

CONVERSION IN THE BIBLE: A DIALOGICAL PROCESS

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I. Introduction

When studying the topic of conversion in the Bible, we face a basic ambiguity at the outset. On the one hand, the vocabulary of conversion, frequent in the Scriptures, does not apply specifically to what we currently call conversion in the sense of a shift in religious affiliation.¹ On the other hand, conversion in the usual sense given to the term nowadays is expressed by other terms in the Bible. This is not just a semantic observation. This ambiguity is significant. It invites us to reconsider what we call 'conversion' and possibly what we think to be conversion.

II. The Biblical Concept of Conversion²

1. Terminology

In the New Testament, the two main roots used to express the idea of conversion are *metanoi/a,ein* (to undergo a change of heart), which refers to the interior change, and *epistr/ephein,ophe* (to return), connoting the return to God. The verb *metanoiein* is used 34 times in the New Testament and the noun *metanoia* 22 times.³ *Epistrephein* (in the sense of conversion)

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¹According to the Oxford Dictionary, conversion (in the religious sense) means "bringing over to an opinion, party, faith, etc." or "turning of sinners to God." "Conversion can refer to the fact that someone has become a member of a specific Christian church, or it can refer to a Christian's deeply emotional experience of being 'born again' in turning to Jesus as one's personal saviour" (J. J. Walter, "Conversion" in J. A. Komonchak, M. Collins, D. A. Lane, eds., *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Bangalore: TPI (Indian ed.), 1993, 234.

²On Conversion in the Bible, the bibliography is enormous. See for instance, the four columns of titles in TWNT X/2, 1188-1190 complementing the list already given in the articles "*Metanoia*," TWNT IV, 972-973. Yet this long bibliography is incomplete since it omits the long article of Giblet-Grelot in the *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* by X. Leon-Dufour, ed., Bangalore: TPI (Indian ed.), 1973. 486-491.

³Etymologically, *metanoi/a,ein* means a radical transformation of one's mind, an upheaval in one's mental set-up, a reversal of one's aims, priorities, and sense of values and this is the original meaning of the word 'conversion'. The usual

occurs 21 times (especially in the Acts) and the noun *epistrophe* once. If we add *metamelesthai* (to be sorry and change), used twice (for the human change of mind of conversion), we find a total of 80 references to 'conversion' in the New Testament.

2. Conversion: A Universal Challenge

But, in general, the words mentioned above do not refer to a change of religion. The basic call to conversion which constitutes the caption of the entire ministry of Jesus in Mark 1:14-15 is addressed to Jesus' own co-religionists, the Jews: "The time is fulfilled and the Rule of God has come; change your hearts and believe the Good News."

Such was already the message of the Baptist (Mk. 1:4) and so would also be the content of the mission of the Twelve (Mk. 6:12). In the Acts of the Apostles, the call to conversion is equally directed to the Jews (Acts 2:38; 3:26; 13:39) and to the Gentiles (10:43; 17:30). As Paul says to the elders of Ephesus, "With Jews and Gentiles alike I insisted on conversion before God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21; see also 26:20). Jesus would even propose the conversion of the Ninevites as a model to the Jews:

The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it because they changed their hearts at the preaching of Jonah and see, something greater than Jonah is here (Mk. 12:41; see also Lk. 11:32).

The parallelism between Israel and Nineveh works both ways. It invites Israel to imitate Nineveh in their conversion. But it implies also that the conversion of Nineveh is of the same order as the conversion of the worshippers of the true God, Yahweh. In this connection, it should be noted that the book of Jonah does not mention any change of religion on the part of the Ninevites. Their "belief in God" (Jon. 3:5) consisted in "turning from their evil ways and from the violence that was in their hands" (3:8); the challenge of the prophets to the people of Israel was not different.

translation 'repent' (RSV, NRSV, NEB, JB) is too weak. "Turn away from your sins" in the Good News Bible is better but focuses too much on committed transgressions. The New American Bible has "reform your lives" which is too moralistic. In Bible quotations we put in italics the words corresponding to the *metanoia* terminology.

3. "Turning to God From Idols"

When addressed to the Gentiles, the call to conversion entails abandoning idols as a matter of course (1 Thes. 1:9) and giving up their ignorance of God (Rom. 1:25; Acts 17:30). The New Testament rejects idolatry as clearly as the Old Testament (2 Cor. 6:16; 10:21; 1 Thes. 1:9; 1 Cor. 12:12). The most explicit indictment and thorough analysis of idolatry are found in the beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans. Because the Gentiles "have exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creatures rather than the Creator... God has given them up to dishonourable passions" (Rom. 1:25-26), the list of which follows for another seven verses in an infamous litany (1:26-32). But this indictment must be qualified by a few observations:

a) "Paul is obviously not gathering information from personal experience nor from the situation in Rome" (Kaesemann 1980: 49). Paul had never gone to Rome and could not speak of the situation there by firsthand information. Commentators have traced the list of vices of Rom. 1 in the Hellenistic Jewish traditions (Wis. 14:25-26; 4 Mac. 1:26-27; 2:15; Philo, Sac 32) and in Stoicism. This does not mean that these vices did not exist in the Greco-Roman world. Yet the picture projected in Romans 1 should not be taken as a coolly balanced assessment. It is not immune from rhetorical one-sidedness:

The analysis here is not to be judged in relation to a modern carefully documented survey of social trends. This is written with the flourish of ancient rhetoric; in the style of the preacher of all ages, and would be recognized for what it is – a dramatic expression of a widespread malaise, of a human condition whose character as a whole is demonstrated by its failure to control or to find an answer to its most depressing features and worst excesses (Dunn 1988:70).

b) The turn taken by the New Testament polemics against idols is noteworthy. The identification of idols with images of deities "resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles" in Rom. 1:23 is rather rare in the New Testament. The antithesis of God is seldom given the name of the deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon (except in a general way in 1 Cor. 8:5; 10:20 and in a veiled manner in Rev. 2:13).⁴ The only clear reference

⁴This respect towards other religions is already to be found in Hellenistic Judaism. The LXX Greek version of the Old Testament translates *elohim* in Ex.

to specific deities occurs in the comic misunderstanding reported in Acts 14:12. Otherwise, the antitheses of God are called mammon or money (Mt. 6:24; Mk. 10:2), the belly (Phil. 3:19; see also 12:19), the powers of this world (Gal. 4:8-10), local authorities (Acts 4:19; 5:29) or even the Roman Empire (Rev. 13:17).⁵ In Rom. 1 also, the formal idolatry, once mentioned, is not insisted upon: the stress will be laid more on the concrete shapes of alienation from God. The viewpoint is practical. The New Testament denounces the existential forms of denial of the divine lordship in the same way as the prophets reprobated them in the lives of those who claimed to articulate the name of the Lord properly.

c) The third observation is the most important one. The condemnation of pagan idolatry and of its consequences is often followed by a parallel and equally vigorous denunciation of the sinfulness of the "true believers." If the Gentiles have "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles" (Rom. 1:23), those who "boast of (their) relation to God" are equally guilty of causing "dishonour to God" (Rom. 2:17, 23) and the epistle proceeds in chapter 3 with a set of quotations from the Psalms and the Prophets incriminating God's people. Amos had already brought the description of the crimes of the Nations (Amos 1:3-2:3) to a climax by arranging Judah and Israel for equally grievous misdeeds (Amos 2:4-16). The conclusion is clear: "I have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin... Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded" (Rom. 3:9, 27). Cranfield's comments are quite apt:

Paul himself reckoned that, by describing ... the obvious sinfulness of the heathen, he was, as a matter of fact, describing the basic sinfulness of fallen man as such, the inner reality of the life of Israel no less than that of the gentiles... So we understand these verses as the revelation of the gospel's judgment of all men, which lays bare not only the idolatry of ancient and modern paganism but also the idolatry ensconced in Israel, in the Church and in the life of each believer (1980:105f.).

22:27 in the plural: "You shall not insult other gods." This was already the interpretation of Josephus: ("Let no one blaspheme what other cities consider as gods": Ant. Jud., IV. 207) and of Philo blaming "those who blaspheme what others consider as gods" (Spec. Leg. II, 53).

⁵See E. Stauffer, "Theos", TDNT II, 102.

The indictment of sin and the call to conversion in the Bible and particularly in the New Testament is universal. It covers the entire human horizon and leaves no one outside: "All have sinned; all fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). There is no ground for the condemnation of the sinners by the righteous and the one sided invitation to outsiders to adopt the correctness of our position. The call to conversion stems from a deep awareness of the universal human inadequacy, of the ontological inanity of the human being in front of God. The universality of salvation implies an equal universality of the need for salvation.

The challenge to conversion belongs certainly to the core of the Christian message. The prophetic people of God must call God, 'God', creatures 'creatures', and sin 'sin'. The Bible does not justify the naïve denial of evil. There is evil in the world whether it is called injustice, oppression, hatred, inequality, poverty, ignorance, sickness, suffering or death. Evil is to be named and denounced if it is to be eradicated. But the call to conversion is to be dialogical. When relayed by a human voice, it does not issue from a higher position of owned truth and virtue. It arises from the midst of a vivid awareness of one's own inadequacy. "All fall short of the glory of God," and all share in the same creaturely condition and the call to conversion addressed to another must first deeply resound in the hollowness of one's heart. The idols of others are our own idols. There is no place for a superiority complex. We are all humble pilgrims travelling on the same road, carrying the same load of illusions, frailties and failings and driven by the same longing. The opposite attitude would not be evangelical. It would be the pharisaism held by the gospel as the ultimate opposite to God's grace.

Another remark, which is not an aside but the heart of the matter, is to be made. Awareness of sin and conversion are not the ultimate contents of the biblical message. In Jesus' summary of the Gospel in Mark 1:14, the call to conversion comes only in second position. It is subordinate to the first part of the proclamation: "The time is fulfilled; the rule of God is at hand." In other words, it all begins with the gift of God's grace. The 'Gospel' is primarily what the word means: "Good News." Whereas the prophets and John the Baptist threatened, Jesus announces the advent of God's rule of love, though with the upsetting and challenging stipulation that it is meant for the poor: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has anointed me to announce the Good News to the poor" (Lk. 4:18). His first

message will be the triple repetition of the advent of happiness (Lk. 6:20-21).⁶

The Gospel message, therefore, is not shrouded in a gloomy obsession with sin. It is the revelation of God's glory and love. The sense of human inadequacy is but the response to that joyful discovery. It is when the murky complex of guilt faces the manifestation of the glory of the Lord in the Temple. It is the obverse of the dazzling revelation of the gift of God.⁷ The story of the Samaritan woman offers a paradigm of the revelation and discovery in which the process of conversion is involved. She is the first to discover "the gift of God" (Jn. 4:10); then her whole life is opened up and her illusions are laid bare as regards her sinful ways (4:19-24) and even her worship (4:17-18). Conversion begins with the enraptured exclamation of the first disciples: "We have found..." (Jn. 1:41, 45). "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes..." (Mt. 13:44). With God's treasure, "finding is the first act," comments J. D. Crossan (1979), not the seeking as in other treasure stories: the gift of God precedes any human endeavour.

III. A New People

The word 'conversion' is not the specific term by which the Bible qualifies a change of religious affiliation; it expresses rather the basic attitude expected from all those who come to God in a spirit of genuine faith, "Jews and Gentiles" alike, whichever may be their religious affiliation. What we call 'conversion' in the sense of full allegiance to the "living and true God" (1 Thes. 1:9) is expressed by other phrases.

⁶According to what is likely to be the original form of the Beatitudes in Luke 6:20-21.

⁷St. Teresa of Avila puts it in a concrete manner: "We shall never attain to the knowledge of ourselves if we do not first try to know God. The sight of his greatness will show us our lowliness; the sight of his purity will reveal our defilement... Our intelligence and our will acquire a greater nobility ... when the soul casts the eyes successively on God and on itself whereas there are many disadvantages in looking only at the dirt of our miseries... If we are continuously absorbed in the consideration of our misery, we shall never get away from the mire of our fears, of our pusillanimity and faint heartedness" (*Obras de Santa Teresa de Jesus*, ed., P. Silvero de Santa Teresa, Burgos: Editorial de "El Monte Carmelo," 1954, "Castillo Interior o Las moradas," ch. 2, 532f.).

1. A Common Search for a 'Hidden God'

A typical expression of 'conversion' is given by Ruth, the 'pagan' Moabite woman, when she chose to follow her mother-in-law, Naomi, to Bethlehem: "Your people shall be my people: your God shall be my God" (Ruth 1:15).

"Your God shall be my God": Ruth accepts the God of Naomi. But it is not as though Naomi possessed a God that she could hand over to her daughter-in-law. Naomi does not give God to Ruth. She takes her on a journey: "Ruth was determined to go with her... So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem" (Ruth 1:18-19). The God of Naomi and of Israel is the God of the exodus, the God of his people's on-going pilgrimage, a God calling his people to meet him in the cloud of Sinai (Ex. 24:15-18) or of Mount Thabor (Mt. 17:5), the God "who dwells in thick darkness" (1 Kg. 8:12; 2 Chr. 6:1). Both Naomi and Ruth, the people of Israel and the nations alike, walk together towards this mysterious end of their journey: both are equally called to the conversion needed to enter the "cloud of unknowing."⁸

2. The Nations Form a New People

If the second part of Ruth's statement expressed her commitment to the God of Naomi and of Israel, the first part also should be noted. The decision is not purely intellectual: it entitles a new fellowship: "Your people shall be my people." The new vertical relationship with God also implies horizontal bonds of a new partnership. This twofold commitment reflects obviously the covenantal terms: "You shall be my people and I shall be your God" (Dt. 26:16f; 7:6; Jer. 7:23; 31:33; 32:38; Ez. 37:27).

This is not proper to the Old Testament. The covenantal formula is resumed in 2 Corinthians 6:16; Hebrews 8:10; Revelation 21:3 and its reversal in Hosea 1:9 and 2:23 recurs in Romans 9:25 and 1 Peter 2:10. It constitutes the background of the important theme of the "people of God" (Laos), the "people of God's own possession" (Tit. 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9; see also Ex. 19:5; Dt. 9:26), the "holy national and royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9; see also Ex. 19:5). When Paul ponders over the significance of the

⁸"All true knowledge of God begins with the knowledge of his hiddenness," says G. Von Rad, commenting on Isaiah 45:15 (*Old Testament Theology: Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, New York: Harper and Row, 1965, 377).

unexpected conversion of the Gentiles, he bases his reflection on this theme of the people of God. To Israel, as God's people, "belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law, the cult and the promises of the Fathers" (Rom. 9:2) and "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). Therefore, the conversion of the Nations means that they have become sharers in those promises and covenants. They have been adopted by sharing in the sonship of Israel; they are 'grafted' on the trunk of the covenant (Rom. 11:17-24); they are branches of the old root (Rom. 11:16).

The same line of thought is resumed in Ephesians 2:12-13. Deprived of the Messiah, aliens to the community of Israel, strangers to the promises of the Covenant, "the Nations who were far off have now been brought near in the blood of Christ." Now they are "no longer strangers and sojourners;" they are "fellow citizens of the saints, members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:29). The discovery of the God of Jesus Christ is also the discovery of a family and of its history; henceforth they will be "built on the foundation of the apostles and of the prophets" (Eph. 2:20).

3. Israel Called to Be a New People

But, by entering this new family, the Nations bring as much as they receive. With the coming of the Nations, the Israelite 'commonwealth' undergoes an implosion. The arrival of the Nations makes God's people aware of the radical priority of faith (Rom. 9:31-32), of the vacuity of "the law of commandments and ordinances" (Eph. 2:14). The ethnic sign of the circumcision is no longer the distinctive mark of their identity: it is rather the "circumcision of the heart" (Rom. 2:29). The theme was not new. It had already been proclaimed by the prophets of old (Jer. 4:4; 9:25; Dt. 10:16; 30:6). But there was a big gap between the moral exhortation of the old prophets and the actual massive arrival of outsiders claiming to belong to the Israel of God in terms of this new identity. We can understand how deeply upsetting this event must have been for the descendants of Abraham. It called for a total upheaval of their religious vision and national sensitivity, for a 'conversion' in the proper sense of the term. But it was at the cost of this conversion that the new humanity (Eph. 2:15) was to merge in which the walls of ethnic divisions and of hostility would crumble in hearts and lives penetrated by the peace of Christ (Eph. 2:15-16). This was to be the new humanity of which the arrival of the Nations was the harbinger. By their conversion, the Nations do not just join the

people of Israel as former prophetic oracles had envisaged (Is. 60:3-7; Ps. 72:10-11, 15). Israel itself is deeply transformed and called to a new sense of identity. The conversion of the Nations is a challenge of conversion for the believers themselves. What was true for the individual applies also to the community. The call to conversion is dialogical. They who relay the evangelical call to conversion are collectively as well as personally challenged to a radical reconsideration and reconstruction of what they stand for.

IV. Conclusion

Thus the Spirit is always moving ahead of the mission of the disciples. Those who do not want to remain cooped up within the narrow boundaries of their certitudes but keep their eyes open to the wonders of the Spirit all around will see the signs of his presence and of his work in the 'outsiders', in the generosity and piety of 'pagan' officers (Lk. 7:6; Acts 10:2), the sense of justice "of certain government authorities" (Acts 18:12-17) and the insights of the poets of Nations (Acts 17-28). It is not only those who proclaim the Gospel of Christ who go to the Nations; it is also the Nations which come to the Gospel or, rather, and much more so, the Holy Spirit, the protagonist⁹ of the Mission, who precedes any evangelization. This gentle yet powerful prompting of the Spirit is equally challenging for the evangelizers and the evangelized; it calls both alike to conversion. "God shows no partiality" (Rom. 2:11). No one stands on a pedestal of ownership of truth. We all stand in front of the Cross. Its grace and its challenge are equally appealing and upsetting to all.

What the Bible tells us, therefore, is not that conversion is a bygone concept. The evangelical call to conversion will be valid as long as there is 'sin' in the world, in all its forms of hatred, injustice, inequality, division, exploitation, oppression, greed, ignorance, self-centeredness, etc., in all the ways in which the deeply ingrained *māyā* prevents humankind from achieving its authentic realness. But this is not a matter of hurling accusations at each other within the confined field of narrow communalism. It is the universal challenge thrown to every human being and society. Nobody stands above this challenge. In the Bible all, "Jews and Gentiles," those who claim to be worshippers of the true God as well

⁹The theme is developed at length in the third chapter of the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*.

as the others, are confronted with the cross of Christ to discover in it the manifestation of the glory of God's love and, thus, enlightened, to renounce and denounce evil in the world and in their hearts. There is no place, therefore, for any communal sense of superiority. As a commentator on Romans 1 puts it, when Paul makes the detailed indictment of the Roman world, he does not

propose an accurate balance sheet of paganism... His aim is rather to bring the readers to ask themselves whether they cannot recognize one or the other features of their character, one or the other aspects of their condition, in the picture he draws. We all partake of the humanity ravaged by the denial of God... Nobody may be guilty of so many faults altogether but nobody is totally innocent and no one can claim not to be concerned. If the portrait does not bear the likeness of anybody, it is because it is in the likeness of everybody (Leenhardt 1957: 42f).

We can speak of the "conversion of the pagans" on condition that really and sincerely, deep in our hearts, we realize and recognize that we are all pagans. Then shall we be able to experience that "where sin increased, God's grace increased all the more" (Rom. 5:20) and to share this experience of the immense love of God with the whole world.

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