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An Outside Look at the *Missio Dei* in 2 Kings 5

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Editor’s Note: This article was developed from a presentation on June 16, 2018 for GCS18 (Great Commission Summit 2018), Concordia University–Irvine under the theme, Interpreting Scripture through Non-Western Eyes.

Abstract: God’s Word is for all people. Western worldview and culture may cause bias as we study and interpret Scriptural narrative. Understanding how those from other language communities and cultures interpret such narratives increases our knowledge-base and our appreciation of God at work through the Word in the world.

A teenager said to his friends. “It was terrible. First, I got angina pectoris, then sclerosis. Then, I got psoriasis and tonsillitis followed by appendectomy.”

“Wow! How did you survive?” said his friends.

“I don’t know,” the teenager replied. “That was the toughest *spelling test* I ever had.”

Context matters. The words of a narrative event may remain the same, but as we apply new information, new insight is gained. This sometimes results in humor, other times in new learning.

As Lutheran Christians, we confess that God and His Word are for everyone regardless of who they are, where they are, or what language they speak. We have historically applied much effort within our own Western contexts to inform our knowledge-base of God’s Word and what it means to us. We witness this through the many commentaries written by Western theologians. This cumulative knowledge base informs us. But our understandings of the narratives and texts that are God’s Word are also limited by our own context and perspectives. Missiologist Lamin Sanneh notes, “Context is not passive but comes loaded with its own biases ready to contest whatever claims it encounters.”¹



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You would think we might be happy to see where our Western worldviews may provide bias and limit us as we study Scripture. That is not always the case.

The missionary journey starts with formation within our “home church” context. The missionary is then sent to serve outside the home church, perhaps abroad. As the missionary shares and studies the Word, these outsiders also get excited about what they are hearing. They ask questions. Often those questions are ones that may not have occurred to the missionary before. Neither have the answers. Tension occurs.

The missionary has one of two choices: to reject the question as illegitimate, thus in effect maintaining one’s own bias as a standard, or to enter into dialogue to determine why outsiders are asking the question and how God’s Word might address it. In such a case, new insight may be gained. The missionary may then wish to share such insight towards widening the knowledge base of his or her home church. But straddling the gap between those from a foreign culture and the home church is not always easy. The home church may even view the returning insight with suspicion. However, without such stimulation, the home church is at risk of stagnation and institutionalization. We need the observations and insights from those whom God calls who are different from ourselves to inform, discuss, accept, and reject. By so doing, our home church’s knowledge base is challenged and grows. The process may be uncomfortable, but overall we grow in our faith and understanding as the people of God.

This article looks at 2 Kings 5, the Naaman narrative, in a way that Western readers may have not observed it before; at least, this writer cannot find it presented this way in any of our Western commentaries. Yet, having lived on the African continent for the better part of thirty-three years and worked with this text with multiple African and U. S. audiences, I have come to an alternate way to look at such Old Testament narrative events. The interpretative findings are so consistent that, even though they may not be recorded in a commentary, in their unified conclusions they become just as valid and informative as those expressed by Western Bible commentators. It is a good lesson. Though those from different cultural contexts may interpret the events in Scripture in a different manner, the end result of the Word understood everywhere is both faith and a deeper appreciation of God and His mission to us, as we see Him at work throughout the world.

That said, let us look at 2 Kings 5, sometimes called the Naaman narrative. There are three main human characters in this narrative: Naaman, Elisha, the servant of God, and Gehazi, the false servant. Naaman, as will be seen from his actions, operates similarly to those who practice African traditional religions yet today. Such practitioners are termed “animists.” It is useful to understand this narrative from an animist worldview and perspective. But to interpret from that perspective, first the Western reader must understand how an animist worldview informs perspective.

Worldview works silently in the background of our thought processes. Such is how we make meaning of the world. Our worldview conditions what we observe and hear and the assumptions we make. One cannot know what one does not know. One will try to fit the meaning of what one sees or hears through the lens of what one already knows until one learns something new and thus modifies worldview.

Worldview works silently in the background of our thought processes.

A comprehensive definition is provided by the American Scientific Affiliation.

A worldview is a view of the world, used for living in the world. A world view is a *mental model* of reality—a comprehensive *framework of ideas & attitudes* about the world, ourselves, and life, a *system of beliefs*, a *system of personally customized theories* about the world and how it works—with answers for a wide range of questions.²

A group of Western seminarians approached a Kenyan student studying in the U. S. and said, “Let’s go out and get something to eat.” There is an underlying worldview assumption. Who pays? The Kenyan student was aghast when he finished and found he was expected to pay for his own food. He had to borrow money. From his context with a high component of hospitality, the one who invites is expected to pay. That is not the case in a Western student community, which assumes that each person will pay for his own food. The assumptions provided by alternate worldviews may be different.

To help equip the reader to understand more fully the animist perspective, whether historical as in Naaman’s action or contemporary as in African traditional religions today, it is first prudent to anchor ourselves through the lens of our Christian worldview.

In the Christian worldview, God’s action is first. He has given us salvation through His Son not because of what we have done but as a gift of grace. He has done this in spite of us, not because of us. We respond in gratefulness to God’s action; God’s action is first, our action in response follows.

The animist’s world is diametrically opposite. Human desire motivates action and propitiation to the spiritual world. Human action is first, and, if successful, the spiritual responds.³

Within an animist spiritual world, there are many spiritual powers. While there is almost always a high god or creator god to which all power is ultimately attributed, there are many ways—tribal spirits, territorial spirits, life-force, familial spirits, ancestors—through which one can access the power. The Hindu spiritual world estimates over thirty million powers are available for supplication.

In animist thought, there is an underlying premise that the spiritual and physical are intrinsically linked. If one can manipulate either the spiritual or the physical, the other is also manipulated. There is no coincidence. If a physical problem occurs, it means the spiritual world is not happy and must be propitiated to fix the problem. If one desires the physical—money, love, power, or position—the spiritual can be manipulated to fulfill the desire. If the animist himself does not know how to get what is wanted from the spiritual world, there are multiple spiritual specialists who are available to help, for a price. The spiritual world responds to human action.

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Now I must admit to the reader that I have propitiated the spiritual through animist practice. When I was in the eighth grade playing basketball, I had a pair of lucky socks. When I wore the socks, I played better than when I didn't. I hid those socks so they wouldn't get washed and lose their "luck." Notice my animist practice. First my action—maintaining and putting on lucky socks—and if I did it right, I got what I wished as "luck," which caused me to play basketball better. I never cracked the first team, so readers may come to their own conclusions as to actual efficacy.

Animism lies within our human nature and as such is present in every society. In dualistic Western societies, animist practice tends to be peripherally practiced through crystals, lucky charms, and superstition. In more holistic societies, animism serves as a foundation where the spiritual and physical are linked. Naaman operates from such a society, or at least his actions are understood so by African hearers who hold a similar holistic premise. As such, his worldview is likely to hold several key animist precepts.

- Holistic: Every physical action is tied to a spiritual cause. There is a Liberian proverb—"nothing happens for nothing." There is no coincidence. Additionally, the assumption is that if physical and spiritual are tied together, then one can manipulate the spiritual by manipulating the physical and vice-versa.
- Many spiritual powers: There are many different names and types, but the underlying foundation is the same. All somehow derive their power from one source: a creator being who usually is quite distant and not directly accessible. However, the being's life-force/spiritual power is present in earthly objects, ancestors, and spiritual beings and through them becomes accessible. Some have more and some less.

- Ritual is the key to accessing spiritual power; *correct* performance of ritual binds power to your purpose. Conversely, *incorrect* performance invites spiritual wrath.
- Power words, such as the name or associative number of a spiritual power, unlocks and harnesses spiritual power for one's own use.
- A spiritual specialist can help, usually for payment. If one cannot achieve results, there is always the hope that someone else might. Animists are functional. They keep trying until something works to give them what they desire.

One last note in preparation for entering into the text—this one on translation. The name of God in the original Hebrew text is expressed as a tetragrammaton, YHWH. Several hundred years before the birth of Christ, Hebrew readers began to use the referential term *Adonai*, “Lord,” wherever they encountered YHWH, the name considered too holy for direct use. Most English versions, such as the ESV used in this article, maintain such insider tradition; the tetragrammaton is translated as the LORD (all caps). The ESV then translates the more generic *elohim* as God (capitalized) or god depending upon the context understood by the translator.

This article does not use these traditions, but rather lets the text speak more directly to the English reader by maintaining YHWH as in the original text and translating the more generic *elohim* as “spiritual power.” This lets the reader eavesdrop on how these terms of reference occur within the original narrative and were perhaps “interpreted” by non-Israelites.⁴

2 Kings 5:1–4

In foundational animist society, position and power are a direct result of access to spiritual power. Naaman is a great man and, from the point of view of an animist who has achieved power, such position is obtainable only through spiritual help. In this case, he is technically correct, yet he does not know specifics, i.e., it is YHWH (v. 1) who is delivering Israel into the hands of Syria through him. But Naaman has a skin disease, and since the problem is not yet solved, his available spiritual resources have failed. He is so desperate that he is willing to follow the suggestion of a captured Israelite girl who, in her circumstances, cannot be seen as having much success with spiritual power. Yet, in the animist worldview, there is always hope that a solution can be found. Naaman secures a letter from his king to the king of Israel.

So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. (2 Kgs 5:5)

What is Naaman's purpose? He has an estimated three to four million U. S. dollars' worth of silver and gold in addition to the changes of clothing. Naaman is

prepared to pay whatever the cost. Great spiritual specialists require great compensation. They have access to the greatest spiritual powers and charge accordingly.

And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, “When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant that you may cure him of his leprosy.” And when the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I *elohim* [spiritual power], to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me.” (2 Kgs 5:6–7)

Note that the king of Syria does not identify Elisha or any other specialist in his letter. My Western worldview found this omission unexplainable until an African pastor from the Zande ethnic group in South Sudan explained to me that traditional chiefs and kings lead by being aware of and using all the spiritual resources in the land. Such awareness is necessary to both maintain their own power and protect themselves from others using spiritual powers against them. Naturally, from an animist perspective, the king of Israel is expected to know exactly the most powerful spiritual specialists to whom to refer Naaman.

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But the king of Israel’s reaction is not as Naaman would have expected, and this created doubt. This journey, from Naaman’s perspective, is to a defeated king in a defeated land with defeated spiritual powers, on the suggestion of a captive servant girl with dubious access to spiritual power. But the journey continues when Elisha hears and sends a message, “Let him come now to me that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel” (v. 8). Naaman keeps trying.

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha’s house. And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” (2 Kgs 5:9–10)

In sending a messenger with simple instructions, Elisha provides another worldview challenge for Naaman. In dealing with a mere messenger with simple instructions, Naaman will have an underlying assumption about the spiritual power behind the instructions. In an animist worldview, great spiritual power is not easily unlocked. Spiritual specialists—witchdoctors, palm readers, fortune tellers, New Age practitioners, etc.—help clients negotiate the complexities of dealing with spiritual powers. The more complexity, the more spiritual power. Helping a client means payment. Complexity and success means bigger payment. The best in Syria have already failed him. The messenger and instruction in Israel is too simple to reflect the

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great spiritual power needed. Naaman reacts,

But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, “Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of [YHWH] his *elohim* [spiritual power], and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” So he turned and went away in a rage. (2 Kgs 5:11–12)

Naaman’s words confess animist thought. Elisha is expected to call on the name of his spiritual power, wave his hand over the place, and bind the power to purpose through ritual. The action Naaman is expecting has nothing to do with Naaman’s faith, or lack of, but is about Elisha manipulating *his* spiritual power through ritual to cure him.

The action Naaman is expecting has nothing to do with Naaman’s faith.

In verse 12, Naaman mentions the Abana and Pharpar rivers. If one researches through Western commentaries, the comments are about the quality of water—the rivers of Damascus are sparkling clean. But Naaman’s confession has little to do with quality of water. Rather in an animist worldview, natural features such as rivers, mountains, caves, forests, giant trees, etc., are links to spiritual power. Naaman is not maintaining that the water of Syria has better physical quality; rather, he is touting the spiritual powers in the waters of Syria over any in the Jordan River.

It seems that Naaman has had enough. Naaman no longer has the slightest hope that he will find his cure in Israel. His servants intervene.

But his servants came near and said to him, “My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, ‘Wash and be clean’?” (2 Kgs 5:13)

The underlying meaning in verse 13 is less literally expressed in the King James, “if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it?” Animist ritual can be elaborate. Access to great spiritual power requires more than mere simplicity. The servants point out that if Naaman would have been asked to accomplish an elaborate ritual, he would have entered into the task. It is simple, so why not just try? Naaman returns, but note his action.

So he went down and *dipped* himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of *elohim* [spiritual power], and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. (2 Kgs 5:14)

Naaman goes down into the Jordan and ‘*dips*’⁵ himself even though in verse 10 and 13, he was instructed to ‘*wash*’⁶. The Hebrew words are different. A coincidence? Western commentaries brush right over the different expressions. But there is no coincidence in the animist worldview.

The difference in terms of reference is not viewed as insignificant. By “dipping” rather than “washing,” Naaman demonstrates contempt and intention to disrupt the ritual. The literally rendered English provides meaning which dismisses difference for Western readers. The sense of what is actually happening as reflected in the context is less literally expressed as, “He went down in the Jordan seven times according to the word of the man of *elohim* [spiritual power] and/but dipped.” Elisha’s instructions are not followed. There was no washing. In the doing this, Naaman is challenging any powers in the Jordan associated with the number seven.

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On one of my early days serving with Lutheran Bible Translators in Liberia, a commotion occurred at the house next door. When I arrived, a man lay writhing on the floor foaming from the mouth. I was told that the man had obtained “medicine” (spiritual power in an object) to get a girlfriend, but he had broken its rules. It had turned on him.

If Naaman had any fear or respect towards a spiritual power in the Jordan River, he would not disobey and invite spiritual wrath upon himself. But the opposite of what Naaman might expect occurs. He is made clean. It is a gift of grace through the waters of the Jordan River.

Note Naaman’s new confession.

Then he [Naaman] returned to the man of *elohim* [spiritual power], he and all his company, and he came and stood before him. And he said, “Behold, I know that there is no *elohim* [spiritual power] in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant.” But he [Elisha] said, “As [YHWH] lives before whom I stand [serve], I will receive none.” And he urged him to take it, but he refused. (2 Kgs 5:15–17)

Naaman doesn’t confess a high god over many other powers, rather he confesses that he has found the *one* God in all the earth in Israel. This spiritual power is not one of many. Also notice Elisha’s role—a true servant. He could have used ritual in association with YHWH’s power. In 2 Kings 6:6, Elisha did so. But that context is of the people of God who already knew YHWH, not animist practitioners from outside. Elisha could also have accepted payment, since in an animist worldview, spiritual specialists expect payment to complete the process of “helping” their client. Elisha does not and in the refusal, he points to YHWH, not himself.

Then Naaman said, “If not, please let there be given to your servant two mule loads of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any [spiritual power] but [YHWH]. In this matter

may [YHWH] pardon your servant; when my master goes into the house of Rimmon [name of a spiritual power associated with thunder and lightning] to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, [YHWH] pardon your servant in this matter.” He said to him, “Go in peace [goodbye].” (2 Kgs 5:17–19a)

Naaman’s new confession is precarious. Challenge awaits when he returns home. He asks for Israeli dirt. In an animist worldview, a part equals the whole. For example, access to a lock of hair can be used to cause harm to the physical body of someone far away. Spiritual essence remains linked. In the request, Naaman still exhibits animist thought. He wishes something physical that contains the spiritual power of Israel and makes YHWH available to him. He anticipates problems when he returns to where other territorial spirits have jurisdiction. Elisha doesn’t castigate Naaman; rather, he just says “go in peace,” which is the equivalent of an English goodbye—no agreement or castigation.

The rest of this narrative has been termed an appendix by some Western commentary writers. It is not. It is a continuation of the same spiritual battle even as the focus shifts. Whereas in the previous section the focus has been on God’s action through an Israelite captive, Elisha and the waters of the Jordan, now the focus moves to Gehazi and man’s action. The contrast is that of a false servant’s actions, while Elisha serves within God’s mission.

Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of [spiritual power] said, “See, my master has spared this Naaman the Syrian, in not accepting from his hand what he brought. As [YHWH] lives, I will run after him and get something from him. (2 Kgs 5:20)

We observe Gehazi further in the previous chapter, 2 Kings 4. He seems somewhat a “wannabe,” a servant of Elisha trying to emulate results through his own actions. However, what tells us most about Gehazi’s spiritual approach is his oath in 2 Kings 5:20. Contrast verse 16, as Elisha issues an oath using the name of God, “As [YHWH] lives, before whom I stand (serve).” We note that Gehazi omits the part about serving and instead uses the name to empower his own actions—“As [YHWH] lives, I will run after him,” in the animist sense of seeking to empower his own desire.

So Gehazi followed Naaman. And when Naaman saw someone running after him, he got down from the chariot to meet him and said, “Is all well?” And Gehazi said, “All is well. My master has sent me to say, ‘There have just now come to me from the hill country of Ephraim two young men of the sons of the prophets. Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.’” And Naaman said, “Be pleased to accept two talents.” (2 Kgs 5:21–23)

In an animist worldview, what is granted can be taken away. One must always make sure that the spiritual world and its specialists are satisfied. When Naaman sees Gehazi, he expresses concern. He has just received what he wanted. Is there a problem?

Negotiations and pretenses of politeness are often complicated in Africa and the Middle East. One may politely protest an offer on the surface, even as an underlying negotiation is progressing. Naaman appears to assume that such negotiation is in progress. The earlier protestations of Elisha were just the beginning of the formula. Now comes actual payment. The process seems familiar and, as such, is a direct challenge to Naaman's new confession. Naaman responds by providing twice the payment requested. He seals the deal and disappears from the narrative.

Gehazi returns to Elisha. Here is Elisha's response.

Elisha said to Gehazi, "Did not my heart go when the man turned from his chariot to meet you? Was it a time to accept money and garments, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male servants and female servants? Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and to your descendants forever." So he went out from his presence a leper, like snow. (2 Kgs 5:26–27)

Western commentaries tend to focus on Gehazi's greed as the reason for the punishment. However, when we look at Gehazi's actions and how those actions may have affected the new faith of Naaman, the severity of the punishment makes more sense. We do not know what happened to Naaman. We can only conjecture. But we do know that Gehazi's action pointed Naaman away from the faith that YHWH had extended to him in the waters of the Jordan River. Naaman had confessed the spiritual power he had met as unique from any other. Elisha's actions synched with the new spiritual understanding given by Israel's God of grace. Gehazi's actions were just the opposite. They conformed to an animist worldview, pointing Naaman away from the YHWH he had just experienced through the waters of the Jordan.

It is this that evokes the wrath of Elisha and the punishment. In Matthew 18:6, the words of Jesus would seem to apply, "but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."

In God's mission, our task is to continually point to our God of grace and not set up barriers to what God is doing in the world. Elisha did so. Gehazi did just the opposite and pointed Naaman away from the

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faith to which God had called him. The severity of punishment fit the action.

Naaman experienced a spiritual power in Israel that didn't act as he expected. He received a gift he did not deserve, even as we have. God has given us faith and salvation through Jesus, not because of our own merit, reason, or strength, but because of His great love for us. That good news is consistent throughout Scripture and comes through in this outsider view of this Old Testament narrative.

God's Word is for every language community and those within every culture and worldview. Our own worldviews may create bias and limit us in fuller indications of Scripture, but the end result in every culture is faith, as we meet our God of grace through the Word. To hear and experience Scripture as those in other cultures and contexts do does not negate our own knowledge base; rather, it validates the awesome nature of God's Word going forth into the world, bringing faith to all peoples, no matter where they are or what their worldview.

Endnotes

¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 5.

² Craig Rusbult, "What is a worldview?—Definition & Introduction," The American Scientific Affiliation, accessed June 25, 2018, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/education/views/index.html>.

³ For an overview on animism, see Michael Rodewald, "Observing Sacred and Profane in Animist Worldview" (PhD diss., Concordia Theological Seminary, 2017).

⁴ Paul Mueller, "Spiritual Warfare" (presentation at The Concordia Mission Institute, Concordia MO, July 2017).

⁵ טָבַל tabal {taw-bal'} "to dip or plunge"

⁶ רָחַץ rachats {raw-khats'} "wash, wash off, wash away, bathe"