

## Repentance: A Victim of Mistranslation

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A much-debated question is whether repentance is required for salvation. Some say it is required; others insist that salvation is by faith alone, and that nothing – including repentance – should be added to faith. For example, Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote,

A great disaster has been wrought by the careless and misguided preaching to unregenerate people of repentance as a divine requirement separate from believing, confession of sin as an essential to salvation, and reformation of the daily life as the ground upon which a right relation to God may be secured.<sup>1</sup>

A key factor involved in this debate is the definition of the word “repentance.” It is my firm belief that any discussion of a Biblical doctrine must be based on the language used *in the original Biblical languages* (i.e. Hebrew and Greek), not on the English translation. And so, in this article I would like to address primarily the issue of definitions of key Biblical terms and how they relate to the argument about what is required for salvation.

The argument against repentance as a requirement often follows this line of reasoning:

- *Maj. Pr.* Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.
- *Min. Pr.* Repentance is something other than faith.
- *Concl.* Therefore, repentance cannot be added to faith as a requirement for salvation.

The logic seems simple enough. The major premise appears to be a legitimate summation of the teaching of such passages as Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 3:19-4:25; and Galatians 3-4, and has been hailed by most conservative Christians since the reformation. However, there are two problems with this syllogism:

1. Certain New Testament verses appear to contradict the conclusion.
  - Acts 2:38 Peter *said* to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.
  - Acts 3:19 “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;
  - Acts 11:18 When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads* to life.”

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, “The Specific Character of the Christian’s Sin,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (July-September 1993): 259-72, reprint, originally published in October 1935.

- Acts 17:30 Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent,
- Acts 20:20–21 I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, <sup>21</sup> solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.
- Acts 26:18–20 to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.’ <sup>19</sup> So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, <sup>20</sup> but *kept* declaring both to those of Damascus first, and *also* at Jerusalem and *then* throughout all the region of Judea, and *even* to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.
- 2 Corinthians 7:10 For the sorrow that is according to *the will of God* produces a repentance without regret, *leading* to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.
- 2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

While the interpretation of some of these verses might be debated, the overall force of these verses seems clearly to suggest that “repentance” is what the apostles held forth as the thing that leads sinners to salvation. If that is the case, then how can salvation be based on faith alone? This question leads us to a consideration of the second problem with the syllogism.

## 2. The minor premise needs closer examination. Is repentance truly “something other than faith”?

This is a question of definition. What is meant by the word “repentance”? I believe this is the crucial question in this whole debate. And the remainder of this article will be devoted to a discussion of the definition of this important term. However, let me repeat what I indicated at the very beginning of this article: Any discussion of a Biblical doctrine must be based on the language used *in the original Biblical languages* (i.e. Hebrew and Greek), not on the English translation.

In the New Testament, the words “repent” and “repentance” are almost always translations of the Greek terms μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*). The use of these terms in Greek carries a significantly different semantic weight than does the English “repent/repentance.” This semantic difference has led to serious error in the teaching of salvation by many.

Two elements in the definition of the English terms “repent/repentance” are unsuitable to the definition of the Greek terms μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*):

1. The feeling or expression of sorrow and remorse over sin.
2. Turning from sin.

The first of these elements (sorrow/remorse) is found in most standard English language dictionaries, and is likely how most English speakers typically understand the terms “repent/repentance.” It can also be found in much of the academic literature. Consider the following definitions of the word “repent”:

- “To feel regret or contrition.”<sup>2</sup>
- “Feel or express sincere regret or remorse.”<sup>3</sup>
- “We may define repentance as follows: *Repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ.*”<sup>4</sup>

This element of repentance is closely akin to the etymological background of the English word. “Repent” comes into the English language by way of the Latin root *pen*, a root that is also the basis for such words as “pain,” “penal,” “penalize,” “penalty,” “penance,” “penitent,” and “penitentiary.” All these terms carry with them some notion of pain (either internal or external). If this definition is read into the Greek terms μετανοῶ/μετάνοια then one could not have saving faith unless one also feels regret, contrition or remorse. But is this what the apostles intended to convey, when they used these Greek terms? This is a question that will require a close look at how ancient Greek speakers used and understood these terms.

The second of these elements (turning from sin) is frequently heard in sermons, but also found in some academic literature.

- “Repenting is conceptualized as turning.”<sup>5</sup>
- “In both Old and New Testaments, the term *repent* means ‘go the opposite direction.’ So to repent of one’s sins is to turn around and turn to God.”<sup>6</sup>
- “My boys love watching me describe repentance. I simply walk until they say ‘repent,’ at which point I turn about-face and walk in the other direction.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003.

<sup>3</sup> *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 713.

<sup>5</sup> “The Lexham Figurative Language of the New Testament Dataset,” in *Lexham Figurative Language of the Bible Glossary*, ed. Joshua R. Westbury et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Jim George, *Know Your Bible from A to Z: A Quick Handbook to the People, Places, and Things* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Alan P. Stanley, *Salvation is More Complicated Than You Think: A Study on the Teachings of Jesus* (Colorado Springs: Authentic Publishing, 2007).

- “*Repentance Will Always Produce Fruit*. Repentance or turning is never merely internal.”<sup>8</sup>

But if repentance means to turn from sin, is it a matter of conduct? Can one turn from sin without having a change of lifestyle? A change of lifestyle is clearly a work, and requiring a change of lifestyle for salvation is tantamount to requiring works for salvation, clearly a contradiction to Ephesians 2:8-9.

The question that needs to be addressed is whether the notions of remorse and turning can be properly understood as part of the semantic weight of the Greek terms μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*). In Modern Greek, μετανοῶ (*menano*) simply means “change one’s mind.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in Classical Greek, μετανοῶ (*metano*) meant, “perceive afterwards, change one’s mind or purpose.”<sup>10</sup> The focus on the “mind” in these definitions comes from the element νοῦς/νοῦ (*nous/no*). By “mind” the ancient Greeks often meant more than just intellectual reflection. It could be a matter purely academic, but often one that included activity by other features of the inner man, such as the emotions, and the will. Walden said it well when he wrote:

What is the “mind”? It is that spiritual part of us which receives and assimilates whatever it has an affinity for in the world outside, whether that world be spiritual or material. It is the whole group of faculties which compose the intelligence. It is sight and perception, thought and reflection, apprehension and comprehension – all that is popularly known as the intellect or understanding. But it also embraces more than this, namely, a large portion of the moral and affectional nature. It occupies the realm of the heart.<sup>11</sup>

So, by “change of mind” we are to understand an inward change of “sight, perception, thought, reflection, apprehension, and comprehension.”

Up to this point, I have written about definitions found in dictionaries, lexicons, and other resources. But even these can be influenced by personal bias. Ultimately, word meaning is determined by usage. That is, a word means whatever the actual users of that word intend by it. The ancients did not use dictionaries the way we do. The best way to understand what a word meant in an ancient language like Greek is to observe its actual use in many different contexts. Literary context is often a better guide to understanding word meaning than consulting a dictionary or lexicon can be.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> George A. Magazis, ed., *Langenscheidt’s Standard Greek Dictionary*, (Athens: Langenscheidt, 1989), *sub* μετανοέω.

<sup>10</sup> Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1115.

<sup>11</sup> Treadwell Walden, *The Great Meaning of Metanoia: An Underdeveloped Chapter in the Life and Teaching of Christ* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1896), 5.

It remains, then, for us to see whether the words μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*) were actually used in the sense of “an inward change of ‘sight, perception, thought, reflection, apprehension, and comprehension’” by the ancient Greeks. I believe they were, as the following examples will demonstrate.

### **Diachronic Survey**

Moulton and Milligan suggest that the meaning of μετανοῶ “deepens with Christianity, and in the NT it is more than ‘repent,’ and indicates a complete change of attitude, spiritual and moral, towards God.”<sup>12</sup> Their statement that this sense is “deepened” when compared with the usage in the papyri suggests that their own understanding of how it is used in the NT may be heavily influenced more by theological concerns than by linguistic ones. In the following section, I would like to survey the use of the terms μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*) throughout the ancient history of the Greek language.

#### **1. Antiphon 2.4.12 (480–411 BC)**

Antiphon was a 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenian orator. As a logographer (λογογράφος), that is a professional speech-writer, he wrote for those who felt incompetent to conduct their own legal cases without expert assistance. The following citation is an excerpt from a defense speech against the charge of murder. LSJ cite Antiphon 2.4.12 (480–411 BC) as an example of μετάνοια having the sense of “repentance.” But it is not at all clear that the passage cited has any different sense than a “change of mind,” or “change of opinion.” The passage records the courtroom exchange between prosecutor and defendant in a murder charge. Following the prosecutor’s second argument, the defendant insists on his innocence and states the following:

You see how unjustifiably my accusers are attacking me. Yet notwithstanding the fact that it is they who are endeavoring to have me put to death in so impious a fashion, they maintain that they themselves are guiltless; according to them, it is I who am acting impiously—I, who am urging you to show yourselves god-fearing men. But as I am innocent of all their charges, I adjure you on my own behalf to respect the righteousness of the guiltless, just as on the dead man's behalf I remind you of his right to vengeance and urge you not to let the guilty escape by punishing the innocent; once I am put to death, no one will continue the search for the criminal. [12] Respect these considerations, and satisfy heaven and justice by acquitting me. Do not wait until remorse (μετανοήσαντες) proves to you your mistake; remorse (μετάνοια) in cases such as this has no remedy.

The first instance of “remorse” in the translation above is the participle μετανοήσαντες (from the verb μετανοῶ); the second is the noun μετάνοια. If the translation “remorse” in the passage

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<sup>12</sup> James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 404.

above is rendered, “a change of opinion” or “a change of mind,” the passage makes good sense. In fact, as a courtroom argument, the defendant might better be supposed to be making an attempt to persuade the prosecutor’s mind/opinion than his emotions.

## 2. Plato (428-328 BC), *Euthydemus* 279c, d

Euthydemus (Εὐθύδημος) is a dialogue written by Plato satirizing the logical fallacies of the Sophists. In it, Socrates describes a visit he and various youths paid to two brothers, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, both of whom were prominent Sophists. Euthydemus attempts to ensnare Socrates with deceptive and meaningless arguments to try to demonstrate his philosophical superiority.

Socrates invites his friend Crito to come and take lessons in rhetoric from Euthydemus and his brother, Dionysodorus. This begins a dialogue between Socrates and young Cleinias in which they discuss the nature of what is good. In the course of this dialogue, Socrates exclaims:

**Socrates:** By Heaven, we are on the verge of omitting the greatest of the goods.

**Cleinias:** What is that? he asked.

**Socrates:** Good fortune, Cleinias: a thing which all men, even the worst fools, refer to as the greatest of goods.

**Cleinias:** You are right, he said.

**Socrates:** Once again I reconsidered [μετανοήσας] and said: We have almost made ourselves laughing-stocks, you and I, son of Axiochus, for our visitors.<sup>13</sup>

Here, the verb μετανοῶ is used for a shift in thinking in Socrates’ mind, as he is developing his argument. There is no sorrow expressed, and certainly no turning around to head in the opposite direction.

## 3. Xenophon (431-354 BC), *Cryopaedia* 1.1.3

Xenophon was an ancient Greek historian, philosopher and soldier from Athens. In discussing the politics of ruling over men, Xenophon observes first that many men are difficult to rule and in fact have rebelled against their rulers (1.1.1), while on the other hand, animals are readily tamed and brought under the authority of their human masters (1.1.2). This analogy would lead one to the following conclusion:

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<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes Translated by W.R.M. Lamb.*, vol. 3 “Euthydemus,” 279c.d. (Medford, MA: Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1967).

“for man, as he is constituted, it is easier to rule over any and all other creatures than to rule over men.” (1.1.3)

In contrast to this seemingly obvious conclusion, he then states:

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 opinion (μετανοεῖν) 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. (1.1.3)

The phrase “to change our opinion” is from μετανοῶ (μετανοεῖν).

#### **4. Menander (342-290 BC), *Epitrepontes*, 70-75,**

Menander was a fourth century Greek dramatist and writer of comedies. In the play *Epitrepontes*, Daos, a single shepherd, finds an abandoned baby along with some jewelry. He takes the baby and the jewelry home with him, intending to raise the child. The next day, he realizes he has made an unwise decision, since he cannot afford to raise the child. Later that day, he tells Syros about his problem. Syros, whose wife recently gave birth to a baby who subsequently died, asks for Daos’ baby to take home to his wife. Daos gladly accepts. Later, Syros decides that the jewelry should be his, too, and demands it from Daos. Daos replies to Syros,

“I gave you something of mine. If it’s to your liking, keep it now. If it isn’t, and you’ve changed your mind (μετανοεῖς), give it back. But don’t treat me unfairly, or feel slighted. You can’t have everything, not when half of it is free and half by force.”

The expression “changed your mind” is μετανοῶ (μετανοεῖς, line 72).

#### **5. Flavius Josephus, *Life*, 110 (ca. AD 37-100)**

Josephus relates an event in his life in which a certain “Jesus” attempted to lead a rebellion against his leadership in attempting to unite the Galileans against the Romans. Jesus came with armed men to Sepphoris intending to kill Josephus. However, learning of this plot, Josephus took precautionary measures and related the story as follows:

(108) and, when I had given orders that all the roads should be carefully guarded, I charged the keepers of the gates to give admittance to none but Jesus, when he came, with the principal of his men, and to exclude the rest; and in case they aimed to force themselves in, to use stripes [in order to repel them]. (109) Accordingly, those that had received such a charge did as they were bidden, and Jesus came in with a few others; and when I had ordered him to throw down his arms immediately, and told him, that, if he refused so to do, he was a dead man, he seeing armed men standing all round about him, was terrified and complied; and as for those of his followers that were excluded, when they were informed that he was seized, they ran away. (110) I then called Jesus to me by

himself, and told him, that “I was not a stranger to that treacherous design he had against me, nor was I ignorant by whom he was sent for; that, however, I would forgive him what he had done already, if he was sure to change his mind (μετανοήσῃν), and be faithful to me hereafter.” (111) And thus, upon his promise to do all that I desired, I let him go, and gave him leave to get those whom he had formerly had with him together again. But I threatened the inhabitants of Sepphoris, that, if they would not leave off their ungrateful treatment of me, I would punish them sufficiently.<sup>14</sup>

Here, “to change his mind” (μετανοῶ) refers to Jesus having a change of mind and plans about his loyalty to Josephus. This change of mind was produced by threat of arms, not by a remorseful soul. Jesus did back down, but there is no indication from the text that he experienced anything like what the English word “repent” connotes.

#### **6. Plutarch (ca. AD 46-120) *Galba* 6.4**

The Greek Platonist philosopher and biographer Plutarch wrote a biography of the emperor Galba, who succeeded Nero. As Nero was beginning to decline and Galba was increasing in popularity, the Roman generals Vindex, Verginius, and Clodius became divided in their allegiances. Battles broke out and many lives were lost. Verginius had firmly opposed Galba, supporting Nero instead. However, Galba responded by inviting Verginius to join in his insurrection in seeking the position of emperor. Galba later thought this strategy to have been unwise, and Plutarch records:

[Galba] spent his time in repenting (ἐν τῷ μετανοεῖν) of what he had done.

There may have been some sorrow over having made an unwise decision, but the principal sense of μετανοῶ in this context is that of evaluating one’s decisions and coming to the conclusion that a different approach would have been better. Thus, remorse, though possibly involved, is not the essential characteristic of μετανοῶ in this passage.

#### **7. Lucian (AD 125-180) *On Dancing*, 84**

Lucian is best known as a satirist. He loved to poke cynical fun at the moral and religious institutions of his day. It is precisely this love of satire that makes it difficult to interpret Lucian at times. As Fowler and Oxford explain:

One of the bad consequences arising from the company of wits, who deal with irony and sarcasm is that you never know whether they are in jest or earnest. This is the case with Lucian in regard to the following dialogue, which wears a double face, and is difficult to say whether he meant to ridicule the noble science of dancing, or truly and soberly to defend and extol it. When he tells us in the beginning that dancing is coeval with the

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<sup>14</sup> Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 7. Translation of μετανοεῖν altered.



universe and that the world is nothing but a grand dance of things, we can hardly think him to be serious. And yet in the latter part of the treatise, the gravity of his arguments and manner would incline us to think him serious. The whole, however, except, perhaps, the long string of fables, is entertaining and sensible.<sup>15</sup>

In his essay on dancing, Lycinus defends his love of watching the dance to Crato who believes his practice to be immoral. As Lycinus concludes his defense, he relates the following somewhat humorous incident involving an actor who became overly involved with his character:

[83] I remember seeing this exemplified in the case of an actor of repute. In most respects a capable, nay, an admirable performer, some strange fatality ran him a-ground upon this reef of over-enthusiasm. He was acting the madness of Ajax, just after he has been worsted by Odysseus; and so lost control of himself, that one might have been excused for thinking his madness was something more than feigned. He tore the clothes from the back of one of the iron-shod time-beaters, snatched a flute from the player's hands, and brought it down in such trenchant sort upon the head of Odysseus, who was standing by enjoying his triumph, that, had not his cap held good, and borne the weight of the blow, poor Odysseus must have fallen a victim to histrionic frenzy. The whole house ran mad for company, leaping, yelling, tearing their clothes. For the illiterate riffraff, who knew not good from bad, and had no idea of decency, regarded it as a supreme piece of acting; and the more intelligent part of the audience, realizing how things stood, concealed their disgust, and instead of reproaching the actor's folly by silence, smothered it under their plaudits; they saw only too clearly that it was not Ajax but the pantomime who was mad. Nor was our spirited friend content till he had distinguished himself yet further: descending from the stage, he seated himself in the senatorial benches between two consulars, who trembled lest he should take one of them for a ram and apply the lash. The spectators were divided between wonder and amusement; and some there were who suspected that his ultra-realism had culminated in reality.

[84] However, it seems that when he came to his senses again he bitterly repented (μετανοῆσαι) of this exploit, and was quite ill from grief, regarding his conduct as that of a veritable madman, as is clear from his own words. For when his partisans begged him to repeat the performance, he recommended another actor for the part of Ajax, saying that 'it was enough for him to have been mad once.' His mortification was increased by the success of his rival, who, though a similar part had been written for him, played it with admirable judgement and discretion, and was complimented on his observance of decorum, and of the proper bounds of his art.

In section 84 the translators have given us, "he bitterly repented of this exploit, and was quite ill from grief," where "bitterly repented" translates μετανοῆσαι. The Liddell, Scott, Jones Greek

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<sup>15</sup> Fowler, H W and F G. Oxford, transl., *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*. (The Clarendon Press, 1905) 1.

Lexicon cites this as an example of μετανοῶ meaning “repent.” But it should be noted that the idea of remorse comes, not from μετανοῶ, but from the following phrase (νοσῆσαι ὑπὸ λύπης). This must leave the question open as to whether μετανοῶ bears the idea of remorse or sorrow when used without an accompanying, limiting phrase. Lucian’s use here could simply mean that the actor came to his senses and had a change of mind which was accompanied by being sick from grief.

## 8. Tebtunis Papyrus IIIIPC (late 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD)

The example below from Tebtunis Papyrus IIIIPC is a perfectly good late example of μετανοῶ used in a very classical sense of a change of mind. This papyrus document, discovered by Grenfell and Hunt in the winter 1899–1900 in Tebtunis, Egypt, records the following account regarding a failure to pay taxes:

Sarapammos Piperati. I wrote you a letter through the baker and probably you know what I wrote to you. And on the one hand, if you persist in your madness (ἀπόνοια) I rejoice together with you; but if you change your mind (μετανοεῖς), you [only] know. But be that you owe taxes and seven-years’ past taxes, as if you did not send restitution, you know your peril.<sup>16</sup>

The writer of this note describes the current delinquent status of Sarapammos as “madness” (ἀπόνοια), which has the idea of a loss of right perception.<sup>17</sup> It is a state of the mind (νοῦς) that has departed from (ἀπό) what is sensible. This is contrasted (in a sarcastic way) with what he urges on Sarapammos, namely that he have a change of mind (μετανοῶ). There is no need to read into this any requirement of remorse. It is simply a matter of making up his mind to pay his debt.

## 9. Septuagint

The words μετάνοια/μετανοῶ occur only rarely in the Septuagint (24x for the verb, 7x for the noun). Only once does it translate the Hebrew שׁוּב (*shuv*), which means “to turn.” Instead, the vast majority of the occurrences of שׁוּב (*shuv*) are translated in the Septuagint by the Greek term μεταστρέφω (*metastrepho*) which most certainly does mean “to turn.” One would think that if “turning” were a necessary semantic component of μετάνοια/μετανοῶ, that it would have been used regularly to translate שׁוּב (*shuv*). But that is not the case. The one verse that does so translate it is Isaiah 46:8,

Remember this, and be assured;

Recall it (שׁוּב/μετανοῶ) to mind, you transgressors.

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<sup>16</sup> *P.Tebt.*: *The Tebtunis Papyri*, Duke Data Bank of Documentary Papyri (Perseus Digital Library, n.d.).

<sup>17</sup> Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 211.

The parallelism of the Hebrew suggests that שׁוּב (*shuv*) is used in this verse synonymously with “remember” (זָכַר *zakar*). Far from indicating a change of life, or 180-degree turn, it is clearly used in this verse of a change of heart,<sup>18</sup> an internal attitude.

Having surveyed these representative examples of μετάνοια/μετανοῶ (*metania/metano*) from the Classical Era through the late Roman Era, one can see that these terms consistently have the sense of “change of mind,” but do not necessarily connote the ideas of sorrow or turning. Though sorrow and/or turning may *accompany* the action of μετάνοια/μετανοῶ (*metania/metano*), they are not necessary components, and should not be included as defining qualities.

### **Synchronic Study: New Testament Usage**

Having surveyed the uses of μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*) outside of the New Testament, it remains for us to see whether the senses of sorrow or of turning are required of these terms as used in the New Testament itself, or, on the other hand, whether these terms refer more simply to a change of mind/heart. Chafer wrote,

It is an error to require repentance as a preliminary act *preceding and separate from believing*. Such insistence is too often based on Scripture which is addressed *to the covenant people, Israel*. They, like Christians, being covenant people, are privileged to return to God on the grounds of their covenant by repentance. There is much Scripture both in the Old Testament and in the New that calls that one nation to its long-predicted repentance, and it is usually placed before them as a separate unrelated act that is required. The preaching of John the Baptist, of Jesus and the early message of the disciples was, “repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”; but it was addressed only to Israel (Mt. 10:5, 6). This appeal was continued to that nation even after the day of Pentecost or so long as the Gospel was preached to Israel alone (Acts 2:38; 3:19. See also 5:31). Paul mentions also a separate act of repentance *in the experience of Christians* (2 Cor. 7:8–11. See also Rev. 2:5).<sup>19</sup>

Note that Chafer did not necessarily discount “repentance” as a requirement for salvation, only repentance “as a preliminary act preceding and separate from believing.” If “repentance” is understood as essentially synonymous with believing, then it is entirely appropriate to speak of it as a “requirement” for salvation. So, what must be determined is whether the New Testament uses μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*) in a salvation passage in a sense other than as a synonym of faith.

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<sup>18</sup> The word “mind” in the NASB translation of Isa. 46:8 translates the Hebrew לֵב “heart.”

<sup>19</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Salvation* (Philadelphia, PA: Sunday School Times Company, 1922), 48. Emphasis added.

The authoritative New Testament Greek Lexicon BDAG<sup>20</sup> gives as the first definition of μετανοῶ (*metano*), “change one’s mind.” However, they do not list even a single New Testament verse as representing this meaning. The second definition they list, containing all of the New Testament references, is, “feel remorse, repent, be converted.” The idea of feeling of remorse is the least problematic soteriologically, since this is an inner response of the heart. The most problematic part of this definition is “be converted.” If by “converted” one understands the concepts of “turning,” “changing direction,” “forsaking sin,” etc., then these are outward actions that go beyond “a change of mind.” This article began with a list of New Testament verses that appear to require “repentance” for salvation. The remainder of this article will consist of an examination of these verses to determine whether the concepts of “sorrow” or of “turning” are required by the context.

### **Acts 2:38**

Peter *said* to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

At the conclusion of Peter’s Pentecost sermon, he appealed to his audience to respond to the message he has just delivered. Earlier in the sermon Peter had accused his hearers of having taken Jesus and “by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death” (Acts 2:23). They had concluded that Jesus was a criminal worthy of capital punishment. It appears, then, that Peter was essentially charging them with a miscarriage of justice and was exhorting them to adopt a new opinion, a change of mind, about Jesus, to regard Him not as a criminal but as “both Lord and Messiah” (verse 36). This change of mind might be accompanied by a sense of sorrow, but the sorrow itself would be a separate response of the inner man, not the “repentance” itself. Marty’s comment is apropos:

Peter was calling the hearers to change their minds about their participation in and approval of the crucifixion of Jesus. Darrell Bock notes that repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. One cannot turn to Christ in faith for forgiveness without also turning away from reliance upon something else. He proposes, however, that there is a distinction between faith and repentance: “Repentance stresses the starting point of the need for forgiveness, whereas faith is the resulting trust and understanding that this forgiveness comes from God, the one turned to for the gift (Acts 20:21)” (*Acts* BECNT [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007], 142).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> William H. Marty, “Acts,” Michael Rydelnik and Michael VanLaningham, ed., *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 2014) 1676-1677.

It does not appear that Polhill's conclusion is correct when he describes repentance in this verse as, "... complete turnabout that comprises true repentance, to turn away from their rejection of the Messiah and to call upon his name."<sup>22</sup> Newman and Nida further complicate the matter. They assert that the meaning of repent "must be sought in its Jewish, rather than in its Greek, background ... signif[ying] either 'to turn from one's sins' or 'to turn to God,' which from the biblical standpoint are essentially the same."<sup>23</sup> But seeking to define a Greek word on the basis of Hebrew semantics is problematic. In fact, the Hebrew word used for "to turn" (שׁוּב *shuv*, over 1,100 times in the OT) is almost never translated with μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*) in the LXX, almost always being translated instead with μεταστρέφω (*metastrepho*) or ἐπιστρέφω (*epistrepho*).

In view of Peter's charge that his hearers were guilty of a miscarriage of justice, it appears that the reference earlier in this article to Antiphon 2.4.12 forms a close linguistic parallel, and that neither "turning" nor "sorrow" are necessary accompaniments of μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*) in this context.

### **Acts 3:19**

Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.

The command "return" (ἐπιστρέφω *epistrepho*) is added to the command to "repent." Therefore, "repent" by itself does not mean "return." The idea of "turning" or "returning" needed to be expressed by this additional term.

This verse needs to be understood in the context in which it was spoken. Peter was at the Beautiful Gate of the temple (Acts 3:1-2) where he and John had just healed a lame man. The worshippers who rushed together to see the miracle constituted Peter's audience. They were devout Jews living at the end of the second temple era. As such, they were living at a time of heightened messianic awareness, feeling the burden of Roman oppression, and looking for the messianic kingdom. The miracle itself would have constituted in their minds a legitimate sign of the coming of the Messiah (Isaiah 35:6). Peter's exhortation to "return" is consonant with the Old Testament prophets' message to Israel that they return to the covenant they had forsaken. Thus, the exhortation to "return" has a unique significance for the Israelite covenant community, a significance that would be lost on a gentile audience.

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<sup>22</sup> John B. Polhill, Acts, vol. 26, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 117.

<sup>23</sup> Barclay Moon Newman and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), 59.

### **Acts 11:18**

When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads* to life.”

In contrast to Acts 3:19 (above), the gentiles who responded in faith to Peter’s message were described, not as having “returned,” but only as having been granted “repentance” (i.e., a change of mind). While there may have been an attendant sorrow and/or change of lifestyle, it was simply the μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*) that led to life.

### **Acts 17:30**

Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent.

Paul’s address to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at the Areopagus, urged that all people everywhere should “repent.” These Greek philosophers would certainly have understood Paul’s use of μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*) against the backdrop of its historical use in Greek literature. Thus, the best way to understand the term here is as it was used throughout its secular history as illustrated in the first part of this article. There is no need to read into μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*) any sense of sorrow or turning, though these may have been attendant actions on the part of the Athenians who did exercise faith. Of those who did join with Paul, it is simply said that they “believed” (17:34).

### **Acts 20:20–21**

I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house,<sup>21</sup> solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders, he affirms that his message of salvation included the preaching of “repentance” (μετάνοια) to both Jews and Gentiles. Here, the preposition “toward” (“repentance toward God”) may suggest the idea of “turning.” However, this is not the necessary meaning of the Greek preposition εἰς (*eis*). This Greek preposition has a very wide range of potential semantic meaning, and must be understood carefully in light of the context. If one presumes the notion of “turning” as part of μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*) would one certainly translate it as “toward.” However, if μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*) means simply a change of mind/heart, then εἰς is probably used as a marker of a point of reference, “with reference to,” or “with respect to.”<sup>24</sup>

Another significant feature of this passage that supports the idea that μετάνοια could be used in a soteriological context as a synonym for πίστις (faith), is found in verse 21 where Paul said that

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<sup>24</sup> BDAG, εἰς #5.

the content of his preaching was “repentance (μετάνοια) toward God and faith (πίστις) in our Lord Jesus.”<sup>25</sup> These two nouns are closely connected conceptually by the article-noun-καί-noun construction, sometimes referred to as the Granville-Sharpe Construction. The single article used with both nouns strongly suggests that the two nouns are not two separate things, but are either various facets of the same thing, or simply synonyms for the same thing.<sup>26</sup> Wallace, commenting on this construction in this verse states, “The construction in the least implied some sort of unity between μετάνοια and πίστις.... Saving faith *includes* repentance.... Conversion is not a two-step process, but one step, faith – but the kind of faith that *includes* repentance.”<sup>27</sup> This supports the notion that μετάνοια does not refer to conduct (i.e. “turning from sin”) but rather expresses an inner function of the mind/heart.

### **Acts 26:18–20**

... to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.’<sup>19</sup> So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision,<sup>20</sup> but *kept* declaring both to those of Damascus first, and *also* at Jerusalem and *then* throughout all the region of Judea, and *even* to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

As Paul described his ministry to king Agrippa, he described his gospel message for gentiles as being that they should “repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.” Similar to Acts 3:19 (above), “turn to God” is specified as a separate action from “repent.” So, the μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*) terminology should not be understood as signifying “turning” in and of itself. The idea of “turning” needs to be conveyed by added terminology.

To understand what Paul intended by the expression “turn to God,” it is important to consider the opening phraseology of verse 18. He has already mentioned turning from darkness to light. The Light/Darkness motif is a common one in Scripture. Note the following observations about this motif:

John 1:5, “The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.” The “light” in John 1 is the manifestation of Jesus as the Word. Thus, turning from darkness to light

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<sup>25</sup> τὴν εἰς θεὸν μετάνοιαν καὶ πίστιν εἰς τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν.

<sup>26</sup> Bing refers to these as “overlapping activity.” Charles Bing, *Grace Salvation and Discipleship: How to Understand some Difficult Bible Passages* (The Woodlands, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2015), 157.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 289. Cf. Lenski, “Luke uses only one article with the two nouns: τὴν μετάνοιαν καὶ πίστιν He thereby indicates that repentance and faith constitute a unit idea in Paul’s mind. Either noun involves the other; either might be used alone in the present connection. The use of both after one article is more effective, strong, and clear” R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 840–841.

is acknowledging this truth. It is a mental activity, a changing of one's opinion/thought with regard to Jesus.

Ephesians 5:8 "You were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light." There is both a positional truth and an experiential truth here. Positionally, "you *are* light in the Lord. The believers who were the intended recipients of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians were "light" positionally by virtue of their faith-relationship to Jesus. Experientially, these who were already "light" were urged to "walk as children of light." Their walk (conduct) was a separate matter from their position in Christ.

I would conclude that Paul's gentile-directed ministry of "turning them to God" consisted in turning their minds from their previous polytheism and idolatry to a belief in the One True God.

### **2 Corinthians 7:10**

For the sorrow that is according to *the will of God* produces a repentance without regret, *leading* to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.

Even though the words "sorrow," "repentance," and "salvation" all occur in the same verse together, this does not mean that any two of these terms are identical in meaning. In this case sorrow produced "repentance"; it was prior to "repentance"; it was something other than "repentance." Another important consideration about this verse, however, is that the "salvation" referred to here is not eternal salvation from sin through the death of Christ. The context refers to this sorrow and subsequent "repentance" as something that happened to the believers at Corinth in regard to their criticisms of Paul. The "salvation" here is most likely a reference to deliverance from God's chastisement or possibly deliverance from loss of rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

### **2 Peter 3:9**

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

According to Peter, "repentance" is what God desires of the unbeliever. There is really nothing in the context that requires reading into μετάνοια (*metania*) any notion of either turning or sorrow. Rather, the word simply expresses the change of mind toward Christ and His work that God desires the unbelievers to accept. "Coming to repentance" is essentially equivalent to "coming to faith."

### **Synchronic Study: Apostolic Fathers Usage**



Nearly contemporary with the New Testament authors are those early Christian writers known as the Apostolic Fathers. Kirsopp Lake's edition of the Apostolic Fathers<sup>28</sup> contains the writings of 1 Clement, 2 Clement, Ignatius, the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, and Polycarp. There are 186 occurrences of either μετάνοια or μετανοῶ in these writings. By far, the largest number of these occurrences is in Hermas (144 times). These writings express some of the earliest Christian understanding of the gospel following the times of the apostles. A thorough examination of these passages is beyond the scope of the present article and will be treated in a second part to be published in a future edition of this journal. But for now, suffice it to say that the uses of μετάνοια/μετανοῶ in the Apostolic Fathers is consistent with what we have seen throughout the history of the Greek language. When used in a soteriological context, these terms do not necessarily imply any notion of either sorrow or turning from sin, but rather express an internal action closely related to faith (πίστις).

### **Conclusion**

Our English Bible translations appear to teach that “repentance” is an important part of the Gospel message. Some free grace proponents have attempted to deny this. But such verses as Acts 2:38; 3:19; 11:18; 17:30; 20:20-21; 26:18-20; and 2 Peter 3:9 seem to lead us to the unavoidable conclusion that “repentance” was an important part of the apostles’ preaching of the gospel. Proponents of a free grace approach to soteriology are interested in making sure that works do not get introduced into the gospel message. I would suggest that rather than attempting to disregard the verses examined in this article, a better approach is to reexamine the definition of the terms μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*). Throughout the history of Greek literature, these terms have never required human works of any kind. Rather, they always appear to denote the inner activity of the mind and heart. As such, these terms are a close synonym to “faith.” When the ideas of sorrow and turning are removed from the terms μετανοῶ/μετάνοια (*metano/metania*), the idea of a “change of mind/heart” makes perfectly good sense in every passage where they are used in a soteriological context.

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<sup>28</sup> Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Edited by Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1912–1913).