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*I am Kneeling on the Outside, but I am Standing on the Inside:  
Another Look at the Story of Naaman through the Lenses of  
Kraft*

**Abstract**

The story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5 has been a popular mining ground for theological positions and missiological perspectives. How one views Elisha's response to Naaman in verse 19 is inevitably affected by one's view regarding the appropriateness of how Naaman intends to resolve the conflict between his new relationship with Yahweh and his former pagan practices. Based on the movement of the story, and the use of comparison and contrast of characters, Elisha's answer should be seen as a positive affirmation, rather than a negative or indifferent response. Using Kraft's model for conversion helps us see the positive benefits for doing so. Combining biblical studies and intercultural research methods, we discover that Elisha's answer to Naaman is the most propitious response to a new convert returning to his former pagan culture.

**Keywords:** Elisha, Naaman, characterization, Charles Kraft, conversion

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## Introduction

The story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5 is described as a narrative that “includes themes of international intrigue, confession, monotheism, greed, grace, universalism, generosity, and the failure of ‘conventional wisdom’ in its complex structure” (Smith 1994:205). It is no wonder that, among the Elisha narratives, the story of Naaman has been a popular mining ground for theological positions and missiological perspectives. In addition, Naaman’s story “contains all the elements of a good drama, with subtleties and blatant contrasts” (Effa 2007:306). Among the accounts of the prophet Elisha, it has “the most highly developed plot and contains the largest number of characters” (Hobbs 1992:968).

The use of characterization, word play, and twists of events makes the account of Naaman a great story to be studied. The first part of this paper will focus on the request of Naaman for forgiveness and Elisha’s response in 2 Kings 5:18-19a. I will argue for seeing Elisha’s response in a positive light in view of the movement in Naaman’s life surrounding his conversion, and the author’s use of characterization in his writing. The missiological overtones of Naaman’s story raise questions of practical theology, in particular to the appropriateness of Elisha’s response. Using the conversion model of Charles H. Kraft, the second part of this paper argues for the propitiousness of Elisha’s positive response to Naaman.

## I Am Kneeling on the Outside, but I am Standing on the Inside

2 Kings 5 is a single continuous story that comprises three units: verses 1-14, 15-19, and 20-27 (Cohn 1983:171-172). It is one of the few accounts recording the conversion of an individual pagan in the Old Testament. Naaman, a high-ranking Syrian officer and a valiant warrior, is held in esteem by his master because Yahweh has given him victory for his country through him (2 Kgs 5:1). The extensive description of Naaman’s positive attributes is contrasted by a single word at the end of the verse concerning his skin disease (Cohn 1983:173-174). After a series of advices and obstacles, Naaman is miraculously healed. This leads him to confess that “there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel” (2 Kgs 5:15). Moreover, Naaman makes a commitment that he will no longer offer burnt offering, nor will he sacrifice to other gods except Yahweh (2 Kgs 5:17). However, he immediately foresees that his newly found belief would bring him new challenges upon returning to his homeland, particularly in terms of cultic practices such as paying obeisance to his native god Rimmon. In this regard, Naaman seeks the forgiveness of Yahweh on the basis that his outward posture of bowing down is merely a ceremonial

requirement that does not reflect his allegiance to Yahweh. To his request, Elisha replies with “go in peace” (*lēk l’šālôm*), which intrigues scholars as to the meaning of the prophet’s answer. Is Elisha approving or disapproving Naaman’s request, or is he simply being indifferent?

Many scholars who comment on Elisha’s brief answer to Naaman in 2 Kings 5:19 concur with Terence E. Fretheim that “Elisha simply gives [Naaman] his blessings” (1999:153). D. J. Wiseman sees Elisha’s response as “a statement of confirmed agreement rather than a polite dismissal” (1982:324). In his 1983 article, Robert L. Cohn agrees with Ralbag that Elisha’s answer to Naaman was an affirmative (1983:179). However, in his more recent commentary, Cohn changes his position to say that “Elisha replies simply ‘Go in peace,’ not indicating specifically whether or not he grants the requests” (2000:39). W. Alan Smith is of the opinion that “Elisha...forgives Naaman of the compromises of his faith.” (1994:210). Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan goes even further to offer the possible reason for Elisha’s approval of Naaman’s request. Ngan writes that “Perhaps Elisha recognizes the precarious life of faith Naaman would face upon his return. He does not burden the new convert with legal and ritual requirements, nor advises him to withdraw from Syrian society, but sends him home in peace” (1997:593).

Scholars who take Elisha’s response to Naaman as disapproval are rare (Lasine 2011:5). Many prefer to take the neutral ground and suggest that Elisha withheld giving his opinion in regard to Naaman’s request. Cogan and Tadmor posit that in contrast to Naaman’s lengthy petition, Elisha’s “laconic answer... refrains from commenting...on Naaman’s conversion” (1988:65). Volkmar Fritz also shares the same view that Naaman’s request “is neither granted nor precluded by Elisha’s response,” and that “Elisha’s formula...leaves the question ultimately undecided” (2003:260). Authors who are in this category of seeing Elisha’s response as indifferent include those who attempt to explain Elisha’s rationale for doing so from a missiological perspective. Walter A. Maier III claims that Elisha’s response was neither a “yes” nor a “no,” but understands the prophet to be simply “commending Naaman to the care and guidance of God” (1997:192). However, Maier does not think that Elisha could concede to Naaman’s request, but that the prophet was simply withholding verbal judgment on Naaman’s intentions because “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” (1997:193). Essentially, Maier does not approve of Naaman’s request, but thinks that a new believer should not be overburdened with so many religious demands all at once. Similarly, Allan L. Effa explains that “Elisha responds graciously, without offering

concrete advice” and “leaves the issue of casuistry for Naaman to work out himself and wishes him well by granting him the blessing of God’s peace” (2007:311). Effa justifies his statement by claiming 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” (2007:311). Emmanuel O. Nwaoru opines that “Elisha did not explicitly pronounce YHWH’s forgiveness; he left Naaman in the hope that God would show his mercy. Indeed, the prophet expresses understanding for the compromises Naaman will have to make” (2008:37).

What do we make of such a diversity of opinions? In a recent article, Stuart Lasine raises an insightful question pertaining to this discussion: “to what extent are the readers’ understandings of Elisha’s reply influenced by their own notion of what constitutes appropriate behavior on the part of those who profess belief in the biblical God?” (2011:4). To be sure, how one views Elisha’s response to Naaman is inevitably affected by one’s view regarding the appropriateness of how Naaman intends to resolve the conflict between his new relationship with Yahweh and his former pagan practices. Missionaries have to wrestle with a situation similar to Elisha with converts from a pagan culture that is hostile to Christianity. In a way, the mastery of narrative writing as demonstrated by the author here draws the reader into the same dilemma as Elisha. As a more mature believer, what advice can we offer to a new convert from another culture? But are we left to our own discretion when interpreting Elisha’s response? For this reason, we need to take another look at Naaman’s story.

## **Another Look at the Story of Naaman**

### *1. Movement in the story of Naaman*

In later Judaism, missionary effort follows a linear geographical movement from the sending country to the recipient country (Nwaoru 2008:31). Nwaoru observes that the conversion of Naaman defies such traditional geographical movement, but is instead of a chiasmic nature where the protagonist starts off in Aram, finds his new faith in Israel, and returns again to his homeland where his new faith is to be practiced (2008:32). While Nwaoru is right about the path of Naaman’s physical movement, he fails to consider the direction of Naaman’s spiritual journey.

In the account of Naaman’s conversion, the author is intentional in depicting the movement of Naaman’s spiritual journey as a growing relationship with Yahweh through a series of aids and obstacles. The story begins by attributing

Naaman's military success to Yahweh. This is ironic because firstly Naaman most likely is unaware of Yahweh's providential help, and secondly because this victory comes at the expense of Israel. Naaman's skin disease sets him up for a need for healing which the audience knows comes only from Yahweh. The first aid towards Naaman's encounter with Yahweh comes from an Israelite slave girl who, through Naaman's wife, refers him to "the prophet who is in Samaria" who has the ability to heal. Next, the obstacle to Naaman's spiritual journey comes in the persons of the two kings—the king of Aram who sends Naaman to the wrong person for help, and the king of Israel who misinterprets the intention of the Syrian king for trying to pick a fight. The agonizing cry "Am I God?" from the mouth of Israel's king both betrays his awareness of Yahweh, and reveals his spiritual distance from Israel's God. Hearing of this somehow, Elijah asks for Naaman to be sent to him, giving the reader hope again for Naaman's journey to knowing Yahweh. Naaman arrives at Elisha's house but is not given an audience. Naaman is simply given the instruction, via Elisha's messenger, to wash seven times in the Jordan. The prophet's attitude appears to be at odds with traditional evangelization principles. Faced with this unconventional reception, Naaman's own anger and pride become the next obstacles to his conversion. At this point (2 Kgs 5:11), the narrator reveals that Naaman becomes aware of Yahweh for he thinks that Elisha would simply call on Yahweh's name to heal him. At the same time, Naaman refers to Yahweh as Elisha's God, showing that there is still a personal distance between him and God. This gap between Naaman and Yahweh is nudged forward again by some unnamed servants of Naaman, who actually manage to convince him to follow Elisha's instruction. Naaman washes himself in the Jordan, is healed and professes a personal knowledge (*yāda*) of Yahweh in his remarkable confession, "Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel" (2 Kgs 5:15). Moving another step forward, Naaman makes known his intention to no longer offer burnt offerings nor sacrifice to other gods besides Yahweh (2 Kgs 5:17). This depiction of Naaman's spiritual journey leads to the passage of our present discussion. The narrator has thus far employed many characters as aids and foils in this journey, but the movement of the story is one that is ultimately forward, despite the potential obstacles along the way. In light of this, it is highly possible to see both Naaman's final request for forgiveness, and Elisha's response to him positively. It is likely that Naaman's request at the end signals a forward step in his newly found faith rather than a slip into compromise. This understanding follows the flow of the narrator's story-telling most naturally.

## *2. Contrast and comparison of characters in the story of Naaman*

A prominent literary feature in the story of Naaman is the contrast of characters. In the first seven verses of 2 Kings 5, all the characters in the story are unnamed except for Naaman. In this first part of the story, even Elisha is only referred to ambiguously as “the prophet who is in Samaria.” We have here a pair of characters—two kings, one of Aram, and the other of Israel. The former is a non-believer of Yahweh; the latter, as expected of an Israelite king, a representative of Yahweh. Both are in the position of sovereign power over their respective kingdoms. However, both kings are powerless over the skin problem that Naaman is having. Another pair of characters is the captive slave girl and the prophet in Samaria, whom we later know refers to Elisha. Both of these characters are Israelite, but despite the fact that one lives in a foreign land while the other in the Promised Land, both of them exhibit faith in the healing of Naaman. Between the two pairs of characters, there is further contrast in that the kings act as foils in Naaman’s conversion, whereas both the slave girl and the prophet play the role of helping Naaman towards knowing Yahweh.

One other pair of characters is found in Naaman and Gehazi, Elisha’s aide. Both Naaman and Gehazi are servants of their respective masters—the king of Aram and the prophet Elisha. Both of them report to another person of higher authority. By contrast, Naaman is a non-Israelite and non-believer of Yahweh, while Gehazi is an Israelite and acknowledges the name of Yahweh (2 Kgs 5:20). The former is a generous giver of gifts, and the latter a greedy taker of gifts. However, the greatest contrast in the two is found in their relationship with Yahweh. In the story, Naaman is moving towards Yahweh, whereas Gehazi is moving away from Yahweh. By contrast, Naaman’s spiritual transformation is accompanied by physical healing while Gehazi’s apostasy is accompanied by physical ailment. This is most ironically depicted in the visible transfer of leprosy from Naaman to Gehazi. In light of the author’s use of character comparison and contrast, reading with the grain of Naaman’s story will lead the reader to see Naaman’s actions (and hence his requests to Elisha) in the positive light.

## *3. How do we understand Elisha’s response to Naaman?*

No matter how hard one looks, one cannot find in the text the rationale for Elisha’s approval of Naaman’s request to be pardoned for bowing down to Rimmon externally while remaining true to Yahweh internally. The bible is silent regarding what happens to Naaman after he returns to Syria. We are not told whether Naaman has been successful in holding on to his allegiance to Yahweh, or about his continual struggle to remain a secret Yahweh believer. The story ends

without giving us a clue as to how Naaman lives out his new found faith, and his commitment to worship Yahweh alone. While the story tells of a successful conversion account of a pagan growing positively in his newly found faith, it leaves the reader wondering about the wisdom behind Elisha's laconic parting words to a new believer about to return to his polytheistic environment.

In the rest of this paper, I would like to offer a way to see how Elisha's response is the most propitious thing that he has done for Naaman. To do this, I will draw our attention to the conversion model of Charles H. Kraft.

## The Story of Naaman through the Lenses of Kraft

### *1. Kraft's Model of Conversion*

In his book *Christianity in Culture*, Charles H. Kraft dedicates an entire chapter to Christian conversion (1979:328-344). He argues here that inadequate models of conversion believe in only one form of initiation into the Christian community, whereas in actual fact, God deals with human beings by adapting according to the cultural setting they are integrally a part of (1979:328). First, Kraft opines that biblical examples of conversion are not merely concerned with a single instance of some form of "conversion experience," but rather the process of relationship with God beyond that initial encounter (1979:330). Second, Kraft believes that "God's way is to work with, rather than against, psychologically and culturally appropriate mechanisms to bring about spiritual ends" (1979:332).

Admitting to the lack of "a single prescribed pattern for conversion" in the Bible, Kraft maintains that one may enter into a new relationship with God "via a number of culturally and psychologically appropriate ways." Nevertheless, Kraft posits that the basic concept of conversion is a "turning" (Heb. *šub*; Gr. *epistrepho*) away from the previous way of life and towards God instead (1979:333-334). This basic concept of conversion is manifested in some constant attitudes which Kraft proceeds to delineate. First, conversion involves "a conscious allegiance (faith commitment) to God" (Kraft 1979:334). With regard to a Gentile in particular, this new relationship with God necessitates an intentional and radical discontinuity with previous religious allegiances (Kraft 1979:335). A second constant, according to Kraft, is "a dynamic interaction between God and human beings that issues from a person's conscious allegiance to God" (1979:335). Kraft understands this as a series of encounters with God that involve decision-making, resulting in incorporating new habits or behaviors into the person's life (1979:335-336). This process comprises of distinct decisions leading up to the point of conversion, as well as the subsequent reinforcement of the new relationship (Kraft 1979:337).

The third constant follows the second, in that the conscious allegiance and dynamic interactions lead to a definite direction of “growth and maturation” (Kraft 1979:337). The fourth constant is “the need for the conversion-maturation process to take place in community” (Kraft 1979:338). Kraft emphasizes in this fourth aspect the role that other believers play in affirming the direction and nature of this growth (1979:338). Finally, the fifth constant for Kraft resembles more of a desirable outcome for this growth and maturation process to be “in keeping with the culture in which [the converts] are immersed” (197:338).

## *2. Naaman's Conversion*

Using Kraft's model of conversion, we now look at the story of Naaman again, this time to see if Naaman exhibits the constants as described by Kraft.

### *A conscious allegiance to God*

There are a few instances in the story where we can see Naaman exhibiting a conscious allegiance to God. Upon the miraculous curing of his skin disease, Naaman confesses that he knows of no other God in all the earth except for the God in Israel. Coming from a pluralistic and polytheistic culture, Naaman's confession is startling (Barrick 2000:31). Walter Brueggemann points out that Naaman's confession is striking because it essentially denies the relevancy of his Syrian gods back in his home country (2007:269). Another incident of Naaman's allegiance to God is his stunning commitment to no longer burn offerings, nor sacrifice to other gods except Yahweh. Naaman's willingness to abandon all previous known gods shows his sole allegiance to Yahweh. Finally, where Naaman initially refers to Yahweh as “Elisha's God” (2 Kgs 5:11), at the end he refers three times to Yahweh by his personal name (2 Kgs 5:17-18).

### *A dynamic interaction between God and the convert*

The story of Naaman shows a number of decisions that Naaman has to make in his spiritual journey as he encounters God. Prior to his healing, Naaman has to decide whether to believe that Israel's God could heal. However, Naaman initial approach to Yahweh is one of caution. He does not anticipate a personal encounter with Israel's God, but thinks that he can receive healing by just having Elisha perform some rituals over him. Naaman's attempt at distancing himself from Yahweh is seen in his reference to Yahweh as Elisha's God. Elisha's instruction to wash in the Jordan requires Naaman to make a decision to trust and be personally involved in a method that is seemingly ridiculous to him. After some persuasion from his servants, Naaman eventually decides to wash in the Jordan where he is

healed. Upon being healed, Naaman confesses his allegiance to Yahweh, and makes the decision to worship no other god except Yahweh. He also has to make decisions concerning the conflicting interests between his new allegiance and his old vocation. These involve specific considerations regarding the worship of Yahweh outside of Israel, and his conduct with regard to the pagan practices required of his job. All these accounts fit Kraft's definition of a dynamic interaction with God.

*Definite direction of growth and maturation*

Signs of growth and maturation in Naaman's life are evident in the account of his conversion. Naaman begins the story as a "great man" (*'š gādōl*), but at the end, his skin is described as that of a "young lad" (*na'ar qātōn*). Before he meets Elisha, Naaman is described as a "valiant warrior" (*gibbôr hayil*); at the end of the story, Naaman describes himself as Elisha's "servant" (*ebed*). We observe here that the once arrogant and enraged Syrian officer who feels ridiculed by Elisha's instruction to wash in the Jordan now stands in humility before the prophet. This goes to show that Naaman's transformation is not merely external, but that in the process, his character is also being transformed.

*The need for the conversion-maturation process to take place in community*

As far as we can tell from the recounting of the story, the environment of a community for growth and maturation is almost, if not, totally nonexistent for Naaman. The only other Yahweh believer in Syria mentioned in the story is the slave girl. Even if there were other Israelite captives in Syria, they would hardly be considered suitable as a community for Naaman. The story of Naaman does not provide us a solution. Nevertheless, this is a real issue faced even in present day mission efforts.

*Growth and maturation process in keeping with the culture in which the convert is immersed*

The situation of Naaman is unique in that after his conversion, he does not remain in the community of Yahweh believers, but returns to his former community of pagan culture and practices. Unlike the Moabite Ruth who relocates to live in Israel with her mother-in-law Naomi, Naaman returns back to his home country in Syria. His situation is also different from Daniel, who grows up in a community of Yahweh believers and is subsequently transported to a land of pagan religions. Naaman is a Gentile convert who is required to return to his pagan homeland. In his unique situation, Naaman has to wrestle with the practical issues

of continuing his allegiance to Yahweh in an environment that is not favorable to his new belief.

### *3. Contextualized Christianity*

As with much modern missionary work, new converts are required to respond to God via a culture that is distinctly different from their original cultures (Kraft 1979:340). Thus new converts need not only to understand God through the lenses of the witness' culture, but also to acquire their concept for a new pattern of behavior filtered through the culture of the witness. According to Kraft, "conversion in response to such an approach may result in a genuine relationship with God on the part of the convert(s). Or they may simply convert to the culture of the witness without developing a saving relationship with God" (1979:340). As mentioned earlier, the way one understands Elisha's response to Naaman may be influenced by what one thinks is the appropriate behavior of a believer of Yahweh. In the same way, for many well-meaning missionary groups and organizations, a convert's faith in God is not sufficient for them. This faith has to be "understood by and expressed in terms of their particular subculture" (Kraft 1979:341). One such example is seen in the influence of individualism in the western concept of conversion, often understood as taking place by means of "one by one against the social tide" (McGavran 1970:299). In this form of conversion, the convert's continual growth and maturation is influenced by the culture of the witness, and the direct dynamic interactions with God is interfered by the witness. As a result, the quality of the convert's relationship with God is greatly dependent on the convert's ability to assimilate the unfamiliar culture of the witness (Kraft 1979:342). Obviously, this model will pose as an obstacle to indigenous and contextualized faith practices in the life of the convert.

On the contrary, Kraft proposes that the new convert should be allowed to interact with and respond to God in terms of the convert's own culture. In this way, the growth of new converts, and the problems that they encounter in the process, will not be entangled with the additional need to learn the ways of a foreign culture (1979:342-343). As Kraft states, "God chooses the cultural milieu in which humans are immersed as the arena of his interaction with people" (1979:114). The witnesses only complicate things when they insist on the converts understanding God through the culture of the witnesses.

Going back to the story of Naaman, we now appreciate better what Elisha has done for him. After overcoming a series of external and internal obstacles, Naaman comes to genuine faith in Yahweh, as demonstrated by his monotheistic confession and commitment to worship Yahweh alone. His sincere allegiance to

Yahweh is also seen in his considerations for continual practice of his newly found faith, despite the lack of an open environment for publicly professing his belief. When Naaman asks for forgiveness for his eventual bowing down before Rimmon, Elisha could have imposed Israelite practices on him. What we do know from the story is that Elisha did not make demands of Naaman, but sent him away in peace. Neither did the prophet run through the Decalogue with Naaman, nor make him recite the Shema. We do *not* know Elisha's rationale for not doing so, and no amount of speculation will produce any definite answers. We can only understand in retrospect, with the help of Kraft's work, that Elisha's response was the most propitious thing to do in that situation. To be sure, Naaman needs to work out for himself the appropriate way to express his faith in his own culture through his personal interactions with Yahweh. This may take a long process, and as the story goes, time is not at Elisha's disposal. Imposing immediate demands of outward conformation at that moment may actually short circuit the growth process.

## Conclusion

One can draw many missiological applications from the story of Naaman, and many have already done so in the past. In this paper, I have combined biblical studies with intercultural research in the hope of better understanding one particular issue in Naaman's story—that of Elisha's response to Naaman's request for forgiveness on the account that he will be bowing down to Rimmon. I have argued that based on the movement of the story, and the use of comparison and contrast of characters, Elisha's answer should be seen as a positive affirmation, rather than a negative or indifferent response. Although we cannot enter Elisha's mind to understand his rationale for responding positively to Naaman, using Kraft's model for conversion helps us see the positive benefits for doing so.

In mission efforts, one often encounters the situation of seeing new converts that come from a previous religion or culture that is hostile towards the Christian faith. The question of whether such converts can continue to carry out their former religious duties while remaining true to the Christian God in secret is a difficult one, and this study is not able to provide a simple direct answer. However, the above discussion should hopefully bring to our awareness the need to exercise patience and grace in allowing these converts to work out the complex issues over time. The new converts should be given time for their personal responses to the text concerning such issues, and their community of believers are the best people to implement the outworking of their faith in response to their understanding of the text. The missionaries should exercise sensitivity in their help during this process.

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