

## DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Forty-Ninth Week - Monday

NAAMAN THE SYRIAN

*"So he [Naaman] went down and dipped seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. And he returned to the man of God, he and all his aides, and came and stood before him; and he said, 'Indeed, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel; now therefore, please take a gift from your servant.' But he said, 'As Yahweh lives, before whom I stand, I will receive nothing.' And he urged him to take it, but he refused. So Naaman said, 'Then, if not, please let your servant be given two mule-loads of earth; for your servant will no longer offer either burnt offering or sacrifice to other gods, but to Yahweh" (2 Kings 5:14-17).*

There are a few points that especially awaken our curiosity and interest in this remarkable history of the Syrian general Naaman, and to this we shall limit our claim upon the reader's attention.

It has been asked, Why should Elisha refuse the presents offered by the grateful Syrian when he returned from the Jordan cured of his leprosy? We have shown that such presents were customary for an Oriental, and to decline them when offered was regarded as an incivility if not an outright affront. There must have been some reason, however; for on a subsequent occasion we find Elisha, while in Damascus, accepting without hesitation presents offered to him by the king of Syria. But the burden of the breach of etiquette lies on the side of Naaman himself. He ought to have presented his gift *before* he made his request. To offer it after the request had been granted divested the gift of its grace, giving it instead the stigma of a poor return for such a vast obligation laid upon him by the prophet.

But this omission was scarcely Naaman's fault but arose from the peculiarity of the circumstances. Seeing that Naaman went first to the king of Israel and was there referred to Elisha, the prophet already knew his errand before Naaman came. Elisha was thus enabled to send his directions to him the moment he appeared at his door without giving him time to offer his gift. But now being offered after the cure, they were seen in a different light, and Naaman therefore had no reason to feel offended at their being refused; and, in fact, he was not offended.

Now as Elisha might decline without offense gifts thus offered, he wisely chose to do so. And why? Because the Lord would not have the miraculous conversion of a soul and the healing of a leper diminished by a reward from a recent convert whose strength was small though his wealth great. God's prophets never stand in such deep needs that God must be dishonored by the means of their supply.

But what are we to say concerning the new convert's request to be allowed to take two mules' burden of earth away with him? That he asked at all implies that Naaman desired the prophet's sanction for the use to which he designed to put it; otherwise he could have easily secured any amount of earth on his way home. What, then, was its purpose? It may perhaps be gathered from his own words. He says that his healing miracle had convinced him that "there was no God in all the earth but in Israel," and that he would "henceforth offer neither burnt-offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the Lord."

It will here be observed that Naaman was converted but not yet instructed. He believed in the power and greatness of the God who had healed him, but he still regarded him as the God of Israel, whose power was chiefly exercised, if not confined, to that land. He would therefore carry a portion of this land with him that he might, as it were, have an Israel even in Damascus, believing as he did that such worship could be rendered more acceptable in connection with this sacred soil.

Some think Naaman intended to make an altar with it, since the altars of Israel were altars of earth. But he was not likely to know this; and besides, local altars were disapproved by the law. In addition, this would have involved the grievous irregularity of the new convert performing a function, that of offering sacrifice, which was reserved to the priests. If this had been his meaning, Elisha would not have neglected to correct him.

Now may it not be that Naaman contemplated forming a spot on which he might offer up his devotions to the God of Israel? If we look to the uses to which the Orientals apply the soil of places accounted holy, it is possible this may be the exact reason for Naaman's singular request. To the Mohammedans at the present day, the sacred soil is that of Mecca, and that man accounts himself happy who has in his possession the smallest portion of it for use in his devotions. He carries it with him in a small bag, and before he begins his prayers he puts this small portion on the ground in such a manner that his head rests upon it in his frequent prostrations.

Among the ancient Jews, we find that prayer was always preceded by a cleansing washing, and where water was scanty earth could be used. May it not be that Naaman, in his regret at having belittled the waters of Israel, has now rushed to the other extreme, conceiving that no water but that of Israel could be fit for ceremonial cleansing, and that since the water of Israel was not attainable in Damascus its earth might be used instead?

Then again, the appreciation of sacred ground is so intense in the East that there is a craving

desire to be buried in it. Corpses are often carried to great distances for interment therein. When this is impracticable, the next goal is to secure a portion of it so that one may be buried "representatively" in sacred ground by being laid upon some of it or having a pillow filled with it under his head, or even a small portion of it placed upon his body.

With such diversified uses and applications of soil counted sacred, it is possible that Naaman had some other and less objectionable use for his two mules' burden of earth than is usually ascribed to him.