

Namaan's no-nonsense cure: Sunday, July 8. 2 Kings 5: 1-14

by [Peter S. Hawkins](#) in the [June 20, 2001](#) issue

Traditional Christian appropriation of the Hebrew scriptures often flattens them. Stories become precursors of later New Testament events rather than genuine events in themselves. Vivid multidimensional characters become mere prefigurations instead of figures in their own right, and complex narrative situations are reduced to a single theological point. This is due in part to the allegorization of the Hebrew Bible that began with St. Paul and continued to flourish for centuries. For example, every element of the Exodus—the manna in the wilderness, the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, the rock which released streams of fresh water—all were commonly interpreted to mean “Christ.” Likewise, when Namaan the Syrian emerges from the Jordan cleansed of his leprosy, we are supposed to understand that the river’s healing waters *really* signify grace in general and the sacrament of baptism in particular.

Maybe. But look at what is thereby lost to these narratives—almost everything! The Exodus, given its historic importance and the immensity of its claim upon the imagination, has been able to resist the forces of well-meaning theological reduction. But what about Namaan, a minor figure tucked away in the ancient history of the Northern Kingdom, whose full story occurs but once in the three-year cycle of the lectionary? What chance does he have to survive death by allegory?

Namaan is not only a high-ranking member of the enemy Aramites but also the chief commander of his king’s army—the army that brought down King Ahab with a well-placed arrow. When that conflict ends, Namaan is left with increased grandeur and the booty of war, including “a young girl captive from the land of Israel.” But that is not all: he also has been struck by leprosy.

Remedy comes from an unlikely source. The Hebrew slave girl tells her mistress about Elisha, the wonder-working prophet of the Lord. Wife speaks to husband, and husband goes to his king, who writes a letter to his Hebrew enemy about his beloved commander: “Please, cure my servant Namaan.” The situation is bizarre: a hostile pagan king asks an impossible favor for his generalissimo, thereby setting the stage for disappointment and what might well be the next political disaster: “Just look,”

says the king of Israel, “and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.”

When a king balks, the prophet of the Lord rushes in. Elisha tells Namaan to come, and when he comes, it is with all the Aramean horses and chariots that have otherwise been deployed so bloodily on the battlefield. Elisha stays indoors while a messenger delivers the holy man’s words for him: All Namaan need do for this leprosy is wash seven times in the river Jordan. That is all. Perhaps contrary to Elisha’s expectations—Namaan did want to be healed, didn’t he?—the commander of legions is incensed by a series of slights to his dignity. Yes, he has leprosy, but he is, after all, the esteemed warlord of the king of Aram, who deserves a personal audience with the prophet and not just a secondhand, servant-delivered prescription. Then there is the insult to the injury: Bathe in the Jordan? That muddy trickle? “Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?” No wonder Namaan turned away in rage.

Once again, servants save the day. In the beginning, the Hebrew slave girl had spoken about Elisha and his powers. Now, at what seems to be a complete standoff, her fellow servants rescue the situation with common sense. If the prophet had commanded something strenuous, Namaan would probably have done it; the exertion would have seemed something worthy of a great and heroic man. Instead, Elisha said, “Wash, and be clean.” But perhaps what could be done with difficulty could also be done with ease? Wouldn’t it make sense to just do it?

We are not told what goes on in Namaan’s heart and mind, or what pride he has to swallow, or how filthy the Jordan actually is on that particular day. All we know is that Namaan descends into the waters seven times, sees his leprous skin “restored like the flesh of a young boy,” acknowledges the full authority of Israel’s God and, to ensure that he can render proper thanks to the Lord when he returns to Damascus, gets permission from Elisha to bring back two mule loads of local soil—a piece of Israel upon which to give thanks to the one who washed him clean.

What do I love about this story? Servants telling their masters what to do. Enemy kings doing one another’s bidding. Elisha’s moxie. Nathan’s injured pride overcome by his desire to be made whole. The backstairs conversations between servant and mistress, the official missive from one king to another, the Syrian “dissing” of the River Jordan.

At his first sermon at Nazareth, Jesus caught some of this extraordinary richness. In fact, he used Namaan’s healing by Elisha as the ancient Hebrew warrant for his own

ministry to the gentiles: “There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Namaan the Syrian” (Luke 4:27). Jesus plays with the politics implicit in the story, making good use of the perennial tensions between Jew and gentile, us and them. He exploits the essential edginess of the tale and, as a result, pays a price in that Nazareth congregation: “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.” Clearly, he saw more here than “grace” or the sacrament of baptism. He recognized a provocative tale when he heard one.