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“Returning unto the Lord”

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THE USE of the verb *shûbh* for the act and fact of conversion is characteristically Hebrew. For this word comes from concrete, profane speech.¹ Its meaning in this speech is abundantly clear in its first occurrence at Genesis 3:19 where Adam is told that the curse of toil will be upon him “unto your return” (*shûh ekha* to the ground:

because from it you were taken—
for—dust you are
and into dust shall you return (*tāshûbh*).

This basic meaning of the word is perhaps even more evident in Genesis 37:29–30 where it is twice used to indicate Reuben’s “return” to the pit, followed by his “return” to his brothers. The basic meaning is also clear in Jeremiah 3:1 where the prophet asks if a man will “return” to a wife whom he has divorced, if she has married another.

The word *shûbh*, then, usually used with one of the prepositions translated “into,” “unto,” “upon” or “to,”² clearly denotes movement back toward an earlier place or state. It is usually translated “return.” When the word is used of a movement of the spirit of the people toward (or away from) the Lord, or of the Lord toward (or away from) the people, we have what William L. Holladay in his exhaustive lexical study calls the “conventional usage” of the verb and its derivatives.³

Our investigation of the word and concept will be in reverse chronological order, for in this way we move from simplicity to complexity.⁴ In the post-exilic period, the teachers of the theocracy make “returning unto the Lord” little more than a liturgical act, or a concrete response to an institutional religious appeal of the “pay and pray” variety only too familiar to the modern churchgoer!

Characteristic of post-exilic prophecy is the type of oracle designated “Admonition” in form-criticism. Malachi 3:6–12 is an Admonition cast in the form of a dialogue between “the Lord of Hosts” and “the sons of

1. H. W. Wolff, “Das Thema ‘Umkehr’ in der alttestamentlichen Propheten,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 48/2, p. 132. In only about one-tenth of its occurrences, says Wolff, does *shûbh* refer to a spiritual relationship with Yahweh. He contends that, on the other hand, the related verbs *dārash* and the intensive forms of *bāqash* are “at home in cultic speech” (p 131).

2. Wolff, p. 133. *Shûbh* occurs by itself 30 times, as against 98 times with one of the prepositions, in what Holladay would call “covenantal” contexts.

3. W. W. Holladay, *The Root Shûbh in the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958), p. 2 *et passim*.

4. It is to be hoped that the development of the *shûbh*-concept will be best understood if we move from simpler to more difficult meanings, even though this requires us to move backwards in time.

Jacob." In answer to the divine appeal: "Return unto me, and I will return unto you" (3:7), the people ask: "In what shall we return?" (*bammēh nāshūbh*). This "return" is to consist of the full payment of tithes and offerings because the whole community has been "robbing" God (v. 8). The result of such a "return," the prophet says, might well be an "overflowing blessing"—the end of the locust plague and the recognition of Israel by all nations as "a land of delight" (vv. 11–12).

A similar situation meets us in the Admonitions which make up the prophecy of Haggai. This book, incidentally, is the only one in the Old Testament which does not use the word *shūbh* in any of its forms.⁵ Yet the post-exilic pattern is there. Blessing and prosperity will come when the community responds to the appeal to build the temple (2:15–19). Zechariah, Haggai's contemporary, seems to make "return unto me and I will return to you" (1:3) a kind of slogan which summarizes the word of his predecessors in the prophetic office. His concern, expressed in his visions, is with institutional reconstruction and rebuilding.

In Joel, a prophecy notoriously difficult to date,⁶ the "return unto me" (*shūbh 'ēlay*) (2:12) is clearly a call to a liturgical act of confession and repentance. Joel is aware that it is the rending of the heart, not the tearing of the clothes, that will make repentance real (2:13); yet the emphasis is clearly on a public demonstration to which the call must be made so urgent that it will bring bride and bridegroom from their chambers and drive the priest to intercession between the vestibule and the altar (2:17). The whole community, from the elders to the nursing children, must respond to the call for a solemn assembly (2:15–16). A favourable response to the prophet's call is the condition of a possible ("who knows?," 2:14) divine response and blessing described in 2:19ff.

The post-exilic nature of the return unto the Lord is manifest in the book of Jonah. Here the word is used both for the Ninevites' "turning" from their evil ways and for Yahweh's "turning" from his threatened judgment (3:19–10). In Jonah *shūbh* cannot be translated "return" in the covenantal sense as its application is to heathen. As in Joel, *shūbh el-Yahweh* is a mass act of contrition and confession, accompanied with fasting and the wearing of sackcloth.

In the post-exilic period, then, *shūbh* appears characteristically in the Admonition, in an institutionally religious context, and its precise import is usually quite evident. "Return unto me and I will return unto you" is not unlike the calls to national prayer, confession, and intercession with which we became familiar during the darker days of the Second World War.

5. Note the omission of *shūbh* in the rather careless reproduction of Amos 4:9 in Haggai 2:17. Some form of *shūbh*, however, must have once been in the Hebrew text for LXX reads: *kai ouk epestrepsate pros me, legei Kurios*, which follows LXX Amos, except for a tense change.

6. Cf. J. A. Thompson, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI, p. 732: "Proposals for the date of Joel vary from the tenth to the second centuries B.C." See also all the other commentaries. But most agree on a post-exilic date.

When we move back to Ezekiel we find that the meaning of *shûbh* is not nearly so easy to comprehend. Form-critical classification of Ezekiel 18, and the nearly parallel 33:10-20, is exceedingly difficult. This passage is a combination of the Admonition, the eschatological Salvation Oracle, and the casuistic legal pericope. The appeal, "return ye . . . , return ye . . ." (*shûbhû . . . , shûbhû . . .*), in 33:11, calls for a concrete forsaking of the legally proscribed transgressions enumerated in 33:5 (cf. 18:6-18). But this appeal is made in the context of a choice between "life" and "death." It is demanded of the sinner that he get for himself "a new heart and a new spirit" (18:30-31). In 36:26, however, it is made plain that this new creation is to be graciously given by Yahweh. When the sinner, thus divinely enabled, forsakes his transgressions of the Torah commandments, he shall live. Thus in Ezekiel 18 and 33 (cf. also chapter 36) Law and Gospel are firmly joined together. The invitation to "turn" and "live" (for "why will you die?") can be given (indeed it is the life-and-death responsibility of the prophet to give it) because Yahweh has made the impossible possible. The sinner, dying in his sin, can live. As we move back to Ezekiel, we move from the bare, institutional appeal of the later prophets to deeper ground. The concrete act envisaged, it is true, is hardly more than the cessation of crimes against the Torah. But this turning from "wicked ways" is seen in a life-and-death context which takes seriously the depth of human involvement in sin and death, and the human impossibility of the *shûbh el-Yahweh*. *Shûbh* in Ezekiel is usually translated *turn* rather than *return* because there seems to be here no implication of regaining a lost estate.

In the two relevant passages of Deutero-Isaiah—44:22 and 55:6-7—the appeal to "return" is firmly embedded in what form-criticism calls the Salvation Oracle. The salvation proclaimed in this type of prophetic pronouncement is always associated with divine eschatological intervention. Thus, in the former of the two passages, the appeal to return is based on the assertion that Yahweh has redeemed his people, sweeping away their transgressions and sins like clouds and mist. In the more familiar chapter 55 the same situation appears. Here the divine, redeeming action is pictured as the going forth of an irresistible word (v. 11). Because of this going forth Yahweh, at the moment, is "near" and "may be found."⁷ As in Ezekiel the "return" here consists of a forsaking of the "way" and "thoughts" of the wicked (v. 7). In Deutero-Isaiah it is undoubtedly connected with the actual physical return of the exiles.

Isaiah 40-55 is indeed almost one long Salvation Oracle, and it is in the context of Yahweh's saving deed wrought through Cyrus that the invitation to return is given. Indeed Yahweh himself returns to his land in his people's homeward pilgrimage. The highway to be made "straight in the desert" is a "highway for our God" (40:3). In Yahweh's redeeming

7. In 49:8, a passage made familiar to the church by Paul's use of it in 2 Cor. 6:2, Deutero-Isaiah again refers to this concept of the "right moment."

activity, now manifest in history, is the possibility of return unto him revealed. This is at the same time a physical and politico-military event, a holy pilgrimage, and a spiritual renewing.

In Jeremiah the possibility of conversion is, over and over again, bluntly rejected. If the African native can change the colour of his skin, or the leopard the markings on his coat, then, and only then, can the people who are used to doing evil do good (13:23). Jeremiah uses the verb *shûbh* in its pure sense of "return"—in his case to the type of Yahweh-Israel relationship that he believed prevailed in the early days of the covenant in the wilderness (2:2-3 and other texts). The "good way" is found amid the "ancient paths" (6:16) to which the people refuse to look. Therefore their chance of returning has gone. Here we have no "acceptable time," no "day of salvation" for the prophet's generation, but only the bleak assurance that the day of opportunity has passed like a summer and harvest whose bounty has been left standing in the desolate fields (8:20). In the face of Yahweh's harshest judgments the people have hardened their faces like rock and refused to return (*me'anû lāshûbh* [5:2]). Therefore Yahweh, having spoken, having determined upon it, has not relented, nor will he "turn from" his final judgment (4:28). For the northern kingdom, already judged and in exile, there is a Salvation Oracle and an invitation to return (3:11-14),⁸ but for post-Josianic Judah there is nothing but the darkness of the coming judgment (cf. also 18:12ff. and 35:17b).

In 36:1-3 it might seem that Jeremiah did hold out some hope for the nation. This single quotation, from a prose account, can hardly be used to qualify the clear intent of the oracles themselves. Whatever hope he had was eschatological. Judgment and exile must come. The end of the nation is at hand. The Salvation Oracles introduced with the formula, "Behold, the days are coming . . ." (23:5, 7; 31:31, 38), are often denied to Jeremiah. But it is not necessary to sacrifice their authenticity in the interest of Jeremiah's consistency. For they are clearly eschatological. Whatever hope there is lies beyond the inevitable cataclysm. His own purchase of the ancestral estate also testifies to this kind of hope. But for his own people in their day he has but one word. It is the word of judgment and destruction because they have refused to repent.

Jeremiah was in many ways the heir of Hosea. The earlier prophet also idealized the wilderness period and it is to the conditions which (he believed) prevailed then that the nation must return (2:15). It is difficult to say whether or not Hosea held out any hope of conversion. When Israel says in 2:9 (Hebrew text): "I will go and return to my first husband" the prospect presented in the succeeding verses is only judgment. Yet, if there is no reason to deny Hosea the Salvation Oracle of 2:16ff. (and I believe there is none) there is indeed hope held out for a time of mercy beyond

8. Jer. 3:22-23, in which all the changes are run on *shûbh*, also probably refers to "Israel" in the political sense.

the coming judgment (see especially v. 23). In 14:1-3 there is a direct appeal to “return.” This return is to be by verbal confession (“take words with you and return”) and not sacrificial cultic observance. Verse 2 apparently contains the liturgical prayer of “return.”⁹ On the whole, however, Hosea’s pages are dominated by the oracles of judgment. The almost hopelessly corrupt state of the text contributes to the difficulty of discovering exactly what he did teach on this or any other subject.

In Isaiah the possibility of conversion is reserved for the “holy seed” of 6:13. The very burden of the prophetic proclamation is to confirm the insensate mass in its blindness, deafness, and stupidity and thus prevent its turning to be healed (6:10). The name of the prophet’s son *Sh^ear Yāshubh* (7:3) is a promise to the remnant (*sh^ear*), the holy seed, but a word of judgment and doom to king and people.¹⁰ For the nation has spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel who has said: “In returning (*b shūbhā*) and rest you will find your deliverance” (30:15). Wolff argues that for Isaiah conversion is no real possibility.¹¹ To maintain this it is necessary to translate and interpret the familiar 1:18 as something like ironic contempt: “Come now, let us be reasonable; can your sins, crimson red as they are, really and truly become white like snow—just like that?” This kind of rendering is indeed possible. But the succeeding verses do seem to present a real choice: “If you are willing and obey . . . but if you refuse and rebel . . .” Isaiah 1:18 read in the light of the two succeeding verses, and the Salvation Oracle with which the first chapter concludes (1:24-31)¹² prevent us from adopting too easily the position that this prophet’s word is pure doom. For Isaiah conversion would not be a “return” to an idealized past but a reformation in the corporate life of the people (1:16-17).

It would almost seem that Isaiah deliberately avoids the word *shūbh*. In the whole of Isaiah 1-39 the verb occurs but six times and the noun *shūbhā* but once. Of these, three occurrences are in the passages of doubtful authenticity (10:21; 19:22, and 31:6) and one (1:27) is also sometimes doubted. This leaves us with 6:10, 9:13, 30:15, and the name *Sh^ear Yāshūbh* (7:3). All three undoubtedly genuine occurrences are in oracles of judgment, and the name carries a double promise-threat intent.¹³

In Amos *shūbh* occurs five times in chapter 4 in the identical phrase which follows the recital of Yahweh’s warning deeds. I sent famine, drought, blight, pestilence, invasion—“yet you did not return unto me.” Only the use of *shūbh*’s near synonym, *dārash* (seek, search for), in 5:4-6 keeps us from declaring dogmatically that there is a total absence of the possibility

9. In Hos. 14:2 read “fruit” with LXX and Syr. (so RSV) instead of MT “bull.”

10. Holladay, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

11. Wolff, p. 138: “Umkehr ist keine reale Möglichkeit für Israel; sie gehört darum als Thema ausschliesslich in die Gerichtsverkündigung.”

12. The authenticity of this passage is questioned by those interpreters who rule out *a priori* the possibility that Isaiah held out any hope whatsoever for the future.

13. Holladay, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-125.

of conversion in Amos. In Micah there is but one appearance of *shûbh* (2:4) and no indication of the possibility of conversion.

It would appear from the foregoing that the word *shûbh*, and the concept of conversion which is intimately associated with this word, did undergo some development in the history of the prophetic literature. This must be said despite the currently popular minimizing of the idea of development in biblical theology. In Amos, Micah, and Isaiah the word is found in the Oracle of Judgment. This is true also of the characteristic and indisputably authentic oracles of Hosea and Jeremiah. But the latter two collections, as we have them, do contain Salvation Oracles with the invitation to "return unto the Lord," as does Ezekiel. In Deutero-Isaiah the formula is firmly embedded in the Salvation Oracle. This does not mean that Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah deny their predecessors' insistence on the inability of the leopard to change its spots. They, especially Deutero-Isaiah, proclaim the saving act of the God who makes the impossible possible. In the prophets of the post-exilic theocracy, conversion is institutionally conceived and propagated. In them *shûbh el-Yahweh* becomes little more than an appeal to come to church, do penance, offer sacrifices, bring tithes and offerings, build, work, pray, etc.

It is, of course, only too easy to be critical of the institutional preoccupation of the teachers of the theocracy. What we have here is an attempt to make concrete what was difficult for them, and is difficult for us, to understand and to do. At the same time, it would be fatal for the church to limit her understanding of what it means to "return unto the Lord" within the context of the institutional appeal. In the earlier *shûbh*-oracles sin is indeed "unto death," and the appeal to "return" is an invitation to which response can be made, if at all, only in the light of the saving act and conquering the word of the Lord of Israel. In the church it must be clearly set in the context of the Cross and Resurrection, where the mortal power of sin is once for all destroyed.