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Pastoral Sensitivity To Converts: The Case Of Elisha's Response To Naaman In 2 Kings 5:19

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Abstract

2 Kings 5:1-27 tells the story of Naaman's journey to Samaria in search of his healing. His physical healing is accompanied by an inner spiritual journey towards faith in the God of Israel. The narrative contains the interesting motif found in some classical narratives like the book of Kings where the foreigner comes to Israel, undergoes a unique experience of YHWH, praises him and departs. This is unlike the negative portrayal of foreigners in some post-exilic narratives like the book of Daniel where they experience punishment before they come to know and confess the greatness of YHWH. As Naaman undergoes a conversion he decides to worship YHWH, which puts him in a dilemma. How does he worship YHWH in his country and still bend down before Rimmon while performing his official duties? His situation reveals a typical challenge faced by people who embrace new religions. How do they handle the conflicts they encounter especially during the period of transition from their former ways to the new faith? This is a crucial matter and makes one to suggest that missionaries need to be well prepared to meet the recipients of the gospel message in their concrete realities of life so as to offer them the appropriate accompaniment. Naaman makes a bizarre request at the end of his healing. The prophet does not condemn him in 2 Kings 5:19 but simply responds: "go in peace".

This response provides a good example of the appropriate way to handle new converts.

Introduction

The necessity to translate Christianity when it crosses cultural boundaries has been illustrated in several accounts in Lamin Sanneh's study that covers over twenty centuries of missionary activities.¹ As missiologists have also insisted, messengers need to translate the message of the gospel in terms of its language and culture so as to make it appropriate to its recipients.² When missionaries cross cultures in order to evangelize, the evangelized often experience not only cultural conflicts, but also some conflict of religious obligations. This is because those called to the new faith are not called from a vacuum, without a religious or cultural context.³ Therefore, while new converts journey towards a new religion the change in life is often gradual and the transition could take some time.

The story of the healing of Naaman, like some classical biblical narratives, contains a fascinating motif of a foreigner who comes to Israel, undergoes a unique experience of YHWH, praises him

¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

² See Charles H. Kraft ed., *Appropriate Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005).

³ The call of Abraham, for instance, did not take place in a vacuum. God employed the ancient Near Eastern understanding of treaty and the reality of idol worship with which Abraham was familiar in calling him. See Robert L. Gallagher, "The Hebraic Covenant as a Model for Contextualization," in *Appropriate Christianity*, 135-154; Brian K. Petersen, "A Brief Investigation of Old Testament Precursors to the Pauline Missiological Model of Cultural Adaptation," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 24/3 (2007) 117-129.

and then leaves.⁴ In such narratives we find that gentiles are represented positively as models of faith and of the move to praise the God of Israel. In the story of the healing of Naaman, more than just a journey in search of a physical healing from leprosy, it is a story of conversion. The narrator has artistically worked the narrative in such a way that the gentile is brought to recognize the God of Israel, proclaim his power and greatness, and then depart.⁵

It is remarkable to note the fact that, in the midst of the extraordinary experiences that lead to the confession of the God of Israel and the attraction to tarry in Israel, the foreigner does not remain in the land of Israel but returns to his nation. In other words, as crucial as the praise of God is in the narrative, it is even more remarkable that the foreigner, after experiencing the greatness of God, leaves. The narrator highlights the tension in the convert between the urge to stay in Israel and the need to return to his home. It is this tension and the conflicts associated with the moment of transition with respect to the conversion of Naaman that this paper considers. After the healing of Naaman he tries to offer the prophet some gifts and upon the prophets refusal Naaman promises to continue worshipping YHWH when he returns home.

⁴ We can see this pattern in the narratives of the visit of the queen of Sheba to Solomon in 1 Kings 10:1-13 and the healing of the Syrian Naaman in 2 Kings 5:1-27. A similar event is found in the story of Jethro, a paradigmatic gentile, who heard and came (Exod 18:1-5), praised (18:10-11) and later departed (18:27). As foreigners who confess the greatness and uniqueness of Israel's God, one may refer to them as converts journeying from error and disbelief to truth and belief.

⁵ It is striking to point out that this structure in classical narratives, like the books of Kings, differs from that in post-exilic narratives like the book of Daniel where the foreigners are negatively presented as they experience some punishment in the course of their encounter and such recognition (see Dan 4-6).

He begs to take home some soil that he might raise an altar for YHWH; in other words, we notice the conflict of religious obligations. The question is, why does Naaman go back to his land if he has become a convert and returning home puts his practice of the Yahwistic religion at risk? Is that a sign that he is not yet ready for the new way? But the story is not complete if he does not return home. He asks to take some soil home and he begs for forgiveness in advance for bending down in the house of Rimmon. The prophet does not explicitly challenge Naaman but simply bids him farewell.

The response of Elisha to Naaman's request shows the prophet's awareness of the difficult plight of Naaman and his readiness to help. Elisha says "Go in peace" (2 Kings 5:19). This statement has attracted varying interpretations because of its paucity. Is the prophet condemning a syncretic and hypocritical way of life or is he being genuinely sensitive to the pastoral need of the Aramean general who has just decided to, henceforth, give his allegiance to no other god but to the God of Israel?⁶ I submit that Elisha's

⁶ Some authors see Elisha giving his blessings to Naaman. See D. J. Wiseman, "Is It Peace?: Covenant and Diplomacy," *VT* 32/3 (1982) 311-26, 324; Robert L. Cohn, "Form and Perspective in 2 Kings V," *VT* XXXIII, 2 (1983) 171-84, 179; Alan W. Smith, "Naaman and Elisha: Healing, Wholeness and the Task of Religious Education," *Religious Education* 89/2 (1994) 205-19, 210; Terence E. Fretheim, *First and Second Kings* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 153; For authors who interpret Elisha's response in terms of indifference, see Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1988) 65; Walter A. Maier III, "The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61/3 (1997) 177-96, 192-93; Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 210; Volkmar Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings* (trans. Anselm Hagedorn; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 260; Allan L. Effa, "Prophets, Kings, Servants, and Lepers: A Missiological Reading of an Ancient Drama," *Missiology: An International Review* 35/3 (2007) 305-13,

response is most propitious and provides a good example to missionaries with respect to sensitivity to the situation of new converts.⁷

I will analyze the narrative paying attention to the following typical structure: Firstly, the initiation of the journey, that is, a word is received in the foreign land that leads the foreign character usually of renown, to embark on a journey to Israel; The second is the encounter, that is, the foreigner's experience, which occasions the transformation in him and his subsequent response, that includes the confession of the God of Israel; and thirdly the gift-giving and departure.

Analysis of 2 Kings 5:1-27

Background

The story begins with the presentation of Naaman as a full-fledged character.⁸ He is the commander of the army of the king of Aram,

311; Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, "The Story of Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-19): Implications for Mission Today," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 96/1 (2008) 27-41, 37.

⁷ Using linguistic analysis and cultural hermeneutics, Daniel Shinjong Baeq ("Contextualizing Religious Form and Meaning: A Missiological Interpretation of Naaman's Petitions 2 Kings 5:15-19" *Biblical Interpretation* 27/4 [2010] 197-207) shows in the encounter between Naaman and Elisha the biblical meaning embedded in heathen forms.

⁸ The lengthy, lavish and positive appraisal of the archenemy of Israel at the beginning of the story calls for suspicion. This general does not only enjoy the favor of Aram's king, but also of Israel's God. Cohn observes that "in contrast to the usual pithiness of biblical character description, this author expands upon the praiseworthiness of Naaman. In fact he reverses the normal word order (consecutive verb-subject) in each half of the verse in order to underscore the distinctiveness of the subject, Naaman." Cf. Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 173.

is important to his lord, and high in favor. *Liphne* (“before, in front”) also means “the attitude of the party concerned in terms of judgment, will, approval, and the like.”⁹ Naaman is mentioned in reference to the king of Aram but the king is not named (v. 1). Through the power of the Lord he has brought victory to Aram. Attributing Naaman’s victories to YHWH already highlights the all-encompassing sovereignty of Israel’s God.¹⁰ Although it is not altogether clear if the victories of Naaman have come against Israel, “victory by the Lord” is the standard way of expressing Israel’s defeat as God’s people (cf. Judg 6:1; 13:1; 2 Chron 28:5; Dan 1:2), for the hand of the Lord needs to allow it before any foreign army can be victorious over Israel according to Israelite theology. Naaman’s wife is mentioned in reference to him and the young girl who was taken captive from their war with Israel is attendant to Naaman’s wife. The narrative, as it stands, does not give a prominent place to the young girl. A few commentators have pointed to the patriarchal background of the text as being responsible for this brevity.¹¹ Without the suggestion of the young slave girl the story would not have begun.¹² Naaman, however,

⁹ Cf. English “countenanced by,” as E. A. Speiser (*Genesis*, AB; New York: Doubleday, 1964, lxviii, 51) points out; and see Gen 6:11; 10:9; 17:18; 27:7; 43:32; and Num 32:20. Akk. *panū*, “face” is used in similar terms; cf. Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 67.

¹⁰ The victory we hear about over Israel perhaps refers to the victory in the conflict over Ramoth-gilead (1 Kings 22:19-23 – Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.5 has it that Naaman was the one who shot the arrow that “accidentally” killed Ahab in that battle. See also the *Targum* on 2 Chron 18). Cf. Choon-Leong Seow “The First & Second Books of Kings,” in Leander E. Keck et al, eds., *New Interpreters Bible III* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999) 1-295, 193.

¹¹ Jean Kyoung Kim, “Reading and Retelling Naaman’s Story (2 Kings 5),” *JSOT* 30/1 (2005) 49-61.

¹² Walter Brueggemann, “A Brief Moment for a One-Person Remnant (2 Kings 5:2-3),” *BTB* 31 (2001) 53-59.

embodies contradiction within himself. Though a great warrior, he was a leper (v.1): *wehaish hayah gibbur chayil metzura'*

God is revealed here through the instrumentality of the prophet using his powers on behalf of a gentile enemy. Naaman suffers from a serious disease. It is agreed among scholars that the use of the word "leprosy" for the Hebrew *tzarat* is not medically accurate. It is not the type of leprosy we know today (i.e., Hansen's disease). It is more afflictions of various sorts which here may refer to psoriasis or vitiligo.¹³ His disease involved some social stigma and was associated with death (Num 12:10-12). To that extent, though the Lord used him to bring victory to Aram, he had not yet realized the power of God. This contradiction needs to be resolved before he can univocally give testimony to the greatness of the God of Israel. It is the prophet in Samaria alone who can bring resolution into the life of Naaman as finds expression in the wish of the slave girl. The young girl's direct speech presents her perspective of her relationship to Naaman. She calls him Master (*adoni* v. 3). Using Chatman's categories of point of view as described by Berlin¹⁴, Naaman is the interest point of the story. A powerful gentile is converted and he glorifies the Lord. In the context of defeat and exile, this type of story is very marketable because it shows that "despite the tragedy of defeat and captivity, it seems, greater good may be achieved."¹⁵

¹³ See David P. Wright and Richard N. Jones, "Leprosy," in *ABD* 4:277-82.

¹⁴ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns 1994) 47.

¹⁵ Seow, "Kings," 193.

Initiation of the Journey

Salvation comes to the Aramean captor through the Israelite captive.¹⁶ The young girl from Israel, a more active agent in the story than her mistress who seems to be a functionary present only in order to advance the story, speaks to her: “I wish Master could come before the prophet in Samaria; he could cure him of his leprosy” (v. 3). The words of the young girl are repeated by Naaman to his lord. The narrator does not say exactly what Naaman told his lord but we are told that he said exactly what the young girl had said (*kezoth wekezoth dibberah ha na'arah*).

Even though the narrative is very brief about the slave girl's intervention, her role in the story is very significant. She is inferior to the characters in the story who are not slaves, but her speech leads to Naaman's healing. She sets the whole healing process in motion. It is her intervention 'from below' that leads to Naaman's recovery and conversion.¹⁷ It is interesting that after his healing, Naaman is going to be assimilated to the young slave girl on the level of the skin and perhaps also in terms of being a messenger of YHWH or the one who speaks about the great prophet.

From the mere wish of the young girl the narrator shifts to the scene between Naaman and his lord. The king, who represents the

¹⁶ As Gerhard von Rad (*God at Work in Israel* [trans. John H. Marks; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980] 48) points out, the story is packed with irony as insignificant slaves rather than influential persons make the healing of Naaman possible.

¹⁷ That we are told exactly how the rumor came to Naaman in contrast to the story of the queen of Sheba in which that is unknown highlights the flexibility in the story form.

nation par excellence, sends Naaman to the king of Israel¹⁸ with a letter asking that he cure Naaman of his leprosy. Why is the king of Aram sending Naaman to the king of Israel and not to the prophet as the young girl had suggested? This may suggest the correlate between the two kings. The king speaks to the fellow king.¹⁹ The Aramean general who apparently was responsible for the defeat of Israel requires some diplomatic arrangements before visiting Israel. The letter does not say anything about the prophet. It is ambiguous and the king of Israel interprets it as a pretext against him. From the tone of the letter the king of Aram is looking for ways to go into war with Israel. The point of view of the king of Israel is completely different from the points of view of the reader or the Arameans. The little girl's speech concerning the presence of the prophet in Samaria, the royal city, might suggest that the prophet must be found under royal auspices.

Royal authority, however, is shown to be impotent in the powerlessness of the king of Israel. The king is powerless but the prophet is powerful. The prophet is a man of God. The king of Israel's action and speech suggest his differing perspective. His comment is striking: "Am I God, to deal death or give life, that this fellow writes to me to cure a man of leprosy?" (v. 7). He is aware that only God gives life and death, not any human being

¹⁸ It has been suggested that we identify this king of Israel as Jehoram. He acted in similar way in 2 Kings 3:10 in addition to his being on throne following the sequence of stories here. He was negative and blaming. He has forgotten already about the power of Elisha in the battlefield at Edom (2 Kings 3:11–20). Cf. Gina Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006) 260.

¹⁹ Cohn notes that "somehow the Israelite maiden's assurances about the prophet in Samaria have been sidetracked by an official royal memorandum caught up in formality but lacking any mention of the prophet." Cf. Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 175.

(Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6; Hos 6:2). Whether he realizes that there resides a prophet in his land who could make Naaman well, we do not know. All he seems to know from the point of view of what the narrator says about him is that the king of Aram has come to threaten him. The king is portrayed as faithless and unaware of what Elisha can do. What he thinks about the letter might also actually be what the king of Aram felt when he was writing the letter since he totally fails to mention anything about the prophet.

It is quite ironical that the king of Israel does not seem to know what the slave girl knows: that a prophet in Samaria is able to bring healing to Naaman. The slave girl was able to see the healing from afar, but the king who was close by could not see it. This contrast highlights an important motif in the entire story, that is, the dependence of those of higher social status on people in the lower cadre. The king of Aram depends on the king of Israel, and the king of Israel on the prophet (vv. 5-8). Later in the narrative, Naaman is going to take counsel from his servants and from Elisha (vv. 13-15). The prophet breaks through royal authority structure. Now the emphasis of the story definitely shifts from the king to the prophet. It moves from the royal seat in Samaria to Israel. The prophet gives orders to the king and not vice versa. The portrayal of the king as powerless and ineffectual here is in line with the king's portrayal else-where in the Elijah-Elisha cycle (as a tool of his wife 1 Kings 21; his allies 1 Kings 22; the prophet 2 Kings 1). The king thus disappears from the scene and the prophet assumes control.²⁰

Elisha hears that the king of Israel has rent his clothes and he sends for Naaman. He says "let him come to me." While the king

²⁰ Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 176.

panics, the prophet exercises control. He expresses self-assurance in contradistinction to the king's agitation. Naaman comes to Elisha and stops by the door of Elisha's house. The power of the prophet is so strong that he does not even need to see Naaman. He sends his servant. The use of intermediary between Elisha and Naaman shows Elisha's superiority over Naaman. At the same time it minimizes the prophet's role in the healing.

Encounter

The word of the prophet tells Naaman to bathe in the Jordan seven times. The number seven suggests completeness (cf. Lev 14:7, 16, 27, 51; see also 2 Kings 4:35). Elisha's simple words to Naaman through Elisha's messenger upset the perspective of the gentile mind. This is contrary to expectation and Naaman objects. The great general feels insulted as a person and, at the same time, his national pride is hurt. In fact, we see that the Naaman of a man has his own ideas about the right way a prophet should carry out exorcism. Thus he says:

I thought he would surely come out to me and stand and invoke the Lord his God by name and would wave his hand toward the spot, and cure the affected part. Are not the Amanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? I could bathe in them and be clean! (2 Kings 5:11-12).

Naaman is not only sick bodily but his unhealthy situation may be symbolic of his totally disillusioned state of mind. His misconception concerning the right way the prophet ought to behave almost denied him his healing. He had his expectation about what should be done to him. He expected something more

dramatic and even more spectacular. His national pride was also at stake. He is a statesman from Aram where there are better rivers with more prestigious and dignified waters. In contrast to Naaman's disillusioned and arrogant mind, his servants present a well ordered, collective speech as if only one of them spoke on behalf of the rest. "Sir," they said, "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'" (*rahats wetaher* v. 13).

It is important to note the contrast that the narrator presents between the speech of Naaman and the collective speech of his servants. The art of the narrator to collate all the views of the various individuals that make up a group into one voice representing the group is in line with the bid to avoid more than two characters to a scene.²¹ The group thus speaks with a single voice as if one individual comes to speak on behalf of the entire group. In other words, the group is treated as a character and the biblical narrator conventionally uses the following to describe group speech: *wayomru*, or *wayomer ish 'el achiu*, or *wayomer ish 'el re'ehu*.

That the narrator puts all the views of Naaman's servants into one voice suggests, at least, for our purpose, the unity of the servants in their persuasion of Naaman. Naaman is a warrior in army but he is also shown to be capable of listening. He is obedient to his lord, heeds the suggestion of the young girl, and finally is also persuaded by his servants. After bathing in the Jordan seven times, he is healed. The narrator adds that "his flesh became like

²¹ George Savran, "Multivocality in Group Speech in Biblical Narrative," *JHS* 9, Article 25 (2009) 1-24, 2.

a little boy's" (v. 14). The word *na'ar* here forms an inclusio with *na'arah* in v. 2 suggesting that the great warrior of v. 1 has been assimilated to the little maid. Interestingly, the servants, while not *na'arim*, do address Naaman as *abi*, thus positioning themselves as children (cf. Gk. *pais* "child, servant"). Likewise, in v. 15, Naaman characterizes himself as Elisha's *'ebed*. He came expecting a cure but the man of God has done something that goes beyond his expectation. Naaman has undergone conversion. His "hardness of heart ceases. As his flesh turns to that of a renewed state, so too does his heart turn to a new God. His recalcitrance is replaced by receptivity. Humility replaces anger. Gratitude supplants indignation."²² He turns around (*shuv*) and we can say that he has undergone a spiritual conversion.

Then he exclaims:

Now I know that there is no God in the whole world
except in Israel!

So please accept a gift from your servant (v. 15).

The contradiction within Naaman (i.e., his being a warrior but leprous) has been resolved and now he can stand before the man of God and speak with one voice. Notice that the previous medium (Gehazi) between the man of God and Naaman is no longer needed. Naaman comes to stand before (*liphne*) the prophet (v. 15) whereas he had expected earlier that the prophet would come and stand before him (v. 11). And in v. 16, Elisha himself stands before (*liphne*) God. The little girl's desire that Naaman stand before the prophet (v. 3) is now fulfilled. Again the God who heals him is no longer just Elisha's God (v. 11) but the Lord of all. Now the reader can see the transformation that has

²² Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*, 261.

taken place in Naaman and can hear his confession of the uniqueness and lordship of the God of Israel. The individual who is a high-ranking personnel from the land of the Arameans, a force to reckon with, has moved from misconception, incoherence, pride and arrogance to an embodiment of a single voice that praises the God of Israel and would not want to serve any other god but the Lord. Notice that while Elisha comes forward to show Naaman the presence of a prophet in Israel, Naaman realizes that “there is no other God in all the earth except in Israel. Naaman acknowledges the supremacy of YHWH by forsaking his master’s god and he thus becomes a proselyte.”²³ At this juncture the author creates a dialogue for the first time in the story rather than the familiar monologue or announcement by one character. The use of dialogue signals the transformation that has taken place in Naaman who is now able to speak face to face with the prophet and make his confession.

Gift-giving and Departure

Naaman offers gifts to the prophet not to the king and acknowledges his subordination.²⁴ In v. 16, Elisha refuses to take any gift from Naaman even when pressed to do so.²⁵ His refusal

²³ Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 67. Like Ruth another foreigner, “he is admitted into the community of the worshippers of YHWH without the requirements of rite of conversion or polemic which were the hallmarks of the post-exilic period.” Cogan and Tadmor observe that YHWH is inaccessible for fugitives and exiles (cf. 1 Sam 26:19; Ps 137:4), for unlike the land of Israel, foreign lands, polluted as they were by idolatry (cf. Josh 22:19; Hos 9:3–5; Amos 7:17), are not suited for cultic worship of Yahweh.

²⁴ This is slightly different from the case of the Queen of Sheba who offers gifts to Solomon the king.

²⁵ Cf. Num 22:18; Dan 5:17/ Amos 7:12; Mic 3:5, 11.

is so that the miraculous healing is not attributed to him.²⁶ The divine is behind the healing. That is why Naaman also gives testimony to God. Elisha's powers did not bring about the cure but God's power did and Elisha wants Naaman to recognize this and feel a sense of indebtedness to God. This explains why Elisha is later angry with Gehazi for going to take the gifts from Naaman. It also shows that true prophetic word transcends personal gain.

The prophet's refusal of Naaman's gifts could also be viewed in terms of the prophet's intention to make peace with the Arameans. In the following chapter the men that came from Aram to kill him were fed and sent back (2 Kings 6:8-23). The statement at the end of that story is intriguing: "No more Aramean raiders came into the land of Israel." The narrator perhaps wanted us to connect this ending with Elisha's benevolence towards the Arameans. The prophet that was highly instrumental to the healing of the Aramean general is the one that has just shown some act of loving kindness to the men. The motivation for this could be the need to make peace with the Arameans as they experience the power of YHWH and go home to tell about the kindness shown to them by the prophet in Israel. There may be no going out to proselytize but there is room for a foreigner to come in, experience conversion and return to their homeland. Here, the foreigner is not an enemy but a potential proselyte. Rather than seeing mission as always going out of one's culture to evangelize, we emphasize the aspect of people of other cultures coming to have an experience within our context. At different points foreigners came to join the house of Israel and they were welcomed. Going out to seek others to become part of the covenant with God was not really part of the

²⁶ This is in contrast to Solomon, who accepts the queen's gifts.

Israelite way. Nowhere were they commanded to do so. And they were not to have regard for the gods of other nations. But outsiders could be incorporated into the group and its worship through marriage, bondage, alliance, residency, adoption, etc.²⁷ There is also the hope of some prophets like Isaiah and Zechariah of a future when all will come to Israel to worship YHWH.

The tension between remaining and leaving now comes to light at this point. Naaman, whose view is in line with the idea that limits deities to some particular territories (cf. Ps 137:4, "How can we sing a song to the Lord on alien soil?"), wants to take home some of YHWH's domain to Damascus. He begs to go with the soil from Israel (v. 17). The transformation has completely taken place in him. The one who earlier preferred the rivers of Damascus to the Jordan now begs to take the soil from the land of Israel. Damascus is now subordinated to Israel thanks to the power of Israel's God. He takes his confession literally and therefore limits God to the land of Israel. He also asks for forgiveness in advance for having to bow before the god of his master (v. 18). Elisha simply tells him, "Go in peace" (v. 19). As noted above, this statement has been interpreted in different ways. In a recent article, Stuart Lasine groups different interpreters according to the three different ways in which this statement has been understood:

²⁷ See Joseph's wife, Asenath (Gen 41:45-52); and Moses' wife, Zipporah (Exod 4:25-26) were foreigners. Enslaved males were circumcised and they took part in the Passover meal (Gen 17:10-14; Exod 12:44, 48). Notice that the exclusion of the Moabites and the Ammonites spoken of in Deut 23:3-4 presumes the inclusion of some other foreigners and while Ezra and Nehemiah were very radical in rejecting outsiders, Judith 5:5-21; 14:10 and Ruth 1:16-17 would have a different view.

approval, disapproval or indifference.²⁸ He raises an interesting question: "to what extent are the readers' understandings of Elisha's reply influenced by their own notion of what constitutes appropriate behavior on the part of those who profess belief in the biblical God?"²⁹ This might be true and there is no clear explanation of Elisha's statement in the text but attention to the context might be worthwhile.³⁰

Sensitivity to the situation of the new convert makes the prophet's response understandable.³¹ He does not make life more difficult for Naaman. Most of the commentators that think Elisha is giving his approval or is indifferent focus on the pastoral sensitivity of

²⁸ Stuart Lasine, "'Go in Peace' or 'Go to Hell'? Elisha, Naaman and the Meaning of Monotheism in 2 Kings 5," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* Vol 25/1 (2011): 3-28, 5-6.

²⁹ Lasine, "Go in Peace," 4.

³⁰ It is important to also understand that the immediate context of this story is the mighty deeds of the prophet in Israel. It makes no sense for the narrator to praise the mighty deeds of the prophet if they were not connected with the power of YHWH. 2 Kings begins with the issue of the presence of God in Israel (1:1-18). Elijah confronts King Ahaziah for sending messengers to Baalzebul, god of Ekron to make inquiry about whether he would recover from his injury. For this reason Ahaziah died. It seems far-fetched to think after all these positive representations Elisha would curse Naaman to hell. In other words, it goes against the grain of the narrative.

³¹ There is some consistency in Elisha's approach. When Elijah called Elisha to follow him Elisha asked to go home and bid his people farewell and Elijah consented (1 Kings 19:19-21). Elisha carried out some ceremony that looks very interesting if considered from the African context. In some places the burial of one's parents required the killing of a cow. One may decide to anticipate this in a case where there is no guarantee that they would be there when their parents would die. Jesus may not give his would-be disciple this opportunity to perform their filial obligation because of the urgency of his mission (Luke 9:60-62; cf. Matt 8:19-22). Elisha was shown some consideration here. This is perhaps the same consideration he is showing to the new convert.

the prophet.³² This interpretation is striking based on the connection that we find between this passage and mission or evangelization as well as the conflicts that new converts or proselytes experience in their new religious contexts. According to Emmanuel Nwaoru, “Elisha did not explicitly pronounce YHWH’s forgiveness; he left Naaman in the hope that God would show his mercy. Indeed, the prophet expresses understanding for the compromises Naaman will have to make.”³³ The prophet shows his understanding of the concrete reality that Naaman faces. He perhaps realizes that while it is certainly desirable and convenient for Naaman to stay in Israel and worship God, his return home is a necessity in line with the narrative. He also needs to go home and bear witness to the power of the prophet.

The necessity of his return home requires further consideration. Nwaoru observes that Naaman’s conversion does not follow the linear geographical movement from the sending country to the recipient country that missionary efforts in later Judaism entailed. Rather it entails a movement from the convert’s home to Israel where he finds the new faith and then back to his homeland.³⁴ Chew adds the dimension of the spiritual journey, which does not clearly come out in Nwaoru’s point. Though there is different line of movement physically, Naaman grows spiritually in his

³² Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan (“2 Kings 5,” *Review and Expositor* 95/4 [1997] 589-97, 593) states that “Perhaps Elisha recognizes the precarious life of faith Naaman would face upon his return. He does not burden the new convert with legal and ritual requirements, nor advises him to withdraw from Syrian society, but sends him home in peace.”

³³ Nwaoru, “Story of Naaman,” 37.

³⁴ Nwaoru, “Story of Naaman,” 31.

relationship with God “through a series of aids and obstacles.”³⁵ It is in light of the upward spiritual movement in spite of obstacles that we see Naaman’s request for forgiveness and the prophet’s response in a positive light. As Chew maintains, “it is likely that Naaman’s request at the end signals a forward step in his newly found faith rather than a slip into compromise. This understanding follows the flow of the narrator’s story-telling most naturally.”³⁶

To help with the understanding of the intent of Elisha in his final words to Naaman, Chew applies the model of conversion set out by Charles Kraft. This is very interesting as it has to do with sensitivity to the culture of the convert. As Kraft states, “God chooses the cultural milieu in which humans are immersed as the arena of his interaction with people.”³⁷ When missionaries are sensitive to the culture of the convert and allow the convert to experience God within it, their experience is more genuine and lasting. As Chew observes, “the witnesses only complicate things when they insist on the converts understanding God through the culture of the witnesses.”³⁸

YHWH’s universalism is expressed in the healing of Naaman. “Through His prophets, YHWH works abroad and is recognized as the sole God (cf. e.g., 1 Kgs 17:14; 19:15; 2 Kgs 5:1; 8:13). This faith is still land-bound and non-missionizing, signs of a stage

³⁵ Jeremy Chew, “I am Kneeling on the Outside, but I am Standing on the Inside: Another Look at the Story of Naaman through the Lenses of Kraft,” *The Asbury Journal* 70/1 (2015) 63-75, 66.

³⁶ Chew, “Kneeling on the Outside,” 67.

³⁷ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979) 114.

³⁸ Chew, “Kneeling on the Outside,” 72.

which preceded classical prophecy.”³⁹ In the story’s denouement Naaman’s commitment is contrasted to Israelite King’s and Gehazi’s faithless acts. Gehazi’s thoughts are made known to us. He is still exclusivist and calls Naaman “that Aramean” (v. 20). He takes an oath before the Lord to take something from the foreigner (v. 20) in contrast to Elisha’s oath before the Lord not to take anything (v. 16). The Israelite is cursed and the foreigner is healed and converted. Naaman’s open heart to the Lord is contrasted to Gehazi’s selfishness and greed. The contrast with the servant of Elisha on the one hand and the fact that Naaman is assimilated to the slave girl both make the representation positive. In fact, the link with the slave girl makes one think of her role in the story and the possibility of the narrator wanting us to think of Naaman’s role back at home.⁴⁰ It is on this note that we see Elisha’s “go in peace” as positive consideration in the face of the genuine predicament in which Naaman finds himself upon his return.

Conclusion

Naaman’s story brings to the fore the power of God to work across cultures to bring one out of their prideful position to experience

³⁹ Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 67.

⁴⁰ The proclamation of the mouth of the foreigner of God’s oneness reaches the heart of Israel’s faith. The event of Naaman’s visit to Israel, his cure and proclamation of faith in the God of Israel is in contrast to King Ahaziah in 2 Kings 1:2 who looks to the god of Ekron to inquire about his recovery. Israel’s election involves the call to bring all unto faith in the one true God. In addition to this, the Lord’s inclusivity is extended as God’s instruments and agents are not limited to recognized religious appointees of cult and the prophets, but also include the servants in the story. The lowliest of all people can also be emissaries of the Lord. God acts beyond the structures of hierarchy and the power of kings or religious officials.

salvation. The new believer experiences some cultural conflicts. There is often the challenge of conflicting religious obligations. Naaman is drawn into knowledge of the power of God just like the queen of Sheba was years earlier. The journey of recovery was a progressive journey towards humiliation. First of all the news comes from an insignificant slave girl. The healer is not brought to the general. Rather he goes to another country. In the foreign country he moves to the lowly prophet; the prophet sends him to river with muddy waters to bath. "He was forced to cross over class distinction, country border, and cultural bias."⁴¹ As he makes this journey geographically, he makes an internal spiritual journey also. He is converted. Faced with the conflicts that come with the transition from one faith to another, he makes some strange requests and the prophet shows some understanding of his plight and sends him away in peace. This is a profound example for missionaries to emulate.

⁴¹ Marvin J. Newell and Patrick Fung, *Crossing Cultures in Scripture: Biblical Principles for Mission Practice* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006) 118. 110.