

New Testament Repentance: Lexical Considerations
A series on Repentance: part 3 (R. Wilkin)

1. What does the term *repent* mean according to the NT? Does it refer to *turning* from one's sins? If so, are all sins or only major sins in view? Or, does it mean a *willingness* to forsake one's sins--or even something else again?

The NT Words in Question

There are two NT Greek words which are translated *repentance* in modern English translations: *metanoia* (and its verbal counterpart *metanoeo*) and *metamelomai*. The former term is so translated fifty-eight times in the NT; the latter only six times. The much wider use of *metanoia* has led me to give it greater attention in this article.

The Pre-Christian Meaning of *Metanoia*

In Classical Greek *metanoia* meant changing one's mind about someone or something. For example, Thucydides used the term when writing about the response of the Athenian council to a revolt. The council decided that all of the men of the city of Mytilene were to be put to death--not merely those who participated in the revolt. However, on "the next day a *change of heart* came over them." (1) The Athenian council changed its mind. It decided that only those who participated in the rebellion should be put to death.

Another example is found in Xenophon's use of our term. He wrote:

We were inclined to conclude that for man, as he is constituted, it is easier to rule over any and all other creatures than to rule over men. But when we reflected that there was one Cyrus, the Persian, who reduced to obedience a vast number of men and cities and nations, we were then compelled to change our opinions and decide that to rule men might be a task neither impossible nor even difficult, if one should only go about it in an intelligent manner. (2)

During the pre- and early Christian period of Koine Greek (ca. 300 BC-100 AD) *metanoia* continued to carry the sense of a change of mind about someone or something. For example, Polybius (ca. 208-126 BC) used *metanoia* to refer to the Dardani, a people who had decided to attack Macedonia while Philip was away with his army. However, Philip caught wind of it and returned quickly. Even though the Dardani were close to Macedonia, when they heard that Philip was coming, *they changed their minds*. They broke off the attack before it even began. (3)

Similarly, Plutarch, who lived and wrote in the late first and early second century AD, wrote:

"Cypselus, the father of Periander... when he was a new-born babe, smiled at the men who had been sent to make away with him, and they turned away. And when again *they changed their minds*, they sought for him and found him not, for he had been put away in a chest by his mother." (4)

Notice that in all of the cases cited the individual or people in view had thought one thing or made one decision and then, based on further evidence or input, changed their minds.

Thompson suggests that two other nuances emerge during this period: change of purpose and regret. (5) However, the evidence does not substantiate her claim. On both counts she is guilty of "illegitimate totality transfer," that is, the unwarranted transfer of the meaning of a phrase containing a given word to that word when it stands alone. She fails to show any examples where either *metanoia* or its verbal counterpart was used absolutely in the senses which she suggests. Rather, it is other words in the context which indicate that the change of mind in question concerned sinful practices or was accompanied by grief or sorrow.

Metanoia and *metanoeo* occur twenty times in the canonical books of the Greek OT (Septuagint) and seven times in the apocryphal books. They retain the meaning of *a change of mind about someone or something* in the LXX. (6) The following examples are representative.

New Testament Repentance: Lexical Considerations

A series on Repentance: part 3 (page 2)

When the Lord decided to take the kingdom from King Saul He instructed Samuel to say, "He will not turn nor change His mind, for He is not as a man that He should change His mind" (1 Sam [1 Kingdoms in the Septuagint] 15:29; translation mine).

Likewise, Prov 20:25 speaks of how foolish it is for a man to rashly promise to give something to the Lord, because after such a hasty vow the man may come to change his mind.

Similarly, the Ninevites believed in the Lord and turned from their sinful ways in the hopes that the Lord might change His mind and not destroy them and their city (Jonah 3:9-10). From a human perspective God did indeed change His mind and withhold the judgment He had planned. (7)

Behm disagrees. He argues that *metanoeo* in the Greek OT "approximates" *shûb* of the Hebrew OT. (8) However, I believe he fails to prove his point. The term *shûb* was used 1,056 times in the Hebrew text. None of those occurrences is translated by *metanoeo* in the Greek OT. Not one. This is inexplicable if the translators of the LXX felt that *metanoeo* was a good translation of *shûb*. Rather, the translators routinely used *strepho* and its various compound forms to translate *shûb*.

In the OT pseudepigrapha *metanoia* and *metanoeo* nearly always occur in contexts dealing with the need to abandon sinful practices in order to escape God's judgment. Behm concludes from this that *metanoia* had thus come to refer to turning from sins. He too, however, is guilty of illegitimate totality transfer. *Metanoia* did not come, by itself, to refer to a turning from one's sins. Rather, words in the context inform the reader that the change of mind in view would include a resolution to cease the sinful practices mentioned.

In summary, the pre-Christian meaning of *metanoia* was a change of mind about someone or something. When the context specifically mentions sinful practices about which one was changing his or her mind, the translation "repentance" is acceptable.

The History of NT Translations of *Metanoia*

The Old Latin

The Latin Fathers translated *metanoia* as *paenitentia*, which came to mean "penance" or "acts of penance." They felt that in order to obtain eternal salvation men had to perform righteous acts of penance as prescribed by one's confessor priest.

The Latin Vulgate

Jerome established this Old Latin translation as authoritative when he retained *paenitentia* as the translation of *metanoia*. The system of penance became an established pathway whereby one hoped to obtain grace.

Early English Versions

John Wycliffe, "the Morning Star of the Reformation," pioneered the first complete English Bible in the late 1300's. Unfortunately his work was not based on the original Greek and Hebrew, but was a very literal translation of the Vulgate. Hence we should not be surprised that he translated the Latin *agite paenitentiam* as "do penance." This was adopted in 1609-1610 in the Roman Catholic Douay Version.

William Tyndale produced the first printed English NT in 1526. He used *repent* and *repentance* for *metanoia* and *metanoeo*, a great improvement over "do penance," but still misleading in many contexts.

New Testament Repentance: Lexical Considerations

A series on Repentance: part 3 (page 3)

Later English versions, including the Authorized or King James Version of 1611, were deeply indebted to Tyndale's phraseology, including his *repent* and *repentance*.

Repentance as a translation seems to keep the idea that one must turn from his sinful deeds to obtain God's favor. However, it eliminates the notion that, in addition, one must confess his sins to a priest and do prescribed good works before he can obtain (or regain) grace.

Modern Translations

Modern translators also generally translate *metanoia* as repentance. While this is an improvement over the Latin translation "penance," it is in most cases, as we shall now see, a poor reflection of its meaning in the NT.

2. What is the meaning of *Metanoia* in the New Testament? Use a lexicon.

Basic Sense: Change of Mind

The pre-Christian meaning of *metanoia* as a change of mind is its basic NT sense as well. This can readily be seen in Heb 12:17 which reads: "For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit a blessing, he [Esau] was rejected, for he found no place for *metanoia*, though he sought it diligently with tears." What was it that Esau could not find? It was not a turning from sinful behavior. It was not penance. What he could not find was *a way to change his father's mind*. The matter was settled. No matter how much he pleaded, he couldn't change Isaac's mind.

All NT uses include the sense of a change of mind present. However, if the context clearly indicates what one is changing his mind about, it could be that a more polished English translation can be found. For instance, if one is to change his mind about his sinful deeds, the term repentance conveys that thought nicely.

There are four specialized types of uses of *metanoia* in the NT. We will now consider these.

A Synonym for Eternal Salvation

In a few passages *metanoia* is used via metonymy as a synonym for eternal salvation. These cases involve a metonymy of cause for the effect. The cause is a change of mind about Christ and His Gospel. The effect is eternal salvation. Thus when we read in 2 Pet 3:9, "The Lord is... not willing that any should perish but that all should come to *metanoia*," the idea is the same as 1 Tim 2:4, "[God] desires all men to be saved."

Luke 5:32 illustrates this same usage: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to *metanoia*." That is, Jesus is affirming that He didn't come to call those who think that they are righteous, but those who know themselves to be sinners, to salvation. *Metanoia* is used as a synonym for eternal salvation.

A Change of Mind Regarding Sinful Behavior = Repentance

On some occasions *metanoia* is used in contexts where the change of mind in view is clearly indicated as having to do with one's sinful practices. For example, in Luke 17:3-4 Jesus taught the disciples that they were to forgive all who sinned against them if they came and indicated that they had changed their minds regarding their sin. In this case and others like it "repentance" would be a good translation choice. We are to forgive anyone who sins against us and then repents.

It is important to note, that eternal salvation is never conditioned upon changing one's mind about (i.e., repenting concerning) his sinful practices.

A Change of Mind Regarding Self and Christ

Many NT passages use *metanoia* in contexts where what one is to change his mind about is himself and Christ. For

New Testament Repentance: Lexical Considerations

A series on Repentance: part 3 (page 4)

example, in Acts 2:38, after having indicted his Jewish audience for crucifying their Messiah and in response to their question "What shall we do?" Peter called them to change their minds about Jesus Christ. They had rejected Him. Now they could accept Him. They were to believe that He is the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the world. Such a mindset includes a recognition that one is a sinner in need of the Savior. Self-righteousness is clearly antithetical to faith (cf. Luke 18:9-14).

In this use *metanoia* occurs as a virtual synonym for *pistis* (faith).

A Change of Mind Regarding Idols and God

In one passage the object of *metanoia* is stated as idols and God (Acts 17:29-31). Paul told the Athenian philosophers that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead and that He would be coming back to earth as Judge. He told his listeners that in order to escape eternal condemnation they had to change their minds about their idols and about God and the Man whom He had sent and would send again. They had to transfer their faith from their idols to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Summary

Metanoia is used in the NT in a number of different ways, all of which have the idea of a change of mind at the root. In a few contexts it is used via metonymy as a synonym for eternal salvation. When it is used in contexts dealing with temporal salvation from life's difficulties, a change of mind about one's sinful ways (i.e., repentance) is given as the condition. However, when used in contexts dealing with eternal salvation from hell, a change of mind about oneself and Christ (or, in one passage, regarding idols and God) is given as the condition. In such contexts *metanoia* is used as a synonym for faith.

3. Using the lexicon again, what is the meaning of *Metamelomai* in the New Testament?

The basic meaning of *metamelomai* is "to feel regret." In 2 Cor 7:9 Paul indicates that he no longer regretted sending them a letter which made them sorry, though at first he did regret sending it.

Regret usually carries with it the idea of a change of mind. In Matt 21:29 Jesus told the Parable of the Two Sons. Both were told to go work in the vineyard. One said he would not, but later changed his mind (or regretted his decision) and went. The other said that he would go, but did not.

After betraying Christ, Judas regretted what he had done, gave back his blood money, and hanged himself (Matt 27:3). Judas "repented" in this sense; or more precisely, he "was remorseful" (NKJV). Yet he did not come to faith in Christ. He never changed his mind about Christ being His Savior. He rejected Him to his death.

While it is commonly translated in that way, there are no uses of *metamelomai* in the NT where "repentance" is a good translation. It always refers to regret, remorse, or to a change of mind. It never refers to turning from one's sins.

4. Examine the meaning of *strephe* and the compound words using *strephe*.

While they are never translated as "repentance," the compounds of *strephe* in some contexts carry the idea of turning from sins. The basic sense of these compounds is turning from or to someone or something. These compounds are the true corresponding terms to the OT word *shûb*.

"Turning to the Lord" is used in the NT, as it was in the OT, as an expression for faith and conversion. (9) When Paul reported in Acts 15:3 that Gentiles were turning to the Lord, he was simply saying that Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ, were being saved.

New Testament Repentance: Lexical Considerations
A series on Repentance: part 3 (page 5)

Nowhere in the NT are these verbs used to indicate that one must turn from his sins to obtain eternal salvation.

Conclusion

The word repent has a well-defined meaning in English; however, not all who use it mean the normal dictionary definition. Some mean merely a recognition of one's sinfulness. Others mean a change of thinking about Jesus Christ. Still others mean turning from one's sins, a willingness to do so, or a sense of remorse over one's sins.

If we could retranslate the NT, it would make it easier to understand the passages using *metanoia*. It would eliminate the confusion many have when they read their Bibles and see the word repent. However, this is not likely to happen. It seems that "repentance" as a translation for *metanoia* (and *metameloma*) will probably be with us for a long time.

In most cases when the English word repent occurs in the NT, it is translating *metanoia*. *Metanoia* is not the equivalent of the OT term *shûb*. It certainly does not mean "penance." Nor does it normally mean "repentance." Rather, in the NT it retains its pre-Christian meaning of a change of mind. The English reader thus generally needs to read "change of mind"--not turn from sins--when he sees the word "repent" in the NT. The context must be consulted to determine the object of a person's change of mind.

The only times repent is actually a good English translation is when the object of *metanoia* is sinful deeds. A change of mind about sinful behavior is equivalent to repentance.

Nearly a century ago, in *The Great Meaning of Metanoia*, Treadwell Walden decried the Latin and English translations of *metanoia* as being "extraordinary mistranslation." (10) I would agree.

References:

1. Thucydides, *Thurydides* 3. 36. 4. Compare 3. 37. 1. Author's translation, emphasis supplied.
2. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 1. 1. 3. Translation by Walter Miller, Loeb Classical Library, emphasis supplied.
3. Polyblus *The Histories* 4. 66. 7.
4. Plutarch, *Moralia* 163 F. Translated by Frank Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library, emphasis supplied.
5. Effie Freeman Thompson, '*METANOEO*' and '*ME TAMELEI*' in Greek Literature Until 100 AD., Including a Discussion of Their Hebrew Equivalents (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 14.
6. Cf. 1 Sam 15:29; Prov 14:15; 20:25 (19); 24:24 (29:27), 47 (32); Isa 46:8; Jer 4:28; 8:6; 18:8; Joel 2:13, 14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9, 10; 4:2; Zech 8:14.
7. In a number of OT passages God is said to have changed His mind, relented, or repented of calamities which He had planned to send. The Hebrew word used is *naham*. In each of these cases God did not actually change His mind, relent, or repent. God is omniscient and thus nothing which happens ever takes Him by surprise. The so-called "repentance of God" is actually a figure of speech known as an anthropomorphism. At times the Scriptures speak to us as though God were a man. For example, we read of His strong arm (Exod 6:6; Ps 77: 15; Jer 21:5), His hand (John 10:28-29), and the like, as figures of His might and ability to deliver us from difficulty and protect us. So, too, from a human perspective it appears at times that God has changed His mind. In reality, He knew all along what the final outcome would be. The change of mind is apparent, not actual. For further discussion of this subject see H. Van Parunak, "The Repentance of God in the Old Testament," unpublished Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975, and "A Semantic Survey of NHM," *Biblica* 56 (1975): 512-32.
8. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. "*metaneo metanoia*," by J. Behm, 4 (1967): 989-90.
9. E.g., Matt 13:15; Mark 4:12; Luke 1:16; John 12:40; Acts 9:35; 1 5:3; 28:27; 1 Pet 2:25.
10. Walden, *The Great Meaning of Metanoia* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1896), p.24.

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