

EVELINE VAN STAALDUINE-SULMAN      The Niphal of the Hebrew Verb נָחַם  
and Its Reception in Early Jewish Sources

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In one Biblical chapter, 1 Sam. 15, two contradictory things are said concerning God: He repents that He made Saul king over Israel (vv. 11 and 35) and He is no human being that He repents (v. 29).<sup>1</sup> This contradiction is in itself worth investigating, but the thought that the Almighty God could feel remorse or have a change of mind is intriguing too. Can we state that God – with features such as omniscience, omnipotence, and immutability – can repent? Because this is a dogmatic question, we will not be able to answer it. But this article will provide elements for the discussion of such questions in systematic theology.<sup>2</sup>

We will first investigate the interpretation of the Hebrew verb נָחַם – and especially the meaning and use of its Niphal – on the most basic level. The verb is linked to various complements, introduced by the prepositions עַל, אֶל, לְ, and מִן, and to subordinate clauses, starting with כִּי. Do these various complements change the meaning of the verb? Moreover, the Niphal has the meaning of both “comfort” and “repent.” Is the difference between these two meanings visible in the use of the complements, or must it be deduced from the context?

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<sup>1</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 268 states that the contradiction is so blatant that “we must question its originality.” Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel: Ein narratologisch-philologischer Kommentar* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2007), 213 supposes that the author postulates the contradiction in God Himself. God may repent, but not as humans do. God’s behaviour is here the opposite of Saul’s. Hans Wildberger, *Jesaja 1–12, Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972), 64 supposes that verses speaking about God’s repentance are strongly anthropomorphic.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 372 states that it “is odd, and important, that we can trace Yahweh’s unreliability precisely in the narrative... wherein Yahweh’s reliability is most intense and explicit.”

Then we will turn to the ancient sources, which have problems in finding the level on which to translate the verb: does it refer to emotions of the subject, to someone's will, to his verbal expressions or to his deeds? The Septuagint, the Targum, the Midrashim, and the Babylonian Talmud will be used to explore the range of possible translations and explanations of the verb as well as to focus on the theological problems around God's remorse in some texts. Ancient translations are not only based on lexical or syntactical information, but also on theological presuppositions.<sup>3</sup> And finally, how can it be that the same verb is used parallel to negative words (e.g. "to lie") and to positive words (e.g. "faithful, slow to anger")? There it is that we will again meet the systematic questions, both in the Hebrew Bible and in the ancient Jewish sources (the Midrashim and the Babylonian Talmud). How reliable is God when He repents? It is namely He that is the subject of the Niphal of נִחַם most of the time, 35 out of 48 verses in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup>

### I. Complements, Meaning, and Translations

Let us first turn to the Niphal of נִחַם and investigate the combinations of the verb with the various complements. We will concentrate on two questions: (1) whether the various combinations have different meanings and (2) whether a formal difference is visible between the meanings of comfort and regret.

#### 1.1. No complement

In fifteen verses the Niphal of נִחַם does not have a complement. In these cases there is no formal difference between the various translations: it totally depends on the context. The meaning "to be comforted" – in cases of severe need or mourning – occurs four times (Gen. 24:67; 38:12; Ezek. 31:16; Ps. 77:3). The meaning of "to repent" occurs five times. In four verses the repentance concerns something evil (Jer. 31:19; Joel 2:14; Jon. 3:9; Ps. 106:45). In one verse it concerns something good: the people of Israel might change their minds concerning the exodus from Egypt, when confronted with battles against the Philistines (Exod. 13:17). In the other six instances the verb more or less means "to change one's mind" in the sense that the reliability and the certainty of a statement is underlined. Psalm 110:4 says, "The Lord swore [it] and He will not change his mind." This is typical for these six verses (1 Sam. 15:29; Jer. 4:28; 20:16; Ezek. 24:14; Zech. 8:14; Ps. 110:4): God is the one that "will not change his mind" and his statements in these six verses are absolutely certain. The Niphal of נִחַם functions as an antonym of "to lie" or "to break one's word."

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<sup>3</sup> Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman, "Chapter 3," in *The Targum of Samuel* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Search via *Stuttgarter Elektronische Studienbibel*, confirmed by [www.shebanq.ancient-data.org](http://www.shebanq.ancient-data.org).

## 1.2 Complement starting with על (or אל)

In most cases the Niphal of נהם is constructed with a complement starting with על. This complement indicates the person or the object towards which the feelings of the subject are changing, either through comfort or through repentance. There is no formal difference between the meanings of the verb, except that “to repent” is only used with על + something and “to change one’s mind” only with על + someone, while “to be comforted” is used with both persons and objects.

In fifteen verses someone – mostly God – repents of (על) evil, either evil that has been actually done or evil that has only been intended.<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah also mentions one time that God might repent of something good. After a promise that God would change his mind if a nation abandons its wickedness (Jer. 18:8), the threat follows that God will change his mind about the good which He was intending to confer on a nation if it refuses to listen to his voice (Jer. 18:10).<sup>6</sup> In several of these instances in Jeremiah and 2 Samuel the preposition על is contested: some manuscripts read אל (2 Sam. 24:16; Jer. 26:3, 13). In two cases all the manuscripts read אל (Jer. 26:19; 42:10). Nothing indicates that there might be a difference in meaning between a complement starting with על and one with אל.

Ezekiel uses the construction with על in the sense of “being comforted over” something. Where Jeremiah often formulates that the Lord נהם “over the evil” that He brought or intended to bring upon Israel, Ezekiel chooses the perspective of Israel: “You will be comforted over the evil which I have brought on Jerusalem – everything that I have brought on her” (Ezek. 14:22). A few chapters later the pharaoh of Egypt will be comforted “over all this throng slaughtered by the sword” (Ezek. 32:31).<sup>7</sup>

One poetic verse (Ps. 90:13) also gives the combination of נהם Niphal + על, but in the sense of “to soothe one’s feelings concerning someone.” The Psalm speaks of God’s wrath and the shortness of man’s life. He is asked to “come back” and “have pity” on his servants.<sup>8</sup> One wonders whether the psalmist should have used the Hitpa-el, because the Hitpa-el + על is used in this sense in Deut. 32:36 (= Ps. 135:14). Another option is that the psalmist is using an elliptic construction: God is asked to “repent over [the evil You have brought on] your servants.”

<sup>5</sup> Exod. 32:12, 14; 2 Sam. 24:16; Isa. 57:6; Jer. 8:6; 18:8; 26:3; Joel 2:13; Amos 7:3, 6; Jon. 3:10; 4:2; Job 42:6; 1 Chron. 21:15.

<sup>6</sup> Changing one’s mind about something good also occurs without complement, see above (Exod. 13:17), and in combination with a subordinate כי-clause, see below (Gen. 6:6–7; 1 Sam. 15:11, 35).

<sup>7</sup> For two other verses carrying the meaning of “be comforted over someone,” see below (2 Sam. 13:39; Jer. 31:15).

<sup>8</sup> See also Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976), 2:65. See also Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen 60–150*, *Biblicher Kommentar Altes Testament* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1960), 627.

### 1.3 Clause with כִּי as complement

In four cases the Niphal of נָחַם is followed by a כִּי-clause, indicating what is regretted (Gen. 6:6, 7; 1 Sam. 15:11, 35). In these cases the verb means “to regret that.” In Genesis God regrets that He had made mankind on the earth, once told by the narrator, once by God Himself. And in 1 Samuel He regrets that He made Saul king over Israel, also once told by the narrator and once by God Himself.

In two other cases the Niphal is followed by a כִּי-clause, but a complement starting with עַל is standing between the verb and the subordinate clause. The verb then means “to be comforted over someone.” The complement with עַל indicates the person who died, the subordinate clause described the fate of that person: David “had been comforted over Amnon that he was dead” (2 Sam. 13:39) and Rachel “refuses to be comforted over her children that they are no more” (Jer. 31:15). The translation “because” for כִּי is in these cases not appropriate. The prepositional phrase and the כִּי-clause together function as the explanation of the comfort: David was comforted concerning the fact that Amnon was dead<sup>9</sup> and Rachel refuses to be comforted concerning the fact that her children are no more.

Consequently, the Niphal of נָחַם followed by a כִּי-clause alone refers to the meaning of repentance, while the same combination plus a complement with עַל refers to being comforted.

### 1.4 Complement starting with לְ (or אֵל)

In Judges 21 the Niphal of נָחַם is followed by a complement starting with אֵל (Judg. 21:6) and לְ (Judg. 21:15): the people of Israel had changed their mind/feelings concerning their brother Benjamin. Moreover, the latter verse continues with a כִּי-clause, which might function as a second complement to the verb. These complements might be a variation on the עַל-complements.<sup>10</sup> In that case, the combination might refer either to being comforted, as the Septuagint and the Targum translate, or to soothing one’s feelings, by analogy with Psalm 90:13 and the Hitpael constructions. In either way the כִּי-clause of verse 15 might be the second complement: Israel was comforted, or felt sorry, (1) about Benjamin (2) that the Lord had made a breach in the tribes of Israel. The mentioning of נָחַם is the start of a string of deeds, providing the Benjaminites with wives and a future.

### 1.5 Complement starting with בְּ

Two verses construct the Niphal of נָחַם with the preposition בְּ. Once the preposition is followed by an object, in which case the construction means “to repent at [their

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel: Ein narratologisch-philologischer Kommentar* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2009), 142: “darüber, dass Amnon tot war.”

<sup>10</sup> As Jenni and Westermann, *Theologisches Handwörterbuch*, 2:65, suggests.

groans]” or “to repent because of [their groans]” (Judg. 2:18). The object following מן is therefore the motivation or the inducement for repentance.

The other time the preposition is followed by a person, “my haters,” and the construction is paralleled by “I will avenge myself on my foes” (Isa. 1:24). The latter case resembles one of the Hitpael meanings, except that these were constructed with לִ (Ezek. 5:13; Gen. 27:42). Taking into consideration the general meaning of מן and the fact that it refers to an inducement to repentance, Isaiah 1:24 seems to be an elliptic construction: “I will soothe my feelings from [taking revenge on] my haters.”<sup>11</sup>

### 1.6 Conclusions concerning complements

There are four options to combine the Niphal of נהם with a complement: no complement, the preposition על – although alternated by אל or לִ – the preposition מן, and the subordinate כִּי-clause. In some cases two complements are combined, viz. the preposition על or a variant and the subordinate כִּי-clause. Within these categories the meaning of the Niphal can be “repent,” “be comforted” or “change one’s mind/soothe one’s feelings.” The complements starting with על and the subordinate כִּי-clause both indicate the object about which the subject has changed his mind or feelings, and consequently his expressions and actions. The complement starting with the preposition מן more or less indicates what made the feelings of the subject, and consequently his expressions and actions change.

There are only a few formal differences between the various meanings. In most cases the context of the verb decides which translation must be used. In the case of על-complements, there is the difference between על + person, referring to being comforted or changing one’s mind, and על + object, which can either refer to comfort or to repentance. With regard to כִּי-clauses, they refer to repentance, except when there is an על-complement as well. Then the combination refers to being comforted. It must be admitted that there are so few instances in all categories that the above mentioned differences in meaning might be coincidental.

## 2. Feelings, will, expressions or deeds?

The question on which level the Niphal of נהם must be placed – the level of emotions, the will, verbal expressions or of deeds – can be examined in several ways, although none of them is decisive. Parallel verbs and expressions, especially in poetical lines, may indicate on which level the author is speaking. However, an emotional verb may be combined with an active one to cover the total field of human behaviour.<sup>12</sup> A second

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Wildberger, *Jesaja*, 64: “sich letzen” and “sich (seelische) Erleichterung verschaffen.”

<sup>12</sup> Wilfred G. E. Watson, “Chapter 6,” in *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (1984; repr., Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001), asks attention for the use of complementary parallelism, such as “father // mother” or “son // daughter.” The same might be true on the various levels of human behaviour: “emotions // deeds.”

way of investigating the level is, of course, studying the other stems of the same verb. Finally, ancient versions and Jewish Midrashim indicate on which level ancient scholars interpreted the verb. However, theological presuppositions play a role in the process of translating. These three ways are not sufficient to determine the level, but together they give a good indication of the problems that translators are confronted with.

### *2.1 Parallel expressions*

In several poetical lines the Niphal of נהם stands in parallelism with other verbs. In some prose verses the Niphal is used in a consecutive enumeration of actions. Investigation of these parallel and consecutive verbs reveals how the Niphal is used and on which level its meaning lies. The following overview shows that all levels are involved.

On the emotional level the verb עצב Hitpael, “to be grieved,” is used (Gen. 6:6), while expressions of emotions are also mentioned, such as “I beat my breast” (Jer. 31:19) and “saying: what have I done?” (Jer. 8:6). The twice mentioned list of God’s characteristics “gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, rich in faithful love” stands in parallel with God’s relenting (Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2), although these are not only emotions, but form the basis for divine action. Similar verbs are used by Ezekiel, viz. פרע, “to show pity,” and חוים, “to have compassion” (Ezek. 24:14).

On the level of thought, or planning, two parallel expressions can be mentioned. A psalmist parallels the verb with “bearing his covenant in mind” (Ps. 106:45) and Zechariah uses the parallel verb זמם, “to resolve” (Zech. 8:14).

The level of verbal expression is covered by three parallelisms. Saying “it is enough” can be the result of remorse (1 Chron. 21:15), or saying “it will not be” (Amos 7:3, 6). The verb שבטע Niphal, “to swear,” can be used as parallel of the negation of נהם Niphal (Ps. 110:4). The strongest parallel on this level is found in the words of Samuel, where he equates “remorse” with שקר Piel, “lying” (1 Sam. 15:29). These actions are typically human, according to Samuel.

The level of deeds is mentioned most often. Ezekiel uses עשה, “to act,” as the opposite of נהם (Ezek. 24:14), while Jonah states that not acting is the result of remorse (Jon. 3:10). The Niphal of נהם can be used as parallel of נקם Niphal, “to revenge oneself” (Isa. 1:24). The most commonly occurring parallel is the verb שוב, “to turn back” (Exod. 13:17; Jer. 4:28; Joel 2:14; Jon. 3:9; Ps. 90:13). The Targum’s choice to translate נהם Niphal by שוב is therefore not arbitrary.

The use of נהם Niphal in prose and poetry indicates that the emotional level is important, but is certainly not the only one. If there is emotion in נהם Niphal, it is often accompanied or expressed by words or followed by actions.

### *2.2 The Piel and the Hitpael*

A similar conclusion can be drawn from the use of the Piel and the Hitpael of the verb נהם. Emotions are at the basis of all meanings, but reasoning and action play an impor-

tant role as well. The Piel is used when the subject is comforting others, by words (cf. 2 Sam. 10:2–3) or by deeds (2 Sam. 12:24). *HAL* stresses that the Piel may also indicate that the period of mourning is over and that it is time to go on with life.<sup>13</sup> The same is true in some instances of the Niphal, for example in Judah’s case (Gen. 38:12).<sup>14</sup> Judah goes on with his life after “being comforted.” The Piel, therefore, not only refers to the soothing of emotions, but also to the beginning of “normal life.” Elliger rightly concludes that נָחַם “does not mean to sympathise but to encourage.”<sup>15</sup>

The Hitpael refers to the soothing of one’s feelings or to the changing of one’s mind. In several cases it is not clear how these feelings or thoughts are changed (e.g. Deut. 32:36 = Ps. 135:14; Num. 23:19). In two of these verses the person about whom the feelings or thoughts are changed, is indicated by the preposition לְ (Deut. 32:36 = Ps. 135:14). In other cases action, i.e. revenge, is the way to end one’s feelings of anger or hatred (e.g. Ezek. 5:13; Gen. 27:42). Then the person on whom revenge is taken, is indicated by the preposition לְ.

### 2.3 Ancient versions and commentaries

The third task is to explore ancient translations and explanations for their interpretation of the meaning of the Niphal of נָחַם. The Septuagint is at one extreme, translating the verb with various expressions, the Targum at the other, standardizing its translation as thoroughly as possible.

The translations of the Septuagint can be divided into three categories. The largest category contains verbs indicating feelings, such as παρακαλέω, “to comfort, excite” (e.g. Gen. 24:67), μεταμέλομαι, “to feel repentance, regret” (e.g. Exod. 13:17), ἐνθυμέομαι, “to take to heart, be hurt” (e.g. Gen. 6:6), and ὀργίζω, “to provoke, irritate” (e.g. Isa. 57:6). The second category mainly refers to deeds with verbs such as ἀποστρέφω, “to turn away, divert” (e.g. Jon. 3:9), ἴλαος, “[to be] gracious, gentle” (e.g. Exod. 32:12), and παύω, “to bring to an end, make to rest” (e.g. Jer. 33[26]:3). The last category is the smallest, although the first verb occurs regularly, and consists of verbs referring to thought or will, such as μετανοέω, “to change one’s mind or purpose” (e.g. Amos 7:3), and ἠγέομαι, “to believe, hold” (e.g. Job 42:6).

The Targum translates נָחַם Niphal by נָחַם Itpeel “to be comforted,” when that meaning of the Hebrew verb is clearly meant (e.g. Gen. 24:67). This seems to be on the emotional level. Another rendering on this level is רָחַם Aphel, “to pity someone” (Ezek. 24:14). In many cases the Targum gives a standard rendering, viz. a derivative of the verb שׁוּב, “to turn back, return.” This verb mostly concerns the level of deeds, e.g.

<sup>13</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), s.v. נָחַם Piel.

<sup>14</sup> The same is true for the Hitpael. In Gen. 37:35 Jacob refuses to be comforted (Hitpael) until his death. He does not want to end his mourning period and go on with normal life.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Elliger, *Jesaja 40,1 – 45,7*, *Biblicher Kommentar Altes Testament* (Neukirchen: Neukirchner Verlag, 1978), 13.

“the Lord returned from the evil” (Exod. 32:14) or “no man who is turning back from his evil” (Jer. 8:6). Some paraphrastic translations fit this category, e.g. “I will do it” (Jer. 4:28) or “do justice to the haters of my people” (Isa. 1:24). In some cases it seems to point to the expression of God’s will. The rejection of King Saul is circumscribed as “I turned in my Memra that I made Saul king over Israel” (1 Sam. 15:11, see also verse 35; Gen. 6:6–7). The use of the level of deeds in connection with God – and the lack of the level of feelings in those cases – is typical for Targumic literature. It safeguards God’s objective fairness and his omnipotence.<sup>16</sup>

Midrash and Talmudic explanations of the Niphal of נָהַם link the verb to emotions, rational evaluations, and decrees. God’s remorse in Genesis 6:6 is explained as “a regrettable error on My part” on the level of evaluation, but also as a comfort for God that He created humankind as mortal and terrestrial, on the level of emotions (Genesis Rabbah 27:4, see also Sanhedrin 108a). This level is, however, rare with regard to divine action. The level of decrees is mentioned more often. With regard to נָהַם in Amos 7:6 R. Jose b. Hanina said: “Our Master pronounced four sentences on Israel, but four prophets came and revoked them.” Also Jonah 3:10 is a starting point for theologising concerning God’s decrees: several things nullify a divine decree (Genesis Rabbah 44:12; Exodus Rabbah 45:1; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 6:1; Rosh Hashanah 16b).

Conclusively it can be said that the Niphal of נָהַם is rendered on various levels in late antiquity. The distribution over the various levels in the Septuagint is the broadest, also where it concerns the divine subject. Rabbinic commentaries on Genesis 6 suggest divine emotions, but in general the level of decrees and deeds is used for explaining נָהַם. As in the Targum, rabbis appear not to speculate about God’s emotions, but want to declare God’s fairness and reliability.

#### 2.4 Preliminary conclusion

The verb נָהַם is primarily referring to the inner motions of a human being: feelings or thoughts of the subject with regard to someone or something are changed – in most cases anger, grief or feelings of mourning are brought to an end. The change may take place within the person himself, but it is accompanied or expressed by words or even deeds in most cases. To soothe one’s feelings by taking revenge is such an active meaning of נָהַם, which focuses on the inner feelings (ending anger), but is expressed on the level of action (revenge).

In many instances in Jeremiah the verb נָהַם refers to a change in action. In those cases the Septuagint renders the verb simply by παύω, “to bring to an end, make to rest,” for instance, “the Lord shall cease from the evils which he has pronounced against you” (Jer. 33[26]:13). The Targum, avoiding divine emotions, also stresses the

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<sup>16</sup> See the conclusion of Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman, “Animosity in Targumic Literature,” in *Animosity, the Bible, and Us. Some European, North American, and South African Perspectives*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald et al. (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 128–147.

level of action by consistently translating “to turn back.” That is the most commonly used synonym in the Hebrew Bible, but the absolute avoidance of the emotional side is not in accordance with the Hebrew text.

### 3. Is divine repentance positive or negative?

During the investigation of all the possible constructions, in which the Niphal of נחם can function, and all its possible meanings, one thing was striking: in most verses God was the subject of the verb (35 out of 48 finds). In some books God is even the only person showing regret or a change of mind (Samuel, Isaiah, Joel, Amos, Jonah, Zechariah, Chronicles). Most authors clearly had no trouble combining God with the Niphal of נחם. Others, however, made it the object of some theological reflection or even postulate that God cannot feel regret. It is amazing that both sides – God having regret and God having no possibility of feeling regret – are part of the theological discussion on God’s reliability.

#### 3.1 *No regret as feature of reliability*

In most verses, in which God is said to have “no regret” in general (נחם without complement), the expression functions to underline the certainty of a previous saying. Jeremiah prophesies that “the whole country will be laid waste” and underlines that by quoting God: “I have spoken, I have decided, I shall not change my mind (נחם) or go back on it” (Jer. 4:28).<sup>17</sup> The combination of all these verbs and negations stresses God’s determination and, ultimately, reliability: He will certainly do what He has spoken.

In two verses the negation that God would have regret is brought to a higher level. It is not what He said in the direct context that is stressed by stating that God will not regret that, but it is denied in general that God would have regret. Feelings of regret are defined as human. Numbers 23:19 uses the negation of God’s possibility to feel regret as the foundation for his determination and reliability. He does what He says. This, of course, stresses the reliability of the direct context, i.e. the prophecies of Bileam, but the wording seems to refer to a more general divine characteristic.<sup>18</sup>

לֹא אֵישׁ אֵל יִבְזֹב וְיִרְאֶה וְיִתְנַחֵם  
 הֵהוּא אָמַר וְלֹא יַעֲשֶׂה וְדַבֵּר וְלֹא יִקְיַמְנָה:<sup>19</sup>  
*God is no man that He should lie,  
 no human being that He would change his mind.*

<sup>17</sup> A similar use of the verb in Ezek. 24:14; Zech. 8:14; Ps. 110:4.

<sup>18</sup> Although Willem H. Gispen, *Het boek Numeri*, Commentaar op het Oude Testament (Kampen: Kok, 1964), 110 denies the abstract character of the verse and supposes that it only serves as underlining the reliability of God’s statements in the prophecies of Bileam.

<sup>19</sup> *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: SESB Version* (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2003), c1969/77, S. Num. 23:19.

*Did He ever say and not do it,  
speak and not fulfil it?*

A similar reasoning is found in 1 Samuel 15:29, where “to regret” is also paralleled by “to lie” and where regret is likewise seen as something human.

וְגַם גִּצַּח יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִשְׁקַר וְלֹא יִנָּחַם  
כִּי לֹא אָדָם הוּא לְהִנָּחֵם:<sup>20</sup>

*The Glory of Israel does not lie or repent,  
for he is no human that he would repent.*

The use of the Niphal of נָחַם here is in sharp contrast to its use in verses 11 and 29, where it is said that God repented (נָחַם Niphal) that He had made Saul king over Israel.

The Targum and the Septuagint have their own strategy to deal with this contrast. The Targum claims that verse 29 – God not having regret – refers to Saul’s dynasty: He already decreed upon Saul that his sons would not succeed him, and that decree will not be repented.<sup>21</sup> The Septuagint argues from the subsequent history and uses three different verbs to render נָחַם. God says to Samuel (15:11): παρακέκλημαι ὅτι ἐβασίλευσα τὸν Σαοὺλ εἰς βασιλεία, “I am comforted that I have made Saul to be king.” It is as if He had mourned over Saul from 1 Samuel 13 onwards, and now reached the end of his mourning and therefore the beginning of new actions.<sup>22</sup> At the end of the story the narrator concludes that God μετεμελήθη ὅτι ἐβασίλευσε τὸν Σαοὺλ ἐπὶ Ἰσραήλ, “felt grief that He had made Saul king over Israel” (15:35).<sup>23</sup> Both verbs primarily refer to God’s emotions and do not suggest in any way that God is unreliable or breaking his promise to Saul. Samuel’s prophecy, however, refers to God’s action, but arguing from the subsequent history in which Saul remains king until his death the Septuagint adds a few words:

28 ...διέρρηξε Κύριος τὴν βασιλείαν σου ἀπὸ Ἰσραήλ ἐκ χειρός σου σήμερον καὶ δώσει αὐτὴν τῷ πλησίον σου τῷ ἀγαθῷ ὑπὲρ σέ 29 καὶ διαιρεθήσεται Ἰσραήλ εἰς δύο, καὶ οὐκ ἀποστρέψει οὐδὲ μετανοήσει, ὅτι οὐχ ὡς ἄνθρωπός ἐστι τοῦ μετανοῆσαι αὐτός.

*...The Lord has rent your kingdom over Israel out of your hand today, and will give it to your neighbour, who is better than you. And Israel shall be divided into two, and [God] will not turn nor change his mind, for He is not as a human to change his mind.*

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., c1969/77, S. 1 Sam. 15:29.

<sup>21</sup> See Van Staalduine-Sulman, *The Targum of Samuel*, 333–334.

<sup>22</sup> See a similar reasoning in Genesis Rabbah 27:4, where R. Joshua b. Karhah said that God mourned for his world before bringing the Flood.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted from <http://www.ellopos.net/elpenor/greek-texts/septuagint/chapter.asp?book=9&page=15>; the text does not substantively differ from Alfred Rahlfs, ed., *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1935).

Subsequent history tells us that God did not abnegate his word to Saul that He had made him king. Saul remained in his office, while David was already the chosen and anointed successor. Even after Saul's death, God's loyalty did not stop: Ishbosheth was king for two years, during which the land of Israel was indeed divided into two – a division that became permanent after Solomon's death. It appears that the presupposition that God is reliable functions as the basis for interpreting the entire chapter of 1 Samuel 15, although the Targum and the Septuagint had their own way of dealing with the internal opposition.

Several Church Fathers claim that verse 29 must be the key verse, from which to interpret the entire chapter. Cassian and Tertullian stress God's foreknowledge and describe his repentance as anthropomorphism: "God as it were repented."<sup>24</sup> Augustine stresses that "even though God said 'I repent,' it is not to be taken according to the human sense."<sup>25</sup>

### 3.2 Regret as feature of reliability

Completely opposed are those verses that speak of regret as a permanent and reliable characteristic of the God of Israel. Both Joel and Jonah sum up five characteristics of God, among which is the habit to repent:

<sup>26</sup> קִי־תִנּוּן וְרַחוּם הוּא אֲרָךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־תְּהוֹד וְנִחַם עַל־הַרְעָה: (Joel 2:13)  
<sup>27</sup> קִי אֶתֵּל אֱלֹהֵי־תִנּוּן וְרַחוּם אֲרָךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־תְּהוֹד וְנִחַם עַל־הַרְעָה: (Jon. 4:2)  
*... for [He is] [you are a God] gracious and compassionate,  
 slow to anger, rich in faithful love, and relenting about evil.*

The Hebrew prophet Joel guarantees that relenting is one of God's positive features. The first part of his characterization of God had found its firm formulation in liturgical settings.<sup>28</sup> Joel cannot guarantee that God also repents of the evil that is upon Israel in his time. He continues his prophecy by suggesting: "Who knows if He will not come back, relent and leave a blessing behind Him" (Joel 2:14).

The trend of the ancient versions to stress the reliability of God, even enhance it, is also visible in the Targum of the Joel verses. The Targumist did not translate the

<sup>24</sup> Cassian, *Conference* 17.25.14–15 and Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 2.24, quoted in John R. Franke, ed., *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament 4 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 254. Also Genesis Rabbah 27:4 stresses that God's remorse does not interfere with his foreknowledge.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *On Various Questions to Simplician*, 2.25, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, c1969/77, S. Joel 2:13.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, c1969/77, S. Jon. 4:2.

<sup>28</sup> So Hans Walter Wolff, *Dodekapropheten 3: Obadja und Jona*, Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977), 140, referring to Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 145:8; Exod. 34:6; Neh. 9:17 and Joel 2:13. See also the liturgy for Rosh Hashanah, in which this credo is used.

future blessing of God as a possibility, but as a certainty for those people that repent themselves:

Whoever knows *that he has sins on his conscience*, let him turn back from them, and he will be shown compassion; and whoever repents, his sins shall be forgiven, and he will receive blessings and consolations, and his prayer will be like that of a man who presents offerings and libations in the *Sanctuary* of the Lord your God (Tg. Joel 2:14).<sup>29</sup>

Targum Joel's certainty that human repentance will provoke God's blessing is in agreement with early Jewish sources.<sup>30</sup> The link between human and divine repentance is already made by Jeremiah. God warns against sin and its consequences, but also gives new opportunities. If a threatened nation abandons its wickedness, God will change his mind (נחם) about the evil that He intended to do (Jer. 18:8). But if a blessed nation refuses to listen, God will change his mind (נחם) about the good that He intended to do (Jer. 18:10).

This link forms the core of theological reflection on the verb נחם in the Midrashim and the Babylonian Talmud. The exemplary prayer of Moses (Exod. 32:12) and God's immediate compliance (32:14) are taken as foundation for future occasions: God will repent after prayer (Exodus Rabbah 43:9). Jeremiah's above mentioned prophecy even gave rise to the idea that God immediately repents, the moment a man is penitent (Exodus Rabba 45:1). It must be taken into account that all God's moves are for the benefit of Israel. The strong tendency to stress that God does not repent is applied to God's promises to Israel: He will keep them. But the actual repenting and neglecting of his threats are applied to God's promises of doom (Numbers Rabba 23:8).<sup>31</sup>

What makes God repent, is the next question. How will Israel know that God will turn away from a threat of doom? A very short answer comes from a comment of R. Abbahu, stating that the God of Israel said: "I rule man, who rules me? The righteous, for I make a decree and he [may] annul it" (Moed Qatan 16b). Examples are given by R. Jose b. Hanina, who explained that the four prophets Amos, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah all annulled one of Moses' prophecies of doom (Makkoth 24a). Several instances try to systematize the categories of human actions that can lead to God's repentance. Three are mentioned each time: prayer, charity, and human repentance (Genesis Rabbah 44:12; Exodus Rabbah 45:1; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 6:1; Rosh Hashanah 16b, although the last one mentioned "change of conduct" instead of repentance). In addition the following things are designated: change of name (Genesis Rabbah 44:12; Rosh Hashanah 16b), good deeds (Genesis Rabbah 44:12),

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<sup>29</sup> Translation from Kevin J. Cathcart and Robert P. Gordon, *The Targum of the Minor Prophets*, The Aramaic Bible (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 69.

<sup>30</sup> E.g. Martin McNamara, *Targum and New Testament: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 280–281; Bruce D. Chilton, *The Glory of Israel: The Theology and Provenience of the Isaiah Targum* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 37–46. See also Christian M. M. Brady, *The Rabbinic Targum of Lamentations: Vindicating God* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 103–118.

<sup>31</sup> See for an identical idea on doom and promise, Alberdina Houtman, "Doom and Promise in the Targum of Isaiah," *Journal for Jewish Studies* 49 (1998): 17–23.

fasting (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 6:1), and change of place (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 6:1; Rosh Hashanah 16b).

Repentance might be linked by some authors to arbitrary and unreliable behaviour. For others God's tendency to repent over the evil He has said to bring or has brought is part of God's reliability and steadfast love for his people. There appears to be a trend to consolidate this reliability by theological frames: Joel's "who knows" has been replaced by a certainty of blessing after repentance in the Targum and several rabbis designed a systematized theology to give guidance to every member of Israel how to make God repent from intended doom.

#### 4. Conclusions

The Niphal of נחם refers to a change of attitude, either after mourning or after rage. The person or object that is considered in a different manner is indicated by על (or its variant אל) or by a subordinate כי-clause, or by a combination of the two. The inducement to the change of attitude is indicated by מן. The verb certainly refers to inner feelings or considerations, but is also used to express verbal statements or explicit actions. Three basic translations can be used to cover the nuances of the Niphal: to be comforted, to regret or to soothe one's feelings.

Within the range of regret the verb can have both a negative and a positive connotation. Negatively, it is used as a synonym of "to lie." With regard to this range it is said that God never regrets and that regret is typically human. Positively, it is used as a synonym of "to have compassion" or "to be slow to anger." In those cases God has an almost predictable habit of feeling regret and turning back from the evil that He threatened to do. Both the negative and the positive usages stress God's reliability and faithfulness to his people.

The positive and negative connotations are never used within one chapter, except in 1 Samuel 15. The narrator tells twice that God feels regret concerning Saul's kingship. Still, he has the prophet Samuel say that God does not regret. The ancient versions tend to harmonize the two meanings by various renderings (LXX) or by referring to different situations (LXX, Targum). It would be wise in translation processes to consider that one verb can have various nuances, even within one chapter. Given the abovementioned conclusion that both connotations serve to underline God's faithfulness and reliability, it is good to render 1 Samuel 15 within this parameter.

Rabbinic theology has the tendency to stress God's reliability, to the extent that God almost automatically repents if a human being turns back from his evil ways. Several ways are mentioned to provoke God's regret. The "maybe" of the prophet Joel is turned into a "most certainly" in theology. Is it typically Christian to warn that such theology would harm God's sovereignty? Or can Christian theology learn from rabbinic sources that God really responds to people's actions and prayers? Systematic theologians are the next speakers.