

**An ancient example of person-centred, non-discriminatory acceptance and care**

**2 Kings 5: 1-5, 8-19a**

<sup>1</sup>Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.<sup>a</sup> <sup>2</sup>Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. <sup>3</sup>She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.'<sup>b</sup> <sup>4</sup>So Naaman<sup>c</sup> went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. <sup>5</sup>And the king of Aram said, 'Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.'

<sup>8</sup>But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.' <sup>9</sup>So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. <sup>10</sup>Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.' <sup>11</sup>But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, 'I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! If <sup>12</sup>Are not Abana<sup>g</sup> and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?' He turned and went away in a rage. <sup>13</sup>But his servants approached and said to him, 'Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean"?' <sup>14</sup>So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

<sup>15</sup>Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, 'Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.' <sup>16</sup>But he said, 'As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!' He urged him to accept, but he refused. <sup>17</sup>Then Naaman said, 'If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt-offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord. <sup>18</sup>But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count.' <sup>19a</sup>He said to him, 'Go in peace.'

---

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah were divided during this period as a consequence of moral failure. Aram, which Israel viewed with bitter enmity [Hayes,2012, p71] was a large kingdom covering roughly modern Syria and Jordon, to the north and east of the little kingdom of Israel which encompassed Samaria, Galilee and trans-Jordan [Bible, 1991, map3]. These were troubled times. Beyond Aram, the Assyrian empire loomed and eventually overwhelmed and captured Israel in 722 BCE.

Ostensibly this is a historical tale from the Hebrew Bible's prophetic tradition around the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It reads like a parable and its inclusion in the Hebrew sacred literature emphasizes the God of Israel's moral will for their ancient kingdom. Israel's God is the source of life, health, justice, mercy, and loving-kindness.

Naaman, Aram's army chief-of-staff, had developed a skin disease which threatened, at the very least, his social future regardless of any potential medical sequelae. Whether serious or trivial, his condition had profoundly life-threatening possibilities because of the community's deep fear and the need to safeguard its members from the possibility of contamination. This fear is encapsulated by public health traditions such as Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 and other ancient near eastern cultures [10/02/2025, Internet]. Naaman was therefore threatened with total exclusion from family relations, community and culture and everything that defined his self-hood, identity and value.

One of the spoils of his military career was a young captive maid-servant who attended his wife. It is, perhaps, a tribute to the household that this young girl was able to put aside any feelings of resentment and was confident enough to share with her mistress that her owner's disease might be treated by Israel's famous principal prophet. Naaman tells his king and is quickly dispatched to Israel, equipped with a handsome financial reward indicating high regard for this commander. The king of Israel is naturally dismayed by this apparently impossible request for healing by an enemy for a life-threatening condition. News of the diplomatic crisis comes to Elisha, who sends for Naaman and his entourage.

Elisha was at this time Israel's outstanding intellectual and religious leader having been mentored by, and then succeeded, the great prophet Elijah. His main professional role was to expound and elucidate the ways of Hebrew monotheism, speaking and acting with God's authority; to speak truth to power and act as conscience of the king [Hayes, p.245 & v.8]. In addition, as God's intermediary, he had the responsibility to diagnose in accordance with the Law [Leviticus 13] and to administer medical and social advice to the king and people. So, he had a number of calls on his time.

But Elisha makes himself available to Naaman with the message 'Let him come to me...' [v.8], accepting this favoured foreign commander without hesitation or discrimination. Clearly, he intended to advise immediately to achieve the desired relief. He acknowledges that this group of dreaded and devastating diseases are under his creator-God's control [Leviticus 14:34]. Scholars generally agree that 'leprosy' was a generic term for a variety of scaly, inflammatory, or infectious skin disorders. We may surmise these to include eczema, psoriasis, fungal or suppurative infections and also mold on clothing [Leviticus 13:47-52], and rarely, the various forms of the then untreatable leprosy. Today, from my own experience, though of low infectivity, true leprosy remains a disease whose potential consequences and meaning can be catastrophic. It was clear to Elisha that through

this illness God had much to convey to Naaman who had complete autonomy of decision and action, full of self-confidence to match his huge responsibilities.

Elisha strikingly disregards the statutory two weeks of waiting and watching required to enable diagnosis [Leviticus 13: 2-8]. Were chronicity established the sufferer would be pronounced 'unclean', excluded from society and mandated to wear a face-mask in public until such time as natural healing might be completed and confirmed [Leviticus 13:45]. Instead, Elisha acts according to the roughly contemporaneous Judean prophet's ethic: '...do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God' [Michah 6:8], an approach later endorsed by Isaiah: 'is not this the fast that I choose? ...to let the oppressed go free... break every yoke... [and] not to hide yourself from your own skin?' [Es 58:6-7]. Jesus' own practice, recorded in all three synoptic Gospels, also contrasts with Hebrew law [Matt 8:2-4; Mark 1:40-44; Luke 5:12-14 and Matt 25:35-40].

Elisha orders cleansing treatment, the science of his day, and sends a deputy instead of coming to the patient in person (not an entirely unknown practice by a busy principal!). This seems so very simple that Naaman is enraged and threatens to return home with all the diplomatic implications which would follow.

'Feelings form part of the personal encounter' Frederic von Orelli reminded us when outlining Paul Tournier's own understanding of person-centred medicine at last year's meeting [07/08/2024, p4]. We don't know what Elisha felt but it might not be unreasonable to wonder whether Naaman's reaction may have been anticipated by Elisha so that, in the end, the general would emerge a humbler man. Naaman's own servants use the argument that he would surely have complied with a difficult regime so why does he object to a simpler one? Wise counsels prevail and he submits to the recommended treatment. Cure is accomplished and he returns to thank Elisha who refuses any payment. Naaman instinctively wanted personal human contact and this came about when he put aside his pride and anger finally giving him access to a personal revolution. I believe that Elisha judged that this master of men, probably without a second thought, could send, at a moment's notice, cohorts of soldiers into hand-to-hand combat to kill or be killed. Naaman needed to confront the meaning of his disease within the context of his life and responsibilities and to understand that this seemingly simple regimen would completely change his life. Elisha's approach is humane rather than technical, recognising the needs and difficulties his patient had in understanding his disease as an expression of his personhood and its profound significance to his qualities and failings. He offered physical treatment, but his encounter with Naaman is 'honouring, respecting and loving with real interest, valuing and taking him seriously as a person in the image of God, not one amongst a mob but one with disappointed hopes, struggling to remain faithful to ideals within [his] community of persons' [Tournier, 1957, p.181-3]. Naaman had to abandon his ego and accept Elisha's gift, only then could he receive and learn, in his passivity, what true goodness means.

We need to understand that Israel's supreme monotheism meant that God controlled history [v 1], nature and its creatures yet a profound mutual covenant relationship remained. In stark contrast, other Ancient Near Eastern cultures had pantheons perceived to be engaged in constant struggle against chaotic demons. At home in Aram, General Naaman conventionally accompanied his king to worship the thunder god, Rimmon. So, the peoples surrounding Israel saw evil as a metaphysical reality forever threatening, whilst 'the biblical god imposes order... on the demythologised and inert elements of chaos' [Hayes, 2012, p.37]. The Hebrew God and his creation, is good, separating light from darkness, and his people are encouraged to do the same. So, evil ceases to be a metaphysical force but is understood as a moral reality within the realm of human freewill and responsibility [ibid, p.23].

Naaman had experienced a ‘cure of the soul’ [F. Von Orelli, 07/08/2024, p. 4], beginning to realise himself as a whole person and to ‘understand the meaning of his illness’ [ibid, p.5]. During this encounter, he became convinced that there was something special about Israel’s God so he declares that he now trusts Him above Aram’s pantheon [v. 15,17]. Henceforth, he will give thanks to the one God from whom flowed the life-changing loving-kindness he had experienced. To that end he requests soil as a firm base for such devotions even though the setting will be the temple of the storm-god at home [v. 17,18].

I believe that this encounter does fit the pattern of person-centred healing since the patient was helped to ‘find the meaning of their sickness and their life; to deal with the problem of death, to discover a specific ethical approach to their environment; to open sources of love for themselves and for their fellow-men; to sense the meaning of suffering... to find strength through the community for a new responsibility towards themselves and their fellow-men’ [Harnik, 1973, p.44]. Having experienced this Naaman wants more of it, to belong to that goodness and to express his ongoing gratitude. So Naaman committed himself to ‘a single, simple, but nevertheless differentiated way of being’ [Pattison, 2024, p.12]. This was not only a cure but a confrontation with the one God of Israel who would travel with him, love him and change him.

So, surprisingly and paradoxically, a personal and person-centred practice of medicine is seen in this ancient story which takes account of the patient’s situation in life and deep needs, beyond his superficial presentation, resulting in holistic change. Paul Tournier cites a patient who experienced a similar release exclaiming: ‘... I cannot deny the facts. I had an astonishing experience. It was almost like falling in love’. [Tournier, 1967, p.31]. So Naaman leaves for Aram not only with renewed skin but inside it he is ‘a person reborn’ [ibid, title].

## **References:**

- Hayes, CE. (2012) *Introduction to the Bible*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press (1991) *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- (10/02/2025) Internet searches:  
<https://babylonian.mythologyworldwide.com/hammurabis-code-a-study-of-public-health-laws-in-ancient-mesopotamia/>  
<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsnr.2018.0056#d2856550e1>
- Von Orelli, F. (07/08/2024) *Paul Tournier and medicine of the Person*, Medicine de la Personne conference paper, Northampton, UK
- Tournier, P. (1957) *The Meaning of Persons*, London, SCM.
- Harnik, B. (1973), in Ch 2, Pfeifer, H-R and Cox, J. (2007) *Medicine of the Person*, ed Cox et al, London, Jessica Kingsley.
- Pattison, GA. (2024) *A Philosophy of Prayer; Nothingness, Language and Hope*, New York, Fordham University Press.
- Tournier, P. (1967) *The Person Reborn*, London, SCM and Wm Heinemann.