

Discussed: jokes, flattening of Scriptures, leading ladies,
Eowyn, evil witch king, pomegranates and figs, doing laundry, social
boundaries, entitlement

Surviving Death by Allegory or Sitting with a Bible Story

By Chris Oberg

I have tried to sit still with the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5 and resist the urge to summarize, to conclude, or to reduce the narrative to a single theological point before it even has the chance to be heard or reimagined. Resisting a speedy summary goes against the grain of our Christian tradition. We deserve the critiques that label us *impatient*, *premature*, and at times *self-serving* in our storytelling. Why are we so eager to announce the same conclusion over and over again? This is like saying Amen before you've heard the sermon or applauding before the postlude, or tuning out before the punch line because you know how the joke will end.

Peter Hawkins of Boston University calls this a flattening of the Hebrew Scriptures, and he says that it happens at least a couple of different ways. At times, we assume the stories are precursors of later New Testament events rather than genuine events in themselves. At other times, we allegorize ad nauseam, so that everything, for example, in the Exodus story—the manna in the wilderness, the

cloud by day and pillar by night, the rock that released fresh water—all are commonly interpreted to mean Christ. In the story at hand, when Naaman emerges from the dirty Jordan clean, we are to understand that the healing waters really signify grace in general and the sacrament of baptism in particular. Is there any chance, Hawkins muses, that Naaman can survive death by allegory?



When we tune out early, the joke is on us. So I have tried to sit still with the story this week. Listen to what can be heard when one sits still with the characters and literary devices:

1. The story begins with a leper and ends with a leper.
2. A foreigner is restored, and an Israelite smitten.
3. A humble female servant aids a great army commander.
4. If one female helper weren't scandalous enough, a second woman is required to convey the message from the first woman.
5. A king throws a tantrum, revealing in front of his guest that he is powerless.
6. A prophet steps in for the king, which begins a long series of undercuts for the powerful Naaman. Instead of receiving royal treatment from the court, he is sent to a prophet; instead of a prophet greeting him and waving a magic hand over his skin, he gets a servant who tells him to take a bath; instead of receiving an expected order to be healed and then bathe, the prophet sends him to wash in dirty water. It is a big man who must now go down into the waters. All of this for one of the winningest warriors of the Syrian army.
7. If I sit still a little longer, I see the story in its 2 Kings context with a cluster of miraculous events that involve the new prophet Elisha, and the story confirms that this new prophet is authentic because he has proven himself as a miracle healer. He can indeed replace Elijah; the nation of Israel will not be left without a prophet.
8. Finally, while sitting still one can notice that Yahweh appears in the very first verse and remains until the end.

When we sit with a story, we allow it to alert us, to alter us, for there is power in personal stories of life-changing encounters with the divine. This is what story theology is about, and it is powerful because we can identify with a character, we recognize a plot, and we resonate with the presence or absence of God—all of which leads us to contemplate the possibility of ourselves in the story. The story can be internalized; it can become personal. This is how you and I slip into the pages of our canon at times almost unnoticed even to ourselves.

This Naaman story alerts me at several points. I cannot go without noticing that the slave girl is the heroine, for without her one sentence of well wishing we would not have a story to tell. She put this entire

narrative into motion; she is the catalyst for the cleansing, for the confirmation of the new prophet, and for the witness that, once again, God stands with the people. Oh, how I love a leading lady in the Scriptures. We get so few that I admit I feel triumphalistic almost instantly.

This Hebrew slave calls to mind one of J. R. R. Tolkien's characters, Eowyn, the niece of Theoden, king of Rohan. Are you still with me? Somewhere in book five and in movie three all the good men are gathered in yet another battle to save Middle Earth from evil. Each battle is costly, which is why Theoden has forbidden his niece to do battle. And being forbidden is the best reason for any young person to proceed.

Toward the end of the Battle of Pellennor Fields, one warrior picks a fight with an evil witch king—a horrible, frightening character five times the size of the warrior. After exchanging several blows, the evil king pins the warrior to the ground and exhales this curse: "You fool, no mortal man can kill me. Die now."

The evil king raises his sword just as the warrior reaches to remove the head armor. With one pull of the hand, the armor falls to the ground and the warrior responds, "I am no man." And Eowyn takes out the evil king. My living room fills with screams of delight every single time this heroine emerges.

Yes, perhaps women readers can agree, we are alerted first of all by a female heroine who rescues Captain Naaman. And perhaps we are alerted by her status as a servant. Who among us doesn't like it when a servant saves the day? I am drawn in, for I am not a king, I am not a ruler or a commander, not a CEO or a top dog of anything. And neither are most of you. Maybe this is one reason why we slip into the lines of this narrative with ease. She is an unlikely heroine and so are we—and we like that.

This character alerts me on another level, for she is a lamb among the wolves. I see her witness. I see her desire to bring healing to the household and announce the presence of her God, but I don't understand how she got to the place where she could whisper a prayer for her captor while still in enemy territory.

How homesick she must have been to eat pomegranates and figs from her grandmother's tent, to hear her daddy sing late into the night or celebrate Shabbat like everyone back home. She served the captain's wife, and most likely served the captain, too, and probably many men in the ranks of the army. At least they didn't have leprosy.

The captain's contagious disease would not have been tolerated in her homeland. In Israel, the captain would be condemned to live outside the camp or city,

forbidden to make contact with others. But here she finds herself sleeping in the same house as the man with the sores—doing his laundry and scrubbing his dishes—and everything he touched he contaminated.

Somehow in the midst of this, she is able to hope for a healing that even her own people didn't understand. She hopes that Israel's God might bring healing within the enemy nation that Israel itself didn't enjoy. This is the only Old Testament leper ever cleansed from leprosy. How did she know to hope for such a thing? How did she know her God was that big?

Although her circumstances are very different from the many people who followed Jesus, I see in this Hebrew girl the kind of disciple that would make Jesus relax. He would say of her, "She gets it!" She wouldn't have needed the instructions for the road that Jesus gave when sending out the seventy-two (Luke 10). Their instructions are scattered in almost a dozen canonical and extracanonical locations. They can be found in various forms with unique editorial and theological frameworks. However, it is possible to identify the core of the instructions and to trace them to the earliest Jesus tradition.

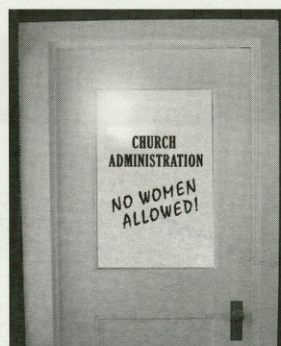
The core might sound like this: Go into a household, eat their food, bring health to those who need it, and announce the presence of God's Kingdom. Something happens when you walk into the houses of neighbors or strangers and you sit eye-to-eye with them around a table. Something happens when you accept food and you eat it together. You enter into a pattern of receiving and giving. You obligate yourselves to the needs of others, almost binding yourselves together. When you look eye-to-eye and share the same bottle of wine, social boundaries disappear. Physical goods are shared, and so is power. Mutuality and reciprocity emerge around a table. And you begin to see a kingdom without barriers between people. Yes, Jesus would say of her, "She gets it!"

I invite you to sit with the story. Sit with Captain Naaman. What he needs most is healing, yet what he wants to do least is what he is asked for the healing to be complete. Entitlement is difficult to surrender. Sit with the story and think about ideas like freedom, patriotism, allegiance. What would it be to pray for a healing on an enemy nation's army captain?

Most of all, sit with the God, who outwaits the sick, the proud, and the unconvinced. Sit with this God for awhile and perhaps you will exclaim with the Psalmist, "Weeping only lasts for a night, but joy comes in the morning."

Chris Oberg pastors the Calimesa, California, Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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