

Research on Israel and Aram

Autonomy, Independence and Related Issues

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Research on Israel and Aram in Biblical Times I

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The Strange Conversion of Naaman, Chief of the Aramean Army

THOMAS RÖMER

Abstract: The article deals with 2 Kings 5. This narrative corrects the negative view of the Arameans in the books of Samuel and Kings. The author may have knowledge about Yhwh worship in some Aramean border territories, but he is above all interested in presenting a positive picture of the Arameans, which comes close to the idea of a family link between Aram and Israel, in the Patriarchal narratives and in Deuteronomy 26.

1. Introduction:

The Arameans in the Torah and the Former Prophets: An Overview

Aram or Arameans are present in the beginning and at the end of the Enneateuch (Gen–2 Kgs). Aram appears for the first time in the so-called Priestly Table of Nations in Genesis 10, which details the offspring of Noah’s three sons after the Flood where Aram is one of the five sons of Shem (Gen 10:22). Shem’s genealogy is continued in Genesis 11; here Abraham’s family is located first in Ur Chasidim, from where his father moves to the Aramean city of Harran (Gen 11:27–32). This itinerary from Ur to Harran presupposes the religious context of the time of the Babylonian king Nabonidus, when Ur and Harran were linked through the cult of the moon god Sin.¹ Interestingly, the name of Abraham’s father Teraḥ reminds of the Hebrew word for moon (Yareah).

In the Patriarchal narratives, the family connections between the Patriarchs and Matriarchs and the Arameans play a major role. In order to find a bride for his son Isaac, Abraham sends his servant to his family in Aram-naharaim (Gen 24:10); in the Priestly texts the same region is called Paddan-Aram (Gen 25:20). Isaac, again, according to source P, sends his son Jacob to the same place in order to find a wife there (Gen 28:1–9). In the older Jacob story, the Patriarch also sojourns with his Aramean kin Laban, who later redactors located in Harran but, according to the oldest narrative tradition, was probably located in the Gilead.²

This close relation between the Patriarchs and the Arameans is also emphasized in the beginning of the so-called “historical credo” in Deuteronomy 26:5. Here the Israelite coming to offer his first fruits in the sanctuary should recite a prayer which opens with

¹ See for instance, RUPPERT, Genesis, 92f.

² FINKELSTEIN/RÖMER, Jacob, 322f.

the statement: אֲרָמִי אֲבֹד אָבִי, “my father was a perishing Aramean.” This opening clearly affirms an Aramean origin for the Israelite ancestor (maybe Jacob) and underlines at the end of the Torah again a close link between the Arameans and the Israelites.³

The situation changes in the Former Prophets where the Arameans appear almost exclusively as Israel’s and Judah’s enemies. After an episode in Judges 3 (which mentions a king Cushan-rishathaim of Aram) military conflicts between Israel and Aram are reported in the context of the establishment of the monarchy under David. 2 Samuel 8 relates David’s victory against an Aramean coalition, and 2 Samuel 10 against a coalition of Ammonites and different Aramean kingdoms and tribes, led by Hadad-ezer.

According to 1 Kings 15, king Asa of Judah who is at war with Baasha of Israel sent all the treasures of the Temple and of the palace to “king Ben-Hadad son of Tabrimmon son of Hezion of Aram, who resided in Damascus” (v. 15) in order to become his vassal and to receive protection.

Most of the narratives that mention the Arameans belong to the Elijah and Elisha cycles.⁴ In 1 Kings 19:15 the prophet Elijah receives the divine order to go to Damascus and to anoint Hazael, king of Aram. This order, however, is never fulfilled. In 2 Kings 9:7–14 it is Elisha who announces to Hazael that he will become king over Aram (he is anointed by one of Elisha’s disciples). 1 Kings 20 tells about Ben-Hadad waging war against Ahab of Israel and laying siege to Samaria. An anonymous prophet foretells Ahab that he will beat the Aramean army; Israel is indeed victorious, and Ben-Hadad has to flee. In the following year, Ben-Hadad attacks Israel again, and Ahab strikes the Aramean army a second time. Ahab spares Ben-Hadad’s life; the latter restores Israelite territories taken by the Arameans and allows Ahab to establish “bazaars” in Damascus.⁵ This arrangement is criticized by a prophet, who announces Ahab’s defeat and death because of his sparing of Ben-Hadad’s life. After three years of peace, Ahab summons Josaphat of Judah to help him to conquer Ramoth-gilead from the Arameans (1 Kgs 22). Ahab does not listen to the prophet Micaiah and is killed in the battle.

The next story mentioning the Arameans occurs in 2 Kings 5 (the prophet Elisha heals the commander of the Aramean army), a narrative which we will discuss in detail. This story presupposes Aramean domination after Ahab’s defeat in 1 Kings 20 and 22.

2 Kings 6 reports another situation of war between Israel and Aram. Through a miraculous intervention of Elisha, the Arameans are led to Samaria, captured there and then released. After a time of peace, Ben-Hadad lays a second siege to Samaria (2 Kgs 6:24–7:16), which fails again because of Yhwh’s intervention.

2 Kings 8:7–16 narrates how Elisha comes to Damascus where Hazael consults him about king Ben-Hadad’s illness. Elisha tells Hazael that the king will die, but that he should lie to him, and he also tells him that he will be the next king of Damascus and a redoubtable enemy of Israel.

2 Kings 8:25–29 and 9:14–29 contain a story about Joram of Israel who together with Ahaziah is at war with the Arameans at Ramoth-gilead (again), wounded by them and killed by Jehu.

³ TEIXIDOR, *Araméen*, 33–38.

⁴ See below.

⁵ Probably free access to the city’s markets, see COGAN/TADMOR, *Kings*, 469.

2 Kings 12:18–22 reports that Hazael invaded Judah; Joash becomes his vassal and Hazael renounces the attack on Jerusalem. 2 Kings 13 contains notes about the Aramean domination over Israel at the time of the kings Jehoahaz and Joash of Israel. In his last intervention Elisha announces to Joash that he will beat the Arameans three times, and that happens after Hazael’s death, who is succeeded by (another) Ben-Hadad.

2 Kings 16 deals with the so-called “Syro-Ephraimite war” during which Rezin of Damascus and Peqah of Israel want to force the Judean king Ahaz to join an Anti-Assyrian coalition. Ahaz however submits to the Assyrian king, who wins the war against the Arameans and Israelites and kills Rezin. However, when Ahaz meets his Assyrian lord in Damascus, he is impressed by the altar that is standing there and orders to rebuild it in Jerusalem.⁶

The last mention of the Arameans in the books of Kings occurs in the description of the first siege of Jerusalem in 597 BCE by the Babylonian army; according to 2 Kings 24:2 the Babylonians are accompanied by bands of Arameans, Moabites and Ammonites, participating in the fall of Judah and Jerusalem.

This overview reveals quite different attitudes towards the Arameans: in the book of Genesis they are depicted as close relatives of the Patriarchs, and, although the relations are sometimes complicated (as in the case of Laban and Jacob), the idea of a family connection prevails. This is also the case in Deuteronomy 26, where Israel’s ancestor is presented as an Aramean.

On the other hand, in the book of Kings the Arameans appear as Israel’s (and Judah’s) enemies. Inside these stories one can detect differences: in some stories the names of the Aramean and Israelite kings are given, other stories only mention “the king of Aram” and “the king of Israel.” Some stories seem to reflect historical conflicts between Damascus and Israel, other stories seem to be theological narrations, that highlight the superiority of Israel’s prophets and Israel’s god over the Arameans.

In this context, 2 Kings 5 has a special status because it emphasizes the “conversion” of an Aramean military chief to the god of Israel, and suggests that at least some Arameans recognize the superiority of the god of Israel or even the fact that this god is the only “real” one.

2. The Narrative of 2 Kings 5

1 Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him Yhwh had given victory to Aram. The man, <a mighty warrior>,⁷ had a skin disease.

2 The Arameans used to go out to their raids and captured a young girl from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. **3** She said to her mistress, “If only my lord were in front of the prophet who is in Samaria! He would deliver him of his skin disease.”

⁶ On this episode see WAZANA, Ahaz, 380–386.

⁷ Missing in LXX^B, and probably an addition.

4 So he⁸ went in and told his lord: Thus and thus said the girl from the land of Israel. 5 And the king of Aram said, “Go then, and I will write a letter to the king of Israel.” He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand [shekels of] gold, and ten changes of clothes.

6 He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which said, “When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may deliver him from his skin disease.” 7 When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends to me to deliver a man from his skin disease? Just recognize and see how he is trying to stir up trouble with me.” 8 But when Elisha <the man of god>⁹ heard that the king <of Israel>¹⁰ had torn his clothes, he sent to the king: “Why did you tear your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may recognize that there is a prophet in Israel.”

9 Naaman came with horses and his chariots, and stopped at the door of Elisha’s house. 10 Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your skin shall be restored and you shall be clean.” 11 Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, <and stand>¹¹ and call on the name of <Yhwh>¹² his God, and would wave his hand <over the place>¹³, and deliver from the skin disease! 12 Are not Amana¹⁴ and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Can I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned around and went away angry.

13 His servants approached and spoke <and said>¹⁵ to him, “My father, if the prophet had commanded you to do a big thing, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and become clean?’”

14 So he went down and washed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of >Elisha<¹⁶; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

15 He returned to >Elisha<¹⁷, he and all his camp; he came and stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no god on all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.”

16 But he said, “By the life of Yhwh, whom I serve, I will not accept anything!” He urged him to accept, but he refused.

17 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 other gods except Yhwh. 18 But may Yhwh pardon your servant on this thing: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to bow down there, when

⁸ Naaman. The MT does not explain how Naaman did know about the girl’s suggestion. Therefore, LXX^B changes into: “She went and told her husband.”

⁹ “Elisha” is missing in LXX^L and may be an addition, see STIPP, Elischa, 46. LXX^L has only “man of god.” MT conflates the two.

¹⁰ Missing in LXX^L.

¹¹ Missing in LXX.

¹² The tetragrammaton is absent in Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. It may have been added later. In the original story Naaman did not know (yet) the name of the God of Israel.

¹³ LXX^L has a variant reading: “he would wave his hand over the skin disease and remove it from the flesh.” The original text probably only referred to a magical gesture. The Hebrew מִקְוֵה is probably a gloss.

¹⁴ According to the *qere*. The *ketiv* has “Abana.” See under 2.3.1.6.

¹⁵ An addition, see STIPP, Elisha, 30; HAARMANN, Verehrer, 132. MT is a conflation of LXX^B and LXX^L. See WEVERS, Readings, 309.

¹⁶ According to LXX^B, which has here and v. 15 “Elisha” instead of “man of God” (MT; LXX^L); see HAARMANN, Verehrer, 132.

¹⁷ See above.

he leans on my arm, and bows down in the house of Rimmon, I will bow down¹⁸ in the house of Rimmon¹⁹; may Yhwh pardon your servant on this thing.” **19** He said to him, “Go in peace.” Naaman went from him a certain distance.

20 Gehazi, the servant of Elisha <the man of God>²⁰, said, “My master spared that Aramean Naaman by not accepting from him what he brought. By Yhwh’s life, I will certainly run after him and get something from him.”

21 So Gehazi went after Naaman. When Naaman saw him running after him, he got down from the chariot to meet him and said, “Peace?” **22** He replied, “Peace! My master has sent me to say, ‘Two young men from the guild of prophets from the hills of Ephraim have just come to me; please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothes.’”

23 Naaman said, “Please accept two talents.” He urged him, and wrapped two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of clothes, and gave them to two of his servants, who carried them ahead of him.

24 When he came to the citadel, he took the bags from them, and stored them inside; he dismissed the men, and they left.

25 When he went in and stood before his master, Elisha said to him, “Where [do you came from], Gehazi?” He answered, “Your servant has not gone anywhere.” **26** But he said to him, “Did not my heart go with you when someone left his chariot to meet you? Is this a time to accept silver and to accept clothes, olive orchards and vineyards, cattle, and male and female slaves? **27** Naaman’s skin disease shall cling to you, and to your descendants forever.” So he left his presence with a skin disease, as white as snow.

2.1. *The Question of the Literary Unity of 2 Kings 5*

2 Kings 5 can be understood as a narrative with three parts: verses 1–14 relate Naaman’s healing through a word of Elisha, verses 15–19 contain a dialogue between Naaman and Elisha in which Naaman confesses that Yhwh is the only god, but also asks for a “religious compromise” when he is back in Damascus. In this dialogue he also offers a recompense for Elisha, who does not accept it. In the last part of the narrative, verses 20–27, Elisha’s servant asks Naaman for some reward and is punished for that initiative: he becomes as leprous as Naaman was in the beginning of the story.

In European, especially German scholarship, these three parts have often been considered to reflect three stages of growth of the narrative.

The oldest kernel would have been a popular miracle story, close to other stories of the Elisha cycle comprising v. 1a α b.2-5a.6-14;²¹ after that, a first addition was made in v. 15–19* (v. 15a.17*–19a) by a redactor who transformed the old anecdote into a story

¹⁸ According to the MT it seems that Naaman bows down twice. The translation follows LXX^L. The Hebrew form *בִּהֲשַׁתְּחוּיָהּ* is strange. It is either a scribal error or an Aramaic influenced form (JOÜON, Grammaire, §79t). For details see HAARMANN, Verehrer, 157 with n. 628.

¹⁹ LXX^L has “in the house of Yhwh,” a dogmatic correction.

²⁰ See above.

²¹ For instance: SCHMITT, Elisa, 78–80; HENTSCHEL, Könige, 23 (only verses 1–3, 10b and 14); WÜRTHWEIN, Könige, 296–298; SAUERWEIN, Elischa, 62, who also eliminates verses 11–13 from the original narrative.

of “conversion,” or recognition of the god of Israel as the only true deity,²² finally, a later redactor added to the story the Gehazi episode, which contrasts Elisha’s exemplary behavior with the greed of his servant (v. 5b*, 15b–17a*, 19b–27).²³

There are however no clear stylistic indications or problems of literary coherence that would necessitate such a diachronic stratification.²⁴ On the contrary, those who advocate the existence of an “old” miracle narrative need to eliminate the statement in verse 1 according to which “Yhwh had given victory to Aram through Naaman,” because this statement asserts that Yhwh is the god who conducts also the destiny of the Arameans in allowing them to defeat the Israelites. But this elimination is a circular reasoning based on the assumption that 2 Kings 5 contains an “old” story. If one accepts the idea that the author of the narrative wanted from the beginning to underline the power of Yhwh and his prophet over the Arameans then there is no need to imagine an old narrative with a rather weak plot (Naaman comes to Elisha, the prophet heals him and then he goes back). For this reason, I suggest that Naaman’s healing and his confession praising Yhwh as the “only” god belonged together from the very beginning.

Nevertheless, it is possible that the story about Gehazi’s greed was added in a second stage. Elisha’s servant does not play a role in the narrative about Naaman’s cure, which only mentions an anonymous messenger in v. 10. The information of v. 15 according to which Naaman was accompanied by his whole camp is not taken up in verses 20–27. For these reasons v. 20–27, in which Gehazi acts in contrast to his master and is punished by becoming “leprous” like Naaman, were possibly added in a second stage. The redactor, who composed this anecdote, was perhaps motivated by the idea of explaining the name of Gehazi (“avaricious”); he also wanted to attribute to Elisha the power not only to heal but also to impose leprosy.²⁵

The question of whether the Gehazi episode is a later addition may, however, remain open²⁶ since our enquiry will focus on the relationship between Yhwh and the Arameans.

2.2. *Kings 5 in the Context of the Elisha Cycle*

The stories about Elisha, which occur between 2 Kings 2 and 13, can be divided into short miracle stories and stories about Elisha’s implication in military conflicts, mostly between the Israelites and the Arameans.

The miracle stories are normally short and present Elisha as a thaumaturge: He makes undrinkable brackish water drinkable (2:19–22), he curses children who jeer at him so

²² WÜRTHWEIN, *Könige*, 301; SAUERWEIN, *Elischa*, 64: v. 1aßb, 4–5a; 6–8,11–13.15a (this is slightly in contradiction with the reconstruction on p. 62, see also 282–285: according to her, the old layer only contains: v. 1*, 2–3, 9–10, 14, which would have been a quite boring narrative). FRITZ, *Könige*, 29, only distinguishes two layers: v. 1–14* and 15–27*.

²³ WÜRTHWEIN, *Könige*, 302f.; SAUERWEIN, *Elischa*, 64: v. 5b, 15b–17aa.19b–27. She detects another earlier addition in v. 17aß–19a.

²⁴ See also STIPP, *Elischa*, 315–19.

²⁵ GRAY, *Kings*, 508; THIEL, *Erkenntnisausage*, 214 (according to him and others verses 20–27 were added together with the verses v. 5b, 15b–17a*, 19b* that prepare the addition); OTTO, *Jehu*, 230.

²⁶ Against the attribution to a later stratum see ROFÉ, *Stories*, 126f.

that they are mauled by bears (2:23–25), he multiplies oil (4:1–4), and brings a dead boy back to life (4:8–37), he makes a poisoned (?) stew eatable (4:38–41) and multiplies bread (4:42–44). He also makes an iron axe-head float (6:1–7), and even after his death a dead man comes to life after his body touches Elisha's bones (13:20–21).²⁷

The stories about Elisha's implications in military conflicts are more complex: in 2 Kings 3, during a war between an Israelite, Judahite, and Edomite coalition against Moab, he announces water in a valley; in 6:8–23 he prays Yhwh to strike the Arameans with blindness, he then announces that the famine in the besieged Samaria will not last and the Arameans will abandon the siege because of Yhwh's intervention (6:24–7:20); later Elisha goes to Damascus and informs Hazael that he will be the successor of Ben-Hadad (8:7–15); he legitimates Jehu's revolt (9:1–10), and before his death he announces to Joash of Israel a limited victory over Aram (13:14–19). This second group presents the Arameans as Israel's enemies and Elisha appears more as a prophet than a miracle worker.

The narrative in 2 Kings 5 does not fit exactly in one of these two groups of Elisha stories.

Elisha provokes a miracle though not through a magical ritual but through his word, and the one who benefits from it is an Aramean general, who has no hostile intention, but who, on the contrary, recognizes the power of Elisha's god. In contradistinction to other stories which narrate military conflicts between Aram and Israel (based partially on historical events), and which name the kings of Aram and the kings of Israel, 2 Kings 5 is clearly a theological construction and is not interested in a historical context. This is made clear by the fact that the Aramean and the Israelite kings do not bear names, so that it is inappropriate to speculate about the identity of these kings in the narrative of 2 Kings 5.

One may therefore suspect that 2 Kings 5 belongs to the latest layer of the Elisha traditions. It may have been written in order to correct two elements of the older traditions: a) Elisha's miracles are not performed by magical gestures, but by his word; b) the Arameans are not presented as enemies but as generous people and possible worshippers of Yhwh.

In the Elisha cycle a parallel to 2 Kings 5 can be found in 2 Kings 8:7–15, which was probably known to the author of 2 Kings 5. In 2 Kings 8:7–15 Elisha is travelling to Damascus, apparently to be consulted by the sick king Ben-Hadad. In its existing form,²⁸ the narrative presents Elisha as a well-respected prophet. The king sends his confident Hazael, ignoring that the latter will usurp the throne.

8 The king said to Hazael, "Take a present with you and go to meet the man of God. Inquire of Yhwh through him, whether I shall recover from this illness." **9** So Hazael went to meet him, taking a present with him, all kinds of goods of Damascus, forty camel loads. When he entered and stood before him, he said, "Your son, King Ben-Hadad of Aram has sent me to you, saying, 'Shall I recover from this illness?'" **10** Elisha said to him, "Go, say to him, 'You shall certainly recover'; but Yhwh has shown me that he shall certainly die."

²⁷ See on this RÖMER, *ossements*, 179–181.

²⁸ The story is indeed somewhat confusing, see WÜRTHWEIN, *Könige*, 318–321; SAUERWEIN, *Eli-scha*, 81–84.

Interestingly, this passage suggests that the Aramean king consults a prophet of Yhwh and not of the Aramean deities. Does the narrative therefore indicate that in Damascus the Israelite deity Yhwh was known and respected?²⁹

Contrary to 2 Kings 5, 2 Kings 8 reflects on a historical event, the usurpation of Hazael, who is presented in the narrative as a murderer. This may be corroborated by an inscription of Shalmaneser III, in which Hazael is presented as a “son of nobody,” who “seized the throne.”³⁰ According to this inscription, the murdered king was not Ben-Hadad, but Hadad-ezer (Hadad-îdrî). Apparently, the biblical author was confused³¹ and had no exact information about the names of the Aramean kings in Damascus, so that he used “Ben-Hadad” as a standard name for any Aramean king.³²

In any case, the biblical text presents the rise of Hazael as planned by Yhwh, although this Aramean king became a dangerous enemy of Israel:

11 He fixed his gaze and stared at him, until he was ashamed. Then the man of God wept. **12** Hazael asked, “Why does my lord weep?” He answered, “Because I know the evil that you will do to the people of Israel; you will set their fortresses on fire, you will kill their young men with the sword, dash in pieces their little ones, and rip up their pregnant women.” **13** Hazael said, “What is your servant, who is a mere dog, that he should do this great thing?” Elisha answered, “Yhwh has shown me that you are to be king over Aram.”

In this dialogue, which is often be considered (together with v. 10b) as an insert in the original story,³³ the rule of Hazael is presented as being part of Yhwh’s plan, who had informed Elisha about Hazael’s usurpation. Hazael is presented, quite similarly to Naaman in this regard, as showing profound respect to Elisha by calling himself his “servant” and a “mere dog.”

One may therefore imagine that the author of 2 Kings 5 built upon this story. The beginning of 2 Kings 8 shows some further parallels with 2 Kings 5: in both stories, Elisha is consulted by Arameans of high social standing (the king, the highest military officer); the communication with him is made through the sending of a messenger. In both episodes there is a problem of illness (in 2 Kgs 8 the king wants to know whether he will recover, in 2 Kgs 5 Naaman wants to be cured). In both cases the Arameans take with them outstanding gifts (2 Kgs 8:9; 2 Kgs 5:5). In 2 Kings 8 king Ben-Hadad is presented as Elishah’s “son,” whereas in 2 Kings 5, Naaman is called “father” by his servants. In 2 Kings 8:13 the expression “big thing” (תִּבְרָתְךָ הַגְּדוֹלָה) occurs to characterize Hazael’s rule, and the same rare expression³⁴ is used in 2 Kings 5:13 to describe an extraordinary act that Elisha could have commanded (לִבְרָתְךָ הַגְּדוֹלָה).

The author of 2 Kings 5 could therefore have used the story in 2 Kings 8 in order to contrast it with a more positive picture of the relation between Israel and the Arameans.

²⁹ See below.

³⁰ ANET, 280.

³¹ ATHAS, Inscription, 289.

³² The case of the Tel Dan inscription is complicated. Hazael is normally thought to be its author, and he presents his father as having had a peaceful death. This consensus has been challenged by ATHAS, Inscription, 258–265, who attributes the inscription to Bar-Hadad II, son of Hazael.

³³ WÜRTHWEIN, Könige, 319; SAUERWEIN, Elischa, 82f.

³⁴ The only other occurrences appear in 1 Sam 12:6, 20:2, and Jer 21:6.

The motif of Naaman's skin disease is perhaps taken from the strange episode in 2 Kings 7:3–16 where four leprous men leave Samaria, besieged by the Arameans and discover that the Arameans have abandoned their camp because of a hallucination sent by Yhwh. After having eaten and taken a rich booty (7:8: silver, gold, clothing), which reminds of the gifts that Naaman carries with him (5:5 silver, gold, clothing) they inform the Israelite king that the Arameans have fled.

The author of 2 Kings 5 may have used this anecdote and transferred the skin disease of the four Israelite men to Naaman (interestingly there is a further literary parallel: 2 Kgs 7:17 uses the expression “to lean on one's hand” [אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׁעָן עַל-יָדוֹ] expressing the king's trust in his captain; and in 2 Kgs 5:18 the same expression [וְהוּא נִשְׁעָן עַל-יָדַי] appears to describe the Aramean king's trust in Naaman when worshipping in Damascus).

Summing up, the author of 2 Kings 5 is apparently aware of older traditions of Elisha as a miracle worker, but also of narratives about military conflicts between Arameans and Israel, especially 2 Kings 7 and 2 Kings 8. He uses these narratives, taking up motifs and literary expressions in order to create a story with another political and theological perspective.

2.3. The Purposes of 2 Kings 5

2.3.1. Actors and Places

The narrative builds on the encounter of Naaman and Elisha, who, together with Gehazi (who only appears in v. 20–27, which are perhaps a later addition), are the sole actors bearing names. There are many other actors who remain, however, anonymous: the Israelite girl serving Naaman's wife, the Aramean and Israelite kings, Elisha's messenger and Naaman's servants. There are also two divine actors: Yhwh, the god of Israel, who is indeed acting, and Rimmon, the Aramean god, who remains passive.

2.3.1.1. Naaman

The name is attested in Mari and several times in Ugarit,³⁵ especially as an epithet of royal personages, and also in pre-Islamic Arabic texts.³⁶ The name may either be a truncated theophoric name or simply express the pleasure that parents take in their child: “The gracious one, the pleasant one.”³⁷ The author uses this name perhaps to describe how attractive he was before he became leprous,³⁸ or also in order to indicate that he will finally behave towards Elisha and his deity, in a “fair” manner.

As a commander of the army Naaman is one of the most important persons in the court. The expression “in high favor” uses the Hebrew expression נִשָּׂא פָנִים or נִשָּׂא רֹוֶשׁ (“to lift up the face/the head”) which alludes to a royal gesture: the king touches the face of a suppliant who is bowing before him, so that this may refer to a

³⁵ GRÖNDAHL, *Personennamen*, 163.

³⁶ GRAY, *Kings*, 504.

³⁷ NOTH, *Personennamen*, 166.

³⁸ SCHÖPFLIN, *Naaman*, 35.

special grace given by the king (cf. Gen 40:13 and Esth 8:3–4). Naaman's high position is contrasted by the fact that he has skin disease. The term **צִרְעָת** designates perhaps psoriasis or more generally different kinds of scale diseases.³⁹ Contrary to Leviticus 13 or 15, where the leper should be kept in strict quarantine, Naaman can live in society, he is able to interact with the king and his own household.

2.3.1.2. *Yhwh*

According to the narrator Naaman's prestige comes from the fact that "by him Yhwh had given victory (**וַיִּשְׁוֹעַהוּ**) to Aram." The narrator informs his audience that the military success of Naaman comes from the god of Israel. This statement presupposes the Deuteronomistic idea that Yhwh also controls foreign nations, as for instance in 2 Kings 24, when he sends the Babylonians and the Arameans in order to destroy Jerusalem. Therefore, it is not necessary to postulate that the "victory" mentioned here alludes to the Aramean victories against the Assyrians,⁴⁰ it is more likely that it refers to the Aramean-Israelite war in 1 Kings 20 and 22.⁴¹ Like in 2 Kings 8:11–13 Aramean victories and oppression of Israel are attributed to the will of Yhwh.

2.3.1.3. *The Role of the Servants*

The different servants have an important and positive role in the story, whose legendary character appears already in the fact that if one takes v. 2 literally the main aim of the Aramean raid was to capture a young Israelite girl to serve in Naaman's household. This girl is absolutely loyal to her Aramean mistress and her information about a powerful prophet in Samaria provokes Naaman's travel to Israel.

After Naaman has washed in the Jordan it is said (v. 14) that his flesh had become like that of a young juvenile (**נֶעֱרָה קִטְנָה**) which alludes to the young girl (**נֶעֱרָה קִטְנָה**) who initiated Naaman's search for cure in Samaria.⁴²

Naaman's servants, who accompany him, also play a decisive role by convincing their reluctant master to wash in the waters of the Jordan River. And here again Naaman accepts their argument.

In this way the narrator emphasizes the idea that the Israelite and Aramean servants "collaborate" in regard to Naaman's cure.

2.3.1.4. *The Aramean and the Israelite Kings*

The Aramean king also accepts the idea according to which help for Naaman can be found in Samaria. The practice of "international medical courtesy" is attested in extra-biblical sources from the ancient Near East.⁴³ The Aramean king sends, following a common practice, a letter to his Israelite counterpart without any hostility: "When this

³⁹ See the discussion in HIEKE, *Leviticus*, 470–471, 473–474.

⁴⁰ ŠANDA, *Könige*, 38.

⁴¹ FRITZ, *Könige*, 29–30.

⁴² HOBBS, *Kings*, 65.

⁴³ MONTGOMERY/GEHMAN, *Kings*, 374.

letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may deliver him from his skin disease.”

But the Israelite king misunderstands the letter. He thinks that he himself is asked to perform Naaman’s healing, although the Aramean king has sent the letter to him because he considers the prophet as a servant of the king so that the latter should cure Naaman by the mediation of his prophet.⁴⁴ Taking the content of the letter to be directed to himself, the king misinterprets it as if the Aramean king was seeking for an occasion of war.

The Israelite monarch is put here in a bad light in comparison with the Aramean king. This negative presentation of the Israelite ruler is reinforced by Elisha’s speech, who accuses him to having torn his clothes, and having lacked faith in Elisha’s and Yhwh’s healing power.

2.3.1.5. *Elisha and Naaman*

This encounter starts with Naaman’s dissatisfaction about Elisha’s way to heal. In contrast to the other Elisha narratives, the prophet is supposed to live in the city of Samaria.⁴⁵ First there is no direct contact between Naaman and the prophet, and Naaman is disappointed that Elisha is not performing some ritual or exorcism⁴⁶ in the name of his god. The expression “waving his hand [towards the place (*maqôm*)]” is unclear.⁴⁷ It could refer to the “spot” of the affected area,⁴⁸ but the glossator may have intended an allusion to a sanctuary of Yhwh in Samaria. The passage can be understood as a critique or a redefinition of the traditional picture of Elisha transforming him more into a prophet who is acting by words. The healing of Naaman is achieved when he finally executes Elisha’s order.

2.3.1.6. *The Jordan and the Rivers of Damascus*

The opposition between the river Jordan and the rivers of Damascus has also a theological function. It is quite a long way to go from Samaria to the Jordan River, and one may ask why Elisha did not send Naaman to a nearer brook like the Wadi Farah. The author knew certainly that the Elisha tradition was associated with the Jordan (2 Kgs 2), a river, which also had a symbolic importance in the Deuteronomistic conquest account (Josh 3–4).

Abanah should be corrected according to the *Qere*, some manuscripts, the Targum and Canticles 4:8 to *Amanah*, which designates a mountain height that gave its name to the river that descends from the Anti-Lebanon mountain range to the plain of Damascus (modern name Barada); the name Ammananu appears perhaps also in Assyrian records.⁴⁹ The name Pharpar is associated with the river el-Auwaj, which has its source in

⁴⁴ GRAY, Kings, 506.

⁴⁵ This idea is probably based on 2 Kgs 2:25.

⁴⁶ It has often been argued that the Hebrew root *ʾsp* – translated “to deliver” here – is related to exorcism; but this does not seem to be the case, see the discussion in COGAN/TADMOR, Kings, 64.

⁴⁷ *Maqôm* is probably a gloss, see above.

⁴⁸ So most commentators.

⁴⁹ See the discussion in KUAN, Inscriptions, 32–33.

Hermon and flows about 10 miles south-east of Damascus. The name Pharpar may come from the Wadi Barada one of the tributaries of the el-Auwaj River, which waters the swamps south of Damascus.⁵⁰ The name Pharpar shows that the author of 2 Kings 5 had perhaps not an exact idea of the names and did not remember exactly the name of the second important river of Damascus.

2.3.2. Naaman's Confession

After he is healed Naaman returns to Elisha and confesses: "Now I know that there is no god on all the earth except in Israel." This "monotheistic" statement has often been understood in the sense that Naaman has become a "proselyte."⁵¹ But, with his confession Naaman does not integrate in Israel or the "people of Yhwh," he returns to Damascus. He is therefore presented as a foreigner who worships Yhwh.⁵²

If one compares the statement of Naaman (יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אֵין אֱלֹהִים בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ כִּי (אִם־בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל לְדַעַת כִּי) as in Deuteronomy 4:35 (לְדַעַת כִּי) or Isaiah 45:6 (כִּי אֵפֶס בְּלִעְדֵּי) or Isaiah 45:6 (אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עוֹד לְמַעַן יִדְעוּ... כִּי אֵפֶס בְּלִעְדֵּי) or Isaiah 45:6 (אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עוֹד לְמַעַן יִדְעוּ... כִּי אֵפֶס בְּלִעְדֵּי), one may observe that Naaman insists on the fact that the god of whom he recognizes the power is linked to the land of Israel. In a way this idea is less "universalistic" than the monotheistic discourses in Deuteronomy 4 and parts of Second Isaiah. There is indeed a strong link between this "only" god and the land of Israel, and this strong link is emphasized by the fact that Naaman asks Elisha to take with him earth from the land of Israel "for your servant will no longer offer holocausts or sacrifice to any god except Yhwh" (כִּי לֹא־יַעֲשֶׂה עוֹד עִבְדְּךָ עֲלֶיהָ וְנֹבַח לְאֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים כִּי) (אִם־לְיְהוָה).

The idea that Naaman needs to bring earth from the land of Israel to worship Yhwh in Damascus is strange. This idea has been understood as legitimating exiled Israelites who wanted to worship Yhwh in the "impure" lands of their deportation.⁵³ But why should an Aramean represent Israelite or Judahite deportees?

The idea that Naaman wants to offer holocausts and other sacrifices in his own land also contradicts the Deuteronomistic ideology of cultic centralization according to which sacrifices to Yhwh can only be performed in Jerusalem. Therefore, the text is definitely non-Deuteronomistic. But does this mean that it is necessarily pre-Deuteronomistic?

2.3.3. A Cult of Yhwh in Aram?

One could of course speculate that Yhwh was also worshipped in some Aramaic regions in the 9th or 8th century.⁵⁴ Assyrian records reporting the campaign of Tiglath-pileser

⁵⁰ THOMPSON, Pharpar, 304.

⁵¹ GUNKEL, Elisa, 39; SMYTH-FLORENTIN, Conversion; SCHULT, Übertritt, 13–14 (he dates the story to the Hellenistic time); COGAN/TADMOR, Kings, 67.

⁵² HAARMANN, Verehrer, 152.

⁵³ ROFÉ, Stories, 111–112.

⁵⁴ DALLEY, Hamath; ZEVIT, Worship, 365–66; WAZANA, Ahaz, 393–94.

III in north Syria in 738 BCE seem to attest an Aramean king Azriyahu,⁵⁵ maybe of Hadrak, as suggested by Nadav Na'aman.⁵⁶ The Annals of Sargon II mention a revolt of a Yahu-bihdi of Hamath.⁵⁷ The yahwistic names of these kings may indicate that Yhwh was also worshipped in some places in the north of Israel. Since "Aramean sources indeed reflect a high degree of assimilation of a range of regional gods,"⁵⁸ this possibility cannot be ruled out. And the graffiti from Kuntillet 'Ajrud also attest that Yhwh could be worshipped outside the Israelite and Judahite territories. 2 Kings 5 can therefore be understood as a late non-Deuteronomistic etiology of an Aramean Yhwh-veneration. The author who probably wrote in the postexilic period⁵⁹ could have taken up such knowledge in order to combine it with the idea that Yhwh is the only real god and that he cannot be worshipped adequately outside of Israel.⁶⁰

2.3.4. *Yhwh and Rimmon*

The story of the encounter between Elisha and Naaman ends with a theological compromise. Naaman explains him that when he has to accompany the king in order to worship Rimmon he has no other choice than to fall down before his statue. So he asks the prophet for Yhwh's forgiveness.

The deity Rimmon refers to the Mesopotamian and Levantine name Rammanu. The Massoretic vocalization, which can be understood as "pomegranate," may be a parody of the real divine name. The name Rammanu ("the thunderer") was a sobriquet of the storm god Hadad, a main divinity in some Aramean kingdoms.⁶¹ In the Bible the identification of Rammanu and Hadad is attested in the late text of Zechariah 12:11 ("On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo") which indicates an Israelite worship of this deity in the Hellenistic period (the mourning may indicate an identification of Rammanu with Adonis the cult of whom also included mourning rites⁶²). The Aramean worship of Hadad-Rammanu is further attested in the Bible by the name of the king "Tabrimmon" in 1 Kings 15:18. The name occurs (perhaps) also on an early Aramaic seal mentioning a "Šidqi-Rammanu," and in names from the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods.⁶³ The reference in Zechariah 12 shows that this deity was known until the Hellenistic time.

Elisha's answer to Naaman's request to be allowed to continue to worship the tutelary deity of the Aramean king is somewhat laconic: "Go in peace!," so that the reader may interpret it in different ways. However, there is no open opposition to Naaman's project. One may ask whether Naaman serves here also as a "mirror" for Israelites and Judahites

⁵⁵ DALLEY, Hamath, 26.

⁵⁶ NA'AMAN, Looking, 229–30.

⁵⁷ ANET, 285.

⁵⁸ WAZANA, Ahaz, 394.

⁵⁹ HAARMANN, Verehrer, 159–160.

⁶⁰ Contrary to WAZANA, Ahaz, 386–390, I do not think that 2 Kgs 5 reflects the existence of an altar of Yhwh in Damascus. The narrative seems to indicate a "hidden" private yahwistic cult of Naaman.

⁶¹ SCHWEMER, Wettergottgestalten, 237.

⁶² ATALLAH, Adonis, 227–228.

⁶³ GREENFIELD, God, 195–196.

in the diaspora who were perhaps also sometimes in the situation of participating in the cult of other deities.

3. Conclusion

2 Kings 5 is a late postexilic story with different intentions. First of all, it corrects the negative view of the Arameans in the books of Samuel and Kings: the Aramean actors are depicted positively, whereas some Israelite actors (the king, and later Gehazi) appear in a negative way. “All the appearing Arameans co-operated with the man of God; i.e. the wife of Naaman; the king of Aram; the servants of Naaman.”⁶⁴ Naaman and the Arameans appear here as an incarnation of people who behave rightly. Namaan’s confession that Yhwh is the only god is formulated in a monotheistic way, but also maintains the idea that the only place where this god can be worshipped adequately is the land of Israel. The author may have knowledge about Yhwh worship in some Aramean border territories, but he is above all interested in presenting a positive picture of the Arameans, which comes close to the idea of a family link between Aram and Israel, in the Patriarchal narratives and in Deuteronomy 26.

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⁶⁴ AXSKJÖLD, *Aram*, 124.

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