Introduction

Temples have been and continue to be a pervasive institution in the religious history of mankind (Stark 2007), and one of the primary ways through which man has endeavored to communicate with his god. While the complex structures, practices and beliefs associated with temples and shrines have confronted God’s people within the pages of Scripture (and throughout the church’s mission for the past twenty centuries), the temple has also been embedded in their history. This article attempts to examine how a proper exegesis of the biblical material surrounding Solomon’s temple, particularly as it relates to a structure known as the Rean Theivoda (“spirit house,” “angel tower”), can help determine this structure’s potential as a vehicle for communicating Christian beliefs and shed insight into mission in Cambodia today. Admittedly, these reflections are not conclusive in themselves, but are only an initial and partial evaluation of the broader process of “critical contextualization” (Hiebert 1987), a process that must ultimately involve the local Cambodian believing community.

Contextualization and Method

For the last three decades, “contextualization” has received much attention from missiologists and missionaries, with a renewed emphasis on authenticity in both Christian practice and the theology of the peoples who are responding to the gospel. Definitions of “contextualization” vary, but I find Enoch Wan’s especially clear and concise. For Wan, “contextualization” denotes the efforts of formulating, presenting and practicing the Christian faith in such a way that it is relevant to the cultural context of the target group in terms of conceptualization, expression and application; yet maintaining theological coherence, biblical integrity and theoretical consistency (Wan 2010).

Additionally, Ninian Smart outlined the seven dimensions of religion—doctrinal, ritual, mythic, experiential, ethical, social, and material—that need to be dealt with in contextualization.
with if there is to be a complete contextualization of biblical truth in a given culture (Smart 1996). If Smart has narrowed down the religious aspects that may need to be contextualized, Paul G. Hiebert has provided a model for the process of “critical contextualization,” whereby aspects of religion and culture can be addressed appropriately. He suggested a four-step process: 1) phenomenological analysis (exegesis of the culture); 2) ontological reflection (exegesis of the Scripture and the hermeneutical bridge); 3) critical evaluation; and 4) missiological transformation (Hiebert 1987; Hiebert, Tienou, and Shaw 1999, 21–29) (Figure 1).

This paper seeks—through exegesis and, to the degree possible, the application of “critical contextualization” principles—to evaluate, both biblically and missiologically, the potential appropriate use of the Rean Theivoda (angel tower) in Cambodian Christianity. The phenomenological analysis (step 1 in Figure 1) draws upon the author’s knowledge of Rean Theivoda, which he gained from over sixty research papers written by his Cambodian university students. The ontological reflection (step 2) will not be exhaustive due to space limitations. One passage will be examined exegetically while others will be suggested for further study.

One limitation of this study is that local Cambodian Christians were not a part of the contextualization process. Thus, for steps 3 and 4 (critical evaluation and missiological transformation) I will simply offer suggestions, since the necessary decisions about the use of Rean Theivoda need to be made by the hermeneutical community of Cambodian Christians.

**Contextualization in Cambodia**

Protestant mission in Cambodia began in 1923 when Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Hammond of the Christian and Missionary Alliance began their ministry there (Cormack and Lewis 2001, 57). As the church grew and matured, hymns were indigenized by putting Christian lyrics to traditional Cambodian music. Similarly, the Bible was translated using familiar, authoritative Buddhist religious terms (derived from Sanskrit and Pali), so that the Bible would be received as a holy text and not be seen as foreign. These efforts at contextualization were successful in relaying the gospel in easily identifiable terms.

Church growth came to a near standstill during the communist revolution of the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979). Not many Christians survived this period, as people of any faith or education were targeted and massacred. Some, however, were fortunate enough to flee to refugee camps in Thailand. There, missionaries evangelized a new group of Cambodians and gathered them into churches (Cormack and Lewis 2001, 13). Without their Christian predecessors, a new Christian culture began to emerge in the camps, one that did not recognize the importance of contextualization or the need to deal with the personal and communal issues of Cambodian society. Then in 1991, with the help of UN peacekeeping troops (1991–1992) and the United National Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC, 1992–1993), Cambodia became a nation with religious freedom. Thus a new community of Christians from the camps moved into the country under foreign protection.

As Cambodia has become increasingly less dangerous in recent years, the number of missionaries has risen rapidly. However, those who attempt to evangelize are met with much resistance, especially because many missionaries discourage traditional practices. Most traditional celebrations or rituals (such as weddings and funeral traditions) identify participants as members of Cambodian society and are closely related to their traditional religions. All of these areas of Cambodian culture need to be addressed as potential candidates for contextualization. Among these rituals and practices is the daily practice of praying and giving offerings at the Rean Theivoda (hereafter RT). Can the structures, practices, and beliefs associated with the RT be used to communicate Christian beliefs in a way that are both compatible with cultural norms but distinctive enough to be perceived as carrying a different message? Can the RT be used to complement and enhance scriptural truth?

**A Brief Description of the Rean Theivoda**

The Rean Theivoda is a prominent structure in Cambodian society, one that exists in the majority of Cambodian homes, businesses, and even Buddhist temples. One major ritual practiced at a RT is prayer to ancestral spirits (Neak Ta) for the protection and blessing of the household. Such prayers are performed by putting one’s palms together and bowing toward the RT. Sometimes these prayers are accompanied by the

![Figure 1. Methodology of Critical Contextualization (Hiebert, Tienou, and Shaw 1999, 22)](image-url)
burning of incense, as people believe that their prayers ascend with the smoke from the incense.

Another ritual practiced at the 
RT involves the giving of different kinds of offerings. For example, after their daily visit to the market, the women usually offer some of their groceries to the various spirits that reside either in the miniature house of the 
RT or under it. On special occasions, flowers like jasmine and lotus are placed there to venerate the higher spirits, including ancestral spirits. This act not only expresses respect for the ancestors but also conveys filial piety toward the living, both parents and elderly relatives. The offering of prayers and food at the 
RT falls within “the practical expressions through which religious identity is founded and lived out in the real world” (Moreau 2006, 329). Because of their importance in Cambodian society, the rituals at the 
RT and other folk practices are areas that the Cambodian church needs to address.

**Background**

Like most traditional practices and beliefs, both missionaries and Cambodian Christian communities alike have strongly rejected the practice of the 
Rean Theivoda as a form of idolatry. Some zealous missionaries often encourage new believers to destroy their 
RT in order to show their faith in Christ. In my ministry in the small town of Kampong Cham, the 
RT often became an issue for new Christians and those being evangelized.10

As the Cambodian Christian community continues to spread rapidly,11 culturally foreign and strange practices are being introduced and traditional practices visibly rejected,12 creating both public and private13 conflict between Christians and non-Christians.14 So far no Cambodian church or foreign missionary has attempted to accept the traditional practice of 
RT. Undoubtedly, accepting such a practice without appropriate contextualization will lead to syncretism. On the other hand, any strong rejection of the 
RT that ignores the significance and influence of this ritual could produce a “split-level Christianity” in the long run (Hiebert et al. 1999, 15). A split-level Christianity (where some Christians return to the former folk practices of their old belief system), may occur when the church or its leaders are unable to successfully deal with the serious life crises that their members face.

**Historical and Religious Background**

In the South Asian countries of the Indochina peninsula, the worship of spirits in the “spirit house” is common practice (Reichert and Khongkhunthan 2007, 97–103). In Cambodia this type of spirit house is called 
Rean Theivoda (literally “angel tower,”) or in more formal religious terminology, 
Preah Phumdey (the earth god). This worship of spirits originates from an ancient belief that likely existed long before any of the major religions predominated in Cambodia.

The main function of the 
RT is religious in nature. The 
RT is a place where people honor several venerated spirits including “
Neak Ta (ancestral spirits), 
Preah Ko (the sacred bull), and Buddha.” (Ranges and LeBoutillier 2010, 92).15 
Neak Ta, often thought of as a grandfather–like spirit, finds its origin in the oldest ancestral spirit belief system in Cambodia (Baeq 2007, 61–62).16 It represents a nature spirit and therefore is believed to exist in animals, old trees, rivers, and houses (Choulean 2000, 3–6). Though ancient, this belief system continues to persist to this day.

Historically, the practice of 
RT was adapted by various religions. It was widely accepted during the Hindu empires of Chen La (505–802 AD) and the early Angkor (802–12th c.). During this period, the 
RT became a place of prayer to the angelic spirits of Hinduism and has been called the “angel tower” ever since. People believed that the angels would descend and sit on top of the 
RT and thereby give protection to the household.

Around AD 1181, under the reign of King Jayavarman VII, Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to Cambodia (Chandler 1992, 56). Rather than getting rid of the structure, the 
RT was dedicated to Buddha by royal decree. Cambodian Buddhist monks integrated the 
RT into Buddhism at that time17 and even now 
RTs are preserved in Buddhist temples to house guardian spirits. Many temples have four to eight towers of 
Preah Phumdey, a formal title for 
Rean Theivoda, erected around the fence to protect the vicinity from evil spirits (vinhnen akkorok).

Along with the 
RT structure itself, the folk practice of 
Neak Ta survived through the Hindu and early Buddhist periods, and is still practiced to this day with its syncretistic form and meaning (Anon. 1973, 113–116). The folk practice of worshiping household 
Neak Ta at the 
RT is common among rural Cambodians as well as many urban dwellers.

**Ethical and Social Functions of 
Rean Theivoda**

There are three ethical aspects to the practice of 
RT. The first entails respect for parents and the elderly. Those who pray daily to the 
Neak Ta at the 
RT are constantly reminded to care
for their parents and elderly. The fear of being punished for neglecting the Neak Ta elicits dutiful devotion of one generation to another.

The second aspect of the RT is how this ritual relates to the spirits who are believed to reside beneath the RT, namely the spirits of dead travelers, the poor, and unborn or dead children. People offer food at the RT each day to allay these spirits and in so doing ward off harm and invite blessings (the spirits of the dead babies, for example are believed to attract customers to vendors). This and other beliefs (e.g., that those who refuse to help the needy risk becoming the target of their wrath after the needy die) all work to engender sympathy toward the marginalized.

Lastly, the RT also provides the opportunity to publicly demonstrate one’s level of dedication to, and respect for, the ancestors. By building an extravagant RT structure, dutifully offering food and daily prayers, and participating in other ceremonies to honor the dead, people attain great honor, respect and recognition in the community. It is also believed that praying to the Neak Ta brings protection to the community as a whole.

Having laid the basic foundation needed to understand the practice of RT (which satisfies the first step in critical contextualization), we now turn to the second step, the exegesis of Scripture and development of a hermeneutical bridge to the culture. Since the RT structure itself is most visible element and focal point for the aforementioned rituals, a similar case of the contextualization of a building—namely Solomon’s temple—will be examined to search for a potential hermeneutical bridge.

**Contextualization of the Temple in the Old Testament**

When YHWH called Abram, a “worshiper of pagan gods” (Josh. 24:2), to become Abraham, he did not call him within a religious or cultural void. YHWH knew full well that Abraham’s worldview was limited by his culture and his popular notions about God. But YHWH seems to contextualize His purposes by using the form and practice of the ancient Near Eastern temple in the Old Testament to uncover 1) which factors influenced David to propose the idea of building a “house of cedar” (temple) for YHWH (vv. 1-3); 2) what YHWH’s initial response was (vv. 4-7), and 3) why YHWH temporarily permitted the temple structure to represent the “house” (dynasty) of David from which the kingdom of YHWH’s son (v.14)—the son who would ultimately build YHWH a house for His name (vv. 8-17)—would be established. We will also discuss how the pagan concepts and forms associated with religious architecture were adopted to represent the ways of YHWH.

**David’s Plan to Construct a Temple (2 Sam. 7:1-3): Man’s Thoughts**

Several factors contributed to David’s desire to build a temple for YHWH. Arnold suggests that David’s proposal was based on the successful establishment of his kingdom in the region and the completion of his own palace (2003, 473). It was during this time of peace that David turns his attention to doing something for YHWH and comes up with the idea of building a temple.

As David contemplated what he could do to honor YHWH, he must have remembered his earlier experiences with the Ark of the Covenant. Arnold suggests that since the Ark of the Covenant had previously been captured by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4:11), David wanted to safeguard it from future danger (2003, 473). Indeed, David’s first attempt to bring it to Jerusalem had initially failed and the second time the process had not been easy. On both occasions, however, David was overjoyed at the prospect of having the ark brought to Jerusalem. This reflected his love for YHWH and his genuine desire to build a temple befitting the true God of Israel as neighboring nations had done for their gods.

There is strong evidence that the Israelites were constantly being exposed to the influences of the surrounding nations. And when the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, YHWH knew that they would want a king like the neighboring nations even before they had asked for one. In Deuteronomy 17:15-20, instructions are given to Israel’s future king. The biblical account seems clear that
YHWH had decided to use the form of earthly kingship to contextualize the deeper meaning and significance of Messianic kingship in redemptive history. Similarly, some scholars suggest that the fact that temples were so widespread throughout the ancient Near East led to the idea of building a temple for YHWH as well (Kaiser 1978, 150; Collins 2007, 124). Also, David’s desire to build a temple for YHWH seems to reflect the popular notion that a house was better than a tent, and therefore, God would prefer a temple to a tent as well.

Some liberal theologians have suggested that David’s proposal may have been modeled after the prevalent ancient Near Eastern royal ideology of securing and expanding a dynasty (Bergen 1996, 335). Archeological research on ancient Near Eastern culture does indicate similarities between aspects of the Davidic-Solomonic temple and other ancient Near Eastern temples. Overall, however, the biblical text does not support the idea that David’s reason for wanting to build a temple was to make a name for himself or his dynasty, but rather to make a name for YHWH; David’s intentions were pure.

**First Response of YHWH (v. 4-7): Correcting False Assumptions**

Nathan’s role in David’s court was to help David discern and follow the will of YHWH. When David first spoke to Nathan about building a temple for the Ark of God, Nathan told him to proceed with whatever he had in mind. And David would have gone ahead with his plans had YHWH not spoken to Nathan that night to let him know that He had not spoken to Nathan that he had in mind. And David would have gone ahead with his plans had YHWH not spoken to Nathan that he had in mind. And David would have gone ahead with his plans had YHWH not spoken to Nathan that he had in mind.

YHWH poses two questions in this passage (see italics above). Keil and Delitzsch suggest that the first question carries a negative overtone (2001, 2:596). In fact, Old Testament scholar William J. Dumbrell interprets verse 5 as a “clear refusal” of David’s idea, especially when the same account of this story in 1 Chronicles 17 is considered (Dumbrell 1984, 145). Thus by posing the first question, YHWH establishes the fact that David will not be the one to build a house for Him.

Many evangelical scholars suggest that the statement following the first question explains the reason for YHWH’s refusal. After denying David’s request, YHWH describes how His dwelling place had always been in motion, moving with His people. Additionally, Martens notes that YHWH raised the subject of His dwelling place to negate the “notion that God dwells, as pagan gods do, in temples” (1981, 141). Indeed, God’s second (also rhetorical) question reinforces the idea that dwelling in a tent had been YHWH’s choice and preference. Thus it seems credible to suggest that YHWH preferred to dwell in a tent in order to reflect the “mobility of the divine presence” (Dumbrell 1984, 145).

The flip side of YHWH’s initial choice of a tent over a house could be that He was concerned about just what the loss of the “mobility” of His presence would mean (Brueggemann 1990, 254). Dumbrell suggests that YHWH wanted to prevent the institutionalization of faith, which could lead to the corruption of the priesthood, as was the case with Eli’s two sons in Shiloh (1 Sam. 2:17) (Dumbrell 1984, 145).

Another plausible reason that YHWH refused David’s petition—and this relates to issues of RT practice—is that temples were pagan in origin. As noted earlier, liberal critics have pointed out the similarities between Solomon’s temple and other temples (Stacey 1979, 239; Walton 2009, 2:442). We know from hindsight that since the Spirit of YHWH had instructed David as to how the temple was to be built, YHWH was not concerned about structural similarities to pagan temples. What was at issue for YHWH was the failure of the people to keep His precepts. The later history of Israel and Judah reveals the propensity of the Israelites to follow other gods and the wicked practices of the surrounding nations. Although at first YHWH rejected David’s petition to build Him a temple, a new covenant of a Messianic dynasty would later be given to David (2 Sam. 7:8-16).

**The Davidic Covenant: YHWH’s Thoughts (v. 8-17)**

Most scholars agree that this passage contains the Davidic covenant (Campbell 2005, 72; Firth 2009, 382) and many point out how it stands apart from the previous covenants YHWH made. Firth states that “this is an essentially promissory covenant that does not require any specific action on David’s part” (2009, 382). Indeed, it is not presented in the form of a conditional “if-then” structure.
Examination of this passage reveals that YHWH’s covenant has two parts (Grisanti 1999, 236–240). In the first, YHWH begins by reminding David that it was He who had chosen David when he was just a shepherd boy and it was He who had led him until the present time (vv. 8, 9b). Then He makes a series of promises (vv. 9b-11a) concerning David and the Israelites that would come to pass in the days of David.

In the second part of this covenant, YHWH expresses His thoughts concerning David’s idea of building Him a “house of cedar.” If the first part of the covenant would be physically manifested in the immediate future, the second part would be spiritually manifested in the everlasting future. Without being explicit, YHWH contrasts David’s “house of cedar” with the “house” He is going to establish for David (v. 11b). While the “house of cedar” would result from human effort, the “house” for David would be YHWH’s initiative.

Because this dynasty would be established by YHWH himself, it would have all the qualities of an everlasting dynasty. Further, from this dynasty, YHWH promises to raise up David’s offspring (v. 12), one who will also be a “son” to YHWH (v. 14). And this “son” will be the one to build a house for YHWH’s Name (v. 13a). This “one way covenant” with David was, in essence, not about David’s immediate successor, Solomon, but about the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ.

This is especially evident since neither Solomon’s kingdom nor his throne was “physically” established forever.31 Further, after Solomon dedicates the temple, YHWH responds to Solomon by making a covenant with him (1 Kings 9:4-9). Here the covenant differs from the unconditional, one-way covenant that YHWH made with David in that it follows a conditional “if-then” format. This further supports the idea that the “house” that YHWH would build for David would not be a physical house, but a spiritual one. However, the question arises: Why did YHWH allow an earthly temple to be built when the house to be built for His name would be a spiritual one?

YHWH’s Purposeful Authorization: The Temporary Grant

YHWH was gracious to grant Israel a king when they cried out for one, even though He objected to it. And He was gracious enough to use this model of kingship and kingdom to build His revelations upon. Similarly, the building of the physical temple, despite YHWH’s reservations,32 was permitted on a temporary basis to be used as “typos” until the redemptive plan through the Messiah was fulfilled (Goppelt and Ellis 1982, 114–115). Groningen also supports the view that the temple became the central place where YHWH gradually revealed the redemptive history of the Messiah (1990, 855).

Although nowhere in Scripture does YHWH give direct permission for the temple to be built, some passages do indicate that YHWH allowed it and accepted it.33 The construction of the temple did, at least initially, serve to bring forth a nationwide commitment to wholehearted offerings (1 Chron. 29:1-9).34 And, as Kaiser points out, the history of the Exile clearly reveals that Yahweh Himself would be the real temple of true believers (Ezek. 11:16-21) (1978, 239).

As the kings fell away from God, king and people alike frequented the high places in order to worship other gods (2 Chron. 33:3-5). This physical temple—despite David and Solomon’s genuine desire to make a name for YHWH, and that of a few subsequent kings to turn the people’s hearts back to the Lord—failed to fulfill its role.

As for the spiritual temple, both Jesus (John 1:14; 2:21) and the hearts and bodies of those who believe in Jesus (1 Cor. 3:16) are referred to as the temple. Indeed, the temple would only be perfected in the body of Jesus Christ. Numerous passages support the idea that the temple of Israel was internalized in the person of Jesus.35 For example, Jesus referred to himself as the temple when he said, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19-21). The account in Mark 14:58 records, “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days’” (John 2:19-21). The disciples of Jesus believed that Jesus embodied the “presence of God’s grace far more than the temple” (Goppelt and Ellis 1982, 115). John recorded in Revelation 21:22, “I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Omnipotent and the Lamb Himself are its temple.” Paul also taught the reality of an “internalized” temple and applied it to the Corinthians believers themselves when he said, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16) The true temple where...
YHWH resides is in the heart of believers. This is an internalizing of the temple. In fact, this is precisely what Jesus emphasized when he told the Samaritan woman that the physical location did not matter—what matters is the worshiper’s heart.36

**Contextualization Principles Learned and Applied**

Through His preference for the tent, YHWH showed His desire to be mobile in order to dwell among His people and to move with them. YHWH’s intent still remains the same—He desires to move with His people even through changing times and cultures. YHWH is willing to contextualize in order that “all may be saved” (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13). I see five principles from the lessons in 2 Samuel 7:1–7 that should guide any critical contextualization of the RT in its Cambodian setting.

**Principle 1: YHWH allowed His tabernacle to be contextualized into a temple to adapt to changing times and settings.** YHWH knew that the nation of Israel would transition from living in tents to houses as they acquired land and settled down. YHWH knew that their worldview would change and that they would come to value a temple over a tent. And in His grace, I believe He allowed a foreign structure, one akin to pagan structures, to represent His Name because He knew that in this new setting a temple could be used to communicate His message.

Christian forms, including visible structures and metaphysical theologies, also need to be utilized to communicate eternal truths in ways that are specific to different cultures and worldviews across the different generations and periods of history. To accomplish this, the mode and style of communication need to be modified, while conserving the truth.

For Cambodians, the RT is one such pagan structure that has long been a part of their worldview and experience. Asking Cambodians to denounce or abandon the RT would be like asking someone not only to change into a different set of clothes, but to cut off a part of their body. Since the physical structure and practices surrounding the RT are so central to Cambodian culture and life experience, it would be worthwhile to discover ways to contextualize it appropriately.

**Principle 2: The structure or form does not matter as much as the meaning conferred on the form itself; meaning takes precedence over form and the heart or intentions of the believer who adopts the foreign forms is more important than the forms themselves.** Even though the form of the tabernacle was allowed to change, the meaning remained unchanged; although YHWH accepted Solomon’s temple (despite certain foreign influences), He never allowed any pagan meaning to contaminate what the temple stood for. Further, God recognized the genuine love that David had for Him and allowed David to express his love by arranging for Solomon to build the temple.37

I understand intention to be closely related to conscience. Conscience is the passive counterpart of intention, both of which are internal in nature. Thus Paul’s discussion about the eating of food sacrificed to idols hinged on the intention of the eater. Likewise, if one does something for YHWH with pure intentions, and an appropriate meaning is attached to the form, then one can expect to have a clear conscience. If one does something with an evil intention without regard for YHWH, one has attached a wrong meaning to the form and one’s conscience is not clear.

Believers should be given instruction on prayer so that there is no confusion as to the theology behind it.

Since there is no obvious parallel form like the RT in Christianity, it is difficult to replace the practices performed at the RT with Christian ones. Since the RT is such an integral part of the Cambodian culture, it may be possible to alter the structure of the RT so that Christian meanings can be conferred on them.

Without a doubt, the rituals practiced at the RT are unacceptable, since praying to ancestors or spirits and offering goods to them are both unbiblical.38 Thus changing the belief system behind praying at the RT would be a challenging but necessary step. There would need to be clear teaching that differentiates between these very different concepts of offering. Offerings are made at the RT to allay the spirits so that they will protect rather than harm their household and community. In contrast, offerings in the Christian context are given with the knowledge that all that we own comes from YHWH and that He is more interested in the attitude with which we give the offering rather than what and how much we give. Likewise, while believers and non-believers alike use similar body gestures while praying, there are (or at least should be) very different attitudes toward, and conceptual understandings of, this common form. Believers should be given instruction on prayer so that there is no confusion as to the theology behind it.

With respect to the practice of RT, whether the hermeneutical community will reject, modify, or accept it will depend on their ability to replace pagan meanings and attach Christian ones to the form (Baeq 2010, 201–202).
Principle 3: YHWH’s revelation is progressive, that is, it becomes gradually and increasingly more clear with the passage of time (Kaiser 1978, 234) so that it moves from the visible and tangible forms and rituals to the invisible, eternal spiritual truths. The concept of messianic redemption has become increasingly more complete and encompassing over time. In this particular passage YHWH used David’s desire to build a “house of cedar” to explain the coming of an eternal King, the Messiah.

Similarly, the Ten Commandments are clarified from the Old to the New Testament, all the while giving greater value to spiritual truths. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount parallels Moses’ delivering the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. In the Mosaic covenant, it was sufficient not to commit murder, the emphasis being on outward display of obedience to the law. In contrast, when it comes to the New Testament, Jesus clarifies the true intent of the law and says that thinking murderous thoughts, calling a brother “Raca,” or not being reconciled to a neighbor, all falls under the commandment “Do not murder.” Jesus fine-tunes and clarifies God’s precepts and shows that the intent of the heart takes precedence over the outward appearance.

In regard to the practice of RT, it should be understood that Cambodian religion and culture are heavily based on external forms and rituals. Western Christianity, on the other hand, has had sufficient time through its long history to move from an emphasis on visible and tangible forms to more invisible spiritual truths. Thus a huge chasm exists between the way that Western Christian missionaries want to relay the Good News versus how Cambodians are ready to receive such a message. They need a “stepping-stone” to go from the tangible, visible religious culture to the invisible, spiritual truths taught by the missionaries. They need both a stepping-stone and time to cross it. It is conceivable that contextualized pagan forms can serve such a function, as something to bridge the gap between a maturing Christian culture and a pagan one. With each generation, this gap is lessened and, once they are able to internalize spiritual truth, the need for the stepping-stone may disappear entirely.

One application of this principle may be that a contextualized form of the RT would be allowed on a temporary basis just as YHWH allowed the temple as a temporary arrangement. Even if the RT is modified to convey Christian truths, it should only be a stepping-stone to decrease the antagonism of Cambodians against Christianity so that Christianity is not perceived as a foreign and dishonorable religion that seems almost anti-Cambodian. If YHWH was willing to wait for His people to completely conform to His ways and will, missionaries should not be quick to dismiss what seems like the entire traditional culture of the Cambodians.

Principle 4: A christocentric messianic message must be the highest cause and the primary reason for adopting pagan forms. Despite the danger of syncretism, YHWH permitted the construction of the temple in order to establish Messianic redemptive history through it. The contextualization of the tabernacle into the temple strengthened the nation and developed the concept of a Messianic dynasty.

To apply this principle to the practice of RT would require creativity. Since the RT is by the main gate, one suggestion is that a cross be placed on top of the miniature house so it will resemble a church building. Further, in the miniature house that is the RT, a praying-hands statue can be placed inside instead of a statue of Buddha, a Neak Ta, or some other idol. In this way, whenever a Christian enters the home, he or she can be reminded to pray for his or her household. Further, it could be used as a reminder that the church is not a building to be visited weekly but rather the body of Christ both gathered in churches and scattered in homes and places of work. Moreover, it could be a reminder that Jesus is the head of the church and of the household of faith, the one who dwells with us and in our hearts. The Bible could remind them to always put the Word of God in the center of their lives and to whole-heartedly follow His ways.

Principle 5: Even when contextualization is successful, there is always the danger that the Christian meaning of accepted forms will become altered or distorted, and thus a constant openness to reformation is necessary if syncretism is to be avoided. Even Solomon’s temple, which made a name for the Lord, lost its purpose over the successive generations. Empty rituals were carried out merely for the sake of keeping religious ordinances, and both kings and the people began to turn to other gods. Once a form begins to lose its intended meaning, rituals can themselves become the focus of worship. Thus God raised up many prophets to get the people to turn from their wicked ways.

Even when another temple was built
during Ezra’s time and the returning Israelites repented and truly turned to God’s ways, by the time of Jesus’ ministry, His “Father’s House” had once again become a den of robbers.

Similarly, if the practice of RT is contextualized so that a new Christian meaning is conferred on the RT, the congregation should continue to be reminded not to focus on the physical structure (lest they revert to idolizing the form) but rather to focus on the christocentric meaning that justifies its use. Furthermore, just as the notion of the temple was eventually “internalized” through the redemptive history of the Messiah, the role and significance of adopted pagan forms should diminish so that the Christians are weaned away from the forms themselves, lest the forms become objects of worship. Christian meaning should be reinforced, strengthened and internalized so that the need for the forms diminishes over time.

Conclusion

The principles that emerge from this Old Testament passage are not limited to the five listed above. And other passages will need to be studied to uncover yet other principles. Contextualization is neither an easy nor an instant process, but requires comprehensive effort and a great deal of patience. I have tried to address the first and second steps of critical contextualization in this paper. However, as Hiebert has recommended, critical contextualization has to be done from an emic (insider) perspective of cultural and biblical analysis (Hiebert, Tienou, and Shaw 1999, 21–28). Since this paper was drafted in the absence of the local community of faith, the suggestions made here are based solely on the author’s experiences of engaging students, doing research, and teaching cultural studies at the Cambodian University for Specialties (CUS) in Kampong Cham, Kingdom of Cambodia.

The next step is the critical evaluation of what was learned from the first two steps (my attempts at descriptive and biblical analysis). This step of reflecting on the biblical teaching and cultural realities needs to be carried out within the local community of faith and missionaries as they engage in intensive dialogue. Unless decisions are made by the community of local believers, any decision, even if good and appropriate, can easily become irrelevant to the actual faith community (Hiebert et al. 1999, 27–28). The role of the hermeneutical community, which is comprised of local leaders, believers, and missionaries, is critical for successful contextualization. The purpose of this paper was to simply to make some suggestions that would promote the critical contextualization of the RT (see Appendix 1, p. 38).

This brief survey of the practices surrounding the RT has sought to provide some general insights into the ethical and social functions of these rituals as they relate to everyday issues in the lives of Cambodians. In traditional folk religion, the practices of RT have provided answers about filial piety, communal relationships, social ethics, health, safety, fortune, and the meaning of life. The task of contextualization must also meet multiple needs. After these related forms and meanings are analyzed, the pagan meanings need to be detached and replaced with Christian meanings that not only provide profound answers to everyday issues but also show that God is concerned even about the smallest needs. Even if the RT is creatively adopted to convey Christian meaning and worldview for the current generation, believers will have to be vigilant in guarding the new Christian meaning from mutation.

If the missionaries and Cambodian Christians continue to denounce the practice of RT and refuse to engage with the issues that are relevant to Cambodians, the pull of folk religion may cause some believers to go underground, creating a hidden level of false meaning and practice. In this case, they would hold both an orthodox public faith and a more private traditional faith that still conserves older meanings and practices. The failure to allow the church to address the meaningfulness and significance of RT practice may create a “schizophrenic” faith in these believers (Tillich 1964, 3). Indeed, the practice of RT may or may not be modifiable for Christian use but the decision must remain with the Cambodian believers. Giving local Christians the opportunity to deal with these issues over time will help them to discern Biblical truth more clearly than before so that whether they decide to modify and accept the RT or denounce it, they will have clear reasons for their convictions.

Good contextualization cannot be created overnight or without critique and opposition. Agents of contextualization should anticipate these hurdles in their ministry of transformation (Kraft 2005, 255–273). As Kraft has pointed out, time is a critical factor in contextualization. Each generation will need to re-evaluate the efforts of the previous generation and strive to keep their faith and practices pure.
## Appendix 1. Suggestions for Critical Contextualization of the Rean Theivoda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>Biblical Reference</th>
<th>Social Function</th>
<th>Christian Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel Tower (Rean Theivoda)</td>
<td>Place of service for haunting spirits and ancestral spirits</td>
<td>2 Sam. 7:1-29</td>
<td>Generosity toward people and toward the spirits</td>
<td>Preserve the structure with noticeable changes but reject spirit worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit House (Preah Phumdey)</td>
<td>Style of Hindu or Buddhist temple</td>
<td>2 Kings 5:15-19</td>
<td>Worshipping high gods and earthly angels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Offerings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Spirits of the unborn, dead children, and those who died on the streets without any family</td>
<td>Mark 7:14ff</td>
<td>Social ethics toward travelers, weaker people, and the marginalized</td>
<td>Reject the offering of food to the spirits but teach social responsibility for the marginalized and prayer for them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowers (Jasmine, Lotus)</td>
<td>Worshiping ancestral spirits (Neak Ta)</td>
<td>Acts 14:13</td>
<td>Filial piety toward living parents and dead ancestors</td>
<td>Discard the practice but emphasize Biblical teaching about respecting and obeying parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prayer</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer or Wish (Bueong Sueong, Attitan)</td>
<td>Protections and blessings</td>
<td>Ps. 65:2</td>
<td>Household and communal protections and blessings</td>
<td>Prayer for family, community, the church, and world missions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burning of Incense</td>
<td>Ascends with their prayers to heaven</td>
<td>Ex. 30:1</td>
<td>Visual confirmation of their prayer</td>
<td>Needs further discussion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Endnotes

1. Rodney Stark, a professor of the sociology of religion at Baylor University, describes this phenomenon as "temple religion," which has a long history since ancient civilizations (2007, 64–112).

2. As the Western missionaries have endeavored to reach all people groups from different religions, races, and cultures, terms like indigenization, inculturation, contextualization, and appropriate Christianity have been used to make the Gospel message and praxis authentic to them (Shorter 1988; Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989; Gilliland 2002; Kraft 2005). Each term overlaps in meaning but puts different emphasis on certain aspects of making Christianity appropriate and relevant to different people groups. The word 'contextualization' was first used by Shoki Coe (Coe 1976) to move beyond indigenization to transforming society as a whole (Ott, Strauss, and Tennent 2010, 266).


4. The theme that this paper is dealing with, *Rean Theivoda* (angel tower), falls in different dimensions of Smart’s model (1996). It has a materialistic dimension because these rituals are carried out at a structure; a ritual dimensions because prayers and food offerings are practiced daily; and ethical and social dimensions, because it teaches moral values and reinforces appropriate social behavior.

5. According to Hiebert, there are three responses to the old belief system; acceptance, leading to syncretism; rejection, leading to a split-level Christianity; and engagement,
leading the community of believers to critical contextualization (Hiebert 1985, 183–190; Hiebert, Tienou, and Shaw 1999, 20–29). A notable aspect of critical contextualization is that it is not conducted by the missionary (as was traditionally the case), but rather by lay Christians and church of leaders of the target group, with the missionary’s support and guidance. In this case, the missionary is merely the facilitator and is there to try to answer difficult theological questions. Critical contextualization shifts power to the local people.

A key aspect of critical contextualization (Hiebert 1985, 183–190; Hiebert, Tienou, and Shaw 1999, 20–29).)


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Critical contextualization shifts power to the local people.
25 In 1 Kings 5:5, 8:17, and 8:18 Solomon quotes David as having told him to build a temple for the Name of the Lord.

26 God recognized David’s genuine intention to bring glory to God. 1 Kings 8:18 has Solomon quoting YHWH, “But the Lord said to my father David, ‘You did well to have it in your heart to build a temple for my Name.’” Further, immediately following God’s covenant with David, David responds to God saying, “… Do as you promised, so that your name will be great forever” (2 Sam. 17:25b, 26a).

27 In the same account in 1 Chronicles 17:4, God answers, “You are not the one to build me a house to dwell in.”

28 In 1 Chronicles 28, David gathers all the officials to announce that God has endorsed the establishment of his dynasty and has, by the Spirit of the Lord, given detailed instructions for a temple. In v. 12 it says, “He gave him the plans of all that the Spirit had put in his mind for the courts of the temple of the LORD and all the surrounding rooms, for the treasuries of the temple of God and for the treasuries for the dedicated things.” Also in v. 19 it says, “All this,” David said, “I have in writing as a result of the Lord’s hand on me, and he enabled me to understand all the details of the plan.”

29 King Manasseh of Judah is described as the king who led Judah and the people of Jerusalem astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites (2 Chron. 33:9). In 2 Chronicles 33:2-6, “He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places … he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them … Sin both courts of the temple of the LORD, he built altars to all the starry hosts. 6 He sacrificed his children … practiced divination and witchcraft, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spirits.”

30 There are covenants, including the Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Palestinian, Mosaic covenants. Among them the Davidic covenant is unique and important for messianic hope (Enns 1989, 503–512).

31 1 Chronicles 17:14 says, “I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever.” This “house” cannot be Solomon’s temple because it was destroyed by the Babylonians. The second temple was built as recounted in the Book of Ezra and later renovated by Herod.

32 Permission to construct the Temple was granted despite the dangers of corruption and of “a state-supported religion” that would “place itself wholly at the service of the state and [would] begin to hallow the state in the name of its God” (Bright 1953, 41).

33 The construction of the temple was accompanied with divine signs: answer to prayer at the site (2 Sam. 24:18-25), divine instructions concerning the design of the temple (1 Chron. 28:12a), and God’s consecration of the temple after the dedication ceremony (1 Kings 9:3).

34 The Israelites gave wholeheartedly for the construction of the temple just as their ancestors had done for the building of the tabernacle during the Exodus (Ex. 35:4-36:7).

35 Bergen lists many New Testament teachings concerning Jesus based on the Davidic covenant, which shows Jesus is the Messiah who fulfills the Davidic covenant on the house that YHWH promised. “(1) the son of David (cf. Matt. 1:1; Acts 12:22-23; Rom. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:8; Rev. 22:16, etc.); (2) the builder of the house for God (cf. John 2:19-22; Heb. 3:3–4, etc.); (5) the possessor of an eternal kingdom (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24-25; Eph. 5:5; Heb. 1:8; 2 Peter 1:11, etc.); (6) the son of God (cf. Mark 1:1; John 20:31; Acts 9:20; Heb. 4:14; Rev. 2:18, etc.)” (Bergen 1996, 337–338).

36 Caldwell interprets Jesus’ response to the Samaritan woman, “not on this mountain nor in Jerusalem temple” (John 4:21) as a recognition of both places (Caldwell 2000, 26). By teaching about the true worship for two more days in Samaria, Jesus freed the Samaritan believers to worship YHWH in spirit and in truth even at the temple on the Mount Gerizim. The location of worship space should not be the central issue, if religious form and meaning are detachable. This permissive adoption of pagan cultures was also practiced to free the new community of worship during the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 (Flemming 2005, 43-53; Higgins 2007).

37 In fact, God himself has ordered questionable things. For example, he commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. There are biblical texts that tell how God destroys the sacrificing of children. So why does He ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? First of all, God’s intention was not the blood sacrifice of a human being, rather the testing of Abraham’s faith.

38 It is interesting to note, however, that Christians do pray and are to pray unceasingly to God. Christians pray to God because He is the possessor of an eternal kingdom (cf. John 2:19-22; Heb. 3:3–4, etc.); … (3) the builder of the house for God (cf. Mark 1:1; John 20:31; Acts 9:20; Heb. 4:14; Rev. 2:18, etc.); … (3) the builder of the house for God (cf. Mark 1:1; John 20:31; Acts 9:20; Heb. 4:14; Rev. 2:18, etc.)” (Bergen 1996, 337–338).

39 Messiah was represented in many ways: the seed of the woman, the sacrificial lamb, our High Priest, King, the Anointed One, etc.

40 Tillich calls this “demonization,” when syncretism leads to a form that becomes more important than the sacred meaning (Tillich 1964, 60).

41 Yet, for this struggle over time to successfully make a foreign culture able to “present and practice the Christian faith” at all times, I would recommend Peter Beyerhaus’ three steps of biblical adaption or possession (i.e., selection, rejection and reinterpretation) as a helpful spiral development of contextualization (Beyerhaus 1975, 119–141).

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