Lambert’s book is representative of an influential current in contemporary North-American scholarship. It is inspired from a Foucauldian and discourse-analytical debunking of naturalisations of time-honoured concepts that have featured largely in the understanding (whether in scholarly or more general cultural parlance or in both) of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, and other related texts from the same period—the author slightly in contradiction to his approach adheres to “Bible”-language despite its anachronistic character with respect to the era examined. Lambert’s focus is on the notion of repentance. I understand and accept his approach as scholarly mandatory, since it helps us to detach ourselves from culturally established truths and to diminish the risk of falling victim to prejudicial thinking. In this way, the book does not only strive to provide a more suitable lens for interpreting a number of scriptural terms, motifs, and clusters of ideas traditionally subsumed under the heading repentance, but it also involves a shift in focus from historicising scriptural texts to particular readings of these text. In doing this, the book is similar to recent books by Brent Nongbri and Carlin Barton and Daniel Boyarin, which both focus on the genealogy of religion. However, there is an inherent danger in such an approach, namely that one apotheosises a particular understanding of a concept the erroneous nature of which the subsequent discussion is focused on demonstrating by interpretation (albeit the meticulous character of the readings) of various texts, but without fundamentally questioning (both historically and philosophically) the ground on which the elevated concept rests. I do not think Lambert’s book is entirely innocent in this regard (see below).

Lambert writes in an articulate and inviting English language that is a real treat in style. The book is an instructive and pleasurable read. It consists of a brief preface, a short introduction to the perceptual filter of penitence, three major parts comprising altogether seven chapters, a brief postscript, 35 pages of endnotes, references to primary sources, and a subject index. In his “Introduction: The Penitential Lens,” Lambert unequivocally states the aim of

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the book. Through the history of interpretation, repentance has unconsciously come to be identified with various religious elements such as fasting, prayer, and confession as rituals through which ancient people have been held to experience repentance (4), but, Lambert asks, is such terminology really helpful in shedding light on these phenomena? The book, therefore, seeks to attain three goals:

(1) to identify dominant penitential modes of reading the Bible and understand their ontological underpinnings, (2) to explore the possibilities for articulating alternative readings of so-called penitential phenomena, and (3) to examine the formations whereby a discourse around repentance was brought into effect (10).

The introduction also presents Lambert’s overall view of repentance, that it emerged as a discourse during the Hellenistic period in conjunction with moral philosophy as a distinct technique for the sage’s progress, and that around the turn of the Common Era this was taken up in emerging forms of Judaism and Christianity “as a practice of subjective control for shaping communal discipline and defining communal boundaries” (9). I take this as being partly correct, but it suffers from the weakness referred to above, namely that without questioning its own presuppositions it promotes one particular discursive coinage of “repentance” which is then taken to designate the phenomenon in toto (cf. pp. 153-154). Had Lambert not bound his understanding of repentance to this discursive framing, much could and would have looked differently in the book.

The first main part looks at rituals of fasting (ch. 1), prayer (ch. 2), and confession (ch. 3) as ritual practices found with specific individuals, kings and communities—somewhat idiosyncratically from the study of religion perspective dubbed rites. Perusing a number of texts in the Hebrew Bible, Lambert suggests that they are more suitably seen through respectively a mercy and a justice filter rather than being viewed through the penitential lens. The mercy track relates to different forms of appeals such as sacrifice to the deity and presupposes a god “who saves because he is powerful and kind to his people, apart from their merits” (24). The justice track, conversely, “attempts to defuse the wrath of a deity confronted by sin” (ibid.). In Lambert’s view the penitential interpretation erroneously locates fasting on the justice track, whereas it should be placed on the mercy trail. The vitality of fasting lies in its manifestation of distress rather than being a mere outward expression of internal feelings (31), but this argument hinges on the preconceived notion of what repentance means and the associated dualism between interiority and exteriority. Lambert