

MOSES, ELISHA AND TRANSFERRED SPIRIT: THE HEIGHT OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY? PART II

ELLIOT B. GERTEL

In the first part of this article, we began to explore ironic and even chastening uses of "spirit" [*ruah*] in the account of Moses, the elders and the transfer of spirit (Num. 11) and in remarkably parallel narratives about Elijah and about Elisha's early career (II Kg. 2ff.) In this second and concluding part of our explorations, it remains for us to look at the whole career of Elisha, in order to gain insight into the biblical message about *ruah* that is conveyed even more strongly in the biblical treatment of the most distinguished of the prophets, Moses.

The remaining chapters of the Elisha cycle are all that we have to make sense of transfers of spirit in the Moses/elders and Elijah/Elisha passages. In II Kings 3:11 the question is put into the mouth of King Jehoshaphat: *'Is there not a prophet of the Lord here?'* The Hebrew wording "prophet of the Lord [*navi l'adonai*]" is strange. It suggests a prophet as a conduit to God, without a Divinely sanctioned message. Indeed, Yehezkel Kaufmann wisely sees in the Elisha narratives an "artless candor" preserving records of an ecstatic, less polished, music-induced "prophecy" like the one that briefly animated Saul (I Sam. 10:9 ff.).¹ Could it be that the Bible is mocking such prophecy, along with the kind that affected the elders in Moses' time, the kind that Moses himself imprudently praised?

The narrative suggests that Elisha has his moods, and that his kind of prophecy may be a reflection of those moods. He condemns the deceased, paganizing Ahab, King of Israel, and his equally corrupt successor, but responds to King Jehoshaphat of Judah because he "respects" him (II Kg. 3:14). Christopher Begg, a perceptive historian, suggests that Elisha was not mentioned in the Books of Chronicles because he supported Jehoshaphat's "cooperation with the military schemes of Israel (and the 'foreign' Edomites)," in violation of the biblical proposition that joining foreign nations in military or commercial ventures or appealing to them "inevitably leads to divinely-

Elliot B. Gertel is the rabbi of Congregation Rodfei Zedek in Chicago, has served on the editorial boards of Conservative Judaism and Jewish Spectator, and has been film and TV critic for the National Jewish Post and Opinion since 1979.

effected disaster."² Begg does yeoman service in positing a biblical condemnation, however subtle, of Elisha's methods and words, which betray "ideological incompatibility" with sacred biblical principles. But why focus on only one of Elisha's actions? Perhaps the very basis of his prophetic authority, attributed to the "double portion" of spirit from Elijah, is in question.

Is it a compliment to Elisha that he inherited some kind of spiritual authority over the Disciples of the Prophets [*b'nai neviim*]? Kaufmann convincingly regards the very title *b'nai neviim* as denoting neurotic social outcasts of "wild imagination" whose only claim to fame may have been popular interest that opened the way to some morally and politically powerful leaders who emerged from their circles.³

Given the double spirit received by Elisha, the biblical narrative does not show him great respect as a top-rank prophet. First, the narrative never calls him a prophet per se; he is referred to in the third person only as a "man of God [*ish Elohim*]," a designation that applies as much to King David (II Chron. 8:14, Neh. 12:24,36) as to prophets like Elisha.⁴ The only one who calls Elisha a prophet [*navi*] is Elisha himself (II Kg. 5:8).⁵

Elisha must induce prophecy that is not readily available to him. At the moment of the query from Jehoshaphat, he requests a musician to play so that the "hand of the Lord" (namely, prophecy) might come upon him (3:15). Only after this jam session can he assure the two kings that they will be victorious over Moab.⁶ But some of Elisha's most dramatic predictions result in a partial victory only.⁷

Indeed, most of Elisha's ministry as prophet, as described in II Kings 4-8, is given over to road show tactics that are impressive but never quite succeed all at once or even once and for all. He helps the widow of one of the Disciples of the Prophets by expanding her one vessel of oil into many vessels that can be sold to relieve her debts. He tells her to borrow as many vessels as she can, for the miracle is strictly limited to the number of vessels she can beg or borrow (4:1-7).

He rewards a wealthy woman from Shunem and her husband, who have provided him with sleeping quarters, by telling them that they will have a child (4:8-17), but seems clueless when that child later succumbs to illness (heatstroke?). When the grieving woman informs him of it, he says: *'The Lord has hidden it from me and not told me'* (V. 27). She responds that it was not she who asked for a son, implying that somehow Elisha's gifts of spirit

bring as much heartache as blessing. Elisha then performs a successful mouth-to-mouth (or spirit-to-spirit) resuscitation of the lad, as a kind of prophetic damage control.⁸

At the end of Chapter 4, his provision of stew for the Disciples of the Prophets has mixed results, at least at first, but he does better at multiplying bread. At the beginning of Chapter 6, he must do some fishing in order to locate an axe head for the Disciples of the Prophets.

Elisha appears to use his skills best when dealing with gentile aristocracy and crowds, and bringing them to far-reaching appreciation of God. For example, his cure of Naaman (Ch. 5), his benevolent victory over the Arameans who tried to seize him (6:8-23) and his triumph in Damascus in virtually announcing the succession of Hazael, though the latter would bring grief to the Israelites (8:7-15).

Interestingly, each of these triumphs occurs only after Elisha himself prays to God, or his petitioners mention prayers to God. It is not by spirit that Elisha is esteemed by gentiles, but by the name of God.⁹ The rabbis perceptively observed that Elisha's accomplishments were by prayer and not so much by spirit (Megillah 27a).

The cycle of Elisha stories ends with what might be regarded as narratives that suggest a testiness in Elisha's ministry. These bear vivid witness to the haphazard effects of the spirit conveyed to him by Elijah himself. Thus, for example, Elisha instructs King Joash to strike the ground with his arrows as a portent of victory over the oppressive Aram. When Joash does this only three times, Elisha dooms him to defeating Aram only three times. Then, he dies (13:14-15).¹⁰ This angry take on archery does have much in common with incantational methods that characterize many of Elisha's feats and that do parallel practices that come dangerously close to magical rites proscribed by Scripture.¹¹

The narratives about Elisha end with a corpse being thrown upon his grave and coming alive and standing on its feet (13:21). This resurrection account may well be one final testament to the problematic effects of transferred spirit run amok. Just as Elisha's use of spirit was subject to his own moods and limitations during his lifetime, so was the power suffused, as it were, in his bones, out of control after his death. The narrative may contrast Elisha's remarkable but uneven powers with Moses, whose grave was not allowed to

become a shrine (Deut. 34:6), and whose own transfer of spirit was directly guided by God.¹²

The narratives in Numbers 11 (Moses and the elders) and II Kings 1-13 (the impressive but troubling tale of Elisha) provide an astonishing but clear biblical lesson on the dangers of "spiritism." The trials and errors of Elisha may well be related in order to provide insight into the greatness and the foibles of the finest and most venerated of biblical prophets and leaders, Moses. When the Israelites complain about lack of food and Moses suggests that God does not know how to treat prophets, the spirit [*ruah*] carries excessive food and out-of-control prophecy to the people, as if to say: In your complaining and whining, would you presume that you can better control the uses of *ruah*?¹³ Is it spirit you want, Moses and Israel, for more efficient food distribution and for religious authority? You had better learn now, the hard way, that you could not utilize it better than God. Such things should be left to God, Who does not want His people to be masters at manipulating spirit, but wants them to be loyal to God, to love God and to trust in Him.¹⁴

The message here may well be an echo of the golden calf narrative (Ex. 34:29-35). Benjamin Scolnic persuasively argues that God renders Moses "horned" because the people wanted to simulate the Egyptian horned god, the sign of spiritual authority with which they had been familiar. In Scolnic's paraphrase: "You want to see a horned symbol of the sun? Take a look at Moses. You wanted to replace Moses and Me with the Golden Calf? Moses is My representative, he reflects My light. Behold My agent on earth. Here, in terms you cannot miss, is the message of My power."¹⁵

Likewise, the Elisha narrative says to readers of the Bible: Those who ask for a double portion of God's spirit from someone other than God may be overzealous disciples, but they will not make the best prophets. They will succeed to the point that they pray to God and remain humble before the Creator. They may win the esteem of Disciples of the Prophets with certain spirit gifts and with a working guild. They may even do God's work, but it will be in a haphazard, even roundabout way.¹⁶

It is not until the later, classical prophets that a more profound and consistent quality of prophecy [*nevuah*] is found. The period after Elisha is characterized by a scarcity of prophecy. Bible scholar Richard Elliott Friedman sees in the miracles of Elijah and Elisha "humans' most advanced control of divine powers in the Hebrew Bible."¹⁷ Friedman traces a Divine transfer of power to

human beings as God diminishes signs of His Presence in order to allow for increased human growth and participation. My thesis is that the biblical narrative frowns upon human presumption to transfer the spirit of prophecy. The notion was popular in certain prophetic guilds, but seen as a brazen use of *ruah*. God is regarded as bestowing it at will, ideally with the higher prophetic experience of the *davar*, or Divine Word, a perspective Divinely shared with a prophet.

Elijah should have learned that God's presence is in the *still small voice* (I Kg. 19:12), and not appropriated by manipulation of *ruah*.¹⁸ But he still went on to "transfer" *ruah* to Elisha, resulting in both the promotion and obstruction of Elisha's prophecy. As a result, there is a period of waning prophecy until a higher, classical prophecy emerges. We hear of a Jonah ben-Amitai, who brings a promise of Divine deliverance to the corrupt Jeroboam II (II Kg 14:25), but there is no prophetic triumph here of any kind. As if promising a more dramatic and significant, even central, role for prophecy, however, the narrative pledges Divine utilization of *every prophet and every seer* to ask Israel to turn from its *wicked ways*, to *observe My commandments and My laws, according to all the instruction that I commanded your fathers and that I transmitted to you through My servants the prophets* (17:13). With these prophets, God will utilize spirit only as an emergency measure.¹⁹

The last word on such matters will be given to the Prophet Zechariah, who cries out:

'And I will also make the so-called prophets and the unclean spirit vanish from the land In that day, every prophet will be ashamed of the visions [from which] he prophesied, and he will not wear the hairy mantle in order to deceive' (13:2,4).

The reference to the Elijah-Elisha stories is unmistakable here. After all, Elijah had employed his mantle [*adderet*] to initiate Elisha into prophecy (I Kg. 19; II Kg. 2). Zechariah calls into question both the spirit of transferred prophecy and the mantle, which encouraged Elisha in his inappropriate request for a double portion of Elijah's spirit.²⁰

Might Zechariah's warning be the ultimate biblical response not only to Elisha's escapades with Elijah's mantle of spirit, but also to Moses' careless surrender of prophetic authority when the people complained about food?²¹

NOTES

1. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, tr. Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) pp. 96-97.
2. Christopher Begg, "The Chronicler's Non-Mention of Elisha," *Biblische Notizen* 45 (1988), p. 11. See his dismissal of Elisha being blackballed from Chronicles because of North-South tensions.
3. Kaufmann, pp. 275-7.
4. Joseph Albo, the 15th-Century Jewish philosopher, regards Elisha as having achieved the highest degree of prophecy, comparable to a Moses and an Isaiah, because he did not require "preparatory degrees" of Divine communication (*Sefer Ha-Ikkarim*, III: 20; see also I:20 and III:10). Yet, as Ze'ev Weisman "The Personal Spirit As Imparting Authority" *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93 (1981) correctly points out, it remains significant that there is no hint in the text of Elisha's authority being validated "by the word of God or by any other involvement of the Lord" (p. 233).
5. Mordecai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor in the Anchor Bible, *II Kings* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) note that the narration allows the Shunamite woman to refer to Elisha as "holy," the only instance where a prophet is so described, p. 56, n. 9. It must be emphasized, however, that this is not the narrator's word.
6. The rabbis salvage from this rather hokey approach to prophecy the lesson that the Divine Presence rests on those who take joy in the performance of a *mitzvah* (Shabbat 30b, Pesahim 117a).
7. On the partial victory, see Cogan and Tadmor, p. 51, and Kaufmann, p. 282.
8. Cogan and Tadmor, p. 57, n. 27) cite passages where other seers and prophets were prepared by God for similar kinds of visits. The lack of preparation here might indicate biblical condemnation of Elisha's reliance on the transferred spirit of Elijah without prayer and invocation of God.
9. Cogan and Tadmor, p. 88, note that such narratives effectively make the point that Elisha's "great deeds" were retold "not only among the Sons of the Prophets, those circles of Elisha's loyal disciples, but also in the court of Samaria (and Damascus)." See also p. 75 on the Arameans.
10. Cogan and Tadmor regard this narrative as a deathbed testament paralleling Moses' final discourse in Deuteronomy 33. Perhaps this is a further biblical link of Elisha to Moses and thus to the spirit saga in Numbers 11. Kaufmann regards it as an effort to explain Elisha's "failed prophecy" (see above, note 17.) In regard to Elisha's curse of Joash, Cogan and Tadmor, pp. 149-50, insist that although "this act and many others performed by Elisha resemble non-Israelite magical practices . . . they should not be regarded as a violation of biblical law or a circumvention of divine will," as they are linked with God in the narrative (pp. 149-50).
11. See W. Boyd Barrick, "Elisha and the Magic Bow: A Note on 2 Kings 13:15-17," *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (July 1985) and Bob Becking, "Touch for Health," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 108 (1996). Becking does, I think, go too far in his historical reconstructions by attributing the illness of the Shunamite's son to demonic possession, and ruling out a powerful internal critique within the Elisha narratives of that particular genre of prophecy. Yet his listing of texts from ancient Near Eastern literature is most instructive.
12. Cogan and Tadmor, p. 150, credit the resurrection story as ending the Elisha narrative with an account of "life-giving contact" in contrast to the "deadly curse" of the bears upon the children with which the cycle of Elisha narratives begins (2:23-5). Yet, the Elisha saga likewise ends

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with the curse on Joash which is also due to moodiness. The resurrection motif further highlights and gives a lasting impression of the erratic nature of Elisha's powers.

13. Martin Buber sensed the parallel between too much food and too much spirit, but went off on a tangent about a prophetic "antithesis" between flesh and spirit. See *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1946) p. 164.

14. See Elliot B. Gertel, "The Holy Ghost and Judaism," *Conservative Judaism* (Winter 1997).

15. Benjamin Edidin Scolnic, "Moses and the Horns of Power," *Judaism* (Fall 1991).

16. Scolnic deals elsewhere with the problem that Elijah never carries out the commandments he receives in special epiphany: To anoint Hazael as king in Aram (Syria), and Jehu as king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (I Kg. 17:15-18). See, "The Flexible Word of God: Thoughts on the Other Pole of Biblical Authority," *Judaism* (Summer 1987). Elisha, after receiving a double portion of spirit from Elijah, carries out these two commandments. Scolnic regards this as biblical testimony to the modification of God's Word by prophetic messengers in the face of human repentance and other historical contingencies. But perhaps Scripture actually blames transference of spirit for the failure of the jobs being done in timely fashion. Elijah does, after all, go "off the beaten track," as Scolnic puts it, to accede to Elisha's spirit request. Could the narrative regard this as unhealthy distraction? Could the timing of Hazael and Jehu have been disastrous as a result? Or could it be, as Scolnic suggests, that the narrative holds up human freedom and initiative, both on the part of the prophet and of the objects of prophecy? Could the text also be expressing distrust of transferal of double spirit, even in Scolnic's scenario, by suggesting that Elisha was shackled by Elijah's unfinished prophecies?

17. Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Disappearance of God* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1995) p. 132.

18. See Kaufmann, p. 100.

19. See Gertel, *op. cit.*

20. In II Kings 2, Elijah uses the mantle to presume to be another Moses crossing the sea. Is that what emboldens Elisha to ask for a transfer of spirit as in Numbers 11? The mantle might be denigrated here as a misleading apparatus, akin to the hairy garment that Jacob used to deceive Isaac. See Carol L. Myers and Eric M. Myers, *Zechariah 9-14, The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) pp. 379-80. See also, the thorough and impressive essay by Fred E. Woods, "Elisha and the Children: The Question of Accepting Prophetic Succession," *Brigham Young University Studies* 32, no. 3 (1992). For an intriguing theory of the use of *ruah* in Zechariah, see Judith R. Phillips, "Zechariah's Vision and Joseph in Egypt," *Conservative Judaism* (Fall 2000). On the ambiguities of *ruah* in the Book of Job, see Kevin Snapp's article in the same issue.

21. See the brilliant comment by Nachmanides (Ramban) on Numbers 11:17, in which he quotes Bamidbar Sinai [Behaalotekha] Rabbah to the effect that God was disappointed that Moses wanted to share his prophetic spirit with others. Therefore, God refused to bestow His spirit directly upon the elders, but did allow Moses to share his own portion of spirit without losing any of it himself. Fred E. Woods posits a link between the Elisha narratives and the biblical account of Korah who questioned Moses' authority. Woods suggests that the ill-fated youths who were eaten by bears because they insulted Elisha by calling him "bald" [*kereah*], may have actually been labeling him as a "Korah," a challenger of prophetic authority. I would add that it is possible that Numbers 11 actually foreshadows the Korah revolt. While Elisha is a genuine prophet, he has achieved it through a roundabout means not unlike that by which Moses ceded

his authority and opened the door to Korah-like challenges. Elisha's literal overkill of his young questioners is a first example of his inability to control both the spirit and his temper.