The Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories in 1 Kings 16:23 – 2 Kings 13:25 has consistently been misunderstood because its arrangement in the form of a ring composition is unfamiliar to most modern readers. A ring composition is a literary form found throughout the ancient world in which a sequence of analogies is arranged in a chiastic structure of parallelisms. The late Mary Douglas, an anthropologist who worked in the field of biblical studies, made a significant contribution towards correcting such misreading, most recently in her final work, *Thinking in Circles*. The insights that Douglas brought to the rereading of ancient texts can profitably be applied to the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories.

The smallest form of ring structure is widely recognized to be in evidence in the Hebrew Bible in the form of chiastic sentences and paragraphs. The term chiasm is derived from the Greek letter χ whose crisscross shape aptly expresses an inversion of elements in two otherwise parallel constructions. In the Hebrew Bible Num 14:2 provides a very basic example of chiastic patterning within a single verse:

\[
\begin{align*}
A & \quad \text{If only we had died} \\
B & \quad \text{in the land of Egypt;} \\
B' & \quad \text{or in this wilderness} \\
A' & \quad \text{if only we had died.}
\end{align*}
\]

This simple construction is an example of an AB B'A' chiasm.

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A variation of this pattern, AB C B'A', likewise appears throughout the Hebrew Bible. In this construction the inverted parallels of the chiasm are separated by a single, central element, at which point the sequence returns to the beginning in reverse order. We see this pattern in the four verses that comprise David’s boast to Saul in 1 Samuel 17:34-37:

A 34 Then David said to Saul, “Your servant used to be a shepherd for his father’s flock, and if a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, 35 I would go after it and strike it and rescue it from its mouth. And if it attacked me I would seize it by the beard and strike it down and kill it. 36 Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and that uncircumcised Philistine shall end up like one of them, B for he has defied the ranks of the living God.”
C 37 And David continued, B’ “YHWH, A’ who rescued me from the grasp of the lion and the grasp of the bear, he himself will rescue me from the grasp of that Philistine.”

Here, the chiastic structure of the passage directs our attention to the person of David, located at the center of the ring, and underscores the fact that he is surrounded by enemies (the lion, the bear, and the Philistine). Situated between David and these enemies, the ring construction conveys that David is protectively encircled by “the living God… YHWH,” whom he confidently expects will rescue him from the Philistine Goliath, much as he once delivered David from the lions and bears of the field.2

These short passages demonstrate how the biblical writers used the structuring device of chiastic patterning, and also illustrate its compelling rhetorical implications. This same technique has likewise been found to undergird much larger biblical passages. Umberto Cassuto proposed that the stories of the flood and the garden of Eden are arranged in the form of a ring,3 while Jacob Milgrom has demonstrated that the whole of the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua

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together form just such a chiastic structure. More recently Mary Douglas has argued that the books of Leviticus and Numbers are both variations of extended ring compositions. The significance of this identification reaches far beyond mere artistic appreciation, because the conventions of the genre dictate the works’ interpretation. Read as a ring composition, the central themes of the book of Leviticus are justice and atonement – concerns that challenge the supposed opposition of priest and prophet. Likewise, Douglas argues that the structure of the ring in the book of Numbers brings into focus the social and political interests of a redactor who sought to protect the status of the Aaronide priests, as well as the inclusiveness of the covenant.

And ring composition is not limited to the Hebrew Bible. A few examples must suffice: the seventeen ancient poems that comprise the Zoroastrian Gathas exhibit extensive chiastic structuring; as do the digressions in both the Iliad and the Odyssey. Despite the once pervasive use of ring composition in the ancient world, however, this literary style eventually fell out of fashion. Later readers, oblivious to the form’s conventions came to regard texts composed in this manner as poorly organized and even incomprehensible. We see just this confusion with the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories, which biblical scholars have routinely maligned as a nonsensical jumble of prophetic stories. Alfred Jepsen, C.F. Whitley, and J. Maxwell Miller all challenge the present order of these stories and propose a variety of explanations for the cycle’s supposed confusion. Mordechai Cogan notes that the redactor of this block of stories made little effort to

4 Jacob Milgrom, Numbers: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992), xvii.
erase the telltale signs of his individual sources, leaving the narrative uneven to the point of blatant contradiction.\textsuperscript{11} Criticism of the Elisha stories has been particularly harsh. Yehuda Radday asserts that these stories lack inner unity and are wrongly placed. He argues that: “Its message – religious, national, or social – is practically nil and why it was included in the book is a problem that still has to be solved.”\textsuperscript{12} G.H. Jones also remarks on the lack of unity of these stories,\textsuperscript{13} and Wesley J. Bergen likewise notes a lack of coherence.\textsuperscript{14}

I shall argue that these stories are not confused, but have been redacted in the formal structure of a ring composition. When we recognize the chiastic structure of the passage, an intricately constructed and well-ordered ring is revealed that guides the reader to the intended meaning of the text. While this cycle of prophetic stories reflects a complex history of development, their present placement in the Deuteronomistic History reflects the careful redaction of a pre-exilic editor. The intention of this editor, the Deuteronomistic historian(s), was to predict (after the fact) and explain the earlier destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel, while at the same time foreshadowing and supporting the expected re-birth of a united kingdom under the rule of King Josiah. Moreover, when the structure of the ring is allowed to guide our interpretation, it reveals how the Josianic reform was infused by the ideology of holy war. Like the books of Leviticus and Numbers, these prophetic stories are clearly a unit; and their correct interpretation requires a method that attends to the cycle in its entirety.

Mary Douglas has identified seven indicators for a ring composition: first, a prologue states the theme and sets the stage; second, the composition is split at midpoint into two halves;

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} M. Cogan, \textit{1 Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary} (AB 10; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 95.
\item \textsuperscript{13} G.H. Jones, \textit{1 and 2 Kings} (NCB; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 1:69.
\end{itemize}
third, the two halves are arranged in parallel sections; fourth, the individual sections are clearly marked, typically through the use of key words; fifth, the meaning of the ring is located at the mid-turn; sixth, the broader structure of the ring often includes smaller rings (rings within rings); and seventh, the ring must close both structurally and thematically. The Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories conform to all seven of these criteria.

The diagram below depicts the broad structure of the Elijah-Elisha ring.

The composition begins with a short prologue, 1 Kings 16:23 – 34, designated here as section I. It introduces the apostasy of Baal worship in Israel, and it notes that Ahab has strayed even further than those before him, by erecting a sacred post in Samaria. The reference here in the prologue to Hiel the Bethelite, who fortified Jericho at the cost of both his first born and youngest sons, recalls the curse of Joshua delivered after the battle of Jericho, the holy war par excellence of the Hebrew Bible, and so sets the stage for this dominant theme. The prologue is connected to the mid-turn, section VIII (2 Kings 1 – 2) though a cluster of key words: Bethel [בְּתֵל], repeated four times, and Jericho [שְׁכִּירָה], repeated five times, and this correspondence

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between the prologue and the mid-turn splits the ring down the middle into two parallel halves. From the prologue the ring begins its outward bound journey, with each of the individual sections clearly marked through the use of key words. (Please see the appended chart of key words and parallels for details). Advancing through sections II – VII (1 Kings 17 – 22), the ring continues until it reaches the mid-turn, where it reverses itself and turns back towards the beginning, with sections IX – XIV (2 Kings 3 – 13) lining up neatly with their corresponding sections on the other side of the ring, and the matched pairs connecting the two sides much as the rungs of a ladder connect its two upright posts. The interpretive effect of this construction is to interrupt a straight, sequential reading. Instead, the paired sections must be read in relation to one another, and in relation to the composition as a whole.

The editor’s intention, I argue, was to explain the destruction of the northern kingdom, while at the same time foreshadowing and supporting the expected re-birth of a united kingdom under the rule of Josiah. Read within the frame of the ring composition, the significance of the ideology of holy war within the Josianic reform comes to the fore. The composition’s focus on the reunification of the northern and southern kingdoms is first suggested by the initial theme of resuscitation in section II, and it is further advanced with the metaphorical restoration of the corpse in the composition’s conclusion in section XIV. However, this purpose is made most clearly at the apex of the mid-turn: Elijah strikes the water of the Jordan River, which then “split in half, this way and that” (2 Kings 2:8), an act repeated by Elisha after Elijah’s ascension in the fiery chariot. In anticipation of Elijah’s departure, his disciple Elisha requests that a double portion (two) of Elijah’s spirit pass on to him. Finally, as Elijah is whisked away in the whirlwind, Elisha rends his garment in two. While the action of rending one’s garment as a sign of mourning is quite common, nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible does anyone rend a garment in
two. In fact, nowhere else does anyone rend a garment into any number of pieces, with the
singular but telling exception of the prophet Ahijah, who rends a garment into twelve pieces
when he prophesies to Jeroboam that YHWH is going to rend the kingdom away from the
descendants of Solomon, giving ten tribes (the northern kingdom of Israel) to Jeroboam, but
preserving a lamp for David in Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:29-36). Moreover, this verb [קרע] is
employed numerous times by the Deuteronomistic historian(s) in describing the house of David’s
loss of the northern kingdom.

The centrality of the mid-turn in a ring composition is like the keystone of an arch; it
should connect to the prologue (here, by the cluster of the key words Bethel and Jericho) as well
as to the ending (here, with the repetition of the enigmatic expression, “Father! Father! Israel’s
chariots and horsemen!”). The significance of the mid-turn makes it essential that this section be
clearly marked. The Elijah-Elisha mid-turn is made obvious in several ways. First, the last rung
of parallels (sections VII and IX) placed just before the mid-turn are the strongest parallels of the
entire composition, with nearly identical stories, containing identical dialogue, and numerous key
words. One could hardly begin section IX (2 Kings 3) without noticing its connection to section
VII (1 Kings 22). To quote Douglas, “It is common in ring compositions for the mid-turn to be
flanked by two sections that are nearly the same. The parallels before and after the mid-turn
form a triad that helps the reader to recognize the significance of the piece in the middle.”
Second, the mid-turn of the Elijah-Elisha ring is itself a ring – that is, a “minor ring” within the
greater ring of the entire composition. According to Douglas, the occurrence of such minor
rings, particularly where they form the mid-turn of the greater ring, is another indicator of a ring
composition.17

16 Douglas, Thinking in Circles, 55-56.
17 Douglas, Thinking in Circles, 24; 34; 37.
As the end returns to the beginning, a ring must be closed at two levels. First, the end should be signaled by some conspicuous key words that link the ending to the prologue, and ideally, to the first section of parallels. Second, these verbal links should lead to a thematic correspondence.\(^{18}\) In the Elijah-Elisha ring, the key words sacred post, alive/live, and three times link the end to the beginning. On a thematic level, the blatant fact that the sacred post still stands indicates that the apostasy described in the reign of Ahab has not yet been eradicated. However, the miraculous re-birth of the corpse when it comes into contact with the Elisha’s bones ensures the reader of the coming, miraculous restoration.

In his list of criteria for identifying chiastic structures, John W. Welch\(^{19}\) includes the additional element of “purpose.” Is there an identifiable literary reason why the author or editor might employ such a construction? In the Elijah-Elisha pericope, a ring composition that is divided down the middle and returns to the beginning to create a whole, provides a satisfying analogy to the divided kingdom and its hoped for reunification.

The frequent charge that the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories is something of a muddled collection has long been used to justify an approach that treats these tales individually or in various groupings. This approach has produced many insightful studies,\(^{20}\) but it has contributed to the neglect of the broader composition’s ring structure. The cycle occupies nearly a third of the books of Kings, but when studied within the larger context of the Deuteronomistic History,

\(^{20}\) For example A. Rofé’s detailed analysis of these prophetic stories has greatly contributed to our understanding of the various literary genres that comprise the cycle. *The Prophetical Stories: The Narratives about the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, Their Literary Types and History* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988).
scholars typically dispensed with these stories quickly.  

Where they have received greater attention, the results have often been elaborate but untenable theories involving multiple redactional levels and even the reconstruction of a supposed lost source.

These troubles are not unique to the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories. Since Martin Noth first presented his theory of a unified and coherent Deuteronomistic History, scholars have posited an increasing number of Deuteronomistic layers. Now, almost sixty years since Noth first advanced his theory, Deuteronomistic scholarship has yet to reach a consensus. At one extreme lies the argument that any claim for a unified Deuteronomistic History must simply be rejected; at the other extreme one finds arguments for a return to Noth’s model of a single Deuteronomistic historian writing in the Babylonian Exile. I propose that the correct interpretation of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories contributes a crucial piece of this puzzle. Noth argued that the Deuteronomistic historian received these prophetic stories as a collection which he then redacted according to his own needs – a conclusion supported by the vast majority of scholars. Because the presence of the ring composition was overlooked, the redactor’s structure was consistently misunderstood; and the meaning of the text was lost.

To reread this text according to the literary conventions of a ring composition not only sheds light on the composition of the Deuteronomistic History, but also further elucidates the

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23 A. Campbell has proposed the existence of a late ninth-century “Prophetic Record” that emanated from early northern prophetic circles, *Of Prophets and Kings: A Late Ninth Century Document (1 Samuel 1 – 2 Kings 10)* (Washington, DC: Catholic Bible Association of America, 1986).


ideology of the Josianic reform. It offers us a glimpse into an ancient example of the interaction of politics and theology. This cycle of stories is nothing less than a carefully crafted work of propaganda. Championing the rallying cry of holy war, King Josiah and his party hoped to capitalize on the misfortunes of the Assyrian Empire that allowed the small Judean kingdom to imagine a return to its glory under David.²⁷ The chariots and horses of fire, the heavenly army of YHWH, would once again battle for Israel.

### APOSTASY

*Prologue*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section I: 1 Kings 16:23 – 34</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(16:24) the mountain [הר]; (16:33) sacred post [-sama]; (16:34 Bethel [באתי]; Jericho [יריחו]</td>
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<tr>
<th>Section II: 1 Kings 17</th>
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<tr>
<td>(17:17) falls sick [חלות]; (17:21) three times [לעתים שלש]; (17:22) revived [חיים]</td>
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<tr>
<th>Section III: 1 Kings 18</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(18:3) steward of the palace, [משה], sometimes called the prophet [נביא], (18:13) prophets’ lives save through being hidden [חבא]; (18:40) seized [משתת] and slaughtered [שבט]</td>
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<th>Section IV: 1 Kings 19</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(19:15-17) Elijah is commanded to anoint Hazael as king of Aram, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha to succeed himself as prophet</td>
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<tr>
<th>Section V: 1 Kings 20</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(20:1) king of Aram, Ben-hadad wages war [לוחם] against Israel with horses and chariots [סוסים ורכב], (20:13, 22) a prophet [נביא], (20:28) gives Ahab military advice; (20:34) sets free Ben-hadad [שיבח] (20:38) motif of eyes covered</td>
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<tr>
<th>Section VI: 1 Kings 21</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(21:1, 2, 6, 7, 15, 16, 18) vineyard [סומר]; (21:2) silver [כסף]; (21:7) heart [ﭵ]; (21:8-11) letters sent [ספר] (repeated four times); (21:10, 13) two scoundrels [משה נ妫]; (21:19) Elijah confronts Ahab with a question; (21:19-24) punishment corresponds to sin; (21:27) Ahab rends [חרץ] his garment in despair</td>
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<tr>
<th>Section VII: 1 Kings 22</th>
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<tr>
<td>(22:4) King of Israel asks King Jehoshaphat of Judah, Will you come with me [לובד] to make war [לוחם] at Ramoth-gilead? The reply: I will do what you do; my troops shall be your troops, my horses shall be your horses; (22:5) Jehoshaphat requests they inquire [אש] of YHWH; (22:14) Micahiah swears, “as YHWH lives” [חיים יי חי]; (22:36) army of Israel flees with cry for every man to return to his city, to return to his land [ארץ]</td>
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### RESUSCITATION AND RESTORATION

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<tr>
<th>Section XIV: 2 Kings 13</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(13:6) sacred post [-sama]; (13:7) fifty [חמשים]; (13:14) Father, father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!; (13:18, 19, 25) three times [לעתים שלש]; (13:21) revived [חיים]</td>
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### ANTI BAALISM

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<tr>
<th>Section XIII: 2 Kings 9:30- 12</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(10:5) steward of the palace, (10:7) slaughtered [שבט] and slaughtered [שבט]; (11:3) Joash’s life saved through being hidden [חבא]</td>
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### THE THREE SWORDS OF YHWH

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<tr>
<th>Section XII: 2 Kings 8 – 9:29</th>
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<tr>
<td>(8:7-15) Elisha sets in motion the coup of Hazael; (9:1-10) Elisha sends a disciple to anoint Jehu, initiating the coup against the house of Ahab</td>
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### HOLY WAR

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<tr>
<th>Section XI: 2 Kings 6-7</th>
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<tr>
<td>(6:1) sons of the prophets [בני נביאים]; (6:8) the king of Aram wages war [לוחם] against Israel; (6:9, 10, 15) the man of God [איש האלהים], the prophet [נביא] Elisha gives king of Israel military advice; (6:14) Aram sends horses and chariots [סוסים ורכב] against Elisha; (6:17; 7:6) YHWH sends horses and chariots of fire; (6:17, 20) motif of eyes blinded and opened; sets free troops of Aram [שיבח]</td>
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<th>Section X: 2 Kings 4-5</th>
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<tr>
<td>(5:5) letters sent [ספר] (repeated four times); silver [כסף]; (5:7,8) king of Israel rends [חרץ] his garment in despair; (5:22, 23, 26); (5:22) two youths [שבט]; (5:23) two servants [שבט]; (5:26) heart [を通して]; (5:26) Elisha confronts Gehazi with a question; (5:26) vineyards [סומר]; (5:27) punishment corresponds to sin</td>
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<th>Section IX: 2 Kings 3</th>
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<tr>
<td>(3:7) King of Israel asks King Jehoshaphat of Judah, Will you come with me [לובד] to make war [לוחם] to Moab to make war [לוחם]? The reply: I will do what you do; my troops shall be your troops, my horses shall be your horses; (3:11) Jehoshaphat requests they inquire [אש] of YHWH; (3:14) Elisha swears, “as YHWH lives” [חיים יי חי]; (3:27) army of Israel flees and they returned to their land [ארץ]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Section VIII: 2 Kings 1-2</td>
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<td>--------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>(mid-turn forms a minor ring within greater ring)</td>
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**A** (1:2) Ahaziah is injured [חלה]; (1:3) Go up [עלה] (imperative ms)

**A’** (2:23) Go up [עלה] (imperative ms)

**B** (1:9-14; 2:7) fifty [חמשים]; (1:9) the mountain [ההר]; (2:2, 3) Bethel [bethו]; (2:4, 5) Jericho, [יריחו]; (2:3, 5, 7) sons of the prophets [בני הנביאים]; (2:3) sons of the prophets came out [יצא]

**B’** (2:15) sons of the prophets [בני הנביאים]; (2:16, 17) fifty [חמשים]; (2:15, 18) Jericho, [יריחו]; Bethel [bethו]; little boys came out [יצא]

**C** (2:8) Elijah took [לקח] his mantle [אדרת] and struck the water and they split in half this way and that [וכו את המים ויחצו הנה והנה] and they two crossed [עבר]

**C’** (2:14) Elisha took [לקח] Elijah’s mantle [אדרת] and struck the water and they split in half this way and that [וכו את המים ויחצו הנה] and he crossed [עבר]

| (mid-turn of the minor ring) |

**D** (2:9) Elisha requests a double (two) portion of Elijah’s spirit; (2:11-12) fiery chariot with fiery horses appears and parts them both (two) and takes Elijah; Elisha cries out Father, father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!; Elisha rends [קרע] his garments in (two) [שניים]
WORKS CITED


