What is the difference between a prophecy of doom and a curse? As I studied Elijah’s letter to Jehoram in 2 Chr 21:12-15, this was the question that I found intrigued me. This problem speaks to a larger question of genre, which also intrigues me. This problem, then, speaks to a methodological problem of generic identification: How can we tell a curse when we see one? In this paper, I will be exploring Elijah’s letter from a number of perspectives. First, I will examine the status of letters and writing in Chronicles. Next, I will examine the figure of Elijah, and his construction as a character in Chronicles. Finally, I will turn to the question of the curse in 2 Chr 21:12-15 and its fulfillment in vv. 16-19. I will then use the analysis to say something about the larger question of the curse genre and its relationship to prophecy. In a way, I will suggest that Chronicles itself can be read in an analogous fashion to a curse.

First, writing in Chronicles. The written word in Chronicles has a peculiar status. The source citations are to “books” (sefer), and as has often been noted, some of the “books” are said to have been written by prophets (insert citations). The books themselves are used to legitimize the Chronicler’s own account. (expand)

Chronicles also ends with a quotation from a written text: Cyrus’ edict is given specifically by a herald proclaiming orally, and as a written proclamation (miktav) (2 Chr. 36:22).

Besides source-books, other written texts are also used to give authority in Chronicles. Thus, in 2 Chr 25:4, the torah, the sefer-Moshe is cited as providing the basis
for Amaziah’s actions. Hezekiah wrote letters (*katav*) to Ephraim and Manasseh to invite them to the Passover in Jerusalem in 2 Chr 30:1. An oral proclamation is not made to them, but a written text is sent instead. The letters are sent by couriers (vv. 10-11), but the couriers are not said to have proclaimed the message. Again, an oral proclamation is reinforced by written texts in 2 Chr 32:17; in this case it is Sennacherib the Assyrian king who writes the letters.

The discovery of the book of the law in 2 Chr 34:14 and following is a very important event in Chronicles, and of importance to the topic of cursing. When called upon to interpret the book of the law, Huldah the prophet links curses with a written text: “Thus says Yhwh: See, I am bringing evil upon this place and upon its inhabitants, all the curses [*’alot*; unique to the MT of Chr, not in Kgs] that are written in the book which they read before the king of Judah” (v. 24). While we might immediately think of Deuteronomy, with its litany of curses in chapters 27-28, I do not want to explore this connection. It is enough for us to see that for the Chronicler, curses may be written, and written curses have a particular authority.

There are three basic terms for something written in Chronicles, and these terms have significance for the understanding of Elijah’s written message. The term most frequently used is *sefer*, which should usually be understood as a “book” in the sense of a written account or record. This is the term that is used in the source citations when referring to a “book of the affairs of X” [expand refs]. It is also the term used particularly in 2 Chr 34 in referring to the *sefer-torat-Yhwh* (it also occurs a couple of other times). This term is also the one used to describe Sennacherib’s written correspondence with Hezekiah and the Judahites in 2 Chr 32. This particular case is anomalous in Chronicles,
in that it probably has the meaning of “letter,” although it is typical of Iron Age usage (cf. Lachish letter 3). In Chronicles, therefore, a sefer is a “record,” whether it be annals of the king or the torah of God.

The second term that is used in Chronicles to refer to written texts is ketav, which appears only in late texts [list]. Significantly, it is an Aramaic term and occurs 12 times in the Aramaic portions of the Bible. It seems likely to be an aramaism when it appears in the Hebrew corpus. It appears three times in Chronicles: 1 Chr 28:19, where it refers to David’s plans for the temple; 2 Chr 2:10, where it refers to Huram’s letter to Solomon, and 2 Chr 35:4, where it refers to David’s arrangements for the Levites now being implemented by Josiah. All three occurrences are in the non-synoptic parts of Chronicles. These occurrences point to a meaning of “written notes” for ketav in Chronicles. [look at other refs]

The third term is the one actually used in our message: miktav. This term occurs nine times in the HB, with six of them in earlier texts (Isaiah, Deut, Exod). Three are in Chronicles and one in Ezra, to which I shall return. In most occurrences, this term has the sense of “written edict”: the clearest example is 2 Chr 36:22//Ezra 1:1, where it refers to Cyrus’ edict being written and also pronounced orally by heralds. In 2 Chr 35:4, it refers to Solomon’s written edicts for the arrangements of the Levites, and is used parallel to ketav (David) in the same verse. In Deut 10:4 and Exod 32:16, it refers to the Decalogue and Torah as a whole as proclaimed orally and written down. In Exod. 39:30, it refers to the inscription on the high priests vestments. In Isaiah 38:9, it refers to Hezekiah’s psalm. Significantly, all three occurrences in Chronicles are in non-synoptic portions of the text. The use of this term to describe Elijah’s written communication,
therefore, is significant. It gives Elijah’s text the status of an edict – a written official
pronouncement. It is notable that the two other authors of a miktav in Chronicles are
royal figures: Solomon and Cyrus (also Hezekiah in Isaiah). It is also notable that is the
torat-Yhwh that is referred to by the term miktav in Deuteronomy and Exodus – Yhwh the
divine king. Elijah’s text, then, is given royal and/or divine spokesman status. This will
have significance when I further explore the role of Elijah.

Let us turn to that enigmatic figure, the second part of my title: Elijah. This
passage contains the only mention of Elijah in Chronicles, unlike the extended Elijah
narratives in Kings. It is not unexpected, given the Chronicler’s exclusive focus on
Judah, that this northern prophet Elijah has a much diminished role. In fact, he need not
appear at all. That he does gives us some indication of the importance of this figure. We
might expect that if any mention of Elijah were to be made in Chronicles, that it would be
in relation to Jehoram’s son Ahaziah’s death in at the hands of Jehu in 2 Chr 22. Elijah is
presented in Kings as the enemy of the Omrides, trying to redeem the Israelite Ahab from
the influences of Jezebel; Ahaziah is an Omride, as 2 Chr 22:2 makes clear. Elijah had
made a prophecy about the downfall of the Omrides in 1 Kings 21: 21-24. But Elijah is
not mentioned in the context of Jehu’s coup in Chronicles. Instead, he is mentioned in
the context of Jehoram. I suggest that he is mentioned here precisely because in Kings
Jehoram gets off scot-free (2 Kgs 8:24): even though he sinned, he was not punished.
For the Chronicles, with his theology of immediate retribution, this was unthinkable.
Somehow Jehoram had to have been punished. So, by introducing a prophetic story here,
and developing a punishment, Jehoram is treated correctly by the Chronicler here,
according to his ideology. But this does not deal with the issue of Elijah being the prophet of his doom.

Scholars have usually pointed out that the chronology is wrong here in Chronicles: by this point, at least according to the chronology in Kings (2 Kgs 3:1): Elijah has already disappeared, since Elisha is the prophet at the end of Jehoram’s father Jehoshaphat’s reign (2 Kgs 3). Elijah should not be able to send any letter to anyone: yet it is the letter tactic that scholars point to as getting around the chronology problem (saved up for just this moment, perhaps). Alternatively, if the chronology is not seen as a problem (it is derived from Kings, after all), the letter is seen as a way to bring this renowned northern prophet into the picture in Judah, where he did not act according to Kings.

The solution to the problem is, I think, two-fold. First, I would suggest that Elijah is actually conflated with Elisha here, for the reason of the “curse” that I will discuss shortly. The tradition history of the Elijah and Elisha stories is not my primary concern here. However, I will point out that in these traditional holy-man folktales, there is every likelihood of stories being attached to more than one figure. But why should Elijah be the important figure in Chronicles? I think it is due to the increased importance of the Elijah figure in the late Persian and Hellenistic periods. We may point to Mal. 3:23-24 (ET 4:5-6) as evidence of this increased status – Elijah is the prophet that would return to herald the day of Yhwh. In 4 Ezra 7:39 and 1 Macc. 2:58, Elijah is included as one of a number of worthy figures of the past. Both Elijah and Elisha are included in Ben Sira’s Hymn to the Ancestors in chapter 48, where Elijah is given eleven and a half verses and Elisha two and a half. The depiction of Elijah in Ben Sira is consistent with that of Kgs,
and also cites Mal 3:23-24, demonstrating that Elijah’s depiction as the herald of the day of Yhwh was established by the time of Ben Sira. However, what is most interesting in this passage from Ben Sira is the description of Elisha: “From where he lay buried, his dead body prophesied. In life he performed wonders, and after death, marvelous deeds” (48:13-14). While this would seem to pick up 2 Kgs 13:20-21, I wonder if it does not also pick up our text from 2 Chr 21; perhaps this is further evidence of a conflation of Elijah and Elisha: Elisha performed amazing deeds after death, perhaps sending this letter was one of them; at some point credit was transferred to Elijah, without reconciling the stories.

Secondly, Elijah is presented by virtue of his “edict” as almost a royal figure, and his edict is not a prophecy but something else. This points again to the increased status of Elijah in the Chronicler’s time period. Edicts generally are shown as being fulfilled; so why not this one as well?

Finally, we can turn to the third part of this paper, namely to the cursing. I have indicated the importance of writing for the Chronicler, and suggested that prophetic writing is key for the Chronicler. I have also suggested that the figure of Elijah is in itself important. But is Elijah’s written edict a curse? There are several points that I think suggest that it is.

First, as I noted above, Elijah may be conflated with Elisha. The passage that I think is relevant is 2 Kgs 2:23-24, when Elisha curses the boys who make fun of his baldness. The curse itself is not spelled out, but we are specifically told that he cursed them “in the name of Yhwh” (v. 24). The fulfillment of the curse is that forty-two boys are mauled by two she-bears (v. 24). So we might presume that the curse was that the
boys be mauled by bears! Two important features may be drawn from this episode: that one could curse in the name of Yhwh, and if one were a prophet, the curse would come true. It is key to note that Elisha does not prophesy here. So in terms of Elijah’s written edict in 2 Chr 21, we may see that Elijah’s curse of Jehoram, and its fulfillment, may fit entirely into a “cursing” genre. If Elisha was a “curser,” it may be that either the Chronicler or some other tradition conflates Elisha with Elijah.

Second, we need to examine the syntax of curses in the HB. Methodologically, I suggest that the best way to approach the issue is by examining statements that are explicitly named as “curses,” and seeing how that syntax operates. This may then be extrapolated to our case here, which is not specifically called a curse by the narrator. The examples are numerous here. The first I would like to examine is Shimei’s cursing (described using qll) of David in 2 Sam 16:7-8: “Out! Out! Murderer! Scoundrel! Yhwh has avenged on all of you the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and Yhwh has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, disaster has overtaken you; for you are a man of blood.” This curse does not invoke consequences; rather it sees in current events the consequences of past actions on David’s part; the perfect rather than the imperfect is used. It also describes David as a murderer, a “man of Belial,” and a man of blood. Is this the curse, to call David by these names? However, the main point I wish to make is that there is nothing in the syntax to indicate that this is a curse.

The second example is Jotham’s curse in Judges 9:20. This is an interesting case, because it reads like a prophecy, yet it is explicitly called a curse (qelalah) in 9:57. In this case, the imperfect/jussive is used by Jotham to invoke the future consequences:
“Let fire come out from Abimelek and consume the lords of Shechem, and let fire come out from the lords of Shechem and from Beth-Millo, and consume Abimelek.” A third example is Elisha’s curse of the boys in 2 Kgs 2:24 that I discussed above, also denoted using qll. A fourth case is Jer 29:22, described by qll: “Yhwh make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon has roasted in the fire.” Again, the imperfect/jussive is used. A final case is Job 3:1-10, also described by the narrator as cursing (qll): “Let the day perish on which I was born...”; the imperfect/jussive is again used here. We can see from these cases that when a formula like “cursed be” (’arur) is not used, curses are usually but not always framed in the imperfect/jussive. When these curses are named in the texts, terms from qll are used; ’rr and brk are not used. The verb qll, to be small or to be of little account, in the piel is usually rendered as “curse;” we could render it as “to belittle.” [check TDOT]

In Malachi, which does have cursing as a prominent theme, the term is ’rr and me’erah (this is the text that also mentions Elijah). It is probably the curses of Deut 27-28 that are evoked here. More to the point, though, are the connections between curses and writing in Numbers 5:27, which has the priest write the curses (’alot, perhaps “execration oaths”) on a bowl, and Zech 5:1-4. It is this latter case that is of interest because of the curse (’alah) written on the giant flying scroll that will home in on the house of the thief like a guided missile. Here we have curses actually written on a scroll (megilla), and they condemn the evil-doer.

Turning to 1 Kgs 19:2, we see an oath formula being used by Jezebel. This oath invokes God/the gods and then invokes consequences (negative), if she does not kill Elijah. Although this is never explicitly called a curse, it ends up being fulfilled: the
negative consequences ("and more also") do happen, eventually. We must consider that *elohim* is usually translated as "gods" here, it ironically ends up being *Elohim*, that is, Yhwh, who causes the curse to be fulfilled. Yet it is also clear that this is not a prophetic oracle. Or is it clear? What is the difference between a curse/oath and a prophecy?

This brings us to the other prophecies in Chronicles. There are several prophets who pronounce a prophetic oracle. Since Elijah’s edict is not paralleled in Kings, I shall examine the prophetic speeches of doom that are not paralleled in Kings. These are: Shemaiah’s speech in 2 Chr 12:5, Zechariah’s speech in 2 Chr 24:20, the anonymous prophet’s aborted speech in 2 Chr 25:15-16, and Oded’s speech in 2 Chr 28:9-11. All of these speeches of doom are very short; in fact Elijah’s written text is the longest pronouncement of doom in the non-synoptic material (the only longer one is Micaiah’s prophecy in 2 Chr 18:18-22). As an aside, we may note that there are several occurrences of prophets simply speaking to the king or Israel/Judah in Chronicles, as if it was simply "the standard" pronouncement of doom, so much so that it did not need to be spelled out [give examples]. When we examine the speeches that are given, they are very brief, and even formulaic. Shemaiah’s speech is: “Thus says Yhwh: you have abandoned me and so I have abandoned you into the hand of Shishak” (2 Chr 12:5). Zechariah’s pronouncement is: “Thus says God: why have you transgressed the commandments of Yhwh so you do not prosper? Because you have abandoned Yhwh, he has abandoned you” (2 Chr 24:20). The anonymous prophet’s aborted pronouncement is: “Why have you sought the gods of the people, which did not deliver their people from your hand?” (2 Chr 25:15). Presumably, the rest of the pronouncement would have been something like: because you have abandoned Yhwh, he has abandoned you. Finally, Oded’s
pronouncement to the Israelites in Samaria concludes with: “For the fierce anger of Yhwh is upon/against you” (2 Chr 18:11). All of these prophecies are immediate (in the perfect), and quite vague or all-encompassing.

In contrast, Elijah’s written edict is in the future: “See, Yhwh is plaguing you, your children, your wives and your possessions with a great plague. And you (will have) a great disease, a disease of your bowels, so that your bowels will come out because of the disease, day by day” (2 Chr 21:14-15). The other prophecies of doom in Chronicles were followed by narratives that demonstrated what had already been stated, namely that Yhwh had already abandoned the people/king; this edict is followed by a demonstration of its fulfillment. So although Elijah’s edict might look prophetic, it is actually anomalous in Chronicles. It is also anomalous in its specific concerns: plague and disease. In this way, the edict looks much more like a curse: future tense, specific consequences being invoked. The first part of the edict is simply the reason for the curse, as in Jotham’s curse in Judges 9.

Elijah in 2 Chr 21 is a writing prophet. He writes not annals (like other prophets in Chronicles), but an edict. However his edict is not an oracle of doom but a curse. I think it is possible at this point to link Elijah’s written curse with Zechariah’s vision of a flying scroll in Zech 5:1-4. In many ways we can see in Zechariah the end of prophecy, and I think we can see in Chronicles the same stereotyping of prophecy. Elijah’s prophecy is a shift from oracles of doom to curses, in a way analogous to Zechariah’s shift to apocalypticism. Elijah is perhaps also like the Chronicler as the Chronicler shifts genres, taking an older genre of “historiography” and moving towards something else that we might call hagiography.