

The Lepers, the King and the Cannibal¹

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Introduction

While II Kings 6:24-7:20 is considered a literary unit, the characters of the cannibal mother, the king and the leprous men are not usually brought together. Are the behaviours of the first two and the conditions of the latter connected? There is notable concern with physical wholeness in the tales of Elisha. Can the motif of flesh provide the key to both the interrelationship of the characters in this particular story and to underlying issues in the text? To these questions I bring the psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva with particular interest in her use of the concepts of subjectivity, symbolic order and abjection. In doing so, the story reveals itself to be concerned with issues of establishing and maintaining personal identity and the symbolic order. Those who are ambiguous and boundary crossers are shown as being both needed and despised by the symbolic order.

The Text

II Kings 6:24-7:20 is a dramatic and unsavoury tale. It forms part of the Elisha cycle of stories and sits uncomfortably in the text, apparently out of sequence². It tells the story

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² For example, in 6:23 the Arameans are no longer raiding Israel, only to besiege Samaria in 6:24. Gehazi, sentenced to perpetual leprosy for fraud and theft as a servant in 5:27, reappears unblemished in 8:4.

of the siege of Samaria by the king of Aram. While famine and the price of food and fuel become exorbitant, the king of Israel is witnessed walking the walls of the city. A woman approaches him crying out for help. At first, the king tells her to take her problems to YHWH, but on enquiring about her complaint he learns that the woman has struck a deal with another mother to eat their own sons. However, the second woman has refused to follow through on the deal after consuming the first woman's child. The king does not reply to the woman but instead tears his clothes revealing sackcloth undergarments and dispatches a man with an order to remove Elisha's head. Elisha, sitting in his house and surrounded by elders, is expecting the arrival of both the man and the king himself. Sure enough, the king arrives hot on the tail of his man. After the king tells him he has no hope in YHWH, Elisha then makes a prediction that Samaria's situation will soon be reversed although the king would not live to enjoy it. In II Kings 7:3, the scene shifts to events outside the walls. Four lepers are trying to decide what course of action to take to ensure their own survival. They choose to go to the camp of the Arameans rather than enter the city. They find the camp deserted and after making the most of the provisions left behind they return to tell the Samarian gatekeepers the good news. The siege now lifted, the people rush out to plunder the camp and in the process the king of Israel is trampled to death.

Questions of the Text

I was initially drawn to this passage by the presence of the cannibal mothers and the negative commentary that they attracted. After spending time considering the story from the perspective of the mother who has consumed her child, I found that much remained

unanswered regarding the actions and motivations of the other speaking characters in the story of the siege and in its conclusion.

Why was it important for the author to specify that four “leprous” men discovered that the Aramaean camp was empty? Was their leprosy in any way related to that of Naaman’s or Gehazi’s that the reader has already encountered in II Kings 5? What does leprosy signify?³ And why was it important to reveal the king’s sackcloth underwear? What connects the characters with each other and what estranges them? I will outline the answers that have been proposed regarding the king’s sackcloth and the four lepers, and then suggest a method that draws the characters together and that may shed light on the underlying issues in the story.⁴

The usual explanations for the king’s sackcloth are that he was suffering with the people (Gray 1977:523; Hobbs 1985:75), or that he was penitent. Jacques Ellul suggests that the king shows himself to be a pious man, repenting in secret for the sins of the nation, the mark of a true king (1972: 45-46).

There are problems attached to both these suggestions. Firstly, why would a king who wishes to suffer with the people appear to want to keep the fact secret? It seems he tore

³ I am using the translation “leprosy” out of convention. Stanley Browne has made quite clear that the biblical description of tsara’ath bears little relation to the disease known as leprosy today (n.d.:5-8). The biblical tsara’ath could appear on wool, leather and even the walls of houses (Lev. 13:47-59). Browne hesitates to name any known skin disease as a replacement translation given the diversity of biblical symptoms. Whatever the pathology of the biblical references it is clear that the symptoms induced fear and a need for control of the victims of outbreaks. I have retained the word leprosy as a sign that continues to carry that fear and need for control.

⁴ This essay could have explored the role of the narrator, YHWH, Elisha, and even included discussion of Queen Jezebel, but I especially wished to examine that which binds the lepers, the king and the speaking cannibal so closely together.

his clothes only after the approach of the woman and even then, the people only saw his sackcloth when they happened to look upward at the elevated king. Surely there is nothing to be gained by suffering with the people unless the people know that their leaders are suffering with them. Even if the king were repenting of personal sins, it would be politically expedient to repent of one's sins in public, as American politics has recently illustrated⁵. One could suggest that the king was trying to appear to be discreetly carrying out an act of penitence and indeed, took the opportunity of the woman approaching him to tear theatrically his outer clothing and reveal the sackcloth⁶. Yet, even if the king was so subtle, why is he portrayed in this positively repentant manner? Perhaps Jacques Ellul is right, the king is a truly pious man repenting privately to bring about forgiveness for the sins of himself and his city, and thus YHWH's intervention in the siege. Yet this does not sit comfortably with the author's picture of the king as a whole. The unnamed king is presented as indecisive, powerless, a murderer and also lacking faith in YHWH and YHWH's prophet. Why, then, bother to give the king any redeeming feature?

Why is it necessary to have four lepers bring about the end of the siege? The most obvious thought is that only lepers would be left outside the city walls in a siege and thus are the only ones to be desperate enough, or in a position to go over to the enemy camp. In opposition to this idea stands v. 4, which shows that the lepers thought they had the option of entering the city if they so desired (Gray 1977: 524). The death they

⁵ Please refer to footnote 1.

⁶ While other kings are portrayed as wearing sackcloth in 1 and 2 Kings, this is the only episode where there seems to be an attempt at privacy. See 1 Kings 21:27, 2 Kings 5:7, 19:1 and 22:11.

expected there is not defined. Rather than at the hands of the city dwellers, it could have been the lack of food and water in the city to which they referred.

Robert LaBarbera suggests that the lepers are used as social comment. It was a way for a peasant society dominated by a military elite to express their resentment and hostility (LaBarbera 1984:651). In this story, the military leaders fail to bring an end to the siege where four lowly common people do. Elisha and Elisha's god are on the side of the common folk whereas the king and his military, and their Canaanite religion, are rejected. There is certainly much to be said for the element of humour and satire in the Elisha cycle of stories. There are elements of farce and some clever puns in this story. The Aramaeans flee because they are afraid of the Hittites and Egyptians (*miṣrayim*) and instead the lepers (*hamṣorîm*) arrive. That there are *four* lepers could be due to the pun on windows (7:2) (*'arubôt*) and four (7:3) (*'arba'ah*) (LaBarbera 1984:648).

While these options—stage setting, social comment and humour—are all possibilities and contribute to the telling of a good yarn, I find them unsatisfying. I would like to suggest there is something deeper that underlies the descriptions of both the deserting lepers and the secretive king. Certainly, there is mortification of the body and there is social comment, but it is operating on a deeper psychological level than is usually discussed.

A New Reading

It seems to me that the tales of Elisha are very concerned with flesh and physical wholeness. There are bear-mauled boys (2:23-5), the dead child raised to life (4:8-37), the feeding of the hungry (4:38-44), the leprosy of Naaman and Gehazi (chap. 5) and the blinding of the Arameans (6:8-23). Some of these are opportunities for a display of miraculous power; others, of what seems to be divine punishment. In 6:24-7:20, flesh unites the cannibal mother, the sack-clothed king and the four lepers. The mother consumes the flesh of her child, the king mortifies his skin with abrasive fabric and the lepers bear their skin disease in isolation from the rest of the community. No reason for punishment is given and miracles do not appear to be forthcoming for their individual circumstances. Perhaps this interest in flesh signifies a more profound issue that goes beyond miracles and punishment.

Stuart Lasine (1991) talks of the world in this story as an inverted one: a world upside down. Lasine and others have noted that cannibalism is one of the curses threatened in Leviticus (26:29) and Deuteronomy (28:53-57) when the people have broken the covenant (1991:29). He sees this primarily as a breakdown in social relations. I would agree that the cannibalism is representative of a breakdown in social order, but I would like to go a step further. When the lepers, the cannibal and the king are put together, the story is about the fear of the symbolic order breaking down for *individuals* as much as for society. I would suggest that what is illustrated here goes beyond covenant breaking to the heart of personal identity.

Like many, I suspect, I have been sceptical about the use of psychoanalytic theory in biblical criticism, but it was in reading Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982) that I wondered if it could be usefully applied to this particular passage from II Kings. I will outline three concepts used by Kristeva—subjectivity, symbolic order and abjection—and then will bring them to the text.

In psychoanalytic theory the primary task of any individual is to become precisely that; to become a subject and to maintain separation from any object (1982:94). A child has to move from being part of its mother to enter into the symbolic order. The symbolic order can be defined as “the system of pre-existing social structures into which the child is born, such as kinship, rituals, gender roles and indeed language itself” (Appignanesi & Garratt 1995:92). As Kristeva puts it, each person must wage a struggle “during the entire period of his personal history in order to become separate, that is to say, to become a speaking subject and/or subject to Law” (1982:94). Law in this instance means symbolic order, but also within this particular context has an overtone of Torah, which is an example of a law upon which a symbolic community is founded. So, the individual must separate from its mother, *become subject* operating within the symbolic order and *maintain that subjectivity* in the face of any threat to its internal cohesion and separation from others. Ideas on how the separation of the subject from the maternal object is achieved vary widely and these will not be dwelt on here.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes that the threat to the symbolic order is “the frailty of the symbolic order itself” (1982: 69). It is not from some external evil or chaos. The

threat is when the borders established by the symbolic order become blurred, moved or transgressed.

The work of Mary Douglas (1966) was pioneering in its examination of the relationship between ritual, defilement and boundaries. From the work of Mary Douglas, Kristeva accepts the idea that “filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary*”, but she wants to look further than defilement of a ritual kind (1982: 69). She asks why it is that,

corporeal waste, menstrual blood and excrement, or every thing that is assimilated to them, from nail-parings to decay, represent -like a metaphor that would have become incarnate-the objective frailty of the symbolic order? (1982:70)

In my reading she brings the use of these things as metaphors, back to their role in the establishment of each individual’s subjectivity (1982: 70-73). She summarises,

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within the social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference (1982:71).

Julia Kristeva calls these bodily excretions and equivalents, abject. While her whole book works on a definition of abjection the following perhaps offers the most straightforward summary:

It is thus not a lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour... Abjection is... a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles... a friend who stabs you (1982:4).

Now I will attempt to bring these concepts of subjectivity, the symbolic order and abjection together with the biblical passage.

After the narrator has offered us an appetiser of doves' excrement and amputated donkey heads we encounter our first fleshy nightmare. A woman has consumed her child. Maternal cannibalism represents the failure of the individual to maintain separation from its primary object at the most basic level⁷. The abject can be defined as the thing which is jettisoned across a border (Kristeva 1982:69). The beginning of the individual is the abject expulsion of the child from its mother (Oliver 1993:57). The child of II Kings 6:24-7:20 may not even have established its subjectivity and certainly failed to maintain it.

⁷ It is clear that cannibalism within a siege could be considered a metonymy for the abjection of a whole people. For this to have meaning at a social level, for it to represent a breakdown of order generally, how it works on the level of personal archaeology must be seen. In other words, how does cannibalism function for the disintegration of the individual and what makes it taboo in the first place?

The cannibal mother and her child represent failure in two ways. When the abject is defined as “the ambiguous”, the mother certainly represents it. She is the mother who is not a mother. She is supposed to love and protect her child but does not. She is the devouring mother: the mother who refuses her child’s borders, and thus its own existence. This mother is a child’s worst fantasy. While it is usually the mother that needs to be abjected in order for the child to make the separation from her, cannibalism inverts this relationship. From the mother’s perspective the child itself has failed to become abject enough. Perhaps if it had been more disgusting it would not have been eaten (Oliver 1993:193). It did not successfully become taboo for the mother. However, in being reabsorbed into the mother, its borders have been eliminated. The child’s fears are realised. Ironically (or perhaps confusingly), the child represents the abject more successfully by being consumed because its identity and borders have been destroyed.

So the cannibal mother tells us that we have entered a world where not only social codes and thus the symbolic order are topsy-turvy, but that the very borders of the individual are at stake. We are seeing abjection on both sides of the coin. The abjection that enables people to become subject, to participate in, construct and maintain the symbolic order, is overwhelmed by the abjection that exists by the very nature of the symbolic order and yet threatens to destroy the structure of the symbolic order itself. In other words, the mother’s behaviour can only be abject because borders exist and the symbolic order can only be threatened by the failure of these borders.

It is worth noting at this point that boundaries are clearly marked in this story. At the centre we have Elisha holed up with some elders behind a closed door, then we have the city enclosed by the wall upon which a king perambulates. The city gates also feature, connecting the internal tale of the king, Elisha and the cannibals with the tale of the four lepers. Between the walls and the camp of the besiegers—presumably surrounding the whole city—are the lepers in “no-man’s-land”.

The lepers are another example of the jettisoned object which is abject. They have been cast out of human society, put beyond the border of the city. But the lepers are abject even before they are expelled. The disease they bear already represents a transgression of borders. Another way to connect the lepers with the cannibal mother is found when Kristeva connects leprosy and broken skin with the violent separation of child from mother at birth. The broken skin bears a trace of unsuccessful separation, where the “obsession of the leprous and decaying body would thus be the fantasy of a self-birth on the part of a subject who has not introjected his mother but has incorporated a devouring mother” (Kristeva 1982:102).

Kristeva calls the skin “the essential if not initial boundary of biological and psychic individuation” (1982:101). Leprosy damages the external organ that guarantees our “corporeal integrity” (1982:101). Broken skin is a permeable membrane, allowing an exchange of internal and external substances. It erases difference. This decay, as previously noted, represents the external threat to both the individual and society.

Inside the city, the lepers represented a threat to identity and to the symbolic order so they had to be spat out. Yet, outside the city they continue to represent a threat. The symbolic order depends on “borders, discrimination and difference”, that is, it needs to prohibit, and thus the expelled lepers continue to point out the fragility of the system that needs to prohibit them (Oliver 1993:56).

What is more, the lepers’ permeability enables them to pass into the camp of the enemy. Their crossing over illustrates further the fear of those whose identity is ambiguous. The lepers can just as easily be the outcastes of the Aramaeans as the Samaritans.

So let us return to the king walking the city walls. He is quite literally walking the line between insider and outsider. It is a line that could represent the symbolic order itself (although we know that the order has already broken down within the city with the act of cannibalism). The king is hedged about with the cannibal mother and child representing the failure to *establish* identity and the lepers on the other side of the wall representing a failure to *maintain* individual subjectivity. He is the king whose faith is lost, whose city is apparently doomed and whose power appears non-existent. He is the king who is not a king. He is ambiguous, abject.

He walks in contrast to the one named person in this account. Elisha, sits knowing the outcome of events, sure of his god, safely enclosed with his elders. Doubt and ambiguity do not appear to exist for him. The door to his room can be shut to keep out the abject; the man whom he calls murderer is the king who wears sackcloth.

Some scholars have named this king Jehoram whose parents were Ahab and Jezebel⁸.

This is conjecture but even if it were so, I think it is significant that the king here remains unnamed. The sackcloth wearing away at his skin, his traversal of the boundary of the city and his namelessness signify a crisis of identity. The unknown king is overwhelmed by the presence of Elisha, the Man of YHWH, the Man of Certainty. In terms of action he is even outdone by the lepers, but there is one more comparison that should be made.

Naaman, the commander of the army of Aram, whose story of affliction and healing appears in chapter five, offers a humiliating contrast to the king of Israel. He is not even a king yet he is named. He has leprosy. It is unlikely that he could continue to be commander of the army with leprosy for health reasons alone, even if Aram did not possess similar separation laws to Israel. His identity is threatened. It becomes even more questionable when he forsakes local cures for the Israelite prophet (Elisha). When he is healed he proclaims faith in the god of Israel. One might think that perhaps the porous skin allowed a change of identity and national allegiance similar to that of the lepers of Samaria, yet Naaman does not become an Israelite, he does not become a traitor to Aram. He returns to his king and holds the various aspects that make up his identity in tension.

⁸ For example, see Ellul (1972) and Lasine (1991). John Gray suggests he is Joash or Jehoahaz (1977:522).

If read using concepts from psychoanalytic theory, it may be seen that the story links personal identity with the security of the symbolic order. The king of Israel is not being portrayed as a secret saint for wearing sackcloth, in contrast with the general portrait of him as a weak and indecisive leader. Rather, the sackcloth represents his failure to establish his own identity, one that was worthy to carry his name into the annals of history. His proximity to the cannibal mother may illustrate the difficulty in breaking away from Baalism or perhaps specifically, the influence of Jezebel herself⁹. Another aspect that may link the king and the cannibal mother is the presence of two mothers who could represent the “split mother”. Thus, the mother who ate her own child would represent the abject mother, and the mother who reneged, the sublime. Kristeva suggests that the heterosexual male needs to split his mother in this way, in order to establish his own subjectivity and sexual identity (1982: 157). Has the king been unsuccessful in “splitting” his mother Jezebel and so initiating his identity problems?

His proximity to the lepers just on the other side of the boundary, indicates the danger that a vacillating king or any individual represents to the symbolic order itself. Unlike Naaman he cannot hold the varying aspects of himself together and instead stands on a limn ready to cross the threshold and murder the Man of Certainty.

In Kristevan terms, the king appears to be on the verge of losing his struggle to maintain his individual identity and remain a speaking subject, subject to the Law. The king by

⁹ This would be particularly significant if the suggestion that Ahab and Jezebel are the king’s parents is taken up. For discussion on the Elisha stories forming a polemic against Canaanite religion see Bronner 1968. For a contrary opinion, see Moore 1990.

ceasing to maintain his own identity threatens the symbolic order or the Law upon which the city, the prophet, and perhaps even YHWH depend.

Finally, in this story, the city, the king, and the symbolic order are informed of their salvation by those abject lepers in their abject act of crossing into the enemy camp. This highlights the double bind of the discussion on abjection. It is a peculiar situation that the symbolic order both loathes and needs the abject to exist at all. The ambiguous, the boundary breaker, the outcaste, the “unnatural” are all needed to create the very order which rejects them.

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