



# How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity, and the Interpretation of Scripture

By David A. Lambert

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**How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity, and the Interpretation of Scripture** By David A. Lambert

**Winner of the AAR's 2016 Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion: Textual Studies**

*How Repentance Became Biblical* tells the story of repentance as a concept. Many today, in both secular and religious contexts, assume it to be a natural and inevitable component of our lives. But, where did it originate? How did it become so prominent within Western religious traditions and, by extension, contemporary culture? What purposes does it serve? The book identifies repentance as a product of the Hellenistic period, where it was taken up within emerging forms of Judaism and Christianity as a mode of subjective control. It argues that, along with the rise of repentance, a series of interpretive practices, many of which remain in effect to this day, was put into place whereby repentance is read into the Bible and the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, comes to be seen as repentance's source. Ancient Israelite rituals, such as fasting, prayer, and confession, all of which are incorporated later on within various religious communities as forms of penitential discipline, are understood as external signs of internal remorse. Hebrew terms and phrases, such as the prophetic injunction to "return to YHWH," are read as ancient representations of the concept, repentance. Prophetic literature as a whole is seen as serving a pedagogical purpose, as aiming at the reformation of Israel as a nation. Furthermore, it is assumed that, on the basis of the Bible, sectarians living in the late Second Temple period, from the Dead Sea sect to the early Jesus movement, believed that their redemption depended upon their repentance. In fact, the penitential framework within which the Bible is interpreted tells us the most about our own interpretive tendencies, about how we privilege notions of interiority, autonomy, and virtue. The book develops other frameworks for explaining the biblical phenomena in their ancient contexts, based on alternative views of the body, power, speech, and the divine, and, thereby, offers a new account of repentance's origins.

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**How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity, and the Interpretation of Scripture** By David A. Lambert Bibliography

- Rank: #652758 in Books
- Published on: 2015-12-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.40" h x .80" w x 9.30" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 280 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Examining the language of sin, prayer, and fasting in diverse parts of the canon, Lambert finds that the apparent language of repentance does not mean what we think it means. The pervasive idea of the interiority of the penitential self says more about us than it does about the biblical texts. It is not only the Bible that needs to be historicized, but 'also its readers.'"--*Christian Century*

"David Lambert...has done a great service to the field of biblical studies with his substantial volume, *How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity, and the Interpretation of Scripture*...Lambert's volume offers an impressive resource to scholars of ancient texts and to those interested in the concept of repentance. This is a fine work that raises beneficial questions about an important theological idea."--*Biblical Interpretation*

"It has taken until Lambert's book properly to identify the semantic and historical range of the word 'repentance'...Lambert has done us a great service in helping us to repent with linguistic and cultural sensitivity."--*Marginalia*

"Groundbreaking...David Lambert's work has the potential to become integral to the forward motion of biblical studies."--*The Biblical Review*

"*How Repentance Became Biblical* is an intellectually disturbing book in the best sense of the term. In this careful work of intellectual and cultural history Lambert demonstrates the extent to which readers, including scholars, have misunderstood critical aspects of the biblical worldview, culture, and practices by reading the concept of repentance into texts where it is not present. Biblical studies will be grappling with the implications of this transformative work for a long time." --Carol Newsom, Professor of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, Emory University

"In this methodologically sophisticated, profoundly learned, and lucidly written book, David Lambert problematizes the idea of 'repentance,' arguing that it fully emerges not in the Hebrew Bible but in the Judaism of the last centuries BCE. This is an important work for students of the Hebrew Bible no less than for students of formative Judaism and Christianity." --Shaye J.D. Cohen, Littauer Professor of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy Chair, Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University

"In this sophisticated study, David Lambert argues that the Hebrew Bible did not originally contain the idea of repentance as now understood. Repentance is a creation of the Hellenistic age, found in Philo and Ben Sira, and later read back into the Hebrew Bible. Based on meticulous exegesis, this convincingly revisionist account deserves to be read by everyone interested in the theology and ethical practice of ancient Israel." -- John Barton, Emeritus Oriel & Laing Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture, University of Oxford

"The invigorating discussion and innovative analysis holds potential to significantly impact the field of biblical studies... highly recommended."-- *The Biblical Review*

"Lambert aims to 'denaturalize' [repentance], while at the same time unearthing what scriptures really mean when they say at least what they've been read as saying 'repent, repent'...in his provocative book. "--*Jewish Review of Books*

About the Author

**David Lambert** is an assistant professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he teaches courses on the Hebrew Bible and its history of interpretation. He received his undergraduate and graduate training at Harvard University in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.

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