

Bible Study about 2 Kings 5 (Elisa and Naemann)

Kaiserswerth General Conference, 26-09-2015 Gallneukirchen

What can you do with two to three hundreds kilos of soil? The cured Naemann takes home to Syria two loads for a mule from the banks of the Jordan. That is too much for a mere souvenir. For using it in a flower bed it is not enough. The comments said with one voice, that he wanted to build an altar for God in his home country, because the representative of God had healed Elisa. But, as we learn in the stories about Abraham (for example Gen. 12,8; 22,9), altars are made of stone and acacia wood (Ex. 37, 25; 38,1) and not only piled up with mud. And I do not know what he wanted with the soil.

But it is remarkable. Why didn't he take some of the water into which he submerged seven times and due to which he became healthy again instead of the soil? As today pious pilgrims take home water of the Jordan in small bottles from the Holy Land in order to maybe add it to baptismal water. Or the Catholic pilgrims, who bring home miraculous water from Lourdes. Naemann did nothing of this kind, he remained faithful to the soil.

And in general: the whole area, the Middle East of that time was full of professionally managed health resorts, which tried to offer all appropriate facilities on the health market. We do not have to think only about the clinics of Hippokrates on the Isle of Kos, which was extraordinary of course. But for a Syrian captain, a chief of staff, it would not have been a problem to travel to that places.

No I think about Bustan-es-She, only three kilometres from the Phoenician port of Sidon. There a world famous place of cult or health was situated, namely in the temple of "Eschmun at the spring of Jidlal". The flowing water of this place was led to several channels into a kind of "garden of paradise", where ritual washing took place. A well equipped, richly ornamented – probably costly – shrine, which could fulfill all wishes of the guests.

The excavated remains in the National Museum in Beirut are an eloquent testimony for this. Similar institutions could be found on many places, in Laodicea in Syria, in Marathos, Arwad, Laodicea in Phoenicia, Duma, Berytus, Palmyra, Ptolemais in Trachonitis, Gadara, Caesarea, Samaria, Neapolis, Antipatris, Askalon and even in Jerusalem, as it is proven by the story of the pond Bethesda (Joh. 5,1 ff.) and the excavations at this place.

No, Naemann did not want to be a normal guest of a spa, nor a patient of a normal health resort, nor a simple user of welfare and social facility. But what did he want? What did he do at Elisa? What brought him to Samaria of all things and from there to the Jordan? We know only little, in some questions we do not know anything at all. And still: the story of the Second Book of Kings has more details than any other stories of the life of Elisa. There are many details. So let's listen to it again:

Now Naaman, chief of the army of the king of Aram, was a man of high position with his master, and greatly respected, because by him the Lord had given salvation to Aram; but he was a leper.

And now I have to interrupt and ask: The Lord gave victory to Aram? But were they not constantly fighting with the Northern part of Israel? The Books of Kings are full of it and they describe very vividly, how the luck of the fighters was waving between both sides. There

were dramatic decades of fighting between Israel and their mighty enemy in the North and the East. But why should the Lord, the God of Israel, also give victory to the enemies of his own people?

Here we get a gleam of the theology of the deuteronomistic historical work, according to which victory and defeat of Israel were depending on its faith to God, and that God could use even the enemies at any time as a tool in order to punish his stubborn or unfaithful people and bring them back to the way of his prophecy. Naaman, a powerful man, but a leper. Which kind of illness that was is not clear. It could not have been leprosy, as it is translated in the Septuaginta, that is the Hansen-illness. Because Naamann was not isolated, he lived among men and he had access to the king. Besides that the Hansen-illness was introduced into the countries of the Bible approximately four hundred years later from India by Alexander the Great . So Naamann had some kind of skin disease, which we cannot even diagnose today.

2And the Syrians had gone out by companies, and had brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid; and she waited on Naaman's wife. 3And she said unto her mistress, Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy. 4And one went in, and told his lord, saying, Thus and thus said the maid that is of the land of Israel. 5And the king of Syria said, Go to, go, and I will send a letter unto the king of Israel. And he departed, and took with him ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment. 6And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, saying, Now when this letter is come unto thee, behold, I have therewith sent Naaman my servant to thee, that thou mayest recover him of his leprosy. 7And it came to pass, when the king of Israel had read the letter, that he rent his clothes, and said, Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy? Wherefore consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me.

The deported kidnapped young woman had opened the door for the healing of Naamann. Immediately the diplomatic machinery started to move. The king, his name was Benhadad according to what has been passed on, orders to write a letter to his opposite, the king of Israel. Communication among equally important kings, even when they are at war against each other. But the result is a disaster. The king of Israel, he stays without name, but we know that it was Joram-suspects bad intentions. He seeketz a quarrel against me and a reason to start a war! Now it is Elisa`s time:

8And it was so, when Elisha the man of God had heard that the king of Israel had rent his clothes, that he sent to the king, saying, Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel.

The man of God, *isch ha'elohim*, the prophet, Nabi, head of a whole school of prophets. He was determined by Elia to become his successor and immediately he behaved accordingly: the children were making fun of him and calling him "bald head, bald head", and he let the bears loose after them, which killed 42 of the children (2.King.2,23-25). No he was not able to take a joke. Then he resurrects the son of the wife of Schunem from death (2.king.4,8-37) and feeds many people with little bread (2.king.4, 38-44). It is no wonder, that there is a bridge from Elisa to Jesus of Nazareth (Lukas 4,27). Elisa was a free farmer, he had his own property in the country. Due to his position he probably had direct access to the royal court, or to be precise: to the royal courts. Because that was the King of the Northern part Israel

and the Southern part of Judah, and later he will even appear at the royal court of Damascus and decide, who will be the next king. A chief diplomat, chief negotiator and the highest-ranking consultant of the king in all important decisions. And he was very well informed: why did you tear your clothes? Let this man come to me.

9 So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. 10 And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean. 11 But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper. 12 Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage.

Naamann is disappointed in his expectancies. The King of Israel is not doing what he should do. And this prophet does not even go to the door!

13 And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?

And again it is the simple people, the unnoticed, the nameless, who push history forward and keep the doors open. And they have arguments, they convince the angry and furious general.

14 Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. 15 And he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and came, and stood before him: and he said, Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel: now therefore, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant. 16 But he said, As the LORD liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none. And he urged him to take it; but he refused.

And only now, when everything is over and Naamann is healthy again, there is a direct meeting between him and the man of God Elisa. Naamann starts with a confession: now I know, that there is no God in all countries, only in Israel. If he really said so? Later he will talk about that, that he will deal with the gods worshipped in his own country. Are there really no other gods than the God of Israel? We observe monotheism developing. Is this phase possible in the time before the exile? But it is weakened in a moment: because Naamann is convinced, that he cannot worship the God of Israel without the soil of Israel. The gods are still linked with the soil, the earth on which live the ones who are worshipping them.

17 And Naaman said, Shall there not then, I pray thee, be given to thy servant two mules' burden of earth? for thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the LORD.

That means other gods! But he does not want to listen to them anymore. Our starting question "What will somebody do with two to three hundred kilos of soil?" is occurring again. Naamann takes soil from a foreign country into his home country. Does he try to give his faith a "kind of sacramental support" (GvRad, 2,40). Normally it is the other way round. The soil of home is taken to a foreign country. All Austrians know the poem of the Styrian

writer Peter Rosegger (1848-1918) written shortly after the year 1880, after the first great wave of emigration of Styrians to the United States.

Ein Freund ging nach Amerika
Und schrieb mir vor einigen Lenzen:
Schick' mir Rosen aus Steiermark,
Ich hab' eine Braut zu bekränzen!

Und als vergangen war ein Jahr,
Da kam ein Brieflein gelaufen:
Schick' mir Wasser aus Steiermark,
Ich hab' ein Kindlein zu taufen!

Und wieder ein Jahr, da wollte der Freund,
Ach, noch was anderes haben:
Schick' mir Erde aus Steiermark,
Muss Weib und Kind begraben!

Und so ersehnt' der arme Mann
Auf fernsten, fremden Wegen
Für höchste Freud', für tiefstes Leid
Des Heimatlandes Segen.

It is the poem of a young Styrian who emigrates to the United States and asks a friend at home to send him roses from Styria for his young bride, a year later water from Styria to baptize his new-born baby and again one year later to send soil from Styria to bury them both.

For Naamann, however, the soil he took with him is a blessing, which he could not find at home and which he found abroad.

Und so ersehnt' der arme Mann
Auf fernsten, fremden Wegen
Um heimzufinden in sein Land
Der Fremde reichen Segen.

That the stranger, the foreign country can become a blessing, is one of the deepest insights of the Bible. God loves the stranger as it is said very simply (Dtn.10,18). I was a stranger and you welcomed me, says Jesus in the gospel (Matth.25,35), and: don't forget hospitality, because some of you have hosted angels without knowing it (Gebr.13,2). And that is the soil of Naamann: who joins issues with the God of Israel will not wish to live, will not be able to live without the strange element and without the foreign country. Only then he will find his home in the world.

18 In this thing the LORD pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of

Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon thy servant in this thing.

The powerful man, the great sir knows exactly, that he will be in a difficult dilemma. His social obligations are contradicting his newly gained faith. He asks forgiveness in advance.

19 And he said unto him, Go in peace.

Lech leSchalom! Go in peace! Naamann lives from the forgiving, which was granted to him before he did or could do something himself. Even when it sounds weird when it is said there is already a flashing of the justification of the sinner only because of grace (H.D. Preuß, 1,193), this conclusion, however, is still remarkable: Naamann does not receive any rules, no orders or forbiddances, no code of behavior for proselytes, but an absolution in the broadest sense. How he handles that situation, which he sees the same way, is his responsibility.

This he should perceive in liberty. His question and the reply, which he gets, are unique in the Old Testament. The “Go in peace” is defending against any “purism and radicalism” (H.D. Preuß, 2, 311). How God will deal finally with other peoples and their gods stays open – and not only in that place. God is always approaching his people again and again, he is the approaching, the future God. He approaches his people as a giving and demanding, a threatening and promising, a choosing and an obligating God. What he wants is the vivid faith in the community, the mutually accepted responsibility for life. God is never only at our back, but he is standing in front of us. The story could be finished here. But that is not the case. There must be something left for thinking. Now we have the appendix with Gehase, the servant of Elisa.

So he departed from him a little way. 20 But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, Behold, my master hath spared Naaman this Syrian, in not receiving at his hands that which he brought: but, as the LORD liveth, I will run after him, and take somewhat of him. 21 So Gehazi followed after Naaman. And when Naaman saw him running after him, he lighted down from the chariot to meet him, and said, Is all well? 22 And he said, All is well. My master hath sent me, saying, Behold, even now there be come to me from mount Ephraim two young men of the sons of the prophets: give them, I pray thee, a talent of silver, and two changes of garments. 23 And Naaman said, Be content, take two talents. And he urged him, and bound two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of garments, and laid them upon two of his servants; and they bare them before him. 24 And when he came to the tower, he took them from their hand, and bestowed them in the house: and he let the men go, and they departed. 25 But he went in, and stood before his master. And Elisha said unto him, Whence comest thou, Gehazi? And he said, Thy servant went no whither. 26 And he said unto him, Went not mine heart with thee, when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee? Is it a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards, and vineyards, and sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants? 27 The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed for ever. And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow.

Poor Gehasi! He did not deserve this. The story was added later, because we have met Gehase before and afterwards as a faithful and therefore healthy servant of his master Elisa. In Talmud he belongs to the bemoaned four, who will not resurrect because of plasphe-my

(Sanhedrin 90a), but also the Christian traditions condemn him as greedy. A prophet should never receive wages or use from his work. And when he heals somebody? Is this not work deserving pay?

Is it really so objectionable what Gehasi is doing? Of course we do not have to agree with his xenophobia – “this Aramean” he calls Naaman disrespectfully-, his fraudulent intent, because he is not asking for himself, but for two others of the group of prophet disciples, and finally his cowardice.

But in principle there are good reasons for his behavior. At least Naamann does not see any offensive things in it, on the contrary, he gives him more than he demanded. Gehasi reminds us that also welfare and social acting has to be proven on the market. It has its price if it has its value. But it has only value, if it can keep its free space, for which stands the prophet Elisa. Because Naamann could have been healed as well and even better in other places. I remind you on the long list of health resorts, which were open to him. He could have paid there and got what was offered to him.

But he could not have found a religious reorientation, a new relation to God. One cannot be played off against each other. Primarily we talk about healing, which can be explained finally not by a magic miraculous water or by the shamanistic abilities of a man of God, but by God himself. The restraint of Elisa, which Naaman has to understand as an impolite snub, keeps the free space for God`s work. So the other, the unexpected, the non-calculable is happening. Naamann did not become clean in his flesh only, but he found salvation also in his heart and his soul.

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