

DIVINE REPENTANCE: A WORD STUDY

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What does the Bible mean when it says that God “repented” or “relented?” Good Bible interpreters always ask questions of the text they seek to understand. One common question is, “What does this word mean?” As one part of this journal’s examination of the Openness of God theory, I shall examine the Hebrew verb נָחַם .¹ This word is often translated “repent” or “relent” and is near the center of the exegetical debates surrounding the openness of God theory. In this article, I shall briefly define the word by etymology and stem usage; then I shall examine its usage in the text of the Old Testament.

The etymology of a word does not define it, but helps us understand more about it. “The origin of the root seems to reflect the idea of ‘breathing deeply,’ hence the physical display of one’s feelings, usually sorrow, compassion, or comfort.”² *Nhm* is an expressive word; it can express sorrow, remorse, and even satisfaction. How is it used in the Hebrew Bible?

As with most verbal roots in Hebrew, *nhm* has various shades of meaning in its different stems. In the Niphal stem, it tends to mean to suffer sorrow or remorse, but can also mean to console oneself or to be comforted or relieved (by taking vengeance). In the Piel, *nhm* means to comfort or console, while the Pual stem means to be comforted or consoled. The meaning in the Hithpael is similar to that of the Niphal.

The Hebrew verb *nhm* is used with God as its subject throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. There are two ways in which the Old Testament portrays God as repenting or changing his mind. First, he relents from an intended good action; and second, he relents from intended vengeance.

Occasions are few when God intends to do a good or favorable action but repents and changes his mind. The most notable of these is found in the early chapters of Genesis.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry [*nhm*] that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them” (Gen 6:5-7).

God’s creation was very good (Gen 1:31), as was his preservations of the same. Yet God was made sorry (*nhm*) by the wickedness of mankind, and declared his intention to destroy mankind. To destroy his creation was, in effect, to reverse the good of divine creation and preservation.

¹ Throughout the remainder of this article, I shall render this Hebrew word by a transliteration of its root form: *nhm*.

² *TWOT* 2:570.

More frequently divine repentance concerns a change from intended vengeance. One clear example of this occurred in conjunction with Israel's sin in worshipping the golden calf at the foot of Sinai. Yahweh was angry with Israel's infidelity and sought to destroy them (Exod 32:10). Moses, however, implored Yahweh not to destroy his people, and "the LORD relented [*nhm*] from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people" (Exod 32:14). Yahweh is depicted as repenting from bringing calamity upon his people not only in the Law, but often in the Prophets (Jer 23:20;³ Joel 2:14; Amos 7:3, 6; and Zech 8:14) and in the Writings (1 Sam 15:11; 2 Sam 24:16; 1 Chr 21:15; and Ps 106:45).

Often Yahweh's repentance is seen in conjunction with his other character attributes. Divine repentance "often occurs in the set formula describing God as 'gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity' (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2, cf. 3:9-10)."⁴ In Joel 2:13-14 God calls his covenant people to repent and declares himself to be one who, among other wonderful things, "relents from sending calamity." In Jonah, however, the prophet knows that Yahweh, Israel's covenant God, is so compassionate and gracious that he would relent from sending calamity even upon the pagan city of Ninevah. Yahweh's repentance must not, therefore, be understood apart from his other character attributes.

Divine immutability needs to be understood in conjunction with his repentance. The word *nhm* is used often of God to teach that he does not change or repent.

"God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind (*nhm*). Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it" (Num 23:19)?

Maybe the most profound teaching concerning divine repentance and immutability is found in 1 Samuel 15. In verse 11, Yahweh himself, through Samuel, says "I regret (*nhm*) that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." In verse 29, however, Samuel declared that Yahweh, the Glory of Israel, "will not lie or have regret (*nhm*), for he is not a man, that he should have regret (*nhm*)." Yahweh is thus shown to repent or regret, but the prophet makes clear that he does not regret, at least not as mankind does.

Divine repentance can be a difficult thing to understand.⁵ This small examination of the word *nhm* has attempted to demonstrate clearly that Yahweh is portrayed as one who occasionally relents from doing good and often relents from doing evil or calamity. I have also shown that the Scripture keeps divine repentance (so to speak) in balance with all divine character attributes. Finally, whatever divine repentance may be, it is altogether not like what mankind does when it is said to repent or change its mind.

³ Jeremiah uses a different word: שׁוּב *shub*, which means "to turn," "turn back," or "return."

⁴ *NIDOTTE* 3:82.

⁵ There exists a palpable tension between texts that assert divine repentance and those that deny its possibility. Here is one possible resolution: "When *nhm* is used of God, however, the expression is anthropopathic and there is not ultimate tension. From man's limited, earthly, finite perspective it only appears that God's purposes have changed" (*TWOT* 2:571).