

Jesus' unique rising: Acts 9:36-43

by [Sarah Hinlicky Wilson](#) in the [April 20, 2010](#) issue

The mark of a good wonder-worker is his similarity to wonder-workers of the past. Though Jesus exceeded Moses in teaching authority, his miraculous acts are patterned after his prophetic forebears Elijah and Elisha. John the Baptist is commonly compared to Elijah in the New Testament, but the implicit corollary—that just as Elijah is followed by Elisha, so John is followed by Jesus, and the latter do greater things than the former—is never made explicit. Luke makes the one and only reference to Elisha in the entire New Testament, when Jesus mentions the healing of Naaman the Syrian—even though, like Elisha, Jesus raises a dead child, feeds the hungry with more food than is scientifically possible, and cures the leprous.

Significantly, though, the one miracle that Elijah, Elisha and Jesus all perform in common is the raising of the dead. Elijah raises the son of the widow of Zarephath. Elisha gives new life to the Shunammite woman's son and then—posthumously—to a corpse tossed in Elisha's grave that revives when it comes in contact with the prophet's body. These three are the only instances of the resurrection of the dead in the Old Testament, so Jesus' resurrections (Lazarus, Jairus's daughter and the son of the widow of Nain) testify to his singular if not unique power from God. The ability to raise from the dead is not yet an end in itself, though. It is confirmation of the prophet's words' origin in God. As the widow of Zarephath put it: "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."

In Acts, Peter picks up the mantle of the prophetic wonder-worker, following in the footsteps of Jesus as he performs great deeds in the name of Jesus. In chapter 3 he heals a beggar lame from birth, a detail highlighting the extramiraculous nature of his action (without parallel in Luke's Gospel, though Jesus does heal a man blind from birth in John 9). Two chapters later Peter's healing renown has spread so widely that people are laying out their beloved ill in the streets, hoping that Peter's shadow might fall on them and heal them. In chapter 9 a paralytic bedridden for eight years is healed, followed quickly by Peter's most distinctive and glorious miracle of all, raising a dead person.

Only Paul matches Peter in this ability when he raises up Eutychus (the patron saint of all those put to sleep by long sermons). As if the sheer infrequency of resurrections weren't enough to prove the Elijah-Elisha-Jesus-Peter connection, Luke goes further by indulging in what has to be a pun. Peter addresses the woman, Dorcas in Greek, by her Aramaic name: "Tabitha, arise." Assuming he spoke to her in Aramaic, since that's the name he used, his words are only one letter off from Jesus' in one of his own resurrections: "Talitha, cumi." Curiously, Peter doesn't even invoke the name of Jesus to wake Tabitha from the dead.

In light of all this wonder-working, it is hard to avoid the question: what makes Jesus so special? Elijah and Elisha had already done the things that Jesus did. Peter and Paul did the same things afterward. As a rule the apostles do their wonders in the name of Jesus—though not always—but they do consistently refer their power beyond themselves to the Christ, demanding faith in him and not in themselves. (Paul is horrified when he discovers that the men of Lystra want to sacrifice oxen to him.) Luke especially among the evangelists stresses the continuity between Jesus and his disciples, inspired by the same Holy Spirit who empowered Jesus at his baptism and descended upon the company of believers at Pentecost. Yet, alone among those who raise from the dead, Jesus is named the "Author of Life." What is his distinction?

Resurrection from the dead is indeed one of the keys to the unique status of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. The human act of raising the dead is unusual, but it is not impossible. It is God's work, to be sure, through a human instrument. But—here's the first distinction—only one person is raised by God apart from any human intervention, directly, immediately. As Peter preaches time and again, "God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it." Why not? Peter tells us it is because of God's fidelity to His own promise, as revealed in Psalm 16: "You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let [Y]our holy one see corruption." This is not just a temporary reprieve, as with Lazarus or the widows' sons. God puts Jesus forever beyond the grasp of death.

Luke-Acts, though, does not only use the language of raising and getting raised, most often expressed with the Greek verb *egeiro*-. Following Mark, Luke also speaks of rising, *aniste-mia* (in the active or middle voice). Jesus is the only one to stand up, awake, arise from death—his unique prerogative as Son of God and Lord of all. Yet even this is not a matter of glorious divinity alone. Jesus' unique rising is and must be preceded by his suffering, which qualifies him to be the firstborn of the dead, the

pioneer, and a light “both to the people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:23). His light shines backward to the prophets and forward to the apostles. Why should the light not shine so brightly as to wake others from the dead as well?