

A Turnabout in the Meaning of Repentance

By David Lamb

In Nephi 1:1 and 2 we find a significant chiasm in which the center point emphasizes the importance of understanding the "learning of the Jews."

Nephi advises us that we must understand Hebrew customs, traditions, and language if we are to fully understand and appreciate the message conveyed by the scriptures.

It is often difficult for us as 20th century Gentiles to understand many of the theological concepts expounded in the scriptures simply because we interpret these ideas and concepts through our own language and culture, rather than interpreting them through the Hebrew language and culture in which they were originally given.

A classic example of this is the theological concept of repentance. To the Christian community of today, repentance is most often defined as a feeling of remorse or regret for past sins.

The majority of us have been taught that when we repent, we are to feel sorry for an act or shortcoming. We are then merely to ask God's forgiveness in the matter, promising never to commit the sin again. This misconception of true repentance leads to frustration when, after a short time, we find ourselves caught up once again in the same act or shortcoming.

This scenario repeats itself in our lives because we do not have the in-depth understanding of true repentance as was originally possessed by the ancient Hebrews.

To more fully understand the concept of repentance, we must explore the Hebraic meaning of the word "repent" itself.

In Hebrew the verb "to repent" is *shub* and means to "turn around" or "return" (Harris, Archar, Waltke).

In Hebrew, *shub* carries the idea of turning one's back on sin and turning toward God. In essence it means to make a spiritual "about face" (Wilson).

As we become caught up in sin, we progress down the road of life on a path which takes us farther and farther away from God. If we become truly repentant, we will not merely feel remorse for past sins, but will encounter a change in life style as we *turn* from sin and *return* to God.

The concept that repenting is returning to God is the predominant idea expressed in the parable of the prodigal son. In the parable, the son willfully chooses to separate himself from his father and his father's way of life. When the son finally comes to his senses and decides to repent, he does not merely feel remorse; he *returns* to his father.

As is the case with the Prodigal, true repentance for us requires a change in life style. It requires us to return to our Heavenly Father and his ways.

The beautiful part of the parable is the fact that as the son returns, his father goes out to meet him and helps/welcomes him back.

Encouragement should be taken from the fact that, just like the Prodigal's father, our Heavenly Father will come to assist/welcome us back when he finds that we are truly returning.

In many cases, this concept of repentance is emphasized in the writings of the Old Testament prophets by use of parallel synonyms: "... *repent*, and *turn* yourselves from all your transgressions" (Ezekiel 18:30); "... *repent*, and *turn* unto the Lord your God ..." (Joel 2:13) [emphasis added]. In each of these examples, a doubling of thought is used as both the word "repent" and "turn" carry the idea of turning from sin and back towards God.

Once we realize that true repentance is returning to God and requires a change in life style, we find that The Book of Mormon has always been very explicit in communicating this idea. Indeed, Alma 16:231 gives us the definition of repentance: "... I will repent, that I will return to my God."

In The Book of Mormon we also find examples of the Hebrew doubling of thought as the word "repent" is often used in conjunction with "turn" and "return."

Helaman 3:18 uses beautiful Hebrew poetry to emphasize that repentance is turning back to God: "O repent ye, repent ye! why will ye die? Turn ye, turn ye, unto the Lord your God."

Third Nephi 4:58 stresses the point of repenting with the full intention of experiencing a changed and dedicated life style: "... *repent* and *return* unto me with a full purpose of heart."

Likewise, 3 Nephi 8:65 draws our attention to the true meaning of repentance: "For ye know not but what they will *return* and *repent*, and come unto me with full purpose of heart ..." [emphases added].

Coming to an understanding of the Hebraic meaning and usage of repenting greatly increases our understanding of this theological concept. True repentance is not merely remorse. True repentance is a change in life style actuated by returning to God.

This concept is expressed very distinctly in the Book of Mormon, and is but one of many concepts which can be enhanced by following the chiasmic message of 1 Nephi 1:1 and 2 and exploring the customs, traditions, and language of the ancient Hebrew people.

References Cited:

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