

Behind the Scenes

2 Kings 5:15-27

Dr. Pierre Cannings

The story moves in two directions and the common element in each is the figure of Naaman. The tragic figure of Naaman receives healing for his condition in the first part of the chapter, then is used for personal gain by the deceitful Gehazi. For his deceit Gehazi is rewarded

I. The People

a. Elisha

i. Man of God

1. Elisha declares with this oath that he “stands before” (i.e., worships) Yahweh. Elisha’s refusal to accept Naaman’s gift is particularly remarkable, since the story is set in a time of famine (4:38; 7:1–20).
2. Then he returned.” The cleansed Naaman with his entourage returns to the man of God. This time he approaches in gratitude. ידעתי כי אין אלהים בכל־הארץ כי אם־בישראל “I know there is no God in all the earth except in Israel” are words which accord closely with Elisha’s words in v 8
3. This text contains one of the great Gentile conversion accounts in the Old Testament. Like Rahab (Josh 2:9–13), Ruth (Ruth 1:16–18), and the sailors and Ninevites in Jonah (Jonah 1:16; 3:6–10), Naaman believes in the Lord.

b. Gehazi

i. Servant of Elisha

1. The contrast is cleverly drawn between the selfless action of Elisha and the selfish conniving of Gehazi. Naaman now assumes the role of a naive dupe.
2. Just because you are around character doesn’t mean you have character

People and Plans are connected – Greed means selfish gains etc

II. The Plan

a. Elisha

i. I will take nothing

b. Gehazi

- i. I will run after and take something from him
 1. as Yahweh lives.” Gehazi’s exclamation, although in the form of an oath, stands in direct contrast to the oath of Elisha (v 16). The contrast is seen in the purposes to which the oaths are put. Gehazi’s oath borders on blasphemy and can be equated with the English expression, “By God!”
 2. **Gehazi** became greedy of what Naaman had offered to give Elisha. Evidently he justified his greed by reasoning that since **Naaman** was an **Aramean**, a natural enemy of Israel, he should at least be taken advantage of
 - a. Gehazi certainly thinks Elisha has been too lenient, but he focuses on financial, not spiritual, leniency. He determines to get some of the goods “this Syrian” brought as a gift for Elisha. In this way he shows himself as greedy as Elisha is unaffected by wealth
 3. “anything.” Gehazi’s greed is such that he is determined to get “anything” from Naaman.
- ii. The Lie
 1. He said his **master** had received unexpected guests (**two ... prophets**) and wanted to give them some **silver** and a change of **clothing** each. Gehazi put this lie in Elisha’s mouth and made the request sound very unselfish.
 2. “from the sons of the prophets.” Gehazi’s cunning is shown by this allusion. Since the story is set in a time of need, Elisha’s care for such persons would have been quite natural.
- iii. Initial Success
 1. he urged him.” It cannot escape attention that Gehazi finds himself in the same position as Elisha. Unlike Elisha (v 16), he accepts the gift. The added detail of the way the gift is secured is a fine literary touch.
 2. Received
 - a. Servants - The reference is ambiguous. Either Gehazi’s own servants are intended (so Skinner, 301, et al.) or Naaman’s servants. Since Gehazi’s actions are secretive, they are likely to be the servants of Naaman.
 - b. **Naaman** was happy to oblige and urged Gehazi to accept twice as much **silver** as well as the clothing. He even provided **two ... servants** to carry these gifts back to Elisha. **Gehazi** followed **the servants** and when they

arrived at **the hill** (on which Samaria was built) **he took the gifts from them and put them ... in his house.**

Plans require results or cover ups

III. The Lie

a. Lie Again

- i. Your Servant
- ii. Went Nowhere

- 1. He did not realize that God had revealed his whereabouts to **his master**. So to cover one lie he told another
- 2. Elisha confronts Gehazi by asking where he has been. Once more Gehazi lies, but this time he has lied to a man who knows he has lied. After reminding Gehazi of his special spirit, he rebukes him for accepting money for a healing ministry

b. My Heart

i. The Truth

- 1. Elisha then explained that he was aware of everything **Gehazi** had done.

ii. The Sin

- 1. Elisha pinpoints the greed of Gehazi in his self-seeking at a time of hardship for others.
- 2. **Elisha** added that true servants of the Lord should not **take** personal rewards from people, especially influential non-Israelites, in return for blessings that God, not His servant, had given them. False prophets were selfishly lining their own pockets and bringing contempt on the prophetic office; true prophets should avoid conduct that might be misunderstood as self-seeking.

c. White Lies = White Skin

- i. **Naaman's leprosy** had been removed from him for his trust in and obedience to God. Now, ironically, leprosy would **cling to** Gehazi for his lack of trust in and obedience to God. The servant had brought dishonor to Yahweh's name. A bad case of leprosy turned one's skin and hair **white as snow**. Gehazi's judgment was serious because his sin had far-reaching consequences; this story was probably told all over Aram and Israel. As a servant of God Gehazi had more privilege than most people and therefore more responsibility than most people
- ii. Then Elisha pronounces a strict judgment. Gehazi will inherit Naaman's leprosy, just as Naaman seems to have inherited Gehazi's faith. One man goes away healed because of his obedience, while the other man, indeed the one who should have known what matters most, walks away with

leprosy. Yet another Israelite has made the tragic mistake of choosing a substitute for the Lord, while a Gentile convert has discovered that what his servant girl said about the Lord's prophet is true

15 וישב "Then he returned." The cleansed Naaman with his entourage returns to the man of God. This time he approaches in gratitude. ידעתי כי אין אלהים בכל־הארץ כי אם־בישראל "I know there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" are words which accord closely with Elisha's words in v 8. Following a major theme of these chapters, Naaman realizes that only in Israel, and through Israel's God, is healing to be found. Following this confession, Naaman's actions support his new-found faith.

קח נא ברכה מאת עבדך "accept now a gift from your servant." The dialogue which follows between Naaman and Elisha is reminiscent of that between Elisha and the Shunemite in the previous chapter. The roles are reversed. It is Elisha who now refuses to accept payment for what had happened to Naaman.

16 חי־יהוה אשר־עמדתי לפניו "As Yahweh lives before whom I stand." Naaman had come to "stand before" the prophet (v 15). Elisha declares with this oath that he "stands before" (i.e., worships) Yahweh. Elisha's refusal to accept Naaman's gift is particularly remarkable, since the story is set in a time of famine (4:38; 7:1–20).

“and he urged him to accept.” In Hebrew there are two closely related words for “to urge,” **פָּצַר** and **פָּרַץ**. The second has a secondary meaning of “to break out” (cf. BD1

17 Naaman’s strange request for two loads of dirt from Israel introduces into the story a mixture of monotheism and universalism with the notion of the localization of Yahweh in Israel. A conflict appears between Naaman’s statement and the author’s comment in v 1. Sentiment, rather than superstition, motivates Naaman. Altars were to be made of earth or unhewn stone (Exod 20:25) and Naaman wished to establish his own shrine to the LORD in Syria.

עֹלָה “offering and sacrifice.” The **עֹלָה** was the whole burnt offering which ascended as a symbolic prayer. The **זֶבַח** was a general offering consumed by the worshiper after the sacrifice. Cf. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 415–23; *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice*. For a general survey of the use of the two terms in the OT cf. BD2

18 The text of v 18 is confusing (see *Notes*), although the basic sense is clear. Even with the emendations suggested, the text still remains grammatically clumsy and repetitive. Naaman clearly asks for forgiveness for the resumption of his duties as the king’s “right hand man,” which would involve him in compromise. He would be forced to accompany the king to worship.

בֵּית רִמּוֹן “the temple of Rimmon.” Rimmon was the national god of the Syrians. He is also known as Hadad, the storm god, a common figure in many ancient Near Eastern pantheons. Later he became identified with Zeus, the all-powerful Hellenistic storm god. See H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 154–56; *ID3* 4:99. Presumably the Syrian king, especially if he were Ben Hadad, would have worshipped regularly at the temple of his divine patron.

19 Elisha’s reassurance sends Naaman on his way.

20 The story of Gehazi’s deceit, which follows, diverts the plot to a different track from what it has traveled thus far. The contrast is cleverly drawn between the selfless action of Elisha and the selfish conniving of Gehazi. Naaman now assumes the role of a naive dupe.

גִּחְזִי עֶבֶד אֵלִישָׁע “Gehazi, the servant of Elisha.” Gehazi now becomes the main actor. It is not clear, although it is often assumed, that the servant of v 10 was Gehazi.

חַי יְהוָה “as Yahweh lives.” Gehazi’s exclamation, although in the form of an oath, stands in direct contrast to the oath of Elisha (v 16). The contrast is seen in the purposes to which the oaths are put. Gehazi’s oath borders on blasphemy and can be equated with the English expression, “By God!”

מֵאִמְרוֹ “anything.” Gehazi’s greed is such that he is determined to get “anything” from Naaman.

21 **וַיֹּאמֶר הַשְּׁלוֹם** “and he said, ‘Are things well?’ ” There is an interesting reversal of roles for Gehazi here. In 4:26 this was the question he asked of the Shunemite woman. Both responses

BDB F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*

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IDB G. A. Buttrick (ed.), *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*

were untrue since the woman was very distressed. Her intention, however, was to get to the one man who could help her. Gehazi is out to deceive for personal gain.

22 הר אפרים “Mount Ephraim.” In mind here is the central mountain range of Israel. The territory was originally allotted to Joseph (Josh 17:15) and became the final settling place for Joshua (Josh 19:50; 24:30). Its capital was Shechem (Josh 20:7). In the Former Prophets the area assumes importance as the place of origin of famous judges (Judg 4:5; 7:24; 10:1; 17:1; etc.) and it was the home of Elkanah, the father of the prophet-judge Samuel (1 Sam 1:1).

מבני הנביאים “from the sons of the prophets.” Gehazi’s cunning is shown by this allusion. Since the story is set in a time of need, Elisha’s care for such persons would have been quite natural.

23 ויפרץ בו “and he urged him.” It cannot escape attention that Gehazi finds himself in the same position as Elisha. Unlike Elisha (v 16), he accepts the gift. The added detail of the way the gift is secured is a fine literary touch.

ויתן אל שני נערי “and he handed them to two of his servants.” The reference is ambiguous. Either Gehazi’s own servants are intended (so Skinner, 301, et al.) or Naaman’s servants. Since Gehazi’s actions are secretive, they are likely to be the servants of Naaman.

24 ויבא אל העפל “and he came to the Ophel.” The change in עפל “hill” to אפל “darkness” is most effective, and perhaps deliberate. It exploits the homonyms to the full, and draws out the theme of the “dark deed” of Gehazi. However, it serves no purpose as an attempt to identify precisely where this “ophel” was located. The term is used exclusively elsewhere of the “Ophel” of Jerusalem (cf. 2 Chr 27:3; Isa 32:14; Mic 4:8; Neh 3:26, 27; 11:21). But it is unlikely that Jerusalem is in mind here. Gehazi would not hide his loot in the capital city of a foreign country, nor would he live there. Most commentators suggest an etymology of “hill.” The word occurs in the Moabite Stone (1:22), and is translated by Gibson as “acropolis” (cf. *Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 1, 76). Albright’s translation (ANE5, 320) is “citadel.” The precise city is still unknown. The modern “Ophel” of Jerusalem is the “city of David,” which can hardly be called an “acropolis” since it is the lowest of the Jerusalem hills. See further F. S. Frick, *The City in Ancient Israel*, 53.

25 ויעמד אל אדניו “and he stood before his master.” The use of the preposition אל “to” with the verb עמד “he stood” is rare in the OT and can indicate antagonism (cf. 1 Sam 17:51). It stands in contrast to the more usual עמד לפני “he stood before.” אנה ואנה “nowhere in particular.” Cf. 1 Kgs 2:36, 42.

26 הלא לבי הלך “did not my heart go?” Elisha’s claim to knowledge of Gehazi’s actions is in sharp contrast to his confession of ignorance in 4:27. העת לקחת את הכסף “did you not take silver?” Elisha pinpoints the greed of Gehazi in his self-seeking at a time of hardship for others. Such comprehensive catalogs of wealth and prosperity are a common feature of the Former Prophets (cf. Deut 6:11; 8:8; Josh 24:13; 1 Sam 8:14–17) and elsewhere (Neh 5:11; 9:25). They are seen as a gift from God (Deut 8:8; Josh 24:13), a temptation to apostasy (Deut 6:11; Neh 9:25) or a sign of self-seeking greed (1 Sam 8:14–17).

G Septuagint (the text cited in this volume is from A. E. Brooke, N. McLean, and H. St. J. Thackeray, *The Old Testament in Greek*, II, ii [Cambridge, 1930])

ANET J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*

27 ויצא מלפניו מצרע כשלג “He went out from his presence, snow-white with leprosy.” Gehazi’s punishment for his greed shows two things. First, his leprosy is not that dealt with in the regulations in Lev 13–15. In 8:1–6 Gehazi is still able to enjoy social contact and is not ceremonially unclean. Second, Naaman’s affliction, contracted by Gehazi, was contagious. It is reminiscent of Moses’ temporary leprosy in Exod 4:6–7. On the absence of the symptoms of what is medically described as leprosy today cf. V. R. Khanolkar, “The Pathology of Leprosy” (*Leprosy in Theory and Practice*, 125–51).⁶

Explanation

2 Kgs 5 contains a more complicated story than has appeared thus far in the book, and these features of the narrative have been dealt with above. The story moves in two directions and the common element in each is the figure of Naaman. The tragic figure of Naaman receives healing for his condition in the first part of the chapter, then is used for personal gain by the deceitful Gehazi. For his deceit Gehazi is rewarded. The conditions pertaining to Naaman’s journey to Israel in search of healing must have been such that the journey was possible. Israel and Syria must have been enjoying a certain relaxation of hostilities.

In contrast to the miracles performed in chapter four, the healing of Naaman was motivated by something other than a pressing human need. The miracle clearly has an “apologetic” aim, and Naaman is expected to learn something from the miracle, namely, that “there is a prophet in Israel” (v 8). The miracle then becomes a witness to Elisha’s status as a prophet. With the action of Naaman after his healing, this goal is achieved (vv 15–18).

In the context of the Elisha stories the miracle takes on added significance. To call the miracle “ordinary” because Elisha performs no spectacular actions, as some have done, is in error. In fact, few of Elisha’s miracles are spectacular, if by that is meant some ostentatious gesture. The actions of Elisha almost always consist of the ordinary, such as the use of the chemical salt to “heal” waters (2:19–22) or a rather uncanny sense of timing (cf. 3:16). In some, the prophet takes no active part (4:1–7), and even in those miracles which tax the imagination (4:32–37) the prophet acts behind closed doors. The results of the miracles are important, not necessarily how the results are achieved; although it must be noted that in the story of Naaman, Elisha did not live up to the expectations of the visitor since he avoided any gestures at all (v 11).

There is a second element to the miracle of healing in this chapter, and that is the obedience of Naaman. At first he is reluctant to follow the instructions of the prophet, and only on the advice of one of his own servants does he obey and thereby receive healing (vv 13–14). When he finally “descends” (v 14) he is healed.

Beyond these incidental features of the story, the miracle draws back to the forefront the theme already encountered in chapter one and again in chapter eight, namely, the search for healing in a foreign country. In chapter one, Ahaziah, the apostate son of Ahab searches for healing from Baal-Zebub, god of Ekron, and later, in chapter eight, Ben Hadad seeks help from

⁶ T. R. Hobbs, [2 Kings](#), vol. 13, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 65–68.

Elisha. Only Naaman, however, is healed. Ahaziah searches in the wrong place and in chapter eight, other, more important, historical events must take place. Coupled with this theme is that of the presence of Yahweh's prophet in Israel, which is established in chapter two and repeated in chapters three, five, and eight.

Beyond the immediate context of the stories dealing with the activities of Elisha other links can be seen. The book of Deuteronomy makes much of the love Israel is to show the stranger and foreigner (Deut 10:19). Such love and care are motivated by Israel's own experience as a stranger in Egypt (Deut 23:7). It is also a theme kept alive during the period of the monarchy with Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kgs 8:41–43). That prayer, too, has an apologetic aim which is echoed in Naaman's confession of his new-found faith (vv 15–18) and in the dream to which expression is given in Isa 56:8:⁷

5:15–19a This text contains one of the great Gentile conversion accounts in the Old Testament. Like Rahab (Josh 2:9–13), Ruth (Ruth 1:16–18), and the sailors and Ninevites in Jonah (Jonah 1:16; 3:6–10), Naaman believes in the Lord. From Gen 12:2–3 onward in the Old Testament, God desires to bless all nations through Israel. This ideal becomes a reality here due to the witness of the Israelite servant girl and the work of the Israelite prophet.

Naaman's conversion includes a confession of faith. He states that no other god exists besides the Lord, a conclusion he draws from the fact that only the Lord can heal him. Hobbs correctly claims that Naaman's confession consists of "words which accord closely with Elisha's words in v. 8. Following a major theme of these chapters, Naaman realizes that only in Israel, and through Israel's God, is healing to be found. Following this confession, Naaman's actions support his new-found faith."⁵⁸ Sadly, Naaman's confession of faith condemns most Israelites of that era, since

⁷ T. R. Hobbs, [2 Kings](#), vol. 13, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 68–69.

⁵¹ Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 65.

they have rejected the one true God and embraced gods that cannot heal. Jesus makes this point while rebuking the people of Nazareth in Luke 4:23–30.

Naaman's conversion also leads to some new commitments on his part. First, he tries to give Elisha a gift, which indicates his gratitude for the human instrument of his healing. The prophet's refusal contrasts sharply with the typical court prophet and also with the actions of Gehazi, Elisha's servant, later in the story.⁵⁹ Second, he asks to take dirt home with him, with which he will build an altar to the Lord in his homeland.⁵¹⁰ Montgomery says that transporting "holy" dirt from one place to another was a fairly common ancient custom.⁵¹¹ This practice is not unlike the modern tendency to take home significant personal souvenirs from the Holy Land.

Third, Naaman requests Elisha's indulgence on one point. He requests that the Lord forgive him for participating in worship of Rimmon when such participation is necessary to carry out his career responsibilities. Rimmon was a Syrian version of Baal. Naaman seems to say that this "worship" will not be real worship, since he has already confessed Yahweh's sole existence and sovereignty. His dilemma is not unlike the one Obadiah faced (cf. 1 Kgs 18:1–15), who also felt torn between prophet and king and between Yahweh and Baal. Even in this request, however, Naaman places himself under Elisha's authority and admits Yahweh's importance.

Elisha gives Naaman his blessing. Has the prophet been too lenient? Has Elisha given in to religious accommodationism? Three observations may help provide an answer. First, Keil notes that Naaman simply asks whether or not God will forgive him. He does not ask permission to worship Rimmon.⁵¹² Second, Naaman has stated his opinion of Rimmon and has declared his intention to serve and offer sacrifices to Yahweh. Third, he must create what amounts to a personal outpost of Yahwism in Syria. He can pray, but there is no opportunity for community worship, nor is it likely that he can come back to Israel to worship. Elisha understands these realities and lays no more guilt on Naaman than Elijah did on Obadiah. Again, his commitment to the Lord is already greater than all but a remnant of the faithful.

5:19b–27 Gehazi certainly thinks Elisha has been too lenient, but he focuses on financial, not spiritual, leniency. He determines to get some of the goods "this Syrian" brought as a gift for Elisha. In this way he shows himself as greedy as Elisha is unaffected by wealth. Further, his greed contrasts the generosity shown by Naaman, who is "the humble and charitable healed one, who still, it develops, wishes to reward his benefactor."⁵¹³ Gehazi, on the other hand, appears "opportunistic and duplicitous, grasping at those outpourings of gratitude which a principled Elisha has refused."⁵¹⁴ When he catches up to Naaman, Gehazi lies to get silver and clothing, then stashes the loot before he sees his master.

⁵² Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, 208.

⁵³ Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 2:418.

⁵⁴ Montgomery and Gehman, *Kings*, 377.

⁵⁵ Keil, "I and II Kings," 321.

⁵⁶ Long, *2 Kings*, 74.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Elisha confronts Gehazi by asking where he has been. Once more Gehazi lies, but this time he has lied to a man who knows he has lied. After reminding Gehazi of his special spirit, he rebukes him for accepting money for a healing ministry. Then Elisha pronounces a strict judgment. Gehazi will inherit Naaman's leprosy, just as Naaman seems to have inherited Gehazi's faith. One man goes away healed because of his obedience, while the other man, indeed the one who should have known what matters most, walks away with leprosy. Yet another Israelite has made the tragic mistake of choosing a substitute for the Lord, while a Gentile convert has discovered that what his servant girl said about the Lord's prophet is true.¹⁵

(4) Gehazi's greed (5:19–27).

5:19–21. Elisha's departing benediction (**Go in peace**) probably was a blessing on the journey ahead of **Naaman** rather than on the compromising behavior the general had outlined (vv. 17–18), which the prophet neither approved nor disapproved verbally.

Gehazi became greedy of what Naaman had offered to give Elisha. Evidently he justified his greed by reasoning that since **Naaman** was an **Aramean**, a natural enemy of Israel, he should at least be taken advantage of. So **Gehazi** pursued **Naaman** to **get something from him**. Gehazi was able to overtake the large slow-moving caravan on foot. Naaman **got down from his chariot** (cf. 4:26) and **asked if everything was all right**.

5:22–24. Gehazi said **everything was all right** but then lied to the commander. He said his **master** had received unexpected guests (**two ... prophets**) and wanted to give them some **silver** and a change **of clothing** each. Gehazi put this lie in Elisha's mouth and made the request sound very unselfish. **Naaman** was happy to oblige and urged Gehazi to accept twice as much **silver** as well as the clothing. He even provided **two ... servants** to carry these gifts back to Elisha. **Gehazi** followed **the servants** and when they arrived at **the hill** (on which Samaria was built) **he took the gifts from them and put them ... in his house**.

5:25–27. Shortly thereafter **Gehazi** returned to **Elisha**. He did not realize that God had revealed his whereabouts to **his master**. So to cover one lie he told another. Elisha then explained that he was aware of everything **Gehazi** had done. **Elisha** added that true servants of the Lord should not **take** personal rewards from people, especially influential non-Israelites, in return for blessings that God, not His servant, had given them. False prophets were selfishly lining their own pockets and bringing contempt on the prophetic office; true prophets should avoid conduct that might be misunderstood as self-seeking.

Naaman's leprosy had been removed from him for his trust in and obedience to God. Now, ironically, leprosy would **cling to** Gehazi for his lack of trust in and obedience to God. The servant

¹⁵ Paul R. House, [1, 2 Kings](#), vol. 8, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 273–274.

had brought dishonor to Yahweh's name. A bad case of leprosy turned one's skin and hair **white as snow**. Gehazi's judgment was serious because his sin had far-reaching consequences; this story was probably told all over Aram and Israel. As a servant of God Gehazi had more privilege than most people and therefore more responsibility than most people.

This story contains many lessons. Naaman's healing was another great proof of the Lord's power to restore health, power which only Baal supposedly possessed. This incident also helped spread the fame of Yahweh to another part of the ancient world. The contrasting behaviors of Elisha and Gehazi also model positive and negative attitudes and actions for God's servants of all ages.¹⁶n

¹⁶ Thomas L. Constable, ["2 Kings,"](#) in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 548–549.