

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – July 7, 2019

[2nd Kings 5:1-14](#) & [Galatians 6:1-10](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on 2nd Kings 5:1-14

(From *Homiletics*; “Instant God”, February 16, 2003)

Today's lesson, the story of the healing and conversion of Naaman, is one of the better-known episodes from the cycle of stories told about Elisha, a prophet from Abel-Meholah in the northern kingdom of Israel and successor to the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19). The story of Naaman's healing and conversion to Yahwism combines both the emphasis on the extraordinary, characteristic of the Elijah-Elisha stories (1 Kings 16:29-2 Kings 13:21), and the theological concern for Israel's neighbors characteristic of the Deuteronomic history, of which the story is a small part (cf 1 Kings 8).

The Aramaean commander-in-chief bears a name whose root means “to be fair” or “pleasant” (a root shared by the name Naomi), which is exactly what he is not as the story opens. Not only does he suffer from a skin disease that may or may not have been what is medically defined today as leprosy (i.e., Hansen's disease), which would have marred his appearance, but he is also described as a “great man” and a “mighty warrior,” epithets that would have evoked admiration among the story's hearers - had they not been describing one of Israel's enemies.

Although Israel and Aram (-Damascus, i.e., Syria) could make common cause against a shared threat (the Assyrians in 853 B.C., and Ahaz of Jerusalem in 734 B.C.; cf 2 Kings 16:5-9), such unity was the exception in their relations rather than the rule. From the time of Ahab of Israel (reigned 869-850 B.C.) until the death of Elisha some 50 years later, warfare characterized the interaction between the northern kingdom of Israel and its nearby neighbor, with only brief periods of peace (cf 1 Kings 20:1-34; 22:1-40; 2 Kings 1:1; 3:1-27; chapters 6-8, etc.). That one of Israel's arch foes should bear a name meaning “pleasant” sets the ironic tone immediately that will reappear throughout this story.

That Aram's victory (over Israel?) is attributed by the narrator to Yahweh, the Israelites' own god, should not be surprising in this context. The idea that Israel's fortunes and misfortunes alike came from Yahweh was a staple of Israelite theology (cf Deuteronomy 8:11-20), and in the present story the statement foreshadows Naaman's ultimate and most significant realization, that Yahweh is the only true God.

The introduction of the “young girl” taken captive in a Syrian raid, who serves Naaman’s wife (v. 2), does several things in the narrative. First, it establishes both the range of the social stations that the characters in the narrative occupy, from the lowest (female foreign slave) to the highest (the king). Second, the servant girl introduces the theme of the “servant savant” vs. the clueless rulers (played out by both Naaman and the kings of Israel and Aram). Third, the virtuous, altruistic servant of Naaman’s wife will serve as a foil for the greedy, dishonest servant of Elisha, Gehazi (who appears at the end of the narrative, vv. 19b-27, not included in today’s lesson but clearly a part of the present narrative).

Word of Elisha’s healing powers had likely circulated throughout “Samaria” (v. 3), the region where his ministry was largely located. In 4:38, the prophet is said to be at Gilgal, which is probably not to be identified with the site where the Israelites entered Canaan for the first time (Joshua 4:19), but a town slightly north of Bethel (cf 2 Kings 2:2, which refers to “going down” to Bethel from Gilgal, suggesting a more northerly location for the latter), and in the southern hill country of Samaria.

Officialdom begins to work at cross-purposes with itself when the letter of introduction from the Aramaean king is interpreted, not unreasonably, as a sly provocation to war by the king of Israel (vv. 5-7). The letter’s contents, of course, were more appropriately addressed to Elisha than to King Jehoram, and the mix-up may be a wry criticism of the Aramaean king’s fastidiousness with regard to royal protocol: As a ruler, he felt he could communicate officially only with a peer.

Elisha’s epithet “man of God” fell to him as successor to Elijah, who was also known by that title (1 Kings 17:18, 24). It signifies, in the context of competing claims of genuine prophecy (cf 1 Kings 18:20-40), that Elisha is a true servant of the true God. The point is emphasized in Elisha’s self-promoting assertion that Naaman should come to him so “that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel” (v. 8). The ultimate personal reality at issue in the story, of course, is Yahweh, not Elisha.

The comedy of ceremonial manners continues when Elisha instructs Naaman, through a messenger, to bathe himself seven times in the Jordan River (v. 10). Seven was a highly symbolic number, not only in ancient Israel, but also throughout the ancient Near East. Naaman takes umbrage at both the prophet’s use of an intermediary and the lack of “performance act” on the part of Elisha (vv. 9-12). Now it is Naaman’s turn to misunderstand the prophet, and it is his servants who must soothe his offended dignity by presenting an a maiori ad minorem argument: If the prophet had asked something difficult of Naaman, he would have done it, so “how much more” should he be willing to do something as simple as bathing in the Jordan to be cured? (v. 13). The argument persuades the servants’ truculent master, described, uniquely, as “father,” a designation ordinarily used by a disciple to a teacher, rather than by a servant to a master.

Naaman’s expectation that Elisha would “wave his hand” over Naaman’s leprosy (v. 11) reflects his deficient, magical understanding of Elisha’s healing power, which is one of the points of the story. The diagnosis and cleansing rituals for various scale diseases in Leviticus 13-14 provide for careful priestly examination, sacrifice and sprinkling (as well as isolation and ablutions on the part of the diseased), but there is no indication that waving of the hand over the affected part was included. Indeed, the expression of waving the hand is rare in biblical Hebrew; it occurs only here and in First Isaiah (11:15; 13:2; 33:15).

After heeding the prophet’s instructions, Naaman emerges from the Jordan restored, with flesh “like the flesh of a young boy” (v. 14), a description of purity found nowhere else in the Bible. It is possible that the comparison is meant to reinforce the ongoing contrast between elders, who are supposed to know what they’re doing, and the (young) servants, who actually seem to have a better grasp of the situation.

Apart from this story, Naaman appears only once more in the biblical record. In Luke 4:27, Jesus refers to the healing of Naaman as an example of a foreigner’s faith working wonders impossible among the chosen, but jejune, people. In the Lucan context, the reference is a judgment against the faithlessness of the Israelites. In its original context, the story has a less negative connotation: It signifies God’s care not only for the chosen people, but for outsiders as well, a theme found elsewhere in the Deuteronomistic history, and articulated most eloquently in Solomon’s great prayer of dedication of the Jerusalem temple (1 Kings 8:30, 34, 36, 39, 50, and especially vv. 41-43).

Commentary on Galatians 6:1-10 (From *Homiletics*; “Critical Thinking and Compassion”, July 7, 2019)

At the beginning of Galatians 6:7-16, Paul specifies one tenet of his faith. Although he makes use of a traditional formulation here — “God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow” (cf. Job 4:8; Proverbs 22:8; Jeremiah 12:13; Hosea 8:7; 10:12) — he has already hinted at this maxim in his letter to the churches in Galatia. For example, he advises them that if they return to a life ordered by “the works of the law,” God will neither “supply you with the Spirit [nor] work miracles among you” (3:1-5). Later, Paul states, “If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you” (5:2). The truism is so broad in its application that Paul eventually delivers two pointed warnings: (1) “But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty” (5:10); and (2) “If, however, you bite and devour one another [rather than loving your neighbor as yourself], take care that you are not consumed by one another” (5:15).

Clearly, from Paul’s perspective, we have a choice. On one hand, whoever plants seeds of the flesh will harvest a host of carnal sins — including conceit, competition and envy — and forfeit the promised inheritance of God’s kingdom (see 5:19-20, 26). Conversely, whoever sows Spirit seed will harvest “the fruit of the Spirit” and be empowered to crucify “the flesh with its passions and desires” (5:22-24). One option begins in the flesh while the other option flows out of the Spirit. The ramifications of the choice made are immense.

Paul is unequivocal about the preceding axiom, “If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit” (v. 8). Indeed, the chasm between life attentive to the Spirit’s guidance and life lived according to the flesh is vast. This divergence is fixed because “what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh” (5:17). It is — as C. S. Lewis attempted to demonstrate in *The Great Divorce* — an “either-or” proposition, not a “both-and” possibility. At some point there simply is no amalgamation of the flesh and the Spirit.

Continuing, Paul exhorts the Galatian believers not to “grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at the harvest time, if we do not give up” (v. 9). Christians are to love one another, cultivate the fruit of the Spirit and depend on the Spirit’s direction (cf. 5:13-14, 22-25). Instead of living a self-indulgent life as a slave to our own desires, God’s grace through the cross of Christ demands that our interests turn outward, toward others despite the inconvenience of it all. We become “slaves to one another,” says Paul, and “whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of God” (v. 10; cf. 5:13).

Having offered this counsel based on the sowing and reaping adage, Paul then returns to an issue that has dominated his letter to the Galatians. Here, in verses 11-16, he makes one last appeal concerning those who are “confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ — not that there is another gospel” (1:7). These false messengers — whoever they are — are bewitching the Galatians (cf. 3:1; 5:10). More importantly, they are robbing them of their freedom in Christ with demands of circumcision and the observance of “special days, and months, and seasons, and years” (cf. 4:8-11; 5:1-6).

Then Paul writes, “See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!” (v. 11). At this point Paul has obviously taken the parchment and pen from his amanuensis, and while it’s possible that Paul writes with large characters because of some eye malady, as some scholars have suggested (cf. 4:13-15), it seems more plausible to think he employs a large hand for emphasis. In other words, to paraphrase: “Notice that I am writing this in CAPS!”

Given his persistent effort throughout this letter to remind the churches of Galatia that there is only one gospel through which all are “one” and “children of God” (cf. 2:15–3:1; 3:26-28), Paul attempts to strike one final blow “to those who want to make a good showing in the flesh” (v. 12a). To be sure, his opponents in Galatia do this, not because they are concerned for the welfare of their comrades, but “only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ” (v. 12b). It is a tactic that Paul knew all too well since, at one time, Peter and even Barnabas had been seduced by a similar appeal (cf. 2:11-14). What’s more, Paul was fully aware of the fact that “preaching circumcision” removes “the offense of the cross,” which would have increased the likelihood that the troublemakers could stay out of harm’s way (5:11).

Beyond their desire to dodge persecution, Paul's adversaries employ circumcision as a means for self-promotion. "They want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh," Paul says (v. 13b). By means of some distorted spiritual calculus, these vendors of a counterfeit gospel presume that adherence to a Jewish ritual endows them with some sort of status, conceivably among members of the religious establishment. In contrast, Paul avers, "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (v. 14; cf. 2:19-20).

In Paul's judgment, "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!" (v. 15; cf. 5:6a; 2 Corinthians 5:17). "The only thing that counts is faith working through love," so that "if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (5:6b; 6:1). Rather than exploiting others out of self-interest, Paul exhorts the communities of faith in Galatia to "bear one another's burdens" (6:2; cf. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, esp. v. 7). In essence, Paul says, "Don't fool yourselves. God certainly isn't deceived!" The choice between life lived to oneself versus life lived in pursuit of the things of the Spirit is oppositional in its very nature.

Although Paul's letter to the Galatians entails a scathing indictment of his opponents (cf. 1:6-9; 3:1; 4:17-20; 5:7-11), he extends a final blessing on "those who will follow this rule" (i.e., "a new creation is everything!"). He prays that "peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God" (v. 16), which perhaps reflects his own attempt to restore all, including the purveyors of a perverted gospel, "in a spirit of gentleness."

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on 2nd Kings 5:1-14:

1. What are the motivations of the various actors in this story... The servant girl who suggested Naaman seek healing from the prophet in Samaria? The king of Aram, who sent a letter to the king of Israel with the request? The king of Israel of tore his clothes receiving it? The prophet Elisha, who answered the request with a set of simple instructions for healing? In a more general sense, do such motivations matter? To God? To believers? To outsiders?
2. According to the text, Elisha wanted Naaman (and his king) to "learn that there is a prophet in Israel" (v. 8). But his instructions for healing contained no mention of God or spiritual matters. What do you make of this? Was Elisha seeking only to demonstrate power? Or was he counting on the reputation of Israel's God to carry the day? In the end, Naaman does return and confess newfound belief in Israel's God (v 15. ff). Is this outcome essential? Would the story lose something significant if Naaman expressed gratitude without conversion?
3. This story features a wide range of social situation (ruler-servant, foreigners and natives, insiders and outsiders, etc). What might we take from this story in considering these various stations?

Reflection Questions on Galatians 6:1-10:

- 1.** This passage continues the themes of “flesh” and “spirit” from last week’s reading (5:1,13-25). Do you accept Paul’s sharp dichotomy between the spirit and flesh? Is life truly an “either-or” experience of living either a spiritual or a material existence? If so, how are we to navigate our real lives according to Paul’s guidance? If not, what do we make of Paul’s distinction between Spirit and Flesh?
- 2.** What do you think of Paul’s assertion that “you reap whatever you sow” (v. 7)? Such a sentiment certainly has precedent in the Judeo-Christian tradition (e.g. see Job 4:8 and Prov. 22:8) But there are also streams of the tradition that question its wisdom – e.g. Job, John 9. Is such a statement just a Judeo-Christian version of karma? Common sense? A mistaken philosophy that fails to distinguish correlation and causation?
- 3.** Consider v. 10 – “let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” Which one is it – all? Or just our own faith “tribe”? What do we do if the interests of one conflicts with the other?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?