

# RAISED FROM THE DEAD: RATIONALIST APPROACHES?

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## INTRODUCTION

The Bible contains a few accounts of people seemingly raised from the dead. In this article we will explore attempts at more rationalist explanations given to these episodes that attempt to limit the violation the laws of nature as we know them. We will be dealing with the three episodes in the Bible where a person is described as being brought back to physical life from death.<sup>1</sup>

## THE SON OF THE WIDOW OF ZAREPATH

I Kings 17 tells of the widow of Zarepath who provided Elijah the prophet with bread and water during a drought, and was rewarded by having her flour and oil not run out. After this, we are told how Elijah saved her son:

*(17) And it came to pass after these things that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him. (18) And she said unto Elijah: 'What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God, that you should come unto me to bring my sin to remembrance, and cause the death of my son?' (19) And he said unto her: 'Give me thy son.' And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into the upper chamber, where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed. (20) And he cried unto the LORD, and said: 'O LORD my God, hast Thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, and let her son die?' (21) And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the LORD, and said: 'O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come back into him.' (22) And the LORD hearkened unto the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back into him, and he revived. (23) And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the upper chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother; and Elijah said: 'See, thy son liveth.' (24) And the woman said to Elijah: 'Now I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth.'*

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TB *Sanhedrin* 113a considers this a case of *tehiyat hametim*, resurrection of the dead. This is the approach followed by the classic commentaries, Rashi, Ralbag, Abrabanel and Metzudat David. However, Radak records an opinion, "there is someone who says", that the boy was very sick, to the extent that "his breathing stopped, and no signs of life could be recognized", but that he was not actually dead. This approach is based on the fact that the narration does not describe the child as dead, but rather *there was no breath [neshama] left in him*, an expression similar to that found in Daniel 10:17, *there is no spirit [neshama] left in me*. In Daniel, the phrase means that he lost his strength, but he was still alive, and so is the case in Kings. Radak himself writes that this interpretation goes too far, and the correct approach is that he actually died. Based on this approach, when Elijah *stretched himself upon the child three times* and revived him, some kind of warming of the dead child was taking place. Radak, although accepting that Elijah *stretched himself upon the child* to "warm him up with his natural heat from his face and flesh" explains that it was still miraculous, but that miracles are performed "as naturally as possible."<sup>2</sup>

Even so, Radak (in his commentary to verse 20) states that Targum Jonathan seems to follow this approach, when he interprets Elijah's prayer as asking that "her son will not die." Radvaz, in his responsa (6:2203) also brings this view and rejects it, as all rabbinic literature treats this as a case of reviving of a dead child. He further states that the words of Targum Jonathan can be understood to mean that the boy was dead, and Elijah was praying that he not remain dead.

The opinion brought anonymously in Radak is also brought in R. Betzalel Ashkenazi's work *Shitah Mekubetzet* (to *Baba Metzia* 114b) in the name of "the student of Rabbenu Peretz", the famed Tosafist. The discussion that interested the Tosafists was how Elijah, who according to TB *Baba Metzia* 114b was a cohen, could allow himself to become impure by being in contact with a dead body. A few solutions are provided to this problem; the one brought by the student of Rabbenu Peretz is that the boy was not actually dead. Note that this approach was not brought to provide a rationalist explanation for the miracle here, but was a solution to a question Tosafot asked on the Talmudic tradition that Elijah was a cohen.<sup>3</sup>

Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (1:42), explains that the word *mavet* in the Bible can mean either "death" or "severe illness". He gives one example of this usage, 2 Samuel 25:37, where Nabal's reaction to what Abigail tells him is *his heart died [vayamat] within him*, while the next verse states that *About ten days later the LORD struck Nabal and he died*. Thus the word *vayamat* regarding the heart of Nabal must be that he had a severe illness, but he did not yet actually die. Maimonides states that "For this reason it is stated concerning the son of the woman of Zarapeth that *his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him*. The simple expression *va-yamat* (and he died) would have given the idea that he was very ill, near death." Meaning, that in this case, in order to show that the child was really dead, not just critically ill, the verse explicitly states that *there was no breath left in him*. Maimonides does bring the approach of "Some of the Andalusian authors" who "say that his breath was suspended, so that no breathing could be perceived at all",<sup>4</sup> but Maimonides does not accept this interpretation here.<sup>5</sup>

The Andalusian scholars that Maimonides is referring to have not been identified,<sup>6</sup> but their interpretation, along with the approach of the "the student of Rabbenu Peretz", is evidence of an interpretation of this narrative, although widely disputed, that the child was never really dead, and so this is not necessarily a case of someone being brought back from the dead.

#### THE SON OF THE SHUNAMITE WOMAN

In one of the many parallels between the narratives of Elijah and Elisha, Elisha also revives the dead child of a woman who provided him with hospitality. In 2 Kings 4 we read:

(17) *And the woman conceived, and bore a son at that season, when the time came round, as Elisha had said unto her.* (18) *And when the child was grown, it fell on a day, that he went out to his father to the reapers.* (19) *And he said unto his father: 'My head, my head.'* And he said to his servant: *'Carry him to his mother.'* (20) *And when he had taken him, and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon, and he died.* (21) *And she went up, and laid him on the bed of the man of God, and shut the door upon him, and went out.*

She then travels to find Elisha the prophet: (27) *And when she came to the man of God to the hill, she caught hold of his feet. And Gehazi came near to*

*thrust her away; but the man of God said: 'Let her alone; for her soul is bitter within her; and the LORD hath hid it from me, and hath not told Me.'* (28) *Then she said: 'Did I desire a son of my lord? did I not say: Do not deceive me?'* (29) *Then he said to Gehazi: 'Gird up thy loins, and take my staff in thy hand, and go thy way; if thou meet any man, salute him not; and if any salute thee, answer him not; and lay my staff upon the face of the child.'* (30) *And the mother of the child said: 'As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.'* *And he arose, and followed her.* (31) *And Gehazi passed on before them, and laid the staff upon the face of the child; but there was neither voice, nor hearing. Wherefore he returned to meet him, and told him, saying: 'The child is not awaked.'* (32) *And when Elisha was come into the house, behold, the child was dead, and lay upon his bed.* (33) *He went in therefore, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the LORD.* (34) *And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and he stretched himself upon him; and the flesh of the child waxed warm.* (35) *Then he returned, and walked in the house once to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him; and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.* (36) *And he called Gehazi, and said: 'Call this Shunammite.'* *So he called her. And when she was come in unto him, he said: 'Take up thy son.'* (37) *Then she went in, and fell at his feet, and bowed down to the ground; and she took up her son, and went out.*

Although the scene described in verse 19 could be one of heatstroke and dehydration leading to an appearance of death,<sup>7</sup> here we have the word *vayamot* (and he died) in verse 20, an explicit pronouncement of the narration, one not found in the previous case of the son of the widow of Zarepath in I Kings 17.<sup>8</sup> Although we saw above that Maimonides stated that the term *vayamot* (and he died) can also mean a near death state, R. Yosef Kaspi, in his commentary to 2 Kings 4:20 writes that that cannot be the case here, since the narration pronounces that *behold, the child was dead* in verse 32, similar to the terminology used in 1 Kings 14:17 to describe the death of the son of Jeroboam. For this reason, and the fact that there was no cohen problem to resolve as in the case of Elijah, none of the classical commentaries bring an opinion that this boy was not actually dead.

As in the case of Elijah, Radak explains (verse 34) that Elisha *lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth* to "warm him up with his natural heat from his face, hands and eyes" since although this was a miraculous revival of a dead child, miracles are performed "along with a little action in the manner of the world."

#### THE MAN THROWN INTO ELISHA'S GRAVE

The last example of reviving a dead person is the most unusual. We are told nothing about the deceased, and he is revived by coming into contact with the bones of Elisha. For our purposes, this episode seems to be the most difficult to explain in a non supernatural way, as the person here was presumably dead for a while, as he was about to be buried, and we are not told anything along the lines of that he lost his breath or fainted in the heat as in the previous two cases.

The brief narrative is found in II Kings 13: (20) *And Elisha died, and they buried him. Now the bands of the Moabites used to invade the land at the coming in of the year. (21) And it came to pass, as they were burying a man, that, behold, they spied a band; and they cast the man into the grave of Elisha; and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood up on his feet.*

Although *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* (chapter 33) states that this person would live on and have a son, TB *Sanhedrin* 47a comments that "he *stood up on his feet*, but he did not go home", meaning that he was only revived temporarily. Abarbanel writes that this is the approach that makes more sense, as the miracle was only needed to remove the dead wicked person from the burial place of Elisha. Theoretically, that approach could be used to explain that the person being buried appeared to be dead, but was in fact just very ill, and this was a case of premature burial. When he touches the bones of Elisha he momentarily revived, only to actually die soon after. However, such an explanation does not appear in the classic commentaries.

#### CONCLUSION

We have seen that the Jewish commentators did not seek out rationalistic explanations for the three episodes of revival of the dead in the Bible. Only one of these narratives has a history of an explanation that the child was not

actually dead, the son of the widow of Zarepath, and that explanation was brought to harmonize the narrative with the rabbinic tradition that Elijah was a cohen who should not have been in contact with a corpse. Thus, among Jewish thinkers we find no approach seeking to explain these narratives on the grounds that the miracle is considered unreasonable or too extreme. This is the case despite the fact that Maimonides, in his definition of the term for death, stated that it can sometimes mean a severe illness with the appearance of death. The commentators, and even Maimonides himself, did not avail themselves of this rationalistic escape clause to explain these episodes of revival. It would seem that the resurrection of the dead was not deemed any more extraordinary than any of the other miracles recorded in the Bible, and did not need any special rationalistic explanation.

#### NOTES

1. Other narratives in which dry bones come back to life in a prophetic vision (Ezekiel 37), or when the spirit of Samuel seemingly returns from the afterlife, but could not be seen by Saul (I Sam. 28:14), indicating that it was not a full fledged physical resurrection, are not relevant here.
2. This is the way Ralbag describes the procedure, "mouth to mouth...so that the spirit will go from the limbs of the prophet to the limbs of the child." Note though that Ralbag explicitly states that the child was dead in his commentary to verse 17, so he agrees with Radak's conclusion, that this was the method used to revive the child who was completely dead at the time. See also, Mordechai Cohen, "The Qimhi Family", in Magne Sabo, ed., *Hebrew Bible Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation – 1/2: The Middle Ages* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 200), p. 399.
3. For a lengthy discussion of other ways to resolve this problem, see Yosef Kapach, ed., *Peirush Neviim Rishonim l'Rav Avraham ben Shlomo* (Kiryat Ono: Machon Mishnat haRambam, 2006), pp. 323-328. R. Avraham ben Shlomo was a 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century Yemenite Bible scholar.
4. M. Friedlander, ed., *The Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), pp. 56-57.
5. See Abarbanel on 2 Kings 17:17; Yosef Kapach, ed., *The Guide for the Perplexed* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977), p. 63, notes 8-10. Note that even Moses Narbonne, the 14<sup>th</sup> century philosopher often considered an arch-rationalist, does not interpret the death here as anything other than actual physical death. See his comments in Yaakov Goldenthal, ed., *Beur l'Sefer Moreh Nevuchim* (Vienna: 1853), p. 5a. Maimonides was accused of claiming that there is no revival of the dead based on this passage in the *Guide* in a letter from Judah alPachar (haRofeh) to Radak, *Iggrot v'Sheelot u'Teshuvot* (Warsaw: 1877), p. 34. See also Aryeh Leib Schlossberg, ed., *Sefer Moreh Nevuchim* (Warsaw: 1904), p. 60, note 1 from Dr. S. Scheyer.
6. Yosef Kapach, ed., *The Guide for the Perplexed* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977), p. 63, note 10.
7. According to Abarbanel this is exactly what the boy's father assumed.

8. Yehuda Kiel, ed., *Da'at Mikra - Book of Kings* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989), p. 499.



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