

Sin is Godless (Hebrew: rāshâ', Greek: asēbēs)
A Series on the Meaning of Sin: Part 3

Throughout this series of articles on sin, Hebrew and Greek terms are presented as a pair, which may give the impression that there is a one to one translation between the two languages. This is not true. Hebrew vocabulary is more complex and varied than the Greek. These articles attempt to simplify the complexities of language translation so that one may gain a greater appreciation of the definition of sin beyond the English translation.

Rāshâ' (Strong's #H7563)

Similar to ra' is rāshâ' and its word group family. Rāshâ' is a Hebrew adverb for "morally wrong, bad, or wicked person." When Jewish scholars translated the Old Testament into Greek (Septuagint / LXX), they use several different Greek terms for rāshâ' and among them is asēbēs.

Asēbēs (Strong's #G765)

This Greek adjective means "impious, irreverent, wicked, and ungodly." The adjective provides some emotional context as in outrage against one who has broken established religious ordinances and laws. While sin may include an aspect of antisocial behavior, asēbēs describes that aspect of sin that is intentionally against God.

In the context of Sodom, Gomorrah, and Pharaoh, the English translation conveys a sense that rāshâ' is a deeper form of ra' (evil); however, the asēbēs word group places a focus on impiety / godlessness.

Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked (H: **rāshâ'** / G: **asēbēs**), so that the righteous and the wicked (H: **rāshâ'** / G: **asēbēs**) are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Gen 18:25)

Then Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "I have sinned this time; the Lord is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked (H: **rāshâ'** / G: **asēbēs**) ones (**rāshâ'**). (Ex 9:27)

While translating rāshâ' into English as "wicked" places an emphasis on human behavior, Jewish scholars used the asēbēs word group to place an emphasis on whether one was godly or not.

He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself,
And he who reproveth a wicked (**rāshâ'**) man (H: **rāshâ'** / G: **asēbēs**) gets insults for himself. (Prov 9:7)

The wages of the righteous is life,
The income of the wicked (H: **rāshâ'** / G: **asēbēs**), punishment. (Prov 10:16)

The thoughts of the righteous are just,
But the counsels of the wicked (H: **rāshâ'** / G: **asēbēs**) are deceitful. (Prov 12:5)

A righteous man hates falsehood,
But a wicked (**rāshâ'**) man (H: **rāshâ'** / G: **asēbēs**) acts disgustingly and shamefully. (Prov 13:5)

Haughty eyes and a proud heart,
The lamp of the wicked (H: **rāshâ'** / G: **asēbēs**), is sin. (Prov 21:4)

But it will not be well for the evil (**rāshâ'**) man (H: **rāshâ'** / G: **asēbēs**) and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God. (Ecc 8:13)

In the New Testament, asēbēs is used less often, and its English translation describes sin as an absence of faith in God.

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For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly (**asëbēs**), his faith is credited as righteousness, (Rom 4:3-5)

But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly (**asëbēs**) and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted. (1 Tim 1:8-11)

It was also about these men that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly (**asëbēs**) of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly (**asëbēs**) sinners have spoken against Him.” (Jude 1:14-15)

In a few instances, Jewish scholars translated *râshâ'* into the Greek *anōmōs* word family which means “lawless.” This meaning of “being without law” provides a judicial dimension to the concept of sin which is lost when the English translation “wicked” is used.

When Daniel sought an understanding of the end times (Dan 12:8), the angel speaks of unrepentant sinners as those without knowledge of the law.

Many will be purged, purified and refined, but the wicked (H: **râshâ'** / G: **anōmōs**) will act wickedly (H: **râshâ'** / G: **anōmōs**); and none of the wicked (H: **râshâ'** / G: **anōmōs**) will understand, but those who have insight will understand. (Dan 12:10)

The Greek *anōmōs* word family is frequently used in the Septuagint, and this will be explored in another article of this series.

References:

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