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A Turnabout in The Meaning of Repentance

by David Lamb

In 1 Nephi 1:1 and 2 we find a significant chiasm in which the center point emphasizes the importance of understanding the "learning of the Jews."

Nephi advises us that we must understand Hebrew customs, traditions, and language if we are to fully understand and appreciate the message conveyed by the scriptures.

It is often difficult for us as 20th century Gentiles to understand many of the theological concepts expounded in the scriptures simply because we interpret these ideas and concepts through our own language and culture, rather than interpreting them through the Hebrew language and culture in which they were originally given.

A classic example of this is the theological concept of repentance. To the Christian community of today, repentance is most often defined as a feeling of remorse or regret for past sins.

The majority of us have been taught that when we repent, we are to feel sorry for an act or shortcoming. We are then merely to ask God's forgiveness in the matter, promising never to commit the sin again. This misconception of true repentance leads to frustration when, after a short time, we find

ourselves caught up once again in the same act or shortcoming.

This scenario repeats itself in our lives because we do not have the in-depth understanding of true repentance as was originally possessed by the ancient Hebrews.

To more fully understand the

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concept of repentance, we must explore the Hebraic meaning of the word "repent" itself.

In Hebrew the verb "to repent" is *shub* and means to "turn around" or "return" (Harris, Archar, Waltke). In Hebrew, *shub* carries the idea of turning one's back on sin and turning toward God. In essence it means to make a spiritual "about face" (Wilson).

As we become caught up in sin, we progress down the road of life on

a path which takes us farther and farther away from God. If we become truly repentant, we will not merely feel remorse for past sins, but will encounter a change in life style as we *turn* from sin and *return* to God.

The concept that repenting is returning to God is the predominant idea expressed in the parable of the prodigal son. In the parable, the son willfully chooses to separate himself from his father and his father's way of life. When the son finally comes to his senses and decides to repent, he does not merely feel remorse; he *returns* to his father.

As is the case with the Prodigal, true repentance for us requires a change in life style. It requires us to return to our Heavenly Father and his ways.

The beautiful part of the parable is the fact that as the son returns, his father goes out to meet him and helps/welcomes him back.

Encouragement should be taken from the fact that, just like the Prodigal's father, our Heavenly Father will come to assist/welcome us back when he finds that we are truly returning.

In many cases, this concept of repentance is emphasized in the

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The Purpose Principle in Action:

Understanding the Nephite Monetary System

by Barbara Smith Wilkinson

A senum of silver was equal to a senine of gold;
 And either for a measure of barley,
 And also for a measure of every kind of grain.
 Alma 8:58

When I first heard about the “purpose principle,” the idea was new and exciting to me. This is the principle that everything in the Book of Mormon is there for a purpose, and suggests that if you wonder about something in the book you should ask the Lord to know why it’s there.

As I read the debate in Alma 8 between Zeezrom and Amulek, I again wondered why Mormon inserted the long eleven-verse explanation of the Nephite monetary system (vv. 52-63), giving the names and values of their gold and silver pieces. Previously I have just said, “What a waste of space!” but this time, I applied the “purpose principle” asking the Lord why the information was included.

I felt led to make a chart of the money pieces as explained by Mormon. So it would be meaningful to me, I set it up so the senum/senine equaled our dollar, thus the following chart:

EQUIVALENT VALUES	AMERICAN EQUIVALENT	SILVER	GOLD
1/8	\$.125	leah	—
1/4	.25	sheblum	—
1/2	.50	shiblon	—
1	1.00	senum	senine = measure of grain
1 1/2	1.50	—	antion
2	2.00	amnor	seon
4	4.00	ezron	shum
7	7.00	onti	limnah
[Bribe]	42.00	6 onties]	

Six onties of silver is the amount that Zeezrom offered Amulek to “deny the existence of a supreme being” (Alma 8:70). On my chart the equivalent would be \$42.00.

But \$42.00 isn’t much money, so I pondered over the eleven verses some more. The following stood out:

A senum of silver was equal to a senine of gold;
 And either for a measure of barley,
 And also for a measure of every kind of grain.
 Alma 8:58 (emphasis added)

I became excited—I realized if I could determine how much was in a measure of wheat and the price of wheat, I could calculate approximately how much Zeerom offered Amulek to deny God in today’s money. I used wheat rather than barley because wheat prices are much more easily obtained at various sources around this country. The following is the method I used:

Facts Used to Determine the Current Monetary Equivalents of Nephite Money

1. Biblical authorities differ on the value of a measure of grain in Old Testament times (both before and after the Exile). The measure ranges from 6.25 bushels (*The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*) to 13 bushels (103 American dry gallons, 8 gallons/bushel; *The New Bible Dictionary*).
2. Bushel of wheat = 60 lbs. (*Webster’s Dictionary*)
3. Cost of wheat per bushel:
 \$6.00 per bushel from a coop in Grand Forks, ND
 \$19.20 per bushel @ \$16.00/50 lb. from a health food store in Storm Lake, IA
 \$31.08 per bushel @ \$2.59/5 lb. flour from a grocery store in DuBois, PA

I used the three prices listed above because they give an idea of the wide variety of prices charged for wheat in various amounts in different locations in the United States.

Mormon tells us, “But they altered their reckoning and their measure, according to the minds and the circumstances of the people, in every generation. . .” (Alma 8:55). Variations in prices of grains seem to have

The question is, would you deny Christ for \$8,000 to \$17,000? Because of the prophecies of the tribulation times ahead, there may come a time when we are destitute and could be tempted by even the smallest offer if we have not developed a strong testimony and relationship with the Lord.

been a problem throughout history.

In 2 Kings 6 and 7 we are told that the nation of Israel was at war, and the capital city of Samaria was under siege. There was such a famine that they were eating their children. In 2 Kings 7:1 Elisha prophesied that the next day a measure of fine flour would sell for a shekel. So in one day in Old Testament times it went from priceless to only one shekel.

However, notice that the Nephites did not "reckon after the manner of the Jews who were in Jerusalem, neither did they measure after the manner of the Jews" (v. 55). Since my calculations are reckoned after the Jewish calculations and measure of wheat, the results will be only speculative. But they will give us some idea of the relative value of the amount of money Zeezrom was offering Amulek as a bribe.

VARIATIONS IN THE COSTS OF A JEWISH MEASURE OF WHEAT AT TODAY'S PRICES

Price per bushel	Measure of Wheat 6.25 bushels	13 bushels
\$ 6.00	\$ 37.50	\$ 78.00
\$19.20	\$120.00	\$249.60
\$31.08	\$194.25	\$404.04

EQUIVALENT AMOUNT ZEEZROM OFFERED AMULEK

[6 onties = 42 X a measure of grain]

Price per bushel	Measure of Wheat 6.25 bushels	13 bushels
\$ 6.00	\$1,575.00	\$ 3,276.00
\$19.20	\$5,040.00	\$10,483.20
\$31.08	\$8,158.50	\$16,969.68

It is obvious that six onties was a lot of money to be carrying in your pocket. But which of the six figures was the more accurate? I had no idea.

I asked my brother who is a mathematician to check the accuracy of my figures. My math was correct, but as

he read the section in Alma 8 he noticed that verse 52 said, ". . .the judge received for his wages according to his time: *a senine of gold for a day.* . ." (emphasis added). That is the exact same value of a measure of grain. I hadn't even noticed this fact, and was fascinated that God had directed Mormon to include this detail so that we could get an even more accurate estimate of the value of six onties.

I called the library to get information on a judge's salary and was told that local and state judges' salaries ranged from \$49,200 to \$95,000 in 1989 (1990-91 *Occupational Outlook Handbook*). Dividing by 260 work days, this equals a salary range of \$189.23 to \$365.38 per day. By comparison, the range of the value of a measure of wheat that most closely matches the judges' salary range is \$194.25 to \$404.04 at \$31.08/bushel.

This is the price of wheat purchased as flour at a local grocery store. Referring to the "Equivalent Amount" chart, you can see that the amount of the bribe (42 times the value of a measure of wheat) ranges from \$8,158.50 to \$16,969.68. This range is the most accurate answer we can obtain with the information available.

The question is, would you deny Christ for \$8,000 to \$17,000? Because of the prophecies of the tribulation times ahead, there may come a time when we are destitute and could be tempted by even the smallest offer if we have not developed a strong testimony and relationship with the Lord.

The Book of Mormon tells us to ". . . watch and pray continually, that ye may not be tempted above that which ye are able to bear . . ." (Alma 10:28). We need to do this in preparation for the future trial of our faith.

I am fascinated by the details the Lord directed Mormon to include in the Book of Mormon. He has promised, "the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little and there a little;" (Isaiah 28:13).

But this promise can only happen if you are searching. Each year as I read through the Book of Mormon I ask for another testimony of the Book of Mormon. This prayer has been answered each time with new insights,

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writings of the Old Testament prophets by use of parallel synonyms: "... *repent*, and *turn* yourselves from all your transgressions" (Ezekiel 18:30); "... *repent*, and *turn* unto the Lord your God ..." (Joel 2:13) [emphasis added]. In each of these examples, a doubling of thought is used as both the word "repent" and "turn" carry the idea of turning from sin and back towards God.

Once we realize that true repentance is returning to God and requires a change in life style, we find that The Book of Mormon has always been very explicit in communicating this idea. Indeed, Alma 16:231 gives us the definition of repentance: "... I will repent, that I will return to my God."

In The Book of Mormon we also find examples of the Hebrew doubling of thought as the word "repent" is often used in conjunction with "turn" and "return."

Helaman 3:18 uses beautiful Hebrew poetry to emphasize that repentance is turning back to God: "O *repent ye, repent ye!* why will ye

die? *Turn ye, turn ye*, unto the Lord your God."

Third Nephi 4:58 stresses the point of repenting with the full intention of experiencing a changed and dedicated life style: "... *repent* and *return* unto me with a full purpose of heart."

Likewise, 3 Nephi 8:65 draws our attention to the true meaning of repentance: "For ye know not but what they will *return* and *repent*, and come unto me with full purpose of heart ..." [emphases added].

Coming to an understanding of the Hebraic meaning and usage of repenting greatly increases our understanding of this theological concept. True repentance is not merely remorse. True repentance is a change in life style actuated by returning to God.

This concept is expressed very distinctly in the Book of Mormon, and is but one of many concepts which can be enhanced by following the chiasmic message of 1 Nephi 1:1 and 2 and exploring the customs, traditions, and language of the ancient Hebrew people.

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often ones that no one else seems to have noticed.

I challenge you to read the Book of Mormon applying the "purpose principle," looking for things that seem to have no purpose. Ask the Lord why they are included and keep your eyes open, watching for the answer. ZRF

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