JEHU BEN NIMSHI IN LIGHT OF ISHMAEL BEN NETHANIAH: AN INNER-BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

RUTH WALFISH

In 1996 Prof. Yisrael Rosenson published a seminal article in which he argued that the overt message in the story of Jehu`s rise to power (II Kings 9-10) is in fact at odds with the covert message.[1] While the Tanakh openly praises Jehu for his destroying the house of Ahab and ridding the country of the Baal worship (ibid 10:28-30), the underlying message conveys a condemnation of the methods that Jehu employed in order to achieve his goals. Rosenson`s proofs include an analysis of the bloodletting actions of Jehu, the fact that some of his adversaries had been his allies (ibid 9:14), the fact that the Israelite king he assassinated had been wounded in battle (ibid, 15), the deceit and treachery he employed (see below), the gratuitous violence against both the guilty and the innocent,[2] the absence of Elisha the prophet as a guide, the final verses of the Jehu story that criticize him (ibid, 10:31-33), et al. In fact, the overwhelming detail of the carnage has no parallel in other usurpation stories, and can lead us to the conclusion that Jehu may have indeed eliminated the Baal worship, but the methods he used are to a large extent incriminating and immoral.

Rosenson acknowledges that his thesis has no basis in rabbinic sources and traditional exegesis (except for the modern *Da`at Mikra* commentary). Indeed, classical commentaries accept at face value the praise accorded Jehu for carrying out his mission as prophesied by both Elijah and Elisha. In addition, the idea of a dual message embedded in the biblical text that is self-contradictory is hard to accept, and traditional scholars in particular would have difficulty with it.[3] Nevertheless, I will contend that by using inner-biblical interpretation I can reinforce Rosenson`s theory, that indeed the text is critical of Jehu. In inner biblical interpretation, the reader or interpreter of a

Ruth Walfish, has a Ph.D. in Jewish Education from Hebrew University and is the retired head of the Department of Bible at Efrata Teacher's College in Jerusalem. She is an associate editor of the Jewish Bible Quarterly.

biblical passage uses other biblical texts in order to understand the principal passage he is studying.[4]

Finding and connecting linguistic or thematic parallels between texts can shed light on the hidden meanings of the passage, often a later text elucidating an earlier one. I will argue that the brief story of the assassination of Gedaliah as told in the book of Jeremiah, chapters 40-41, alludes by means of various lexical clues to the story of Jehu, and gives us a better understanding of how the figure of Jehu is regarded in the Bible.

After the destruction of the Temple and the conquest of Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzer, king of Babylonia, appoints Gedaliah ben Ahikam, a member of a distinguished Judean family, to take over the administration of the population that remained in Judea (Jer. 40:5). The prophet Jeremiah joins Gedaliah in his post at Mizpah (ibid, 6), and attempts to encourage the rehabilitation of the Jewish settlement.

It appears at first that Gedaliah succeeds in uniting those people who had not been exiled from the land. We read of several military officers who join Gedaliah, among them Ishmael ben Nethaniah, and Johanan and Jonathan the sons of Kareah. Gedaliah promises them that if they accept the yoke of Babylonia, he will intercede on their behalf with the king, and they will surely prosper in the land. Johanan ben Kareah then comes to Gedaliah in secret and informs him that Ishmael has been recruited by the king of Amon to assassinate him, and that he, Johanan, volunteers to put Ishmael to death surreptitiously. Gedaliah rejects the offer and insists that Ishmael has no such intentions. Gedaliah`s blind belief in Ishmael brings about his murder and seals the fate of the community that had gathered around him. After the assassination by Ishmael, the community self-exiles to Egypt, fearing a Babylonian reprisal.

Ishmael is clearly the villain of the story. Aside from the cold-bloodedness of the murders that he perpetrates, the repercussions of his actions are disastrous. Had he not murdered Gedaliah, the Jewish remnant might have regained a foothold in the land, and flourished. Their presence very likely would have impacted positively on subsequent events, such as the return of the exiles to Judea after the Persian conquest of Babylonia.

The following are the parallels that can be drawn between the rebellion of Jehu and the uprising of Ishmael:

1. DECEIT

Ishmael deceives Gedaliah by participating in the assembly of the officers who are ostensibly supporting Gedaliah (Jer. 40:7-8). Ironically, Gedaliah accuses Johanan of deceit, when the latter apprises him of Ishmael`s intention to murder him (ibid, 16). Gedaliah persists in believing in Ishmael`s innocence, and this lays the groundwork for Ishmael`s second appearance at Mizpah, where he and his men eat a festive meal with Gedaliah, as an expression of their loyalty to him. Immediately afterwards, Ishmael rises up and with the aid of his ten accomplices, murders Gedaliah, as well as all the Jews and Chaldeans who have gathered around him (ibid 41:1-3). He later meets a group of pilgrims from the north who are bringing grain offerings to the Temple (ibid 5-6), and pretends to be crying over the destruction of the homeland.[5] He further pretends that Gedaliah is alive and invites them to Mizpah, thus trapping them and murdering them as well.

Jehu is a master of deceit. He assassinates King Jehoram, under whom he had served as general. Jehoram, surprised by the attack upon him, warns Ahaziah, king of Judah, "Treachery, Ahaziah" (II Kings 9:23). In another instance, Jehu pretends to be a worshipper of Baal, and gathers together all the Baal priests for a grand sacrifice. As Scripture attests, "But Jehu dealt deviously (*be`okba`*) in order to destroy the servants of Baal (ibid 10:19). The root *ekev* is consistently used in the Bible as a negative term. Jehu warns the guards outside that if any Baal priest escapes, they will pay for it with their lives. Then he and his soldiers proceed to murder all the Baal worshippers (ibid 19-26). The interplay of truth/falsity characterizes both stories.

2. SLAUGHTER ALONGSIDE A PIT

When Ishmael lures the pilgrims to Mizpah, he *slaughtered* them *and flung them into the cistern* (*bor*) (Jer. 41:7). Similarly, when Jehu happens upon the kinsmen of Ahaziah he orders that they be caught alive, and then slaughters

all forty-two of them *at the pit* (*bor*) *of Beth – Eked* (II Kings 10:14). In both cases the term for murder is *vayishatem/vayishatum*, implying a massacre. These are the only two cases in the Bible where the terms *bor* and *shahat* appear together. Both Ishmael and Jehu demonstrate an almost offhand brand of viciousness that is quite chilling.

3. MURDER OF THE INNOCENT

As stated above, Ishmael murdered Gedaliah and his followers, as well as most of the pilgrims who were tricked by him into believing that Ishmael supported Gedaliah and was inviting them to meet him. The killings that Jehu carries out bear a resemblance to the latter. Although Jehu was mandated to wipe out the house of Ahab (II Kings 9:7), it is questionable whether Ahaziah, King of Judah, the son-in-law of Ahab, was to be included in this dictate. It is even less credible that Jehu was instructed to kill the brothers of Ahaziah. Just as Ishmael had not planned the murder of the pilgrims, but did so spontaneously in order to prevent word of Gedaliah`s assassination from being discovered, so Jehu had not set out to attack Ahaziah`s brothers, but rather happened upon them. The latter were on their way to visit their relatives, clearly unaware that Jehoram and Ahaziah had been killed at the hand of Jehu, just as the pilgrims were unaware of Gedaliah`s murder. Both Ishmael and Jehu took advantage of the innocence of their victims and cut them down on the spot. It is rare in the Bible to find instances of mass slaughter precipitated by a chance meeting.

It is also questionable whether Jehu had to murder all the Baal worshippers in a vast slaughterhouse. As Rosenson points out, Jehu, as king, could have brought them to trial when he saw fit to do so.

4. THE REMNANT

Johanan ben Kareah warns Gedaliah that Ishmael is a traitor, who will kill Gedaliah, as a result of which *the remnant of Judah will perish* (Jer. 40, 15). Subsequently, we read that *Ishmael took captive all the rest of the people …all the people remaining at Mizpah* . . . (Jer. 41:10). Similarly, *And Jehu struck down all who were left of the house of Ahab in Jezreel . . . till he left him no remnant* (II Kgs. 10:11; see also verse 17). Both men are presented as callously wiping out or capturing those who are their perceived enemies.

5. THE AFTERMATH

Ishmael`s uprising against Gedaliah leads to the self-imposed exile to Egypt of the remnant of Judah, this despite Jeremiah`s prediction that they will be safe in Judah but endangered in Egypt (Jer. 42:7-22). Likewise, the story of Jehu ends not with a glorious victory, as one might have expected, given his obedience to God, but rather with a somber note of defeat: *But Jehu did not watch out to go by the teaching of the Lord… the Lord began to trim away Israel, and Hazael struck them down through all the borderland of Israel…* (II Kgs. 10:31-32). Despite the praise that Jehu receives for wiping out the house of Ahab and the Baal worship, the final word is one of failure.

WHY BOTH AN OVERT AND COVERT MESSAGE IN THE JEHU STORY?

It is well known that biblical narrative is often characterized by ambiguity.[6] Not only can a particular story contain more than one message, but allusions to the story from other sections of the Bible may introduce a new perspective on the original story. The prophet Hosea declares that God will *make a reckoning for the blood of Jezreel against the house of Jehu…* (Hos. 1:4). Alter comments (op.cit, Prophets, p. 1206), that Hosea presents a very different view of Jehu`s mass executions than that which is presented in Kings. Rosenson would argue that the original story actually contains the message that Hosea pronounces, but in a nuanced way. I would add that an additional evaluation of Jehu can be inferred from the comparison that the Bible intimates between Jehu and Ishmael.

By presenting both overt and covert messages, the Bible points to the complexity of human behavior. One can view a particular figure or behavior from several perspectives. What appears on the surface may not reflect the whole picture. Moral judgments must be based on an in-depth approach to character and action. Jehu accomplished what he set out to do, but the ways in which he achieved his goals reveal the kind of man he was.

CONCLUSION

The Bible rarely evaluates its characters in an explicit manner, but rather leaves it to the reader to assess their qualities. Even when the text would appear to be evaluating a figure in an explicit manner, the subtleties of the

biblical narrative leave room for further study and questioning. Inner-biblical interpretation is one of the ways in which the reader can exercise his prerogative of unearthing hidden textual layers. I have shown that both Ishmael ben Nethaniah and Jehu ben Nimshi chose similar modes of operation when dealing with their enemies, ways that are particular to them. Additionally, several phrases and terms link the two men. As such, the nefarious figure of Ishmael highlights similar character traits in Jehu. This in turn strengthens Rosenson`s thesis that Scripture subtly criticizes Jehu for the methods in which he carried out his battle against his various enemies, methods that to a large extent diminish his achievements.

NOTES

The translation used is that of Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 2019.

1. "The Story of Jehu and the Puzzle of the Dual Message", *Megadim* vol. 25, Kislev 1996, pp. 111-124 (Hebrew).
2. E.g. ibid 9, 23-24; 33; ibid 10, 6; 14.
3. Erel Segal, "Jehu King of Israel", *Megadim* vol. 35, 2002, pp. 107-117 (Hebrew). R. Elhanan Samet delivered an oral lecture at Herzog College in the summer of 1997 in which he opposed Rosenson`s thesis. See: "Jehu`s Rebellion and how it is Judged in the Tanakh" (Hebrew) on the Herzog College HaTanach website.
4. Benjamin D. Sommer, "Inner-biblical Interpretation", in *The Jewish Study Bible*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 1835.
5. This is how Metzudat David understands his "crying."
6. See, for example, Jonathan Grossman, "Dual Meaning in Biblical Narrative and its Contribution to the Composition of the Story", doctoral dissertation, Bar Ilan University, 2006 (Hebrew).

INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS

Detailed *Instructions for Authors* and journal style
can be found on our Internet website:
http://www.jewishbible.org