

II Kings
IN A WHIRLWIND



Alex Israel

מלכים ב'
II KINGS
IN A WHIRLWIND

Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies
Yeshivat Har Etzion
Maggid Books

11 Kings
In a Whirlwind

First Edition, 2019

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.maggidbooks.com

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Cover photo by solarseven

The publication of this book was made possible through
the generous support of *Torah Education in Israel*.

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ISBN 978-1-59264-494-0, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the United States

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In memory of my beloved son, Dr. William Gordon z"l who brought love and light to all

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In loving memory of Shimon ben Tzvi Hirsch HaLevi

CHARLES AND AVIVA FREEDMAN & ANONYMOUS

In honor of our inspiring teacher, Rabbi Alex Israel

*Dedicated to my dear wife, Aliza,
and to our wonderful children
Avinoam, Maayan, Hillel, and Yehuda*

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Preface

Sometimes I am asked why, of all the books of Tanakh, I chose to write on *Sefer Melakhim*, the book of Kings. In truth, my motivation has been primarily pedagogical. For students who are finding their feet in the world of Tanakh, one of the first and primary challenges is to study the books of *Nevi'im Rishonim*, the “Former Prophets.” These are Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings – works that offer a continuous prophetic history of the period of the first commonwealth, from Israel’s entry to the land until the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile. These books are fundamental in that they provide a historical context as well as narrate many of the key stories and familiarize the student with the personalities of this period in Jewish history.

Some books, however, are easier to study than others. Joshua, Judges, and Samuel all have sweeping stories and accessible, rich characters, and are, in the main, quite readable. But when one enters into the world of Kings, the student has a tendency to feel overwhelmed by statistics and logistics, at times disoriented by the lengthy lists and the wealth of confusing names of kings and kingdoms, many of which sound the same and which, for the uninitiated reader, obscure the storyline. Many a student of Tanakh has made it to the book of Kings and then simply abandoned the project, frustrated by the imperceptible flow and drama of the narrative and exasperated by

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the difficulty of bringing the personalities of its heroes and villains into focus.

This is the educational challenge that I sought to address in my first book, *1 Kings: Torn in Two*,¹ and again with this second volume on 11 Kings. I have been deeply gratified by the overwhelmingly positive reception of my first volume from a wide array of students, laypeople, and teachers around the English-speaking Jewish world, who have found that volume an invaluable resource for studying and teaching the book of Kings. It has fulfilled its objective by adding historical background, framing the narrative, giving depth and color to the characters, spanning ancient and modern commentary, focusing and deepening the reader's attention to the key themes and messages of the biblical text, and in many ways, bringing *Sefer Melakhim* to life. I hope and pray that this second volume will similarly succeed in meeting these goals.

This book is not a line-by-line commentary, but more of a reader's companion to 11 Kings. To optimize the usefulness of this book, I recommend reading the relevant biblical chapter in its entirety before proceeding to the chapter that discusses it in this volume. In this way, the book will serve to amplify and deepen the reader's understanding of the chapter. My presentation is varied in style and scope. In chapters whose storyline is readily accessible, I have offered a deeper presentation, drawing upon literary intricacy and sophisticated rabbinic interpretation. In chapters that are more challenging to a basic understanding, I have sometimes sufficed with merely narrating the story within its historical backdrop. I hope the reader will appreciate that my key objective is enabling the reader to fully engage with the story, character, and messages of Kings.

The subtitle to this book is *In a Whirlwind*. On one level, this reflects one of the early and most magnificent scenes of 11 Kings – the heavenward ascent of the great prophet Elijah “in a whirlwind.” But on a deeper level, it refers to a far wider motif that underlies the entire book of 11 Kings. I am referring to the sense that the kingdoms of Israel and Judah are caught in a web of tempestuous forces throughout the period described by this book. Whether the adversary is the powerful kingdom of Aram, or the aggressive empires of Assyria and then Babylonia that

1. Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2013.

threaten the very existence of the Israelite state, the backdrop of II Kings is of a small nation-state entangled in and subjected to forces much larger than itself, caught as if in a whirlwind.

The Land of Israel is a nexus point of the major near-eastern civilizations, and then, just as in our days, in a region which is often unstable, seething, and volatile, current events do not allow the Jewish state to remain inert. Kings relates the significant cultural, religious, and strategic challenges that confront the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, and the successes and failures of its leadership in upholding the divine covenant on the one hand, and in navigating the tortuous regional politics on the other. As we shall see, the margin of error is frequently slim, and the stakes are high – survival or national downfall.

In many ways, Kings might be experienced as a depressing book. It opens with a strong, unified nation and the excitement of the construction of the Temple, and yet it rapidly spirals downward, through national rupture and fragmentation followed by waves of religious and geopolitical upheaval, until the terrible exile, first of Samaria and then of Jerusalem, and the dissolution of the Jewish state. I frequently wonder how Kings was read during the past 1,900 years of diasporic Jewish life, and whether its tale of failure and woe offered much that could be invigorating or inspiring. And yet, today, with the blessing of a flourishing Jewish state and the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty, this book takes on a different hue. Rather than a lament to fallen grandeur, we can now reconnect with the triumphs and tragedies, with the successes and mistakes of our early history, and allow the timeless words of the prophets to act as an inspiration as well as an admonition, a critique and corrective to contemporary ills and failures that reflect our ancient sins. In a contemporary context there is much food for thought in Kings.

In this context, I feel deeply blessed to live in *Medinat Yisrael* and specifically in Gush Etzion, in this incredible era of Jewish sovereignty and peoplehood. We have experienced the national return to our historic and holy land, the ingathering of Jews from around the globe, the privilege of self-governance, an army to defend our people, and in a broad sense, the restoration of a deep sense of Jewish pride and dignity. The fact that I can get up in the morning to teach Torah in Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish people, is nothing less than a direct fulfillment

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of the consolatory words of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah. We have much work to do and farther to go to realize our prophetic visions in the realms of social justice and regarding our moral and religious aspirations, but for me our current reality is a daily source of inspiration and contentment. For these, and for all the other manifold gifts of life, it is to the Almighty that I offer my thanks, “for Your miracles that are with us every day, and for Your wonders and Your goodness that are constant” (from the *Modim* prayer).

In the sphere of Torah study, I feel humbled by the wonderful privilege of publishing my second volume on Tanakh, thereby adding a new Torah work to the bookshelf of Jewish scholarship. I am fortunate “that God has placed my lot among those who sit in the *beit midrash*” (the prayer recited upon leaving the Torah study hall, *Berakhot* 28b), spending my hours and days teaching Torah and thinking about Jewish education. For this too I am deeply thankful and pray that I, my family, and my students will always find Torah to be a “tree of life.”

Acknowledgments

My special thanks to the people at Koren-Maggid Publishers: to Matthew Miller for his enthusiastic support of my work; to the editorial director, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler; and to Tomi Mager, Shira Finson, and Ita Olesker, for faithfully chaperoning this book from manuscript to finished product.

The material that went into this book is a product of two decades of teaching. In particular, I would like to thank the administrations and students of Midreshet Lindenbaum, the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, and Yeshivat Eretz Hatzvi, under whose auspices I have had the honor to teach various segments of II Kings. The classroom is the great laboratory in which we get to observe which ideas are well received and which fall flat. Our students' questions alert us to the weaknesses or strengths of our theories, arguments, and formulations. As a result, all the aforementioned *batei midrash* have made precious contributions to this work.

The first draft of this book was an online series for Yeshivat Har Etzion's Virtual Beit Midrash. I am honored to be part of the VBM team, a website that provides some of the highest caliber Torah content on the web. Thanks to Rav Ezra Bick and Debra Berkowitz for allowing me to write despite regularly breaking my weekly

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deadlines, and to my editors, Noam Shapiro and Daniel Landman, for their keen reading.

The last word of thanks is to my wonderful family to whom I have dedicated this book. You are my strength and my joy. Mere words cannot express my love and appreciation. Perhaps Solomon's prayer can appropriately articulate my hopes and prayers:

יְהִי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ עִמָּנוּ, כַּאֲשֶׁר הָיָה עִם-אַבְתֵּינוּ: אֵל-יַעֲזֹבֵנוּ, וְאֵל-יִטְשָׁנוּ.
לְהִטּוֹת לְבַבֵּנוּ, אֵלָיו לְלַכֵּת בְּכָל-דְּרָכָיו, וְלִשְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתָיו וְחֻקָּיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו,
אֲשֶׁר יְצַוֶּה אֶת-אַבְתֵּינוּ.

May the Lord our God be with us, as He was with our ancestors. May He never abandon or forsake us. May He incline our hearts to Him, that we may walk in all His ways and keep the commandments, the laws, and the rules, which He enjoined upon our ancestors. (1 Kings 8:57–8)

Alex Israel

Alon Shevut

Rosh Ḥodesh Tammuz 5778 / June 2018

In the seventieth year of our beloved State of Israel

Introduction

Background to II Kings

S*eder Melakhim*, the book of Kings, is a prophetic chronicle that narrates the history of Israel, from the inception of King Solomon's rule, through the period of the divided kingdom, and to the destruction of the Temple and Babylonian exile of 586 BCE. Whereas the style of the book is an alternating history between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, Kings is not a history book in the contemporary sense of the word, a factual rendition of past events. Rather, archival material about each king and his era is didactically selected to explain the past to the reader of its time, who was probably a refugee grappling with the tumult of national disintegration and the painful loss of its religious center, looking to make sense of the devastation that had been wrought on individual and nation. The central message is this: The religious and moral failure of the monarchs led to the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem.

Illicit worship is the primary sin in Kings – there was idolatry as well as divine worship outside the Temple, at the northern shrines and illicit altars, called *bamot*. The book charts how all the northern and many of the southern kings failed to meet their covenantal and moral obligations. As a consequence of these actions, it depicts the kingdoms' gradual demise, first through minor disasters, and finally with the exile

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of Israel, and some 150 years later, Judah. The book records the prophetic warnings presaging the disastrous effects of sin. As such, the catastrophic outcome is a product of fully informed, if errant, choices. Written from the historical vantage point of the national downfall,¹ the purpose of Kings is to educate and teach the nation, to explain the divine perception of the national calamity, justifying God's actions, and to describe the causes of national ruin to ensure that future events do not repeat past misdeeds.

STYLE

The timeline of Kings is constructed by discreet regnal summaries which each list, in a formulaic manner, the duration of the king's reign and key events of his rule. However, this style is maintained only for some segments of the book. Kings is characterized by unexpected changes in the type of material presented, with sudden shifts from dry annalistic writing, heavy with statistical data, to sophisticated narrative, rich with elaborate plot and character development.

During the period of the divided kingdom, Kings synchronizes the chronology of a king to his counterpart in the opposite kingdom, alternating between the history of Judah in the south and Israel in the north so that both stories are told in tandem. While the alternation between north and south reminds the reader that both kingdoms are equally bound by God's covenant, the constant switching also directs attention to the contrast between the kingdoms, which may manifest

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1. There is widespread agreement that Kings was composed in the aftermath of the destruction of the First Temple. The Talmud (Bava Batra 15a) names the prophet Jeremiah as the author of Kings, but fails to specify how much of the book drew on earlier material and how much was penned by Jeremiah himself. Academic opinion agrees placing the book's final composition in the same basic timeframe as Jeremiah, although many earlier layers are suggested and Jeremiah's specific authorship is disputed. For an excellent survey of the issues raised in academic study of Kings and the major schools in each debate, see M. Avioz, "The Book of Kings in Recent Research, Part I," *Currents in Biblical Research* 4 (2005): 11–55, which addresses fundamental questions of scholarship, and M. Avioz, "The Book of Kings in Recent Research, Part II," *Currents in Biblical Research* 5 (2006): 11–57, which addresses questions related to specific stories and segments of the book of Kings.

itself in one kingdom's instability in contrast to the other's stability, or idolatry in one kingdom as opposed to strict loyalty to God's law in the other.

ONE BOOK OR TWO?

In its original form, the entire book of Kings was a single unit. Its division into two segments – I Kings and II Kings – is arbitrary and crude in that it awkwardly interrupts the account of Ahaziah's reign and mystifyingly perforates the smooth flow of the Elijah stories. The division is first found in the Septuagint and the Vulgate, and appears in Jewish sources only from the Venetian printing of the Tanakh in 1525; it has ever since been the standard in Jewish sources. It is apparent that the split was motivated by the need to divide the large and unwieldy scroll of Kings into two more manageable segments. Due to this ungainly rupture, the reader who picks up the thread at the start of II Kings lacks significant background information and perspective. We shall attempt to bridge some of this knowledge by providing requisite introductions and explanations where necessary.

SOURCES

Kings cites its primary sources as the “Chronicles of the Kings of Judah”² and “Chronicles of the Kings of Israel,”³ but these works did not survive the vicissitudes of history. We presume that many other texts formed the historical archive from which Kings was written. In the past 150 years of biblical archaeology, a remarkable array of artifacts has been discovered that corroborate, supplement, and occasionally challenge, the narratives of Kings.

THE STRUCTURE OF II KINGS

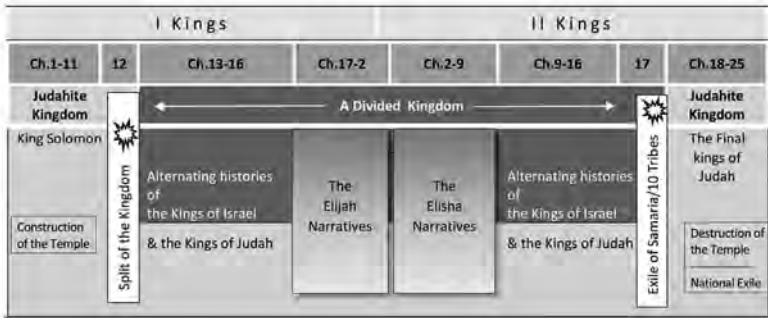
The structure of Kings would be best perceived by viewing the book as a single unit. As such, Kings has a chiasmic structure, as depicted in the chart on the following page.

2. II Kings 8:23; 12:20; 14:18; 15:6, 36; 16:19; 20:20; 21:25; 23:28; 24:5.

3. *Ibid.*, 1:18; 10:34; 13:8, 12; 14:15, 28; 15:11, 15, 21.

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The Structure of the Book of Kings



The period of Solomon, during which the kingdom is united with its Temple in Jerusalem, finds its parallel at the close of II Kings, under the rules of Hezekiah and Josiah, who mirror Solomon's greatness, his penchant for national unity, and his adherence to God. The description of the split of the kingdom (I Kings 12–13) and the advent of the northern kingdom of Israel finds its parallel in II Kings in the fall of the northern kingdom and the exile of Samaria. In the center space of Kings are the two great prophets, Elijah and his protégé Elisha, who battle the kings of the Omride dynasty and their religious affiliation to Baal.

The above structure, which spans I and II Kings, divides II Kings into large units. For the reader who is looking for a more specified breakdown of II Kings, we may delineate the broad subunits as follows:

- Chs. 1–2 Completion of the Elijah stories from I Kings
- Chs. 2–8 The Stories of Elisha
- Chs. 8–12 Coups in Aram, Israel, and Judah; the demise of the house of Omri
- Chs. 13–17 Synchronic history of Israel and Judah
- Ch. 17 Fall and exile of the northern kingdom
- Chs. 18–20 The southern kingdom; Hezekiah and the Assyrian invasion
- Ch. 21 Manasseh
- Chs. 22–23 Josiah

Background to 11 Kings

Chs. 24–25 Rise of Babylonia; the fall and exile of the southern kingdom

We have offered these short comments of introduction to orient the reader. Further introductions may be found in this volume's predecessor, *1 Kings: Torn in Two*.

II Kings 1

All the King's Men

What should a prophet do when the king of Israel finds his life in peril and turns to an idolatrous deity rather than God? How might God act? This dramatic chapter tells the story of a powerful and violent clash between the prophet Elijah and King Ahaziah, who favors the foreign deity of Baal. This confrontation bears all the pent-up pathos of the extended national struggle between monotheism and the forces of idolatry.

BACKGROUND

Before we encounter Elijah and Ahaziah, let us offer some historical background to explain the context of this altercation, an episode which transpires in the royal court of the northern kingdom.

After the magnificent reign of King Solomon, the kingdom ruptures. Spurred by Jeroboam's revolt, the nation splits into two: Judah in the south with Jerusalem as its capital, and Israel in the north. Samaria eventually becomes its capital.

During the fifty years that follow the split, the northern kingdom flounders, plagued by intermittent mutiny, foreign invasion, and an ongoing state of hostility with its sister kingdom in the south.¹

1. Split of kingdom, I Kings 12; mutiny, I Kings 15:28; 16:9–10, 16–18; foreign invasion, I Kings 15:20 and archaeological records describing Shishak's rampage through the

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It was King Omri and his son Ahab who gave the north a new stability, strength, affluence, and regional hegemony. His dynasty was the most powerful succession of kings that ruled the north. Omri designed and built its splendid capital, Samaria, and his son Ahab forged economic ties with Phoenicia. Ahab's military vanquished his powerful neighbor, Aram. But alongside these raised economic and military fortunes, Ahab and his Phoenician wife, Jezebel, led the kingdom to abandon the God of Israel as they adopted the cult of Baal. They built a Temple to Baal in Samaria, murdered and persecuted God's prophets, and replaced them with a retinue of four hundred prophets of Baal. The kingdom's material success combined with the adverse spiritual state only encouraged national religious waywardness. This set the stage for the clash between King Ahab and his powerful antagonist, the great prophet Elijah, who challenged Ahab's religious deviance. After Ahab is killed in battle, his son Ahaziah continues his religious orientation. Consequently, Elijah will oppose the new king just as he fought his father.

11 Kings opens with the sole chapter dedicated to King Ahaziah.

AHAZIAH, SON OF AHAB

Ahaziah the son of Ahab began to reign over Israel in Samaria in the seventeenth year of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, and he reigned two years over Israel. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of his father, and in the way of his mother, and in the way of Jeroboam son of Nebat, wherein he made Israel to sin. And he served Baal, and worshipped him, and provoked the Lord, the God of Israel, according to all that his father had done. And Moab rebelled against Israel after the death of Ahab. (1 Kings 22:52–11 Kings 1:1)

northern province; hostility with the south, 1 Kings 14:30; 15:6, 16–22; migration southward, 11 Chr. 11:13–16; 15:9; 16:1.

Ahaziah is the third king of the Omride Dynasty. He is a notably unsuccessful king² and rules for only a single year.³ His early demise is due to an unfortunate domestic accident in which he is mortally injured.⁴ He dies without leaving an heir (11 Kings 1:17).

Ahaziah “walked in the way of his father, and in the way of his mother (Jezebel),” continuing the idolatrous regime of his parents and their disdain for God’s prophets. In the book of Kings there could be little worse than a royal house devoted to a foreign deity. And yet, as we shall see, our chapter demonstrates how Ahaziah manages to take idolatry a step further than even his father.

THE MISSION TO EKRON

Our story begins as the ailing Ahaziah dispatches a delegation to Baal-Zebub, god of Ekron, in search of a medical prognosis or, more likely, seeking a supernatural power to cure him of his injuries.

He sent messengers, and said to them, “Go, inquire of Baal-Zebub⁵ the god of Ekron whether I shall recover from this sickness.” An

-
2. He rises to power at a time of national weakness following Israel’s defeat by Aram (1 Kings 22), a battle in which his father, Ahab, is killed. The kingdom’s hegemony declines yet further after Ahab’s death as Ahaziah loses control of Moab (11 Kings 1:1). In a similar vein, his seafaring collaboration with the southern kingdom, presumably to further economic interests, ends in ruin (1 Kings 22:49–50).
 3. Ahaziah ascends the throne in Jehoshaphat’s seventeenth year (1 Kings 22:52), and his brother Jehoram assumes the throne in Jehoshaphat’s eighteenth year (see 11 Kings 3:1). Since the king reigned in two calendrical years he is considered to have reigned for “two years,” but in fact his reign extended only for the duration of a single year.
 4. Abarbanel and R. Joseph ibn Kaspi both suggest that this was a divine punishment for his idolatry.
 5. Baal-Zebub is called “the god of Ekron,” Ekron being one of the prominent Philistine cities. See U. Cassuto, *Encyclopedia Mikrait* (The Biblical Encyclopedia), vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik), cols. 287–8 [Hebrew], who suggests that Baal-Zebub (Lord of the Flies) may be a pejorative term for a Phoenician Baal god whose real name was Baal-Zebul, meaning “lord of glory/dominion/majesty.” Solomon’s Temple is referred to as *Beit-zevul*, a stately house (1 Kings 8:13). Similarly, it is possible that the name Jezebel – Izevel in Hebrew – was a mockery of her true name, *Bat-Zevul* or *Avi-Zevul*, and that the Bible disparages her by warping her name and giving it an association with manure – *zevel*.

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angel of the Lord said to Elijah the Tishbite, “Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say unto them, ‘Is there no God in Israel that you go to inquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore, thus says the Lord: You shall not descend from the bed you ascended, but you shall surely die.’” (11 Kings 1:2–4)

Ahaziah’s appeal to Baal-Zebub arouses God’s ire, and Elijah is dispatched to inform the king of his certain death. Why does this modest appeal to a foreign deity illicit such a swift and exacting divine response? In the past, God did not hasten to condemn idolatrous kings such as Ahab; what is the severity of Ahaziah’s infraction?

We suggest that the act of petitioning a foreign god is a step beyond standard Israelite idolatry. The petition to Baal-Zebub would have certainly necessitated a request for access from Philistine royalty, and thus Ahaziah is publicizing Israel’s reliance upon foreign powers on an international scale, thereby desecrating the name of God. God’s indignation is articulated in Elijah’s opening and closing lines:

Is there no God in Israel that you go to inquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? (1:3)

Since you sent messages to inquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, as if there were no god in Israel whose word you could seek, assuredly...you shall surely die. (1:16)

With this gesture Ahaziah essentially broadcasts that Israel’s God is inept and irrelevant. Even the most sinful kings of the north such as Jeroboam⁶ and Ahab⁷ consulted with prophets of God in moments of distress. Ahaziah hereby violates God’s reputation. In response, God rules out any option of a royal recovery.

This might be supported by 11 Kings 9:37: “The carcass of Jezebel shall be like dung on the ground.” The notion of Baal-Zebub as the prince of demons is absent from the Hebrew Bible, and originates in the New Testament (Matthew 12:24–25).

6. 1 Kings 14:1–2.

7. *Ibid.*, 20:13–14, 22, 28.

It is the nations of the world who are to seek God's assurance and assistance, not Israel who should seek the counsel of other gods. A perfect example, the inverse of Ahaziah's appeal to Baal-Zebub, using identical language, features in 11 Kings 8, where Israel's great nemesis, Ben-Hadad, is on his deathbed in Damascus. He is informed that Elisha, "the man of God," is in the vicinity, and he dispatches his aide, Hazael:

Take a gift with you and go meet the man of God, and through him inquire of the Lord: Will I recover from this illness? (8:8)

Ahaziah's foreign appeal is not merely a humiliation to God, but it fundamentally inverts the idyllic eschatological image whereby Jerusalem is designated to become an international magnet for those who seek divine wisdom:

Many peoples shall go and say: Come – Let us go to the mount of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.... He will judge many nations, and arbitrate for many peoples. (Is. 2:3–4)

MESSENGERS

A key literary feature of the chapter is that the entire dramatic clash between God and king is enacted by a series of emissaries and intermediaries. Ahaziah sends delegates to Baal-Zebub; in a mirror image, God dispatches his emissary Elijah by means of an angel.

Why does God send Elijah to intercept Ahaziah's delegates? Why not dispatch Elijah directly to the king? This question seems especially pertinent given that the chapter ends with Elijah personally appearing before Ahaziah.

One answer is that Elijah is banned from the royal city, Samaria. Jezebel had issued a death warrant against him, and this could still be in force (Radak). Rather than facing the king, Elijah is forced to engage him remotely, by means of his delegates. Secondly, if Elijah had personally approached Ahaziah, the royal delegates would have continued to Ekron! Elijah must intercept the delegation to forestall the religious embarrassment of an Israelite royal appeal to the Philistine god.

But the issue of emissaries in this chapter goes beyond mere practical concerns. Each emissary – human delegate and angel – is denoted by the noun *malakh*.⁸ The text thereby establishes a fundamental symmetry; Elijah is the counterforce to Ahaziah’s messengers. Who controls the intermediaries? Is it God and his emissary, Elijah, or the king? This will be the pivotal question of the chapter. In the chapter’s initial scene (11 Kings 1:3–8), Elijah, instead of engaging directly with the king, manipulates the royal delegation, turning it against its sender. In the second scene (1:9–15), Elijah will contend with a series of military commanders dispatched by Ahaziah and again demonstrate his superior power to control Ahaziah’s emissaries.

WHOSE MESSENGERS?

But Elijah goes one step further. If we closely compare Elijah’s instruction with the message that the delegates relay to Ahaziah, we discern a subtle but highly significant shift.⁹

Elijah’s instruction:

Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say unto them, “Is there no God in Israel *that you* [plural, *attem*] go to inquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore, *thus says the Lord*: You shall not descend...but you shall surely die.” (1:3–4)

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8. Mentioned six times in this passage (11 Kings 1:2, 3 twice, 5, 15, 16). The question of delegates and who controls them is the pivotal feature of this story as expressed by the sevenfold usage of the verb SH-L-H, “send” (1:2, 6 twice, 9, 11, 13, 16).
9. Note that a stage is skipped over here. First (1:3–4), the angel instructs Elijah to talk to the messengers. This is followed by “And Elijah went” (1:4). But immediately afterward (1:5–6), we read of the messengers addressing Ahaziah. Where is the middle segment, where Elijah is talking to the messengers? This is a familiar literary feature in Tanakh, whereby a middle, linking stage is omitted. Other examples from Kings include 1 Kings 21:17–20 and 11 Kings 4:26. The passage may be skipped merely to speed up the narrative – presuming that Elijah would transmit the communication faithfully. Alternatively, it could be skipped as a stylistic device to ensure a pattern of threefold repetition within the story.

The messengers' words to Ahaziah:

Go, return to the king who sent you, and say to him, "*Thus says the Lord*: Is there is no God in Israel *that you* [singular, *atta*] send to inquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore, you shall not descend ... but you shall surely die." (1:6)

Elijah's instruction consists of two separate statements. The first is a challenge and rebuke to the messengers. It is phrased in the plural (*attem*) and chastises the officials themselves for complying with the king's appeal to Baal-Zebub. The second statement is a divine pronouncement of punishment – "Thus says the Lord" – worded in the singular and therefore addressed particularly to Ahaziah, announcing the king's death.

Observe how the delegates adjust and reorient the original message. One might have anticipated that they would solely repeat verse 4, the second statement, and ignore the first. Instead we observe two differences:

1. "Thus says the Lord" is moved to the beginning of the double pronouncement.
2. The rebuke, "Is there no God in Israel ..." is now addressed to the king personally (*atta*), blaming the king for "sending" rather than accusing the messengers of "going."

In other words, the messengers reorient the accusation originally leveled at them and turn it, with full divine force, at Ahaziah. It is not merely the punishment but rather the entire guilt that is to be visited upon Ahaziah personally for the mission to Baal-Zebub. As such, the delegates introduce the entire message with the words, "Thus says the Lord."

In essence, these messengers undergo a dramatic metamorphosis. They turn from Ahaziah's representatives into God's mouthpiece. The loyal envoys who initially sought the king's health now condemn their king to death. Those who were sent out (*lekhu*) in search of the foreign deity Baal-Zebub return (*lekhu shuvu*)¹⁰ bearing the message of God.

10. Rabbi Elchanan Samet, *Pirkei Eliyahu* (Jerusalem: Maaliyot Press, 2003), 423–24 [Hebrew], discusses the twin verbs, *lekh* and *shuv*, and their function.

Earlier we contended that Elijah was instructed to intercept the delegation in order to obstruct and forestall the encounter with Baal-Zebub, averting the profanity of a royal Israelite appeal to an idolatrous deity. But the interaction with these officials goes far beyond that pragmatic objective. In this scene, God, through Elijah, exerts His control of the king's men as they transform into God's emissaries rather than those of Ahaziah and Baal.

In the past, Elijah has challenged the dual loyalty that plagued his generation: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal is God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). In this drama, the tug-of-war between those two options is evident, and God enforces His supremacy.

THREE MILITARY CAPTAINS

When the delegation returns with the dreadful prophecy and the king identifies the source as none other than Elijah, he dispatches the first of three military units, "a captain of fifty with his fifty men," to seize the prophet. The story is narrated in a recursive style, with Elijah "sitting on the top of the hill" (11 Kings 1:9), expressive of his unassailable position.¹¹ In the first of the three encounters, he is confronted by the military commander, who addresses the prophet in an aggressive and authoritative tone, ordering Elijah "by order of the king, come down!" (1:9). This is a direct collision between the king and God: On one side, Ahaziah's sovereign power is invested in the hands of his army captain; on the other, God is represented by His surrogate, Elijah – hence Elijah's response: "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" (1:10).

Three military units are dispatched to seize Elijah. Three army captains address him. A textual comparison between the scenes illustrates the storyline.

11. The drama of the chapter is illustrated beautifully by its use of the vertical axis. The motif of "up" and "down" as found in the Hebrew roots A-L-H and Y-R-D features twenty-one times in the chapter, most significantly in this scene, as the army officers must "ascend" to Elijah and command him to "descend." Of course, the key line in the chapter also displays this motif: "You shall not descend (Y-R-D) from the bed which you ascended (A-L-H), but you shall surely die."

1. "He climbed up to him ... and said to him, 'Man of God, by order of the king, come down!'" (1:9).
2. "He said to him, 'Man of God, by order of the king, come down *at once!*'" (1:11).
3. "The third captain of fifty climbed and *approached and knelt before Elijah and implored him*, saying, 'Man of God, please have regard for my life and the lives of these fifty men, your servants! See, fire has fallen from heaven and consumed the first two captains and all their men. But now have respect for my life!'" (1:13).

The first captain ascends the mountain and delivers the king's decree with full and uncompromising royal authority, as would be expected of a military officer. But he and his men are consumed by fire. The second officer acts more boldly without even approaching Elijah.¹² Instead he issues his command from the foot of the hill, insisting that the prophet respond "at once!" to the king's command. This dauntless exhibition of power leaves Elijah unfazed; his response remains identical to his response to the first officer: "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" The second group is similarly obliterated.

With the approach of the third captain we witness a capitulation, an absolute surrender of royal power to God's power. The officer abandons the confident stride and belligerent tone of the first two. He approaches the prophet deferentially, even timidly, kneeling before him, and pleading for his life and the life of his subordinates. He even "forgets" to mention his royal commission. It is at this point that God's angel assures Elijah that he is safe and allows him to accompany the troops.

This three-stage process illustrates the crumbling of the king's authority. His troops disregard his orders as they cower before the prophet. The balance of power has shifted dramatically. Now Elijah has absolute control of the situation. Elijah, who embodies God's power, has demonstrated God's supremacy, which is now affirmed by Ahaziah's mighty military.

12. His forceful tone could be a sign of boldness, or it may be a cover for his fear after he saw the fate of the first officer and his brigade.

AHAZIAH'S MOTIVES

What is Ahaziah's motivation in ordering Elijah's arrest? Ralbag assumes that he intended to honor Elijah, as fifty soldiers sometimes constitute an honor guard.¹³ Alternatively, Abarbanel indicates that the bedridden king might have sought to hear the prophecy personally from Elijah; hence the order to summon the prophet to Samaria.¹⁴ These approaches are problematic, as no appeal is made to Elijah to accompany the troops peaceably. Furthermore, from the very outset, the combative and disdainful tone of the captain would seem to preclude these positive explanations. Rather, it seems that the king sought to harm or even to kill Elijah. Rabbi Elchanan Samet adopts this approach:

By causing the prophet bodily harm, they are also harming his prophecy and causing it to be annulled. This explains the attempts of several kings in Tanakh to harm or even kill prophets who had uttered prophecies of punishment against them. It is not merely an attempt to silence the opposition, as the modern reader may interpret the move. Rather, it is a "metaphysical" intention to revoke the prophet's undesirable message.

It seems that for Ahaziah, lying in his sickbed and surely terrified that the prophecy conveyed to him from Elijah would be realized, an assault on Elijah represents an act negating the validity of his prophecy. He sends his soldiers to harm Elijah *in order to bring about his own recovery*. The opposition to the "man of God" is therefore, in essence, opposition to the "word of God." The battle against the prophet is an attempt to thwart the realization of his prophecy.¹⁵

13. For example, the honor guard of Adoniah (1 Kings 1:5) and that of Absalom (11 Sam. 15:1). The imperious tone of the captain here makes the option of an honor guard unlikely. However, we should recall the use of groups of fifty with regard to the prophets of God, both in 1 Kings 18:4 and in 11 Kings 2:16. The inverse symmetry is striking.

14. Ralbag and Abarbanel are forced to explain that despite the king's intent to respect or summon the prophet, Elijah objected to the dominant tone of the army officers and insisted that he be granted a higher status than the king. This insistence, obviously unthinkable for the king's courtiers, led to the violent confrontation. Alternatively, there was some misunderstanding, and despite the king's innocent intent, Elijah felt that his life was threatened (Abarbanel).

15. Samet, *Pirkei Eliyahu*, 434 (italics added).