

2 KINGS 5

5:1

The phrase “great man with his master” means that Naaman was highly thought of by the king of Syria, who was probably Ben-Hadad II, the successor to Hazael, whom Elijah was told to anoint as king. Ben-Hadad’s wars with Israel and Judah are described in 1 Kings 20 and 22. Leprosy in the Bible was probably not the same illness that we call Hansen’s disease today, but it was definitely a skin-related illness. Probably the same term was used for every skin condition known to the biblical world.

5:2–4

“And the Syrians had gone out by companies” is a literal translation of a Semitic idiom, and it should be interpreted as “and the Syrians went out to raid.” Syrian soldiers would have rushed into an Israelite village, stolen anything of value, and kidnapped anyone who would make a good slave. Naaman’s wife’s servant was called a “little maid” and would likely have been an adolescent. We can assume that Naaman’s wife treated her well based on her desire to help Naaman recover from his illness.

5:5–7

The king of Israel at the time was Jehoram, whom Elisha reluctantly agreed to help in 2 Kings 3 in a campaign against the Moabites. Jehoram faced Ben-Hadad in 2 Kings 8, was wounded in that battle, and possibly as a result, lost the kingdom to Jehu.

5:8–11

Elisha didn’t even meet with Naaman but sent a messenger. This messenger was probably not Gehazi since he is named elsewhere, and it’s likely if it was him the text would name him here as well. “Strike his hand” might be better translated as “wave his hand.”

5:12

Because of the low elevation of the Jordan River and because it is fed by the Sea of Galilee instead of by springs or mountain run-off, Naaman's low opinion of the Jordan is justified. There are some very pure springs scattered throughout Israel, but no constant flowing rivers other than the Jordan. The Abana and Pharpar rivers are probably the modern Barada River that flows through Damascus. That two names are listed is probably the result of the river splitting near Damascus as it still does today right where it enters the city.

5:13–14

That Naaman's servants called him "father" is a little odd, especially considering that they called Naaman's wife "mistress" (verse 3), the feminine form of a Hebrew word for "lord."

5:15

Elisha lived near or on Mount Carmel on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and Naaman lived in Damascus, inland and farther north. The likely route Naaman would have taken was the King's Highway, which was a trade route that connected Egypt to Mesopotamia. Naaman would have traveled south on the King's Highway and then turned west, crossed the Jordan River, and gone through the Jezreel Valley to get to Carmel. When Naaman was dismissive of the Jordan in verse 12, he must have known the river already. Naaman would have been halfway to the King's Highway when he completed his Jordan River bathing, but he traveled back anyway to bear his new testimony of faith in God and offer a gift to Elisha.

5:16–19

Naaman wanted to take some dirt with him back to Damascus so that he could worship the god of the land of Israel. This idea that gods were attached to certain regions and to something like dirt was common thinking among ancient peoples. Rimmon, or sometimes Ramman, was the thunder god of the Aramaeans (Syrians). Naaman, uncharacteristically for a military commander, seems to ramble and repeat himself. Elisha in stark contrast spoke very little, and as noted in verse 11, this is the only time Elisha had any contact with Naaman.

5:20–22

This lie told by Gehazi hints that perhaps Elisha and the sons of the prophets served as some kind of monastic community who might get new members periodically showing up unannounced to join. Also, the new members may have come without any possessions or means to sustain themselves. A talent was about seventy-five pounds. Today, seventy-five pounds of silver is worth US\$20,000.

5:23–25

Gehazi's second lie, this time to Elisha, makes us wonder how Gehazi thought to deceive a prophet, especially when he had been around long enough to witness Elisha's revelatory knowledge.

5:26–27

Elisha's poetic response has some wordplay: the verb “turned,” like in English, can also mean “betray.” The Hebrew word for “silver” comes from the Hebrew word for “greed,” and likewise the Hebrew word for “garment” comes from the word for “treachery.” Note that there are a few different Hebrew words that the King James Version translates as “garments.” The first time “garment” is used in the King James Version the Hebrew word comes from “idol,” and the second time the word comes from “glory” (Genesis 9:23; 25:25).

We are not told anything else about Gehazi or his descendants. While it does seem harsh to curse unborn children with leprosy, consider that this story takes an enemy of Israel and turns him into a convert and also takes someone who could succeed Elisha as prophet and turns him into an outcast. The extreme nature of the curse underlined the morality broken by Gehazi in his betrayal of Elisha. Posterity was one of the most important things to the Israelites.

The leper's skin being as white as snow is also how it was described in Exodus 4:6 for Moses and in Numbers 12:10 for Miriam. The whiteness comes from dead skin shedding off white and flakey.

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