

The Prophet Elisha and Naaman, oil on canvas, c 1630, Lambert Jacobsz, c.1598-1636

Commentary by Hovak Najarian



Hope, expectation, and suspicion are familiar aspects of human nature and in Biblical stories, we often read about things that we ourselves have experienced. We may even find amusement in the story of Elisha and Naaman as it unfolds.

The Cast: Naaman: Commander of Aram’s army.
Captive Israeli Girl: Mistress to Naaman’s wife.
Ben-Hadad II: King of Aram
Joram: King of Israel.
Elisha: Prophet of Israel
Attendants: Naaman’s entourage

Naaman, a highly regarded Commander of Aram’s army, suffered from leprosy. A young girl from Israel who was captured in a raid and was now a mistress to Naaman’s wife, said: “If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” Naaman went to his king, Ben-Hadad II, and

told him what his wife's mistress said. The king said, "By all means, go ... I will send a letter to the king of Israel." King Ben-Hadad II's letter said: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

Joram, king of Israel, was puzzled by what seemed like a bizarre request and this led to suspicion that maybe there was more to this. He wondered what was behind this request to cure Naaman and questioned King Ben-Hadad's motive. "Why would this fellow send someone to me to be cured of leprosy?" "Am I God?" Is the King of Aram trying to start a quarrel?

When Elisha heard about the letter and the trouble it caused, he asked king Joram to send Naaman to him. Naaman and his entourage went to Elisha's house but only a messenger came out and told Naaman, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." Was that all? Was this some kind of joke? He could have washed himself seven times in a river in his own country. Naaman expected Elisha himself to come out and call on God in some form of dramatic display that would result in a cure. He left in a rage but his servants convinced him to try what Elisha's messenger said. What did he have to lose? When Naaman washed himself in the Jordan River as instructed he was cured and returned to Elisha house to express thanks and offer a gift.

Lambert Jacobsz' painting, *The Prophet Elisha and Naaman*, depicts the meeting of the two men after Naaman, who was now healed (dressed as a wealthy seventeenth century Dutch merchant, complete with turban), returned to Elisha's house to offer thanks. A barefooted Elisha has come out in a dark robe and his dog is in the entryway. Elisha's left arm is across his chest and draped with a red mantle and his right hand is raised as he waves off Naaman's offer of a gift. The scene is rounded out with secondary figures that fill in the composition. Naaman's carriage and other attendants are in the background.

Note: Dogs are a symbol of loyalty, fidelity, and faithfulness. They have been depicted in art since early times but have been featured more often since the Renaissance. The type of dog depicted coincides usually with the time and place a breed became popular. The whippet, first given that name in England in 1610, was also popular across the channel in the Netherlands and Jacobsz has included one standing by the attendant on the far right side of his painting, *The Prophet Elisha and Naaman*.

