Two New Studies of Biblical Repentance

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While repentance will always be an important topic for readers of the Bible, scholarly treatments of this subject peaked in the middle of the twentieth century, and it has hardly received further attention until recently. As one promotional blurb correctly points out, the repentance theme in the Bible has received little sustained attention over the past half-century of scholarship, which has been largely restricted to word studies or focused on a particular text or genre. Studies of the overall theology of the Bible have typically given the theme only passing mention.1

Even theological commentaries on the Bible tend to skip over this topic while relying on the conclusions of mid-twentieth century linguistic studies. The recent 900-page Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible presents 282 topical articles by 172 distinguished contributors without featuring the topic of repentance in any that I have found. Notwithstanding that “the ultimate aim of the present work is to commend ways of reading Scripture that lead to the blessing of knowing God and of being formed unto godliness,”2 repentance is never featured as a topic. Even the three-page treatment of sin does not include a single mention of the word repentance.3 Fortunately, the situation is now changed. The recent publication of two major studies now provides students of biblical theology with thorough and up-to-date analyses of this central biblical topic. It is also helpful that each is written from a different philosophical/theological perspective — highlighting thereby the competing methodological assumptions of each study. Both authors represent the highest scholarly standards in their respective traditions. Both scholars feature the early origins of repentance language and literature in the Hebrew Bible, which makes their work especially valuable for students of the Book of Mormon, who can appreciate more help with pre-exilic Hebrew traditions.

Mark J. Boda is an extraordinarily prolific scholar whose early passion for the Hebrew Bible led him to a PhD at the University of Cambridge. Now a professor of biblical literature and theology at McMaster Divinity College, he has authored 13 significant books, 100 academic articles, and a comparable number of other related publications over the last 25 years. Clearly a star in the expanding field of highly competent evangelical biblical scholars, he is actively engaged with other scholars and institutions across a broad range of scholarly collaborations and associations and graduate student supervision, while maintaining an active ministerial agenda. ‘Return to Me’ appears as the culmination of a significant sequence of earlier works on penitential themes and texts and provides evangelicals generally with a much needed treatment of repentance both supportive of their theological commitments and informed and guided by first-rate scholarly principles and methodologies.

Since completing his third degree in Near Eastern languages and civilizations at Harvard University in 2004, David A. Lambert has continued to focus on his dissertation topic of repentance and on how the concept has evolved through centuries of interpretation and translation. Methodologically, Lambert deliberately stands apart from much traditional biblical scholarship by assuming that theological terms like repentance must have developed over time and that it would be a serious mistake to look for a constant core of meaning across the full sweep of biblical texts. As his published articles and this award winning book amply illustrate, Professor Lambert consistently integrates a historical criticism of the biblical text with a similar criticism of the interpretations and translations of the text through the ages. Now a professor in the University of North Carolina Department of Religious Studies, he recently received the American Academy of Religion reward of excellence for this book. In both his teaching and his academic writing, he emphasizes the importance of recognizing the assumptions that students, academics, and historical interpreters of scripture bring to that enterprise.

Boda and Lambert are clearly aware of each other’s projects, though both books avoid a direct confrontation. From Lambert’s historical perspective, it must be obvious that Boda is searching the earliest biblical writings for evidences of conceptual continuity with the later Christian scriptures and teachings. On the other hand, Boda might be inclined to question Lambert’s assumption that there was a time before repentance, a time in biblical origins in which our modern religious interest in repentance would have been unrecognizable.
The traditional bridge that Boda is trying to cross in reverse direction is the longstanding recognition of biblical scholars that the principal Hebrew word for repentance in the Old Testament was *shuv*, meaning “turn” or “return” as actions leading to changes in direction of movement, while the New Testament writers moved on to the Greek terms *metanoia/metanoeo*, meaning a “change of mind.” Even though the four gospels held on to *epistrepho* as a translation for *shuv*, other New Testament writings and certainly the early Christian writers shifted their preferred usage to *metanoia/metanoeo* and associated references to mental thinking and feelings. Accordingly, Boda is quick to notice Old Testament references to feelings of remorse or regret, to rituals of confession or penitence, that may be associated with instances of repentance. Lambert, on the other hand, notes how rare such references to mental and emotional interiority are in his search for the original meanings of *shuv* in the oldest Hebrew texts.

In his systematic examination of the sequence of texts from the Judeo Christian tradition, Lambert finds the first occurrences in YWHW’s warnings to Abraham’s descendants that they not seek direction from (turn to) oracles identified with other gods, and that they not put their trust in (turn to) the armies of stronger nations through treaties and alliances. Rather, he calls them to *return* or *turn* to him. From this simple beginning, in which it would not be easy to distinguish faith from repentance, Lambert tracks five major stages of development for this “genealogy of repentance.” Even more provocatively, he concludes that our modern theological discourse around repentance was a product of the Hellenistic period; it began within moral philosophy, as a technique for the progress of the sage, and was taken up around the turn of the Common Era, within emerging forms of Judaism and Christianity, as a practice of subjective control for shaping communal discipline and defining communal boundaries. 4

Boda, on the other hand, argues for a deep continuity of meaning for *repentance* throughout the Bible as is exemplified in Zechariah 1:1–6 and in Acts 26:16–20.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Return *[shuv]* to me,” declares the Lord of hosts, “that I may *return* *[shuv]* to you,” says the Lord of hosts. … Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Return*[shuv]* now from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.”

… Then they *repented* [shuv] and said, “As the Lord of hosts purposed to do to us in accordance with our ways and our deeds, so He has dealt with us.” (Zechariah 1:3–6, New American Standard Bible, emphasis added)

Boda finds the same basic meaning in Paul’s recounting of his original vision — in which he uses all three New Testament terms for repentance, when he was told that he would be sent to Jews and Gentiles

... to open their eyes so that they may *turn* [epistrepho] from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God…. That they should *repent* [metanoeo] and *turn* [epistrepho] to God, performing deeds appropriate to *repentance* [metanoia]. (Acts 26:18–20, New American Standard Bible, emphasis added)

Beginning with the Genesis account of Cain, Boda shares his analysis of every biblical passage relating to *repentance*. Like Lambert, he sees the Torah picturing “repentance as a return to relationship with Yahweh” which may require “abandoning other gods.” But while this returning focuses on behavior, Boda also sees in many passages the requirement of “an inner reorientation that engages one’s heart and soul.” He points in this regard to Leviticus, which “emphasizes the verbal and affective dimensions of repentance, exhorting confession of sin and humility of heart.” He also finds Deuteronomy emphasizing both “the behavioral and affective dimensions of repentance, exhorting obedience and a change from the heart.” 5 Finally, after completing his detailed review of the rest of the Old Testament and the New Testament, Boda concludes that Christian scripture supports the same “essential relational character of the theology of repentance:”

This relational return to our Creator and Redeemer arises from the depth of the human heart, enabled
by the work of the Spirit. Such Christian repentance will often be expressed through oral confession and necessarily entails turning from the sinful attitudes and actions that frustrate the intimacy we as humans can enjoy with our Creator and Redeemer.6

Students of the Book of Mormon will find a great deal in both these books to help them in their study. Both present a thorough analysis of all the early biblical texts that could be thought to have influenced Lehi and his successors. Lambert reads those texts through the lens of contemporary historical criticism. And Boda reads them through the lens of the redemptive teachings of the New Testament. Both will be relevant for the Book of Mormon reader. What neither of these books picks up on at all is how often the biblical passages they analyze characterize repentance as turning or returning to the Lord’s path or way to walk with him, the metaphor that dominates Book of Mormon teaching.7

1. See back cover of Boda, ‘Return to Me.’


3. Ibid., 748–51.


5. Boda, 46–47.
