The Vocabulary of Sin (OT)

Romans 3:23 for all have <u>sinned</u> and fall short of the glory of God,

Before proceeding with Romans chapter 3 and the doctrines of redemption and propitiation, it is really necessary to understand the concept of "sin." A knee-jerk reaction would be to look at lists of "sins" in the Old Testament and the New Testament. But you must ask the question, <u>why</u> are these listed offenses called "sins?" What classifies them as "sins?"

First, we must understand the Biblical context. Sin is against God. Listen to David:

Psalm 51:1 Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my <u>transgressions(פֶּשַׁע)</u>.

Psalm 51:2 Wash me thoroughly from my <u>iniquity (עָוֹן)</u> And cleanse me from my <u>sin.(חַטָּאה)</u>

Psalm 51:3 For I know my transgressions (פֶּשַׁע), And <u>my sin (חַטָּאה)</u> is ever before me.

Psalm 51:4 <u>Against You, You only, I have sinned (חָטָא)</u> And done what is <u>evil (רע)</u> in Your sight, So that You are justified when You speak And blameless when You judge.

The context of this confession is given in the superscription of the Psalm:

For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

Note the variety of words for sin that David used in these verses. These are words we want to look at. There are two "body" sins that David committed (adultery/?rape? and murder) but there are a host of other associated sins that one would assume also occurred like, lust, fear, hatred, jealousy. But David has put them all together in a cluster of sin. He has looked at this cluster from different perspectives giving each a different word for sin.

Sin is against God. We know that God is infinite, perfect and eternal. His glory is something that is so powerful that the Hebrews were afraid of seeing it or of seeing God lest they die.

God spoke to the Exodus generation that had just left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea.

Exodus 20:18 All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance.

Exodus 20:19 Then they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die."

Exodus 20:20 Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to

test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, <u>so that you may not sin</u>.”

There are many Old Testament and New Testament words for sins. Some are translated “sin” while other have different nuances like “rebel” or “wicked” or “evil.” Unexpectedly, there is a Systematic Theology that covers eight Old Testament words for sin. Ryrie’s *Basic Theology* includes eight Hebrew words for sin and twelve Greek words for sin[1]. Ryrie was a professor of Systematic Theology at Dallas Theological Seminary. He is also author of the notes in the Ryrie Study Bible.

There are eight words worthy of mention in this study of the Old Testament vocabulary for sin. The first word is perhaps the most used and most general word for sin. It has several nuances. It is found used in a non-theological setting as well as within the sacrificial system used to “cover” sin.

חָטָא (Chata)

For each of the words, I have included the Hebrew as well as a transliteration.

The BibleHub.com quotes from the Berean Strongs Lexicon. It is quoted here because it avoids technical terms and is easy to read. It communicates.

“Usage: The Hebrew verb "chata" primarily means "to sin" or "to miss the mark." It conveys the idea of failing to meet a standard or deviating from a path of righteousness. In the Old Testament, it is often used to describe moral and ethical failures, transgressions against God's commandments, and actions that result in guilt. The term can also imply

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1 Charles Caldwell Ryrie (1988). *Basic Theology*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

a sense of missing the intended target or goal, both in a literal and metaphorical sense.[2]"

"**Cultural and Historical Background**: In ancient Israelite culture, sin was understood as a breach of the covenant relationship with God. The concept of sin was not merely about individual moral failings but was also seen in the context of community and covenantal faithfulness. The sacrificial system, as outlined in the Torah, provided a means for atonement and restoration of the relationship between God and His people. The understanding of sin and atonement was central to the religious life of Israel, influencing their worship, laws, and societal norms.[3]"

According to Gesenius in his dictionary of Old Testament Hebrew, there are several meanings for the word.

Keep in mind that in the Hebrew verb, there are various stems that modify the basic meaning. The intensive form of the verb means to bear the loss or to bear the sin.

We start with a non-theological use that clearly indicates the "miss the mark" meaning.

Judges 20:16 Out of all these people 700 choice men were left-handed; each one could sling a stone at a hair and <u>not miss</u>.

Here is an often referenced verse that illustrates a non-theological use of this term. It is translated as "miss," as in miss the mark. It is in the causative stem.

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2   https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2398.htm
3   https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2398.htm

There is another non-theological use of this term that provides additional insight into its meaning. This is Jacob speaking to Laban explaining the hardships Jacob had to endure under Laban.

> **Genesis 31:38 These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks.**

> **Genesis 31:39 That which was torn of beasts I did not bring to you; <u>I bore the loss</u> of it myself. You required it of my hand whether stolen by day or stolen by night.**

I bore the loss. You can take this at face value or you can look at the action of this verb in this context. This is the intensive form of the verb and means exactly what the English says: "I bore the loss." Look at the context. Laban, Jacob's father-in-law has treated him badly. According to law, per one commentator, the owner of the flock, Laban, should have borne the loss. But here Jacob bears the loss. Let's put this in different words. The loss causes a debt to be incurred. It should be incurred by Laban. However, here, Jacob incurs the loss. He must pay the debt.

What is redemption? Jesus paid the debt due to sin that we should bear. Instead, he bore the debt. So here in Jacob's life is a mini-illustration of the concept of redemption.

> **Proverbs 19:1 Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity Than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool.**

Proverbs 19:2 Also it is not good for a person to be without knowledge, And he who hurries his footsteps <u>errs</u>.

Here, in a context that is not specifically theological, someone who is hurrying down a path may step off the path, miss the mark. The NIV has "hasty feet miss the way!"

Job 5:24 "You will know that your tent is secure, For you will visit your abode and fear <u>no loss</u>.

NIV: "you will take stock of your property and find nothing missing."

Now, we slide over to the theological sphere, understanding a basic meaning of this Hebrew word as to miss the mark, lose something or to incur a loss or a debt.

Leviticus 5:1 'Now if a person <u>sins</u> after he hears a public adjuration to *testify* when he is a witness, whether he has seen or *otherwise* known, if he does not tell it, then he will bear his guilt.

Leviticus 5, as well as other passages in Leviticus, is filled with words related to sins. Here is Leviticus 5:1, our verb for sinning is included. A person that bears false witness by failing to testify has sinned. He has missed the mark of justice.

Leviticus 5:5 So it shall be when he becomes guilty in one of these, that he shall confess that in which <u>he has sinned</u> (verb).

Leviticus 5:6 He shall also bring his guilt offering to the Lord for his sin (noun) **which he has committed** (verb from same root)**, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat as a <u>sin offering</u>** (noun based upon the intensive stem)**. So the priest shall make atonement on his behalf <u>for his sin </u>**(noun)**.**

Remember that the intensive form of this verb means to bear the loss or in this case, bear the sin. Again we see redemption embedded in the application of this word to this context. The Levitical offerings are shadows of Christ's work on the cross.

Hebrews 10:1 For the Law, since it has *only* a shadow of the good things to come *and* not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near.

Hebrews 10:2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?

Hebrews 10:3 But in those *sacrifices* there is a reminder of sins year by year.

Hebrews 10:4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

רַע (Ra')

Here is a second word for sin. You might suggest that you already know what sin is: missing the mark of God's perfect righteousness. That is only one perspective of sin. There are many nuances that guide us in our understanding of what is sin and how much it offends God. This word is perhaps more intense than the previous word. *Chata* was a general word for sin. But this word, ra', is actually the first word in our Bibles used for sin. But first, what is the difference of this word from the previous word. What nuance is there that we need to understand. We encountered this word in the study of the book of Judges.

Judges 2:11 Then the sons of Israel did <u>evil</u> in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals,

Judges 2:12 and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the Lord to anger.

Judges 2:13 So they forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtaroth.

This passage describes what "evil" is. It is directly anti-God activity. In this case, worshiping idols which are actually demon provided. That is, they are worshiping demons instead of God. This is not just missing the mark. This is actively anti-God.

Now, let us look at where this word is first used. Just a side note: the noun of this word group is used more than the verb.

Genesis 2:16 The Lord God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely;

Genesis 2:17 but from the tree of the knowledge of good and <u>evil</u> you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."

Evil is here contrasted with "good." In the spiritual world, there is light and dark. There is good and evil. There is nothing in between.

1 John 1:5 This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.

Missing the mark is one thing. But acting in direct opposition to God is "evil." What did Adam and Eve do?

Genesis 3:4 The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die!

Genesis 3:5 For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and <u>evil</u>."

Genesis 3:6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its

fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

Adam and Eve trusted Satan. They ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They then knew evil. They had committed evil. The very first sin was trusting Satan and his lie. The very first sin was evil.

Jeremiah 7:30 For the sons of Judah have done that which is evil in My sight," declares the Lord, "they have set their detestable things in the house which is called by My name, to defile it.

פֶּשַׁע Pasha

In some of the entries in BibleHub.com, there are extendeddefinitions of the words. I have included them where it seemed appropriate.

"Usage: The Hebrew word "pesha" primarily denotes a willful transgression or rebellion against God's law. It implies a deliberate act of disobedience or defiance, often in a covenantal context. In the Old Testament, "pesha" is used to describe not only individual acts of sin but also national rebellion against God's commandments."

"Cultural and Historical Background: In ancient Israel, the concept of "pesha" was deeply tied to the covenant relationship between God and His people. Transgressions were seen as breaches of this covenant, which required atonement and repentance. The sacrificial system in the Mosaic Law provided a means for addressing "pesha," emphasizing the seriousness of sin and the need for reconciliation with God. The prophets frequently called out "pesha" as a reason for divine judgment, urging the people to return to God.[4]"

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4   https://biblehub.com/hebrew/6588.htm

Genesis 31:36 Then Jacob became angry and contended with Laban; and Jacob said to Laban, "What is my <u>transgression</u>? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me?

Jacob was accused by Laban of having stolen the household idols. Laban did not find them in Jacob's things. So, Jacob got angry and demanded Laban identify where he had been wronged. Essentially, where did I break faith with you. Was I not honorable?

Exodus 22:9 For every <u>breach of trust</u>, whether it is for ox, for donkey, for sheep, for clothing, or for any lost thing about which one says, 'This is it,' the case of both parties shall come before the judges; he whom the judges condemn shall pay double to his neighbor.

The "breach of trust" is essentially what Jacob referenced in his accusation against Laban. So this word *pasha* may deal with a breach of trust between individuals. When it is between man and God, it is a greater breach. Man breaks trust with God.

Genesis 50:15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!"

Genesis 50:16 So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father charged before he died, saying,

> **Genesis 50:17 'Thus you shall say to Joseph, "Please forgive, I beg you, <u>the transgression</u> of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong."' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.**

Again, the implication is that this was a breach of trust of brothers against Joseph.

עָוֹן Awon

"Usage: The Hebrew word "avon" primarily refers to iniquity or sin, emphasizing the moral distortion and perversion of God's law. It often conveys the idea of guilt and the consequences that arise from sinful actions. "Avon" can also imply the punishment or judgment that results from iniquity. It is used to describe both individual and collective sin, highlighting the inherent corruption and deviation from righteousness."

"Cultural and Historical Background: In ancient Israelite culture, the concept of "avon" was deeply tied to the covenant relationship between God and His people. The Israelites understood that iniquity was not just a personal failing but a breach of the covenant, affecting the entire community. The sacrificial system, as outlined in the Torah, provided a means for atonement and restoration of the relationship with God. The prophets frequently called the people to repentance, warning of the consequences of "avon" and urging a return to covenant faithfulness.[5]"

> **Genesis 4:13 Cain said to the Lord, "My <u>punishment</u> is too great to bear!**

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5   https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5771.htm

שָׁגָה Shagag

1 Samuel 26:21 Then Saul said, "I have sinned. Return, my son David, for I will not harm you again because my life was precious in your sight this day. Behold, I have played the fool and have <u>committed a serious error</u>."

This word includes sin but it is focused on the result of that sin: guilt and sometimes the punishment that the guilt incurs.

Isaiah 28:7 And these also <u>reel</u> with wine and stagger from strong drink: The priest and the prophet <u>reel</u> with strong drink, They are confused by wine, they stagger from strong drink; They <u>reel</u> while having visions, They totter when rendering judgment.

The word used in English is "reel" which means to stagger or to fall back. It can mean unintentional sin. I get the sense it is more like reckless endangerment. As with the Isaiah passage, the priests got drunk, which is a sin, and then as a result stagger and sin in other ways.

אָשֵׁם Asham

"Almost all the uses of this word are found in connection with the ritual of the tabernacle and the temple in Leviticus, Numbers, and Ezekiel. Guilt before God is its principle idea. It designates the guilt and sin offerings and therefore includes both intentional and unintentional guild (Lev. 4:13; 5:2-3)[6]"

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6   Charles Caldwell Ryrie (1988). *Basic Theology*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books. Page 210

Leviticus 4:13 'Now if the whole congregation of Israel commits error and the matter escapes the notice of the assembly, and they commit any of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done, and they become <u>guilty</u>;

רָשָׁע Rasha

Rarely used before the Exile, it occurs frequently in the Psalms, Ezekiel, and the Wisdom literature. It means wicked, the opposite of righteous (Ex. 3:13; Ps 9:16; Prov. 15:9; Ezek. 18:23)[7]"

Ezekiel 18:23 Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked," declares the Lord God, "rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?

תָּעָה Taah

"This word means to wander away, to go astray, and the sin is deliberate, not accidental, even though the person may not realize the scope of his sin.[8]"

Isaiah 53:6 All of us like sheep have <u>gone astray</u>, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him.

Summary

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7 Charles Caldwell Ryrie (1988). *Basic Theology*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books. Page 210
8 Charles Caldwell Ryrie (1988). *Basic Theology*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books. Page 210

The words for sin refer to different aspects of sin. As we have seen, often more than one word for sin will be used in a single context.

Chata – general word for sin

Ra' – evil, engaging in anti-God worship of idols/demons

Pasha – breaking trust

Awon – guilt and punishment for sin

Shagag – unintentional/reckless endangerment

Asham - guilt

Rasha - wicked

Taah – go astray