The Word "Sin"

The usage of "sin" as it occurs in the N.T. cannot be summed up in one sentence. The word occurs in a variety of contexts that sometimes include figurative language and rhetorical devices. This overview will hopefully provide some background to aid in an appreciation of the various contexts in which the word occurs.

We begin with noting an obvious point. Neither Paul nor any of the other writers of N.T. documents knew or used the word "sin." We should, therefore, be cautious concerning any assumptions we might have regarding the meaning of this English word. The writers of the N.T. knew Greek, and perhaps Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin. The fact that the original writings were in Greek speaks to the fact that Greek was widely known and used in the regions to which the various letters were written and then circulated. It should also be noted that the Roman Empire, which dominated these areas, was strongly influenced by Greek culture. The writers of the N.T. lived in and were influenced by both Jewish culture and Greco/Roman culture. All the writers were Jews by birth, but to varying degrees they lived in a Greco/Roman-dominated culture. This is notable in the case of Paul who spent his early years and another block of time after his conversion in the city of Tarsus, which is described in Scripture as "no mean" city.

> [Tarsus] was well-known for its culture of Greek philosophy, literature and wealth. Its schools of learning rivaled and excelled even those found in Athens and Alexandria. Around 171 B.C. the city's library held 200,000 books, including a huge collection of scientific works.

> …in all that relates to philosophy and general education, [Tarsus] was even more illustrious than Athens and Alexandria … it is evident that its main character was that of a Greek city, where the Greek language was spoken, and Greek literature studiously cultivated.[1]

We do not know in detail what Paul's early years looked like. We do know that he was born a Roman citizen, which afforded him opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable to other residents of Tarsus.[2] We might presume from Scripture that he was at least somewhat familiar with Greek poets and playwrights. Whether his exposure to Greek literature occurred as a young student in Tarsus, later when he studied under Gamaliel in Jerusalem, or after his conversion when he spent about 10 years in Tarsus we do not know. But we can be confident that he knew some of these writings well enough to quote them.

> **Acts 17:27 and 28** (Paul at the Areopagus in Athens Greece)
> **27** that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; **28 for in Him we live and move and exist**, as even some of your own poets have said, '**For we also are His children**.'

The first quotation comes from *The Kretika* by the Greek poet Epimenides of Knossos (6th century BCE). The second quote is the first half of the fifth line, word for word, of a poem of Aratus (c. 310–245 BC), a Greek countryman of the apostle, and his predecessor by about three centuries.[3]

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[1] https://www.biblestudy.org/biblepic/tarsus-birthplace-of-apostle-paul.html.

[2] The Early Life of and Background of Paul the Apostle.

[3] Greek Writers Quoted in the New Testament. Re: Acts 26:14 where Paul quotes Jesus, see NET note 45; the expression is not from the O.T., so perhaps Jesus quoted something familiar to Paul that Paul could relate to, or

1 Corinthians 15:33

33 Do not be deceived: "**Bad company corrupts good morals**."

This saying is directly quoted from the comedy *Thais* by the Athenian comic playwright Menandros (c.342–c.291 BCE). Menandros, however, may have borrowed the quote from the tragedy *Aiolos* by Euripides (c.484–406 BCE).[4]

Titus 1:12

12 One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "**Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons**."

This quote also comes from the Kretan poet Epimenides of Knossos.[5]

This information is worth considering because, while Paul did not know the word "sin," he was no doubt familiar with the Greek word *hamartia* and its cognates which were used as early as the 8th century BC. This is the regularly used Greek word translated with the English word "sin" in the N.T. We focus here on Paul because of the 170+ occurrences of *hamartia* in the N.T. 60+ occur in his writings, 48 in Romans alone (the next closest frequency is in Hebrews, 25 times; then 1 John, 17 times). The point here is that it might be of benefit to consider this Greek word as it was understood in the culture in which Paul used it. We are not ignoring the point that Scripture can define its own terms.

The historical secular use of the word *hamartia* and its cognates is summarized below.[6]

> …the survey of the evolution of hamartia from (c. 8th century BC) through Epictetus (c. AD 50–c. 135) has shown it to be a flexible term that can cover a variety of human actions: missing an intended target in the literal sense, making a mistake in logic or argumentation, harming or wronging another person or oneself due to a lack of knowledge or poor judgment, behaving in a manner not fitted to a particular moral standard, being under the influence of one's passions, acting in an unjust manner while under the sway of the passions, offending the gods, and deviating from divine law in a way that brings punishment and suffering upon oneself.

Missing an intended target in the literal sense is not used in Scripture except one time in the LXX.[7] Though not specifically stated above, the idea of failure to act in an appropriate manner or failure to achieve what one might want to achieve is certainly an undercurrent. This could be stated as failure to hit the mark figuratively. The idea of "mistake" or "error" is evident in Scripture and can cover intentional or unintentional words or actions. A deviation from what God considers righteous is an acceptable, broad definition that would fit most scriptural contexts. "Being under the influence of one's passions" comes close to the idea of *hamartia* being a condition or state which may also fit certain scriptural contexts.[8]

Paul took the "liberty" of using the quote in consideration of his audience who would have been familiar with the expression.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Reconsidering Hamartia as 'Sin' in 1 Corinthians (available at https://philarchive.org/archive/ROBRHA-3).

[7] See the Septuagint (LXX) translation of Judges 20:16 where "miss" (*chata* in Hebrew) is a form of *hamartanó*. The LXX was produced in 3–2 BCE.

[8] The word "condition" has a variety of meanings, among them "the particular state that something or someone is in," e.g., coronary artery disease (CAD) is a heart condition; we might say that a runner is in good condition; we

Given the flexible nature of *hamartia* and its cognates, we might not want to force one sense on every occurrence in Scripture. That English translators have, almost exclusively, chosen the one word "sin" (for both noun and verb) indicates the possibility of "narrowing" the sense of the word in particular contexts. Again, we note that Paul was not ignorant of Greek, literary or otherwise. Therefore, it is possible that a certain context might communicate a different sense from what the typical English reader would tend to think when encountering the word "sin."

Regarding the "flexible" nature of the word, here are some examples.

1 Peter 2:20a
20 For what credit is there if, when you **sin** [*hamartanó*] and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience?

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

In 1 Peter, the "sin" is something that is irritating or offensive to the slave's master. This could include any number of possible actions, even something as arbitrary as serving the wrong drink. In this context, there is no sense of the servant having deviated from God's righteousness—the servant just did something that irritated the master. In Matthew, "sins" is an example of the figure of speech metonymy and refers to the consequences of intents, words, or deeds contrary to God's righteousness. There is similarity in that both "sins" are something contrary to an authority (a master or God), but to use the same English word in both cases might not accurately reflect the sense of the word in context. Here is another example.

Romans 6:12
12 Therefore do not let **sin** [Sin] reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts,

In this verse, "sin" is being personified as if a king or emperor. This carries a very different sense than either of the two examples above.

We are not attempting to establish a particular definition of sin here. The intent is to understand what the word is communicating given the particular context in which it occurs. We will refrain from saying "sin means such and so in this verse" and prefer to say, "Sin is referring to such and so in this verse;" or "Sin in this verse implies such and so."

It is perhaps worth noting in light of how the words have historically been used that the Greek word *hamartia* and its cognates are composed of the prefix "a" (appears as "ha," a negation) and *meros* which means a part, portion, or share. A similar negative prefix can be seen in the English word "**a**typical" which means "not typical" or "**un**comfortable" which means not comfortable.[9] Below are some examples of the word *meros* in Scripture.

John 13:8
8 Peter said to Him [Jesus], "Never shall You wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no [*ouk*] **part** [*meros*] with Me."

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might say that because of an accident, a person is in terrible condition. The word also refers to external circumstances, e.g., horrible working conditions.

[9] Other Greek words with this prefix include: *agnoeó* (negation of *ginóskó*); *agrammatos* (negation of *gramma*); *agrupnia* (negation of *hupnos*); *adapanos* (negation of *dapane*); *adélos* (negation of *délos*).

Revelation 20:6
6 Blessed and holy is the one who has a **part** [*meros*] in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

Revelation 21:8
8 "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their **part** [*meros*] will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

Revelation 22:19
19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his **part** [*meros*] from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.

This is not intended as a definition of *hamartia* but that the word and its cognates can carry this sense of no part, no portion, or no share. Obviously, deviating from God's righteousness or failing to achieve God's righteousness will result in not having or not sharing in the things of God as the cites from Revelation clearly indicate.

An acceptable general definition of *hamartia* as used in Scripture is "not conforming to God's standard." If a person is not conforming, then we might ask, "What does a failure to conform 'look like'?" We might say that the person has no part, portion, or share with God or the things of God. We might say that their failure means they are "missing out" on what otherwise might have been gained. Or, we might say they are experiencing "loss." This includes the idea of forfeiture—if a person fails to achieve a goal or misses the target (the historical, literal sense of the word), they forfeit what they might have maintained or gained. An archer failing to hit an enemy combatant could result in death—the forfeiture of life.

The following well-known verse summarizes the state of every person.

Romans 3:23
23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

A consequence of "sin" is "falling short." "Fall short" [*hustereó*] in the NASB is translated as am...lacking (1), come short (1), comes short (1), destitute (1), fall short (1), impoverished (1), inferior (2), lack (2), lacked (1), lacking (1), need (1), ran (1), suffering need (1), worse (1). We see that "fall short" is only one possibility for a translation of *hustereó*. The sense of this verse might be that "sin" results in "being in need of" or "lacking" the glory of God.

Along this train of thought, we see the following:

In ancient Greek thought, sin [*hamartia*] was looked upon as, in essence, a failure on the part of a person to achieve his true self-expression and to preserve his due relation to the rest of the universe; it was attributed mainly to ignorance.[10]

"We see that this description is not religious, i.e., it is not declaring "an offense against religious or moral law." However, with some slight modifications, this statement could be applied to the sense of *hamartia* in Scripture. A person "sins" in that they fail to achieve what they could have or should have achieved, notably due to ignorance. This could easily describe the condition of a person who has not accepted Christ, who does not have spirit, and therefore lacks a true

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[10] Britannica online.

identity and a relationship to the creator of the universe—notably due to ignorance (intentional or unintentional).

We propose that Paul was not ignorant of how this Greek word and its cognates were used in the culture in which he lived and that God, by way of Paul, intentionally chose to use this particular word to describe the general plight as well as the various kinds of errors, mistakes, or failings of all humans.