

Handout: Is there Conversion in the Synoptic Gospels? A *Problemanzeige*

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Thesis: Examining the use of terms that supposedly “lexicalize” conversion in the synoptic gospels (i.e., μετάνοια, ἐπιστρέφω, and μετανοέω) we find that the evangelists are concerned with something much closer to restoration than conversion, and most interestingly, it appears this conception of restoration applies intrareligiously to Jews, intracommunally among Jesus’ followers, and universally in so far as Gentiles are concerned.

I. Intrareligious Restoration

The most obvious thing to note when investigating these terms with the question of conversion in hand is that turning and repentance (or changing of mind) are called for by Jews for Jews. The task of John and Jesus is not the turning of people from one religion to another, but the restoration of relationships (expressed with familial language) that already existed and have somehow gone bad through sin.

“John came baptizing in the desert and proclaiming a baptism of a change of heart for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk 1:4).

“Jesus came into galilee proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has arrived! Change your hearts and trust in this good news” (Mk 1:14-15).

“He will turn many sons of Israel to the Lord their God [...] and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children” (Lk 1:16-17).

II. Intracommunal Restoration

In the following examples we find an analogy with the way turning and repentance occur elsewhere in our literature: those who are already a part of something but who have failed in faithfulness or in sin are to be restored in some way to right relationship. Membership in the group is presupposed in both cases, whether as part of the Jewish people generally, or as part of the group of Christ believers specifically.

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he has a change of heart (μετανοέω), forgive him. Even if he sins against you seven times a day and seven times he turns (ἐπιστρέφω) to you saying, I have had a change of heart (μετανοέω), forgive him” (Lk 17:3-4).

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you, that your *pistis* might not fail. But once you turn back (ἐπιστρέφω), strengthen your brothers” (Lk 22:31-32).

III. Universal Restoration

The same words used of how Jews should respond to Jewish prophets are also used of how non-Jews should respond to Jewish prophets. In other words, there is no distinction between, say, Jewish repentance and Gentile conversion. Moreover, the nations are offered the same *μετάνοια* for the forgiveness *of sins* as the Jews. We find neither a distinction in message nor a distinction in response. This should likewise be understood as restoration and not a conversion to Judaism. (Cf. Romans 1-2, where Paul presupposes that all people, Jews and Gentiles, in fact do know God and are thus culpable for sin, even if God has for a time given people over to perversion.)

“Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! For if the powerful deeds done among you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have changed their minds [*μετενόησαν*] long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes” (Lk 10:13).

“And he said to them, ‘It is written that [...] a change of heart [*μετάνοιαν*] unto the forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all the nations’” (Lk 24:46-27).

IV. Comparison to the Apostolic Fathers

The writings known as the Apostolic Fathers use our vocabulary very similarly as in the gospels, only in many places in these writings it is not Jews who are called to turn and change their hearts, but Christian believers who have endangered their salvation by sinning. Both in the synoptics and in the Apostolic Fathers, our “conversion” vocabulary is used primarily for inner-group restoration, and then *only by extension*, also for the restoration of those outside.

“Jonah proclaimed destruction to the Ninivites, but having changed their minds concerning their sins, they appeased God by beseeching him and received salvation *even though* they were aliens to God” [i.e., a foreign people; cf. 2 Clem 17.1].

“[...] For the repentance of the righteous has an end; complete are the days for repentance mind for all the holy ones. But for the nations, a change of mind is available until the last day” (Herm 6.5).

V. Conclusion

The discussion surrounding conversion in the gospels strikes me as analogous to the discussion of religion in antiquity: when we examine the ancient words we think mean “conversion” or “religion”, we discover their original contexts yield a different nexus of meanings than our modern terms, which is not surprising. A lexical starting point for identifying conversion in antiquity is doomed to failure, at least as far as the synoptic gospels are concerned.