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Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts

Lambert Jacobsz
(Amsterdam ca. 1598 – 1636 Leeuwarden)

ca. 1628–33
oil on canvas
112 x 162.6 cm
LJ-100

How to cite

Bakker, Piet. "Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts" (2020). In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge. New York, 2023–. https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/elisha-refusing-naamans-gifts/ (accessed November 10, 2026).

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Lambert Jacobsz's *Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts* depicts an episode from the Old Testament story of Naaman, the widely admired commander of the Syrian army, and the Prophet Elisha, who cured him of leprosy. To demonstrate his gratitude, Naaman, wearing a richly decorated turban and pale turquoise kaftan, came before the prophet to offer Elisha precious gifts, including the purple cloak on which he rests his left hand. The aged prophet, however, refused Naaman's gifts and, placing his hand on an open Bible, explained to the commander that God, not he, had healed Naaman (2 Kings 5:1–16).

In this quiet and restrained scene, Lambert Jacobsz placed Naaman in the center of the composition and gave him added prominence through his slightly larger scale and the brilliant colors of his turban and kaftan. The balding and aged prophet, in contrast, is dressed soberly in a brown habit. The artist carefully modelled the faces of these two protagonists, paying great attention to their facial expressions. He focused particularly on Naaman's gaze as he quietly reflects upon the prophet's reasons for refusing to accept his gifts of appreciation—the moment of revelation when Naaman came to understand that "there is no God in all the world except in Israel."

Among the onlookers to this encounter are Naaman's servants and soldiers, as well as Elisha's servant Gehazi, the attentive young man at the far right. Gehazi, as is recounted in a subsequent episode in the biblical story, follows Naaman after the Syrian commander leaves Elisha and accepts the gifts intended for his master, falsely telling Naaman that Elisha had sent him to do so (2 Kings 5:17–27). When Elisha became aware of Gehazi's duplicity, he punished his servant by infecting him with the disease from which Naaman had just been cured.

Only a few Dutch paintings depicting this biblical narrative have survived, most of them by artists working in Amsterdam and Haarlem in the first half of the 1600s. Among them are paintings by Lambert Jacobsz's teacher Jan Pynas (1581/2–1631), who depicted the subject in a 1627 painting, now in the Old Catholic Church in Leiden, and one by Pieter de Grebber (ca. 1600–1652/3), who executed the biblical narrative as a portrait historié for the regents of the Haarlem Leprozenhuis (Leper Asylum) in 1637 **(fig 1)**.[1] De Grebber's work shows some affinities with Jacobsz's painting in its compositional format and half-length depiction of elaborately dressed figures, but the two paintings differ greatly in character and in their treatment of the biblical subject.

Although the story of Naaman and Elisha was infrequently depicted by other artists, Jacobsz painted episodes from this story at least six times in the late 1620s and 1630s, including three scenes with small-scale figures and three with large-scale figures.[2]

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Pieter de Grebber, *The Prophet Elisha Refuses the Gifts of Naaman*, 1637, oil on canvas, 120 x 185.5 cm, Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, inv. no. I-103, Photo: Margareta Svensson.



Fig 2. Lambert Jacobsz, *Naaman Urges Elisha to Accept Some Gifts, but Elisha Refuses Them (2 Kings 5:16)*, 1633, oil on panel, 85 x 115 cm, present location unknown, RKDimages (ill. no. 000014126).



Fig 3. Lambert Jacobsz, *Elisha and Gehazi*, ca. 1629, oil on canvas, 82 x 103 cm, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, inv. no. 57-013.



Fig 4. Lambert Jacobsz, *Elisha and Gehazi*, 1629, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 84 cm, Landesmuseum, Hannover, inv. no. PAN 996, ©Landesmuseum

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One of Jacobsz's early portrayals of this subject, which is known only from a black-and-white photograph **(fig 2)**, has compositional elements similar to those seen in *Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts*, such as the interaction between Naaman and Elisha. Not only is Elisha's gesture of refusal reminiscent of that in the Leiden Collection painting, but Gehazi similarly stands behind the prophet in both works. Nevertheless, the now-lost painting represents an episode that immediately precedes the one Jacobsz depicted in the Leiden Collection painting. As a result, the earlier work lacks the spiritual and reflective character that is so poignant in the master's later rendering of this biblical narrative.

Lambert Jacobsz and his many assistants produced history scenes with small figures throughout his career, but works with large figures—such as this one in the Leiden Collection—were made only for a short while and overlapped with Jacob Backer's stay in Leeuwarden.[3] Like Jacobsz, Jacob Backer (1608/9–51) was a Mennonite who grew up among fellow believers on Amsterdam's Nieuwendijk. He had also trained with Jan Pynas. Around 1627, after finishing his training, Backer moved to Leeuwarden to assist his former neighbor with the production of paintings, especially large-figure history pieces.[4] The collaboration between Jacobsz and Backer, his main assistant, must have been harmonious. Josua Bruyn once remarked that the large-figure paintings produced in this workshop—the Backer-like Jacobsz and the Jacobsz-like Backer paintings—were difficult to distinguish.[5] One example of how closely related the works of these painters were during this period is *The Tribute Money* in Stockholm. This painting was long believed to have been painted by Lambert Jacobsz, but recently has been attributed to Jacob Backer.[6]

Since Jacobsz did not execute large figure pieces after Backer's departure, *Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts* must have been painted between 1628, shortly after Backer arrived in Leeuwarden, and 1633, when he returned to Amsterdam. During the same period, Jacobsz painted two other large-figure paintings depicting Elisha rebuking Gehazi in the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston **(fig 3)** and in the Landesmuseum Hannover **(fig 4)**.[7] In both the Kingston and Hannover paintings, the artist focused on the interactions of the two protagonists, with the elderly prophet admonishing his chastened servant by wagging his finger.

Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts was not always attributed to Lambert Jacobsz. When the painting first appeared on the market in 2005, it was given to Pieter de Grebber.[8] As Albert Blankert rightly recognized, however, this attribution is not tenable for stylistic reasons, despite the fact that Jacobsz knew De Grebber's work.[9] Blankert also pointed out that the way in which the old Elisha and young Naaman face each other is comparable to the confrontation between Elisha and Gehazi in the Hannover painting.[10] Other arguments reinforce the attribution of the Leiden Collection

Hannover – ARTHOTEK.



Fig 5. Lambert Jacobsz, *The Disobedient Prophet*, 1620s, oil on canvas, 107 x 136 cm, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, inv. no. NM 6880

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painting to Lambert Jacobsz. For example, the artist often divided the picture plane and juxtaposed his main protagonists in this manner, as in *The Disobedient Prophet* in the Nationalmuseum Stockholm **(fig 5)**.[11] The old prophet in that painting, moreover, resembles Elisha.[12]

A final question concerns patronage. Since documents about a commission have not been preserved, it is not known for whom Lambert painted *Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts* or where it was originally intended to be displayed. Could he have executed it for the Leprozenhuis in Leeuwarden, much as Pieter de Grebber did in 1637 for the regents of the Leprozenhuis in Haarlem, or as Ferdinand Bol would do in 1661 for the Leprozenhuis in Amsterdam? It seems unlikely that Jacobsz's depiction of this Biblical story would have been suitable for the Regents Chamber in the Leprozenhuis in Leeuwarden. His painting does not focus on Naaman's recovery from leprosy or on Elisha's refusal to be rewarded, but rather on Naaman's conversion to the true faith.[13]

Lambert Jacobsz's interpretation of the story is consistent with Mennonite beliefs. A person is not born a Mennonite, but only becomes one when mature enough to decide based on personal belief to follow the Christian faith, much like Naaman, who came to that revelation through the actions and words of Elisha. In *Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts*, Jacobsz, a devout Mennonite teacher and biblical expert, was more interested in conveying the conversion of a great leader to the Christian faith than in portraying physical drama.[14] With the painting in The Leiden Collection, Jacobsz showed himself to be both a talented painter and an earnest Mennonite teacher.

- Piet Bakker, 2020

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Endnotes

1. Jan Pynas, *Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts* (Oud-Katholieke Kerk, Leiden); see the RKD website. In De Grebber's painting, the patrons assume the roles of Naaman and three of his servants. For an extensive discussion of this work, see Neeltje Köhler, ed., *Painting in Haarlem 1500–1850: The Collection of the Frans Hals Museum* (Ghent, 2006), 468–69. Originating around the same time are versions of the subject by Jacob I de Wet (1610–75) and Simon Kick (1603–52). Jacob de Wet, *Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts* (present whereabouts unknown); Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler,* vol. 6, *Nachträge, Ortsregister, Ikonographisches Register, Bibliographie, Künstlerverzeichnis* (Landau, 1983), no. 2847; see also the RKD website. Simon Kick, *Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts*, 1644 (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie); Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, vol. 3, *B. Keil – J. Ovens* (Landau, 1983), 1630, no. 635 (as Haarlem master); see also the RKD website.

   The two works of this subject by Abraham van Dijck (1635/6–80) and Ferdinand Bol (1616–80) date from much later. Abraham van Dijck, *Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts* (present whereabouts unknown); Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, vol. 1, *J.A. Backer – A. van Dijck* (Landau, 1983), 669, no. 358; see also the RKD website. See Albert Blankert, *Kunst als regeringszaak in Amsterdam in de 17e eeuw* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Royal Palace) (Lochem, 1975), 41–46.

2. The first small-figure picture is known only from a description in Lambert's inventory, where it can be gleaned that a "landscape" formed the backdrop for Gehazi's attempt to inveigle Naaman into giving him the gifts. See Hendrik Luitje Straat, "Lambert Jacobsz, schilder," *De Vrije Fries* 28 (1928): 74. "Noch een ander landschap met een groote ruine ende een rivire daer op de voorgront staet Naomi [Naaman] sprekende met Gehasij des propheten Elisei knecht die hem naegelopen compt ende carosse int verschiet hem verwachtende. L.J" (Yet another landscape with a large ruin and a river within the foreground Naaman speaking to Gehazi, the prophet Elisha's servant, who came after him, and for whom a carriage waits in the distance). Another composition with small-scale figures is the 1635 *Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts* in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

3. Jasper Hillegers, "Lambert Jacobsz (1598–1636) en zijn werkplaats. Atelierpraktijk in Leeuwarden omstreeks 1630," *De Vrije Fries* 89 (2009): 67–92.

4. The practice in Lambert Jacobsz's workshop included the frequent variation and copying of originals by some leading painters of the time, such as Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), Jan Lievens (1607–74), and Gerrit von Honthorst (1592–1656). Jacobsz also painted original compositions, of which his assistants made copies and variations. On Backer in his Leeuwarden period, see Jasper Hillegers, "Lambert Jacobsz (1598–1636) en zijn werkplaats. Atelierpraktijk in Leeuwarden omstreeks 1630," *De Vrije Fries* 89 (2009): 74–85; and Peter van den Brink, *Jacob Backer (1608/9–1651)* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Aachen, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum) (Zwolle, 2008), 30–34, 204–11, nos. A1–A16.

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5. For Bruyn's remark, see Jasper Hillegers, "Lambert Jacobsz (1598–1636) en zijn werkplaats: Atelierpraktijk in Leeuwarden omstreeks 1630," *De Vrije Fries* 89 (2009): 78, which refers to Josua Bruyn, "Boekbespreking Werner Sumowski, Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler, VI," *Oud Holland* 110 (1996), 167.

6. Jacob Backer, *The Tribute* Money, 1630s (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm); see Görel Cavalli-Björkman, *Dutch and Flemish Paintings*, vol. 2, *Dutch Paintings c. 1600–c. 1800* (Stockholm, 2005), 59, no. 78. Another example can be found in Lambert Jacobsz's estate inventory, in which Jacob Backer's name is later added to a large painting of "Paul with a sword," that was initially only attributed to Lambert Jacobsz. See Hendrik Luitje Straat, "Lambert Jacobsz: schilder," *De Vrije Fries* 28 (1928): 71, no. 5, S. Paulus met sijn sweert groot L. Jacobs selffs [added later] off J[acob] A[riens Backer].

7. See Piet Bakker, *De Friese schilderkunst in de Gouden Eeuw* (Zwolle, 2008), 140, fig. 122. Lambert Jacobsz, *Elisha and Gehazi* (Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queens University, Kingston). This painting was first attributed to Lambert Jacobsz (and dated around 1630) by Jasper Hillegers; see Jasper Hillegers, "Lambert Jacobsz (1598–1636) en zijn werkplaats: Atelierpraktijk in Leeuwarden omstreeks 1630," *De Vrije Fries* 89 (2009): 67–92. See also Jasper Hillegers, "Lambert Jacobsz: Elisha and Gehazi," in *Salomon Lilian Old Masters 2012*, Jasper Hillegers et al. (Amsterdam, 2012), 44–47.

8. Sale, Sotheby's, London, 7 December 2005, no. 6 (ascribed to Pieter de Grebber by Fred Meijer). This attribution by Fred Meijer was largely based on an alleged kinship with De Grebber's *Belshazzar's Great Feast* from 1625 in Museum Schloss Wilhelmshöhe, Kassel. Moreover, the figure of Elisha was thought to resemble the old man at the left in De Grebber's *Conferring of the Sword on the Coat-of-Arms of Haarlem* from 1630.

   Pieter de Grebber, *Belshazzar's Great Feast,* 1625 (Museum Schloss Wilhelmshöhe, Kassel). For example, Naaman's turban and sash—as well as the sash of his youngest servant—feature the same decorations as Belshazzar's sash. Similar decorations are also visible on the sash of one of the servants in De Grebber's version of *Elisha's Refusal* for the Leprozenhuis in Haarlem, while the jewels on Naaman's and Belshazzar's turbans are nearly identical. Furthermore, the uniform purple color and trim of the gift cloak given in the Leiden Collection painting are somewhat similar to that in De Grebber's *The Wrath of Ahasuerus*, 1628 (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm); see Görel Cavalli-Björkman, *Dutch and Flemish Paintings*, vol. 2, *Dutch Paintings c. 1600–c. 1800* (Stockholm, 2005), 213, no. 212. I am grateful to Jasper Hillegers for alerting me to these similarities.

9. Jacobsz acted as an art dealer in Leeuwarden, which allowed him to have close ties with artists and dealers in other cities. For example, mentioned in Jacobsz's stock inventory is a *Naomi and Ruth* by De Grebber, which would have been sent to the artist in Leeuwarden from Haarlem, or from Amsterdam via Hendrick Uylenburgh.

10. Albert Blankert in a letter to Jack Kilgore, 5 October 2006, at The Leiden Collection, New York. Blankert also noted the strong resemblance of some figures in *Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts* with those in Jacobsz's *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard* in the Musée des Beaux-Arts et de la Céramique de Rouen and especially with those in the painting with the same subject in the Musée des

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Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie de Besançon. *The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard* (Musée des Beaux-Arts et de la Céramique de Rouen), and *The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard* (Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie de Besançon); see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälder der Rembrandt-Schüler*, vol. 5, *Nachträge, Ortsregister, Ikonographisches Register, Bibliographie* (Landau, 1994), nos. 3238 and 3913.

11. The pictorial source for this "confrontation scheme" may be Peter Paul Rubens's *The Tribute Money* (Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco), which was known in the Northern Netherlands from a print by Lucas Vorsterman. Knowledge of this print is evident in Jacob Backer's *The Tribute Money* in Stockholm, which he executed during his Leeuwarden period. See Görel Cavalli-Björkman, *Dutch and Flemish* Paintings, vol. 2, *Dutch Paintings c. 1600–c. 1800* (Stockholm 2005), 59, no. 78.

12. The model for the elderly man was also used for a version of *The Tribute Money* in Stockholm by Jacob Backer in his Leeuwarden period; see Görel Cavalli-Björkman, *Dutch and Flemish Paintings*, vol. 2, *Dutch Paintings c. 1600–c. 1800* (Stockholm 2005), 59, no. 78. For comparable tronies of old men executed by Jacob Backer in this period, see Jacob Backer, *The Head of an Apostle*, ca. 1631 (Private collection, United States); Peter van den Brink, *Jacob Backer (1608/9–1651)* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Aachen, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum) (Zwolle, 2008), 44, fig. 32; 206, no. A4.

    However, it cannot be entirely ruled out that Jacob Backer also contributed to the painting. Backer had a great reputation as a skilled painter of finely formed hands. Elisha's hands are exceptionally beautifully shaped and contrast strongly with the usually somewhat clumsy hands painted on other original work by Lambert Jacobsz. Peter van den Brink, *Jacob Backer (1608/9–1651)* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Aachen, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum) (Zwolle, 2008), 32.

13. The regents of the Leprozenhuizen in Haarlem and Amsterdam seem to have used Naaman's story to show their integrity, as city councils often fall back on stories from classical history. According to Blankert, the subject had a twofold significance for the regents: first, Elisha's refusal symbolized the regents' own rectitude and, second, the example of Gehazi was a cautionary note for their servants that they would pay a heavy price for deception. See Albert Blankert, *Kunst als regeringszaak in Amsterdam in de 17e eeuw* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Royal Palace) (Lochem, 1975), 41–46. Jacobsz's interpretation of this episode focuses on faith and not questions of civic virtues.

14. Because of Jacobsz's painting's devotional content, it is tempting to assume that it was intended for the Mennonite Church (*Vermaning*) he cofounded, and where he delivered the first sermon on 7 August 1631; see the biography of Lambert Jacobsz in this catalogue. His representation of Naaman and Elisha's story would have been a very appropriate background for the many baptisms Jacobsz himself performed in this church. However, as noted, nothing is known about a commission, and it therefore remains uncertain for whom or which institution Jacobsz originally made this painting.

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Provenance

- Private Collection (sale, Sotheby's, London, 7 December 2005, no. 6, unsold).
- Jack Kilgore & Co., Inc., New York, 2006.
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2006.

Exhibition History

- Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam, "Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection," 4 February–27 August 2023, no. 6 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr., Christiaan Vogelaar, and Caroline van Cauwenberge. *Rembrandt and His Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection.* Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam. Zwolle, 2023, 40–43, no. 6. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Technical Summary

The painting is on a fine plain-weave canvas support. The original support has been lined and its tacking margins have been removed. In the past, the edges of the painting appear to have been folded over a smaller stretcher about an inch from the current edge. The present format appears to be at, or near, the original dimensions.

An overall warm gray ground has been applied to the painting. The artist began the composition on top of the ground by painting in part of the architectural setting, leaving a reserve for figures such as Naaman, Elisha, and Gehazi. In contrast, the figures in the background on the left side were painted on top of the brown background paint. Small sections of the ground have been left visible between some of the brushstrokes. At times, these slivers of warm gray act as a transitional midtone, as in the lower contour of Elisha's sleeve where it overlaps with the white page of his book.

The artist worked with loose and gestural brushwork. Some paint layers were thinly applied, as in sections of the brown background and the plum-colored textile held by Naaman's attendant. In the more thickly painted central figures, the artist used dabs of paint to imitate metallic reflections in Naaman's garments, as well as in the highlights and other light-colored details in the textiles. In general, he painted directly onto the canvas,

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working both wet into wet and over dried paint layers. He did make use of translucent glazes in certain areas, however, such as the shadows of the red garments and the figures' lips.

The paint layers are generally in good condition. There are some old damages to the canvas support with associated paint losses, as in the two figures immediately to the left of Naaman. Scattered pinpoint losses are also found in the more thinly painted areas. The painting's present restoration integrates these condition issues and unifies the composition well.

– Gerrit Albertson, 2020

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