

The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures

ISSN 1203-1542

<http://www.jhsonline.org> and

<http://purl.org/jhs>



Articles in JHS are being indexed in the ATLA Religion Database, [RAMBI](#), and [BiBIL](#). Their abstracts appear in Religious and Theological Abstracts. The journal is archived by *Library and Archives Canada* and is accessible for consultation and research at the Electronic Collection site maintained by [Library and Archives Canada](#) (for a direct link, click [here](#)).

VOLUME 8, ARTICLE 5

**Yael Shemesh,
The Elisha Stories as Saints' Legends**

THE ELISHA STORIES AS SAINTS' LEGENDS

Yael Shemesh,

Department of Bible, Bar-Ilan University, Israel

The present article seeks to define the literary genre of the Elisha cycle of stories. Let me state at the outset that I agree with the widespread view that these tales are intended to praise Elisha and belong to the genre of Saints' legends or prophetic hagiography.¹ But many have challenged this classification, which has generally been made intuitively and not been backed by solid proofs;² some scholars have assigned all or some of the stories to different categories. What is more, in recent years we have been increasingly exposed to the argument that one or another of the Elisha stories, or even the entire cycle, is critical of the prophet, as a subversive reading of the text makes clear. For this reason, before I defend the genre assignment I accept I will review and refute the opinions voiced by various scholars (Part I). Next I will parry the contention that the Elisha stories disparage the prophet (Part II). Finally, I will show that the Elisha stories were motivated by strong admiration for him and do in fact belong to the genre of the saints' legend (Part III).

¹ By contrast, some of the categories proposed for the Elisha stories—such as “prophet narrative” or “prophet legend”—seem to blur their distinctive character. For the former, see O. Plöger, “Die Prophetengeschichte der Samuel – und Königsbücher,” dissertation, Griefswald 1937, pp. 39-40 [this work is not available to me]. He proposes subcategories as well: “Prophet deed story” and “prophet word story.” His idea has been accepted by other scholars, such as: G. von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1968), vol. 2:42 n. 2; R. M. Hals, “Legend: A Case Study in OT Form-Critical Terminology,” *CBQ* 34 (1972), pp. 166-176. Hals notes the problems with the term “legend” and proposes “prophet story” instead (p. 176). Similarly, De Vries and others would categorize the Elisha cycle as “prophet legends” (see S. J. De Vries, *Prophet Against Prophet* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], p. 52). He accepts “prophet legend” as a broad category, which he then breaks down into distinct sub-categories that he applies to the Elisha stories (pp. 118-119). But his approach, which distinguishes, for example, between “later legitimization collection” and “early legitimization collection,” strikes me as artificial and as making no contribution to a better understanding of the stories. I believe that none of these proposals are suitable for the Elisha stories, because they obscure their distinctiveness and do not express their unmistakable veneration of Elisha and the intention to lionize the prophet. A prophet legend/story, it seems to me, may be any story about the words or deeds of a prophet, even an anonymous prophet, and the message, rather than the prophet, is at the center of interest (e.g., the story in 1 Kings 13).

² An exception is A. Rofé, *The Prophetical Stories* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), pp. 13-74, but he too fails to deal with other positions advanced in the literature.

1. FIVE GENRES PROPOSED FOR THE ELISHA STORIES

A. A POLEMIC AGAINST BAAL WORSHIP

According to Bronner, the Elijah and Elisha cycles are polemics against Canaanite mythology and Baal worship.³ To support her contention she lists various motifs she asserts are common to Ugaritic and Canaanite literature and to the Elijah and Elisha stories: fire, rain, grain and oil, healing, revival of the dead, the ascent to heaven, and rivers. She also notes the open conflict between Elijah and Baal worshipers in 1 Kings 18 and the explicit taunt at Baal by Elijah's mocking, "Shout louder! After all, he is a god. But he may be in conversation, he may be detained, or he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up" (1 Kgs 18:27). She also identifies an anti-Baal polemical intent in stories that have a strong ethical cast: the incidents of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) and of the siege of Dothan (2 Kgs 6:8-23), which ends with Elisha's release of the prisoners. She maintains that the Bible employs these literary devices to assail Canaanite mythology, which has no ethical dimension. This line indicates, however, just how far Bronner has gone in twisting the Elijah and Elisha stories to fit her definition of them as polemics against Baal worship. It is true that the central topic of the Elijah cycle is his open opposition to Baal worship (1 Kings 17-19, 2 Kings 1); but this theme hardly comes up in the Elisha stories. What is more, the motifs listed by Bronner are universal;⁴ most of them are anchored in the biblical tradition in general and in that of the Exodus in particular. The frequent occurrence of such motifs in distant and unrelated cultures is not astonishing, since it stands to reason that fundamental human experiences, such as the desire to overcome death, illness, famine, and childlessness, would produce stories with common motifs. Thus the mere presence of shared motifs says nothing about any intentional link between one story and another. Only a close literary analysis can discover such things. As Moore notes, however, Bronner does not offer such an analysis.⁵

³ L. Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics against Baal Worship* (Leiden: Brill, 1968). See also: J. R. Battenfield, "YHWH's Refutation of the Baal Myth through the Actions of Elijah and Elisha," *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison* (ed. A. Gileadi; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 19-37; F. E. Woods, *Water and Storm Polemics against Baalism in the Deuteronomistic History* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), pp. 95-121 (to be mentioned below).

⁴ A glance at Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, shows that all of the motifs mentioned by Bronner are widespread in world literature. For a discussion devoted specifically to the motifs shared by the Elijah and Elisha stories and world literature, see T. H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament: A Comparative Study* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 498-525.

⁵ R. D. Moore, *God Saves: Lessons from the Elisha Stories* (JSOTSup 95; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), p. 39. For additional criticism of Bronner's thesis, see P. A. H. de Boer, "Leah Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics against Baal Worship* [Review]," *VT* 19 (1969), pp. 267-269.

Unlike Bronner, who found an anti-Baal polemic in all of the Elijah and Elisha stories, Woods proposes that it exists only where it is explicit (such as 2 Kings 1) or where the motif of water and storm is prominent (such as 2 Kgs 2:1-18), because Baal was the lord of the storm and controlled water. Among the Elisha stories he cites the following passages as anti-Baal polemics: 2 Kgs 2:8-14 (crossing the Jordan); 2:19-22 (healing the waters of Jericho); 3:4-27 (providing water in the desert); 5:1-19 (healing Naaman of his leprosy by having him immerse himself in the Jordan); 6:1-7 (making the iron axe-head float); 6:24-8:1 (stories about famine and the royal aide-de-camp's sarcastic reference to "windows in the sky" in the first of these [7:2]).⁶ Wood's overall thesis is that such a polemic against Baal imbues all of the Deuteronomist literature, from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings. But it is far from clear whether the Elijah and Elisha stories are Deuteronomist. Many believe that they predate that corpus,⁷ noting in particular that the Elisha stories (as well as the Elijah cycle) makes no reference to the centralization of the cult at a single site or of the shrines in Bethel and Dan, which aroused the wrath of the Deuteronomist editor of the book of Kings.

B. EXALTING THE INSTITUTION OF PROPHECY

Long maintains that the Elisha stories are intended to exalt the institution of prophecy in general, and not just Elisha.⁸ He infers this from a study of the *Sitz im Leben* of the miracle stories about shamans, found in various cultures in North America, Central Asia, and central India. All of these stories were composed, he holds, in a period when shamanism was losing its luster and needed to be rehabilitated. This, he asserts, is the social background of the Elisha stories as well. Long claims that the Hebrew Bible provides abundant evidence of a popular enmity toward prophets, as well as skepticism and outright disbelief in their vocation; and the Elisha stories are intended to counter these.⁹

⁶ Woods, *Water and Storm Polemics against Baalism*, pp. 103-111.

⁷ See, for example: R. Kittel, *Die Bücher der Könige* (HK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1900), p. 186, who thinks that the Elisha stories were written in 780-760 BCE; R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1948), p. 408; B. Lehnart, *Prophet und König im Nordreich Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), who argues that the stories about Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha are a pre-Deuteronomistic northern tradition. For a survey of the literature on the date of composition of the Elisha stories, see M. Avioz, "The Book of Kings in Recent Research (Part II)," *Currents in Biblical Research* 5(1) (2006), pp. 11-57 (p. 28).

⁸ B. O. Long, "The Social Setting for Prophetic Miracle Stories," *Semeia* 3 (1975), pp. 46-63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57. Long seems to have recanted this idea, however, since in his commentary on 2 Kings, published 16 years later, he defines most of the Elisha stories as "legends" and "prophet legends" intended to exalt Elisha himself. See B. O. Long, *2 Kings* (FOTL 10; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 34, 35, 50, 61 et passim.

Like Bronner, however, Long does not ground his thesis in the details of the stories whose genre he would define. His sociological and anthropological method ignores the literary aspect and focuses on an attempt to discover the social background of shamanistic miracle stories. He does acknowledge that “unfortunately, we do not really know a great deal about the social settings for any of these traditions from Middle India, or for that matter, from Siberia, North America, or Africa.”¹⁰ But this lack of knowledge does not prevent him from arguing that what all these traditions have in common is that they were recounted in periods when shamanism was on the wane among the people.

As for the idea itself, I see no contradiction between lionizing a particular prophet and bolstering the status of prophecy in general: quite the contrary, since the latter depends on the former. Nevertheless, the Elisha stories clearly concentrate on the prophet himself. In the account of his prophetic consecration (2:1-18), all the sons of the prophets are depicted as grossly inferior to him in their powers; nevertheless, they challenge his prowess repeatedly.¹¹ This unflattering picture of the sons of the prophets shows that even if the Elisha stories indirectly enhance the reputation of the prophetic institution, this is not their main goal. The fact that Elisha is an extraordinary figure, and certainly not a model or type of the typical biblical prophet undercuts Long’s argument.

C. RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL SATIRE AGAINST THE ROYAL HOUSE

Unlike Bronner and Long, who would define the genre of the entire Elisha cycle without a literary analysis of the individual stories, LaBarbera defines the genre of three stories based on a literary analysis. In his dissertation, an expansion of an earlier article he wrote on 2 Kgs 6:8-7:20, he maintains that the three stories in 2 Kings 5, 6:8-23, and 6:24-7:20 are religious and social satire directed against the socioeconomic elite of the Kingdom of Israel in the ninth century BCE.¹² He holds that all three stories focus on the social tensions between an elite that is drawn to Baal worship and the lower class of peasant farmers, who are loyal to the Lord. All three depict the king of Israel (2 Kings 5; 6:24-7:20) or the king of Aram (2 Kgs 6:8-23) as helpless. In the latter two stories, with their parallel scenes of the king in consultation with his ministers, the king is depicted as misinterpreting the situation (6:11 and 7:12).

Pace LaBarbera, the tension in the stories is not between the ruling class and the peasant class but between the king and the prophet of the Lord. The critical shafts directed against the king or his aide-de-camp, on whose arm he leans (2 Kgs 7:2), have nothing to do with the regime’s unjust

¹⁰ Long, “The Social Setting,” p. 55.

¹¹ See Y. Shemesh, “The Stories of Elisha: A Literary Analysis,” Ph.D. dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 1997, pp. 107, 120-121, 131-137.

¹² See R. D. LaBarbera, “The Man of War and the Man of God: Social Satire in 2 Kings 6:8-7:20,” *CBQ* 46 (1984), pp. 637-651; idem, “Social Religious Satire in the Elisha Cycle,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley 1986 [Ann Arbor, Michigan 1989].

treatment of the people, but with the king's relations with Elisha. In the story of the siege of Dothan the king and the prophet are on good terms, which is why LaBarbera has to invoke the king of Aram, who attempts to take Elisha prisoner (2 Kgs 6:13-14), to demonstrate the presence of a critical attitude toward the royal house. What is more, the Israelite common folk hardly appear in these stories, and when they do they are not depicted in a particularly flattering light. The woman's complaint to the king (6:26-29) exposes the harsh reality of mothers who eat their children during the siege of Samaria.¹³ Furthermore, the woman's grievance is not that she was forced into such an appalling situation, but that the woman with whom she made the agreement has reneged on the bargain and hidden her son. The manner in which she presents her case makes it difficult for readers to identify with her suffering.

There is no support in the Elijah and Elisha cycles for LaBarbera's basic assumption that only the upper class in Israel was attracted to the Baal cult, whereas the lower classes worshiped the Lord.¹⁴ Elijah castigates "all the people": "How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!" (1 Kgs 18:21). By their mute response, "the people answered him not a word," they corroborate the charge of syncretism that the prophet has lodged against them. As for the Elisha stories, there is nothing in them about Baal worship; certainly one cannot infer any correlation between social class and loyalty to the Israelite religion from their silence on the subject.

D. A POLEMIC AGAINST THE HOUSE OF OMRI

Some scholars, taking a sociological perspective, reach a conclusion similar to LaBarbera's, but add that the main thrust of the stories is to strip the House of Omri of its legitimacy and set up the House of Jehu in its place. The conflict they find in the story is not religious, but socioeconomic.¹⁵

But this theory lacks even the barest support in the text. Only 2 Kings 3 refers to a king of the House of Omri by name; in all the others we always

¹³ See the criticism of LaBarbera by Moore (*God Saves*, p. 126) and S. Lasine ("Jehoram and the Cannibal Mothers [2 Kings 6.24-33]: Solomon's Judgment in an Inverted World," *JSOT* 50 [1991], pp. 27-53 [p. 38]). Unlike Lasine, I do not believe that the story is meant to condemn the women for eating their children, but only to illustrate the intensity of the hunger by means of such a shocking incident. Nevertheless, it is quite implausible that a story whose goal is to depict the people in a favorable light would include such an episode.

¹⁴ LaBarbera, "The Man of War," p. 637.

¹⁵ See mainly T. H. Renteria, "The Elijah/Elisha Stories: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Prophets and People in Ninth-Century B.C.E. Israel," *Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective* (ed. R. B. Coote; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), pp. 75-126. So, too, J. A. Todd, "The Pre-Deuteronomistic Elijah Cycle," *ibid.*, pp. 1-35; and also, to some extent, S. D. Hill, "The Local Hero in Palestine in Comparative Perspective," *ibid.*, pp. 37-73.

read of an anonymous “king of Israel.” It seems only logical that a story that targets a particular dynasty would not omit the name of the king(s) in question. In the short miracle tales about the assistance that Elijah and Elisha render to individuals (1 Kgs 17:8-16 and 17-24; 2 Kgs 4:1-7 and 6:1-7) and groups (2 Kgs 2:19-22; 4:38-41; 42-44), Renteria sees criticism of the House of Omri as responsible for the grave situation in which the people found themselves under its rule. But this argument, too, is left without proof. The Elijah stories in 1 Kings 17 are set, not in Israel, but in Sidon. The Elisha stories do take place in Israel, but none of them are set in a particular reign; we cannot know whether the king at the time was of the House of Omri or of the House of Jehu. Renteria assumes that the misery reflected in the stories is proof that a king of the House of Omri was on the throne at the time; but this is simply begging the question.

E. DIDACTIC SALVATION STORIES

Like LaBarbera, Moore employs a literary analysis to determine the genre of 2 Kings 5, 6:8-23, and 6:24-7:20, but reaches a different conclusion. He sees all three as didactic salvation stories that teach that the Lord saved His people in one of the most difficult periods in its history.¹⁶ He maintains that the perpetual Aramean threat of the ninth century BCE provoked serious doubts in Israel, especially among royal circles, about the credibility of the tradition of the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan; namely, that the Lord comes to the defense of His people and fights against its enemies.¹⁷ These stories, according to Moore, are meant to buttress this tenet. His main evidence for this genre assignment is the emphasis in the stories on the Aramean threat, on the one hand, and the prevalence of motifs associated with divine salvation, on the other.

Of the three stories, he says, the siege of Samaria (6:24-7:20) is the least amenable to classification as hagiography; because it is hard to see how Elisha's taking refuge behind a locked door (6:32) is compatible with praise for him.¹⁸

One of the weak points in Moore's theory is his failure to prove that the background of these three stories is in fact the bitter warfare between Israel and Aram in the ninth century. In the account of Naaman's miraculous cure, this conflict has only a secondary significance and is reported to us only in the exposition that sets the scene for the story (5:1-2). If the conflict with the Arameans and a demonstration that the Lord

¹⁶ This is also the interpretation proposed by B. Uffenheimer (*Early Prophecy in Israel* [trans. D. Louvish; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999], p. 462) for the story of the siege of Samaria (2 Kgs 6:24-7:20). He argues that “the whole story may be classified as a typical prophetic war tale, which leaves no room for heroic action by a human agency: the only hero here is God Himself.”

¹⁷ Moore accepts Lind's idea about the influence of the Exodus tradition on the Elisha cycle. See M. C. Lind, “Paradigm of Holy War in the Old Testament,” *Biblical Research* 16 (1971), pp. 16-31 (p. 30); idem, *Yabweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), pp. 138-144.

¹⁸ Moore, *God Saves*, p. 110.

delivers His people from the enemy were the cruxes of the story, as Moore believes, we would expect a conclusion along the lines of “the Aramean bands stopped invading the land of Israel” (2 Kgs 6:23). Not only is there no such ending to the story of Naaman; the Aramean commander is not even present in the last scene.

I do not mean to deny that one goal of the three stories is to exalt the name of the Lord. They certainly demonstrate His ability to save all Israel (6:8-23; 6:24-7:20) or an individual (chapter 5). In two of the stories the deliverance is indeed from the Aramean enemy (6:8-23; 6:24-7:20). In the third story, by contrast, it is precisely the representative of that enemy, the Aramean commander Naaman, whom the Lord delivers from his illness (chapter 5). Thus the Lord’s power is universal and not limited to a particular type of danger or a particular nation for whom He performs miracles.

I do not, however, agree with Moore that exaltation of the Lord, and not of the prophet Elisha, is the main point of these stories. The status of the Lord and the status of His prophet Elisha are necessarily intertwined, of course. In my reading, these stories give greater weight to the latter.¹⁹

The last scene of the Naaman pericope, in which Gehazi and Elisha occupy center stage, demonstrates the prophet’s power to see what is hidden from others and to miraculously infect the transgressor with leprosy. Thus the story teaches that the prophet has the ability not only to heal the leprosy that afflicts a sick person, but also to invert the situation and inflict leprosy on a healthy individual. It is important to emphasize that in the closing scene neither the narrator nor the characters mention the Lord. The miracle of Gehazi’s leprosy is attributed to Elisha and not to the Lord. As Gunkel notes, the two mirror-image miracles, curing and causing leprosy, equate Elisha with God as one who has the power to slay and to heal.²⁰

In the story of the siege of Dothan (2 Kgs 6:8-23) it is the Lord who opens the eyes of Elisha’s lad (v. 17), deprives the Arameans of clear sight (v. 18) and then restores it (v. 20). Note, though, that the Lord does this in response to Elisha’s prayers. The fact that a fiery chariot and horses are sent from heaven to protect Elisha is an indication not only of the Lord’s power and might, but also of the lofty status of the man of God. Similarly, Elisha’s miraculous ability to see the heavenly troop that surrounds him enhances his reputation. Another supernatural ability associated with vision is recounted in the exposition. Elisha knows the location of the Aramean ambushes and warns the king of Israel against them, “time and again” (6:8-10). In other words, Elisha is endowed with clairvoyance, the ability to know an event or scene that is beyond the range of his physical senses. The Lord is not mentioned in the exposition in connection with this extraordinary power wielded by Elisha.

¹⁹ See also the succinct criticism by Avioz, “The Book of Kings,” p. 26.

²⁰ H. Gunkel, *Geschichten von Elisa* (Berlin: K. Curtius [1925]), p. 45.

Elisha's words of encouragement to his servant, "Have no fear; there are more on our side than on theirs" (6:16), is cited by Moore as proof that the story belongs to the genre of the "Wars of the Lord."²¹ But this encouraging remark is not spoken by the Lord to the rescuer He has appointed for His people, as in the case of Joshua,²² or by the Lord directly to the people of Israel,²³ but by Elisha to his servant. This reassuring statement plays no role in the plot, given that the fear that paralyzes the lad has no bearing on its development. On the other hand, the remark is important conceptually, serving as another indication of Elisha's supernatural powers: not only does he enjoy Divine protection, he can also perceive the heavenly reality that surrounds him.

The story of the siege of Samaria (2 Kgs 6:24-7:20) seems to come closer to the genre proposed by Moore. The town is delivered because "the Lord had caused the Aramean camp to hear a sound of chariots, a sound of horses—the din of a huge army" (7:6). But this story, too, reflects the supernatural powers with which Elisha is endowed. I find it hard to understand Moore's argument that the scene of the prophet's locking his door against those who have come to kill him tarnishes his character. For precisely in this scene we encounter another example of Elisha's clairvoyance: sitting in his home he perceives that the king has ordered his execution (6:32). The rest of the story also reflects his supernatural powers: he foretells the miraculous delivery of the city, which seems utterly impossible at the time. What is more, the mockery of the king's aide-de-camp causes Elisha to add his own portent, directed against the skeptic himself: "You shall see it with your own eyes, but you shall not eat of it" (7:2). The end of the story reiterates the fulfillment of Elisha's enigmatic prediction (vv. 17-20).

In addition to the various proposed definitions of the literary genre of the entire Elisha cycle or of some of its tales, which we have reviewed above, there are suggestions about individual stories, such as Marcus' argument that "Go Away, Baldhead" (2 Kgs 2:23-25) is an anti-prophetic satire²⁴ and Amit's contention that the story of the Shunammite's son (2 Kgs 4:8-37) is a development story intended to teach the prophet a lesson.²⁵ What all of these proposals have in common is their assertion that stories that recount Elisha's miracles are in fact critical of him. The validity of this approach, which seems to be winning more and more adherents, is examined in the next section.

²¹ Moore, *God Saves*, p. 132.

²² Josh. 8:1; 10:8; 11:6.

²³ E.g., Deut. 7:18; 20:1; Isa. 10:24.

²⁴ D. Marcus, "The Boys and the Bald Prophet," in *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 43-65.

²⁵ Y. Amit, "A Prophet Tested: Elisha, the Great Woman of Shunem, and the Story's Double Message," *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003), pp. 279-294.

2. DO THE ELISHA STORIES CRITICIZE THE MAN OF GOD?

Not all scholars who have dealt with the Elisha stories agree that they honor and esteem him. Some have found a critical bent in one story or another, or even in the entire cycle. Here I will summarize the main points of this argument, in the biblical sequence of the stories, along with my responses.

2.1 “GO AWAY, BALDHEAD” (2 KGS 2:23-25)

The Indictment

This brief episode, in which the prophet’s curse results in the death of 42 children, provokes great unease for many scholars who have addressed it. Gray, followed by Jones, is astonished by the inclusion of this anecdote—which, they say, does no credit to the prophet—in the Bible.²⁶ Marcus reads the story as an anti-prophetic satire, just as he reads the incident of Balaam and his donkey (Num. 22:21-35), the lying prophet of Bethel (1 Kings 13), and the book of Jonah.²⁷ He emphasizes that the boys are small²⁸ and that Elisha’s reaction is quite disproportionate to their assault on his dignity.²⁹ Elisha, in this view, abuses his powers and in fact inclines toward the dark side.³⁰

The Rebuttal

Although I understand and share the moral revulsion that many have with this story, I cannot accept the attempts to “rescue” the story ethically at the price of what I see as total rejection of the author’s intention and of the genre—the saints’ legend.³¹ In the biblical view of things, all contact with the sacred realm is life-threatening. This is why the Israelites are warned before the revelation at Sinai, “Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death: no hand shall touch it, but he shall be either stoned or shot; beast or

²⁶ J. Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (2nd edition; OTL 9; London: S.C.M. Press, 1970), p. 479; G. H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), vol. 2:389. See also R. S. Wallace (*Reading in 2 Kings: An Interpretation arranged for Personal and Group Bible Study* [Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1996], pp. 28-29), who argues that we must not assume that the narrator or Elisha was proud of what happened and thinks that Elisha probably remembered the incident with a sense of shame.

²⁷ Marcus, “The Boys and the Bald Prophet.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 50-51.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 65.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65; Q. R. Connors, “Elijah and Elisha: A Psychologist’s Perspective,” *Master of the Sacred Page: Essays and Articles in Honor of Roland E. Murphy* (ed. K. J. Egan and C. E. Morrison; Washington: Carmelite Institute, 1997), pp. 235-242 (p. 239).

³¹ See below, §3.

man, he shall not live.” (Exod. 19:12-13).³² This is why people are in mortal fear after an encounter with the Lord (Deut. 5:5, 20-24) or with an angel (Judg. 6:22; 13:22). There is also an inherent danger in approaching too close to the sanctuary, which belongs to the realm of the holy. Hence the Israelites are warned, “any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death” (Num. 1:51; 3:10, 38; 18:7); this ban even applies to the Kehathites, members of the tribe of Levi (Num. 4:15, 20). The use of “foreign fire”—evidently a flame not taken from the perpetual fire on the sacrificial altar—results in the deaths of Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-2). Any abuse of a sacred object, such as the Temple vessels (Daniel 5) or the holy ark,³³ brings in its wake severe punishment, even when done inadvertently and with good intentions, as in the case of Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:6-7).

It is against this background that we must understand the story: the boys who offended the “holy man of God” (2 Kgs 4:9) are punished for sacrilege.³⁴

It is important to understand that punishment of those who offend the dignity of a holy man, even slightly, is an important convention of saints’ legends. It is an affirmation, no less than the salvation miracles they work, of their great power and intimacy with the Lord.³⁵ This is why Alexander Rofé asserts that “not the ethical categories of good and evil are relevant in this and in the other stories, but those of the sacred and profane.”³⁶ Although there is much to be said for this argument, I believe that the story presents the boys who tease the prophet as deserving their punishment. It does so by means of various rhetorical devices, as I have tried to show in my analysis of the story.³⁷ Here I will briefly review my argument. On the assumption that the boys are from Jericho (Elisha has to turn around to see

³² See also Exod. 19:21-24; 24:1-2; Deut. 5:5, 20-24.

³³ See 1 Samuel 5, especially vv. 10-11; 6:19; 2 Sam. 6:6-7.

³⁴ Cf. J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 62; T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (WBC 13; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985), p. 24; Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, p. 16.

³⁵ See: E. Marcus, “The Oicotype of the ‘Desecrator’s Punishment’ (AT* 771),” *Studies in Aggadab and Jewish Folklore* 7 (1983), pp. 337-366 (in Hebrew); H. Bar-Itzhak, “The ‘Saints’ Legend’ as a Genre in Jewish Folk-Literature,” Ph.D. dissertation, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 71-72, 107, 108, 265, 312 (in Hebrew). Although Bar-Itzhak studied saints’ legends in the folklore of Jewish communities, many of her insights are valid for the genre in general and not just for folklore. See also the index to I. Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration Among the Jews in Morocco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), s.vv. “curse” and “offense against saint.” Among the examples he cites are that of a Jewish woman who became pregnant after making a pilgrimage to the tomb of Rabbi Makhluḥ ben Yosef Abuhatsira, but lost her first-born son and then her second son because she did not give them the saints’ name (p. 52); a Jew who broke a pitcher belonging to the holy man Rabbi Ḥayyim Pinto the Younger and died a few days later after being cursed by him; and a physician who died the day after chasing a holy man from his house (p. 53).

³⁶ Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, pp. 15-16.

³⁷ Shemesh, “The Stories of Elisha,” pp. 148-163.

them [v. 24a]),³⁸ their ingratitude toward the prophet is contemptible. Although he has just made their town's formerly toxic water supply drinkable (2 Kgs 2:19-22), they come out of the city not to provide him with an honor guard, as we might have expected, but to humiliate him and shout him out of town,³⁹ mocking him as "baldhead."

Unfortunately we lack sufficient data about how readers in antiquity would have understood Elisha's baldness. Some believe that it was a natural phenomenon and that the children's ridicule targets an aesthetic defect.⁴⁰ Others hold that Elisha had a shaven pate, which, they believe, was one of the hallmarks of prophets in Israel,⁴¹ similar to the custom among priests in Egypt, many of whom had polled heads and were consequently referred to as "bald ones."⁴² The advocates of this view argue that in the ancient Near East men generally covered their heads, especially when traveling, meaning that the boys could not see Elisha's scalp. But they inferred that he was bald because they knew that he was a prophet (perhaps because of the prophet's cloak he wore). Support for the idea that Elisha's is a ritual baldness may perhaps be found in the description of the ceremony for purifying the Levites before they could begin ministering in the sanctuary, which includes shaving their entire bodies (Num. 8:7).⁴³ If we accept this conjecture, the children intended to insult Elisha as a prophet rather than as a private individual, which makes their offense even more serious.

Another possibility, considering that this story follows immediately upon Elisha's prophetic consecration and has close links with it,⁴⁴ is that

³⁸ See: H.-C. Schmitt, *Elisa: Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur vorklassischen nordisraelitischen Prophetie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1972), p. 180; Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, vol. 2:389; Y. Zakovitch, "'Go away, baldhead, Go away, baldhead': Exegetical Circles in Biblical Narrative," *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 8 (1985), pp. 7-23 (p. 16) (in Hebrew). The variant "he turned after them" in MS Alexandria and MS Vatican of the Septuagint does not reflect a different Vorlage used by the translator but represents a correction or emendation based on the translator's assumption that the boys were from Bethel.

³⁹ Rashi explains that *עלה* 'go up' means "go up [i.e., away] from here." So, too, Schmitt, *Elisa*, p. 180; M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; [New York]: Doubleday, 1988), p. 38. For examples of the root *עלה* plus the preposition *מן* in the sense of "go away," see Num. 16:24, 27; 2 Sam. 2:27; 1 Kgs 15:19; 2 Kgs 12:19; Jer. 37:5.

⁴⁰ See, for example: H. Gressmann, *Die älteste Geschichtsschreibung und Prophetie Israels* (2nd edition; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921), p. 290; Hobbs, *2 Kings*, p. 24; Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, p. 38.

⁴¹ See, for example, A. Šanda, *Die Bücher der Könige* (EHAT 9/2; Münster: Aschendorff, 1912), pp. 14-15; Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, pp. 68-69; Gray, *I & II Kings*, p. 480; Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, vol. 2:389-390.

⁴² A. Macalister, "Baldness," *A Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. J. Hastings; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), vol. 1:234-235 (p. 235).

⁴³ Cf. Lev. 14:8-9; Num. 6:9, 18.

⁴⁴ On the links between the "Baldhead" episode (2 Kgs 2:23-25), Elisha's

Elisha shaved his hair in mourning for the loss of his master, Elijah. Despite the ban in Deuteronomy, “you shall not cut yourselves or make any baldness on your foreheads for the dead” (Deut. 14:1), various biblical texts indicate that shaving the head was a common mourning practice in Israel.⁴⁵ If so, the disrespectful children were offending not only Elisha, but also the memory of Elijah, which of course compounds their felony.

As noted, we do not have enough information to choose among these options. But even if we assume that the boys' sin was the least serious of these and that they were teasing Elisha for an aesthetic defect—natural baldness—their action constituted a severe attack on the dignity of the holy man, which cannot be ignored or forgiven.

The reduplication of their taunt, “Go away, baldhead” (v. 23), indicates that the children repeated their gibe over and over. Remember, too, that dozens of boys took part—more than the number who died, since we are told that the she-bears mangle 42 “of them” (v. 24). The large number of children, plus the repetition of their rude remark, amplifies their sin and gives some idea of Elisha's distress.

The narrator precedes the neutral verb “they said” (וַיֹּאמְרוּ) with the loaded verb “they jeered” (וַיִּתְקַלְסוּ [v. 23]). The root קלס denotes scorn and derision (Ezek. 16:31; 22:5; Hab. 1:10), as demonstrated by the occurrences of the noun קִלְסָה (Jer. 20:8; Ps. 44:14; 79:4), as well as the noun קִלְסָה, which is parallel to the noun תְּרִפָּה ‘reproach, shame’ (Ezek. 22:4).

The story portrays the boys' punishment as measure for measure: they sin by speaking lightly of Elisha and are punished through speech—the prophet's curse. The parallel between the crime and the punishment is amplified by the play on words derived from the roots קלס and קלל which have the first two consonants in common and are associated with proximate semantic fields: קלס denotes mockery and abuse, which is also one of the senses of the קלל,⁴⁶ though not in our story.

The children's sin follows their first action—they “came out of the town” (v. 23); their punishment follows the action of the she-bears, the instrument of their punishment—they “came out of the woods” (v. 24). The root יצא ‘come out’, used in both statements, and the phonetic and graphic similarity between the nouns עיר ‘town’ and יער ‘woods’ indicate that the structural and semantic principle of measure for measure continues to hold sway in the description of the punishment.⁴⁷

To sum up, the story of Elisha's consecration to prophecy (2 Kgs 2:1-18) is followed immediately by two short tales in praise of him, which

consecration (ibid., 1-18), and the detoxification of the waters of Jericho (ibid., 19-22), see Shemesh, “The Stories of Elisha,” pp. 149-151.

⁴⁵ See: Isa. 3:24; 22:12; Jer. 7:29; 16:6; 41:5; Ezek. 7:18; Amos 8:10; Micah 1:16. See also G. J. Botterweck, “גלח,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 3 (1974), pp. 10-12.

⁴⁶ E.g., 1 Sam. 2:30; 2 Sam. 16:7; Jer. 42:18; Eccl. 7:21. The Akkadian verb *qullulu*, too, means to offend a person's honor, and is used as an antonym to *kubbutu* (cognate with the Hebrew *kavod*).

⁴⁷ This was noted by Zakovitch, “Go Away, Baldhead,” pp. 11-12.

recount how Elisha consolidated his status as Elijah's legitimate heir. The two episodes seem to contradict each other, since the first is a miracle of deliverance and the second a miracle of punishment. The truth, though, is that the stories are complementary. Only the combination of the two opposed stories provides a full picture of the two facets of the man of God and highlights his full powers. Elisha keeps children from dying in the first story and causes children to die in the second story. The placement of the two stories adjacent to each other and immediately after the consecration story foreshadows Elisha's characterization as a prophet and a holy man of God, who acts mercifully with those who merit favor but punishes the wicked.

2.2 ELISHA AND THE SHUNAMMITE MATRON (2 KGS 4:8-37)

The Indictment

This story seems to have been the target of most of the critical shafts aimed at Elisha.⁴⁸ The prophet is indicted for announcing a miraculous birth of his own accord, rather than in the name of the Lord, as in every other miraculous birth story in the Bible,⁴⁹ and for doing so even though the Shunammite matron makes it plain that she expects no reward from him.

⁴⁸ See, for example: R. Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983), pp. 115-130 (p. 126); E. Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (ed. A. Yarbo Collins; Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 117-136 (p. 128); Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, pp. 29-30; B. O. Long, "A Figure at the Gate: Readers, Reading, and Biblical Theologians," *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (ed. G. M. Tucker et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 166-186; idem, *2 Kings*, pp. 61-62; M. E. Shields, "Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman: Role and Power Reversals in 2 Kings 4," *JSOT* 58 (1993), pp. 59-69; F. van Dijk-Hemmes, "The Great Woman of Shunem and the Man of God: A Dual Interpretation of 2 Kings 4.8-37," *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings* (ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 218-230. P. J. Kissling, *Reliable Characters in the Primary History: Profiles of Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Elisha* (JSOTSS 224; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 189, 196; J. Siebert-Hommes, "The Widow of Zarephath and the Great Woman of Shunem: A Comparative Analysis of Two Stories," *On Reading Prophetic Texts* (ed. B. Becking and M. Dijkstra; Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 231-250; U. Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (trans. by L. J. Schramm; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 227-262; W. J. Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism* (JSOTSup 286; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 97-104; M. Roncace, "Elisha and the Woman of Shunem: 2 Kings 4.8-37 and 8.1-6 Read in Conjunction," *JSOT* 91 (2000), pp. 109-127; Amit, "A Prophet Tested."

⁴⁹ See, for example, Bergen's criticism (*Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, pp. 99, 101, 104) of Elisha for usurping the role of God. See also Amit's claim ("A Prophet Tested," p. 287) that Elisha "behaves arrogantly toward God" when he imposes the miracle on Him.

Her son's subsequent death is taken to be an annulment of the miracle.⁵⁰ Simon even sees it as an indication that the Shunammite was right and Elisha wrong: the boy's death is a retrospective confirmation of the fear she expressed immediately after Elisha's announcement that she would become a mother: "Please, my lord, man of God, do not delude your maidservant" (v. 16). He understands the woman to be expressing her "profound doubt that she is worthy of such a miracle." The source of this doubt is her "pious humility." The matron, as he reads the story, is afraid of being disappointed by "a miracle that cannot last."⁵¹ According to this reading, the Shunammite asks Elisha not to work a miracle, but the prophet, confident in his abilities and certain that his generous hostess merits a miracle, ignores her protest. Consequently he is responsible for the calamity of her son's death, in that he gave her a son who was not viable.

It is clear to Simon that the Shunammite wants a son but is afraid that she is not worthy of a miraculous birth. Other scholars, however, mainly of the feminist persuasion, reject the notion that motherhood is her goal. It follows that Elisha imposed his gift on her, one that reflects the patriarchal idea that every woman yearns for a son.⁵² Shields even associates the woman's reaction to the promise of a son, "Please, my lord, man of God, do not delude your maidservant" (v. 16) with biblical rape stories,⁵³ noting that this pattern of the negative hortative ⁵ plus the vocative, followed by another negative and a verb, occurs elsewhere only in the stories of the concubine in Gibeah (Judg. 19:23) and of Amnon and Tamar (2 Sam. 13:12).⁵⁴

Another critical point leveled against Elisha is that, flouting the convention found when a previously barren woman has a child, the Shunammite's son remains nameless and has no national role to play or other vocation that would justify his miraculous birth.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ See, for example, Shields, "Subverting a Man of God," pp. 65-66; Amit, "A Prophet Tested," p. 282.

⁵¹ Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, pp. 242-243. Similarly Shields, "Subverting a Man of God," p. 62, argues that the Shunammite matron's "do not delude your maidservant" (4:16) alludes to her son's death.

⁵² See mainly Shields ("Subverting a Man of God," pp. 62, 63, 67), who sees vv. 11-16 as a parody of the annunciation type-scene (p. 63). See also: Dijk-Hemmes, "The Great Woman of Shunem," pp. 225, 228; Amit, "A Prophet Tested," pp. 287-288. According to Amit (p. 288), Elisha works a miracle that serves his needs more than those of the Shunammite matron.

⁵³ Shields, "Subverting a Man of God," p. 62. So too, in her wake, D. Jobling, "A Bettered Woman: Elisha and the Shunammite in the Deuteronomistic Work," *The Labour of Reading: Desire, Alienation, and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. F. C. Black et al.; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), pp. 177-192 (p. 180); S. B. Plate, "The Gift that Stops Giving: Hélène Cixous's 'Gift' and the Shunammite Woman," *Biblical Interpretation* 7 (1999), pp. 113-132 (on pp. 126-127).

⁵⁴ Shields, "Subverting a Man of God," p. 62. But see 2 Sam. 13:25, for a sentence with a similar structure in a context not associated with rape.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63; Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, p. 97; Amit, "A Prophet Tested," p. 282.

Elisha's limited knowledge, as reflected by his acknowledgement that "the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me" (2 Kgs 4:27), is also interpreted to his detriment.⁵⁶ He clearly had no prophetic knowledge of the death of the boy whose miraculous birth he announced.

As for Elisha's dispatch of Gehazi to revive the boy, it has been argued that Elisha continues to underestimate the severity of the situation and of the response required. Gehazi's failure to revive the boy is considered to be Elisha's failure.⁵⁷ The Shunammite matron, who stubbornly insists that the prophet be directly involved, once again demonstrates that her understanding is superior to his.⁵⁸

In light of all this, Simon argues that the story's purpose is not to praise Elisha or showcase his miracles, but "to investigate the interaction between his ability to work miracles and his human limitations." Elisha requires assistance from the beneficiary of the miracle, who, it is true, cannot perform miracles, but is nevertheless blessed with greater powers of understanding. Only when Elisha recognizes this and follows her lead can he fully realize his prophetic talents.⁵⁹ Simon argues further that the story of the birth and revival of the Shunammite's son depicts Elisha and Gehazi as sharing the concept of prophecy depicted in the short legends that present the prophet's powers as unlimited and above reproach. The story, which does not share this view, for all that it was prevalent and accepted, is intended to demonstrate the peril that lurks for the man of God if he has too much confidence in his powers, as well as to teach his followers that his holiness does not make him immune to human frailty.⁶⁰

Shields and Amit are even harsher in their censure of Elisha. They maintain that the story employs a narrative technique that permits reading on two levels. On the first level it is a legend that praises the prophet; on a deeper level, however, it exposes Elisha's weaknesses, subverts the first level, and reveals the criticism that lies beneath the praise.⁶¹ According to Amit, such a reading entails the definition of a new genre, the "development story":

In a development story the miracles are meant not only to impress the prophet's surrounding society and the readers of the story but also to teach the prophet a lesson and to suggest to readers that, although he

⁵⁶ See, for example: Shields, "Subverting a Man of God," p. 65, 66; Dijk-Hemmes, "The Great Woman of Shunem," p. 228; Kissling, *Reliable Characters*, pp. 189-190; Siebert-Hommes, "The Widow of Zarephath," pp. 240, 249; Roncace, "Elisha and the Woman of Shunem," p. 118.

⁵⁷ Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers," p. 128; Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, p.101.

⁵⁸ Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, pp. 249-250.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 233, 258.

⁶¹ Shields, "Subverting a Man of God"; Amit, "A Prophet Tested."

possesses super-human powers, the prophet is only a human being with human failings.⁶²

Even though Elisha works two great miracles for the woman, his relationship toward her comes in for fierce criticism. Scholars emphasize his attempt to preserve his distance from her, manifested in the fact that she must speak to him through Gehazi and that he never addresses her by her name. Worse still, he refers to her (three times) as “this Shunammite woman” (vv. 12, 25, 36), which is disrespectful, as in similar uses of the deictic elsewhere in the Bible.⁶³

Amit lists other biblical stories that criticize a prophet: Numbers 20:1-13, where the target is Moses; 1 Samuel 16:1-13, where the target is Samuel; and the book of Jonah, which is critical of its main character. The point of these stories, she asserts, is to draw a clear line between the prophets and the Lord.⁶⁴ She includes 2 Kings 4:8-37 in this genre of criticism of prophets.⁶⁵

The Rebuttal

I begin with the last point, insisting that we pay attention to the difference between Amit's examples and our story. The criticism of Moses (Num. 20:1-13), Samuel (1 Sam. 16:1-13) and Jonah is open and explicit. Here, by contrast, there is no overt disapproval of the prophet. But is it even possible to find covert censure, as so many scholars believe?

On the surface there seems to be something to the argument that the story of the Shunammite matron is critical of Elisha, who works a miracle that does not last and fails in his first attempt to revive the boy. But even if we accept this line, we must not ignore the fact that the story centers on two great miracles. This is why Simon writes that “the man of God is described as a great and wonderful man but susceptible to human frailties.”⁶⁶ The criticism of Elisha that Simon finds in the story is strictly circumscribed and never casts doubt on his supernatural powers. We can add that the depiction of the Shunammite's superior insight about everything associated with her son's life is perfectly compatible with the secondary use that the story makes of the genres of the miraculous birth

⁶² Amit, “A Prophet Tested,” p. 279.

⁶³ Shields, “Subverting a Man of God,” pp. 61-62; Amit, “A Prophet Tested,” p. 285. There is no real difference between *ba-zot* (vv. 12 and 36) and *ba-laz* (v. 25).

⁶⁴ Amit, “A Prophet Tested,” p. 291.

⁶⁵ But see a different view, which she advanced in an earlier article: Y. Amit, “Why were the Matriarchs Barren?” *Reading Genesis: Women Write about Genesis* (ed. R. Ravitzky; Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth-Sifrei Hemed, 1999), pp. 127-137 (in Hebrew). There she wrote, “The birth and revival of the Shunammite's son, whose mortal peril could have been expected, illuminate the power and place of prophets, who could work miracles and redeem barren women and announce God's continued involvement in the life of the people” (p. 137). See also her remarks at the bottom of p. 136.

⁶⁶ Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, p. 261.

and deliverance from death.⁶⁷ Because it is the woman who bears children and guarantees the continuation of the human race, many stories illustrate how “the Holy One, blessed be He, endowed woman with more understanding than the man” (B Niddah 45b); hence it is the woman’s resourcefulness that overcomes barrenness, saves her son’s life,⁶⁸ or saves lives in general.⁶⁹ So praise of the Shunammite matron does not necessarily imply criticism of Elisha. A story can contain more than one positive character and need not be a dichotomy between a praiseworthy woman and a blameworthy man of God.⁷⁰

What is more, I believe that the story can be interpreted in a different way, one that actually depicts Elisha as a supremely moral person. Elisha recognizes the debt he owes his generous hostess and seeks to provide her with some recompense for everything she has done for him and his servant.⁷¹ After the Shunammite matron rejects his offer to intervene on her behalf with the authorities, he does not give up, but continues to look for a way to reward her. With Gehazi’s help he finally discovers what this well-off woman who lives among her people is missing, and replaces his previous offer of pulling strings for her, which she declined, with the

⁶⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 279 n. 59.

⁶⁸ On these two roles of women in biblical narrative, see the table in *ibid.*, p. 36, in the column headed “The woman’s wisdom and resourcefulness.” See also (and especially) Y. Amit, “‘Manoah Promptly Followed his Wife (Judges 13.11): On the Place of the Woman in Birth Narratives,” *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 146-156.

⁶⁹ For example, Rahab saved the two spies and her entire family (Joshua 2). The woman of Thebez saved the townspeople from being burned alive in their tower by killing Abimelech (Judg. 9:53). A woman from Bahurim hid the young priests Jonathan and Ahimaaz and kept them from being captured by Absalom’s men (2 Sam. 17:18-20). A woman of Abel Beth-Maacah negotiated with Joab and saved the town from destruction by killing Sheba son of Bichri, who had fled there (2 Sam. 20:16-22). Esther saved her people from genocide. In the Apocrypha, Judith rescued her town and people from the Assyrian invader. On women as lifesavers in the Bible, see U. Simon, *Seek Peace and Pursue it* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2002), pp. 185-196 (in Hebrew).

⁷⁰ This seems to be the basic approach of the feminist critic T. Frymer-Kensky, “The Shunammite,” *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), pp. 64-73. She focuses on the Shunammite and illuminates her great and unusual character, but not by criticizing the male lead in the story, Elisha, for whom she reserves a few kind words about his greatness, wonder-working powers, and good intentions toward the Shunammite.

⁷¹ By contrast, Plate (“The Gift that Stops Giving”) criticizes Elisha for his stubborn insistence on rewarding the Shunammite for her kindness to him, which—he claims—turns her selfless generosity into a barter deal. Building on Hélène Cixous’ theory of gender differences with regard to gifts, he explains that Elisha’s need to respond to his hostess’s benefactions stems from his unwillingness to be in her debt.

proclamation of a miraculous birth: "At this season next year, you will be embracing a son" (v. 16).

The circumstances—an overwhelming desire to reward the Shunammite matron for her generosity—lead Elisha to intervene in a domain that is elsewhere reserved to the Lord. I believe that this is an expression of the strong admiration of Elisha, who like God himself, could grant the miracle of a child to a barren woman,⁷² rather than criticism that he did so of his own initiative. It bears noting that outside the Bible, miraculous births worked by saints are extremely common in saints' legends to the present time.

The argument advanced by Shields and others, mentioned above, that the Shunammite matron doesn't want a son at all, ignores the social reality of the biblical era as well as the woman's own response. She does not tell the prophet that she does not want a son, but pleads with him not to delude her. It is from the very intensity of her fear that we learn the intensity of her desire to hold a son in her arms.⁷³

It is hard to understand the woman's response, "Please, my lord, man of God, do not delude your maidservant" (v. 16), as reflecting a fear that the child would not survive.⁷⁴ Such thinking, two steps ahead, seems to be quite implausible, given that the Shunammite is not blessed with prophetic knowledge. It is more likely that her doubt concerns the mere possibility that she might conceive and bear a child. Pace Shields and others, nothing in the Shunammite's answer proves that she does not want a son. Quite the contrary. We may assume that as a woman with no sons, the Shunammite has had her fill of false hopes that she might be delivered of a boy. As the years passed, and especially after her husband grew old (v. 14), she must have despaired that she would ever hold a son, and learned to live with her disappointment. It was this resigned acceptance of her destiny that was threatened by the prophet's announcement. This is why the Shunammite

⁷² This understanding of the miraculous birth in Shunem can be traced back to the Midrash (Deut. Rab. 10:3). To support his statement that "everything that God does, the righteous do," the homilist invokes several miracles performed by Elisha and Elijah, beginning with this one. The same view is evident in what R. Aḥa stated in the name of R. Jonathan: "There are three keys which the Holy One, blessed be He, does not give over into the hands of an emissary: the key to the womb, for it is said, *And the Lord ... opened her womb* (Gen. 29:31); ... Nevertheless, when it pleased the Holy One, blessed be He, to do so, He gave the keys over to righteous men. The key to the womb of a barren woman, God gave over to Elisha, [for it is said], *When the time cometh round, thou shalt embrace a son* (2 Kings 4:16)" (*Midrash Shoḥer Ton* on Ps. 78, §5; in *The Midrash on Psalms* [trans. W. G. Braude; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959], vol. 2:25 [slightly modified]).

⁷³ Cf. C. V. Camp, "1 and 2 Kings," *Women's Bible Commentary*, expanded edition (ed. C. A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 102-117 (p. 113).

⁷⁴ This is the interpretation of Rashi, David Kimḥi, and Gersonides; as noted, it is also how Simon understands the women's anxiety (*Reading Prophetic Narratives*, pp. 242-243).

asks Elisha not to reignite vain hopes.⁷⁵ Her reaction should be compared to the disbelieving laughter of Abraham and Sarah when they are told that she will have a son (Gen. 17:17; 18:12). Their internal monologues inform us that their skepticism about God's promise is related to their advanced age. So it is not astonishing that the Shunammite matron, whose husband Gehazi has described as "old" (v. 14), is hard put to believe the prophet's declaration. Nor should we make an issue of the fact that the woman doubts this pronouncement by someone whom she has called "a holy man of God" (v. 9); Abraham, the father of the nation, doubted an unequivocal promise made by the Lord Himself. Her incredulity when she hears the promise contributes retrospectively to increasing the miracle.⁷⁶ Indeed, despite the matron's fears, the immediate continuation of the story is the precise realization of Elisha's promise: "The woman conceived and bore a son at the same season the following year, as Elisha had said to her" (v. 17).

Here, I believe, the prophet's role and moral responsibility vis-à-vis the Shunammite could be at an end. Were this no more than a story of a miraculous birth, it would include the newborn child's future vocation and we would expect to follow him into adulthood and see how he realizes his destiny. In this case, however, the miraculous birth paradigm is secondary. The true focus is not the child, who remains anonymous, but the miracle-worker and his power. This is why the birth itself does not guarantee the boy's survival and he is subject to the slings and arrows of life's fortunes like any other human being.

Had the narrator wanted to indicate that Elisha worked a miracle that cannot last, we would expect the realization of his promise to be followed immediately by something like "some time later the son of the Shunammite woman died."⁷⁷ Instead, the narrator informs us that the child grew up and provides a realistic description of the circumstances of his death: "The child grew up. One day, he went out to his father among the reapers. [Suddenly] he cried to his father, 'Oh, my head, my head!'" (vv. 18-19). We are to understand that after staying out too long under the broiling harvest sun the child succumbed to heatstroke or sunstroke, as frequently happens in hot climates.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Cf. O. Thenius, *Die Bücher der Könige* (2nd edition; Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1873), p. 288; Gray, *I & II Kings*, p. 496.

⁷⁶ See Y. Zakovitch, *The Concept of the Miracle in the Bible* (trans. S. Himmelstein; Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1991), p. 44; Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, p. 45.

⁷⁷ Cf. the account of the death of the son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:17).

⁷⁸ This view can be traced back to the Jerusalem Talmud, where it is expressed by R. Mana (J Yebamoth 15:2 [14d]). It is shared by, among others, Isaac Abravanel, *Commentary on the Former Prophets* (Jerusalem: Torah Vadaath Press, 1955), p. 617 (in Hebrew); Thenius, *Die Bücher der Könige*, vol. 2:288; Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, vol. 2:406.

But the Shunammite matron, a mother who fights for her son's life and knows that only Elisha's direct intervention can restore him, gives a broad interpretation to the man of God's responsibility toward her and initiates a series of actions to exploit the prophet's supernatural powers to bring her son back to life. The woman who has always maintained her distance from Elisha, who built him an attic room to provide him with maximum privacy, and who, when summoned to hear his promise of a miracle to benefit her was careful to stand in the doorway and not enter the room (v. 15), now lays her dead son on the prophet's own bed in that very room. There are two possible explanations for this. It may simply be a technical matter: she wants to conceal what has happened from others, and the best place to do this is the prophet's room, which no one will enter. Alternatively, there may be an element of magic here, reflecting the notion, common in saints' legends, that the personal effects of holy people absorb their sanctity and acquire their own intrinsic power to work miracles.⁷⁹ Elisha's bed, on which he lay whenever he came to Shunem (see v. 11), is such an object. By laying her son in the closed domain of the man of God, in his room, on his bed, she can suspend the process of death, even if she cannot restore the boy to life. Only the direct involvement of the man of God himself can work such a wonder. The Shunammite matron understands this very well, which is why she hurries off on the long journey to Elisha's residence on Mt. Carmel. Elisha, who suspects that her arrival, when it is neither the New Moon nor the Sabbath, is an indication of distress, does not wait for her to reach him, but immediately orders Gehazi to "run at once to meet her, and say to her, 'Is it well with you? Is it well with your husband? Is it well with the child?'" (v. 26). That the child is the last one he asks about indicates not only that he has no prophetic knowledge of the boy's death,⁸⁰ but also that his suspicions about the reason for her visit are not focused on the son at all. Thus we learn that the concern he evinces for the Shunammite is not motivated by a sense of responsibility for her calamity, but by a sincere wish to help the woman who has been so generous to him.

The woman, in her clear knowledge that only Elisha can deliver her from her misery, dismisses Gehazi with the laconic "it is well" (v. 26); but then, belying her calm answer, she hurries up to the prophet and takes hold of his feet (v. 27). This is how she indicates that a great calamity has overtaken her. The reaction of Gehazi, who would defend his master's dignity by pushing the woman away, represents the standard attitude toward the holy man of God. It is not meant to make Gehazi look bad, but rather to illuminate Elisha, by way of contrast, in a positive light.⁸¹ As opposed to

⁷⁹ For this idea, see I. Genuz, "The Belongings of Tsaddikim as Treasures of Virtues," *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division D, vol. 2 (1989), pp. 29-31 (Hebrew section).

⁸⁰ As is noted by Šanda, *Die Bücher der Könige*, vol. 2:32; Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, p. 246.

⁸¹ On the use of minor characters as a device for the moral evaluation of the protagonist, see Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, p. 268.

the normative aversion that Gehazi feels for the woman's atypical behavior, Elisha understands that now is neither the time nor the circumstances to stand on his dignity: "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; and the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me" (v. 27). His admission that he lacked prophetic knowledge makes it clear that it was not from disinterest or apathy that he did not help the Shunammite woman in her distress, but solely because he did not know what had befallen her. We may infer from this that had he known her trouble he would not have waited for her to come to him but would have taken immediate action on her behalf. Note that Elisha's knowledge is described as deficient in the short tales that almost all agree are intended to praise Elisha (2 Kgs 4:2; 6:6). Evidently critical scholars expect the man of God to demonstrate supernatural powers even more than his own devotees and admirers did.

Elisha realizes that only some serious distress could cause the woman to behave in this unrestrained fashion; but he does not know what it is. From her plaintive cry, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Didn't I say: 'Don't mislead me?'" (v. 28), he infers that the calamity has to do with the son who was born as a result of his blessing. I believe that these words also provide a new interpretation for her earlier reluctance to hear the promise of a child. Looking back, the Shunammite matron can present her skepticism that she might conceive and bear a son as anxiety about a miracle that could not last.⁸² Now Elisha, who accepts this interpretation and the woman's rebuke, displays moral greatness.

Close attention to what the woman says indicates that while she makes it clear that the reason she has come involves her son, she does not say that he is dead.⁸³ I believe that this explains the sequence of events in the rest of the story. Evidently Elisha fails to understand that the boy was dead and infers that he is seriously ill or has fainted.⁸⁴ Consequently he believes it sufficient to send an emissary to effect a miraculous cure, using his staff and following his precise instructions. But the woman, who knows that her son

⁸² This is also the understanding of G. W. Savran, *Telling and Retelling: Quotation in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 99.

⁸³ The reason for this, I believe, is her feeling that if she says anything about it out loud she will make her son's death real and irrevocable and put an end to her hopes that he may be revived by the man of God. Another possibility is her fear that if Elisha knew that the boy was dead he would believe that nothing further could be done in the matter and would not accompany her back to Shunem.

⁸⁴ Cf. Roncace, "Elisha and the Woman of Shunem," p. 118. Roncace sees this as criticism of the prophet, who took action even before the Shunammite had had time to tell him that her son was dead, and may consequently have underestimated the gravity of the situation and thought that Gehazi could make matters right. My reading, by contrast, is that the woman had no intention of telling Elisha the full truth. In support of this, consider that during their long journey back to Shunem she said nothing more about her son's condition; it was only when Elisha reached her house and saw the boy with his own eyes that he realized he was dead (as I shall demonstrate below).

is dead, and not merely ill, understands that in such an extreme case only Elisha's direct intercession will avail. This is why she adamantly declares that "As the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you!" (v. 30). Here too Elisha demonstrates his greatness by accepting her terms and accompanying her back to Shunem.

Gehazi's inability to revive the boy retrospectively enhances Elisha's own success,⁸⁵ showing Elisha, Gehazi, and readers what the woman knew all along—that only the holy man of God could accomplish the impossible.

Only when he reaches his room in the Shunammite woman's house does Elisha discover that it is not a case of illness or faintness, but of death, and that he has been called to effect not a miraculous cure but a resurrection. The narrator does a good job of conveying the prophet's surprise by suddenly presenting the story from his point of view, by means of the word *והנה* 'and there':⁸⁶ "Elisha came into the house, and there was the boy dead, laid out on his couch" (v. 32). This conveys nothing new to readers, whom the narrator has already informed that the child is dead. Hence I believe we must understand the verse as reporting Elisha's sudden realization that the boy is dead. Elisha now understands that only a stubborn struggle for the boy's life can restore him to his mother. Through a combination of prayer (whose content is not reported) and intensive physical exertion, which involves conveying the vital force from his own holy body to the child's corpse,⁸⁷ he succeeds in this greatest miracle of all.

Elisha's miraculous resurrection exceeds that worked by his master Elijah in Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:17-24).⁸⁸ In the first place, 2 Kgs 4:20 states explicitly that the Shunammite's son is dead, so it is clear that Elisha brought him back to life. The matter is not so explicit in the case of Elijah, where the narrator is ambiguous, stating, not that the child is dead, but that "his illness grew worse, until he had no breath (*נשמה*) left in him" (1 Kgs 17:17). A similar expression is used with regard to Daniel, who attests of himself that "no breath is left in me" (Dan. 10:17), where the reference is to fainting rather than dying (see also Dan. 10:9). Similarly, in her astonishment at Solomon's wisdom and the lavishness of his court, the

⁸⁵ This is also the opinion of Gressmann, *Die älteste Geschichtsschreibung*, p. 294; Gray, *I & II Kings*, p. 93. Gressman compares Elisha's success, after Gehazi fails to revive the child, with the cure worked by Jesus after the disciples fail to do so (Luke 9:37-42).

⁸⁶ On the function of *והנה* as an indication of direct perception by characters, see: J. P. Fokkerman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975), pp. 50-51; A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), pp. 62-63; S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), pp. 35-36.

⁸⁷ See Gersonides on v. 34.

⁸⁸ Contrary to the view of Shields, "Subverting a Man of God," pp. 60-61; Siebert-Hommes, "The Widow of Zarephath"; H.-J. Stipp, "Vier Gestalten einer Totenerweckungserzählung (1 Kön 17,17-24; 2 Kön 4,8-37; Apg 9,36-42; Apg 20,7-12)," *Biblica* 80 (1999), pp. 43-77 (p. 70).

Queen of Sheba “was left breathless (רוּחַ)” (1 Kgs 10:5).⁸⁹ The narrator’s use of the verb יָחַי does not necessarily connote a miracle of resurrection, because the root חיה can also have the sense of healing (e.g., Josh. 5:8; 2 Kgs 1:2). The uncertainty as to whether the widow’s child really died contributes to the impression that Elisha is a more powerful miracle-worker than Elijah.⁹⁰

Second, Elijah, who boarded with the widow when her son was left without breath, could begin his efforts to revive the child at once. But Elisha was on Mt. Carmel when the Shunammite’s son died, so that at least ten hours passed from the time of the child’s death until Elisha arrived in the woman’s home and began his efforts to revive the boy. This delay amplifies the miracle, since, as the story makes clear, time is of the utmost importance, for both the woman (v. 24) and for Elisha (v. 29).⁹¹

Why Elisha refers to his hostess as “this Shunammite woman” remains unclear, but I do not believe that it is meant disparagingly.⁹² The narrator never reports the woman’s name, so we cannot criticize Elisha for failing to address her by it.⁹³ In fact, the deictic “this” or “that” is frequently used with no intention to belittle its referent, as we can see from “Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?” (1 Sam. 6:20) and many other passages.⁹⁴ Note that after Elisha first tells Gehazi to “call *this* Shunammite woman” (v.12), he addresses her to express his gratitude: “You have gone to all *this* trouble for us” (v. 13). The parallel use of the deictic with reference to the woman and with reference to how she has treated him undercuts the argument that Elisha looks down at his hostess. Note, too, that all three times that Elisha refers to the Shunammite as “this Shunammite woman” he has good intentions toward her: in v. 25 he sends Gehazi to meet her, because of his concern at her unexpected arrival; the other two times it is associated with the miracles he performs for her (v. 12, when he wants to tell her the good tidings of the future birth; and v. 36, when he summons her after the child’s miraculous revival).

The story concludes with the woman’s mute gesture of thanks: “She came and fell at his feet and bowed low to the ground; then she picked up

⁸⁹ See also Judg. 15:19; 1 Sam. 30:12.

⁹⁰ See: Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, p. 134; Kissling, *Reliable Characters*, p. 195.

⁹¹ Cf. Gressmann, *Die älteste Geschichtsschreibung*, p. 294

⁹² Neither does Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, p. 326 n. 14, even though, as noted above, he does believe that the story is critical of Elisha in other respects.

⁹³ Frymer-Kensky (*Reading the Women of the Bible*, pp. 64-65, 72-73) holds that the Shunammite matron is identified by her hometown because this is an important element in the identity and biography of a woman whose security derives from the fact that she lives among her relatives (4:13), later goes into exile at the prophet’s advice, and finally returns to her hometown and has her property and rights restored by the king (8:1-6).

⁹⁴ E.g., Gen. 34:4; Exod. 2:9; 15:1; Num. 5:30; Deut. 28:58; 29:20, 26; Judg. 19:23, 24; 1 Sam. 17:12; Jer. 26:16; and, for חָלַי, Judg. 6:20 and 2 Kgs 23:17.

her son and left" (v. 37). In her moments of joy, just as in her moments of grief, the woman falls at Elisha's feet. But how great is the distance between her clasping his feet in despair (v. 27)—which, for all that it expresses her certainty that only Elisha can help her, is also an affront to his dignity—and the silent prostration that expresses her gratitude to the holy man of God who fought stubbornly to restore her dead son to life and to her arms.

We see, then, that taken in isolation the story depicts Elisha as a wonder-worker and miracle-maker, but also as a moral figure who evinces true concern for the Shunammite's fate. The death of her son spurs him to effect a miracle that exceeds the miracle of the annunciation of his birth. Consequently, from the overall perspective of the story, the boy's temporary death cannot be viewed as an injury done by the prophet to the woman, just as it does not detract from his dignity.

Furthermore, if we scrutinize the story in its broader context, the account of "all the great things that Elisha has done" (2 Kgs 8:1-6), we find that not only was the Shunammite matron not harmed by her son's temporary death, but that in retrospect she actually gained by it. That miracle, which Gehazi has just been narrating to the king when she, by a miraculous concurrence, appears before him to plead her cause, accompanied by the son whom Elisha had restored, so impresses the king that he orders not only that her house and field be returned to her—the subject of her petition—but even what she had not dared dream of, that she be reimbursed for the harvests of the seven years when she was abroad (v. 6). Her son's death and miraculous revival saved her from dispossession and penury many years later.

Simon rightly argues that the account of "all the great things that Elisha has done" is an intrascriptural response⁹⁵ to the story of the Shunammite matron.⁹⁶ But whereas Simon sees this brief anecdote as a sort of corrective epilogue intended to refurbish Elisha's tarnished prestige, I understand it as a complementary postscript, which shows that the woman's close relationship with Elisha eventually helped her even in a domain that she had rejected when he proposed it—interceding on her behalf with the king (2 Kgs 4:13). I think that with regard to their attitude toward the prophet and to prophecy in general, the similarity between the two stories outweighs the difference. Both stories seem to imply that the prophet's intervention in the Shunammite's life (the miraculous birth; the advice based on prophetic knowledge, after which she leaves the country for seven years) harms her (the loss of the son and the loss of her property). In the event, however we find that in neither case was she—nor could she be—injured by the counsel of the holy man of God.⁹⁷ Not only is the crisis

⁹⁵ On the several varieties of intrascriptural exegesis, see M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

⁹⁶ Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, pp. 230, 258-262.

⁹⁷ This lesson is frequent in saints' legends. In some of them the pious man's action or advice seems to make the petitioner-beneficiary's situation worse, but ultimately this proves not to be the case. See, for example, *Shinhei ha-Besht* (ed. S. A. Horodetsky; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1947), pp. 113-114 (in Hebrew). The story there is that

provoked by his intervention resolved (the revival of the son and the restoration of her property); after the fact it is clear that he helped her improve her situation. This improvement is not part of the story itself in Chapter 4 and must be derived from the broader literary context, the return of property in Chapter 8 as an indirect result of the miracle of her son's resurrection. In Chapter 8, by contrast, the betterment of her situation is part and parcel of the story: had her property not been confiscated, she would not have petitioned the king when she returned to the country and would have lost the yield of her field for the time she was abroad. In sum, the message to be drawn from both stories is that Elisha's intercession conveys only good to the beneficiary of the miracle, even if this is not apparent at first.

2.3 THE STORY OF NAAMAN (2 KINGS 5)

The Indictment

Zakovitch sees the story of the healing of Naaman as critical of Elisha.⁹⁸ In his reading, Elisha is excessively proud and ignores his due subordination to the Lord. He bases this assertion chiefly on Elisha's response to the king of Israel: "Let him come to *me*, and he will learn that there is a *prophet* in Israel" (2 Kgs 5:8). Zakovitch attaches great weight to the distinction he would make between the term "the man of God" used by the narrator (v. 8a) and the term "prophet" used by the Israelite slave girl (v. 3) and Elisha himself. Noting that these terms are used to designate two different characters in the story of the man of God from Judah and the lying prophet of Bethel (1 Kings 13), he sees "man of God" as positive and "prophet" as derogatory.⁹⁹ According to him, the author of the story in 1 Kings 13 attaches a higher value to the designation "man of God," because it includes a direct

a boy born as a result of the blessing given by the Baal Shem Tov, the eighteenth-century founder of Hasidism, dies, only to return to life at the end of the circumcision ceremony. The dependence of that tale on the biblical account in 2 Kgs 4:8-37 is clear. With regard to seemingly bad advice that turns out to have been the key to salvation, see *ibid.*, pp. 73-74, about the advice given by Dov Baer, the "Maggid of Mezhirech," to two emissaries who consulted him. See also *Qovez Eliyahu: Oral Tales* (ed. H. A. Sternberg; Jerusalem: [Sternberg], 1983), pp. 22-23, §77 (in Hebrew). For a miraculous birth effected by a righteous man, which led to temporary difficulties, see the story there about a childless follower of the Baal Shem Tov, who had a son thanks to the latter's blessing. When the boy grew up he abandoned religious observance and caused his father such pain that he was led to exclaim, "if only the boy had never been born!". Under the influence of the amulet that the Baal Shem Tov had given the father, however, the son became a penitent skilled in getting others to repent their evil ways, precisely because of his non-observant past (*ibid.*, pp. 41-42, §124).

⁹⁸ Y. Zakovitch, "Every High Official Has a Higher One Set Over Him": A Literary Analysis of 2 Kings 5 (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1985) (in Hebrew).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30, 48-49.

reference to God, whose emissary he is, whereas “prophet” does not.¹⁰⁰ It follows that Elisha, who refers to himself as a prophet, ignores his due subordination to the Lord. So too, according to Zakovitch, the words “to me” in the message he sends to the king of Israel are an expression of Elisha’s arrogance and egocentricity.¹⁰¹ He also disapproves of the fact that Elisha does not go out to meet Naaman, who is standing outside his door, but sends word to him via a messenger in order to impress him.¹⁰² For Zakovitch, it is only after Naaman has been humbled and come to recognize his subjection to the God of Israel and his prophet does Elisha, too, realize his own subordination to the Lord.¹⁰³ Hence he is of the opinion that the point of the story is not Elisha’s miracles, but clarifying the concept of the hierarchy—“every high official has a higher one set over him” (Eccl. 5:7)—with the God of Israel highest of all.¹⁰⁴ He adds that our story goes beyond Naaman’s recognition of the Lord and demands that Elisha, too, recognize his subordinate position to God.¹⁰⁵

The Rebuttal

As with the story of the birth and revival of the Shunammite’s son, no one disputes the magnitude of the two miracles that Elisha works in the Naaman pericope. Here too the criticism is of a moral order. Zakovitch’s interpretation of the story hangs on the supposed pejorative overtones of the word “prophet” used by Elisha (v. 8).¹⁰⁶ It is true that the term is applied to both true prophets and false prophets and consequently can be intended either positively or negatively. But the sense depends on the context, and it is clear that when Elisha proclaims himself to be a prophet he is presenting himself as a prophet of the Lord who acts on behalf of that higher power. Nowhere in the Bible does a person refer to himself as a “man of God.”¹⁰⁷ Wherever it is found it is employed by the narrator¹⁰⁸ or the other characters who address the man of God directly¹⁰⁹ or are conversing among themselves about him.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, we do find

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 29-30.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 50, 60. Similarly, Bergen maintains that Elisha is motivated by a desire to exalt his own name, not the Lord’s (*Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, p. 115).

¹⁰² Zakovitch, *Every High Official*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 54, 134, 136.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 71-72, 133-136.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁰⁶ Curiously, Gertel criticizes Elisha on precisely the opposite grounds: although Elisha does refer to himself as a prophet (2 Kgs 5:8), the stories about him call him a “man of God” instead. That is, he is not a prophet of the first rank, on the level of Moses, Samuel, and Elijah. See E. B. Gertel, “Moses, Elisha and Transferred Spirit: The Height of Biblical Prophecy? (part II),” *JBQ* 30 (2002), pp. 171-177 (p. 172).

¹⁰⁷ Elijah’s “if I am a man of God” (2 Kgs 1:10, 12) is a provocative response to the vocative employed by the two unfortunate captains of fifty (vv. 9, 11).

¹⁰⁸ See: 1 Sam. 9:10; 1 Kgs 13:1; 2 Kgs 4:21, 25; 6:6, 9; 7:2; 13:19; et passim.

¹⁰⁹ See 1 Kgs 13:14; 17:18; 2 Kgs 1:9; 4:40; et passim.

¹¹⁰ 1 Sam. 9:6; 1 Kgs 13:26, 31; 2 Kgs 4:9; et passim.

messengers of the Lord who describe themselves as “prophets.”¹¹¹ So there is nothing astonishing or unusual about Elisha’s referring to himself as a “prophet” and not as a “man of God.”

When the king of Israel rends his garment and complains, “Am I God, to deal death or give life, that this fellow writes *to me* to cure a man of leprosy?” (v. 7), he is not questioning the Lord’s power of life and death, but only saying that he does not believe that the Lord will intervene in this case. He fails to draw the appropriate conclusion; namely, that to receive help from God one must turn to the man of God. His failure to think of the man of God constitutes a direct affront to Elisha’s status as a prophet and an indirect attack on the belief that the Lord acts in human history by means of His emissaries. Elisha’s retort to the king, “Why have you rent your clothes? Let him come *to me*, and he will learn that there is a prophet in Israel” (v. 8), echoes the king’s despairing “to me” in v. 7.¹¹² Elisha is not boasting; he is merely proclaiming that the person who can work a miraculous cure is not the king of Israel, but the prophet in Israel. Because there is a prophet in Israel, the king’s strident despair is not justified.

What is more, the first reference to Elisha as a “prophet” is made by the Lord, in his revelation to Elijah at Horev: “Anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah to succeed you as prophet” (1 Kgs 19:16). In the early days of Elisha’s prophetic career, however, Jehoram of Israel does not recognize him as the person to whom he should turn to inquire of the Lord. It is one of his courtiers who notes the presence of “Elisha son of Shaphat” in the camp, and Jehoshaphat of Judah who proclaims that “the word of the Lord is with him” (2 Kgs 3:12). Like Jehoram on that occasion, in our story the unnamed king of Israel does not think to refer Naaman to Elisha, even though his reputation as a man of God is now so well established that even a young Israelite girl has utter confidence in his powers (2 Kgs 5:3). We should accordingly understand Elisha’s statement as a fully warranted rebuke of the king. It is to the king, even more than to Naaman, that Elisha wishes to make clear that “there is a prophet in Israel” (v. 8).

Although this statement is intended to defend Elisha’s own status, it contains the implicit recognition that the Lord intervenes in human history to benefit His people; or, in the words of Malbim on 2 Kgs 5:8, “it is an indication of the divine presence and of [the Lord’s] attachment to them.”¹¹³ Many scriptural passages view the gift of prophets who act in His name and convey His words as an expression of the Lord’s benevolence to Israel.¹¹⁴ By contrast, the absence of true prophets or the failure of the

¹¹¹ Deut. 18:15 (Moses); 1 Kgs 18:22 (Elijah); Ezek. 2:5 (Ezekiel).

¹¹² Zakovitch, *Every High Official*, p. 50

¹¹³ R. Meir Leibush Malbim, commentary ad loc.

¹¹⁴ See Deut. 18:15, 18; 1 Sam. 3:19-21; Jer. 29:15; Ezek. 2:5; Hos. 12:14; Amos 2:11; et passim.

prophets to receive and convey the word of the Lord is a manifestation of the removal of Divine providence.¹¹⁵

It is not clear why Elisha is deemed to be arrogant for sending a messenger instead of going out to meet Naaman himself. In fact, it represents Elisha's rebuke to Naaman's presumptuous arrival by horse and chariot all the way to the door of his house, in an attempt to impress the prophet with his status and military power and to spur him to make a greater effort to heal him.¹¹⁶ By staying indoors Elisha, solicitous of his own dignity, also defends the honor of prophecy in Israel and of the God of Israel.

One might also say that Elisha sends a messenger precisely in order to minimize his own contribution to the miracle and to magnify the Lord's role. This is clearly behind his refusal to cure the leprosy by magical means, as Naaman had expected (v. 11). To do so would be to emulate the wizards or shamans of the ancient world;¹¹⁷ Naaman would have acknowledged Elisha's prowess as a magician, but no more. It is precisely the unconventional treatment he prescribes (which echoes the language of Leviticus 14:8-9 about the role of the priest in the ritual to heal leprosy¹¹⁸) that brings Naaman to the recognition that "there is no God in the whole world except in Israel!" (v. 15).¹¹⁹ Elisha's adamant refusal to accept Naaman's generous gifts is fully compatible with his intention to minimize his role in the miracle and to present himself as no more than an emissary of the Lord, who derives his power from his Master.¹²⁰

Various scholars have noted that, alongside the intention of lionizing Elisha and entrenching his status as the emissary of the Lord, our story seeks to exalt the Lord.¹²¹ To this we can add that the hero, Elisha, is described as sharing this latter intention. Elisha's attempt to minimize his role in the miracle and to highlight the Lord's power casts him in a positive

¹¹⁵ See 1 Sam. 28:6; 1 Kgs 22:22-23; Hos. 4:5; Ps. 74:9.

¹¹⁶ Abravanel, *Commentary on the Former Prophets*, p. 619. This is also the understanding of Gunkel, *Geschichten von Elisa*, p. 35; Gray, *I & II Kings*, p. 506; R. L. Cohn, "Form and Perspective in 2 Kings V," *VT* 33 (1983), pp. 171-184 (on pp. 176-177); Zakovitch, *Every High Official*, pp. 52-53.

¹¹⁷ That this is what Naaman expected Elisha to do is noted by Gunkel, *Geschichten von Elisa*, p.37; Cogan-Tadmor, *II Kings*, p. 67; Moore, *God Saves*, p. 75 n. 5. On the exorcist's direct involvement in healing the sick, see F. Smyth-Florentin, "Histoire de la Guérison et de la Conversion de Naaman (II Rois 5, 1-19)," *Foi et Vie* 69(3) (1970), pp. 29-41.

¹¹⁸ See: J. Heller, "Drei Wundertaten Elisas," *Communio Viatorum* 2 (1959), pp. 83-85 (p. 84); Zakovitch, *Every High Official*, p. 57.

¹¹⁹ Cf. S. Bakon, "Elisha the Prophet," *JBQ* 29 (2001), pp. 242-248 (on pp. 246-247).

¹²⁰ Cf. T. E. Fretheim, *Deuteronomistic History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), p. 154.

¹²¹ See, for example, S. H. Blank, *Understanding the Prophets* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1969), p. 18; Fretheim, *Deuteronomistic History*, p. 151.

light and, paradoxically, makes him seem even greater, as is frequently the case in saints' legends.¹²²

2.4 "ALL THE GREAT THINGS THAT ELISHA HAS DONE" (2 KGS 8:1-6)

The Indictment

Hobbs argues that this brief story takes Elisha down a peg, as it were, because it was his advice that the woman leave her home and country that caused her to be dispossessed. What is more, she complains to the king, not to the prophet, and it is the king, not the prophet, who solves her problem.¹²³

Roncace develops this argument further. He finds literary links between 2 Kgs 4:8-37 and 8:1-6, which, he says, make the criticism more pointed. The Shunammite matron provided Elisha with food (4:8); he warns her of an impending famine (8:1). She provided him with a place to sleep in her home (4:9-11); he instructs her to "arise and depart" (8:1). She told him that "I live among my own people" (4:13), meaning among her kin, who provide her with security and status; he enjoins her to leave her people and land (8:1), and it is precisely this counsel that caused her problems. Roncace sees this advice as a continuation of Elisha's tendency to ignore what the woman says: just as he ignored her reservations about his promise of a son, he also ignores her statement that she dwells among her people and tells her to abandon them, even though they are the source of her strength.¹²⁴

¹²² See, for example, the talmudic story of Ḥanan "the hidden": "When the world was in need of rain the Rabbis would send to him school children and they would take hold of the hem of his garment and say to him, 'Father, Father, give us rain.' Thereupon he would plead with the Holy One, Blessed be He, [thus], 'Master of the Universe, do it for the sake of these who are unable to distinguish between the Father who gives rain and the father who does not'" (B Ta'anit 23b). For saints' legends from more recent times, consider the tale about Rabbi Israel Abuḥatseira (known as the "Baba Sali"). To the father of a girl who recovered from a mysterious and protracted ailment after the rabbi gave her his blessing and set the father a test of faith, he said: "It is not by my merit ... but by the merit of Him who heals by grace" (*Baba Sali—Our Holy Rabbi: The Holiness, Torah Learning, Precepts, and Miracles of our Holy Rabbi ... R. Israel Abuḥatseira* (ed. E. Alfasi and H. Z. Be'eri [Jerusalem, 1983/4], p. 132 [in Hebrew]). Another story in that volume (pp. 134-136) tells of a man who was about to have his leg amputated because of a blood clot. After making a pilgrimage to the rabbi's house and receiving the holy man's blessing, he felt a sudden improvement in his leg. To his emotional thanks, the rabbi replied, "Don't thank me. Instead, say, 'blessed be He who publicly sanctifies His name.'" Indeed, in R. Issachar Meir's preface to the book, he praises the Baba Sali that "if his blessing was answered and a person was saved, he did not attribute it to his own merit" (ibid., p. 32).

¹²³ Hobbs, *2 Kings*, pp. 97-98.

¹²⁴ Roncace, "Elisha and the Woman of Shunem," p. 120.

According to Roncace, Elisha's absence from the scene in which the Shunammite appeals to the king is ironic, since he had once offered to speak to the king for her (4:13).¹²⁵ Instead, she finds Gehazi talking to the king about Elisha. Roncace sees irony in the fact that ultimately the Shunammite must plead her own case with the king.¹²⁶ The son with whom Elisha blessed her proves to be of no help, for he is unable to solve her problem.¹²⁷ Roncace adds that nothing in the story indicates that the king returns her property to her by virtue of the miracle Elisha had worked for her in the past.¹²⁸

Comparing 2 Kgs 8:1-6 with Elijah's proclamation of famine (1 Kgs 17:1), Roncace finds another negative evaluation of Elisha. Whereas Elijah has good reason to proclaim a famine—as punishment for Baal worship—the famine announced by Elisha is unmotivated.¹²⁹

The Rebuttal

First of all, it is important to emphasize that the famine of which Elisha warns the woman is not presented as his own initiative, but as the Lord's: "for the Lord has decreed a famine upon the land" (2 Kgs 8:1). Elisha merely has prophetic foreknowledge of the famine and its duration, which he exploits to help his benefactress once again. There are no grounds for the notion that Elisha proclaims a famine in contraposition to the food she provided him. He is not the cause of the famine, but only attempts to minimize the harm it will cause her.

The assertion that the story is critical of Elisha, because his advice is initially to the woman's detriment, ignores the fact that the damage is temporary. What counts is that ultimately the woman reaps a great reward for heeding the prophet.¹³⁰

Elisha's absence from the scene in which the Shunammite appeals to the king is to be explained, I believe, by the fact that it takes place after Elisha's death.¹³¹ This explains why the woman appeals to the king and not to the prophet, in whose power she had total faith. Similarly, the king's eagerness to hear stories about Elisha (v. 4) makes more sense if we assume that the man of God has already passed away. Elisha is not an active player in the scene, but his presence is unmistakable. The king is eager to hear about Elisha's miracles and Gehazi is happy to comply with his request. And then, with miraculous timing, just when Gehazi is telling the king about the revival of the Shunammite's son, the woman herself appears on the scene to petition the king for the return of her house and field. Gehazi,

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 122.

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 123-124.

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 122-123.

¹²⁸ Ibid., pp. 124-125.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 121.

¹³⁰ See above § 2.2.

¹³¹ See Gressmann, *Die älteste Geschichtsschreibung*, p. 295; Gunkel, *Geschichten von Elisa*, p. 29; Gray, *I & II Kings*, p. 525; M. Rehm, *Das zweite Buch der Könige* (Würzburg: Echter, 1982), pp. 27, 82; Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, pp. 26, 32-33.

strongly moved by this miraculous coincidence, emotionally informs the king that “this is the woman and this is her son whom Elisha revived” (v. 5). The king, who is certainly moved no less than Gehazi by this conjunction and the living evidence of the miracles—here are the Shunammite and her son who was revived standing before him—exploits the unlooked-for opportunity to hear from the beneficiary of the miracle, from her own perspective and in her own words, about what Elisha had done for her. Hence the Shunammite’s son also has a role to play in the story, since he is living proof of the miracle that the king cannot hear enough of. I have no doubt that the special favor the king extends to the woman, returning to her what is not hers by law—all the produce of her field since she had left the country—is a direct consequence of the strong impression made on him by the combination of Gehazi’s story about the miracle, the incredible coincidence that the woman and her son appear precisely then, and the narration by the woman herself, who corroborates Gehazi’s account.¹³² His generous decision is a gesture to Elisha, whom he admired so strongly. Hence it is wrong to argue that Elisha is not helping the Shunammite woman now. The story shows that even in his absence (and, as I read it, after his death) he continues to perform miracles.¹³³

2.5 THE RESURRECTION OF THE MAN WHO TOUCHES ELISHA’S BONES (2 KGS 13:20-21)

The Indictment

Surprisingly, Zakovitch explains the short legend that concludes the Elisha cycle as a humorous barb at Elisha.¹³⁴ He begins his article “Elisha Died” with a number of “heretical thoughts,” as he calls them, about the fundamental assumptions of the theory of biblical storytelling: “From time to time we should examine the axiom that each and every story in the Bible was written with petrifying seriousness, with no smile and no winks.

¹³² Contrary to the argument by Roncace, “Elisha and the Woman of Shunem,” pp. 124-125.

¹³³ Contrary to Roncace’s contention (ibid., p. 125), that Elisha’s powers are effective only when he is present. In fact, the idea that the prophet continues to work miracles even after his death is embodied by the last two stories in the cycle. The three victories over Aram that Elisha, on his deathbed, promises Joash, almost certainly took place after his death (2 Kgs 13:14-19). This is certainly the case with the resurrection of the man who came into contact with the prophet’s bones (vv. 20-21).

¹³⁴ Y. Zakovitch, “‘Elisha died ... he came to life and stood up’ (2 Kings 13:20-21): A Very Short Story in Exegetical Circles,” in *“Sh’arei Talmon”: Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (ed. M. Fishbane and E. Tov; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), pp. 53*-62* (Hebrew section). Kissling, too (*Reliable Characters*, p. 198), briefly observes that one cannot rule out the possibility that the story is meant to be humorous.

Another question we must ask ourselves again is whether the biblical narrator is really always seeking unlimited authority, whether he expects us, his readers, to display blind faith in his every word?"¹³⁵ He supports these "heretical thoughts" with a number of arguments about the narrative of the dead man who is restored to life when his corpse comes into contact with Elisha's bones:

1. The story says nothing about the national mourning that followed Elisha's death or about his funeral. In fact, his burial place is not even specified. This leaves the impression that the prophet's death did not produce any serious manifestations of grief.
2. The narrator never says that the anonymous man who is tossed in the grave was in fact dead. Perhaps he was still alive and it was a case of premature and mistaken burial. This possibility gives the story a humorous aspect.
3. It is possible that the subject of the verbs "he came to life and stood up" (2 Kgs 13:21) is Elisha, and not the anonymous man. In other words, it was Elisha who came back to life after coming into contact with the other corpse!
4. Even if we accept the simpler reading that it was the anonymous man who was restored to life by contact with Elisha's bones, there is still a humorous vein if we picture him standing up in the grave into which he was thrown, perplexed and alone, with no idea of what has happened to him. The miracle seems to be just an accident. No one requested it and no one will give thanks for it—an unnecessary miracle by all accounts.
5. Elisha's status is diminished by the fact that he can help others, but could not save himself and come back to life.
6. There are no witnesses to this miracle. Only the narrator attests to it, by virtue of the authority he arrogates to himself, and he makes no attempt to corroborate its truth. In practice, the narrator leaves readers to decide whether or not to believe him. All of this weakens the credibility of the story for readers.

Zakovitch explains that the satire targets the traditions that attach holiness to a prophet's tomb and recount miracles that take place there. He says that the story aims to provoke skepticism about such traditions and even to deride them and to keep people from coming to pray at Elisha's tomb.¹³⁶

The Rebuttal

Zakovitch's reading of the story, whose genre is unmistakably the saints' legend, is an extreme example of the common trend of recent scholarship

¹³⁵ Zakovitch, "Elisha died," p. 53.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

to make the Elisha stories critical of him. In my opinion, however, his interpretation fails to undermine the basic premises of biblical storytelling—the fundamental seriousness of the story and the reliability of the biblical narrator—because these assumptions are sound and essential for understanding religious and ideological literature, and also because, even if we set aside the cultural and social context of the story, the reading is simply not persuasive.

Although it is difficult to separate my two arguments, I will first attempt to deal with the proposed reading of the story and only then briefly consider the nature of biblical narrative and the implications of Zakovitch's thesis for our understanding of biblical literature.

There is no doubt that the elliptical nature of biblical storytelling creates many lacunae that make the stories harder to understand. Sometimes these gaps are permanent and cannot be filled in; but sometimes they are temporary and readers can fill them in after engaging in difficult but fascinating labor. Our very short story presents no such challenge, however. The gaps that Zakovitch finds in it are artificial and belong to the category of those that readers fill in automatically, without even being aware of them. The reasonable reader has no doubt that if we are reading about the burial of an unnamed person, he is in fact dead. Nor would one ever imagine that the subject of the verbs “came to life” and “stood up” might be anyone other than the anonymous man. Zakovitch's proposal that Elisha is the subject is unreasonable, with regard to both plot and theme. Would anyone expect contact with the corpse of some unnamed person to bring the holy man back to life? Grammatically, too, this reading is far-fetched. Verse 21b begins “[when] the man came in contact with Elisha's bones”—where the subject is clearly “the man” and Elisha's bones the direct object. How can one maintain that in v. 21b β the direct object becomes the subject, in the absence of some real difficulty that would force us to do so?

As for the claim that the narrator's failure to describe the circumstances of Elisha's death and burial suggest that the people did not mourn his passing, the answer is that a brief legend like this focuses exclusively on the miracle. One must not expect to find details outside its constricted narrative horizon—the immediate time and place of the miraculous resurrection. What is more, the story is part of a larger unit; its basic assumptions derive from the fact that it is a part of a whole—the Elisha cycle. Readers come to this brief legend equipped with everything they know about the prophet from the other stories in the cycle. These include the decisive proof of his standing with the king of Israel, as recounted in the preceding short episode (13:14-19). There can be no doubt that the assumption underlying our story is that Elisha's death was a grievous blow for the king, which was alleviated, to some small extent, by the recognition that even after his death the man of God could perform miracles.

The narrator is silent about the subsequent adventures of the living dead after his miraculous resurrection because he has absolutely no interest in his fate. The man's sole narrative function is to serve as the object of a miracle that provides final evidence of the holiness and greatness of the deceased prophet. As Lasine maintains with regard to other stories of revival and resurrection, both in the Old Testament (1 Kgs 17:17-24, the revival of the son of the widow of Zarephath by Elijah; 2 Kgs 4:18-37, the revival of the Shunammite's son by Elisha) and in the New Testament (Luke 7:11-16, the resurrection of the widow's son by Jesus), none of them evinces any interest in the experiences of the beneficiary of the miracle.¹³⁷

It should be obvious that Elisha cannot bring himself back to life, since no one can live forever; but contact with holy bones can bring someone else back to life. The meaning of the story, as Rofé notes, is that the unique energy latent in the holy man is not consumed by his death.¹³⁸ This idea that sacred relics can work miracles is common in medieval Christian saints' legends¹³⁹ as well as in Jewish saints' legends.¹⁴⁰ Hence it is hard to understand how anyone could detect in the miraculous resurrection worked by Elisha's bones mockery of a prophet because he helps others but cannot help himself.¹⁴¹ As for the assertion that the miracle worked by Elisha's bones is not necessary, the answer is that it is not necessary in and of itself, but only as evidence of Elisha's greatness. Something similar is told of the Moroccan Jewish saint Mulay Ighi (whom some traditions identify with Rabbi David Alshqar): lambs and a goat slaughtered at his tomb came back to life and began prancing about. The informant, who claimed to be an eyewitness of this miracle, which affected animals he had slaughtered himself as well as those slaughtered by others, concluded: "This is a sign

¹³⁷ S. Lasine, "Matters of Life and Death: The Story of Elijah and the Widow's Son in Comparative Perspective," *Biblical Interpretation* 12 (2004), pp. 117-144 (p. 120).

¹³⁸ Rofé, *The Prophetical Stories*, pp. 22-23.

¹³⁹ See A. Jolles, *Einfache Formen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1968), pp. 32-33. For Jolles, "relics" include an item that belonged to a saint (a garment or cross) but also the saints' tomb. See also Rofé, *The Prophetical Stories*, p. 23, on sacred relics in medieval Christianity. On the powers ascribed to the corpses of saints in Christianity and Islam, see Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom*, pp. 251-252.

¹⁴⁰ On hasidic rebbes who performed miracles by means of hairs of the Baal Shem Tov, see Yisrael Yaakov (Klapholtz), *The Complete Tales of the Baal Shem Tov*, part 1 ([Tel Aviv: Pe'er Hasefer], 1968/9), pp. 243-244 (in Hebrew). See also the index in Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration*, s.vv. "incubatio," "sleeping at the shrine," "relics of the saint"; as well as Genuz, "The Belongings of Tsaddikim." For examples of hasidic tales of miracles that took place at the tombs of rebbes, see G. Nigal, *Hasidic Stories* (2nd edition; Jerusalem: Institute for the Study of Hasidic Literature, 2001/2), p. 159 (in Hebrew). He mentions, inter alia, the story of the resurrection of the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, after his granddaughter, the boy's mother, placed the corpse on her grandfather's grave.

¹⁴¹ Zakovitch, "Elisha died," p. 57.

that the holy man is alive and present and reveals his merits.”¹⁴² The miracle is needed only to demonstrate the departed Saints’ holiness and power.

What is more, Zakovitch’s attempt to undermine the basic assumptions of the theory of biblical storytelling ignores the fact that biblical storytelling, which presents religious and ideological narratives, cannot allow itself to mislead readers, tease them, or hint that they should not relate seriously to the information and messages it conveys.¹⁴³ Unlike modern stories, in which a reliable narrator is only one option among many, the religious and ideological stories in the Bible make no sense unless we take it as a literary convention that the narrator is utterly and completely reliable. Were the biblical narrator winking at his readers and urging them to doubt his words, as Zakovitch would have it, the Bible’s authority to teach its audience religious truths to be steadfastly maintained and proper conduct to be followed, both in the relations among human beings and in those between human beings and God, would be severely impacted. Precisely because scriptural stories belong to the genre of religious and ideological texts they cannot employ the narrative technique, familiar to us from modern literature, of making both narrator and reader the butts of the hidden author’s irony. As Sternberg asserts, even if the whole truth is hidden in biblical narrative, the truth is nevertheless explicit.¹⁴⁴ Readers may, it is true, miss some of a biblical text’s intentions; nevertheless, even in a passive reading they will not seriously err with regard to its meaning. The use of this narrative technique, which Sternberg refers to as “foolproof composition,” guarantees that readers will understand the main messages of the story.¹⁴⁵

2.6 THE ENTIRE CYCLE

The indictment

In contrast to the scholars already mentioned, who find criticism of Elisha in one or another of the stories about him, Kissling and Bergen believe that the entire cycle takes a critical attitude toward the prophet.¹⁴⁶ There is nothing really surprising about this, because if we take all the stories already mentioned, which different scholars have asserted evince disapproval of

¹⁴² I. Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration among the Jews in Morocco* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), p. 447 (in Hebrew). This passage is not included in the abridged English edition.

¹⁴³ On the religious and ideological nature of biblical narrative, see M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 37. This definition has implication for the narrator’s reliability (in the literary, not the historical, sense) and the mode of narration.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-52.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 230.

¹⁴⁶ Kissling, *Reliable Characters*, pp. 149-199; Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*.

Elisha, the overall impression must be that the entire cycle is a harsh indictment of him. Because many of the arguments advanced by Kissling and Bergen overlap those already presented and have already been rebutted, here I will review their arguments only in outline.

For Kissling, Elisha is not a reliable character. Although he is certainly a master miracle-worker, even greater than Elijah, he sometimes employs his abilities in ways that are far from admirable.¹⁴⁷ The contrast that Elisha is responsible for the death of children (2 Kgs 2:23-25) whereas Elijah is responsible for the death of soldiers (2 Kings 1) demonstrates Elisha's moral inferiority to Elijah.¹⁴⁸ Not only is Elisha's credibility lessened by the fact that he instructs Hazael to lie to his master (2 Kgs 8:10); it is morally reprehensible that he plants the idea of assassinating his master in Hazael's mind, even if he does not do so directly.¹⁴⁹

Bergen, too, proposes a subversive reading of the Elisha cycle that uncovers criticism of the prophet, although he does not reject the option of reading the stories as intended to exalt him and emphasizes that this is a choice between different strategies of reading.¹⁵⁰ In addition, Bergen believes that the criticism he extracts from the Elisha cycle is not directed exclusively at Elisha, but also at the institution of prophecy as a whole. The stories seek to demonstrate the limits of prophecy and its ultimate lack of hope.¹⁵¹ Like Kissling, Bergen cites the amorality of the Elisha stories and notes that the prophet's activities are not guided by ethical constraints.¹⁵² He also observes that despite the expectation that Elisha would be a firm opponent of the wicked king, his relations with the monarch are described as good or at least as ambivalent.¹⁵³ But the crux of his criticism of Elisha is different. He emphasizes the fact that Elisha is a prophet with no mission and no message.¹⁵⁴ He works miracles that are unrequested or pointless.¹⁵⁵ The voice of the Lord is never heard in the Elisha stories and in practice the deity plays almost no role in them.¹⁵⁶ Where we might expect to read the fulfillment formula "according to the word of YHWH," we find instead "according to the word of Elisha" (2 Kgs 2:22; 6:18)¹⁵⁷—as if Elisha has usurped God's role.¹⁵⁸ According to Bergen, readers must feel uncomfortable by this depiction of Elisha as supplanting the deity.¹⁵⁹

¹⁴⁷ Kissling, *Reliable Characters*, pp. 162, 172-173, 190-191, 194-195, 198-199.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 167, 195.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-170.

¹⁵⁰ Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, p. 46.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 42.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 14.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 176.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 104, 177.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 97, 103, 175.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 67.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 101, 107, et passim.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 107, 178.

The Rebuttal

I have no doubt that Bergen feels uncomfortable when he reads the Elisha stories, which blur the boundaries between God and the man of God; apparently other readers react in a similar fashion. Nevertheless I cannot agree that the stories are meant to provoke such discomfort and to encourage criticism of the man of God. In fact, the unique lineaments of Elisha and the Elisha stories enumerated by Bergen are hallmarks of saints' legends. It is true that Elisha has no message and no mission in the normal sense, but he is depicted as wielding supernatural powers that are consonant with the epithet applied to him—"a holy man of God" (2 Kgs 4:9). This also explains the absence, emphasized by both Kissling and Bergen, of a moral dimension in many of the stories. As for Kissling's complaint that Elisha instructs Hazael to lie to his king (2 Kgs 8:10), remember that God himself told Moses to mislead Pharaoh (Exod. 3:18) and told Samuel to deceive Saul (1 Sam. 16:2). There are other cases in the Bible where prophets practice deception. There can be no doubt that the Bible recognizes that there are circumstances in which prevarication is essential and not to be condemned.¹⁶⁰ I do believe, though, that whenever the Lord or one of His prophets is involved in such misrepresentations, as in 2 Kgs 8:10, the technique employed is one of ambivalence or half-truths, with a deliberate omission of details, so that even if the intention is to mislead, formally speaking there is no fabrication.¹⁶¹

3. THE ELISHA CYCLE AS PROPHETIC HAGIOGRAPHY MEANT TO EXALT THE PROPHET

I believe there are solid grounds for assigning the Elisha stories to the genre of the saints' legend:

1. Elisha is referred to as "a holy man of God" by the Shunammite matron (2 Kgs 4:9). The Bible frequently employs the adjective "holy" as an epithet of God,¹⁶² but it is also applied to the people of Israel,¹⁶³ to priests,¹⁶⁴ to Nazirites,¹⁶⁵ and to angels.¹⁶⁶ Its only occurrence with reference to a specific individual, outside the context of the priest's ritual function, is in the case of Elisha.

¹⁶⁰ See Y. Shemesh, "Lies by Prophets and Other Lies in the Hebrew Bible," *JANES* 29 (2002), pp. 81-95.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92. For an analysis that is similar in spirit though different in detail, see J. Grossman, "The Use of Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives of Misleading and Deceit," *Tarbiz* 73 (2003-2004), pp. 483-515 (on pp. 490-493) (in Hebrew).

¹⁶² 1 Sam. 2:2; 6:20; Isa. 6:3; Ezek. 39:7; Ps. 22:4; et passim.

¹⁶³ Exod. 19:6; Deut. 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19; et passim.

¹⁶⁴ Lev. 21:6-8; Num. 16:5, 7; et passim.

¹⁶⁵ Num. 6:5, 8.

¹⁶⁶ Job 5:1; Dan. 8:13.

2. All of the Elisha stories, except for the narrative of his entering Elijah's service (1 Kgs 19:19-21), describe his supernatural powers, manifested in various realms and diverse forms (miracles of healing and resurrection, a miraculous birth, clairvoyance, and so on). Most of his miracles benefit those who are close to him or appeal to him for assistance, as is common in Saints' legends.¹⁶⁷ Other miracles severely punish those who infringe the dignity of the holy man of God; this theme, too, is frequent in Saints' legends.¹⁶⁸
3. The Lord is not prominently involved in the Elisha stories, as opposed to His presence in the stories of Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and Elijah. In none of them does the Lord address Elisha or send him on a mission. Elisha effects miracles on his own initiative, without a divine order to do so. This is why, even though he is a prophet, he is described not as a prophetic emissary but as a holy man of God endowed with supernatural powers.
4. Those around him almost always treat Elisha with exaggerated respect and deference, manifested also in the way in which they address him when they request his assistance. As a respectful form of address¹⁶⁹ they call Elisha "my Lord"¹⁷⁰ and portray themselves as his servants.¹⁷¹ Even the king of Israel calls Elisha "my father" (2 Kgs 6:21; 13:14). Similarly Hazael, sent by the king of Aram to inquire of Elisha, begins with the formulaic "Your son Ben-hadad" (2 Kgs 8:9). It is precisely the reverent attitude that the beneficiaries of his miracles display toward Elisha that makes them worthy of these wonders, just as their scorn and mockery renders those who offend his dignity deserving of their punishment.
5. One of the most impressive manifestations of this veneration of Elisha is the request by the king of Israel to hear "all the great things that Elisha has done" (2 Kgs 8:4). This fascinating evidence of a willingness and desire to recount and hear the prophet's wonders perfectly matches the common phenomenon, known to us from outside the Bible and flourishing down to our own day, of stories of the wonders

¹⁶⁷ See Bar-Itzhak, "The 'Saints' Legend' as a Genre," p. 311.

¹⁶⁸ See above § 2.1

¹⁶⁹ On respectful speech see G. Brinn, "Respectful Forms of Speech and Address in Biblical Language," *Molad* n.s. 6 (1975), pp. 506-514 (in Hebrew).

¹⁷⁰ 2 Kgs 2:19; 4:28; 6:5, 15; 8:12.

¹⁷¹ Naaman styles himself "your servant" no fewer than five times in his interchange with Elisha after he is healed (2 Kgs 5:15-18). Another prominent Aramean, Hazael, also refers to himself in this way (8:13). One of the "sons of the prophets" applies this term to all of them when he entreats Elisha to accompany them (6:3). So too, the widow of one of the "sons of the prophets" refers to her late husband as Elisha's servant and to herself as his maidservant (4:1-2).

worked by saints, whether during their lives or posthumously.

Note that this is the only place in biblical literature where we encounter the transmission of traditions that deal with a person rather than with the Lord and that elsewhere in the Bible *gedolot* 'great things' always refers to divine deeds or miracles.¹⁷² The fact that this noun is employed for wonders worked by a human being only in 2 Kgs 8:4, with regard to Elisha, is evidence of the tendency to minimize the distance between Elisha the man of God and his God.¹⁷³

6. The last story in the Elisha cycle, which tells of the resurrection of a corpse that comes into contact with Elisha's bones (2 Kgs 13:20-21), serves as a fitting final chord to the praises of Elisha and as additional evidence that Elisha is a holy man of God.

In conclusion, the Elisha cycle constitutes the earliest example in the literature of Israel of the genre of the saints' legend. These tales, long and short, express the worshipful attitude and the intensity of the religious experience that people felt in the presence of the embodiment of holiness in the Lord's emissary, the holy man of God, Elisha.

As for the question of how these stories found their way into the canon, the answer is that despite their unusual nature in the Bible they do not transcend the bounds of monotheistic belief.¹⁷⁴ The fundamental axiom of the saints' legend is that their holiness derives from the saints' proximity to God.¹⁷⁵ The holy man's powers are a direct consequence of this intimacy. For this reason, the figure of Elisha the wonder-worker, the holy man of God, made it possible for the compilers of the Bible to show that the Lord's providence, power, and mercies accompanied Israel throughout its history, even if they assumed different forms in different periods. I believe that there is both internal and external corroboration for this. Within the biblical text, I am thinking of its manifestation in the stories about Elisha, in Naaman's realization that the powers of the man of God are proof of the power and exclusive divinity of his God (2 Kgs 5:15). Externally, the same idea is found in post-biblical saints' legends. The New

¹⁷² This was noted by R. Kasher, "The Theological Conception of the Miracle in the Bible," Ph.D. dissertation, Bar Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 1981, p. 65 (in Hebrew); Zakovitch, *The Concept of the Miracle*, p. 12. See also Deut. 10:21; Ps. 71:19; 106:21; Job 5:9; 9:10; 37:5. There are two exceptions to this general rule: Jeremiah's question of Baruch son of Neriah, "do you seek גדלות ("great things") for yourself?" (Jer. 45:5); and the self-assessment by the psalmist, "I do not occupy myself with things too great (גדלות) and too marvelous for me" (Ps. 131:1).

¹⁷³ Kasher, "The Theological Conception of the Miracle," p. 65.

¹⁷⁴ According to Uffenheimer (*Early Prophecy in Israel*, pp. 469, 475), the veneration of Elisha pushed the authors of the stories about him "to the very limits of the monotheistic faith." Even if this statement is understandable, the stories do not really exceed the bounds of monotheism.

¹⁷⁵ Bar-Itzhak, "The 'Saints' Legend' as a Genre," p. 93.

Testament reports how the people reacted when Jesus healed the paralyzed man of his own accord, with no express authorization to do so by God: “When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men” (Matt. 9:8). The same idea is found in much later Jewish hagiography of the eighteenth century. In his approbation to the *Praises of the Besht*, a work that recounts the wonders worked by R. Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, R. Moses b. Israel (the rabbi of Kopyts, in Belorussia, where the first edition of the book was published in 1815) declares that he found it to be “something exceedingly necessary, so that people may know and understand that the Lord has not abandoned us, but that in each and every generation He has provided us with faithful shepherds.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Shivḥei ha-Besht, p. 31.

I would like to thank *Beit Shalom* of Japan for its generous support, which made this research possible.