Many of you responded to my colleague David Lambert’s provocative post a couple of days ago on whether the idea of “repentance” could be found in the Bible. He has replied to your comments, but has wanted to provide a follow up post. It keeps getting more interesting. This is an intriguing reflection on “repentance” in the Bible, one that totally turns on its head what many of us have always thought. See what you think.

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“The Meaning(s) of Repentance in the Bible”

A lot of the comments that I received on my first post (http://ehrmanblog.org/is-repentance-a-biblical-idea-interview-with-david-lambertb/) had to do with the definition of “repentance” that I’m using in my new study, How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity, and the Interpretation of Scripture. Just to review my main claim, I contend, after careful examination, that there are a lot of biblical passages and practices that we’ve understood in connection with repentance that don’t really have much to do with the concept. I claim that we’ve come to read the Bible as animated by a concern for repentance because of the concept’s subsequent importance within Judaism and Christianity. So obviously, it’s really important to be clear about what I’m considering to be repentance and what I’m not.

Now I want to start off by saying that, of course, every society has some sort of method for reconciliation. People do bad things, conflict ensues, and there needs to be a procedure for ending conflict. But we can’t call every form of reconciliation, “repentance.” If we do that, we just impose our own terminology and ideals, and lose the specific, fascinating insights that an ancient culture, such as that of Israel, has to offer us about sin, punishment and forgiveness. Clearly, there could be, for instance, procedures for dealing with sin in the Hebrew Bible and restoring the relationship with Israel’s god that don’t exactly fit into what we call “repentance” today.

Let’s start off by looking at a few examples from the Hebrew Bible. In 1 Kings 21:17-29, Elijah confronts Ahab about his bad behavior toward Naboth (he killed him and stole his vineyards). Ahab responds by tearing his clothes, donning sackcloth and fasting. God, in turn, responds pretty positively, saying that he’s going to let Ahab off the hook because he “humbled himself” before him. Is this “repentance?” Well, I think if we use that word we end up importing some things into the story that aren’t necessarily there. Is there any sign that Ahab, after this point, abandoned his evil ways and started to worship YHWH (Israel’s god) exclusively? Is there any sign that he felt badly about what he did? You could read feelings of guilt and contrition into his mourning rituals, but the biblical text doesn’t go there and instead highlights another really interesting term “humbled himself.” It turns out that this term nikhnaʿ is used most frequently in military contexts. To me, Ahab’s little performance looks more like a ritual of defeat; he recognizes his impending doom, and it turns out that’s what the deity needs. He wants Ahab to demonstrate that even he too is subject to the power of Israel’s god. You could call this “repentance” but I think the term ends up obscuring more than it reveals.

Now, let’s take a look at another really interesting term in the Hebrew Bible, shuv. This turns out to be such an important term because the Rabbis later on use it as the basis for a word that they invent, teshuva, which means, you guessed it, “repentance.” So is biblical shuv really the same, as the Rabbis would have it, as teshuva? Shuv appears most significantly in the well known prophetic phrase, “return to the Lord.” That often gets
understood as a return to covenantal obedience, but is it? I would suggest that the early prophets—Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah—used it quite differently. For instance, Isaiah talks about how one day the Egyptians (!) are going to build an altar to YHWH and will cry out to him whenever they are attacked. God will respond to their entreaties whenever they “turn back to him.” (Isaiah 19:19-22).

Are the Egyptians really “returning” to covenantal obedience? Instead, the term seems to function early on as a form of appeal, alongside other terms such as “seeking.” It has to do with turning to the deity at an altar site dedicated to oracular inquiry. Shuv is also really important to Jeremiah, but he talks about a “return to the Lord” that often seems more like an offer for familial reconciliation, “Come back, wayward children!” (Jer 3:22), than a formal process of abandoning sin and reforming one’s ways. Then when we get to later biblical texts, such as those found in Ezekiel, Jonah, and Job, we find a new phrase: “turn away from sin.” This clearly paves the way for the later understanding of repentance but doesn’t yet seem to be the identical concept. For one thing, you can’t “turn away” from a particular sin; it has to do only with a generalized abandonment of wrongdoing. For another, it’s not a mental act, just a behavioral change, what I call a “cessation of sin.” It has to do with removing sin, like other kinds of impurity, before the deity, so that, when he looks down upon the people, he is not enraged by the sight of their sin, but it doesn’t yet envision repentance itself is an efficacious act. What matters is the result, not the particular sort of process through which it is brought about. We may be closer to a concept of “repentance,” but still not quite there.

It’s really only when we get to the Greek sources that we start to see the idea in its most familiar form. First of all, it’s important to realize what metanoia, the common word for “repentance,” means. It’s usually used in classical sources for the futile feeling of regret that you get after making a wrong decision. But starting around the turn of the Common Era, it starts to be used in positive terms in the writings of figures such as Plutarch and Philo. Here’s a passage from Plutarch:

> For as wayfarers who have stumbled over a stone, or skippers who have capsized off a headland, if they retain the circumstances in their memory, henceforth never fail to avoid with a shudder not only the occasion of their misadventure, but everything resembling it, so those who constantly hold up to their repentance and remorse the shame and loss involved in compliancy will in similar circumstances resist the feeling and not easily allow it to carry them away. (On Compliancy 536, 19 [De Lacy and Einarson, LCL])

With this formulation we arrive at a concept very close to the one used within early Christianity and Judaism. Repentance is retrospective; it’s a way of looking over our past lives and, through the pain caused by past wrongdoing, ensuring some transformation in our future identity. Philo takes the notion and applies it to the process of conversion as well. It’s not just for the righteous who err but for those who want to enter into Judaism as well. I think this is the concept as it appears more or less in rabbinic Judaism and in the Gospels (though there are attempts among certain scholars to see the concept there as unique, as something closer to a “change of mind”—see my book, chapter seven). It represents a significant development over and against what is found in the Hebrew Bible because of its focus on repentance as an effective mental act, an event that transpires within our beings that has transformative potential. Interesting enough, as a final point, the Septuagint, the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, does not even use metanoia to translate Hebrew shuv! It uses instead terms related to “turning.” However, later Greek translations
did use metanoia as did passages in the New Testament referencing Hebrew Bible texts, thus showing that the understanding of Hebrew shuv had indeed changed. In this sense, “repentance” really only comes into its own around the turn of the Common Era long after the texts that comprise the Hebrew Bible were composed.

David’s book How Repentance Became Biblical can be purchased on Amazon.com, at the following address:


Paul, Jesus, and the Messiah
Is Repentance a Biblical Idea? Interview with David Lambert