

Hebrew Definition of Sin

Michael Heiss—November 15, 2014

Good morning, everyone! Always a pleasure to be with you. This morning we're talking about sin and the words for sin. The Hebrew is rich in words for *God* and very rich in words for *sin*.

This is going to be like a class that I had at Ambassador College years ago called *Old Testament Survey*. I do mean *survey*, not an excavation. Today we're going to have a brief survey of four or five words that are used for *sin*, *transgression* and so forth, and to see how they are used in the Bible, what they mean and how they might apply to us. If we looked at all of the words, we'd be here all day and night and still wouldn't get through.

If I don't mention some Scriptures that you think should have been, I apologize in advance. We're going to look at the first time that the word *sin*, in English, appears in the Bible.

Genesis 4—this is the time when Cain and Abel had given their offerings. God accepted that of Abel, but not that of Cain.

1. 'Chata'—fall short, miss the mark

Genesis 4:6: "And the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you so angry? And why has your countenance fallen?... [What's up, Cain? Come on!] ...If you do well, shall you not be accepted? But if you do not do well, **sin** lies... [crouches] ...at the door. Its desire *is* for you, but you must rule over it!'" (vs 6-7).

This word for *sin* is a generic word in the Hebrew; a transliteration will be 'chata' or 'chatah.' Generally, it means *to fall short, miss the mark*. You're going to fire with your bow and arrow and your arrow missed the bull's eye. That's what this word means; it covers all sins.

To use Catholic theology, it could cover venial sin or cardinal sin and you don't know which one it is until you see the context. But it's a general term for *sin*.

Quite often we use Ezek. 18 to show that there is no immortal soul. Ezekiel 18:4: "...The soul that sins, it shall die." Verse 20: "The soul that sins, it shall die...."

The reason that I'm pointing this out is that it doesn't matter what we call sin, if it's not repented of it's going to result in death. Sin is not a light thing! Even if the Bible just talks about 'chata' it is sin.

Let's look at how a man names Saul used that word. It has to be 'tongue in cheek' and read between the lines. We'll see that same word—

'chata'—and see how Saul uses it.

The story is that God talked to Samuel, instructed him to instruct Saul: 'Saul, remember what I did to Amalek coming out of Egypt: gather up your army, go down there and destroy them! All of them!' The women you can take as slaves, but otherwise destroy them! Saul didn't do it! He took his army and wiped out the warriors, but he took spoil—didn't kill all the cattle as God said to. He didn't Agog the way God said to. Samuel called him on it, and look at what Saul says here:

1-Samuel 15:30: "Then he said, '**I have sinned....**'"—'chata'—I didn't rebel, I didn't do wickedly, I just sinned, that's all. I sinned! I'm sorry! **NO!** *He did much more than just not follow instructions, he rebelled against God!*

So, you can see that 'chata' has a wide variety of meanings.

2. 'shagag'—to meander, to wander, to stray

Now we'll see an innocuous word translated as sin.

Leviticus 4:13: "And if the whole congregation of Israel **sins** through ignorance..." It's not 'chata,' it's 'shagag.' It means *to meander, wander, stray*; didn't do anything terrible, no violence, not rebelling against God! It's like you're in the forest or mountains and you're on a trail and all of a sudden you wonder: *where are my kids?* 'Oh, they're way over there! Get back here, get back on the trail.' That's what 'shagag' means: *you strayed and didn't follow instructions; you missed something and were inattentive!* Of course, if not repented of, that can also lead to death. All sin must be repented of, but this is a mild form of it.

Num. 15:28 talks about sinning through ignorance or error. That is 'shagag.'

3. 'avon'—iniquity

Now we come to something worse! Something to remember about Hebrew *vs* English: In English you can have synonyms that don't look anything like each other: fast—I can go fast, quick dart all means essentially the same thing: *moving quickly*.

Not so in Hebrew; all synonyms have the same root letters. When you see all these same root letters it means essentially the same thing with a slight differentiation.

What does 'avon' mean? *Perverse, make crooked, do amiss, do wickedly!* But more than that,

it's an *act of defiance or rebellion!* Just plain stubbornness. Ever hear the phrase 'stiff-necked'? That's what 'avon' means. It doesn't mean *wicked*. Not yet, we haven't gotten there. It's not evil.

Anyone remember the 'chairman of the board'—Frank Sinatra—'I'm doing it my way.' That doesn't make any sense. Not evil, not wretched, not rottenness, just plain 'stiff-necked.' That's bad, though.

Exodus 34:7—this is the Lord passing before Moses, speaking of Himself: "Keeping mercy to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity... ['avon'] ...and transgression and sin... [chata']. We'll get to *transgression* later.

Verse 9: "And he said, 'If now I have found grace in Your sight, O LORD, I pray You, let my LORD go among us, although it is a stiff-necked people. And pardon our iniquity...'—'avon'—stubbornness. The word also means *false and unjust, trouble*.

1-Samuel 15:23: "For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and **stubbornness**... [stiff-necked] ...is as **iniquity**... ['avon'] ...and idolatry." That's what iniquity means, *rebellion!*

I remember a little book I had read talking about *thinking, judging and revolting*. I remember being in an organization or two and the word was: *don't think, because to think is to judge; to judge is to criticize, to criticize is to revolt and rebellion is the sin of witchcraft!* Therefore, don't think! In this case it was *rebellion*. "...rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and **stubbornness is as iniquity**..."

4. 'ra'—evil

Now we're going to drop down to the worst of the lot. This you don't ever want to be your state of mind; 'avon' is bad enough, but at least you haven't sunk to the depths of depravity. This word has two different types of meanings.

- evil in and of itself
- bad things that happen

Gen. 6—God is talking about what's going to happen to the world, and is getting ready to talk to Noah.

Genesis 6:5: "And the LORD saw that the **wickedness**... ['ra'] ...of man was great on the earth..."--

"...and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil... ['ra'] ...continually" (v 5).

There's a slight difference between *wickedness* and *evil*. Wickedness implies a *worse sense of depravity than evil does*, but they are very

close synonyms. *God used those words to describe the people on earth at that time!*

Genesis 8:21—this is after the Flood and Noah had come down from the ark and everybody else with him, and built an altar and offered sacrifices:

Genesis 8:21: "And the LORD smelled a sweet savor; and the LORD said in His heart, 'I will not again curse the ground for man's sake—although the imagination of man's heart is **evil**...'—'ra'—this is the imagination of man and that's how He's using the word.

Genesis 13:13: "But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners against the LORD, exceedingly so." Sinners is 'chata' and wicked is 'ra.' You don't want to be in the state of 'ra'; believe me, you *never* want to get to that point!

Genesis 19:7—this is Lot; the angels have come and he brought them into his house and the men of Sodom want to play with them sexually. "And he said, 'I pray you, brethren, do not act so wickedly!'"—'ra'—that is truly bad.

But 'ra' has the meaning that *bad things can happen*. If I'm out in the sun and it's bright, and someone asks me, 'How bright is the sun?' *Not bad! Not 'ra.'* It can mean evil, but it also can mean *drought, plagues, misfortune, calamity*. When we see that God says, 'I will bring evil upon you,' or 'I create evil,' He doesn't mean that He's creating something that is morally impure. He's merely visiting upon us our sins—'ra.' We will see this word used:

Deuteronomy 31:29—Moses speaking: "For I know that after my death you will become utterly corrupt, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you. And **evil** will befall you in the latter days..."—meaning *plagues, drought, punishment, calamities, cyclones, tornados*—all 'ra.' Not necessarily that which is ghoulish.

"...because you will do **evil** ..." (v 29). There's a spiritual side of this, because you're going to do rotten and depraved things, and you're going to be punished for it. But it's the same word. Understanding that helped me to understand a problematic Scripture for me for a number of years until I read it in the Hebrew.

Isaiah 45:7: "I form the light and create darkness; I make peace and create **evil**. I the LORD do all these things." How does God create *evil*? *He doesn't!* But isn't that what it says? *Well, that's the English translation of the Hebrew, and that's the problem!*

The word *create* is indeed 'bara.' "God created..." (Gen. 1:1). But like many words, it has

secondary meanings. The primary meaning of the word ‘commute’ is not what I think of. I think of driving, commuting from home to work and *visa versa*. But that’s the secondary meaning, that’s not the primary dictionary meaning, which is to *commute a sentence* from perhaps death penalty to life in prison. You commuted the sentence, the punishment.

Well, ‘bara’ has a secondary meaning, which is to *dispatch, send forth, bring upon*. Now do you get what God is saying here: *I, the Lord, create evil.* That is I dispatch or bring upon people bad things for what they have done—*that’s what He’s saying!*

Verses 1-4 is the context, what God is talking about; He’s going to go before Cyrus loosening the doors and the gates of Babylon. God is sending *evil* upon the Babylonian Empire in the form and person of Cyrus and his Persian army.

So, God doesn’t create that which is evil, He simply brings upon us *evil for our own misdeeds!*

5. ‘pesha’—transgression—break away, rebel, a deliberate act of rebellion against known law

Exodus 34:7: “Keeping mercy to the thousandth generation, forgiving **iniquity and transgression and sin**...” Not just forgiving stubbornness, but forgiving transgression—‘pesha’—*outright rebellion against known law!*

This is not just missing the mark; this isn’t just an innocent mistake. It’s not necessarily *depravity*—‘ra.’ This means an outright defiance; ‘I’m not just doing it my way, *I’m really doing it my way!*’

Isaiah 43:7: “Your first father has sinned, and your teachers... [talking about Israel] ...have **transgressed** against Me.” Outright rebellion: ‘you have rebelled knowingly against Me.’ That’s how the word is used. That is not good! It’s not a depraved state, but outright rebellion!

Jeremiah 2:8: “The priests did not say, ‘Where *is* the LORD?’ And they who handle the law did not know Me; the rulers also **rebelled** against Me...” That’s the English word, which is the same thing as *transgress*, because the Hebrew word is still the same—‘pesha’—*an outright rebellion!*

Now we’re going to partially wrap this up with two verses:

Daniel 9:1: “In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans, in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood by

books the number of the years...” (vs 1-2).

Verse 3: “And I set my face toward the LORD God, to seek by prayer and supplications...”

Verse 4: “And I prayed to the LORD my God and made my confession...”

Verse 5: “We have **sinned** [‘chata’] and have committed **iniquity** [‘avon’], and have done **wickedly** [‘ra’], and have **rebelled** [‘pesha’], and have turned aside from Your commandments and from Your ordinances.”

Talk about an indictment! How much worse can you get? They’re all there!

- missing the mark
- iniquity
- stubbornness
- going my way
- wickedly
- seeking to depravity
- outright rebellion

And Daniel calls upon God to forgive them; which He did! Let’s not any of us fall into the state described in Dan. 9:5.

Rather, we’re going to see these same words used and see how they were received and how they were uttered by a man named David, King of Israel! This is David’s psalm after he committed the crime with Bathsheba—adultery and having had Joab kill her husband in war, leading him into the thick of the battle and he couldn’t defend himself properly.

Psalms 51:2 “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity... [from my stubbornness] ...and cleanse me from my sin [‘chata’], for I acknowledge my transgressions...” (vs 2-3)—‘pesha’—my rebellion against You. When did David really actively rebel against God? What do you call *murder and adultery*?

Yet, he didn’t do it in the sense of desiring to rebel against God. He didn’t see it at the time, he let himself get deluded; but nevertheless, when he’s in his right mind this is how he repented of it.

“...and my sin... [‘chata’—rebellion] ...is ever before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned... [‘chata’] ...and done evil...” vs 3-4—‘ra.’ David was acknowledging that he was *evil* in God’s presence. His coming to realize his depths of depravity of human nature and what he had done, and what he was.

God still said of David that he was ‘a man after God’s own heart.’ Why? *David repented bitterly!* I don’t know of any other man who repented to the extent that David did. I’m not saying there haven’t been any, but we don’t know about them.

This whole thing is written for our admonition. Remember that Paul wrote that these are ‘examples for our admonition,’ our encouragement.

Verse 5: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” What’s he talking about here? *He’s coming to realize how weak and futile human nature is; how weak human beings are!*

Remember Jesus’ instruction to His disciples? When He said ‘the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.’ It’s David understanding how weak the flesh is, how it is subject to iniquity and sin. Not that his mother was a sinful individual and a terrible person. *NO!* But they’re all caught up in sin! That’s why David says:

Verse 7: “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me...”

Verse 9: “Hide Your face from my sins [‘chata’], and blot out all my iniquities”—all my stubbornness! All my desires to go *my way* without thinking about You.

That should be our approach. Israel was indicted by Daniel and David was indicted the same way, except David repented. I say this to you sincerely: one way or another we’ve all be in this state.

- Maybe we haven’t committed actual murder—*hopefully not!*
- Maybe we have not committed actual adultery—*hopefully not!*
- Maybe have not actively shaken our fist in God’s face—*hopefully not!*

But we’ve been in this general condition! Let us all repent to the extent that David did! If we do, we can look forward to being in God’s Kingdom!

Scriptural References:

- 1) Genesis 4:6-7
- 2) Ezekiel 18:4
- 3) Exodus 34:7, 9
- 4) 1 Samuel 15:30
- 5) Leviticus 4:13
- 6) Exodus 34:7, 9
- 7) 1 Samuel 15:23
- 8) Genesis 6:5
- 9) Genesis 8:21
- 10) Genesis 13:13
- 11) Genesis 19:7
- 12) Deuteronomy 31:29
- 13) Isaiah 45:7
- 14) Exodus 34:7
- 15) Isaiah 43:27
- 16) Jeremiah 2:8

- 17) Daniel 9:1-5
- 18) Psalm 51:1-5, 7

Scriptures referenced, not quoted:

- Numbers 5:28
- Genesis 1:1

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Transcribed: 11-25-14

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