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Where Does Salvation Come From? A Reading of 2 Kings 5:1–27

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Abstract: 2 Kings 5:1–27 describes the healing of a foreigner, Naaman the Syrian, a high officer of the King of Damascus, by Elisha, a prophet in Israel. Naaman the Syrian suffers from a kind of skin disease called "leprosy" in the Bible. He thinks that, being rich and powerful, he is in possession of the means to get healed. He has to change his mind and his behaviour, though. He is healed when he agrees to listen to an Israelian maidservant, a slave, to the prophet Elisha, and to his own servants. When he bathes in the Jordan, he symbolically enters the Promised Land because he is healed and, at the same time, he acknowledges that Yhwh is the only Lord of the universe.

Keywords: healing, monarchy, prophecy, conversion, *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, Jordan

"Go, bathe seven times in the Jordan: thy body shall return unto thee sound, and thou shalt be cleansed" (2 Kgs 5:10). The account of the healing of Naaman the Syrian in 2 Kgs 5 contains more than one unusual feature and one of them is precisely the decisive role played by the river Jordan.[1] People discussing the story seldom dwell on this detail, which – nevertheless – has its significance in the economy of the text.[2] The purpose of this short paper

1 For a *status quaestionis* on this text, see A. Rofé, *The Prophetical Stories. The Narratives about the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Their Literary Types and History* (Publications of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1988) 126–131, espec. 126–127; C. Conroy, "Riflessioni metodologiche su recenti studi della pericope di Naaman (2 Re 5)," *Luca-Atti. Studi in onore di P. Emilio Rasco nel suo 70. Compleanno* (eds. G. Marconi – G. O'Collins) (Commenti e Studi Biblici; Assisi: Citadella 1991) 46–71; S.L. McKenzie, *1 Könige 16 – 2 Könige 16* (IEKAT; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2021) 346–369, espec. 346–347. For a full analysis of the chapter from a narrative point of view, see N.C. Baumgart, *Gott, Prophet und Israel. Eine synchrone und diachrone Auslegung der Naamanerzählung und ihrer Gehasiepisode (2 Kön 5)* (ETS 68; Leipzig: Benno 1994). For a first essay of the same kind, see R.L. Cohn, "Form and Perspective in 2 Kings V," *VT* 33 (1983) 171–184. For a recent commentary, see McKenzie, *1 Könige 16 – 2 Könige 16*, 346–355. Some interesting insights can also be found in the seminal work by Hermann Gunkel, *Geschichten von Elisa* (Meisterwerke hebräischer Erzählungskunst 1; Berlin: Curtius 1925).

2 See, however, I. Cranz, "Naaman's Healing and Gehazi's Affliction: The Magical Background of 2 Kgs 5," *VT* 68 (2018) 540–555. She lists several parallels between our narrative and the magic practices well-known in Ancient Near East. If colours are similar, the picture is nonetheless often different. She mentions the Jordan's purifying function (*ibidem*, 547–549) and similar rituals, especially in Mesopotamia. The role of the Jordan in the OT is also mentioned (*ibidem*, 549) but without insisting on its unique value in Israel's history in Josh 3–4. Hugo Gressmann ("Die Heilung des Aussätzigen," *Die älteste Geschichtsschreibung und Prophetie*

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will be precisely to demonstrate the validity of this first intuition. Why must the healing take place in the Jordan (2 Kgs 5:14)? And why does Naaman's conversion immediately follow his purification in the river (2 Kgs 5:15)? In more technical terms, the *peripeteia*, i.e., the reversal of the situation and the healing, and the *anagnorisis*, i.e., the change of knowledge, from ignorance to knowledge of the one true God, the God of Israel, have the Jordan as their backdrop.[3] The waters of the Jordan are precisely the effective tool for solving the problems in the story. Moreover, the narrative insists that Naaman be healed in the Jordan and not elsewhere. His reaction in 2 Kgs 5:12 makes this clear: there are also rivers in Damascus and it was therefore not necessary to come to Israel to find water to bathe. However, the healing can only take place in the Jordan.[4] The account does not explain the reason for the choice and the question therefore remains open. We will try to find a satisfactory answer in the biblical background of the story. It is therefore necessary to reread the chapter carefully in order to gather the elements useful for the interpretation of the above-mentioned detail.

1. Obstacles to Be Overcome to Reach the Jordan

At first, it will be useful to retrace the route taken by Naaman to reach the Jordan.[5] In fact, there are at least two moments when the Aramean general finds himself in a dead end and could very well never reach the river and, therefore, never recover.[6] Furthermore, one must ask why and how it happened that Naaman set out for the land of Israel and not for another destination. Indeed, each narrative takes a precise direction in its first sentences, and makes a choice from the countless possibilities that are available to each narrator before the narrative begins. In the case of 2 Kgs 5 specifically, everything is decided in vv. 1–2.[7] The first verse presents the problem: a famous officer of Syria, who enjoys an enviable situation at the top of the hierarchy – and the crucial point appears in the last word of the verse – suffers

Israels [von Samuel bis Amos und Hosea] [Die Schriften des Alten Testaments 1/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1910] 297) already defends the idea that 2 Kgs 5 expunges all magic elements from the narrative.

3 For the vocabulary of narrative analysis see, among others, J.L. Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us". Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives,* 2 ed. (SubBi 13; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute 2000) 27–28.

4 See Cranz, "Naaman's Healing," 548.

5 According to recent studies, the text is homogeneous, with the exception of a few small, punctual, additions of minor importance. See especially H.-J. Stipp, *Elischa – Propheten – Gottesmänner. Die Kompositionsgeschichte des Elischazyklus und verwandter Texte, rekonstruiert auf der Basis von Text- und Literaturkritik zu 1 Kön 20.22 und 2 Kön 2–7* (Arbeiten zu Text und Sprache im Alten Testament 24; St. Ottilien: Eos 1987) 300–319. Marvin A. Sweeney (*I & II Kings. A Commentary* [OTL; London – Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2007] 297–298) is of the same opinion: "Consequently, the depiction of Gehazi's punishment works together with Naaman's recognition of YHWH to promote recognition of YHWH and just behavior as the Israelite audience knows that YHWH requires." Cf. McKenzie, *1 Könige 16 – 2 Könige 16*, 355–356, for a slightly different opinion.

6 See, among others, Baumgart, *Gott, Prophet und Israel*, 118–119, 120.

7 See, for instance, Baumgart, *Gott, Prophet und Israel*, 117.

from a skin disease. Better to speak of a skin disease than of leprosy because, certainly, it is not Hansen's disease. Naaman does not have to be isolated, he can live with his family, he can see his ruler, he can travel with a large retinue, he is not shunned by anyone and, finally, he can attend worship with his ruler (2 Kgs 5:18).[8]

Nevertheless, this must be a severe problem because he seeks healing. Verses 2–3 offer the solution or, at least, a possible solution which lies in the hands of the prophet in Israel. The proposed solution, and this is an essential point, comes not from above, but from below, and from the lowest, from a maiden, a foreigner and a slave, brought to Damascus by Naaman after a raid on the kingdom of Israel. Naaman and the servant girl stand at the two extremes of the society at the time. One element, however, is of foremost importance in the story, namely that the maidservant is a member of the people of Israel while Naaman is an Aramean, a non-Israelite, a "pagan" to use the traditional vocabulary in this context.[9]

The news is passed from the handmaid to her mistress and, we must fill in the missing link, from Naaman's wife to her husband who, in turn, turns to his ruler (2 Kgs 5:4).[10] We climb the social hierarchy as the information given by the maidservant reaches the top of the social ladder, the king of Damascus. Naaman turns to his ruler for permission to go to Israel. Here begins the long journey that ends in the waters of the Jordan, but only after some vicissitudes that are essential to understand the story.

Before leaving, Naaman gathers belongings he is going to take with him, including a number of gifts, silver, gold and clothes. Why this detail? We find the mention of gifts twice. The first time, after the healing, Naaman wants to offer gifts to Elisha in gratitude, but the prophet refuses (2 Kgs 5:15–16). The second time, in the final part of the story, Elisha's servant Gehazi runs back to Naaman to get a part of the gifts and is chastised for this very reason (2 Kgs 5:20–27). The motif thus plays a significant role in the different parts of the story and contributes to its substantial homogeneity.[11] Alongside the theme of power, embodied by the king, the theme of wealth appears here. How will healing be achieved? Through the power of kings or the wealth of the powerful? Or will there be another way? These are some of the possibilities open to the reader at this point.

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8 For more on this disease, see, for instance, McKenzie, *1 Könige 16 – 2 Könige 16*, 343, n. 3, with bibliography, and 348–349.

9 See Baumgart, *Gott, Prophet und Israel*, 116–117, who, however, does not say much on the topic. Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 174–175, is more explicit: "[…] ironically, the lowest of the low, a female Israelite captive, is heeded by the great king of Syria" (*ibidem*, 175).

10 Several scholars noted the fact. See, for instance, Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 174; Baumgart, *Gott, Prophet und Israel*, 117. The LXX has a different version in v. 4: Naaman's wife reports the maid's suggestion to her husband and the reader must assume that Naaman then spoke to the king.

11 This is an important argument against the division of the narrative in three redactional layers as, for instance, in Hans-Christoph Schmitt, *Elisa. Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur vorklassischen nordisraelitischen Prophetie* (Gütersloh: Mohn 1972). See the opinion of Charles Conroy ("Riflessioni metodologiche," 58–59). Schmitt was followed by several authors, with some nuances, and even by Steven L. McKenzie (*1 Könige 16 – 2 Könige 16*, 355–356) who identifies a "prophetic legend" supplemented by a "prophetic narrator" with some later additions. See his translation with different fonts (*ibidem*, 341–342).

The following scene closes the first door (2 Kgs 5:6–7). Naaman arrives with a letter entrusted to him by the king of Damascus for the king of Israel, knocks on the door of the latter's palace, who reads the letter and tears his clothes.

The reaction of the king of Israel is a clear manifestation of impotence: "Am I God to give death or life, that he should command me to deliver a man from his leprosy? Recognise and see that he evidently seeks excuses against me" (2 Kgs 5:7). It is not in his power to give death or life, a theme we find elsewhere, e.g., in Deut 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6. Only God has power over life and death, over health and sickness. In fact, God belongs to a different category than power and wealth and, therefore, it is important to find the way to the divine sphere.[12] We are, however, at a dead end and, if it were not for outside intervention, Naaman could return home with his illness.[13]

This outside intervention comes from Elisha who, we do not know how, learns of the reaction of the king of Israel. In 2 Kgs 5:8 a path completely different from the one followed by Naaman so far opens to him. He has gone from one king to another and, now, he is addressed by a prophet. The change of direction is essential because the "royal way" turns out to be unsuccessful while the "prophetic way" is the right one, the one that leads to healing. The final lesson is clear as salvation does not come from monarchy, but from prophethood. This may seem like an obvious statement, but it is not. In ancient Israel, as well as in the cultures of the ancient Near East, the privileged link between divinity and humanity was the person of the king.[14] The analysed story challenges this ideology to substitute the prophet for the ruler. This seems like a minor detail, but it is a hallmark of the biblical tradition that affirms, after all, that salvation does not come from the ancient monarchical institution that failed and disappeared forever with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. It is the prophets who saved Israel and Elisha is one of them. The contrast between king and prophet becomes increasingly blatant. Where the king is powerless, the prophet is not.[15]

Another element that needs to be highlighted: Elisha's response initiates a cognitive process that adds to the initial, situational plot. In effect, the reader expects a change of condition, i.e., the transition from illness to healing. Elisha, when he sends word to the king of Israel, anonymous as in many folk tales, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let that man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel" (2 Kgs 5:8), gives hope for a "revelation," a change of knowledge on the part of Naaman who should recognise in

12 See McKenzie, *1 Könige 16 – 2 Könige 16*, 350.

13 See, among others, Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 175.

14 On this topic, see the classical study by Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1955; 2 ed., 1967). See also G. Widengren, *Sakrales Königtum im Alten Testament und im Judentum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1955); P. Merlo, "Il re mediatore di Dio nell'Israele antico. Lineamenti alla luce del contesto storico-religioso," *«Multifariam multisque modis» (Eb 1,1). Necessità e vie della mediazione divina nell'Israele biblico. Atti del XIX Convegno di Studi Ceterotestamentari (Napoli, 7–9 Settembre 2015)* (RStB 27; Bologna: Dehoniane 2017) 67–95.

15 Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 175: "Though the king is powerless, the prophet is powerful [...]."

Elisha a prophet of Israel.[16] A path of recognition begins at this moment, and reaches its culmination in v. 15, with Naaman's confession of faith. The prophet will not be the one spoken of – it will be the God of Israel. This is one of the many examples of "double causality" because recognising God means recognising the prophet as God's agent. Verse 8 sets the scene for vv. 15–18, another argument in favour of the essential homogeneity of the passage.

2. The Point of Arrival

With Elisha, the journey that will lead to the solution of Naaman's problem can be resumed. It is he who shows the way to follow: "Go, bathe seven times in the Jordan: your body will return to you healthy and you will be cleansed" (2 Kgs 5:10). The circumstances in which the information was given to Naaman are surprising. Elisha, having been informed of Naaman's arrival with all his mighty retinue, in his chariot and with his horses, signs of his power, does not even go out to meet his guest.[17] He sends him an anonymous messenger. Why? The answer suggested by the context is simple. Naaman makes a show of his power, and Elisha is not impressed. Moreover, sending a messenger focuses attention precisely on the content of the message, eliminating all elements that might distract the reader. The message, in fact, is centered on the role of the Jordan. It is there that Naaman will be healed and not by a direct intervention of the prophet. According to some scholars, this account is intended to avoid suggesting the almost magical power of Elisha, something emphasised in other accounts.[18]

We then find ourselves at a second dead end for the moment. Naaman actually rejects Elisha's proposal because he sees it as contrary to his expectations. In fact, Naaman desired a classic miracle according to the criteria of the culture of the time, a "magical" gesture, something that Elisha intentionally excludes, it seems.[19] Moreover, Naaman contrasts the qualities of the rivers of Damascus with those of the Jordan and wonders about the reasons for Elisha's choice. What are the qualities of the Jordan that other rivers do not possess? We may be stuck if Naaman's question is not answered and if the Damascus official is not convinced to change his mind.[20]

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16 Baumgart, *Gott, Prophet und Israel*, 36–37, 79–85. For a similar expression, see Ezek 2:5; 33:33; cf. 1 Kgs 18:36.

17 On the symbolism of the horse, see D. Cantrel, *The Horsemen of Israel. Horses and Chariotry in Monarchic Israel* (HACL 1; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2011). On Elisha's behaviour, see Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 176–177: "The author implicitly contrasts the impotent king with the confident prophet who, unlike the king, actually exercises royal authority" (*ibidem*, 177).

18 Rofé, *Prophetical Stories*, 128; McKenzie, *1 Könige 16 – 2 Könige 16*, 358. See especially Cranz, "Naaman's Healing," 540–555.

19 Rofé, *Prophetical Stories*, 128 and *passim*. For a contrary opinion, see Cranz, "Naaman's Healing," 550 and *passim.* The latter author, however, does not insist enough on the special qualities of the Jordan in a biblical context, and therefore also in 2 Kgs 5.

20 McKenzie, *1 Könige 16 – 2 Könige 16*, 351–352.

The answer comes, once again, from below, as several authors have noted.[21] Just as the initial move came from a servant girl, another move comes from servants who manage to convince their superior to do as the prophet suggested. Again, the hierarchy of that time is reversed.[22] Let us recall, for example, the words of the Roman centurion addressed to Jesus of Nazareth in Matt 8:8–9:

> But the centurion replied: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my servant will be healed. Though I too am an underling, I have soldiers under me, and I say to one, 'Go!', and he goes; and to another, 'Come!', and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this!', and he does it."

In the case we are analysing, the exact opposite happens, since the leader complies with what his subordinates tell him. This is no small matter, because Naaman's recovery depends on his submission to the advice of his servants, just as it depended on the suggestion of the Hebrew servant passed on to him by his wife. By acting in this way, Naaman shows discernment and intelligence. He leaves aside his pride and arrogance to accept the very reasonable proposal of his servants: "My father, if the prophet had commanded you a great thing, would you not have carried it out? All the more now that he has said to you: 'Bask and you shall be cleansed'" (2 Kgs 5:13). You lose nothing by trying, say the servants, and Naaman listens to them.

3. Solution and Resolution of the Story[23]

Naaman listens to his servants and thus we arrive immediately at the resolution of the story, described, as often, in very few words: "He then went down and plunged into the Jordan seven times, according to the word of the man of God, and his body became like the body of a boy again; he was cleansed" (2 Kgs 5:14). Many scholars have noted the inclusion of this verse in verse 2: Naaman's body became like that of a "little boy" again, which evokes the "little girl" of 2 Kgs 5:2, and the detail contrasts with the description of Naaman in v. 1, presented as a "big man."[24] Equally important seems to me the allusion to a "rebirth," because Naaman comes out of the Jordan "rejuvenated." Ablutions, bathing, always have this meaning. One goes into the water and comes out different. In some cases, it is even a matter of dying and being resurrected.[25]

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21 See McKenzie, *1 Könige 16 – 2 Könige 16*, 352, according to whom the servants make a proposal just as the maid servant did in v. 3.

22 Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 177, the "great" man (v. 1) expected a "great thing" (v. 13).

23 See Baumgart, *Gott, Prophet und Israel*, 195–196; Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 177–178; McKenzie, *1 Könige 16 – 2 Könige 16*, 351–352.

24 See Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 177.

25 See the symbolism of baptism in Rom 6:1–14.

In his commentary on this passage, Alexander Rofé insists on the particular character of the tale and characterises it as an "ethical legend," precisely because it excludes any possible reference to magic:

> Since the purpose of the miracle was to demonstrate the greatness and uniqueness of the Lord God of Israel – whose uniqueness lay in that no other god possessed His power of deliverance – the miracle could not be accomplished through magical means, usual in the legends.[26]

His view was recently challenged by Isabel Cranz in the following passage:

> As the comparative material will illustrate, the water of the Jordan attains its power through the same principles as water used in Assyro-Babylonian rituals which also draws its efficacy from sacred space and proximity to the gods. To substantiate this claim, I turn to a Standard Babylonian cultic commentary which states that an individual suffering from skin disease is to be immersed in the river.[27]

Without getting into a lengthy discussion on the subject, it seems to me that there are two elements that distinguish the miracle of 2 Kgs 5 from other purification rituals. First, the narrative intentionally contrasts Naaman's expectation of an effective ritual performed by Elisha on his behalf (2 Kgs 5:11) with the simple act of bathing in the Jordan without the prophet's presence.[28] The contrast is intentional, and the message is clear, as the efficacy is due to the waters of the Jordan alone. That there are parallels to the ritual of purification in the waters is not surprising. The culture of Israel is part of the culture of the ancient Near East.

The particularity of 2 Kgs 5 lies in its sobriety, but not only that. A second element is indispensable to healing, namely the "conversion" of Naaman, who will only be healed if he changes his attitude and listens instead of commanding. Healing is not only physical, it also has an ethical and behavioural dimension.[29] Naaman cannot be healed unless he changes his attitude, and this element is emphasised at crucial points in the story, particularly in vv. 11–13. Rofé is certainly right to speak of an "ethical" legend for this reason, but above all because the "moral" aspect is much more difficult to find in Mesopotamian rituals. The God of Israel is not only omnipotent, he is also an "ethical" God.

Naaman's inner transformation manifests itself again with all the intended clarity in his reaction after the healing.[30] The narrative continues, which means that there are elements essential to its understanding in vv. 15–19, after achieving what seemed to be the main purpose of the narrative, the healing of Naaman in 2 Kgs 5:14. We witness, in effect, a conversion, with a confession of faith (*anagnorisis*): "He returned with all his retinue to the man of

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26 Rofé, *Prophetical Stories*, 128 ("The Ethical *Legenda*"). See also Gressmann, "Die Heilung des Aussätzigen," 297.

27 Cranz, "Naaman's Healing," 550.

28 Rofé, *Prophetical Stories*, 128: "Naaman only expected a magical feat [...]."

29 Baumgart, *Gott, Prophet und Israel*, 196–200, speaks of a "change of personality" (*ibidem*, 199: "Veränderung des Charakters").

30 Cf. Baumgart, *Gott, Prophet und Israel*, 198; Cohn ("Form and Perspective," 177–178) speaks of a "spiritual transformation of Naaman." Now, Naaman can "stand before the prophet" (cf. vv. 3 e 15) (*ibidem*, 178).

God; he went in and stood before him, saying, 'Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel'" (2 Kgs 5:15). Naaman enters the Jordan as an Aramean, a pagan and a sick man, and leaves as an Aramean, but healed and a believer in the God of Israel. The transformation is radical.

Naaman's conversation with Elisha confirms the reader's first impression. To show that the miracle is not obtained with money and cannot be bought, but is conditioned by a change of attitude, Elisha refuses the gifts offered by Naaman (2 Kgs 5:15b–16). Instead, Naaman asks if he can take some "holy land" home with him. Here is his speech: "[...] let [...] thy servant be permitted [...] to load here as much earth as a couple of mules carry, for thy servant no longer intends to perform a burnt offering or a sacrifice to other gods, but only to the Lord" (2 Kgs 5:17).[31] The underlying idea is that Naaman wants to be from now on a faithful worshipper of the God of Israel, Yhwh, and only of this God. Therefore, he wants to bring with him a load of "holy land," because according to the mentality of the time, a god can only be worshipped in his own territory.[32] The gesture allows us to identify a fundamental element of the story that, perhaps, has not been emphasised enough in ancient and recent commentaries. By bathing in the Jordan, Naaman retraces the path of the people of Israel when they crossed the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua to enter, for the first time, the Promised Land (Josh 3–4). The two chapters of the book of Joshua describe the event in great detail to emphasise the solemnity of the moment. With the entry of the people into the Promised Land, we reach one of the most important goals of Israel's ancient traditions. One more element may be meaningful in this context. During the forty years in the wilderness, the generation that God brought out of Egypt and rebelled in the desert disappeared completely (cf. Num 14:27–35; Deut 1:35–36; 2:14). A new generation, grown in the wilderness and educated by God, crossed the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua. The crossing of the Jordan is the result of a process of education and the final step of a long purification for the people of Israel as for Naaman.

The function of the Jordan is also illustrated in 2 Kgs 2:1–18, the account of Elijah's ascension.[33] Elijah first and Elisha later are able to part the waters and cross the Jordan (2 Kgs 2:8, 14) that separates the "land of the living" from the rest of the world.[34]

Now, to return to our story, Naaman makes a similar gesture that enables him, in his own way, to join the people of Israel as fully as possible because he too enters the Promised Land. His confession of faith in the God of Israel, his determination to worship one God, the only God of the whole earth (2 Kgs 5:15), and the fact that he takes with him a load of

31 McKenzie, *1 Könige 16 – 2 Könige 16*, 353.

32 See Gressmann, "Die Heilung des Aussätzigen," 296; Rofé, *Prophetical Stories*, 128–129. On this point, see S. Hart, *From Temple to Tent. From Real to Virtual World (Exodus 24:15–Numbers 10:28)* (Hindmarsh, Australia: ATF 2019); B.M. Gittlen (ed.), *Sacred Time, Sacred Place. Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press 2021).

33 Cranz, "Naaman's Healing," 549.

34 The land of the living: Job 28:13; Pss 27:13; 52:7; 116:9; 142:6; Isa 38:11; 53:8; Jer 11:19; Ezek 26:20; 32:23–27, 32.

"holy land" to worship the God of Israel, are signs of a transition from his status as a "pagan" to that of a "believer," in a way similar to that of the members of the people of Israel.[35]

The narrative, in other words, describes the journey of a proselyte. It is therefore possible, according to this account, to belong – to an extent not clearly defined – to the people of Israel without being born an Israelite, without being a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is possible to cross the boundary that separates Israel from other nations; it is possible for a "foreigner" to change his condition in order to gain a type of belonging to the chosen people.[36]

What is the condition, though? In short, Naaman had to renounce his wealth and power in order to be healed. He also had to show humility in order to listen to a simple foreign servant girl and his own servants. Finally, he silenced his pride and awareness of his position to listen to the voice of reason. In this way, and only in this way, could he be healed in the Jordan by the God who can bring about life and death (cf. 2 Kgs 5:7).

4. The Stand-in for Gehazi (2 Kgs 5:20–27)

The final episode, unexpectedly, caused quite a few problems in the exegesis of the passage. In two words, Gehazi acts as a foil of Naaman when he tries to cunningly seize precious goods. The narrative makes him the perfect foil of Naaman because, in the end, the Israelite, Elisha's servant, is a victim of the disease that affected Naaman. In short, Naaman the pagan becomes a believer like the Israelite, and the covetous Israelite becomes like the pagan Naaman. If a pagan, following the path of humility and discernment, agrees to bathe in the Jordan in order to enter the Promised Land, the believing Israelite may lose his privileges because of his behaviour and become like the sick stranger. The narrative suggests that the boundary between Israel and other nations are certainly geographical borders, linked to birth, but that they are also ethical frontiers, linked to people's conduct. As Marvin A. Sweeney says: "Thus, the narrative emphasises that YHWH's moral character as G-d of all creation entails expectations of Israelites and Arameans."

Conclusion

In conclusion, the tale describes two intersecting paths: Naaman the Syrian succeeds in entering the Promised Land and Gehazi, an Israelite, loses most of his privileges to become similar to the foreigner Naaman because of his deplorable behaviour. Being a foreigner is, in this tale, not only a matter of birth and residence, but also of conduct.

35 See Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 178.

36 See the observations of Norbert C. Baumgart (*Gott, Prophet und Israel*, 141–142) ("Zwischen Aram und Israel" – "Between Aram and Israel") who, however, does not elaborate on the topic much beyond the question of vocabulary.

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