



WOMEN WHO FOLLOWED THE LORD

This month: The Shunammite Woman

In the Second Book of Kings we meet two people whose paths will cross twice in very important ways. One is the prophet Elisha, the disciple of the great Elijah and the one who will literally inherit his mantle. (The first part of the Second Book of Kings tells how Elisha uses the mantle that had fallen from Elijah to strike the Jordan River so that he can cross over it, repeating a miracle which Elijah had earlier performed.)

To get an idea of the greatness Elisha had inherited, we should remember that according to the tradition of the Old Testament only two men, Elijah and Enoch, were worthy to be taken up into heaven without having to die. (This is why one of the Armenian Church hymns for requiem services, *Ee Verin*, refers to the heavenly Jerusalem as a place where “Enoch and Elijah live in old age in dove-like form.”) Elijah is taken up into heaven in a whirlwind, a momentous event which Elisha witnesses. It is from this remarkable prophet that Elisha inherits his gifts and his own prophetic responsibility.

The second person we meet here is an unnamed Shunammite woman. II Kings 4:8 calls her “wealthy” and also tells us she is married, most likely to a man consider-

ably older than she is. The area she lives in is a historical one. King Saul and his son Jonathan had both been killed in battle nearby; the soldiers of Israel had won important victories over the Philistines on the ground near her home. She may have seen the great Elijah passing in front of her door, for it opened onto the village of Shunem, which sat at the edges of the rich grain fields of Esdraelon. A road from Nazareth to Jerusalem went through the plain of Esdraelon, and this road the prophet had traveled many times. The Shunammite woman might even have known about Elisha before she ever met him, for he became known throughout the northern kingdom for miracles and acts of charity. One of the best-known of these was his increasing the oil in the jars of a prophet's widow so that she could pay her debts.

The Second Book of Kings relates that Elisha often passed her house, as his mentor had done, and that one day she offered him food. It became his habit to stop whenever he passed, and finally the woman told her husband that they should make a "small roof chamber" for him so that he would have a private retreat whenever he wanted it. Obviously she is a woman of faith and reverence for God, for she tells her husband, "I perceive that this is a holy man of God." She is the kind of person who wants to be around such holiness.

After accepting hospitality from her many times, Elisha asks her how he can repay it, but she tells him there is nothing she wants or needs from him. Elisha's servant Gehazi reminds the prophet that the couple is childless, and that having a child would undoubtedly fulfill their greatest wish. Elisha then calls the woman to him and tells her she will have a son within the year. She is skeptical, but sure enough she does have a child.

The next part of the narrative picks up when the boy is about twelve. It is harvest season, a time during which the whole valley around the village would be burning hot. The air would be still, the sand hot and fiery to the feet. The boy has gone out among the reapers with his father, and begins to complain, "My head, my head." He is taken to his mother, who holds him for hours on her lap, but he dies (probably of sunstroke).

His mother's reaction is a picture of extraordinary faith. She does not cry out or lament; she doesn't even call her husband. She takes her boy up to the "bed of the man of God" in the roof chamber and lays him there, and then sets out on a donkey to find Elisha at Mount Carmel. When she sees him and he asks her, "Is it well with the child?" she answers, "It is well." So ready is she to put her faith in God that she can say this, knowing that Elisha has God's power to restore her son's life.

Yet she is in bitter distress, and Elisha, seeing this, orders Gehazi the servant to go and lay his staff on the child's face. Gehazi does so, but it is not till Elisha comes himself to pray over the boy and stretch his own body over the child's that the youngster revives.

Once again, when her son is restored to her, the woman is silent. She falls at Elisha's feet, bowing to the ground, but says nothing. Her faith in God has been rewarded, and

there are no words to tell her feelings or express her gratitude.

The Shunammite and Elisha are described as meeting again in II Kings 8:1-6. Elisha comes to warn her (apparently her husband has died by this time) to leave the rich grain fields around Shunem because drought and famine are spreading in that direction. (He had just come back from Samaria, where conditions were so bad that some people had resorted to cannibalism, and he knew that food was becoming so scarce that an ass's head was selling for the incredible price of eighty pieces of silver.) Heeding his warning, the Shunammite woman uncomplainingly and silently picks up her whole life and goes to the land of the Philistines, where she and her son spend the next seven years.

They finally return, only to find that their land and house have been confiscated. She goes to appeal to King Jehoram, who at that moment is asking Gehazi to "tell me all the great things that Elisha had done." When the woman walks in, Gehazi identifies her as the one whose son Elisha raised from the dead. King Jehoram asks the woman, who confirms Gehazi's words. Then Jehoram orders an official to "restore all that was hers, together with all the produce of the fields from the day that she left the land until now."

This dramatic ending to the story of the Shunammite shows us a woman who could be calm, quiet, and yet very effective in times of crisis. It is she who gets Elisha to come with her and restore her son's life. It is she who stands up to the "powers that be" in demanding the return of her house and lands in Shunem. It is she who faces the difficulties of widowhood, loss of her son's life, and the need to displace herself and the boy for a long seven years. She does so with courage and fortitude, because her faith in God is absolute. She is able to recognize Elisha for what he is, a compassionate and powerful prophet, because her own spiritual sight is strong and clear. Like many others we meet in the Bible, her silence is powerful because it is filled with the strength of God.

Information for this article was taken from Theology for Non-Theologians by James Cantelon.

*Published monthly except July and August
Department of Religious Education
Diocese of the Armenian Church
Bishop Khajag Barsamian, Primate*

*630 Second Avenue
New York, New York 10016*

*Editor: Valerie Goekjian Zahirsky
Layout/Design: Adrina Zanazanian
Typesetting: Sharon Shively
Printing: Michael Kehyaian*

Subscription: \$5.00 a year.
Bulk rates for parishes and schools are available and will be furnished upon request.