

THE REPENTANCE OF GOD

Biblical passages referring to "the repentance of God" have been sources of embarrassment for scholars, since these passages undermine the immutability of God. This study seeks to do justice both to God's repentance and to his immutability.

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The Bible as the Revelation of God intends to present through the medium of language who God is, what he has done and what he will do. The Bible set itself within the limits of language, even as other books do. Modern books, i.e., books of the past few centuries, employ charts, pictures and symbols to assist the printed word. The Bible, however, restricts itself to words, phrases, and expressions current during the time of its authors. What we know about the past and God's relationship to the past is to be found within the confines of the language which people used the days the Bible was written.

Much as we do not find artistic symbols, graphs or charts so common in books today, we do encounter language which employs a wide variety of expressions in which literary devices, such as parable, proverb, metaphor, are frequently used. And especially in the descriptions about God writers frequently resort to language of pictures and symbols. A type of this language is commonly known as anthropomorphism which means that God is described in the form of man as when the Scriptures speak about God who walks in the garden, who comes down to see the wickedness of the cities of the plain, who stretches out his arm, who inclines his ear, who smells the sacrifice, who writes with his finger or who talks with his voice from the mountain. A similar group of symbols is known as anthropopathism which means that God is described by human feelings and emotions. These include feelings or qualities of love, compassion, jealousy, hatred, wrath, patience and repentance. All these manlike forms or qualities, commonly called anthropomorphisms, are the tools of language by which the reader of the Bible can come to an understanding of God who is speaking to the reader through that language.

The anthropomorphism, however, valuable as it may be for purposes of communication, poses limitations in the understanding of God. Certainly the Old Testament itself would be the first to admit the limitation of anthropomorphism, or any type of language for that matter, for defining the Lord God of Israel. Observe questions such as: "To whom then will you liken God or what likeness compare with him?" or, "To

whom then will you compare me that I should be like him? says the Holy One" (Isa. 40:18, 25). In a discerning article on the topic, "*Die Grenzen des Anthropomorphismus Jahwes im Alten Testament*,"¹ J. Hempel points up the limitations in the use of justice to describe God, for the justice of God has qualities unlike anything found in the justice of men. God's justice does not come within the scope of man's laws and courts, yet it is true that man's justice is or should be a reflection of God's justice. In the sphere of life also we sense the folly of confining God to life as we know it. To be sure, God is alive, even as we are alive; our life in some measure resembles the life of God who created us. Yet God's life cannot be restricted to life as we have it. Sex life, which Israel's neighbors freely ascribed to their gods, was in no instance incorporated within the being of the God of Israel. This kind of popular anthropomorphism so commonly employed in Canaan for their gods was most abhorrent to writers of the Old Testament. Yet these same writers would employ the descriptive words of father and husband to the Lord. Consequently the anthropomorphisms of fatherhood and marriage pose some limitations in the understanding of God. Hempel's list of justice, life and sexuality can be expanded to take in other anthropomorphisms which would show that each representation of God under some human likeness carries with it some limitation in the understanding of God.

If therefore on the one hand we are correct in noting the limitations for the comprehension of God inherent in anthropomorphisms, we ought on the other hand to observe a faulty misuse or misinterpretation of biblical anthropomorphisms. Here we encounter a limitation that rests on presuppositions or prejudices which determine what anthropomorphisms or anthropopathisms are proper for God, or suitable for the honor of God. One anthropopathism over which there has been much dispute, especially in the early history of the church, is that of the suffering of God. Patripassionism which held that God the Father suffered on the cross during the death of his Son was condemned as heretical by the church. Suffering and pain are human passions and therefore cannot be ascribed to God who is above the ills and conflicts that plague sinful man. Suffering was endured by the Son as man; but it was firmly declared that suffering could not be an experience of God. The impassibility of God became a proper article of the orthodox declaration about God. It is not the purpose of this lecture to enter the controversy of patripassionism; but rather at this point to show that a selective presupposition ignores or refuses to deal with passages that plainly state that God suffers or is grieved. Let it be said in passing that recent studies in biblical theology have treated the data of the Bible more realistically and more responsibly and have

¹*Zeitschrift fuer die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (1939), 75-85.

concluded that it is more correct biblically to believe in the passibility of God, than to affirm his impassibility.²

The subject of this lecture has to do with another anthropopathism, the unchangeableness and the changeableness of God. These concepts appear in the Bible under the word REPENTANCE. The unchangeableness of God would be his non-repenting, and the changeableness his repenting. (Let it be noted at the outset that the word repentance carries no connotation of moral evil or guilt as it does in the case of man's repentance of sin. This warning about the ambiguity of meaning in repentance will remove one limitation at least!)

The anthropopathism repentance has not been prominent in the history of Christian doctrine. In comparison with the furor about the impassibility of God, which furor produced anathemas to be pronounced over the heads of heretics, the problem of divine repentance has received scant attention. One is led to ponder why Christians were so exercised about the suffering of God and paid little attention to his changing of mind or purpose. Surely the reason is not that the Bible speaks less about repentance than about the suffering of God, for the opposite would be the case. Rather the reason for the special concern about the impassibility of God is that this concept was vitally related to the Christological controversies of the first centuries of church history. Since passages in the Old Testament having to do with the repentance of God did not directly impinge upon the Christological controversy, the problem of repentance received little attention.

HEBREW ROOT

The Hebrew verbal root *NHM* with which this study is concerned appears frequently with God as subject. In the niph'al inflection in 27 instances the meaning is "repent" as in I Sam. 15:35, "The Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel." Two instances of the niph'al, Jud. 2:18; Ps. 90:13, yield the sense of "have compassion." Subjects other than Jahweh are used with this same root and the same meanings are derived. In the piel inflection the root offers the idea "to comfort, to have pity," such as Isa. 51:3, "For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places." Of the four appearances of this root in the hithpael inflection only one yields the sense of "repent," Num. 23:19. This lexical study establishes the following results: The verb in the niph'al inflection usually carries the meaning of repent, the piel inflection contains the concept of comfort, compassion or pity. To be sure, we do not have

²Cf. articles by Gerald Wondra, "The Pathos of God," *Reformed Review* (Dec. 1964), 28-35, and by K. E. Pollard, "The Impassibility of God," *Scottish Theological Journal* (1955), 353-364.

a neat distinction of meaning in the usages of these inflections of the verb, for variations occur within the different inflections of the verb. For one who prior to his study of the biblical languages had hoped that clear-cut and definite meanings could be assigned to every verb or noun, variations and oscillations in interpretation are most annoying and discomfiting; but for one who in previous study of other languages, and indeed of English, has learned that words are like choral music with prominent and sublimated themes, variations offer depth of understanding so that the interpreter not only hears the main tone of the word, but also its under- and overtones. Consequently we do well to hear the tones that interplay in our verb *NHM*. They are concepts of repentance, regret, comfort, compassion and pity. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

HISTORY OF TRANSLATIONS

As we follow the record of translators, we need to be informed at the outset that the Old Testament speaks both about the non-repentance of God and of his repentance. Let one passage for each usage suffice. In I Sam. 15:29 we read: "And also the glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man that he should repent." There are *eight* passages in the OT which speak of God's not repenting. In the same chapter in Samuel in verses 11 and 35 we read: "I the Lord repent that I have made Saul king; for he has turned his back from following me." And, "The Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel." Of the last usage there are 24 instances in the OT.

The first translators were scholars responsible for the Greek version known as the Septuagint (LXX). These scholars translated the Five Books of Moses, known as the Law, first. Since these books constituted the basis of the Hebrew canon, they were given special care in translation. This care is evident in the translation of five passages which have to do with repentance. The first two appear in Gen. 6:6-7 where a literal translation of the Hebrew would be: "And Jahweh repented that he had made man" and in direct discourse Jahweh declares: "For I have repented that I have made them." Here the LXX has: "And God considered that he has made man." and in the second instance: "Because I have become angry that I made them." In both instances the translators considered it improper to have Jahweh repent of making man. These scholars also changed the two instances of repentance in Ex. 32:12, 14. The translation of the prayer of Moses is: "Repent of the evil against thy people." And the comment follows: "And Jahweh repented of the evil which he spoke to do to his people." Observe the change in thought of the LXX: First, "And be merciful concerning this evil." and then, "And the Lord was propitiated concerning the evil he said he would do to his people."

In the Balaam oracle of Num. 23:19, the Hebrew text has: "God is not a man that he should lie, or a son of man that he should repent." For this the LXX has: "God is not like a man to be misled, neither like a son of man to be threatened." In this last case the LXX shies away from having God either lie or repent. The changing of "the Lord repented" to something less severe accords well with other modifications by the Seventy in their translation of the Pentateuch.³ Repentance or changeableness seemed to be at variance with the omniscience of God. In the concern to protect the honor of God and to revere him the word "repent" was softened to something more fitting to be said about God.

This scruple, however, did not bother the Greek translators of the rest of the OT, for they rather consistently translate *NHM* with *metanoeo* "to be sorry, to repent." The next most used verb is *metamelomai* "to change the mind." L. Koehler informs us that the LXX uses sixteen different translations for the verb *NHM*.⁴ The point to be made here is that the LXX apart from the Pentateuch understood this verb to mean a change in mind or purpose which occurred when it is said that Jahweh repented. The Latin Vulgate follows the LXX in using the verb *paenitere*, "to be sorry, to repent," most often, for translating the Hebrew *NHM*. However, in a significant number of cases the Vulgate does not follow the LXX's rendering of repent or change of mind but uses the deponent verb *miserere*, "to be compassionate, to pity." This shift to compassion or pity is understandable since the Hebrew verb *NHM* embraces this meaning also, as we noted above. In addition to these two verbs the Vulgate sparingly uses five other verbs. The observation made relative to the LXX may be underscored here, viz., the Vulgate understood the verb to mean that a change of mind or purpose took place when Jahweh repented.

In our English versions both the K.J.V. and the A.S.V. consistently render our verb *NHM* with repent. Although the R.S.V. generally uses "repent" for translation, yet a few notable exceptions occur. In Gen. 6:6-7 the verb "sorry" is used: "The Lord was sorry that he had made man . . . 'I am sorry that I have made them'." Deut. 32:36 has "The Lord will have compassion on his servants" and thereby follows the translations of the LXX and Vulgate. In four passages "relent" is used: "He remembered for their sakes his covenant, and relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love" (Ps. 106:45, cf. also Jer. 4:28; 15:6; Zech. 8:14). Two instances have "pity": "The Lord overthrew without

³Charles T. Fritsch, *The Anti-Anthropomorphisms of the Greek Pentateuch* (Princeton: University Press, 1943).

⁴*Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1951), 608-9.

pity" (Jer. 20:16, cf. Jud. 2:18). This survey of translations favors rendering the verb *NHM* with "repent."⁵

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

Philo in his essay, "On the Unchangeableness of God,"⁶ interprets the passages of Gen. 6:6-7 which speak about God's repentance. Even though Philo uses the LXX Greek for his discussion, which softens the idea of God's repenting to his having the matter in mind and to being angry, yet he is fully aware of the Hebrew's repenting and declares that it is a great impiety to speak of the Creator as repenting. Such impiety is greater than the wickedness about which the chapter deals. If among the best on earth there is constancy, how would anyone dare to think of God in terms of changeability? Since the Creator is above the change and growth set within the creation, he cannot be regarded as subject to change. The LXX in the first instance of the Hebrew verb reads: God had it in his mind that he had made man which is interpreted to mean that God considered that he made man a rational free being and that it was the misuse of freedom which produced the wickedness in the earth. The second occurrence of the verb is rendered that God was angry that he had made man. This causes Philo difficulty since God is not subject to human passions such as wrath or anger. His exegesis which suffers from lack of clarity suggests that Moses the lawgiver speaks about God's anger to frighten the foolish into proper reverence for God. In other words anger is not a proper quality to be found in God but only a device to show man how wicked he has become and to move him from sin to seek the grace of God, as Noah did. Philo therefore dismisses the Hebrew sense of repentance and the Greek translation of anger as concepts not to be found in God, although the equally human trait of thinking and reflecting Philo freely ascribes to God.⁷

⁵Other English versions: The Torah by the Jewish Publication Society (1962) has "regret" in Gen. 6:6-7, "renounce" in Ex. 32:12, 14, "change the mind" in Num. 23:19; New Catholic Edition in Gen. has "regret," in Ex. "relent," in Num. "change the mind"; The Anchor Bible for Genesis (1964) has "regret" and "am sorry."

⁶*Philo*, The Loeb Classical Library, Vol. III (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons), 3-101.

⁷According to Philo anthropomorphism is used as a "crutch for our weakness." Observe his discussion on the impropriety of God binding himself with an oath. "Why then did it seem well to the prophet and revealer to represent God as binding himself with an oath? It was to convince created man of his weakness and to accompany conviction with help and comfort. We are not able to cherish in our souls continually the thought which sums so worthily the nature of the Cause, that 'God is not as man' (Num. 23:19), and thus rise superior to all human conceptions of him. . . . Therefore we invent for him hands and feet, incomings and outgoings, enmities, aversions, estrangements, anger, in fact such parts and passions as can never belong to the Cause. And of such is the oath—a mere crutch for our weakness." *Philo*, The Loeb Classical Library, Vol. II, 165-67.

Origen in his translation and comment on Num. 23:19 declares: "God is not confounded like man nor is he frightened like a son of man." Among men terror sometimes changes the mind, but does God who is above all things change his mind? Origen allows another rendering of the text: "Neither does God like a son of man frighten." This means that God frightens men for purposes of punishment and emendation of life; men frighten others for display or boasting.⁸

Augustine in his comments on passages in which repentance of God occurs states that all things are arranged and fixed by God from the beginning. In the change which occurs in temporal things there is no change in the matters which were decreed by the immutability of God's most secret will. Both the present and the future things God has already done. Here the church father muses on the wonder of the comprehensive and immutable will. When it is said that God "repented according to the greatness of his mercy" he did what he had arranged to do before hand. God foreknew that his people would pray to him out of their tribulation and because of this prayer which he foreknew he would change their captivity into deliverance (Ps. 106:45).⁹ In his comment on Ps. 132:11 Augustine observes that when God is said to change he changes his works or deeds, but he does not change his immutable will.

Jerome, a contemporary of Augustine, in his commentary on Jer. 18:1-10 relates the repentance of God to the exercise of Israel's freedom of choice. If Israel turns from evil to uprightness then God will hold back the threatened evil; and if Israel forsakes uprightness to turn to evil, then the promised good will not come upon the people. Freedom of decision must be maintained.¹⁰ Jerome has some qualms about the propriety of using the word "perhaps" (*fortians*) in Jer. 26:3, "Perhaps they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way, that I may repent of the evil which I intend to do to them." Surely God knows all future things, consequently it seems improper to ascribe uncertainty to God. Jerome, however, approves this contingency on the part of God as necessary for our benefit. In fact, Jerome finds the "perhaps" in the Evangel: "I will send my son, perhaps they will honor him" (Lk. 20:13).¹¹

⁸J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Graecae*, XII, 691f.

⁹J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Latinae*, XXXVII, 1416.

¹⁰J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Latinae*, XXIV, 796.

¹¹*Ibid*, 844. Observe Jerome's comment on Jer. 4:28: The pity of God is mixed with wrath, the earth is deserted, but destruction does not occur that they may know his mercy. The heaven above shall appear black and the earth shall mourn because the sentence of God shall prevail, neither will he repent of what he has determined and spoken. Nevertheless the penitence of God is declared because the predicted sentence is removed and the raging wrath does not prevail to the end. He threatened through Jonah, but the multitude escaped the impending sword of tears and lamentations. *Ibid*, 712.

Cornelius A Lapede, a Roman Catholic scholar of the seventeenth century, notes in his commentary that the Hebrew verb *NHM* means "repent," yet as a faithful Catholic scholar of that time he uses the Latin version which in several cases has altered the basic meaning of the Hebrew verb. Although the Vulgate in Gen. 6:6-7 has *paenitere* "repent," yet Lapede is not pleased with that rendering since it is improper to speak of God's repenting or grieving. The repenting here, however, must be understood to mean that because of the hardness of men God retracts his gifts and casts out the sinner whom he has created.¹² In Ex. 32:12, 14 the Vulgate uses forms of *placere* "appease," which means that here God was appeased not to destroy Israel because of the intercession of Moses. Joel 2:13 has: *Et praestabilis super malitia*, "And he is exalted above evil." Lapede takes note of the Hebrew text, "And he repents concerning evil," and interprets it to mean that God revokes the threatened decrees when he repents. The Vulgate, however, has a more elegant meaning in that it declares that God stands above all evil such as wrath or vengeance, and that God does not allow himself to be conquered by evil, but he as Lord rules over it.¹³ In Jonah 3:10 the Vulgate has: "God was compassionate over their evil." The interpretation is that God's compassion should move godly people to treat repentant sinners with compassion. In the next chapter (4:2) the Latin text has *ignoscere*, which has the sense of excusing or allowing evil. Lapede observes that the threatening oracles of God are conditional even though not explicitly stated. When things or persons change, the decree or will of God is changed. Therefore the basic change is not in God nor in his decrees but in the accused themselves and in sinners, for the will of God is this: The sinner will die if he indeed persists in sin, but if he does not persist, but repents, he will not die but live, Ez. 18:32.¹⁴ With reference to the three passages in I Sam. 15 where the Vulgate has *paenitere*, Lapede observes that since God is immutable, most wise, and aware of and foreknowing all future things, neither grief nor penitence can fall on him. In his repentance God withdraws his promised benefits because of man's ingratitude and unworthiness.¹⁵

Although John Calvin's comments on the repentance of God differ little from the prevailing exegesis prior to the Reformation, yet our study will profit from a survey of Calvin's thought on passages we have already discussed. In Gen. 6:6-7 Calvin declares that repentance cannot properly

¹²*Commentaria in Pentateuchum Mosis* (Lugduni [Lyons]: Fratres de Tournes, 1732), 84.

¹³*Commentaria in Duodecim Prophetas Minores*, 193.

¹⁴*Ibid*, 318.

¹⁵*Commentaria in Josue, Judicum, Ruth, IV Libros Regum et II Paralipomenon*, Tomus I, 248f.

be ascribed to God for nothing unforeseen or unexpected can happen to God.

And the same reasoning would keep us from attributing grief to God for certainly, says Calvin, nothing sorrowful or sad can happen to God who forever remains himself in his celestial happiness and repose. These words of repentance and grief are to be understood to mean God's severe detestation of sin and to point out to man his extreme wickedness.¹⁶

In the intercession of Moses for Israel, Ex. 32:12-14, Calvin manifests some uneasiness about God's not consummating the threatened destruction which in his wrath God said he would bring upon the apostate people. Surely God's word must come to pass. If this is a problem, and in truth it is a problem for Calvin, then his solution is offered in two not closely related suggestions: (1) We here confront an incomprehensible mystery which God is not obliged to explain to us; and (2) we are here instructed about God as judge, his doom upon sin and his pardon which was being withheld. Calvin further adds in his comment for this passage that repentance is a change in dealing with Israel which is tantamount to being appeased.

In other passages that contain repentance of God Calvin affirms that no change takes place in God but rather a change takes place in man. Man becomes aware of his desperate plight and of the punishment which the wrath of God will bring upon him. Consequently man turns away from his sin to experience the pardoning grace of God. The point is that the change occurs in man and not in God.¹⁷

Since Calvin sets the repentance of God in the realm of mystery, he would find much limitation in language to describe something about God which is beyond our grasp. In fact it appears that the anthropopathic repentance is misleading since it easily conveys a concept of mutability in God instead of the intended concept of pardon which is to mitigate or withhold the pronounced punishment. Calvin detects that the threatened doom is conditional even when conditions are not expressed. Because of these implied conditional factors in all threats, it becomes possible for God to repent of sending the threatened destruction because certain conditions were fulfilled that allowed God to refrain from the evil and to pardon the sin.¹⁸

POST-REFORMATION INTERPRETATION

From Reformation times to the present many scholars have taken up the problem of the repentance of God. I shall note only a few of them. Z. Ursinus in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism speaks about

¹⁶Comments are from Calvin's Commentaries *in loco*.

¹⁷Cf. comments on Joel 2:13 and Jonah 3:10.

¹⁸*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. I, Chap. XVII, 13, 14.

God's immutability against which an objection is raised in that God is said to have repented of things which he did. The answer to this objection is that this is spoken figuratively, which would be another way of saying that since it is figurative God's repentance has no bearing upon his immutability. Another objection is raised in that God changes his precepts and observances and works. The answer to this is that God changes them according to his eternal decree.¹⁹

F. Turretin in his controversy with Socinus on the immutability of God demonstrates rationally that complete immutability must be ascribed to God as follows: God is able to change neither for the better since he is the best, nor for the worse since he is defined as the most perfect. Therefore all reasons of change are taken from God, such as dependence on prior things, and permissive power, error of mind and inconstancy of will. When penitence is ascribed to God as in Gen. 6:6-8, this must not be understood as *pathetikos* a suffering or distress, but as *energetikos*, a showing of kindness or beneficence. Penitence when it is ascribed to God must be understood as *theoprepos*, that is, befitting God, which means that penitence is not by reason of deliberation but because of the event, not of the will itself, but of the thing willed, not of the state of mind and internal grief, but of accomplishment and external work because he does what penitent man is accustomed to do.²⁰

Theologians such as Charles Hodge, William G. T. Shedd, A. H. Strong, L. Berkhof, to mention a few, follow much the pattern of Turretin in establishing distinctions through definitions to relieve the problem relative to God's repentance which the Scripture so openly states. They allege that passages which speak about God's repenting of what he was about to do are either figurative or anthropomorphic and therefore need not be taken seriously, even as one does not believe that God has a body because Scripture speaks about God's deliverance of Israel with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Or these passages speak of a change, not in God, but in man, either in his turning from evil to good thereby to escape the threatened doom or in his understanding of God's extreme wrath against sin thereby to importune God for pardon. In any event, no change takes place in God.²¹

The preceding survey of protestant scholars reveals a labored effort to avoid the obvious meaning of passages which speak about God's repentance. Protestantism in its exegesis on the being of God largely fol-

¹⁹*The Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), 126.

²⁰*Compendium Theologiae Didactico-Elencticae* (1731), 65f.

²¹For an elaborate treatment on the Immutability of God by a protestant scholastic, see Stephen Charnocke, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1860), 195-230.

lowed the patterns and presuppositions of medieval scholasticism which, as Brunner has pointed out, were based on speculations of Platonism and Neo-Platonism.²² This legacy of Greek thought persisted into post-Reformation exegesis with the result that Protestant scholars were inclined to balk at any suggestion of change in God. Consequently they were obliged to resort to a devious exegesis to avoid the obvious statement of a change in God's manner of dealing with his people.

One of the first to give some recognition to this changeability in God as expressed in Scripture was J. A. Dorner in his essay on "The Proper Comprehension of the Dogmatic Concept of the Unchangeableness of God."²³ Dorner observes that tension exists in theological reflection between the unchangeableness and transcendence of God on the one hand and his vitality and immanence on the other hand. The author asks in what kind of being does unchangeableness and vitality exist. Dorner would define this as the ethical being of God which expresses itself in freedom and love. This ethical being is what may be called the unchangeableness of God who in his ethical purpose expresses himself in freedom and love. This kind of vitality expresses itself so strongly that one can observe on the one hand a rigid unchangeableness in God and on the other hand a flexibility in God's act which establishes man's freedom in the influence which qualifies the divine act.

This survey of interpretation I would conclude with a brief note on Karl Barth's discussion about "The Constancy and Omnipotence of God," which I refer to with special appreciation. Barth in his review of the scholastic treatment of the immutability of God notes that scholasticism has not found the God of the Bible. The immutable God of the Bible is the One who is forever acting in freedom and love. In fact the constancy of God is to be demonstrated and seen in his freedom and love which he never surrenders but always at every point manifests vividly. This is far from the pagan notion of the immobile God which notion, says Barth, is only a euphemistic description of death. If we may accept the immutability of God as primarily manifested in his freedom and love, then we may have some direction by which to understand and to discuss the repentance and non-repentance of God.²⁴

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In bringing this study to a close I shall for sake of clarity place two aspects of God's repentance in focus which I shall call the primary role of God's repentance and its secondary role. The primary role is seen in

²²*The Christian Doctrine of God*, Vol. I (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), 266-9.

²³"*Ueber die richtige Fassung des dogmatischen Begriffs der Unveränderlichkeit Gottes*" in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Verlag von Wilhelm Hertz, 1883), 188-377. Karl Barth acknowledges his debt to this essay.

²⁴*Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 490-500.

God's withholding the evil which he threatened to bring upon his sinful people. The making of the golden calf and its worship at Sinai (Ex. 32:1-14) serve well to note the sequence in the existential encounter between God and his people. The sequence is Israel's apostasy, God's wrath, pronouncement of doom, intercession of Moses, and the repentance of God which held back the destruction of the people. This sequence also appears in Amos in which the apostate people are threatened by a plague of locust or by fire (Amos 7:1-6). The prophet intercedes and the Lord repents of the evil he intended to bring upon the people. In this sequence the intercessory prayer is the vital factor that occasions the repentance of God. Another sequence with slight variation appears as the framework for the writing of the book of Judges: apostasy, oppression, cry for help, and "the Lord repented because of their groaning on account of those who oppressed them" (Jud. 2:18). Much the same sequence is presented through Jeremiah: sinful people, declaration of doom, forsaking of evil and repentance of God (Jer. 18:7-8; 26:3, 12-13). In effect the pattern of the above sequences is sinful people, oppression or threatened punishment, a cry of intercession or of anguish, and the repentance of God. Hosea expresses the final step in this sequence in these moving utterances:

My heart recoils within me,
My REPENTINGS unitedly become warm
I will not execute my fierce anger,
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
For I am God and not man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come to destroy (11:8-9).

The repenting of God from evil that was threatening to destroy his people became so much a part of the thought and message of prophet and historian that it became a part of the confessional credo of two prophets. "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and repents of evil" (Joel 2:13). "For I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil" (Jonah 4:2). The credo as given at Sinai was: "A God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). As the inspired historians and prophets observe that in spite of Israel's frequent apostasy God never sent final destruction upon his people, they declare that God repents of the evil pronounced over his people. This repentance was so much an observable factor in Israel's history that later prophets added "repents of evil" as a significant addendum to the Sinai credo.

The secondary role in God's repentance may be observed in his withholding the good promised to his people. Let me quote the significant

passage in Jeremiah where both the primary role and the secondary role of repentance appear.

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it.

And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will repent of the good which I had intended to do to it (18:7-10).

The withholding of the good for the people is here ascribed to God's repentance (v. 10). I regard this passage rather significant since here alone the withholding of good is because God repented. Usually the primary role of God's repentance of withholding evil is balanced by the manifestation of God's anger by which doom and destruction come upon the guilty nation. Here, in this one case, it is his repentance that withholds the good. In any case both Amos and Jeremiah preach this secondary role of God's sending judgment upon his people for their wickedness. God can and does retract in a most terrible manner his favor, as the disaster and shame of the exile witnesses. However, much as we need to acknowledge the possibility of the two kinds of repentance, they are not to be put in parallel or balance one against the other. Barth²⁵ has well observed that God is not placed in arbitrary fashion between the two in order to select the one the same number of times as the other. If not by sheer difference in occurrence between these two usages of repentance, then surely by pertinent passages such as Ezekiel's famous utterance: "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God; so turn and live" (18:32), we may confidently affirm that the primary role of God's repentance is to hold back evil or to put it positively to bring about salvation and redemption.

Even though the Old Testament speaks more often of God's repenting than of his non-repenting, as we noted above, yet we should note that a few passages declare that God does not repent. I choose to come to this final discussion of repentance by way of an incidental statement of the apostle Paul which he gives in Romans 11:29 in the context of Israel in the plan of God. Paul says: "For the gifts (*ta charismata*) and the call of God are not to be repented of." Paul wants to establish that God has not abandoned Israel who are now beloved of God for the sake of the forefathers. To prove his point Paul appeals to the Old Testament by citing what appears to be a generally-accepted, not-to-be-challenged point, viz., the charismatic gifts and call of God can always be depended on;

²⁵*Ibid*, 497f.

they are not to be repented of.²⁶ These are as constant as God himself, for he does not repent of them, or ever abandon them. We may well assume that Paul knew all about those passages of God's repenting, especially since in a previous chapter he refers to the potter's illustration taken from Jeremiah in which we are told about the repenting of God. Paul makes no attempt to solve any problems but wants rather to find the basic certainties of the Old Testament which carried Israel throughout her history. These are the divine gifts and the divine call.

In the light of what Paul declares, we may note that the whole history of charismata depends on the non-repentance of God in that lawgiver, judge, prophet and poet received the charismata of God. And to crown all these charismata Israel herself had received the divine call, the special election. These are manifestations of God's covenantal faithfulness to his people for which there never was and never will be any regret or repentance. Therefore it was that Balaam declared that God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man that he should repent (Num. 23:19). The charismata and the call under Moses given to Israel would not be annulled. Therefore Samuel also speaks and affirms in the face of the defection of king Saul which defection threatened to reduce Israel to the level of intrigue and pagan alliance that God does not repent of the destiny set for Israel (I Sam. 15:29). God's charismata shall come upon another who would be David. And therefore the psalmist declares that the Lord through his oath and his non-repentance shall endow David's son with the charismata of kingship and priesthood (Ps. 110:4). The charismata and the call, says Paul, are God's unrepented of gifts to Israel.

As now, even now, we sense imperfectly and partially our existence under God in terms of Old Testament language, and as we too have the charismata and the divine call which are not repented of, then we too like the apostle are lifted into an ecstatic doxology: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:33, 36).

²⁶Michel remarks that ver. 29 has the "form of a statement or of a theological doctrine." The word *ametameleta* stands at the opening of the verse for emphasis. It means irrevocable, not to be repented of. The combination of charismata and call indicates that call is specifically under the charismata and is one of the most weighty gifts. *Der Brief an die Roemer* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 283.