Sin and Sinfulness: A Study In New Testament Terminology

GEORGE ALLEN TURNER AND J. HAROLD GREENLEE

THE SUBJECT DEFINED

The New Testament concept of grace cannot be understood apart from its underlying concept, the doctrine of sin. Perhaps the most subtle aspect of Biblical hamartiology is sinfulness, by which is meant, not the act of sin, but the moral conditions which cause sin. While sins are properly regarded as acts of rebellion against God and are objective in nature, sinfulness is a condition, principle, or state and hence is subjective in nature. The former is related to God, the latter to man. A study of sinfulness therefore involves psychology; here hamartiology and anthropology converge.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

With the exception of extended discussions of original sin, theologians and expositors have spent comparatively little time on the subjective aspect of sin. Most treatments of sin are content to deal with the more obvious features of sinful conduct, leaving many of the more subtle aspects of sin unexplored or superficially treated. It is the purpose of this study to isolate and analyze this more evasive concept of the subjective aspect called inward sin or sinfulness.

THE PROBLEM

The New Testament uses some nine different synonyms for sin—that is, nine families of words. These nine synonyms, together with their cognates, total twenty four different words. There are approximately 386 occurrences of these synonyms. Of these, *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία) and its cognate forms are the most important and occur most frequently, a total of about 214 times. The basic meaning of this term is to miss the mark or the designated goal, hence is the opposite of *teleios* (τέλειος) —complete, perfect, entire—and, es-

pecially in Romans, to *dikaiosune* (δικαιοσύνη) —conformity to the standard, to God.[1]

While the cautious student will bear in mind that "in the common intercourse of life, words easily lose their original precision,"[2] yet a careful study of etymology is indispensable. The statement is often made that ἁμαρτία in the singular "would seem to denote primarily, *not sin considered as an action*, but sin considered as the quality of action."[3] This generalization needs to be substantiated. How accurate is the statement? If true as a generalization is it true of other New Testament writers or is it a characteristic of Paul only? Does Paul use the singular of this word to indicate a studied and precise distinction between "sin" and "sinfulness"? Is it actually a qualitative usage, as distinct from specific acts, or is it simply used to designate sins in the aggregate? How valid is the conventional statement that the New Testament writers are careful to maintain a distinction between the principle of sin and acts of sin? In other words, does the New Testament recognize a distinction between sinful conduct and sinfulness in principle as underlying sin, and can this generalization be substantiated on objective linguistic grounds?

Distinctions of this kind are admittedly rare in the Old Testament, where a more objective and physical view of sin prevails. Intimations of the importance of motive, of the sin principle, are, however, apparent even in the Old Testament in such words as *avah* (עוה) —bent, crooked, perverse,

---

[1] H. Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, I, p. 99.

[2] Umbreit, *Die Sunde*, p. 49, cited in Cremer op. cit., p. 98.

[3] Cremer, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

Such words "represent the perversion or distortion of nature which is caused by evil doing."[4] The prophets speak of correcting the source of evil as well as pardon (e.g., Ezek. 36:26, "the stony heart"). The Psalmist also is concerned not only with his sinful acts and resultant guilt but also with their inner source (Ps. 51:7, 10). Later writers of the inter-testamental period are relatively more concerned with the subjective side and with the source of sin (e.g., IV Esdras 3:20-27; 4:30, 31; 7:118). Rabbinic sources indicate a similar concern with the source of sin: "an evil eye and the evil principle and hatred of mankind drive a man out of the world" (Pirke Aboth 2:15); and, "Who is mighty? He that controlleth his evil disposition" (Pirke Aboth 4:29). The rabbis made much of the Evil Yetzer ("evil imagination", as in Gen. 6:5) as the source of rebellious acts.[5]

Post-Reformation theological tradition has emphasized the distinction between act and principle, between source and consequence. Calvin: "We say, therefore, that man is corrupted by a natural depravity, but which did not originate from nature."[6] Barclay: "... not only their words and deeds only, but all their imaginations are evil perpetually ..... as proceeding from this depraved and wicked seed ......"[7] This evil principle is usually identified with "original sin," as in the Articles of Religion in Anglican and Methodist churches. Watson: "This connection of positive evil, as the effect, with privation of life and image of God, as the cause, accounts for the 'corruption of man's nature.'"[8] Wesley: "..... the sin which still remains .... even in them that are regenerate .... a conviction of our proneness to evil, of an heart

bent to backsliding, ... a conviction of the sin still cleaving to all our words and actions."[9] None is more precise than a Puritan preacher in Boston in 1699: "Every actual sin leaves a spot, a stain, a filthiness behind it. There is therefore a two-fold taking away of sin, answerable to the two-fold mischief which it doeth the man, by its adhesion to him: the former is by Justification, the latter by Sanctification."[10] Likewise Kuizenga:

"The personal nature both of sin and salvation make necessary not only the experience of conversion but also the nature of sanctification."[11]

Mozeley: "..... there is a goodness and a sinfulness in disposition as well as in acts."[12] The question now raised is whether these theologians and expositors have correctly supposed that a qualitative distinction between sins and sinfulness is set forth in the New Testament.

Grammarians as well as theologians speak of the two-fold nature of sin. Trench quotes Chrysostom as distinguishing between *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία) as designating original sin and *hamartema* (ἁμάρτημα) as "the several acts and outcomings of sin" from which infants are free.[13] Cremer, in the work previously cited, concludes that ἁμαρτία in the singular with the article designates sin as "a principle manifesting itself in the conduct of the subject. Without the article ἁμαρτία .... is used where the reference is to the idea itself and not to the collective sum of manifestations."[14] Likewise Thayer:

In this sense ἡ ἁμαρτία ... as a power exercising dominion over men (*sin as a principle and power*) is rhetorically represented as an imperial personage ... ; the dictate of sin or an impulse

---

[4] R. B. Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament*, p. 130. E. g., II Sam. 19:19.

[5] See S. Schecter, *Some aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, pp. 219-93.

[6] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II, 1, p. 277.

[7] Robert Barclay, *Theses Theologicae*, cited by Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, I, p. 790.

[8] Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, II, p. 79.

[9] John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," *Standard Sermons*, II, pp. 454 ff.

[10] Samuel Williard, *The Fountain Opened*, pp. 78f.

[11] John A. Kuizenga, "Sin," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, IV, 2801.

[12] J. B. Mozeley, *Predestination*, cited in James Orr, *Sin as a Problem of Today*, p. 240.

[13] R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, 7th ed., p. 228.

[14] Cremer, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

proceeding from it .... Thus ἁμαρτία is the source whence the several evil acts proceed."[15]

But the quotations cited by Thayer in support of these generalizations are, with one exception, all from Paul's writings. Is this a habit of Paul, due perhaps to the influence of rabbinic modes of expression, or is it a grammatical principle which was generally observed? The investigation narrows down, therefore, to whether or not ἁμαρτία in the singular designates a *principle* of sin which needs *cleansing* as distinct from *acts* which need *pardon*.

THE EVIDENCE

From the standpoint of etymology, ἁμάρτημα signifies the result of action, and ἁμαρτία signifies quality of an action."[16] Old Testament usage bears out these distinctions in the case of the former but not the latter. In the Greek Old Testament both words mean "an act of sin," "a sin committed." There may be partial exception in the idea of "a sin offering," which is expressed by περὶ ἁμαρτίας or a similar phrase; but even in these instances the sin-offering seems to be for a *sin* rather than for *sinfulness*. In The Old Testament, therefore, we must assume that both ἁμαρτία and ἁμάρτημα are regular words for an act of sin, and that the former is more commonly used than the latter.

In the New Testament, on the other hand, the distinction between these two words is often clear. While ἁμαρτία appears more than 200 times, ἁμάρτημα occurs only five times, according to Moulton and Geden's Concordance. The meaning of ἁμάρτημα is always "an act of sin." As the ratio of their frequency would suggest, ἁμαρτία also is used to mean an act of sin; and it carries this meaning in practically all of the 75 instances or so where it is used in the *plural*. In the singular, however, the situation is quite different. After allowing for differences of interpretation of some passages, it appears that of the approximately 125 in-

---
[15]J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 31.

[16]Samuel G. Green, *Handbook to the Grammar of the Greek Testament*, rev. ed., pp. 144-5.

stances of the singular of ἁμαρτία in the New Testament, only between ten and twenty designate an *act* of sin.

ʼΑμαρτία is used both with and without the definite article. In the plural, the presence or absence of the article would generally imply only the difference between definite and indefinite acts of sin. It is the significance of this word when it is used in the singular which is of particular importance to this study.

In the New Testament, the word ἁμαρτία *without* the article doubtless sometimes designates an act of sin. In these instances ἁμαρτία may be considered as synonymous with ἁμάρτημα. Yet these instances are distinctly in the minority, comprising no more than ten per cent.—possibly much less—of the examples. In this category may be listed Matt. 12:31, "every sin and blasphemy" (ARV); II Cor. 11:7, "did I commit a sin" (ARV); and I John 5:16, "a sin which is not unto death," and "a sin unto death."

Much more common, however, are the instances where ἁμαρτία seems to have the very meaning which its etymology suggests —sinfulness, the quality of sin. It is a commonly recognized grammatical principle that nouns may be thus used without an article to denote quality. A very few of the many available examples include John 13:35, "if ye have *love* one to another"; Rom. 14:15, "thou walkest no longer in *love*" (ARV) —literally, according to love"; Luke 2:14, "*Glory* to God in the highest, and on earth peace"; and Matt. 17:20, "If ye have *faith.*" ἁμαρτία is not thus used in the Synoptic Gospels, Matt. 12:31, cited above, being the only occurrence of this word in the singular in these gospels. From the Fourth Gospel may be mentioned John 16:8, "he will reprove the world of sin" (similarly 16:9), and possibly some other instances. In the First Epistle of John, this idea seems to be present in 1:8, "If we say that we have no sin"; 3:5, "in him is no sin"; and 5:17, "All unrighteousness is sin"; and in Heb. 11:25, "the pleasures of sin." In the Pauline writings, the idea of quality is probably

intended in Cor. 5:21, "him ... who knew no sin" (better, "him who did not know sin"). Most Pauline instances occur in Romans: e.g., 3:20, "knowledge of sin"; 5:13, "sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law"; 7:7, "Is the law sin?"; and perhaps 8:10, "the body is dead because of sin."

With the article, ἁμαρτία in the singular sometimes refers to an act of sin, the article denoting definiteness. Acts 7:60, "lay not this sin to their charge," is an example. Yet obvious as such usage may seem, the instance just given is practically unique in the New Testament.

A second usage with the article is found in the examples where the phase refers to sin in a generic or collective sense—that is, in the same sense in which the singular "man" is used to mean "mankind," "the human race." This usage occurs in John 8:21, "ye ... shall die in your sin" ARV; the Authorized Version incorrectly reads "sins") —cf. verse 24, "ye shall die in your sins—and in Rom. 5:20, "where sin abounded."

Akin to the generic sense is the use of the article to refer to a noun typical of its class, as in the similar use of the word "man" in Matt. 12:35, *"The good man out of his good treasure bringeth forth good things: and the evil man out of his evil treasure bringeth forth evil things"* (ARV; the Authorized Version incorrectly reads "a good man" and "an evil man"). In this passage, "the good man" and "the evil man" is any good man and any evil man, each being held up as representative of all men of their class. Examples of this use of the word "sin" are rather rare in the New Testament, but an example probably occurs in John 8:34, "whosoever committeth sin," where the word "sin" may be understood as any sin, standing as a representative of all sins.

By far the largest group of instances of ἁμαρτία in the singular with the definite article, however, are those in which, according to the regular grammatical rule, the article seems to signify sin as an *abstract noun personified* or made a sep-

arate object of thought." This is similar to the English custom of capitalizing an abstract noun when the noun is personified, as in Acts 28:4, "whom .... Justice hath not suffered to live" (ARV). This usage seems to comprise a great majority of the occurrences of ἡ ἁμαρτία—the singular noun with the definite article. As in the common usage without the article, here also, in thus picturing sin with personal characteristics, as a figurative person or "thing," the New Testament writers follow a practice recognized in the usage of other abstract nouns. I Cor. 13:4-7 presents an extended list of "personal" characteristics of love (AV, "charity"). Rom. 5:3-5 refers to tribulation, steadfastness, approvedness, and hope (ARV) as working or accomplishing goals, as though these abstract ideas were objective realities. Eph. 2:14 speaks of Christ as "our peace," just as we might speak of him as "our Lord," thus figuratively picturing peace as though it were a person or "thing." (Contrast the following verse, 2:15, where "peace" without the article denotes quality -- "making peace.")

This personification of sin, ἡ ἁμαρτία, or of picturing it figuratively as a "thing" in itself, is particularly characteristic of Rom. 5-8. Yet it is not unknown elsewhere in the New Testament. John 8:34 refers to being "the servant of sin," picturing "Sin" as a master who rules. James 1:15 figuratively pictures both "lust" and "sin" as giving birth to offspring, which obviously is literally possible only to living beings.[18] Heb. 3:13 thus speaks of sin as a deceiver, and 12:4 as an enemy in warfare; and in the light of the latter passage Heb. 12:1 doubtless refers to laying aside, not a particular sin, as the AV and ARV both seem to imply--"*the* sin which doth so easily beset us"--but rather "sin" as a real object (figuratively, of course) meaning the

---

[17]Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-4.

[18]It is possible, however, that the article here is used merely for definiteness, as ARV implies: " . . . drawn away by his own lust . . . Then *the* lust, . . . beareth sin: and *the sin*, . . . bringeth forth death."

force, the idea itself, the principle of sin.[19] Not as a person, but as a material object, I Cor. 15:56 graphically describes sin as "the sting of death." In all this it must be borne in mind, however, that this personification of these abstract nouns, or considering them as tangible objects, is purely figurative. It must not be supposed that the New Testament writers conceived of sin, peace, etc., as material objects.

We may now turn to the occurrences of ἡ ἁμαρτία in Rom. 5-8, observing the use of this phrase to describe sin, not as a particular act of sin, not as the sum total of sins, but as "Sin," a force or principle underlying sinful acts. Since ἡ ἁμαρτία is capable of the other meanings, it is possible that a few instances here referred to may be subject to alternative interpretations without invalidating the general conclusion. The following passages are pertinent: Rom. 5:12, "sin entered into the world, and death by sin." 5:21, "sin hath reigned unto death." 6:6ff., "the body of sin"; "he died unto sin . . . , he liveth unto God"; "dead indeed unto sin"; "Let not sin therefore reign"; "Neither yield ye your members . . . unto sin"; "servants of sin"; "made free from sin"; "the wages of sin . . . the gift of God." 7:8ff., "sin . . . wrought in me all manner of concupiscence"; "sin revived, and I died"; "sin . . . deceived me"; "that sin . . . might become exceeding sinful"; "sin that dwelleth in me" does the evil ("Sin"; not a particular act of sin).

CONCLUSIONS

It is sometimes suggested that ἡ ἁμαρτία, particularly Paul's use of this expression in Romans 5-8, refers to sin as a principle, the idea being that the definite article prefixed to the noun is the identifying mark of the sin principle. The present investigation does not contradict this idea in general. A more comprehensive point of view, however, may be stated as follows: In general,

ἁμαρτία in the New Testament refers, *not to an act of sin, but rather to something which underlies and issues in acts of sin,* something which also accompanies and follows these acts of sin.

Without the definite article, this noun refers particularly to sin from the point of view of its quality, essence, or nature. It carries the idea of sinfulness. Sinfulness, being a quality, requires, not forgiveness, but rather purging, removal, cleansing.

With the definite article, this noun regularly refers to "Sin"--sin as a force figuratively objectified, either as a person, able to rule over man, to bring him into subjection to itself, and to act in a number of ways as a personal agent would act; or as some other material object, such as a "sting." This usage is to be clearly distinguished from the comparatively few instances where the same phrase is used to refer to sin in a generic or collective sense, as simply the totality of acts of sin. Here again, sin is pictured, not as an act which needs to be forgiven, but as a person who must be put to death, a force which must be rendered completely inoperative" (Rom. 6:6), or as some other objective reality which must be dealt with in a drastic manner.

In the New Testament, therefore, but not commonly in the Old Testament, ἁμαρτία, when used in the singular, either with or without the article, appears usually to refer to ideas which are associated with a need in the human heart which goes beyond the need of forgiveness of sinful acts, a need which arises from the presence of sinful tendencies in man. The New Testament seems clearly to teach that this deeper need can and should be met. Grammar and exegesis, therefore, appear to bear out the insights of generations of gospel preachers, who, like the Puritan divine of Boston, affirm that "there is a two-fold taking away of sin, answerable to the two-fold mischief which it doeth the man . . . [20]

---

[19]See, e.g., *Expositor's Greek Testament,* ad loc.