

REPENTANCE IN ACTS IN LIGHT OF  
DEUTERONOMY 30

Charles P. Baylis

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## REPENTANCE IN ACTS IN LIGHT OF DEUTERONOMY 30

Charles P. Baylis

### INTRODUCTION

In the debate about what is necessary for salvation, repentance and its meaning have always been a focal point. At the center of this controversy are verses in Acts<sup>1</sup> which link repentance with salvation. Peter stated in Acts 2:38 to those gathered at Pentecost, “*Repent* and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.” Why did Peter call on them to *repent*? In Acts 3:19 he continued his second sermon by requesting that they “*repent and return*.” Return to what? Was it necessary that men return to something before they could be saved?

The etymologies and the usages of these words have been researched frequently,<sup>2</sup> but few writers have ever examined the Old Testament context from which these Acts usages are derived. It is the purpose of this article to demonstrate that the word “repentance” in Acts 2:38, 3:19 and 11:18 is based on the promise of the New Covenant found in Deuteronomy 30:1-6.<sup>3</sup> Any analysis of the meaning of repentance must take place in that light. This study will place this word in a proper historical theological context.

### THE OLD TESTAMENT CALL FOR REPENTANCE

#### The Prophecy: Deuteronomy

Moses stood on the edge of the promised land and gave four sermons to the Israelites as they were about to enter the land. Deuteronomy is the record of these exhortations. Even though

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:38, 3:19 and 11:18 will form the basis for this article. However, repentance is mentioned elsewhere in Acts (5:13, 13:24, 17:30, 19:4, 20:21, 26:20). Some explanation of these other verses will be given at the end of this article. However, the explanation of the three main verses in this article should provide clarification of the other uses.

<sup>2</sup>Bibliographic references for some etymological studies of the particular words, shûwb, metanoeo, and epistrepho are given throughout the article.

<sup>3</sup> The examination of Deuteronomy 30:1-6 will also include its related prophecies of the New Covenant in Ezekiel 36:22-38 and Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Israel had yet to enter the land, failure was already assured (29:22-30:1; 31:16-21,29; 32:35). But Moses also prophesied that the nation Israel would return to God from that failure. In 30:6 Moses stated that when they returned God would circumcise their heart (give them the New Covenant).

To what were they to return? Obviously, they were to return to God, but more specifically they were to return to covenant relationship.<sup>4</sup> How were they to return? The Deuteronomy text indicated this clearly. They were to believe from their hearts. Early in Deuteronomy (6:5), Moses had stated that obedience and the covenant relationship came from the heart, not from external acts. In 30:10 he explained *how* they were to turn to Him, "...if you turn to the LORD your God with *all your heart and soul*."<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately the Israelite had a heart no different from the one he had received from Adam. He would surely disobey, because he would fail to believe in his heart. God indicated that without a new heart ("the Lord has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear," 29:4) Israel would fail to continue a covenant relationship with Him.

In chapters 28 and 29, Moses had outlined the blessings and the cursings which would fall on the nation for their obedience or disobedience. Following the list of curses which would surely afflict the unbelieving Israelites, Moses began the description of the "return" (30:1).

<sup>4</sup> The term for "return" is the root *shûwb*. For a discussion on the covenant implications of the word see R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), s.v. "*shûwb*." While the term is used in the general sense of "turn," "return," or "change direction," when used by the prophets in a covenantal context it indicates a "return" to the covenant relationship. Also see William L. Holladay, *The Root Šûbh in the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1958), 116-157.

<sup>5</sup> This was the problem with the Israelites (and the New Testament Pharisees). They concerned themselves with external acts and did not obey God from a changed heart. External acts should have come from a love of God. The nature of the word "return" is a general word. The specifics of "how" are always to be gained from the context. The instructions on "how" are never far away. It is a general term similar to our word "convert." One may convert in many ways. He may convert to Judaism, Catholicism, Mormonism or he may simply convert a car from gasoline to natural gas. The word itself does not explain *how*. It must be gained from other passages.

So it shall become when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the LORD your God has banished you, and you *return* to the LORD your God.

Then Moses continued with an explanation of means of the return.

and obey Him with *all your heart and soul* according to all that I command you today.

Then God would bring Israel back from captivity to the promised land (30:3-5), and would restore their fruitfulness. In 30:6 Moses spoke of a change that would insure their continued obedience.

Moreover the LORD your God will *circumcise your heart* and the heart of your seed, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may *live* ... And you shall again obey the LORD, and observe all His commandments which I command you today.

The phrase "the LORD your God will circumcise your heart" introduced the New Covenant. The New Covenant was a change which God would enact within man, as opposed to a change which man would accomplish on his own.<sup>6</sup> Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31 expanded Deuteronomy 30:6 further.

Thus Moses' final sermon to the nation prophesied a time when Israel would *return* to covenant relationship, and God would change their hearts. It was one of the earliest, most specific references to the New Covenant. It is *this* return that is called "repentance."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The Old Covenant was a test of man's ability to change his own heart. He was exhorted to "circumcise his heart" (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4), but he could not. The Old Testament records that failure. It is only in the New Covenant that *God* changes man's old heart (cf. Col. 2:11; Rom. 2:29).

<sup>7</sup> There is not space in this article to delve into the use of the words for "repentance" in the Old Testament. The major word for repentance in the Old Testament was *yashûwb*. Throughout the Old Testament the prophets would refer to this passage and call Israel back to covenant relationship by "returning." The reader is referred to the article by Gerhard Kittel, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), s.v. "*metanoeo*." The point is made that *metanoeo* became a synonym for the Hebrew *yashûwb* during

It is very important to take note of the people to whom this message was spoken. Israel *alone* was being called to a repentance or a return. This message did not address any Gentile nations. In the Deuteronomy passage, the new heart was promised *only* to a future returning nation; that nation was Israel.

### The Call of the Prophets

From the day that Joshua crossed the Jordan, Israel was instructed to remember Moses' words in Deuteronomy (Joshua 23:6). In the Book of Judges, the nation went through cycles of failure, repentance and restoration as Moses had warned in Deuteronomy.<sup>8</sup>

But, as the kings arose and led Israel, the nation continued in a downward movement. Prophets arose to call the people back to the promise of Deuteronomy. God had promised if the people "turned to Him" that He would save them. Yet no one called on Him, for the people felt they were "acting" according to covenant relationship and did not need repentance.<sup>9</sup>

*Isaiah.* Isaiah is typical of the pre-exilic prophets. The people were not about to repent ("return") for they were not aware of their lack of relationship with God. They could no longer recognize the differences between good and evil (Isaiah 5:20). So Isaiah's ministry was to harden them in their rebellion.<sup>10</sup> In 6:10

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the intertestamental period (p. 991), and thus in the New Testament became interchangeable.

One must be careful, however, not to insist that every use of the word *metanoeo* or *yashûwb* was a reference to covenant return. The word may be used simply as "to return" as Abraham's promise to "return" to his servants after sacrificing (Genesis 22:5). Other references indicate a "change of mind." However, the emphasis of this article is to note that the references in Acts (2:38, 3:19, 11:18) are speaking about a historical instruction, that of "returning" to covenant relationship.

<sup>8</sup> In contrast, it is with a great sense of hope that one reads Ruth and finds a faithful remnant in Boaz, who is an avid covenant keeper.

<sup>9</sup> Malachi 1, following the return from exile, is an example of the people acting out their covenant obligations, but not having their heart in it. They would bring unhealthy animals for sacrifice. God stated: "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar!" (Mal. 1:10a).

<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that Isaiah has the fewest calls for repentance among the pre-exilic prophets. This is explained by "return" in 6:9-10. The people were beyond

God referred to the call of Deuteronomy 30.

Render the hearts of this people insensitive,  
Their ears dull,  
And their eyes dim,  
Lest they see with their eyes,  
Hear with their ears,  
Understand with their hearts,  
And *repent* and be healed.

*Jeremiah.* Jeremiah also expounded the New Covenant of Deuteronomy 30:6 during the rebellious events at Jerusalem. Jeremiah spoke of the prophesied circumcision of heart in 31:33-34.

"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,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will *forgive their iniquity*, and their sin I will remember no more."<sup>11</sup>

Thus Jeremiah, in the midst of judgment, gave hope. He referred back to Deuteronomy 30:6. The promise had not been withdrawn.

*Ezekiel.* Ezekiel ministered to a nation already in exile.<sup>12</sup> In the midst of this ministry of misery and judgment, God repeated His promise of Deuteronomy 30:1-6 in Ezekiel 11:14-19. However, it was in Ezekiel 36:22-31 that the circumcision of heart was developed in its fullest.

For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and

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the time of repentance. Now Israel's fate was to be sealed by the hardening ministry of Isaiah.

<sup>11</sup> Here is the "forgiveness of sins." Forgiveness of sins was essential if man was to have a relationship with God. In the Old Testament, men came to God through the blood of bulls and goats, which could never take away sins (Hebrews 10:4). In the New Covenant, men's sins are permanently forgiven through the blood of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:14).

<sup>12</sup> Another exilic prophet, Daniel, prayed for the return of his people to the land based on the prophecy of Deuteronomy (Daniel 9:3-19).

bring you into your own land...then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new *heart* and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you shall be careful to observe my ordinances.<sup>13</sup>

In the midst of exile, the Israelite was reminded of the prophecy of Deuteronomy 30. The day was coming when he would return to God and would gain a new heart. Related to that is the cleansing (forgiveness of sins) and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

*Nehemiah.* Nehemiah led the rebuilding of the city following the exile. But Nehemiah's return to rebuild the city was necessarily preceded by repentance based on Deuteronomy 30:1-6 (Nehemiah 1:6-9).

We have not kept the commandments...which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses. Remember the word which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses, saying, If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you *return* to Me and keep My commandments and do them...I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.

*Malachi.* The call to return to the covenant relationship continued during the post-exilic era as Israel again continued the facade of covenant obedience (cf. Malachi 1:6-14). Malachi predicted that the prophet Elijah would come and call the people to return to covenant relationship as he did in days of old (Malachi 4:6).<sup>14</sup>

At the close of the Old Testament, Israel still had not changed. They were a people with a disobedient, rebellious heart. On their return from exile, they did not sustain a change of heart, but continued to pursue their own self-centered objectives.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ezekiel is similar to Jeremiah, especially in that under the New Covenant, the Spirit would dwell within man.

<sup>14</sup> The smiting of the land with a curse spoken of in Malachi 4:6 is based on God's promise of Deuteronomy 28-29.

<sup>15</sup> Nehemiah 13 and Ezra 10 record the failure of the returning exiles to keep the covenant any better than their fathers. If Israel's hope lay in their own ability to change their ways, the Old Testament ended without any hope.

*Summary.* The Old Testament prophet was guided by Deuteronomy 28-30. Israel had gone through periods of blessing and cursing based on its desire for a covenant relationship with God. The prophets pleaded with Israel to call on God (return or repent). Yet Israel felt it *was* in a covenant relationship. Thus, it did not call out.

This is the sense of the Old Testament "repentance" (or "return"), particularly where related to the covenant and covenant restoration. The major thrust of the Old Testament is the story of this call to "return" to covenant relationship and Israel's failure to do so.

From the prophecies of the New Covenant, the Old Testament reader should have expected certain items.

1. Israel: Israel would be the nation to whom God would give the New Covenant. There was no indication in the Old Testament that any Gentiles would share "equally" with Israel in its blessings.
2. Repentance: A national repentance would come about when the nation desired to return to covenant relationship.
3. Cleansing or forgiveness of sins: The expected cleansing from sin would be permanent and real, instead of temporary and symbolic.
4. The Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit would indwell all believers regardless of rank instead of only coming "on" men who were performing a special purpose for God.
5. Kingdom: The kingdom would come to Israel after God had changed their hearts.

The Old Testament reader would have entered the New Testament era with this expectation. Both John the Baptist and Jesus offered its fulfillment.

#### THE NEW TESTAMENT CALL FOR REPENTANCE

The New Testament continued the Old Testament call for a return to covenant relationship. The first prophet spoken of in the New Testament was really the last of the Old Testament prophets.<sup>16</sup> His message was the same. Only now the potential for the

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 11:7-11.

Kingdom of Heaven (and the preparatory New Covenant) was present.

#### John the Baptist and Jesus

Based on Deuteronomy 30:1-6, John the Baptist called out, "Repent" (Matthew 3:2). However, there was something new. The full potential of Deuteronomy 30 had come. Now if Israel would return to covenant relationship they would, for the first time, actually be able to receive the changed heart and the kingdom. The call was extended to include the words "for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The words "Kingdom of Heaven" did not simply indicate that Jesus, the King, was present. They indicated that the New Covenant and the changed heart were potentially available to the nation Israel if they would repent.<sup>17</sup> Jesus' call, "Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17) was exactly the same as John's.

#### The Reaction of the Nation

The reaction of the nation to the call for a return to the covenant is evident in Matthew 11:20-21, 12:41. The nation would not call for a return to the covenant. Just as in Isaiah's day, they thought they were in covenant relationship, and needed no repentance.

This is quite clear from the repentance calls in Luke. The Pharisees were those who felt they "needed no repentance."<sup>18</sup> Thus the nation in their blindness refused to recognize their sinful state, and did not cry out to God, that He might heal them.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> John 3:3 speaks directly to this issue. "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." The term "born again" was the "new heart" and "life" promised in the New Covenant of Deuteronomy 30, Ezekiel 36-37 and Jeremiah 31. (Notice that the terms "water and the Spirit" of John 3:5 are references to Ezekiel 36:25-27, and the promise of cleansing from sin and the indwelling Spirit.) The kingdom would not come to men who had the old heart. It was only in fulfillment of Deuteronomy 30:1-6 that it would come. God must change their hearts, and Jesus was the Prophet of this New Covenant.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Luke 15:7, 18:9-14. The fact that the Pharisees felt they were "righteous" indicated their blind understanding of their covenant relationship.

<sup>19</sup> In the current debate concerning "repentance," it is commonly stated that John ignored the term. However, it is present in John 12:40, where he quoted the strongest reference in Isaiah. In the John passage, Jesus saw Himself with the same ministry as Isaiah, that of hardening the hearts of those who had rejected Him.

The crucifixion of the Savior, however, was not the last rejection by the nation Israel. It is in the rejection of the resurrection that Israel reconfirmed its earlier rejection of Christ.<sup>20</sup> This is recorded in the Book of Acts. But, unlike the gospels, the offer of the New Covenant was not "at hand," it was immediately available. Also, unlike the offer in the gospels, the king was now absent. While there was a New Covenant, there would be no kingdom until His return.

### REPENTANCE IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

John the Baptist and Jesus both had offered the New Covenant to the nation Israel if they would "return" to God or "repent." But they did not. In Acts the payment for the New Covenant had been completed in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection (Luke 22:20).

#### The New Covenant Given

The apostles (Acts 1:4) were commanded to wait for "the promise of the Father." What was the promise of the Father? It was the Old Testament promises of the New Covenant in Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31, based on Deuteronomy 30:6. For when Jesus stated, "but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now," He was speaking of the indwelling Spirit, who was inseparably part of the New Covenant promise.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> This is clear in Matthew 12:39, 16:4, Luke 11:29-32. The nation crucified the Savior, but Jesus made it plain that the sign of His resurrection would be the final sign to the apostate nation, Nineveh repented at the original sign of Jonah. This resurrection is fully revealed to the nation in the Book of Acts. There the nation is continually confronted with the resurrection evidence and continually rejects it. At the end of the Book of Acts (28:17-28), following the rejection by the Jews at Rome, Paul quoted Isaiah 6:9-10, to show that the nation was hardhearted and would not repent, just as prophesied.

<sup>21</sup> This is why the apostles responded immediately with the question, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). These Old Testament prophecies of the New Covenant were always followed by the kingdom. The apostles simply knew their Old Testament scriptures well. Besides, the king was still present. After the departure of the king in Acts 1:9, the angels remind the disciples of Zechariah 14:3-4 when the Lord will return to rule and establish the kingdom. Thus the angels gave the apostles the answer to their question of 1:6.

### The Faithful Remnant of Israel

Having told them of the soon-to-be-fulfilled promise, Jesus left them. The next event in the book of Acts is the story of choosing of the twelfth apostle to take the place of Judas. There has always been considerable question over this event, and whether the eleven apostles had acted correctly. Why was it important that the eleven be made twelve? Because from the time that the original twelve were chosen, these men were to be representatives of the nation Israel (twelve tribes). While the real nation rejected, these men were to be the remnant of Israel who would accept the Messiah. It is these twelve men, the remnant of the nation Israel, who received the New Covenant on behalf of the apostate nation.<sup>22</sup> Thus it became important that this group be returned to twelve men so as to precisely represent the nation, but as a remnant.<sup>23</sup>

The full nation would not receive the kingdom at the same time the covenant was given. The covenant would be given to a remnant who “returned” (repented), according to Deuteronomy 30. But the kingdom would wait until the king reappeared and the total nation repented (Zechariah 12:10).

### The Call to Repentance in Acts 2:38

Peter gave his sermon. The recipients of this speech were *only* Israelites (2:5, 22). They were accused of killing their nation’s Messiah (2:23), who was the One who was to bring them the New Covenant and the Holy Spirit (2:33). Having killed the very One who was the King of the Kingdom and the Prophet of the New Covenant, they reacted in panic, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Peter responded to them with the instructions given in Deuteronomy

30:1-6, “Repent” (return to covenant relationship).<sup>24</sup>

*Repent.* If individual Israelites would “return” to God, call out to Him, then God would heal them as He had promised. But this time He would add them to the remnant receiving the New Covenant. So Peter was simply telling them to “return” to God to restore their covenant relationship. They had recognized their part with the nation in the Messiah’s crucifixion (2:23, 36). This alone indicated that they were outside of covenant relationship, particularly the New Covenant of which Jesus was the Prophet.<sup>25</sup>

*Let each of you be baptized.* This was the outward sign of the New Covenant. It began with the baptism of John the Baptist.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Notice that Peter’s call was similar to John the Baptist’s. John called on them to repent and then baptized them. So did Peter. The difference was that John anticipated the New Covenant forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16), and Peter preached that they were available right then (Acts 19:4).

<sup>25</sup> It is in Acts 3:22-26 that Peter speaks concerning the relationship of Jesus as the Prophet of the New Covenant, while Moses was the prophet of the Old Covenant. Jesus’ words of the New Covenant were far superior to Moses’ words of the Old Covenant. For further details about the treatment of the Deuteronomy 18:15 prophecy of Jesus as the Greater Prophet of the New Covenant as dealt with in the Gospel of John, see the article by this author, “The Woman Caught in Adultery: A Test of Jesus as the Greater Prophet,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 146 (April 1989): 171-184.

<sup>26</sup> While baptism has been related to many things, it appears that the New Covenant is its prime relationship. The evidence of this is found in John 1:19-28. Ezekiel 36:25 had prophesied that God would “sprinkle clean water on them.” While this was speaking of spiritual cleanliness, the New Testament audience looked for a corresponding physical sign, that of baptism or ritual washing. Since this “washing” was a future prophecy, the Pharisees felt (John 1:19-21) that it would be done by an eschatological character, the Christ, Elijah (Mal. 4:5), or the Prophet (Deut. 18:15). Thus the Pharisees sent out priests and Levites (the experts in ritual washings) in John 1:19,22. They asked him which of the eschatological personalities he was (1:21-22,25). John replied that his water baptism was only a sign (1:31), to prepare people for the real cleansing of the Holy Spirit (1:33). Baptism then was a related outward sign of the real cleansing taking place under the New Covenant. John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. John was calling the nation to return in accordance with Deuteronomy 30 so it could receive the long awaited New Covenant. The baptism in Acts is an identification of a real spiritual cleansing which had taken place.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 22:20 records the initial cutting of the covenant in the Upper Room with the eleven disciples.

<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that this giving of the New Covenant in no way negates the future of the nation Israel and their kingdom. These men were not the nation, only the remnant. And this was not the kingdom. The ultimate fulfillment of Deuteronomy 30:1-6 will come when the full nation does repent (Romans 11:25-27). It is in Acts 3:19 that this is made very clear to the national listeners. “Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things.” While the New Covenant had been given to a remnant, the absent king and the unrepentant nation stood between them and the kingdom.

Ezekiel 36 had promised a washing with clean water (spiritual cleansing) and baptism was the symbol of that inward washing. Thus Peter calls on the repentant audience to be baptized, symbolizing their personal link with the New Covenant.

*In the name of Jesus Christ.* This was the focus of their repentance and baptism. It was Jesus' person, death and resurrection that brought about the New Covenant. It was by belief in Him that it was accomplished. Baptism in His name publicly indicated a separation from the apostate nation who had crucified Him.

*For the forgiveness of sins.* Forgiveness of sins was an integral part of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:34). Thus reception of the New Covenant by desiring to return (Deuteronomy 30), illustrated by baptism (belief in the cleansing ability of Jesus Christ), resulted in the reception of the New Covenant.<sup>27</sup> This included the

<sup>27</sup> Interpretations of this phrase have given problems from the earliest Christian readers. The link between baptism and the forgiveness of sins seems to imply baptismal regeneration. Thus a number of interpretations have been fostered to avoid that interpretation.

However, when the reader understands that baptism is the sign of the New Covenant, it only fits in that having demonstrated one's acceptance of it, he should receive the things promised by the New Covenant, namely, forgiveness of sins (Jeremiah 31:34b) and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:27).

The proper translation of the word "for" in "for the forgiveness of sins" would be "with a view to" or "in connection with" (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., s.v. "epi"). In essence the baptism was not the cause but was a related outward demonstration of the inward cleansing from sin.

Was baptism necessary for reception of the New Covenant? The answer is, of course, "no." It was no more necessary in Peter's call to repentance than it was in John the Baptist's. Note that Cornelius receives the New Covenant before baptism is offered to him (Acts 10:44-48). But it was part of the imperative of the Pentecost speech. The reason was that Peter was calling on them to do more than secretly believe. The nation Israel, *their* nation, had crucified Jesus *publicly*. And they, as members of that nation, were publicly part of a national confession that Jesus was *not* the prophet of the New Covenant. They were already publicly included in that national crime. Thus to escape that national guilt required public repudiation of that nation and its decision to crucify Jesus Christ. Baptism *in the name of Jesus Christ* made it clear that they were identifying with Jesus against the nation Israel. Was baptism necessary for the New Covenant reception? Technically, it was not. But Peter was calling for

forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

*The gift of the Holy Spirit.* The indwelling Holy Spirit was another integral part of the New Covenant given on that Pentecost morning (Ezekiel 36:27).

*Summary.* Peter's sermon in Acts 2 had called individual Israelites out of the apostate nation to receive the gift of the New Covenant. They would become part of a faithful remnant of that nation who had responded to the call of Deuteronomy 30 to "repent" (return).

#### The Call to Repentance in Acts 3:19

If there is a verse in Acts which comes the closest to referring precisely to Deuteronomy 30:1-6, it is Acts 3:19. It is there that the nation (not just individuals) was addressed under that ancient promise.

*The situation.* Peter and John had healed a crippled man. The purpose of this miracle was to demonstrate that Jesus was not a dead man, but alive (3:6, 12, 16, 4:10). Resurrection verified that He was the God-approved Messiah. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, the sign of Jonah, was presented to the nation of Israel.

*The addressed.* Here again, as in chapter 2, the addressed group are *only* "Men of Israel" (3:12).<sup>28</sup>

*The message.* Peter first pointed out that they and their leaders had crucified their Messiah. He then gave them instructions concerning their only hope for the salvation of the nation.

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more than basic salvation. He was calling for identification with Jesus, against the nation. Notice Peter's following comment in 2:40, "Be saved from this perverse generation" (the present apostate nation of Israel).

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting that it is at the Portico of Solomon that the miracle takes place. This literary color recalled the prayer of dedication which Solomon made at the temple in 2 Chronicles 6:36-39. In that prayer Solomon used Deuteronomy 30:1-6 to state that Israel could one day call upon God (return) and He would hear and restore them. How significant was that Old Testament speech in that Peter was calling on Israel to do exactly that.



*Repent* therefore and *return*,<sup>29</sup> that your sins may be wiped away, in order that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.

Peter had invited them to return according to Deuteronomy 30:1-6. If they did, they would receive the New Covenant (the circumcision of heart). The accompanying kingdom, however, would come only after a time of delay, when the King would return.

*The reaction of the nation.* Following the message to the people of the nation, Peter and John were taken before the rulers and elders of the nation (4:1-22). He presented the evidence of the former crippled man. Then he told them that the “repentance” of Deuteronomy 30 was only accomplished by receiving Jesus Christ as the messiah (Acts 4:12).

*Summary.* Peter’s sermon to individuals of the nation in chapter 3, in the shadow of Solomon’s speech so long ago, echoed the same sentiments. The nation needed to “return” to God, and Jesus Christ was the way. Deuteronomy 30:1-6 was still the basis of repentance. Repentance was to take place, not through the prophet of the Old Covenant, Moses, but through the Greater Prophet, Jesus (Deuteronomy 18:15).

### The Call to Repentance for the Gentiles

The first several chapters of Acts explain the reception of the New Covenant by a remnant of the nation Israel. Chapter 10 explains the inclusion of Gentiles into that promise. If “repentance” was a return to covenant relationship, then how was it that Gentiles might return according to Deuteronomy 30:1-6, when they never

<sup>29</sup> The word for repent is *metanoeo*. The word for return is *epistrepho*. There are differences between New Testament scholars on the different emphasis of these words, since they are to some degree synonymous. According to *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (s.v. “*metanoeo*”), *metanoeo* became synonymous with *yashûwb* of the Old Testament during the intertestamental period. *Epistrepho*, however, is the actual word used in the Septuagint in Deuteronomy 30. It is this author’s opinion that Peter was insuring that they knew he was referring to Deuteronomy 30:1-6, by using *epistrepho* of the LXX in addition to the common *metanoeo*. Refer to Acts 28:27 where Paul quotes Isaiah 6:10. There he uses the LXX *epistrepho* for the Hebrew *shûwb*.

had a covenant relationship to which to return? It is one of the major purposes of Acts to explain the inclusion of Gentiles in the New Covenant.

*Acts 10-11.* Peter received the revelation that Gentiles were able to receive the New Covenant in the same manner as the Jews. This was a great revelation, since there was nothing in the Old Testament that indicated that the New Covenant promise was directly for Gentiles. It had been only for Israelites who “returned” to God.

*The addressed.* Peter had gone to the house of Cornelius to preach to his family. Cornelius was a God-fearing Gentile (10:1-2).

*The message.* This message was absent of any accusations of killing the Messiah, since it was the Jews that had done this. It is also absent of any mention of the word “repentance” since Deuteronomy 30 was addressed only to Israel, and would have meant nothing to Cornelius as a Gentile. However, other than the substitution of the word “believe” for “repent,”<sup>30</sup> the elements are the same. Belief brought forth forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (10:44-45), the elements of the New Covenant. The sign of the New Covenant, baptism, was then administered to these Gentiles in 10:47.<sup>31</sup>

*The response of the Jewish remnant.* Until this point there had been no one who was a full Gentile who had received the New Covenant. Since the Old Testament had not mentioned Gentile inclusion, the Jews who accompanied Peter were amazed to see that Gentiles were accepted on the same basis as Jews (10:45).

Peter returned to Jerusalem in chapter 11 and met some Jews who refused to believe that Gentiles were welcome on an equivalent

<sup>30</sup> Note that the message to the Jews was to *repent* for the forgiveness of sins, but Cornelius is told that “everyone who believes in Him has received forgiveness of sins” (10:43). This forgiveness of sins was the New Covenant.

<sup>31</sup> The New Covenant was supposed to be only for Jews. Thus baptism, or the sign of the New Covenant, was not to be administered to Gentiles. However, after the Jews saw that Gentiles had received the New Covenant (witnessed by the speaking in tongues), Jews could not refuse Gentiles the sign, for the Gentiles already had the substance.

basis (11:3). Peter testified that these men had received the Holy Spirit (the New Covenant) just as the Jews had (11:15-17).

*Gentiles and the repentance of Deuteronomy 30.* Deuteronomy 30:6 had stated, "...the Lord your God will circumcise your heart...in order that you may *live*." Thus, the repentance brought about the New Covenant which brought new life.

Acts 11:18 records the reaction of the Jerusalem Jews to Peter's testimony about Cornelius. "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the *repentance* that leads to *life*." While a Jewish remnant were repenting (returning) to covenant relationship, Gentiles had been mysteriously included in that remnant's return.

### SUMMARY

Deuteronomy 30:1-6 had prophesied that the Jews would repent some day and God would give them the New Covenant (new heart, forgiveness of sins, Holy Spirit). While the prophets called the nation to repent, it did not. John the Baptist and Jesus both offered the New Covenant and the Kingdom, but Israel rejected its king. The kingdom was delayed but the New Covenant was offered to a remnant. Following the Deuteronomy 30:1-6 instructions, Peter called on Israelites to repent and receive the New Covenant (forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit) in Acts 2:38. In Acts 3:19 the nation Israel was told that if it repented according to Deuteronomy 30, it would receive its kingdom upon the return of the king. Finally, Acts 10-11 confirmed the inclusion of Gentiles, demonstrating that the benefits of Jewish repentance spoken of in Deuteronomy 30 had been expanded to include Gentiles.

Repentance in these three passages in Acts is totally and directly related to Deuteronomy 30:1-6.<sup>32</sup> Jews were being called on to return to covenant relationship by receiving the New Covenant. Gentiles were mysteriously included in that promise.

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<sup>32</sup> After understanding these particular uses of "repent" (*metanoeo*) in Acts (2:38, 3:19, 11:18) it becomes much easier to categorize other usages in Acts. Acts 5:31 is also a direct reference to Deuteronomy 30 (call of repentance to the nation and the forgiveness of sin of the New Covenant). Acts 13:24 and 19:4 declare that John's baptism was indeed the call of repentance to which Deuteronomy 30 refers. Acts 20:21 and 26:20 are similar to Acts 11:18 in that both Jews and Gentiles have been included in the repentance of Deuteronomy 30.

Repentance cannot be interpreted apart from a knowledge of that historical context. Repentance involved a return to covenant relationship through belief in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Prophet of the New Covenant.