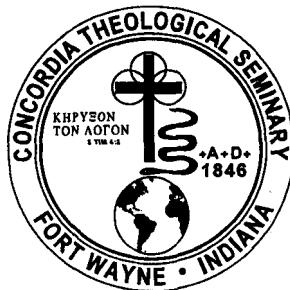


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The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective

Walter A. Maier III

This study analyzes the narrative of the healing of Naaman the Syrian, 2 Kings 5:1-19a. Selected verses will be treated exegetically with a particular focus on their missiological character and implications.

The pericope of Naaman's healing is actually the first part of the whole Naaman account. The second part, involving the rest of 2 Kings 5, relates the unfortunate Gehazi incident. The entire Naaman account is well known, in part because of how this history has been recorded in Scripture. As James Montgomery states, "The story is brilliant in its representation of the international manners of the age, as also in its fine sketching of the actors."¹ A. Graeme Auld correctly notes that "a remarkable amount about the character of the main participants is communicated in very few words."²

Further, T. R. Hobbs has observed that of all the stories associated with the great prophet Elisha, this one has the most highly developed plot and contains the largest number of characters.³ In the first part, verses 1-19a, there are eight characters or groups of characters: Naaman, his wife, her maid, the king of Syria, the king of Israel, Elisha, Elisha's unnamed messenger, and Naaman's servants. The second part of the account, verses 19b-27, adds two more: Gehazi and the

¹James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1951), 373.

²A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Kings*, The Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 167.

³T. R. Hobbs, "Naaman," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:968. See Hobbs' discussion in his commentary *2 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985), 13:58-62.

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unidentified servants who carry Gehazi's loot for him. These characters, how they interact with each other, and the accompanying "scene changes" make the whole Naaman account one of greater complexity than the other Elisha stories.⁴ This complexity enhances the main incident in the first part of chapter 5, the encounter between Naaman and Elisha.⁵

Turning to verses 1-19a, which are the focus of this study, we note that much information is given to us about Naaman in the opening verse. He is commander of the army of Aram, or Syria, the country just to the north of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Naaman is a great man in the eyes of the king of Syria, who regarded his general highly because he had gained victory for Syria. The relationship between Naaman and his king, described here in verse 1, will again come to the forefront in our analysis of verse 18.

The word "victory" in our English translations is a rendering of the Hebrew word *תְּשׁוּבָה*, which can also be "salvation," "deliverance." The victory, or deliverance accomplished by Naaman in part may have involved repulsing Assyrian aggression, but probably included defeating the Northern Kingdom in various battles. Most interesting is the precise wording of our text: "through him Yahweh had given victory to Aram." The Hebrew author of the text was reminding his first readers that Yahweh, the God of all the earth, can use an enemy, pagan commander to accomplish his purposes. This specific mention of Yahweh working with a Gentile sets the tone for what will transpire later on in the chapter.

Naaman has a serious skin disease, but probably not leprosy as we think of it today.⁶ As a result of the witness of his wife's Israelite maid concerning the prophet in Samaria, Naaman comes down to that city with a letter from the Syrian king and meets

⁴Hobbs, 2 Kings, 59, 62.

⁵One may see Hobbs, 2 Kings, 59.

⁶One may see, for example, Auld, *I & II Kings*, 167; also Hobbs, 2 Kings, 63; and Richard D. Patterson and Hermann J. Austel, *1, 2 Kings*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 4:191.

with the king of Israel. Neither king is given a personal name in the account. Judging from the context in 2 Kings, the Israelite king was probably Joram/Jehoram, who reigned *circa* 852-841 B.C. If this is correct, the Syrian king may have been Ben-Hadad II (around 870-842 B.C.).⁷ Apparently the story takes place during a rare time of peace, or at least “a certain relaxation of hostilities,” between Syria and the Northern Kingdom, making Naaman’s journey to Samaria possible.⁸

The king of Israel’s response to the letter of Syria’s king is both humorous and sad: humorous because we can understand his frustration at the request to heal Naaman, and sad because he does not think of the prophet Elisha. Evidently the letter makes no mention of the prophet, since the Syrian king simply assumes that his Israelite counterpart is very familiar with the prophet (even a little girl knew about his amazing works) and that he, as king, can command the prophet to heal. It is a telling commentary that the Israelite king thinks immediately of international intrigue rather than of the power of Yahweh in the ministry of his prophet Elisha. As the story continues, however, Naaman does proceed to Elisha’s house. Although he goes with no command of the king directed to the prophet, Naaman has with him an enormous amount of gold and silver, plus ten sets of clothing, with which he thinks he can buy the prophet’s services. Surely such wealth, Naaman presumes, will persuade Elisha in his favor.

Standing at the door of the prophet’s house, Naaman is certain that Elisha will come out to meet him. From elements in the text we almost can look into Naaman’s mind and see his reasoning. His confidence about Elisha’s appearance seems to be based both on Naaman’s attempt outwardly to honor the prophet, and on the commander’s pride, of his actually feeling superior to Elisha. Concerning Naaman’s honoring the prophet, Matthew Henry astutely observes how the commander deals with Elisha. He does not send for Elisha to come to him; rather, Naaman shows the prophet respect by traveling to Samaria, though he is diseased,

⁷For another opinion one may see, for example, Wayne T. Pitard, “Ben-Hadad,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:663-665.

⁸Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 68.

the journey is over 120 miles, and he would be entering a country with which he was usually at war. Moreover, he honors the prophet by coming with a great retinue: with chariots, horses, and servants.⁹

However, Naaman's speech later in the text reveals that there is another side to his dealing with Elisha in exactly this way. Naaman is confident that because he, the commander of the army of Syria, is standing at Elisha's door, and he is there with so many horses and chariots and servants, that Elisha will be most impressed—indeed, awestruck—and will surely come out and pay homage to him, Naaman the Great. He is a Syrian, a general, his king's highly-valued right-hand man. Elisha is an Israelite, only a prophet (Naaman categorized Elisha as he did the prophets in his own land), whom the Israelite king basically has forgotten. Naaman is the man of military power, social status, and wealth, not Elisha. The prophet should consider it a privilege to serve him.

Having considered the two sides to Naaman's action and thinking—one involving honoring the prophet, the other his own pride—we understand fully why he speaks as he does in verse 11: "To me he will surely come out [literal translation]!" Hebrew יְנַחֵם, "to me," is placed first for emphasis, as noted by various scholars.¹⁰ Likewise, the infinitive absolute is emphatic.¹¹ Naaman

⁹Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1896), volume 2, no page numbers given.

¹⁰For example, John Gray, *I & II Kings*, second edition, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 506; also Rick D. Moore, *God Saves: Lessons from the Elisha Stories*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, volume 95 (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1990), 75; and Patterson and Austel, *1, 2 Kings*, 191.

¹¹Although the infinitive absolute follows, it can still carry the sense of "surely," "indeed," "certainly." See, for example, Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 158; and Choon L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 182. One may also see Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 11:64. Gray comments: "The infinitive absolute . . . also emphasizes the fact that Naaman regarded it the duty of Elisha, whom he regarded as his social inferior, to come out to him" (506).

not only assumes that Elisha will come out to him, but that the prophet will cure him right then and there in a dramatic ritual involving Elisha's calling aloud on Yahweh and waving his hand over the diseased area. Or, the prophet will tell him face-to-face to carry out some heroic act, corresponding to Naaman's position and power, something which would match his, as Moore phrases it, "obsession with greatness."¹² This "great man," as verse 1 describes him, has come from Syria prepared to do, using the words of his servants in verse 13, "a great thing."

Therefore Naaman is surprised and reacts angrily when Elisha does not come to meet him, but merely sends a messenger, and tells him simply to wash seven times in the unimpressive Jordan River. Naaman feels insulted, humiliated, the prophet seemingly not paying any attention whatsoever to the respect Naaman was paying him, and especially to Naaman's high position. Patterson and Austel write:

Naaman was incensed. Here was a person whom he considered to be both ethnically and socially inferior to himself who failed to receive him. Furthermore he certainly was not acting like any of the "prophets" Naaman knew.¹³

This Israelite prophet, Naaman realized, will carry out no dramatic display on his behalf, he will assign the general no daring, challenging task. Naaman, bitter, holds up two rivers of Syria as better than all the waters of Israel. Moore comments:

The rivers of Israel and Aram provide him with a convenient opportunity to strike back without having blatantly to expose his own egocentricity. In declaring the superiority of Aram's rivers, he can subtly assert the superiority of Aram over Israel and his own superiority over an Israelite prophet.¹⁴

Elisha, of course, has crucial reasons for not coming out to Naaman. As Henry points out, the prophet does not want to seem

¹²Moore, *God Saves*, 76.

¹³Patterson and Austel, 1, 2 Kings, 191.

¹⁴Moore, *God Saves*, 76.

overly pleased with the honor being shown him.¹⁵ At the same time, Elisha does not want to seem overly impressed with Naaman and his retinue. Further, Elisha sees the need to humble the general in his pride, for his own good. The prophet also wants to teach Naaman that his cure would be due not to any power of Elisha, not to any ritual he would perform, or incantation he would utter, not to any magic touch of the prophet. On the other hand, Naaman would understand that his healing came about not because of any heroic effort on his own part, or any great accomplishment, not because of anything he did to earn the cure. He would see that wealth, status, prestige, pomp, influence of royalty, human might, and human effort avail nothing with regard to his healing.

Naaman reacts angrily to his treatment by the prophet; but his servants, with simple yet powerful reasoning, convince him to go to the Jordan. As he travels to the river, Naaman has time to cool down somewhat from his anger and think. His healing, if it occurs, will not be due to Elisha, who, in effect, has distanced himself from the miracle, nor to Naaman's own riches or any achievement on his part. So who does get the credit? Why does the miracle come about? It will not happen because of the Jordan, as if that river had some special, magical property or power—otherwise, as J. Lumby points out, there would have been no lepers in Israel.¹⁶ No—Naaman would remember that Israel, after all, has a god. As his speech in verse 15 reveals, Naaman believes that Yahweh is the god in this land (one may compare verse 11). Further, Elisha is the prophet of Yahweh, his spokesman. Therefore, if the healing takes place, this would be due to Yahweh, to his power, to his unearned kindness.¹⁷

¹⁵Henry, *Exposition*.

¹⁶J. Lumby, *The Second Book of the Kings*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1892), 51.

¹⁷Naaman does not think that his getting himself wet in the Jordan would be a contribution to, or a matter of his earning, his healing. The general's only thought must have been that this action with the water would be, as my colleague James Bollhagen phrased it, "too little" a thing to have any credit given to Naaman. He would be healed only because of Yahweh's grace. My colleague Douglas Judisch has reminded me that the sacraments provide interesting analogies to this relationship between human action and God's

Naaman apparently travels to the Jordan with no great resolution, as Henry observes.¹⁸ Whereas Elisha told him to wash (נִזְבַּח) seven times in the river, Naaman merely dips (נִצְבֵּח) himself in the water as many times, as lightly as he is able. Nevertheless, the miracle occurs. A wonderful change comes about, which involves more than the restoration of Naaman's skin. Naaman shows himself changed internally by his actions and his words.

First, instead of returning immediately to Syria from the Jordan, Naaman, as G. Rawlinson has noted, goes out of his way and makes the trip back with all his retinue to Elisha.¹⁹ Now the prophet grants him a face-to-face meeting. Immediately Naaman—one can almost sense his eagerness—confesses: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel." The gods of Syria, supposedly superior to Yahweh, could not heal Naaman; thus he sees that what he has been taught, and what he has believed about these gods, is false. They are false gods, they are not really gods at all. They are in fact non-existent, and, if such is the case for Syria's gods, that certainly holds for the gods of other nations. Yahweh cured him; Yahweh exists; indeed Yahweh is the only God in all the earth.

Naaman, then, believes in Yahweh, and he indicates in verse 17 that he will worship only Yahweh. However, does he have saving faith? Does Naaman, converted to monotheism, knowing that Yahweh alone is God, believe in the Messiah? None of the scholars this author examined dealt with this question. Jesus says in John 17, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, *and* Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." Saving faith was the same in the Old Testament era as it is in the New, namely, faith in the Savior (the coming One for Old Testament believers, the One who has come for New Testament believers). If Naaman lacks knowledge of the Messiah, the faith he did have

grace. Parents, bringing their infant son to baptism, are not earning salvation for him; and a believer, coming to the Lord's Supper and kneeling at the rail, is not meriting the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁸Henry, *Exposition*.

¹⁹G. Rawlinson, *II Kings, The Pulpit Commentary* (McLean, Virginia: MacDonald, n.d.), 5:95.

would not save him, and Elisha's farewell to Naaman in verse 19—"Go in peace"—rings hollow.

This study contends that Naaman believed in the Messiah, because the Messianic hope was alive in Israel and just as much a part of the faith of Israelites as the doctrine that Yahweh is One, the only God. The significance of Genesis 3:15—the first promise of the Savior—cannot be overemphasized. The *protevangelium* defines that which follows in Scripture. It makes clear the importance of God's relationship with Shem as spelled out in Genesis 9; the reason God called Abram, and why he said to him, "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed"; what the blessing of Judah means in Genesis 49, and the promise concerning Shiloh. Thus the explanation for the Exodus, the covenant at Sinai, the entrance into the Promised Land goes back to Genesis 3:15. A true Israelite believed that there was one God, Yahweh, and that He chose Israel for a special purpose: from this nation would come the Savior promised in Genesis 3:15. To believe in Yahweh meant believing in the Messiah; to proclaim "The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:4) was to confess faith in the coming Savior. Genesis 3:15 told the Israelites what the sacrificing of lambs foreshadowed. That verse was the defining background for the promise of the prophet in Deuteronomy 18, God's covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7, the Messianic Psalms, for all the Messianic prophecies recorded by the time of Elisha and Naaman.

Consider Abraham in Genesis 15: in verse 5 God promises him numerous off spring, and verse 6 says that Abraham "believed Yahweh" [or, "he believed in Yahweh"] and Yahweh credited this faith of Abraham to him as righteousness. In other words, Abraham's faith in Yahweh in verse 6 was saving faith, as Paul makes abundantly clear in Romans 4. Abraham's believing in Yahweh meant he believed Yahweh's promise to grant him many descendants, it meant he believed all Yahweh's promises, including the one in Genesis 3:15 of the coming Savior.

Consider Rahab, the Canaanite woman of Jericho, a prostitute. In Joshua 2 she declares to the Israelite spies whom she hides in her house: "Yahweh your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below." This was saving faith, according to the author of

Hebrews, who includes Rahab in his list of exemplars of faith in chapter 11 (verse 31). James indicates that Rahab had saving faith, because from this true, genuine faith came good works (2:25). Rahab's confession, "Yahweh is God," included a confession of the coming Savior. To believe in Yahweh meant to believe in his Messiah.

Consider the showdown scene on Mount Carmel involving Elijah, the prophets of Baal, the Israelites, and the question, "Who is God? Yahweh or Baal?" In the end, the Israelites proclaimed the confession Elijah wanted to hear, "Yahweh—He is God!" Elijah, zealous that his countrymen have true, genuine faith, would not have been satisfied if the people believed only that Yahweh was God, and not Baal. To confess Yahweh was to confess his Messiah.

Again, the position of this study is that the confession of Naaman in verse 15 means that he believes in the coming Savior, something which Elisha understands with his prophet's insight. As to how Naaman came to know about the Messiah can only be imagined. Although the religious situation in the Northern Kingdom was not good, genuine believers were still there. Naaman could have come into contact with one of these through the business of diplomacy, or through commerce, or through warfare. We recall that apparently a believer was in his own household, his wife's Israelite maid. Further, if the Israelites became familiar with Canaanite religion, and if Ahaziah had become familiar with the religion of the Philistines (2 Kings 1:2), why could not Naaman become familiar with Israelite religion? As commander of the army of Syria he would want to learn about his southern neighbors, the Israelites, who were often his enemies. Perhaps Naaman was willing to come to Israel in the first place because he knew about some of the miracles which were part of Israelite tradition. General Naaman would have done his homework, which included studying the belief system of the Israelites. Indeed, in our narrative Naaman is the first one to mention the name "Yahweh" (verse 11). In verse 11, and in verse 15, after his healing and conversion, Naaman, as does the Old Testament, uses the plural noun "Elohim" to refer to the one

God of Israel.²⁰ He goes on to speak about making “whole burnt offerings” (לְלִבָּן) for Yahweh (verse 17). Finally, Elisha told Naaman to wash in the Jordan seven times. Why seven? Did Elisha perceive, with his prophet’s insight, that Naaman, due to a familiarity he had with Israelite religion, would remember that seven was a sacred number to the Hebrews, stamping a work as that of Yahweh?

Naaman, healed and changed, “stands before” Elisha as a servant, just as the prophet says in verse 16 that he “stands before” Yahweh, also as a servant. The mighty Syrian general, properly humbled, calls himself “your servant” five times when speaking to Elisha.²¹

Moreover, he urges the prophet to accept a gift, not because he thinks Elisha is a sorcerer who requires payment, but in sincere gratitude to Elisha as the spokesman of Yahweh. There was nothing wrong with bringing a gift to a prophet of God (1 Samuel 9:7-8; 1 Kings 14:3). Nor would Elisha, who enjoyed the hospitality of the rich Shunamite woman (2 Kings 4:8-11), have been wrong in accepting a gift from Naaman. Elisha could have used this gift for the benefit of the company of prophets who assisted him or for other poor people (2 Kings 4:42). However, in this particular situation, Elisha wants to avoid any possibility of a misunderstanding, of clouding the truth which Naaman has come to grasp. The prophet earnestly desires to keep matters clear in the new convert’s head. Elisha refuses to accept any gift so that Naaman will continue to understand without any uncertainty that Elisha was not like the false prophets, who selfishly sought financial gain from their work; that Yahweh, not Elisha, healed Naaman; that the blessings of Yahweh cannot be bought; that Yahweh deals with people in grace.

Naaman’s speech in verses 17-18 reveals three elements in his thinking. The first relates to his request to take two mule loads of Israelite soil back to Syria so that he could carry on worship of

²⁰I would translate לְאֱלֹהִים אֶחָרִים of verse 17 as “to other gods.”

²¹Adam Clarke comments (*Clarke’s Commentary* [New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d.], 2:497): “Naaman, the leper, was more proud and dictatorial than he was when cleaned of his leprosy.”

Yahweh. The pagan gentiles of the ancient Near East believed that each country had a chief deity who reigned supreme in the land. In other words, the deities were localized (one may compare 1 Kings 20:23; 2 Kings 17:26). Proper worship of a god could take place only in his land, or if it was carried on outside his territory, then *on* the god's land. That is, there could be worship of a deity in another country if the worship took place on soil from his land.

This convert, then, mixes his new Yahwism with an old pagan notion. He had confessed, "There is no God *in* all the earth but *in Israel*" (verse 15). Yahweh is the only God, yes, but Naaman does not yet comprehend that Yahweh is God of all the earth. He still sees Yahweh as a territorial deity: Yahweh dwells in Israel. Accordingly, Naaman deems it necessary to take Israelite soil back to Syria so that there he could properly worship Yahweh. He would build an altar on this holy soil spread out on the ground, perhaps also using some of the soil to make the altar (one may compare Exodus 20:24). He would have a sanctified place for Yahweh in a land unclean, polluted with idolatry.

The second element in Naaman's thinking relates to sacrifices. He intends to offer up "whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" to Yahweh at his shrine in Syria. The pagan Gentiles were accustomed to offering up sacrifices to their deities; Naaman naturally plans to do this for Yahweh. Perhaps, as implied earlier, the specific words Naaman uses indicate he has some familiarity with the sacrificial system outlined in the Israelite Torah. Yet we recall that these Pentateuchal guidelines also stress centralization of worship. In the Torah the one God commands that the Aaronic priests offer up his sacrifices at one place, at the central sanctuary, which was first the tabernacle, later the temple.

The third element in Naaman's thinking relates to his carrying on his life back in his idolatrous homeland as the king's right-hand man. He is of the opinion that he will not be able to avoid bowing down in the temple of Rimmon, the chief god of Syria. This Rimmon, also known as Hadad, was Baal, the ancient

Semitic storm god.²² Now if the phrase “leaning on my hand” can be taken literally, the discussion on this point ends. Since the Syrian king, infirm perhaps from old age, literally supported himself on Naaman’s hand, Naaman would have to enter Rimmon’s temple when his master went to worship there, and as the king bowed down, Naaman would have to do the same. Naaman simply would be acting as a support for his master. No question on religious compromise arises.

However, in this context the phrase “leaning on my hand” probably is to be taken figuratively. As Karl Keil has explained, it most likely denotes the relationship between a king and his adjutant or second in command and the kind of service rendered to the king by this confidant.²³ Compare the usage of the same phrase in connection with the Israelite king, 2 Kings 7:2, 17. In chapter 6 that Israelite king does not appear as infirm, since he is vigorous enough to tear his robes (verse 30).

With this understanding of the phrase, a discussion of Naaman’s going into the temple of Rimmon takes on a decidedly different tone. The Syrian king expects his right-hand man, who attended him, to accompany him to the temple and worship the state god with him. In other words, duty requires Naaman to go through the ceremony of Syrian worship. While Naaman’s words can be translated as saying that he, Naaman, only will bow down in the temple, and not really in his heart worship Rimmon (the context favors this interpretation), he still will be going through the outer motions of obeisance to the deity. Naaman sees no way out of this dilemma.

To Naaman’s speech in verses 17 and 18—his requesting Israelite soil, his indicating his intention to sacrifice to Yahweh in Syria and to continue bowing down in Rimmon’s temple—Elisha

²²See Walter A. Maier III, “Hadadrimmon,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:13.

²³Karl Keil, *Die Bücher der Könige*, second edition, Biblischer Kommentar über die Prophetischen Geschichtsbücher des Alten Testaments (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1876), 266-267. See also James L. Crenshaw, *Story and Faith: A Guide to the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 149-150, and Henry, *Exposition*.

responds, "Go in peace." What does the prophet's response mean? Elisha bids the Syrian farewell, wishing him peace—yes. But do his words also give approval to Naaman's way of thinking? Is the prophet basically saying to Naaman, "That's O.K."? Several Old Testament scholars argue as much.²⁴

How might one argue in support of such an interpretation of Elisha's "Go in peace"? Naaman's speech, once again, shows him to have undergone a major change. He refers to himself as Elisha's servant, and further shows his respect for the prophet by asking his permission to carry dirt back to Syria. He regards the soil of Israel as sacred, whereas before his healing he had voiced plainly his contempt of the Jordan and, by implication, of the whole land of Israel. With his desire to set up a shrine in Syria where he can worship and sacrifice to Yahweh, Naaman reveals his enthusiasm and sincerity as a worshiper of Yahweh, his devotion to the one God, and the seriousness with which he takes his new faith. Naaman demonstrates forthrightness and honesty to Elisha in requesting the soil and admitting his future activity in Rimmon's temple. Because of his conviction concerning Yahweh Naaman feels uncomfortable when he thinks ahead to his bowing to the Syrian deity.

In addition, the Israelite dirt could serve as a tangible reminder to Naaman of his experience with Elisha and his new relationship with Yahweh. Richard Nelson has compared Naaman's use of the soil to the use of icons in the Christian church.²⁵ Certainly the Church expresses its faith in part with sculptures, pictures and other visible means. Also, the soil, in a sense, could have served as a witness to Naaman's family, servants, and neighbors of his belief in Yahweh, the God of Israel. Moreover, if Jonah, a true prophet of Yahweh, thought he could flee from his land and so escape the Lord, how critical should one be of Naaman with his conception of Yahweh as localized in Israel?

²⁴For example, A. S. Aglen, *Lessons in Old Testament History* (London: Edward Arnold, n.d.), 315; Crenshaw, *Story and Faith*, 149-150; and Gwilym H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 2 volumes, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Williams B. Eerdmans, 1984), 2:419.

²⁵Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 182-183.

Could the fact that Naaman came from a different culture support the interpretation that Elisha voices approval in verse 19a? Naaman is not going to be living among God's covenant people. Does Elisha, so to speak, let Naaman play by a different set of rules? C. H. Kraft states that "culture is not in and of itself either an enemy or a friend to God or humans," and that "God chooses the cultural milieu in which humans are immersed as the arena of his interaction with people."²⁶ Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians that their men ought not, and their women ought, to cover their heads when praying or prophesying. If the apostle had been writing to us today with our customs, he would have given a different judgment. According to Jewish culture, the Virgin Mary and Joseph were regarded as husband and wife because they were betrothed to each other. Today, in our country, engagement is not tantamount to marriage.

Finally, if Elisha is giving his consent in verse 19a, was this a matter of, to use a phrase from the New Testament era, Christian liberty? Paul, in 1 Corinthians, recognizes a certain amount of flexibility with regard to eating meat offered to idols. Concerning circumcision, he acted in two different ways on two different occasions. The apostle refused to circumcise Titus in opposition to the Judaizers, but circumcised Timothy because of certain Jews (Galatians 2; Acts 16).

Therefore, when Elisha responds, "Go in peace," is the prophet giving his approbation to Naaman's way of thinking? I think not. Despite the various arguments raised in support of the "approval" interpretation, important basic facts remain. Naaman's conception of Yahweh as localized in Israel is not merely inadequate, it is wrong. Also, God's covenant with Israel given through Moses actually expressed his will for all mankind in the Old Testament era. Yahweh formulated no separate covenant for gentile believers, for those of a culture different from Israel's. When a gentile came to faith in Yahweh, even though he lived outside of Israel he was bound to the same moral and

²⁶C. H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 113, 114.

ceremonial law as were the Israelites. How much the gentile followed the ceremonial guidelines varied from convert to convert (for example, with regard to circumcision), but he was not free, for example, to set up his own personal shrine where he sacrificed to Yahweh. In the Old Testament era the one God's will for the one, true Israel—made up of all Israelite *and* Gentile believers—was that sacrifice be carried out at the one central sanctuary. True, Samuel sacrificed at different locations in Israel, but this was an irregularity, and Samuel, a prophet, had his own inspired reasons.

The Christian liberty argument does not apply here. The freedom of the Gospel gives no license to believe and practice in the wrong way. Besides, although Paul recognized some flexibility in the matter of eating idol meat, he told the Corinthian Christians not to attend the idol feasts, namely, feasts in honor of an idol in the idol's temple. Paul warns the Corinthians about having fellowship with devils. That command of the apostle has particular relevance to verse 18 of our pericope.

Concerning verse 18, Naaman, as already mentioned, shows that he is quite uncomfortable about his going into the temple of Rimmon. Naaman's discomfort derives from his recognition that his behavior will not be right. Naaman's conscience bothers him because he accurately regards his future behavior as wrong. Therefore he says, "May Yahweh *forgive* me for this." Naaman's emphatic way of speaking in verse 18 indicates his being troubled by the whole matter. He repeats both his description of what he will do in Rimmon's temple and his wish for forgiveness, and puts all of these words into a chiastic construction.

With Naaman himself judging his coming actions as contrary to God's will, how can Elisha be approving, or making concession, to such action? Elisha knew that Naaman owed allegiance to a King higher than his Syrian master; the prophet knew, as Peter would confess centuries later, that believers "must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Naaman's bowing to Rimmon because of governmental pressure contrasts badly with the heroic behavior of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego; of Daniel; of the many Christians who suffered martyrdom because of their refusal to burn incense to the Roman emperor.

Nor can the prophet of Yahweh be giving an absolution to a man who essentially says, "What I *will* do is sin, but I am going to do it anyway." Elisha's response does not open the way for Naaman to go against his conscience.

How, then, are we to take Elisha's words, "Go in peace"? We note that nowhere in Naaman's speech in verses 17 and 18 does the Syrian actually ask Elisha to render judgment concerning his plan to prepare his own sanctuary for Yahweh, to carry out sacrifices, to keep on bowing down in the temple of Rimmon. Naaman simply indicates to the prophet what he intends to do. Another consideration is that apparently Naaman has to leave immediately for Syria; he cannot stay any longer to learn more from Elisha.

Under these circumstances and in this particular situation, Elisha, the man of God, gives the best possible response, he speaks just the right words. The prophet's "Go in peace" does not, as already explained, give approval to Naaman's way of thinking and his plan of action, but neither does Elisha's response voice his disapproval. Elisha does not say, "That's O.K." to Naaman. At the same time he refrains from telling the Syrian "Don't think or act that way! You're wrong!"

How might we understand Elisha's response? The prophet is commanding Naaman to the care and guidance of God.²⁷ Yahweh had brought Naaman to faith through the truth the Syrian possessed. Elisha, with his prophet's insight, trusts that Yahweh, through the same truth, will grant Naaman spiritual growth and maturity. The prophet may even have been confident that Naaman would seek to add to his knowledge of God's Word.

Elisha's way of dealing with Naaman earlier in the narrative points to his earnestly desiring Naaman's salvation. The prophet had not come out to meet Naaman — that ultimately the Syrian might come to believe in Yahweh. Elisha refused to take any gift after the healing — that Naaman would keep focusing on Yahweh,

²⁷One may compare the discussion of, for example, F. W. Farrar, *The Second Book of Kings*, The Expositor's Bible (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1894), 55-56; Henry, *Exposition*; Keil, *Die Bücher der Könige*, 267; and Lumby, *The Second Book of the Kings*, 55-56.

and his grace. In verse 19a the prophet says "Go in peace" because he wants the flame of faith which has started in Naaman to continue burning and not be snuffed out. The flame in the new convert is still small; Elisha does not want to quench what has just begun in Naaman with a strong negative response or with instruction which, too hastily given, only would confuse and upset. He handles Naaman tenderly, as a spiritual babe. The prophet realizes that if at this moment he is too critical and makes too many demands Naaman will feel discouraged, weighed down, and "turned off" to Yahwism. Some of the Syrian's old pagan notions still cling to him, and he is not ready to give up his high position, and to experience suffering because of his faith. Obviously Naaman needs more instruction; he needs to grow and mature spiritually; his knowledge of, and wisdom from, God's Word need to increase. But again, Elisha trusts that Yahweh will grant these blessings to Naaman according to Yahweh's will, timetable, and method; He will cause the flame in Naaman to burn brighter and stronger. Yahweh had changed Naaman remarkably; Naaman gives evidence of his being a new man; Elisha commits Naaman to the continuing gracious care and guidance of the Lord. Therefore the prophet makes no comment about the soil, the sacrifices, the bowing to Rimmon, or, for that matter, the importance of circumcision, and attending the annual feasts in Jerusalem.

When a person comes to faith, often not everything changes immediately in his or her life. Evangelists, missionaries, and pastors constantly pray for wisdom in dealing with recent converts.²⁸ A rough, partial analogy to the Elisha-Naaman situation exists in the New Testament: Paul's handling of Philemon and Onesimus. How can one Christian brother *own* another brother in Christ? However, Paul in his letter to Philemon does not order this Christian master to free his slave Onesimus. The Apostle trusts that God, through the Gospel, will lead Philemon to greater spiritual wisdom, resulting in appropriate action.

²⁸I have had fascinating discussions on this subject with my colleagues who have served in the mission field.

This study concludes with the following brief observations: First, the Naaman narrative is a powerful story from several different perspectives, including the missiological. This tone is set from verse 1, with the information that God had used Naaman to give victory to Syria. Such a fact, along with the rest of the narrative, must have astounded many of the first Israelite readers of 2 Kings 5. The story reaffirms that Yahweh is Lord of all nations, who had concern for all the people of the earth. God directed everything in Naaman's life—giving him power, the favor of his king, but also a skin disease that Naaman might come to faith.

Second, a key element in our story is the witness given by a little Israelite girl, a captive maiden. God can use the lowly of this world to accomplish mighty deeds, to carry out his will. We note that others who lack prestige play an important role in the narrative: the messenger who met Naaman at Elisha's door, Naaman's servants who convinced him to go to the Jordan. As Moore states, "The words of kings have come to nothing, while words from lowly persons have prevailed."²⁹

Third, concerning the Israelite maiden, Henry notes that "the unhappy dispersing of the people of God has sometimes proved the happy occasion of the diffusion of the knowledge of God, Acts, 8.4."³⁰

Fourth, the Naaman narrative reminds Missouri Synod Lutherans of a necessary balance in the ministry of the Word. The first, pressing need is that a person come to faith in Jesus Christ; then we work on his becoming one who holds to all the doctrines of the LC—MS. As we well know, the word takes varying amounts of time in different individuals to carry out its leavening work. But in due course, the word will produce fruit.

As Nelson has observed, "every faithful person who does not simply abandon the world is confronted by the wrenching issue of divided loyalties. There is no easy answer that works every

²⁹Moore, *God Saves*, 77.

³⁰Henry, *Exposition*.

time."³¹ Evangelists, missionaries, and pastors thus operate with a certain amount of flexibility when dealing with new converts, in order that they may patiently, gently, effectively lead them, through the word, to deeper spiritual insight and a more dynamic demonstration of their faith in their lives.

Fifth, Naaman certainly needs spiritual refining and growth, but he compares well to a goodly number of Israelites living in the Northern Kingdom. Although the general plans to keep on bowing down to the Syrian state god, he at least does not try to justify his action by attempting a synthesis of Yahweh and Rimmon, or Baal. Unlike Naaman, a large portion of Elisha's countrymen either were blending Yahweh together with Baal, and vice versa, or were worshiping exclusively Baal.

Remember also the "rest of the story," 2 Kings 5:19b-27. Nelson writes: "Although Naaman lost his egocentricity (verse 11) and his ethnocentricity (verse 12) in his Jordan bath, these things still clung to Gehazi (verse 20)," Elisha's Israelite servant.³²

Sixth, Jacques Ellul puts the Naaman account into this interesting perspective.

From the political standpoint . . . the incident does not improve the situation between Israel and Syria nor stop the war which will very soon break out between them afresh. We see this war developing in Chapter 6, and historians agree that the same king of Israel figures in both stories. . . . [Naaman's] conversion does not change the relation between the powers.³³

We wonder, of course, what happened to Naaman after he returned to Syria. Samuel Schultz interprets evidence from 2 Kings 8 as implying that Naaman made known his experience with Elisha.

³¹Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 183.

³²Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 183.

³³Jacques Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), 35.

Elisha's ministry was known not only throughout Israel but in Syria as well as in Judah and Edom. Through the healing of Naaman and the peculiar encounter of the Syrian armies with this prophet, Elisha was recognized as the "man of God" even in Damascus, the Syrian capital. Toward the end of Joram's reign . . . Elisha made a visit to Damascus (2 Kings 8:7-15). When Benhadad [King of Syria] heard of this he sent his servant, Hazael, to Elisha. With gifts impressively distributed on a caravan of forty camels . . . Hazael made inquiry of the prophet whether or not Benhadad . . . would recover from his illness.³⁴

Finally, the cleansing of Naaman the "leper" foreshadows similar miracles performed by Jesus, the Savior whom Naaman grasped in faith. At the beginning of his Galilean ministry Christ, in the synagogue of Nazareth, mentions Naaman (Luke 4:27). Why? In that setting Christ was teaching the people of his hometown that the

gifts of God's grace, in particular the works of his power, are not bestowed because of nationality or outward connection of any kind. . . . There are no claims that coerce God; he bestows the gifts of his grace and mercy freely, without human merit or worthiness . . . according to his gracious plans and designs . . .³⁵

What Jesus was trying to teach those in the Nazareth synagogue, Naaman had learned. We rejoice that the God of salvation healed Naaman externally, and internally, by the same grace and almighty power through which He has given us everlasting life.

³⁴Samuel J. Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks*, third edition (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 181.

³⁵R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), 258.