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FROM A BEGGAR FOR LIFE TO A GIVER OF LIFE

**An Exegesis of 1kings 17:8-16 - Its Theological Implications
and Relevance to Today's Context**

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A Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
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To grandma, who taught me to trust in Divine Providence, to Hellen, in whose heart I adore the love of God, to Augustinians Friars under whose patronage I have attained meaningful growth, and to all men and women who no longer beg for life.

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STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this Long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in religious studies. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

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This Essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the College Supervisor.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Our preference for the topic 'From a Beggar for Life to a Giver of Life' was motivated by three factors. First, we are living in a world where systems and ideologies such as globalization, capitalism, materialism, consumerism among others, make false claims on their ability to answer all of mankind's questions especially those that border on the meaning of life. Proponents of such systems and ideologies ridicule and mock traditional foundations of religion and ethics, which for centuries have provided mankind with a roadmap for life, and in its stead, pretend to offer better alternatives.

The tragedy with such systems and ideologies however, is, they do not only fail to fulfill their false claims, but worse, they leave man confused, shattered and devoid of any form of meaning. To all those who seek a meaning and life from systems and ideologies we dare to say: only God is the giver of life.

Second, at the level of international relations, our occidental counterparts have always considered the African continent as both dark and helpless and therefore, in constant need of their help. The tragedy however, is that the Africans themselves have internalized this myth, with the sad result that they make no efforts to find a solution to their problem except that of begging. They have come to believe that this is their destiny. Knowing this, their European and American counterparts attach all sorts of conditions to their financial assistance often times imposing conditions that jeopardize

the sovereignty of nations. It is with our fellow continental brothers and sisters that we wish to share the conviction that in trusting obedience to the word of God, they can become a source of the solution to their problem, and a supplier of life to the West who for the most part, live in emptiness and meaninglessness without ever wanting to acknowledge it.

Third, I have observed with concern cases of people, who have become overly dependent on certain forms of pleasures, to the point where these have become their ultimate values in the mistaken belief that such, may ultimately lead to their happiness. We have in mind people who have become dependent on alcohol, drugs, sexual pleasures, wealth acquisition and power. All these forms of pleasures have the ability to become idols, where people see in them their ultimate source of life. It is with such people that we desired to share the conviction that only God is the giver of life.

The story of the encounter of Prophet Elijah with the widow of Zarephath is of paradigmatic value in our attempt to develop the thesis that only God is the giver of life. Condemned as it were by the system, she was left for dead, but through her trusting obedience, God manifested his power to sustain life but also to empower, so that, she, who was once a beggar for life became a supplier of life.

Our work will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter will discuss on the historical circumstances under which prophet Elijah worked, the situation of widows in the Near East and particularly that of the widow of Zarephath. The second chapter is dedicated to the exegetical analysis of 1Kings 17: 8-16, beginning as it were by tackling the introductory questions. Using the analysis provided by chapter two, chapter three

will attempt to draw out the few theological themes that emerge therefrom and then seek to apply them to our contemporary situation.

Chapter 1

Historical Background of 1 Kings 17:8-16

1. Introduction

In this chapter, we wish to accomplish three objectives. One, we wish to explore the social-historical context within which prophet Elijah worked. The people of Israel lived under the constant danger of apostasy. This danger became ever more serious and glaring when they arrived in the Promised Land but especially so when they began to have social intercourse with their new neighbors, namely, the Canaanites. For this reason, they needed prophets to counsel and exhort them to remain within the parameters of the covenant.

Secondly, apart from presenting a general treatment of Israel prophecy, we shall focus on Prophet Elijah, a man about whom very little is known, yet whose prophetic activity so profoundly shaped the history of Israel.

Thirdly, we shall focus on the situation of the widows in the ancient near East. This will facilitate a better understanding of the plight of the widow of Zarephath, the second but most important character in the text to be considered. With this, we shall have achieved a better picture of the background to our text.

2. Socio-Religious Situation

When the Israelites migrated into Canaan from the Sinai Peninsula, they found their new environment both familiar and strangely new. With their new neighbors they shared the same Semitic roots. The Canaanites however, were accustomed to both city and farming life, while the Israelites were used to a nomadic lifestyle.¹

The above difference was significant because for the Canaanites, their whole life including their religion was focused on the fertility of their land, animals and also their families. They had one godhead, El, who was the father of all the gods. There was Baal (which means “master” or “lord”). He was the god of storm and was the day-to day king of the gods. It was he that controlled the rainstorm and fertility cycle of the earth and on him depended the yearly agricultural success. He was thought to go into a slumber or death during winter. During spring time therefore, a great celebration marked his awakening. A large fire from which he was thought to renew his strength was lit, and the priests whirled faster and faster around it, entering into a delusion and gashing themselves on their arms and legs. In this way, Baal woke from his slumber or death and fertility was restored.²

There were also some goddesses. Anat was the sister wife to Baal. It was she who had the power to bring back to life her husband Baal and thus restore the fertility of

¹ Cf. D. MURPHY, *His Servants the Prophets*, 33.

² Cf. J. DHEILEY, *The Prophets*, 82.

the land.³ Astarte was identified with fertility rites while Ashera was the queen of the sea. The shrines for all these gods were built on the top of the hills and were usually marked out by a stone or pillar. The Bible refers to such shrines as the high places.⁴

The Israelites on the other had a deep sense of fellowship underpinned as it were on their belief in one God, the only real God. Theirs was a simple religion with very high ideals. Faced with this new phenomenon, most of them were initially disgusted though many of them later succumbed to some of the religious practices of their new neighbors. Having become farmers themselves, the Hebrews found a religion promising fertility at least of land very appealing. Besides, the Canaanites had an immense wealth of material culture in the form of art and music which when used in their worship attracted the Hebrews in a way that they could not resist.⁵

King David and his son Solomon may have succeeded in expanding the boundaries of the kingdom but little did they know the consequences this would bring to the life of their subjects. King Solomon married foreign wives and went ahead to erect some shrines for alien gods, thus exposing the religion of Yahweh to the dreaded danger of syncretism. The problem was aggravated by the division of the kingdom in the year 922BC.⁶ Instead of the previous one kingdom, we now had the southern (Judah) and the northern (Israel) kingdoms. While the southern kingdom remained faithful to one

³ Cf. F. MONARTY, *Introducing the Old Testament*, 93.

⁴ Cf. L. BOADT, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*, 289.

⁵ Cf. F. MONARTY, *Introducing the Old Testament*, 94.

⁶ Cf. F. MONARTY, *Introducing the Old Testament*, 90.

dynasty, the northern kingdom followed a different system which even though more democratic, was nonetheless less stable.⁷

Fifty years after the reign of King Jeroboam (922-901 BC.), the northern kingdom was subjected to a violent succession of five dynasties. Jeroboam was succeeded by his son. He was later murdered by Baasha who took up the mantle of leadership between (900-877 BC.). He too was murdered by an assassin who ruled for only seven days before he himself was assassinated by one of his generals. The general's name was Omri. He ruled Israel from 876-869 BC.⁸

The ascension of Omri to power marked a turning point in the history of the northern kingdom. He built a new capital and called it Samaria in 880 BC. The city was so strongly built that it would take the Assyrians 3 years to lay it under siege. His own palace was made of ivory, a rich symbol of affluence.⁹

Both Israel and the city of Damascus claimed the ownership of a strip of land lying across Jordan. In order to augment his position against any possibility of an invasion by Damascus, Omri entered into a pact with Phoenicia. To seal this alliance, he had his son Ahab married to a Phoenician princess, Jezebel. In spite of the great achievements which King Ahab made, the author of 1-2 Kings ignores these achievements, for according to a theological criteria Ahab did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all that were before him..... (1Kings 16:30)¹⁰

⁷ Cf. G. RECE, *1Kings, Nations under God, International Theological Commentary*, 137.

⁸ Cf. H. CLARKE, *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, 72.

⁹ Cf. W. HARRELSON, *Interpreting the Old Testament*, 202.

¹⁰ Cf. G. RECE, *1Kings, Nations under God, International Theological Commentary*, 138.

Phoenicia was on the coast of what is today known as Lebanon. Its inhabitants were great sailors, businessmen and skilled metal workers. Their skills were in great demand and Solomon may have hired some of them for the construction of the temple. King Ahab too relied on their skills to rebuild the city of Jericho.¹¹

Jezebel was determined to convert the people of Israel into her own religion and to make Israel something of an extension of Phoenicia. To accomplish this, she brought missionaries and prophets from her homeland, who introduced the cult of their chief divinity *Melkart*, here referred to under the general name Baal. She had the promoters of Judaism murdered in great numbers. Prophetic brotherhoods were persecuted, and those of their members who escaped had to go into hiding or flee from the locality.¹²

Although King Ahab himself never forswore his allegiance to Yahweh, he succumbed to the desires and the intentions of his wife. Her religion suddenly became so intertwined with the national life, that when King Ahab, her husband started to rebuild the city of Jericho, the rebuilding was preceded by a human sacrifice. "With the king embracing Canaanite religion and the queen aggressively promoting it (1Kings 18), what chance did the authentic faith of Israel have of surviving?"¹³ Most of the Israelites, while remaining partially faithful to the worship of Yahweh came to make sacrifices to Baal. The religious milieu at the time came to bear the stamp of

¹¹ Cf. S. DEVRIES, *1Kings, World Commentary*, 142.

¹² Cf. J. DHEILY, *The Prophets*, 82.

¹³ Cf. G. RICE, *1Kings, Nations under God, International Theological Commentary*, 138.

syncreticism. It was within such a context of great turmoil that prophet Elijah and his contemporaries had to work.¹⁴

3. The Rise of Prophecy in Israel and the Role of Elijah and his Message

3.1 The Rise of Prophecy in Israel

Prophets are intermediaries between man and God. The anchor Bible dictionary describes a prophet as one who is inspired by God with a speech that is clear in itself and which is directed to a third party.¹⁵ A popular mentality has it that the work of the prophets is to predict about the future. A prophet however does more than merely carrying out prognosis. He is concerned with the present. He discerns the will of God at a particular point in time, under particular historical circumstances; he interprets it for the people and exhorts them abide by it. In so doing, he creates an awareness of the consequences of not following God's will. This does not however turn his mission into that of spelling doom.¹⁶

In the Old Testament, the will of God was enshrined in the Ten Commandments. It was the duty of the kings to make sure that this will was followed by the people. In other words, the kings were supposed to be the custodians of the will of God. It was when they had failed in this God-given duty of safeguarding the covenant, that God raised his prophets to undertake this paramount role. It was not a coincidence therefore,

¹⁴ Cf. J. DHEILLEY, *The Prophets*, 82.

¹⁵ Cf. D. FREEDMAN, "Prophets", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 477.

¹⁶ Cf. P. ELLIS, *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament*, 201.

that prophecy proper in Israel was born when the leadership was in crisis. The kings had failed to safeguard the covenant thus plunging the whole nation into idolatry.¹⁷

The most immediate relevant text to a reconstruction of the historical setting of the prophets is 2 Kings, where the historical period specific to most of the prophets is narrated. The second book of Kings however does not stand in isolation. It is the culmination of a larger historical narrative that begins from Joshua to 1-2 Samuel and then 1-2 kings. Originally, this whole unit was treated as a single continuous history telling the story of Israel from the days of its founder, Moses, to the point in time when the authors of the historical overview were themselves probably living (near the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Because the Book of Deuteronomy serves to supply its basic theme, this history as a whole came to be referred to as Deuteronomistic history.¹⁸

Prophecy in Israel is surrounded by an aura of mystery. For example, scholars have not been able to reach a consensus on the question of its nature and social function. This has been particularly true of the early prophets, those prophets who prophesied before the time of Amos, the first of the writing prophets. While it is possible to place most of the writing prophets in specific historical contexts and to paint a rough picture of their personal backgrounds and professional activities, the early prophets remain shadowy figures yet they are supremely crucial in the understanding of later prophecy.¹⁹

¹⁷ Cf. J. LUTHER, ed., *Interpreting the Prophets*, 1.

¹⁸ Cf. P. ELLIS, *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament*, 203.

¹⁹ Cf. K. KOCH, *The Prophets*, 33.

The names of some of them are forgotten (Numb 11:24ff)²⁰, while in other cases Some of them disappear as suddenly as they appear (2Sam 7:12).²¹ Extensive information however is provided on some of them. The early prophets did not leave behind any writing. Their words have been recorded in narratives. Still, these narratives emanate from one major source, namely, the Deuteronomic source. The source preserves much early material but the fact that it was edited in exile it may not be historically true. In addition, "the historian's apparent interest in prophecy raises the possibility that all the historians' prophetic narrative have been influenced by the deuteronomist's distinctive religious, political and social views".²²

On the relationship between the early and the writing prophets, the opinion that the writing prophets manifest a pure form of monotheistic religion and ethics unlike the early prophets has been highly contested. The data available in the scriptures does not favor such an opinion. Equally objected is the opinion that early prophecy was characterized by ecstatic behavior just like that of the Canaanites and that indeed Israel prophecy was so much influenced by the former. Connected to this is the idea that early prophecy was cultic. Available evidence however, seems to suggest that, in fact, some of the writing prophets were ecstatic themselves. Besides, ecstasy can occur in any society where there are proper sociological and psychological conditions. Both Jeremiah

²⁰ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people, and placed them round about the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was upon him and put it upon the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did so no more.

²¹ When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his Kingdom.

²² Cf. J. LUTHER, *Interpreting the Prophets*, 2.

and Ezekiel came from priestly families. Therefore, cultic environment was not a preserve of the early prophets.²³

Perhaps it is proper to see both phases of Israel prophecy from the point of view of continuity. What is the connection between the two phases and if there is any development, of what nature is it? Arguing from the point that the existence of the prophets depends on the society, some scholars submit that some rituals, speech forms and the way the role of prophecy is handled will always be carried over to future historical epochs. This is because cultural practices are passed to the future even when modifications may be made.²⁴

Generally, in Palestine and in the surrounding areas, there were two kinds of prophets; those that operated within the power structure and those that operated within the peripheries. Within the power structure, the prophets had an important role to play in ensuring the integrity of the society. For instance, Samuel legitimizes the new ruler and fulfils the prophet's obligation to ensure that even the king is subject to divine Laws. This practice of the prophets as part of the established social structure persists in the Deuteronomistic sources until the division of the kingdom after Solomon. After this, the prophets of the Deuteronomist appear at the periphery delivering divine words of judgment on the people for breaking the Law and the covenant. They no longer defend the leadership structure. We have among these the unnamed man of Judah (1Kings13), Ahijah (1Kings 14:1-18), Jehu (1Kings 10: 1-4) and Micaiah (1King 22).²⁵

²³ Cf. R. WILSON, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, 34.

²⁴ Cf. J. MCKENZIE, "Prophecy" *Dictionary of the Bible*, 694.

²⁵ Cf. J. DHEILLY, *The Prophets*, 83

Elijah and Elisha belong to this group of peripheral prophets even though they are from older traditional material than the Deuteronomist. These peripheral prophets sometimes came together to form bands and schools perhaps primarily for mutual support.

3.2 Prophet Elijah

Prophet Elijah worked during the reign of King Ahab though he lived also during the reign of king Ochozias and Joram. He hailed from Tishbeah, a village across the Jordan, standing on the edge of the desert, "where the YHWH tradition was still unimpaired by the insidious attractions of civilization".²⁶

Owing to his greatness, many felt that it was only an epic or saga that could do him justice. The author of the book of Kings has preserved some of these hoping that by reading it, "we could get somewhere near the real greatness and significance of this man".²⁷ The stories of Elijah and others like them are Hero-legends, with lots of color and bravado and great deeds beyond anything performed by ordinary people. For this reason, historians are careful to sort out what probably happened from the great mass of enthusiastic and exaggerated praises.²⁸ "The air of mystery that surrounds this meteoric character throughout the narrative is sustained to the end, when he does not die in the usual way but disappears heavenwards in a chariot of fire".²⁹

²⁶ Cf. J. DHEILLY, *The Prophets*, 86.

²⁷ Cf. D. MURPHY, *His Servants the Prophets*, 36.

²⁸ Cf. L. BOADT, *Reading the Old Testament: An introduction*, 298.

²⁹ Cf. W. NEILS, "Elijah" *One Volume Bible Commentary*, 192.

So important is Elijah in the history of Israel that his influence greatly impacted on the people of Israel. He is ranked with Moses, for whereas Moses laid the foundations for the people of God, Elijah made sure that the work of Moses would continue. During Passover, the Jews have the practice of leaving the doors open so that Elijah may come in. During the naming ceremony, a seat is left vacant for Elijah.³⁰ Since God could not allow the death of such a man, and could not let him exist just like a shadow, the Jews postulated that Elijah was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. Conviction grew also among them that Elijah would come back to prepare the way of God's kingdom (Mal 4:5, Sir 48:10)³¹ His importance is also shown in the New Testament. He is frequently referred to, and features in the transfiguration of Jesus (Mathew 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36; Mark 9:2-13)³²

3.3 Elijah's Message

Elijah's message could easily be sieved from the cycle of his stories which have five main stages. In the first, he commands drought. In the second, he contests with the Baal's prophets at Mount Carmel. In the third, Elijah is desperate that the people have not reformed. In the fourth, we see him concerned with a matter of justice, and in the

³⁰ Cf. E. MAI Y, *Prophets of Salvation*, 56.

³¹ "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes

³² You are destined, it is written, in time to come to put an end to wrath before the day of the Lord and to re-establish the tribes of Jacob.

fifth, which is to be found in the second book of Kings, he gives an oracle against the son of Ahab, Ahaz who had succeeded his father.³³

Elijah is uncompromisingly faithful to the one, universal Yahweh and to the morality that flows therefrom. One is either loyal to this one God or not at all. There can never be a division of loyalty. Yahweh is the only God, worshipped by the patriarchs. Besides only He is God. Baal and all the other deities are nothing.³⁴

The power of Yahweh is universal. His power passes over the frontiers. For example, it supplies bread and life to the home of a woman from Zarephath in the district of Sidon, a pagan region.³⁵

Monotheism, in which only Yahweh is God, has an effect on the practical conduct of life. In the excitement aroused by Naboth's murder, Elias goes to the loyal palace to pronounce condemnation and the divine penalty. In this instance, monotheism is concerned with the principle of justice.³⁶

The covenant is the source of prophetic action. The avenger of the oppressed is also the solitary and the contemplative. Elias withdraws to the same mountain where Moses had had an encounter with God. Besides wanting to be refreshed with the living waters of the covenant, he shows clearly the unity between his mission and that of Moses.³⁷

³³ Cf. D. MURPHY, *His Servants the Prophets*, 42.

³⁴ Cf. C. LAYMAN, ed., *The Interpreters, One Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 193.

³⁵ Cf. P. CRAIGE, *The Old Testament, Its Background, Growth and Content*, 281.

³⁶ Cf. V. RAD, *Old Testament Theology II*, 17.

³⁷ Cf. V. RAD, *Old Testament Theology II*, 17.

4. The Status of Widows in the Ancient Near East and the Widow of Zarephath

4.1 Status of Widows in the Ancient Near East

Most studies on widows in the Hebrew Bible consist mainly in commenting on texts in which the word for “widow” (*almana*) occurs. There has been little attempt to create an overall picture of the widow in the Bible or in her social context in ancient Israel.³⁸

The people of the ancient Near East had tried as much as possible to avoid an eventuality in which they would have widows, that is, women who had no males obligated to them. A woman whose husband had passed on could stay in her father’s house, and if she had no son of her own, her father-in-law could marry her to one of his sons. If he pleases, her father could as well marry her to the father-in-law. If it happens that her husband and her father-in-law are both dead, and that she had no son of her own nor was there a son from her in-laws, she became a widow, and she had liberty to go wherever she pleased.³⁹

Jews too had two ways by which they averted the eventuality of widowhood. First, there was levirate marriage according to which a widow was to get married to the

³⁸ Cf. F. FRICK, ed., “Widows” *Women in Scripture, A Dictionary of Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical and the New Testament*, 197.

³⁹ Cf. Deuteronomy 25:5-10, “When brothers live together and one of them dies without a son, the widow of the deceased shall not marry anyone outside the family; but her husband’s brother shall go out to her and perform the duty of a brother in-law by marrying her.”

brother of the deceased.⁴⁰ Levirate marriage served to continue the lineage of the deceased and facilitated the transfer of his property to the next generation. It also reaffirmed the widow's place in the home of her husband's family. Equally, it was meant to provide support and protection of the widow. Gen. 38, while suggesting a brother as the normal partner allows that the father in-law may assume the responsibility. There seems to be a difference however in both Deuteronomy and Ruth. For instance, while Deuteronomy makes Levirate marriage a compulsory, Ruth thinks that this should be left to the individual. While Deuteronomy speaks of "a brother (s) who resides together" (Deut. 25:5-10)⁴¹, Ruth suggests a more distant relative.⁴²

Secondly, widows had the rights of inheritance. Whereas other ancient near eastern societies describe widows' inheritance rights, in ancient Israel, this is less explicit. The Book of Ruth is cited as evidence that widows inherited.⁴³ Others deny that such a practice existed. In Numbers for instance, the inheritance of a deceased man would pass to his children if he had any. But if he did not have, the inheritance passed to the nearest kinsman. The widow was not entitled to anything.⁴⁴

Accordingly, the plight of widows in Israel could become complicated especially if she had no children, since she would have no claim to her husband's property. Deprived of both her husband and protection from in-laws, all sorts of mean

⁴⁰ See Footnote 38.

⁴¹ Cf. F. FRICK, ed., "Widows" *Women in the Scripture, A Dictionary of unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha/deuterocanonical*, 196.

⁴² Ruth 4:2-3, "Then Boaz picked out ten of the elders of city and asked them to sit nearby. When they had done this, he said to the near relative: "Naomi, who has come back from the Moabite plateau, is putting up for sale the piece of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech.

⁴³ Cf. F. FRICK, ed., "Widows" *Women in the Scripture, A Dictionary of unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical*, 199.

⁴⁴ Cf. F. FRICK, ed., "Widows" *Women in Scripture, A Dictionary of Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical*, 198.

actions and extortion were meted against the widows as is evidenced by a good number of the Biblical texts. The widow was considered to be among the most vulnerable persons in Israel. Other categories who underwent a similar ordeal were orphans, the sojourners and the poor. As such, she needed special consideration.⁴⁵ Her life could be lonely (Lamentations 1:1)⁴⁶ and even humiliating (Is 54:4)⁴⁷.

For this reason, the Law kept them under its protection, and the prophets upheld their cause.⁴⁸ They were to be invited to the meals celebrated at the time of the great feast (Deut 6:11, 14)⁴⁹. They had a share in the tithe (Deut 14:28, 29; 26:12)⁵⁰. They were also allowed to glean in the fields and vineyards (Deut 24:19-21)⁵¹

4.2 The Widow of Zarephath

The information we have about the widow of Zarephath is very limited. For instance, we know that she was a widow and a pagan. If we concede that she is the

⁴⁵ How lonely she is now, the once crowded city! Widowed is she who was mistress over nations; the princess among the provinces has been made a toiling slave.

⁴⁶ Fear not, you shall not be put to shame; you need not blush, for you shall not be disgraced. The shame of your youth you shall forget, the reproach of your widowhood no longer remember.

⁴⁷ Cf. A. HEATHCORE, "widows" *A Dictionary of the Life in Bible Times*, 23.

⁴⁸ Vs.16:11-12 "In the place which the Lord, your God, chooses as the dwelling place of his of his name, you shall make merry in his presence together with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, and also the Levite who belongs to your community as well as the alien, the orphan and the widow among you. Remember that, you too were once slaves in Egypt, and carry out these statutes carefully."

⁴⁹ 26:12, "When you have finished setting aside all the tithes of your produce in the third year, the year of the tithes, and you have given to them to the Levite, the alien, the orphan and the widow, that they may eat their fill in your own community,....."

⁵⁰ "When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf there, you shall not go back to get it; let it be for the alien, the orphan or the widow, that the Lord your God, may bless you in all your undertakings."

⁵¹ Cf. CHOONG-LEONG, SEOW, "The First and Second Book of Kings", *New Interpreters Bible Commentary V*, 128.

same woman described from verse 17 of chapter 17, then we might as well say that she had a son.⁵²

Zarephath was a Phoenician commercial city and a Baal's territory. It is ironical therefore; that the drought commanded by Yahweh should affect Baal's territory and that he could not do anything to avert it, being as he was, the god of fertility. The effects of this drought must have been terrible especially for a widow.⁵³

By accepting to offer a crumb of bread and some little water to the prophet of God even without being aware, she allows herself to be used by God for salvific purposes. To support God's messenger is to support God and his mission. In this, she stands in contrast with Jezebel (another Phoenician worshipper of Baal in Israel) whose mission was to counter the mission of the prophet and consequently that of God. Again, it is ironical that the lord should have a worshipper of Baal feed his servant Elijah. It is ironical too that a widow in a land devastated by drought is to feed Elijah. She who has such scarce means is instrumental in God's plan to provide for others.⁵⁴

To both, the people of God and the pagans, this woman teaches them that it is God who withholds and gives rain and not some gods of their own making. If they are obedient to his word, proclaimed by the prophet, they will equally become givers of life rather than beggars for life.⁵⁵

⁵² Some scholars are of the opinion that the widow of Verse 7-16 is different from the one of verse 17-24. While the former is graphically described as poor, the latter is well off enough to afford an upper room. This view however, does not enjoy wide popularity and the general concession is that this is the same widow. See, R. NELSON, *First Kings, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 21.

⁵³ M. MCKENNA, *Prophets, Words of Fire*, 49.

⁵⁴ Cf. M. MCKENNA, *Prophets, Words of Fire*, 52.

⁵⁵ Cf. L. BOADT, *Reading the Old Testament, An Introduction*, 92.

The widow of Zarephath becomes a prototype for other gentile women who receive God's grace. God's universal love reaches far beyond the boundaries of nationality, ethnicity and even religious affiliation.

Jesus will later refer to this woman citing her as the only widow to whom Elijah was sent due to her openness to the saving grace of God. He was castigating the Jews who given their complacency for being the people of God had hardened their hearts to receive the good news. To become a people of God will no longer depend on nationality or any other criteria except that one is ready to 'listen' to God.⁵⁶

Conclusion

In this first chapter, an attempt was been made to create a historical background suitable for the understanding of the story of Elijah's encounter with the widow of Zarephath. In order to place Elijah under the historical situation in which he lived and worked, it was inevitable that we have a general survey of the history of the monarchy specifically that of the northern kingdom and particularly that of King Ahab.

Elijah belongs to the pioneer group of Israel's prophecy. It was fitting therefore that we treat the beginnings of this paramount institution before focusing on Elijah, one of the characters in our consideration. In order to understand the plight of the widow of Zarephath, we have cast a look at the status of widows in the Near Eastern region and

⁵⁶ Cf. P. CRAIGE, *The Old Testament, Its Background, Growth and Content*, 282.

later in the bible itself. We this background, we shall now in the second chapter embark on an exegesis of the text.

Chapter II

Introductory Questions and Exegesis of 1Kings 17:8-16

1. Introduction

The main task of chapter two is to carry out an exegesis of the text. To facilitate this however, we shall first seek to establish the limits of the text, its context and then its structure and form.

The text, seen as a complete unit begins from verse 8 and ends in verse 16. Verses 7 and 17, mark a shift in time, thereby setting the episode apart from what happened previously and what will happen subsequently. However, we shall show that the text could also be considered as part of another larger unit.

In the immediate context, the text tells the story of Elijah's encounter with the pagan widow of Zarephath. Broadly, the text is part of the wider perspective of prophet Elijah's assault against idolatry in Israel.

In discussing the structure of the text, we shall refer to the unity of two stories, the story of the raven (17:1-6) and the story of the widow (17:8-16). The two share a similar structure. As for the form, we shall refer to the unity of three stories running from 17:1 to 17:24.

1. Introductory Questions

1.1 *Delimitation and Context of the Text*

The text is a complete unit for two reasons. Verse 7 which introduces the episode begins with the phrase, “after some time” and verse 17, which marks the beginning of the next episode begins with the phrase, “some time later”. What these two phrases clearly show is an instance of a shift in time and the two verses can be considered as transitory verses. The encounter of Elijah with the widow that leads to the miracle of the jar of flour and the jug of oil is separated from the previous event but also from the one that comes after it. This makes the text a complete unit. To support this thesis, some scholars are of the opinion that in fact, the widow of verse 8-16 is different from the one of verse 17-24. While the former is graphically described as poor, the latter is well off enough to afford an upper room. This view however, does not enjoy wide popularity.⁵⁷

Secondly, the main themes of Elijah’s prophecy namely, the opposition between Baalism and Yahwism and a portrait of the prophetic life can be discerned from this text. This is a Baal’s territory, the god of fertility, yet he cannot provide rains and consequently food to sustain the life of the people but especially of this poor widow and her son. How can he be God if he has no control over nature? The mission of the prophet of God is precisely this; to prove that only Yahweh is God and that Baal is not.

⁵⁷ Cf. R. NELSON, *Interpretation, First King: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 107.

In this text, he does this by performing the miracle of food, thereby sustaining the life of the poor widow.⁵⁸

Having established the fact that our text is a complete unit in itself, we need to demonstrate that it is also related to some other texts and that it constitutes an integral part of a larger unit. The stories of Elijah (to be found in 1Kings 17:2-7; 17:8-24; 18:1-46; 19:1-18; 19:19-21), of which our text is one of them, were originally narrated independently. However, in editing, the redactor may have intended that they be read as a single literary unit.⁵⁹

Some scholars regard this unit in terms of a concentric journey narrative, according to which Elijah leaves Israel from Transjordan to the North (1Kings 17:8-24) and then re-enters again (18:1-46). He then leaves Israel to the south (19:1-18). Finally, he returns to Transjordan (19:19-21), bringing his journey full circle and affording the narrative a sense of closure.⁶⁰

Richard Nelson proposes a much smaller unit running from verses 1-24, containing 3 interlocking stories of which one of them is our text of concern. Others are the story of the ravens, verses 2-7 and that of the power of prayer over mortal illness, verses 17-24. These stories are held together by interlocking themes and movements. The word of God in v.1 is confirmed by the widow's confession in v. 24, thus making the unit complete.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Cf. E. CLEMENTS, *Old Testament Prophecy*, 2.

⁵⁹ Cf. J. WALSH, "1-2Kings" *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 171.

⁶⁰ Cf. J. WALSH, "1-2Kings", *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 171.

⁶¹ Cf. R. NELSON, *Interpretation, First Kings: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 108.

Each of these three stories is concerned with an instance of desperation to which God intervenes. The desperation intensifies progressively. In the first story (verses 2-7), Elijah is hungry. God uses the ravens to sustain his life. In the second story (8-16), the number of the hungry increases and there is no indication that the widow is in a position to feed herself let alone the man of God. Yet, by accepting to feed the prophet of God with the little that she had, she saves not only her household's life but also that of the prophet. Once again, God shows his might by transforming a situation of need and desperation to a situation of abundance. The situation is horrific in the third story (17-24). Death has visited the poor widow's house. Her only son is dead. But God transforms a situation of real death to life by raising her son from the dead.⁶²

The three stories are also related in another way. For the prophet, they portray a private period of preparation, whereby, he moves from a passive to an active role as the agent of God's power. In the first story, he simply obeys and is fed. In the second, he reports what God will do, and in the third, he takes an active role and the Lord listens to him. These deeds become his credentials and serve to establish his prophetic legitimacy.⁶³

As a way of harmonizing the above approaches, the three stories (chapter 17), together with chapters 18 and 19 (in other words all of Elijah's stories), could be described as part of a larger plot movement. Chapter 17 tells of waiting, hiding and preparing, along with implicit victories over Baal. Chapter 18 moves to a public

⁶² Cf. E. BRILL, *The Trouble with Kings, the Composition of the Book of Kings in the Deuteronomistic History*, 34

⁶³ Cf. R. JAMIESON, "1Kings" *The Definitive Bible Commentary*, 292.

challenge in which God's victory is explicit. Whereas previously the question was about who causes rains or life, in chapter 18 the question is of a fundamental nature; between Yahweh and Baal, who is God? Chapter 19 speaks of Elijah's retreat and attempted resignation and points to a future shaped by Elisha, Jehu and Hazael.⁶⁴

1.2 Structure and Form

In the description of the structure of the text, we shall adopt the one given by DeVries. Owing to their similarities, he considers as a unit the stories of the ravens (2-6) and the story of Elijah and the widow (7-16).⁶⁵

In verse 1, we have the thematic announcement to Ahab. What follows is a demonstration of Yahweh's Power to provide.

(a) In summoning of nature's creatures to feed the prophet

- (1) The divine Instruction; vv.2-4
- (2) Narrative of compliance; vv. 5-6

(b) In the renewal of human sustenance

- (1) The divine instruction; vv.7-9
- (2) Interview with the widow; vv. 10-12
- (3) Oracle of abundance, vv.13-14
- (4) Narrative of compliance; v. 15
- (5) Interpretation as the fulfillment of prophecy.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Cf. R. NELSON, *Interpretation, First Kings: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 112.

⁶⁵ Cf. S. DEVRIES, "1Kings" *World Biblical Commentary* 1, 209.

⁶⁶ Cf. S. DEVRIES, "1Kings" *World Biblical Commentary* 1, 210.

The stories that follow after the thematic announcement to Ahab, that is from verse 2-6 and then from 7-16, conform to classic standards for word-fulfillment. They begin with the reception of a word from God which contains a command and a promise. They then recount obedience to the command followed by fulfillment of the promise. They close by observing that all these happened according to the word of God.⁶⁷

If we refer to the unity of three stories as proposed by Nelson (chapter 17), we see a case of *inclusio*. In 1Kings 17:1b, Elijah swears by the Lord that there shall be no rain or dew except by the word of God. In 1Kings 17:24, the widow acknowledges after her son was brought back to life that the word of the Lord has come truly from the mouth of the prophet. In other words, the word of God has been fulfilled. Although this word is not about bringing rains, that it restores life is an indication that it has power over nature and indeed everything, and that when the right time will come, it will bring back the rains.⁶⁸

2. Exegesis

WTT 1 Kings 17:7
וַיְהִי מֵקֵץ יָמִים וַיִּבָּשׁ
הַמָּנְחֶל כִּי לֹא־הָיָה נֶשֶׁם בַּבְּאֶרֶץ: 6

The phrase וַיְהִי מֵקֵץ יָמִים literary translated as, “after the end of the day” or “it came to pass” or even, “after a definite time”, clearly marks a leap in time. In fact, verse 17 is a transitory verse. The transition here however, is not just about time or place. It is about

⁶⁷ Cf. S. DEVRIES, “1Kings” *World Biblical Commentary II*, 209.

⁶⁸ Cf. A. COHEN, *In All Fairness to Ahab. A Socio-Political Consideration of the Ahab-Elijah Controversy*, 80.

⁶⁹ After some time however, the brook ran dry, because no rain had fallen in the land.

circumstances and a demand for a new response. The general situation is that of famine and drought. God had commanded Elijah to go to the desert where drought can be even more acute. He however, had commanded the ravens to feed him but also provided him with a brook from where to drink. God intervened in a situation of need. The new situation could be more desperate⁷⁰

WTT 1 Kings 17:8⁷¹ וַיֵּתֵן דְּבַר־יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר:

The response of God to the needs of his servant comes in form of a command or a word. The Hebrew דְּבַר literary translates as “speech”, “word of request”, “action”, but also as “command” The word of God is active. It has within itself a dynamism that translates into action. This is what sets God apart from Baal and other gods. They make false claims about who they are but their words are hollow and empty. God’s legitimacy however, is established to the extent that he is able not only to utter a word, but that he is able to back his word with a deed. On the other hand, the prophet’s legitimacy is established to the extent that he is able to listen to the word of God, to trust it and to obey it.⁷²

Prophet Elijah has already experienced God’s consistency, between what he says and what he does during the previous episode but now he has to abandon himself to the word even in a more active and challenging way. God has catered for him outside the normal order of things and has shown himself capable of operating outside the

⁷⁰ Cf. T. WALSH, *Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry*, 1 Kings, 228.

⁷¹ So, the Lord said to him:

⁷² Cf. W. BRUEGGEMANN, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, 223.

prevailing social system. Elijah will now not just sit back to be fed by the ravens, rather he will have to assume an active role by proclaim the word to a more challenging situation, to a widow who together with her son are on the edge of life. He has to trust that God will give life from a situation of non-life. His faith being contagious, as faith always is, will lead the widow to abandon herself trustingly to the same word, convinced as it were, that God will transform her desperation. In other words, she will recognize in the word the two aspects of a charge and a promise.⁷³

WTT 1 Kings 17:9
 קים לך צִרְפָּתָה אִשָּׁר
 אִשָּׁה אֶלְמָנָה לְבַלְלָלְךָ:

Like the first command in 1Kings 17:2-6, this one comes with a command, an explanation and an immediate response. Unlike the first however, the command-compliance gives way to a fuller dramatic development than in the first episode. The command is twofold. Elijah is not only told to go to the house of the widow of Zarephath, but he is also commanded to remain or dwell there. In other words, he has to go and become part of her life. This was an act of solidarity. It was solidarity with a person who the prevalent social system considered as non-person. However, it is not just a solidarity for the sake of it but rather one that is eventually transformative. From a beggar for life, the poor widow becomes a giver of life.⁷⁵

God has already stirred up faith in her so that she will be able to see the prophet as a man of God. God is able to enter into the heart of a pagan and stir faith even

⁷³ Cf. G. GUTIERREZ, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 3.

⁷⁴ "Move on to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have designated a widow there to provide for you."

⁷⁵ Cf. W. BRUEGGEMANN, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, 224.

without her consent or awareness. This is true because God is free to do whatever he wills and there is no situation or even anyone who can exclude God. He has access to every situation and persons.

WTT 1 Kings 17:10
 וַיֵּלֶךְ צָרְפָּתָה
 וַיִּבֶא אֶל־פֶּתַח הָעִיר וְהִנֵּה־שָׁם אִשָּׁה
 אֹמֶנֶה מְקַשֶּׁשֶׁת עֲצִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלֶיהָ
 וַיֹּאמֶר קְחִינָא לִי מֵעֲטֻמִּים בְּכֹלִי
 וְאֶשְׁתֵּה:

The prophet obeys God's command. At the time, the poor used to stay at the city and temple gates begging from those who came in or were leaving the city or the temple. Therefore, Elijah knows immediately that this woman is poor. Perhaps this is the reason why he makes two polite and moderate requests. He requests for some "little drinking water" and a "morsel of bread." Her readiness to give to the prophet some water is contrasted to her reluctance to give him bread (v.11.) While she could cope with a life without water, the famine was too much to bear for her to release the only piece of bread she had for a meal.⁷⁷

How could God expect him to be fed by this woman? Who is to feed who? This is a desperate scene and the situation will require God's miraculous intervention. Baal has not been able to bring rains and save the life of the entire nation. How could he be expected to feed a single household?

WTT 1 Kings 17:12
 וַחֲאֲמֹד תִּיְהִי
 אֵלֶיהָ אִשְׁוֹשִׁי מַעַג כִּי 2אִסְמֵלָא
 בְּהִקְמָח בְּכֹד וּמִשְׁטָשָׁמִן בַּעֲפָתָה

⁷⁶ He left and went to zarephath. As he arrived at the entrance of the city, a widow was gathering sticks there; he called out to her, "Please bring me a small cupful of water to drink."

⁷⁷ Cf. T. WALSH, *Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry*, 34.

והנני מקששת שנים עצים וקצחי
”ועשיתיהו לי ולבני ואכלנהו ומתנו:

The widow swears by the God of Elijah. Could this be an expression of the implicit faith spoken of in verse 9?⁷⁹ Had she already recognised that the God of Elijah lives? Some scholars are of the view that this is not an indication that the widow had already succumbed to the faith in the God of Elijah. In a polytheistic culture, the widow acknowledges that Elijah is a devotee of Yahweh rather than of one of the deities of Sidon.⁸⁰

What follows paints graphically the plight of the widow. She and her son are living on the edges of life. The God of Elijah may be living, but what has that to do with their imminent death after they eat of their last meal? Their fate is sealed and she knows as much.

WTT 1 Kings 17:13
אל-חוראי באי עשני 2 כדבךך אף
עשילי משם ענה קטנה קראשנה
והוצאת לי ולך ולבנך מעשי
באחרינה: כ

Elijah’s response takes the same form as Yahweh’s original speech to him at the beginning of the episode, a command followed by an explanation promising hope. The

⁷⁸ “As the Lord your God lives,” She answered, “I have nothing baked; there is only a handful of flour in my jar and a little oil in my jug. Just now I was collecting a couple of sticks, to go in and prepare something for myself and my son; when we have eaten it, we shall die.”

⁷⁹ See footnote 75.

⁸⁰ Cf. T. WALSH, *Studies In Hebrew Narrative and Poetry*, 23.

⁸¹ “Do not be afraid,” Elijah said to her. “Go and do as you propose. But first make me a little cake and bring it to me; then you can prepare something for yourself and your son.

command begins with a reassurance but adds a challenging proviso. As God's ambassador, he must speak on his behalf.⁸²

The use of the phrase, אֵל-תִּירָא "do not fear" is a common occurrence especially in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament. God uses these words to announce his presence in a difficult situation.⁸³ It is not by coincidence that the name of Elijah is mentioned before these words and for the first time in this episode. The name Elijah means "Ya" (Yahweh) is 'El', "Yahweh is God" being the general Semitic name for the high God. Thus Elijah's name and presence represents God himself. Why should the widow be afraid then?⁸⁴

Prophet Elijah calls the widow to an extreme sacrifice, for, with the little she has, she will "first" prepare something for the prophet, and only "afterwards" will she make something for herself and her son. She must not give priority to her own security.

WTT 1 Kings 17:14
 אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כֵּן הַקֶּמַח 3 לֹא תִכְלֶה
 וְצִפְתָּח הַשֶּׁמֶן לֹא תִחְסַר עַד יוֹם
 (חֲתָן) נִחְזָוִיהֶנָּה גִשֵּׁם עַל-פָּנַי
 הָאֲרָמָה:⁸⁵

The formula, "Thus says the Lord" is one of the standard ways in which a prophet introduces a divine oracle whether it be of promise or of condemnation.⁸⁶ The

⁸² Cf. E. MALY, *Prophets of Salvation*, 17.

⁸³ See for example, Jer. 1:8 and Jn. 6:20.

⁸⁴ Cf. J. HADLEY, ed., "Elijah and Elisha" *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 575.

⁸⁵ "For the LORD, the God of Israel, says, 'The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'"

⁸⁶ See for example, Jer. 10:22 and Ezek. 17:19.

oracle is a short poem that promises the widow continuing sustenance as long as the drought lasts.

The wording of Elijah's response corresponds point to point with the widow's speech. She intends to "go" and "prepare" (do) and Elijah tells her to "go" and "prepare", only that this time the priority will have to shift from her to him.

The jar of meal shall not be spent and the cruse of oil shall not fail until the day that the Lord sends the rain upon the earth. It is God who caused the drought, it is he who sustains life, and it is he who will end the drought by bringing back the rains. The drought is not as a result of Baal's going to sleep. Baal is not the God of fertility because he cannot cause or even withhold rains. That power belongs to Yahweh alone.

WTT 1 Kings 17:15
אלֶיהוּ וַתֵּאָכֵל⁴ (הוֹאִיָּהּ) (הִיא)
וְיָהוּא וְבִיָּתָהּ יָמִים⁸⁷

With the promise that her meagre resources will never be exhausted until God sends the rains and with her trust in the words of the prophet, , the poor widow is ready to abandon her short term security and embrace that long-lasting security that comes from the God of Elijah. With faith and trust, she went and did as Elijah had commanded her.

Verse 16 emphasises that this intervention, this miracle happened according to the word of the Lord which he spoke through his prophet.⁸⁸ Only the word of God can accomplish such a task because besides being a living word, it is also active and full of

⁸⁷ She left and did as Elijah had said. She was able to eat for a year, and he and her son as well;

⁸⁸ The jar of flour did not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, as the LORD had foretold through Elijah.

power. Upon obedience to this word, the poor widow is transformed from a situation worse than that of a beggar for life to a new one where she becomes a giver of life to herself, to her household and to the prophet.

Conclusion

We have established that our text is a complete unit in itself, that it is also related to some other larger units, and that it is part of the wider perspective of the prophet's fight against idolatry in Israel. We have also established its structure and form and finally analysed it.

However, in carrying out the above task, we had to put up with some difficulties. For instance, in spite of our submission that the text is a complete unit, and as such, therefore, could be considered on its own merits, we have had to treat it as part of other units in our description of its form and structure. This we admit could pose some confusion to the reader, since we have had to shift from one unit to another without being consistent.

Another apparent confusion was in the exegesis. The text is limited to verse 8-16, yet we have started with verse 7. Our reason was that this verse plays an important transitory role. It indicates a change of time and circumstances. References have also been made to verse 17 (though not in the exegesis) precisely because like verse seven, this verse marks a transition from the text to the next episode.

We shall now in the next chapter, and borrowing from our analysis of the text, develop some of the key theological insights that emanate therefrom and see how we could apply them to contemporary society.

Chapter III

Theological Implications of 1Kings 17:8-16 and its Relevance to Today's Context

1. Introduction

Chapter three will have as its main objective to develop the main theological themes that derive from the analysis of the text. As the most paramount of all, we shall explore more the threat of Baalism to the sovereignty of God. .

The threat to God's sovereignty is as real and perhaps even more serious today than it was during the time of Elijah. We shall reflect on such systems as globalization, secularism, democracy and on some religious systems, which today make claims of self-sufficiency and the ability to give life.

In the midst of such systems and ideologies, Christians have a duty to witness and to defend the sovereignty of God as the only source of life. In this regard, we shall make some proposals on how contemporary Christians can maintain the belief that only God is the giver of life.

2. Theological Implications of 1Kings17:8-16

2.1 The Futility of Worshipping Baal

With the discovery of the *Ugarit* tablets in the twentieth century, a lot can now be known about Baal. He was regarded as the storm god and the god of fertility, who, in regular agricultural cycles, defeated the power of death and made possible a new cycle of agricultural productivity. He was the rightful owner of the earth and was considered to be the giver of life. These and other attributes made Baal the primary rival of Yahweh. He was a threat to Yahweh's claims. Their confrontation reached its climax during the Omride dynasty in Northern Israel during the reign of king Ahab and Jezebel.⁸⁹

As soon as Baalism became the royal religion, it was only a matter of time before it could become the dominant social system. The values of Baalism became the values of the society. The politics, the social life, the worship and the economic life of Israel henceforth derived their inspiration from Baalism.⁹⁰

From a sociological point of view, there are three categories of people in any given system whether economic, religious or social, all of whom serve to ensure its survival. First, there are the benefactors. These are the originators of the system. In a belief system this could be a god or gods, while in a political or economic system these

⁸⁹ Cf. W. BRUEGGEMANN, *Reverberations of Faith*, 14.

⁹⁰ Cf. W. BRUEGGEMANN, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, 223.

could be the so-called super powers. Secondly, there are the managers of the system whose stint is to ensure that the system is running smoothly. In a political system like the one of today, these could be the leaders of the third world countries who become puppets of the world dominant system. In a religious system, these could be priests who ensure that the deities receive a worthy reverence. Thirdly, there are the beneficiaries of the system. To this category belong the members of the ruling class and their associates. Simply put, they depend on the system for their survival.⁹¹

All the above three categories belong to a system that claims to have solutions to all of their questions, which is why they must support and defend it. To them, there is no alternative way of viewing reality except the one proposed by the system. Often times, systems make exaggerated claims about their identity and ability, but since its adherents are dependent on it, they cannot even summon the courage to put some of the claims to test. For anyone to falsify the claims of such a system, he or she must be prepared for a real confrontation. When such an initiative originates from those who the system considers to be outside of it, such is considered to be subversion.⁹²

If we bring this sociological analysis to bear on our present discussion, then we shall understand better the nature of the tension between Baalism and Yahwism. Both were belief systems and both had a tremendous influence on the social life of the people. Baal was the benefactor of those who followed Baalism while Yahweh was the

⁹¹ Cf. W. BRUEGGEMANN, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, 222.

⁹² Cf. G. GUTIERREZ, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 11.

benefactor of those who believed in him. The manager of Baalism was the King and all the members of the ruling class. They were also the beneficiaries of the system.⁹³

Although most systems like the one of Baalism pretend to cater for the interests of all, the poor are usually marginalized. They are considered to be outside the system and are therefore regarded as non-persons. They have no dignity whatsoever. The widow of Zarephath belongs to this category.⁹⁴

The survival and credibility of any given system however, is dependent on whether such a system is able to authenticate its claims. Baal, through his managers and beneficiaries claimed to have power over life and death, the highest claims that any deity can arrogate to itself. He claimed to have the power to cause rains and light. Yet, Yahweh uses his (Baal's) own weapons; rain and lighting from heaven to defeat him in his very own sphere of divinization. Baal cannot authenticate his claims. He has no such powers as he had claimed.⁹⁵

Elijah, however, does not only stop at demonstrating that Baal does not have the powers which he claims to have, he goes ahead to demonstrate where such power resides. The power of life and death belongs to Yahweh. He is not conditioned by any system. He has the absolute freedom to do choose which system or person he may use to dispose this power. In our case, he chooses an agent outside the prevalent system in the person of the widow of Zarephath, a poor woman by all standards. In so doing, he falsifies the claim that the system has power to give life. G. Gutierrez is of the view that

⁹³ Cf. B. BRUEGGEMANN, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, 224.

⁹⁴ Cf. W. BRUEGGEMANN, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, 224.

⁹⁵ Cf. H. DIETRICH, *Old Testament Theology*, 72.

the poor are the God's most preferred starting point in his redemptive mission, for he has nothing to do with persons and systems that consider themselves self-sufficient.⁹⁶

Any system or person that claims to have absolute powers or answers to every question regarding life, makes claims that rightly and exclusively belong to God. Such a system or person *ipso facto* becomes an idol. That Baal could not be shown to have these powers exposed him for what he was, an idol and a liar.

Such an audacious clarification of God's sovereignty is destabilizing, to the people of Elijah's time but more so to the people of our time. Modern man has placed all his trust in some systems, examples of which we shall elaborate later, which make claims that properly and exclusively belong to God. What is worrying is the blindness with which man worships and prostrates himself at the altar of such systems giving rise to the various forms of atheism which we have today.⁹⁷

2.2 The Word of God As the Only Source of Life

The author of the letter to the Hebrews describes the word of God as both active and living, (Hebs 4:12).⁹⁸ It has within itself not only the power of self-propulsion but also the ability to generate life. It is this creative ability of the word of God that is underscored right from the beginning of Genesis to the last page of the Holy Scriptures. This is because the word of God is God himself.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Cf. G. GUTIERREZ, *The Power of the Poor In History*, 3.

⁹⁷ Cf. I. KLINGER, "Theodicy", Class Notes, Consolata Institute of Philosophy, Nairobi 2004, Photocopy, 20-21.

⁹⁸ For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

⁹⁹ Cf. J. MCKENZIE, *The Power and the Wisdom*, 120.

Since this creative power is intrinsic to the word, it does not depend on conditions as its principal cause. It is the principal cause of its own activity. At their best, conditions serve only as instrumental causes to the activity of the word. Accordingly, the word is at liberty to choose whichever instrument it deems fit and to dispense with any instrument it considers inappropriate. No condition can consider itself either as a primary cause of life or indispensable.¹⁰⁰

The word manifests its liberty by choosing to act outside the system. Prophet Elijah is commanded to go beyond the “safe zones” of the system. In so doing, the word falsifies the claims of the system; that it is capable of giving life and that outside of it there can be no life at all. In other words, that it is a principal cause. This is a claim that exclusively belongs to the word of God.¹⁰¹

The poor widow of Zarephath has no means of survival. The system cannot provide life. If anything, it has sealed her fate. She has only one meal before she and her son succumb to death. Yet, the word of God does not only show itself capable of generating life but more so among the vulnerable and those who have no one to care for them. The word shows that the poor have social power that the regime cannot nullify by giving them life. It also exposes the regime and its beneficiaries for what they are - liars. They cannot give life because they do not have life. Their words are empty but the word of God is full of life. The word of God and the obedience of the prophet declare the official reality a lie.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Cf. J. MCKENZIE, *The Power and Wisdom*, 127.

¹⁰¹ Cf. H. DIETRICH, *Old Testament Theology*, 77

¹⁰² Cf. W. BRUEGGEMANN, *Social Reading of the Old Testament*, 225.

2.3 *A Transformative Solidarity*

The concept of solidarity has gained wide popularity in recent times. For instance, rich nations are called upon to express solidarity with their poor counterparts. The church's prefers the concept of "preferential option" for the poor which is another way of emphasizing the need for solidarity with the less privileged as a fundamental aspect of her mission.¹⁰³

Much of what is being taunted as solidarity however, is nothing but counterfeits of solidarity. Rich nations have a moral obligation to assist the poor countries financially. They do this by granting loans to them. A major problem with these loans however, is that, besides having so many conditions attached to them, the recipients eventually pay back so much more than they had borrowed even when such repayment is spread over a long period of time. As a result, the common man has to bear with exorbitant taxes levied on commodities and services, never mind the fact that this borrowed money often times end up in the stomachs of some few greedy persons.¹⁰⁴

It is a moral evil first, to give loans to countries when it is clear that they cannot repay them. Genuine solidarity requires that such assistance be given without demanding any repayment. Secondly, it is morally evil to charge interests that supersede the borrowed amounts. This is oppression and anything but solidarity. It maintains a

¹⁰³ Cf. M. WALSH, ed., *Proclaiming Justice and Peace*, 950.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. D. DORR, *Social Justice Agenda*, 2. See also, D. BROSANAN, *On International Debt*, 13.

perpetual state of begging. Genuine solidarity is about empowerment. When solidarity aims at empowerment, it becomes transformative solidarity.¹⁰⁵

The widow of Zarephath was a beggar for life. When the prophet of God came to sojourn with the widow of Zarephath, he entered into her real life situation. He did not just sympathize with her as most people do in the name of solidarity. He did not even give her some food so that the following day she resumed back to her daily preoccupation of begging. He did not glorify her condition either. There is nothing to be glorified in poverty. The poor know as much. It is the rich who conveniently glorify poverty just so that they can keep at bay any possibility of a revolution. Elijah enters into the life of the widow of Zarephath without despising her or affirming her condition.¹⁰⁶

He does not lead the widow to believe that her condition is God-willed and as such to be accepted ungrudgingly. She and her son were living on the edge of life. This was a deplorable situation even in the eyes of God, the giver of life. His solidarity thus, must be directed towards transforming her condition.¹⁰⁷

The word of God does not only cause life but it also empowers the poor so that they can themselves become givers of life. This is what becomes of the widow of Zarephath. By making the poor dependent on them, systems turn the poor into beggars of life. Their managers and beneficiaries are however beggars of life themselves even when they may not acknowledge it. In both cases, the Word can effect a change, but

¹⁰⁵ Cf. W. BRUEGGEMANN, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, 224.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. W. BRUEGGEMANN, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, 223.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. M. WALSH, ed., *Proclaiming Justice and Peace*, 934.

spiritual. Practically, it leads to an unlimited quest for wealth commonly known as consumer materialism. As soon as the spiritual aspect is denied, all claims of a transcendental God are down-played and any form of human self-transcendence that appeals to what lies beyond history is seen as a form of escapism. As a consequence, man and the systems he creates, take the place of God.¹¹¹

We must commend science for the inroads it has made into solving some of the human problems particularly those that border on our health. Ultimate trust in science commonly referred to as scientism, however, has led to the belief that religion ought to be abandoned in favor of science just as childhood eventually gives way to adulthood. The tragedy however is that science has not been able to unravel the so many mysteries that surround human life. One thinks immediately of the deadly HIV virus which causes AIDs and which has so far proved elusive even to the best of human genius.¹¹²

Democracy is hailed as the best form of governance. All nations are working towards a democratization of their institutions. Democracy, however, is based on the false principle that a decision is good as long as it enjoys a majority vote. Such a principle is dangerous especially where a decisions borders on morality. A decision cannot be morally good simply because it enjoys popularity.

Even religion is not free of systems and ideologies. For instance, within the Catholic Church, the church leadership in Rome is often times seen to operate as if it were a bureaucracy, imposing its ideologies on the local churches as if they themselves did not share in the oneness, the universality and apostolicity of the Catholic Church.

¹¹¹ Cf. A. SHORTER, *Secularism in Africa*, 23.

¹¹² Cf. E. UZUKWU, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, 42.

She wants to subordinate every one to herself as if she enjoys the monopoly of the Holy Spirit. In this way, she operates just like any system and ideology, advancing the interests of some few and making false claims about herself.¹¹³

Emanating as it were from the most powerful on earth, most of these systems and ideologies have the capacity to become world systems. They are the modern forms of Baal and we are all worshipping under their altars, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

Unlike the Baal of Israel, the Baals of our times are more enticing precisely because of the few “miracles” that they are able to perform. The old Baal fell flat on his face. As a result many people have come to trust them as their source of life at the expense of the one God, the giver of life.

3.2 The Challenge of Modern Forms of Idolatry to Contemporary Christianity

From the foregoing, it is clear that the above systems and ideologies threaten the sovereignty of God. That there is only one God, who is the only giver of life, who holds the power of life and death, is a core element of the Christian faith. Accordingly, these systems, these Baals, threaten not only the sovereignty of God but more so the very foundation of Christian belief. Like Elijah therefore, Christians must rise to the occasion and defend their faith.

When the word of God became flesh, he concretely, through his deeds, showed his ability to give life where there was none, thereby falsifying the claims of the

¹¹³ Cf. E. UZUKWU, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, 48.

prevalent system. The system even subjected him to death, the ultimate form of human cruelty, but by rising he manifested the powerlessness of the system. Its weapon, death, could not hold him back. Accordingly, by rising from the dead he became the Lord of life. By choosing to operate outside the system, he disabused the idea that there can be no alternative to a system and clearly showed where true life can be found, only in him.

Christians believe that the only true source of life is God through his Son Jesus Christ. Individually, Christians avoid the temptation of regarding themselves as self-contained or even self-sufficient. Convinced as they are that true life comes from the Lord, Christians can only pity those who pretend to derive their joy from material acquisitions, sexual pleasure, reveling and all other forms of indulgences. Such people seek for life from where it cannot be found. As a result, they remain perpetual beggars, moving from one form of indulgence to another without ever settling down. In his book *Human Fully Alive*, John Powell refers to this restlessness as a *cult of experience*, where people move from one form of experience to another in the hope of finding some form of contentment.¹¹⁴

Similarly, Christians have a duty towards all the above mentioned systems. They should work towards bringing down any system or ideology that presents itself as Lord, and therefore as an answer to all of human problems. Such systems or ideologies are idols. This does not however mean that they do not have something positive to offer to humanity. They all do, but that does not guarantee any of them to become absolute.

¹¹⁴ Cf. J. POWELL, *Fully Human Fully Alive*, 67.

Even when they speak of solidarity, systems intend to entrench further an attitude of dependence which they have already planted in the minds of their subjects. Christians have a duty to ensure that any form of solidarity is transformative and not the kind that keep people under subjugation forever. They can do this by denouncing any international policy that perpetuates a state of perpetual begging among the poor countries.¹¹⁵

Christ has set all of us free and we have only one master to serve. When people become slaves to a particular system, they adore that system. Christians have only one Lord, the giver of life, whom wishes that those who he encounters be transformed into givers of life. Any form of solidarity therefore, especially if it is a Christian initiative must aim at empowerment. The church has initiated so many projects in the third world countries especially in Africa. She must ensure that all such projects are geared towards the development of people by making them more and more self reliant and autonomous. Any project that serves to create dependence among the people serves only to advance and promote the evil objective of enslaving people and controlling them.

Conclusion

In this last chapter, we had set out to explore the major themes that derive from the analysis of the text. The theme of the threat of Baalism to the sovereignty of God has received considerable attention. It serves as the axis around which all the other themes revolve. When the sovereignty of God is acknowledged, concomitantly the trust

¹¹⁵ D. BROSANAN, *On International Debt*, 13.

that he is the sole giver of life is cultivated. It is only God and those whom he delegates are able to bring about genuine transformation through transformative solidarity

Modern systems and ideologies threaten the sovereignty of God. They make absolute claims about themselves. Most of such claims however are false. Apart from elucidating on some of them, we have attempted to point out the various weakness or falsehoods that inform each of them.

Lastly, we have made suggestions on how Christians ought to guard themselves against such systems that tend to play God, guided as it were by their belief in Jesus as the Lord and giver of life.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

At the end of this presentation, we now stand on a better platform to recapitulate our findings. In the first chapter, an attempt was made firstly to present a general picture of the historical circumstances within which prophet Elijah exercised his ministry. It was a time of religious syncretism, where the faith of the people of God risked losing its identity owing to the infiltration of the Canaanite religion, otherwise known as Baalism.

Secondly, we have highlighted on the plight of the widows in the Near East. This category of people is marginalised in most of the world cultures and the biblical culture was not an exception. In a system managed by the ruling elite, their situation can even be worse. This is the case with the widow of Zarephath. Being outside the system as she was, she had no identity and her only fate was to die.

In the second chapter, we focused our attention on the text itself. Apart from insisting on the fact that the text as it stands could be considered as a complete unit in itself, it was our submission that it could also be considered in relation to other units, all of which bring out similar themes. Thirdly, an analysis of the text was carried out.

In Chapter three, the theological themes deriving from the analysis of the text were presented, the one on the threat of Baalism to the sovereignty of God being given more emphasis. Apart from the observation that seems to capture the situation of Israel during the time of Elijah, it functions as the axis around which all the other themes revolve.

Our submission is that the threat to God's sovereignty is far from over, which is why a treatment of the modern systems and ideologies as modern forms of Baalism has been offered. Christians have, in the face of these modern forms of Baalisms, a mountainous challenge to defend the sovereignty of God. However much a system or an ideology helps in advancing the society, it can never take the place of God. No system can give people life, for this is an exclusive preserve of God.

Whereas most of such systems are baked in the West, they are usually served here in Africa ostensibly presented as a solution to our problems. Helplessly and unknowingly, we begin to serve their interests and before we realise it, we become overly dependent to a point where our imaginations are unable to work out alternatives. If only Africans could realise that the solution to their problems can only come from the Lord. That IMF and other financial institutions cannot help revamp their economies. More than often, they cripple them further. If only Africans could one day realise that it is only through trusting obedience to the word of God that they can be empowered to engender a solution to their problem but also be empowered to become suppliers of life. Until then, they will remain beggars of life.

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