

JEHORAM AND THE CANNIBAL MOTHERS (2 KINGS 6.24-33):  
SOLOMON'S JUDGMENT IN AN INVERTED WORLD

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In 2 Kgs 6.26 a woman appeals to the king of Israel for help. Famine has gripped the besieged city of Samaria, and the king is walking along the walls unable to relieve his people's hunger. At first the king assumes that the woman wants him to provide her with food and wine, even though such aid could only come from Yahweh. The woman's testimony reveals that she has already taken action to relieve her hunger; in fact, her grievance concerns that action. Another woman had suggested that the complainant give her son to be eaten that day, and tomorrow they would eat the other woman's son. They then boiled and ate the first woman's son. But when she asked the other woman to give *her* son to be eaten on the next day, the other woman hid him. The king responds to these words by tearing his clothes, revealing that he has been wearing sack-cloth beneath. He then vows that Elisha's head will no longer remain on his body by the end of the day. Elisha, sitting in his house with the elders, is aware of the king's intention, and orders his door to be held shut. Nevertheless, when the king arrives he does not act with violence. Instead, he<sup>1</sup> attributes the

1. Reading *hmlk* for MT *hml'k*. In the context of 2 Kgs 6.24-33 the verse makes most sense if the speaker is the king himself, as opposed to his messenger (see next note). This reading is also supported by 7.18, as noted by Cogan and Tadmor (1988: 80).

present disaster to Yahweh, and asks why he should wait for Yahweh any longer.<sup>1</sup>

What is one to make of the story? How might the ancient audience have responded to it? To be sure, readers of the exilic and post-exilic periods<sup>2</sup> would not be totally surprised by the thought of parental cannibalism, which is threatened, or reported to have occurred during siege, in five other books of the Hebrew Bible, and which is one of the curses mentioned in eighth- and seventh-century Assyrian treaties (see below). At the same time, this story includes some bizarre elements which are unique even in the biblical context. Foremost among these is the complainant's callousness and her utter obliviousness to the fact that she has committed an abominable crime. When she approaches the king her sole concern is with the injustice she believes she has suffered because the other woman reneged on an agreement. She states all this publicly without shame, and even acts as though she assumes the king will share her view of the situation. Retaining an absurdly narrow focus on a relatively trivial issue while ignoring a colossal problem is typical of characters in comedy (see §1, below). Could this account of atrocities committed during a siege actually contain elements of grotesque humor?

1. While commentators often conclude that this story ends at 6.31 or 7.2, in terms of its central thrust 6.33 is the natural conclusion. Verses 32-33 report what follows after the king's vow to kill Elisha. Assuming that the king is the speaker in v. 33 (see previous note), that verse registers the king's desperation and belief that only Yahweh could help, the same attitude he had expressed in v. 27. Verse 32 contrasts the king's response with the passive Elisha, prompting readers to compare and judge their respective attitudes (see §4 and §5, below). Although 7.1 seems to be Elisha's response to the king's words in 6.33, 7.1-2 actually constitutes a transition to a new series of events in which the focus shifts to the fulfillment of Elisha's prophecy as punishment for the disbelieving adjutant of 7.2. Nor does Elisha's prophecy in 7.1 respond to the troubling ethical questions raised by 6.24-33 concerning Elisha's earlier failure to intervene.

2. Nelson (1987: 4-8) has made a composite portrait of the book's original and intended late-exilic audience by using clues from 1-2 Kings and several other biblical books. Other factors which must be taken into consideration when attempting to define the intended audience will be discussed below.

In this paper I will view this story from several perspectives in an attempt to answer such questions about possible audience response. I will begin by investigating the mother's cannibalism in terms of the metaphorical values of parental and social cannibalism in the Hebrew Bible and Assyrian treaties. Here, as in some tribal societies, cannibalism serves as the most violent symbol of a society characterized by lack of trust, disruption of family ties, and advancement at others' expense. Stories of parental cannibalism can also function as examples of the world-upside-down *topos*. In the Hebrew Bible, this *topos* describes the topsy-turvy behavior of idolaters. However, it also describes characters such as the cannibal mother and the Levite of Judges 19, whose perversity is epitomized by their total obliviousness to the crimes they have committed against those who are nearest and dearest to them.

Finally, I will attempt to determine the social function of 2 Kgs 6.24-33 by contrasting it with the similar story of Solomon's judgment, which carries a comforting message about the stability of human nature and monarchical justice. Even Solomon's godlike insight into human nature would be useless in the topsy-turvy world of this narrative. The only verdict King Jehoram can deliver is death for Elisha, the one person able to set things aright. In spite of this death-order, the king is presented sympathetically here and in other reports of his interaction with Elisha. The story is not a peasant-inspired satire on the ruling elite, as LaBarbera contends. It is grappling with problems far more basic to the reality-concept of all Israelites. In terms of the ethics of reading, those who identify with the desperate king and share his perspective will be led to question a divine justice devoid of maternal compassion which punishes the guilty by inverting human nature itself.

### 1. *Cannibalism and the Breakdown of Society*

One might argue that readers of 2 Kgs 6.24-33 would be expected to view maternal cannibalism as retribution for violation of the Sinai covenant, as do speakers in Lamentations (2.17, 20; 4.10; 5.7; see further below). Parental cannibalism is one of the curses for covenant violation listed in Leviticus and Deuteronomy (Lev. 26.29; Deut. 28.53-57). In fact, when the

apocryphal book of Baruch alludes to what occurred in Jerusalem according to the word of Moses, parental cannibalism is the only curse specifically cited (2.2-3). Parental cannibalism is also mentioned in several Assyrian treaties, as well as in Mesopotamian texts as old as the *Curse of Agade* and *Atrahasis*.<sup>1</sup> Although not all scholars agree that the curses in Deuteronomy 28 are modeled on Assyrian treaties,<sup>2</sup> it is probable that readers of Deuteronomy would have taken the references to parental cannibalism as a conventional way of epitomizing the devastating results of treaty violation, whether or not the book's author had intended to emulate Assyrian practice. At the same time, one need not conclude with Hillers that this 'literary commonplace' merely serves a *poetic* function 'as a traditional and expressive way of depicting the severity of the suffering' during a famine (1983: 157, 160). Further analysis of biblical examples will suggest that this literary convention probes fundamental contradictions in human social behavior, contradictions which may have had profound *historical* consequences in ancient Israel during periods of social strain.

A closer examination of Deut. 28.53-57 can illustrate this point. After predicting that the tender and delicate man will eat his children, refusing to share the meal with his brother, wife and remaining children because 'his eye will be evil against' them, Moses describes the case of the mother:

1. *Curse of Agade*, lines 237-38 (Cooper 1983: 61; cf. Hillers 1983: 158); *Atrahasis*, Neo-Assyrian Version 2.6.35-37, 48-50 (*ANET*, 3rd edn, 105-106); treaty between Ashurnirari V and Mat'ilu, rev. 4.10-11 (*ANET*, 3rd edn, 533); vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon, lines 448-50, 547-50, 570-72 (*ANET*, 3rd edn, 538-40); cf. Assurbanipal's annals (*ANET*, 3rd edn, 298, 300).

2. For arguments favoring an Assyrian *Vorlage*, see especially Weinfeld 1972: 116-29. Arguing against this position is Nicholson (1986: 52-86, esp. 72-78). Nicholson's critique of Weinfeld and McCarthy is weakened by his exclusive focus on the hypothetical author's conscious intentions. He is more concerned with the stages of redaction through which the curses have presumably passed than with the way the present form was received by *its* ancient audience (see, e.g., p. 74). An analysis of the ways in which the ancient audience might have received this material must accompany any speculation on possible authorial intention (see Lasine 1984b: 27-28).

The tender and delicate woman among you, who would not chance to set the sole of her foot upon the ground for delicateness and tenderness, her eye shall be evil against the husband of her bosom, and against her son, and against her daughter; and against her afterbirth that comes out from between her feet, and against her children whom she shall bear; for she shall eat them for want of all things secretly . . . (Deut. 28.56-57).<sup>1</sup>

Driver (1902: 315-16) comments that the cannibalism is dwelt upon here to illustrate in two vivid pictures 'the ghastly reversal of natural affection' caused by the siege. The extreme reversal of the mother's situation is highlighted by the double mention of her feet. Whereas earlier she was too delicate to touch her foot to the ground, now she grudges to her family the afterbirth between her feet.

More significant is the fact that these tableaux add another, apparently lesser, 'crime' to the cannibalism. It isn't bad enough that the parents ate the kids; they had to be hogs about it, refusing to share the feast with those near and dear to them! This recalls the second mother in 2 Kings 6, who, according to the complainant, has hidden her son instead of sharing him (v. 29).<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on the seemingly minor sin of selfish hoarding might seem absurd when the basic problem is the major crime of cannibalism. Yet a serious point underlies the connection. The breaking of trust, and failure to share freely with others, including family members, is itself symptomatic of a society capable of social cannibalism. Interestingly, the expression 'eye be evil against' (*rā'ā 'ayin b<sup>e</sup>*) appears elsewhere only in Deut. 15.9. Here Moses admonishes his audience not to let their eye be evil against their needy brother so

1. The fact that only the mother is said to eat the children 'secretly' may be motivated by the assumption that she, unlike the father, lacks the physical strength necessary to fend off those who would otherwise force her to share the repast.

2. There is no textual support for Laffey's assumption that this verse presents a unique example of 'the "maternal instinct" winning out over the instinct of "self-preservation"' (1988: 81). According to the complainant, the second mother has just acted to preserve her life by eating a human child; the text offers no hint that she is now prepared to save her own child at the cost of her life.

that they give him nothing, just because the year of release is at hand and their loan might not be repaid. Such 'base thoughts in the heart' (v. 9) undermine the sense of responsibility toward others which is necessary to maintain the community.

This connection between parental cannibalism and a wider breakdown in social relations is already found in Akkadian texts. References 'to the disruption of family ties' are characteristic of Babylonian 'siege documents' (Oppenheim 1955: 78-79; cf. 72-73). The vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon not only mention eating the flesh of one's children, but also adults eating one another, and mothers barring their doors to their daughters (lines 448-50; *ANET*, 3rd edn, 538). These connections are thoroughly explored by the biblical prophets. When Jeremiah quotes Yahweh's prediction of the plagues which will beset Jerusalem during the siege because of the people's sins, Yahweh declares that he will not only make the people eat the flesh of their children but also the flesh of their neighbors (19.9). Such accounts of society-wide cannibalism had already been given by the eighth-century prophets Isaiah and Micah, who describe the breakdown of social order and trust in terms of cannibalizing one's neighbors. According to Isaiah, every man eats the flesh of his own arm, or (following the Targum<sup>1</sup>) his neighbor's flesh (9.18-19). Micah accuses the leaders themselves of cannibalism. They eat the flesh of the people, flay their skin, break their bones, and chop them up like meat boiled in a cauldron (3.3). Ezekiel claims that the shepherds of Israel have fed themselves on their sheep rather than feeding those sheep (34.2-3; cf. Zech. 11.5, 9). According to Psalm 14, no one at all does good and all the evil-doers eat up Yahweh's people as they eat bread (vv. 3-4).

The prophetic descriptions of social cannibalism are usually accompanied by reports of related social problems which ultimately stem from a breakdown in trust among all members of the society. Micah describes everyone as lying in wait for blood, with every man hunting his brother with a net (7.2). One cannot trust one's closest friends or relatives, who have become one's enemies (7.5-6). Isaiah precedes his account of social cannibalism by asserting that no one spares his brother (9.18).

1. Reading Hebrew *rē'ô* for MT *z'rô'ô*.

According to Jeremiah, no brother can be trusted; all brothers and neighbors deceive one another (9.3-5).

In 2 Kgs 6.24-33 a breakdown of social relations is not only implied by the nature of the complainant's crime but by her exaggerated obliviousness to the horrible nature of her actions. Her inattentiveness to the way others might view her deed shows that she lacks the public emotion of shame, which makes possible orderly social relations (see Gilmore 1982: 198; Gouldner 1965: 85-86). The fact that her extreme obliviousness is actually *comic* also indicates that her relations with other people have been ruptured. As Bergson observes, comedy begins

at the point where our neighbor's personality ceases to affect us. It begins... with... a *growing callousness to social life*. Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow-beings (1956: 147).

Moreover, a mechanically rigid focus on one object, such as the cannibal mother's focus on her lawsuit, is also typical of comic characters, in that it reveals a person's likeness to a thing (Bergson 1956: 117). Thus, the comic element of the mother's behavior underscores the inhumanity of her cannibalism. Bergson believes that an audience's laughter at such behavior is itself a 'social gesture' which acts as a corrective to obliviousness toward others (pp. 117, 187).

The biblical reports of a 'dog eat dog' society imply that when people lose their sense of shame and ignore laws designed to protect others' rights as persons, they may devour one another without their deity having to punish them with the curse of cannibalism. This troubling conclusion may already have been reached by the mishnaic rabbi Hanina, who recommends that one 'pray for the peace of the government, since, but for the fear of it, we men would swallow one another's neighbors alive' (*Abot* 3.2). In 2 Kings 6, however, the government represented by Jehoram is incapable of preventing cannibalism. It is beyond his power to 'stabilize' his country in the manner of the just king described in Prov. 29.4 or the Solomon of 1 Kings 3.

Evidence for a relationship between social cannibalism and

the destructive emotions of envy<sup>1</sup> and competitiveness can be found in modern tribal societies as well as in other ancient cultures. Ancient Greek sources describe cannibalism during siege, ritual cannibalism, and maternal cannibalism as a divine punishment.<sup>2</sup> Reference to social cannibalism can be found as early as the eighth century, when Hesiod implies that humans would eat each other if Zeus had not given them law and justice (*Works and Days*, 276-79). Competitiveness and predatory envy were driving forces in classical Greek culture (see Gouldner 1965: 41-77). If Aristotle defines the human being as the social or 'political' animal (*Pol.* 1253a3), the contrary of this lawful, social being is Homer's Polyphemos, who is a lawless and antisocial cannibal.<sup>3</sup>

Among modern tribal societies, the inhabitants of Goodenough Island in the southwest Pacific have reportedly eaten their children during famine even in the current century.<sup>4</sup>

1. Some anthropologists assert that envy can generate violence capable of destroying societies (see Lasine 1989a: 71-72, 81 n. 13).

2. Thucydides (2.70) reports cases of cannibalism caused by starvation during the siege of Potidaea. Suggestions of ritual cannibalism accompany some accounts of Dionysiac *ōmophagia* (see Dodds 1960: xviii-xix, xxvi, 224), while Orpheus is at times credited with eradicating primitive cannibalism (Guthrie 1966: 17, 24 n. 5, 40; cf. Plato, *Laws* 782c). Dionysus is also said to have punished the disbelieving daughters of Minyas by driving them to commit maternal cannibalism (Plutarch, *Greek Questions* 38; Halliday 1975: 30, 164-68).

3. *Odyssey*, Book 9. If the parents of Deut. 28.53-57 are not only guilty of eating their children but of selfish hoarding as well, Homer's Polyphemos is not only a host who eats his guests, but one who has atrocious manners and an uncouth habit of drinking 'unmixed milk' (9.297) instead of mixed wine with the cannibal feast. When Aristotle himself wishes to illustrate the nadir of human brutishness he too cites cases of cannibalism, including parental cannibalism, among uncivilized non-Greeks (*Eth. Nic.* 1148b 22-24).

4. Goodenough Island is often subject to drought and therefore famine (Young 1971: 3-4). There is evidence that friends exchanged children with one another for food, and that a father murdered his child to eat with his relatives, during the great famine of 1900 (see Sunday 1986: 209). Concerning the interpretation of actual cases of cannibalism together with *stories* about cannibalism, one should keep in mind an observation made by Sahlins in his study of Fijian cannibalism: 'cannibalism is always "symbolic", even when it is "real"' (1983:



According to the folk history and myths of one of the Good-enough villages, cannibalism ended when the mission and government came (Sanday 1986: 210). The story that relates how cannibalism ended 'indicates that excessive competition and jealousy between leaders is responsible for famine, cannibalism, and near social extinction' (*ibid.*).<sup>1</sup> The cannibalism described in the tale includes people killing one another for food, and exchanging their children to eat. According to Young (1971: 188), this story demonstrates that famine ultimately means 'the total negation of social life', which is partly expressed by 'that terrible symbol of cultural suicide, the eating of children'. In the biblical context, the eating of children is both cultural and religious suicide, for it is through the children that the covenant with Yahweh is kept alive.

## 2. *Cannibalism and the World-Upside-Down Topos*

Because the behavior of parents and leaders who feed on their dependents is the exact opposite of what is normally expected of them, such cannibalism indicates that, in this sense at least, the world is upside down.<sup>2</sup> The same is true for ordinary citi-

88). That is, it always has a symbolic value as part of a people's 'cultural logic' or 'total cultural scheme' (1983: 90, 88).

1. The fact that the introduction of the mission and government put an end to cannibalism associated with excessive competition and jealousy accords with Girard's view (1977: 20-24) that sacrificial religion and a judicial system can control social violence generated by mimetic rivalry. Cf. Lewis (1986: 66-67), who reports that among some African peoples cannibalism is believed to be practiced by witches, whose defining trait is their use of 'sinister forces to achieve selfish ends to the disadvantage of virtuous citizens and neighbors. Success... is at the expense of others.' According to Lewis, these witches become 'endowed with all the antisocial vices that are the counterparts of corresponding social virtues', such as 'sexual perversion, incest, and the ultimate denial of human sociability and commensality—cannibalism'.

2. If sacrifice seeks to curb the violence stemming from rivalries and other forms of social violence, cannibalism can be viewed as a topsyturvy form of 'sacrifice' which actually exemplifies what sacrifice normally serves to *prevent*, namely, rampant social violence and chaos. The stories that describe how Dionysus punished women with

zens who hunt and 'devour' one another instead of loving their neighbors. It should therefore not be surprising that in prophetic texts these behaviors are associated with other classic themes related to the world-upside-down *topos*. Thus, Micah precedes his portrait of the leaders' cannibalism by declaring that they hate good and love evil (3.2). Isaiah predicts that boys will be princes and the child will be insolent toward the aged, while neighbors will oppress one another (3.4-5). Lamentations 5 asserts that servants rule over the populace and princes are hanged by their hands (vv. 8, 12). The speaker uses *hāpak*, the key biblical term for inversion, to describe how their inheritance is turned over to strangers and their dance into mourning (vv. 2, 15).

Treaty curses typically depict a world turned upside-down. In the *Curse of Agade*, the cattle slaughterer will slaughter his wife and aristocrats who eat fine food will lie hungry in the grass (lines 237, 249; Cooper 1983: 61, 63). In the treaty between Ashurnirari V and Mat'ilu cursed warriors will change into women (rev. v 9, 12-13; Hillers 1964: 66). The Aramaic Sefire treaty uses the root *hpk* to describe the way good things will be turned to evil and the gods will overturn a man and his house with all that is in it (I, C, 19, 21; Fitzmyer 1967: 20-21). In Deuteronomy 28, the curses often invert the blessings described by Moses earlier in the chapter. For example, v. 43 predicts that the stranger in your midst will mount up above you higher and higher while you go down lower and lower, whereas v. 13 had declared that you shall be the head and not the tail, above and not beneath. This case is particularly noteworthy because the curse emphasizes a social situation which is a zero-sum game, that is, a situation in which one wins only by another's loss. In societies which promote such competitiveness and destructive envy, social cohesion and trust are weakened, and people tend to 'feed on' one another in precisely the way described by the prophets.

The presence of the inverted world *topos* in a text can signal

maternal cannibalism for failing to accept his cult can be understood as conveying this message. If one rejects the sacrificial solution to uncontrolled violence, perverted social behaviors like cannibalism will be the result.

that from the author's perspective the proper social hierarchy has been perverted. Thus, when Qoheleth claims that he has seen slaves on horses and princes walking like slaves on the ground (10.6-7), Crenshaw (1987: 171) observes that this social conservative is giving voice to the dominant attitudes of those sages who enjoyed the advantages of privilege. According to Crenshaw, the Preacher is thinking, 'How dare the ruler allow social upheaval to invert the upper and lower strata of society?' Similarly, Van Leeuwen, pointing to world-upside-down symbolism in Prov. 30.21-23, argues that the poem's origin is in the royal court, and that its social function is 'to maintain respect for right order at all levels of society' (1986: 603). As described by these scholars, such depictions of social inversion illustrate what Geertz (1973: 201-202) calls 'interest ideology', because they are designed to promote the interests and maintain the power of those at the top of the social hierarchy.

However, the world-upside-down *topos* often mocks and challenges the hierarchy of the day (Kunzle 1978: 74), as illustrated by its use in conjunction with peasant rebellions in Reformation Europe (see Kunzle 1978: 61-82). One German peasant leader who protested that the peasants had been turned into beasts of burden was asked what kind of animal he represented. He replied that it was 'a beast that usually feeds on roots and wild herbs, but when driven by hunger, sometimes consumes priests, bishops, and fat citizens' (Kunzle, 63). Here the speaker threatens to reverse the present situation, in which leaders cannibalize the poor. In one sense this threat recalls Hosea's claim that the people of the Northern Kingdom 'devour their judges' (7.7). However, Hosea is not siding with the people against wicked leaders; the people themselves are all 'hot as an oven' (7.4-7) with their devouring lusts. Here the image of cannibalism signals total anarchy rather than a reversal of the social hierarchy.

### 3. *The World-Upside-Down Topos in 2 Kings 6.24-33*

The fact that the world-upside-down *topos* is elsewhere associated with peasant interests at first seems to support LaBarbera's claim that the story of the cannibal mother, together

with the rest of 2 Kgs 6.8–7.20, constitutes ‘a cleverly constructed satire on the ruling elite of the day’ (1984: 637). He believes that the ultimate source of such traditions is in a ‘peasant milieu’, even if this biting social commentary was not actually ‘composed by peasants in its final form’ (1984: 637, 651). In arguing for his hypothesis LaBarbera does not discuss the woman’s cannibalism as an example of the inverted world *topos*, in spite of the fact that it is the only textual feature which might support his interpretation.<sup>1</sup> LaBarbera’s theory requires that the people be shown in a favorable light and that the ruling elite be ridiculed. However, the king is portrayed sympathetically in most of 2 Kings 6–7 (see below), while the people, as represented by the cannibal mothers, are certainly not presented favorably. Rather, they exhibit the destructive behavior the prophets associate with rampant social breakdown on the part of ordinary citizens as well as leaders. Clearly, the troubling issues raised by 2 Kgs 6.24–33 are so elemental that they threaten all members of the social hierarchy.

The complainant’s obliviousness to the appalling nature of her crime is also an indicator of the inverted world *topos*. For

1. LaBarbera (1984: 637 n. 1) notes that he owes his ‘initial insights’ into the peasant origin of these stories to Marvin Chaney. More recently Chaney has argued that the Omrides did an ‘about-face on the peasantry of Israel’ which had a negative effect on the peasants (1986: 71). He contends that the royal quarter of Samaria, which was separated from the rest of the city by its own wall, ‘was but one architectural manifestation of sharply increased social stratification’. According to Chaney, the stereotyped characters which appear in the Elisha miracle stories grant us access to the ‘generic realities of the folk ethos and severe deprivation which shaped it’ (1986: 72). Peasants who were ‘forced to the brink’ by Omride policies ‘had been pushed into the void when natural disaster struck’ in the form of drought and famine. From the historical perspective, however, there is no evidence that anything like the siege famine described in 2 Kgs 6.24–33 could have occurred in Jehoram’s time (see below). From the literary perspective, it will become increasingly clear that the king is not presented as a stereotypical oppressor of peasants, but as a well-rounded personage whose despair and concern for his people invite a sympathetic response from readers. Finally, I have already shown that the cannibalism metaphor signals a social crisis which would affect all strata of the social hierarchy.

example, idolaters, who 'turn things upside down' (Isa. 29.16) by acting as though they create their creator, are oblivious to the fact that they hold a lie in their right hand, not a 'god' (Isa. 44.20). The complainant's behavior is also mirrored by the Levite of Judges 19. As I have shown elsewhere (Lasine 1984a), this narrative reveals what becomes of Lot's hospitality in an inverted world. This world is out of kilter because there is no king in Israel and every man does what is right in his own eyes, which is precisely what is evil in Yahweh's eyes. A mob demands to have intercourse with the Levite, just as the Sodomites desired Lot's angelic guests. While the angel-guests save Lot and blind the mob, the all-too-human Levite shoves his concubine out to the mob in order to save himself. He apparently has a good night's sleep while she is being gang-raped and beaten outside the entrance, only to emerge in the morning and address her lifeless body with the words, 'Up, let's get going' (v. 28), as though in a hurry to get on the road to beat the morning traffic. He acts totally unaware of the fact that she lies there tortured to death because he sacrificed her to save himself. He is not only oblivious to his responsibility for her death<sup>1</sup> but also to the horrible event itself. The Levite's absurd lack of awareness and his narrow focus on the petty goal of beginning the journey home serve the same function as the comic obliviousness and social myopia of the cannibal mother of 2 Kings 6. In both stories grotesque humor conveys the essence of an inverted world in which social relations have totally broken down.

2 Kgs 6.24-33 also resembles Judges 19 in the way the events are told. In both stories the narrator abstains from making any emotional response or making any judgment concerning the atrocities he or she is reporting. However, only 2 Kgs 6.24-33 describes a personage *within* the story who is not as detached as the narrator. This is the king, who registers the horror of the inverted world by making an urgent, desperate judgment. Although some readers detect humorous touches in the emotional responses and dress of the king,<sup>2</sup> his ultimate response—

1. The Levite also evades acknowledging his responsibility in his dishonest report to the assembled tribes in Judg. 20.5.

2. Schweizer (1974: 387) suggests that the narrator might have

the call for the death of Elisha—shows that he has not lost all sense of urgent social responsibility. Whether readers are being invited to share his perspective can only be determined after examining his character in 2 Kings 3–7, his role as a just king, and the ethical implications of the prophet Elisha's apparent detachment.

#### 4. *Solomon's Judgment, the Case of the Cannibal Mother, and the Character of Jehoram in 2 Kings 3–7*

If the king in 2 Kgs 6.24-33 is indeed motivated by a sense of social responsibility, can one conclude that the story is constructed so that readers will identify with the king at this point, sympathizing with his response, even if they do not agree with it? Is he attempting to enact the role of the just king, as did Solomon in the case of the harlot mothers (1 Kgs 3.16-28)? According to Würthwein (1984: 311), the king's sackcloth indicates that he has attempted to elicit God's help. Würthwein asks how the king could have made a judicial decision in a case such as this; a gesture of horrified agitation could be his only

injected a touch of humor in relation to the king's sackcloth-underwear. However, the king's repeated panicky and defeatist responses to crises may themselves be comic from Bergson's perspective, because they are mechanical and comically predictable (2 Kgs 3.10; 5.7; 6.27, 31; 7.12). A humorous element is particularly detectable in 5.6-7, which Nelson calls a 'comic complication' to the story (1987: 178). Here the humor would be generated by the exasperation Jehoram exhibits after receiving the Aramean king's letter concerning Naaman, a letter he misinterprets twice, first as implying that he personally should cure the leprosy, and then as a military trap. Nelson, as well as Thompson and Bigger (1989: 198), also detect 'black humor' in the following scene of ch. 7 involving the lepers. Finally, Rofé (1988: 67) finds 'an element of humor' in Elisha's behavior in ch. 6. Rofé interprets Elisha's order to 'squeeze' the potential assassin between his door and doorstep (v. 32) as 'a practical joke'. While 'the city is dying of famine, the king walks about in sackcloth, . . . the prophet ignores everything and finds time for farcical pranks' (!). Rofé does not view this as an implied criticism of Elisha; for him 'the sharp contrast between the desperate, anguished king and the confident prophet' is merely a characteristic of the 'political *legenda*'.

answer (pp. 311-12). He concludes that the king is depicted sympathetically, insofar as he is presented as contrite. Other commentators stress how seriously the king takes his role as the representative or embodiment of the people (e.g. Gray 1970: 523; Jones 1984: 433), although they may point out that the king's desperate commitment to this role leads to attempted murder (e.g. Nelson 1987: 189). Rofé (1988: 65) believes that the King is 'an ideal figure in comparison with the people', even if he seems flawed and weak when compared to the prophet. On the other hand, some scholars claim that the story shows the king's faithlessness or lack of sincerity (Robinson 1976: 65; Šanda 1912: 55). LaBarbera also condemns the king, not so much for lack of faith and insincerity as for lack of power and wisdom. He contends that the story has the function of ridiculing the king by showing that he is ineffective and that his 'wisdom is non-existent' (1984: 647).

Put simply, LaBarbera's charge is that the story condemns the king for not being Solomon, whose godlike judicial wisdom is supremely effective. Readers are indeed invited to compare the two monarchs, if only because 2 Kgs 6.24-31 and the story of Solomon's judgment (1 Kgs 3.16-27) are similar in several respects.<sup>1</sup> Both cases involve two women who have given birth to a son. In each account one of the women's sons is now dead, and at least one of the mothers lays claim to the living son. In 2 Kings 6 the way the complainant states her grievance implies that she wants the child to be brought back so that she may eat him. Like the false mother in the judgment story, she desires

1. 2 Kgs 6.24-33 has been viewed as a 'poignant reprise' of the judgment narrative (LaBarbera 1984: 646), and as providing 'a grim analogical contrast' to it (Nelson 1987: 189). Coats (1981: 379) calls it 'a remarkably similar parallel', although he increases the similarity by stating that 'two women confront the king of Israel'. While two women approach Solomon in 1 Kings 3, only *one* woman confronts the king in this story. Rofé (1988: 64) also assimilates 2 Kgs 6.24-33 to 1 Kgs 3.16-28 when he refers to 2 Kgs 6.24-33 as a narrative about 'the two women who argue over the live and the dead child'. Jacob (1924: 274 n. 1) makes the same error when he argues that 2 Kgs 6.24-33 connects the motif of parental cannibalism with the motif of 'the two disputing mothers who take their complaint concerning their children before a king'.

equality with her rival. The mother of the dead child in 1 Kings 3 affirms the king's mock death order because she wants her rival to be deprived of her son, just as she has been deprived of hers. Here the complainant wants her rival to surrender her son so he might be eaten, just as they have eaten her own son.

Reading 2 Kgs 6.24-33 in light of Solomon's judgment highlights the predicament of the king in besieged Samaria. In the case of the two harlots Solomon was able to demonstrate that a judge with godlike wisdom can use his knowledge of maternal nature to reveal the truth in a difficult case by exposing the true characters of the disputants (see Lasine 1989a). The story therefore carries the comforting message that human nature is stable and predictable. In contrast, the king in Samaria is approached by a woman whose behavior turns upside down all expectations concerning maternal nature. Far from exposing the mother's nature, the king can only expose the sackcloth he wears under his clothes, revealing that he has been in a state of constant mourning for his people. His despair is entirely appropriate.

The fact that the king proceeds to order Elisha's execution might seem anything but appropriate. According to some commentators, the king is 'given an entirely different character as the opponent of Elisha in 6.13-7.1'<sup>1</sup>—which must therefore be a prophetic revision of the original story intended to portray the clash between the prophets and Omride kings. However, the king's lethal vow does *not* signal a change in his character when it is viewed in terms of his relations with Elisha throughout 2 Kings 3-7. Regarded in this context, the unnamed king of ch. 6 must be Jehoram, son of Ahab. Jehoram's interaction with Elisha begins in ch. 3. He is consistently presented as a king who, while not very perceptive or intelligent,<sup>2</sup> is at least

1. Jones (1984: 430). Jones (p. 433) believes that the alleged prophetic revision of 6.27, 31-7.1 should be attributed to the same hand as the supposed revision in 3.4-27.

2. For example, the king tends to jump to conclusions. Just as he incorrectly assumes that the cannibal mother was going to ask him for food and wine, in 5.7 he wrongly assumes that the Aramean king is seeking an occasion against him. Later, he responds to the lepers' report of the abandoned enemy camp by wrongly assuming it is part of an enemy trap (7.12).



aware of the limitations of his power and as one who is saved by the power of Elisha.<sup>1</sup> Within ch. 6 Elisha has helped Jehoram against the king of Aram (vv. 9-10) and afflicted enemy soldiers with blindness (v. 18). The king shows his dependence on and respect for Elisha after the latter miracle by asking the prophet (whom he calls 'my father') whether he should smite the soldiers (v. 21).

Elisha has already demonstrated in ch. 5 that he can invoke divine power to help the king. Jehoram receives a letter from the king of Aram asking him to cure the leprous Naaman. He responds to the letter in the same way<sup>2</sup> that he responds to the petition of the cannibal mother. In both cases he tears his clothes and despairs because he is not God and therefore does not have the power to help (5.7; 6.27, 30). Elisha sends to the king asking him why he has torn his clothes and telling the king to send Naaman to him, so he will know there is a prophet in Israel (5.8). Thus, Elisha himself leads Jehoram to expect that the prophet can end the king's predicament through the use of God's power.

This is precisely the situation in 2 Kgs 6.24-33. The king begins by declaring that only the Lord can help, and then curses the man of God, whom he has every reason to believe *could* help.<sup>3</sup> According to Josephus, Jehoram's initial wrath is due to the fact that Elisha did not ask God to give them a way out (*Ant.* 9.4.4 §67). That this is the king's view is confirmed by his final statement at Elisha's door, to the effect that the evil is

1. Although Elisha is not depicted as being on friendly terms with Jehoram, son of Ahab, in ch. 3 (e.g. v. 13), the story nevertheless follows the basic pattern of chs. 5-7: the king despairs because he feels powerless in a crisis and Elisha is presented as the solution to the problem (3.10-12).

2. *After* the initial response the situations do differ. In ch. 5 the king's problem is that he fails to recognize that Elisha can help, while in ch. 6 his problem centers on his recognition that Elisha could help but has failed to do so.

3. Contrast Stinespring's comment on 6.31: '*For some unknown reason, the king blamed Elisha, although in vv. 8-23 king and prophet were on the best of terms*' (in May and Metzger 1977: 463; emphasis added). See Schweizer 1974: 316 for similar remarks by other commentators.

from the Lord, and that there is no longer any reason to wait for the Lord's intervention (6.33), perhaps because everything is already so topsy-turvy it is too late for help. Josephus interprets the king's statement as indicating that he has repented of his wrath against the prophet, but is still reproaching Elisha for not having asked God for deliverance and 'for looking on so indifferently while they were being destroyed...' (*Ant.* 9.4.4 §70). Indeed, it is only after the king's confrontation with Elisha in 6.33 that the prophet takes action, predicting an end to the siege and famine (7.1). Insofar as the king responds to perceived disorder and violence with urgency rather than simply looking on with indifference, he resembles biblical heroes like Moses and Job more than his father Ahab (see further below).

#### 5. *The Social Function of 2 Kings 6.24-33 and the Issue of Theodicy*

According to Geertz, humans cannot deal with chaos, 'a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but *interpretability*' (1973: 99-100). Chaos threatens when we are at the limits of our analytic capacities, our endurance, and our sense of intractable ethical paradox. Hanson (1987: 488-91) has analysed the ways in which these three human vulnerabilities—bafflement, suffering and ethical paradox—are registered in biblical texts written in the wake of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. Hanson notes that while apocalyptic and millenarian tendencies might have been expected among oppressed peasants in the early post-exilic situation, the ruling elite also exhibited this response to the recent calamity, a calamity which shook the fundamental conceptual foundations which had sustained the society (p. 492). In the same way, 2 Kgs 6.24-33 expresses a sense of bafflement over ethical paradoxes stemming from a recognition that the society's fundamental conception of human nature may be inadequate, and that what makes it inadequate is Yahweh's readiness to turn human nature upside-down.

This view does not require that the story was composed in response to a social crisis precipitated by an actual famine in besieged Samaria around 850 BCE, analogous to the crisis fol-

lowing the later siege and fall of Jerusalem. Evidence for such an event at that time is lacking.<sup>1</sup> Nor can one simply assume that the narrative contains 'historical reminiscences' of siege cannibalism for which an exact date cannot be determined.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, one cannot assume that it was composed after the fall of Jerusalem and retrojected to a time and place distant enough to allow contemplation of a painful crisis, as Greek tragedies dealt with recent military and social disasters by depicting them as having occurred in distant times and places.<sup>3</sup> The fact that cannibalism and other world-upside-down metaphors are used to express violent social distrust and rivalry at various points of biblical history implies that a social breakdown capable of shaking the foundations of a culture's reality-concept can occur during *any* period of social stress, without the catalyst of a famine or a military disaster.

Another aspect of the biblical reality-concept concerns the relationship between human and divine nature. One major way in which the Bible defines human nature is through the opposition between divine omniscience and human ignorance, including ignorance of the true character of one's fellow citizens (see Lasine 1989a: 73-74). Solomon, in his solution of the

1. 'Kuenen was the first to state the obvious: "In the reign of that king [Jehoram], Israel was not in the condition described to us in 2 Kgs 6.24-7.26" [sic: read 20]' (Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 84). Like many other commentators (e.g. Jones 1984: 430-32), Cogan and Tadmor believe that 'a siege of Samaria of the proportions described... is hard to imagine before the reign of Jehu' (p. 84).

2. The phrase is employed by MacLean (1962: 972), who is certain that the passage contains such reminiscences, and by Whitelam (1979: 182-83), who merely suggests this as a possibility. Compare Ottosson's contention (1974: 238) that the 'theme' of parental cannibalism 'becomes historical reality in 2 K. 6:28f'.

3. Thus, while Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* takes place in pre-Trojan War Thebes, the play's characters, setting, and plot reflect conditions in Athens following the great plague of 430-429 BCE. This tendency to view contemporary problems obliquely is also illustrated by Herodotus's story about audience response to Phrynichus's play on the loss of Miletus (6.20). After the audience burst into tears, the author was fined a thousand drachmae for reminding them of this painful disaster, and a law was passed forbidding anyone from putting the play on the stage again.

harlot dispute, successfully mediates that opposition. In that sense the judgment narrative functions as what Geertz (1973: 201-203, 219) calls 'strain ideology', as opposed to interest ideology. When traditional solutions to social problems and antinomies prove inadequate, ideologies must redefine social categories. However, ideology can also cope with social strain by *undermining* categories and norms (Geertz 1973: 203). 2 Kgs 6.24-33 undermines ordinary assumptions about human nature by showing that one cannot not rely on mothers acting with compassion or jealousy.<sup>1</sup> Maternal nature becomes unpredictable—and therefore baffling—when God allows people to turn things upside-down, or when he turns things upside-down for them as a punishment. As Yahweh puts it in 2 Kgs 21.13, he can 'wipe Jerusalem' 'as a man wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down'. In 2 Kgs 6.24-33, Yahweh fulfills a curse for covenant violation announced long before.

In Isa. 49.15 Yahweh asks, 'Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion (*mērahēm*) on the son of her womb (*beten*)?' He then answers, 'Yes, these may forget, yet I will not forget thee'. The poet of Lam. 4.10 makes it clear that even mothers who are 'full of compassion (*raḥamāniyyôt*)' can boil and eat their children during a famine caused by siege, not just mothers like the complainant of 2 Kings 6, who has no compassion whatsoever for her son, and no remorse for her deed.

However, both Lamentations 4 and 2 Kings 6 can be viewed as calling into question the nature of God as well as the nature of the mothers. They suggest that God too can 'forget' his motherly<sup>2</sup> compassion for his children in spite of his declaration in Isa. 49.15. This impression is reinforced by the earlier mention of maternal cannibalism in Lam. 2.20, which occurs near the end of a moving account of the results of Yahweh's retribution. The poet repeatedly states that this retribution was

1. According to Bird (1974: 61), compassion, solicitousness and jealousy for her children are the primary characteristics of the mother in the historical writings.

2. On the metaphorical connections between *reḥem* (womb) and God's *raḥamīm* (compassion), see Trible 1978: 31-59.

administered without pity (*lō' hāmal*, 2.2, 17, 22; cf. 3.43).<sup>1</sup> Mintz (1984: 31) asserts that the passage actually makes 'God responsible for cannibalism as well as for priest and prophet murder'. In 2 Kgs 6.24-33, Jehoram's reaction to cannibalism among Yahweh's people expresses both his bafflement and his awareness of ethical paradox. His response implies that he believes in a compassionate God who could turn things right side up again, although, paradoxically, he and his agent Elisha have not chosen to react with compassion.

If one is to draw any final conclusion about audience response to this pericope, one must consider not only the baffling problems with which it is concerned but the way in which its narrative rhetoric raises the issue of the ethics of reading. Are readers being led to condemn the king as well as the cannibal mother and to accept Elisha's passivity and God's mode of punishment? Or is the audience to affirm Jehoram's desperate response and to question Elisha's behavior and the fairness of divine punishment, in spite of the fact that the Deuteronomistic history is generally assumed to reflect prophetic interests, to be theologically opposed to the northern kings, and to be based on a schema of divine retribution?<sup>2</sup> The

1. Similarly, Isaiah's description of a society in which no man spares or pities (*lō' yahmōlū*) his brother and every one eats the other's flesh (9.18-19) is preceded by the declaration that Yahweh will not have compassion (*lō' y'rahēm*) even on the orphans and widows among the people (9.16).

2. If one answers 'yes' to this question on the basis of textual evidence, must one conclude that the author and/or editor of the present text consciously intended to challenge the supposed Deuteronomistic ideology in this way? While some literary critics believe that creators of ideology cannot prevent an ideological text from undermining itself (see Lasine, 1989a: 78), this does not seem to be an adequate explanation for the questions raised by this narrative. The subtle narrative rhetoric of 2 Kings 3-7 exhibits a consistent tendency to leave room for such challenging questions. This implies that the ideology promulgated by the writers of the Deuteronomistic history was not so rigid as to preclude a flexible response to social calamities. The story of Solomon's judgment also illustrates this point, for the narrative may have functioned *both* as interest ideology for those in power *and* as effective strain ideology for deeper social problems, whether or not the author consciously intended to address those basic problems (see Lasine 1989a:

king acts as the audience's surrogate in the story, prompting readers to witness the narrated events from his perspective and to share his helplessness.<sup>1</sup> Whether readers choose to identify with the king or to condemn him, the story as a whole challenges its audience to acknowledge that God can not only turn creation back into chaos, but turn creation upside-down with all its structure intact, in a way that is even more threatening because it is still 'orderly', although the order is now perverse and uncanny. The complainant, whose crime was so perverse, proceeds to play by the rules of the old right-side-up world by presenting her grievance according to judicial custom.<sup>2</sup> The king, on the other hand, refuses to play along,

76-78). For a different understanding of the way stories in Kings 'undercut' the ideology they are intended to support, see Nelson (1988: 47-48).

1. When readers make ethical judgments about characters they do so in their capacity as members of the 'narrative audience' (Rabinowitz 1977: 127-29). The narrative audience pretends to believe in the existence of the people and events about which the narrator is speaking. (On the relationship between the narrative audience, the 'authorial audience' [the specific hypothetical audience for whom an author rhetorically designs the work], and the actual audience, see Rabinowitz 1977: 130-34 and Lasine 1989b: 54-55, 65). According to Rabinowitz's 'rules of snap moral judgment' (1987: 84-93), readers begin by assuming that physical appearance reveals character, and judge fictional personages by the way those personages judge other characters in the story. By these standards, Jehoram's exposed sackcloth undergarment and his implied judgment of the cannibal mother would lead the narrative audience to judge him favorably.

2. As Cogan and Tadmor put it (1988: 79), 'the proceedings follow formal rules of address'. Compare 2 Kgs 6.26 and 2 Sam. 14.4-5. Although Whitelam (1979: 182) also notes the appearance of 'formal judicial language' in the passage, he does not recognize that in this context the formalities are being employed to make a point about the topsy-turvy nature of the situation in Samaria. This leads him to discuss the passage as though it were an incomplete account of a legal case which may or may not be historical ('the narration of this case is so skeletal that even the decision of the king seems to have been omitted'), and to make a negative assessment of the king's behavior. He concludes that the legal language, the king's apparent refusal to give a decision, and the king's statements in vv. 27 and 33 may all be intended 'to highlight the irony of the [king's] lack of faith in Yahweh' (1979: 183).

responding instead to the woman's inhumanity.

The king's response to Elisha suggests that the prophet's position may be inhumane in another sense. If a prophet 'sees the world with the eyes of God' (Heschel 1969: 212), human moral agents cannot afford to 'see as God sees' (Job 10.4) when such sight implies indifference to those suffering down on earth (see Lasine 1988: 30-37). A number of biblical passages imply that humans must intervene with urgency, like the prophet Moses and the prophet-like Job,<sup>1</sup> when their fellows are hunting and devouring one another and their children. 2 Kings 3-7 demonstrates that Jehoram views Elisha as a human being with unlimited power from God. If he views God as a deity who feels maternal compassion for his children, it is easy to understand why Jehoram would have expected Elisha to intervene immediately to set things right, and why he would have held the man of God responsible for allowing heinous crimes to occur, crimes so contrary to human nature that neither he nor any other just king could 'solve' them.

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1. Exod. 2.11-12 (cf. Isa. 59.15-16) and Job 24.1-12; 29.17. See Lasine 1988: 36-37, 47.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to determine how the ancient audience might have responded to the bizarre story of the cannibal mother in 2 Kgs 6.24-33. It does so by analyzing the relationship between parental cannibalism and other forms of social violence in biblical and Assyrian texts, by examining the function of comedy and the world-upside-down *topos* in the story, and by contrasting 2 Kgs 6.24-33 with Solomon's judgment. Even Solomon's godlike insight into human nature would be useless in this topsy-turvy world. Those who adopt the perspective of the desperate Jehoram will be led to question a divine justice devoid of maternal compassion, which punishes the guilty by inverting human nature itself.



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