

**GOD SAVES.... GO IN PEACE:
*WHOLENESS AFFIRMED OR PROMOTION PIECE?***

BY JOHN SPAN¹

1 Introduction

With what seemed to be a wave of a nonchalant hand and a non-directive voice, Elisha the prophet sent the cured, former “generalissimo”, Naaman on his way. “Go in peace”. This three-word phrase has been seized upon by certain missionaries as the *carte blanche* for permission to continue adhering to one’s religion and its practices and by extension even to prostrate oneself at the house of a foreign deity.² But is everything in this story from 2 Kings 5 what it has been made out to be?

In order to fully appreciate the story we must know its macro context, and then look at its more micro-contexts, knowing that it falls into the genre of historical narrative.³ Additionally it will be prudent to examine the story of the healing and subsequent request of Naaman for a dispensation to continue in his role of royal service in the light of a greater Elisha [= My God saves], namely Jesus, who is the God who saves, and similarly dismisses a healed person with the same three-word sendoff. Graeme Goldsworthy in his *According to Plan*, shows that many hermeneutical mistakes are made by failure to interpret the OT through the lens of Christ⁴ and elsewhere he suggests that narrative passages must be approached with the question “What is God doing here?” rather than just focusing on the humans in the story. These seem

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² John Travis, “Messianic Muslim Followers of Isa: A Closer Look at C5 Believers and Congregations” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17.1 (Spring 2000); Kevin Higgins, “The Devoted of Acts” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21:4 (Winter 2004), p. 158 and by same author: “Inside What? Church, Culture, Religion and Insider Movements in Biblical Perspective” *St Francis Magazine*, 5:4 (August 2007), pp 90-91.

³ See Bruce Waltke and Charles Yu. *An Old Testament Theology: a canonical and thematic approach* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2007), ch 4 and V. Phillips Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, Vol 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

⁴ Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible*, (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1991), pp. 54-57

to be mistakes made as well, by some missiologists on a mission for a justification for their methodologies.

2 Background to 2 Kings 5

The Elijah and Elisha stories of 1 and 2 Kings serve as polemics against the brokenness of the world due to sin, against the propensity of the people of Israel to prostitute themselves with foreign gods, and against the reputations of the foreign gods themselves.⁵ They are found in the larger context of the books of Kings in which the True, Faithful, Just and Covenant Keeping King is portrayed against the backdrop of false, faithless, unjust and fickle earthly gods, kings, and the people of Israel. Paul House describes the story of 1 and 2nd Kings being “that Israel went into exile” but that the underlying plot is that “Israel went into exile because of its unfaithfulness to God”.⁶ With an even wider circle, House describes the larger message of the OT, namely “The Lord your God is one”,⁷ or as Bruce Waltke described it “the inruption [= breaking in from without] of the kingship of the holy, merciful and only God”.⁸

3 The story in 2 Kings 5: 1-19

Masterfully using the tools of Biblical narrative, including plots, subplots, multiple characters, word repetitions, double entendres, ironic reversals, chiasms, and plays on words in this story (2 Kings 5:1-27), the divinely inspired narrator introduces us to the “big man”: Naaman the Great.⁹ No time is spared to get the reader into the story. The com-

⁵ Lelah Leih Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics against Baal Worship* (Leiden: Brill, 1968) as cited by Waltke, pp. 746-7

⁶ Paul R. House, vol. 8, 1, *2 Kings*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1995), p. 61.

⁷ House, p. 74, “If Old Testament theology could be summarized in one sentence, it probably would read, ‘There is no god but the Lord.’”

⁸ Waltke, p. 144 note. I am following Waltke’s convention of using *I AM* for the name of YHWH in his *Old Testament Theology*.

⁹ Robert L. Cohn, “Form and Perspective in 2 Kings V”, in *Vetus testamentum*, 33 No 2 (1983), pp. 171-184, and his commentary *Berit Olam: 2 Kings - Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2000). Also Walter A.

mander of the army of Aram [RSV 'Syria'] is called '... a great man before his lord... .. in high favor... a mighty man of valor [Heb. "a man of substance"] leprous ... with victories given by YHWH'.¹⁰

Cohn describes verse one as "a kind of précis in code, not deciphered until the story is complete".¹¹ This should alert us to spend some time with this verse. Only as the story progresses will we come to know who are truly people of substance. Elisha will be shown to be such due to his standing before his LORD, the Mighty-Warrior who is of ultimate substance (vs 16). Eventually Naaman, too, once rid of all the worldly trappings that contribute to his status, will declare that there is no great God but the one in Israel, and become a man of substance (vs 15).

With a masterful touch, two polemics are engaged in verse 1. To a Jewish audience, the fact that "their God *I AM* [=YHWH] gave this unclean Syrian victory would have made them less than at ease. Gerhard von Rad observes: "The remark is brief, but in ancient Israel no one would have missed it".¹² The theme that Israel would have expected was that the Divine-Warrior went out to battle for his people and won decisive victories for them.¹³ Instead, the LORD of hosts has declared war on his own wayward, idol-adoring, treaty making "adulterous" wife Israel, and he is using the Syrians.

The second polemic that is engaged is that for all his outward pop and circumstance, Naaman is an outsider, someone who by Jewish law should cry out "unclean, unclean". (Later we will see that Jesus reached out to another who had the same label of unclean, and sent her away whole). The affect of Adam's fall has reached both the body and soul of Naaman. He is proud of his country and race (vs 12), uses money to buy his way (vs 5), wants healing on his terms (vs11), is not afraid to use people for his advantage, and a leper. No wonder the narrator commences verse 11 with the egotistical words "to me" Literally:

Maier III, "The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective", in *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 61 No 3 (July1997), pp. 177-196, especially p. 180.

¹⁰ Burke O. Long, *2 Kings*, FOTL (Forms of Old Testament Literature) 10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 66-77, for a plot analysis of this chapter.

¹¹ Cohn, p. 174.

¹² Gerhard von Rad, "Naaman: A Critical Retelling," in *God at Work in Israel*, trans. John H. Marks (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 48.

¹³ Tremper Longman III, "The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif", in *Westminster Theological Journal* 44:2 (Fall 1982), p. 292.

“To me he [Elisha] will surely [or most certainly] come out.”¹⁴ He is a model of the results of the fall.

The third polemic is one that has already started with the cycle of the Elijah miracles and continued with the ministry of Elisha. Each of these miracles, like the plagues of Egypt directed against the gods of Egypt, was a direct offensive against Baal worship. Bronner identifies eight such offensives.¹⁵ Thus it is no surprise that water in a river is used to bring healing in another display that “there is no God, but the God” of Israel (vs 15). This might put us on the alert whether or not *I AM* would be about to use this story as a sanction for someone to go to a temple of the Syrian rendition of Baal, namely Rimmon, and worship there along with his master, presumably Ben-Hadad II, which was the Syrian form of “Son of Rimmon” or the “Son of Baal”.

4 A broken man made whole

With an ironic touch, a prisoner of war, a servant girl (Heb. *a little maiden*) who stands in the service of Naaman’s wife, utters a wistful comment that sets the husband of her mistress on the path of wholeness. “Oh that my master...” (vs 3). This nameless, strategically placed maiden follows in the same line of others like Obadiah (1Kings 18), Esther, Mordecai, Daniel, and Jeremiah, who exercise their faith in places of duress and in foreign lands. In some way they are model “outside-insiders” as they are foreigners in the culture in which they find themselves, yet because of their trust in *I AM* they are able to exercise incredible influence.¹⁶

The “little” servant girl, deliberately set in contrast to Naaman the Great, recognizes that the key to Naaman’s healing is not in method, but in a change of submission to authority, and thus dictates the terms of healing. Moore notes that Naaman who is under the authority of the King of Aram, needs to come under the authority of the prophet of Israel. He summarizes: “In order to experience a transformation of physi-

¹⁴ Maier, p. 180

¹⁵ Cited by Waltke, p. 746, where the Ugaritic Baal epics celebrate Baal’s power in “fire, rain, oil and corn, child giving, healing, resurrection, ascent, and defeating the River God”.

¹⁶ See Esther Menn, “A little child shall lead them: the role of the little Israelite servant girl (2 Kings 5:1-19)”, in *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 35 No 5 (October 2008), pp. 340-348.

cal condition, Naaman must experience a transformation of allegiance.”¹⁷ The theme of submission pervades the entire passage, as the servant girl stands in submission before her mistress, Elisha before God, Naaman before his king (vs 1), the servants before Naaman, Naaman before Elisha, Naaman before God, and Naaman’s king before his god. Notable contrasts in feigned submission are made in the Gehazi scene (vss 19-27). It is little wonder that one Hebrew scholar called this story, “Every High Official Has a Higher One Set over Him.”¹⁸

With the tools of the trade of protocol between kings and military commanders who think they hold power, but are actually pawns in the hand of the great King, the quest for healing is put into place (vs 4ff). The actions of both the Israelite and Syrian kings, and Naaman’s thought that he can buy his healing, are made to look like the work of foolish boys. The Syrian king sends his official letter demanding a healing as if it is a commodity to be gotten. The Israelite king tears his clothes at the thought of a suggestion of a provocation for more war. The audience of the story is alerted to the fact that perceived power might not be all it is “hyped up” to be. The audience might also start to see that the King of Syria, who later will need Naaman at his right hand, might not be the great-warrior, contrary to his own name.

Elisha, who stood in the presence of God, avoided taking center stage. He would have none of the bait that he had caused the healing or had “initiated” something. Compare this stance to the invitation to a conference, which was entitled “Initiating Incarnational Insider Movements”. Elisha would have had none of it. He would not even go to the door to welcome the “big man”. Everything Elisha did seemed counter-intuitive. Was there a reason for this “humiliation” and offending his visitor? It is in this dismantling of all of Naaman’s worldly props that Elisha prepares him for his eventual return to Syria and effective service for *I AM*. Elisha sent a simple proclamation. Wash. The man whose name meant “pleasant” or “charming” showed his true colors. Naaman’s arrogance and rage-filled dismissiveness of a di-

¹⁷ Rick D. Moore, *God saves: lessons from the Elisha stories* (Sheffield: JSOT Pr, 1990), p. 73.

¹⁸ Y. Zakovitch, *Every High Official Has a Higher One Set over Him: A Literary Analysis Of 2 Kings 5* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1985 [Hebr.]) as cited by Long in his bibliography.

vinely ordained method might also warn us about any kind of “obsession with greatness” or with technique.¹⁹ He wanted magic and mystery, “a great thing” (vs 13) to impress his retinue, and received none of it. It was his servants, ironically, who help him to get on to the path of servanthood. (vs 15)

Finally, the big man consents to Elisha’s prescription. There is more than meets the eye in the description of Naaman’s decent into the Jordan. It was a physical “going down” and yet, much more, a spiritual abasement. Matthew Henry, however, shows that in effect, healing came in a counter-conditional way, because rather than “washing” in the Jordan as directed, he only “dips” himself. This may be semantic hair-splitting, yet God is gracious and heals Naaman, in spite of his lack of filling all the correct conditions. He comes out of the water with skin “like a little [--with a nuance suggesting--- servant] lad”. (vs 14) His flesh literally had a “turn around” and it was then that he could “turn around” to face the prophet. (vs. 15) For good reasons, the narrator of the story uses two words, both derived from the Hebrew *šûb* a key Old Testament word that is used to denote repentance or a return back to the point of departure.²⁰ Naaman has taken on the same form as the servant girl and 5 times uses the word “servant” in his dialogue with Elisha, and even took a servant’s posture in making a detour to pass by Elisha’s place on his way back to Aram.

The physical healing shows the power of *I AM* over sickness, and pronounces another deathblow to the foolishness of trusting in Baal. Additionally the healing of Naaman’s arrogance deals a deathblow to the proud and arrogant storm-god, Baal. Robert Chisholm observes:

By exhibiting His sovereignty over Baal's traditional spheres of authority, Yahweh established His right to Israel's undivided loyalty. Israel must look to Yahweh, the one true God (18:24, 37, 39) for the necessities of life. Baalism was not an option.²¹

¹⁹ Moore, p. 76.

²⁰ See R. Laird Harris, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999, c1980), p. 909.

²¹ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “The Polemic against Baalism in Israel's Early History and Literature”, in *Bibliotheca sacra*, 151 No 603 (July-September 1994), pp. 267-268.

As a result of this miraculous intervention, Naaman declares words that are reminiscent of those of Jethro who witnessed the deliverance of the Israelites from the Egyptians as he declared: 'Now I know that YHWH is greater than all gods, because he delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians'.²² (Ex 18:11) We read that Jethro offered sacrifices to God, and eventually left for his country of Midian. Naaman, with the declaration, "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel" (vs 15) declared that he would not offer any sacrifices or bow down to any god (vs 17) and affirms positively, that like Jethro that he would only offer sacrifices and bow down to YHWH. He too will return to his own country.²³ Rahab, another foreigner, as well makes a positive declaration of the greatness and uniqueness of *I AM* with the words, "YHWH your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (Josh 2:11).²⁴

In a curious twist, Naaman attempts to bring a blessing [Heb. *berakah*] to Elisha. This might have been a gift to show genuine thankfulness, or it could have been a subtle way of using the old dynamics that he as a big man only knew, namely payment for services. The refusal by Elisha to receive any kind of a payment, prefaced with the words, "As surely as *I AM* lives", served to underscore the free gift of grace that Naaman had received. Elisha knew his place. It was the living "God who saves". It was then that Naaman pronounced his knowledge of the existence of the True God, in words reminiscent of the servant girl who suggested that he should come to know that there was a prophet in Israel. (vs 3) One cannot help but think that Naaman also began to make mental comparisons between the god Rimmon, whom

²² Jo Bailey Wells, *God's Holy People: a theme in Biblical theology* (Sheffield, Sheffield Univ. Press 2000) Series: Journal for the study of the Old Testament / Supplement series, 305), p. 174, states "Twenty occurrences of a verb related to knowing God are found outside of Ezekiel, all follow from the experience of divine blessing or curse, twenty occurrences relate to Israelites knowing God and eight to non-Israelites knowing God. 'Of these 28, 17 are presented on the lips of YHWH, 3 on the lips of Moses, 3 of the Psalmist, 2 of Solomon (1 Kings 8:43, 60), one of Manasseh (2 Chron 33:13), one of Jethro (Ex 18:11) and one of Naaman (2 Kings 5:15)."

²³ Wells, pp. 174-175.

²⁴ For an analysis of the constituent parts of conversion in the OT, including examples of Naaman, Rahab, and Abram see William D. Barrick, "Living a New Life: Old Testament Teaching about Conversion", in *The Master's Seminary Journal* 11/1 (Spring 2000), pp. 19-38.

he had previously served and bowed down to, and the Living *I AM*. This is reinforced by the narrator's use of the words "...there is no God... except...in Israel" (vs 15) and he would offer burnt offerings and bow down to no one "except...to the LORD". (vs 17) The exclusiveness of the God of Israel could not be put in stronger terms.

5 Two requests

5.1 Soil

Naaman then asks for two dispensations, likely to help him facilitate this task of serving the One True God. Ironically, the man used to gaining spoils from war, now asks for soil from Israel in order to make an altar or a place of prayer. He recognized an association between the presence of the One True God and that of land. Formerly he had denigrated even the waters in Israel (vs12), and now he wants a memorial from the "God of the whole earth". Maier sees this as a visible "witness to Naaman's family, servants, and neighbors of his belief in Yahweh, the God of Israel".²⁵ There would be no secret reception, one can be sure, of a healed, now-servant-like army commander, with his retinue and two mule-loads of soil. It is as if the great Warrior-King is leading the formerly proud commander back to Syria as a prisoner of war, humbled, divested of his hands full of clothing and money, with a couple of mules bringing soil.

This calls into question the suggestion that somehow Naaman might be a champion of the insider movement. Sure, he returned to his own country. Sure he remained a Syrian by passport. Sure he could foresee remaining useful in the king's service. None of these; however are unique to a certain special class of "insider" believers. Whereas much of the insider strategy talks of secretiveness, one does not see this with Naaman. He seems to be more aware than some, that it is the public, in-the-marketplace, nature of Christianity that causes it to be reviled. For good reason there was a public ministry of Jesus, a public entrance into Jerusalem, a public crucifixion, a public resurrection, and a public ascension.

²⁵ Maier, p. 189.

Naaman's request was in effect, that the same presence of God that lived in the land of Israel would go with him to the land of Syria.²⁶ In the book of Acts, another army commander, Cornelius, also a Gentile, is the recipient of the "the gift of land" in the "territory" that Jesus has won by the cross. He is indwelt by God's presence that now lives in the believer by the Holy Spirit. Thus the "holy" place, once restricted to the physical temple in Jerusalem, is already, in the story of Naaman, no longer restricted to a piece of geographical territory. This also foreshadows the dismantling of the dividing wall of Jews and Gentiles that would be fully realized at Pentecost.²⁷

5.2 Pardon

Naaman's second request has caused commentators no small amount of discussion.²⁸ The text reads: (Heb.) "When my master enters the house of Rimmon to bow down there, and he leans on my hand and I bow down [in] the house of Rimmon, when I bow down [in] the house of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this thing."²⁹ Cohn lays out the verse as a chiasm³⁰ in the following form:

²⁶ Nelson, p. 179, states: "His request in verse 17 is based on the idea that a god was tied to a home territory (Deu. 32:8) and that worshiping Yahweh from a foreign land might present a problem (Ps 137:4)." See also 1 Kings 20:23; 2 Kings 17:26 for the notion of a territorial deity. Jonah, as well, thought that by leaving Israelite soil, he could escape the presence of God.

²⁷ See Larrimore Crockett, "Luke 4.25-27 and Jewish-Gentile Relations in Luke-Acts", in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 88 No 2 (June 1969), pp. 177-183.

²⁸ As early as the first translation of the Hebrew text into Greek, this verse has been a challenge. The Septuagint translators tried to clean it up by saying "With the king leaning on my arm I will bow down in the temple of Rimmon... In his bowing down in the temple of Rimmon may YHWH forgive his servant for this." See also the 1840 work by Friedrich Wilhelm Krummacker, *Elisha* (Philadelphia: Wetham, 1840) especially pp. 365-385 for a very nuanced exposition.

²⁹ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

³⁰ "A chiasm is a symmetrical literary device in which items in the first half of the piece are recapitulated in a balanced fashion in the inverse order in the second half; ordinarily the items in the center represent the focal moment of the narrative, either the moment of greatest dramatic tension or the features of central interest to the author." Raymond B. Dillard, p. 15, *Word Biblical Commentary: 2 Chronicles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), p. 5. See, however the work of Elie Assis, "Chiasmus in Biblical Narrative: Rhetoric of Characterization," *Prooftexts* (2002, Vol 22; Part 3), p. 293, who feels that the above description is far too simplistic. Assis uses numer-

A For this thing
B may the LORD pardon your servant
C when my lord comes to the house of Rimmon to worship³¹
there
X and he leans on my hand,
C' and I worship in the house of Rimmon
B' may the LORD pardon your servant
A" for this thing³²

Frequently, the “punch line” of a chiasm is found in the center. What is the point? As Cohn states, “and he leans on my hand”, appears to be an idiom denoting not that Naaman was his physical support but, rather, his “right-hand man” (cf. 2 Kings 7:2, 17). One can’t help but wonder if there is a touch of irony going on here. Verse 1 started out with a long description of Naaman’s exploits. He is called a mighty warrior,³³ the same epithet that is given to Baal. Curiously he also serves a king whose name is “Son of Baal”. Ironically, Naaman’s exploits, unknown to him, are all due to *I AM*’s intervention i.e. they come from His hand. They leave him with his resultant arrogant attitude, but his encounter with the God of Israel left him describing himself like a servant. His eyes have been opened to the pretenses of power. He has seen that real power lies with one like “the little maiden”, the word of the LORD through Elisha, and the power of the God of Israel to heal, through the instrumentality of Jordan River water. One can not help but wonder if the narrator of the story has a double meaning with Naaman saying this somewhat facetiously, like “this king really needs me as his right hand man? I don’t think so. He needs to know that “*every high official has a higher one set over him*”. He needs the God of Israel to support him. The God of Israel is the True

ous OT examples to show that chiasms were rhetorical tools employed by narrators for the specific effect of revealing the inner life of the character.

³¹ Worship = bow, bow in worship, prostrate oneself, i.e., make a low stance as a sign of honor, worship, and homage of deity, with an associative meaning of allegiance to that deity. James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), DBLH 2556, #2.

³² Cohn, p. 179.

³³ Chisholm, p. 270.

Mighty Warrior-King. His worship of this false god is a sham.” (For background on the verb “to lean” see footnote 34³⁴)

Cohn also shows that the “hand”-“house” pairing will be used for contrast in the next scene with the opportunistic “servant” of Elisha. Gehazi, who unlike Naaman uses his hand to support his master as he is doing his religious duties in the house of his god, uses his hands to take the loot out of Naaman’s servants’ hands, and bring it to his own house.³⁵ (vs 24) Assis, however feels that this interpretation is forced, that the center of the chiasm should not be over-emphasized, and prefers to see the chiasm as a way of showing that Naaman’s speech is premeditated. He states:

The structure functions here to expose Naaman's inner life at this point. Naaman's confession may have derived from his admiration and appreciation, but not from his sincere intention to worship Israel's God. The formation of Naaman's words in a chiastic structure characterizes him as one who speaks in a premeditated manner; the reader realizes that Naaman is aware of the conflict between belief in God and worship in the temple of Rimmon.³⁶

Gerhard von Rad pointed out that this verse would have the effect of a shock-wave on the Jewish audience.³⁷ First of all, Israel’s God had turned on them by giving victory to a Syrian. Jesus, similarly, uses the same example in Luke 4 to shock his audience, by stating that although Israel had many lepers at the time, it was the outsider, Naaman that was healed. Then he heals this same Syrian who has a Jewish girl as a prisoner of war in his house. Then God seems to sanction an action expressly forbidden in the Decalogue. To paraphrase Graeme Goldswor-

³⁴ Harris, Archer & Waltke, p. 945, say that the verb means primarily to lean on something or someone, as on a staff (Eze 29:7), a spear (2 Sam 1:6), or an arm or hand (2 Kings 5:18; 7:2, 17). The latter use probably refers to the relationship of a king to his confidant or second in command. Most importantly the verb is used figuratively of an attitude of trust. Thus in Prov 3:5 we are told not to “rely on” our own understanding. Rather we are to trust the Lord.

³⁵ Cohn, p. 182.

³⁶ Assis, p. 282.

³⁷ Von Rad, "Naaman", p. 52, quoted by Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan, “2 Kings 5”, in *Review & Expositor*, 94 No 4 (Fall 1997), p. 593.

thy's question, we must ask, "What is God up to?"³⁸ This is exactly the point of the passage.

God, through the inspired narrator, seems to be using this verse as a polemic against Israel. He has started this in verse 1 and is continuing on the same theme. It has much less to do with how one performs their state-sanctioned duties in their line of work, as important as that is (see below), as a question of loyalties. If one reads this with a purely anthropocentric view, the result will necessarily read as follows:

Naaman's second request is even more directly related to our question about possible biblical precedents for Insider Movements. Naaman asks Elisha to forgive him because when he returns to Assyria he will accompany his king into the temple of Rimmon to bow down in worship there. Elisha's response? Go in peace. Now Naaman is one "convert", not a movement. And Elisha's "Go in peace" is given in response to a request for forgiveness. But the text is an example of a follower of another religion who becomes a believer in the true God and yet continues to worship the true God within the religious life and practices of his prior religion. Not only is it a description, but also the text includes the clear blessing of the prophet upon the practice. In this text we find at least one case where God blesses "remaining inside".³⁹

Logically, with an anthropocentric reading, backed by a desire to make the text say what he wants it to say, Kevin Higgins found his "proof text". Yet, it would seem that he has drawn overly hasty conclusions with little respect for the genre of the text, the immediate context, and its larger theological contexts. How quickly it seems to be overlooked that Naaman calls himself the servant of Elisha. This same Elisha is called a man of God, and the servant of Elijah from whom he asked for a double portion of his spirit. It was Elijah who castigated Israel for "limping between two opinions" and set out to demonstrate "...if God be God..." It is this same Naaman who has been taken as a "prisoner of war" by the Divine-Warrior King. How is it possible that this author thinks that Naaman considers himself free to do as he pleases "within the religious life and practices of his prior religion?"

³⁸ Goldsworthy, Lecture Series "And Beginning with Moses and All the Prophets: Biblical Theology in the Church, the Academy, and the Home."
http://www.sbts.edu/pdf/Gheens/The_Necessity_and_Viability_of_Biblical_Theology.pdf (11/29/2009)

³⁹ Higgins (2004), p. 158.

Another way to look at this passage is to ask the question: “Is God is saying something to Israel, through the voice of Naaman, an outsider?” This would not be entirely surprising as Yairah Amit notes that God used the mouths of foreigners such as Jethro, Rahab and Naaman to bring across his message.⁴⁰ Additionally, Robert Long notes that in the milieu of ambivalence and hostility to prophets such as Elisha, God used miracle stories to drive home a message in a parabolic way.⁴¹ Might *I AM* be saying the following to Israel, in light of their track record?

“As much as you profess to honor me with your lips, your hearts are far away from me. Compare this to Naaman, an uncircumcised Syrian foreigner who honors me with his lips, refuses to sacrifice to any other god, and even considers my gift of land as something sacred. You in the meantime pollute my land with idols; you sacrifice to any foreign god that comes along, and even use your lips to kiss the Baal idols. Your own king Azariah seeks out Baal prophets (2 Kings 1) and a foreigner seeks out my prophet.”

“As much as you consider yourselves to be scrupulous in your religious practices and worthy of *I AM*’s favor by virtue of your ethnic origin, your apostasy is so far gone that you have no regard for any appearance of evil by making altars on high places, thinking nothing of the word *abomination* and even burning your children to Molech. Compare this with this unworthy Syrian who refers to himself as a servant and who is genuinely worried about any kind of appearance of evil. He knows the connection between a religious action, such as bathing in the river Jordan, and a spiritual result. He sees the connection between the religious action of bowing down in a temple, and a spiritual acknowledgement and submission to the authority of that deity. You do not seem to make the connection.”⁴²

⁴⁰ See the observation of Yairah Amit in his *Hidden polemics in biblical narrative*:

“The choice by the author of a foreign hero to articulate his monotheistic-universalist declaration strengthens its effect— a technique that, as is known, is repeated in biblical narrative. *Biblical interpretation series*, 25.(Leiden [u.a.]: Brill.), 63

⁴¹ Burke O. Long, “Social setting for prophetic miracle stories” *Semeia*, no 3 (1975), 57

⁴² Leland Ryken,, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*,

“As much as you flaunt your sins in my face, and do not consider that any kind of pardon for them might be needed, this formerly arrogant pagan knows the meaning of the word ‘shub’. He asks for pardon two times while voicing a request in a way that even would allow for a refusal of that very request. He is genuinely worried about divided loyalties and the possibility of serving with a divided heart.”⁴³

“A restored army general has more concern about the service of his king, than an Israelite servant of a prophet has for his master’s business. The former is selfless in his actions, and the later, selfish. The dishonorable attitude encapsulated by Gehazi stands as an example for the attitude of all of Israel.”

In essence God is saying to Israel, “shame, shame, double shame, everyone knows your lover’s name” It is Baal and company. Jeffery Salkin, a Jewish writer, attempts to crawl into Naaman’s skin with the following soliloquy:

Look, God, I have to prepare you for something that is bound to happen. I might believe in You now, but I still have official duties to the king of Aram, who, as You Surely know, is still, well, a worshiper of Rimmon, which, as You know, is another name for the chief god of us Arameans back in Damascus, whom You probably also know as Baal-Hadad”. I may not like it any more than You do, but a job's a job. Just to let you know - it is going to appear to You, God of Israel, that I am bowing down before Rimmon. In fact, I will only be appearing to be bowing low, because my master will be leaning on my arm. He will be bowing low and I will be supporting him. So don’t hold it against me. I, personally, as You know, no longer have any use for Rimmon. I care nothing for Rimmon, but my king is still my king.⁴⁴

electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1998), 528.

⁴³ As Richard 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 time." Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), p. 183 cited by Maier, pp. 194-195.

⁴⁴ Salkin, Jeffery K., *Righteous Gentiles in the Hebrew Bible: ancient role models for sacred relationships* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub. Righteous Gentiles, 2008), pp. 101-102.

6 The dismissal

“Go in peace”. What is Elisha saying? Von Rad describes the statement as almost “bewilderingly brief”. Ngan pointedly asks:

How can Naaman be permitted to bow down to Rimmon if he is truly a Yahweh worshipper? It seems outrageous that he knows it is wrong and asks for forgiveness in advance. Why doesn't Elisha reprimand him for not standing up for his faith? Where is the demand for faithful witness regardless of cost? When Elisha sends Naaman away with his blessing, does this not encourage all sorts of compromises?⁴⁵

Answers vary:

- An example of the “first non-directive counselor”⁴⁶ ;
- A response to a request for pre-forgiveness.
- No rigorist or purist solution, only Elisha's non-committal, but non-judgmental, "shalom" (vs 19a) giving tacit approval to Naaman's practical compromise.⁴⁷
- It does not suggest cheap theological compromise, but rather recognition of the realism and integrity of Naaman's commitment.⁴⁸
- A subtle way of “not indicating specifically whether or not he grants the requests. Instead the two conditions of YHWH worship outside the land of Israel are allowed to stand without comment.”⁴⁹
- An ‘amphibologia’ - a double meaning. “If he had said, ‘Yes; you may bow’, that would have been to sanction idolatry. And if he had said, ‘No; you must not bow’, that would have been to put Naaman's conscience under a yoke of bondage to Elisha.”⁵⁰
- Ralbag (R. Levi ben Gershom) suggests, “that the brevity of the reply implies the granting of the requests.”⁵¹

⁴⁵ Ngan, p. 593.

⁴⁶ Patrick Miller, *Israelite religion and Biblical theology: collected essays*, JSOT Series 267 (Sheffield: Sheffield Acad. Press, 2000), p. 662.

⁴⁷ Nelson, p. 180.

⁴⁸ Moore, p. 80.

⁴⁹ Cohn, p. 179.

⁵⁰ Ethelbert William Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (London; New York: Eyre & Spottiswoode; E. & J. B. Young & Co., 1898), p. 804.

⁵¹ Cohn, p. 179.

- Von Rad suggests Naaman is returning to a "very threatened existence",⁵² and "leaves him completely to his new faith, or better, to God's hand which has sought and found him".⁵³
- "One case where God blesses 'remaining inside'"⁵⁴

One commentator calls Elisha's response a "controversial enigma".⁵⁵ That seems dismissive. Compare Paul House who summarizes his findings by stating:

First, Keil notes that Naaman simply asks whether or not God will forgive him. He does not ask permission to worship Rimmon. Second, Naaman has stated his opinion of Rimmon and has declared his intention to serve and offer sacrifices to Yahweh. Third, he must create what amounts to a personal outpost of Yahwism in Syria. He can pray, but there is no opportunity for community worship, nor is it likely that he can come back to Israel to worship. Elisha understands these realities and lays no more guilt on Naaman than Elijah did on Obadiah. Again, his commitment to the Lord is already greater than all but a remnant of the faithful.⁵⁶

To do justice to our passage, and to avoid proof-texting, or agnostic dismissiveness, the Semitic, well-wishing phrase of "Go in shalom", needs to be examined in the larger Biblical context. Other accounts of healing linked to the same phrase will shed some light on its usage. Additionally the contexts for its usage must be considered.

Jesus used the phrase, "Go in shalom" to two women who had formerly had an "unclean" status (Mark 5:24-34, Luke 7:36-40). In their desperate situations they took social risks to approach and touch him, and found the wholeness they were looking for. This wholeness was affirmed by Jesus with the tender words, "daughter, [in the Mark passage] your faith has made you well... [be on your way for the rest of your life enjoying this wholeness.-author's addition]". Schweizer saw

⁵² Cohn, p. 179.

⁵³ Von Rad, "Naaman", p. 54; also in Ngan, p. 593.

⁵⁴ Higgins (2004), p. 158.

⁵⁵ Abdul Asad, Unpublished document, 2009.

⁵⁶ House, p. 274. See also two responses to insider's use of 2 Kings 5: Bill Nikides, "Evaluating Insider Movements", in *St. Francis Magazine*, 4 (March 2006, p. 6, also his "A Response to Kevin Higgins' 'Inside What?', in *St Francis Magazine*, 5:4 (August 2007), p. 105; Timothy Tennent, "Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques", in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 23:3 (Fall 2006), p. 108.

this as a sendoff of one “restored to a proper relationship with God”.⁵⁷ In the one case, the woman was described as unclean due to her flow of blood, and in the other, as a sinner. In many ways they are outcasts due to their gender, or their physical or moral condition. Naaman, likewise, needed the same touch by the “God who saves” as these women did from Jesus.

In the Old Testament the phrase “go in peace” had been used by others in authority or in positions of power in sending people off. Jethro, the priest of Midian sent his son-in-law Moses on the his perilous mission back to Egypt where he was an outcast from Pharaoh’s court, and not in much better standing with his own people with the same words. (Ex 4:18) The priest Eli dismissed a once distraught, barren woman named Hannah to go back to her place of former rejection with the words of shalom saying, “May the God of Israel grant your petition...” (1 Sam 1:17) Another priest, a Levite, responded to the request of the men of Dan, regarding their potentially perilous journey and affirmed likely successful outcome with the same words...” The journey on which you go is under the eye of the Lord” (Judges 18:6). As well the words are found on the mouth of king David who responded to a request like that of Moses, “Please let me go” to his own son Absalom with his blessing. (2 Sam 15:9) Thus the words of send-off, wishing wholeness and that the “eye of the Lord” would be on that particular person, are found in the mouths of prophets, priests and kings. Elisha, it would seem was affirming the following facts:

- a. That the “eye of the Lord” God would go with Naaman (cf. Judges 18:6);
- b. That Naaman should walk in the wholeness that he had received due to sheer grace and live it out (cf. 1 Sam 1:17);
- c. That the same *I AM* who had given him victory over his enemies (vs 1) would give him victory when battles of an ethical nature would come his way. (cf. Ex 4:18; Judges 18:6);

⁵⁷Robert A. Guelich, vol. 34A, *Word Biblical Commentary : Mark 1-8:26*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 299 citing E. Schweizer *The Good News According to Mark*. Tr. D. H. Madvig. (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1970), 118.⁵⁷

- d. That he as a representative of the “God of the whole earth” was confiding Naaman into the care of the Mighty-Warrior-King.

There may be a dark irony in the send-off as well, as the foreigner; Naaman is being commissioned with God’s blessing to bring “light to the Gentiles”, whereas the stand in for Israel at the time, namely Gehazi, is eventually sent off as well, but in a leprous condition. A great reversal has happened. Absalom, the son of David had been sent off in peace, (2 Kings 15:9) but to his destruction. Could this be a dark foreboding for Israel as well? Exile is not far off.

Is this send-off by Elisha so much different from New Testament sendoffs that somehow it can become the justification for a movement? Did Jesus not send leave his disciples with shalom, “my peace I give you?” Did he not say that he would be “with you even until the end of the age” (Mat 28) as he was giving out his supreme marching orders? Did not Paul give his sendoff to the recipients of the books of Romans and Philippians with the words, “May the God of peace ...guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus”? (Rom 15:33; Phil 4:7) Anyone who is a disciple needs the same sendoff. It is a sendoff needed because the world is occupied enemy territory. Elisha realized that a military commander like Naaman needed this most.

7 Conclusion

The text has clearly shown that Elisha, as one who stands before God, avoided any kind of suggestion that he had initiated something. This stands in contrast to some advocates of the insider movement who are quite proud to have initiated something. Whereas the insider movement advocates secrecy, Naaman was about to go public. Whereas the insider movement does not seem to have a great problem with divided loyalties, it was front and center in Naaman’s mind. Likewise, the suggestion that this text gives a blessing to those who “... continue[s] to worship the true God within the religious life and practices of his prior religion” is nothing less than poor Biblical scholarship and has a look and feel more of propagand, than fact.

Naaman’ story contains a powerful message to those who would “rightly divide the word of truth”. As much as a cursory reading of the text may yield “valuable” information for a proof-text like usage for a particular agenda, the text will not allow itself to be forced into a small

mold. It is sure to disappoint moralists with their “dare to be a Naaman, or Elisha, or the little girl” agenda. Front and center is the “God who saves”. By virtue of the Divine Warrior’s power and will to save, He accepts no competitors. Thus He wages a polemical war against the effects of sin in this world, against false gods who cannot save, and against the waywardness of the people he had delivered out of slavery. He demonstrates that his salvation plan will go global. The miracles of Jesus help to demonstrate His power over the moral and physical effects of sin, and underscore the wholeness that He gives. In a similar way, Elisha sends off Naaman as God’s representative in “enemy territory” with a promise that the same God, who had brought about his healing, will go with him.