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A More Appropriate Mission to Hindus: Another Look at Syncretism in Light of the Naaman Narrative

Second Kings 5:1-19 is a well-known story that is often taught even to children at an early age. It contains elements of genuine kindness and caring as well as a power encounter scenario. But most relevantly it contains practical guidance for the missioner who is interacting with Hindus. For these reasons this narrative has been chosen as an Old Testament example to demonstrate an aspect of God's mission that is often overlooked.

Unusual Narrative

Second Kings 5:1-19 is a unique and unusual narrative in many respects. It has been said that it is "complex on the literary plane, it leads the reader into deep levels of theological reflection in a variety of directions" (Nelson 1987:176). There is no doubt that this narrative has often perplexed exegetes. One thing is for certain, this "is yet another narrative that picks up themes from the Elijah story; the LORD is seen to be God, not only of Israelites, but also of foreigners (1 Kgs 17:17-24) and is acknowledged as the only real God (1 Kgs 18:20-40)" (Provan 1995:191). Naaman is a Syrian, and Syrians at this time worshipped Rimmon, not Yahweh.

Beyond this there are other unique and peculiar events in the narrative. A slave girl serves as the main connection between a powerful army commander and the prophet of Israel. The other servants in the story play key roles as well. Finally, after the healing of Naaman takes place, he makes two peculiar requests, which Elisha answers in an odd and, to some, shocking manner.

Rather than give a verse-by-verse analysis of the narrative, the focus will be on certain portions of the narrative that are particularly applicable in the context of a Hindu coming to faith in the God of the Bible. Verses 15-19 are especially significant for understanding God's mission as it relates to non-believers, therefore these particular verses will be the main focus of

this article. And from these verses a working theology that can be applied missiologically will appear.

Two Requests

Naaman makes two interesting and controversial requests of Elisha after he has been healed. These are presented as dilemmas concerning his worship once he returns to his land (Hens-Piazza 2006:262). First, Naaman requests that he be allowed to carry back to Syria two mule loads of soil (2 Kgs 5:17). Second, he asks for a pardon from Elisha (v. 18). Why? Because he knows that when he returns to his country the king is going to ask him to enter the temple of Rimmon to worship. He will bow with the king but in his heart he will worship the God of Israel. To these two requests Elisha simply answers "go in peace." Each request deserves its own analysis.

Two Mule Loads of Soil

This request of Naaman must be understood in its context. Many scholars have debated the real meaning behind this odd request, but there are some basic points of consensus among scholars. It is recognized that this request is made in light of Naaman's statement that he will no longer make sacrifices to any other god (Nwaoru 2008:37). This leads many interpreters to conclude that the soil requested is in some way connected to sacrifices or an altar to perform sacrifices on (Hens-Piazza 2006; Hobbs 1985:66). This alone however still leaves some doubt as to the motives of Naaman for taking Israelite soil.

Some scholars are reluctant to find much meaning in this request. They pass it off as Naaman attempting to maintain a liturgical connection with the land where he has first encountered Yahweh, but they refuse to see any sort of syncretism or dual allegiance in his request (House 1995:273). Others have found his request as showing a total lack of true understanding of who God is. They tie this request to the common tradition that deities were overseers of particular land, and that once you passed out of their territory you were in the domain of a different deity (Block 2000; Maier 1997:187; Nelson 1987:179). Therefore, it is deduced that Naaman was of the mind-set that Syria was beyond the territory of Yahweh, so in order to maintain contact with this powerful and true God he must have some of the soil from Israel.

Based on the historical context and the textual context, there may be some truth in both of these positions. It does appear that Naaman makes a pretty strong statement in a belief that there is only one God, and that God is the God of Israel. At the same time he is clearly still influenced by his Syrian worldview, which believed that gods were territorial. This appears

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to be a major reason behind his request for soil. Block states that "sensing some special mystical relationship between the deity and the land in which he was revered, Naaman desired to take two loads of Israelite soil with him back to Damascus" (Block 2000:86). If this is the case, then Naaman did not have a complete understanding of God as sovereign over *all the earth*, even though he may have begun to understand that there was no God like Yahweh and that his own previous god(s) were not really god(s) at all.

If the above is true, which the text seems to support, than Elisha's answer "go in peace" may be problematic for some. Here is the prophet of God allowing a new convert to leave his presence with a faulty view of God, and he does nothing to admonish or correct him. If this were the only problem it may not be so bad, but Naaman's second request is in many ways even more shocking.

Bowing to an Idol

Naaman has clearly thought about what his newfound faith may mean when he returns to his home country, which religiously is very different from Israel. He recognizes that when he returns, the king of Syria, who has shown much kindness to him in the past, will want him to come and worship at the temple of Rimmon with him. This is not a question of whether it will happen, but rather what to do when it happens. Naaman knows for a fact that he will be asked to go to the temple with the king.

In Naaman's mind, he must go. There does not appear room for another option at this point in Naaman's thinking. He is not asking Elisha if it is okay to go, but rather, can he be pardoned for going, and even bowing down. It is also clear that at least at first Naaman is not planning on telling the king about his newfound faith. This is made clear when Naaman makes the point that in his heart, not openly, he will worship Yahweh and not Rimmon. In short Naaman is requesting that he be pardoned for what will appear to those all around him to be continued worship of Rimmon, who is a false god and an idol. Can idol worship ever be overlooked? Even "fake" idol worship? Elisha's answer "go in peace" implies in this situation that Naaman's request for pardon is granted.

As with the first request Elisha has no rebuke or admonishment for Naaman. He does not explain to him that he must speak boldly of his new faith even if it means being cut off from his community or possibly death. It is interesting that Naaman is "admitted into the community of worshippers of YHWH without the requirements of rite of conversion" (Cogan and Tadmor 1988:67). Is there theological significance to these two requests and Elisha's answer?

Is Naaman Being Syncretistic?

Some argue that Naaman's questions reveal a weak understanding of God. Some will go so far as to accuse him of "syncretism," mixing his false, pagan worldview of God with his newfound faith in God. What are the implications of Naaman's questions and Elisha's answer of "go in peace?" If this is a form of syncretism, can this narrative be a valid example of a positive worldview transformation? The answers to these questions inform the missiological outcome of this narrative.

Syncretism

Over that last several decades, the term syncretism as become a key term heavily used in missiology especially in connection with contextualization and how far contextualization should go. Defining syncretism, however, has not been easy for many, and continues to be a fluid task. There are a variety of definitions extant, some which basically call all non-biblical practices syncretistic; others look at it as a turning away from clear biblical teaching back to a culturally unacceptable alternative; some have associated it with a lack of critical thinking on the part of the one telling the gospel; while others would blame the recipient (Van Rheenen 2006:7-8). Because of this "there is a growing recognition that syncretism is not a simple process of conscious oil-and-water compromise" (Conn 1984:184). If the definition is so ambiguous, it is difficult to be able to take the Naaman narrative and check it for syncretism. What this narrative may be able to do is highlight the futility of the syncretism arguments that continue to surround missiology.

The Soil

There is no doubt that Naaman, by asking for soil from Israel, was still thinking that God was territorial. The historical context leaves little room for any other interpretation. The question is: Does this qualify as syncretism? Or does it fall into a different, less defined category?

Naaman is not turning away from a clear biblical understanding of God. He simply does not have a mature understanding of God, which is to be expected since there has been such a short time that he has known anything about Yahweh. While he has made a major decision and recognized that Yahweh is special and the only one deserving of his worship, he has not fully understood who Yahweh really is. Maier appears correct when he says that Naaman has "his new Yahwism with an old pagan notion" (Maier 1997:187). To many this would qualify as a form of syncretism.

If syncretism is defined as "the blending of Christian beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture so that Christianity loses it[s] distinctiveness" (Van Rheenen 2006:8), then Naaman's request and follow-up

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action could be classified as syncretism. But the question deserves to be asked, Is Naaman expected to have a complete understanding of God after such a short time? Few would expect that of him, and it would seem even Elisha felt that this was not the appropriate time to give Naaman a lesson on God's complete sovereignty that would deem the soil unnecessary. Worldview transformation is no simple task accomplished overnight. It takes time and considerable knowledge for a person to move from one view of the world into an entirely different view. It may even take "multiple generations" before a solid biblical foundation is accomplished (Konkel 2006:438). This would mean that a definition of syncretism like the one starting this paragraph does not seem to take into account the overwhelming challenge of worldview change.

The Bowing to an Idol

The second request is in many ways similar to the first. But there are some key differences that deserve comment. This second request could also be considered syncretistic by some. Naaman is willing to continue a false practice in order to avoid certain repercussions. While it is true that Naaman was not actually worshipping the idol in his mind, no one around him would have known that. It would not be so bad if it were a simpler issue, but idol worship, something God is so clearly against, seems a bit beyond the acceptable. Yet Elisha's response is for both of these requests, not just the first one.

The context again can help shed light on this seemingly syncretistic request. It is important to note that the king was very close to Naaman, and had even written a letter to his enemy on behalf of Naaman. Therefore Naaman has no doubt that when he returns the king will ask him to worship in the temple of Rimmon. Would it be appropriate for Naaman to refuse this honest request by the king? The king would not have been aware of Naaman's experience at that time, and for whatever reason Naaman feels that this would not be an appropriate time to fill him in on his newfound faith. Terence Fretheim is clear when he says: "This is not a lapse into syncretism, but a recognition that the life of faith must be lived out in ambiguous situations and away from the community of faith" (1999:153).

Notice also that Naaman's attitude is one of humbleness. He recognizes that this is not the ideal by seeking pardon for his future actions beforehand (Long 1991:73). He seems to understand that ideally he should not be bowing to idols at any time, but that in this case he sees no way around it. Again it is important to understand that Naaman has very recently gained a new way of looking at the world, and has made an "astounding confession of monotheism" (Nelson 1987:178). To ask him to break all ties for his faith, and even possibly lose his life does not seem appropriate to

Elisha at this time. It is enough that he recognizes that worshiping the idol is wrong, the social consequences of which he must work out himself in his time. August Konkel puts it this way:

> Elisha's assurance of peace to Naaman when he should go the house of Rimmon in the service of his master is a reminder that believers must be given freedom to choose how they can best give witness to their faith. The question is not whether believers should be faithful, but how they most effectively give testimony to their faith. Believers in hostile circumstances must make decisions about what constitutes a situation where they must be faithful to death. (Konkel 2006:441)

By responding "go in peace" Elisha is not necessarily condoning these two requests (Nelson 1987:180, 183). Elisha understands the challenge that Naaman has to face and therefore "lays no more guilt on Naaman" (House 1995:274). He either felt that this was not the appropriate time to illuminate Naaman on these topics or that Naaman had a good enough grasp of the issue to make his own decision. Alongside this "Elisha does not expect Naaman to abandon the world or withdraw into a ghetto where he can escape moral dilemmas and difficulties" (Leithart 2006:195). Elisha would seem to be putting Naaman into Yahweh's care, allowing God to lead him forward from this point onwards (Effa 2007:471; Maier 1997:192). Most important, though, is that Naaman left the presence of Elisha encouraged rather than discouraged. This is the key missiological point to the encounter.

Syncretism?

Syncretism deserves to be better defined before it can be used to describe specific situations. This narrative proves this point very clearly. If syncretism is simply the mixing of cultural beliefs with the new religious ones, then clearly Naaman was syncretistic. Normally syncretism is a pejorative term; therefore if Naaman was syncretistic, then Naaman was most likely in the wrong. It would seem to be more accurate to categorize syncretism as something that occurs among longer-term believers, who have had more time to understand better the faith they are a part of, yet still choose to incorporate non-biblical practices that can be harmful. This would, however, create many questions, since almost all groups of believers have some sort of non-biblical practices evident in their faith experience.

Perhaps the term syncretism needs to be laid aside for a time, and concepts developed which can help answer the ambiguity that is currently surrounding the term. This has already been done, although not inten-

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tionally, by some. This narrative can be a test case for some of the extant theories in connection with syncretism and its antidote.

Time

First, there has been some literature which has attempted to show that the process of conversion is slower than many would hope it to be. It has been recognized that sincere commitment and genuineness can be accompanied with doubts, misunderstandings, and the slow process of incorporating new beliefs into a host culture. This being the case, then what often may appear to be a type of syncretism or dual allegiance may actually be stages in the conversion process (Schreiter 1985:158).

Anthropology has helped to uncover the depths of what it means to change a belief system and the complexity and slowness of the processes involved. In fact, it would seem that syncretism as stated above is actually unavoidable to a large extent and that religious change and growth will be accompanied by some aspects of syncretism. Louis Luzbetak seems to find this understanding valid and even states: "God does not reject those in the process of purification just because they are not yet pure" (1988:369). The first step of recognizing that God is unique as a Savior, whether from sin or disease, in this case, is a sign that the seeds of the Word have been planted, but it should be expected that those seeds will take time to bear fruit.

The narrative of Naaman appears to support this thesis. Naaman has just recently become a believer in Yahweh. The requests he makes indicate that he has not come to a complete understanding of God. "Elisha's enigmatic response may at least suggest that God is patient with those who have just turned to him and gives them time to discover what it means to worship him in ways that do not require an immediate separation from their culture" (Effa 2007:471).

Direction

Another key issue that is pertinent to this discussion is the issue of direction. In other words, where is the faith of the person directed? Are they moving closer to the biblical ideal or moving away from it? Paul Hiebert in his work on different types of "categories" or "sets" dealt with this concept.

These categories/sets have already been well defined by Paul Hiebert, therefore the focus will be on a particular "set." The centered set is "created by defining a center or reference point and the relationship of the thing to that center" (1994:122). In centered sets, things that move towards the center are considered "members" while those moving in the opposite

direction are not. Hiebert compares this type of set with "bounded sets," which have strictly delineated boundaries. Either you are in or out of the bounded set, direction is irrelevant. The centered set on the other hand has a well-defined center and develops well-defined boundaries based on the relationship one has to the center. Centered sets are more concerned about the relationship or direction rather than the boundary itself (Hiebert 1994:124).

In the realm of religion and Christianity, Hiebert applies this concept by defining the center as a belief in Jesus and the Bible. Understanding God as Sovereign and as a Savior that desires to bless all people as the center of the set also would seem appropriate in light of the Old Testament witness connected to the Naaman narrative. Applying Hiebert's concept further would mean that those who are beginning to understand this view of God are moving in the right direction, towards the center. This also allows for recognition of the issue of time discussed above. "Some are close to Christ in their knowledge and maturity, others are immature and need to grow to attain adequate understanding" (Hiebert 1994:126).

Hiebert lists a number of positive outcomes if this view is adopted as a model for the church and Christianity in general. These include a move towards better discipleship, recognizing that the first act of conversion is only the beginning of the journey and not the final goal. He also concludes that a "centered-set approach avoids the dilemma between offering cheap grace that allows new believers to become Christians but leads to shallow church or costly grace that preserves the purity of the church but keeps them out of the kingdom" (Hiebert 1994:127).

Based on the above paragraphs, syncretism as so often currently defined cannot possibly describe Naaman's situation, or the situation of any number of current people who are in the midst of transforming their worldview. It is appropriate here to define a new term or terminology that can better describe the Naaman situation. Rather than coin an entirely new term, it may be appropriate to borrow and expand terminology already in use in the field of hermeneutics.

William J. Webb has come up with what he calls a "redemptive-movement hermeneutic." He defines this terminology in the following manner: it is "the need to engage the redemptive spirit of the text in a way that moves the contemporary appropriation of the text beyond its original-application framing" (Webb 2001:30). While this is clearly dealing with hermeneutics it lends itself very nicely to the Naaman situation when slightly altered. Perhaps we can use the term "redemptive-movement encounters" to explain the encounter that occurs between Naaman and Yahweh, through Elisha. This encounter leads Naaman to pledge allegiance to a new God and move in a new direction, but it is just the beginning stage

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of his "redemptive movement," not the final moments.

Elisha very well may have had this type of idea in mind when he encourages Naaman as he leaves, rather than scolding him. Hiebert, commenting on centered sets, said that this "emphasis . . . would be on exhorting people to follow Christ, rather than on excluding others to preserve the purity of the set. Salvation is open to everyone, no matter who they are, what they know, or what baggage they bring with them" (Hiebert 1994:125-126).

With this understanding, Hiebert defined syncretism as "moving in the wrong direction, away from a fuller knowledge of the Gospel" (Hiebert 2006:44). This definition of syncretism is more defined and logical. It leaves room for new believers to have less "maturity" in their understanding of who God is and what He requires without calling them syncretistic. It also defines how one does become syncretistic, namely when a choice is made to become involved in thinking or practices that are known to be contrary to the gospel. Elisha's response to the requests of Naaman begin to make better sense when understood in this paradigm. Naaman had begun to move in the right direction, while still not fully understanding the center. Elisha's response creates an atmosphere of encouragement that will help Naaman continue to move towards the center rather than away from it.

Present Application

This narrative can be instrumental in providing a biblical example of the required patience and encouragement one should have and give when studying with and interacting with someone who has a very different religious worldview such as a Hindu. Practically speaking, how does this narrative inform the present challenge of sharing the God of the Bible with Hindus?

Hindus may not grasp fully what it means to believe in only one God; or that idol worship is an inappropriate way of worshipping God when they first encounter the God of the Bible. For some time Hindus may continue with certain rituals that appear unbiblical in nature. But at the same time they may be very clear that they no longer are following their former Hindu deities, but have replaced them with the God of the Bible. What should be done in such a situation? It may be that there are times when allowing them to continue, with words to encourage them in the right direction, are more valuable than a rebuke. This does not mean that they are left with an incomplete view of God. Rather this encourages them to continue the journey, rather than discourage them at a crucial juncture.

In the same strain it may be better to avoid forcing Hindus to abandon home and community in order to avoid the household *puja* or other worship ceremonies. Like Naaman, they too will most likely recognize the

futility of such worship, but in order to maintain good relations with their family members it may be appropriate to hold off on telling their family of their changing perspective. This is especially true of many Hindu women who have come to know Jesus but live in a household where the husband is still a practicing Hindu. They often have to read their Bibles in private when the husband is away and pray secretly (Hoefer 2001:23, 50, 198). This does not mean that a time may come when they will have to choose to be more open, but in the end they need to make this decision; others cannot make it for them. Ultimately the goal should be to continue growing in the biblical truth of God. However, it would also seem advantageous to remain in the community as best one can so as to keep the line of witness open. "In this regard, individual missionaries are to be trained in inculturational principles to enable them to address thorny issues relating to divine worship and the culture of the people" (Nwaoru 2008:39).

Dayanand Bharati calls for more patience and less pressure when working with Hindus. "Allow them to make their own decisions. They may go wrong initially, but if they do make mistakes we can correct them gently by pointing it out under the light of Scripture" (2001:23). He goes on to say that it is true that people need the whole gospel, but that no one can understand the whole gospel in one sitting. He encourages the development of good "rapport" and spending time discussing the needs and challenges that the Hindu is facing. As in Naaman's case, he advises dealing with the present needs rather than delving into the deep things of the gospel to start with (23).

In dealing with Hindus there will no doubt be times when aspects of the new believers' understanding and practice are not in complete harmony with the Word of God. But an attitude of encouragement that works with the Hindu in patience is needed rather than a spirit of critical correction. Hiebert has shown that it is the direction one is headed that is of most importance. It is possible to speak of new believers and even more mature believers as being on a journey, each one at a different stage. Lutzbetak points out that all humans struggle with sin, and that true syncretism is a result of sin; therefore, as a group of believers we should struggle onward together with encouragement holding onto the promise that "he who has begun a good work . . . will carry it through to completion, right up to the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6) (Luzbetak 1988:371).

Conclusion

The narrative found in 1 Kgs 5 is not easy to understand or explain. The two unorthodox requests are especially troubling in light of Elisha's reply. While there is no doubt that there are unusual aspects to the narrative, it is

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also a very useful narrative to guide those who are sincerely working with Hindus. It can encourage better understanding of certain principles that help in encouraging new believers in their new-found journey of faith.

All those engaging their Hindu friends should be given some "flexibility" as they navigate the many challenges that a change of faith entails. Special prayers for wisdom need to be a constant reality throughout the process of change (Maier 1997:193, 195). The focus is on encouraging the new believer to continue in the direction that they have started in, moving toward the center, which is an understanding of the Sovereign, saving God who desires to continue to bless them.

Patient encouragement, allowing for the believer's faith and understanding to develop over time, is vital. Allan Effa finishes his article on this narrative with the following paragraph:

> Finally, the community of believers needs to exercise patience in allowing Gentile converts to discover the implications of faith in Yahweh, while remaining contributing citizens within their respective cultures. When a genuine turning to God has taken place, it may be best to refrain from imposing the full burden of what the believing community understands to be implicit in worshipping and serving God. Instead, one should trust God to continue to lead that convert into greater truth about God and the details of what it means to be a follower. The faith journey is a process laden with tension, and the struggle to integrate one's faith with every aspect of life may take an entire lifetime. (Effa 2007:472)

While Elisha's answer "go in peace" may be troubling to some, it is actually much more encouraging than troubling. It is important to recognize that Jesus used Naaman as an example of faith in Luke 4:27, thereby strengthening the argument that Elisha's answer was the correct one. This narrative gives a key to understanding the importance of maintaining an attitude of patient encouragement even when the new believer does not understand fully while taking those first faltering steps toward the God of the Bible and beginning to understand what following him requires.

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