CONVERSION IN OLD TESTAMENT TIMES

Many Christians do not understand the Old Testament teaches much about the turning or returning to God of sinful wicked people during those times. Those living under the Mosaic Covenant were condemned and cursed by the Law of Moses because of their sins (see Leviticus 26:14-39 and Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Those living before the Mosaic Covenant period were condemned by God’s Law written on their consciences (see Romans 2:12-15). But because of His awesome love, grace and mercy, God provided a means of salvation based on Jesus’ future death for these two groups of people.

The relevant Hebrew word

The Hebrew word "shub" expresses key features of the conversion of sinful people in Old Testament times. "Shub" is spelt "sub" by some Bible dictionaries. "Shub" means "to return…The basic meaning of the verb is movement back to the point of departure… In the case of spiritually returning (metaphorically) to the Lord, ‘sub’ can mean… ‘turning from’ pursuing evil (1 Kings 8:35), and ‘to return’ to Him and obey Him (Deuteronomy 30:2)…” (Vine, pages 203-204) or "turn back, return" (Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 996). Wilson defines "shub" as "to turn about, to turn back, to return…to turn, to return to any person or thing” (page 458).

Differences about turning to God during Old and New Testaments

There is one main difference between Old Testament grace-based turning or returning to God and that occurring under the New Covenant. In Old Testament times – those before and after the Mosaic Covenant began – turning to God did not result in people being born-again of the Holy Spirit or becoming new creations in Christ. They did not come into spiritual union with Christ through His Spirit. Being born-again occurred only under the New Covenant (see John 7:38-39 and Colossians 1:27).

But there are two main features which conversions in Old and New Testament times have in common. These are:

turning to God in faith.

turning from known sins.

Turning to God

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the word "shub" is used often in relation to turning or returning to God. The turning to God of Israelites who were previously condemned to eternal punishment because of their sins against God and His laws, was empowered by His undeserved grace.

1 Samuel 7:3 quotes the words of the prophet Samuel which were used by God to bring a wonderful revival to the nation of Israel: "Then Samuel spoke to all the
house of Israel saying ‘If you return to the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Astoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the Lord and serve Him only; and he will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines’.

Turning from sin

The word "shub" is used many times in the Old Testament in relation to turning from sin, evil, wickedness, idolatry and so on. 2 Kings 17:13-14 links not turning ("shub") from evil ways with not having faith in God: "Yet the Lord testified against Israel and against Judah, by all of His prophets, namely every seer, saying, ‘Turn from your evil ways, and keep My commandments and My statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets.’ Nevertheless they would not hear, but stiffened their necks, like the necks of their fathers, who did not believe in the Lord their God.

In Jeremiah 36:3, God relates turning from evil to receiving his forgiveness: "It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the adversities which I purpose to bring upon them, that everyone may turn from his evil way, that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin." Ezekiel 18:21-23 declares the following wonderful promise: "But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?' says the Lord God, ‘and not that he should turn from his ways and live?'"

In Jeremiah 35:15, God links turning ("shub") from sin to changing or amending our actions. Jeremiah 8:5 says the people of Judah would not return ("shub") to the Lord. Jeremiah 7:1-34 reveals these people were pleased to "worship" God at the Temple, but they refused to turn from stealing, murder, adultery, swearing falsely, worshipping other gods and other sins. Jeremiah 8:8 shows these same people even claimed to be wise through their knowledge of the Word of God: "How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the Law of the Lord is with us’? Look, the false pen of the scribe certainly works falsehood." Like many Pharisees (see Matthew 15:1-20), these religious Jews in Jeremiah’s time twisted the Word of God to fit in with their sins.

Verses linking turning to God to turning from sins

There are a number of Old Testament verses which closely link turning to God with turning from sin: 2 Chronicles 6:37, 6:38, Isaiah 55:7, Jeremiah 4:1, Zechariah 1:3-4 and Malachi 3:7-10. These verses confirm what the two previous sections suggest: True saving conversion by God’s grace throughout Old Testament times involved both turning to God and turning from sins. Such conversion did not result in a state of permanent sinless perfection in those who had turned or returned to God. Nor did it relate to salvation by perfect obedience to works of Law.

Zechariah 1:3-4 says: "Therefore say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Return to Me', says the Lord of hosts, "and I will return to you," says the Lord of hosts. "Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets preached, saying," Thus
says the Lord of hosts: "Turn now from your evil deeds." But they did not hear nor heed Me,’ says the Lord."

Isaiah 55:7 declares: "Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts, let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon." Note the above verse stresses the two main conditions God has set for wicked unrighteous people receiving God’s pardon of their sins are their hearts:

returning to the Lord (obviously through faith in Him).

forsaking their wicked ways and sinful thoughts.

**Turning from God to sin**

The Hebrew word "shub" is also used numerous times in the Old Testament in connection with turning from God. The word "shub" is used a number of times in the Old Testament relative to turning to sin.

Jeremiah 11:10 states: "They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers who refused to hear My words, and they have gone after other gods to serve them; the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken My covenant which I made with their fathers." Therefore, we see the concept of turning or "shub" is linked to both God and sin – two opposites. Generally speaking, humans have either turned to God from sin or turned from God to sin.

**Turning to or from our own way**

The word "shub" is also used in Jeremiah 8:6 in the sense of people sinfully turning to their own way. Jeremiah 8:5 defines this as backsliding which in Hebrew is "meshubah". "Meshubah" is a word derived from "shub". Jeremiah 8:5-6 records God’s Words to His backslidden people: "Why then has this people slidden back, Jerusalem, in a perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit, they refuse to return. I listened and heard, but they do not speak aright. No man repented of his wickedness, Saying, ‘What have I done?’ Everyone turned to his own course…” The obvious inference from this usage of "shub" for people turning to their own way, is turning to God in Old Testament times included turning from our own self-centred ways.

**Not connected with supposed salvation by works of Law**

In some verses in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word "shub" is used in connection with the Law of Moses. Examples of this are 1 Kings 9:16, 2 Kings 23:25 and 2 Chronicles 7:19. As a result of seeing this connection, some may mistakenly think the word "shub" is related to the concept of being saved by works of Law. But the real truth is the word "shub" is used in the Old Testament in relation to:

being saved by grace through faith.
a right use of the Law of Moses. This involves using the Law not as a means of salvation but as the basis on which Israelites of faith would live.

"Shub" connected with salvation by grace

There are many Old Testament verses which link the Hebrew word "shub" and the turning to God from sin associated with this word, to His grace, mercy and forgiveness. Hosea 14:1-2 declares: "O Israel, return to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity; Take words with you, and return to the Lord. Say to Him, ‘Take away all iniquity; Receive us graciously’." Jeremiah 3:12-13 states: "Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: ‘Return, backsliding Israel,’ says the Lord, ‘And I will not cause My anger to fall on you; For I am merciful,’ says the Lord..." Jeremiah 24:7 links turning to God, to Him graciously giving people hearts to know Him.

God is our strength by His grace

Another outstanding indication many Israelites who lived during the time of the Mosaic Covenant were saved by God’s grace and mercy, not by self-empowered obedience to works of Law, is their emphasis on God as their strength. Verses which record Israelites in the Old Covenant era calling God their strength are Exodus 15:2, 1 Samuel 15:29, 2 Samuel 22:33, Psalm 18:1, 18:2, 19:14, 22:19, 27:1, 28:7, 28:8, 31:4, 37:39, 43:2, 46:1, 59:17, 62:7, 73:26, 81:1, 118:14, 140:7, Isaiah 12:2, 25:4, 26:4, 45:24, 49:5, Jeremiah 16:19, Joel 3:16 and Habakkuk 3:19. These marvellous verses show that the Israelites who wrote them understood and taught others to have trusting faith in God’s strength instead of their own. Such writers understood the evils of self-reliance and self-righteousness.

Moses was God’s instrument in the giving of the Law. But Moses’ words in Exodus 15:2 show he understood salvation is based on grace expressed through God being our strength: "The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God..." In Psalm 18:1-2, David connects salvation, trusting God, loving Him and Him being our strength together: "I will love You, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold." Other verses which link salvation, God being our strength and having trust or faith in Him are Psalm 28:7-9, 37:39-40, 62:6-8, Isaiah 12:2-3 and 26:1-4. The Old Testament concept of salvation in relation to the Israelites involved both deliverance from the attacks of pagan nations and other enemies and being saved from God’s judgements against sin.

Psalm 59:17 shows David understood and taught other Israelites that God being their strength was linked to His undeserved mercy or loving kindness. "To You, O my Strength, I will sing praises; for God is my defense, the God of my mercy." In Psalm 73:26, we see Asaph, the Psalm-writer understood his own weakness and that God was his strength: "My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." Psalm 52:6-7 records David rebuked people who did not want God as their strength: "The righteous also see and fear, and shall laugh at him, saying, ‘Here is the man who did not make God his strength, but trusted in the abundance of his riches, and strengthened himself in his wickedness’."
There are multitudes of other Old Testament verses recording God strengthening those with faith in Him. A few of these are Psalm 68:35, 71:16, 84:5, 105:4 and Isaiah 40:27-31. But note these verses do not teach God merely gives us strength. Such verses are a reflection of those other verses previously mentioned which stress God Himself is our strength. In Psalm 19:13-14, David reveals he trusted God to be his strength to enable him to resist presumptuous or wilful known sins: "Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and I shall be innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer."

These men of God preached salvation by grace through trusting faith, not by self-empowered obedience to works of Law.

A common error

Many Christians know the Mosaic Law demands obedience to its various commands and statutes. But few understand that the Mosaic Law also teaches about sinful wicked people turning or returning to God from their sins by His grace, love and mercy.

The word "shub" is used in the sense of turning or returning to God in Deuteronomy 4:30, 30:2, 30:3, 30:8 and 30:10. Deuteronomy 4:30-31 relate turning to God to His great mercy: "When you are in distress, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, when you turn to the Lord your God and obey His voice (for the Lord your God is a merciful God), He will not forsake you nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers which He swore to them." Here God promises to not abandon wicked sinful Israelites who returned to Him.

Deuteronomy 30:1-10 contains similar marvellous promises for wicked Israelites who turned back to God.

In Deuteronomy 30:3, God promises to have compassion on those sinners turning to Him. In the original Hebrew, the expression "have compassion" in this verse is "raham" which also means "to be tender, to have mercy, to pity, from an idea of fondness, cherishing, especially of God pitying his afflicted people" (Wilson, page 90). Deuteronomy 30:1-10 refers to sinners returning to God through His tender mercy and pity for them.

In Leviticus 26:40-45, God also promised to be gracious and merciful to sinful Israelites who returned to Him from their sins. In these verses, God relates His grace partly to the promises He made in the previous Abrahamic Covenant. God’s covenant with Abraham was centred on God’s grace for undeserving sinners. Exodus 32:7-14 and Deuteronomy 9:23-29 also teach God was gracious to unrepentant sinful Israelites because of His undeserved grace promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob related to the Abrahamic Covenant. Deuteronomy 9:4-6 refers to God being gracious to the Israelites on the basis of the Abrahamic Covenant despite their lack of righteousness.

"Shub" associated with a right use of the Law of Moses
The word "shub" used in the sense of turning to God from sins is associated with a right use of the Law of Moses for Old Testament believers because it is connected with:

- a recognition of their own sinfulness and total inability to obey the Law of Moses perfectly every day. Solomon’s words in 1 Kings 8:46-50 relate to this.

- God by His undeserved grace forgiving these believers of their breaking of any of His commands found in the Law (see 1 Kings 8:46-52, Isaiah 55:6-7, Jeremiah 3:12-13, Ezekiel 18:21-22 and Hosea 14:1-2). (The Bible defines sin as being more than disobedience to God’s known commands, but includes this.)

- God graciously giving believers His power to enable them to obey the Law of Moses. Such obedience was not perfect but it did not need to be because they were being saved by God’s grace and not by works of Law. This is a right use of the Law of Moses for sinful humans.

**The conversion of sinners to God in Job’s era**

The Hebrew word "shub" is used in Job 36:10 in the sense of God commanding sinners to turn from their sins. Job 36:9-11 says: "Then He tells them their work and their transgressions — that they have acted defiantly. He also opens their ear to instruction, and commands that they turn from iniquity. If they obey and serve Him, they shall spend their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasures." Elihu, the speaker of these above words is referring to people turning from their sins through God’s grace.

Earlier in Job 33:14-30, Elihu explained what turning from sins by God’s grace meant. Verse 24 here speaks of God’s grace and a ransom to prevent a sinner going down to the Pit. Verse 28 refers to God redeeming (purchasing) someone’s soul from going down to the Pit. This is salvation by grace.

"Shub" is also linked to New Testament conversion

Hosea 3:4-5 reveals the Hebrew word "shub" describes how people would turn to God under the New Covenant in the latter days: "For the children of Israel shall abide many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the children of Israel shall return, seek the Lord their God and David their king, and fear the Lord and His goodness in the latter days." The expression "David their king" refers to the Messiah (Who is Jesus Christ), the fulfilment of the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7:1-17.

Psalm 22 is about the suffering and praise of the Messiah – Jesus Christ. Psalm 22:27-28 relates to the people who will turn ("shub") to God from all the nations of the Earth through the Messiah during the New Covenant period: "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the Lord’s, and he rules over the nations."

When prophesying in Daniel 12:3 about people turning others to the Lord in the New Covenant "last days", Daniel uses the word "shub": "...and those who turn many to
righteousness…” Isaiah 59:20 prophecies that the Redeemer – Jesus Christ – would in future come to those Israelites who turn from their sins. In context, this verse is another prophecy about the New Covenant.


The difference between true and false prophets

Jeremiah 23:21-22 records God described true prophets as those who turned people from their sins and false prophets as those who did not: "I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in My counsel, and had caused My people to hear My words, then they would have turned them from their evil way and from the evil of their doings." This above verse uses the Hebrew word "shub". Jeremiah 23:14 says similar things.

Bible Study Questions

1. What does the Hebrew word "shub" mean?

2. What is the main difference between Old Testament grace-based turning or returning to God and that occurring under the New Covenant?

3. List some verses which show that Old Testament conversion involved turning to God and turning from known sins.

4. What does the Hebrew word "shub" mean in Jeremiah 11:10?

5. In Old Testament times, was turning or returning to God related to salvation by grace or salvation by works of Law?

6. Does the Old Testament place much emphasis on God strengthening believers by His undeserved grace?

7. What does the Mosaic Law in Deuteronomy 4:30-31 and 30:1-10 teach about turning or returning to God?

8. Which Old Testament verses reveal that conversion to God in New Testament times also involves turning from our known sins?

9. What does Jeremiah 23:21-22 reveal about the difference between true and false prophets?