

## **Holy, Horrid, and Hilarious Meals of the Bible**

### **Part 5: Death in the Pot!**

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Scripture: 2 Kings 4:38-44 (The Message)

Poetry: "Song for Someone" by U2

#### **1. Death in the Pot!**

Thus far in our series, we've reflected on holy, horrid, and hilarious biblical meals that teach us something about life, and God, through stories about food. This week our focus is on two meals, both involving the prophet Elisha. The first story might be considered not only horrid, but *horrifying*. Yet through both stories, something holy is revealed that helps us live more boldly while facing the horrors of our present day world.

Writing about the first meal, the storyteller actually employs a technique that is commonly used in horror films (or perhaps I should say that horror films use a technique that is found in the Bible!). The technique is called a "jump scare." One way to set up a "jump scare" is to put your protagonists in a really horrible situation, then allow them to think they've escaped it, then BAM! You hit them with a terror that is far worse than the one they thought they had escaped.

In our story, the terror that Elisha and his fellow prophets face is starvation. There is a severe famine in the land, which doubtless means that many are dying. However, Elisha's intuitions tell him there's enough food to be found to make a stew. To his companions' delight, they manage to forage for enough food to keep them from starving another day. We can imagine their relief and joy as the stew is boiled, the savory smells waft about, and finally the stew is served. Then, just as they are taking their first bites, BAM!

"Death in the pot, O man of God! Death in the pot!" someone screams.

They discover that a poisonous gourd has accidentally been cooked in the stew. I can almost hear the soundtrack from the shower scene in *Psycho* running in the background, "Ree, ree, ree, ree!"

The jump scare is short-lived, however. Elisha saves the day by ordering that some barley meal be brought to him, which he sprinkles into the stew pot, then orders that the stew be served. Miraculously, the stew is fine.

It's a rather odd story, isn't it? A horror story resolved by adding a little flour to a pot of stew? Hardly a screenplay for the next blockbuster horror film. Not that I've seen enough horror films to know how to judge (perhaps three in my life). But I did do a little research on horror films last week thanks to a rather unusual review by Micah Mertes in the *Omaha World-Herald*, of a film called "Hereditary." Mertes wrote:

*I've seen a 2018 horror film about a troubled family. And it's a thrilling crowd-pleaser, full of suspense and heart. Scary but not too scary, violent but not too violent, with lovable characters everyone can root for. Everyone's gonna like it. Fun for the whole family!*

*That movie is called "A Quiet Place," and it opened about two months ago. "Hereditary," opening this weekend, is not that. It's vile. An emotionally abusive and ingeniously cruel film — a cinematic masterclass in making you feel bad about everything forever.*

*You could accurately call the movie "scary" ... But a better word for "Hereditary" — the stunning debut feature of writer/director Ari Aster — is traumatizing.*

*The film features images you'll wish you could unsee, plumbs emotions you'll wish you could unfeel. It has maybe the worst death in any movie ever and the second-worst death, too ...*

*This review is less a recommendation ... than it is a dare. "Hereditary" possesses the power to ruin your life for a little while, in the way only the best and most evil horror movies can.*

I shivered just reading that review! Yet, knowing that we'd be covering a horrifying meal in the Bible this Sunday, I decided to "take one for the team" and see "Hereditary." I think it was Micah Mertes' dare that pushed me into the theatre as much as anything else. I was curious how any film could scare the pants off of even a film reviewer.

My verdict? After watching the film from start to finish without covering my eyes once, I must admit that my first thought as I left the theatre were:

"This film isn't anywhere near as scary as everyday life in our world today!"

Case in point: When I turned on the radio in my car, the very first story I heard was about the psychological trauma being experienced by children separated from their families at our border with Mexico.

The reporter spoke of the anguished screams of children as they cried for their mothers and fathers not knowing what was happening to them or why. Then, just as in a horror film, just when you think it can't get any worse, it does: the reporter said that these screaming, crying children were being prevented from hugging one another for comfort, and that even personnel in the holding facilities were not allowed to hug them either due to a policy that is supposed to protect children from sexual misconduct.

Once they wrapped up that horrifying story, the horror continued with a report about how the government is going to open a sixth branch of the military called Space Force so we can weaponize space with high power lasers, nuclear warheads, and God only knows what else pointed down at the earth.

Do you feel safer? Or do you suppose there may be another "jump scare" or two when we finally fill the heavens with weapons?

"Death in the *pot*"? We have "Death in *the earth*" and "Death of *children's childhoods*!" Faced with these and other realities of modern life, I think the core message of this ancient, rather odd story of Elisha and the poisoned stew may very well be of use to us. The message being: **When a situation goes from bad to worse and all hell is about to break loose, this is when we need to look for the prophets of our day – those who see possibilities and opportunities when everyone else is fixated on doom and gloom.** The story calls out to us across the centuries asking, "Who are our modern-day Elishas? Who are the ones who are not cowering in despair but are bowed before God, being guided by God's greater vision rather than fear?"

## II. "Augmented Reality"

Speaking of God's vision, I had a rather "visionary" experience last week – though perhaps not of the prophetic kind. I purchased my first pair of VR goggles called "Oculus Go." "VR" stands for "Virtual Reality."

I purchased the VR goggles because the Convergence Network, of which Countryside is one of its flagship churches, is actively exploring the possibilities of VR for holding remote meetings, participating in worship and meditation remotely, and so on.

After using these goggles for a week, I'm impressed. If you own stock in movie theatres, I'd suggest you get rid of it. My guess is that movie theatres will be obsolete within ten years. Now that you can make films where the action takes place not on a flat screen front of you, but surrounds you in 360 degrees, all in 3D, we're about to undergo a revolution in the art of storytelling and the art of, well, art!

My favorite VR experience thus far has been not a movie but a music video in which U2 performs, "Song for Someone." As the song opens, members of the band surround you as they play. You can see each one of them as you swivel in your chair. But as you're watching U2 play and sing, you start hearing other voices and instruments joining them. As you swivel in your seat, you're treated to a virtual cornucopia of the world's peoples joining in to sing a portion of "Song for Someone." There's a Native American from Yosemite National Park whose house you suddenly enter as he strums his guitar and sings. Then there's a harp player from New York City, playing in her living room, then a woman sitting on her bed in a Parisian apartment playing a tiny electronic keyboard, then a boy joining in on piano in India, a girl from Thailand picking up the next few bars on guitar, a handful of 30-somethings from Israel, a mariachi band from Hacienda Heights, California, and an African American gospel choir ... all taking pieces of the song, shifting in and out of view as you swivel in your chair.

My brain went, "Pooof ..."

This really shouldn't be called *virtual* reality. I call what I experienced *augmented* reality. The video adds to, or augments reality. It doesn't create something that's "virtually" real. U2 featured perfectly real musicians, really singing from real locations around the world and mashed them up to create an augmented reality that cannot be experienced fully outside the "virtual" realm.<sup>1</sup>

Looking through my VR goggles, I experienced "Song for Someone" in a more intimate, thought-provoking, and moving way than I had even experienced the

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<sup>1</sup> You can, however, see a 2D video of the VR video on YouTube in which you can drag your cursor around to see the various musicians around you. Just type "U2 virtual reality" into the search bar or follow this link: <https://youtu.be/qnmeEnm3WR0>

song live at the CenuryLink last month! I'm not saying I'd swap an augmented-reality experience of U2 for a live one, but I would hate to have to choose between the two!

My virtual – or *augmented* – reality experience reminded me this week of what biblical prophets do, and modern ones besides. They see more of reality than we do. Most of us seem to go about our days operating only on a narrow band of information, which we narrow down even further when we react to a situation we don't understand in fear, anger, or despair. A prophet or other person of profound awareness can look at the same situation and interpret what's going on, and how to respond to it, based on a higher state of consciousness, producing a wider array of available reality. All without using an Oculus Go! A prophet's information isn't "virtual" but very real. More real, in fact, than the limited view of others.

So when Elisha and his companions are brought a few loaves of barley bread and a handful of apples in our second story involving a meal, Elisha instructs them to feed everyone. Yet his companions say, "Dummy! There are a hundred people here! There's not nearly enough to feed them all!" Yet when Elisha looks at the food, he sees possibilities that we do not, leading him to concluded, "**God says there's plenty.**"

And there is.

This miracle, of course, foreshadows Jesus' own feeding of the 5,000 nearly 1,000 years later. Just like the miracle that Jesus performs, it's ambiguous whether he magically multiplies the food or simply gets people to share the food they have been hiding from each other because they're all afraid of going hungry if they share. Either way, what Elisha sees, and what his companions see, are two different realities. Or rather, they both see reality, but Elisha sees more of it. From the standpoint of his augmented reality, Elisha exclaims, "God says there's plenty."

Now we get to the heart of the message – a message that is as applicable in our day as it was in Elisha's. It's a message that, if we really took it seriously in the horrific situations we face, it might widen our own pool of available reality and help us overcome the horrors we face. The message we should keep hearing – like a U2 song that's stuck in our heads – is, "**God says there's enough.**"

What would happen if people of God became *prophets* of God? In situations where most people see only doom and gloom and are therefore willing to commit all sorts of horrors and atrocities (or overlook those being committed to others) in order to protect what they have, modern-day prophets might very well proclaim the same message Elisha did in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE: "God says there's enough!" For instance:

- "God says there's enough wealth and opportunity in our country to go around." Therefore, people of God don't need to resort to committing or condoning child abuse at our southern border in order to keep some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in North America out.
- "God says there is enough humanity left in people and nations, and enough of the Holy Spirit quietly at work in people of every faith and no faith, that we can achieve peace through diplomacy and applying diplomatic pressure rather than weaponizing the heavens and endangering the entire planet."
- Speaking of the planet, modern-day people of God might add: "God says there is more than enough economic strength and vitality in our country that we don't need to pollute the air with cheap carbon anymore. We don't need to put the lives of our own children, and many generations after them, at risk from runaway global warming all so that some people – even middle-class people – can live like kings and queens compared to most people throughout human history.

Perhaps as you face your own personal horrors this week, this month, or this year, you can hear God's prophetic word to you, too: (God says,) "There is enough!"

What would it be like to face a divorce knowing "there is enough" love still available to you in the world to put your life back together on the other side?

What would it be like to face financial insolvency and hear God's word, "there is enough" resiliency within you, and generosity available to you, to get through whatever shortfall you may have?

And what would it be like to face a scary health situation and hear God's word, "there is enough" support around you, and grace, and love, to heal you whether you are cured or not?

Then you might know what it is like to be Elisha, and many other women and men of God, who draw from a deeper pool of available reality when making decisions. And you would know what it is like to move about with faith, courage, and resilience in a world full of horrors.