

Chapter 4

38. And Elisha had gone back to Gilgal. And there was famine in the land, and the acolyte prophets were sitting before him. And he said to his lad, “Put the big pot on the fire and cook a stew for the acolyte prophets.”
39. And one of them went out to the field to gather sprouts and found a field vine and gathered from it field gourds, as much as his garment could hold, and he came and sliced them into the stew pot, for they did not know.*
40. And they poured for the men to eat, and it happened, as they were about to eat, they cried out, “Death is in the pot, man of God!” And they could not eat.
41. And he said, “Fetch flour.” And he flung it into the pot, and he said, “Pour for the people, that they may eat.” And there was nothing harmful in the pot.†
42. And a man had come from Baal-Shalishah, and he brought the man of God first fruits, twenty loaves of barley bread and fresh grain in his sack.‡
43. And he said, “Give it to the people, that they may eat.” And his attendant said, “What? Shall I set this before a hundred men?” And he said, “Give it to the people that they may eat. For thus said the LORD, ‘Eat and leave over.’”
44. And he set it before them, and they ate and left over, according to the word of the LORD.

* *Sprouts...field gourds.* As with many other flora mentioned in the Bible, the exact identification of these plants remains uncertain. What is clear is that instead of a plant that would have been a proper ingredient for the stew, the ignorant gatherer brings back a poisonous plant.

† *Fetch flour.* It is highly unlikely that flour would have the property of neutralizing the poison, so one must take this as a purely miraculous act.

‡ *sack.* This is the traditional rendering of the unique Hebrew term *tsiqalon*, from whence it has passed into general usage in the language. But some scholars, proposing a Ugaritic cognate, argue that it refers to a kind of grain.

Chapter 5

1. And Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man in the presence of his master and highly esteemed, for through him the LORD had granted victory to Aram, and the man was a valiant warrior stricken with skin-blanch.*
2. And Aram had sallied forth in raiding parties and captured a young girl from the land of Israel.†
3. And she said to her mistress, “Would that my master might come before the prophet who is in Samaria. Then he could cure him of his skin-blanch.”‡
4. And he sent and told his master, “Thus and so did the girl who is from the land of Israel speak.”
5. And the king of Aram said, “Go forth, and I shall send a letter to the King of Israel.” And he went, and he took in his hand ten talents of silver and six thousand pieces of gold and ten changes of garments.§
6. And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, saying, “And now, when this letter comes to you, look, I have sent to you my servant Naaman, and you shall cure him of his skin-blanch.”
7. And it happened when the king of Israel read the letter, he rent his garments and said, “Am I God, to deal death and life, that this person

* *for through him the LORD had granted victory to Aram.* This clause establishes the universalist perspective of the story, in which a prophet of Israel will perform a wonder for a non-Israelite. From the viewpoint of the Hebrew writer, it is the Lord, the God worship by Israel, who determines all events, though of course the Aramaean general could not be aware that he owes his victories to YHWH.

† *the land of Israel.* This designation is actually unusual and in all likelihood reflects the perception of the Aramaeans.

‡ *Would that my master might come before the prophet.* The Hebrew has only the implied verb “be.” To be or stand before someone implies a relationship of deference or even subservience, and the idiom recurs in the story. One notes that the captive Israelite girl appears to be on good terms with her Aramaean mistress, evincing solicitude for her mistress’ husband.

Skin-blanch. The Hebrew *tsara’at* is traditionally translated as “leprosy,” but the leading symptom mentioned in this narrative and elsewhere is a complete loss of pigmentation, whereas leprosy involves lesions and lumps in the skin and sometimes a slightly paler color but not the ghastly whiteness of which the biblical texts speak. This is, then, a disfiguring skin disease that remains unidentified, and hence the present translation, here and elsewhere, coins a name not to be found in dermatological manuals that refers to the whiteness.

§ *I shall send a letter to the king of Israel.* The king of Aram decides to intervene on behalf of his general on the highest diplomatic level, King to King. He barely registers the advice that came from the captive girl to turn to the prophet because his letter to the king of Israel makes no mention of it, in consequence of which the Israelite king is panicked.

Ten talents of silver and six thousand pieces of gold. This vast treasure is meant to be a gift or payment to the Israelite prophet.

- has sent to me to cure a man from his skin-blanch? For you must surely know and mark, pray, that he is seeking a pretext against me.”**
8. And it happened when Elisha, the man of God, heard that the king of Israel had rent his garments, he sent to the king, saying, “Why did you rend your garments? Let him come, pray, to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel.”††
 9. And Naaman came with his horses and his chariot and stood at the entrance to Elisha’s house. ††
 10. And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go and bathe seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored, and you will be clean.”
 11. And Naaman was furious, and he went off and said, “Look, I thought to myself, he will surely come out and stand and call in the name of the LORD his God and waved his hand toward the place and cure the skin-blanch person.§§
 12. Are not Amanah and Parpar the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not bathe in them and be clean?” And he turned and went off incensed.***
 13. And his servants approached and said, “Father! If the prophet told you to do something difficult, would you not do it? How much more when he has only said to you, ‘Bathe and be clean.’”†††

** *he is seeking a pretext against me.* Confronted with the bare request from the Aramaean king in his very brief missive to cure Naaman, the Israelite king construes the entire maneuver as a trap: when he fails to cure Naaman, the king of Aram will attack him.

†† *when Elisha...heard that the king of Israel had rent his garments.* Word of this public gesture of mourning or grief would have quickly spread.

†† *And Naaman came with his horses and his chariot.* Now we learn that the general has come to Samaria with a full military retinue.

and stood at the entrance of Elisha's house. Nevertheless, the distinguished general does not presume to march into the house of the man of God, but stands at the entrance, awaiting word. The word comes to him only through an intermediary, a messenger (evidently not Elisha's personal attendant Gehazi).

§§ *he will surely come out and stand and call in the name of the Lord his God and waved his hand.* Naaman had expected personal intervention by the prophet that involved invocation of the deities powerful name and magical hand gestures, probably over the "place" of the disease.

*** *Are not Amanah and Parpar the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel?* The masochists, after all, is situated at a fertile confluence of rivers, and to the Damascene eye, the Jordan is no more than a muddy rivulet. If simple bathing could cure the disease, he would have been better off doing it in Aram.

††† Alter's translation is actually, “*The prophet has spoken a great thing to you.*” The servants intuit that the ostensibly simple command to dip seven times in the Jordan is actually the direction for a miraculous cure.

How much more... It is a great thing that can be effected through an easy act.

14. And he went down and dipped in the Jordan seven times, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored, like the flesh of a young lad, and he was clean.*
15. And he went back to the man of God, he and all his camp, and he came and stood before him and said "Now, pray, I know that there is no god in all the earth except in Israel, and so, take, pray, a gift from your servant."†
16. And he said, "As the LORD lives, in Whose attendance I have stood, I will not take it." And he pressed him to take it but he refused.‡
17. And Naaman said, "If not, let your servant be given two mules' load of soil, for your servant will no longer perform burnt offering or sacrifice to other gods but to the LORD.§
18. For this thing may the LORD forgive me: when my master comes to the house of Rimmon to worship there and he leans on my arm and I worship in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive me in this thing for my worshipping in the house of Rimmon."**,**
19. And he said to him, "Go in peace." And he went away from him some distance.
20. And Gehazi, lad of Alisha man of God, thought: "look, my master has held back Naaman the Aramaean, not taking from his hand what he brought. As the LORD lives, I will run after him and take something from his hand."
21. And Gehazi chased after Naaman, and Naaman saw him running after him and alighted from the chariot to meet him and said, "Is all well?" And he said, "It is well.††

* *like the flesh of a young lad.* There is an interesting echo of the phrase here, *na'ar qaton*, with the designation of the captive girl who gave the advice, *na'arah qetanah*, "a young girl."

† *stood before him.* The posture, as noted above, is deferential.
there is no god in all the earth except in Israel. The miraculous cure converts the Aramaean general into a monotheist.

‡ *I will not take it.* Elisha does not seek payment for services. His payment is in the triumph of Naaman's conversion.

§ *let your servant be given two mules' load of soil.* Naaman assumes that proper sacrifice to YHWH can be offered only on the soil of Israel, and so he requests permission to take some of it back with him to Aram. Some scholars see in this a reflection of the quandary of the Israelites exiled after 721 BCE, though that is not a necessary inference.

** *the house of Rimmon.* This is the temple of the national God of Aram, evidently a storm-god.
to worship. Literally, "to bow down," this gesture being a synecdoche for worship.
and he leans on my arm. Given Naaman's position as accompanier of the king in the temple, which would be an official duty, he can scarcely avoid going through the outward motions of Rimmon worship.

†† *Is all well?* Seeing Elisha's attendant running after him, Naaman is alarmed that something may be amiss as far as the prophet is concerned.

22. My master sent me, saying, ‘Look, just now two lads from the high country of Ephraim of the acolyte prophets have come to me. Give them, pray, a talent of silver and two changes of garments.’”^{‡‡}
23. And Naaman said, “Be so kind as to take two talents.” And he pressed him, and he wrapped the two talents of silver in two bags, and the two changes of garments, he gave them to his two lads, and they bore them off before him.
24. And he came to the citadel and took them from their hand and lay them aside in the house and sent away the men, and they went off.
25. And he had come and was standing by his master, and Elisha said to him, “From where have you come, Gehazi?” And he said, “Your servant has not gone anywhere.”
26. And he said to him, “Did not my heart come along when a man turned back from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take silver and to take garments and olive trees and vineyards and sheep and cattle and slaves and slave girls?”^{§§}
27. May Naaman’s skin-blanch cling to you and to your seed forever!” And he went out from before him skin-blanch as snow.^{***}

^{‡‡} *My master sent me.* Gehazi is obliged to implement his greedy act by an outright lie: that his master need some of the proffered gift for two newly arrived acolyte prophets. He does not dare ask for the whole splendid gift, though Naaman generously gives him twice the amount of silver he requested.

^{§§} *Did not my heart come along.* At this juncture, for purposes necessary to the plot in which Gehazi’s base act is exposed, Elisha exercises clairvoyance.

olive trees and vineyards and sheep and cattle and slaves and slave-girls. These items, of course, are not part of the gift Gehazi extracted from Naaman, but Elisha implies that the talents of silver could serve to purchase these standard markers of wealth in the agricultural-pastoral society.

^{***} *May Naaman’s skin-blanch cling to you.* In the final turn of the universalist screw in this story, the rapacious and dishonest Israelite is stricken with the disease of which the Aramaean general, now a devout follower of the God of Israel, has been cured.