

Repentance

Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology - Repentance

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/repentance/>

The most common term in the Old Testament for repentance is *sub* [suv]; the verbal forms appear well over 1,050 times, although translated “repent” only 13 times, and the substantive “repentance” occurs only once in the *New International Version*. More commonly the translation is “turn” or “return.” A related term is *naham*, which is translated three times as “repent” in the *New International Version*. In the New Testament, the most common verb is *metanoeo* (33 times) and the noun *metanoia* (20 times). A synonym *metamelomai* is once translated “repent” (Matt 21:32).

Two requisites of repentance included in *sub* are “to turn from evil, and to turn to the good.” Most critical theologically is the idea of returning to God, or turning away from evil. If one turns away from God, apostasy is indicated. Three times Ezekiel included God’s call to the people of Israel: “Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!” (14:6); “Repent! Turn away from all your offenses” (18:30); “Turn! Turn from your evil ways” (33:11). Such a call was characteristic of the prophets (see, e.g., Isa 45:22 ; 55:7 ; Joel 2:12-13). The Septuagint underlines this idea by usually translating *sub* by *epi* (*apo*-)*strepho* (to turn about, or to turn away from). To be abandoned are both evil intentions and evil deeds, and both motive and conduct are to be radically changed. A striking example is found in Isaiah 1:16-17: “Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”

One may detect two sides to this turning/convert. There is the free sovereign act of God’s mercy, and a conscious decision to turn to God (a turning that goes beyond sorrow and contrition).

Confession of sins is both commanded and frequently illustrated (e.g., in the penitential prayers, as Pss. 25 and 51). When one is guilty of various sins, “he must confess in what way he has sinned” in order to receive atonement and forgiveness (Lev 5:5 ; 26:40-42). Thus, confession belongs to repentance, and is needed for divine forgiveness (cf. 1 John 1:9). A great prophecy/ promise is given in the Book of Isaiah: “The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins” (59:20).

The two chief forms of repentance in the Old Testament were cultic and ritual (e.g., expressed in public ceremonies, fasting, various displays of sorrow, liturgies, or days of repentance), and the prophetic concept (e.g., people are to “return to the Lord”). The latter stresses a change in relation to God.

To repent and to convert involved obedience to God’s revealed will, placing trust in him, turning away from all evil and ungodliness. Each person was to “turn from his wicked evil way” (Jer 26:3 ; 36:3). Amos gave God’s lament, that despite all he had done for or to the people, “yet you have not returned to me” (4:4, 8-11). Hosea anticipated the day when Israel “will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king” (3:5). Thus he pled with them to return to the Lord their God and to say, “Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously” (14:2b).

Included also in the Old Testament is the idea of “regretting” something. The Septuagint used *metamelomai* of the indecision of the people coming out of Egypt, that “they might

change their minds and return to Egypt” (Exod 13:17). Lady Wisdom warned against immorality by saying, “At the end of your life you will groan” (Prov 5:11).

The use of the Hebrew word *naham* often refers to God “repenting, “ along with human beings doing the same. The basic sense is “being sorry, or grieved” for something that has been done. Frequently God “relents” or “changes his dealings” with humans. God was “grieved” at human evil in the earth, resulting in the flood (Gen 6:6-7); the Lord “relented” and turned away his threat of disaster (Exod 32:14); he was “grieved” at having made Saul king, and deposed him (1 Samuel 15:11 1 Samuel 15:26). These descriptions may be regarded as anthropopathic, in which God exhibited emotional responses known to be present in humans also. Not infrequently God relented and withheld predicted judgment on Israel. An especially vivid illustration of this reversal is found in Hosea 11:8-9: “How can I give you up, Ephraim? My heart is changed within me I will not carry out my fierce anger.” God’s true love for Israel would triumph, and he would keep covenant with his people.

In the New Testament, the key term for repentance is *metanoia* It has two usual senses: a “change of mind” and “regret/remorse.”

In the Synoptic Gospels *metanoia* indicated “turning away from sin” (Mark 1:4), made imperative by the nearness of judgment (see Matt 3:10, ; “already”), despite having Abraham as ancestor. John the Baptist called for a break with the old and a turning to God.

According to Matthew 3, John was not specific about “the fruits of repentance, “ except in his call for baptism with water. But the Lukan narrative includes the question of people, “What should we do then?” To the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers, John spelled out specific ways in which the validity of their repentance should be demonstrated (Luke 3:10-14). Thus, *metanoia* was to be concretized by the baptism of repentance (Mark 1:4 ; Luke 3:3), and was to be evidenced by the changed attitudes and deeds of the respondents.

In both Mark (1:15) and Matthew (4:17) Jesus began his public proclamation with the call “Repent.” Mark connects it with believing the good news; Matthew, with the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. While Luke does not include this initial call, he notes several strong calls for repentance in Jesus’ teachings (see esp. 10:13 ; 11:32 ; Luke 13:3 Luke 13:5 ; 17:3-4). The Book of Acts often connects *metanoia* with remission of sins (see 2:38 ; 3:19 ; 5:31 ; 8:22 ; Acts 26:18 Acts 26:20). There are strong reminiscences here of John’s proclamations, but one striking difference is in the audiences. While John addressed Jewish hearers only, those in Acts were comprised of Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles. The first four incidents feature Peter as speaker; the last text refers to Paul’s statement about his mission. In addition, Paul is said to have preached to both Jews and Gentiles/Greeks to “turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (20:21). These two elements are also found in the Markan account, where Jesus called people to “repent and believe [in the good news about himself]” (Mark 1:15). Further, *metanoia* is joined with *epistrepho* in Acts 3:19 (Peter) and 26:20 (Paul). Thus, repentance leads to conversion, and “deeds consistent with repentance” are to follow.

In Paul’s letters the verb *metanoeo* occurs once only (2 Cor 12:21) and the noun *metanoia* four times (Rom 2:4 ; 2 Corinthians 7:9 2 Corinthians 7:10 ; 2 Tim 2:25). The negative word “unrepentant” appears in Romans 2:5. Many conclude that for Paul the more comprehensive term “faith” (*pistis*) and “to believe” (*pisteuo*) include the idea of repentance. As noted, Luke joined them in his report of Paul’s preaching in Ephesus (Acts 20:21).

A knotty problem arises in Hebrews 6:4-6 in the text, “It is impossible for those to be brought back to repentance, because “ For persons described as “fallen away” is repentance repeatable in any sense? Much depends on the context and syntax of the text, and the reader is referred to commentaries for detailed discussion. Probably the statement of the text is a pastoral rather than a dogmatic theological assertion, but nonetheless the warning is to be taken seriously. The final epistolary occurrence is 2 Peter 3:9, describing the Lord’s patience in waiting for all who will repent.

Finally, *metanoia* is frequent in Revelation, often as part of formulaic exhortations (Revelation 2:5 Revelation 2:16 Revelation 2:21-22 ; Revelation 3:3 Revelation 3:19). Believers are called to repent of various malpractices, and to exercise their former faithfulness. Those outside the church, despite various warnings, did not repent of their deeds (9:20-21 ; Revelation 16:9 Revelation 16:11).

The other Greek word for repenting (*metamelomai* occurs six times in the New Testament, but is translated “repent” in the *New International Version* only once (Matt 21:32). There the temple authorities are confronted by Jesus with their failure to repent at the preaching of John. In Greek usage, this term referred to changing one’s mind or one’s feelings; according to Aristotle it showed inner inconsistency.

The sense of “regret” is common to New Testament uses. A son “changed his mind” about doing his father’s bidding (Matt 21:29). Judas Iscariot was “seized with remorse” after betraying Jesus (Matt 27:3). Paul did not “regret” the sorrow caused by his severe letter to Corinth (2 Cor 7:8); instead, the pain brought “repentance” (*metanoia*) that leads to salvation, and leaves no “regret” (vv. 9-10).

Walter M. Dunnett

Bibliography. J. Behm, TDNT, 4:975-1006; V. P. Hamilton, TWOT, 2:2340; H. Merklein, EDNT, 2:415-19; O. Michel, TDNT, 4:626-28; G. F. Moore, Judaism, 1:507ff.; M. R. Wilson, TWOT, 2:571.

Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology. Edited by Walter A. Elwell
Copyright © 1996 by Walter A. Elwell. Published by Baker Books, a division of
Baker Book House Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan USA.
All rights reserved. Used by permission.
For usage information, please read the Baker Book House Copyright Statement.