

## REPENTANCE

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The notion of repentance follows from the notion of sin. It suggests that sin is an act or attitude which can be corrected by some change in the person.

### A. Old Testament

The basic Hebrew word which is used to express this change is *šwb*, the root of which means simply “to turn.” It is a particularly instructive word because it reflects the notion of journeying and pilgrimage, which exemplifies in a very fundamental sense the attitude and relationship between Yahweh and Israel (Deut 26:5-11).

The idea of walking in the way of the Lord is a common metaphor in the Hebrew Bible (Ps 1:1). And in a variety of contexts the way of Israel is contrasted with the way of Canaan, the way of the Lord with the way of evildoers, the way of the righteous with the way of sinners. Israel’s religious calendar, too, is built on the core of pilgrim feasts: Passover, Booths, and Pentecost all have pilgrim contexts. It is this notion of walking and journeying, then, that illumines the meaning of *šwb* (or the less common *nhm*; Exod 13:17). The relationship with Yahweh is envisioned as an ongoing journey requiring constant attention and vigilance, and a sense of purpose. To deviate from the way is, at the same time, to lose sight of the objective.

Three classical passages illustrate this sense of repentance-returning: Amos 4:6-13; Hos 5:15-6:5; Jer 3:12-24.

In Amos the prophetic vision of the coming destruction finds powerful expression. His prophecy cuts through the appearances of prosperity and illumines the hypocrisy and idolatry of self-love. The passage in chap. 4 rehearses the chastisements, punishments, and signs that Yahweh has visited upon Israel. Despite this “parental” admonition, “you did not return (*šwb*) to me.” This phrase becomes a refrain in the passage. The general tone of Amos is pessimistic and the repentance which is required seems remote. In these passages the emphasis is on “Israel,” the people. The dire call “Prepare to meet your God” is directed to the nation which “did not return.”

In Hosea the great metaphor of the faithless wife is the key to understanding the sense of repentance (Hosea 2-3). Faithless Israel has become a prostitute and abandoned the relationship with the Lord, forgotten the love God showed, and been ungrateful for the Lord’s gifts of plenty and prosperity. But the Lord does not (as in Amos) let go. “I will woo her. I will go with her into the wilderness and comfort her: there I will restore her vineyards...and there she will answer as in her youth” (Hos 2:14-15). There is in Hosea a real sense of the possibility of repentance. “Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us and will heal us. He has struck us and he will bind up our wounds; after two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that in his presence we may live” (Hos 6:1-2). Following this consolation, the prophet goes on to enumerate the qualities of repentance: humility and knowledge of the Lord (Hos 6:3-4). And further in chap. 12 he cites “loyalty and justice” (Hos 12:6). Over and over it is the care of the poor, the quality of justice, and the dedication to the Torah that exemplify true repentance.

So in Hosea, while the references are to Israel (2:4-4), the repentance which is required is more personal, more individual than the call to repentance in Amos.

Finally in Jeremiah the prophet's call for a "new heart" provides the context of repentance. In chap. 3 Jeremiah proclaims, "Come back to me, apostate Israel, says the Lord, I will no longer frown on you. For my love is unfailing, says the Lord, I will not be angry for ever" (Jer 3:12). The condemnations of Israel and the apostasy which will bring disaster on the people are offset constantly by the appeal to renewal. "I remember the unfailing devotion of your youth, the love of your bridal days when you followed me in the wilderness, through a land unknown" (Jer 2:2). And the renewal which is required is also specified. "If you will banish your loathsome idols from my sight, and stray no more; if you swear by the life of the Lord in truth, in justice, and uprightness, then shall the nations pray to be blessed like you" (Jer 4:1-2).

But one theme that Jeremiah develops more fully than his predecessors is the idea of gleaning out of Israel a faithful few (Jer 6:9). And this faithful remnant may yet survive the disaster if they acknowledge their wrongdoing, confess their rebellion and their promiscuous traffic with foreign gods (Jer 3:13). In this group of confessors, repentant and renewed, the future hope lies because these the Lord loved: "With everlasting Love have I loved you, therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you" (Jer 31:3).

This can only take place, however, when the Lord "will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." This new covenant will not be external to the faithful, nor a "thing" to be done; rather, the Lord "will write it upon their hearts." The renewed covenant and the renewed heart are essential elements of the future. From the very beginning, the Lord both winnowed and called. And to that call those who heard and repented responded and so became "like a watered garden" (Jer 31:12).

Again in Jeremiah, there is a growing sense of a distinction between the fate of the whole people and the fate of the faithful. So the repentance of the faithful few restores Israel even though the many perish.

It seems clear from the prophetic writings that repentance is eschatological. The final punishment of faithless Israel is withheld. The sword is stayed, the final light is not extinguished, the possibility of repentance remains because the Lord is faithful and full of love and refuses to abandon the covenant (Childs 1986: 226).

Repentance in the prophets, then, is an act of the heart. It is more than mere words. It is defined by clear actions that lead to justice, mercy, and fidelity. But repentance was also a cultic act. It is a liturgical function in Israel. There are a number of passages which point to the liturgical act of repentance (Isa 63:7-64:12; Hos 6:1-3; 7:14; 14:1-3; Joel 2:15-18). These cultic expressions apparently included acts such as rending garments, throwing ashes, wearing coarse garments, and as in the liturgy of the *yôm hakkippurîm*, symbolic acts (Leviticus 16). These cultic acts attest to a widespread belief in both the necessity and the possibility of repentance and forgiveness. Though the prophets often excoriate such rituals because they are performed without a change of heart (Jeremiah 7), they are important indicators of the faith of Israel in the continuous mercy of Yahweh.

Finally, one should note the many references in the Psalms to repentance and forgiveness. Two psalms in particular, Psalm 51 and Psalm 130, express most poignantly the elements of true repentance and its place in the religion of Israel:

If you, Lord, keep count of sins  
Who, O Lord, could hold up his head.  
But in you is forgiveness  
And therefore you are revered  
(Ps 130:3-4).

Create a pure heart in me, O God,  
And give me a new and steadfast spirit. ...  
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit,  
A wounded heart you will not despise  
(Ps 51:10, 17).

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## **B. New Testament**

The primary Gk term rendered “repentance” in English translations of the NT (*metanoia*) is found 24 times, and its verbal form “to repent” (*metanoēō*) is used another 34 times. In addition, another important word which is sometimes translated “repent” (*metamelomai*) occurs six times. The generally recognized core idea of these words is a “change of mind” (NIDNTT 1: 356-57), although *metamelomai* also carries the nuance of “regret” or “remorse” (TDNT 4:628-29). The English rendering has perhaps been colored by the Latin background of concepts like penance and penitence.

1. OT Background. In the LXX both *metanoia/metanoēō* and *metamelomai* translate the Heb *nāham* a total of 35 times, again emphasizing the elements of a change of thinking and regret. It has been commonly held that the NT concept of “repentance” follows the meaning of the frequent Heb verb *šûb* (TDNT 8:989; NIDNTT 1: 357). However, such a view cannot be sustained from LXX usage because *šûb* which is used over 1,050 times, is always translated by *epistrophō* (“to turn, be converted”) and its kindred terminology (TDNT 8:726-29; NIDNTT 1: 354). Thus, any possible shift in meaning took place during the Intertestamental Period, perhaps under Hellenistic influence (TDNT 4:989), though such a conclusion lacks fully persuasive proof (Wilkin 1985).

2. NT Usage. The noun *metanoia* and its related verb *metanoēō* occur 26 times in the gospels, though not at all in John. They are found eleven times in Acts, five times in the Pauline epistles, three times in Hebrews, once in 2 Peter, and twelve times in Revelation. The minority term *metamelomai* is encountered three times in Matthew, twice in 2 Corinthians, and once in Hebrews.

In the gospels, John the Baptist burst onto the scene in Israel “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). His urgent message was

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt 3:2). Those who came to be baptized by John were warned, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:8). Here the basic flavor of intellectual change in *metanoia* is evident. It is also clear that behavioral “fruit” (i.e., a changed life) is expected to flow from repentance (Turner 1975: 63-64).

In his early ministry, Jesus’ own message was expressed in similar ways. Like the Baptizer, he proclaimed, “Repent, for the kingdom...is near” (Matt 4:17). His mission focused on calling “sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). What that meant is clarified in Mark 1:15: “Repent and believe the good news.” Any conception of repenting (*metanoēō*) not wedded to faith in the gospel falls short of the full biblical message.

On the other hand, the proclamation of Jesus (Jeremias 1971: 152-58) and his apostles sometimes utilized the idea of *metanoia* to include faith (Mark 6:12). In a real sense, “Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin” (IDB 4:34). The issue could be sharpened to “repent” or “perish” (Luke 13:3, 5), “repent” or go to “hell” and “torment” after death (Luke 16:23, 28, 30). For those sinners who do repent, however, there is “joy in heaven” (Luke 15:7, 10). Thus, it can be concluded that, in the gospels, *metanoia* stands for the entire response bringing about eternal life, including faith when it is not stated. Accordingly, the Great Commission statement which concludes Luke’s gospel reads, “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (24:47).

At the human level, sincere repentance (*metanoēō*) for interpersonal sin demands forgiveness, according to Christ (Luke 17:3-4). Surprisingly, John’s gospel contains no reference to repentance in either dimension, the idea apparently being included in John’s concept of faith (IDB 4: 34).

The three uses of *metamelomai* in the gospels are instructive. In Matt 21:29, 32, it is similar, but not equivalent, to *metanoēō*. In Matt 27:3 the “remorse” of Judas does not have “the power to overcome the destructive operation of sin” (TDNT 4:628). This example “makes it clear that *metamelomai* and *metanoēō* do not have identical meanings in the NT” (NIDNTT 1: 356).

Virtually echoing John the Baptist, Peter’s sermon at Pentecost in Acts urged, “Repent and be baptized...so that your sins may be forgiven” (Acts 2:38). Further usage links repentance not only with forgiveness (5:31) but also with “faith in our Lord Jesus” (20:21) and with “life,” as a result of repentance (11:18). In Acts 17:30-31 Paul on the Areopagus states God’s command for “all people everywhere to repent” or be justly judged. Parallel to the phenomena in the gospels (NIDNTT 1: 359), repentance in Acts may be complementary to faith (20:21) or include faith (17:30) and leads to forgiveness of sins (2:38; 5:31) and eternal life (11:18).

Two other passages bring *epistrophō* alongside *metanoēō* in noteworthy ways. Acts 3:19 records Peter’s offer to Israel: “Repent...and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out.” Paul’s explanation of his apostolic commission to Agrippa in Acts 26:18 clarifies this turning (*epistrophō*): “from darkness to light,” from Satan’s power to God to receive forgiveness of sins. The apostle’s obedience to that commission meant that he preached that his hearers “should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds” (Acts 26:20). Here again is the expectation that the one who changes his mind (*metanoēō*) about the gospel and turns (*epistrophō*) to the Lord will display a “converted” lifestyle (cf. Luke 3:8).

The Pauline literature rarely uses the terms for repentance, and the Johannine epistles not at all. For Paul, like John, repentance is included in faith (IDB 4: 34). Besides several standard uses (Rom 2:4; 2 Cor 12:21; 2 Tim 2:25), Paul strongly contrasts *metanoēō* and *metamelomai* in 2 Cor 7:8-10 (TDNT 4:629).

The writer of Hebrews refers to the God who “will not change his mind” (7:21) and Esau, who could not achieve repentance (12:17). He also speaks of foundational initial repentance (6:1) and the utter impossibility of returning to the point of first repentance (6:6). Peter describes the patient God, who desires “everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9), apparently including forgiveness and salvation (See 1 Tim 2:4). Again the basic idea of a change of mind is demonstrated in the epistles.

The letters to the churches in the Roman province of Asia in the book of Revelation contain eight uses of “repent” (2:5 [twice], 16, 21 [twice], 22; 3:3, 19). The glorified Christ’s command to repent was directed at a lukewarm church in Laodicea (3:19), but also at the great church at Ephesus (2:5), which had “forsaken its first love” (2:4). All these sinful churches needed to change their minds and bring forth the fruit of repentance (Luke 3:8; Acts 26:20), turning again to Christ.

Sadly, the last mentions of “repent” (*metanoēō*) in the NT picture an unrepentant mass of humankind as God’s climactic wrath is poured out on the earth (Rev 9:20, 21; 16:9, 11). Instead of turning to the Lord in repentant faith through his longstanding patience (2 Pet 3:9) or to escape his righteous judgment, these sinners continued with their abominable acts (9:20, 21) and cursed God instead of glorifying him (16:9, 11).

In conclusion it can be said that repentance in the NT is always anchored in a change of thinking (*metanoia*), although the psychological and emotional aspects sometimes color or expand the concept (especially the usage of *metamelomai*) (ISBE 4: 136-37). Repentance must not be separated from its flip side of faith (Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21), or from the realization that it sometimes stands for the package of human response to the good news of Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:9; cf. Acts 2:38). True repentance, whether by an unbeliever or a believer (Acts 26:18, 20; Luke 17:3-4), receives the gracious forgiveness that God continually offers all humankind in Christ (Luke 24:47).

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