



Volume: 2, Issue: 4, 167-171  
April 2015  
www.allsubjectjournal.com  
e-ISSN: 2349-4182  
p-ISSN: 2349-5979  
Impact Factor: 3.762

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## The use of assimilation motif by redactors as a missionary device in 2 kings 5

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### Abstract

Holy writs are the storehouses and repositories of religion but behind them are the more important human agents known as redactors who dictate how religious issues are to be understood. Assimilation is a very important motif used by the redactors in the whole of Old Testament to achieve an atmosphere of beneficial association by which the Israelites demonstrate the superiority and supremacy of Yahweh (יהוה) over the gods of their neighbours. In the passage under study, Israel lost a crucial war to the Syrians and suffered heavy casualties including scores of captives and prisoners of war taken away to Syria. Yahweh could still work through it all to establish his supremacy over Syria through the captive Israelite maid. The vital lesson of it is that no situation is too grave for יהוה to work through to bring glory to his name. To the Old Testament redactors, missionary expedition is envisioned from the point of view of sustaining the distinctness of the faith in the midst of religious diversities, while asserting the supremacy and sovereignty of יהוה over all the earth. A vital instrument for achieving both objectives is the assimilation motif. By this device, Israelite elements of faith are made to filter, in a missionary fashion, into the domain of their neighbours, even their hostile ones.

**Keywords:** assimilation, motif, redactors, missionary and device

### 1. Introduction

One significant theme that runs through the Old Testament is the supremacy of Yahweh over all the earth or its more common form; "...there is no God in all the earth but in Israel" (2Kings 5:15). This theme is so important to the redactors in the Old Testament that it is woven into every major testimony, breakthrough or achievement in the Old Testament plots. While it remains an issue of debate whether this and similar expressions are indigenous to, and of Hebrew origin, it is only important to point out that corollaries to it exist in the Ancient Near Eastern religions and even contemporary faiths that are of Near Eastern origin.

In Islam the cardinal affirmations is *Layallah il'Allah* (There is no God but Allah). In the Old Testament, missionary expedition revolves around and centres upon, not necessarily the conversion of souls to the Hebrew faith (the delineation of which remained an ongoing process for over four thousand years of its history,) but rather the demonstration of the supremacy of Yahweh (יהוה) over the other gods of the land. This demonstration is done through both the outright military confrontation of Israel with her neighbours, and by ploys involving the assimilation of Israelite elements of faith into the domain of their hostile neighbours. This motif of assimilation is used by redactors in 2 Kings 5, in which, though Israel lost, a war to the Syrians and Israelites were taken captive in Syria, yet, the battle had not been entirely lost, as the Israelite captive maid, utilizing the device of assimilation, created the atmosphere in which the supremacy of Yahweh (יהוה) was demonstrated and the overall missionary objective was accomplished.

Israel's numerous wars with Syria date back to the days of Ahab in 1 Kings 20. These wars are however not unconnected with clashes over common economic interests, and the battle for supremacy in the popular trade route. Kitchen (1982) explains that:

The geographical entity Syria is bounded by the Taurus mountains in the N, the W bend of the Euphrates river and the Arabian desert-edge from here to the dead sea in the E, the Mediterranean sea on the W, and the Sinai isthrams at the extreme S. (p.1155),

This route is characterized by major economic activities in the region such that every season of war was marked by a renewed zeal to dominate the region. Besides, Syria became a prophetic test case for the survival, not only of Ahab as a king in Israel, but of the subsequent kings in Israel (Walsh and Begg 1990)

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Redaction is a form of editing in which multiple source texts are combined and altered to make a single document. These editors are referred to as redactors. In context it means how the series of writings on the contact between Israel and Syria were created or recreated to make a definitive and coherent work. The persons performing redaction add brief elements of their own to suit their opinion. Redactors of the passage under study used assimilation motif as a device to re-echo Yahweh's supremacy over Syrian god. The weaving of this narrative is not obviously noticed by readers and students of Old Testament, hence the need for this work. Redaction criticism as a tool for Old Testament research constituted our methodology.

### **Assimilation Motif in the Old Testament**

Assimilation is a very important motif used by the redactors in the whole of Old Testament to achieve an atmosphere of beneficial association by which the Israelites demonstrate the superiority and supremacy of Yahweh (יהוה) over the gods of their neighbours. This motif is usually employed in a situation in which an outright confrontation by the Israelites against their hostile neighbours is considered too risk-laden and foolhardy for Israel. For instance, Joseph was the son of Jacob whose brothers sold away to slavery in Egypt (Genesis 37ff). There in Egypt, he prospered as a caretaker in the house of a highly placed government official called Potiphar. However, this prosperity was cut short by an inordinate demand made upon Joseph by the wife of his boss.

By a strange turn of events, Joseph ended up a prisoner in Egypt. There, the gift and favour of God being manifest in him, he interpreted the dreams of fellow prisoners who happened to be highly placed officials in government. The same gift of interpretation of dreams eventually paved way for Joseph and brought him face to face with Pharaoh the king of Egypt, whereupon, he was appointed the Grand Vizier (prime minister) of Egypt. This role was to be given a messianic connotation by the redactors, in that at a time of great famine in the world, Egypt was the only nation that had grains, and Joseph used his position as the Head of Administration of the nation's treasury, to save his father's family from the ravaging onslaught of global famine.

Extra-biblical sources confirm that at a time in the history of Egypt, the indigenous Pharaohs were overthrown by the Hyksos (the foreigners) who took over the administration of the land until the time their might waned and the indigenous Pharaohs regained authority over their land. According to Hinson (1990):

Most scholars agree that Joseph's rise to power in Egypt is likely to have happened during the rule of the Hyksos kings. These kings were Semitic princes who first entered Egypt from South-west Asia about 1720BC, and brought the whole country under their rule by about 1690BC. They set up their own capital city at Avaris in the Nile Delta. From there they ruled a wide area of the ancient Near East, including Palestine and possibly reaching as far as Mesopotamia. They had the same tribal origins as the Israelites and would naturally have welcomed Joseph as a new leader among them. (p. 46).

From available records, the rule of the Hyksos lasted about a hundred years before the people of Upper Egypt broke free from their control and eventually captured Avaris in about 1550BC. The return of the indigenous pharaohs corresponds to the period in Exodus 1:8 in which "there arose up a new king over Egypt which knew not Joseph". At the return of the indigenous pharaohs, the Hyksos were expelled from

Egypt. Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian of antiquity believes that the Exodus coincided with the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt.

Moses, the personality prepared to champion the Exodus event was born in Egypt at the time when the indigenous Pharaohs had returned to power, and severe hostility against the foreigners had started. This is the setting for understanding the legislation against male offsprings to Israelite families and the stringent working conditions imposed against the Israelites by their Egyptian taskmasters (Exodus 1:8-12). Here again, the redactors went to work to arrange an assimilation device by which, in a swift turn of events, Moses, an Israelite male offspring born in Egypt at the time when a death sentence hung over every Israelite male offspring in Egypt, was rather nurtured in the very palace courts of the king. Thus Moses benefited from the vast exposure to the art and craft of Egyptian Monarchy, an exposure that was to help him in the leadership roles in the new nation thrust unto his care.

This assimilation motif is further espoused in the exilic episodes where, even though the people of Yahweh (יהוה) were humiliated and subdued, yet the missionary purpose of Yahweh (יהוה) in demonstrating his supremacy and superiority is still realized. Thus, in separate experiences, as recorded in the Book of Daniel, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego demonstrated the greatness of Yahweh - Daniel in the lion's den and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the burning fiery furnace. This assimilation motif is even further espoused in the writings of the inter-testamental period - Esther, Ruth, Judith and Tobit. In Esther, a Jewish damsel becomes the queen in the Persian Empire and uses her position to turn the table around against an enemy of the Jews who sought to exterminate the Jews. In Judith, a Jewish widow disguises as a prostitute and lures to bed the Assyrian war commander, Holofernes, whose army had held siege over Israel and was about to conquer the city. The Jewish lady sedates the army commander with wine and while he dozed away, she cut off his head. The Assyrian army fled on realizing that their commander had been slaughtered and Israel was saved.

Throughout the periods mentioned above – Joseph, Hyksos, Moses, exilic and post exilic periods – stories concerning the events surrounding each of the persons and dealings circulated orally, grew into traditions and some of them committed into writing to serve the believing communities. At different points in time many fragments witnessed editing and re-editing to accommodate latest events of the people. From these scattered pieces of fragments of writings the final redactors weaved a coordinated narrative with their own theological bias, resulting in what we have as the Old Testament today. Through human agency no one could save Joseph from the plot of the brothers, no one could save the child Moses within the oppressive legal restriction he was born and no one could stop the exile.

God through all these seemingly impossible situations proved his supremacy over the gods of those who thought they had victory over Israel. Through some Israelites becoming part of other people's community and culture, God still showed himself as the superior one always. This is how the final editors of the scripture want it to be seen.

### **Assimilation Motif in 2 Kings 5**

Apart from being a Hebrew by birth, there are two ways to become a worshipping Jew. One is by being a proselyte. According to Stewart (1982):

OT and Talmud bring proselytes ever more fully within covenant Judaism. The Hebrew term גֵּר first meant a resident alien, not necessarily with religious affiliation – indeed the same word is used for dispensed Jews on foreign soil (Gen. 15:13, Ex. 23:9). Within the OT canon, or possibly later, it came to designate full proselytes. The term תּוֹשֵׁב has the same civil restriction as the earlier usage of גֵּר, but with a lesser implication of permanence. The Lxx (Septuagint) renders the common word גֵּר about a dozen times as a neighbour

What is very well known is that in the Old Testament, those outside the covenant of Yahweh (יהוה) are commonly described by the term גוֹיִם commonly translated as Gentiles or nations. They are sometimes admitted into the faith by a procedure which is left rather obscure in the Old Testament. We know however that when such people are admitted, they are accorded the full rights of the covenant faith. We know, for instance, that Uriah the Hittite was a proselyte to the Jewish faith (2 Samuel 11 - 12). Baker (1982) describes Naaman as “a Yahwist” (p. 807) implying that he became a proselyte to the (יהוה) covenant faith. Probably because of the socio-political crisis of the ancient Near East, and the exclusivist regulations of the prophetic party, culminating in the endogamous sanitization of the Ezra post-exilic reforms, proselytism was played down in the Old Testament. Stewart again affirms that:

Political and geographical circumstances doubtless kept the number of proselytes relatively small in OT times. Such persons would normally be aliens resident in Palestine, voluntarily accepting circumcision, and with it the whole burden of the law. Yet, Is. 19:18 – 25, and Zp. 2:11 breathe a vision singularly unfettered by racial tradition and prejudice. If certain strains of later Judaism were unwilling to receive proselytes, they possessed no valid OT excuse. (p. 989).

As with the issues of inclusivism and exclusivism which relate directly to endogamy and exogamy, the Old Testament position on proselytism remained ambivalent and one of prevarication. The reason is no doubt connected with issues that border on state security and nationhood ideals.

The second and in fact rather more pronounced missionary perspective in the Old Testament is one which has no emphasis on drawing converts to the Yahwehstic faith, but one which is only concerned with advertising the supremacy of Yahweh, couched in such expressions as - There is no God in the whole earth except in Israel (הָאֱלֹהִים בְּכָל הָאָרֶץ כִּי אֵימֵי יְהוָה אֵלֵינוּ). For the greater proportion of the Old Testament, missionary expedition simply means the announcement and demonstration of the supremacy of יהוה over all the earth. This is the case in the passage under study.

The Syrians had defeated the Israelites in a war and had taken captives or war prisoners from the land of Israel (מִצְרַיִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל). One of the captives was a little girl (קַטְנָה). And, irrespective of the huge losses and devastation that Israel had suffered at the war, a little Israelite girl had gone along with the Syrians to publicize the greatness of Yahweh. It is noticed from verse 1 of the text that it was יהוה that had given victory to the Syrians by the hand of Naaman the war lord. And the little girl said unto her mistress “Would that my Lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would recover him of his leprosy” (2Kings 5:3).

Outside the assimilation motif of the redactors, this statement of the Israelite captive is rather ironical because

prior to this time spiritual healing of leprosy had not at all been known in Israel. In fact much later in the New Testament, Jesus had remarked: “And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian”. (Luke 4:27). So the statement of the little girl captive was rather strange and had no precedence at all.

Anyway, upon that suggestion, Naaman acted and dispatched official letters to Israel applying for a place in the benevolence of Yahweh. As the prophet receives the request, an opportunity is created for the redactors to weave in the *raison-d’etre* of the text: Let him come to me that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel (2Kings 5:8b). (לְמַדָּה קָרַעְתָּ בְּגָדֶיךָ: בְּבֹאֵנָא אֵלַי וְיָדַע כִּי יֵשׁ נָבִיא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:

Upon Naaman’s arrival, an interplay of sentiments took the centre stage. The prophet did not as much as expected come out to receive such an important foreign personality with a retinue of official entourage. The resentment between the two nations would obviously be held accountable for this state of affairs. This situation nearly aborted the miracle in that it led to the warrior’s misinterpretation of the prophet’s instruction as a statement of traditional prejudice. Even the statement, “Go and wash in Jordan, seven times” might have appeared to have some prejudicial connotation, suggesting that the prophet could not cope with the body odour of an improperly washed Syrian. What follows could be easily understood:

But Naaman was angry, and went away and said, behold, I thought he will surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God and strike his hand over the place and recover the leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them and be clean? So he turned and went away in rage. (2 Kings 5:11 – 12).

But the prophet, as was soon to be demonstrated, was not caught up in any of the traditional prejudices. He was carrying out the command of יהוה. No wonder as the warrior obeyed, he received an instant miraculous cleansing. Then the redactor weaves in the sole objective of the text in confession of the war lord: And he said, Behold now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel. (וַיֹּמַר: (כִּי אֵין אֱלֹהִים בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ כִּי אֵימֵי-יְהוָה אֵלֵינוּ: הִגִּידָהּ יְדַעְתִּי

Here the objective of the redactors in the story is clearly stated, which is to establish the jurisdiction, supremacy and sovereignty of יהוה over the whole earth. This is the missionary enterprise for which the assimilation motif became very vital in the text. In simple terms Naaman became a worshiping Jew because according to the redactors he has witnessed by himself the overwhelming superiority of Yahweh over his gods and other gods of the whole earth.

### **Naaman and the Maid in the Context of the Plot of the Redactors.**

Namman was a military commander of the Syrian army during the reign of Benhadad of Syria. The name, Naaman, is in fact Hebrew, נְעֻמָּן meaning pleasant. Baker (1982) affirms that the name is a common North Syrian name during the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, as shown by the archeological evidence from Ugarit (modern Ras-Shamra). This in fact suggests that at a certain point in history, the Hebrews and the Syrians shared a common language.

Benhadad, (Hebrew name, meaning Son of Hadad) is the Hebrew form of the common Aramaic name, Bar-Hadad or Bir-Hadad. Two or three kings of the Aramean kingdom of Damascus are known by that name.

- Benhadad I son of Tabrimmon, son of Hezion was king in Aram in 1 Kings 15:18. In his 15<sup>th</sup> year, corresponding to 35 years of Israelite Monarchy, Asa, king of Judah, vanquished Zerah the Ethiopian king and held a great thanksgiving feast in Jerusalem.
- Behadad, the well-known opponent of Ahab ruled from 874 to 853BC. He died at the hand of Hazael in the days of Joram and Elisha. Hazael succeeded Benhadad about 843BC.
- Benhadad III son of Hazael ruled from 796 to 770BC. He continued his father's oppression of Israel into the reign of Jehoash who, in fulfillment of Elisha's prophecy was able to successfully repel Benhadad.

From the foregoing description, Naaman was the military commander of the Syrian army during the reign of King Benhadad I. He retained his high position in spite of his condition of leprosy. This situation contrasts with the situation in Israel which required that leprous people, no matter how highly placed, be thrust out of the city, outside the city gate. Even, as in 2 Chronicles 26:20f when the king Uzziah became leprous, he was suddenly thrust out of the presence of God.

The significance of the emphasis that Naaman, though leprous, still rose to become the military commander of the Syrian army is to highlight the superiority of the Israelites' political and liturgical traditions over and above those of their neighbouring nations. In Israel, leprosy made a person unclean before יהוה and thus reduced even the highest placed person in the country to the basest level. In contrast, however, in Syria, a leprous person is the one who is the commander of the army.

The critical climax and turning point in this narrative lies in the introduction of the role of the "little maid" (נַעֲרָה) in the plot. According to the plot, this little maid was taken as a war prisoner specifically by Naaman, and she served (וַתְּהִי) before Naaman's wife.

2Kings15:2 says: "And the Syrians went out in troops and took captive out of the land of Israel a little maid; and she served before Naaman's wife". (נַעֲרָה קָטָנָה וַתְּהִי לְפָנֵי אִשְׁתּוֹ נַעֲמָן). The details of the particular war in which Naaman commanded the Syrian army against Israel and took captives of the Israelites, are not recorded for us. However, it must be any of the accounts of wars between Israel and Syria, particularly the three accounts recorded in 1 Kings 20 – 22. It was in 1 Kings 22 that Israel suffered such great defeat in war at the hands of the Syrians, which must have led to the taking of a large proportion of war prisoners. It was in that war over Ramoth Gilead, in which the kings of Judah and Israel formed an alliance in battle, that Ahab, the king of Israel lost his life. According to Baker (1982), "Jewish legend, recorded in Josephus (Ant. 8. 414) but unsubstantiated, identifies Naaman as the one who killed Ahab by drawing 'his bow at a venture' (1King 22:34)". (p. 807).

Two Hebrew words could have been rendered 'maid' in this context. The first and more common word is בְּתוּלָה. According to Vine (19996):

Cognates of this word appear in Ugarit and Akkadian. Its 50 Biblical occurrences are distributed throughout every period of Old Testament literature. This word can mean "virgin", as is clear in Deut. 22:17, where, if a man has charged that "I found not thy daughter a maid", the father is to say, "And yet these are the tokens of my daughter's virginity (בְּתוּלִים) (p. 145).

The second word which is the one used in 2Kings 5, is נַעֲרָה. This word is more appropriately translated "young girl". It would appear that the critical point of difference between the two words lies in the condition of virginity. This is attested to in Genesis 24:16, where both words appear, and the distinct meanings become more apparent:

And the damsel (נַעֲרָה) was fair to look upon, a virgin (בְּתוּלָה), neither had any man known her: and she went down to the well, and filled her pitcher, and came up. (Gen. 24:16).

The peculiar significance of the word בְּתוּלָה is that it also has a masculine plural form (בְּתוּלִים) which is sometimes seen in the Old Testament text. For instance, in Isaiah 23:4 the masculine and feminine forms (both in the plural) are used in the same text:

Be thou ashamed, O Zidon: for the sea hath spoken, even the strength of the sea, saying, I travail not, nor bring forth children, neither do I nourish up young men, (בְּתוּלִים) nor bring up virgins (בְּתוּלוֹת).

This further attests to the fact of virginity as the central underlying meaning for the word בְּתוּלָה

Be that as it may, the maid taken captive from Israel by Naaman, and who waited on Naaman's wife was a נַעֲרָה not a בְּתוּלָה. We must however not lose sight of the sentimental connotations of the words. בְּתוּלָה is a more sacred personage in the socio-liturgical setting of Israel, and redactors would be more uncomfortable consigning a בְּתוּלָה to the sacrilegious courts of a leprous Gentile army commander. A נַעֲרָה would be more tolerable for that kind of role. Issues in Jewish linguistic sentiments cannot be easily overlooked in the appraisal of redaction works.

This narrative about Naaman and the maid can only be appreciated better with the understanding that the redactors had their own agenda which at first instance may not seem to fit into the historical workings of Israelite system but accords well with the theological structure of God's covenantal relationship with Israel. Holy writs are the storehouses and repositories of religion but behind them are the more important redactors who dictate how religious issues are to be understood. They are the first set of interpreters of every written religion. The way modern interpreters of religion guide and misguide us today show a glimpse of what transpire during the redaction processes.

## Conclusion

Missionary expedition does not mean in the main frame of the Old Testament what it means for us today. While today we envision missionary expedition from the point of view of winning souls into the faith, to the Old Testament redactors, missionary expedition is envisioned from the point of view of sustaining the distinctness of the faith in the midst of religious diversities, whilst asserting the supremacy and sovereignty of יהוה over all the earth. A vital instrument for achieving both objectives is the assimilation motif. By this, Israelite elements are made to filter into the domains of even their hostile neighbours just to prove the supremacy of יהוה. With this objective in mind, it is no longer a problem that Israelites lost a crucial war to the Syrians and suffered heavy casualties including scores of captives and prisoners of war taken away to Syria. יהוה could still work through it all to establish his supremacy over all the earth. For the redactors the vital lesson of it is that God of Israel is superior to other gods and no situation is too grave for יהוה to work through to bring glory to his name.

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