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“Return to the Lord” (Hos 14:3): Repentance as the Essence of the Relationship Between God and Man¹

Abstract: The article focuses on the theme of return/conversion in the Book of Hosea. The issue is presented from the perspective of the two parties of the covenant: God and Israel. At the starting point lies Israel's refusal to return to God, and Yahweh's threatening, punitive retribution to his people. The ending focuses on the conversion of the people to Yahweh, a development possible only owing to God's preceding forgiveness, expressed by his turn to his people. These four different dynamics of return are reconstructed on the basis of the twenty-two instances of the verb *šûb* in the Book of Hosea.

Keywords: Book of Hosea, return, conversion, covenant

The importance of the theme of repentance in the Book of Hosea is indicated by the twenty-two instances of the verb *šûb*, with an additional double use of the noun *məšûbā^h* (11:7; 14:5). The idea of return emerges in two overlapping contexts. First, that of the marriage of Hosea and Gomer, who leaves her husband, and second, the covenant between God and Israel, who express their disloyalty to God through worship (acts of idolatry), and politics (political

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alliances with Assyria and Egypt). In his article titled “Hosea: Let us Return to the Lord”² Gianfranco Ravasi points out that the prophet Hosea speaks about repentance (or the necessity of repentance) not only on the part of Israel, but also of God. In both these cases, we can discover a certain dynamic of “return/repentance.” It commences with Israel’s failure to “return/repent,” as God’s punitive intervention against them turns out to be a “threatening return.” The “return/repentance” of Israel is only possible owing to God’s “return in forgiveness” to his people. On the basis of the structure of repentance in the Book of Hosea, as reconstructed by Ravasi, an attempt will be made here at discovering the role of repentance in the relationship between God and man. Four questions will guide the subsequent sections of this paper. Why does man refuse to “return” to God? When does God’s “return” mean his “turning away” from man? In what way man’s “return” to God constitutes “repentance”? In what sense God’s “return” to man is an act of His love for man?

1. Man’s Failure to “Return” to God

Using the verb *šûb* Hosea describes not only his marriage to Gomer, but also the relationship between God and Israel. However, considering the structure of the Book of Hosea, one should start by focusing on his matrimonial vicissitudes. The reasons why Gomer left her husband are unknown. The fact that she is referred to as “a woman who has a lover” (3:1), and the mention of her buyout for the price of a slave (3:2) allude to her genuinely becoming a prostitute (either sacred, or ordinary), after she left Hosea. However, we are not talking solely about Gomer. Through the prophet, God points out Israel’s disloyalty. The people of Yahweh go away with “lovers,” who are to secure its political safety and material well-being. These “lovers” include not only Canaanite fertility deities, considered the source of good harvests and fertility (2:7), but also the political powers of the time—Assyria and Egypt, whose protection in the international arena Israelites wished to

² G. Ravasi, “Osea: «Torniamo al Signore»”, *PSV* 22 (1990): 9–16.

secure (cf. 7:8–12; 8:9–10; 12:2; 14:4). Instead of a “return” (*šûb*), they display “dissent,” signified by Hosea with the term *məšûbā^h* (14:5).³ “Israel’s pride testifies against him; yet they **do not return** to the LORD their God, or seek him, for all this” (7:10). And if they do, “they **return**, but not upward (*lōʔ ʿāl*)” (7:16),⁴ that is, not to Yahweh (cf. 7:15). Hence, it is not a return/repentance toward God, who saves, but turning toward what is below—to idolatry, injustice, and oppression. Where to look for the cause of such great misdirection of the return? The prophet gives his answer in two parallel passages:

Their deeds do not permit them to **return** to their God.
 For the spirit of whoredom is within them,
 and they do not know the Lord. (5:4)
 Israel’s pride testifies against him;
 yet they **do not return** to the Lord their God,
 or seek him, for all this. (7:10)

Israel’s tragedy unfolds at the level of cognition, which bears upon the spheres of will and emotions. The problem of leaving with “lovers” is the result of their ignorance of Yahweh. The people “have forgotten” (2:15), “do not know” (2:10) that it is Yahweh, and not “lovers,” who is the source of their material well-being. The knowledge of God should be founded upon the historical experience of the exodus. Through it [the experience of the exodus], Israel “learned, there is no other saviour;” but Yahweh [13:4]. In the

³ The same term is also used in 11:7; however, there it has a positive meaning of the “return/repentance” to God (cf. the discussion on the semantics of this term in: A.A. Macintosh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Hosea*, ICC, Edinburgh 1997, 445).

⁴ The phrase *lōʔ ʿāl* (literally: “not upward/above”) proves difficult for some commentators; therefore, they suggest alterations to the MT (“towards Baals”, “to no benefit”, “towards worthless things,” cf. J.A. Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, NICOT, Grand Rapids – Cambridge 2010, 207). F.I. Andersen and D.N. Freedman (*Hosea. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 24, New York 1980, 477–8) read *ʿāl* as a reference to deity, and accordingly render it as “to no god,” whereas A.A. Macintosh (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 284–5) considers *ʿāl* to be a reference to “altitude,” and interprets the entire expression as a claim that Israel did not direct its thoughts to what is above.

desert, Yahweh “got to know” them, that is, he chose and loved them, he got involved in their history and looked after their material existence. In reaction, they have “forgotten [their] Maker” (8:14; cf. 13:6).

The lack of knowledge of Yahweh on the part of Israel was not a mere lapse of memory, but a deliberate decision to reject God. For within them, they have the “spirit of whoredom,”⁵ which results in the fact that “they do not know the Lord” (5:4), and hence they are “led astray” in their life (4:12). Israel’s problem is their own pride,⁶ which appears to be Yahweh’s first rival (rather paradoxically—instead of Canaanite deities or foreign powers). Their heart became proud (13:6), and their pride “precedes them” (5:4); therefore, in spite of their superficial deeds directed towards God, “they do not return to Lord their God, or seek him” (7:10) with their hearts.

Consequently, the declarations made by Israelites about their return to God are false and amount to no more than simple hypocrisy, as identified by the prophet in their mutual encouragement to return, after God has punished them for their disloyalty:

“Come, let us **return** to the Lord;
for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us;
he has struck down, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD;
his appearing is as sure as the dawn;
he will come to us like the showers,

⁵ Following the MT, in Hos 4:10b–11a we read about Israel that “they have forsaken the Lord to devote (*šmr*) themselves to whoredom (*zənuʾt*). Wine and new wine take away the understanding.” Whereas in Hos 5:4, it is said that “the spirit of whoredom (*rūʾh zənuʾnīm*) is within them.” According to F.I. Andersen and D.N. Freedman, the “spirit of whoredom” would in this case serve as a pejorative name of a male deity, whereas *zənuʾt* of a female one, both competing against Yahweh (*Hosea*, 363–4). However, the issue is to a larger extent that of the baalisation spreading to all aspects of Israel’s life.

⁶ Cf. various meanings of pride brought together by A.A. Macintosh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 185.

like the spring rains that water the earth.” (6:1–3)

The people assume that in his benevolence and mercy God is predictable as the seasons, as the cycle of night and day, as the coming of showers in autumn and spring (6:3). The Israelites are convinced that, in spite of their sins—though they provoke the wrath and punishment of God (“for it is he who has torn, . . . he has struck [us] down” in 6:1)—it is only matter of time when God, conciliated and becalmed by some act of ritual atonement, will return “to heal [them], and bind [them] up” (6:1), forgetting about their past. Moreover, they downright set the term for God’s salvific intervention: “After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up” (6:2). Thus, they treat Yahweh as a mere idol, who can be subject to their plans, and whose favour can be won over with their offerings.⁷ There is no place here for “return/repentance,” it is rather a cool calculation, a caricature of repentance, one more provocation against God. The true intention of Israel is different, as “they refuse to **return**” (11:5).⁸ The failure to return/repent in the context of 11:1–4 appears to be the ultimate transgression of Israel, whose earlier history since the exodus from Egypt had been expressed in a series of breaches of the covenant, even though God continued to present initiatives revealing his merciful benevolence towards Israel.

2. Destructive “Return” of God

The symbolic value of the verb *šûb* lies in its ability to convey opposite directions and meanings. In a negative sense, as it describes

⁷ A. Schoors speaks in this context of the “baalisation of Yahwism” (*Die Königreiche Israel und Judea im 8. und 7. Jahrhundert v. Ch.* Die assyrische Krise, *Biblische Enzyklopädie* 5, Stuttgart 1998, 185); likewise (“baalisation of the Yahwist religion”) H. Irsigler, “«An mir findest du reiche Frucht». Hosea 14,2-9 als ein Höhepunkt des ‘Evangeliums’ von Gottes Zuwendung zu seinem Volk im Hosea-Buch,” *BZ* 59 (2015): 277.

⁸ In Jer 5:3, an identical accusation of Israel, i.e., that “they refuse to return,” is rendered metaphorically with the expression that they “have made their faces harder than rock.” This metaphor indicates the attitude of rebellion and disobedience against God (cf. Ezek 2:4; 3:7–8).

man's sin, his infidelity and hypocrisy in relation to God, so it may also refer to the punitive activity of God. In its explicative commentary on the marriage of Hosea and Gomer in Chapter 2, God announces that faced with the betrayal of his beloved (Israel) "he will return" as the Bridegroom (or rather, to use the expression of L. Alonso Schökel, as a "cheated husband"⁹) to take away his gifts:

Therefore I will return and take away
 My grain in its time
 And My new wine in its season,
 And will take back My wool and My linen. (2:9)

The gifts listed above are more than a mere metaphor, for they refer to the apostasy of Israel, considering they started to attribute the fertility and good crops of the land to Canaanite deities of fertility, headed by Baal, and not to Yahweh, the Maker of heaven and earth.

This judicial "return" of God is achieved, paradoxically, through God's "remoteness." That way, man is left to his own devices, falling prey to his own weakness and vice, as well as to his fears and terror. Such is the case, for faced with deepening perfidy of his people, God leaves them, distancing himself from them:

I will return again to my place
 until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face.
 In their distress they will seek me eagerly. (5:15)

Assuming that v. 15 is the continuation of the animalistic metaphor in v. 14, we may believe that God, like a lion, having torn his victims apart, returns to his cave. However, in the Hebrew Bible, the term *māqôm* is often used with regard to the Temple in Jerusalem (e.g., Deut 12:5.14; 14:25; Isa 18:2; Jer 27:22; Ezek 43:7). In the temple consecration prayer, Solomon admits that God's actual dwelling place is heaven (1 Kgs 8:43), but even that is unable to

⁹ L. Alonso Schökel, *I nomi dell'amore*. Simboli matrimoniali nella Bibbia, Casale Monferrato 1997, 162.

contain Yahweh (1 Kgs 8:27). As a result of God's remoteness in Hos 5:15, in spite of cultic allusions, what is emphasised is his inaccessibility due to his having distanced himself from the people (cf. Hos 5:6). Through other prophets, God will announce his coming back "from his place," to perform the judgement over the earth (Isa 26:21; Mic 1:3).

The return, and the resulting absence of God, has catastrophic consequences for Israel. In this context, Hosea evokes the exodus from Egypt, which was for Israelites the experience of God's salvific presence. With God's absence, the "revocation of the exodus," an "anti-exodus,"¹⁰ will take place, also denoted with the verb "to return":

[Lord] will remember their guilt and punish their sins;
 they will have to **go back** to Egypt. (8:13)
 They shall not remain in the land of the Lord,
 but Ephraim shall **return** to Egypt . . . (9:3)

In 11:5, the relation between the two "returns" of Israel is illustrated: because the people did not want to "return" to God, they will have to "return" to Egypt:

They shall **return**¹¹ to the land of Egypt, . . . ,
 because they have refused to **return** to me. (11:5)

Instead of the history unfolding itself towards the fullness of salvation, what occurs is its regress and return to the point of origin,

¹⁰ The former expression comes from H.-J. Fabry, "שׁוּב *sûb*", *TDOT* XIV, 488, the latter from G. Ravasi, "Osea," 13.

¹¹ In the MT, there is the phrase *lôʔ yāšûb ʿel-ʿereš mišrayim*. Because Hosea threatens with the return to Egypt on several occasions, commentators suggest taking the negative *lôʔ* as an assertive "certainly," or see the negative as a homonymous form of *lô* ("to him"), connecting it with the preceding verse. Another option is to retain the negative, with a concurrent reading of the entire passage as a rhetorical question: "will they not return to the land of Egypt?" (J.A. Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, 285). W. Rudolph opts for omitting the negative *lôʔ* in the MT; however, in his argument he refers to the criterion of content, i.e., the congruence of the expression in 11:5 with the prophecy in 9:3 (*Hosea*, KAT 13/1, Gütersloh 1966, 210).

when the people were still enslaved.¹² This way, the prophet announces the rapid fall of Israel (Samaria), and the exile in Assyria (cf. 9:3; 11:5).

3. The “Return” of Israel, Who “Repents”

Man’s “return” is the object of God’s desire, his dream. In Chapter 2, where the marital experiences of Hosea are transferred to the realm of Yahweh’s relationship with Israel, there comes a moment when the beloved one (Israel), disappointed with her lovers (idols and political powers) decides to “return” to her Bridegroom (Yahweh):

“Then she will say,
«I shall go back to my first husband,
I was better off then than I am now»” (2:9)

Faced with this longed and hoped for return of the people, God is ready to forego the requirements of justice. According to the marital law in Deut 23:1–4, husband cannot marry once again the wife he sent away. God, however, breaks that regulation. He is ready to “love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress” (3:1), as long as she returns to Him. Owing to the fact that “God loves the people of Israel” (Hos 3:1), their “return” to Lord will take place:

“But after that, the Israelites will **return**
and again seek Yahweh their God . . . ,
and turn trembling to Yahweh and to his bounty.” (3:5)¹³

¹² Cf. G. Ravasi, “Osea,” 13.

¹³ The question arises, whether the return mentioned in Hos 3:5 is conditioned by the love of God, who first returns to his people, or whether it results from the fact that Israel has discovered that dissent from God leads to death and nothingness. One can assume the latter scenario, recognising a cause-and-effect (instead of merely chronological) connection between v. 4 and v. 5. In v. 4, it is said that the people have neither a king, nor a cult. Such experience could urge Israelites to admit their own insufficiency, and thus to rediscover Yahweh (cf. 2:9); cf. H.W. Wolff, *Hosea*. A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Hosea, Hermeneia, Philadelphia 1974, 62–3. J.A. Dearman adds that “the separation of Israel is the result of their sin,

In this prophecy, some commentators want to see an account of the process of repentance, the stages of which are marked by the three verbs: *šûb* (“return”) – *biqqeš* (“seek”) – *pāḥad* (“tremble”). Especially the last of those requires some explication. As a starting point, one must come closer (*šûb*) to God, by turning away from the current wandering with idols and alien powers. It enables one to seek Yahweh. However, the prophet does not mean the cultic significance of the verb *biqqeš* as “seeking” Yahweh in sanctuaries and worship, for these have been destroyed and abandoned by God (cf. 3:4; 5:15).¹⁴ It is rather the abandonment of pride, which originated from the belief of one’s independence from God and his law (Cf. 4:6; 8:1.12), and self-sufficiency based on one’s wealth and cunning (12:8–9), as well as military capabilities (10:13). The final verb – *pāḥad* – describes the ultimate joy that will be the lot of Israel returning “to Yahweh and to his bounty [*tûbô*].” The trembling accompanying the returning people does not mark an expression of fear and terror before Yahweh, but it is a sign of joyful acceptance of the goods of which He is the only giver (2:24).¹⁵ In a similar vein, God will speak through Jeremiah: “they shall fear (*pāḥad*) and tremble (*rāḡaz*) because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it [=Jerusalem]” (33:9).

The “return” appears to be the source of a new relationship between God and Israel. The prophet calls for Israel to return to

whereas their restoration to the relationship will occur after their judgment and purification” (*The Book of Hosea*, 139).

¹⁴ Cf. H.W. Wolff, *Hosea*, 62–3.

¹⁵ In the context of the phrase *tûb yhw̄h* in Jer 31:12, one could suspect that what is meant here are the natural resources of Palestine (its fields, olive groves etc.), cf. H.W. Wolff, *Hosea*, 63; J. Jeremias, *Der Prophet Hosea*, ATD 24/1, Göttingen 1994, 58. However, in 8:3 the “good” is identified as Yahweh, his covenant and Law (cf. 8:1). Thus, perhaps we are rather speaking of recognising the goodness of God. And that will be their joy (they will come trembling with joy). This direction is possible if it is related to the announced in 2:21–22 remarriage between Israel and Yahweh, who will offer a mohar in the form of *ṣedeq* and *mišpāṭ*, *Hesed* and *raḥāmîm*, as well as *ʿēmûnā^h*. These are not material objects, but qualities that make a relationship “everlasting” (2:21).

Yahweh particularly in the final chapter of his book, therefore this appeal may be considered as a sort of a spiritual testament of Hosea:

“**Return**, O Israel, to the LORD your God,
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.
Take words with you and **return** to the LORD;
say to him, «Take away all guilt;
accept that which is good,
and we will offer the fruit of our lips.» (14:1–2)

In the calls cited above, Hosea tries to outline the manner and the content of such a “return” to God. “The words to be taken” by Israel constitute their offering of “the fruit of [their] lips” (v. 2). These “words” mean the words in which Israel will renounce looking to other peoples for help, and trusting solely in its own power, at the same time expressing their longing for Yahweh to remove their guilt so that it no longer burdens them. In light of v. 4, this new type of offering of “the fruit of [their] lips” means the renunciation of everything that had so far constituted an idol for Israel: foreign powers, their own military capacity (horses), and the deities “crafted with their own hands.” This will indeed be Israel’s return to their covenant with Yahweh.¹⁶

In Hos 12:7, there is another triad of verbs: *šûb* (“return”) – *šāmar* (“guard”) – *qīwwāh* (“hope, trust”), which indicates what is involved in the act of repentance:

“You must **return** to your God.
Maintain loyalty and justice,
and always hope in your God.” (12:7)

The context of this utterance is the story of the patriarch Jacob, who returns to his homeland with the help of Yahweh.¹⁷

¹⁶ Cf. D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC 31, Nashville 1987, 213–14.

¹⁷ It must be noted, however, that on synchronic reading of Hosea, Jacob’s response to return, should we assume that it is expressed in Hos 14:13, was in fact negative: “for a woman he ran to Aram,” and “for a woman he guarded” [the herd]. That way, the prophet would make allegation of mixing with foreign women, as well as

The structure *bēʾlōheʾkā tāsūb* does not primarily mean a return to Yahweh, but a return thanks to Yahweh.¹⁸ Repentance requires one to maintain mercy and the law (*hesed ūmišpāt šəmōr*). In a sense, it is the response to God’s gift to his beloved, mentioned in 2:21–22. The polysemantic character of the noun *hesed* used here allows for the rendering of this expression as “extending love, kindness, mercy, goodness, mildness, loyalty, constancy” both towards God, and towards man. Hence, it is not only horizontal involvement for the sake of justice, but also vertical involvement, referred to as trustful confiding in God. In its spiritual aspect, the “return” is reflected both in a new programme of life in terms of faith, and morality. It will also have its material consequences, experienced by man in history. As the “non-return” to God resulted in the reversal of the exodus (an anti-exodus)—the loss of freedom and land, so the “return” to God will bear the fruit of a new entering into the promised land, to enjoy its fertility and richness:

“They will **come back** to live in my shade;
 they will grow wheat again,
 they will make the vine flourish, their wine will be
 as famous as Lebanon’s.” (14:8)

4. The merciful “return” of God

God does not return to “destroy Ephraim” (11:9), but to grant him a new exodus. The exiles “shall come . . . like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria,” for God “will **return** them to their homes” in the promised land (11:11). Return/repentance is identified with the return from exile, the work of God who does “restore the fortunes (*šūb šəbūt*) of [His] people” (6:11). The

practicing cults of fertility, assuming a negative meaning of the verb *šmr*, cf. 4:10–11 (cf. H.W. Wolff, *Hosea*, 216).

¹⁸ Here, commentators suggest two ways to understand the preposition *beʾh*: an instrumental one (“the return thanks to God”)—H.W. Wolff, *Hosea*, 211; A.A. Macintosh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 491, or as an introduction of an adverbial of manner (“the return in the presence of God”)—J. Jeremias, *Der Prophet Hosea*, 154; J.A. Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, 308.

manner it will occur is presented in 14:5, where the verb *šûb* is used about God's wrath:

“I will heal their **disloyalty** (*məšûbā^h*);
I will love them freely (*nəḏābā^h*),
for my anger has **turned from** (*šāb*) them.” (14:4)

Through his love and forgiveness, symbolically expressed by the anger “turning from” its object and “returning” to God, the dissent of the people wrongly “returning” (*məšûbā^h*) to their idols is healed by God. God's love precedes the return of the people, as it awaits, prepares, and causes the repentance of man. God's love is denoted with the term *nəḏābā^h* in the function of an adverbial of manner. It underscores the fact that God's love is “spontaneous,” that it remains fully “unconditional and boundless.”¹⁹ Earlier, Yahweh expected Israel to repent (14:3), now he rather surprisingly resigns from all introductory conditions. Instead of waiting for the change in the attitude of his beloved, God himself “returns [literally «pushes back»] his anger” and turns towards her with love. The same thought is expressed even more dramatically in 11:8:

“Ephraim, how could I part with you?
Israel, how could I give you up?
How could I make you like Admah
or treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart within me turns,
fever grips my inmost being.” (11:8)

On the basis of the verb *hāpāk* used in 11:8, the same as the one denoting the destruction of Admah and Zeboiim mentioned in Deut 29:22, one can say that instead of “destroying” Israel, God “destroys himself,” in the sense that “his heart turns,” that is, he changes his decision (such is the meaning of the analysed verb in Exod 14:5; Ps 105:25). It occurs due to the influence of God's entrails—*niḥûmîm*, which in light of their two other appearances in the

¹⁹ The first rendering was proposed by L. Koehler – W. Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*, I, Leiden ³1995, 634.

Hebrew Bible (Isa 57:18; Zech 1:13) express a kind of contrition, compassion, and mercy intended to console another person. Such compassion triumphs over wrath and leads God to his original decision of loving Israel: “I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim” (11:9). God remains constant in his emotion and will towards his unfaithful son, Israel. His heart is not driven by anger and revenge, but by mercy and goodwill even for the son who denies His love. The power of God’s feeling “will heal the disloyalty” of Israel in such a way that they will return to Yahweh.

Thus, the human logic of forgiveness has been reverted, as it requires the repentance to come first. God forgives the people, even before they repent, and even should they not repent.²⁰ That does not mean that repentance is not necessary. It is required, but not as a precondition of God’s forgiveness, but in response to God’s love.

The motif of a “return” is among the key elements of the history of God and Israel symbolically described through the difficulties experienced by Hosea and Gomer. The polysemantic character of the verb *šûb* allows the prophet to demonstrate the entire dynamics of the relationship between God and man. God’s reaction to such an attitude is that of a double “return.” On the one hand, it is the “return” of God with the punishment for the perfidious people, on the other—God “returns” with his love and forgiveness. Torn with the punishment and healed with the forgiveness, man ultimately “returns” to God, who “allures him . . . , and speaks to his heart” (cf. 2:16). With such elaborate treatment of repentance, it may be surprising that there are no direct calls to repentance, addressed to the people. Instead, the Book of Hosea presents an outline of man’s return to God, which is only possible owing to God’s own return, as with his forgiving love he makes man capable of answering with repentance to the One, who is the source of life for the people of the covenant (cf. 14:6–9).

²⁰ L. Alonso Schökel, J.L. Sicre Diaz, *I profeti*, *Commenti Biblici*, Roma ³1996, 976.

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