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2 Kings: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

2 Kings, Chapter 1 is a chapter of ups and downs. The opening verse of the chapter concerns the rebellion of Moab against Israel, a narrative thread that is introduced at this point only to be suspended until Chapter 3. The rest of the chapter compares and contrasts King Ahaziah and the prophet Elijah. Ahaziah suffers a fall from the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria.

There are other upper chambers in the books of the kings. In Chapter 17, there is the upper chamber in which the son of the widow of Zarephath is raised. And in 2 Kings, Chapter 4, there is another upper chamber in which a son is raised, the son of the Shunammite woman.

In both of those cases, the upper chamber is the elevated place of proximity to God, and also the place where the prophet dwells. In the case of Ahaziah, however, he is cast down from the upper chamber, and he lies sick. Wondering what his fate will be, he

sends messengers to Beelzebub, the god of Ekron.

The name Beelzebub, Lord of the Flies, is probably a twisting of the actual name of the god, which would have been Beelzebul, Lord Prince. However, he is called Lord of the Flies, or Beelzebub, as a form of dishonour. He is the Lord of the Trash Heap.

The angel of the Lord, however, has other plans for Ahaziah. He sends Elijah the prophet to intercept the messengers of Ahaziah, and delivers the answer to Ahaziah's question. He will not come down from the bed to which he has gone up.

He will surely die. The story begins with Ahaziah falling down. Now he is spoken of as having gone up to a sickbed, and he will not come down.

We might expect it to be the other way around. The messengers return to Ahaziah with the message. The primary part of the message is a challenge to Ahaziah's idolatry and his service of foreign gods.

He has turned to the god of Ekron, rather than looking to the god of Israel. Ahaziah asks his servants to describe the man that met them. The messengers literally describe him as a bale of hair.

He is a lord of hair, a hairy man. We could perhaps speculate that as part of his prophetic calling, Elijah has taken a Nazirite vow and has not cut his hair, and so is distinguished by the great amount of hair that he has. Whether that is the case or not, the use of the term bale in reference to Elijah contrasts him with the character of Baal-Zebub.

The lord of hair stands in contrast to the lord of the flies. We should also keep the hairiness of Elijah in mind, because the next chapter there will be a man who is ridiculed for being bald. There is, as it were, a shaving off of the hair of the prophet, so the hairy prophet Elijah has his successor in the hairless prophet Elisha.

Ahaziah recognises Elijah from the description of his men immediately. He sends 50 soldiers with their captain to bring Elijah back. We should note, these aren't messengers, these are soldiers.

There is a threatening aspect to this. Elijah is sitting on the top of a hill, and he is instructed to come down. He answers the military captain that if he is a man of God, that fire should come down from heaven and consume him and his 50 men, and fire comes down and consumes them.

There might well be a play upon the words for fire of God and man of God here. Having lost the first 50 men with their captain, the king sends another 50 men with their captain, and he says much the same thing, delivering the order of the king to Elijah to come down from the hill. Once again, Elijah calls down fire from heaven upon him and his 50 men.

We should recall the theme of the ups and downs here. Ahaziah fell down at the beginning of the story, then he went up into his sickbed, and the Lord declares that he will not come down from his sickbed. Now men of Ahaziah are telling Elijah to come down from the hill upon which he has gone up, and he is not going to come down.

Rather, he calls down the fire of God. We should bear this all in mind as we come to the next chapter, as the next chapter is a story of ascension. Elijah will be taken up once and for all.

The king having gone up on his sickbed and not coming down, and Elijah going up on his hill and not coming down, offers an ironic parallel between the two characters. Ahaziah who fell down from the upper room is going to die, whereas Elijah is going to be taken directly up into heaven to God's very presence. In the following chapter we will also see groups of 50 men that look for Elijah, and just as there are 3 captains with their 50 in this chapter, in the next chapter there will be 3 times when Elisha is told to go back and does not do so.

This suggests that the themes of ascension, of going up in this chapter, must be read alongside the chapter that follows. The two chapters are a natural pair. Likewise, the Lord of hair, the Bald of hair that Elijah is described as at the beginning here, will naturally connect with Elisha who follows him, who is a bald man and is ridiculed for that at the end of chapter 2. After two captains in their 50s have come and been destroyed by the fire of the Lord, a third captain comes and this time he speaks with honour and deference to the prophet of the Lord.

He goes up and falls down on his knees and pleads for his life and for the life of his men. And now the Lord instructs Elijah to go along with the men, so he goes to meet the king and delivers the message that has already been delivered to him before. The message of judgement concerning the fact that he has gone to a foreign god rather than turning to the Lord and the message that he will die and not come down from his sickbed.

The message of the Lord concerning Ezechiah comes to pass, he dies and in his place Jehoram his brother becomes king. Jehoram becomes king in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah. These are two different Jehorams, but the presence of a Jehoram in the southern kingdom of Judah and a Jehoram in the northern kingdom of Israel suggests a twinning of the two.

The two nations are a lot more entwined in this period, as we will see in the judgement that comes through Jehu. A question to consider, in verse 17 we are told that Jehoram became king in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat. However, in chapter 3 verse 1 we are told that Jehoram of Israel became king in the 18th year of King Jehoshaphat of Judah.

And to make matters a lot more complicated, in chapter 8 verse 16 we are told that

Jehoram of Judah began to rule in the 5th year of Jehoram of Israel. How could we explain these seeming contradictions? 2nd Kings chapter 2 describes the transition from the ministry of Elijah to that of Elisha. Elisha was called back in 1st Kings chapter 19 verses 19-21, but he hasn't really appeared again until this point.

Elijah, Elisha and the sons of the prophets all seem to know that Elijah is going to be taken up. Elisha is asked three times by Elijah to stay, as he is going to Bethel, as he is going to Jericho and then on to the Jordan. On each of these occasions Elisha insists on following him.

Sandwiched between these requests from Elijah, Elisha is also asked by both the sons of the prophets at Bethel and those at Jericho if he is aware that the Lord is going to take his master from over him. The repetition develops a rising sense of anticipation. Some significant transition is about to occur.

The presence of the sons of the prophets at this point might be surprising to us. As we've read through the story of Elijah, he seems to be largely alone and he laments that he alone is left. However, here we seem to have communities of faithful prophets at various parts of the country.

These figures will be a lot more prominent in the story of Elisha. Whereas Elijah is an isolated and struggling prophet in the wilderness, Elisha's work occurs in large measure in the context of remnant communities that are being established within the land. The journey that they take from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan River is significant.

The itinerary might surprise us, they almost double back on themselves. And each of these places is closely associated with Joshua's conquest of the land. It is as if Elijah is tracing back through the conquest narrative of Joshua, a narrative that will later be replayed as Elisha enters into the land.

Elisha insists on going with Elijah. All these opportunities that he is given to go back, he insists on going on at each point. This story has two aspects to it.

On the one hand, it's the story of Elijah's ascension. And on the other hand, it's the story of Elisha's Pentecost. Elisha will receive the firstborn portion of Elijah's spirit, the double portion.

He will be identified with Elijah and he will complete the ministry that Elijah had started. Elijah never completed the ministry that he was given in chapter 19. He was given the task of anointing Hazael king of Syria, of anointing Jehu, and of anointing Elisha as his successor.

He had anointed Elisha as his successor, but he never anointed Hazael or Jehu. And now Elisha will complete what Elijah had started. Their ministries are one ministry, a two-part ministry in two persons.

As we will later see, this has resemblances with the story of Moses and Joshua. The condition for Elisha to receive the double portion of his master's spirit is that he see him when he is being taken up. He must have the perception to perceive this event.

At a number of points in the story of Elisha, there are visionary phenomena that can only be perceived by those who have their eyes opened. The fact that Elisha can see these things is a sign that he is a suitable successor for Elijah who has gone before him. We might think of a similar event in the New Testament in the baptism of Jesus.

The heavens being opened and the spirit descending upon Christ in the form of a dove is not something that everyone would have seen. Rather, it's something that John the Baptist and Jesus saw. These were visionary phenomena that you needed spiritual perception to perceive.

Chariots of fire and horses of fire separate the two of them, and Elijah ascends into heaven in a whirlwind. We might have recognized allusions to the story of Jacob at Bethel back in chapter 19 with the angel coming to Elijah while he slept on his journey. Now, however, it is as if Elijah is ascending Jacob's ladder.

He is going to enter into the heavenly place itself. As a prophet, he was one who participated in the divine council, being part of the deliberations of the Lord's court, and now he is ascending to that throne room. Elisha proclaims, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen.

There will be a similar statement made in the context of the death of Elisha in 2 Kings 13.14. The ascent of Elijah in fire also naturally contrasts with what we saw in the previous chapter as fire came down from heaven and consumed the 250s. God's fire destroys the wicked, but it is the means by which the righteous are raised up to his throne. Peter Lighthouse observes, The story of Elijah's departure into heaven follows the sequence of a sacrificial rite.

By their mutual journey around the land, Elijah and Elisha form a unit, a two of them. They cross the Jordan as parts of a sacrificial animal will be washed before being placed on the altar. Fire descends from heaven, dividing them in two, one ascending in fire to God, as the altar portions of the animal ascend in smoke to heaven.

In the ascension, or holy burnt offering, the skin of the sacrificial animal is given to the priest, and the mantle skin of Elijah, the hairy garment of the bale of hair, is left for Elisha. Through this human sacrifice, Elisha becomes a successor to Elijah, and a new phase of prophetic history begins. The fact that 50 sons of the prophet stand at a distance, opposite the Jordan, as Elijah and Elisha cross, Elijah ascends, and then Elisha returns, might fill out something of the sacrificial image that's playing out here.

There are two water crossings, which might remind us of Moses' water crossing leading

the people out of Egypt, and Joshua's leading the people into the promised land. In the crossing of the Red Sea, it is Moses' rod that is the key thing that affects the crossing. In the case of the crossing of the Jordan, in the entrance to the land, it's the feet of the Levites carrying the Ark of the Covenant.

Here, it is the mantle of Elijah that is the means by which the waters are crossed. Perhaps we are to see Elijah as a sort of human rod, as one who bears God's presence in a more personal way. In bearing the Ark of the Covenant, the Levites were bearing a symbol of God's throne, but here there seems to be a more intimate involvement between God's presence and a person.

The mantle isn't just something that Elisha will carry, it is something that he will wear. As a miracle-working prophet, Elisha will bear the presence of God with him into the land. The Lord will act in and through him.

There are natural comparisons to be drawn between Elijah and Moses. Both have strange deaths or departures, as we see in Deuteronomy chapter 34, verses 5 to 6. So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peel, but no one knows the place of his burial to this day.

Both Elisha and Joshua are closely associated with the spirit of their master, and have a father-son relationship with the one that preceded them, something that we see in Numbers chapter 27, verses 18 to 23, and Deuteronomy chapter 34, verse 9. In Numbers chapter 13, verse 16, Moses renamed Hoshea Joshua. The name Joshua means the Lord is salvation. The name Elisha means God is salvation.

Moses and Joshua share a single two-stage mission. The same can be seen with Elijah and Elisha. Elijah is the prophet of the wilderness, and Elisha is the prophet of the land.

Moses is the one who leads them through the wilderness, and Joshua is the one who leads them into the promised land. Elijah performs eight miracles, Elisha performs sixteen. It would seem to be a very natural thing for one who holds the double portion of his father's spirit to do.

After Elisha takes the mantle of Elijah, he calls upon the name of the Lord, and repeats the miraculous crossing by which Elijah had led them over, when they had first crossed. There is a natural relationship between chapters one and two, as fifty strong men seek after Elijah for three days. The preceding chapter had three sets of fifty men seeking Elijah.

The men in chapter one had sought to bring down the prophet that had gone up, and in this chapter they are looking to see whether the prophet who has been caught up has been set down by the Lord. The chapter ends with further demonstrations of the

connection between Elijah and Elisha, demonstrating that Elisha is the proper successor of Elijah. The story of Elijah began immediately after the description of the rebuilding of the city of Jericho, and the death of two sons.

Now Elisha comes to Jericho, and he begins by healing waters there. The waters are healed from death and miscarriage. Jericho, that had been a place of death, is now made a place where life is found.

The manner of the healing might recall the events of Mara in the wilderness, where the bitter waters were healed immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea. It is important to read the miracles of Elisha against the backdrop of the miracles and actions of Elijah. For example, the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath becomes the raising of the Shunammite son in chapter four.

Elijah's ministry began by pronouncing a lack of water, and here Elisha's ministry begins by healing waters. Elisha, God is salvation, is also replaying the story of Joshua in various ways. Joshua meaning the Lord is salvation.

Joshua crossed over the Jordan and entered into the land and fought against Jericho. Now Elisha enters into the land, crossing the Jordan, and then heals the waters of Jericho. Whereas Elijah's ministry had been chiefly characterized by conflict, the ministry of Elisha is predominantly characterized by healing and provision of life.

However, this chapter does end with a judgment story. The story of the 42 lads of Bethel and the she bears needs to be read carefully in its context. Peter Lighthouse has some very helpful remarks.

He observes that the sons of the prophets earlier in the same chapter in verses three and five speak of the Lord taking Elisha's master from over his head. Lighthouse comments, this repeated statement from the sons of the prophets helps to explain the story at the end of second Kings two, one of the most controversial passages in scripture. The phrase little boys in chapter two, verse 23 can mean young men or subordinates.

The word in question can be seen elsewhere used to refer to characters in their late teens or young men who are old enough to fight. In Genesis chapter 48, it is used to refer to Ephraim and Manasseh, who by that point were in their early twenties. Lighthouse goes on, Bethel is the site of Jeroboam the first golden calf shrine.

And the context suggests that these are not children, but Levites of the idolatrous shrine. Elisha's curse is an act of warfare, a Joshua like attack on a center of idolatry. We should know that Elisha has just crossed the Jordan into the land.

Lighthouse observes that there is a chiasmic or there and back again structure to the narrative. It begins with removing the head, the fact that Elijah is going to be taken from

Elijah. Then there are 50 men mentioned.

Then they crossed the Jordan with Elijah dividing the waters. Then Elisha requests the spirit of Elijah. A chariot separates them and then Elijah is taken up by a whirlwind into heaven.

And then back again, Elisha sees and calls to the chariot and tears his clothes. Then the mantle is received as Elisha had requested the spirit earlier. Then Elisha divides the waters as Elijah had divided them earlier.

Then 50 men are mentioned again. And finally, at the end of the chapter, we have the reference to the bald head that corresponds to the removing of the head at the beginning. Lighthart proceeds, the young man mark Elijah because his hairy head, his bale of hair, mentioned in verse 8 of chapter 1, is taken from him.

Perhaps he literally shaves his head in mourning over Elijah's departure. But it is also possible that they are marking Elisha because they assume he is unprotected without Elijah. Their taunt to Elisha to ascend also points back to Elijah.

You know where you can go, Elisha. Elisha again demonstrates that he bears the spirit of Elijah, which is the spirit of Yahweh. For he can call out bears from the forest as readily as Elijah can call out fire from heaven to consume the soldiers of Ahaziah.

If we look back at chapter 1, we should be able to see some of the parallels between these two events. In his commentary on Second Kings, T.R. Hobbes notes that there are similarities between the story of the bears and the story of the fire coming down from heaven. We can think about the way that the bears correspond with the two times that the fire comes down from heaven.

In both, there is a challenge offered to the status of the prophet. In chapter 1, the king orders Elijah to come down. In chapter 2, the young men order Elisha to go up.

In chapter 1, the men describe Elisha as a hairy man. In chapter 2, Elisha is described as bald-headed. Hobbes also observes the similarities in the syntax between the two events of judgment.

In chapter 1, verse 10, and came down fire from the skies and consumed. In chapter 2, verse 24, and came out two she-bears from the forest and devoured. Perhaps in the movement from the hairy prophet to the bald-headed prophet, we should also see a completion of a Nazirite vow.

Elijah has been engaged in a sort of zealous warfare for the Lord, and now that the vow has been completed, according to the ritual of chapter 6 of Numbers, his head is shaved and the hair is burnt up. Elisha's ministry will take a very different form after this. The fact that it is 42 of the lads that are killed might again be significant.

In chapter 10, verse 14 of the book, Jehu will kill 42 relatives of Ahaziah of Judah, persons who come to visit the royal princes and the sons of the queen mother. Elisha's judgment upon the 42 lads foreshadows the judgment upon the Amorite dynasty of Ahab and upon all who are associated with it. Such a parallel should not surprise us given the relationship between Elisha and Jehu in 1 Kings chapter 19, verses 16 to 17.

Beyond the parallels between Elijah and Elisha, and Moses and Joshua already mentioned, there are parallels to be seen between Elijah and John the Baptist and Jesus and Elisha. In Mark's Gospel, chapter 1, verse 6, John the Baptist is described being clothed in much the same way as Elijah is described in chapter 1, verse 8 of this book. The dynamics between Elijah and Jezebel and Ahab remind us of the relationship between John the Baptist and Herodias and Herod.

John the Baptist, like Elijah, is a desert prophet, a forerunner of a prophet whose work will mostly be in the land. In the Gospels, we are told that John the Baptist will come in the spirit and power of Elijah and that he is the Elijah to come prophesied in the book of Malachi. As with Moses and Joshua, and Elijah and Elisha, there is a transition on the banks of the Jordan.

John the Baptist baptises Jesus, as in the story of Elijah and Elisha, they are visionary phenomena, and Jesus' ministry begins. Jesus' name, of course, is related to Joshua. The Lord is salvation, once again connecting with Elisha, God is salvation.

We might also see later in the story of the Gospels and of Acts, ways in which Jesus is like Elijah. His ascension in Acts chapter 1 is the church's Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. The leader ascends into heaven and his spirit descends upon his followers. Further interesting details might be noted on this front.

As already pointed out, chapters 1 and 2 of the book of 2 Kings belong together. In chapter 1, three sets of 50 soldiers and their captains are sent to capture Elijah. Doing the maths, this is 50 plus 1, three times over, 153.

As James Bajon points out, in the final narrative of the Gospel of John, as Jesus' ministry transitions to that of his disciples, 153 fish are caught. Perhaps a call back to the transition that we see between Elijah and Elisha in chapters 1 and 2 of 2 Kings. A question to consider.

How might recognising these parallels between the story of Elijah and Elisha and the stories of John the Baptist, Jesus and Jesus' disciples help us to understand the ministry of Jesus and his disciples more fully? 2 Kings chapter 3 rejoins the narrative of the kings after the succession narrative of Elijah and Elisha in chapters 1 and 2. Jehoram comes to the throne in the 18th year of Jehoshaphat of Judah. In chapter 1 verse 17, we're told that he became king in the second year of Jehoram king of Judah. In chapter 8 verse 16, we're told that Jehoram became king of Judah in the fifth year of Joram or Jehoram of

Israel.

How are we to make sense of these seemingly conflicting details? There is a rather simple explanation. Toward the end of the reign of Jehoshaphat, Jehoram of Judah reigned alongside his father for seven years. His sole reign only began in the fifth year of Jehoram of Israel.

Jehoram of Israel is the son of Ahab, the brother of Ahaziah, his predecessor on the throne. The typical statement that you would find concerning the reign of the king is found here near the beginning of Jehoram's reign rather than at its untimely end a few chapters later where it would interrupt the narrative flow. Jehoram of Israel is a king who does evil even though his sin is mitigated relative to the evil of Ahab and Jezebel, his father and mother.

He makes some minimal gestures towards faithfulness to the Lord by putting away the pillar of Baal that Ahab had set up. Nevertheless, he continued in the sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, presumably the idolatrous worship of the golden calves. This was a breaking of the second commandment, whereas the pillar of Baal was a breaking of the first.

The first verse of second kings tells us about the rebellion of Moab against Israel. The narrative thread was left hanging and we have to wait for chapter 3 for it to be taken up again. Moab was subjugated as a tributary kingdom by David, an event recorded in 2 Samuel 8 verse 2. Since that point, Israel had dominated Moab, first as a united kingdom under David and Solomon and then as the northern kingdom of Israel.

At this point, Moab rises up, causing trouble both for Israel and Judah, Judah being the lesser part in the alliance between the two kingdoms. This is something we see in 2 Chronicles chapter 20, where the Moabites attack Jehoshaphat with the Ammonites and the Muunites. Jehoram of Israel calls upon Jehoshaphat to join him.

Jehoshaphat of Judah was likely in a marriage covenant with Israel at this point, as his son Jehoram, who would later become Jehoram of Judah, had married Athaliah, a granddaughter of Amrei. It's important that we don't mix up our Jehorams. The Jehoram in the northern kingdom of Israel is the last of the Amreit kings.

The Jehoram in the southern kingdom is the successor of Jehoshaphat, his father, and for some time co-regent. That there are Jehorams on the thrones of the northern and the southern kingdom at the same time suggests that these two nations are being twinned in many ways. They're becoming too close through their alliances.

The consequences of this too close joining will be seen in the events around the story of Jehu and then later on in the devastation that Athaliah wreaks in the southern kingdom. We should also observe the way that the pattern of events that we see in 1 Kings

chapter 22 is being repeated in many senses in this chapter. In verses 4 and 5 of that chapter, much the same sort of thing will happen here.

Once again there will be a misleading prophecy and an unfavorable but inconclusive result of the battle. The battle against the Syrians in chapter 22 of 1 Kings had ended badly for Israel and Judah. King Ahab had been killed in that conflict but now the two nations join together once again to fight in a similar manner.

Edom is a vassal kingdom of Judah and it joins them as they go south to the Dead Sea through the wilderness of Edom. They hope to surprise the Moabites to their east. It's possible that they take this more circuitous route because the crossing near Jericho may be controlled by the Moabites.

However, taking this route through the wilderness there is no water. Jehoram of Israel suggests that the Lord might have called out the three kings in order to give them as a weakened force into the hand of Moab. As in 1 Kings chapter 22 though, Jehoshaphat desires the counsel of a prophet of the Lord and he's directed to Elisha by one of Jehoram of Israel's servants.

The three kings go to consult with Elisha who presumably is with the army at this point, perhaps as one enjoying at least a semi-official role. Elisha's reception of Jehoram of Israel however is cold. He says that he should go to one of the prophets of his father and mother.

As a very surprising detail here he summons a musician to help him in his process of prophesying. Prophecy in scripture often has a poetic or lyrical quality. Perhaps we're supposed to think that he sung part of this.

It would certainly be appropriate for the spirit's association with the glory of speech and the transformation of speech into song. 1 Samuel chapter 10 verses 5 to 6 is another part of scripture where we see some sort of relationship between prophecy and music. Likewise in the case of David and perhaps also in the singers who are associated with the temple.

Perhaps the connection between prophecy and music as John Ahern observes is found in the way that music can open us up to things beyond ourselves. In Ephesians chapter 5 verse 18 Paul speaks about not getting drunk with wine for that is debauchery but being filled with the spirit addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs singing and making melody to the lord with your heart. While condemning intoxication and drunkenness the scripture speaks about the way in which we can open ourselves up to God through song.

Music is something that can catch us up and carry us along. It can place us into different emotional states and it can also be the sort of spirit that binds together people in a

crowd. Music then would seem to have a fitting correspondence with prophecy.

Elisha's desire for a musician might be for someone to help him to open up to adopt the right spiritual posture to receive the word of God. The spirit is as it were the music of God which is one reason why it is so important that we give thought to fitting music that should accompany our worship of God to open us up to him and to his presence. The word of the lord comes through Elisha and he promises that he will make the dry stream bed full of pools.

This will occur apart from wind and rain and it will provide all that the company need to drink both them and their animals. The provision of such water in the wilderness might remind us of exodus narratives and beyond that he's going to give the Moabites into their hand. The prophecy ends with the statement that they will attack every fortified city and every choice city and shall fell every good tree and stop up all springs of water and ruin every good piece of land with stones.

That last part of the prophecy is particularly surprising as elsewhere in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 20 verses 19 to 20 we are told that they should not do these things. When you besiege a city for a long time making war against it in order to take it you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them but you shall not cut them down.

Are the trees in the field human that they should be besieged by you? Only the trees that you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down that you may build siege works against the city that makes war with you until it falls. The cutting down of trees was only for a limited purpose for the purpose of getting wood for siege works. Beyond that they were supposed to leave the land alone.

They were expressly forbidden to spoil the land. And yet here in the prophecy of Elisha this is exactly what we are told that they will do. It might make us scratch our heads and wonder what's going on.

As we've seen the Lord use prophecy to deceive and mislead people to their doom, people who are wicked and reject his word, perhaps we are seeing that happen again here. Back in 1st Kings chapter 13 the man of God from Judah was misled by the old prophet from Bethel. By heeding his lying prophecy and not adhering to the word that the Lord had given to him directly he ended up being killed by a lion.

In 1st Kings chapter 22 the Lord had put a lying spirit in the mouths of Ahab's prophets and Micaiah had to alert him to it. The Lord is shrewd with the wicked and people who reject his word will find themselves coming to ruin. The next morning the Lord's promise of water comes to pass.

The whole country is filled with water that comes from the direction of Edom and the

Moabites hear too late that all the kings have come to fight against them and they scramble to get their army together. They look out early in the morning and the sun shines on the water and they see the water as red with blood. The fact that they see the water as red with blood as the sun rises up would suggest that the three kings of their enemies are camped there east.

Edom, Israel and Judah have come all the way around and are attacking them from the direction that they least expected. However to the Moabites the water that looks like blood is proof that their enemies have been defeated. They must go up and gather the spoil.

Water turning to blood might also make us think of the story of the exodus. When they come to the camp of the Israelites the Lord's promise that he would give the Moabites into their hand comes to pass. The Moabites are caught unawares and the Israelites and Judahites and Edomites pursue them destroying everything in their path.

They lay the land in its city's waste until the king of Moab holds up in Kir HaRashath. Desperate not knowing what to do he sacrifices his son for a burnt offering on the wall presumably as a sacrifice to his god Kimosh. All human stratagems had failed for Meshach the king of the Moabites and now he turns to his god and most surprising of all at this point great wrath comes upon Israel.

Where does this great wrath come from? Is it the Moabites being spurred up against them by this action? Probably not. Nor is it likely to be the wrath of Kimosh who is called the filth of the Moabites elsewhere in first kings. The wrath in question is almost certainly from the Lord which leaves us with the question of how the wrath of the Lord relates to the sacrifice.

Why for instance would the Lord strike out at Israel rather than against Moab? It seems most likely to me that what is happening is that they are brought to the point where it seems absolutely certain that they will win and then at that point the Lord springs his trap. The king of Moab has desperately tried his last plans. He has tried to break through with the 700 men and then he has sacrificed his son and now on the very brink of victory the entire tide of the battle turns.

As in chapter 22 of first kings they return to their own land and the battle is inconclusive. Israel, Judah and Edom have been disobeying the word of the Lord. Disobeying the word of the Lord concerning the manner of battle.

Perhaps also disobeying the word of the Lord in trying to control Moab at all. In Deuteronomy chapter 2 verse 9 we read and the Lord said to me do not harass Moab or contend with them in battle for I will not give you any of their land for a possession because I have given our to the people of Lart for a possession. Peter Lighthouse suggests that we might see a sort of perverted exodus narrative in the case of Misha.

Misha has a name that might remind us of Moses. As his name means salvation he might also remind us of Joshua. His sacrifice of his firstborn son maybe reminds us of the story of the Passover.

The exodus themes that we saw to this point which may have seemed to the reader to have foretold a defeat of the Moabites by Israel may actually foreshadow a very different result. A question to consider what insights into God's character and the ways that he deals with people might we draw from this chapter. Elisha is given a double portion of his master Elijah's spirit and he goes on to perform twice as many miracles as his master does.

He also performs themes from the ministry of Elijah albeit transposed into a different key. In 2nd Kings chapter 4 we find several of Elisha's miracles. Miracles that should readily recall those of Elijah.

While much of Elijah's ministry was outside of the land in Zarephath, in Sinai or near the brook Cherith the ministry of Elisha is largely based in the land itself and whereas Elijah's ministry was particularly characterized by judgment the ministry of Elisha is one that brings life and healing. Elijah is the prophet of the desert. He's also the prophet of the drought whereas Elisha is a man who heals and gives water.

The ministries of Elijah and Elisha are tied up together. The one completes the ministry of the other. The transition to the ministry of Elisha brings a new and more glorious stage of God's work through these prophets.

During the drought that he had pronounced upon Israel, Elijah after he left the brook Cherith stayed with a woman of Zarephath, a widow who had one son. Elijah was in a cocoon of protection that the Lord has established around him. First of all he was protected by the ravens and then he was protected and fed by the woman of Zarephath and her son.

The widow of Zarephath provided for Elijah with her oil and her flour which would not run out as long as she was providing for Elijah. If she offered the prophet Elijah a cake first then there would be enough to provide for her and her son until the prophet needed food once more. The widow and her son then were kept alive as a means of keeping Elijah alive.

At the beginning of this chapter we have a story with several similarities to that earlier story but with significant differences. Now there is a widow with two children and the threat this time is not starvation but slavery. That her two children would be sold into slavery to pay for her debt.

Once again there is a miracle of a jar of oil not running out. However while the last jar of oil just continued to provide enough to keep them going, this jar provides such a super

abundance that a great many vessels provided by many neighbors are filled before it finally stops flowing. Once again God is sending his servant as a redeemer of widows but now to an Israelite widow not just a Sidonian one.

In this chapter we also see that a community is being formed around Elijah. The sons of the prophets, the wealthy woman who supports him in Shunem. A remnant community is being formed in a way that might remind us of Jesus and his disciples in the Gospels.

Elijah performed two miracles for the widow of Zarephath. Her oil and her flour were extended and her son was raised. Here we have another extension of oil and it's followed by a story of a child being born and a child being raised from the dead.

It begins with an act of hospitality. Elijah goes through Shunem and a wealthy woman urges him to eat some food with her. Subsequently every time he passes that way he goes in to eat some food.

The woman speaks to her husband and suggests that they build a little room at the top of their house in which he can stay every time that he visits. The room will have a bed, a table, a chair and a lamp. Peter Lighthouse suggests that there might be an allusion here to the various items of furniture in the temple.

The bed is the altar, the table is the table of showbread, the chair is the mercy seat throne of which the ark of the covenant is the footstool and then the lamp is the lampstand. The fact that Gehazi is always the go-between might suggest some sort of priestly connotation. Elijah represents the Lord and Gehazi is his priest.

What the woman recognizes is that God's presence is particularly in and with Elijah. Israel does not have the temple that the southern kingdom has but it does have God's work in someone like Elijah, God's presence being especially known in and around him. Part of this presence is the new community that is being formed in his orbit.

With his servant Gehazi as a go-between, Elijah discovers that the principal thing that the woman wants is a son. When she is summoned she stands in the doorway and Elijah declares to her at this season about this time next year you shall embrace a son. She struggles to believe it but sure enough that time next year she bears a son as Elijah had said.

There is of course an event that this should remind us of. In the book of Genesis chapter 18 verses 10 to 12 the Lord said I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah your wife shall have a son and Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years.

The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah so Sarah laughed to herself saying after I am worn out and my Lord is old shall I have pleasure? The similarities can be readily seen. In Genesis chapter 18 the promise of a son is given after the act of hospitality to

the angels. In both cases the parties are older and seemingly beyond childbearing.

In both cases the woman is standing in the doorway and in both cases the same turn of phrase is used I will surely return to you about this time next year. The birth of another child in the manner of Isaac, one of the great forefathers of the nation, is a propitious sign for God's blessing of his people. It's also a sign of God's power over death.

This whole chapter is a chapter that shows God's power over death, his power over scarcity and his commitment to redeem his people. However there is a twist in this particular story. After the child has grown one day when he's out with the reapers he complains of a sore head and the father instructs his servant to carry the child to his mother.

The Shunammite woman's response is to bring the child up to the room of Elisha to lay him out on his bed. This upper room is a place that's as it were sealed off from the rest of the world. It's a realm where the servant of the Lord dwells, the man who is anointed by the Lord's spirit.

If there is any hope for the child it will be found by sealing him up in this realm, a sort of cocoon of God's presence distinguished from the wider world. The woman then goes to seek the prophet Elisha. She saddles her donkey and sets out for the mountain.

When Elisha sees her coming afar off he sends Gehazi his servant to meet her and the woman assures Gehazi that all is well with her, her husband and the child. However when she meets Elisha she grabs his feet in her bitterness. She then goes on to tell him what has happened highlighting the injustice of it all.

She had not asked for a child but yet a child had been given to her and now that child has been taken away, treating her more cruelly than if she'd never been given the child to begin with. Elisha sends on his servant Gehazi ahead of them. However when Gehazi lays the staff of Elisha upon the face of the child, the child does not rise.

Nothing happens. Elisha then comes into the room and prays to the Lord and he goes and lies on the child, puts his mouth on the mouth of the child, his eyes on his eyes, his hands on his hands. He's identifying himself with the child in much the same way as Elijah related to the child of the widow of Zarephath.

When he does this the first time the child's flesh becomes warm but nothing further happens. After walking back and forth in the house he goes up again and does the same thing. And now the child sneezes seven times and opens his eyes.

He then instructs Gehazi his servant to tell the woman to pick up her son. Once again this is a story with many similarities to other ones. It is a story that might remind us of the binding of Isaac.

There there is not a child that has died but a child that will have to be put to death. Once again it's the promised child, the child that has been given by God to the barren woman. Here after the child has died the woman undertakes a journey very similar to the one of Abraham.

She saddles her donkey and she travels to the mountain. There is also as there was back in Genesis chapter 22 a reference to seeing something afar off. We earlier saw the similarities between the room that was prepared for Elisha and the temple.

And the bed was like an altar. Now the body of the child is laid out on the bed like the body of Isaac was laid out on the altar. However now the child's body is laid out not to be killed but to be raised up.

Back in Genesis chapter 22 there's no reference to Sarah in the story. The impression is strongly given that Abraham does all of these things without consulting with her. Here something similar happens but the other way around.

The woman places the child in the upper room without even telling her husband and then goes off to seek the prophet without telling her husband the purpose of her journey. In some ways we could imagine this story as a sort of way in which Sarah could respond had the sacrifice of Isaac gone ahead. She had been promised this child.

This child had been given to her in the Lord's kindness. Was he going to take this child away? No she would go back and she would insist upon the Lord's goodness that the child be restored to her. There is another story that this might remind us of.

A story that immediately precedes the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. It's the story of Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness. In that story there is also a woman with a dying son and it ends with the woman being told to pick up her son much as our story in 2nd Kings chapter 4. It is through reflecting upon such stories and their close relationships and the way in which they invert particular characters and particular scenarios that our theological imagination is developed.

We can consider a different permutation of the characters in the story of the binding of Isaac and consider what would have happened in that case. Through such reflection we have a better understanding of the original story of Genesis chapter 22 and of the highly related story of chapter 21 and the meaning of 2nd Kings chapter 4 is thrown into far sharper relief when we read it against the backdrop of Genesis. After the raising of the son of the Shunammite woman we read of a meal at Gilgal that is prepared with the sons of the prophets and in the pot one of the sons of the prophets places some wild gourds that he found that poisoned the stew.

When they eat it they discover that it was poisoned and they tell Elisha who instructs them to bring him some flour which he throws in the pot and heals it of its poison. A few

chapters earlier he had healed the waters of Jericho by casting some salt in them and now he casts flour in a pot to have the same effect. As with the raising of the woman's son we should probably see some sort of sign here.

The pot might represent the nation, all the people together and the wild gourds might make us think of the cultivated gourds that you see in the temple. The nation is poisoned by this wild fruit but God is going to cast into the nation the salt and the flour of his word and his people and through them to heal the nation of its poison. This chapter ends with a further miracle, the miraculous feeding of a hundred men with the first fruits of the man of Baal Shalisha.

The presentation of the first fruits to Elisha might be another way in which Elisha is being associated with the temple. As in the extension of the oil of the widow at the beginning of the chapter the multiplication of the bread that ends it is another miracle of plenty illustrating the abundance that God can provide for his people, a joyous success that provides for all that is needed with more left over. A question to consider, in what ways could we compare Elisha and his miracles to our Lord and his miracles? The events of 2nd Kings chapter 5 presumably occur during a period of relaxed hostilities between Syria and Israel who had been at war in 1st Kings chapter 22.

Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Syria is an important figure. He is held in great favour and he has great power and influence. One of the more remarkable details here is that he is described as being the means by which the Lord gave victory to Syria.

Here we see the sovereignty of God from a different perspective, a sovereignty that does not merely judge Israel but raises up someone in another nation to be a means by which he will make his own name great. However this Naaman has leprosy. The leprosy described here is some sort of skin condition that changes the colour of the skin.

It is most fully treated in Leviticus chapter 13 and 14. On account of the name of the condition many mistakenly identify it with Hansen's disease which is the condition that we more commonly call leprosy. However most scholars suggest that it may have been a family of different related conditions things like psoriasis or eczema.

Others raise the possibility that the condition in question no longer exists. In the book of Leviticus this condition can also afflict houses. It does not seem to be a contagious condition but it is something that requires cleansing.

On various occasions it is associated with God's afflicting of a person with a judgment. It is one of the signs given to Moses. It happens to Gehazi in this chapter, it happens to Miriam in Numbers chapter 12 and it also happens to Uzziah in 2nd Chronicles chapter 26.

The seriousness of the condition seems to arise less from its contagious character or from some serious medical symptoms that accompany it but rather lies more in the realm of symbolism. The person with leprosy is unclean and they are restricted in their approach to holy and clean places accordingly. Naaman's wife has a little Israelite servant girl who tells her that there is a prophet in Samaria who would be able to heal her husband's condition.

Having heard this Naaman goes to his master the king to seek his blessing to go to the land of Israel. He is sent to Israel with an immense quantity of money and a handsome reward in changes of clothes. The king of Syria sends a message with him to the king of Israel.

Now while there has been a relaxation of hostilities between the two nations this is truly a remarkable event. The king of this rival power is sending the very commander of his army, the sort of man who had taken away little girls from Israel as slaves. He is sending this commander in order to seek healing from the king of Israel.

Given the volatile relationship between the two kingdoms it's not surprising that the king of Israel was deeply distressed to receive this message. He knew that if he did not respond in a way that satisfied Naaman and the king of Syria they might seek occasion to fight against him again. Naaman's need for healing becomes a matter then of immense national concern.

It threatens to reignite conflict between the two nations. Elisha however shows that something else is going on. The healing should serve an apologetic purpose to show that there is a prophet and hence a god in Israel.

Receiving a message from Elisha the king sends Naaman his way. Naaman comes to Elisha and stands at the door of his house much as the Shunammite woman stood at the door in the previous chapter. There are a number of parallels between these two stories and it's worth looking at them in more detail.

Once again Gehazi is the go-between. He's instructed to wash seven times in the Jordan. This instruction with the reference to washing and something being done seven times should remind us of the instructions given in Leviticus chapter 14 verses 1 to 9. The Lord spoke to Moses saying this shall be the law of the leprous person for the day of his cleansing.

He shall be brought to the priest and the priest shall go out of the camp and the priest shall look. Then if the case of disease is healed in the leprous person the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two live clean birds and cedar wood and scarlet yarn and hyssop and the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel over fresh water. He shall take the live bird with the cedar wood and the scarlet yarn and the hyssop and dip them and the live bird in the

blood of the bird that was killed over the fresh water and he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease.

Then he shall pronounce him clean and shall let the living bird go into the open field and he who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes and shave off all his hair and bathe himself in water and he shall be clean and after that he may come into the camp but live outside his tent seven days and on the seventh day he shall shave off all his hair from his head his beard and his eyebrows he shall shave off all his hair and then he shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water and he shall be clean. Naaman is appalled by this instruction. He was expecting to be received by Elisha himself.

He's an important figure. He should be recognized in this manner not just have a messenger sent to him. The fact that there is a go-between once again might alert us to the possibility that Elisha is playing a role similar to that of the temple.

He represents the presence of God among his people. The messengers and other go-betweens are playing a role similar to priests. Naaman was expecting a more elaborate rite as well.

He wanted some waving of hands and some visual display and what he's given is a word of instruction. He is expected to hear, to believe and to obey. As in many of the miracles of Christ, particularly in John's gospel, this miracle of Elisha occurs apart from Elisha's own presence.

The miracle is a word that he gives that if followed will accomplish the healing that is desired. Beyond the lack of Elisha's presence and the fact that no elaborate rite is performed, Naaman is annoyed that he has to perform all of this in the Jordan River. There are far greater rivers in his home city.

Yet the significance here is not the material rite as such, the fact that it's just a washing in water. It matters where it is performed. It's performed relative to Israel.

The Jordan River is the key river of Israel and to wash in this river is to acknowledge the power of the God of Israel. It's not just to perform a sort of magic rite. It is to adopt a posture of submission relative to a personal God.

His servants persuade him to go ahead and to wash. What he has been asked to do is no great thing. All he has to do is wash himself seven times in the Jordan and the promise associated with that is so great he will be cleansed.

With such a promise attached, why would he not obey the word of the prophet? As he goes down to the river, he dips himself within the river and his flesh is restored like the flesh of a little child. He is, as it were, born again. The story began with a little girl and now there is a little boy.

At this point we might also recall that when he was given this instruction, he was standing in the doorway, which is also where the Shunamite woman was standing when she received the word that she would have a son that time next year, an event that was reminiscent of Sarah hearing about the promise of a son when she was standing in the tent. Having experienced this great miracle, he goes back to Elisha. The miracle, which, as I noted earlier, required him to adopt a position of submission relative to the God of Israel, clearly and appropriately stands for a lot more than just a great healing by a miracle man in the mind of Naaman. His response is not just thanks for a healing, but it's a confession of faith in God.

Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel. As a token of his appreciation for what he has received, he wants to give a gift to the prophet Elisha. Naaman started off standing before the king of Syria, with his wife, with a servant girl standing before her.

Now he's standing before the prophet of the Lord Elisha. This movement that we see in the language of the text betrays something of the greater movement that is taking place. Naaman's principal loyalty is no longer to the king of Syria but to the God of Elisha.

Elisha refuses the gift. It is not for him to receive a gift for the work of the Lord. The Lord was the one that wrought this great miracle and by refusing the reward, Elisha underlines this fact.

As his gift is refused, Naaman makes a request. He requests two mule loads of earth to take back because he does not want to offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any God but the Lord. The altars of the Lord were supposed to be built out of earth or unhewn stone as we see in Exodus chapter 20 verse 24.

Naaman the Syrian is going to establish an altar of the Lord outside of the land of Israel. He follows this with a request for indulgence that when he has to go to the temple of Rimmon, the God that his master the king serves, that the Lord will pardon him as he kneels down in assisting his master. Elisha's response implies that the pardon is granted.

The story of the Shunammite woman in chapter 4 had a surprising sequel to it. The child was born but then the child died and the Shunammite woman had to go on a journey to meet the prophet. Here it is Gehazi who initiates the surprising sequel.

He's displeased his master has spared this Naaman the Syrian. He would have liked to see his master take advantage of Naaman the Syrian. This is one of the great enemies of the people, the commander of the foreign army that had killed the Israelite king not that long ago.

After that battle with the Syrians in 1st Kings chapter 22, the blood of the slain king Ahab

in his chariot had been washed in the pool and licked up by the dogs and now the commander of the army that killed him comes on a chariot and he's sent to wash in Jordan and be cleansed of his leprosy. Perhaps this provided some of the motivation for Gehazi's actions. He makes a blasphemous oath to the lord swearing by the name of the lord in contravening his master's wishes.

When he meets with Naaman, Naaman asks is all well? This is similar to the encounter that Gehazi had with the Shunammite woman in the preceding chapter although he is now on the different side of the interaction. Lying to Naaman he requests some changes of clothes and a talent of silver and Naaman insists that he takes two talents. Gehazi goes back to his house, sends the servants away and then meets his master Elisha who inquires what he has been doing.

Whereas in the preceding chapter the lord had not revealed to him what had happened to the Shunammite woman's son, here the lord had revealed everything that Gehazi had done. Elisha's response to Gehazi is very surprising. Did not my heart go when the man turned from his chariot to meet you? Was it a time to accept money and garments, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male servants and female servants? All that Gehazi accepted were these changes of clothes and two talents of silver.

Why the reference to all these other things? The clearest background for these seems to be found in 1st Samuel chapter 8 verses 13 to 17. In Samuel's words concerning the actions of the king. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.

He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys and put them to his work.

He will take the tenth of your flocks and you shall be his slaves. Why on earth would Elisha allude to this when speaking to his servant Gehazi? Gehazi isn't It seems to me that the answer to this is found in the fact that Samuel's words concerning the king concern the way that those who have power over others will exploit that power to take advantage of others. On account of his spiritual power as one who has been given the power to work miracles, Elisha and by extension his servant have great power over Naaman the Syrian.

Elisha is very concerned not to wield that as a means of taking advantage of him. Rather he must act as a faithful servant of the Lord. On the other hand Gehazi sees that spiritual power as something to be taken advantage of, as something to profit from, as something to subjugate others with.

He sees the fact that the commander of the Syrian army is in debt to his master as too great an opportunity to let pass up. What's the point of performing such miracles for

enemies of the people of God if you can't fleece them for what you can? In Gehazi's desire for Naaman's wealth however, he receives Naaman's condition. Leprosy, and not just leprosy as such but Naaman's leprosy, will cling to him and to his family forever.

He has been struck by the Lord for his abuse of the Lord's power that was given to his master. Reading this story we can also see a juxtaposition between Naaman the Syrian and Gehazi. Gehazi stands before his master Elisha but he ends up becoming a leper.

Naaman starts off as a leper and he ends up standing before Elisha, the man of God. Jesus references the healing of Naaman the Syrian in his first sermon in the book of Luke, as he speaks in the synagogue at Nazareth in Luke chapter 4 verses 25 to 27. Once again in 2nd Kings chapter 6, Israel is having trouble with the Syrians.

There are two connected stories in this chapter. In the previous chapter Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, had been healed and now once again we will see the reputation of Elisha and the work of the Lord through him spreading to the court of the king of Syria. The chapter starts however with the miracle of the axe head raised from the water.

Peter Lighthouse and James Jordan suggest a chiasmic or there and back again structure in chapters 3 to 7. War with Moab in chapter 3 corresponds with war with Syria in chapters 6 and 7. The provision for the indebted widow at the beginning of chapter 4 parallels with the recovered axe head at the beginning of chapter 6. The raising of the Shunamite's son in the middle of chapter 4 parallels with the healing of Naaman in chapter 5. And then at the centre is the healing of the stew and the feeding of the hundred men. Both the stories of the widow whose sons are at risk of being sold into slavery to repay her debt and the man who loses the borrowed axe head are stories of the redemption of debtors. An iron axe head would have been a costly item at the time and as he had lost it the man would be liable to pay the full cost of the property according to the law of Exodus chapter 22 verses 14 to 15.

If a man borrows anything of his neighbour and it is injured or dies, the owner not being with it, he shall make full restitution. If the owner was with it, he shall not make restitution. If it was hired, it came for its hiring fee.

The loss of the axe head is occasioned by a building project for the growing band of the sons of the prophets that surround Elisha. These are maybe like the disciples that follow Jesus. The prophets are going to get a new dwelling place and they go to the Jordan to get the materials.

While cutting down trees the axe head falls off. This is the fourth miracle to occur at the Jordan in 2 Kings to this point. There are the two crossings of the river in chapter 2 and Naaman goes down into the Jordan and comes up healed of his leprosy in chapter 5. The fact that it is the Jordan might recall the significance of the Jordan as the border of the

promised land.

The manner of the miracle might recall the events of Exodus chapter 14 and 15 where Israel was taken up out of the waters of the Red Sea and then the events of Mara that followed in chapter 15 verses 23 to 25. When they came to Mara they could not drink the water of Mara because it was bitter. Therefore it was named Mara.

And the people grumbled against Moses saying, what shall we drink? And he cried to the Lord and the Lord showed him a log and he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. Elisha's healing of the waters of Jericho in chapter 2 were reminiscent of this event but the throwing of wood into water occurring again here is likely noteworthy. Earlier in 1 Kings chapter 8 verse 51 Solomon had described the people as follows.

They are your people and your heritage which you brought out of Egypt from the midst of the iron furnace. The identification of Egypt as the iron furnace is also found in Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 20 and Jeremiah chapter 11 verse 4. Perhaps this miracle is among other things a symbol recalling the Exodus. Israel was forged as a nation in the iron furnace of Egypt and then taken up out of the waters through the instrumentality of wood particularly Moses rod.

Lost outside of the land if the people seek the Lord the iron axe head of Israel that has sunk in the waters of the Gentiles in exile can be recovered. This is also the third time that Elisha has performed a miracle by throwing something into liquid. He healed the waters by throwing salt into the spring.

He healed the poisoned pot by throwing flour into it and now he raises the sunken axe head by throwing the stick into the waters. In the second episode in the chapter the Syrians come on the scene again. The chronology of the events isn't entirely clear.

We might be dealing with events quite a number of years later. Neither the names of the king of Israel or of Syria are given to us. Syria has been raiding Israel and engaging in small skirmishes.

However the Lord reveals to Elisha what the Syrians have planned and he is able to warn the king of Israel so that he is delivered from the hands of the Syrians on a number of occasions. The reputation of Elisha has clearly spread widely as one of the servants of the king of Syria knows that Elisha tells the king of Israel the plans of the king of Syria. He sends an army to Dothan, the same place from which Joseph was taken as a slave into Egypt, where he had heard that Elisha is.

The servant of Elisha is very afraid when he sees the city surrounded by the Syrian army but Elisha prays that the Lord will open his eyes. When they are opened he sees the mountain filled with the horses and fiery chariots of the Lord, much as Elisha had seen the chariots of fire that had taken Elijah into heaven in chapter 2. While Elijah had

considered himself to be the only one left, Elisha has a recognition of the vast forces arrayed on his side of the spiritual conflict. Elisha is the spearhead of the Lord's operations in the land.

Elijah and Elisha are like angelic messengers to Israel and much as the violent sodomites who sought to take Lartan his guests in Genesis chapter 19, the Syrians are blinded by the Lord. This sets up an immediate contrast with the servant of Elisha who has his eyes opened to perceive what his master sees and the Syrians who are further blinded so that they lack even physical sight. Their loss of sight is most likely not a complete loss of vision but rather a bedazzling so that even though they are still seeing things they lack perception.

In a comic development Elisha leads the men into the city of Samaria where their eyes are opened to recognise their predicament. However Elisha forbids the king from striking them down instructing the king to provide a meal for them instead treating them as subdued captives rather than as active enemies. Elisha leads the king to treat the Syrians with mercy and kindness in a way that might remind us of the Apostle Paul's teaching in Romans chapter 12 verses 19 to 21.

Beloved never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God for it is written vengeance is mine I will repay says the Lord. To the contrary if your enemy is hungry feed him if he is thirsty give him something to drink for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

This is not the first time that Elisha has shown kindness to the Syrians of course. He was involved in the healing of Naaman a commander of their army in the preceding chapter. Now on his instruction a Syrian army is shown great mercy.

They had intended to capture him but he took them captive and brought them to the king of Israel only to set them free again. As a result they do not raid the land again for some time. The story of Elisha's mercy to the Syrian army has a sequel though.

Ben-Hadad the king of Syria musters his entire army and besieges Samaria and there is also a great famine. It is so serious that unclean donkey's heads are being sold for a great price for food and people are even buying dove's dung in a desperate search for it. As the king likely Jehoram at this time is walking on the wall a woman calls out to him for help.

The king declares his own powerlessness in response but asks the woman concerning her trouble. She wants him to judge between her and another woman with whom she has made a pact to eat their two sons. However after the woman asking for help had given her son to be eaten with the other woman.

The other woman hid her own son so that he could not be eaten. This is a twisted version

of the case judged by Solomon in 1st Kings chapter 3 verses 16 to 28 where Solomon judged between the two prostitutes the one with the dead and the other with a living child. It might also recall the petition of the Shunammite woman to Elisha concerning her dead son.

In contrast to Elisha however the king of Israel lacks any power to help. Perhaps we are also to see here some premonition of what will befall Israel and Judah. The Amorites of Israel have two great murderous women Jezebel the Sidonian wife of Ahab and Athaliah the granddaughter of Amoraï.

Athaliah is the murderous mother of Israel who tries to consume the sons of David killing all of the royal family of Judah save for Joash who is hidden away by Jehoshabab his aunt in chapter 11. Like the cannibal mother of this chapter in the marriage of Athaliah to Jehoram of Judah the two kingdoms as two women had joined together in a child consuming pact. In 1st Kings chapter 3 the two nations that would arise from the divided kingdom could be seen in the symbol of the two prostitutes one who did not care for the seed and the other who protected the seed.

Once again we see two women struggling over the seed. The woman who repents of her cannibalism of the seed and protects her own child from the cannibal mother might be seen as Judah after the restoration of its kingdom under Joash. We might further note that this is a fulfillment of one of the curses of the covenant from Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 52 to 57.

The man who is the most tender and refined among you will begrudge food to his brother, to the wife he embraces, and to the last of the children whom he has left, so that he will not give to any of them any of the flesh of his children whom he is eating, because he has nothing left in the siege and in the distress with which your enemy shall distress you in all your towns. The most tender and refined woman among you, who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground because she is so delicate and tender, will begrudge to the husband she embraces, to her son and to her daughter, her afterbirth that comes from between her feet, and her children whom she bears, because lacking everything she will eat them secretly, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemy shall distress you in your towns. This is pretty far down the list of curses that have already come upon the Northern Kingdom.

It is swiftly running out of opportunities and will eventually face the ruin of exile for its sins. The king vents his anger at Elisha. Elisha had spared the Syrian army earlier in the chapter, and now the army has come back to destroy them.

Like the king of Syria had done earlier in the chapter, the king of Israel sends men to take Elisha. However, knowing the intent of the king, Elisha gets the men with him to bar the door against the messenger of the king. There were resemblances to the protection of the angels from the men of Sodom in Genesis chapter 19 earlier in the chapter, where

the Syrians were bedazzled like the men of Sodom, and now we might see further resemblances, as a door has to be guarded against people trying to take a messenger of the lord from inside.

At this point the king arrives on the scene. He expresses his anger and his despair at the situation. The lord had brought this disaster upon the people.

While the righteous waited upon the lord in their distress, trusting him to deliver them, the king sees no point in doing so any longer. The lord is their enemy, and he will wait for the lord no longer. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger.

A question to consider. How should the king of Israel have responded to this situation? In the story of 2nd Kings chapter 6 verses 8 to 23, where the Syrians had tried to capture Elisha in Dothan, the story had begun with an attack from the Syrians, from which the lord miraculously delivered his people, concluding with the provision of a great feast and the departure of the Syrians. Albeit in a rather different manner, the same pattern plays out again here in chapter 7. Perhaps this invites comparisons and contrasts between the two accounts, as narratives designed to be read alongside of each other.

As Peter Lightheart notes, the whole narrative is chiasmically structured, as a there and back again story. It begins with Elisha's prediction to the officer in verses 1 to 2, and ends with the fulfilment of that prediction in verses 16 to 20. It then has the four leprous men discovering the abandoned camp in verses 3 to 8, which corresponds with the return of the messengers of the king in verse 15.

The lepers return to report the empty camp in verses 9 to 11, and the messengers of the king are sent out in verses 14 to 15. At the centre of the pattern are verses 12 and 13, in which the king expresses his suspicions concerning a trap set by the Syrians, and one of his men suggests that they send out some horses and some men with them to discover whether a trap indeed had been set. Chapter 6 ended with the king coming against Elisha, whom he blamed for the horrific crisis of the siege and the famine that had befallen Samaria.

Now, as the king comes to Elisha's door, Elisha responds to him. Elisha's prophecy is astonishing. Samaria's famine isn't merely the result of the siege, as can be seen in the following chapter.

It's gone on for several years. To claim that the Lord would provide such a quantity of food that the people of Samaria would almost instantly go from selling a donkey's head for eighty shekels of silver, and a small quantity of a dove's dung for five shekels of silver, to a situation where barley and fine flour would be so cheaply obtained, was difficult to countenance. A famine does not instantly lift.

In this respect it isn't like a drought, where the coming of rains can change the situation

in a matter of hours. Rather, access to food takes some time to be restored after a famine. Food has to be grown, harvested, brought to the people, and then sold to them.

Each of these stages takes time, a lot longer than a day. The sudden end to the famine reminds us of the sudden end to the drought in the story of Elijah in 1 Kings chapter 18. Once again, the power of the word of the Lord would be demonstrated to a resistant Umrade king.

The captain who accompanied the king refused to believe it, and he expressed his disbelief, to which Elisha responded with a word of judgment, which would also serve as a further confirmation of the word of the Lord concerning the event. We don't see many lepers in the narrative of the Old Testament, but there are a cluster of lepers in these chapters, Naaman the Syrian, Gehazi the servant of Elisha, and the four lepers of this chapter. The lepers, on account of their uncleanness, were excluded from the city, although there is some irony in this fact, when we consider that the people within the city were eating donkey's heads, dove's dung, and even their own children.

The lepers are outsiders, the people excluded from the community, but they will be the first to enjoy the fruit of the Lord's deliverance, and they become the bearers of the good news. The lepers, excluded from the beleaguered city, decide that they have nothing to lose by going to the camp of the Syrians in search of food. However, when they go there, there is no one to be found.

In the previous story, the Lord had confused the eyes of the Syrians so that they could not recognise Elisha or where they were. In this story, we discover that the Lord had deceived the ears of the Syrians, so that they heard the sound of chariots, horses, and a great army, causing them to flee. In discussing the structure of the books of the kings, Lighthart and James Jordan observed that the events of chapter 6 verse 24 to chapter 7 verse 20 are parallel to the earlier story of chapter 3, concerning the battle against the Moabites.

Lighthart writes, The two chapters are chiastically linked, and are neatly inverted. In one, an army leaves a city expecting to find an empty camp and is surprised to find an army. In the second, lepers leave a city expecting to find a full camp and are surprised to find an empty camp.

In both stories too, Elisha prophesied miraculous provision of water in chapter 3 verse 17 and food in chapter 7 verse 1. The lepers arrive at the camp at twilight, and the Syrians flee the camp in the twilight. The implication might be that they flee before the lepers. They believe that the sound that they hear must be the sound of the kings of the Hittites and the Egyptians, and they presume that Israel has hired them against them.

In his commentary on the book, Ian Provan notes that there is a strong pun on the word for lepers, Mitsurayim, and the word for Egyptians, Mitsurayim. Once again, the

involvement of the Lord in the situation is comic in character. The pun gives weight to the suggestion that the Syrians are mistaking the lepers for the first of the Egyptians and fleeing before four outcasts scavenging for food.

On the other hand, in the previous account of the Syrians trying to capture Elisha and Dothan, the city had been surrounded by invisible chariots and horses of the Lord, and now the city of Samaria is delivered by an invisible yet audible army of chariots and horses. Israel's forces look beleaguered, but they have a far greater force surrounding them. In Psalm 34 verse 7 we read, The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and delivers them.

The deliverance here might also have echoes of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt in the Exodus. Israel was cornered, seemingly with no hope of escape. However, the Lord completely eliminated the threat, causing the enemies to flee, and delivered his people, with his people enjoying the spoil of their enemies.

Lighthouse further notes the fact that this occurs after a sort of perverse Passover, as the women boil the sun in chapter 6. The lepers initially behave like Achan, they hide the spoil, but they rightly think better of their actions and determine to go back to the city and deliver the news. They inform the gatekeepers of Samaria, telling them about the empty camp, and the gatekeepers pass on the news to the king's household. The king, hearing the news, is wary that the Syrians have set a trap, which they will spring as soon as the men of Samaria leave the city.

They decide that they will act cautiously, so they send out a few men and horses to scout out the camp. Besides, what do they have to lose if they die at the hand of the Syrians, rather than dying in the city like everyone else? When they seek to follow the path of the Syrian army, however, they discover that the way was littered with abandoned clothes and equipment, which they had abandoned in their haste. In the conclusion of the chapter, we see that the word of the Lord by Elisha was fulfilled, a prophecy that was beyond remarkable when it was first delivered.

Due to the disbelief of the captain, Elisha had given him a word of judgment, and this was also fulfilled. His failure to believe the word and the power of the Lord meant that he tragically missed out on the Lord's deliverance. A question to consider.

This story, like the story that preceded it, is a story of the Lord confusing his enemies, frustrating their violent intentions, and giving a feast or a gift of plenty. How might these examples of the Lord's dealing with his people and their enemies anticipate the events of the gospel? Chapter six of the book of second kings ended with a woman seeking help from the king in a time of famine, and the king was powerless to help. Chapter eight begins with the king now able to assist a woman after a famine on account of the memory of the prophet Elisha.

The famine mentioned here seems to be the same one as afflicted Samaria in chapters six and seven. Elisha had provided forewarning about the famine in a way that extended the deliverance of the Lord to others. There are possible connections here with the story of the exodus, going into another country as a result of a seven-year famine.

In Genesis chapter 10 the Philistines are associated with the Egyptians, and then the woman returns to find that her land is lost before it is later restored to her. These early verses of the chapter involve a surprising scene. Two of the characters that have been previously mentioned in the story, who are very negatively portrayed, Gehazi and King Jehoram, are reflecting upon Elisha's works in his absence, telling the great deeds that the Lord has accomplished through him.

As Gehazi is telling the story of the raising of the woman's child, lo and behold the woman comes to ask for the restoration of her land, the land that she lost when she left the country. The recounting of the story of the woman is left off as her story continues in the land being restored to her by the king. The return to the land and the land being restored is a sort of jubilee, it's like the original entrance into the land, where with the seven-fold circuit of Jericho on the seventh day the land is restored with the blowing of trumpets.

It looks back, but Peter Lighthouse notes that it also possibly looks forward to the exile. Israel leaving the land and dwelling among the nations for a period of time could be restored to the land if the memory of the prophet is preserved. King Jehoram, presuming it is him, seems to have a rather different attitude after the events of Samaria.

He's far more positively inclined to Elisha. We should also note that the king's restoration of the woman's lost land is parallel to Elisha's restoration of her lost child. Remembering and meditating on the deeds of the prophet inspires to appropriate and analogous action in the present, and it might make us think of an implicit promise to Israel that their seed will be raised from the dead of exile and their lost land will be restored to them.

We've seen negative images of Israel and Judah in the cannibalistic mothers of chapter 6, and now we have a possible positive image of how faithful to the word of the prophet they might know restoration and deliverance. In 1 Kings chapter 19 verses 15 to 17, the Lord said to Elijah, Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you arrive you shall anoint Haziel to be king over Syria, and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-Meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place, and the one who escapes from the sword of Haziel shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Immediately after this Elijah had gone on to anoint Elisha, but the reader of the text will have been surprised to note that neither Haziel nor Jehu are anointed by Elijah.

Those anointings don't actually occur until chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Kings. To understand this we should think about the ministry of Elijah and Elisha as a two-part ministry. There

is a connection between the two.

Elisha continues the ministry of Elijah by the double portion of his spirit. The two ministries are a two-part ministry. Elijah's ministry is a ministry of the wilderness, followed by the ministry of Elisha which is a ministry of the land.

Elisha will be the one who completes the commissioned task of Elijah. He is the one that will have to anoint these two men. We may be surprised to encounter judgment here, just as there seems to be an apparent thawing in Jehoram's attitude towards Elisha.

He's asking about the works of Elisha from Gehazi, and he has just performed an act of kingly justice in restoring the Shunammites' land to her. Nevertheless, Jehoram, while his evil is less than that of Ahab his father, is still an evil king, and the death sentence hanging over the Amorite dynasty will fall upon him and his kingdom. He never truly repents.

We see here that the reputation of the prophet has extended beyond the land of Israel. Elisha was involved in the healing of Naaman in chapter 5, and also in the sparing of the Syrian army in chapter 6 verses 8 to 23. Israel was called to be a light to the nations, and the nations are now coming to Israel to learn from the Lord, more specifically from Elisha the man of God.

While the role of the prophets to this point has largely been confined to Israel and Judah, now we're seeing the role of the prophets bringing God's word out and extending Israel's influence to the surrounding nations and empires. Israel will later be scattered throughout the world, not just as a punishment, but a means of spreading that light of God's truth to other peoples. God's word is going international.

John the Baptist had wondered whether Jesus was the one expected, or whether to wait for another. He had heard about the mighty works of Christ, the way that he healed the sick, about his casting out of demons, and about the way that he was teaching the poor. However, he had prophesied that the one coming after him would bring judgment, that he would come with fire, that he would purge the threshing floor, and that the axe was laid to the root of the trees.

And then Jesus comes along, and he brings healing and life. We can understand John the Baptist scratching his head and wondering whether this was indeed the one that he had foretold. One could imagine Elijah having the same feeling about Elisha.

When he met with the Lord at Horeb, he had received this great message of judgment, that God was going to judge the people, and that he was going to do so through Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha. And then Elisha comes on the scene, and nothing happens. Well, not judgment anyway.

He raises the dead, he delivers people from debt, he miraculously multiplies food, he

provides deliverance from famine, he heals a foreign leper. All of these things are great, but they don't fulfil what we've been waiting for since chapter 19 of 1 Kings. We started the book of 2 Kings with fire coming down from heaven, but since then we've not seen an awful lot of judgment.

Why is this the case, and how can reflecting upon the story of John the Baptist and Jesus help us to understand it? I think in the case of Jesus, as in the case of Elisha, the Deliverer brings life and gathers a remnant community first, and then judgment falls. Elisha has been forming a community, the community of the sons of the prophets that surrounds him, and with them a wider body of people who believe in the word of the Lord. When judgment comes, these people will be preserved through it, as the true remnant of Israel.

Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria, wants to know whether he will recover from his sickness, and he sends Hazael with an enormous gift. Elisha, however, gives him an ambiguous word, and there are various ways to understand this. There could perhaps be an ambiguity in the statement that Elisha gives to Hazael to deliver to the king.

The statement could be read in two different ways. By one way of reading it, Ben-Hadad would not live, and by another he would, and then Elisha clears up the confusion and the ambiguity by explicitly and forthrightly foretelling what will occur, leaving Hazael himself to determine how to deliver the message. Alternatively, the message itself could be a clear statement that he will live, followed by a statement that he will not live.

Elsewhere, in places like 1 Kings chapter 22, we see such contradictory words from the Lord, ways in which he deceives people to their doom. Whichever it is, Hazael is going to become king in Ben-Hadad's place, and Hazael does not just deliver the message, he actually fulfills the prophecy by killing the king Ben-Hadad. And by the fact that the prophecy is delivered to Hazael himself, the prophecy provokes the actions by which it will be fulfilled.

The chapter concludes by turning our gaze towards the southern kingdom of Judah. However, at this time, the northern kingdom of Israel, in its rebellion, is clearly setting the terms for both of the kingdoms. There's been a close convergence of the two nations.

Jehoshaphat had been unwise in fighting with Israel on two different occasions. In chapter 22 of 1 Kings, he had narrowly escaped with his life. In chapter 3 of 2 Kings, he had also been part of a losing battle, fighting alongside Israel.

While Jehoshaphat was a good king, he ends up bringing Judah into a very damaging alliance with the northern kingdom of Israel. His son marries the daughter of Ahab, Athaliah. And shockingly, we read that he walked in the way of the kings of Israel.

He may be a king of Judah, he may be a son of David, but the pattern for both northern and southern kingdom is provided by the sinful Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, and all of his successors. While he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, the Lord preserved a testimony within the south, preserving the house of David so that David would not be wiped out. Just as the northern kingdom had lost Moab, so the kingdom of Judah loses Edom.

Libna also revolts at the same time. The land is being chipped away. After Jehoram dies, he is succeeded by his son Ahaziah.

Once again, he walks in the ways of the kings of Israel, his mother being Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and the granddaughter of Amasai. We might also note that the names of the two sons of Ahab who reign are Ahaziah and Jehoram. And now we've had a Jehoram and an Ahaziah on the southern throne.

The nations are starting to mirror each other. A question to consider. At the end of the chapter, Ahaziah joins Jehoram of the northern kingdom to fight at Ramath Gilead against the Syrians with Hazael.

Jehoram is wounded and he returns to Jezreel to be healed. How might reading this event in the light of chapters 21 and 22 of First Kings help us to understand its significance? At the beginning of Second Kings chapter 9, we find Israel still engaged in battle at Ramath Gilead against the Syrians. Jehoram of Israel has been injured in battle and returned to Jezreel to recover.

However, the army remains at Ramath Gilead which is where the story picks up now. In First Kings chapter 19 verses 15 to 18, after Elijah went to Mount Horeb, the Lord had spoken to him and had given him a mission. And the Lord said to him, go return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.

And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel. And Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel Meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place.

And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death. And the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.

However, surprisingly, after anointing Elisha as his successor at the end of the chapter, nothing more happened. It had seemed for a moment as if Israel was about to face its great reckoning, but it didn't materialize. Elijah ascended into heaven in 2 Kings chapter 2. Elisha took his place and went around mostly healing, delivering and performing miracles.

The forgetful reader of the books of Kings will probably have forgotten 1 Kings chapter 19 already at this point, and the more attentive might have puzzled about what was going on. The prophetic commission had not been abandoned though. It awaited the proper time.

The remnant had to be formed first through the ministry of Elisha before the time for judgment came. In 2 Kings chapter 8, Hazael had been anointed king of Syria, and at the end of the chapter was causing trouble on the northern border of the Transjordan in Ramoth-Gilead. Ramoth-Gilead was the same place where Jehoshaphat and Ahab had fought unsuccessfully in 1 Kings chapter 22.

Ahab had been fatally wounded in that battle and had died in a manner that fulfilled the prophecy that Elijah had given in the preceding chapter after Ahab's sin in killing Naboth and taking his vineyard. But a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel between the scale armour and the breastplate. Therefore he said to the driver of his chariot, Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded.

And the battle continued that day, and the king was propped up in his chariot facing the Syrians, until at evening he died. And the blood of the wound flowed into the bottom of the chariot, and about sunset a cry went through the army, every man to his city, and every man to his country. So the king died, and was brought to Samaria.

And they buried the king in Samaria, and they washed the chariot by the pool of Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood, and the prostitutes washed themselves in it, according to the word of the Lord that he had spoken. The preceding chapter should have given us a sense of déjà vu, once again a battle with the Syrians at Ramoth Gilead, once again an alliance of the king of Israel and the king of Judah, once again the Lord turning the conflict against his people, once again the Israelite king wounded by the Syrians in battle, then the wounded king returned to Jezreel. At this point we should have a sense of where the story is going.

In Elijah's prophecy to Ahab in Naboth's vineyard, the Lord had pronounced judgment upon Ahab and upon his house. In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick up your own blood. The dogs had licked up the blood of Ahab in chapter 22, but not in Jezreel where Naboth had been killed.

And there was more to the prophecy in chapter 21 verses 21 to 24. Behold, I will bring disaster upon you, I will utterly burn you up, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Beasha the son of Ahijah, for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin.

And of Jezebel the Lord also said, The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel. Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city, the dogs shall eat, and anyone of his who

dies in the open country, the birds of the heavens shall eat. Ahaziah the son of Ahab had died shortly afterwards in 2nd Kings chapter 1, with his brother Jehoram or Joram becoming king in his place.

Now, 8 chapters later, we are finally going to see the prophecy come to pass. Beyond anointing Elisha as his successor, setting the ball in motion, Elijah had not personally fulfilled any of the further elements of his vocation. In the previous chapter, Elisha had anointed Hazael.

In chapter 9, Elisha commissions another prophet to do the anointing. Perhaps his presence in Ramoth-Gilead as a famous prophet would have drawn unwanted attention to his mission, compromising it. The young man of the sons of the prophets was commissioned to anoint Jehu secretly, taking him into an inner chamber in order to do so.

Jehu is seemingly the only king in Israel to have been anointed in such a manner. Peter Lighthouse notes that anointing by a prophet or priest is not that common in the books of the kings, and that only three main kings are anointed, Solomon, Joash and Jehu. Jehu is the only anointed king of Israel.

Like the two other figures, he might be seen as one who foreshadows the advent of the Messiah. Solomon builds the temple, Jehu cleanses the temple, and Joash will reform the temple. However, Jehu also recalls the figure of Saul in some unsettling ways.

Jehu is anointed as a minister of the Lord's vengeance upon the house of Ahab. Former dynasties such as Jeroboams and Baashas had been cut off, but they had been cut off in the Lord's providential judgment by the conspiracies of Baasha and Zimri, respectively. Neither of these two figures was anointed by the Lord for the task.

The Lord did not merely anoint Jehu as king, he also commissioned him to strike down Ahab's house, promising to make Ahab's house, the dynasty of the Omrides, like the dynasties of Jeroboam and Baasha that had preceded it. And Jezebel, Ahab's queen, who still lived, would suffer a gruesome fate. This would avenge the blood of the prophets that Ahab and Jezebel had slain upon Ahab's house.

The anointing of Jehu occurred secretly, behind closed doors, with Jehu and the prophet alone, and once Jehu had been anointed, the prophet fled. When Jehu left the inner room and came out to the other commanders of the army, they asked him what the prophet had come to him for. Jehu initially tried to dismiss the issue, speaking of the prophet as if he were a madman.

However, the other commanders knew that something more was going on and they pressed him on the matter. He then revealed to them the message that he had been given, and they immediately rushed to confirm the message, that he would be the king.

As in the triumphal entry in the Gospels, the men removed their garments and placed them in front of him on the steps and blew the trumpet, declaring him to be the king.

This is not the regular form of an announcement that would accompany a typical king in the line of succession. It is the sort of statement that comes with a coup. Jehu instructed his men to prevent anyone from leaving Ramoth-Gilead to warn the king in Jezreel.

He wants to strike Joram and Jezebel when they are unprepared. Jehu mounts his chariot, leads a great company behind him, and races towards Jezreel. A tense scene is set up as we alternate between this approaching army and the watchmen on the tower of Jezreel.

He sees the company approaching, informs the king, and the king sends out a horseman to meet them. The messenger comes to Jehu, and Jehu tells him that he has nothing to do with peace as a servant of Jehoram. He instructs the man to join him.

A second horseman is sent out, and the same thing happens. The watchman then recognises the approaching man as Jehu, the son of Nimshi. He is driving furiously, or madly, a related word to the way that the prophet is described earlier on as a madman.

The mad zeal of the prophet has been communicated to Jehu the commander, and now he is coming to avenge the blood of the Lord's prophets upon the house of Ahab. Joram readies his chariot, and with him comes Ahaziah the king of Judah. Now that the approaching man has been recognised as Jehu, Joram likely presumes that he comes with a message that he can only deliver to Joram in person.

So to get the message as soon as possible, he goes out to meet him. He asks the same question, is it peace? Jehu's answer makes clear that there will be no peace. It is the sins of Jezebel that he particularly emphasises.

Not only had she slain the Lord's prophets, she had also led the people in idolatry. They meet Jehu at an ominous location, in the property of Naboth the Jezreelite, the very place where the blood of Ahab was going to be spilled. Jehu at this point draws his bow and shoots Joram between the shoulders.

Joram will die in much the same way as his father Ahab. Jehu at this point declares that this is the fulfilment of the message of the Lord through Elijah the Tishbite. This was the judgement that had been foretold, the blood of Ahab and his son is being shed at this particular place.

We also learn here that it was not just the blood of Naboth that was slain, but also the blood of his sons. Naboth and his sons were killed, and now Ahab and his sons will be killed in vengeance. Joram's body is thrown upon the plot of land.

An Ahaziah is then pursued also. Ahaziah we must remember is also a descendant of Ahab. He is the nephew of Jehoram, the son of Jehoram's sister Athaliah, who is the

daughter of Ahab.

This is a judgement coming upon both of the nations, both Israel and Judah. They become mirror images of each other. They both walk in the ways of the kings of Israel, in the ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and they both die together as a result.

Hearing that Jehu is approaching and knowing his intentions, Jezebel paints her eyes and adorns her head. If she's going to die, she's going to die like a queen. She looks out of the window and as Jehu approaches, she refers to him as Zimri, murderer of your master.

Zimri brought down the dynasty of Beasha, but his coup was short-lived and ill-fated. After seven days, he committed suicide within his palace. By associating Jehu with Zimri, Jezebel is suggesting that his coup will be equally unsuccessful, and perhaps also that the Amrites will get the supremacy again, just as they first gained the throne of Israel in the Jezebel's son Ahaziah had died in consequence of falling through a lattice in Naperum, and now Jezebel dies as she is thrown through a window by three eunuchs.

The horses trample on her and her blood is spattered on the wall and on the horses, and then Jehu goes in and eats and drinks. Lighthart suggests the possibility of some sort of sacrificial illusion here. The eating and drinking is a fellowship meal that can result after the blood of Ahab's house has been shed, and it has been sprinkled like sacrificial blood on the walls to purge the sins of the house of Israel.

The spattering of the blood of the woman against the wall might also remind us of the use of the expression, whoever pisses against the wall in the case of men who are doomed to judgment. Lysa-Re-Beel suggests that the spattering of the woman's blood may be the female counterpart. After they have eaten and drunk, they go outside to see if they can bury the body.

Jezebel was the daughter of a Sidonian king and the wife of a king of Israel, so she should be accorded a proper burial. However, according to the word of the Lord, the body had been consumed almost entirely by the dogs. This fulfilled the judgment prophecy of Elijah concerning the punishment for the killing of Naboth.

The gruesome account of Jezebel's demise is concluded with the statement that her corpse will be as dung on the face of the field in the territory of Jezreel. This might be a play upon her name, with the concluding three consonants relating to a word for dung. A question to consider, reading the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, what comparisons and contrasts can we see with the story of Jehu? Jerome Walsh observes the way that 2 Kings chapter 10 is part of a larger cyclical pattern of violence and death running from chapters 9 to 11, as the sins of Ahab and all associated with him come crashing down on their heads.

The first cycle begins with the death of Jerome of Israel in chapter 9 verses 14 to 26, followed by the death of Ahaziah of Judah in chapter 9 verses 27 to 29, followed by the death of Jezebel in chapter 9 verses 30 to 37. The second cycle begins with the death of the 70 sons of Ahab in chapter 10 verses 1 to 11, followed by the death of the 42 relatives of Ahaziah in chapter 10 verses 12 to 17, followed by the death of the worshippers of Baal in chapter 10 verses 18 to 28. The final cycle begins with the death of Jehu in chapter 10 verses 29 to 36, followed by the death of the seed of Ahaziah in chapter 11 verses 1 to 3, with the death of Athaliah concluding the sequence in chapter 11 verses 4 to 20.

The sequence associates the deaths of Joram and Jehu, kings of Israel, with the deaths of the 70 sons of Ahab, the greatest of the Amorite dynasty. It associates the death of Ahaziah of Judah with the death of his 42 relatives and the death of his seed. Finally, it associates the deaths of Jezebel, the worshippers of Baal, and Athaliah.

Ahab has 70 sons, a number representing the full number of the nations in Genesis chapter 10, and it's also the number of the Jewish elders. Killing 70 sons suggests a comprehensive judgment. It might also remind us of the story of Gideon, or Jeroboam, in Judges chapter 9 verses 1 to 5. And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, He is our brother.

And they gave him 70 pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-bereth, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, who followed him. And he went to his father's house at Ophrah, and killed his brothers, the sons of Jeroboam, 70 men, on one stone. But Jotham, the youngest son of Jeroboam, was left, for he hid himself.

This event might also come to mind at the beginning of the next chapter, as Athaliah kills off the royal household of Judah, save for one son who hides himself. Jehu has to deal with potential rivals. As Ahab has so many sons, Jehu needs to ensure that none are set up as a rallying figure for Omride's supporters against him.

He begins by laying down the gauntlet, challenging the men of Samaria to appoint one of Ahab's sons as king, and fight for him as king. He is probably gambling on them not daring to do so. They respond by presenting themselves as his servants, declaring that they will appoint no rival to him.

He then instructs them to take the heads of their master's sons, and bring them to him in Jezreel, as a proof that they are on his side. The instruction is an intentionally ambiguous one, as commentators generally observe. It could refer to the heads of Ahab's sons, meaning those set over them as guardians, or it could mean their literal heads.

The men of Samaria go with the latter meaning, and decapitate them, bringing their heads in baskets to Jezreel. Jehu allays any fear that the men of Samaria might have

concerning reprisals from him. He openly acknowledges his role in the conspiracy, and his responsibility for killing Joram, but he presents the killing of the sons of Ahab as if it were not his responsibility, taking advantage of the plausible deniability that his ambiguous statement had given him.

In killing the sons of Ahab, they are made complicit in Jehu's coup. That Jehu intended their death is quite apparent, and it's suggested by the statement that he makes following concerning the fulfilment of the word of the Lord through Elijah. He then proceeds to kill anyone else associated with Ahab in Jezreel, his officials, his friends, and his priests.

As Judah had become so tangled up with Ahab's house and its sins, they too will suffer at the hand of Jehu. Just as Ahaziah of Judah was in the kingdom of Israel, and was killed there by Jehu and his men, so relatives of Ahaziah are now visiting. They seem to be entirely unaware of what has happened.

They don't know that Ahaziah is dead, they don't know about Jehu's coup, the death of Jezebel, and the fact that Jezreel has been taken over. They are going to visit the great lady in the court, presumably Jezebel. Jezebel is the grandmother of Ahaziah the king of Judah, and so they intend to meet with relatives.

Jehu instructs his men to take them alive, and they take them alive so that they can slaughter them together at a pit. 42 people are killed in this massacre, which likely reminds us of the 42 that are killed back in chapter 2, verse 23 to 25. This suggests a parallel between Jehu and Elisha that has already been drawn back in chapter 19 of 1 Kings.

On his way to Samaria, Jehu meets Jehonadab, the son of Rechab, coming out to meet him. He takes him with him as a witness to what he is about to do. He is going to show him his zeal for the Lord.

When we think of zeal for the Lord, we can think of Moses, of Phinehas, or of Elijah earlier on in the Book of the Kings. Jehu will be another example of what zeal for the Lord can look like. When Jehu arrives in Samaria, he kills any of the surviving persons of the house of Ahab.

He then gathers all of the people and speaks concerning this great celebration that he is about to have. As the new king, he bears a particular responsibility for upholding the religious cult of the nation, and so from the very outset he declares his great loyalty to Baal. He is going to be even more of a servant of Baal than Ahab, and so he wants all the prophets, all the worshippers, and all the priests of Baal to gather together.

He is going to have a great sacrificial event. Any servants or worshippers of Baal that do not attend are going to be killed, so there's a great incentive to turn up. All of the

worshippers and priests and prophets are gathered together, and then a solemn assembly is called for Baal and proclaimed.

Then he calls further afield. He brings all the people throughout all Israel, all the worshippers of Baal. There's no one left who does not come.

In addition to all the priests and the prophets and the worshippers of Samaria, all the worshippers of Baal throughout the land are now gathered. Then he gets the person who's in charge of the wardrobe and brings out the vestments for all of the worshippers of Baal, so they are all going to be dressed in distinct garments that mark them out as his worshippers. Having brought them all into the house, he then gets them to search to ensure that there is no servant of the Lord among them.

Once that has been done, they go in to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings. Jehu and his cunning has gathered all these people together, marked them out, and now he instructs the 80 men that he had stationed outside to go in and slay them all. When all of the prophets, the priests, and the worshippers have been killed, his men remove the pillar of Baal, which they then burn.

They demolish the pillar of Baal and they demolish the house of Baal. The house of Baal is reduced to a latrine, much as the body of Jezebel was reduced to dung. By this act, Jehu effectively wipes out official Baal worship within the land of Israel.

Jehu's action might also remind us of the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal that were gathered together at Carmel for a sacrifice and then killed because of their idolatrous worship of Baal. For all of his zeal and his opposition to the worship of Baal, Jehu continues in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat in worshipping the golden calves at Dan and at Bethel. However, of all the kings of Israel, Jehu is the one that stands out.

He is the one king that really makes a stand against the evil of Baal worship. He's the one king that to some degree turns the spiritual tide in the north and the law commends him for this. On account of his faithfulness and the way that he has deceived and overcome the servants of Baal and the house of Ahab, he is going to be blessed with a dynasty.

In contrast with his predecessors on the throne of Israel, the Lord will establish his house for four generations. However, on account of his failure to turn away from the sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, the Lord begins to chip away at the edges of Israel. Hazael of Syria in particular ravages the transjordan.

Hazael had been anointed by the Lord to judge his people Israel and if Jehu would not judge them effectively from within, Hazael would have to judge them from without, a far more painful judgment. A question to consider, comparing and contrasting the zeal of Jehu with the zeal of figures like Elijah, Moses and Phinehas, what differences can we

see? What are some of the limitations of the form of zeal that Jehu represents? Second Kings chapter 11 is the completion of a bloody cycle of vengeance upon the house of Ahab led by Hazael and Jehu. In the north this struck a strong blow against Baal worship but didn't ultimately change the fundamental direction of the nation as it had been set by Jeroboam the son of Nebat.

The people continued to worship the golden calves at Dan and Beersheba under Jehu. In the south however it led to the start of a project of reformation under Joash. The judgment comes in a series of blows and these blows come in cycles of three, three of them.

Perhaps this might remind us of the pattern of the plagues that came upon Egypt in the book of Exodus. There are several Exodus patterns in second Kings chapter 11 as we shall see. The judgments that have already occurred in order are the death of Joram, the death of Ahaziah, the death of Jezebel, the death of the 70 sons of Ahab, the death of the 42 relatives of Ahaziah, the death of the worshippers of Baal and the death of Jehu.

In this chapter we come to the death of the seed of Ahaziah and then the death of Athaliah. Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah when she hears that her son is dead kills the royal family. Her concern is that the royal family, the house of David, will destroy her as a member of the house of Ahab.

The political tide has turned against the Umayyad dynasty and whereas formerly it would have been a benefit to have an Umayyad queen now it is a great liability. Jehu has purged the north of the house of Ahab and he has even killed a great many of the royal family of the southern kingdom who had gone up to the north to visit Jezebel and members of the extended royal family. It is worth noting that this is not the first time that a ruler of Judah had killed many members of their own royal family.

Athaliah's own husband Jehoram had killed his brothers as we see in 2nd Chronicles chapter 21 verse 4. When Jehoram had ascended the throne of his father and was established he killed all his brothers with the sword and also some of the princes of Israel. We should consider the likelihood that Athaliah was the one who had incited Jehoram of Judah to this action. Her mother was Jezebel and she is parallel to Jezebel in many respects.

Both in 2nd Kings and in 2nd Chronicles she is presented as a key means by which the infection of the Omrides afflicted the southern kingdom. Once Athaliah and her husband had set this precedent she was naturally going to fear falling foul of it herself when her own son was killed. We should also recall the cannibalistic women of Samaria in chapter 6. Here is another woman who devours her children and it seems that in those women we have some foreshadowing of the women of this chapter.

There is once again a split between two women with Jehoshaba, Jehoram's daughter and

Ahaziah's sister, rescuing her nephew the infant Joash from the hand of his murderous grandmother and hiding him away. If there was one place in Jerusalem's complex of royal buildings that Athaliah was unlikely to frequent it would have been the temple of the Lord. Jehoshaba was the wife of Jehoiada the priest so she could hide Joash in the temple complex with his assistants without raising too many suspicions among supporters of Athaliah.

She could raise him as if he were her own son. Jehoiada we should note is the first significant priest of the Lord to appear since the days of Solomon. In 2nd Chronicles chapter 22 verse 11 we get further details of this event.

But Jehoshaba the daughter of the king took Joash the son of Ahaziah and stole him away from among the king's sons who were about to be put to death and she put him and his nurse in a bedroom. Thus Jehoshaba the daughter of King Jehoram and wife of Jehoiada the priest, because she was a sister of Ahaziah, hid him from Athaliah so that she did not put him to death. As a child being raised in the house of the Lord under the fatherly guidance of a priest we might be reminded of Samuel, not only is Joash a member of Jehoiada's family he is a member of the household of the Lord.

Athaliah's reign which interrupts the reign of the Davidic kings is not treated as a legitimate reign and is accompanied by none of the regnal details that accompany other rulers even those who won the northern throne through coups. Had she not been disqualified as an imposter Athaliah would have been the only queen regnant in the histories of Israel and Judah. In the seventh year, she makes her move.

It is an auspicious time to do so, it's also associated with the Sabbath. Jehoiada clearly wields significant influence and enjoys powerful command over a number of units of soldiers. The identity of the Karaites is uncertain.

His scheme would be set in motion when the guard changed at a time when it would be most likely to pass undetected for a critical window of time. The main body of the soldiers, two units, are set around Joash who would be publicly revealed. They are to strike anyone who approached Joash.

Joash is referred to as the king, he is the true heir of the throne. This is not a coup but the overcoming of a coup. The third unit who have just come from the temple divide into three and they are stationed around the palace.

Jehoiada armed the men with weaponry of David in the temple. They will be restoring the Davidic king on the throne with David's arms. He then brought out Joash, crowned him, gave him the testimony, the book of the law, which represented the king's accountability to the lord.

They proclaimed him king, anointed him and then they cheered his coronation. Athaliah,

hearing the commotion, goes to the house of the lord to discover what is happening. Joash is standing beside the pillar, likely the pillar of Boaz, by the entrance of the temple, representing the king himself as a pillar of the nation.

Perhaps it is named after his ancestor Boaz, the great grandfather of David. Arrayed before Joash is an assembly celebrating and rejoicing. Just as Joram had declared outside Jezreel to her son Ahaziah, Athaliah cries out that treachery is occurring.

Lysa-rei-beel notes that the words for her tearing of her robe and her crying out are extremely similar. Athaliah is taken from the precincts of the house of the lord and she is executed in the king's house. Having executed Athaliah, Jehoiada leads the people in making a threefold covenant between the lord and the king and the people.

Joash would rule in the name and the authority of the lord and the restoration of the Davidic throne had to occur on the foundation of that relationship. Jehoiada also established a covenant between the king and the people. The king does not have absolute rule.

The king and the people have mutual obligations. The king is under the lord who is the true king and he is responsible to the people. Having established this covenant, the people go to the house of Baal and tear it down, much as Jehu had done in Samaria in the preceding chapter.

Joash is then ceremonially processed to the palace and enthroned there. Following Joash's enthronement, the land and the city rejoice and have peace. This completes the great outpouring of judgment upon the Amrites and Baal that had first been initiated in the ministry of Elijah.

As the southern kingdom of Judah had been so polluted by the idolatries of the north, it should not surprise us to see many similarities between the judgments that fall upon both. Peter Lightheart observes some of the parallels. In chapters 9 to 10, we have Jehu's secret coronation.

Trumpets announcing him as king, shouts celebrating him, a king crime treason, Jehu having Jezebel killed and the house of Baal being destroyed. In chapter 11, the same pattern plays out but now in the southern kingdom. Joash has a secret coronation, trumpets and shouts announce him, a queen cries treason, Jehoiada has Athaliah killed and then the house of Baal is destroyed.

We should also notice themes associated with the exodus. A royal figure is trying to kill off all of the baby boys. One is hidden so that he can later lead and deliver his people.

After a succession of blows against the enemies of the Lord and their false gods, a new covenant is formed and the house of the Lord will then be restored. A question to consider, how are the figures of Jezebel and Athaliah connected and paralleled in their

lives and in their deaths? After the imposter Athaliah was deposed and the young Joash was set up, the reformation of Judah could properly begin. Both Jehu and Joash's anointings began in inner rooms, hidden from public sight, before they both burst out in judgment upon the wicked of their respective kingdoms.

Jehu partly turned back the tide of idolatry in the north, for which the Lord praised him, but he never truly reversed it. In 2nd Kings chapter 12, following the coronation of Joash, he will take on a further part of the messianic task of the anointed one, restoring and reforming the worship of the temple. Joash or Jehoash reigned over Judah for 40 years.

This might be regarded as a propitious length of time, the same duration as the reigns of both David and Solomon. Joash is here described as a righteous king, one who serves the Lord and his life is defined by that. The role played by Jehoiada the priest in his rearing and instruction is identified as a key cause of his long-term faithfulness.

The king was supposed to be a son of the Lord, his house connected to the Lord's house and learning under the guidance of the Lord's appointed stewards, the priests. We see this in Deuteronomy chapter 17 verses 18 to 20. And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests, and it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children in Israel.

Joash had the benefit of spending all of his early childhood in the temple, under the instruction of Jehoiada. Jehoiada continued to instruct him when he came to the throne. However, like many before him, Joash failed to deal with the problem of the worship of the high places.

In Deuteronomy chapter 12, the Lord had commanded his people to establish a single central site of worship, one of the primary tasks of the king was to establish the unity and centrality of the nation's worship, ensuring that there weren't many different cultic centres, each with their own attendant customs. The failure to establish the temple as the single site of worship was an enduring problem from Solomon's days onwards. Joash initially entrusted the priests with the repair of the house of the Lord, over 100 years old by this point, yet by the 23rd year of his reign no repairs had been made.

We don't know when Joash first instructed the priests in this matter, but it seems likely that it took him a while to recognise its failure. Perhaps as Joash had been raised in the temple under Jehoiada and the priests, the priests had much greater power and influence in the first half of his reign. The priest's seeming mismanagement of the funds suggests that the temple's disrepair might not merely be a matter of crumbling masonry, but of institutional corruption too.

Joash's failure to address the situation prior to this point suggests a king weakened by his youth and his over-dependence upon the priests perhaps, and perhaps also a king who, despite his good intentions and character, was lacking in competence for some of the fundamental tasks of effective governance and administration. The nation was always healthiest when kings, priests and prophets could function in firmly counterbalancing ministries, without any one or two of the officers being under the excessive influence of one or both of the others. Lysa Rae Beale notes that as the northern kingdom of Israel was weakened by Syrian incursions, the temple in the south would have been a symbol of growing importance.

It would have consolidated the soft power of Judah with members of the northern kingdom who worshipped the Lord, and it would also serve to validate the Davidic dynasty within the nation. Joash confronts the priests concerning their mismanagement, and he takes the responsibility for the repairs out of their hands. This was an important step towards a better managed administration, but the fact that it took so long was not a promising sign of Joash's competence to achieve it.

While we can see a lot of parallels between Joash and Solomon in their respective anointings, their concern with the temple, the length of their reigns and other such things, as in the case of Jehoshaphat, the similarities invite contrasts that highlight how far the nation had fallen from its former golden age. Jehoiada the priest sets up a collection chest for the house, and under the joint direction of the king's secretary and the high priest, the money was counted and weighed out to the overseers of the workers, who in their turn paid the various workmen. The overseers of the workmen were trustworthy men, demonstrated by the progress of the project, so an accounting was not demanded of them.

This money was not used to make implements for the temple's service, however. The implements were seemingly to come from the king's own money. The money for the guilt and sin offerings was also exempted from the funds, as that money went directly to the priests.

Hazael, the king of Syria who had been anointed by the lord against his rebellious people of Israel and the idolatrous Omrides, harries the northern kingdom and increasingly becomes a threat to the south. Joash and certain of his predecessors had given costly gifts to the temple as tribute to the lord, but now Joash takes things that had been given as tribute to the lord and gives them as tribute to Hazael. It is a very negative sign.

Joash's reign ends in assassination, in far more tragic circumstances than 2nd Kings records. In 2nd Chronicles chapter 24 verses 17 to 26 we read of the premature conclusion of Joash's reign. Now after the death of Jehoiada the princes of Judah came and paid homage to the king.

Then the king listened to them, and they abandoned the house of the lord, the god of

their fathers, and served the Asherim and the idols. And wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this guilt of theirs. Yet he sent prophets among them to bring them back to the lord.

These testified against them, but they would not pay attention. Then the spirit of God clothed Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, and he stood above the people and said to them, Thus says God, Why do you break the commandments of the lord, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the lord, he has forsaken you. But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of the lord.

Thus Joash the king did not remember the kindness that Jehoiada Zechariah's father had shown him, but killed his son. And when he was dying he said, May the lord see and avenge. At the end of the year the army of the Syrians came up against Joash.

They came to Judah and Jerusalem and destroyed all the princes of the people from among the people, and sent all their spoil to the king of Damascus. Though the army of the Syrians had come with few men, the lord delivered into their hand a very great army, because Judah had forsaken the lord, the god of their fathers. Thus they executed judgment on Joash.

When they had departed from him, leaving him severely wounded, his servants conspired against him because of the blood of the son of Jehoiada the priest, and killed him on his bed. So he died, and they buried him in the city of David. But they did not bury him in the tombs of the kings.

Those who conspired against him were Zeba the son of Shimeath the Ammonite, and Jehuzabath the son of Shimre the Moabite. Like Asa, Joash starts well but ends badly, striking out against a prophet of the lord. A question to consider.

Which other Davidic kings took from the treasury of the lord to give tribute to foreign invaders? Can you think of any ways in which we might face analogous choices regarding the ones to whom we pay our tribute? After the lord had judged the Umayyad dynasty, and the idolatry and the wickedness of both the northern and southern kingdoms, we now find ourselves largely in the aftermath, and in chapter 13 the nation of Israel sinks to its sorriest condition yet. The 23rd year of Joash of Judah was the year that he addressed the failure to advance the repairs of the temple, and the mismanagement of the priests. It was also the year in which Jehoahaz the son of Jehu came to the throne of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Jehu had received a promise from the lord concerning his dynasty in chapter 10 verse 30. And the lord said to Jehu, Because you have done well in carrying out what is right in my eyes, and have done to the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel. Nevertheless Jehoahaz

walks in the ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, like all the other kings of Israel.

God had promised that he would judge his people Israel by means of Elisha, Hazael, and Jehu, and the failure of Jehu and his descendants to walk in the way of the lord meant that the judgment would come from Hazael and Elisha. Hazael and Ben-Hadad his son ravaged the northern kingdom. Jehoahaz is left with only the smallest rump of an army, a mere 50 horsemen, 10 chariots, and 10,000 footmen.

But Jehoahaz sought the favor of the lord, and the lord took compassion upon him and upon Israel, and raised up a deliverer for them. This probably recalls for us the stories of the judges, where the people would lapse into idolatry and would be ravaged by their enemies, only for them to call upon the name of the lord and some deliverer to be raised up. Various suggestions of the identity of this deliverer have been suggested.

Elisha, Jehoash, the son of Jehoahaz, and even Adad-Nerari the third of Assyria, who by attacking the Arameans gave Israel some relief from their assaults. Jehoash or Joash of Israel succeeds his father Jehoahaz. Once again he follows in the way of Jeroboam.

He also fights against the southern kingdom. If we pay attention to the numbers it should be clear that many of the kings were co-regents for a period of time with their predecessors. Jehoash is one example of this.

Jehoahaz comes to the throne in the 23rd year of Joash. He reigns for 17 years and then Jehoash of Israel, the son of Jehoahaz, becomes the king in the 37th year of Joash king of Judah. There is clearly an overlap in their reigns of about two years or more.

Elisha's ministry had begun back in 1 Kings 19 during the reign of Ahab. His prophetic ministry had spanned almost 50 years and included within it the reign of Ahab, Ahaziah, Jehoram, Jehu, Jehoahaz and now it was ending in the reign of Jehoash. Joash of Israel, whose death we have just read about, went down to visit the dying Elisha and was distraught at his passing.

Elisha represented the Lord's presence with his people, the Lord fighting for his people. His response to the dying Elisha is, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. These are the same words that Elisha had used of the passing of Elijah back in chapter 2. Chariots of the Lord had been associated with Elijah and Elisha in chapter 2 and chapter 6 and then in chapter 7 as well as the sound of the chariots had driven away the besieging Syrians.

The king rightly recognises Elisha as a father figure. Elisha is the prophetic leader of the people. The fact that he is going to depart in such a low point in the nation's history is of great concern for the king who faces serious threats on the borders.

Who is going to fight for Israel now? In answer to such concerns, Elisha gives two signs to the worried king. For the first of the two signs, he is instructed to take a bow and some

arrows and drawing the bow to shoot it out of the window eastward. Firing the arrow in the direction of Syria with the prophet's hand upon his, the king has an assurance of his victory over them.

He will fight against Syria and he will be victorious against them. He will fight the Syrians in Aphek and he will make an end of them. The Aphek mentioned here is not the Aphek of 1 Samuel chapter 4, the battle of Aphek being the battle at which the Ark of the Covenant had been captured by the Philistines.

This Aphek is towards the south east of Galilee. This first prophetic sign is followed by another. In the second he must take the arrows again and then he is instructed to strike the ground with them.

But he only does so three times and he stops. And Elisha is angry with him. Joash should have struck the ground five or six times.

Perhaps the difference lay in the fact that now Elisha's hands were not accompanying his upon the bow. Joash would still win great victories over the Syrians but they would not be as decisive as they could have been. Elisha died, was buried and his body decomposed leaving only his bones.

Sometime later a body was thrown into his grave and the body came to life. This should not be seen merely as a random miracle. It's a sign that Elisha's power, his word, the way in which God was working through him, was still powerful within Israel.

Implicit in this miracle is a promise for life from death for those who associate with the prophet. If they cling to the words of the prophets there will be life from death even in the grave of exile. The chapter ends with continued struggles against the Syrians.

Hazael and his son Ben-Hadad continue to fight against Israel. However God has mercy upon Israel on account of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He does not cast his presence away from them and he does not destroy them.

He also empowers Joash according to the word of Elisha to take back some of the lost territory, recapturing from Ben-Hadad some of the cities that his father had lost in war. This is a rare occasion in the story of Israel where the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is mentioned. A question to consider, what lessons may we learn from God's merciful dealings with an unfaithful Israel during this period of its history? Amaziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel are the subject of 2 Kings chapter 14.

At several points in these parts of 1 and 2 Kings we might find our eyes glazing over as one king blurs into another and the two nations are increasingly difficult to tell apart, not least due to the fact that their kings so often share the same name. One after another with intermittent exceptions the kings in both the northern and the southern kingdoms are described as not having departed from the sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat. At

times we might feel that we are fast forwarding through a boring movie with the scenes becoming indistinguishable from each other, occasionally pausing to get a sense of our bearings with a small episode.

Israel and Judah's history is an almost continual narrative of sin and failure. The text can seem more plentiful in problems for the reader than in rewards. The chronological details are complex and confusing.

Many elaborate theories have been put forward for how to harmonize them. While promising explanations can be advanced, the reader might be forgiven for often feeling that they are chewing gristle rather than enjoying meat. This might indeed be part of the point that the text is communicating.

There is a sterility, a monotony and a futility to sin. The ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat are seemingly interminable, wandering in the wilderness of sin, leaving the reader longing for the relief of some divine act to interrupt the desperate tedium. Amaziah the son of Joash of Judah became king during the reign of Joash king of Israel.

He does what's right in the eyes of the Lord but in a way that follows Joash rather than David. In particular his failure is to remove the high places. One of the key tasks of the king is to order the worship for the people and to ensure that it is centralized in the temple in Jerusalem and he fails to do this.

Joash, Amaziah's father, had been killed as a result of a conspiracy and as soon as Amaziah gets the power of the kingdom firmly in his grasp he kills the conspirators who were responsible for his father's death. While Athaliah and Jehoram had both tried to wipe out families who were a threat to their reign, Amaziah is a righteous man and he kills the conspirators responsible for the death of his father without avenging himself upon all of their families and the text applauds him for his adherence to the law of Moses on this point. He also has military success against the Edomites, striking down 10,000 of them in the valley of salt and taking Sila.

This victory seems to give Amaziah confidence as he faces the northern kingdom, a confidence that proves misguided as we'll soon find out. Sending messengers to Jehoash, the king of Israel, he says, come let us look one another in the face. Whether this is an invitation to battle or an invitation to deal as peers, Jehoash is having nothing of it.

He sees Amaziah as an upstart, a king who has ideas well above his station and who thinks that his nation is fit to stand against Israel when it is really not. In a parable that might remind us of the parable that Jotham gives to the leaders of Shechem back in Judges chapter 9, Jehoash compares Amaziah to a thistle on Lebanon, a small thistle that could easily be trodden underfoot that sees itself fit to stand against a great cedar of Lebanon. Jehoash thinks that Amaziah is delusional in his sense of his power but Amaziah is not to be dissuaded and when Amaziah goes and faces Israel in battle, Israel

completely crushes the southern kingdom.

Amaziah himself is captured, Jerusalem has large stretches of its wall broken down and the gold and silver of the treasuries of the king's house and of the temple are raided. Jehoash returns to Samaria with all of this spoil and also with many hostages, presumably hostages of the royal household that will ensure that Amaziah is compliant from that point onwards. After the death of Jehoash, the king of Israel, Amaziah, the king of Judah, lives for 15 further years.

It is interesting to note that we're told that he lived, we're not told that he reigned. The knotty chronology of this passage has been discussed at length in the works of people such as Edwin Teeler and in many commentaries on the books of the kings. Co-regencies and other explanations have been given for the mismatch between the chronological details of the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom.

Totting up the years of the kings in the south leads to a much higher number than totting up the years of the kings in the north. If Azariah was made king after the capture of Amaziah, this might relieve some of our chronological problems. The reign of Azariah or Uzziah is described in a great deal more detail in the book of Second Chronicles. In chapter 26 of Second Chronicles, Uzziah or Azariah's power rises to a considerable height.

He has military success against the Philistines, the Ammonites pay tribute to him, his fame spreads to the border of Egypt, he develops an army of over 300,000 men, and builds towers and war machines on the walls of Jerusalem, walls which had been broken down under the reign of his father. Beyond his building of Eilat and restoring a bit to Judah though, we do not read any of this in Second Kings. During Amaziah's reign, Jeroboam II becomes king of the northern kingdom of Israel and he reigns in Samaria for 41 years.

Like his namesake Jeroboam I, the son of Nebat, he continues in the sinful ways of idolatry that had defined the northern kingdom. However, under his reign the nation prospers and its borders are greatly extended. During this period of time, the threat of the Syrians and the Assyrians in the north is greatly relieved and so Israel was able to retake land that it had formerly lost.

All of this is said to occur according to the prophecy of Jonah the son of Amittai the prophet, who is of course the protagonist of the book of Jonah in the Minor Prophets. In that book, in the symbols of the big fish and the gourd, we can see God's dealing with the nations round about Israel, raising up and bringing down empires and kingdoms in order to deal with his people. God sees that the affliction of Israel is bitter and he saves them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.

Jeroboam is of course another contender for the saviour that was anticipated by Elisha

back in chapter 13. The restoration of the border of Israel from Lebohemath as far as the Sea of the Araba or the Dead Sea, suggests the recapture of the Transjordan and not just a diminished region of the Transjordan but well up into formerly Aramean territory. With the threat of the Aramean or Syrians quelled and Assyria focused on issues on its own borders and within itself, and with Judah more quiescent under Azariah, Israel can expand considerably to its north.

Together the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, Judah being victorious over the Edomites and having built Eilat in territory that seems to reach down to the Gulf of Aqaba, now control an expansive territory with borders similar to those under the reign of Solomon. Discussing this passage, Peter Lighthouse observes some of the larger patterns that we can see replaying here. He writes 2 Kings chapter 14 offers several examples of this parabolic or allegorical style.

As Israel begins to wind to a close for example, history begins to repeat itself. After the reign of Solomon the kingdom was divided in two. Jeroboam I established a separate kingdom.

Rehoboam planned an attack but refrained because of the prophet and Shishak of Egypt plundered the temple. Joash was a new Solomon which, if the pattern holds, makes his son Amaziah a new Rehoboam. The pattern holds.

Like Solomon's son, Amaziah goes to fight in the north and a prophet intervenes but unlike Rehoboam, Amaziah refuses to hear the prophet and is defeated by the northern king Jehoash. In retaliation, Jehoash plunders the temple and breaks down the walls of the city of Jerusalem as Shishak did during the reign of Rehoboam. Idolatrous Judah ultimately returns to where it began.

The parallels between beginning and end are not confined to Judah. By the end of the chapter another Jeroboam is in Israel and the following chapters point to a providential chronological and historical symmetry between the beginning of the northern kingdom and its closing decades. Lighthouse unpacks the pattern.

Jeroboam I, then there are seven kings, then the seventh king is Ahab and then Jehu destroys Ahab's house. The pattern is then repeated. There's a Jeroboam II, then there's seven kings, the seventh king is Hoshea and then he is defeated in the Assyrian invasion.

Even as the northern kingdom prospers in a great many ways, it is fatefully returning to the place where it first started. A question to consider. Within this chapter Amaziah, a righteous king, suffers a terrible defeat and Jeroboam II, a wicked king, experiences amazing success.

How is the reader of the books of the kings to see God's hand in these events? 2 Kings

chapter 15 covers a period of over 70 years. The reigns of Uzziah or Azariah and Jotham in Judah and then the reigns of Zechariah, Shalom, Menahem, Pechahiah and Pekah in Israel. After the death of Jeroboam II, the northern kingdom is sliding down towards exile.

Azariah's regency probably begins with a co-regency and his sole regency comes from the 27th year of Jeroboam II. He reigns for 52 years in total. He acts righteously like his father Amaziah, however once again he fails to take away the high places.

While 2 Chronicles chapter 26 records the events in which Uzziah is struck with leprosy, nothing of that is recorded here, just the fact that he was struck with leprosy by the Lord, after which he lived in a separate house. Like the reference to Asa's diseased foot in chapter 15 of 1 Kings, the ailment gives a sense of the decline of the king into unfaithfulness or failure. Some shadow of unknown origin lies over his reign.

As a result of his leprosy, Jotham, his son, takes on responsibilities of rule and office. In 1 Kings chapter 15-16 we saw a succession of conspiracies overthrowing kings of Israel, Nadab, Ela, Zimri, Tibnai. Now we have another flurry of assassinations and conspiracies, Zechariah, Shalem, Pechahiah and Pekah.

Zechariah is the last king of the line of Jehu. He only reigns for half a year, in stark contrast to the lengthy reigns of his predecessors. Some have suggested tribal rivalries behind some of the assassinations of this chapter, although Lysa Rae Beale notes some of the problems with these arguments.

It seemed more likely that most of them were due to foreign policy. While some wanted to take a posture of appeasement towards Assyria, others wanted to stand up against them in resistance. Zechariah was killed by Shalem, who reigned in his place.

There is no reference to Zechariah's burial here. The Lord had promised four generations of Jehu's sons on the throne, but by Zechariah in the fourth generation they were swiftly removed. Zechariah doesn't even have a full year upon the throne.

However, if Zechariah's reign was short, Shalem's was even shorter, only one month before he was killed by Menahem. He doesn't even reign for long enough to merit a mention of the way he continued in the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat. Menahem is from Terza, Israel's early capital in Manasseh, before Amrei moved it to Samaria.

Menahem, around the same time as he killed Shalem, sacked Tifsa and judged its territory. Tifsa is in the very far north of the land, and it might be coming under Assyria's sway. The refusal to open up to Menahem may be a result of the fact that its allegiances have switched.

Menahem uses the most extreme cruelty and terror to subdue them. This is the way of the pagan nations that we see elsewhere. It's also a sign of a fracturing kingdom, a kingdom that needs to be kept together by great fear.

Once again, in the case of Menahem, the beginning of a king of Israel is dated relative to the reign of Azariah and Judah, a sign of just how destabilized the northern kingdom had become by this point. Menahem reigns for longer than his immediate predecessors, ten years, but while he is not assassinated by an internal coup, during his reign the threat of Assyria to the north begins to be more powerfully felt. Pul, or Tiglath-Palisa III, comes against Israel, and Menahem has to pay tribute.

Beal notes the way that Assyria could begin by requiring tribute, before gradually taking away nations' independence, absorbing them into Assyria as provinces under Assyrian governors. These are all ominous signs of what is to come. Menahem is just buying time at this point.

It is worth noting that Menahem's payment is recorded in Assyrian annals. After Menahem's death, he was succeeded by his son Pechahiah, who also did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam. His reign was a short one, only two years in length before he was killed by Pekah, the son of Remeliah, his captain, and by some men of Gilead, in yet another conspiracy.

All of these conspiracies and short reigns are a sign of the rising power of Assyria, and how Israel is panicking and falling apart as a result. Pekah's conspiracy was likely designed to reverse Menahem's policy towards Assyria, intending to form an alliance with Syria and bring Judah under their sway to resist the tide of Assyria together. The dating of Pekah's accession to the throne, connected with the 52nd year of Azariah, causes problems, as it would mean that he ruled past the time when Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BC.

It's possible that Pekah was an internal rival, who had ruled over parts of Gilead before becoming the king over the whole of Israel some time into his reign. To get a sense for the complexity of the dating of some of these kings' reigns, it's worth thinking back to the example of David. David ruled for 7 years over Judah in Hebron, and 33 years over the whole land in Jerusalem, and then Solomon was enthroned as his successor while he was still alive.

How long did David reign for? 40 years, the 7 years in Hebron and the 33 years in Jerusalem put together? Or was it only about 39 years? 40 years minus a year or so of a co-regency with Solomon. Or maybe only 32 years, if you exclude the time when he was king over only part of the land, and the time of the co-regency. When did his reign begin? When did it end? Thinking about the example of David can give us a sense of how difficult these questions can be to answer, when many of the kings seem to have been co-regents with their predecessors for some period of time before they became the king in the sense of sole regency.

Meanwhile down south, Jotham has become king of Judah, replacing his father Uzziah. Like Joash, Amaziah and Uzziah his forefathers, he is a righteous king, although like them

he fails to remove the high places. The Lord sends the Syrians and Israel against Judah during his days, a threat, as it's worked out in the days of Ahaz, that will provide the backdrop for key passages in the book of Isaiah.

A question to consider, Israel and Judah are twins, what lesson should the southern kingdom have learned from its northern sister during this period? 2nd Kings chapter 16 chronicles the reign of Ahaz, the son of Jotham and the grandson of Uzziah as king of Judah. Ahaz reigns from the 17th year of Pekah the son of Ramaliah in the northern kingdom of Israel, likely in a co-regency with his father Jotham between 735 and 732 BC. There have been a series of kings in Judah who were largely faithful to the Lord, Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah and then Jotham.

While all of these men were faulted in some regard, for their failure to remove the high places typically, but also for their personal sins, most usually their failure to be faithful in the later years of their reign, Ahaz breaks this streak. Ahaz walks in the ways of the kings of Israel, although no reason is given here for his following of their example. In Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 9 to 14 the Lord had warned Israel about the practices of the nations whom they were entering into the land to remove.

When you come into the land that the Lord your God has given you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination, or tells fortunes, or interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a necromancer, or one who inquires of the dead. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord, and because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you.

You shall be blameless before the Lord your God, for these nations which you are about to dispossess listen to fortune tellers and to diviners. But as for you the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this. Ahaz follows the pattern of the Israelite kings but he also acts according to the practices of the dispossessed nations.

Most notably he makes his son pass through the fire, which Manasseh, the most wicked king of Judah of all, will also do in chapter 21 verse 6. This practice seems to refer to the actual burning up of children as an especially cruel and abominable form of sacrifice. Such a reversion to the practices of the Canaanites is clearly concerning, especially when a line of largely faithful kings might have led us to hope that Judah had progressed beyond such extreme forms of wickedness to more subtle forms. Turning back to the ways of the Canaanites will also mark out Judah for the fate of the Canaanites.

In chapter 15 verse 37 we read of the reign of Jotham. In those days the Lord began to send Rezan the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Ramallah against Judah. In the reign of Ahaz this alliance becomes a far more serious threat.

The coalition of Syria and Israel was designed to function as part of an anti-Assyrian alliance of smaller nations of the region. Assyria was expanding and threatening to wipe them all out. During Pekah's reign the Assyrians overran large areas of the land of Israel and deported their population to Assyria.

The alliance was a matter of existential urgency for the nations within it. The Assyrians would completely wipe them out if they could not effectively withstand them. The coalition needed to pressure all of the nations in the region to stand with them.

If Ahaz did not join the alliance they would replace him with a puppet king of their own. We get a sense of their intent in Isaiah chapter 7 verses 1 to 6. When the house of David was told Syria is in league with Ephraim the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. And the Lord said to Isaiah go out to meet Ahaz you and Shear-Jashrub your son at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field and say to him be careful be quiet do not fear and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands at the fierce anger of reason and Syria and the son of Remeliah.

Because Syria with Ephraim and the son of Remeliah has devised evil against you saying let us go up against Judah and terrify it and let us conquer it for ourselves and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it. Israel and the Syrians came up to Jerusalem besieged it but were unsuccessful in their attempts to capture it. However the Syrians were able to strike a crucial blow against Judah by capturing the city of Elath.

This had been Judah's access to the Red Sea and its lucrative trade. It was an extremely strategic area which they had recaptured under Uzziah. After they were driven out by the Assyrians the Edomites returned to possess it.

Facing this threat Ahaz turns to the monster in the north Assyria for aid. Ahaz becomes a tributary and vassal of Assyria stripping the treasuries of the king's house and of the temple and sending them to Tiglath-par-lizah looking to him rather than to the lord as his savior. Assyria is encouraged to take more immediate action against the coalition of Israel and Syria and to come to the aid of Judah.

It was presumably in response to this that Assyria subjugated the north of Israel and deported its people and Assyria also killed the king of Syria and captured Damascus. Following the victory of Tiglath-par-lizah over Damascus Ahaz goes up to meet him there as an obedient vassal confirming his official relationship with him. Ahaz is a syncretist, someone who is looking to the surrounding nations rather than to the lord for security and aid and someone who assimilates to their religious practices and brings elements of their practice into the worship of the lord.

Seeing a great pagan altar in Damascus he wants to have an altar built according to its pattern in Jerusalem replacing the bronze altar that belonged to the temple. By imposing

pagan forms upon the worship of the lord Ahaz was also implying the subservience of the lord himself to the supposedly greater gods of the surrounding nations. Uriah the priest readily and seemingly enthusiastically complies with Ahaz's request.

He has an altar built according to the pattern of the Damascus altar even before Ahaz has returned. On Ahaz's return he inaugurates the altar with a series of sacrifices and demotes the bronze altar of the lord moving it to the north side treating it as a private altar for his personal use perhaps in practices of divination. From that time on Uriah and the priest must offer sacrifices using Ahaz's pagan altar.

Indeed Ahaz goes further in redesigning the temple in terms of the pattern provided by the Assyrians and the temple in Damascus. He adapts the bronze sea to a more pagan pattern. In the thrall of the king of Assyria he redesigns what was likely a covered walkway for use on the sabbath and also redesigns the king's entrance.

The impetus for these actions is subservience to the king of Assyria for whose sake he will willfully reorder and adulterate the worship of the lord. The lord had given the pattern of the tabernacle on mount Sinai and that pattern was developed by king David according to the vision that the lord gave him. King Ahaz is assuming for himself the privileges of a new Solomon or David and is doing so according to a pattern not received from the lord but from pagan neighbours.

A question to consider what are some of the ways that we might adulterate the worship of the lord in subservience to the dominant forces and rulers of our own age? Second Kings chapter 17 is the death and the autopsy of the northern kingdom of Israel. A nation that did not depart from the ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat discovers the place to which those ways finally lead. Although Judah is not here taken into exile they do not escape the condemnation.

Judah has followed Israel in its ways. A number of the sins for which Israel is drowned in the abyss of exile are sins of which Judah is no less guilty. The indictment of Israel serves as a powerful warning for the southern kingdom as its sister the northern kingdom being taken into exile is a warning about its own potential fate if it does not repent.

Especially under Ahaz Judah is walking in the same direction stepping towards that precipice that Israel has just fallen over. Indeed Judah's doom has already been determined it's just going to be a longer time until they get there. Israel here loses everything.

It loses its land, it loses its national life, its peoplehood and the favour and the special presence of the Lord. Uprooted by the king of Syria they will be scattered and lost. Unless they hold fast to the word of the Lord they lose their identity entirely.

Israel was defined by the covenant of their liberation at Sinai. They were defined by the

land that gave them a common rootedness and at the very heart of it all they were defined by common worship by the worship of the Lord their God who had brought them out of Egypt and brought them into the land. He had formed that covenant with them.

However when they reject the covenant and when they reject the true worship of the Lord everything else will start to unravel. The nation is divided in two after Solomon. Jeroboam leads the northern kingdom into idolatry and as they proceeded down that path they gradually lost the things that made them distinct in the first place until they are indistinguishable from the nations and are finally scattered among them like the ashes of a once great people that have ceased to exist.

Hoshea is the last king of Israel. He comes to power through a conspiracy against Pekah the son of Ramaliah and there is a switch under him in the foreign policy towards Assyria. He becomes the vassal of Assyria.

Under Pekah the son of Ramaliah Israel had tried to form an anti-Assyrian coalition with Syria and other nations in the region. They had besieged Jerusalem intending to establish a puppet king and to force Judah to join the anti-Assyrian coalition. That plan had come to nothing and Hoshea had conspired against Pekah and taken the throne in his place.

Hoshea's intention was to reverse this policy towards Assyria. However a little while into his reign he changes his mind and turns to Egypt for aid against Assyria. Israel and Judah were caught between kingdoms in the north and the south, great empires and powers.

The region of Israel and Judah and the nations surrounding them was like the center of a chessboard. The back rank powers of Syria and Egypt lay behind them. While manipulated by these great powers the kingdoms in between fought like pawns in the middle of the board.

After Israel stops giving tribute to Assyria and turns to Egypt, Assyria invades the land and comes to Samaria besieging it for three years. It finally falls. Israel is deported and is then lost in exile.

Hoshea and Israel are largely lost in captivity. This will not be the case with Judah. Judah will be spared in part on account of the Davidic king and also as they look to the words of the prophets.

Hoshea's name is the same as Joshua's original name as we see in Numbers chapter 13. There is a sort of irony here. Israel was brought into the land under Hoshea and now it is removed under Hoshea.

Verses 7 to 23 are the autopsy report for Israel. It begins with a summary statement in verses 7 to 8. They sinned against the Lord who brought them out in the Exodus. They served other gods and they walked in the customs of the nations and their wicked kings.

They reject the God who has made them his own. They violate the covenant, especially the core commandments, have no other gods beside the Lord. They should not worship the Lord their God with graven images and they should not bear the name of the Lord in vain.

Yet they had done all of these things. They had rejected God for other gods. They had served God through idols and then they had borne the name of the Lord in a way that caused the name of the Lord to be blasphemed among the nations.

Not only did they reject the Lord, they followed the practices of the nations, the very practices for which the other nations were cast out. Israel was supposed to be distinct from the Canaanites. In Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 9 to 14 they are warned against following in the pattern of the nations.

When you come into the land the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord and because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you.

You shall be blameless before the Lord your God for these nations which you are about to dispossess. Listen to fortune tellers and to diviners but as for you the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this. They have also walked in the ways of their wicked kings, Jeroboam in particular.

More specific sins of Israel are given in detail in verses 9 to 12. All these sins of idolatry, all these sins in which they walked in the ways of the Canaanites that had preceded them. Throughout the book of Kings there is an emphasis upon the ministry of the prophets.

God gives warning after warning but Israel stubbornly refused to listen. Far from being distinct from the Canaanites that had preceded them they follow in their ways and have committed all of their sins. The two golden calves in Bethel and Dan established by Jeroboam following the pattern of the rebellion of Israel at Sinai sets the course for what follows.

Israelite king after Israelite king does not depart from the ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, the ways in which he caused Israel to sin and this all provokes the Lord to anger. The gross ingratitude and the brazen offense of Israel's sin should be apparent from these verses. The Lord rejects the descendants of Israel more generally in verse 20.

Judah's being left is only temporary. Both nations will be given over to plunderers. If we

are to understand the cause of we look back to the event of Jeroboam.

Jeroboam's sin is the key event. One man's sin set the destiny of the nation. Once he had established that pattern Israel did not depart from it.

Once the path had been set they never left it. This should be contrasted with their attitude to the way of the Lord which they abandoned so quickly. Peter Lighthouse notes some of the poetic justice.

The narrator shows that there is an eye for eye justice in God's dealings with his people. Israel never turns away from their sin so Yahweh turns away his people. Israel rejects Yahweh's statutes and covenant so Yahweh rejects it.

Yahweh has the Canaanites carried away to exile and he does the same with the Israelites who follow Canaanite customs. Israel cannot complain against the justice of Yahweh and has no grounds for suggesting that he is unfaithful to his covenant. Israel's breach of covenant is evident in the 10 violations listed in chapter 17 verses 15 to 17 numerically matching the 10 words of Moses that summarize the original covenant in which Israel receives the land.

The book of Kings is theodicy justifying God's ways with Israel by showing that Israel and Judah both sinned in the face of Yahweh's persistent mercy and repeated warnings. As Israel is removed from the land and scattered among the nations there is the strange situation of exiles being brought in. In the book of Leviticus the land is described as if it had a life of its own in executing the covenant, a witness of the covenant and of the word of the Lord that enacts sanctions against those who are rebellious.

And here the land and its creatures rise up against the new inhabitants. Lions eat them in judgment. Lions have been used to judge unfaithful persons on a couple of earlier occasions in the books of the Kings.

There are also the bears that eat the 42 lads in chapter 2 of 2nd Kings. As the lions afflict the new inhabitants they figure that it must be a failure in worship. They see the Lord as a local or a regional deity that must be appeased.

Ironically they look to a priest from the deported Israelites to teach them how to be faithful to the Lord. This priest is set up at Bethel, a place of great sin and idolatry. The new inhabitants are syncretists like Israel had been.

They worship the Lord but alongside their own gods in the shrines of the high places. They make priests from all the people rather than just from the Levites. They're like Israel but now the nation has reverted to a sort of pre-conquest condition.

Brought in under Hoshea and brought out under Hoshea. It is as if the whole history of Israel had been thrown into reverse and little evidence now remains that they had ever

inhabited the land. All of this comes down to their failure to remember the word of the Lord and their failure to listen.

The book of Deuteronomy given just before they were entering into the land had emphasized these two things. Their need to remember and their need to listen. If they do not remember the word of the Lord, if they do not learn the lessons of the wilderness, if they do not learn the works of the Lord in the exodus, they will suffer all the curses of the covenant and will ultimately be expelled from the land.

This is what happens to Israel and it is a sign of what will later happen to Judah. A question to consider. Jeroboam and his sins set the course for the entire history of the nation of Israel.

Why was Jeroboam's sin so decisive for its course? In 2nd Kings chapter 18, the northern kingdom of Israel falls to Assyria and the southern kingdom is on the brink of joining them. The chapter begins with Hezekiah the son of Ahaz coming to the throne. The dates of the reign of Hezekiah present us with an immediate problem.

In verse 13 we read of events that we know occurred in 701 BC. But if this was in the 14th year of Hezekiah's reign then he would have come to the throne in 715 BC, some years after the fall of the northern kingdom. However in verse 1 we are told that he came to the throne in the third year of Hoshea son of Elah.

The numbers of the books of Kings and Chronicles are frequently confusing, not because they are impossible but because they are greatly complicated by co-regencies and the like. Various suggestions have been advanced for resolving the tensions at this particular point, including a co-regency with Ahaz followed by a 29 year sole regency, Hezekiah being designated king without yet having acceded to the throne. Others have suggested that the synchronizations are off by 12 years.

Others that there is an error in verse 13 which should read 24 instead of 14. Hezekiah is a faithful king. He is distinguished in his rooting out of idolatry.

In particular Hezekiah removes the high places and breaks down the pillars. A repeated accusation against the kings of Judah is their failure to remove these high places and now Hezekiah finally does this. The bronze serpent is also broken in pieces.

The bronze serpent was made during Israel's time in the wilderness in response to the fiery serpents that were released by the Lord among the people. Nehushtan is a play on the words for copper and serpent. In Numbers chapter 21 verses 8-9 we read of the event of the bronze serpent.

And the Lord said to Moses, Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and if the serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. The

fiery serpent had an appropriate use.

Indeed it had been made according to the Lord's own instruction, but it had clearly subsequently become an object of idolatry. Hezekiah was committed to the Lord, trusting in him, and the Lord strengthened him. He rebelled against the Assyrians at this time and also defeated the Philistines.

The defeat of the Philistines was probably designed to open up a path to Egypt, in whom Hezekiah placed some trust as an ally against the Assyrians. The Lord warned against dependence upon the Egyptians through the prophet Isaiah, and later on the Rabshakeh in his speech to the people in Jerusalem will make the same point. Egypt is not the power that it once was, and it is not sufficient to fight against the military might of Assyria.

The northern kingdom of Israel falls in the fourth year of the reign of Hezekiah. This largely repeats the events recorded in the previous chapter, but now it ties them to the reign of Hezekiah. It also has the effect of setting up a parallel, because in verse 13 there is a close parallel with verses 9-10.

Verses 9-10 describe the downfall of the northern kingdom, and now Israel's fate and Judah's fate are held side by side with each other. Israel has been destroyed by the Assyrians. Will Judah suffer the same fate? There is of course a key difference in that Hezekiah is a righteous king, unlike Hoshea and the Israelite kings that preceded him.

Will this make any difference for Judah? And signs don't initially look good. Sennacherib captures all of the fortified cities of Judah, and Hezekiah has to ask for mercy from him. Hezekiah sends messengers to Sennacherib at Lachish, a heavily fortified city that is the second city of Judah to Jerusalem.

At this point it might seem that Sennacherib is well underway to completely overrunning the nation. However, he has offered mercy in exchange for a grand tribute. Sennacherib's successful siege of Lachish and Hezekiah's payment of tribute are recorded in Assyrian annals from the time.

Several of Hezekiah's predecessors had raided the treasuries of the house of the Lord to pay tribute to a foreign king. Rehoboam had done it for Shishak, king of Egypt. Asa had given money to Ben-Hadad of Syria to get him on his side against Beasha.

Jehoash had given money to Hazeol of Syria. During Amaziah's reign, Jehoash of Israel had broken down the walls of Jerusalem and taken away much of the treasure of the temple. Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, had also raided the treasuries of the temple to give money to Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria.

Hezekiah now does the same thing to Sennacherib. He gives the silver of the house of the Lord and all of the gold from the doorposts. Not only is Judah standing in the very greatest jeopardy, Hezekiah's action in response is a troubling one.

He is taking tribute that had been given to the Lord and he is handing it over to a foreign invader. The hearer of the text might wonder where he is actually placing his hope. Hezekiah sends an envoy to Jerusalem.

The Tartan, the highest official after the king, the Rabsarus, who is the chief eunuch, and the Rabshakeh, who is the chief cupbearer or the butler. We should be wary of putting too much weight upon the literal interpretation of these roles. The chief eunuch may not have been a eunuch at all, but rather a name for a high office within the administration.

Likewise, the Rabshakeh, as the chief cupbearer or the butler, may have been primarily a man responsible for overseeing the affairs of the court of the king, whether back home in Assyria or out on some military campaign. Here the Rabshakeh acts as the mouthpiece of his master Sennacherib. He is a high official with the ability to speak in the Judean tongue, which is helpful in this particular situation, as we will see.

He and those who gave him his message also seem to have deep insight into the state of Judah and the nature of its religious beliefs, among other things. From what we learn from Assyrian annals, a great number of soldiers from Judah had either surrendered or defected at this point. The Assyrians could have gained much intelligence about the internal affairs of the nation of Judah from such persons.

The Rabshakeh's speech is perfectly designed to demoralise the people. Speaking to Eliakim, who is over the household, Shebna the secretary, and Joah the recorder, the Rabshakeh presents them with the big question, in whom do you trust? Given Hezekiah's actions in Philistia, it may seem that he is trusting in Egypt, yet Egypt is far from powerful enough to act as an effective ally, even if it were reliable, which it isn't. Leaning on Egypt would actually hurt Judah rather than helping them.

The Lord also warns Judah against such an alliance within the book of Isaiah. As the Assyrians have conquered cities through Judah, they have probably noticed the signs of a recent revolution in the religious life of the nation. They've seen the ruins of former shrines, they've seen pillars that have been torn down.

Recognising that something significant has occurred, they probably gained intelligence from Judean defectors, discovering that Hezekiah had broken down all of the high places in the pillars. This presents the Rabshakeh with a very effective demoralising argument that he can present to the people in Judah. They have clearly offended their God, the Lord, and he has now turned upon them.

He mocks them for their inability to assemble an effective military force. Even if he were to give them 2,000 horses, they would not be able to put riders upon them. Why then would they look to Egypt for horses and chariots, when they lack the men to use them? The Rabshakeh goes even further in his argument.

Not only has the Lord abandoned his people Judah, turning against them because they have abandoned his proper worship, the King of Assyria has been commissioned by the Lord himself against them. It is by his word that he has gone up to attack Jerusalem. The officials of Hezekiah are greatly dismayed by these words, even more so because they are spoken in the hearing of the regular soldiers on the wall, in a language that they can understand.

The Rabshakeh is speaking, presumably, in the Judean dialect. They request that he speaks in Aramaic, but he refuses. The Rabshakeh's speech is not merely for Hezekiah and his officials.

It is also for the more general population and the soldiers on the wall. It is designed to demoralise them. The Rabshakeh moves on to develop further arguments.

They should not trust in Hezekiah, nor should they trust in the Lord, allowing Hezekiah to persuade them that the Lord would deliver them. Neither Hezekiah nor the Lord would deliver them from the hand of the King of Assyria. Along with this demoralising message, the Rabshakeh gives a different piece of propaganda, the message that there is hope if they would only surrender to the King of Assyria.

If they surrender, then each one of them will eat of his own vine and each of his own fig tree, and each one of them would drink the water of his own cistern. This language is usually associated with very positive visions of the Lord giving rest to the people in the land, so that they all enjoy their own property and have untroubled relations with their own wives. Here, however, in an almost satanic fashion, it is taken up by the mouthpiece of a foreign king.

He presents this promise, and he presents it with the promise of bringing them into a new land. I will come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey, that you may live and not die. This parodies the sort of language that we find in Deuteronomy 8, 7-9.

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. The King of Assyria is the one that they should look to, not the Lord. Indeed, the gods of the other nations have not helped them, why should the God of Judah help it? Once again there is a parody here of the words of the Lord.

Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? This very closely mirrors the language of Deuteronomy 4, 34. Or has any God ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself

from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? In this very carefully targeted message, the King of Assyria is attacking the faith of Judah at its very base. He's sowing doubt and fear and demoralization.

Judah can't trust its king, Judah can't trust its god. The God of Judah is either on the side of Assyria or is a helpless bystander, unable to intervene to save his people. On the other hand, if the people do surrender, the King of Assyria will bring them into a glorious land.

He will be their saviour and deliverer. They will look to him for aid. The king has commanded the people not to answer.

They must hold their nerve, they must resist this temptation. And they all obey him, being silent in response. But Eliakim, Shebna and Joah go to the king and they have their clothes torn as they deliver the message to Hezekiah.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which the Rabshakeh's speech might remind us of Satan's devices to deceive and demoralize the people of God? In 2nd Kings chapter 18, the King of Assyria, Sennacherib, had sent an envoy to Jerusalem to speak to Hezekiah and his men. The Rabshakeh, accompanied by the Rapsarus and the Tartan, delivered a message by Hezekiah to his officials in Jerusalem.

By this point, most of the fortified cities of Judah had already fallen to the Assyrian forces. Judah cannot muster a large military force. Egypt does not promise to be an effective or reliable ally.

The Assyrians are seemingly not satisfied with the payment of tribute. And it seems most likely that Judah and Jerusalem will suffer the same fate as the Northern Kingdom and its capital Samaria. In 2nd Kings chapter 19, the message delivered by the Rabshakeh is brought to King Hezekiah by his officials.

Hezekiah is quite understandably deeply dismayed. But his response here, in contrast to his earlier response of taking treasures from the temple to pay his tribute, is to turn to the Lord. He tears his clothes, goes to the temple of the Lord, and then sends messengers to Isaiah the prophet of the Lord.

This is one of a very few occasions, Jonah being another example back in chapter 14, of one of the prophets of the canon appearing in the historical narrative. The prophet Isaiah will be a key player within the narrative of these chapters, in events that are also recorded in the book of his prophecies. 2nd Kings chapter 19 is paralleled in the book of Isaiah chapter 37.

When reading the histories of the books of the kings and the chronicles, it is important to remember that this period is one in which many of the prophets that we have later on in

the biblical text are actively engaged in their mission. Hezekiah describes the situation to the prophet Isaiah as akin to the situation of a woman in labour who is trying to bring herself to birth, but lacks the strength to do so. He reports the claims of the Rabshakeh and his master the king of Assyria to Isaiah, presenting them not only as a challenge to his own reign as the king of Judah, but also as a challenge to the Lord's own honour.

The king of Assyria has mocked the living God, he has claimed that the Lord is not able to deliver his people, and indeed that the king of Assyria was sent by the Lord to attack the people of Judah. He requests the prayers of Isaiah on their behalf. The Lord responds to king Hezekiah through Isaiah in a message paralleled and contrasted with the message of the Rabshakeh.

The servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed the Lord. Hezekiah should not be afraid of the Rabshakeh's words, as the Lord will act against Assyria and on behalf of his people. The Lord promises Hezekiah deliverance, a deliverance that would have required considerable faith to believe under the circumstances.

All of the signs seem to be pointing against them. When the Rabshakeh returns, he finds that the king of Assyria has left Lachish and is fighting against Libna. Then Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, hears a rumour concerning the king of Cush, who has set out to fight him.

Once again he sends messengers to Hezekiah in Jerusalem. He directs Hezekiah's attention to the many lands that he has subdued. He has defeated their peoples and their gods were not able to save them.

The Lord, the God of Judah, he argues, will be no different. Hezekiah's response, once again, is to turn to the Lord. He takes the letter, spreads it out before the Lord, and seeks the Lord in prayer.

For all the bluster and pride of Sennacherib, the Lord is still the God of all the earth. He is the one who created all. He is the one who is sovereign over all nations.

He has not been brought down from his throne. He is still enthroned above the cherubim. The empty words of Sennacherib are directed not just against the people of Judah.

They're directed against the Lord, and he calls the Lord to pay attention to them. The kings of Assyria have indeed laid waste all these other lands. But they served idols, false gods, gods that are no god.

By contrast, the God of Judah is the true God, and he can act against Assyria. He can deliver his people. The Lord responds to Hezekiah's prayer by the words of Isaiah, the son of Amoz, the prophet.

In Isaiah's prophecy, the virgin daughter of Zion, Jerusalem, is described as wagging her

head, scorning the reviling and the mocking of the king of Assyria, not taking them seriously. The king of Assyria boasts in his power and his might and the many great deeds that he has done. He has felled great nations like Cedars and Cypresses on the mountains.

He has caused his might to spread to all parts of the world, even up to Egypt. Yet the Lord is the one who determined all of this long ago. It is the Lord who oversees and directs the affairs of men according to his purposes.

The king of Assyria thinks that it is by his power that fortified cities have been brought down. But that would never have taken place had it not been the Lord's will and determination that it should. The king of Assyria rages against the Lord, proud in his own power, but the Lord can bring him down.

The Lord can put his hook in his nose and his bit in his mouth, and against all of the odds the Lord will turn him back the way that he came. The Lord will give Hezekiah a sign to confirm all of this to him. Using agricultural imagery, the Lord describes a situation where after complete devastation of the land, within three years of such devastation, Judah will have placed roots down into the land again.

The Lord is going to restore them. This will be accomplished by the zeal of the Lord. He is zealous for his great name.

He will not allow his people to be snatched from him. He will not allow his name to be blasphemed. The king of Assyria will not be successful in his attempts to take the city of Jerusalem.

There will not even be an arrow shot there, or he will not come against it with a shield or a siege mound. He will be sent back, tail between his legs, the way that he came. God defends the city for the sake of his own name and for the sake of his servant David, to whom he had made promises and given a covenant.

That night, the angel of the Lord goes and strikes down 185,000 of the Assyrians. Just as the Lord had delivered his people from Egypt, and the destroying angel had struck down the firstborn of the Egyptians, so the destroying angel strikes down the Assyrians. Sennacherib returns to Assyria, lives at Nineveh, and there he is killed by two of his sons, ironically in the house of Nisroch his god.

He mocked the Lord who was able to deliver his people in the most miraculous of ways, and yet his own god cannot defend him in his very own house. In Sennacherib, another enemy of the Lord is humiliated. A question to consider, what might we learn from the example of Hezekiah about appropriate responses to political and national crisis? 2 Kings chapter 20 concludes the account of the life of Hezekiah within the books of the kings.

As a sort of addendum to the story of Hezekiah's life, it tells of two particular events that

are connected together. The two events occur around the time of the Syrian threat, as we see in verse 6. The city is under threat, but the king is also seriously ill. He is at the point of death.

And if the severity of his illness was not enough, the Lord sends Isaiah to confirm the fact of his forthcoming death to him. He will not recover. With the nation being on the brink of being overrun by the Assyrians, the king is on his deathbed.

He's about to die. At one of the most critical times in the nation's history, he would have to leave the reins of the nation in the hands of his son Manasseh, and help him to establish a new regime under these circumstances. The symbolic relationship between the physical body of the king and the body politic has been much explored by writers and poets, and theorized by theologians and political thinkers, perhaps most notably in the work of Shakespeare, and also in the work of someone like Ernst Kantorowicz, who wrote on the subject in *The King's Two Bodies*.

The illness of King Hezekiah is a symbol of the ailing of the kingdom. The kingdom is near to death. Can the kingdom be delivered from its fate from the exile that seemingly awaits it? Hezekiah's response to the lord's announcement is to turn his face to the wall and to seek the lord's reprieve.

He calls upon the lord to consider the way that he has walked before him faithfully. Like David, he has walked before the lord with a whole heart. He has sought to do what is good in the sight of the lord.

After the idolatry of the reign of Ahaz, he has sought to re-establish true worship in the land, and to root out all the idolatry and false worship that had become entrenched there. Even before Isaiah has left the courts of the palace, the word of the lord comes to him, sending him back to Hezekiah with the message that his prayer has been heard. God addresses Hezekiah as the god of David his father.

He will be healed and restored, and on the third day he will be raised up to go into the house of the lord. And this won't merely be a reprieve of a short duration. The lord will add 15 years to his life.

And as the king symbolizes the nation, this deliverance is not just for Hezekiah as a private person. It's also for Hezekiah as the representative of the nation and the city. The city will also be delivered, delivered from the hand of the king of Assyria.

God's commitment to the city is for the sake of David his servant, and also for his own namesake. He has placed his name there in the temple, and he is jealous for its holiness. Isaiah instructs them to bring a cake of figs, and to take it and lay it on the boil, and that would be the means by which he would recover.

It is not entirely clear what is meant by a boil here. However, the application of figs was

a known form of treatment. We need not presume that it is some strange prophetic sign.

Hezekiah requests a further sign, and Isaiah doesn't rebuke him here. He offers Hezekiah the choice of two alternatives. On the one hand, the shadow could go forward 10 steps, or it could go back 10 steps.

The location of this sign, as we see in Isaiah chapter 38 verse 8, is the steps of Ahaz. It is not entirely clear what these were. Some suggest that this is a reference to a sundial.

Others suggest that these are literal steps, maybe steps that go up to the altar, or perhaps they are steps that go up to some part of the palace. Hezekiah chooses the harder of the two signs, and the Lord brings it to pass, demonstrating that he will indeed be saved from his illness. In the book of Isaiah chapter 38 verses 10 to 20, we have a writing from Hezekiah around this time concerning his illness.

I said in the middle of my days I must depart. I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years. I said I shall not see the Lord, the Lord in the land of the living.

I shall look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world. My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent, like a weaver I have rolled up my life. He cuts me off from the loom.

From day to night you bring me to an end. I calmed myself until morning. Like a lion he breaks all my bones.

From day to night you bring me to an end. Like a swallow or a crane I chirp. I moan like a dove.

My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed. Be my pledge of safety.

What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it. I walk slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul. O Lord, by these things men live.

And in all these is the life of my spirit. O restore me to health and make me live. Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness.

But in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction. For you have cast all my sins behind your back. For she old does not thank you.

Death does not praise you. Those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day.

The Father makes known to the children your faithfulness. The Lord will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives at the house of the Lord. The second event from the reign of Hezekiah recorded in this chapter is a visit from Merodach Baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon.

He sends envoys to Hezekiah, and Hezekiah shows them around all of his treasures. He shows them the riches of his house, the riches of his armory, and all of the wealth of his storehouses. This probably occurs in the second period of Merodach Baladan's reign, around 703 to 702 BC.

Hezekiah presumably seeks to form an alliance with Merodach Baladan in order that they can both fight against Assyria together. With such a northern ally, he would be much more confident in fighting against the Assyrians. He also looks, of course, to the south, to Egypt, as another potential ally.

Neither of these two potential allies would prove to be of true aid to Judah. The Lord sends the prophet Isaiah to Hezekiah to give him a dismaying message about the Babylonians. He has shown them all around his house, and all that he has shown them will one day be carried out into Babylon.

Nothing will be left. Indeed, some of Hezekiah's own sons, whether his immediate sons, or some of his later descendants, would also be carried into Babylon. Hezekiah's response is rather selfish.

He acknowledges that the word of the Lord is good and just, but he takes more concern for the peace and security of his own days, with seemingly little concern for the well-being of the nation after his death. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of his reign. The building of the pool and the conduit that brought water into the city from the river Gihon is mentioned here.

This was a remarkable work of engineering undertaken in the days of Hezekiah. A 530 meter long tunnel excavated by two different teams on the two different ends, who met in the middle according to the Siloam inscription. It better protected the water supply of the city that was facing the threat of siege.

The waters of the upper Gihon, which were already guarded by a tower, were diverted towards the city so that the critical water supply of the city would be less vulnerable to besieging armies. This is the word that he gave to Hezekiah concerning his imminent death in response to his prayer. 2 Kings chapter 21 recounts the reign of Manasseh, although it does not mention the repentance and restoration that we read of in 2 Chronicles chapter 33.

The account that we have in this chapter is very selective, especially when we consider the source material that the writer probably had to hand. He doesn't really tell us about relations between Judah and Assyria during the period. From what we know of other sources, during the reigns of the Assyrian kings Esauhaddon and Ashurbanipal, Judah was mostly a loyal vassal nation of the Assyrian Empire.

Judean troops were among those used to suppress the rebellion of Ter-Haka in Egypt.

Judah also contributed to the rebuilding of Sidon. The hero of this passage who is familiar with the text of 2 Chronicles will likely be very surprised not to see any reference to the captivity and exile of Manasseh, and even more surprised not to read anything of his repentance.

The presentation of Manasseh in this chapter is unremittingly negative. There are no details mitigating this portrayal, or presenting us with some account of the reversal that Manasseh underwent. The selectivity of the account then invites our attention, and also calls for some sort of explanation.

Why would the author of the books of the kings not include such details? When considering this question, we should keep in mind that the account of 2 Chronicles chapter 33 has the same tenor to it as this one. Manasseh is presented in the most negative of terms, as one who had a lasting impact through his wickedness. The account of his repentance, though important, does not change the general character of his reign, or fundamentally alter the course of the nation.

Manasseh reigns for 55 years, the longest reign of any king in either Judah or Israel. Over the course of this period, he exerts an immense impact upon the spiritual character of the nation, and even though he may seek to repair that impact towards the end of his life, the damage had already been done. Manasseh's father Hezekiah had engaged in a great reformation project, seeking to restore the true worship of God.

Manasseh, however, seeks to reverse all of these things. His motives for doing so are not entirely clear. Perhaps he is seeking to curry favour with the Assyrians and others by engaging in certain sorts of syncretism.

Perhaps the decision is motivated in part by domestic politics. Hezekiah's reformation of the worship of the land might have faced considerable resistance. People would not want their local shrine to be torn down.

They would not like to see the disruption of their worship of Baal and Asherah. To such people, Manasseh might have come across as far more religiously tolerant. He is also far more cosmopolitan than Hezekiah.

He does not oppose pagan practices and the worship of the gods of neighbouring peoples. He is far more relaxed to the idea of a larger pantheon of gods, of which the Lord may be just one. And by abandoning the centralising religious project of his father, he gives power back to different regions.

They can worship as they want. They don't have to worship in the temple in Jerusalem or according to the ways of the temple in Jerusalem. They can enjoy a much greater religious autonomy.

Religious pluralism seems far better for a nation that's facing all these sorts of internal

and external pressures. It seems far more expedient in such a situation to worship many different gods, gods that represent all the different groups within the nation. Maintaining pure worship of just one god creates unnecessary tensions both within the nation and with other nations.

Political expediency alone would suggest a more polytheistic approach is far more reasonable. Manasseh engages in all sorts of religious practices. He builds altars for the host of heaven and places them in the courts of the house of the Lord.

He burns his son as an offering. He uses fortune-telling, omens, deals with mediums and necromancers. He goes so far as to place a carved image of Asherah within the house of the Lord.

The Temple of Solomon, a symbol of exclusive worship to the Lord, is now opened up to other sorts of worship. It becomes a far more inclusive place. As Judah is weak and needs to look to other nations round about as Assyria spreads its power, it seems only appropriate that it should express that openness in the relaxing of the exclusivity of its own religious cult.

It shouldn't be that hard to see some of the ways that Manasseh might have rationalized his religious policies. A less divisive, centralizing and exclusive religious approach would relax some of the tensions that the nation experienced. However, in taking this approach, Manasseh was abandoning the Lord, the Lord who had delivered them from Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land.

He was defiling the Lord's place of worship. He was filling the land that the Lord had promised to his people with violence. By putting his trust in the nations and their gods and in human wisdom over the word of the Lord, Manasseh doomed himself to judgment.

Over the decades of his reign, the Lord sent his servants the prophets with messages of warning to Judah and Manasseh. The warnings were based upon Manasseh's own sins but also upon the sins of the nation more generally. Manasseh led the people in wickedness and idolatry, but the people very willingly followed.

The Lord declares that he will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria and the plumb line of the house of Ahab. The same judgment that the northern kingdom of Israel had faced would fall upon the southern kingdom of Judah. The language of the measuring line and the plumb line can also be found in places like Isaiah chapter 28 verse 17.

And I will make justice the line and righteousness the plumb line and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies and waters will overwhelm the shelter. Or in Isaiah chapter 34 verse 11. But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it, the owl and the raven shall dwell in it.

He shall stretch the line of confusion over it and the plumb line of emptiness. Like Samaria, Jerusalem will suffer a sort of decreation on account of their sins. The Lord will wipe Jerusalem clean, cleaning off of it all its rebellious people.

He will forsake his rebellious people, abandoning them to the fate that they have chosen for themselves. Beyond all his sins of idolatry, Manasseh is also a violent king. He sheds a lot of innocent blood, filling Jerusalem from one end to another.

This all calls God's judgment down upon the city. The nation had already been doomed to exile. But on account of Manasseh's long and wicked reign, that judgment can't come soon enough.

Manasseh dies and he's succeeded by his son Ammon, who only rules for a couple of years. After he is killed by conspirators, Josiah his son is set up as king in his place. Peter Lighthouse writes of Manasseh, but because he forgot the Lord, his deliverance of Israel from Egypt, and his commandments.

Each time the Bible says that Judah is condemned to exile because of Manasseh, the original readers would have recognized they are condemned because of forgetfulness. Forgetfulness seduced them to do evil. Because of forgetfulness the land became full of innocent blood.

And even after Josiah, the Lord did not turn from his wrath because of all the provocations with which forgetfulness had provoked him. Finally, the Lord sent bands of raiders because of the sins of forgetfulness. The story of the consequences of forgetfulness was a stimulus to remind exilic Israel never to forget again.

A question to consider, how might Manasseh's religious policies serve as a cautionary example for us today? In 2nd Kings chapter 22, Judah is on the brink. After over 50 years of Manasseh's reign, and the wickedness that had flourished within it, we might think that the threat of judgment the Lord had declared concerning Jerusalem and Judah would soon come upon them. The prophetic judgment hangs like a sword of Damocles over the sinful nation and city.

At any time the thread of grace by which it hangs might be cut, and destruction and exile before the people. Yet in the very twilight of the kingdom, Judah is granted a brief reprieve. Under the reign of Josiah, the nation undergoes a spiritual reformation, and their judgment is postponed.

Chapter 22 and 23 recount Josiah's reign, where there is a temporary reversal of Judah's trajectory. These should be read as a unit. Josiah is the son of Ammon, the wicked son of the wicked Manasseh, who only reigned for two years and was killed by a conspiracy.

Josiah does not have promising parentage, but he proves to be a very faithful king. He walks in the ways not of Ammon and Manasseh, but of David. Josiah begins his reign in

his youth at the age of only eight, and presumably he was thrown into his reign relatively unprepared, his father being assassinated before he could enjoy a full education as the crown prince.

As a boy king who ends up seeking to restore the temple, Josiah should naturally remind us of Joash. Peter Lighthouse observes the way that this sets up a broader parallel sequence in the book of 2 Kings, running from chapter 11 to the end of the book. The structure as he sees it is as follows.

First, Athaliah, daughter of Ahab, kills the royal seed in chapter 11 verse 1. Then there's Joash's reign in chapters 11 to 12. Then there's a quick sequence of kings of Israel and Judah in chapters 13 to 16. In chapter 17, there's the fall of Samaria, and the first iteration of the sequence concludes with the revival of Judah under Hezekiah in chapters 18 to 20.

The second sequence begins with Manasseh as a king like Ahab, promoting idolatry and killing the innocent in chapter 21. In chapters 22 and 23, Josiah reigns. In chapter 24, there is a quick succession of kings of Judah, and in chapter 25, the fall of Jerusalem.

And finally, the concluding element of the sequence is the elevation of Jehoiachin in chapter 25 verses 27 to 30. Josiah reigns from 640 to 609 BC. In the 18th year of his reign, at around the age of 26, Josiah determines to repair the temple.

This wasn't the first reforming action that Josiah engaged in. 2nd Chronicles tells us that he was seeking the Lord from his youth, and that he had already started a widespread purge of idolatry from the land in his 12th year. 2nd Chronicles chapter 34 verses 3 to 7 read, For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet a boy, he began to seek the God of David his father.

And in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, and the carved and the metal images. And they chopped down the altars of the Baals in his presence, and he cut down the incense altars that stood above them. And he broke in pieces the Asherim and the carved and the metal images, and he made dust of them and scattered it over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them.

He also burned the bones of the priests on their altars and cleansed Judah and Jerusalem. And in the cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, and Simeon, and as far as Naphtali, in their ruins all around, he broke down the altars and beat the Asherim and the images into powder, and cut down all the incense altars throughout all the land of Israel. Then he returned to Jerusalem.

Josiah cleanses not just Judah, but also the remains of Israel. As the Davidic king, he is concerned not just for the southern tribes, but also for the remnant of their northern brothers. The text's description of Josiah's reforms invite a parallel between him and

Joash, back in chapter 12, who also repaired the temple some years into his reign.

As Lyseret Beal notes, the parallels also reveal contrasts between Joash and Josiah. Josiah is far more directly overseeing the repairing of the temple than Joash. However, despite Joash's extensive purge of idolatry from the land, and his repairs of the temple, these primarily set the scene for a far greater event, which is the discovery of the Book of the Law in the temple.

When the Book of the Law is discovered, the repairs of the temple move to the background. The Book of the Law is given to Shaphan the secretary, by Hilkiah the high priest, and is then read to Josiah by Shaphan. The Book of the Law was likely the Book of Deuteronomy, the second giving of the law, as Israel was on the brink of entering into the Promised Land.

Besides the Ten Commandments, it contained extensive material exhorting Israel to remember the lessons of the Exodus in the wilderness, as they prepared to possess the land. The book concludes with blessings and curses, and witnesses called against the people. Hearing the book, Josiah is devastated by its message.

He tears his clothes and he weeps in response. It is clear that neither the people nor their rulers had obeyed the Book of the Law, and as a result, they had called down the judgment of the Lord upon them. Indeed, both the people and their king were supposed to be familiar with the Book of the Law.

In Deuteronomy chapter 17 verses 18 to 20, the king is instructed, And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law, and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel. In Deuteronomy chapter 31 verses 9 to 13, we see that the people are supposed to be made aware of the contents of the Book of the Law, reminded of them as an entire congregation every seven years, besides the teaching that they would receive on a regular basis from the priests and the Levites in their cities and towns.

Once he hears the contents of the Book of the Law, Josiah realises just how serious the sin of Judah is, and their desperate need to seek the mercy of the Lord. It's clear that the Lord is angry with Israel, but perhaps there is some chance that the Lord will spare them if they turn to him. Josiah assembled a delegation of his highest officers, Hilkiah the high priest, Shaphan the secretary, and Ahikam his son, Akbor and Asaiah, and he sends them to a prophetess called Huldah, who lived in Jerusalem.

A number of people in the delegation are mentioned favourably in the Book of Jeremiah.

There were several prophets who were active during the reign of Josiah. Whether or not they were as accessible as Huldah was, Huldah was the one to whom Josiah turned.

She obviously had a high reputation as a prophetess. There are not many examples of prophetesses in scripture, and they are especially rare within the Old Testament. Relatively speaking, women engage in more prophetic discourse in the New Testament.

While priests were exclusively male by divine establishment, and the reigning monarchs of Israel and Judah were exclusively male, Athaliah was the only potential exception to the rule, although she wasn't considered a true monarch in the text. Prophetesses, though relatively rare, did exist. Miriam, Deborah, Isaiah's wife, and Huldah are all described as prophetesses in scripture.

As we see in the Lord's response to Miriam and Aaron in Numbers chapter 12, prophetic revelation and authority could vary from prophet to prophet. Some prophets performed many mighty works of power, like Elijah and Elisha. Some performed none.

Some wrote lengthy prophetic books, and others only delivered lesser oracles. Some prophesied routinely, others prophesied on just a few occasions. Some developed movements of disciples around them, while others did not.

Some were leaders, while others were only consulted by leaders. Some had far more powerful and revelatory visions, while others, like Moses, had more direct conversation with the Lord, and yet others only had dim dreams. Some prophets had words of great and direct authority, while others functioned more as a sort of non-authoritative counsel.

While Huldah was not a prophet writing scriptural prophecies like Jeremiah, nor likely a miracle-working prophet like Elisha, she is an eminent prophetess and counsellor to the king, and she delivers authoritative words of the Lord to Judah and to Jeziah. She declares the Lord's judgment first upon the nation of Judah. They have forsaken the Lord and served other gods, so all of the words of the judgment of the book of the law would come upon them.

There is, however, a more positive message for Jeziah. Because he was penitent and humbled himself, he will be spared the judgment himself. This is similar to the reprieve that Hezekiah enjoys.

However, Jeziah's response to it is a better one than Hezekiah's. Similarities to the repentance of Ahab can be drawn here as well, but now the fate of the entire nation hangs in the balance, not just that of a particular dynasty. The concluding promise of the Lord to Jeziah here is rather surprising considering the death that Jeziah dies.

Perhaps we are supposed to read it in a more relative manner. Although he dies in a blow upon the nation, it is not yet the final death blow that is to be delivered. A question to consider, what would have been some of the key teachings of the book of the law that

would have caused Jeziyah to tear his clothes and to weep? 2 Kings chapter 23 belongs with chapter 22.

It continues the account of Jeziyah's reforms, especially following the discovery of the book of the law in the temple. While Hezekiah had responded to the news that Judah would not meet its end in his reign with a complacent relief, Jeziyah responds to the same news with a reforming urgency. He is not merely concerned to be reprieved himself, he is concerned for the well-being of the nation.

He assembles the entire congregation to hear the book of the covenant, everyone is brought together, which was the procedure for a covenant renewal ceremony. Deuteronomy had mandated such a ceremony every seven years during the Feast of Tabernacles. Deuteronomy chapter 31 verses 9 to 13 reads, Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel.

And Moses commanded them, At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God, at the place that He will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. We find such comprehensive covenant ceremonies in Deuteronomy chapter 29 and in Joshua chapter 24.

Josiah stands beside the pillar as he makes the covenant on his own part, and the people join in. This is not just a renewal of the commitments of kingly office as such, it's a renewal of the Mosaic covenant. Joash also stood by the pillar back in 2 Kings chapter 11 verses 12 to 14.

Some have taken the pillar to be a reference to a platform upon which the king would stand. It might perhaps be the pillar of Boaz however, representing the king alongside the priestly pillar of Jacob. These are the two pillars which represent the two leaders of the nation.

Having renewed the covenant, Josiah undertakes comprehensive reforms. He purges the land of idolatry beginning in the temple. 2 Chronicles chapter 34 verses 3 to 7 mentions such reforms beginning in the 12th year of Josiah's reign.

So this is probably a great intensification of reforms that were already ongoing after the initial reforms had led to the discovery of the book of the law in the temple. Josiah might hold out hope for a reprieve of Jerusalem and Judah. However, whether or not such a reprieve would be forthcoming, he pursues the reforms because they are the right thing

to do.

Every single idol and false form of worship is purged from the land. He deposes the priests who had been involved in worship on the high places. He removes the priests of Baal and the worship of the heavens.

He removes the Asherah from the house of the Lord. Manasseh had set up an Asherah in the house and then removed it in the course of his repentance. Perhaps we are to assume that Ammon simply reversed the reforms of Manasseh in his short reign.

Josiah is concerned not merely to remove such idols and idolaters, but utterly to remove them, spiritually to scorch the earth where they once were, so that they will never return and take root there again. This is generally accomplished by defiling their sites with dead bodies or grinding things to dust and putting them in a defiled place. We get a sense of how bad things had become when we learn of the non-priestly men, which some have taken to be male cult prostitutes, and women serving the shrine of Asherah in the temple.

He deposes the unfaithful priests, reducing them to the status of lay Levites. The reforms are extensive. They run throughout the land before returning to Jerusalem and dealing with the ways that pagan worship had become embedded at the heart of the nation.

He follows the pattern of Deuteronomy chapter 12 verses 1 to 4. Josiah tears down and purges the whole stubborn legacy of idolatry and false worship in the land. Altars and shrines to false gods set up by Ahaz, Manasseh and Solomon are all destroyed. These may have been destroyed on previous occasions, but they seem to have been re-established afterwards.

Josiah is concerned that their destruction be complete and irreversible. The legacy of idolatry goes all the way back through the Book of the Kings, right back to Solomon. Josiah extends the reach of his reforms beyond Jerusalem and up to Bethel, which had been the principal cultic site of the northern kingdom of Israel.

It was at Bethel that Jeroboam erected one of his golden calves. Just as he uproots the idolatry of Solomon, which set the southern kingdom on its false course, he goes down to the root of the northern kingdom's idolatry, in the altar and high place of Jeroboam in Bethel. His actions fulfil the prophecy of the man of God from Judah, way back in 1 Kings chapter 13, shortly after the split in the kingdom.

1 Kings chapter 13 verses 1-5 read, And behold, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the Lord to Bethel. Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make offerings. And the man cried against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, O altar, altar, thus says the Lord, Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places, who make offerings on you, and human

bones shall be burned on you.

And he gave a sign the same day, saying, This is the sign that the Lord has spoken. Behold, the altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are on it shall be poured out. And when the king heard the saying of the man of God, which he cried against the altar at Bethel, Jeroboam stretched out his hand from the altar, saying, Seize him.

And his hand, which he stretched out against him, dried up, so that he could not draw it back to himself. The altar also was torn down, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign that the man of God had given by the word of the Lord. The words of the prophet having been fulfilled, the mind of the hearer of the books of the kings should be taken back to 1 Kings 13, considering the story of the man of God from Judah and the old prophet from Bethel, considering the ways that it is a sign of the fate of the two nations.

The fulfillment of all of this is underlined as Josiah sees the monument that was set up to the man of God from Judah and asks concerning it, learning of the prophecy that the man of God from Judah had made, he leaves the monument alone. The old prophet of Bethel is referred to as coming from Samaria, which is anachronistic, as Samaria wasn't built until the time of Omri. However, as the land was later referred to more generally as Samaria, this isn't improper, and it has the effect of underlining the symbolic association between the northern kingdom and the old prophet.

Josiah sacrifices priests of the high places on their altars in Samaria too, completely defiling them so that they could never be restored. Continuing his reforms, Josiah establishes a great Passover celebration, according to the instructions of Deuteronomy 16, verses 1 to 8. or the herd at the place that the Lord will choose to make his name dwell there. You shall eat no leaven bread with it.

Seven days you shall eat it with unleavened bread, the bread of affliction. For you came out of the land of Egypt in haste, that all the days of your life you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt. No leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory for seven days, nor shall any of the flesh that you sacrifice on the evening of the first day remain all night until morning.

You may not offer the Passover sacrifice within any of your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, but at the place that the Lord your God will choose to make his name dwell in it. There you shall offer the Passover sacrifice, in the evening at sunset, at the time you came out of Egypt. And you shall cook it and eat it at the place that the Lord your God will choose.

And in the morning you shall turn and go to your tents. For six days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a solemn assembly to the Lord your God. You shall do no work on it.

2 Chronicles chapter 30 records a great Passover celebration held by Hezekiah, which isn't recorded in 2 Kings. This might make the hearer of 2 Kings wonder whether the book's claims about the uniqueness of Josiah's Passover are really accurate. However, 2 Chronicles, which records Hezekiah's Passover, is no less clear about the uniqueness of Josiah's Passover.

2 Chronicles chapter 35 verse 18 reads, No Passover like it had been kept in Israel since the days of Samuel the prophet. None of the kings of Israel had kept such a Passover as was kept by Josiah, and the priests and the Levites and all Judah and Israel who were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Hezekiah's Passover had been irregular in its timing, and he had prayed to the Lord to cleanse the people, as many of them weren't ceremonially clean.

Josiah's Passover, by contrast, is celebrated at the proper time and on a grander scale. It is described in great detail in 2 Chronicles chapter 35. We get some sense of the scale of that Passover in verses 7 to 9 of that chapter.

Then Josiah contributed to the lay people as Passover offerings for all who were present, lambs and young goats from the flock, to the number of 30,000, and 3,000 bulls, these were from the king's possessions. And his officials contributed willingly to the people, to the priests and to the Levites, Hilkiah, Zachariah and Jehiel, the chief officers of the house of God, gave to the priests for the Passover offerings 2,600 Passover lambs and 300 bulls, Cunaniah also, and Shemiah and Nathanael, his brothers, and Hashabiah, and Jeiel, and Jezobab, the chiefs of the Levites, gave to the Levites for the Passover offerings 5,000 lambs and young goats and 500 bulls. Josiah was utterly unprecedented as a king in his faithfulness.

He acted according to the great charge of the law in Deuteronomy 6, verse 5, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. However, despite everything that Josiah did, the Lord did not relent from the judgment that he had declared upon the nation, a judgment that especially resulted from the provocations of Manasseh. Despite Manasseh's repentance and Josiah's great faithfulness, the wickedness of Manasseh's reign still had irrevocable consequences.

Josiah's life ends tragically. Pharaoh Necho of Egypt is going up to the king of Assyria at the river Euphrates. Egypt and Assyria were allied against Babylon at the time.

Pharaoh Necho is just passing through the region, on his way up to fight alongside the king of Assyria. But Josiah unwisely inserts himself into the situation, and he is killed by the Egyptians. There is a sort of unravelling that is occurring in the reign of Josiah.

He removes idolatry and false worship from the land, right down to its roots in Jeroboam and Solomon, taking us back to the very beginning of the books of the kings. He then celebrates a great Passover celebration, before being killed by the Egyptians. It is as if

Josiah is moving backward through the history of the nation, setting its house in order before its inevitable descent into the grave of exile, symbolically foretold in the story of the man of God from Judah.

In fulfilment of the prophecy of Huldah, he dies in relative peace, before Babylon finally comes upon the nation. Josiah is replaced by his son, Jehoahaz, elsewhere called Shalom, who is chosen by the people of the land over some of his elder brothers. He only reigns for a short period of three months.

Even in that brief time, however, he reverts to the wickedness of the former kings. He is deposed by Pharaoh Necho, who had killed his father. Pharaoh Necho brings him in captivity to Ribla, and places the land under a heavy tribute.

Eliakim is put in his place, and his name is changed to Jehoiakim. Eliakim is the second son of Josiah, and presumably is appointed as one who will support Egypt. The changing of his name is a curious detail, as Eliakim means God establishes, but Jehoiakim means Yahweh establishes.

Perhaps this is designed to increase support from faithful worshippers of the Lord in Judah. The tribute is required of the people of the land, according to the command of Pharaoh. It isn't raised from the king's treasuries, or from the treasuries of the house of the Lord, but it seems to be a punitive tax upon rebellious people in a tributary nation.

Jehoiakim reigns for eleven years, and he continues the pattern of wickedness of his younger brother who preceded him, and of the former kings of Judah. A question to consider. Throughout the books of the kings we see much about the legacies of unfaithful rulers.

Jeroboam the son of Nebat is the greatest example. The sins of such men long outlived them, and are still having their impact centuries later. When Josiah seeks to reform the nation, he needs to dislodge the stubborn roots of sin that go all the way back to Solomon and Jeroboam, well over 300 years earlier.

While several reform efforts had preceded him, none actually succeeded in uprooting these. They seem to be removed, but they can spring back to life again. How do the books of the kings serve as a commentary upon the effects of sin over a great many generations in the life of a nation? How might this help us to think more carefully about some of the sins of our own nations? In 2nd Kings chapter 24, Israel finally goes over the precipice and tumbles down into exile in Babylon.

Jehoiakim had been placed on the throne of Judah by Pharaoh Necho after he had removed his predecessor Jehoahaz and brought him into exile in Egypt. The whole region was in turmoil. The great powers in the north and the south, Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, are coming into direct conflict and the minor nations that formerly functioned as buffers

between them are being removed from play.

The outcome of this is far from certain. Assyria and Egypt are decisively beaten by Babylon at Carchemish in 605 BC, leading to a few years of Babylonian dominance, during which time Jehoiakim, who had been a tributary of Egypt, becomes a Babylonian vassal. Yet a few years later, in 601 BC, Babylon suffered a serious setback in a failed attempt to conquer Egypt.

This was likely the point when Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon, presuming that they were no longer in the ascendancy. And his rebellion fails terribly. Judah is attacked by raiders on all sides, from nations under Babylonian rule, yet in a way orchestrated by the Lord in judgement upon their sins and in fulfilment of the words of the prophets.

In particular, this is a consequence of the idolatrous abominations of Manasseh and his violence and his shedding of innocent blood. Jehoiakim dies after his 11-year reign and he is replaced by Jehoiachin, his son. Babylon, unlike Egypt, had the reserve power to recover from the earlier failed attempt at conquest.

By the end of Jehoiakim's reign, the tide has turned decisively in Babylon's favour. Egypt is a spent force and Babylon now controls the entire territory between Egypt and the Euphrates. The attentive hearer of the text should recognise that this is the territory that used to be ruled by Solomon at the height of the Kingdom of Israel.

It now all rests under the power of Babylon and the doom of Judah is set. The finishing blows come in stages, beginning in the reign of Jehoiakim, the throne name of Jeconiah or Caniah. Jehoiakim continues in the wickedness of his father.

About three years after Jehoiakim's rebellion against Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar besieges Jerusalem. It isn't often that we have a reference to the regnal year of a pagan king, but here we see that Nebuchadnezzar takes Jehoiakim captive after his surrender in the eighth year of his reign. He takes the treasures of the king's house and the temple and exiles the royal family and the officials, the artisans and the trained military men, leaving only the poor of the land.

The nation has its head and its might cut off. Babylon's approach to deportation was different from Assyria's. Assyria deported populations and replaced them with different populations, cutting off the connection between people and the land in which they belonged and flourished.

This can be one of the most devastating ways to break down a people's nationhood, peoplehood and selfhood. In much more recent history, we can see this in the impact of the European powers transporting African slaves to the Americas. Babylon's approach was different.

They sought to remove the head of the nations that they conquered, stripping them of

the people of skill and power who could grant them nationhood and effective collective agency by their leadership. There were 10,000 deportees, 7,000 of the men of valor, 1,000 craftsmen and metal workers. Presumably the remaining 2,000 were members of the ruling classes.

Stripped of these people in 597 BC, Judah is left powerless and leaderless. There would be a further deportation later in 586 BC, but while that deportation is more final, this earlier deportation is the greater of the two. Jehoiachin is carried away to Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar replaces him with his uncle, Mataniah, the third son of Josiah, whose name he changes to Zedekiah, meaning the righteousness of the Lord.

The irony of this should not be missed. This is all the fulfillment of the Lord's righteous judgment upon Judah. Zedekiah, like Jehoiachin, reigns for 11 years before rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar.

He repeats the error of his predecessor and he suffers the same consequences. Peter Lighthouse, following Robert Cone, observes that there is a close parallel between two different sections here. 2 Kings 23.21-24.2 is paralleled closely with 2 Kings 24.8-25.1. Jehoiachin reigns for 3 months.

Jehoiachin is imprisoned by Pharaoh. Jehoiachin is imprisoned by Nebuchadnezzar. Pharaoh places Eliakim on the throne and changes his name.

Nebuchadnezzar sets Mataniah on the throne and changes his name. Pharaoh takes Jehoahaz to Egypt. Jehoahaz dies in Egypt.

Nebuchadnezzar takes Jehoiachin to Babylon. But Jehoiachin does not die in Babylon. Jehoiakim reigns for 11 years.

Zedekiah reigns for 11 years. Jehoiakim rebels against Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah rebels against Nebuchadnezzar.

God brings attackers upon Jehoiakim and then the Lord rejects Judah in the reign of Zedekiah. Lighthouse proceeds to remark, Comparing these sequences we can see that Judah's dealings with Egypt foreshadow its dealings with Babylon and this suggests that the writer of 1 and 2 Kings is operating within Isaiah's notion of a second exodus from Babylon that recapitulates the exodus from Egypt. The final chapters of 1 and 2 Kings also complete a larger pattern of 7s that run through the history of Judah.

6 kings and then Athaliah interrupts the dynasty. 6 kings and then Manasseh reigns as the worst Davidic king ever. 6 kings and then Nebuchadnezzar destroys the city and the temple.

The events of the final years of Judah are also discussed in the prophets in such places as the book of Jeremiah and the book of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel chapter 17 verses 11 to 21 for

instance. Now you know what these things mean.

Tell them, Behold the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and took her king and her princes and brought them to him in Babylon. And he took one of the royal offspring and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath, the chief men of the land he had taken away, that the kingdom might be humble and not lift itself up, and keep his covenant that it might stand. But he rebelled against him by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army.

Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape? As I live, declares the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells who made him king, whose oath he despised and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die. Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives. He despised the oath in breaking the covenant.

And behold, he gave his hand and did all these things. He shall not escape. Therefore, thus says the Lord God, as I live, surely it is my oath that he despised and my covenant that he broke.

I will return it upon his head. I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there for the treachery he has committed against me. And all the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

I have spoken. A question to consider. Reading Jeremiah chapters 27 and 28, what light do they shed upon this chapter? In 2 Kings chapter 25, the final chapter of the book of the kings, the kingdom of Judah is finally removed and goes into exile in Babylon, joining the northern kingdom of Israel in removal from the promised land.

The fate that had been foretold from at least the reign of Hezekiah, and which was on the near horizon from the reign of Jezebel, now befalls the nation, bringing to a tragic close a story that began with David and Solomon. In the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, Nebuchadnezzar comes against Jerusalem, in response to Zedekiah's rebellion against him. There is a sense of inevitability to the events of this chapter, of the futility of fighting against the fate that is appointed for the nation.

There is an inexorable movement from Nebuchadnezzar's setting up of the siege works to the final fall of the city of Jerusalem. Nothing can save Judah now. The disaster is in the process of unfolding, and nothing can stop it.

The siege begins in January of 588 BC, and it ends in July of 586. Over the 18 months of the siege, famine conditions become severe in the We should imagine a situation similar

to that described of Samaria in chapter 6, where people were buying donkey's heads and dove's dung to eat, and even eating their own children. The city is finally breached, at which point Zedekiah and his warriors try to flee by night, at a place where the besieging army might be the thinnest.

They flee east, but are pursued by the Chaldean army, which overtakes them in the plains of Jericho. Zedekiah's escape is short-lived, his army is scattered, he is captured. He is brought north to Ribla, where Nebuchadnezzar is now based.

There his sons are killed before his eyes, and to ensure that this is the last thing that he will ever see, they put out his eyes. He is brought in chains to Babylon, and with his sons killed there is seemingly no hope of restoring his dynasty. Here we are told the year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar in which Jerusalem fell.

Now that Judah is being removed from the map, the marking of time moves from the regnal years of Judah's kings to the year of the reign of kings of Babylon. The entire temple complex, the house of the Lord and the king's palace, is burned down, along with all of the other great and notable buildings of the city. Solomon's temple, which had been at the very heart of the life of the nation of Judah, is no more.

The people had trusted in the temple, they had treated it as if it were some sort of idol, and now it is removed from them. The walls of Jerusalem are broken down, the city is utterly humbled, any remnant of its former grandeur is reduced to smouldering rubble. The smaller remnant of the elite and the artisans that had been left after the former deportation are removed.

Only some of the poorest are left to work the land. Near the beginning of the books of the kings we had the assembling of the furniture of the temple, and now it is stripped from the house. Item by item, in a tragic mirroring of 1 Kings 7, verses 15-45, the temple is divested of its treasures.

The Babylonian captain of the guard assembles a representative group of men of various high officers. They are then taken north, up to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah, where they are put to death. Although many of the poorer people remain, Judah is now in exile, and they have ceased to nation.

The remnant of the people in the land are placed under a new regime established by the Babylonians. A man named Gedaliah is made the governor. Mizpah is the new administrative capital after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Gedaliah was a man with a strong pedigree. Both his father and his grandfather had served in top positions under Josiah. He assures the people that if they live peaceably in the land under the rule of Babylon, no ill will befall them.

However, in the seventh month of his tenure, he and his Jewish and Babylonian

supporters are struck down by a minor royal with a band of assassins. Fearing imminent reprisal from the Babylonians, the people then flee to Egypt. In Jeremiah chapter 40 and 41, we read of these events in more detail, followed by Jeremiah's failed attempt to dissuade the people from fleeing to Egypt in chapter 42, after which he is taken down to Egypt with them in chapter 43.

Had the people remained, the Lord declared that he would have granted them mercy from Nebuchadnezzar, allowing them to dwell peacefully in the land. However, if they went down to Egypt, they would face destruction. Jeremiah chapter 42 verses 7 to 22 describes this.

At the end of ten days, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. Then he summoned Johanan, the son of Koriah, and all the commanders of the forces who were with him, and all the people from the least to the greatest, and said to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of to whom you sent me to present your plea for mercy before him. If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down.

I will plant you and not pluck you up, for I relent of the disaster that I did to you. Do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid. Do not fear him, declares the Lord, for I am with you to save you and to deliver you from his hand.

I will grant you mercy, that he may have mercy on you, and let you remain in your own land. But if you say, We will not remain in this land, disobeying the voice of the Lord your God, and saying, No, we will go to the land of Egypt, where we shall not see war or hear the sound of the trumpet or be hungry for bread, and we will dwell there, then hear the word of the Lord, O remnant of Judah. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, If you set your faces to enter Egypt and go to live there, then the sword that you fear shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine of which you are afraid shall follow close after you to Egypt, and there you shall die.

All the men who set their faces to go to Egypt to live there shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. They shall have no remnant or survivor from the disaster that I will bring upon them. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, As my anger and my wrath were poured out on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so my wrath will be poured out on you when you go to Egypt.

You shall become an execration, a horror, a curse, and a taunt. You shall see this place no more. The Lord has said to you, O remnant of Judah, Do not go to Egypt.

Know for a certainty that I have warned you this day that you have gone astray at the cost of your lives. For you sent me to the Lord your God, saying, Pray for us to the Lord our God, and whatever the Lord our God says, declare to us, and we will do it. And I have this day declared it to you.

But you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord your God in anything that he has sent me to tell you. Now therefore know for a certainty that you shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, in the place where you desire to go to live. Whereas the account of the fall of the northern kingdom was followed by a lengthy discussion of the reasons why they went into exile in Assyria in chapter 17, no such explanation is found here.

The reasons for Judah's exile were all given back in chapter 17. The sister kingdoms resembled each other in their sins. The reasons why judgment falls upon Judah are the same reasons as judgment fell upon Israel.

What lessons should we draw from the books of the kings and chronicles? Different Old Testament books focus our attention on different levels of human existence, helping us to see both sin and righteousness as they play out. Genesis, for instance, teaches us to trace the movements of sin and grace in four generations of a single family. First and Second Samuel help us to trace the movements of sin and grace in the lives of Saul and David, showing us the development of their characters over the years of their lives.

Kings and Chronicles zoom out further and show us the movements of sin and grace over the history of two kingdoms over a number of centuries. At each level we learn something more about the character of life in God's world, in addition to the way that they are tracing as their fundamental message the work of God as it goes from the very beginning, the story of creation and fall, all the way through to the time when God will deliver his people from the grave of exile and later in the sending of his son, restore humanity in relationship with himself. The book ends on a surprising note with a brief flicker of hope in the gloom of exile.

As Lysa Rae Beale notes, there's a return at this point to Judean chronology. It is the 37th year of exile, about halfway through. Jehoiachin, Zedekiah's nephew and his predecessor on the throne of Judah, is released from prison.

He's treated kindly by evil Merodach and he's made to sit regularly at the king's table above all the other captive kings in Babylon. He is also granted a regular allowance for his needs. Judah had been told that if they submitted to Babylon, they would enjoy peace.

Now in the darkness of the grave of exile, there is a slight stirring of the bones. A question to consider. What lessons should Israel have learned from the Lord's hand in their going down into exile and his blessing of them in it? What lessons might we learn?