

LIVING A NEW LIFE: OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING ABOUT CONVERSION

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Both liberal and evangelical scholars have entertained doubts about the presence and/or frequency of conversion in the OT, but the doctrine is illustrated and objectified in the OT rather than being presented in doctrinal discourses as in the NT. Moses spoke of conversion in terms of the circumcision of the heart in Deut 10:16 and 30:6. The OT prophets referred often to Deuteronomistic theology found in Deut 27–30 as a foundation for their prophecies. Joshua spoke of fearing the LORD in developing the Deuteronomistic basis of conversion. Hezekiah's trust in the LORD also built on that foundation, and the prophets after him continued to build thereon. Examples of conversion in the OT included Abram, Naaman, Rahab, Ruth, the sailors on board the ship with Jonah, and the Ninevites. Elements involved in conversion in the OT included the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, knowledge of God, confession, faith, and repentance. A total change in a person's life was the obvious outcome of conversion.

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Introduction

Is the OT doctrine of conversion one of the “things” to be taught to all peoples (Matt 28:20)? Jacob Milgrom claimed that “religious conversion is neither attested nor possible in ancient Israel before the second temple period.”¹ Evangelical scholars may not be so sweeping in their claims, but some are convinced that “the concept of conversion is actually very rare in the Old Testament.”² Some scholars claim that “the OT has no fully developed idea of conversion.”³ Do these statements present an accurate picture of the doctrine of conversion in the OT?

Should one look for doctrinal teaching about conversion such as is found

¹Jacob Milgrom, “Religious Conversion and the Revolt Model for the Formation of Israel,” *JBL* 101/2 (1982):169.

²Darrell L. Bock, “Convert, Conversion,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 118.

³Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 120.

in the NT? Didactic subgenre is present in the OT, but it occurs less frequently than in the NT. To speak of doctrine in the OT as though it must be taught in forms similar to those in the NT is misleading. Yet it could be that the doctrinal teachings of the OT are couched in the terms of history and parable—more like the teachings of Jesus Himself. If doctrine can be illustrated and objectified rather than systematized and catechized, perhaps the OT is far more doctrinal than commonly thought.

The thesis of this article is that a number of narrative descriptions of conversion occur in the OT. Examples of conversions in the OT include Abram, Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, the sailors who were aboard the ship with Jonah, and the Ninevites.⁴ Those conversion stories contain similarities which mark them off as an intentional subgenre, designed to teach the doctrine of conversion by means of historical example. As in the account of the conversion of the apostle Paul in the Book of Acts, such histories indicate that conversion involved a total change in the individual's life—a new life.

Conversion implies a break from one's former mode of life. It must be genuine "with all one's heart and with all one's soul"—an external acknowledgment of having sinned is wholly insufficient. Saul regretted not having observed Yahweh's command and Samuel's directions, but his sorrow proceeded merely from the evil consequences of his actions. There is no conversion without abandoning sin because sin breaks intimacy with God.⁵

Such change was produced by divine intervention.⁶ The individual responded in faith, repentance, and commitment. Divine forgiveness and corporate fellowship within the covenant were results of conversion in the OT.

The Mosaic Description of Conversion

Moses's second and third sermons on the plains of Moab contain the earliest developed description of conversion:

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (Deut 6:4-5).⁷

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear

⁴Amazingly, of these particular examples, Abram is the most neglected as far as OT history is concerned. The narrative assumes his conversion and describes it only tangentially.

⁵Paul Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. William G. Heidt (Collegeville, Minn.: The Order of St. Benedict, 1955) 183. Cf. Richard J. Sklba, "The Call to New Beginnings: A Biblical Theology of Conversion," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 11/3 (July 1981):71.

⁶Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967) 2:295.

⁷Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible* (La Habra, Calif.: The Lockman Foundation, 1988).

(לִירְאָה, *l̄yir'āh*) the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the LORD's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good? Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. . . . Circumcise then your heart (וּמַלְתֶּם אֶת עֵרְלַת לְבַבְכֶם, *ûmāltēm 'ēt 'ārlat lēbabkem*), and stiffen your neck no more. For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality, nor take a bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him (וּבֹ תִדְבָּק, *ûbô tidbāq*), and you shall swear by His name. He is your praise and He is your God, who has done these great and awesome things for you which your eyes have seen (Deut 10:12-14, 16-21).

The LORD your God will circumcise your heart (אֶת־לְבַבְךָ . . . וּמַל, *ûmāl . . . 'ef lēbabkā*) and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live (Deut 30:6).

The circumcision of the heart described in Deut 10:16 and 30:6 “speaks of internal identification with [the Lord] in what might be called regeneration in Christian theology.”⁸ John J. Davis gave the following definition of regeneration: “Regeneration in its basic and most fundamental aspect is an act of God whereby He imparts to the sinner new life which is eternal and holy in character, effecting a change in the whole man.”⁹ The Mosaic description certainly involved change and new life. Over 1,400 years later, the Apostle Paul used the exact same imagery to define the spiritual Jew (Rom 2:28-29). He attributed the renewal to the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Ezek 36:25-27). The Mosaic description served as a preview of the New Covenant¹⁰ that would be revealed through Jeremiah 800 years later:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD (יָדַעוּ אֶת־יְהוָה, *dē'û 'ef yhw̄h*),’ for they shall all know Me (יָדַעוּ אֹתִי), *yē dē'û 'ōfi*), from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and

⁸Eugene Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4 in *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 388.

⁹John J. Davis, “Regeneration in the Old Testament” (ThM thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Ind., 1964) 64.

¹⁰Merrill, *Deuteronomy* 388-89; J. Gordon McConville, *Grace in the End: A Study in Deuteronomic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 137.

their sin I will remember no more" (Jer 31:31-34).

Deuteronomic Theology and Prophetic Proclamation

Chapters 27–30 of Deuteronomy were the basis for much of the prophetic preaching in the OT.¹¹ Over and over again, the prophets referred to the deuteronomic issues of obedience and disobedience, blessing and cursing, rebellion and repentance. Their preaching was not purely an exposition of Deuteronomy. They also proclaimed the revelation they had received from Yahweh. That revelation involved a progressive development of OT theology couched in each prophet's own terminology and phraseology. Just as the modern preacher refers to the teachings of the OT and NT as the revelatory foundation for his messages, so also the OT prophets referred to prior revelation as the foundation for some of their messages. It is not possible to understand the messages of the OT prophets properly (or for that matter, even the NT prophets) without being well-grounded in the theology of the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Especially those two books of Moses defined and applied issues of personal and corporate holiness to everyday living.

Many scholars hold a radically different view of the relationship between Deuteronomy and the historical and prophetic books of the OT.¹² They propose one or more exilic or post-exilic redactors who either composed, edited, or updated the Pentateuch, the historical books,¹³ and the prophetic books. That redacting hand (or hands) is normally identified as the "Deuteronomist." McConville sounds a warning about such deuteronomistic (as opposed to deuteronomic) theorizing:

[T]he interpreter should be sensitive to the possibility that the theory might unduly dominate the reconstruction of the authentic Deuteronomy.

I believe that this has in fact happened, partly because certain theological value-judgments have been brought to bear that lack adequate justification either in Deuteronomy

¹¹Cf. Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT* 2:295. However, one must be careful to observe that Eichrodt attributes such preaching to the Deuteronomist, not to Moses (2:296).

¹²See a discussion of this matter as it relates to Jeremiah in William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26-52*, Hermeneia, ed. Paul D. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 12-13. Cf. also Henri Cazelles, "Jeremiah and Deuteronomy," trans. Leo G. Perdue, in *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies*, ed. Leo G. Perdue and Brian W. Kovacs (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1984) 89-109; J. Philip Hyatt, "Jeremiah and Deuteronomy," in *A Prophet to the Nations*, 113-27; John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 33-43. Regarding Mic 6:1-8, Delbert R. Hillers wrote, "In sum, these expressions may be indications of a late date for this passage, or may indicate the influence of an early form of Deuteronomy or a source of Deuteronomy, which is not impossible in Hezekiah's reign" (*Micah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Micah*, Hermeneia, ed. Paul D. Hanson, with Loren Fisher [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984] 79).

¹³Cf. Robert G. Boling, *Joshua: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, vol. 6 in *The Anchor Bible*, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982) 152: "the Rahab story was only rescued from oblivion and put in place by the later redactor, Dtr 2."

omy itself or in OT theology more generally. For example, the distinction between root and branch has often been made on the basis of a polarization of the theological themes of law and grace.

I shall anticipate some of the argument by saying at the outset that I believe that Deuteronomy as we have it today is the true formative influence, not only on [Deuteronomistic History], but more generally on OT theology. This view attributes to the book a vigor and brilliance of thought that is rarely appreciated. It sees it as a document of theological profundity, capable of discerning a range of possibilities in the relationship between God and human beings, rather than as a series of layered programs for ever-new situations.¹⁴

At times the historical books took up the deuteronomic theology in order to demonstrate how the pagans around Israel occasionally lived more righteously than the Israelites themselves. When the priesthood was tainted with corrupt and immoral men, such Gentiles as Ruth, Rahab, and Naaman came to the God of Israel by faith. The prophet Jonah demonstrated by his disobedience that he was not leading a new life characterized by godliness. He compared unfavorably with the pagan sailors who risked their own lives in an attempt to save his life. The biggest contrast exploded on the stage of history when the repentant pagan population of Nineveh renounced idolatry and violence to turn to the living God (cf. 1 Thess 1:9). They became everything Israel and Jonah should have been but were not.

Deuteronomic exposition was the source for a great deal of prophetic proclamation demanding covenant obedience of apostate (i.e., idol-worshipping) Israelites. Moses's successor, Joshua was the first to expound the Mosaic message:

Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God and walk in all His ways and keep His commandments and hold fast to Him (יִדְבַקְתֶּם בְּיְהוָה, *ûlê dābqā bō*) and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul (Josh 22:5).

Now, therefore, fear the LORD (יִרְאוּ אֶת־יְהוָה, *yər'û 'ef yhw̄h*) and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods (אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי־מִצְרַיִם, *wêhāsîrû 'ef 'êlōhîm*) which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD (Josh 24:14).

Someone might object that what both Moses and Joshua were describing was the concept of covenant renewal rather than conversion. Covenant renewal, however, was actually a recommitment to the changed life that had been entered at conversion. "Commitment . . . begins with the experience of conversion and then follows through into a life of progressive sanctification in obedience to God's law."¹⁵ On the plains of Moab Moses stood before the second generation of Israelites. They were well aware of the idolatry of their parents and grandparents who perished in the

¹⁴McConville, *Grace in the End* 11-12.

¹⁵J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) 297.

wilderness. In preparation for their entry into the land of promise, Moses called upon converted Israelites to recommit themselves to the keeping of the covenant. At the same time, he called upon yet unconverted Israelites to put away their idols and turn to the living God. Joshua issued the same call in Josh 24:14.

The Mosaic description of conversion applied to the kings of Israel and Judah in order to evaluate their relationship to Yahweh. Hezekiah's faith and reformation were described in deuteronomic phraseology:

He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel (חַבַּח בְּיְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, *bayhwh* 'ēlōhē yisrā'ēl bā'āh); so that after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him. For he clung to the LORD (וַיִּדְבַק בְּיְהוָה, *wāyyidbaq bayhwh*); he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses (2 Kgs 18:5,6).

Prophetic proclamation in the monarchical period called for conversion.¹⁶ The call of the prophets was, in actuality, "*the divine demand for conversion*, proclaimed with unprecedented vehemence and harshness . . . for this demand, even though directed to the nation as a whole, yet made its appeal to the individual's capacity for decision."¹⁷ The people of Judah and Israel were exhorted to change, to convert, to repent, to turn away from idols and back to the living God, the Creator of heavens and earth, Yahweh, their Redeemer.

Prophets ministering over 200 years prior to the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem proclaimed the same deuteronomic message:

"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "Return to Me (שׁוּבוּ עִמָּי, *šubū 'ēday*) with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping, and mourning; and rend your heart and not your garments." Now return to the LORD your God (וּשְׁבוּ אֶל־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, *wəš'ubū 'eṭ yhw'w* 'ēlōhēkem), for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, and relenting of evil. Who knows whether He will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him, even a grain offering and a libation for the LORD your God? (Joel 2:12-14; cf. Exod 34:6,7).

The Gentiles were included in the invitation to convert or turn from idolatry to faith in Yahweh:

Turn to Me (פְּנֹנָאֵי לִי, *pənū' ē lay*), and be saved (וְהִשְׁעָנוּ, *wəhiwwāš'ū*), all the ends of the earth; For I am God, and there is no other (Isa 45:22).

In the Book of Isaiah "the means of the conversion of the nations is clear: they will come to acknowledge that Yahweh alone is God, because they will see his Lordship

¹⁶Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT* 2:245.

¹⁷Ibid. (emphasis in the original).

and glory made manifest in his salvation of his people Israel.”¹⁸

To include in this article an analysis of prophetic phraseology that is derived from deuteronomic materials is unnecessary. Various scholars have compiled detailed lists and have demonstrated the similarities.¹⁹ A development of the theology of conversion in the OT is parallel to the development of Mosaic theology throughout the remainder of the OT. That does not mean, however, that the concept of conversion did not exist until the time of Moses. Abram’s testimony puts that fallacy to rest.

Unfortunately, many theologians explain away any possible Mosaic involvement in the theology of conversion by attributing the teachings to the hypothetical “Deuteronomic school and the Priestly Code.”²⁰ Such an approach denies Mosaic authorship to much of Deuteronomy and attributes portions of Moses’s sermons to the creative editorial work of a later redactor (e.g., Deut 4:3, 9-10; 10:16; 30:2, 10). It is more consistent with the *prima facie* evidence of the biblical text to conclude that exilic prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel expounded the Mosaic Torah rather than to conclude that an exilic or post-exilic redactor inserted the teachings of those two prophets into Deuteronomy.

Milgrom’s article was primarily a response to Norman Gottwald²¹ and George Mendenhall²² who had proposed that Israel had been composed of Canaanite converts who revolted against their overlords and joined the invading bands of Yahwists from the desert. Milgrom proposed that the resident alien (גֵר, *gēr*), even if he were to accept and practice Israelite religion, was kept from assimilating with the nation throughout the pre-exilic period.²³ Gottwald defined conversion as

¹⁸Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 75. Achtemeier, however, attributes such teaching to the fictions of Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah—yet another example of how some theologians manage to limit the doctrine of conversion to the exilic and post-exilic periods.

¹⁹Viz., Herbert B. Huffmon, “The Covenant Law suit in the Prophets,” *JBL* 78 (1959):285-95; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972); and Louis Stulman, *The Prose Sermons of the Book of Jeremiah: A Redescription of the Correspondences with the Deuteronomistic Literature in the Light of Recent Text-critical Research*, SBL Dissertation Series 83, ed. J. J. M. Roberts (Atlanta: Scholars, 1986) esp. 31-48. Cf. William D. Barrick, “Leviticus 26: Its Relationship to Covenant Contexts and Concepts” (ThD dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Ind., 1981).

²⁰Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT* 2:470.

²¹Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979). See esp. chapter 45, “Canaanite Converts, Neutrals, and Allies vis-à-vis Liberated Israel,” 555-83.

²²George E. Mendenhall, “The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 25/3 (September 1962):66-87

²³Milgrom, “Religious Conversion,” 175. It is not the purpose of this article to respond to Milgrom’s views regarding גֵר in the OT. It is true that the Hebrew term is the equivalent of “proselyte” in the later Jewish history, but the doctrine of conversion in the OT is not limited to the occurrences of גֵר. To limit it

“incorporation into Israel.”²⁴

In arguing for the lack of mass conversion in the pre-exilic period, Milgrom appealed to the mysterious hand of the deuteronomic redactor:

In any event, D's law of the *ḥēřēm* and its concomitant ban on intermarriage presumes that Canaanites qua Canaanites continued to thrive at least into the eighth century. Furthermore, by positing, with many scholars, that the origins of D lie in eighth-century northern Israel, this thesis receives additional support. For the great urban blocks of Canaanites, to judge by the list of city-states that Israel could not conquer (Judg 1:27-35), are all located—with the exception of Jerusalem (v 11)—in the north. It was these Canaanite enclaves assimilating at such an alarming rate—not through conversion but through intermarriage—which gave rise to the intermarriage—apostasy—*ḥēřēm*—holy people sequence in the *ḥēřēm* law of D.²⁵

This concept of a redactor or textual-updater creates problems for the study of conversion in the OT. Were the individual accounts of conversion inserted by the redactor or a sequence of editors from the eighth through the fifth centuries B.C.? Some would argue that the conversion stories were more pertinent to the concerns of the exilic and post-exilic communities. However, “the fact that a book can be shown to be relevant to a certain age does not require that it was composed then.”²⁶ The various hypotheses of redaction often rely upon fallacious presuppositions that undermine the integrity and authenticity of the biblical text.²⁷ Unless the pre-Mosaic setting of the Book of Job is explained away by the fallacious assumption that the

the doctrine in that fashion would be the same fallacy that would deny the biblical teaching concerning the Trinity because the word “trinity” is not employed anywhere in Scripture. Cf. A. H. Konkel, “*רל*,” *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 1:838: “The logical translation of the nom. *רל* in the LXX is *prosēlytos*, since the G word has the sense of one who has arrived or a sojourner. The term is used especially in those texts referring to the inclusion of the resident alien as a full participatory member in the religious community (ca. 70s), giving it the nuance of the later, more technical meaning of a convert.” “In postbiblical Heb. and Aram. the vb. *gwr* most often refers to converting (becoming a proselyte)” (ibid). Unsubstantiated presuppositions regarding the Deuteronomist are part and parcel of the discussions regarding the theological significance of *רל*: “It would seem that the *ger* plays an important role in Deuteronomy because at the time of the Josianic Reform in 622 B.C., the problem of the protected citizen required special attention” (D. Kellermann, “*רל*,” *TDOT*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] 2:445).

²⁴Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh* 555.

²⁵Ibid., 173.

²⁶McConville, *Grace in the End* 98.

²⁷Examples of such fallacious presuppositions include: (1) Reality is uniform and universal. (2) Contemporary human experience can provide the criteria by which the past can be determined, examined, and interpreted. (3) Western traditions and cultures are valid sources for evaluating OT literary forms. (4) *Vaticinia ex eventu* explains the reason for prophetic detail. (5) There are no more significant discoveries to be made in the realm of history and archeology that will confirm the accuracy or authenticity of the text of the OT.

time of composition redates the original events themselves, conversion was a concept with which Job and his friends were familiar (cf. Job 8:5-7; 11:13-20; and esp. 22:21-30).²⁸ Thus, conversion in the OT was not a late development—it was a theological concept at least as old as the patriarchs.

The Examples of Conversion in the OT

Individuals who were converted from an idolatrous Gentile background include such major figures as Abram (Genesis 12), Naaman (2 Kings 5), Rahab (Joshua 2), Ruth (Ruth 1:16-18), and the sailors on board the ship from Joppa to Tarshish (Jonah 1:16). Examples of national or corporate conversion include Judah in the time of Asa (2 Chr 14:2-4; 15:12-15)²⁹ and the city of Nineveh (Jonah 3:5-10).

Abram. The inevitable implication of the OT narrative is that Abram's family had been worshipers of idols in Ur (cf. Josh 24:2, 14). Abram had been a Gentile. The primary evidence of his conversion from idolatry is the fact that he responded to Yahweh's call to leave Ur for the land of Canaan (cf. Heb 11:8). Throughout the Scriptures Abram is the epitome of saving faith (cf. Rom 4:1-12; Gal 3:7-9). His conversion was obviously genuine and its pre-Deuteronomic date is practically incontestable. "Both the command of God (v. 1) and the promises of God (vv. 2-3) antedate the implementation of the covenant. Moreover, Abram's faith is also in operation prior to his commitment to be Yahweh's servant."³⁰ However, some scholars do question the legitimacy of accepting the Abrahamic narratives as patriarchal in their time of composition. Albrecht Alt considered "the patriarchal narratives as consisting mainly of secondary material composed by the later writers and reflecting their own religious philosophies."³¹

Interpreters dealing with Josh 24:2 differ in their conclusions concerning the extent to which the statement by Joshua implicated Abram in idolatrous worship.³² It cannot be denied, however, that the NT presents Abram as the classic example of biblical faith. "In effect, said the apostle, Abraham was circumcised in the heart before he ever was in the flesh, and it was that inner work that set him apart

²⁸Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT* 2:472.

²⁹This article will not examine this particular example. See Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament* 300; and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Quest for Revival: Personal Revival in the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1986) 77-88.

³⁰Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, NICOT, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 371.

³¹Thomas Edward McComiskey, "The Religion of the Patriarchs: An Analysis of *The God of the Fathers* by Albrecht Alt," in *The Law and the Prophets*, ed. John H. Skilton (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974) 195.

³²Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, NICOT, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 344.

as a covenant son (Rom 4:1-12).³³

Rahab. Before the Israelites entered the promised land, a Canaanite woman of questionable reputation converted to faith in Yahweh (Josh 2:1-21). Her conversion included an “active acknowledgment that establishes a formal relationship, not merely a passive cognitive condition.”³⁴ Such an acknowledgment is “a formulaic expression used more than once when a foreigner acknowledges Israelite truth (e.g., Exod 18:11; 1 Kgs 17:24; 2 Kgs 5:15; Isa 45:3).”³⁵ Her confession of Yahweh’s supremacy (2:11) echoes deuteronomistic themes and phrases (cf. Deut 4:35, 39; 7:9; 10:17).³⁶ Rahab also gave evidence of her changed life by demonstrating **תְּוֹנָה** (*hesed*) to the Israeli spies. In the Book of Joshua she is the first individual

³³Merrill, *Deuteronomy* 388. For an excellent treatment of conversion in the NT (especially the Book of Acts), see William Barclay, *Turning to God: A Study of Conversion in the Book of Acts and Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964).

³⁴Boling, *Joshua* 146 (re: Josh 2:9). G. F. MacLear, *The Book of Joshua, with Notes, Maps, and Introduction*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, ed. J. J. S. Perowne (Cambridge: University Press, 1889) 40, however, does not accept Rahab as a true convert since she merely voiced “a knowledge which is possible to the heathen, for the ‘invisible things of God from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His *eternal power and Godhead*’ (Rom. I. 20).” Cf., also Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library, ed. James L. Mays, Carol A. Newsom, and David L. Petersen (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1997) 50: “Yet her words, for all their deuteronomistic flavor, remain appropriate to the ancestor of a group who would remain outside Israel’s camp (6:23). Yahweh remains ‘*your God*.’ She is not the Gentile convert that later tradition would make of her, but rather one of those foreigners in the Hebrew Bible whose acknowledgment that Yahweh is God underscores the self-evident power and glory of Yahweh (Balaam, Naaman, Nebuchadnezzar, Dariusus).” Woudstra, *Joshua* 73: “In some ways her words [2:8-11] reflect clearly that she is just beginning to emerge from her pagan environment. Calling God *the Lord your God* who is a *God in heaven above and on earth beneath*, Rahab expresses a thought which is also biblical; but similar utterances may be found also in pagan literature.” “Cf. the Egyptian ‘Hymn to Aten’ and the ‘Hymn to Amun’; see *DOTT*, pp. 147, 149. These hymns contain expressions such as ‘Thou sole god, there is no other like thee!’ and ‘The only sole one, who has no peer.’ For a pagan reaction to the Lord’s acts on behalf of Israel see also 1 Sam. 4:8. The thought that Israel’s God acts ‘in the sight of the nations’ is frequently expressed in Ezekiel, e.g. 20:22. The Alalah inscriptions contain an invocation of ‘the gods above and the gods beneath,’ language similar to that used by Rahab; see D. J. Wiseman, ‘Alalakh,’ in *AOTS*, pp. 131, 135” (*ibid.*, 73 n. 23).

³⁵Frank Anthony Spina, “Rahab,” *NIDOTTE* 4:1125. Von Rad also cites the conversion of Rahab as an example of a Gentile exercising faith: Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols., trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65) 2:379.

³⁶It is due to such echoes that Butler attributes the Rahab account in the Book of Joshua to the Deuteronomist: “The one thing that does appear to be clear is that the Deuteronomist has introduced his own theological conception into the mouth of Rahab in vv 9-11. The tradition of the fear of the nations, the drying up of the waters (וַיַּבֶּשׂ הַיָּם *hi.*), the two kings of the Amorites, and the divine title (12b) all bear Deuteronomistic stamp. Verse 24 stems from the same source. Here then is pre-Deuteronomistic literature given a Deuteronomistic stamp” (Trent C. Butler, *Joshua*, vol. 7 in *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1983] 11). Cf., also Nelson, *Joshua* 46.

to employ the word *hesed* (2:12).³⁷ In the NT, Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 present Rahab as an example of the same faith that characterized Abraham.

In effect, Rahab recites what amounts to an Israelite “Apostles Creed.” Her confession is not that of someone aware of only the most rudimentary aspects of the faith. Rather, this quintessential Canaanite utters an equally quintessential Israelite confession of faith. The ingredients of the confession are constitutive of the covenant between the Lord and Israel, just as the confession becomes in part the basis of the covenant Rahab makes with the spies (Josh 2:12-14, 17-21 . . .). In the end, Rahab’s confession and agreement with the spies eventuate in her and her household becoming part of Israel “to this day” (6:25). This is a conversion story.³⁸

Ruth. Comments and references in the commentary by Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., were the catalyst for this article. Hubbard posed the question: “Is Ruth a ‘convert’ to Yahwism? Since the very question is a modern one, the answer must be a qualified yes.”³⁹ Ruth’s oath of allegiance to Naomi sounds like a confession and reveals her life-changing commitment to Yahweh (cf. Ruth 2:12, “the LORD . . . under whose wings you have come to take refuge”):

Further, her commitment involved a change in life direction—one opposite to Orpah’s—away from her past ties and toward a new God, Yahweh. The commitment also extended into the afterlife. Significantly, though the oath formula normally has Elohim, Ruth invoked the personal, covenantal name *Yahweh*—the only time in the book in which she does so. Since one appeals to one’s own deity to enforce an oath, she clearly implies that Yahweh, not Chemosh, is now her God, the guardian of her future. Hence, while the OT has no fully developed idea of conversion, vv. 16-17 suggest a commitment tantamount to such a change.⁴⁰

One of the great themes of the Book of Ruth is that of *hesed*. According to the testimonies of Naomi (Ruth 1:8) and Boaz (3:10), Ruth clearly demonstrated loyalty and lovingkindness to her deceased husband, to her mother-in-law Naomi, and to her

³⁷Ibid., 147. Cf. Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT* 2:506: the conversion required by the prophet Hosea includes “that full understanding of *hēsēd* which befits the covenant relationship, and which takes seriously the God of history.”

³⁸Spina, “Rahab,” *NIDOTTE* 4:1125. McConville offers a sane response to those scholars who would argue for an exilic or post-exilic date for the composition of the Rahab story: “There are, indeed, some indications of a perspective in Joshua that is at some distance from the events described, notably in the phrase ‘to this day’ (4:9; 5:9; 6:25; 7:26; 8:28; 9:27). These notices do not identify a particular time in Israel’s history, but a long time is scarcely required. The allusion to Rahab (see especially 6:25) is most easily comprehensible if the gap between the event and the comment is short.” Such comments in the text of Scripture are “evidence of a date in the seventh century or later only in the context of a prior commitment to the view that that requirement is to be so dated” (*Grace in the End* 98-99).

³⁹Hubbard, *Ruth* 120.

⁴⁰Ibid.

husband-to-be, Boaz.

Naaman. Jewish tradition identified Naaman as “an example of the righteous proselyte, ranking even higher than Jethro.”⁴¹ Naaman became a proselyte or convert by acknowledging the supremacy of Yahweh (2 Kgs 5:15).⁴² Cogan and Tadmor make the observation that the characteristic post-exilic requirements of the rite of conversion are lacking in the biblical account of Naaman’s conversion.⁴³ That would seem to indicate, therefore, that the biblical account is being recorded accurately in its original historical setting in the monarchical period even though the author of the account may be living in the time of the exile. Naaman’s conversion evidences the universality of the call to conversion that is a frequent aspect of the Elijah-Elisha chronicles.⁴⁴ It also highlights the apostasy of the Israelite king and Elisha’s faithless servant, Gehazi. For a commentary, Paul House’s presentation is the clearest and most comprehensive treatment of Naaman’s conversion and its theological implications.⁴⁵ Naaman’s conversion includes the elements of a confession of faith and a commitment to a new manner of living.⁴⁶

⁴¹Editorial staff, “Naaman,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Cecil Roth (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971) 12:734.

⁴²Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 11 in *The Anchor Bible*, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1988) 67; T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, vol. 13 in *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985) 65; James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, ed. Henry Snyder Gehman, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1951) 375, 379; Gray, *I & II Kings* 507. Lest Gray’s position be misunderstood as supporting the thesis of this paper, the author would refer the reader to Gray’s anti-supernaturalistic treatment of the miracles of Elisha: “The factual basis of the ‘miracle’ of the floating axe-head may be that Elisha with a long pole or stick probed about the spot indicated (an important point in the text) until he succeeded either in inserting the stick into the socket, or, having located the hard object on the muddy bottom, moved it until the man was able to recover it. In the circles in which the Elisha-hagiology took shape simple instances of prophetic sagacity were soon exaggerated to miracles” (ibid., 511, re: 2 Kgs 6:6).

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Some, like Preuss, have argued that Naaman recognized the revelation of Yahweh in what he experienced—that it was equivalent to the word of Yahweh (Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. Leo G. Perdue, Old Testament Library, ed. James L. Mays, et al. [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1995] 1:208).

⁴⁵Paul R. House, *I, 2 Kings*, vol. 8 in *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995) 271-74, 313-15.

⁴⁶“Naaman’s conversion includes a confession of faith. . . . Hobbs correctly claims that Naaman’s confession consists of ‘words which accord closely with Elisha’s words in v. 8. . . . Following this confession, Naaman’s actions support his new-found faith.’ Sadly, Naaman’s confession of faith condemns most Israelites of that era, since they have rejected the one true God and embraced gods that cannot heal. Jesus makes this point while rebuking the people of Nazareth in Luke 4:23-30” (ibid., 273). House also points out the implications regarding the theology of missions in the OT: “[T]he Naaman story furthers a canonical emphasis on God’s grace to the nations. From Abraham’s call (Gen 12:1-9) onward

Naaman, like the widow of Zarephath before him (cf. 1 Kgs. 17:7-24), realizes that the God who heals must be the God who saves. His servant girl assumes correctly that Naaman's nationality does not matter to the prophet or to her compassionate God.

Naaman's healing causes him to confess that "there is no God in all the world except in Israel" (2 Kgs 5:15). The fact that he makes this claim in a pluralistic, polytheistic culture is significant, for he is in no way sheltered from competing world-views, nor has he failed to observe more than one belief system at close range. He has simply learned to discern the difference between a powerless idol and a personal God who meets worshippers' needs. Clearly, then, Naaman confesses what Israel fails to confess: the sovereign, saving God is the only God and therefore deserves worship.⁴⁷

The sailors. One of the most amazing accounts of conversion is that on the high seas aboard the ship bound for Tarshish with a disobedient prophet as one of its paying passengers (Jonah 1).⁴⁸ The key element in this particular conversion account is the employment of the word "fear" (אָרַץ, *yārē*). The account contains an obvious progression in the development of the concept:⁴⁹

"Then the sailors became afraid" (וַיִּירָאוּ, *wāyyîrē'û* v. 5)

"I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land" (אֲנִי יְהוּדִי וְאֵת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ יָרֵא, *wē'ef yhw h'ēlōhē haššāmayim 'ānî yārē*, v. 9)

"Then the men became extremely frightened" (וַיִּירָאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים יָרֵא גְדוֹלָה, *wayyîrē'û hā 'ānāšîm yirē 'āh gēdōlāh*, v. 10)

"Then the men feared the LORD greatly" (וַיִּירָאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים יָרֵא גְדוֹלָה אֶת יְהוָה, *wayyîrē'û hā 'ānāšîm yirē 'āh gēdōlāh 'ef yhw h*, v. 16)

Hans Walter Wolff observes that even though the statement in verse 16 "has a narrative form, the statement reminds us of the phrase 'fear of Yahweh' which, in the Elohist and in the wisdom writings, is not merely the term for worship, in the sense of a permanent religious affiliation, but even more describes a living

God expects Israel to bless other nations. Moses marries a Cushite (Num 12:1); Ruth is from Moab; Rahab is a Canaanite; Jonah preaches to Assyrians; Daniel prophesies and witnesses to Babylonians. Yahweh, the only God, stands ready to accept Naaman without hesitation. The question is whether the covenant people are ready to share the covenant Lord. Surely this issue must have penetrated the minds of some of the original readers of 1, 2 Kings, and the servant girl's response to Naaman's pain sets a high standard of loving even captors enough to explain God's power to them" (ibid., 313).

⁴⁷Ibid., 314

⁴⁸Joyce Baldwin, "Jonah," *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 2:563.

⁴⁹Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 122; Jonathan Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah*, Bible and Literature Series, ed. David M. Gunn (Sheffield: Almond, 1983) 31-32; James Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library, ed. James L. Mays, Carol A. Newsom, and David L. Petersen (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 57.

relationship of obedience and trust.”⁵⁰ The sailors did more than reverence Yahweh—they acceded to His sovereign control (v. 14, “Thou, O LORD, hast done as Thou hast pleased”). In addition to this evidence of conversion, the sailors demonstrated *hesed* by their self-sacrificing efforts to save the life of the prophet (vv. 10-13). They entreated Yahweh for forgiveness for that which they were about to do with Jonah (v. 14), they offered a sacrifice to Yahweh, and made vows (v. 16) indicating “a lasting bond of trust with Yahweh.”⁵¹

Such a sacrifice could have taken place aboard ship. The commentators speculate on these matters; the text does not say. The important thing is that these sailors, who once called upon other gods (1:5), now worship the Lord that Jonah confesses (1:9). A vow is a promise made to the Lord (Deut. 23:21-23); the contents of these promises are not indicated here. After his experience in the fish, Jonah will resolve to make sacrifices and to fulfill vows that he has made (2:9[10]).⁵²

Ninevites. Upon hearing the Word of God proclaimed by the prophet Jonah (3:4), the people of Nineveh “believed in God” (v. 5, *וַיִּאֱמְנוּ אֶת־יְהוָה בְּאֵלֵהֶם*, *wayya’āminū ’anšē nīnēwēh bē ’lōhīm*).⁵³

Just as in Exod. 14:31 so here (*וַיִּאֱמְנוּ בְּאֵלֵהֶם*) is a synonymous parallel to *וַיִּיָּרֶאוּ אֶת־יְהוָה*, in 1:16. . . . If the meaning differs at all, it does so only by a nuance: *יָרָא* may perhaps lay more emphasis on the relationship of obedience (cf. 1:16 with 1:10), while *וַיִּאֱמֵן* rather stresses the relationship of trust (Ps. 78:22). But both words aim to stress the complete reliance on God. . . . Otherwise *וַיִּאֱמֵן* is used only in connection with Israel, as all the references cited show; at the same time, the sense is often that this kind of faith is not to be found in Israel (Num. 14:11; 20:12; Deut. 1:32; 2 Kings 17:14; Ps. 78:22). Against this background it is “almost as if the narrator wanted to say: “Not even in Israel have I found such faith” (. . . cf. Matt. 8:10 with 12:41 and John 1:9f.; 4:1ff.).⁵⁴

⁵⁰Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah* 121. There is evidence that the potential for Gentile conversion existed even prior to the exodus from Egypt (cf. Exod 9:20, 30). This potential must be carefully evaluated in light of the absence of conversion even though there might be a fear of Yahweh (cf. 2 Kgs 17:41).

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 122. *Pirkē Rabbi Eliezer* “fills in the story: ‘They returned to Joppa and went up to Jerusalem and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins, as it is said, “And the men feared the Lord exceedingly; and they offered a sacrifice unto the Lord”’” (Limburg, *Jonah* 57 n. 62).

⁵²Limburg, *Jonah* 57-58.

⁵³“In v. 5 ‘God’ as the object of faith is almost required, since the Ninevites have been told nothing about Yahweh (as were the sailors in 1:9). And it is with conscious artistry that 3:10 picks up *וַיִּאֱמֵן* from 3:9” (Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah* 147).

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 150. Wolff (151) draws an intriguing parallel to the situation of Sodom and Gomorrah, another group of Gentiles who were given the opportunity to convert: “The reader is supposed to grasp, even at this early point, that it is not only a limited number who came to believe. (This was the choice open to Sodom, where at the end even ten righteous men would have been enough to save the whole city [Gen. 18:23-33].” Cf. T. Desmond Alexander, “Jonah,” *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, TOTC, ed. D. J.

Both the sailors and the citizens of the city of Nineveh “called out” to God in prayer (1:14, וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־יְהוָה, *wayyiqrē ’û ’eġyhwḥ*; 3:8, וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־יְהוָה בְּחִזְקָה, *wēyiqrē ’û ’eġ ’ēlôhîm bēḥzēqāh*). They possessed the same hope “that we do not perish” (וְלֹא־נָאֲדָר, *wēlō’ nō’bēd*: 1:6; 3:9).⁵⁵ Nineveh’s inhabitants repented in sackcloth and ashes together with fasting (3:5-8).⁵⁶ Limburg comments, “Once again, the people of the world are demonstrating to the people of God how they ought to conduct themselves! . . . The actions of the Ninevites would long stand as a model response to prophetic preaching (Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:32).”⁵⁷ The involvement of the Word of God in the conversion of the Ninevites is undeniable.⁵⁸ Evidence of their conversion is seen in their humble acceptance of the judgment of God as a consequence of their former behavior (3:9).⁵⁹

The first consequence of faith is acceptance of the judgment as deserved. This is shown through rites of self-humiliation. . . . The completeness of Nineveh’s repentance is brought out in a number of different ways. . . . The fact that even the beasts participate in the rites of repentance (vv. 7b-8a) may be a reminder to the reader that among these strangers even ox and ass (Isa. 1:2f., like the stork and the swallow, Jer. 8:7) know more about repentance than do men and women in Israel.⁶⁰

In addition to their humility, the Ninevites set about to change the way they behaved

Wiseman (Downers Grove, Ill./Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1988) 121: “The Hebrew idiom *he’ min b’*, denotes more . . . than just believing what someone has said; it expresses the idea of trusting a person.”

⁵⁵Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, ed. Walter Brueggemann, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 72.

⁵⁶Limburg, *Jonah* 80.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 82. Cf. 85: “Of course the Assyrian king as portrayed here would not know the sort of creedal statements used by Joel and in *Jonah* 4:2. . . . He is kindred to another Gentile, a centurion, who also did not presume upon the Lord’s help, and of whom Jesus said, ‘I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith’ (Luke 7:1-10).” Many commentators express the opinion that “the king of Nineveh” is inconsistent with the usual title “king of Assyria” and indicative of composition as late as the Persian period (cf. Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, NICOT, ed. R. K. Harrison [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976] 185). However, it must be borne in mind that “there is a sparsity of Assyrian source material from the first half of the eighth century BC. This is a period of Assyrian history about which we are unfortunately very poorly informed” (Alexander, “Jonah,” *TO TC* 125; cf., also 122).

⁵⁸Limburg, *Jonah* 151: “Here [3:6] הַדְּבָר ‘the word,’ does not mean the news of the people’s conversion. If that were meant we should expect to find הַדְּבָרִים אֲלֵהֶם, ‘these things’ (Gen. 15:1; 1 Kgs 17:17; 21:1; and frequently). It is precisely ‘the word’ which Jonah proclaimed, דְּבַר, being the specific term for the prophetic word (Jer. 18:18; Amos 3:1; Ezek. 33:30, and frequently).” See, also 156: “The precondition for the faith is the messenger’s word that has gone forth.”

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 153.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 156. See Ralph L. Smith, *Old Testament Theology: Its History, Method, and Message* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993) 306-9, regarding the nature of forgiveness and its relationship to remission of penalty. Cf. also Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, vol. 3 of *The Anchor Bible*, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 373-78.

toward their fellow man. As individuals they turned (וָשׁוּבוּ אֶל־יְהוָה, *wəyāšubū 'iš*) from their “wicked way and from the violence [הַחֲמָסָה, *hehāmās*]” that was a hallmark of their national character (3:8; cf. Nahum 2:13 [Eng. 12]; 3:1). Such a change could be an indication that they would enter into human relationships with what could be termed *hesed*.

The Elements of OT Conversion

One element is glaringly absent in all of these OT examples of conversion: they have no reference to the Holy Spirit. Did the Spirit have a role in OT conversion? From John 3:5-8 it would appear that knowledge of the Spirit's involvement in regeneration had been revealed in the OT. However, John 7:39 seems to indicate that prior to Christ's glorification the Spirit had not yet been placed within those who believed. That the Spirit did not enter or indwell OT believers in association with conversion would be consistent with the future focus of passages such as Isaiah 44:3; Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26-27; 37:14.⁶¹ Absence of an indwelling of the Spirit in OT believers is not the same as His having no involvement at all, however. The exact nature of the Spirit's role in OT conversion is a subject deserving further examination, but that is beyond the scope of this current study.⁶²

The instrument of conversion in the OT was the Word of God (Ps 19:7).⁶³ Although the Word of God is not directly evident in a few of the OT cases, it is present indirectly. Naaman heard the words of the prophet Elisha who was the spokesperson for Yahweh. The prophet's instructions were obviously in accordance with the will of God since God did heal the Syrian. No word of or from Yahweh was mentioned in the first chapter of the Book of Ruth, but it may be assumed that she had received some instruction since she was cognizant of the covenant name of her in-laws' God and employed it in her oath of allegiance. Rahab had heard the reports of Yahweh's delivering Israel out of Egypt and leading them through the wilderness. Perhaps she had not heard it from a prophet, but she had heard nonetheless. She responded to what she had heard and did know. God met her at that point and provided her with the additional witness of the Israelite spies who had come to her house. Those spies confirmed the reports Rahab had heard. It is nonsensical to speak of the encounter with the spies in sexual terms. There was no better place for the Israeli spies to become invisible.⁶⁴ It had the appearance of happenstance or an on-the-spot human decision. However, as in the Book of Ruth, such happenstance was

⁶¹Cf. Ralph A. Alexander, “Ezekiel,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 6:922, 925-26; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 354-56; Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel: The Glory of the Lord* (Chicago: Moody, 1969) 66, 209.

⁶²One approach to this question is presented by Leon J. Wood in *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 64-68.

⁶³Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament* 300.

⁶⁴Woudstra, *Joshua* 69-70.

really an indication of divine guidance behind the scenes.⁶⁵

Conversion may be summed up in the Hebrew term **נָשַׁב** (*šûb*, “he turns”).⁶⁶ Repentance and faith are its primary elements.⁶⁷ Faith “achieves in practice the acknowledgment by the individual of the sole sovereignty of Yahweh.”⁶⁸ Such acknowledgment is inseparable from conversion which includes penitent humility.⁶⁹ Confession of the sovereignty of Yahweh is clearly evident in the cases of Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, the sailors, and the Ninevites.⁷⁰

An entreaty for forgiveness was also an element of OT conversion.⁷¹ Prayers for forgiveness were conditioned upon the nature of God and were accompanied by the awareness that God was not obligated to forgive their sins. As a holy God, He was perfectly within His rights to execute full judgment upon the sinner even though he or she had confessed. They threw themselves at His mercy, trusting that there was yet an opportunity for them to experience His grace. Divine forgiveness was the equivalent of freedom from guilt.⁷²

A total change in one’s life was the obvious outcome.⁷³ Eichrodt refers to this element of conversion as “the bringing of every department of life under the sovereign claims of the holy God.”⁷⁴ Evidences of conversion’s radical change in the individual’s life include a commitment to Yahweh and the performance of covenant-loyalty (*hesed*) to one’s fellow man. The pagan sailors on the ship with Jonah offered sacrifices to Yahweh and made vows (Jonah 1:16). Naaman also committed himself to the offering of sacrifices to Yahweh (2 Kgs 5:17). Ruth showed that kind of loyalty and loving-kindness to her mother-in-law Naomi. Naaman exhibited it in his offer of a gift to the prophet Elisha. Rahab demonstrated it by hiding the Israeli spies. Corporate or mass conversion provided the same evidence. The Ninevites demonstrated it by forsaking their violent practices and treating one another with mutual love and respect.

Another change was also evident: the converted experienced a new relationship to God.⁷⁵ The new relationship implied the renewal of fellowship with

⁶⁵Ibid., 71.

⁶⁶Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT* 2:288, 466-71. Cf. Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament* 299-301.

⁶⁷Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament* 297.

⁶⁸Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT* 2:283.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰See the charts appended to this article.

⁷¹Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT* 2:458.

⁷²Ibid., 2:422.

⁷³Cf. Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament* 242, 299.

⁷⁴Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT* 2:245.

⁷⁵Ibid., 2:434.

Him that had been broken by personal sin.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Through the process of studying the Mosaic description of conversion and the OT examples of conversion it has become clear that there is, indeed, evidence of a developed concept (or, doctrine) of conversion prior to the Second Temple period. This author has the same reaction that Eichrodt had to the theological opinion that claimed the OT “speaks only occasionally of forgiveness and certainly does not put it as the centre of its scheme of salvation”: “it is simply incomprehensible that anyone can venture such an opinion.”⁷⁷

⁷⁶Ibid., 2:459.

⁷⁷Ibid.; cf. n. 3 and Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* 120.

CHART 1: ELEMENTS IN OT CONVERSION

| <i>Element</i> | <i>Individuals</i> | <i>Passage (NASB)</i> |
|-------------------------|--------------------|--|
| Word of God | Abram | “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed” (Heb 11:8) |
| | Rahab | “we have heard [רָחַבָּ]” (Josh 2:10) |
| | Naaman | “Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, ‘Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you and you shall be clean’” (2 Kgs 5:10) |
| | Sailors | “I am a Hebrew, and I fear [אֱלֹהֵי אֲרָם] the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.” (Jonah 1:9) |
| | Ninevites | “Jonah began to go through the city one day’s walk; and he cried out and said, ‘Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.’” (Jonah 3:4) |
| Knowledge | Rahab | “I know [יָדַעְתִּי] that the LORD has given you the land” (Josh 2:9) |
| | Naaman | “Behold now, I know [יָדַעְתִּי] that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel” (2 Kgs 5:15) |
| | Sailors | “the men knew [יָדְעוּ] that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them” (Jonah 1:10) |
| Confession | Rahab | “the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (Josh 2:11) |
| | Ruth | “Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God [וְעַמִּי אֶלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי] . . . Thus may the LORD [יְהוָה] do to me” (Ruth 1:16-17) |
| | Naaman | “Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel” (2 Kgs 5:15) |
| | Sailors | “Thou, O LORD, hast done as Thou hast pleased” (Jonah 1:14) |
| | Ninevites | “that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands” (Jonah 3:8) |
| Faith / Repen- tance | Abram | cf. Rom 4:1-12 |
| | Ruth | “the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge” (Ruth 2:12) |
| | Ninevites | “Then the people of Nineveh believed in God [וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֲנָשֵׁי נִינְוָה בְּאֱלֹהִים]” (Jonah 3:5) |

| <i>Element</i> | <i>Individuals</i> | <i>Passage (NASB)</i> |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|--|
| Entreaty | Naaman | "In this matter may the LORD pardon (חַלַּף) your servant" (2 Kgs 5:18) |
| | Sailors | "Then they called on the LORD and said, 'We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for Thou, O LORD, hast done as Thou hast pleased.'" (Jonah 1:14) |
| | Ninevites | "let men call on God earnestly [יִקְרְאוּ אֶל־אֱלֹהִים] [בְּתַזְקָה]" (Jonah 3:8) |
| Change (שׁוּב) / Commitment (חֻסָּד) | Abram | "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance" (Heb 11:8) |
| | Rahab | "I have dealt kindly with you (עָשִׂיתִי עִמָּכֶם חֻסָּד)" (Josh 2:12) |
| | Ruth | "May the LORD deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me [וַיַּעַשׂ לְיָהוָה עִמָּכֶם חֻסָּד כַּאֲשֶׁר] [עָשִׂיתֶם עִם־הַמֵּתִים וְעִמָּדִי]" (Ruth 1:8) AND "You have shown your last kindness [חֻסָּדְךָ] to be better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich" (3:10) |
| | Naaman | "please take a present from your servant now" (2 Kgs 5:15) "your servant will no more offer burnt offering nor will he sacrifice (נָזַבַח) to other gods, but to the LORD" (2 Kgs 5:17) |
| | Sailors | "Then the men feared the LORD greatly [וַיִּירָאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים] [וַיִּרְאֶה גְדוּלָּה אֶת־יְהוָה] and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD [וַיִּזְבְּחוּ לַיהוָה] and made vows [וַיִּנְדְּרוּ]." (Jonah 1:16) |
| | Ninevites | "turn [וַיִּשְׁבוּ] אִישׁ מִדַּרְכּוֹ הַרְעָה וּמִרְחֻמָּס" from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands" (Jonah 3:8; cf. 3:10) |
| | Forgiveness | Naaman |
| Ninevites | | "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented (נִינָחַם) concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it" (Jonah 3:10) |