

“Someone came from Baal-Shalisha ...”

The Significance of the Topography in 2Kgs 4.42-44

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In the Old Testament example of the tale of ‘the feeding of the multitude’ (2Kgs 4.42-44) the main protagonists remain conspicuously anonymous. Although the story is firmly embedded in the Elisha-cycle, the prophet and his servant are not mentioned by name. The same holds true for the man who comes up to offer the prophet bread and grain of the first fruits. Only the home town of the man is explicitly identified as Baal-Shalisha. The occurrence of the place name Baal-Shalisha in this short tale, however, is not altogether without significance.

In order to clarify the significance of the place name Baal-Shalisha a few characteristics of the tale need to be discussed. The text of 2Kgs 4.42-44 may be rendered as follows:

42. Someone¹ came from Baal-Shalisha
and brought the man of the gods² bread of the first fruits:
twenty loaves of barley,
and new corn on the stalk.³

¹ See Ges-K § 139d; DCH I, 222a, for the use of אִישׁ in the sense of ‘anyone’, ‘someone’.

² The use of אֱלֹהִים in the genitive construction אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים may simply qualify the man in question as someone who possesses divine powers (see Ges-K § 128s-t) referring to one type of intermediary between the worlds of god and man among many others – e.g. prophets, seers, ecstasies etc., etc. – that inhabited the world of ancient Israel. A ‘man of the gods’ may in particular have been renowned for the miracles he worked (see especially 2Kgs 2.19-21, 2.23-25, 4.1-7, 4.8-37, 4.38-41, 5.1-27, 6.1-7).

³ The interpretation of בַּצִּקְלוֹ in the phrase וּכְרָמָל בַּצִּקְלוֹ in verse 42aβ is a famous *crux interpretum* which has troubled ancient translations and modern commentators alike. The translation וּפְרִיכֹן בְּלִבְשֵׁיהּ, ‘(and broken corn) in his garment’ offered by the Targum (and the Peshitta), or the alternative, *et frumentum novum in pera sua*, ‘(and new corn) in his bag’, suggested by the Vulgate seem to be no more than educated guesses based on the immediate context (see also Cogan / Tadmor, Kings 59: ‘its meaning was lost fairly early’). The same holds true for the Masoretic vocalisation that seems to take בַּ as a preposition and the *hapax* צִקְלוֹן as some sort of container for the transportation of the first fruits. In the second part of the twentieth century, however, several scholars have proposed to take בַּצִּקְלוֹ as a cognate of Ugaritic *bsql*, ‘sprout’, ‘shoot’, ‘branch’ (see Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language, 241) and take the form בַּצִּקְלוֹן

- He said:
Give it to the people,
that⁴ they may eat.
43. His servant said:
How can I present this to a hundred men?
He said (again):
Give it to the people,
that they may eat,
for thus says YHWH:
They shall eat and have some left.⁵
44. He presented it to them,
they ate and had some left,
in accordance with the word of YHWH.

The tale reveals all the characteristics of the stories about ‘the feeding of the multitude’ recorded in the Gospels (Matt. 14.13-21; 15.32-39; Mark 6.30-44; 8.1-10; Luke 9.10-17). In each story (a) someone comes up with a little food – 20 loaves of barley bread (2Kgs 4.42), seven loaves of bread and a few fish (Matt. 15.34; Mark 8.5, 7), five loaves of bread and two fishes (Matt. 14.17; Mark 6.38; Luke 9.16) – which is insufficient to feed the (b) masses – 100 men (2Kgs 4.43); 4000 men (Matt. 15.38; Mark 8.9) 5000 men (Matt. 14.21; Mark 6.44; Luke 9.14) – that are present. (c) Both the servant of the **אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים** – ‘How can I present this to a hundred man’ (2Kgs 4.43) – and the disciples – ‘Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed such a crowd’ (Matt. 15.33), ‘Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat’ (Mark 6.37), ‘How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert’ (Mark 8.4) – protest the suggestion that they feed the masses with the little food available. However, after the masses have eaten there is (d) plenty left (2Kgs 4.44) or in the

as a diminutive in the sense ‘ear of grain’, ‘stalk’ (cf. HALAT 142a, 984b; DCH II, 246b). The emendation of **וּבְרִמְלוֹן בְּרִמְלוֹן** in **וּבְרִמְלוֹן בְּרִמְלוֹן**, ‘and plants of his orchard’, suggested by Gray, Kings 501, nevertheless, seems to be a little far fetched and indeed unnecessary. The term **בְּרִמְלָה** (Lev 2.14; 23.14; 2Kgs 4.42) does not have the connotation ‘fresh ears (of cereal)’ as suggested by DCH IV, 462b, but the meaning ‘new corn’, as argued by Mulder, **בְּרִמְלָה** 343, (cf. HALAT 475a). The phrase **וּבְרִמְלוֹן בְּרִמְלוֹן** in verse 42a β may be rendered comprehensively by ‘and new corn on the (lit. its) stalk’; contra Schmitt, Elisa 211 n. 2, who argues that: „Das in M dem Wort angehängte Suffix 3. masc sing. nicht zu der vom Ugaritischen her nahegelegten Bedeutung [passt],” but fails to acknowledge that **בְּרִמְלָה** is masc. sing.

⁴ See Ges-K § 109f for the use of a volitive after an imperative to express an intention or an assurance of a contingent occurrence.

⁵ See Ges-K § 113ee for the use of the infinite absolute instead of the imperfect in emphatic promises.

cases of the Gospels: seven (Matt. 15.37; Mark 8.8) or twelve (Matt. 14.20; Mark 6.42; Luke 6.17) baskets full. The stories of 'the feeding of the multitude' in the Gospels may nevertheless not present independent examples of a common and conventional narrative theme. The Gospels in all likelihood borrowed the theme from the Old Testament presupposing that 'anything Elisha can do, Jesus can do better'.⁶

The omission of all personal names in the episode recorded in 2Kgs 4.42-44 meanwhile suggests that the tale of 'the feeding of the multitude' was originally told of one or another anonymous *איש האלהים*.⁷ The miracle may in the course of time have been attributed to Elisha who presents the Old Testament *איש האלהים* par excellence. The explicit reference to the place name Baal-Shalisha in verse 42aα may well be construed as the editorial technique by which the tale is incorporated in the wider Elisha-cycle.⁸ The place name only makes sense in combination with nearby Gilgal which happens to be the scene of the previous miracle performed by Elisha: the cure of a case of 'death in the pot' (2Kgs 4.38-41).

The pivotal role of Baal-Shalisha in the compilation of this section of the Elisha-cycle may be elucidated by a topographical survey of the area in question. The location of Baal-Shalisha has never been a matter of much controversy. Unfortunately, the location of the village is not self-evident as the place name occurs only once in the Old Testament. The *nomen topographicum* Shalisha is admittedly mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament in the story of Saul and his servant in search of a couple of strayed donkeys (1 Sam. 9.1-10.16). In the course of their search they 'passed through the hill country of Ephraim and passed through the land of Shalisha, but they did not find them. And they passed through the land of Shaalim, but they were not there' (1 Sam. 9.4). However, 'the land of Shalisha' must be located somewhere in the eastern hill country of Ephraim⁹ and may indeed not have been

⁶ The same principle may be observed in the attribution of the resurrection of a beloved son by the *איש האלהים* Elisha in 2Kgs 4.8-37 to the prophet Elijah in 1Kgs 17.17-24 (note the use of the title *איש האלהים* in 1Kgs 17.18, 24); see especially Thiel, Könige 67-68, who argues convincingly in favour of the originality of the Elisha tradition.

⁷ See also Schmitt, Elisa 99-100, who argues that both the *Botenformel* *כה אמר יהוה* and the *Wortentensprechungsformel* *כרבר יהוה* are unusual in the Elisha-cycle and that the designation *משרת* instead of *נער* for the servant of the *איש האלהים* is indeed unique (*משרת* in 2Kgs 6.15 is clearly corrupt).

⁸ See also Schmitt, Elisa 100: „Die ins Detail gehenden Angaben über Herkunfts-ort und Art der dem Gottesmann gebrachten Gaben sind für den Fortgang der Wundergeschichte völlig bedeutungslos.”

⁹ See especially the meticulous reconstruction of the route taken by Saul and his servant by Edelman, Saul's 44-58.

associated with Baal-Shalisha.¹⁰ Since the days of Eusebius Baal-Shalisha has been identified with βαλθσαρσα (LXX < Beth Baal-Shalisha?) 15 Roman miles north of (Diospolis) Lydda.¹¹ The place in question has traditionally been identified with present day *bet serisiye* about 22 km northeast of Lydda. Nowadays, however, the village is usually equalled with *hirbet kafir tilt* (cf. Arabic *tult* and Hebrew שִׁלְטִי) about 25 km northeast of Lydda.¹²

The location of Gilgal, on the other hand, has indeed been a matter of debate.¹³ Although one episode of the Elijah-Elisha-cycle admittedly presupposes that the two men cross the Jordan opposite Jericho (2Kgs 2.1-28), the village in question may hardly have been identical with the famous Gilgal situated between Jericho and the Jordan. One does not travel all the way from Baal-Shalisha – a distance of 50 km in a straight line – to offer bread and grain from the first fruits to אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים who resides in the vicinity of Jericho.¹⁴ The Gilgal which is occasionally mentioned in the Elisha-cycle (2Kgs 2.1; 4.38) must rather be located in the central hill country of Ephraim and may – in accordance with the close association of Gilgal and Bethel in Hosea 4.15; Amos 4.4; 5.5 – be identified with present day *ḡilḡiliye* about 12 km north of Bethel.¹⁵ This location would conveniently fit the journey from Gilgal (2Kgs 2.1) by way of Bethel (2Kgs 2.3) to Jericho (2Kgs 2.4) presupposed in the story of the succession of Elijah by Elisha (2Kgs 2.1-18).¹⁶ Gilgal would thus be situated about 20 km in a straight line southeast

¹⁰ Contra Kallai, Baal-Shalisha 191-204; Edelman, Saul's 50-51; Cogan / Tadmor, Kings 59; who take the identification for granted and consequently look for Baal-Shalisha in the eastern hills of Ephraim.

¹¹ Notley / Safrai, Eusebius 56. 21-23: "It is in the territory of Diospolis fifteen miles to the north in Thamnitiki"; see for a recent edition and translation of Eusebius' Onomasticon Notley / Safrai, Eusebius esp. 57.

¹² See Abel, Géographie 259-260; see also Šanda, Bücher 34-35; Gray, Kings 474; Schmitt, Elisa 210-211 n. 101; Rehm, Buch 58; Würthwein, Bücher 296.

¹³ See Schmitt, Elisa 158-162, for a survey of the various proposals for the identification of Gilgal.

¹⁴ Contra Würthwein, Bücher 296: „Man erinnert sich also des Gottesmannes von Gilgal in einem weit entfernten Gebiet und bringt ihm die Gaben ...“ A more obvious reason than the distance involved will be discussed below.

¹⁵ See already Thenius, Bücher 270-272; see also Abel, Géographie 337; Rehm, Buch 58; Cogan / Tadmor, Kings 31.

¹⁶ Contra Schmitt, Elisa 160-161, who has Elijah and Elisha travel zigzag from Gilgal opposite Jericho to Bethel and all the way back to Jericho; see also Würthwein, Bücher 274, who nevertheless refrains from further speculation because he considers 2Kgs 2.2-6 as a later addition.

of Baal-Shalisha – a distance easily travelled with a load of twenty loaves of barley bread and new corn on the stalk.¹⁷

The distance between Baal-Shalisha and Gilgal in turn accounts for the fact that the **אִישׁ הַאֱלֹהִים** in 2Kgs 4.42-44 receives bread and grain of the first fruits from Baal-Shalisha. In a place like Baal-Shalisha located in the western foothills of Ephraim the first fruits of the new harvest will have been available much earlier as in a place as high up as Gilgal. The geographical differences in the harvest times can be reconstructed confidently with the help of the monumental work of Gustav Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, whose observations of the agricultural seasons in early twentieth century Palestine may still reflect the unaltered conditions of the first millennium B.C.E. Although the dates may vary from year to year due to climactic variations,¹⁸ the barley harvest in the Jordan valley and on the coastal plain normally starts towards the end of April, whereas the harvest in the mountainous regions does not begin before the middle of May.¹⁹ Dalman cites from his own observations 3 June 1911, 21 May 1913, 16 May 1921, and 24 May 1925 as the beginning of the barley harvest in the hill country around of Jerusalem.²⁰ The wheat harvest commences a week or two after the beginning of the barley harvest. In the mountainous regions the wheat generally ripens in the beginning of June, in the Jordan valley and on the coastal plain about two weeks earlier.²¹ Dalman again cites from his own observations 11 June 1909 and 1 June 1925 as the beginning of the wheat harvest in the vicinity of Jerusalem.²²

Awaiting the first produce of the new harvest after a famine (2Kgs 4.38) it consequently takes someone from down hill Baal-Shalisha to bring the **אִישׁ הַאֱלֹהִים** and the people of Gilgal twenty loaves of barley and new corn

¹⁷ See also Thenius, Bücher 290. The identification of Gilgal with present day *gilguliye* about 10 km west of *hirbet kafr tilt*, suggested by Šanda, Bücher 10; Gray, Kings 499-500, would admittedly fit the story of the presentation of bread and grain of the first fruits in 2Kgs 4.42-44 even better, but as Schmitt, Elisa 159 n. 31, argues, such a Gilgal is nowhere else attested in the Old Testament.

¹⁸ Dalman, Arbeit, III 2: „Die absolute Kalenderzeit ist dabei abhängig von dem klimatischen Charakter des Jahres, der Art des Regenendes, dem Eintreten von Ostwind und Sommerwärme.“

¹⁹ Dalman, Arbeit I/2 415: „Im allgemeinen dürfte für das Gebirgsland der Beginn der Gerstenernte um Mitte Mai ... als zutreffend gelten. In Küstenland und Jordanebene wird der Beginn um etwa 14 Tage früher liegen.“

²⁰ Dalman, Arbeit III 2; the table in Arbeit III, 4-6, puts the barley harvest in May.

²¹ Dalman, Arbeit I/2 415: „Im allgemeinen dürfte für das Gebirgsland der Beginn (...) der Weizenernte um Anfang Juni als zutreffend gelten. In Küstenland und Jordanebene wird der Beginn um etwa 14 Tage früher liegen.“

²² Dalman, Arbeit III 2; the table in Arbeit III 4-6 puts the wheat harvest in June.

on the stalk. This state of affairs positively rules out the possibility that the present storyline has Gilgal opposite Jericho in mind.²³ In the Jordan valley the barley ripens even a little earlier than on the coastal plain. Dalman actually observed that the barley was about ready to be harvested in the vicinity of Jericho 18 April 1909.²⁴ The new grain harvest would have been available in Gilgal even before someone from Baal-Shalisha could set out on his long journey to bring the first fruits to the **אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים**.²⁵

Last but not least, the presentation of barley bread and new corn of the **בְּכֹרִים**, ‘first fruits’, to the **אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים** in 2Kgs 4.42-44 likewise fits the present storyline. Elsewhere in the Old Testament bread of the **בְּכֹרִים**, ‘first fruits’, is admittedly reserved for the priests of YHWH: ‘You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread (...) and raise them as first fruits before YHWH (...). They shall be holy for YHWH – they are reserved for the priest’ (Lev. 23.17, 20). The **אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים** and his servant, however, can hardly be accused of a kind of sacrilege doling out bread and new corn of the **בְּכֹרִים**, ‘first fruits’, to the people of Gilgal. The compilation of the Elisha-cycle pre-dates the priestly legislation on the **בְּכֹרִים**, ‘first fruits’, by one or two centuries. In the pre-priestly compilation of the Elisha-cycle the anonymous **אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים** – or Elisha for that matter – was not hampered by the later restrictions.²⁶ He could accept the **בְּכֹרִים** for what they were: the very first fruits of the new harvest after a period of famine.

²³ Contra Schmitt, *Elisa* 159 n. 3, who argues that: „II 4,42 kann nun jedoch zur Bestimmung der Lage des in 4, 38 genannten Gilgal nicht herangezogen werden, da nach unserer Literarkritik (...) 4,42-44 erst in nachexilischer Zeit mit 4, 38-41 zusammengestellt worden ist,“ but in fact turns the argument upside down, as the explicit reference to Baal-Shalisha in 2Kgs 4.42 presents itself as the editorial technique by which 2Kgs 4.42-44 was attached to 4.38-41; see also Gray, *Kings* 500: “The two episodes, however, may simply be juxtaposed in Kings and not be really associated with the same locality, though it is likely that they are.”

²⁴ Dalman, *Arbeit* I/2 415: „In Jericho dürfte die Gerstenernte schon Mitte oder Ende April beginnen; denn am 18. April 1909 sah ich sie dort fast reif“; although Dalman may have misinterpreted the agricultural conditions slightly, because *Arbeit* III 2, cites 11 June 1909 as the beginning of the wheat harvest in the vicinity of Jerusalem and the beginning of the barley harvest in the Jordan valley and the beginning of the wheat harvest in the mountainous regions can hardly be more than four to six weeks apart.

²⁵ The same would also hold true if Baal-Shalisha were located in the eastern hill country of Ephraim as Kallai, *Baal-Shalisha* 191-195; Edelman, *Saul’s* 50-51; Cogan / Tadmor, *Kings* 59, suggest; in this case the barley harvest in Gilgal would have begun two or three weeks earlier than in Baal-Shalisha.

²⁶ Contra Gray, *Kings* 501, who tries to justify the actions of the **אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים** by arguing that: “the provision brought by the man of Baal-Shalisha may have been

In conclusion: the explicit reference to Baal-Shalisha in the episode of the ‘feeding of the multitude’ in 2Kgs 4:42-44 was triggered by the inclusion of the miracle – that was originally performed by an anonymous אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים – in the wider Elisha-cycle. The place name makes perfect sense in combination with Gilgal the scene of the previous miracle performed by Elisha in the days of a famine. While the inhabitants of the hill country are eagerly awaiting the first produce of the new grain harvest it takes someone from down hill Baal-Shalisha to bring the אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים and the people of Gilgal ‘twenty loaves of barley bread and new corn on the stalk’.

Summary

The place name Baal-Shalisha does not occur by chance in the tale of ‘the feeding of the multitude’ in 2Kgs 4:42-44. The topography of the tale mirrors the difference in the harvest times of the cereals between the valleys and the mountainous areas of Syria-Palestine. The barley and the wheat on the coastal plain and in the valleys ripen a fortnight before the crops in the mountains. In Baal-Shalisha which was located in the western foothills of the hill-country of Ephraim the first fruits of the cereal harvest would thus be available much earlier than in the vicinity of Gilgal where the prophet Elisha resided (2Kgs 4:38-41). It consequently takes ‘someone from Baal-Shalisha’ to bring the prophet ‘twenty loaves of barley, and new corn on the stalk’ (2Kgs 4:42).

Zusammenfassung

Der Ortsname Baal-Shalisha taucht nicht zufällig in der Erzählung der „Speisung der Menge“ in 2Kgs 4:42-44 auf. Die Lokalisierung der Erzählung spiegelt die zeitliche Abweichung der Getreideernte in den Tälern zu den gebirgigen Regionen von Syrien-Palästina wider. Die Gerste und der Weizen der Küstenebene und Täler reifen vierzehn Tage früher als das Getreide in den Bergen. In Baal-Shalisha, das in den westlichen Ausläufern des Hügellandes von Ephraim lag, konnte man die ersten Früchte der Getreideernte folglich viel früher ernten als in der Umgebung von Gilgal, wo der Prophet Elisha seinen Wirkungsort hatte (2Kgs 4:38-41). Infolgedessen wurde „Jemand von Baal-Shalisha“ benötigt, um dem Propheten „zwanzig Laib Gerstenbrote und frische Getreidehalme“ (2Kgs 4:42) zu bringen.

appropriated by Elisha on the authority of Yahweh (...) as the elements of a special sacramental meal.”

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