

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A.

Forty-Ninth Week - Monday

Hazael and Ben-Hadad

"So Hazael went to meet him [Elisha] and took a present with him, of every good thing of Damascus, forty camel-loads; and he came and stood before him, and said, 'Your son Ben-Hadad king of Syria has sent me to you, saying, "Shall I recover from this disease?"' And Elisha said to him, 'Go, say to him, "You shall certainly recover." However Yahweh has shown me that he will really die.' Then he set his countenance in a stare until he was ashamed; and the man of God wept. And Hazael said, 'Why is my lord weeping?' He answered, 'Because I know the evil that you will do to the children of Israel . . .' So Hazael said, "But what is your servant--a dog, that he should do this gross thing?' And Elisha answered, 'Yahweh has shown me that you will become king over Syria.' Then he departed from Elisha, and came to his master, who said to him, 'What did Elisha say to you?' And he answered, 'He told me you would surely recover.' But it happened on the next day that he took a thick cloth and dipped it in water, and spread it over his face so that he died; and Hazael reigned in his place" (2 Kings 8:9-15).

The great Ben-Hadad lies on a sickbed. Having heard that the famous prophet of Israel (who had healed his general Naaman) had come to Damascus, he sent a great officer named Hazael to ask him if he should recover from his disease.

Hazael arrived with the usual complimentary present, and it was in this instance such as became a great king--for no less than forty camels came laden with all the good things of Damascus. It is not, however, to be understood that each camel was burdened with as much as it could carry; for it is and always has been usual in the East--especially in gifts to or from kings--to render honor both to the giver and the receiver by distributing the articles among a number of human or animal bearers, and this greatly disproportionate to what they are able to carry. In other words, ten or more men, camels, or horses are employed to carry what would be but a light burden for one. It is a part of state custom, parallel to that of ours where six or eight strong horses draw carriages which one or two might pull with ease.

Still it was a royal offering, and we do not find that Elisha declined it as he had formerly that of Naaman. In this case, the name of the Lord would not in any way be dishonored but rather magnified by Elisha's acceptance of the gifts given him in the presence of the heathen. It served to signally mark in the eyes of the inhabitants of Damascus their king's appreciation of

the power and greatness of the God whose prophet Elisha was known to be, in addition to the comparative disparagement which was therefore cast upon Ben-Hadad's own idols. Either he had sought the assistance of his own gods in vain or thought it in vain to seek it.

The interview between the prophet and Hazael is very remarkable, and it is of some importance to the character of Elisha that it should be rightly understood. Hazael opened his mission thus: "Your son Ben-Hadad king of Syria has sent me to you, saying, 'Shall I recover from this disease?'" Elisha promptly replied, "Go, say to him, 'You shall certainly recover.'" That is, the disease with which he was stricken was not fatal but he might certainly recover from it--and would indeed recover if let alone. This was all that was required from Elisha, and he gave it.

But Elisha knew more upon which he was not consulted. He read the heart, the purposes, and the future life of Hazael and was willing to let him know it. So after a pause he added (addressing himself to Hazael personally and not as part of his response to the king), "However the LORD has shown me that he will really die." Much apprehension has arisen from regarding this as part of the response to be taken to the sick king, though the change of personal pronouns in the two sentences might alone suffice to show the difference--"You" in the first and "he" in the second.

Hazael then returned to his master and delivered the message Elisha intended for Ben-Hadad alone. But the very next day, it would seem that Hazael accomplished the purpose he had probably long contemplated and which the prophet had detected. He put his master to death, and in such a manner that the crime remained undetected with the king supposedly dying from his disease; and dying apparently childless, the wicked and unscrupulous general was able to secure his own ambition--being elevated to the throne of Syria.

The mode in which this regicide was committed is very singular and has been variously understood. It is said, "he took a thick cloth and dipped it in water, and spread it over his face so that he died." We have interpreted this as Hazael's act, as is commonly done. But there is an ambiguity in the original that renders it really uncertain whether this was done by the king's order for the purpose of alleviating his burning fever and so *caused* his death, or whether Hazael did it either violently so as to smother him or non-violently under the pretense of applying what he knew would prove a fatal remedy. Now supposing it was Hazael's own act, then it would meet his presumed objective of destroying the king without leaving any marks of violence that might lead to detection.

What our translator calls "a thick cloth" seems to mean some part of the bed furniture--probably the thick quilted coverlet still in use. It is an eastern practice in relieving some kinds of fever to wet the bedding, while in other kinds of fever such an application would be dangerous if not fatal. With reference to fevers of the former class, Bruce, speaking of the disorders common in the region of the Red Sea, states: "Violent fevers, called there *nedad*, make the principal figure in the fatal list, and generally terminate the third day in death. If the patient survives till the fifth day, he very often recovers by drinking water only and throwing a

quantity of cold water upon him, even in his bed, where he is permitted to lie without any attempt to make him dry or to change his bedding until another deluge adds to the first." We have ourselves received exactly this treatment under the orders of a native physician and recovered, though whether by reason of this treatment or in spite of it we do not know.

Now it may be supposed that Ben-Hadad's fever was not of the sort to which such treatment could bring relief, but yet Hazael recommended it with the knowledge that it was likely to be attended with fatal results. Or it may be that the fever was of the nature that it would respond favorably to such treatment, and that Hazael then took advantage of the opportunity by smothering or strangling the king under the pretense of laying over him the needed coverlet freshly dipped in water. Now the coverlets used in the East (where blankets are unknown) are thickly quilted with wool or cotton and take on a great weight when soaked in water. Hazael might therefore have found it to be the fittest instrument for killing his king without any suspicion arising from the coverlet being found saturated with water.

It grieves us to find some right-minded men, such as Dr. Chalmers, assenting to the notion that Elisha put it into Hazael's mind to murder his master. But, in the first place, there is no clear evidence that he did murder him or had any hand in producing his death. And in the second place, and supposing that this crime was done by his own hand, the tone of the narrative suggests that Elisha was rather intimating his knowledge of a purpose Hazael had already formed rather than suggesting anything new to his mind. All we can allow is that Hazael was watching what turn his master's disease would take with the hope that it would prove mortal and he would be spared an act of murder, and that the prophet's intimation that the king would recover led him at once to execute his purpose, being now aware of the result of the disease.