

Scriptural Reasoning 'Texts' and 'Traditions of Reading'

REPENTANCE

"REPENTANCE" - SCRIPTURES

Jewish Text 1

Ezekiel 33: 10-20

י וְאָתָּה בֶן-אָדָם אָמַר אֶל-בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּן אָמַרְתֶּם לְאֹמֵר כִּי-
פָשַׁעֵינוּ וְחַטֵּאתֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ וּבָכְם אֲנַחְנוּ גְּמֻקִים וְאִיךָ נִחְיָה.
יא אָמַר אֲלֵיהֶם חֵי-אָנֹכִי נֹאֵם אֲדָשׁם ה' אִם-אֶחָפֵץ בְּמוֹת
הָרָשָׁע כִּי אִם-בְּשׁוּב רָשָׁע מִדַּרְכּוֹ וְחָיָה שׁוּבוּ שׁוּבוּ מִדַּרְכֵיכֶם
הָרָעִים וְלָמָּה תָמוּתוּ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל.
יב וְאָתָּה בֶן-אָדָם אָמַר אֶל-בְּנֵי-עַמֶּךָ צְדָקַת הַצְּדִיק לֹא תִצְלִינּוּ
בְיוֹם פָּשָׁעוֹ וְרָשַׁעַת הָרָשָׁע לֹא-יִכָּשֵׁל בָּהּ בְּיוֹם שׁוּבוֹ מִרָשָׁעוֹ
וְצְדִיק לֹא יוּכַל לְחַיּוֹת בָּהּ בְּיוֹם חַטֵּאתוֹ.
יג בְּאֹמְרֵי לְצְדִיק חַיָּה יִחְיֶה וְהוּא-בְטִחַ עַל-צְדָקָתוֹ וְעָשָׂה עֲוֹל
כָּל-צְדָקָתוֹ לֹא תִזְכְּרֶנָּה וּבְעֲוֹלוֹ אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה בּוֹ יָמוּת.
יד וּבְאֹמְרֵי לְרָשָׁע מוֹת תָּמוּת וְשָׁב מִחַטָּאתוֹ וְעָשָׂה מִשְׁפָּט
וְצְדָקָה.
טו חֵב לֵיָשִׁיב רָשָׁע גְּזֵלָה יִשְׁלַם בְּחֻקוֹת הַחַיִּים הֵלֶךְ לְבַלְתִּי
עֲשׂוֹת עֲוֹל חַיּוֹ יִחְיֶה לֹא יָמוּת.
טז כָּל-חַטֵּאתָיו אֲשֶׁר חָטָא לֹא תִזְכְּרֶנָּה לוֹ מִשְׁפָּט וְצְדָקָה עָשָׂה
חַיּוֹ יִחְיֶה.
יז וְאָמְרוּ בְנֵי עַמֶּךָ לֹא יִתְכַּן דַּרְךְ אֲדָשׁם וְהִמָּה דַרְכָּם לֹא-
יִתְכַּן.
יח בְּשׁוּב-צְדִיק מִצְדָקָתוֹ וְעָשָׂה עֲוֹל וּמַת בָּהֶם.
יט וּבְשׁוּב רָשָׁע מִרָשַׁעַתוֹ וְעָשָׂה מִשְׁפָּט וְצְדָקָה עָלֵיהֶם הוּא
יִחְיֶה.
כ וְאָמַרְתֶּם לֹא יִתְכַּן דַּרְךְ אֲדָשׁם אִישׁ כְּדַרְכּוֹ אֲשַׁפוּט אֶתְכֶם
בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Ezekiel 33: 10-20

¹⁰ And you, son of man, say to the House of Israel: This is what you have been saying: 'Indeed our transgressions and our sins are upon us; we are sick at heart about them, and how shall we live?' ¹¹ Say to them: As I live—declares the Lord God—I do not desire the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why should you die, O House of Israel?

¹² And you, son of man, say to the children of your people: The righteousness of the righteous man shall not save him when he sins, and the wickedness of the wicked man shall not cause him to stumble when he turns back from his wickedness; and the righteous man shall not live by [his righteousness] when he sins. ¹³ When I say of the righteous man, 'He shall surely live', and he relies on his righteousness and commits iniquity, none of his righteousness shall be remembered; but he shall die for the iniquity that he has committed. ¹⁴ And when I say to the wicked man, 'You shall surely die', and he turns back from his sins and does justice and righteousness—¹⁵ if the wicked man restores a pledge, makes good what he has taken by robbery, follows the laws of life, and does not commit iniquity—he shall surely live, he shall not die. ¹⁶ None of the sins that he sinned shall be remembered against him; he has done justice and righteousness, he shall surely live. ¹⁷ But the children of your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not fair.' But it is their way that is not fair. ¹⁸ When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die for it. ¹⁹ And when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness and does justice and righteousness, he shall live because of them. ²⁰ And yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is unfair?' I will judge each one of you according to his ways, O House of Israel!

Glosses

- v. 10: 'son of man' - *ben adam*. The phrase could also be translated as 'mortal', or 'son of Adam', meaning 'human being'. It has connotations of mortality—like our ancestor Adam, we too will die—and of humans' propensity for sin—again harking back to Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden.
- v. 11: 'turn back, turn back' - *shuvu shuvu*. The Hebrew root *sh-b* has connotations of 'turning', 'returning', and 'repenting'. This verse appears as part of the Amidah of Yom Kippur, one of the central prayers of the day.
- v. 14: 'justice and righteousness' - *mishpat utsedaqah*. Possible translations of *mishpat* include 'judgement', 'law', 'right', 'custom'; possible translations of *tsedaqah* include 'righteousness', 'justice', 'fairness', 'right', 'merit', 'good deed'. 'piety', 'mercy', or 'charity'. Both are central concepts in Judaism and often appear together.
- v. 15: 'laws of life' - *chuqot hachayim*. Compare Leviticus 18: 5: 'You shall keep My laws [*chuqotai*] and judgements [*mishpatai*], which a person shall do and live through them; I am the Lord.'

Jewish Text 2

Malachi 3: 6-7

ו כִּי אֲנִי ה' לֹא אֲשַׁנֵּיתִי וְאַתֶּם בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא כִלִּיתֶם.
ז לְמִימֵי אָבִי תִיכֶם סָרְתֶם מִחֻקֵּי וְלֹא שָׁמַרְתֶּם שׁוּבוּ אֵלַי
וְאֲשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת וְאַמְרָתֶם בְּמֶה נָשׁוּב.

Malachi 3: 6-7

⁶ For I am the Lord—I have not changed;

and you are the children of Jacob—you have not ceased to be.

⁷ From the days of your ancestors you have turned away from My laws and have not observed them;

turn back to Me and I will turn back to you, said the Lord of hosts.

But you ask, 'How shall we turn back?'

Glosses

v. 7: 'you have turned away from My laws' - *sartem mechuqai*. The verb used here, from the root *s-r*, often has negative connotations: 'stray', 'turn away from', 'go away from', in contrast to the root *sh-b*, which implies 'turning back towards', 'repenting', and is used in the second half of the verse: 'turn back to Me and I will turn back to you', *shuvu elai ve'ashuvah aleikhem*.

Jewish Text 3

Micah 7: 18-20

יח מי קל כְּמוֹךָ נִשְׂא עֲוֹן וְעַבְרָה עַל פְּשָׁע לְשֹׂאֲרֵית נְחֻלָּתוֹ
לֹא הֶחְזִיק לְעַד אָפוּ כִּי חָפֵץ חֶסֶד הוּא.
יט יָשׁוּב יִרְחַמֵּנוּ יִכַּבֵּשׁ עֲוֹנוֹ תִּינּוּ וְתִשְׁלִיךְ בְּמַצְלוֹת יָם כָּל
חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם.
כ תִּתֵּן אֱמֶת לְיַעֲקֹב בְּחֶסֶד לְאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְרָהָם תִּינּוּ מִימֵי
קָדָם.

Micah 7: 18-20

¹⁸ Who is a God like You,
forgiving iniquity and passing over sin
for the remnant of His possession;
Who has not maintained His anger forever,
because He desires loving-kindness.
¹⁹ He will return, He will have mercy on us,
He will overcome our iniquities;
You will cast all their iniquities into the depths of the sea.
²⁰ You will grant truth to Jacob,
loving-kindness to Abraham,
as You swore to our ancestors in the days of old.

Glosses

- v. 18: 'His inheritance' - *nachalato*. The word *nachalah* can mean 'estate', 'property', 'possession', 'inheritance', 'legacy' and 'patrimony'; it is often used metaphorically of the Jewish people, seen as a special 'possession' of God.
- v. 18 (and v. 20): 'loving-kindness' - *chesed*. A central concept in Judaism: possible translations include 'favour', 'goodness', 'love', 'grace', 'mercy', 'charity', 'benevolence', 'benefaction' 'loving-kindness'.
- v. 19: 'He will return' - *yashuv*. Another example of the root *sh-b*, with its connotations of 'turning', 'returning', 'repenting'.
- v. 19: 'He will have mercy on us' - *yerachamenu*. The word for 'mercy' or 'compassion'—*rachamim*—is related to the word *rechem*, meaning 'womb'.
- v. 20: 'Jacob' 'Abraham'. Here these ancestral names refer to the Jewish people, the descendants of Abraham and Jacob; the use of these names reinforces the appeal to God's promise to the ancestors that He would maintain His covenant with their descendants.

Christian Text

Luke 15: 11-32

¹¹ And he said, 'There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me." And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ 'But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." ²² But the father said to his servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ 'Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound." ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" ³¹ And he said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

Glosses

v. 20: 'had compassion' – *esplanknisthei*, this Greek word for 'compassion' is the same word that is used of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 33, when he sees and helps a man who has been mugged, and it is the same word that is used to describe Jesus's feelings when he sees the people looking 'like sheep without a shepherd' (Matt. 9: 36; Mark 6: 34). It suggests powerful, gut feeling.

v. 21: 'sinned' – *hemarton*, from *hamartia*, meaning a wrong state of mind or soul, or an error.

v. 23: 'fattened calf' – *ton moschon ton siteuton*. Meat would have been rarely eaten. This marks the occasion out as special.

Islamic Text 1

[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]

Surah al-A'raf ('The Heights', 7: 11-36)

¹¹ It is We Who created you and gave you shape; then We bade the angels bow down to Adam, and they bowed down; not so Iblis; he refused to be of those who bow down.

¹² He said: 'What prevented you from bowing down when I commanded you?' He said: 'I am better than he: You did create me from fire, and him from clay.'

¹³ He said: 'Get you down from this: it is not for you to be arrogant here: get out, for thou art of the meanest (of creatures).'

¹⁴ He said: 'Give me respite till the day they are raised up.'

¹⁵ He said: 'Be among those who have respite.'

¹⁶ He said: 'Because you have thrown me out of the way, I will truly lie in wait for them on your straight way:

¹⁷ 'Then will I assault them from before them and behind them, from their right and their left: Nor will you find, in most of them, gratitude (for Your mercies).'

¹⁸ He said: 'Get out from this, disgraced and expelled. If any of them follow you, Hell will I fill with you all.'

¹⁹ 'O Adam! dwell you and your wife in the Garden, and enjoy (its good things) as you wish: but approach not this tree, or you run into harm and transgression.'

²⁰ Then began Satan to whisper suggestions to them, bringing openly before their minds all their shame that was hidden from them (before): he said: 'Your Lord only forbade you this tree, lest you should become angels or such beings as live for ever.'

²¹ And he swore to them both, that he was their sincere adviser.

²² So by deceit he brought about their fall: when they tasted of the tree, their shame became manifest to them, and they began to sew together the leaves of the garden over their bodies. And their Lord called unto them: 'Did I not forbid you that tree, and tell you that Satan was an avowed enemy unto you?'

²³ They said: 'Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls: If you forgive us not and bestow not upon us Your Mercy, we shall certainly be lost.'

²⁴ He said: 'Get you down, with enmity between yourselves. On earth will be your dwelling-place and your means of livelihood, for a time.'

²⁵ He said: 'Therein shall you live, and therein shall you die; but from it shall you be taken out (at last).'

²⁶ O Children of Adam! We have bestowed garments upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you. But the garment of righteousness, that is the best. Such are among the signs of Allah, that they may receive admonition!

²⁷ O Children of Adam! Let not Satan seduce you, in the same manner as He got your parents out of the Garden, stripping them of their garments, to expose their shame: for he and his tribe watch you from a position where you cannot see them: We made the satans friends (only) to those without faith.

²⁸ When they do anything that is shameful, they say: 'We found our fathers doing so'; and 'Allah commanded us thus': Say: 'Nay, Allah never commands what is shameful: do you say of Allah what you know not?'

²⁹ Say: 'My Lord has commanded justice; and that you set your whole selves (to Him) at every time and place of prayer, and call upon Him, making your devotion sincere as in His sight: such as He created you in the beginning, so shall you return.'

³⁰ Some He has guided: others have (by their choice) deserved the loss of their way; in that they took the satans, in preference to Allah, for their friends and protectors, and think that they receive guidance.

³¹ O Children of Adam! wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer. Eat and drink, but waste not by excess, for Allah loves not the wasters.

³² Say: 'Who has forbidden the beautiful (gifts) of Allah, which He has produced for His servants, and the things, clean and pure, (which He has provided) for sustenance?' Say: 'They are, in the life of this world, for those who believe, (and) purely for them on the Day of Judgement.' Thus do We explain the signs in detail for those who understand.

³³ Say: 'The things that my Lord has indeed forbidden are: shameful deeds, whether open or secret; sins and trespasses against truth or reason; assigning of partners to Allah, for which He has given no authority; and saying things about Allah of which you have no knowledge.'

³⁴ To every people is a term appointed: when their term is reached, not an hour can they cause delay, nor (an hour) can they advance (it in anticipation).

³⁵ O Children of Adam! whenever there come to you apostles from amongst you, rehearsing My signs unto you, those who are righteous and mend (their lives), on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve.

³⁶ But those who reject Our signs and treat them with arrogance, they are companions of the Fire, to dwell therein (for ever).

Gloss

ayah 11: 'Iblis' - A Qur'anic name for Satan, possibly related to the Greek *diabolis*, which gives us the English word 'diabolical'. The change of name from Iblis to Shaytan (Satan) during this passage is intriguing.

Islamic Text 2

Selections from the 'Chapter on Repentance' in Imam al-Nawawi's *Riyad al-Salihin* ('Gardens of the Righteous'), translated by Usama Hasan

The people of knowledge say that repentance is obligatory from every sin. If the disobedience in question is solely between a servant and Allah Exalted, having no relationship with a human right, the repentance has three conditions: firstly, he must desist from the disobedience; secondly, he must regret doing it; thirdly, he must resolve firmly never to return to it. If any one of these conditions is missing, the repentance is not valid.

If the disobedience involves (violation of) a human right, the repentance has a fourth condition: that he should restore the right of the person. If it involves someone's wealth etc., this should be returned to the person. If it involves the legal penalty for slandering a woman's chastity etc., he must undergo the punishment or ask for it to be forgiven. If it involves backbiting, this must be rectified or forgiven.

It is obligatory to repent from all sins. If a person repents from some of his sins, his repentance from those sins is valid in the view of the people of truth, but he remains liable for the rest. There are numerous proofs from the Book, the *sunnah* (practice of the Prophet) and the consensus of the community that support each other to establish the obligation of repentance.

Allah Exalted says, 'Repent to Allah together, O believers, that you may prosper.'¹ The Exalted also says, 'Seek forgiveness from your Lord and repent to Him.'² The Exalted also says, 'O you who believe! Repent to Allah—a pure, sincere repentance!'³

1. On the authority of Abu Hurayrah, Allah be pleased with him, who said: I heard the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, saying, 'By Allah! Truly, I certainly seek the forgiveness of Allah and repent to Him more than seventy times a day.' It was transmitted by al-Bukhari.
2. On the authority of al-Agharr bin Yasar al-Muzani, Allah be pleased with him, who said: The Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, 'O people! Repent to Allah and seek His forgiveness, for truly, I repent to Him a hundred times a day.' It was transmitted by Muslim.
3. On the authority of Abu Hamza, Anas bin Malik, Allah be pleased with him, servant of the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, who said: The Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, 'Verily, Allah is happier at the repentance of His servant than one of you coming across his mount that he had lost in

¹ *Surah al-Nur* ('Light', 24: 31).

² *Surah Hud*, 11: 3.

³ *Surah al-Tahrim* ('The Prohibition', 66: 8).

the desert.’ Agreed upon.⁴

In one version transmitted by Muslim, ‘Verily, Allah is happier at the repentance of His servant when he repents to Him than one of you who was riding his mount in the desert. The mount slipped away from him, carrying his food and drink, and he despaired of ever finding it. He came to a tree and lay down in its shade, having despaired of finding his mount. While he was lying there like that, behold! his mount was standing beside him, so he grabbed its reins and said out of extreme joy, “O Allah! You are my servant and I am your Lord” He speaks mistakenly out of extreme joy.’

4. On the authority of Abu Musa, ‘Abdullah bin Qays al-Ash’ari, Allah be pleased with him, that the Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, ‘Truly, Allah extends His Hand by night that the sinner by day may repent, and extends His Hand by day that the sinner by night may repent, until the sun rises from its setting-place.’ Transmitted by Muslim.
5. On the authority of Abu Hurayrah, Allah be pleased with him, who said: the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “Whoever repents before the sun rises from its setting-place, Allah turns to him in acceptance.” Transmitted by Muslim.
6. On the authority of Abu ‘Abd al-Rhman ‘Abdullah bin ‘Umar bin al-Khattab, Allah be pleased with both of them, that the Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, ‘Truly Allah, Mighty and Majestic, accepts the repentance of the servant until the last throes of death.’⁵ Transmitted by Tirmidhi, who said that it was a sound *hadith*.
7. On the authority of Abu Sa’id, Sa’d bin Malik bin Sinan al-Khudri, Allah be pleased with him, that the Prophet of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said: ‘There was, in the nations before you, a man who had killed ninety-nine souls. He asked for the most knowledgeable person on earth, and was directed to a monk. He came to him and told him that he had killed ninety-nine people, and asked if it was possible for him to repent. The monk replied, “No.” So he killed him and completed a hundred by him. He asked again for the most knowledgeable person on earth, and was directed to a person of learning. He came to him and told him that he had killed a hundred people, and asked if it was possible for him to repent. He replied, “Yes. Who can prevent you from repenting? Travel to such-and-such a land, for there there are people who worship Allah: worship Allah with them. Do not return to your land, for it is a land of evil.”
He began travelling but when he reached half-way, death came to him. The angels of mercy and the angels of punishment disputed over him. The angels of mercy said, “He came in repentance, turning

⁴ ‘Agreed upon’ means that it was transmitted by the two foremost compilers of *hadith*, i.e. Bukhari and Muslim.

⁵ Literally, ‘until the choking or gargling sound’ as the soul leaves the body.

his heart towards Allah Exalted.” The angels of punishment said, “Truly, he never did any good whatsoever.” An angel came to them in human form so they appointed him as arbiter between them. He said, “Measure the distance between him and the two lands—whichever one is nearer, he belongs to it.” So they measured and found that he was nearer to his destination, so the angels of mercy took him.’ Agreed upon.

In an authentic narration: ‘He was nearer to the village of goodness by a handspan, and so was counted amongst its people.’ In another authentic narration: ‘Allah Exalted inspired that land to move away, and this land to move closer, and said: “Measure the distance between them.” They found that he was nearer to this land by a handspan, so he was forgiven.’ In one narration: ‘He turned his chest towards his destination.’

8. On the authority of Ibn ‘Abbas, Allah be pleased with both of them, that the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, ‘Were the son of Adam to possess a valley of gold, he would love to possess two (such) valleys. But nothing will fill his mouth except dust. Allah turns (in acceptance) to whoever turns (in repentance, this is a must).’⁶
9. On the authority of Abu Hurayrah, Allah be pleased with him, that the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, ‘Allah, Glorified and Exalted, laughs upon two men, one of whom kills the other but they both enter the Garden. One of them fights in the way of Allah and is killed. Then Allah turns to the killer, who submits (embraces Islam) and is martyred.’ Agreed upon.

⁶ I have attempted to capture a sense of the original rhyming prose in the translation.

"REPENTANCE" – TRADITIONS OF READING

JEWISH TEXTS

Introduction and Context

All three texts come from the second section of the Tanakh (the Jewish Bible)—that of *Nevi'im* ('Prophets', consisting of the books of: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets). These books span the period from Moses' death (roughly 1210 BCE) down to about 500 BCE.

The first text is from the book of Ezekiel, one of the three great books recording the words of an individual prophet (the other two are Isaiah and Jeremiah). Ezekiel was forced into exile by the Babylonians in 597 BCE, along with thousands of fellow Judaeans, as part of Babylonian attempts to make the small vassal kingdom of Judah more obedient. Trouble continued, however, and in 586 BCE the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem, burnt down the Temple, killed the king, and exiled most of the remaining Judaeans to Babylon, where they remained for some seventy years. Ezekiel was the prophet of the exile, at first warning his community of the coming disaster and urging them to repent and mend their ways, but changing his tone after Jerusalem had fallen, offering hope and promises that God would redeem the people from exile. He presents a stark and logical picture of sin and its consequences—every individual will be punished for his own sins—but emphasizes that repentance and return to God's ways are always available, offering hope and salvation.

The other two texts come from books of the 'Minor Prophets', a group of twelve short books written in one scroll from early times (to preserve them from loss). Micah is one of the earliest (late 8th century BCE) and Malachi the latest (late 6th century BCE).

Parts of all these texts appear in the prayers of the High Holidays, also known as the Ten Days of Repentance (*aseret yemei teshuvah*), which fall in September/October. They begin with Rosh Hashanah, New Year, which lasts two days (one among Reform Jews) and inaugurates a period of reflection, repentance, prayer and contemplation, culminating in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Many Jews who rarely attend synagogue during the year do make a special effort to be there then, especially for Yom Kippur, which is a 25-hour fast day with long, introspective prayers focusing on repentance (*teshuvah*, literally 'return') and reconciliation to God.

Points to Consider

- Are there any loopholes in Ezekiel's scheme of sin and punishment?
- What is God's attitude to repentance?
- What is God's role (if any) in repentance?

The Text in Tradition and Today

Repentance, *teshuvah*, is a central theme in Jewish life, prayed for three times daily in the fifth blessing of the Amidah prayer (composed of nineteen blessings):

Bring us back [*hashivenu*], our Father, to Your Torah; and draw us near, our King, to Your service; and lead us back to You in perfect repentance. Blessed are You, Lord, Who desires repentance.

There is a rich Jewish literature on repentance, spanning two thousand years, from the Mishnah (Oral Law, c. 200 CE) to the present, including many works that were written for people to study during the Ten Days of Repentance (see Introduction); a widely used example, *Days of Awe*, was composed in 1948 by Shai Agnon, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, and many people study the ten chapters of Maimonides' 'Laws of Repentance' during the Ten Days, reading one chapter each day.

Teshuvah is seen as having both practical and spiritual aspects: it is often emphasized that repentance is useless without first making amends for one's misdeeds (see Text 1 above, with its emphasis on the wicked man restoring a pledge and making good what he has taken by robbery). The small book of Jonah is read in its entirety on Yom Kippur, since one of its themes is that of the repentance of the inhabitants of Nineveh, after hearing Jonah's prophecy that God was about to destroy them. On this, the rabbis of the Mishnah commented: 'Our brothers, it is not said of the people of Nineveh that "God saw their sackcloth and fasting" but "God saw their deeds, that they had turned back from their evil path" (Jonah 3: 6)'.

The other principal requirement for repentance is asking forgiveness from those one has injured:

Yom Kippur makes atonement for sins committed against God; Yom Kippur does not make atonement for sins against one's fellow, until the sinner has made peace with his fellow.

(Mishnah, *Yoma* 8: 9)

The philosopher Sa'adiah Gaon (882-942 CE) listed four points necessary for true repentance: 1. renunciation of each sin; 2. remorse; 3. asking for forgiveness; 4. assuming the obligation not to relapse into sin.

The greatest of all Jewish philosophers, Maimonides (1138-1204) notes that every individual is endowed with free will, and thus bears the responsibility for his or her deeds; since this is so, everyone needs to repent, both for sinful acts and for 'evil dispositions':

He needs to investigate and repent of ... hot temper, hatred, jealousy, scoffing, eager pursuit of wealth or honours, greediness and so on ... they are graver than sinful acts, for when one is addicted to them it is difficult to give them up.

(*Mishneh Torah (Code of Jewish Law)*, 'Laws of Repentance' 7: 3)

Jewish discussion of repentance is serious and intense but never morbid: it is often stressed that repentance is a gift from God and a source of joy:

Let not the penitent suppose that he is kept far away from the degree attained by the righteous because of the iniquities and sins that he has committed. This is not so. He is beloved by the Creator, desired by Him, as if he had never sinned.... The sages say, "Where penitents stand, the completely righteous cannot stand" ... the reason being that the former have had to put forth a greater effort to subdue their passions than the latter. ... Only through repentance will Israel be redeemed ... Great is repentance, for it brings men near to the Divine Presence.

(Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah (Code of Jewish Law)*, 'Laws of Repentance' 7: 4-6)

God is an active partner in aiding repentance. A midrashic parable based on the text from Malachi presented above (Text 2, verse 7) tells us:

A king had a son who had gone astray from his father a journey of a hundred days. His friends said to him, 'Return to your father'. He said, 'I cannot.' Then his father sent to say, 'Return as far as you can, and I will come to you the rest of the way.' So God says, 'Turn back to Me and I will turn back to you.'

(*Pesikta Rabbati*, ninth century CE)

Ultimately, repentance is one aspect of the love of God and the desire to approach Him more closely, removing the barriers that stand in the way: 'The gates of prayer are sometimes open and sometimes closed, but the gates of repentance are always open. As the sea is always accessible, so is the hand of the Holy One, blessed be He, always open to receive penitents.'
(*Deuteronomy Rabbah*, midrashic work, 9th-10th centuries CE).

CHRISTIAN TEXT

Introduction and Context

Luke's Gospel is the third of the four New Testament Gospels, and while it shares much material with the others (especially Mark and Matthew), this parable is uniquely Lukan. It is the third of three closely related parables of Jesus—recorded by Luke one immediately after the other—all of which illustrate God's mercy for sinners. The first parable involves a lost sheep, which the shepherd leaves ninety-nine other sheep behind in order to find; the second involves a lost coin (worth a tiny sum), which a woman turns her house upside down in order to recover. This third parable is about a lost son. The stories together emphasize Luke's preoccupation with the wideness of God's loving concern—a theme that comes up elsewhere too in his emphasis on the importance of the poor in God's plan, in his defence of Jesus's apparently indiscriminate table fellowship, and in his attention both in his

Gospel and in the Book of Acts to the important place of the Gentiles in the Kingdom of God.

Following the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop in chapter 9, and his prediction of his crucifixion, there are ten chapters of the Gospel given over to Jesus's teaching about the demands, the meaning and also the joy of discipleship. All of these happen in the context of his journey to Jerusalem with his followers, and this passage is a part of that body of teaching 'on the way'.

Points to Consider

- In English, this parable is usually referred to as the 'prodigal son'; in many other countries it is referred to as the 'lost son'. What do you think are the most important things about this son and his behaviour?
- What do we learn about repentance from the parable?
- Is the older son also in some way 'lost' or in need of repentance?
- With whom are we being asked to identify in this parable?

The Text in Tradition and Today

There are other 'two brother' stories inside and outside the Bible, so there is perhaps a familiar feel to this parable. But it doesn't quite run as we expect, because usually the younger brother in such stories (for example, in the Jacob and Esau story) triumphs over the older one. So is there something of a parody going on here in Luke's Gospel, in the fact that the younger brother is such a wastrel—a sort of anti-hero? Another surprising feature of the parable is its ending: it allows the possibility that both brothers will end up feasting together, rather than giving us one winner and one loser. Though having said that, we never actually find out whether the older brother takes up his father's invitation and enters the banqueting hall. Is this significant? What challenge might be being put to us by this open ending?

And can the younger son's reasons for repenting be read as rather venial and selfish—he will have a better life than he has in the far country even if he only gets back into his father's house as a servant? And does his treatment in comparison with his brother's treatment all seem rather unfair?

The degradation of the younger son is made very acute indeed to the ears of Jewish listeners by the fact that he ends up amongst pigs. Maybe there is a reflection going on here about the implications of engaging in Gentile ways or being surrounded by Gentiles. It might be that we are being asked to see analogies between the structure of this story and the bigger structure of the history of the Jewish people—first exiled (in Babylon) and then allowed to return to their land and Temple (though this land again, in Jesus's time, was overrun and polluted by Gentiles: the Romans). Perhaps even the story of the whole human race is being evoked here—from the Fall to the eventual restoration to God's Kingdom which Jesus is bringing about. The story of the prodigal could be a microcosm of the story of humankind.

If we are alert to the fact that Jesus is telling this story on the way to Jerusalem, where he will be arrested and killed, then we may be tempted to draw comparisons between his journey and that of the younger son in the story. Commentators in Christian tradition have certainly done so. *Unlike* the wayward son of the parable, Jesus is following the path of faithful obedience, so here there is a contrast. But there are also interesting similarities, for Jesus seems to be willing to share space with Gentiles, and to undergo ultimate degradation in solidarity with sinners—to ‘enter the pigsty’—so maybe we can see a bit of a *likeness* between Jesus and the prodigal. And after the prodigal experiences his moment of repentance, he makes a straight way to his father, which is something like what Jesus is doing by turning his face to Jerusalem and a death he seems certain will come.

It is sometimes remarked that the lost son is fundamentally different from the lost sheep and the lost coin in the companion parables, because sheep and coins are passive (they are simply *found*), whereas human beings can actively *turn round* (which is literally what the Greek word for repentance—*metanoia*—means), and go back. This puts a great deal of importance on the action of the son. But maybe we should allow that there is more going on than his activity (which might in any case, as we’ve noted, be somewhat compromised in its intention), for in a way, perhaps *he too* is ‘found’—found by a *memory*: the memory of the beauty and order and love of his father’s house, which passes over him like the shadow of a reconnaissance plane, and wakes him up to what he must do. And he only needs to begin the journey home to have the rest ‘made up for him’—as the elderly father sets dignity aside and runs to meet him.

A Jewish perspective on the Christian Text

My first reaction is rather one of sympathy for the older brother—I can see all sorts of questions that will arise after the festive meal is over. What is the younger brother going to live on? Has the father something in reserve or will the older brother be expected to redivide the inheritance with him? And given that there is a supersessionist interpretation of this story, with the older brother representing Judaism and the younger brother representing Christianity, I feel some unease with the blithe assumption that the older brother is behaving badly and that the younger one deserves his unconditional welcome.

ISLAMIC TEXTS

Introduction and Context

The root of the Arabic word for ‘repentance’, i.e. *tawbah*, literally means ‘to turn’. The verb is used both for God and man: humans turn to God away from sin in repentance while God in return turns to the sinner in acceptance of the repentance. The ninth *surah* (chapter) of the Qur’an is called *al-Tawbah* or ‘Repentance’.

'The Heights' begins with the Arabic letters *alif lam mim sad* and is a long *surah* that begins with the story of Adam, Satan and Eve, followed by a majestic passage on the Garden, the Fire and the greatness of God and the beauty of His creation. Next comes a long passage, only the initial part of which is given here, which recounts the stories of various prophets, highlighting the similarity of their message and of the reaction from their communities. The longest story comes last and is that of Moses and Pharaoh, the most oft-told story in the Qur'an.

The story of Adam, Satan and Eve is presented here, followed by a passage on morality that is related to the previous story through the theme of clothing. Adam and Eve's prayer in *ayah* 23 is repeated frequently by Muslims, especially to repent to God and ask His forgiveness.

Imam al-Nawawi from the village of Nawa in Syria was a deeply-revered Sunni scholar of *hadith* and the Shafi'i school of law during the seventh/thirteenth century (AH/CE). He was known for his asceticism: he never married, and his entire wardrobe consisted of one long shirt. His *Riyad al-Salihin* ('Gardens of the Righteous') consists of about 370 chapters on morality, worship and general etiquette of life. Each chapter usually begins with a few brief quotations from the Qur'an, followed by numerous, often lengthy, traditions or *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad. The total number of *hadiths* in the book is about two thousand, always quoted from the primary, canonical collections of *hadith*. 'Gardens of the Righteous' is therefore a secondary collection of *hadith*. The chapter on repentance is the second chapter of the book, the first being about sincerity of intention for the sake of God in all deeds. The book is a popular one for admonition, and extracts will often be regularly read out after prayers in mosques around the world, as well as often being the basis for Friday sermons.

Points to Consider

- What is the nature of the Qur'anic 'forbidden tree'?
- The themes of clothing and nudity.
- Is not the story in *hadith* 3 reminiscent of that of the Prodigal Son in the New Testament?
- *Hadith* 7 speaks of a pre-Islamic story. In similar contexts, this usually refers to the 'People of the Book'. Is such a story found in the Jewish or Christian traditions?
- *Hadith* 7 implies that repentance is possible even for a serial-killer or mass-murderer. Is there still hope for today's world, then?

The Text in Tradition and Today

In the Qur'anic accounts, the story of Adam and Eve and their fall is preceded by the even more important story of Adam and Satan, especially Satan's fall. The doctrine of original sin is absent from Islam because of Adam and Eve's repentance, signified by their prayer, 7: 23.

The phrase 'forbidden tree' occurs in the Qur'an, rather than 'forbidden fruit'. Some commentators speculated on the nature of the tree and its fruit, although the more sensible ones pointed out that clearly, this does not matter too much, the moral of the story being paramount.

The 'tree of knowledge' is a possible explanation for the forbidden tree because the Arabic for tree (*shajarah*) also refers to the erupting of disputes, since disputation and argumentation often has a tree-structure: shoots and leaves branching off from the root cause(s) of the dispute. Further, it is repeatedly stated in the Qur'an that schism and disputation amongst religious communities only begins after knowledge comes to them. In the Islamic tradition, knowledge is a dangerous weapon and its correct usage must be learnt carefully.

Another interpretation of the forbidden tree is a popular but minority view that is also indicated by the great scholar, revivalist and mystic, Shah Waliullah of Delhi (tenth/eighteenth century AH/CE). This proceeds on the basis that no fruit makes people feel naked, so that they must cover themselves with leaves: therefore the fruit is metaphorical, and refers to the sexual act. Satan's promise in 7: 20 that approaching the tree would make Adam and Eve live forever refers to their seemingly eternal life through their descendants. This interpretation opens up new dimensions and vistas of meanings for married life, where husband and wife recreate the 'original sin' of their first ancestors, but in a sacred and holy setting. There is also a subversive element to the idea that 'original sin' becomes 'sacred worship'.

Imam Nawawi's expertise as a jurist can be seen in his legalistic approach with terms and conditions applied to what is essentially a spiritual action, i.e. repentance. The *hadiths* he quotes here are much-loved and oft-quoted, especially in Friday sermons. There is a rich tradition of commentary on these *hadiths* also.

A Jewish perspective on the Muslim Text

In *ayah 22*, we see the first humans, seduced by Iblis, sewing themselves garments of leaves (as they do in the Torah version of this story), presumably to cover their nakedness—the 'shame' that has become manifest to them. However, in *ayah 27*, the children of Adam are urged not to let Satan seduce them and 'strip them of their raiment'; this seems to contradict the evidence of *ayah 22*, that Satan actually inspired them to make clothes. How are the two *ayat* reconciled (if they are?). In addition, *ayah 35* seems to imply that more apostles might be sent to humanity in the future; how does this fit with the concept of Muhammad as 'seal of the prophets'? Lastly, a more general question: we see that the first humans do repent of their sin, but does it do them any good? Are they forgiven?

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