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The recipient becoming a participant and the participant becoming a recipient: A strange encounter in 1 Kings 17 with a not so strange outcome¹

ABSTRACT

A narrative in 1 Kings 17:1-16 tells of a strange encounter between two people of different backgrounds, one is a prophet of YHWH and the other is a dying widow.² Dialogue brings them closer to each other in a mysterious way, causing them to change roles. In doing so, they come to realise that the trust they have for each other has an origin far deeper than they could imagine.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to contribute to the Supplement, *Transforming theology and religion*, with the theme of “dialogue”. The first question that



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- 1 A draft of this article was read at the annual OTWSA conference held at the University of Natal in September 2019.
- 2 Waltke (2007:716-717) places the Elijah cycles in four acts and a *janus* (doorway [*sic*]) to the Elisha cycle: Elijah and the drought (1 Kings 17:1-24); Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:1-40); Elijah and I AM at Horeb (1 Kings 19:1-21), and Elijah calls Elisha as his attendant (1 Kings 19:19-21). Within the first act, two dramas unfold. There is the narrative of Elijah and the widow's flower jar (1 Kings 17:7-16), followed by the narrative of the resurrection of the widow's son (1 Kings 17:17-24). This article focuses on 1 Kings 17:7-16.

comes to mind is: How do theology and religion fit together? A basic definition of theology could be “the study of God” (Van der Walt 2014:13). Furthermore, it implies that

[t]hose who undertake to study God will learn a great deal about God’s nature, actions and attitudes. They will in turn discover how God relates to the created world, including the human race (House 1998:53).

Religion in this reader’s mind could be approached from two different angles, namely non-theological (non-faith based) and theological (faith based). Non-theological scholars would argue that religion has developed because of “evolutionary biological adaptation”, or that religion is a “by-product of nonreligious cognitive systems and patterns” (Kärkkäinen 2015:261-262). From a faith perspective, religion has to do with the ability to mirror the Creator (Kärkkäinen 2015:276). In other words, religion has to do with practising or living according to the ordinances of the Creator God. There are various ways in which the church can learn how to live according to God’s ordinances, one of which being to study the way in which dialogue in ancient texts³ is brought to us, the readers of these texts.

This article’s objective is to make a theological contribution with regard to the essence of true dialogue.⁴ The kind of dialogue that brings people closer to each other, closeness where trust is an obvious virtue. A narrative in 1 Kings 17 will serve as case study. In this narrative, there is a strange encounter between two people of different backgrounds; one is a prophet of God and the other is a dying widow. Dialogue brings them closer to each other in a mysterious way, causing them to change roles, so that they come to realise that the trust they have for each other has an origin far deeper than they could imagine.

3 Ancient texts refer to the Hebrew Bible.

4 Sällström (1991:27) describes dialogue “as a process of finding something out together [that is] not a particular behavior or attitude, [but rather] something purely factual, which, whether in the form of words, art or music, involves both parties in their total historical experience”. This reader assumes that the same would apply with regard to religious backgrounds. Nemchinova (2013:71) mentions that, when people have the desire to build or to create, the desire “is based on dialogical relations”. In relations, “they realize all the creative potential of a person”. Therefore, continues Nemchinova, dialogue is a way of original human life, “as the person learns and transforms the world in dialogue”.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE NARRATIVE IN 1 KINGS 17

Within the larger plot of 1 and 2 Kings, the story that involves Elijah seems almost out of place (Van der Walt 2014:162). It is placed at the latter part of 1 Kings and continues uninterrupted in 2 Kings, breaking the stylised notices of 1 Kings 15-16. This change of style is marked by the return to narratives (Van der Walt 2014:162) and indicates a change in content: Elijah serves as an interruption. In fact, Elijah's appearance disrupts the so-called "Omride Dynasty" (Brueggemann 2001:34). The answer to why this interruption took place is given in 1 Kings 16:29-33, where the spiritual downfall of Israel is spelled out in specific terms – Israel was moving away from Yahweh, further than ever before.

3. PROTAGONISTS AND ANTAGONISTS IN 1 KINGS 17:1-16

In any given narrative, there are protagonists (role players or characters) and even antagonists (rivals or villains). The narrative story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, in 1 Kings 17:1-16, will serve as framework for this investigation. The discussion about the interaction between protagonists will be limited to Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. For the sake of understanding the *Sitz im Leben* of the narrative, two antagonists, Ahab and Jezebel, will be referred to briefly.⁵

3.1 Elijah the Tishbite

Elijah's name means "YHWH is God". It embodies his entire message and mission: To point out to Israel that there is only one God – YHWH.⁶ All that is known about Elijah are the words that describe him in 1 Kings 17:1. He was a Tishbite, from Tishbea in Gilead. No mention is made of Elijah's upbringing. He appeared out of nowhere, with the insinuation that he was a Tishbite from Gilead (Bronner 1968:18). According to Wyatt (2012:446), the Hebrew text suggests a possibility that Elijah was a foreign settler in Israel.⁷ The short introduction to Elijah's appearance in 1 Kings 17 is there for a reason. The Masoretic text suggests that, although he stayed in Gilead, his actual birthplace was elsewhere (Bronner 1968:18). Tishbi was

5 At the abovementioned conference, a remark was made during discussions at the end that the "earth" as a role player could also be investigated. This could be an interesting study with reference to the so-called Earth Bible.

6 This message climaxes in 1 Kings 18 with the battle at Carmel, when all of Israel confess that YHWH is Lord (1 Kings 18:39).

7 It should be mentioned that, although Elijah speaks of himself as a stranger (גֵר) to the widow (1 Kings 17:20), he does believe that he himself was a faithful Israelite of YHWH (1 Kings 19:14).

his native town or clan. Besides 1 Kings 17, there is no other reference to Tishbi in the Old Testament. Elijah could, therefore, have been a complete stranger to anyone with whom he might have crossed paths. As mentioned earlier, Elijah, the now stranger, with his sudden appearance, interrupts or disrupts the spiritual downfall in which Israel find itself. Birch *et al.* (1999:267) put it as follows:

Elijah is a towering figure, a new Moses, who bursts onto the scene from outside normal channels (Gilead is east of Jordan, away from the centers of power) and confronts the power structures with uncompromising terms.

3.2 Ahab and Jezebel

Although Ahab is only mentioned in the first verse of the selected text of investigation, five out of the six of Elijah's appearances are directly related to Ahab and his family (Van der Walt 2014:165). Some background information about him and his wife Jezebel, in particular, serves to better understand the outcome of the article. They are the obvious antagonists in this narrative.

Ahab, son of Omri, opened the door to Baalism for Israel during the period of the Omride Dynasty (874-853 B.C.). His marriage to Jezebel, daughter of the king of the Sidonians (1 Kings 16:31) was the start of the spiritual downfall of Israel (Maré 2009:74). It is interesting to note that the name Jezebel is a reflection of the deity Ba'al Zevul (Berlyn 2012:55).⁸ Ba'al Zevul was known as the so-called rain god. According to Canaanite mythology, this so-called god was killed by a rival god, Mot, whose name means 'death'. To the Canaanites, this was the explanation for sporadic dry seasons. When Ba'al was "restored" to life again, rain would fall (Berlyn 2012:55).

Ahab's wife was a firm believer in Ba'al and had one intention, namely to replace YHWH's ordinances with that of Ba'al (1 Kings 18:18). She even tried to eliminate all of YHWH's prophets (1 Kings 18:13).

3.3 The widow of Zarephath

The widow's introduction to the narrative is found in 1 Kings 17 verse 8:

Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.

8 Meaning "Baal is prince".

In 1 Kings 17:2, it is written that YHWH sends Elijah east (outside the land), but in verse 8, YHWH sends Elijah west (still outside the land), specifically to Jezebel's home territory, which is also Ba'al's territory (Van der Walt 2014:212; Olley 1998:29). As with Elijah, the author does not expose the widow's identity. According to information given in the text, she lived in Zarephath (region of Sidon) and had a son (1 Kings 17:12). She could have been a wealthy woman at some stage, as she lived in a house with an upper room (Nelson 1987:110). Verse 17 refers to her as the "mistress of the house". Wyatt (2012:451) claims that the different description is not a coincidence. The term "mistress" (*baalah*) is the female counterpart of the Hebrew word *ba'al*, meaning "master" or "lord", but also strikingly, the name of the Canaanite deity, Baal, whose prophets Elijah face in 1 Kings 18. Wyatt (2012:451) continues:

The use of *baalah* as descriptor for the widow interjects a reminder that she is a non-Israelite and someone whose ultimate loyalties most likely still reside with her own gods.

Nevertheless, neither her home, nor the king's house could provide what is essentially needed to survive – food and water.

4. PROTAGONISTS EXCHANGING ROLES

4.1 Elijah as recipient

Elijah hid in the Cherith brook, just as YHWH instructed (1 Kings 17:3). He was nurtured by the water flowing in the brook. Ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and at night, yoking the image with the feeding stories from Israel's sacred past (Hens-Piazza 2006:165). Elijah did not have to do anything but accept the gifts of food brought by the ravens and drink water from the brook, which was part of YHWH's creation. As YHWH nurtured His people in the Wilderness (Ex. 16-18), He did for Elijah, thus making Elijah a grateful recipient.

Elijah received life from sources that have nothing to do with the agricultural cycle of civilized society, with which Baal was commonly associated (Hauser 1990:14).

As described in the Exodus narrative, YHWH demonstrates with the provision of food and water that He has control over nature. He can control rain and creatures. Hauser (1990:14) attracts attention to the use of the verb *sustain*, rather than *feed* (vv. 4 and 9), which emphasises YHWH's power. Elijah, being a recipient, could do nothing other than embrace YHWH's grace.

4.2 Elijah as participant

The narrative changes direction in verse 8. Elijah's position switches from a passive recipient to an active participant. On YHWH's order, Elijah goes to Zarephath. YHWH assures him that he would meet a widow and that she would care for him. Elijah goes to meet the widow as he was told. On meeting the widow, he requests water from her (v. 10). When she obeys, he orders her to bring him some bread as well (v. 11). At first glance, Elijah's requests seem rude. However, in a patriarchal system, it would not have been interpreted as such. He possibly assumed that YHWH had already briefed the widow to look after him and that there would be no problem regarding her food supplies (v. 9). The widow did, however, tell Elijah that she did not have the necessary supplies to nurture him. The author sketches a bleak picture, that of a dying family (the widow and her son):

As Jehovah thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but a handful of meal in the jar, and a little oil in the cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die (1 Kings 17:12 [ASV]).

Hearing the widow's anxiety, Elijah assures her that, if she participates and follows his requests, YHWH will provide enough for Elijah, her son and herself and beyond, until rain once again drenches the earth (vv. 13, 14). At this stage, Elijah is a participant – he obeys YHWH's order. The pattern is then transferred to the widow. As soon as she obeys Elijah's instructions, she also becomes a participant.⁹

4.3 The widow as participant

The author describes a situation of extreme scarcity by using language of minimalism: a little water, a morsel of bread, a handful of meal, a little oil, two sticks and a little cake. The scarce food of the widow is in sharp contrast to the rich meals brought to Elijah by the ravens (Van der Walt 2014:213). With this chain of verbs, I will go; I will prepare; we will eat and then we will die, the author predicts the inevitable course of the widow and her son's fate (Nelson 1987:110).

Against this backdrop, it should be understood how brave this woman actually was. She became an active participant, trusting a stranger who

9 The suggestion is given in verse 9 that YHWH had already spoken to the widow. In a sense, Elijah did not instruct the woman to bring him water and bread in the first place. She must have received her orders from YHWH before she even met Elijah. A time frame was not given, leaving it to the imagination of the reader to think that the widow might have thought that she did not hear YHWH correctly. A similar situation is found in Genesis 16:2, where a long time passed after YHWH told Abraham that Sarai would give birth to his child.

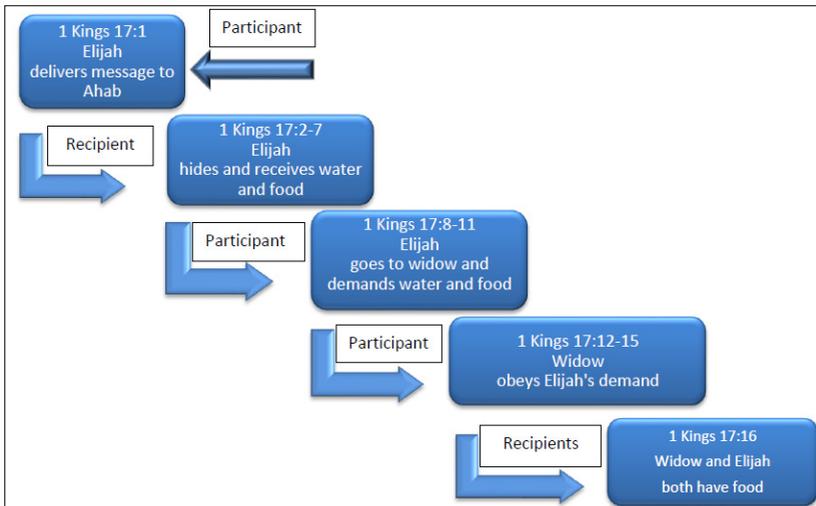
claimed that a God she did not know would provide. This was an extreme risk, with no plan B whatsoever. Nonetheless, she had nothing to lose. Fate lurked on the horizon for her and her son.

4.4 The widow as recipient

Fate did not find its way, as hope was restored. YHWH provided: “the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry” (1 Kings 17:16). The narrative points to the fact that Ba’al cannot do what YHWH did. YHWH previously provided Elijah with food by sending ravens carrying meat and bread. He now provided in an unknown, miraculous way, nurturing Elijah, the widow, and her son. As Elijah did nothing at the brook and only lived by YHWH’s grace, the widow could now enjoy the same grace, experiencing the limitless provisions according to the word of the Lord (Henz-Piazza 2006:167).

4.5 Structural diagram illustrating the cohesion between participating and receiving

The following diagram demonstrates the dialogical flow (movement) between participants and recipients:



Elijah is introduced to the narrative as an active participant when proclaiming to Ahab YHWH’s word that there would be no rain or dew during the next few years (1 Kings 17:1). He further participated when

obeying YHWH by hiding in the Cherith brook. There he became a recipient as the brook delivered water and the ravens brought him food (1 Kings 17:2-7). Then, on YHWH's instruction, he went to the widow in Zarephath and asked her for water and bread, thus making him a participant once again (1 Kings 17:8-11). The widow also plays the role of participant as she obeys his order (1 Kings 17:12-15). Ultimately, both Elijah and the widow are recipients (1 Kings 17:16).

5. A MESSAGE TO THE FIRST READER

The narrative scope investigated and those to follow are addressed to people who find themselves displaced in Babylonia in roughly 586 BC. These first readers would realise that the main characters in the story are not Elijah, nor the widow and definitely not the leaders of the Omride Dynasty. Through each miracle described by the narrator in 1 Kings 17 and further on, YHWH is authenticated as Israel's true King (Waltke 2007:724). Furthermore, as Olley (1998:50) puts it, the first reader should remember that YHWH's presence is a reality.

YHWH's presence is suggested by the *Word of YHWH motif*, placing the focus on YHWH who is true to His word. Elijah and the widow's receptive actions contribute to the fact that YHWH is in command of the life-giving sources of nature and that YHWH has the last say regarding life and/or death. Ba'al is dead. Ba'al does not have a word; he cannot sustain life; he cannot provide; he is not present!

Wyatt (2012:449-450) notices how Elijah's displaced status establishes a stronger relationship between him and the other protagonist in the story, the widow of Zarephath (and her fatherless son). Wyatt continues, by arguing that, in the book of Deuteronomy,

[t]he legal collection that guides the writing of the Deuteronomistic history, often groups the widow, orphan/fatherless, and foreign residents together in its legal provisions (Deut. 10:18-19; 14:29; 24:17-21; 26:12-13; 27:19). One who lives as a widow, orphan or foreign resident shares the status of 'living apart from his or her own kin group'. Furthermore, they share a common plight; they are all dependents that survive by virtue of the care of others. Elijah (the alien), the widow of Zarephath (husbandless), and her son (fatherless), must depend on one another for survival in this story.

Wyatt then mentions that, on the part of the Deuteronomistic author, whether intentional or not, Israel's struggles with its identity are part of the interwoven fabric of its narrative efforts to come to terms with its history.

Be that as it may, the story points to the fact that YHWH is Lord and reigns over creation, kings, foreigners, widows, and orphans.

6. A MESSAGE TO LATTER READERS

The year is 2020. Many a society is filled with strangers, foreigners, and displaced people. Poverty is the order of the day. Globally, the year 2020 has also been marked as the year of COVID, a virus that changed the world as we know it in many ways. In the space of a few months, people have learned how to work differently, in different places, even from home. People have learnt to communicate differently and interact differently. Buying or collecting food is done differently to what was previously considered the norm.

However, in all these difficult situations, dialogue remained. The ways in which people used to interact may have changed, for instance, greeting with the elbow instead of a handshake and speaking through a mask; but dialogue will never leave us. Dialogue can draw people closer to each other or drive them apart. Elijah's first dialogical encounter is with Ahab (1 Kings 17:1). After this brief interaction, Elijah had to flee for his life. The rest of the narrative shows the reader how dialogue can actually bring people closer together, no matter how strange they might be to each other. In the most difficult of situations, Elijah and the widow needed to understand that, by putting their trust in YHWH, they could exchange roles and be assured of YHWH's presence. The displaced foreigner, with no land and means to survive, the husbandless and the fatherless, they can all be drawn closer together through the cycle of being a recipient and a participant. Strange situations can evolve into not so strange outcomes. That is, when YHWH is in control.

When reading the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, some questions come to mind: Why did the prophet Elijah challenge the poor widow of Zarephath to bring him water, a very scarce commodity, and why did he ask her to bring him bread, even after she told him that she had basically nothing left? The answer to these questions could be answered straight from the text:

Then the word of the LORD came to him: "Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food" (1Kings 17:8-9 NIV).

Elijah obeyed YHWH, whom he knew as the living God. The widow, on the other hand, had to trust a strange man from a foreign land and a God she did not know. In the dialogue between her and Elijah, what made her

place her trust in his words? In South Africa, the Xhosas have a term that describes positive interaction between two or more people: *Ubuntu*. One of the aspects of *Ubuntu* can be described as: I see you in me and you see me in yourself (Battle 2009:6). In other words, when a person gazes in another person's eyes, s/he could recognise him-/herself in the other person. *Ubuntu* emphasises that trust between two people can only be achieved when the two persons are able to see themselves in each other.

Did the widow see herself in Elijah? Or did she see her late husband in Elijah? The text does not tell us what happened to her late husband. To the reader, the author makes it clear. The story is neither about Elijah nor about the widow. The main protagonist in this narrative is YHWH. YHWH is mentioned in 7 of the sixteen verses of the narrative (1 Kings 17:1, 2, 5, 8, 12, 14, 16). What or who established trust between Elijah and the widow? It seems that the author suggests that trust lies on a deeper level, beyond that which the eye can see. Elijah saw what YHWH did at the brook. He was a passive recipient. He trusted the word of YHWH and became a participant by going to Zarephath to seek the widow. The widow was a participant when she obeyed (trusted) the word of YHWH – trusted that He would provide. Both she and Elijah became recipients, because one of them had already experienced the provision of YHWH. The other was about to learn and experience the same. YHWH brought the two together. Through dialogue, they learned that they can trust the word of YHWH. The strange encounter thus had a not so strange outcome. The message to the first and latter readers implies that, when strangers who find themselves in need, come together, their trust for a better outcome lies not in the fact that they trust each other, but because they trust YHWH.

7. CONCLUSION

This article made use of a biblical narrative that addresses the scarcity of food. There are many narratives in the Old Testament that could be explored to address many other issues in our society. Dialogue will always remain one of the most important aspects to address issues. It is hoped that this article will stimulate more creative ideas in the field of biblical dialogue. More strange encounters, with not so strange outcomes, are described in biblical narratives. The church could embrace and learn from these narratives.

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