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## **VOLUME 8, ARTICLE 4**

**Yael Shemesh,  
ELISHA AND THE MIRACULOUS JUG OF OIL (2 KGS 4:1-7)**

## ELISHA AND THE MIRACULOUS JUG OF OIL (2 KGS 4:1-7)

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Scholars who have studied the Elisha stories as literature have tended to focus on the longer narratives (chiefly 2 Kgs 4:8-37 and 2 Kgs 5), while neglecting the shorter miracle tales, which they dismiss as simple and undeveloped.<sup>1</sup> I believe this approach is mistaken. Through a close literary analysis of one of the short stories—that of the miraculous jar of oil in 2 Kgs 4:1-7—I want to demonstrate that these stories are on a higher artistic level than one might suppose, and employ various literary devices, including analogy.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the stories are a faithful expression of the people's veneration of Elisha. Through a close reading of the story, paying attention to the literary genre of the Elisha cycle in general and of the episode of the miraculous jar of oil in particular, I will attempt to arrive at a better understanding both of the story and of the unique figure of Elisha, as he is portrayed in the Bible.<sup>3</sup> My basic axiom has already been stated by Meir Weiss: "The style of the creation in all its manifestations is not only a matter of aesthetics but also a matter of expressiveness."<sup>4</sup>

I begin by considering the location of the story and its interrelations with its immediate environment—the account of the Moabite war, which precedes it (Chapter 3), and the three miracle tales that follow it in Chapter 4 (§2). Next I look closely at the story itself: first its structure (§3), and then a close reading that constitutes the bulk of this paper (§4). In this analysis I hope to demonstrate the high artistic level of this brief narrative, on the one

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, W. Brueggemann, *2 Kings* (Atlanta: Knox Press, 1982), p. 18; A. Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), pp. 13-40 (esp. 13, 18, 27).

<sup>2</sup> In my doctoral dissertation, written under the guidance of Prof. Uriel Simon, and completed in 1997, I sought to corroborate this argument through an analysis of the stories of the healing of the waters of Jericho (2 Kgs 2:19-22), "Baldhead" (ibid., 23-25), the bitter stew made edible (2 Kgs 4:38-41), and the multiplication of the food (ibid., 42-44). See Y. Shemesh, "The Stories of Elisha: A Literary Analysis," Ph.D. dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 1997, pp. 138-186 (in Hebrew). The story addressed here was not analyzed there.

<sup>3</sup> On the benefits of a combination of close reading and genre criticism see, for example, J. Mulenburgh, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969), pp. 6-7; B. O. Long, "Some Recent Trends in the Form Criticism of Old Testament Narratives," *WCJS/Bible* 7 (1981), pp. 63-72.

<sup>4</sup> M. Weiss, *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), pp. 21-22.

hand, and to buttress my assertion that, generically, the Elisha stories are saints' legends, on the other.<sup>5</sup> The close reading will uncover, among other things, the parallel that the story draws between Elisha and the Lord, Who delivers Israel from bondage—a parallel that has not previously been noted in the research literature. After examining the story in isolation I will consider another parallel that cannot be missed—the one between this story, which describes a food miracle effected by Elisha, and the food miracle performed by Elijah (1 Kgs 17:8–16). I will show that this parallel, too, illuminates Elisha's unique personality and the unique quality of the stories about him—a result of their literary genre (§5).

## 2. THE LOCATION OF THE STORY IN THE BOOK OF KINGS

The fourth chapter of 2 Kings comprises four stories, which report five miracles worked by Elisha: the miraculous jar of oil (vv. 1-7), the miraculous birth and subsequent resurrection of the son of the Shunammite matron (vv. 8-37), the stew that he makes edible (vv. 38-41), and the multiplication of the barley bread and grain (vv. 42-44). The first two stories tell how Elisha helps individuals, in both cases a woman;<sup>6</sup> the last two stories recount his assistance to a large group of people, the disciples of the prophets who live around him in Gilgal. The first and last stories in the chapter involve a miracle that affects food—liquid food in the former case and solid food in the latter. In both miracles the assistance he renders goes beyond the immediate need, reflected in the use of the root **יתר**: you and your sons can live on the rest (**בנותר**)” (v. 7); “they shall eat and have some left over (**והותר**)” (v. 43). The narrator adds that Elisha's promise is fulfilled: “When they had eaten, they had some left over (**ויותירו**), as the Lord had said” (v. 44).<sup>7</sup>

The account of the miraculous jar of oil has several linguistic links with the preceding story, which deals with the war of the three kings against Moab (2 Kings 3). Both stories employ the verbal forms of the root **יצק** (“who poured water on the hands of Elijah” [2 Kgs 3:11]; “pour into all those vessels” [2 Kgs 4:4]; “she poured” [2 Kgs 4:5]) and the root **נסע**

<sup>5</sup> On the Elisha stories as hagiography see Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, pp. 13-74, as well as my article, “The Elisha Stories as Saints' Legends,” elsewhere in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Although there are, of course, differences between the two women: the first is desperately poor, the second well-to-do. The first needs relief from her economic plight, whereas the second supports the prophet and hosts him in her house whenever he passes through her city. The first calls on the prophet for help, whereas the second rejects his offers of assistance. On the distinctions between the two women, see R. L. Cohn, *2 Kings* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, Minnesota 2000), p. 25. I believe that the reason for presenting two such different figures, both of whom are ultimately helped by the prophet, in different ways, is to depict the broad spectrum of the beneficiaries of Elisha's miracles as well as their diverse character.

<sup>7</sup> Compare N. Levine, “Twice as Much of Your Spirit: Pattern, Parallel and Paronomasia in the Miracles of Elijah and Elisha,” *JOT* 85 (1999), pp. 25-46 (p. 29).

(“they withdrew [ויסעו] from him” [2 Kgs 3:27]; “remove [תסיעי] the full ones” [2 Kgs 4:4]). There may also be a phonetic link in the similarity of the verb נשא ‘respect’ employed by Elisha (2 Kgs 3:14) and the noun נושה ‘creditor’ used by the woman (2 Kgs 4:1). But the most important link between the two stories is thematic: the nature of the miracle—the miraculous filling of the dry streambed and of the jars—is similar. This thematic link is reinforced by the use made in both stories of the root מלא ‘fill’ in association with the miraculous deed. In the story of the Moabite war Elisha prophesies, “that stream-bed shall be filled with water” (2 Kgs 3:17), and the narrator reports the fulfillment of the prophecy: “the country was filled with water” (v. 20). In the story of the miraculous jar of oil Elisha instructs the woman, “remove the full ones” (2 Kgs 4:4), and the jars indeed fill up miraculously until all have been used, as reported by the narrator: “When the vessels were full” (v. 6). Thus in both stories Elisha satisfies a desperate need. In the first he is involved in rescuing the armies of Israel, Judah, and Edom from death by thirst, when the dry streambed fills up with water; in the second he rescues the widow of one of the disciples of the prophets from her destitution, which threatened the enslavement of her sons, by filling the empty jars with oil.

An even stronger link is that between the story of the miraculous jar of oil and the episode that follows it, the miraculous birth of a son to the Shunammite matron and his later resurrection (2 Kgs 4:8-37). In both of them Elisha helps a woman who calls herself “your maidservant” (vv. 2 and 16).<sup>8</sup> In the first story he saves the widow’s sons from slavery; in the second he works a miracle that provides the Shunammite with a son and several years later brings him back to life. Both stories present the woman as deserving the prophet’s assistance, although in the episode of the miraculous jar of oil it is the woman who attests to her own (admittedly vicarious) merit (“your servant feared the Lord” (v. 1), whereas in the story of the birth and resurrection of the Shunammite’s son her virtues are asserted by the narrator, through the details of the plot, and by Elisha, who, wanting to reward the woman for her goodness, tells her: “You have gone to all this trouble for us. What can we do for you?” (v. 13). In addition, the closing of the door as a precondition for the miracle is a detail common to both stories (vv. 4 and 5; 21 and 33).<sup>9</sup>

There are stylistic and linguistic ties between the stories, too: Elisha’s question to the Shunammite matron, “What can we do for you?” (v. 13), repeated to Gehazi in the next verse (“What then can be done for her?” [v. 14]), echoes almost word for word his question of the widow: “What can I

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<sup>8</sup> This was noticed by Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, p. 50. Alongside the similarities there are of course differences. In the first story, the woman is desperately poor and cries out to Elisha for help, whereas in the second story the woman is rich and deflects Elisha’s offers of assistance.

<sup>9</sup> This was noted by T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (WBC 13; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985), p. 49. But the widow has to be told by Elisha to close the door (4:4, 5), whereas the Shunammite matron understands on her own that she must close the door on her son’s body, which she has laid out on the prophet’s bed (4:21).

do for you?” (v. 2). The Shunammite matron’s statement, “I have come to know” (v. 9), remind us of the widow’s “you know” (v. 1).<sup>10</sup> Linguistically, both stories are notable for the Aramaism of the final *yod* in the second-person feminine singular: לְכִי (v. 2), שְׁכַנִּיכִי (v. 3), נְשִׁיכִי and בְּנִיכִי (v. 7) in the first tale; אֲתִי (v. 16) and הִלַּכְתִּי (v. 23) in the second tale.<sup>11</sup>

There are also structural reasons for the juxtaposition of the story of the Shunammite matron, which concludes with the resurrection of her son, with that of the miraculous jar of oil: the editor of the Elisha cycle wanted to draw a parallel between Elisha’s miracles and those performed by his master Elijah: the story of Elijah’s resuscitation of the son of the widow of Zarephath is preceded by an episode in which “The jar of flour did not give out, nor did the jug of oil fail” (1 Kgs 17:16). But whereas in 1 Kings 17 the miracle of the flour and oil benefits the same woman whose son Elijah restores to life, and the two events can be seen as scenes of one story,<sup>12</sup> here there are two different women and two separate stories, although linked by many bonds.

The story of the miraculous jar of oil is the first in the Elisha cycle that recounts the deliverance of an individual—the widow of one of the disciples of the prophets.<sup>13</sup> The story has no national or political significance.<sup>14</sup> After a story that shows Elisha acting on the national plane and assisting the armies of Israel, Judah, and Edom in their war against Moab (chapter 3), the spotlight switches to the private domain, where we find that Elisha does not scorn small deeds and is willing to assist a single family in Israel—a widow and her two orphan sons. This is also the first story that provides evidence of the new relations forged between Elisha and the disciples of the prophets after the power struggle between them,

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<sup>10</sup> U. Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (trans. by L. J. Schramm; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 256.

<sup>11</sup> This was noted by A. Šanda, *Die Bücher der Könige* (EHAT 9/2; Münster: Aschendorff, 1912), p. 79; J. Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; OTL 9; London: S.C.M. Press, 1970), p. 467.

<sup>12</sup> See Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, pp. 159-168.

<sup>13</sup> The miracles of individual deliverance found later in the Elisha cycle are the birth and resurrection of the son of the Shunammite matron (4:8-37), the healing of Naaman’s leprosy (ch. 5), making the borrowed axhead float to the surface for one of the disciples of the prophets (6:1-7), Elisha’s injunction to the Shunammite matron to leave the country, which stems from his prophetic foreknowledge of the seven years of famine that are about to strike the land, followed by the sequence of events based on the miraculously coincidental timing that ends with the king’s returning her lost property to her (8:1-6), and the resurrection of the corpse that comes into contact with Elisha’s bones (13:20-21).

<sup>14</sup> Pace A. Winters, “Una Vasija de Aceite: Mujer, Deudas y Comunidad (II Reyes 4:1-7),” *RIBLA* 14 (1993), pp. 53-59, who asserts that Elijah and Elisha headed a resistance movement to the house of Ahab, a movement that fought against the introduction of Baal worship to Israel by the royal house and was motivated in addition by the economic hardship of many in the country. But there is no support for this argument in the biblical text, or for her conjecture that the widow is one of the female prophets active in the community (*ibid.*, p. 57).

described in the story of his consecration (2 Kgs 2:1-18).<sup>15</sup> After Elisha serves as the patron of the widow of one of the disciples of the prophets, his assistance to the disciples themselves, as described in the sequel (chiefly 4:38-41, 42-44, dealing with food-related miracles, but also 6:1-7) is a natural continuation to the story.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. THE STRUCTURE OF THE STORY

Although short, the story consists of three scenes, distinguished by changes of place and partial changes of characters, as follows:

**Scene 1:** The widow's appeal to Elisha and the prophet's instructions (vv. 1-4).

Characters: The widow of one of the disciples of the prophets and Elisha

Location: Elisha's residence (unspecified place)

**Scene 2:** The miraculous flow of oil (vv. 5-6)

Characters: The widow and her sons

Place: the Widow's residence (unspecified place)

**Scene 3:** Elisha tells the widow how to benefit from the miracle (v. 7)

Characters: The widow and Elisha

Place: Elisha's residence

The story begins with the desperate widows' cry for help to Elisha (v. 1) and concludes with Elisha's instructions to the widow, which ends with the words "live on the rest" and removes the cause of her distress (v. 7). Its basic structure, like all of the stories in chapter 4 and stories of miraculous deliverance in general, is "a movement *from trouble to well-being*."<sup>17</sup> And this takes place in the wake of intervention by the man of God.

All three scenes begin with an action taken by the widow: in the first scene she cries to Elisha for assistance (v. 1), in the second scene she goes and carries out his instructions (v. 5), and in the last scene she returns (v. 7) and tells him what has happened.

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<sup>15</sup> On the power struggle between Elisha and the disciples of the prophets in the story of Elisha's consecration as a prophet (2 Kgs 2:1-18), see Shemesh, "The Stories of Elisha," pp. 107, 120-121, 131-137. And compare J. G. Butler, *Elisha: The Miracle Prophet* (Clinton: LBC Pub., 1994), p. 31, who notes that the disciples of the prophets, when they address Elisha at the start of the story (2:3, 5), are eager to show off their wisdom and superior knowledge.

<sup>16</sup> The disciples of the prophets were in some respect prophets in training, or, as Maimonides wrote: "Those who aspire to prophecy are called 'the disciples of the prophets'. Even though they concentrate their attention, it is possible that the Divine Presence will rest upon them, and it is possible that it will not rest upon them" (*Mishneh Torah, Hilbot Yesodei Hatorah*, 7,5 [ed. E. Touger; New York: Moznaim, 1989]). According to the Elisha cycle there were communities of disciples of the prophets in Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho. We may assume that they lived a life of poverty. On the disciples of the prophets in Elisha's period and their links with Elisha see Shemesh, "The Stories of Elisha," pp. 117-120.

<sup>17</sup> Brueggemann, *2 Kings*, p. 17 (emphasis in the original).

The widow's sons, who are the subject of her appeal, are active only in the second scene, when they help their mother fill the jars of oil. But they are also mentioned in the other scenes. In the first scene, at the beginning of the story, their mother mentions them in the context of her misery: "The creditor is coming to seize my two children to be his slaves" (2 Kgs 4:1). In the third scene, in the sentence that concludes the story, Elisha's instructions to the widow include them in her new-found relief: "you and your sons can live on the rest" (2 Kgs 4:7).

Elisha is active in the first and third scenes. Although he is not present in the second scene, which reports the occurrence of the miracle, his spirit dominates it, both at the start, when the widow is following his instructions, and at the end, when the miracle he promised takes place.

#### 4. A CLOSE READING

##### ***SCENE 1: THE WIDOW'S APPEAL TO ELISHA AND THE PROPHET'S INSTRUCTIONS (VV. 1-4)***

The story begins when the wife of one of the disciples of the prophets (we do not yet know that she is a widow) cries out to Elisha (v. 1). Her first words indicate the initial cause of her misery—her husband is dead, she is deep in debt (we cannot know whether the debt was incurred by her husband, who died before he could repay it, or whether it was created after his death, as a result of the worsening of the family's economic situation), and the creditor intends to collect what he is owed by selling her sons into slavery, if she cannot pay.

In the Bible, appeals for help are almost always addressed to the Lord or the king.<sup>18</sup> This one, however, is addressed to the man of God, Elisha. When a person petitions the king for help, the context is almost always that of the king as the supreme judicial authority, and the petitioner is asking for justice.<sup>19</sup> This is not the situation in the present narrative. The woman is not going to a court of law, but to the man of God. Her appeal is a cry for help by a person in distress, not a request for protection under the law: the widow has no legal grounds to sue the creditor, who is acting according to the law, even if not mercifully. Biblical law, like the other legal codes of the ancient near East, permitted the enslavement of children in order to pay off a debt.<sup>20</sup> The creditor was fully entitled to take a borrower or his son as slaves if the debt was not repaid (Isa. 50:1; Amos 2:6 and 8:6).

<sup>18</sup> Cries for help to the Lord: Ex. 8:8 [12]; 14:10, 15; 15:25; Num. 12:13; Judg. 10:12; Ps. 77:2 [1], etc. Cries for help to a Gentile king: Gen. 41:55; Ex. 5:15. Cries for help to an Israelite king: 1 Kgs 20:39; 2 Kgs 6:26; 8:3, 5. An exception is the Israelites' appeal to Moses (Num. 11:2), the widow's appeal to Elisha in our story (2 Kgs 4:1), the appeal to Elisha by the disciples of the prophets (2 Kgs 4:40), and the request for help made to Elisha by one of the disciples of the prophets (2 Kgs 6:5).

<sup>19</sup> See 1 Kgs 20:39; and, in the Elisha cycle, 2 Kgs 6:26; 8:3, 5.

<sup>20</sup> See Ex. 21:7; Isa. 50:1; Neh. 5:5. According to article 117 of the code of Hammurabi, a man may sell his wife and sons into slavery for a limited term of three years. On the biblical law that permits selling one's sons into slavery see J.

The widow's appeal to Elisha comprises three statements (v. 1):

Your servant (עַבְדִּי) my husband is dead,  
and you know how your servant feared the Lord.

And now the creditor is coming to seize my two children to be his slaves (לְעַבְדִּים).

The woman's factual exposition is made part of the plot rather than being stated by the narrator by way of setting the stage. This form of narration makes the woman's appeal to Elisha more dramatic. It highlights the depths of her misery on the one hand and her respect for Elisha on the other, as expressed by the manner in which she addresses him.

The woman begins with her husband's death and continues with the problem associated with her two sons.<sup>21</sup> Despite her wretchedness, she leaves herself almost totally out of the appeal and is not the subject of any of the three statements she makes. The subject of the first statement is her dead husband; of the second statement, Elisha (the main clause) and her late husband (the subordinate clause); and of the third statement, the creditor. She herself intrudes only through the possessives attached to "my husband" and "my two children." The first two statements relate to the past, and the third to the future: Should the widow not find a way to repay the debt, the creditor will collect it by enslaving her two sons.

The first and third statements present facts associated with the woman's distress: she has already lost her husband and is liable to find herself alone in her house after her two sons are also taken away from her. The middle sentence, which divides her past sorrow from her future sorrow, is a moral evaluation of her late husband's piety. This assessment is presented by the woman as a fact, supported by Elisha's conjectured knowledge thereof: "you know how your servant feared the Lord."<sup>22</sup> It is intended, of course, to support her right to petition him for help, by virtue of her late husband, who was Elisha's servant and God-fearing. The emphasis on her husband's loyalty both to the man of God and to his God allows the widow to emphasize Elisha's moral responsibility for seeing to the welfare of his "servant's" family.<sup>23</sup>

The content and style of the widow's attestation of her late husband's righteousness recall Obadiah's justification of himself to Elijah (1 Kgs 18:9-14). On the surface the situations are similar: Obadiah is pointing out to Elijah the injustice of the situation in which he finds himself: he, who saved

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Van Seters, "The Law of the Hebrew Slave," *ZAW* 108 (1996), pp. 534-546.

<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the wise woman of Tekoa, who disguises herself as a widow, begins by stating that her husband has died (2 Sam. 14:5) and then continues at once to her plight, also associated with her sons (2 Sam. 14:6-7). Elisha, unlike David, cannot act on the judicial level and bend the law to help the widow; unlike David, though, he can work a miracle to deliver her.

<sup>22</sup> For the use of the idiom "you know" as indicating the speaker's entitlement, see also Jacob to Laban, Gen. 30:26, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Compare Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism* (JSOTSup 286; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 84; R. L. Cohn, *2 Kings* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 2000), p. 25.



100 disciples of the prophets from death, is now himself in peril of death. Similarly, the widow presents her case, noting that her late husband “feared the Lord,” just as Obadiah says of himself, “your servant has feared the Lord from my youth” (1 Kgs 18:12).<sup>24</sup> Both of them rely on the prophet’s knowledge: “My lord has surely been told” (1 Kgs 18:13), says Obadiah to Elijah; “and you know” (2 Kgs 4:1), cries the widow to Elisha.

But there is also a significant difference between the two situations. Obadiah is accusing Elijah that his command, “Go tell your lord: Elijah is here!” (1 Kgs 18:8), will bring disaster on his head.<sup>25</sup> His emotional protest is meant to persuade the prophet to rescind his request. On the other hand, the widow is not trying to persuade Elisha to withdraw a potentially disastrous order, but to rouse him to act on her behalf. In other words, Elijah is being asked to refrain from action, so as not to cause harm to his interlocutor, whereas Elisha is being asked to act, so as to help his.

The woman does not provide the prophet with details of her unbearable poverty, which has no doubt become worse since her husband’s death and left her close to starvation (only later, after the prophet inquires, does she tell him that all she has in the house is one small jug of oil). She limits herself to a brief presentation of the consequences of her bleak situation, which grieves her more than anything else—the creditor’s intention to enslave her sons.

Like the people of Jericho (2 Kgs 2:19), the widow does not make an explicit request to Elisha, but only hints of her need, by making him aware (even if only in part) of her sad situation. Of this form of request Alexander Rofé noted:

The attitude of fear and admiration towards the Man of God is also evident in the way in which he is addressed. Instead of a direct request for his assistance, his petitioners merely state their troubles. This indirect appeal expresses the intense faith of the common people in the ability of the Man of God to render aid and succor, but at the same time allows him the possibility of not intervening and still preserving his self-respect. It can be said that the miracles performed by Elisha, his small acts of deliverance, are carried out by request, though the request is a silent one.<sup>26</sup>

The woman begins her petition with the words “your servant my husband.” Thus from the outset she speaks respectfully, referring to her husband as

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<sup>24</sup> It is this similarity that underlies the ancient tradition that identifies the widow’s unnamed husband with Obadiah. See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 9, 4,2; Targum Jonathan on 2 Kgs 4:1; Pesiqta deRav Kahana 2,5. It is interesting that Levine (“Twice as Much of Your Spirit,” pp. 28-29) also assumes that the widow is Obadiah’s wife, even though there are no grounds for this assumption in the biblical text. Obadiah is described as Ahab’s majordomo (1 Kgs 18:3) and not as one of the disciples of the prophets.

<sup>25</sup> On Elijah’s public image as one who wreaks catastrophe, see Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, pp. 173-174, 177.

<sup>26</sup> Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, pp. 16-17.

Elisha's servant (and later to herself as his maidservant).<sup>27</sup> She even puts her husband's relationship to Elisha, "your servant," before her own relationship to him ("my husband"), which is another way of showing respect for Elisha.<sup>28</sup>

The widow's remarks create an inclusio: she begins with "your servant" (עבדך) and finishes with "slaves" (לעבדים). This inclusio indicates that the situation is unfair and provides Elisha with an incentive to take action. How can he allow the children of someone who was his עבד (metaphorically, meaning one of his loyal followers) to become עבדים (slaves in the literal sense of the word)? Another way in which she emphasizes the injustice and loss liable to befall her is by juxtaposing "my children" with "his," the creditor's—as if to say to Elisha, the children are *my* children, but the creditor wants to make them *his* slaves.

In various passages the Bible describes the Lord as delivering widows and orphans<sup>29</sup> and as concerned to provide their needs.<sup>30</sup> He hears their cries (Ex. 22:22 [RSV v. 23]), just as he hears the cry of the poor debtor oppressed by his creditor (v. 26 [27]). Our story combines these two elements: its beneficiaries are a widow and her orphan children, who are also debtors unable to repay a loan. The man of God, Elisha, like the Lord Himself, hears the cry of the poor indebted widow and delivers her and her orphan children.<sup>31</sup>

As the first scene progresses, readers oscillate between hope and despair as to whether Elisha will be able to rescue the widow and her sons. The very fact of her petition opens the door to hope. Elisha's reply, in the form of the question—"what can I do for you?" (v. 2)—makes us fear that he cannot help her.<sup>32</sup> It seems as if the prophet means that his hands are

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<sup>27</sup> On respectful speech see G. Brinn, "Respectful Forms of Speech and Address in Biblical Language," *Molad* n.s. 1 (1975), pp. 506-514 (in Hebrew). Other characters who address Elisha respectfully are the disciples of the prophets as a collective character (2 Kgs 2:16), one of the disciples of the prophets (6:3), Naaman (5:15, 17, 18), Gehazi (5:25), and Hazael (8:13), all of whom refer to themselves as Elisha's "servant," as well as the Shunammite matron, who calls herself "your maidservant" (4:16). But only here is the person described as Elisha's servant not the speaker, but an offstage character—the speaker's late husband.

<sup>28</sup> Compare how Judah presents Jacob to Joseph—"your servant my father" (Gen. 44:24, 27, 30), "your servant our father" (Gen. 44:31)—and how David is described by Solomon in his prayer to the Lord: "Your servant my father David" (1 Kgs 3:6; 8:24, 25, 26).

<sup>29</sup> Ps. 68:6 [5]: "The father of orphans and judge of widows." See also Deut. 10:18; Mal. 3:5; Ps. 146:9, et passim.

<sup>30</sup> Deut. 26:12-13 et passim.

<sup>31</sup> As he responded to the plea by one of the disciples of the prophets whose borrowed axhead had sunk in the Jordan River (2 Kgs 6:5-6). On all of the parallels between Elisha and the Lord in the Elisha cycle, see Y. Shemesh, "I Am Sure He is a Holy Man of God" (2 Kings 4:9): The Unique Figure of Elisha," *And God Said, "You Are Fired": Elijah and Elisha* (ed. M. M. Caspi and J. T. Greene; Texas: Bibal Press, 2007), pp. 15-54 (on pp. 35-41).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Gen. 27:37; 1 Sam. 10:2. This is also the argument of A. W. Pink,

tied, because the creditor is indeed entitled to take her children. Without a pause, however, he seems to resolve to help her by means of a miracle,<sup>33</sup> asking, “what have you in the house?” Neither the widow nor readers understand what he is getting at, although the question arouses hope that he does intend to do something to help her, using whatever remains in her pantry. The idea seems to be that a miracle must have some anchor in the real world and cannot be created out of nothing.<sup>34</sup> The widow’s reply, “Your maidservant has nothing at all in the house,” seems to sound the death knell for the hopes created by the prophet’s question. But the qualification, “except a jug of oil,” opens another crack for hope, although it is difficult for readers, and certainly for the widow, to imagine how she could be delivered by the one tiny jug of oil that she still owns.<sup>35</sup> The beginning of Elisha’s reply, “Go and borrow vessels outside” (v. 3) may give the impression that he intends to help her through some natural means, by advising her what she can do to support herself, but the continuation, “empty vessels,” catches her and us by surprise and indicates that we are about to experience some sort of miracle. If Elisha spoke with greater directness—“go and borrow empty jars from outside”—the effect of surprise would be lost.

The story of the miraculous jar of oil alternates between two poles: emptiness and fullness. Elisha asks the woman what she has in the house (מה יש לך), and she replies that she has nothing (אין... כל בבית) there. In the first scene the emphasis is on emptiness: the woman’s husband has died, the creditor is going to take away her sons, too, and she has nothing in the house. Elisha’s instruction that she borrow empty vessels from her neighbors is astonishing: how can she be saved by *empty* vessels, which seem to be part and parcel of the sad picture of her empty house? But when he goes on, “pour [oil] into all those vessels, removing the *full* ones” (v. 4), the mystery is solved. The story is raised to the level of the miraculous and the pole of fullness. The prophet is telling the widow that a miracle will enable her to pour oil from the one small jug she has and fill an unlimited number of vessels, as many as she can collect from her neighbors.<sup>36</sup> In contrast to

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*Gleanings from Elisha: His Life and Miracles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 64; M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; [New York]: Doubleday, 1988), p. 56; Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, pp. 13, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Just as he exchanged his proposal of natural assistance to the Shunammite matron (2 Kgs 4:13) with a miracle he could perform for her (vv. 15-17).

<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the miracle of the multiplication of food by Elisha (2 Kgs 4:42-44) and the food-related miracles performed by Jesus (Matt. 14:13-21; 15:32-39; Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-9; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14).

<sup>35</sup> אִסוּךְ, a hapax, seems to be derived from the root סוּךְ ‘anoint’ and to denote a small clay container for liquids. On its shape, see J. L. Kelso, *The Ceramic Vocabulary of the Old Testament* (Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, Supplementary Studies 5-6; New Haven 1948), §§22, 26, 35; A. M. Honeyman, “The Pottery Vessels of the Old Testament,” *PEQ* (1939), p. 79.

<sup>36</sup> Another miracle of a flask of oil, perhaps inspired by our story, is recounted in the Talmud (B. Shab. 21b). According to the story there, in the times of the Hasmonians a single cruse of oil found in the Temple, which should have been

the picture of dearth that she paints—“Your maidservant has nothing at all (אין...כל) in the house” (v. 2)—Elisha instructs her to borrow vessels (כלים) from all her neighbors (v. 3) and to “pour into all those vessels (כל הכלים)” (v. 4). The play on words in the widow’s statement and Elisha’s instructions (כל, כלים, כל) and the repetition of the word “all” (כל) by both of them emphasize the contrast between the present bareness of the house and the imminent solution, which will be achieved through the vessels she must collect from all of her neighbors, following the prophet’s instructions.

There is another instance of borrowing vessels from one’s neighbors, as the Lord instructs Moses: “Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house vessels of silver and vessels of gold, and clothing, and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, despoiling the Egyptians” (Ex. 3:22). There are a number of words in common between the Lord’s instruction to Moses (Ex. 3:21-22) and Elisha’s to the woman (vv. 2-4):

2 Kgs 4:2-4	Ex. 3:21-22
What have you in the <i>house</i> ? (v. 2)	The lodger in her <i>house</i> (v. 22)
<i>Go</i>	you will not <i>go</i> away empty-handed (v. 21)
and <i>borrow</i>	each woman shall <i>borrow</i>
<i>vessels</i> outside, ... empty <i>vessels</i> ,	<i>vessels</i> of silver and <i>vessels</i> of gold (v. 22)
<i>empty</i> vessels (v. 3)	you will not go away <i>empty</i> -handed (v. 21)
behind your <i>sons</i> (v. 4)	you shall put these on your <i>sons</i> (v. 22)

The situations, of course, are different. The widow’s neighbors have not been exploiting her the way Egyptians exploited the Israelites during their years of slavery, so she is not despoiling them, but only asking them for help. We may be certain that she returned the borrowed vessels after selling the oil.

But the two scenes also have much in common. In both stories there is an instruction to borrow vessels from neighbors and we read of the economic benefit produced after the words of the Lord or the man of God were obeyed. What is more, in both cases it is a question of delivery from slavery. It is hard to believe that the linguistic and plot similarities are coincidental. Rather the story of the miraculous jar of oil was intentionally written so as to call to mind the Lord’s deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, which also included His concern for their future prosperity. In the same way, Elisha delivers the widow’s sons from slavery and provides for the economic security of mother and sons (v. 7). This resemblance between Elisha and the Lord is part of the broader picture presented by the Elisha stories, which draws a number of parallels between the man of God and his God,<sup>37</sup> an analogy that indicates the extent to which the people and the authors of the stories about him venerated Elisha.

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enough to keep the candelabrum in the sanctuary burning for only one night, miraculously sufficed for eight days. The difference is that, in that case, the quantity of oil was not unlimited, but only enough to last until new oil could be produced.

<sup>37</sup> For more on this topic, see above, n. 31.

Two other poles of the story are “inside” and “outside.” The woman goes out of her house in order to appeal to Elisha in the first scene, returns to her house and witnesses the great miracle that takes place inside it in the second scene, and goes back to Elisha to report to him about the miracle in scene three. The movement between outside and inside is duplicated in the prophet’s instructions in the first scene: as against “Go and borrow vessels *outside*,” an action that requires public knowledge (v. 3), the rest of his instruction, “then *come* in and *shut the door* behind you and your sons” (v. 4) means keeping the miracle private, inside the walls of her house, in the protected space behind the closed door. The miracle of the resurrection of the Shunammite matron’s son also takes place behind a closed door, evidently for reasons associated with magic.<sup>38</sup>

***SCENE 2: THE MIRACULOUS FLOW OF OIL (VV. 5-6)***

This scene begins with the words “she went from him,” creating an impression of the widow’s prompt obedience to Elisha’s instructions, which began with the imperative “go” (v. 3). Elisha told her to “come in and shut the door behind you and your sons” (v. 4), and she does precisely as instructed: “she shut the door behind herself and her sons” (v. 5). He instructed her to “pour” (v. 4), and we are told that this is what she did: “she poured” (v. 5). But one significant element of the prophet’s directions is not repeated in the account of their execution: borrowing jars from all of her neighbors. This makes it hard to know whether she complied with both parts of his instructions (to go to all her neighbors and to ask them for as many empty containers as possible) meticulously. It is easy to imagine how uncomfortable she might feel about such an action, which would make her seem strange to her neighbors. Certainly her request aroused their curiosity: why does our destitute neighbor need so many jars? We are not told whether she was allowed to tell them the reason for her request—that she was following the orders of the man of God. In any case, it must have been the topic of the day in her neighborhood. Because the elliptical description omits the stage of borrowing jars on the execution side, we are allowed to speculate that the woman asked for fewer vessels than she could have received, both because of the unpleasantness of the request and because of a natural sense of urgency, stemming from her desire to know whether the man of God’s words would be fulfilled and her one small jug of oil would fill up all the empty jars, rescuing her and her sons from their misery. So we may conjecture that when she told her son, “bring me another vessel,” and he replied, “there are no more vessels” (v. 6), her joy at the sight of all the full jars was accompanied by a feeling of disappointment that she had not been more scrupulous about complying with Elisha’s instructions to collect as many jars as possible.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> This is the view of Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. R. S. Wallace, *Readings in 2 Kings: An Interpretation arranged for Personal and Group Bible Study* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1996), p. 41.

The scene concludes with the words “the oil stopped [sc. flowing],” which is another miracle: the wondrous flow of oil ended precisely when it was no longer possible to derive any benefit from it, in the absence of additional containers to hold it. Had the oil continued to flow the blessing might have turned into a curse—a common motif in folklore. That the flow ended precisely at the right moment is an indication of Elisha’s total control of the miracle, even when he is not present.<sup>40</sup>

***SCENE 3: ELISHA TELLS THE WIDOW HOW TO BENEFIT FROM THE MIRACLE (v. 7)***

The woman, who went away from Elisha in the previous scene (“she went from him” [v. 5]) to follow his instructions and make preparations for the miracle, now returns to report to him what happened (“She came and told the man of God” [v. 7]). At the start of the story she “cried out” to him (v. 1); at its conclusion there is no longer a need for crying, but only to deliver her report (“she ... told”), which was certainly very excited and grateful.

We should note that she does not dare do anything with the oil until she receives explicit instructions on the matter from Elisha. The reverence with which she treats the oil, acquired miraculously, is evidence of her reverence for the person who caused the miracle. Elisha tells her what readers could have supplied on their own—that she should sell the oil and pay her debts. In the ancient Near East, olive oil was an essential commodity for both rich and poor; it had many uses—dietary staple, medicine, and fuel for clay lamps.<sup>41</sup> Clearly the woman had no trouble disposing of her stock of oil.

“And you and your sons can live on the rest” (v. 7) indicates that the miracle exceeded the original need that had caused her to appeal to Elisha—a way to procure her sons’ freedom. The proceeds from the sale of the oil will allow her not only to pay her debts to the creditor and free her sons from slavery, but also to live on “the rest.” In contrast to the destitution described by the woman at the start of the story—“Your maidservant has *nothing* at all in the house” (v.2)—it ends with “the rest,” which indicates the new situation that now prevails in the widow’s home. Similarly, whereas the story begins with the widow’s plaint, “your servant my husband is *dead*,” it concludes with the prophet’s promise that “you and your sons can *live* on the rest.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, p. 257.

<sup>41</sup> On the importance of olive oil and its many uses see P. J. King and L. E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 97-98; F. S. Frick, “‘Oil From a Flinty Rock’ (Deuteronomy 32:13): Olive Cultivation and Olive Oil Processing in the Hebrew Bible—a Socio-materialist Perspective,” *Semeia* 86 (1999) pp. 3-17 (esp. pp. 11-15).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Levine, “Twice as Much of Your Spirit,” p. 32.

### 5. A COMPARISON OF ELISHA'S FOOD-RELATED MIRACLE (2 KGS 4:1-7) WITH ELIJAH'S (1 KGS 17:8-16)

There is a story somewhat similar to ours in the Elijah cycle. The resemblances are unmistakable between them: the two prophets—Elijah and Elisha—work a food-related miracle for a widow (Elijah provides his with flour and oil; Elisha, with oil). In each case, before the miracle the widow's house is totally bare. The widow of Zarephath makes it plain to Elijah that all she has left is “a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a cruse” (1 Kgs 17:12). The widow of one of the disciples of the prophets tells Elisha that all she has in her house is a “jug of oil” (2 Kgs 4:2). In both stories we are told that the widow obeys the prophet's instructions (explicitly or implicitly): “She went and did as Elijah had spoken” (1 Kgs 17:15); “she went from him and shut the door behind herself and her sons; ... she poured” (2 Kgs 4:5)

But alongside the similarities there are significant differences:

- a) Elijah works the miracle for a Gentile woman. Elisha, who is deeply involved in the life of his people, works it for an Israelite woman who is the widow of one of the disciples of the prophets.
- b) Elijah's food-related miracle begins with his asking the widow for something to drink and eat. By contrast, it is the Israelite widow who comes to Elisha with a (silent) request that he deliver her from her misery—the imminent enslavement of her sons.
- c) Elijah performs his miracle only after subjecting the widow to two severe tests. First, he calls out to the widow, who is busy gathering wood, and asks her “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so I can drink” (1 Kgs 17:10). This is a test of her character: will the woman agree to stop working and do a favor for a thirsty stranger, in a time of severe drought? Next he puts her to a test of faith. After the widow explains that she cannot satisfy his second request to bring him some bread, because her cupboard is almost bare, with just enough flour and oil to provide one last meal for herself and her son, Elijah takes an oath in the name of the Lord that if she shares her pittance with him and feeds him before feeding herself and her son (in contrast to individuals' natural instincts to provide for their families and themselves first and only then for other people, especially if they are utter strangers) she will not want for food until the drought is over (vv. 12-15). The widow's obedience to Elijah attests that she believes in the divine promise he conveys and passes the test of faith. Elisha, by contrast, does not put the woman to a test before performing the miracle for her.<sup>43</sup>
- d) Elijah himself benefits from the miracle he performs, whereas

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, pp. 132-133.

Elisha gains nothing from his wondrous deed.

- e) The nature of Elijah's miracle is not readily apparent. Do the cruse of oil and jar of flour keep renewing themselves, as happens in the house of the Israelite widow?<sup>44</sup> Or is it merely that the widow of Zarephath suddenly finds other and seemingly natural sources of sustenance (such as wages for work that she or Elijah performs for neighbors), so that there is no shortage of flour and oil throughout the drought? The second explanation detracts from the impression of the miracle. No such question exists when it comes to Elisha's overt miracle.
- f) The Lord is present and involved in Elijah's miracle. The story begins with the Lord's word to Elijah—"Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have designated a widow there to feed you" (1 Kgs 17:9)<sup>45</sup>—and concludes with the food-related miracle, "just as the Lord had spoken through Elijah" (1 Kgs 17:16). Elijah declares to the widow that the Lord will perform a miracle for her: "For thus said the Lord the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not give out and the cruse of oil shall not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth'" (1 Kgs 17:14). For the narrator, too, the wonder is "just as the Lord had spoken through Elijah" (1 Kgs 17:16). By contrast, the Lord is not a character in the story of Elisha and the miraculous jar of oil. He is mentioned only when the widow notes, with reference to her dead husband, that "your servant feared the Lord" (2 Kgs 4:1). Unlike Elijah, Elisha does not use the formulaic "thus said the Lord" and the miracle is attributed to him, not to the Lord.

These differences between the food-related miracle performed by Elijah and by Elisha are in keeping with the different ways in which the two prophets are depicted in their respective story cycles. The Elijah stories portray him as a messenger-prophet, zealous for the Lord but aloof from his people. Although the popular view of Elijah in Jewish folklore, from the talmudic period to the present, sees him as working miracles to deliver individuals and the community, in the Bible itself Elijah performs only two miracles at his own initiative, both of them for the widow of Zarephath who provides him with lodgings, and then only after he has subjected her to two harsh tests, one of character and one of faith.<sup>46</sup> Elisha, on the other hand, although referred to as a "prophet," is usually not characterized as a

<sup>44</sup> This is the opinion of Gray, *I & II Kings*, p. 482.

<sup>45</sup> Here we should understand צויתִי not as "commanded" but as "ordained that such will be" (see 2 Sam. 17:14 and 1 Kgs 17:4). The widow, of course, is not aware of YHWH's decision.

<sup>46</sup> The other miraculous deliverance with which Elijah is associated, the end of the drought (1 Kings 18), comes at the Lord's initiative rather than his own.



messenger-prophet, but rather as “a holy man of God” (2 Kgs 4:9), endowed with supernatural powers, which he uses to work miraculous rescues of individuals and communities.<sup>47</sup> He performs these miracles at his own initiative rather than as the representative of the Lord. In most cases, including the miraculous jar of oil, he does not address the Lord in prayer before performing a miracle. The Elisha stories emphasize the role of the man of God in the miraculous event and downplay that of God himself.<sup>48</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

The short episode of Elisha and the miraculous jar of oil (2 Kgs 4:1-7), like the other stories about him, is designed to extol Elisha and attest to his supernatural powers. It is the first account in the Elisha cycle that deals with the miraculous deliverance of an individual. Nevertheless, because the miracle is performed for the widow of one of the disciples of the prophets, it foreshadows the relationship of patron and devoted followers that will emerge later in the cycle (2 Kgs 4:38-44; 6:1-7).

In the story, the movement from the pole of emptiness to the pole of fullness emphasizes the magnitude of the miracle that Elisha performs. The widow's attitude toward Elisha throughout the story is evidence of her reverence and respect for him. A comparison of her plea to Elisha (2 Kgs 4:1) with Obadiah's to Elijah (1 Kgs 18:9-14), and a comparison of the entire story with the food-related miracle performed by Elijah (1 Kgs 17:8-16) shows that the Elijah stories and Elisha stories belong to different

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<sup>47</sup> The difference between the two is also reflected in their names. Elijah's name, which means “YHWH is God,” reflects his zealotry for the Lord and his campaign to impose pure monotheism in Israel and stamp out the syncretistic cult. Elisha's name, which links *el* ‘God’ with the verb *עשׂ* ‘deliver’, is appropriate to the centrality of miraculous deliverances in the stories about him. See, for example, R. D. Moore, *God Saves: Lessons from the Elisha Stories* (JSOTSS 95; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), p. 147; M. Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (trans. from the Hebrew edition [1988] by P. Hackett, revised edition; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991), p. 219.

The other side of the coin is the three miracles Elisha performs to punish those who displease him. The children who jeer at his baldness are mangled by two she-bears after he curses them in the name of the Lord (2 Kgs 2:23-25). Gehazi, who disobeys Elisha's stated refusal to accept a gift from Naaman, and then lies to his master, is stricken with leprosy, which will cling to him and his descendants forever (2 Kgs 5:27). The king's adjutant, who questions Elisha's prophecy of deliverance from the siege of Samaria, sees the fulfillment of the prophecy with his own eyes, but does not enjoy it (just as Elisha told him would happen), because he is trampled to death in the gate by the people (2 Kgs 7:2, 17-20). Punitive miracles, frequent in hagiography, are another means of exemplifying and exalting the saint's powers. See, for example, I. Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration Among the Jews in Morocco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pp. 51-53 et passim. It may be that the punitive side of Elisha's character is reflected in his father's name, *שפּט* ‘Shaphat,’ which is related to *משפּט* ‘justice’.

<sup>48</sup> Although, of course, it does not eliminate God's role, since it is assumed that the man of God receives his supernatural powers from God Himself.

literary genres and that the characters of the two prophets are depicted in quite different ways.

Elijah, too, is said to have effected great miracles (though many fewer than Elisha). Many scholars point to the similarity between the two prophets, on the basis of the miracles they worked, and ignore the material differences between the stories about Elijah and those about Elisha and between the figures of Elijah and Elisha. For example, Richard Elliott Friedman writes that the effect of the miracle stories associated with the two prophets is “to produce a picture of humans who are more in control of miraculous power than anyone preceding.”<sup>49</sup> But this statement suits Elisha better than Elijah, in whose miracles the Lord is a conspicuous presence.

The Elijah narratives are prophetic stories that emphasize the power and marvels of the Lord, whereas those about Elisha are chiefly hagiographic and emphasize the powers of Elisha the wonder-worker. The Elijah stories depict a messenger-prophet, zealous for the Lord, and aloof from his people, whereas the Elisha stories portray a holy man of God, endowed with supernatural powers, who lives among his people and works miraculous deliverance for individuals and the community. There is also a parallel drawn between Elisha and the Lord, manifested in the fact that Elisha, like the Lord, is concerned for widows and orphans, rescues people from slavery, and provides for the economic well-being of those whom he delivers from bondage.

This resemblance is part of the broad picture painted by the Elisha stories, which draw analogies, within limits, between Elisha and the Lord Himself. This phenomenon, which is unparalleled in the Bible—certainly in the scale and intensity found in the Elisha cycle—is yet another way of emphasizing the unique character of Elisha, the holy man of God endowed with supernatural powers.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> R. E. Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1995), p. 132.

<sup>50</sup> I would like to thank *Beit Shalom* of Japan for its generous support, which made this research possible.