

God's 'Repentance' in light of the Covenantal Relationship between שׁוּב and נָחַם in Jeremiah 18:1-10¹

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Abstract

This article addresses the relationship between two Hebrew verbs found in Jeremiah 18:7-10 that may shed light on the subject of God's 'repentance', especially when the Hebrew verbs words are viewed from the context of the covenant. We see that the main point of the passage shifts from the potter's unilateral control and sovereignty over the clay to the flexibility of the potter to work with his clay. The significance is that in this covenantal context, the author(s) used שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) to demonstrate that God sometimes, but not arbitrarily, relents in response to the decisions of his people, meaning that the response of the nation had an influence on God's actions.

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1. Introduction

The concept of the ‘repentance’ of God makes for an interesting roundtable discussion among scholars. If it were not for the numerous examples in the Old Testament that portray God as having changed his mind or relented, it would be easier to simply overlook these texts or classify them as nonconsequential in the grand scheme of theology. It was, however, this recurring pattern that piqued my curiosity enough to draw a seat to the table. Nowhere is the concept of God’s relenting better exemplified than in Jeremiah 18:7-10. Here, repentance is illustrated by the usage of the Hebrew verbs שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*). The first verb, שׁוּב (*shub*), refers to a nation ‘turning’ *from* evil or ‘turning’ *towards* evil. The second verb, נָחַם (*nacham*), refers to God ‘turning’ from sending judgment or ‘turning’ from sending blessing.

When speaking of God, נָחַם (*nacham*) is translated to express an idea of change (Fabry and Simian-Yofre 1998:340–356). The problem, however, is how this ‘change’ is to be understood. The debate is on whether נָחַם (*nacham*) is an accommodating anthropomorphism or straightforward (literal) language. For example, scholars who understand ‘God’s relenting’ as an accommodating anthropomorphism interpret נָחַם (*nacham*) as a metaphor or figure of speech that does not reflect literal reality but instead accommodates God in human terms so he can be understood (Oliphint 2012:123; Geisler 2010:117; Routledge 2013:252). In Jeremiah 18:7–10, then, a nation’s repentance, שׁוּב (*shub*), would lead to a change in the circumstances surrounding the situation at hand but not to a literal change with God. In other words, the nation’s actions should not influence God’s actions.

Scholars who interpret ‘God’s relenting’ in a straightforward way believe that even if the language was metaphorical, it does not necessarily and automatically negate a straightforward literal interpretation of the phrase (Fretheim 1984:5–12, 1987; Goldingay 2006:89; Enns 2005:106–107). This is because the anthropomorphic metaphor would still have to communicate something true about God and his relationship to the world. This view sees Jeremiah’s use of נָחַם (*nacham*) as binding God to human activity. For example, the nation’s turning from evil caused God to turn from sending judgment, so not only does the situation change from the nation’s perspective but also from God’s perspective as well (Hays 2010:82; Chisholm 1995:390; Brueggemann 2002:171).

As we can see, the way we interpret נָחַם (*nacham*) affects the interpretation of the meaning of the passage and our understanding of the relationship between God and mankind.

3 The terms 'covenantal relationship' or 'covenantal context' refer to the context of the Deuteronomic covenant between God and his people that runs all throughout the Old Testament. In this covenant, both Yahweh and Israel had roles to fulfil towards each other, and there were consequences surrounding Israel's faithfulness or unfaithfulness (Deuteronomy 28). For more information on the book of Jeremiah's connection with Deuteronomy and the covenantal context, see Brueggemann 1988:3-4; 1998:142; 2002:171.

Furthermore, שׁוּב (*shub*) hardly ever enters the discussion when scholars try to determine how נָחַם (*nacham*) is to be understood. The premise of this article is that the covenantal relationship³ between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in Jeremiah 18:1–10 proves to be significant in shedding light on the controversial passage. To test this premise, we must look briefly at שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*), and then exegetically analyse Jeremiah 18–10.

2. Word Study Overviews

2.1. Word study of שׁוּב (*shub*)

שׁוּב (*shub*) is used 1059 times, making it the twelfth most used verb in the Old Testament (Fabry and Graupner 2004:461–522).

שׁוּב (*shub*) has a wide range of meanings and can be translated: to turn back (to God), return, turn away from, abandon, to bring or lead back, to give back, to repay, to answer, to revoke or cancel, to convert from evil, to restore and to repent. As evident from the semantic range, the verb is associated with motion (Fabry and Graupner 2004:461–522). שׁוּב (*shub*) appears in five different Hebrew verb forms: qal, hilphil, hophal, polel and polal. For relevancy's sake, only the qal verb form will be considered in this article.

2.1.1. שׁוּב (*shub*) in the Qal stem

שׁוּב (*shub*) appears in the qal form 679 times in the Old Testament, of which both Jeremiah 18:4 and 18:8 represent two of those instances (Donnell 1988:27). The qal stem is 'the simple or basic verbal stem', and qal verbs are mostly active in voice, meaning the subject is doing the action (Practico and Pelt 2009). In qal form, the subject of שׁוּב (*shub*) is most often man, but there are instances where God is the subject (e.g. Deuteronomy 13:17). שׁוּב (*shub*) is also used in the context of the relationship between God and man. In these instances, שׁוּב (*shub*) can be described primarily in two ways: firstly, "return" in the sense of 'relationship' (Donnell 1988:27) and secondly, 'covenantal' in the sense of 'expressing a change of loyalty on the part of Israel or God, each for each other' (Holladay 1958:2). The difference between these two 'usages' is that the first example can apply to human-to-human relationships, such as marriage or kinships. The second example applies exclusively to people's relationship to God and God's relationship to people. Donnell (1988:27–28) noted that there are twelve examples in the Old Testament where שׁוּב (*shub*) refers to a 'return in a relationship', and there are 129 times where שׁוּב (*shub*)

in qal form is used exclusively in a ‘covenantal context’, mainly in the writings of the prophets.

Holladay (1958:53) wrote extensively on the covenantal aspect of שׁוּב (*shub*) and defined the central meaning when it appears in qal form:

The verb (שׁוּב), in the qal, means: having moved in a particular direction, to move thereupon in the opposite direction, the implication being (unless there is evidence to the contrary) that one will arrive again at the initial point of departure.

In the covenantal contexts, the idea of ‘moving in the opposite direction to arrive at the initial place of departure’ (Holladay 1958:53) implied a return on unfaithful Israel’s part to Yahweh. In other words, Israel was once faithful, but now they had become unfaithful and moved away from Yahweh. Repentance would have moved the nation in the opposite direction of their unfaithfulness and brought them back to where they once were positioned, that is, in a faithful relationship with Yahweh.

2.1.2. שׁוּב (*shub*) in ‘Covenantal Relationship’ in Qal Form⁴

There should be no surprise that the prophets used שׁוּב (*shub*) as an expression of the covenant between God and Israel, as they often called the nation back into right relationship with God. Holladay (1958:120) noted that the usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) in the covenantal contexts was predicated on the assumptions of the covenant, ‘namely, that it was established in the past on the initiative of God’. In this context, שׁוּב (*shub*) does not represent the initial *turning* to Yahweh but a *returning* to Yahweh. As indicated from the context of Jeremiah 18:1–10, it refers to a turning back from evil to God. Donnell (1988:28) discovered that of the 129 times שׁוּב (*shub*) is found in the context of covenantal relationships, Israel is the subject of the verb in all but seven instances. In the other seven occurrences, God is the subject (Donnell 1988:28). Davis (1983:19) noted that Jeremiah 32:40 is the only instance where God is the subject, that his relationship to Israel was not dependent upon what Israel did or how they related to God. This is significant, because it shows that the normal usage of the verb with God as the subject associates God’s response as relating to Israel’s actions. For example, in Deuteronomy 30:1–5, God’s ‘turning from’ judgment and promise to ‘restore’ is solely dependent upon the obedience of Israel.

4 שׁוּב (*shub*) is found in covenantal usage eleven times in the Hilphil form, which expresses a causative action in active voice. Because Jeremiah 18:4 and 8 are expressed in qal form, we shall not cover the Hilphil form in this article.

2.2. Word study of נָחַם (*nacham*)

נָחַם (*nacham*) is used 108 times in the Old Testament (Fabry and Simian-Yofre 1998:342) and can be translated to mean: comfort in the face of calamity, one who seeks to identify with another in suffering, compassion, to be sorry, to have pity, to grieve, to change one's mind, relent and to repent (Fabry and Simian-Yofre 1998:340-356). נָחַם (*nacham*) occurs in four verbal forms: Niphal, Piel, Pual and Hithpael. In the Piel and Pual forms, the verb most often refers to 'comfort' or 'compassion' and has an emotional component in that the person who is comforting shares the pain of the one being comforted (Parunak 1975:517; Butterworth 1997:82). When God is the subject of the verb in these forms, he is said to bring comfort to the people from judgment or oppression from enemies by removing or changing the circumstances (Parunak 1975:516). In the niphal and hithpael form, there are examples of, God grieving about decisions that people have made, God regretting decisions he has made based on the disobedience of people, and God changing his mind in response to the obedience or disobedience of people. In Jeremiah 18:1–10 נָחַם (*nacham*) occurs twice and both are in Niphal form.

2.2.1. נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Niphal Stem

The Niphal stem is used to express simple action with either a passive or reflexive voice (Practico and Pelt 2009). Oftentimes, 'whatever a verb means in the Qal stem, it becomes passive or reflective in the Niphal stem' (Practico and Pelt 2009). Jeremiah contains fourteen usages of נָחַם (*nacham*). In twelve of the fourteen times, it is found in the Niphal stem (Donnell 1988:23).

The complexity of the lexical problems when it comes to the niphal and hithpael⁵ of נָחַם (*nacham*) can be seen by the unrelated translations given in lexicons. Parunak (1975:519–525) grouped the basic meanings of נָחַם (*nacham*) into six categories: (1) suffer emotional pain, (2) be comforted, comfort oneself, (3) execute wrath, (4) retract punishment, (5) retract blessing and (6) retract a life of sin.

The breakdown of נָחַם (*nacham*) can be listed as follows: there are at least thirty-three occurrences where נָחַם (*nacham*) associates God with changing his mind or experiencing emotions. Seven of these present God as experiencing regret, sorrow, and pity.⁶ In another instance, God stated, 'I will not show pity'.⁷ In the remaining twenty-five of the thirty-three occurrences, נָחַם (*nacham*) is used in reference to God changing his mind and can be further broken down in the following way: on three of these uses, the text directly states twice that God does not change his mind.⁸

5 The Niphal and Hithpael forms of נָחַם (*nacham*) are similar and are oftentimes grouped together.

6 Genesis 6:6, 6:7; Judges 2:18; 1 Samuel 15:11, 15:35; 1 Chronicles 21:15; Psalm 90:13.

7 Ezekiel 24:14.

8 Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29.

On six of these occasions, the text implies that God can and does change his mind.⁹ Finally, in sixteen occurrences, נָחַם (*nacham*) is used to portray God as either changing his mind or promising to change his mind depending on whether his people repent.¹⁰ Jeremiah 18:8, 10 are two examples of this category.

⁹ Psalm 110:4; Isaiah 57:6; Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6, 20:16; Zechariah 8:14.

¹⁰ Exodus 32:12, 14; 2 Samuel 24:16; Psalm 106:45; Jeremiah 18:8, 10, 26:3, 13, 19; Joel 2:13, 14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9, 10, 4:2.

Having examined albeit briefly שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*), we can turn our attention to exegetically analysing Jeremiah 18:1–10 to see exactly how these words prove to be significant to this passage.

3. Exegetical Analysis of Jeremiah 18:1–10

3.1. Jeremiah 18:1–4

Jeremiah 18:1–4 began with Yahweh telling Jeremiah to visit the potter's workshop in order to receive his message. The Hebrew word for 'message' in verse two is דְבַר (*dabar*) and reiterates that the following illustration and message is from Yahweh and not Jeremiah's own concoction (Hays 2016:125). This command represented another symbolic act, like Jeremiah 5:1–6 and 16:1–4, that Yahweh planned to use to illustrate Jeremiah's prophetic messages (Longman 2008).

Jeremiah was obedient and went down to the potter's house (Carroll 2004:82). In ancient cultures, making pottery was an important occupation (see King 1993:164–178). The prophet had probably watched a potter at work prior to the event recorded here, but the difference for this visit was that he was going to learn something about God (Huey 1993:180). Upon his arrival, he saw the potter 'working at the wheel' (Jeremiah 18:3). The 'wheel' consisted of two discs revolving one above the other (Allen 2008:214). Huey (1993:180) described the process of how the potter's wheel operated:

The lower stone was turned with the feet. It was attached by an axle to the upper wheel. As the lower wheel was turned, the upper wheel, on which the lump of clay was placed, rotated. As the wheel turned, the potter skillfully shaped the clay into a vessel by the pressure of his fingers against the pliable material. If the clay did not achieve the desired shape, he did not throw it away. Instead, he patiently reworked it until it became the vessel he wanted it to be. If it became misshapen as he worked it, it was not because of his lack of skill. The clay may have been of an inferior quality, may have contained defects, or perhaps was not sufficiently moist and pliable.

Huey's (1993:180) point about the potter patiently reworking his clay until he received the desired result is important for

understanding the illustration of Jeremiah 18:4. We should notice that it was not the poor skill level of the potter that was responsible for the ‘misshapen’ clay. Instead, Jeremiah 18:4 reveals the clay had become ‘marred’ in the potter’s hands. In response, the potter was skilled enough to take the ‘misshapen’ clay and ‘form’ it into something desirable. ‘Marred’ is the Hebrew verb *חָתַשׁ* (*shachath*) and its basic meanings are ‘to ruin, destroy, annihilate; to behave corruptly, cause trouble’ (Holladay and Köhler 2000:366–367). In the context of 18:4, *חָתַשׁ* (*shachath*) means ‘to have become ruined or corrupted’ (Conrad 2004:583–584). The clay had not turned out the way the potter was hoping or had originally intended. The word ‘formed’ (Jeremiah 18:4) is a variation of the Hebrew verb root *שׁוּב* (*shub*) (Hays 2016:125). In this context, the potter had to change directions (or turn back) and rework his clay to get his desired product. In other words, the potter revised his plan.

3.2. Jeremiah 18:5–6

In these verses the symbolism of the illustration becomes clear. In this specific context, the potter represented God, while the clay represented Judah. Willis (2002:164) explained that God addressed Judah as ‘house of Israel’ rather than ‘people of Judah’, because God was appealing to their sense of obligation as a covenant people. A common misconception among Judah was that this covenant relationship guaranteed their divine protection (Jeremiah 7:1–15). The prophet, on the other hand, was proclaiming that the covenant relationship demanded obedience and faithfulness on Judah’s part (Brueggemann 2002:171). The nation’s choices mattered, and if they wanted to experience the blessings of the covenant, they had to obey.

In this section (Jeremiah 18:5–6) God pointed Judah back to the illustration of the potter working with the clay. The rhetorical question, ‘Can I not do with you ...’, expects an affirmative answer, but ‘the fact he asks it suggests that there was some doubt—probably based on their sinful actions—as to whether they actually accorded him this “right”’ (Willis 2002:164). God reminded the nation that he has the right to do with them as the potter did with the clay. The question is, ‘What did the potter do with the clay?’ Many commentators believe the main point of 18:5–6 is to show God’s absolute sovereignty over nations and people in that God’s actions are never dependent upon human actions (see Longman 2008; Huey 1993:181; Ware 2000). While we may agree that God is certainly sovereign, is the main point of the potter and clay illustration to show the potter’s absolute sovereignty in that he never changes his plans in response to the clay? Answering this

question leads us back to the question posited above: God says he can do with Judah as the potter did with the clay, so what exactly did the potter do with the clay?

As indicated from Jeremiah 18:1–4, the potter saw that the clay was defective, so he crushed it and started over, and perhaps this process continued until he received his desired result. In the same way, God knew that Judah had become defective, corrupted or marred, because of their disobedience and sin. In other words, at this point in their history, Judah was not what God had originally intended for them to be according to their covenant relationship and standards. This passage shows that God, like the potter, instead of throwing them away completely, was willing to change or revise his plans based on the response of the people as indicated in 18:7–10. If the potter and clay illustration was solely about God's unilateral control over Judah, then would that not make God responsible for Judah's failures? I suggest that perhaps a more consistent way of understanding the potter and clay illustration is that it shows God's flexibility in dealing with his covenant people. In other words, God can be flexible in that he is sovereign and can revise his plans and change directions, if the circumstances require him to do so. This 'change', however, is never arbitrary as we shall see in verses 7–10.

3.3. Jeremiah 18:7–10

If there is any confusion about what verses 5–6 are teaching, then verses 7–10 provide clarity. I understand this statement is not agreed upon by all. For example, Frese (2013) argued that 18:7–10 is not connected in any way to 18:1–6, except that they are both complementary points that help serve the large purpose of 18:1–11, that is, calling the people of Judah back to repentance. Unlike what I am arguing here, Frese (2013:377) believed that 18:7–10 does not elaborate on or explain the metaphor of the potter. One of the main objections Frese (2013:383) raised is that the potter and clay in verses 1–6 are not depicted in the same way as God and the nations in verses 7–10. In other words, Frese (2013:383) believes that if verses 7–10 were meant to explain verses 1–4, then the author should have portrayed the potter as changing his plans based on the behaviour of the clay.

In Frese's (2013) analysis of Jeremiah 18:1–10, he overlooks two important points. First, the potter does in fact change his plans in verses 1–6, because the clay had become marred in his hands. The words of Jeremiah 18:7–10 show examples of exactly how God, like the potter in verses 1–4, changes or revises his plan for the nations. These verses (7–10) also show a contrast between how the LORD responds to evil nations who repent (vv.7–8) and how the

LORD responds to good nations who “repent” and become evil (vv. 9–10)’ (Willis 2002:164). The structure of this chapter is such that 18:1–4 is a narration of the illustration, while 18:5–10 is the explanation and interpretation of the action in verses 1–4.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, these verses show a relationship between the Hebrew verbs שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*), particularly in the context of covenant relationship. For example, when a nation repents, then God will relent. On the other hand, if a nation does not repent, then God will not relent (Goldingay 2007:77). In other words, without humankind’s שׁוּב (*shub*), there is no נָחַם (*nacham*) from God. Frese (2013:388) ultimately concluded that God’s plans for the nations are not rigidly fixed and can be altered based on people’s behaviour, even though Frese’s method of structuring the text is different from mine. In the same sense, Stulman (1999:55) observed that ‘Yahweh can “re-form” the destiny of Israel and the nations based on their conduct and response to prophetic speech’. Huey (1993:181) concluded, ‘When we change, God can change his actions toward us . . .’ and that ‘the clay cannot challenge the potter, but Israel can act so that Yahweh will change’. A main point of Jeremiah 18:7–10 is that when people or circumstances change, God can adapt his actions in response to the change (Willis 2002:167).

It is argued here that both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*), in the context of a covenantal relationship, work together to form a powerful relationship that has an enormous influence over the entire meaning of the passage. Understanding the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*), in the covenantal context of Jeremiah 18:1–10 reveals that God’s change of mind does not happen arbitrarily. As Longman (2008) wrote, ‘These decisions are conditional upon the response of the nations and kingdoms. If those announced for judgment repent or those who are established sin, then all bets are off’. The blessings and curses listed in Deuteronomy 28 give strong evidence that in covenantal contexts, conditional clauses are literal not just from man’s perspective but also from God’s perspective. In other words, there is nothing about the use of these words in this covenantal relationship context that implies they are not to be taken literally. As Moberly (2013:129) correctly concludes, ‘...to say that God repents implies that God’s relationship with humanity in general, and with Israel in particular, is a genuine and responsive relationship, in which what people do and how they relate to God matters to God’.

Understanding the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the covenantal context of this passage allows us to

reaffirm the main point of the entire potter and clay illustration. The covenantal relationship in this passage does not emphasise a firm definition of God's sovereignty where he unilaterally controls everything, including the clay. If this was the central message of 18:1–10, then Jeremiah's use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in verses 7–10 does not make practical sense. This illustration shows, rather, that in the context of covenantal relationship God is able and willing to adjust his plans with people, just as a potter adjusts his plans with a vessel that has been spoiled (Boyd 2000:141).

So, in Jeremiah 18:1–10, God brought the prophet to a potter's workshop where the potter was shaping a vessel that was not turning out the way he had hoped. The potter changed his plans and worked the clay into something else. God showed the prophet this to illustrate that because he is the potter and Judah is the clay, he has the right to change his mind about his plans for them, if they will repent (Boyd 2018). The potter and clay analogy is not about God's unilateral control but his right to change plans in response of the nation's decisions.

Only when reading this passage in the light of the Exile, did Jeremiah's readers grasp the full meaning of the passage. Before that there was a lack of understanding, which is evidenced by the nation's response to God's plea for repentance in Jeremiah 18:12 (Stulman 1999:55). The nation did not think repentance would have saved them. They did not understand that their actions might have a literal influence on God. They, instead, thought it was of 'no use'. God had already declared judgment was coming, they reasoned, and nothing could stop it.

4. Conclusion

We can see how in one view, both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) play a vital role in understanding the overall meaning and message of Jeremiah 18:1–10. Furthermore, we see that when שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) are viewed from a covenantal context, they shed light on the understanding of the concept of God's repentance or 'changing his mind'. An area of further research would be to determine how this covenantal view of Jeremiah 18:1–10 might potentially shed light on the understanding of another controversial passage, Romans 9, particularly where Paul references the potter-clay analogy in verses 19–21. This would require exploring Romans 9 in light of its Old Testament background with an emphasis on Jeremiah 18:1–10 and the covenantal relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*).

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