

## EXEGETICAL STUDY OF GENESIS 6:7: THE REPENTANCE OF GOD

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### ABSTRACT

One of the widely misunderstood and avoided subjects by theologians and preachers alike is the doctrine of God's repentance. The question remains, can God repent? What does the word **נחם** mean in this context? Does the repentance of God suggest His mistakes and limitation? If God does repent, what theological implication does it have? The study attempts an exegetical study of Genesis 6:7 to arrive at the theological and contextual meaning of **נחם**. When God is the subject, *repent* is a poor English translation, for *repent* carries the idea of *remorse for wrongdoing*. Thus, no English equivalent proves satisfactory. We are now in a position to affirm that **נחם** in Genesis 6:6-7 has nothing to do with regrets, grief, or being sorry. Rather, God is enforcing a system of checks and balances as part of the equilibrium that He is maintaining in the world. Human beings can repent, God cannot. He was *comforted* in Himself and Noah found favor in His eyes.

### INTRODUCTION

It is conceivably obvious that Divine Repentance is an important topic these days, especially in light of the threats of open theism.<sup>2</sup> The Old Testament (OT) in general, and the Pentateuch in particular, employs two main terms to capture the concept of repentance; they are **נחם** and **שׁוּב**.<sup>3</sup>

Most Christian theologians have affirmed that God is immutable. This doctrine is supported by citing several Old Testament passages such as Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29, and Psalm 110:4. Robert Chisholm argues that, in all these, *nhm* is translated *repent* or *change His mind*.<sup>4</sup> However, many other Old Testament passages, using a Niphal form *wayyinnahem* of this same verb *nhm* with the same semantic sense, assert that God typically does change His mind (Jer 18:5-10; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2), describe Him doing so (Exod 32:14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:10), or at least assume that He might (Jer 26:3; Joel 2:14; Jonah 3:9).<sup>5</sup>

Genesis 6:7 with the immediate context (vv. 5-8) seems to reveal the peak of human degradation. A larger context of Genesis 3-7 encapsulates the background surrounding the text, "And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it *repenteth* me that I have made them" (Gen 6:7 KJV, emphasis added).

Divine repentance can be a difficult thing to understand.<sup>6</sup> The question remains, can God repent? What does the word *nhm* mean in this context? Does the repentance of God suggest His mistakes and

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<sup>2</sup> 'Divine Repentance: Does God Really Change His Mind?' accessed 26 March 2015, <http://inchristus.files.wordpress.com/2010/.../does-god-really-change-his-mind.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup>T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 684. The transliteration of the Hebrew words shall be used in this article.

<sup>4</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, 'Does God Change His Mind?' *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152, no. October/December, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Prussic, 'Divine Repentance: A Word Study,' *WRS Journal* 12/1 (February 2005) 21-22. There exists a palpable tension between that assert divine repentance and those that deny its possibility. Here is one possible resolution: 'When *nhm* is used of God, however, the expression is anthropopathic and there is not ultimate tension. From man's limited, earthly, finite

limitation? The study dares conventional interpretations of Genesis 6:7 by presenting a new meaning and understanding to *repentance of God* with the potentiality to illuminate people’s understanding of God’s immutability and omniscience in the context of *nhm*. This study attempts to interpret the Hebrew text and its contextual meaning with the hope of affirming whether God can repent or not and possibly how.

The focus of this study is to give contextual interpretation to *nhm* in Genesis 6:7 much more than the other words and terms in that verse. The focus is not an exhaustive discussion of the whole chapter and its general meaning.

**Textual Analysis**

Genesis 6:7 records God as saying, "I will destroy... both man and beast, and the creeping things, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them." It is observed that the Septuagint version of the Old Testament and Apocrypha have this verse as verse 8. The critical apparatus renders the “grieved” as “I have thought or reasoned.”<sup>7</sup>

Selected versions and their interpretation of *nhm* in Genesis 6:7:

Versions	NIRV	NAB	CEB	TARGUM	M T	exeCB	NIV	K J V	ESV
Interpretation	S a d	Regret	Regret	Repented	Sorry	s i g h	Regret	Repented	Sorry

וַיַּרְא יְהוָה כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וְכָל-יֵצֶר מִחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ לֵבּוֹ רָק רַע כָּל-הַיּוֹם:

<sup>5</sup> Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

וַיִּנְחַם יְהוָה כִּי-עָשָׂה אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֵל-לִבּוֹ:

<sup>6</sup> The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֲמַחֶה אֶת-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר-בְּרִאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה מֵאָדָם עַד-בְּהֵמָה עַד-רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם כִּי נִחַמְתִּי כִּי עָשִׂיתִם:

<sup>7</sup> The Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them."

וַיִּבֶט מִצָּא הוֹן בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה: פ

<sup>8</sup> But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

The text does not portray God as responding in a fit of anger. In some translations, it is rendered that He was sorry He made human beings (e.g. NKJV). If we are sorry we have done something, we logically refrain from doing it again. However, traditional translation has in effect thrown up its hands on *nhm* and contented itself with categories such as grieve, repent, console, relent, be comforted, and change one’s mind.<sup>8</sup> God did not act out of cold calculation or judge with indifference, hence, the sense of “relent” or “change the mind” fails to capture the deep emotions that compel God to take a different course. Thus, no English equivalent proves satisfactory.<sup>9</sup>

The Niphal of *nhm* can be viewed in terms of acting to keep personal, national, or cosmic “ledgers” in balance.<sup>10</sup> God is known as a God who does not allow evil to stand on the books but balances it with

perspective it only appears that God’s purposes have changed. Open Theism teaches that God is open to change and adjusts His plans to new circumstances’ (TWOT 2:571).

<sup>7</sup> Lancelot Charles Lee Brenton, *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament and Apocrypha*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), 7.

<sup>8</sup> John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 309.

<sup>9</sup> John E. Hartley, *New International Biblical Commentary: Genesis*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 98.

<sup>10</sup> Taking this information back to Genesis 6, we must first make a stop in Judges 21. Here, the tribe of Benjamin has been decimated, and the other tribal leaders have gathered to discuss the situation. In verse 6, they begin seeking to ‘balance the ledgers’ (NIV ‘grieved,’ the Niphal of *nhm*) for Benjamin. The course of action they decide on is described in verses 8-14. Still balance is not achieved, and in verse 15 the people seek to ‘balance the ledgers’ further, here with the important explanation, because (Heb. *ki*) the Lord has made a gap.

either grace or mercy (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2) or with punishment (Jer 18:10).<sup>11</sup> This suggests that *nhm* in Genesis 6:6-7 has nothing to do with regrets, grief, or being sorry. Rather, God is enforcing a system of checks and balances as part of the equilibrium that He is maintaining in the world.

An English verb to capture this nuance is hard to come up with. Consequently, one would resort to circumlocution: “The LORD audited<sup>12</sup> the accounts because He had made man in the earth and His heart tormented Him (i.e. He was distressed) over it. So, the LORD said, ‘I will wipe man, whom I have created from the face of the earth ... because I have audited the accounts since I have made them.’”<sup>13</sup>

### Word Studies

*Nhm* as a key root stem shall be considered.<sup>14</sup> Etymologically, the origin of the root seems to reflect the idea of breathing deeply, hence the physical display of one’s feelings, usually sorrow, compassion, or comfort. However, *nhm* is an expressive word; it can express sorrow, remorse, and even satisfaction.<sup>15</sup> The root occurs in Ugaritic (see “to console” in UT 19: no. 1230) and is found in OT proper names such as Nehemiah, Nahum, and Menehem.<sup>16</sup>

*Nhm* occurs 108 times in the Hebrew Bible in four forms: Niphal, Piel, Pual and Hithpael. As with most verbal roots in Hebrew, *nhm* has various shades of meaning in its different stems. In the Niphal stem, it tends to mean to suffer or remorse, but can also mean to console oneself or to be comforted or relieved (by taking vengeance). In the Piel, *nhm* means to comfort or console, while the Pual stem means to be comforted or consoled. The meaning in the Hithpael is similar to that of the Niphal. In its usage, it occurs as comfort 57 times, as repent 41 times, as comforter 9 times, and as ease 1 time.

It is of importance to note that LXX renders *nhm*, niphal, in Genesis 6:6-7 with the verbal root *enthumeomai*, “to reflect (on), consider, think.” In a broader sense, translations such as “to summon, call upon, invite, urge, request, comfort, try to console or conciliate,” are used to translate the *niphal*, *piel*, *pual*, and *hithpael* of *nacham*.<sup>17</sup> In the LXX Genesis 6:6-7 are the only verses where *enthumeomai* is used for

<sup>11</sup> When God has set a course for punishment, it can at times be counterbalanced by an act of grace that revokes that punishment and brings the ‘ledger’ back into balance (Jer 26:13; Jonah 3:9-10). Cf. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 308-311.

<sup>12</sup> When God is the subject “repent” is a poor English translation, for repent carries the idea of remorse for wrongdoing. The sense of “relent” or “change the mind fails to capture the deep emotions that compel God to take a different course” Cf. Hartley, *New International Biblical Commentary: Genesis*, 99.

<sup>13</sup> Despite the struggle of having an English word to use in translation, this proposal lends a credible cohesion to the meaning of the root and resolves the theological difficulties by eliminating any need to explain how God could be sorry or repent. Inasmuch as it is widely accepted that the term “repented” was used anthropopathically, putting God in human feelings, and not really capturing the root meaning; but the contextual analysis suggests God taking an action because of what man has done. Hence, God was merely auditing or balancing up, both with grace and mercy or punishment.

<sup>14</sup> *tn* or “was grieved,” “was sorry.” In the Niphal stem, the verb נָחַם (*nakhām*) can carry one of four semantic meanings, depending on the context: (1) “to experience emotional pain or weakness,” “to feel regret,” often concerning a past action (see Exod 13:17; Judg 21:6, 15; 1 Sam 15:11, 35; Job 42:6; Jer 31:19). In several of these texts כִּי (*ki*, “because”) introduces the cause of the emotional sorrow. (2) Another meaning is “to be comforted” or “to comfort oneself” (sometimes by taking vengeance). See Gen 24:67; 38:12; 2 Sam 13:39; Ps 77:3; Isa 1:24; Jer 31:15; Ezek 14:22; 31:16; 32:31. (This second category represents a polarization of category one.) (3) The meaning “to relent from” or “to repudiate” a course of action which is already underway is also possible (see Judg 2:18; 2 Sam 24:16 = 1 Chr 21:15; Pss 90:13; 106:45; Jer 8:6; 20:16; 42:10). (4) Finally, “to retract” (a statement) or “to relent or change one’s mind concerning,” “to deviate from” (a stated course of action) is possible (see Exod 32:12, 14; 1 Sam 15:29; Ps 110:4; Isa 57:6; Jer 4:28; 15:6; 18:8, 10; 26:3, 13, 19; Ezek 24:14; Joel 2:13-14; Am 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9-10; 4:2; Zech 8:14). See R. B. Chisholm, “Does God ‘Change His Mind’?” *BSac* 152 (1995): 388. The first category applies here because the context speaks of God’s grief and emotional pain (see the following statement in v. 6) as a result of a past action (His making humankind). For a thorough study of the word נָחַם, see H. Van Dyke Parunak, “A Semantic Survey of *NHM*,” *Bib* 56 (1975): 512-32.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Prussic, “Divine Repentance: A Word Study,” *Western Reformed Seminary Journal* 12, no. 1 (February 2005): 21-22. Cf. Marvin R. Wilson, “נָחַם,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, vol. 2 (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), 570.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, “571-570,” נָחַם.

<sup>17</sup> Heinz-Josef Simian-Yofre, “*Nhm*” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Vol. 9. Translated by David Green. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 355.

*nacham*.<sup>18</sup> All these derivatives do not carry any sense of regret or repent. Therefore, regret or repent should not be alternate translations for *nhm* in Genesis 6:6-7.

However, because of the preceding context, Genesis 6:1-5, and as a parallel to the second half of verse 6 He was pained to his heart “The *’sb* root use for grief can also be translated as distressed, displeased. It is used in hithpael as feel grieved, outraged. It occurs 15 times and the common reflexive usage and texts such as Isaiah 54:6 (distressed in spirit) shows that it has to do basically with inner feelings. Three instances have to do with God’s grieving, provoked by the sinful response of the human race (Gen 6:6) and by Israel, from its beginnings (Ps 78:40) and throughout its history (Isa 63:10). God is revealed, not as one who remains unmoved by the human response, but as one who is deeply affected by what has happened to the relationship.”<sup>19</sup>

It is observable that New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis use “be sorry”, “console” for niphala of *nhm*. The ideal seems to include “getting over the grief” and affirming “comfort” as right meaning for niphala.<sup>20</sup> In Genesis 5:29, Noah, meaning “provide us relief or comfort” connects with Hebrew *niham* “to comfort” (Gen 6:6-7)<sup>21</sup> an evidence that “comfort” was the intention of the author and not “regret or repent” as some versions interpreted it.

And God was “comforted in Himself”, in verse 6, suggests a sense of reflection and balancing, in verse 7. LXX saw that by translating *nhm* in verses 6-7 as “*enthumeomai*” - because God was rather “reflecting on” and not “repenting”. This reflection as used by LXX carries the same idea as general usage, such as “to summon, call upon, invite, urge, request, comfort, try to console, or conciliate.” God’s reflection makes Him to comfort in Himself, as Noah (comfort) found grace in His eyes. This comfort or reflection led to summon, request, or need for auditing!

Therefore, The Niphala of *nhm* can be viewed in terms of acting to keep personal, national, or cosmic “ledgers” in balance.<sup>22</sup> This suggests that *nhm* in Genesis 6:6-7 has nothing to do with regrets, grief, or being sorry. Rather, God is enforcing a system of checks and balances as part of the equilibrium that he is maintaining in the world. God is known as a God who does not allow evil to stand on the books but balances it with either grace or mercy (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2) or with punishment (Jer. 18:10).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Walter A. Maier, “Does God ‘Repent’ or Change His Mind?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (April 2004): 130.

<sup>19</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, “*Sb*,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, General ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 482–483.

<sup>20</sup> Mike Butterworth, “*nchm*,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 81–82. Cf. Wilson, “571 ”, *nchm*.

<sup>21</sup> *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 10.

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<sup>23</sup> When God has set a course for punishment, it can at times be counterbalanced by an act of grace that revokes that punishment and brings the “ledger” back into balance (Jer 26:13; Jonah 3:9-10). Cf. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 308-311.

<sup>24</sup> When God is the subject “repent” is a poor English translation, for repent carries the idea of remorse for wrongdoing. The sense of “relent” or “change the mind fails to capture the deep emotions that compel God to take a different course” Cf. Hartley, *New International Biblical Commentary: Genesis*, 99.

<sup>25</sup> Despite the struggle of having an English word to use in translation, this proposal lends a credible cohesion to the meaning of the root and resolves the theological difficulties by eliminating any need to explain how God could be sorry or repent. Inasmuch as it is widely accepted that the term “repented” was used anthropopathically, putting God in human feelings, and not really capturing the root meaning; but the contextual analysis suggests God taking an action because of what man has done. Hence, God was merely auditing or balancing up, both with grace and mercy or punishment.

## Summary of the Findings

The emergence of open theism has led to a deeper study of some certain texts that have to do with God's repentance or God's limitation. This study has revealed that God's repentance is seen from His attributes of making Himself provision for the saving of humankind (Gen 6:14-16). This implies that God Himself takes up humanity's pain and anguish (Gen 6:6; cf. 3:16, 17). His decision to destroy the earth is not arbitrary as God only "destroys" (*šāhat*, 6:13) what humanity had already ruined or corrupted (*šāhat*, vv. 11-12); He simply mercifully brings to completion the ruin already wrought by humankind.

When God is the subject, repent is a poor English translation, for repent carries the idea of remorse for wrongdoing. The sense of relent or change the mind fails to capture the deep emotions that compel God to take a different course. Thus, no English equivalent proves satisfactory. However, when God is said to repent or relent, it indicates (1) that He is aware of a human situation that has been altered and (2) a desire to act in a way that is perfectly consistent with His character (merciful/just).

It is observable that New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis use "be sorry", "console" for niph'al of *nhm*. The ideal seems to include "getting over the grief" and affirming "comfort as right meaning for niph'al.<sup>26</sup> In Genesis 5:29, Noah - meaning provide us relief or comfort - connects with Hebrew *niham*, to comfort, (Gen 6:6-7) an evidence that comfort was the intention of the author and not regret or repent as some versions interpreted it.

It is of importance to note that LXX renders *nhm*, niph'al, in Genesis 6:6-7 with the verbal root *enthumeomai*, to reflect (on), consider, think. In a broader sense, translations such as to summon, call upon, invite, urge, request, comfort, try to console, or conciliate are used to translate the *niph'al*, *piel*, *pual*, and *hithpael* of *nacham*. All these derivatives do not carry any sense of regret or repent. Therefore, regret or repent should not be an alternate translation for *nhm* in Genesis 6:6-7. God's reflection makes Him to comfort in Himself, as Noah (comfort) found grace in His eyes. This comfort or reflection led to summon, request, or need for auditing!

In the light of the above findings, Genesis 6:6-7 can be rendered as follows: "The LORD *audited* the accounts since He had made man in the earth and God's heart tormented Him (i.e. He was distressed) over it. So the LORD said, 'I will wipe man, whom I have created from the face of the earth ... because I have audited the accounts since I have made them.'"

This rendering offered by this study suggests that the action of God is motivated by His sense of justice as He *weighs* the situation (cf. "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting," Dan 5:27). This proposal would lend a credible cohesion to the true meaning of the root *nhm* and resolves the theological and translation difficulties by eliminating any need to explain how God could be sorry or repent. This acknowledges the common use of the term repented anthropopathically, putting God in human feelings. God had to take action because of what man had done. God was merely auditing or balancing up the accounts with grace, mercy, and punishment.

## CONCLUSION

The study is part of the tension that always occurs when we use human terms to describe God. God is not a man, but the only words we have to describe Him and His feelings are human terms. It must be asserted that God is not fickle. He is steadfast and longsuffering in His redemptive purpose for humanity, but mankind's response in repentance of sin often determines God's actions in a particular situation (cf. Ps 106:45; Jonah). The world in Noah's day was full of evil such that God had no choice but to destroy the earth with flood after giving more time for them to repent through Noah's preaching. The deep pain of this unusual punitive act that would follow people's non-repentance led God heaving with sigh. Noah found favor in God's eyes. God chose grace over judgment!

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<sup>26</sup> Butterworth, "82-81 ", נחם. Cf. Wilson, "571 ", נחם.

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