AMBIGUITY AS NARRATIVE STRATEGY? THREE TEST CASES IN KINGS

Andrew Goodwill[1]

Old Testament narratives use the principles of selectivity and implication to communicate their message. The narrator selectively includes or excludes details to lead the reader to his theological message. We as the reader are given the truth but not always the whole truth.[2] In addition, the narrator sets forward his message implicitly. Few narratives contain summary statements (e.g., "and there was no king," Jgs 17:6), yet God declares them to be instructive and profitable (1 Cor 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:16). The narrator communicates through allusion (1 Kgs 12:28), analogy (1 Kgs 18:17–18), irony (e.g., 1 Kgs 20:31), and humor (2 Kgs 1:8). He uses foils (e.g., the widow of Zarephath to Jezebel), setting (e.g., Mount Horeb in 1 Kgs 19), and even time (e.g., slowing of narrated time in 1 Kgs 16:29 – 2 Kgs 8:15) as part of his teaching strategy. We must pay attention both to what is said and how it is said to understand the message. Some literary scholars suggest that the narrator uses gaps and ambiguities as literary devices. Both temporary and permanent gaps align well with the principle of selectivity. However, ambiguity as a literary device raises a fundamental question. Does the inspired narrator intentionally create an impossible choice between multiple interpretive options to advance his message? To answer this question, we must first establish a workable definition for strategic ambiguity, develop criteria for identifying ambiguity, and test the criteria to conclude the validity of ambiguity as a narrative strategy.

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[1] Andrew Goodwill is dean of students at Maranatha Baptist University and teaches Hebrew and Old Testament courses at Maranatha Baptist Seminary.

[2] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 235.

Defining Strategic Ambiguity

Strategic ambiguity possesses four qualities: permanency, influence, purpose, and uncertainty.[3] The first three qualities overlap with gaps. Sternberg defines a gap as "a lack of information about the world" relevant to the passage.[4] Gaps may be temporary or permanent. For example, the narrator in Judges withholds the identity of Micah's Levite for thirty-six verses after his introduction (17:7; 18:30). It is a temporary gap. However, the concubine's death in Judges 19 demonstrates permanent gaps. In Judges 19, the concubine did not answer the Levite after falling at the door (19:26–28). The Levite took her home and "lay hold" on her to dismember her (19:29). When did she die? The narrator never clarifies (permanency) and uses this gap to shock us (purpose). Her death was not the topic of a side quest (influence). Instead, her death sparks a three-chapter plot and a civil war![5] Strategic ambiguity differs from gaps in its uncertainty. The narrator creates uncertainty by hinting at multiple valid solutions to the gap as subsequent examples show. We can define strategic ambiguity as a permanent gap (permanency) that is central to a plot (influence), possesses multiple valid means of resolution (uncertainty), and has an identifiable purpose within the narrative (purpose).

Objections to Strategic Ambiguity

We must exercise caution when straying from the written text of Scripture. Reading in between the lines can be another way of saying diving into heresy. Strategic ambiguity as a literary device should raise some hermeneutical and doctrinal objections. However, these

[3] Criteria will vary among sources. Paul R. Raabe quipped, "I doubt, however, that we will ever be able to formulate such scientifically precise rules so as to remove all scholarly agreement. There will always be some, well, ambiguity." "Deliberate Ambiguity in the Psalter," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110, no. 2 (1991): 227.

[4] Sternberg, 235. Sternberg refers to unimportant information gaps as "blanks" (236). Blanks are permanent information gaps that have no relevancy to the interpretation of the passage. If the narrator does not care, the reader should not either. For example, what color sandals did David wear when fighting Goliath? No one knows; no one cares (or should care).

[5] The Levite's concubine may be an example of strategic ambiguity. However, I use it here merely to illustrate the characteristics of a permanent gap.

objections should shape the criteria for analyzing strategic ambiguity rather than reject the concept.

First, applications of strategic ambiguity can digress into a reader-response hermeneutic For example, Jerome Walsh raises the potential for multiple readings before commenting, "it is ultimately the reader who determines which of those variants to actualize."[6] In other words, "Thus saith the LORD" becomes "Thus chooseth I." Reader-response contradicts authorial intent, which is foundational to the historical-grammatical hermeneutic.[7] Although this hermeneutical objection holds in some applications of ambiguity, the objection is not entirely accurate to the principle of strategic ambiguity. Just because it can be used inappropriately does not mean it is inappropriate. The historical-grammatical hermeneutic seeks the intended meaning and message of the text. It generally focuses on what is explicit (e.g., words, grammar, syntax, themes) to meet this purpose. Appropriate literary analysis shares the same goal while employing methods that focus more on the implicit (e.g., plot, foils, implications of setting). Literary analysis is a necessary tool of the historical-grammatical hermeneutic toolbox for identifying a narrative's theological message within the narrative. As part of literary analysis, the concept of strategic ambiguity violates the historical-grammatical hermeneutic no more than the concepts of foils and plot in the narrative.[8] Any issue is with the user, not the tool.

Second, strategic ambiguity seems to contradict the perspicuity of Scripture. Did the Holy Spirit inspire a detail that is impossibly unclear? The clarity of Scripture applies to the message

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[6] Jerome Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative: a Guide to Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 66.

[7] J. Daniel Hays, "An Evangelical Approach to Old Testament Narrative Criticism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166, no. 661 (2009): 3.

[8] One may also argue that strategic ambiguity violates the single-meaning of scripture. See Robert Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2002), 141–42. However, strategic ambiguity claims the validity of multiple options, not the actuality of multiple truths. For instance, it is non-sensical to claim that Uriah the Hittite both knew of David's affair with Bathsheba at the same time that he did not know of the affair. For more on the ambiguity of 2 Samuel 11, see Sternberg, 220; George G. Nicol, "The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba: Some Observations on Ambiguity in Biblical Narrative," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 73 (1997): 43–54; and Gale A. Yee, "Fraught with Background: Literary Ambiguity in II Samuel 11," *Interpretation* 42, no. 3 (1988): 240–53.

of Scripture, not the details.[9] Even if the reader misses or misinterprets details, he can still arrive at the intended message. For instance, we can misread "Is there not a cause" in the KJV (1 Sam. 17:29) and still understand the theological message of David's victory over Goliath.[10] Strategic ambiguity violates the clarity of Scripture only if one claims that the ambiguity is necessary to know the message. Again, the issue would then lie with the user, not the tool.

Ultimately, the hermeneutical and doctrinal objections act as guardrails, not roadblocks. We should use them to shape the criteria so that they focus on the text and guard against an inflated purpose or significance for ambiguity.

Criteria for Strategic Ambiguity

Sternberg proposes several criteria for permanent gaps, including narratorial highlighting and identifiable purpose.[11] We can use these criteria for strategic ambiguity because it overlaps with permanent gaps. Two more criteria include multiple valid solutions in the text (uncertainty) and disagreements among interpreters as criteria. First, multiple valid solutions must create uncertainty. Not all solutions are equally true, but all are equally possible. For example, the concubine's possible times of death in Judges 19 cannot both be true, although both are possible.[12] The inspired narrator makes no difference between mostly dead and all dead.

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[9] Mark D. Thompson defines perspicuity as "The clarity of Scripture is that quality of the biblical text that, as God's communicative act, ensures its meaning is accessible to all who come to it in faith" *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* in New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: InterVarity Press, 2006), 170. Kevin J. Vanhoozer defines clarity as "the Bible is sufficiently unambiguous in the main point for any well-intentioned person with Christian faith to interpret each part with relative adequacy." *Is There Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 315.

[10] "Is there not a cause" (הֲלֹוא דָבָר הוּא) can be read in English as David's rallying cry to the cowardly Israelites. The Hebrew reads "is it not a word." The NIV captures the nuance of the verse well: "'Now what have I done' said David, 'Can't I even speak?'" David was not rallying a nation but defending his right to ask questions when his older brother acted like an older brother (17:28).

[11] Sternberg, 236–63.

[12] For another example, see Gale E. Yee's discussion of Uriah's knowledge (240–53).

Second, the narrator must highlight the permanent gap. The narrator may this is several ways.[13] One, the gap is central to the plot resulting in a significant plot hole.[14] Consider again the concubine's death in relations to the plot Judges 19–21. Two, the gap is a missing link in the chain of events creating dissonance in the narrative.[15] For example, we do not know how Solomon knew the infant's true mother (1 Kgs 3:16–28). Yet, through silence, we can conclude that Solomon's ruling was part of God's gift of wisdom (3:28). Three, the gap violates a norm, especially epistemological, moral or social, or linguistic.[16] For example, Esau made a threat against Jacob "in his heart" (בְּלִבּוֹ; Gen. 27:41), but someone told Rebecca (Gen. 27:42). Because mind-reading remains a divine characteristic, the chain does not fit the reader's expectations. Something is missing because there is a gap.

Third, the ambiguity must have an identifiable purpose within the narrative. Potential purposes include confusion, emotion, curiosity, suspense, and surprise.[17] We may need to analyze the narrative's literary unit and the book's theme or message to determine the purpose due to the interconnectivity of many narratives. For example, the reader has an emotional response of frustration or despair in Judges 19 as he considers the concubine's death in connection to Judges 1–18 and the closing refrain of Judges (21:25). Even if the reader accepts the "better" option of an early death, the possibility of the "worse" option makes him long for the king that Israel lacked.

Fourth, a text should have a history of interpreters removing the ambiguity. This extra-textual criterion looks for smoke to find the fire. By analogy, can a passage contain a problem of

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[13] The examples provided are examples of gaps, not ambiguities.

[14] Sternberg, 191.

[15] Ibid., 242–43.

[16] Ibid., 249–58. Consider Sternberg's examples. Epistemological: how did Rebekah discover Esau's murderous thoughts which he voiced "in his heart" (Gen 27:41)? Moral or social: why did Sampson stubbornly pursue a Philistine wife (Jgs 14:1–3)? Sampson's reason is a temporary gap (c.f., 14:4). Linguistic: what did Ben-hadad order his soldiers to do (1 Kgs 20:18)?

[17] The last three categories are suggested by Sternberg regarding permanent gaps (259).

interpretation if interpreters never differ on the passage? Interpreters can attempt to resolve ambiguity in several ways, such as unfounded textual emendation, espousing critical theories of textual development, or speculating on how to reconcile the gap with the text.

Strategic ambiguity is a significant permanent gap with multiple valid resolution means and an identifiable purpose within the narrative. The criteria above fall into three categories. Internally, the text must support the presence of multiple solutions and highlight the gap. Contextually, one must show the purpose of the ambiguity, which often requires a broader context. Finally, externally, interpreters acknowledge ambiguity by attempting to resolve it. With a working definition and proposed criteria in place, we can now test the validity of strategic ambiguity as narrative strategy.

Test Cases in the Book of Kings

The Book of Kings contains several potential instances of strategic ambiguity. We can use these instances to test the validity of the literary device and the usefulness of the proposed criteria. For example, do the criteria help limit subjectivity? How do the criteria function in smaller or larger case studies? Each analysis below describes the passage, applies the criteria, and draws conclusions.

Ben-hadad or Ahab? 1 Kings 20:34

The narrator incorporates heading scratching deatils into the Ben-hadad and Ahab conflicts. (1) Ahab and Ben-hadad exchanged banter (20:5–13). (2) Yahweh surprisingly supported Ahab (20:13). (3) The prophet put on a killer performance (20:30–40). (4) As Aphek fell, Ben-hadad's servants encouraged him to plead for his life becuase the kings of Israel were loyal or kind (חֶסֶד, 20:31).[18] (5) When Ben-hadad's servants offered servitude, Ahab offered

[18] Marvin A. Sweeney notes that from a political point of view, the kings of Israel could be faithful to their covenants with other nations. *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2013), 243. From a theological point of view, the kings of Israel are anything but faithful to their covenant with Yahweh.

equality by calling Ben-hadad "my brother."[19] Yahweh gave Ahab a great victory at Aphek, but Ahab snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by allowing Ben-hadad to live (20:42).

Ben-hadad is the only speaker in 20:34 if we accept the MT without textual emendations. A straightforward translation reads, "And he said to him, 'the cities which my father took from your father I will return, and you may set up streets for yourself in Damascus as my father set up in Samaria and I myself will send you away with this covenant,' and he made a covenant with him and he sent him away." Despite overwhelming manuscript support to the contrary,[20] many commentators and translations identify Ahab as the one promising the covenant ("and I myself will send you away").[21] However, without a clear speaker change, Ben-hadad is also a potential subject for the phrase "and he made a covenant with him and he sent him away."[22] *Hû'* is he?

The application of the strategic ambiguity criteria shows that 1 Kings 20:34 contains strategic ambiguity. First, the reader has multiple valid solutions to resolve the ambiguity. On the one hand, "he" could be Ahab since the prophet later condemns Ahab for sending (שלח, 20:42) Ben-Hahad away. The same verb appears in 20:34 ("and he sent him away," וַיְשַׁלְּחֵהוּ). Historically, the victor sets the terms of surrender. On the other hand, if Ben-hahad is the only

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[19] First Kings 9:13 compares brotherhood to an alliance.

[20] The Lucianic Recension (LXX^L) adds "and Ahab said" in an attempt for clarity on the speakers. See Lissa M. Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 261. The textual apparatus of *Biblia Hebraica Stuggartensia* list וַיֹּאמֶר ("and he said") as a probable reading. The NET Bible offers a literal translation in its verse not but does not defend the addition of "and Ahab said."

[21] Versions that change the speaker to Ahab included ESV, CSB, NAU, NET, NIV, KJV, and TNK. Commentators who change the speaker include Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 469; August H. Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 326; Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, Interpretation, ed. James Luther Mays (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1987), 135; Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry, ed. David W. Cotter (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1996), 309; Wray Beal, 266. Although Walsh changes the speaker in his commentary, he discusses the ambiguity of 1 Kings 20:34 at length in another work. He says, "The fog of pronouns enhances this effect: it does not much matter who says what to whom, or who does what to whom; Ahab and Ben-hadad, Ben-hadad and Ahab, it is tough to tell them apart. This, of course, implies a severe, though tacit disapproval of Ahab, who, as king of the northern realm of Yhwh's people, ought to be preserving the *uniqueness* of Israel, not promoting its assimilation to the ways of pagan nations [emphasis original]." *Old Testament Narrative: A Guide to Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 75.

[22] וַיִּכְרָת־לוֹ בְרִי וַיְשַׁלְּחֵהוּ,

speaker in 20:34, Ben-hadad already spoke of sending Ahab away ("I myself will send [אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָּ] you away with a covenant"). Ben-hadad is also the subject of all seven occurrences of שׁלח in 1 Kings 20 before 20:34.[23] Contextually, the narrative contains many reversals and nonsensical words from Ben-hahad which lend support to Ben-hadad as the covenant-maker.[24] While one option might seem stronger to an interpreter, both solutions are valid.

Second, the narrative highlights the ambiguity because Ben-hadad's expected defeat and death are central to the plot. At the end, the narrator reveals Yahweh's prior command to Ahab about killing Ben-hadad (20:42).[25] We already expect Ben-hadad to die (1 Kgs 19:15), which makes Ben-hadad's survival and success in 20:34 confusing.

Third, the narrator uses ambiguity to create confusion within the narrative. He portrays Ahab negatively until 1 Kings 20 (c.f., 16:30, 33; 17:1; 18:18; 19:16) when two prophets promised Israelite victory for Ahab's benefit (20:13, 28).[26] The reader begins 1 Kings 20 expecting Ahab's death (19:15) before expecting his success. Ahab's change from a Yahweh-offending antagonist to a Yahweh-supported protagonist creates confusion to which the ambiguity of 20:34 adds. This confusion follows Ahab through his complicit murder of Naboth (21:19) and Yahweh's surprising mercy (21:29). The narrator removes the confusion in the account of Ahab's death (1 Kgs 22). Despite every opportunity to respond correctly to Yahweh, Ahab ultimately rejected Yahweh's word.

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[23] First Kings 20:2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 17

[24] Ben-hadad went from "lord" (20:4) to "servant" (20:32). The untrained young men were more effective than a seasoned army (20:20). Ahab makes Ben-hadad a brother rather than a captive (20:32–33). By 20:34, the reader should expect the unexpected.

[25] For alternate views of 20:42, see Tchavdar Hajiyev, "The King and the Reader: Hermeneutical Reflections on 1 Kings 20–21," *Tyndale Bulletin* 66, no. 1 (2015): 63–74; Jeremy Schipper, "From Petition to Parable: The Prophet's Use of Genre in 1 Kings 20:38–42," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2009): 264–74. Tchavdar Hadjiev and Jeremy Schipper argue that Ahab was judged for not showing mercy to the soldier (disguised prophet). However, the narrator in 1 Kings 20 hides Ahab's knowledge of the ban until the end in order to create a dramatic reversal that changes the reader's opinion of Ahab. Ahab is not the obedient, merciful king that he appears to be in 20:1–34. That façade is torn away in 20:42 with the revelation that Ahab has disobeyed, again.

[26] The first "know" is masculine singular making Ahab the subject (20:13). The second "know" is masculine plural referring to Israel, but Ahab would still be included in the group (20:28).

Fourth, interpreters corroborate the presence of strategic ambiguity through various opinions on how to resolve the ambiguity. G. R. Driver suggests that the text is corrupted but admits there is no textual support.[27] A. R. Hulst considers 1 Kings 20:34 an interpretational issue, not a textual one, before concluding subjectively that Ahab is the likely speaker.[28] Finally, Mordechai Cogan attempts to be more objective by interpreting the emphatic "and I myself" (וַאֲנִי) as a marker that Ahab replied to Ben-hadad's offer.[29] The speaker change would make Ahab the unquestioned referent to "and he sent him away." Although these attempted resolutions fall short, they show how interpreters wrestle with the ambiguity. In conclusion, all four criteria for strategic ambiguity are present in 1 Kings 20:34. The strategic ambiguity may not change the narrative's message but does contribute to it.

Why did God's Word Fail? 2 Kings 3:25

The narrator records the Moabite war clearly until 3:25. Jehoram was better than his father Ahab (3:1–4) but still not a good king. After Jehoram led his coalition of kings to near disaster, Yahweh promised provision (3:16–17) and complete victory over Moab (3:18–19) for Jehoshaphat's benefit (3:14). Water came (3:20). Moab made an ill-advised attack (3:23), and the Israelite-led coalition took advantage (3:24–25). Mesha of Moab sacrificed his heir publicly (3:27a) which somehow stopped the Israelite advance (3:27b). Did Yahweh's promise fail, or was someone else to blame? The narrator describes Israel's initial victory with a series of third-person plural verbs with Israel as the implied subject (3:24–25). However, the narrator uses a

[27] G. R. Driver, "Forgotten Hebrew Idioms," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 78, no. 1 (1966): 4.

[28] A. R. Hulst, *Old Testament Translation Problems* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1960), 41. Hulst notes that the Dutch New Version accepts Ben-hadad as the speaker for the whole verse.

[29] Cogan, 469. However, וַאֲנִי occurs seventy-four times from Genesis through Nehemiah (the bulk of Hebrew narrative) but is never used by itself to mark a speaker change. First Kings 18:24 uses וַאֲנִי without changing speaker.

third-person singular: "until he caused to remain (he left)" (עַד־הִשְׁאִיר) when reporting on Kir-hareseth.

This test case ultimately fails when we apply the criteria. First, the passage may have multiple valid solutions. One, Yahweh caused the stones of Kir-hareseth to remain. Joshua 11:8 provides a parallel situation in which Yahweh promised to give (3ms of **נתנ**) victory, but Israel did the fighting (3mp verbs). The narrator uses a similar construction in 2 Kings 3:25 when describing the extent of Yahweh's victory (עַד־בִּלְתִּי הַשְׁאִיר).[30] In 2 Kings 3, Yahweh promised to give the victory (3ms of 3:18, **נתנ**). Israel fought (3mp verbs in 3:24–25). The narrator records that Yahweh limited the extent of the Israelite victory (3ms verb, עַד־הִשְׁאִיר). Unfortunately, this interpretation cannot clearly explain why Yahweh limited the victory he promised to be complete.[31] Two, Jehoram stopped the Israelite advance. Jehoram is a significant focus of the narrative (3:1–4). He planned the invasion (3:6), chose the path (3:8), and put his foot in his mouth (3:10, 13) before Elisha rebuked him (3:14). Others in the narrative are merely agents who advance the plot (Jehoshaphat, Elisha, and the king of Edom). Jehoram already led a half-hearted reform (3:2). He may have also led half-hearted obedience (3:25). While the latter interpretation of Jehoram is preferable, the narrative has multiple valid solutions.

Second, the narrator may highlight the proposed ambiguity by withholding a clear explanation for the failure of Yahweh's promise. The Book of Kings focuses on the reliability of

[30] The ESV reflect this construction in its translation: "And they struck them until he left none remaining." Other translations of Joshua 11:8 translate the singular as a plural ("they left," KJV), handle the hiphil in more of a passive way ("no survivor was left to them," NAU), or interpret the phrase as a description of "struck" ("leaving no survivors," CSB).

[31] Some commentators suggest that Israel broke the laws of warfare in Deuteronomy 20:19–20, specifically the prohibition of cutting down of fruit bearing trees. See William Barnes, *1–2 Kings* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2012), 210, and Patricia J. Berlyn, "The Wrath of Moab," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2002): 222. However, the law about fruit bearing trees applies to lengthy sieges and is a means of supporting the Israelite army. The Moabite war does not appear to fall into the lengthy siege category. In addition, the law forbids cutting down fruit bearing trees (עֵץ מַאֲכָל) whereas the Israelites cut down good trees (עֵץ טוֹב) in 2 Kings 3. The difference in vocabulary makes it difficult to draw a parallel between the law and the Moabite war.

Yahweh's word.[32] In addition, the larger literary unit (2 Kgs 2:19–8:6) emphasizes the reliability of Yahweh's word through the blessing and curse theme.[33] However, we have a clear explanation if Jehoram is the culprit in 3:25. The narrator may use a temporary gap in which (1) we do not immediately identify the 3ms actor in 3:25 until (2) we realize that Yahweh's word "failed" (3) forcing us to find a cause and (4) conclude that Jehoram as the 3ms actor is the only possible solution. While the narrator highlights the information gap, the gap may be a temporary gap rather than strategic ambiguity.

Third, the purpose of the ambiguity in 3:25 is challenging to identify. Suspense and surprise do not unless one first resolves the ambiguity. If Yahweh, we should be surprised. Why would Yahweh stop the victory march? If Jehoram, we should feel the suspense. How will Yahweh respond? In both cases, resolving ambiguity causes the response, not the presence of ambiguity. Unlike 1 Kings 20:34, confusion does not fit. Why would the narrator question what he has been confirming throughout his book? Curiosity and emotion are equally unlikely choices. After applying the criteria, we have one positive (multiple valid solutions), one maybe (narratorial highlighting), and one probably not (identifiable purpose). The 3ms actor in 3:25 is a temporary information gap, not an example of strategic ambiguity. Interpreters have often misinterpreted 3:25, but the fourth criterion does not apply if the first three are absent. While the example failed the test, the criteria helped disqualify the test case.

Where did Solomon Fail? 1 Kings 1–11

The final test case revolves around a moral judgment spanning the multiple narratives of Solomon's literary unit (1 Kgs 1–11). In 1 Kings 1, Yahweh providentially placed Solomon on the throne. After David challenged Solomon to keep the law of Yahweh (1 Kgs 2:1–4), Solomon secured his kingdom justly (1 Kgs 2:5–46), married Pharoah's daughter (3:1), received

[32] Robert D. Bell, lists fifty-three prophecies in the Book of Kings that are also fulfilled within the book. *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2010), 150–51.

[33] Philip E. Satterthwaite, "The Elisha Narratives and the Coherence of 2 Kings 2–8," *Tyndale Bulletin* 49, no. 1 (1998): 9.

Yahweh's blessing (3:5–14), and demonstrated his wisdom (3:16–28). In 3:3, the narrator praises Solomon's love for Yahweh (3:3). During Solomon's temple preparations, Yahweh reminded him of the promised blessing (6:12) and emphasized the importance of Israel's obedience (6:13).[34] The narrator later interrupts the temple preparations to mention Solomon's house (7:1–8) and his Egyptian wife (7:8) before recording his temple prayer (1 Kgs 8). In 1 Kings 9, Yahweh gave Solomon two scenarios (9:4–5, 6–9).[35] The warning scenario (9:6–9) comprises over half of the message (79 of 125 Hebrew words) and ends abruptly, giving the succeeding narratives a foreboding feel.[36] Unlike Yahweh's previous charges to Solomon, the narrator does not report Solomon's sacrifice (3:15) or subsequent obedience (6:14). Several themes run through the rest of Solomon's narratives before the record of his fall: Pharaoh's daughter (9:16, 24; 10:28–29), chariots and horsemen (9:19, 22; 10:26), and Canaanites (9:16, 20–21). We finally discover that Solomon loved (11:1, אהב) many strange women in the end even though he loved Yahweh to start (3:3, אהב).[37] Yet Solomon's primary sin was his idolatry, not immorality (11:4–5, 7–8, 10).[38] Where did Solomon fail? That question is harder to answer than we might first think.

The criteria for strategic ambiguity are more challenging to apply because the proposed ambiguity revolves around moral judgments rather than grammatical phrases. However, all four

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[34] See Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 128; Konkel, 125.

[35] Solomon's bountiful situation mirrors Deuteronomy 8:9–20 where Moses warns Israel not to forget Yahweh when they have food (8:12), good houses (8:12), and wealth (8:13).

[36] Nelson, 61.

[37] These strange women included the daughter of Pharoah, Canaanites, and other nations with which Yahweh had forbidden intermarriage. The *waw* of accompaniment (וְאֶת־בַּת־פַּרְעֹה; "and [along with] the daughter of Pharaoh") places the emphasis on her relationship to the strange women and not as a separate object of Solomon's love. The ESV, NAU, KJV, and TNK take the *waw* as a *waw* of accompaniment. For an explanation of the *waw* of accompaniment, see Ronald J. Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 154.

[38] Solomon is the first idolatrous king of Israel. Saul consorted with a medium, but Saul never sacrificed to idols. David married multiple wives, committed adultery, and organized a murder; but David never committed religious adultery through idolatry.

criteria are present in 1 Kings 1–11. First, the narrator allows for multiple solutions to the ambiguity by withholding information necessary to make a moral judgment. For instance, did Solomon sin by marrying Pharoah's daughter (3:1)? If so, how do we reconcile his sin with his love for Yahweh two verses later (3:3)? Did Solomon selfishly spend more time building his house (7:1) than the temple (6:38), or did he delay its completion because he devoted so many resources to the temple? Should we read into Solomon's silence after Yahweh's warning (9:9)? After all, he responded in say way after prior revelations (3:15; 6:14)? Was Pharaoh a better example of an Israelite king (9:16), or did Solomon make the best out of the unfortunate Canaanite situation (9:21)?[39] We know Solomon's start (3:3) and end (11:1ff), but his path is ambiguous.

Second, the narrator makes Solomon's success or failure the focus of the literary unit's plot. David's charge to Solomon in 1 Kings 2:1–4 encapsulates a primary message of the Book of Kings: God blesses those who obey the law of Moses and curses those who do not.[40] In 3:3–14, Solomon recognized the need to follow Yahweh and the necessity of Yahweh's wisdom (3:6–9). Obedience to the law frames Yahweh's appearance as Solomon noted how David kept the law (3:6) and as Yahweh set obedience to his law as the condition for Solomon's longevity (3:14). In addition, Solomon made obedience to Yahweh's law a significant theme of his temple prayer. Of the seven scenarios mentioned by Solomon (8:31–53), four scenarios involve Israel's sin, repentance, and subsequent obedience (8:33, 35, 37, 46). Yahweh gave his law (8:9), taught Israel how they should live (8:36), and inclined their hearts to keep his law (8:58). At the end of his prayer, Solomon admonished Israel to devote their hearts wholly to walk after Yahweh and keep his commandments (8:61). Finally, Yahweh's message in his final appearance highlighted the need for Solomon's obedience. If Solomon kept Yahweh's commandments, Yahweh would

[39] It is interesting that Pharaoh killed (הרג) the Canaanite inhabitants whereas Solomon made them servants (9:21) because Israel did not utterly destroy them (חרם, 9:16).

[40] Richard D. Nelson also notes how David's speech introduces two of the book's primary themes: "Deuteronomic voice" and "eternal dynasty." *First and Second Kings*, Interpretation, ed. James Luther Mays (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1987), 28.

establish his kingdom forever (9:5). If Solomon or his descendants sinned, Yahweh would exile them and allow the temple to be destroyed (9:7–9). The narrator makes the question of Solomon's success or failure the center of the plot.

Third, the ambiguity around Solomon has identifiable purposes in the literary unit and the rest of the book. It increases our suspense within the unit as we recognize Solomon's responsibility (c.f., 2:1–4) and understand the potential dangers (c.f., 9:1–9). Will Solomon fail or succeed? Hindsight does not help much because the narrator gives too little information to adequately judge parts of Solomon's life (e.g., 3:1; 7:1; 9:1). The suspense created by the ambiguity morphs into confusion after the bombshell of 1 Kings 11. Not all that glitters is gold. How, why, and when did Solomon begin his decline? Solomon remains in a literary fog throughout the book. The narrator compares later kings to their fathers (e.g., 22:15), David (e.g., 15:11), or Jeroboam (e.g., 15:30) in their regnal summaries. David and Jeroboam become type characters with whom the kings are stereotyped. The narrator never uses Solomon as a type character. He could have included evaluations of Solomon's recorded works but did not. As a result, the reader reads the rest of the book cautiously. The consumer duped by fool's gold once will inspect the next batch of gold cautiously. The reader confused by a character's downfall will examine the following characters in more detail.

Fourth, interpreters corroborate the presence of ambiguity by suggesting opposing perspectives on the narrator's portrayal of Solomon. For instance, Gray holds a dualistic view in which Solomon was good until his direct violation of Deuteronomy 17:16 (10:26).[41] Daniel J. Hays suggests that the narrator's praise of Solomon is tongue-in-cheek.[42] Lucas Glen Wisely

[41] Gray, 270.

[42] J. Daniel Hays writes, "'Look how great Solomon was', the narrator says on the surface. 'He was great in violating Yahweh's law', the narrator is really saying, right below the surface." "Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him?: Narrative Subtlety in 1 Kings 1–11," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28 no. 2 (2003): 157. Hays does make some excellent points about later portrayals of Solomon, although his arguments for a negative reading of 1 Kings 1–2 are tenuous. His article is especially helpful for its concise yet comprehensive overview of various views on Solomon's portrayal in 1 Kings 1–11 (149–55).

prefers a nuanced view of Solomon that balances the positive and negative.[43] Jerome Walsh claims that the ambiguity shows the difference between the narrator seeking to praise Solomon and the implied author seeking to tear him down.[44] Finally, using only his dissertation title, Franklyn Jost summarizes the frustration of many interpreters: "Why is 1 Kings 3–11 Lying to Me?"[45] Most of these views attempt to resolve the moral ambiguity, which corroborates the presence of ambiguity. With all four criteria present, we can conclude that 1 Kings 1–11 contains strategic ambiguity.

Conclusion

The inspired narrator uses ambiguity strategically to enhance his message. The hermeneutical and doctrinal objections shape the criteria bringing a level of objectivity to the analysis of a subjective literary device. What observations can we make from the test cases? First, the criteria limit subjectivity by disproving some claims of ambiguity.[46] Misinterpretation, problems of interpretation, and strategic ambiguity are three different issues. Second, the criteria can identify different types of strategic ambiguity. For example, they identified the multi-narrative moral ambiguity of Solomon and the subject ambiguity of Ben-hadad and Ahab. Third, we need the external criterion only if the internal and contextual criteria are met. The test case from 2 Kings 3:25 demonstrates the need for this order. The multiple handlings of 3:25 are an issue of interpretation, not strategic ambiguity. Fourth, narratorial highlighting and identifiable

[43] Lucas Glen Wisely, "Israel's Paradoxical King: The Characterization of Solomon in 1 Kings 1–11, 2 Chronicles 1–9, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2018), 59–65. In conclusion to his overview, Wisely says, "I believe these studies have correctly highlighted that there is more ambiguity to Solomon than is normally recognized in either the 'good Solomon/bad Solomon' of 1 Kings 1–10 and 11 or the literary structure of the narrative determining the positive and negative depictions of Solomon" (65).

[44] Jerome Walsh, "The Characterization of Solomon in First Kings 1–5," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 57 (1995): 493.

[45] . "'Why Is 1 Kings 3–11 Lying to Me?': Literary and Homiletic Analysis" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1996).

[46] It would be interesting to see if the criteria would limit claims of strategic ambiguity in Judges 19 and 2 Samuel 12.

purpose need more refinement. In a way, these criteria are comparable to allusions. What is the difference between an intended allusion and an echo? The allusion's probability increases as its influence on the message increases. We need further guidance on what constitutes a significant narratorial highlight or a significant purpose that influences the narrative.

Finally, an expositor can benefit from understanding strategic ambiguity even if the words "strategic ambiguity" never make it into a sermon. The test cases show how the narrator uses strategic ambiguity to shape characterization and encourage application. For example, in 1 Kings 20, the narrator creates confusion around Ahab, which climaxes in 20:34. An expositor can reveal Ahab's characterization as a warning to the audience. When occasional piety mixes with a habitual disregard for God's law, tragedy occurs to others (e.g., the nation in 1 Kgs 20; Naboth in 1 Kgs 21) and to self (e.g., Ahab in 1 Kgs 22). True stability comes from a habitual submission to God's Word (Psa 1). In 1 Kings 1–11, the expositor can use the narrator's ambiguous portrayal of Solomon to challenge his audience regarding their walk with God. A right start (3:3) does not guarantee a right end (11:1). The audience must focus on what is known rather than speculate on where he went wrong. Solomon could have done right by following God's Word (2:3–4). The reader must simply recognize that Solomon's error started when he did not do what he should have done. Tracking the subtle steps away from God may have some use, but obeying God's Word has more.

Future studies in strategic ambiguity should focus on several questions. First, do other genres such as poetry use ambiguity as a literary device?[47] If so, in what way(s) does the genre change the criteria? Second, does strategic ambiguity occur commonly in Old Testament narrative? The answer to this question may spare Old Testament studies from a variant strain of chiastic-mania. In the meantime, strategic ambiguity is present, can be discerned, and has potential use in exposition.

[47] Raabe argues for "deliberate ambiguity" in Psalms (213–14). Although Raabe cites many examples of potential deliberate ambiguity, his suggested controls over invented ambiguities need more expansion (227).