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## **An Examination of Repentance as a Gift from God in the OT**

Dr. David O. Momo  
Dept. of Ancient Studies, University of Stellenbosch  
Bible Society of Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

The Old Testament (OT) makes many references to the issue of repentance. In this study the notion “repentance as gift from God” is examined. The basic question is whether this gift is free for all or only for a pre-determined few from the OT perspective. A brief survey of rabbinic thoughts, the idea of freedom and determinism is made. It is then argued that to say that repentance is a gift from God is different from other notions such as spiritual gift(s) and grace. A thesis is then proposed about how repentance as a gift from God may be understood. Employing the analogies of how the sun heat may be

used and the way human body may get diseases, it is proposed that the combination of the social environment largely influence human moral behaviour. It is therefore argued that to say that a moral choice such as repentance is a gift from God is to say that God maintains an open door policy so that anyone who so wills may freely decide to repent and if he does so, he may find pardon and acceptance before God. It is argued that this seems to be the idea of repentance being a gift from God from the OT perspective.

### **1. Introduction**

It may be rightly asked, why should someone be interested in studying repentance? In order to answer this question, it may be necessary to make a few observations. First the story about Jesus is contained in the New Testament part of the Christian Scriptures, but the Scriptures that Jesus used in his preaching were mainly those of the Jewish Scriptures known as “Torah,” which the Christians refer to as the OT. At the beginning of his sermons, Jesus begins by calling his audience to repent (see Matt. 4:17). Matthew in his account reports that John uses the text of Joel 2:12 in his sermon, calling on the people of Israel to repent (Matt. 3:2). The sermon of John also contains another text taken from Isaiah 40:3, which says “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, in the desert prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God” (NIV).

Secondly, as it shall be argued latter, repentance has a higher priority to God in the OT than the multitude of sacrifices that it contains. In Ps. 51:16, 17 we read,

“You do not delight in sacrifice or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart” (NIV). Contrite is defined as being “very sorry for something bad that you have done” (Hornby 2000:250).

By this definition, I take it to be that to be sorry, share substantially, the semantic domain of repentance. So, for this discussion I shall assume them to be one and the same. With so many occurrences of ‘repent,’ repentance’ or ‘sorry,’ in the OT, and it may be rated as having a very high priority just as sacrifice. The place occupied by discussions of sacrifice in OT theology is much more than that given to discussions on repentance. In the OT “repent” and its modified forms such as “repented” and “repentance” occur about one hundred and seven times. The word “sacrifice” and its other related forms

occur four hundred and fifteen times according to my search from the Paratext 6 software of the RSV Bible. Yet God never says in the OT that he does not desire repentance, but he has said it that he does not desire sacrifice a number of times in the OT, (see 1 Sam. 15:22; Ps. 51:6; Prov. 15:6; Ecc. 5:1; Isa. 1:11; Jer. 7:21; Hos. 6:6) to mention only a few. If God attaches so much value to repentance, it should be examined to know whether God gives all the opportunity to repent or the opportunity is given to only a few.

Thirdly in light of today's debate as to whether gay <sup>1</sup> is a genetic problem or a choice from free will, it will be of interest to know whether an individual can choose to repent or not. To the end that people who practice gay may be required to repent, if it lies within their will power to do so, one assumes that the OT considers that gay practice is an evil that God hates and demands those who practice it to turn from doing so.<sup>2</sup> The account in Gen. 19:5 says, "They called to Lot, 'where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them'" (NIV). Against this Lot insisted, "Do not do this wicked thing." From the foregoing, it could be argued that the OT views gay as a wicked act. For every wicked act, repentance is demanded of man by God, according to OT view (see 2 Chr. 7:14.)

Fourthly, one of the three "solas" of the evangelical movement is "sola scriptura," Scripture only. With a conviction that God's objective truth is revealed in the OT and the NT, one becomes curious to also know what the OT says about repentance (see Evangelical Alliance). The authors in this internet article hold the view that, "the Bible must always take precedence over reason, tradition, ecclesiastical authority and individual experience." The second is "sola gratia," 'by grace alone'. "This was the conviction that God takes the initiative in salvation and the outworking of his plan for the world. It holds that we know the truth first and foremost not because we deduce it rationally from observation of nature, but because the God of truth has revealed it to us. In fact, without this divine

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<sup>1</sup> The practice whereby same gender engage in sexual relations with one another is what I mean by the term "gay." Some use the term homosexual or alternate sexual orientation for the same practice.

<sup>2</sup> On the discussion of homosexual views of the Bible see Lilly Nortje-Meyer 2005 pp174-182.

initiative, we are powerless and lost” (see Rev Dr David Hilborn in [http://evangelical alliance](http://evangelicalalliance.org) Nov. 7, 2008).

In this study, attempts will be made to examine the notion that a moral act required to be performed by human is viewed as a gift from God in the OT. What does it mean to say that a moral behavior is a gift from God and at the same time is required of all human to act it out? These are the issues that will be critically examined in this study. First, a definition of repentance is proposed.

## **2. Toward a Working Definition of Repentance as Used in Study**

David Hilborn ([http://evangelical alliance](http://evangelicalalliance.org)) defines repentance as “a discernible reorientation of the sinner's mind and heart towards God.” According to Hilborn this is “**Conversionism** - The truth of the eternal gospel must be appropriated in personal faith, which comes through repentance - that is, a discernible reorientation of the sinner's mind and heart towards God.” Though Hilborn writes from a New Testament perspective, his idea that repentance is “a discernible reorientation of the sinner’s mind and heart towards God finds good support in the OT too. In Joel 2:13, we read,

“Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God ...”  
See also Ez. 3:19.

While there are views as to whether repentance is religious or only psychological, there seems to be a general consensus that repentance involves a change of heart and that it is changing from doing what is considered as evil to doing what is considered as good. The view being held in this study is that repentance is a religious experience and that it involves a change of behaviour, a view that runs through the entire OT.

Does man take the initial step to repent? If it is said that repentance is a gift from God, what would that mean? Does God give it to all or to only a chosen few? What will be the implication of a conclusion either for or against free will upon our understanding of the nature of God? These are the issues that this study seeks to address.

## **3. Thesis**

My thesis in this article is to make a case that repentance viewed as a gift from God in the OT, could be understood as an opportunity given to man by God to repent; an opportunity that may be accepted

or rejected by moral free man. The notion “gift” is here taken to mean that an offer made by God or any one may or may not be accepted. The potential recipient may choose either way. That is to say that God decides to make available *opportunity* for repentance as a gift to whosoever will. God allows the possibility for people who once chose to do evil to turn and choose to do good and still find acceptance before God. The opportunity is different from the anticipated action. It is this *opportunity* that is considered as a gift from God in this study, while the act of repentance itself is a voluntary moral choice available to all. If it can be demonstrated that a man wants to repent, but there is no opportunity given to him, then whosoever withholds such an opportunity may be said could be held responsible for the non-repentance of the subject in question.

The willingness or otherwise to receive this gift is contingent upon man’s free will, not compelled by God, as shall be argued. To illustrate, the sun is a gift from God to all mankind. Suppose that someone has some beans of cocoa to be sun-dried but decides to keep it in the house from the reach of the sun heat, God will not force the sun into the house of such a one in order to dry the cocoa beans. The sun is ever there. Some may make use of it, others may refuse to. It shall be argued that this is similar to the way any gift from God, including repentance may be understood.

#### **4.0. A Brief Survey of Literature on Repentance**

This survey is intended to explore a few important studies on how the OT may be understood to deal with the issue of repentance. It is not intended to be exhaustive, only a few representative of some major works is surveyed. Particularly the question that will guide the survey is, “does the OT see repentance as that which God gives to some and withholds from others?” In order words, may human be held responsible for not repenting?

An insight into where the OT places the responsibility on repentance may help in appreciating the great debate that has divided Bible students into two main camps, predestination and moral freedom. Our brief survey shall not be limited to studies drawn from OT alone. Debates on the question of the existence or otherwise of moral free will for human shall be briefly referred to also.

#### 4.1. Berkhof

Berkhof in his systematic theology identifies two types of repentance. Type one he refers to as “National Conversion.” He notes that “In the days of Moses, Joshua and Judges the people of Israel repeatedly turned their backs upon Jehova and after experiencing the displeasure of God, repented of their sin and returned unto the Lord... “(1988:482). Also, the Ninevites demonstrated national repentance, (Jonah 3:10). Berkhof (1988:483) also identifies what he refers to as “Individual Repentance.” He cites David in 2 Sam. 12:13 and Naaman in 2 Ki. 5:15 and Manasseh in 2 Chr. 33:12 as examples of individual repentance.

Berkhof tries to answer a question that is assumed in this discussion. If human is required to repent from doing bad things, who authors the doing of bad things in the first place? According to Berkhof, “God’s eternal decree certainly rendered the entrance of sin into the world certain, but this may not be interpreted so as to make God the cause of sin in the sense of being its responsible author” (1988:220). He cites Job 34:10; Isa. 6:3; Deut. 25:16, 32:4; Ps. 5:4, 11:5; 92:16; Zech. 8:57). Berkhof argues that the essence of sin lays “in the fact that Adam placed himself in opposition to God, that he refused to submit *his will* to the *will of God*... “(italics for emphasis are mine). This may be collaborated by a statement from Baruch 15:14-15,

“Do not say, ‘It was the Lord’s doing that I fell away,’ for he does not do what he hates. Do not say, ‘It was he who led me astray,’ for he has no need of the sinful. The Lord hates all abominations; such things are not loved by those who fear him. It was he who created humankind in the beginning, and he left them in power of their own free choice. If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice” (NRSV Apocryphal).

Even though Berkhof struggles to wriggle himself from openly placing the responsibility of evil on God, yet his claim that “God’s eternal decree certainly rendered the entrance of sin into the world certain” is highly problematic. Would it be thought that God made a mistake or was not quite perfect when he created the world, since he did not foreclose the possibility of sin entering into the world? In other words, could God’s creative act be likened to an automobile

engineer who designs a car with some mechanical fault that eventually makes the car to malfunction? This is difficult to conceive because in Gen. 1, for every account of each of the elements that God created, it is closed with the refrain “and God saw that it was good.” At the end of the narrative, the narrator says “God looked at what he had done. All was very good” (CEV). Indeed the Hebrew says “and it was very, very good.” With such superlative qualification about what God has done, how was the entrance of sin made certain? Berkhof does not tell us this, not even his free will gives adequate explanation.

Berkhof also attempts to answer the question “who authors conversion?” By conversion I am using it here to express the same idea as repentance, the recognition that a particular choice of behavior is evil and taking decision to turn from doing that which is considered to be evil. In Berkhof’s view, “God only can be called the author of conversion” (1988:490). He supports this argument by citing Ps. 85:4. If Berkhof’s translation of the Psalm is correct or if the versions he uses may be said to have translated the Hebrew correctly, then repentance as gift from God may be understood as saying that repentance, like the gene of a human person is ordained or decreed by God. However, the translation of the text that Berkhof uses is disputative. In the textual apparatus of BHS, it is said that the text might be read as “turn from your anger” (see Bratcher and Reyburn 1991:746). Also in Lam. 5:21, it is most unlikely that God is being asked to cause someone to repent. Rather it is most probable that the one praying requests God “to please restore him to the former position of favour” (see Reyburn 1992:144-145). If we consider the second stich of this poem, then this interpretation is quite possible and more probable going by the theory of parallelism in Hebrew poetry (see Watson 1984, Moomo 1993). Thus the texts that Berkhof depends upon to demonstrate that it is God that causes a person to repent are disputative texts and thus may not be suitable for being admitted in evidence for an argument of the type under discussion.

If even one were to ignore the problem posed by the texts that Berkhof uses, there is still the problem of understanding what is meant by saying that “God is the author of conversion”? In other words, what does it mean to say that God is the author of repentance? Is this statement in agreement with Baruch 15:14-15 that is cited

above? Exactly what is the role of God in repentance? What does it mean to say that it is a gift of God to mankind? These are the issues that shall be discussed in subsequent sections in this study.

The problems inherent in Berkhof's proposal notwithstanding he must be commended for bringing together various perspectives on repentance, which I summarize below (see Berkhof 1988:488).

- That conversion is found in religious and non-religious spheres. It is a known human experience.
- That conversion is adjustment to what human feels is the divine will.
- That Pratt views conversion as a unification of character, the achievement of a new self.
- That Coe thinks conversion is related to God.
- That James thinks conversion may not have anything to do with divine intervention.

However repentance is conceived, there is agreement among those who have given it a thought that it involves a change of behavior from a considered negative value to a more positive value. It is also the case that for the OT people and by extension for the Christian community, repentance is demanded by God of every one. As the OT acknowledges in Ps. 14:3 that "all have turned aside, they have together become corrupt, there is no one who does good, not even one." So, all needs repentance.

In the Jerusalem Talmud Sanhedrin 28b it states that God speaks to Elijah thus, "Behold the precious gift of which I have bestowed on my world: though a man sins again and again, but returns in penitence, I will receive him."<sup>3</sup> Also, Talmud Yoma 86a states, "Great is repentance. It brings healing into the world. It reaches to the throne of God, it brings redemption, it prolongs life."<sup>4</sup>

From these statements, it is perhaps safe to say that the Rabbis of the Talmudic period see repentance as a gift from God to *all* mankind, a view that Berkhof seems to uphold. From the OT perspective, repentance plays a major role in salvation of mankind. Indeed in the book of Baruch, it is expressed very clearly that the reason why the

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://en.Wikipedia>, read on 26/6/2008.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://en.Wikipedia>.



people of Israel suffered so much in the hands of the Babylonians was because they did evil and would not repent. In Baruch 2:7-9 we read,

All those calamities with which the Lord threatened us have come upon us. Yet we have not entreated the favor of the Lord by turning away, each of us, from the thoughts of our wicked hearts. And the Lord has brought them upon us, for the Lord has brought them upon us, for the Lord is just in all the works that he has commanded us to do (NRSV Apocryphal).

If the views of Berkhof and those of the Rabbis were compared with those of the author of Baruch as presented above, there seems to be some sort of difference. While Bekhof is of the opinion that it is God that authors or initiates repentance in humans, the Rabbis and the author of Baruch view repentance as an act of the will of human that may willingly take advantage of the gift of repentance.

With such apparent conflicting views, how may one understand the idea that God takes the initiative of salvation by giving repentance to humans as a gift? There is the need to clarify the nature of this gift and who may or may not be eligible to receive it.

#### **4.2. Grudem**

Grudem (1994) addresses the question of evil events and their cause in his systematic theology. He agrees that “the term providence is not found in the Scripture” (1994:315). By providence Grudem includes the following:

- God keeps all things existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them. By properties, Grudem seems to mean the physical properties of nature that enable them to have the physical actions and reactions they have. It has nothing to do with moral choice (see Grudem 1994:316-317).
- God cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties with which he created them. By this Grudem means that the properties of snow and how it behaves can be predicted. This applies to all other properties of every natural phenomenon.

One may infer from the above that the laws of nature that causes rain to fall or the law of gravity that flowing water or falling apple obey are created by God and sustained as long as nature exists.

Scientists do not create these laws; they only discover and use them to explain how nature is governed. It is not the case that God is cooperating with nature, as Grudem supposes; rather they are part and parcel and are the very ontology of the created order.

It is curious that Grudem cites Neh. 9:6 which is clearly a reference to natural physical world and its operating laws in a strictly determined way to human moral choices. This curiosity is heightened when one considers that Grudem (1994:316-317) also agrees that the passage is referring to physical created amoral world and not human moral choices. Also Grudem does not seem to make any difference between good actions and evil actions when he reads passages such as Jer. 10:23; Pro. 20:24; Pro. 16:1, to mention only these. Grudem would want his readers to believe that God is to be held responsible for every kind of action (1994:321). It may be argued that the normal moral inclination of man, like the law of gravity to the physical world, is to do evil always (see Gen. 6:6; Ps. 14:2-3). So when a man makes a good moral choice, it should be considered as doing that which is abnormal. In that case it may be argued that a man, who makes a moral choice, does so because he has been aided by a divine power. When he does evil, he is acting his very nature. The question, of course, still remains, where does this evil come from when man was created good (See Gen. 1:31)? How does he become so totally corrupt? This shall be examined in section 5 below.

There are passages that Grudem (1994:323-325) uses to demonstrate that God is to be held responsible for evil actions. Such passages include Ex. 4:21, 9:12; Ps. 105:25; 1 Sam. 16:14; Isa. 10:5; Jer. 25:9; Amos 4:6, 8-11 to mention a few from Grudem's examples. A more critical examination of these passages reveals that these instances are where God uses such evil acts to judge his people because they had sinned against him. Pain may be considered as evil. When God wants to judge his people he uses pains as his instrument. It will be debatable to assume that such actions would be at par with human moral choices.

For example, in some countries, armed robbers are usually executed by firing squad when arrested. The robbers themselves kill their victims by shooting them. Would any one argue that the same moral law is binding on those who shoot convicted armed robbers by the order of the court of law of the land and those who shoot innocent

traders who do their businesses according to the law of the land? If it may be considered absurd to think so, then it could be argued that it is equally absurd to equate God's choice of evil acts to punish offenders with humans who willingly choose to act immorally.

#### **4.3. The Evil “Yezer” in Rabbinic Thinking**

In rabbinic theology, “yezer”<sup>5</sup> is said to be the source of evil, specifically “yezer ra’a, the evil yezer or evil imagination” (see Solomon Schechter 1993:242-263). According to Schechter, God originally created “yezer” (imagination) but man is capable of imagining good as well as evil. According to Schechter (1993) Rabbinic theology teaches that without any help from God, man cannot overcome the evil “yezer.” Accordingly, in rabbinic theology, it is perceived that repentance is the “means of reconciliation” (1993:313). Schechter quotes God as saying, “I made the Evil Yezer. Be careful that he should not make thee sin; but if he did make thee sin, be eager to do repentance, then I will forgive thy sins” (1993:313). One may deduce from the forgoing that “the gates of repentance” are opened by God himself. But here again, God is made responsible for the existence of “yezer.” It appears from reading Schechter that God would not repudiate “yezer” but provides another avenue by which man could overcome “yezer.” This is similar to the way the ancient monarchs, especially the Medes and the Persians, are known to make laws. When they make a decree, it is irrevocable, but another decree could be made to checkmate the first decree (see Est. 5:10-12; 8:8; Dan: 8).

The theory of yezer is still a vexing theory because it makes God the originator of evil thinking/imagination. What will have been the purpose of allowing evil in a world that was perfectly made? Is it to subject man to suffering when he eventually chooses to do evil? So, one may still ask, “where does ‘yezer ra’a’ really come from? Does it come from God? This has been a long and inconclusive debate among theologians and philosophers for a very long time. It should be said that the notion “yezer ra’a” is not found in the Hebrew Bible or its translation “Evil imagination” found in the English Versions as the origin of evil. However it can be argued that the idea is not

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<sup>5</sup> In Gen 2:7 in the Hebrew Bible, the verb used to say that God formed man from the ground sounds like “yezer.”

foreign to the OT view about the source of evil (see Gen. 3:6; 6:3.) There are excellent sources on this for those who may want to peruse the debate (see Hopkins 1907:419-431).<sup>6</sup>

However, it appears that the OT Jews would not attribute evil imagination to have come from God. In the case of Isaiah 45:7 we read “I [God] form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I the LORD, have created it.” It may be argued, contrary to McKenzie (1968:77) that Isaiah does not talk about moral choice of humans in this text. Rather he talks about the punishment and disciplinary measures that the Lord brings upon Israel because of the negative moral choices that they make (see Buttrick 1956:524, The Prayer of Azariah 1:4-8 NRSV Apocryphal). If that argument merits any consideration, then it is difficult to make God responsible for human’s moral choices, whether good or evil.

Evil imagination, I would argue, may be compared to cancer. Cancer may be caused by a combination of the kinds of food that is eaten and the kinds of drinks that is drunk. There could be biochemical processes that could cause cancer to develop as a result of combinations and reactions of the chemicals in the food and drink taken when they interact in the body under favourable environment. In the same way, it is possible to imagine or think that there are some reactions and processes that can take place in the human psychological condition arising from the things heard, read or seen. Such reactions and processes in the mind or thought patterns may produce behaviours that may be evil or good, depending on the quality of the word heard, things seen or read (see Phillip Zimbardo 1971, 2007.<sup>7</sup> In the study cited above, Zimbardo (1971) concludes, “the results of the experiment are said to support situational attributions of behaviour rather than dispositional attribution. In other words, it seemed the situation caused the participants’ behaviour, rather than anything inherent in their individual personalities.”

The idea that the world to which an individual is exposed play very important part in shaping his/her moral choice seems to find support from the OT. Indeed, in Prov. 4:23-25) we read,

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<sup>6</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evil-philosophical\\_quandries\\_about\\_evil](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evil-philosophical_quandries_about_evil).

<sup>7</sup> See Zimbardo P. 1971. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford\\_prison\\_experiment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford_prison_experiment), Jan. 7, 2008.

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you.

It is of interest to note that in Deut. 7:5, total annihilation of the peoples of Canaan is what God commanded the people of Israel to do when they have conquered the land. Could it be that part of the reason is that the existence of certain social environment could interact with the people of Israel and cause them to do evil things? Verse 4 of the cited text seems to lend credence to such an idea.

#### **4.4. Opening the Gates of Repentance**

Schechter introduces the notion “opening the gates of repentance.” The question may be asked, how may one understand this “opening of the gates of repentance” by God? Does God open it to all or shuts it against some and open it to others? The relevance of this question shall become clearer when the issue of certain kind of sexual orientation choice that some people make has become a great debate in recent times. That choice will be used as an example to show the implication of perspectives on who should be held responsible on certain human actions. Should they be seen as being given by God or freely chosen by man? I shall argue there that the opening of the gates of repentance is indeed the same idea as *opportunity* given to people to repent if they want to. It is such an opening of gate or such an *opportunity* that is being seen as a gift from God. Before then, let us consider one more view on the subject under discussion.

#### **4.5. The View of G.A. Turner**

Turner G.A (1976) writes a very short article on repentance. In this work, he discusses the Hebrew word for repentance as “nakham” while the Greek is said to have used “metanoeo for the same notion. Quoting examples from several O.T scriptures, he notes two types of repentance. There is the repentance of man from doing evil things and turning to God and begging for God’s mercy. Turner also states that God is sometimes said to repent. This is when God regrets for making man (Gen. 6:6). Turner then comments on the prophets of O.T such as Amos, Jonah, and Ezekiel, to mention only these three, that have challenged their audiences to repent (Turner 1976:63). The repentance being discussed in this study is that of man turning from

doing evil and turning toward God by doing what is good. This, as already indicated, may be national as in the case of the people of Nineveh or individual as in the case of David, when prophet Nathan confronted him over his affairs with Uriah's wife.

Turner does not, however, discuss any further on the subject repentance, whether it is a gift from God and whether it is available to all or only to a few.

The question that preoccupies us is whether some are favoured to receive this gift while others are destined never to receive it. That is the subject of the next section.

### **5. Is a Human Free to Make a Moral Choice or Is He Predetermined to Choose Whatever Moral Choice He Chooses?**

There has been a long and inconclusive debate on whether human is free to choose what he wants to do or he is predetermined in doing what he does. Gordon H. Clark in The Theopedia defines freed will as “ability to make choices without prior prejudice, inclination or disposition ... and that these free will choices are not ultimately predetermined by God.”<sup>8</sup> In that article, various perspectives on free will are discussed. Also, in the Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, various views on free will from Christian thought, Mormonism, Islam, Hinduism and the Jew are presented.<sup>9</sup>

Of particular interest is the Jewish perspective on free will. I choose to focus on the Jewish perspective here because the OT is the religious and cultural literature of ancient Jew. Since the study is on the view of the OT on the subject, an examination of ancient Jewish perspective is considered to be relevant.

In the article, Gordon H. Clark cites Deut. 30:19 to argue that God does not determine anyone to do evil. The author argues that God created man so that man may, through the gate of this world enter into a joyful relationship with God. The place of this joyful relationship is in the world to come. The article contends that free will is required by God's justice. Without this free will, “man would

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<sup>8</sup> See [www.theopedia.com/Free\\_will](http://www.theopedia.com/Free_will), page 1.

<sup>9</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free\\_will\\_in\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_will_in_theology).

not be given or denied good for actions over which he had no control.” The argument continues,

in order for Man to have true free choice, he must not only have inner free will, but also an environment in which a choice between obedience and disobedience exists. God thus created the world such that both good and evil can operate freely.

From this the Rabbis formulate their maxim “All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven” (Talmud Berachot 33b) quoted in Wikipedia cited above.

Gordon also mentions the opposite of free will. The opposite of free will is referred to as determinism. The author presents various shades of free will, which include the view that human may possess a combination of free will plus determinism in his moral choice. This Gordon refers to as “compatibilism.”

The following observations may be made from the presentation of Gordon. First, the debate is mainly between two Christian teachings known as Calvinism and Arminianism. At a point in time the adherents to these teachings are so hostile to one another that a Calvinist has told an Arminianist saying “You are an Arminian, you are not a Christian” (see Roger, E. Olson 2008:151). Second, the dichotomy that is so prominent in Christian teaching and philosophy does not seem to be so prominent in OT view of man. For example, there is no debate in the OT as to whether man is a free moral agent or whether he is programmed by God to behave in a particular way. This is reflected in a summary of Jewish philosophy on this subject.<sup>10</sup> The Jewish thinkers attribute free will as a product of human soul (nsham). According to the Jews, nsham is “not hindered by or dependent on cause and effect.”

Gunton (1995) in his introduction to the book “God and Freedom,” surveys the debate. He traces the discourse on freedom and determinism to the idea of Pelagius, which Augustine strongly opposed. Augustine is said to hold the “autonomy theory” of human action (1995:3). According to Gunton, Augustine does not mean absolute autonomy in the platonic sense. In platonic view of freedom, “there is within us inbuilt faculty whereby, apparently without divine grace, we are able to recognize and do the good” (1995:3). Gunton

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<sup>10</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free\\_will](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_will), page 10.

states that Augustine would recognize that human freedom has some strains of God's prerogative. Strangely in Augustine's work "On Grace and Free Will," Gunton states that "Augustine attributes, without reference to the notion of grace, considerable power to both mind or spirit and will" (1993:3). Gunton surveyed representatives of most important works on freedom such as that of Edwards, who saw the difficulty of solving the problem of freedom and determinism as the absence of God from the discourse, the work of Milton, the work of Hume who saw the problem of justice with respect to determinism, the work of McFadyen, who struggles with the apparent contradiction between determinism and to be human and be in the image of God, to mention only these. Gunton comes to the conclusion that, "it is the community that enables us to realize what we each particularly are, and that is what is meant by freedom." In other words, freedom is social. I am not free without being a member of a community. This conclusion is also arrived at by Gunton's main article in the book he edits. He argues, "Freedom, I wish to argue, is not an immediate but a mediated relation to other people and the world which is the realm and object of free human action. Our freedom does not come neat, but is in part mediated to us by our fellow human beings and by God. What precisely is the role of God in human freedom, Gunton does not explain. But his idea that the social environment is relevant to understanding freedom is instructive in view of social dynamics in human behaviour as exemplified in the life of the people of Israel as they journeyed to the land of Canaan (see Deut chapter 7.)

The short survey above is only on some very general philosophical debate on freedom and moral choice, not specifically tied to OT study. Craig (1968) makes a contribution on the question of predestination from the OT perspective in a book he edited, titled *Biblical and Theological Studies*. His understanding about predestination as he sees it in the Old and the New Testaments may be appreciated by quoting in full the introduction to his article. He states,

No survey of the term used to express it [predestination] can convey an adequate sense of the place occupied by the idea of predestination in the religious system of the Bible. It is not too much to say that it is fundamental to the whole religious consciousness of the Biblical writers, and is so involved in all religious conceptions that to eradicate it would transform the entire scriptural representation. This is true of the OT as of the New Testament, as will become



sufficiently manifest by attending briefly to the nature and implications of such formative elements in the OT system as its doctrines of God, Providence, Faith, and the Kingdom of God (1968:270).

Having given the attributes and power of God, Craig argues that “such a God could not be thought of otherwise than as the free determiner of all that comes to pass in the world which is the product of His creative act; and the doctrine of Providence (pequdah) which is spread over the pages of the OT fully bears out this expectation” (1968:271-2782). Craig argues that “according to the OT conception, God foreknows only because he has pre-determined” (281). Does foreknowledge also mean that he who knows before hand is also responsible for the act? Is this what Craig means by arguing that he who foreknows also pre-determines all that happens including human moral choices? According to Craig, the OT does not allow us to imagine that God is the author of sin (283). One may ask, if God does not pre-determine that human should sin, could God still be said to be the free determiner of all that happens in his world? More specifically, would he be thought to pre-determine some to repent while others are pre-determined never to repent? If God determines all things and yet “OT does not allow us to imagine that God is the author of sin” is this not some kind of contradiction? These arguments are difficult and opinions are divided. The final word will not be said in this study, but attempts will be made to present a perspective that, at least, will open another little window through which the problem may be seen with regard to repentance as a gift from God.

The brief discussion on freedom and determinism above is intended to provide a background against which a view on repentance as a gift from God may be presented. One good example of this problem is found in the story of the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh, King of Egypt. In Ex. 2:19 God has said that he knows that the king of Egypt will not allow Israel to go away to worship him in the wilderness. In chapter 4:21, God said that he would harden the heart of Pharaoh because Pharaoh would not agree to let the Israelites go away from his land. In chapter 5:2 when Moses and Aaron met Pharaoh, he told them that he does not know God and so would not listen to him. The question here is, does Pharaoh freely choose not to

listen to God's message or does God pre-destine him not to listen to God's message through Moses?

It should be noted that the Pharaohs of Egypt see themselves as part of the system of divinities of their land. Nahum Sarna (1991) has argued that the judgments or the mighty acts that Moses performs in Egypt were against the divinities of Egypt, which understandably, include the king of Egypt himself. On Ex. 4:21 where God is said to harden the heart of Pharaoh, the note of the NRSV study Bible has this to say, "Pharaoh will harden his own heart or stubbornness (8:15, 32; 9:34), but toward the end God will respond by hardening it for him." Commenting on Ex. 4:21, Grudem (1994:323) argues,

It is sometimes objected that Scripture also says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Ex. 8:15, 32; 9:34), and that God's act of hardening Pharaoh's heart was only in response to the initial rebellion and hardness of heart that Pharaoh himself exhibited of his own free will. But it should be noted that God's promises that he would harden Pharaoh's heart ... are made long before Scripture tells us that Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

One response to this way of looking at this story is to ask, when does God's judgment begin?" Is it at the time of execution or sometimes long decided before the execution time? Also it should be asked, what constitute(s) the entire judgment? First it will be observed that in Ex. 3:7 we read,

And the LORD said I have certainly seen the suffering of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry for help from those who oppress them. As you know, I know his pains. I have come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians and to take them away from the land, that land to a land that is good and broad, to a land that is very fertile for crops and animal husbandry, the land of Canaan. [*translation mine*].

From the quotation above, it can be argued that God had completed all the activities of judgment that will be brought against the Egyptians in order to deliver the people of Israel from oppression and exploitation. The set of activities include the hardening of the heart of Pharaoh. If one may use a song from revivalist songs, Pharaoh has crossed the fatal line. This idea of crossing a fatal line is also known in both OT and the NT (see Dan. 5:26; Ps. 81:10-12; Rom. 1:21-24). In the case of Dan. 5:26, the judgment of Belshazzar had been completed, but not yet executed. Part of the execution was a bloody coup that swept away the rule of Belshazzar. In this wise, part of the judgment of an evil doer is that when he refuses to take advantage of

opportunities to repent, his time of judgment may have come. Part of that judgment may be that God will withdraw the opportunity to repent and so the evil doer will no longer be able to repent. In the case of Pharaoh, the Israelites, through Joseph saved that land from death by famine. As time went on, a new Pharaoh reigned and he forgot the good done to him and bit the fingers that fed him. He paid good with evil, therefore he must receive evil. God is just and justice demands that Egypt should be paid in her own coin. For the stories that teach justice see Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:1-15), Jacob and Esau (Gen. Gen. 37:31-37; 22:16, 34) and the law (Ex. 21:23-26). Thus when they refused to stop cruel oppression against the people that saved their own lives, justice must take place. So, before Ex. 4:21, that Grudem relies on, judgment had already taken place. This may be one way of dealing with the issue of God hardening the heart of Pharaoh.

I would argue that the judgment of Pharaoh probably began when he became extremely wicked to the Israelites and by saying that he will not listen to the messenger of God. The hardening of the heart by God is not the reason why God judged Pharaoh, rather it is in itself the judgment (see Rom 1:19-26). If such a line of reasoning merits any consideration, then the difficulty of the case of Pharaoh's heart being hardened by God becomes greatly reduced. It may then be consistent with what the OT says about God that he foreknows all that will be, yet he does not author or pre-determine human to make choices that are considered morally bad.

If God may be seen as not having pre-determined some to repent, what then does it mean to say that repentance is a gift from God? This is discussed in section six below.

## **6. The Notion “Gift from God”**

The New Testament writers see salvation as a gift from God (Eph. 2:8-9). If the idea of being saved by grace may be understood that the person saved would not have qualified by way of good character or religious acts of piety, it appears that it is not exactly the same thing as the decision to repent. If we may illustrate from human example, there could be cases where a person may express regret and sorrow for doing harm to another person and that person will not forgive the repentant offender. In such a case, there is repentance, but there is no forgiveness.

Even in the case of Nineveh, some argue that a non-Near Eastern context reading may point to the possibility that though Nineveh repented, it was not forgiven. Reading the text through Greek traditions, Bolin (1995) points out that Nineveh was “unequivocally destroyed” (1995:109). If Bolin’s argument has any merit, then it is possible to infer from his discourse that one may repent and yet not be forgiven.

Equally in the Bible we find cases where there are no explicit statements of repentance, but God offers forgiveness. In the story of the Fall, Adam and Eve are never said to repent. Yet God made covering from animal skin and covered the shame of the first humans on earth.

So, the two actions may be related, but not the same. A question that may be raised from this example is, does the OT see repentance as a gift from God? Before discussing the question, an attempt should be made to clarify the notion “gift from God,” even though some light had been thrown on it above. The idea of spiritual gifts is discussed extensively in the New Testament (see R.A. Cole 1976:506-508). Cole observes that the OT does not list various human capabilities as gifts of the Spirit. Rather it recognizes all skills of man, his wisdom to do crafts and military ability as what happens when the spirit of the LORD comes upon a person. In Gen. 41:39-40, we read that Pharaoh recognized that God gives to Joseph a special gift in economic planning in time of economic downturns. Also, in Ex. 31:2-6 we read about Bezalel and Oholiab whom God gives the spirit of being able to do good craft work in constructing the Tabernacle. In 1 Cor. 12 and Eph. 4:9-16, we read about the gift of the Holy Spirit. In these instances, what God does to the individuals mentioned in the NT was specific to them. Such gifts or special power is not within the will power of the individuals concerned. It is decided by God as he wishes (1 Cor. 12:4-6; Eph. 4:7).

The notion “gift from God” in terms of religious act of piety is not referred to in OT. If spiritual gift may be understood as the special abilities that the Holy Spirit gives, will it be helpful by way of analogy to think about “gift from God” as any religiously positive moral action by man as being so given to him by God? In other words is it God that enables the doer of such an act to perform it? Could an individual have willed or decided, for example to be a

skillful Tabernacle builder? One could answer this in the affirmative. However, even with learning in building or construction engineering, the special ability will still show differences in some more than in others. In contrast to this, spiritual gifts as found in the NT does not depend upon what a person wills. For instance, no one may will to speak in tongues, or to be a healer or to be an interpreter of tongues. Also those who speak in tongues may not be said that one tongue is smoother than another like one tabernacle builder may build a better tabernacle than the other, even though both may have studied building technology.

On the basis of the above, one could argue that spiritual gifts in terms of abilities to perform certain activities that are amoral are different from the notion that to make a moral decision, like repentance, is a gift from God. To make a moral choice being regarded as a gift from God should be seen and understood as *opportunity* given by God to whosoever will without any interference from the Divine to oppose any one to exercise such a will. Anyone that so wills, has the liberty to take advantage of such an opportunity. The opportunity is an open gate to all and sundry to choose a moral act such as repentance. Though man is innately bad, yet he has the ability to decide to change and thus he could repent if he so desires.

Does the OT see repentance in terms of spiritual gift? What does it mean when in Yoma 86b (<http://en.wikipedia><sup>11</sup>) the Jerusalem Talmud Sanhedrin is quoted as saying that God spoke to Elijah thus: “Behold, the precious gift which I have bestowed on my world: though a man sins again and again, but returns in repentance, I will receive him”? This idea is also echoed in Sirach 5:5-7 as referred to before.

One way of understanding gift from God in relationship to repentance is to think of it as an *opportunity* that God gives to humans such that anyone who does wrong and wants to return to God at any time, he is allowed by God to do so. If repetition may be allowed for the purpose of emphasis, it is an open gate. This seems to be the view of the Talmud Sanhedrin referred to above.

From the discussions above, an understanding of repentance as a gift from God may be proposed. It may be said that to say that God

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<sup>11</sup> Read on 26/4/2008.

has a foreknowledge of what shall be is not the same thing as saying that he is the cause or responsible for the existence of that event, particularly the moral choice of man. Also it may be proposed that a gift may be presented, but the will to accept or not to accept lies on the shoulder of an individual. For if God is just, he could not have created an individual predetermined never to be able to repent and then turns around to punish that person when he does not repent. God does not do what he hates. I cite a few cases to illustrate this.

In Ez. 33:11 we read, “Say to them, as I live, says the Lord, GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live.” The same idea is repeated in Ez. 18:23 and 32. Isa. 55 is a call to the wicked to turn to the Lord. In verse 7, the prophet says “let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD that he may have mercy on them.”

Also in 2 Chr. 6:36-39, we read

If they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to a land far or near; then if they come to their senses in the land to which they have been taken captive, and repent, and plead with you in the land of their captivity, saying, ‘We have sinned, and have done wrong; we have acted wickedly’; if they repent with all their heart and soul in the land of their captivity, to which they were taken captive, and pray toward their land, which you gave to their ancestors, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name, then hear from heaven.

These very few examples are given to demonstrate that in the OT perspective, the responsibility to repent lies squarely with the individual. God does not give this gift as favour to some and denies it to others. As stated earlier, repentance is a gift that anyone may voluntarily receive or reject. ***It is a gift only in the sense that it is an opportunity that is open for all.*** In other words it is not the case that there could be a time when an individual wants to repent and then he is disallowed or disabled by God. At least such is not found recorded in the OT except where judgment is already decided. In that case the fatal line is crossed. This view seems to be supported by the OT as demonstrated by the few cases cited above.

The provision of opportunity for man to repent, I would propose, is an act made available through which man and God can be reconciled. It is a gift from God. However whether man seizes the

opportunity and takes advantage of the provision is entirely man's responsibility. This seems to be what the OT reveals. There is no evidence from the Scriptures to suggest that it is God's responsibility to make man receive or reject this gift. Man has always been given the moral free will with sufficient enlightenment to choose God's good gift (see Deut. 30:15-19).

Hans Walter Harrelson (1964) has observed that the writer of the Flood story demonstrates that "man is destined for life" that is, if destination is a valid view. So repentance is a provision such that man should take advantage of it. Yet, like in the Flood story, man has the capability of rejecting warnings and instructions from God. When that happens, the unrepentant man will, with great pains be judged by God.

### **7 Some practical implications of the study.**

As mentioned in section 1, it is important for a faith community to have a standard that will guide and judge their practice of the faith they profess. Reference was then made to the early Fathers who assert sola scriptura. If the OT is part of the scriptures of the Christian community, it is important to know its views on the nature of repentance, specifically the way it may be viewed as a gift from God. Today, the Church is facing great challenges, including moral choices of members of the professing community. Specifically, are the events that happen to a man, including his moral choices pre-determined by God? I shall illustrate the problem by narrating some practical life stories.

In 2003, I was travelling in company with some colleagues from Stellenbosch, near Cape Town to Bloomfontain to attend a conference at the Free State University. An argument ensued as to whether homosexuals may be morally held responsible. A seminary teacher among us opined that homosexuals have been made the way they are, and cannot behave otherwise. It is not his fault that he is a homosexual, so he can be appointed a bishop of a church or to any office of the church, the argument goes. A view such as this, rules out the possibility or even necessity of repentance. Indeed God is to be held responsible. If anyone needs to repent, it will be God. In discussing this issue, an Anglican Bishop of Awori in Nigeria insists, "Some of these gay people say they are created that way, that there is

nothing they can do about it.” He then queried, “Can people be created as gay?”<sup>12</sup>

In 2006, I was attending a summer programme at the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology. I happened to be in the company of some missionaries who were assisting to reduce the effects of HIV/AIDS on patients. After some pleasantries, I enquired about their modus operandi. One of the missionaries said that they educate people on how to change their sexual behaviour, and especially the need to use condoms where one cannot stay with a married partner. Throughout the discussion, she did not mention self-restraint. When I asked what she thought about biblical injunctions, she responded, “How would you expect young people who are sexually very active to be told to resist the urge?” The question is “How relevant is the Bible to modern Church?”

In the 2008, a group of Anglican Bishops refused to join their counterparts in Bishops Conference that usually holds at Canterbury every ten years. Why? The Bishop of Canterbury supports the appointment of a gay Bishop in an American Diocese. There were protests from those who hold the view that such an act is unbiblical and contradicts the tenets of Anglicanism. So, the Bishops that do not subscribe to gays being appointed to the office of a bishop decided to hold their conference in Jerusalem, which they refer to as “Global Anglican Future Conference” (GAFCON) for short. If God refuses to grant this gift of repentance to the gay bishops, why will anyone insist that they should do the impossible by demolishing what the Almighty has ordained?

Finally, in 2008, Barak Obama was elected as the first black man to be the president of the most economically powerful country in the world. On an Africa Independent Television (AIT) guest of the moment, one Sylvester Anyanngu of Nigeria made this comment about Obama’s election: “Obama’s time has come. He is not leading because he is intelligent, but his time has come, having been so destined, no one can change this (AIT October 18, 2008 at 4:15 p.m). So what? If Africa or any part of the world continues to have corrupt, inept and greedy leaders, never mind. God has so destined it.

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<sup>12</sup> Daily Sun. Thursday December 25, 2008. Page 22.



These stories are told to show that the belief system of a person goes a long way in influencing his behaviour. If repentance, like any other human moral acts are seen as given by God to some and denied to others, then no one could be held or should be held responsible for not changing his way of life.

### **Conclusion**

This contribution adds two views to the on-going debate on human moral choices. First it has been argued that to say that God has a foreknowledge of what shall be is not the same thing as saying that he is the cause or responsible for the existence of that event. Also it has been argued that a gift may be presented, but the will to accept or not to accept lies on the shoulders of an individual. For if God is just, he could not have created an individual predetermined never to be able to repent, and yet call on all to repent. The judge of all the earth must be just. Therefore, repentance as a gift from God from the OT perspective may be understood as saying that God has provided *opportunity* for human to be able to return to God any time he/she may want to do so. That provision by God is essentially the idea that it is a gift from God. That opportunity in itself is the gift. It is argued that in OT, it is difficult to show that someone wants to repent, and the opportunity to do so is denied him. Rather, what is clearly seen is that human has repeatedly rejected the call and opportunity given by God to him to repent. The moment he grabs the opportunity, he is forgiven. If he rejects the counsel to take the opportunity to repent then he voluntarily refuses to avail himself the opportunity given and he bears the consequence, holding himself entirely responsible (see Deut. 30:15-19 and Ez. 33:11) as already mentioned above.

Lastly, it has been shown what the practical implication of the way repentance is viewed in this study could be. If the OT is still held as part of Christian scripture, then its demand that human should repent and turn to God may be seen as still compelling and binding on those who profess to accept that book as a valid document that sets religious practice and moral standards. That book does not seem to show that any one is foreclosed from repenting or is anyone programmed to repent against his/her will.

Finally it may be argued that one's theology by and large determines his ethical choices. Equally, moral choices have to be defended through the instrument of ideology. Ideology is here

defined as that system of beliefs principles and ideas that propel a person and give direction to what he/she does. Gays and Lesbians and other morally contentious debates including the racial-political and economic relations in the world today are not free of held ideologies and or theological perspectives.

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