

Naaman the Syrian

David Moore

THE STORY of Naaman, the Syrian general who was cured of leprosy by Elisha, is well known. On the surface it is a simple story of a great man who humbled himself before God after an arrogant start. Yet there are subtleties in the story, powerful lessons that are not apparent from a casual reading. We shall need to do a little detective work, to search out some otherwise unanswered questions.

The meaning of his name

Naaman was a complex man, a man of outstanding character, a man worthy to be called out from the Gentiles, a man selected by God to punish a sinful Israel, and yet a man with fleshly pride that had to be humbled. His story is both a parable and an exhortation.

We consider first the meaning of his name. According to Strong it means 'pleasant' or 'pleasantness'. Not many Gentile enemies of Israel would be known by such a name. We have here a clue to the type of man he was, because names in the Hebrew language are always very important. The word could have been Aramaic, of course, as the language of Syria, or Aram, was very similar to Hebrew.¹

A key verse

"Now Naaman, captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honourable, *because by him the LORD had given deliverance unto Syria*: he was also a mighty man in valour, but he was a leper" (2 Kgs. 5:1).

This is the key verse to the whole chapter, because it unlocks the meaning behind the story. The core of this verse is the fact that by Naaman Yahweh gave deliverance to Syria. It is a fact not much discussed in any writings on the subject. I could not find a suitable explanation anywhere, from Robert Roberts onwards. Why would Yahweh *want* to give deliverance to Syria, the arch-enemy of Israel? How was this achieved by Naaman?

As the captain of the host, or commander-in-chief of the army, Naaman would have had a very close relationship with his king, Ben-hadad, in much the same way as Joab did with David. In those days the commander-in-chief of the army was not like a modern general who sits behind

the lines working out strategy on a computer; he was the mightiest fighting man, who led the army into battle. As well as being skilled in battle strategy and tactics, he had to be completely familiar with all forms of weaponry and to have the fitness, strength and endurance to use them for hours on end. Joab was such a man in the time of David.

Leprosy, being the dreadful living death that it was, would have precluded anybody from carrying out any of the duties of the captain of the army. And Naaman was not only commander-in-chief of the army, he was the king's right-hand man, the king's representative, his chief diplomat. Whenever there was an official delegation then Naaman would have accompanied the king: "Naaman was commander-in-chief of the army of Syria, and was nearest to the person of the king, Ben-hadad II, whom he accompanied officially and supported when he went to worship at the temple of Rimmon".² A leper would not have been acceptable in this position of honour.

Syria defeated by Israel

I believe that Naaman was not a leper until we meet him in 2 Kings 5, and that he was involved with Ben-hadad king of Syria in an earlier record of the book of Kings as a healthy, vigorous, fighting man: "And Ben-hadad the king of Syria gathered all his host together: and there were thirty and two kings with him, and horses, and chariots: and he went up and besieged Samaria, and warred against it" (1 Kgs. 20:1). This action agrees with the meaning of Ben-hadad's name, 'Son of the fierce one' (Strong).

It is not necessary to deal with this campaign in detail, except to note that Yahweh fought for Israel on that occasion. Naaman, brilliant general though he was, had no chance of prevailing against the Elohim. Ben-hadad was so soundly defeated that he was forced to humiliate himself before Ahab and beg for his life.

"And Ben-hadad fled, and came into the city, into an inner chamber. And his servants said

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1. 'Naaman' is the masculine form of 'Naomi', which has the same meaning.
 2. *Smith's Bible Dictionary*.

unto him, Behold now, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings: let us, I pray thee, put sackcloth on our loins, and ropes upon our heads, and go out to the king of Israel: peradventure he will save thy life. So they girded sackcloth on their loins, and put ropes on their heads, and came to the king of Israel, and said, Thy servant Ben-hadad saith, I pray thee, let me live. And he said, Is he yet alive? he is my *brother*. Now the men did diligently observe whether any thing would come from him, and did hastily catch it: and they said, Thy *brother* Ben-hadad. Then he said, Go ye, bring him. Then Ben-hadad came forth to him; *and he caused him to come up into the chariot*. And Ben-hadad said unto him, The cities, which my father took from thy father, I will restore; and thou shalt make streets for thee in Damascus, as my father made in Samaria. Then said Ahab, I will send thee away with this covenant. So he made a covenant with him, and sent him away" (vv. 30-34).

Look at verse 31: "[The servants of Ben-hadad] said unto him, Behold now, we have heard that the kings of Israel are merciful kings". Who would those servants have been? Obviously the most senior of all Ben-hadad's servants would have been Naaman, the captain of the host, the commander-in-chief of the army, an army which had just been defeated by Divine power, against which Naaman would have had no chance of success. So it would have been Naaman who persuaded his master Ben-hadad—the arrogant Syrian king who had been ready to confiscate Ahab's wife, his children, his house, and all his possessions—to put ropes on his head and sackcloth on his loins, and appeal to the king of Israel for mercy.

This was a golden opportunity to refuse clemency and rid Israel of a dangerous enemy.³ But look what Ahab says: "Is he yet alive? he is my brother". This ridiculous remark was eagerly snapped up by Naaman and the other servants of Ben-hadad, and they hastened to bring him to Ahab, who foolishly made a covenant with him and sent him back to Damascus. Note especially verse 33, where Ahab invites Ben-hadad "to come up into the chariot". That was an act of royal privilege in those days.

Chariots had large wheels, and Ben-hadad would have needed a helping hand to climb into the chariot. The man to do that would have been Naaman, and he would have had a very close

view of King Ahab of Israel as he waited for the interview to end.

Now we look at verse 42, where one of the prophets gives a dreadful edict to Ahab: "And he said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Because thou hast let go out of thy hand a man whom I appointed to utter destruction, therefore thy life shall go for his life, and thy people for his people". Chilling words!

Judgement on Ahab

After three whole years of peace between Israel and Syria, Ahab obviously felt it was time to break his covenant with his "brother" Ben-hadad II of Syria, and decided to attack him on his home ground. Ben-hadad, to his credit, had honoured the covenant of peace. This time Ahab enlisted the help of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, who had come to visit Ahab, and he rather naively accepted the invitation to join him in a campaign to recapture the city of Ramoth-gilead, a city of refuge in the tribe of Gad (Deut. 4:43), captured for Syria many years before by Ben-hadad I.

A royal conference was held between the two kings just outside the gates of Samaria to hear the advice of the prophets of Baal, who all encouraged the campaign. Jehoshaphat called for a prophet of Yahweh, and Micaiah was brought before the thrones of the kings. This true prophet warned Ahab that he would be killed in the battle if he went ahead, but he was ignored by both Ahab and Jehoshaphat, and the campaign went ahead, with the following result:

"And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, I will disguise myself, and enter into the battle; but put thou on thy robes. And the king of Israel disguised himself, and went into the battle. But the king of Syria commanded his thirty and two captains that had rule over his chariots, saying, Fight neither with small nor great, save only with the king of Israel. And it came to pass, when the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, that they said, Surely it is the king of Israel. And they turned aside to fight against him: and Jehoshaphat cried out. And it came to pass, when the captains of the chariots perceived that it was not the king of Israel, that they turned back from pursuing him. And a certain man drew a bow at a venture, and smote

3. Compare Samuel and Agag (1 Sam. 15:32,33).

the king of Israel between the joints of the harness: wherefore he said unto the driver of his chariot, Turn thine hand, and carry me out of the host; for I am wounded. And the battle increased that day: and the king was stayed up in his chariot against the Syrians, and died at even: and the blood ran out of the wound into the midst of the chariot. And there went a proclamation throughout the host about the going down of the sun, saying, Every man to his city, and every man to his own country. So the king died, and was brought to Samaria; and they buried the king in Samaria" (1 Kgs. 22:30-37).

Naaman the deliverer

We return now to 2 Kings 5:1, quoted above, which says that Yahweh gave deliverance to Syria by Naaman, and repeat our questions: Why should Yahweh deliver Syria, the archenemy of Israel, a nation which worshipped the god Rimmon? And how was this deliverance accomplished through Naaman? I believe that the answer is not so much that Yahweh delivered Syria, but that He punished Israel.

We shall have to recapitulate a little here. Israel, with the aid of the Elohim, had previously trounced Syria, and Ben-hadad was almost certain to be killed. It was Naaman who delivered Syria by asking mercy for its king. As a result Ahab let Ben-hadad go, for which deed he was to pay with his life. I believe that Yahweh caused the life of Ahab to be destroyed *by the same man who had saved Ben-hadad*—Naaman.

Imagine the scene in the plain where Ramoth-gilead (meaning the heights of Gilead) nestled in front of the foothills close to the Golan Heights: a melee of hundreds of chariots, the thunder of hooves, clouds of dust, the clash of weapons, the cries of soldiers searching for Ahab as their king has commanded them; a great shout as Jehoshaphat is discovered; a cry from him which causes them to swerve away and look elsewhere; and *then*, the captain of the Syrian host, Naaman, sees through the disguise of the man before whom he had stood so closely when he pleaded the life of his master.

I believe Ahab saw Naaman too late for his chariot to take evasive action, as the Syrian general drew back his bow to its fullest extent, causing an arrow to fly with immense force, so that it penetrated the overlapping scales between the shoulder harness and the breastplate of Ahab's armour and sank deep into one of his lungs.

Ahab, with tremendous courage, ordered his charioteer to withdraw from the main part of the battle, and stayed propped up in the chariot, enduring the dreadful pain of his wound until the evening, when he died from loss of blood, which had been pouring over the floor of the chariot.

The army of Israel then fled back to Samaria and buried their king. It is recorded that the dogs licked up his blood as a man cleaned the chariot in the vineyard that once belonged to Naboth, in fulfilment of Elijah's chilling words in 1 Kings 21:19: "Thus saith the LORD, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine".

Once again Naaman had delivered Syria through the will and determination of Yahweh.

But, it may be said, 1 Kings 22:34 clearly says that "a certain man drew a bow *at a venture*". Almost all the translators say this, in one way or another. Some say that he drew a bow at random; that he shot a casual arrow, not intending to hit anyone special, and by Divine providence the arrow hit Ahab. I do not deny that Divine providence caused the arrow to hit Ahab, in the same way that the stone from David's sling found its mark on the forehead of Goliath.

We need to look closely at a very remarkable word. It has been translated "at a venture", but the meaning of the word has nothing to do with chance. The Hebrew word *tom* has been translated elsewhere as 'completeness', 'innocence', 'full', 'integrity', 'perfect(ion)', 'simplicity', 'upright(ly, -ness)'. The meaning of the Hebrew is that the archer took perfect aim, and fired a perfect shot.

The Septuagint and Josephus

It is interesting and revealing to look at the Septuagint translation to see how the scholars understood the Hebrew words about 250 years before Jesus was born: "And it came to pass, when the captains of the chariots saw Josaphat king of Juda, that they said, This seems to be the king of Israel. And they compassed him about to fight against him; and Josaphat cried out. And it came to pass, when the captains of the chariots saw that this was not the king of Israel, that they returned from him. And one drew a bow with a good aim, and smote the king of Israel between the lungs and the breast-plate: and he said to his charioteer, Turn thine hands, and carry me away out of the battle, for I am wounded" (1 Kgs. 22:32-34, LXX).

This is a report of the same incident from the pen of Josephus:⁴ “Ahab’s fate found him out without his robes; for Benhadad the king of Syria had charged his army, by means of their commanders, to kill nobody else but only the king of Israel. So when the Syrians, upon their joining battle with the Israelites, saw Jehoshaphat stand before the army, and conjectured that he was Ahab, they fell violently upon him, and encompassed him round; but when they were near, and knew that it was not he, they all returned back; and while the fight lasted from the morning light till late in the evening, and the Syrians were conquerors, they killed nobody, as their king had commanded them; and when they sought to kill Ahab alone, but could not find him, there was a young nobleman belonging to king Benhadad, whose name was Naaman; he drew his bow against the enemy, and wounded the king through his breastplate, in his lungs. Upon this Ahab resolved not to make his mischance known to his army, lest they should run away; but he bid the driver of his chariot to turn it back, and carry him out of the battle, because he was sorely and mortally wounded. However, he sat in his chariot and endured the pain till sunset, and then he fainted away and died”.

I believe, with Josephus, that the archer was Naaman, because the Scripture says, “by *him* had the LORD given deliverance unto Syria”. I cannot see that deliverance could have been given through any other individual.

Trouble for Naaman

Many people used by God to punish Israel have later been punished themselves because of their attitude when damaging Israel. Babylon, for example, was punished because of the way it rejoiced over the destruction of Jerusalem. We are told that Naaman, despite his otherwise good character, was a proud man who did not want to demean himself by bathing in the Jordan. I believe that he would have indulged in a natural human exultation following his slaying of Ahab, and that he would have been rewarded richly in wealth and status by his master, causing an arrogance of mind. I think that was the time when he was struck down with leprosy, at the height of his triumph, to remind him that he was not to exalt himself for being used by the Lord to punish His people.

This obviously caused consternation in his household, and one of his sympathisers was a young girl captured in one of the many border

raids carried out by Syrian bandits. She was doubtless captured for purely carnal reasons, and had evidently been rescued by Naaman, who took her into his household as personal maid to his wife. This was an act of kindness much appreciated by the girl, and she was anxious to repay it. Her action started a chain of events which could not have been foretold.

Naaman went to the king with his troubles, and Ben-hadad was also anxious to help. He had much to thank Naaman for. He sent a letter to Jehoram king of Israel that caused a good deal of consternation. Jehoram flew into a panic: “And it came to pass, when the king of Israel had read the letter, that he rent his clothes, and said, Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy? wherefore consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me” (2 Kgs. 5:7). At this stage Yahweh moved the prophet Elisha, who had already had dealings with Jehoram and Jehoshaphat, to give instructions to the king: “And it was so, when Elisha the man of God had heard that the king of Israel had rent his clothes, that he sent to the king, saying, Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel” (v. 8).

A proud man humbled

This part of the story is very well known, nevertheless we will look at it again. Naaman comes with his horses and chariot, and his servants bearing expensive gifts, and stands at the door of the house of Elisha. I do not suppose Elisha’s house was an imposing structure—probably not much more than a hut. We do not even know where it was, but it was probably close to the banks of the Jordan, and could well have been at Jericho, where the sons of the prophets had their headquarters. I do not think he had a regular abode, for we know that later on he was at Dothan when the king of Syria sought to destroy him—an unkind move considering he had cured his top general of leprosy (6:13).

Wherever Elisha’s home was, it was suddenly confronted by a large party of Syrian soldiery with all their trappings, with the leprous Naaman at its head. Gehazi, Elisha’s servant, must have been somewhat overawed when he saw them. Elisha probably knew why and when Naaman

4. *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 8, chapter 15.5.

had been stricken by leprosy, and realised he needed to be humbled. He did not even bother to come out to meet the great man. He just instructed his servant to tell him to go and dip in the Jordan seven times.

We have two contrasting personality images of Naaman here. One is the haughty man who, angry that the prophet should treat him so disdainfully, himself disdains to dip in the Jordan, and, preferring the rivers of Damascus, turns away in a rage. The other arises from the fact that his servants address him as “My father” rather than “My Lord”. As he was one of the most powerful men in Syria, probably second only to the king, it is very significant that his servants would regard him as a father rather than as a tyrant. And he listens to them after a while, and does what they suggest. He controls his anger, humbles himself, acknowledges his desperate need for redemption, and dips himself seven times in the Jordan. He is baptized and—this is the wonderful part—after the seventh time “his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child” (5:14).

It was not just that he was healed of his leprosy. His flesh was like that of a little child; not the flesh of a warrior chieftain, but the flesh of a little child, which has not been contaminated with the mire and dirt of the world. Remember the words of Jesus, “Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein” (Lk. 18:16,17). He was clean. His sins were forgiven. He was as a little child, a babe in understanding, but a man determined to worship the God of Israel for the rest of his life. And it was a little girl who caused this process to happen.

The first thing he did was to return to the house of the prophet with all his retinue to offer his grateful and humble thanks. This time Elisha

was prepared to meet him. He refused the gifts offered to him, but Naaman was not offended. He understood. All he asked for was two mule loads of earth from Israel (2 Kgs. 5:17) to build an altar in Damascus, so that he could worship before Yahweh.

A lesson for us

We are required to be like Naaman. Often we are proud and arrogant. Spiritually we are all lepers, doomed to death. We are desperately in need of forgiveness for our sins, and we must acknowledge this every day. When we were baptized we became as little children, innocent and washed from the sins we were covered with. We are of the earth, earthy, as Paul said, like the first Adam. That earth represents our flesh and has to be suppressed. If occasionally we are able to suppress it we must not become pleased with ourselves, because at best we are unprofitable servants, who have only done what is our duty to do.

When Naaman defeated wickedness in Israel by slaying Ahab he was an instrument of Yahweh, His servant. But the adulation he received made him proud—very understandable, but not acceptable to Yahweh. He was punished for his attitude by being infected with the most dreaded disease known to man at that time. He had to acknowledge his need to be healed. Having acknowledged the need, he was baptized and became clean. I believe that he became spiritually a member of the commonwealth of Israel, adopted as one of Abraham’s seed, accepted as an heir according to the promise.

We need to approach our God daily, as Naaman did, to acknowledge His grace and goodness in bestowing the same gifts to us, and to realise the need for our own sins to be forgiven. The lesson of Gehazi is that if we turn back on this gracious redemption our leprosy will return.

Campaigns of the Kingdom

This 168-page book by Brother Graham Bacon is subtitled “An Explanation of the Significance of the Last Day Battle Chapters of the Bible”. According to the summary at the end there are twenty-one chapters in the Bible relevant to the theme, and the author presents a sequence of events involving five distinct campaigns, leading to all the world being subdued by Christ. *Campaigns of the Kingdom* is available from the author at 109 Akuna Avenue, Bangor, NSW 2234, Australia, cost AU\$7.50 including postage. The book can also be supplied to the US and the UK at \$7.50 and £4 respectively, inclusive of airmail postage, but payment *must* be made by International Money Order.