

# Contextualizing Religious Form and Meaning: A Missiological Interpretation of Naaman's Petitions (2 Kings 5:15-19)

by Daniel Shinjong Baeq

In his vivid portrayal of mission over twenty centuries, Lamin Sanneh illustrates in account after account the necessary postulate that Christianity must be translated whenever it crosses cultural boundaries (Sanneh 1989). Missiologists have also insisted that to make the gospel message comprehensible, messengers need to put greater efforts into translating the linguistic and cultural “appropriateness” of the gospel message for the recipients (Kraft 2005).<sup>1</sup> This article suggests that this same appropriateness in communication is witnessed in the cross-cultural, inter-religious encounter of Naaman and Elisha in 2 Kings 5:15-19, and can provide one more biblical filter for sorting and sifting our contextualization efforts. By using linguistic analysis and cultural hermeneutics, I hope to penetrate the complexity of this Old Testament encounter and categorize the possible combinations of biblical meaning when attached to heathen forms.

When God called Abram, a “worshiper of pagan gods” (Josh 24:2), to become Abraham, the founding ancestor of people of faith, he was not called from a vacuum, void of religious or cultural context. God chose to make a covenant with Abram, knowing fully that he was limited by his current religious culture in the understanding of God and the covenant that He wanted to make with him. God used the practices of the Ancient Near Eastern treaty and the epitome of idol worship that Abraham was accustomed to in calling him (Gallagher 2006, 146-147; Petersen 2007, 118-119). Beginning with Abraham I believe God reveals a model of contextualization for His kingdom ministry among people groups of other religious traditions.

In recent decades, missiologists have put greater emphasis on contextualization in presenting the gospel. While many creative and bold efforts have been made, many others feel unsure about making decisions about what degree of contextualization is appropriate. There is fear among the largely Westernized Christian community that contextualization, if unchecked, can lead to syncretism. Recent efforts in contextualization among the Muslims is one such attempt that has received scrutiny.

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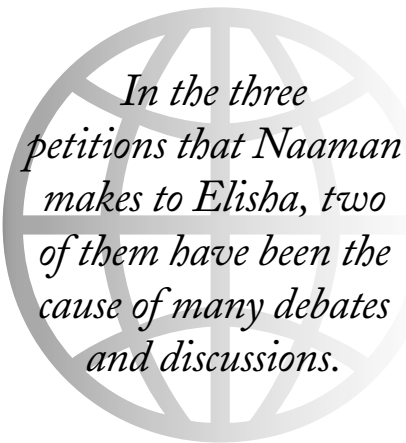
**A Review of Discussions on Mosque Attendance**

In “Contextualization Among Muslims” (1989), Dudley Woodberry shed a new light on missionary practices in the Muslim context as well as on the missiological understanding of contextualization. He argued that the “five pillars” in Islam, in fact, are “all adaptations of previous Jewish and Christian forms” (Woodberry 1989, 283). By pointing out that Paul and James continued to attend Jewish synagogues even after the community of new faith was formed, he among others provided biblical evidence that permitted the “followers of Isa” to attend Mosques (Woodberry 1989, 289). His argument resulted in strong support for the “followers of Isa” movement and led to many successful case stories in Muslim contexts, to the development of the C5 “Insider” Movement,<sup>2</sup> and to reaching out to the forgotten peoples behind the formidable walls of religious traditions (Travis 1998; Caldwell 2000; Culver 2000; Massey; Massey; DeNeui 2006).

Those not so enthusiastic about the C5 and Insider Movement cautiously disagreed, believing that any legitimization of attending Mosques will make the “followers of Isa” vulnerable to religious syncretism (Parshall 1998, 409-410). This paper will especially address one particular argument from Tennent’s list of the possible dangers in the C5 movement (Tennent 2006). In his brief exegesis of 2 Kings 5:18-19, Tennent states that practitioners of C5 movement inappropriately legitimize the Mosque attendance of Muslim background believers (MBBs hereafter) by misinterpreting Elisha’s response to Naaman as a positive agreement between Elisha

and Naaman (Tennent 2006, 108). It is this use of the Naaman account in contextualization discussions that has led to this paper’s further examination of 2 Kings 5: 15-19 discourse.

I believe this Old Testament account offers us another biblical case in our missiological discussions surrounding the contextualization of the gospel. I will present different interpretations of Naaman’s petitions and Elisha’s response, using biblical exegesis and theology of mission as it relates to contextualization. In addition, the relationship between form and mean-



ing as described by Paul G. Hiebert (1989) will be utilized. The strength of the link between form and meaning, evolved from Hiebert’s discussion on the “connectedness” between form and meaning,<sup>3</sup> will also be explained in order to develop a model of contextualization. Using this model, the Naaman narrative will be re-examined to find the strength of relationship between forms and meanings embedded within the narrative and deepen our understanding of issues related to contextualization. Further, lessons from the narrative will be used to reevaluate some issues in the

interpretation of the Naaman narrative raised by Tennent (2006).

This story is especially interesting to the study of contextualization, since it is a conversion story of a Gentile that returns to his home culture. This story is similar to situations and dilemmas that many missionaries and newly converted Christians experience in countries where Christianity is scrutinized. In the three petitions that Naaman makes to Elisha, two of them have been the cause of many debates and discussions because they involve Naaman’s actions after his conversion and seem to overlap with his previous religious practices.

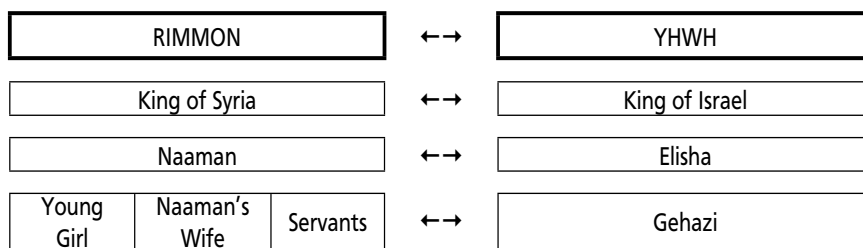
**Synopsis of the Naaman Narrative**

The pinnacle of the Naaman narrative is his confession of faith in YHWH after the miraculous healing of leprosy. In the Ancient Near Eastern culture, the disease and its cure signified judgment and divine salvation for the patient. In Smith’s words, biblical healing “is not limited to the relief of physical suffering; healing generally refers to much larger theological issues as well” (1994, 205). Therefore, the narrative<sup>4</sup> of Naaman’s healing is not only an account of who the true God is and who finds favor with God, but also provides the foundational plot of the narrative.

The broader plot of the narrative is the clash of two religious worldviews: YHWH, the true God, against the false god of Syria, Rimmon. By considering parallel characters<sup>5</sup> from the domain of YHWH in contrast to those of Rimmon as shown in Figure 1, readers are prone to assume that those siding with YHWH have a covenantal relationship with God and are the beneficiaries of an unfathomable grace, while those in the domain of Rimmon are heathens. This premise, however, is challenged as the narrative progresses.

Subplots appear as different characters are introduced. There are three contrasting pairs of characters. The first pair of contrasting characters are the King of Aram, Ben-Hadad II, and Johoram of Israel (Kaiser 2000, 42; Schultz 2000, 180). Both are kings of their respective

Figure 1. Contrasted Characters in the Naaman Narrative.



countries and both would be vitally dependent on their god for the wellbeing of their kingdom. The King of Aram was a man who did not know or have a relationship with YHWH. He served and worshiped his god, Rimmon, according to their religious traditions and cultural rituals. But when the healers of Rimmon could not cure “the honorable and highly regarded general,” he released the general to the hands of the prophet of YHWH with a considerable amount of treasure (Kaiser 2000, 44).<sup>6</sup>

The King of Israel shows all the signs of despair when he is approached with Ben-Hadad II's request. Sweeney concludes that the King of Israel “demonstrates his own lack of confidence in YHWH and the prophet of God in his own capital city” (2007, 299). Although Johoram was outwardly connected to YHWH, he neither knew the breadth of God's power nor sustained any expectation that God would help him.

The second set of contrasting figures are the servants of Naaman and Elisha. The young female servant of Naaman's wife is presented as a special person of faith. Despite her sufferings and hardships as a casualty of war, she did not give up her faith in the God of Israel. It is possible to conclude that her faith in the true God enabled her to be confident enough to suggest that Naaman visit Israel, knowing fully that if the mission turned sour it would bring calamity on her. Unlike the king of Israel, however, she did not lose her connection to God. The unshakable faith that a young girl showed throughout sufferings and hardships in her life is often used as an important hermeneutical device in the Asian context to encourage believers in the face of persecution and oppression and to give reasons for endurance.<sup>7</sup>

Naaman's wife, as well as the servants who accompany her, persuade their lord to follow through on the good news. Naaman's wife, upon hearing the news of her husband's hope for cure, persuades Naaman to seek help. The servants

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also contributed positively to the overall configuration of the plot because without their input Naaman would never have washed himself in the Jordan River.

On the contrary, the servant of Elisha, Gehazi, despite his position as YHWH's servant, was not controlled by his faith in YHWH but instead by his material greed. As a consequence of his choice, the curse of leprosy from which the general was released became a shackle to this servant of Israel's prophet (2 Kings 5:27).

Lastly, two most prominent contrasting human characters are Naaman and Elisha. The prophet, Elisha, was a man who had a strong relationship with YHWH. Naaman did not know YHWH nor had any relationship with him, but he came to the prophet of YHWH in desperation to be rid of leprosy that was “beyond everyone's control” in his homeland (Brueggemann 2007, 265). Naaman is clearly disappointed at the reception that he received and the method proposed for healing (v. 11,12). Being fully immersed in his religious culture, he expects rituals similar to those he had previously experienced in his homeland.

After the miraculous healing of Naaman, which may not have happened without the plea and persuasion of his faithful servant, Naaman returns to Elisha to make his confession of faith, which is the climax of the narrative to which all devices of the narrative plot lead.

I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel...your servant will no longer offer burnt offering nor will he sacrifice to other gods, but to the Lord (v.15b, 17b, NASB henceforth).

Although YHWH caused the victory of the Aramean general (v. 1), the general was still devoid of the knowledge of the Lord. However, by the sovereign

activity of YHWH, Naaman is brought into an invisible divine congregation of true believers. Of those who were on the Israelite side, the only true believer proved to be Elisha. The King of Israel and Gehazi were not true servants of the Lord. From the religious world of Rimmon, however, Naaman, a foreign general, found favor with God. The critical roles played by the servant girl, Naaman's wife and the servants testify that they were under the will of God, unconsciously obeying God so that they fulfilled their part in this story.

Therefore this narrative suggests that the conventional manner of separating those who belong or don't belong to the true God simply by their religious association is not a valid assumption. We often assume that conversion is simply switching from one religious world, or religious association, to another. But in this narrative we can see that identity in YHWH is not that clear-cut. This narrative forces the missiological question of religious identity and what true conversion involves. It forces us to ask what indicators of change should be present when a person of another faith identifies with Christ.

### *Naaman's Conversion*

Despite the consensus among scholars on Naaman's great confession of faith,<sup>8</sup> their reactions to Naaman's petitions, which shortly follow his confession, display a wide theological spectrum. However, the evaluation of his questionable petitions should be based on the quality of his “spiritual transformation” (Long 1991, 73). Scholars have raised a series of questions on Naaman's conversion and his petitions: Was Naaman's conversion partial or perfect? (Nwaoru 2008, 35) Was his faith faultless or bound to his old belief system? (Buttrick 1962, 490) Was his confession monotheistic, henotheistic,

or monolatric? (Gray 1970, 507; Kaiser 2000, 46; Nwaoru 2008, 37) How then should we evaluate the conversion of Naaman?

According to the theologians of conversion, there are two aspects in the Greek word for conversion, *epistrophē*: directional *metanoia* (repentance) and confessional *pistis* (faith) (Berkhof 1996, 482; Peace 2004, 8). In the case of the Naaman narrative, there is a faith confession that Naaman makes to Elisha, "there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel" (v.15). On the contrary, it is not easy to find his repentance immediately from the narrative. Naaman could repent of many crimes he may have committed in his military career. There is, however, no evidence of his repentance of any of his previous crimes, and his conversion may seem to be incomplete.

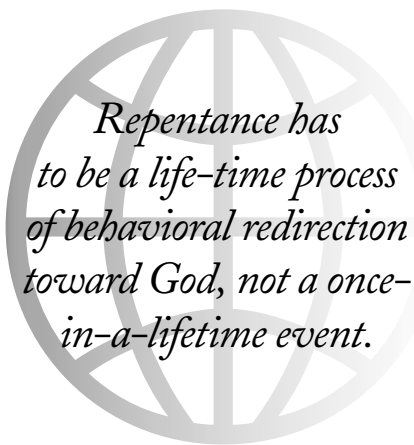
Here we have to carefully examine the biblical words for repentance. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoō* or *metanoia*, focuses on the "emotional change of one's mind" (Arndt, Danker, and Bauer 2000, 640). But the Hebrew word, *nīham*, is closer to a "directional change" of behavior (Kromminga 1984, 936). In the Old Testament, when the prophets urged the Israelites to repent, it meant a behavioral turn from their idol-worship to become true worshippers of the YHWH. Repentance, therefore, has to be a life-time process of behavioral redirection toward God, not a once-in-a-lifetime event, since people are always under a constant inclination to fall away from God.

If repentance is a directional change of behavior, Naaman's second statement of faith can be accepted as an evidence of repentance: "[Y]our servant will no longer offer burnt offering nor will he sacrifice to other gods, but to the LORD." (v. 17) Directional change is apparent in Naaman's confession. Therefore, I cautiously conclude that Naaman's conversion, which shows his confession of faith and *repentance of directional change*, meets the theological requirement of conversion. However,

it is premature to accept Naaman's subsequent petitions and behavior as indicative of genuine conversion without closer examination.

### *Debate on Naaman's Petitions*

Naaman's petition to take some dirt from Israel back to his country and the request to be pardoned of bowing down at the Rimmon temple have been the center of much controversy and debate among scholars of the Old Testament and of theology of mission. These petitions arose because Elisha refused to accept Naaman's gifts.



### **First Petition: Please Take These Treasures!**

Scholars speculate on why Elisha refused Naaman's gifts. Brueggemann claims that Naaman is acting according to the religious and traditional customs of his country, where heathen prophets often offered their services for money (2007, 269). Just as Naaman's expectation of what Elisha would do to heal him was based on his experiences with heathen prophets in his own country, likewise his offering of gifts after the healing was a compensation for the healing received (Brueggemann 2007, 269).

Also, if the prophet accepted the gifts, Naaman would consider his debt to God or to Elisha fully repaid, or maybe that God can be coerced into doing miracles in return for riches and treasure. Elisha wanted this man to fully understand that it was God's divine will and His power alone that had healed him. This idea is concurrent with the moral and functional perspective of

Sweeney, who says that "by declining to accept the gift, the narrative portrays both YHWH's and Elisha's magnanimity and highlights once again the relative power of Naaman and Elisha" (Sweeney 2007, 300). Elisha's acceptance of the gifts would have sent the wrong message that somehow this miracle was Elisha's doing and thus take the glory away from YHWH.

### **Second Petition: Soil for an Altar?**

Just after Elisha declines Naaman's plea of accepting his gifts, Naaman says, "If not," which indicates a conditional statement. The rejection of the former petition gave cause for the second petition, to obtain "two mules' load of earth" (v.17). Some scholars criticize this petition as an act of "idolatrous superstition" because it reflects his polytheistic territorial concept of divinity and limits the almighty God to the soil of Israel (Keil and Delitzsch 2001, 3:226; Hobbs 1985, 13:66). Others criticized this petition as having a "monolaterous"<sup>9</sup> intention (Nwaoru 2008, 37). Scholars find it difficult to judge whether Naaman decided to *worship* God exclusively (monolatry) or to *believe* God exclusively (monotheism) from the given text. Gray's quote from a German theologian widens our understanding of the context of the narrative.

(Naaman's) reason consented to monotheism but convention bound him practically to monolatry. Eissfeldt has argued that there was already a tendency to monotheism in the cult of *Baal-shamaim* in Syria, so that Naaman was the more prepared to confess that the one God was Yahweh (Gray 1970, 507).

This observation suggests that it is unreasonable to conclude that Naaman's petition was rooted in "idolatrous superstition" or "territorial concept of divinity." Other scholars evaluate his request as a decision to maintain his faith in YHWH using the dirt as a "sacramental attachment" (von Rad 2001, 35) or for simply building his own altar for YHWH (Bullock 1861, 161; Provan 1995, 193; Nwaoru 2008, 35). Whether he intended to build an altar

or to use it as a sacramental attachment, the petition to get earth of Israel indicates the clear intention to worship YHWH alone.

### Third Petition: Worship in the Heathen Temple?

The third petition is even more controversial. Naaman says,

When my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leans on my hand and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon—when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter (v.18b, NASB).

Many scholars negatively interpret Naaman's petition as based on "polytheistic superstition" (Keil and Delitzsch 2001, 3:226), "religious compromise and superstition" (Hobbs 1985, 13:60,66), or a "pagan notion of territorial deity" (Maier III 1997, 187). Similarly, Kaiser asserts that Naaman "mixes his new Yahwehism with strands of an old paganism" (2000, 47). Smith is most severe and regards this petition as an excuse to get permission for "worshiping another god" (1994, 210). Nwaoru takes this further and surmises that Naaman experienced only a "partial conversion" (2008, 35). A few scholars such as Brueggemann, however, take a more generous position and regard Naaman's petition as "only a social

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requirement and not a serious theological act" (2007, 269).

To understand Naaman's true intentions, Elisha's response must also be taken into consideration. To Naaman's third petition of pardoning his bowing at the temple of Rimmon, Elisha succinctly replies, "Go in peace" (v. 19a). Scholars differ in their opinion of Elisha's answer as well. Some interpret Elisha's response as a simple farewell in Hebrew (Edwards, Rogers, and Dwight 1839, 2:741; Grieve 1920, 306). Other scholars suggest a neutral interpretation. They propose that Elisha did not give any decisive answers, neither approval nor disapproval (Keil and Delitzsch 2001, 3:227; Fritz 2003, 260; Maier III 1997, 190-191; Kaiser 2000, 48-49). They interpret Elisha's response to mean that now with a new faith in YHWH, Naaman should go back to his country, depending on the guidance of YHWH alone. A number of others are of the opinion that Elisha's answer is a positive affirmation,<sup>10</sup> which acknowledges the "social requirement" and "unavoidable occasions" in Naaman's situation (Provan 1995, 193; Brueggemann 2007, 269).

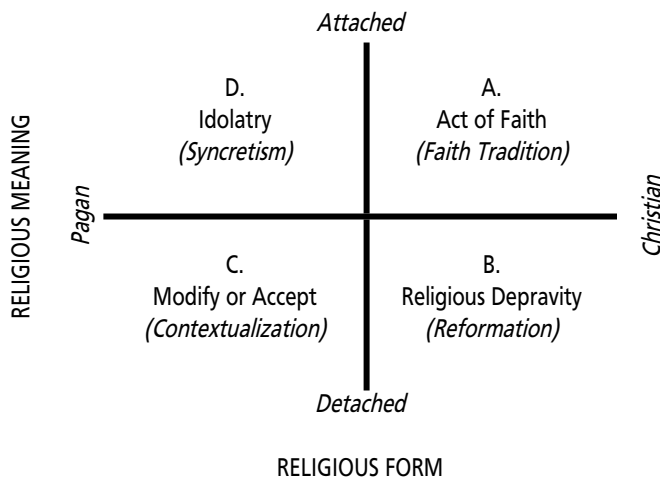
### A Principle of Contextualization

The core discussion of the Naaman narrative has to do with using religious patterns of heathen culture (form) to express Christian faith (meaning). Tillich (1964) defined the relationship between form and meaning by identifying differences between "religious sign" and "religious symbol."<sup>11</sup> Borrowing a theory of linguistics, he contended that if form and meaning have a strong and natural connection, it is a symbol. If the connection is weak (or detached), it is a sign. His account of the relationship between religious symbol and meaning provides a clearer understanding of religious symbolism, especially in the use of Christian symbols.<sup>12</sup>

[S]igns do not participate in any way in the reality and power of that to which they point. Symbols, although they are not the same as that which they symbolize, participate in its meaning and power.... The difference between symbol and sign is the participation in the symbolized reality which characterizes the symbols, and the non participation in the "pointed-to" reality which characterizes a sign (Tillich 1964, 54-55).

Paul G. Hiebert also observes that the development of scientific theory in the West has led to the merging of the cultural form and meaning as an inseparable entity (1989, 103). He advocates the necessity of a *divorce* between form and meaning. According to Hiebert, form and meaning can be connected differently, either arbitrarily, loosely, or tightly. Therefore missionaries must uncover the deeply rooted underlying connection between the cultural form and meaning if they intend to impart a different meaning through accustomed cultural forms (Hiebert 1989, 104). If a local form has an indivisible connection to the pagan religious meaning, it may need to be rejected (Hiebert 1989, 110-115).

Figure 2. Interpretative Graph of Religious Symbols.



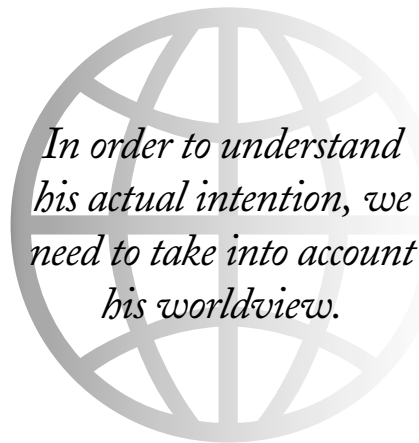
Interpreting the form-meaning relationship of religious symbols is complex, for the Christian context as well as in the context of other religions. Based upon theories of Tillich and Hiebert, a graph might help us see the different realities of religious symbolism (Figure 2 on p. 201). Within a "faith tradition," a Christian form may be attached to a particular Christian meaning as an "act of faith" (Quadrant A). Missionaries can often make the mistake of thinking that this form will carry the same meaning as it crosses religious and cultural boundaries. Since the bond between the Christian form and meaning is very strong in the mind of the missionary, he or she feels compelled to impose it upon the new believers in the mission field. But missionaries should avoid the absolutization of Christian traditions and any grafting of those traditions on to a foreign context by simple transplanting or translation. These traditions should also be contextualized appropriately within any other intellectual, linguistic, and cultural setting.

The area of religious depravity (Quadrant B in Figure 2) is where the Christian meaning is detached from a Christian form, and can often indicate a place in need of reformation and revival. Extensive renewal is constantly required when a Christian symbol or form has lost its meaningfulness. When these forms are transferred to the context of other religions, appropriate contextualization has to be applied with great caution.

When a Christian form and its Christian meaning are detached or are only arbitrarily linked, the form has lost much of its religious connection in the missionary's home country and may easily be dismissed as not having any religious value in the foreign context. While pushing the form onto the target culture is not advisable, the missionary needs to restore the lost meaning of that form and see whether it could be used in the target culture.

When pagan forms are detached from pagan meanings (Quadrant C), the forms become a characteristic of culture with another religious heritage, rather than a form that is crucial to that religion itself. Missionaries often assume that since the form has lost its religious meaning, it can be used to convey Christian meaning. Sometimes, however, minor modifications may be required to create a distance from certain previous meanings.<sup>13</sup>

The final quadrant represents a dangerous area where syncretism often occurs (Quadrant D). This is where



pagan forms and pagan meanings are tightly linked. Therefore, when a non-believer in the mission field comes across that form, it potentially conjures up all the idolatrous meanings associated to that form. Attempts to disassociate the pagan meaning from pagan form and give it a new Christian meaning are extremely difficult and have more often created syncretism rather than effective contextualization. Missionaries, however, should avoid directly attacking or passing judgment without the proper understanding of deep-level meaning and function of religious symbols in this area. If, as Paul Hiebert posited, the level of connection between religious symbols and their meaning can be arbitrary, loose, or tight, then this particular area where religious symbol and meaning are tightly linked requires extensive discussion. Further interaction and examination among local leaders and

believers as a "hermeneutical community" can determine whether (or how) the form and meaning can be detached or not (Hiebert, Tienou, and Shaw 1999, 385).

### *Re-evaluation of Two Petitions Using Form-Meaning Dynamics*

The various viewpoints of scholars on the second and third petition of Naaman were reviewed earlier. Now, in light of the previously discussed relationships of form and meaning, the two controversial petitions will be re-examined using form-meaning connection to shed greater clarity on the debate and its implications for contextualization in mission contexts.

#### The Significance of Soil (v. 17)

Altars of animal sacrifice are prominent structures in religious cultures of the Ancient Near East. Israel also had altars for burnt offerings. Even though Naaman used an ancient worldview with a pagan notion of God, we need to be cautious in judging his petition as paganism or syncretism. As was mentioned in the previous exegetical review, some scholars believe that Naaman's petition reflects a "polytheistic territorial concept" of divinity, that the link in his worldview between the almighty YHWH and the soil of Israel is too strong (Keil and Delitzsch 2001, 3:226; Hobbs 1985, 13:66). Although this attachment of pagan theological form is true, a deeper level of speaker's intention still needs to be interpreted.

Naaman's second request of two mule-loads of soil can be analyzed with "deep-level semiotic narrative structure" (Pavel 1985, 91).<sup>14</sup> In order to understand his actual intention, we need to take into account his worldview. In linguistics, an utterance contains a surface meaning and a deep-level meaning; thus, let us examine these levels in Naaman's petition.

Naaman's actual utterance to Elisha is a request to take the soil of Israel, which is the surface meaning. Biblical scholars sense the syncretism in his request because they see an embed-

ded connection between his petition and the old religious worldview. Fritz points out that in the Ancient Near Eastern context, soil and deity are intermingled (2003, 260), and von Rad interprets Naaman's intention as reflecting the belief that there is a "sacramental attachment" between dirt and YHWH (2001, 35). These views, including Hobbs and Keil above, all agree that in Naaman's belief system, the form (soil) had an intricate connection to meaning (god of that land).

This is, however, only a partial interpretation of the deep-level semiotic structure. A fuller interpretation takes the connection one step further. When Naaman confessed his exclusive monotheistic faith (v. 17b) in his heart and mind, he had already replaced Rimmon with YHWH. Thus Naaman's final and deep-level intention can be interpreted as Naaman's intention to worship YHWH.

Let's add our work in Figure 2 to this deeper analysis of Naaman's request. In his theological frame, Naaman was unable to detach the meaning from the form. In his mind, dirt was a direct representation of the deity. When he realized that YHWH was the only true God, he immediately attaches YHWH to the dirt from Israel. In essence, he has taken a biblical meaning, YHWH, and attached it to a pagan framework of worshiping a deity. Naaman's request, however, is a dangerous attempt to contain biblical meaning, the worship of YHWH, in a pagan religious form. As we see in Quadrant D in Figure 2, if there is a tight form-meaning connection

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in pagan religious symbols, the use of a pagan form endangers Christian meaning with syncretism, even though Naaman was personally able to detach the pagan meaning from its form.

It is improbable that Naaman worshiped YHWH exactly as the Israelites did. More likely, he would have offered up sacrifices in the most reverent and worshipful way he knows. Certainly the likelihood of his generating syncretism was there, but more likely, because the material that made up the altar was from Israel, he would never forget that he is, in fact, worshiping God. That altar would represent no being other than YHWH, the God who searches the hearts of men, the God who would accept his sacrifices.

#### Bowing at the Temple: Detachable Meaning (v. 18)

Naaman's third and final petition to excuse his bowing in the temple can yield deeper meaning with narrative analysis. *Structural semiotic analysis* (Wolde 1989, 24-28) of Naaman's discourse reveals an interesting symmetric meaning structure (Figure 3). The utterance can be divided into six phrases where the first three phrases are mirrored by the last three phrases. In the first and last phrase, Naaman begs pardon (A, A') from the Lord for his bowing (C') in the house of Rimmon (B'). When his master goes

there to *worship* (B), Naaman has to support the King next to him (C). You'll notice that B-B' and C-C' have formatic (syntactic) similarity; yet, even though the discourse is symmetric in form, the meaning behind is not the same. Nelson endorses this in stating, "because his loyalty is to his king and not to Rimmon, as his overfull speech tries to make clear, his request does not undercut his monotheism" (Nelson 1987, 179). In other words, Naaman's bowing is not because of his faith in Rimmon, but because of his duty to the King. Since Naaman confessed to not worship any of his former gods (v.15), it is more reasonable to interpret Naaman's petition in the context of his duties to the king.

As was discussed earlier, our interpretation can only be complete when it includes Elisha's response. Naaman had to return to his home in Aram. But what will happen next is a critical question both to Elisha and Naaman. Naaman knows that as the commander of the army and a notable and powerful official, he is unable to excuse himself from all the state functions, which usually entailed religious rituals. Thus, rather than trying to hide what he would be required to do, he is earnest and honest before Elisha, voluntarily informing Elisha of an unavoidable, inevitable activity in his home land. The fact that he even brought up this subject strongly indicates that Naaman had already considered the future and foreseen what serving YHWH would entail in his home country. In essence, Naaman is explaining to Elisha that even though he has to physically bow down before the idol, he is not worshipping the idol. He wants Elisha to know where his heart is, what his true intentions are.

In this context, the form is the act of bowing in the temple. The meaning associated with this form is the

Figure 3. Symmetric Structure of Naaman's Second Petition (2 Kings 5:18).

A In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant:  
 B when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to *worship* there,  
  
 C and *he leans on my hand* (to **bow** in the house of Rimmon)  
 C' and I *bow* myself in the house of Rimmon,  
 B' when I **bow** myself in the house of Rimmon,  
 A' the LORD pardon your servant in this matter  
 (2 Kings 5:18, NASB, parenthesis and emphasis is mine)

worshipping of Rimmon. Based on Naaman's confession of faith, one cannot assume that he will be worshipping Rimmon by bowing at the temple, since he explicitly confessed that there is no other God other than YHWH. Thus even though he bows out of necessity, he has detached any spiritual meaning from this transaction and is only performing an empty act.

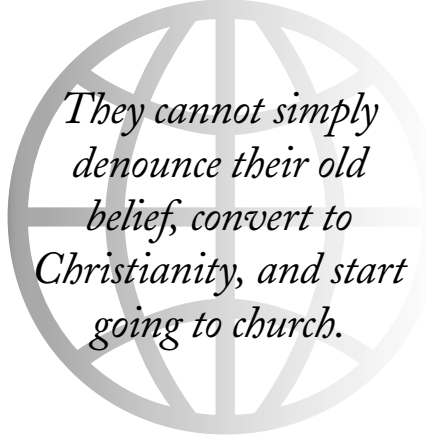
### *A Short Response to Tennent*

What is the potential contribution of this interpretation of Naaman's narrative to the theology and practice of contextualization? Can we develop a principle of contextualization based upon this story? As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Tennent is critical about the mosque attendance of an MBB. He presents two arguments. In his first argument, he states that if Naaman accompanied the king because the King was frail, it would legitimize mosque attendance only in cases where the new convert had to dutifully accompany "his ailing and feeble father" (Tennent 2006, 108).

However, as it was pointed out earlier, the reason for Naaman's temple attendance was because of the "social pressure" and expectation that came with his position as the chief general of the King (Brueggemann 2007, 269). Muslim "followers of Isa" can be said to be under similar social pressures. They cannot simply denounce their old belief, convert to Christianity, and start going to church. They will be disowned by their families, communities, and society at large and possibly face life-threatening situations. Tennent asserts that C5, if social pressure is the case, is comparable to Naaman's case: it is not a C5 movement anymore because the condition is more likely close to C6 (hiding identity and faith in Christ). In the passage, there is no explicit clue as to whether Naaman concealed or disclosed his new faith to the king and people around him. Yet, since the king and the people in the palace will hear about Naaman's miraculous healing, it is plausible that they

may also know about Naaman's new faith in YHWH. If this is the case, Naaman's case can be applied to the C5 movement as well.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, Tennent assumes that Naaman already had guilty feelings when he asked Elisha for "*forgiveness*" because "they both knew (it) was wrong" (Tennent 2006, 108). This interpretation, however, has shortcomings because the symmetrical structure of his petition explicitly showed that his bowing did not have the same meaning as his master's bowing, which was described as



*They cannot simply denounce their old belief, convert to Christianity, and start going to church.*

"worshipping" to Rimmon. If he does not attach a pagan spiritual meaning to his form of bowing, it should not be interpreted as an act of idolatry. Naaman in fact sought *understanding* from Elisha because even though he appears to be bowing at the temple of Rimmon, he is only going through the motions and has detached spiritual significance from the act of bowing to Rimmon.

### *Conclusion*

As all theologians acknowledge, biblical messages are not always found in the literal meanings of the scripture. It is important that in a narrative discourse like that of Naaman's story, the interpretations of passages be in agreement within the context and not in conflict with each other. The Naaman narrative shows a positive inner coherence between his conversion and consequent petitions. Naaman's petitions, though their

surface structures indicate an affinity to his old belief system (form), should be interpreted from a conversion that indicates his genuine commitment to YHWH (meaning). Further, since Jesus comments positively about Naaman's healing story in Luke 4:27, inter-textual agreement is reached when Elisha's response to Naaman is also accepted as positive.

Contrasting characters in the narrative raised a question of who the true people of God were. Those who have a "theo-centered directionality,"<sup>16</sup> whose inclinations lean toward God, consciously or unconsciously, are the people of God in reality. A conventional boundary of religious culture, one which was used to divide Jews and Gentiles, was found to be inaccurate. Therefore, the readers of the Naaman narrative should acknowledge that God is at work not only among the Israelites but also among the Gentiles, in and through situations prior to their conversion experience. Traditionally, mission in the context of other religions has often focused on extracting a new believer from their pagan religious context. Then the new convert becomes isolated from the community of his own people with lesser possibilities to bring others to Christ. There has been less appreciation for the *theo-centered directionality* of those like Naaman who find themselves within other religious associations.

Can we simply allow new believers to attend religious rituals at a Buddhist temple or worship at a Mosque? Or should we ban the pagan temples altogether? Stuart Caldwell, a practitioner and scholar of the insider movement, takes a negative view on the "place-location" interpretation of the pagan temple issue. In his research on "Jesus in Samaria," Caldwell concludes that Jesus' response to a Samaritan woman, "not on this mountain nor in Jerusalem temple" (John 4:21), actually implies his recognition of both places (Caldwell 2000, 26). His interpretation indicates that if a worshiper can revere God "in spirit and in truth," the actual place does



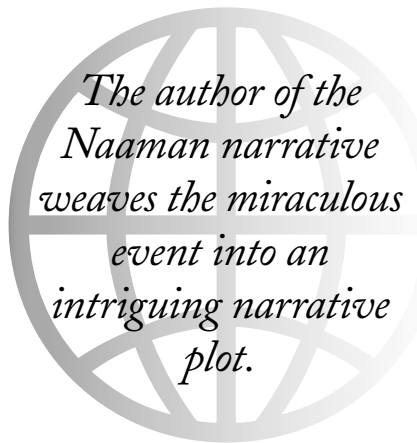
not matter.<sup>17</sup> However, although Caldwell's view respects the subjective position of the worshipers, it does not adequately deal with objective understanding and the relationship one has with other members of the faith community.

The lesson of the Naaman narrative advises us to allow a new believer to remain in the person's own familiar context while consistently discerning and developing better ways for the new believer to express his new faith in God. The task of the missionary is not only to coach new believers in preaching the gospel, but to assist them in cultural analysis, and to apply the form-meaning dynamics in religious symbolism as they seek together to contextualize the gospel. **IJFM**

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- and worldview for a better communication, the gospel message that they preach will remain a foreign religion.  
<sup>2</sup> John Travis (a pseudonym) developed "C1-C6 spectrum" to portray the degrees of "Christ-centeredness" in the expression of Muslim background believers (Travis 1998). His article provided and pioneered the C5 movement. According to Travis, the C5 believers identify themselves as "Muslim followers of *Isa Al Masi*." They do not dramatically change their religious practices even though they do so in faith confession. The C5 movement has brought controversial discussions among both practitioners and missiologists (Parshall 1998; Travis 2000; Tennent 2006).  
<sup>3</sup> Hiebert's idea of connectedness between form and meaning is compatible to the linguistic and theological concept of sign and symbol. The prominent French linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), identified the level of connection between "signifier" and "signified." If there is an arbitrary connection between the "signifier" and the "signified," it is a "sign." If there is a natural connection, it becomes a "symbol." (Saussure 1972, 65-68) The German theologian, Paul Tillich, also identified similar relationship between "religious sign" and "religious symbol." (1964)  
<sup>4</sup> Provan also suggests that the books of First and Second Kings should be studied as narratives in which "plots" are found as literary devices (1997, 27). To portray this conversion story of a Gentile, the author of the Naaman narrative weaves the miraculous event into an intriguing narrative plot. Following this informed suggestion, it is proper for us to start finding literary plots and their hidden meanings.  
<sup>5</sup> As a literary plot, Alan Smith focuses on two "major characters," Naaman and Elisha (Smith 1994, 205). By eliminating the *minor* characters, he limits his research without taking account of the bigger picture of the narrative in its reductionism. Kim tries to expand this concept of "main character" by marking the importance of the slave girl's role in the whole plot. However, the overall effort of Kim's feministic hermeneutics made this young slave girl (female) stand alone, even without Naaman's wife, against the other male characters (Kim 2005). In the given text, we observe that there are non-dismissible characters whose relationships positively contribute to the Naaman narrative; his wife, a young slave girl, the king of Syria, and servants who accompany Naaman to Israel. Elisha was also present with the king of Israel and his servant, Gehazi.



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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> While missionaries need to deculturate their mother culture so that they become messengers of the gospel, they also need to find contact points or common grounds to present the gospel that is meaningful to the hearers as well. Unless they actively research and evaluate local culture

<sup>6</sup> The true intention of the King is uncertain, as some speculate that the reason for sending Naaman to Israel may have been a way to create an excuse to wage war against Israel. However, what is certain is that YHWH orchestrated all things so that Naaman would arrive at Elisha's door and later be healed.

<sup>7</sup> Nwaoru accounts for the meaning of the Israelite girl's situation missiologically, suggesting that the young girl "saw the problems of her life as opportunities to propagate her faith and to bear witness to the healing/saving power possessed by YHWH's representative." (Nwaoru 2008, 29) It is not certain whether the Israelite girl actually acknowledged Naaman's diseases as an opportunity of evangelism or not. However, it is evident that YHWH used her life to make the narrative happen for Naaman's salvation under his sovereignty. It is also interesting to compare a similar story in contemporary Ethiopia in which a kidnapped girl, Kakalla Amale, was forced to become the third wife of a Muslim man, Ato Jate Malegu. This laid a foundation for the Kale Heywet Church and the conversion of the whole village (Dindamo 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Naaman's confession indicates a major shift in his worldview. He denounces the existence of any other god except YHWH and that is why he will no longer offer burnt offerings nor make sacrifices to other "gods." He declares that the Lord, who resides in Israel, is the true God. Unlike Naaman's confession of YHWH as Israel's regional God, the plot of the narrative as a whole proves that YHWH is the True God of the earth and His power goes beyond the limits of ethnic, religious, and national boundaries (Smith 1994, 207; von Rad 2001, 30-31). Gray and Jones gave Naaman's confession high marks in comparison with the Islamic monotheistic *shahada* (Gray 1970, 507; Jones 1984, 418) However, Gray carefully diagnosed Naaman's situation as a form of "monolatry." (Gray 1970, 507)

<sup>9</sup> The dictionary meaning of this word is "worship of one god without denying the existence of other gods."

<sup>10</sup> Mackay re-narrates Elisha's response; "Your heart is now filled with peace through the knowledge of Jehovah's grace; now wherever you go, whatever you do, take heed that you never lose that peace which is now your portion." (1882, 111)

<sup>11</sup> His idea is very similar to Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a prominent French linguist who claimed that "no word is inherently meaningful. Rather a word

## Instead of showing "lotus hands," Christians [in Cambodia] press the palms firmly so that they become "prayer hands."

is only a 'signifier,' i.e., the representation of something, and it must be combined in the brain with the 'signified,' or the thing itself, in order to form a meaning-imbued "sign." If there is a natural connection between the "signifier" and the "signified," it becomes a "symbol." (Anon. 2010)

<sup>12</sup> Though Paul Tillich perceived religion as a system of symbols (1964), his failure of cognition of religious reality imprisoned faith in a philosophical and religious symbolic system. Therefore, his cognition of God cannot overcome the religious symbolism. Unlike the evangelical cognition of God as a personal and relational being, God, to Tillich, God became an impersonal being imprisoned in a symbolic religious system. The following statement clearly reflects Tillich's cognition of God: "The fundamental symbol of our ultimate concern is God." (Tillich and Scharlemann 1988, 252)

<sup>13</sup> For example, Cambodians greet each other by pressing palms together in front of face and bowing at the same time (hands should be shaped as if they hold an egg). This is called *sompeab(k)*. The shape of lotus hands symbolizes dedication of life to the Buddha. Therefore, in some Cambodian churches, missionaries taught new believers the Korean bow or the Western "hi" (waving one hand over one's shoulder), which is improper and absolutely foreign to the local non-believers. In this case, simple modification and rendering with new Christian meaning would bring cultural appropriateness. Instead of showing "lotus hands," Christians press the palms firmly so that they become "prayer hands." When they greet each other, they can confess in their heart, "I pray for you."

<sup>14</sup> In order to interpret the intension behind Naaman's request, one needs to consider Noam Chomsky's famous theory of "transformative syntax." In his book, *Aspect of the Theory of Syntax* (Chomsky 1965), he observed a deeper meaning behind the syntax, the surface structure; of a language. In *Language and Mind* (Chomsky 1972), he argues that linguistics should not be a study of utterances, but of the "human mind" revealed in the "inner relationship between sound and meaning." (Chomsky 1972, 100-114)

<sup>15</sup> A Muslim writer in her article titled, "Secret War: Protecting Yourself, Your Family, and Your Community from

Missionaries," views the C5 believers as "heretical or confused Muslims" since they profess a different faith from the Muslim majority (Zaid 2006).

<sup>16</sup> To articulate this, the concepts of "centered-set" and "directionality" are borrowed from Hiebert (Hiebert 1994, 123).

<sup>17</sup> Caldwell's view, however, is also deficient in dealing with the weak believers (1Cor 8:1-13) who cannot worship YHWH "in spirit *and* in truth" with full knowledge, genuine emotion, and sound judgment of their socio-religious context.