

An Alternative Approach to the Dilemma of 2 Kgs 3:27

Drew Holland

Martin Methodist College

dholland@martinmethodist.edu

Abstract

King Mesha's sacrifice of his son and the subsequent retreat of the Israelite army from Moab in 2 Kgs 3:27 has proven to be a puzzling text for interpreters from rabbinic Judaism to the present. Modern historical analysis has fallen short in providing a coherent explanation for the events of this verse. This article attempts to seek a new and cogent interpretation for this passage based upon support from other texts and lexemes within the Old Testament. In keeping with the theme of Omride disobedience found throughout the Old Testament, this article deduces from intertextual evidence that Israel participated in Mesha's burnt offering after securing victory over Moab. This cultic impropriety led YHWH to drive the Israelite army from its newly regained territory.

Keywords: 2 Kgs 3:27, Mesha, Elisha, Intertextuality, Child Sacrifice

Introduction

After mustering help from Edom, Judah, and the prophet Elisha, Israel inflicts a crushing campaign against Moab, which had previously been a vassal of the Northern Kingdom. The battle appears to conclude

when Mesha, king of Moab, attempts to break through enemy lines with seven hundred horsemen and fails (2 Kgs 3:26). However, the narrative takes an unexpected turn with the following verse, which reads:

וַיִּקַּח אֶת־בְּנוֹ הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר־יָמְלֵךְ תַּחְתָּיו וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ עָלָהּ עַל־הַחֹמָה וַיְהִי קֶצֶף־גָּדוֹל
עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ מֵעָלָיו וַיָּשׁוּבוּ לְאָרֶץ:

And he (Mesha) took his son, his first-born who was to reign after him, and he offered him as a burnt offering upon the wall. And there was great wrath upon Israel. So they withdrew from it, and they returned to the land.

This abrupt change of fortune for Israel ends the account of chapter 3. Its suddenness, brevity, and verbal ambiguity leave the reader with myriad questions. Does this mean Elisha’s prophecy of victory for Israel (3:15–19) has gone unfulfilled? Why does a sacrifice by a non-Israelite lead to “great wrath” upon Israel? Who sends this wrath? To whom does Mesha offer his sacrifice?

The enigmatic nature of this verse has puzzled interpreters from Josephus to the modern-day. Josephus and later rabbis understood the Israelites to be so repulsed at such a horrific act that they returned.¹ In the critical period, G. R. Driver suggested that the wrath (קֶצֶף) demonstrated in this passage bears the sense arising later in Aramaic and Mishnaic Hebrew, that of “sorrow.”² Others, however, have not been willing to massage the text in this way. Instead, they view Elisha’s prophecy as a failure since Israel could not conquer Moab.³ Two recent interpreters, Jesse C. Long and Raymond Westbrook, have offered

¹ Josephus, *A.J.* 9.42–43; Qimḥi and Gersonides, Commentary in *Mikra’ot Gedolot*.

² G. R. Driver, “Studies in the Vocabulary of the Old Testament. VIII,” *JTS* 36 (1935): 293.

³ Cf. Robert B. Jr. Chisholm, “Israel’s Retreat and the Failure of Prophecy in 2 Kings 3,” *Biblica* 92 (2011): 70; Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *2 Kings: A New Translation with Commentary*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988), 51.

more nuanced readings in which they see Elisha's prophecy as technically fulfilled in terms of the prophet's verbiage, yet this prophecy did not necessitate that the battle would go Israel's way.⁴ The cacophony of voices attempting to make sense of the confusion in this passage has led Cogan and Tadmor to proclaim that the writer's inclusion of the wrath upon Israel "has been an embarrassment to all his readers."⁵

This paper attempts to add a new understanding of the text to this inventory of interpretations. I propose that this passage need not embarrass readers but rather provide constructive background toward our understanding of the history of Yhwh's relationship with the Northern Kingdom. Instead of presenting a failed prophecy or show of divine power by a foreign deity, 2 Kgs 3:27 reckons with Israel's disobedience and thus failed responsibility to the gift of victory given them by Yhwh. Elisha's prophecy did come true, but at the very moment Moab fell back into Israel's hands, the Northern Kingdom failed the God who had led them to reclaim their rebellious vassal when they participated with Meshah in his illicit sacrifice. The result was divine anger from Yhwh against Israel, which forced them to withdraw from the land.

Such an interpretation requires filling in many gaps not present in the text of 3:27. As daunting as this seems, my proposal is that these gaps may be filled inductively from elsewhere in the Old Testament.⁶

⁴ Jesse C. Long, *1 & 2 Kings* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002), 304–305; Long, "Unfulfilled Prophecy or Divine Deception? A Literary Reading of 2 Kings 3," *SCJ* 7 (2004): 101–17; Long, "Elisha's Deceptive Prophecy in 2 Kings 3: A Response to Raymond Westbrook," *JBL* 126 (2007): 168–72; Raymond Westbrook, "Elisha's True Prophecy in 2 Kings 3," *JBL* 124 (2005): 530–33; Westbrook, "Law in Kings," in *The Book of Kings: Sources, Composition, Historiography and Reception*, ed. Baruch Halpern and Andre Lemaire (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 445–66.

⁵ Cogan and Tadmor, *2 Kings*, 52.

⁶ I adopt this approach from the work of Shemaryahu Talmon, who contends that, before looking to ancient Near Eastern parallels, we must first look within the linguistic and thought world of the Bible. See Shemaryahu Talmon, "The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems," in *Congress Volume: Göttingen, 1977*, ed. Walther Zimmerli, VTSup 29 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 320–56. For my use of the term "inductive," I draw upon the definition from Bauer and Traina that inductive Bible study is "a commitment to the evidence in and around the text so as to allow that evidence to determine our understanding of the

The reader is required to bring to this text a number of other passages from Israel's history that create a fuller meaning than one finds by merely accepting the text as presented in its equivocal form. We will also address, where necessary, issues arising from the ancient Near Eastern background of the text. The net of this method will be to suggest an alternative reading of a long-puzzling text.

Elisha's Prophecy Succeeds

One's interpretation of 3:27 depends on one's reading of previous material in the chapter. Did Elisha's prophecy of Israelite victory over Moab come to fruition or not? If Elisha's prophecy has failed, then one must interpret the events of 3:27 as an impediment to prophetic fulfillment. However, if Elisha's prophecy is successful, this sets the stage for understanding Israel's waywardness in handling the victory given to them by Yhwh.

Given the withdrawal of the Israelite army in 3:27 and no explicit reference to victory over Moab, it appears that Israel has been defeated after Mesha's sacrifice.⁷ Indeed, Robert B. Chisholm is correct in critiquing the interpretations of Iain Provan and Raymond Westbrook, who argue for a technically-complete prophecy and thus initially-successful military campaign, in that they fail to account for any notice of Moab falling "into the hands" of Israel at the conclusion of the chapter, as Elisha predicts in 3:18. Chisholm argues instead that the prophecy did fail, but that this is no fault of Elisha's. Rather, Israel has failed in its contingent responsibility to serve Yhwh. His warrant for this is Jer 18:10, which is a direct rebuke of Israel's wantonness and a claim

text, wherever that evidence may lead." See David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 17.

⁷ Cf. also a brief reading from ancient Near Eastern background of prophecy in Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, "Prophecy as a Way of Cancelling Prophecy—The Strategic Uses of Foreknowledge," *ZAW* 117 (2005): 345–46.

that divine favor will be withheld from the Northern Kingdom as a result.⁸ While I agree that Israel is irresponsible in this passage, Chisholm does not expand upon exactly how Israel fails Yhwh here. Moreover, Chisholm argues that Jer 18:1–10 evinces the conditional nature of prophesies, but he does not engage fully with the text of this latter prophet. In Jer 18:6, Yhwh says that he will change his mind about a prophecy concerning a nation’s destruction if that nation turns from evil. Yet 2 Kgs 3 does not indicate that the Moabites, once destined for destruction, ever turned from evil. His argument for a conditional prophecy in 2 Kgs 3 is thin and comes from outside of the Deuteronomistic corpus. Instead, I argue that we need to first look within the Deuteronomistic corpus for the appropriate context of the language used in this passage.

One approach is that of Jesse C. Long, who argues that this passage exhibits another instance of the “lying spirit,” as found earlier in 1 Kgs 22. There, the Judean king Jehoshaphat joins forces with Ahab and has aided him in battling neighboring Aram. The prophet in question, Micaiah, explicitly fools the Israelite king to enter a losing battle as part of the prophecy (22:15–23). In the same way, Long argues that Elisha has tricked Jehoram into a losing battle. He notes several parallel movements between these passages, such as 1) the Northern king asking the Southern king if he will join him in battle, 2) inquiring the word of Yhwh, 3) the question “Is there a prophet of Yhwh?” and 4) a battle report of defeat. The prophecy in 3:19 promises that the Israelites will “strike/נכה” all the fortified and choice cities, while the actual events in 3:25 show that they only “tore down/הרס” the cities and that only Kir-hareseth was “struck/נכה.” The notice of “tore down/הרס” thus interrupts the expected flow as the prophecy is fulfilled.

However, Long’s reading comes up short in a few ways. For one, although the formal and compositional connection between this

⁸ Chisholm, “Israel’s Retreat.” As we will see, I also disagree that the prophecy is unfulfilled due to the lack of recurrence of the phrase “in your hand.” Rather, this phrase serves as the introduction to the following chiasm.

passage and 1 Kgs 22 is clear, there is no explicit trickery of the king by the prophet in 2 Kgs 3:27, as we see in 1 Kgs 22:15–23. Further, Long has manipulated the technique of chiasm to suit his interests. He argues that 3:25, as the fulfillment of the prediction in 3:19, reverses the events to form a chiasmic structure of prophecy and fulfillment, but that the verb “tore down/הרס” interrupts this order so that the fulfillment portion of the chiasm is incomplete. But he overlooks the phrase in 3:18, which functions as the summary and heading of Elisha’s prophecy, stating plainly that “Yhwh ... will hand Moab over to you.” Elisha’s prophecy cannot be fulfilled if Israel does not defeat Moab. The remainder of the prophecy enumerates how this will be done (i.e., felling good trees, stopping the springs, ruin good fields with stones). Also, the first clause of 3:25, that they “tore down/הרס” the cities, falls outside of the chiasmic structure since it appears before the fulfillment portion of the chiasm, but Long wishes to include it in the chiasm anyway to fit his proposed schema. The notice of the cities having been “torn down/הרס,” merely provides background to the fulfillment portion of the prophecy.

Another recent interpretation of the prophecy has come from Raymond Westbrook who claims, “The plain fact is that Israel lost the war.”⁹ However, he argues that Elisha’s prophecy did not fail but instead was “fulfilled to the letter.”¹⁰ The reason he offers for this is the use of the verb נכה. When Elisha gives the initial prophecy in 3:19, the reader and Jehoram are led to believe this verb is being used in its usual sense, that of “destroy” or “conquer.” However, the text tells us that Kir-hareseth is “struck” by the slingers, and this does not carry the connotation of victory for Israel, but rather simply that these infantrymen innocuously slung rocks at larger stones. Therefore, Israel did not conquer Kir-hareseth but merely dented a few keystones. This then led to Meshah’s two last-ditch efforts, the final of which, the sacrifice of his

⁹ Westbrook, “True Prophecy,” 530.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 531.

son, was successful.¹¹ Thus, Westbrook holds that Elisha’s prophecy was indeed fulfilled since the prophecies of 3:19 occurred, but not in the manner the reader and Jehoram expected.

Nevertheless, Westbrook’s arguments do not hold up under scrutiny. First, the slingers, which Westbrook considers ineffectual, were actually quite potent in ancient warfare tactics and were known for wreaking an army’s final salvo while conquering a city.¹² Second, the verb נכה in both 3:19 and 3:25 must entail the destruction of the city. Of the 269 occurrences of the verb נכה in the Deuteronomistic literature, the text only refers to striking without death or destruction eight times (2 Sam 24:10; 1 Kgs 20:35, 37; 22:24; 2 Kgs 2:8, 14; 11:12; 13:18). Of these, only twice in a single passage does it refer to striking with an instrument of war and not involve annihilation (2 Kgs 2:8, 14).¹³ Among these examples, the objects of striking are either inanimate objects or a specific body part, not a city or human life. Third, Westbrook’s scheme does not reckon with the explicit prophecy from 3:18 that Yhwh will give Moab into the hands of Israel. Finally, Westbrook does not consider 3:26. Here, we are told that Mesha attempts to take “with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through, toward (אֶל) ¹⁴ the king of Edom, but they could not.” Why does Mesha attempt to head toward the King of Edom, and why was he unable? Precisely because he was running *away* from Israel and its band of slingers, who were so effective that Mesha’s final opportunity to claim victory was thwarted.

¹¹ Ibid., 531–32.

¹² Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands: In the Light of Archaeological Study* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 297. Morschauser, on the other hand, argues that the work of the slingers was an “opening salvo” while engineers and sappers undermined the bulwarks. Although he is correct that we do not need to read the assault of the slingers as impotent, neither do I think Morschauser’s reconstruction is necessary given the information of the text. See Scott Morschauser, “A ‘Diagnostic’ Note on the ‘Great Wrath upon Israel,’” *JBL* 129 (2010): 300–301.

¹³ See also Josh 10:28, 30, 32, 37, 39; 11:10, 11, 12, 14; 19:47; Judg 1:8, 15; 20:37, 48; 21:10; 2 Sam 15:14; 2 Kgs 22:34

¹⁴ The NRSV reads “opposite,” but this is an odd translation of אֶל here, likely to try to make sense of the passage.

Taking these arguments into account, nothing in the text suggests that Israel is unsuccessful in suppressing the Moabite army. Instead, Elisha’s prophecy is fulfilled as predicted in 3:19, indicated by the exact unfolding of the events of 3:25 in reverse order. Moreover, the content of 3:19 is summed up by its heading in 3:18, namely that Moab will be given into the hand of Israel with Yhwh’s help. So, if we have correctly observed a closely corresponding chiasm between 3:19 and 3:25, we must hold that Israel has defeated Moab. This observation is affirmed by the beginning of 3:26, captured best by the NIV’s translation, “When the king of Moab saw that the battle had gone against him . . .” In short, Mesha knew he had lost the war. Consequently, we must consider Mesha’s following failed attempt to break through enemy lines with seven hundred swordsmen as the last-ditch action of a defeated king. Mesha’s action in 3:26, then, precludes us from viewing his sacrifice of 3:27 as his final attempt at victory, a topic to which we now turn.

The Meaning of Mesha’s Sacrifice

The dominant interpretation regarding Mesha’s offering in 3:27 is that the Moabite king immolated his first-born son to appease Chemosh, the chief Moabite god, and has undertaken the last possible route to salvation from his enemy, Israel.¹⁵

¹⁵ This can be seen in the following: Cogan and Tadmor, *2 Kings*, 47; Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, IBC (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 169; Lissa M. Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 315; Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 284; J. B. Burns, “Why Did the Besieging Army Withdraw? (II Reg 3,27),” *ZAW* 102 (1990): 190; Chisholm, “Israel’s Retreat,” 79; Baruch A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 25; Patricia Berlyn, “The Wrath of Moab,” *JBQ* 30 (2002): 224; Christian Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer im Alten Testament: Die Signifikanz von Blut und Verbrennungsriten im Kultischen Rahmen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2002), 372; Jacob Milgrom, “Were the Firstborn Sacrificed to YHWH? To Molek? Popular Practice or Divine Demand?,” in *Sacrifice in Religious Experience*, ed. A. I. Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 53, 55; Julie Faith Parker, *Valuable and Vulnerable: Children in the Hebrew Bible, Especially the Elisha Cycle*, BJS (Providence, RI: Brown University, 2013), 103; Kristine Henriksen Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*,

Baruch Margalit distinguishes his interpretation by attempting to explain Mesha's wrath by both historical and psychological means. He notes sacrificial infanticides by city leaders in Ugarit and Carthage when battles were going against them.¹⁶ Based on these parallels, he argues that Mesha sacrificed his son in view of the Israelite army to evoke disgust from them and influence their retreat.¹⁷ This reading has recently come under increased scrutiny and does not hold up. J. B. Burns contends that both ancient parallels omit the city walls as the sacrificial location, whereas both parallels assume the performance of the sacrifices upon an altar. Moreover, to attribute the motivation of the sacrifice to the provocation of the enemy's horror is anachronistic.¹⁸ And, though the Ugaritic text does mention a "first-born" as the object to be sacrificed (which we expect with a burnt offering) and Rufus's account of the Carthaginian practice mentions a free-born male child (*ut ingenuus puer*), neither of these cite a prince as the specific object to be sacrificed.¹⁹ In addition, neither of these texts designates these sacrificial actions with a cognate to the technical term used in 3:27, whole burnt offering (חֹלֶבֶת). Instead, they cite more general terms for the sacrifice.²⁰ Finally, as I will argue below, to draw these particular

EANEC (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 180. Although he believes, as I do, that Israel cooperated in this sacrifice, Westbrook also holds the view that Mesha's sacrifice was made to Chemosh in particular. See Westbrook, "Law in Kings," 465. Garroway contends that this passage belongs in view with 2 Kgs 6:24–30; Deut 28:52–57; and Jer 19:9. However, these examples refer to the consumption of children and not in connection with cultic sacrifice, and particularly the burnt offering.

¹⁶ Baruch Margalit, "Why King Mesha of Moab Sacrificed His Oldest Son," *BAR* 12 (1986): 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Burns, "Besieging Army," 188–190.

¹⁹ See A. Abou-I-Faradj Al-Ouche et al., eds., *Ugaritica VII* (Paris: Mission Archéologique de Ras Shamra, 1978), 31–39; Quintus Curtius Rufus, *Historiae Alexandri Magni*, ed. Edmund Hedicke, Perseus, n.d., sec. 4.3.23.

²⁰ RS24.266 line 9 indicates that the firstborn shall die by *dbb*. See Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "Prayer and Sacrifice in Ugarit and Israel," in *Text and Context: Old Testament and Semitic Studies for F.C. Fensham*, ed. W. Classen, JSOTSupp 4 (Sheffield, 1988), 145; Abou-I-Faradj Al-Ouche et al., *Ugaritica VII*, 32–33. *Historia Alexandri Magni* 4.23.3

parallels to 2 Kgs 3:27 is to ignore the shared historical context between Israel and Moab evident within the biblical text, which consistently reveals proximity between the two nations in their cultic practices. Indeed, the southern Levant seems to have a particular understanding of this act apart from its neighbors to the north. Margalit’s incorporation of these parallels is evidence too far afield for the writer of Kings.

Westbrook correctly searches for an understanding of Mesha’s action within the biblical text itself. He enumerates a parallel between this passage and 2 Kgs 18–19, in which Hezekiah renders tribute to the Neo-Assyrian king, Sennacherib, after a prolonged rebellion. This passage finds resonance with 2 Kgs 3 in that both detail the rebellion of a vassal state against its suzerain.²¹ After the suzerain regains control over the vassal in both instances, the vassal undertakes an act of propitiation to reconcile with the suzerain. This alternative is better than the “ultimate punishment” of destruction.²² In the case of 2 Kgs 3, this act of propitiation is the sacrifice of Mesha’s son.²³ For Westbrook, Mesha sacrifices his son to Chemosh to atone for breaching his oath against the vassal state.²⁴ This sacrifice parallels Hezekiah’s earlier action, who explicitly relays his apologies to Sennacherib and renders tribute from the Temple treasury accordingly (18:14). In sum, we may draw the following parallels with Westbrook’s argument:

Parallel Passages	Event
2 Kgs 3:5 2 Kgs 18:7	Vassal rebels against suzerain

uses *immolaretur*, which is a more general term for sacrifice and from which English derives the term “immolation.”

²¹ This is another point Burns notes against Margalit, as the latter dubs Israel’s act incorrectly as **מַרְסָה**. See Burns, “Besieging Army,” 188.

²² Westbrook, “Law in Kings,” 465.

²³ *Ibid.*, 465–66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 465.

2 Kgs 3: 21–26 2 Kgs 18:13	Battle account—vassal loses to suzerain
2 Kgs 3:27 2 Kgs 18:14–15	Vassal attempts to offer propitiation

Westbrook writes, “From these two tendentious accounts, we may conclude that the rebellion was in fact settled by a compromise: restoration of the rebel king’s vassal status in return for payment of a heavy tribute.”²⁵

Given the reasons we have seen to detract from Margalit’s view of parallel accounts in the ancient world, Westbrook is right to look for an explanation of Mesha’s sacrifice within the Bible itself. And a few more points illustrate that Westbrook’s interpretation is more viable than Margalit’s. For one, it is important to note that Mesha’s sacrifice was not a general sacrifice; rather, it was a particular kind, the burnt offering (הֲלֵב) — a type of sacrifice Israel shared with its Canaanite neighbors and was specifically concerned with the contrition of the offerer.²⁶ Milgrom, in particular, notes that the burnt offering often serves a “propitiatory and expiatory” function in the ancient Near East and the Bible.²⁷ Moreover, the whole burnt offering must be of a “first-born” (Exod 22:9 and Num 18:17). Mesha’s sacrifice in 3:27 fits the pattern of a burnt offering. He has been defeated in battle and must atone for his rebellion or else face death and the annihilation of his people. He properly exhibits his attempt to atone for his sin by offering his first-born son.

²⁵ Westbrook, “Law in Kings,” 466.

²⁶ See Gary A. Anderson, “Sacrifices and Sacrificial Offerings (Old Testament),” *ABD* 5:872–87 and Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, ABC (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 172–76.

²⁷ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 174. Note also, that other purposes for this sacrifice can be detected. See *ibid.*, 172–77. Here I argue that the propitiatory and expiatory function is one dimension of Mesha’s sacrifice.

Also, similar occurrences appear elsewhere in the Bible. In Judg 20:26, the text indicates the Israelites offered a burnt offering to Yhwh at Bethel after losing eighteen thousand soldiers in a defeat at the hands of the Benjaminites. In 1 Sam 7:9, Samuel offers a burnt offering to Yhwh as they learn their impending doom at the Philistines' hands. These examples tie military failures to an act of repentance via the burnt offering. Nevertheless, the most telling instance is found in 2 Kgs 16. There, Ahaz attempts to strike a tribute deal with Tiglath-Pile-sar III so that the neo-Assyrian king will help him destroy King Rezin of Aram. After establishing the alliance through gifts from the house of Yhwh to Tiglath-Pile-sar, Ahaz sends the priest Uriah to construct an altar based on the model of the altar in Damascus. Ahaz then commands Uriah to offer a burnt offering upon this altar, and the text tells us that this, along with the giving of other gifts to Tiglath-Pile-sar, was done "before the king of Assyria" (16:8). These examples provide further context for Mesha's motivation to offer the burnt offering. The burnt offering was commonly sacrificed in a wartime situation by battle losers to express apology, and it was also done by vassal kings to solidify a relationship with a suzerain king. Both types fit Mesha in 2 Kgs 3, the rebellious vassal wishing to re-establish his relationship with his suzerain after defeat.

What then is the reason for implicating Israel as a partner with Mesha in this act? For one, the above-noted instance of Tiglath-Pile-sar's presence during the tribute payment and subsequent offering of an *עֹלָה* points to a common pattern in Kings and the ancient world. Namely, the suzerain is present at the ceremony, which cements the vassal status. In the case of 2 Kgs 3, the burnt offering re-solidifies this agreement.

Second, this sacrifice has practical functions. It both expresses contrition in cultic terms and serves the political purpose of ensuring that Mesha's successor would not seek vengeance against the Israelites. If Mesha's first-born son is the offering to be destroyed in a sacrifice, he will not live to seek the rebellious path of his father. In the words

of Julie Faith Parker, “By sacrificing his son, King Mesha saves his kingdom from defeat while robbing it of its next ruler.”²⁸

Third, the idea of the “first-born” (הַבְּכוֹר), is intrinsically connected with the burnt offering and is instructive to revealing the nature of the burnt offering in this case. The gift for a burnt offering is typically a first-born male.²⁹ With regard to the offering of human children, Gen 22 provides an instructive example. God commands Abraham to offer Isaac, the first-born male of Abraham and Sarah, as a burnt offering. However, the angel soon prevents Abraham from following through, allowing Abraham to offer a ram instead.³⁰ A similar idea is at play in 2 Kgs 3:27, where Mesha’s beloved first-born is offered as a burnt offering. Yet, in contrast to Abraham, Mesha follows through with the offering.

One function of the sacrifice of the first-born male is as a substitute for the sacrificer.³¹ This concept is seen not only in cultic contexts (as in Gen 22) but also in the milieu of military conflicts. It is a prominent theme of the exodus, as Yhwh institutes both the final plague against the first-born as an ultimate warning against the Egyptians as well as a consecration of Israelite first-born to Yhwh after victory (Exod 4:23; 11:5; 12:12, 29; 13:1–15).³² The substitutionary function is

²⁸ Parker, *Valuable and Vulnerable*, 109.

²⁹ Exod 22:29; Num 18:15, 17. There is some debate concerning whether the “firstborn” refers to animals or humans. See Karin Finsterbusch, “The First-Born between Sacrifice and Redemption in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Human Sacrifice in the Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. Diethard Römheld, Armin Lange, and Karin Finsterbusch (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 49–55. See also Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 172–177.

³⁰ Gen 22:14. Another example is Judg 11. In this case, the daughter is sacrificed since Jephthah had no other children. Therefore, the text goes out of its way to note that she was his “only child.” (Judg 11:34)

³¹ Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer*, 188ff. Summarized in Finsterbusch, “The First-Born between Sacrifice and Redemption in the Hebrew Bible,” 107.

³² That is, the firstborn Egyptian children die rather than Yhwh inflicting total death and destruction upon all the Egyptians. This sense is evident in Num 3:11–13, where the text connects the Levites as the firstborn dedicated to God’s service with the firstborn of Egypt dedicated to God in death. Thus, the firstborn of Egypt are seen as a substitute in a similar pattern to that of the Levites. For this idea, I credit Jim Wilson, who has crafted this argument elsewhere. Jim Wilson, “Help Wanted:

also behind Joshua’s claim that anyone who rebuilds Jericho will do so at the cost of his son’s life.³³ Although not in the context of a military conflict or overt cultic practice, the death of David’s son with Bathsheba, who dies as a result of his father’s sin, similarly functions as a substitute for the king himself following his contrition (2 Sam 12:14–19). The incident of David’s son echoes the claim in Deut 5:9 that Yhwh will attend to the sins of the father upon his children.

Further examples from the OT suggest that, in general, the first-born is to be considered a substitute.³⁴ Similarly, the Moabite crown prince functions as a substitute for his father’s sin. Regarding this passage, Jon D. Levenson writes, “This variety of child sacrifice is to be associated with the ancient notion that, in certain circumstances the king himself must be offered: the son is here but a substitute for the father, just as the lamb will become a substitute for the son....”³⁵ Since Mesha has rebelled against the Israelites, Jehoram and his army have exacted punishment against Mesha by agreeing to allow his son’s death to function in place of Mesha’s death and the entire destruction of Moab.

Fourth, intertextual evidence indicates one dimension of the burnt offering in military contexts is that it functioned as a means of

The Role of ‘The Levites in Your Gates’ in Deuteronomy,” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Region of the SBL, St. Louis, 14 March, 2016), 35–36.

³³ Josh 6:26 and paralleled by 1 Kgs 16:34, as Hiel rebuilds Jericho and loses his firstborn as a result. Joseph Coleson also connects this to the concept of firstfruits, as does Wilson in the note above. See Joseph Coleson, “Joshua,” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, CBC (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2012), 77.

³⁴ Regarding the Levites as substitutes, see Num 3:12, 41; 8:16–19. For other, even more general examples, see Job 15:7; 16:13; and Mic 6:7.

³⁵ Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 27. Levenson builds his argument from the work of Christiano Grottanelli, whom he quotes on the same page, stating that a sacrifice like this is “to be interpreted as a substitution for the sacrifice or suicide of the king”: “Through [his first-born son], the king supplicates the angry gods and pays a great price to ransom his people; but through him the king also ransoms himself, as he covers the child with the insignia of his own rank and person.” Of course, I disagree that this instance is necessarily a supplication of the angry deity, the point of the son as sacrificial substitute holds true.

celebrating success for the victor and as an instrument of contrition for the loser. The primary example of this is seen after the exodus event. Moses's father-in-law, Jethro, confesses the power of Yhwh over all the deities following the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea in Exod 18:11. In the following verse, he helps the Israelites celebrate this victory by offering a burnt offering to Yhwh. Then, after destroying Ai in Josh 8, Joshua explicitly follows the command of Moses by building an altar on Mount Ebal and offering a burnt offering to Yhwh (Josh 8:30–31). In an infamous episode of Judges 11, Jephthah vows to offer a burnt offering to Yhwh should he be able to defeat the Ammonites and does so by sacrificing his daughter (Judg 11:21–40). Also, after the ark is returned from the Philistines, the people of Beth-Shemesh offer a celebratory burnt offering.³⁶ These examples point to a common trope within biblical, and especially in Deuteronomistic literature, that victorious kings would offer a burnt offering following a successful military campaign. So, the intertextual evidence reveals to us that burnt offerings are common following military battles. They were performed by the loser as an attempt to reconcile either with the deity or enemy, and the victor often sacrificed burnt offerings to the deity as a means of celebration.

Another example illustrative of the Bible's, especially the Deuteronomistic History's presentation of the burnt offering in association with military campaigns, appears in 1 Sam 13. Here, Saul hides in Gilgal for seven days while waiting to fight against the Philistines. Meanwhile, the people of Israel have "slipped away" from Saul, and he begins to

³⁶ 1 Sam 6:14. An extra-biblical assertion of this idea also appears in Moab's own literature. Although the debates surrounding this passage are many, including arguments over the historicity of this very passage, it is worth noting the cultic parallels in a Moabite text. Harold Schweizer notes that lines 12/13 of the Mesha stele include this very practice, as there the Moabites drag the "Davidic hearth" before Chemosh. See Schweizer, *Elischa in den Kriegen: Literaturwissenschaftliche Untersuchung von 2 Kn 3, 6, 8–23, 6, 24–7, 20* (München: Ksel, 1974), 100–101. I am aware of the debated translation of *'r'l dwdh* of line 12. Regardless of whether this is a "Davidic" hearth or the hearth of a beloved, the object remains cultic and the action is presumed as sacrificial.

feel his grip of power loosening. In an act of insecurity, he offers burnt offerings to Yhwh before the battle with the Philistines has begun despite Samuel's command to wait for his own arrival (1 Sam 13:12). When Samuel finally arrives, he chides Saul for this act and claims that Saul will soon be usurped (1 Sam 13:13–14). Not only was this not Saul's sacrifice to make, but he undertook this act inappropriately.³⁷ The incident in 1 Sam 13 underscores the idea that the burnt offering was meant to follow a military campaign as either a sign of remorse or celebration rather than to precede a campaign as a means of influencing the deity. Such manipulation, however, is what many interpreters have exactly accused Mesha of doing.

In fact, nowhere in the biblical text do we find the burnt offering functioning as the means by which one would appropriately provoke a deity for military victory assistance.³⁸ Rather, the burnt offering is only intended to be undertaken after a battle is complete. If one loses the battle, the burnt offering has repentant force. If one wins the battle, the burnt offering has celebratory intentions. The significance attached to burnt offerings affirms not only the rationale for Mesha's sacrifice but also the point of the prior section that the battle at Kir-hareseth was complete and that Israel had won, fulfilling Elisha's prophecy.

Although I have attempted in the preceding analysis to further Westbrook's argument that Mesha sacrificed his crown prince in appeasement of his military failure, as opposed to summoning his god, I diverge from Westbrook in his argument that the recipient of Mesha's sacrifice was the Moabite god Chemosh.³⁹ The text is puzzling in its opacity here, simply noting that Mesha offered this burnt offering

³⁷ Indeed, it seems at some points that Samuel had granted Saul some priestly authority (1 Sam 9:23–24; 10:4), so Saul may have assumed his license to offer this sacrifice. However, the means by which he undertakes this sacrifice is ultimately inappropriate, particularly given the literary and historical context we have surveyed.

³⁸ Milgrom notes that 3:27 is the only example when a sacrifice of a firstborn was performed in a crisis. However, I hope that the preceding has shown that Mesha's sacrifice was not unique in this respect. See Milgrom, "Firstborn," 55.

³⁹ Westbrook, "Law in Kings," 465.

without giving notice as to whom he offered it. The text's ambiguity is further complicated by confusion over the subject of the "great wrath" in the following clause. However, I hold that the textual ambiguity here is purposeful. It functions to indicate that the Israelites were behaving in a cultically ambiguous, thus inappropriate manner. We have little idea to whom Mesha, supported by the Israelites, sacrificed. But we do know it was cultically inappropriate for Yhwh's people to participate in it. In Judg 11:24, Chemosh's effectiveness for his people is noted, highlighting the Moabite god's power to save his people. But the author chose not to name Chemosh or any deity here. In short, the ambiguous description of the sacrifice is appropriate for exactly the kind of sacrifice it was.

The rationale for this ambiguity lies in the long history of convergence between Israel and Moab. From its earliest engagements with the people of Moab, the Israelites struggled to differentiate their identity and worship from those of the Moabites. In Genesis, the author proffers the close relationship between Israel and Moab in an etiological note which cites the Moabites as descendants of Lot (Gen 19:37).⁴⁰ The two nations were engaged in conflict throughout several periods of Israel's history.⁴¹ But, most importantly for understanding our passage at hand, Israel was also frequently tempted to intermingle with Moab in ways deemed cultically inappropriate. The first noted instance appears in Num 25, in which the text indicates that the Israelites began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab and sacrificed to their gods, directly violating the prohibitions against these acts given at

⁴⁰ This is reaffirmed in Deut 2:9.

⁴¹ Num 21–24 discusses their relationships during the wilderness wanderings. In the period of settlement and the judges, we see interaction between the two nations in Josh 24; Judg 3; and Judg 11. During David's reign, there was also some fighting against Moab, as noted in 2 Sam 23:20. Ps 60:8; 83:6; 108:9; Isa 15–16; Jer 48 all speak to tension with the Moabites. However, sporadic periods of peace between them are indicated by 1 Sam 22 and 1 Kgs 11. To this we may add that Ruth was a Moabite (Ruth 1:1–4).

Sinai.⁴² Before the Israelites were oppressed by the Ammonites, the text notes that the Moabites are one of several people groups whose worship has tempted the people (Judg 10:6). In the postexilic period, Nehemiah is disgusted with the Jews who intermarried with the women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab (Neh 13:23). But closest to our text are two passages from the Deuteronomistic history. First, the perceived cultic sin of the eastern tribes of Josh 22 has been viewed in light of Israel's relationship with Moab.⁴³ Second, the Deuteronomistic Historian gives notice that Solomon's downfall came about due to his syncretistic practices involving, among others, the Moabites (1 Kgs 11:33).⁴⁴ These must be read in light of the warnings of Deut 29, which by no mere coincidence appear on the plains of Moab. It is there that Moses warns the Israelites of cultic abominations leading to a break of the covenant with Yhwh, and it is there that many such sins occur in the unfolding narrative of the OT.

Another instance in the OT pointing to cultic ambivalence that proves instructive for interpreting 2 Kgs 3:27 is the story of Balaam in Num 22–24. Here, the Moabite king Balak calls the prophet to curse Israel and subsequently encounters Yhwh through a series of divine messages. After these encounters and the subsequent oracles, Balaam twice orders Balak to offer burnt offerings (Num 23:13, 29–30).⁴⁵ These follow a prior confession of apology (Num 23:13, 29–30). Thus, we witness the established pattern of a worshipper who is first contrite, then offers a burnt offering. However, as with Mesha's sacrifice, the text never mentions a divine recipient of the sacrifice. In both cases, Moabites and Israelites have come into conflict, and the character of

⁴² For the prohibition against worship of foreign gods which precedes this episode, see Exod 20:3. The prohibition against marriage first appears in a later text, Deut 7:3, but is hinted to in Gen 34:14.

⁴³ See J. Maxwell Miller, "Moab (Place)," *ABD* 4:882–93.

⁴⁴ See also 1 Kgs 11:7.

⁴⁵ Balak also offers a sacrifice in 22:40, but this is prior to any oracle and utilizes the more general verb זָבַח.

the resulting burnt offering is mysterious, pointing to the ambiguous nature of Israelite/Moabite relations, as revealed in the cultic activity.

The close and often ambivalent relationship between the Israelites and Moabites is clear across several generations. For this reason, Maxwell Miller writes concerning the composition of the stories concerning Moab, “While many will have married non-Israelite wives and worshipped local gods at Moabite shrines, there will have been counter efforts to maintain ethnic and religious distinctiveness....”⁴⁶ If I am correct in agreeing with Westbrook’s argument that Jehoram’s forces participated in Mesha’s burnt offering, then this action continues the long-running theme throughout the Old Testament of Israel participating in syncretistic activities with the Moabites. This means that the recipient of Mesha’s sacrifice was not strictly Chemosh. Rather, even if the Moabites and Israelites had their respective gods in mind while sacrificing, the net result of their deed was a worshipful action directed to an unknown god. The text reflects this syncretistic situation in its ambiguity.

The advantage of using evidence from the surrounding biblical text to investigate Mesha’s burnt offering has been to place this mystifying act in its closest literary and geographical contexts. Margalit’s attempt to use comparative ancient evidence falls short in comparison with this approach because it locates Mesha’s action farther north than the southern Levant and with only minimal points of literary connection. Other approaches have attempted either by analogy or by general (and vague) understanding of the ancient Near East to project towards the motivation for Mesha’s sacrifice of his first-born son. The attempt here has been to investigate Mesha’s sacrifice in the light of the larger literary context surrounding it, and by extension, the historical context of the southern Levant.

⁴⁶ Miller, “Moab (Place),” 888.

The “Great Wrath” and Its Intertextual Counterparts

The greatest point of contention among scholars regarding 2 Kgs 3:27 has been the subject of the “great wrath” (לְקִצְּוֹתֵי-יְהוָה). The text is silent on this issue, simply noting that great wrath was present “against” (עַל) the Israelites. On the one hand, some scholars contend that the wrath emanated from Chemosh.⁴⁷ Since this was the god to whom Mesha had sacrificed, this was the same deity who was exacting revenge on behalf of his worshiper. On the other hand, some have seen it impossible for the Bible to refer to the wrath of a foreign deity as being efficacious against Israel. Therefore, they have posited that the subject of the wrath is Yhwh.⁴⁸ However, some have taken Driver’s route by viewing the wrath in its sense from later Hebrew. Thus, לְקִצְּוֹתֵי here refers to the “vexation” or “sorrow” that was upon Israel after viewing Mesha’s horrible act.⁴⁹ Others still wish to leave the ambiguity in the text and not supply a subject for the wrath.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Burns, “Besieging Army,” 192; Chisholm, “Israel’s Retreat,” 79; Levine, *Presence of the Lord*, 25; Westbrook, “Law in Kings,” 465; Gwilym H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, NCBC (London: Eerdmans, 1984), 400.

⁴⁸ Philip D. Stern, “Of Kings and Moabites: History and Theology in 2 Kings 3 and the Mesha Inscription,” *HUCA* 64 (1993): 11–13; Long, *1 & 2 Kings*, 306; Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 316.

⁴⁹ For Driver’s original article, again see Driver, “Studies,” 193. For others who follow this interpretation, see Margalit, “King Mesha,” 63; Montgomery, *Book of Kings*, 364; Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 284; Terrence Fretheim, *First and Second Kings*, WC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 143. Indeed, Burns concedes that the LXX μεταμέλος used here in this passage appears to carry this effect. But he, as do I, regards this as a softening of the original Hebrew. See Burns, “Besieging Army,” 192. A similar argument appears in Morschauer, “Diagnostic Note.” Here, he argues that the “wrath” is a tangible plague, as opposed to divine wrath.

⁵⁰ Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 169; John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1963), 490; Berlyn, “The Wrath of Moab.” I cite Berlyn because she does not appear to land on any particular answer regarding this question. See especially 225.

The first suggestion must be dismissed. As the scholars holding the second position have noted, it would be out of character for the biblical text to attribute such power to a foreign deity. Although I have mentioned above that Jephthah does acknowledge Chemosh's abilities for his own people, this does not indicate that Chemosh holds sway over the Israelites. To the contrary, the prophetic narratives of Kings refuse to view any foreign deity as effectual. This view is most evident in a preceding narrative, 1 Kgs 18:20–40, in which Elijah defeats the prophets of Baal. The climax of this passage comes in the confession of the people that “Yhwh is God,” as opposed to Baal (1 Kgs 18:39). Not only would the author of 2 Kgs 3, who falls in this same prophetic tradition (if not the same author of both passages), omit Chemosh as the subject of this passage, but he would never consider Chemosh powerful enough to influence the Israelite soldiers. Only Yhwh has this ability for the author of Kings.

Similarly, we must discount Driver's suggestion of remorse. Driver's thesis that the author utilizes the sense of the word seen in later Aramaic and Mishnaic Hebrew certainly fits our modern psychological tastes in response to child sacrifice, but the examples he gives do not fit the literary context of 2 Kgs 3. Rather, this passage must be seen in its broader literary light, as I will show. Only in this way will the meaning of the wrath make sense.

Also, the intimation that we ought not to supply a subject for the wrath falls short. While this proposition is true to the literary form presented in the text, it ignores the reader's ability to supply meaning for this verse based on surrounding passages and within the corpus of literature.

As is evident by this point, I argue that Yhwh is the subject of the wrath in this passage. My approach, however, differs from those who have posited a similar reading. They have focused on the OT's insistence of Yhwh's power over Israel at the exclusion of other deities. They are certainly correct in this approach, but I wish to add another factor to it. Scholars have often focused on “wrath” as a concept in

itself. Yet 2 Kgs 3:27 does not simply list “wrath” as what drove the Israelites from Moab. Instead, it is “great wrath” (גְּזַף־גָּדוֹל) that caused Jehoram’s army to flee. This phrase deserves our attention as the exact construct the author of this passage utilizes. We must then investigate the usage of this phrase in other OT texts.

My primary contention here is that this phrase as constructed in 2 Kgs 3:27 has its roots in Deut 29:27 (MT). In this passage from the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy, Moses hypothesizes a situation in which the Israelites will be disobedient to Yhwh, disobeying his commandments, worshiping other gods, and blessing themselves. Under these circumstances, Yhwh will pour out his “great wrath” upon them, and he will send them to another land. A parallel movement appears in 2 Kgs 3. Here, the evil ways of Jehoram have been established in 3:13–14. Certainly, the reader is aware of the sins of all of the Omrides to this point as well. The ambivalent cultic action of the Israelites in 3:27 as expressed above, combined with the intimation of Israel’s participation in the abhorrent practice of child sacrifice (Lev 18; Deut 12:31; Jer 7:31; Ezek 16:20; 20:31; Ps 106:37–39), provides a tipping point for Yhwh. Israel’s God drives away the soldiers of the Northern Kingdom in accordance with this Deuteronomic commandment. Granted, at this point, Israel has not been exiled from their own land, as they have only been driven from the land that was promised them in 3:18. But the movement of this passage remains the same.⁵¹ In fact, it functions as an anticipation of the descriptions in 2 Kgs 17 and 18:9–12 of the ultimate exile of the Northern Kingdom in 722.

This trope is reflected in several other passages, all of which deal with cultic sins that provoke the “great wrath” of Yhwh, ultimately leading to the flight of the people. Both Jer 21:5 and Zech 7:12 utilize this exact phrasing (גְּזַף־גָּדוֹל) to describe Yhwh’s reaction to the

⁵¹ Therefore, I contend that this reference functions more at the level of an “echo” than strictly an “allusion.” For the definitions of “echo” and “allusion,” see Timothy K. Beal, “Glossary,” in *Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Diana Nolan Fewell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 21–24.

misappropriations of worship on the part of his people, culminating in exile. Several other passages present identical understandings of “great wrath,” albeit with different lexemes for “wrath.” Four times, “great wrath” is designated with the term **אַף** (Deut 29:27; 2 Kgs 23:26; Jer 21:5; 32:37). Six times the term **הַמָּה** is used (Deut 29:27; 2 Kgs 22:13; 2 Chr 34:21; Ps 90:11; Jer 21:5; Zech 8:2). With the exception of Ps 90:11, “wrath” described as “great” (**גָּדוֹל**), unanimously refers to Yhwh’s anger resulting from the cultic malpractice of Israel and is always tied with a flight from the land.⁵² While the occurrence of two other terms for “wrath” might appear to argue against my claim for this trope, this need not be the case. Instead, the three lexemes used for “wrath” in association with its modifier **גָּדוֹל** are interchangeable. G. Sauer writes regarding the terms for “wrath,” “The etymology does not permit a differentiation of the nuance of various terms.” Rather, as Sauer defines these terms, all three indicate “the human expression of the emotion of anger toward another person.”⁵³ The use of **קָצַף-גָּדוֹל** in 2 Kgs 3:27 thus characterizes God’s wrath towards the army of the Northern Kingdom.

Thus, the “great wrath” 2 Kgs 3:27 must be seen in light of the previous discussion. It must come from Yhwh and it must refer to some cultic sin on the part of Israel. It anticipates the final sending from the promised land at the hands of the Neo-Assyrians by using the same movement of the passage and similar lexemes. Such a reading conforms to the trope of cultic sin on the part of Israel, leading to great wrath from Yhwh, which in turn necessitates that Yhwh drives his people from the land. Other interpretations have neglected this biblical trope in favor of historical comparisons from outside of the southern Levant or by offering alternatives with less substantial evidence. The

⁵² I would argue that the presence of “great wrath” in Ps 90:11 is tendentious in comparison to the other examples as it appears predicative and refers to two referents, wrath and fear. Moreover, it is poetry abstracted from historical context and falls outside of the genre pertinent for our study here.

⁵³ G. Sauer, “קָצַף,” *TLOT* 3:1157.

present approach seeks to give voice to the thought world of the historian by placing the lexeme of קִצְף־גְּדוֹל in the biblical context.

Conclusion

In sum, intertextual correspondences of the burnt offering (עֹלָה), the first-born (בְּכוֹר), the ambivalent cultic situation existing between the Israelites and Moabites, and the great wrath (קִצְף־גְּדוֹל) offer a more coherent interpretation of this passage conforming to the boundaries of the biblical text as a whole. Mesha's burnt offering of his first-born son echoes Israel's own participation in similar sacrificial acts and its cultically ambivalent past with Moabites. The echoes betray Israel's participation in this sacrifice. Since this particular burnt offering is considered unclean by Torah standards, Yhwh drives his people away from the land he had promised them in 3:18. The manner in which the author of this passage expresses this, namely by omitting the divine recipient of the burnt offering and the subject of the great wrath, underscores the severity of this situation. Israel's vague and improper cultic action provokes Israel's god to distance himself from identification with them, yet also to act swiftly and decisively in punishment.

Doubtless, the author of Kings wishes to contend for the failings of the Omrides and that such disobedience cannot go unpunished.⁵⁴ He accomplishes this in this passage while still revealing the effectiveness of Yhwh's prophet, Elisha. As demonstrated, Elisha's prophecy of victory over the Moabites is fulfilled. The Israelites overcome their foe, as 3:26 displays. However, it does not take long for Israel to fail in their responsibilities of this gift, as they soon cooperate in a cultic misdeed with their vassal king, Mesha. Thus, the author of Kings holds in

⁵⁴ Indeed, I hope this paper provides additional support to a recent argument on this topic by Rachele Gilmour, who suggests via a modern literary reading of the sacrifice in 3:27 that the resulting withdrawal of Israel was due to their disobedience of a conditional prophecy. See Gilmour, "A Tale of the Unexpected: The Ending of 2 Kings 3 Re-Examined," *ABR* 65 (2017): 17–29. See especially pp. 24–25.

tension the idea that, on the one hand, Yhwh is powerful to deliver, but, on the other hand, his people may reject what Yhwh grants them through his power. No other dynasty exemplifies such disobedience as the Omrides.

Cogan and Tadmor resolve that “A proper biblical explanation [of 2 Kgs 3:27] would have been to point to some wrongdoing on the part of Israel which then brought on the divine wrath, but such an act was not a part of the prophetic tradition in vv. 6–25.”⁵⁵ This paper has sought to offer such a “biblical explanation” by the incorporation of various facets of meaning from other OT texts into 3:27. My interpretation fits more suitably with the prophetic tradition of the prior verses in the immediate context of the pericope and the larger tradition of the OT itself.

⁵⁵ Cogan and Tadmor, *2 Kings*, 51–52.