

2 Kings 4 — Borrow Not a Few — The Oil That Stopped at the Last Vessel, the Great Woman of Shunem, Death in the Pot, and the Bread That Was Left Over

2 Kings 4: Elisha multiplies a widow's single pot of oil to the exact measure of the empty vessels she gathered; a great woman of Shunem receives a promised son, loses him in the harvest field, and receives him back alive on the prophet's bed; meal heals a poisoned stew at Gilgal; twenty barley loaves feed a hundred men with bread left over; Elisha's ministry under Jehoram of Israel, c. 848 BC (scholars place Jehoram's reign at roughly 852–841 BC).

Two chapters ago, Elisha watched his master go up in a whirlwind and asked for one thing: "let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me" (2 Kgs. 2:9). That request was not greed — the double portion is the inheritance law of the firstborn son (Deut. 21:17). Elisha was asking to be Elijah's *heir*, and chapter 4 is the inheritance being spent. Read it beside 1 Kings 17 and the family resemblance is unmistakable: there a widow with a failing barrel of meal, here a widow with one pot of oil; there a boy raised in an upper chamber, here a boy raised in a prophet's chamber; there a prophet fed by ravens, here a hundred men fed from twenty loaves. The son has his father's face. But everything has doubled and widened — one provision miracle has become three, one household has become a widow's family, a village matron's estate, a seminary of prophets, and a hundred hungry men. The mantle did not just fall on Elisha; it multiplied.

Hebrew Word Studies

keli (H3627) / req (H7386) (קֵּלִי / רֵק) — **vessel, implement, container / empty, vain vv. 3–6.** *Keli* is the ordinary Hebrew word for any container or implement — jars, tools, weapons, temple furnishings all answer to it. Nothing exotic; the miracle runs on household crockery. The load-bearing word is the adjective: Elisha specifies *empty* vessels (*req*, v. 3). Full jars are useless to this miracle — whatever they already hold is exactly the amount of oil they cannot receive. And then the mechanism: the flow continues precisely as long as an empty *keli* is presented, and the moment "there is not a vessel more," the oil stands still (v. 6 — the verb is *amad*, H5975, the ordinary word for standing, the same verb this chapter uses when the Shunammite *stands* before Elisha in vv. 12 and 15). Scripture keeps returning to this economy: "the LORD's hand is not shortened" (Isa. 59:1); what varies is presented capacity. "Prove me now herewith... that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (Mal. 3:10) makes *room* the bottleneck; Alma 12:10 makes the heart's hardness the throttle on how much of the word is given. The doctrine hiding in the widow's kitchen is that emptiness — acknowledged, gathered, brought to the pour — is not the disqualification for grace. It is the qualification. The only limit the miracle honored was the number of empty things she thought to bring.

gadol (H1419) (גָּדוֹל) — **great, large — of size, wealth, standing, or worth vv. 8, 38.** The narrator calls her an *ishah gedolah*, a "great woman" (v. 8) — in context, a woman of wealth and local standing, the kind of household that can add a room and furnish it. But the chapter quietly audits what her greatness consists of, and none of it is the estate: she perceives holiness in a passing stranger (v. 9), she builds before she is asked (v. 10), she wants nothing from the king (v. 13), and when catastrophe comes she rides straight for the man of God and will not be peeled off (v. 30). The same adjective returns at Gilgal — "Set on the *great* pot" (v. 38) — one word serving a matron and a stewpot, which is the chapter's sense of humor and also its point: greatness, in 2 Kings 4, is measured by capacity to serve and to hold, not by title. Her son, meanwhile, gets the verb of the same root: "when the child was *grown*" (*gadal*, H1431, v. 18). What she received grew; what she was, held. Scripture's ledger runs the same way elsewhere — "whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister" (Matt. 20:26); King Benjamin, royal enough to be spoken for at any court, laboring with his own hands (Mosiah 2:14). The great woman of Shunem is what that doctrine looks like with a guest room.

shalom (H7965) (שָׁלוֹם) — **peace, wholeness, well-being, completeness vv. 23, 26.** Five times in this narrow passage the word sounds — once from her (v. 23), three times in Elisha's triple question, once more in her answer (v. 26) — and every time she says it, her son is dead. *Shalom* is not "fine"; it comes from the root meaning wholeness, completeness, everything settled and paid (the same root supplies "pay" in v. 7, *shalam* — the widow's debt made whole). So her "It is well" is not denial and not social reflex. It is a settled verdict issued in advance of the evidence: whatever this hour holds, the account between her and God will balance — and she will discuss the particulars with no one beneath the man of God himself. Scripture keeps this word for exactly such moments: "Peace I leave with you... not as the world giveth" (Jn. 14:27); "My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment" (D&C 121:7). The world's peace is

the absence of the storm; *shalom* is wholeness held inside it. She is the Old Testament's great practitioner of the word — galloping to Carmel with a dead child behind a shut door, answering every inquiry with the one syllable that was both perfectly true and not yet visible: *shalom*.

davar (H1697) (דָּבָר) — **word, speech — and also thing, matter vv. 41, 44.** Readers of 1 Kings 17 will recognize this noun — it was the spine of that whole chapter, the "word" that shut heaven and kept the barrel full. Here it makes a sly double appearance that the King James translation half-conceals. Verse 44: the hundred ate and left "according to the *word* of the LORD" — *davar* in its royal sense, the spoken promise of verse 43 keeping itself. But look back at verse 41: "there was no *harm* in the pot." The Hebrew behind "harm" is the same noun — literally, there was no bad *davar*, no evil thing, in the pot. *Davar* means both word and thing, and Hebrew's refusal to separate the two is a doctrine wearing a grammar: what God says and what happens are one substance. So the chapter closes on the noun twice — an evil *davar* removed from the pot, a good *davar* fulfilled at the table — and between them stands the prophet through whom the word does both. This is the inheritance of 1 Kings 17 paid forward: the widow of Zarephath learned that "the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth" (1 Kgs. 17:24), and a generation later that same word is still doing things — unmaking death in a stewpot, outlasting a hundred appetites. "There hath not failed one word of all his good promise" (1 Kgs. 8:56); "the word of our God shall stand for ever" (Isa. 40:8); and Nephi's counsel remains the practical application: "feast upon the words of Christ" (2 Ne. 32:3) — a feast this chapter caters twice, literally.

From the Chapter's Architecture

There is one more design worth naming. This chapter is built to be read on top of 1 Kings 17 — widow for widow, oil for oil, raised son for raised son — and the doubling is the point of the double portion. But it is also built to be read under the Gospels: Luke's widow of Nain, Mark's shut door at Jairus's house, John's barley loaves. 2 Kings 4 is the middle pane of a triptych, receiving Elijah's ministry from one side and handing it forward to Christ's on the other. Read it in isolation and it is a wonder tale. Read it in its place, and it is one long argument that the Lord's way of working — through a servant, into a house, starting from what is offered — never changes.