

## **A WIDOW WHOM GOD KNEW**

One of the most engaging “others” story is found in 1 Kings 17 concerning the widow of Zarephath who hosts God’s prophet Elijah.

The setting of the story flows out of the context of famine brought on by Elijah as a consequence of Israel’s King Ahab’s idolatry (1 Kings 16:29-34). Ahab was infamously evil as king. His marriage to pagan Jezebel was a corruptive influence leading him to erect Asherah poles expanding the worship of Baal throughout Israel. This provoked God. Elijah, speaking for God, calls for a draught to occur. This in turn creates the circumstance of his meeting the widow.

Initially, God directed Elijah to a hidden valley to escape potential repercussions from Ahab. There he lived by a stream and was feed by ravens. Once the brook eventually dried up due to the draught God instructed him to “go at once to Zarepath of Sidon” to seek this widow.

### **The Other’s Land**

This may have seemed like a strange request to Elijah. Sidon, after all, was the land of Jezebel; of Asherah; and of Baal—not exactly a welcoming place for a prophet of Jehovah trying to escape the clutches of the king he reprimanded for worshipping these same gods. It was indeed the other’s land. Faith in Jehovah was not something he would expect to discover there. Yet this is where God sent him to a woman whom God already knew, having “commanded” her to supply him with food.

### **The Story**

As the story unfolds there are several noteworthy elements. As Elijah approaches her for drink and food, she explains that she had very little flour and oil and that what remained was for a last meal for her and her son—not expecting to live after that with no rations. But in this conversation she recognizes the God of Elijah in the statement, “As surely as the Lord your God lives.” This is no statement of faith on her part, but it is an affirmation of Jehovah. She is aware of Elijah’s God. God is known even in pagan Sidon. While this may not be that great of a surprise due to geography, but was there more to it than this since God had “commanded” her?

Elijah next explains to her that she has nothing to fear. “The Lord, the God of Israel” is going to provide her with all she needs by basically giving her an endless supply of flour and oil—to take care of Elijah as long as it takes. And this turned out to be a prolonged period of time.

For the text does next say, “sometime later” indicating that the draught continued (It appears his stay with the widow as well as the draught was three and a half years or so—1 Kings 18:1). And at this point the widow’s son becomes ill and dies. Here the story takes an interesting turn as both the widow and Elijah question God. The widow reacts taking blame upon herself—a mother’s natural reaction perhaps in not doing enough to protect her son; thinking maybe it was a consequence of her own sinfulness, especially with God’s prophet living in her household reminding her of her sins? Elijah even puts blame upon God asking

God why he caused the boy to die? A human reaction by the prophet, but one we may think he would be exempt from due to his close relationship with Jehovah, perhaps?

Elijah then appeals to God to resurrect the boy—dramatically stretching himself out on him three times and calling upon God. God hears and acts, bringing the boy back to life. Elijah then takes him, presenting him alive to his mother. Upon seeing her son alive she proclaims:

*Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth. (17:24).*

So after some period of time; after having some kind of visit from God before Elijah's arrival; after experiencing God's miracle of providing continuous food; and after witnessing her son brought back to life, the widow comes to full faith in Elijah's God—the one true God of Israel. Her story is definitely one for the ages as even Jesus recalled it:

*I tell you the truth, he continued, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. (Luke 4:24-26)*

## Questions

Her story and even Christ's commentary on it provokes several questions to consider—particularly in light of the widow being an “other.”

Did God, in fact, speak to her prior to the meeting with Elijah? It does appear that way from the language and from their first encounter. This then brings up the question—does God speak in some way to those considered “others” today? How might this change our thinking about the others?

What are we to make out of their reaction to the son's death? The mother reacts in some ways that are relatable. Her self-blame is quite interesting considering she thinks the boy's death is somehow connected to her own sin. Did Elijah's presence somehow heighten her awareness of her own sin?

Then there is Elijah's God-blame for the son's death. It seems in that moment of crisis, he did not work through any theology to account for how death entered the world. Rather he put it directly on God. What kind of thoughts does this stimulate?

And finally, there is Christ's take on the story. He mentions it within the context of his own story—not being accepted and received in his home region of Galilee. In that context it appears that Elijah would have not found a protective welcome in Ahab's Israel; that he had to go to the others to be received. Of course, this serves as a metaphor for Christ's ministry. He was all about going to the others.

So here is this widow, this “other”—outside of God's covenant, yet known by God as someone willing to hear and obey him; a person who would come to complete faith through relationship and witnessing the work of God. How does her story inform us as we seek to share Christ with those outside of his covenant today?