THE "REPENTANCE" OF GOD IN THE BOOKS OF SAMUEL, JEREMIAH, AND JONAH

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The OT affirms that God "repents" (nicham, usually in the niphal, but once in the hithpael) 27 times, including three times in the books of 1-2 Samuel (1 Sam 15:11, 35; 2 Sam 24:16); six times in the book of Jeremiah (18:8, 10; 26:3, 13, 19; 42:10); and three times in the book of Jonah (3:9, 10; 4:2). It also affirms that God "does not repent" (nicham, usually in the niphal, but twice in the hithpael) 9 times (including the noun nocham, "repentance," in Hos 13:14), including twice in the books of 1-2 Samuel (both in 1 Sam 15:29) and three times in the book of Jeremiah (4:28; 15:6; 20:16). The other occurrences of these concepts are scattered throughout several other OT books. Thus, out of 36 references in the OT to God's repenting or not repenting, 17 appear in the books of 1-2 Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah. The affirmation that God repents appears at crucial points in the OT canon: the account of the flood (Gen 6:6-7); the appearance of Yahweh to his people at Sinai (Exod 32:11-14); the early events connected with the establishment of the Israelite monarchy (1 Sam 15:11, 35); the fall of North Israel (Hos 11:8-9); the fall of Judah (Jer 26:3, 13); several times in the prophets (see the passages in Jeremiah and Jonah above); and several times in the Psalms (90:13; 106:45; 135:14).

Jewish and Christian thinkers have struggled for centuries to understand and explain the theological concept of God's repenting or not repenting. Several factors contribute to the complexity of this issue. First, the biblical writers themselves disagree in their affirmations as to whether God repents or does not repent. Second, basic logic reasons that the idea of God's repenting contradicts (or, at least, seems to contradict) other fundamental concepts about God's nature: (a) God is omniscient, and therefore knows the future; hence, it does not make sense to think that he changes his mind; (b) God is perfect; but if he changes his mind, then he is imperfect; (c) the idea of God's repent-
ing is inseparably connected with God's grieving over what he had
done previously (see e.g., Gen 6:6) or his being moved to compas-
sion by people on whom he had announced or performed punitive
judgment (see e.g., Judg 2:18; Jonah 4:2); but God does not ex-
perience pain or suffering or grief as human beings do. Third, Greek
philosophy, and in particular Platonic thought, with its emphasis on
God's transcendence and total "otherness" from human beings, has
had a great influence on the way many Jewish and Christian thinkers
have envisioned and defined God, from the most respected early
Church Fathers to the leading philosophers and theologians of the
present day. And this philosophy has determined the way in which
many exegetes and commentators have interpreted and applied
metaphorical, anthropomorphic, and anthropopathic language in
various Biblical texts.²

A recent example of this is Brian Kelly's view of God's immutable
nature, rooted in the reasoning of Thomas Aquinas as set forth in his
Summa Theologiae, Part 3, Questions 48, 49; and Parts 1-2, Quest-
ion 114. Aquinas contends that God is in essence eternal and im-
movable. Eternity encompasses the human past, present, and future
without moving from one to the other. Any and all change in human
life demands that there be an unchanging being. If God changed, he
could not exist as the God of faith. God is; He is not in the process
of unfolding himself or emerging gradually, for then He could never
be a full reality that is present all together at the same time. How could
one believe in a God who is actually (not anthropomorphically) af-
fected by creation and what happens in it?³

The Root nhm and Biblical Metaphorical Language for God

Several centuries ago, when the English word "repent" had a broad
range of meanings, it was customary to translate the Hebrew root nhm
by "repent." However, in the last few decades, as the meaning of the
English word "repent" has become narrower and narrower, various
translators and commentators have chosen several English words in
an attempt to capture the thrust of this Hebrew root: "regret," "be
sorry," "grieve," "have compassion," "retract," "change one's mind,"
"think better of," "go back on one's word," and "relent."⁴