

Does God Repent?

André Piet



REPENTANCE?

How it is possible that we read in the Bible, a number of times, that God repents (see Genesis 6:7; Jeremiah 42:10)? Is it not so that anyone who repents says, in effect, “If I had known it in advance, I would not have done it?” Yet how can this ever apply to God, Who indeed knows all things beforehand? Isn’t the whole idea of “repentance” by God an outright denial of His omniscience (I John 3:20; Romans 11:36; Ephesians 1:11)?

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Or does God merely have remorse, “by way of speaking”? The same as He also “by way of speaking” walks (Genesis 3:8), smells (Exodus 29:41), sleeps and awakens (Psalm 44:23), descends and ascends (Genesis 11:5), has arms, eyes, ears, nose, intestines, and even has a “behind” (Exodus 33:23). Each and every one of these examples is speaking of God in terms that are characteristic of human beings. Anthropomorphism (the “expensive” word for this phenomenon) is very often used in the Bible, rhetorically. Figuratively speaking, God has a nose, eyes and ears, but in a literal sense, God is spirit (John 4:24). Figuratively, He sleeps and awakens, but in the literal sense, God never tires (Isaiah 40:28), etc.

OPPOSITE STATEMENTS

When reading that it “repented God,” we indeed, have to realize that such is a mere human way of speaking about God. That becomes clear when we consider other statements given in Scripture: declarations that are factual and true which deny that God repents.

Thus we read in Numbers 23:19,

God is not a man, that He should lie; neither the son of man, that He should repent: hath He said, and shall He not do it? or hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good?

I Samuel 15, in connection with our question, is altogether a very interesting chapter. At the end of this chapter (15:35) we read,

Samuel mourned for Saul: and the LORD repented that He had made Saul king over Israel.

However, a few verses earlier (15:29) Samuel, in stark contrast, very solemnly had said,

And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for He is not a man, that he should repent.

Two seemingly contradictory statements, almost directly behind each other. Both statements, of course, cannot simultaneously be literally true. One of them must be a “so to speak” expression. In this case, which one it is is not difficult to recognize. In relative terms, *i.e.*, for us to understand easily the intensity of His grief, He expresses Himself humanly; but in absolute terms, GOD obviously has no remorse, “for He is not a man” who makes a mistake or ever can be surprised.

REPENT OR COMFORT?

Something that is not to be ignored, either, is that the Hebrew word, hidden behind our translated word “repent” (*nâcham*), has a much broader meaning. It is related to the word for “warm” (*châm*). It is often used for “warm” feelings such as “mercy,” “compassion” and “consolation.”

When it says in Genesis 6:6, “*it repented the Lord,*” then it uses the same word (Strong’s #1562) as in Genesis 24:67, where we read, “*Isaac was comforted.*” If the translators in Genesis 6:6 would have used the same word as they did in 24:67, we would read: “*The Lord was comforted that he had made man ...*” Does this rendering not throw a glorious light on our wonderful GOD? No matter how wickedly humanity manifests itself, it “comforts” God that He has made man. The very fact that HE is the Creator and Maker of man is the best guarantee for a happy ending!

(Translation from Dutch by Peter Feddema)

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