

2 Kings 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] 2 Kings chapter 4 Then go in and shut the door behind yourself and your sons, and pour into all these vessels.

And when one is full, set it aside. So she went from him and shut the door behind herself and her sons. And as she poured, they brought the vessels to her. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, Bring me another vessel.

And he said to her, There is not another. Then the oil stopped flowing. She came and told the man of God, and he said, Go, sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your sons can live on the rest. One day Elisha went on to Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived who urged him to eat some food. So whenever he passed that way, he would turn in there to eat food. And she said to her husband, Behold now, I know that this is a holy man of God who is continually passing our way.

Let us make a small room on the roof with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that whenever he comes to us, he can go in there. One day he came there, and he turned into the chamber and rested there.

[1 : 30] And he said to Gehazi his servant, Call this Shunemite. When he had called her, she stood before him. And he said to him, Say now to her, See, you have taken all this trouble for us.

What is to be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king, or to the commander of the army? She answered, I dwell among my own people. And he said, What then is to be done for her?

Gehazi answered, Well, she has no son, and her husband is old. He said, Call her. And when he had called her, she stood in the doorway. And he said, At this season, about this time next year, you shall embrace a son.

And she said, No, my lord, O man of God, do not lie to your servant. But the woman conceived, and she bore a son about that time the following spring, as Elisha had said to her.

When the child had grown, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. And he said to his father, Oh, my head, my head. The father said to his servant, Carry him to his mother.

[2 : 30] And when he had lifted him, and brought him to his mother, the child sat on her lap till noon, and then he died. And she went up, and laid him on the bed of the man of God, and shut the door behind him, and went out.

Then she called to her husband, and said, Send me one of the servants, and one of the donkeys, that I may quickly go to the man of God, and come back again. And he said, Why will you go to him today? It is neither new moon, nor Sabbath.

She said, All is well. Then she saddled the donkey, and she said to her servant, Urged the animal on, Do not slacken the pace for me unless I tell you. So she set out, and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, Look, there is the Shunammite. Run at once to meet her, and say to her, Is all well with you? Is all well with your husband? Is all well with the child?

And she answered, All is well. And when she came to the mountain to the man of God, she caught hold of his feet, and Gehazi came to push her away. But the man of God said, Leave her alone, for she is in bitter distress, and the Lord has hidden it from me, and has not told me.

[3 : 38] Then she said, Did I ask my Lord for a son? Did I not say, Do not deceive me? He said to Gehazi, Tie up your garment, and take my staff in your hand, and go.

If you meet anyone, do not greet him, and if anyone greets you, do not reply. And lay my staff on the face of the child. Then the mother of the child said, As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.

So he arose and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. Therefore he returned to meet him and told him, The child has not awakened.

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and shut the door behind the two of them, and prayed to the Lord. Then he went up and lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands.

And as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm. Then he got up again, and walked once back and forth in the house, and went up and stretched himself upon him.

[4 : 41] The child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Then he summoned Gehazi and said, Call the Shunammite. So he called her. And when she came to him, he said, Pick up your son.

She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground. Then she picked up her son and went out. And Elisha came again to Gilgal, when there was a famine in the land. And as the sons of the prophets were sitting before him, he said to his servant, Set on the large pot, and boil stew for the sons of the prophets.

One of them went out into the field to gather herbs, and found a wild vine, and gathered from it his lap full of wild gourds, and came and cut them up into the pot of stew, not knowing what they were. And they poured out some for the men to eat. But while they were eating of the stew, they cried out, O man of God, there is death in the pot! And they could not eat it. He said, Then bring flour.

And he threw it into the pot, and said, Pour some out for the men, that they may eat. And there was no harm in the pot. A man came from Baal Shalisha, bringing the man of God bread of the firstfruits, twenty loaves of barley, and fresh ears of grain in his sack.

[5 : 49] And Elisha said, Give to the men, that they may eat. But his servant said, How can I set this before a hundred men? So he repeated, Give them to the men, that they may eat.

For thus says the Lord, They shall eat, and have some left. So he set it before them, and they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord. Elisha is given a double portion of his master Elijah's spirit, and he goes on to perform twice as many miracles as his master does.

He also performs themes from the ministry of Elijah, albeit transposed into a different key. In 2 Kings chapter 4, we find several of Elisha's miracles, miracles that should readily recall those of Elijah.

While much of Elijah's ministry was outside of the land, in Zarephath, in Sinai, or near the brook Cherith, the ministry of Elisha is largely based in the land itself. And whereas Elijah's ministry was particularly characterised by judgement, the ministry of Elisha is one that brings life and healing. Elijah is the prophet of the desert, he's also the prophet of the drought, whereas Elisha is a man who heals and gives water. The ministries of Elijah and Elisha are tied up together. The one completes the ministry of the other.

[6 : 59] The transition to the ministry of Elisha brings a new and more glorious stage of God's work through these prophets. During the drought that he had pronounced upon Israel, Elijah, after he left the brook Cherith, stayed with a woman of Zarephath, a widow who had one son.

Elijah was in a cocoon of protection that the Lord has established around him. First of all, he was protected by the ravens, and then he was protected and fed by the woman of Zarephath and her son.

The widow of Zarephath provided for Elijah with her oil and her flour, which would not run out as long as she was providing for Elijah. If she offered the prophet Elijah a cake first, then there would be enough to provide for her and her son until the prophet needed food once more.

The widow and her son then were kept alive as a means of keeping Elijah alive. At the beginning of this chapter we have a story with several similarities to that earlier story, but with significant differences.

Now there is a widow with two children, and the threat this time is not starvation, but slavery, that her two children would be sold into slavery to pay for her debt. Once again there is a miracle of a jar of oil not running out.

[8 : 05] However, while the last jar of oil just continued to provide enough to keep them going, this jar provides such a super abundance that a great many vessels provided by many neighbours are filled before it finally stops flowing.

Once again God is sending his servant as a redeemer of widows, but now to an Israelite widow, not just a Sidonian one. In this chapter we also see that a community is being formed around Elisha, the sons of the prophets, the wealthy woman who supports him in Shunem.

A remnant community is being formed in a way that might remind us of Jesus and his disciples in the Gospels. Elijah performed two miracles for the widow of Zarephath. Her oil and her flour were extended, and her son was raised.

Here we have another extension of oil, and it's followed by a story of a child being born, and a child being raised from the dead. It begins with an act of hospitality.

Elisha goes through Shunem, and a wealthy woman urges him to eat some food with her.

Subsequently, every time he passes that way he goes in to eat some food. The woman speaks to her husband and suggests that they build a little room at the top of their house, in which he can stay every time that he visits.

[9 : 13] The room will have a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp. Peter Lighthouse suggests that there might be an allusion here to the various items of furniture in the temple. The bed is the altar, the table is the table of showbread, the chair is the mercy seat throne, of which the Ark of the Covenant is the footstool, and then the lamp is the lampstand.

The fact that Gehazi is always the go-between might suggest some sort of priestly connotation. Elisha represents the Lord, and Gehazi is his priest. What the woman recognises is that God's presence is particularly in and with Elisha.

Israel does not have the temple that the southern kingdom has, but it does have God's work in someone like Elisha, God's presence being especially known in and around him. Part of this presence is the new community that is being formed in his orbit.

With his servant Gehazi as a go-between, Elisha discovers that the principal thing that the woman wants is a son. When she is summoned, she stands in the doorway, and Elisha declares to her, At this season, about this time next year, you shall embrace a son.

She struggles to believe it, but sure enough, that time next year she bears a son, as Elisha had said. There is, of course, an event that this should remind us of. In the book of Genesis, chapter 18, verses 10 to 12, The Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.

[10 : 36] And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, After I am worn out and my Lord is old, shall I have pleasure?

The similarities can be readily seen. In Genesis, chapter 18, the promise of a son is given after the act of hospitality to the angels. In both cases, the parties are older and seemingly beyond childbearing.

In both cases, the woman is standing in the doorway. And in both cases, the same turn of phrase is used. I will surely return to you about this time next year. The birth of another child in the manner of Isaac, one of the great forefathers of the nation, is a propitious sign for God's blessing of his people. It's also a sign of God's power over death. This whole chapter is a chapter that shows God's power over death, his power over scarcity, and his commitment to redeem his people.

However, there is a twist in this particular story. After the child has grown, one day when he's out with the reapers, he complains of a sore head, and the father instructs his servant to carry the child to his mother.

[11 : 42] The Shunammite woman's response is to bring the child up to the room of Elisha, to lay him out on his bed. This upper room is a place that's, as it were, sealed off from the rest of the world.

It's a realm where the servant of the Lord dwells, the man who is anointed by the Lord's spirit. If there is any hope for the child, it will be found by sealing him up in this realm, a sort of cocoon of God's presence, distinguished from the wider world.

The woman then goes to seek the prophet Elisha. She saddles her donkey and sets out for the mountain. When Elisha sees her coming afar off, he sends Gehazi, his servant, to meet her, and the woman assures Gehazi that all is well with her, her husband, and the child.

However, when she meets Elisha, she grabs his feet in her bitterness. She then goes on to tell him what has happened, highlighting the injustice of it all. She had not asked for a child, but yet a child had been given to her, and now that child has been taken away, treating her more cruelly than if she'd never been given the child to begin with.

Elisha sends on his servant Gehazi ahead of them. However, when Gehazi lays the staff of Elisha upon the face of the child, the child does not rise. Nothing happens. Elisha then comes into the room and prays to the Lord, and he goes and lies on the child, puts his mouth on the mouth of the child, his eyes on his eyes, his hands on his hands.

[13:00] He's identifying himself with the child, in much the same way as Elijah related to the child of the widow of Zarephath. When he does this the first time, the child's flesh becomes warm, but nothing further happens.

After walking back and forth in the house, he goes up again and does the same thing. And now the child sneezes seven times and opens his eyes. He then instructs Gehazi, his servant, to tell the woman to pick up her son.

Once again, this is a story with many similarities to other ones. It is a story that might remind us of the binding of Isaac. There there is not a child that has died, but a child that will have to be put to death.

Once again, it's the promised child, the child that has been given by God to the barren woman. Here, after the child has died, the woman undertakes a journey very similar to the one of Abraham. She saddles her donkey and she travels to the mountain. There is also, as there was back in Genesis chapter 22, a reference to seeing something afar off. We earlier saw the similarities between the room that was prepared for Elisha and the temple.

[14:02] And the bed was like an altar. Now the body of the child is laid out on the bed, like the body of Isaac was laid out on the altar. However, now the child's body is laid out, not to be killed, but to be raised up.

Back in Genesis chapter 22, there's no reference to Sarah in the story. The impression is strongly given that Abraham does all of these things without consulting with her. Here, something similar happens, but the other way round.

The woman places the child in the upper room, without even telling her husband, and then goes off to seek the prophet, without telling her husband the purpose of her journey. In some ways, we could imagine this story as a sort of way in which Sarah could respond, had the sacrifice of Isaac gone ahead.

She had been promised this child. This child had been given to her in the Lord's kindness. Was he going to take this child away? No, she would go back and she would insist upon the Lord's goodness that the child be restored to her.

There is another story that this might remind us of, a story that immediately precedes the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. It's the story of Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness. In that story, there is also a woman with a dying son, and it ends with the woman being told to pick up her son, much as our story in 2 Kings chapter 4.

[15:16] It is through reflecting upon such stories and their close relationships, and the way in which they invert particular characters and particular scenarios, that our theological imagination is developed.

We can consider a different permutation of the characters in the story of the binding of Isaac, and consider what would have happened in that case. Through such reflection, we have a better understanding of the original story of Genesis chapter 22, and of the highly related story of chapter 21, and the meaning of 2 Kings chapter 4 is thrown into far sharper relief when we read it against the backdrop of Genesis.

After the raising of the son of the Shunammite woman, we read of a meal at Gilgal that is prepared with the sons of the prophets, and in the pot one of the sons of the prophets places some wild gourds that he found that poison the stew.

When they eat it, they discover that it was poisoned, and they tell Elisha, who instructs them to bring him some flour, which he throws in the pot and heals it of its poison. A few chapters earlier, he had healed the waters of Jericho by casting some salt in them, and now he casts flour in a pot to have the same effect.

As with the raising of the woman's son, we should probably see some sort of sign here. The pot might represent the nation, all the people together, and the wild gourds might make us think of the cultivated gourds that you see in the temple.

[16:32] The nation is poisoned by this wild fruit, but God is going to cast into the nation the salt and the flour of his word and his people, and through them to heal the nation of its poison. This chapter ends with a further miracle, the miraculous feeding of a hundred men with the firstfruits of

the man of Baal Shalisha.

The presentation of the firstfruits to Elisha might be another way in which Elisha is being associated with the temple. As in the extension of the oil of the widow at the beginning of the chapter, the multiplication of the bread that ends it is another miracle of plenty, illustrating the abundance that God can provide for his people, a joyous success that provides for all that is needed, with more left over.

A question to consider. In what ways could we compare Elisha and his miracles to our Lord and his miracles?