Research on:

“Elijah and the Widow: Barrel of Meal”

“Elijah was the first great prophet of the northern Kingdom of Israel. He is identified with the period in Hebrew history in which the prophets began to appear as dominant figures to combat widespread apostasy [total departure from one’s faith or religion, a total desertion of faith] and raise the ethical standard of Israel’s religious worship.

“The social discontent generated under Solomon reached its climax at the accession of Solomon’s son Rehoboam to the throne. The kingdom was split when ten of the twelve tribes revolted against Rehoboam’s rule. This rift was an important event in Israel’s history. The United Kingdom was divided (933/32 B.C.E.): the tribes of Judah and Benjamin formed the southern Kingdom of Judah, continuing to be loyal to the house of David; the remaining ten tribes formed the northern Kingdom of Israel. These two monarchies went on side by side for the next two centuries. . . .

“Ahab, seventh king of Israel, was one of its most apostate [one who has forsaken church to which he before had adhered; one who has abandoned his religion] rulers. Ahab’s wife Jezebel was a Phoenician princess of Tyre, a fanatic champion of her native deity Baal, and through her influence Tyrian Baal worship with its gross immoralities was introduced into Israel. It flourished widely and threatened to smother the faint monotheism which still remained.

“During this period of almost total apostasy the great prophet Elijah suddenly appeared to pronounce God’s judgment of Ahab’s sinful conduct” (Shotwell 118).

“The name Elijah means ‘Yah is El,’ El being the general Semitic name for the High God. Thus Elijah’s own name is the proclamation of his message. It is one of a number of instances in which, perhaps by deliberate intent, the name fits the character or the mission: e.g., Isaiah ‘Yah is salvation,’ etc.” (*IB* 3.145).

**“**PROPHET**.** A spiritual seer; disappearance of material sense before the conscious facts of spiritual Truth” (*S&H* 593).

II Pet. 1:19-21

19 We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts:

20 Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.

21 For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

I Kings 17: 1, 8-16

1. And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.

“Elijah came from Tishbe in Naphtali, but he had settled among the Gileadites east of the Jordan” (*IB* 3.145).

“Of his preparation and call to the prophetic office there is no record, but his words ‘before whom I stand’ show his authorization and mark him as a chosen servant of

God. . . . To protect him from Ahab’s wrath God commanded . . . ‘Arise, get

thee to Zarephath,’ [where] he found refuge in the home of an impoverished widow” (Shotwell 118).

“Nothing is related about the reason for the drought which the prophet predicted; but the cause was doubtless Ahab’s idolatry” (Dummelow 224).

8 ¶ And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying,

9 Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee.

“Zarephath is commonly identified with the village of Sarafand, some nine miles south of Sidon on the Mediterranean coast” (*IB* 3.146).

“Zarephath or Sarepta. Obadiah refers to it as a Canaanite (probably meaning Phoenicia) town. Josephus says it was not ‘far from Sidon and Tyre, for it lay between them. Eusebius, places it on the public road, i.e. the road along the seashore. . . it is conjectured that the Syrophoenician woman mentioned in Luke 4:26 was an inhabitant of Zarephath” (biblos.com – Bible Atlas).

The widow woman resided in a Gentile area, possibly the area where Jezebel was from. Most certainly she was a Gentile, and not a Jew. A widow in biblical times, who had no inherited wealth or income of her own, was a desperate woman. She was at the lowest end of the social scale. Because she had to depend on charity for survival in the best of times, her position was always precarious. However, during a famine, when the whole country was starving, she found herself completely destitute. This particular woman had no husband and her son was not old enough to provide for her.

*Widow*, in the Bible. “Under the Mosaic dispensation no legal provision was made for the maintenance of widows. They were left dependent partly on the affection of relations, more especially of the eldest son, whose birthright, or extra share of the property, imposed such a duty upon him, and partly on the privileges accorded to other distressed classes, such as a participation in the triennial third tithe, ( [14:29](http://www.biblestudytools.com/deuteronomy/14-29.html) ; [26:12](http://www.biblestudytools.com/deuteronomy/26-12.html) ) in leasing, ( [24:19-21](http://www.biblestudytools.com/bible/passage.aspx?q=Deuteronomy+24:19-21) ) and in religious feasts” (Bible Study Tools online).

It’s interesting to ponder the thought of the ‘widow’ woman. She was at a desperate place, at the end of her rope so to speak. There was no visible help for her, at least humanly. She was totally vulnerable, hopeless, and literally on her last meal for herself and her sons. And yet she was willing to share her last meal with the prophet, similar to the widow who gave all that she had at the Temple. Is this the thought that we must have to experience healing?

The widow expressed willingness and obedience, unselfish love and receptivity. She showed great hospitality to the prophet even though she had so little. She had literally lost everything – her husband, her supply, her hope, and yet she ‘fed the prophet first’ with such childlike trust. The widow manifested the qualities in the first three beatitudes: she was ‘poor in spirit’ manifesting willingness and receptivity, she was ‘mourning’ everything that was mortally important to her and letting all that go, recognizing her source of help was higher, and she was ‘meek’, learning that her answers were not in the mortal earth, but in the spiritual sense of Life and Love.

“As it had been Jehovah who ‘commanded’ the ravens, so it was He also Who ‘commanded’ the widow of Sarepta, all unconscious as she was of it, to sustain Elijah. But how should the prophet recognize her? He must go, trusting to God’s direction, and watching such natural indications as would appear, be guided to whither he was supernaturally sent” (Edersheim 672).

“*Commanded* in Hebrew is *tsavah* which means “appointed, charged, commissioned” (Strong 6680).

*Sustain* in Hebrew is *kul* which means “sustain, support, nourish, keep, feed” (Gesenius 3557).

10 So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, the widow woman was there gathering of sticks: and he called to her, and said, Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.

“Many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, and some, it is likely, would have bidden him welcome to their houses; yet he is sent to honor and bless with his presence a city of Sidon, a Gentile city, and so becomes the first prophet of the Gentiles. Jezebel was Elijah's greatest enemy; yet, to show her how powerless was her malice, God will find a hiding-place for him even in her own country. The person appointed to entertain Elijah is not one of the rich or great men of Sidon; but a poor widow woman, in want, and desolate, is made both able and willing to sustain him” (Henry online).

“Arrived at the gate of Sarepta, he saw a widow, whose poverty was evidenced by her searching for a little brushwood” (Edersheim 672).

*Gathering* in Hebrew is *qashash* which means “to forage for straw, stubble or wood, to assemble” (Gesenius 7197).

11 And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand.

12 And she said, As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die.

*Cake* in Hebrew is *ma’owg*, meaning a little cake of bread (Thayer 4580). So the handful of meal might symbolize the bread of Truth or the Word of God. Jesus tells us that “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4, Deut. 8:3).

Oil was used in biblical times to cook with, and for light. *Oil* in Hebrew is *shemen* which means “fat, fatness; a staple; a symbol of plenty; for anointing kings; for worship; to anoint priests” (Gesenius 8081).

The spiritual definition of oil given by Mary Baker Eddy in *Science and Health* w*ith* *Key to the Scriptures* is “consecration; charity; gentleness; prayer; heavenly inspiration.” (S&H 592) This spiritual concept of oil represents the inspiration from prayer that never runs out.

The word for *sticks* in Hebrew is *ets* which can mean “sticks or logs for fuel or building” (Gesenius 6086). The two sticks might signify the spiritual understanding that fuels the oil and meal into true lasting spiritual nourishment.

All the evidence pointed to the fact that the widow was extremely vulnerable, that she had no human source of food or help. Finding herself in such a hopeless place, she felt so discouraged that her only alternative appeared to be suicide. Her plan was to make her last meal, using these limited resources – make a tiny cake for herself and her son, then give up and die.

13 And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son.

Elijah told her to “fear not!’ Jesus often used these same words just before he healed a patient, and in a Christian Science treatment, we are taught to get rid of fear as our first step in the healing practice. Clear the deck, so to speak, of anything that would obstruct one from seeing the allness and ever-presence of infinite God.

Elijah then told her to, “Go and do as thou hast said *BUT* *feed me first*!” Now let’s consider his request for a moment. What might have been in the woman’s thought when she heard Elijah say those words? How did she mentally receive that command? From a 21st century perspective, we know how things worked out, and that might seem like a reasonable request, but to the woman, who appeared to be totally in a hopeless place, and whose son was starving, she must have been distressed at this appeal and not a little terrified. Certainly how could her needs be met, if she shared what little she had with someone else?

At this crisis point, however, when all the human doors were shut, when there was no one else to turn to, she lifted her thought enough to hope in God, to have a budding confidence and faith in Him, and to be obedient to Elijah’s divine demand. With a developing sense of trust, she *feeds the prophet first.*

**“**ELIAS. [the Greek word for Elijah] Prophecy; spiritual evidence opposed to material sense; Christian Science, with which can be discerned the spiritual fact of whatever the material senses behold; the basis of immortality” (*S&H* 585).

In one sense, Elijah was asking the woman to ‘feed prophecy’ first; to pay strict attention to the spiritual evidence no matter what the material senses were telling her. She was being asked to lift her thought up to the conscious facts of spiritual Truth, to the level of understanding that God truly was the source of her supply, and it was ever-present and uninterrupted.

14 For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth.

Elijah came from a totally different mental standpoint. He had spent a lifetime consistently listening to God, and he was obedient when God told him to go to this Gentile city and find the widow woman who would sustain him through the famine. Of all the people in town who could have helped him, she was the last person one would choose. On the surface, she was the poorest, the weakest, and the lowest in economic status, but Elijah, being obedient to God’s direction, perceived in her a spiritual sense, a quality of thought that could be cultivated, a receptivity, so he asked her to prepare a meal for him.

15 And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days.

“One thing at least is clear: that this heathen woman, whose knowledge of Jehovah could only have been rudimentary and incipient, and who yet, at the word of a stranger, could give up her own and her son’s last meal, because a prophet had bidden it, and promised her miraculous supply for the future, must have had the most simple childlike trustfulness in the God of Israel. What lesson this, and how full of comfort, to Elijah!” (Edersheim 673).

16 And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah.

“There, almost hourly these many ‘days,’ the promise proved true, and, day by day, as when Israel gathered the manna in the wilderness, did an unseen Hand provide—and that not only for herself and her son, but for all ‘her household.’ It was a constant miracle” (Edersheim 674).

Under the influence of the prophet’s higher thought and spiritual apprehension of God’s unlimited abundance, of spiritual prophecy, which Mrs. Eddy defines as “Christian Science,” the widow woman willingly shared all she had, discovering that it was better to give than to receive; and her own needs were immediately supplied. For as long as she needed it, this infinite source of supply was inexhaustible and constant for herself, her son, and Elijah.

In the next few verses, when her son “fell sick and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him” (I Kings 17:17), the widow woman was able to be a significant part of an even higher demonstration when Elijah restored her son from the belief of death into immortal life.

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