

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS

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Dedicated in memory of

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Shiur #11 – Chronology, Structure, and Two Judean Kings

STRUCTURE AND TIMING IN THE ELISHA STORIES

One should realise that on the basis of the years of the kings, Elisha served Israel from the nineteenth year of Yehoshafat until his death – a period of sixty-six years." (Abarbanel, *II Melakhim* 13:17)

As we draw our study of Elisha to a close, we should appreciate that Elisha has an extraordinarily lengthy career. He becomes an apprentice to Eliyahu in the days of Ach'av, and assumes the full status of prophet close to the advent of King Yehoram, Ach'av's son. He dies during the reign of Yeho'ash.^[1] This lengthy tenure raises questions regarding the historical context of the component stories of Elisha, a collection of stories that spans chapters two to nine of *II Melakhim*. Specifically, we should note that the king of Yisrael is referred to anonymously in several stories (from chapter five through chapter eight) even though he figures prominently in virtually every episode. Why hide the identity of the king? The standard approach of the traditional commentators is to assume that the nameless king of Yisrael is none other than Yehoram; Yehoram's ascent to the throne is recorded explicitly in chapter three and a new king, Yeihu, assumes the throne, killing Yehoram, only at the conclusion of the Elisha stories. The chronology affirms that the king in question is Yehoram.

However, since the king remains in a state of anonymity throughout several of these episodes, this ambiguity suggests other possibilities. After all, King Yehoram reigns for a mere twelve years. Could it be that all of Elisha's miracle stories are concentrated into twelve years of a sixty year career, or might they possibly be more evenly spread?^[2]

There are compelling reasons to suggest that Elisha also serves as a prophet during the reign of subsequent kings:

· Several stories depict the king and the prophet in a warm and positive relationship.^[3] This seems unlikely given the acerbic attitude exhibited by Elisha towards the idolatrous Yehoram: "What have you to do with me? Go to your father's prophet's or your mother's prophets" (3:13-14). A relationship of respect and cooperation would make more sense if the king in question is Yeihu, a God-fearing king, or his son, Yeho'achaz.

· Chapter six depicts a situation in which a huge Aramean force surrounds the town of Dotan. This is followed by Aram besieging the capital Shomron in an extended campaign (6:24-7:20). The ease with which Aram penetrate central Israel gives the impression that Yisrael's border defence has entirely collapsed. However, this picture does not match up with the national security situation during Yehoram's reign. The Yisrael-Aram border is drawn at Ramot Gilad in Transjordan during the time of Yehoram (see 8:28 and 9:1), and, as such, it is unlikely that the Aramean army could have so easily penetrated Yehoram's defences, deep into the heartland of Yisrael's territory. This situation would seem to reflect more accurately the dreadful crumbling of Yisrael's military: "for the King of Aram had decimated them and trampled them like the dust under his feet" (13:7), during the reign of Yeihu and his son Yeho'achaz.

In summary, the evidence points to an understanding that Elisha indeed functioned under Yehoram, but that several of these episodes transpired later, during the reign of the kings that succeeded him: Yeihu, Yeho'achaz and Yeho'ash.

THE SEQUENCE OF THE ELISHA STORIES

And so, if the chronology is disturbed, why are the Elisha stories all grouped in a single collection. Why does the *Tanakh* arrange all the stories consecutively rather than narrating them in their historically appropriate context?

The answer is as follows: the ordering principle of the Elisha stories is not historical but associative. Each of the episodes is hinged to the preceding one by dint of a commonality of theme or language that furnishes a linkage between stories.^[4] We shall list below some of the connection points:

Ref.	Story	Link to Previous Story
2:1-18	From Eliyahu to Elisha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Both chapters one and two relate to groups of fifty soldiers (1:9-13) and prophets (1:7,17). · The root <i>sh-l-ch</i> (1:2,6,9,13,16/ 2:2,4,6,16,17) · Repeated use of a vertical theme, and the verbs <i>a-l-h/ y-</i>

		<i>r-d</i>
2:19-22	Healing the Spring at Yericho	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The story is a continuation of the previous one, geographically (Yericho) and chronologically. · The chiasm of the chapter (Beit-El/Yericho/Jordan/Transjordan/Yericho/Beit-El) supports the placement of this story.
2:23-25	Bears	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · "And he left there (Yericho)" (2:23) establishes this as a continuation of the previous story, as does the aforementioned chiastic pattern.
3:1-27	War against Moav	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · "...he returned to <u>Shomron</u>" (2:25) / "in <u>Shomron</u>" (3:1) · "<i>va-tibakana</i>" (2:24) / "<i>le-havki'a</i>" (3:24) · The killing of children concludes both stories.
4:1-7	The Widow and the Oil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The filling [<i>yimaleh</i>] of the empty wadi with water (3:17,20) / the filling [<i>ha-maleh</i>] of the empty jugs with oil (4:4,6) · "Elisha who <u>poured</u> water" (3:11) / "<u>pour</u>" (4:4) · The root <i>n-s-a</i>: "So they withdrew [<i>vayisu</i>]" (3:27) / "remove each one as it is filled [<i>tasi'i</i>]" (4:4)
4:8-37	Shunammite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · In both stories Elisha assists a woman who refers to herself as his "maidservant" (4:2/ 4:16). · Both are stories of a woman and her children: the danger to the child (or children) is averted, and life is restored. · "What can I do for you?"(4:2) / "What shall be done for her?"(4:14)
4:38-41	"Death in the Pot"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · "And he <u>died</u>" (4:20) / "<u>death</u> in the pot" (4:40)^[5]
4:42-44	The Bread	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Both are stories of Elisha providing food for the benei ha-nevi'im. · Both have a similar structure.^[6] · "Give to/ pour for the people that they may eat"

		(4:41/42,43)
5:1-27	Na'aman	· In both stories gifts are brought to the prophet (4:42/5:5,15). ^[7]
6:1-7	Floating Axe-head	· The Jordan River features in both stories. · Similar language: " <i>ho-el na</i> " (5:23/6:3); " <i>Hinnei na</i> " (5:15/6:1); "has not gone anywhere [<i>aneh va-anna</i>]"(5:26)/ "Where [<i>ana</i>] did it fall?"(6:6)
6:8-23	Dotan – Fiery chariots	· The word " <i>makom</i> " features three times in each story. · "Alas, Master!" (6:5/6:15)
6:24-7:20	Siege in Shomron	· Chronological connection: "And it was, afterwards..." (6:24) · "Horses and chariots" (6:13-14/7:14) · Both stories have the Arameans surrounding a town.
8:1-6	The King and the Shunammite	· In both stories, women cry out to the king (6:26/8:3). · Both stories include the king's courtiers: the <i>shalish</i> (7:2,19) and the <i>saris</i> (8:6). · " <i>Ke-daber ish Ha-Elokim</i> " (7:18) / " <i>ki-devar ish Ha-Elokim</i> "(8:2)

Looking at this list, we observe that the entire Elisha unit is organized under the principle of "*semikhat parshiot*" – connections from one section to the next. And on this basis, a literary connection between stories, we are free to propose that the pieces of the Elisha story occupy a wider historical span than the twelve years of Yehoram, as may appear at first glance from *Sefer Melakhim*.^[8]

ELISHA REFLECTING ELIYAHU

Nevertheless, an alternative interpretation of the chapter ordering is also particularly attractive. The table below demonstrates the manner in which the Elisha narratives are ordered by the same structural paradigm as those of Eliyahu.

Eliyahu Narratives	Elisha Narratives
(17:2-6) Eliyahu drinks the water in the wadi	(3:9-20) Soldiers of Yisrael drink the water in the wadi
(17:8-16) Eliyahu and a widow, Oil and flour miraculously multiply	(4:1-7) Elisha and the widow, Oil multiplies (4:38-44) Flour in the pot/ loaves extend themselves to provide food
(17:17-24) Resuscitation of a widow's child	(4:8-37) Resuscitation of a widow's child
(18:20-39) The miraculous spectacle at Mt. Carmel induces recognition of God: "The Lord alone is God!" (18:39)	(5:1-27) Elisha miraculously cures Na'aman, who responds: "Now I know that there is no God in the whole world except in Yisrael!" (5:15)
(18:1-3) Eliyahu's life is threatened	(6:18-14) Elisha's life is threatened
(Ch.19) Two military campaigns of Yisrael against Aram	(Ch.6-7) Two military campaigns of Aram against Yisrael
(<i>II Melakhim</i> ch.1) Eliyahu delivers God's word to a dying king	(8:7-15) Elisha delivers God's word to a dying king

In this schematic structure of the Elisha chapters, the Elisha stories are modeled after those of Eliyahu, his master. In the same manner, the proclamation: "My father! My father! Chariot of Yisrael and his horsemen" is made both at Eliyahu's death and at the death of Elisha (2:12, 13:14). The student who requested "a double portion" of his master's spirit finds the narrative of his miracles and interactions constructed upon the paradigm of the master himself.

8:16-24 KING YEHORAM OF YEHUDA

After many chapters that have been focused upon the Northern Kingdom, *Sefer Melakhim* now returns to events in Yehuda, bringing the account of its royal dynasty in line with that of Yisrael. King Yehoram is the son of the righteous king Yehoshafat, and having been designated by his

father,^[9] we would expect a God-fearing king. And yet, it his evil wife, Atalia, daughter of Ach'av and Izevel,^[10] who is the primary influence upon Yehoram:

He followed the practices of the kings of Yisrael – whatever the House of Ach'av did, for he had married a daughter of Ach'av – and he did what was evil in the eyes of God. However the Lord refrained from destroying Yehuda ... During his reign Edom rebelled against Yehuda's rule and set up a king of their own ... and Livna likewise rebelled at that time. (8:18-22)

The precise circumstances of his rise to power are clouded in mystery. His father was a stable and powerful monarch, and yet, it appears that a rivalry developed between Yehoshafat's sons, as they contended for the throne during Yehoshafat's twilight years. This led to the early appointment of Yehoram, still during his father's reign.^[11] In *Divrei Ha-yamim*, we read:

He had brothers, sons of Yehoshafat: Azaria, Yechiel, Zekharia, Azaryahu, Mikhael, Shefatya ... Their father gave them many gifts of silver, gold and [other] presents, as well as fortified towns in Yehuda, but he gave the kingdom to Yehoram because he was the firstborn. Yehoram proceeded to take firm hold of his father's kingdom, and he killed all his brothers buy the sword, and many officers of Yisrael. (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:2-4)

The scenario in which we find a leadership struggle between brothers leading to the ascent of the heir to the throne during the reign of the elder monarch is familiar to us. This is precisely the situation that transpired in the opening chapter of *I Melakhim*, in which Shlomo and Adonia both contend for the throne. King David anoints Shlomo and seats him on his throne, even while David is still king. And yet, in our situation, Yehoram overcomes the instability surrounding his coronation by killing all of his brothers.^[12]

NATIONAL WEAKNESS

In this regard it seems that the norms of the Northern Kingdom constitute the dominant influence upon the royal court of Yehoram. Yehoram's period is characterized by weakness: spiritual, moral and military. Spiritually, when the verse speaks of Yehoram turning to "the practices of the kings of Yisrael" (8:18), it refers to Ba'al worship, a terrible religious downturn for the kingdom of Yehuda. When it states that, "the Lord refrained from destroying Yehuda" (8:19), the verse implies that the religious climate under Yehoram rendered Yehuda deserving of destruction. Morally, the king's murder of his own brothers is a reprehensible act, reflecting political norms alien to the kingdom of Yehuda,^[13] and quite possibly influenced by his mother-in-law, Izevel, who had no compunction when it came to murder.^[14] Indeed, *Divrei Ha-yamim* gives us the text of an extraordinary prophetic communique:

A letter from Eliyahu the Prophet came to him which read, "Thus says the Lord God of your father David: 'Since you have not followed the practices of your father Yehoshafat and the practices of Assa, king of Yehuda, but have followed the practices of the kings of Yisrael, leading Yehuda astray and the inhabitants of Yerushalayim ... and have killed your brothers of your father's house, who were better than you, therefore, the Lord will inflict a great blow upon your people...'" (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:12-15)

How could Eliyahu have sent a letter posthumously, many years after his own death? Some commentators suggest that Eliyahu appeared to a prophet of that time (Radak), or that since it refers to the House of Ach'av, Eliyahu's arch nemesis, Eliyahu had written the letter in a spirit of prophecy before his death (Malbim). Alternatively, it was miraculous and not explainable rationally (Abarbanel). But, whatever the circumstances of this message, this eerie condemnation by the great Eliyahu is an ominous judgment upon Yehoram's reign.

A third sphere in which Yehoram fails is in national defense. In his era, Edom overthrows Israelite control. Yisrael had controlled Edom since the days of King David, but now Yehoram fails to suppress their uprising, such that Yehuda lose control over Edom "to this day." He was evidently perceived as a weak leader: *Divrei Ha-yamim* details an even more devastating campaign against Yehuda waged by "the Pelishtim and the Arvim who lived near the Kushim" which threatened one of the royal cities:

They marched against Yehuda, breached its defense, and carried off all the property that was found in the king's palace, as well as his sons and wives. (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:17)

Moreover, his rule aroused internal controversy. Livna, a Judean city in the coastal plain, rebels against Yehoram's authority. Was this a sign of political opposition to Yehoram? Alternatively, does the revolt of Livna, a Levite city,^[15] demonstrate a religious opposition to Yehoram's idolatrous orientation?

In conclusion, Yehoram's reign is characterized by religious deviation, a weak regional military presence, and a harsh attack by foreign forces. Yehuda is in decline on all fronts. *II Divrei Ha-yamim* (21:20) records that even in his death he was not awarded a royal burial site.

8:25-29 KING ACHAZYAHU OF YEHUDA

Yehoram's son, Achazyahu, reigns for only a year until he is assassinated in the Yeihu revolt. In his short reign, however, he is controlled by advisors from the Northern Kingdom,^[16] and he continues to lead the country in the ways of idolatry. His union with the North is emphasized as Achazyahu accompanies his northern counterpart, Yehoram, in a war against Aram, a battle in which Yehoram is severely injured.

In the wake of this war, and Yehoram's injuries, Achazyahu makes his way to Yizrael to visit the sickly Yehoram. The rendezvous between the king of Yisrael and the king of Yehuda forms the backdrop to the revolt of Yeihu, which we shall study next week.

[1] Abarbanel assumes that the war against Moav, narrated in chapter three of *II Melakhim*, transpires at the start of Yehoram's reign, as he acts to subdue Moav's rebellion which had flared up before his ascent to power. Yehoram comes to the throne in Yehoshafat's eighteenth year, and Abarbanel presumes that the campaign takes place a year later. The years of the kings are as follows: Yehoram (12), Yeihu (28), Yeho'achaz (17), and Yeho'ash (16). I am unsure as to how Abarbanel calculates the precise number of sixty-six years.

[2] R. Yehuda Kiel in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary suggests this option. See comments in summaries on pgs. 538, 542, and 547-8.

[3] For example, note the reference to Elisha as "my father" in 6:21.

[4] See Dr. Yael Shemesh's thorough analysis of the organizational principles of the Elisha stories in her doctoral thesis, Y. Shemesh, "*The Stories of Elisha: A Literary Analysis*," Ph.D. dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 1997, pp. 14-32 (Hebrew). R. Yehuda Kiel in his *Da'at Mikra* commentary adopts this approach as well. See his chapter summaries.

[5] Some see the connection with the previous story in its reflection of the Eliyahu narrative in *I Melakhim*, ch.17. See Dr. Y. Shemesh, pgs. 21-22.

[6] R. Elchanan Samet, *Pirkei Eliyahu*, pg.291

[7] There are few parallels to the story that immediately precedes chapter 5, but many more between the Na'aman story and the episode of the Shunammite and her son: "*isha gedola*" (4:8) / "*ish gadol*" (5:1) ; "she stood before him"(4:12) / "He stood before him" (5:15); Geichazi is present in both stories; the number seven: "the boy sneezed seven times" (4:35) / "bathe seven times" (5:10,15); the greeting "*Ha-shalom*" and response "*Shalom*" (4:26 / 5:22-21).

[8] Some, however, oppose this entire theory. R. Elchanan Samet (*Pirkei Elisha*, pgs. 638-645) supports the rabbinic identification of the king as Yehoram and he asserts that the stories

are indeed chronological. After all, Elisha's earlier stories (the healing of the waters in Yericho, the bears, and the war with Moav – ch. 2-3) are incontestably from the start of Yehoram's reign. Likewise, the later stories – the anointing of Chaza'el and the appointment of Yeihu – are clearly dated from the close of the Yehoram period. As for the middle episodes, Rav Samet assumes that the veneration for Elisha, expressed by the royal court of Aram when Elisha visits Damascus, is a product of his fame in the episodes of Na'aman (ch.5) and Elisha's blinding of the troops in Dotan (ch.6). On this basis, the stories are ordered chronologically. And Elisha's description of the king as "the son of the murderer" (6:32) merely confirms the king's identity as Yehoram, son of Ach'av. (Ach'av is a "murderer" on the basis of *I Melakhim* 21:19.) As for the singular identity of the king, Rav Samet contends that these stories display a consistent characterization of King Yehoram, as a man animated by pessimism, despair, and fearfulness. Rav Samet must still account for the huge historical lacuna in Elisha's patronage of the nation; why does Elisha disappear after the anointment of Yeihu, only to return in one final appearance, on his death-bed, during the reign of Yo'ash? To this Rav Samet turns to the model of the prophet Shmuel who anoints King Sha'ul, interacts with him, and yet when the king fails, his final act is to anoint David, his successor. He then disappears from public life. Similarly, R. Samet suggests that Elisha was particularly designated to work with King Yehoram. He obeyed God and had Yeihu anointed, but he never sought to work alongside Yeihu, as the national prophet. His allegiance lay with Yehoram.

^[9] *II Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:3

^[10] There is some ambiguity here. 8:18 indicates that Yehoram married Ach'av's daughter; 8:26 seems to indicate that Atalia was Omri's daughter. Most commentators assume that the reference in 8:26 identifies Atalia by her grandfather Omri, and not by her father, Ach'av.

^[11] Yehoshafat reigns for twenty-five years (*I Melakhim* 22:42). Yehoram (ben Ach'av) of Yisrael ascends the throne in Yehoshafat's eighteenth year (*II Melakhim* 3:1). However, *II Melakhim* 8:16 records that Yehoram of Yehuda, son of Yehoshafat, ascended the throne in the fifth year of Yehoram son of Ach'av. There is a two year disparity. This indicates that Yehoram of Yehuda was crowned in his father's lifetime.

^[12] Shlomo also killed his half-brother and rival, Adonia, but that was after giving him an initial reprieve, and only after Adonia schemed to depose Shlomo.

^[13] See Avimelekh (*Shoftim* 9:5). However, see also Sha'ul (*I Shmuel* 24:21), Basha (*I Melakhim* 15:29).

^[14] *I Melakhim* 18:4,13, 19:2, 21:7-16

^[15] See *Yehoshua* 15:42-44. It was in Israelite control in the time of Chizkiyahu.
See *II Melakhim* 19:8.

^[16] *II Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:22:5