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Conversion: Turning or Returning? The Biblical Background of a Controversial Concept

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Proselytising, that is trying to increase the number of the followers of a religion, is a common practice among the followers of many religions. This practice of necessity needs some sort of a justification. And this will be found either in the injunction of the religion's founder or in some text that is considered canonical or normative by the religious community, interpreted mostly in a fundamentalistic fashion. It is the aim of this paper to inquire into the biblical background, both in the Old and the New Testaments, of the so-called practice of 'conversion' among Christians in order to dispel some misconceptions or misunderstandings of the topic under discussion.

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The Biblical Background of a Controversial Concept

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1. Introduction

Proselytising, that is trying to increase the number of the followers of a religion, is a common practice among the followers of many religions. This practice of necessity needs some sort of a justification. And this will be found either in the injunction of the religion's founder or in some text that is considered canonical or normative by the religious community, interpreted mostly in a fundamentalistic fashion. It is the aim of this paper to inquire into the biblical background, both in the Old and the New Testaments, of the so-called practice of 'conversion' among Christians in order to dispel some misconceptions or misunderstandings of the topic under discussion.

2. Concept of 'Conversion' in Ancient Israel

The idea of conversion is found among the prophets mainly of the pre-exilic period like Hoshea, First Isaiah and Jeremiah, as well as to a lesser extent in those of the post-exilic prophets like Joel. There is no teaching on 'conversion' as such among any of them. In fact the abstract words *shûbâ* or *t^eshûbâ* are quite rare in the Old Testament. Surprisingly the abstract word *š^mshûbâ* which is its opposite and is

translated as 'backsliding', 'faithlessness' or 'apostasy' is more common (cf. Jer 2:19; 3:22; 5:6; 8:5; 14:7; Hos 11:7; 14:4/5). But the root *shûb* occurs in various verbal forms in the OT with relative frequency (c.1050x), with a concentration in Jeremiah (111 x).¹ As the same lexicon tells us "*shûb* is basically a vb. of motion, with the meanings return, turn back, go back, come back, often in reference to physical motion of returning to a point of departure".² And so the verb has been given the theological meaning both of turning away from evil and a turning to or returning to God. W. L. Holladay in particular treats 154 passages, both verb and noun, where the theological use of the term is in question, in this sense and terms it the "covenantal usage".³ In other words, when the covenantal relationship with God is broken by sin, 'conversion' is a returning, in the sense of a reconciliation with the covenantal partner.

2.1. Conversion in Amos

This is the first time that we meet with the verb *shûb* in the sense of a returning to God in the Old Testament. In the words of Amos, Yahweh has been sending Israel quite tough warnings that she should return to him. Thus Yahweh

had sent Israel famine, withheld the necessary showers, blasted her crops with mildew and locust, sent pestilence and the sword, visited her with earthquake, but Israel refused to heed his voice. Every time the refrain is the same, “Yet you did not return to me, *wē lō’ sh ābtem ‘āday*” (Am 4:6.8.9.10.11). What is implied in this is that God had been urging Israel to return to him but each time Israel refused and so the hour for pardoning has passed. God will no longer make any more offers. Therefore, Amos threatens in the name of Yahweh: ‘Israel, be ready for the consequences!’ (Am 4:12).

2.2 *Conversion in First Isaiah*

The situation is very similar to that in his senior contemporary Amos. The only difference is that Isaiah always offers a ray of hope to Israel in spite of its rebellious and faithless attitude (Isa 1:2-3). But even in Isaiah conversion seems to be something that Israel as a whole has rejected. Israel simply does not want to return to Yahweh! This is found in the text quoted by Jesus in Mark’s Gospel to preserve the Messianic secret (cf. Mk 4:11). Isaiah is given a most strange commission to preach to the Israelites who as Yahweh assures Isaiah will not listen to him, because if they were to do, they would be converted. “Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn (*wēshāb*) and be healed!” (Isa 6:10). This is even more clearly seen from the following text. Here the rejection is explicitly stated. “For thus said the Lord

God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning (*shûbâ*) and rest (*naḥat*) you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. But you refused. . . .” (Isa 30:15). Instead of relying on Yahweh the kingdom of Judah under her king Hezekiah preferred to rely on the dead crocodile that Egypt was (Isa 30:7) to whom messengers with heavy laden beasts carrying tribute are being sent across the Negeb (Isa 30:1-5).

And so Isaiah sees hope only for a few Israelites. His programmatic *she’ar y āshûb*, ‘A Remnant Will Return’, which was the name given to his son as a sign of future hope in the Syro-Ephraimitic crisis (Isa 7:3), is now given a new interpretation. But the hope is in the future: “On that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on the one who struck them, but will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth” (Isa 10:20). There is once again, as is common among the prophets, a play on words. Those coming back to the land of Israel from the exile will also come back, that is, will be converted to Yahweh! “A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God!” (Isa 10:21).

2.3 *Conversion in Hoshea*

Hoshea treats quite often the theme of conversion and his influence will be seen on the younger Jeremiah. The exhortation to return to Yahweh, who is portrayed by the prophet as Israel’s spouse, is to be found in the prophet: “But as for you, return to your God!” (Hos 12:6a). But Hoshea is not interested in mere formalism. True conver-

sion implies a change of life-style, that is, “a holding fast to love and justice” (Hos 5:6b). Hoshea is painfully aware that the disloyal and faithless attitude of Israel does not allow her to return to Yahweh. This is stated in no uncertain terms by him: “Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God” (Hos 5:4). For this the punishment is clear, and once again with a play on words we are told that, since Israel refuses *to return* to Yahweh she will have *to return* to the land of Egypt, that is to say, to bondage under the Assyrian! (Hos 11:5).

According to prophet Hoshea, Yahweh Israel’s loyal Spouse will not abandon his bride for ever. And so conversion finally becomes a gift reserved for the eschatological times. “Afterward the Israelites shall return and seek the LORD their God . . . in the latter days” (Hos 3:5) when Yahweh himself will heal their *m^eshûbā*, that is, backsliding or disloyalty (Hos 14:5). As we know, the term *’ahărît hayyāmîm*, “the latter days” is a technical term in the Old Testament for the post-exilic eschatological times.⁴ It is then that the invitation to return will once again be made to Israel (Hos 14:2), but this time Israel will respond to it (Hos 2:9), because God himself will help her to do it. Israel will not need to take any sacrificial victims along with her when she returns to Yahweh. She will have to take only words of repentance and gratitude and praise! “Take words with you and return to the LORD and say to him, ‘Take away all guilt; accept that which is good, and we will offer the fruit of our lips’” (Hos 14:2).⁵ The same idea is found in the post-exilic sermon on

covenant in the Book of Deuteronomy, where ‘Moses’ is foretelling Israel’s conversion at the end of days: “In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, (*b^e’ahărît hayyāmîm*), you will return (*w^eshabtā*) to the LORD your God and heed him” (Dt 4:30).

2.4 Conversion in Jeremiah

It is the merit of Hans Walter Wolff to have conclusively shown that the theme of conversion which appears exclusively in the invectives and threats of the prophets of the pre-exilic period, now for the first time from Jeremiah onwards begins to appear in their exhortations as well.⁶ From the statistics alone it is obvious that Jeremiah more than any other prophet treats at some length and in various passages throughout the book this topic of conversion. He is clearly dependent on Hoshea with whom he has some phrases and terms in common as we shall notice as we proceed. Jeremiah not only exhorts Israel as a nation to return to Yahweh, as the prophets before him had done, but he also urges every Israelite to do so. In fact this seems to be programmatic with him. He also gives the verb “to return” both meanings, that of “turning away *from* evil” and of “turning *to* God”.⁷ Thus more than once he exhorts: “Turn now, every one of you, from your evil way and wicked doings” (Jer 25:5; cf. also 26:3; 36:3; 36:7).

The traditional prophetic appeal to Israel is found elsewhere in the book, where Jeremiah says: “If you wish to come back, Israel – it is Yahweh who speaks – it is to me you must return!” (Jer 4:1 JB).⁸ From the conditional for-

mulation of the text it seems that Jeremiah like his predecessors has doubts about Israel's sincerity. In fact he states this very forcefully in another place. In his opinion it would be as difficult for Israel to return to Yahweh as it would be for an Ethiopian to change his skin colour or for a leopard to change his spots (cf. Jer 13:23). Jeremiah compares Israel to a faithless wife whom her husband has divorced and who has remarried. In such a case according to Israelite law, this woman is forbidden to go back to her first husband again (cf. Dt 24:4). That is the irony in the words addressed to Israel by Yahweh: "And would you return to me?" (Jer 3:1).

The show of repentance that Israel put up is according to Jeremiah only a returning to Yahweh in pretense. It was not something done with the whole heart (cf. Jer 3:10). Possibly there is an allusion here to the reform of king Josiah (2 Kgs 22-23) or to the covenant which king Zedekiah had made with the people of Jerusalem whereby they had agreed to set their Hebrew slaves free, and on which they soon went back and forced the liberated individuals into slavery once again (cf. Jer 34). But in spite of everything Jeremiah repeats his exhortation to the people of Judah to come back to their God. In contrast to her elder sister Israel, that is the Northern Kingdom whom Jeremiah calls *m^eshûbâ*, the backsliding apostate, he reserves the title *bōgēdāh*, "false" for Judah (Jer 3:6-11). And so he makes his appeal to Israel, as the people of God, to come back to their God. There is a play on words in the Hebrew original, *shûbâ meshûbâ yisrā'el*, which could be rendered as "Come back, you

backsliding, Israel!" (Jer 3:12. See also verses 14 and 22).

As was to be expected, Israel did not respond to the urgings of the prophet and so she had to go into exile in Babylon. But God did not abandon his people. He promised them the gift of repentance in the eschatological times. Once again as in Hoshea it is God who takes the initiative in the conversion of Israel when he says: "I will heal your *m^eshûbôt*, that is your faithlessness! (Jer 3:22; cf., Hos 14:5)⁹. By that time Israel will come to the realisation that by herself she is incapable of conversion. It is Yahweh who will have to effect her conversion. This is explicitly stated in the Book of the Consolation of Jeremiah: "Bring me back, let me come back, for you are the LORD my God. For after I had turned away I repented..." (Jer 31:18-19).¹⁰ The unmerited forgiveness of sins will be explicitly stated as one of the gifts of the new covenant (cf. Jer 31:34). There is a late psalm which deals with the same theme. Of course a double meaning could be given to the clause *hashîbēnî* both referring to conversion or causing to return to Yahweh as well as restoration in the sense of bringing Israel back from exile (Ps 80:3.7.19; see also v.14 turn). The Septuagint at any rate understands this as God bringing about the conversion of Israel. Here there is clearly no hint at a restoration after the exile. This same idea is also to be found in the Book of Lamentations: "Make us come back to you, Yahweh, and we will come back" (Lam 5:21 JB). Earlier in this book the idea of conversion is explicit (cf. Lam 3:40-42).

2.5 *Conversion in Ezekiel*

As is well-known Ezekiel stresses more than even Jeremiah the conversion of the individual Israelite rather than that of the nation, though this latter idea is not absent in him (Ezek 18:30-32). He considers the prophet's task to be that of a sentry who is supposed to warn the citizens of impending danger (cf. Ezek 3:16-17; 33:1-9). And so he contrasts the situation of the righteous person with that of the sinner. However, it becomes clear that conversion is not a one time decision but an ever-recurring phenomenon in the life of a believer. And so if righteous persons abandon their righteousness they are once again in need of conversion (cf. Ezek 18:21-32). Thus, there will be a recurring abandonment of Yahweh followed by a return to him and vice versa. But once again in Ezekiel too conversion in the final analysis is God's gift who effects a heart transplant in the believer. And so the exhortation to procure and acquire a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek 18:31) is an eschatological enactment of Yahweh himself who gives the Israelites a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek 11:18-21). In fact in the vision of the dry bones it is His own spirit that God will put into our hearts (Ezek 37:14).

2.6 *Conversion in Deutero Isaiah*

Similarly too in Deutero Isaiah, as Hans Walter Wolff has pointed out, the call to conversion is placed in the context of a promise and not that of a threat or an invective, and so it is an invitation of love.¹¹ It is not a question of a future possibility of forgiveness once Israel returns to Yahweh. Rather, Yahweh has already forgiven and redeemed his people: "I have swept away

your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you!" And so here conversion is an expression of a coming back in gratitude!

3. **Absence of a Mission Command in the Old Testament**

After the discovery of the sea routes to Asia by the Portuguese Vasco da Gama and to the Americas by the Spaniards under the leadership of Christopher Columbus, the Church in Europe began to send out missionaries to those distant lands to bring the newly discovered peoples into her fold. And the text on which she based her missionary activity was taken from the conclusion to the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus says: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). But when we go through the pages of the Old Testament we shall not find any such command anywhere except perhaps the lone text in the prophetic midrash of the Book of Jonah,¹² where Yahweh sends the prophet Jonah to preach repentance to the Ninivites but even here there is no question of "converting" anyone in the sense of a change of religion (Jon 1:2)

In a previous article I have shown how Israel was open to other religions whenever its economic and political situation was favourable or prosperous, but that it tended to become chauvinistic not to say self-centred whenever it suffered from foreign subjugation as it happened in the times of the Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian domination.¹³ All the same Israel did not lack prophetic

voices like Deutero Isaiah and the authors of the Books of Ruth and Jonah who spoke of the universalism of salvation and castigated Israel for her wrong out-look and mentality, and for making of Yahweh a partisan God.

3.1 *Prophetic Vision for the Nations*

Jeremiah did not conceive of Yahweh as a mere national God of Israel. He is also the Lord of history who is in charge of all the nations of the earth. And so he will bring Nabuchadnezzar, whom he calls his servant (Jer 25:9) to destroy Jerusalem. He asks all the nations to submit to the Neo-Babylonians (Jer 25:14-29). Jeremiah thinks of Yahweh as the one who “fills heaven and earth”, and from whom no one can hide (Jer 23:23-24). He is the Maker of heaven and earth (Jer 10:12). Yahweh is the true God, the living God, the everlasting King (Jer 10:10). All the same, Israel remains the special tribe of his heritage (Jer 10:16). But Jeremiah sees a plan of salvation that also includes the other nations. And so Yahweh heals not only Israel, as we have seen, but all nations. Thus, in the eschatological times there will be hope and salvation for all. In his own words: “At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will” (Jer 3:17). But there is no going out or being sent to the nations. Rather, it is they themselves who will come to Jerusalem.

Similarly too a contemporary of Jeremiah, the prophet *Zephaniah*, shows that Yahweh is interested not only in the

Israelites but even in the peoples most distant from Israel in the far away mountainous regions of Cush or Ethiopia. And once again it is Yahweh himself who will purify the lips of those peoples so that they can invoke him. And according to Jeremiah so here too the inhabitants of the lands beyond the Blue Nile will come bringing their offerings to Yahweh (Zeph 3:9-10).

And even in a cultic prophet like the *First Zechariah* who along with the prophet Haggai is deeply concerned about the rebuilding of the Temple, there is interest in other nations. And again no missionary will be sent to convert the nations. It is they themselves who will come flocking to Jerusalem to entreat his favour. We quote only a part of the last paragraph of the First Zechariah: “Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew grasping his garment and saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’” (Zech 8:23). The initiative to go to Jerusalem (cf. the previous verse), is coming from the other nations and not from Israel. But it must not be forgotten that it is an oracle of salvation that the prophet is making as is clear from the formula “in those days” which, as we have seen, is a reference to the eschatological times.

And finally we come to the classical text which shows that there is no concept of mission in the Old Testament. It is to be found in the *Book of Isaiah* (Isa 2:1-5), but there is not the slightest doubt that it is not from the First Isaiah. It is probably a post-exilic interpolation which with slight varia-

tions is also found in the Book of Micah (Mic 4:1-5). The stereo-typed phrase “in days to come” (*b^e ‘aḥrîṭ hayyāmîm*) which refers to the post-exilic eschatological times, speaks for its lateness. In symbolic language the late post-exilic writer tells us that Mount Zion, where Yahweh dwells, will be lifted higher than any other mountain, and that all nations and peoples shall stream to it to learn from the newly promulgated Law. As a result of this, wars will cease from the earth and all the peoples shall work in collaboration for the common welfare of all humanity, a goal that still remains unfulfilled in our own days. To anticipate the New Testament, it is Luke, the author of the third Gospel and of Acts, who will base his two volume work on this text. He will show how in the Gospel Jesus is going up to Jerusalem (Lk 9:51-57; 10:38; 13:22), where he will be crucified, but after his Resurrection the Spirit will descend on his disciples in Jerusalem. And it is from here that the disciples will go out to preach the Good News beginning from Jerusalem and through the length and breadth of Judaea and on to Samaria and the ends of the world (Act 1:8).

4. Conversion in the Post-biblical Period and in Judaism

How important the concept of ‘conversion’ in the post-biblical times was can be understood from the fact that Greek speaking Jews coined a new term *proselytos*, which means a ‘proselyte’, or “one who has come over”, that is a convert from another religion to Judaism. It appears for the first time in the Septuagint, that is the Greek translation

of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁴ Thus we read in the deuterocanonical Book of Tobias about Tobit, the father of Tobias, that he had the custom of giving a third tenth in the form of money to the orphans, the widows and the “converts who had attached themselves to Israel” (Tob 1:8, Synaitic Codex). In general Philo the Jew and Flavius Josephus avoid the word *prosēlytos* which is not found in classical Greek, since their writings were addressed mainly though not exclusively to non-Jews whom they wanted to win over to their faith. Philo mostly uses the classical *epēlys* or *epēlytês*, whereas Josephus uses the verb *proserchesthai*, “to come over” or a circumlocution like “to accept the customs of the Jews”¹⁵

4.1. Old Testament Background of Proselyte

The Old Testament law codes in particular mention the word *gēr* which is variously translated as ‘alien’, ‘stranger’ or more accurately, ‘resident alien’, that is a foreigner who lives under the protection of the Israelite law. This was originally a sociological term but gradually, especially in post-biblical times, it got a religious colouring and came to be used for what we call a ‘convert’. But already the Priestly Code seems to be giving this sense to *gēr*, and reserves a sociological connotation to the new term *tôshāb* that it introduces (Lev 25:47). Thus, the *gēr* who is given equal status before the law (Num 15:15) may, however partake of the Passover provided he is circumcised (Ex 12:48).

4.2. Proselytes in Judaism

Due to constraints of space we need to summarize the available data and have recourse to generalisations. But right from the outset it must be noted that some of the post-exilic biblical books in glaring contrast to the inward-looking and intolerant attitude of Ezekiel (cf. 44:9) already show that Israel was open to receive non-Israelites into its fold. These are known as “those who had joined themselves to Israel” (cf. Isa 56:3-7 and Est 9:27). In fact the author of the Book of Esther has coined a new term for such converts, *mi tyahăḏīm*, that is, those “who professed themselves as Jews” (Est 8:17).¹⁶ The most important difference that we have to make when speaking of Judaism is that between the so-called Palestinian Jews and the Jews of the Diaspora. In particular due to the ruthless suppression of all things Jewish by Antiochus IV Epiphanes during the time of the Maccabees, there was a bitter hatred of the Gentiles among the pious Jews in particular. But the Jews who dwelt outside their Palestinian homeland were of necessity more open to people of the host country, and were keen to win them over to their faith as can be seen from the efforts of Philo.

At this juncture mention must be made of the forced conversions in the time of the Hasmoneans. Thus, John Hyrcanus forced the Idumeans, descendants of Old Testament Edomites, who had migrated to the Negeb under pressure from Arabs and Nabataeans, to become Jews (*Ant* 13:9:1). The family of the Herodians are the descendants of these first converts. John’s son Aristobulus forcefully converted

Galileans who belonged to various races (*Ant* 13:11:3). Finally Alexander Jannaeus massacred the Moabites of Pella who refused to convert (*Ant* 13:15:4). However, it must be noted that all these instances were more politically than religiously motivated. The Hasmonaeans were utterly corrupt and did not care for religion at all but only for their personal interests. Further, it has to be stressed that the Pharisees never approved of forced conversions, not even of slaves.¹⁷

4.3 Attraction of Judaism

It is also to be kept in mind that the religion of the Jews with its monotheism and elevated morality was a great attraction to many Hellenistic Greeks, especially after the criticism which Greek philosophers had voiced against any form of polytheism, superstition and immorality. Thus, proselytes from these countries, especially in Egyptian Alexandria, were not uncommon. In fact there would have been many more converts were it not for the painful requirement of circumcision especially among the more rigid Jews like Rabbi Shammai. All the same, the more liberal rabbis like Rabbi Hillel did not demand circumcision as a *sine qua non* condition for converting. Whatever it be, Pharisaic zeal for acquiring proselytes is attested to by Jesus himself (cf. Mt 23:15). Consequently the uncircumcised proselyte was called *gēr ‘areḷ* or *gēr tōshāb*, and the circumcised convert was called *gēr bēn bēṛîṭ*.¹⁸ And so the full conversion of a Gentile to Judaism involved three steps, (1) the so-called proselyte baptism (2) circumcision and (3) a sacri-

fice to be offered by the candidate in the Temple. The last step was of necessity dropped after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans. The reason why there were more women converts to Judaism than men was because circumcision was not a requirement for women. And so a half-way house was constituted, whereby some would join the Jewish ranks without undergoing circumcision. According to M. H. Pope these were “in an intermediate state between pagans and Jews.”¹⁹ They were called *yir'ê shāmayîm* or “those who feared God”.

4.4 Cessation of Proselytising in Judaism

Kuhn calls the conversions of king Izates of Adiabene, of the queen mother Helena and of his brother Monabazus, which are narrated by Josephus (*Ant* 20:2) “the greatest achievement of Jewish missions.”²⁰ Besides these, Josephus also mentions two other important personages from Rome, both ladies, first of all Poppea, the wife of the emperor Nero (*Ant* 20:8:8), and the second, the lady Fulvia, “a woman of great dignity” (*Ant* 18:3:5). In fact, the zeal of Jewish proselytism was so great in Rome that emperor Tiberius banished all the Jews from Rome, from among whom four thousand were enlisted into the ranks of soldiers and sent to Sardinia as Josephus informs us (*Ant* 18:35). Finally conversion to Judaism was forbidden under Domitian, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Septimius Severus²¹ During the Roman persecutions of the Jews a good number of converts became turncoats as a result of which Jewish missionary ardor weakened considerably,²²

and this turned out to be to the advantage of Christianity which under Paul had dispensed with circumcision altogether.

5. Conversion in the New Testament

When we pass from the Old Testament prophets in particular to John the Baptist and Jesus we notice that there is, as is to be expected, a continuity with regard to the theme of ‘conversion’, but there is also a break. In fact there is a break even between the thinking of John the Baptist and that of Jesus, as we shall see.

5.1 Antecedents in the Septuagint

It must be kept in mind that the Septuagint never translates the Hebrew word *shûb* (turn or return) with *metanoëô* but almost always with *apostrephô* (turn away from) or *epistrephô* (turn towards or return). The Hebrew verb *niḥam* on the other hand is almost exclusively rendered by the Greek *metanoëô*. The verb *niḥam* basically means ‘to regret’ and hence ‘to pity’ or ‘to alter one’s purpose out of pity’. All the same it is to be remembered that in the Hebrew Bible quite often the verbs *shûb* and *niḥam* are seen in parallel (cf. Ex 32:12; Jer 4:28). But when we come to the writings of the New Testament there seems to be a jump. The normal translation of the Hebrew *shûb* in the New Testament is not *epistrephô* or *apostrephô* but *metanoëô*!

5.2 Antecedents in the Inter-Testamental Literature

And the explanation for this is to be found in the inter-testamentary lit-

erature including the deuterio-canonical Greek books. As we read in Kittel: "The linguistic material leads to the conclusion that for the Jewish Hellenistic world of the 2nd cent. A.D. *metanoëō* was a common and even preferred equivalent of *epistrephomai* = *shûb*, 'to turn', 'to convert.'" ²³.

5.3 Conversion in John the Baptist

John's preaching of *metanoia* or conversion is to be seen against the background of the impending judgement of the eschatological New Age which he is proclaiming. His message of conversion is addressed to all human beings, including Pharisees and Sadducees, and not merely to the sinners. No one can escape from the coming wrath (Mt 3:7). And hence he is proclaiming a baptism of repentance (*metanoia*) for the remission of sins (Mk 1:4). For John conversion has to be genuine and not mere lip service.. "Bear fruit worthy of repentance!", he urges his listeners (Mt 3:8): The evangelist Luke also stresses this point both in the Gospel and in the Acts (Lk 3:8; Act 26:20). No one can escape the judgement! "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Mt 3:19).

5.4 Conversion in the Proclamation of Jesus

Jesus begins his public ministry to Israel by proclaiming the message of the Old Testament prophets but in real fact he is transcending both the ancient prophets and John the Baptist himself

as we shall see: "Repent and believe in the Good News!" (Mk 1:15). But the context of the preaching of Jesus is the kingship of God which he is announcing in his person. There is no question here of legalism or a theory of retribution. The kingship of God is to be received like a child, for it is God's gift which is to be received in faith! In the words of Jesus as given in the Gospel of Matthew: "Truly I say to you, unless you change (*ean me straphete*) and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven " (Mt 18:3). In fact this is the only text in the New Testament which uses *strepheo* instead of *metanoëo* ²⁴ Another important difference between John and Jesus is that the baptism of Jesus involves the imparting of the Spirit and fire (Lk 3:16), which will effect a transformation of the human being as foretold by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 36:26-27). According to Ezekiel it is the Spirit that will enable human beings to keep God's statutes and ordinances. For, human beings of themselves are unable to keep God's laws.. And so we realise that conversion in the proclamation of Jesus is not a task left to the human beings but is a pure gift of God. This idea is stressed repeatedly in the deuterio-canonical Book of Wisdom. According to its author God not only grants an opportunity to humans to be converted but conversion itself is God's gift (Wis 11:23; 12:10; 12:19).

5.5 Conversion in the Theology of Luke

Luke in particular while treating of conversion rules out any theology of retribution. Conversion according to him is God's unmerited gift to Israel.

God raises Jesus from the dead after he had been put to death on the Cross and “exalted him as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance (*metanoia*) to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Act 5:31). But in Luke’s theology this is not reserved exclusively for the Jews, for the Gentiles are also chosen to be recipients of God’s gift in faith. Simon Peter who had witnessed personally the granting of the Spirit to the Roman centurion Cornelius even prior to his baptism (Act 10:44-48), defends his position to the assembly of Christians at Jerusalem: “If then God gave them (the Gentiles) the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I, that I could hinder God?” (Act 11:17). As a result they promptly realised God’s impartiality and praised Him who had given “even to the Gentiles the repentance (*metanoia*) that leads to life” (Act 11:18).

As a result of all this the church at Jerusalem sends apostles to the regions of Phoenicia and Samaria to preach the Good News, who on their return to home base narrate to the brethren the “conversion (*epistrophē*) of the Gentiles” (Act 15:3). This openness of the Hellenistic non-Jews, many of whom probably already were semi-converts to Judaism, that is to say, had embraced the Jewish religion without being circumcised, (the *yir’ê shaumayîm*), now gladly became adherents of Christianity which tutored by the apostle Paul had dispensed with the painful rite of circumcision as an indispensable condition for conversion to Christianity (cf. Gal 5:6; 6:15).

6. Conclusion

It has been a long journey as we turned from one prophet to another in the history of Israel in our search for the meaning of conversion as they understood it. And from there we passed to the inter-testamental period of the Maccabean and Hasmonaean periods both in the Palestinian homeland and in the Diaspora until we came to John the Baptist, Jesus and the New Testament. The pre-exilic prophets from Amos to Jeremiah showed us how Israel did not heed their God’s message as delivered by them. Israel showed herself incapable of turning away from evil and turning to Yahweh. The First Isaiah gave Israel some hope for future conversion through the name of his son ‘A Remnant Shall Return’. Hoshea and Jeremiah promised Israel that Yahweh himself would heal their disloyalty and bring Israel back to himself. In the time of the Maccabees and Hasmonaean some of the petty kings of Judah resorted to forced conversions of their subjects for political motives. More enlightened Jews sought to win over Hellenistic non-Jews tired of the polytheism, the superstitions and the immorality of their contemporaries. Finally, Jesus himself came and proclaimed conversion in the context of the new age where God’s kingdom was ushered in by himself. He addressed his message to each individual whatever his denomination. Never was there a question of one individual trying to convert another, for all human beings, irrespective of their nationality and creed, are in need of God’s grace. And the infant Church continued this proclamation of her Founder. Christ never preached division

but only harmony, a harmony that can only come when all human beings submit themselves to God's rule. And so the greatest teacher of the infant Church, Paul of Tarsus, who dispensed with the painful requirement of circumcision as a prerequisite for conversion, puts it in his address to the nations of the world:

'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ Jesus. Therefore be reconciled to one another' (cf. 2 Cor 5:17-19). In other words, since God has turned to human beings in Christ Jesus, human beings must turn to one another, and together return to the one common Father of us all.

Notes

1. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. by W. A. VanGemeren (sic), Vol. 4, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997, under *shûb*, p. 56.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Quoted by J. A. Soggin, in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol. 3, ed. by E. Jenni & C. Westermann, Hendrikson, Peabody, Massachusetts, 1997, under *shûb*, p. 1315. He refers to Holladay's book, *The Root shûbh in the OT*, 1958, pp. 116-157.
4. See the article of E. Jenni on "Eschatology of the OT", in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, ed. by G. A. Buttrick, Abingdon, Nashville, 1962, p. 126, (From now on *IDB*). Jenni makes a distinction between 'prophetic eschatology', still on the historical plane (broader sense) and 'apocalyptic eschatology', at the end of history, mythic plane (narrower sense).
5. The Hebrew has "the bulls of our lips". Both the JB and the NRSV have emended the text which can be done by slightly altering the Massoretic text and punctuation. The incorrect Hebrew *pārîm šēpātēnû*, "the bulls of our lips", is altered to *pērî šēpātēnû*, that is "the fruit of our lips", which suits the context.
6. See his article, "Das Thema 'Umkehr' in der alttestamentlichen Prophetie" (1951), reprinted in *Gesammelte Studien zum AT*, Kaiser Verlag, Munich, 1973, p.141.
7. For 'turning away from' the Greek uses *apostrephô* and for 'turning to' it has *epistrephô*, whereas the Hebrew *shûb* could mean both things.
8. The NRSV has: "If you return, O Israel, says the LORD, if you return to me," which is a tautology! The Hebrew has: *'im taμshûb yiśrā'ēl, nē'um yhwh, 'elay tāshûb*.
9. Hoshea uses the singular *mēshûba* (backsliding) whereas Jeremiah has the plural *mēshûbot* (backslidings), which is not clear from the English.
10. The Hebrew has *hashîbēnî wē'āshûbāh*, the first verbal form is causative while the second is intransitive., that is" Make me come back and I shall come back!"
11. *Op. cit.*, p. 145.
12. The books of Esther, Tobit and Judith are known as theological midrashim, that is, narratives that are ahistorical but which convey a theological or kerygmatic message.
13. Cf. the author's article, "Communalism in Israel", in *Vidyajyoti*, Vol. 56, March 1992, pp.135-150.

14. Cf. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, transl. and ed. by W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, University Press, Chicago, 1957, under *prosêlytos*, where the Latin equivalents, *proselytus*, *proselyta* and *advena* are also given.
15. See *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VI, ed. by G. Friedrich, transl. and ed. by G. F. Bromiley. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1968, pp. 731-732. Henceforth TDNT.
16. The term *mi tyahădîm* comes from the Hebrew *yêhûdî*, which means a Jew. And so *mi tyahadîm* would mean literally 'to make oneself a Jew'. This is the Hithpael or intensive reflexive form of the nominal verb.
17. Cf. M.H. Pope's article, "Proselyte", in *IDB*, Vol. 3, col. 1, p.925 (See footnote 4)
18. Cf. *TDNT*, Vol VI, p. 741.
19. Cf. *IDB*, Vol. 3, p. 929, col. 2. (See Footnote 4).
20. Cf. *TDNT*, Vol. VI, p. 735
21. Cf. *IDB*, Vol. 3, col. 1, p. 931 (See footnote 4)
22. Cf. *Ibid.*
23. Cf. *TDNT*, Vol. IV, ed. by G. Kittel, p. 990.
24. Cf. *TDNT*, Vol IV, under "E. ' *metanoëô* and *metanoia* in the New Testament", p. 1003, footnote 160.