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The Facts of Life before God and the Prophetic Peculiarity

Three Illness Narratives of the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is a canonical text for many including its portrayals of illness. This article explores the narrative representation of illness in three longer narratives in the Hebrew Bible by means of a close reading. The narratives are all legends of some sort and involve terminal or impossible illnesses and the prophet. In 2 Kings 4 the story revolves around illness as an enigma and involves the motifs of hospitality, responsibility, and empowerment in an ever expanding plot. In 2 Kings 5 leprosy as an incurable disease stands at the center and the story develops through several contrasting motifs including greatness, simplicity, and humility. In 2 Kings 20/Isaiah 38 illness is a death warrant leading to bitterness, and the story probes the necessity and honesty of prayer. Two common traits in the narratives are prayer and argument as a response to illness, and the status of the prophet as a health care consultant.

1. Introduction

In her article "Hope in Hard Times: Moments of Epiphany in Illness Narratives," Marylin Chandler McEntyre starts by relating a few episodes about novelist and poet Reynold Price and his fight against cancer. Among the things she writes is the following

> Most of it [Price's autobiographical *A Whole New Life*] – exquisitely written though it is – is unsensational. But Price does record a few remarkable, life-changing moments, the encounter with Jesus being the most dramatic [having been just related]. One other is an unexpected phone call from a remote acquaintance one morning who, with no introductory word of explanation, announced, 'I've called to tell you, you are not going to die of this cancer.' Then she quoted the words from Psalm 91, 'He shall give his angels charge over thee; to keep thee in all thy ways' (64-65). Though he had heard similar words of comfort from other sources, he was suddenly filled with conviction that the woman spoke the truth. (McEntyre 2006, 230)

The Bible is a resource for many in times of illness and suffering, and also a model for how to handle and understand it. What is interesting with this excerpt is that it does not only show how someone tries to share a word of courage from the Bible, but also how this someone models a sort of prophetic personality: the unexpected word delivered in the exact right moment, which brings comfort, and, not least important, afterward proves true. Having grown up in a charismatic Christian context, I have encountered these kinds of stories many times. This illustrates the meaningfulness of the Bible as a canonical text for numerous people around the world.

However, behind this example lies also the fundamental question of how the Bible actually does tell about illness, or what the narrative representation of illness looks like in the Bible. Exploring that question is the aim of this article, and I will turn to three stories of the Hebrew Bible as case studies, that at some length and in detail tell about being ill. They are all found in the Second Book of Kings (2 Kings), and all involve a sick person and a prophet, which is typical for this kind of stories.

In terms of theory and method, the concept of illness is here aligned generally to the common distinction made between disease and illness, the former having to do with biological, psychological, and professional identification, the latter being about personal experience and the meaning of perceived disease (cf. Kleinman 1980, 72; Avalos 1995, 23-27, 248; Lindström 1994, 24-41). Illness narratives are stories that emanate from and explore such experiences and constructions of meaning (Frank 2013; Kleinman 1988, 3-55). Furthermore, the analysis in what follows is simple, making a close reading of the three narratives chosen in view of the concept of illness, which also can be aligned loosely to narratology and Monroe C. Beardsley's understanding that literary interpretation involves the three facets explication, elucidation, and interpretation (proper) (Beardsley 1981, 129-131, 242f., 401-403; cf. Forsling 2013, 22-40; Herman et al. 2005; Lamarque 2009, 132-173).

The narrative books of the Hebrew Bible are primarily episodic and their stories have been described as terse, only telling what is absolutely necessary for the trend of events (cf. e.g. Alter 1981; Amit 2001; Berlin 1983; Licht 1978; Ska 1990). However, they do not lack depth or detail; in Erich Auerbach's famous phrase, they are "fraught with background" (Auerbach 1968, 12). To this characterization should be added the composite nature of the biblical narratives, both in terms of the oral and written stages of composition and the later manuscript transmission (cf. Person / Rezetko 2016; Steck 1998; Tov 2012).

Finally, while much has been written about disease, medicine, and health care in and around the Hebrew Bible, few if any have investigated illness narratives as such in it (cf. e.g. Avalos 1995; Brown 1995; Seybold / Müller 1981; Wiseman 1986; Zucconi 2014). Closely related are, naturally, disability studies, but the focus of illness narratives would seem to be broader, which also affects the selection of stories.[1] I believe the subject is best explored through a detailed and careful reading of the stories, and to this we now turn.

2. Empowerment, Responsibility, and the Fallible Prophet – 2 Kings 4:8-37

The first story concerns a woman from Shunem and her son, and is perhaps not very well-known. It is a prophetic legend, but several features pinpoint typical aspects of illness and perceptions of it in the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, the

story has several twists and turns and is no simple hagiography of the prophet in question, Elisha, which make it an interesting example of illness narratives.

In short, the legend tells of an unnamed woman who receives the prophet Elisha during his travels, and miraculously bears a son in connection to this. However, when the son grows older he one day complains of a headache and dies. The woman, without telling her husband, seeks out Elisha, and entreats him to help her. Elisha first sends his servant Gehazi, but is persuaded by the woman to follow her home. Upon arrival, he prays for the boy, warms his body with his own body, and the boy is remarkably resuscitated.

It is impossible to say anything about the disease of the boy. The most common suggestion has been to say that he suffered a severe sunstroke (being out in the fields), which some would take to indicate that he did not really die, and therefore could be resuscitated (cf. Cogan / Tadmor 1988, 57; Montgomery 1951, 367; Sussman 1992, 12; Sweeney 2007, 289). This is, however, a misplaced rationalization of the story in the interest of a medical explanation. In terms of narrative representation, it is crucial for the story that the boy actually dies (cf. v. 20; Sweeney 2007, 290). All we are told is that he complains of a headache and then dies, and that is not much to build a diagnosis on. Instead, the disease remains an enigma, which is probably intentional.

Several interlocking themes and motifs flow through the story. The illness of the boy is only introduced after a rather lengthy exposition (vv. 8-17), which turns on two main motifs: the hospitality of the woman on the one hand; and the extraordinary man of God, the prophet, on the other. The two motifs establish a fundamental tension: what happens if you invite a man of God into your house? The first answer is that the woman who has no son receives a son and heir to the family (v. 14; cf. Fritz 2003, 251). However, what seems to be a good answer to the question of hospitality, turns into despair and a prolonged exposition through the boy's falling ill (cf. Amit 2001, 281f.; Fritz 2003, 251; Gray 1977, 492; Hobbs 1985, 47).

This change of fortunes is explored by a motif of holding. It first surfaces when Elisha announces that the woman will bear a son, saying that in about a year she will "hold a son" (v. 16). That is of course a tender metonymy for the birth of a child, but the same imagery is taken up again when the boy falls ill. He is then brought to his mother and seated in her lap until dusk, where he dies in her arms (v. 20). The woman who was promised a son to hold, holds him only to lose him in illness. The motif also resurfaces at the very end after the healing of the boy, where it is stated, shortly, that the woman "lifted up her son [from the prophet's bed] and went out" (v. 37). Thus, the motif also takes us through the plot, from promise via despair, and unto the denouement.

Another exploration of the change of fortunes concerns hospitality and responsibility, and is seen in two lines of the woman to Elisha. The first concerns the assurance that she will have a son: "No my Lord, man of God, do not *lie* to your servant" (v. 16). At first the answer would seem to be a polite and humble way to respond to the promise. But as the son dies, has Elisha in fact lied? Is this how the hospitality is rewarded? The word used for lying, *kazav*, does not mean

'to say what one knows is wrong,' so Elisha is not to be interpreted to try to dupe the woman. Instead it has to do with what is objectively true or false (cf. Mosis 1995, 109-111). Yet, that constitutes a more severe questioning of the authority of the prophet: does he really know the will of God? That suspicion becomes empowering for the woman in handling the situation and the illness, which is seen in the second line. Abandoning all politeness, she says: "Did I ask for a son? Did I not say do not deceive me?" (v. 28; cf. Cogan / Tadmor 1988, 57; Hobbs 1985, 47f.; Kalmanofsky 2011, 67-73) If the prophet does not know what God is up to, at least he has to do his duty and plead the woman's case before God. The word "deceive" (*shalah*) in the second line more commonly means "cause to be at ease," but in this context "induce contentment, give false hope" (cf. Gray 1977, 498; Grünwaldt 2006, 12). The illness has shown that the woman's hope for a son was false, and she entreats the prophet to act.

The notion of Elisha's responsibility for the illness is further underscored in several ways. His extreme hurry in sending Gehazi when the woman has confronted him and then his going himself would signal this (cf. Gray 1977, 498). Furthermore, the woman's oath in urging Elisha to go himself (v. 30) echoes Elisha's own oath in taking up the duty of the prophet (2 Kings 2:2, 4, 6). Hence, Elisha has once accepted the responsibilities of the prophet, and now needs to fulfil them (Hobbs 1985, 48). Lastly, the motif of responsibility is connected to that of hospitality in the narrator's comment upon Elisha's arrival to the sick bed that he finds the boy 'dead on *his* bed' – i.e. the bed that the woman had arranged for Elisha in her home (v. 32). In accepting the invitation to stay in her home, Elisha must accept accountability. The scene with the boy on his bed is explicitly focalized through Elisha by the word *hinneh* ('look!') (cf. Gray 1977, 496; cf. further Berlin 1983, 62f.). At that point, Elisha prays but also has to venture his own body in a sympathetic ritual, where his life force passes into the boy, as it were (cf. Fritz 2003, 251f.; Gray 1977, 498). Only then does the boy awake.

With the question of responsibility in view of the illness I have already started to analyze the other main motif in the story apart from hospitality: the extraordinary man of God, the prophet. Hector Avalos has argued that the prophet is the most important health care consultant in the Hebrew Bible (Avalos 1995, 394). The prophet can be seen to diagnose illness (if not beyond the question of survival or not), recommend medical treatment, and function as an intermediary to God both for divinatory and intercessory purposes. In contrast to Mesopotamia and Egypt, however, no complex medical rituals are associated with the prophet in Israel and Judah (Avalos 1995, 261, 274-276; cf. Saggs 1989, 240-255). This is seen in this story in the simple rituals of Elisha and his servant Gehazi. It is noteworthy also that before Elisha performs his ritual he prays, meaning that he puts first things first – intercessory prayer is the most important means and extra effective because of the prophet's special relationship to God (cf. Fritz 2003, 251f.). Only after the prayer is the ritual performed.

However, the prophet is not a person to be taken lightly. Prophets are, most importantly, adamant about being true to God, in word, worship, and deed (cf. 1 Kings 18 and 2 Kings 1), and their authority lies in their special relationship to

God. The latter is emphasized in the story when the Shunammite calls Elisha 'holy' (v. 9; cf. further Cogan / Tadmor 1988, 56). We are also told in 1 and 2 Kings that prophets command droughts and fires from heaven (1 Kings 17:1; 18:21-39), slaughter false prophets (18:39), and walk in and out of royal courts at their own will (1 Kings 17:1; 18:1; 19:1f.; 2 Kings 1:15f.). However, they also miraculously bring food and money to the poor and needy (1 Kings 17:7-16; 2 Kings 4:1-7, 42-44), cleanse water to drink (2 Kings 2:19-22), and, as has been noticed already, heal the sick (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 8:7-15; cf. also Gen 20; Num 12). Inviting the prophet to the house entails both great risk and great promise, as the woman from Shunem will experience.

Now, the risk of the prophet in the story of the Shunammite's son is that even though powerful, the prophet is not infallible (cf. further Kalmanofsky 2011, 68). I have noted the drama of Elisha's responsibility already. As the story progresses towards its climax, the tension between prophetic power and illness is deepened considerably. First, when the woman arrives to Elisha, he simply states the fact that: "The Lord has hidden this from me, and has not told me" (v. 27), thus (again) limiting his authority and access to God (cf. Hobbs 1985, 52). Second, when Gehazi on Elisha's authority and with his staff performs the ritual, this does not work (cf. Gray 1977, 498; Sweeney 2007, 291). Third, the boy is not immediately healed even when Elisha prays and perform his ritual, it is only at the second time that he wakes up (cf. Hobbs 1985, 46, 52-54). The prophet is the solution to the illness in this story, but arriving there only happens through the woman's fight, and the story is prolonged through a series of hurdles that delay the action. Overcoming these hurdles in different ways seems to be a central component of the story, not the least since the healing is only stated very briefly at the end.

Drawing things to a close, women are often portrayed as caring for the sick in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Avalos 1995, 394). Yet, the caring performed in this story primarily consists in the woman's searching for Elisha. She holds the boy until he dies and then puts him on Elisha's bed – the lack of treatment may here simply evince the enigma of the illness and the desperation of the mother, in that there is nothing else she can do but hold her son. Such despair in regard to the illness at least surfaces in other actions of her: abandoning politeness, grasping Elisha's feet, refusing to be removed by the servant Gehazi, and refusing to be content with nobody but the prophet himself (vv. 27-30). More puzzling is that she does not tell her husband or Gehazi that the boy is dead, when going to seek out Elisha. Instead she tells them that everything is well (vv. 23, 26). Part of the answer may be that she cannot bring herself to announce the ultimate disaster to her husband. Another is that she refuses to take responsibility for his death as a health care consultant, but urges Elisha to do this, as was argued above. In this perspective, the action of the woman for her ill son simultaneously underscores her desperation but also her determination to help.

To sum up, the illness is an enigma around which the story is weaved. By showing hospitality to the prophet, the woman takes a certain risk, which gives her a son, who is then, however, taken from her. Nevertheless, this scenario also

involves the responsibility of the prophet, and knowing this, the mother is empowered even if despairing. These different motifs are connected with each other and developed throughout the plot, which begins with a long exposition, and whose denouement is repeatedly delayed by various hurdles.

3. Impossible Leprosy and the Simple Belief – 2 Kings 5

The prophetic legend concerning Naaman in 2 Kings 5 is in contrast to the preceding story perhaps one of the best known stories of healing in the Hebrew Bible, and the picturesque details would seem to contribute to this.[2] On the way to healing, however, the story presents a certain view of illness, and this will be the focus in what follows.

In brief, the legend tells about a captain of the Aramean king's army, Naaman, who is successful in war, but leprous. After advice from an Israelite maiden, he seeks out the prophet Elisha in Israel to be cured. First refusing to do the unremarkable bidding of the prophet to dip himself seven times in the river Jordan, his servants persuade him to do it, and Naaman is healed. This results in his confessing that there is no God but the Israelite God. The story, however, does not end here but with a twist where Elisha's greedy servant Gehazi asks for the gifts that Elisha has refused to accept from Naaman and is himself punished with Naaman's leprosy.

Right at the outset it is stated that Naaman is "leprous," and this diagnose and its connotations need to be explored a bit to begin with. The Hebrew word is *sara'at* (vv. 3, 6f.; cf. vv. 1, 27), and in light of modern medical knowledge the word seems to be a cover term for several types of skin diseases (cf. further Pilch 2008; Wright / Jones 1992). It is not what is known today as leprosy, or "Hansen's disease," which, as far as we know, did not exist in the ancient Near East until approximately 300 B.C.E. – i.e. later than the composition of the story (cf. Wright / Jones 1992, 278).

An important context for understanding leprosy in the Bible is Leviticus 13f., since it connects leprosy to purity thinking. Being leprous meant that you were impure and therefore closed off from the cult until having recovered, and while this theological understanding is not worked much into the story of Naaman, it helps explain the problematic status in biblical thought of being leprous generally as well as the desire to recover. One may note the seriousness with which leprosy is viewed in the story in the enormous gift that is brought by Naaman on his journey (v. 5, cf. Hobbs 1985, 63f.; Sweeney 2007, 299). Furthermore, Naaman's healing is four times phrased as 'becoming pure' (vv. 10, 12-14).

The apprehension behind impurity would seem to be abnormality of some sort or signs of death, encroaching upon life, so to speak (Douglas 1969, 4-6, 35-57; Jenson 1992, 75-83; Milgrom 1991, 766-768; Wenham 1979, 18-25; Wright 1992, 739f.). Furthermore, from time to time we encounter the phrase

"leprous as snow" in the Hebrew Bible, and also in this story (v. 27). It is common to understand this to imply *white* as snow,[3] but David P. Wright and Richard N. Jones have argued that other qualities of snow, such as flakiness, might be implied (1992, 278), and we have descriptions of leprosy in which it is compared to a stillborn child, "whose flesh is half-consumed" (Num. 12:12). Therefore, Thomas Kazen has argued that the emotion underlying these concepts is disgust, i.e.

> [...] a reaction against that which is understood as threatening to throw society back to a world where basic order and human identity are absent. It causes humans to shun perceived threats associated with dirt, disorder, demons, decay and death. (2011, 36; cf. 81f.)

Leprosy would thus communicate a set of associations interconnecting skin disease, impurity, flakiness and blisters, being shut out from cult and others, and disgust. Three threads in the story pick up the idea of impurity.

Apart from explicitly calling Naaman's healing "to become pure" (*tahar*), it is also phrased as "gather him from his leprosy" (vv. 3, 6, 7), and "gather the leprosy" (v. 11), the verb being *'asaf*. This is a unique use of the verb in the Hebrew Bible, but possibly has to do with the leprous person being isolated from people until having recovered, and then brought back, or gathered together, with the community again (Cogan / Tadmor 1988, 64; cf. Gray 1977, 505; Montgomery 1951, 376, 378). If so, there would possibly be a social dimension of alienation to the illness. Again, the verb also means "remove" in certain instances (Brown et al. 1951, 62; Koehler et al. 1994, 74; VanGemeren 1997, 469), meaning that Naaman would be "removed from his leprosy" (v. 3, 6, 7) and that "leprosy is removed" from him (v. 11). This may also be connected to purity-thinking and the idea of leprosy as something disgusting, a threat that is to be shunned.

In view of purity-thinking it is, finally, also interesting to note the exhortation to wash seven times in the river Jordan, since cleansing with water was a common procedure in purity matters (cf. again Lev. 13-15). However, the purity washings only occur after the leprosy have vanished, and not as a means to remove the impurity. They are rather symbolic washings to mark the transition into purity. In the Naaman-story the washing precedes and presumably effects the healing (Hobbs 1985, 64). This points us to the role of the prophet, the mighty man of God who can work miracles. In contrast to the story of the Shunnammite's son, there is no questioning here of the authority of the prophet. It is rather underlined in Elisha's line: "Let him [Naaman] come to me and know that there is a prophet in Israel" (v. 8).

So far, I have investigated the illness as leprosy, and how it is presented. However, other aspects of Naaman's illness that do not directly relate to it being leprosy are also important in the story.

To begin with, the story works through several contrasts (cf. Gray 1977, 502). It starts with saying that Naaman is successful, but leprous (v. 1), which forms the problem and starting point for the plot (cf. Strimple / Creangă 2010, 110). Illness falls upon anyone regardless of status, it would seem (cf. Zucconi 2008, 169). One of the Hebrew expressions used here to describe Naaman is literally that he is a "big man," which is contrasted with the good advice of the "little

maiden" (v. 2, cf. Baumgart 1994, 34f.), which in turn leads to the seeking of a solution for the leprosy from the prophet in Israel. At the start, it is not indicated that pride or the like would be a part of the characterization of Naaman, and his name derives from a verbal root, meaning "to be pleasant, lovely, friendly" (cf. Kronholm 1998, 468f.; Koehler et al. 1995, 705f.). However, Naaman's anger towards Elisha's simple cure seems to evidence pride: "to me [i.e. such an important person] he should surely go out […]" (v. 10) (cf. Nyberg 1952, 258; Hobbs 1985, 60; Baumgart 1994, 167). Nevertheless, Naaman is also a reasonable man, and listens (again) to the advice of servants, "goes down" to the river Jordan (v. 14, possibly implying "humbles himself," cf. Hobbs 1985, 65), and becomes healed. An idealized contrast is here used between his former blistered skin, and that it is now "like the skin of a little boy" (v. 14; cf. Strimple / Creangă 2010, 113). It is interesting in this regard that the skin of the "big man" becomes like that of a "little boy" (v. 14), as if implying that his pride is transformed into humility almost physically. Another aspect is that the expression may imply that Naaman is transformed into a God-fearing servant, as well. The word used for boy here (*na'ar*) also means servant, and is the masculine form of the word used for the Israelite "little maiden" (*na'arah*) at the start of the story (Strimple / Creangă 2010, 118f.). Lowering himself to the advice and cure of the common and simple, Naaman may start to see things the way of his wife's maiden.

Remarkably, the healing means that the Aramean Naaman is converted to Israelite faith, seen in his confession that "there is no God in the whole world except in Israel" (v. 15; cf. further Baumgart 1994, 111f.). This notion of the universality of God is actually assumed already at the start of the narrative, where the narrator states that it is God that lies behind Naaman and Aram's success in war (v. 1). All this is presumably hidden to Naaman (and the king of Aram), and only revealed to him through the healing. The confession, therefore, becomes the high point of the story, almost amounting to a thesis (cf. Avalos 1995, 263).

To the connection between illness and the universality of God is also related a thread on treatment and expectations, that is explored in various ways. First, Elisha's refusal to accept Naaman's gifts after the healing would seem to evince that he points away from himself to God as the actual physician. Healing cannot be bought, as it were. This pointing away is evident already in Elisha's failure to meet Naaman's expectations of the 'normal' ancient Near Eastern healer and not "come out, stand, call the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot,[4] and remove the leprosy" (v. 11) (cf. Zucconi 2014, 107f.). The failure to meet expectations would point away from the prophet and his medical or even magical technique to God.

This understanding is furthermore underlined by an interesting use of the verb "to stand" (*'amad*)[5] in vv. 9-16 (cf. Strimple / Creangă 2010, 120f.). In v. 9, the narrative tempo slows down, and we find Naaman courteously "standing before" the door of the prophet awaiting his treatment. This includes, in the following verse, that the prophet is expected to "come out and *stand*" etc. (v. 10), which Elisha does not do. This standing before Elisha and his door would be the wrong type of standing, exhibiting the wrong set of expectations. After the

healing, Naaman again "stands" before the prophet (v. 15), to confess his faith and offer him gifts, and we here have Elisha refusing them, saying "As the Lord lives, *whom I stand before*, I will not take it" (v. 16). Standing before a God implies serving that God, and this is the right standing in the story, which Naaman is invited to through his illness and its treatment (cf. further Strimple / Creangă 2010, 114f.; Sweeney 2007, 297-300). To this motif of servanthood can also be connected the phrase that his "skin became like that of a little boy," as was noted above.

However, there is a deconstructive tension in the story at this point, in that Elisha is also depicted as the extraordinary man of God through whom miracles may happen. While Naaman's confession begins "Now I *know* that there is no God [...]" (v. 15), Elisha's reply to the Israelite king runs "Let him [Naaman] come to me and *know* that there is a prophet [...]" (v. 8). The high-point of the story would thus be undercut by Elisha's self-assertiveness as a healing prophet. The textual history of the story has struggled with the tension in that some manuscripts replace "prophet" with "God" in Elisha's reply, thus trying to harmonize it with Naaman's confession. But the tension is there, and the story would rather simultaneously promote turning to God *and* prophet in illness (cf. further Baumgart 1994, 3f., 36-38).

Finally, illness (in the story) has its mysterious ways. In contrast to Naaman and Elisha's standing, Gehazi has a different understanding of the cost of healing and greedily "runs [...] and takes" the gifts of Naaman (v. 20). In so doing, he contradicts the thesis about God as the exclusive healer and is punished with "Naaman's leprosy" (v. 27). Furthermore, Gehazi's behaviour is criticized in a rather subtle way in this the final verse of the story as well. Cheryl Strimple and Ovidiu Creangă have noted that the editors of the books of Kings underline allegiance to God by, among other things, adding formulaic language of "clinging to Yahweh" from time to time (2010, 117f., 121). Failing to "cling to Yahweh" means that punishment will "cling" to the person instead. And this is exactly Elisha's words in the final verse: "Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and your offspring forever" (v. 27).

Coming to the last verse, we may summarize. The story presents illness mainly through different contrasting motifs. Despite Naaman's greatness, he is leprous, and it is only by listening to servants and bowing to the strangely simple command of the prophet that he becomes healed. This leads on to Naaman's monotheistic confession, on the one hand, and to the notion of prophets as strange God-men that can do the impossible, on the other. Understood in all this is leprosy as a hopeless illness constructed upon disgust that shuts you out from God and fellow human beings.

4. The Praying King and the Sound of Illness – 2 Kings 20 and Isaiah 38

With this story, several things change in comparison with the preceding ones. By the end of 2 Kings the editors increasingly added historiographical material, and the present legend is inserted during what has been called the Assyrian crisis in Judah (cf. Gray 1977, 657; Sweeney 2007, 397). Furthermore, we are still reading about a prophet in conjunction with illness, but we move into the royal court in Jerusalem encountering the prophet Isaiah and king Hezekiah, the latter being the focal point for the story.

The legend is also found in a slightly different form in the book of Isaiah together with the same historiographical material, and seems to have gone through several stages of growth before achieving the form it now has (cf. e.g. Anderson 2013; Fritz 2003, 380-382; Gray 1977, 668, 696; Wildberger 2002, 360-368).[6] The most conspicuous difference in Isaiah is the addition of a thanksgiving psalm, which gives a personal witness to the experience of illness from Hezekiah.[7] Even more, thanksgiving psalms has been characterized as narrative songs of praise since they often retell a story of suffering before praising God for deliverance (Eissfeldt 1965 117; cf. Seybold 1990, 84, 117; Westermann 1981, 102-116). Since such personal representations of illness are rare in narratives of the Hebrew Bible the narrative together with the psalm become interesting for the analysis. In what follows, I will first look at the narrative, following mainly the account in 2 Kings 20, and then turn to the thanksgiving psalm in Isaiah 38.[8]

In essence, the story takes place during a siege by the Assyrians, and tells of the Israelite king Hezekiah who becomes terminally ill and is told so by the prophet Isaiah. While Isaiah is leaving the royal palace, Hezekiah reacts with deep sorrow and prays to God to remember him. Before Isaiah has left the courtyard, God orders him to return with a good answer, and also that Hezekiah will live another fifteen years, and be saved from the Assyrians. Furthermore, Isaiah treats Hezekiah with a fig-cake and conveys a prophetic sign in which a shadow retracts its pace from the palace stairs.

As with the two preceding stories, it is difficult to know much about Hezekiah's actual disease. The first descriptive word used, *halah*, is general for "being ill," building on the idea of being weak somehow (cf. Koehler et al. 1994, 316; Paganini 2010). The seriousness in Hezekiah's case is pointed out by adding "sick unto death." (v. 1) In v. 7 it is stated that the disease is a boil (*sehin*) and that it is treated with a cake (or plaster) of figs. The etymology of *sehin* suggests "warm, becoming warm," and thus possibly refers to some kind of inflammation. It is also used in naming one of the ten Egyptian plagues in Exod. 9:9-18 (cf. Deut. 28:27; cf. Hobbs 1985, 291; Koehler et al. 1999, 1460; Wildberger 2002, 445). Treatment with figs is known from Pliny and two veterinary texts from Ugarit in the thirteenth century B.C.E., and can be assumed to be common medical knowledge (Gray 1977, 698; Wiseman 1986, 33; cf. further Cogan / Tadmor 1988, 255).

In the two preceding narratives, the problem instigating the plot is fundamentally solved when the sick person becomes healed. This aspect is downplayed in the present narrative in preference of the prophetic oracle, which both creates the problem, so to speak, and constitutes the solution in the story (cf. Cohn 1985, 603-616; Hobbs 1985, 46). The narrator begins by stating that Hezekiah is terminally ill (v. 1), but it is the prophetic word from Isaiah that makes this clear to the king, and leads on to his prayer (vv. 1-3). Isaiah both orders a treatment and provides a prophetic sign, but the immediate answer to Hezekiah's prayer is another prophetic word. Thus, prayer is the proper response to illness, and prayer in turn is answered through the reliable word of the prophet, or "The prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16). The narrative, then, deals to a large extent with the exemplary piety of Hezekiah in response to illness, and has been deemed to be hagiographic (cf. Blenkinsopp 2000, 483; Gray 1977, 659f.; Sweeney 1996, 493f., 502f.; Wildberger 2002, 443).

The two oracles and Hezekiah's prayer carry much of the understanding of illness in the story. The first oracle (v. 1) is in its historical context simply diagnostic, stating that the sick person will survive or not (literally "you are dying and you will not live"). This either-or-diagnosis perhaps sounds harshly black and white, but is typical and may be compared to similar practices in Mesopotamia (Avalos 1995, 268, 275). Thus, nothing more than diagnosis is implied in the formulation, even though it is abrupt for Hezekiah in the middle of his life. The recommendation introducing it seems graver though: "order your house," i.e. make a will (v. 1; cf. Cogan / Tadmor 1988, 254; Gray 1977, 697; Montgomery 1951, 506). Illness requires practical arrangements, which in turn underscores the seriousness for Hezekiah.

In response to the diagnosis Hezekiah turns to the only resource left: prayer to God for mercy (v. 2f.). The scene is touching and emotional in that the king (curled up in his bed? cf. 1 Kings 21:4) turns his face towards the wall and weeps bitterly. As was noted above, praying to God is also what good kings do. Interestingly enough, being a good king is what makes up Hezekiah's prayer;[9] he does not mention the illness nor ask explicitly for healing, even though this is understood (cf. Cogan / Tadmor 1988, 254). Nevertheless, in all his piety, one may note that Hezekiah does not simply resign himself to the will of God, but rather, in his sorrow, argues with God through prayer. God is presumably the ultimate cause behind what happens, and therefore the only one to turn to (cf. Wildberger 2002, 461).

The second oracle (vv. 5f.) is more elaborate and begins by directly addressing Hezekiah's prayer of v. 2, "I have heard your prayer and seen your tears, look, I will heal you" (v. 5). That God hears and sees is fundamental and expresses his care for Hezekiah. The concern does not stop there, however, but in an answer of unexpected mercy, God also promises prolonged life and the salvation of Jerusalem from the Assyrian siege. Even so, the prolonged life is both gift and limit in that Hezekiah is healed but his days are counted (cf. Ps. 139:16; Hobbs 1985, 292).

The note on salvation from the Assyrians expresses the intimate connection between the welfare of the state and that of the king. The siege is far in the background of this story and only resurfaces here, but the promise of healing for Hezekiah may work in itself as a sign that God will indeed rescue Judah and Jerusalem from the Assyrians. T. R. Hobbs writes about the social significance of Hezekiah's illness and the notion that the body often stands for the community and social order: "The fact that the skin of the king is affected by the sickness clearly reflects the attack on the limits of the society carried out by the Assyrians which reached the very gates of Jerusalem, but stopped there" (1985, 292; cf. Blenkinsopp 2000, 483; Sweeney 2007, 420f.). Moreover, the story following Hezekiah's illness is an ominous account of a visit by the Babylonian king to Hezekiah, which prefigures the future invasion by the Babylonians and exile of the people. Just as a limit is set upon Hezekiah's life, it would seem that a limit on the communal life of Judah is intimated (Sweeney 1996, 503f.).

The passage telling about the sign with the shadow is intriguing in many ways (vv. 8-11). It seems to be a later addition since the previous verse ends with the assertion "and he recovered," (v. 7) after which a sign warranting the promise to get healed is superfluous (cf. Cogan / Tadmor 1988, 255-257; Fritz 2003, 280f.; Gray 1977, 697). But why was it added? A quick glance at the sign would seem to suggest that it has little to do with either Hezekiah's illness, prolongation of life, or the siege of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, it is probable that "the sun going down Ahaz's stairs" (v. 11) refers to some kind of sundial. If so, the sign might connote the passing of time, and as Hezekiah's life has reached its end, so the retracting shadow shows in contrast that a miraculous turning back of time is possible, even though only temporary (cf. Cogan / Tadmor 1988, 255; Hobbs 1985, 287f.). The idea would be that as Hezekiah sees the shadow retreat, he may take that as a comforting sign of his coming healing.

In short, the narrative emphasizes the prayer and the prophetic oracle as an answer to illness, but also portrays the deep anguish of receiving a death warrant, and the mercy of God in healing, which is unexpected and limited at the same time.

One aspect of the story that has been left out so far is that both the second oracle and Hezekiah's reply to it has a line saying roughly "on the third day go up to the house of the Lord" (v. 5, 8).[10] The idea here is that the person having been healed goes to the temple for a thanksgiving service, to give witness to God's saving power. To this service belonged, among other things, sacrifices, the fulfilment of vows, and songs of thanksgiving (cf. Seybold 1990, 84, 117; Roberts 2015, 483). This explains, at least in terms of literary presentation, the presence of Hezekiah's thanksgiving psalm in Isaiah 38. However, it is impossible to know if Hezekiah's psalm actually originated with the historical king somehow or if a suitable psalm has been selected or even composed for the literary rendition in Isaiah 38 (cf. Roberts 2015, 483f.; Wildberger 2002, 452, 454f.; Hallo 1976).

Even though the psalm is meant to portray the personal experience of the Hezekiah in the narrative, one may begin to note that in contrast to the prayer

in the narrative (v. 3) the psalm does not press on the goodness or innocence of the king, rather, an awareness of sin is suggested (cf. v. 17; Wildberger 2002, 456f., 466). In view of the fairly idealized portrayal of the king in the narrative, this contrast would seem to have the literary effect of giving the psalm a more 'honest' or 'authentic' account of the experience of the illness, despite that we cannot know anything about the actual historical relationship of the psalm to the king.

In the following analysis of the psalm's portrayal of illness, I will focus on the introduction, three clusters of images that follow, and the ending in praise. As for the introduction, the first line opens in a way that connects back to the narrative: "I said: in the middle of my days I must go" (v. 10). Adding up the numbers from 2 Kings 18, 20, and Isaiah 38, king Hezekiah was 39 years old when becoming ill. In this context, the introduction would seem to signal the bitterness of being given a death warrant in the middle of one's life, which sets the tone for the psalm: the painful fate of premature death.

That tone is picked up in the first set of images, which relate to *Sheol*, the kingdom of death (cf. Hades). Sheol is a complex concept that needs some introduction. Being in Sheol somehow is a common imagery in the psalms and is often used metaphorically (cf. e.g. Psalms 30:9; 88:10-12). In Klaus Seybold's succinct formulation

> [...] an established image does indeed lie behind it, whereby the sick, the imprisoned, the threatened are seen as already in the power of the Underworld, and in the sphere of death. The Underworld, the sphere of a reduced and declining life-force, reaches far into the sphere of life itself, extending its dominion even to the living. (1990, 169f.; cf. Barth 1947)

In the literary context of Hezekiah's psalm, actual death is intimated, but the employment of the imagery also gives resources for Hezekiah to entreat God not unlike the woman of Shunem arguing for healing. In this argument, Sheol provides the psalmist with grounds for God to save: "Sheol does not thank you, death does not praise you" (v. 18). If God does not want to lose out on praise, he must save the psalmist.

Returning to the tone of the bitterness of premature death, the first verse of the psalm juxtaposes the phrase "dying in the middle of one's days" with being "consigned behind the gates of Sheol for the rest of one's years" (v. 10). The center here is the motif of Sheol and a sense of being imprisoned (cf. Wildberger 2002, 457). But there is also a fine balance in the first two lines between the phrases "middle of one's days" and "rest of one's years." Paradoxically, even though dead, the psalmist will spend the rest of his life in Sheol. This again captures the feeling of being imprisoned and in despair, but also of meaningless nothingness. The paradox is not absolute, since the idea of Sheol still is an idea of existence somehow, but a bleak, grey, non-active existence (cf. Blenkinsopp 2000, 485). This existence is contrasted in v. 11 with the world of the living, where the psalmist may see God (in the temple cult) and fellow human beings (cf. Roberts 2015, 484; Wildberger 2002, 457). Being confined to Sheol thus also cuts off all relationships.

The imagery connected to Sheol has also left traces throughout the psalm (cf. vv. 16-19), but two instances are especially interesting for our purposes. The first comes as a contrast in the second petition in v. 16: "Restore me, let me live." The word "live" (*hajah*) is commonly used for healing and health in the Hebrew Bible ("revive, recover," cf. Koehler et al. 1994, 309; Ringgren 1980, 334), and is the word used for Hezekiah's return to health in the narrative (2 Kings 20:7; Isaiah 38:21). However, other words could be used, and it would seem intentional here that the more frequent meaning of the word is "live." Thus, the answer to death is the gift of life.

Second, part of the psalmist's complaint in v. 11 is the line "I will not see the Lord, the Lord, in the land of the living." The repetition uses the short form of God's name, *Yah, Yah* (instead of *Yahweh*), that here would seem to approximate an interjectional exclamation (cf. Nyberg 1952, 61; Roberts 2015, 481).[11] It is used to lament the situation of being drawn into death in the psalm. Reduced to severe suffering, the psalmist can hardly pronounce God's name and the uttering becomes a groan in the direction of God, as it were. This motif of sound and groaning because of the suffering is further explored later on in the psalm, as we will see. What is interesting with this particular case is that the sound is inverted in a shout for joy in the latter part of the psalm. In v. 19 the first line is the climax of three statements that Sheol does not praise God, saying "The living! The living thank you, as I do today!" The repetition is in Hebrew *Hay, Hay*, i.e. *Yah, Yah* backwards.[12]

Leaving the tropes of death behind momentarily, v. 12 introduces the next cluster of images interpreting the illness of Hezekiah, which concerns tent and textile fabrics: "My dwelling is pulled up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent." The verb "pull up" concretely designates pulling up the tent plugs, and is thus to the point with the simile, used figuratively for a human's life. The metaphor explores life as an easily movable and transient home (cf. Roberts 2015, 484).

The introductory phrase in v. 12 is elucidated by two pictures together with "like a shepherd's tent": "roll up my life like a weaver," and "cut down from the loom." What is common to these pictures (and the introductory phrase) is that something is finished and concluded. As the shepherd moves on to the next pasture, and the work for the day is finished by the weaver, so life is now over. More specifically, the terms used in reference to the weaver, relate to removing the finished product from the loom, and cutting it off from the threads of the frame, again underscoring the finality of death, and that all connections to life are severed (cf. Wildberger 2002, 458). The finality is furthermore emphasized by the conclusion to the imagery in v. 12: "From day to night you complete [i.e. finish] me."

None of these pictures signal that the finish is premature, however. Instead, it is the inevitability of the end that is foregrounded; the shepherd must move on, the weaver cut down to finish his work. The idea of time being up is similar to the sign of the shadow signifying time in the narrative, which is not supposed to retreat. Furthermore, an interesting angle on this imagery presents itself in

comparison with ancient Greece and Rome, in which the idea of cutting the thread of life also occurs. Here the idea is found in connection to destiny deities, whose decision a human cannot change. In contrast, the psalmists of the Hebrew Bible turn to God to lament, argue, and ask the only one responsible for a change (cf. Wildberger 2002, 458f.). Thus, even though those images signal the finality and inevitability of death, the psalmist keeps arguing.

The last cluster of images makes use of similes with different animals for interpreting Hezekiah's illness: God crushes his bones like a lion (v. 13), and he moans like a swallow, crane, and dove (v. 14). Here the motif of a pain leading to mere sound and groaning rather than words reappears and the sequence of images are also enclosed by cries for help. Thus, v. 13 begins by saying: "I cry for help until morning." The reason for the cry then immediately follows: God "crushes all my bones like a lion." This is a very graphic picture. That the bones of a person are touched by an illness is a common motif in the psalms of lament, but there the bones are struck with terror, waste away, are out of joint, wither, not smashed to pieces (cf. Wildberger 2002, 459). The simile thus conveys the pain of the illness that reduces the sick person to moans, which in turn is elucidated by the bird similes.

The comparison to the call of birds contains several layers of meaning. As for the sounds themselves, one may imagine the "'[...] long drawn out eeee...' with which a swallow flits through the air [...]" (Kaiser 1974, 405), and the murmuring of doves. The two verbs used for the sounds mean basically "peep, chirp" (*'atsaftsef*) and "mumble, moan" (*'ehggeh*) respectively. They also would seem to be onomatopoetic, letting the reader hear the suffering sounds of illness and not only imagine them. Furthermore, those sounds are associated with the sounds of the dead, ghosts, and spirits (cf. Blenkinsopp 2000, 485; Roberts 2015, 484; Wildberger 2002, 460). The image of Sheol is thus alluded to again, which, as we saw, also led to groans earlier on in the psalm. Finally, the simile of the birds is "[...] reproducing an ancient topos of the dead as bird-like, e.g., in Enkidu's dark dream of the underworld in *Gilgamesh*" (Blenkinsopp 2000, 485). In short, the suffering described by the psalmist is dreadful, and all poetic recourses are used to convey this.

Again, crying for help is not given up. Following upon this sequence of pictures is first the words, "My eyes are weak [looking] at the heights," (v. 14) which do not so much indicate the exhaustion of the psalmist, as the stubborn petitioning to God, which is thought to dwell upon high (cf. Kaiser 1974, 405f.; Wildberger 2002, 460). Second, the persistent crying to God despite everything being lost is continued in the next phrase: "Lord, for me is oppression, be my security!" (v. 14)

Coming to the ending of the psalm, lastly, we may note that it turns to praise. Further, the thanksgiving service in the temple gives the psalmist an opportunity to tell the story of being helped, which is evidenced by the psalm: "A father makes known to sons your faithfulness" (v. 19), and "We shall sing [...] all the days of our lives in the house of the Lord" (v. 20). This is what the thanksgiving

psalm does: it embodies and enacts the praise told of in the psalm. What is interesting for our purposes, however, and here we may return to the initial note on the 'honesty' of the psalm, is that the story of illness is made part of the thanksgiving. Surely, it is complemented by praise, but it is not replaced by praise. In comparison to the psalms of lament, nothing suggests that the portrayal of illness would be tampered with to downplay the suffering. Indeed, Hans Wildberger has noted that in comparison with other thanksgiving psalms, Hezekiah's psalm "[...] in contrast to the 'normal' pattern of such a psalm, begins with the retelling of the terrible affliction instead of with a declaration of thanks" and further on the "possibilities of what can be included in a song of thanks are pressed to the extreme. The depiction of the terrible distress caused by the illness seems to leave no door open for the possibility of a restoration" (2002, 456, 465). The story of illness is given its full weight in the psalm, the whole is told, and God is not diminished by this.

To sum up, the psalm exploring illness through images of death, tent, and animals starts on a note of the bitter fate of dying prematurely and ends in praise, while fully incorporating the experience of illness.

5. Conclusion

I started this article with the question of the narrative representation of illness in the Hebrew Bible in view of its being a resource for many in coping with the difficulties of life. The three stories chosen as case studies for this purpose in no way exhaust the range of possibilities, while they at the same time present some typical features: encountering illness with prayer and argument, and the status of the prophet as health care consultant, being among the most prominent. In view of the first, the story in 2 Kings 4 has the woman primarily arguing with the prophet about the illness, and indirectly through him with God. In 2 Kings 20/Isaiah 38, on the other hand, king Hezekiah turns directly to God, and the psalm develops this, pushing the limits of what can actually be said in prayer. Concerning the prophet, 2 Kings 5 fully endorses him as the mysterious God-man that can heal, while 2 Kings 4 questions his authority while urging him to act in view of the illness, and 2 Kings 20/Isaiah 38 subordinate the miraculous trait to what is considered the main duty of the prophet, being a messenger of the divine word, in this instance concerning the outcome of the illness.

Moreover, the three stories incorporate representations of illness to an unusual extent as compared with many other narratives in the Hebrew Bible in which illness plays a role. 2 Kings 4 molds the illness into the plot of the story in a way that would seem to present the reader with endless hurdles, and builds on the shock and despair of a mother faced with the enigmatic death of her only son. 2 Kings 5 uses several sets of contrasts to highlight the impossibility of leprosy and the necessity of negotiating one's expectations. 2 Kings 20/Isaiah 38 start

from the bitterness of terminal illness in the middle of life, but juxtapose a hagiographic account of how to deal with it, with a psalm that can hardly contain the pain groaning and moaning its way to God. Two fundamental presuppositions for these narratives are that illnesses happen and God exists, and much of their narrative ingenuity has to do with teasing out the relationship between these presuppositions.

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[1] For disability studies in biblical research, see Avalos et al. 2007; Moss / Schipper 2011; Olyan 2008; Raphael 2008. For the connection of disability and narratives in the Hebrew Bible, cf. Schipper 2016.
[2] For an incisive analysis of the literary features of the story, see Hobbs 1985, 58-62.
[3] Cf., for instance, the following modern translations: the English New Revised Standard Version and New International Version, the French Traduction Oecuménique, the German Einheitsübersetzung, and the Swedish Bibel 2000.
[4] Literally, the Hebrew word means 'the place' (*hammaqom*), and it has been questioned if the reference could really be to Naaman's skin, this being rather a geographical term. However, it is used similarly in Lev. 13:19, dealing with leprosy (cf. Montgomery 1951, 379; Gray 1977, 506).
[5] This being a common word, one might start with noting that it only occurs here in the story, although it could have been found at several other places, such as the maiden standing before her mistress (vv. 2f.), Naaman standing before the Israelite king (v. 6), or Gehazi standing before Naaman (vv. 21f.). Cf. Strimple / Creangă 2010, 120, who analyze the significance of the preposition 'before' in conjunction with 'to stand.'
[6] The story is also summarized very shortly in 2 Chron. 32:24-26, but that summary does not say much about the illness. Interestingly enough, it states that the cause of the illness was that Hezekiah was proud and only got healed after humbling himself. This is in line with the general thesis of the law of retribution of the writers of 1 and 2 Chronicles (cf. e.g. Childs 1979, 643-654).

[7] For poetic material as portraying personal experience and the inner life of characters in narratives of the Hebrew Bible, cf. further Linafelt 2016.
[8] Most scholars would agree that the sequence 2 Kings 20-Isaiah 38 also represents the line of dependence, i.e. the editor of Isaiah 38 used 2 Kings 20 (or something similar to it) as his source (cf. Anderson 2013).
[9] The words of Hezekiah's prayer fit well into the general ancient Near Eastern understanding of the good king, and are also typical of the editor's language concerning good kings (cf. Sweeney 2007, 420f.; Wildberger 2002, 445). A more elaborate presentation of this concept is found in Ps. 72.
[10] The first instance in v. 5 is left out in Isa. 38:5, but retained the second time (cf. Isa. 38:22).
[11] Most scholars would not retain the repetition *yah, yah*, but see it as an error in the textual transmission (cf. e.g. Blenkinsopp 2000, 479, 481; Kaiser 1974, 398; Wildberger 2002, 435, 438). I do believe it has poetic significance, however.
[12] There is, admittedly, a tiny difference in the pronunciation of the h-sound: in the first instance the h represents a glottal fricative, in the second, an unvoiced pharyngal fricative (cf. Khan 2013, 87-89). However, the sounds are similar enough to establish the poetic connection in my view.