Chapter 3

From nobody to somebody through the gift of giving: "A woman, a widow" becomes "the mistress of the house" in 1 Kings 17

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1. Introduction

My contribution to this special collection comes as an Old Testament (OT) biblical scholar. I specialise in the translation and interpretation of OT narrative texts, with a particular interest in the ancient stories that introduce us to people on the margins of society. In analysing 1 Kings 17, I employ the methodology of narrative exegesis, as explained and demonstrated for OT texts by Gunn and Fewell (1993), Brown (2017), and Fewell (2016).

Gunn and Fewell (1993:1) argue that stories, including the ancient stories in the OT, are not merely explanatory but have a performative action, as they can "powerfully shape people's lives". These stories draw readers into what Brown (2017:79) calls "a complexity of narrative dynamics, including plot development, characterization, repetition and variation, ambiguity, irony, tension, and subtle interconnections".[1]

1 Fewell (2016:3–26) explores the significance of biblical narrative in her introductory chapter to "The Oxford handbook of biblical narrative". Gunn and Fewell (1993:2–3) introduce the elements of readers and listeners, characters, plot and word patterns and go into more depth into each of these elements in ensuing chapters of their book *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*. In *A handbook to Old Testament exegesis*, Brown

In my presentation of 1 Kings 17, which includes a brief historical background to the narrative, some summarised sections, and others with more detailed analyses and discussions (drawing on the aforementioned elements of narrative exegesis), my focus is on the character development of the woman first introduced in 1 Kings 17:9 as "a woman, a widow".[2] My aim is to show how this woman's identity development, as a marginalised person, is closely linked to how she is perceived in society and by the (opportunity to) agency that she has. I connect this to the concept of personhood as explained by Klaasen (2017). In the unfolding of the plot, several crucial factors contribute to the woman's growth, including the ancient practice of hospitality and the notion of reciprocity.

Taking up Brown's (2017:195-197) challenge to bring "text to table" by engaging with 1 Kings 17 from an "embodied, contemporary" place and perspective, I undertake a reading of the narrative through the African hermeneutical lens of *Ubuntu* (humanity towards others). Exploring the notions of hospitality, reciprocity and personhood on the margins, the chapter attends to the possibilities of growth and development within individuals and amongst strangers through reciprocal acts of care during times of disruption and challenge. It aims to demonstrate journeys of transformation that can be reciprocal. Developing spaces of reciprocal transformation has the potential to strengthen the collaboration between Nordic and South-African researchers and communities, especially within the context of globalisation, mission and development.

2. *Ubuntu* as a hermeneutical lens for reading 1 Kings 17

Rooted in African philosophy, the Nguni Bantu term *Ubuntu* means "humanity". It is an all-encompassing concept central to African thought and culture (Anofuechi & Klaasen, 2024:1). *Ubuntu* represents a philosophy of human interconnectedness and mutual support, as captured in its common translation: "I am because we are". This reflects the belief

(2017:79–93) provides a strong methodological foundation for OT narrative exegesis, adding to the discussion additional elements of plot development such as interruptions, surprising twists and climaxes (2017:79).

2 This epithet is repeated in verse 10: "… and look, there was a woman, a widow gathering wood".

that a person's identity is fundamentally shaped by their broader community and interpersonal relationships (Ajitoni, 2024:1). At its core, *Ubuntu* teaches that no person is an island - we depend on one another not only to survive, but to thrive. Numerous African scholars have contributed significantly to the discourse on *Ubuntu*.

Simon Aihiokhai, a theologian born and raised in Nigeria, has written extensively on the African ethic of hospitality (Aihiokhai, 2017:20). He rightly argues that Africa's long-standing tradition of hospitality, which affirms the nurturing of all life, has a crucial role to play in the global church's vision and mission for a pluralistic world (Aihiokhai, 2017:20). For Aihiokhai (2017:32), *Ubuntu* is an expression of African hospitality, as it promotes kindness towards the other. When employing the lens of *Ubuntu* in reading 1 Kings 17, it is important to consider the central role of hospitality within the African worldview. This practice creates a meaningful connection between the African *Ubuntu* context and the OT context, where 1 Kings 17 is regarded as one of the classic ancient texts on hospitality (Hobbs, 2001:22; Martin, 2014:4).

The South African theologian John Klaasen (2017:34) links the notion of *Ubuntu* with understandings of personhood and identity formation. He explains that the African concept of *being human* is rooted in community: "a person is not born with personhood, but grows into a person" through their connections with others. In this sense, we can argue that a person "becomes truly human through their interactions and connections within their community" (Ajitoni, 2024:10).[3] Since an individual's identity is deeply connected to their relationships with others, the community plays an integral role in shaping a person's sense of self. Individuals are responsible for one another's well-being (Anofuechi & Klaasen, 2024:4; see also Ajitoni, 2024:10). This responsibility - expressed through acts of care, compassion, and trust - fosters personal development (see Klaasen, 2017:40). However,

3 Aihiokhai (2017:30) also accentuates the connection between hospitality and identity. He cites Bujo's (1997) phrase "'*cognatus sum ergo sum*' (I am related, so I am) ... Without communal relationship, one can neither find his or her identity nor learn how to think". In the same vein as Klaasen (2017), Aihiokhai (2017) maintains that African hospitality is linked to the question, "what does it mean to be human?"

relationships are never one-directional; they involve dialogue, reciprocity, and mutual commitment. As Klaasen (2017:41) rightly asserts:

> Development is an interactive process that takes both parties as active participants and not passive recipients. Development is not about the professional against the unskilled, but everyone is viewed on the basis of her capacity, whether it is technical skills, human capital or informal knowledge.

In my analysis of 1 Kings 17, I will demonstrate how the reciprocal relationship that develops between two strangers on the margins of society - the Israelite prophet Elijah and the widow of Zarephath - creates space not only for community, but also for personal development. Over the course of the narrative, "a woman, a widow" is given the opportunity to become a giver. Through this transformation, she claims her place in the household and becomes "the mistress of the house", a respected member of the community.

3. A story of becoming in 1 Kings 17

3.1 Background

First Kings 17 follows chapter 16, where King Ahab of Israel, in an effort to forge a political alliance with the Sidonians (Phoenicians) to the north, marries the Sidonian princess Jezebel and begins worshipping Baal (1 Ki 16:29–34; see also Howard, 2012:172). Ahab's disloyalty to Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, leads to political and religious divisions within Israel. It is within this context of tension and hostility that Elijah appears on the biblical scene for the first time in 1 Kings 17:1.

The chapter is composed of three consecutive stories, each centred on the theme of well-being: 1 Ki 17:1-7, 1 Ki 17:8-16, and 1 Ki 17:17-24 (Gallagher, 2014; Nelson, 1987:107-108). This triad of stories forms the introduction to the narratives about Elijah and his resistance to King Ahab's rule (Sweeney, 2007:208). While this chapter focuses primarily on the central story (vv. 8-16), it is important to consider the two surrounding stories in order to grasp the full significance of the woman's character development in the focal text. It is in the final story (vv. 17-24) that the

development and effects of the events in the central narrative (vv. 8-16) become fully visible.

3.2 The marginalised Elijah announces a drought (1 Ki 17:1-17)

In the first story, spanning 1 Kings 17:1-7, Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbe in Gilead announces an impending drought to Ahab. The purpose of the drought is to prove that Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, holds power over rain and fertility - unlike Baal, the god of the Phoenicians, who was commonly associated with fertility. As Todd (1992:12) explains, "Elijah's prophetic message is that Ahab has been praying to the wrong weather god, and the judgment is the drought". Elijah reinforces this proclamation by linking it to an oath formula:

> By the life of Yahweh, the God of Israel before whom I stand (whom I serve), there will not be dew and rain in these years except by my word (1 Ki 17:1b; author's own literal translation).[4]

The epithet used to describe Elijah - "the Tishbite from Tishbe in Gilead" - reveals the ambiguous nature of his identity. Wyatt (2012:443–450) writes compellingly about Elijah's estrangement as a character, noting his abrupt appearance and the lack of clarity offered by the phrase "the Tishbite from Tishbe". Elijah is the only Tishbite mentioned in the Bible, and Tishbe itself is an otherwise unknown location with no further biblical reference. Furthermore, Gilead was situated in the Transjordanian region, an area whose tribes were often not regarded as fully part of the Israelite community.[5] Wyatt (2012:449) captures the estranged identity of Elijah as follows:

4 All translations of 1 Kings 17 in this chapter are literal translations by the author of the chapter.

5 Many scholars hold similar views to that of Wyatt. Brueggemann (2000:214) speaks of "the abruptness" of Elijah's appearance and that he had no credentials or authority (we read of no calling narrative) besides what he claims for himself. Likewise, Walsh (1996:225–226) notices Elijah's sudden appearance and his lack of substantial background information. Walsh (1996:226) is in agreement with these findings and he is also attuned to the gaps in the text, arguing that the narrator does not introduce Elijah as a prophet. In the same vein, Sweeney (2007:211) notes the complications with the

> [W]e meet Elijah from Trans-Jordanian Gilead. He is a prophet with no specific parentage, with no call narrative to legitimate his mission from YHWH, originating from a town that has no record of existence outside of its mention in relationship to him, living in a portion of Israel that is narratively questionable. He may even be a foreign immigrant to Israel, but even this claim remains unclear. The narrative's ambiguous description of him opens the possibility that Elijah may not be an ideal Israelite. Narratively speaking, Elijah is an estranged character, isolated from the legitimacy tradition has accorded him.

From this introduction to the figure of Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1, it is evident that he emerges from the margins of society. By the authority of the God of Israel, before whom he stands, Elijah announces a drought that will last for years. He is then sent by this very God to hide - presumably from King Ahab - in the Kerith Valley, where he is sustained with food from the ravens and water from the stream (1 Ki 17:2–6). The scene concludes as the drought intensifies, and the stream eventually dries up (v. 7).

3.3 Through acts of hospitality and reciprocity a widow in Sidon becomes a provider (1 Ki 17:8–16)

At the end of his resources and at the beginning of the second story, Elijah is once again sent by Yahweh his God - though, surprisingly, this time he is sent directly into enemy territory, to Zarephath in the region of Sidon, the homeland of Jezebel and her god Baal, to live there. What follows is even more astonishing: "Look", says Yahweh, "I have commanded a woman, a widow [from] there to provide for you" (v. 9). In the ancient world, widows were counted amongst the most vulnerable and desolate members of society (Gallagher, 2014; Coomber 2007:390; De Vries, 1998). Without a man to care for her in a patriarchal system, a widow faced severe disadvantage - especially in the face of natural disasters such as drought and famine. The narrator's omission of the widow's name further signals her low status on the social hierarchy (see also Brueggemann, 2000:210).

terms "Tishbe", "Tishbite" and "Gilead", concluding that "the people of the Transjordan might very well be viewed as foreigners".

As Elijah approached the city gate of Zarephath, he saw "a woman, a widow" gathering sticks (v. 10). Thirsty, he called out to her with a polite request: "Please bring me a little water in a cup" (v. 10). As she turned to fetch the water, Elijah called to her again - this time with a more substantial request: "Please bring me a scrap of bread in your hand" (v. 11). In response to this second request, the widow broke her silence, offering words that revealed the severity of her situation:

> As surely as the Lord your God lives, I have no food except for a handful of flour in the jar and a little oil in the jug. Look, I am gathering two sticks for a fire. Then I am going and I will prepare it for me and for my son and we will eat and we will die (1 Ki 17:12).

The widow is observant; she recognises that Elijah is a foreigner who serves Yahweh and not one of the Sidonian deities. Nevertheless, she is willing to extend hospitality as far as she is able - offering a small amount of water. However, when Elijah adds a request for food, the language of scarcity and desperation that pours from her lips is striking: "no food … a handful of flour … a little oil … two sticks".[6] She intends to use her final provisions to prepare a last, meagre meal for herself and her son before they die (Nelson, 1987:110). Her statement on scarcity begins with an oath formula invoking the life of Yahweh, the God of Elijah, and ends with the despairing acceptance that she and her son will perish. Her response moves from life - her first word in the biblical Hebrew text - to death - her final word - symbolising the only outcome that she can envisage for them both (see also Walsh, 1996:229).

Elijah, who had previously asked passively for sustenance, now responds actively (Todd, 1992:13). He begins with a word of reassurance, then - surprisingly - makes an even greater request than before, followed by the promise of a miracle from Yahweh, his God:

> Do not be afraid. Go and do as you have said, but make for me a small cake first and bring it to me, and make for you and your son afterwards. For this is what the Lord God of Israel says, "The jar of

6 In his article, "The recipient becoming a participant and the participant becoming a recipient…", Van der Walt (2021:225) also emphasises the extreme scarcity by using language of minimalism".

> flour will not be empty and the jug of oil will not run out until the day that the Lord makes it rain on the surface of the ground" (1 Ki 17:13-14, author's italics).

Whilst promising a miraculous, never-ending supply of flour and oil for as long as the drought lasts, Elijah adds an extremely challenging condition: before preparing the envisaged meal for herself and her son, the widow must use some of the flour and oil to prepare a meal for him first. The position of the words 'first' and 'afterwards' emphasises their contrast and highlights the extreme sacrifice to which Elijah calls the widow (Walsh, 1996:230). He expects her to place hers and her son's lives in the hands of a foreign prophet - the very prophet who announced the devastating drought in the name of his God - and in so doing, he asks for the ultimate display of hospitality and trust. Whether out of faith or simply driven by the realisation that they had little left to lose - sharing their final meal would not significantly shorten their lives, but it would allow her the opportunity to offer hospitality one last time - the widow went and did as Elijah had said (v. 15a).[7]

The play on words between Elijah and the widow is significant in the unfolding of the plot. Both of them use the language of scarcity ("a little water", "a scrap of bread", "a handful of flour", "a little oil", "two sticks (for a fire)", "make a small cake" (vv. 10-13). Elijah sent the widow to "go and do as you have said" (v. 13) and she "went and did as he had said to her" (v. 15a). In verse 13, Elijah asked the widow to bake for him and serve him first, before taking care of herself and her son. However, in verse 15b, the reality of the eating seems to have been integrated, with Elijah listed between the widow and her household rather than before them: "and she ate - she and he and her house for days" (v. 15b).

Through this interplay of words and phrases, the narrator vividly brings to life a scene of hospitality and reciprocity between strangers on the margins of society, creating a space of solidarity and a rhythm of give and take (also see Gallagher, 2014). Elijah, the stranger, requests a little water and a scrap of bread, but the widow swears by the life of Elijah's God that she has only

7 Van der Walt (2021:225–226) views the widow's response as bravery, stating that she took an "extreme risk" by "trusting a stranger who claimed that a God she did not know would provide".

a handful of flour and a little oil - just enough to require only two sticks for a fire on which she will prepare a final meal for herself and her son before they die. Elijah then responds with a salvation oracle[8] "Do not be afraid" and instructs the woman to go and do as she had said, but then he inserts himself into the production line of her last meal plan, emphasising (with emphasis in the biblical Hebrew text) that she should serve him before she and her son eat. While this request comes with the promise of miraculous, never-ending provisions until the end of the drought causing their current devastation, the extent of the request should not be overlooked. Given that Elijah was a foreigner and his God was the reason for the drought, the widow had no incentive to believe his promise or to share their food with him. The fact that he asked to be served first could be interpreted as arrogance and greed, considering the desperate situation she and her son were in; however, it could also simply reflect the normal order of serving in ancient hospitality culture.

The widow then goes and does as Elijah (not she) had said, meaning that she prepared a meal for him first and then for herself and her son. However, when it came to the actual eating, this order changed, and "she ate – she and he and her household for days".[9] The subsequent supply of food provisions lasted for as long as the drought continued, for "the jar of flour was never empty and the jug of oil never ran out, according to the word of the Lord which he spoke through the hand of Elijah" (1 Ki 17:16). The biblical Hebrew phrase, literally translated as "through the hand of Elijah", emphasises Elijah's active role in providing for the widow and her household. His contribution stemmed from the promise of supplies he made in the name of his God, Yahweh. Elijah spoke God's promise into

8 Brueggemann (2000:211) defines salvation oracles as "a characteristic formula whereby and utterance of powerful presence alters circumstance. It is spoken against death in order to assure life. It is spoken against exile to assure homecoming. It is spoken against despair in order to assure hope."

9 Sweeney (2007:207–208) and Todd (1992:13) both discuss the interchange between "go and do as you have said" and "she went and did as he had said". Walsh (1996:230) also emphasises the significance of this variation. Further emphasising the argument of this article, Sweeney (2007:207) and Todd (1992:13) highlight the order of eating – "she and he and her household".

action, as the words of God became effective through the hand - that is, through the actions - of Elijah (also see Sweeney, 2007:213-214).

It is at this point that our focus text - the story at the centre of the chapter - comes to an end. However, to fully grasp the implications of what has transpired, it is important to consider how the narrator refers to the widow (previously introduced as "a woman, a widow" in vv. 9 and 10) following the drought.

3.4 The widow is reintroduced as a respected member of the community (1 Ki 17:17-24)

> It happened after these things (that) the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, got sick… (1 Ki 17:17a, author's focus in bold).

Disaster strikes once again, this time in the form of a serious illness that befalls the son. While this next predicament is not the focus of the article, the new way in which the narrator refers to the widowed woman in verses 9-16 is significant. Setting the stage for the third story of 1 Kings 17, he now introduces her as "the woman, the mistress of the house".

Twice in the previous story, the woman is referred to without the use of a definite article in the biblical Hebrew text, and by the addition of the diminishing descriptor "widow", also without an article - thereby emphasising her marginalised identity: "a woman, a widow" (vv. 9 and 10). Besides these two direct references, she is afforded no other identity. She speaks only once (in v. 12), and that is in response to Elijah after he addresses her. The content of her utterance is filled with scarcity, as she explains why she cannot help him with his request for food. After this, Elijah is the one who speaks again, and she obeys. In the unfolding of the courageous act of hospitality in the face of starvation - masterfully portrayed through careful word choices - a reciprocity between Elijah and the widow is born. The outcome of their mutual acts of kindness and care is the survival of them all.

Another often-overlooked outcome is the change in agency: from charity case (reflecting the dire status of widows in the ancient context) to hostess - providing Elijah not only with food, but also with a place to stay during the drought - resulting in a transformation of identity. Through the eyes

and words of the narrator of 1 Kings 17, "a woman, a widow" becomes "the woman, the mistress of the house".[10] It does not stop here. In all subsequent references to this woman in 1 Kings 17, she is granted the definite article: no longer "a woman", but "the woman" (vv. 18 and 24); no longer "a widow", but "the widow" (in Elijah's prayer to Yahweh, v. 20). And for the first time, she is also referred to as "his mother" in verse 23 - an acknowledgement that she is more than a widow, and more than the owner of a house: she is a mother to and provider for her son. Once she was given the opportunity to care for her household and for Elijah - to reciprocate in a time of deep distress, to act as a hostess rather than a mere charity case - she became a respected member of the community. The narrator clearly recognises this change.

As a deeply concerned mother, the mistress of the house no longer waits to be addressed, as she did in the previous scene. When her son falls ill, she takes the initiative - raising her voice and confronting Elijah (v. 18). By taking up agency, it is this act that sets her son's healing process into motion.

4. A Story of hospitality, reciprocity, and becoming

Hospitality in the OT meant something completely different from our modern understanding of hosting friends or acquaintances. Janzen (1994:43) observes that:

10 Prominent OT scholars either fail to recognise this significant change of identity or they ignore it in their discussion of the text. See, for example, Todd (1992:14-15) who continues to refer to the woman as "the widow" in his discussion of 1 Ki 17:17-24. Likewise, Walsh (1996:230-231) also persists in calling her "the widow". His only reference to her as "owner of the house" is in a footnote (1996:230). Nelson (1987:110) mentions that "the woman's social status seems to have improved", but he does not elaborate at all, not even by remarking on the new epithet "mistress of the house". Brueggemann (2000:211-212) does not attend to the narrator's new introduction of the woman as "the mistress of the house" either; however, he does pick up on the focus on her status as mother in the last scene. Sweeney (2007:214) is amongst the few scholars who explicitly mention that the woman is identified as "mistress of the house" in v. 17, but then states that she is later again called "the widow". He does not notice the added definite article that did not appear in the previous scene and that also functions to emphasise the development of her identity.

> [T]ravel, in the ancient world, was only undertaken for grave reasons, often negative in nature, such as flight from persecution or search for food and survival. Hospitality under those circumstances, has little to do with modern tourism, but embraces the biblical equivalent to our policies regarding refugees, immigrants and welfare.[11]

While 1 Kings 17 is regarded as one of the classic hospitality texts in the OT (Hobbs, 2001:22; Martin, 2014:4), it deviates from established norms in several important ways. Firstly, hospitality could be dangerous from the host's perspective and was therefore not extended to just anyone. It was especially not offered to complete strangers - for instance, foreigners from different countries (Martin, 2014:2-3).[12] However, Elijah was sent into foreign, hostile territory to request hospitality from someone there.

Secondly, while travellers would make their presence known when arriving in need of food and shelter, they typically did not actively seek out hospitality. They would wait until a host extended an invitation (Hobbs, 2001:23-24; Martin, 2014:3). In contrast, Elijah invited himself, explicitly requesting water and food (Hobbs, 2001:23).

Thirdly, hospitality in the ancient world was generally extended by the male head of a household, and typically included water, food, and a place to stay (Hobbs, 2001:11). Yet in 1 Kings 17, Elijah was not sent to a patriarch with the means to act as an honourable host, but to "a woman, a widow".[13]

Lastly, hospitality was usually limited to a brief period - typically no more than three days (Martin, 2014:3) - but Elijah remained for a longer duration. Comparing the unusual features of 1 Kings 17 with standard hospitality practices in the Ancient Near East highlights the enormous risk the widow took in hosting Elijah.

11 Also see Hobbs (2001:17-18).

12 Hobbs (2001:24) states that "[h]ospitality, then, is directed at those relatively unknown travellers who are assumed to be members of one's larger community, but not immediately recognised as such. In no cases are threatening foreigners (*nokrim*) or resident aliens (*gerim*) offered hospitality".

13 Hobbs (2001:22) notes that there are some exceptions to the rule, including Gen 24, Exod 2, 1 Ki 12, 1 Sam 25, and 2 Ki 4.

Hospitality in the OT was inherently reciprocal in nature (Rathbone, 2024:1, 3–5).[14] Martin (2014:7), in discussing the plight of the most vulnerable, acknowledges that people in the Ancient Near East were mutually dependent on one another:

> The OT recognises our mutual dependency and requires that the stronger members of the community care for the weaker. Widows, orphans, resident aliens, the sick, and the poor are particularly needy and vulnerable.

In 1 Kings 17, we encounter two individuals - both vulnerable, both marginalised - who come together in a time of dire distress. Through reciprocal acts of intervention and care, they survive a famine that would likely have resulted in starvation. Wyatt (2012:449-450) rightly argues that "Elijah's displaced status establishes a stronger relationship between him and the other characters in the story, the widow of Zarephath and her fatherless son". She notes that vulnerable people - such as widows, orphans or the fatherless, and foreign residents - are often grouped together in the legal codes of Deuteronomy.[15]

> 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, 2012:450).

In the development of a reciprocal relationship between host and guest, the guest is usually unable - and is not expected - to match the charity extended by the host. Even so, the mutual relationship is nurtured through the host's acts of hospitality, which contribute to the host's reputation and honour in the public sphere (Rathbone, 2024:4; Hobbs, 2001:28). Reynolds (2006:198), writing on the connection between identities and hospitality within the Christian tradition, states that:

14 Also see Hobbs (2001), Martin (2014:6-7), and Reynolds (2006:196-197), amongst others, on reciprocity in the OT practice of hospitality.

15 See Deut. 10:1–819; 14:29; 24:17–21; 26:12-13; 27:19.

> hospitality lets the boundaries between host and guest become blurred. Created is a liminal zone of mutual sharing, a kind of covenantal exchange that both receives and gives. In this exchange something counterintuitive happens. As the host gives to the guest, the host paradoxically gains a gift, unexpectedly becoming more than he or she was before. The host becomes honored and enhanced.

This relates to 1 Kings 17 in a significant way, since the host in this instance does not fit the expected description of a host at all: she is a woman, moreover a widow, from a foreign country. She finds herself in a desperate situation - marginalised and unable to provide for herself and her son during the famine - with a future that appears not merely bleak but utterly hopeless. She is amongst the most vulnerable, a charity case, dependent on the generosity of others for survival. She is arguably the most unlikely host who could be imagined in the ancient world. And yet, Elijah is sent specifically to her - emphasised by the use of the biblical Hebrew focus particle *hinee*, repeated in verses 9 and 10. He sees her, interacts with her, and treats her as though she has something to offer, even though she insists that she has nothing.

When she expresses her complete lack, Elijah promises a miracle: an unending supply of food that will be sufficient not only for her and her household but also for him. She is thus given the opportunity to become a hostess, a giver. Through this gift of agency - not merely of food - she gains honour within the community and becomes a respected person. As her relationship with Elijah develops, so too does her own identity. She grows from "a woman, a widow" to "the woman, the mistress of the house". By the end of 1 Kings 17, she is also acknowledged as a "mother" - not only to her son, but to another in need.

Pohl (1995:135), writing about "hospitality from the edge", asserts that an "important transformation occurs when poor or disempowered people have the opportunity to be more than guests, when they too can be hosts". On the margins of society, people often have no choice but to depend on one another - and it is here that we most clearly see *Ubuntu* hospitality in action: the transformation of a person (formerly regarded as a nobody) into someone of honour and value, through the opportunity to become a giver.

5. Conclusion

This chapter presented an exegetical exposition of 1 Kings 17, focusing on the central narrative (vv. 8-16). Read through the African lens of *Ubuntu* and incorporating the concepts of personhood, hospitality, and reciprocity, it explored the development of the widow of Zarephath - initially introduced as "a woman, a widow", but later reintroduced as "the mistress of the house". I argue that this transformation in her identity is brought about by the gift of giving: when she was given the opportunity to become a hostess and to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the prophet Elijah during a time of severe crisis brought on by famine, she took up agency and actively contributed to the survival of herself, her son, and Elijah. This was a journey of becoming - a process of transformation - as reflected in the narrator's shift in how he refers to her in 1 Kings 17:17-24, with respect and honour.

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