic form? At issue, Douglas insists, is the nature of language. As Saussure demonstrated, words are pliable—meanings shift and ambiguity increases. Drawing on the Russian philologist Roman Jakobson’s theory of parallelism, Douglas maintains that the structure of a ring composition works to control interpretation. Meaning is both restricted—locked into place through parallel correspondences—and simultaneously deepened by the new range of references forged through this amalgamation. Jakobson likens the effect of parallelism to the dynamic cutting in film montage, which “uses the juxtaposition of contrasting shots or sequences to generate in the mind of the spectator ideas that these constituent shots or sequences by themselves do not carry.” In this way, a ring composition’s chiastic structure of parallelisms is able to convey complex, multidimensional messages.

Despite the seemingly universal use of ring composition, Douglas notes that we are slow to recognize its presence, condemning countless ancient texts to the unfair criticism of disorder and incoherence. (She speculates that postmodernist culture creates a bias against formality and structure that impedes our awareness). Towards this end, Douglas offers seven indicators for identifying a ring composition: first, a prologue states the theme and sets the stage; second, the composition is split at the midpoint into two

---

163 Douglas, Thinking in Circles, x.  
164 Ibid., 13.  
165 Ibid., 14.  
167 Douglas, Thinking in Circles, 139-148.
halves; third, the two halves are arranged in parallel sections; fourth, the individual sections are clearly marked, typically through the use of key words; fifth, the meaning of the ring is located at the mid-turn; sixth, the broader structure of the ring often includes smaller rings (rings within rings); and seventh, as the end returns to the beginning, a ring must be closed at two levels. Structurally, the end should be signaled by some conspicuous keys words that link the ending to the prologue, and, ideally, to the first section of parallels. These verbal links should lead to a thematic correspondence. In the following section, we shall consider these criteria by examining how Douglas utilized them in her final analysis of the book of Numbers.

I. The Prologue

Section I, the prologue of the ring composition (Num 1:1—4:49) sets out three main themes. The first is the order of the twelve tribes, the descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob (Num 1:1-7; 1:20-43; 2:1-31). Next, the status of the Levites is defined: as attendants to the priests, they are placed in charge of the Tabernacle, to carry and tend the Tent of Meeting and all of its furnishings (1:47-54). The final theme concerns the extreme sanctity of the Tabernacle. To breach this holy sector means certain death.

Among the Levites, the Kohathites are singled out to carry the most sacred objects: the ark; the table; the lampstand; the altars; the sanctuary curtain; and the sacred utensils (Num 3:27-31). This honor, however, is fraught with danger—before the Kohathites may touch these articles, the priests must wrap them in covers. The peril of their task is

underscored by YHWH’s charge to Moses and Aaron, twice repeated, not to let the Kohathites violate this holiness, lest they die (4:1-20).  

**II. Split into Two Halves**

The narrative begun in the prologue resumes seamlessly at the mid-turn (section VII, Num 16:1-17:28), splitting the ring into two halves. There, Korah, a Kohathite Levite, initiates a rebellion against the authority of Moses and Aaron. With a band of three Reubenites and two-hundred and fifty chieftains of the community at his side, Korah rejects his subservient station, charging that all members of the community are equally holy (Num 16:1-3). This challenge to the priesthood is settled by YHWH. Together with Moses and Aaron, Korah and his company are invited to bring fire pans of incense to present before the deity at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. The danger to the Kohathites foreshadowed in the prologue is realized at the mid-turn: Moses calls upon YHWH to confirm his authority; and instantly the ground beneath Korah and his people splits open, swallowing the rebels alive (vv. 16-35). The election of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood is then definitively demonstrated when YHWH calls for twelve staffs, one from the chieftain of each tribe, to be left overnight with Aaron’s staff in the Tent of Meeting. The next morning the thirteen staffs are retrieved, and all can see that Aaron’s staff alone has blossomed and borne almonds (Num17:16-24).  

---

169 Ibid., 44.  
170 Ibid., 59-61.


III. Parallel Sections

Having crossed the dividing line of the mid-turn, sections VIII-XII line up in reverse order with sections II-VI, forming five intervening rungs. Sections VI (Num 15:1-41) and VIII (Num 18:1-19:22) deal with sacrifice and meal offerings. These two sections exemplify the charge of needless repetition often leveled at an unrecognized ring composition, but precisely this duplication calls attention to the mid-turn lying between them. Sections V (Num 10:11—14:45) and IX (Num 20:1--27:23) relate the Israelites’ complaints as they travel through the wilderness. Sections IV (Num 10:1-10) and X (Num 28:1-30:17) concern the ritual calendar—the sounding of trumpets and the appointed feasts. Like the prologue and the mid-turn, these two sections can be read consecutively without the slightest sense of displacement. Section III (7:1—9:23) relates the commencement of the journey from Sinai, while section XI (Num 31:1—33:56) summarizes the journey, listing the places of their encampments. Section II (Num 5:1—6:27) reports the command to expel lepers from the camp, while in section XII (Num 33:50—35:34) the Israelites are commanded to drive the Canaanites from the land. Sections II and XII also are concerned with unintended sin. These parallels extend across the text, binding the two halves of the ring into a single whole.\(^\text{171}\)

IV. Indicators to Mark the Sections

\(^{171}\) Ibid., 49-56.
Key words often mark the individual sections of a ring composition. In the book of Numbers, however, the outline of the ring is further made obvious by alternating passages of law and story. (Douglas proposes that a similar technique appears in the *Iliad*, where sections alternate between night and day).\textsuperscript{172} Story sections in the book of Numbers typically begin by citing some combination of a time, a place, and a person or community featured in the narrative. Legal sections usually begin with a formulaic charge, such as: “YHWH said to Moses [or Aaron], command [or ‘tell,’ or ‘say to’] the children of Israel….” This technique of staggering passages of law with passages of story precisely orders the ring’s structure.\textsuperscript{173}

\textit{V. Meaning and the Mid-Turn}

As we noted above, the prologue of the book of Numbers sets the stage for the Levites’ rebellion that erupts at the mid-turn. The revolt is thwarted; and the destruction of Korah and his followers, as well as the miracle of Aaron’s staff, makes it clear that only Aaron’s descendents may serve as priests. Protecting the exclusive privilege of the Aaronide priesthood, Douglas theorizes, was the primary goal of this author, whom she locates in the post-exilic Persian province of Judea. When the priestly party resisted the exclusionary changes introduced by Ezra, Douglas proposes, the author replaced the Aaronides with Levites. The priestly editor responded in turn by literarily demoting the Levites to little more than Temple servants. Douglas argues further that the repeated

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 115-124.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 48-49.
listing of the twelve tribes (recited seven times in the book of Numbers) is a blatant repudiation of Judah/Judea’s claim to represent “all of Israel” to their Persian rulers. All of Jacob’s descendants were members of the community of Israel, including the Josephite tribes of the northern province of Samaria.\textsuperscript{174}

\textit{VI. Rings within Rings}

A larger ring composition often includes smaller rings—rings within rings. Numbers 22:2-24:25 tells the story of how the king of Moab attempts to hire a foreign prophet named Balaam to curse Israel. YHWH, however, repeatedly turns the prophet’s curses into blessings. Douglas argues that this humorous little story, itself a small ring, is a work of political satire intended to mock the Persian governor.\textsuperscript{175}

\textit{VII. Closure at Two Levels}

Closure is obviously an intrinsic aspect of a ring composition, for the end returning to its beginning is the very definition of a ring. In section XII of the book of Numbers, the Israelites are encamped on the banks of the Jordan River. Moses has seen the land, but he will not enter it. Having led the people through the wilderness, he now designates the borders of the land, appointing leaders from each tribe through whom the allotments will be apportioned (34:1-29). The Levites, whose actions dominated the prologue and the mid-turn, also appear at the end. They will receive no hereditary portion

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 59-67.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 37; 46.
of land, but Levitical cities will be distributed throughout the holdings of the remaining tribes. With the reappearance of the Levites, the twelve tribes, the chieftains, and the children of Israel, the prologue is structurally linked to both the mid-turn and the end of the ring. Thematically, however, the ending of the ring fails to return to the central meaning of the composition, because the rebellion of the Levites is never mentioned.  

Nevertheless, a second closing device securely binds the end to the beginning. This “latch” (Num 36:1-13) returns to a topic raised in Num 27:1-11—the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad, who died without a son. Because his daughters have been allowed to inherit, their tribe approaches Moses with a new concern: if these women marry outside of their tribe, their land will pass from the hereditary holdings of the tribe. YHWH commands Moses to instruct the people that an inheriting daughter must marry within a clan of her father’s tribe (Num 36:6, 7, 8, 12). This concern returns us to the prologue, where the Israelites were numbered according to their fathers’ houses (Num 1:2, 4, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 44, 45), thereby matching the end of the ring to its beginning.  

By identifying the ring composition undergirding the book of Numbers, Douglas has provided a key to its interpretation. Although the Book has been notoriously regarded as disorderly and unstructured, the syntax deemed lacking is in fact located in this chiastic frame. When read according to the conventions of a ring composition, the book of Numbers is revealed as a political argument in support of both the supremacy of the Aaronite priesthood over the Levites and a call for solidarity among Israel’s twelve tribes.

---

176 Ibid., 46: 58.
177 Ibid., 68-70.
in the early years of the return from Babylonia. Moreover, while the sanctity of the tabernacle/Temple is crucial, the purity rules espoused in Numbers offer no distinctions among the Israelites. All are equally susceptible to easily remedied states of ritual impurity.

As Douglas’s study demonstrates, recognizing the presence of a ring composition has the potential to clarify and bring new insights to the reading of a text. Nevertheless, the precision of criteria by which chiastic structures are identified has been troublingly inconsistent. Before proceeding to our own analysis of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories, we shall first establish our own criteria for identifying ring compositions.

Towards a More Empirical Approach to Ring Compositions

The study of ring compositions has suffered from a general failure to establish reliable criteria. In an attempt to advance a more rigorous standard, John W. Welch offered fifteen criteria for evaluating the strength or weakness of a proposed chiastic pattern. He acknowledges the similar effort made by Lund, who proposed seven laws of chiastic structures, but Lund’s rules, Welch argues, “are riddled with subjective words like ‘often,’ ‘frequently,’ and ‘many,’ leaving unfinished the task of identifying the factors that are characteristic of strongly chiastic texts or that describe the point at which

---


it is appropriate to denominate a passage as chiastic.”

Welch’s goal is to produce rigorous and verifiable results; however, he falls into the same trap of subjectivity that he recognized in the earlier work of Lund. Indeed, the intangible element of objectivity appears first on Welch’s list:

To what degree is the proposed pattern *clearly evident* in the text? If the process of identifying chiasmus is to produce verifiable results, the inverted parallel orders must be *objectively evident*. If a proposed chiasm consists of elements that are *objectively observable* in the text, rather than depending on distant parallels or clever linkages that require imaginative commentary to explain, it is more likely that the chiastic character of the text is strong and less likely that the reader has imposed an arrangement upon the text which he or she alone has brought to it. The *more evident* an arrangement, the greater the degree of chiasticity.  

No one would disagree with Welch’s call for objectivity, but his criteria fail to provide a yardstick of any kind in determining just what is “clearly evident,” or “objectively evident,” or “objectively observable.”

Mary Douglas provides some much needed guidelines for identifying chiastic structures, most critically in the area of establishing what constitutes a parallel correspondence. She notes the importance of key words, particularly as they appear in clusters, as well as the pairing of parallel phrases. Douglas’s contribution has been invaluable; nevertheless, the present study goes further in providing empirical evidence

---

182 Ibid., 161-162; emphases mine.
184 Ibid., 69-70.
185 Ibid., 116.
regarding the occurrences of key words—tabulating their presence both within and outside of the chiastic pattern. This data supports our claim that the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories is arranged in the form of a comprehensive ring composition.

The Elijah-Elisha Cycle of Stories as a Ring Composition

Chapters 2 and 3 provide a detailed textual analysis of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories (1 Kgs 16:23—2 Kgs 13:25). At this point, however, we shall sketch the broader outline of the ring. Table 2 depicts its overarching structure:

Table 2. The parallel rungs of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition.

The Elijah-Elisha ring composition conforms to all seven of Douglas’s criteria. The composition begins with a short prologue, 1 Kgs 16:23–34, designated here as section I. The prologue is connected to the mid-turn, section VIII (1 Kgs 22:52–2 Kgs 2:25), through a cluster of key words: Bethel, repeated four times; Jericho, repeated five times; and the mountain of Samaria, which stands in parallelistic tension with the mountain of
The presence of such key words is the primary structuring device utilized in the Elijah-Elisha ring composition. (See Table 3).

Table 3. Key words and parallels of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APOSTASY (Prologue)</th>
<th>RESUSCITATION AND RESTORATION (Sixth Rung)</th>
<th>ANTI BAALISM (Fifth Rung)</th>
<th>THE THREE SWORDS OF YHWH (Fourth Rung)</th>
<th>HOLY WAR (Third Rung)</th>
<th>SECTION V: 1 Kings 20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section I: 1 Kings 16:23—34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(20:1) king of Aram, Ben-Hadad wages war [למלך] against Israel with horses and chariots [דרובים ורכב]; (20:13, 22) a prophet [נביא], sometimes called the man of God [איש האלהים]; (20:28) gives Ahab military advice; (20:34) sets free [שלח] Ben-Hadad; (20:18) seize [חלה]; (20:35) sons of the prophets [בני הנביאים]; (20:38) motif of eyes covered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(16:24) the mountain [הר]; (16:33) sacred post [אשרה]; (16:34) Bethel [ב întalmart]; Jericho [יריחו]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section II: 1 Kings 17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(17:17) falls sick [חלה]; his illness [חליו]; (17:21) three times [שלש פעמים]; (17:22) revived [ויחי]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section IV: 2 Kings 8—9:29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(8:7-15) Elisha sends a disciple to anoint Jehu, initiating the coup against the house of Ahab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9:1-10) Elisha sets in motion the coup of Hazael</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section V: 1 Kings 20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(6:1) sons of the prophets [בני הנביאים]; (6:8) the king of Aram wages war [למלך] against Israel; (6:9, 10, 15) the man of God [איש האלהים]; (6:12) the prophet [נביא] Elisha gives king of Israel military advice; (6:14) Aram sends horses and chariots [דרובים ורכב] against Elisha; (6:17; 7:6) YHWH sends horses and chariots of fire; (6:17, 20) motif of eyes blinded and opened; (6:23) sets free [שלח] troops of Aram; (7:12) seize [חלה]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### SOCIAL JUSTICE (Second Rung)

**Section VI: 1 Kings 21**
(21:1, 2, 6, 7, 15, 16, 18) *vineyard* [בֵּית־אֵל]; (21:2, 6, 15) *silver* [כְּסֵף]; (21:7) *heart* [לב]; (21:8-11) *letters* sent (repeated four times); (21:10, 13) two scoundrels [שׁוּנֵים]; (21:19) Elijah confronts Ahab with a question; (21:19-24) punishment corresponds to sin; (21:27) Ahab *rends* [קרע] his garment in despair

**Section VII: 1 Kings 22:1-51**
(22:4) King of Israel asks King Jehoshaphat of Judah, Will you come with me [הָלֵךְ אֶתִּי] to make war [לָמָּתָרוֹ] at Ramoth-gilead? The reply: I will do what you do; my horses shall be your horses, my chariots and horsemen! [כְּרוּצֵי שָׁנַיִם; הָלְיוֹ דִּישָׁנִים] and parts them both (2:9) Elisha requests a double (two) [שָׁנָם] portion of Elijah’s spirit; (2:11-12) fiery chariot with fiery horses appears and parts them both (two) and takes Elijah; Elisha cries out Father, father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen! [כְּרוּצֵי שָׁנַיִם] Elisha rends [קרע] his garments in (two) [שָׁנָם] punishment corresponds to sin

### HOLY WAR (First Rung)

**Section VIII: 1 Kings 22:52—2 Kings 2:25**
(mid-turn forms a minor ring within greater ring)

A (1:2) Ahaziah is *injured* [חלֵל]; (1:3) *Go up* [עִלָּה] (m. s. imp.)

B (1:9-14; 2:7) *fifty* [שֵׁלוֹשָׁה]; (1:9) *the mountain* [נַחֲלָה]; (2:2, 3) *Bethel* [בֵּית־אֵל]; (2:4, 5) Jericho, [יריחו]; (2:3, 5, 7) *sons of the prophets* [גּוֹרָיֹן]; (2:3) *sons of the prophets came out* [וַיַּלְאוּ]

C (2:8) Elijah *took* [קָחָה] and *struck* [שָׁנַה] the water and they split in half this way and that [וַיִּמְסָרוּ וְיָדְעוּ] and they *two* [שְׁנֵי] crossed [עַדְבָּר]

### RENT IN TWO (Mid-turn)

A’ (2:23) *Go up* [עִלָּה] (m. s. imp.)

B’ (2:15) *sons of the prophets* [בְּנֵי נְבֵي]; (2:16, 17) *fifty* [שֵׁלוֹשָׁה]; (2:15, 18) Jericho, [יריחו]; (2:23) *Bethel* [בֵּית־אֵל]; little boys *came out* [וַיָּלֶאו]

C’ (2:14) Elisha *took* [קָחָה] Elijah’s *mantle* [אָדוֹרָה] and *struck* [שָׁנַה] the water and they split in half this way and that [וַיִּמְסָרוּ וְיָדְעוּ] and he *crossed* [עַדְבָּר]

D (2:9) Elisha requests a double (two) [שָׁנָם] portion of Elijah’s spirit; (2:11-12) fiery chariot with fiery horses appears and parts them both (two) and takes Elijah; Elisha cries out Father, father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen! [כְּרוּצֵי שָׁנַיִם] Elisha *rends* [קרע] his garments in (two) [שָׁנָם] punishment corresponds to sin

### Section IX: 2 Kings 3
(3:7) King of Israel asks King Jehoshaphat of Judah, Will you come with me [הלך אתי] to Moab to make war [לאלהו]? The reply: I will do what you do; my troops shall be your troops, my horses shall be your horses; (3:11) Jehoshaphat asks: is there another prophet of YHWH here [אדרת יהוה] from whom we can inquire [为导向ה] of YHWH [לָמָּתָרוֹ] whom we can inquire [为导向ה] through him [מאתו]; (3:14) Elisha swears, “as YHWH lives” [יְהוָה חי] [יְהוָה חי]; (3:27) army of Israel flees and they returned to their land [ארץ]

### RENT IN TWO (Mid-turn)

A’ (2:23) *Go up* [עִלָּה] (m. s. imp.)

B’ (2:15) *sons of the prophets* [בְּנֵי נְבֵי]; (2:16, 17) *fifty* [שֵׁלוֹשָׁה]; (2:15, 18) Jericho, [יריחו]; (2:23) *Bethel* [בֵּית־אֵל]; little boys *came out* [וַיָּלֶאו]

C’ (2:14) Elisha *took* [קָחָה] Elijah’s *mantle* [אָדוֹרָה] and *struck* [שָׁנַה] the water and they split in half this way and that [וַיִּמְסָרוּ וְיָדְעוּ] and he *crossed* [עַדְבָּר]

D (2:9) Elisha requests a double (two) [שָׁנָם] portion of Elijah’s spirit; (2:11-12) fiery chariot with fiery horses appears and parts them both (two) and takes Elijah; Elisha cries out Father, father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen! [כְּרוּצֵי שָׁנַיִם] Elisha *rends* [קרע] his garments in (two) [שָׁנָם] punishment corresponds to sin
Correspondence between the prologue and the mid-turn splits the ring down the middle into two parallel halves. From the prologue, the ring begins its outward bound journey, with each individual section clearly marked through the use of key words. Advancing through sections II–VII (1 Kgs 17–22:51), the ring continues until it reaches the mid-turn, whereupon it reverses itself and turns back towards the beginning with sections IX–XIV (2 Kgs 3–13:25), which line up neatly with their corresponding sections on the other side of the ring. The mid-turn of a ring composition is like the keystone of an arch, locking all the other pieces into position. Structurally, the mid-turn must connect to the prologue (in this case, by the cluster of the key words Bethel, Jericho, and the mountain), as well as to the ending (with its repetition of the enigmatic expression, “Father! Father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!”). The interpretive effect of this construction is to interrupt a straight, sequential reading. The paired sections must be read in relation to one another and to the composition as a whole.

The significance of the mid-turn makes it essential that this section be clearly marked. The Elijah-Elisha mid-turn is made obvious in several ways. First, the rung of parallels placed just before the mid-turn (sections VII and IX) are the strongest parallels of the entire composition, with nearly identical stories containing identical dialogue and numerous key words. One could hardly begin section IX (2 Kings 3) without noticing its connection to section VII (1 Kgs 22:1-51). To quote Douglas: “It is common in ring compositions for the mid-turn to be flanked by two sections that are nearly the same. The parallels before and after the mid-turn form a triad that helps the reader to recognize the
significance of the piece in the middle.” Second, the mid-turn of the Elijah-Elisha ring is itself a ring—that is, a “minor ring” within the greater ring of the entire composition. The key words sacred post, falls sick, his illness, three times, and he revived link the end to the beginning. On a thematic level, the fact that the sacred post still stands indicates that the apostasy described during Ahab’s reign has not yet been eradicated. However, the miraculous re-birth of the corpse when it comes into contact with Elisha’s bones foreshadows the restored neo-Davidic kingdom anticipated by the Josianic redactor.

In his list of criteria for identifying chiastic structures, Welch includes the element of “purpose.” Is there an identifiable literary reason why the author or editor might employ such a construction? In the Elijah-Elisha pericope, a ring composition that is divided down the middle but returns to the beginning to create a whole provides a satisfying analogy to the divided kingdom and the hope for its reunification. This dissertation demonstrates that this cycle of prophetic stories is arranged as a ring composition and reveals its propagandistic intention to support Josiah’s reforms. The northern provenance of these stories, which display no overt interest in the concerns of the Dtr, has long misled scholars into assuming that these chapters comprise a discrete unit, only loosely connected to the greater DtrH. Clearly, the author constructed this treatise from preexistent narratives; however, this study demonstrates that these stories are not the late additions of a post-exilic reworking, but an integral part of the Josianic edition of the DtrH. Championing the rallying cry of holy war, King Josiah and his party

186 Ibid., 55-56.
hope to capitalize on the misfortunes of the Assyrian Empire, which allowed the small Judean kingdom to imagine a return to its former glory under David. The chariots and horses of fire, the heavenly army of YHWH, will again battle for Israel.
Chapter 2 – Interpretation: The Prologue and the Mid-Turn

Introduction

Having considered the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories within the context of the DtrH, as well as the literary form of ring compositions and their prevalence throughout the ancient world, we now turn to a detailed examination of the relevant biblical texts. As our analysis below makes clear, this composition was redacted by the ideologues supporting Josiah’s program of holy war to convince the people of Israel (both northern and southern) of Josiah’s divine sanction, and of the inevitability of his success. Drawing on the rich stories of the prophetic heroes of the north, these writers sought both to reinterpret the past and to explain the meaning of events unfolding in their own time—events presently culminating with Josiah’s penetration into the territory of the former northern kingdom of Israel. Josiah’s death at Megiddo ended this dream of reestablishing an independent and united neo-Davidic kingdom. Within a few short decades, Judah was destroyed; and the Davidic dynasty ended. Later redactors brought the Deuteronomistic History up to date—adding layers of writing that buried the ring. As the historical events that the composition was intended to illumine receded into the past, the meaning of this subtly imbedded corroboration for Josiah’s reforms began to fade. The complexity of the ring composition—a high style meant to validate its message—further contributed

to this loss. The prophecy the Dtr had cultivated remained unfulfilled and eventually was forgotten by the post-exilic community that inherited these texts.

As we begin our textual analysis, we must bear in mind the nature of ring compositions and adjust our approach accordingly. Rather than impose a straight, sequential reading on this text, we will allow our interpretation to be guided by the chiastic structure that connects parallel passages across the cycle. The present chapter will consider the prologue (1 Kgs 16:23–34) and its relationship to the mid-turn (1 Kgs 22:52—2 Kgs 2:25); chapter 3 addresses the six intervening rungs that reach across the composition. In choosing this approach, we respect the literary structure provided by the composer. Nevertheless, a degree of damage to the integrity of the ring is inevitable; such compositions were not intended simply to be read (or heard) only once. They were read over and over, with a familiarity that allowed all elements to be actualized simultaneously. Our analysis can only attempt to recreate that experience.

The Prologue: APOSTASY (1 Kings 16:23–34)

The prologue of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition consists of twelve densely packed verses that deftly set the stage for events that will unfold. Table 4 identifies the key words and parallels of the prologue and the mid-turn. The passage begins by introducing the reign of Omri, who attained the throne of Israel amidst the fourth military coup following Jeroboam’s revolt and the division of the formerly united kingdom almost

---

half a century earlier. After this violent beginning, Omri becomes the first ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel to accomplish dynastic succession.

Table 4. The key words and parallels of the prologue and the mid-turn.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>APOSTASY (Prologue)</th>
<th>RENT IN TWO (Mid-turn)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Section I: 1 Kings 16:23—34</strong></td>
<td><strong>Section VIII: 1 Kgs 22:52—2 Kgs 2:25</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(16:24) <strong>the mountain</strong> [ההר]; (16:33) <strong>sacred post</strong> [אשרת]; (16:34 <strong>Bethel:</strong> [בית האלה]; <strong>Jericho:</strong> [יריחו]</td>
<td>(mid-turn forms a minor ring within greater ring)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>(1:2) Ahaziah is <strong>injured</strong> [חושל]; (1:3) <strong>Go up</strong> [עלה] (m.s. imp.)</td>
<td>A′ (2:23) <strong>Go up</strong> [עלה] (m.s. imp.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>(1:9-14; 2:7) <strong>fifty</strong> [עשרים]; (1:9) <strong>the mountain</strong> [ההר]; (2:2, 3) <strong>Bethel:</strong> [beth el]; (2:4, 5) <strong>Jericho:</strong> [יריחו]; (2:3, 5, 7) <strong>sons of the prophets</strong> [בני הנביאים]; (2:3) <strong>sons of the prophets came out</strong> [יצא]</td>
<td>B′ (2:15) <strong>sons of the prophets</strong> [בני הנביאים]; (2:16, 17) <strong>fifty</strong> [עשרים]; (2:15, 18) <strong>Jericho:</strong> [יריחו]; (2:23) <strong>Bethel:</strong> [beth el]; little boys <strong>came out</strong> [יצא]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>(2:8) Elijah took [לקח] his mantle [אדרת] and struck the water and they split in half this way and <strong>that</strong> [והיכה את מים ויחצו הנה והנה] and they <strong>two</strong> crossed [עברו]</td>
<td>C′ (2:14) Elisha took [לקח] Elijah’s mantle [אדרת] and struck the water and they split in half this way and <strong>that</strong> [והיכה את מים ויחצו הנה והנה] and he <strong>crossed</strong> [עבר]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>(2:9) Elisha requests a double (two) [שנים] portion of Elijah’s spirit; (2:11-12) fiery chariot with fiery horses appears and parts them both (two) and takes Elijah; Elisha cries out Father, father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!: Elisha rends [кроת] his garments in (two) [שניים]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though the biblical text implies otherwise, the wealth and power of the house of Omri dwarfed its sister kingdom in the south. It was Omri who, after finally wresting the

---

kingdom from his rival, Tibni son of Ginath, abandoned the city of Tirzah, where his predecessors had ruled, to establish a new northern capital at Samaria. To build this city, the Dtr explains, Omri purchased the mountain \( \text{ההר} \) of Samaria for two talents of silver:

“Then he bought the mountain of Samaria from Shemer for two talents of silver; he built [a city] on the mountain and named the city which he had built Samaria, after Shemer, the owner of the mountain” (1 Kgs 16:24). The importance of Samaria’s location on the mountain, emphasized by the quick, three-fold repetition of this key word, prepares the reader for what will become a cosmic opposition between the God of Israel and the kings of Samaria, whose northern capital appears in parallel tension with the mountain of Carmel, at the mid-turn of the ring. The key word “the mountain” occurs six times within the ring composition, with four of those occurrences in accordance with the pattern of the ring composition. It occurs three times in the prologue (1 Kgs 16:24 [3x]) and one time at the mid-turn (2 Kgs 1:9). The word also appears two times outside of the ring composition pattern (2 Kgs 4:27; 6:17). As we shall see, however, the key words of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition appear in clusters. Thus the significance of the word is strengthened by its appearance within the cluster of key words—“the mountain,” “Beth-El,” and “Jericho”—which occur together at both the prologue and the mid-turn, but nowhere else.

Omri was succeeded by his son, Ahab, whose apostasy, the Dtr contends, exceeded even that of Jeroboam ben Nebat (1 Kgs 16:30–31). Jeroboam had established the rival shrines to Jerusalem at two ancient holy places, Beth-El and Dan, in an attempt to buttress the political division between north and south (1 Kgs 12:26–27). Although this
fracture occurred when Rehoboam attempted to claim the throne of a united kingdom after the death of his father Solomon (1 Kgs 11), the Dtr understood Solomon’s cultic transgressions, made to accommodate his foreign wives, as having set these events in motion. Now Ahab is depicted as following suit, taking the Phoenician princess Jezebel as his wife and worshipping her god, Ba’al. Not only did Ahab build a temple for Ba’al in Samaria, but also he went so far as to erect a sacred post, an Asherah, in the land of Israel. This key word occurs two times in accordance with the pattern of the ring composition. It appears once here (1 Kgs 16:33) and one other time at the conclusion of the ring (2 Kgs 13:6). Although the word “Asherah” occurs in 1 Kings 18:19, that reference is actually to “the four-hundred prophets of Asherah” [نبيי האשרה] who eat at Jezebel’s table and not to the sacred post.

This brief prologue succinctly describes the rise to power of the House of Omri and the founding of Samaria. It also sets the stage for Elijah’s confrontation with Ahab that immediately follows. It concludes with a final verse that most commentators insist is so unrelated to its context that it can only be a late addition:191 “In his [Ahab’s] days Hiel the Bethelite fortified Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of Abiram his first-born, and set its gates in place at the cost of Segub his youngest, in accordance with the words that YHWH had spoken through Joshua ben Nun” (1 Kgs 16:34). The key words “Jericho” and “Beth-El” connect the prologue to the mid-turn (1 Kgs 22:52—2 Kgs 2:25). “Jericho” occurs six times in accordance with the pattern of the ring composition:

once here (1 Kgs 16:34) and five times at the mid-turn (2 Kgs 2:4 [2x], 5, 15, 18). “Beth-
El” occurs five times in accordance with the ring composition pattern: once here (1 Kgs
16:34) and four times at the mid-turn (2 Kgs 2:2 [2x], 3, 23). Beth-El also appears once
outside of the pattern in reference to Jeroboam’s calves in 2 Kings 10:29.

The battle of Jericho is the quintessential example of holy war in the Hebrew
Bible, and its reference in the prologue of the ring composition is significant. By recalling
Joshua’s curse against the city of Jericho, the Dtr has explicitly evoked the circumstances
of the original conquest of Canaan, establishing those events as the lenses through which
Josiah’s conquest must be viewed. At that time, the sacralized troops of Israel, led by the
king-like figure of Joshua (whose image, Richard D. Nelson has convincingly
demonstrated, was modeled on Josiah’s), had overthrown their enemies and taken
possession of the land promised to their forebears. Now, the Dtr asserts by analogy,
Josiah and his army will reclaim this land for Israel. The ritualized military campaign
against Jericho recounted in Joshua 1–6 is paradigmatic of the entire conquest, and nearly
one half of the conquest material is devoted to its telling. The invasion begins with
YHWH’s command to Joshua to prepare the people to cross the Jordan River and take
possession of the land (Josh 1:2). The account of Joshua’s crossing unfolds with great
solemnity (Josh 3–5:1). Led by levitical priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant, the
Israelites advanced to the Jordan in ceremonial procession. At the moment when the
priests’ feet entered the river, its flow was cut off; and the waters began to pile up in a

193 See Millard C. Lind, Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel (Scottdale,
heap. With the priests and the Ark stationed midstream, restraining the waters, the people crossed over on dry land. This allusion to Joshua’s crossing of the Jordan (and to Moses’ crossing of the Reed Sea) will be echoed at the mid-turn of the ring with the miraculous crossings of Elijah and Elisha. Joshua then commanded twelve men, one from each tribe, to lift a stone from the riverbed. When all of this was done, the priests moved forward, carrying the Ark out of the river; and its waters immediately resumed their course.

Leaving the Jordan, the Israelites continued on to Gilgal, on the eastern border of Jericho, where the Dtr records that the twelve stones taken from the river were set up to commemorate the miracle of the crossing.

With this reference to Gilgal, the Dtr has created an intersection of allusions: at Gilgal, the Israelites celebrated their first passover in the promised land (Joshua 5:10-12). The Dtr recounts that Josiah looked to the example of this earlier period, maintaining that his own celebration was the first legitimate passover since before the period of the Judges (2 Kgs 23:21–23). Also from Gilgal, YHWH commanded the Israelites to advance against Jericho. Here too, the ring composition evokes the Joshua narrative, since Elijah and Elisha also are described as setting out from Gilgal on their circuitous trek through Beth-El, Jericho, and across the Jordan—a journey bisected by Elijah’s spectacular departure.

As Nelson has noted, the pomp and circumstance of the battle of Jericho narrative is strangely non-militaristic, considering that it introduces a book of war and bloodshed. Joshua first encounters a divine being, sword in hand, who identifies himself as the captain of YHWH’s army. At YHWH’s command, the troops set out with seven priests,
all carrying ram’s horns, escorting the Ark of the Covenant. This procession silently circles the city once a day for six days. After seven rounds on the seventh day, the priests blow their horns, the people shout, and Jericho’s walls collapse. Although the troops on the ground carry out the actual combat, their victory is a foregone conclusion granted to Israel by YHWH. The entire expedition is presented as a triumphant procession, not a violent invasion. Nelson insightfully suggests that the Dtr sought to temper the violent traditions of the conquest that he had inherited, in keeping with the author’s present day reality of Josiah’s triumphant, yet peaceful recovery of the land abandoned by the declining Assyrian Empire.  

With this allusion to the original conquest, the prologue of the ring establishes the composition’s purpose. The events taking place now—in the time of the Josianic redactor (who edited, arranged, and supplemented the texts he had inherited) and his reader (the people of Israel, both north and south)—mirror those of the earlier conquest under Joshua. At that time, according to the Dtr, the land had been granted to the Israelites in fulfillment of God’s promise to their forebears. Led in holy war by Joshua, the original conquest generation realized this divine gift, until the syncretistic religious practices of Solomon divided the kingdom, and ignited an apostasy that continued to flourish in the north. And nowhere was this apostasy more flagrant than at Beth-El, home of a state sanctuary that functioned as Jerusalem’s constant rival for three hundred years (ca. 921-621 BCE). At the conclusion of the ring composition, the Dtr will remind us that even the sacred post Ahab erected more than two centuries earlier still stood in Samaria (2 Kgs

By recalling Joshua and the success of the original conquest, however, the Dtr alludes to Josiah and foretells an identical outcome in his effort to extinguish all such competing cults. As the author of this composition already knew (from the vantage of his privileged prospective in the future), Josiah destroyed Ahab’s sacred post and desecrated the Beth-El sanctuary (2 Kgs 23:15) in his attempt to reestablish a united and independent neo-Davidic kingdom.

The Mid-Turn: RENT IN TWO (2 Kings 1—2)

The prologue of a ring composition anticipates the mid-turn, where the chiastic structure serves to direct the reader’s attention. The meaning of the work is located there. In the Elijah-Elisha ring composition, the mid-turn’s events form a minor ring nested within the greater composition. Here, the narrative reaches its climax in Elijah’s miraculous ascension. This double emphasis—with the mid-turn of the minor ring in perfect alignment with the mid-turn of the greater ring—dramatically underscores the significance of its message.

Commentators typically pass over this verse without recognizing that the sacred post destroyed by Josiah at the Beth-El sanctuary in 2 Kings 23:15, was the very one whose construction was attributed to Ahab in 1 Kings 16:33. An exception in this regard is G. Knoppers, Two Nations Under God, (2 vols.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993-94), 2:206, who rightly notes that the text does not pinpoint the location of Ahab’s post. That Knoppers is correct in identifying these sacred posts as one and the same is further demonstrated a few verses later, in 2 Kings 23:18, where the narrative of Josiah’s destruction of Beth-El is concluded with the summation that “they left his [the man of God’s] bones undisturbed together with the prophet who came from Samaria.” According to the narrative of 1 Kings 13 in which Josiah’s coming had been foretold, the prophet lived in Beth-El (1 Kings 13:11), however this reference to Samaria reflects the passage’s origin in the time of Josiah, when Beth-El was part of the Assyrian province of Samaria – hence the prophet from Beth-El was in fact from Samaria.


Table 5. The geographical chiasmus that traces Elijah and Elisha’s journey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Scripture Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samaria</td>
<td>1:2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Unnamed Mountain</td>
<td>1:9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilgal</td>
<td>2:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth-El</td>
<td>2:2-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jericho</td>
<td>2:4-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan River</td>
<td>2:6-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans-Jordan</td>
<td>2:9-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan River</td>
<td>2:13-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jericho</td>
<td>2:15-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth-El</td>
<td>2:23-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Carmel</td>
<td>2:25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samaria</td>
<td>2:25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The minor ring of the mid-turn begins in Samaria. Ahab’s death in battle at Ramoth-gilead (1 Kgs 22) brings his son, Ahaziah, to the throne of the northern kingdom of Israel.
His reign is brief, however—Ahaziah falls from his upper chamber and is fatally injured. This key word occurs three times in accordance with the ring composition pattern. It appears once at the mid-turn (2 Kgs 1:2) and twice more on the sixth rung (1 Kgs 17:17; 2 Kgs 13:14). The link between these occurrences on the sixth rung is further strengthened by their presence in a cluster with the key words “his illness” [חלה] (1 Kgs 17:17; 2 Kgs 13:14) and revived [ויחי] (2 Kgs 13:21). The word also appears three times outside of the pattern (1 Kgs 22:34; 2 Kgs 8:7, 29).

With his life in the balance, Ahaziah sends messengers to inquire of his fate. However, he foolishly directs his inquiry to Ba’al-zebub, the god of Ekron, and not to YHWH. What follows is a powerful demonstration of the infinite reach of Israel’s God, channeled through his prophet, Elijah. No sooner have Ahaziah’s messengers set out than an angel of YHWH directs Elijah to intercept them: “Arise and go up [עלה] to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say to them, ‘Is there no God in Israel that you go to inquire of Ba’al-zebub, the god of Ekron?’” (2 Kgs 1:3). This key word, the masculine singular imperative, “go up,” occurs nine times within the ring composition, with six of those occurrences lying outside of the pattern. However, the three occurrences within the pattern all appear at the mid-turn: once here (2 Kgs 1:3) and twice more in the taunts of the boys of Beth-El against Elisha (2 Kgs 2:23), where they open and close the minor ring. Again, their significance in the structure of the ring composition is buttressed by their placement with other key words. The same root will describe Elijah’s rise to heaven in the whirlwind (2 Kgs 2:11). The narrative both anticipates and builds towards this
climatic moment (thereby emphasizing its importance) through a suspenseful series of up/down [עלה / יורד] reversals that begin in v. 3 with the angel’s initial command to Elijah that he “go up” to meet the king’s messengers. The verb עלה occurs fifteen times in the mid-turn, with eleven occurrences leading up to and including Elijah’s ascension: 2 Kgs 1:3, 4, 6 [2x], 7, 9, 11 (emended from ענה in accordance with the Lucianic recension), 13, 16; 2:1, 11. The final four occurrences (2 Kgs 2:23 [4x]) close the minor ring. The opposing verb ירד occurs twelve times (2 Kgs 1:6, 9, 10 [2x], 11, 12 [2x], 14, 15 [2x], 16; 2:2).

The prophecy that Elijah is to deliver to the king includes both verbs: “The bed onto which you have climbed, you will not descend from, for you shall surely die” (v. 4). Elijah sets out; and although his confrontation with the messengers takes place beyond our view, the delivery of the prophecy results in their quick return to the king. Their journey was interrupted by a man who “came up” to meet them, the messengers explain; and they relay the damning prophecy to the bedridden king (v. 6). Hearing his messengers’ description of the man who “came up” (v. 7), Ahaziah recognizes his father’s nemesis, the prophet Elijah, and dispatches a captain of fifty [חמשים] and his fifty men to bring the prophet to his sickbed in Samaria (v. 9). The key word “Fifty” occurs nineteen times in accordance with the pattern, with eighteen of these occurrences clustered at the mid-turn (2 Kgs 1:9 [2x], 10 [3x], 11 [2x], 12 [2x], 13 [4x], 14 [2x]; 2:7, 16, 17). One additional occurrence appears in 2 Kings 13:7, where it links the mid-turn to
the conclusion of the ring in section XIV. The word appears five times outside of the pattern (1 Kgs 18:4, 13 [2x], 19, 22).

The captain of fifty and his fifty men are matched by the number of prophets at Jericho who trail behind the traveling Elijah and Elisha (2 Kgs 2:7). These prophets will later offer to send fifty strong men in search of the vanished Elijah (vv. 16, 17)—an allusion that extends a military nuance to this prophetic party.\footnote{The Hebrew Bible offers other examples of military units of fifty men serving beneath a captain. See 1 Sam 8:12; 2 Kgs 15:25; Isa 3:3. Units of fifty are also evidenced among their ancient Near Eastern neighbors. See Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, II Kings (AB 11; New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1988), 26.} To reach Elijah, the captain must “go up” to the top of the mountain (v. 9) where Elijah sits waiting. English translations frequently render Elijah’s perch as “hill,”\footnote{For example see the New Revised Standard Version, and the New JPS Translation.} and הר can be translated as “hill” in some contexts. The prefixed definite article makes it clear, however, that a specific site (one readers are expected to recognize) is being designated. This unnamed mountain’s association with Elijah, as well as its placement in the geographical chiasmus parallel to Mount Carmel (2:25), strongly suggests that the mountain in question is indeed Carmel.

Just as the Euphrates River is often referred to as the river \footnote{Gen 31:21; Exod 23:31; Num 22:5; Josh 24:2, 3, 14, 15; 2 Sam 10:16 etc.} Mount Carmel, the largest and best-known mountain of the region, was likely called the mountain.\footnote{Lundbom, Elijah’s Chariot Ride, 42. See also 2 Kgs 4:27, where Carmel is specifically designated as the mountain.}

After ascending the mountain, the captain calls out to Elijah, addressing him as “man of God” and demanding on the king’s authority that the prophet “come down” (v. 9). Elijah counters that if he is a man of God, fire should instead “come down” from heaven and consume the captain and his fifty men (v. 10). The response from heaven is
immediate—the fire “came down” and all the men were consumed. A second captain with his fifty are also devoured by the heavenly fire that “comes down” at Elijah’s bidding. The third captain pleads for the lives of himself and his men, and the angel of YHWH assures Elijah that it is safe for him to “go down” (vv. 11-16). Clearly, no army can stand against the power of Israel’s God! Elijah “comes down” and delivers his original prophecy directly to the king: “The bed onto which you have climbed, you will not descend from, for you shall surely die” (v. 16).

This story, with its repeated up/down reversals, provides a dramatic lead-in to Elijah’s fast-approaching exit—a grand ascent from which he will not descend. Surely the story of Elijah’s miraculous disappearance was well-known; and the author, having repeatedly alluded to its inevitable outcome, makes no attempt to withhold it from the reader now. Having duly recorded the fulfillment of Elijah’s prophecy with the death of Ahaziah and the succession of his brother, Jehoram (vv. 17-18), the Dtr returns immediately to Elijah and Elisha: “When YHWH was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha had set out from Gilgal” (2 Kgs 2:1). Recall that according to the book of Joshua, the Israelites proceeded from their encampment at Gilgal when they advanced against Jericho (Joshua 5:9–10). The location of Gilgal, the third stop on the geographical chiasmus that further undergirds the minor ring of the mid-turn, is absent from its returning arm. However, its meaning, “the circle,” is curiously appropriate within a ring composition.
After leaving Gilgal, Elijah asks Elisha to remain behind, explaining to his disciple that YHWH has ordered him on to Beth-El. Elisha flatly refuses this request in an exchange that will be repeated when YHWH sends Elijah on to Jericho and then to the Jordan River. Each location on the geographical chiasmus is significant for the ring composition’s interpretation; however, the Dtr’s particular obsession with the rival shrine at Beth-El will become increasingly apparent. Upon Elijah and Elisha’s arrival there, the sons of the prophets from Beth-El come out to address Elisha, asking if he realizes that YHWH will take his master from him that day. The key phrase “sons of the prophets” appears six times in accordance with the pattern of the ring composition. Four of those occurrences appear here, at the mid-turn (2 Kgs 2:3, 5, 7, 15); two others can be found on the third rung of the ring composition (1 Kgs 20:35, and 2 Kgs 6:1). “Sons of the prophets” appears four times outside of the pattern (2 Kgs 4:1, 38 [2x]; 9:1). The verb “come/go out” is ubiquitous, of course. Nevertheless, the parallel of its use to describe

203 From Gigal, Elijah and Elisha “go down” to Beth-El. Due to Beth-El’s prominent elevation, however, there is scarcely a location from which this is possible. Joel Burnett, “Going Down to Bethel,” JBL 129 (2010): 281-297, has argued that the representation of this journey as “going down to Beth-El” is part of the anti-Beth-El polemic that pervades the Deuteronomistic History. Accordingly, “going down” has the dual effect of diminishing the status of Beth-El and assuring the reader that the prophets were not “going up” to worship at the shrine. As appealing as this argument is for my thesis, it is not compelling. Before this journey ends, Elisha does in fact “go up” to Beth-El (2 Kgs 2:23). Burnett argues that in v. 23, Elisha never leaves the road to enter the city, so there are no worries of apostasy. Furthermore, he explains that the insertion of the phrase “from there” eliminates this concern, since nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is the phrase “go up from there” used in the context of worship. Neither of these explanations is convincing. If the Dtr had intended “going down to Beth-El” to be polemical, he would have used the same verb to describe Elisha’s ascent in v. 23. Moreover, the author had other lexical choices to describe such a climb if his goal were to avoid the verb עלה, as he demonstrates just two verses later when Elisha leaves Beth-El: “He went [הלך] from there to Mount Carmel….” (v. 25).

204 Whether these particular locations are consistent with earlier version(s) of the story is certainly debatable. Such logistical narrative adaptations can be seen, for example, in the Assyrian version of the Enuma Elish, where the later author replaced the Esagila of Babylon with the then Assyrian capital, Assur. Likewise, the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch stresses the primacy of Mount Gerizim, in accordance with that group’s religious and political claims.
the coming out from Beth-El of both the prophets (here) and the boys (2 Kgs 2:23) on the second rung of the minor ring must be noted.

Elisha acknowledges the truth of the sons of the prophets’ claim, but he silences them (v. 3). When the two men continue on to Jericho, the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho also approach him with the identical result (vv. 4-5). Finally, Elijah sets out on the last leg of his journey, accompanied by Elisha and with fifty sons of the prophets following at a distance (vv. 6-7). As Elijah and Elisha stand together on the bank of the Jordan River, the Dtr records that Elijah took his mantle and struck the water, and they split in half this way and that (v. 8). This key word phrase occurs only twice; once on either side of Elijah’s ascension at the apex of the ring. Both prophets will part the waters with the aid of Elijah’s mantle—but what Elijah did with his mantle before striking the water is not entirely clear. Commentators have uniformly rendered the verb גָּלַם as some variation of “rolled up,” or “folded up.” The word is a hapax legomenon, however; and a consideration of the comparative Semitic lexicography suggests that this long assumed translation is erroneous. Although two etymologically related words appear in the Hebrew Bible (both of which also occur only once), neither provides a plausible explanation for Elijah’s action. In Ezek 27:24, the plural of the noun גָּלַם occurs in a list of international trade items (the word is typically translated as some sort of garment).

Additionally, the word גָּלַם, often translated as “embryo,” or “unshaped form,” appears in

---

205 Read as a third person, masculine singular vav-consecutive construction.
Ps 139:16. With no lexicographic support from the Hebrew Bible, commentators’ translations appear to have been influenced by Elijah’s obvious identification with Moses, who was also known miraculously to have parted a body of water—the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 14:16). To do this, Moses employed his staff, an object clearly understood to be an instrument of power.\(^{207}\) Perhaps this association led to the mistaken belief that Elijah’s mantle somehow physically resembled Moses’ staff. Consequently, גלמה was assumed to mean “roll up,” since this action might conceivably result in an article of clothing shaped something like a staff. We see this interpretation reflected in both the Septuagint (whose process of translation spanned four-hundred years, from the third century BCE until the second century CE),\(^ {208}\) as well as the Aramaic translation, Targum Jonathan (which originated in the late first century CE, but was continually redacted into the seventh century).\(^ {209}\)

In light of the uncertainty of this reading, John Kaltner has proposed that the Arabic equivalent of this root jalama, “to cut,”\(^ {210}\) provides an alternative meaning that better fits the circumstances of the story. Kaltner’s insight is supported by the Aramaic, where we find that this underlying sense of the root has been preserved in the noun גלמה.

---

\(^{207}\) For example, see Exod 4:17, where YHWH gives this staff to Moses so that he can perform signs; in Exod 9:23, YHWH sends thunder, hail, and fire raining down on Egypt when Moses raises his staff; in Exod 10:13, this action brings an east wind across Egypt; in Exod 17:9, the staff in Moses’ hand allows the Israelites to defeat the Amalekites; in Num 20:8-11, a rock delivers water when Moses strikes it with his staff.

\(^{208}\) Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 136-137.


\(^{210}\) This meaning is listed in the *Arabic English Lexicon*, Edward W. Lane, (8 vols.; Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1980), II: 445.
A similar relationship between noun and verb appears in Biblical Hebrew: the verbal root בָּקַע “to cleave” appears in the nominal form as בִּקְעָה, “valley.”

This revised reading accords well with the events of 2 Kings 2. Standing at the water’s edge, Elijah “cut” his mantle—a symbolic action that then reverberates in the actual splitting of the water, and recalls the division of the kingdom. As the two men cross over on dry land, Elijah tells his disciple to make a final request before he is taken away; and Elisha responds, “Let a double portion [פִּי-שָׁנֵים] of your spirit pass on to me” (v. 9). This request for a “double portion” reflects the legal terminology of Deut 21:17, in which the first-born son [בָּכֹר] is guaranteed to inherit [נֹחֲל] a double portion of his father’s property. In the Hebrew Bible, the verb “to inherit” almost exclusively denotes the receipt of landed property. Since Israel’s possession of the land is understood as

---


213 A discussion of the symbolic actions of the biblical prophets must begin with the work of Georg Fohrer, who considered these acts in the context of ancient Near Eastern magic. See “Prophetie und Magie,” *ZAW* 78 (1966): 25-47. Other narratives that depict such physical manipulations as generating analogic responses are: 1 Kgs 11:29-31, where the prophet Ahijah “rends” a robe into twelve pieces, in conjunction with his prophecy to Jeroboam that YHWH will rend ten tribes away from Solomon; 1 Kgs 19:19-21, where Elijah throws his mantle over Elisha, inducing him to leave him home and family, to serve as Elijah’s disciple; 1 Kgs 22:11, where the prophet Zechariah makes horns of iron, to simulate Israel’s victory over the Arameans; 2 Kgs 13:14-19, where Elisha has King Joash of Israel first shoot, then strike the ground with arrows, to ensure his defeat against Aram. While Fohrer’s work had emphasized the symbolic acts of the prophets in relation to magic, Bernhard Lang has brought a more nuanced analysis that includes how events are perceived as symbolically significant. See Bernhard Lang, “Games Prophets Play: Street Theatre and Symbolic Acts in Biblical Israel,” in *Hebrew Life and Literature: Selected Essays of Bernhard Lang* (SOTSMS; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), 185-196.
having been “inherited” from its God, the use of the term “a double portion” evokes Israel’s status as YHWH’s first-born son. The two half-kingdoms, north and south, constitute Israel’s lawful portion.

Elijah’s response heightens the narrative suspense: Elisha has requested a difficult thing; but if he sees Elijah as he is being taken away, Elisha’s request will be granted. Otherwise, it will not (v. 10). The long-lived scholarly consensus has been that prophetic succession is at issue, but Elisha’s appointment as the prophet who will succeed Elijah has already been accomplished. YHWH commanded Elijah to anoint Elisha during the theophany on Mount Horeb, a directive fulfilled when Elijah cast his mantle over Elisha and induced him to follow and serve the older prophet (1 Kgs 19:15-21). The moment when Elijah is taken up does mark the moment of Elisha’s accession to the prophetic role, but that conclusion was never in doubt. Rather, the dramatic tension concerns Elisha’s successful completion of the symbolic act that will determine the divided kingdom’s future. Will he observe Elijah’s ascension? As the two walk on, “a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in the whirlwind” (v. 11). Witnessing his master’s departure, Elisha cries out, “Father! Father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!” This key word phrase occurs only twice in the entire corpus of the Hebrew Bible; here, and at the conclusion of the ring composition in 2 Kgs 13:14. Elijah is gone, and Elisha is left alone—an outcome that, for the Josianic redactor,

---

215 This claim is made in Exodus 4:22-23. There, YHWH commands Moses to confront Pharaoh saying: “Israel is my first-born son … Let my son go that he may worship me.” The ongoing relevance of this designation is demonstrated by its presence in later texts: the Dead Sea scroll fragment 4Q504; Ben Sira 36:12; Wisdom of Solomon 18:13.
216 For example, see John Gray, I & II Kings (OTL; London: Westminster Press, 1970), 421; Cogan and Tadmor, II Kings, 33-34; Sweeney, I & II Kings, 273; etc.
symbolically recalls the lone remaining half-kingdom of Judah. Elisha “grasped his garments and rent them in two” (v. 12). Elijah has been whisked away, but his mantle lies on the ground. Elisha picks it up and returns to the bank of the Jordan. Then he takes the mantle and strikes the water, saying, “Where is YHWH, the God of Elijah?” As they did for his master, the waters split in half this way and that; and Elisha crosses over. Seeing him at a distance, the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho confirm his accession, exclaiming “The spirit of Elijah has settled on Elisha!” (vv. 13-15).

Throughout this episode, a drumbeat of “twos” was not always obvious in translation (“The two of them” [שניהם] [vv. 6, 7, 8, 11]; “double portion” [פִּי-שְׁנֵים] [v. 9]; “rent in two” [שָׁנִים] [v. 12]), and an emphasis on division that culminates when Elisha “rent[s] [קרע] his garment in two (Elijah “cut” [פגם] his mantle [v. 8]; the “halving” of the Jordan [חוצה] [vv. 8, 14]; the fiery chariot and horses that “divide/separate” [פרד] Elijah and Elisha [v. 11]; Elisha “rent” [קרע] his garment [v. 12]).” The Dtr employed this same root with pounding repetition to convey the coming division of the kingdom in the wake of Solomon’s apostasy:

And YHWH said to Solomon, “Because you are guilty of this—you have not kept my covenant and the laws which I enjoined upon you—I will surely rend [קרע] the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your servants. But, for the

---

217 Elisha does not “ EGLJ his mantle before striking the water. If Elijah had earlier “rolled up” his mantle, we would now expect Elisha to do the same, however a cut need not be repeated.
sake of your father David, I will not do it in your lifetime; I will rend [אקרע] it away from your son. However, I will not rend [אקרע] away the whole kingdom; I will give your son one tribe, for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen” (1 Kgs 11:11-13).

The prophet Ahijah predicted the imminent rending of the kingdom to Jeroboam in like fashion: “Ahijah took hold of the new robe he was wearing and rent [ייקרעה] it into twelve pieces [קרעים]. And he said to Jeroboam, ‘Take for yourself ten pieces [קרעים], for thus said YHWH the God of Israel: I am about to rend [קרע] the kingdom out of Solomon’s hand, and I will give to you the ten tribes’” (1 Kgs 11:30-31).

These facts all signal to the knowledgeable reader that what is at issue here is the division of the once united kingdom of David. Yet ultimately, this episode is about reunification, because although two cross over, only one returns—one now possessing the double portion. Elisha’s exclamation\(^{218}\) reveals the means by which reunification will be accomplished: a victory won in holy war, led by the fiery chariots and horses of YHWH’s heavenly army. As the ring composition leaves the mid-turn to make its way back to the beginning, these horses and chariots of fire will reappear; and their power will properly dwarf their earthly counterparts. Perhaps nowhere is this divine power better illustrated than at the moment of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. The Israelites had marched across the Sea’s basin on dry ground. At YHWH’s command, however, Moses

\(^{218}\) Elisha’s cry, “Father! Father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!” in verse 12 is routinely characterized as a “title” applied to Elijah, and later to Elisha, however this phrase is better understood as an exclamation of trust in YHWH’s heavenly army.
stretched out his arm, bringing the waters back upon the Egyptians, “upon their chariots and upon their horsemen” (Exod 14:26). As the Egyptians attempted to flee, YHWH hurled them into the sea, where the waters covered “the chariots and the horsemen—Pharaoh’s entire army…. (vv. 27-28). The poem that celebrates this divine victory (Exod 15:1-18) concludes with a final verse in prose: “For the horses of Pharaoh and his chariots and horsemen, went into the sea; and YHWH turned back on them the waters of the sea; but the Israelites marched on dry ground in the midst of the sea” (v. 19).

Deuteronomistic holy war theology is anchored in the recollection of this event, when Israel’s God fought on its behalf, and defeated the Egyptians. Written half a millennium later than the events Exodus 15 presumes to depict, the rules for waging holy war, as set out in Deuteronomy, begin with the reassurance that when facing horses and chariots and an army greater than theirs, the Israelites need not be afraid because the God who brought them out of Egypt will be with them (Deut 20:1). First Isaiah records a prophetic rebuke, presumably directed at Hezekiah, for his failure to trust in YHWH and for turning, instead, to Egypt’s abundant chariots and horsemen in order to survive the growing hegemony of Assyria. The Egyptians were mere men, Isaiah reminded the king; and their horses were flesh, not spirit (Isa 31:1, 3). When the seventh century BCE witnessed a dramatic shift in the balances of power, and the long endured Assyrian threat seemed miraculously to melt away, Josiah and his ideological party must surely have

219 Scholars have long attributed an early date to the poem of Exodus 15, consistent with the commonly accepted 1200 BCE dating of an Exodus event. For example, see Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, “The Song of Miriam,” JNES 14 (1955): 237-250; Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic, 121-123; David A. Robertson, Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry (Missoula, Montana: Society of Biblical Literature for the Seminar on Form Criticism, 1972); and more recently Brian D. Russell, The Song of the Sea: The Date of Composition and Influence of Exodus 15:1-21 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).
become convinced that they were witnessing a divine victory of no less magnitude than the original conquest.

In the account of Joshua’s conquest, as told in Joshua 1—6, the Dtr had depicted Joshua as cursing anyone who attempted to rebuild the defeated city of Jericho. The prologue of the ring compositions picks up that narrative thread when the Dtr confirms that the curse was fulfilled with the deaths of the sons of the Hiel, both his first-born and his youngest. Now, in the wake of Elijah vanishing in 2 Kings 2, the men of Jericho approach Elisha, pleading that (as the prophet himself could see) that though the city was good, the water was poisonous and the land caused bereavement. Elisha responds by demanding that salt be brought to him in a new dish. As he casts the salt into the spring, he proclaims, “Thus says YHWH: I heal this water; no longer shall death and bereavement come from it!” (vv. 19–21).

By reversing the curse of Jericho, Elisha has initiated the restoration of Israel. This cleansing of sorts, in preparation for the new conquest, continues at Beth-El. Leaving Jericho, Elisha goes up to Beth-El, where a group of little boys comes out of the city, calling to the prophet, “Go up/away, baldhead! Go up/away, baldhead!” This use of the imperative “go up” corresponds to the command of the messenger of YHWH, delivered to Elijah, that he “go up” and confront the messengers of Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:3). Moreover, it signals the final section of the minor ring of the mid-turn. Elisha’s response to these taunts is stunning. He turns, looks at the boys, and curses them in the name of YHWH. Immediately, two she-bears emerge from the woods, and mangle [עָקַב] (“rip open”) forty-two of the children.
Commentators agonize over just how young these boys are, hoping to soften the horror of what they have read. But since the text refers to them as נערים קדומים (little boys), they are clearly presented as “little”; and we should consider the significance of that detail. In the context of the events of the mid-turn, the symbolic nature of this story is unmistakable. First, the emergence of the boys from Beth-El, the seat of Israel’s apostasy, is critical. With their coming out of Beth-El, the Dtr has placed these ostensibly wicked children in parallelistic tension with the sons of the prophets who came out of Beth-El at the beginning of the geographical chiasmus of the mid-turn. Although the division of the kingdom was decreed by YHWH, the cultic sins of Jeroboam had led Israel astray (2 Kgs 17:21). Now, the massacre of the boys from Beth-El portends the coming of Josiah and his slaughter of the Beth-El priests. Not only are the priests doomed to die, the Dtr asserts, but also they are further disparaged, cast as nothing more than “wicked little boys.”

The continuing existence of the Beth-El sanctuary was an infuriating reality to the Dtr; it presented both a theological contradiction and an obstacle to Josiah’s reforms. Jeroboam originally established two sanctuaries, one at Beth-El (lying just north of Judah) and a second at Dan (on the northern most border of his kingdom). Yet the Dtr

---

221 Divine justice in the Hebrew Bible is often delivered through the violence of wild beasts. The book of Hosea, which shares the Dtr’s contempt for the Beth-El sanctuary, rebukes the northern kingdom for its creation of molten images (the golden calves), the handiwork of craftsmen, to which men are appointed to sacrifice (Hos 13:2). Therefore, YHWH threatens: “I will become like a lion to them, like a leopard I lurk on the way; like a bear robbed of her young I attack them and rip open the casting of their hearts; I will devour them there like a lion, the beasts of the field shall mangle them” (vv. 7-8).
was largely uninterested in Dan, since that shrine had already been swallowed up in the Assyrian invasion of 722 BCE.\textsuperscript{223} Beth-El and its cultus, on the other hand, continued to function.\textsuperscript{224} Moreover, 2 Kgs 17:24-33 states that after the northern Israelites were deported,\textsuperscript{225} the king of Assyria repopulated the land with foreign peoples. Because these newcomers failed to worship YHWH, the God of Israel sent lions against them. When the people informed the king of Assyria that they did not know the rules of the God of this land, he ordered that a priest among the deportees return to instruct the peoples in the worship of YHWH. But according to the Dtr, the result was a multitude of syncretistic practices, with various peoples simply blending the worship of their own deities with worship of YHWH.

The Dtr’s concern with Beth-El cannot be overstated. This rival shrine was the basis for Jeroboam causing Israel to sin; and its continued existence, even after the northern kingdom had fallen, challenged the Davidic dynasty’s Jerusalem theology. Josiah’s revival of a united kingdom under Davidic rule demanded its destruction. Yet Beth-El was an ancient shrine, whose founding was attributed to none other than Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen 35:1–6). According to tradition, Abraham had once pitched his tent at Beth-El (Gen 12:8); and Jacob had dreamed of a stairway that extended from heaven to earth, with messengers of God traveling up and down it. YHWH

\textsuperscript{223} The biblical account attributes Israel’s fall, and the subsequent Assyrian exile to Shalmaneser, (2 Kgs 17:1-6). However, the writer has telescoped what were actually two events. Shalmaneser captured Samaria in 722 BCE, following a three-year siege. The exile occurred two years later under Sargon II. See Cogan and Tadmor, \textit{II Kings}, 198-201; Miller and Hayes, \textit{A History of Ancient Israel}, 383-388.
\textsuperscript{225} The Assyrians would have deported a substantial portion, but certainly not all of the Israelites. Such population relocations, standard practice in the ancient Near East, were intended to punish their conquered subjects for having rebelled, as well as to avert nationalistic uprisings by removing their leadership. See Miller and Hayes, \textit{A History of Ancient Israel}, 388-391.
had appeared to Jacob there, and promised to protect him (Gen 28:10-15). To justify the
destruction of such a well-established sacred site, the Dtr had to counter its positive
image. Hence, he seeded his history with an anti-Beth-El polemic that begins in the book
of Judges.226 There, in a veiled allusion to Beth-El, a man named Micah (who lived in the
hill country of Ephraim) constructed a personal shrine, called a “house of God” [ בית
אלים] (Jud 17:5). This parody of Jeroboam’s shrine included an idol and a molten image,
as well as an ephod and teraphim, and depicts Micah as having hired a Levite to serve as
priest (vv. 4-5).227

The polemic is subtle, as it must be, since in the chronology of the narrative, the
events of Jeroboam’s reign still lay nearly five hundred years in the future.228

Nevertheless, readers in Josiah’s time would have recognized these negative inferences
immediately. The cryptic approach ends when the historian reaches the events of
Jeroboam. 1 Kings12:25—13:34 relates his establishment of the rival shrines to
Jerusalem at the ancient holy sites of Beth-El and Dan, where the newly crowned king of
Israel installed a golden calf at each sanctuary.229 According to the Dtr, when Jeroboam
ascended the Beth-El altar to present an offering, a man of God arrived from Judah and

8:4-5; 10:5; 13:2.
227 For a detailed examination of this narrative, see Yairah Amit, Hidden Polemics in Biblical Narrative
228 Contrary to Amit’s argument that it reflects a period after Josiah’s death, when the Beth-El polemic was
driven underground (p. 142).
229 So successful was the Dtr that the idolatrous nature of the “sin of the golden calf” resonates with us even
now, however, modern scholarship has demonstrated that Jeroboam’s calves were no more idolatrous than
the cherubim of the Jerusalem Temple. Both are found in the religious iconography of the ancient Near
East, where they are not in themselves objects of worship, but rather represent the throne of the deity,
whose presence is understood in the negative space above. So for example, Hezekiah prayed to “YHWH of
hosts! Enthroned upon the cherubim!” (2 Kgs 19:15). See Cross, Canaanite Myth, 198-200; Miller and
Hayes, A History of Ancient Israel and Judah,275-276; Cogan, I Kings, 358.
prophesied at YHWH’s command: “O altar, altar! Thus said YHWH: ‘A son shall be born to the House of David, Josiah by name; and he shall slaughter upon you the priests of the shrines who bring offerings upon you. And human bones shall be burned upon you.’ He gave a portent on that day, saying, ‘Here is the portent that YHWH has decreed: This altar shall be torn [קרע], and the ashes on it shall be spilled’” (1 Kgs 13:2-3).

Jeroboam pointed at the man of God and ordered his men to seize him. But his outstretched arm became frozen, and he was unable to draw it back. Just as the man had prophesied, the altar then tore, spilling ashes onto the ground. Jeroboam pleaded to the man of God that he pray to YHWH to restore his arm; and when his arm was healed, he entreated the man to come back to his house for food and a reward. But the man of God refused, insisting that even if the king were to give him half of his wealth, he would not eat or drink in this place, since YHWH had commanded him to eat no bread, to drink no water, and not to go back by the road he came (vv. 4-9).

The renting [קרע] of the Beth-El altar dramatically recalls the tearing asunder of the kingdom, but the reader is reassured that this division is not forever. In a classic example of *vaticinium ex eventu*, the Dtr purports to throw back the curtain of time. A future Davidic king—Josiah—whose birth is nearly three centuries in the future, will repair this schism and correct the religious apostasy that Jeroboam has introduced into Israel. What happens next has long puzzled interpreters: in keeping with YHWH’s

---

230 Literally “prophesying from an outcome,” a technique used by the biblical writers to sometimes “foretell” an event that had actually already taken place.

commandment, the man of God from Judah leaves Beth-El by a different road, only to have his departure interrupted by an old prophet living in Beth-El. Knowing full well that YHWH has commanded the man of God not to eat or drink in this place, the prophet from Beth-El nevertheless invites him to his home for food. When the man of God repeats that he is forbidden to eat or drink in this place, the Beth-El prophet responds that he, too, is a prophet; a messenger of YHWH has informed him of God’s command to bring the man of God back to his house to eat and drink (vv. 11-18). Although the prophet’s motivation is unstated within the world of the narrative, the narrator tells the reader that the prophet from Beth-El is lying. As the two men sit and eat, the word of YHWH comes to the prophet from Beth-El, causing him to prophesy against the man of God and condemning him to death for violating his original directive. After leaving the prophet’s home, the man of god is killed by a lion. When word of his death reaches the old prophet of Beth-El, he sets out to retrieve the body, which he finds lying in the road with the lion standing over it. The prophet brings the man of God’s corpse back to Beth-El, where he buries him in his own burial place. Lamenting his death, the prophet from Beth-El implores his sons to bury him in the same grave, placing his bones beside those of the man of God, “For what he announced by the word of YHWH against the altar of Beth-El, and against all the cult places in the towns of Samaria, shall surely come true” (vv. 19–32).

These are striking words from the mouth of a prophet of Beth-El, and the Dtr undoubtedly placed them on his lips for just that effect. That a prophet from Judah would

---

condemn the Beth-El shrine is to be expected; that his northern counterpart at Beth-El should acknowledge the truth of his prophecy and even request that the two someday share a single grave is shocking. By relating this prophetic tale, the Dtr seeks to demonstrate that even the northern prophets of Israel recognized the apostasy of Jeroboam’s cult and rejected it. Although YHWH offered to build Jeroboam a “secure house,” [בית נאמן] (i.e. a dynasty), that promise was forfeited on account of his cultic apostasy (1 Kgs 11:38). This sentence of dynastic doom was appropriately delivered to Jeroboam by Ahijah of Shiloh (the very prophet who first proclaimed him king of the ten tribes of Israel) when Jeroboam inquired if his son, who had fallen sick, would live or die. Not only would he die, Ahijah insisted, but YHWH “would sweep away the House of Jeroboam” (1 Kgs 14:10)—a prophecy fulfilled by Baasha’s coup in the second year of the reign of Jeroboam’s son, Nadav: “As soon as he [Baasha] became king, he struck down all of the House of Jeroboam; he did not spare a single soul belonging to Jeroboam until he destroyed it—in accordance with the word that YHWH had spoken through his servant, the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite—because of the sins Jeroboam committed and which he caused Israel to commit thereby vexing YHWH, the God of Israel” (1 Kgs 15:29-30).

The dynastic promise to Jeroboam (1 Kgs 11:38-39) unmistakably echoes Nathan’s oracle to David in 2 Samuel 7: David wished to build a “house” [בית] (i.e., a temple) for YHWH. In a play on words, however, the deity turned his proposal around, promising instead to build a “house” [Beth] (i.e., a dynasty) for David (2 Sam 7:11) and
adding that although he might chastise David’s descendants, David’s “house would be secure” [נאמן בית] forever (vv. 14-16). By alluding to Nathan’s oracle in the promise made to Jeroboam, the Dtr has invited the same play on words. Baasha “struck down all of the House of Jeroboam,” sparing not even “a single soul belonging to Jeroboam.” Nevertheless, Jeroboam’s house (i.e. the Beth-El sanctuary) remained. And it was this house that Josiah knew he must “sweep away” if he were to reunite the divided kingdom under a Davidic monarch, with Jerusalem at its center.

Summary and Conclusion

The earlier conquest of Joshua (as recounted by the Dtr) provided the theological template for Josiah’s message of reunification. Here, at its mid-turn, the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories mediates these two events. The chiastic structure of the ring composition channels our attention to this critical apex, where the minor ring points to the events of Elijah’s ascension with unmistakable exactness. These events begin with Elijah and Elisha setting out from Gilgal, just as Joshua and the Israelites set out from Gilgal on the military advance that initiated the original conquest of Canaan. Joshua’s miraculous crossing of the Jordan River is also reenacted, although here, the waters are not simply stopped, allowing the men to cross, but more precisely “halved.” Likewise, the holy war theme first introduced in the prologue with the reference to the battle of Jericho.

232 Leuchter, “Jeroboam the Ephrâtite,” 69, n. 66, notes that by extending the prototype of Jeroboam’s sin throughout the duration of the northern kingdom’s history, long after other northern dynasties had taken power, proves that Jeroboam’s “house” is meant to signify the Beth-El sanctuary, and not the biological lineage of Jeroboam.
culminates here at the mid-turn, with the appearance of the fiery chariot drawn by fiery horses. Although Elijah is carried away, the double portion of his spirit that falls to Elisha evokes Israel’s enduring status as YHWH’s first-born—an inheritance, the Dtr asserts, that Josiah is about to reclaim.

The ongoing presence of the Beth-El sanctuary challenged this interpretation and led to the creation of the anti-Beth-El polemic that pervades the DtrH. These anti-Beth-El traditions, attributed to the prophets of YHWH, provide a powerful confirmation of Josianic ideology. Who better than the prophetic heroes of the north, Elijah and Elisha, might the Dtr have employed to further this cause? The mid-turn of the ring composition legitimizes these polemics and foreshadows the day when YHWH’s chosen king will eliminate every idolatrous shrine in Israel, beginning with the temple at Beth-El.

This chapter has analyzed the prologue and the mid-turn of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition, identifying connections between this cycle of stories and the ideology underlying Josiah’s reforms in the seventh century BCE. By alluding to events of the original conquest under Joshua, the Dtr sought to imbue Josiah’s program of reunification with the religious sanction of holy war ideology and to demonstrate the inevitability of his success. In Chapter 3, we shall further extend our analysis to include the six intervening rungs that reach across the chiastic composition.
Chapter 3 – Interpretation: The Six Intervening Rungs

Introduction

In chapter 2, we considered the prologue and the mid-turn of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition, identifying connections between this work and the ideology underlying Josiah’s reforms in the seventh century BCE. In the present chapter, we undertake an analysis of the six intervening rungs that bridge the composition. Following the chiastic structure that guides our reading, the cycle begins with the prologue (section I) and advances consecutively through the individual sections (II–VII) that form the first half of each rung. This linear reading propels the plot and provides the narrative and theological context that frames the entire composition. One by one, each theme is introduced—the restorative powers that come from YHWH alone (section II), the false worship of Ba’al that pollutes the land (section III), the decree of divinely directed political coups that will reconfigure the monarchies of both kingdoms (section IV), Ahab’s violation of the laws of holy war (section V), and the king’s failure to provide justice (section VI)—all of which lead to YHWH’s refusal to wage holy war on behalf of the northern kings of Israel (section VII). The pinnacle of the composition is the mid-turn, where the rending of Elisha’s mantle in two, the halving of the Jordan River, and the separation of the two prophets by a fiery chariot and horses culminates in Elijah’s ascension in the whirlwind (section VIII). Afterwards, the ring turns back; and each rung is completed with the revelation of the lateral parallels that frame the mid-turn. Like his father before him, the king of Israel is abandoned in war by YHWH (section IX); the greed of Gehazi mirrors
the extremes of royal corruption (section X), the fiery horses and chariots of YHWH’s heavenly army demonstrate the God of Israel’s exclusive power (section XI), the coups of Hazael and Jehu bring Elijah’s directive to completion (section XII), Ba’alism is utterly erased from the land (section XIII), and finally, the revival of the corpse that touches the bones of Elisha foretells a miraculous restoration (section XIV).

Together, these twelve sections form the six rungs of the ring composition. We begin our interpretation with the first rung, revealed when the reader passes the mid-turn and recognizes that sections IX and VII form an obvious pair.

The First Rung: (UN)HOLY WAR (1 Kings 22:1–51 // 2 Kings 3:1-27)

Section VII (1 Kgs 22:1-51) and its parallel passage, section IX (2 Kgs 3:1-27), address the topic of holy war. The stark reversal of this theme might best be termed “unholy war,” since both stories on this rung recount how YHWH first enticed into battle, and then abandoned, Israel’s king. To set the stage for our interpretation, however, we must first consider the cause of this divine desertion as told in section V (1 Kings 20).

There, in a paradigmatic example of holy war, Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram, and all his army advanced against Israel, whose own troops were so diminutive in size as to be described as ‘two little flocks of goats’ (v. 27). Nevertheless, a prophet had guaranteed Israel’s victory so that Ahab would know that YHWH was God (vv. 13, 28). In a ritualized battle narrative that evokes the account of the battle of Jericho recounted in

---

233 A classic example of victory in the face of overwhelming odds appears in the story of Gideon’s battle against the Midianites in Judg 7:2-8. There, YHWH systematically reduces Gideon’s troops from 32,000 men, to a mere three hundred, leaving no doubt that the following victory is not the work of human hands.
Joshua 6, Israel is said to have encamped against the Aramean troops for seven days. On the seventh day, its forces advanced and struck down the troops of Aram. Ben-Hadad escaped the battle; but following his defeat, he approached the king of Israel wearing sackcloth and begging for his life. Ahab welcomed Ben-Hadad into his chariot and parlayed this divinely-sanctioned victory into a lucrative treaty that reinstituted trade between their two countries (vv. 29-34).

While we might applaud Ahab for his diplomacy, the king of Israel has violated the Deuteronomic laws of holy war\(^{234}\) (Deut 20:1-20). Moreover, he has done so for his own economic gain.\(^{235}\) YHWH’s response is swift: at his word, a man from among the sons of the prophets approaches another and commands him to strike him. The man refuses; and on account of his disobedience, the prophet declares, a lion will strike him dead as soon as he leaves—a punishment immediately enacted (vv. 35-36). Approaching a second man, the prophet makes the same demand; and this time he obliges, striking and wounding him (v. 37). With a bandage over his eyes for a disguise, the prophet waits at the side of the road for the king of Israel to pass by; and when he does, the prophet calls out to him. He was left to guard a prisoner from the battle, the prophet explains, with his own life as collateral for the man’s safekeeping (vv. 38-39). But while he was “busy here

\(^{234}\) The ideology of the ban [חֵרֶם], that which is “devoted” to YHWH, takes many forms in the Hebrew Bible. At issue here is the ban as God’s portion of the victors’ booty. Since YHWH defeated Aram, Ben-Hadad’s life belongs to the deity. Therefore, he is doomed for destruction. For a comprehensive treatment of the ban, see Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

\(^{235}\) A striking parallel to this episode occurs in 1 Samuel 15. There, King Saul is commanded to impose the ban upon Amalek as punishment for its earlier assault against the Israelites as they came up from Egypt. Although Saul’s attack was victorious, he spared King Agag, as well as the best of the animals. Like Ahab, Saul attempted to justify his actions when Samuel confronted him. But this transgression cost Saul the kingship, and Samuel himself executed King Agag.
and there,” the man got away. The king is unmoved. The verdict is clear, he insists; the man has pronounced it himself. At this point, the prophet removes the bandage from his eyes, revealing himself to the king as a son of the prophets, and delivers his prophesy: “Thus said YHWH: Because you have set free the man whom I doomed, your life shall be forfeit for his life and your people for his people” (vv. 40-42).

This lesson in the rules of holy war prepares us for the events of the first rung, sections VII (1 Kgs 22:1-51) and IX (2 Kgs 3:1-27). In twin accounts that frame the mid-turn, the kings of Israel invite their Judean counterpart, King Jehoshaphat, to join them in disastrous wars that will end in defeat (Table 6).

Table 6. The first rung: (Un)Holy War.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(UN)HOLY WAR</th>
<th>(UN)HOLY WAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section VII: 1 Kgs 22:1-51</strong></td>
<td><strong>Section VII: 1 Kgs 22:1-51</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(22:4) King of Israel asks King Jehoshaphat of Judah, Will you come with me [התלך אתי] to make war [לחימה] at Ramoth-gilead? The reply: I will do what you do; my troops shall be your troops, my horses shall be your horses; (22:5) Jehoshaphat asks: is there another prophet of YHWH here [האין פה נביא ליהוה] through whom we can inquire [ונדרשה מאותו]; (22:14) Micaiah swears, “as YHWH lives” [חי־יהוה]; (22:36) army of Israel flees with cry for every man to return to his land [ארץ]</td>
<td>(22:4) King of Israel asks King Jehoshaphat of Judah, Will you come with me [התלך אתי] to make war [לחימה] at Ramoth-gilead? The reply: I will do what you do; my troops shall be your troops, my horses shall be your horses; (22:5) Jehoshaphat asks: is there another prophet of YHWH here [האין פה נביא ליהוה] through whom we can inquire [ונדרשה מאותו]; (22:14) Micaiah swears, “as YHWH lives” [חי־יהוה]; (22:36) army of Israel flees with cry for every man to return to his land [ארץ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In section VII (1 Kgs 22:1-51), the first of these similar stories, King Jehoshaphat of Judah agrees to participate in the king of Israel’s proposed expedition, but immediately requests that the king of Israel first inquire of YHWH (v. 5). In response, the king of
Israel gathers the prophets—about four hundred, the Dtr writes—who enthusiastically endorse his plan to march against Aram at Ramoth-gilead. Despite this overwhelming confirmation, Jehoshaphat remains uncertain. “‘Is there another prophet of YHWH here, through whom we can inquire?’” he asks (v. 7). The king of Israel admits that there is another prophet, a man named Micaiah ben Imlah; but the king hates Micaiah because he never prophesies anything good for him, only misfortune. After more urging from Jehoshaphat, Micaiah is summoned; and the messenger sent to collect him offers the prophet advice: all of the other prophets have prophesied good news to the king, he warns; and Micaiah should do the same (vv. 8-13). But the prophet is resolute: “‘As YHWH lives,’ Micaiah answers, ‘I will speak only what YHWH tells me’” (v. 14).

Because the narrative has led us to anticipate an ominous prophetic word, we are startled when Micaiah’s first prophecy echoes the positive words of the four hundred prophets: “March and triumph! YHWH will deliver [it] into the king’s hands” (v. 15). The king of Israel is both surprised and suspicious: “‘How many times must I adjure you to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of YHWH?’” he responds (v. 16). Commentators have puzzled over Micaiah’s words (which will soon be proven to be a lie); and some scholars conclude that this initial exclamation is not a prophecy at all, but an utterance by Micaiah alone. However, Micaiah has prophesied the word of God—albeit a false prophecy that serves to demonstrate that YHWH can and will tender...

---

236 Crenshaw, Prophetic Conflict, 83, regards this initial reply as the personal (and ironic) words of Micaiah, with the real word of God delivered only upon the king of Israel’s adjuration that the prophet speak only the truth; Gray, I & II Kings, 401, proposes that Micaiah has offered these first remarks on his own authority, to demonstrate the ease with which the prophets are able to bolster the human aspirations of the king; R. W. L. Moberly, “Does God Lie to His Prophets? The Story of Micaiah ben Imlah as a Test Case,” HTR 96 (2003): 1-23, likewise credits these remarks to the personal rhetorical efforts of Micaiah.
deception through the mouths of the prophets.\textsuperscript{237} Ahab is right to recognize the lie, but the \textit{truth} is not what Micaiah has sworn to uphold. Rather, he has promised to speak only what YHWH \textit{tells} him to speak. The irony of this distinction quickly becomes apparent. The prophecy that follows heralds the disaster awaiting Israel’s king and lays bare the deity’s deceptive tactics. Israel will be scattered over the hills like sheep without a shepherd, Micaiah declares. Its king, Ahab, has been enticed to his death in battle by a lying spirit placed in the mouths of these four hundred prophets by YHWH himself (vv. 17-23).\textsuperscript{238} Even Ahab’s own trickery of sending Jehoshaphat into battle wearing his (Ahab’s) royal robes fails to prevent the inevitable. A stray arrow enters a gap in Ahab’s armor, and the king of Israel is killed in accordance with Elijah’s prophecy in 1 Kgs 21:19. With its king dead, Israel returns to its land in defeat (vv. 29-38).

The parallel passage in section IX (2 Kings 3) pairs Jehoshaphat with Ahab’s son, Jehoram, who extends to the king of Judah an invitation almost identical to his father’s. This time, the kings of Israel and Judah set out with the king of Edom to wage war against King Mesha of Moab, who has rebelled against his Israelite overlord following Ahab’s death (vv. 4-5). After seven days in the wilderness, their water supplies are exhausted; and the group appears to face certain death (vv. 6-9): “‘Alas!’ cried the king of Israel. ‘YHWH has brought these three kings together only to deliver them into the

hands of Moab!’” (v. 10). Jehoshaphat is more trusting, however; and he asks, “‘Is there a prophet of YHWH here, through whom we can inquire of YHWH?’” (v. 11). A prophet is here, a courtier of the king of Israel responds: Elisha ben Shaphat, who attended the prophet Elijah. When the three kings approach Elisha, his initial response is to advise Israel’s king to consult the prophets of his mother (Jezebel). But the king of Israel pleads for his help—again insisting that YHWH alone has assembled these three kings, only to deliver them into the hands of Moab (vv. 11-13). “‘As YHWH of hosts lives, whom I serve,’ Elisha answered, ‘were it not that I respect King Jehoshaphat of Judah, I would not look at you or notice you’” (v. 14). With these words, the prophet demands a musician be brought; and in a musically-induced prophetic trance, Elisha prophesies a miraculous delivery. No rain will fall, but the wadi will fill with water; and they and their animals will drink (vv. 15-17). Moreover, Elisha continues: “. . . this is but a slight thing in the sight of YHWH, for he will also deliver Moab into your hands. You shall strike every fortified town and every splendid city; you shall fell every good tree and stop up all wells of water; and every fertile field you shall ruin with stones” (vv. 18-19).

Once more, the reader is taken aback by a positive prophecy to a king of Israel whom we have been led to believe is living on borrowed time.239 With the story of Micaiah as our template,240 we were prepared for Elisha to deliver a prophecy of doom to Ahab’s son, thus completing the parallel of the rung and fulfilling Elijah’s earlier

239 Elijah’s prophecy concerning Ahab’s punishment for Naboth’s murder (1 Kgs 21:20-22) was two-fold: first, disaster upon Ahab himself, which was fulfilled with his death at Ramoth-gilead (1 Kgs 22:37-38); second, the obliteration of his dynasty, which was deferred to the generation of his son after Ahab humbled himself before YHWH (1 Kgs 21:29).
240 See Long, “Unfulfilled Prophecy,” for a thoughtful analysis of the correspondences between 1 Kgs 22 and 2 Kgs 3, that includes the identification of the striking chiastic structure of 2 Kgs 3.
prophecy. A positive word is suspiciously suggestive of a lying spirit. Yet just as Elisha has prophesied, at the hour of the morning meal offering, water suddenly flows from the direction of Edom and floods the land. Seeing the reflection of the sun off the water, the Moabites think it is blood. The kings, they reason, have fought among themselves and killed each other, leaving the spoil of battle for them. When the Moabites enter the camp to collect their anticipated plunder, however, the Israelites rise up and attack, sending their enemies fleeing before them (vv. 20-24). In the ensuing battle, the Dtr writes, the Israelites tear down the Moabite cities, ruin every fertile field with stones, stop up all wells, and fell every good tree. With only the city of Kir-hareseth remaining, the slingers surround it and strike (v. 25), thereby fulfilling Elisha’s prophecy to the letter. To “strike” [נכה] is not necessarily to conquer, however—an ambiguity in meaning that will soon prove disastrous. With his army under sieged in the city, Moab’s king takes his first born son and heir and offers him up on the city wall as a burnt offering, igniting a “great wrath” [קצף-גדול] upon the Israelites and sending them fleeing to their own land in defeat (vv. 26-27). In an ironic twist, the Dtr presents both Mesha and Ahab as having forfeited their dynasties’ future through the apostasy of false worship. Mesha’s nameless son is dead, slaughtered by his own father. But the reader is rightfully confident that Ahab’s son, Jehoram, also is doomed.

---

241 See Provan, 1 and 2 Kings, 183-186; and Long, “Unfulfilled Prophecy,” 113-114; who both note how the literal fulfillment of Elisha’s prophecy hides its deceptive intention of enticement.  
242 While Mesha’s sacrifice was surely directed to the Moabite god, Chemosh, in the context of the Dtr’s telling, the God of Israel moved the Moabite king to commit this terrible deed. The efficacy of the act is undeniable, but the great wrath it evokes, a virtual cosmic cataclysm, comes from YHWH alone.
Like Micaiah’s prophecy in the parallel episode of the rung, Elisha’s prophecy has come true. Yet we now realize that it was no less a “false” prophecy than Ahab’s four hundred prophets uttered. Their message was hijacked by a lying spirit; however, the technically accurate, yet disastrously incomplete prophecy of Elisha proves no less deceptive. Both accounts depict YHWH as employing deceit in his dealings with human beings, yet this action must be considered within the larger concept of divine providence. As James L. Crenshaw makes clear, the principle of divine sovereignty requires us to recognize that the ultimate source of false prophecy is God himself. These are not the capricious acts of a spiteful deity, but the means by which Israel’s God will execute judgment on Ahab and his descendants. The sins of Ahab, the Dtr insists, exemplify the apostasy of the kings of northern Israel. Not only has he led the nation astray in his worship of Ba’al, but also he has robbed and murdered the very people YHWH has charged him to protect. So deaf is Ahab to the prophetic word that even after insisting upon hearing the truth from Micaiah (and receiving it), he persists in following the false prophecy of victory. But neither Ahab’s battle at Ramoth-gilead, nor his son Jehoram’s attempt to reestablish the boundaries of his father’s kingdom, will succeed. YHWH, the God of Israel who led his people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, will no longer fight on behalf of the apostate kings of northern Israel.


243 Crenshaw, Prophetic Conflict; see also Chisholm, “Does God Deceive?” 11-28.
The second rung, sections VI (1 Kgs 21) and X (2 Kgs 4-5), visits the theme of social justice. As the legal corpus that comprises the core of the book of Deuteronomy demonstrates, social justice was an issue of considerable concern to the Dtr. In Israel, as throughout the ancient Near East, the king was responsible for establishing a just society. Singled out in this charge was the obligation to protect society’s most vulnerable members—the widow, the orphan, and the poor. Indeed, the king’s virtue as a ruler, and even his success, was contingent upon his fulfillment of this requirement.

Deuteronomy provides special protection for these individuals (Deut 10:17-19; 14:28-29; 16:11, 14; 24:17-22), as well as others who are weak or disadvantaged (e.g., the debtor and the slave (Deut 15:1-18). Each of these types is represented in the stories of the second rung.

---

244 For example, in the law code promulgated by the Sumerian king Ur-Nammu (c. 2050 BCE), the king boasts that he established equity in the land, so that “the orphan did not fall prey to the wealthy; the widow did not fall prey to the powerful; the man of one shekel did not fall prey to the man of one mina (sixty shekels),” (Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer: Thirty-nine Firsts in Man's Recorded History* [Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981], 54). The Babylonian king Hammurabi (1728-1686 BCE) concludes his law code with the claim that he was called by the gods to protect the people: “that justice might be dealt the orphan (and) the widow….” (James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [trans. T. Meek; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950], 178). In the Egyptian tale, *The Instruction of King Amen-em-het*, Amen-em-het I (d. 1960 BCE) purports to have said, “I gave to the destitute and brought up the orphan,” (Pritchard, ed., *ANET* [trans. J. Wilson], 418). And in *The Legend of Keret*, a Canaanite myth discovered in the ancient city of Ugarit (destroyed around 1200 BCE), a son attempts to dethrone his father with the accusation: “You do not judge the cause of the widow, you do not try the case of the importunate. You do not banish the extortioners of the poor, you do not feed the orphan before your face (nor) the widow behind your back,” (J.C.L. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* [ed. G.R. Driver; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978], 102). See also Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 45-56; F. Charles Fensham, “Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature,” *JNES* 21 (1962): 129-139.

245 Fensham, “Widow, Orphan, and the Poor,” 129.

The passages that form the second rung are linked by an identical cluster of key words (Table 7). The first passage, the story of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21), recounts how Jezebel perverted the integrity of the Deuteronomic legal system, which required two witnesses in death sentence cases (Deut 17:6), to rob Naboth of his ancestral property.

Table 7. The second rung: Social Justice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIAL JUSTICE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section VI: 1 Kgs 21:1-29</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(21:1, 2, 6, 7, 15, 16, 18) vineyard [כרם]; (21:2, 6, 15) silver [כסף]; (21:7) heart [לב]; (21:8-11) letters sent [ספר] (repeated four times); (21:10, 13) two scoundrels [שני]; (21:19) Elijah confronts Ahab with a question; (21:19-24) punishment corresponds to sin; (21:27) Ahab rends [ףתר] his garment in despair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section X: 2 Kings 4:1—5:27</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5:5) letters [ספר] sent (repeated four times); (5:5, 22, 23, 26) silver [כסף]; (5:7,8) king of Israel rends [קרע] his garment in despair; (5:22) two youths [שני]; (5:23) two servants [שני]; (5:26) heart [לב]; (5:26) Elisha confronts Gehazi with a question; (5:26) vineyards [כרמים]; (5:27) punishment corresponds to sin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Naboth’s vineyard was located in Jezreel, adjacent to Ahab’s palace, the Dtr writes, making it a tempting extension of the king’s property. Ahab’s greed is stirred, and his offer to Naboth at first seems generous—a trade for an even better vineyard, or if Naboth prefers, the vineyard’s price in silver (vv. 1-2). The key word “vineyard” occurs eleven times in accordance with the ring composition pattern. It appears ten times here (1 Kgs 21:1, 2 [2x], 6 [3x], 7, 15, 16, 18) and one time in the parallel passage of the rung (2 Kgs 5:26). The key word “silver” occurs a total of thirty-one times throughout the ring composition. Here, its placement within this cluster of key words reinforces the thematic parallels of the rung.
Although Ahab’s offer seems fair, it is rejected by Naboth, who emphatically replies: “YHWH forbid that I give the inheritance of my ancestors to you!” (v. 3). Ahab retreats to his bed in a petulant sulk at this rebuff, refusing even to eat. Finding him there, Jezebel takes charge, telling her husband: “Now is the time to show yourself king over Israel. Rise and eat something, and be of good heart; I will get the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite for you” (v. 7). Writing letters in her husband’s name, Jezebel commands the elders and nobles residing in Naboth’s town to proclaim a fast and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly. Opposite Naboth, she adds, they should seat two scoundrels, literally “sons of worthlessness,” who will testify against the unsuspecting Naboth. The negative depiction of these two “sons of worthlessness” forms a thematic parallel in the corresponding passage, with the positive depiction of the two “sons of the prophets” (who exist only in Gehazi’s lie) and the two servants of Naaman who obediently carry back Gehazi’s stolen goods, oblivious to the theft they are assisting. The key word “heart” occurs four times in accordance with the ring composition pattern; once here (1 Kgs 21:7) and once more in the parallel passage of the rung (2 Kgs 5:26). It also reappears on either side of the fifth rung (1 Kgs 18:37 and 2 Kgs 12:5). And it appears twice outside of the ring composition pattern (2 Kgs 6:11; 9:24). The key word “letter” occurs eight times in accordance with the ring composition pattern; four times here (1 Kgs 21:8 [2x], 9, 11), and four times in the parallel passage of the rung (2 Kgs 5:5, 6 [2x], 7). It also appears four times outside of the pattern, all within the narrative of Jehu’s coup (2 Kgs 10:1, 2, 6, 7).
Jezebel’s scheme is implemented—Naboth is accused of reviling God and king, taken outside, and stoned to death (vv. 8-14). When the queen receives word that her plot has succeeded, she brings the good news to her husband: “Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite which he refused to sell to you for silver, for Naboth is no longer alive, he is dead” (v. 15). Ahab sets out at once to take possession of the vineyard he has coveted. However, this theft has not gone unnoticed by YHWH, who sends his prophet Elijah to confront the king with a damning question: “Would you murder and take possession? Thus said YHWH: in the very place where the dogs lapped up Naboth’s blood, the dogs will lap up your blood too” (v. 19). The house of Ahab is doomed for disaster, Elijah continues, because Ahab’s endless, evil provocations have led Israel to sin (vv. 20-22). Jezebel also is condemned: “‘The dogs shall devour Jezebel in the rampart of Jezreel!’” (v. 23). Upon hearing this prophecy, the king of Israel rends his garments in despair. The key word “rends” occurs four times in accordance with the ring composition pattern: once here (1 Kgs 21:27) and three times in the parallel passage of the rung (2 Kgs 5:7, 8 [2x]), where another king of Israel (Ahab’s son) likewise rends his garments in despair. Excluding the instance of Elisha’s symbolic rending at the mid-turn (2 Kgs 2:12), the word appears twice outside of the pattern (2 Kgs 6:30; 11:14).

In the face of this two-fold judgment, Ahab humbles himself before YHWH, donning sackcloth and fasting. His actions bring a partial deferral of his sentence—his dynasty will not be extinguished in his lifetime, but in the lifetime of his son. His own violent death, however, lurks just around the corner.
The theme of social justice continues in the parallel passage (section X), with stories that contrast the weakest members of society with the crushing oppression of the monarchy. The passage begins with the issue of debt slavery (2 Kgs 4:1-7). A widow of one of the sons of the prophets appeals to Elisha because her children are to be taken by a creditor. Her husband, the widow reminds the prophet, revered YHWH. With only a jug of oil in her possession, Elisha facilitates a miracle: oil pours from the jug, filling every vessel the woman is able to gather. When not a single vessel is left, Elisha tells her to sell the oil and pay her debt. A second miracle story follows (vv. 8-37). A wealthy Shunammite woman who has furnished Elisha with room and board lacks only a child. At the prophet’s word, she delivers a son. When the boy is in the field with his father, he is stricken with a headache and dies. In desperation, the woman hurries to Elisha, who returns with her to find the dead child laid out on his bed. Elisha first prays to YHWH, and then twice lays his own body over the child—mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, and hands to hands. The boy’s body begins to warm, and then he sneezes seven times and opens his eyes. Through the power of YHWH, the prophet has restored the child to life.

Two succinct stories continue this life-giving theme. In the first (vv. 38-41), the sons of the prophets add wild gourds gathered in a famine to a pot of stew. When the men begin to eat, they quickly realize the gourds are poisonous and cry out, “O man of God, there is death in the pot!” Elisha responds by calling for flour, which he throws in the pot. The poison is neutralized, and the men are able to eat. In the second story (vv. 42-44), twenty loaves of bread and some grain in a sack feed a hundred men with some bread left over—just as YHWH had said through his prophet, Elisha.
These brief stories set the stage for the central narrative of this section: the miraculous restoration of Naaman, the Aramean army commander afflicted with leprosy (5:1-27). Hearing of Elisha’s miraculous healing powers from a captive Israelite slave girl247 who serves his wife, Naaman appeals to the king of Aram, who sends his army commander to the king of Israel with a letter requesting that the man be cured of his affliction (vv. 1-6). “When the king of Israel read the letter, he rent his garments and cried, ‘Am I God, to deal death or give life, that this fellow writes to me to cure a man of leprosy? Just see for yourselves that he is seeking a pretext against me!’” (v. 7). When Elisha hears of his despair, he sends word to the king of Israel that Naaman should be sent to him.248 Then, Elisha asserts, the king will learn that there is a prophet in Israel (v. 8). [Again, the recognition formula.] But when this great procession of horses and chariots arrives at Elisha’s door, the prophet merely sends a messenger to tell Naaman: “Go and bathe seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean” (v. 10). Expecting something more dramatic, the Aramean army commander becomes furious at the simplicity of this response. But his servants convince him to do as the prophet says. After all, they argue, if he had demanded something difficult, Naaman would not hesitate to do it. After immersing himself seven times in the Jordan River, the man is cured. With this miraculous healing, Naaman, the Aramean, recognizes that the God of Israel is the one true God—an ironic turn of events since Ahab, the Israelite, turned away to worship a foreign god. In gratitude, Naaman attempts to reward the

247 As noted by Robert L. Cohn (“Form and Perspective in 2 Kings V,” VT 33 (1983): 171-184), 175, the lowest of the low, a female Israelite war captive, advises the great king of Aram.
248 Just as Jezebel solved Ahab’s problem in the parallel passage by securing the coveted vineyard, the helpless king of Israel must be delivered by another.
prophet with a generous gift. Elisha declines a reward, however, and sends the man away in peace (vv.11-19).

Consumed with greed, his servant Gehazi perceives an opportunity to secure this fortune for himself. Slipping away from Elisha, he overtakes the departing Naaman. His master, Gehazi lies, has changed his mind. Because two young men, sons of the prophets, have joined Elisha’s group, the prophet requests a talent of silver and two changes of clothing. Naaman is delighted to comply, insisting that Gehazi take not one, but two talents of silver, and that two of his own servants carry back this gift. When these stolen goods are safely stowed away, Gehazi returns to Elisha, who asks his servant where he has been. Gehazi responds that he has not gone anywhere (vv. 20-25), but the prophet knows better. “Did not my heart go along when a man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this a time to take silver, and to take clothing, and olive groves and vineyards, and sheep and cattle, and slaves and maidservants?” (v. 26). Gehazi’s punishment, like Ahab’s, will correspond to his crime: he and his descendants will be afflicted with leprosy forever (v. 27).

This catalog of stolen goods seems strange at first —after all, Gehazi has taken only the first two items on the list—silver and clothing—from Naaman. The inclusion of the misbegotten vineyards in Elisha’s reproach recalls Ahab and Jezebel’s crime against Naboth in the rung’s parallel passage. But the addition of olive groves, vineyards, sheep, and slaves and maidservants connects this list to another—the list of possessions that Samuel warns the Israelites a despotic king will demand from his people (1 Sam 8:14-17). This connection links Gehazi’s theft with the worst excesses of royal oppression.
The tyranny decried here had its origins in the process of urbanization that began with the rise of city-states between the fifth and third millennia BCE—a process that caused a shift in power away from tribal groups that protected the social and territorial rights of their clan(s) and towards a centralized state. The result was an accumulation of wealth and resources by the state and its wealthy elite. Small land owners and craftsmen became dependent upon these elite for the resources of their production, such as water, seed, draft animals, and farm implements, forcing the underclass to procure loans at ever higher interest rates. In ancient Israel, as elsewhere, free citizens unable to repay their loans lost their land and fell into debt-slavery.249 As the biblical authors knew well, “there will never cease to be poor” (Deut 15:11). Nevertheless, they envisioned a just society in which all of its members were cared for and protected. In juxtaposing these passages, the Dtr makes plain that the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel failed miserably in their sacred charge to defend society’s weakest members.

The Third Rung: HOLY WAR (1 Kgs 20:1-43 // 2 Kgs 6:1—7:20)

The third rung, sections V (1 Kings 20) and XI (2 Kings 6—7), returns to the theme of holy war. Our preview of section V (in conjunction with the analysis of the first rung) considered Ahab’s failure to fulfill his obligation of the ban. Through the word of his prophets, YHWH delivered the Aramean army and its king into the hands of Israel, only to have Ahab set free the man whose life belonged to YHWH. This disregard caused

249 Chirichigno, Debt-Slavery, 30-54.
the God of Israel to withdraw his support from the kings of Israel, as illustrated in the disastrous battles depicted in the first rung.

The key words and thematic parallels linking sections V and XI are obvious (Table 8). Both sections recount events when the king of Aram waged war against Israel with horses and chariots; and both feature a prophet, sometimes called the man of God. The prophet(s) of section V is anonymous, but the prophet in section XI is none other than Elisha.

Table 8. The third rung: Holy War.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section V: 1 Kgs 20:1-43</th>
<th>Section XI: 2 Kgs 6:1—7:20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(20:1) king of Aram, Ben-Hadad wages war [לחם] against Israel with horses and chariots [סוסים ורכב]; (20:13, 22) a prophet [نبي], sometimes called the man of God [איש האלהים] (20:28) gives Ahab military advice; (20:34) sets free [שלח] Ben-Hadad; (20:18) seize [פתש]; (20:35) sons of the prophets [בני הנביאים]; (20:38) motif of eyes covered</td>
<td>(6:1) sons of the prophets [בני הנביאים]; (6:8) the king of Aram wages war [לחם] against Israel; (6:9, 10, 15) the man of God [איש האלהים]; (6:12) the prophet [نبي] Elisha gives king of Israel military advice; (6:14) Aram sends horses and chariots [סוסים ורכב] against Elisha; (6:17; 7:6) YHWH sends horses and chariots of fire; (6:17, 20) motif of eyes blinded and opened; (6:23) sets free [שלח] troops of Aram; (7:12) seize [פתש]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section XI begins with a brief prophetic tale concerning the sons of the prophets, in which Elisha uses his restorative powers to recover a lost ax head for his disciples (vv. 1-7). It then turns quickly to the ongoing theme of holy war. As in the parallel passage (section V), the king of Aram is waging war against Israel; and YHWH has dispatched his prophet to assist in their defense. Each time the king of Aram plans an ambush, the man of God sends word to the king of Israel, advising him to avoid the area. Time after
time the king of Aram is thwarted until, in frustration, he accuses his own men of spying for Israel. The fault is not theirs, his officers reply; the prophet Elisha informs the king of Israel of his every action. In response, the king of Aram sends a strong force with horses and chariots to capture Elisha. With the town surrounded, Elisha’s attendant is terrified (vv. 8-15). But the prophet reassures him: “Fear not,”²⁵⁰ he replied. ‘There are more on our side than on theirs.’ Then Elisha prayed: ‘YHWH, open his eyes and let him see.’ And YHWH opened the servant’s eyes and he saw the hills all around Elisha covered with horses and chariots of fire” (vv. 16-17). As the Aramean army advances against them, Elisha prays again: “Please strike this people with a blinding light.” And he struck them with a blinding light, as Elisha had asked” (v. 18).

Like the servant’s initial inability to see the heavenly army of horses and chariots of fire, the blindness of the Aramean troops is not true blindness, but an inability to see what matters. Although the object of their quest (Elisha) stands before them, they are oblivious. The prophet offers to guide them: “This is not the road, and that is not the town; follow me, and I will lead you to the man you want.’ And he led them to Samaria” (v. 19). Once there, however, Elisha requests that their eyes be opened; and the Arameans see that they are prisoners within their enemy’s capital city. YHWH has literally delivered the mighty Aramean army to the king of Israel, and he is eager to put them to the sword (vv. 20-21). But Elisha denies his request: “‘No, do not,’ he replied. ‘Did you

take them captive with your sword and bow that you would strike them down? Rather, set
food and drink before them, and let them eat and drink and return to their master’” (v. 22). The message is clear—these prisoners of holy war belong to the God of Israel, and they are his to condemn or spare as he wishes. The captives are given food and drink and then set free (v. 23).

In the final episode of this section, the city of Samaria is besieged by Ben-Hadad and his army. Trapped within the walls that should protect them, the city’s inhabitants are slowly reduced to starvation. In the midst of this devastating famine, the king of Israel walks along the city wall; and a woman cries out to him: “Help me, your majesty!” (vv. 24-26). Believing that she is asking for food, the king admits he is powerless to save her: “If YHWH does not help you, how shall I help you? From the threshing floor or from the winepress?” (v. 27). Both are empty, of course, but the king asks further: “What troubles you?” The following story is both gruesome and disturbing: “That woman said to me, ‘Give up your son and we will eat him today; and we will eat my son tomorrow.’ So we cooked my son and we ate him; and I said to her on the next day, ‘Give up your son and let us eat him”— but she hid her son!” (vv. 28-29).^{251} Like the tale spun by the prophet to convict Ahab for setting free Ben-Hadad in the parallel section (1 Kgs 20:35-43), this tale

---

invites the king to indict himself.\textsuperscript{252} The northern kings of Israel, like cannibalistic mothers, devour the people they are charged with protecting. The king is unwilling to see his own culpability, however. Instead, he rends his clothes, revealing the sackcloth underneath, and calls for the head of Elisha (vv. 30-31). With this action, the narrator hints that the king’s piety is questionable; after all, his counterpart on the other side of the rung, Ben-Hadad, also donned sackcloth in an effort to persuade Ahab to set him free (1 Kgs 20:32). The prophet responds with a prediction of abundant relief (7:1-2), which is quickly fulfilled when the heavenly thunder of the horses and chariots of fire causes the Aramean troops to flee in terror, abandoning their camp and all their supplies (vv. 6-7).

This miraculous turn of events goes unnoticed by those within the city. Outside the city gate, four lepers sit, contemplating their fate. In the city is certain death by starvation, they reason; should they wait for death where they sit (vv. 3-4)? With nothing to lose, the men decide to appeal to the Aramean camp. But when they enter it, they are amazed to find it abandoned. Their first response is to carry off and bury some of the treasure they have found. They quickly realize, however, that they must share this discovery with their fellow Israelites (vv. 8-9). The good news is delivered to the palace; but once again a king of Israel fails to see what is obvious even to a leper—a social outcast (vv. 10-12). Readers recall another leper, the Aramean commander Naaman, who recognized the ultimate rule of YHWH while the king of Israel worshipped Ba’al. Convinced that the empty camp is a trap, a courtier must persuade the king to send out a

\textsuperscript{252} Nathan employed the same tactic with his parable to David concerning the Bathsheba/Uriah incident (2 Sam 12:1-14), as did Joab with the story he placed in the mouth of the wise woman of Tekoa to convince David to bring Absalom back to court (2 Sam 14:1-24).
team of scouts. Only after following a trail of discarded equipment—abandoned in the Aramean army’s haste to escape the heavenly army—to the Jordan River does the king of Israel recognize this divinely-wrought victory (vv. 13-20).

The arrival of the horses and chariots of fire of YHWH’s heavenly army proclaimed the God of Israel’s awesome might. Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram who challenged Ahab, was no match for the deity who had tossed Pharaoh, with his horses and chariots, into the sea, defeated the peoples of Canaan, and driven them from before the Israelites. Like these earlier foes, Aram was defeated initially. But Ahab violated the sacred covenant of holy war by setting free Ben-Hadad, whose life was proscribed to Israel’s God (v. 42). Just as YHWH had abandoned the invading Israelites, letting them fall in battle to the city of Ai after a man among them took riches for himself from the proscribe spoil of war in the battle of Jericho (Josh 7:1-26), so also he abandoned the kings of Israel. First Ahab (1 Kgs 21:1-51), and then his son, Jehoram (2 Kgs 3:1-27), were enticed to fight (un)holy wars against Aram and Moab (recounted on the first rung of the ring composition); and both kings met ruinous defeats. With section XI, the Dtr brings us back to the rung of holy war with the miraculous arrival of YHWH’s heavenly army. This invisible army, horses and chariots of fire, foreshadows our narrator’s own time, when the Assyrian forces’ unexpected withdrawal from the northern kingdom of Israel signals to Josiah and his party that YHWH, the warrior God of Israel, is again fighting for his people.

The fourth rung of the ring traces events unleashed by “the Three Swords of YHWH” (Hazael; Jehu; and Elisha; see 1 Kgs 19:17), from the beginning of the God of Israel’s command to Elijah to anoint these men (in section IV [1 Kgs 19:1-21]) through the onset of their charge of slaughter (in section XII [2 Kgs 8–9:29]; see Table 9).

Table 9. The fourth rung: The Three Swords of YHWH.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE THREE SWORDS OF YHWH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section IV: 1 Kings 19:1-21</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(19:15-17) Elijah is commanded to anoint Hazael as king of Aram, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha to succeed himself as prophet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section XII: 2 Kings 8:1—9:29</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8:7-15) Elisha sets in motion the coup of Hazael; (9:1-10) Elisha sends a disciple to anoint Jehu, initiating the coup against the house of Ahab</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section IV begins with Elijah’s flight from Jezebel after he has killed the prophets of Ba’al (1 Kgs 18:40). Fortified with food and water by an angel of YHWH, the prophet travels forty days and forty nights before arriving at the mountain of God (vv. 1-8). There, Elijah takes refuge in “the cave” (v. 9)—presumably the very cleft in the rock that sheltered Moses in an earlier theophany (Exod 33:21-22).²⁵³ Now, the God of Israel calls his prophet to account: “Why are you here, Elijah?” (v. 9). Elijah’s reply is fierce: “I am moved by zeal for YHWH, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life” (v. 10). At this, the deity orders him to come out of the cave

²⁵³ The parallels between Elijah and Moses are widely recognized. See Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 191-194.
and stand before him. A violent display of divine power follows: YHWH passes by with rock shattering wind, earthquake, and fire. But YHWH is not in the wind, or the earthquake, or even the fire (vv. 11-12). The God of Israel, the Dtr insists, is no mere force of nature; he is the master of all creation.

After the fire, Elijah hears a small whisper of sound, wraps his mantle around his face, and dares to stand in the entrance of the cave. Again YHWH asks his prophet: “Why are you here, Elijah?” (v. 13). In response, Elijah reasserts his zeal for YHWH and receives his orders. He is to anoint Hazael as king of Aram; Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha to succeed him as prophet (vv. 15-16). The sentence for Israel’s apostasy is severe: “Whoever escapes the sword of Hazael shall be slain by Jehu, and whoever escapes the sword of Jehu shall be slain by Elisha. I will leave in Israel only seven thousand—every knee that has not knelt to Ba’al and every mouth that has not kissed him” (vv 17-18).

Elijah sets out from Horeb; and when he comes upon Elisha ben Shaphat plowing in his field, he throws his mantle over the young man, designating Elisha as his disciple (vv. 19-254)

254 The repetition in this passage has led many scholars to propose that the text is confused. Gerhard von Rad (Old Testament Theology [trans. D.M.G. Stalker; 2 vols.; New York: Harper and Row, 1965] 2:19), calls vv. 9b-11a a “maladroit” intrusion that should be struck out. Ernst Würthwein (“Elijah at Horeb: Reflections on I Kings 19:9-18,” in Proclamation and Presence: Old Testament Essays in Honour of Gwynne Henton Davies [eds. J. I. Durham and J. R. Porter; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983], 159), describes the entire theophany (vv. 11-13a) as a “profound disturbance of the narrative,” arguing that this interruption produced the doublet of vv. 9b-11 and 13b-14 and noting that a redactor often repeats the last sentence of the original text following a secondary insertion (160-61). Campbell and O’Brien (Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History, 396) follow Würthwein in regarding the theophany as an insertion; unlike Würthwein, however, they recognize the rhetorical effectiveness of these verses. McKenzie (The Trouble with Kings, 83) also regards the theophany as an insertion. But Frank Moore Cross (Canaanite Myth, 193 n. 197) dismisses Würthwein’s suggestion as an instance of “throwing out the baby with the bathwater.” Acknowledging what appears to be a doublet, Cross argues that the original account likely possessed both a prophecy-inducing incubation in the cave and a “passing by” of YHWH as Elijah stood in the entrance. Whatever the text’s compositional history, as it now stands, the rhetorical effect of this doublet is a dramatic intensification of the moment.
The task Elijah began will be completed by his student in the parallel passage, when Elisha sets in motion the coups of Hazael (2 Kgs 8:7–15), and Jehu (2 Kgs 9:1-29).

Section XII begins with a brief prophetic tale in which the king of Israel appeals to Elisha’s servant, Gehazi, to tell him all of the wonderful things that the prophet has done (2 Kgs 8:1-6). Yet even this suggestion of piety will not save the king from the violence soon to unfold. These events begin with Elisha’s clandestine exchange with Ben-Hadad’s courtier, Hazael. When the king of Aram falls ill, he sends his servant, Hazael, to meet the prophet, who at that moment is on his way to visit the king. Bearing lavish gifts for the prophet, Hazael has been charged with inquiring if the king will recover from his illness (vv. 7-9). “Elisha said to him, ‘Go and say to him, ‘You will recover.’ However YHWH has revealed to me that he will surely die’” (v. 10). Again, we see a prophet abetting YHWH’s deception. The two men regard each other in silence until, at last, Elisha begins to weep. “Why does my Lord weep?’ asked Hazael. ‘Because I know,’ he replied, ‘what harm you will do to the Israelite people: you will set their fortresses on fire, put their young men to the sword, dash their little ones in pieces, and rip open their pregnant women” (vv. 11-12). Hazael protests: “But how,’ asked Hazael, ‘can your servant, who is a mere dog, perform such a mighty deed?” Elisha’s reply ignites the treasonous coup that follows: “YHWH has shown me a vision of you as king of Aram” (v. 13). Returning to the king, Hazael reassures him that the prophet has said he will live. The next day, however, Hazael murders Ben-Hadad and succeeds him as king (vv. 14-15).

Jehu’s coup follows (2 Kgs 9:1-29). This time, Elisha sends a disciple, who takes Jehu, a commander in the Israelite army, aside from his troops and anoints him king of Israel—charged with striking down the house of Ahab and inflicting YHWH’s vengeance against Jezebel. As Elisha had foretold, Israel was then defending itself against the Aramean usurper, Hazael. But when the reigning king of Israel, Joram ben Ahab, was wounded in battle, he retired to Jezreel to recover from his injuries. Also at Jezreel was Ahaziah, the king of Judah, who had fought alongside his fellow monarch against Hazael and was visiting Joram in his convalescence. The alliance between these two kings reflects a kinship relationship, because Ahaziah was not only the Davidic king of Judah, but also a descendant of the house of Omri (his mother, Athaliah, was the daughter of Ahab; 2 Kgs 8:18; 26). This intermarriage between the Davidic dynasty and the descendants of the hated King Ahab is a tangle that the Dtr will address in the next rung of the composition.

With Elisha’s endorsement, Jehu and his army set out for Jezreel to overthrow the king. From the tower of the royal residence, the lookout sees the approaching troops. Twice horsemen are sent out from the fortress to greet the fast moving army and to inquire if all is well; and each time Jehu orders the rider to fall in line. When neither rider returns, Joram and Ahaziah have their own chariots hitched up; and the two kings set out. They meet Jehu in the field of Naboth the Jezreelite; and the king of Israel calls out to the captain of his troops, asking if all is well. Jehu’s response leaves no doubt about his

---

256 The name “Joram” is a shortened form of the name “Jehoram.”
257 The biblical text provides two genealogies for Athaliah. In the first (2 Kgs 8:18) she is called the daughter of Ahab; in the second (2 Kgs 8:26) she is called the daughter of Omri, a designation that likely reflects her dynastic identification as a granddaughter of the great Omri. See Sweeney, I & II Kings, 320-321; Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, II Kings, 98.
intentions: “How can all be well as long as your mother Jezebel carries on her countless harlotries and sorceries?’” (v. 22). At this, the two kings turn and flee; but the situation is hopeless. Jehu shoots an arrow that pierces the king of Israel’s heart; and he collapses dead in his chariot, bringing Omri’s dynasty to an end in fulfillment of Elijah’s prophecy in 1 Kgs 21:19-23 (vv. 23-26). On Jehu’s order, the fleeing Ahaziah is pursued and shot as well. Fatally wounded, Judah’s king flees to Megiddo, where he dies (vv. 27-29).

Sections IV and XII, which together form the fourth rung of the ring composition, are two halves of a whole. Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha, named “the Three Swords of YHWH” in section IV, fulfill their commissions in the parallel passage of section XII. Just as the God of Israel commanded Elijah on Mount Horeb, Elisha has succeeded his master and placed men on the thrones of Aram and Israel who will further his design.

With Hazael as its king, YHWH will wield the enemy nation of Aram as a weapon of chastisement against his own people. And the ruthless Jehu, whose assassination of Joram has fulfilled Elijah’s prophecy against his father, Ahab, will now set in motion events that will, at long last, purge the land of Ba’alism.


The purge of Ba’al worship is realized on the fifth rung of the ring composition with Elijah’s slaughter of the prophets of Ba’al on Mount Carmel in section III (1 Kings 18) and the continuing events of Jehu’s coup in the parallel passage of section XIII (2

Kgs 9:30—12). These events bring about the final destruction of the Ba’al cultus in both Israel and Judah. Key words link these passages (Table 10), and the thematic parallels are equally striking.

Table 10. The fifth rung: Anti-Ba’alism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section III: 1 Kgs 18:1-46</th>
<th>Section XIII: 2 Kgs 9:30—12:22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(18:3) steward of the palace, [אשר על־הבית]; (18:4, 13) prophets’ lives saved through being hidden [חבא]; (18:37) heart [לב]; (18:40) seized [פתוש] and slaughtered [שחט]</td>
<td>(10:5) steward of the palace, [אשר על־הבית]; (10:7) slaughtered [שחט] and slaughtered [שחט]; (10:14) seized [פתוש]; (11:3) Joash’s life saved through being hidden [חבא]; (12:5) heart [לב]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section III recounts Elijah’s epic battle against the prophets of Ba’al, the Canaanite storm god believed to bring the seasonal rains that restored the land. At issue is nothing less than the ultimate sovereignty of YHWH, a fact the God of Israel effectively demonstrates to Ahab by withholding the life giving rain (18:1). The resulting famine causes Ahab and the steward of the palace, Obadiah, to scour the land in search of grass for the starving livestock. When Elijah appears before Obadiah and commands him to inform Ahab of his presence, the terrified man begs the prophet to reconsider: Elijah’s miraculous comings and goings are well known; and if Obadiah returns with the king, only to discover that Elijah has disappeared, the king will kill him.

Surely, Obadiah pleads, Elijah has heard how he saved the lives of the prophets of YHWH, hiding them in caves from the murderous Jezebel. The phrase “steward of the palace” occurs twice in accordance with the ring composition pattern--once here (2 Kgs 18:3) and once in the parallel passage of the rung (2 Kgs 10:5). The key word “hide” occurs three times: twice here (1 Kgs 18:4, 13) and once in the rung’s parallel passage (2 Kgs 11:3). The same word also appears one time outside of the pattern (2 Kgs 6:29).

Assured that the prophet will appear, Obadiah informs the king of Elijah’s presence. From Ahab’s greeting, it is clear that the king blames Elijah for the drought: “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?’ He [Elijah] retorted, ‘It is not I who have brought trouble on Israel, but you and your father’s house, by forsaking the commandments of YHWH and going after the Ba’alim” (vv. 17-18). In this confrontation with a king, the prophet gives the orders: “Now summon all of Israel to join me at Mount Carmel, together with the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba’al and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table” (v. 19). What ensues on Mount Carmel is a prophetic contest between Elijah and the prophets of Ba’al. Whose god will make himself known? Elijah sets the terms of the battle: the opponents will receive a bull to offer in sacrifice, but neither will light the fire. Rather, they will invoke their respective deities by name. The Prophets of Ba’al go first. They prepare their bull for sacrifice, but though they plead and call for most of the day, dancing ecstatically around the altar and gashing themselves with knives and spears, the heavens are silent (vv. 25-29). Elijah’s turn begins with an act emphasizing the historic unity of Israel: “And Elijah took twelve stones, corresponding to the number of tribes of the sons of Jacob—to whom the word of
YHWH had come: ‘Israel shall be your name’—and with the stones he built an altar in the name of YHWH’ (vv. 31-32). Like the prophets of Ba’al, Elijah prepares his bull for sacrifice. Then, as if the challenge were too easy for the God of Israel, Elijah orders that water be poured over the burnt offering, soaking the wood and filling the trench around the altar. With this task done, Elijah calls upon YHWH to prove himself God. Instantly fire descends, consuming the burnt offering, as well as the wood, stones, earth, and water (vv. 33-38). Seeing this miracle, the people fling themselves to the ground and profess their faith: “YHWH alone is God, YHWH alone is God!” (v. 39). At Elijah’s command, the prophets of Ba’al are seized and slaughtered. The rain that follows is a fitting confirmation of YHWH’s victory (vv. 41-46). The key word “seize” occurs seven times in accordance with the ring composition pattern: twice here (1 Kgs 18:40 [2x]) and twice in the rung’s parallel passage (2 Kgs 10:14 [2x]), as well as on either side of the third rung—twice in section V (1 Kgs 20:18 [2x]) and once in section XI (2 Kgs 7:12). The key word “slaughter” appears three times in accordance with the ring composition pattern: once here (1 Kgs 18:40) and twice in the rung’s parallel passage (2 Kgs 10:7, 14).

The second half of this rung begins with the death of Jezebel, royal benefactress of the prophets of Ba’al. Jehu’s first task upon usurping the throne was to kill Jezebel in fulfillment of Elijah’s prophecy (in 1 Kgs 21:23). While the elimination of Jezebel was politically inevitable, the real threat to Jehu’s claim to kingship came not from this

---

261 These twelve stones recall the twelve stones Joshua erected after the crossing of the Jordan River (Joshua 4), as well as the twelve pillars Moses erected by the altar on Mount Sinai (Exod 24:4). All are said to represent the twelve tribes of Israel.
elderly queen mother, but from Ahab’s remaining descendants—the seventy sons being raised by guardians in the city of Samaria. To consolidate his power, Jehu invites the supporters of Israel’s murdered king (Joram) to choose the best of these boys, place him on his father’s throne, and prepare to defend him. The steward of the palace and the other officials are overcome with fear, however; and they assure Jehu that he is free to rule. If they are on his side, Jehu replies, they will bring him the heads of the princes, a grisly task they complete. All seventy princes are slaughtered, and their heads are delivered to Jehu (2 Kgs 10:1-11).

Jehu’s purge is not yet complete, however. When he stumbles upon the forty-two brothers of Ahaziah who have come north to pay their respects to the royal family, Jehu orders that these men be seized and slaughtered (vv. 12-14). He then moves to wipe out the remaining worshipers of Ba’al. Proclaiming a solemn assembly for Ba’al, Jehu gathers all of his followers at the temple of Ba’al, where they are struck down; and the temple is destroyed. Thus, the Dtr tells us, Jehu eradicated Ba’alism from the northern kingdom of Israel. But he did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam, the golden calves at Beth-El and Dan (vv. 18-29).

The gaze of the Dtr now turns south to the kingdom of Judah, which also has lost its king in Jehu’s coup. When Ahaziah’s mother, Athaliah, daughter of Ahab, learns of her son’s death, she immediately attempts to kill off all of the royal descendants and claim the throne for herself. One child is rescued, however. The infant prince Joash is taken by his aunt and hidden in the Temple. When the child is seven years old, his existence is revealed in a countercoup orchestrated by the priest Jehoiada. Athaliah is
killed, and Joash is made king of Judah. Without delay, the Dtr tells us, the people converged upon the temple of Ba’al, tearing it down, and killing its priest (2 Kgs 11:1-20). Thus both kingdoms, north and south, have destroyed their temples to the Canaanite god, Ba’al.

The Dtr has given considerable attention to the coups of Jehu and Athaliah. Placed in parallel with Elijah’s rout of the prophets of Ba’al on Mount Carmel, the overriding theme of anti-Ba’alism in these episodes is obvious. Our Josianic author is also concerned to address intermarriage between the house of David and the Omride dynasty, however, because from this point forward, every Davidic king is also a descendant of Ahab. As the Dtr carefully detailed, Jehu’s coup left no survivors among the Israelite side of Ahab’s family (2 Kgs 10:7, 11, 17); and Athaliah did her best to eliminate every male descendant on the Judahite side (2 Kgs 11:1). Jehu’s rebellion even netted forty-two of Ahaziah’s brothers, who were summarily executed (2 Kgs 10:14). Certainly this slaughter was politically pragmatic. After all, these members of Judahite royalty also were direct descendants of Ahab and potential claimants to Jehu’s throne. The interest of the Dtr was more pointed, however. The intermarriage between the houses of David and Omri was too well known to be denied; but the Josianic writer sought to temper this fact by unequivocally presenting Joash as the sole survivor of this unfortunate union—one small boy, raised in the Jerusalem Temple under the tutelage of the priests.

262 There are 27 references to Ba’al here on the 5th rung: 1 Kgs 18:18, 19, 21, 22, 25, 26 [2x], 40; 2 Kgs 10:18, 19 [3x], 20, 21 [3x], 22, 23 [3x], 25, 26, 27 [2x], 28, 11:18 [2x]. An addition 7 references to Ba’al occur throughout the ring: 5 in the prologue, 1 Kgs 16:31, 32 [2x], and the mid-turn, 1 Kgs 22:54; 2 Kgs 1:8; 1 on the 1st rung, 2 Kgs 3:2; and 1 on the 4th rung, 1 Kgs 19:18.
263 That these brothers number forty-two evokes the earlier slaughter of the wicked boys of Beth-El (2 Kgs 2:23-24).
Thus, the Dtr hopes to persuade, the stigma of the house of Omri has been successfully erased from the Davidic line.

With the continued legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty established, the final episodes of the fifth rung record the reign of Joash (2 Kgs 12:1-22). There, the Dtr sets the stage for events that will initiate Josiah’s reforms almost two centuries later (2 Kings 22—23) with a narrative recounting how Joash placed a chest in the Temple to collect money for Temple repairs (2 Kgs 12:5-17). The description of this arrangement explicitly echoes the passage describing Josiah’s Temple repairs at every point: the guards of the threshold; the silver; the scribe; the high priest; the overseers of the work in charge of the house of YHWH; paying the carpenters and labors and masons; and purchasing wood and quarried stone (2 Kgs 22:3-9). Note the presence of a literary technique, called “Chekhov’s gun,” according to which a gun introduced in the first act must go off in the second. The detailed description of Joash’s arrangement becomes tremendously significant when Josiah later sets this process in motion: sending a scribe to the high priest to weigh out the silver deposited with the guards of the threshold to initiate the Temple repairs—the very repairs that, according to the Dtr, led to unearthing the scroll of the teaching that initiated Josiah’s reforms.

Here on the fifth rung, the assault against Ba’alism that began with Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) is completed in the parallel passage about Jehu’s destruction of Ba’al’s temple in Israel (2 Kgs 10:27) and the people of the land’s demolition of Ba’al’s temple in Judah (2 Kgs 11:18). Both Jehu and Athaliah are merely YHWH’s

---

264 In this passage the author refers to the king of Judah as both “Joash” and by the longer version of the name, “Jehoash.”
instruments, the Dtr insists, used to expunge all worship of the Canaanite deity from both kingdoms and to obliterate the monarchs who supported this apostasy. What emerges from these events, the Dtr insists, is a purified Davidic line, expunged of the sins of the house of Omri—a legitimate dynasty that will one day restore the divided kingdom.


The sixth and final rung of the ring composition consists of sections II (1 Kings 17) and XIV (2 Kgs 13:1-21), which together frame the entire work. The theme of these passages is resurrection and restoration—a topic that permeates the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories (Table 11).

Table 11. The sixth rung: Resurrection and Restoration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESURRECTION AND RESTORATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section II: 1 Kgs 17:1-24</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(17:17) falls sick [חלה]; his illness [חלי]; (17:21) three times [שלש פעמים]; (17:22) revived [ויחי]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section XIV: 2 Kgs 13:1-25</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(13:6) sacred post [אשרה]; (13:7) fifty [חמיסים]; (13:14) falls sick [חלה]; his illness [חלי]; (13:14) Father, father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!; (13:18, 19; 25) three times [שלש פעמים]; (13:21) revived [ויחי]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section II begins with Elijah’s pronouncement of a drought. Without rain, the land is enveloped in famine; and YHWH sends the prophet whose words announced this devastation into hiding. First, he is sent to the Wadi Cherith, where at the command of
YHWH he is fed by ravens. When the wadi dries up, the God of Israel sends Elijah to Zarephath of Sidon. In going to the Phoenician city of Sidon, Elijah has crossed over into the territory of Ba’al. Yet this no-god clearly is powerless to bring the life giving rains; Sidon, too, is ravaged by drought. YHWH tells Elijah that he has designated a Sidonian widow to feed him; and when Elijah enters the city, he sees a widow gathering wood: “He called out to her, ‘Please bring me a little water in your pitcher, and let me drink.’ And as she went to fetch it, he called out to her, ‘Please bring along a piece of bread for me’” (vv. 10-11). This second request is beyond her means, the widow answers. She has only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. With the sticks she has just gathered, she will prepare this last bit of food for herself and her son; and then they will die. Elijah reassures her: do as she has said, the prophet tells her, but first make a small cake for him. The God of Israel will sustain them—the jar of flour and the jug of oil will not run out until YHWH sends rain (vv. 12-16). Just as Elijah says, the widow and her son are miraculously sustained. But after a while, the widow’s son falls sick; and his illness worsens until he has no breath left in him. The key word “fall sick” occurs three times in accordance with the ring composition pattern: once here (1 Kgs 17:17), once in the rung’s parallel passage (2 Kgs 13:14), and once more at the mid-turn (2 Kgs 1:2). In addition, both appearances on the sixth rung are paired with the key word “his illness,” which occurs nowhere else in the ring composition. The word also appears three times outside of the pattern (1 Kgs 22:34; 2 Kgs 8:7, 29).

265 Sweeney, I & II Kings, 212.
Taking the child from his mother, Elijah brings him up to his room and places him on his own bed. Crying out to YHWH, the prophet performs a symbolic action, stretching himself over the boy three times. And YHWH responds: the boy’s breath returns to his body, and he revived (vv. 17-22). Seeing her child alive, the woman tells Elijah: “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of YHWH is truly in your mouth” (v. 24). The phrase “three times” occurs four times in accordance with the ring composition pattern: once here (1 Kgs 17:21) and twice in the rung’s parallel passage (2 Kgs 13:18, 19, 25). “And he revived” (Qal, vav consecutive imperfect, 3 m. s.) appears twice in accordance with the ring composition pattern: once here (1 Kgs 17:22) and once in the parallel passage of the rung (2 Kgs 13:21).

The similarities between this story of Elijah’s resuscitation of the Sidonian widow’s son and the story of Elisha’s revival of the Shunammite woman’s son (second rung; 2 Kgs 4:8-37) are obvious; and their resemblance reflects a theme deeply rooted in Israelite culture—the symbolic death and resurrection of a beloved son. Many doublets, and even triplets, of nearly identical stories appear throughout the Hebrew Bible. In the story of Elijah’s resurrection of the Sidonian widow’s son, however, the key words falls sick [חלה], his illness [חליו], and revived [ויחי] (absent from the Elisha version of the story on the second rung) definitively link this story with section XIV (2

---


Kgs 13:1-25), its parallel passage on the sixth rung. There, in the final section of the ring composition, the Dtr recounts how YHWH, angry with Israel, has repeatedly delivered them into the hands of Aram. At the pleading of King Jehoahaz, Israel is granted a redeemer, allowing it briefly to regain its. But once again, the Israelites fail to address their most blatant transgression: “However they did not depart from the sins which the house of Jeroboam had caused Israel to commit; they persisted in them. And even the sacred post stood in Samaria (v. 6).” This legacy of apostasy continues with Jehoahaz’s son, Jehoash. Yet when Elisha falls sick—and it is clear that his illness will be fatal—the distraught king comes to the prophet and, weeping over him, exclaims: “Father! Father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!” (v. 14). At this, Elisha instructs the king to get a bow and arrows and, in a series of symbolic actions, he tries once more to deliver Israel. With the prophet’s hands placed over the hands of the king, an arrow shot to the east will bring Israel victory against Aram at Aphek. Elisha then commands the king to strike the arrows against the ground, but the king strikes the ground just three times, a tentative response that elicits the prophet’s wrath. The king’s lack of faith is costly; had he struck the ground five or six times, Elisha chastises him, he would have annihilated Aram. Now, Israel will gain only three victories (vv. 14-19). Then, the Dtr writes, the man of God dies and is buried. Later, when the burial of another man is interrupted by a marauding band of Moabites, the body is hastily cast into Elisha’s grave. But in a fantastical turn of events, our author asserts, the corpse touched Elisha’s bones, was revived, and stood up (vv. 20-21).

268 This “redeemer” [ממשית], from the root “to save” [ישע], is surely Elisha, whose name, “God is salvation” [אלישע], derives from the same root.
In the Hebrew Bible, death and the grave קֶבֶר can symbolize exile, a metaphor perhaps nowhere more explicit than in Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37:1-14). There, the prophet Ezekiel, transported by the spirit of YHWH, witnesses a vision of desiccated bones strewn across the valley. Leading Ezekiel among these skeletal remains, the God of Israel commands him to prophesy to the bones; and as he does so, the dry bones begin to come together—bone meets matching bone; and sinews, flesh, and skin form over them. The bodies are now whole, but they remain lifeless (vv. 1-8); and the deity commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath. Ezekiel prophesies to the breath, “And the breath entered them, and they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast multitude” (vv. 9-10). The next four verses explain the significance of their miraculous resurrection:

And he said to me, “O mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed. Prophesy, therefore, and say to them: Thus said YHWH God: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O my people, and bring you to the land of Israel. You shall know, O my people, that I am YHWH, when I have opened your graves and lifted you out of your graves. I will put my breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil. Then you shall know that I YHWH have spoken and have acted”—declares YHWH (vv. 11-14).

Clearly Ezekiel’s vision represents the restoration of the nation; the metaphorical grave is the terrible state of the Babylonian Exile.\textsuperscript{270} Here, on the sixth rung of the ring composition, the Dtr signals a similar allusion with the miraculous resurrection of the corpse that his countrymen “cast” [שָׁלַל] into the grave—the same verb our author uses to described the fall of the northern kingdom, when YHWH “cast” Israel from his presence (2 Kgs 17:20).\textsuperscript{271}

In the final verses of the ring composition, the Dtr makes this allusion to the Assyrian imposed exile explicit. Hazael of Aram had continued to oppress Israel throughout the reign of Jehoahaz, the son of Jehu (v. 22), “but YHWH was gracious and merciful to them, and turned to them for the sake of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and he did not wish to destroy them, and he did not cast them from his presence—until now”\textsuperscript{272} (v. 23). The three victories granted to Joash by Elisha’s symbolic act (vv. 24-25) will not suffice to save the northern kingdom of Israel.

With this final section, the structure undergirding the ring is complete. Key words link the last section to both the prologue (sacred post), and the first section (falls sick; his illness; three times; he revived); and the exclamation, ‘Father! Father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!,’ appearing at the mid-turn and the conclusion, divides the ring down the

\textsuperscript{270} The metaphor of death and exile also occurs in Hezekiah’s proverb (2 Kgs 19:3b), where the threat of Assyria (and exile) is equated to the imminent death of a difficult birth. See Katheryn Pfisterer Darr’s unpacking of this proverb in \textit{Isaiah’s Vision and the Family of God} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 205-224. See also Moses’ charge to the Israelites as they prepare to enter the land: to choose between life—to dwell in the land YHWH promised to their fathers—or death (Deut 30:17-20).

\textsuperscript{271} As noted by Provan, \textit{1 and 2 Kings}, 230.

\textsuperscript{272} The phrase “until now” [עד־עתה] occurs three additional times in the Hebrew Bible, each time with a slightly different temporal nuance. Here (as in Gen 32:5), it refers to an event of the past; in Deut 12:9 it indicates a time that has not yet occurred, and in 2 Sam 19:8 it refers to the moment at hand. Campbell and O’Brien (\textit{Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History}, 434), note that it could refer to the exile of 722 or 586.
middle. On a thematic level, the blatant fact that the sacred post still stands indicates that the apostasy that burgeoned in the reign of Ahab has not yet been eradicated. However, the incredible re-birth of the corpse when it comes into contact with Elisha’s bones ensures the reader of the coming, miraculous restoration under Josiah of a newly united Davidic kingdom, as anticipated by the Dtr.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter concludes our textual analysis of the ring composition. With the chiastic structure of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories brought to the fore, it becomes clear that each of these episodes was placed with careful precision. Regardless of any historical basis that might (or might not) lie behind the individual stories, the Dtr has appropriated these characters and their narratives, shaping and arranging the source material to create a propagandistic herald for Josiah’s reforms and his ambition to reunite the divided kingdom. The intervening rungs advance the argument first introduced in the prologue—the apostasy of the northern kings exceeded even that of Jeroboam ben Nebat. Blind to the miracles performed on their behalf, the kings of Israel had utterly failed. Despite their occasional gestures of piety, their faithlessness had led the people astray and brought down the punishing wrath of YHWH.

The Dtr will later recite these failures explicitly in his account of the northern kingdom’s fall. Although YHWH had freed them from the land of Egypt, defeating Pharaoh in an epic battle of holy war, and although he had dispossessed the nations before them, the Israelites had followed their kings in emulating the religious practices of
other nations (2 Kings 17:7-12). When YHWH sent the prophets to warn them, like their fathers before them, they did not obey (vv. 13-15). They made molten idols for themselves—the two calves of Beth-El and Dan—bowing down to the host of heaven and worshipping the Canaanite deity, Ba’al (v. 16). For all this, YHWH spurned Israel, delivering them into the hands of plunderers and finally casting them from his presence (v. 20).

Thus the northern kingdom, torn away from the house of David two centuries earlier, came to an end. According to the Dtr, the dynastic promise extended to Jeroboam had been no more than a temporary stewardship—the descendants of David would be chastised, but not forever (1 Kings 11:39). The two half-kingdoms would be reunited. According to the Dtr, Jeroboam himself knew this. He tried to secure his grip on the northern territory with the establishment of a competing cult in Beth-El and Dan (1 Kgs 13:25-30)\(^{273}\)—a challenge to YHWH’s dominion that brought a swift response from the deity with the dispatch of the man of God (1 Kgs 13:1-10). Jeroboam and those who followed had been forewarned, the Dtr insisted; with Josiah as their king, the Davidic dynasty would reclaim its heritage. The Elijah-Elisha ring composition foreshadows this eventuality. We turn now to consider the Josianic reform, whose politics and theology the ring composition was intended to promote.

\(^{273}\) Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 279, 284.
Chapter 4 – The Politics and Theology of King Josiah’s Reforms

Introduction

The detailed textual analyses in the previous chapters explicate the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories (1 Kgs 16:23—2 Kgs 13:25) as a comprehensive ring composition within the broader DtrH. Although these prophetic stories originated in the traditions of northern Israel, they were later appropriated and recontextualized by a Josianic redactor, who sought to garner support for the social, religious, and political reforms of King Josiah of Judah. The purpose of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition is articulated in its prologue (1 Kgs 16:23-34), where a reference to Joshua’s battle of Jericho recalls the circumstances of the original conquest of Canaan. In making this analogy, the Dtr casts Josiah’s unchallenged march into the territory of the former kingdom of Israel, which resulted in the destruction of the sanctuary at Beth-El, as a victory in holy war equal to Joshua’s.

Set in parallel to the prologue, the events depicted at the mid-turn of the ring composition (1 Kgs 22:52—2 Kgs 2:25)—itself a minor ring within the greater ring composition—both recall the division of the kingdom in the wake of Solomon’s reign and foreshadow the restoration anticipated by the Josianic reformers. Standing at the edge of the Jordan River, Elijah cuts his mantle and strikes the water—a symbolic act that elicits an analogous halving of the water (2 Kgs 2:8) and alludes to the division of the kingdom. As Elijah is carried away in the whirlwind, Elisha also rends his mantle in two. His receipt of a double portion of Elijah’s spirit evokes Israel’s status as YHWH’s firstborn son, thus confirming that the two half-kingdoms are Israel’s lawful inheritance.
The mid-turn concludes with an allusion to Josiah’s slaughter of the Beth-El priests, who are disparaged by the Dtr as wicked little boys. Within the minor ring, the prophets who came out from Beth-El to greet Elijah and Elisha at the outset of their journey correspond to a group of small boys who come out from Beth-El to insult Elisha as he retraces their journey alone. Elisha responds by cursing these boys, and two she-bears emerge from the woods to mangle forty-two of the children.

According to the narrative recounted by the Dtr, the ten northern tribes were torn away from Davidic rule in response to the failings of Solomon; in establishing the offending sanctuaries at Beth-El and Dan, however, Jeroboam ben Nebat violated the cultic exclusivity of Jerusalem. This apostasy reached its apex with Ahab, whose marriage to Jezebel, argued the Dtr, introduced Ba’al worship to Israel. The events recounted in the six intervening rungs of the ring composition detail the growing faithlessness of the northern kings, setting the stage for Josiah’s efforts to restore Davidic rule over a unified nation. Such a restoration would surely have seemed impossible when Josiah came to the throne in 639 BCE.; at that time, Assyria was at the height of its power. Yet only thirty years later, the massive Assyrian empire had effectively ceased to exist. The crisis that led to Assyria’s fall began with Babylonia’s revolt in 626 BCE. Struggling to reassert his rule, in 623 BCE the king of Assyria, Sin-shar-ishkun (the son of Ashurbanipal) led a major campaign into Babylonia. With the king and his army thus preoccupied, a usurper exploited his absence and seized control of the Assyrian throne,

forcing the king to abandon his effort in Babylonia and turn his attention homeward.  

Under these circumstances, the Babylonian Chronicles suggest that Sin-shar-ishkun entered into an alliance with Psammetichus I, the king of Egypt, in which he ceded control of the territories west of the Euphrates River in exchange for military aid against the combined threat of the Babylonians and Medes. As Nadav Na’aman has noted, it is surely no coincidence that Josiah’s reforms began the following year in 622 BCE.  

Although Egypt had assumed the role of overlord to the peoples of the Levant in the wake of Assyria’s retreat, the king of Egypt was initially far too busy securing his hold on the coast and maritime transportation routes this exchange had afforded him and fulfilling his obligation of military support for Assyria to concern himself with the cultic reforms of the small kingdom of Judah.  

This illusion of sovereignty likely convinced Josiah and his ideologues that the united kingdom of ancient memory would soon be restored. The Deuteronomistic History—the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings—served this ambition. From the story of the original conquest through the years of the divided kingdom, this propagandistic narrative recounts the events of Israel’s past and prepares us for the arrival of the king whom the Dtr believed was destined to return the nation to its former glory.  

In this chapter, we examine the politics and theology of Josiah’s reform. We begin by addressing how the Dtr shaped his telling of the past to prepare his audience for...
the coming of Josiah. We then consider how the policies of centralization, which began in the reign of Hezekiah and were fully implemented by Josiah, served to concentrate power and resources for the Davidic monarchy in the capital city of Jerusalem. Finally, we will examine how the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories, appropriated by the Dtr and arranged in a highly-structured ring composition, functioned to legitimize Josiah’s program of reforms.

Preparing for Josiah: The Past Reconfigured

David Lowenthal writes in *The Past is a Foreign Country* that the standard of “absolute ‘truth’ is a recent and uncommon criterion for evaluating accounts of the past.” He further notes that the prime function of memory “is not to preserve the past but to adapt it so as to enrich and manipulate the present.” We see this reconfiguration of the past in the stories of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis, where the origins of Israel are re-imagined from a blending of distant memories and traditions. By means of the narrators’ linking of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in genealogical succession, the tribes who came to identify themselves as the nation of Israel could each remember their own ancestor as one of twelve brothers—a single family. In this way, these revered ancestors were bound to, and made relevant for, all of the peoples who came to comprise the Children of Israel. While a folkloric undertone is obvious in the stories about the patriarchs and matriarchs, the books of Kings present the past in a manner that at first glance is strikingly similar to modern historiography. The author introduces the reign of

---

279 Ibid., 210.
each monarch by naming his father and dating his accession to the throne in relation to
the year of his counterpart’s rule in the rival kingdom. These notices include the king’s
age and the number of years he ruled and, in the case of the kings of Judah, sometimes
the name of his mother. Moreover, the writer supports his account by repeatedly citing
three sources: the Annals of Solomon; the Annals of the Kings of Israel; and the Annals
of the Kings of Judah. Such details in the narrative might lead us mistakenly to assume
that the Dtr shared our modern attitudes towards historiography. But writing an objective
account of the actual past was never the ancient biblical authors’ intent. Like the
narrator(s) of the stories in Genesis, the Dtr was not concerned with what might actually
have happened in the past. He wrote to validate his own present—the social, religious,
and political reforms of King Josiah of Judah.

We begin our analysis of the Josianic redactor’s propagandistic shaping of the
past by examining three instances in the DtrH in which the figure of Josiah has been
retrojected back in time—in the Dtr’s portrayals of King Joash of Judah, Joshua ben Nun,
and the prophet Elisha. Each of these “Josianic doppelgangers” contributes to the

References to one of these sources conclude the presentation of each king’s reign, beginning with
Solomon (1 Kgs 11:41) and continuing through the reigns of the kings of Israel (1 Kgs 14:19; 15:31; 16:5,
14, 20, 27; 22:39; 2 Kgs 1:18; 10:34; 13:8, 12; 14:15, 28; 15:11, 15, 21, 26, 31), excluding Israel’s last
16:19; 20:20; 21:17, 25; 23:28; 24:5) up to and including Jehoiakim. Although it cannot be definitively
proven (none of these works is extant), scholars generally assume them to have been annalistic-like
accounts compiled from court records. See Miller and Hayes, A History of Ancient Israel, 194-195.

See Marc Zvi Brettler, The Creation of History in Ancient Israel (New York: Routledge, 1998); idem.,
“Memory in Ancient Israel,” in Memory and History in Christianity and Judaism (ed. M. Signer; Notre
Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 1-17; idem., “Biblical History and Jewish Biblical
Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Panel Sessions: Bible Studies and Hebrew Language (Jerusalem:
World Union of Jewish Studies, 1983), 47-60.

From the German Doppel (double) + Gänger (walker). Although the concept of the doppelganger
became a popular symbol in horror literature and film, in modern vernacular the term conveys a slightly
author’s presentation of Josiah’s reforms as the climax towards which all of Israel’s history has been building.

The Josianic Doppelgangers

According to the account in 2 Kings 22—23, King Josiah of Judah came to the throne after the assassination of his father in an internal palace coup (639 BCE). No reason is given for the plot. However the Dtr reports that the “people of the land” put the conspirators to death and placed his eight year old son, Josiah, on the throne in his stead. When the young king initiated a program of Temple renovations in the eighteenth year of his reign (622 BCE), an ancient scroll was brought to light, whose contents revealed that the nation had strayed far from the precepts of their God. The Dtr writes that when this “scroll of the law” was read to Josiah, he rent his clothes in despair. The inevitability of divine wrath was confirmed by the prophetess Huldah; and Josiah launched a comprehensive reform meant to right the wrongs of his forefathers. At the heart of these reforms was the centralization of worship at the Jerusalem Temple. Upon Josiah’s word, shrines located around Jerusalem and throughout the towns of Judah, both Israeliite and foreign, were destroyed (2 Kgs 23:5, 8, 13, 15, 19; in accordance with Deut 7:5; 12:2; 12:5-14; etc.). Moreover, the Passover sacrifice depicted in a domestic setting in Exodus 12 was transformed under Josiah into a national pilgrimage holiday celebrated in

---

284 The account of Josiah’s reforms found in Chron 34–35 differs from 2 Kgs 22–23. Most significant among these differences is the Chronicler’s assertion that Neco warned Josiah that his own advance was undertaken at God’s command. Josiah, however, refused to allow Neco and his army pass, and thus brought about his own death.
Jerusalem (2 Kgs 23:21-23; prescribed in Deut 16:5-7). Pressing north into the territory of the former kingdom of Israel, Josiah destroyed and desecrated the sanctuary at Beth-El (2 Kgs 23:15-16) and the shrines throughout Samaria (vv. 19-20), preparing the way for the reunification of the two half-kingdoms.

There is little doubt that the scroll providing the authoritative basis for Josiah’s reforms was an early form of the book of Deuteronomy, since the measures he is said to have imposed directly correspond to the demands of the Deuteronomic law code. However the unremitting hopelessness of Huldah’s oracle (2 Kgs 22:15-20)—disaster upon both the land and its inhabitants is inescapable (v. 16)—stands in tension with the exhaustive description of Josiah’s reforms that the discovery of the scroll initiates. The redactional integrity of the oracle appears further compromised by the discrepancy between Huldah’s assurance that Josiah will be laid in his tomb in peace (vv. 19-20) and the reality of his violent death at the hand of Pharaoh Neco. While it seems clear that a later editor has attempted to revise the Josianic text in the aftermath of Judah’s fall to Babylonia in 586 BCE, the original version of the oracle (which presumably held out the possibility of redemption, thus motivating Josiah’s reforms) can no longer be discerned. As the text now stands, Josiah acts decisively, without regard for the futility of his mission. The king summons the elders of Judah and Jerusalem, the priests and

285 Most scholars concur with the original insight of de Wette, that the book in question is a version of our present day book of Deuteronomy. See Nelson, Deuteronomy, 6-7; Sweeney, King Josiah of Judah, 157; Cogan and Tadmor, II Kings, 294; Provan, 1 and 2 Kings, 271; Moshe Weinfeld, Deuteronomy 1–11 (AB 5; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 81-84; Knoppers, Two Nations Under God, 2:121-123; E.W. Nicholson, Deuteronomy and Tradition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 1-7.

prophets, and all of the people, young and old. Together they go up to the Temple, and Josiah reads to them all of the words of the scroll (2 Kgs 23:1-2). Then, the Dtr writes, “the king stood by the column [העמוד] and solemnized the covenant before YHWH: that they would follow YHWH and observe his Commandments, his injunctions, and his laws with all of their heart and soul; that they would fulfill all the terms of this covenant as inscribed upon the scroll. And all of the people entered into the covenant” (v. 3).

Josiah’s covenant renewal ceremony unmistakably recalls events said to have occurred almost two hundred years earlier, when much like Josiah, King Joash of Judah came to the throne as a small boy in the aftermath of his father’s assassination (2 Kings 11). As we discussed in the previous chapter, the infant Joash was rescued in the midst of the purge of Davidic descendants undertaken by his grandmother, Athaliah, and hidden in the Temple until the age of seven. In a countercoup directed by the priest Jehoiada, the boy was brought out, the crown and royal insignia were placed on him, and he was proclaimed king (v. 12). Hearing the shouts of celebration, Athaliah entered the Temple: “She looked about and saw the king standing by the column [העמוד], as was the custom, the chiefs with their trumpets beside the king, and all the people of the land rejoicing and blowing trumpets” (v. 14). The column by which Joash was stationed was likely understood as one of two columns on the porch of the Jerusalem Temple, whose construction is described in 1 Kgs 7:15-21. According to this account, the column on the right was named “Jachin” [יכין] and the column on the left was named “Boaz” [בעז]. Ziony Zevit has proposed that these names can be read as a sentence meaning “May he be
established in strength”—hence, the ceremonial “custom” of kings to stand by the column appears to have been symbolic of dynastic succession. The prophet Nathan’s dynastic oracle (2 Sam 7:8-17) employs this same verb, “to establish” [וָקַם], three times: “When your days are done and you lie with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own issue, and I will establish his kingship” (v. 12); “He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish his royal throne forever” (v. 13); “Your house and your kingship shall ever be secure before you; your throne shall be established forever” (v. 16). In the entire Hebrew Bible, only Josiah and Joash are depicted in this manner—standing by the pillar in a royal pose of dynastic succession. As with Josiah, this display included a ceremony of covenant renewal, when Jehoiada (acting on behalf of Joash in his minority) “solemnized the covenant between YHWH, on the one hand, and the king and the people, on the other—as well as between the king and the people—that they should be the people of YHWH” (2 Kgs 11:17). The parallels between Josiah and Joash continue with both covenant ceremonies immediately followed by a violent eradication of rival cults, in which religious sites are destroyed and opposing priests are slaughtered (2 Kgs 23:4-20; 11:18-19). We should also recall that according to the Dtr, Joash reformed the system of Temple repairs that led, two hundred years later, to the discovery of the scroll of the law in Josiah’s day. Finding the house of YHWH in disrepair, Joash established a process in which monies were collected in a secure chest by

---

287 Noted in Ziony Zevit’s commentary on the books of Kings, in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 687, 748. For a survey of scholarly attempts to explain the significance of these names, see R.B.Y. Scott, “The Pillars of Jachin and Boaz,” *JBL* 58 (1939): 143-149.
288 As noted by Scott, “The Pillars of Jachin and Boaz,” 147.
the priestly guards of the threshold. When the box was full, the king’s scribe and the high priest were to collect and count the money, and then to distribute it to the overseers in charge of the Temple, who would use it to pay the carpenters, labors, and masons, and to purchase the wood and quarried stone needed to make the repairs (2 Kgs 12:5-17). This exact scenario unfolds when Josiah sends his scribe, Shapan, to the high priest Hilkiah to weigh out the silver deposited with the guards of the threshold and initiate the Temple repairs. Finally, the Dtr reports that both Josiah and Joash were crowned as very young boys; eight and seven years of age respectively. According to the account of Joash’s reign, he was instructed by the priest Jehoiada (2 Kgs 12:3). While the specifics of Josiah’s education are not revealed, his oft-stated piety, as well as the role played by the high priest Hilkiah in discovering and interpreting the scroll, suggest that Josiah too was influenced by the Temple priests.

Given the meticulous attention to detail demonstrated by the Dtr, the correspondences between these two Judean kings, living centuries apart, could hardly be coincidental. The author has intentionally depicted Joash as a sort of Josianic doppelganger—a presage of the seventh century BCE king retrojected in time. Nelson has noted a similar relationship between the portrayals of Joshua and Josiah.289 Both narratives involve the scroll of the law; its discovery is central to Josiah’s reforms. However, it also has a prominent role in the story of Joshua. After the death of Moses, YHWH cautions Joshua to observe the law: “Do not deviate from it to the right or to the

left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Let not this scroll of the law cease from your lips, but recite it day and night, so that you may observe faithfully all that is written in it” (Josh 1:7-8). This divine admonition recalls the law of the king in Deut 17:14-20, wherein the monarch is directed to keep a copy of the law scroll written for him by the levitical priests. He is to read this scroll all of his life, deviating from it neither to the right nor to the left (vv. 18-19). The charge “not to deviate to the right or to the left” occurs four times in Deuteronomy (5:29; 17:11, 20; 28:14). However, the historian credits only Josiah with fulfilling this directive.290 “He did what was pleasing to YHWH and he followed all the ways of his ancestor David; he did not deviate to the right or to the left” (2 Kgs 22:2).291

In directing Joshua to obey the law of the king, the Dtr presents him as a royal figure. This impression is bolstered by Joshua’s assumption of power immediately upon the death of Moses (Josh 1:2). Rather than the charismatic leadership of the judges and prophets, Joshua’s rule is accomplished by the smooth dynastic succession of an appointed heir with the people pledging unwavering obedience on penalty of death (vv. 16-18; compare with capital punishment for insubordination to the king in 1 Sam 11:12; 22:16; 2 Sam 16:5-9; 19:22; 1 Kgs 2:24, 39-46; 21:10). In keeping with YHWH’s injunction to Moses (Deut 27:2-8), Joshua leads the people in a ceremony of covenant renewel after they have crossed the Jordan River and entered the land. The Dtr reports that Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal in accordance with the scroll of the law (8:31);

291 Compare to the regnal accounts of the other kings of Judah, who received overall positive evaluations, yet are not recorded as deviating neither to the right nor to the left: Asa (1 Kgs 15:9-24); Jehoshaphat (1 Kgs 22:41-51); Jehoash/Joash (2 Kgs 12:1-22); Amaziah (2 Kgs 14:1-22); Azariah/Uzziah (2 Kgs 15:1-7); Jotham (2 Kgs 15:32-38); and Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:1—20:21).
and with all of Israel present, he read to them the words of the law as written in the scroll of the law (v. 34; compare with 2 Kgs 23:1-3). On his deathbed, Joshua urged the Israelites faithfully to observe all that is written in the scroll of the law (Josh 23:6). Yet this law book—deemed so important—then disappears almost entirely from the narrative until it tellingly resurfaces during Josiah’s Temple renovations. With the newly discovered law in hand, writes the Dtr, Josiah led the people in the first properly observed Passover sacrifice since the period of the judges—a clear allusion to Joshua’s Passover, offered at Gilgal (Josh 5:10). Indeed, outside of Deuteronomy’s instructions for the festival (Deut 16:1-8), these texts are the only references to Passover celebration in the DtrH.

The numerous correspondences between these figures and the events surrounding them are obvious, but for what purpose has the biblical writer depicted Joshua and Joash as Josianic doppelgangers? Both men were presumed to have lived not only centuries before Josiah, but also centuries apart from one another. By projecting the figure of Josiah back in time in the person of Joshua, the seventh century BCE redactor anticipates Josiah’s reforms and frames the king’s incursion into the former territory of the northern kingdom of Israel as an exercise in holy war comparable to the original conquest. The Elijah-Elisha ring composition subtly foreshadows Josiah’s expectation to reunite the two half-kingdoms under Davidic rule. However, the peoples of both kingdoms were well aware of the failings of the Davidic dynasty. According to the biblical author, David was

---

292 The scroll of the law is mentioned only one time between the narratives of Joshua and Josiah—in 2 Kgs 14:6, where King Amaziah of Judah is said not to have put to death the children of his father’s assassins in accordance with the scroll of the law of Moses.
YHWH’s chosen, but his adulterous affair with Bath Sheba, and the murder of her husband to conceal his transgression, corrupted his dynasty before it began (2 Samuel 11). Although Solomon achieved succession upon David’s death (1 Kings 1—2), his foreign wives eventually turned his heart away from YHWH (1 Kings 11). Moreover, his oppressive policies of heavy taxation and forced labor, continued by his son Rehoboam, caused the rupture of the united kingdom (1 Kgs 12:1-24) and led to the sin of Jeroboam in establishing rival sanctuaries at Beth-El and Dan (1 Kgs 12:25—13:10).

The kings who followed Solomon were evaluated by the Dtr according to their adherence to the Deuteronomistic principle of exclusive worship of the God of Israel at the single legitimate sanctuary in Jerusalem. Although many of Judah’s kings were judged righteous, the Dtr’s praise is still qualified—of those preceding Josiah, only Hezekiah removed the high places (2 Kgs 18:4). The northern kings were condemned without exception, however, with the harshest criticism reserved for the house of Ahab, whose marriage to the Phoenician princess Jezebel was remembered as having introduced Ba’al worship to the Israelites (1 Kgs 16:29-33). The intermarriage between the house of David and the descendants of Ahab was surely a disturbing truth to the historian, who writes of this Davidic king: “He [Joram] followed the practices of the kings of Israel—whatever the house of Ahab did, for he had married a daughter of Ahab—and he did what was displeasing to YHWH” (2 Kgs 8:18). Among the offspring of this union, only Joash survived his grandmother’s murderous attempt to steal the throne of Judah (2 Kings 11). Although Joash’s ancestry was terribly blemished, the Dtr ameliorated this problem as best he could with a dramatic narrative that neatly eliminated his brothers of mixed
descent in both kingdoms and underscored his rightful place as the Davidic heir. By presenting Joash in the image of Josiah, the Davidic dynasty is redeemed. Any vestige of its relationship with the house of Ahab, as well as its own sins, is expurgated; and the Davidic dynasty receives a fresh start.

The third and final Josianic doppelganger appears in the redactor’s presentation of the prophet Elisha. The parallels drawn between Josiah and Joash emphasized his royal attributes—traits also projected onto Joshua. Both Joash and Joshua prefigured Josiah by defending the divine authority of the scroll of the law and leading the people in a ceremony of covenant renewal. With his portrayal of Elisha, the Dtr underscores Josiah’s charismatic leadership. These parallels begin with the long recognized similarities between Moses and Elijah: both Moses and Elijah are depicted as fleeing east to escape the wrath of a king (Exod 2:11-15; 1 Kgs 17:2-4) and receiving shelter by a family (Exod 2:16-22; 1 Kgs 17:8-24). Both men return to confront the king and to reawaken the faith of their fellow Israelites (Exod 3-12; 1 Kgs 18:1-46). Both journey to Mount Sinai/Horeb, where they experience a theophany (Exodus 13—24; 1 Kgs 19:1-18); and both build an altar of twelve stones (Exod 24:4; 1 Kgs 18:31). Finally, Moses’ death and divinely

---

hidden burial corresponds to Elijah’s miraculous disappearance in the whirlwind amid the horses and chariots of fire (Exod 34:1-6; 2 Kgs 2:11, 16-18).\(^{294}\)

The parallel between Moses and Elijah extends to their disciples. As Moses conferred his leadership upon Joshua (Deut 34:9), so Elijah passed his authority to Elisha (2 Kgs 2:10-15). Both Joshua and Elisha are depicted as “serving” [יְסַרְּר] their masters (Exod 24:23; 1 Kgs 19:21).\(^{295}\) Just as Joshua replicated Moses’ miracle of parting the Sea of Reeds (Exod 14:21-22), by parting the waters of the Jordan River (Josh 3:1-17), Elisha (2 Kgs 2:14) replicated Elijah’s miracle of dividing the waters of the Jordan (2 Kgs 2:8).\(^{296}\) Lastly, just as Joshua inherited Moses’ prophetic office (Deut 34:9) and completed his commission to lead the Israelites into the land of Canaan (Josh 3:1-17), so Elisha inherited the prophetic office of Elijah (2 Kgs 2:9-15) and completed his commission to initiate the coups of Hazael (2 Kgs 8:7-15) and Jehu (2 Kgs 9:1-13).\(^{297}\)

Both Josiah (the new Joshua) and his counterpart, Elisha, are portrayed by the Dtr as leaders in holy war. When the spirit of Elijah settles upon Elisha, he reverses [right word?] the curse against Jericho that Joshua delivered during the original conquest (Josh 6:26; 2 Kgs 2:19-22). He then sets out for Beth-El, where he encounters the taunting boys coming out of the city. Elisha delivers his own curse against these disrespectful boys, causing two she-bears to emerge from the woods and mangle his adversaries. These boys, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, correspond to the Beth-El priests slaughtered by Josiah (2 Kgs 2:23-24; 2 Kgs 23:15-20). Elisha plays a critical role in the holy war battles

\(^{295}\) Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic, 192.
\(^{297}\) White, The Elijah Legends, 10.
recounted in 2 Kings 3:4-27 and 6:8-7:20, in stark contrast to the failings of the northern kings of Israel. While King Joash of the newly absolved Davidic dynasty rules in Judah, King Jehoahaz’s persistence in following in the sins of Jeroboam leads YHWH to abandon the northern Israelites into the hands of Aram. Their suffering induces the deity to send an unnamed “redeemer” —clearly the prophet Elisha—who is the hero of this cycle of stories and whose name, from the same Hebrew root, means “God is salvation.” Elisha’s act of deliverance provides only a brief reprieve, however. The kings of Israel continued in their sins, writes the Dtr; even Ahab’s sacred post remained standing in Samaria. Aram soon returned and decimated Jehoahaz’s forces, leaving the king of Israel with a mere fifty horsemen, ten chariots, and ten thousand foot soldiers (2 Kgs 13:3-7). Although this Josianic doppelganger could not save the northern kingdom from its disastrous fate, the attentive reader recognizes in Elisha a foreshadowing of Josiah, who would burn the sacred post in Samaria and attempt to restore the northern tribes to their rightful place within a unified nation.

Aram’s oppression of the northern kingdom continued into the reign of Jehoash ben Jehoahaz, the Dtr recounts; and with Elisha near death, the king can only weep at his bedside. Through a series of symbolic actions, the prophet guarantees the king of Israel three victories over Aram (vv. 14-19); and the narrative concludes with a notice that Jehoash defeated Ben-Hadad three times and recovered the towns of Israel (v. 25). Although no further description of these battles follows, J. Maxwell Miller has argued that remnants of these battle accounts appear in the biblical text; they have been
“misplaced” in the chronology of the narrative. Following Alfred Jepsen and C. F. Whitley, Miller locates two of these victory accounts in 1 Kings 20 (20:1-25; 26-43); he identifies the third in 1 Kgs 22:1-38.

Miller’s argument that these battle narratives have been dislocated from their original historical context within the reign of Jehoash (800-784 BCE) and retrojected some sixty-plus years to the reign of Ahab (873-852 BCE) is compelling. As he notes, the weakened kingdom of Israel depicted in 1 Kings 20 is at odds with what we know of the Omride period. The Moabite Stone records that Omri conquered the kingdom of Moab and held it as a vassal well into the reign of Ahab. The Monolith Inscription of King Shalmaneser III credits Ahab with contributing 2,000 chariots and 10,000 foot soldiers to the coalition of Syro-Palestinian kings that halted Assyria’s westward march at Qarqar. Hence, the near vassal state of Israel described in 1 Kings 20 better fits later conditions during the reign of Jehoahaz (the son of Jehu) recounted in 2 Kgs 13:1-9. Furthermore, both 2 Kings 13 and 1 Kings 20 identify the Aramean king as Ben-Hadad; and both locate a victory at Aphek. The battle narrative that Miller identifies as the third victory promised by Elisha (1 Kgs 22:1-38) depicts Ahab’s campaign to restore Ramoth-Gilead to Israeliite control. Once again, however, the account fits poorly within the time of Ahab. Contrary to the premise of this narrative, Assyrian sources suggest that Israel

---

298 Miller, “The Elisha Cycle and the Accounts of the Omride Wars,” 441-454; see also Miller and Hayes, A History of Ancient Israel and Judah, 287-297.
300 Whitley, “The Deuteronomic Presentation of the House of Omri,” 137-152.
301 Miller, “The Elisha Cycle and the Accounts of the Omride Wars,” 443.
303 Miller, “The Elisha Cycle and the Accounts of the Omride Wars,” 443.
304 Ibid., 444-445.
and Aram were allies during the final years of Ahab’s reign, as indicated by his inclusion in the anti-Assyrian coalition of twelve kings led by Hadadezer of Damascus. In addition, Ramoth-Gilead does not seem to have needed restoration during the period of the Omride dynasty, since according to the biblical account in 2 Kgs 10:32-33, the territory east of the Jordan River was not lost to Aram until the later reign of Jehu. Finally, the notice that Ahab “slept with his fathers” (1 Kgs 22:40)—a phrase reserved exclusively in the Hebrew Bible for those who receive a peaceful death, further suggests that this narrative originated in an historical context other than the period of Ahab.

Miller’s identification of the three battle narratives appearing in 1 Kgs 20:1-25, 26-43, and 22:1-38 as the three victories Elisha promised to Jehoash in 2 Kgs 13:14-19 is convincing. Nevertheless, his conclusion that these accounts are “misplaced” fails to appreciate the ideological interests of the Josianic redactor. According to Miller, when the Judean redactors appropriated these northern prophetic tales, they were concerned to identify the various kings who, in the original telling, were nameless. Since Jehoshaphat was traditionally remembered for his alliance with Israel, he was the obvious choice for the Judean king who appears alongside the king of Israel in 1 Kings 22 and 2 Kings 3. With the king of Judah identified as Jehoshaphat, the anonymous kings of Israel could only be his contemporaries—the kings of the Omride dynasty. This conclusion, Miller argues, led the Judean redactor erroneously to insert these stories into his history during the reign of Israel’s King Ahab.

---

Miller correctly notes the composite nature of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the Dtr organized his source material according to such happenstance. Rather, the editor who selected and shaped these stories arranged them in the form of a ring composition with calculated precision. The concerns of these stories betray their origins independent of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories. Neither Elijah nor Elisha plays a role in these episodes. The prophets who appear in 1 Kings 20 are unnamed, while the central character of 1 Kings 22 is the previously unheard of prophet, Micaiah ben Imlah. There are no challenges by foreign prophets; and unlike Elijah and Elisha, none of these prophets are miracles workers. Instead, these narratives focus on the role of the prophet as mediator of YHWH’s word, with an overriding concern for strict obedience and a distinction between true and false prophecy.\textsuperscript{307} As supporting characters to this message, both the kings and prophets appearing in the tales (with the probable exception of Micaiah) were originally unnamed; and their generic quality facilitated the Dtr’s ability to manipulate these stories to serve his own purpose.

1 Kgs 20:1-43 (section V) and 1 Kgs 22:1-40 (section VII) are the first of two episodes in a series of four battle narratives within the ring composition; they are followed by 2 Kgs 3:1-27 (section IX) and 2 Kgs 6:8–7:20 (section XI), with the four narratives together comprising the first and third rungs of the ring composition (see below, Table 12). The sequence of stories begins in section V of the ring composition, with the God of Israel’s victory against Ben-Hadad of Aram. When Ahab sets free the deity’s prisoner in exchange for a favorable trade agreement for himself (1 Kgs 20:1-43),

\textsuperscript{307} McKenzie, \textit{The Trouble with Kings}, 88-93.
however, his violation of the laws of holy war leads YHWH first to entice into battle, and then to abandon, the kings of Israel (Section VII, 1 Kgs 22:1-40; and section IX, 2 Kgs 3:1-27).

Table 12. The narrative progression of the four battle narratives within the Elijah-Elisha ring composition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holy War (Rung 3)</th>
<th>Battle Narrative 1 (1 Kgs 20:1-43)</th>
<th>Battle Narrative 4 (2 Kgs 6:8—7:20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YHWH delivers Ben-Hadad of Aram into the hands of the king of Israel, only to have Ahab set free the deity’s prisoner—in violation of the laws of holy war that doomed Ben-Hadad to destruction.</td>
<td>Returning to the rung of holy war, the final episode of the sequence brings the miraculous arrival of YHWH’s heavenly army, which frightens away the Aramean forces—foreshadowing Josiah’s unchallenged campaign to reclaim the northern territories of David’s kingdom that Assyria has abandoned.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Un)Holy War (Rung 1)</th>
<th>Battle Narrative 2 (1 Kgs 22:1-40)</th>
<th>Battle Narrative 3 (2 Kgs 3:1-27)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As punishment for having violated the laws of holy war, YHWH places a lying spirit in the mouths of the king of Israel’s prophets, enticing Ahab into a battle in which he loses his life.</td>
<td>This punishment continues against Ahab’s son, Jehoram, who was similarly enticed into battle, only to be abandoned by YHWH.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the final episode of the sequence (section XI), Elisha is surrounded in the city of Dothan by the horses and chariots of the king of Aram (2 Kgs 6:8–7:20). His attendant is terrified by this display of royal power, but Elisha prays for his eyes to be opened, revealing to his servant what the prophet already knows—the hills are filled with the God
of Israel’s horses and chariots of fire (2 Kgs 6:15-17). This heavenly army soon reappears to deliver the besieged city of Samaria. With the king of Israel cowering in his castle, the Aramean army is frightened away by “a thunder of chariots, a thunder of horses—the din of a huge army….And they fled headlong in the twilight, abandoning their tents and horses and donkeys—the [entire] camp just as it was—as they fled for their lives” (2 Kgs 7:6-7).

Removed from its historical context and reordered by the Dtr, the narrative progression of these stories explains YHWH’s rejection of the northern kings of Israel in punishment for Ahab’s violation of the laws of holy war. It also anticipates Josiah’s miraculous victory against Assyria as carried out by his doppelganger, Elisha—the commander of YHWH’s horses and chariots of fire. Read through the lens of Aram’s terrified retreat before the heavenly army of YHWH, Josiah’s unchallenged campaign to reclaim the northern territories of David’s kingdom abandoned by Assyria is cast as a similar victory in holy war; and King Josiah appears as the new commander of YHWH’s horses and chariots of fire.

*The Josianic Foils*

The Dtr employed a positive likeness of Josiah in his depictions of Joshua, Joash, and Elisha in order to cast the king retroactively in the mold of these past heroes. Conversely, the author used a negative image to contrast Josiah’s actions with those individuals whose sins his reforms intended to rectify. Both Jeroboam and Ahab are presented by the Dtr as foils for the righteous Josiah: Jeroboam sinned in establishing the
golden calves at Beth-El; and Dan led the northern kingdom into apostasy and eventual destruction. Ahab exceeded their transgressions by marrying the Phoenician princess Jezebel, worshipping the foreign god Ba’al, and erecting a sacred post in Samaria (1 Kgs 16:30-33). The biblical writer employs these errant northern monarchs to highlight Josiah’s righteousness; as Marvin Sweeney has persuasively argued, however, the idealization of Josiah is most effectively conveyed through the Dtr’s critique of Josiah’s renowned forebear, the Judean monarch Solomon.

According to this argument, the Josianic redactor attributes the division of the kingdom to Solomon’s many excesses. Nevertheless, the account of his rule in the DtrH celebrates the king’s great wisdom, wealth, and power. His reign is portrayed as an idyllic time when a son of David ruled the nation of Israel from YHWH’s chosen city. Solomon’s dominion, the biblical writer asserts, extended over the kingdoms from the Euphrates River to the land of the Philistines and down to the border of Egypt (1 Kgs 5:1). Solomon built the Jerusalem Temple (1 Kings 6)—the single legitimate place of worship in the eyes of the Dtr; and his wisdom, as well as riches, glory, and long life, were bestowed upon him by the God of Israel (1 Kgs 3:11-14). “King Solomon surpassed all the kings on earth in wealth and wisdom,” boasts the biblical writer; “All the world came to pay homage to Solomon and to listen to the wisdom with which God had endowed him” (1 Kgs 10:23-25). Nevertheless, this laudatory narrative begins and ends by recounting the transgressions of Solomon that led to the kingdom’s fracture early in

---

his son’s reign and and the northern tribes’ ongoing estrangement from the Jerusalem Temple. Immediately upon the conclusion of the Succession Narrative (the dramatic telling of Solomon’s accession to the throne recounted in 2 Samuel 9—20 and 1 Kings 1—20,\(^{310}\)) we read that Solomon allied himself with Egypt through his marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter—a politically motivated union that violated the prohibition against “sending the people back to Egypt to add to [the king’s] horses” (Deut 17:16), as well as the injunction against intermarriage (Deut 7:3-4; Josh 23:12). Furthermore, although the king loved YHWH, he sacrificed and made offerings at the shrines (1 Kgs 3:1-3). The Dtr returns to both of these criticisms at the conclusion of the narrative (1 Kgs 11:1-8), thereby creating a negative frame around—and coloring our interpretation of—the positive depiction of Solomon and his reign in 1 Kgs 3:4—10:29.\(^{311}\) As the narrative now stands, Solomon’s marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter is portrayed as the catalyst for all of the problems that Josiah’s reforms were intended to correct. In addition to Pharaoh’s daughter, the Dtr continues, Solomon went on to love many foreign women from the nations that YHWH had warned the Israelites not to marry, “lest they turn your hearts away to follow their gods” (1 Kgs 11:1-2). And the king was indeed led astray: “Solomon followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Phoenicians, and Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites” (v. 5). Solomon, the king revered for building the Jerusalem Temple, “built a shrine for Chemosh the abomination of Moab on the hill near Jerusalem, and one for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites. And he did the same for all his foreign wives

\(^{310}\) For an overview of the Succession Narrative see Harold O. Forshey, “Court Narrative,” *ABD* 1:1172-1179.

\(^{311}\) Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah*, 97-100.
who offered and sacrificed to their gods” (vv. 7-8). The apostasy begun by Solomon is set right by Josiah, who destroys all of the outlying shrines throughout Judah (2 Kgs 23:8-9), as well as those Solomon built for Ashtoreth, Chemosh, and Milcom (vv. 13-14). And as was prophesied at the dedication of Jeroboam’s altar in Beth-El (1 Kings 13), Josiah demolishes this rival sanctuary to the Jerusalem Temple in his quest to reunite the divided kingdom (vv. 15-18).

The tradition that Solomon wed the daughter of Pharaoh likely predates the Josianic edition of the DtrH. As Sweeney has noted, it was originally intended to illustrate the king’s international prestige by linking it to the account of Solomon’s love of foreign women (11:1-8). The Dtr has transformed this story into a scathing criticism, however.\(^\text{312}\) The Josianic redactor’s censure of Solomon is also evident in the law of the king (Deut 17:14-20), which seems to presuppose Solomon’s failings. Although the Israelites were free to set over themselves a king chosen by YHWH from among the people, this king was forbidden to keep many horses for himself and to send the people back to Egypt to add to his horses. He should not have many wives, lest his heart be led astray; and he should not amass silver and gold to excess. The correspondences between these proscriptions and the critique of Solomon are obvious. Moreover, the passage concludes with a positive command concerning the scroll of the law that betrays its Josianic origins:

> When he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this law written for him on a scroll by the levitical priests. Let it remain with him and let him read from

---

\(^{312}\) Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah*, 93, n. 1.
it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to revere YHWH his God, to observe faithfully every word of this law as well as these statutes. Thus he will not act haughtily towards his fellows or deviate from the instruction to the right or to the left, to the end that he and his descendants may reign long in the midst of Israel (vv. 18-20).

Despite this emphasis on a written scroll of law, some scholars reject the Josianic authorship of the law of the king, arguing that Josiah would never have consented to such a restriction of his power.  

Sweeney rightly notes, however, that the image depicted here of the impotent monarch subsumed under the Levite’s law obscures the fact that in legislating that the king must keep a copy of the law and study it daily, the authority of this law is made supreme. The scroll of the law is the constitution that Josiah appeals to in implementing his far-reaching reforms. The law of the king does not restrict Josiah’s authority—to the contrary, it sanctions his power by making the king the final executor of the law of the land. Dynastic succession, while not promised for all eternity, is guaranteed if the monarch faithfully observes the scroll of the law. Although the Dtr avoids the obvious anachronism of explicitly naming the house of David, the law of the king clearly recalls the reign of Solomon—the last Davidic monarch to rule over a united kingdom of Israel. That Solomon fell short of this ideal is readily acknowledged; but the Dtr’s presentation of Josiah as David redivivus presumes the continuity of the Davidic dynasty.

---

313 For example, Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History*, 79-80; 139-141; Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 168.

314 Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah*, 14; 162.
The Dtr’s elevation of the written law over and against the human intuition of Solomonic-style wisdom is further evidenced in Deuteronomy 4, where true wisdom is explicitly identified as the laws and rules Moses received on Mount Sinai. As Moses explains to the Israelites: “See, I have imparted to you laws and rules, as YHWH my God has commanded me….observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, ‘Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people’” (Deut 4:5-6).

In presenting Solomon as a foil to Josiah, the Dtr returns to events that set in motion a cascade of consequences leading to the division of the united kingdom of David and culminating in the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel. According to the Josianic redactor, the exclusivity of the Jerusalem Temple was first violated by Solomon, who made sacrifices and offerings at the high places. His marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter was followed by the addition of numerous foreign wives, who led the king into apostasy and introduced foreign cults into the land of Israel. These cultic transgressions are cited as reasons why YHWH tore the ten northern tribes away from the house of David (1 Kgs 11:9-13) and gave them to Jeroboam ben Nebat, who later erected the golden calves at Beth-El and Dan. But the narrative recounting the fracture of the kingdom also includes an alternative tradition, which remembers Solomon’s harsh treatment of the northern tribes as the reason for their secession (1 Kgs 12:1-19). This scenario is supported by references to Solomon’s use of forced labor in his numerous building projects (1 Kgs 5:27-32; 9:15-22), as well as by the obligation imposed upon the people to provision Solomon’s court (1 Kgs 4:7-19). Sweeney proposes that like much of the narrative that
recounts Solomon’s reign, these remarks were not originally intended to criticize the 
king. Nevertheless, they suggest that the northern tribes bore a disproportionate share of 
the burdens of taxation and corvée labor due to the lopsided nature of this two state 
confederacy. Of the twelve tax districts established by Solomon, eleven fell within the 
territories of the northern tribes, while Judah maintained only one. Since the king himself 
was from the tribe of Judah, and because the Temple and palace were located in 
Jerusalem, Sweeney argues, it is not surprising that the remaining tribes grew resentful of 
Davidic rule. The law of the king recalls the bitterness of this oppression; by 
condemning Solomon’s treatment of the northern tribes, the ideologues behind Josiah’s 
reform program hoped to win back the peoples of the northern kingdom of Israel with the 
promise of a neo-Davidic monarchy bounded by the law.

By retrojecting the figure of Josiah in time in the persons of Joshua, Joash, and 
Elisha, as well as contrasting Josiah’s rule with Solomon’s failures, the Dtr has recast the 
past and ideologically framed the significance of this new Davidic king for the present 
and future. Empowered by the scroll of the law, Josiah sought to reunite the two half-
kingdoms of Israel and Judah around the Jerusalem Temple under the rule of a Davidic 
king. We turn now to consider the politics and theology of the centralized state Josiah 
envisioned.

315 Sweeney, King Josiah of Judah, 100-101.
The Politics and Theology of Josiah’s Reforms

Hezekian Beginnings

The northern kingdom of Israel’s fall to Assyria in 721 BCE likely stirred the aspirations of Judeans to reclaim the territories lost during the reign of Rehoboam and to reestablish the united kingdom of David. Stepping outside of the Deuteronomistic History, Chronicles reports that King Hezekiah of Judah (727-699 BCE) sent letters throughout the former kingdom of Israel, inviting their coreligionists living under Assyrian rule to come back to the Jerusalem Temple to keep the Passover (2 Chr 30:1). Meanwhile, Hezekiah had begun to prepare his nation for revolt against its Assyrian overlord: he stopped up the springs outside of the city to deprive the Assyrian forces of water; he rebuilt and expanded the breached wall and raised towers upon it; he appointed battle officers over the people (2 Chr 32:3-6); and he made a conduit to bring water into the city (2 Chr 32:30; corroborated in 2 Kgs 20:20). Both archaeological evidence and accounts recorded in non-biblical texts support the historicity of these preparations for war. Assyrian reports of Sennacherib’s campaign record that his army took forty-six strong walled cities in Judah; and the Siloam Tunnel that brings water into Jerusalem from the Gihon Spring is almost certainly the watercourse built by Hezekiah in preparation for the Assyrian siege. Archaeological evidence indicates that the population of Jerusalem increased considerably during this period, presumably from an influx of

---

317 For an overview of Hezekiah’s reign, see Miller and Hayes, A History of Ancient Israel and Judah, 400-421.
refugees from the north. Only in the wake of these events did Jerusalem become a major metropolitan center. The book of 2 Chronicles records that Hezekiah filled his treasuries, and built store-cities to collect the produce of grain, wine, and oil, as well as stalls for flocks and cattle (2 Chr 32:28-29).

In conjunction with these military preparations, the Dtr reports that Hezekiah embarked on a religious reform: he abolished the high places; smashed the pillars and cut down the sacred post; and broke into pieces the bronze serpent Moses had made, to which the Israelites offered sacrifices (2 Kgs 18:4). Like Josiah’s reforms nearly a century later, these actions were directed against Israelite altars for YHWH outside of Jerusalem, as well as religious objects within the Temple that were deemed improper. By centralizing worship in the Jerusalem Temple, Hezekiah hoped to revive nationalistic sentiments and to bind the peoples of both kingdoms to Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty. Indeed, in naming his son and successor Manasseh—a name synonymous with the north—Hezekiah might well have been proclaiming his intention to recover the northern territories and reunite the Davidic kingdom.

Despite these efforts, Hezekiah’s rebellion was ultimately a failure. Sennacherib and his forces invaded Judah in 701 BCE, inflicting widespread destruction throughout the Shepelah and the areas surrounding Jerusalem. The city of Lachish was captured and despoiled, and the Assyrian army laid siege to Jerusalem. According to the Assyrian

---


320 Miller and Hayes, A History of Ancient Israel and Judah, 410-412.

321 Ibid., 413-415.
annals, Sennacherib made Hezekiah “a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage.”\(^{322}\) The city of Jerusalem survived, however. Hezekiah resubmitted to Assyrian rule; and after paying an indemnity that emptied the palace treasury and required that gold plating be stripped from the posts and doors of the Temple, the king was allowed to remain on his throne (2 Kgs 18:14-16). Why Sennacherib chose to retain the traitorous Hezekiah as his vassal is unclear, as is the reason for the Assyrian army’s unexpected withdrawal from Jerusalem. But the city’s seemingly miraculous survival contributed to the belief that YHWH’s chosen city was inviolable.\(^{323}\)

The biblical account of Sennacherib’s invasion (2 Kgs 18:13—19:37)—actually three reports combined to form a single running narrative—begins with Hezekiah’s submission.\(^{324}\) With the fortified cities of Judah destroyed and Jerusalem under siege, the king of Judah dispatches a message to Sennacherib confessing his wrong in rebelling and pleading for Assyria’s withdrawal (2 Kgs 18:13-16). Despite Hezekiah’s payment, Sennacherib sends an envoy to demand Jerusalem’s complete surrender. With the Judean soldiers listening from atop the city wall, Sennacherib’s spokesman (the Rabshakeh)\(^{325}\) attempts to dishearten the men. The God they are relying upon, he argues, is the very God whose shrines Hezekiah has destroyed. In fact, he insists, YHWH has commissioned Sennacherib to invade the land and destroy it (2 Kgs 18:17-25). Furthermore, YHWH

---

\(^{322}\) Pritchard, ed., *ANET*, 288.


\(^{324}\) There is widespread agreement among scholars that the present version of this narrative relied upon several earlier sources. The discussion begins with Bernhard Stade, “Anmerkungen zu 2 Kö 15-21,” *ZAW* 6 (1886): 172-186. For a thorough analysis of the difficulties inherent in this text, see the introduction by Lester L. Grabbe in *‘Like a Bird in a Cage’: The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (ed. L. Grabbe; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003). A parallel version of 2 Kgs 18—20 appears in Isaiah 36—39.

could no more save his people from the king of Assyria than could the gods of other
tions. Sennacherib has already conquered (2 Kgs 18: 33-35; 19:10-13). When Hezekiah
prays for the city’s deliverance (2 Kgs 19:14-19), YHWH responds to Sennacherib’s
blasphemy through his prophet, Isaiah: the king of Assyria will not enter the city, he
promises; rather, he will go back the way he came (2 Kgs 19:21-34). Accordingly, the
biblical author writes, that night an angel of YHWH struck down one hundred and
eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp that night. Sennacherib and his forces must
retreat to Nineveh, where Sennacherib is assassinated in the temple of his god by his own
sons (vv. 35-36). After a brief story about how Hezekiah was healed from a grave illness
after praying to YHWH (2 Kgs 20:1-11), the account of his reign concludes with a report
of a Babylonian delegation’s visit to his court, during which Judah’s king shows this
group all the riches of his kingdom. Questioned by the prophet Isaiah, Hezekiah admits
there is nothing in his palace and storehouses that the Babylonians did not see—leading
Isaiah to prophesy that everything, including Hezekiah’s sons, will one day be carried off
to Babylonia (vv.12-19).

Although this allusion to the Babylonian exile points to a final exilic redaction,
the concerns of the Josianic author are paramount. The narrative of Sennacherib’s
thwarted invasion underscores the Davidic covenant tradition that YHWH defends both
his chosen king and the city of Jerusalem; and the account of Assyria’s surprising retreat
evokes the events of Josiah’s uncontested northern advance in the wake of Assyria’s
sudden collapse. Moreover, the faithfulness of Hezekiah, who turned to YHWH during
the Assyrian crisis, serves as a model for Josiah—it supports his claim of the rightness of
Davidic rule over a united kingdom, and it stands in stark contrast to the apostasy of the northern monarchs that ultimately led to Israel’s fall to Assyria.\textsuperscript{326} As the reigning king in Judah when Assyria ended the monarchy in Israel, Hezekiah attempted to reassert Davidic rule by concentrating worship of their common God in Judah’s capital city. The Dtr offers rare praise for Hezekiah by comparing him to his ancestor David. Judean kings he otherwise judges as righteous are rebuked, nonetheless, for not removing the high places (Jehoshaphat, 1 Kgs 22:44; Joash, 2 Kgs 12:4; Amaziah, 2 Kgs 14:4; Azariah, 2 Kgs 15:4; and Jotham, 2 Kgs 15:35).

Still, the biblical author regarded Hezekiah’s cultic reform as incomplete. It was left to Josiah to remove the altars on the roof of the upper chamber of Ahaz that were dedicated to astral worship\textsuperscript{327} (2 Kgs 23:12), to eliminate the shrines for foreign gods built by Solomon (2 Kgs 23:13), and to destroy Jerusalem’s rival shrine at Beth-El. Hence, Hezekiah concludes the pattern of pairs begun with Moses and Joshua:

\begin{align*}
\text{Moses} & : \text{Joshua} \\
\text{Elijah} & : \text{Elisha} \\
\text{Hezekiah} & : \text{Josiah}
\end{align*}

Deuteronomy records that Moses set out to lead the Israelites into the land promised to their forebears; the completion of this task was deferred to Joshua, however (Josh 1:1-9). Under Joshua’s leadership, the Israelites crossed the Jordan River and settled in the land. They failed to dispossess all of the inhabitants, however; and the next generation

\textsuperscript{326} Sweeney, \textit{King Josiah of Judah}, 64-65. \\
\textsuperscript{327} That the altars were used for astral worship is assumed from their location on the roof, as well as from the presence of the sundial of Ahaz, which appears in the narrative of the miracle performed at Isaiah’s bequest to assure Hezekiah that he would be healed. This miracle involved the shadow moving unnaturally backwards on Ahaz’ sundial (2 Kgs 20:11). See Cogan and Tadmor, \textit{II Kings}, 256.
abandoned YHWH to worship the Ba’alim and the other gods of peoples still in their midst (Judg 2:10-13). Elijah initiated the battle against Ba’alism on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), but Elisha completes the task. He set in motion the coups of Hazael (2 Kgs 8:7-15) and Jehu (2 Kgs 9:1-10), which culminated in the eradication of Ba’alism in both Israel and Judah (2 Kgs. 10:18-28; 11:18). Now, the analogy is brought full circle. As Joshua completed the work of Moses, and Elisha completed the work of Elijah, so too Josiah will complete the work begun by Hezekiah. Moreover, the Dtr asserts, Josiah will at last fulfill the commission of Moses.

Josianic Innovations

The cultic centralization initiated by Hezekiah was conferred with Mosaic authority with the appearance of the scroll of the law during the reign of Josiah. The account of his cultic reforms begins in 2 Kgs 23:4-5 with Josiah’s order that the objects made for Ba’al and Asherah, and for all the host of heaven, be removed from the Jerusalem Temple. In addition, Josiah suppressed the priests whom previous kings of Judah had appointed to make offerings to Ba’al, the sun and moon and constellations, and all the host of heaven. Support for these measures appears in Deut 17:2-3, which forbids the worship of other gods, including the sun, the moon, and any of the heavenly host (see also Deut 5:7; 6:4, 14; 7:16; 8:19; 11:28; etc). Josiah’s cultic reforms continued when he removed the sacred post from the Temple and burned it in the Kidron Valley outside of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 23:6). He also shattered the pillars and cut down the sacred posts erected at the shrines Solomon had built for his foreign wives (2 Kgs 23:14). These
actions conform to Deuteronomy’s injunction against setting up a sacred post beside the altar of YHWH and erecting stone pillars (Deut 16:21-22; 7:5; 12:3). Josiah brought to Jerusalem all of the priests who made offerings at the outlying shrines, in accordance with Deut 18:6-8, which permitted any Levite to serve YHWH at his Temple. He defiled these outlying shrines and destroyed the altar at Beth-El in keeping with Deuteronomy’s oft repeated demand that the Israelites look only to the site that YHWH would choose to establish his name (Deut 7:5; 12:2; 12:5-14; etc.). He also directed the Israelites to celebrate the passover festival exclusively in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 23:21-23), as stipulated in Deut 16:5. Furthermore, Josiah tore down the cubicles of the male prostitutes in the Jerusalem Temple (2 Kgs 23:7), in accordance with the injunction against cultic prostitution (Deut 23:18); and he defiled the Topheth in the Valley of Ben-hinnom so that parents could not consign their children to the fire of Molech—an abomination prohibited in Deut 18:10.

Despite the obvious connection between Josiah’s reforms and the laws of Deuteronomy, several scholars have maintained that the book’s origins lie in the northern kingdom of Israel. C. F. Burney first made this claim in a footnote in his 1918 commentary on the book of Judges, where he remarked that Deuteronomy represents the culmination of a stream of thought that runs through the northern prophetic E source, the book of Hosea, and a later stratum of E that he identified as E2. According to Burney, Deuteronomy was composed by northern prophets, who remained in the land after the Assyrian conquest in 722 BCE, and who wrote in anticipation of a future when a united
kingdom of Israel would worshiped YHWH at one common center.\textsuperscript{328} Although the footnote states Burney’s intention to develop this initial thesis in a future work on the prophetic school of northern Israel, no such volume had been published at the time of his death in 1925. A. C. Welch, in his 1924 monograph on the book of Deuteronomy, also regarded correspondences between Deuteronomy and Hosea as indications of the former’s northern origins.\textsuperscript{329} According to Welch, both books insist that YHWH—not Ba’al—provides the bounty of the land (Deut 26:1-11; Hos 2:1-25),\textsuperscript{330} both deem the institution of prophecy (exemplified by the prophetic leadership of Moses) fundamental to Israel’s existence (Deut 18:15-22; Hos 12:14),\textsuperscript{331} and both are concerned to rein in the power of the king (Deut 17:14-20; Hos 8:4).\textsuperscript{332} Interpreting the law of the king (Deut 17:14-20, minus v. 16b, which he regarded as a later addition) as limiting the monarch’s authority, Welch regarded it as a tenth century BCE composition written in direct response to Solomon oppressive reign.\textsuperscript{333} Welch argued further that the Samaritan ritual of the community Passover sacrifice on Mount Gerizim reflects the northern practice articulated in the Passover law in Deut 16:1-8,\textsuperscript{334} while Amos 4:4 demonstrates the northern provenance of the law of the tithe (Deut 12:6, 11, 17; 14:22, 23, 28; 26:12).\textsuperscript{335} Furthermore, with the exception of Deut 12:1-7 (which he again designated as a secondary addition), Welch maintained that the long standing view of Deuteronomy’s

\textsuperscript{328} C.F. Burney, \textit{The Book of Judges} (London: Rivingstons, 1918), xlvi.
\textsuperscript{331} Ibid., 114-115.
\textsuperscript{332} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{333} Ibid., 117-132; 206-220.
\textsuperscript{334} Ibid., 74-77.
\textsuperscript{335} Ibid., 38.
demand for cultic centralization is a misinterpretation of laws actually intended to guard against the danger of making offerings at a heathen altar.336

The book of Deuteronomy clearly incorporates earlier material, some of which stems from northern traditions. The account of the covenant ceremony at Shechem (Deuteronomy 27—28) is incompatible with the Josianic effort of centralization in Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem/Zion traditions of the Davidic dynasty are entirely absent. In light of the influence of the Assyrian vassal treaties of Esarhaddon on Deuteronomy,337 as well as the clear associations to Josiah’s reforms, however, Welch’s tenth-century dating of its written composition cannot be sustained. Furthermore, our incomplete understanding of ancient Samaritan ritual is too limited to support his attribution of Deuteronomy’s Passover law to northern praxis. Also unconvincing is Welch’s claim that Amos’ mention of the tithe reveals its origin at the northern sanctuaries. The practice of the tithe was widespread in Mesopotamia and is documented in Ugarit as early as the fourteenth century BCE.338 Against Welch’s claim that the laws of centralization are not integral to Deuteronomy, E. W. Nicholson rightly notes that the requirement is repeated again and again throughout the Book. Moreover, the removal of the local sanctuaries is the basis for additional provisions within Deuteronomy that cannot be simply excised from the book. These include: the permitting of “profane” slaughter for food (Deut 12:20-25); the stipulation that the newly unemployed Levites be allowed to minister at the

336 Ibid., 46-62.
central sanctuary (18:6-8); the oft repeated command to remember the needs of the Levites (12:12, 18, 19; 14:27, 29; 16:11, 14; 26:11, 12, 13); and the centralization of justice (17:8-13).  

Nicholson attributes the presence of northern ideology within Deuteronomy to prophetic disciples from Israel who fled south after the Assyrian conquest in 721 BCE. The traditions they carried influenced Hezekiah’s rebellion, but Sennacherib’s victory in 701 BCE brought these hopes to an end. Consequently, Nicholson argues, this group produced their own plans for national renewal—the book of Deuteronomy—during the reign of Manasseh. The scroll was deposited in the Temple and later found during Josiah’s reforms. According to Nicholson, these northern ideologues made concessions to the Jerusalem traditions in order to have their program accepted by Judean authorities. The most obvious of these allowances is the demand for centralization in Jerusalem; however, as Nicholson acknowledges, the principle of centralization and everything it implies is intrinsic to Deuteronomy—a fact that weighs against its inclusion as a mere concession. As Moshe Weinfeld notes, the laws of sacrifice, tithes, firstlings, festivals, and even the cities of refuge are inextricably bound up with the tenet of centralization. Like Nicholson, Weinfeld placed Deuteronomy’s written composition in Jerusalem during the period of Hezekiah and continuing into the reign of Josiah. However, he attributed the work to Judean scribes and officials, who employed northern traditions.

340 Ibid., 58-106.
342 Weinfeld, Deuteronomy 1-11, 44-57; cf. Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School, 158-178.
Northern influence on Deuteronomy is now generally recognized. Nevertheless, most scholars currently agree that the book was composed in Judah, either initiating or responding to a national revival that began in the reign of Hezekiah and came to fruition with the reforms of Josiah.\footnote{For example: Gerhard von Rad (Deuteronomy [trans. D. Barton; OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966], 23-30) argues that Deuteronomy was composed in Judah by levitical priests. A. D. H. Mayes (Deuteronomy [London: Oliphants, 1979], 107) also attributes the Book to northern Levites serving at the Temple in Jerusalem after 721 BCE. Sweeney (King Josiah of Judah, 165-169), places Deuteronomy’s composition in the court of Josiah. Collins (Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, 170) also ascribes its composition to Jerusalem scribes in the service of Josiah. Similarly, Nelson (Deuteronomy: A Commentary, 4-9) associates Deuteronomy with Josiah’s reform, attributing its composition to a movement comprised of scribes, priests, sages, and aristocrats.} Given Deuteronomy’s significance as the scroll of the law that sanctioned these Josianic innovations, the authors’ decision to draw on northern traditions might appear curious at first. R. E. Clements argued that Deuteronomy was composed in Jerusalem by heirs to the religious traditions of the northern kingdom. Its writers employed northern traditions to emphasize the conditional nature of Israel’s covenant (which hinged upon Israel’s obedience) and to counter Judean ideology of an eternal and unconditional covenant grounded in the election of David as YHWH’s king and the selection of Jerusalem as his dwelling place.\footnote{R.E. Clements, “Deuteronomy and the Jerusalem Cult Tradition,” VT 15 (1965): 300-312.} Citing Deuteronomy’s law of the king (Deut 17:14-20) as support, Clements contended that these ideologues were concerned to “cut [the institution of the monarchy] down to size.”\footnote{Ibid.,” 306.} As noted above, however, Sweeney has aptly demonstrated that far from circumscribing monarchic authority, the law of the king subtly empowered Josiah by bestowing divine sanction upon the law book that undergird his reforms.
According to Sweeney, the political, judicial, and economic power of the king was further enhanced by Deuteronomy’s program of centralization.\(^{346}\) By eliminating Yahwistic shrines throughout the land and demanding that Israel’s God be worshipped solely at the place where YHWH would cause his name to dwell (revealed in 1 Kgs 8:29 as the Davidic capital, Jerusalem), the Judean state secured absolute control of the collection of tithes and offerings that once flowed to outlying shrines.\(^{347}\) This innovation revised the teaching of the older Covenant Code (Exod 20:19–23:33),\(^{348}\) which had recognized the existence of multiple altars (Exod 20:21). This newly centralized system also distinguished between the ritual sacrifice of animals at an altar and the slaughter of domestic animals for the purpose of eating meat (Deut 12:15-16). By allowing secular slaughter within the towns, the Josianic reformers eliminated a vital function of the provincial Levites, undercutting both their status and their ability to support themselves. With the outlying shrines abolished, tithes and offerings were now redirected to the central sanctuary (Deut 12:17-18), where the system was further modified by the stipulation that these gifts be consumed before YHWH by the donor—a contrast to the practice described in Num 18:21-32, in which the tithe was given to the priests. Although Deut 18:6-8 ensures that any Levite from the towns was entitled to serve at the central sanctuary, the account of Josiah’s reforms notes that Levites from outlying shrines

destroyed by Josiah did not ascend the altar in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 23:9). The diminished circumstances of the Levites seem to be reflected in Deuteronomy’s appeal not to neglect the Levite (Deut 12:19; 14:27), who is repeatedly included in a list of Israel’s most destitute: the stranger; the orphan; and the widow (Deut 14:29; 16:11; 26:12). This list of recipients for the newly appropriated tithe, Sweeney contends, suggests that the monarchy was the source of these innovations since, in the ancient Near East, the responsibility to care for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow fell ultimately to the king. Indeed, the king’s fitness to rule was in part measured by his attention to the needs of these disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, in the ancient Near East the tithe received at the royal sanctuary was generally regarded as the king’s due, which he could redistribute as he saw fit. In redirecting the tithe and offerings to the people, the centralization of the cult significantly weakened the Levites while concentrating resources in the Davidic capital and enhancing popular support for the king.

The most vulnerable members of society, Sweeney argues, were further protectcentralization of the administration of justice, which modified earlier legal tradition by according greater authority to the state. This change is evident in the Deuteronomic law code’s adaptation of the instructions for the sabbatical year in Exod 23:10-11. The Covenant Code stipulates that the land may be worked for six years, but in

---

349 See above, Chapter Three, note 11.
350 For example, see 1 Sam 8:15, in which Samuel warned the Israelites when they appealed to him for a king, that the monarch would take a tenth part of their grain and vintage and give it to his eunuchs and courtiers.
351 Sweeney, King Josiah of Judah, 150-154.
the seventh year it must lie fallow—and the needy among the people will eat of its produce (Exod 23:10-11). Deuteronomy 15:1-6, 7-11 ignores the issue of rest for the land and redefines the command to let the land “lie fallow” [שְׁמִּטָה] as a seventh year “remission” [שְׁמַטָּה] of debt (Deut 15:2). Thus, while Exod 23:10-11 offered relief for only one year in seven, Deuteronomy’s modification allowed the needy to borrow money to sustain them through the intervening years without the risk of a lifetime of inescapable debt. The borrower in ancient Israel who was unable to repay a loan faced debt slavery. Both the Covenant Code and Deuteronomy attempt to mitigate the severity of this penalty by imposing limits of servitude for Israelite slaves. Exodus 21:1-11 stipulates that a male slave will serve six years, and in the seventh year he will go free—without payment. If his master gave him a wife, and she has borne him children, they will remain the property of his master; and the man will leave alone. When a female is sold into slavery, she is only released in the event that her marriage rights are violated. Deuteronomy 15:12-18 also demands that a male slave be released in the seventh year. However he is not to be sent away empty-handed. Rather, his master should furnish him from the abundance that he acquired from the slave’s labor. The same terms of release apply to the female slave; Deuteronomy dictates that the wife of a male slave also will be released upon completion of her service.353

Deuteronomy further attempts to safeguard the rights of women in its modification of the Covenant Code’s law concerning the seduction of an unbetrothed virgin. Exodus 22:15-16 demands that a man who seduces a virgin pay her father the

353 Sweeney, _King Josiah of Judah_, 154-156.
bride-price and make her his wife. Her father is accorded the right to refuse this marriage. However, the seducer must still pay him the full bride-price due for a virgin.

Deuteronomy 22:28-29 adds to the earlier law by fixing the bride-price at fifty shekels (an amount that likely reflects a penalty for his failure to secure her father’s permission) and revoking the man’s right ever to divorce her. In addition, Deuteronomy protects the socioeconomic rights of the woman—even over those of her father—by rescinding his right to withhold her from the man. Other marriage prospects for her would now be unlikely, leaving her dependent upon her father and eventually, her brothers. As a woman, she was ineligible to receive a share of her father’s inheritance. Yet left in this ambiguous state of un-marriage, she would be denied the security of sons of her own. In the Deuteronomic law code, the state removes the right to make this decision from the father and places it with the woman.

These examples illustrate a shift towards a more centralized system of justice introduced in the Deuteronomic law code, in which the state assumes overriding power to make legal decisions on behalf of its citizens. The cultic and socioeconomic innovations introduced in Deuteronomy clearly benefited the neediest members of society at the expense of Levitical priests and wealthier segments of the population. Although the law of the king (misleadingly) implies a powerless monarch ruling under the supervision of the Temple Levites, in reality Josiah’s reforms eliminated the shrines of the provincial

---

354 Sweeney assumes this depicts rape. But unlike the explicit case of rape in v. 25 (which uses the verb גנב), the verb שפח (“to seize”) seems more likely to mean “to grasp,” “hold,” or “handle,” suggesting a consensual sexual encounter. See Deut 9:17; Gen 4:21; Jer 50:15; and Ezek 29:7 for examples of more benign nuances for this word. See also Weinfeld, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School, 286.

355 Sweeney, King Josiah of Judah, 156; see also Weinfeld, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School, 284-288.
Levites in favor of a single, centralized sanctuary in the Davidic capital, to which the resources of the kingdom were divinely directed.

In the literary context of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses and the Israelites have at last arrived on the steppes of Moab. Fulfillment of God’s long delayed promises to their ancestors seems near, but the forward movement of the Pentateuchal narrative now halts as Moses turns to address the nation. Although the literary artifice of Deuteronomy depicts Moses addressing an Israel of the remote past, the Book’s actual audience was the seventh century BCE descendents of those early Israelites, who had yet fully to realize those earlier promises. That fulfillment, implied the Dtr, would be accomplished by Josiah. Moving north into the territory of the former kingdom of Israel, Josiah destroyed the altar at Beth-El, paving the way for the restoration of a united kingdom ruled from Jerusalem by a Davidic king. Towards this end, the book of Deuteronomy was conceived to address the peoples of both kingdoms. Having once endured the oppression of Davidic rule under Solomon, however, it was the descendents of the former kingdom of Israel—both those who remained in the land after the Assyrian conquest and those who fled south to Judah—that the Deuteronomic authors needed most to persuade. By drawing on familiar northern motifs and traditions, such as casting Moses as the principal figure of authority over the twelve tribes and honoring Shechem as the site of the covenant ceremony between YHWH and his people, the Josianic ideologues hoped to win northern support for a newly constituted Israel. The Dtr employs this same strategy in his use of

---

northern prophetic heroes, Elijah and Elisha. We turn now to consider the Josianic reform in light of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition.

**Josiah’s reforms and the Elijah-Elisha Ring Composition**

In the narrative chronology of the DtrH, the stories of Elijah and Elisha are centuries removed from the events of Josiah’s reign. Appropriated and recontextualized by the Dtr, however, they now echo five themes dominating the account of Josiah’s reforms in 2 Kings 22—23. These themes can be summarized as: 1) the exclusive worship of YHWH; 2) the legitimacy of the Davidic monarchy; 3) the expected reunification of the divided kingdom; 4) miraculous victory through holy war; and 5) the divine authority of the scroll of the law.

1. **Exclusive Worship of YHWH**: Josiah’s reforms emphasized a strident effort to enforce the exclusive worship of YHWH begun in the reign of Hezekiah. The Jerusalem Temple was purged of objects made for Ba’al and Asherah, and all the host of heaven; and the many idolatrous shrines throughout the land were destroyed (2 Kgs 23:4-7, 10-14). In the ring composition, Josiah’s zeal for YHWH is matched by Elijah’s fervor. A polemic against Ba’al worship runs through the Elijah-Elisha ring composition, beginning in section II with the prophet’s pronouncement of a far-reaching drought that Ba’al, the supposed god of rain and fertility, is incapable of relieving. As an agent of YHWH, Elijah not only provides life-giving sustenance to the Phoenician widow appointed to feed him, but also resuscitates the widow’s dead child in a compelling demonstration of the
powerlessness of Ba’al (1 Kgs 17:1-24). This affront to Ba’al’s legitimacy continues in section III with Elijah’s challenge to the prophets of Ba’al on Mount Carmel—a challenge that results in their slaughter (1 Kgs 18:20-40). Fleeing from Jezebel’s wrath to Mount Horeb (section IV), Elijah receives YHWH’s commissions to anoint Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha—the “Three Swords of YHWH”—whose task is to purge Ba’alism once and for all from Israel (1 Kgs 19:1-21). Elijah further confronts the apostasy of false worship at the mid-turn of the ring composition (section VIII), when Ahab’s son, Ahaziah, brazenly sends a delegation to inquire of Ba’al-zebub. Again, YHWH’s prophet bests a foreign god, calling down fire from heaven to consume his would be captors and correctly prophesying Ahaziah’s death (2 Kings 1—18). Finally, Ba’alism is eradicated in section XIII of the ring composition, with the accounts of Jehu’s destruction of the temple of Ba’al in Israel, and the slaughter of its worshippers (2 Kgs 10:18-28), along with the destruction of the temple of Ba’al in Judah, and the killing of its lone priest (2 Kgs 11:18).

2. Legitimacy of the Davidic Monarchy: The redactor of the ring composition reveals his allegiance to Josiah and the Davidic dynasty by means of an extended excursus that records the accession of Joash (a Josianic doppelganger) to the throne in Judah (2 Kings 11—12). As Obadiah saved the prophets by hiding them in caves (section III), Joash’s aunt secretly rescues the infant Joash—a descendant of both David and the much-despised Ahab—by stealing him away and hiding him in the Temple (section XIII). For the Dtr, Joash’s survival and his upbringing in the Jerusalem Temple under priestly supervision marks a new beginning for the errant Davidic dynasty. Furthermore, the Dtr
links Josiah’s reforms to the Elijah-Elisha ring composition by depicting Joash as having established the procedure for Temple renovations that two centuries later set in motion the events of Josiah’s reforms (2 Kgs 12:5-17).

3. Reunification of the Divided Kingdom: Allusions to the division of David’s once united kingdom and its coming restoration by Josiah are highlighted at the mid-turn (section VIII) of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition (1 Kgs 22:52—2 Kgs 2:25), where a repetition of “twos” and a focus on division reaches a crescendo with Elisha’s “rending” [קרע] of his garment in two (2 Kgs 2:12). The Dtr employed this same root to announce the division of the kingdom in response to Solomon’s apostasy (1 Kgs 11:11-13). Elisha’s receipt of the double portion as the just inheritance due to the firstborn (2 Kgs 2:9-10; 15), as well as the miraculous resurrection of a corpse (2 Kgs 13:20-21) at the conclusion of the ring composition in section XIV, further foreshadows the impending restoration of the united kingdom of Israel.

4. Miraculous Victory through Holy War: By portraying Joshua in the image of Josiah, the Dtr represents Josiah’s seemingly miraculous advance into the territory of the former kingdom of Israel as a holy war reminiscent of Joshua’s invasion of Canaan. The Elijah-Elisha ring composition makes numerous allusions to the original conquest: the battle of Jericho (1 Kgs 16:34; 2 Kgs 2:19-22); Joshua’s encampment at Gilgal (2 Kgs 2:1); and the crossing of the Jordan River (2 Kgs 2:7-8, 13-14). The battle narratives that comprise the first (1 Kgs 22:1-51; 2 Kgs 3:1-27) and third (1 Kgs 20:1-43; 2 Kgs 6:1—7:20) rungs of the ring composition further this motif. Miller has convincingly demonstrated that
these four narratives are out of historical order in our present text, but their arrangement within the ring composition is hardly haphazard. It reflects the deliberate shaping of the Dtr, who cast Josiah’s reforms within the tradition of holy war. Read sequentially, the first of these stories (section V, 1 Kgs 20:1-43) recounts how Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram, advanced against Israel. Though greatly outmatched in troops, a prophet guaranteed Israel’s success so that Ahab would know that YHWH was God. In the wake of this miraculous victory, however, Ahab violated the laws of holy war by setting Ben-Hadad free in exchange for a profitable trade deal. The second (section VII, 1 Kgs 22:1-51) and third (section IX, 2 Kgs 3:1-27) episodes depict YHWH’s response to Ahab’s faithlessness—the kings of Israel are lured into waging disastrous wars that end in defeat. By arranging the battle narratives in this order, the Dtr demonstrates that YHWH abandoned northern Israel’s kings. In contrast, the heavenly army of the final episode of the sequence (section XI, 2 Kgs 6:1—7:20) foreshadows the author’s own time during the reign of Josiah, when Assyrian forces unexpectedly and miraculously receded from the northern kingdom of Israel.

5. Divine Authority of the Scroll of the Law: According to the account in 2 Kings 22—23, the Josianic reform was divinely sanctioned by the scroll of the law discovered in the Jerusalem Temple—the law of Moses. Although Moses is not explicitly named in the ring composition, parallels between Moses and Elijah are patent, with Elijah depicted as nothing short of a second Moses. Moreover, as Robert Wilson notes, Elijah is portrayed as more than just one prophet in a long line of prophets “like Moses” (promised to Israel

in Deut 19:9-18); rather, the biblical author links Elijah with a very specific event in the Moses narrative: the giving of the law. After receiving food and drink from the angel of YHWH, Elijah walks forty days and forty nights to reach the mountain of God (1 Kgs 19:5-9). Similarly, Moses did not eat or drink during the forty days and forty nights he spent on the mountain recording the words of the covenant (Exod 34:28; 24:18). When Elijah reached the mountain of God, he entered “the cave” [המערה]. The definite article implies a particular cave, suggesting the cleft in the rock that protected Moses when YHWH allowed his presence to pass by (Exod 33:22-23). Questioned by YHWH, Elijah explains that he has come to the mountain because the Israelites have forsaken YHWH’s covenant, torn down his altars, and put his prophets to the sword (1 Kgs 19:10, 14). This response recalls the golden calf episode recounted in Exodus 32—34. When Moses tarries on the mountain, Aaron leads the Israelites in casting a molten calf. Descending from the mountain at last, Moses finds that the people have forsaken YHWH; and in his fury at their apostasy, he hurls the tablets of the law to the ground (Exod 32:19). Finally, the experiences of both Elijah and Moses culminate in dramatic theophanies featuring storm motifs (Exod 19:16-19; 1 Kgs 19:11-12). In the ring composition, Elisha’s completion of the task assigned to Elijah echoes Joshua’s completion of the commission of Moses. This pattern of pairs culminates with Josiah, who not only completes the reform initiated by Hezekiah, but also fulfills the charge of Moses. Josiah, the Dtr argues, will liberate the people from foreign oppression and finally take possession of the land promised to their forebears.

358 Wilson, Prophecy and Society, 197-198.
Summary and Conclusion

The unexpected collapse of the Assyrian Empire in the final decades of the seventh century BCE convinced Josiah and his ideologues that the time was ripe to reunite the divided kingdom under a single Davidic monarch ruling from the capital city of Jerusalem. Both the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History, including the Elijah-Elisha ring composition, were composed to support this effort by reconfiguring the past to anticipate and support Josiah’s far reaching reforms. Deuteronomy retells events of the Exodus from Egypt and the Israelites’ forty years in the wilderness. Employing Moses—the law giver—as his narrator, the biblical author anchors these innovations in Israel’s remote past. Then, as in the time of the reformers, Israel seemed poised to realize the promises made to their forebears. Now, argued the Dtr, Josiah would implement Israel’s Mosaic inheritance—the ancient scroll of the law discovered in the Temple.

The Dtr foreshadowed Josiah’s arrival by retrojecting his image back in time in the figures of Joshua ben Nun (leader of the original conquest), King Joash of Judah (newly absolved Davidic monarch), and the prophet Elisha (Israel’s charismatic leader in holy war). Each of these Josianic doppelgangers encapsulates an aspect of Josiah’s persona, and together they convey a strong sense of inevitability to Josiah’s reign and the accomplishment of his goals. This strategy is further underscored by the contrast between Josiah and Solomon, the king whose transgressions ultimately led to the division of the kingdom. In critiquing Solomon, the Dtr rejects the cultic apostasies Solomon propagated. Furthermore, the law of the king (which presupposes Solomon’s reign)
condemns the oppression he inflicted upon the northern tribes and reassures their descendants that Josiah’s neo-Davidic monarchy will rule the reunited kingdom with fairness to all of its citizens.

At first glance, Elijah and Elisha seem unlikely candidates for the Dtr to employ in promoting Josiah’s agenda to establish Davidic rule over a reunited kingdom ruled from Jerusalem. Both men were northern prophets, and neither is remembered as objecting to the state sanctuaries in Beth-El and Dan, or to the outlying shrines Josiah opposed. Although Elijah’s contest on Mount Carmel was a cultic aberration meant to address an unprecedented situation, it nonetheless runs contrary to the policy of Jerusalem as the only legitimate location for offering sacrifices. Yet in many other ways, Elijah and Elisha were ideally suited for the Dtr’s purposes. Elijah’s fervent opposition to Ba’alism, and his reputation for religious zeal made him an obvious champion for Josiah’s reforms, as did his clear association with Moses, whose law Josiah claimed to reinstate. Furthermore, both Elijah and Elisha were remembered as charismatic leaders in holy war—an aspect of Josiah’s reforms that the Dtr sought to underscore in the movement’s endeavor to reassert national independence. Finally, as the venerated prophetic heroes of the north, Elijah and Elisha were uniquely situated to speak to the descendants of the former kingdom of Israel, in support of Josiah’s vision of a newly constituted united kingdom. In an essay that considers Elijah and Elisha within the paradigm of the local hero in ancient Israel’s environs, Scott D. Hill offers the following insight:

The picture we have of any biblical prophet has been shaped from diverse materials on controversial figures by scribes with a definite point of view. Sometimes the
scribe succeeded in producing a flat picture consistent with that view. Often they
were obliged to leave intriguing loose ends. In any case, politics and issues shaped
the message of prophets—during and after their lives—at least as much as the
prophets shaped the politics.359

Whoever Elijah and Elisha might or might not have been, the legends of their exploits
belonged to the revered traditions of northern Israel. Retold and transformed by the Dtr
and arranged in the form of a ring composition, stories of these prophetic miracle workers
were employed to build northern support for Josiah’s restoration of a new Davidic
kingdom. Within the propagandistic work of the DtrH, the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories
has long been thought to comprise a discrete unit only lightly touched by
Deuteronomistic editing and post-exilic insertions.360 The above analysis has
demonstrated, however, that these northern prophetic tales not only belong to the Josianic
edition of the DtrH, but also were carefully redacted and arranged in the form of a ring
composition to validate the reinstitution of Davidic rule over a restored kingdom of
Israel.

359 Scott D. Hill, “The Local Hero in Palestine in Comparative Perspective,” in Elijah and Elisha in
360 See, e.g. Noth, The Deuteronomistic History, 68-72; McKenzie, The Trouble with Kings, 81-100;
Römer, The So-Called Deuteronomistic History, 98, n. 50, 153-155; Susanne Otto, “The Composition of
Chapter 5 – Conclusions

Summarization

This study has sought to demonstrate that the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories found in 1 Kings 16:23–2 Kings 13:25, is a carefully constructed ring composition intended to build support for the reforms of King Josiah of Judah. Although commentators have often characterized these chapters as a disordered jumble of northern tales, when the chiastic arrangement of the work is recognized this confusion is dispelled, and the meaning of the composition can be recovered. The Elijah-Elisha ring composition is comprised of fourteen sections—a prologue and mid-turn, and twelve sections whose pairings form six intervening rungs (see below Table 13).

Table 13. The fourteen sections of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition.
Sections of this extensive ring are linked by key words and phrases. The prologue (section I) is connected to the mid-turn (section VIII), which splits the ring down the middle into two parallel halves. From the prologue, the narrative advances through sections II–VII until it arrives at the mid-turn, where it reverses itself and turns back to the beginning. Sections IX–XIV line up with their parallel passages on the other side of the ring. Section XIV closes the ring with key words linking the conclusion to both the prologue and the mid-turn.

As modern readers we are unfamiliar with the process of navigating texts composed as ring compositions. Here, the advice of Lévi-Strauss on the reading of myths is instructive. He explained that the meaning of a myth cannot be grasped through a linear reading, as one would approach a novel, or a newspaper article, read line after line from left to right. Rather, he proposed, one needed to approach such works as one would approach an orchestral score: “That is, we have to read not only left to right, but at the same time vertically, from top to bottom. We have to understand that each page is a totality.”361 This is a fitting analogy for deciphering the meaning of a ring composition. Reading the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories, we advance through the text, one episode following the next, until we arrive at the mid-turn. There, we discover the chiastic structure that frames Elijah’s ascension in the whirlwind. Attentive to the possibility that the broader collection of Elijah-Elisha stories is arranged as a comprehensive ring composition, we continue through the sections that form the second half of the ring, alert

to the presence of key words and phrases; and we are able to perceive the thematic parallels extending across each rung.

The prologue (1 Kgs 16:23–34) sets the stage for the narrative that follows by recounting the rise of the notorious Omride dynasty. Omri purchased the mountain of Samaria as the site for a new capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. Ahab, Omri’s son and successor, built a temple for Ba’al in Samaria and erect a sacred post. This brief introduction ends with a cryptic reference to the battle of Jericho, which provides an important key to the ring’s interpretation. By recalling Joshua’s curse against the defeated city of Jericho, the Dtr evokes the circumstances of the original conquest, framing Josiah’s incursion into the former kingdom of Israel as a similar act of holy war—one that will reclaim the land promised to their forebears.

Sections II–VII propel the narrative towards the thematic climax of Elijah’s miraculous ascension in the whirlwind, which takes place at the mid-turn. With Ahab’s apostasy established in the prologue, section II (1 Kgs 17:1–24) introduces the prophet Elijah as Ahab’s divinely-appointed adversary. Upon Elijah’s word a drought has enveloped the land—proof that YHWH, not Ba’al—controls the elements. This declaration of the restorative powers of Israel’s God is further heightened by the story of Elijah’s resuscitation of the widow of Zarephath’s son. The child falls sick, and his illness worsens until no life remains in his body—just as the drought is sapping all life from the land. Ba’al, the supposed god of fertility and rain, can no more save the child than he can relieve the drought. Elijah calls out to YHWH, who returns the boy’s life to his body.
Elijah’s assault on Ba’alism continues in section III (1 Kgs 18:1–46). Because of the famine, Ahab’s steward leaves the palace to search out grass to feed the starving livestock. Suddenly, Elijah appears and demands that the man inform Ahab of his presence. Terrified that the prophet will disappear before he returns with the king, the steward reminds Elijah that he once saved the lives of the prophets of YHWH by hiding them in caves from the murderous Jezebel. When the steward of the palace returns with Ahab, Elijah challenges the king to a prophetic contest on Mount Carmel that ends with 450 prophets of Ba’al being seized and slaughtered. Section IV (1 Kgs 19:1–21) recounts Elijah’s flight from the ensuing wrath of Jezebel. Arriving on Mount Horeb, Elijah experiences a theophany in which he is assigned a threefold task: to anoint Hazael as king of Aram; to anoint Jehu as king of Israel, and to appoint Elisha to succeed him in his role as prophet. Setting out from Mount Horeb, Elijah comes upon Elisha, whom he enlists as his attendant. Hazael and Jehu will enter the narrative in their proper place on the opposite side of the ring.

Section V (1 Kgs 20:1–43), the first of four battle narratives in the ring, is a classic example of holy war. The king of Aram has waged war against King Ahab and Israel with horses and chariots. Although Israel is vastly outnumbered, a prophet of YHWH arrives with military advice; and Aram is successfully routed. This victory is disparaged, however, when Ahab sets free the king of Aram—a man sentenced to death by YHWH—in exchange for a lucrative trade agreement. Ahab’s failure to fulfill the ban is a flagrant violation of the laws of holy war; and as a consequence, YHWH withdraws his support from the kings of Israel.
Section VI (1 Kgs 21:1–29) recalls the murder of Naboth and the theft of his vineyard—a crime orchestrated by Jezebel to fulfill Ahab’s desire to extend his own property. In response to this crime, YHWH sends Elijah to confront the king in his stolen vineyard, where he delivers the devastating prophecy that both Ahab and Jezebel will meet their own violent ends, and the house of Omri will be destroyed. Ahab’s death is recorded in section VII (1 Kgs 22:1–51), the last section before the mid-turn. In an effort to reclaim Israelite territory lost to Aram, Ahab invites King Jehoshaphat of Judah to accompany him into battle. The Judean king agrees—promising horses and troops—but he implores Ahab to first consult a prophet of YHWH. The reader recalls Ahab’s earlier violation of the laws of holy war; however the court prophets enthusiastically declare that their expedition will be victorious. Jehoshaphat remains unsure, and asks if there isn’t one more prophet of YHWH they can consult. Reluctantly Ahab sends for the prophet Micaiah, who warns the king that YHWH has placed a lying spirit in the mouths of his prophets to entice him to his death. Rejecting this prophetic word, Ahab and Jehoshaphat advance into battle. Although Ahab has traded his royal garments for a disguise, a random arrow finds a joint in his armor and Ahab is fatally wounded, fulfilling Elijah’s prophecy and demonstrating that YHWH has abandoned the kings of Israel.

With Ahab’s death, the ring composition arrives at its mid-turn, section VIII (1 Kgs 22:52—2 Kgs 2:25)—itself a minor ring nested within the broader ring composition. As with the larger ring, key words and phrases structure this tightly-knit internal ring.  

---

362 The key words and phrases linking the ABC D C’B’A’ chiasmus of the mid-turn are: “go up,” “fifty,” Beth-El,” “Jericho,” “sons of the prophets,” “came out,” “Elijah/Elisha took his mantle and struck the water and they split in half this way and that,” and “crossed.” The mid-turn is linked to the prologue by the key words: “the mountain,” Beth-El,” and “Jericho.”
It is further supported by a geographical chiasmus that traces the journey of first Elijah alone (from Samaria to the unnamed mountain), then Elijah and Elisha together (starting out from Gilgal, through Beth-El, and Jericho, crossing the Jordan River to the Trans-Jordan), and finally Elisha alone (re-crossing the Jordan River, passing back through Jericho, and Beth-El, skipping Gilgal where they had started out together, on to Mount Carmel, and back to Samaria). At the center of both rings is Elijah’s ascension in the whirlwind. Arriving at the Jordan River, Elijah cuts his mantle—a symbolic action that divides the waters, allowing the two prophets to cross over on dry land. The splitting of the Jordan River (first by Elijah, and then by Elisha upon his return) reminds the reader of Joshua’s similarly miraculous crossing with the Israelites at the outset of the original conquest (Josh 3:1—5:1). With Elijah’s departure imminent, he offers to grant his disciple a final request. Elisha responds by asking for a “double portion” of his master’s spirit—a legal term that reflects the right of a first-born son to inherit a double portion of his father’s property (Deut 21:17). The dynamics of their pairing—Elijah alone, then the two prophets together, only to be separated by the fiery horses and chariot before Elijah is taken, leaving Elisha alone but in possession of the double portion—evokes the history of the nation. A single kingdom ruled by a Davidic king is divided into two. These parallel states exist side by side until the loss of the northern kingdom, after which one state remains. As this story seeks to remind the reader, however, Israel is YHWH’s first-born son; and both kingdoms (the double portion) are its lawful due—a guarantee that the fractured nation will be restored. The mid-turn of the ring concludes with the story of the slaughter of the wicked boys of Beth-El. As Elisha approaches the city, a group of small
boys emerges hurling taunts. The prophet responds by cursing them in YHWH’s name; and without delay two she-bears emerge from the woods and mangle forty-two of the children—an event prefiguring Josiah’s advance north and his slaughter of the Beth-El priests.

The mid-turn is followed by section IX (2 Kgs 3:1–27), and the reader immediately recognizes that this section mirrors section VII (1 Kgs 22:1–51), with nearly identical stories containing identical dialogue and sharing numerous key words. These two sections frame the mid-turn and form the first rung of the ring composition. Once again the king of Israel (Jehoram, the son of Ahab) invites King Jehoshaphat of Judah to accompany him into battle. Jehoshaphat agrees—promising horses and troops—and the kings of Israel and Judah set out together with the king of Edom to wage war against Moab. After running out of water the group appears doomed, and again it is Jehoshaphat who asks if there is a prophet of YHWH to whom they can inquire. This time, the prophet they consult is none other than Elisha, who prophesies that not only will the wadi miraculously fill with water, but also the coalition force will strike every city, fell every good tree, stop up all wells of water, and ruin every fertile field with stones. Recalling the false prophecy of Ahab’s court prophets, the reader might question the veracity of his words. Yet, just as Elisha has foretold, water floods the land; and the coalition force strikes every city, fells every good tree, stops up all wells of water, and ruins every fertile field with stones. Their victory seems certain until the king of Moab, besieged in the last

---

363 The key words and phrases connecting sections VII and IX (the first rung of the ring composition) are: the “king of Israel” asks “Jehoshaphat of Judah,” “will you come with me to make war,” Jehoshaphat replies “I will do what you do; my troops shall be your troops, my horses shall be your horses.” “Jehoshaphat” asks “is there (another) prophet of YHWH here,” from “whom we can inquire.”
remaining city, sacrifices his own son—igniting a great wrath that sends Israel fleeing back to its own land in defeat. Like the prophecy of Micaiah in the parallel passage, Elisha’s prophecy has come true. Yet it is no less a false prophecy than the lying spirit in the mouths of Ahab’s court prophets. To “strike” is not necessarily to conquer—an ambiguity YHWH exploits once again to entice a king of Israel to wage a disastrous war that will end in defeat.

An identical cluster of key words alerts the reader that section X (2 Kgs 4:1–5:27) must be read in conjunction with the story of Naboth’s vineyard in section VI, resuming the theme of social justice. This section begins with Elisha’s miraculous deliverance of a widow whose children are to be taken by a creditor, followed by the story of a wealthy Shunammite woman whose generosity to the itinerant Elisha is rewarded with the gift of the one thing she does not possess: a child. The central narrative of the section, however, concerns Elisha’s healing of Naaman, the Aramean army commander afflicted with leprosy. Miraculously healed, Naaman is moved to recognize that the God of Israel is the one true God; and in gratitude he offers to reward the prophet. Elisha declines his gift and sends the man away in peace; however his assistant, Gehazi, is overcome with greed. Slipping away from Elisha, he overtakes the departing Naaman, and offering a lie that his master has changed his mind, Gehazi takes possession of the reward belonging to Elisha. After concealing this stolen property Gehazi returns to Elisha, who confronts him with his crime. Is this the time, Elisha asks, to take silver, clothing, olive groves and vineyards, sheep and cattle, and slaves and maidservants? This list is surprising since

---

364 The key words linking sections VI and X (the second rung of the ring composition) are: “vineyard,” “silver,” “heart,” and “letters.”
Gehazi actually received only silver and garments—the first two items on the list. The reader, however, knows to consider these events in light of the monarchic oppression demonstrated by King Ahab’s theft of Naboth’s vineyard. The reader might further recognize that this list recalls the possessions that the prophet Samuel had warned the Israelites a despotic monarch would demand from his people, and so be reminded that the northern kings failed in their obligation to defend the weakest members of society.

Section XI (2 Kgs 6:1–7:20) returns the reader to the theme of holy war. This is the fourth and final battle narrative of the ring, and it concludes a progression of events in which YHWH first fights on behalf of Israel (section V), but then, in reaction to Ahab’s violation of the laws of holy war, not only abandons the kings in their military exploits, but also entices them to fight disastrous wars they cannot win (sections VII and IX). Like its pair on the other side of the ring composition (section V), section XI depicts the king of Aram waging war against Israel, whose king is once again assisted by a prophet of YHWH. This time, the prophet is Elisha.365 Furious that Elisha has repeatedly revealed the presence of his troops to the king of Israel, the king of Aram sends a strong force with horses and chariots to surround the town and capture the prophet. Elisha’s attendant is terrified, but the prophet reassures him that YHWH’s army far outnumbers the Aramean troops. At Elisha’s request, YHWH opens the eyes of his attendant to reveal that the hills all around are covered with horses and chariots of fire. Elisha delivers these Aramean troops to the king of Israel, but he refuses to allow him to strike them down—a stern

365 The key words connecting sections V and XI (the third rung of the ring composition) are: “king of Aram/Ben-Hadad,” “wages war,” “horses and chariots,” “prophet,” “man of God,” “sets free,” “seize,” “sons of the prophets,” and “eyes.”
reminder that these prisoners of holy war belong to YHWH. They are given food and
drink and then set free. As the war continues, the king of Aram and his troops march
against Samaria and besiege it. Locked up in his own capital, the king of Israel is
powerless to save his people who are slowly being reduced to starvation. Israel’s
deliverance comes not from their king, but from YHWH’s heavenly army of horses and
chariots, whose thunder causes the Aramean troops to flee in terror.

Section XII (2 Kgs 8:1–9:29) resumes the narrative begun in section IV, in which
the God of Israel commanded Elijah to anoint Hazael as king of Aram, Jehu as king of
Israel, and Elisha to succeed him as prophet—the Three Swords of YHWH charged with
eradicating Ba’alism from the land of Israel. Now Elisha, who has assumed the
prophetic mantle of his master, sets these events in motion. He begins by anointing
Hazael, who usurps the throne of Ben-Hadad and then marches against Israel at Ramoth-
gilead. When King Joram (the son of Ahab) is wounded in this battle against Hazael, he
retires to Jezreel to recover from his injuries, where is visited by King Ahaziah of Judah,
his ally against Aram. With the king convalescing in Jezreel, Elisha sends a messenger to
Ramoth-gilead to anoint Jehu (the commander of Joram’s army) as king of Israel.
Supported by his army, Jehu sets out to Jezreel to claim his throne, assassinating both
King Joram of Israel and King Ahaziah of Judah.

The result of these political coups is the elimination of Ba’alism from both Israel
and Judah. Section XIII (2 Kgs 9:30–12:22), parallel on the ring with Elijah’s slaughter
of the prophets of Ba’al in section III, begins with Jehu’s efforts to secure his hold on the

366 The key words linking sections IV and XII (the fourth rung of the ring composition) are: “Hazael,”
Jehu,” and “Elisha.”
kingship. He first assassinates Jezebel; however, the real threat to his rule are the seventy sons of Ahab, who are being raised by guardians in Samaria. Jehu invites the supporters of these descendants to choose the best from among them, place him on his father’s throne, and then prepare to defend him. But the steward of the palace and the other officials fearfully decline his offer. As proof of their loyalty, Jehu demands the heads of these princes; and the boys are summarily slaughtered. When Jehu and his party stumble upon forty-two brothers of Ahaziah, who have come north to visit the royal family, they too are seized and slaughtered. The killing continues against the worshippers of Ba’al. Jehu proclaims a solemn assembly in honor of Ba’al, bringing all of his followers to his temple in Samaria. There, they are struck down; and the temple is destroyed.

In the southern kingdom of Judah, Ahaziah’s mother (the daughter of Ahab) responds to her son’s assassination by killing his descendants and claiming the throne for herself. Only the infant prince Joash is saved when his aunt takes him and hides him in the Jerusalem Temple. For six years, the boy is raised in the care of the priests; at the age of seven, he is brought out of hiding and crowned king amidst a countercoup organized by the priest Jehoiada. Athaliah is killed, the priests of Ba’al are slain, and their temple is destroyed.

Section XIV (2 Kgs 13:1-25), together with its parallel passage on the other side of the ring (section II), forms the sixth and final rung of the ring composition. The key words linking sections III and XIII (the fifth rung of the ring composition) are: “steward of the palace,” “hidden,” “heart,” “seized,” and “slaughtered.” The key words linking sections II and XIV (the sixth rung of the ring composition) are: “falls sick,” “his illness,” “three times,” and “revived.” Section XIV is linked to the prologue (section I) by the key word...
reader knows that the cycle has come full circle when the narrator reports that the sacred post erected by Ahab still stands in Samaria. Ba’alism has been eradicated from both Israel and Judah, but the kings of Israel have not departed from the sins of Jeroboam, who established the sanctuaries at Beth-El and Dan. Therefore, YHWH has repeatedly delivered the nation into the hands of Aram. The prophet Elisha was their redeemer. But now he lies on his deathbed, and King Joash weeps at his side crying: “Father! Father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!”—an exclamation of trust in YHWH’s heavenly army was previously voiced by Elisha to Elijah, as he was taken up to heaven in the whirlwind. Through a series of symbolic actions, Elisha assures Israel of three more victories against Aram. The prophet then dies and is buried—however the Dtr goes on to recount a fantastical story. The body of a dead man is “cast” [שָׁלַךְ] into the grave of Elisha; and when it touches the prophet’s bones, it comes back to life and stands up.

This corpse symbolizes the northern kingdom of Israel, “cast” [שָׁלַךְ] into exile by YHWH (2 Kgs 13:22-23; 17:20). Death and the grave are frequent metaphors for exile in the Hebrew Bible.369 Two centuries later, Ezekiel will employ this same metaphor in his vision of the valley of dried bones. Commanded by YHWH to prophesy over a valley strewn with the skeletal remains of a defeated army, these dead men return to life, and stand on their feet (Ezek 37:1-14). The significance of this resurrection is explained by Ezekiel:

---

369 See Levenson, Resurrection and the Restoration, especially pages 152-165; Provan, 1 and 2 Kings, 230.
And he said to me, “O mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed.’ Prophesy, therefore, and say to them: Thus said YHWH God: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O my people, and bring you to the land of Israel. You shall know, O my people, that I am YHWH, when I have opened your graves and lifted you out of your graves. I will put my breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil. Then you shall know that I YHWH have spoken and have acted”—declares YHWH (vv. 11-14).

Like the resurrected multitude of Ezekiel’s vision, the Dtr’s tale of the corpse, cast into the grave of Elisha but miraculously returned to life when it touches his bones, heralds the nation’s restoration.

The redactor of these northern prophetic stories signaled his purpose at the outset of the composition with an allusion to Joshua and the battle of Jericho. The figure of Joshua presented in the Deuteronomistic History is a literary prefiguration—a doppelganger of Josiah—meant to anticipate the coming of Josiah and frame his military advance north into the territory of the former kingdom of Israel as an exercise in holy war equal to that of the original conquest.370 Two more Josianic doppelgangers appear in the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories: Joash, the king who institutes the policy of Temple repairs that leads to the discovery of the scroll of the law in Josiah’s day; and Elisha, a leader in holy war whose deadly curse against the wicked boys of Beth-El portends Josiah’s slaughter of the Beth-El priests.

A reader of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition first perceives the shadow of Josiah with the mention of Joshua and Beth-El in the prologue. This correspondence becomes explicit at the mid-turn of the ring, where a repetition of “twos” (“The two of them” [שניים]; “double portion” [עמעים]; “rent in two” [שניים]) and an emphasis on division (Elijah “cut” [חל] his mantle; the “halving” of the Jordan [חוצה]; the fiery chariot and horses that “divide/restore” [פרד] Elijah and Elisha; Elisha “rent” [קרע] his garment) intimates the circumstances of the once united kingdom of David—rent in two—with the kingdom of Judah left standing alone. The slaughter of the boys of Beth-El, so obscure to us two and a half millennia in the future, would not have puzzled a reader in the seventh century BCE, who would have recognized the allusion to Josiah’s destruction of the sanctuary at Beth-El and his killing of its priests. Leaving the mid-turn, the theme of each rung becomes apparent: YHWH’s abandonment of the kings of Israel; the failure of these kings to establish a just society; the ultimate power of YHWH to wage holy war; the Three Swords of YHWH charge with eradicating the worship of Ba’al; the end of Ba’alism; and finally, the promise of restoration. The heavenly army of YHWH would fight for Josiah—and the united kingdom of David would live again.

Conclusions and Implications

The rediscovery of the Elijah-Elisha ring composition has implications for the identification and interpretation of chiastic structures in the Hebrew Bible (and other
ancient literature), as well as for our understanding of the place of these prophetic stories within the broader Deuteronomistic History.

As we noted in Chapter 1, a lack of clear and consistent criteria employed in identifying ring compositions has led to numerous studies whose claims are ultimately unsustainable. At the heart of this problem is the issue of subjectivity in identifying legitimate parallel correspondences. To address this problem, Mary Douglas (who considered the presence of comprehensive ring compositions in her analyses of the biblical books of Numbers and Leviticus) argued for the importance of recognizing clusters of key words and parallel phrases meant to signify paired units. The present study has implemented the model advanced by Douglas. In addition, we have tabulated the occurrences of these key words (both within and outside of the chiastic pattern) as further evidence for the strength of these correspondences. While individual key words might occasionally appear outside of the pattern, stable clusters of key words provide a reliable indicator of parallel units.

In the Elijah-Elisha ring composition, these correspondences are confirmed by the obvious thematic parallels extending across the ring. If the purpose of a chiastic structure is to guide the reading of a text, then connections between the units must be obvious to the reader. While our present clumsiness at recognizing this lost literary convention should be taken into consideration, vague or convoluted associations between sections cannot be regarded as demonstrating significant parallels.

Rereading the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories as a ring composition has led to the conclusion that these traditional stories were appropriated and recontextualized by a
Josianic redactor to build support for the social, religious, and political reforms of King Josiah of Judah. Consequently, the cycle’s place within the Deuteronomistic History must be reexamined.

Martin Noth argued that the Elijah-Elisha stories were originally independent episodes that had already coalesced into a unified narrative when they were taken up by the Dtr (identified by Noth as a single author/compiler writing in the land of Israel in the middle of the sixth century BCE). According to Noth, the Dtr incorporated the cycle into his work, rearranging the stories to suit his own purpose. He combined the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard with the prophecy of Ahab’s death (1 Kgs 21), adding the additional verses that condemned Ahab’s dynasty (vv. 21-22; 24), and depicted him as an example of escalating moral degeneration (vv. 25-26). The Dtr then placed this episode immediately before the account of Ahab’s death in chapter 22, thus separating chapters 20 and 22, both of which record events when Ahab is at war. Noth further argued that the account of Jehu’s coup (2 Kgs 9:1—10:27) was not originally part of the Elijah-Elisha stories. Elisha plays only a minor role—sending a disciple to anoint Jehu (2Kgs 9:1-3)—and Elijah’s prophecy against the house of Ahab (accomplished with the slaughter of his seventy sons at Jehu’s behest) is mentioned only in passing (2 Kgs 10:10b).  

Noth was right to recognize both the early dating of the original Elijah-Elisha stories and the hand of the Dtr in shaping their present arrangement. Clearly, these stories were redacted by a purposeful editor. Noth, however, locates this redactor in the sixth century BCE—a conclusion that was convincingly challenged by Frank Moore Cross’s

---

theory of a double redaction of the DtrH. Cross argued that the first edition was produced in the time of Josiah to support his consolidation of worship at the Jerusalem Temple, as well as his goal to reunite the divided kingdom under a Davidic monarch. A second edition, undertaken after the fall of Jerusalem, brought the history up to date by recording the final events of the kingdom and reconfiguring the earlier work to foreshadow its destruction.\textsuperscript{372} Cross included the Elijah-Elisha stories as part of the first redaction of the DtrH; however, he made no attempt to connect them to the propagandistic aims of Josiah. Rather, he assumed that these stories remained relatively untouched by the Dtr, with the exception of the editor’s shaping of Elijah into the figure of a new Moses.\textsuperscript{373}

In a work as politically motivated as the DtrH, one could reasonably question why the author/redactor chose to include such a large portion of text (the Elijah-Elisha cycle extends across nineteen chapters) that did not contribute to advancing his position. Steven L. McKenzie addressed this point by attributing nearly all of these prophetic stories\textsuperscript{374} to a post-Deuteronomistic level of redaction.\textsuperscript{375} As Gary N. Knoppers points out, however, McKenzie failed to explain who preserved these northern prophetic stories through the centuries, who finally edited them, and for what purpose were they later inserted into the DtrH.\textsuperscript{376} Marc Brettler echoes these reservations and questions the likelihood of such an extensive addition to the very center of the already formed book of Kings.\textsuperscript{377}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{372} Cross, \textit{Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic}, 274-289.
\textsuperscript{373} Ibid., 191-192.
\textsuperscript{374} McKenzie assigns all of the following texts to a post-Deuteronomistic level of redaction: 1 Kgs 17-19; 20; glossing of 21:1-16; 21:18a, 19b, 23; 22:1-38; 2 Kgs 1:2-17a; 2; 3:4-27; 4-7; 8:1-15; glossing of 8:28b-29a; 9:7b, 10a, 14-15a, 27b-28, 36b; 10:18-28; 13:14-21.
\textsuperscript{375} McKenzie, \textit{The Trouble with Kings}, 81-100.
\end{flushright}
Frank Moore Cross’s theory of a double redaction of the Deuteronomistic History remains the most compelling explanation for the biblical text as we have received it. His theory includes the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories within the Josianic redaction, but it does not attempt to explain them or to integrate them into his overall theory of the DtrH as a propagandistic work from the court of King Josiah. The present reading of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories fills this lacuna. When read according to the conventions of a ring composition, these prophetic stories herald the arrival of Josiah—the Davidic monarch whom the historian believed was destined to return the kingdom to its former glory.


Bilde, Per. *Flavius Josephus Between Jerusalem and Rome*. Journal for the Study of the


Cohn, Robert L. *2 Kings*. Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry. Edited by


De Wette, W. M. L. *Dissertatio critica qua a prioribus Deuteronomium pentateuchi libris diversum, alius cuiusdam recentioris auctoris opus esse monstratur*. Jenna: Leteris Etzdorfii, 1805.


——— “A Bird, a Mouse, a Frog, and Some Fish: A New Reading of Leviticus 11.”


Immerwahr, Henry R. *Form and Thought in Herodotus.* Cleveland: Press of Western Reserve University, 1966.


51-72.


O’Brien, Mark A. The Deuteronomistic History Hypothesis: A Reassessment. Orbis


——— “How Much was Known about Chiasmus in 1829 When the Book of Mormon was Translated?” *The FARMS Review* 15 (2003): 47-80.


Woods, Frank E. “Elisha and the Children: The Question of Accepting Prophetic


