**The Elijah Narratives: Polarity or Complexity?**

**The Stark Contrast between Elijah and Jezebel**

Of all the contrasts between biblical figures one of the most acute is that between Elijah the prophet and Queen Jezebel. As explained by Trible, the very details of their respective biographies diverge sharply:

[quote originally in English].

Gender, land of origin (including geography and climate), social status and even personal names all contribute to the polar opposition between the two figures. As noted by Trible, the polar contrast between these figures emerges from their very names. The name Elijah means ‘the Lord is God’, or ‘my God is the Lord.’ This name is reflected in the narrative of mount Carmel. In that account, after a fire came down from heaven, the people cry out: “[*verse*]” (18:39). The name Jezebel is composed of the words *iy-zbl*. The component *zbl* is apparently the western-Semitic word *zabul*, common in Ugaritic inscriptions and in Phoenician documents. It means ‘prince,’ an honorific term for the god Baal. Her name expresses the inquiry: ’Where is the prince?’ This name, which attests to the worship of Baal, stands in direct opposition to the name Elijah, which attests to belief in the God of Israel. These two names represent the opposing beliefs of these two figures: One is a prophet who is zealous for the God of Israel, tenaciously fighting an uncompromising battle against Baal worship and all forms of syncretism. By contrast, the other believes in the god Baal, and endeavors to spread his faith among the Israelites. This stark contrast, and the inevitable conflict alluded to by Elijah and Jezebel’s opposing names, materializes as the story progresses. Jezebel not only spreads the worship of Baal among the Israelites, she even persecutes those who believe in God and kills the Lord’s prophets (I Kings 18:4,13). In response to Jezebel’s attempts to eliminate the Lord’s prophets, Elijah slaughters all of Baal’s prophets after God’s revelation at Mount Carmel, allowing none to escape (I Kings 18:40).

The total war waged between these beliefs results in a total war between these figures. Jezebel reacts to Elijah’s execution of Baal’s prophets by swearing that she will add Elijah to the Baal’s prophets who he had killed: “[*verse*]” (I Kings 19:2). Like Jezebel, Elijah swears in the name of the Lord, his God. However, a comparison of their oaths reveals the sharp contrast between them. Elijah swears for the first time in the beginning of the narrative that there would be no rain in the land other than by his decree: “[*verse*]” (I Kings 17:1). He takes an oath a second time when he swears to Obadiah that he will appear before Ahab: “[*verse*]” (I Kings 18:15). Elijah is central to all of these oaths, whether his or Jezebel’s. In his first oath Elijah asserts that he will determine when it will rain; in his second oath, he pledges that he will appear before Ahab that day and Jezebel’s oath states her intention to kill Elijah. However, this common denominator only casts the contrast between the oaths into relief.

Despite the fact that Jezebel’s oath is not connected to Elijah’s oaths in terms of the flow of events in the narrative, it, nonetheless, stands in direct contrast to them. In his first oath, Elijah clarifies that the people’s lives are dependent on God (who provides rain). It is clear from the textual context that the impending drought is a punishment for the worship of Baal described in the previous verses. By contrast, Jezebel clarifies that Elijah’s life is in her hands, and she promises to kill him as punishment for killing the Baal’s prophets. She clarifies that life and death are not in the hands of God’s prophet, but, rather, in her hands. As a result of Jezebel’s oath that Elijah will die the next day, the prophet is forced to flee for his life (I Kings 19:3-18). This is contrary to Elijah’s second oath, in which he assures that he will not disappear and that he will appear before King Ahab that day.

These oaths are not only contradictory in terms of their content. There is also a marked difference between the gods adjured in each. Whereas Jezebel swears using the generic title, *Elohim* [God], in the plural form – “[*verse*]” – Elijah goes out of his way to provide details about the god in whose name he swears: “[*verse*],” “[*verse*].” The very way in which the gods are referred to in each oath conveys the essence of their respective messages. The opposing oaths are part of a conflict between the different faiths.

**Contrasted until their Death/ Disappearance**

The conflict between Elijah and Jezebel continues until their disappearance. Even though Jezebel’s death is only mentioned at the end of chapter nine, seven chapters after the narrative of Elijah’s ascent to heaven, there is a clear connection between these two narratives in terms of content. Elijah the prophet is mentioned explicitly in the story of Jezebel’s death (II Kings 9:36). Jezebel’s death, as noted by Jehu, was the fulfillment of Elijah’s prophecy. However, Jezebel’s death relates not only to Elijah’s prophecy but also to the narrative of his ascent to heaven. Elijah ascends to heaven in a tempest in “[*verse*]” (II Kings 2:11). Jezebel’s death also relates to horses: “[*verse*]” (II Kings 9:33). The disciples of the prophets at Jericho pressure Elisha to allow them to go and search for Elijah; and, in fact, they do search the mountains and valleys – but without success: “[*verse*]” (II Kings 2:17,18). Jezebel’s body also disappeared in her property following her death. Jehu commands the people who were with him to go and bury Jezebel. They go, but only locate some of her bones: “[*verse*]” (II Kings 9:35,36). Jezebel, like Elijah, is never buried.

However, these parallels between Elijah and Jezebel’s death/ disappearance only serve to cast the contrast between them into relief. Elijah is accompanied by his faithful disciple, Elisha, who shows total devotion to his master until his last moments: “[*verse*]” (II Kings 2:2,4,6). Elisha is, in fact, recognized as Elijah’s heir and successor: “[*verse*]” (II Kings 2:15). By contrast, Jezebel’s chamberlains betray her; they are the ones who hurl her to her death. Whereas Elijah was taken up to heaven – “[verse]” (II Kings 2:11), Jezebel is thrown out of the window, falls to earth and dies (II Kings 9:32,33). According to the narrative, no trace of Elijah is found because he disappeared into the heavens, whereas Jezebel’s flesh is not to be found because it is eaten by dogs. She is not buried, rather her carcass is scattered “[verse]” (II Kings 9:37). A comparison of the two figures’ ends reveals the sharp contrast between them. Elijah’s departure is marked by ascent and spiritual elevation, whereas Jezebel’s death is violent and grotesque. This contrast regarding the time of their departure shows how the fate of the Lord’s prophet, who battled idolatry, is the opposite of the fate of the queen who murdered His prophets and spread the worship of Baal throughout Israel.

The degree of polarity between Elijah and Jezebel emerges from the aforementioned. This polarity precludes their encountering each other. Extreme opposites such as these are incapable of meeting. Jezebel does not address Elijah directly, instead communicating with him through a messenger (I Kings 19:2). Jezebel does not appear before Elijah, and Elijah does not appear before Jezebel. The tension between them precludes encounter. Trible mentions the opposition between Elijah and Jezebel as an example of the sort of polar thinking which typifies the Deuteronomist approach: [quote originally in English.]

While I agree that the opposition between Elijah and Jezebel is polar in nature, I do not believe that one may therefore infer that polar thought typifies Deuteronomist writing in general, or the Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel narrative in particular. Trible limited her analysis to the opposition between Elijah and Jezebel. However, this opposition is but a part of a broader opposition, a three-way opposition between Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel. Trible only focused on the polarities belonging to the contrast structure. However, relating to the entirety reveals a diverse contrast, based on a complex perspective, which is not limited to polar opposites.

**A Three-way Opposition: Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel**

The opposition between Elijah and Jezebel is part of a complex which also includes King Ahab, in addition to the polar figures of Elijah and Jezebel. In terms of the story, Ahab is an intermediary figure, positioned between the polar figures of Elijah and Jezebel. The two polar figures, Elijah and Jezebel, never meet and do not speak directly to each other. By contrast, the text describes interactions between the two polar figures and King Ahab. The common denominator of Elijah and Jezebel’s relationships with Ahab is Ahab’s weakness relative to these other figures. Elijah and Jezebel’s relationships with Ahab provide a contrast between Elijah and Jezebel’s strength and Ahab’s weakness. Ahab is controlled and influenced by these stronger figures. He obeys them and follows their orders. Ahab is caught in the middle of the clash of titans between Elijah and Jezebel, and throughout the narrative he is constantly pulled in the direction of one of the polar figures. The focus of the narrative and its primary concern is the question of who he will ultimately choose to follow – the Lord’s prophet or his wife who worships Baal. The story and its design aim at resolving this central question. It turns out that the focus of the narrative is not the polar figures and their clash, but rather the intermediate figure subject to their influence, who must decide who to follow.

The story’s design and main tension stems from Ahab's deliberation and vacillating between Elijah and Jezebel’s influence. The narrative does not only highlight Elijah and Jezebel’s influence over Ahab and contrast their strength to his weakness. I would argue that there is a tendency throughout the story to create an analogy between Elijah and Jezebel’s respective relationships with Ahab, an analogy which sharpens the figures’ struggle for influence over Ahab, and his vacillating between their influences.

**A Prophet More Powerful than the King: Ahab and Elijah’s Relationship**

Let us begin by describing Ahab and Elijah’s complex relationship. The Mount Carmel narrative (I Kings 18) provides extensive information about Ahab and Elijah's relationship. Ahab is not mentioned in the account itself, but he is mentioned before and after it. Elijah and Ahab's relationship, as depicted in their interactions preceding and following the Mount Carmel narrative, show Elijah’s clear superiority in the realm of leadership. The encounter between these figures prior to the Mount Carmel narrative is replete with tension. The king goes to meet Elijah and refers to him as “[verse]” (I Kings 18:17) and Elijah responds by accusing Ahab and his dynasty of actually being the ones who sullied the Israelites: “[verse]” (ibid. v. 18).

Elijah then commands Ahab to assemble the Israelites, along with Baal and Astarte’s prophets, at Mount Carmel, and Ahab follows Elijah’s instructions to the letter (ibid. v. 20). During the event itself, Ahab didn’t intervene, despite the fact that Elijah slaughters all of Baal’s prophets. Immediately following the execution of Baal’s prophets, Elijah commands Ahab: “[verse]” (I Kings 18:41), and Ahab once again follows Elijah’s instructions to the letter: “[verse]” (ibid. v. 42). Below, Elijah now commands him to descend: “[verse]” (ibid. v. 44), and the text recounts that: “[verse]” (ibid. v. 45). It turns out that the king goes up to eat and descends to Jezreel at Elijah’s command. The prophet controls the king by means of his control over rain, a realm which, according to belief in Baal, is under the god Baal’s control. The king carries out whatever Elijah commands, without qualification or delay.

There are many points of comparison between the next encounter between Ahab and Elijah after Ahab murders Naboth and takes possession of his vineyard (the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard is cited in the following section) and the previous encounter prior to the Mount Carmel narrative. The encounter once again opens with Ahab referring to Elijah in a pejorative fashion. While in the first encounter, prior to the Mount Carmel narrative, Ahab labeled Elijah “[verse]” (18:17), he now labeled him his personal enemy: “[verse]” (21:20). Elijah’s response, like his response in the previous encounter with Ahab, shifts the blame to Ahab: “[verse]” (ibid.). Ahab responds to Elijah’s reproach and the severe punishment which he metes out to him by ripping his garments, wearing sackcloth, fasting, and mourning. The remorse which Ahab expresses elicits a declaration of postponement of his punishment (21:29).

Despite the fact that Ahab refers to Elijah as “[verse]” and “[verse],” he obeys all of his instructions. Ahab’s relationship to Elijah is characterized by subservience and awe. The king’s relationship to the prophet stands in opposition to Jezebel’s relationship to Elijah. Ahab encounters Elijah, as well as other prophets, many times. He always accepts their rebuke and does not harm them. This relationship stands in opposition to that of Jezebel, who persecutes and murders the Lord’s prophets (I Kings 18:13) and threatens Elijah with a similar fate (I Kings 19:2). Jezebel does not encounter or speak to Elijah in person. By contrast, although the prophets severely criticize Ahab, the king does meet with the prophets, obeys them and does not persecute them.

**A Queen More Powerful than the King: Ahab and Jezebel’s Relationship**

Just as Elijah is dominant in his interactions with Ahab, Jezebel is the dominant figure in her interactions with Ahab. The narrative of Naboth’s vineyard (I Kings 21) provides us with a glimpse of the relationship between Ahab and Jezebel. This story shows the difference between Ahab and Jezebel both in terms of their nature, and in terms of their perception of the monarchy. Jezebel is assertive, self-confident, and has faith in the power of the government. By contrast, Ahab is depicted as incompetent, a passive figure incapable of action. Ahab reacts to Naboth’s refusal to give him his vineyard with mourning and fasting (I Kings 21:4). Jezebel reacts decisively to Ahab’s depression and commands him: “[verse]” (ibid. v. 7). Jezebel orders Ahab to cease mourning and to start eating, and she promised him that she would acquire Naboth’s vineyard for him. Jezebel indeed delivers the goods and provides the king with the vineyard, as promised. She writes letters in Ahab’s name, signs them using his seal, and sends them to the elders of Naboth’s city, with explicit instructions for incriminating Naboth and executing him. Beyond its concrete narrative role, Jezebel’s use of Ahab’s name and signature has symbolic-metaphorical significance: Jezebel controls Ahab and the monarchy. The city elders carry out her orders to the letter, and report to her that they were carried out. Despite the fact that the orders were sent in the king’s name, the elders know who is behind them and, therefore, report directly to her. Parallel to Jezebel’s original orders to Ahab, “[verse]” (21:7), she now commands him “[verse]” (21:15).

The justification which Jezebel provides for her orders to Ahab to take possession of Naboth’s vineyard: “[verse]” (ibid.), conceals and softens what actually occurred. After Jezebel ordered Naboth’s stoning – “[verse]” (I Kings 21:10), and it was carried out and reported to her (21:13, 14, 15), she spares Ahab’s feelings and instead of revealing what actually happened, settles for a sanitized account of Naboth’s death. This change in formulation sharpens the contrast between the Jezebel whose nature is cruel and insensitive and Ahab, who is characterized by a certain degree of sensitivity which prevents him from hearing the details of what actually occurred.

Jezebel’s decisive influence over Ahab emerges not only from the story, but also from the narrator’s evaluation in summing up Ahab’s wickedness: “[verse]” (I Kings 21:25). Ahab’s wickedness is attributed to Jezebel’s enticement. True, Ahab acted Wickedly in God’s view and is punished for doing so, but Jezebel is the source of the evil. As Holt states: “Who was actually responsible for Baal worship of the worst sort infiltrating the Israelites? Jezebel! Whose table seated 400 of Astarte’s prophets and 450 of Baal’s prophets? Jezebel! Who acquired Naboth the Jezreelite’s vineyard for Ahab, in contravention of divine law, justice and tradition? Jezebel! Ahab “sold himself” to acting wickedly. This unusual expression hints at the buyer to whom Ahab sold himself. The identity of the buyer is clarified in the continuation of the verse. It is none other than Jezebel, who enticed Ahab to acted wickedly against God.

**Opposing Influences**

So far, we have discussed Ahab’s relationships with Elijah and Jezebel, each one independently. However, it is my contention that the text connects these relationships and creates an analogy between the two relationships. This tendency can be seen in the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard, as well as through a comparison between the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard and the Mount Carmel narrative. While most of the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard focuses on the interaction between Ahab and Jezebel, the conclusion depicts an encounter between Elijah and Ahab. In this encounter, Elijah rebukes Ahab for his sins, and informs him of his severe punishment and the obliteration of his dynasty (21:21-22). Ahab reacts with broken-hearted mourning: “[verse],” (21:27). Elijah’s reproach chastens Ahab and causes him to mourn. Ahab’s mourning in response to Elijah’s rebuke is parallel to his emotional state in the beginning of the story, in face of Naboth’s refusal to give him his vineyard: “[verse]” (21:4). Ahab is portrayed in both instances as lying down grieving. This parallelism between Ahab’s emotions in the beginning and end of the story highlights the contrast between the influence of Jezebel on Ahab and that of Elijah. Jezebel reacts to Ahab’s depression by ordering him to eat and promising him that she will acquire the vineyard for him. Whereas Jezebel consoles Ahab, Elijah returns Ahab to a state of mourning. These opposite emotional influences highlight Elijah and Jezebel’s opposite positions. Jezebel satisfies the king’s desires and aspirations regardless of the cost, including an awful act of murder, while Elijah rebukes the king for his awful actions.

This contrast between Jezebel’s influence over Ahab and Elijah’s influence is apparent not only in the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard. It can also be seen by means of a comparison between the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard and the Mount Carmel narrative. To the best of my knowledge, the scholarship has not yet dealt with the analogy between the two narratives. This analogy sharpens the three-way opposition between Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel. As shown in the table below, there is a parallel between Elijah’s two commands to Ahab in the Mount Carmel narrative and Jezebel’s two commands to Ahab in the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Elijah’s commands to Ahab at Mount Carmel | Jezebel’s commands to Ahab in the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard |
| “[verse]” (I Kings 18:41,42) | “[verse]” (21:7) |
| “[verse]” (I Kings 18:44-45) | “[verse]” (21:15-16) |

Jezebel’s words, “[verse]” (21:7), are reminiscent of Elijah’s words to Ahab at Mount Carmel: “[verse]” (18:41). It is interesting to note that both Elijah and Jezebel order Ahab to eat and that this command is accompanied by an assurance that he will thereby attain that which he seeks – Naboth’s vineyard by Jezebel, and rain by Elijah. Indeed, just as Elijah brings about the rain, Jezebel gives the king Naboth’s vineyard, as she had promised. Jezebel’s second order to Ahab and its fulfillment, “[verse]” (21:15-16), are reminiscent of Elijah’s second order to Ahab at Mount Carmel and its fulfillment: “[verse]” (18:44-45). In both instances, Ahab is ordered to move and in both instances Ahab descends to Jezreel.

These two narratives highlight Elijah and Jezebel’s dominance relative to Ahab. To a significant extent, Elijah and Jezebel control Ahab and give him orders which he obeys. There are parallels, in terms of both content and language, between the orders which Elijah and Jezebel give Ahab. The orders include a command that the king eat as well as a command that he descend to the fields of Jezreel. However, this parallelism creates an opposition and casts the contrast between the contradictory directions of Elijah and Jezebel’s influence over Ahab into sharp relief. Elijah commands Ahab to eat and to travel to Jezreel due to beneficial rain. Elijah’s influence over Ahab is one of blessing, which leads to the drought finally ending. The rain brought by Elijah terminates the drought, ensuring life. By contrast, Jezebel’s influence is the opposite. While she does help Ahab overcome his depression which was caused by Naboth’s refusing to relinquish his vineyard, her actions lead to a wrathful prophecy, ensuring death for Ahab’s household, including Jezebel herself. In contrast to Ahab’s ascent to Mount Carmel, representing a spiritual ascent as well, bringing with it the blessing of rain, Ahab’s descent to take possession of Naboth’s vineyard is not only a physical descent, it also represents an ethical decline, bringing with it a wrathful prophecy. Ahab’s spiritual decline in the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard is alluded to in God’s command to Elijah: “[verse]” (21:18). Jezebel’s words, “[verse],” followed by “[verse]” lead to God’s command to Elijah, “[verse],” and to the Ahab and his household’s terrible punishment. The contrasting analogy between Elijah and Jezebel’s orders to Ahab highlights the dilemma facing Ahab, who is caught between the influence of the two powerful figures, Elijah and Jezebel. Ahab’s story is none other than the drama of a choice between two opposite paths led by two polar figures. Ahab, who is influenced by both and vacillates between the influence of the two figures, is not a polar figure, but rather an intermediate figure who lends complexity and interest.

**The intermediate Ahab**

Ahab’s intermediate position can also be seen in the circumstances of his death. In the previous section, I showed the opposition between Elijah and Jezebel’s disappearance. The stories of the polar figures’ end share several motifs: Horses, an unsuccessful search for the corpse, and lack of burial. I have shown that these parallels serve to connect these narratives for the purpose of contrasting the story of their deaths. While the reason for the failure to find Elijah’s corpse was his miraculous ascent to heaven, Jezebel’s flesh was not found because it was eaten by dogs. Elijah’s disappearance is a sign of ascent and spiritual elevation, whereas Jezebel’s death is an ignoble one. An analysis of the narrative of Ahab’s death reveals that his death is part of the framework of analogy between the disappearance of the three figures.

The disappearance of all three figures is predicted in advance. The apprentice prophets know from the outset that “[verse]” (II Kings 2:3). Jezebel’s death is already predicted in the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard: “[verse]” (I Kings 21:23). Ahab’s death is also predicted. It is first predicted as part of the general prophecy about Ahab’s household in the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard, adjacent to the prophecy concerning Jezebel’s death: “[verse]” (ibid. v. 24). His death was predicted a second time in the narrative of Ahab’s death in Micaiah son of Imlah’s prophecy, which states that the nation will be left “[verse]” (I Kings 22: 17). The fact that the death/ disappearance of these three figures was predicted indicates that these events are significant and divinely orchestrated. Their death/ disappearance is the consequence of divine justice. We might add that these figures’ disappearance has not only theological significance in the context of divine retribution, but also literary significance as part of the development of the analogy between the figures.

A number of motifs in the narrative of Ahab’s death (I Kings 22) connect to the story of Elijah’s disappearance and the death of Jezebel below. The most glaring parallel is the one between the stories of the deaths of Ahab and Jezebel, both of which tell of the fulfillment of Elijah’s prophecy that the dogs will eat Ahab and Jezebel’s flesh. Similar to Jezebel’s flesh being eaten by the dogs (II Kings 9:36), it recounts concerning the death of Ahab: “[verse],” (I Kings 22:38). This parallel connects Ahab and Jezebel and supports the view that, in fact, Ahab and Jezebel are parallel to each other in their opposition to Elijah.

However, there is also a significant difference between Ahab and Jezebel’s deaths. Jezebel’s death was demeaning in the extreme – her chamberlains betray her and throw her out of the window, she remains unburied and her corpse is scattered “[verse]” (II Kings 9:37). By contrast, Ahab dies heroically. Unlike Jezebel whose death is part of a revolution led by Jehu, Ahab goes into battle as a symbol of unity between the kingdoms of Judea and Israel. He even accompanies Jehoshaphat, king of Judea, into battle. The text emphasizes that despite the fact that he is injured in battle, the king “[verse]” until evening (I Kings 22:35). Ahab, not wanting his troops to know of that he was injured out of concern for their morale, stands in his chariot until evening, and doesn’t abandon the battlefield. Ahab does, in fact die, and Elijah’s prophecy is fulfilled when the dogs lap up his blood. Nonetheless, his death is heroic and admirable, and he is buried – unlike Jezebel. These differences preclude equating Ahab and Jezebel. Despite the repetition of the motif of the dogs, Ahab and Jezebel’s deaths cannot be completely equated.

Another motif, that of the ‘chariot,’ connects the narrative of Elijah’s disappearance to Ahab’s death. Elijah is taken by means of a chariot of fire which raises him to the heavens: “[verse]” (I Kings 22:35). The motif of the ‘chariot’ connects Ahab, in the context of his death, with Elijah, in the context of his disappearance. One might add that like Elisha’s attachment to Elijah at the time of his death, Jehoshaphat, the king of Judea, and Ahab, king of Israel, are unified in the narrative of Ahab’s death. This unity and devotion stands in contrast to Jehu and the chamberlains’ betrayal in the death of Jezebel. Elijah ascends heavenward, whereas in Ahab’s death it is the battle which ‘ascends’ and brings about Ahab’s death in battle. However, the fact that Ahab dies standing up in the chariot, forms an analogy with Elijah who ascends in a chariot of fire, and a contrast with the death of Jezebel, who is hurled to the ground by her chamberlains and trampled by horses.

There are, therefore, both parallels and contrasts between the narratives concerning the three figures’ ends, which contributes to the three-way contrast between them. Elijah’s ascension to heaven stands in stark contrast to the demeaning death of Jezebel who is hurled to the ground and eaten by dogs. Ahab’s death integrates motifs from both the narrative of Elijah’s ascension heavenward and the narrative of Jezebel’s death, commensurate with his intermediate place in the story. Being eaten by dogs connects Ahab and Jezebel’s deaths. On the other hand, the chariot and the state of unity connects Ahab death and Elijah’s ascension heavenward. Unlike the case of Elijah, and parallel to that of Jezebel, the narrative mentions Ahab’s death, although his death is not demeaning like Jezebel’s and he is buried. The conclusion to be drawn from the circumstances of Ahab’s death is that although Ahab is punished and falls in battle due to his sins, he is not evil like Jezebel. Rather, he is a complex figure, situated between Elijah and Jezebel, who integrates both positive and negative characteristics.

**A Paradigmatic Analysis of the Three-way Opposition between Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel**

My claim regarding the intermediate statues of Ahab is bolstered by a paradigmatic analysis of the story’s depth structure. The story of Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel is a polemical narrative, with a theological/ religious struggle against worship of Baal at its core. As explained by Cappelrod, the struggle against belief in Baal occupies a central place in the prophets’ struggle against idolatry: “The Israelite prophets viewed Baal as a serious rival of the Lord’s. This perspective allows for a much better assimilation of many points in the Israelite faith, especially that of the prophetic polemic.” The three-way opposition between Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel in the story’s surface structure reflects an opposition between faiths – worship of the Lord versus worship of Baal – in the story’s depth structure. This opposition has a central role among the various literary methods which assist in creating the polemical thrust in the story. As explained by Amit: This position, recognizing the Lord and negating Baal’s power, is greatly strengthened by means of the extensive use of contrast.”

The opposing figures in the story represent faiths involved in a conflict which is central to the story’s depths. Jezebel represents worship of Baal and Astarte. I mentioned above that Jezebel’s name, which includes the component *zbl* and is an honorific term for the god Baal, attests to the worship of Baal. She is introduced for the first time in the story as “[verse]” (I Kings 16:31). Immediately after she is introduced, there is a plethora of references to the god Baal (ibid. v.31, 32) as well as a reference to Astarte (ibid. v. 33). Even though Jezebel does not appear in the Mount Carmel narrative (I Kings 18), she is represented by 450 of Baal’s prophets and 400 of Astarte’s prophets “[verse]” (I Kings 18:19). There is even an opinion that Jezebel’s putting on make-up and looking out the window in the story of her death (II Kings 9:30) is intended to present her as the embodiment of a goddess, a rejected goddess.

Elijah, for his part, is the Lord’s representative. His theophoric name, as explained above, attests to the Lord being God. Elijah’s status as the Lord’s representative is evident in the Mount Carmel narrative: Elijah asks the Lord to prove that he is His representative and that everything which he did was done in His name: “[verse]” (18:36). God’s revelation is intended not only to demonstrate that the Lord is God, but also that Elijah is His representative. Elijah emphasizes the quantitative gap between him and the Baal’s prophets: “[verse]” (I Kings 18:22). In my opinion, this quantitative contrast represents the opposition between the approach advocating exclusive worship of the Lord and the approach advocating syncretism, or – in the words of Elijah – skipping “[verse]” (I Kings 18:21). The lone prophet represents the sole God. The trail at Mount Carmel takes place on two levels. One level is the personal level – the conflict between Elijah and Jezebel (represented by 450 of Baal’s prophets and400 of Astarte’s prophets who ate at her table). The second level is the ‘celestial’ level in which the two ‘deities’ – the Lord and Baal – battle each other. As explained by Trible: “On the heavenly level, this competition pits Baal against the Lord. On the human level, Elijah faces off against Jezebel.”

On the paradigmatic level, the more complicated question is: What is Ahab’s role in the narrative in general, and in the Mount Carmel narrative in particular? Clarifying Ahab’s role in the story is particularly challenging since he is not mentioned in the trail at Mount Carmel, only before and after it. Ahab assembles Baal’s prophets and the nation to Carmel in anticipation of the event, and after the event and the slaughter of Baal’s prophets, he is commanded by Elijah to go up and eat. Amazingly, however, Ahab is not mentioned in the trail itself. The difficulty regarding this silence concerning Ahab in the trail at Mount Carmel led many scholars to the conclusion that the narrative is a conflation of two independent stories – the story of a drought in which Ahab appears, and a story about the trail at Mount Carmel in which Ahab is not mentioned. In my opinion, the solution to the mystery of Ahab’s absence from the trail at Mount Carmel is rooted in understanding Ahab’s role in the depth structure of the work. Ahab, king of Israel, plays the role of the ‘chooser’ who must decide between faith in the Lord and faith in Baal. Ahab’s vacillating between Elijah’s influence and Jezebel’s is but a part of the ‘drama of choosing’ between the Lord and Baal. In the course of the trial at Mount Carmel, Ahab is not mentioned because the role of the ‘chooser’ is played by the people present at the trail. Ahab and the people fill the same literary role and, therefore, do not need to be mentioned together. Ahab, king of Israel, as leader of the people, also represents them. They do not need a representative – king Ahab – when ‘those being represented’ are present. Like Jezebel, who represents worship of Baal and, therefore, is not present when Baal’s prophets are there themselves, Ahab, who represents the people, is also not present when the people are there.

The ‘drama of choosing’ in the story’s surface structure takes place on two levels – on the personal level in terms of Ahab and on the national level. The story’s surface structure reflects its depth structure, which deals with the topic of the choice between worship of the Lord and worship of Baal.

**The Surface Structure**

**The personal level The national level**

Elijah Jezebel Elijah Baal’s prophets

=

Ahab The people

**The depth structure**

The Lord Baal

The ‘chooser’

The Mount Carmel narrative is portrayed as a competition between the Lord and Baal, however, this ‘battle’ between the deities is directed at the people. Elijah calls upon them to clarify who it is that they believe in: “[verse]” (I Kings 18:21). The people are hopping between two opinions – vacillating between belief in the Lord (represented by Elijah) and belief in Baal (represented by Baal’s prophets) – and, therefore, they do not respond to Elijah. The syncretism which the people embrace does not choose either side decisively. The question of the people’s faithfulness is also the central question concerning Ahab. Ahab, like the people, hops between two opinions. This hopping between two opinions is expressed by his vacillating between the influence of Elijah – the Lord’s representative – and that of Jezebel – Baal’s representative.

My claim that Ahab is not a polar wicked figure, but rather an intermediate figure, is bolstered by the parallelism in the story between his role and that of the people. They are parallel neither to Baal’s prophets nor to Elijah. Rather, they are positioned in the middle, between the two. The people’s indecision is resolved by the appearance of the fire that descends from heaven and consumes Elijah’s offering, leading to the declaration: “[verse]” (I Kings 18:39). Choosing the Lord necessitates a disengagement from Baal. This disengagement is expressed by the people’s seizing Baal’s prophets and Elijah’s slaughtering them in Wadi Kishon (I Kings 18:40). Whereas in the beginning of the trail at Mount Carmel Elijah proclaims that he alone survived from amongst the Lord’s prophets (18:22) and Baal’s prophets were gathered together with the people opposing him, now the people joined Elijah and disengaged from Baal’s prophets.

Unlike the people, who disengaged from Baal’s prophets, Ahab returns to Jezreel and immediately informs Jezebel about what Elijah did to Baal’s prophets (19:1). Ahab’s following of Jezebel only intensifies in the story of Naboth’s vineyard (I Kings 21). Yet there is also a parallel to the people’s repentance in the Mount Carmel narrative, which includes recognition of the Lord as God and recognition of Baal worship as a sin, in terms of Ahab, on a personal level. Notwithstanding Ahab’s terrible sin in the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard, Ahab accepts Elijah’s reproach, has remorse and grieves over his actions. In the end, Ahab obeys Elijah, just as the people obey him in the Mount Carmel narrative.

**The Drama of Choosing Between Good and Evil**

Contrary to Trible’s claim that the narrative of Elijah, Jezebel and Ahab reflects polar thought, the perspective which emerges from the story is more complex. Trible’s conclusion is based on an analysis of the opposition between Elijah and Jezebel. The opposition between Elijah and Jezebel is indeed polar in nature, however our study reveals that the opposition between Elijah and Jezebel is part of a broader complex of oppositions. This complex also includes – in addition to the polar figures – an intermediary figure, Ahab, who is a more complex and a much less unambiguous figure. In addition to the stark contrast between Elijah and Jezebel, the complex of oppositions includes contrasts between the two polar figures, Elijah and Jezebel, and the intermediate figure, Ahab. The three binary oppositions – the opposition between Elijah and Jezebel, the opposition between Elijah and Ahab and the opposition between Jezebel and Ahab – together form a complex of oppositions, forming a three-way opposition. In my opinion, Ahab is at the center of this story, which may be viewed as a drama of decision. Like the Mount Carmel narrative, which revolves around the people’s choice between believing in the Lord or in Baal, so too, the broader story of Elijah, Jezebel and Ahab revolves around the choice facing Ahab, an intermediary figure who is forced to choose between following Jezebel (Baal’s representative) and following Elijah (the Lord’s representative).

Ahab’s decision is not unequivocal, and he vacillates between the two poles. As I demonstrated in the course of my analysis, the text contains an analogy between Elijah’s influence over Ahab and Jezebel’s influence. They both order Ahab to eat and both push him to descend to Jezreel. This focus on eating and on the land of Jezreel is not accidental. Baal is also, inter alia, the god of rain and agricultural fertility. The question of who it is who provides man’s food and who is the god of the land is the very issue at stake in the narrative of Elijah, Jezebel and Ahab. Sometimes Ahab eats in response to an order from Elijah and sometimes in response to an order from Jezebel. Ahab, like the people, hops between two opinions and vacillates between faith in the Lord and faith in Baal. Elijah uses the Lord’s mastery over rain to prove that He is the God of the land, and that life and agricultural fertility are dependent on Him. He also proves this in Zarephath of Sidon, the heart of the Phoenician region which Jezebel came from and where people worshiped Baal. Elijah’s providing food for the widow in Zarephath and resurrecting her son prove that life is in the hands of the Lord. The same is true of Mount Carmel, which according to some opinions is part of, or on the border of, the Phoenician region, where Elijah causes rain to fall. Binary contrasts, such as life/ death, rain/ drought, and fasting/ eating, which recur throughout the broader narrative, sharpen the central question: Who is God in the land, who rules over and provides life -The Lord or Baal?

Ahab’s decision is not only a theological choice between faith in the Lord and faith in Baal. The narrative presents the choice between the Lord and Baal as being not only a question of rite but also an ethical choice. Following Jezebel, the representative of Baal, ultimately leads to the murder of Naboth for the sake of the acquisition of his property. Ahab’s sin reaches its climax in the story of Naboth’s vineyard, a sin which is not in the realm of the ritual, but rather the realm of the ethical. His punishment is only proclaimed in the wake of his ethical corruption (21:17-22). The choice between the Lord and Baal is ultimately a choice between good and evil.

While Trible is correct that the opposition between Elijah and Jezebel is polar, her analysis fails to address Ahab. The entire narrative is constructed in such a way that Ahab is positioned as an intermediate figure between Elijah and Jezebel. As an intermediate figure, Ahab fills the role of the ‘chooser.’ The choice facing Ahab is, in fact, portrayed as a polar decision. There is no possibility of syncretism between the two perspectives. However, the fact that Ahab vacillates between the two approaches, between Elijah’s influence and Jezebel’s influence, positions him between the two of them and precludes the possibility of defining him in an unambiguous manner as either good or evil. Constructing the opposition between the figures as a three-way opposition places Ahab in the middle, between Elijah and Jezebel. The syntagmatic development of the story also leads to the same conclusion. Even though Ahab sins and is described as acting wickedly in the Lord’s view (I Kings 16:30; 21:25), God recognizes his sincerity and honesty of his repentance. His obedience to Elijah distinguishes him from Jezebel. Even his death carries parallels and contrasts to the disappearance/ death of Elijah and Jezebel. True, the dogs lap up Ahab’s blood (I Kings 22:38), similar to Jezebel’s flesh being eaten by the dogs (II Kings 9:36). However, his death is a hero’s death on the chariot in battle, and he is even buried, in contrast to Jezebel.

The complexity of the figure of Ahab has already been noted by both classical and contemporary commentators. According to one opinion espoused by the Sages, “Ahab was balanced.” A similar approach is expressed by Holt, who defines Ahab as: “A tragic hero, a person who is not entirely good, but neither is he entirely evil.” This complexity is incompatible with a polar or dichotomous view. A drama of choosing highlights the ‘chooser’ as the ‘vacillator’ and forms a complex plot in which the main character cannot be placed in a category of black or white. While Trible viewed this story as an example of the polar perspective which was common in the Deuteronomist writings, Holt reaches the opposite conclusion, and views the complexity of the figure of Ahab as typical of many biblical figures:

[original quotation of Holt in English]

The biblical narrative creates many oppositions which are polar in nature. However, these polar oppositions often include a third element in the contrast structure, an element which serves as an intermediary component between the two polar elements. Relating comprehensively to the three-way opposition reveals that often the focus of the narrative is actually the intermediate component of the opposition. He argues that the three-way opposition is a methodology, common in the biblical text, which is used to present the drama of decision. The focus of the drama is specifically achieved by means of the intermediate figure who is required to choose and decide between conflicting paths. This decision is presented as a choice between polar opposites, but the focus on the intermediate figure who decides lends depth and complexity to the story. Trible’s analysis is limited to one binary opposition between the polar figures, Elijah and Jezebel. This opposition is not independent, but is rather part of a broader complex of oppositions. In my opinion, it is a mistake to draw conclusions about a dichotomous biblical world view based on one opposition which is a component of a broader complex of oppositions. Were Trible to have broadened the framework of analogies and invited Ahab, the third element in the opposition complex, to join, she would have reached the conclusion that the biblical perspective is not so polar, and it also contains complexity and gray, which exists between the dichotomous world view of black and white.

**Lot’s Rescue from Captivity (Chapter 14)**

Chapter 14, the story of Abram’s rescuing Lot from captivity, is a unique chapter, different in character, content, and form from the other narratives in Genesis. Its uniqueness led to the opinion that the connection between this chapter and the rest of the array of stories about Abraham and Lot is a very tenuous one, and this story is to be treated as an independent unit. I would argue that despite the uniqueness of this story, one can discern in it the continuation of the trend of a three-way opposition between Abram, Lot, and Sodom, which serves as the foundation for the array of stories about Abraham and Lot. Gunkel noted that mentioning Lot in a story dealing with an international war is strange. However, as Cotes clarifies, this story functions as part of the array of the Abraham and Lot stories: “[*yellow highlighted*]” In the context of the array of stories about Abraham and Lot, chapter 14 contributes to the three-way opposition between Abram, Lot, and Sodom.

In chapter 14, Lot is a secondary character whose functional role is that of an agent. Lot’s capture is the reason for Abram’s intervention in the war between the kings. However, the way in which Lot is portrayed in the story also serves as a contrasting backdrop to the figure of Abram. In the course of the story, Lot is portrayed as an object which is moved from place to place:

“[*yellow highlighted*]”

These two verses begin and end with similar words – “and they took” and “and they went.” Despite the fact that many citizens of the cities of the plain were captured together with Lot, Lot was the only person among the four components of the booty taken by the four kings. After Abram’s victory in the battle, the booty reverts to its owners:

“[*yellow highlighted*]”

Like the repetition in the verses describing his being taken captive, here too, the verb ‘to retrieve’ appears twice, once in connection with the generic booty of Sodom and Gomorrah, and once in connection with Lot and his property. Lot is mentioned both in the description of his being taken captive and when he is retrieved and is surrounded by an abundance of property. He is taken captive together with property, and in the end, he is retrieved together with property. Lot’s placement in the list of the spoils, surrounded by property, depicts him as an object that is transported like property.

The depiction of the figure of Abram in chapter 14 stands in stark contrast to the manner in which Lot is depicted in this chapter. The scholarship has already pointed out the opposition between Abram and Lot in this chapter and stressed various aspects of the opposition. According to Alexander, the focus of the opposition is the two figures’ opposite fates: “Lot’s desire for an easy life leads only to disaster, whereas Abraham prospers to such a degree that he even wields influence on the international affairs of the nations of the region…” Ever since their separation, Lot’s fortunes worsened, his dwelling place was conquered by foreigners and he was captured, while Abram thrives. According to Cotes, the focus of the opposition is the contrast between the passivity and weakness of Lot and the activity and strength of Abram. Lot is completely passive in this story: “[yellow highlighted].” The portrayal of Lot as an object which is taken and later retrieved with the booty stands in total contrast to Abram, who is depicted as a quasi-king who changes the course of history and triumphs over the kings:

“[yellow highlighted]”

I agree with Alexander and Cotes’ arguments concerning the opposition between Abram and Lot. However, one must add another dimension, which – in my opinion – is the primary focus in the opposition between Abram and Lot in chapter 14. After Abram’s victory, the narrative relates Abram’s encounters with the king of Sodom and with Melchizedek, the King of Salem. In contrast to the concise description of Abram’s victory in the battle, when describing Abram’s encounters with the kings, the narrative transitions into extensive scenario reporting, including a detailed dialogue. The scope of the description of the encounters and its style led a number of scholars to the conclusion that these encounters constitute the climax of the story. Van Strauss, who notes the transition into scenario reporting based on dialogue in the encounter between Abram and the king of Sodom, has difficulty understanding what this encounter contributes to the story:

“[yellow highlighted]”

In my opinion, Van Strauss ignored the focus of the story. Abram’s conquest of the four kings raises a very intriguing question: How will Abram act towards Sodom and its king? This question is a central one in the story and connects to a key topic in the array of stories about Abraham and Lot – the relationship between Abram and Lot and their association with Sodom. The encounter between Abram and the king of Sodom is very significant because it is the only time when there is direct contact between Abram and Sodom. This encounter presents Abram with a dilemma as to how to act towards Sodom and its king. In the encounter, the king of Sodom neither blesses nor thanks Abram. Rather, he begins to negotiate coldly: “[*verse*]” (14:21). Despite the fact that according to the premise of the story Abram had rights to all of the property as the conqueror, he refrained from taking any of the spoils for himself. Abram’s relinquishing the booty stands in total contrast to the way Lot is depicted in the story. Lot is always depicted as being surrounded by property and his appearing as part of the booty which was taken and later retrieved, suggests the image of Lot himself as property. Lot, who is drawn to Sodom because of its fruit, is ultimately transformed into part of the property of Sodom. Lot’s material nature stands in stark contrast to Abram’s absolute relinquishment of the booty.

However, the opposition between Abram and Lot is not merely a contrast between materialism and a willingness to forego property. A popular opinion in the scholarship views Abram’s relinquishment of the booty as a magnanimous gesture on the part of a victorious warrior. As Gunkel states: “[yellow highlighted]” A similar approach is offered by Mofas:

“[yellow highlighted]”

According to this opinion, Abram’s forgoing the booty derives from generosity and nobility. Mofas and others even raise the possibility that Abram and Sodom, together with Lot, were formal allies. Indeed, Gunkel was surprised at the close relationship between Abram and the king of Sodom: “It is very surprising that this section describes cordial relations between Abraham and Sodom, which everywhere else is mentioned in disgust. This is but one of this chapter’s many difficult riddles.”

In my opinion, these interpretations are not compatible with the reason which Abram gives for his not partaking of the booty: “[*verse*]” (14:22-23). Abram’s relinquishment does not derive from generosity or friendship with Sodom. On the contrary, his relinquishment derives from his aversion to Sodom. The encounter between Abram and the king of Sodom is not a friendly one, but rather it is an encounter resulting in a total rift. Abram is unwilling to take even that which the king of Sodom agrees to give him, so that he will not have any association with Sodom whatsoever. Abram’s conduct does not derive from an anti-materialistic approach or generosity. The stories about Abram clearly show that Abram has no compunctions about accepting property from Pharaoh, king of Egypt (12:16) or Abimelech, king of Gerar (20:14, 16). Abram is not an anti-materialistic figure. Nor does his refusal to partake of the booty derive from his assessment that the booty does not belong to him. His refusal to partake of the booty derives from his opposition to the king of Sodom and all that he represents, not to the booty itself. Abram does not merely turn down the king of Sodom’s offer, he also backs up his refusal with an oath with a raised hand. In my opinion, this oath not only demonstrates the intensity of Abram’s rejection of the king of Sodom’s offer, it also hints at its motivation. Abram’s desire to ensure a total break with Sodom derives from his association with the Lord. One who is associated with the Lord, the highest God, cannot be associated with Sodom whose citizens are “[*verse*]” (13:13), even in the slightest.

This position of Abram’s stands in total contrast to the approach of Lot who dwells in Sodom. Contrary to what one would expect, Lot is not mentioned in the conclusion of the chapter, we are not told of any conversation between him and Abram after he was rescued, nor of Lot expressing gratitude to his savior. Cotes notes that the absence of any mention of Lot in the final section of the story strengthens the connection between Lot and Sodom and its king. “[yellow highlighted].” In complete contrast to Lot, who settles in Sodom and is now represented by the king of Sodom who requests the people of Sodom for himself, Abram rejects any association with Sodom and its king. The opposition between Abram and Lot in chapter 14 contrasts not only their opposite fates, or the activity of Abram and the passivity of Lot, but also their opposing connection and relationship to Sodom.

**The Dramas of Opposing Choices: Lot’s Choice** **(chapter 13)** **and Abram’s Choice (chapter 14)**

The highly significant encounter between Abram and the king of Sodom (14:17, 21-24) is interrupted by another encounter, between Abram and Melchizedek, the King of Salem (14:18-20). The question of the meaning of the interweaving of the encounter between Abram and Melchizedek into the context of the encounter between Abram and the king of Sodom occupies and challenges all of the commentators. Van Strauss is surprised at the very mention of the encounter between Melchizedek and Abram in this narrative, as well as its placement within the story:

“[yellow highlighted]”

The conventional wisdom in the diachronic scholarship is that the conclusion of the story describing the encounters between Abram and the kings is not unified, but rather is a composite taken from different sources. Many various and sundry theories have been put forward in terms of the time and thrust of the additions to the story. The common denominator of the various theories is an ethical/ political approach.

The suggestions in the scholarship for identifying the period in which Abram’s encounter with Melchizedek, the King of Salem was inserted into the general story, and the explanations that have been given for the thrust of its insertion, are numerous. On the other hand, discussions of the scene and its role in current context in the story are rare. Vanhem stresses the importance of paying attention to the meaning of the story of Abram’s encounters with the kings in its current form: “As far as the editor is concerned, Melchizedek and the king of Sodom both met with Abram at the same time. In the current context, verses 18-20 are not meant to be taken as a separate event.” Abram’s encounter with Melchizedek is not entirely disconnected from the story surrounding it. A comparison between Abram’s two encounters with the kings reveals a number of linguistic links connecting them. In both scenes, the root *ytza* [go out] is used to describe the king’s action (14:17,18) and the phrase “highest God” is used. Similarly, there is an echo of the word *maaser* (14:20) in Abram’s encounter with Melchizedek, in the word *he’esharti* (14:23) mentioned in the encounter with the king of Sodom.

A number of scholars point out a thrust of opposition between Melchizedek, the King of Salem’s reception for Abram and the reception of the king of Sodom. An example of this can be found in Vanhem’s statement:

“[yellow highlighted]”

Whereas it states concerning the king of Sodom: “[*verse*]” without specifying any expression of gratitude towards Abram, concerning Melchizedek it states: “[*verse*].”

I agree with the argument that there is a thrust of opposition between Melchizedek and the king of Sodom, however, I do not think that this is the central thrust in the verses. It is neither Melchizedek nor the king of Sodom who is central in the story, rather it is Abram. In my opinion, the central thrust of the story is not to contrast the conduct of Melchizedek with that of the king of Sodom, but rather to contrast Abram’s relationship to the two kings. Skinner argues along similar lines:

Removing the episode of Melchizedek, which interrupts the connection between verses 17 and 21 is tempting and easy, but it is questionable whether it is justified… it is more plausible that the narrator’s goal is to bring the three players together on the same stage in order to show the difference between Abraham’s relationship to a sacred authority (Melchizedek) and a secular one (the king of Sodom).

According to Skinner, the motive for interweaving the encounter between Abram and Melchizedek into the report about Abram’s encounter with the king of Sodom is wanting to contrast Abram’s relationship to the two kings and all they represent. Skinner’s argument even leads him to reject the diachronic scholarship’s conventual wisdom that the narrative is constructed from various sources. What many bible critics consider to be a gross interruption of the natural flow of the story of Abram’s encounter with the king of Sodom by the insertion of a separate source, is considered by Skinner to be unified and deliberate composition, intended to create a contrast.

I have explained Abram’s refusal to take anything from Sodom’s property as deriving from an aversion to the king of Sodom and from his desire to ensure a total break between him and Sodom and all that it represents. In contrast to the deliberate break which characterized the relations between Abram and the king of Sodom, the relationship between Abram and Melchizedek is characterized by closeness. Melchizedek greets Abram with bread, wine and blessings. Some have suggested that presenting Abram with bread and wine should be viewed as establishing a covenant with him. Most maintain that presenting him with bread and wine is a mark of esteem, intended to feed the conquering army. In response to Melchizedek’s greeting and blessing, Abram gives Melchizedek a tithe of the booty. Some view the giving of a tithe to Melchizedek as a reflection of the laws governing division of spoils of war or an obligatory tax, paid by merchants who are under the protection of the king. In my opinion, the fact that Melchizedek is presented as the king of Salem and a priest of the highest God lends a religious/ ritualistic tone to the giving of the tithe. This is not a standard case of dividing spoils of war or of paying taxes. Rather, it is a gift which makes a religious statement. I concur with what Skinner says about the subject: “By paying the tithe, Abraham recognizes Melchizedek’ priesthood and the religious bond of belief in one God which unites them.” This argument gains force in light of Melchizedek’s blessing Abram in the name of the highest God and the linguistic parallelism between Melchizedek’s words and those of Abram, below. The appellation ‘highest God’ appears three times in the context of the scene involving Melchizedek (14:18-20), once with the addition of the description “creator of heaven and earth” (14:19). In the encounter between Abram and the king of Sodom, Abram swears in the name of “the Lord, the highest God, creator of heaven and earth” (14:22). Abram swears in the name of the very same “highest God, creator of heaven and earth” mentioned in connection with Melchizedek, with the addition of the name “the Lord.” This surprising parallelism between the references to God in the words of the priest- Canaanite king and the words of Abram is deliberate and significant. According to Gunkel: “Abraham deliberately mentions the name of the Lord, in order to show that Abram’s God is also the God of Melchizedek.” Gunkel goes so far as to explain the absence of any mention of the name “the Lord” in Melchizedek’s words as a deliberate and necessary thrust in the context of the creation of a religious connection between Abram and Melchizedek:

“[yellow highlighted]”

The interpretations which I suggested for Abram’s encounter with Melchizedek and with the king of Sodom raise a number of questions. One question is: What is the purpose of the contrast between Abram’s relationship with Melchizedek and his relationship with the king of Sodom, a contrast achieved by means of interweaving the encounter with Melchizedek into the encounter with the king of Sodom? A further question is: What is the meaning of the unique presentation of Melchizedek as a priest of the highest God who is close to Abram religiously/ ritually?

In my opinion, the answer to these questions is rooted in the intent to create a contrast between Abram’s decision in the story of his rescuing Lot from captivity (Genesis 14) and Lot’s decision in the previous story concerning Abram and Lot’s parting (Genesis 13). The focal point of the story of Abram and Lot’s parting (Genesis 13) is Lot’s agreeing to part from Abram and his choosing to dwell in the Jordan Plain, in the city of Sodom. The main ‘kernel of the plot’ – the moment of decision which serves as the central nexus of the suspense – is Lot’s decision. In the story of Lot’s rescue from captivity (chapter 14), Lot functions as a secondary character – an agent – whereas Abram is central to the story. The central ‘kernel of the plot’ is the decision which Abram makes in response to the king of Sodom’s offer: “[*verse*]” (Genesis 14:21). Both decisions – that of Lot in chapter 13 and that of Abram in chapter 14 – take place in the context of a situation involving the acquisition of property/ booty. Lot’s decision involved both separating from Abram and attaching himself to Sodom. In order for the two decisions to be somewhat symmetrical, it is not sufficient to present Abram’s choice as one between accepting a portion of the booty of Sodom or refusing to take it. Ultimately, Lot’s decision is between dwelling with Abram and dwelling with Sodom. Therefore, the story of Lot’s rescue from captivity requires a figure parallel to Abram to serve as an alternative to the king of Sodom. In my opinion, this is Melchizedek’s role in the story. The interweaving of the encounter between Abram and Melchizedek into the context of the encounter between Abram and the king of Sodom presents Abram with the possibility of choosing an alternative to the king of Sodom which is, to a large degree, parallel to the role of Abram in Lot’s decision in chapter 13. Abram in chapter 13 and Melchizedek in chapter 14 fill the same slot, or, to use the terminology of the structuralists, the same plot role (actants). This parallelism in terms of roles might explain the point of comparison between the two figures, Abram and Melchizedek, a parallelism which has already been pointed out by commentators. Hamilton notes: “[yellow highlighted].” Abram and Melchizedek both integrate royalty with priesthood. Melchizedek is referred to as the king of Salem as well as a priest to the highest God. Abram intervenes in the war between the kings and leads his allies to victory against the four kings. Aside from his activity in the “royal” field, Abram is a religious figure, cleaving to the Lord and observing his commandments. It follows that there is a parallelism between the choice facing Lot (chapter 13) and Abram (chapter 14), and a contrast between their decisions:

Chapter 13 Chapter 14

Melchizedek

Abram The king of Sodom

Lot Abram

Lot parts from Abram, the Lord’s chosen one, as well as from the land of Canaan, and settles in in the fertile Jordan Plain, with the people of Sodom who are “[*verse*]” (Genesis 13:13). In contrast to Lot, Abram rejects any association with Sodom, and refuses to take anything from the booty offered him by the king of Sodom. On the other hand, Abram gives a tithe of the booty to Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the highest God. In both stories, the choice is between association with the Lord (by means of associating with His followers) and association with Sodom. These two adjacent dramas of decision are mirror images which create a contrast between Abram’s decision (chapter 14) and Lot’s (chapter 13). The proliferation of property spurs Lot’s parting from Abram and his association with Sodom. By contrast, despite the abundance of booty, Abram refuses any association with Sodom. On the other hand, he utilizes the booty for the purpose of connecting to Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the highest God.