

The Widow of Nain



The Resurrection of the Widow's Son at Nain | James Tissot , 1886–1896 | Brooklyn Museum | PD-US

¹¹ Soon afterward he journeyed to a city called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd accompanied him.¹² As he drew near to the gate of the city, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. A large crowd from the city was with her.¹³ When the Lord saw her, he was moved with pity for her and said to her, “Do not weep.”¹⁴ He stepped forward and touched the coffin; at this the bearers halted, and he said, “Young man, I tell you, arise!”¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.¹⁶ Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, exclaiming, “A great prophet has arisen in our midst,” and “God has visited his people.”¹⁷ This report about him spread through the whole of Judea and in all the surrounding region. (Luke 7:11-17)

“Soon afterwards...” is a reference to Jesus’ encounter with the centurion in Capernaum which itself is in the shadow of the Sermon on the Plains. As mentioned in the commentary on that pericope, Luke draws a comparison between Jesus’ healing action (Luke 7:1-10) in Capernaum and the healing actions of the Prophet Elisha in 2 Kings 5. This theme, begun in the Sermon, will continue in this gospel passage. In both passages the mercy of God is offered even to enemies. This challenges the idea that limits the extent of Jesus’ and apostles’ ministry and mission. The Good News extends even to the Gentile world.

Here in the city of Nain (a Galilean town located some six miles to the southeast of Nazareth) we have another demonstration of Jesus’ compassion. The comparison of Jesus to the prophetic figures of Israel’s past underlies the narrative. His action of revivifying the son of a widow along with the expression “Jesus gave him to his mother” alludes to the earlier act of power by Elijah (1 Kgs 17:23). Key echoes are the identification of the dead man as the only son of a widow, the meeting of the prophet and the widow at the gate of the city, and the return of the resuscitated son to his mother.

When the people see what has happened, their reaction is to recognize a “*great prophet*.” Jesus’ compassion for the woman draws him to the funeral procession. As in Capernaum, Jesus faces condemnation of ritual uncleanness because he touches the corpse (Num 19:11). The response of the people is first fear, but ultimately the praise of God, as in the earlier healing of the paralyzed man (Luke 5:26). Faith is not mentioned preliminary to the deed as in the healing of the centurion’s servant; but the action elicits faith in the form of divine praise.

It would be easy to simply note “another miracle and demonstration of divine power” but there is more. Jesus’ first words to the woman, “*Do not weep*,” should focus our attention on something other than another miracle. Tales of Jesus’ powerful deeds have been broadcast throughout the region. The interpretation of this passage needs to be guided by Luke’s placing of the woman at the center of this story. This stands in sharp contrast to the Capernaum episode: Centurion, man of power, foreigner vs. woman, without husband or son, she epitomizes the “poor” to whom Jesus has come to bring good news.

Consider the woman’s future: to be without a husband or only son meant profound social, economic, and emotional vulnerability. In first century Jewish life a husband or adult son was typically the provider. Without either, a woman had no guaranteed livelihood. She would likely rely on extended family, charity, or the synagogue community for sustenance. If these failed, she might face begging, destitution, or even slavery if debts existed.

Ancient Jewish society was patriarchal; a woman’s social status was closely tied to her relationship to a male (husband, father, son). A widow without a son had no legal protector or advocate in courts or public life. And more, the loss of a husband and then a son meant compounded grief. The son would represent not only her remaining family but her future security. His death, particularly if he was her “only son,” would have signaled the end of her family line—a significant cultural and spiritual blow in Jewish thought. Children were seen as a blessing from God and a sign of divine favor (Psalm 127:3–5). To be left without descendants could be interpreted (wrongly by some) as a sign of divine judgment or misfortune. Her situation might have evoked compassion, but also shame and marginalization.

The encounter at Nain entails the miraculous raising of this young man from the dead, but should also be seen as the restoration of this woman within her community.

Joel Green (Luke, 292) notes that Jesus performs three acts:

“First, he tells the widow not to weep, a transparent reminder to Luke’s audience that the good news of salvation will turn weeping into laughter (6:21).”

“Second, he touches the funeral bier or wooden plank on which the body is being carried. This is not an act of healing, but seems designed only to stop the procession; nevertheless, simply by touching the bier Jesus has again crossed the boundaries of ritual purity (cf. 5:12–14).”

“Finally, Jesus speaks, not in prayer to God (as Elijah had done), but directly to the corpse, commanding it to be revived. This is the act of healing, and with this speech-act Jesus evidences striking dimensions of his apparent authorization, status, and institutional role in the salvific purpose of God. Even if the exact nature of this identification is not yet available to the crowds, who respond to Jesus as a prophet (7:16), the narrator makes this more apparent for his audience by explicitly identifying Jesus as “Lord.” The twofold response of the corpse, sitting up and speaking, signals his revivification (cf. Acts 9:40).”

The purpose of the crowds now becomes clear: *Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, exclaiming, “A great prophet has arisen in our midst,” and “God has visited his people.”* They are present to be witnesses, to interpret, and to report this miracle of restoration. But the response of “fear” might surprise modern readers.

The Greek word used—φόβος (phobos)—can mean not just terror, but awe-filled reverence. It's the same kind of fear experienced by those who encountered divine power directly, as in Luke 5:26 (healing of the paralytic): “Astonishment seized them all and they glorified God...” and Luke 8:37 (exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac): the people are filled with fear and ask Jesus to leave. The crowd at Nain realizes they are in the presence of something holy and powerful—a sign that God is acting directly in their midst.

It should be noted that this is the first resurrection (resuscitation) miracle in Luke's Gospel. For a dead man to sit up and speak would be terrifying—it defies natural law and signals divine intervention. It was held that only God or His prophets could raise the dead. The fear comes from realizing: this is not just a healer; this is someone with power over death itself. This is an eschatological moment that suggests the Kingdom of God is at hand: the crowd exclaims: *“A great prophet has arisen in our midst.”* and *“God has visited his people.”* These words are theological affirmations, not just emotional reactions.

It should be noted that the actions at Nain point ahead to Luke 7:22 when the disciples of John the Baptist are sent to ask Jesus if he is the “One.” Jesus responds, asking them what they have seen: *“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.”*

Sources

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