

THE PORTRAYAL OF PROPHETS IN 2 KINGS 2

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It is a pity that 2 Kings 2 has not received more attention in the current surge of interest in biblical narrative. The recent commentaries by Richard Nelson and Burke Long aside, there has been no study of this chapter in its own right as an example of OT narrative art.¹ The chapter belongs to a cycle of prophetic stories that are gaining recognition as fine examples of ancient Israelite storytelling. It is about two of the major prophets in the books of Kings, Elijah and Elisha. It is a unique story in the OT, the only one that deals with prophetic succession. 2 Kings 2 deserves a careful reading and this article is an attempt to do so. Particular attention will be devoted to the dialogues which feature prominently in this narrative. Within vv. 2-6, there are three dialogues between Elijah and Elisha and two between Elisha and companies of prophets—one at Bethel and the other at Jericho. Vv. 9-10 contain a fourth dialogue between Elijah and Elisha, while vv. 16-18 contain a second exchange between Elisha and the company of prophets at Jericho. There is also a dialogue between the citizens of “the city” (presumably Jericho) and Elisha in vv. 19-22. These dialogues play a key role in the portrayal of the narrative's principal characters.²

To a modern reader, the portrayal of character in biblical narrative may seem incomplete and superficial. The narrator rarely lingers over the description of a character or spells out the motives for this or that action. According to Robert Alter, such a reaction overlooks the “art of reticence” in biblical narrative. Its characters tend to be portrayed indirectly, in the way their appearance is described, in the way they speak or in the way others speak about them. Nevertheless, biblical narrative is able to

¹R. D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Interpretation: Atlanta: John Knox, 1987) 157-63; B. O. Long, *2 Kings* (FOTL 10; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 19-35.

²2 Kgs 2:23-24 tells of an encounter on the road to Bethel between Elisha and a group of boys, but there is no dialogue. The significance of this absence will be commented on in the course of my analysis. On the role of dialogue in biblical narrative's portrayal of character, see R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 63-87.

employ these techniques to paint powerful and complex portraits.³ Meier Sternberg has drawn attention to the way biblical narrative skilfully exploits the literary phenomenon of the gap.⁴ Certain things are left unsaid or referred to obliquely, prompting the reader to fill in the gaps from the surrounding context. Gaps are a key ingredient in what Sternberg calls the “drama of reading”, the dynamic engagement with the text that is the challenge and pleasure of reading. Gaps are an important component of the narrative’s art of reticence.

Antony Campbell provides another angle on gaps and reticence in biblical narrative with his proposal that the written text preserves the report or outline of a story rather than the full story.⁵ Campbell holds that it is unrealistic to equate the written version of a story such as 2 Kings 2 with the version actually told to an audience. In a culture where people told stories and listened to them rather than read them, oral performance must have lasted much longer than the few minutes it takes to read the written version aloud. In short, the written version provided a base for a storyteller to display his or her skill by developing the story outline in an oral performance. A storyteller could exploit gaps in the text in ways that suited the audience or the particular slant that he or she wished to give. A storyteller would of course have to select between the various options that a gap may provide. Each performance is a particular development and interpretation of a story outline. Campbell’s proposal also offers a new angle on the findings of historical-critical analysis. Texts may have been added to or expanded in order to provide storytellers with options that could be taken up in oral performance. His proposal views biblical narrative as more than something to be read and studied for its literary and theological import.

The analysis of 2 Kings 2 given here owes much to the insights of these scholars. It will pay attention to the art of reticence in the story, to its gaps and the clues provided in the narrative to fill these gaps. It will focus in particular on the portrayal of character and the contribution of

³Cf. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 114-30. S. Bar-Efrat observes “that there is more indirect than direct shaping of characters in biblical narrative” (*Narrative Art in the Bible* [Bible and Literature Series, 17; Sheffield: Almond, 1989] 64). D. M. Gunn and D. N. Fewell refer to the “biblical narrator’s customary reticence about characters” (*Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* [The Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993] 51). See also the earlier work of J. Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978) 51-74.

⁴M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative. Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985) 186-229.

⁵A. F. Campbell, “The Reported Story: Midway between Oral Performance and Literary Art,” *Semeia* 46 (1989) 77-85, and more recently, A. F. Campbell and M. A. O’Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch. Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 205-6.

the dialogues to this portrayal. Elijah and Elisha are the principal characters in the story, with the companies of prophets as a subsidiary but nevertheless significant collective "character". An appreciation of the way these characters are portrayed greatly enhances our understanding of 2 Kings 2. Attention will also be drawn at appropriate points to the way the text can serve as a basis for a storyteller's performance.

2 Kings 2 has received its fair share of historical-critical attention. A widely held view is that an original story can be identified in vv. 1b-15. The original story was added to in different stages to form the present text. The principal additions proposed are vv. 1a, 2-6, 16-18, 19-22, 23-24, 25.⁶ As will be pointed out in the body of the article, there are good reasons for accepting vv. 16-18, 19-22, 23-24 and 25 as additions but not vv. 1a, 2-6. The additions not only enrich the earlier story but provide attractive options for a storyteller to exploit.

DIVISION OF THE TEXT

The text of 2 Kings 2 falls easily into distinct parts. V. 1a serves as the introduction, informing the reader in advance what is to happen to Elijah. Vv. 1b-7 tell of Elijah and Elisha's journey from Gilgal to the Jordan. There are three stages in this circuitous journey: from Gilgal to Bethel in vv. 2-3; from Bethel to Jericho in vv. 4-5; and from Jericho to the Jordan in vv. 6-7. Each stage is marked by an exchange between Elijah and Elisha. In each of the first two stages, there is also an exchange with a company of prophets; at Bethel in v. 3, and at Jericho in v. 5. In the third stage, fifty members of the company of prophets from Jericho watch from a distance. In v. 8, Elijah and Elisha cross the Jordan river. Vv. 9-12 recount the final dialogue between Elijah and Elisha and the dramatic departure of Elijah. Vv. 13-14 narrate Elisha's return across the Jordan. In vv. 15-24, Elisha retraces in reverse order the three stages of the journey in vv. 1b-7, encountering different groups at each stage. There is the company of prophets at Jericho in vv. 15-18, the citizens of the city in vv. 19-22 (from the context, presumably Jericho), and a group of boys on his way to Bethel in vv. 23-24. There is dialogue in vv. 15-18 and in vv. 19-22; in vv. 23-24 words are spoken by both parties but there is no dialogue. The reversal of the earlier journey gives the text a chiasmic symmetry. The symmetry is however not perfect; Elisha does not return

⁶For a recent review and discussion of historical-critical analysis, see H.-J. Stipp, *Elischa-Profeten-Gottesmänner. Die Kompositionsgeschichte des Elischa-Zyklus und verwandter Texte, rekonstruiert auf der Basis von Text- und Literaturkritik zu 1 Kön 20-22 und 2 Kön 2-7* (ATAT 24; St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1987) 56-62.

to Gilgal and in v. 25 he journeys beyond Bethel to Carmel and finally to Samaria.⁷

INTRODUCTION—(verse 1a)

Historical-critical analysis has argued that v. 1a is a later addition because the proper place for the mention of the whirlwind is at v. 11b, not at the beginning.⁸ V. 1a also robs the reader of a sense of anticipation at vv. 9-10 where Elijah leaves the manner of his departure unspecified.⁹ The problem with the first argument is that it presumes v. 11b is a high point in the story, but this only becomes the case if one has already judged that the story should be read without v. 1a. The second argument fails to take into consideration a technique in storytelling where a narrator lets the reader know more than a character in the story.¹⁰ There is no need to multiply authors. Making v. 1a an addition also leaves the story with a rather abrupt beginning in v. 1b; there is no verse in 2 Kings 1 that can function as an introduction to it.¹¹ In sum, the case for v. 1a as a later addition is not persuasive.

Historical analysis was nevertheless right about the impact of v. 1a on v. 11b. By announcing at the beginning that Elijah is to be taken up in the whirlwind, v. 1a signals that the focal point of the description of Elijah's departure does not lie in v. 11b. It is elsewhere, in an area or areas that the reader will need to discern. V. 1a also signals that the narrator has given the reader a privileged piece of information that may not be shared by the characters in the story. This will need to be assessed as the story unfolds.¹² The reader knows from the start how Elijah will disappear, a

⁷For a schematic presentation of the structure, see Long, *2 Kings*, 20.

⁸Cf. K. Galling, "Der Ehrenname Elisas und die Entrückung Elisa," *ZThK* 53 (1956) 129-48; see p. 129, and H. C. Schmitt, *Elisa. Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur vorklassischen nordisraelitischen Prophetie* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1972) 102.

⁹Cf. A. Schmitt, *Entrückung—Aufnahme—Himmelfahrt. Untersuchungen zu einem Vorstellungsbereich im Alten Testament* (FB 10; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1973) 59-60.

¹⁰Modern literary analysis speaks of multiple points of view in a narrative. For a discussion of this phenomenon in biblical narrative, see A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, (Bible and Literature, 9; Sheffield: Almond, 1983) 43-82. Two notable examples in the OT are Genesis 22, where the reader and Abraham know about the proposed sacrifice but Isaac does not, and Job 1-2, where the reader knows about God's wager with Satan whereas Job does not.

¹¹Galling, suggested that the original story began with something like "Elijah and Elisha lived in Gilgal" ("Der Ehrenname Elisas," 129). Speculation on what is no longer in the text is risky.

¹²As the story unfolds, a reader must continually compare his or her point of view with those of the characters in the story. One's reading of the text is both sequential and retrospective; the meaning of a statement may be modified or transformed by a subsequent statement. On the sequential (or progressive) and

storyteller could choose not to divulge the information in v. 1a, keeping the audience in suspense until the appropriate moment.¹³

DIALOGUES AND JOURNEYS—(verses 1b-7)

The arguments in favour of vv. 2-6 as a later addition to this section are as follows. It is impossible to envisage a journey from Gilgal down to Bethel because Gilgal is near Jericho in the Jordan valley, whereas Bethel is in the hill country (v. 2b uses the verb *yārad* [go down] while v. 23 correctly uses *‘ālā* [go up]). Secondly, vv. 3 and 5 employ the active form of the verb *lāqah* (to take) with YHWH as subject, whereas vv. 9 and 10 have the passive form of this verb with no mention of YHWH.¹⁴ Thirdly, vv. 2-6 are repetitive; if they are removed there is a smooth connection between v. 1b and v. 7.¹⁵

Granted the respect that OT redactors now enjoy, it is difficult to see why one would construct an impossible journey with v. 2b. An intelligent redactor, like an author, presumably knew where Gilgal and Bethel were. The suggestion has been made that the text may refer to another Gilgal or Bethel and not the well known ones in the OT, but this seems unlikely.¹⁶ Whether one opts for a later redactor or not, v. 2b remains equally puzzling. In relation to the second argument, one should note that not only are there references to YHWH by the companies of prophets in vv. 3 and 5 but also by Elijah and Elisha in vv. 2, 4 and 6. References to YHWH abound in the dialogues of vv. 2-6 but are absent from vv. 9-12. It is difficult to decide whether this is evidence of a composite text or a subtle shift of emphasis by the narrator as the characters move from invoking God to encountering God.¹⁷ The repetitive nature of vv. 2-6 could be a

retrospective reading of a text, see E. V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) 236-39.

¹³The level of suspense or 'discovery' would no doubt be qualitatively different for those familiar with the story and those hearing it for the first time. A test of the storyteller's craft would be how one could tell a story in a way that engaged and surprised those familiar with its outline.

¹⁴Except for a disputed reading in v. 14 (not found in the LXX or Vg), YHWH does not occur in vv. 7-15.

¹⁵Cf. Schmitt *Elisa*, pp. 104-5, who sees vv. 2-6 as part of a later "Yahwebearbeitung". Among recent commentaries, see G. H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, vol. II (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 382; and E. Würthwein, *Die Bücher der Könige. 1. Kön. 17-2 Kön. 25* (ATD 11, 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984) 274.

¹⁶Cf. Jones *1 and 2 Kings*, vol. II, 383. As T. R. Hobbs notes, "the OT make no distinction between different Gilgals" (*2 Kings* [WBC 13; Waco: Word Books, 1985] 19).

¹⁷The difficulty is compounded by S. Talmon's proposal that an ancient scribe could operate as an author or redactor, depending on what was needed. ("Textual

sign of a later hand, but it is now widely acknowledged that OT narrators employed repetition to advance the storyline.¹⁸ Repetition is not in itself, therefore, a reliable indicator of a composite text. On balance, the evidence is not strong enough to accept that vv. 2-6 are a later addition; they will therefore be treated as part of the original story.

There are two series of dialogues in vv. 2-6; the first between Elijah and Elisha, the second between Elisha and companies of prophets at Bethel and Jericho respectively. The first series consists of three almost verbatim repetitions in vv. 2, 4 and 6. This series is interspersed by the two verbatim repetitions of the second series in vv. 3 and 5. The arrangement is strategic—the first dialogue between Elisha and the prophets of Bethel in v. 3 sheds light on questions that arise from reading the first dialogue between Elijah and Elisha in v. 2. Although the repetitions are verbatim their different settings develop the meaning and impact of the dialogues on the story.

In v. 2, Elijah commands Elisha to stay because YHWH has sent him on a journey to Bethel. Elisha refuses, swearing by YHWH that he will not leave Elijah. Both men invoke YHWH, one to justify his command, the other to justify his refusal to obey the command. The command and its refusal create an impression of struggle between the two men for control. The command and refusal also contain gaps that lead to questions. Why does Elijah try to leave Elisha and why does Elisha disobey his master on what is a serious matter, an errand from God? Elisha's refusal would seem to be a serious matter too for he also invokes YHWH.

The dialogue between Elisha and the company of prophets in v. 3 provides help in tackling these questions. The prophets elicit from Elisha an admission that he knows Elijah is to be taken. The realization that both Elisha and the prophets know of Elijah's imminent departure (cf. "today" in v. 3) leads one to assume that Elijah knows as well. At this stage the narrative has not given any explicit indication that Elijah knows his fate. V. 1a is for the reader's benefit; one cannot conclude from it that the characters in the story enjoy the same level of knowledge. Nevertheless, in the light of v. 3 it is difficult to imagine that a character of such stature as Elijah is not also aware.

In v. 3, the prophets use the phrase "YHWH is taking your master from over your head" to describe Elijah's departure. The phrase occurs with the participle of the verb *lāqah* only here in the OT. The prophets describe Elijah as "your master". From this, one may infer that the unusual phrase refers to the removal of Elijah as Elisha's head or master.

Study of the Bible—A New Outlook," in *Qumran and the History of the Biblical Text* [ed. F. M. Cross and S. Talmon; Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975] 321-400; see especially pp. 332-81).

¹⁸See Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 88-113; Sternberg, *Poetics*, 365-440.

The knowledge that Elijah is to be removed “today” “from over your (i.e., Elisha’s) head” is presumably what motivates the words and actions of Elisha and the prophets. Even though Elijah does not take part in the dialogue, one may presume that the same understanding, or something close to it, influences his actions.

These conclusions bring further questions to the fore. Granted that the characters in vv. 2-3 know Elijah’s fate, what are their reasons for speaking and acting as they do? Elijah effectively lies to Elisha that he has been sent on an errand by God. A possible explanation is that Elijah wants to be alone when the moment of his departure comes. One may note that the bulk of the stories about Elijah portray him as a solitary figure. In this explanation, Elijah is concerned about himself. Ironically, it implies that he makes a monumental blunder for a prophet of his stature. He attempts to take control of something that is out of his control; namely, the manner and moment of his departure. Irony like this is a significant feature of OT narrative. However, the reading does not provide a very satisfactory reason why Elijah would invoke the name of YHWH in his lie. A second possible explanation is that Elijah is testing Elisha’s knowledge of his imminent departure and, through this, of his reaction to it. Does Elijah suspect that Elisha wants something from him before he departs, something that Elijah does not want to, or cannot, give? Elijah’s suspicions are so grave that he attempts to leave Elisha by appealing deceptively to the authority of YHWH.¹⁹ In this reading, Elijah’s concern is about Elisha; it is a reading that offers a more satisfactory reason for Elijah’s lie.

Elisha’s disobedience could be an expression of loyalty to his master; he refuses to leave him at this critical time for any reason. Here, Elisha’s focus is on Elijah and his invocation of YHWH is an expression of the depth of his loyalty. On the other hand, Elisha could be motivated by the implications for himself of his master’s departure; it signals a radical change in his life and status. Here, the focus is more on himself and his words conceal his real motivation. In both readings, Elisha knows that Elijah’s reason for his journey is not the real reason.

One does not have the same sense of conflict and concealment in the portrayal of the prophets of Bethel. They share their knowledge openly with Elisha even to the detail of the time and manner of Elijah’s departure

¹⁹Another explanation from S. De Vries (*Prophet Against Prophet* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978] 82-83) is that Elijah is testing to see whether Elisha is a worthy successor. See also Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 159. For a reader of the present text, this explanation clashes with 1 Kgs 19:16 where the succession has already been decided by God who instructs Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor. This is in keeping with the general tenor of the OT that it is God who chooses prophets and that God may choose those who appear unlikely or unworthy (cf. for example, Isaiah 6).

(i.e., he will be taken "today" and "from over your head"). Elisha's call for silence implies a move to take charge and the potential for conflict. However, there is no report of the prophets clashing with Elisha. Their inquiry is about "your master"; their focus seems firmly fixed on Elijah.

The repetition of these dialogues in different settings enhances their meaning and import. Elijah first tries to shake off Elisha when they are alone—and fails. His subsequent attempts to do so take place in the presence of the prophets—and also fail. The master is repeatedly and publicly disobeyed and dominated by his servant. This seems to go beyond the bounds of loyalty. One has the impression that Elisha knows what he wants and is determined to get it. This favours the reading in which Elijah lies to Elisha because he suspects Elisha is after something. It also favours the view that this is the reason for Elisha's evasive replies. Support for these readings comes from the portrait of the two companies of prophets. In contrast to Elijah and Elisha, they do not invoke YHWH to deceive or evade; rather they seek confirmation about what YHWH is to do to Elijah.

The journeys are also a significant feature of vv. 1b-7; Elijah and Elisha are repeatedly in conflict about them. For a prophet supposedly on God's errands, Elijah does not seem to be going anywhere in vv. 1b-4. The second journey effectively cancels the first. Nevertheless, as a motif the journeys form an unusual but effective parallel to the dialogues between Elijah and Elisha. Talk, like their travels, is getting them nowhere. The one journey that does lead somewhere is the subsequent one that takes them across the Jordan and out of Israel. Given the parallel between dialogues and journeys, this points to a further exchange in which master and disciple will no longer be able to maintain deception and evasion.

Elisha initially appears as a dominant and confident figure in vv. 1-7; nevertheless, there are a number of features that subtly undermine this impression. Although Elijah is overruled by his servant, he remains the focus of attention. Elisha follows him closely and fifty of the prophets watch him from a distance (v. 7). Both companies of prophets refer to him as "your master". Elisha is not the only one who knows about Elijah's imminent departure; the prophets seem to be just as well informed. These features foreshadow an ironic reversal that unfolds in the subsequent narrative. The departed Elijah again becomes dominant—through the sign he gives Elisha, the mantle that falls from his shoulder, and the dispute between Elisha and the prophets about the search party.²⁰

²⁰In relation to this, it is worth noting the debate between J. Conrad and H. N. Rösel as to whether 2 Kgs 2:1-18 is a story about Elijah or Elisha. Conrad holds that it is principally a story of Elijah, against whom all other prophets are measured ("2 Kön 2,1-18 als Elija-Geschichte," *Wünscht Jerusalem Frieden* [ed.

The analysis indicates there are a number of ways of reading vv. 1b-7, with some options more promising than others. A reader can weigh the various options against one another. For a storyteller, the situation is different. A performance has to be given and decisions have to be made about which areas of the story outline should be developed. Depending on the audience, a storyteller could choose to develop the encounters with the prophets. One could portray a dramatic scene in which Elijah, before the assembled prophets, commands Elisha who disobeys. This would heighten the impression of conflict and intensify interest in Elisha's motives.

ELIJAH AND ELISHA CROSS THE JORDAN—(verse 8)

In v. 8, Elijah strikes the Jordan with his mantle and the two prophets cross on dry ground. There is no mention of God, the focus is on the mantle which, in Elijah's hands, has extraordinary power.²¹ It will feature again prominently in Elisha's return across the Jordan (vv. 13-14). Vv. 1b-7 give the destination of each journey by Elijah and Elisha; once across the Jordan this ceases. Nelson believes that this signals their passage into a mysterious realm "where supernatural translations can take place."²² This is suggestive but a more mundane explanation may do. The absence of any reference to a further destination signifies that Elijah's earthly journey is effectively over. At this point a reader might expect the whirlwind, foreshadowed in v. 1a. Significantly, it is dialogue that once more comes to the fore—in vv. 9-10.

FINAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN ELIJAH AND ELISHA—(verses 9-10)

Verse 9 confirms the earlier impression that Elijah was aware of his imminent departure when commanding Elisha. The description of his departure in v. 9 is close but not identical to that of the prophets in vv. 3 and 5. Like Elisha and the prophets, Elijah knows that his departure is about to take place (cf. "today") because he invites Elisha to make a last request. The same verb *lāqah* is used to refer to his departure, but in the passive and without specifying YHWH as the agent. The phrase "from

M. Augustin and K.-D. Schmuck; *Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und die Antiken Judentums*, 13; Frankfurt: Lang, 1988] 263-71). In a rejoinder, Rösel argues that it is principally a story of Elisha ("2 Kön 2,1-18 als Elija-oder Elischa-Geschichte?" *BN* 59 [1991] 33-36). The debate points to the subtle and elusive nature of vv. 1-18. Elisha really becomes prominent only after v. 19.

²¹While the crossing of the Reed Sea in Exodus 14 and the crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 3-4 readily spring to mind here, these are distant texts and it is far from clear whether v. 8 implies a connection with Moses or Joshua or both. Discussion of the issue is beyond the scope of this article.

²²Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 158.

you” occurs instead of the earlier “from over your head”. Though seemingly minor, these differences are signals of the way the subsequent narrative unfolds: first, in the description of Elijah’s departure; second, in the prophets’ proposal for a party to search for Elijah.

Verse 9 provides confirmation but also raises questions. Is Elijah’s invitation to Elisha a reward for his loyalty or a way of getting him to voice the real reason for his refusal to stay behind? Elisha’s reply, read in the light of the analysis of vv. 2-6, points to the latter. Elijah judged correctly that Elisha was after something and concealing it from him. If one understands Elisha’s request for a “double share of your spirit” on analogy with the primogeniture of Deut 21:17, then he is after the lion’s share of Elijah’s prophetic power. The Deuteronomic text refers to the eldest son’s right to a double share of his father’s inheritance. Elisha is therefore claiming a unique prophetic status as his right. This is in keeping with the portrait of him in vv. 2-6 as a confident and dominant figure. However, it does not sit all that comfortably with the polite tenor of his request (*vîhî-nâ*)²³. Moreover, a “double share” may be understood in the sense of “two thirds”, as in Zech 13:8. In this case, Elisha appears more as a loyal and humble servant who requests less than a full portion of his master’s spirit.

Whichever way a “double share” is understood, Elisha’s request is a “hard thing”, one that Elijah cannot grant (v. 10). Elijah can part the Jordan waters but he cannot designate a prophet. The intriguing thing here is that although Elijah knows this, Elisha apparently does not. Thus, the one most closely associated with the great prophet, who in vv. 2-6 seemed to know what was going on and what to do, appears unaware that prophecy is not in the prophet’s gift. In a highly significant move for the subsequent narrative, Elijah offers a sign—if Elisha sees Elijah being taken, he can be sure that his request is granted. As in v. 9, the verb *lāqah* here is in the passive.

DEPARTURE OF ELIJAH—(verses 11-12)

The description of Elijah’s departure in vv. 11-12 leaves the reader uncertain whether Elisha saw Elijah ascending to heaven in the whirlwind or the chariot and horses of fire that separated them. V. 12aα could mean that he saw Elijah; it could also mean that he kept looking and calling out to Elijah but did not see him because the chariot of fire came between them. V. 12aβ can be translated as “and he did not see him again” or “and he could no longer see him” (cf. NRSV). The Hebrew pronoun translated as “him” can refer either to Elijah or to the masculine singular term

²³The Greek and Syriac omit the vav-copular; in Hebrew this would give *yîhî-na*.

“chariot”. Elisha tearing his clothes in v. 12b could be a reaction to seeing Elijah depart or frustration at his failure to see him because of the intervening chariot and horses. In short, one cannot be sure about Elijah’s sign; it is ambiguous, like so many things in this narrative. In relation to Elijah, the ambiguity of the sign adds an ironic touch to his last prophetic act. In relation to Elisha, the ambiguity of the sign casts doubts on whether he has inherited a double share of his master’s spirit.

The juxtaposition of the whirlwind and the chariot of fire in v. 11 has attracted the attention of historical-critical analysis. Galling, for example, regarded the chariot and horses in v. 11a β as secondary, along with v. 12a α which contains the formulaic expression “my father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen”. According to Galling, these additions were imported from 2 Kgs 13:14 where the formulaic expression is associated with Elisha in a military setting. It occurs also in a somewhat different form in 2 Kgs 6:17, again associated with Elisha and in a war story. There is no military setting in 2 Kings 2. Hence, the original story described how Elijah ascended to heaven in a whirlwind.²⁴ Schmitt, on the other hand, believes that the whirlwind in v. 1a and v. 11b is the later addition.²⁵ The appearance of the chariot and horses in a non-military setting, and in the only association of this motif with Elijah, suggests that Galling may have the better of the argument. In terms of the present text, the combination of these two elements is highly effective. Elisha is enveloped in an intense experience that is paradoxically full of uncertainty and ambiguity. A storyteller could choose to develop the ambiguity of the story outline; alternatively, a storyteller could choose to focus on the whirlwind or the chariot and horses. The choice made here would influence the way one tells how Elisha returned across the Jordan in vv. 13-14.

The uncertainty and ambiguity of Elisha’s experience coincides with another feature of the story, namely, the absence of any mention of God in vv. 9-12. In vv. 2-6, each of the dialogues contains references to YHWH. There is no such reference in the dialogue between Elijah and Elisha in vv. 9-10, nor is there any reference to God in the account of Elijah’s departure in vv. 11-12. There is the whirlwind, the chariot, the fire, and Elijah is taken—but God remains unmentioned.

ELISHA CROSSES THE JORDAN—(verses 13-14)

The next reference to God is in the form of a question. In v. 14, Elisha strikes the water with Elijah’s mantle, cries out “where is YHWH, the God

²⁴Cf. Galling, “Der Ehrenname Elisias,” 141-42.

²⁵Cf. Schmitt, *Elisa*, 102-4.

of Elijah?”, and then strikes the water again.²⁶ The question and repeated actions do not convey an impression of a confident, effective prophet, especially when compared with the way Elijah crossed the Jordan in v. 8.²⁷ Despite the intensity of his experience in vv. 11-12, and despite having the mantle of Elijah in his hand, Elisha remains uncertain about God and about whether he has inherited Elijah’s spirit. Even the parting of the water may be an ambiguous sign. Does it point to the power of Elisha or—because of the importance of the mantle—to the power of Elijah?²⁸

ELISHA’S ENCOUNTER WITH THE PROPHETS OF JERICHO—(vv. 15-18)

The prophets proclaim that “the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha” and pay him homage (v. 15), then they propose that a party should go and search for Elijah (vv. 16-18). There is a tension here that has led historical-critical scholars to identify vv. 16-18 as a later addition to a story that ended at v. 15. They also note that the prophets’ proposal for a search party seems out of step with their earlier acceptance that YHWH was about to take Elijah (cf. vv. 3, 5). These points of tension favour the view that vv. 16-18 are additions.²⁹ The prophets’ proclamation and their act of homage make v. 15 a suitable conclusion. In this hypothesis, their words and gesture presumably resolve Elisha’s uncertainties.

²⁶As Nelson notes, this is obscured in the RSV and NRSV (*First and Second Kings*, 159). The name YHWH does not occur in the LXX or Vg.

²⁷Is there a distant echo in v. 14 of Num 20:9-13 where Moses strikes the rock twice and incurs God’s censure?

²⁸The reading proposed here for vv. 10-14 disagrees with those who hold that Elisha’s reception of the spirit of Elijah is validated in what he sees (vv. 10, 12), in his crossing of the Jordan (v. 14), and in the proclamation by the prophets (v. 15); cf. J. A. Todd, “The Pre-Deuteronomistic Elijah Cycle,” in *Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective* (ed. R. B. Coote; IBL Semeia Studies; Atlanta: Scholars, 1992) 1-35, p. 29; Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 160; Long, *2 Kings*, 27-28. Todd’s third validation, v. 15, could be invoked for a story that ended at v. 15. On this see below.

²⁹See Schmitt, *Elisa*, 105-6; Stipp, *Elischa-Profeten-Gottesmänner*, 56-62; Würthwein, *1. Kön–2. Kön* 25, 276-77; Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, vol. II, 387-88. Additional arguments have been proposed but are not convincing. One is that vv. 16-18 speak of the spirit of YHWH whereas v. 15 speaks of the spirit of Elijah (cf. also v. 9b). Another argument is that in v. 16 the prophets at Jericho offer fifty “strong men” from “among your servants” to search for Elijah; v. 7 however, refers to fifty prophets who watch Elijah and Elisha by the Jordan. The first argument overlooks the prophets’ recognition that the spirit of Elijah now rests on Elisha. Hence, another term is needed to describe the spirit that has taken Elijah away. In relation to the second argument, one can readily envisage fifty prophets from among a company of prophets as well as fifty strong men from the same company, who may also be prophets.

Why then were vv. 16-18 added? The preceding narrative provides two clues. One is the absence of any word of Elisha in response to the prophets' words and gesture. This leaves a slight gap, the possibility that his uncertainties were not resolved. The second is the unusual phrase in vv. 3 and 5 to describe Elijah's departure—"YHWH is taking your master from over your head". One would initially be inclined to take this as a reference to Elijah's permanent departure, like vv. 1a and 9-10. V. 16 however, allows one to understand the phrase differently. It can refer to a temporary rather than a permanent disappearance of Elijah. There is a precedent for this in 1 Kgs 18:12 where Obadiah complains that the spirit of YHWH can suddenly whisk Elijah away to an unknown location. The prophets in v. 16 therefore want to establish whether Elijah's disappearance is temporary, like 1 Kgs 18:12, or permanent.³⁰

A skilful redactor could therefore exploit a small gap and an ambiguous phrase in the earlier narrative to add vv. 16-18. The addition explores the theme of Elisha's uncertainty by shifting the focus from his experiences in vv. 11-14 to the fate of Elijah. The prophets want to search for Elijah and Elisha tries to stop them. Presumably, their understanding of the above phrase is in conflict with his—he understands it to refer to Elijah's permanent departure. If this is the case, why does he not explain to them what happened to Elijah? This would have averted the ensuing conflict and fruitless search. But, if the preceding narrative leaves uncertain whether Elisha saw Elijah or only the chariot and horses, then he cannot tell them for certain what has happened to Elijah.

Verses 16-18 also take up issues from vv. 2-6. The prophets in vv. 15-18 play a similar role to that of Elisha in vv. 2-6, while Elisha himself is cast in the role of Elijah. The prophets pay homage to Elisha in v. 15 and they refer to themselves as "your servants" in v. 16. Nevertheless, they effectively overrule him by insisting on the search party in spite of his prohibition. The parallel with the relationship between Elijah and Elisha in vv. 2-6 is unmistakable. The prophets' insistence and Elisha's capitulation also provides an ironic contrast to vv. 3b and 5b. There, he ordered them to silence, presumably with success; here he is unable to silence them.

The present text builds a subtle but powerful critique of the desire for tangible signs that will provide certainty. Elijah offers Elisha a sign so that he will know whether or not he has received the spirit of prophecy. According to the reading outlined, the sign proves unreliable. Elisha has an intense experience of the divine but is left uncertain and frustrated. According to the reading presented, this is because his experience does

³⁰Long suggests that the prophets' purpose may be to look for a corpse (2 Kings, 28). According to v. 16, this would mean that YHWH was in some way responsible for Elijah's death, an unlikely possibility.

not conform to the sign given. The prophets send a party to search for a tangible sign of Elijah and it returns empty handed. From their perspective, uncertainty remains; either Elijah has not yet been found or he is not there to be found. Vv. 16-18 end with Elisha's question; it reiterates his earlier command but—for the prophets—leaves Elijah's fate as unresolved as before.

Reading the present text obliges one to reflect on the relationship between vv. 1-15 and vv. 16-18. A storyteller could choose to end the story at v. 15; according to historical-critical analysis, this was its original ending. However, the understanding of vv. 16-18 outlined here could also provide a storyteller with another way of telling this part of the story. As Campbell proposes, redactional additions may have served as reminders that a story could be told in more than one way.

ELISHA'S DIALOGUE WITH THE PEOPLE OF THE CITY—(verses 19-22)

The final dialogue of the chapter occurs in vv. 19-22, the episode in which Elisha restores polluted water to "the city"—from the context this is presumably Jericho. There is general agreement in historical-critical analysis that the episode is a later addition to the chapter.³¹ This makes good sense. From a form-critical point of view, vv. 19-22 are similar to other short accounts of miracles in 4:1-7; 4:38-41; and 6:1-7. These may once have circulated as a collection to celebrate Elisha as a wonder worker.

Vv. 19-22 have been added at a strategic point in the text. The dialogue between Elisha and the people of the city contains none of the tension and conflict observed in the dialogues of vv. 2-6 and vv. 16-18. There are no refusals and no prohibitions. The people make a request of Elisha who complies immediately with instructions that engage the people's participation, with a sign (throwing salt from a new bowl into the polluted water), and a prophetic word. For the first time, Elisha uses the prophetic formula "thus says YHWH". V. 22 testifies to the lasting efficacy of Elisha's intervention, emphasizing that the outcome was according to the word that he spoke. The episode forms a marked contrast to the preceding narrative; Elisha acts decisively as a prophet with both word and sign proving effective. In terms of the present text, one could say that the successful outcome of Elisha's encounter with the people is a clear sign that the spirit of Elijah rests on him.

³¹Cf. the discussions in Schmitt, *Elisa*, 106-7; Würthwein, *1. Kön-2. Kön* 25, 277-78; Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, vol. II, 383, 388; Long, *2 Kings*, 33.

ELISHA'S JOURNEY—(verses 23-24 and 25)

Verses 23-24 and 25 are also best taken as later additions to the chapter.³² Elisha's encounter with a group of boys on his way to Bethel (vv. 23-24) is not a pleasant passage to read; despite this, there are important reasons for its presence in the text. Unlike vv. 19-22, this episode does not contain any dialogue between Elisha and the boys who revile him. Its importance lies in other features of the text. One is the theme of journey. Vv. 23-24 describe Elisha retracing Elijah's earlier journey from Jericho ("from there" in v. 23) to Bethel. V 25 continues the account of his journey to Mount Carmel and thence to Samaria. Whereas Elijah's journey to Bethel and thence to Jericho in effect led nowhere, Elisha's journey is purposeful. He travels to Bethel, then to Mount Carmel, the site of Elijah's triumph in 1 Kings 18, and finally to Samaria, the seat of royal power. Within the larger context, this is surely a sign that Elisha has assumed decisively the role played by Elijah in the northern kingdom.³³ A second significant feature is the she-bears that maul forty-two of the boys. In the preceding narrative, Elijah gave Elisha a sign, Elisha looked for this sign, and the prophets looked for Elijah as a sign. None of the signs proved reliable. Here, Elisha simply utters a curse. The she-bears are a fearful sign that his word has prophetic power.

CONCLUSION

This reading of 2 Kings 2 unfolds a complex yet finely balanced portrayal of the principal characters, Elijah and Elisha. On the one hand, it reveres them as major prophets in Israelite tradition. On the other hand, it develops a subtle but powerful critique of them as prophets.³⁴ The critique can be seen as a theological reflection on the prophetic charism; in the narrative this is "the spirit of Elijah" that is transferred from Elijah to Elisha. The critique is principally about the following points. One is the ambiguous nature of prophets' signs. Neither Elijah, Elisha nor the prophets of Jericho can provide a clear sign that confirms what has happened to the

³²Following the arguments of the authors cited in the preceding note.

³³Long (*2 Kings*, 20) fails to see the significance that v. 25 plays in the overall portrayal of Elisha as Elijah's successor. Hobbs (*2 Kings*) sees the significance of the reference to Samaria and links v. 25 with 2 King 1.

³⁴The critical appraisal is not confined to this chapter of the Elijah and Elisha stories. Other pertinent passages are in 1 Kings 19 and 2 Kings 4. In the former, Elijah fails to be moved by his encounter with God at Horeb and makes the same reply to God after the encounter as before (cf. 19:10 and 14). As well, his assessment of Israel's complete lack of fidelity is corrected by God (cf. 19:18). In the latter, the woman of Shunem shows more insight than Elisha (cf. 4:29-30). For similar comments see Nelson (*First and Second Kings*, 126-27 and 172-73), although he tempers the critical view of Elijah in 1 Kings 19 by proposing that it portrays him suffering from depression.

spirit of Elijah. Being a prophet is no guarantee that one can provide clear signs of the presence of God. Another point of criticism is undue preoccupation by prophets with the prophetic charism. Here the critique is directed mainly at Elisha who seems bent on getting a double share of the master's spirit. At the outset of the narrative, he is a confident and dominant character who knows what he wants. His encounter with the divine leaves him unsure as to whether he has got what he wants. The prophets of Jericho proclaim that the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha but he remains uncertain and ineffective. It is only in responding to those in need that he successfully exercises his prophetic charism. Elisha learns through painful experience that the charism is not for oneself but for the service of others. A third point is more a reflection on Elisha's experience. It is invaluable for him as a prophet but it is not a condition of his becoming a prophet. This is signalled by the way the narrative portrays Elisha acting as a prophet in vv. 19-24 but declines to pin down in the preceding text when and how he becomes a prophet.

If 2 Kings 2 was composed by prophetic circles who traced themselves back to Elisha and Elijah, it is a tribute to their capacity for critical reflection on their tradition.