A PROPHET IN KING’S CLOTHES: KINGLY AND DIVINE RE-PRESENTATION IN 2 KINGS 4 AND 5

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1. Introduction

A. G. Auld observes that with biblical characters what you see is not necessarily what you get. Characters designated ‘priest’ may occasionally be seated as ‘king’. But such characterisations may work in other directions as well. By means of an exploration of 2 Kings 4–5 this essay will show that in the presentation of Elisha, we observe a ‘prophet’, functioning as much more than a prophet.

It is not uncommon for scholars to point out the lack of coherence present within the stories of Elisha found in 2 Kings 2–8. W. Bergen states that for readers of the Elisha narrative ‘coherence is elusive in 2 Kings’. G. W. Anderson writes that the Elisha stories are less coherent than the Elijah stories since the former ‘are linked together by little more than the personality of the prophet’. For G. H. Jones the larger collection of stories of multiple genres ‘gives them no more than a superficial appearance of unity’. Y. Radday states that the Elisha Cycle seems like a ‘foreign intrusion’ into Kings and that its

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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.\(^6\)

This essay will not solve the problem of why Elisha was included in Kings. However, we will venture a start, challenging these assessments by means of an examination 2 Kings 4–5. The argument set forth is that it is Elisha’s kingly and divine re-presentation that makes the Elisha Cycle much more than a ‘foreign intrusion’ in the books of Kings.\(^7\)

2. The Literary Structure of 2 Kings 2–8

The miracle stories in 2 Kings 2–8 provide a conundrum for the assessment of literary coherence both because they are ill-suited to their context and because the miracle stories appear so pointless. This is perfectly understandable given the view that the stories are post-Deuteronomistic additions perhaps lifted from a prior prophetic source.\(^8\) B. Long notes, for example, the difficulty of discerning the intention of DtrH’s use of the stories in 2 Kings 4 which ‘accent’ Elisha within the reign of Jehoram. He suggests that perhaps, despite an apostate monarch and people, the DtrH wanted to emphasise the availability of God’s power in and through the successor of Elijah, i.e., since there is still a prophet in Israel there remains a God in Israel as well.\(^9\) This is an important emphasis in 2 Kings 5 (cf. v. 15) encouraging us to treat the two chapters together. The question of Elisha’s literary function within 2 Kings remains. Is it possible to read the narratives of chapters 4–5 and indeed all of 2 Kings 2–8 as an implicit indictment on the monarchy and its failed leadership and as the elevation of a prophetic figure to new heights?

At the wider narrative level it is difficult to establish a ‘principle of composition’. P. Buis attempts an arrangement of stories grouped


\(^7\) The larger and more detailed argument may be found in W. B. Aucker, ‘Putting Elisha in His Place: Genre, Coherence, and Narrative Function in 2 Kings 2–8’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2001).
