

POOR OIL
1 Kings 4:1-7

2 Kings 4:1 Now the wife of one of the sons of the prophets cried to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.” Elisha replied to her, “How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?” “Your servant has nothing there at all,” she said, “except a small jar of olive oil.” Elisha said, “Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don’t ask for just a few. Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side.” She left him and shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. When all the jars were full, she said to her son, “Bring me another one.” But he replied, “There is not a jar left.” Then the oil stopped flowing. She went and told the man of God, and he said, “Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left.”

A. There is a lot to learn about this woman’s husband here.

1. “Sons of the prophets,” he was walking in ministry, there was a prophetic call on his life”.
2. “You know” **יָדַע** means to know by experience. Elisha knew the virtue of this man.
3. “Your servant”, possibly ministered to, for or with Elisha.
4. “Feared the Lord” this is a Godly man who esteemed the LORD’s will over people demands.
5. **Targum¹ 2 Kings 4:1** [Targum is an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible] is an example of this. The story of this widow in the Bible does not mention who her husband was. The Targum written by this Jewish scribe believed or speculated he was the prophet “Obadiah” who was saving the lives of other prophets in the recent wicked reign of Ahab and Jezebel. The reason for the widow’s debt was that this family sustained the lives of the Prophets Ahab and Jezebel were killing. Her used his resource, then barrowed and died, leaving his wife and family vulnerable.
6. **1 Kings 18:3-4** and **Ahab had summoned Obadiah, his palace administrator. (Obadiah was a devout believer in the LORD. While Jezebel was killing off the LORD’s prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water**
 - i. This man Obadiah is 10-20 years earlier than Elisha and is who this Targum (Translation) is identifying as the widow’s husband. This Obadiah is NOT the writer of the minor prophetic book, “Obadiah” but rather someone with that name who protected many prophets when Ahab and Jezebel were killing them.
7. **The Jewish Historian Josephus holds to the same interpretation of the widow’s husband as this man “Obadiah” Josephus Antiquities 2.47-50²** (47) For they say that the widow of Obadiah, Ahab’s steward, came to him, and said, that he was not ignorant how her husband had preserved the prophets that were to be slain by Jezebel, the wife of Ahab; for she said that he hid a hundred of them, and had borrowed money for their maintenance, and that, after her husband’s death, she and her children were carried away to be made slaves by the creditors; and she desired of him to have mercy upon her on account of what her husband did, and afford her some assistance. (48) And when he asked her what she had in the house, she said, “Nothing but a very small quantity of oil in a cruise.” So the prophet bid her go away, and borrow a great many empty vessels of her neighbors, and when she had shut her chamber door, to pour the oil into them all; for that God would fill them full. (49) And when the woman had done what she was commanded to do, and bade her children bring every one of the vessels, and all were filled, and not one left empty, she came to the prophet, and told him that they were all full; (50) upon which he advised her to go away, and sell the oil, and pay the creditors what was owing to them, for that there would be some surplus of the price of the oil, which she might make use of for the

¹ Targum means “Translation”. It is the Aramaic Translation of the Bible. Since Targums were not in Hebrew, the authors could insert variations of texts or expansions of possible inferences in the Bible without violating the sacredness of Scripture.

² Josephus was a Jewish Historian that lived in Israel from 37-100 AD.

maintenance of her children:—and thus did Elisha discharge the woman’s debts, and free her from the vexation of her creditors.³

8. **Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 8a-b⁴** "a person should complete his portions of scripture along with the community, reading the scripture twice and the *targum* once" This shows the synagogues of this time were instructed to read through the Bible twice a year and the Bible in its Targum format once a year.

B. **“Widow- My husband is dead... the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.**

1. It was an accepted custom in Israel that if a family could not pay off its debts by any other means, some or all members of that family would work as servants for the creditor (**Leviticus 25:39–41**).⁵

a. The failure to repay a debt resulted in a man or his family being held in bondage by his creditor (**Ex. 21:7; Dt. 15:12; Isa. 50:1**); this is equivalent to “self-sale” (**Lev. 25:39–55**).⁶

b. You became a worker for the creditor and your wages paid the debt.

c. limited debt-slavery to six years (**Ex. 21:2; Dt. 15:12**). The Code of Hammurabi (c⁷a 1725 B.C.) also provided for debt-servitude, but limited it to **three years** (§ 117; ANE⁸T)

i. **Code of Hammurabi §117 (1755 B.C.):** If an obligation is outstanding against a man and he sells or gives into debt service his wife, his son, or his daughter, they shall perform service in the house of their buyer or of the one who holds them in debt service for three years; their release shall be secured in the fourth year.⁹

2. **Leviticus 25:25-38** “If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. ³⁶Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. ³⁷You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. ³⁸I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.

C. **The Greed and Need of a Nation:**

1. **Proverbs 22:7** The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender.

2. **Amos 2:6** “For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—

3. **Amos 8:6** that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat?”

4. **James 4:3** When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

D. **The Miracle:**

1. **“Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don’t ask for just a few.”** If were not willing to do the footwork, why should God or others do the legwork for us. You have to step towards miracles.

2. **“Bring me another one. But he replied, “There is not a jar left.” Then the oil stopped flowing.”**

Miracles continue as far as they need to go, we need faith that goes further than our fears.

3. **She went and told the man of God** The Testimony, a missing spiritual discipline that seals the miracle.

4. **he said, “Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left.”** We need wisdom to navigate the provision of miracles from Gods

a. הָיָה To live, to have a life. To live well. God knows how to provide for not only your debt. Your life, but also a full living.

b. God does not fail the God of the widow and the fatherless the God of the widow and fatherless (Deut. 10:18; Jas 1:27)¹⁰

E. **Conclusion for my life?**

³ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 248.

⁴ **The Babylonian Talmud** (Talmud means “pupil or student”) It records the debates of scriptures interpretation between Rabbis.

⁵ John J. Bimson, “1 and 2 Kings,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 365.

⁶ S. S. Bartchy, “Slavery,” ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–1988), 539.

⁷ NETS 1.8. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (1950; 3rd ed. 1980)

⁸ William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, *Context of Scripture* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2000), 343.

¹⁰ Donald J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 9, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 216.