

TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

THE MEANING OF פֶּשַׁע

BY

JOEL JUPP

(D-488)

DEERFIELD, IL

JUNE 5, 2010

One of the most important words in Hebrew Scripture, פֶּשַׁע communicates what it means to rebel against God. Of course, that concept can seem abstract even to theologians, so an investigation of this term can be very beneficial. By understanding how this word was used, as well as its political connotations, interpreters of Scripture can better understand what it means to commit a transgression. This paper will argue that פֶּשַׁע connotes revolt and rebellion, but carries political and legal imagery that would have been well-known to readers in antiquity. This connotation helps us distinguish this word from its closely related synonyms.

Related Words

To begin, one way to define פֶּשַׁע is to compare it to other related words. If one were to count both specific and general terms, there are more than fifty words for sin.¹ Often these terms are used for the general concept of sin or in close proximity with Hebrew parallelism. Without going into all 50 words, there are some specific Hebrew words that are used more often than the others.

Of the three most common terms, חָטָא is the most frequent with roughly 595 occurrences. This Hebrew word is often translated as “sin” in our English Bibles. Sometimes חָטָא is used outside of a moral context, and as in Judges 20:16, it means to “miss.” Thus, it is from this term that we define sin as “missing the mark.” The frequency of this term shows the significance of sin to the authors of the Old Testament.

Another related word is עָוֹן. Though used in many different ways, עָוֹן often means “error” or “iniquity.”² Often the term was used to denote guilt, punishment, sin, and other related concepts, but generally, עָוֹן refers to intentional wrong behavior or the guilt incurred by

¹ David Noel Freedman, vol. 6, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 31.

² David Noel Freedman, vol. 6, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 32.

intentional wrong behavior. In a way, it focuses on the end result of sin.

It should be noted that along with פִּשַׁע, these three words are often used in close proximity. An example of this is Psalm 32:1-2:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

When various terms are interspersed, this can make it very difficult to discern any difference in meaning between the three words. In some instances, these “sin” terms are used synonymously, and an interpreter should not overemphasize the importance of variety for stylistic reasons. In other cases, however, an author may be using parallelism or emphasis, and each term should be distinguished from one another.

General Usage

Amongst these terms, פִּשַׁע is the third most common term and used 134 times in the Masoretic text. As a verb, פִּשַׁע occurs 41 times. More often, פִּשַׁע is used as a noun, which accounts for 93 occurrences.

According to most dictionaries, פִּשַׁע refers to “willful, knowledgeable violation of a norm or standard.”³ After reading the many passages in which this word is used, it is obvious that פִּשַׁע often means “rebellion” or “revolt.” In English, the closest term may be “transgression” because “the English word combines *trans* and *egere* (Latin), meaning to “to go over” or “to go beyond”—in this case, to go beyond God’s sacred laws.”⁴

However, such a definition is difficult to determine until passages like 1 Kings 12:19 are

³ David Noel Freedman, vol. 6, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 32.

⁴ Eugene E. Carpenter and Philip W. Comfort, *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 193.

considered. Most of the time, פשע seems synonymous for sin, so we must rely upon other usages of the word to help us define it more specifically. Thus, by observing the “rebellion” that is clearly in 1 Kings 12:19, we can see that this connotation was sometimes intended in other passages as well.

Interestingly, it used in both political and spiritual contexts. In other words, it would have been a term commonly used and understood, but it was applied to the spiritual realm, so that the people could understand what their transgression truly meant. For example, human rebellion is seen in Genesis 3:1-7, even though the specific term is not used in that passage. But the way that פשע is used in Amos, Psalms, Proverbs, and elsewhere, it is evident that Adam and Eve transgressed against God.

Another helpful observation is that פשע is often used in contexts of relationships. For example, פשע most often appears in the context of divine oracles -- more than 30% of the time that the word occurs in the Old Testament. This is instructive. For those who think of sin as an individualistic or private matter, this may be surprising. The fact that פשע is used so often in oracles and narratives speaks to the fact that sin should not be reduced to a psychological phenomenon (as many modern people try to do), but should be recognized as actual and relational. According to Hebrew Scripture, פשע is a reality.

Verbal Usage

As a verb, פשע has been defined as “to break away” and “to behave as a criminal.” The ESV most commonly translates the verb as transgressed, rebelled, and revolted. Clearly, there is a sense of breaking away in order to pursue wrong behavior. Thus, the word can mean “to revolt or refuse subjection to rightful authority.”⁵

⁵ Robert Baker Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament : Their Bearing on Christian Doctrine*. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1998), 81.

Often, the subject of the verb is a nation or people group – such as Edom, Libnah, and Israel. Again, 1 Kings 12:19 speaks of Israel in “rebellion” against the house of David. As another example, 2 Kings 1:1 records that Moab “rebelled” against Israel. Though individuals transgress (Gen. 31:36, Ps. 25:7), פָּשַׁע is also used nationalistically, since a nation as a whole can rebel or transgress.

Surprisingly, in the Hebrew Bible, פָּשַׁע is used as an active verb, except for one instance in Proverbs 18:19. It is difficult to know how much to make of this, but this may be because a major focus of the Hebrew Bible is upon the perpetrator or the transgressor.

Noun Usage

More commonly, פָּשַׁע is used as a noun. The meaning ranges from “offense” to “crime,” though there is obvious overlap between those ideas.

The most significant repetition of this word occurs in Amos. In the first two chapters, a similar phrase is used 8 times by the author. Every few verses, this repetition is purposeful and impossible to miss.

Clearly in Amos, there are political overtones to the term, particularly when it comes to social justice and international ethics. Thus, פָּשַׁע can speak of a legal offense.⁶ When God speaks his judgment against their פִּשְׁעֵי, He says that He will not revoke his punishment. A transgression against another people group is also a transgression against God.

Significance of this Word

As stated above, פָּשַׁע signifies a willing, intentional decision to do what is wrong. Thus, in most contexts, it should be thought of as an act of *betrayal* rather than ignorance. Whether a

⁶ Eugene E. Carpenter and Philip W. Comfort, *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 193.

nation or a group of individuals, they knew what they should do, but refused to do what was right.

Consequentially, a transgression is an act *against* a person or an entity. It is not possible to transgress unless there is someone or something to transgress against. Theologically, this is important because *פֶּשַׁע* against God is a major theme of the Hebrew Bible. Transgression is not merely a broken rule (like some of the other terms for sin suggest), but an intentional rejection and betrayal against the God who created the heavens and the earth.⁷

Knowing the meaning of *פֶּשַׁע*, verses like Jeremiah 33:8 take on deeper and richer meaning. When the Lord promises to cleanse them of their sin (*עֲוֹנוֹת*), which they sinned (*חָטְאוּ*) against him, He also promises to give the guilt of their sin and of their rebellion (*פְּשָׁעוֹ*). In other words, the Lord not only forgives unintentional sin, but the intentional and willing rebellion against Him. On a practical level, because the three different terms for sin are used in this verse, it means that God will forgive it all – not only unintentional actions of missing the mark, but also of intentional acts of betrayal and rebellion.

Conclusion

Defining *פֶּשַׁע* depends upon context, and sometimes this can be difficult because of its close relationship to other terms for sin – especially *חַטָּא* and *עֲוֹן*. Often, the word can be understood in a general sense as “sin” when used synonymously. In certain instances, however, it is important to see the legal sense of the word – the sense of rebellion, betrayal, revolt, etc. When distinguished from other terms for sin, *פֶּשַׁע* (1) emphasizes our intentional departure from God, and (2) reminds us that betrayal and rebellion is one aspect of what it means to sin.

⁷ Psalm 51:1-4