

Resurrection or Miraculous Cures? The Elijah and Elisha Narrative Against its Ancient Near Eastern Background

SHAUL BAR (UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS)

ABSTRACT

The Elijah and Elisha cycles have similar stories where the prophet brings a dead child back to life. In addition, in the Elisha story, a corpse is thrown into the prophet's grave; when it comes into contact with one of his bones, the man returns to life. Thus the question is do these stories allude to resurrection, or "only" miraculous cures? What was the purpose of the inclusion of these stories and what message did they convey? In this paper we will show that these are legends that were intended to lend greater credence to prophetic activity and to indicate the Lord's power over death.

A INTRODUCTION

There is consensus among scholars that Dan 12:2-3, which they assign to the second century B.C.E., refers to the resurrection of the dead.¹ The question becomes whether biblical texts earlier than this era allude to this doctrine. The phrase "resurrection of the dead" never appears in the Bible. Scholars searching for biblical allusions to resurrection have cited various idioms.² They list verbs including "arise,"³ "wake up,"⁴ and "live,"⁵ all of which can denote a return to life. We also find "take,"⁶ which refers to being taken to Heaven, the noun "life,"⁷ and "see."⁸ In the present paper however, we shall examine the stories of the Elijah and Elisha cycles which include similar tales in which the prophet brings a dead child back to life: in Elijah's case, the son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:17-24); in Elisha's, the son of the Shunammite matron (2 Kgs 4:31-37). In the second tale in the Elisha story, a corpse is thrown into the prophet's grave; when it comes into contact with one of his bones, the man returns to life (2 Kgs 13:20-21). Thus we will try to determine whether these sto-

¹ John J. Collins, *Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 391-392.

² John F. A. Sawyer, "Hebrew Words for the Resurrection of the Dead," *VT* 23 (1973): 218-234.

³ 2 Kgs 13:21; Isa 26:14, 19; Job 14:12.

⁴ 2 Kgs 4:31; Isa 26:19; Job 14:12; Dan 12:2.

⁵ 1 Kgs 17:22; 2 Kgs 13:21; Isa 26:14, 19; Ezek 37:3, 5-6, 9-10, 14; Job 14:14.

⁶ Gen 5:24; 2 Kgs 2:3, 5, 9; Ps 49:16; 73:24.

⁷ Ps 27:13; 30:6; 36:10; 56:14; 68:29; 116:8-9; 133:3; 142:6.

⁸ Ps 17:15.

ries do in fact allude to the resurrection of the dead or "merely" of miraculous cures?

B ELISHA

1 The Son of the Shunammite

In this story, Elisha sends his servant Gehazi ahead to place his wonder-working staff on the boy's body (2 Kgs 4:29). To prevent any delay the prophet orders his emissary not to greet any person on the way. Brunner thinks that Gehazi was sent ahead not to revive the boy but to prevent the body being moved to the grave for burial. The attempt to resuscitate the child was his own initiative.⁹ According to the story Gehazi was unable to revive the boy. When he reports his failure to his master, he says "the boy has not awakened" (v. 31); as we have seen, awakening is one of the terms the Bible employs for resurrection. The verb מוֹת "die" is used explicitly twice (vv. 20, 32); but David Kimchi, in his commentary, writes that the child was only unconscious.

We should point out that Gehazi placed the staff on the lad's face and according to the Bible "there was no sound (קֶשֶׁב) and no response" (v. 31). In Hebrew, the word קֶשֶׁב means literally "attentiveness to spoken words."¹⁰ Thus, it appears that here is a kind of magic in which the staff was placed on the face of the boy while Gehazi articulates some words or incantations. Indeed, the following chapter 5 records Naaman's cure from leprosy. Naaman expected the prophet to practice some rite of exorcism which included raising his hand and calling upon his God (5:11). According to the Gospel of Mark in the NT, Jesus took the girl by the hand meaning he touched her and used a verbal command, "'Talitha cum,' which means, 'little girl, get up!'" (Mark 5:41).

After Gehazi's failure Elisha prays to the Lord. He stretches himself out on top of the child and evidently practices mouth-to-mouth resuscitation until the boy revives. Kimchi explains that the physical contact is meant

to focus the prayer on the person he is praying for, as with Isaac who prayed opposite (לִנְכַח) his wife (Gen 25:21). It is also possible that he breathes on the child to warm him with his natural heat from his mouth and his eyes, because most miracles are achieved through some natural stratagem.¹¹

⁹ Leila Leah Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha: As Polemics Against Baal Worship* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 121.

¹⁰ Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1988), 58.

¹¹ Kimchi on 1Kgs 17:21; *Miqra'oth Gedoloth*, 42. Commentaries of Rashi, Abraham ibn Ezra, David Kimchi, and Mesudoth are taken from *Miqra'oth Gedoloth* [The Rabbinic Bible], (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1976).

In fact, the statement (v. 20) that the child "died" (וימת) does not necessarily denote irreversible death. It can also refer to a critically ill person who stops breathing, or stops breathing normally.¹² The biblical author may have exaggerated here and the child was simply in a coma. We know that the boy was in the field with the harvesters, evidently bareheaded; it is plausible that he came down with sunstroke, which is why he cried out that his head was hurting. Rabbi Manna explicitly stated that it was a case of heatstroke: "Accidents occur during the harvest season, because the sun inflames the head of people."¹³ Another possibility is that the boy was suffering from fulminating encephalitis or a subarachnoid hemorrhage.

Elisha's prayer and contact with the boy's body are similar to Elijah's treatment of the son of the widow of Zarephath. There too the boy is said to have been critically ill and no longer breathing (1 Kgs 17:17).¹⁴ In all likelihood, then, the Shunammite matron's son was unconscious and close to death; but he was not dead, and the story is not one of resurrection. Note that one of the questions that the men of Alexandria asked R. Joshua ben Hananiah was whether the (dead) son of the Shunammite matron could convey ritual impurity. His reply that only a dead person could do so, suggests that he thought the child was alive and only seemed to be dead.

Another story of death from sunstroke can be found in the book of Judith (8:3), where Judith's husband Manasseh dies "in the days of the barley

¹² It is possible that the child was in a coma and breathing so shallowly that his respiration could not be detected. When the prophet lay on him and forced air into his mouth, it was a stimulus like pouring cold water on a person. Elisha did not perform what is known as mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. See Haim Gevaryahu, "On Elisha the Prophet," *BethM* 113 (1988): 194.

¹³ Y. Yebam. 15:2 (14d).

¹⁴ Rofé argues that the story of the son of the widow of Zarephath is of late origin and derived from the story of the Shunammite matron. He alleges two points as proof of this contention. First, the Shunammite's son is said to have been dead and Elisha restores him to life, whereas the condition of the child in Zarephath is somewhat ambiguous. The text reads that "there was no breath left in him"—not that he has died (v. 17). The widow's complaint is that Elijah has come to kill her son, not that he has killed him (v. 18). And although ויחי "he revived" (v. 22) could mean resurrection from death, it sometimes refers to recovery from illness. According to Rofé, in his account of a miraculous cure worked by Elijah the author employed language appropriate to death and resurrection because he already had in front of him the story of Elisha and was influenced by it. Rofé's second point is that the Shunammite was rich and built a special room for Elisha. The widow of Zarephath is penniless but nevertheless seems to have an attic room—a detail he says was transferred from the story of Elisha. See: Alexander Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 132-135.

harvest.” He was standing in the field overseeing his workers and then “heat came on his head” and he took sick and died.

2 Elisha’s Grave

In the second resurrection story (2 Kgs 13:20–21) a corpse from Elisha’s grave came into contact with one of Elisha’s bones, “he came to life (וַיָּחַי) and stood up” (2 Kgs 13:21). This tradition is also found in Sir 48:13-14 where it says that “his body prophesied.” Here the prophet works a miracle after his death. The point of the legend is that the prophet is endowed with supernatural powers that did not vanish when he died. Perhaps the story grew up in connection with Elisha’s grave, a site which was well known and to which sick people came on pilgrimage.

According to v. 21, the corpse was tossed into Elisha’s grave and then the man “came to life and stood up.” For R. Íanina bar Íama, this is evidence that “the righteous are more powerful after death than in life.”¹⁵ Rashi, in his commentary, emphasizes the power of the dead prophet:

“When the [dead] man came in contact with Elisha’s bones, he came to life:” but when he was alive and wanted to bring the Shunammite’s son back to life, he had to place his mouth on his mouth and his eyes on his eyes and beseech mercy.¹⁶

This miracle was performed to fulfill Elijah’s promise to Elisha that he would be granted “a double portion” of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kgs 2:9–10). Since Elijah had revived the son of the widow of Zarephath, Elisha had to revive two dead people. Having already revived the son of the Shunammite, he then had to revive another dead person.

As to the identity of the man who was revived the Bible does not say a word about him. However, in the Midrash and the Talmud different explanations for his identity are given. According to Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 32 the man, Shallum son of Tikvah, was one of the greatest of his generation, noted for his daily charitable acts. He would fill a water skin and sit by the entrance of the city. Whenever a traveler came along, he would offer him water and refresh him. As a reward for these charitable acts he merited that his wife became a prophetess. She was Huldah the prophetess, mentioned below (2 Kgs 22:14). When he died, all Israel came out to escort him to his grave. When they threw him into Elisha’s grave, he came back to life and went home. He subsequently begot Hanamel the son of Shallum, Jeremiah’s cousin, mentioned in Jer 32:7.

According to the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 47a), the man stood up but did not go home. Rather, he died again immediately and was buried in a

¹⁵ b. Íul.7b.

¹⁶ Rashi in b. Íul.7b.

suitable place for one of his spiritual level. Since a wicked man may not be buried near a righteous man, he was not permitted to repose next to the prophet Elisha. Rashi says that he was a false prophet from Samaria, who misled Iddo the prophet, causing him to be devoured by a lion (1 Kgs 13:11–31).

According to the Midrash on Ps 26, the corpse was that of the son of the Shunammite matron, whom Elisha had revived previously. Now he lived briefly before dying again, to be buried elsewhere because he was wicked.¹⁷

Apparently the Talmudic sages and medieval commentators believed in resurrection and in the power that the dead can wield. Consequently they interpreted the story of the corpse in Elisha's grave as a miraculous resurrection.

But there is another way of looking at it; namely, that the mourners were mistaken when they thought the man was dead and this was a case of a premature burial. Tractate Semaġot insists that one must carefully check whether a person is truly dead. "We go to the cemetery and check the dead for 30 days, and we do not refrain from doing so because it resembles a pagan custom."¹⁸ This reading pertains to a person who had been buried but, when the grave was checked, he was found to be alive; he survived for another twenty-five years and raised five sons before dying. Therefore it is possible that the corpse placed in Elisha's grave was that of a person in a coma.

C ELIJAH

The account of Elijah's revival of the widow's son (1 Kgs 17:17–24) resembles the story of Elisha and the Shunammite in many ways. Both involve mothers who have introduced a holy man into their home and given him his own room (1 Kgs 17:19; 2 Kgs 4:9–10). Both women have a son who falls ill and dies suddenly (1 Kgs 17:17; 2 Kgs 4:18–20). Both of them blame the man of God for their loss (1 Kgs 17:10; 2 Kgs 4:28). In both cases the prophet prays to God and performs some kind of magical rite that restores the child to life (1 Kgs 17:1; 2 Kgs 4:34–35).¹⁹

Despite the many similarities, there is one important difference between these two stories. Elijah addresses the Lord and beseeches Him to deal ethically with the woman, who took him into her home when he had serious difficulties. Her actions saved his life, so there is good reason to restore her son to life. Furthermore, after Elijah's action she recognizes the greatness of Lord and his prophet (1 Kgs 17:24). None of this is to be found in the story of the Shunammite. The widow's expression of gratitude to the Lord recalls the remarks by Naaman, who, after being healed by Elisha, also recognizes the God of Israel

¹⁷ William G. Braude, trans. *The Midrash on Psalms* (vol. 8; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 363.

¹⁸ t.Sem.8:1.

¹⁹ Mordechai Cogan, *I Kings*. (AB 10; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 432.

and his power (2 Kgs 5:15). In both cases Gentiles recognize the God of Israel after a miraculous cure worked by a man of God.²⁰ According to Rofé, the Elijah story represents a development from a simple *legenda* into an ethical *legenda*.²¹

The narrator reports that "his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him" (1 Kgs 17:17); in other words, the boy was in critical condition. Although "there was no breath left in him" is a picturesque idiom for death, commentators and scholars disagree whether it means actual death or simply unconsciousness.²² According to David Kimchi,

some say that he was not quite dead, but that his illness was so severe that he stopped breathing and displayed no signs of life, neither breath nor pulse, so that his mother thought he was dead. Daniel, too, says, "no breath is left in me;" but this is hyperbole. The truth is that he really was dead, as most people think.²³

According to Rashi, however, "the son of the woman ... became ill in order that [Elijah] should need the key of the resurrection of the dead, as is stated at the end of the aggadah in the chapter *Íleq*."²⁴

The widow's remonstrance implies that she believed that the prophet's presence in her house caused the Lord to remember her sin and kill her son, along the lines of "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children" (Exod 20:5; Deut. 5:8)—though she does not specify what her transgression was. Her cry, "What harm have I done you, O man of God?" (1 Kgs 17:18) articulates her protest against outside interference.²⁵

Elijah stands up against God and contends against Him, voicing a strong protest against the divine action that felled the widow's son: "O Lord my God, will You bring calamity (הרעות) upon this widow whose guest I am, and let her son die?" (v. 20). For it is stated that God "upholds the cause of the fatherless

²⁰ Cogan, *I Kings*, 432.

²¹ Rofé, *The Prophetical Stories*, 132.

²² T. C. Mitchell, "The Old Testament Usage of *nešāmâ*," *VT* 11 (1961): 177–187.

²³ Kimchi on 1Kgs 17:17; *Miqra'oth Gedoloth*, 242

²⁴ "There are three keys that were not entrusted to an agent: The key of childbirth, the key of rain and the key of resurrection. One key I [God] have already made an exception and given you—the key of rain. Now you request a second key, the key of resurrection. It is proper that people should say: Two keys are in the hands of the student and only one is in the hands of the teacher? Bring back that key, the key of rain, and take in its place this key, the key of resurrection. Elijah was thus forced to give up his control of the rain in order to resurrect the child of his hostess. As a result, God decreed an end to the drought, as it written: God's word came to Elijah: Go, appear before Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth" (b. Sanh. 113a).

²⁵ Judg 11:12; 2 Sam 16:10; 19:23; 2 Kgs 3:13; 2 Chr 35:21.

and the widow" (Deut 10:18). Elijah's complaint recalls Moses' outcry against the Lord, "O Lord, why did You bring calamity (הרעתה) upon this people?" (Ex. 5:22).

Elijah picks up the boy and takes him to his attic room, where he lies on top of him and covers his body with his own (v. 21), anticipating Elisha's treatment of the Shunammite's son (2 Kgs 4:34). David Kimchi explained that he did this so that his prayer would be focused more intensely on the child, because he was lying on top of him, and adds "that he did this to breathe on him and warm him with his natural heat from his face and flesh, because most of the time miracles are worked through some natural stratagem."²⁶ Gersonides conjectured that Elijah was transferring the spirit from his limbs to the child's. Gray believes that some sort of magic may have been involved, of the kind common in the ancient Near East in Mesopotamia and Canaan.²⁷ The idea was that disease could be transferred to the corresponding parts of an animal. In the Ugaritic legend of Keret, the king's illness is transferred to a clay image.²⁸ In this story the idea is that the prophet's strength and health enter the child's damaged organs. Elijah is functioning as a sort of witch doctor.²⁹

After stretching himself out on the lad three times, the prophet turns to the Lord, using language that sounds very much like a command: "O Lord my God, let this child's life (נפש) return to his body!" (1 Kgs 17:21). According to David Kimchi, however, "each time the prophet prostrated himself over the child, he prayed, 'O Lord, O God, please restore the soul.'" The Lord hears Elijah's entreaty and the child revives. Kimchi understood this to mean that he started breathing again and regained consciousness, comparing it to "when he had eaten, his spirit revived (והשב רוחו)" (1 Sam 30:12). Gray, however, believed that the return of his soul does not necessarily mean that the boy was dead, because נפש means "'breath' or 'animation' rather than 'life.'"³⁰ The last word in the verse, ויהי, does not have to mean "he came [back] to life," but that "he recovered" his health, since before his "death" he was critically ill. Significantly the Hebrew word הים means both "life" and "vitality," and sometimes "health," as in Syriac.³¹

The Talmudic sages thought that this was a genuine occurrence of a resurrection. Elijah prays to the Lord, who does as he asks. "When the boy died, [Elijah] beseeched God that He give him the key of resurrection, so that Elijah

²⁶ Kimchi on 1Kgs 17:17; *Miqra'oth Gedoloth*, 242.

²⁷ John Gray, *I & II Kings* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 382.

²⁸ "The Legend of King Keret," trans. Harold L. Ginsberg (*ANET*, 142-149)

²⁹ Robert Martin Achard, *From Death to Life* (trans. Joseph Penney Smith; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), 59.

³⁰ Gray, *I & II Kings*, 342.

³¹ Gray, *I & II Kings*, 342.

might thereby revive the dead child."³² A similar interpretation is found in Ben Sira, who apostrophizes Elijah: "You who raised a corpse from death and from Hades, by the word of the Most High."³³

D GOD'S POWER OVER DEATH

The stories about Elijah and Elisha come from the Northern Kingdom of the ninth century B.C.E.. They may have been committed to writing by the Deuteronomists in the seventh century. If one accepts that these are accounts of resurrection, they refer to the restoration of life in the present and not in the apocalyptic future. The question that has to be asked is why are these stories come from the Northern Kingdom of that era?³⁴ The answer to this question can be found in the Ugaritic literature. Reading the Ugaritic myths, it appears that Baal and Anat bestowed life and death. Anat promises eternal life to Aqhat, who expresses doubt about her ability to fulfill her word. In response she kills him (although it is possible that at the end of the tale she restores him to life).

Then quoth the Maiden Anath:
Ask for life O Aqhat the youth,
Ask for life and I will give it thee,
For deathlessness and I'll bestow't on thee.
I'll make thee count years with Baal
With the sons of El shalt thou count months.
And Baal when he gives life gives a feast. ...
So give I life to Aqhat the Youth.³⁵

Bronner conjectures that the author of the Elijah and Elisha stories was aware of the Ugaritic notion that Baal, who himself died and returned to life, could also resurrect human beings. The prophets almost certainly felt a need to show that the God of Israel could also slay and restore life. Thus these stories were part of a polemic against the cult of Baal.³⁶ More so the stories came to undermine the belief in the myths about Baal that he or another god or goddess could revive the dead.³⁷ Sweeney follows Brunner's lead and according to him the stories display the Prophet's and Yahweh's ability to overcome death. More so he believes that in Elisha's story the narrative deliberately contrasts Yahweh and the prophet with the Baal supporters of the House of Omari in the Jehu History.³⁸ Spronk pointed out that Elijah's and Elisha's work is characterized

³² b. Sanh.113a.

³³ Sir 48:5.

³⁴ Leila Leah Bronner, "The Resurrection Motif in the Hebrew Bible: Allusions or Illusions?" *JBQ* 30 (2002): 145.

³⁵ "The Tale of Aqhat," trans. Harold L. Ginsberg (*ANET*, 149-155).

³⁶ Bronner, "The Resurrection Motif in the Hebrew Bible," 146.

³⁷ Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha*, 122.

³⁸ Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 290.

by the struggle against the Baal worshippers. Yahweh takes the place of Baal while his prophets take the place of the *rp'um* healers.³⁹ A different approach was advanced by Rentería who used a socio-cultural and anthropological method for analysis of prophets and people in the ninth century B.C.E.. She believes that the stories can be considered a literature of Monarchic resistance. The stories of Elijah-Elisha miracles provide evidence of resistance to the state hegemony. The stories were told over and over again to spread the news of a prophet who helps those who have no resources to find a solution to their problems. The stories provided an alternative source of leadership, prophets that have special powers with unique connections to the supreme deity Yahweh.⁴⁰ However we should be very careful with this analysis since none of these stories express explicit anti monarchial sentiment.

The author of the Elijah and Elisha stories was probably aware of the Baal myth. But more importantly the Biblical author was more aware of the Israelite belief about the Underworld, Sheol. Examination of the Biblical underworld reveals that the underworld is a void; the dead are in a condition of utter silence in Sheol and cannot praise the Lord. There is no link between the dead and the living, or even between the dead and their own past, including their family and they know nothing about the living. The notion of the underworld as the final station of life, from which there is no return and which is utterly divorced from reward and punishment, came to represent too simplistic and too cruel a notion. It left no room for answering the thorny question of why evildoers prosper and the righteous suffer. Hence the biblical texts began asking questions about the underworld and the survival of the soul. The stories about Elijah and Elisha which included stories of the resurrection came to propound the notion of the resurrection. The stories came to reject the notion that death is the end. Thus, not surprisingly, we read in the book of Samuel: "The Lord deals death and gives life, casts down into Sheol and raises up" (1 Sam 2:6). This expresses the hope that the Lord who casts the living down to the underworld will also bring them back. In addition, these stories give greater credence to the prophetic activity that came to stress that the power of Yahweh also extends to the dead and the netherworld.

E CONCLUSION

The Elijah and Elisha cycles include similar stories in which the prophet brings a dead child back to life: in Elijah's case, the son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:17-24); in Elisha's, the son of the Shunammite matron (2 Kgs 4:31-37). In addition, in the Elisha story, a corpse is thrown into the prophet's grave;

³⁹ Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (AOAT 219; Kevelaer: Verlag Butzon & Bercker, 1986), 262.

⁴⁰ Tamis Hoover Rentería, "The Elijah/Elijah 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, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1992), 75-126.

when it comes into contact with one of his bones, the man returns to life. The author of the Elijah and Elisha stories was probably familiar with the myths about Baal that he or another god or goddess could revive the dead. Thus the Biblical stories were polemic against the cult of Baal. But more importantly the stories came to stress the Lord's power over death. Examination of the Biblical narrative shows that in many passages death and the underworld was believed to be the end of man's life. Therefore against this background and the cult of Baal the Biblical narrator included stories which exhibit the power of God over death. The stories also lend greater credence to prophetic activity but most importantly they came to indicate the Lord's power over death. They reinforce the divine proclamation that "I deal death and give life" (Deut 32:39; cf. 1 Sam 2:6).

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Dr. Shaul Bar; Bornblum Judaic Studies, The University of Memphis, Mitchell Hall 301, Memphis, Tenn.. *Email*: sbar@memphis.edu.