ELISHA AND THE MAGIC BOW: 
A NOTE ON 2 KINGS XIII 15-17

2 Kgs xiii 14-19 describes two of the many extraordinary deeds which characterize the biblical portrayal of the career of Elisha ben Shaphat. A distraught king of Israel comes to him seeking support in the war with Aram-Damascus. In response Elisha has the king shoot an arrow in the direction of the enemy (vv. 15-17) and then strike several arrows upon the ground (vv. 18-19); he accompanies these actions with pronouncements which relate them to Israel’s fortunes in the war. Both incidents safely may be classified as examples of sympathetic magic or, at the very least, as symbolic acts in which “the echo of magical elements” is clearly audible. Analogous acts are found in various cultures around the world. Of particular interest is the ceremonial use of a bow in the Egyptian Sed-festival: the pharaoh dramatizes his universal earthly domain by shooting an arrow to each of the four points of the compass. Instructional as this ritual may be in amplifying the cultic background of the king’s bowshot in vv. 15-17, several details in the biblical account require clarification.

The actual bowshot is preceded by a series of four separate actions:

v. 15: wayyo’mer ló Elisha qah qeset wēhiṣsim wayyiqqah ḥēlāyw qeset wēhiṣsim
v. 16a: wayyo’mer l’émelek yisra)ef harkeb yādéka ?al-haqqeset ze?ayyarkeb yado
v. 17a: wayyyāsem ḥēliṣa yādāyw ?al yēdē hammelek
v. 17a: wayyo’mer pētah hahallón qēdimā wayyyiptāh

It is commonly supposed that the king, having taken possession of the bow in v. 15, “draws” it in v. 16a (so RSV, JB, and many commentators). This interpretation is problematic for several reasons. Contextually, it is most unlikely that the king would first draw the bow and then open the window (v. 17a) through which he will shoot. An unmentioned attendant might have opened the window, but this is sheer speculation. That the king would have opened the

Vetus Testamentum XXXV, 3 (1985)
window with one hand while, with Elisha’s help, holding the drawn bow with the other is sheer nonsense. Vocabulary also poses difficulties. ṛkb is a peculiar verb to use in connection with archery, and this is a unique occurrence in Biblical Hebrew. The basic signification of the verb is vertical movement resulting in superimposition: “to mount, to be positioned upon something” (in Qal); “to elevate an object and place it upon something” (in Hiphil). When drawing a bow the archer’s hands move more-or-less horizontally relative to the bow, not vertically as the sense of ṛkb requires. In three biblical passages the Hiphil of ṛkb designates the forward movement of an object toward a destination—“to transport, to carry” (semantically equivalent to nîlô—but it is hard to imagine how this idea could be applied to the movement of the hands when drawing a bow. In Aramaic the verb occasionally does occur idiomatically in descriptions of bow usage, and there this developed sense may be applicable: ṣ̀l ṛkb ḫṣʾ ḫṣʾylk, “shoot not your arrow at a righteous man.” If ṛkb is taken in its narrower, more literal sense, however, the reference could be to the positioning of the arrow on the bowstring prior to drawing (cf. Ps. xi 2, quoted below) or, by extension, to “aiming” the loaded bow at an adversary. Such might be the intent of the verb in 2 Kgs xiii 16a, but the two passages are not really comparable and the problem of the window remains. It is perhaps not surprising that many standard translations simply evade the question through vagueness: “Put your hand to the bow” (so KJV, JPS, NAB, NEB) is not very illuminating.

A second difficulty in this pericope concerns v. 16b. The text is straightforward enough—“Elisha placed his hands upon the hands of the king”—but why he did so is unclear. There is broad agreement among commentators that this action should be understood in terms of the magico-symbolic dimension of the proceedings. Typical is the opinion of John Gray: “Elisha’s putting his hands on those of the king was designed to give the king reassurance that the power, or divine blessing b‘rāḵā) of the prophet as the vehicle of the ‘spirit of Yahweh’ was being communicated to him.” Following this line of reasoning, the action is to be seen minimally as a gesture by the dying prophet to strengthen the king’s confidence or, at the other extreme, as a magical transfer of spiritual power analogous to Elisha’s use of bodily contact to revive the Shunammite’s son (2 Kgs iv 34-35; cf. 1 Kgs xvii 21-22) and identical in principle with