



The Gospel according to Gehazi¹

DEAN ERICKSON

Gehazi enters the biblical story without introduction as a trusted servant of Elisha. In a series of three stories in the midst of the larger Elisha narrative, the narrator strategically moves, removes, and reuses Gehazi. Gehazi plays an important role in the lengthy story of the Shunammite woman and her son, first as companion and confidant of Elisha and later as the mysteriously ineffective conduit for Elisha's power. He then provides a tragic conclusion to the Naaman story, stealing reward from God and receiving Naaman's leprosy in return. The third and final appearance of Gehazi finds him as a witness to Elisha's miracles before the king, with a positive result for the Shunammite woman and her son.

While many articles and commentaries focus rightly on Elisha, as well as on the Shunammite woman and Naaman, most mention Gehazi only in passing or as a secondary character whose only narrative purpose is a foil for the lead characters. Yet, Shimon Bar-Efrat rightly notes: "It is not always possible to make a clear and unequivocal distinction between a primary and a secondary character."²

The unique identification by name of Elisha's servant Gehazi and his enigmatic role in each of these stories invite a thorough narrative-critical study with

¹ This essay is dedicated with gratitude and affection to my *Doktorvater* Mark A. Throntveit, who expanded my understanding and appreciation of biblical narratives in general and the Elijah-Elisha stories specifically. Though our paths seldom cross, I hear his voice regularly in my research and teaching.

² Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 86–87.

Sometimes in the biblical narrative it is the minor characters who, at crucial points in the story, provide the witness that the author intends. In the book of 2 Kings, one such character is Gehazi, who appears in and around the narrative concerning Elisha.

special attention to Gehazi's role in the plot structure. His role fits well with Meir Sternberg's chapter title "Temporal Discontinuity, Narrative Interest, and the Emergence of Meaning."³ Gehazi's story appears to end in tragedy (2 Kgs 5:27), but then he reappears (2 Kgs 8:1–6), informing the king of Israel of the great acts of Elisha. "The production of surprise depends on the reader's being lured into a false certitude of knowledge. In structural turns, therefore . . . for the new information to perform its unsettling effect, the old must look settled."⁴

Interestingly, to illustrate his point, Sternberg uses two Elisha stories: the 2 Kings 4:12–16 Gehazi account of the previously unrevealed Shunammite's childlessness and the 2 Kings 7:1–7 leper account of the previously unrevealed dispersal of the Aramean army. These serve his point well enough within individual stories, but an illustration of plot structure displaying a far greater gap and a surprise resolution is found within the larger Elisha narrative (2 Kgs 4, 5, 8).

The three stories in the Elisha narrative that mention Gehazi are carefully crafted and interconnected. The accounts of the Shunammite woman and Naaman stand near each other and are well developed, while the account of Gehazi's discussion with the king in chapter 8 is terse and separated from the first two by a brief miracle account and two lengthy war stories. Still, this final appearance of Gehazi bears strong connections with the two previous stories in which he appears. A thorough examination of Gehazi will provide a unique perspective on the larger Elisha narrative, a possible meaning for exilic readers, and inspiration for today.

A thorough examination of Gehazi will provide a unique perspective on the larger Elisha narrative, a possible meaning for exilic readers, and inspiration for today.

GEHAZI'S (IN)EFFECTIVE MINISTRY (2 KINGS 4:8–37)

The story of the Shunammite woman who miraculously receives a son not once but twice at Elisha's words has been approached from many angles. Traditional scholarship generally recognized that the purpose of this and other miracle stories in this series was to exalt the prophet. In fact, Yairah Amit notes: "The tendency to find in this story a touch of criticism is rare and relatively new, mainly from the 1980s and at first in short notes."⁵ The narrator's ambiguous characterization of Gehazi in this story creates uncertainty concerning his role in the plot structure of these chapters, which will produce a surprising conclusion in chapter 8.

³ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 264.

⁴ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 309.

⁵ Yairah Amit, "A Prophet Tested: Elisha, the Great Woman of Shunem, and the Story's Double Message," *Biblical Interpretation* 11, no. 3/4 (2003): 280, fn. 5.

Claiming a subtle, deeper literary reading “that focuses on the differences and deviations that expose the criticism of the prophet,” Amit notes that the Shunammite woman also goes unnamed in this story and concludes that this somehow indicates a “subterranean current of criticism” of Elisha, who slights the woman by not calling her by name.⁶ To illustrate that even authors who recognize the negative tone tend to downplay its impact on the story, Amit notes that Uriel Simon⁷ defends the prophet’s image: “For example, where the prophet speaks of her as ‘this Shunammite,’ Simon ascribes it not to arrogance but to the narrator’s forgetfulness.”⁸

Both arrogance and forgetfulness are creative readings between the lines. What is overlooked or underappreciated by most commentators is what the text actually states. Gehazi’s name appears seven times (vv. 12, 14, 25, 27, 29, 31, 36); what is more, Gehazi faithfully does what Elisha says and provides the prophet with needed information (v. 14). Gehazi’s ineffectiveness later in this pericope will create some tension that the reader will find clarified in the tragic conclusion to chapter 5, but that will also create a surprising reversal in chapter 8.

Amit’s call for a more sophisticated reading of this story is accomplished by Burke Long as he observes the “framing repetition and synchronicity”⁹ in the verbal exchange, mediated by Gehazi, between Elisha and the woman. Long notices that Elisha repeatedly asks Gehazi to speak to the woman but that the woman responds directly to Elisha.

This suggestion of protocol between Elisha and the woman is characteristic of the narrator’s vision; it is evident in vv. 25–27, 36 and is vigorously upset by the Shunammite herself in verse 27 as she emerges as a forceful mother determined to wrest moral restitution from Elisha. In short, anachrony which expresses simultaneity and which is marked by framing repetition also helps the narrator characterize protagonist and antagonist.¹⁰

This observation is valuable, but the application only to protagonist and antagonist falls short of the insight offered by the exchange.

Notice that Elisha speaks indirectly to Gehazi rather than to the woman, but the narrator never grants Gehazi voice in the exchange. Mark Roncace outlines the effect this feature has on the characterization of Gehazi: “One of the peculiar and striking aspects of this scene is the use of Gehazi as an intermediary. . . . the intermediary (Gehazi) is unnecessary. . . . The irony in this scenario serves to

⁶ Amit, “A Prophet Tested,” 290.

⁷ Uriel Simon, “Elisha and the Woman of Shunem—The Miracle Worker Needs Guidance from the Beneficiary of His Miracle,” in *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, trans. L. J. Schramm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 328, fn. 27.

⁸ Amit, “A Prophet Tested,” 290, fn. 16.

⁹ Burke O. Long, “Framing Repetitions in Biblical Historiography,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106, no. 3 (1987): 390.

¹⁰ Long, “Framing Repetitions in Biblical Historiography,” 390–91.

diminish Elisha's position and to elevate the woman's. . . . There is never any direct speech between Gehazi and the Shunammite. Thus, Gehazi never really acts as an intercessor."¹¹

After Elisha presses for an idea to bless the woman who has provided room and board, Gehazi states simply six words in Hebrew, which translates to: "She has no son, and her husband is old" (v. 14). While he faithfully supplies Elisha with an observation that produces the miracle that drives the rest of the story, his sentence is noticeably terse when compared to Elisha and the woman.

The birth and growth of the son are relegated to scenery as the narrative speeds to the son's sudden death. An unnamed servant is sent by the unnamed father to carry the boy to his mother. It is striking in this quickly developing crisis that the servant and husband are unnamed while Gehazi will be titled servant and named, as at the beginning of the story (v. 11), when the scene again shifts to Elisha in verse 25. When the husband twice questions the woman's request to go to the man of God, the wife brushes off these questions with a simple *שָׁלוֹם*: "It will be all right" (v. 23).

Her dismissive response is not only curious at this point, but sets up the next sighting of Gehazi. Elisha sees the woman coming and sends Gehazi to intercede with a series of questions. Again Gehazi is gagged by the narrator as we hear not his repetition of the questions but only the woman's response, once again: *שָׁלוֹם*: "It will be all right" (v. 26). Mary Shields observes:

In a text where the politics of power play such a major role, the fact that the woman uses the same words to her husband that she uses to Gehazi places the husband on the level of Gehazi in the story. Just as Gehazi is given orders by Elisha, so the husband is given orders by his wife (v. 22). Additionally, her very words, 'it is well', mislead them both as to the true nature of her trip.¹²

The description of the meeting in verse 27 furthers this subversion of Gehazi. The woman, having brushed off her husband and Gehazi, reaches the man of God and takes hold of his feet. As if tired of being overlooked in the story, Gehazi springs into action, trying to push the woman away from Elisha. Though the prophet, strangely, continues his avoidance of direct conversation with the woman, he does observe her distress and rebuke Gehazi.

Once the woman reveals the crisis, Elisha sends Gehazi to tend to the boy with his staff and with the haste exhibited by the woman. The woman now slows her pace, that she might remain with the prophet rather than hurry back to her son with the faster Gehazi. In fact, the text is unclear whether Elisha intended to go in person or simply expected Gehazi to heal the boy by proxy. Yet the woman

¹¹ Mark Roncace, "Elisha and the Woman of Shunem: 2 Kings 4.8–37 and 8.1–6 Read in Conjunction," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 25, no. 91 (2000): 112.

¹² Mary E. Shields, "Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman: Role and Power Reversals in 2 Kings 4," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 18, no. 58 (1993): 65, fn. 11.

makes her intension to remain with Elisha crystal clear, as Yael Ziegler's detailed examination of her oath at verse 30 reveals: "The Shunemite's evocation of Elisha's own oath to his master, Elijah (2 Kings ii 2,4,6) is intended to emphasize her determination to view him as the sole authority."¹³

Meanwhile, Gehazi hurries to the boy and follows Elisha's instructions, but the effect is a double use of negatives *קֹשֶׁב* וְאֵין קוֹל, וְאֵין קוֹל (literally, "not voice, not response," v. 31a). Gehazi hurries back to the approaching prophet and woman and is granted only half the brief sentence afforded him earlier in the story. In three words he informs Elisha: לֹא הִקְיִין הַנְּעָר (lit. "not awake the child," v. 31b). In an expected yet stark reversal, Elisha revives the boy and calls for Gehazi to call the woman to reclaim her son.

In this first account, Gehazi effectively identifies the Shunammite woman's need but has been muted by the narrator, subverted by the woman, rebuked for insensitivity by the prophet, and exposed as ineffective by his own actions and words.

In this first account, Gehazi effectively identifies the Shunammite woman's need but has been muted by the narrator, subverted by the woman, rebuked for insensitivity by the prophet, and exposed as ineffective by his own actions and words.

GEHAZI CURSED / NAAMAN HEALED (2 KINGS 5:1–27)

The story of Naaman is well developed and certainly has more than one memorable feature. In such a story it is understandable that the negative ending is occasionally overlooked in favor of the penultimate positive conclusion at Naaman's healing and conversion. Robert Cohn argues convincingly that the negative ending to the story is not an addendum or later addition, but rather, "through the skillful use of repetition and contrast, of narration and speech, the author creates a single narrative fabric which allows us to understand the action of the story from ever wider horizons."¹⁴ Gehazi is often reduced to a simple foil for Naaman. However, a careful examination of the final scene will highlight Gehazi's role in this Elisha story.

A subtle use of the term נַעַר (young man, servant) in the previous account was not mentioned, but becomes significant in chapter 5. Gehazi, who should be well known to the reader at this point, is re-introduced as "Gehazi, servant of Elisha" in verse 20. The significance of the use of this title is to be found in the

¹³ Yael Ziegler, "As the Lord Lives and as Your Soul Lives': An Oath of Conscious Deference," *Vetus Testamentum* 58, no. 1 (2008): 122, fn. 15. [Editor's note: There is an error in the original, which reads "1 Kings" rather than "2 Kings." The author and editor have corrected the original so as to avoid confusion.]

¹⁴ Robert L. Cohn, "Form and Perspective in 2 Kings V," *Vetus Testamentum* 33, no. 2 (1983): 172.

opening of chapter 5, where Naaman's wife's Israelite servant girl is identified as נַעֲרָה. Kim notes the significant contrast between the lofty Naaman and the lowly servant girl, which reminds us of the importance of names noted above: "This antithesis is further highlighted by the anonymity of the little girl. . . . Despite her insignificance and obscurity, the little girl becomes the first instrument of God in the narrative and introduces the narratively enticing possibility of Naaman's cure."¹⁵ The framing position of the Israelite נַעֲרָה introducing the potential healing and Elisha's נַעַר appearing just after the healing further highlights the comparison.

The irony of this comparison between Gehazi, the servant of the man of God, and Naaman's wife's captive servant girl is furthered by her proclamation of healing. The narrator allows this little girl ten words in the narrative. While word-counts are not always significant, it bears noticing that Gehazi was allowed a total of only nine words (first six, and then three) in the midst of mediating extensive dialogue in the previous narrative. The ironic contrast may be extended further when Gehazi's tone is observed in his revealing internal monologue (v. 20). Where the little girl longs for her captor to be healed by the prophet, Gehazi resents that the foreigner, "that Aramean," could receive healing without payment. The internal monologue is intensified when Gehazi vows by יהוה to "get something out of him."

The developing contrast between Gehazi and Naaman cannot be missed nor overstated. When Gehazi reaches Naaman, the lofty Aramean warrior who has been humbled before Yahweh and the prophet now gets down from his chariot to express concern for Gehazi. His inquiry and Gehazi's response should ring in the reader's ears from Gehazi's questions for the Shunammite woman: "Shalom? Shalom" (vv. 21–22; see 4:26).

Gehazi's clever story of two needy young men (note, נַעֲרִים) who have come to Elisha prompts a doubly generous response from Naaman, which continues to intensify the contrast between the two men. The contrast is summed up well by Robert Cohn:

His appeal to Naaman elicits the man's genuine charity, while his lie to Elisha provokes the prophet's naked retribution. . . . Naaman had asked pardon in advance for showing loyalty to his lord, while Gehazi criticizes his lord for sparing Naaman and excuses himself in advance for his treachery. . . . The hand with which Naaman supports his lord is the hand from which Gehazi wants to steal.¹⁶

Cohn continues his eloquent description of the comparison:

Gehazi's two young men "carry before him" . . . the booty. This expression subtly alludes to v. 1 where Naaman was described as . . .

¹⁵ Jean Kyoung Kim, "Reading and Retelling Naaman's Story (2 Kings 5)," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30, no. 1 (2005): 52–53.

¹⁶ Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 180.

(“renowned, of lifted face”) because of his victories. Here, in contrast, the young men “lift before [Gehazi’s] face” . . . the assistant’s treachery. While Naaman’s good reputation preceded him, Gehazi’s crime is carried ahead of him.¹⁷

Even those profound descriptions do not exhaust the narrator’s masterful use of the Hebrew imagery of לְפָנָיִם (to the face of; before). The story began with the little Israelite girl longing for her master Naaman to “stand before” the prophet, and proceeds to see this literally fulfilled in verse 15. Now in verse 25 Gehazi returns from his extortion to “stand before his master” and declare himself Elisha’s servant. Kim notes that by using the language of servants standing before masters in these verses, “the narrator seems to intend to emphasize a theological claim by using parallel phrasing for the purpose of establishing the line of authority.”¹⁸ Cohn refines this insight by noting: “Elisha refuses Naaman’s offer of a gift . . . because he takes no credit for the healing but attributes it to Yahweh. The author underscores this theological claim by using parallel phrases to establish the line of authority: Naaman ‘stood before’ . . . Elisha, but Elisha ‘stood before’ . . . Yahweh (v. 16).”¹⁹

One final comment deserves attention in the confrontation between Elisha and Gehazi. Elisha’s rhetorical questions concerning the nature of Gehazi’s theft intensify the contrast between Gehazi and Naaman. In a detailed comparison of the LXX and MT of this indictment by way of rhetorical question, O’Brien posits that this odd reproach “possibly acts as a signpost to the Dtr compiler’s *arrière-pensée*”²⁰ (literally, “behind thought,” hidden motive). The significance of the list in verse 26 (olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves) is indicated by its first appearance as a unit in 1 Samuel 8:14–17 “in the form of a tithing list for a despotic ruler from the blessings of the land.”²¹ This observation forms a reasonable explanation for the curse of Naaman’s leprosy tragically falling on Gehazi.

GEHAZI RECALLED (8:1–8)

Judgment is not God’s final word, however. In a passage where the apostle Paul was teaching on God’s judgment, he reminds us that “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance” (Rom 2:4). This is the situation that took place between 2 Kings 5 and 8. In spite of Israel’s persistent wickedness, Yahweh had protected its king (6:8–23) and rescued Samaria from siege, famine, and certain destruction (6:24–7:20). These saving acts came by the word of the prophet Elisha, whose

¹⁷ Cohn, “Form and Perspective,” 181.

¹⁸ Kim, “Reading and Retelling,” 55.

¹⁹ Cohn, “Form and Perspective,” 179.

²⁰ D. P. O’Brien, “‘Is This the Time to Accept . . .?’ (2 Kings V 26B): Simply Moralizing (LXX) or an Ominous Foreboding of Yahweh’s Rejection of Israel (MT)?” *Vetus Testamentum* 46, no. 4 (1996): 451.

²¹ O’Brien, “‘Is This the Time to Accept . . .?’” 456.

name means “God of Salvation.” The reader may wonder whether Israel’s king is moved by God’s merciful salvation in chapters 6–7 to seek information about God’s prophet in 8:4. But before this conversation, the narrative flashes back seven years.

In spite of Israel’s persistent wickedness, Yahweh had protected its king (6:8–23) and rescued Samaria from siege, famine, and certain destruction (6:24–7:20). These saving acts came by the word of the prophet Elisha, whose name means “God of Salvation.”

The final appearance of Gehazi in the Elisha narratives describes levels of separation. An internal analepsis informs the reader that the Shunammite woman had moved out of Israel for seven years at Elisha’s instruction in order to avoid a famine. While this account was not revealed in chapter 4, the narrative time consumed in chapters 5–7—combined with the constant enemy threat and the mention of lengthy siege that produced famine and desperation—makes 8:1–3 flow naturally here. In addition to the woman separated from her land, the reader also finds Gehazi still separated from Elisha. While there is no mention of leprosy, the previous scenarios of the woman pleading her cannibal case to the king on the wall and of lepers living outside the wall near the city gate allow the story to continue naturally without critical explanation. Even a wicked king in Ahab’s line may want to learn more about this prophet who saved his capital a few verses earlier. The context allows the reader to picture the king on the wall requesting information from the crowds at the city gate below, which may include the leper community begging from among the commercial traffic.

These levels of separation serve a purpose in the plot structure: “what looked like a suspense pattern . . . emerges as a bait for surprise; what looked like a straight chronology reverses . . . with a camouflaged gap and an overdue resolution.”²² In the briefest of terms, the analepsis is followed by Gehazi recounting for the king the great deeds of Elisha. The mention of “great deeds” הַגְּדֹלוֹת of Elisha should prompt the careful reader to recall the “great” הַגְּדֹלָה Shunammite and the “great” הַגְּדֹלִים Naaman. The repetition of the title נַעַר in chapters 4–5 also makes another appearance, recalling for the reader the little Israelite servant girl whose message was relayed through Naaman’s wife and Naaman to the king of Aram. As the reader is invited to recall these previous stories, God recalls (calls again) Gehazi into his spokesman role.

Just as Gehazi is about to share the story of the Shunammite woman in 8:5, the woman herself appears next to Gehazi to plead her case with the king. It is again significant to note the lack of actual words credited to Gehazi in the recounting of the great deeds in verses 4–5. Gehazi is finally resuming his role as

²² Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 311.

intercessor for Elisha when he is interrupted. “Just as the Shunammite had on two previous occasions pre-empted Gehazi’s role as an intermediary (4.13, 26), here again she obviates Gehazi’s function, for when the woman appears, the king asks her about Elisha’s miracle and she herself tells the king.”²³ Yet, Gehazi will not be denied voice on this occasion. The narrator had re-introduced the woman to the reader in verses 1 and 5 as “the woman whose son Elisha had brought back to life,” and finally allows Gehazi the honor of echoing the fact for the third time in five verses. Gehazi finally effectively proclaims the good news of “the great things that Elisha [God of Salvation] has done” (v. 4).

GOSPEL MINISTRY TODAY

Walter Brueggemann aptly describes the message of these stories this way: “The Books of Kings, of course, look like history. In fact, however, they are an account of history disrupted, of the power of God come close to lived humanity, the invasion of divine newness that overrides the deathly power of kings, the Holy Power of God mediated through human agents.”²⁴ Consider how Gehazi functions in this description. Returning briefly to Sternberg’s chapter title, the “temporal discontinuity” in the Gehazi story creates “narrative interest” by the “surprise and the dynamics of recognition” to allow the “emergence of meaning.”²⁵ This meaning found in the plot structure of the Gehazi narrative is a window into the overall message of Kings for exilic and modern readers alike.

Many today can relate to Gehazi’s ineffective attempts to live as a servant of God, scarred for life through sinful failures. Yet, the “Gospel of Gehazi” provides hope. While leprosy still clung to his body (5:27), he lived in a community that shared the good news of God’s victory (7:3, 10), and he took an opportunity to proclaim that good news to a king. In his feeble efforts to share the good news, he facilitated the restoration of the Shunammite woman and her son. If Gehazi continued to live and share the gospel, even after his own disappointment and downfall, we can all certainly do likewise. ☩

DEAN ERICKSON earned his BA degree from St. Paul Bible College and his MDiv from Denver Seminary. After serving as a pastor in Colorado and Minnesota for a decade, he pursued a teaching career and earned his PhD from Luther Seminary in 2011. Dean serves as Professor of Old Testament at Crown College in St. Bonifacius, Minnesota.

²³ Roncace, “Elisha and the Woman of Shunem,” 123.

²⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “2 Kings 5: Two Evangelists and a Saved Subject,” *Missiology: An International Review* 35, no. 3 (July 2007): 264.

²⁵ The quoted phrases of this sentence come from the title of Sternberg’s eighth chapter, p. 264.