

Sin in the Generic Sense (Hebrew: chattâ'âh, Greek: hamartanō)
A Series on the Meaning of Sin: Part 1

There are several nuances of meaning to the term “sin,” and the Bible employs several Hebrew terms and their corresponding Greek translations to provide clarity on this important subject. This series will look at various Hebrew words and their primary meaning without consideration of their verbal stems.

Châṭâ' (Strong's #H2398)

This Hebrew verb primarily means “to go astray, miss the path, or miss the mark.” The action of sin here is in the broad sense to include intentional and unintentional offensive behavior towards an individual, nation or God; châṭâ' covers all acts of sin.

The origin of the word may be rooted in the pastoral lifestyle of ancient Semitic culture where pathways separated properties but allowed paths to open pastures or water. Shepherders, taking their flock, sometimes would wander off the path and trespass onto someone's property.

The feminine noun form of châṭâ' is **chattâ'âh** (Strong's #H2403) is correspondingly a generic term for “sin, crime, or offense.”

Sin, as a noun, is first introduced in the periscope of Cain and Abel and subsequently in the context of the Bible's first murder - the murder of a brother. It is portrayed as a temptation that one must resist.

If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin (**chattâ'âh**) is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.” (Gen 4:7)

The idea that sin is evil and is against God (Gen 13:13) is developed further in the periscope of Sodom and Gomorrah. While sin may be committed in private, God is very aware and attuned to its presence.

And the Lord said, “The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin (**chattâ'âh**) is exceedingly grave. (Gen 18:20)

For the nation of freed slaves from Egypt, God makes a covenant with Moses that teaches them what sin is and how one could be forgiven. With this formal bilateral agreement, the Mosaic Covenant becomes the basis from which sin is determined. Sin is portrayed in the judicial sense; if left without atonement, the sinner is culpable and punished according to the Law. For the Old Testament Jew, sin is viewed through the prism of the Law.

Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin (**chattâ'âh**); yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” (Ex 34:6-7)

God's word attempts to encourage right behavior through a variety of means, and with historical narratives, the reader can understand and perhaps identify with the act of sinning and its consequences.

Whether against God, a king or an individual, sin is an offense towards anyone and committed by everyone regardless of faith.

Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning (**châṭâ'**) against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her. (Gen 20:6)

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Then it came about after these things, the cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt offended (**châtâ'**) their lord, the king of Egypt. (Gen 40:1)

Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin (**châtâ'**) against the boy'; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood." (Gen 42:22)

The intent to sin reflects one's attitude towards God. One may sin intentionally in defiance of God or one may fear to disobey God and intentionally avoid the act of offending Him.

But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned (**châtâ'**) again and hardened his heart, he and his servants. (Ex 9:34)

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, so that you may not sin (**châtâ'**)." (Ex 20:20)

Human behavior is measured against God's word which determines what is holy or not. Against this standard, one may sin either knowingly or not.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'If a person sins (**châtâ'**) unintentionally in any of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done, and commits any of them, (Lev 4:1-2)

Israel has sinned (**châtâ'**), and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. And they have even taken some of the things under the ban and have both stolen and deceived. Moreover, they have also put them among their own things. (Josh 7:11)

Failing to heed the prophet Jeremiah's warning to return to their covenant commitments (Jer 1:5-10), Jerusalem falls and the Exile to Babylon occurs. For their chronic failures, God reveals through Jeremiah a New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34; 32:40), in which God will restore His people and forgive them of their sins.

I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned (**châtâ'**) against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned (**châtâ'**) against Me and by which they have transgressed against Me. (Jer 33:8)

In light of the Mosaic Covenant, the propensity to sin is inversely related to one's faith and relationship with God. When Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek LXX, the corresponding Greek terms had a broader meaning of sin over their original Hebrew terms.

Hamartanō (Strong's #G264)

This Greek verb was used prominently in the LXX to mean "to miss, miss the mark, be mistaken, to sin." The extrabiblical Greek view included an intellectual orientation towards sin as in a result of ignorance.

The origin of the word may be rooted in the martial lifestyle of the Greeks. Missing the mark was in reference to a thrown spear missing its target.

The feminine noun associated with *hamartanō* is **hamartia** (Strong's #266), which means "mistake or failure to reach a spiritual goal." In the New Testament, *hamartia* is used as a comprehensive expression of everything against God.

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With the dominant thought of the Old Testament as sin separating one from God, the New Testament highlights the judicial remedy for it. Throughout the gospels, hamartia is almost exclusively used in the context of forgiveness of sins.

She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins (**hamartia**)." (Matt 1:21)

But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins (**hamartia**)"—then He said to the paralytic, "Get up, pick up your bed and go home." (Matt 9:6)

To give to His people the knowledge of salvation
By the forgiveness of their sins (**hamartia**), (Luke 1:77)

Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins (**hamartia**); for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins (**hamartia**)." (John 8:24)

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin (**hamartia**) is the slave of sin (**hamartia**). (John 8:34)

for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins (**hamartia**). (Matt 26:28)

The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin (**hamartia**) of the world! (John 1:29)

The apostles explain that Jesus, like the unblemished lamb, took on the sins of mankind (2 Cor 5:21) and make a once and for all sacrifice of atonement. Jesus came to fulfill the function of the Law (Matt 5:17); instead of the Law as the standard of determining sin, the word of Jesus Christ becomes the standard of determining sin (Matt 7:21-23), and He Himself would be the Judge of that (John 5:21-24).

He made Him who knew no sin (**hamartia**) to be sin (**hamartia**) on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Cor 5:21)

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin (**hamartia**) and of death. (Rom 8:2)

The significance of the act of sinning is emphasized when Adam's sin is highlighted. As Adam shut himself off from fellowship with God, mankind becomes godless.

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned (**hamartanō**) (Rom 5:12)

Natural is the act of sinning, because it is the opposite of agape (1 John 3:1-10); resisting the act of sinning is unnatural.

Be on your guard! If your brother sins (**hamartanō**), rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins (**hamartanō**) against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." (Luke 17:3-4)

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for all have sinned (**hamartanō**) and fall short of the glory of God, (Rom 3:23)

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin (**hamartanō**). And if anyone sins (**hamartanō**), we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; (1 John 2:1)

the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned (**hamartanō**) from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. (1 John 3:8)

While sanctification is initiated by faith in Jesus Christ, the Believer's process of sanctification is an active spiritual growth towards holiness. And all that God comes in contact with must be sanctified (Ex 3:5; 19:23; 40:32-38).

But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him. Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins (**hamartanō**) against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? (1 Cor 6:17-19)

References:

1. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).