

Queens, Widows, and Mesdames: The Role of Women in the Elijah-Elisha Narrative

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The Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 13) features a higher density of women than usual in the Hebrew Bible. What do these women contribute to the narrative unit(s)? Through semiotic analysis, this paper presents a complex of three socio-religious and theological themes: food-famine, life-death, and orthodoxy-idolatry. These semiotics do not come into sharp focus, it is argued, without the analysis of the women of 1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 13. The semiotic axes of food-famine, life-death, and orthodoxy-idolatry are, further, interwoven into and indicative of the miraculous and prophetic activity of Elijah and Elisha.

KEYWORDS: *Elijah, Elisha, Narrative, Semiotic/s, Women*

INTRODUCTION

The Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle begins at 1 Kgs 17, the start of Elijah's prophetic ministry, and continues almost without interruption to 2 Kgs 13, which records the death of Elisha. In this portion of the Kings record there features a high density of women who come into the narrative spotlight, which is an uncommon phenomenon in the Hebrew Bible; rather, women typically feature seldom and sporadically in the Scriptures. The cadre of women in the Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle essentially always appears in pairs, interestingly, just as Elijah and Elisha are presented as a couplet.¹ The cast of females in 1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 13 include:² two mothers whose sons are resuscitated (1 Kgs 17:17–24 and 2 Kgs 4:8–37), two widows who receive miraculous food supply (1 Kgs

1. The only exception of a female who does not have a narratological pair is the maid-servant of Naaman's wife (2 Kgs 5).

2. This excludes matronymics (1 Kgs 22:42; 2 Kgs 12:1).

17:8–16 and 2 Kgs 4:1–7),³ and two cannibalistic mothers (2 Kgs 4:26–29).⁴ But perhaps most striking is the pair of queens.

The only two queens—in the entire Kings corpus—who, beyond their mere mention or reference in a matronymics list, are actually furnished with a character sketch and a voice⁵ are Jezebel and Athaliah.⁶ Jezebel figures dauntingly at the beginning of the Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle with the contest between Baal and YHWH atop Mt. Carmel and the subsequent aftermath (1 Kgs 18–19).⁷ Jezebel emerges again as the antagonist in 1 Kgs 21 with the murder of Naboth and the sequestration of his vineyard. Finally, near the end of the Elijah-Elisha cycle Jezebel comes to the narrative fore as her demise and death are related (2 Kgs 9). Subsequently, Athaliah features predominately at the end of the Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle where she instigates a genocidal coup d'état for ascendancy of the throne (2 Kgs 11). Consequently, it is almost as though the two nefarious queens bring equilibrium to the narrative cycle which features two conspicuous men of God, Elijah and Elisha; or, inversely, it may be seen that Elijah and Elisha are appointed at such a time to temper the two wicked queens of Israel and Judah.

But how do all the women of the Elijah-Elisha cycle function in general and what do they contribute to biblical interpretation?⁸ Whereas several studies have highlighted either individual women or women

3. In the case of the widow of Zarephath she is one and the same as the mother whose son is revived.

4. There are even two “she-bears” who devour 40 youths (2 Kgs 2:24, ESV). Actually, דבֵּים can also mean “he-bears” (the plural inflection is masculine), but שתיים (“two [or more]”) is a feminine dual cardinal form.

5. See Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Bible and Literature Series 9; Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 23–24. Berlin further explains “[t]he way a character is ‘shown’ is through his own words—his speech—and his actions” with the result that “characters . . . further the plot and . . . create characterization” (38).

6. There is direct mentioning of Israelite/Judean queens in 1 Kgs 11:19 and 15:13. The Queen of Sheba receives a full character sketch (1 Kgs 10:1, 4, 10, 13), though she is exceptional in that she is a foreign queen.

7. Though Jezebel is not actually at Mt. Carmel, she is nonetheless at the forefront of the events (cf. 1 Kgs 18:46; 19:1).

8. Cf. Tamis Hoover Rentería, “The Elijah/Elisha Stories: A Socio-cultural Analysis of Prophets and People in Ninth-Century B.C.E. Israel,” in *Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective* (ed. Robert B. Coote; Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), 75–126, esp. 114–17, 123–25. Of course there are several other factors beyond gender issues in this corpus; see, e.g., Leah Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics against Baal Worship* (Pretoria Oriental Series 11; ed. A. Van Selms; Leiden: Brill, 1968); Thomas Overholt, *Cultural Anthropology and the Old Testament* (GBS; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

couplets within the aforementioned narrative unit,⁹ there are few studies that look at all the women throughout.¹⁰ In what follows it shall be argued that were it not for the plethora of women in the Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle, certain socio-religious and theological themes may not be elucidated from the textual unit as saliently as they are with the large cast of females. Hence, it is through a semiotic analysis of the females of 1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 13 where thematic commonalities (and variations) may be viewed. These semiotic elements, furthermore, are also circuitously descriptive of Elijah and Elisha's prophetic ministry. But first, a word concerning semiotics.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

A. J. Greimas is considered the pioneer of semiotics, and as such is also the creator of the so-called semiotic square.¹¹ "Greimas's square is one of the most useful things Greimas has offered literary criticism."¹² The square specifically and semiotics in general is a methodological device that helps to facilitate the identification of linguistic signs (Gk. *sēma*, or seme) in a given text.

9. E.g., Deborah A. Appler, "From Queen to Cuisine: Food Imagery in the Jezebel Narrative," *Semeia* 86 (1999): 55–71; Robert J. Merez, "Jezebel's Oath (1 Kgs 19,2)," *Bib* 90 (2009): 257–59; Stephanie Wyatt, "Jezebel, Elijah, and the Widow of Zarephath: A *Ménage à Trios* that Estranges the Holy and Makes Holy the Strange," *JSOT* 36 (2012): 435–58; Stuart Lasine, "Jehoram and the Cannibal Mothers (2 Kings 6.24–33): Solomon's Judgment in an Inverted World," *JSOT* 50 (1991): 27–53; Gina Hens-Piazza, "Forms of Violence and the Violence of Forms: Two Cannibal Mothers before a King (2 Kings 6:24–33)," *JFSR* 14 (1998): 91–104; idem, *Nameless, Blameless, and Without Shame: Two Cannibal Mothers before a King* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2003); P. J. Berlyn, "The Great Ladies," *JBQ* 24 (1996): 26–35; Amy Kalmanofsky, "Women of God: Maternal Grief and Religious Response in 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4," *JSOT* 36 (2011): 55–74; Mary E. Shields, "Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman: Role and Power Reversals in 2 Kings 4*," *JSOT* 58 (1993): 59–69; Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17–19," *JBL* 101 (1982): 333–50; Stanley D. Walters, "All is Well," *CTJ* 47 (2012): 192–214.

10. Although see e.g., Mercedes L. Garcia Bachmann, *Women at Work in the Deuteronomistic History* (SBL International Voice in Biblical Studies 4; Atlanta: SBL, 2013); Bradley L. Crowell, "Good Girl, Bad Girl: Foreign Women of the Deuteronomistic History in Postcolonial Perspective," *BibInt* 21 (2013): 1–18.

11. See A. J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method* (trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie; Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); A. J. Greimas and Francis Rastier. "The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints," *Yale French Studies* 41 (1968): 86–105.

12. Ronald Schleifer, "Introduction," in *Structural Semantics*, xxxiii.

Jean Calloud, a spearhead of biblical semiotic exegesis, has explicated that “[t]he objective of semiotics is to enable us to speak of meaning other than in terms of empirical perception or of interpretive procedures. It proposes a way of arriving at a formal description of that which we call meaning, which is immanent in the text and therefore not directly perceptible.”¹³ “The semiotic form” moreover “will be seen in the form of pairs of semantic ‘characteristics’ or ‘values’ which are the opposite to [*sic*] each other. These are called ‘semes’ (s).”¹⁴ In Greimas’s verbiage, these pairs of semantic values are isopoties, and isomorphism—“the formal correspondence between different levels . . . of language”¹⁵—yields homologation.¹⁶

The semiotic square is displayed as such:

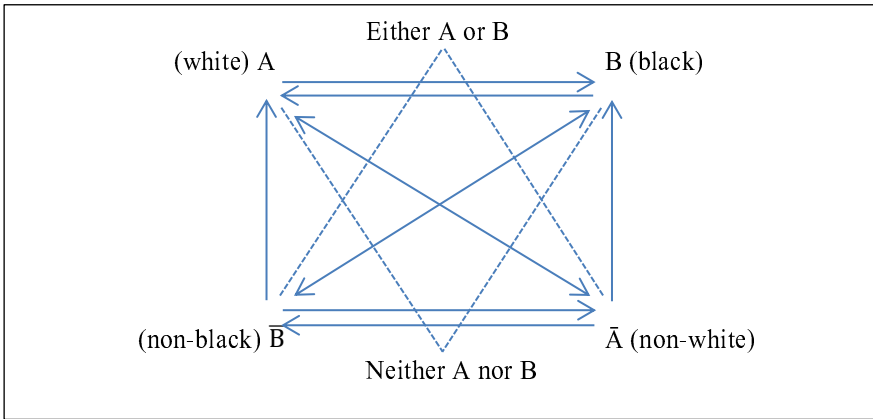


Fig. 1: Calloud’s Adaptation of Greimas’ Semiotic Square.¹⁷

“Semiotic square is the name given to the model used to bring out the three principal relationships to which all the signifiers must be submitted so that they can give us a demonstrable semantic universe,”¹⁸ writes Calloud. These three principles include *contrariety* ($A | B$), *contradiction*

13. Jean Calloud, “A Few Comments on Structural Semiotics: A Brief Review of a Method and Some Explanation of Procedures,” *Semeia* 15 (1979): 53.

14. *Ibid.*, 55.

15. Schleifer, “Introduction,” xxix.

16. *Ibid.*, xxx.

17. Calloud “Structural Semiotics,” 68.

18. *Ibid.*, 68.

(A | non-A [\bar{A}]), and *subcontrariety* (non-A [\bar{A}] | non-B [\bar{B}]).¹⁹ To articulate this schema differently, Nancy Armstrong states: “Once any unit of meaning (S_1) is conceived, we automatically conceive of the absence of that meaning (\bar{S}_1), as well as an opposing system of meaning (S_2) that correspondingly implies its own absence (\bar{S}_2).”²⁰

Semiotics comports well into synchronic exegesis,²¹ and notwithstanding, it is also advantageous for diachronic exegesis.²² In this paper semiotics and the semiotic square shall be utilized as a methodological tool to advance observations from primarily a synchronic vantage. Ultimately, the religious factors of the Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle as it concerns women are of primary interest. Indeed, as Daniel Patte maintains, “structural semiotic methodologies are ideally equipped to elucidate the ‘religious dimensions’ of biblical texts—dimensions which are strangely neglected in other kinds of critical biblical studies.”²³

Because of the methodology undertaken, the literary interests are limited within the scope of material. Further, relevant parts of several stories will not be presented separately and in chronological order, for example; instead, the 1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 13 unit shall be viewed and interacted with as a whole, i.e., as one collage of female characters who have a significant function in it.²⁴ The three main socio-religious and

19. See *ibid.*, 68–71. Schleifer (“Introduction,” xxxiii) uses the term “arbitrary” instead of “subcontrariety.”

20. Nancy Armstrong, “Inside Greimas’s Square: Literary Characters and Cultural Restraints” in *The Sign in Music and Literature* (ed. Wendy Steiner; Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 54.

21. Schleifer, “Introduction,” xxxiii. Cf. Calloud, “Structural Semiotics,” 71–72.

22. Daniel Patte, “Critical Biblical Studies from a Semiotic Perspective” in *Thinking in Signs: Semiotics and Biblical Studies . . . Thirty Years After* (SemeiaSt 81; ed. Daniel Patte; Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 6. Albeit, Patte (*ibid.*, 3) realizes “semiotics cannot be reduced to any single critical method.” Cf. also Jean Delorme, “Orientations of a Literary Semiotics Questioned by the Bible” in *Thinking in Signs* (trans. Jean-Paul Pichot, Daniel Patte, and Victoria Phillips), 52.

23. Patte, “Semiotic Perspective,” 6–7. “Semiotics differs fundamentally in its operation from the method by which we pass from text to language, the results of which are a grammar and lexicon. In semiotics we move from a text to a system of correspondences which organize the many movements from one level of text to another” (Calloud, “Structural Semiotics,” 76).

24. Along these lines, Delorme (“Orientations of a Literary Semiotics,” 36) states: “Semiotic analysis makes it possible to construe the operations that enable one to *construct a text as a discourse*” (italics original).

theological semiotic axes,²⁵ or isotopies, orbiting the women of the Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle are food-famine, life-death, and orthodoxy-idolatry. Each isotopy or axis shall be analyzed individually; it will additionally be related how these three isotopies create one grand isomorphism of homologation, that is, how the aforementioned socio-religious and theological motifs each interrelate one to the other.

FOOD-FAMINE

The isotopy of food and famine in the land of Israel, and beyond, is set in tension in the Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle. Food, that is to say vegetation and successful agriculture, is the norm which is ruptured at the point of Elijah's pronouncement to King Ahab: "Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word'" (1 Kgs 17:1).²⁶ Hence a famine ensued for three and a half years, according to biblical tradition (Luke 4:25; Jas 5:17; cf. 1 Kgs 18:1).

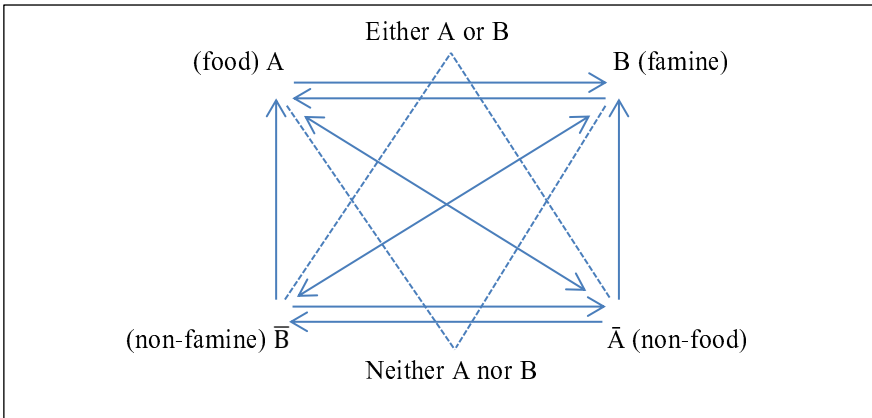


Fig. 2: Semiotic Square with Food-Famine Axis.

Within the *contrariety* of food and famine ($A \mid B$), there are also *contradictory* factors, that is non-famine conditions in the face of famine ($B \mid \bar{B}$).

25. "The relationship between the contraries is sometimes called the *axis* or *semantic axis*, since we can bring out the value by listing a characteristic common to two opposing categories" (Calloud, "Structural Semiotics," 69).

26. All biblical references are quoted from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001) unless otherwise specified (by the author's initials).

Even though there is, presumably, little to no food available to the masses, this is apparently not the case for the royalty and their officials. First Kings 18:19, which, in narrative time, is near the end of a famine, states there were “450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, *who eat at Jezebel’s table*” (emphasis added); thus, the implication is that these prophets were not too affected by the famine. These same prophets are those gathered atop Mt. Carmel for the demonstration of the true god; here we find another non-famine element. When preparations for the divine match of which god can produce fire from heaven are underway, both the prophets of Baal and Asherah on the one side and Elijah the prophet of YHWH on the other are furnished with a bull for the sacrifice (1 Kgs 18:23–24); moreover, for Elijah to drench his sacrifice with four jars of water thrice is quite shocking (1 Kgs 18:33–35). In light of the longevous famine these are rare commodities. After the cultic showdown, the drought/famine ends as rain from the LORD pours down after Elijah prays for it (1 Kgs 18:41–46).

Before this, Elijah received sustenance of food and water during the famine. While beside a flowing brook, Elijah is fed for a time with bread and meat that ravens deliver to him—all at the command of God (1 Kgs 17:2–7). When these provisions expire, God sends Elijah to a widow in Zarephath where the famine is also strong. There in the land of Sidon, Elijah miraculously provides for the widow and her son a continuous supply of flour and oil until the famine ended (1 Kgs 17:14–16).²⁷ Consequently, there is food in the face of famine, making these contexts non-famine environments (\bar{B}).

Another type of *contradictory* semiotic is when non-food becomes food ($A \mid \bar{A}$) due to the extreme severity of a famine. The two mothers who make a pact to eat one of each of their sons on consecutive days serves as such an example (2 Kgs 6:25–31).²⁸ Cannibalism is a byproduct of the Deuteronomistic curse of famine (Deut 28:53–57).²⁹ As a curse, and nowhere permitted in the law, cannibalism can be seen as the semiotic equivalent of eating non-food. Indeed, the king of Israel’s

27. The superabundance of oil caused by Elisha (via God) for another woman, the widow of a diseased son of a prophet, is done not in the setting of a famine, but rather to pay a debt (2 Kgs 4:1–7).

28. This episode can be seen as a polemic of the reign of King Solomon (cf. 1 Kgs 3:16–28); see e.g., Lasine, “Jehoram and the Cannibal Mothers.”

29. Cf. Lev 26:29; cf. also Isa 9:19; Jer 19:9; Lam 2:20; 4:10. “Cannibalism is a frequent theme in ancient Near Eastern curses” (Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Rituals and Ethics* [CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004], 321). See also Jeffery H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 270–71.

horror (2 Kgs 6:30–31) and the second mother’s reticence (2 Kgs 6:29) gauges the prohibitory understanding of the practice.

Above we have distinguished two types of semiotic contradictions of food and famine ($A \mid \bar{A}$ and $B \mid \bar{B}$) because the textual unit (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 13) has lent itself to do so. “From a semantic point of view,” though, Calloud states, “there is no difference of meaning between A and \bar{A} or B and \bar{B} . Only the presence or absence of the negative differentiates them.”³⁰ In this case, accordingly, Elijah, the widow, and the starving mothers find food (A) in the midst of a famine (B) from unlikely (\bar{B}) and unnatural (\bar{A}) sources.

LIFE-DEATH

The semantic axis (isotopy) of life and death also features predominately in the Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle.³¹ This isotopy is often, but not always, the result of the previous isotopic seme famine in 1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 13. Life and death, and gradations in between, are lucidly depicted with the two mothers whose sons are resuscitated and with the queens Jezebel and Athaliah.

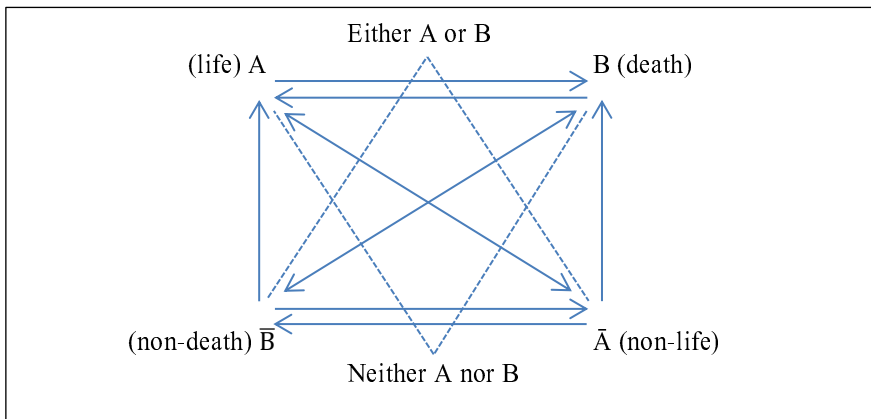


Fig. 3: Semiotic Square with Life-Death Axis.

Concerning the first pair, the widow’s son first falls ill to the point where his soul is not in him (1 Kgs 17:17), and the Shunammite boy arrives at the same condition after the time his head began to hurt (2 Kgs 4:18–20).

30. Calloud, “Structural Semiotics,” 69.

31. Cf. Greimas, *Structural Semantics*, 258–61, 263–5, 269–70.

Death (B) is the narrative implication of nonlife (\bar{A}).³² But, after the miraculous (or magical?³³) resuscitation of both boys, by Elijah and Elisha respectively (1 Kgs 17:21–22; 2 Kgs 4:34–35), the youths reenter a living state (A) which is the narrative implication of non-death (\bar{B}). Therefore, the boys are alive (A) and then not alive (\bar{A}), hence dead (B); but then revived they are not dead (\bar{B}), hence alive (A).

The two queens are intensely involved in the isotopy of life and death (as mentioned earlier). At the beginning of 1 Kgs 19 Jezebel issues a death threat at Elijah because the latter slaughtered her prophets at Mt. Carmel (vv. 1–2). However, instead of Elijah being killed (B) on the spot or shortly thereafter, he flees from Samaria and at the far end of Judah collapses and bids God to let him die (\bar{A}): “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers” (1 Kgs 19:4). Despite this request he is revived (\bar{B}) with food from an angel (1 Kgs 19:5–7).³⁴ Subsequently, when Elijah arrives at Horeb the mountain of God, he recounts to God the death threat on his life (A) (1 Kgs 19:8–10, 13–14).

Though Jezebel does not kill Elijah, she does have Naboth killed so that Ahab can acquire the former’s vineyard (1 Kgs 21:1–16). The word of the LORD comes to Elijah, and Elijah prophesies a death according to the law of talion: “Thus says the LORD: ‘In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood’” (1 Kgs 21:19). Also “of Jezebel the LORD also said, ‘The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel’” (1 Kgs 21:23; cf. 2 Kgs 9:10). In the end, both Ahab and Jezebel are murdered (B); in the case of the king his blood was indeed lapped up by dogs (1 Kgs 22:38), and in the case of the queen the dogs both ate her corpse and licked her blood (2 Kgs 9:34–37).

Interestingly, while Jezebel (and Ahab) tries repeatedly to kill Elijah, Elijah himself does not die (\bar{B})! When Elijah is taken up to heaven in a flaming chariot this is a subcontrariety of life-death: he is in a sense neither dead nor alive, thus either non-dead or non-alive.³⁵

32. For \bar{A} (\bar{B}) being the narrative implication of B (A), see Calloud, “Structural Semiotics,” 69.

33. See T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (WBC 13; Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 52.

34. Both the mention of “cakes” (עוגה: 1 Kgs 19:6) and “jar” (חפץ: 1 Kgs 19:6) mirror the terms used in the initial episode of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:13 and 1 Kgs 17:12, 14, 16, respectively).

35. It seems to me the longitude poles on Calloud’s adapted square should read “Either \bar{A} or \bar{B} ” to differentiate between it and “Neither A nor B” (Calloud, “Structural Semiotics,” 68). *Sic?*

The queen mother Athaliah is also enmeshed in life-death semiotics. She assassinated the royal offspring in order to secure the throne of Judah for herself; yet, Joash was hidden away and not put to death (1 Kgs 11:1–3). Instead, Joash grew and six years later there is a usurpation of the throne and Joash is declared king over Judah (2 Kgs 11:4–14). Subsequently, Athaliah is put to death (B) outside of the temple (2 Kgs 11:15–16, 20); further, “they killed Mattan the priest of Baal before the altars” (2 Kgs 11:18b). As a result, Athaliah wanted all royal offspring to die (B); yet, Joash did not die (\bar{B}), though neither was he acknowledged to be alive (\bar{A}) for six years. When Joash was presented alive (A), Athaliah was thence executed (B).

ORTHODOXY-IDOLATRY

Orthodoxy and idolatry is an isotopy which correlates with the above delineated isotopies;³⁶ for, in many ways religion finds its exigency in issues of life and death, food or the lack thereof. Once more, the females of the Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle vividly elucidate this semantic axis.

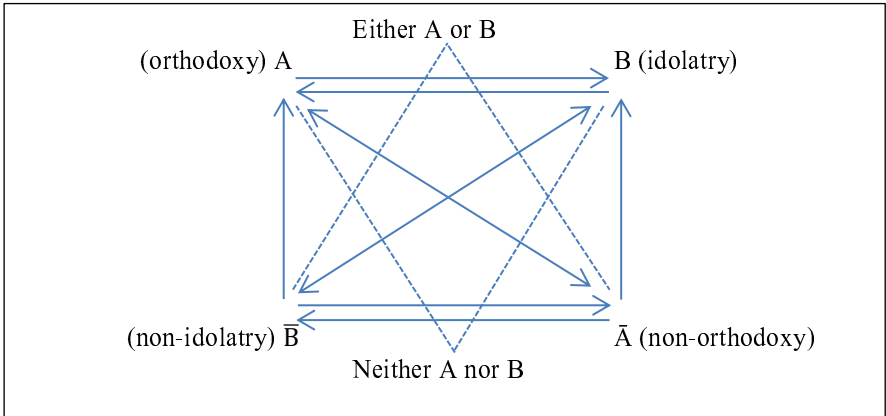


Fig. 4: Semiotic Square with Orthodoxy-Idolatry Axis.

At the end of 1 Kgs 16, a report is given concerning Ahab’s marriage alliance with the Sidonian princess, Jezebel (v.31b α). As the queen of Israel, Jezebel brought her worship of Baal and Asherah to the Northern Kingdom (vv.31b β –33). For Yahwists this was unorthodox, idolatrous (B). This polytheistic tension comes to a zenith when there is a contest as to which god can produce fire from heaven to ignite a prepared sacrifice

36. “Idolatry” is used as opposed to “unorthodoxy” so that in the \bar{B} position of the semiotic square there will be more clarity (than “nonunorthodoxy”).

(1 Kgs 18), since both YHWH and Baal were venerated as sky gods.³⁷ Before the match, Elijah prods for an unwavering confession: “Elijah came near to all the people and said, ‘How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.’ And the people did not answer him a word” (1 Kgs 18:21). The people’s unresponsiveness is representative of a semiotic subcontrariety—that is, the crowd is, in this mute moment, either non-orthodox (\bar{A}) or non-idolatrous (\bar{B}), for they are neither orthodox (A) nor idolatrous (B). After all is said and done, however, the people cry out: “‘The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God’ (1 Kgs 18:39). This is, according to Israelite religion, the orthodox position (A); and Baal worship is thereby classified as idolatry (B). Notwithstanding, Jezebel retains her religious allegiance to Baal and Asherah (cf. 1 Kgs 22:51–53).³⁸

When Elijah is sent by God to Zarephath in Sidon, it was he who would have held idolatrous (B) or unorthodox beliefs (\bar{A})—being himself the foreigner (\bar{B}). Nevertheless, the LORD says he has commanded the widow to feed him (1 Kgs 17:9), and she in fact does recognize Elijah’s religious adherence (while initially denying him bread): “she said, ‘As the LORD your God lives . . .’” (1 Kgs 17:12a α). This confession is not unorthodox (\bar{A}), but seems to contrast (or be a “contradiction” to) her later, more explicitly orthodox confession (A) after her son is resuscitated back from death: “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth” (1 Kgs 17:24).

The Shunammite woman, conversely, articulates to her husband: “I know that this is a holy man of God who is continually passing our way” (2 Kgs 4:9b); so they extended hospitality to Elisha whenever he had need (v. 10). She customarily calls Elisha a “man of God” (2 Kgs 4:16, 22), and when she beseeched him to personally come to her son when he had died she swears: “‘As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.’ So he arose and followed her” (2 Kgs 4:30). These all appear to be orthodox (A) enunciations and responses.

Yet, there are other, more subtle semiotics at play in this story. The Shunammite husband asks his wife:³⁹ “Why will you go to him [i.e.,

37. See Alberto R. W. Green, *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East* (Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California San Diego 8; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 219–80.

38. Elijah thence commences to capture and slaughter the prophets of Baal, which feeds into the previous semiotic axis of life-death and even alludes to the first isotopy of food-famine.

39. It is likely the husband does not know his child has died, that is to say his wife had kept that information from him.

the man of God] today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath” (2 Kgs 4:23). These holy days are apparently when it is appropriate to approach a prophet (cf. Hos 2:13; Amos 8:5; Isa 1:14); so, is it in fact unorthodox (Ā) to seek Elisha on other days? Additionally, there appears to be a religious polemic against idolatry concerning the Baal cult (B̄) in the act—or more precisely, the non-action—of Gehazi placing Elisha’s staff upon the boy’s face. The outcome was *וַאִין קוֹל וַאִין קֶשֶׁב* (“there was neither voice nor attentiveness” 2 Kgs 4:31, JJS); likewise, the unresponsiveness of Baal at Mt. Carmel is thusly noted: *וַאִין-קוֹל וַאִין-עֲנָה וַאִין קֶשֶׁב* (“there was no voice, no answer, and no attentiveness” 1 Kgs 18:29, JJS).⁴⁰ Could it be concluded, then, from this verbatim intertextuality that the failure, so to speak, of Gehazi’s use of Elisha’s staff had non-idolatrous (B̄), and similarly non-orthodox (Ā), effects? In the end, the raising performed by Elisha is essentially a miracle with orthodox alignment (A), since he prayed to the LORD in the process (2 Kgs 4:33).⁴¹

A final example of the orthodoxy and idolatry isotopy is found with the youngest, and heretofore unmentioned, female highlighted in the literary cycle of Elijah-Elisha: a young Israelite girl who had been taken as a slave by the Syrian commander for the latter’s wife. When it becomes known (to the narratee/reader) that Naaman has leprosy, the Israelite maiden professes: “Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy” (2 Kgs 5:3). This statement instigates the entire series of events (of 2 Kgs 5*) which are set unambiguously along the orthodox-idolatrous semiotic axis.

Naaman journeyed to Israel with a letter from the king of Syria charging that the former be healed. “And when the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, ‘Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me’” (2 Kgs 5:7). This response is provocative. Beyond equating leprosy as a non-life status (see LIFE-DEATH above), the king of Israel utters the orthodox (A) confession that it is God alone who raises the dead, or makes well someone quite unhealthy—orthodox, of course, if *הָאֱלֹהִים* is to be read as the God of Israel.

In spite of all this, the Israelite girl only said that there was a prophet in Samaria who could heal Naaman; and Elisha echoes the same (B̄): “[Elisha] sent to the king, saying, ‘Why have you torn your clothes?

40. These phrases appear nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible. Cf. Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings* (AB 10; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 442; Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *2 Kings* (AB 11; New York: Doubleday, 1988), 58.

41. Concerning magical or hypothermic resuscitation explanations, see again, Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 52.

Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel” (2 Kgs 5:8). Is this a non-orthodox avowal (\bar{A}); is Elisha self-aggrandizing (B) and upstaging God (cf. 2 Kgs 5:16)? Initially Naaman does not like Elisha’s plan for his cleansing, claiming the rivers of Syria are cleaner; eventually, however, being cleansed of his leprosy in Israel, Naaman confesses: “Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant” (2 Kgs 5:15). This is an orthodox profession (A), in the Israelite viewpoint. This assertion exists in tension with his religious obligations in Syria where Naaman must assist his master the king in the worship of Rimmon (B); so, in light of this conflict, Naaman takes a load of dirt from Israel that he might not be idolatrous (\bar{B}), yet at the same time not fully orthodox (\bar{A}), when at the temple of Rimmon in Syria (2 Kgs 5:17–18).

To reiterate, it should be remembered that this entire series of events was catapulted by the “little girl from the land of Israel” and her religious declaration (2 Kgs 5:2).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summation, the three semiotic axes food-famine, life-death, and orthodoxy-idolatry, though distinct in their own right, are interrelated. Religio-cultic worldviews incorporate all three isotopies in a cyclical rhythm of life. It was believed the gods were responsible for sending rain and thereby generating the production of vegetation. Rainfall was believed to be both conditioned upon and the effect of ardent worship and faithful sacrifice of foods and animals. If there was rain then there was food, but the lack of rain resulted in famine; if famine was prolonged, then life and death become heightened struggles. Lastly, a dying people cannot worship the gods and/or goddesses with appropriate food sacrifices unless the gods blessed with rain, vegetation, and thence life.⁴² Thus, in the words of Tamis Hoover Rentería, “religion does not provide an abstract system of evil and good, but rather a means to make sure that children remain healthy, grain crops yield abundantly, neighbors do not mistreat you, and drought does not devastate your village.”⁴³

The three theological portentous semiotic axes (themes) analyzed in 1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 13 were primarily elucidated by means of examination of the lives of females. It was Jezebel who imported Baal and Asherah into Israel; both she and Athaliah in Judah were strong

42. Green, *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East*, 275–80.

43. Rentería, “The Elijah/Elisha Stories,” 98.

supporters of these fertility gods over against YHWH. According to the Kings record, the LORD caused a famine to occur in order to demonstrate sovereignty over the natural order, thereby rendering Baal and Asherah impotent (and the worship of them futile). This caused a scarcity of food, naturally; and of all people to be illustrated as suffering of starvation, two mothers and a widow prefigure as victims. Starvation and other such conditions cause death; and here too women are of highest predominance and closest proximity. Some in the Elijah-Elisha narrative are killed by women (e.g., Naboth, prophets of God, would-be kings) and women are also those who are closely affected by death (e.g., the widow of Zarephath, the Shunammite woman).

Therefore, the homologation of the three semantic axes (like the overlapping parts of a Venn diagram), food-famine, life-death, and orthodoxy-idolatry, projects a portrait of a society where females and religion are at the forefront of consciousness and in a prominent position within the Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle.⁴⁴

44. Cf. Rentería ("The Elijah/Elisha Stories," 75–126) who argues that such an emphasis is aimed at portraying a subversion of males and politics.