

[The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash](#)

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #80: Achazya Part 9: Structure of the Story

We have already noted, in previous *shiurim*, that our narrative is clearly divided into two halves of fairly similar length: verses 2-8 (7 verses), and verses 9-17 (9 verses). The distinction between the two halves arises, first and foremost, from their content: the first half discusses the messengers of Achazya, whom Eliyahu succeeds in turning around and transforming into his own messengers to Achazya. The second half covers the story of messengers of a different type. The captains of fifty, and their men, are soldiers whose mission is to capture Eliyahu, with a view to harming him. Although Eliyahu has to deal with messengers sent by Achazya in both instances, the nature of these emissaries and their objectives, along with the biblical terminology for them and the way in which Eliyahu handles them, are entirely different.

The conclusion of the first half is left dramatically open-ended. Achazya discovers that the man who has stopped his messengers and sent them back to him, bearing a prophecy of punishment for him, is none other than Eliyahu, the old enemy of the royal house. All of the bad feeling from the past, along with the fear that the prophets present message will indeed be realized, are condensed into Achazya's emotional exclamation after hearing the prophet's identifying characteristics: "He is Eliya the Tishbi!"

This name for Eliyahu – "Eliya ha-Tishbi" – concludes the first half. The same title had appeared near the beginning of this half (verse 3): "And God's angel spoke to Eliya the Tishbi." It occurs nowhere else in our narrative, and is quite rare in all the Eliyahu narratives.

The second half begins with a dramatic turning point: Achazya responds to Eliyahu's victory and to the message that he conveys in the first half. He attempts to sabotage the prophecy of his impending death by doing away with the prophet. However, in the second half, too, Eliyahu prevails over Achazya's scheme. The emissaries who do not submit willingly to Eliyahu (as Achazya's messengers had done in the first half) are burned with

a fire that comes down from heaven, and the last captain is therefore ready and willing to submit. It would appear, therefore, that Achazya fails in his attempt to have Eliyahu brought down from his elevated seat by the king's messengers. However, it then turns out that it is specifically those messengers who do submit to Eliyahu, who succeed in getting the prophet to come down and to accompany them to the king. In this way Eliyahu ends up prevailing not only over Achazya's messengers, but over the king himself. Achazya is forced to hear God's word directly from Eliyahu's mouth, without being able to harm him in any way.

As in many other biblical stories, including most of the "Eliyahu narratives," the two parts of our story parallel one another in inverse symmetrical form (a chiasmic parallel). This symmetrical structure is especially prominent in the beginning and ending of the story, with increasingly close examination required as we approach the center. The relationship between the corresponding limbs of the two halves is not a fixed one. Sometimes it is a relationship of cause and effect, while at other times there is a comparison, with some degree of development in the second half. Aside from the two innermost limbs which are not equal in length (and which in turn cause the two halves of the story to be of unequal length), all the other corresponding limbs occupy exactly the same number of verses.

The

following presentation of the story highlights the parallel between the two halves. Thereafter we shall discuss each pair of parallel limbs independently.

- A (2) Achazya fell through the lattice... and he was sick, and he sent messengers...
Go, inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv... **if I will live** through this illness.
- B (3) And **an angel of God spoke to Eliya** the Tishbi: Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Shomron
And speak to them: **Is it because there is no king in Israel that you are going to inquire of Ba'al Zevuv, god of Ekron?**
- (4) **Therefore, so says God: You shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but shall surely die**
And Eliyahu went.
- (5) And the messengers returned to him and he said to them: Why have you returned?
- C (6) And they said to him: A man came up to meet us, and he said to us: Go, return to the king who sent you, and speak to him. So says the Lord: Is it because there is no king in Israel that you send to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron?
Therefore you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but shall surely die.

- (7) And he said to them: What was the manner of the man who came up to meet you and who spoke these things to you?
- D (8) And they said to him: He was a hairy man, and with a leather girdle around his loins.
And he said: He is Eliya the Tishbi!
- * * *
- (9) And he sent to him a captain of fifty and his fifty men...
And he said to him: Man of God, the king has spoken: Come down.
- D1 (10) And Eliyahu answered and he spoke... Let a fire come down from the heavens...
And a fire came down from the heavens and consumed him and his fifty men.
- (11) And he again sent to him another captain of fifty and his men...
So says the king: Come down quickly.
- (12) And Eliyahu answered and spoke to them...
And a fire came down from the heavens and consumed him and his fifty men.
- C1 (13) And again he sent a third captain of fifty and his fifty men
And he went up and he came... and he fell upon his knees before Eliyahu and beseeched him and said to him:
Man of God, Let my life, and the life of your servants, these fifty, be dear in your eyes.
- (14) Behold, fire has come down from the heavens and consumed the two captains of fifty...
And now, let my life be dear in your eyes.
- (15) And **an angel of God spoke to Eliyahu**: Go down to him, do not fear him.
So he arose and went down to him, to the king.
- B1 (16) And he said to him: **So says God** - Since you sent messengers to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron – is it because there is no God in Israel that you inquire of him?
Therefore you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but shall surely die.
- A1 (17) **And he died**, according to God's word which He spoke to Eliyahu..."

A-A1: This pair of limbs represents the framework of the story. Unit A recounts Achazya's fall, his illness, and his inquiry as to whether he will live, while unit A1 records his death from that illness. His death is not merely the natural outcome, but an event that happens "according to God's word which He spoke to Eliyahu." Achazya made no attempt to inquire of God, and God's word destines him to die as a punishment for his having inquired of Ba'al-Zevuv. In other words, unit A1 arises out of the two facts

that pave the way for it in unit A: the actual fall and illness, and the fact that the king chooses to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv as to his fate. God's announcement of his imminent death is uttered by Eliyahu, and everything that leads from the announcement to the result is covered in all the sections in between A and A1.

B-B1: An angel of God is revealed to Eliyahu in each of these units, and the purpose of the revelation is to send Eliyahu to convey God's word to Achazya. In B1 the angel instructs Eliyahu, "Arise, **go up**," and he places God's word in Eliyahu's mouth in order that the prophet will pass it on, via Achazya's messengers, to the king. In B1 the angel commands him, "**Go down** to him." He does not repeat God's message, since it is already known to Eliyahu. Instead of hearing God's word uttered by the angel (as in B), we now hear it from Eliyahu as he addresses Achazya. (On the other hand, in B we do not hear Eliyahu's words to the messengers of Achazya, and thus the two units maintain equal length.) Corresponding to, "Eliya went," at the end of B, we find in B1 – "He arose and went down to him...." The second unit represents a development in that this time the message is conveyed to the king by Eliyahu himself, rather than through the agency of any messengers. This is as a result of the confrontation that is played out in the second half of the story. (The parallel between the two revelations was discussed in a previous *shiur*.)

C-C1: There are two sets of emissaries from the king, each of which submits to Eliyahu: In C the messengers return to the king, at Eliyahu's command, becoming the prophet's messengers to Achazya to tell him God's word concerning his imminent death. The messengers in C1 likewise fail to prevail over Eliyahu and to fulfill their king's command to bring him down by force. They are reduced, eventually (in the person of the third captain), to beseech him for their lives. This pair of parallel limbs reflects an interesting reversal: Eliyahu's success in C results in the messengers going against the king's instructions, and instead of going to Ekron, they go back to Achazya. In contrast, the prophet's success in C1 leads to a situation in which the messengers themselves (unlike their predecessors in the first half) actually do fulfill Achazya's command to bring Eliyahu down from his seat, and to present him before the king. Eliyahu performs the wish of the third captain of fifty (at the command of the angel of God) because he is submissive and pleads for his life. This reversal heralds the development that follows: now Eliyahu's word will prevail over Achazya's rejection of it, even within the framework of the king's desire (that Eliyahu be brought to him) being fulfilled.

D-D1: This pair reflects a relationship of cause-and-effect. In the dialogue between Achazya and his messengers upon their return from the

encounter with Eliyahu, the king seeks to discover the identity of the prophet who has uttered such a terrible prophecy about him. When he realizes that "He is Eliya the Tishbi," he is driven to dispatch captains of fifty with their men to capture and do away with him. Thus, D represents a psychological and practical stage of preparation for the actions that Achazya undertakes in unit D1. The quantitative imbalance between the two units arises from the fact that Achazya's efforts to have Eliyahu captured by his soldiers are repeated over and over. Furthermore, in D1 the text describes not only Achazya's efforts, but also their subversion by Eliyahu. Therefore this unit is twice as long as unit D (such that the overall equality between the two halves of the story is also affected).

The subject of our story is the victory of God's word and the victory of its bearer over the king who has sinned and then seeks to disrupt God's word by injuring its bearer, the man of God. The victory of God's word is in its ultimate realization, and it is this that serves as the framework of the story (A-A1). However, the real message of the story is the failure of the attempts to harm Eliyahu – the bearer of God's word, and Eliyahu's ability to declare God's word to the king unimpeded – whether through the agency of the king's own messengers, or directly, in person. Those who attempt to sabotage the fulfillment of God's word by harming its bearer are punished. In contrast, those who submit to the prophet are not harmed, even though the act of submission would seem to endanger them. This is true of Achazya's first set of messengers, as well as applying to the third captain of fifty and his men.

Translated by Kaeren Fish