

2 KINGS 4

4:1–7

Many of Elisha’s miracles match those of Elijah, and the one these verses recount is similar to Elijah’s miracle with the widow of Zarephath. There are some important differences, though. This widow was an Israelite where Elijah’s widow was not; this widow had two sons where Elijah’s widow had one; and this widow had many vessels where Elijah’s widow had one. There has been a tendency since medieval times, and possibly before, to try to connect unnamed people in the Bible with people named elsewhere in the Bible. The widow’s deceased husband is, according to this tradition, Obadiah, Ahab’s steward from 1 Kings 18. In considering this and many of the other assumptions on identities of unnamed people, these claims can easily be refuted by asking what possible motive would cause the author to not include the name if it was known. In this case, Obadiah was a high official in the court of Ahab, and while it’s certainly possible for him to have lost status and wealth due to his faith, it seems more likely that the widow’s husband from these verses was just one among many of Elijah and Elisha’s acquaintances.

4:8–10

“Great woman” in verse 8 probably means “wealthy and influential.” The woman’s greatness was probably the consequence of some quality or inheritance of her own and not of her husband since he is hardly mentioned throughout this narrative. She recognized something in Elisha’s bearing that marked him out as holy, so she created some cozy spot on her property for him to use when he came through town. The woman can be compared to Israel, Elisha to God, and the little chamber to the temple—especially since it had a table like the shewbread table and a candlestick like the menorah.

4:11–12

This introduction to Gehazi, Elisha's servant, lacks in comparison to Elisha's own introduction as Elijah's servant. This could be because we are missing passages about his background or because he ultimately failed in his duties (see 2 Kings 5). He did not receive the mantle from Elisha nor the attention of the narrator.

4:13–17

The story of the Shunammite woman matches that of Sarah's making food for the messengers of God while they met with Abraham. Sarah was separated from the men as they talked, but she could hear the conversation through the tent, similarly to how Elisha communicated at first with the Shunammite woman indirectly through his servant Gehazi.

4:18–21

There are too many possible ailments the boy may have suffered from, and we are only given one symptom. Considering the hard work associated with reaping and how hot Israel can be during harvest times, one possibility is that perhaps the boy had heat stroke. We aren't told his age, but that he spent time on his mother's knee implies he was probably quite young while obviously being old enough to speak and either visit his father at work or help out. The dead boy was laid on the prophet's bed, just as the child was in the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath.

4:22–23

The new moon was a monthly occasion for sacrifice (Numbers 28:11–15). There are two possible explanations behind the reference to the time. Either it wasn't appropriate to visit with a prophet unless it was the new moon or the Sabbath, or the people knew Elisha's whereabouts only on those days and the husband of the Shunammite woman didn't think she would know where to find Elisha.

4:24–26

Shunem is about ten or fifteen miles east of Mount Carmel (depending on where on the mountain Elisha lived). If Elisha was going anywhere in Israel, he likely would have passed right by Shunem. Gehazi asked the Shunammite woman if all was well with her, her husband, and her child, to which she answered with a lie. Based on how poorly she was spoken to through Gehazi in verses 13–14, perhaps she was saving her plea for Elisha's ears.

4:27–30

The Shunammite woman's words match Elisha's three-times-repeated statements to Elijah shortly before he was taken up to heaven. She would not accept Elisha's proxy servant Gehazi, perhaps again pointing to her distrust for Gehazi.

4:31–35

Since Elisha and the boy were the only ones in the room, how is the author able to provide us with this kind of detail? If the account is true to reality, the actions seem ritualistic and similar to Elijah’s actions with the son of the widow of Zarephath. There is only one other place in the Bible where sneezing is mentioned (Job 41:18), but the Hebrew words in each instance are not the same, and both are used only once in the Old Testament. The sneeze in Job is actually God’s sneeze, and it brings light. The Hebrew word translated as “sneeze” in this verse (*zarar*) is probably onomatopoeic, meaning the word imitates the sound it’s meant to describe. Sneezing in the Middle Ages, especially during times of plague, was considered dangerous. The Bible doesn’t seem to associate sneezing with poor health or danger to the sneezer. This passage and the one in Job are both positive depictions of sneezing.

4:36–39

The wild gourds were probably the *Calotropis procera*, sometimes called the apple of Sodom. Consuming even a small amount results in severe diarrhea, and consuming a large amount could be fatal.

4:40–41

As he healed the water at Jericho with salt (2 Kings 2:21), Elisha healed the food from the poison with some ground wheat.

4:42–44

This last vignette, like some of the others in the narrative such as that of the servant’s widow in the beginning of the chapter, is a multiplication of food reminiscent of Christ’s feeding His disciples. The place name Baal-shalisha isn’t known. The name means “Lord of Three,” and the use of the term “Baal” might indicate it was a Canaanite city. This isn’t necessarily the case, however, since the Canaanites spoke the same language as the Israelites and Baal was not just the name of the Canaanite god but also meant “lord, god, or husband.” In English we frequently use the names of deities without believing in them. For example, the Roman goddess Fortuna is invoked whenever someone is called fortunate.

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