

Blessing and Curse: the Significance of Contrapuntal Structure to the Message and Exposition of 2 Kings 3:1–8:15

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The Elisha cycle (2 Kgs 3:1–8:15) presents a challenge for anyone attempting to analyze its structure.² The cycle lacks the common cause-effect relationship (i.e., Elijah's primary ministry in 1 Kgs 17–19) and regnal introductions common to the Book of Kings. The structure is not just an academic detail reserved for the introductory comments of a sermon or commentary but may contribute significantly to a literary unit's message. For example, Jeremiah used a broken acrostic (Lam 4) and complete absence of an acrostic (Lam 5) to convey a sense of desperation. The inclusio of 1 Kings 13 links the story of the man of God from Judah to the prophecy against Jeroboam's altars (13:2–3, 32–34). The Elisha cycle's structure can best be described as literary counterpoint, or contrapuntal. The Elisha cycle's contrapuntal structure contains three distinguishing features: the blessing and curse theme, the contrasting trajectories of the simple and complex plots, and the anticipation of the covenant judgment based on the literary context. As these features come together, the contrapuntal structure reinforces the message of the Elisha cycle: Yahweh stands ready to bless and care for his people if they will return, but the likeliness of their return fades as they reject his call. Since the contrapuntal structure contributes to the message, it must inform an exposition of the Elisha cycle. The

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² "Cycle" is a standard term for the describing the Elisha narratives regardless of one's view of the structure of the Elisha narratives.

validity and contribution of the contrapuntal structure can be demonstrated through an overview of other proposed structures and an analysis of the Elisha cycle's context, chronology, and plot types.

Proposed Structures for the Elisha Cycle

Many commentaries do not address the structure of the Elisha cycle. Those that do fall into four general categories: paratactic, chiastic, analogical, and thematic. First, Richard D. Nelson proposes a paratactic structure in which the narrator places isolated narratives together and allows their combined weight to bring the reader to the desired conclusion.³ It is as if the narratives are a line of bullet points that one can rearrange without altering the message of the cycle (e.g., . . .).⁴ The paratactic structure does not change the message of the individual narratives but fails to explain the interplay between the simple and complex plots.

Second, several commentators have suggested a chiastic structure (e.g., ABCC¹B¹A¹). Jerome Walsh organizes 2 Kings 3:1–8:6 into a chiastic structure but

³ Nelson says, "The narratives of [2 Kings] 4 are part of a larger paratactic. . . presentation of stories of Elisha's prophetic power (3:4–8:15)." Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, Interpretation, ed. James Luther Mays (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1987), 170. Robert L. Cohn agrees with Nelson's general labeling of the Elisha narratives but prefers an analogous relationship between the Elijah narratives and Elisha narratives. Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Structure of Kings," in *The Books of Kings: Sources, Composition, Historiography, and Reception*, ed. André Lemaire and Baruch Halpern (Boston: Brill, 2010), 119–22.

⁴ In other words, when a narrator employs a paratactic structure, he is like a lawyer calling character witnesses in a criminal case. The order in which he calls the character witnesses may not matter as much because they are present to establish the character of the defendant. The lawyer can achieve his desired outcome if he examines the character witnesses regardless of the order in which he examines the witnesses. On the other hand, when a narrator employs a structure based on cause-effect and chronological relationships, he is like a lawyer calling witnesses to the crime. Witness A establishes that the defendant carried boxes labeled as dynamite to his truck at 5:00 PM on the day of the bank robbery. Witness B recalls hearing a large explosion at 5:30 PM that day. Witness C remembers seeing the defendant carry in large duffle bags from his truck at 6:00 PM. In this case, the lawyer is trying to establish a relationship between the "accounts" in order to prove his case.

must rearrange two narratives to accomplish the complete chiasm (2:19–22 and 2:23–24).⁵ Walsh overgeneralizes the narratives to achieve this chiasm and justifies the rearranging of narratives based on unfounded textual history. David Dorsey views 2 Kings 2:1–8:6 as two complementary but independent chiasms centered around the themes of death (2:1–4:37) and kindness (4:38–8:6).⁶ Just as Walsh, Dorsey overgeneralizes the narratives to achieve his chiasms. For example, he parallels Elijah’s ascension (2:1–12) with the resurrection of the Shunamite’s son (4:1–37). The narratives share a general topic (death) but differ in their message (prophetic authority vs. response of faith) and treatment of the general topic (ascension vs. resurrection). Ultimately, the chiastic structure changes the messages of the narratives through overgeneralization.

Third, Robert Cohn and Michelle L. Bellamy each propose an analogical arrangement between the Elijah and Elisha cycles but not in a chiastic form (ABCA¹B¹C¹).⁷ While Cohn makes valid connections between the Elijah and Elisha oracles to dying kings (1:1–18; 2:7–15), his other proposed analogies are less obvious. For example, he tries to connect 1 Kings 7:2–6 (Elijah at Kerith) and 2 Kings 3:9–20 (Moabite War) because both narratives mention wadis. Bellamy modifies Cohn’s approach and suggests a complicated ring composition in which each Elisha narratives corresponds to an Elijah narrative. For example, Bellamy

⁵ Jerome Walsh, “The Organization of 2 Kings 3–11,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2010): 242–44.

⁶ David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MN: Baker Books, 1999), 140; Michelle L. Bellamy, “The Elijah-Elisha Cycle of Stories: A Ring Composition,” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University: 2013), 187.

⁷ Robert Cohn, “The Literary Structure of Kings,” in *The Books of Kings: Sources, Composition, Historiography, and Reception*, ed. André Lemaire and Baruch Halpern (Boston: Brill, 2010), 119. Michelle L. Bellamy “The Elijah-Elisha Cycle of Stories: A Ring Composition,” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University: 2013), 187.

sees a correspondence between 1 Kings 21:1–29 (Naboth’s vineyard) and 2 Kings 4:1–5:27 (prophet’s widow, Shunammite woman, and Naaman) because both deal with social justice.⁸ After noting the shared vocabulary between the passages (e.g., letter, rent, silver, two, and vineyard), she loosely connects Gehazi’s greed to that of Ahab.⁹ Social justice is not the focus of 2 Kings 5 unless the entire account of Naaman (5:1–19) is preparation for a loose comparison between Ahab and Gehazi. The analogical structure overgeneralizes and mischaracterizes the narratives even though it highlights a few interesting connections.

Fourth, Philip E. Satterthwaite proposes a thematic structure to the Elisha cycle built around the blessing and curse themes from the Jericho and Bethel narratives (2:19–25).¹⁰ The juxtaposition of these themes between the individual-focused short narratives and national-focused long narratives provides an implicit commentary on Israel.¹¹ Satterthwaite’s thematic approach focuses on details rather than overgeneralizing and invites the reader to understand the Elisha cycle in the broader context of the Book of Kings. The proposed contrapuntal structure of this paper builds on Satterthwaite’s thematic approach but also considers the plot trajectory and the anticipation of the judgment set up by 1 Kings 19.

Context of the Elisha Cycle

The context of the Book of Kings and themes of 2 Kings 2:19–25 provide the interpretive lens for the Elisha cycle and build the foundation of the contrapuntal structure. First, the message of the Book of Kings is Yahweh’s faithfulness to his

⁸ Ibid., 104.

⁹ Ibid., 110–11.

¹⁰ Philip E. Satterthwaite, “The Elisha Narratives and the Coherence of 2 Kings 2–8,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 49, no. 1 (1998): 9.

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

written and spoken word despite the unfaithfulness of his people. For the Jews in exile, this message provided the reason for the exile and hope for future restoration. The center literary unit of the book (1 Kgs 16:29–2 Kgs 8:15) focused on the prophets rather than kings. The prophets not only act as God’s spokesmen but serve as a litmus test for a character’s relationship to God. One’s attitude toward the prophet reflects his or her attitude toward God.

Second, the unfulfilled command to anoint Elisha, Hazael and Jehu are plot propellers for the Elisha cycle. In 1 Kings 19:15–17, God gave Elijah the three-fold command as a covenantal-judgment.¹² The swords of Elisha, Hazael, and Jehu would judge the nation because Israel had rejected Yahweh and persecuted his prophets (19:14). The subsequent narratives tease the three anointings but stop short of fulfillment. Elisha quickly enters the scene but as Elijah’s servant rather than his replacement (1 K 19:21). Ben-hadad and Ahab escaped death in the next two narratives (1Kgs 20:42; 21:29). The first anointing does not happen until 2 Kings 2 when Elisha became Elijah’s unquestioned heir based on his witness to ascension and miraculous works at Jordan, Jericho, and Bethel. Elisha’s rise in 2 Kings 2 along with the introduction of a non-Jehu-named king in 2 Kings 3 (Jehoram) reminds the reader of the three-fold command of 1 Kings 19. In a broader context of God’s faithfulness to his word, the Elisha cycle begins with overtones of covenantal-judgment and the expectation of new kings in Samaria and Damascus.

¹² The phrase “instead of you” (תַּחֲתֶיךָ) may describe substitution (e.g., a new dynasty; 1 Kgs 16:10) or continuation (e.g., a son ascending to the throne; 1 Kgs 1:30). If Yahweh intended to substitute Elisha for Elijah, he could have left the phrase out since the anointing of Hazael and of Jehu inherently meant a substitution. For instance, if “A” and “B” were substitutions, “C” would be a substitution unless otherwise noted. The inclusion of “in your place” (תַּחֲתֶיךָ) implies that Elisha’s anointing is different in nature from the first two.

Third, the incidents at Jericho (2:19–22) and Bethel (2:23–25) provide the immediate context for the Elisha cycle.¹³ In 2:19, the men of Jericho approached Elisha with a problem. Because they responded correctly to Elijah, they received a covenant blessing.¹⁴ After Jericho, Elisha met a group of young boys who came out of Bethel. The young boys mocked Elisha, and Elisha cursed them in Yahweh's name (2:24). Two she-bears killed forty-two of the young boys.¹⁵ The Jericho and Bethel narratives provide the thematic foundation on which the Elisha cycle

¹³ One could argue that these narratives begin the Elisha cycle. While this is possible, the narratives appear during a time of transition where Elisha backtracks the recent travels of Elijah and performs miracles establishing him as Elijah's heir. In addition, the focus on the monarchy in 2 Kings 3:1–4 gives a clear division between the transition period in 2 Kings 2 and the ministry of Elisha in 2 Kings 3:5–8:15.

¹⁴ This interpretation is based on the following line of reasoning. (1) The participle, שָׁכַל, often refers to a bereavement of a child (Gn 27:45, 42:36; 43:14; Dt 32:25). (2) The unfruitful "land" (הָאָרֶץ) refers metonymically to Jericho's residents (e.g., Hos 4:3). The women of Jericho suffered miscarriages because of the tainted water. (3) Elisha never mentioned the soil when proclaiming the water healed (2:21). He said that there would be no more death or שָׁכַל. (4) If the land is the soil, the men of Jericho never mentioned death as a problem, just the failure of crops. (5) The bereavement of children was a curse of the covenant (Lv 26:22), whereas protection from bereavement was a covenant blessing (Ex 23:26). (6) Only one of the twenty-two Old Testament occurrences of שָׁכַל refer explicitly to foliage (Mal 3:11). (7) The subsequent narrative poetically contrasts the miracle of Jericho. The occupants of Bethel were bereaved of forty-two children because they did not accept the prophetic authority (2:23–25).

¹⁵ This account has caused confusion as commentators struggle to understand Elisha's response to the situation. The reader must recognize several points to understand appropriately the encounter at Bethel. (1) The young boys were responsible moral agents. Consider the use of יָלַד in 1 Kgs 14:13–14. (2) The young boys were guilty of rejecting Yahweh's prophet, not mocking Elisha's person. Their taunt of "bald (one)" suggests a contrast with hairy Elijah (1:8), whom they may have seen a few days earlier (2:3). In addition, all three ways of understand their taunt are negative (rejection of Elisha, mocking Elisha for losing Elijah, inviting Elisha to worship the golden calf at Bethel). (3) The young boys likely reflected the attitude of their parents to Yahweh through their attitude toward Yahweh's representative. Bethel was a bastion of Jeroboamism. Their punishment served as a warning to the city of the coming judgment on the altar at Bethel (1 Kgs 13:1–2; 2 Kgs 23:15–16). (4) The young boys received an appropriate covenantal curse for rejecting Yahweh's word. Leviticus 26:21–22 warns that Yahweh will send animals to bereave the people of their children as a judgment for hostility against his word. (5) The young boys' judgment was mixed with mercy. The narrator records that forty-two of the children died (2:24). The construct relationship indicates that there were more than forty-two young boys involved.

expands. When Israel obeys, Yahweh will protect them from bereavement as at Jericho (Ex 23:26). When Israel disobeys, Yahweh will bereave them of their young as at Bethel (Lv 26:21–22). The context of the Book of Kings and themes of 2 Kings 2:19–25 provide the interpretive lens for the Elisha cycle.

Chronology of the Elisha Cycle

The chronology of the Elisha cycle may appear disjointed in comparisons to other sections of the Book of Kings because most of the cycle lacks a cause-effect or chronological connection. Table 1 gives the introductory statements of the eleven sections following Jehoram's ascension to the throne (2 Kgs 3:1–4).

Table 1: Plot Chronology and Transitions in 2 Kings 3:1–8:15

#	Section	English	Hebrew
	3:1–4	In Jehoshaphat's eighteenth year	בִּשְׁנַת שְׁמֹנֶה עָשָׂרָה לַיהוֹשָׁפָט
1	3:5–27	And it happened after Ahab died	וַיְהִי כְּמוֹת אַחָאב
2	4:1–7	And the wife of one	וְאִשָּׁה אַחַת
3	4:8–37	And there was a day	וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם
4	4:38–41	And Elisha returned to Gilgal	וְאֵלִישָׁע שָׁב הַגִּלְגָּל
5	4:42–44	And a man came from Baal-shalishah	וְאִישׁ בָּא מִבַּעַל שָׁלִישָׁה
6	5:1–27	And Naaman was captain of the hosts of the king of Syria	וַנַּעֲמָן שָׂר־צָבָא מֶלֶךְ־אַרָם
7	6:1–7	And the sons of the prophets said	וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְנֵי־הַנְּבִיאִים
8	6:8–23	And the king of Syria was warring	וּמֶלֶךְ אַרָם הָיָה נִלְחָם
9	6:24–7:20	And it happened after thus	וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי־כֵן
10	8:1–6	And Elisha spoke to the woman	וְאֵלִישָׁע דִּבֶּר אֶל־הָאִשָּׁה
11	8:7–15	And Elisha entered Damascus	וַיָּבֹא אֵלִישָׁע דְּמָשֶׁק
	8:16ff	And in Joram's fifth year	וּבִשְׁנַת חֲמִשָּׁ לַיּוֹרָם

Six of the eleven narratives begin with a *waw* copulative and a noun-verb construction (sections 2, 4–6, 8, and 10) rather than the more typical verb-noun. This variation from the norm marks is one way to mark the beginning of an

independent narrative. Narratives 3, 7, 9, and 11 begin in the normal verb-subject order. However, only narrative 9 (siege of Samaria) alludes to a previous narrative as a time marker (“And it happened after thus,” 6:24).¹⁶ One must consider more subtle connections among the narrative plots because of the lack a clear chronology.

Diversity of Plot Type

Two general observations about the plots reveal more subtle connections than cause-effect and clear chronology. First, the Elisha cycle plots are need-oriented instead of task-oriented. In 1 Kings 16:29–2 Kings 2:18 (Elijah’s ministry), only two narratives record a character seeking a prophet.¹⁷ In the rest of the narratives, Yahweh sends his prophets to perform tasks (e.g., 1 Kgs 17:1; 18:1; 20:13, 22, 28, 35; 21:17; 2 Kgs 1:3; 2:2, 4, 6). In the Elisha cycle, Yahweh never sends Elisha to perform a task. Instead, characters seek Elisha to help with a need.¹⁸ The miracle of bread (4:42–44) could be the one exception but still differs from previous task-oriented narratives because Yahweh gave Elisha specific direction in the situation rather than sending him into a situation. These need-oriented plots direct the reader’s attention to the relationships between the characters and the prophet rather than the work of the prophet. The cycle is less about Elisha and more about peoples’ relationships to Yahweh mediated through Elisha.

¹⁶ The appearance of the Shunammite woman in section 10 (8:1–6) does connect the section to a previous one but not as a marker of time.

¹⁷ First, the widow of Zarephath cried out to Elijah when her sons died (1 Kgs 17:17–24). Second, Ahab summoned Micaiah at Jehoshaphat’s insistence (1 Kgs 22:1–28). The three captains of Ahaziah in 2 Kings 1 also sought out Elijah. However, they did so with dubious intentions and only in response to Elisha’s message to Ahaziah.

¹⁸ Sometimes the “need” is not upright. For instance, the king of Syria (6:13) and king of Israel (6:31) both see the death of Elisha as their driving need. Yet, they are the ones coming to Elisha rather than Elisha going to them.

Second, the eleven narratives differ in their plot complexity. Table 2 shows the diversity of the narratives in topic, word count, plot type, and setting. Simple plots are brief (average of 70 Hebrew words), contain little suspense over the outcome, and lack round and dynamic characters. Complex plots are longer (average of 247 Hebrew words), provide greater suspense, and contain round and dynamic characters. The complementary nature and contrasting trajectories of the complex and simple plots creates the contrapuntal structure of the Elisha cycle.

Table 2: Plot Diversity of 2 Kings 3:1–8:15

#	Section	Topic	Words	Plot Type	Primary Setting(s)
1	3:5–27	Moabite War	232	complex	Moab
2	4:1–7	Widow's Oil	97	simple	unknown
3	4:8–37	Shunammite Woman	254	complex	Shunem / Carmel
4	4:38–41	Pot of Stew	64	simple	Gilgal
5	4:42–44	Miracle of Bread	35	simple	Gilgal (?)
6	5:1–27	Healing of Naaman	347	complex	Jordan River
7	6:1–7	Floating Ax Head	68	simple	Jordan River
8	6:8–23	Syrians at Dothan	163	complex	Dothan / Samaria
9	6:24–7:20	Siege of Samaria	387	complex	Samaria
10	8:1–6	Elisha's Works	86	simple	Samaria
11	8:7–15	Anointing of Hazael	104	complex	Damascus

Complex Plots

Complex plots mix the blessing and curse themes and have a negative trajectory. The anticipation of a covenant curse increases gradually in the complex plots through two means: the eventual disappearance of blessing and the increasing Syrian presence. The increasing Syrian presence in the narratives strengthens the curse theme because it anticipates Yahweh's judgment through Hazael's anointing. Table 3 displays the progression of the complex plots as they pertain to blessings, curses, and the anticipation of Hazael.

Table 3: Progression of Complex Plots

	3:5–27	4:8–37	5:1–27	6:8–23	6:24–7:20	8:7–15
Blessing	X	X	X	X		
Curse	X		X	X	X	X
Anticipation of Hazael			low (Naaman)	medium (blind army)	high (siege)	fulfilled (anointing)

The first complex plot (3:5–27) contains blessing on account of Jehoshaphat’s righteousness (3:14) and judgment for Jehoram’s halfhearted obedience (3:27).¹⁹ The narrator foreshadows Jehoram’s eventual demise in 3:14 and anticipates Jehu by refusing to name Jehoram again in the Elisha cycle.²⁰ The account of the Shunammite woman (4:8–37) eases the tension between blessing and curse by including only blessing. The Shunammite honored Elisha in her time of prosperity (4:8–17) and sought him in her time of need (4:18–38). She is the ultimate foil to Jehoram. The next complex plot (5:1–27) returns to the mixture of blessing and curses. Naaman the Syrian was blessed for his faith while Gehazi was cursed for his faithlessness. After the narrator credits Yahweh with Naaman’s military victories (5:1), the reader further anticipates Hazael’s sword of judgment.²¹

¹⁹ In 2 Kings 3, the narrator describes Israel’s victory with a series of third-person plural verbs with Israel as the implied subject (3:24–25). However, when reporting on Kir-hareseth, the narrator employs a hiphil, third-person singular: “until he caused to remain” (עַד־הֵשְׁאִיר). Many English versions translate the hiphil as a passive (“were left”). These translations use the stones or Kir-hareseth as the subject. However, both are grammatically unacceptable as subjects. “Stones” (feminine plural) disagrees with the verb in gender and number, and Kir-hareseth is the object of a כִּי preposition. In addition, the singular cannot refer collectively to Israel, since the narrator consistently uses plural verbs before and after עַד־הֵשְׁאִיר to describe Israel (3:24, 25, 27). Therefore, the clearest referent is Jehoram. The only other hiphil in 2 Kings 3 refers to Jehoram causing Israel to sin by following Jeroboamism, a half-hearted reform (3:3). In 3:25, he causes Israel to sin again by stopping short of full-heartedly obeying Yahweh. The ambiguous reference to Jehoram may be the narrator’s attempt to force the reader to seriously consider who is at fault. In the end, the narrator places the blame on Jehoram’s choice not to attack Kir-hareseth.

²⁰ Jehoram is not named again until 2 Kings 8:16. He is known as the “king of Israel” throughout the Elisha cycle (5:6; 6:9, 21; 7:17; 8:4).

²¹ There is a strong connection between 2 Kings 5 and the account of Miriam’s leprosy in Numbers 12. First, the two accounts contain the only references to a leper being gathered ((אָסַף; 2 Kgs 5:3; Nm 12:13–15). Second, the number seven is crucial in both “gatherings” from leprosy (2 Kgs 5:10; Num 12:4). Third, “as snow” describes leprosy in only

The next three complex plots show the increase of Syrian aggression against Israel. In 6:8–23 (Syrians at Dothan), Elisha’s young man was blessed with sight when he cries to Elisha (6:15–17) while the Syrians were judged, albeit lightly, for seeking to harm Elisha (6:23). In 6:24–7:20, the Syrian siege of Samaria contains explicit covenant curses highlighted by a gracious deliverance rather than a blessing for obedience. Except for Elisha, no character or group character does right. The woman who cried to the king for help was a cannibal (6:26). Her character is the only one in the Elisha cycle to cry to someone other than Elisha (עֵשֶׂה; 6:26). The covenant curse of cannibalism (Lv 26:29) sets an ominous tone for the rest of the narrative. The king of Israel sought to kill Elisha (6:31). The royal officer publicly doubted Elisha’s word (7:2). The lepers made traitorous and pragmatic choices (7:4, 9). Upon hearing news of the fulfillment of Elisha’s prophecy, the king of Israel declared it to be “fake news” (7:12).²² The final complex plot contains only curses for Israel as Hazael was anointed king of Syria (8:7–15). His anointing was a direct result of Israel’s covenantal unfaithfulness and concludes the Elisha cycle and the center section of Kings (1 Kgs 16:29–8:15). What was the result of Israel’s re-Canaanization under Ahab (1 Kgs 16:29–34)?²³ Yahweh fulfilled a covenant curse by raising a pagan king to punish his people (2 Kgs 8:12; Dt 28:22). The complex plots begin with a mixture of blessing and curse before declining into judgment.

one other place outside 2 Kings 5 and Numbers 12 (Ex 4:6). It is interesting to note that 2 Kings 5 and Numbers 12 both have subthemes of ethnic strife (2 Kgs 5:20; Nm 12:1).

²² Jehoram had an unfortunate habit of speaking his own opinion instead of listening to Elisha (3:10, 13).

²³ Jerome Walsh coined the term “re-Canaanization” in his comments on Ahab’s regnal summer. *1 Kings*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry, ed. David W. Cotter (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1996), 347.

Simple Plots

The simple plots contain only the blessing theme and demonstrate a consistent improvement as they progress. Table 4 compares the five simple plot narratives. Several observations can be noted from the patterns and variations.

Table 4: Analysis and Progression of Simple Plots

	4:1–7	4:38–41	4:42–44	6:1–7	8:1–6
Words	97	64	35	68	86
“Cry”	צַעַק (4:1)	צַעַק (4:40)		צַעַק (6:5)	צַעַק (8:3, 5)
Miracle	Oil multiplied	Stew healed	Bread multiplied	Ax head retrieved	
Beneficiary	Widow of son of the prophets	Sons of the prophets	“people” (עַם)	Sons of the prophets	Shunamite Woman
Yahweh Speaks			X		
Orientation	Need	Need	Task?	Need	Need
Progression	Threat (servitude)	Threat (famine)	Sustenance (general care)	Growth (danger of debt)	Restoration (loss of land)

First, the middle simple plot diverges from the general pattern in multiple ways. One, it is 47% shorter than the average simple plot. Two, it is the only simple plot that immediately follows another simple plot. Three, it does not have an apparent need nor includes a “cry” (צַעַק). Four, the account is Yahweh-focused rather than Elisha-focused. It is the only simple plot to include “thus says the Yahweh” (4:43) or record people doing “according to the word of Yahweh” (4:44).²⁴ Five, although the context implies the presence of the sons of the prophets (4:38–41), the “people” received the benefit of Yahweh’s blessing. These divergences imply that God does not require a need or a cry to provide graciously for his people.

Second, the final simple plot (8:1–6) also diverges from the general pattern. One, the account does not contain a miracle. Elisha prophesied of a coming famine, but famine is a providential act, not a miracle. Two, Elisha was not the direct

²⁴ In 2 Kings 8:2, the Shunamite woman did “according to the man of God.”

answer to the need even though his shadow covers the entire narrative. God did not need Elisha to turn the heart of a king or prepare a meeting of impeccable timing. Three, it is the only simple plot to share non-Elisha characters with complex plots. The Shunammite woman (1 Kgs 4:8–37) and Gehazi (1 Kgs 4:8–37; 5:20–27) are illustrations of God’s power to restore. The faithful Shunammite sojourned in Philistia because Yahweh sent a famine (8:1–2). The providential timing of her appeal to godless Jehoram teaches that Yahweh can restore his people to their land using a godless king—whether Israelite, Babylonian, or Persian. Yahweh used Gehazi despite his past failure (5:20–27).²⁵ Leprous Gehazi stood in an honorable position before the king and was called “the servant of the man of God” (8:4).

Third, the growing positive tone of the simple plots can be tracked through the gravity of the need and the presence of the sons of the prophets. In 4:1–7, a son of the prophet had died and left a widow who was in danger of losing her sons to forced servitude. A widow of a godly man living in an ungodly land would have a

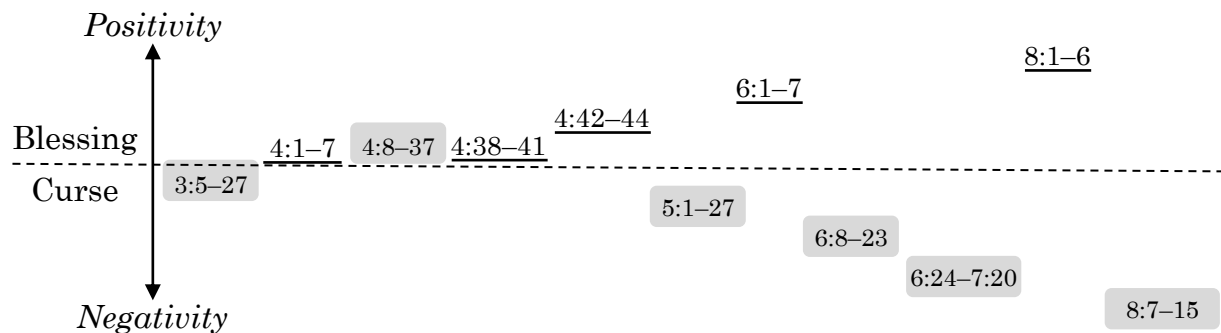
²⁵ The appearance of Gehazi and the narrator’s title for him, “servant of the man of God,” raises questions about the chronology of 2 Kings 3–8. Some commentators suggest that 8:1–6 precedes the healing of Naaman, which explains why Gehazi is present. See Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Kings: The Power and the Fury* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2005), 133; Donald Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 226. Both Wiseman and Davis place 8:1–6 chronologically before Naaman’s healing in 2 Kings 5. However, several considerations make it unlikely that 8:1–6 occurs before the healing of Naaman. First, the ideal reader would naturally understand 8:1–6 as coming after 2 Kings 5 based on the narrative order. If the narrative order was greatly disrupted, the narrator could have easily noted the timing (e.g. “before Gehazi was a leper”). Second, assuming that the king in 8:4 is Jehoram, Jehoram’s eleven-year reign necessitates that 8:1–6 occurs at the end of his reign. Elisha does not start his ministry until after the death of Ahaziah (1:17). This means that the Shunammite’s son is not born until the second year of Jehoram (4:7). The son died at an age old enough to communicate through words (4:19). If the son started to talk at age two, his resurrection could occur as early as the fourth year of Jehoram. Adding a seven-year sojourn after the boy’s resurrection, 8:1–6 falls in the last year of Jehoram’s eleven-year reign. Third, 2 Kings 5 cannot come before 2 Kings 6:8–7:20, based on the Syrian court’s knowledge of Elisha. The Syrian court had no knowledge of Elisha before 2 Kings 5:2 but knew details about of him and his abilities by the assault on Dothan. There is not enough narrated time to place 8:1–6 before Naaman’s healing while keeping Naaman’s healing before 6:12. The question about Gehazi’s physical condition in 8:1–6 remain, but it is best to understand Gehazi to still be a leper (5:25).

more difficult plight than the average widow.²⁶ In 4:38–41 (Pot of Stew), the sons of the prophets were threatened by famine while present with Elisha. Starvation is serious. In 4:42–44 (Miracle of Bread), the man from Baal-shalisha applied the spirit of the law by giving his first fruits to the servants of Yahweh in Israel. The absence of need and the multiplying of the bread create an increased optimism in the simple plots. In 6:1–7 (Floating Ax Head), the sons of the prophets outgrew their place of living (6:1). If one were had the simple plots, the expansion of the sons of the prophets could show a growing revival around Israel. The complex plots show otherwise. The loss of a borrowed ax head was a true need but does not compare to the loss of one's sons or the prospect of starvation. Finally, in 8:1–6 (Elisha's Works), the optimistic tone reaches a climax as Yahweh restored the Shunammite's land.

Plots and Contrapuntal Structure

The simple and complex plots form a literary counterpoint based on the blessing and curse theme, the contrasting trajectories of the simple and complex plots, and the anticipation of the covenant judgment (c.f., 1 Kings 19). Figure 1 illustrates the contrapuntal structure by placing the simple plots (underlined) and complex plots (shaded) sequentially.

Figure 1: Visual Display of the Contrapuntal Structure



²⁶ Davis, 54.

A narrative's distance from the horizontal line indicates its general positivity or negativity. For example, the expansion of the sons of the prophets (6:1–7) is a more positive situation than the famine facing the sons of the prophets (4:38–41). The anticipation of Hazael in Naaman's narrative (5:1–27) moves it further from the horizontal line than the Moabite war (3:5–27) even though both contain the blessing and curse theme.

The simple plots of 3:1–8:15 are like a swelling melody of blessing reminding the reader that Yahweh blesses those who seek him. The complex plots of 3:1–8:15 are the contrasting melody. At first, the complex plots share the theme of blessing with the simple plots before moving deeper into the curse theme. Eventually, the curse theme completely replaces the blessing theme as 6:24–7:20 (Siege of Samaria) Dothan) and 8:7–15 (Anointing of Hazael) drop the blessing theme. These two distinct yet complementary melodies bring the reader to a realization: while the opportunity to seek Yahweh was always present (simple plots), the likelihood of Israel repenting and seeking Yahweh fades away (complex plots) as a national and catastrophic judgment draws near (c.f., 1 Kgs 19:15–17).²⁷

Conclusion: A Strategy for Exposition

The Elisha cycle contains a powerful message that is reinforced through the contrapuntal structure. If expositional preaching can be defined as making the main message of the text the main message of the sermon, a preacher should not neglect the contrapuntal structure when preaching the Elisha cycle.²⁸ A preacher

²⁷ Philip E. Satterthwaite summarizes this well by saying, "There are few sadder parts of the Old Testament than these chapters in 2 Kings, where the narrator raises the possibility of Israel's return to YHWH, holds the possibility open for a number of chapters, and then finally shows how the possibility came to nothing, causing us to reflect on what has been lost" (28).

²⁸ This simplistic definition of expository preaching is adapted from Bryan Chappell's fuller definition: "An expository sermon may be defined as a message whose structure and thought are derived from a biblical text, that covers the scope of the text, and

can use the contrapuntal structure to shape his sermon series on the Elisha cycle in the following ways.

First, preach the narratives within the context of the message of the Book of Kings.²⁹ Specifically, a preacher can highlight the themes of Yahweh's faithfulness and expectations (i.e., the law theme). Yahweh had already proved his faithfulness before the Elisha cycle (e.g., 1 Kgs 11:34; 19:4–7), given clear expectations for obedience, and promised consequences for disobedience (1 Kgs 2:3; 3:14; 8:33–36; 9:4–9). The reader of the Book of Kings should expect Yahweh to judge as he had promised even without the three-fold command of 1 Kings 19 anticipating the covenantal judgment. The events and end of the Elisha cycle are not a surprise.

Second, highlight the three-fold command from 1 Kings 19 whenever possible in the Elisha cycle narratives. The command explains details from the narratives and creates unfilled expectations that foster interest. For example, Yahweh paid attention to Jehoram because of Jehoshaphat (2 Kgs 3:14). Why? Jehoram and the rest of Ahab's line were doomed (1 Kgs 19:16). The intensifying Syrian incursions (Naaman, incursion at Dothan, siege of Samaria) are like an approaching storm front that motivate an immediate response to the message. Judgment will come even though God might delay judgment.

Third, begin the series with the hard narratives of 2 Kings 2:19–25 instead of ignoring them. The events at Jericho and Bethel provide the key for interpreting the narratives of the Elisha cycle. An initial exposition of 2 Kings 2:19–25 provides a

that explains the features and context of the text in order to disclose the enduring principles for faithful thinking, living, and worship intended by the Spirit, who inspired the text." *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 31.

²⁹ As Robert Bell says, "Thus by studying book theologies. . . the preacher can develop sermons that are solid, doctrinal, and pertinent to modern congregations." *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2010), 1.

reference point for highlighting those themes in later narratives since every narrative of the cycle contains either blessing or curse theme, if not both.

Fourth, preach the first four simple plots as one sermon. The thematic unity and brevity of the four plots would make it difficult to preach four individual sermons that are not different versions of the same sermon. When Yahweh's people cry for his help, he blesses by providing for their needs in any situation.

Fifth, preach the final simple plot (8:1–6) as a single sermon. The plot shows at least a partial restoration for Gehazi and encourages the Jewish exiles to hope for their future restoration to the land and relationship to God. If Yahweh can use an ungodly and obstinate king to return the Shunammite's land, Yahweh can bring the exiles back to the promised land. If preached after sermons on 6:8–23 (Syrians at Dothan) and 6:24–7:20 (Siege of Samaria), the message of 8:1–6 gives great hope despite past failures and dire circumstances.

Sixth, conclude the series with Hazael's anointing (8:7–15). The narrative not only concludes the Elisha cycle but also ends the center section of the Book of Kings. Yahweh is faithful to every written and spoken promise whether to bless or to curse. The center section (1 Kgs 16:29–2 Kgs 8:15) demonstrates this truth through the ministry of the prophets before quickening the narrative pace and rushing to the demise of the Northern Kingdom (2 Kgs 17). The anointing of Hazael provides a somber ending to a sermon series, but its message challenges the hearer to evaluate his relationship toward God and God's Word while there is still time.

The contrapuntal structure better explains the details and the order of the narratives than the other proposed structures. It also reinforces the message of the Elisha cycle: Yahweh stands ready to bless and care for his people if they will return, but the likeliness of their return fades as they reject his call. A preacher who allows the contrapuntal structure to inform his exposition can say with more confidence "thus says the LORD" when expositing the Elisha cycle.

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