Below is the third guest post by my colleague David Lambert, connected to his book How Repentance Became Biblical. For many readers of the blog, this will be the most important and interesting of them all. It deals with the historical Jesus. Did Jesus tell people that they needed to repent? You might think the answer is obvious....

Did Jesus Preach Repentance?

In my past two posts, I argued that the concept of repentance, as we use it today and as it first developed within Judaism and Christianity, was not originally found in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Now, it’s possible that you might be tempted by this argument to draw the conclusion that repentance is a specifically Christian concept. It’s important, however, to keep in mind that, even though repentance became very important to Christianity, it actually first developed in the context of late Second Temple Judaism shortly before the advent of Christianity. The concept, for instance, is alive and well in the writings of Ben Sira (also known as Ecclesiasticus) a text that was written by a Jew in the second century B.C.E. Nevertheless, in ancient Judaism repentance was not yet a fully established concept. It appeared in the writings of certain ancient Jews, like Ben Sira and Philo, but was strikingly absent from the writings of others, particularly those with a commitment to apocalypticism, such as the Dead Sea sect. Apocalyptic-minded Jews favored instead the notion that, at the end of days, there would be a divinely-orchestrated transformation of human nature, a concept that differs from repentance by strikingly locating all agency in the hands of God. In fact, they saw a promise of just such a transformation in Deuteronomy 30:6, which alludes to God circumcising Israel’s heart at some point in the future. No amount of human repentance could change human nature or alter the course of history. Humanity was just too rotten to the core, too overrun by powerful demonic forces, to save itself. Only some radical divine intervention would suffice.

Now, as Bart has made clear in his recent posts, understanding the history of Jewish apocalypticism is fundamental to understanding the development of the early Jesus movement. In fact, it’s not wrong to see it, at its earliest stage of development, as a Jewish apocalyptic sect. So, where did the early Jesus movement fall on the question of repentance?

On the face of it, there is a very simple answer: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’” (Mark 1:14-15) However, deeper inspection reveals a number of problems. First of all, on the basis of this famous passage and its parallels in Matthew, scholars have often misunderstood the nature of ancient Jewish apocalypticism, claiming that a call to repentance in connection to the end of time is the norm rather than the exception. But, as I stated, this formulation looks like a later development that uses traditional apocalyptic language but departs considerably from its standard formulation that human transformation will only occur at the end of days through direct divine intervention.

More importantly, this statement, attributed to Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, does not seem to really fit what Mark goes on to describe elsewhere as Jesus’ main activities: healing, exorcism, and proclaiming the good news. All of these activities transpire without any allusion to repentance and do not seem to presuppose repentance. Jesus seems most keen on demonstrating the fact of the impending arrival of the kingdom of God, not on leveraging its arrival for the purpose of moral renewal or doctrinal change. In fact, we don’t
hear of repentance again until Mark 6:12, when Jesus passes the torch, so to speak, to his disciples to carry on his mission.

Scholars have dealt with this problem of disconnect in several ways. It is often argued that the need for repentance is implicit in all of Jesus’ actions and teachings, even when it is not actually mentioned. This argument would have more weight if, in fact, the absence of repentance wasn’t entirely comprehensible, indeed, expected, in light of its absence in the apocalypticism of late Second Temple Judaism. Others assume the later editorial additions made by the author of Luke when they interpret the passages from Mark. So Jesus states in Mark 2:17: “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners,” but Luke adds: “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:32) But is it safe to assume that Jesus’ “calling of sinners” necessarily involved repentance, where other notions of group identity and even human transformation are available? Maybe, he’s gathering a group of sinners around him to heal them himself? Luke is clearly very interested in repentance, but were his earlier sources? Luke also, for instance, added repentance to the parable of the lost sheep, as we can tell from comparison of the text to the Gospel of Matthew. (Compare Matthew 18:12-14 with Luke 15:4-7.)

To return to Mark, the passage attributing the preaching of repentance to Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry (Mark 1:15) could be seen as an attempt to summarize or even interpret his later activity. It doesn’t necessarily fit the original content of that ministry, and the same can be said for the summary of the disciples’ mission given in Mark 6:12. That raises the real possibility that a concern for repentance was introduced later on as the Synoptic traditions grew and the early Jesus movement moved from an apocalyptic sect to a more established religious group. It needed a method for ensuring discipline within the community and a method for allowing individuals to join the community with relative ease. However, the most important point, here, in my view is not whether we can say with certainty that Jesus preached repentance or not but to point out that we’ve been overlooking some of the underlying diversity or gaps in the Gospel sources. Some of them privilege the concept of repentance, while others seem to do without it. In that respect, they would be exactly in keeping with the kind of range of interest in repentance that we see in late Second Temple Judaism.

For further discussion of relevant passages and, especially, the additional cases of John the Baptist and Paul, please see my new book!

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David’s book How Repentance Became Biblical can be purchased on Amazon.com, at the following address:  
http://www.amazon.com/How-Repentance-Became-Biblical-Interpretation/dp/0190212241/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1452903064&sr=8-1&keywords=how+repentance

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