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Repentance as a Gift in the Old Testament

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Introduction

Herbert Lockyer said,

Strange though it may seem, repentance is produced, not by the threats of divine wrath and judgment, but by the goodness of God (Rom 2:4; Jon 4:2). Repentance is the gift of God, and not the work of an unbelieving man, which he must perform; neither is it a burden he must bear in order to move the pity of God. It comes as the gift of the risen Savior (Acts 5:31; 11:18), and of God (Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25). It is wrapped up in the scheme of saving grace (Romans 7:23; Ephesians 2:8, 9). Repentance is a pure Gospel of grace, and is wrought out through the Gospel as it sets the Crucified One before our eyes.²

¹See www.CBCSeymour.org for the church site, and his blog at www.viaemmaus.wordpress.com.

²Herbert Lockyer, *All the Doctrine of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 174.

Scripture is crystal clear, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...[and] the wages of sin is death” (Rom 3:23; 6:23). Made in God’s image to bring God glory (Isa 43:6-7), mankind has rebelled against God, violated his law, invoked his curse, and rightfully earned an eternal punishment in hell. Hebrews 9:27 is unflinching: “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.” The only remedy is repentance from sin and faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21). This is the New Testament message of salvation for you and for me. But what about those who lived in the days before Christ? Was repentance requisite then? Or was there another means of reconciliation and righteousness?³ And if repentance was requisite, was it the same or different from repentance demonstrated in the New Testament?

These are vitally important questions as they address God’s relationship with mankind, the relationship between the Old and New Covenant, and the nature of God’s grace. This paper will set out to answer these questions and to prove from the Scriptures that repentance and faith have always been the instrumental means of salvation for God’s people. Moreover, in examining repentance in the Old Testament, it will be argued that genuine repentance is a gift from God not merely offered, but effectively applied to the hearts of those who receive his covenantal grace.⁴

This argument will unfold in three parts. First, a brief lexical treatment of repentance will be considered. Second, a biblical-theological survey of key passages will examine the theme of repentance in the OT; from its findings, I will argue that God sovereignly circumcises the hearts of his chosen people in order to

³It should be recognized that this same question can be ask of those today who have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. Is there any other way by which men might be saved? John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 answer, ‘No.’ Faith in Christ and repentance from sin are the only instrumental means of salvation given by God.

⁴This contests the position put forward by David Moomo in his article, “An Examination of Repentance as a Gift from God in the OT.” Moomo suggests 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 morally free man [sic]” (emphasis mine). Moomo’s position is the standard semi-Pelagian view that men are capable of choosing right from wrong, and thus have the power to repent or believe, as they encounter the claims of the gospel. As it will be spelled out in this paper, repentance in both testaments is far more powerful (and hope-giving) than that. God’s gift of repentance is not merely an outward command, it is an inward regeneration in the heart of a convert. Moomo’s position strips the gospel of its efficacy and threatens to undermine Christian confidence in God’s ability to save.

accomplish repentance. Thus, this paper aims to prove that repentance is a gift that not only *offers* pardon, but also *effects* repentance in the heart of the covenant-breaking sinner. This is in keeping with God’s new covenant promise foretold in the OT, and fulfilled in the NT.⁵ Third, because God’s word cannot be broken and maintains an organic unity, an examination of repentance as a gift in the NT will conclude our study and confirm the findings of the OT.

The Meaning of Repentance: A Linguistic Examination

To understand repentance in the Old Testament requires more than a simple lexical study. Since the concept of repentance is embedded in the covenantal makeup of the Old Testament,⁶ and the idea of repentance employs a variety of terms and phrases that extend beyond simple words,⁷ a singular word study is insufficient.⁸ Nevertheless, in order to get a handle on the subject, we begin by familiarizing ourselves with the word, or words, that are used to describe repentance in the Old Testament.

The word in the OT which is most prevalent for expressing and describing ‘repentance’ is *sub*.⁹ It is used over 1000 times and speaks of the volitional (re)turning to God from a position of exile, hostility,

⁵It is my contention that new covenant repentance is likewise “proleptically foreseen” in the OT saints. While the reality of the New Covenant does not materialize until the Cross and Pentecost, it is evident that the spirit of God regenerates OT saints and gives them ‘circumcised hearts’ (e.g. Joshua, Caleb, David, Daniel). For a discussion on the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, see James Hamilton, *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old & New Testaments* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2006), 1-56.

⁶J.M. Lunde, “Repentance,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond, Brian S. Rosner, D.A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 726. For a fully-developed study of the covenant in the Old Testament, see Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. J.A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961).

⁷Cf. “Repentance” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, eds. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 704-05.

⁸On the subject of word studies and their usefulness and misuse, see D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 27-64.

⁹*Nhm* is also used in various passages to describe a kind of ‘turning,’ however, this usage is better translated ‘relent’—as it is translated in the ESV—especially when YHWH is the subject (Donald Gowan, “Repentance in the OT,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfield (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 4:764). J.R. Soza in his article on the subject, points out that in the Pentateuch, the idea of ‘divine repentance’ dominates Genesis-Numbers, and that when *nhm* is employed, “it is used almost exclusively with reference to God” (“Repentance” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003], 684-87).

or covenant-breaking.¹⁰ “*Sub* is basically a verb or motion, with the meanings ‘return,’ ‘turn back,’ ‘go back,’ ‘come back,’ often in reference to physical motion or returning to a point of departure.”¹¹ The word however carries more theological weight. It often describes the activities of God’s covenant people Israel returning to God, and the prophets repeatedly use it as an imperative: “Repent and return to the Lord!” Therefore, it is central to the concept of repentance in the Old Testament, so that when it is used in a moral or theological context, it pictures “a person doing a [religious] turnabout.”¹²

Critical to this turnabout, if it is to be repentance, is the direction toward which one turns, namely, to Yahweh. The moves in this turning process are delineated clearly in Jer[emiah] 3:22-4:2, a veritable liturgy of repentance: acknowledging God’s lordship (3:22); admitting wrongdoing (3:23), including the verbal confession ‘We [I] have sinned’ (3:25); addressing shame (3:25); and affirming and adhering to new conduct (4:1-2).¹³

The root *sub* is used in a number of different contexts and conjoined with a number of illustrative images.¹⁴ As the exile nears, the term is employed with greater frequency and intensity.¹⁵

¹⁰J.A. Thompson and Elmer A. Martens, “*sub*” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem Van Gemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 4:55-59; cf. J.A. Soggin, “*sub*” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 3:1312-17. *Sub* is accompanied by two synonyms: *swr* (‘turn aside or depart’) and *pnh* (‘to turn or face in one of several directions’). “In a religious sense *sub* is the most common term for both turning decisively to God (or idols) or turning away from him (them). The term *swr* describes defection, a shift in loyalties and allegiance, mostly in the sense of religious apostasy (Exod 32:8). *Pnh* is only infrequently employed to describe a shift in one’s spiritual position (e.g. Deut 31:18; Isa 53:6; Jer 2:27)” (Thompson and Martens, “*sub*,” 4:56).

¹¹Thompson and Martens, “*sub*,” 4:56.

¹²*Ibid.*, 4:57.

¹³*Ibid.*, 4:57. The components Jeremiah 3-4 are similar to the six-fold explication of repentance given by Puritan Thomas Watson: (1) sight of sin, (2) sorrow for sin, (3) confession of sin, (4) shame for sin, (5) hatred for sin, (6) turning from sin (*The Doctrine of Repentance* [1668; reprint: Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009], 18-58).

¹⁴J.A. Soggin describes *sub*’s use: “In Amos *sub* seems primarily to be a technical term for the people’s repentance (Amos 4:6-11)...In Hos[ea] the idea is amplified and clarified by the marriage-law version in which it appears: here Yahweh is the abandoned, deceived husband to whom the unfaithful people should ‘return’; since, however, Israel does not wish to do so, it shall ‘return’ to Egypt under judgment (Hos 11:1-11; cf. also 5:4)...Jeremiah newly develops the idea of marriage (Jer 3:1f; cf. also 8:4-7; 14:2ff; 15:15ff)...Isaiah also gives prominence to the return idea (Isa 30:15); the name of his first son *sar yasub* even becomes programmatic (7:3ff)” (*sub*,’ 3:1316).

¹⁵J.R. Soza explains, “Because the Hebrew prophets are primarily preachers of *sub* (repentance), the term is fully developed and applied in full force at this later stage in Israel’s history” (Soza, “Repentance,” 684).

Moreover, as William Holladay has shown in his lexical study, *sub* is frequently used in the context of God's covenant with Israel.¹⁶ So that, in the Pentateuch, YHWH warns Israel that if they turn away from God, forget his instructions, and break his covenant that they will be cast out of the land (Lev 26; Deut 27-28). Nevertheless, with tender mercy and covenantal faithfulness, YHWH promises that genuine repentance can still restore their relationship. This notion is developed in the prophets with greater urgency;¹⁷ while the contingency of God's willingness to relent is outlined in Jeremiah 18: "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken *turns* from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it" (18:7-8).

What God shows Jeremiah at the potter's house (18:1-11) is true throughout the Old Testament: "If [God's] people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chron 7:14). Sadly, so few Israelites took God at his word.¹⁸ Consequently, while talk of 'repentance' fills the pages of the OT, Scripture's overwhelming testimony concerning the subject is failure, not success. Still, there exists in the OT a minority group of men and women who express genuine repentance and receive God's pardon. Therefore, questions remain: Can all Israel genuinely return to the Lord? Is God's *offer* of forgiveness enough for Israel to turn and be saved? Is something more needed?

The answer seems to come from an already/not yet reality about genuine repentance in the Old Testament. In other words, in the OT, God has already given some of his people the power to repent and

¹⁶William L. Holladay, *The Root SUBH in the Old Testament with particular reference to its covenantal contexts* (Leiden: E.J Brill, 1958). Holladay argues that repentance in the OT is predominately a covenantal concept—used in that way 164 times.. Unfortunately, his final conclusions bear little appreciable fruit due to the source-criticism on which his dissertation is based. Concurring with Holladay, J.R. Soza writes, "The concept of *sub* has its moorings in the pentateuchal covenant" ("Repentance," 684).

¹⁷J.A. Soggin, "Sub," 3:1316.

¹⁸Nevertheless, the tragedy is not without purpose. As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians, Israel's disobedient unbelief served as negative example for the church of Jesus Christ, "on whom the end of the ages has come" (10:6, 11) In other words, God used the failures of the Old Covenant to show the greater power and promises of the New Covenant (cf. Heb 8-10). God's word did not fail, and his intentions were not thwarted.

believe, a power that is manifestly a new covenant reality. Call this a proleptic gift. Yet, the promise of repentance remains a forthcoming reality when God pours out his spirit on all flesh (Joel 2:28ff). Therefore, as we survey the OT, it will be helpful to keep in mind that the repentance which is occasionally depicted in the OT is typological of an eschatological reality—namely the new covenant gift of a circumcised heart that is able to repent and believe.

A Biblical-Theological Survey of ‘Repentance’ in the Old Testament

Moving from a lexical evaluation of these words in their original language to the English translation in Scripture, we find 13 occurrences of ‘repent’ or ‘repented’ in the Old Testament.¹⁹ Along with these 13 occurrences, there are also a select number of passages in the Old Testament—some that have already been cited (e.g. Jer 18:1-11; 2 Chron 7:14)—that specifically detail God’s command for repentance and his provision for granting repentance. Due to the centrality of this theme, passages that speak about repentance can be found in all sections of the OT. Appreciably, the 13 occurrences of ‘repent-’ in the OT are diffused throughout the various genres and epochs in the Hebrew Bible. In what follows, we will examine these passages with an eye towards the covenantal nature of their usage to better understand how each author understands repentance in regards to man’s responsibility and God’s gracious provision.²⁰

Deuteronomy 30:1-6

Covenantally-speaking, the idea of repentance begins in Deuteronomy.²¹ On the whole, Deuteronomy is formatted as a

¹⁹Admittedly, this removes us from the original language, but because of the scope of this paper, it is necessary to base our research on those passages that are most pertinent to the subject of repentance. So, basing our research on the ESV translation, we find that ‘repent-’ occurs 13 times. Four times in the parallel accounts of Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:47-48; 2 Chron 6:37-38); once in Job’s response to God’s theophanic rebuke (42:6); twice in the Psalms (7:12; 78:34); and 6 times in the latter prophets (Isa 1:27; Jer 5:3; 34:15; Ezek 14:6; Ezek 18:30; Zech 1:6).

²⁰Something that is worth noting as we survey the OT is the way that the accent of each passage lands on the sovereign work of God to accomplish repentance in the life or lives of the participants in the covenant. From a brief survey of these instances, we begin to see a pattern: Just as God is sovereign over salvation (the end of the covenant), he is also sovereign to grant repentance (the means to that end). As Isaiah 46:10 says, “he declares the end from the beginning,” and accordingly he plans out every means to that end.

²¹J.R. Soza explains how Deuteronomy functions as the foundation for all future prophetic calls to repentance, “In Deuteronomy *sub* appears more than thirty times and serves as its primary moral and [Footnote continued on next page ...]

covenantal treaty between YHWH and Israel, and in particular, chapters 29-30 function as Israel's covenant renewal with God as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. Just prior to this section, Moses recounts an extensive list of blessings and the curses that will come according to Israel's faithfulness or waywardness (Deut 27-28). Then chapter 29 outlines Israel's previous rebellion and the seriousness of the covenant, before chapter 30 calls upon Israel to respond with repentance, faith, and ongoing covenant loyalty.

In chapter 30, Moses begins with a sobering prediction. He looks at the rebelliousness that he is so familiar with in Israel and he anticipates the way Israel will turn from God in the future: "When all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curses,... return to the Lord" (30:1-2a). Giving instruction to future generations, Moses records that when Israel awakens to find itself scattered abroad, cast out of the land, you are to call "to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the LORD" (30:2). In this context, Moses unpacks the divinely-initiated gift of repentance.

Deuteronomy 30:2 records the force of God's call for repentance: "return to the Lord your God...obey his voice in *all* that I command you today, with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul" (30:2). The repentance YHWH demands is whole-hearted obedience to all the law of God; partial repentance and half-hearted devotion do not qualify. Verse 3 holds out the fruit of repentance, and promises tangible blessings—financial restoration, heavenly compassion, and a corporate re-gathering of Israel *in the land*. Verses 4-5 develop this last idea, stating that God will gather his people from the farthest nations, and that he will make them more numerous than previous generations. Moreover, he promises to re-settle his people in the land, so that they might possess it once again.

From these five verses, it is evident that Israel's restoration depends upon their repentance, but their repentance is not meritorious. The promise of restoration, like their original deliverance from Egypt,

responsive term... Deuteronomy 30 is especially enlightening because of its repetitive use of *sub*. The chapter gives further definition to the blessings and curses discussed in preceding chapters of Deuteronomy. The 'returning' of Israel (*sup* in Deut 30:3) demonstrates that the function of the blessings is to serve as a positive motivation and the function of the curses is to serve as negative motivation in stimulating repentance" ("Repentance," 687).

is not gained through righteous living, but by God’s unfailing mercy (cf. Exod. 34:6-7; Deut 7:7-11; 9:4-7). It is all of grace! God as the sovereign Lord unilaterally saves his people. It depends not on Israel’s obedience, but on YHWH’s covenantal love (*hesed*). To put it another way, restoration is an entirely free gift from God. But Moses goes still further.

At this point, God’s gracious provision for pardon and restoration can still be construed as merely an offer or opportunity. Left here, there is no certainty that anyone would actually repent.²² Yet, what Moses says in verse 6 confirms that God’s gift of repentance is more than an open door; it is an omnipotent promise. Israel’s future ability to repent is entirely God’s doing. Just as God makes the offer and promises restoration to those who repent, he simultaneously promises that he will give his people new hearts in order to repent and live. He will fulfill the condition that he has commanded: “[T]he LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live (Deut 30:6)”²³

Remember: Earlier in Deuteronomy, YHWH commanded Israel to circumcise their own hearts. In response to God’s electing love (10:15), Israel is called to “circumcise the foreskin of their hearts and be no longer stubborn” in order to continue in God’s love (10:16). Deuteronomy 11 continues on this imperatival theme, commanding Israel to love and serve God and keep all his commandments (11:1-25), and like Deuteronomy 27-28, it offers blessing for keeping the covenant, and warns of terrible curses if their hearts turn from God. The sad result for Israel is that they are always unable to keep these laws. The law offers life to those who keep it (cf. Lev 18:5), but as Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:12 reveal, this promise was not a means of life to Israel; it was a sentence of death, for no Israelite ever kept the law.

²²This is what establishes the old covenant on weaker promises, and the new covenant “enacted on better promises” (Heb 8:6ff).

²³Commenting on this verse, Eugene Merrill states, “People can love God with all their heart only after the heart itself has been radically changed to a Godward direction. When that happens, not only is obedience possible but so is life (v. 6). Here more than physical life on the land is in view. There is a glimpse of life that does not end, life that comes to birth with the supernatural work of grace that alone is sufficient to account for all of these aspects of Israel’s future restoration” (*Deuteronomy* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994], 389).

Accordingly, the good news of Deuteronomy 30:6 is that God fulfills the command for Israel, saying that he will give them what he earlier commanded. Just as he restores Israel to the land, repopulates their herds, and blesses their homes, he will take the initiative to circumcise the hearts of those on whom he sets his love. Putting this altogether, God commands an impossible thing (whole hearted obedience), but amazingly gives an unstoppable gift (a clean heart which longs for God). While verse 6 does not say that God causes Israel to repent, it does say that he causes him to love God, which is in fact a returning to the Lord (cf. Jer 24:7; Hos 14:4; Mal 4:4-6). Thus, we can observe in this passage that God commands what he wills (v. 2) and gives what he commands (v. 6).²⁴

Psalms

In Psalm 7, David praises God for his righteous judgments (v. 11, 17) and requests vindication and help against his enemies (v. 6ff), for he fears for his safety (v. 1-2). It is in this context that he says, “If a man does not repent, God will whet his sword.” Clearly, God’s covenantal promise stands behind these words: Those who return to God with repentant hearts will be pardoned, but those who fail to repent will be destroyed. In fact, the Bible frequently suggests that God hardens hearts, meaning that he somehow stirs up disobedience in the hearts of the unrepentant, in order to destroy these enemies who stand in the way of his redemptive plans. Yes, men are culpable for

²⁴It should be noticed that this passage ultimately points to the New Covenant. The idea of a new heart is one that finds explicit expression in Ezekiel 36, as the prophet develops this idea saying “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (v. 26-27). For a recalcitrant people wandering from God, this covenantal promise secures the blessings of the covenant by confirming that God’s gift of repentance is not simply offered; it will be effected in the lives of his elect. While this would take hundreds of years to find fruition in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ (Luke 22) and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2), circumcised hearts are adumbrated in the Old Testament. Two that come to mind are Joshua and Caleb, who resisted the temptation to unbelief in the wilderness and believed the promises of God, who are granted entrance into the promised land because of faith, and who the Scriptures say are possessed by a different spirit (Num 14:24; 27:18; cf. Num 32:12; Deut 34:9).

their volitional choices, but mysteriously God's sovereign hand works to harden the hearts of those whom he is going to destroy (cf. Prov 16:4; 21:1). This was true in the life of Pharaoh,²⁵ of the kings Sihon and Og,²⁶ and the people of Canaan.²⁷

Conversely, when repentance is found in the most improbable figures (e.g. Manasseh, Nebuchadnezzar), the finger prints of God are manifold. Through outward sufferings, God turns the heart to repent and believe (cf. Ps 119:67). This is what Psalm 78:34 explains. Recalling the obstinate history of Israel, Asaph remarks, "When he [YHWH] killed them [Israel], they sought him; they repented and sought God earnestly." In other words, through God's chastisement, he caused Israel to "remember that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer" (v. 35). Yet, it appears that this repentance is disingenuous, because the next verse says that Israel lied to God (v. 36), and as the testimony of the OT and NT makes clear, the people of Israel died in their unbelief (cf. Psalm 95; Hebrews 3-4).²⁸

Without steering off course too far, it must be recognized that Psalm 78 introduces a dilemma in understanding repentance in the OT, for in Psalm 78 and elsewhere,²⁹ 'repentance' is used to describe a kind of turning to God that does not abide and in the end does not save.³⁰ To rephrase Paul's expression from Romans 9:6: "not all

²⁵Exod 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14: 4, 8.

²⁶Deut 2:30.

²⁷Joshua 11:20.

²⁸Jeremiah 34:15-16 is another place where repentance is shown to be fraudulent: "You recently repented and did what was right in my eyes by proclaiming liberty, each to his neighbor, and you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name, but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back his male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them into subjection to be your slaves" (emphasis mine). Apparently, repentance in the OT is not a technical term which always speaks of repentance that leads to salvation. The NT also recognizes a kind of repentance that fails in the end, for John the Baptist says, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt 3:8), insinuating that fruit must be ongoing for repentance to be proven sincere (cf. James 2). So too, Paul also speaks of a kind of repentance that leads unto salvation in 2 Corinthians 7:10, as opposed to a kind of repentance that is insincere (cf. Acts 8:9-24).

²⁹One thinks of Pharaoh and the way that he used repentance before Israel's God as a plea-bargaining tactic in the world of diplomatic affairs. While repentance served him and brought relief, he proffered repentance; however, in the end, it is apparent that Pharaoh's heart, as he sought to destroy the fleeing Israelites, never truly repented. The repentance he offered was self-generated, it was not the life-saving work of God that qualifies as a gift.

³⁰John Calvin provides a helpful taxonomy that differentiates "two forms of repentance." He calls the first type a "repentance of law" in which "the sinner, wounded by the branding of sin and stricken by dread of God's wrath, remains caught in that disturbed state and cannot extricate himself from it." He contrasts this sterile repentance with the life-saving "repentance of the gospel," where "the [Footnote continued on next page ...]

repentance in the OT is truly repentance.” Israel’s return to God gives the appearance of repentance, but in the end it shows itself to be a mirage. Nevertheless, while adding complexity to the matter, it also reiterates the point that genuine repentance, which is a gift from God, can only be created, sustained, and brought to its intended outcome by God himself, because God’s gift of repentance does not simply hold for a season, it lasts until the end.³¹ This is Asaph’s petition in Psalm 80, which reads literally, “turn us again, O God” (Ps 80:3, 7, 19; cf. Jer 31:18; Lam 5:21).

Wisdom

Job 42:6 reads, “therefore I despise myself and repent (*nham*) in dust and ashes.”³² Now, how does this relate to the ‘giftedness’ of repentance? Surely, the context of the whole book and of this final chapter helps inform our answer. From first to last, the book of Job shows that God is the unrivaled sovereign of the universe, and in the more immediate context (Job 37-42), YHWH has been questioning Job and his friends to prove this fact: God is all-powerful, all-wise, and he superintends all things. As Job says, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (42:2). In the wake of that theology—5 verses earlier—it makes little sense to see repentance as something that man determines or effects. Rather, Job’s repentance is in response to God’s word in the preceding chapters. Moreover, as other verses in OT attest, man’s heart which

sinner is indeed sorely afflicted, but rises above it and lays hold of Christ as medicine for his wound, comfort for his dread” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1:596).

³¹Related to this matter in Psalm 78, if Israel’s repentance in the wilderness is called repentance but in fact fails in the end, it shows that their momentary return to God was empowered by the flesh and made in fear, not enacted by the Spirit and conceived in faith. If, on the other hand, there were some Israelites, however few, that did genuinely repent and believe, it shows that this kind of effect is purely of God.

As it has been noted above and will be argued below, genuine repentance—repentance that saves—is a covenantal blessing, given by God as a gift. As with most things concerning the Old and New Covenants, genuine repentance in the Old Testament is extant but rare—so many Israelites died in their sins (cf. 1 Cor 10:1-13). Therefore, genuine repentance is more of a piece with the New Covenant, which is why the NT has four times as many references to repentance. “Repent-” occurs 52 times in the NT.

³²Most English versions translate *nham* ‘repent’ or ‘repentance’ because of the parallelism with ‘despise’ in the verse and the way in which Job describes his repentance as being ‘in dust and ashes.’

seeks not God (Ps 14, 54) is led to repentance by the God who inclines hearts to fear him (Ps 86:11; 119:36; 141:4; cf. Jer 32:39).³³

1 Kings 8

Another Old Testament passage which pictures God's initiating work in repentance is 1 Kings 8. 1 Kings 1-10 chronicles the rise and fall of King Solomon, and offers to us an incredible prayer responding to God's steadfast love, covenant faithfulness, and invitation to return to him found in Deuteronomy. What becomes apparent is that the gracious offer of repentance works at multiple levels, but like Deuteronomy 30:1-6, the gift of repentance is not simply offered it is promised to effect repentance which leads to salvation.

Among other things, 1 Kings recounts the building and dedication of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. In 1 Kings 5, Scripture tells of the provisions collected to build the temple; chapter 6 recounts the actual building; chapter 7 records the furnishings placed in the temple; while chapter 8 witnesses the ark of the LORD entering the temple along with YHWH's overwhelming presence (8:1-11). Following this dramatic temple-building segment, 1 Kings records Solomon's prayer of dedication (8:12ff). The significance of this prayer, for our study, is the way that it is grounded in God's covenantal faithfulness and promise to forgive. Accordingly, Solomon invites future generations to find mercy at the dwelling place of God as they repent and return to him.

In verses 12-26, Solomon blesses YHWH, giving praise to him as the God who is like no other, who upholds the heavens and the earth, and who keeps covenant with his people Israel. Solomon extols God for his covenant faithfulness, he recites the way God has worked on behalf of David in the past, and turns to ponder the unfathomable reality of God dwelling with man: "[H]eaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!"³⁴ Then, his mind turns to the future.

³³It should be pointed out again, that so many passages that speak of God inclining hearts are set in the context of the New Covenant (cf. Jer 32:39; Deut 30:6; Ezek 36:26-27).

³⁴1 Kings 8:27. Solomon's praise is a sure sign of God's gracious intentions with his people. The context of exuberant praise and forward-looking petition is responding to God's gracious approach to Solomon and his brethren. In other words, as we consider the gracious nature of repentance, it is helpful to see that from first to last, God's dwelling with Israel is marked by unmerited favor and divinely-initiated grace (cf. Deut 7:7-11; 9:4-7).

Overwhelmed by the reality of man’s sinfulness,³⁵ Solomon makes confident petition to God, based on his revealed character and covenant promises, to listen to his people Israel when they find themselves under God’s wrath and exiled from the land.³⁶ Comparison of his prayer with the covenantal curses threatened by God in Leviticus 26-27 and Deuteronomy 27-28 shows that what Solomon foresees are products of covenantal disobedience demanding YHWH’s judgment. Military defeat (v. 33-34), drought (v. 35-36), famine and pestilence (v. 37-40), and exile (v. 46-53) are all part of God’s curses that he warned generations earlier.

In his prayer, repentance is designated as the means by which God will forgive his people. While set in the form of a petition, Solomon’s intercession expresses confidence in what God has already promised: “if you will return to me, I will restore you” (Deut 30:1-5). Thus Solomon prays,

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 the land of the enemy, far off or near, yet if they turn their heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, “We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly,” if they repent with all their mind and with all their heart in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their fathers, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name, then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause and forgive your people who sinned against you (1 Ki 8:46-50).

This is just one of the many places in this passage, where Solomon, trusting in the promises of God’s covenant, implores Israel to repent and return to God.

³⁵In 1 Kings 8:46, Solomon interjects, “for there is no one who does not sin.” Whether his own sin or the sin of his people Israel—at present or in years past—are on his mind is indiscernible, but what is striking is the fact that the length of Solomon’s prayer is an exposition of this unshakeable reality. Mankind is utterly sinful (cf. Ecc 7:20), and he knows that the curses for covenant-breaking, outlined in Deuteronomy 27-28, have come upon Israel in the past (see Judges) and will come upon them again. Hence, his prayer is one that invites Israelites to repent and return to the God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ex 34:6-7). Solomon’s prayer is based on the fact that God forgives those who come to him in faith and repentance.

³⁶Four times in 1 Kings 8:27-30, Solomon requests God to ‘listen.’ In 1 Kings 8:31-53, the predominant refrain is for YHWH to give his ear to his people and to ‘hear’ from heaven. Thus, Solomon’s prayer is explicitly personal and passionate for God not to abandon his people. Why such zeal? Because he knows the hearts of Israel are not inclined towards God.

From Solomon's prayer, we discover three layers of grace, three ways that repentance is a gift from God. First, the singular fact that God offers repentance is a gift in itself. This is the kind of opportunity that David Moomo describes. God who cannot stand to look at sin (Hab 1:13) and who hates the wicked (Ps 11:5), has no moral obligation to extend forgiveness, mercy, or accept repentance. Nevertheless, as a gracious God he does. In covenant relationship with Israel, he promises to forgive when they genuinely repent and return to him (Ex 34:6-7).

Second, God graciously inclines the heart of those whom he designates to repent.³⁷ This is what David Moomo fails to recognize. He conceives of repentance as a gracious offer, but unfortunately he minimizes the power of God to change hearts and effect repentance. Thus, Moomo misses the most important aspect of repentance as a gift.³⁸ It is not an external offer alone; it is coupled with an internal regeneration of the heart for those God intends to save. 1 Kings 8:58 affirms this reality when, in the form of a petition, Solomon asks that God would "*incline our hearts to him*, to walk in all his ways and to keep his commandments, his statutes, and his rules, which he commanded our fathers." Throughout Solomon's prayer, he speaks of the heart of Israel. Solomon recognizes that the problem of Israel

³⁷This corresponds with the Reformed doctrines of irresistible grace (or effectual calling) and regeneration. Cf. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 692-708; Bruce Ware, "Effectual Calling and Grace" in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Grace, and Foreknowledge*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 203-28; James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace: Rediscovering the Evangelical Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 135-54.

On the matter of God's role in repentance, biblical theologian Charles H.H. Scobie writes, "Repentance is a *response* to God's gracious offer, but, as the prophets discovered, the stubborn sinfulness of the people often prevented them from repenting and therefore receiving God's forgiveness." Balancing man's responsibility with God's sovereign grace, Scobie continues, "*Although 'turning' is a human response, according to the OT it is God who makes it possible.* Paradoxically, 'it is God who turns us to Him, and man, who has turned away from God, is turned back by God himself'" (*The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 702-03). Scobie is exactly right! No man turns at the mere offer of forgiveness (cf Ps 14; Rom 3:10-23).

³⁸Moomo and others who conceive of repentance as simply an offer would do well to recognize that this kind of limitation is true of the Old Covenant, where God's grace was an external law, but it is not true of the New Covenant which promises the power of the Spirit. Moreover, it is evident in the OT, saints who were saved by faith (Heb 11), whose sins were covered (Ps 32:1), were the ones who received divine assistance in faith and repentance (e.g. Joshua, Caleb). God put a different spirit in them, and caused their hearts to believe. As Calvin remarks on 'repentance as God's free gift,' "This fact indeed stands firm: wherever the fear of God flourishes, the Spirit has worked toward the salvation of man" (Calvin, *Institutes*, 616).

lies in the heart, and that they will need God to give them a new heart in order for genuine repentance to occur.³⁹

Still there is a third level of grace. Figuratively speaking, in order to accomplish cardiac circumcision, the Spirit of God consistently uses the razor of circumstances to cleanse the heart.⁴⁰ Because God's gift of repentance is so precious and so necessary in the life of fallen sinners, God superintends circumstances in order to bring about repentance in the life of his Old Testament saints. As J.M. Lunde recounts, "[Covenantal] curses are ultimately intended to move [God's] people to repentance once again."⁴¹ This is the case of Israel in general,⁴² and in the lives of individuals. Among others, the accounts of Manasseh and Nebuchadnezzar demonstrate God's active role in humbling and leading these men to place of repentance.

Of Manasseh, 2 Chronicles 33:10 says, "The LORD spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention." In short, God instructed Manasseh to repent from his idolatry and return to the Lord, but the offer was unacceptable in the sight of the king. So, with irresistible grace, "the LORD brought upon [Manasseh and Israel] the commanders of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks and bound him with chains of bronze and brought him to Babylon. *And when he was in distress*, he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers" (33:11-12). God used the Assyrian hooks, which lacerated his body, as an

³⁹"Some persons, when they hear weeping, fasting, and ashes spoken of in various passages...consider that repentance consists chiefly of fasting and weeping. This delusion of theirs must be moved. What is there said concerning the conversion of the entire heart to the Lord, and concerning the rending not of garments but of the heart, belongs properly to repentance" (*Institutes*, 1:611). Calvin's criticism gets to the 'heart' of the issue with Professor Moomo, for Moomo conceives of repentance as an external choice based upon the gracious offer of repentance.

Acknowledging the role that the mind, will, and emotions play in repentance, Moomo nonetheless goes on to define repentance this way: "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." Unfortunately, Moomo underestimates the deadness of our flesh and the total inability mankind has to respond positively to God's offer/command to repent. He paints repentance as an outward behavior that can be done by all.

⁴⁰Calvin's comments are illuminating, "If we were not sharply pricked, the slothfulness of our flesh could not be corrected. Indeed, these prickings would not have sufficed against its dullness and blockishness had God not penetrated more deeply in unsheathing his rods...Therefore, the depravity of our nature compels God to use severity in threatening us" (*Institutes*, 1:599).

⁴¹J.M. Lunde, "Repentance," 726.

⁴²For instance, God's judgment on Israel in Judges repeatedly spurred the wayward Israelites to call out to God. Likewise, 70 years of exile lead to repentance and return to the land.

instrument to cut into Manasseh's dead heart, and the outcome was repentance. God restored the king to his kingdom, after God gave Manasseh a heart to repent.

Likewise, Nebuchadnezzar's repentance came after seven years of wandering in the fields like a beast. While the king of Babylon prided himself on the empire he constructed (Dan 4:28-30), his heart was unmoved by Daniel's God, but when YHWH removed his power, authority, dignity, and humanity, he was finally awakened (4:31-37), finally extolling the God of Israel as his own God. Though the authenticity of Nebuchadnezzar's repentance is debated by scholars, his story reaffirms the truth that apart from God, repentance is possible. Left to his own devices, he wandered the wilderness as a beast; but at God's initiative, the king's mind was restored and his lasting words humbly extol the power and authority of YHWH, the God of Israel (Dan 4:34-37).

Manasseh and Nebuchadnezzar's respective acts of volitional repentance were prompted by God's gracious intervention in their lives. Thus, repentance as a gift, is not merely an offer that some may accept or reject; it goes a step beyond that to be an offer that God brings to fruition in the lives of those whom he designates with his elective love. This is, in fact, a new covenant reality, one that bespeaks of things to come in the NT, and one that certain individuals tasted in advance before the coming of Christ. Moreover, it is a promised reality that receives even greater treatment in the prophetic writings—to which we now turn.

Prophets

In the Old Testament, the call for repentance increases as Israel's rebellion and covenantal unfaithfulness persists. As was stated earlier, repentance is a covenantal (re)action that God demands in the aftermath of idolatry, covenant-breaking, and sin. Consequently, repentance in the prophets is marked by conditionality—its presence means peace, its absence means affliction.

Positively, Isaiah promises, "Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness" (1:27); whereas Jeremiah scolds, "O Lord... You have struck them down, but they felt no anguish; you have consumed them, but they refused to take correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to repent" (5:3). Ezekiel too commands the people of Israel to

‘repent’ from their idolatry “lest iniquity be your ruin” (18:30; cf. 14:6). Summarily, a simple covenantal formula concerning repentance can be expressed: Those who repent will be forgiven and restored, but those who refuse to repent will incur the wrath of God. As Moses said to Israel centuries earlier,

And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and *return to the LORD your God*, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, *then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you* (Deut 30:1-3).

Instituted by the Torah, Israel always had before them the promise that if they would repent they would be received and restored. Nevertheless, both their history and the testimony of their leaders stood against them. Moses had foretold of Israel’s apostasy (Deut 31-32), as did Joshua: “You are not able to serve the Lord” and keep covenant (Josh 24:19). Therefore, in the prophets, it is vital to recognize the tension that exists between God’s judgment upon Israel who is unable to repent, and the promise that God makes repeatedly that he is going to do something new.

For instance, in Ezekiel, after commanding wayward Israel to repent (18:30), the prophet expounds, “Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and *make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!* Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live” (18:31-32). God’s command through his mouthpiece Ezekiel is a gracious warning, but the word he gives him is nevertheless impossible.⁴³ God’s blessing is dependent on repentance, defined here as “mak[ing] yourselves a new heart and a new spirit,” but who can do that? Jeremiah, writing at the same time to the same people, and pronouncing judgment on Israel, writes, “Can

⁴³Commenting on this passage, Daniel Block writes, “What is promised elsewhere as a divine act and as a gift (36:26-27) is now recast as a command. The use of the imperative mood does not mean that Ezekiel believes his audience capable of moral and spiritual self-transformation. The command *create a new heart and a new spirit for yourselves* is a rhetorical device, highlighting the responsibility of the nation for the present crisis and pointing the way to the future” (*The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 588).

the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil” (Jer 13:23). The implicit answer is emphatic: “No!” Israel cannot change their behavior because their heart leads them astray; by nature they are objects of wrath.

Therefore, Ezekiel’s ‘gospel’ comes later when he states that what God requires he will give.⁴⁴ Speaking in language that parallels Jeremiah’s new covenant (Jer 31:31-34), Ezekiel records, “I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh”—something Israel could not do—“and give you a new heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (36:26-27). Because God does not delight in the death of anyone (18:32), even the wicked (18:23), he does not merely command repentance as an opportunity for life, he gives those whom he loves new hearts and implants in them new affections for God when he puts in them a new spirit (cf. Jer 24:7; Isa 44:2). He removes their dead heart which thirsts for dead idols, and he replaces it with a living heart of flesh, one that will return to him.⁴⁵ This is not a forced kind of determinism, this is the glory of the new birth.⁴⁶

Finally, after the exile, the prophet Zechariah calls the people of Israel to return to the Lord (Zech 1:1-6). He contrasts the Jews returning from Babylon with their fathers who “did not hear or pay attention to [the Lord]” (1:4). He implores them to repent, and verse 6 says, “So they repented and said, ‘As the Lord of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so has he dealt with us.’” The passage does not say much about Israel’s ability to repent, but it does

⁴⁴Actually, it has already been given in Ezekiel 11, too. So that hearing this command to “make a new heart” the OT saint could have responded, “I am looking for, waiting for, and trusting in the promise of a new heart based on your word” (cf. Ezek 11:19-21).

⁴⁵Though repentance is a human response, yet in a sense only God can enable his people to return to him. While at time God’s future deliverance appears to be conditional on Israel’s repentance, elsewhere the order is reversed and it is God’s future deliverance that will trigger Israel’s repentance and return to the Lord. In Isa 37:29 God says, “I will turn you back on the way by which you came.” And in Jer 24:7 he promises, “I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord... for they shall return to me with their whole heart”; i.e., *God will provide the new heart that will make returning possible* (cf. also Isa 44:22; Ezek 36:26-31)” (Scobie, *The Ways of Our God*, 715-16).

⁴⁶On the relationship between repentance and regeneration (new birth), I agree with John Calvin who remarks, “In a word, I interpret repentance as regeneration...In order that believers may reach this goal [i.e. regeneration], God assigns to them a race of repentance [which I take to mean a new nature or constitution], which they are to run throughout their lives” (*Institutes*, 1:601). For an excellent treatment on this matter, see John Piper, *Finally Alive: What Happens When We are Born Again* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2009).

stress this fact: God did all that he ‘purposed.’ He is the first-mover and the initiator of repentance, and this passage does not overturn that reality—if anything, it reinforces it.

Putting this altogether, Donald Gowan comments, “An important part of the [post-exilic] message...was the claim that restoration as the people of Yahweh would come true only because of Yahweh’s faithfulness, which would make it possible for them to repent.”⁴⁷ Repentance in the OT depends on God’s initiative and grace, and contravenes any notion of self-generated repentance as the cause of mercy. God’s response was promised to Israel, that when they repented they would receive mercy and forgiveness (cf. Jer 18:1-11; Ezek 18:21-32). Accordingly, God effected repentance in the hearts of individuals as he purposed to do (Zech 1:6). From first to last, it was God’s doing, and therefore, repentance was his divinely offered and accomplished gift.

A New Testament Confirmation

When John the Baptist and later Jesus of Nazareth came proclaiming the kingdom of God, they did not explain their terms—at least, the NT writers do not record a definition or explanation of the kingdom’s meaning.⁴⁸ Similarly, repentance as it is proclaimed in the NT is dependent on its development in the OT. So when John the Baptist and Jesus Christ preach a message of repentance, they are coming in the wake of the prophets, who were themselves preachers of repentance. They did not need to re-define their terms, because it had already been established from the covenantal law given by Moses and the prophets who were like him (cf. Deut. 18:18). Consequently, there is a natural and organic connection between Old and New Testaments on the matter of repentance, and what is reiterated in the NT with far greater explication is that repentance is a gift of grace that powerfully effects salvation.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Donald E. Gowan, “Repentance in the OT,” 763.

⁴⁸The closest thing are the kingdom parables in Matthew 13 and Mark 4, but still in their parabolic form the meaning of the kingdom was only perceptible to those who had ears to hear.

⁴⁹If the NT explicitly teaches that God grants repentance as a gift of the covenant and this gift effects repentance leading to salvation, it should raise immediate concerns for teaching something different from the OT. The question concerning repentance as a gift in the Old Testament cannot be radically divorced from the teaching of the New Testament. While the scope of repentance is more narrow (e.g. occurring predominantly among the people of Israel) and the effect is less certain under the Old Covenant, it must, nevertheless, be of a piece with the New Testament doctrine of repentance. And [Footnote continued on next page ...]

2 Timothy 2:25 is probably the most illuminating articulation on the matter, when Paul describes repentance as a gift that is ‘granted’ by God. Speaking on the role and character of the Lord’s servant (2:24), the apostle writes, that the faithful pastor must “[correct] his opponents with gentleness. *God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.*” Unmistakably, repentance is seen by Paul as a gift. It is not left up to the individual, but it is ‘granted’ to the one who hears the word of God. This is true throughout the New Testament. In Matthew, John the Baptist commands those undergoing baptism are to bear fruit in keeping with repentance (3:8). In this case both the repentance and the changed life to follow can only be attributed to the grace of God.⁵⁰ He warns his hearers not to presume upon themselves and their Abrahamic heritage; instead they must bear fruit, which is something that Israel as the vine never did (Isa 5:1-7), and which Scripture teaches can only occur through union with Christ (John 15:1-8) and by the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).⁵¹

Likewise, in the book of Acts, faith and repentance are conjoined. They are “two different sides of the same coin.”⁵² Therefore, as it concerns their genesis, what is true of faith is true of repentance, and

since the New Testament’s teaching on the matter is certain—repentance is a gracious gift from God, effected by the sovereign work of God—we should expect to find something similar in the OT. And indeed as we saw above, the OT does teach that God grants repentance to his chosen, eschatological community. What is typical of the NT believer finds prototypical displays in the OT.

⁵⁰Reinforcing the connection between OT and NT conceptions of repentance, it should be appreciated that John the Baptist preached a message of repentance under the old covenant. Though recorded in the New Testament, John’s ministry was that of the old covenant. Moreover, the New Testament’s understanding is deeply indebted to the OT. As F.T. Gensch observes, “[T]he NT use of the word [*metanoia*] is deeply influenced by the OT’s notion of ‘turning’ to God (*shuv*) as an ‘about face,’ a change of direction and return to covenant fidelity” (“Repentance in the NT,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfield [Nashville: Abingdon, 2009], 4:763).

⁵¹The pattern that emerges in Scripture is that genuine repentance—i.e. repentance that leads unto salvation—is a combination of an external command to repent and an internal ability to repent. The former is a prophetic word, the latter a spiritual work. In theological parlance, this corresponds to the doctrines of the general and effectual calling. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:537-42; (James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (1877; reprint: Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2006), 367-73; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 454-64; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 692-98; Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd Ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 712-17.

⁵²Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 713. Commenting on Acts 20:21, Calvin asks, “There [Paul] reckons repentance and faith as two different things. What then? Can true repentance stand, apart from faith? Not at all. But even though they cannot be separated, they ought to be distinguished. As faith is not without hope, yet faith and hope are different things, so repentance and faith, although they are held together by a permanent bond, require to be joined rather than confused” (*Institutes*, 1:597).

what is true of each is that God is the gracious initiator of both. In Acts 3, Peter commanded the Jews gathered at the temple mount to, “Repent and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out” (3:19), and then a few verses later he follows his command with a powerful promise: God has come to bless his people “*by turning everyone of you from your wickedness*” (3:26). In other words, God commands all to repent, and then to insure that the word of God is not preached in vain, he also gives the ability to obey the command. Therefore, repentance and belief is given to those who were “appointed for eternal life” (Acts 13:48). As Acts 16:31 puts it, God “opens the heart” of sinners like Lydia so that they are able to believe and repent of their sin (Acts 16:31; John 3:1-8; 6:37, 44, 65).⁵³

Therefore, it is clear from the pages of the New Testament that power to repent is granted by God to those dead in their trespasses and sins.⁵⁴ True repentance, according to the Bible, is not just an opportunity, it is a gift given to the penitent believer.⁵⁵ Therefore, as we conclude our study on repentance as a gift in the Old Testament, it is helpful to recognize that the unified message of the Bible—Old and New Testaments—is that God always gives his covenant people the ability to respond with faith and repentance at the preaching of his word. What was promised in the OT, has now come to fruition in the NT with outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who quickens hearts to trust God and hate sin.

⁵³For a discussion on the relationship between faith and repentance and how faith must precede repentance, see John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:592-93;

⁵⁴“As the response to God’s sovereign, effectual summons that was procured by Christ’s cross work (as is every spiritual blessing the Christian receives) and made effectual by the Spirit’s regenerating operations in the soul, repentance unto life is represented as a gift of God” (Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 723-24).

⁵⁵In the end, David Moomo’s article fails to account for the repentance as a divine activity. Though recognizing the graciousness of God’s offer of salvation, he does not go far enough to see how the power to repent must also be given for someone to benefit from the Lord’s grace. Sadly, Moomo’s benign view of humanity leads him to a semi-Pelagian view on repentance. This is evident in the way that he summarizes his thoughts; near the conclusion of his article, he writes, “Though man is innately bad, yet he has the ability to decide to change and thus he could repent if he so desires.” Moomo fails to see the inconsistency in this singular sentence: Men who are ‘innately bad’ have not the will or the power to choose good and repent (cf. Psalm 14, 51; Rom 3:10-23; Eph 2:1-3). Simultaneously, he fails to see that from the Pentateuch until the New Testament, the hope for sinners is that God will give them a new heart, a heart that will enable them to repent. Left to our own devices, repentance is an utter impossibility, no matter how winsome the offer.

Conclusion

All in all, repentance in the Old Testament is a gift, but it is given to a relatively small number of people. In truth, God gives this ability to repent *only* to his chosen remnant.⁵⁶ These are the faithful saints who are commended in the NT and serve as model believers (cf. Rom 4; Heb 11; James 2). According to the all-wise but hidden plan of God (cf Deut 29:29), most of Israel and all the nations⁵⁷ perished under the Old Covenant (Ps 95; Heb 3-4), because they were unable to repent. Therefore, what the OT says most loudly about repentance is not good news—in the way Christians often think of the subject—but the terrifying news that apart from God’s enabling grace, no man can turn and repent.⁵⁸ It serves as a dark relief to the NT reality that a new day has dawned in the advent of Jesus Christ. The New Covenant is to be marveled at in its power as it is contrasted with the Old, and when it comes to repentance this means that the scope and certainty of repentance in the Old Testament is nothing like the New, even though the source of repentance is the same—God’s gracious gift.

Therefore, we finish where we began, reminding ourselves that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a message that calls *all* dead men to repent and promises to bring to life *every* man or woman who God has appointed unto eternal life (cf. Acts 13:48). In truth, what God commands is impossible, and if left up to mankind and their ability

⁵⁶Obviously, this corresponds with doctrine of election, which is unpopular with many today because of the way it grates against any and all egalitarian sensitivities. Yet, from Genesis 3:15 to Deuteronomy 7:7-19 to John 15:16 to Romans 9 to Revelation 20:15, God’s plan includes a plan to save his elect to the praise of his glorious grace (cf. Eph 1:3-6).

⁵⁷Israel alone even knew who to address their repentance towards; as Acts 14:16-17 comments, “In past generations [God] allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” What was meant to lead to repentance, namely the goodness of creation which manifested the kindness of the Lord (Rom 2:4), only hardened the hearts of the nations, because God did not grant to them the kind of heart-changing repentance that he did to Israel. In other words, his kindness was universal, as was his call to repent and acknowledge God as Lord (cf. Rom 1:18ff), but only with Israel did he covenant to give repentance, and to them not all received his promise because of their sin.

⁵⁸As Scobie rightly observes, “The OT is only too well aware of the failings of God’s people: their failures truly to repent, to return to the Lord, to trust him, and to know him, and to commune with him in prayer. As it looks to the future and the dawning of a new age, the OT is mindful of the deep sinfulness of human nature...Human beings are powerless to save themselves: human nature must be changed, and that is something only God can do. In the OT it is also something God promises to do” (*The Ways of Our God*, 714).

respond, but what is impossible with man, is possible with God, and thus we take heart in this reality. Whatever God commands, he commits to accomplishing in those whom he is going to save. This is what gives us confidence in evangelism, missions, and the global effort to make disciples of the nations. May we proclaim Christ to all men, so that some may be saved, because his promise of repentance is not a powerless gift. This was true proleptically in Old Testament and powerfully today, because the Holy Spirit has come and with the bride, he says “Come!”



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