

Chapter 4 – The Widow’s Oil

A Translation for Performance

CONFLICT

A woman, the wife of a member of the sons of the prophets, cried out to Elisha:

Your servant, my husband, is dead. And you know that your servant was one who feared the Lord. And the debt collector has come to take away my two children to be his slaves.

Elisha said to her:

What can I do for you? Tell me, what have you in the house?

She said:

Your servant has nothing in the whole house, except a single jar of oil.

He said:

Go. Borrow vessels from the streets, from all your neighbors. Empty vessels.

Not just a few!

Enter your house and close the door behind you and behind your children. Pour into each and every vessel. When each is full, set it aside.

CLIMAX

She left Elisha. And she closed the door behind her and behind her children. They were bringing the vessels to her, and she was pouring. When the vessels had all been filled, she said to her son:

Bring me another vessel!

He said:

There are no other vessels!

The oil stopped immediately.

RESOLUTION

The woman went and told the man of God. He said:

Go. Sell the oil. Pay off your debt. You and your children will live on what is left over.

Setting

2 Kings 4.1-7 is aptly named "The Widow's Oil." As such a name suggests, it is a drama about death and life, grief and gladness, emptiness and fullness. The opening equilibrium is one of devastating loss, the effects of which reverberate throughout every aspect of the woman's life and family. The unnamed widow and her jar of oil consume the mind of the narrator from beginning to end. And it is her oil that occasions the drama's climax and saves the woman and her children from the clutches of death and its consequences thereby securing for her sufficient resources to continue living long into the future.

The narrator introduces the principle characters in v. 1, namely, the woman and Elisha. We know nothing about the woman outside of how the narrator introduces her. Her name is not provided, though Elisha is identified by name; all we are given is her indirect relationship to Elisha via her late husband who was a member of the "sons of the prophets" (בְּנֵי הַנְּבִיאִים). What we know of this group comes from the sundry references to them throughout the book of Kings¹ in which they are generally poor, married and had children, and lived in their own quarters.² There were groups variously located in Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho³ and with the exception of 1 Kings 20.35-43, Elisha is presented as the leader of these prophetic schools who regularly teaches them⁴ and helps them solve a variety of internal issues.⁵ The only objective information provided about the woman by the narrator in v. 1, therefore, is that she is poor, the wife of a member of Elisha's prophetic guild, and

¹1 Kgs 20:35; 2 Kgs 2:3, 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1; 9:1; and a reference in the singular (נְבִיא) in Amos 7:14.

²*NIDOTTE*, s.v. "Prophecy."

³See esp. 2 Kings 2.1-15, 4.38.

⁴2 Kings 4.38.

⁵2 Kings 6.1-7, another story in which Elisha works a miracle the effects of which have significant economic implications for the individual involved.

she has come to Elisha with some kind of issue.⁶ The nature and severity of her issue is anticipated by the narrator's use of "to shout, call out" (צעק), a word generally used to cry out for help or deliverance.⁷

Conflict

All drama is driven by tension, which is an effect generated by the introduction of conflict. "Conflict is central to drama," writes David Ball.⁸ Performance criticism compels the interpreter to pay careful attention to the conflict and the tension that results from it. This requires more than an objective identification and articulation of the conflict; it involves moving beyond passive recognition to active connection. The performer must identify with the conflict, connect with it, and own it in some way personally, bodily. This process involves careful and focused reflection on the nature and character of the conflict as it is presented in the "script."

"Your servant, my husband, is dead" (v. 1). The woman speaks these words to Elisha herself. This is an "extremely pertinent"⁹ decision made by the narrator for the purposes of enhancing the emotive effect of the tension. "The widow is the asking party; she is best qualified to plead her cause. Having as a spokesperson someone in distress lends dramatic impact to the opening and invites the reader to follow her with sympathy."¹⁰ These are the

⁶Targum Jonathan and Josephus (*Antiquities*, 9.47-48) both identify the woman as the widow of the prophet Obadiah who secretly hid and provided food for 100 prophets to protect them from Jezebel, which Josephus postulates was the source of his debts (Cf. 1 Kings 18.3, 13). The connection is likely due to the fact that both are described as ones who "feared the Lord" (יָרָא אֶת־יְהוָה), though this identification "need not be taken too seriously," so T.R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 50.

⁷HALOT, s.v. צֶעַק.

⁸David Ball, *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 25.

⁹J.P. Fokkeman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 12.

¹⁰Fokkeman, *Reading*, 12. Cf. "The more the author wishes to make the story dramatic, the more he reduces

first words of dialogue spoken by a character, and they immediately reveal the emotional and circumstantial depth of the woman's crisis. This is to be a story about death and widowhood.

The drama does not linger on the personal grief associated with tragic loss of life, however. The woman continues her outcry to Elisha: "And the debt collector has come to take away my two children to be his slaves" (v. 1). Instead of focusing solely on the personal effects of a loved one's death, this drama penetrates the places where personal tragedy intersects with politics, economics, and society, and considers how Israel's God is present in those dire and volatile circumstances.

The debt collector is the dramatic representative of the power of death in 2 Kings 4.1-7. Or, to borrow Brueggemann's phrase, the creditor is the one through whom the "politics of death" are manifested at the expense of and without regard for the powerless widow.¹¹ Though the creditor is not responsible for the man's untimely death, his presence and activity in the wake of the tragedy—regardless of the extent to which he was, perhaps, just "doing his job"¹²—is presented as the embodiment of the force of death now competing with the woman and her children's lives and livelihood. That this is true is made clear through a series of contrasts between life and death. The first is rhetorical and the second is spatial, and therefore performative. The first contrast, contained in the script itself, is

the narration and allows the personae to speak for themselves." Yaira Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, trans. Yael Lotan (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 51:

¹¹Walter Brueggemann, "A Culture of Life and the Politics of Death," *Journal for Preachers* 29, no. 2 (Lent 2006): 16-21.

¹²"The creditor, for all we know, is not mean or rapacious. He is simply committed to the laws of the market whereby debts must be paid, collateral must be held, and defaults must be faced honestly and unflinchingly. Likely he intends the widow no ill..." Brueggemann, "Culture of Life," 17. See also Peter Liethart, *1 & 2 Kings* (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 186. Liethart borrows a similar phrase from Pope John Paul II to make the same point: "During the time of the Omrides, Israel is living in a *culture of death*, a result of the Omride devotion to dead idols, and death permeates the daily lives of the people of Israel" (emphasis added).

voiced by the woman (v. 1) and Elisha (v. 7) respectively. The woman's opening speech (v. 1) links the theme of death to the debt collector's devastating threat by a causative association ("... my husband is dead ... *and* the debt collector has come. . ."). The theme is returned to in the drama's final words, spoken this time by the prophet Elisha (v. 7), which together with the woman's opening line form an *inclusio*: "Sell the oil. Pay off your debts. You and your children will *live*." Elisha can only speak of "living" *after* the debt has been paid off (v. 7).

A second contrast is revealed through the blocking of the story. In our performance the debt collector enters from down-stage left¹³ at the beginning of the drama to collect the debt from the woman. Upon finding her finances wanting he threatens to seize the children before retreating to up-stage left, where he lurks throughout the drama until its closing scene.¹⁴ Fokkelman, reflecting on the narrative from a purely literary perspective, nevertheless anticipated this dramatic blocking when he noted, at the end of v. 1, "the shadow of the creditor looms" throughout the narrative.¹⁵ In our performance his shadow is literally cast across the stage where the woman and her children dwell in the fragile security of their home. Elisha, on the other hand, stands opposite the creditor up-stage right throughout the majority of the drama. These two characters, each representing death (debt collector) and life (Elisha) respectively, establish a horizontal axis along which the tension of the drama runs. Exactly between them, at center stage, is the woman's home,

¹³Stage directions are from the perspective of the actors looking out at the audience. So, "stage left", from the perspective of the *audience*, is the right-hand side of the stage. "Down-stage" is the location on the stage closest to the audience, and "up-stage" is located at the back of the stage.

¹⁴Fokkelman, reflecting on the narrative from a purely literary perspective, nevertheless anticipated this dramatic blocking when he noted, at the end of v. 1, "the shadow of the creditor looms" throughout the narrative, in J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 12. In our performance his shadow is literally cast across the stage where the woman and her children dwell in the fragile security of their home.

¹⁵Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 12.

where she and her children cower as the drama begins. She is caught in the crosshairs of the struggle between death and life, both literally and metaphorically.

The woman's existential crisis, deepened by the debt collector's threat of indentured slavery, functions as the point of intersection for all of the drama's characters: the woman, her children, Elisha, the debt collector, *and the woman's neighbors*. Caesarius of Arles, preaching in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, was sensitive to the presence of the neighbors in the narrative, though he allowed them only an allegorical and anticipatory function: "[T]hose neighbors from whom she borrowed vessels prefigured the Gentiles."¹⁶ Apart from the allegorical reading, the neighbors play a critical role within drama as characters, one that is largely overlooked. First, the woman's neighbors failed to live into their mosaic responsibilities to provide care and support to her and her children, which could have helped avert her crisis. Second, they provided the means whereby the miracle could take place by lending the widow empty vessels—whether they did so generously, begrudgingly, or inadvertently is unclear. Finally, their willingness to purchase the miracle oil in the end provided the means for her to repay her debts and "live on what is left over" (v. 7).

Commentators are quick to point out the legitimacy of the creditor's logic—to take the widow's sons as compensation for the debt—according to Mosaic Law, thereby absolving the community of responsibility. Marvin Sweeney, citing Exod 21.1-11 and Deut 15.12-18, observes, "When a person is unable to repay a debt in ancient Israel or Judah, that

¹⁶Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 157.

person is subject to a legal form of debt slavery."¹⁷ John Gray, though citing other texts,¹⁸ nevertheless comes to the same conclusion, albeit toward more historical and comparative ends: "In permitting the enslavement of the children of a debtor, Hebrew law in the Book of the Covenant is at one with the Code of Hammurabi."¹⁹

These, however, are not the only applicable texts from Mosaic Law. In addition to making allowances for indentured slavery to compensate for debts, the Law also stipulated the community's responsibility to care for widows and orphans, and not to exploit their vulnerability. God self-identifies himself throughout Exodus and Deuteronomy as the one "who executes justice for the orphan and widow."²⁰ For example, Exodus 22.21-22—the chapter directly following the reference cited above absolving the creditor's guilt—holds Israel to a higher standard of justice for the most vulnerable elements of Israelite society: "You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry (צַעֲקָה) as soon as they cry out (צַעֲקוּ יְצַעֲקוּ) to me."²¹ Not incidentally, the same word is used by the narrator to describe the widow's outcry in 2 Kings 4.1-7 as is used here in Exodus 22 (צַעֲקוּ "cry out"). God is indeed hearing the outcry (צַעֲקָה) of the woman, through the medium of his prophet, Elisha, the man of God. "Slavery is sometimes required in ancient Israel as a mechanism for making restitution for property crimes, and an Israelite might also enter slavery to pay off a debt" grants Liethart. He continues, "Though the

¹⁷Marvin Sweeney, *I & II Kings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 288.

¹⁸In addition to Exod 21.7, he adds Isa 50.1 and Neh 5.5.

¹⁹John Gray, *I & II Kings* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 492. See also Gina Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings* (Nashville: Abingdom Press, 2006), 250; Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (n.p.: Doubleday, 1988), 56; Liethart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 186; Choon-Leong Seow, "The First and Second Books of Kings," in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 186; and George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), 204.

²⁰Deut 10.18, cf. Deut 24.17-22, NRSV.

²¹JPS (1985).

widow pursues a legitimate legal option, her creditors act unjustly. Yahweh himself protects orphans and widows, *and Israel is to follow his lead.*"²²

On the heels of God's command to Israel not to ill-treat any widow or orphan come stipulations regarding the practice of usury:

If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate (Exod 22.24-27).

Brevard Childs, commenting on this passage, connects it to the plight of the widow in 2

Kings 4.1.

The stranger was vulnerable to wrong-doing because he lacked the protection of his clan. The widow and the orphan were exposed to violence without the support of husband and father...The style shifts to the first person as God places himself directly in the role of special protector. The vicious nature of money-lending is more than clear from other references to the practice (cf. Lev. 25.35-37; Deut. 23.20-21; I Sam. 22.2; II Kings 4.1; Ps. 109.11).²³

Beyond the explicit biblical evidence, Hannelis Schulte argues that there was a general breakdown of the fabric of Israelite society happening throughout the northern kingdom during the ministry of Elisha, due to the overtaxation and generally oppressive

²²Liethart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 186, emphasis added.

²³Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical and Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 478-9. James K. Mead also sees the creditor's actions as excessive: "Thus, while some commentators point out that the creditor of 4: 1 may have been within his rights...the rhetoric of the whole passage gives the reader the feeling that the creditor's cause is unjust...and that his treatment was harsh." In James Kirk Mead, "'Elisha Will Kill?': The Deuteronomistic Rhetoric of Life and Death in the Theology of the Elisha Narratives," (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1999), 168. Similarly, "[T]he claim of the creditor on the debtor's demise to make good his loss from the children is felt to be unjust." Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 2:241. For a larger discussion of the relevant texts and historical context of slavery in both the ANE and OT context, see the articles "Slavery (ANE)" and "Slavery (OT)" both by M. Dandamayev in *ABD*, 4:58-62 and 4:62-65 respectively.

policies of the Omride dynasty, which contributed to the widow's plight and prevented the community from coming effectively to her aid. Schulte articulates the problem thus:

The story of the woman who was supposed to hand over her two sons to a creditor indicates that old tribal ties offered no more protection...Otherwise she would have been able to turn to her or her husband's kinship group, rather than to the man of God. Without a doubt clans were being broken up into smaller units at that time, into family units with their own land and homes. Even so, relatives would have helped those in distress, had poverty not assumed the upper hand in the agricultural realm, overtaxing the clan's ability to redeem debts.²⁴

Harold Bennet concurs, suggesting that "this breakdown in the major kinship subgrouping devastated any extant social welfare systems for the relief of widows, strangers, and orphans."²⁵ In the case of the widow in 2 Kings 4.1-7, either her neighbors are incapable of coming to her aid, or they refused to do so and willingly aided the oppressive policies of the creditor. Either way, the community is not without some measure of culpability.

Nor is Elisha himself absolved of all responsibility. The widow "confronts Elisha and challenges him, reminding him that her husband feared Yahweh, undoubtedly a reference to the fact that he was a member of Elisha's close followers, and therefore his widow is entitled to the prophet's care."²⁶ Beyond the woman's expression of entitlement and beneath her implicit challenge to Elisha to resolve the issue is her appeal to YHVH: "And you know that your servant was one who feared the Lord" (v. 1). The woman approaches Elisha as YHVH's earthly representative and the leader of her and her husband's community, but her reference to her husband's "fear of the Lord" (יָרָא אֶת־יְהוָה) also functions as an appeal to

²⁴Hannelis Schulte, "The End of the Omride Dynasty: Social-Ethical Observations on the Subject of Power and Violence," in *Ethics and Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, trans. Carl Ehrlich, Semeia 66 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1994), 140.

²⁵Harold V. Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal: Deuteronomic Law and the Plight of Widows, Strangers, and Orphans in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 152.

²⁶Tamis Hoover Rentería, "The Elijah/Elisha Stories: A Socio-cultural Analysis of Prophets and People in Ninth-Century B.C.E. Israel," in *Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective*, ed. Robert B. Coote (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 108.

the highest power, and serves to frame the entire drama in an explicitly theological framework. This adds a layer of complexity to the horizontal axis established on stage through the positions of Elisha and the debt collector by introducing a vertical axis along which another, more fundamental tension runs. The woman is, in effect, asking the representative of YHVH if YHVH will, in fact, live up to the promises that her religious community undoubtedly celebrates:

Father of orphans and protector of widows
is God in his holy habitation. (Ps 68.5)

The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. (Ps 146.9)

The woman wants to know if YHVH will live up to the character their tradition teaches, and puts the issue to Elisha with emotive force couched in respectful deference for his position.

It is no wonder the woman does this, for her situation is dire in the extreme. She has already lost much of what is dear to her, and now all that remains of her life and hope is hanging in the balance with the possibility of the debt collector returning at any moment to make good on his threat, which would complete the process that death began of emptying her life of all that makes it meaningful and rich.

The tension between death and life is therefore worked out dramatically in the woman's life through the motif of emptiness and fullness. At this point in the drama death has left everything empty: her home, her kitchen and cupboards, her bed, her bank account, and with the looming inevitability of her children entering indentured slavery, her future appears empty as well.

In order to establish the narrative context that compelled the woman to cry out to Elisha, and to honor the drama's tension as fully as possible, our performance began with a series of tableaux, which also introduced the characters and their various circumstances and relationships. Further, this silent introduction served to engage the audience's interest and deepen their empathy.

I have already described the initial blocking of the primary actors on the stage, save one important group: the neighbors. Standing around the edges of the stage, establishing its boundaries, are the woman's neighbors. In our performance, for purposes of symmetry and consistency, we had three neighbors: one at center stage left, one at center stage right, and one up-stage center. This arrangement establishes a geographic context in which to understand Elisha's use of "the streets" (חוץ lit. "outside," v. 3).

The series of tableaux that began our performance unfolded in the following way. The neighbors are in place around the perimeter, and the woman and her children are alone at center stage inside their home. Elisha and the creditor are in opposing corners down-stage, creating an initial horizontal axis that will be recreated in opposing corners up-stage partway through the drama. The children, likely quite young,²⁷ rummage through the various storage containers in the house searching for food. Their search is unsuccessful. Meanwhile the widow attempts to comfort them and quiet their collective anxiety. Just then there is a loud knock at the door. When the woman opens the door she is confronted by the debt collector. He motions to the woman that he needs his money. In desperation she

²⁷Their age is uncertain. Nuances of the word *yeladim* (ילדים) range from newborns, to weaned children, to teenagers, to youths, to young men old enough to serve in foreign courts, to descendants. *NIDOTTE*, s.v. ילד. Marvin Sweeney assumes a young age when he says "The woman is not to be taken by the creditor as a debt slave, but her two sons would be considered economically more viable *as they mature* over the coming six years." Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 289, emphasis added.

explains that she has none and begs for mercy. The debt collector enters her home, briefly searches for anything of value, then motions to her children as the arranged price. She responds again by pleading for mercy, then forces him to leave. He leaves willingly, but it is clear he intends to return to take them; this is expressed by the simple gesture of pointing back at them as he walks away to assume his position up-stage left. The woman, knowing her time is now very short, locks her door and runs to Elisha.²⁸

Conflict Development

In biblical drama, conflict is developed primarily through dialogue, movement, and gesture. This story presents a complex and interesting combination of these elements that simultaneously develops the conflict, commands the audience's full attention, and subtly reveals the theological affirmations embedded in the drama's unfolding plot.

Of the 121 individual words in these seven verses, two-thirds of them (80) are direct speech, suggesting that this drama is dialogue driven; the narrator gives over control of (most of) the storytelling to the characters. With the notable exception of v. 5, which is entirely devoted to narration—and is the climax of the drama²⁹—the characters carry the plot and develop the conflict from its introduction through to its resolution. Much of the

²⁸This is, of course, only one possibility for how to block the scene. Here the accent falls on the desperate situation the woman is in, her inability to provide for the material needs of her children, and how the debt collector's arrival is the catalyst that sparks her pursuit of Elisha's help. Another possibility we have explored is to focus instead on the relationship between the woman and her neighbors. In this scenario the woman approaches each neighbor asking for help, and all turn their backs to her, unable or unwilling to provide the support she needs. After this, the debt collector comes, and it proceeds similarly. This blocking establishes a context for the woman's relationship with her neighbors that adds depth to her future interactions with them regarding the collection and eventual sale of the oil. The blocking described here could certainly be combined with the blocking described above, though timing and pacing are important, and the introductory tableaux should not be too long. The important element is that the tension is more fully introduced in ways that anticipate the specific details of dialogue, and that the audience is prepared for and more fully drawn into the details of the plot than if the performance began with the opening words of the narrator.

²⁹As Fokkelman points out, the narrator, who "allocated for himself so few lines, has kept the core of the plot for himself after all." Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 14.

narration in vv. 1-4, 6-7 are merely cues to the actors of when it is time to speak, or descriptions of actions the characters do. These descriptions are not presented without intention, however.

Apart from a seven-word exchange between the widow and her children in v. 6, which sets up a critical declaration by the narrator (“and the oil stopped immediately”), all of the dialogue is between Elisha and the woman. Elisha’s initial response to the woman (v. 2) is charged with theatrical ambiguity. The lexical definition of each individual word is clear, but *meaning* is contextual, and performance reveals the ambiguity inherent in Elisha’s question: “What can I do for you?” (מָה אֶעֱשֶׂה לָּךְ). The meaning of his question is dependent upon how the line is delivered and where the emphasis is placed. Is Elisha testing the woman’s resolve by asking “What can I do for *you*?” Or, is he unsure of her plight and what his response should be and is therefore buying time? (“*What* can I do for you?”)³⁰ Is he, instead, attempting to ferret out the full extent of her faith, asking her why she has come to him, the man of God, and not to some other source of power that could solve her problems? (“What can *I* do for you?”) Perhaps in reality it is a combination of several of these, and other possibilities besides. In performance, the person embodying Elisha must interpret the question, and communicate their conclusion through vocal and nonverbal means. Elisha’s question, however, is not met with a response.

The open-endedness of Elisha’s question combined with the absence of a response by the woman suggests there is a dramatic pause between Elisha’s first and second questions, further evidence of the dramatic nature of these stories. The pause is charged

³⁰Cf. 2 Kings 4.27. When the Shunammite woman arrives at his home, seeking his help for her dead child, Elisha reveals to Gehazi “[T]he Lord has hidden it from me, and has not told me.”

with ambiguity and creates space for character development. What fills the pregnant silence of that moment? Does the woman throw up her hands in desperation, communicating that she is at a loss, and had hoped *he* would know what to do for her? Does she remain prostrate before him, hoping her silence will force him to come up with something on his own? Our conclusion was to have Elisha's question embody compassionate presence on the one hand, and to push her toward deeper ownership of her crisis on the other. Her response was to remain silent, kneeling, face downward, waiting for Elisha to clarify his expectations. Receiving no reply, Elisha proceeds, though it remains unclear what he knows about the extent of her situation and if he yet has a plan for how to answer his own question.

Perhaps still buying time or searching for something to go on, Elisha poses a second question: "What have you in the house?" (מָה־יְשִׁלְךָ־בְּבַיִת) ³¹. The woman, for her part, does not remain silent this time, but answers the question: "Your servant has nothing in the whole house, except a single jar of oil" (אֶסֶדֶד־שֶׁמֶן). The woman's response is remarkable. It is succinct, straight to the point, honest, comprehensive, and displays appropriate deference for a woman in her position. Revell notes that the woman "uses the most self-effacing form in which request can be made. It thus expresses the greatest humility and by implication the greatest respect for the addressee."³² We are led to believe she is being

³¹I will use the *qere* versions throughout. In this case, a Joüon and Muraoka have noted, throughout this passage the *ketiv* shows evidence of "some influence of the northern dialect," a process of "Aramaising" in the 2fs suffix: יָ- In Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, vol. 2, trans. T. Muraoka (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico 1923), 290.

³²E.J. Revell, *The Designation of the Individual: Expressive Usage in Biblical Narrative* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 301.

honest; nothing suggests we should conclude otherwise, and Elisha certainly believes her story of abject poverty and hopelessness.³³

It is impossible to know precisely what kind of container is being referred to with the *hapax legomenon* 'asukh (אָסוּךְ "jar"). Further, it is impossible to know what precise type of oil filled it, and what function it served in the life of the woman and her family, and eventually in the larger community. Any conclusion is tentative and conjectural. The following description details the two primary options.

The first option is based on etymology. The *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT) identifies the root of אָסוּךְ ('asukh) as the verb טָוַח "to grease oneself with oil only for the cosmetic treatment of the body" or "to anoint someone."³⁴ In each case³⁵ the verb (טָוַח) has cosmetic connotations in which the face or body is anointed with oil to make one more presentable, often as part of a beautification process. This oil would have been scented with spices and was ubiquitous in the ancient world, used by rich and poor alike.³⁶

Two brief examples will illustrate the function of this oil. The Lord, speaking through the prophet Ezekiel to Jerusalem, likens Jerusalem's unfaithfulness to a hypothetical birth

³³This widow does not express her hopelessness quite as explicitly or emphatically as the widow of Zeraphath does to Elijah in 1 Kings 17.12, but you can nevertheless feel her hopelessness leak out of her speech. Indeed, her first word is אָרֶץ, which seems to be where her focus is. Her last two words, "jar of oil" (אָסוּךְ וְשֶׁמֶן), name her only possession, apparently an afterthought, barely worth mentioning—not unlike a small collection of loaves and fish—since the "whole house" is empty.

³⁴HALOT, s.v. טָוַח.

³⁵Cf. Deut. 28.40, Ruth 3.3, 2 Sam. 12.20 (this is a conjectural reading, it appears in BHS as the only instance of the Hifil, and means "to anoint oneself"), 2 Sam. 14.2, 2 Kings 4.2, 2 Chron. 28.15, Ezek. 16.9, Dan. 10.3, Mic. 6.15 (these examples all in the Qal); Ex. 30.32, the Hofal "be anointed".

³⁶"Perfumes and cosmetics were worn by both men and women, rich and poor, in ancient Israel. Practically everyone used scented oils to mask offensive odors and to protect the skin from the dry heat and the bright sun." Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 280.

narrative in which Jerusalem was a child left for dead by Amorite and Hittite parents. The Lord approached the infant, cleaned it up, and empowered it to live. The baby grew into a woman "at the age for love"³⁷ at which time the Lord came and found her again, covered her nakedness, committed himself to her, washed her, anointed her (סִיחַ), and then clothed her with fine fabrics, adorned her with ornaments, jewelry, piercings, and a crown. The anointing functions as part of this larger process of the woman moving from shameful nakedness to adorned beauty.³⁸

In Ruth 3 Naomi hatches her plot for Ruth to receive the favor of Boaz at the threshing floor, instructing her daughter-in-law to wash, anoint (סִיחַ) herself, and put on clothing, which many translations contextually interpret as Ruth's "good" or "best" clothes.³⁹ Again, anointing is here used as part of a process of making oneself socially presentable. "To be able to put on oil was apparently considered an integral part of looking and being at one's best."⁴⁰ The derivative nominal *'asukh*, then, could have been a bottle that contained the oil used for such cosmetic purposes.

The multiplication of this oil by the prophet would lend an air of superficiality to the miracle that I find difficult to sustain, even though it was a value-added product that would sell at a good price, and may have shared some of the liturgical significance of holy oil.⁴¹ Further, it is unlikely the woman would have kept a valuable jar of oil in the home given the

³⁷Heb. עַתְּ הַזֶּה עֵת הַחֲבִיבִים, "your time [was] the time of lovers," Ezek 16.8.

³⁸Heb. וְהָיִיתְּ בְּמְאֹד מְאֹד, "And you were very, very beautiful," Ezek 16.13.

³⁹Cf. NRSV, TNIV, and NASB "best"; CJB "good"; JPS "dress up" (v. 3).

⁴⁰*NIDOTTE*, s.v. סִיחַ.

⁴¹Johs. Pederson makes a loose connection between the mixture of oil "used in everyday life for beautification by anointment" to both the holy incense with which it shared a "similar refinement," and also the "holy oil for anointment" which also "came to be made from a certain recipe." Johs Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), IV: 357.

circumstances; this interpretation would cast unnecessary doubt on the genuineness and urgency of her plight.

A second option is to consider the jar a small container of pure olive oil, which was likewise ubiquitous throughout ancient Israel and was used for a wide variety of purposes, both domestic and sacred. Olive oil (זַיִת) had an array of essential life-sustaining functions, and was "a staple of life and an important crop"⁴² throughout the biblical period. It was used as "a dietary staple, medicine, and fuel for ceramic lamps; as a base for cosmetics, perfumes, and oils; and in ritual contexts, such as the anointing of kings at their coronation, as libation offerings, and as fuel for sanctuary lamps."⁴³ It was a desirable commodity throughout the ANE since it was an everyday product, and could therefore be sold on the international market (Ezek. 27.17), included as part of a nation's tribute (Hos. 12.1 [2 Heb]), or used as payment for another nation's services (1 Kings 5.11 [25 Heb]). It was even applied to leather to keep it from drying and cracking (2 Sam. 1.21).⁴⁴ Israel and its neighbors had an oil economy just like many countries throughout the modern world do. As a colleague of mine once reflected, "They had olive oil; we have crude oil, but oil means the same thing to both of us."⁴⁵

This great diversity of potential uses of olive oil creates interesting interpretive possibilities that I believe favor it as the oil that filled the *'asukh*, rather than a mixed blend intended for cosmetic purposes. That the oil could have multiplied from a small jar that was

⁴²NIDOTTE, s.v. זַיִת.

⁴³King and Lawrence, *Life*, 97.

⁴⁴NIDOTTE, s.v. זַיִת. Apparently this use became so common that to "oil the shield" became an idiom for "to make war" (Cf. Is. 21.5). Mayer Irwin Gruber, "Oils," *Jewish Virtual Library* (2008, Encyclopedia Judaica), http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0015_0_15052.html (accessed October 2, 2013).

⁴⁵Tom Boogaart, "Vessels Full of Grace and Truth" (lecture, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI, October 27, 2009).

little more than an afterthought to the woman, into vessels that spread throughout the woman's entire community, silently sustaining their lives by lighting lamps, healing wounds, and filling bellies lends the miracle both practical and theological significance. Further, in this story's counterpart in the Elijah cycle (1 Kings 17.8-16) the widow of Zarephath has pure olive oil, which she used for cooking (v. 12). This correspondence does not demand an interpretation of pure olive oil in 2 Kings 4.1-7 but does make it the more likely possibility.

Elisha's response to the woman's acknowledgment that she had some oil is as unexpected as it is full of gaps. It moves the plot in unforeseen directions and poses particular challenges to the interpreter. Many of Elisha's commands to the woman in vv. 3-4 receive no narrative fulfillment. The most glaring occurrence of this happens in the break between the end of v. 4 and the beginning of v. 5. Verses 3-4 contain Elisha's list of seven commands to the woman ("go" (לָכִי), "ask for vessels" (שְׁאַל־יְלֶדֶךָ בְּלִים), "not just a few" (אַל־תִּמְעִיתִי), "enter" (וּבֹאֵת), "shut" (וּסְגֹרֵת), "pour" (וַיִּצְקֵת), and "set aside" (תִּסְיֵעִי)); in v. 5 the narrator reports her only fulfilling three of those commands ("and she went" (וַתֵּלֶךְ), "and she shut" (וַתִּסְגֹּר), "[she was] pouring" (מוֹצֵקֶת)). The most essential command for the success of the miracle is not reported: collecting the vessels.⁴⁶ However, since the narrator later describes how she pours the oil (מוֹצֵקֶת), and then asks her son to fetch "another vessel" (עוֹד בְּלִי, v. 6), the clear implication is that she does, in fact, collect the vessels.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Fokkelman is certainly right to suggest that the narrator is being selective about what actions to narrate, but is uncharacteristically uncreative in his conclusion as to why the narrator chooses which action to report: "The writer can then decide dutifully to report the execution of all seven instructions in v. 5, but that would be rather boring..." in Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 13.

⁴⁷As Cogan and Tadmor point out, the ancient interpreters of the Hebrew Bible into Greek struggled with this apparent oversight; the Lucianic recensions of the LXX contain the addition "and she did so" following "And she went" in v. 5. The addition is unnecessary, however, since "the ellipsis in MT is not unusual and can be

The interplay between prophetic command and unnarrated obedience in this critical scene sets up an expectation that the woman obeys Elisha not only with respect to collecting vessels, but she obeys Elisha in everything, whether or not her obedience is reported: "Her obedience to the man of God is constant," observes Hobbs.⁴⁸ A performance of this passage must portray the fulness of the woman's obedience. The woman cannot simply leave Elisha's presence and walk immediately into her house, her arms magically filled with empty vessels. Were she able to do so she would undoubtedly not need the prophet's assistance! Performance is a necessary means for bringing out the latent dimensions of the plot not written in to the final script.

Enacting the fulness of the woman's obedience does not compromise the integrity of the narrative selection. By reporting on only three of Elisha's seven commands to the woman, the narrator focuses the audience's attention on what will become a central motif of the drama, and a critical theological affirmation. This affirmation is embedded in the interplay between the miracle conducted behind closed doors, and the ultimate distribution of the oil throughout the community. I will return to this theme in detail below.

The actor is presented with a range of possibilities as to how to fulfill Elisha's command to collect the vessels, each with slightly different accents. One particularly effective option is to insert dramatic pauses into Elisha's speech to the woman in vv. 3-4 in which she fulfills each series of commands immediately upon hearing them. Elisha says "Go. Borrow vessels from the streets, from all your neighbors. Empty vessels." and the woman promptly responds by walking directly to the closest neighbor, standing center-stage right,

maintained." Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 56.

⁴⁸Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 46.

and proceeds to begin collecting the vessels from each of them in turn. An implication of this interpretation is that Elisha travels throughout the "streets" (חֹיץ) with her, accompanying her to her neighbors' homes, his presence serving as an incentive to the community to oblige the widow's request. Perhaps a neighbor is hesitant or unwilling to be compassionate or generous toward the woman. Elisha's word takes on added meaning in this context, telling the woman in the earshot of her neighbor to collect "not just a few" (אַל־תִּמְעַתֶּי) empty vessels. After the collection process is complete Elisha gives his final instructions (v. 4).

There is, perhaps, a small grammatical indication that the above interpretation—in which the woman collects the vessels in real-time as Elisha elaborates his instructions to her—is the intended one. In Elisha's final set of instructions he refers to the vessels the woman is to pour the oil into (lit. "over" וַיִּצְקֶהָ עַל) followed by the demonstrative adjective with definite article, "all of *these* vessels" (כָּל־הַבָּלַיִם הָאֵלֶּה), possibly indicating that the vessels have already been collected and are in Elisha's vicinity for him to refer to with the demonstrative "these."⁴⁹ In this scenario the widow collects the vessels without knowledge of Elisha's plan. The emphasis would therefore fall on her blind obedience. It also puts the narrator's report of her entering her home and shutting the door in sharper relief as it does not compete with the widow collecting the vessels. This was our interpretation.

Another option is to have Elisha speak his entire set of instructions (all of vv. 3-4), then the woman leaves his presence with full knowledge of what she is collecting the

⁴⁹The demonstrative could also take the initial use of "vessels" as its referent (שָׁאַל־יֶלֶד בָּלַיִם "borrow vessels") in v. 3. When הָ (or the plural הָאֵלֶּה) is used, "what it refers to can be pointed to, whether actually or mentally" (Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 531). They cite 2 Kings 4.3 in the section on the demonstrative, but do not clarify if the referent was being pointed to "actually" or "mentally" (534).

vessels for as she moves from home to home making her repeated requests. The emphasis in this scenario would be on the woman's *faithful* obedience, having already been told the extraordinary plan in its entirety.⁵⁰

Either way the scene is played, one thing becomes visible as the woman (likely with her children in tow) wanders the streets, carrying an ever-increasing collection of empty vessels from home to home. Elisha is making a living parable out of the woman's life; as the burden of empty vessels increases, the irony deepens simultaneously. The death of her husband and threat of slavery for her children has left the woman as empty as her house, as empty as one of the vessels she carries. The woman and the vessel are one and the same. In the end it is unclear which is the greater miracle, filling the vessels with oil or filling the woman with life and vitality again. This symbolism is latent in the script, the full impact of it can only be drawn out through performance.

Once the vessels are gathered, their destination is the woman's home. Once inside, the narrator's emphasis falls on the privacy Elisha instructed the woman to create, symbolized in the shutting of the door "behind her and behind her children" (בַּעֲדָהּ וּבְעֵדָהּ בְּנֶיהָ, v. 5). Several commentators note the peculiarity of the narrator's repetition of the closed doors, but offer little to no comment on what it may mean.⁵¹ The interpretive key to

⁵⁰Hobbs would likely favor this interpretation as he comments on the presence of miracles throughout 2 Kings 4, and the interpretive challenge they present the historian, saying "properly seen, such miracles are the results of faith, not the inspiration of faith." Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 54.

⁵¹Cf. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 50; Terence Fretheim, *First and Second Kings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 147; Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*, 251. Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 287, 289. Sweeney understands the motif to function on two levels. First, it functions to connect 2 Kings 4.1-7 with the following narrative, 2 Kings 4.8-37 as the motif occurs in both dramas (vv. 4, 5, 21, 33). Secondly, and almost as an afterthought, he adds "The closed door suggests the miraculous nature of the event" (289). Similarly Rofé identifies the shutting of the doors, along with several other motifs throughout the Elisha cycle, as "instances of magic practices of different kinds." Alexander Rofé, "The Classification of the Prophetic Stories," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89, no. 4 D (1970): 427-440. Cohn offers a helpful insight, contrasting the "public prophecy" Elisha delivered in 2 Kings 3 with the miracle in 2 Kings 4.1-7 which, as Elisha has designed it, is "shrouded in secrecy," so that the

unlocking the meaning of the narrator's emphasis is, I believe, the interplay between action and gesture brought out in performance, particularly between the woman and her neighbors in the concluding scene in the drama, which provides the context in which the private-public dialectic plays itself out. I will return to this theme at the end.

The Climax

The woman and her children are now cramped in their home, which is full of "not just a few" empty vessels. Imagine the scene. The woman and her children on one side, the empty vessels piled up on the other, filling the space with their emptiness and assailing her and her *'asukh* with mocking silence. As the night is darkest just before the dawn, so too the tension peaks just before the climax when the outcome is in doubt and the fate of the woman and her children is hanging in the balance between the oil and the vessels. But the woman, again, obeys the word of Elisha and begins to pour the oil into the first vessel.

The miracle is described with the "remarkable suggestiveness of the Bible's artistic economy."⁵² No elaboration is given as to the mechanics of the miracle. No account is rendered as to how long it took to fill all of the vessels from just a small jar. No description of the woman or her children's response is offered. The narrator's use of the participles "bringing" (מְגִישִׁים) and "pouring" (מוֹצֵקֶת), however, does point to two distinct realities, both of which are made manifest in performance. First, as Joüon and Muraoka have noted, the sequence of two participles signals "two durative actions" happening simultaneously and continuing over time.⁵³ Performance is a medium uniquely suited to present simultaneous

"neighbors, who have lent the woman their vessels, cannot see" it. Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 25.

⁵²Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 122.

⁵³Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 623.

action: the children bring their mother empty vessels and store the filled ones (הם מְגִישִׁים) אֶלֶּיהָ "they were bringing to her") while she is busy pouring (וְהִיא מוֹצֵקֶת) "and she was pouring"). Other media could perhaps intimate and suggest simultaneous action, but only drama can manifest such activity in the service of plot, characterization, and the development and resolution of conflict.

In the second place, the use of the participle signals a dramatic slowing of the pacing of the scene. Pacing is an essential element of effective theatre, and the narrator is here controlling the pacing by bringing all of the focus on to the action as it is in the process of happening. "[T]he direct objects of both the 'bringing' and the 'pouring' have been left out. This double ellipsis of vessels and oil is significant: in this way, our undivided attention is directed toward the action itself, its long duration, and the cooperation between the widow and her boys."⁵⁴ Similarly, Richard Nelson suggests the woman's "act of borrowing jars is not reported, as the plot has been stripped down to its core, but a contrasting interest in the details of their filling throws the emphasis on the miraculous process itself."⁵⁵

The role of the narrator, as described in chapter 3 above, was to facilitate the connection between the story and the gathered congregation. Like a shaman, the narrator straddled two worlds—the past and the present—and it was the narrator's responsibility to ensure that these two worlds collided in such a way that facilitated the congregation's communion with the story being made present through performance. This unique role sets the narrator apart from the other characters in the drama who are confined to its boundaries and speak only to each other. The narrator, however, never speaks directly to

⁵⁴Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 14.

⁵⁵Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987), 171.

the other characters, but tells the story to the congregation. Further, this relationship between narrator and congregation, when coupled with the narrator's omniscience,⁵⁶ creates the possibility of the narrator intimating or representing the role played by God which is implied in the script.

This climactic scene is one such possibility. The word of Elisha anticipates the miracle by articulating to the woman what she is to do with the vessels she collects. The prophet does not, however, imagine that his word is the power that animates the miracle. Rather, in the mind of the prophet, the miracle is made possible by the grace and power of the God in whose service he stands continually.⁵⁷ This perspective is assumed by the storyteller, though not explicitly articulated (for instance, by inserting the phrase "according to the word of the Lord"). In our performance the narrator began the scene by ushering the congregation beyond the walls and closed doors into the home of the widow at the moment the miracle is manifested. This happens through a simple movement. The narrator begins by entering the space on stage defined loosely as the woman's home just after saying "And she closed the door behind her and behind her children." By the time the woman and her children are situated in the house, preparing to begin pouring, the narrator is standing directly above the kneeling widow. From this position on stage the narrator can both describe the scene from the point-of-view of the woman and also embody the divine source of the multiplication. At the same moment the words "And she was pouring" (וַיִּשְׁפֹּךְ)

⁵⁶Cf. Meir Sternberg, "[T]he narrator speaks with the authority of omniscience." Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 85. Though there is some debate on the precise nature of the narrator's omniscience, no one claims the narrator is ignorant of the details of the story being told, even when those details include intimate knowledge of God's thoughts and intentions.

⁵⁷Cf. 2 Kings 3.14, 5.16.

מוצקת) are spoken, the narrator—standing directly above the woman who begins miming the action of pouring oil into a vessel—opens both hands—fingers down, palms out, one hand higher than the other—suggesting a vertical flow descending from above the woman, through the narrator's outstretched hands, and into the vessel over which she is pouring.

Elisha's earlier instructions to the woman (v. 4) add further evidence of a divine presence in this moment. Here Elisha creates an "unusual"⁵⁸ pairing by using the preposition "upon" with the verb "pour" (וַיִּצְקֵהָ עַל) with respect to filling the empty vessels. Hobbs observes that this "combination is used for the practice of anointing"⁵⁹ and is unexpected in this context. In addition to a context of anointing, the pairing is employed to describe the act of pouring "over" an object that cannot be filled. For example, in 1 Kings 18.34, while confronting the priests of Baal, Elijah instructs the people to fill four jugs (כְּדָיִם) with water and pour (יִצֵק) them over (עַל) the altar wantonly, to soak it thoroughly. In Isa 44.3 the Lord promises to pour (יִצֵק) water out upon (עַל) the thirsty land. The only use of יִצֵק עַל that comes close to the present instance is Lev 14.15, part of the description of the purification rite for those healed of leprosy. During the ritual the priest pours oil *into* (עַל) his left hand, filling it like a bowl to hold the oil for use throughout the rite. Each of these examples testify to divine presence and symbolize divine activity. Elisha does not tell the woman to pour the oil wantonly over the array of collected vessels, but frames her act of pouring in a theological context by drawing on the language of anointing in his instructions for this deeply significant act.

⁵⁸Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 50.

⁵⁹Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 50. Hobbs identifies Lev 2:1, 6 and 2 Kgs 9:3, though examples abound of יִצֵק עַל being used in the context of anointing (Cf. Gen 28.18, 35.14; Exod 29.7; Lev 21.10; Num 5.15; 1 Sam 10.1).

The narrator does not reveal the woman's or her children's reaction to the miracle in words, though a performance cannot avoid presenting their interpretation of the gravity of the event nonverbally. As I suggested above, the first vessel is fraught with the greatest degree of tension. The mother kneels, holding the *'asukh*, and one child brings the initial vessel. Does she pour immediately? Does she pause briefly, allowing the silence of the moment to speak of the paradox of her profound emptiness being met by an equally profound faith? As she begins to pour, all of the tension she held in her body, multiplied by the tension held by the audience, is released in joy and amazement. The joy and exultation of the scene confirms to the woman and her children that YHVH does, in fact, fulfill his promises.

Father of orphans and protector of widows
is God in his holy habitation. (Ps 68.5)

The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. (Ps 146.9)

The climactic scene concludes with a masterful bit of storytelling. The widow, fully absorbed by the task of pouring and filling has not noticed that their stock of empty vessels has disappeared. "Bring me another vessel" she demands, the urgency in her voice rising in concert with the oil level in the final vessel as it approaches the lip of the container; she does not want any time or oil to go to waste. The first word of the child's response "there is not" (אין) echoes the widow's pathetic response to Elisha in v. 2, only now with the opposite effect. It's not that the house is empty because "there is nothing" in it, but rather there is nothing *empty* left in the house save the *'asukh* itself, now drained to the bottom of its miraculous contents. The oil from the *'asukh* has not only filled all of the vessels, which

themselves likely fill her "whole house," but the woman's heart and hope has been (re)filled as well. The child's straightforward honesty, "there is no other vessel" (אֵין עוֹד כֵּלִי) breaks any tension that may remain, or may have been introduced by the woman's urgency, and acts as a dramatic segue for the narrator to report the end of the miraculous flow, "And the oil stopped immediately" (וַיִּעַמַּד הַשֶּׁמֶן).⁶⁰ The 'asukh has fulfilled its divine purpose and now sits empty on the floor in dramatic contrast to the rows of filled vessels, indicating that abundance does not necessarily mean excess. There is no miracle oil remaining in her jar to save for future use; the bread gathered on the sixth day is sufficient for that day and the next.

Falling Action / Denouement

Now that the miracle is complete the woman wastes no time; she returns immediately and directly to Elisha to report on what transpired, and (likely) to solicit advice for how to move forward since the threat on her children has not yet been assuaged. The narrator, more interested in pressing forward to tie up the drama's loose ends, does not supply the woman with any dialogue to summarize her experiences inside the house. Instead, the narrator breezes by her report in two words: "And she went" (וַתֵּלֶךְ), "and she told" (וַתִּגַּד). Here the narrator refers to Elisha not by his proper name, as he did in v. 1, but by "his primary quality of 'man of God.'"⁶¹

⁶⁰This instance of "oil" (שֶׁן) as subject of the verb "stand still" (עָמַד) is unique to this verse. There are two other instances of liquid ("water" מַיִם) "standing still," in Jonah 1.15 and Josh 3.13, 16. The basic meaning appears to be that of an object in motion coming to rest. One wonders if its unusual use here in 2 Kings 4 is intended to, however fleetingly, call to mind two other miracles in which people are saved from impossibly desperate situations: the crossing of the Jordan (Josh 3) and the sailors' deliverance from the storm (Jonah 1).

⁶¹Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 16. Cf. "Symmetrically, the scene ends as it began with the woman presenting herself before Elisha, now called a 'man of God.'" Cohn, *2 Kings*, 26.

Elisha's response to the woman concludes the drama's script. It is an interesting choice on the part of the narrator to give Elisha the last word.⁶² This conclusion creates a beautiful symmetry—an *inclusio*—ending on the same theme with which it began, this time as with the first, voiced by the principle character uniquely situated to speak it.⁶³

The expectation of implied obedience on the part of the woman to Elisha's commands, established in vv. 3-6 above, suggests the prophet's final commands (v. 7) are likewise obeyed completely. Elisha begins by instructing the woman to "go" (לֵךְ), just as he did the first time she came to him (v. 3). Elisha wants the woman to be clear that though the God her late husband feared (v. 1) acts in power to transform circumstances, she is not absolved of responsibility to participate in the unfolding of the transformation. This is a theme of Elisha's throughout the dramas contained in 2 Kings 4.⁶⁴

Elisha's second command is to "sell the oil" (מְכֹרֵ אֶת־הַשֶּׁמֶן). The practical application of the miracle for the woman's crisis is now made clear: the miracle oil will generate the necessary capital to pay off her debts. But whether she gathered enough vessels to secure her future remains to be seen. The most logical and likely option for the widow is to return to the very neighbors from whom she borrowed the empty vessels in order to return them, now filled with miracle oil, for a profit. This is the interpretive key performance provides to unlock the mystery of the closed (and locked) doors: the oil, multiplied in private, now goes public, spreading throughout the community, infiltrating their homes, their lives, and their bodies with the anonymous grace of God.

⁶²Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 12.

⁶³"[Elisha's] speeches in vv. 3-4 and 7 offer the solution to the pressing problem, so it is appropriate to grant him the last word. In this way, alternating the speakers creates a balance between the opening and the ending: the woman opens; the prophet closes." In Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 12.

⁶⁴Cf. v. 41 "Serve the people and let them eat," and v. 42, 43 "Give it to the people and let them eat" (NRSV).

In performance the woman responds immediately to Elisha's command to "sell" by returning—her arms now full of full vessels—to each of her neighbors to sell the oil. After the initial confusion registers on the face of each subsequent neighbor, they all receive the oil and dutifully pay her its worth. It's likely they'll never purchase better oil again.⁶⁵

Once the woman finishes selling the oil there is just one command remaining for Elisha to voice: "pay off your debts" (וְשַׁלְמִי אֶת־נִשְׁיָךְ). Occasionally biblical narrators will infuse a closing moment with a final bit of tension which puts the resolution achieved in the climax in doubt. This is the case in this moment.⁶⁶ After Elisha's words fade into silence, the woman slowly turns and faces the creditor, who's shadow has "loomed" across the stage since the opening scene. She approaches him and holds out the money to pay the debt and restore balance and security to her life. The creditor is stunned; this is a very unexpected turn of events. Whence came this money? He takes the money, makes sure it is sufficient, and—this is the critical moment—turns and walks off the stage and out of the woman's life. Different stages offer different possibilities here, but one effective choice is to have the creditor walk up the center aisle of the gathered community (audience) and out the back of the building. By leaving the stage and the vision of the audience the tension created along

⁶⁵There are distant echoes of Jesus' first miracle reported in John's gospel here in which Jesus turns water into wine (John 2.1-12) in which the steward remarks to the groom, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now" (v. 10). Interestingly enough, as Hobbs reports, "Some of the Peshitta MSS regard this as a miracle of turning water to oil." In Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 50.

⁶⁶Another example of this from the Elisha cycle is 2 Kings 2.13-14. When this scene is performed it becomes clear that Elisha must strike the Jordan twice and cry out to "the Lord God of Elijah" between the two strikes, casting a brief shadow of doubt as to whether he has received the "double portion" from Elijah and will in fact be his successor. His second strike both confirms him as the successor and suggests, as an astute colleague pointed out to me, "to receive the double portion requires double the work." Tom Boogaart, personal communication, February 13, 2012.

the horizontal axis between the creditor on the one side and Elisha on the other with the woman and her children in the middle is broken; life has conquered death.

The dramatic exit of the creditor anticipates Elisha's concluding declaration in which he reveals the ultimate victory of life over death. He speaks no longer in the imperative but the imperfect, describing "a verbal action for which, in the mind of the speaker...the conclusion is not in view."⁶⁷ The situation Elisha envisions will continue, like the oil did, until the need no longer remains. He describes the extent of the miracle in the most practical of terms: "You and your children will⁶⁸ live on what is leftover." In Hebrew, "will live" (תִּהְיֶינָה) is the second to last word in the drama, almost perfectly mirroring "is dead" (מָתָה), the third word spoken by the woman in v. 1. The *inclusio* indicates the establishment of a new equilibrium that pulses now with vitality, as opposed to the pathos that characterized the drama's opening scene. Death has given way to life.

Yet another dramatic *inclusio* concludes the drama. Not only does death give way to life, but deficit is displaced by sufficiency. The final word is, appropriately, "leftover" (נֹזְתָר). As there was just enough oil to fill each of the collected vessels, there will likewise be enough resources leftover to last as long as the woman's and her children's need remains. Further, the woman, now filled with the grace of God incarnated in the multiplied oil is transformed into a source of grace from which her neighbors' lives are filled. And the miracle oil itself, multiplied in secret, anonymously sustains the woman's community, lighting their lamps, filling their bellies, and healing their wounds.

⁶⁷Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 130.

⁶⁸A modal translation of the verb is also possible: "You and your children *may* live" or "*can* live". The subjunctive would not diminish the potency of the promise, but rather would introduce a level of contingency, suggesting the woman must be responsible in her stewardship of this gift, which, if squandered, could be lost.