Durham University

Durham E-Theses

Chosen and unchosen : conceptions of election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian interpretation

Joel N. Lohr

How to cite:

Lohr, Joel N. (2007) Chosen and unchosen : conceptions of election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian interpretation. Doctoral thesis, Durham University.

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a https://etheses.durham.ac.uk/id/eprint/1828/ is made to the metadata record in Durham E-Theses
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the full Durham E-Theses policy for further details.

Academic Support Office, The Palatine Centre, Durham University, Stockton Road, Durham, DH1 3LE
e-mail: e-theses.admin@durham.ac.uk Tel: +44 0191 334 6107
https://etheses.durham.ac.uk

Chosen and Unchosen

Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish - Christian Interpretation

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author or the university to which it was submitted. No quotation from it, or information derived from it may be published without the prior written consent of the author or university, and any information derived from it should be acknowledged.

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Theology and Religion

University of Durham

2007

Joel N. Lohr

- 4 JUN 2007

Chosen and Unchosen

Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish - Christian Interpretation

.....

Joel N. Lohr

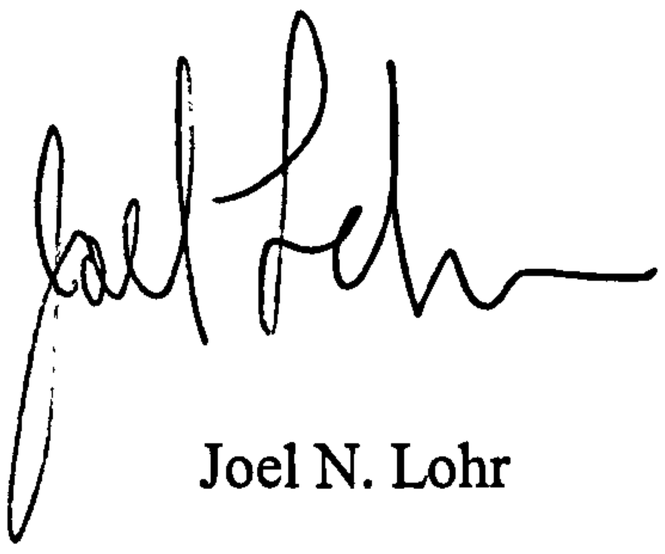
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the concept of election as it is presented in Jewish-Christian interpretation and in the Pentateuch. It attempts to make sense of the question of election and nonelection in the Old Testament, from the perspective of a Christian interpreter and with concern for the history of interpretation and Jewish-Christian dialogue.

In the first part of the thesis I examine a number of recent election studies—from dictionary articles to monographs to Old Testament theologies—those from a Christian perspective and, in the second chapter, those from a Jewish one. In this second chapter, I look in depth at four contemporary Jewish thinkers on election, and then examine the differences in interpretation between the two religious groups. Drawing from both, though convinced that Jewish interpretation has much to contribute to and correct in Christian readings of election, I then look at specific examples from the Old Testament as test cases. In this second part of the thesis, special attention is paid to how the unchosen, whether figure or people, function in relation to the chosen. In chapters three to five, I look at the stories of Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 20), Pharaoh's daughter (Exod 2:1-10), and Balaam (Num 22-24). In chapter six, I look at the nations in relation to Israel more generally in Deuteronomy (Deut 4:1-40; 7; 10:12-22). I argue that the unchosen are important to the overall worldview of scripture and although election entails exclusion, and God's love for the one people Israel entails that it is a love in contrast to others, it does not follow that the unchosen fall outside of the economy of God's workings. The unchosen often face important tests of their own and have a responsibility to God *and the chosen*, however much such an idea defies modern day notions of fairness.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis embodies the results of my own work, that it has been composed by me and that it does not include work that has been presented for a degree in this or any other university. All quotations and the work and opinions of others have been acknowledged in the main text or footnotes.



Joel N. Lohr

"The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published in any format, including electronic and the Internet, without the author's prior written consent. All information derived from this thesis must be acknowledged appropriately."

הַלְלוּ אֶת־יְהוָה כָּל־גּוֹיִם שַׁבְּחוּהוּ כָּל־הָאֻמִּים
כִּי גָבַר עָלֵינוּ חַסְדּוֹ וֶאֱמֶת־יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם
הַלְלוּ־יָהּ

Praise the LORD, all nations;
Extol him, all peoples!
For his steadfast love is great toward us,
And the truth of the LORD is forever.
Praise the LORD!

(Psalm 117)

contents

Contents.....i

Preface

Election and Nonelection: Why Bother? v

Acknowledgments.....x

Abbreviations.....xii

Chapter 1

Introducing Election and Non-Election: Christian Interpretation.....1

Theological Dictionaries 1

TDOT.....2

NIDOTTE 4

TLOT 5

ABD 8

Monographs.....11

H. H. Rowley 11

Seock-Tae Sohn 14

Old Testament (and Biblical) Theologies.....16

Walther Eichrodt.....16

Horst Dietrich Preuss 19

Walter Brueggemann 22

Charles H. H. Scobie.....26

Summary 30

Chapter 2

Jewish Election Theologies: Exclusion and Disgrace?.....33

Joel S. Kaminsky.....34

Issues in Election in the Hebrew Bible 34

The Elect, Anti-elect and Non-elect.....36

Evaluation 42

David Novak....48
Who Chooses: God or Israel? 49
But Did Israel Merit their Election by God?....50
What then of Apostasy? 51
And the Gentiles? Is there a Jewish 'Mission'?....53
Summary 56
Evaluation 57
Michael Wyschogrod 63
Reversing the Depersonalization of Hashem 63
Israel, the Seed of Abraham, Hashem's Favorites 65
Can One Become a Seed of Abraham?....66
A God of Favouritism? 68
A Corporate People, Not Individuals....69
And Can it Be? An Evaluation....70
Calling Abraham....71
A God of Partial love? 72
Defining Israel 75
A Need to Examine....77
Jon D. Levenson....77
Obsessed with Method? 78
Election in the Hebrew Bible....80
The Exodus: A Fulfillment of Promise and Story of Election 81
The Testing of the Chosen and the Vindication of God's Choice 83
The Unchosen and Divine Testing....85
Election to Service? 86
Evaluation: Reading the Bible Well and Reemphasizing the Neglected 88
Election, Nonelection, and Testing....90
Excursus: In What Sense ערב רב ('Mixed Multitude')? 93
The 'Criterion is Singular'?....96
Chapter Conclusion: Jewish Interpretation and the Way Forward....98
Chapter 3
Blessing or Curse? Abraham, Election, and the Nations: The Story of King Abimelech .100
Wives, Sisters, a Righteous Nation and God-Fearing King 100
"She is my Sister": Finding the Grain of Genesis 20....101
Abraham, Promises, Lies, and the Nations 111
Chapter 4
An Unchosen Figure who Saves a People (Exodus 2:1-10) 121
A Numerous and Special People, A People Promised Land....121

The Birth, the Hiding, and the Finding....122
Naming, Ownership, and Adoption....126
Summary and Conclusion....130
Chapter 5
Numbers: Balaam and Yhwh's Irrevocable Love for Israel....132
Numbers and the Book of Balaam....132
The Text: Numbers 22-24....135
Balak, His Fear, and His Big Idea....135
Balaam: Prophet, Diviner, Sorcerer, or Seer?....137
The Call of Balaam and the Donkey Episode....139
Elohim's Anger, the Talking Donkey and Balaam's Integrity....142
The Oracles, Divine Blessing, and YHWH's Continued Love in Disobedience....146
Conclusion....152
Chapter 6
Israel and the Nations in Deuteronomy....155
Deuteronomy 4: Allotted to Whom and Why?....156
Deuteronomy 4:15-20: Context....157
Deuteronomy 4:15-20....159
The Host of Heaven (צבא השמים)....161
Allotting for Redemption or Destruction or?....163
Deuteronomy 7: *Ḥerem* and Election?....168
The Composition of Deuteronomy 7 and Related Issues....169
Deuteronomy 7:1: Seven Nations....172
Deuteronomy 7:2-5: You Shall Utterly Make Them Ḥerem....175
The Ḥerem as Metaphor?....176
Deuteronomy 7:6-8: Ḥerem and Election....181
Larger Deuteronomic Themes....183
Excursus: The Ḥerem as a Blessing to the Nations?....185
Evaluation....189
YHWH: The Ultimate Oath-keeper....191
Conclusion....194
Deuteronomy 10:12-22....194
Summary....203
Chapter Conclusion....204
Conclusion
Chosen and Unchosen: Can Good Come from a God that Favours?....206
Appendix 1
The Tendency to Rationalize Balaam as Sinner....214

Appendix 2

Ḥerem in the Old Testament: An Overview 221

Ḥerem as Sacrifice? 224

Preliminary Observations.....228

Ḥerem as a Divine Command? 228

A God that Gets His Hands Dirty?.....233

The Smoking Gun (or Bloody Sword): The Ḥerem Never Happened.....234

Perhaps Judgment?.....236

Conclusion 238

Bibliography.....239

ELECTION AND NONELECTION: WHY BOTHER?

When David Clines, Professor of Biblical Studies at Sheffield, gave the Didsbury Lectures on *The Bible and the Modern World* a few years ago, he concluded by challenging his listeners with what he regarded to be two pinnacle examples of problematic theological ideas that the Bible presents for the Church. The first 'problem' was how God rescued Israel from Egypt in the Exodus, but it was really God who brought the family of Jacob there in the first place. Of particular interest to our discussion is his second example, titled: "God and the Chosen People." Here Clines discusses the fundamental idea of the Bible that God chose a people, Israel, from among all the nations of the earth. And, although it is not stated explicitly, the prime text of Genesis 12 implies that Abram's blessing is unintelligible unless it means that he (and his eventual descendants) is favoured over others. Clines summarizes the problem:

> How can we modern readers of the Bible cope with the fact that the God represented in the Bible is a national deity? If you adopt the point of view of the Egyptians or the Canaanites, God is not experienced as a saving God, and the only words you will hear addressed to you are words of reproach and threat. If you are not Israel, you do not know the presence of God, and the main reason is not some defect in you but the fact that you have not been chosen. To be sure, the God of the Bible saves Israel from Egypt, but it is equally true that the same God destroys or humiliates the Egyptians, and ignores almost everyone else. The text does not wish us to think that, or, if it allows us to know it, it wants us to suppress that knowledge and concentrate on the deliverance of Israel. But when the deliverance of Israel is effected precisely through the destruction of the Egyptian soldiers, wherein lies the value of the Bible for the church?[1]

Clines does not offer an answer, but we might summarize his challenge this way: The God of the Bible favours a national people, Israel, and this is at the cost of the other nations— they are not valued in the same way. In fact, not being Israel usually means

[1] David J. A. Clines, *The Bible and the Modern World* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997), 100-01.

humiliation or destruction or simply being ignored by God. Reading the text 'with the grain', or placing oneself within the chosen's perspective, may seem very well until one considers the unchosen. Clines states that the text wishes to suppress the problem of the unchosen and concentrates, rather, on God's deliverance of Israel. This is self-evidently a problem for the Church because it points to a national deity, a God of favourites.[2]

The basic premise that election entails nonelection is undoubtedly true. Difficulty arises when adding additional premises. The above seems to add the premise that being unchosen means experiencing the opposite of God's love or election; namely, rejection, humiliation, destruction or being beyond the pale of God's workings. The problem with such models, I think, is that often the focus is on biblical examples that are easy to assemble and then to criticize, like the Canaanite slaughter or the fate of the Egyptians at the exodus. The usual pattern is to point out God's love for Israel but then to pit this against the treatment of the Egyptians or the Canaanites in the land Israel will possess. The result is a picture of God that resembles more the devil than a deity, one who shows love to his people while slaughtering others simply because they are not elected. The present thesis suggests that while these examples are important (indeed, of utmost importance; I devote considerable space to the question of the Canaanites in Chapter 6), they are not the whole picture and in fact are not meant to be taken as a biblical paradigm for how the unchosen are to be perceived or are to be treated more generally. The two prime examples of Clines are one-time, not to be repeated, events in the life of Israel that God uses to bring about the fulfillment of earlier promises made to Israel's foreparents.[3] In looking at examples in the Pentateuch of unchosen figures or nations in relation to the chosen, it becomes clear that the unchosen are not automatically to be opposed or destroyed (or necessarily deemed evil) but can display fear of God, operate in ways that please God,

---

[2] Clines' challenge is only one among many. Regina Schwartz and Rolf Knierim, for example, have issued similar challenges (albeit through different means), which are discussed and rebutted in two separate articles by R. W. L. Moberly. See his "Is Monotheism Bad for You: Some Reflections on God, the Bible and Life in the Light of Regina Schwartz's The Curse of Cain," in *The God of Israel: Studies of an Inimitable Deity* (ed. Robert P. Gordon; Cambridge: University Press, forthcoming); and "Is Election Bad for You?" in *With Mighty Wrestlings I Have Wrestled: A European Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (ed. Jill Middlemas and David J. A. Clines; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, forthcoming), respectively.

[3] In Chapter 6, I discuss whether the one-time nature of these difficult events mitigates them. I argue that ultimately it does not, though it should still be noted and emphasized that these events are *not* to happen again, and as Brevard S. Childs has rightly noted, nowhere does the Israel's scripture call for a celebration of the destruction of other people (i.e. there is no festival to commemorate the *ḥerem*, nor does the Passover so much celebrate the destruction of Egyptian sons or soldiers as it is a time to remember God's deliverance). See further his *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM, 1985), 77-79; and discussion in Chapter 6 below.

can work on God's behalf, and at times even seem to display a more appropriate religious response than that of the chosen.

Before digging into the text, however, I spend considerable time (indeed, just over a third of the study) examining how OT election has been construed within Christian and Jewish interpretation. In many ways, chapters one and two introduce our topic by way of a close interaction with some of the more important recent scholarly discussion on election. In every instance I probe the interpreters to determine how well each handles the important question of election *and* nonelection. Also, in my exploration of the different modes of interpretation and perspectives of the interpreters, it became increasingly clear that the differences between Jewish and Christian interpreters was something worthy of fuller examination. I therefore break from the normal dissertation pattern of providing only a basic or introductory overview of literature as it pertains to the subject. I expose and critique the interpretational distinctives of each group of interpreters in the first part of the thesis, and then work from these findings to look at specific test cases in the Pentateuch. It will become readily apparent, despite my own Christian faith commitments, that I find many aspects of Jewish interpretation to be a more natural and compelling way to understand the OT.

In the second part of the thesis, biblical test cases, I specifically look at how examples of the unchosen, whether figure or people, function in relation to the chosen. In chapter three I look at the story of Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 20), in chapter four I examine the story of Pharaoh's daughter (Exod 2:1-10), in chapter five I investigate the story of Balaam and his oracles (Num 22-24), and then in chapter six I look at the nations in relation to Israel more generally in Deuteronomy (Deut 4:1-40; 7; 10:12-22).[4] In doing so, I also use the work of Levenson and Kaminsky (two Jewish interpreters I survey) heuristically and test their models through examples. I find their proposals most promising in getting at the heart of election in the OT, something I detail more closely in my conclusion to chapter two.

I have purposefully avoided lengthy discussions on method since reinventing the wheel is neither needed nor helpful in approaching my subject. In working with the biblical text, I largely follow a composition of a canonical approach with a narrative-critical approach, with a view towards Christian theology. I work with the final form

---

[4] I should note here that although it would be advantageous to examine examples outside the Pentateuch, space simply does not permit, and I deemed it more important to be thorough and detailed in limited, specific, examples than to be comprehensive at the risk of superficiality. I hope to pursue further research regarding election outside the Pentateuch in future studies.

of the text and largely set aside questions of authorship, date, textual-criticism, and literary sources in order to permit space for fuller engagement with the text as narrative. However, there are occasions when the standard historical-critical questions cannot be ignored and affect our reading. So, in chapter three, for instance, I briefly address the question of the three 'wife-sister' episodes' literary relationship. In the chapter on Balaam, I address the question of Numbers 22-24's relationship to the book of Numbers. And in my work with Deuteronomy 7, I felt compelled to examine OT *ḥerem* more broadly and in relation to its ANE background, though I place the bulk of this material in an appendix (number 2).

On that note, I should mention my rationale for including two substantial appendices. I hesitated to place this material within the main body of the study as it largely distracts from my thesis and is not required to make my larger points regarding election. I should make clear that this material is *not* essential to the larger thesis and may safely be ignored should the reader find the topic of little interest. However, I have included the material for the following reasons. In the case of my first appendix, I felt that there might be readers who would be less than fully convinced of my unconventional reading of Balaam as a positive figure, something that finds only scant support in scholarship. I therefore outline more fully in these appended pages why I think the tendency to read Balaam negatively—*in the Book of Balaam itself*—needs to be resisted. In the second appendix, I felt it necessary to outline more fully an OT overview of what חרם means. Although many explore the issue, much confusion remains. I opt for a reading of 'devote to destruction' when used in the context of war.[5] Such a reading is not crucial for my argument regarding election, yet if election is intricately related to *ḥerem* as I argue, the extent of this action must be understood. My conclusion is not one that will bring comfort to contemporary audiences, nor is it one I am at ease with. But, as the appendix makes clear (in addition to what I argue in Chapter 6), the narrative of the biblical story suggests such a reading is best, even if problematic.

The thesis that follows is an attempt to make sense of the question of election and nonelection in the OT, from the perspective of a Christian interpreter and with concern for the history of interpretation and Jewish-Christian dialogue. There is

---

[5] I largely follow the translation here of McConville as it stresses the sacred implications of חרם, even while I disagree with other aspects of his work regarding the *ḥerem*'s purpose. See more fully the discussion in Chapter 6 below. For ease of discussion, however, I often simply translate the term as 'destroy', with the assumption that readers will bear in mind earlier discussion on the important *religious* and *sacral* significance of the term.

much regarding the unchosen that has not been explored in scholarship and the present thesis aims to rectify that. The thesis also hopes to correct a Christian tendency to read election and nonelection as love and damnation respectively, something I regard to be altogether foreign to the OT itself. I argue that the unchosen are important to the overall worldview of scripture and although election entails exclusion, and God's love for the one holy people Israel entails that it is a love in contrast to others, it does not follow that the unchosen fall outside of the economy of God's purposes, his workings, or his ways. The unchosen often face important tests of their own and have a responsibility to God *and the chosen*, however much such an idea defies modern day notions of fairness. It is a central idea of scripture, something contained already in the original call of and promises made to Abram (as I argue in Chapter 3), and something that, if ignored, places our larger understanding of God at risk. Equally important, if contemporary faith communities (both Jewish and Christian) form their understanding of 'the other' upon a faulty reading of scripture regarding the unchosen, chaos and hatred can ensue. The political and religious climate of our contemporary world has never presented a more important time to get this matter right.

acknowledgements

The task of acknowledging everyone who has helped and contributed to the production of what you are reading is a difficult one indeed. It would be impossible to mention everyone, especially in light of the overwhelming support we have received over the past six months due to my recent health issues. I cannot name you all, but please know that each of you has been a source of help and strength.

I should first mention my mentor, teacher and now friend who introduced me, as an undergraduate, to the task and art of reading the Hebrew Bible as narrative. Also, and importantly, he instilled in me a longing to understand what it means to be an outsider, or the unchosen, in the Old Testament. The entire Religious Studies faculty at Trinity Western University deserves mention, but Paul Edward Hughes, in many ways—through his life, scholarship, and teaching—was the impetus for the present work.

Moving to Durham to pursue doctoral studies came about because of my desire to study under Walter Moberly. He drew me through his writing, and now has taught me as a master teacher who, at every turn, has exemplified what it means to supervise, instruct, mentor, and care. From him I have learned the most, and this relates to much more than scholarship. Our time together in supervision, but also in passing conversation, will always remain for me some of my happiest memories.

I should also briefly thank a number of people at the University of Durham who have contributed to my thinking, and thus to this work. Joel Kaminsky, while on his fellowship at Durham, has been an invaluable dialogue partner and our conversations have deepened this work on many levels. Further, his writings on election were largely what sparked my interest in Jewish interpretation. Brad Anderson, Rob Barrett, Robert Hayward, Anthony Le Donne, Lars Nowen and Stuart Weeks have been important conversation partners, whether regularly or from time to time, and I

am indebted to them for sharpening me in matters from theology to politics, to ale tasting.

On the financial side of things, I must first thank the Overseas Research Scholarship, which significantly funded my studies and made this project possible. Further, the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham granted me a number of departmental scholarships which have made all the difference, and for which I am thankful.

My family has been a continual source of support. This applies to more than immediate family as we have been blessed with caring aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents, not to mention our many siblings who have helped in every way. I must mention my deepest gratitude to my parents—all of you—but most importantly my own mother and father who, as Abraham was instructed, raised me in the ways of the LORD. For this gift I am forever thankful, and to you I owe everything.

To our church family and friends I also must express thanks. Our weekly meetings have been an outlet for worship, prayer, and growth. I am especially thankful for the opportunities our Tuesday evening meetings provided to share our struggles, in life, in work, and health. Your prayers and support have been helpful beyond what I can recount here.

I have read many books, especially published dissertations, in which the author dedicates the work to his or her spouse. Often words are mentioned about the many sacrifices that the spouse made in order that the writer could devote extra time to the task. I vowed, upon commencing this work, never to become one of them, at least in the sense that I would not exploit my best friend and partner in order to obtain a degree, or pursue a career. And yet now, at the end of the exercise, I stand in need of thanking you, Teresa, for the very things I vowed would not happen. I may have an excuse in that I did not anticipate the health problems I would encounter, yet I still feel a debt of gratitude beyond what I can put into words or could ever repay. You took up a burden I never wanted you to bear yet you have done so with love and grace, not to mention an ever-cheerful disposition. Thank you for everything. I am upholding part of the vow by not dedicating the thesis to you, though you deserve it in every way. But I have broken part of the vow and now must thank you for the many sacrifices you made and for making all of this possible. You are my one, my only, my everything.

abbreviations

The bibliography, footnotes, abbreviations and general formatting of the present work follow *The SBL Handbook of Style* (ed. Patrick H. Alexander, et. al.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999). However, I chose to exclude some information in the footnotes that can be found in the bibliography (name of translator, for example) in order to keep the notes manageable. With regard to spelling, I follow *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (ed. Katherine Barber; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2004).

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary.* Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York, 1992
AnBib	Analecta biblica
ANE	Ancient Near East (ern)
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament.* Edited by J. B. Pritchard. 3d ed. Princeton, 1969
ANF	*Ante-Nicene Fathers*
BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
B.C.E.	Before the Common Era
BDB	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Oxford, 1907
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia.* Edited by K. Elliger and W. Rudolph. Stuttgart, 1983
Bib	*Biblica*
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BR	*Biblical Research*
BRev	*Bible Review*
BSac	*Bibliotheca sacra*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BZ	*Biblische Zeitschrift*
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*

CSCO	Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium. Edited by I. B. Chabot et al. Paris, 1903–
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum
DCH	*Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Edited by D. J. A. Clines. Sheffield, 1993–
DOTP	*Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch.* Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker. Downers Grove, 2003
EncJud	*Encyclopaedia Judaica.* 16 vols. Jerusalem, 1972
ETR	*Etudes théologiques et religieuses*
EvQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
GTA	Göttinger theologischer Arbeiten
HALOT	Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden, 1994–1999
HB	Hebrew Bible
HBOTHC	Jon D. Levenson. *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies.* Louisville, 1993
HBT	*Horizons in Biblical Theology*
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.
IBHS	*An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax.* B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor. Winona Lake, Indiana, 1990
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible.* Edited by G. A. Buttrick. 4 vols. Nashville, 1962
IRT	Issues in Religion and Theology
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JBQ	*Jewish Bible Quarterly*
JES	*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSJ	*Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series

JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
MT	Masoretic Text
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIBCOT	New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by W. A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, 1997
NIV	New International Version (Bible)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (Bible)
NT	New Testament
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OT	Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
PEQ	*Palestine Exploration Quarterly*
POW	Prisioner(s) of war
PRSt	*Perspectives in Religious Studies*
PSB	*Princeton Seminary Bulletin*
RBL	*Reviews in Biblical Literature*
ResQ	*Restoration Quarterly*
RSV	Revised Standard Version (Bible)
SAC	Studies in Antiquity and Christianity
SamP.	Samaritan Pentateuch
SBAB	Stuttgarter biblische Aufsatzbände
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SLJT	*St. Luke's Journal of Theology*
SPhilo	*Studia philonica*
StPB	Studia post-biblica
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.* Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 8 vols. Grand Rapids, 1974–
ThTo	*Theology Today*
TLOT	*Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Edited by E. Jenni, with assistance from C. Westermann. Translated by M. E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, Mass., 1997
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TOTOTOT	R. W. L. Moberly. *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism*. Minneapolis, 1992.
TS	*Theological Studies*

TWOT	*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament.* Edited by R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer Jr. 2 vols. Chicago, 1980
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
TZ	*Theologische Zeitschrift*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
Vulg.	Vulgate
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WC	Westminster Commentaries
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

chapter one

INTRODUCING ELECTION AND NON-ELECTION: CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

Instead of introducing the topic through my own discussion, in this chapter I allow the work of others provide a sketch of OT election, at least with regard to Christian interpretation. The sampling of OT election studies that follows is strictly that, a *sampling* that is by no means comprehensive. Inevitably, some works are omitted, though I aim to cover major treatments, including theological dictionaries, monographs, and OT theologies. Most are from a Christian perspective, or written by those within the Christian tradition, though in places it is not explicitly so (e.g. dictionary articles, depending on their format and genre, often aim to bracket faith commitments in approaching the topic). Since we look at a sampling of Jewish interpretations in the next chapter, they will not feature here. Our primary objective in this chapter is to determine how well these readings use the OT and treat the question of non-election in relation to election, if at all.

THEOLOGICAL DICTIONARIES

The nature and structure of a theological wordbook or dictionary present various problems. While such studies can be instructive for understanding a particular passage or word, usually a concept—and in our case certainly 'election' and 'non-election'—cannot be adequately treated in the study of one word. Problems continue when one examines various words that may point to a concept's meaning, as a unified picture may be hard to find. Moreover, as James Barr persuasively showed more than forty years ago, word studies often produce rather artificial results.[1] Developing a concept or doctrine upon various instances of word usage is a practice to avoid.

[1] *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

Nevertheless, ignoring such word studies is no alternative. In examining various dictionaries it becomes clear that most often בחר is taken to be the Hebrew word that best encompasses OT conceptions of election. Other words, such as ידע, לקח and קרא, can indicate general notions of choosing as well, as most entries point out. However, since בחר is usually where the larger theological discussions tend to revolve, it will be the focal point of our first sub-section.

TDOT

As is standard throughout the series, the entry for בחר in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*[2] first examines possible parallels in the ANE and discusses etymology and derivatives before looking at OT usage. Despite an interesting idea or two (e.g. the Mesopotamian equivalent verb suggests that choosing of the king is done through the gaze of the gods—something particularly interesting for the story of Cain and Abel—and the Akkadian root *bêrum*, undoubtedly related to בחר, means *to test*), the article's content proper comes in the latter section. The author examines six primary examples of the verb's usage in the OT: 1) secular, 2) with YHWH as subject regarding a king, 3) of priesthood, 4) of the place YHWH chooses, 5) of the people Israel, and lastly, 6) of human choices as acts of religious confession.

The section on secular uses of the term emphasizes that when the verb is used in this way it indicates a careful, well thought out selection. David chooses suitable stones for his sling (1 Sam 17:40); the 'sons of God' choose the 'daughters of men' because of their beauty (Gen 6:2); and the prophets of Baal carefully choose a bull in their petition for rain (1 Kings 18:25).[3] After listing these and other examples, the author notes that although the reason for the choice can in almost every case be scrutinized, a few examples defy the principle. One example of this is particularly interesting for our study: Jonathan's friendship with David troubled Saul because *it indicated a choice of David over Saul*, bringing shame on the king, whether Jonathan had intended it or not (1 Sam 20:30).

The following discussion on YHWH's choice of a king is important, but one may question whether the author's claim that YHWH's selection of Saul, and eventually David, indicates a "careful choice of the official … for the purpose of fighting the war

---

[2] J. Bergman, H. Ringgren, and H. Seebass, "בָּחַר," *TDOT* 2:73-87. Unidentified page references in this and other sections refer the work at hand.

[3] Seebass, "בָּחַר," 2:75.

of YHWH" (77). I would think that, to the contrary, the selection of Saul was surprising in that he came from the smallest tribe (1 Sam 9:21), some of the people questioned his ability to lead the people in battle (1 Sam 10:27), and further, we might wonder if Saul would have left his ox and plough to fight had the spirit of God not come upon him (1 Sam 11:5-7). At any rate, the 'careful selection for an intended purpose' model may simply be challenged by Saul's demise. The author continues to argue a similar point in the next section in which he argues that the story of Eli and his sons (1 Sam 2) shows "that YHWH carefully chose a family to perform a specific task" but they can lose their privileges if they fail to honour him (79). The author admits that Numbers 16:5,7 and 17:20 "is certainly different" in that priestly qualifications and the process of choosing are not in view (79). To my mind, this latter idea is correct but it applies much more broadly; there seems to be a pervading confusion in these sections between prior qualification and later responsibilities. It would be safer to say that YHWH's choices are inscrutable (and qualifications are not usually in view) but the responsibilities YHWH lays upon the chosen are clear.

The heart of the article comes in the section on the 'Election of the People'. The basic claim of the section, in its conclusion, is that בחר does not signify so much the basic relationship between YHWH and his people (this is conveyed by ידע, as in Amos 3:1), but "that which results from this basic relationship" (87). It is difficult to pinpoint what exactly the author means by this, but it seems to imply that God knew this people and *then* chose them to engage in an active mission or service. While it is commendable that the author rightly acknowledges that Israel's responsibilities (or 'mission') include living separately, maintaining a unique identity, as well as the destruction of the Canaanites (based upon Deut 7),[4] the idea that election comes subsequent to an already established divine-human relationship is difficult to maintain in the light of the biblical story. Is not Israel's relationship to YHWH often referred to as instigated by God's love? At any rate, this could have been addressed more fully here. Perhaps the emphasis of the author reflects a determination to distance himself from the idea that God's love is not directed to all people, and that rather, Israel's election is God's tool to bring this love to a wider humanity. This seems particularly evident when the author speaks of Israel's selection from among the world's peoples "in the service of the whole" (83). We leave the topic for the moment but will return to it as it recurs throughout our survey.

---

[4] See pages 87 and 83-84.

NIDOTTE

Emile Nicole provides the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*[5] with its entry on בחר. After stating brief definitions and looking at ANE usage (largely following *TDOT*) Nicole notes that although divine election is closely connected to the word בחר, it "cannot be understood in terms of a single Heb. word" (638). Nevertheless, בחר is a key term and Nicole begins by arguing that there is no intrinsic difference between theological and 'secular' uses of the word. One can choose a wife, land, a town of residence, stones for a sling, a bull for sacrifice, wood for an idol, or words. Most frequent in such 'secular' uses of the word in the OT, however, is reference to the selection of soldiers. In such cases a person is chosen for battle, becoming a בָּחוּר. This 'chosen one' is often simply rendered 'selected warrior'.[6]

Moving to religious usage, Nicole notes that more than 70 percent of biblical handling of the word falls under this category. Within the category, humanity as the subject constitutes approximately 12 percent, though the entry focuses on that which constitutes approximately 60 percent of OT usage: divine choosing. Here God is the subject and the object falls into four primary categories: a) the place of worship; b) David; c) priesthood; and d) Israel as the people of God. We highlight key points of interest to our study.

In the first example he examines, the place of worship, Nicole notes that although the idea that God will choose a place for his people to worship is not unusual with regard to ANE usage, what is unique is that the place YHWH chooses is limited to one place (639-40). In the second section, Nicole notes the election of David and Saul though God's rejection of the latter is curiously absent from the discussion. Following a discussion on the priesthood Nicole develops what he calls "the cardinal theme": the election of Israel (640). According to Nicole, the concept of Israel's election is present throughout the OT but is developed primarily in Deuteronomy and Isaiah's servant songs. Israel's deliverance from Egypt is an act of election in keeping with the promises to their ancestors (Deut 7:6-8), but this election is not

---

[5] Emile Nicole, "בחר," *NIDOTTE* 1:638-42.

[6] For further observations on בָּחוּר as 'select warrior', consult Ze'eb Weisman, "The Nature and Background of bāḥūr in the Old Testament," *VT* 31 (1981): 441-50. When God is the subject of choosing, the term used is usually בָּחִיר (Compare 2 Sam 21:6; Isa 42:1; 43:20; 45:4; 65:9,15,22; Psa 89:4; 105:6,43; 106:5,23; 1 Chr 16:13).

because of Israel's importance but because of God's faithfulness. His words that follow (focusing on Deuteronomy) require our attention:

> Yet, this choice does not limit God's rule on earth to this small people, but comes within the framework of God's plan for the whole world (10:14–15) and is the basis of the obedience and holiness required of Israel (10:15–16; 14:1–2). Israel's choice is for the purpose of mission ... (641)

Nicole believes that God's choosing of Israel is not without concern for those outside, indeed his election is for their benefit. Can this idea really be maintained in the way he does, from the texts he refers to?

There is much to say by way of evaluation, but the central issue is the last one—Nicole's use of Deuteronomy. Although there are also problems in Nicole's structure (despite the dictionary's intention to work with the final form of the text Nicole still uses categories derived from religio-historical models) and he fails to make explicit the connection between secular and religious use of בחר (he says they are essentially the same but does little to connect them), most devastating—and I choose that word carefully—is Nicole's discussion of Israel's election as serving a greater divine plan of mission to the whole world, *drawn from the early chapters of Deuteronomy with no real engagement with the context of the text itself.* If we examine that context, we will have difficulty finding a mission to the nations in the sense Nicole speaks of, and if there is a mission to the nations there, it would involve their destruction (or at minimum, a placing them under the ban).[7] Perhaps we here mark the beginning of trend in our survey, a trend that takes as established that Israel's election is always in the interest of the entire world, despite an absence of exegetical work to demonstrate this.

TLOT

In the recently translated *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament,* Hans Wildberger provides the hefty entry on בחר.[8] Before discussing OT statistical usage Wildberger looks at various meanings proposed for the term, tracing options to various Semitic languages. After discussing Arabic and Akkadian parallels, Wildberger discusses OT usage of בחר as 'to test'. Such usage (e.g. Isa 48:10; Job 34:4, 33) suggests,

---

[7] Of course the nations are the autochthonous nations of Canaan, but Nicole makes no mention whatsoever. We will examine the matter in detail in Chapter 6.

[8] Hans Wildberger, "בָּחַר," *TLOT* 1:209-26.

according to Wildberger, that the similar in form בחן (to test, to put to the test) exists in close relationship to בחר; the latter is regarded to be a variant of the former.

Wildberger, in ways similar to Nicole above, breaks usage of the term down into three distinct categories: a) profane usage (22%); b) theological usage with God as subject (67%); c) theological usage with people as subject (11%). In discussing the first, Wildberger again notes the importance of בחר as connected to selecting or choosing, frequently used of warriors. The quality of the object, moreover, must in some way be part of the process; as Wildberger states, "[t]he meaning of *mibḥār/mibḥôr* 'choice, the best' reflects this situation" (212). Again, Wildberger mentions a theme he has stated earlier, that is, when one chooses the best, most appropriate, most beautiful, the subject is in effect using the verb with a sense of "to regard precisely," or "to test" (212). "The subj. itself is involved, in fact, because it evaluates," states Wildberger, "but the evaluation arises from a rational consideration" (212). Wildberger is then cautious to distinguish this sort of choosing (what he terms object-conditioned) from a subject-conditioned, volitional choosing. This distinction is preserved, argues Wildberger, when translators render בחר as 'elect' rather than 'choose'. But how, one must ask, is the reader to determine when to do so?

Wildberger's discussion is merely beginning, but we limit our observations to central themes and the crux of the matter for Wildberger. בחר, Wildberger argues, comes to be the technical term used in the OT for 'election'. It is here, in theological usage of the word (to be chosen by God), that the heart of the discussion lies, "while the human choice of God or of the right path fades in significance" (213). Election, according to Wildberger, is a term that finds its earliest (historical) usage in the context of Israel's kingship.[9] Saul is characterized as YHWH's chosen, though later, because "election by YHWH must find response in the proper behavior of the elect," Saul is rejected. David's election is not due to his beauty, height, or spiritual qualities but because "YHWH regards the heart." The concept of merit presents a rather difficult subject for Wildberger; he thus concludes, "The qualities of the chosen are therefore not incongruent with those expected of a king; but precisely why one is chosen remains, finally, a contingent, divine secret, not to be revealed" (215).

The above theme must be of central concern for Wildberger, for, having spent numerous pages discussing specifics in passages relating to Israel's election,

---

[9] Note that *TLOT*'s approach is religio-historical (similar to *TDOT*), not canonical.

Wildberger returns to it. Here, near the conclusion of the entry, Wildberger discusses the tension between the Deuteronomist's challenge, "So choose now life, so that you may live" (Deut 30:19), with the idea that it is God who chooses Israel. His words are substantial, worth citing at length:

> Although the exhortation to choose the good in YHWH's eyes, the right path, life, etc., can be stated, the final consequence—the summons to choose YHWH himself—is lacking. This summons would correspond precisely to the complaint that Israel has chosen strange gods. Josh 24:15 at least approximates this conclusion: "If it does not please you to serve YHWH, then choose today whom you will serve." Israel is apparently confronted here with the choice between YHWH and the gods. But, aside from the fact that Dtr has in reality obligated Israel to a choice long since made, … the logic of the correlation breaks down even in this passage: the alternative to choosing the gods is not choosing YHWH, but fear of YHWH and worship of YHWH in uprightness and faithfulness (v 14). Joshua contrasts the possibility of the people's faulty decision not with his own decision to choose YHWH but with his pledge: "But I and my house, we will serve YHWH." Israel is aware that one cannot choose YHWH, as one may choose other gods. … Israel should not choose YHWH; rather it should acknowledge that it is chosen by him. (225)

By way of evaluation, there is much within Wildberger's entry that reflects deep theological concern and a desire to synthesize biblical data. Wildberger's careful handling of the text affects his understanding of election and this becomes apparent in his conclusions. Regardless of what one might wish, he cannot provide a tidy picture of election and his preoccupation with the question of whether Israel can themselves choose YHWH reflects a sincere attempt to make sense of a difficult idea. His conclusion here is sharp. Nowhere in the OT does Israel choose God—even when the people are said to have chosen other gods in disobedience, or are commanded to choose life and to serve YHWH.

Having noted that, and keeping in mind the subject of this study, I cannot help but wonder why Wildberger fails to discuss what Israel's election might mean for the nations. This is not to suggest that the entry should have included a thoroughgoing theology of the nations, but, in a seventeen page article on election, one would hope for at least mention of what it might mean to be chosen with regard to other peoples, why God chooses some but not others and—specifically in the context of Israel's being termed God's *am segullâ* (Deut 7:6—216-17)—why the nations are anything but a treasured possession in context. For an entry acutely aware of theological issues related to election, the absence of the topic is striking.

ABD

Though not written to be a *theological* dictionary as such, the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* provides the student with an invaluable reference tool authored by a host of recognized scholars. In the case of Dale Patrick's article on OT election,[10] we can see that theological essays surface from time to time, in this case perhaps besting dictionaries that claim the title but with little justification.[11] His entry will conclude our section on dictionary entries.

Patrick begins by giving a brief overview of recent history's fascination with the concept of election. The height of the biblical theology movement saw many monographs written on the subject and a few of the OT theologies around that time focus on the theme of election as well. With the fall of the movement came, according to Patrick, the corresponding collapse of interest in the subject. Though works on election have surfaced from time to time, he states, "nothing of great significance or interest" has appeared (435).[12]

With caution to keep from committing the sins of the biblical theology movement fathers, Patrick attempts to propel the discussion forward by working from the relatively late Deuteronomy, which Patrick regards to have given the concept its classical formulation. The basic questions Patrick hopes to answer in his essay are these:

> Election is a concept which was implicit in the stories Israel told of its origins and vocation. … Election is an abstract concept meant to account for and justify the story of YHWH, the one Creator and Sovereign, and Israel. What explains and justifies the narrowing of the story, after the primeval period, to the people of Israel? How can Israel claim to know the universal God when no other people does? Why was Israel the beneficiary of such marvelous events? What distinctive identity must Israel maintain to be the people the text portrays? (435)

Patrick begins by discussing the biblical use of בחר, particularly in Deuteronomy. According to Patrick, the word had currency in everyday Hebrew, signifying the act of selecting or choosing. It is in Deuteronomy, however, that the word finds its theological significance. As Patrick states, "Whether or not the author

---

[10] Dale Patrick, "Election, Old Testament," *ABD* 2:434-41.

[11] The issue here of course is one of genre. Most of the works examined, despite their titles, are 'theological' only in the 'religio-historical' or 'history of religion' sense. Despite the ABD's similar vein, Patrick's entry provides much by way of theology.

[12] Note that the publication of Patrick's entry more or less coincided with Levenson's important monograph, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), which therefore does not enter the discussion.

of Deuteronomy was the first to speak of YHWH's choice of the people of Israel, this work contains the most thorough and penetrating reflection on the concept of election within Scripture" (436). It is in the idea of 'reflection' that Patrick regards Israel's concepts of election to come to a full flowering. If YHWH was the God of the heavens and the earth, why, from among all the creatures of the earth, did he set his love upon Israel? "YHWH had simply 'fallen in love' with Israel's ancestors," states Patrick, "choosing them over every other people" (436).

Of interest to our study, having implications for the unchosen, is Patrick's discussion on why the "universal God" does not show similar favour to the other peoples of the earth. Patrick attempts to answer the question by guiding the reader back to Genesis 12:2-3, verses containing the divine promises to Abraham. For Patrick, the fundamental question of Israel's election cannot be separated from the promises contained therein. Although no direct language of 'choosing' is employed, the call of Abraham inevitably entails a favour, or selection by God, and, importantly, this choice ensured the blessing of the nations. Although some read Gen 12:3b as "all the families of the earth will bless themselves by you," Patrick believes a better translation is: "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (436-37).[13] With this reading, Patrick argues that the very existence of Israel should ensure the mediation of a blessing to all the peoples of the earth, even if the manner is not yet understood. The problem of God's choosing one nation over others, even if not completely understood, is resolved by Patrick through Israel's role in bringing about the grander plan of God. He develops the idea through his discussion on Israel as a 'kingdom of priests' (Exod 19:5-6):

> The use of the term "priests" in the one phrase may allude to a role of mediation between God and the nations. The priesthood performed such a role within Israel, so by analogy Israel as a priesthood would perform this role for the nations. Such an allusion is justified by its nice fit with the promise to Abraham that he and his offspring will be a blessing to the nations (438).

The content here is rich and deserves careful attention. If we take the reading at face value, Israel's election, read through a particular understanding of Gen 12:3b, enables blessing for itself as a people but also for those it in encounters as a "kingdom of priests." The people have a mediatorial role, though Patrick is careful not to make this the prime reason for Israel's election; rather, Patrick is discussing how Israel's election relates to the nations. Israel's election involves responsibility, and obedience

---

[13] We will address the translation of this clause more fully in Chapter 3 below.

to the God who chose Israel is a necessary ingredient in the larger picture. This obedience is related to questions of the nations but it is primarily wrapped up in obedience to God's law given at Sinai as ratified by the people (Exod 24:3-8). Patrick notes that we should not neglect that in virtually every Deuteronomy passage that speaks of Israel's election, admonitions to obey YHWH are juxtaposed.[14]

Patrick's examination of OT election is the result of careful analysis of individual texts and the larger canon. Though much of the discussion had to be omitted, Patrick's entry shines in its ability to guide the reader through the larger picture, beginning with Deuteronomy, reflecting back on the call of Abraham, the Exodus, the conquest of the land and then into the message of the prophets and the struggle of the exile and post-exilic period. Patrick also displays an admirable concern to understand not just why God chose Israel, but how this might affect those outside. The unchosen peoples of the earth create an issue for Patrick, one he deems worthy of inquiry. His answer reaches back into the original calling (and by implication election) of Abraham and entails the blessing of all peoples. Even if aspects need further scrutiny, Patrick makes an important contribution to the discussion. Particularly helpful is the tone and balance of Patrick's work. Israel's responsibility is important, as is Israel's priestly role to the nations; these matters, however, do not trump the basic idea that "YHWH had simply 'fallen in love' with Israel's ancestors" (436).

Having noted that, it is important to highlight two points in Patrick's article which will become a trend in some of the works that follow. In Patrick's theology of the unchosen (though he does not himself use the term) is an underlying desire to account for the nations in a way that sees their eventual inclusion. Patrick offers a rather generalized picture of a universalism, one whereby the solution to nonelection seems to be eventual inclusion, perhaps making election seem less of a modern affront. Often, and this is the second point, there is talk of a *future* time, or in Patrick's words a 'denouement', when a resolution to the nations (note there is a plight) will be answered. There is no account of the nations or individuals—those within the OT itself—that display an appropriate response to God, yet lie outside God's chosen group. I have not critiqued the above entries in this way because they seemed so far from sight of the issue that comment would be misplaced. But for Patrick, whose work is careful, and as one aware of the issue's significance, the critique seems appropriate.

---

[14] For a similar emphasis, consult Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978), 45-46.

MONOGRAPHS

The above by no means exhausts the host of information on OT election in dictionaries; rather, we have simply mapped some of the territory.[15] As Patrick has mentioned, the biblical theology movement brought with it an onslaught of monographs devoted to the topic of Israel's election.[16] In this section, I propose to look at two, one from that period and one from after its demise.

H. H. Rowley

For Rowley, Israel's election cannot be separated from Israel's mission. Election, *always*, is election to service. His book, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election*,[17] can essentially be summed up in the above, yet, to reduce it to a sentence or two would be premature. There are stops that Rowley makes along the way that are worth visiting, of particular interest to our topic of non-election.

Rowley spends much of the book's first chapter seeking to discover where the idea of Israel's election becomes common. After much discussion about the reliability of the Genesis narratives, Rowley more or less concludes that election was a construal of the Israelites after the Exodus. Their formulations, however, included the weaving in of the patriarchal stories arguing that the patriarchs too were chosen by God.[18] This was not mere wishful thinking, according to Rowley, but an accurate picture of the events. He states,

> What the Old Testament writers wished to say by declaring the election of Israel to date back to the time of Abraham was that it was not merely the tribes that were led out of Egypt by Moses that were chosen of God. The tribes that were akin to them in origin, that worshipped the same God, and that came into the stream of a common life with them, were also of the elect people. This was not a mere antedating of the election through Moses. It was a recognition of facts (30).

In the chapters that follow, Rowley moves the discussion from Israel's recognition of divine election to understanding why God chose Israel and what election involves. The choosing of one person, or nation, over others and the reason for doing so is a recurring question for Rowley. It seems that throughout Rowley's

---

[15] Other works of interest include, but are not limited to, G. E. Mendenhall, "Election," *IDB* 2:76-82; B. E. Shafer, "The Root bḥr and Pre-Exilic Concepts of Chosenness in the Hebrew Bible," *ZAW* 89 (1977): 20-42; and Weisman, "Nature," 441-50.

[16] In addition to Patrick's discussion, consult especially Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 13-87.

[17] (London: Lutterworth, 1950).

[18] A similar line of argument is found in Ronald E. Clements, *God's Chosen People: A Theological Interpretation of the Book of Deuteronomy* (London: SCM, 1968), 48-49.

book there exists an underlying concern to argue that God is not to be viewed as arbitrary in his choosing. Although it may appear this way initially, Rowley argues that Israel is not the only nation that God has chosen for a particular task but Israel is the nation chosen for God's 'greatest purpose'. Further, God so chose Israel because they were best suited for it. He states:

> If there was nothing of special worth in Israel to account for God's choice of her, and if she was really no better than peoples around her, then surely His choice must have been arbitrary. We seem, indeed, to be ever on the horns of a dilemma. If God chooses the worthy, then His grace is in question; while if He chooses the unworthy, then His justice is in question. Either He is self-interested, and man's salvation is really determined by himself; or God is arbitrary, and we are not sure whether we can respect Him. From this unreal dilemma we are saved when we view election teleologically. It is ever election for some purpose, and God ever chooses those who are best suited for His purpose. His purposes are many, and He chooses many to serve Him. His greatest purpose is to reveal Himself to men, and for that purpose Israel was chosen because Israel was most suited to it. This is not to say that He has not revealed Himself to men of other nations, or that He has not chosen other nations for other purposes. He has not withheld the revelation of Himself from man anywhere, but in varying measure, according to the capacity and willingness of men to receive it, has granted it. Yet through men of Israel did He give fuller revelation than through any other, not because they were initially better than others, or because they were His favourites, but because they were more suited to this purpose (39).

The logic of Rowley here seems to argue that although God's choosing of Israel may appear arbitrary, it is because Israel was the nation best suited for the special task (i.e. God's 'greatest purpose') of revealing God to all nations. God may have revealed himself to other nations and they too may have their own tasks based upon their suitability for them. So, God did not choose Israel because of their merit, or because of favoritism, yet somehow they were best suited for the task of their election. The argument becomes clearer below, where Rowley seeks to provide evidence that Israel was best suited:

> ... it is easy to find reflected [in the remnant passages] the self-esteem of Israel, and her depreciation of the neighbouring people. But it should not be forgotten that history has justified her. For the indisputable fact is that Israel has mediated to the world a great spiritual heritage and Edom has not. The character of Jacob is not set forth in very exalted terms, and we know too little of the character of Esau to justify with any confidence the choice of the one rather than the other in terms of character. But if we rightly find in election not the reward of character so much as the summons to service, then the election of Israel and not Edom is justified. For Israel, with all her failures, did through her Remnant render

> that service, and Edom assuredly did not. There is here, therefore, something deeper than Israelite self-esteem. There is a vindicated faith (71).[19]

Rowley's position contains something of a circularity: God did not choose Israel because of anything in the people, but something in the people justifies God's choice of them. In construing the picture not as favoritism, but as 'best suited' for a task, Rowley feels he is able to sidestep, indeed answer, the theological problem of why God chooses some and not others, while not assigning an arbitrary quality to God.

Israel's election thus equals Israel's task and that task (or responsibility) to the nations takes priority over the idea that God simply loved Israel. Israel is "to be a medium of blessing to all men" (64) and Israel's election was not simply for the sake of a relationship between the two:

> Israel's Election was not merely for herself and God. It was not simply that she might reflect the will of God in all her own life and delight His heart by so doing. Her election was for service to the world. For she had a mission to the nations (59-60).[20]

There is much here to consider and evaluate, though I have already outlined (albeit briefly) the circularity of some of Rowley's ideas. The repetitiousness of Rowley's book does not permit the reader to miss his overarching, indeed, overbearing, emphasis on election as election to service, or mission to the nations. The largest difficulty here is finding biblical warrant for Rowley's ideas. This is not to say that Rowley does not approach scripture (somewhat) carefully (it may relate more to his heavy emphasis on Deutero-Isaiah), but it is to say that it seems Rowley is reading the text with an overarching concern to answer an enlightenment predicament at whatever the cost to the actual emphasis of the text itself. All interpreters may be guilty of overemphasizing or underemphasizing particular points of scripture to make a point, but it seems Rowley is especially guilty of underemphasizing those passages, indeed the natural thrust of much of the OT itself, in which it is clear that God's relationship with Israel is founded simply upon God's love.[21] Such an idea, however,

---

[19] Note the similarities of a picture offered by Th. C. Vriezen (*An Outline of Old Testament Theology* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970], 315):

> We must admit that certain stories were viewed in a particularist light, especially perhaps the contrast between Esau and Jacob; on the other hand we should not forget that in these stories there is also the unwarrantable attitude of Esau towards his right of primogeniture; the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, an act of God, is also due to his guilt …

[20] In his final chapter, something we cannot explore here, Rowley argues that Israel's task now lies with the church. The contemporary reader can find something of a case study in supersessionism within these pages.

[21] This idea will become all the more clear in our survey of Jewish thinkers and interpreters, and in our own work with the text itself.

flies in the face of Rowley's concern to show that God's love is universal and that God would not play favourites or make choices that are arbitrary. There is too much to demonstrate to make my point here, so I will return to the problem in our conclusion (Chapter 7) once we have examined some texts in Part Two. To anticipate my findings, we will witness in the stories of Abraham, Balaam, and in various passages of Deuteronomy, that God's election of Israel, though it includes responsibilities, is founded primarily upon God's mysterious love, and is not something that can be reduced to, or equated with, mission or service. Furthermore, Rowley's idea that Israel somehow justifies God's election by living up to its calling is not quite as simple as he supposes—can we be sure that if God entrusted Edom with the divine promises and gave them his special revelation that they would not have rendered equal service to God? Although we cannot address this latter idea in full, we will see particularly in our section on Balaam that God's love for Israel is not dependent upon Israel's obedience, despite God's jealousy for it. In that story, God reinstates his promises and love at a time when Israel was in one of its most rebellious times. But these and other of Rowley's questions, for now, will need to wait.

Seock-Tae Sohn

A more recent account of the election of Israel is Sohn's *The Divine Election of Israel.*[22] This revision of his PhD dissertation (under Baruch Levine at New York University) essentially argues that Israel's election cannot be understood by means of any one word or concept in the OT and that Israel's election was, fundamentally, a central display of God's love out of a desire to be in fellowship with them. Furthermore, and similar to Rowley, Israel's election entailed service, a service to the nations.

The study follows a somewhat tedious program of examining the uses of different Hebrew words that Sohn believes conveys the idea of YHWH's election. He examines various key terms (לקח, ידע, היה לי לעם, קרא, and בחר) and in doing so Sohn concludes that God's election of Israel should not be regarded as an abstract theological concept; for example, it seems that Israel first regarded themselves to be a mustered army, a compilation of levied troops set to do battle for their God. This battle included the exodus from Egypt, the taking the land of Canaan, and becoming God's instruments in judging the nations. In other ways Sohn's study is not far from

---

[22] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

Rowley's; although he is careful not to overemphasize Israel's responsibility to service and seems less preoccupied with rationalizing God's choice of Israel, Sohn spends some time on the idea of election to mission as a reason for Israel's election. This mission, in agreement with Rowley, is that Israel be a light to the nations. According to Sohn, the mission is not realized, at least not until much later in Israel's story. He states,

> It is hard to find any positive willingness on the part of Israel to proclaim YHWH to the world until the time of the united monarchy. To the people of Israel, the foreign nations were only objects to conquer and destroy with the help of YHWH. The Israelites tried to maintain the relationship with YHWH in terms of the Law of Moses, and so it was unthinkable for them to be a positive witness of YHWH to the gentile nations. However, in Solomon's prayer of Temple dedication he mentions the concerns for the foreigner who is not one of YHWH's people. ... This prayer of dedication presupposes that foreigners will hear about the name and power of YHWH and will ask him to show his generosity to them. This seems to be a significant change in terms of Israel's attitude toward foreigners. Apparently they came to regard the foreigners who called upon him as equal beneficiaries of YHWH, as far as answers to prayer were concerned. ... However, the modern sense of mission in which Israel became a positive witness to YHWH is not yet found (197-98).

Sohn does, however, find what he calls "the modern sense of mission" in passages from Isaiah; here he determines that Israel's mission is to be witnesses to YHWH, because "YHWH wants to save all the nations of the earth" (199). Sohn regards the exile as a period that brings the idea to life. For Sohn, there is a progression in the history of Israel whereby Israel finally comes to see that which it was elected for, even while the realization of this mission is not yet in view.

Sohn's work, while not invigorating, is in many ways fruitful because of his industrious manner. His discussion on various Hebrew terms and concepts is helpful and his understanding of Israel's election as a call to be a people, or army, to fight for YHWH is plausible. His idea that Israel's understanding of its election develops is important, even while it is difficult to provide a tidy picture. It might have been more helpful had Sohn approached the material canonically rather than through supposed historical stages, but here we encounter a difference in method. But even if our approaches are different, would it be too much to ask: What then of the final form of the canon? Where does Israel's election stand and how is it developed canonically? It would appear that the answer for Sohn is that Israel came to a proper, "modern sense of mission" during the exile, though it was not realized.

Sohn's treatment does, however, seem stinted. The book lacks an essential section, namely, what, if anything, happens to nations if Israel fails in its task? Sohn's thesis implies that the nations will find their hope through Israel if Israel

would enact its calling. The model can more or less be recalled as follows (as inferred from 193-99):

> 1) God chooses a specific people, not because of their inherent value, but because of his divine purposes (whether knowable or not)
>
> 2) This election is not simply to some esteemed position, but to a mission (in Rowley's words, for service)
>
> 3) This mission is a call to be a holy people set apart for God and includes being a priestly nation, that is, drawing in the other peoples of the earth into this holy people
>
> 4) When the plan succeeds, people are being brought in to the community of God

A question that comes to my mind is this: What happens when number four fails, i.e. what happens to the nations when Israel does not recognize or fulfill its alleged mission? If, according to Sohn, the mission was not recognized until much later in Israel's history (and is never fully realized), what happens to the nations during Israel's failure? Does the OT address this, even if peripherally? It would have been helpful if Sohn paid more attention to OT examples in which non-Israelites do in fact respond to God apart from Israel. To critique Sohn further, and to question the entire program above, to what extent can we be sure from the OT that "YHWH wants to save all the nations of the earth," and to what extent is this connected with Israel's election? This is not to say that YHWH does not, but it is to challenge whether the OT is as clear as Sohn assumes. We will return to this idea later in the thesis.

OLD TESTAMENT (AND BIBLICAL) THEOLOGIES

As mentioned, this chapter of interpretational samplings makes no claims to be comprehensive—entering the world of OT theologies will only underline the pretext. This body of literature provides an invaluable breadth of material, much of which concentrates on the theme of election. In this last section we shall briefly examine portions of four theologies written in the past seventy years.

Walther Eichrodt

An influential, important German scholar, and precursor to von Rad, Eichrodt's work is valuable to our study especially when one considers that his two volume *Theology of the Old Testament*[23] is structured around the theme of covenant, a theme at times

---

[23] (OTL; London: SCM, 1961-1967).

seemingly synonymous with election. The opening pages of Eichrodt's study make the connection clear:

> … the [term] 'covenant' has been retained as the central concept, by which to illuminate the structural unity and the unchanging basic tendency of the message of the OT. For it is in this concept that Israel's fundamental conviction of its special relationship with God is concentrated. … [T]he fact that every expression of the OT which is determinative for its faith rests on the explicit or implicit assumption that a free act of God, consummated in history, has raised Israel to the rank of the People of God, in whom the nature and will of God are to be revealed (1:13-14).

Although no specific chapter or section is devoted to the subject,[24] the reader, if attentive, will find randomly interspersed in Eichrodt's work a theology of the nations. To begin, Eichrodt firmly believes that Israel is to be a light to the nations and that "in due season" the coming in of the Gentiles would happen (1:249). It is also clear that Eichrodt believes that all peoples of the earth, whether Israelite or gentile, are required to obey God, that is, to keep a universal law; a failure to do so results in judgment. There is, however, a tension. For example, although those outside Israel are responsible for their sin, and thus will receive divine punishment, it would seem that ultimately such nations lack the ability to live in an appropriate relationship with God:

> Outside Israel there is at most a number of individual oracles … which can be cited as expressions of a divine authority in history calling for the response of faith. There is no question that such divine messages were capable of arousing powerful confidence in the help of the gods, as the prayers of kings testify. Nevertheless this spiritual condition was unable to determine men's total attitude to life. … Above all, there could be no comprehension of a clear moral saving will, guiding the whole of history, because neither was there a clear concept of history to hand, nor was there any understanding of how the will of God might be considered from universal angles which would take in his whole providential government of the world. In Israel, however, it was precisely this view of history, already impressed on the people by the old story tellers, which provided the basis on which fear of God could develop into faithful obedience to One who through his messengers called men to discipleship (2:275-76).[25]

Interesting for our study, and closely related, is Eichrodt's belief that even if the OT does not witness its realization, it teaches that the gentiles would be the recipients of God's full blessings in the future. To state this negatively, although the nations

---

[24] Although both sections 'The Relations between God and the World' (1:410-15) and 'The Maintenance of the World' (2:151-85) touch on the subject, neither is a formal theology of the nations as such.

[25] In close agreement on such ideas is G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* (SBT 2; London: SCM, 1950), 74-75; further, compare John Calvin's understanding of a person's inability to come to God apart from special revelation. See e.g. his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1.6.4.

would receive the blessings of God in the future and "be equally the objects of divine Providence," in the mean time, "God lets the nations go their own way" (2:171). The nations are not completely removed from the picture, however, as Eichrodt points to the prophetic tradition that highlights how God uses the nations in various tasks such as punishing Israel, in effect becoming "YHWH's rods of correction." Eichrodt also acknowledges that the nations, at times, were objects of YHWH's care (2:171, referencing Amos 9:7).[26]

Again related to the status of the non-Israelite and building from that above, Eichrodt includes a chapter on 'The Norms of Moral Conduct.' Here he develops his understanding of the moral norms and requirements in Israel and those deemed universal. In sum, Eichrodt observes that the requirements for those in Israel are good for all humankind:

> It is true that in their instructions the prophets, too, think primarily of social behaviour within Israel, not of the dealings of man with man as such. … But here again they are driven further by the incomparable greatness of the God made known to them, which caused them to understand the judgment and redemption of the people of God only as acts embracing all mankind, and which made the entry of the nations into God's kingdom the goal of universal history, to a self-evident extension of ethical obligation to humanity as a whole. Even though this happens quite unreflectingly and without systematic elaboration, it elevates the old conviction that basic rules obtain even outside Israel into the *understanding of a universal ethical will of God*, which gives the moral norms established within his covenant people validity for the whole world (2:332).

Eichrodt mentions a few OT examples in which those outside Israel obey this universal ethic (e.g. the stories of Ruth and Jonah—2:344), though he then moves to begin a tirade against the later particularist tendency that squelched this emphasis. His words, frightful though they be,[27] are worth recounting:

> But the particularist tendency, which acquired its driving force from the absolute status accorded to the congregation, was the stronger, and it was this which became dominant in later Judaism. Here unbridled lust for revenge is directed against the heathen; men like to describe their extermination in the past as God's ordinance for the future as well, and this message is proclaimed by the prophets. Toward the heathen there are no moral obligations; men are to turn away from them with contempt, faithlessness and deceit, cruelty and violence are permitted, in fact enjoined. And those who accord the heathen equal status with Israelites in the community, and despise her law, are with equal severity excluded from the scope of moral obligation (2:344).

---

[26] Compare Vriezen, *Outline*, 314.

[27] Eichrodt's words are particularly problematic because of their historical context: they were probably written between 1933-39 in Nazi Germany. It is not hard to see an inherent anti-Semitism within.

Thus, although the message of universal ethic and examples of non-Israelites living in obedience to God were part of an earlier OT thinking, they are replaced with a narrowed exclusivist religious message.

Eichrodt's overall work seem to be clouded by his obsession with universal moral questions related to humankind, over and against that of Israel as a particular people loved by God. Although covenant is central to his theology, the term loses its significance and particularistic focus by becoming an umbrella category for "the broader overall engagement by God with humans."[28] While it is good and right to pursue larger questions regarding all humanity in relation to God's covenant people, in effect Eichrodt removes the particular significance of Israel in so doing. Another area of concern in Eichrodt's study is his belief that the particularist tendency of postexilic Israel eventually triumphs and silences an earlier more open picture toward the nations. This classic modern view has been addressed more fully by Rendtorff and need not be rehearsed here.[29] The problem for our study is Eichrodt's implied assumption that somehow a universalist perspective is inherently better than a particularistic one, a view that may find approval in modern thinking but is nowhere found in the worldview of the OT itself.[30]

Horst Dietrich Preuss

Moving the discussion to our contemporary setting is the theology of Preuss. His *Old Testament Theology*,[31] recently translated to English from the German, is in many ways unchanged in terms of method and in relation to his older German predecessors[32] but does, interestingly, manage to include an entire chapter—his concluding chapter—on a theology of the nations in relation to Israel's election. This chapter, supplemented by relevant areas elsewhere in his theology, will form the basis of this review.

---

[28] Elmer A. Martens, "Eichrodt, Walther (1890-1978)," in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters* (ed. Donald K. McKim; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 483. Unfortunately Martens refers to this positively as 'breaking new ground' instead of the damaging thing it is: a way of removing Israel's special status before YHWH.

[29] Rendtorff outlines the development of such thinking in German scholarship in an essay titled "The Image of Postexilic Israel in German Old Testament Scholarship from Wellhausen to von Rad," in his *Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 66-75. In the concluding chapter of the same book, Rendtorff helpfully explains the movement away from such polar views toward a canonical understanding (pp. 207-19).

[30] More on this to follow. See esp. our discussion on Levenson in Chapter 2.

[31] (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995).

[32] On this point and others, consult Moberly's discussion in "How May We Speak of God? A Reconsideration of the Nature of Biblical Theology," *TynBul* 53 (2002): 177-202, esp. 185ff.

Before moving to specifics of Preuss' understanding of the nations, it is instructive first to mention the centrality of election to the work as a whole. In a move uncommon today, Preuss structures his entire two volume theology around the subject of election for, "YHWH's activity of choosing comprises the most decisive, fundamental structure of the Old Testament witness" (27). The election of Israel is at the heart of Israel's self understanding, and Preuss rightly recognizes that this presents with it a number of issues, issues of particular relevance to our study. He states:

> If a group or a people has made historical election the experience of its faith, if Israel has interpreted its experience as divine election, then there are further, more far-reaching questions that present themselves. Election causes one to ask about those on the "outside," that is, what of YHWH's and Israel's relationship to other nations and to their gods? In addition, is one also to speak of an election that entails a relationship or responsibility "to" others? Does Israel have a purpose toward other human beings and nations, perhaps to be a witness of YHWH in and before the world? Is what YHWH does to and with Israel exemplary in character? (1:38)

Although the above words give the impression that the topic of the outsider (or unchosen) will pervade the two volumes, the reader anticipating this will largely be disappointed. The matter is, however, taken up at the end of Preuss' work in a chapter titled 'The Chosen People of God and the Nations'. In this chapter, Preuss begins by examining what the OT discloses about Israel's relationship to the nations, seeking to determine if any generalizations can be made. He notes that in general the 'YHWHist strand' contains more positive statements, followed by the Elohist, trailed by the Priestly material.[33] A basic assumption that is foundational to Preuss' examination is that the election of Israel does not signal the rejection or renouncement of other nations in any way (2:285). If negative statements surface in the material, it is likely due to historical circumstance, though they should not be seen as normative.[34] Rather, the overall picture encountered in the OT is one of 'openness', one of hope for those outside Israel. This hope or, in his language, salvation is always, however, through the medium of Israel. Preuss states,

> YHWH's salvation was and is first of all earmarked for Israel. And when there was talk also of salvation for the nations and of their praising of YHWH … then Israel and its Zion can serve as the mediator of this salvation, as these texts at the same time show. One cannot imagine Israel not in this picture, for YHWH himself has placed it there for the realization of

---

[33] Though he notes exceptions in the Priestly material.

[34] They are not to be taken as normative because Preuss believes that overall the nations are under God's guidance, an idea given "systematic" theological expression in passages like Deut 4:19 and 32:8f, in light of Psalm 58; 82; 89:7ff; and Isa 24:21 (see 2:285). We will examine this idea in Chapter 6.

> his plan for salvation ... "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). The call to worship, "Praise YHWH, all peoples, praise him all nations" (Psalm 117), and the hope expressed by Psalm 100 ("Make a joyful noise to YHWH all the world") present a grand vision that is to be attained. However, the Old Testament was not positively clear about the way to this hope and how it was to be realized (2:303).

Although Preuss states that the way in which this is to take place is not clear, he does believe a general picture can be deduced. The election of Israel was not for itself, but is, following Rowley, "election for service" (2:284). The heart of the issue, according to Preuss, is dealt with in the so-called Songs of the Servant of God.[35] For Preuss, "These texts represent the high point of the Old Testament statements that deal with the relationship of Israel to the nations" (2:304). His work here thus warrants our close attention.

The servant of YHWH is identified as "both an individual and the people of Israel" (2:304), though the prophet also has a prominent function. The servant has a mission to Israel, and in this case the servant is, according to Preuss, a "figure of the present" (2:304). In the fourth song, Preuss notes that the words of a number of people (or one representative voice) admit their dissatisfaction with the servant, and do not regard his work to be of YHWH. The speeches of God in the middle section look into the future and give a "new lense through which to see the servant and provides the meaning of his destiny, especially his suffering and dying, which was previously unknown" (2:304). The picture presented shows that while the servant had a mission to Israel, he "exerted a positive influence on the nations" (2:304). The servant did not have a mission *to be* a light but rather he was, by nature, a light. The light, according to Preuss, is salvific, salvific in the sense of bringing justice (מִשְׁפָּט). In the death of the servant comes "an atoning sacrifice" (2:305) that is a guilt offering for the 'many', including those who are not Israel. YHWH himself will open eyes to this light, a light with "a consequence that will go beyond Israel itself" (2:305).

While the identity of the servant is not given, one may reasonably suppose that Preuss is reading the passage through a Christian lens, one that regards Jesus to fulfill aspects of the servant's role. Such a reading is not radical when viewed from a Christian perspective as many would find the 'work of Christ' there as well. Preuss does not make the connection explicit, however, so to read his interpretation more guardedly, we must conclude that at a minimum the bringing in of the nations

---

[35] 2:303-05. Preuss lists: Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

involves the suffering individual (and/or people) and is either in the future, or has happened (though not recognized).

As my critique of Preuss revolves largely around questions related to Israel as a 'light to the nations', we will address this more generally in our summary.

Walter Brueggemann

Probably no other OT scholar can rightfully claim to have made the impact on OT theology in the late 20th century that Brueggemann has. His work finds readership in diverse theological camps and is typically refreshing, engaging and almost always provocative. Though claimed to be 'postmodern', his work might better be understood as theology that situates itself both within and beyond conventional methods of interpretation.[36] His work on election, though discussed in places of his OT Theology,[37] is formulated most concisely in an article on the subject in his theological handbook of OT themes.[38] Along with this piece, his important and related article "'Exodus' in the Plural (Amos 9:7)"[39] provides insight into his understanding of God's work with Israel, though more significantly it illustrates a motif he argues the biblical story regularly hints at: God's 'hidden histories' with other nations.

Brueggemann's election theology begins in a seemingly standard way. He explains that "election" is traditional language to describe the conviction that YHWH has chosen Israel to be his special people and that YHWH has irrevocably committed his future to the people's well being. Election is not a minor theme among many; for Brueggemann, this conviction "is the pervasive, governing premise of faith in the Old Testament."[40] We must note, right from the start, that Brueggemann is speaking of the *conviction*, or something believed, not necessarily the act itself. Though such an observation may seem moot, the distinction is important, to be understood more fully in a moment.

Election, Brueggemann goes on to explain, is often linked to responsibility. He states,

---

[36] A sharp critique of Brueggemann's self-proclaimed 'postmodern' theology is Levenson, "Is Brueggemann Really a Pluralist?" *HTR* 93 (2000): 265-94.

[37] *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

[38] "Election," in *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 61-64.

[39] In *Many Voices, One God: Being Faithful in a Pluralistic World: In Honor of Shirley Guthrie* (ed. Walter Brueggemann and George W. Stroup; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 15-34; "Plural," 15-34.

[40] "Election," 61.

> Israel's special status as YHWH's chosen people evidently carries with it a deep, nonnegotiable requirement to live in obedience to YHWH by adhering to the Torah. YHWH chose Israel as YHWH's own treasured people from all the peoples of the earth in order that Israel should conform to YHWH's will. Thus the wonder of election is intimately connected to the reality of Torah commandments.[41]

Of prime importance here is the use of a small word in the first sentence: 'evidently'. Though difficult to detect in a quick reading, upon close interaction with Brueggemann's work, one will notice that Brueggemann appears to want leave open whether God *really* chose a specific people *and not others* (rather than this being *the belief* of those responsible for the text). He hesitates to express the idea of divine election as axiomatic, though at the same time he acknowledges its pervasiveness in scripture. For example, Brueggemann will make strong, compelling statements regarding its place within scripture despite its affront to contemporary thinking:

> The claim for chosenness is doubtlessly an affront to "universal reason" that eschews all particularity and finds it abhorrent to think that God takes sides in the world. This so-called "scandal of particularity"—that YHWH would "elect Israel"—is familiarly celebrated in the light verse of Ogden Nash: "How odd of God / to choose the Jews." Chosenness is unmistakably a defining oddity of the text. Failure to recognize the defining quality of that claim for the text, moreover, is a measure of how deeply misunderstood the Old Testament text can be.
>
> ... the claim stands that YHWH has engaged the world in this particular way and is not—never intended to be—a neutral, nonpartisan, uncommitted God. Choosing Israel is a premise for which no explanation is offered; this act is of this God, who need provide no explanation (see Exod. 33:19).[42]

Having said this, Brueggemann remains uncomfortable with the idea that God chooses one people, and not others. Had his words above been all he had said on the matter, one might think otherwise. But for Brueggemann, though YHWH does choose Israel, he *also* chooses other nations. YHWH's work is not limited but is balanced in his concern for all people. There is a tension within scripture for Brueggemann, and he maintains that although God is at work in Israel he is also at work in other nations. The text, he claims, "hints many times" at the latter. He states,

> In Genesis 12:1-3, YHWH's promise to Abraham provides that through Abraham all peoples will be blessed, so that even in this act of intimate commitment the others are in view. In Amos 9:7, for example, the poet entertains the thought that YHWH does "exoduses" for many peoples—including Israel's enemies-alongside Israel's exodus. In Isaiah 42:6-7 and 49:6, Israel is to be "a light to the nations." Isaiah 19:23-25, moreover, can envision a coming time when YHWH will have a plurality of chosen peoples and Israel will

---

[41] "Election," 61.
[42] "Election," 63.

> have no monopoly on that status. The text hints many times that this God has other peoples with their own stories of chosenness.[43]

The most concentrated case Brueggemann makes with regard to the idea that God has a plurality of chosen people (i.e. Israel has "no monopoly") is his piece on one verse of the OT, Amos 9:7. In it, Brueggemann mounts the case that within the deuteronomistic and monarchical traditions there is—along with its polemic to centralize worship—a mono-theising, something which produces, in turn, a mono-ethnism. Looking at the question posed in 2 Samuel 7:23 ("who is like your people ? … is there another nation on earth … ?), Brueggemann replies,

> [The question] requires a negative answer. There is none like Israel. There is not another nation on earth whose God wants to redeem it as a people. The claim of YHWH is now deeply and intimately tied to the claim of Israel. There is not room on this horizon for any other people.[44]

The above would be less of a problem, states Brueggemann, if "Israel" were a "theological entity bound in covenant to YHWH" and not a "socioeconomic-political entity, alive to issues of power, and therefore endlessly capable of committing overt ideological claims for itself."[45] One may wonder if Brueggemann has left something else out: is Israel not more than a "socioeconomic-political entity"—indeed, a tribal or ethnic entity?

According to Brueggemann, this Deuteronomistic and monarchical tendency to mono-ethnise is precisely the situation that Amos addresses in 9:7. Here the people have taken the singularity of YHWH and the singularity of his relationship with Israel too seriously, a condition influenced by the extreme above mentioned traditions:

> It is into such a situation that the prophet Amos apparently uttered his word. The problem he addressed is not that the Israelites did not believe in YHWH but that they believed too much. They believed not only that YHWH alone is God but also that Israel alone is YHWH's people. A consequence of this ideological linkage is that Israel became self-satisfied in its ethics and in its worship, so that its very "orthodoxy" became a warrant for self-indulgence (cf. Amos 4:4-5; 6:1-6).[46]

Brueggemann believes a context of over-ethnising is decisive to Amos's speech and he argues that Amos' reference to the other exoduses of the Cushites, Philistines, and Arameans is to jostle the self-satisfaction of Israel; Amos maintains "the high claims

---

[43] "Election," 62-63.
[44] "Plural," 17.
[45] "Plural," 18.
[46] "Plural," 19.

of Yahwism and then [turns] those claims against Israel."[47] Just as Israel was delivered in their exodus, so too were other nations brought up from oppressions through YHWH's salvific hand; YHWH appears to have many hidden histories with other nations:

> YHWH, it turns out in this utterance, has other partners who are subjects of YHWH's propensity to liberation. Presumably these other peoples groaned and cried out in their own language, and YHWH responded. We may, moreover, wonder if perhaps these other peoples had behind their exoduses a promissory Genesis, and if perhaps the exodus of these other peoples issues in a form of covenant, commandment, and obedience. We are told none of that, and we are lacking in any such evidence. But Amos does clearly require his listeners to entertain the subversive notion that YHWH is at work in other ways, in other histories, in order to effect other liberations. There is to YHWH, in this imaginative reading, an identifiable core of coherence. YHWH's self-presentation is everywhere as an exodus God. That is who YHWH is, and that is what YHWH does. "History" is a series of exodus narratives of which Israel's is one, but not the only one.[48]

In concluding the piece, Brueggemann remarks that Amos's message contains a profound warning against certain conceptions of election, prevalent in Judaism and Christianity. Of particular importance are his words regarding Judaism, words that seem to be at odds with not only the four Jewish election theologies I survey in chapter two but my own overall thesis as well:

> ... one may draw a warning and critique from Amos concerning the "mystery of Israel," where it is drawn too tightly toward an ethnic Jewishness ... even in the face of Judaism's unrivaled formal claim as the people of YHWH ... the density and majesty of YHWH cannot be contained in any ideological Judaism that weds YHWH to an ethnic community.[49]

To evaluate, Brueggemann's work is characteristically engaging and he makes many observations that might otherwise have been missed. He rightly notes the rise of a mone-theizing tendency alongside the deuteronomistic drive toward centralization of worship. What he says here, however, goes too far. While there is certainly a desire within the deuteronomistic tradition to illustrate Israel's special status (through Torah obedience), I am not sure that this entails there is "not room on this horizon for any other people." While there is indeed a degree of singularity in Israel's position with YHWH, and the nations, especially the nations of Canaan, are not held in high regard therein, I am unconvinced that it is as severe as (or is subverted by the later prophets to the extent that) Brueggemann claims (I will

---

[47] "Plural," 19.

[48] "Plural," 25. The term salvific is taken from Brueggemann's discussion on the use of the verb "bring up" in 9:7 ("Plural," 21).

[49] "Plural," 27. Note that Brueggemann's warning for the Church, though important, does not focus on our question in the same way as the above and I thus omit it for reasons of space.

examine this in Chapter 6). While Brueggemann is right that Amos challenges his listeners with the idea that YHWH is at work in other peoples, it is probably safer to say that Amos' language is a powerful rhetorical tool to 'ruffle the feathers' of Israel rather than a theological axiom regarding divine election. The statement would undoubtedly have jostled its listeners to rethink their complacency and live appropriately in light of their special position before God. We have little reason to believe, however, that had the situation been different (say, the people were responding appropriately to God's commands) Amos would still be delivering his message of 'pluralism', for pluralism's sake. The context of the verse begs to be read against the background of the complacency, apathy, and wicked actions of Israel as a people. Brueggemann's reading, despite his desire to do otherwise, falls prey to making too much of one verse, taking it largely out of context.[50]

Having said that, Brueggemann's reading can not be entirely discarded as we should acknowledge what is implied in the verse. God *does* have hidden histories with other nations; the OT *does* bear witness to a motif of foreign nations having a place in the economy of YHWH's workings. My concern here is to propose caution not to equate other nation's histories with Israel's, something the OT itself certainly resists.

Charles H. H. Scobie

Scobie's recent and massive biblical theology, *The Ways of our God,*[51] is in many ways the pinnacle of his life's work, a thoughtful systematic treatment by a mature biblical scholar, now retired. The final form of the biblical text is Scobie's raw material and he structures his work under four headings, Proclamation, Promise (OT), Fulfillment, and Consummation (NT), looking at four biblical themes: God's Order, God's Servant, God's People, and God's Way. For our purposes, we shall focus in this last sampling on what Scobie discusses under 'God's People', with special attention paid to his work regarding God's relationship to people, both Covenant Community (469-508) and Nations (509-40).

Scobie's sums up his election theology through the use of the above mentioned headings, which he then proceeds to tease out. He states:

---

[50] Brueggemann warns against doing this with the verse, claiming it is not his wish (e.g. "Plural," 24, 26); in the end, however, one cannot help but feel that his reading does precisely this.

[51] Subtitled: *An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

> The OT *proclaims* that in the context of his concern for all humankind God chose a particular people to be the servant people of the Lord. The OT is also very aware of the failings and limitations of this people, and holds out the *promise* of a time when God's people will be renewed, resurrected, and reconstituted. The NT sees the *fulfillment* of these promises in the community that the Christ event brings into being, a people in continuity with Israel yet also a new community that is open to all the peoples of humankind. The church is indeed the eschatological community though it too is imperfect and the people of God will be truly constituted only at the final *consummation*. (97)

The idea that God chose a particular people, Israel, is something that Scobie argues was "brought into being by God's call of Abraham and his deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt" (473). The reason for God's choosing Israel is not difficult to surmise for Scobie: "God's choice of Israel as his people is an act of divine *love*" (478). The Hebrew term חסד is of prime importance, accounting for God's covenant with Israel, and his initial singling out of Abraham. The call of Abraham is a "totally unexpected and unexplained" act of grace that begins "[t]he story of God's activity in the historical order…" (471, 469). All that precedes Abraham (Gen 1-11) is viewed as a sort of primer on sin, showing its origins, proliferation, and eventual total destructiveness, resulting in chaos to be undone in the flood. The flood thus begins a new era, a new time of relationship with a specific person, Abraham, and marks "the beginning of God's election of a special people," Israel (509). This people, though special to the LORD, are a small people, "of no particular importance in the great general history of the world" (473).

For Scobie, the God of Israel is also the God of the nations. This, he argues, is clearly the central theme of Genesis 1-11. All humankind descend from Adam and Noah, and they too are part of his concern. Also, through the examples of strangers within Israel, Scobie seeks to demonstrate that God has a deep concern for those outside of Israel. While he argues against the idea that Israel was an inclusive group (e.g. proselytism was rare and OT food laws argue for separation from the nations), Israel was regularly instructed to deal kindly with the foreigner and stranger and to uphold their rights. More importantly for Scobie, however, is the idea that "All the Nations Shall Come" (514ff). This 'Old Testament: Promise' occupies a preeminent position within the overall framework of the book as it clearly affects all that follows.

Central to Scobie's theology of nations is the idea that the nations will recognize the God of Israel and "acknowledge Israel as God's people" (515). This happens through an 'eschatological ingathering of the Gentiles,' though Scobie believes that this does not involve a mission or active calling on the part of Israel. The nations will

come to Israel (not Israel to the nations) and it will be the work of God (516-20). This ingathering includes the idea that "the nations will come to participate in God's salvation,"[52] something Scobie believes is fulfilled, at least partially, in "the new order" presented in the NT. This new order involves "the incorporation of the Gentiles into the new people of God," something brought about through the Christian mission to evangelize, an activity now centrifugal rather than centripetal—the latter being the way of the OT (522, 530-31).

This "new people of God" is a concept that Scobie discusses gingerly. The church does not replace Israel, yet Scobie wishes to maintain that the church is both a renewed Israel and a new Israel (490ff). The idea that the church displaces Israel as the people of God is one that developed in later church history (after it became composed primarily of Gentiles), something, according to Scobie, not found in the NT. The canonical literature, rather, argues for the *continuity* of the church to Israel. As Scobie reminds his readers, "Christians therefore cannot speak, on the basis of the NT, of any final or total rejection of the Jewish people" (508).

To evaluate, while the Christian reader may find Scobie's work amenable, for the most part it tends to 'prooftext' rather than work from strong examples of specific exegesis. The results may be theologically attractive (for the Christian, and in some ways for the Jew) yet difficult to maintain from the texts themselves. But before we note some specific problems, a few positive remarks about the approach and model.

Scobie's work is thoroughly irenic and seeks to engage difficult issues with utmost concern for balance and respect. His treatment, for example, of how contemporary Jewish people fit within God's people seeks both to make sense of NT as scripture and to display sensitivities to past problems of Christian anti-Semitism. The problems are complex and one might not be completely satisfied with Scobie's answers but one must respect his attempt, on the one hand, to grapple with the question of a contemporary Israel that does not believe in Jesus as messiah and, on the other, the Pauline idea that all Israel will be saved (Rom 11:26). One could only have hoped for more interaction with Jewish writers and interpretation on the matter, a problem not to be taken lightly if we keep in mind Scobie's theological sensitivities.[53]

Problems abound, however, when one tries to make sense of Scobie's use of scripture, particularly the OT. Though I can appreciate, for example, Scobie's

---

[52] *Ways*, 518, something Scobie bases upon Isa 45:22-23, 51:5.

[53] On this idea, consult Moberly's review in *JTS* 55 (2004): 158-62. It is odd that Scobie appears largely unaware of (or at least shows no interaction with) the recent string of discussions by Kendal, Soulen, Wyschogrod, and Novak (among others).

concern to show that God's election begins with the call of Abraham, Scobie's work leaves many questions unanswered related to the primeval story. To what extent is this material unrelated to the election of Israel? How exactly does it relate a story of common humanity and if so, how do the genealogies function? Are they simply to relate a history of general humanity? Is Scobie correct, for example, when he states that the Gospel of Luke recounts the genealogy of Jesus all the way back to Adam, "to emphasize the Lord's solidarity with the entire human race" (349)? (Does it not rather attempt to trace Jesus' lineage into the promised line, the chosen bloodline, to the seed of Eve?) Moreover, can we uphold the idea that the story building up to the flood, and the flood itself, is primarily about the proliferation of sin, quite unrelated to the subsequent story of Abraham?[54]

Scobie rightly recognizes that the OT speaks of the nations coming to Israel, and central to this "ingathering of the gentiles" is that the nations will come and will "acknowledge Israel as God's people." My question, here, is one of fulfillment. If this is at least partially fulfilled in the NT and is a good and right belief for faithful Christians, why does it seem that large sections of the contemporary and historic church fail to do this? Is not the default position to view Israel as 'replaced' by the church?[55] Further, for those wings of the church (particularly dispensational) that *do* view Israel as important, to what extent is this importance more about fulfilling some anticipated eschatological drama than to acknowledge Israel's special place within the economy of God's love? To be fair, Scobie's work should perhaps be regarded as *prescriptive*; that is, we can hope that his readers will take his ideas seriously and put them into practice.

Perhaps this brings up a related and important question, one that involves Scobie's overarching organizational section heads. Scobie wishes to discuss each topic, including Israel's election, through the headings Proclamation, Promise, Fulfillment, and Consummation. While he is able to make these categories work for the most part, there is something difficult in trying to make this fit with regard to a covenant people and the nations. Scobie largely sees the call of Abraham as the Proclamation but then moves, because of the sin of Israel (he lists the fall of the Northern Kingdom, The Babylonian Exile and the persecution under Antiochus) to discuss the Promise, one that concerns a time of a new covenant, a time when the

---

[54] Perhaps I here reveal a pet peeve with a certain Christian reading of Gen 1-11. It seems that Christians regularly refer to 'proliferation of sin' as the theme of Gen 1-11 without enough exegetical and theological engagement with the text itself.

[55] The exceptions are many and, as Bob Dylan has said, "the times they are a-changin."

"ingathering of Israel" (485-86) and the nations will take place. The Fulfillment, a NT concept for Scobie, is one that is brought, at least in part, through the institution of the Christian church. The Consummation is the final time, when, believes Scobie, the new covenant will be fully realized. All this may make sense to the Christian, for whom such ideas are likely familiar. My concern here, however, involves the extent to which we can speak, on the basis of the OT itself, of the proclamation to Abraham as something in need of fixing or repair because of Israel's sin. One might argue, as Levenson does, that the proclamation to Abraham is already addressing the problem of sin: "God's high hopes for the world … are now focused on one man who will reverse the decline of a failing humanity."[56] Thus the promise to Abraham is not something in need of replacing (or fixing, i.e. something in want, or in need of a new covenant), but something in need of realization, something that, it would appear, will come about by Israel's being a holy people and enacting God's commands. Scobie constructs a plight that the NT is to resolve—a thesis that requires much more work from within the OT itself to be convincing.

Having stated these concerns, there is much here to ponder and build upon, and we should highlight Scobie's unusual idea, at least with regard to those surveyed, that part of the gentile's role is to recognize the special relationship YHWH has with Israel and that the 'ingathering' of the gentiles will be through the work of God, not an active Jewish mission. We will encounter this idea again, particularly in the work of Novak, in the next chapter—a chapter that will stand in stark contrast to what we have surveyed here.

SUMMARY

The works surveyed truly reveal a variety of ideas related to election. Through studies on בחר we have come to a better appreciation that the concept of election is not captured through the use of one term, though when it is used it seems to refer to careful selecting, even, perhaps, for a test (compare Levenson in Chapter 2). Wildberger's work was particularly helpful in his attempt to understand if Israel is ever said to choose YHWH; that answer, despite instances where Israel chooses life or the right path, is no. If there has been a unifying factor overall in the works surveyed (though we may need to exempt Brueggemann and perhaps Scobie, to a degree) it is that the election of Israel is *for* something. Rowley's work was the most persistent

---

[56] Levenson, "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism," in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 151. I discuss this idea in Chapter 2 below.

and unequivocal in this regard, but many of the others agreed: God chose Israel for some larger purpose, likely a mission to the nations. The idea pervaded the writings we surveyed but few if any took the time and space necessary to build a solid case from the OT itself. Particularly guilty was Nicole.

If the OT was used to make a case, it usually started with Genesis 12:1-3. Election, even if not termed so, was said to start here with Abraham, and his call was believed to include a plan for the nations. For most, however (and here we might exempt Patrick), the idea seemed to be drawn from a rather undisciplined reading of Gen 12:3b whereby the nations receive a blessing through Abraham, though the difficulties of the passage were not addressed. No one seemed concerned that the passage (as I will argue) may simply be highlighting how great Abraham's blessing really was: *even the nations* will be blessed because of this overwhelming divine favour put upon him. The nations are the backdrop, not the focus, and if there is action foreseen here, it is likely on the part of the nations. There also seemed to be a regular appeal, or in places an assumption, that one of Israel's key tasks as elect was to be a "light to the nations". I know of no interpreter surveyed above that questioned whether the Isaiah 49 passage should be given such emphasis with regard to election.[57] Preuss probably provided the most sophisticated reading but we might still wonder whether the passage should really be used to conclude a theology of the OT, a theology of election, or be viewed as one of the "high points of the declarations of the Old Testament about the nations." To my mind, if the OT speaks to what it means to be the elect people of God with regard to the nations it can be found in Deuteronomy where Israel's obligations to the law are laid out. The book has a lot to say about the nations, but it largely relates the rather uncomfortable idea (at least for modern audiences) that Israel's election entailed *separation* from them, not bringing them in or being a light to them.[58] In fact, Deuteronomy 7 (to which a few commentators pointed without addressing the larger context) likely provides one of the most concentrated statements regarding Israel's election, but there the nations do not feature well, to say the least.[59] Apart from the *TDOT* entry no one seemed to come to terms with this issue. Perhaps it was more convenient and attractive to concentrate on 'light' and 'inclusion', concepts that not only fit modern categories of what a faith

---

[57] For a recent critique of the tendency to use Isa 40-66 for theologies of gentile inclusion or theologies of universal salvation, consult Joel S. Kaminsky and Anne Stewart, "God of All the World: Universalism and Developing Monotheism in Isaiah 40-66," *HTR* 99 (2006): 139-63.

[58] This does not mean that Israel's obedience to Torah would not have a positive effect on the nations as I argue in Chapter 6 (with reference to Deut 4) below.

[59] Again, the passage is more complex than I am making it here. See Chapter 6 below.

community should be like but also are concepts that fit rather well with Christian theological notions of mission.

In those works surveyed, I think it would also be safe to say that few if any (save perhaps Brueggemann, though note my critique) discuss actual examples of specifically *how the nations, or the unchosen, function in relation to the chosen in the OT.* For example, if Preuss can say that "Election causes one to ask about those on the 'outside'," why does he not probe their stories? What of the stories of Abimelech, Rahab, Balaam, Pharaoh's Daughter, or Jethro? Could not these stories give us some sense of what it might mean to be 'outside'? The criticism applies across the board, and in many ways our own study is an attempt to rectify the situation. While it may seem that I am asking something that it is not a concern of the interpreters, I think it should be, and in the next chapter on Jewish election theologies we will see just how important the matter is to those of the Jewish tradition.

And so our next chapter of Jewish samplings awaits, a chapter that will prove to be quite different. Because it seems that Jewish thinking on election has had little impact on the scholarly discussion (an exception may be Brueggemann, who bucks against it), I examine the work of four Jewish thinkers in depth, allotting them considerably more space than those above. The result is a somewhat varied picture but there does seem to be a unified emphasis. Gone is the obsession with mission and in its place is an emphasis on Israel as God's beloved people, a people that is a corporeal ethnic entity. Our questions will continue: how well does each use the HB, and how well does each treat the question of non-election in relation to election, if at all?

chapter two

JEWISH ELECTION THEOLOGIES: EXCLUSION AND DISGRACE?

The previous chapter made abundantly clear that Christian interpreters of election tend to favour elements within the biblical text that point to Israel's election as a call to service, mission, and being a medium of blessing to the nations. Passages that stress a more universalistic picture of God's interaction with humankind are highlighted, and, as observed in some interpreters, even less universal—more particularistic texts—are read to be about Israel's role as medium of blessing to the nations.[1] We now take a distinct turn to examine recent Jewish scholarship on election in the HB. In doing so, we might better see how these two faith groups approach their scripture differently, paving the way forward toward meaningful dialogue.[2] As we shall see, the picture of election offered is distinct, particularly regarding emphases and the biblical texts most often stressed. We look first at the

[1] Here I am thinking especially of Nicole's reading of Deuteronomy (see pp. 4-5 above).

[2] Jewish-Christian dialogue continues within scholarship though its effects are only beginning to be felt within the life of many Christian churches. Concerning this dialogue, consult esp. the discussion in Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), ch. 5, as well as David Berger, "Jewish-Christian Relations: A Jewish Perspective," *JES* 20 (1983): 5-32; Eugene B. Borowitz, "Recent Historic Events: Jewish and Christian Interpretations," *TS* 44 (1983): 221-40; Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 31-61; Robert M. Price, "An Evangelical Version of the 'Double Covenant': New Possibilities for Jewish-Fundamentalist Dialogue," *JES* 20 (1983): 33-42; Shemaryahu Talmon, "Particularity and Universality: A Jewish View," in *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Six Years of Christian-Jewish Consultations* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975), 36-42, and the recent collection of essays in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Jews and Christians: People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). Note as well the important recent Jewish position statement *Dabru Emet,* a statement published in conjunction with two collections of essays: Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al., eds., *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2000) (aimed at a Jewish audience); and David F. Sandmel, Rosann M. Catalano, and Christopher M. Leighton, eds., *Irreconcilable Differences: A Learning Resource for Jews and Christians* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2001) (aimed at both Jewish and Christian audiences). The statement evoked much response, the most scathing of which was articulated by Levenson. See his "How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *Commentary* 112, no. 5 (2001): 31-37, and the subsequent reaction by the statement drafters and others in Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al., "Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Jon D. Levenson & Critics," *Commentary* 113, no. 4 (2002): 8-21. The latter includes an important rejoinder by Levenson.

recent studies of Joel S. Kaminsky, turning then to the work of David Novak, Michael Wyschogrod, and Jon D. Levenson.

JOEL S. KAMINSKY

Having completed doctoral work in the area of corporate responsibility in the HB,[3] Kaminsky's examination of Israel's election might seem a natural next step. His recent musings on the subject make clear that Israel's election is a subject he would like to propel and, it would appear, reconceptualize.[4] His work involves an assessment of the current landscape, a plea for a more nuanced understanding of HB conceptions of election, and a fresh proposal involving the introduction of a tripartite distinction within the economy of election. I first expose the basic issues and problems Kaminsky detects within biblical election; next I present the categories he proposes regarding the elect; and lastly I evaluate his overall proposal and offer some suggestions for modification.

Issues in Election in the Hebrew Bible

Kaminsky notices that many interpreters today tend to devalue the particularistic and nationalistic strands within the HB unless they can be manipulated to show some form of universalism. Israel's special status as the elect people of God seems to present the modern interpreter with discomfort. The result, according to Kaminsky, is either a muting of the texts which suggest such particularism, or, equally problematic, an overemphasis on texts which suggest a more universalistic picture. Particularism, however, is a fundamental element within the HB. To ignore such a prominent idea is to ignore a dominant thread within the fabric of the biblical story and such practice will inevitably lead to a misconstrual of the text. And, to make the point regarding

---

[3] This work was supervised by Levenson at the University of Chicago Divinity School. A revision of the thesis has been published as *Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 196; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1995). Compare also his, "The Sins of the Fathers: A Theological Investigation of the Biblical Tension Between Corporate and Individualized Retribution," *Judaism* 46 (1997): 319-32.

[4] His recent works focusing on the subject of election are: "Wrestling with Israel's Election: A Jewish Reaction to Rolf Knierim's Biblical Theology," in *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium: Form, Concept, and Theological Perspective* (ed. Wonil Kim et al.; SAC 1; Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press, 2000), 262-62; "The Concept of Election and Second Isaiah: Recent Literature," *BTB* 31 (Winter 2001): 135-44; "Did Election Imply the Mistreatment of Non-Israelites?" *HTR* 96 (2003): 397-425. Helpful for understanding Kaminsky's methodology is his "Some Jewish Theological Reflections on Gerstenberger's Sociological Approach to the Hebrew Bible," *HBT* 25 (2003): 95-99. Near the final drafting stages of this chapter, Professor Kaminsky was kind enough to provide me with a draft copy of his forthcoming monograph on election (*Yet Jacob I Loved: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2007]). Although I have not reworked the chapter in light of it, I have supplemented our section where appropriate.

particularism clear, Kaminsky does not shy away from discussing the repercussions of such biblical election, that is, the antonym of Israel's election. "If election means anything," states Kaminsky, "it must mean that some are elected and others are not."[5]

According to Kaminsky, motivating much of the contemporary discussion and underlying phobia of God's particularism in choosing Israel is a fundamental assumption that universalism is inherently good, while particularism is inferior, deficient, or just plain bad.[6] Kaminsky expresses a number of suspicions as to why this discussion takes the shape it does, two of which we shall highlight. The first is that modern readers tend to view the biblical data through recent events and ideas. He states:

> ... much of the current discussion of this issue is animated by the tendency to read the biblical text through certain contemporary events and ideas. In particular, the vivid memory of a number of recent attempts at ethnic cleansing and genocide in combination with current views of race, ethnicity and multiculturalism that have both grown out of and affected our understanding of these terrible events, have shaped recent scholarship on the concept of election in ways that cannot be ignored. While it is inevitable and even appropriate that this should occur, one must recognize that the biblical text might not be compatible with the now pervasive liberal democratic pluralistic ethic. More importantly, one must provide a corrective to the tendency to read the Bible through the lens of current popular notions of race, ethnicity and multiculturalism when such readings lead to serious distortions of the biblical text, especially those that deal with the idea of election. In their crudest form such readings equate the notion of election with modern racism.[7]

As a second observation, Kaminsky notes that the modern preference for universalism, as well as the widespread belief that universalistic texts are somehow superior to others, is the result not of biblical teaching but of Enlightenment ideals, particularly those of Kant.[8] The discussion, unfortunately, falls short as Kaminsky does not elaborate, offering neither the history of such ideas nor an explanation of how this sentiment took hold and subsequently retained its strength. His discussion does, however, raise the important question as to why contemporary scholarship seems to hold unreflectively to such ideals without well thought through reasons or argument.[9]

---

[5] "Wrestling," 253. This is, of course, not the full picture. Kaminsky proposes a carefully worked out structure of those outside the elect, and their relationship to God. See further below.

[6] See especially his discussion regarding modern scholarship on Second Isaiah in his "Concept," esp. 140.

[7] "Concept," 137.

[8] "Concept," 136-37.

[9] Kaminsky is one of few scholars who recognize the importance of questions relating to why universalism has been favoured to particularism and the connection of such preferences to the Enlightenment in general and Kant in particular (note, however, his indebtedness to Joseph

On a related topic, Kaminsky expresses a nagging frustration with contemporary Christian scholarship's tendency to equate election with salvation and non-election with damnation. Such a move, thinks Kaminsky, is based upon a lack of careful reading of the HB and Christianity's commitment to mission, appearing to be "driven at least partially by the sense that either one is elect or one is lost to God."[10] This "classical Christian propensity" flattens the biblical landscape, failing to recognize its complex and highly nuanced view of election.[11] The biblical picture involves not two categories, the elect and non-elect, but, argues Kaminsky, requires the introduction of a third. This third category makes his proposal unique, worthy of our close attention and careful scrutiny.

The Elect, Anti-elect and Non-elect

Kaminsky argues that the prime recipient of God's election is Israel. The picture, however, is not quite so straightforward. Within election there appears, at times, to be gradation and some of the elect have a further 'special' election, usually for some purpose (e.g. Joseph might be an "the elect of the elect," specially used by God for the benefit of his family and others). The lines of delineation of the elect are also, according to Kaminsky, in need of some clarification. It is likely premature to speak of Judaism as a religion before the Hellenistic period, thus any discussion of 'conversion' seems out of place.[12] This does not mean, however, that certain people throughout the HB did not attach themselves to or become part of the Israelite people. Here Kaminsky mentions prime examples, such as Rahab the Canaanite, Ruth the Moabitess, and less-discussed figures such as Uriah the Hittite.[13] Alternatively, Kaminsky notes that at times members of the elect group become, through sinful action, part of the anti-elect. Here the prime example is Achan and his family (Josh 7).[14]

Blenkinsopp's work, quoting as he does from his article, "YHWH and Other Deities: Conflict and Accommodation in the Religion of Israel," *Int* 40 [1986]: 354-66).

[10] "Concept," 136. There is much to say here. I address the matter more fully in our evaluation.

[11] "Did Election," 422.

[12] Kaminsky here follows Shaye Cohen's *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and notes that "Jewish identity was marked by ethnic or tribal affiliation rather than a religious affiliation" ("Did Election," 413). Kaminsky elaborated this idea in "A Light to the Nations? Was there Mission and/or Conversion in the Hebrew Bible?" (paper presented at a McMaster University Colloquium, Hamilton, Ontario, 18 May 2005).

[13] "Did Election," 412. Kaminsky's also offers a more detailed discussion on marrying into Israel as well as the particularism of Ezra-Nehemiah. See his "Did Election," 414-23.

[14] "Concept," 138; "Did Election," 402; note also the chapter Kaminsky devotes to the story in Kaminsky, *Corporate*, 67-95. Discussion of this idea will follow in the evaluation.

We now come to the newly proposed category of the anti-elect. This category is to be clearly distinguished from both the elect and non-elect (which we shall discuss below). Individuals, families, groups, or nations within this category "are deemed enemies of God," having incurred "divine disfavour."[15] These people are considered to be so evil or dangerous that at times a divine command calls for their annihilation. Biblical examples include, according to Kaminsky, the Amalekites, the Canaanites, and perhaps less so the Midianites. Kaminsky is clear in expressing his own discomfort with such notions and acknowledges the texts which discuss such ideas are "deeply troubling."[16] He does not believe, however, that the problem should result in the eradication of the concept of election. In effort to answer the problem, and provide a way forward from the accusations that the HB promotes destructive violence on account of its election theology (as argued by e.g. Cott, Schwartz, and Lüdemann), Kaminsky presents three ways in which his model might positively move the discussion forward:

> First, I believe that the relevant texts deserve a more sympathetic reading; second, although a more sympathetic reading cannot erase all of the troubling aspects of these texts, the call to jettison the concept of election by linking it solely to these texts is equally problematic; and third, later Jewish tradition has found ways to tame and defang such texts even while retaining the integrity of the canon.

Kaminsky uses a number of interpretative strategies as he works his way through some of the troubling anti-election texts. We consider briefly his discussion of the Canaanites as an example. First, Kaminsky believes that "even the harshest texts are more nuanced and ambiguous" than often perceived.[17] Although Joshua 10 implies their complete destruction, not all the Canaanites were killed. Rahab and her family survive, as do the Gibeonites and other groups. Further, archaeological evidence raises questions as to the extent of the Canaanite genocide. Though not indicating his own support, Kaminsky also brings up the peasant revolt model (as advocated by George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald), suggesting the Canaanite conquest was more rhetorical than actual. The problem is not completely removed, though Kaminsky seeks to alleviate it. He states:

> The long shadow cast by the biblical anti-Canaanite polemic on subsequent history cannot be lightened, and a literal, plain-sense reading of these texts indicates that God seems to have endorsed genocide on certain occasions. But it is essential for a biblical scholar to

---

[15] "Did Election," 398-99, and "Concept," 138, respectively.
[16] "Did Election," 400.
[17] "Did Election," 401.

evaluate the biblical text in its own historical context, uncolored by its career in postbiblical history. The question that remains is thus: If these anti-Canaanite texts are more imaginative than historical, as the literary and archaeological evidence suggests, why did ancient Israelite thinkers generate and continue to be preoccupied by such ideas? One explanation is that texts that call on Israel to kill all the Canaanites were likely produced during a period of instability and powerlessness. ... Others think that these texts may represent an exilic attempt to comprehend Israel's failure to maintain possession of the land that, according to tradition, it had received from God. Alternatively, this harsh rhetoric might have arisen among the exiles as a strategy for maintaining Judean social and religious identity by constructing that identity in contrast to either the Babylonians among whom the exiles lived or the Judeans who were not removed from the land.[18]

In another context (where he critiques Knierim's *The Task of Old Testament Theology)*, however, Kaminsky raises an issue at times ignored by his fellow interpreters: the anti-elect *incur* their position as anti-elect.[19] Here Kaminsky is rather difficult to pin down, but it seems he more or less affirms that it was the wickedness of the Canaanites that brought about their anti-election and thus the HB's harsh view of them. He states,

> In Knierim's opinion, the sinful Canaanites must be destroyed because they will tempt the disobedient Israelites. This is one possible reading of the Bible's view ... but another view is that they were uprooted because they had committed so many evil deeds (Gen. 15:16; Lev. 20:22-23). I grant that a later Deuteronomic editor blamed the fall of the northern and southern kingdoms on the evil Canaanites who tempted the Israelites and the Judeans. I also agree that God's promise of land to a wandering tribal group means that someone is bound to be driven off a currently occupied piece of land. But I would not presume, as Knierim does, that the Canaanites were in no sense evil. Knierim believes that because certain highly developed elements of the anti-Canaanite polemic are late, the whole polemic must be false. In fact, he portrays the Cannanites [*sic*] in quite positive terms and speaks of "the Canaanites' own ethos of loyalty to their religious traditions." Although his construction is possible, it is equally possible that the Canaanites did, in fact, engage in practices abhorrent to God. If this latter contention proved to be true, although one might object to a call for their total destruction, one could at least understand why certain biblical authors advocated such a position and believed that it was within the universe of divinely prescribed moral behavior.[20]

The anti-elect and their destruction, however, is not an entirely resolved issue. Regardless of whether or not the anti-elect in some way incurred their position, the problem of the call for their destruction, divine at that, cannot be completely sidestepped. But, in addition to the historical probabilities that the destruction of the anti-elect never took place, Kaminsky believes that these texts of anti-election are in

---

[18] "Did Election," 404. We will critically engage some of these questions below and in Chapter 6.

[19] Note that many conservative Christian interpreters, perhaps following Calvin, do raise this argument. See further our evaluation and Chapter 6 below.

[20] "Wrestling," 256.

no way central to Israel's theology of election (something we address in Chapter 6), nor is the election of Israel grounds for the destruction of everyone else who is not elected. He states,

> First, it is not at all evident that the anti-Canaanite polemic must *of necessity* be actualized in history just because it is part of Scripture. This is true both in the biblical period, in which textual and archaeological evidence strongly suggests it was never fully actualized and may not have been actualized at all, as well as in later Jewish tradition, for many Jewish exegetes were morally troubled by the theme of the destruction of the anti-elect and sought to limit its potential for harm. Second, even if the notion of election and the anti-Canaanite polemic are sometimes linked in the biblical text, it is dubious to assert that the anti-Canaanite polemic is either central to the theology of Israel's election or the inexorable consummation of that theology. In a great number of biblical texts, the notion of election recurs without occasioning the call for a holy war against the anti-elect, or anything like it. More importantly ... the same theology of election that sometimes called for the wholesale destruction of the anti-elect elsewhere gave rise to some of the most sensitive ideas concerning the treatment of aliens and foreigners found anywhere in the ancient world. Election did not simply imply that every non-Israelite was doomed for destruction. Far from it. The vast majority of non-Israelites are better labeled the "non-elect," and they often assumed a very important and positive place in Israel's understanding of the divine economy.[21]

This brings up the final category within Kaminsky's proposal of biblical election: the non-elect.

The last category within the economy of divine election, the non-elect, is, in Kaminsky's words, "far more ambiguous" than the just discussed anti-elect.[22] This category of people is a vast one, including individuals, groups, and nations in the HB who are neither part of the elect, Israel, nor "counted among those who are utterly beyond the pale of divine and human mercy in the Israelite imagination."[23] Kaminsky argues that the thrust of the HB (and subsequent Rabbinic thought) teaches that, contrary to what a large number of Christian thinkers might otherwise believe, being outside of God's special election "is in no way equivalent to being damned."[24] Jewish exclusivism, for all its negative press, might turn out to be more tolerant than its sister faith group, Christianity. Kaminsky's understanding of Judaism accounts for those outside the elect, allowing them "to serve God in their own way" rather than Christianity's stress on "a single path to salvation."[25] Kaminsky elaborates:

---

[21] "Did Election," 408.
[22] "Concept," 138.
[23] "Did Election," 409.
[24] "Concept," 136.
[25] "Concept," 136.

> While the fate of the other nations is never fully worked out in the Hebrew Bible, in classical Jewish thinking those who are not Jewish are not excluded from salvation in the same manner in which much of classical Christian theology excludes those who fail to acknowledge Jesus as Christ from ultimate salvation. Thus Gentiles who observe the Noahide laws can attain the rewards of the righteous in the next world in at least some streams of rabbinic thinking ...[26]

The introduction of the Noahide laws by Kaminsky highlights what will become a dominant theme within the Jewish interpreters we survey. Nothing more is stated, but the reader is now aware of an important teaching within Jewish thought on those considered outside the pales of election.[27]

The non-elect, according to Kaminsky's model, are thus those who are not the elect, that is, Israel, and those who are not enemies of God, that is, the anti-elect. Just as there are gradations and changes within the elect group, likewise, some within the anti-elect (e.g. Rahab and family), *and* within the non-elect (e.g. Uriah the Hittite) can attach themselves to the elect. The categories are quite fluid, even if examples of crossover are few. What seems not to change, however, is Israel's overall status as elect.[28] Though Israel's actions have placed them under judgment at times (e.g. the exile), they remain God's special chosen. While Kaminsky includes a discussion on the defining criteria of the elect in antiquity, he does not offer a clear picture how this might correlate to a modern day Jewish people.[29] He does, however, comment on the Christian tendency to claim Israel's election for the church and in turn eradicate the Jewish people in a highly supersessionist way—one might surmise such a reading to be the very height of supersessionism.

In the end, Kaminsky is not convinced that Christianity offers a more inclusive or universalistic picture than does Judaism. While many within Christianity may wish to believe so and promote Christianity as a universalistic religion, Kaminsky believes that this runs contrary to its early church roots, its traditional understanding of election, and the teaching of the NT. Ultimately, the differences between Judaism and

---

[26] "Concept," 136. A similar comment is made in "Did Election," 422, note 66.

[27] We shall discuss this common appeal to Noahide laws at length in our dialogue with Novak below. Like other Jewish thinkers, Kaminsky appeals to Noahide Law yet says nothing (apart from a footnote referencing Novak's work) as to what these laws are, where they are to be found, how one arrives at them, etc. One might have hoped for a fuller discussion (esp. if this was/is the hope of "salvation" for the non-elect) though the idea is largely taken for granted, admittedly in much the same way as (for example) Christian interpreters often speak of 'the fall'.

[28] This idea seems more assumed and asserted than argued. Though I tend to agree (and hope to show this esp. in relation to Num 22-24—see Chapter 5), one might query: If Achan could, through inappropriate action, be demoted to anti-elect, could this happen to the elect as a whole?

[29] He does, however, suggest that the Jewish people have a "continuing special relationship with God" ("Wrestling," 261).

Christianity's respective election theologies, when properly understood, relate more to a difference of belief in who comprises the elect. If Christians pay closer attention to the texts of the HB, they might ascertain a recovery of the church's service, vocation, and mission and the proper connection of these to election. Closer attention to these texts might also:

> … lead to a greater respect for Judaism as well. No longer will the debate between the two sister religions be characterized as one between an immature, parochial and intolerant Judaism and a universalistic Christianity. Rather, it will become clear that this is an argument between two equally particularistic faiths who have a genuine disagreement about who the elect are and what election implies.[30]

To conclude our exposition, we note that Kaminsky believes that Israel's election should not be reduced to some form of mere favouritism. In fact, Israel's status as elect is "more one of responsibilities than of special privileges."[31] What then, we might ask, are the responsibilities of Israel? Among the many (e.g. "covenantal obedience," "a greater teleological purpose in the world as a whole," "witness to God's unity and purpose"),[32] is one of service, involving being a medium of blessing to the nations. Israel's election is not for Israel alone, but is God's way of expressing his love to the peoples of the earth, even if Israel has a special place within the economy of God's love. But before we too readily believe that this picture is somehow identical to those Christian interpreters surveyed above, Kaminsky clarifies:

> In the Hebrew Bible, the service is not primarily about a mission to bring about the conversion of the nations into the elect, but rather it is about the specially elect being a mediator of God's blessing both to the more general elect group, as well as to the non-elect nations of the world, who remain non-elect even while benefiting from this divine plan.[33]

Perhaps more than anything, however, the election of Israel highlights a recurring and central theme of the HB—God's mysterious love. Though this love, according to Kaminsky, can benefit all people, Jew or Gentile, Israel is the prime recipient, and is elevated above all others. Ultimately, Israel's response cannot be the motivating factor behind this mystery. Nor, importantly, can God's election of Israel be seen simply as serving some larger and greater purpose (though it certainly can and does). God's election of Israel is, quite plainly and simply, because of God's love for his special people. In commenting on the often discussed 'election passage',

---

[30] "Concept," 142.
[31] "Wrestling," 259.
[32] "Did Election," 423; compare "Concept," 141-42.
[33] "Concept," 141.

Deuteronomy 7:7-8, Kaminsky's words make this clear and will conclude our exposition:

> While the promissory dimension is touched upon, here one finds that ultimately election is grounded in God's mysterious love for Israel. Moreover, this is the rationale that propels much of the action in Genesis, where God repeatedly chooses, arbitrarily and mysteriously, to elevate some over others. Although such election might serve a purpose, it is no longer grounded in that purpose, but rather in an inexplicable divine love. This distinction is important because it indicates that Israel's failure to own up to her responsibilities does not dissolve that relationship.[34]

Evaluation

Regrettably, we could not explore the whole of Kaminsky's discussion and the biblical examples he examines in the detail they demand. Hopefully, however, if nothing else, our review will highlight the freshness of his ideas and the integrity of his argument to the overall picture of the HB. Nevertheless, his proposal is not without difficulties. We first move to discuss the strengths of his work and then to mark such difficulties, the greatest of which may well be his tripartite distinction.

Kaminsky's overture is innovating. His picture of election in the HB seeks to account for that beyond the traditional election texts of Deuteronomy (though he does make important observations on these as well), looking to the earlier stories of God's choosing in Genesis, of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph to the later texts of Isaiah. Kaminsky observes that these stories reveal a graduated picture; the elect at times have a special election (e.g. Joseph) and some fall out of this category into the anti-elect (e.g. Achan). In addition, Kaminsky does not shy from asking difficult questions of the Bible. Though he is not comfortable with such texts, Kaminsky looks long and hard not only at God's non-election, but at God's enemies, those he terms the anti-elect. Kaminsky has rightly recognized that election must mean that some are elected while others are not and this has import for one's theology. Kaminsky thus offers not only a theology of the elect, but seems just as concerned with a theology of those outside election. As noted above in our survey of Christian election theologies, such a tendency is rare, or often paid only lip service.

Another strength to note in Kaminsky's work is his attention to the larger questions of, and the presuppositions behind, the interpreter's preference and elevation of biblical universalism over particularism. He rightly shows that the picture in the HB cannot be so neatly divided; often those texts deemed universalistic

---

[34] "Did Election," 424.

(e.g. second Isaiah) are not as universalistic as believed and, on the other hand, those texts that are seemingly exclusivistic or particularistic (e.g. Ezra-Neh[35]) are not always as 'closed' as some might suggest. Unfounded favor toward universalism over particularism (often regarding the latter as inherently bad) taints our readings of the texts and often places higher value on certain passages, skewing the overall picture. In light of Kaminsky's work, I believe one will be hard pressed to produce an election study blindly assuming that particularism is necessarily deficient, always leading to destructive violence or hatred toward all those unchosen. His work, to my mind, calls for future scholarship on the topic to justify exactly why particularism is inferior to universalism (if believed so). Kaminsky's work in many ways paves the way for the present study, one which will further examine examples of how the unchosen function in relation to the chosen in the Pentateuch.

There are certain risks involved when offering a fresh theological proposal that challenges the categories assumed by interpreters for countless years. Without such thinking, our theologies would never advance; we are indebted to Kaminsky's model for accomplishing this goal. We must at the same time, however, critique new models to ensure their reliability. We do so keeping in mind the newness of his work and the very real need for the rethinking of an important, though often neglected, topic.

For the most part, Kaminsky's model is new in its introduction of the category of the anti-elect. This is not to overlook his desire to reemphasize the particularity of Israel's election, to call attention to the unargued modern preference for universalism, or to show that Israel's election is a recurring, undeniable, and central theme of the HB. The substance of his proposal, however, lies in his desire to expand the category of the non-elect into two. The interpreter should not, according to the proposal, lump all those who are not elected, such as the Canaanites with individuals like Uriah the Hittite, into one large category.

While the reasons motivating his proposal are excellent, I am unconvinced that the HB is quite as clear on the categories Kaminsky proposes. I am not sure that one need introduce the category of the 'anti-elect' in order to argue the important case which Kaminsky does, viz., that the HB contains a much more nuanced and fluid picture than often envisaged by interpreters. I believe that this *can* be done through two categories, chosen and unchosen (or elect and non-elect) as this is truer to the

---

[35] See "Did Election," 414-23 for a discussion on the complexities of Ezra-Neh in relation to exclusivism.

biblical picture. Perhaps a critique is only as good as it can demonstrate; thus we turn to a few specifics and examples he offers.

The 'anti-election' of the Canaanites features prominently within Kaminsky's work. Kaminsky seeks to lessen the harshness of the anti-Canaanite polemic by arguing that the extent of their destruction (that is, the actualization) is historically questionable. He claims this lack of actualization is not a complete answer; neither, however, is abandoning the concept of Israel's election. While I do not disagree with him on the latter, I am unsure that the failure of the Israelites to enact the genocide somehow lessens the difficulty.[36] The problem with the anti-Canaanite polemic in the HB is, as I perceive it, not the actualization of genocide (though difficult as it might be) as much as the divine call for it. As one author has said, "History is no longer with us. The narrative remains."[37] This, it seems to me, is the real crux of the problem for interpreters of scripture. Notably, Kaminsky observes that Canaanite 'anti-election' was ultimately incurred. Though a topic ignored by many, this may be a reasonable option.[38] But it also, to my mind, challenges the entire system Kaminsky proposes.

If Kaminsky is indeed making connections between anti-election and wicked action (i.e. anti-election is incurred),[39] it would seem that the category he introduces, anti-election, is redundant. This is not to say that the model is of no value as it provides an instructive tool that highlights an urgent need to recognize the gradation and fluidity in election.[40] I wonder, however, whether one could not make a stronger case that the gradation occurs within both groups of the elect and the non-elect. When one looks at the HB, I would suggest that the overall story speaks of Israel, God's

---

[36] Not to mention that I am not altogether convinced by his historical assessment. The details of such a discussion are beyond the scope of this study to explore fully. Briefly, however, though I am not suggesting a wholesale acceptance of the idea that Israel's conquest did accomplish a complete takeover of Canaan or total Canaanite destruction, I am suggesting that the 'conquest' was more than some minimalist views may suppose or the models Mendenhall and Gottwald advocate. Though not without problems of its own, consult John Bimson, "Old Testament and Sociology," in *Interpreting the Old Testament: Principles and Steps* (ed. Craig C. Broyles; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 125-55, esp. 127-45, on this complex issue. See also Chapter 6 below.

[37] Robert Allen Warrior, "A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (ed. Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah; London: SPCK, 1991), 290, quoted in Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University Press, 1997), 62.

[38] Ultimately, after much work and reflection on the matter, in Chapter 6 I dismiss this idea as it does not account adequately for the call to liquidate the Canaanites. The Canaanites occupied the land Israel was promised. Their fate was sealed (see also appendix 2 below).

[39] Note, as mentioned above, Kaminsky is not entirely clear here, thus I have made inferences which I believe (and hope) do not misrepresent him.

[40] In private correspondence, Kaminsky notes that the distinctions need not be held hard and fast, but are aimed to be used heuristically, helpful in unpacking the biblical material.

specially chosen people, and everyone else, quite plain and simple, those not elected.[41] The thing to note, as Kaminsky does so aptly and persuasively, is that there is gradation and fluidity within these categories and that actions result in consequences, at times modifying one's position with God. The many examples that Kaminsky uses could, perhaps, point to a third category, the anti-elect, or could equally point to the fact that one can, through wickedness, come under the judgment of God (e.g. it is dubious to me that someone like Achan becomes an 'anti-elect' rather than just an elect person who is punished)[42] or, through fearing God, be joined or adopted into God's special and holy people, the elect, Israel (again, Rahab and Uriah, for example). This gradation and fluidity highlights the important idea that election is *not* about salvation and damnation as Kaminsky rightly points out, but rather exposes God's mysterious love *and* the act of election to a task, purpose, or test.

Having again mentioned the topic salvation and damnation, I should address, albeit briefly, Kaminsky's charge that Christian theology tends to equate non-election with damnation. While the problem is very real and problematic within much of the contemporary (though particularly Protestant) church, because Kaminsky is commenting on Rowley's work in his discussion,[43] I feel compelled to point out that Rowley's own views of election and damnation are not quite as Kaminsky conceives. Rowley is very careful to avoid such language regarding Israel's election altogether; note for example Rowley's words where he states: "the theological question of predestination to salvation or damnation ... is an entirely different question from the one that is before us."[44] Also, we might mention that Kaminsky does not seem to recognize a problem long wrestled with in Christian theology. While I do not dispute Kaminsky's contention that (Protestant) Christians tend to equate election and non-election with salvation and damnation respectively (a major objective of the present study is to join with him in the effort to dispel such thinking), I am not sure one can insert the connection to mission so easily. There is complexity within Christianity's views regarding the relationship between election (and issues of divine sovereignty)

---

[41] Note I refer here to the "overall" story. Exceptions certainly occur.

[42] In addition to the example of Achan (i.e. those among the chosen who are, in my opinion, punished, not 'anti-elected'), we could add characters such as Onan (Gen 38:8-10), or the specially chosen Saul (1 Sam 9-10; 15). On a less controversial plane, we note that Moses, one specially chosen by God to deliver the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land (Exod 3-4:17), fails to fulfill his election completely as he was punished because of inappropriate action (the nature of which is difficult to establish; see Num 20:1-13, 22-26; 27:12-14; cf. Deut 3:23-29; 32:48-52; Ps 106:32-33).

[43] See the introductory pages of "Concept," 135-44.

[44] Rowley, *Doctrine*, 16.

and Christianity's mission to evangelize.[45] Though Kaminsky's failure to note the complexity of the issue for some Christians is forgivable, one must be cautious not to reduce the wrestling of many over the years to "simple binary opposition" of the elect and the damned, and claim this appears to be related to mission without further explanation.

All of this, we must note, brings up difficult questions, ones we may never fully understand. What exactly is the relationship between God's disfavour and human action? While the biblical picture clearly argues that God *chooses* based upon reasons known only to him, perhaps upon no reasons at all, it is less clear with regard to his non-election and, in addition, his disfavour. I would suggest that the biblical picture very *infrequently* displays a God who has strong disfavour for or hates without given reason and more generally regards this to be the result of inappropriate action. Kaminsky makes this point with regard to the Canaanites (as exposed above) and this could be worked out more clearly regarding the Amalekites. Allow me to probe this a little more fully.

Kaminsky discusses the Amalekites but seems hesitant to discuss direct connections to incurring their, as he terms it, 'anti-election'. I think a relatively good case can be made that the Amalekites 'incur' their divine disfavour. I am not seeking to justify their genocide (I find the whole business extremely problematic), but I do believe we must be very clear on the picture the canon presents (and here we must, due to the confines of space, leave the many historical difficulties aside). I do not believe that the canon is very interested in the question of why the Amalekites are to be destroyed. Though our modern curiosities may ask such questions, deeming them of great importance, the canon assumes that the punishment of the Amalekites is deserved with little qualification. Of the few sparse remarks related to reasons for their destruction (Exod 17:8-16; Deut 25:17-19; 1 Sam 15:2; and less so, Judg 6:1-6), the most detailed might be the account in Deuteronomy 25, though even there the purpose is not to justify the Amalekites' destruction but rather is to discuss something quite different. Here the Amalekites are said to have killed off the weak who lagged behind in the exodus, the Amalekites having shown no "fear of God." The context of Deut 25:17-19 is significant, in that it shows that this seemingly out of place Amalekite discussion is actually the exact opposite, a carefully crafted piece aimed at making an important theological point. The details concerning them are not given in

---

[45] An example might include D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981).

order to explain the reason for the Amalekites' punishment, but rather are there to make a significant point regarding what God detests and the resulting punishment for such action. Directly preceding the short Amalekite discussion are commandments regarding an abominable act to God. The "differing weights in one bag" (Deut 25:13), though perhaps seemingly harmless to a modern reader, is symptomatic of a greater overarching evil which God detests, namely, עול (perversity, injustice, unrighteousness). The writer is reminding the readers, as a warning and deterrent, that such detestable acts are on par with the wicked deeds the Amalekites committed in killing off the weak. Such action among Israel, i.e. *showing no fear of God*, will result in the same punishment: becoming an enemy of God and sure destruction.

This again does not remove the difficulties as to whether any action is so horrific that it should result in genocide. It does, however, preserve the HB's picture of divine judgment. I am unaware of instances in the HB where God orders the destruction of a person or people group without some form of supplied reason (whether we approve the reason or not is another matter). Though innocent people are regularly included (a topic to which Kaminsky has contributed fine scholarship),[46] the reasons for the destruction are always inappropriate action of some form. We may question the judgment called for, but it is difficult to argue that God calls for the destruction of people without reason, whether or not we agree the punishment is deserved.[47]

Kaminsky's overall argument concerning election, however, even if not altogether convincing in the introduction of a third category, is of tremendous importance in that it not only pleads for but shows how a closer reading of and more adequate engagement with the *entire* HB better informs our theologies of election. The more difficult texts must be read in light of the sensitive 'stranger and outsider' texts and a holistic reading of these texts leads to a picture of divine love first and centrally upon Israel, but also is extended to those outside this people. God's blessing and love might come to, in, and through his chosen instrument, Israel, but it can and does extend to those outside. This 'universal' picture does not, however, lessen the original love God had and has for his special people Israel, but may in fact highlight it.[48] Kaminsky's work has exposed this and shows that divine election need not entail

---

[46] See note 3 above.

[47] To temper this I again point to our discussion in Chapter 6. Although the Canaanites *are* said to be wicked, and this *is* given as one reason for their liquidation, the overarching sense of the story is that they must be removed because they live in the land promised to Israel.

[48] I have purposely used 'scare quotes' on 'universal' here as we must note that a careful reading of Kaminsky shows that he believes God's love for the human race is not universal in a strict sense.

the love of one people at the cost of another. To be sure, as Kaminsky argues, this love is not identical, but why should it be? I can only agree with Kaminsky's concluding remarks that such love reveals the depth and 'humanness' of God's "profoundly *personal* character":

> If God's love is like human love in any way whatsoever, then it is unlikely that God has an identical love for all nations and all individuals. While this theological idea may seem arbitrary and unfair, it may also be taken as a sign of God's close and merciful relationship towards humanity as a whole, and of his profoundly *personal* character. Thus, even the notion of God's mysterious love for Israel, far from being simply a blunt assertion of unbridled ethnocentrism, is ultimately an outgrowth of Israel's conception of how God lovingly interacts with the larger world, including the non-elect.[49]

DAVID NOVAK

For Novak, God's relationship with Israel is special; Israel's identity is completely intertwined with, not to be separated from, God's election. In his recent work dedicated to the subject, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of a Chosen People,*[50] Novak seeks to address the fundamental question: "What does it mean to be a Jew in the world, to be chosen by God, and is that true?" (xi). As we shall see, however, other questions and issues also constitute central themes throughout the book. Among these are questions such as, Who elects, God or Israel? Is Israel's election based upon merit? Can apostasy from the elect group happen? Can non-Jews be part of the elect people? Is there a divine plan, or hope, for gentiles who remain outside Israel? and finally, does Israel's election entail some form of mission? Although not a biblical scholar per se, Novak makes clear that the Bible will be the foundation of his study (108-62). In light of this, while keeping in mind his primary designation as philosopher/theologian, his work fits suitably within our chapter.[51] I first survey Novak's work with regard to each of the above mentioned questions, I then summarize the findings and develop them to show his unified theology, and finally I evaluate, critiquing not only his overall model, but the methodology he employs in reaching his conclusions.

Nowhere, to my knowledge, does Kaminsky state that this divine love is directed also toward *all*, including those he calls 'anti-elect'. The final quote will highlight this.

[49] "Did Election," 425.

[50] (Cambridge: University Press, 1995). Subsequent unidentified page references in this section refer to this work.

[51] I make every effort to read Novak carefully and with due attention to his approach. We shall revisit this in our evaluation.

Who Chooses: God or Israel?

There is no question as to who, apart from God, is at the heart of Novak's election theology—it is Israel. What seems a more urgent question for Novak, particularly in light of the legacy left to us by the enlightenment, is how this special relationship came to be. Was it that God, through a miraculous deed in the world, specially selected the people Israel, or was it rather that Israel, through its own volition, chose to be God's people? In many ways, the question becomes the nub of the project as Novak seeks to trace the historical origins and development of the idea that it was not God, but Israel, who initiated the relationship. On the issue, Novak's major sparring partners are Jewish thinkers Baruch Spinoza and Hermann Cohen. Although we cannot discuss all that he addresses, in the end, Novak rejects the theologies of both Spinoza and Cohen on the question of who instigated Israel's relationship with God. Variations between these two exist, though essentially both believe that it is Israel who chooses God because God, by nature, is not free to choose as he is 'being', that is, without need to change or develop, set in a course determined by his nature.[52] For Novak, such an understanding is flawed at its foundation, too influenced by modern post-enlightenment theory and not enough by scripture, rabbinic teaching, and sound philosophical reasoning. Novak, in the pages that ensue, argues that both the Bible and the thrust of rabbinics teach that it is God who initiates election (as well as any conversion to Judaism) and Israel responds. Election is not conditional upon that response nor is the response a reason in God's choice. He states,

> In the biblical presentation of the doctrine of the election of Israel, the roles of God as the elector and of Israel as the elected are evident and consistent. It is God who initiates the relationship with Israel, and it is Israel who is to respond to that initiation. Even when Israel does not respond to God's election of her ... the election is not thereby annulled. It is simply reiterated by whatever means God so chooses at the time. Any attempt to see this relationship as some sort of contract, some sort of bilateral pact between two autonomous parties, is clearly at odds with biblical teaching. In the Bible, God alone is autonomous, and God alone can make initiatory choices with impunity. Israel's only choice seems to be to confirm what God has already done to her and for her. (163)

Novak's words could be seen to imply that Israel is without choice but to confirm their election. Yet Novak is clear elsewhere that this is not the entire story. Here we begin to see one of our first points in Novak's theology that exists in a dialectical tension:

---

[52] Clearly such a simplification has its weaknesses but for our purposes the summary should suffice. Details of the discussion are at pp. 29-30 (Spinoza) and 61-62 (Cohen).

> ... unlike either biological or adoptive parenting, the election of Israel involves not only the free act of God but also the free act of Israel. The fact of election designated by the word 'covenant' (*berit*) is not a bilateral pact jointly initiated by both God and Israel together. It is, rather, a historical reality created by God to be accepted by Israel. Nevertheless, this historical reality would have no human meaning without Israel's subsequent free acceptance of it and participation in it. For this reason, then, the fact of covenantal election is more often compared to a marriage than it is to parenting. God is more often seen to be like Israel's lover than her parent, more like her husband than her father. Yet even here there is an important difference. Marriage is both initiated and sustained by the natural necessity of eros in both partners. In the covenant, conversely, there is more freedom inasmuch as the divine partner is not bound by any necessity at all ... (12)

For Novak, then, election is initiated by God and responded to freely by Israel. While Novak's equation of election with covenant is questionable in biblical scholarship, we will overlook the issue to address Novak's larger point.[53] God instigates the relationship but it is meaningless without Israel's acceptance and participation. The modern idea that Israel chose God is an unfortunate bi-product of an age that could not accept ideas such as revelation, the idea that God reveals himself in the world. Novak's observations regarding revelation are important, and will prove to be a crucial building block in the present study. He states, in commenting on and agreeing with Rosenzweig,

> ... the heart of the modern inability to understand, let alone appreciate, the ancient doctrine of the election of Israel is due to the modern rejection of revelation. Since election is essentially the self-revelation of God, there is simply no context within which to talk about election intelligibly for those who have accepted post-Enlightenment modernity as permanent. So that context must be opened up before the theological constitution of the doctrine can reoccur in the world. The impediments to the experience of revelation must be removed if the context for revelation is to be made available to us again. (79)

But Did Israel Merit their Election by God?

A pressing question for Novak is whether God's choice of Israel is the result of merit of any kind, or righteousness in the people. Novak deals with the question at length in his (fourth) chapter on retrieving "the biblical doctrine." Here, interestingly, Novak believes that in the case of Noah, God elects Noah to save humankind and the animal world from the flood as a direct result of Noah's righteousness (115). This example,

---

[53] The issue here is important and I mention it simply to highlight that at times Novak's work proceeds seemingly unaware of some of the larger debates in biblical scholarship. The issue of covenant is one long debated, though usually the discussion revolves around dating the concept within Israel's history. For an important study in this vein, see Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: University Press, 1986), though consult the sharp review of Levenson, (*CBQ* 50 [1988]: 306-08) which rightly criticizes Nicholson's failure to come to terms with Israel as an *ethnic* entity.

however, is not paradigmatic for in his evaluation of the prime story, the calling of Abraham; Novak sees no indication that Abraham warranted the favour given him by God. "Any righteousness attributed to Abraham," states Novak, "is seen as subsequent, not prior, to God's election of him. It is thus a result of not a reason for election" (115). This example is significant as Novak uses it in application to Israel's corporate election, particularly in his reading of Deuteronomy 7:6-8. Novak argues that it is clear in the passage that Israel's election occurs without condition or stipulated reason. It is not because Israel was a great people that God chose them; God chose them on account of his love to their fathers. Such an idea, according to Novak, forms a tautology, consistent with the logic of scripture: "God loves you/chooses you/desires you because God loves you/chooses you/desires you" (116).

Such a tautology highlights the absolute character of God, mentioned not a few times by Novak. God acts freely, according to his own purposes, and such acts are not contingent upon human action. God chooses Israel without condition and such an understanding, as he interestingly notes, is not far from Barthian and Calvinist views on the character of God (116-117, note 23). What may also sound familiar to some Christian readers is Novak's insistence that any righteousness in Israel is not their own, but God's. Israel's *redemption*, furthermore, is the result of God's, not their, righteousness. He states,

> … redemption, like creation and revelation before it is the act of God's "righteousness to be manifest" (*ve-tsidqati le-higgalot*) (Isaiah 56:1). Israel is to "do rightly" (*va'asu tsedaqah*) in imitation of God's righteousness, but she herself has no righteousness in the face of God's. (160-61)

The above idea propels our exposition into our next question: If Israel's position before God is the result of God's, not Israel's, righteousness, can there be instances of apostasy?

What then of Apostasy?

Perhaps fueled by concerns within contemporary Judaism, perhaps interested in a question pressing every generation, Novak spends much time reflecting upon whether or not a Jew can apostatize. Woven throughout the fabric of the book, Novak's thinking on the subject varies, for although he believes a Jew *can* apostatize, they cannot remove themselves from the Jewish community. And, as we shall see, Novak

also wants to hold competing ideas on the subject, perhaps paradoxical ones, in dialectical tension.[54]

Novak believes that because Israel enters the covenant on account of God's righteousness, not its own, Israel cannot renounce its position within it. Though the people may sin, Israel will always remain God's special chosen. On the other hand, however, a person within the covenant can apostatize. And yet, states Novak,

> Jewish tradition has continually affirmed that even those Jews whose apostacy might remove them from communication with normative Jews in this world and the world-to-come, even they are still part of Israel, God's elect people, as long as they are alive. ... they cannot annul a covenant they themselves neither initiated nor are capable of terminating." (74)

Similarly, according to Novak, the convert to Judaism, if a true conversion, cannot renounce their new identity. Even if such a person returns to their former religion, they remain part of Israel, never again to be a gentile. He states,

> The [conversion] event is irreversible. Any transgression committed by the convert after a bona fide conversion, even a return back to his or her former religion, makes the convert a "Jewish apostate" (*mumar yisra'el*), but never again a gentile. (181)

The reason for highlighting such an idea is what it reveals about the nature of Novak's beliefs on election. The convert, by converting to Judaism, is not actually 'choosing' God; they are confirming an earlier election by God. Israel too is confirming its election in being faithful to the covenant; Israel does not choose God.[55] Although the two ideas are comparable, they are not the same:

> Ultimately, to compare Israel to converts is to make the covenant too contingent on human volition. In truth, the converts could not decide to come to Israel if Israel had not already been first chosen by God. Israel's election, to use a rabbinic term, is "the root" (*iqqar*); the converts' conversion is "grafted" (*tafel*) onto it. (188)

The main point is that it is God who is the primary agent in all acts of election, responsible for the special status of the elect. Everything points back to God; even when the community of faith exhibits righteousness, it is not their own—it is his. If Novak's thinking went no further, perhaps the initially stated 'dialectical tension'

---

[54] At times one cannot help but wonder if the description 'dialectical tension' serves to be little more than a euphemism for wanting 'the best of both worlds'. See evaluation below.

[55] Though Novak (164-65) regards Josh 24:22 (and 1 Kgs 18) to be an exception (contra Wildberger, whose close reading convincingly argues that the people still do not choose God, they choose *to serve* him [see *TLOT* section in Chapter 1 above]). This raises questions regarding Novak's use of the HB, something we address below.

would be out of place. Near the end of his book, however, as pointed out by others,[56] Novak wishes to present a theology of grace and merit in tension. The following words are difficult to understand in light of his earlier ones that a Jew remains, despite his or her apostasy, part of God's elect people:

> In classical Jewish teaching, there is a dialectic between a theology of grace and a theology of merit. On the one hand, God has chosen the people of Israel and that choice is clearly not due to any prior merit on Israel's part. It is *sola gratia* ... on the other hand, the covenant requires that the people of Israel merit it by keeping God's commandments in the Torah. Thus in spite of "even though Israel has sinned, she is still Israel," it has been recognized by normative Jewish tradition that there are cases when Jews can stray so far from the Torah that for all intents and purposes, they — and even more so their children and grandchildren — do indeed forfeit their election and its privileges. (246)

So, although those within Israel *cannot* lose their election or annul the covenant because it was not instigated by them nor is it because of their righteousness but God's, they *can* seem to forfeit their election through inappropriate action. But is this dialectical tension or inconsistent thinking?

And the Gentiles? Is there a Jewish 'Mission'?

Novak's attention to questions of the non-Jew and their relation to Judaism is extensive. In an earlier book, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism*,[57] Novak pays particular attention to questions of, for example: What is required of the non-Jew; Can gentiles participate in the world to come; and, How do Noahide Laws relate to Judaism? He raises similar themes in his treatment on Israel's election and in this work Novak raises yet another question, of particular interest to our study: Does the election of Israel involve some form of active mission to the non-Jew?

To begin, Novak believes that all people of the world (Jew and gentile) exist in relationship to God through Torah. Though Israel's relationship is mediated by means of what most think of when speaking of Torah (i.e. the written law of Moses), gentiles also have a 'partial Torah'. This partial Torah is known as Noahide Law. Novak's words clarify:

> The connection of the singular relationship between God and Israel and the general relationship between God and the world is indicated by the presence of the Torah in all of them. Although God has chosen Israel and not the world for this singular relationship and

---

[56] See, for example, Wyschogrod's review (*Modern Theology* 12 [1996]: 491-93), who regards the below quotation to be at odds with the thrust of Novak's book. As he states, "This [new idea] requires clarification!" (492).

[57] Subtitled: *An Historical and Constructive Study of the Noahide Laws* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983).

> Israel has responded accordingly, God has not deprived the world of Torah. In Scripture and rabbinic tradition, God gave the complete Torah to Israel and a partial Torah to the world. (14)

In obeying the partial Torah, the non-Jew is able to be in an appropriate relationship with God and live a life pleasing to him. Furthermore, in obeying the Noahide laws, the gentile is able to participate in the world to come.[58] Though interesting in itself, another question arises for the reader: What if non-Jews do not obey Noahide Law? Novak's answer (in his looking at various *aggadot*) is somewhat peculiar. Before the giving of the full Torah at Sinai, disobedience to Noahide law (indicating a rejection of God's authority) would result in punishment of "cosmic consequence."[59] After the giving of the full Torah, however, "the laws are simply prescriptions, having only social and political consequences in those societies which adhere to them."[60] So, although obedience can result in participation in the world to come (i.e. a reward of seeming "cosmic consequence"), disobedience by the non-Jew (at least post-Sinai) will result in only temporal social or political punitive measures.[61] Such a model, at least prima facie, seems to offer reward of cosmic proportions for obedience but only temporal punishment (at least in those societies that recognize the laws) for disobedience. Is there motivation to follow the laws in societies that do not know the laws or recognize them as morally binding?[62]

A more pressing question, to my mind, is how the non-Jew is to be cognizant of Noahide Law. Because the non-Jew is obligated to keep the Noahide commandments whether formally accepted or not,[63] one may see a pressing need to ensure that non-Jewish people everywhere are able to know and understand these divine laws, that is, God's will for their lives. Novak's implied answer seems to suggest that such law is a

---

[58] To my knowledge, Novak never states this explicitly though the thrust of his thought, and those sections that discuss similar rabbinical teaching (e.g. the positive views of Rabbi Menahem Ha-Meiri or Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah), seem to affirm the idea. See e.g. his *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 53-56; *Image*, 262-63; and *Election*, 233-34.

[59] *Image*, 260.

[60] *Image*, 260.

[61] I am not downplaying the severity of the punitive measures taken by some societies (capital punishment is no minor penalty [!]); rather, I am seeking to illustrate an area of possible inconsistency in such thinking, to be evaluated below.

[62] I am thinking here about, for example, ancient (and to some extent contemporary) Japanese society whereby absolute or universal laws are not the norm; of more importance are particular circumstances, or 'case laws'. John Owen Haley, *The Spirit of Japanese Law* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), ch. 1, discusses the phenomenon and outlines the replacement of Japan's older system with that of a modern, European one (though the differences are still great, as a quick perusal of his Chapter 4, for example, will show). See also Isaiah Ben-Dasan, *The Japanese and the Jews* (New York: Weatherhill, 1972), esp. 71-104.

[63] *Image*, 260, 276.

type of natural law. Noahide law is prior to the giving of the full Torah, and reflects that which humans know or desire to do naturally in order to be in right relationship with God. The full Torah is a more complete version of the former, but it too has a "general affinity with those humanly discoverable laws which have *already* responded to recognizable human needs."[64] The details of Novak's treatment would deter our discussion, and perhaps would make it evaluative prematurely. For now the issue is raised to lead to another question for consideration: Do the Jewish people have a mission to the non-Jew?

For Novak, indeed for most observant Jews, the non-Jew is *not* bound to keep the fuller, more specific, laws of the (complete) Torah, nor is obedience to them by the non-Jew necessarily encouraged.[65] As noted above, when the non-Jew obeys the partial Torah (or Noahide Law), he or she lives a life pleasing to God and will be rewarded in the world to come. This is not, however, the complete picture for the gentile as Novak also develops an eschatological scheme which sees gentiles as joining Israel in a Messianic age, "at the end of days" (160). Gentiles, at that time, will be drawn into Israel's fold on account of the "universally irresistible" light that will be upon Israel in the future. Key to the above is that the light is *upon* Israel; Israel is not the light themselves. The reason is that the light is God's, not anything within Israel. This becomes clear in his discussion on Isaiah regarding Israel and the gentiles:

> [In Isaiah 42:5-7] it is not that Israel herself *is to be* a light to the nations ... Instead, it is what God *will do for* Israel in the future that will so impress the gentiles that they will be drawn by God's work to the Temple in Jerusalem, which will then be "a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isaiah 56:7). A most plausible interpretation of this verse is that it predicts mass conversions to Judaism at the end of days. But it is not Israel's light but God's light on Israel that will be an integral part of her redemption. It is not that Israel's task is to bring *her* light to the nations but, rather, that God will bring them to *his* light that is to shine on Israel as a beacon. ... That light will be universally irresistible in the future. In the present, God's incomplete light on Israel is only capable of attracting random individuals. (159-60)

Inherent in Novak's thinking is that any future acts of redemption will not be the work of the Jewish people but of God. Any such redemption will be "the mysterious act of God" (102-03). Although Israel is to point the way (by behaving in a way that

---

[64] *Image*, 412.

[65] Dan Cohn-Sherbok sums up the idea this way: "... the rabbis always taught that non-Jews were acceptable to God provided that they kept a few basic moral laws. Jews, on the other hand, have the obligation to follow the whole *Torah* in all its complexity. Therefore, they argued, there was no advantage to becoming a Jew and there was no point in encouraging converts" (*Judaism* [Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999], 28). Some rabbinical teaching indeed prohibited the teaching of Torah to gentiles (see Novak, *Election*, 159, note 151; and his *Dialogue*, 32).

causes the nations to value the Torah and keep from profaning God's name[66]), Israel's role is to rely on the work of God, not their own, in bringing in his kingdom. Such an idea might help explain a more general tendency among Jews to be skeptical or negative towards an active proselytizing agenda. For Novak, such an agenda is "a supreme form of human pride" (161) and relies too heavily upon human power and not God. The concept of God as the primary agent in redemption, not the faith community itself, is significant and will be a factor in our understanding of Novak's election theology as a whole. Such an idea also shows its distinction when placed against a Christian understanding of how the Kingdom of God is to come about.[67]

Summary

The above exposition has followed a format of questions, questions not only central to Novak's work but those of interest to the present study. Although Novak does not structure his work around these questions, they recur throughout and in some ways create an interesting path to follow when looking at their answers. At the risk of oversimplifying a sophisticated study, Novak's answers more or less state that: a) Israel is specially chosen by God; its response to follow the LORD is subsequent. b) Israel's election by God is the result of God's love for the people, not any merit within the people itself (even Israel's righteousness is God's not its own). c) Because Israel has been chosen (i.e. it did not choose), Israel cannot lose its place as God's people. Although Israel may apostatize, the people remains elect (well, for the most part; we will evaluate this idea below). d) The gentile is also important to God but is separate from Israel. Gentiles can be in right relationship with God through keeping the Noahide laws and a future time will come when many will be brought into the fold of Israel. Though Israel's witness is first of all to themselves (161), a time is coming when the gentiles will become part of this community—though this will be the work of God, not Israel.

---

[66] On these points, see pp. 158ff. and *Image*, 90-92.

[67] Most Christians too look forward to a time when God's Kingdom will come, though it is often regarded as 'already/not yet' here. Usually, the people of God are believed to play an active role in its ushering in. Jewish and Christian views might not differ that much, however. See e.g. the Lord's Prayer at Luke 11:2-4 and Matt 6:9-13. Jesus' plea in Luke's basic prayer that 'the Father's Kingdom come' is explained in Matthew's version, "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (v. 10). We might infer, then, that the coming of the Kingdom involves God's will being done on earth as it already is in heaven.

Evaluation

Novak's approach is biblical, theological, and philosophical. For him the discussion must involve all three for a number of reasons. It must be biblical, for, following Rosenzweig, it is there that God's special revelation to his people is contained, where God's crossing of borders into human life is, and where the election of Israel by God is the *leitmotif* (108). It must be theological for at the heart of election is God. What a Jew is is determined by what he or she is related to. Jewish identity, and all surrounding questions including the foundation, election, cannot be separated from God.[68] The answer must also be philosophical, for, in Novak's mind, the destruction of the doctrine has come from this quarter; the answer, therefore, too must address and answer its concerns.[69]

Although all three of the above approaches inform his work, Novak seems most at home in philosophical discussion. Indeed, the opening chapters of the study are in answer to philosophical issues related to the doctrine of election, though his work is also, to be sure, theological (the heart of everything Novak does comes back to the all important conclusion that it is God who is absolute and the prime agent in Israel's election). I suppose one is most critical in examining the work of another in the area that interests her or him most. I could not help but be acutely aware that Novak is insistent that his work will be biblical; I fear, however, that his overall work will leave the biblical scholar somewhat disappointed. This is not to say that his conclusions are wrong, it is rather to say that his work is not as informed by the biblical material as he implies it will be. In itself, this is not necessarily problematic for one must be careful not to impose upon Novak a criterion of *sola scriptura*, one foreign to Jewish thinking. His work within the biblical text is in many areas wanting, though his conclusions are, for the most part, sound. I hope to show this more fully in the course of this short evaluation. We begin by critiquing some of the ideas fundamental to Novak's theology.

Novak's point regarding revelation is well taken. How one views revelation, in addition to the degree of one's openness to divine activity, will no doubt influence how s/he approaches the question of Israel's election. In making the observation, Novak aptly exposes post-enlightenment suspicion towards such ideas as the one that

---

[68] See discussion at pp. 4ff.

[69] See p. 8. Novak, in an offhanded footnote (96, note 47), reveals his understanding regarding the difference between a theologian and a philosopher: the former begins his or her thinking with God; the latter begins with the human condition.

God elects Israel and not vice-versa. My only concern in this area is Novak's failure to bring the discussion fully up to date. Though a difficult world to encapsulate and thereby assess, current so-called postmodern thinking fails to affect his work here with observable force. One would have hoped that a newfound openness to (what is called) the spiritual would have permitted Novak to comment on how this may affect current thinking on the election of Israel. I believe that election theology is still an area relatively unexplored in this regard yet perhaps change will come. To be sure, Novak's own work could be understood as having been influenced by the contemporary current itself even if in a much modified form.[70] I had only hoped for more integration or self-appraisal in relation to this (semi)dominant worldview.

Those familiar with the Christian Reformation tradition, like myself, will find much to be at home within Novak's work. However, familiarity does not equal good argument so we assess his thinking on these points in turn. The thrust of Novak's study argues that God is absolute. As he states at one point, "Election itself presupposes the absolute status of God, which is indeed the most ubiquitous factor in all of Scripture" (111). If indeed God chooses Israel, and I agree, and this is a basic fact of Israel's election, then the God envisaged is surely the absolute God Novak discusses. But is this the complete picture within the HB? I cannot help but answer yes and no. Yes, because it is clear that God acts freely and absolutely (or perhaps in less abstract terms, he chooses without given reason, and will answer to no other god or person other than himself), and yet no, because the biblical picture also attests to a God who is incredibly responsive and adaptive to the actions of humans. Though the examples are many, because the story of Abraham is paradigmatic for Novak it permits a suitable discussion point. Novak astutely observes that the calling (or election) of Abraham is not because of given reason, nor is any righteousness within Abraham noted as the reason for God's choice. The larger picture of Abraham reveals, however, another side to God that is indeed less 'absolute' and is genuinely interested in the actions of Abraham. The entire premise of the *Akedah* presupposes a genuine test in order to see whether Abraham fears God.[71] All of the promises made to Abraham at his calling, thus his very election, are put in jeopardy in this pivotal event. Because of Abraham's appropriate action his earlier election is affirmed (Gen

---

[70] I say 'much modified' for Novak's basic and foundational presupposition that begins with God, not self (implying a meta-narrative), would probably find a less than warm welcome in most postmodern thinking.

[71] See e.g. the important studies by Levenson, *Death*; and Moberly, *The Bible, Theology and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), esp. ch. 3.

22:15-18). The fact that the story reaffirms the promises should not be overlooked as they constitute a key point to the narrative. As Moberly observes,

> Abraham by his obedience has not qualified to be the recipient of blessing, because the promise of blessing had been given to him already. Rather, the existing promise is reaffirmed but its terms of reference are altered. A promise which previously was grounded solely in the will and purpose of YHWH is transformed so that it is now grounded *both* in the will of YHWH *and* in the obedience of Abraham. It is not that the divine promise has become contingent upon Abraham's obedience, but that Abraham's obedience has been incorporated into the divine promise. Henceforth Israel owes its existence not just to YHWH but also to Abraham.[72]

This, as Moberly makes clear, is not to say that Abraham's original blessing is not due to God's own will and purpose. It does, however, raise questions as to how 'absolute' the character of God really is, and whether Novak can state, without real qualification, that this absoluteness is "indeed the most ubiquitous factor in all of Scripture."[73]

Another comparable point of interest to those familiar with questions contemplated in traditional Reformation theology is Novak's discussion on whether a Jew can apostatize. His answer, as noted above, results in a tension between a Jew not being able to lose their election (because it is the product of God's choice and his righteousness) and the idea that one can, through inappropriate action, remove him or herself from the covenant community and "forfeit their election" (246). I think, when keeping in mind the entire picture that Novak presents, his choice of the word 'forfeit' is perhaps misleading and would be better substituted with a word such as 'abandon'. Throughout the book, Novak states that because the election of Israel is founded upon God and his choice, Israel cannot remove themselves from the community. Yet one can (and here again we note the discussion moves to individuals, not the collective people),[74] through extreme disobedience to the Torah, essentially remove oneself from the people and 'abandon' one's election. I would think that if pressed, Novak would affirm that the divine election still stands even though the recipient, or people, chooses not to participate in it.[75] Perhaps this would remove the so-called dialectical tension that Novak would like to maintain. To my mind, however, when not

---

[72] Moberly, "The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah," *VT* 38 (1988): 320-21.

[73] To be fair, Novak does address a similar problem (the relationship between human responsibility and free choice) in a manner comparable to that offered above (see 204ff.). My complaint, however, is the failure to allow this fuller *biblical* picture to penetrate deeper his picture of the 'absolute' God.

[74] Throughout Novak's study the issue of the people *collectively* and that of *individuals within Israel* oscillates. I have tried to maintain the important distinctions Novak does though at times the two cannot be so easily separated.

[75] Statements (affirming the rabbinical teaching) such as "no matter how evil their denial of the covenant has been ... they are never beyond God's call to them to return (*teshuvah*)" (74), suggest that Novak might think along such lines.

understood along the lines proposed, this may be one occasion in which such thinking is more inconsistent than dialectical.

Novak's understanding of gentiles and Noahide Law is in need of some clarification. I find it rather difficult to reconcile that obedience to Noahide Law will result in reward of cosmic proportion for the gentile yet disobedience will result only in punitive measures in societies that recognize them. If the laws are indeed to be upheld because they are God's will for the gentile, would not disobedience result in more than temporal punitive measures? I am not calling for a theology of damnation or hell or something equivalent; rather, I am suggesting that disobedience must somehow disappoint God and bring about a negative relationship with him. What exactly this means is difficult to ascertain; it seems to me that moral thinking requires that it may include punishment, perhaps even of cosmic proportions.

The above presupposes that Noahide Law is essentially true, that is, discoverable, definable, and binding upon all Noahides. I find the entire line of argument here unsteady, even when one bases the discussion upon something other than biblical material. The problem, however, is that Novak and others[76] contend that Noahide Law *is* based upon scripture.[77] One may search endlessly seeking to find Novak's detailed exegesis showing this to be true.[78] Better might be his argument that Noahide Law is a form of natural law, discoverable to all people through nature; exceptions to the rule, however, show such an argument to be less than straightforward.[79] Although Novak believes that the Jewish people are not responsible to enforce Noahide Law,[80] one might think that there would be some

---

[76] See for example the remarks of Wyschogrod who states that, "Jews are required by God to live in accordance with the commandments of the Torah while gentiles are required by God to obey the Noachide commandments *based on Gen. 9:1-17*" ("Letter to a Friend," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995): 167, emphasis added).

[77] I say 'based' because I do not imply that Novak and others claim that the laws are derived solely from scripture. Novak more or less affirms the structure of Maimonides that the laws are primarily scriptural but are also rational and traditional. See *Image*, 275-304.

[78] This is not to say that Novak does not discuss scripture. My complaint is that the discussions fail to show adequately how these laws are based upon (or operative within) scripture. His note in a later work (*Dialogue*, 161, note 8) listing (not discussing or explaining) scripture that attests to the laws as being operative before the giving of Torah lacks the engagement one would hope for. The nature of the complaint should not be confused with the all too common protestant Christian demand for others to measure up to some form of a system of *sola scriptura*. I understand, respect, and for the most part adhere to Novak's important structure regarding the relationship between scripture, tradition, and rabbinical teaching (see e.g. 171-75). I am simply expressing a frustration with work that *itself contends will be scriptural* yet seems to do more 'using of the text' than listening to it.

[79] In addition to the example of Japanese law mentioned above, one might add, in relation to the second Noahide commandment, the plethora of cultures (particularly those untouched by the three prominent monotheistic religions) that regularly use images or idols, or worship a variety of tribal or territorial gods, and see nothing inherently wrong with such a view.

[80] See *Image*, 53-56.

sense of obligation or perhaps urgency and desire to teach those outside Judaism, particularly those who do not acknowledge or abide by such laws, how to live lives pleasing to God (i.e. understand and obey Noahide Law). To my knowledge, no such action on the part of a Jewish body exists.[81] The sheer difficulty in discovering what these particular laws are attests, to my mind at least, to the very real nature of the issue.[82]

In hope of balancing what I fear may become viewed as a negative assessment of Novak, I would like to conclude by noting and commenting on the strengths of Novak's work.

In many ways, the above criticisms are peripheral. With the exception of the comments on the need for a slightly more nuanced understanding of the 'absolute' character of God in the HB, my remarks have been aimed at areas in Novak's work that are not central to his overall election theology. At the center of his theology is the relationship between God and his special people Israel. This relationship is initiated by God, rooted in his love for them, and Israel is to respond accordingly in their love through upholding the covenant. Here we see a crucial link in Novak's election theology to the Torah. Israel's right response to the love of God in choosing them as his treasure is to love him through faithful Torah obedience. The relationship is distinct in that Israel's Torah obedience is not the reason for God's love, but obedience maintains it. The covenant and election are intertwined thus Torah and election are intertwined. All is instigated in the mysterious love of God but Israel is part of the mystery through their appropriate action, their response, their obedience to Torah.

Though difficult to illustrate through particular examples (though my own exegetical testing, Chapters 3-6, has this aim), I cannot help but agree that Novak has captured the overall thrust of the biblical witness and, I am sure, the thrust of rabbinical teaching. Though I believe that Novak's theology is somewhat weak in its

---

[81] One exception might be the followers of Chabad Lubavitch, though it is uncertain how concentrated the effort to make these laws known is, or what the underlying motivation might be.

[82] For example, in the above quoted statement by Cohn-Sherbok (note 65) it is interesting that in a series written to help the masses understand world religions there is not even a footnote or one bibliographical reference as to where one might discover what these "few basic moral laws" are to obey in order to be "acceptable to God." Often, at least within scholarship, the reader is pointed to Novak's detailed study on the subject (*Image*). My only concern is that the work's complex nature, length, and required background knowledge due to its intended audience (i.e. interested Jews) will discourage many non-Jews from making the effort to read it. His chapter (1) in *Dialogue* is more helpful though still lacks a clear and concise summary and explanation as to the obligations of the non-Jew. In my own reading, I have found Moshe Greenberg, "Mankind, Israel and the Nations in Hebraic Heritage," in *No Man Is Alien: Essays on the Unity of Mankind* (ed. J. Robert Nelson; Leiden: Brill, 1971), 15-40, to be helpful.

construction of the relationship between Israel and the nations (there are certainly strands within the biblical text which advocate that Israel be *active* in calling the nations to worship the one God in Jerusalem—the sense of many Psalms, for example, suggests this[83]), Novak masterfully shows, through the analogy of marriage, just how and why this special relationship between God and Israel is as peculiar as it is, perhaps difficult to understand from the outside. He states:

> In a situation of relational distinctiveness, the distinctiveness of the participants in the relationship is only meaningful in the context of the relationship itself. The best example is marriage, which is a model that plays a regular role in both biblical and rabbinic teaching. In a marriage deeply lived by its participants, the husband and wife believe themselves both chosen and choosing in unique ways, ways having a significance beyond the mere experience of *a* man and *a* woman. To and for each other, he is *the* man and she *the* woman. Moreover, in this profound situation, the husband and wife make very special demands on each other, demands that would be totally unreasonable if extended outside their own communion. But in their relations with the outside world, he is just a man and she is just a woman.
>
> So it is with the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people. In this communion, when the participants are living in mutual presence, God is *the Lord* (YHWH) and the Jewish people is *Israel*, both of which are unique proper names. But in relation to the rest of the world, God is the highest power and authority (*elohim*), whose distinction from the other powers and authorities in the world is one of degree, not one of kind. As for Israel, in this relation she is just one people among many. In other words, the distinctiveness of both the Lord and Israel is not one that can be established by any external criterion. It is not something that could be demonstrated empirically to an uninvolved spectator. *Tertium non datur.* (222)

The relationship between God and his special people may never be fully understood by those outside. To the other nations, Israel is just another people. To these nations, however, God is still the highest power and authority. Novak believes that when properly lived out, the special relationship between God and his people should not result in arrogance or unhealthy pride in the chosen people. God did not choose Israel because of any inherent good quality thus any such thinking is ruled out—God's choice is bound up in his mysterious will, and love. All people exist in relationship to God, though that relationship will be different from that of Israel's. Israel is to live in faithful obedience to Torah, and the nations are to live according to their partial

---

[83] The Psalter is replete with examples in which Israel instructs the nations of the earth to praise the God of Israel, constituting a major theme. Clearly the psalmists and later community regarded such action to be part of what it means to be the people of God (thus their inclusion in the canon); see, among the many, e.g. Ps 66, 96, and 99. This is not to challenge Novak's claim that Israel's witness is 'first of all to themselves' (161), it is to question whether the more passive model he advocates is the complete picture of the HB. In concluding his chapter on 'retrieving the biblical doctrine' (161-62) without attention to such ideas (and psalms), Novak skews the biblical picture.

Torah. I have expressed my reservations with particulars of the latter, but Novak's overall picture is one we need to understand, listen to, and allow to penetrate any Christian theology on the subject.

On that note, and by way of conclusion, I would like to point out that Novak believes that his theology is not radical or substantially different from a Christian view of election. When understood along traditional lines, the respective Jewish and Christian views are not opposing but agreeing; the difference lies in whom each of these faith communities believe the elect people now to be and the extent of the covenant. His words are timely and will conclude our discussion:

> The difference between Judaism and Christianity, then, is *what* constitutes the full covenant, not *that* the covenant is foundational. And the covenant, for both Judaism and Christianity, is initiated by God's election of Israel. Jews and Christians differ — and the difference is crucial — as to the extent of that initiating election. Christians affirm that this election begins with Israel and extends to the incarnation, God's coming to dwell within the body of the Jew Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. Jews refuse to accept this. Hence, for Christians, Judaism is deficient; for Jews, Christianity is excessive. (41)

MICHAEL WYSCHOGROD

A trend in the writing of many contemporary Jewish thinkers on Israel's election is a word of indebtedness to Michael Wyschogrod. As will become evident, his thinking on the subject is distinct, if for nothing other than its boldness. What he says might be considered the quintessence of what others wished to say but perhaps lacked the audacity to do so. But his work is to be recognized for more than mere boldness; it contains an election theology of great import. At the center of Wyschogrod's thinking is the idea that Israel's election is a corporeal one, inextricably linked to the seed of Abraham, not to be confused with a system in which one adheres to a set of beliefs or religious principles. But before we examine his thought, we look to expose his method.

Reversing the Depersonalization of Hashem

> *Man must not heap greater honor on Hashem than he commands, and if the Bible, as the word of Hashem, is willing to speak of him in terms akin to the human, then it is not for man to teach Hashem a lesson in the dignity that properly pertains to the divine.*[84]

---

[84] Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1996), 125. Subsequent unidentified page references in the present section refer to this work.

At a very basic level, the above words reveal the primacy the HB has in Wyschogrod's thought. This is confirmed as Wyschogrod makes his intended approach known early in his work; a significant portion of the preface and opening chapter of his book, *The Body of Faith*, explains that the Bible will be foundational in what follows. It is not that he will ignore rabbinical writings or that he deems them of little importance; rather, Wyschogrod wishes first to return to the written Torah. As he states, "To appreciate the subtleties of rabbinic commentary, we must first read the written Torah. Only then can we appreciate the contribution of the oral Torah" (xxiv). Or, as he states later, "It is the written Torah that is the primary document of revelation" (xxxii). In some ways, the defence Wyschogrod offers for using the Bible first and rabbinic commentary second reveals a subtle challenge to a system he regards to be in need of reform.

Nevertheless, Wyschogrod wants to do more. Hoping to undo what he deems to be a legacy left by Maimonides, Wyschogrod believes the God of the Bible is much more personal, in fact best understood in primarily human terms, than Jewish thinking has allowed. A recurring element within the study is a desire to "reverse the depersonalization of Hashem" (125). The God of Israel revealed himself by name, expressed love in ways familiar to that of a parent, and is regularly spoken of in personal terms in the Bible. As the epigraph to this section makes clear, it is not for the reader to correct the Bible's understanding of the very personal nature of the God of Israel, Hashem.

Wyschogrod also makes very clear that his proposal aims to contribute *not* a history of election or an exercise in regurgitation, but a fresh and evaluative theology which does more than survey ideas. His approach, as he informs the reader, takes risks but he believes that it is the only way to move the discussion forward. Wyschogrod makes use of an analogy to financial investing to make his point:

> True loyalty to the past requires the willingness to risk new ways of looking at things, of formulating ideas and asking questions, because that is what our ancestors did. They did not simply repeat what they had received but they invested it, letting it grow so that their spiritual wealth increased. One can lose one's money by investing recklessly but one can also suffer financially by investing too conservatively. If inflation can corrode one's wealth, so can time corrode a spiritual legacy that is guarded too closely, hidden in a mattress rather than invested in a thriving enterprise. *The Body of Faith* is an attempt to invest Jewish capital conservatively but not so conservatively that the principal will erode even as we collect some modest interest. (xvi)

We move then to expose Wyschogrod's investment and then, eventually, to evaluate its dividends.

Israel, the Seed of Abraham, Hashem's Favorites

The foundation of Judaism is the family identity of the Jewish people as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Whatever else is added to this must be seen as growing out of and related to the basic identity of the Jewish people as the seed of Abraham elected by God through descent from Abraham. This is the crux of the mystery of Israel's election. (57)

Wyschogrod's work repeatedly emphasizes that God's election of Israel is corporeal and that being Israel (or being Jewish) cannot be a mere assent to a set of propositions. To be part of the elect body is to be of Abraham's seed; being part of the people is not a choice one can make, whether to be included or excluded. The picture that Wyschogrod paints is difficult to describe fully in a short synopsis. A few basic ideas, however, will aid our understanding.

God chose Abraham because God loved him; Abraham was God's "favorite" (57). For Wyschogrod, God's calling of Abraham and his bestowal of blessing upon him are foundational in the history of events in Israel's life; the reason for God's love is not to be determined apart from the fact that God simply loved Abraham. According to Wyschogrod, the Bible explains this act through the language of a deeply 'human' love (an idea we shall return to below) and Wyschogrod believes that the outworking of this love discloses the way in which God chose to reveal himself to the world. He states,

> … God chose Abraham as his favorite and promised to make his descendants into a great nation. The God of Abraham chose this people as his vehicle in history, so that his identity is irrevocably attached to this people because he made himself known to man as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, thereby conferring on this people a defining function in regard to this God. There is thus created a relationship of great intimacy between a people constituted by its divine election and a God who chooses to appear in history as the God of this people. (57)

One of the ways Wyschogrod works to explain this election is to spend time examining questions related to Israel's responsiveness to God's love and the role of that response in the relationship. As is regular throughout Wyschogrod's work, a comparison to Christianity serves to clarify the distinctiveness (and similarities) of his ideas. For Wyschogrod, although Israel's response to God's love is important, it is not determinative in the relationship. This, according to Wyschogrod, stands in stark contrast to Christianity in which one's inclusion in the Christian body is determined by what one believes about Jesus as Christ and one's faith in him. Nothing of the sort happens in Judaism. The Jewish people were not chosen on the basis of any spiritual criterion nor are their beliefs determinative in the continuance of God's love. A Jew

is a Jew by birth and a Jew is loved by God "because he sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of his children as a man sees the face of his beloved in the children of his union with his beloved" (64). Although Hashem desires that his people live in an appropriate way (i.e. keeping Torah), and disobedience hurts the very core of who God is, obedience is not the ground of his love and no action on the part of Israel can remove his love. Wyschogrod clarifies,

> Had God chosen a people on the basis of purely spiritual criteria, such a people could have abandoned its election by rejecting the teachings that were the basis of its spiritual election. But God chose a carnal people, whose physical being in the world is a sign of the existence of God. This people is in the service of God no matter what ideas it embraces or rejects. It cannot escape the service of God because its face is known in the family of man as that of the people of God. (177)

A Jew is a Jew regardless of what she or he believes and one's place within Israel cannot be earned or renounced. And he states further,

> A descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a Jew irrespective of what he believes or how virtuous he is. Being a Jew is therefore not something earned. This reflects the fact that the initial election of Abraham himself was not earned. ... Israel's election is therefore a carnal election that is transmitted through the body. And to many, this is a scandal. Is it the body that makes someone dear to God or the spirit? Shouldn't we evaluate a person on the basis of his character and ideas rather than his physical descent? These are difficult questions to answer but we cannot evade coping with them. (174)

Although Wyschogrod appeals to the story of Abraham and notes that his election was not earned, actual engagement with the story to show this is missing. While the idea may be right, we highlight the issue as the practice will become a trend—a trend that may prove detrimental to Wyschogrod's work as a whole.

Can One Become *a Seed of Abraham?*

> *Israel ... lives with a partially open door. A moderate number of gentiles can be absorbed. But they ought not become a majority. The majority of Jews must remain the descendants of the patriarchs and the matriarchs. To these can be added a limited number of gentiles drawn into the covenant and miraculously turned into descendants of the patriarchs and the matriarchs. But miracles must not be multiplied. Converts are therefore accepted but not encouraged.* (xxi)

In the preface to the second edition of the book, Wyschogrod, in answer to questions raised by his reviewers, seeks to clarify questions of gentile conversion. Perhaps that misrepresents the earlier edition; it might be better to state that in subsequent publication Wyschogrod opens for the first time (at least directly) the question of conversion. Because of his strong emphasis on the corporeality of Israel's election,

one, in completing the book, will be uncertain as to whether the outsider of Israel—the gentile—can gain entrance into the body of Israel. If, as we have exposed, belonging to God's elect people is by birth and not by assent to a creed or set of beliefs, how might one be included in that group if born outside? Can one *become* a seed of Abraham who previously was not?

As the epigraph to this section makes clear, Wyschogrod believes that conversions to Judaism are possible, though they should be "limited" and "they should be rare" (xix). To begin, however, Wyschogrod starts with the presupposition that "*conversion to Judaism should not be possible.*"[85] Key to the discussion is Wyschogrod's introduction of the idea that conversion is a miracle. To convert to Judaism is not merely an action of subscribing to a set of beliefs or even following specific Jewish practice (though it should include both). Conversion is a miracle in which a person miraculously becomes a seed of the patriarchs and matriarchs, and this happens "quasi-physically" (xviii). Wyschogrod clarifies his thinking by pointing to the Talmud where it is taught that a convert is born anew, or reborn as a Jew. This is not just a spiritual rebirth but is somehow, again miraculously, an act which involves the physical. To show how strongly this idea is ingrained in the Jewish mind, Wyschogrod discusses the talmudic teaching whereby those who were brother and sister prior to conversion are permitted to marry thereafter. Because such persons have been 'reborn' in their conversion to Judaism, they no longer are regarded as brother and sister, thus the biblical prohibition of incest no longer applies. Though still rabbinically forbidden,[86] the idea allows Wyschogrod a powerful example to show the extremity of what he believes conversion to Judaism involves.

Similar to Novak above, Wyschogrod believes that conversion to Judaism cannot be renounced. Once someone becomes a Jew, they are always a Jew and they are obligated to the covenant and Torah keeping for the rest of their lives regardless of what they might subsequently believe or do. But there still nags the question of those who remain outside Israel. Particularly since conversion is not encouraged and should be rare, what then of those unchosen who are not reborn in the miracle of conversion? Wyschogrod's answer ties into an issue mentioned earlier, something central to his thinking—the mystery of God's love. We shall treat the question in conjunction with that topic.

---

[85] xviii, emphasis in original.

[86] The rabbinical prohibition against such marriages stands in order to ward off charges that converts exchanged a stricter religion for a more permissive one. See xviii-xix.

A God of Favouritism?

> *What, now, of those not elected? Those not elected cannot be expected not to be hurt by not being of the seed of Abraham, whom God loves above all others.* (64)

To understand the election of Israel as maintained by Wyschogrod, one must consider a different picture of God than perhaps typically envisaged. Hashem, the God of Israel, has revealed himself personally, by name, and in a loving relationship to a people, not as a lofty divine figure who dispenses his favour equally to all. Wyschogrod believes that although it could have been another way, Hashem decided the route he did for reasons known only to him; nevertheless, Wyschogrod also believes that the mode God chose *does* display a better alternative to one that equally distributes love to all. Wyschogrod's belief that this way of loving is superior to its alternatives deserves our careful scrutiny (and will feature in our evaluation below). His words regarding the unchosen are worthy of citing at length:

> The consolation of the gentiles is the knowledge that God also stands in relationship with them in the recognition and affirmation of their uniqueness. The choice, after all, is between a lofty divine love equally distributed to all without recognition of uniqueness and real encounter, which necessarily involves favorites but in which each is unique and addressed as such. If Abraham was especially loved by God, it is because God is a father who does not stand in a legal relationship to his children, which by its nature requires impartiality and objectivity. As a father, God loves his children and knows each one as who he is with his strengths and weaknesses, his virtues and vices. Because a father is not an impartial judge but a loving parent and because a human father is a human being with his own personality, it is inevitable that he will find himself more compatible with some of his children than others and, to speak very plainly, that he love some more than others. There is usually great reluctance on the part of parents to admit this, but it is a truth that must not be avoided. And it is also true that a father loves all his children, so that they all know of and feel the love they receive, recognizing that to substitute an impartial judge for a loving father would eliminate the preference for the specially favored but would also deprive all of them of a father. The mystery of Israel's election thus turns out to be the guarantee of the fatherhood of God toward all peoples, elect and nonelect, Jew and gentile. (64-65)

For Wyschogrod, then, God's special love for Israel reveals a very human trait of loving one specifically, in this case one's child, more than the others due to the uniqueness of that child. This reveals the very personal nature of Hashem's love and the alternative, according to Wyschogrod, would entail the substitution of a loving God with an impartial judge, depriving all the children of a loving father. For the time being, we may wish to ask ourselves whether Wyschogrod has offered a complete or adequate alternative to the system of Hashem's love as he construes it. Must God necessarily have favorites lest all be deprived of his love? Our evaluation

will examine this question and assess Wyschogrod's model. But, before we do so, we must first expose one final characteristic of Wyschogrod's proposal.

A Corporate People, Not Individuals

> *Each one of us as a Jew is a replica of the consciousness of the whole people. If we are believers, somewhere in us also lurks the nonbelief of our nonbelieving brethren, and if we are nonbelievers, the belief of the believers is also in us. It is to this complex and fragmented consciousness that the Jewish thought of our time must speak.* (175)

Jewishness is difficult to define. Because Wyschogrod is concerned not just with Israel of old but with his contemporary setting, his thinking on the subject seeks to account adequately for the peculiarities of the Jewish body today without avoiding difficult questions. In what way do unbelieving Jews today relate to the body Israel? Is there a faithful group or 'remnant' within the body of the elect? How do the various facets of Judaism relate to each other if they do? The details of, and answers to, these questions would deter our exposition, but a fundamental idea, important for enhancing the present study—an assuredly Christian one—needs to be exposed.[87] The election of Israel is a corporate election, not one of an individual. To the Jewish mind, such an idea more or less goes without saying. Israel is a people, and, although constituted by an array of different individuals, it is one. Israel is a nation, and to be a Jew is to be part of a nation, a family, and, by definition, to be in relationship in some way to the God who elected, Hashem.

Redemption for Wyschogrod does not happen outside of this national people or on the level of the individual. But to suggest that there is no redemption outside Israel is clearly not his intention:

> [The election of Israel] is a national election precisely because the nation is most remote from God and is therefore commanded to be the most proximate. To believe that the individual can be lifted out of his nation and brought into relation with God is as illusory as to believe that man's soul can be saved and his body discarded. Just as man is body and soul, so man is an individual and member of a nation. To save him as an individual and to leave the national social order unredeemed is to truncate man and then to believe that this remnant of a human being is the object of salvation. The national election of Israel is therefore again a sign of God's understanding of the human predicament and the confirmation of and love for that humanity. By sanctifying the nationhood of Israel, God confirms the national order of all peoples and expresses his love for the individual in his national setting and for the

---

[87] I say "assuredly Christian one" to remind the reader of my own perspective. A prevalent Jewish criticism of Christian thinking on election is a Christian's tendency to think in terms of the individual rather than a corporate people. Our study therefore must be adequately informed by corporate thinking such as Wyschogrod's, and either be corrected, offer an alternative interpretation, or defend its continued emphasis. See our concluding chapter for more.

> nations in their corporate personalities. In the case of Israel, the relationship that started with Abraham, the individual, soon becomes a relationship with a nation that becomes the elect nation. The promise of salvation is thus not held out to man as an individual but as a member of his nation. It is held out to the complete man and therefore to all nations, without which we have a part rather than all of man. (68)

The promise of salvation is for all people yet this cannot happen outside of the setting of one's national identity. The promise must also include the redemption of the "national social order". As becomes regular in the course of the book, Wyschogrod takes the opportunity to point out that such a system of thought stands in starkest contrast to Christianity, particularly early Christianity, which he believes is relatively unconcerned with the political and historical order, "because its citizenship was in the heavenly city and that was not of this world" (68).[88] For Wyschogrod, then, redemption is both spiritual and physical and such ideas tie themselves into his earlier and recurring ones that Israel is a corporate body made up of many different people, entrance into which is not by spiritual criteria but on account of being the seed of Abraham. And, as seen in the epigraph, the unbelieving Jew is as much a part of this body as is the believing. All are elect because all bear the image of Abraham. More could be said, and more could be asked concerning the accuracy of Wyschogrod's description of both Judaism and Christianity, as well as his use of the disparate categories 'spiritual' and 'physical'. I address these concerns in our evaluation, to which we now turn.

And Can it Be? An Evaluation

Because Wyschogrod's theology does what it says it will, his "aim is not to survey the literature but to think" (xvi), one might be tempted to press the work too hard and nitpick endlessly over specific details. Indeed, the Christian reader might feel compelled to 'answer' many of his comparisons, if for no other reason than to correct what might be a plethora of seemingly important misrepresentations. The work makes significant strides in accomplishing its goal and it *is* provocative. As is often the case when writing to counter an argument, or reemphasize something missing or felt to be lost, a rather strong writing emerges in order to ensure that a particular point

---

[88] Notably, as indicated, Wyschogrod is comparing 'early Christianity', yet one cannot escape the feeling that he believes the critique still holds in a general sense today. See note 96 below in which I examine an example where Wyschogrod compares Christianity's assumed emphasis on the 'spiritual' to that of the Jewish on the 'physical'.

has been made.[89] In some ways, I cannot help but feel this is the case with Wyschogrod's work. Only after reading the book does one sense the weight of why Wyschogrod chose the following quotation as the epigraph to his book:

> Even though they [the Jews] are unclean,
> the Divine Presence is among them.[90]

In many ways we can see that the book, particularly when considering the above words as an interpretive key, serves as an apology as to why Israel is God's chosen people, even if or when they are 'unclean'. This theme is taken up too often to number but, again, when respecting that ideas might need be overemphasized to make their point in light of their contextual circumstances, is not altogether overbearing. That said, making a point strongly and persistently does not preclude the question of whether what one argues is sound. Does Wyschogrod do justice to the picture as presented in the HB, as he sets out to do?

Calling Abraham

Wyschogrod, similar to the other interpreters we have surveyed, regards the calling of Abraham to be foundational in the election of Israel. And while Wyschogrod never carefully exegetes the story, the frequent mention of it, and of Abraham's significance (e.g. the fact that Israel is his seed), shows its significance in the underpinnings of Wyschogrod's thought. The strong emphasis on this story in these writers should surely give the reader pause and reason to investigate. Why rest so much upon this story and character? The answer, most likely, is because the Bible itself does and that the God of Israel regularly refers to himself in reference to this patriarch; Hashem is the God of *Abraham*, Isaac, and Jacob. To begin, however, we must notice that God chooses one person.[91] Although God could have called the clan of Abraham and told *them* to leave their land for another, God did otherwise. He eventually makes him into a great nation but the fact remains that God was ultimately concerned, in the first instance, with Abraham. God appeared to *him* and told *him* to walk upright before God (Gen 12, 17). God could have easily appeared to his entire tribe and instructed

---

[89] One might be reminded, for example, of the strong, and perhaps extreme, point of view (and rhetoric) E. P. Sanders had to take in order to turn the tables, as it were, in NT scholarship regarding its understanding of Judaism. See his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977).

[90] *Sifra* on Leviticus 16:16.

[91] Wyschogrod does mention this but then moves quickly to point to the people who descend from him (see e.g. 68).

them to walk upright before him. For reasons known only to God, he chose otherwise.

The point here is simply to note that although 'national' election does become prominent within the biblical witness, we must not make the Torah say something it does not. God was concerned with a single person in the primary biblical story of election. To be sure, Abraham will become a people, and the narrative is told from that perspective, so perhaps the distinction is artificial. But one cannot help but notice the special attention paid to specific persons in Genesis and their stories relate their often intense struggle to survive and bear offspring. It is not until the narrative continues with the Israelites in Egypt that the emphasis changes. *But even here a strong emphasis remains on one person*, Moses.[92] All this does not change the fact that Israel becomes *the* central focus of the Bible, or that these earlier stories serve to trace the line of God's love to that nation. Neither does this change the fact that, as Wyschogrod argues, such elective acts attest to a very personal love, a love that exhibits itself in what might be regarded as a humanlike characteristic of favouritism (though note my criticisms below). My complaint here is that Wyschogrod fails to engage the biblical text itself in the manner it deserves and in the way he states he will (to which we return in a moment).

A God of Partial love?

What then of the partial God, that is, the God prone to favouritism that Wyschogrod contends the Bible portrays? Here again it is difficult to give blanket statements purporting to do justice to the HB. However, it is surely the case that the love God bestows upon Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and, in turn, the people Israel betrays a God who loves in a way uncongenial to modern conceptions of 'fairness'. I believe, however, that such an idea accomplishes exactly what it would seem it is supposed to—reveal that God is God and God will do as pleases him; he is answerable to no one. As seen throughout the Bible, and particularly developed in Deuteronomy, God loves Israel above all other peoples of the earth; they are his treasured possession. God gives no reason for this intimate love other than that he loved the fathers, as Novak states, a tautology consistent with the logic of scripture. Wyschogrod displays an admirable concern for those unchosen and believes that they cannot be expected

---

[92] The early narratives of the exodus clearly feature Moses as a main character; his birth story (see Chapter 4 below) and his call at the burning bush further support this idea. I also develop this idea as it relates to the golden calf incident in a moment.

not to be hurt. I would add (in the light of Levenson's work, see below) that such a position is actually the grounds for a special calling, or testing, to show loyalty to God despite the circumstances, consistent with the logic of life: to do the right in the face of a seemingly 'unfair' situation.

At this point, however, a flaw within the details of Wyschogrod's thesis needs to be exposed. Wyschogrod maintains that the route God chose—loving Israel over others though loving all even if unequally—is superior to what he believes is the alternative, an impartial judgelike God who cannot love in a personal way at all. But why should we accept this as the only alternative? Is it not possible that God could love impartially and still love the unique (as he terms it) character of each nation or person?[93] Does not Wyschogrod's view place a limitation upon God? Although I do not disagree with the main idea that such a system displays the profoundly personal love of Hashem and does not mean that others, those unchosen, are not loved at all, I cannot see how this entails that the alternative has to be a system depriving everyone of real love because it cannot be personal. Could not God love both impartially and personally?[94] Could the problem presented by Wyschogrod not be limited to a human problem? Might it not be better to believe that although Hashem could have equally and effectively loved in another way (e.g. impartially *and* personally), he chose not to for reasons known to him. One possible reason, as hinted at above, is that such a manner of love provides the opportunity for a series of tests of loyalty and obedience. The Israelites are tested (among other things) to accept this love in obedience and not exhibit pride while they, in turn, receive a stricter judgment (e.g. Amos 3:1-2). The gentiles, the unchosen, are tested through this manner of love to see if they will display fear of God and loyalty to God despite facing unfair circumstances. If any biblical story highlights the latter idea, it is that of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-16). God is concerned, yes, with his chosen, but so too does he show utmost concern for the unchosen, Cain. This is not to challenge that God's chosen are loved in a special way, but what are we to make of God's special love for, at least at times, the unchosen? We may also wish to ask ourselves why, and in what sense, does the Bible speak of God as an impartial God and to what extent does God regard Israel as a corporate

---

[93] Formally, we might say that Wyschogrod here creates a false dilemma: we are to choose between 1) a personal God who favours one but can still love all, even if unequally, or 2) a judgelike God who cannot love any in a personal way. But could there not be a third option?

[94] This, of course, is a concept the human mind has difficulty understanding as it must exist in some form of dialectical tension; to be impartial *and* personal would seem incompatible to human understanding. We must at least allow the possibility that such an idea is possible with God, even if it does not appear to be the case.

body, not individuals. Ezekiel 18, for example, is certainly an admonition to avoid the extremes of corporate thinking, though not invalidating it in principle.[95]

Before looking at a final and significant point in Wyschogrod's model—the principles of entrance and staying within the elect group—I must express one key point of agreement between my understanding of the way in which God works to that of Wyschogrod's model, namely, the corporeality of God's election. The HB surely does seem to assume that it is through the seed of Abraham that one is part of the body of Israel. The election of Hashem was not to a spiritual consciousness, or, as Wyschogrod repeatedly argues, an election to a life of enduring the physical in hope of escaping to a spiritual heavenly bliss (which he believes can be charged against strands of Christianity). The Israelites were called to live a holy life, set apart from others, to obey God's special laws. I would agree but add that this is also a proper understanding of Christianity as well. Even if not always recognized by its members, Christianity is not an escape from this world nor should it be an effort to shed the "extraneous outer garment" (177) for some form of spiritual bliss (an idea soundly rejected by the early church in its battles with Gnosticism). The details would deter our discussion, but I raise the point to heighten one's awareness that this emphasis on corporeality is also of prime significance in Christianity and certainly the life Jesus lived according to the NT. I cannot accept certain of Wyschogrod's caricatures of Christianity without reservation.[96]

---

[95] Consult e.g. John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC Commentaries; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1969), 147-48, who argues that the words of Ezekiel do not so much contradict the traditional view of corporate responsibility but are a counterpoise to it.

[96] At one point, for example, Wyschogrod contends that,

> While Jesus was crucified precisely because he was perceived by the Romans as a figure threatening their rule, in the Gospels this political dimension of the Messiah is not emphasized. The kingdom of Jesus is not of this world because it is a spiritual and not historic kingdom. ...the attentive reader of the Gospels must conclude that Jesus considers the blemishes of historic existence of small consequence. He counsels women to obey men and slaves, their masters. The social station to which we are assigned in this world is of little importance compared with the spiritual tasks assigned to us in this life. We are thus dealing with a profound spiritualization of Judaism ... (178-79)

Unfortunately, Wyschogrod's own 'attentive reading' falls short here, highlighted by his misattributing to Jesus words of counsel for "women to obey men and slaves, their masters." More significantly, however, we might ask, was Jesus really unconcerned with historic realities according to the gospels? Jesus' turning of the (real, 'physical') tables at the temple (Matt 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:12-22), and his repeated words exhorting his followers "if you love me you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15, 15:10, etc) involved more than purely 'spiritual tasks' and his ultimatum to his followers to take up the cross daily (Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34, 10:21; Luke 9:23) certainly went beyond 'mere spiritualities' (which most of his disciples did, paying with their real, physical lives). Further, why the gospel's emphasis on Jesus healing the physically sick, raising the dead, and preaching good news to the poor? Were these acts not central to Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom?

One might more safely lay such a charge on various later Christian developments, but even here we should do so cautiously as the church has often showed deep concern for the whole of life, not only

Defining Israel

Finally, we must examine, from the point of the HB, whether Wyschogrod's model is representative of the ways in which the elect body is formed, how entrance into and potential exit from the body might work, and if the action of the Israelites could ever bring about their rejection by Hashem. Again, though I appreciate much of the model he proposes, I cannot help but feel that it presses the biblical picture in places to fit a mold rather than letting scripture speak for itself. Does the sense of the HB suggest that conversion to the people of Israel should be rare, or limited? Does the HB envisage a God that would frown upon or be upset with allowing large amounts of genuine converts enter Israel's body? Even if the HB is largely occasional literature, and thus deals primarily with specific matters facing the community (e.g. slaves and sojourners at Passover),[97] it seems clear that some areas of this literature do envisage the nations joining in Israel's praise of their God. (As I mention in my critique of Novak, many Psalms seem to call for precisely this.) This does not necessarily entail the 'conversion' of the nations but it must mean that Israel is in someway active in calling the nations to join in their song.

On another front, I am not sure that one can speak with complete confidence about a biblical understanding of whether or not an Israelite remains part of Israel regardless of beliefs or actions. While I do believe that Wyschogrod is more or less correct in surmising that an Israelite was an Israelite by birth, and Israel is a community of those who descend from Abraham, the Bible also relates some difficult occasions in which chosen people or persons are judged and rejected by God. For the moment I would point the reader to one notable example in which God wishes to annihilate his people and start over with another. Although Wyschogrod will no

---

so-called "spiritual tasks" (for example, the institution of hospitals, educational centers, modern day water well drilling in developing nations, etc.). Such a categorical separation of 'physical' and 'spiritual' by Wyschogrod is unhelpful. An accessible discussion countering perceptions like Wyschogrod's is Paul Marshall (with Lela Gilbert), *Heaven is Not My Home: Living in the Now of God's Creation* (Nashville: Word, 1998).

[97] The term 'conversion' would be anachronistic here as it implies some form of religious transformation, likely to misrepresent ancient norms. The biblical model is likely to be closer to an adoption into a family, clan, or tribe, than religious conversion. Any reference to activity remotely related to non-Israelites joining the community speaks of regulations for slaves or sojourners in partaking of the Passover (e.g. Exod 12:43-45, 48-49; Num 9:14) and offering sacrifices (e.g. Num 15:13-16). The stories of Rahab and Ruth (and other clues such as Uriah the Hittite) might be better examples and suggest that people did join Israel though they somehow maintained their own national identity (or at a minimum were remembered by it). Unfortunately these important examples receive no real exegetical attention from Wyschogrod.

doubt accuse me of dwelling on the sinfulness of Israel, this is not my intention.[98] I propose rather to consider a small portion of the golden calf narrative in order to show that if it were not for the intercessions of Moses, the people of Hashem would not be of the seed of Abraham (or, we can thus infer, be called 'Israel'), but would be of the seed of Moses. Zipporah, the Midianite, would have become the great Matriarch, and Moses' relatively unknown children would have begun the new line of Hashem's people.

Though such speculations may seem frivolous, the passage (Exod 32:7-14), if for nothing else, should give the reader pause as to why the LORD was, first, no longer referring to Israel as his people (but as yours, i.e. Moses'), and, second, was willing to destroy the people completely and begin anew with the leader. While some have argued that the story involves an artificial rhetorical device to draw out Moses' response (which he faithfully offers, "praying back" the promises God made to the fathers),[99] such an idea has the potential to reduce the seriousness of God's anger and the latitude of his judgment. Did God mean what he said to Moses? Would he really be willing to start over with Moses and his offspring instead of Abraham? If we do not accept the seriousness of God's words, the real nature of his anger, and thus the significance of his judgment, we will surely lower the gravity of Israel's sin and its hurtfulness to its covenant partner, Hashem. The people's act of unfaithfulness moved God to a point in which he could no longer be in Israel's presence. And here again, we can observe the intricate relationship between human response and the workings of God. Yes, God is absolute and he chose Abraham, but everything, including all the promises, was placed in jeopardy in his test to sacrifice the promised child (Gen 22). Later, in the exodus, God moves freely to bring his people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. The sin of the people almost causes their complete destruction, but the faithful obedience of Moses ensures Israel's

---

[98] A recurrent complaint of Wyschogrod is that Christian theologians tend to emphasize the sinfulness of Israel while ignoring their obedience (see e.g. 120, 212-213). My point here is not to do so but to expose an important example in which God rejects his people, which involves the disobedience of Israel.

[99] See the study by Michael Widmer, *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer: A Study of Exodus 32-34 and Numbers 13-14* (FAT 2.8; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), esp. 94-122, who looks in depth at the passage and the model of Moses' "praying back" the promises. Some Jewish and Christian commentators regard the words of YHWH to be a paradoxical summons, seeking to draw a response from Moses (see e.g. Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* [New York: Ktav, 1992], 931ff.; and Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 3:337-41). The paradoxical nature of YHWH's words cannot, however, diminish the seriousness of the situation. As Childs says, "Israel's election is surely at stake because God is now prepared to annihilate her completely" (*The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* [OTL; Louisville: Westminster, 1974], 567).

continuance. The election of Israel is now irrevocably tied into Moses' intercession, revealing again the very intricate composition and contingent nature of the election's structure. God always initiates, but the people (or persons, in the case of Abraham and Moses) play an important role in its continuance. If Abraham had not shown 'fear of God', the story would likely be quite different. Had Moses not been faithful, the picture too would be seriously altered. Human response must be included in how the election of Israel works and how it is maintained. The picture Wyschogrod offers leans too far in a direction at odds with the HB. Yes, God remains faithful throughout and this is integral to the mystery of the story. But it is in the details of the biblical story (e.g. the *Akedah*, Moses' intercession) that we come to understand the dynamic in full. Unfortunately, and despite his wish to do otherwise, stories like these receive far less attention exegetically in Wyschogrod's work than is necessary to be convincing. Wyschogrod's work is provocative, informative, and challenging, yes. But completely convincing? For the reasons stated above, no.

A Need to Examine

We have touched upon one example from the HB that points to the difficult and complex picture of Israel's election, but exegetical engagement with other stories surely needs to follow. In some ways, our evaluation of Wyschogrod cannot be complete without examining more biblical data in detail. Until then, however, we will complete our survey with one last important Jewish thinker on Israel's election.

JON D. LEVENSON

There seems little doubt among biblical scholars that the work of Levenson is scholarship to be reckoned with. Often bridging gaps between Jewish and Christian studies, so too does Levenson's work form a bridge within his own tradition; his contributions often couple rabbinic and biblical study, though never at the cost of each other. His work in the Bible is sharp and penetrating; his discussions on election are no exception. In some ways, one might argue that the topic of election has occupied a great deal of Levenson's scholarly output. His book *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* could more or less be viewed as a treatise on the subject, and his full length article on particularism and universalism in the HB[100] again treats an aspect of it. But also not to be forgotten among these works are his contributions on the subject of the Exodus, in dialogue with aspects of Liberation theology, arguing that the

[100] "Universal Horizon," 143-69.

exodus is one piece in the larger story of God's special relationship with Israel.[101] His work on the larger theme deserves our careful scrutiny and will form the basis of our final exposition.

Obsessed with Method?

It is difficult to decide whether Levenson uses the Bible to explain and demonstrate his method, or whether he employs his hermeneutic to expound the Bible. This is really to say that within seemingly every contribution of Levenson's work is a clear, well defined, and well-executed method. It is probably best to understand his work as accomplishing both, demonstrating the value of his argued for methodology and using his method to penetrate deeply the literature he approaches. The elusive balance is well attained.

To place Levenson within the so-called 'canonical approach' would be convenient but inadequate.[102] Perhaps better than trying to locate Levenson's method within a larger framework of hermeneutics would be to survey a few of Levenson's guiding principles in approaching the HB.

First, for Levenson, 'intellectual honesty' is a value held in highest regard. Although such an idea should be axiomatic, the idea is emphasized in Levenson's work to ensure that the reader understands the differences and limitations of various forms of scholarship. Although the 'practitioner of engaged scholarship'[103] might wish to emphasize or limit discussion to an aspect of the text that suits a pressing need, the biblical theologian must be true to the "manifest text of scripture" and not confuse the former activity with hers, disguising it "as exegesis."[104] The biblical

---

[101] On the topic consult his "Exodus and Liberation," in *HBOTHC*, 127-59; "Liberation Theology and the Exodus," in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (ed. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky; SBLSymS 8; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 215-30; "The Perils of Engaged Scholarship: A Rejoinder to Jorge Pixley," in ibid., 239-46; and "The Exodus and Biblical Theology: A Rejoinder to John J. Collins," in ibid., 263-75. Corresponding articles in the discussion are, Jorge V. Pixley, "History and Particularity in Reading the Hebrew Bible: A Response to Jon D. Levenson," in ibid., 231-37; and John J. Collins, "The Exodus and Biblical Theology," in ibid., 247-61.

[102] For an interesting assessment of Childs' methodology from Levenson himself, consult Levenson's "Is Brueggemann," 265-94, esp. 272-79. As observed there, Levenson appreciates much of Childs' method, with certain qualifications. Compare also his remarks at "Rejoinder to Collins," 270-71.

[103] Which I believe we might, based upon Levenson's discussion, define as a scholar working from within a faith community for a faith community (or community of political interest, etc.) seeking to apply specific texts to contemporary settings.

[104] "Perils," 242. The term 'biblical theologian' is used by Levenson more or less as a self-description, even if indirectly (see "Perils," 240). Arguably, Levenson there employs the terminology due to the nature of the debate and the (Christian) addressee (Pixley). Given another context, we might suspect that he would maintain something slightly more traditionally Jewish, such as e.g. Jewish biblical scholar. For our purposes, we shall retain the term out of convenience.

theologian has a responsibility "to the text in its wholeness and its complexity,"[105] and intellectual honesty requires following a text through even when/specifically when its conclusions fail to corroborate one's own. Moving beyond such findings to apply them to a pressing concern of a faith community is, according to Levenson, appropriate, and expected. One must be sure, however, not to confuse the two.[106]

Secondly, and related to the above, although perfect objectivity is not possible, it is an appropriate goal. Here Levenson repeatedly emphasizes that objectivity is "a necessary ideal," even if one is unable to exercise it in completeness.[107] The task of bracketing one's beliefs and commitments when approaching the text is mandatory for biblical interpretation, though this activity is not to be confused with having removed these things as though they did not exist. "The temptation to read one's values into the text must be resisted," states Levenson, and so too must the following statements be distinguished: "'We all have biases' and 'All we have is biases.' The first is true; the second is false."[108]

Lastly, though by no means exhaustively, Levenson approaches the HB in a time-honoured Jewish manner. As mentioned above, this involves careful attention to rabbinic and talmudic literature, but so too does it indicate that, quite naturally even if not always immediately recognized, Levenson places different emphasis and value upon biblical material than, for instance, certain Christian biblical theologians. For Levenson there is no 'sola scriptura', nor, might we add, necessarily a hierarchy of value of Written over Oral Law. The relationship between the two is one of complementarity, though it is not easily ascertainable (and this is likely purposeful) which might be privileged for Levenson.[109] Of special interest for our exposition is Levenson's respect for the rabbinic idea that the Pentateuch, or Torah, has a privileged status over the rest of Jewish scripture.[110] This might help explain Levenson's own specific interest in these books; it may also assist the reader in understanding Levenson's use of the Pentateuch in constructing his theology of

---

[105] "Perils," 240.

[106] For more on this idea, consult e.g. *HBOTHC*, esp. chapter 1; and "Rejoinder to Collins," esp. 267.

[107] "Universal Horizon," 146; compare "Perils," 241.

[108] "Perils," 241.

[109] Levenson discusses the rabbinic preference for Oral over Written Torah in order to highlight the difficulties in speaking of a common scripture to Jews and Christians. Although he does not explicitly state his own preference, it is safe to say that Levenson at the very least appreciates the rabbinic tradition at this point, even if he himself is primarily a specialist in the Written. Compare his remarks at, "Is Brueggemann," 271-72.

[110] Levenson does not, to my knowledge, directly claim this principle for his own work; his repeated emphasis as a reminder of the principle's significance suggests, however, that it applies with some force for himself. See e.g. *HBOTHC*, 55, 63; and *Death*, 173.

election. The prime election texts for Levenson appear to be specifically from the first two books of the HB. But, to be sure, Levenson also makes clear that the HB can be read as a coherent whole provided precautions are in place:

> ... some systematic statement is possible, so long as it is loose enough to allow for exceptions and self-aware enough to acknowledge its dependence on a canon that did not exist in the biblical period itself.[111]

Election in the Hebrew Bible

> *The story of the humiliation and exaltation of the beloved son reverberates throughout the Bible because it is the story of the people about whom and to whom it is told. It is the story of Israel the beloved son, the first-born of God.*[112]

Levenson observes that the HB begins with the story of the creation of the world, and that humanity in general, not one particular community or people, is embedded in its "very structure of cosmic order."[113] "Israel is not primordial," and their later emergence twenty generations later (or in strict terms the covenants with both Abraham and the Israelites[114]) is to be understood in relation to the eternal covenant made with Noah implicating all humanity.[115] This Noahide covenant "places all peoples in a relationship of grace and accountability with God," and thus although all Abrahamites and Israelites experience a relationship to God that is "unique," it is also "universal": "no other people has it, yet all humanity has something of the same order."[116]

The early backdrop of the Noahide covenant in the HB sets the stage for the subsequent emphasis on the familial-national dimension of the story beginning with Abraham.[117] According to Levenson, "God's high hopes for the world ... are now focused on one man who will reverse the decline of a failing humanity."[118] The reasons for God's choice of Abraham are not given in the Bible and this revelation is

---

[111] "Universal Horizon," 146.
[112] *Death*, 67.
[113] Levenson here contrasts the biblical creation story to that of the *Enuma Elish*, a story that *is* connected with a particular community and place. See "Universal Horizon," 146-47.
[114] Specifically, the covenants of Genesis 17 and Exodus 24 respectively.
[115] I.e. the 'Noahide covenant' of Gen 9:1-17. See "Universal Horizon," 147-48.
[116] "Universal Horizon," 147-48.
[117] This is not to say that for Levenson there are no earlier accounts of particular election (the story of Cain and Abel, for instance, features as an election story—see *Death*, 69-81), but Abraham's is one of prime significance, foundational in the lineage to Israel. Note also that Levenson, in more recent writings, uses the term 'familial-national' over 'particularistic' for reasons of clarity. See discussion as it relates to the exodus at "Rejoinder to Collins," 264.
[118] "Universal Horizon," 151.

"sudden and unanticipated."[119] This divine choosing is the first of a series in Genesis, each one highlighting the mysterious grace of God, and, as will eventually be seen particularly in the birth of Isaac, the miraculous nature of the chosen son's birth. The 'barren woman motif' underlines a central theme of the story, that of the beloved first-born, and relates to the election of the people Israel—who is YHWH's own first-born son. As Levenson states,

> The laughs (*wayyiṣḥāq/wattiṣḥaq*) of Abraham and Sarah are more than mere aetiologies of the name Isaac (*yiṣḥāq*). They also ensure that whenever the second patriarch is mentioned, the miraculous circumstances of his conception will be recalled. This is not a man born of the natural desire of his parents for offspring, but of God's solemn covenantal pledge to make Abraham "the father of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17:3) ... Abraham is his biological father, but it is God who sets aside the laws of biology that have prevented his conception for year upon painful year. And so it is with Jacob/Israel, born of Rebekah, who was barren until God answered her husband's entreaty and she conceived (Gen 25:21), and with Joseph as well, the son of Rachel, another woman barren until "God remembered ... and opened her womb" (Gen 30:22).
>
> Concentrated in Genesis, the motif of the barren woman is rather rare in the remainder of the Hebrew Bible. Its frequency in the first book of the Pentateuch is owing to its association with the account of the origins of the people of God, that is, Israel, YHWH's first-born son. Though neither Isaac nor Jacob nor Joseph is his father's oldest son, providence allows each to attain the bittersweet status of the first-born. The conception of each son in a barren woman is another refraction of this same heavenly supersession of the hard realities of biology. The ancestor of Israel—and thus also Israel itself—is the first-born son of two fathers, one human and one divine.[120]

The Exodus: A Fulfillment of Promise and Story of Election

For Levenson, the status of Israel as YHWH's first-born son is made particularly clear in Exodus 4:22. Although the verse may prima facie appear insignificant within the story of the exodus, his work in *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* shows that this verse is actually the culmination of much groundwork in Genesis. The idea of Israel as God's 'first-born' son is to be taken with absolute seriousness, not simply as a figure of speech.[121] The language ties into an idea that Levenson is at pains to expose, that the first-born of antiquity (including Israel's history) belonged to the Deity. This divine 'possession' or claim on life entailed both exaltation and humiliation. The status as first-born also inextricably relates to the theological idea of chosenness:

---

[119] "Universal Horizon," 152.
[120] *Death*, 41-42.
[121] For more on the specifics of this idea, consult *Death*, 40-42.

The first-born and the chosen are not, of course, synonymous, but their semantic fields overlap so extensively that an investigation of the one concept will inevitably illumine the other. In the case of the Patriarchal narratives of Genesis, the urgent and constantly repeating issue of which son is chosen cannot be disengaged from the painful question of which shall inherit the status of the first-born, or, to put it differently, which is the beloved son? For in the narratives of Israel's origins, chosenness means having the status of the one upon whose very life God has acquired an absolute claim.[122]

This absolute claim, in the case of Israel, will give reason to God's possession of the Israelites and the giving of Torah after the Exodus. The Israelites are not 'freed' in the exodus, but, in a sense, simply change ownership: they become 'slaves of God'. But, before we move ahead of ourselves, a few words on Levenson's understanding of the exodus.

That the story of the exodus begins with a genealogy is not without significance; it is a crucial link that places the event within the larger story of the Bible. According to Levenson, the earlier stories in Genesis, with their emphasized lineage of the favoured son, are not forgotten but here taken up; their connection is incontrovertible.[123] The promises have been made to Abraham and one aspect of these is the giving of the land.[124] The exodus is not primarily, as some liberation theologians would believe,[125] about freedom from oppression and a 'preferential option for the poor' (though Levenson argues it involves elements of both) but concerns the fulfilling of the earlier promises to Abraham. According to Levenson, the exodus has three primary meanings: God is enthroned, a basis for the covenant is constituted (i.e. the exodus "provides rationale for Israel's observance of their divine lord's commandments"[126]), and Israel is "dedicated and consecrated to the service of their God."[127] Repeatedly emphasized within Levenson's work on the exodus, moreover, is the idea that God did not 'free' just any people or all the slaves in Egypt at that time; the story is about *Israel*, God's chosen people. And, to make absolutely clear who Israel is, Levenson points out, contrary to liberationist readings, that Israel is not a socioeconomic class of people or political movement. Israel is a people that descends from Abraham. He states,

---

[122] *Death*, 59-60.

[123] See *Death*, 37-38; *HBOTHC*, 151-53.

[124] On the centrality of the giving of land in the exodus, consult, e.g. "Liberation Theology," 224. Compare the interesting Rendtorff, "The GĒR in the Priestly Laws of the Pentateuch," in *Ethnicity*, 85-87, who argues for the significance of land in determining Israelite identity.

[125] Levenson here argues with Pixley's interpretation in his *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987).

[126] *HBOTHC*, 143.

[127] *HBOTHC*, 140-44, here 144.

> The problem is that these [liberationist] views do not reckon sufficiently with the cold fact that the biblical criteria for inclusion among those who benefit from the exodus are not poverty, oppression, suffering, or anything of the kind. The criterion is singular — descent from a common ancestor, Jacob/Israel son of Isaac son of Abraham. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, Israel is portrayed as a natural family, a kin-group and not a voluntary association, a mystical sodality, or, as these liberationists would have it, a socioeconomic class or political movement. ... God's preferential option for the poor can indeed be detected in the story of the exodus, in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, and in the Jewish ethical tradition, where its application is, as we are about to see, by no means limited to the Jewish poor and oppressed. But the chosenness of Israel is even more pervasive in the Hebrew Bible and carries with it numerous and weighty legal implications both there and in the ongoing Jewish tradition. As important as these two concepts are, the preferential option for the poor and the chosenness of Israel are not to be *equated*, and, though both can be heard in the story of the exodus, it is the chosenness of Israel that dominates there.[128]

The Testing of the Chosen and the Vindication of God's Choice

In God's choosing of the Israelites, and the earlier stories of God's choosing of the favoured sons in Genesis, one might be left with the impression that God's choices are capricious. Levenson does not recoil from the idea that God elects without a given reason, or that his choices are not based upon prior merit in the electee. And yet, for Levenson, the concept of testing becomes a recurring feature within the economy of election and often works, through humiliation and exaltation, to demonstrate a quality within the chosen person or people. The example of Abraham's testing, the *aqedah*, serves to show a number of things. The test, in the first order, is to see "which is stronger, Abraham's fear of God or his love of Isaac ..."[129] Abraham passes the test—he shows fear of God—but the test also does more. Through Abraham's "reverential obedience," God's earlier choice of him is vindicated and the election of Abraham's descendants becomes grounded in his action. He states, commenting of the second angelic address in Genesis 22:15-18,

> The effect of all the superabundant allusiveness of the second angelic address in Gen 22:15-18 is to reconceive the aqedah as a foundational act. It is not only that the binding of Isaac vindicates God's mysterious singling out of Abram. It is also the case that Abraham's obedience to the God who demands the death of his beloved son now becomes the basis for the blessedness of the people descended from him through that very son.[130]

In a recent article, working with midrashic interpretations on Abraham's obedience as mentioned in Gen 26:5, Levenson again highlights the idea, emphasizing how the *aqedah* shows the non-arbitrary nature of God's choosing:

---

[128] *HBOTHC*, 152-53. Compare his similar words at "Perils," 240.
[129] *Death*, 137.
[130] *Death*, 140.

The singling out of Abraham for a special destiny—and thus the chosenness of Israel through all the generations—is no longer an act of pure grace, unrelated to the character and accomplishments of the founding father. ... The effect of Gen 26:5b is to underscore the justice of God's action, which, while remaining altogether gracious, constitutes the condign response to Abraham's extraordinary obedience. Thus, a story that begins, so to speak, in a Lutheran mode—grace without works—ends in a Catholic mode: grace operating conjointly with works, works completing and validating the grace of God.[131]

This concept is not exclusive to Abraham but is evident in the testing of other chosen figures, seen particularly in the story of Joseph, "the most sustained and the most profound exploration in the Hebrew Bible of the problematics of chosenness ..."[132] There Joseph, in the end, meets the test well and we see that "not only Jacob's but also God's favor to Joseph is not unrelated to the moral and intellectual mettle of the favored son himself."[133] Joseph's appropriate actions eventually reverse the decline in the family's fortunes and ultimately ensure the continued existence of the chosen people. Furthermore, as Levenson states, "The chosenness of Joseph proves more an asset than a liability, and the wisdom and justice of the God who chose him, so easily doubted at the beginning of the tale, are richly vindicated at its end."[134]

The above idea is not, to my knowledge, worked out in detail with relation to the people Israel. This is not to say that Levenson fails to discuss the testing of the people as a whole, or the concept of corporate chosenness. It simply indicates that Levenson does not explicitly connect specifics in the testing of Israel as a people to the idea that their appropriate response vindicates God's election. This idea of testing the chosen *generally*, and we might thus infer to that of the people Israel as well, does serve, however, to demonstrate the "fairness of [God's] choices."[135] The idea, I believe, is made clear in the words of Levenson below:

> The larger theological point is that the trials of the righteous serve to demonstrate not God's injustice, as many think to be the case, but quite the opposite, the fairness of his choices. For those choices are not mere whims, evidence of the arbitrariness of providence, and the proof is that those chosen, like Abraham, for exaltation, are able to pass the brutal tests to which God subjects them and thus to vindicate the grace he has shown them. The trials that appear to be their humiliation are, in fact, the means of their exaltation, proof positive that their special destiny is based on other than caprice.[136]

---

[131] "The Conversion of Abraham to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 22-23.

[132] *Death*, 154.

[133] *Death*, 167. See 143-69 for a fuller discussion and how Joseph succeeds in the test.

[134] *Death*, 168.

[135] *Death*, 139.

[136] *Death*, 139.

These words, though arguing that the choices of God are vindicated, do not, we must note, necessarily give *reason* for God's prior choice of Israel, or the earlier patriarchs. That "remains a mystery of [God's] love."[137]

The Unchosen and Divine Testing

Just as the chosen are tested by God, so too, believes Levenson, are those not chosen subject to divine testing. A strong emphasis within the work of Levenson is the idea that to be unchosen is not to be equated with being outside the will or purposes of God.[138] The common dichotomy between universalism and particularism does not do justice to the biblical picture as it often serves to undermine the significance of both the specific people Israel, and, at the same time, all humanity. Levenson states,

> A dichotomy of particularism and universalism cannot do justice to the theological perspective from which these verses [Num 23:9; Exod 19:5-6] are written (and there is a plethora of others). Like a particularism, this theology affirms the ultimate importance of a subgroup of humanity, a subgroup that is, in fact, a natural family and not, for example, a voluntary association based on common beliefs, experiences, values, or whatever. But like a universalism, the theology of Israelite chosenness poses a challenge to human diversity. For the ultimate importance of the kin-group that is Israel derives from the act of the universal God, who rules over all nations, brooks no rivals, and demands the submission of everyone, from Pharaoh on his throne to the lowliest Caananite peasant in revolt against his feudal lord. In short, though the Hebrew Bible conceives of Israel as an ethnic group, its very existence is a standing reproach to ethnicity and, for understandable reasons, arouses the hostility of the unchosen (הגוים, τά ἔθνη).[139]

The unchosen, therefore, are also under the domain of God's concern, even in their unchosenness. The task in being unchosen, as seen in the above words, involves submission to the universal God. But at times, as also attested above, being unchosen will arouse hostility towards the chosen. Levenson develops the idea and believes that divine election brings about important tests for both. This is seen preeminently in the story of Joseph. There, argues Levenson, the unchosen brothers are to accept their status in grace and submission. So too, however, is Joseph to avoid the temptation to sin through using his status for domination. Levenson states:

> The problematic [of chosenness] derives from the disparity between the frailty of the human ego and the mysterious operations of the choosing Deity. Human nature, the story makes clear, is not constituted so as to facilitate the acceptance of chosenness. The one chosen is sorely tempted to interpret his special status as a mandate for domination ... Those not

---

[137] "Universal Horizon," 156.
[138] See e.g. related discussion at "Universal Horizon," 159.
[139] "Perils," 243.

> chosen are unlikely to view their status with grace and quiet acceptance. … If the challenge of the chosen is to bear their exalted status with humility and altruism, the challenge of the unchosen—and chosenness is meaningless unless some are *not* chosen—is to play their subordinate role with grace and with due regard for the common good.[140]

Of the examples available, Levenson notes that the unchosen Esau meets the challenge of being unchosen exceptionally well. In his test, he (eventually) accepts his status and the chosenness of his brother and displays a love and acceptance of his brother that might be taken as exemplary in this form of testing.[141]

Election to Service?

To conclude our exposition, we look briefly to one final idea within Levenson's thinking on election. Though seldom employing the language of 'mission', Levenson does discuss 'service' as a correlative of Israel's election. Israel's very existence, as we have more or less seen from the above, is a "result of YHWH's mysterious grace and the equally mysterious but edifying obedience of Abraham."[142] But what, if any, might the larger purpose of that people and God's foregoing election be? According to Levenson, the election of Israel does, in agreement with Rowley, entail service; the specifics of that service, however, are related to observance of Torah. As indicated above, for Levenson, the exodus involved three elements: enthronement, covenant, and dedication. All three, in a sense, are preparatory for the giving of Torah. In recounting what the commandments and laws of Israel mean and why they are to obey them, the people are instructed that these precepts are connected to the 'freedom' obtained through the strong hand that God moved to bring the people to the Promised Land (Deut 6:20-25).[143] The people, if they obey the LORD faithfully and keep the covenant, will be his treasured possession, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6).[144] Quite plainly, the mission or service of Israel, according to Levenson, is to be obedient to the God who brought Israel out of Egypt. He has been enthroned, is worthy of obedience and the people have been consecrated to serve him; they are now his slaves. "The commandments," states Levenson, "derive their authority from the relationship in which they are embedded, and it is this relationship that ensures

---

[140] *Death*, 154-55.
[141] See *Death*, 67-68, 225-26.
[142] "Universal Horizon," 152.
[143] See discussion at *HBOTHC*, 142ff.
[144] *HBOTHC*, 143.

that their observance will be marked by love and gratitude."[145] And, to make clear that the commandments are not burdens to be followed onerously, Levenson repeatedly emphasizes that the commandments are themselves related to 'freedom'. Herein lies a paradox often incomprehensible to contemporary readers: "*service* (or "slavery") of the God of Israel is based on *redemption* from slavery ... service and redemption are inseparable, and liberation and a certain kind of subjugation are not antonymic but synonymous."[146]

The above is not the end of the story. For Levenson, obedience to Torah is key to Israel's service (or mission), but so too is another idea: to be distinct from other nations.[147] This idea is difficult to grasp and may initially seem incompatible with the related eschatological "reorientation of the nations towards YHWH" in late biblical eschatology.[148] The seeming incompatibility, however, reveals an important distinction that Levenson points out on more than one occasion.[149] God's particular choice of Israel is not incompatible with a universal or broad plan to bring other nations to God. The distinction of Israel as a nation need not be removed in order to bring about the worship of the universal creator and God. The joining of other nations in service does not necessitate the disappearance of that people or an undifferentiated peoplehood. Levenson states:

> The fact that so much of late biblical eschatology envisions the reorientation of the nations toward YHWH is highly significant. It suggests something like a restoration of the situation of the primeval history (Genesis 1-11), in which humanity was united, monotheistic, and YHWHistic. History has come full circle, except that Israel does not disappear into an undifferentiated humanity. Rather, it and the nations survive, only now centered upon the service of YHWH, the universal creator, king, and redeemer, in his cosmic capital, Jerusalem. Israelite particularism, in this vision of things, is not destined to disappear. It is destined to reach its universal horizon.[150]

These words highlight the significance of a 'universal' plan of reorientation of the nations toward YHWH, the God of Israel, within Levenson's thinking. This idea is not disconnected from the election of Israel, but part of its very fabric. The notion of covenant and Torah are inextricably linked to the choosing of God and Israel's

---

[145] *HBOTHC*, 143. For further discussion on biblical law as recipient specific (and the relationship between specific commandments and general values), consult "Universal Horizon," 160-61.

[146] *HBOTHC*, 150.

[147] Although this idea does not feature explicitly as a prominent one, it seems to linger between the lines of Levenson's work, surfacing occasionally, e.g. at "Rejoinder to Collins," 272-73. Levenson there points out that at times the HB portrays Israel as "failing in their divinely assigned mission" when they are, or become, like other nations.

[148] "Universal Horizon," 164.

[149] See e.g. "Perils," 243; and "Universal Horizon," 145.

[150] "Universal Horizon," 164.

existence, but so too is a larger scheme whereby people outside this familial-national group will join in the worship and service of their God. There is thus a balance within the workings of election of both inward and outward focus and obedience and grace. The election is of and for Israel yet its purposes extend to those outside this people. At the same time, Israel is to be obedient to this mission yet God is merciful when Israel fails. Levenson's words make this clear and will conclude our exposition:

> There is, then, a duality in the Bible's concept of election. On the one hand, election is at times articulated in terms of larger purposes that it is to serve, and, of necessity, those purposes extend beyond the confines of the chosen people. On the other hand, God bears with Israel even when it fails in its mission. The purposes do not override the chosenness, and chosenness cannot be reduced merely to the commitment to certain values. ... Election implies service, but service renews election. God's grace implies his law, but his law implies his grace. Neither takes precedence over the other; they are inextricable.[151]

Evaluation: Reading the Bible Well and Reemphasizing the Neglected

> *... [the] ubiquitous and all-important theological tenet of the Hebrew Bible, the chosenness of the people Israel ... is a tenet that in a democratic and egalitarian age like ours is in decided danger of under-emphasis on the part of interpreters ...*[152]

Levenson's words above may well prove to be the interpretive key to his work. As he makes clear in his critique of liberation theologian Pixley's interpretation of the exodus, the exodus is in danger of being misinterpreted when the familial-national dimension of the story is ignored or minimized. The tendency of liberation theologians to do so has forced Levenson to reemphasize that which is ignored and we might surmise that his interpretation would have had different emphases had the scholarly climate been different. Nowhere does Levenson wish only to emphasize the chosenness of Israel and to belittle the strand in the HB that shows a 'preferential option for the poor'; Levenson is simply not content to permit "either to overwhelm the other."[153] When read in this light, and applied to the broader canvas of his study within the HB and not just the exodus, Levenson's work becomes better understood. Much of his work rightfully reacts to a modern contempt for particularism (or, better, familial-national dimensions within a story) and the idea that justice and equality must be synonymous.[154]

---

[151] "Universal Horizon," 156-57.
[152] "Liberation Theology," 223.
[153] *HBOTHC*, 153. See also "Rejoinder to Collins," 269-70.
[154] The latter idea is one that Levenson regularly calls into question. Consult e.g. his arguments with Brueggemann in "Is Brueggemann," esp. 284 ("The divine Father is not an egalitarian"), as well as his words in *HBOTHC*, 133: "The passionate demand for justice does indeed resound throughout the

That Levenson begins with creation is significant; although the procedure should be an obvious one, of those surveyed his work is essentially the first to do so.[155] Discussion of Noahide Law should now be familiar, though what might not be is Levenson's moderation. Levenson carefully observes that the Noahic covenant applies to humanity in general and argues that all people thus experience some form of covenant with God (as he states, "a relationship of grace and accountability"). If there is a weakness in this area, it is one that Levenson himself notices: the HB itself expresses little if any interest in this covenant outside of Genesis 9—interest in the covenant is largely a later rabbinic one.[156] This is not essentially a problem in itself (save, perhaps, for the sola scripturaists), but what Levenson does not really do, however, is show *how* the later covenants of Genesis 17 and Exodus 24 are "to be read against the background of this universal covenant."[157] The criticism is not necessarily a disagreement (the earlier covenant may provide a good basis from which to understand the others), it is rather a question of how this is to be done. Further, I cannot help but ask *why* the HB itself does not make the connection between the covenants or again mention the universal covenant at all. These are all questions; I have no answers. Overall, Levenson is the most convincing of those surveyed in his understanding of 'Noahide Law'; I only wish his work showed more clearly how the covenants related.[158]

Levenson's larger work within the text of the HB, particularly Genesis, is compelling. His bringing together of the 'barren woman motif' with the idea that Israel is a beloved son of the divine father is well argued and handles the biblical material masterfully. His understanding of the absolute claim that the Deity has upon the first born son provides a needed background from which to understand God's relationship with his 'treasured possession' and relates the significance of the exodus and the later giving of the Torah in a way that, for those who have taken his work seriously, will likely affect the way these stories are read and understood for countless

---

Hebrew Bible, but the identification of justice with equality is essentially a modern phenomenon and, in the hands of many modern exegetes, an impetus for gross anachronism." Perhaps most pithy and memorable are his remarks regarding the story of Cain and Abel: "not every inequity is an iniquity" (*Death*, 75).

[155] Note, however, the work of Scobie and my criticisms above (pp. 28-29).

[156] For discussion, see "Universal Horizon," 147-48.

[157] "Universal Horizon," 147.

[158] And this likely stems from the fact that he treats it in an article undoubtedly limited by space and intent. To be sure, Levenson does make some connections (see e.g. "Universal Horizon," 152) and his discussion on the "universal availability of God and his law" helpfully explains some of the early narrative material in Genesis and the background of those who show "fear of God" (see "Universal Horizon," 148-151). I am interested as well, however, in *exactly* how we might read the covenants against each other, particularly when the Bible itself appears to have little interest in doing so.

years to come. Levenson's argument with aspects of Liberation theology and the exodus also provides a needed balance in understanding the narrative.[159] There are numerous examples that I could mention to show the convincing nature of Levenson's work but space will simply not permit. Furthermore, not all that he argues is necessarily as convincing; we must turn to expose and discuss some of these specific features.

Election, Nonelection, and Testing

A strong element within Levenson's work is the idea of testing. Testing of the chosen regularly involves humiliation and exaltation, and, Levenson argues, often brings about the vindication of God's choice of the one tested. The testing of the unchosen involves playing a "subordinate role" with grace while seeking the common good. Both of these ideas of testing are good and right to an extent (and a needed emphasis within the economy of election), but say too much and too little. We shall treat each in turn.

The idea that God tests his chosen is, oddly enough, rarely connected—at least as it might relate to an election theology. Levenson rightly notices that the two are not only connected, but somehow integral to the workings of God's choice. To put my basic complaint plainly, I feel Levenson's conclusions regarding the testing of the chosen go too far. His work is convincing in its observation of these tests and their importance; I simply feel that it is not altogether clear from the biblical data that these tests serve to vindicate God's choice of the elected. In some cases the test does 'vindicate' God's choice but to read the test as somehow seeking to do so (or serving that end) is a leap unwarranted, or at very least, not explicit within the text itself. Abraham and Joseph happen to do well, and they are forever remembered by their appropriate responses. But instead of seeing these tests as working to vindicate God's choice of them, could they not be seen simply as tests to bring out (or expose) their fear of God, which may, or may not, vindicate God? If applied to the broader picture and thus Israel as a whole, Levenson's idea meets too much resistance from the thrust of the biblical material itself. This is not to say that individuals and Israel never meet their tests with success but it is to say that the text itself seems uninterested in the idea that these tests vindicate God or that his choices are 'fair'. If anything, the thrust of scripture seems to be occupied with the idea that God's choices are not based on any

---

[159] I temper this by noting that aspects of his reading of the exodus are not without their difficulties. See critique below.

observable quality (and thus seemingly '*unfair*') and this may well be the larger theological point. To be sure, Levenson does not argue that God chooses on the basis of merit but his line of reasoning does suggest that God's choices are vindicated and that his choosing is not capricious. But how might we reconcile failed tests with the vindication and fairness of God?[160] Perhaps this points to the untidy picture of scripture, a picture that is anything but romantic. This is a picture Levenson himself is undaunted by and as he regularly points out, often "there is no one 'biblical' position ..." on many of the "great theological issues." Given this, it seems at odds with his own approach to scripture to speak of generalizations such as, "The larger theological point is that the trials of the righteous serve to demonstrate not God's injustice ... but quite the opposite, the fairness of his choices."[161] I am not completely sure that Levenson meant this to be a generalization, but, in context, it does appear to be just that.[162] I am not sure God's tests of the righteous in the HB can even regularly be seen as set up for this purpose or accomplishing this end. The idea is a difficult one to sustain—the vindication does not always come.

On the other side of testing we have the testing of the unchosen. Levenson here notices that the unchosen are often recipient of God's concern and their tests involve accepting the subordinate role as unchosen "with grace and with due regard for the common good."[163] First, as should again be emphasized with regard to the above, Levenson's findings are surely correct. The testing of the unchosen is no exception and Levenson masterfully shows that the unchosen too must meet a challenge or trial, as Esau (eventually) so graciously does. My only reservation is that Levenson does not say enough. Although the test may be to accept the role given them, to what extent is it 'subordinate,' and is the full extent of the test to accept it graciously and with 'due regard for the common good'? I would think that the test could involve more (even much more), and may too involve (as with the chosen) a testing to show fear of God or, as is often the case, to respond with an appropriate action that fits into

---

[160] Levenson reads (and not without some warrant) Jacob's tests as ending positively (see esp. *Death*, 65-68). Though possible, Jacob's 'right' response might also be read as *fear* (calling Esau 'master', presenting the 'blessing', etc.), made good only by the graciousness of the unchosen brother, Esau. The choice of Jacob does not, to my mind, receive a strong vindication and may suggest divine caprice or arbitrariness.

[161] *Death*, 139. It is interesting that here Levenson equates justice with fairness. It is difficult to determine what is meant by 'fair'.

[162] Levenson is commenting on a midrash (*Gen. Rab.* 55:1) of Genesis 22, though it is difficult to discern at what point his words reflect his own thinking or only that of the material he looks at. Given his other similar remarks (e.g. *Death*, 167-68), I believe the quotation reflects his own thinking and does appear to be a generalization.

[163] *Death*, 155.

the larger puzzle of God's plan and purposes for the world, whether for the specific people Israel or humanity in general. The range of examples would deter us (and some will feature in the study below), but perhaps, because Levenson spends much time discussing the exodus, we can mention two responses of those unchosen that feature importantly in the survival of the people Israel and the chosen figure Moses. We note that God's sent leader and deliverer, Moses, lives because certain characters, outside of the chosen people, act appropriately in their tests. Pharaoh's daughter, for example, when faced with a Hebrew baby that should have been killed, decided to act justly and not only save the baby's life but make him her own son. The great deliverer receives his name by this foreign woman who did more than accept her role, but chose to take in, safeguard, and adopt the child of her nation's threatening adversary. It is not insignificant that the name he receives is not changed by God and is the way Moses is forever remembered. Just as the Israelites would recall, through his name, that Isaac was born in miraculous circumstances (see Levenson's words above), so too would they be reminded of the good Egyptian's actions whenever the name of their leader was invoked.[164] And this is not the only person Moses owes his life to. We recall that it was Zipporah, the Midianite/Cushite woman he married, who obeyed God and circumcised their son lest Moses die (Exod 4:24-26). The unchosen, in these cases, prove to do more than play their "subordinate role" but act rightly and ensure the survival of the chosen. The unchosen, through responding appropriately to the tests they face, become tools in the divine hand ensuring that the master plan moves forward. Calling such a role subordinate may be less than helpful. These 'subordinate' roles are often the prime tools of God within the larger framework of his purposes.[165]

Another feature of Levenson's work is his attention to the familial-national dimension of the biblical text. This is pronounced in his discussions on the exodus, but so too is it in his work in the Genesis narratives as well. There is little to disagree with here, particularly when keeping in mind the fluidity that Levenson reminds the reader the ancient biblical period would have had with regard to defining peoplehood.[166] What is surprising, however, particularly keeping in mind the idea of

---

[164] See further Chapter 4 where I engage this story more fully.

[165] In some ways, I suspect that Levenson himself would not disagree with much of the above and might question my use of the label 'unchosen' here (in distinction to those clearly faced with being unchosen); my words might be more an amendment or appendage than opposition to his model of testing. I address this in the conclusion.

[166] Levenson presents a balanced position on how peoplehood was conceived in antiquity, that being much less rigid or racial than today. See "Universal Horizon," 159-65.

fluidity in definition, is the rigidity that Levenson maintains when discussing who was 'freed' in the exodus. Levenson here states that the "criterion is singular - descent from a common ancestor, Jacob/Israel son of Isaac son of Abraham."[167] While this is a convenient way to define the people, I am not sure Levenson is here exercising completely sound judgment. Although the definition may be correct, can we be sure that this was the only criterion used to determine who God would bring out of Egypt?

Excursus: In What Sense ערב רב *('Mixed Multitude')?*

The astute observer of the 1998 DreamWorks motion picture *The Prince of Egypt* will notice that within the crowd of those who make it beyond the Sea of Reeds are clearly identifiable Egyptian people.[168] The scene is perhaps a second or two long and easily missed, but, if noticed, surely poses a question: Why did the filmmakers decide to portray Egyptians as exiting Egypt along with Israel? One cannot be sure, but it is possible that through their consultation with either religious specialists[169] or the text itself, they took note of something interesting:

> And the sons of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, apart from dependants.
>
> And there also went up a mixed multitude (ערב רב) with them, and flocks and herds, a very great acquisition of livestock. (Exodus 12:37-38 [38-39])

Just what is meant by ערב רב, here translated 'mixed multitude'? Were the makers of the cartoon epic wrong in interpreting this to be people other than Israelites, even Egyptians, exiting the land of Egypt along with Israel, heading toward the Promised Land?[170]

The phrase is assuredly so minute and obscure that not much can be made of it. Nevertheless, it should not be ignored. Though often translated 'mixed multitude', it might also simply mean something like 'a great mixture', or 'a numerous mixed people, group, or race'.[171] A literal rendering ('great mixture') might lend support to

---

[167] *HBOTHC*, 153.

[168] Two are noticeable by means of the attire that regularly depicts Egyptians throughout the film, white robes and kaffiyehs, with gold agals—something clearly in distinction to the Israelites.

[169] Among these, the credits list Burton Visotzky, Everett Fox, Rabbi Stephen Robbins, and Shoshanna Gershenzon.

[170] These remarks are not so much to evaluate the movie (which, incidentally, would have benefited from many of the criticisms Levenson levels against Liberation theologians' understanding of the exodus), but to highlight the import of how different interpretations of one phrase might change the sense of the story.

[171] On ערב see BDB, 786; *HALOT*, 878; and H. J. Fabry and H. Lamberty-Zielinski, "ערב," *TDOT* 11:333. Compare also Jer 25:20.

the idea that the phrase indicates not so much the idea of foreigners in addition to Israel than a "mixed-blooded people," likely with some biological relation to the people. So does Levenson's brief reference to the phrase suggest.[172]

The phrase, however, is at times treated as a single word, ערברב. As Cassuto argues, it is just that, derived from עָרַב, "formed by the repetition of the last two radicals," similar to the אספסף(ה) of Numbers 11:4 ('rabble', or 'riffraff').[173] For Cassuto the term denotes "a motley mob who were not of Israelite origin."[174] Propp, in his commentary on Exodus, agrees to the possibility of the singular word, though prefers the Masoretic reading.[175] He still renders the two fold term "many foreigners," but suggests that the term is likely referring to either ethnically mixed people (perhaps born to foreign women who lived with the Hebrews—suggested by Exod 3:22), long-term or temporary sojourners, or fellow travelers.[176] Hertz suggests that the term refers to a "mass of non-Israelite strangers, including slaves and prisoners of war who took advantage of the panic to escape from Egypt."[177] Fretheim speculates that the people were not necessarily opportunists (though he allows the possibility) but those who "had been integrated into the community of faith."[178] "Freedom for Israel means freedom for others," speculates Fretheim; "When the people of God are liberated, not only their own kind can come along ... God's redemption is not for the chosen few; it is for the sake of all the world."[179]

A few points are in order here. Notably, the multiplicity of interpretations suggests that holding too rigidly to any one might be unwise. Nevertheless, some options are better than others. The context of the phrase argues that the group here

---

[172] See his parenthetical remarks in "Liberation Theology," 223, suggesting the relation of the term as "mixed-blooded people" to Neh 13:3; Ezra 9:2; and Lev 24:10-23. Note, however, his earlier remarks in which he speculates, following Rashi, that the people are "converts from various nations" ("Universal Horizon," 161-62).

[173] See U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 147-48. האספסף is a term he argues also indicates the 'mixed multitude' of Exod 12:38. The two terms are regularly linked even if not through etymology. Often the mixed multitude of Exod 12:38 is thus postulated to be the same group of troublemakers who complain about the lack of meat to eat in the desert (Num 11:4). One tradition speculates that the group was headed by Pharaoh's magicians, unnamed in the HB, though named in the NT: Jannes and Jambres (2 Tim 3:8). For the interesting story and details of the traditions, consult Albert Pietersma, "Jannes and Jambres," *ABD* 3:638-40.

[174] Cassuto, *Exodus*, 147.

[175] William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 364.

[176] Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 357, 414.

[177] J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Exodus* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), 138.

[178] Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 143. Note, however, his remarks that entrance did not necessarily require faith, but was the result of a "fallout effect" (143).

[179] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 143. If ever there was an overinterpretation of two words, this is it.

mentioned is distinct from the people Israel. It is unlikely that they are part of the 'sons of Israel' for if they were, undoubtedly they would have been mentioned in the previous verse. The reference in 12:37 to the "men on foot" (רגלי—best translated militarily as 'footmen')[180] and the correlating 'dependants' (טף)[181] together are what make up the 'sons of Israel' (בני ישראל). The next verse, with its marker of separation, וגם "and also", or "in addition," distinguishes the people from the previous group. This group is not numbered (as are the footmen) and, combined with the fact that they are not included in the "men on foot," may indicate some uncertainty as to their status (would they aid the Israelites should battle arise?). If we are uncertain of their status for this reason, the following reference to the domestic animals clears away any need for speculation; "they are mentioned in the same breath as the livestock."[182] And, although the term מקנה regularly refers to livestock, it can also simply refer to acquired things (from קנה—to aquire), usually livestock or land.[183] Although it is not clear, the mixed multitude may themselves be included under such a grouping. Whatever the case, the immediately following verse suggests that the entire group together was "driven out of Egypt and could not delay" (Exod 12:39), again leaving ambiguous as to whether this 'mixed multitude' was associated with Israel by their own will.

Although many regard Exodus 12:1-13:16 to be a 'great mixture' of redactional sources,[184] the material, along with what precedes and follows it, may be read as a holistic unit. One reason for doing so is the light such a reading sheds on the idea of a mixed multitude exiting Egypt with the people. When this context is in view, one can better understand the immediately following section of Passover regulations. The 'interruptive' nature of 12:43-51 (and the seeming disconnectedness of 12:42) may actually reveal its connectedness when considering that the preceding verses have just informed the reader that others—in distinction to the sons of Israel—left Egypt along with the people. Although the sense of the passage argues that the prohibitions are for

---

[180] See *HALOT*, 1186; and Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 414. Compare also Exod 12:41 where the people of the exodus are referred to as כל צבאות יהוה going up from Egypt, and Exod 13:8 which indicates that the sons of Israel went up armed (חמשים עלו) from Egypt.

[181] Though the term may literally mean 'children', in context it is best understood as all those apart from the footmen. See Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 338.

[182] Fabry and Lamberty-Zielinski, "ערב," 11:332.

[183] See *HALOT*, 628; *DCH*, 5:467-69. Compare e.g. Gen 26:14.

[184] One need only scan the discussion in, for example, Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 373-82, to discover that any hope of determining with certainty the sources underlying the narrative is as likely as determining the names and number of the mixed multitude.

future Passover observance, the concluding section of verses 50-51 seeks to relate that this is what Israel did on "the same day" the LORD delivered the people from Egypt. Given that the central concern here is to regulate who may celebrate the Passover, the passage, *read in its narrative context*, suggests that the first Passover meal somehow necessitated the regulations. The passage is thus not as disjointed as one might suspect but deals with the practicalities of Passover with regard to those not specifically considered part of Israel.

Perhaps this helps to clarify the nature of the mixed multitude. Although the group might seem an 'add on' to Israel, or 'hanger-ons', it is possible that the people were not so much a collective group outside Israel as they were those who had been joined into the smaller family units within the sons of Israel. These people were still considered distinct from the 'sons of Israel' (e.g. they are not included in the count, and are mentioned in the same context as domestic animals), but they brought up concerns as to whether they could participate in the Passover. The defining mark (more or less)[185] was circumcision and meeting this requirement meant being treated as "a native of the land" (12:48).[186] It seems the question of who was included and who was excluded from the congregation has long been a part of Israel's story, at least since the exodus.

The 'Criterion is Singular'?

As mentioned at the outset, the above involves much speculation due to the obscure nature of the terms. If nothing else, the idea of a mixed multitude accompanying Israel, whatever it looked like, should keep us from too rigid a definition of who God brought out in the exodus. Levenson's remark that the "criterion is singular - descent from a common ancestor, Jacob/Israel son of Isaac son of Abraham" may be too rigid. However, keeping in mind the context of his remarks—warding off ideas that the exodus was a political or social revolution—we may need to permit leniency. I still think the description is too rigid, but Levenson is correct in emphasizing that descent to Abraham constitutes the prime criterion, and is the central theme of the story. As Levenson shows, the exodus *is* a continuation of the story of Abraham. If not, the promises to Abraham would be without realization; the story would be terribly

---

[185] I say 'more or less' here as the prohibitions imply that the one circumcised had to be somehow a part of an Israelite family, not just any hired servant, sojourner, or foreigner. See 12:43-49.

[186] 'Native' may also be read a "full citizen" (אֶזְרָח—see *HALOT*, 28). We might also wish to ask, What land? The reference to land here argues for the late nature of the text; from a narrative perspective, it may also simply be explained as the land to which the exodus will lead: the Promised Land (compare Exod 3:8).

incomplete. It happens that God waits until the opportune moment in order to display his power and splendor by freeing Israel from the oppressive regime of Pharaoh. This feature, and it is a prominent one (Levenson is again on to something when he emphasizes that a major theme of the exodus is the showdown between YHWH and Pharaoh[187]), is part of the larger story of the Bible but so too is the idea of land. Israel (through Abraham) has been promised the land and is to be a great nation (Gen 11:1-3; 13:14-17). The blessing of many people is attested to have begun in Exodus 1:7 (the God-fearing midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, play a significant role and are forever remembered for their action)[188] though it is not yet complete (the '600,000' counted at the exodus is not yet the 'dust of the earth' as promised to Abraham—Gen 13:16).[189] The second part of the blessing, the promise of land, is to be realized in a most dramatic display of power: the rising up of a leader and forever remembered law giver, the 10 plagues, the Passover, the 'plundering' by Israel of the people who enslaved them, the crossing of the sea on dry ground, and the eventual reception of the land. All of this points back to the first words spoken to Abraham.[190] The freeing from slavery was a small piece of the puzzle but it by no means constitutes the point of the story. The point is the faithfulness of God and the fulfillment of promise. The seed of Abraham becomes the 'hosts of YHWH' and they are a numerous people, a people who will possess the land of Canaan and obey God's commands. This people is set apart by God to be his special people, his chosen people, his treasured possession. Any theology of the HB that fails to reckon with this theme of chosenness obscures a central feature of the larger story. It is a theme raised by Levenson and he has done biblical theology a service in doing so.

It is the nagging details of those who do not fit neatly into the picture that are in need of development. For all Levenson's articulate and compelling interpretation, we have yet to understand fully how those outside are part of and contribute to the larger theological theme of chosenness. Why is Moses saved, named, and saved again by foreign women? Why do outsiders participate in the exodus? Why does Jethro contribute to Israelite religion as he does, yet not join the people? Similar questions may be asked of the Abrahamic stories and I think, despite the profundity of his

---

[187] See *HBOTHC*, 140-42.

[188] I discuss this further in Chapter 4.

[189] On the problems related to the numbers in Exod 12:37, Num 1, and 26, consult the string of discussion in *VT* (48 [1998] 196-213; 49 [1999] 131-32, 262-64; 50 [2000] 250-52, 323-28; and 51 [2001] 392-96).

[190] And the 'fulfillment' of Gen 15:13-16.

analysis, Levenson misses some of these important features.[191] Admittedly, to do so would have deterred him from the intent of his study; the complaint is also, however, a modest challenge to Levenson's idea that the testing of the unchosen is to "play their subordinate role with grace and with due regard for the common good." In many ways the task is thus not only to build upon Levenson's work through careful examination of those less noticeable, unchosen characters in the larger story, but to show how these unchosen function in the larger purposes of God and his choosing and testing. In doing so, we may confirm much of Levenson's work, but we too may expose reasons for its modification. The task awaits.

Chapter Conclusion: Jewish Interpretation and the Way Forward

We have examined four major Jewish thinkers on Israel's election and the idea of divine choosing. Notably, two indicated that the biblical text would feature as the foundation and source in constructing their theology or system of thought. Two, though biblical scholars, made no such claims. Kaminsky and Levenson, the latter group, used the biblical text regularly and consistently; Novak and Wyschogrod, though claiming to do otherwise, lacked real engagement with the text.[192] This is not to say that the work of Novak and Wyschogrod was altogether deficient or necessarily unconvincing; it simply did not achieve what it set out to do. We need not rehearse their ideas or my evaluations; these can be found above. A few comments on the thrust and themes of the above, however, I will now note.

In distinction to the Christian interpreters surveyed, a major emphasis of our Jewish thinkers was the importance of the chosenness of Israel as an abiding principle. Israel's election is nowhere regarded as a phase, prototype, or stepping-stone to a greater more inclusive plan of God. It would be wrong to imply that the Christian interpreters surveyed did not look at the texts so foundational to the four above (e.g. Genesis, Exodus and Deuteronomy); they simply did not emphasize them in the same way. For the Jewish interpreters surveyed, Abraham is central. We might say that in many ways the call of Abraham, and the promises made to him, is *the* story. For our Christian interpreters, when looking at the pertinent texts, the emphasis tended to revolve around a blessing of the nations. The Jewish interpretations above

---

[191] Or at very least, they require more in depth examination. See e.g. Chapter 3.

[192] My complaint is not a call for Novak and Wyschogrod to change vocations and become biblical scholars; I appreciate and deeply respect their positions as philosopher/theologian. My concern is that the text did not receive attention at the basic level (despite their desire otherwise) nor did they point to discussion that does.

noted this but were less forthright in determining specifics in how this might take place.[193] The emphasis for them seemed to be the idea that God would make Abraham into a great nation (and give Israel land). The people who descend from Abraham, i.e. Israel, are God's treasured possession, the chosen people of YHWH. This would without doubt affect the rest of the world, but the enduring idea that God loved Abraham, and thus Israel, was the central focus. This idea translated, for those who touched on the subject, into obedience to Torah. We might say that for these Jewish interpreters, the rest of the HB, though important, is details.[194]

Within these Jewish thinkers we also witnessed a continual concern to engage the question of the unchosen. This included everything from Noahide Law to conversion to categories of nonelect and antielect as well as the idea of testing. Because Levenson and Kaminsky raised the most interesting and important questions regarding the biblical material itself, I have chosen to use their work as a discussion partner in the next section. In that section we will probe examples of election and nonelection in the Pentateuch with special attention to what it means to be unchosen, especially in relation to the elect. While I do not revisit their work in every instance, Levenson's ideas regarding the testing of the unchosen and Kaminsky's larger concern to understand the specific roles of the nonelect and antielect (in relation to the elect) will serve as our guide. How well do specific examples of the Pentateuch hold up to their larger ideas? How exactly do the unchosen function in the Pentateuch, at least within our test cases?

---

[193] The exception here might be Novak, who adamantly maintained that the bringing in of other nations would be the work of God, not Israel. See his section above.

[194] Our comparison certainly has its limits as it is clear that the Pentateuch holds greater weight for our Jewish scholars than is likely to be the case for those surveyed who were Christian (the latter would likely give the prophetic literature equal weight). I am not convinced that the texts are as at odds as this might imply (again, see further Kaminsky and Stewart, "All," 139-63) though I also think that the Pentateuch should serve as a foundation from which to read the rest of the OT (an idea I cannot work out in full here).

chapter three

BLESSING OR CURSE? ABRAHAM, ELECTION, AND THE NATIONS:

THE STORY OF KING ABIMELECH

Throughout our exploration of both Christian and Jewish interpretation, we have seen that Abraham is a—if not *the*—central 'election' figure of the Bible.[1] In this chapter, I examine an important interaction between Abraham, the key figure, and a lesser known character, King Abimelech (Gen 20). I argue that the story serves to demonstrate the nature and extent of the promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 while the unchosen character works out his role in relation to God's favoured. The unchosen comes to understand Abraham's special status, and in this case, despite an initial setback, meets his test with success.

WIVES, SISTERS, A RIGHTEOUS NATION AND GOD-FEARING KING

There is no lack of discussion on the so-called 'Wife-Sister' stories in Genesis (Gen 12:10-13:1; Gen 20; Gen 26:1-11). The three stories that comprise this collection are no doubt related; indeed they appear to tell a common story with differing specifics—the first two involving Abraham and Sarah, the last, Isaac and Rebekah.[2] The interest in these stories is understandable, for within them many questions arise: Which story is the earliest? Are the stories telling of the same event through different characters or are there three different episodes being told through a similar motif? Which source(s) underlies each? What was the intention of telling the story three times, if differently? And but one more, How do the stories relate to the context of the larger Abrahamic narrative?

---

[1] I use scare quotes here to remind the reader that election as a concept is not yet developed or defined in Genesis itself, despite strong resonances to the later canonical idea, such as in Deuteronomy.

[2] For convenience, throughout this work I will use the later, changed, names of Abraham and Sarah rather than Abram and Sarai, even when the biblical context indicates the latter.

While interesting, our questions will be limited to those that directly affect our study's focus, viz., those that address questions of Abraham and his relation to the nations, with special attention to his chosenness and divine call. Our discussion will limit itself to the account of Genesis 20, though aspects of the other narratives, Genesis 12:10-13:1 in particular, will affect the discussion necessarily. The issue of sources, and to a degree the interrelationship of the three, will be largely set aside; this is not a judgment upon those studies that undertake this task but is a necessity due to space limitations and the intent of our study.[3] So, in order to grapple with our central concern here, I propose to survey the text (Gen 20:1-18) noting exegetical concerns and potential theological issues. Having done so, I offer a reading of the passage that seeks to make sense of the story exegetically and theologically, and sees it as one centrally concerned with Abraham's election against the backdrop of the nations, in this case a righteous one. I then make some suggestions on how this story might relate to others and the question of blessing and curse in the call of Abraham.

"She is my Sister": Finding the Grain of Genesis 20

There are a number of ways of engaging this story exegetically, and a number of questions that arise apply to the earlier account of Gen 12 as well. In fact, as noted by many, the second account is rather unintelligible without the first.[4] That is, the events are passed over exceedingly quickly in order to get to the central concern of the story—the dialogues between אלהים and Abimelech, and Abimelech and Abraham.

---

[3] Among the many studies that address the question of the stories' sources and related questions of their relationship, see John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 167-91; Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte* (WMANT 57; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1984), 301-11, 405-10; Klaus Koch, *Growth of the Biblical Tradition: The Form-Critical Method* (London: Black, 1969), 111-32; Sean E. McEvenue, "The Elohist at Work," *ZAW* 96 (1984): 315-32; and T. Desmond Alexander, "Are the Wife/Sister Incidents of Genesis Literary Compositional Variants?" *VT* 42 (1992): 145-53. A convenient summary is provided in the introduction of Mark E. Biddle, "The 'Endangered Ancestress' and Blessing for the Nations," *JBL* 109 (1990): 599-611. Ultimately, however, the present study regards the question of the stories' interrelationship not to be primarily one of sources, or history of composition, but one of "creative storytelling." As Moberly remarks ("Genesis 12-50," in *Genesis and Exodus* [Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001], 149):

> Why then should similar stories be told in proximity to each other in the course of the Genesis narrative? Instead of seeing this as a question of origins, it may be a question of creative storytelling. One way of putting this is to observe that whereas traditional source analysis emphasizes the similarities between the stories, seeing the differences as accidents of oral tradition, it may be the case that it is the differences that are really significant.

Such a view does not dismiss the importance of source criticism, but places it subsequent to questions of storytelling conventions and techniques (see further Moberly, "Genesis 12-50," 151 and Moberly, *TOTOTOT*, esp. ch. 6).

[4] Westermann (*Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981], esp. 161-62, 318-21), among others, argues the idea, largely relying on the work of Van Seters (*Abraham*, 167-91, esp. 171-75).

This is surely correct; within the space of one and a half verses (1b-2), we are told that Abraham leaves the Negev to sojourn in Gerar, that he says of Sarah his wife "She is my sister," and that Abimelech, the king of Gerar, sent and took her. By verse three, God appears to the king in a dream at night to tell him that he is doomed on account of his aforementioned deed. We may pause, albeit briefly, to ask some perennial questions the story has raised before getting to its heart. In the earlier parallel account (Gen 12:10-13:1), the reason for Abraham's placing their lives 'at risk' in a foreign land is clear: there was a famine, a severe famine. The repetition of this threat in 12:10 is likely emphasizing that Abraham went down to Egypt out of necessity; in the present story, however, such information is not given.[5] We are told in 20:1 that Abraham journeyed "from there" (מִשָּׁם) toward the Negev and settled between Kadesh and Shur. We are not told why.[6] In the preceding stories, Abraham has again been promised the long awaited son, once directly by YHWH (17:15-22) and then through the three men of the LORD (18:1-15). Between these stories and ours, we are told the story of the destruction of Sodom. Do these details add anything to our story? Many commentators treat the story as an independent unit, not to be understood contextually. Even Calvin, the 'pre-critical' interpreter, quite critically decides that problems arise here, as Sarah should be pregnant, not barren, and that the going to Gerar from Mamre does not really fit into the larger story as it stands. He suggests the possibility that the story took place earlier while Abraham was living in Mamre, "now inserted by Moses" and "relates [what] had taken place previously."[7] Wenham, however, believes that the connection of "from there" is significant, "and that an exegesis of this story in the light of the preceding narratives is therefore called for, if we are to be true to the narrator's intention."[8] Clines likewise is one of the few who

---

[5] We might surmise that the Gen 12 account wishes to provide a reason for Abraham's sojourn, perhaps to alleviate his blame. Some pick up the idea, arguing along these lines. For example, Cassuto states (*A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964], 2:346), "Only because the famine was severe did Abram decide, against his will and with heartfelt grief, to leave the land." While the text emphasizes the idea of famine and its severity, such speculation into Abraham's feelings are difficult to substantiate (though of course possible). We might, however, consider that if famine was understood as the result of divine workings in antiquity (on this idea, see T. Seidl, "רָעָב," *TDOT* 13:533-43, here 542 and Robert J. Way, "רָעָב," *NIDOTTE* 3:1133-37, here 1134-35), that the famine was meant as a test for Abraham. Whatever the case, such information is missing in the second story. More on this below.

[6] The narrative seems to imply that Abraham is "on the move" and this is just one more of his many excursions within the larger journey. Clines points out the oddness of this idea, as it is clear that Abraham has not been moving about much at all—he has been settled at Mamre for the past fourteen years(!). See his "The Ancestor in Danger: But Not the Same Danger," in *What Does Eve Do to Help? and Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (JSOTSup 94; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 76.

[7] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 1:534.

[8] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (WBC 2; Dallas: Word, 1994), 69.

tries to read the story in light of what precedes it and this in effect leads him (as I think it does Wenham) to believe that the story "demands from us an ethical judgment on Abraham ..."[9] For now, we note the issue; we shall return to it in our discussion on Abraham and the theme of promise and progeny in the conclusion below.

Perhaps before moving on, we should also note a question often asked of the story: If we assume that Abraham calls Sarah his sister out of fear that someone will notice her beauty and kill him to obtain her (as is suggested in Gen 12:11-13), how is it that Sarah is the beautiful and desirable woman the text suggests at her age? If Sarah is indeed 65 at the time of the first encounter and 89 here, can the plausibility of her ravishing beauty be maintained? Some ancient retellings of the story go so far as to describe this beauty in exacting detail.[10] Because the answer could affect our understanding of Abraham's decision, we note a few possible solutions. According to some, Sarah experienced a "rejuvenation." Alongside of (or in preparation for) the ability to conceive came the gift of rejuvenated youth, and restoration of beauty.[11] Calvin raises three possibilities, all of which he deems plausible: a) Sarah was not worn with age; this was a gift of God; b) the ruler was attracted to her "rare virtues with which he saw her, as a matron, to be endued"; or lastly, c) Abimelech acted under a divine "secret impulse," "to execute the divine chastisement."[12] An alternative way of addressing the problem is the explanation of Driver: "... the statements about Sarai's age belong to a different document (P) from the one (J) which narrates the visit to Egypt: the author of the latter evidently pictured Sarai as still a comparatively young woman."[13] Wenham wisely notes that ideas of feminine beauty in antiquity may well differ from those of modern ideals.[14] Perhaps the best answer lies here, but there is likely also something to the postulation of many: Abimelech was seeking alliances with the rich foreign prince, Abraham.[15] When

---

[9] Clines, "Ancestor," 76

[10] See e.g. 1Q20:2-9, which details Sarah's beauty from the shapeliness of her breasts to the attractiveness of her feet. There is no doubt something to Gunkel's idea that the ancient narratives tend to overemphasize the beauty of Israel's matriarchs (*Genesis* [Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997], 169-70, 72).

[11] On this idea, consult the case of John Ronning, "The Naming of Isaac: The Role of the Wife/Sister Episodes in the Redaction of Genesis," *WTJ* 53 (1991): esp. 7-13 and the note in Cassuto, *Genesis*, 2:347. The idea is not new but found in rabbinical tradition, as Ronning and Sarna (*The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* [Philadelphia: JPS, 1989], 141) mention (such as Radak, Ramdan, etc.). See e.g. *Bava Metzi'a* 87a.

[12] Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:522.

[13] Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (WC; 4th ed.; London: Methuen, 1905), 149. See similarly, von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (OTL; 2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 222.

[14] Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; Waco: Word, 1987), 288.

[15] The most substantial case is made by James K. Hoffmeier, "The Wives' Tales of Genesis 12, 20 & 26 and the Covenants at Beer-Sheba," *TynBul* 43 (1992): 81-99, who through a comparative study

Abraham asks Sarah to cooperate "that it may go well with me because of you" (12:13), we might hypothesize that he is referring to alliances; thus his immediate addition of the words, "*and* that I may live on account of you."

Whatever the case, we come to a point of departure from the earlier story, where here Abimelech has sent for and taken Sarah, and now Elohim comes to the foreign king in a dream at night. As source critics are quick to point out, the use of אלהים for God and the motif of divine revelation through a dream is an indicator of E material.[16] Theologically, however, it is also of interest to probe the idea of revelation to non-Israelite or unchosen characters. The text seems to assume that the foreign ruler is familiar with the God who appears to him. Absent is any address of uncertainty, such as "who are you?" Rather, Abimelech replies with a reverential address, "Lord" (אדני), "will you slay a nation, even a righteous one?" The response suggests familiarity with the deity not only in the address but in the expectation of the king: God will do rightly; God will not slay an innocent nation. The narrative, and the whole of Genesis for that matter, gives no reason to suggest that the reader should be surprised that the God of Abraham appears to someone outside Abraham's family in a dream. As elsewhere in the patriarchal narratives, there is no religious antagonism between Abraham and those he encounters; the God he knows appears to be known by others.[17] It is also interesting to note that the word 'dream' (חלום) is used relatively infrequently in the Pentateuch, except in the Patriarchal Narratives, where it appears 34 times of the 38 occurrences. The motif of dream is common here, and there seems to be little distinction in who receives these dreams, whether Abraham or others.[18] Perhaps the findings of Smith are telling: "...references to dreams are concentrated in Genesis and Daniel when Israelites were living among Gentiles who believed that dreams were a legitimate way of receiving a divine messages [*sic*]..."[19] In the case of Abimelech, at any rate, we encounter a God who not only reveals

---

argues that such diplomatic marriages were common in antiquity. See also the similar remarks of John E. Hartley, *Genesis* (NIBCOT 1; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000), 192; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 1:239; and Sarna, *Genesis*, 141.

[16] E.g. John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; 2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930), 316. See, however, the recent challenge by Westermann (*Genesis 12-36*, 319-20), who argues that more criteria are required.

[17] On this idea, and the crucial lack of any holiness language in the Patriarchal Narratives, consult the discussions of Moberly in *TOTOTOT*, 79-104; and "Genesis 12-50," 152-61, esp. 159-61.

[18] The list includes (in addition to Abimelech): Jacob (Gen 31), Laban (Gen 31), Joseph (Gen 37), the cupbearer and baker of the king of Egypt (Gen 40), and Pharaoh (Gen 41). Notably, the latter three are not explicitly said to be divine dreams; however, as dreams that foresaw true events, interpreted through divine help (see Gen 40:8; 41:16), they may qualify as such.

[19] Gary V. Smith, "חָלַם, חֲלוֹם," *NIDOTTE* 2:154.

himself directly in a dream, but who listens and agrees to the foreign king's plea. The specifics of this plea are worth teasing out.

In the dream, God immediately pronounces that Abimelech is a dead man (מת) because of his action in taking Abraham's wife. As Gunkel notes, the threat would have been understood that God intended "to kill him immediately, right there in bed."[20] As noted, Abimelech's response indicates some expectation of the deity, in that he answers with a question, or plea: would God really kill a nation (גוי), though innocent (צדיק)? Did not he himself say "she is my sister" and she say "he is my brother"? So, explains the king to God, "in the integrity of my heart/mind" (בתם לבבי), "and in the innocence of my hands have I done this" (ובנקין כפי עשיתי זאת). The king pleads his case of innocence to God and God agrees.[21] Some have raised the possibility that God only partially agrees (in that God only repeats the first clause), while others argue that the king was not really innocent for he should have looked deeper into the matter of Sarah's marital ties.[22] Both of these are possible, but a simple reading of the text suggests that God simply agrees. God's reply, "indeed" or "yes", "I know that in the integrity of your heart/mind you have done this" (גם אנכי ידעתי כי בתם לבבך עשית זאת), is interesting for although Abimelech was to be a dead man because of his action, God now agrees,

---

[20] Gunkel, *Genesis*, 220. Wenham notes that the הנה + participle phraseology used here "is a straightforward prediction" (*Genesis 16-50*, 70).

[21] We note that Abimelech pleads *his* innocence but this is intertwined with the nation (גוי) he represents (see 20:4). Speiser sees the use of גוי here as so strange ("no such meaning [i.e. nation] can be forced into the present context") that he argues it to be "an old textual corruption" (which he reconstructs to arrive at a translation of 'one' instead of nation—see his discussion at *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 1; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 149). Sarna also notes a problem here. He raises the possibility of an extended semantic range (e.g. 'people', 'folk', 'group') but ultimately is open to a meaning of 'nation' (*Genesis*, 142). The idea of nation, as will be seen, is actually integral to reading the story.

[22] Rashi notes the former idea (see M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann, eds., *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary: Genesis* [Louisville: Shapiro, Vallentine & Co., 1946], 85) while others pickup the second. The words of Hartley permit a sampling (*Genesis*, 193-96):

> "[Abimelech] brought his self-defense to a climax by asserting that he had acted with a clear conscience, literally "in integrity of heart," and clean hands. Shrewdly Abimelech ignored his failure to negotiate with Abraham in order that Sarah might become his wife ... The king was also aware that he had inflicted damages on Abraham by having taken his wife into his household without having completely followed proper protocol in this matter. That is, he had not waited long enough for the sojourners to become settled, and he had not made sufficient inquiry into Sarah's identity. Nor had he sought Abraham's permission to take Sarah into his household.

One will be hard pressed to determine how Hartley arrives at such conclusions (particularly the last—did Abraham not tell him that "she is my sister"?). See also the comparable reading of Cassuto, *Genesis*, 2:359.

because of the king's plea, that the action was done with integrity. And then the surprise: God in fact did not allow the king to touch Sarah; God himself kept Abimelech from committing the sin against God. We note first that God somehow worked in (?) the foreign king to prevent sin, and second, God calls the potential sin a sin "against me" (מחמו לי). Such words may suggest that adultery, regardless of whether committed by those of Abraham's line or those outside, was considered an offence to the God of Abraham. It might also suggest, however, that it was a sin against God because Sarah was destined to be a mother, not through the king, but through Abraham. Context, and Abimelech's later questioning to Abraham concerning the potential "great sin," suggests the former.

The dream nears to a close, and God instructs the king to return Sarah to her husband. God indicates that Abraham is a prophet (נביא), and if Abimelech does rightly in returning Sarah, Abraham will pray for him and he will live. If he fails to, however, the earlier pronouncement of death stands, extended to all who are his (אתה וכל אשר לך). The unexpected use of the term 'prophet' for Abraham is significant. While it is certainly not meant as a formal office or position, it does indicate the special role Abraham has in God's eyes.[23] If we permit the narrative to speak on its own, it seems that God views Abraham as a prophet, in the sense that he will pray, or intercede, for others to God on their behalf. It may also indicate his chosen status—prophets were not to be self-appointed—and that prophets receive special protection from God.[24]

Abimelech rises early to call all his servants to tell them what has happened (20:8). The result is not apathy on the part of the people, but great fear (ויראו האנשים מאד). One cannot help but notice, if we take the canonical ordering of Genesis' stories seriously, the juxtaposition of the two tales and the response of the people, here and in Sodom's destruction (Gen 19:1-29). In the earlier story, the wicked deeds of the people were participated in by virtually all (18:16-33 implies that there are not even ten righteous there); here, however, we have what

---

[23] Among the many hypotheses, notable definitions of נביא here include: "a chosen man, and one who is familiar with God" (Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:525-26); "'a man of God,' an intercessor ... a distinguished godly man of that era" (Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 324); "one standing in a special relation to Jehovah" (Driver, *Genesis*, 207); and "a man who prays for others, as prophets should ..." (Moberly, "Genesis 12-50," 160).

[24] The sense of Psalm 105:15, for example, is that prophet and 'my anointed' are related, parallel terms. As 1Sam 24:6; 26:9 and 2Sam 1:14 all make clear, dire consequences await those who harm such a person.

appears to be a nation aroused at the potential sin of one. In the former account, even Lot's sons-in-law did not care about the coming judgment of God on account of the people's sin (19:14—"it was like a joke in his sons-in-law's eyes") whereas here *all* the men expressed great fear at the potential sin of one. Although the text is clear that there was a particularly sinful nation living in the time of Abraham and his family (Sodom), it is equally clear that there was a righteous one as well (Gerar). The inclusion of 20:8 is not accidental to the story—it communicates the important idea that God-fearing nations existed as well, in contrast to the one just destroyed.[25]

What ensues is a dialogue between the king and Abraham, likely in the presence of the people.[26] King Abimelech begins by asking a series of questions, questions that reveal frustration but also deep moral concern. As well, his questions permit the lying husband to clear himself, or offer an explanation. "What have you done to us?" the king asks, in words reminiscent of YHWH to Eve (Gen 3:13), to Cain (4:10), and the Pharaoh's to Abraham earlier (12:18). In each case guilt is assumed though the question is an open and genuine invitation to explanation. "How have I sinned against you (ומה חטאתי לך), that you have brought upon me and upon my kingdom a great sin (חטאה גדלה)? Deeds which should not be done you have done to me." The moral tone of Abimelech's questioning could not be more explicit. Clearly the king is indicting Abraham, the prophet, through the repetition of his guilt in bringing about sin (חטאת), indeed, a "great sin."[27] Again, the contrast between this story and the one which preceded it is strong. There, the sin of the people was *exceedingly* great (וחטאתם כי כבדה מאד—18:20) and widespread, yet there seemed to be no concern to stop it; here, the *potential* sin is great, but contained, and the people seem eager to bring it to an end. Abimelech concludes his discourse with one last question, one the narrator uses, I think, to set up further Abraham's guilt, as will be seen in Abraham's later reply: "What have you encountered (מה ראית), that you did this thing?"

---

[25] Compare Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 75, who makes a similar point.

[26] The king's use of the plural "us" and mention of his kingdom (20:9) likely indicate their continued presence. It seems likely that v. 8 also serves to indicate that the dialogue happens as in a formal court.

[27] The term here, as recognized by many, appears to be a legal one, used for adultery, and apparently is one in common currency in antiquity. See the short but important and influential article, Jacob J. Rabinowitz, "The 'Great Sin' in Ancient Egyptian Marriage Contracts," *JNES* 18 (1959): 73, as well as the discussion in Sarna, *Genesis*, 143.

Abraham is given a chance to reply (unlike the earlier account in Gen 12), and he addresses the last question first: "Because I thought surely (כי אמרתי רק) there is no fear of God (אין יראת אלהים) in this place" (20:11).[28] Dahood, however (in his usual fanciful way), argues for another translation, one that regards the verb אמר is being used in the sense of "to see," thus Abraham is answering Abimelech's question directly ("What did you *see* that you should do this thing?"). He then contends that רק should be vocalized not as in the MT (רַק; 'indeed', 'surely') but as רֹק ("worthlessness"). Abraham thus answers Abimelech: "Indeed I have beheld worthlessness: there is no fear of God in this place ...".[29] Dahood's suggestion does not, to my mind, really change the sense of the story in that in either translation, Abraham is purporting "no fear of God" where there is fear of God, though Dahood's translation indicts Abraham more so. Whether Abraham states that he saw "worthlessness" or not, it is clear that this ('worthless') crowd is greatly afraid of the potential sin Abraham brought about. There seems no other way to read this verse than that Abraham's assumption was wrong.

Abraham continues and explains that he believed he would have been killed on account of his wife. Besides, Abraham continues, Sarah really *is* his sister, not of his mother but of his father. Commentators vary in their readings. Turner calls Abraham's words "a bare-faced lie"; von Rad concludes that the excuse is "rather lame" when contrasted with Abimelech's loyalty; Hartley calls it a self-defense on technical grounds that is "very weak"; Calvin, as well as Rashi, argue that the Hebrew אחות carried "wider significance" in antiquity—Sarah and Abraham were really cousins; finally, Sarna also points to the ambiguity of the word—it means sister, but also is "an expression of love."[30] Given the difficulties (and to permit the benefit of the doubt) I am inclined to take into consideration that Sarah really was related in some way (sister, or cousin) and understand Abraham as making a decision to be 'economic with the truth'. Perhaps 'desperate times call for desperate measures', and Abraham did what he deemed best for surviving what he believed was a dangerous situation. Such an idea, however, only partially deals with the problem, for Abraham

---

[28] Wenham's translation of Abimelech's final question (20:10—"What did you intend that you did this thing?") obscures that Abraham begins by addressing this question.

[29] Mitchell Dahood, "Abraham's Reply in Genesis 20:11," *Bib* 61 (1980): 90-91.

[30] Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2000), 65-66; von Rad, *Genesis*, 224; Hartley, *Genesis*, 195; Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:530; Rosenbaum and Silbermann, *Genesis*, 86; and Sarna, *Genesis*, 95.

says he does this everywhere he goes, and he has, if we take the canonical ordering of his story seriously, been through this before and been indicted for his 'lie'. Furthermore, even if Abraham technically was not lying, it is clear that his words functioned deceptively, in that the result was confusion and potential sin. We will return to this idea in a moment when we examine whether Abraham's actions can be understood as admirable, paying special attention to the idea of 'tricksterism'.

A potential grammatical peculiarity arises in the explanation of Abraham. After stating that Sarah really is his sister, he, as mentioned, explains that he asked Sarah to go along with the scheme wherever they go. The peculiarity is noticed in Abraham's explanation of *when* this routine began: "...when God/the gods caused me to wander from my father's house ..." (כאשר התעו אתי אלהים מבית אבי). Although not unique in the HB, plural verb usage for אלהים, when the one true God is meant, is rare. Even among these cases, arguments can be made that the context allows for a translation of 'gods', rather than 'God' (e.g. Gen 35:7, 48:15; 2 Sam 7:23). What might this mean? Although little can be made of it, and most translations defer to a singular verb with God in the singular, the words of Alter raise good questions:

> Conventional translation procedure renders this as "God," or "Heaven," but Abraham, after all, is addressing a pagan who knows nothing of this strange new idea of monotheism, and it is perfectly appropriate that he should choose his words accordingly, settling on a designation of the deity that ambiguously straddles polytheism and monotheism. It is also noteworthy that Abraham, far from suggesting that God has directed him to a promised land, stresses to the native king that the gods have imposed upon him a destiny of wandering.[31]

Westermann regards such an idea "most unlikely" because "in the present chapter ... the God of Abraham speaks also to Abimelech and gives him instructions. The plural construction therefore is intended in a singular sense ..."[32] Others argue similarly, while some do not comment at all.[33] Calvin, interestingly, believes that when such usage occurs, it refers to angels, and has nothing to do with the fact that Abraham is addressing a foreign king.[34] It seems clear that the context allows for a usage of

---

[31] Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 95. Note also that the SamP. renders the verb in third person singular (והתעה) and changes other plural verbs used of אלהים to singulars as well (e.g. Gen 31:53; 35:7; Exod 22:8). Waltke argues that such variants are emendations to suit a theological agenda to protect the honor of God and ward off charges of polytheism (see his "Samaritan Pentateuch," *ABD* 5:932-40, here 937-38).

[32] Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 327.

[33] See e.g Rosenbaum and Silbermann, *Genesis*, 86; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 73; and Gunkel, *Genesis*, 222. Sarna (*Genesis*, 144), despite commenting on the Hebrew text, fails to mention the question at all, while Waltke (*Genesis: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], 287) obscures the issue to the extent that the reader will not recognize the nature of the problem.

[34] Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:531-32.

'gods' (rather than God), perhaps as Alter suggests, to conform to Abraham's expectations of the king. Westermann's explanation is not altogether conclusive in that although Abraham's God has, yes, appeared to Abimelech, the story as told does not indicate that Abraham has knowledge of this. From a straightforward reading of the story, for all Abraham knew it might have been Sarah who revealed the truth to the king. It is thus possible, against Westermann's argument, that Abraham spoke of a plurality for gods in order to meet what he deemed to be expectations of the foreign king. If Abraham thought there to be no fear of God in the land, he might also have thought that there was belief in gods there as well, rather than the God he knew. We must exercise caution here, however, as Genesis in general gives little reason to believe that such distinctions (monotheism vs. polytheism) are even in view.[35] Also of interest, potentially affecting our reading, is Abraham's use of the verb wander (תעה). While seemingly harmless in English, the term in Hebrew is never used positively, and often carries a sense of 'to stray' or 'err'.[36] Although it may seem unlikely that Abraham is suggesting that gods led him astray, in the context of the discussion—we must remember that Abraham is giving an excuse to the king—such a reading is possible. The negative light cast by such a reading is not commented on by the narrator but simply passed over, perhaps similarly to the case of Abraham's laughter (Gen 17:15-22).

Whatever the case, not enough depends on our reading of this point to make a definitive decision, though when taken as cumulative evidence it may serve to build a questioning picture of Abraham's action in the story. Before addressing that question, we look briefly now to conclude our exposition of the text.

Abraham's defense receives no verbal response from Abimelech but Abimelech extends generosity. The narrator tells the reader that Abimelech gave sheep and oxen and servants to Abraham and restored his wife (20:14). Abimelech then makes an offer to Abraham which would not only extend native status to him, but would allow him to dwell wherever he pleases within the king's land. For Sarah's trouble, Abraham receives 1000 pieces of silver, something Abimelech tells Sarah is for her

---

[35] On this idea, again, consult Moberly, "Genesis 12-50," 159ff.

[36] The point is also made, albeit briefly, by Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (TCOT; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1967), 138-39. The verb occurs 51 times in the OT, none of which (to my knowledge) is used in a positive sense. An interesting comparison, with God causing his people to wander, is Isa 63:17. Consult also the definitions of BDB, 1073; *HALOT*, 1766-1767; and Martens, "תעה," *NIDOTTE* 4:319-20.

vindication, aiming to clear her before all people.[37] This "fabulously large sum" of money is apparently received by Abraham, an action in marked departure from his earlier one in Genesis 14:21-24.[38] Abraham prays to God and God heals the king and his household, in order that they might again be fertile. The wording (וירפא אלהים את אבימלך), taken along with God's earlier words that he had prevented Abimelech from touching Sarah, suggests that the problem was not restricted to female fertility. Commentators regularly suggest that the problem was likely impotence, or sexual sickness—not in punishment but for prevention.[39]

We thus come to the end of our exposition. Although we have hinted at ways of reading the passage along the way, we still need to probe the story to get at its heart. What is the point of the story? How does it function within the larger narrative framework, if it does? Finally, how might we understand this story in light of questions involving Abraham's special calling, or election?

Abraham, Promises, Lies, and the Nations

There is a very real problem when reading ancient stories in that often we impose modern criteria upon them, foreign to the writings themselves. The problem can be particularly acute when looking at questions of morality.[40] Although modern readings may have a keen awareness of gender equality, for example, it is clear that ideas in antiquity differ. The challenge then is to read the story with integrity, allowing for the grain of the story itself to be heard in the interpretation. Decisions may then be made concerning its specifics and perhaps those of its morality.

Within the story under scrutiny, we face a number of problems in this regard. Abraham will look to be a monster for subjecting his submissive, passive wife to such treatment, and his 'lie' (or minimally, deception) is not likely to be met with

---

[37] A number of issues arise here, none of which can occupy our space. First, it is interesting that it is Abraham who receives the gift, not Sarah (though this would not depart from antique custom; Abimelech does, however, inform Sarah of his gesture). And second, the Hebrew phrasing and wording is obscure (כסות עינים), and syntactically it is difficult to determine whose eyes the covering is for (consult discussion in Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 67, 74 and the various options laid out by Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 327-28). Whatever the best translation, all point to the idea that Abimelech wished to undo any wrong and provide a clean record for Sarah.

[38] The identical phrase is used by both Westermann (*Genesis 12-36*, 327) and Waltke (*Genesis*, 287), an amount Waltke claims would have taken a Babylonian labourer 167 years to earn. On the complexity of gift-giving in antiquity (with some helpful discussion on these stories and the problem mentioned) consult, Gary Stansell, "The Gift in Ancient Israel," *Semeia* 87 (2001): 65-90, here 79-80.

[39] Alter (*Genesis*, 96) and Sarna (*Genesis*, 96) suggest impotence; Keil (*Penteteuch*, 1:241) and Driver (*Genesis*, 207) suggest a sickness that prevented sexual intercourse; while Rashi (following *Bava Qamma* [92a]) states that Abimelech faced "the closing up of all the *secretory* channels—*those* of semen, urine, excrement, of the ears and the nose ..." (*Genesis*, 85).

[40] On this problem (and in relation to the passage at hand) consult Levenson, "Conversion," 4-7.

sympathy. One question the astute reader of Genesis must probe is that of 'tricksterism'. When reading the stories of Genesis, one cannot help but feel that when the protagonist uses trickery to obtain a satisfying result, the antique audience was not necessarily dismayed, but likely the opposite: pleased. In stories with outcomes that suit modern sensitivities, the result is similar; what modern reader does not find pleasure in Tamar's tricking of Judah (Gen 38)? That story is just one story of trickery in Genesis, though the appeal of others will vary according to the presuppositions of the modern reader; for example, the trickery of Lot's daughters in sleeping with Lot (Gen 19:30-38); Jacob's tricking of Isaac for the birthright (Gen 27) and Laban for the flock (Gen 30:25-43); Laban's tricking of Jacob in giving Leah instead of Rachael (29:15-30); Jacob's sons in the case of Dinah (Gen 34); Joseph's brothers tricking of their father (37:29-36); and finally, Joseph's tricking of his brothers in Egypt (Gen 42-45).[41] In our story, and in the parallel account of Genesis 12, Abraham seems to add his name to the list of those who successfully trick their adversary and subsequently gain from their wit. The problem, here as elsewhere, is that of moral implication. But would the early audience of these texts judge the same actions as morally culpable? Perhaps more importantly, what might the perspective of the storyteller be? Crucial, therefore, are hints from the narrator. Although the Genesis storyteller is generally reticent in explicit judgment, in some cases judgments are made, whether through the words of a character or by way of implicit reference. In the case of Judah and Tamar, for example, Judah himself, the one tricked, concludes, "she was more righteous than I" (צדקה ממני—38:26), thus providing a careful positive judgment of Tamar's actions of trickery. In the case of Jacob's sons tricking the men of Shechem, it is difficult to determine the position of the storyteller; on the one hand he permits Jacob to vocalize his disdain for the action of his sons (though Jacob is likely concerned with repercussions not morality—34:30), on the

---

[41] For discussion on some of these stories (particularly Lot's daughters and Tamar's tricking of Judah) consult Melissa Jackson, "Lot's Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology," *JSOT* 98 (2002): 29-46. On the concept of tricksterism in general, consult the influential study of Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), who includes a chapter on Gen 12, 20 and 26 (she concludes that although Gen 12 is more clear, the case for Abraham as 'trickster' in Gen 20 is less sure); Richard D. Patterson, "The Old Testament Use of an Archetype: The Trickster," *JETS* 42 (1999): 385-394; and the study of Victor H. Matthews, "Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation," *PRSt* 12 (1985): 185-95 (who demonstrates how Jacob's actions, though perhaps questionable today, would have pleased the ancient audience). The problem of applying the concept of tricksterism to the HB is a very real one, one I hope to pursue in a future study. As Niditch outlines (*Underdogs*, 44-50), the concept is largely derived from West African and North American Native anthropologist and folklorist studies, something that may not prove as capable of cross-referencing to biblical scholarship as some have allowed.

other hand, the narrator repeatedly highlights the folly of Shechem, in that the brothers were angered because "he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel" and "such a thing ought not to be done" (34:7); further, the omniscient narrator reveals that Shechem convinced his men to go along with the circumcision out of greed: they would gain all that belonged to them (34:23). Such details make a decision difficult as to whether the brothers' tricking was acceptable to the storyteller. Prima facie at least, we must accept that the answer is ambiguous, perhaps open, to tricksterism.[42]

The same question, aimed at our story, is also difficult. In the earlier story of Abraham and the Pharaoh, it would appear that Abraham leaves the episode relatively unscathed, wealthy, and without having received explicit judgment by the storyteller. The words of the Pharaoh do, however, point towards his guilt and action that should not have been done. It is likely that God rescued Sarah despite, not because of, Abraham's action.[43] The story of Genesis 20 seems to emphasize this all the more, but this time the plot thickens, at least if we are committed to reading the story canonically. That is, in the first episode, Abraham faced factors that may excuse, even if partially, his act. He faced famine, severe famine, famine that likely meant death if not addressed. He also may have deemed the risk he placed Sarah in as 'buying time' until they could escape, perhaps once the famine ended. Besides, there was no guarantee that someone would necessarily take Sarah. At very least there was a chance they would both live, rather than have Abraham die (as he seemed sure he would), even if not the ideal situation. The famine strikes immediately after God's call to leave Haran and God's promise of progeny, but Abraham was not told who the nation would come through (for Sarah was barren), perhaps explaining Abraham's taking along Lot.[44] Some go so far as to see Abraham's plan as one of brilliance, one

---

[42] Undoubtedly, I here truncate what could be an extended and much fuller study of Genesis 34. For an insightful and compelling discussion on the complexity of this passage, as it relates to the moral dilemma of the brothers' action and trickery, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (OTS; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 110-19.

[43] Although many question whether Abraham's action in Gen 12 should be condemned as he may have done the best he could in a difficult situation (e.g. Barry L. Eichler, "On Reading Genesis 12:10-20," in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg* [ed. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997], 23-38; Levenson, "Conversion," 5, note 11; Sarna, *Genesis*, 94-95; and Gordon M. Freeman, "Wives and Sisters: A Contemporary Exegesis," *Conservative Judaism* 44 [1992]: 51-52), most agree that God's intervention is not necessarily because of his deeds; or minimally, the result is positive because of God's intervention, not Abraham's deeds (see esp. Eichler, "On Reading," 38).

[44] In an interesting and compelling article, Helyer argues that the separation of Lot and Abraham (Gen 13) is significant in that it decides that Lot will not be Abraham's heir, leaving open the all important and recurring question of Abraham's story: "Who will be Abraham's heir?" See Larry R. Helyer, "The Separation of Abram and Lot: Its Significance in the Patriarchal Narratives," *JSOT* 26 (1983): 77-88.

that would preserve the family and showed hope in the promise, one that the ancient audience would have received with pleasure.[45]

The question with our story in Genesis 20, however, is markedly different. Abraham has been through a similar situation before and should know well that God would protect him and Sarah. God has instructed Abraham to "be a blessing" and to "walk blameless before me"; we can only imagine that he should have learned from his experience in Gen 12 that he had not blessed the Pharaoh nor been blameless.[46] Further, Abraham should now have known that it was God's intention to bring about the great nation through Sarah, the one he called sister. She was promised to give birth within that year, yet this does not seem to affect his decision to go to Gerar, or pass her off as a sister available for taking. Should such details not be taken into consideration when looking at the story of Genesis 20?

In order to get at this question we must return to the important question of whether Abraham's trickery is viewed positively in the eyes of the narrator. It would seem that the text indicates, 'no'. First, one cannot help but get the impression that the strong moral language of the king indicts Abraham, something the narrator does not seek to alleviate.[47] The king uses an idiom which implies Abraham's guilt ("what have you done ...?") and he makes clear that such things "ought not to be done" because they risked bringing a great sin upon a nation. Such words do not work well to build Abraham's case, even if in the mouth of a foreigner—perhaps all the more damning as a result. Further, it would seem that Abraham's own words serve to work against him and there is no indication of approval from the storyteller. Abraham speaks of there being no 'fear of God' where there appears to be some, and he even speaks, if our reading is along the right lines, negatively about the call that the gods, or God, made on him: Abraham was made to wander or stray on their/his account, giving reason for his treachery. Although there are no explicit comments made by the

---

[45] So Gunkel, *Genesis*, 169-72, passim. His ideas receive sharp rebut from Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 159-68, esp. 167. Perhaps it is also worth mentioning the important idea that Gen 12 is in fact a 'mini-exodus', a story told as a prefiguring of Israel's experience in Egypt. On this consult Cassuto, *Genesis*, 234-37; Peter D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Fortress: Philadelphia, 1983), 42-45; and the overview of Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 291-92. If true, the paradigmatic nature of these stories (i.e. Israel's relationship to the nations) may gain further support.

[46] See Gen 12:2 and 17:1. In both cases, imperatives are used. Clines rightly notices that in the case of the former, most commentators do not properly underline this idea. See his "What Happens in Genesis," in *What Does Eve Do to Help*, 56. *Pace* Grüneberg (*Abraham, Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in its Narrative Context* [BZAW 332; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003], 142-52), who examines the issue but ultimately concludes that "the force of the imperative [here] is not to issue a command, but to state further the divine purpose" (146).

[47] Of course some note E's "tendency to explain and justify" (Speiser, *Genesis*, 150), and here Abraham's opportunity to explain is apparently to alleviate his guilt. I maintain, however, that Abraham's excuses actually serve to indict him further (see below as well as note 48).

narrator about Abraham's action or response, the overwhelming sense of the story is that he wronged the foreign king and ought not to have done what he did.[48] In this case, Abraham's tricking had the potential to bring about sin, great sin, and such tricksterism is subtly pronounced morally wrong through the mouths of Abimelech and Abraham himself.[49]

But what, then, is the salient point of the story? Although our reading has highlighted the moral questionability of Abraham's action, this ties into but is not *the* point of the story. Some interpreters argue that the point of the story is the threat that Abraham's actions bring to the promised son and, in turn, the nation that will come through him.[50] While this is an important point, and is important to the canonical ordering of Abraham's story, one cannot help but feel that if the narrative is concerned with this issue, it fails to make reference to it, implicitly or explicitly, except for the possible final connection whereby the LORD opens the wombs of Abimelech's household and then takes note of Sarah, opening her womb too (Gen 20:18-21:2).[51] Though important, by and large the story does not indicate an interest in the theme of progeny, at very least it is not a primary concern. Coats argues that the story is not interested in progeny, but is concerned, rather, with divine blessing.[52] Biddle builds upon Coats' work, developing the idea that the story is largely a working out of Gen 12:3.[53] Herein we get to the heart of the matter. The story makes little sense if taken from a standpoint of morality, or proper action. God's own

---

[48] *Pace* McEvenue, "Elohist," 326, and Miscall, *Workings*, 36, the latter of whom argues that the morally pregnant words of Abimelech are "irrelevant to the narrative" and that "neither God nor the narrative make any comment on Abraham's actions." Such a reading fails, to my mind, to account for the subtleties of the storyteller's medium, here using lips of Abraham and Abimelech as his mouthpiece. Miscall's other ideas regarding the narrative (e.g. that election is key—*Workings*, 37), however, are sound, as I argue below.

[49] On the idea that Abraham's words work to condemn him, consult further the exposition of Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 72-73, Turner, *Genesis*, 92-93, and the words of Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 325. The work of Hepner argues similarly but goes too far in drawing parallels to Achan's apology (Josh 7:20), which he purports to show Abraham admitting guilt ("Abraham's Incestuous Marriage with Sarah: A Violation of the Holiness Code," *VT* 53 (2003): 148-49). Though interesting, the link is too elusive to maintain.

[50] See e.g. Martin Kessler and Karel Deurloo, *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 125; and the remarks of James G. Williams, "The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type-Scenes," *JSOT* 17 (1980): 116.

[51] Although 21:1 fronts the noùn יהוה to indicate a new section (Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Reference Grammar* [Sheffield: Academic Press, 1999], 347-38; *IBHS*, 129, 651-52), a link between the stories is plausible. Is it conceivable that Sarah's womb was opened at the same time, in answer to Abraham's prayer?

[52] The case is carefully made for all three 'wife-sister' accounts; see George W. Coats, "A Threat to the Host," in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature* (JSOTSup 35; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 71-81.

[53] Biddle, "Endangered," 599-611. Much of what follows leans heavily upon Biddle's important work.

actions in the story are certainly curious, apart from some relationship to Abraham, the one whom he calls his prophet. McEvenue summarizes the problem nicely:

> Even though God knows that Abimelech had been completely misled about Sarah and was unaware of any adultery in taking her, and even though God himself has prevented Abimelech from actually approaching Sarah sexually (v. 6), still God begins his conversation with Abimelech by telling him that he is condemned to death for adultery (v. 3), and ends with a savage statement in v. 7 that if he Abimelech does not send the woman back, them [*sic*] Abimelech and his whole household is condemned to death. In this view, a guilt which is merely imputed is still treated as meriting divine wrath and radical punishment. Moreover, sending the woman back will not of itself heal the guilt. God further requires that Abimelech ask Abraham, whom he calls »a prophet«, to pray for him (v. 7). Eventually, after Abraham has prayed, and after Abimelech has made extremely generous gifts of land and money to Abraham and Sarah (v. 15-16), only then is the curse removed.[54]

The issue is interesting in that, as we have seen above, Abimelech is actually quite upright about the matter; like Abraham earlier in Gen 18:22-33, he appears to know the nature of God's character (i.e. one who doesn't slay the righteous) and God himself appears to agree that Abimelech/his people is/are righteous and that he indeed did the action in the integrity of his heart. Although Abraham had questioned the fear of God in that place, it appears that there was indeed fear of God, an irony that is likely more than coincidental. Though some interpreters, for reasons unknown, point to a lack of faith in Abimelech,[55] it seems a feature of the narrative to point to the positive qualities of the king, *in contrast to the main character, Abraham.* As Petersen and Seebass independently suggest, a primary theme of the narrative is "the fear of Elohim," and in reference to that displayed in Abimelech.[56] Although the term 'fear of God' can refer to general moral piety, it must imply much more.[57] It is likely in reference to "human integrity, an integrity rooted in responsive recognition of God ...," where putting one's own interest after that of God's or others is paramount.[58] Apart,

---

[54] McEvenue, "Elohist," 326. Although his summary is used here, McEvenue's conclusions lead in a different direction.

[55] E.g. Franklyn L. Jost, "Abimelech," *DOTP*, 7; Waltke, *Genesis*, 286; compare Sarna, *Genesis*, 142 and note 22 above.

[56] David L. Petersen, "A Thrice-Told Tale: Genre, Theme, and Motif," *BR* 18 (1973): 30-43, here 41; and Seebass, "À titre d'exemple: réflexions sur Gen 16//21,8-21 et 20,1-18//26,1-33," in *Le Pentateuque en question* (ed. Albert De Pury; Genève: Labor et Fides, 1989), 215-30, here 226.

[57] As Westermann rightly suggests, its meaning will vary according to context (Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 325-26). For an elucidating discussion of the term, consult Moberly, *Bible*, 78-97. Note especially his discussion on Job, someone Abimelech can be compared to, someone who "stands outside the specific context of God's election of Israel and so seems to represent something about humanity as which may be valid independently of God's special revelation to Israel ..." (Moberly, *Bible*, 84-85). Not only are both characterized by 'fear of God' but both are in someway connected with notions of 'integrity' (תֻּמָּה —compare Gen 20:5-6; Job 1:1,9; 2:3,9).

[58] The quotation is from Moberly, *Bible*, 96.

perhaps, from the initial act of taking Sarah, such a description perfectly fits Abimelech's action in Genesis 20.

If such an assumption is correct, and we further add to the equation that of Abraham's questionable action, why does God condemn Abimelech and rescue Abraham? Why does the one who acted in the integrity of heart need the prayer of one who likely did not? The answer must lie in Abraham's position before God: Abraham is a prophet, a specially chosen man of God who has divine promises laid upon him. These promises include that those who bless him will be blessed, and the one who treats him lightly, or disdainfully, will be cursed (Gen 12:3).[59] Nothing is stated conditionally. When Abimelech's action curses Abraham (it threatened his wife and progeny), God curses Abimelech. Though he had not done so intentionally, Abimelech's action posed a threat all the same and God maintained his promise, at all costs. The full breadth of the promise, however, is also displayed. When Abimelech blesses Abraham, God blesses Abimelech. His fertility is restored and his people live. Although the story would have taught Abimelech something about the patriarch and his special relationship to God, *it also would have confirmed to Abraham, and those later readers who share his bloodline, the faithfulness of their God; moreover, it reveals a paradigm of Abraham's relationship to the nations.* God's promises hold true even when the actions of the chosen are inadequate. God's faithfulness does not depend on human action, yet fear of God is God's desire nonetheless. Abraham's ultimate test regarding 'fear of God' comes in God's command to Abraham to sacrifice the beloved son (Gen 22), but until that time Abraham has opportunity to develop this quality, though he fails here. Despite his failure, he remains God's chosen. In this instance, Abraham once again is taught about his relationship to the nations. Their treatment of him results in a paralleled divine treatment of them. Abraham is also to be their prophet; he is to intercede for them. Although markedly different because Gerar is largely a righteous nation, the story is not altogether different from that of Sodom's destruction. There too God provided Abraham with an

---

[59] English translations often render the verb קלל in 12:3 as 'curse', though it likely implies a slightly different sense than that word conveys. The translation "treat lightly" is Carr's (*Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 183) while "disdains" is Wenham's (*Genesis 1-15*, 265). See Wenham (*Genesis 1-15*, 276-77) and Josef Scharbert, "קלל," *TDOT* 13:37-44 (esp. at 39-40, where 'belittle' and 'revile' appear to be good definitions in context), for a fuller discussion on the word's meaning. Compare the work of Coats, "The Curse in God's Blessing: Gen 12,1-4a in the Structure and Theology of the Yahwist," in *Die Botschaft und die Boten* (ed. J. Jeremias and L. Perlitt; Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1981), 31-41, esp. 32-33.

opportunity to be an intercessor and was concerned, because of the promises he made earlier, that Abraham be consulted in the matter of their coming destruction:

> Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? For I have chosen him [ידעתיו], so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him. (Gen 18:17-19)[60]

In the case of Sodom, the sin of the people was just too great; Abraham's intercession could not save the people. We are thus shown that ultimately both parties involved must be active, both have a responsibility. So also is the case in Genesis 20, but this time Abimelech, and the nation represented in him, responds appropriately.

The nations will find a blessing in Abraham, when they bless Abraham. The nations will find a curse, however, when the treat Abraham lightly or disdainfully. The blessing, interestingly, does not come through Abraham's action or even in his example. The blessing is to be taken hold of by the nations themselves. This idea is important to our story (as well as Gen 12 and 26) and is nicely summarized by Biddle:

> … each of the [wife/sister] stories stresses that the patriarch is not merely an example for the nations, but the means of God's blessing and cursing. The patriarch's instrumentality is not automatic or mechanically causal, however. The patriarch does not convey blessing or cursing by his mere presence or wish: the nations are not passive recipients only. Neither do the nations appropriate blessing or cursing for themselves without the patriarch's participation. Rather, both parties bear a degree of responsibility. The patriarch may act in a manner that endangers the nations (i.e., his deception), or in a manner that offers blessing (as when he lives among them as YHWH's blessed). The patriarch presents the nations with the opportunity to choose whether they will stand in a relationship of blessing or cursing, depending on their treatment of YHWH's holy one.[61]

Such an idea, we must note, seems appropriate when we understand the divine promises that God makes to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3 in a particular way. As already noted, God promises that he will bless those who bless Abraham, and those who treat Abraham lightly will be cursed.[62] This Abimelech experiences in both senses. The promise also indicates to Abraham that all the families of the earth will "bless themselves" in him. The translation here is significant, and makes good sense given our story. As Moberly convincingly argues, the *niphal* ונברכו in Gen 12:3 is best translated in light of parallel usage in Genesis 22:18 and 26:4, cases where the

---

[60] NASB translation. Note that ונברכו (18:18) is likely better translated as a reflexive ("will bless themselves"). See discussion below.

[61] Biddle, "Endangered," 608-10, here 610.

[62] See note 59 above.

hithpael is now employed—implying a reflexive, rather than passive meaning.[63] Not only is the translation persuasive from this contextual standpoint, but it is also convincing when looked at against the larger backdrop of Genesis and our story. A central question that affects our understanding of the promises is that of who the promise benefits. It is one Moberly answers:

> ... '*For whose benefit* is the promise of blessing made?' Von Rad is clear that the promise is for the benefit of the nations, as, in a different way, is Sarna. Yet in fact, within Genesis, the nations form the backdrop against which the promise is made for the benefit of Abraham and his descendants. In the context of a hostile or indifferent world, that is, despite the nations, Abraham is promised that his walk with God will not lead to oblivion; it will lead to a people whose walk with God can receive the respect of others and a desire for emulation. The concern is not to 'save' or 'reconcile' other nations. It is to establish Israel in their midst, a people where the reality of God's presence may be acknowledged by others.[64]

In the case of Genesis 20, we must note that Abraham does not exactly present a walk with God that will "receive the respect of others and a desire for emulation." That may come in time, and perhaps has already in ways, but the main point holds: The promise is made for the benefit of Abraham, not necessarily the nations. Abraham, and the nation he will become, will be established in the midst of the nations, and the nations will recognize his special relationship with God, and that he is blessed. They, and in this case Abimelech, will find a blessing if they treat Abraham as he is, a man specially chosen by God. Abimelech receives blessing because he decided to acknowledge Abraham and bless him. We might say that he passed his test. Though he challenged Abraham's improper behaviour, Abimelech permits him free rein of the land, blesses him with wealth and possessions, and restores his wife. Abraham's role is to pray for him and Abimelech finds healing, and the curse God placed on him is removed. The story is a paradigmatic outworking of the earlier promises God made to Abraham. It confirms that God will do as he says and is loyal. To ensure that the reader understands that this loyalty is unconditional, the story makes clear that it is not because of, nor dependent upon, proper behaviour by Abraham.

In many ways, a relatively unsuspecting story proves to contain much more than an initial read might suggest. Similar stories are told three times, each time making a similar point, though with different emphases. The repetition is a heuristic tool used by the storyteller to reinforce the paradigm of how Abraham, and by extension Israel,

---

[63] See Moberly's discussion in *Bible*, 120-26; compare the recent work of his student, Grüneberg, who challenges his argument (Grüneberg, *Abraham*). Carr's review (*RBL* [2004]) provides a strong rebuttal.

[64] Moberly, *Bible*, 125-26.

will relate to the world at large. The chosen will be established in the midst of the nations and be blessed by God. The nations will receive blessing or curse, depending on how they treat this people. The blessing or curse does not depend upon the action of the chosen, though they are called to be blameless and a blessing. Neither group is to be passive. Israel is to be intercessors and, because of their prayers to God, the nations, in this case a righteous one, can live. The nations are to bless Israel, and, in doing so, they experience the blessing of God.

chapter four

AN UNCHOSEN FIGURE WHO SAVES A PEOPLE (EXODUS 2:1-10)

"And she had compassion on him and said, 'This is one of the Hebrews' children.'"
(Exodus 2:6)

In this brief chapter we examine a short story, the story of Moses' birth (Exod 2:1-10). Although not specifically an election story, here we again witness a main Israelite character—soon to be selected by God to lead his people out of Egypt—interact (if passively) with not only a non-Israelite, but the daughter of the enemy, the daughter of the one who ordered the extermination of all Israelite-born males: the Pharaoh. She is nameless in the story, but her actions speak loudly and the name she gives to Moses will forever be on the lips of not only Israel, but of all who will follow in the Abrahamic religions.[1]

A NUMEROUS AND SPECIAL PEOPLE, A PEOPLE PROMISED LAND

The immediately preceding story, that of Pharaoh's fear of and decision to 'deal wisely' with the sons of Israel, cannot be separated from ours. Indeed, without this background our story makes little sense and Moses' near death is inexplicable. Some have even argued that the material in Exodus 1 has been developed and included to build up to our story, providing a backdrop for the drama of the hero's birth story.[2] Even if we cannot be sure of its literary background or development, there is no question that the chapters are related. In fact, as I argue below, the entire section (Exod 1-2:10) is permeated with the overarching motif of life, birth, and multiplying—that is, a partial fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (e.g. Gen

[1] It is true that Islam has a slightly different view of Moses, his name (*Mūsā*) and his birth story (he is rescued/protected by Pharaoh's wife, not daughter—Sura 28:1-13), but the larger point about his importance (he is a prophet of God, forerunner to Muhammad, etc.) stands, and for ease of reference, many in a Muslim context refer to him simply as 'Moses'.

[2] Childs outlines this idea, largely following Gressmann (see Childs, *Exodus*, esp. 10-11).

12:2-3; 17:2-5). Teeming life does not exhaust God's promises, however, and the Pharaoh must also come to terms with Israel's special status (they belong to God) and that they as a people will not remain enslaved in Egypt but will go to possess a land divinely promised to their ancestors. All three items (becoming a numerous people, Israel's status as beloved, and land) are set up in these opening chapters of Exodus, and women—even non-Israelite women—act on God's behalf to enable fulfillment. Although the deity appears largely absent from the story, his presence is felt in the actions of these women, and his hand is implicitly at work, even if not directly.

THE BIRTH, THE HIDING, AND THE FINDING

The story begins with a familiar narrative prelude, a man 'takes' a woman and she conceives and gives birth to a son. The details of this case, however, are immediately distinguished from the usual OT birth pattern; the parents, though indicated to be from the house of Levi, are anonymous and the newborn receives no name himself. Despite the usual custom of mother or father naming a child at birth, this special boy receives none.[3] We might ask why the names are omitted as a later passage indicates that the parents' names are not a mystery (Exod 6:20; compare *BHS* note). It is likely that the storyteller purposely maintains the anonymity (of all the characters, e.g. the sister and daughter of Pharaoh as well) in order to emphasize the child's name given later in the story. Further, the story mentions, indeed emphasizes, the physical appearance of the boy, something rare in biblical literature. The boy is טוב.[4] So טוב is the boy, in fact, that the text implies it is the impetus for the mother's actions of hiding and providing an escape for the son that was ordered to be drowned.[5] The child was special. The child was טוב. The child must live.

One would be hard-pressed to find a commentator that does not note the parallels of the idiom כי טוב to the creative work of God in the first chapter of Genesis. To

---

[3] Of the approximately 25 occurrences of this construction in the OT (i.e. a woman is said to conceive and give birth), I know of only two other examples where the child remains nameless, though in those instances the offspring represent blessing more generally, and are not specific children to be remembered (1 Sam 2:21; 2 Kings 4:17).

[4] See below for a proposed definition.

[5] I read the relationship between the first and second clause after the *atnaḥ* in v. 2 as causative. This idea has long troubled interpreters as it is supposed that a mother should (and would) preserve the life of a newborn child regardless of appearance (e.g. Hertz, *Exodus*, 14). The writer was likely pointing to the special qualities of the soon-to-be leader. Though perhaps reading too much into the phrase כי טוב, it is not far from the mark when Macchi states that it hints at regal qualities, frequently used of sovereigns (see his, "La naissance de Moïse (Exode 2/1-10)," *ETR* 69 (1994): 399). I discuss the resonances with Gen 1 below.

be sure, a translation of 'good' has never been entirely satisfying in Genesis 1, and it is not fully adequate here either. Moral overtones cloud the term, though suitable alternatives are hard to find. 'Pleasant' or 'pleasing' are likely better, but I think the term is best understood if one considers the artisan's act of creating, forming, or fashioning an object for an intended purpose. Upon completion, the artisan will undoubtedly inspect the fashioned object closely to look for blemishes, imperfections, or features which might make it less than perfect for its intended use. In God's act of creation, we can assume that upon inspection of the newly created objects, he saw no imperfections and decided that they were טוב, without blemish, ideal for the task they were created. Perhaps the mother of the newborn in our story too looked upon the newborn child and inspected him, noticed no blemishes or defects, noticed his fine health and capacity for every newborn's intended purpose: life.[6] The child was טוב, the opposite of that which causes death, and the mother could do no other than preserve it for that which it was created. The child must live.

The link to creation in our story does not stop here, however, and again, interpreters regularly point out the otherwise unparalleled usage of the term תבה, 'ark', the vessel in which the baby is placed in order to endure the waters of the Nile. The word appears elsewhere (biblically) only in the story of Noah, the term used of the ark that preserves those God selected to keep the human race from extinction. It may not be wise to make too much of the connection (it may simply be the Hebrew term for something that floats), yet the link is suggestive. A טוב act of creation comes out of chaos in both stories (here the chaos is Pharaoh's edict of death) and an act of salvation will come through an ark that floats upon the water. Although many point to the similarities between Noah and Moses, it might also be said that the mother who devises, builds and likely seals the ark shadows Noah and the salvific activities of God.[7] Whatever the case, the contents of the little ark will bring about preservation of a people, this time a specific people. Cassuto sums up the connection between the flood event and Moses' rescue well:

> By this verbal parallelism [תבה] Scripture apparently intends to draw attention to the thematic analogy. In both instances one worthy of being saved and destined to bring

---

[6] Rashbam essentially makes the same point regarding the mother checking the newborn for imperfections, although he arrives there through different means (e.g. does not note the idea of artisanship; see Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 149).

[7] In particular I have in mind Noah's building of the ark (Gen 6:14-22), but also the theologically significant divine action of closing the ark's 'door' (Gen 7:16).

> salvation to others is to be rescued from death by drowning. In the earlier section the salvation of humanity is involved, here it is the salvation of the chosen people; in the former passage, Scripture tells of the deliverance of the macrocosm, in the latter it speaks of the deliverance of the microcosm.[8]

The storyteller continues to preserve the anonymity of the story's characters, and in enters the sister of the one now upon the waters of the Nile, placed among the reeds.[9] Obviously an older sister, this girl watches intently from a distance, waiting "to find out what would happen to him" (Exod 2:4).[10] The story now takes a dramatic twist. It is tempting to read the entrance of the next character through eyes familiar with the story. In walks the deliverer of the boy. But to read the story naively, one will notice that in walks the very daughter of the one who ordered the child's (and every other Hebrew male child's) death. The woman coming to bathe at the Nile represents the very threat to life that the child's mother sought to overcome. The reader should make no mistake. If the events were to be of a more contemporary context, the boy could be a Jewish child whom a Dutch family is hiding during World War II. In walks not merely a soldier representing Hitler and his command to exterminate, but one of his own flesh and blood. As Jonathan Sacks has said, this is "Hitler's daughter, or Eichmann's or Mussolini's, saving a Jewish child."[11]

The tension rises as the sister watches the princess 'come down' to the Nile (Exod 2:5). It rises to the fore as the daughter of Pharaoh notices the basket containing the child among the reeds and as she sends one of her maids to retrieve it. Upon opening the basket, it might legitimately be said, as Macchi has, that "l'enfant se trouve « dans la gueule du loup »..."[12] What happens next is remarkable and, if we

---

[8] Cassuto, *Exodus*, 18-19.

[9] Again, as commentators regularly point out, the mention of reeds (סוף) here could be linking to Moses' later deliverance of Israel at the Sea of Reeds (ים סוף), an allusion that is probable though not necessary for our reading.

[10] The problem of the child having an older sister despite the text's use of the standard Hebrew idiom (of a man taking, the woman conceiving and giving birth) to indicate a firstborn's birth, has exercised interpreters regularly. The suggestions are many (from the sister being of another marriage, to a temporary separation of the parents—thus Moses is the firstborn subsequent to the 're-taking') but it is likely that the storyteller was simply unconcerned with these elements, elements that would have otherwise distracted or removed emphasis from the child (James S. Ackerman, "The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story," in *Literary Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* [ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, James S. Ackerman, and Thayer S. Warshaw; Nashville: Abingdon, 1974], 89; cf. Childs, "Birth of Moses," *JBL* 84 [1965]: 115).

[11] Jonathan Sacks, "Righteousness Knows No Racial or Religious Boundaries," *The Times* (24 May 2003): 48.

[12] Macchi, "naissance," 400. Compare also the readings of Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (Kampen: Kok, 1993), esp. 268; Coats, "The Birth Tale and the Moses-Midianite Tradition," in *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1988), 43-56, esp. 44; and Trevor Dennis, "Unsung Heroines: The Women of Exodus 1-4," in *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1994), 84-114, all of whom argue that the tension climaxes here in the daughter's

pay attention to possible biblical allusions, we see that the daughter of the enemy displays actions that are often associated with Israel's God. The daughter of the Pharaoh opens the little ark, sees the child, hears its cries and has compassion. The allusions may be summarized as follows. First, the text describes the daughter as one who 'comes down' (ירד), a verb often used theologically in "theophanic descriptions of YHWH's descent to Sinai or other places where he manifests his presence and glory."[13] Although the verb may seem a natural choice for her action of going to the river, when the narrator describes Pharaoh in the same situation he uses another less theologically charged word: יצא (Exod 7:15). Second, upon opening the little ark, the daughter of pharaoh is said to see the child, and then is said to hear its cries. The act of seeing and hearing the cries of those in need are things God is said to do with Israel (Exod 3:7-9); seeing and hearing the crying child moves the daughter of Pharaoh to compassion in the same way that God is moved by the sight and sound of his people under oppression.[14] We might also note that the daughter's compassion is not dissimilar to the way God is said to hear the cries of the person whose coat is wrongfully kept in pledge (Exod 22:25-26 [26-27]). There God hears the cries of the one in need because he is compassionate. Although the terminology is not identical, the main idea is similar and the reader familiar with both texts can appreciate the connection.[15] The daughter of the enemy shows not only a 'fear of God', but shows actions akin to those of the God she fears.[16] Divine parallels are not hard to find, especially from within the story of the Exodus itself.

To make certain that the reader knows Pharaoh's daughter is fully cognizant of her audacious actions, the narrator includes her exclamation that the boy is "one of the Hebrews' children" (2:6). There is no mistaking the child for an Egyptian, and her

---

opening of the basket, the reader not having knowledge of how the daughter of Pharaoh would respond (indeed it is likely that the life of the child was in great danger). *Pace* e.g. Sarna (*The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1991), 9) and Jacob (*Exodus*, 27-28) who essentially eliminate any tension in the story by arguing that the basket was strategically placed in order that the merciful daughter would find it.

[13] Eugene H. Merrill, "ירד," *NIDOTTE* 2:534; cf. Ackerman, "Birth Story," 91-92.

[14] The term for 'compassion' here (חמל) can also carry the sense of 'spare', or 'pity'. It is usually used of one in power (towards, or withheld from, the weak) and 2 Sam 12:1-7 sheds considerable light on its meaning. There David is indicted by his own words when he states that the rich man who took the single ewe lamb from the poor man deserves to die, because "he had no compassion" (2 Sam 12:6). For further discussion, see Coats, "2 Samuel 12:1-7a," *Int* 40 (1986): 170-75, esp. 170-71.

[15] Having said that, I know of no commentary, article or other writing that makes this specific connection. The idea was suggested to me by Kaminsky, in private conversation. Compare also Ezek 8:18.

[16] I use the term 'fear of God' here, again, as convenient shorthand for faithful or appropriate action. See Hertz, *Exodus*, 16, who likewise suggests the designation (i.e. specifically says that Pharaoh's daughter "feared God").

deciding to save a child of those enslaved by her father was likely not only dangerous (especially as males were ordered to be killed) but repugnant to her peers of social status. The story is not specific with regard to what brings about her knowledge that the child is a Hebrew, but it is likely that the situation, and her knowledge of her father's order ("all his people" are said to be commanded in Exod 1:22), brings about her awareness.[17] With her statement must have come the sister's realization that the situation proved good for the child; she moves immediately, and cleverly, to suggest a way for the princess to protect the boy. For the sister there is no question of *whether* the princess will save the child; the question is one of *how*.[18] The daughter of Pharaoh agrees to the shrewd suggestion that the girl call a woman able to nurse the child from among the Hebrew women. The child would be restored, if temporarily, to its mother.

NAMING, OWNERSHIP, AND ADOPTION

The exchange that ensues between the child's mother and the daughter of Pharaoh (the agreement of wages to be paid for the mother's nursing the child) is often seen to mark another instance of irony in the story.[19] While it is hard to argue against seeing an irony in a mother being paid to nurse her own child, it is more likely, as Childs suggests, that the exchange signals something more. The contract of wages would have likely indicated to the ancient audience that the boy had become legally adopted.[20] To make this evermore clear, the storyteller then indicates that the boy grew and was presented to the daughter and '*he became a son to her*'. Although commentators occasionally argue that לבן should be read figuratively (therefore

---

[17] Rashbam suggests that it was because the boy was circumcised (cf. *Exod Rab.* 1:24). Rashi notes the talmudic idea that Pharaoh's daughter "saw the Shechina with him" (*Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary: Exodus* [London: Shapiro, Vallentine & Co., 1946], 7; from *b. Sotah* 12b). This latter reading determines that the seemingly superfluous pronominal suffix on ותראהו (2:6a) is followed not by the direct object marker (אֶת) but by the preposition אֵת, 'with' (ותראהו את הילד—'and she saw Him *with* the child')—not an impossible reading, though perhaps lacking plausibility in context. For a different understanding of the construction here, consult Cassuto, *Exodus*, 19, and John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Dallas: Word, 1987), 14, both of whom regard it to indicate a stylistic emphasis.

[18] Various interpreters make much of the sister's actions; Childs, for instance, states that her patient watching of the little ark showed "a deep sense of faith in the ultimate will of God" ("Birth," 121); Macchi ("naissance," 400) remarks that the sister becomes "l'actrice principale du récit"; Exum takes special notice of the sister's quick and persuasive words and concludes, "the sister deserves as much credit for saving Moses as her mother or the princess" ("'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10," *Semeia* 28 (1993): 77).

[19] The ironies of the story are said to abound; see e.g. the list of eight by Fretheim, *Exodus*, 37. While I appreciate the idea of ironies in the story more generally, note my reservation below with regard to the contract for nursing the child.

[20] See his "Birth," 109-22, esp. 113-14.

implying the relationship was informal: 'he became *like* a son to her'), such a distinction is moot.[21] The Hebrew boy was—for all intents and purposes—a son to the daughter of Pharaoh. If we had any reason to doubt, the text uses the finale to erase any doubt that the child belonged to her: she names him.[22] This name, the subject of much debate, signals her ownership but also the theme of this and the wider story: life. The boy will live. And so will Israel.[23]

The name we render 'Moses' (מֹשֶׁה) is explained in the text as a Hebrew name, or at least one that has assonances to a Hebrew verb meaning 'to draw' or 'pull' (מָשָׁה). The daughter names the child so because she has pulled him from the water.[24] The story apparently sees no problem with an Egyptian not only speaking Hebrew, but also using the foreign language to name her adopted child. Perhaps we might adduce this to be creative and skillful storytelling, not dissimilar to contemporary films that depict (for example) German officers in World War II speaking English (usually with an accent). The name, however, is also clearly Egyptian.[25] It is similar to many other princes or pharaohs' names in antiquity, despite missing its counterpart genitive proper noun. It means 'son', 'living-one', or perhaps simply 'child' (from the Egyptian root *msi*, 'to give birth'). Although 'Ramose' means Son of the Egyptian sun-god Ra, and 'Thutmose' may mean Son of Thut, the daughter of Pharaoh excludes an accompanying title. Though not mentioned as such in the narrative itself, we might surmise that to Pharaoh's daughter the Hebrew boy is simply son, or child, *her* child. The Egyptian name also points to a theme I have

---

[21] Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 152, nicely handles this issue; compare Childs, *Exodus*, 6.

[22] So Houtman (*Exodus*, 1:288): "That she regards him as her own is brought out by the fact that she gives him a name ..."

[23] Note that Pharaoh's death-edict regarding all newborn Israelite males (Exod 1:22) completely disappears with the story. It is plausible, as tentatively proposed by Fretheim (*Exodus*, 37), that the actions of Pharaoh's daughter were a public demonstration that positively influenced the situation.

[24] Note that the daughter's explanation implies a passive participle (מָשׁוּי—'one drawn out') when Moses' name is in fact an active participle (מֹשֶׁה—'one who draws out'). Ackerman ("Birth Story," 94-95) suggests that Pharaoh's daughter reveals a poor knowledge of Hebrew, and the narrator is mocking her. Exum nicely handles the charge by pointing out that many Hebrew names have only a loose connection to various verbs or nouns based on assonances, often forming puns (e.g. Cain, Noah, Abraham, Samuel, etc.). Thus, under Ackerman's model, even Hebrews do not know their own language very well (see further her "You," 79-80).

[25] That the name is Egyptian has gained something of a consensus (see major commentaries), though note the recent hesitations of Yoshiyuki Muchiki, *Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic* (SBLDS 173; Atlanta: SBL, 1999), 216-17, and Hoffmeier, "Moses and the Exodus," in *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: University Press, 1996), 140-41, who point out that Egyptian names (e.g. toponyms) with the consonant *s* are typically represented in Hebrew by the *samek*, not *shin* (in the end, based on exceptions, Hoffmeier allows for Egyptian derivation, while Muchiki remains unconvinced).

suggested earlier: life. Although the storyteller seems unaware of the link, Moses is 'one who lives', an indicator of Israel's future. We turn now to that theme.[26]

Hughes has argued that Moses' name is intricately linked into the larger theme, or leitmotif of the story. Drawing upon the work of Willi-Plein, who rightly notices that the term ילד permeates the story (verbally 'to bear, give birth'; as a noun, 'child'), Hughes argues that Moses' name indicates, in the face of the story's overarching threat of death, the 'life' he symbolizes and will 'draw-out'.[27] He states:

> The apex of the plot tension maintains a strict focus upon the child and the king's daughter. The tension centers on whether the child will or will not be allowed to continue to live. It is the previous narrative context of Exod 1:8-22 that defines this tension, because the Moses birth story assumes in its present shape the edict of the Egyptian king to submerge Hebrew male children. A meaning for מֹשֶׁה (Moses) that relates the themes of "life" and "birth," as the Egyptian derivation does, is ideally suited to this pervasive *leitmotif.* Denouement does not occur within this microplot until it is clear that the child will be preserved and his life will not be harmed. ...
>
> The naming of מֹשֶׁה is a technique used to develop his character. Although an appellation relating to "birth" and "life" (as with the Egyptian one) would be most fitting for the narrative and follows logically from an analysis of the episode's plot and characterization, the narrator hooks a meaning upon the root that foreshadows the life of this somewhat ambiguous child. As one who was "drawn out," he also will "draw out," in the impending contest between the forces of Pharaoh and Israel's descendants at the Exodus event. Isa. 63:11 remembers מֹשֶׁה as the one who "brought them up through the sea." The literary portrayal of the naming of Moses can be understood by the equation: *name equals vocation.*[28]

The idea that Moses' name signals both life (when he should have been killed) and his vocation (one who will draw God's people out) is all the more powerful when we return to the idea that it is not a name given to him by his natural birthparents, announced through an angel, or otherwise divinely given or changed. The name comes by way of the enemy, at least the daughter of the enemy. It is not without

---

[26] Here, and in what follows, I stray from a strict narrative-critical reading of the story and permit a modern reader-response (i.e. what Moses' name means in Egyptian, something of no noticeable concern to the storyteller) to contribute to the discussion.

[27] See Paul Edward Hughes, "Moses' Birth Story: A Biblical Matrix for Prophetic Messianism," in *Eschatology, Messianism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Peter A. Flint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 10-22, and Ina Willi-Plein, "Ort und literarische Funktion der Geburtsgeschichte des Mose," *VT* 41 (1991): 110-18. Note as well the idea of Macchi ("naissance," 401) who argues that the Egyptian name 'Moses' and the verb from which it is derived (*msi*) represent an exact equivalent to Hebrew ילד: 'child'; 'to bear, give birth'.

[28] Hughes, "Moses'" 17, 21.

significance that God is absent from the story.[29] It is true that God's absence here and throughout helps to build to the importance of Moses' encounter with him at the burning bush (Exod 3), but it also implies that God *is* working, but through characters the reader might least expect. In the earlier story, it is the midwives who prove to fear God and they ensure that Pharaoh's initial plan to oppress and extinguish God's people is thwarted. The identity of these women has been something of a mystery, and commentators have long debated whether they are Hebrew or Egyptian.[30] If we allow Egyptian identity, the people are helped by non-Israelites who, moreover, are women. In our story there is no doubt that the main character who saves the special boy is Egyptian, and this god-fearer, if we permit the title, is also female. Although much has rightly been made of the importance of female characters in these stories,[31] I think there is equally much to be said for the fact that they are not from within, but are outsiders who bless Israel. These characters belong with those of Rahab, Jethro, and Uriah the Hittite. We know nothing about Pharaoh's daughter apart from this story as the Bible, despite its interest here, relegates her by not referring to her again. She is never named and, despite this adding dramatic effect and climax to the naming of Moses in the story, it is regrettable that the ancient writers and shapers of the canon include nothing more (assuming they had something to include). Tradition has, however, at least from time to time, honoured this heroine of Israel's past and called her blessed. Perhaps the most important tradition is one that Sacks mentions, a

---

[29] Probably the most comprehensive reading of God's absence from Exod 1-2 is that of Donald E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 1-24.

[30] The issue largely boils down to vowel pointing in 1:15: MT points the text לַמְיַלֶּדֶת הָעִבְרִיֹּת, thus "Hebrew midwives", though the consonantal texts permits a substantive (so LXX, Vulg.: "midwives *of* the Hebrew women"). The midwives' names (they appear to be Hebrew) as well as details of the episode (e.g. the midwives' response to the Pharaoh in 1:19 likely suggests they are not Hebrew) also come in to play. For more on the problem, consult Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:251-52 and James Plastaras, *The God of Exodus: The Theology of the Exodus Narratives* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1966), 40-41. Compare our reading with Exum, "You," 72.

[31] Feminist readings of Exod 1-2 abound; see e.g. Dennis, "Unsung," 84-114, 185-88; Jopie Siebert-Hommes, "But if She Be a Daughter ... She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1-2," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (ed. Athalya Brenner; FCB 6; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1994), 62-74; and less detailed, but still notable, Phyllis Trible, "The Pilgrim Bible on a Feminist Journey," *PSB* 11 (1990): 232-39. The most important, complete, and insightful exposition to my mind is that of Exum, "You," 63-82. In the end her conclusions are not all that different from ours (see esp. her words on pp. 80-81). Note her later reflections ("Second Thoughts About Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8-2.10," in *Feminist Companion to Exodus*, 75-87), however, where she regrets aspects of the article because it does not call into question enough how the male shapers of the story promote that women can be heroic, but only through traditional, relegated, female roles like child-bearing, rearing, etc. (and then are dismissed from the story). She complains that such gender politics are deeply problematic in that the text still oppresses women—subtly, though powerfully. The importance of her earlier work, to my mind, still stands, despite my existential agreement with the thrust of her complaint. My reading wishes to acknowledge the problem of the text's antique ideology while still working within in it—even if aspects must be overcome.

midrash that links the nameless daughter of Pharaoh to 1 Chronicles 4:18. Her name there is worth recalling: Bityah, "daughter of YHWH." The midrash explains the meaning and significance through words of God: "Moses was not your son, but you called him your son. You are not My daughter, but henceforth I shall call you My daughter."[32]

Summary and Conclusion

Given that one of the most important figures in the Bible, central to Judaism and Christianity, owes his life to the compassionate actions of a foreign princess, we would do well to acknowledge the contribution her actions make not only to Israel's future, but to the worldview of Scripture. A non-Israelite like herself shows that despite the actions of those in power who deal oppressively with Israel, indeed even when that power is your father, one individual can make a difference. The unnamed daughter not only fears God but in this story acts for him. Trible has noted, quite rightly, that this princess also models the way for the leader to be:

> "She draws him out of the water, thereby becoming herself the first deliverer of the Hebrew people. She models for Moses his forthcoming role. The daughter of Pharaoh aligns herself with the daughters of Israel. She breaks filial allegiance, crosses clan lines, and obliterates racial and political differences."[33]

The story of Pharaoh's daughter has contemporary significance when we recognize that often it may seem that God is absent from the story. Although he acts mightily to bring plagues that reduce Pharaoh to his knees and he will guide Israel as a visible fiery pillar, in our story his hand is seen only through the faithful actions of the few. Although not answering every difficulty in times of unbearable oppression, we can hope that the actions of god-fearers in times of turmoil reveal that God *is* at work in the world. The modern-day work of Yad Vashem, for example, which recognizes the importance of such actions, honours those gentiles who risked their lives to save Jews during World War II. In a case like Pharaoh's daughter, the rabbinic dictum, taken up by Yad Vashem, truly holds: "Whoever saves one life is as though he had saved the entire world."[34] In our story it is a she—an Egyptian she.

---

[32] *Lev Rab.* 1:3 (cf. *Exod Rab.* 1:26). See also Sacks, "Righteousness," 48.
[33] Trible, "Pilgrim," 238.
[34] *M. Sanh.* 4:5. Yad Vashem uses the dictum as a motto regarding the actions of the 'righteous among the nations'.

The unchosen again appear to have a duty to bless God's special people and treating them lightly will result in a curse from God.[35] Pharaoh and his people experience the latter 10 times, the culmination of which is the plague that took away their every first-born son. Pharaoh's own daughter overcomes treating Israel lightly, and though recognizing that the abandoned boy was a Hebrew child—one ordered to be drowned in the Nile—she is instead moved with compassion and acts to deliver him. An act of compassion, it seems, means everything; one might surmise that it is the opposite of 'treating lightly'. This unnamed daughter is a righteous gentile (to use an anachronistic term) and she holds an important position in Israel's story. In a study interested in how the unchosen contribute to the Bible's worldview and to the chosen people or person's position (and how such characters respond to what might be a test), it is appropriate to highlight such a character. Her dangerous act of compassion brought life in a time of death, and, in the end, brought about the deliverance of God's special people. In this case the unchosen ensures that the life of the chosen will continue. One seemingly small act delivers a people.

"And she had compassion …"

[35] For more on my use of the term 'treat lightly' (i.e. as it relates to Gen 12:3), see Chapter 3 above.

chapter five

NUMBERS: BALAAM AND YHWH'S IRREVOCABLE LOVE FOR ISRAEL

Interest in the so-called Book of Balaam has surged recently, due in no small part to the discovery of the Deir 'Alla plaster inscriptions, texts that give substantive background to the biblical character Balaam—a non-Israelite seer who speaks to the gods at night and brings their message to the people.[1] In many ways, the Book could stand alone as a discrete unit and, as many have argued, the larger plot of the book of Numbers is not affected by its placement or removal.[2] As we shall see, however, the Balaam story and the oracles he speaks have been preserved in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures with good reason; they contain some of the most, if not *the* most, beautiful and profound statements of the LORD's irrevocable love for his people Israel. All the more interesting are the oracles because they are spoken not only by a non-Israelite, but by one of the most reviled and distrusted of non-Israelites in Jewish-Christian history.

NUMBERS AND THE BOOK OF BALAAM

Although our study is primarily interested in the final form of the text (without particular attention to the sources that gave rise to this corpus), in many ways the Book of Balaam deserves special attention as accounts of its source-critical history suggest a confused and complicated picture. The oracles' Hebrew is of an older archaic form, its use of the divine names YHWH and Elohim (as well as *el, 'elyon,*

---

[1] For more on the Deir 'Alla Texts (DAT), consult the convenient reconstruction and translation presented by Meindert Dijkstra, "Is Balaam Also Among the Prophets?" *JBL* 114 (1995): 46-51, based largely upon the earlier work of Hoftijzer and van der Kooij. Balaam is there called a 'seer of the gods' (*ḥzh. 'lhn*; DAT I.1) who delivers their message to the people (see DAT I:1-7ff). The biblical depiction of Balaam's role will be discussed below.

[2] For instance, as Milgrom ("Numbers," *ABD* 4:1147) avers, Num 22-24 "has absolutely no verbal or thematic link with the contiguous chapters;" or as Rösel ("Wie einer vom Propheten zum Verführer wurde: Tradition und Rezeption der Bileamgestalt," *Bib* 80 [1999]: 508) states, "wenn man ihn entfernen würde, wäre sein Fehlen wohl nicht zu bemerken."

and *shaddai*) is peculiar, and pre-modern traditions' widespread agreement that the Book is an independent composition argues for the Book's independent status.[3] Indeed, if taken at face value, the story assumes the perspective (or at least gives a window into that) of a non-Israelite, not the Torah's assumed author/narrator, Moses. The topic could occupy the bulk of our chapter or even an entire study itself; we therefore limit our comments to a few brief points that bear on our discussion.

It might be argued that Numbers 22-24 has challenged aspects of the traditional JEDP theory more than any other section of the Pentateuch. Once believed to reflect the strands J and E, depending on divine name usage, many now believe the passage to be independent of J-E altogether (though some regard it to reflect all J, or even all E alone);[4] further; many regard the donkey episode to be an interpolation, not part of the original story, though not necessarily reflecting J or E.[5] This latter idea too, however, has been challenged.[6] Based on the episode's contribution to the overall story's ingenuity, the donkey episode is important for understanding what takes place later in the story: Balak's three time blindness—similar to Balaam's on the donkey.[7]

---

[3] Close examination of divine name usage within the story is outside the scope of our study, though I will discuss instances of particular theological significance below. Traditions that regard the Book of Balaam to be an independent composition from the Torah include e.g. *b. Bava Batra* 14b.

[4] Van Seters regards Num 22-24 (less the donkey episode) to be J ("From Faithful Prophet to Villain: Observations on the Tradition History of the Balaam Story," in *A Biblical Itinerary: In Search of Method, Form, Content: Essays in Honor of George W. Coats* [ed. Eugene E. Carpenter; JSOTSup 240; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997], 126-32) while Friedman (with the exception of 22:1), regards the entire section to be E (*Who Wrote the Bible?* [London: Jonathan Cape, 1987], 253). The toppling of J-E attribution to Num 22-24 is conveniently laid out, with bibliography, by Meindert Dijkstra, "The Geography of the Story of Balaam: Synchronic Reading as a Help to Date a Biblical Text," in *Synchronic or Diachronic:A Debate on Method in Old Testament Exegesis* (ed. Johannes C. de Moor; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 72-75; it also receives reasonable attention in Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21-36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 4a; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 137-38, 207, et passim. Modern works that assume J-E strand differentiation abound, though more recent comparable views are not uncommon (see e.g. Hackett's description of the 'consensus' in her "Balaam," *ABD* 1:569-70; and the similar remarks of Ira Clark, "Balaam's Ass: Suture or Structure?" in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis and James S. Ackerman; Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 137-44, esp. 143; and Arthur E. Zannoni, "Balaam: International Seer/Wizard Prophet," *SLJT* 22:D (1978): 5-19). A notable recent revival of the J-E source theory regarding Num 22-24 is Ludwig Schmidt, "Bileam: vom Seher zum Propheten Jahwes: die literarischen Schichten der Bileam-Perikope (Num 22-24)," in *Gott und Mensch im Dialog: Festschrift fur Otto Kaiser zum 80. Geburtstag* (ed. Markus Witte; BZAW 345; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 333-51.

[5] The independence of the donkey episode is often taken as established without due attention to theological themes or respect for the narrator's skill; see e.g. the remarks of Seebass, "Zur literarischen Gestalt der Bileam-Perikope," *ZAW* 107 (1995): 411, who regards the episode's independence to be "indisputable" (unbestreitbar).

[6] See e.g. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1981), esp. 166; Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment* (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 147-49; and further below.

[7] The 'thrice blind' motif has been noticed more recently by many, probably in large part due to the work of Alter (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981], 104-07). Compare Michael L. Barré, "The Portrait of Balaam in Numbers 22-24," *Int* 51 (1997): 260-61; Moberly, "On Learning to be a True Prophet: The Story of Balaam and His Ass," in *New Heaven and*

Further, what many interpreters miss, even those who recognize source criticism's failure to account for the peculiar divine name usage, is the contribution the name usage makes to the story's overall impression; for example, although Balaam refers to God as YHWH, it is Elohim who (usually) approaches him. Such usage likely indicates the narrator's desire (and skill) to confirm that it was indeed Israel's God that inspired Balaam, yet Balaam's relationship to their God was not covenantal. While such a model is not without its problems, it makes best sense of the material to understand such aspects theologically, that is, having interpretative significance in their own right, rather than indicating the text's prehistory, as we shall see.

Perhaps more important for our purposes, however, is the question of the Book's placement within the larger context of Numbers. What purpose does the story have within this multifaceted and, at least prima facie, not very coherent book? Was the story included perhaps out of necessity as a testimony to something significant within Israel's history, otherwise of little sense contextually? Or was the story strategically placed to emphasize something important to the larger issue of rebellion in Numbers: God's love for Israel is unfailing and irrevocable, even when the people rebels?

Olson's recent proposal has gained widespread support, and with good reason.[8] Understanding the book of Numbers not strictly through geographical setting, or viewing it as a disharmonious whole, Olson argues that the book is best understood as the story of two Israelite generations—the rebellious generation, and the new generation that will possess the Promised Land. The former rebellious generation is repeatedly disobedient and will die off in the wilderness; even Moses, Aaron, and Miriam find themselves grouped therein. The new generation, on the other hand, will experience life and fidelity and will enter the Promised Land; of this generation, not one is said to die and they meet success in battle and conquest. Olson's thesis is compelling in that it accounts for the bulk of the material in a way no other proposal does, and uses the otherwise auxiliary census lists to divide the book. The thesis also assists our understanding of those stories in Numbers that may otherwise read incoherently within the larger book; here in particular Olson's thesis helps with Numbers 22-24. The Balaam story might initially not seem to fit Olson's plan, yet he

---

New Earth: Prophecy and the Millennium. Essays in Honour of Anthony Gelston (ed. Peter J. Harland and C. T. R. Hayward; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 14-15, and my (limited) interaction with it below.

[8] Dennis T. Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch* (BJS 71; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985); compare also his concise and helpful recent summaries: "Negotiating Boundaries: The Old and New Generations and the Theology of Numbers," *Int* 51 (1997): 229-40; and "Numbers, Book of," *DOTP* 611-18.

convincingly explains how Balaam, the divine promises spoken through him, as well as the immediately following apostasy at Peor fit the overall proposal:

> In face of the demonstration of the extreme fidelity of God to preserving the welfare of his people in Numbers 22-24, the incident in Numbers 25 stresses the fickle and shallow faith of God's people. The people have every reason to be hopeful and faithful. The Balaam oracles describe the glorious future which is theirs as they stand on the threshold of the promised land. The setting is a replay of the spy story in Numbers 13-14 where the people likewise had every reason to have hope and trust in God. And yet the Israelites quickly and easily turned from their God in apostasy. The Balaam narrative describes how even an ass can recognize an angel of God and how even a pagan seer can see God and do his will. The same cannot be said of this generation of God's own people. Balaam sees glorious visions of a great future. The Israelites see only their own people playing the harlot with the daughters of Moab and Midian in apostasy (Num 25:1-3, 6-7). In short, the immediate literary context of the Balaam story in Numbers 22-24 serves to heighten the contrast between the faithfulness of God in continuing his promises to the people … and the [un]faithfulness of the people…[9]

We leave this idea for the moment but will develop it below, bringing it to the fore in our conclusion.

THE TEXT: NUMBERS 22-24

The story itself is relatively straightforward. A king fears the greatness of Israel and decides to acquire the assistance of a great diviner to curse the people, with a view towards victory in battle. The diviner eventually comes, but will only bless the people he is asked to curse because of his relationship to Israel's God and a divine constraint placed upon him. The details of the story, however, are what give it flavour and, as I argue, determine how it should be read. We turn then, to look briefly at the opening narration describing Balak's fear and then Balak's call of Balaam, before examining the interchange between the emissaries and Balaam, Balaam and God, and Balaam with the donkey and Angel. In doing so, a picture of both Balak and Balaam arises that enables us to understand their characters, which in turn gives us insight into the overall story and words Balaam speaks.

Balak, His Fear, and His Big Idea

The text identifies Balak, son of Zippor, as the king of Moab (22:4) though the text interchanges his name with that of his people (מואב, 'Moab'), a people who

---

[9] Olson, *Old*, 159-60. Compare his later summarizations ("Negotiating," esp. 232-33 and "Numbers, Book of," esp. 612).

collectively fear (גור) and dread (קוץ) Israel's greatness.[10] The king's name is something of an enigma, not attested elsewhere and is probably based upon a rare Hebrew verb (בלק).[11] It likely means 'one who destroys', 'lays waste', or 'devastates'.[12] If true, his failure in being able to do so to Israel is all the more ironic. The cause of Moab's fear and dread is worth noting, as the reader will remember another time in Israel's life when such dread overcame a ruler and his people: Pharoah in Egypt. In fact, some of the wording here is clearly reminiscent of the earlier story; like Pharaoh, Moab is in fear because of the numerical greatness (רב) and might (עצום) of Israel (compare Num 22:3,6 with Exod 1:9), and both leaders fear that Israel's numbers will bring about their defeat in war (Exod 1:10 and, metaphorically, Num 22:4).[13] Both rulers, in their own way, seek to overcome the problem by devising a strategy against Israel (compare Exod 1:10-14 with Num 22:4-6) but fail to recognize that their efforts challenge YHWH's fundamental strategy of blessing Abraham (and thus Israel): Abraham's descendants will become a numerous people (Gen 12:2, 15:5, 17:2-6, etc.).[14] The plan of Balak, like that of Pharaoh, has no chance of success if YHWH is true to his promises.

Clearly unaware (or unconvinced) of this larger promise to bless Israel, Balak sends his messengers to Balaam, a man who Balak knows can bless and curse with authority (22:6). Balak's trust in Balaam's ability seems to play on words also important to the original promises to Abraham. Balak states that 'the one you [Balaam] bless is blessed, and the one you curse is cursed," reminiscent of the wording at Gen 12:3, spoken inversely of Abraham. With these words Balak assumes

---

[10] Biblical usage of the relatively uncommon verbs here gives the sense of 'to be afraid' (not 'to revere'—compare e.g. Job 19:29) and 'to be weary' or 'distressed' (compare e.g. Gen 27:46) respectively.

[11] All biblical references to Balak are either contained in the present story, or refer to it.

[12] The symbolic meaning here is speculation (perhaps nothing more than 'fanciful speculation', as Levine says), based upon the root verb בלק ('to devastate'; compare Isa 24:1; Nah 2:11). See the comments of Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 143-44; compare the strange comments of Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 443, who matter-of-factly states that information about Balak's name is "of little value, since parents in the ancient Near East named their children before their personalities or life's work became apparent." Although placing too much emphasis on a name's meaning is unwise, biblical names often contribute something very important to a story's overall character, as e.g. is the case in Gen 4 and the character 'Abel' (הבל).

[13] And note the parallel use in Exod 1:12 of the verb 'dread' (קוץ) which grips the Egyptians. Compare as well the use of the idiom in 22:5 (and 22:11), where Israel is said to 'cover the eye of the land' (כסה את עין הארץ); the only other biblical usage of the idiom is found in Exod 10:5 where the locusts are said to do the same.

[14] The point is made similarly by Ackerman, "Numbers," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1987), 86.

Balaam's power and reputation, and the messengers of Balak set out on their task. But the reader may wonder exactly who Balak is soliciting. Will he *really* be able to curse God's blessed people? Who is this man of great esteem, one who is said to bless and curse with proficiency?

Balaam: Prophet, Diviner, Sorcerer, or Seer?

Much scholarly ink has been spilled on the question over the years and yet, in the end, such efforts often yield little fruit in aiding one's interpretation of the story. But, because the question affects our understanding of the non-Israelite, his status before God and his words, we make a few brief observations.

Much of the problem in determining the role Balaam plays relates to *title* verses *function*. Elsewhere in the Bible, Balaam is called *the diviner* (הקוסם—Josh 13:22), though it is difficult to know whether the title is original or something developed within the negative traditions that rose up against Balaam, applied almost as a later reason for his execution (cf. Deut 18:9-14).[15] Within the story itself, Balaam is not referred to as diviner, though it is arguable that the divinations (קסמים) the elders of Moab and Midian take to Balaam show that they presuppose the role.[16] Milgrom goes to great lengths to argue that Balaam fulfilled the role of diviner, but not sorcerer (מכשף); that is, he could foretell the future, but could not alter it.[17] Milgrom argues that when Balaam finally casts off his divinations in Numbers 24:1, he rises to the level of prophet. Moore, in his extensive work on the subject, determines that Balaam fulfills a number of roles, most prominently those of diviner/seer and exorcist. He reacts strongly against efforts to formulate Balaam as prophet (something he calls 'nabi-izing') as he believes such attempts incorrectly narrow his role, usually producing bipolar views of his character.[18]

Part of the problem also relates to the expectations of the king, and the actual practice of Balaam in the story. Balak may believe that Balaam can bless and curse

---

[15] The tendency to view this title as a strike against Balaam, i.e. he is a diviner, therefore a wicked, detestable, idolatrous, even demonic magician deserving death, is promulgated by a number of interpreters. A characteristic example is Ronald B. Allen, "The Theology of the Balaam Oracles," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg* (ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg; Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 79-119, esp. 115, note 22.

[16] So Hackett, "Balaam," 1:570. See note 27 below for more on the meaning of the term.

[17] See his excursus dedicated to the subject, in "Numbers," 4:471-73.

[18] The primary work is Moore's *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development* (SBLDS 113; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), though consult also his "Another Look at Balaam," *Revue biblique* 97 (1990): 359-78 and his "Balaam the 'Prophet?'," *ResQ* 39 (1997): 101-06, the latter of which is a tirade on the work of Dijkstra, "Is Balaam," 43-64, and his tendency to 'nabi-ize' Balaam.

efficaciously, yet it is not clear, prior to the story, whether Balaam can do so at will or whether he can only speak truth as he divines it. The drama of the story hinges, however, upon the very real nature of the threatening curse (that is, Balaam's words must have real power); to eliminate this dimension is to relieve the tension of the story, something the storyteller does not do.[19] If we look at Balaam's actual function in the story, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that if Balaam were from Israel, he would be called a prophet (נביא). Balaam's avowal that he will only speak what God 'puts in his mouth' (Num 22:38; compare 23:5, 16) reflects the phraseology and spirit of the paradigmatic description of true prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:18 (compare Isa 51:16; 59:21; and Jer 1:9).[20] Further, Balaam only speaks in the name of YHWH and, from the perspective of Israel, Balaam's words come true—fulfilling the two prime criteria for authentic YHWH prophecy in Israel (Deut 18:20-22).[21]

To be sure, the term נביא is never applied to Balaam in the OT, though here we would do well to adhere to Rendtorff's warnings against assuming a uniform pattern of prophecy in the OT, or focusing too narrowly on the term.[22] Further, there is good reason to believe, as Yaure argues and others corroborate, that Numbers 22:5 contains an old (Aramaic) identification of Balaam as a *pathorah*, a 'diviner' or 'interpreter' (of dreams and oracles), something not altogether negative (though even if a place name as MT states, it may symbolically mean 'land of interpretation').[23] If we allow

---

[19] For more on the very real nature of blessing and cursing (rather than simply declaring what is already determined) as it relates to Balaam, see Grüneberg, *Abraham*, 22-33, esp. 23. Compare the words of Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 327, who states: "Balaam's curses have the reputation for hitting the mark. Obviously the Hebrew writer shares the belief, which he attributes to Balaḳ, in the objective power of the curse."

[20] Hackett, "Balaam," 1:569; Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 167. Although Deut 18 speaks of the prophet raised up from *within* Israel, it also includes criteria by which other prophets of YHWH can be recognized.

[21] This is of course a simplification of a difficult issue (i.e. how do we determine if prophecy, or a prophet, is authentic?), something we cannot address here. See further the comprehensive study by Moberly, *Prophecy*, though aspects of his thesis will be questioned below.

[22] Rendtorff, "נָבִיא in the Old Testament," *TDOT* 6:796-812; see especially his introductory comments (796), where he states:

> Attention is focused almost exclusively on נָבִיא with its derived verbal forms, but this covers only one part of what is to be called prophecy in the OT and it is notably less prominent in the most important area, that of the so-called writing prophets. The material problem is chiefly that there are on the one side institutional prophets who appear in groups or individually and who are linked in all kinds of ways, but that on the other side the most striking prophetic figures are individuals who bear little or no discernible relationship to institutional prophecy. The sources often enable us to draw no very solid conclusions.

[23] L. Yaure, "Elymas-Nehelamite-Pethor," *JBL* 79 (1960): 310-314; compare Scott C. Layton, "Whence Comes Balaam? Num 22,5 Revisited," *Bib* 73 (1992): 32-61, and Barré, "Portrait," 256. See the important comparable Hebrew verb (פתר) used of Joseph in Gen 40-41. Further, note that Balaam makes use of נחש, ('divination' or 'omen reading'—Num 23:23; 24:1), something also seemingly

the inscriptions at Deir 'Alla to bear on the subject, it is interesting that there Balaam is called a 'seer of the gods' (DAT I:1) and he weeps at the message he is given (DAT I:3-4)—an action not unfamiliar to readers of the OT, used by a YHWH prophet to arouse interest in the coming message.[24] Here we do well to remember that 1 Samuel 9:9 notes that prophets (נביא) were formerly called 'seers' (ראה) in Israel and, on another plain, even if the elders and Balak sought to pay Balaam, such practice towards prophets was customary elsewhere in the OT.[25] At any rate, the story of Numbers 22-24 itself neither disqualifies Balaam as a prophet nor directly confirms the official role. For these reasons it is best to say that confirmation of a prophetic role is possible, though not official.[26]

The Call of Balaam and the Donkey Episode

The elders depart to meet Balaam bringing their own divinations, perhaps in the hope of aiding the diviner in his solicited task.[27] After repeating the words of the king to Balaam, Balaam indicates his need to consult YHWH in the matter. Elohim appears to Balaam and asks, as if unknowing (similar to the divine questioning of Cain in Gen 4:9), who the men are that are with him. Balaam repeats the request of the men to have him curse the people that came out of Egypt, in order that Balak might drive them from the land. Although Balaam indicates that he knows the God that appears to him by his personal name, YHWH (and later calls him 'my God'),[28] it is not clear that he knows of the special relationship YHWH has with this people. Had Balaam

---

practiced by Joseph (Gen 44:5, 15—a point made by Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1990), 472).

[24] For more on the Balaam of the Deir 'Alla inscriptions resembling a biblical prophet, see Dijkstra, "Is Balaam," 43-64, esp. 60-64 (though note Moore's criticisms—see note 18 above), and Hackett, "Some Observations on the Balaam Tradition at Deir 'Alla," *BA* 49 (1986): 216-22 (see the supplements therein by Thompson as well). On weeping as a prophet's tool, see 2 Kgs 8:11-13 and the discussions of Jacob Hoftijzer, "Prophet Balaam in a 6th Century Aramaic Inscription," *BA* 39 (1976): 14 and Dijkstra, "Is Balaam," 52-53.

[25] On the latter point, see Grüneberg, *Abraham*, 27, who points to 1 Sam 9:8; 1 Kgs 14:3; 2 Kgs 5:5-6 and 8:8-9.

[26] For more on the idea that 'prophet' may be properly applied to Balaam (provided appropriate nuance is observed), consult the summary of Moberly, "Learning," 5.

[27] The issue of whether קסמים means divinations, rather than 'fees for divination' is discussed by many. The plain (even if difficult) reading is best, as it makes better sense of the leaders' next visit, where, had they been bringing payment in the first visit, it would have been natural to state that the leaders brought greater (fees for) divinations, which it does not. In any case, even if rendered as the majority of translations do ('fees for'), the fees do not automatically indicate greed on Balaam's part but simply the desire of Moab to secure Balaam's services. For more on the issue, consult (among the many), Moore, *Balaam Traditions*, 98, note 8; Moberly, "Learning," 3-4; and Vermes, "The Story of Balaam: The Scriptural Origin of Haggadah," in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (StPB; Leiden: Brill, 1973), 130-31; *pace* Ashley, *Numbers*, 447.

[28] As Moberly ("Learning," 2) comments: "God speaks to Balaam in familiar terms — this is no first meeting or giving of vocation, but a dialogue between those who already know each other."

known, it would have been natural for him to call the people 'your people Israel' rather than to repeat the words of Balak. Elohim's response comes without delay: Balaam is not to accompany the men to curse the people for "they are blessed" (22:12). Although Balaam indicates to the messengers that YHWH will not permit him to go, they simply return to their king with the message that Balaam refused to come (22:13-14).

The second, more numerous and honourable, set of leaders that Balak sends now indicates that the king will pay a great price to have Balaam come and curse the people. Balaam's immediate response is straightforward; no amount of money will persuade him to go, only the command of YHWH his God. Balaam again indicates his need to consult YHWH on the matter, to see what YHWH might add to his initial command. And so, with Balaam's response, begins interpreters' "microscopic over-readings" of the text.[29]

What actually happens is often missed by interpreters. Balaam does not plead with God to go a second time (at least the text does not indicate so), but Elohim approaches Balaam at night with the words: "Since the men have come to call you, rise up, go with them; but only the word which I speak to you will you do." Some, because of God's later anger (22:22), believe God's command was not genuine, or indicates a "complex and ironic tone," telling Balaam "the very thing he wants to hear."[30] Another interpreter makes much of the particle that introduces God's words: אם (if); the idea is that the command was conditional and Balaam did not wait for the call of the men in the morning—he simply rose up, saddled his donkey and went without being called. God's anger was thus justified.[31] Part of the reasoning for reading the entire exchange between God and Balaam negatively toward Balaam, derives from God's later anger (to be discussed below) and that Balaam approaches God a second time, seeking to have words added to his original command. The line of thinking here is that Balaam should have immediately dismissed the men (i.e. Balaam has already been told that Israel is blessed) and further, Balaam's desire to

---

[29] The phraseology is Levenson's (*Death*, 72), used of interpreters regarding Cain and Gen 4. Whether Levenson would agree or not I do not know, but below I argue that the move by interpreters to read avarice and evil intent on the part of Balaam in Num 22-24 is akin to the rationalizations of interpreters on Gen 4.

[30] Moberly, *Prophecy*, 142. Compare *Tanhuma Balak* 8; *Tanhuma* 4:137; *Num. Rab.* 20:12; and finally, Josephus (*Ant.* 4:107), who states that Balaam failed to understand the sarcasm in God's command (cited in Louis H. Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of Balaam," *SPhilo Annual* 5 [1993]: 78).

[31] Isaiah Parker, "The Way of God and the Way of Balaam," *ExpTim* 17 (1905): 45; see precisely the same argument made in the translation notes of William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987), 109.

have words added to the original vision is not an appropriate action.[32] A number of reasons deem such readings less than convincing. First, if we are going to engage in tactics of reading motives into Balaam, we might equally suggest that Balaam was merely being polite to his second set of visitors. After telling them directly that their money would not determine his actions, he may have thought it best to 'humour them' by telling them to stay the night, with no intention of going. It is God who approaches Balaam and tells him to go since the men have come. There is no more reason to believe that it was Balaam's idea to go than God's.

Second, on another plane, there are plausible reasons to believe that dream interpreters and diviners of the ANE often sought, and received, a 'second confirmation' of their first dream, in order to verify it.[33] Some point to Balaam's mention of 'adding' to YHWH's earlier words as inappropriate, though the construction likely suggests the simple idea of seeing if YHWH will speak again about the matter—OT usage of the verb יסף (*hiphil*) with infinitive construct usually, if not always, carries the sense of doing something again.[34] More importantly, we might note that seeking God again in a matter is not always viewed negatively in Scripture. In 1 Samuel 23:1-5, for instance, David enquires of YHWH to see whether he should attack the Philistines; God's command is clear: "Go and attack …". David's men, however, fear defeat and so David enquires again of YHWH concerning the matter. The command is confirmed; David is to rise up and go to defeat them (which he does). I know of not one major commentator that faults (or even questions) David, as interpreters do Balaam, for consulting God again in a matter that was clearly commanded. Here we must also remember that we as readers have the distinct privilege of knowing the fuller plan of YHWH's desire to bless Israel, make the people numerous, and give the people land, something Balaam did not necessarily

---

[32] For instance, consult Calvin, *Harmony*, 4:191; Keil and Delitzsch, *Penteteuch*, 3:166; and Moberly, "Learning," 6 (cf. his *Prophecy*, 141), who argue that Balaam should have banished the men without delay. That Balaam's mention of having words 'added' is inappropriate, see esp. Moberly, "Learning," 7, note 16. I address his charge directly below.

[33] As Milgrom (*Numbers*, 189) notes, "a single dream is not decisive, as in the case of Pharaoh in Genesis 41:5," and "in Mesopotamia, Gilgamesh and Gudea must dream the same dream twice." Although Milgrom then moves to state (illogically) that Balaam thought God was "fickle" in consulting him again, his idea surely permits Balaam some leniency in consulting God again: he was possibly seeking a second confirmation, something conventional in his craft.

[34] Almost every case of this construction in the OT (of which there are approximately 71) reflects doing something again (not adding to). The only real exception, and strongest case to the contrary, is 2 Sam 7:20, though even there the idiom implies 'speaking more about', rather than 'adding words to' (contrast Gen 18:29; Deut 3:26; Judg 9:37; Isa 7:10; 8:5). Moberly makes much of Deut 4:2 as having strong resonances to Balaam's words, though in that case the construction is different; it uses the noun דבר, not verb (לא תספו על הדבר—'you must not add upon *the word*'), something Num 22:19 does not. In any case, it is likely unwise to allow much to hang upon the wording here.

have. Although the first statement of God is clear ("they are blessed"), as Coats argues, Balaam's action could equally reveal complete dependence upon the LORD and a desire not to presume his ways. He states,

> The inquiry suggests to the contrary that at each stage along the way Balaam shows himself completely dependent on the word of the Lord. He does not assume that the word of the Lord from yesterday will be the same for the new situation of today. He assumes rather that with each new development he must inquire of the Lord in order to hear what the word for that occasion will be. Indeed, when Balaam inquires the second time, the Word of the Lord is different. In this case, contrary to the first inquiry, God gives his permission for Balaam to accept the invitation and go. It is not Balaam's greed that leads to the decision. It is the permission of YHWH.[35]

Although the above reasons are not conclusive beyond question, they surely are no less conclusive than the readings interpreters regularly offer, those that conveniently align themselves with traditional, inner-biblical, negative views that read greed into the otherwise upright actions of Balaam.

Because our reading challenges a more traditional, negative view on Balaam, we are obligated to answer potential charges that arise in the donkey episode. We thus look briefly at the episode before examining the content of Balaam's oracles.

Elohim's Anger, the Talking Donkey and Balaam's Integrity

The immediately following story, that of Balaam's journey on his donkey, begins by the narrator indicating that God's anger was kindled as, or because (כִּי), Balaam was going. The divine anger here has long baffled interpreters, and many decide that God's fury is a telltale sign that the donkey episode is an interpolation to the larger story. Attributing the tale to a different source hardly eliminates the problem, however, and such inconsistencies in God's actions are not uncommon in the OT, nor always to be explained by means of source criticism. That God commands Balaam to go, and then is angry because (or as) he goes, is the crux here, something not altogether different from God's inexplicable anger in such episodes as Moses' departure for Egypt (Exod 4:24-26), or David's indictment for taking a census (2 Sam 24). Part of the question is tied into the Angel's words to Balaam, to which we turn.

After Balaam's unsuccessful control of his donkey, and the discourse between the donkey and Balaam that results, YHWH uncovers the eyes of Balaam in order that he might see why his typically obedient donkey had been uncooperative (22:31).

---

[35] Coats, "The Way of Obedience: Traditio-Historical and Hermeneutical Reflections on the Balaam Story," *Semeia* 24 (1982): 54.

Balaam immediately recognizes why the donkey acted as she did, and he appropriately bows "all the way to the ground," indicating his complete surrender.[36] The exact words of the angel in response have long perplexed translators and interpreters. The troublesome word is ירט and how it functions in context. Some interpreters and translations render כי ירט הדרך לנגדי as 'because your way is perverse before me' (so e.g. NRSV), regarding הדרך as Balaam's journey, or way. The problem is that there is no possessive pronoun to indicate that it is Balaam's journey/mission under discussion, or the angel's, and an equally likely translation is simply 'the road'.[37] The verb used, as mentioned, is more problematic. It is scarce in the OT, used only elsewhere in Job 16:11.[38] The exact translation will probably never be attained, though it is more likely that the verb means (in Job's case as well) to 'cast', 'thrust', or 'throw into custody' than it does 'to be perverse'.[39] Some believe that the meaning, in context, "is obvious."[40] But if it is obvious, why has it baffled interpreters for millennia? Why, as is often the case, does the crux of a difficult issue (is Balaam, the non-Israelite diviner, sinful or perverse before God?) seem to be dependent upon reading between the lines, an obscure verb, or a difficult to translate sentence? The answer is probably that the narrator left the issue vague and ambiguous, intentionally. To be sure, the Angel says that he would have killed Balaam had the donkey not assisted him. But, for all we know, the angel was simply acting as he should; he was an adversary (שָׂטָן) to Balaam, sent to kill him. The larger problem of God's anger is difficult to account for but we are not necessarily to find the answer within the Angel's response. The road or mission was cast, or

---

[36] ויקד וישתחו לאפיו; literally, 'he bowed, and prostrated (himself) to his nose.'

[37] Although there is some textual support for דרכך (SamP., Vulg. and LXX), the MT surely represents the more difficult, and probable, reading.

[38] יסגירני אל אל עויל ועל ידי רשעים ירטני ('El hands me over to the ungodly, and into the hands of the wicked *he casts* me'). Note that there is some disagreement on whether the verb here shares the same root.

[39] See *NIDOTTE,* 2:541. *DCH*, 4:297. The NSRV includes a note stating that 'Meaning of Heb uncertain', but still uses 'perverse' (likely in the tradition of the Vulg.). *BHS* proposes the emendation יָרַע (either from ירע [to be timid, to quiver] or from רעע [to be evil, bad]). We maintain our reading of 'thrust' as, though difficult, it does not rely on emendations yet still makes good sense of both cases in the OT.

[40] As Moberly ("Learning," 13) states, "The angel does not spell out the precise reason why Balaam's course is unacceptable, for in context the reason is obvious as soon as the challenge is made: Balaam is allowing his prophetic vocation to be corrupted by greed, a greed which has made him blind to the presence of the God in whose name he speaks." Greed as the obvious reason here is only plausible, I would argue, if the story is read through the eyes of later biblical and religious tradition. The story itself is too reticent to draw this conclusion. Problems of inner-biblical interpretation regarding Num 22-24 will be addressed below.

thrown, upon the Angel (Levine translates it as "the mission was pressing upon me"), and the Angel was ready to perform his life-ending task, had it not been for the donkey.[41] God's anger is not explained; perhaps we should not attempt to discern what the narrator does not make clear. Could God's anger at Balaam's going simply reveal, however discomforting, divine capriciousness, the origins of which are not to be determined by the reader?[42] Perhaps God's anger was not so much at Balaam himself, but at the overall prospect of a people and king wishing to curse his special people (i.e. the anger was at "his going", possibly even "as he went", not necessarily directly at Balaam himself, even if it is his life that is at stake).[43] Balaam experiences the anger of God, perhaps in the same way others experience it—as one not altogether responsible for the problem at hand.[44]

Balaam's response to the angel again seems appropriate. He declares that he sinned or, as is surely logical in context, erred in not seeing the Angel before him. Although some find a moral problem on the part of Balaam here, it more probable, based on his confession, that Balaam is simply admitting error in not seeing the Angel. Ashley puts it well:

> The word *ḥāṭā'* does not involve a willful transgression of YHWH's will and way, but rather a missing of the right way, a mistake (cf. Judg. 20:16; Job 5:24; Prov. 8:36; 19:2). Balaam is simply saying that he made a mistake by not perceiving YHWH's angel in the road. He now assumes that the reason the angel was blocking the way was that YHWH did not want him to go to Balak: since it is a bad thing in your sight, let me return home. But the angel was not there to prevent him from going, but rather to make sure that he understood that without YHWH's inspiration he could not hope to see (i.e., to perceive) anything.[45]

---

[41] See Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 159; compare Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton & Co., 2004), 801, who opts for "the road plunged before me," in an effort to preserve the enigma.

[42] Edgar Kellenberger, "Jahwes unerwarteter Widerstand gegen seinen Beauftragten: Erwägungen zur Episode von Bileams Eselin (Num 22:22-35)," *TZ* 45 (1989): 69-72, esp. 72, for example, argues that this annoyance ("Ärgernis") should be left as it is, revealing that Balaam must experience that YHWH has the sovereign power to 'kill and make alive.'

[43] Though not a common construction, Ashley (*Numbers*, 454-55) follows an older reading by Cox that regards the כִּי in 22:22, with the participle, to carry the sense of 'when' or 'as' (thus 'as he was going'), rather than 'because' (he lists Num 31:51, 34:2; Deut 11:31, 18:9; and BDB, 473a in support). I mention it not because it is necessary for our argument but is possible.

[44] A comparable example might be the case of Uzzah (2 Sam 6:1-11; 1 Chr 13), a seemingly upright man who seeks to stabilize the Ark, which he (probably rightly) perceived to be in jeopardy. God's anger is kindled and he kills Uzzah, though the reasons are not clear (as David's anger—a rarity against God—suggests). If the issue was improper handing of the ark overall (i.e. the Levites should have carried it; 1 Chr 15:13), it is interesting that God's anger (and execution) is directed toward Uzzah, the one closest to the action (similar to Balaam). It is also interesting to note that in Uzzah's story too there lies a difficult textual/translation issue regarding *why* God killed him (see 2 Sam 6:7 and the phrase עַל הַשֵּׁל; see further the discussion in A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* [WBC 11; Dallas: Word, 1989], 103-04).

[45] Ashley, *Numbers*, 459; italics used for commentary purposes removed.

Perhaps it is the life-threatening situation that brought about Balaam's simple confession. Balaam does not confess sin in his going, or in seeking material (or reputational) gain, or even in involving himself in a mission to curse Israel (it is not clear that he intends to).[46] He simply admits error in not perceiving the Angel and, because he understands the seriousness of the matter, offers to abandon the journey, if (or since) it is displeasing to the Angel. Surely if the matter was obvious—that is, Balaam should not have been on the gain-seeking mission—Balaam would have confessed his sin, or the Angel would not have permitted such a skirting of the issue in Balaam's response. When faced with the very serious prospect of death, it is certainly strange that Balaam does not admit his sin of greed had that been the issue. A better reading suggests that *the test of the entire donkey episode is to ensure that Balaam understand, by way of a second and (near) deadly confirmation, that the words he will speak are not to be his own, but only what the LORD will tell him.* Long seen as editorial bridge, the repetition of this command (22:20) at 22:35 serves instead to emphasize what was at issue within the story. In a sense, the episode functions as a tale to 'Let the prophet (and reader) understand …'; the mission has not changed, but Balaam and the reader learn something about the nature of seeing and obeying God's command to speak only his words. Balaam is to speak only the words of the LORD, and God nearly takes his life to ensure that he understand the seriousness of the charge. The episode indeed clarifies that it is God who opens the eye and gives one utterance. If a donkey is able to speak should God open the mouth (22:28), so too can the non-Israelite seer speak divine words at God's prompting.[47] As the story will later

---

[46] Moberly ("Learning," 13-14, note 30) discusses whether Balaam indicates the nature of his sin but determines that the first כִּי in Balaam's response (22:34) is not causative, but asseverative; i.e. Balaam's exclamation of not perceiving the angel is independent of his confession of sin. Though possible, the context and construction suggests the simple causative sense of the conjunction (in a way different from 1 Sam 15:24—a case Moberly uses to support the case—which contains a second, causative, כִּי, though the sense there is essentially the same through juxtaposition, i.e. an appositive relationship). If for the sake of argument we allow the idea, we are still left with Balaam not confessing his (purported) greed, even though he is said to have learned his lesson to relinquish hope for honour and riches (so Moberly suggests). It is not altogether clear that Balaam's offer to turn back is an unambiguous act of repentance (rather than a simple offer to return home out of confusion or fear of the angel), much less one that shows repentance from greed. I would suggest that it is wiser to defer to the text than to read between the lines and detect avariciousness; the natural sense of the text is that Balaam was in error (not moral sin) in not perceiving the Angel (though he does not know, as the reader does, that his eyes were veiled).

[47] Many will undoubtedly point out that I have not dealt with the humorous effect of the donkey episode, and its seeming consequence of downgrading or humiliating Balaam (among those who regard the tale to be humorous satire, or burlesque on Balaam, serving primarily to downgrade his status, see esp. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 468-69; David Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible* [BJS 301; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995], 29-41; Moore, *Balaam Traditions*, 102-03; and Van Seters, "Faithful," 126-32). There is no doubt that the episode contains humorous elements, and makes its points all the stronger through comedic means. What is not clear, however, is that in doing

reveal, Balaam took the message to heart and speaks words that confirm YHWH's love for the blessed people Israel. Balaam also experiences the Spirit of God coming upon him (24:2), has his eyes opened in order to discern truth (24:3, 15), and pronounces words that clearly reflect that it is God who enables him to do so.[48]

The Oracles, Divine Blessing, and YHWH's Continued Love in Disobedience

After their initial meeting, Balak leads Balaam to a viewpoint which enables him to see the 'end', or a 'portion of the people' Israel (קצה העם—Num 22:41). Though of seemingly little significance, Balaam's ability to bless Israel appears to work hand in hand with his ability to 'see' them, as we shall observe. Balaam instructs Balak to build seven altars, to offer a bull and a ram upon each, and Balaam goes off to meet YHWH. God meets him and Balaam addresses him by indicating that he has set up the seven altars and offered sacrifices (23:4). All indications are that YHWH is either indifferent to the ritual, or he acts because of it; it is difficult to determine if we should read the ו conjunction in 23:5 to indicate a response to the sacrifices ("*So* YHWH put a word in Balaam's mouth …") or if it simply relates a divine action ("*Then* YHWH put …"). Whatever the case, YHWH does not condemn the ritual and Balaam is given what he sought: a word from the LORD.[49]

What follows is Balaam's oracle (or proverb, or theme—משל), which speaks directly to Balak's desire to curse Israel. It relates to Balak what Balaam was told in the first vision at night: Israel is not cursed, but blessed. Balaam cannot curse (קבב), nor can he denounce (זעם), whom YHWH has not (23:8). Israel is not an ordinary

---

so Balaam is necessarily downgraded to a despicable evildoer, as some interpreters suggest (see e.g. Appendix 1). Balaam is kept from arrogance through the episode, and so too (as Ashley, *Numbers*, 436, suggests) are later readers kept from esteeming him too highly (something that did not seem to be a problem in Israel). As Dijkstra notes, "There is certainly a lot of humour presented in the way the famous seer is outwitted by his old stalwart donkey, but it is not a burlesque, let alone a negative portrait marking the beginnings of Balaam's later revilement, as some scholars would have it" ("Geography," 81).

[48] For further discussion on whether Balaam should be viewed positively in Num 22-24, see Appendix 1.

[49] Again, it is interesting to read the varying interpretations on Balaam's seven altars and sacrifices, views that seem determined by one's take on Balaam's character. Characteristic of the negative view is Calvin (*Harmony*, 4:203): "In truth, [Balaam] boasts of his seven altars, as if he had duly propitiated God. Thus do hypocrites arrogantly trust that they deserve well of God, when they do but provoke His anger. God, however, passes over this corrupt worship, and proceeds with what He had determined ...". Levine (*Numbers 21-36*, 167) summarizes a different view: "God took the occasion to communicate with Balaam, who stated that he had prepared (the verb *'-r-k*) seven altars along with the requisite offerings. The verb '-r-k, and related forms … are often used to describe the presentation of sacrificial offerings (Exod 29:37, Lev 1:7-8, 12, 24:6 …). The implication is that such activity was prerequisite, and that without it, Balaam would not have received a communication from the God of Israel."

people among the nations, but is a people that dwells apart (23:8). This language would indicate to Balak the central theme of the OT that Israel is holy to God, set apart and specially chosen by him, a people which is not to be reckoned (or does not reckon itself) among the nations.[50] Balak's attempt to curse this people, as he might other nations, is futile. YHWH has not cursed Israel and any attempt to curse or denounce what YHWH has not will be in vain. Israel indeed, as Balak knew (22:3,5), is a numerous people (i.e. blessed), not to be counted (23:10). They are as 'the dust' (a resonance to the divine promises which I discuss in a moment) and this statement of blessing brings about Balaam's immediate wish to be counted among the people in their blessing; that is, Balaam would like his end to be like Israel's.[51]

Balak responds in blindness, as Balaam did in his first frustration with his donkey. Balak devises that perhaps Balaam needs to be taken to another place, a place which will reveal Israel's 'extreme end' (אפס קצהו—23:13),[52] though Balak's actions indicate that he has not heard or understood the divine words spoken by Balaam. Another attempt is made, similar to the first, and ritual sacrifices are again offered. Essentially, Balaam's second theme is not different in content, though it elaborates on the first. This time it is addressed directly to Balak, speaking to his failure to hear the words previously:

> Rise, Balak, and hear;
> listen to me, O son of Zippor:
> God is not a human being, that he should lie,
> or a mortal, that he should change his mind.
> Has he promised, and will he not do it?
> Has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?
> See, I received a command to bless;
> he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it (Num 23:18-20).

Both themes speak to the same issue. They indicate that God has blessed Israel and no human can undo what God has resolved to do. The statements of God not lying or

---

[50] The complexity and difficulty of this latter, little phrase is summarized by Levine as being "one of the most elusive in all of Scripture, because the Hithpael form, *yiṯḥaššāb* (pausal), is unique to the present verse" (*Numbers 21-36*, 174). Whether we translate the verb reflexively or passively, the idea that Israel is completely set apart from the nations is unequivocal. We shall see this idea teased out more fully in our discussion on Deut 4, in Chapter 6 below.

[51] Balaam's wish of an 'end' or 'after-time' (אחריתי) to be like Israel's, relates more to legacy or posterity than it does to an 'afterlife' (an idea not prevalent in ancient thinking—as discussed by Alter, *Five*, 806; Gray, *Numbers*, 348, and others).

[52] Here the storyteller reports the lengthy words of Balak ("Please come with me to another place from where you may see them, although you will only see the extreme end of them and will not see all of them; and curse them for me from there ..." [NASB]), likely revealing a desire to emphasize seeing as a prerequisite of blessing (or cursing).

repenting are not abstract axioms, indicating divine immutability, but address the specific issue at hand: Israel's blessing. In many ways the translation of כזב can prove problematic in that when translated as 'lie', it too easily suggests moral truth speaking when really it addresses failure. Ashley puts it well:

> *God is not a human that he should fail* ... Of the many predications that could have been chosen here, *that he should fail* points to a very basic distinction between the Creator and a creature. Although the translation *lie* is common, the context shows that the primary thought is not that God does not utter untruths (although that is true), but that his purposes are utterly true and reliable, and that his nature does not disappoint or fail, as is the case with human creatures.[53]

Further, the following parallel phrase explains that God will not change his mind (נחם).[54] The conceptual ideas here are then given substance and explained in what follows—God will not undo his promises; what God has spoken he will fulfill.[55] Although Balak is blind to the concept, the basic idea of these two oracles is that no matter what the king tries, God will not fail or renege on his promises. To do so would go against the very fiber of God's being. Balaam's words make clear; YHWH has blessed Israel and nothing will revoke it.[56]

The first two themes also contain indicators of the commands and promises made by God to Israel. Israel is a people that is called out of the world, to be a separate, or holy, people (Num 23:9; compare e.g. Exod 19:5-6; Lev. 19:2; 20:22-26; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:19). Israel has become what God promised, a numerous people, as numerous as the dust or "sand on the seashore" (Num 23:10; compare e.g. Gen 13:6; 15:5; 22:17). Finally, Israel will be protected by God from enemies and will find success against them in battle (Num 23:23-24; compare e.g. Exod 23:20-32; Deut 3:21-22;

---

[53] Ashley, *Numbers*, 477. Compare the similar remarks of Moberly, "'God is Not a Human That He Should Repent' (Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29)," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (ed. Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 116-17.

[54] On the complexities related to the concept of נחם here, consult Moberly, "Not a Human," esp. 115.

[55] Of course the Hebrew does not speak directly of 'promises' (no such word exists) but of what God says (אמר) and speaks (דבר). Essentially, however, the idioms of doing (עשׂה) what one says and causing words to stand (קום, hiphil) communicate the idea.

[56] Consult further the study of Moberly, "Not a Human," 112-23, though note that in some ways our reading varies slightly in that where Moberly sees an irresolvable tension at play in scripture between election and covenant (i.e. there is a tension in that God elects Israel freely and irrevocably, yet the relationship has everything to gain or lose through human action), I believe the matter is more weighted toward God's action, i.e election. When we keep the story's placement within Numbers in mind, it becomes clear that even in the face of Israel's (previous and future) rebellion, God will remain true to his promises.

7:17-24; 28:7).[57] Balaam's words make unequivocally clear that Israel not only comprises a special place within the economy of God's interaction with the world, but that this people has indeed received the blessings divinely spoken long ago. The words would serve as a powerful reminder to Israel that they are indeed loved and that their God is absolutely loyal to his promises. It would also make utterly clear to Balak that his desires to curse this people are completely unattainable. Israel is blessed by God through promises made long ago. No amount of effort, divinations, or money could cause God to fail or renege on what he swore to Israel's foreparents.

Despite the clarity of Balaam's words, the completion of the second theme finds Balak blind, yet again, and after he complains Balaam reminds him that he is bound to speak only the words God gives him (23:26). Still resolved, and clearly without perception as to the content of what Balaam spoke squarely to him, Balak seeks once again (almost humorously) to find a place from which Balaam might curse his enemy. This time he chooses a place where Balaam can see the entire people (Num 23:28).[58] Altars are built, rams and bulls again offered, but this time Balaam changes his usual pattern. Seeing that YHWH was pleased to bless Israel, and seeing the entire camp of Israel in the wilderness, Balaam abandons his usual omens and the spirit of God comes upon him (Num 24:1-2). The oracle that follows is less concerned with Balak directly and now speaks about Israel's beauty, its future successes, and, especially, the plight of those nations that oppose it.

The last oracles are similar to each other in their structure in that they contain introductions by Balaam (identifying himself as one whose eye has been opened) and they speak about future events. They are different from the first two oracles, yet not so different as to render them isolated or lacking continuity.[59] Israel is still a blessed

---

[57] Note also that here I take Num 23:23 to mean that divination is ineffective *against* Israel (rather than that divination is nonexistent in Israel), as seems most likely from context (see further Ashley, *Numbers*, 481; and Moberly, "Learning," 4, note 11).

[58] Num 23:28 speaks of Balak taking Balaam to the top of Peor, overlooking הישימן. Although most translations render the term either 'the wasteland', or Jeshimon, it is likely that given its usage elsewhere (e.g. Deut 32:10; Isa 43:19-20; Psa 68:8; 78:40; 106:14; 107:4), and Balaam's ability to look toward 'the wilderness' (המדבר—24:1), that it simply should be taken as 'desert'. It is further likely, in light of the fact that Balaam can see Israel 'camping tribe by tribe' (24:2) and that the text builds up to this moment through its mention of locations with only partial views of the people, that Balaam has finally been brought to a place where he could view the people in its entirety. See the discussion of Dijkstra, "Geography," 89-90.

[59] *Pace* Hackett, "Balaam," 1:570-71, and Rösel, "Bileamgestalt," 510-11 who suggest that the oracles are independent and distinct; also *pace* Meshullam Margaliot, "Literary, Historical and Religious Aspects of the Balaam Narrative, Numbers 22-24," in *Proceedings of the 10th World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division A* (ed. David Assaf; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 77, and Benjamin Goodnick, "Balaam: Some Aspects of His Character," *JBQ* 24 (1996): 169, who regard the latter oracles to reflect a richer "oracular quality" missing previously.

people and the second and third oracles are linked by their repetition of God's bringing Israel out of Egypt through his ox-like strength (compare 23:22 with 24:8); moreover, Israel is still the metaphorical lion, though now the lion is no longer devouring prey but is couched, satisfied and will not be disturbed (compare 23:24 with 24:9). Although this last detail may seem insignificant, it is important to remember that in these oracles Balaam is now speaking not simply as one with a word placed in his mouth, but as one who had the spirit of God fall upon him. Perhaps the difference is reflected in the forward-looking nature of the content. Previously Balaam spoke of God's irrevocable blessing upon Israel. Now Balaam speaks of Israel's future successes and its coming dominion. Israel will no longer be a lion devouring prey, but will be a couched, satisfied lion who will rest and not be disturbed.[60]

Here too we have clear indicators of earlier promises made to Israel's ancestors. Israel's seed will flourish (24:7), Israel's enemies will be destroyed (24:8) and, most importantly, those who choose to leave the couched lion and bless him will be blessed; those who curse him will be cursed (24:9). The primary call narrative and its promises made by YHWH long ago (Gen 12:1-3) are confirmed and verified by one who stands outside Israel. If ever there was a time in Israel's story that the people needed affirmation that it would be a great, blessed nation that would possess the land, it was in the time of the wilderness. If ever the reader had doubts about these promises, it would likely come in the stories of Israel's wandering. Balaam, who stands outside Israel, makes clear, however, that God's promises are true and that Israel *will* succeed, Israel *will* be a Lion satisfied after devouring its prey, blessing *will* be found by those who treat the Lion rightly but those who treat Israel lightly will be cursed. Balak's efforts would come to nothing and he would become the victim of Israel's successes. God's promises to Abraham *will* be fulfilled.

The completion of the third oracle results in Balak's final scene of blindness, especially evident in his repetition that he would have honoured Balaam if only he had cursed instead of blessed Israel these three times (24:10-11). Balaam reiterates the response he made to Balak's emissaries earlier that all the money in Balak's house would not have made a difference (24:12-13); Balaam is consistent in his refusal to be enticed by financial gain or honour. But, before leaving, Balaam offers one more oracle to Balak, this time concerning his people's future, the future of related nations,

---

[60] For more on the relationship between the spirit coming upon Balaam and the forward-looking nature of the latter oracles, consult Ashley, *Numbers*, 487.

and Israel's coming time of dominion. What follows is a blow-by-blow account of how Moab, Sheth, Edom, Seir, Amalek, Kain, Asshur and Eber will meet affliction or destruction. Israel will destroy its enemies, and Balak's initial request looks all the more foolish in light of Israel's coming successes.

The larger story draws to a close with a familiar narrative closure; Balaam returns to his place, and Balak to his.[61] It is not clear whether Balak ever received sight to see his fate or if he continued in blindness. What is clear is that Balaam's oracles contain a sustained elaboration of God's special love for Israel, and outline Israel's coming achievements. We might be tempted to take this for granted, but a number of reasons remind us to be cautious. First, the oracles come within a book concerned largely with Israel's rebellion and its near failure to continue to the land promised by God. Not only do the sayings present themselves in the midst of uncertainty regarding Israel's future (because of its sin), but they come immediately before one of Israel's greatest apostasies. To recount, indeed formulate, blessing of a magnitude known nowhere else in the OT, and place it directly before the great sin of Israel, is equivalent to saying that 'Even though they are unclean, the Divine Presence is among them'.[62] Although God is deeply concerned with Israel's rebellion (indeed 24,000 are killed and the wicked generation, including the great leader Moses, are denied entry to Canaan), the poems of Balaam confirm that God's deep affection for his chosen people knows no bounds and will endure despite Israel's sin. Israel is blessed by God and his promises will endure. God cannot undo what he has sworn lest he stop being God.

Second, the oracles come not, as we might expect, from one within Israel, but are spoken by a non-Israelite, giving them an added weight and credibility that would not be present otherwise. God uses someone who does not share in the promises of his people, and, from a strict narrative point of view, someone who may not even had known the promises existed. And, although Balaam would like to share in Israel's position, his end is quite different. He dies the death of an enemy—despite speaking divinely inspired words of blessing concerning them. Had Balaam joined Israel, or had he remained a faithful outsider (say, like Jethro), his words would likely have less force. For someone to speak of an eventual enemy as he did points even more to the

---

[61] For more on the formula here, marking the end of a narrative, consult Alter, *Five*, 816, and compare Gen 18:33; 32:1-2 [31:55-32:1].

[62] We recall here the epigraph to Wyschogrod's book, from *Sifra* on Leviticus 16:16, as discussed on page 71 above.

power of God's instigation in seeing and speaking as well as God's willingness to use whomever he chooses to be his mouthpiece.

CONCLUSION

There is probably no other OT figure that is unchosen yet speaks of God's love for Israel in the profound way that Balaam does (though Rahab, whose story we cannot examine, comes close; see Josh 2:9-14). Scripture preserves his story and this should give us pause. Why include a story of an enemy who in this case appears upright and speaks of God's love for Israel at his own expense? Why permit the words of a foreigner to pervade one's holy writings and allow him, in many ways, to better your own prophets regarding poems of beauty and truth? Why permit an enemy to retain his upright portrayal within the story when it would have been easy and convenient to downgrade his actions and make him the wicked villain later tradition does?

At this point, we might wish to return, briefly, to something we raised earlier but have not emphasized throughout: divine name usage. Although the pattern in Numbers 22-24 may initially seem haphazard, it is significant that in almost every case Balaam speaks of God as YHWH. The storyteller is careful, however, to show that YHWH only appears to the non-Israelite under the more generic and non-covenantal name Elohim.[63] Although Balaam may converse with, and on this occasion speak for, Israel's God, his relationship to this God is different and not covenantal, at least our story suggests. The bold changes of the LXX in this regard (strategically eliminating the name YHWH from key areas) in all likelihood indicate a discomfort with the idea that the non-Israelite could speak with the covenantal God directly, an idea our Hebrew text maintains but is careful to circumscribe.[64]

---

[63] The exception of 23:16 is likely due to the fact that this instance, in distinction to the others, contains two clauses placed together (YHWH met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth) and in using the title 'YHWH', the storyteller maintains that it is still YHWH who puts the word in Balaam's mouth (as is consistent in the story).

[64] For more on the LXX version of Num 22-24, see esp. the study of Wevers, *The Balaam Narrative According to the Septuagint* (BETL 144; ed. Jean M. Auwers and André Wénin; Louvain: Peeters, 1999), 133-44. He observes that of the 24 changes from יהוה to (ὁ) θεός in Greek Numbers, 19 occur in Num 22-24 (also, אלהים never becomes κύριος). Wevers then notes the importance of the translator's decision at 22:18 to ignore the first singular pronominal suffix, thus rendering Balaam's words יהוה אלהי ('YHWH my God') as the neutral κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ, before he eventually concludes (144):

> [It is] evident that the notion that Balaam was actually a prophet of YHWH, a seer with whom YHWH had converse [*sic*] was repulsive to the Alexandrian. Whether it was simply a matter of not recognizing a non-Israelite as a recipient of YHWH's word or a reaction against the person of Balaam cannot be determined ... Since this is the consistent pattern throughout the narrative of chapters 22-24, it can hardly be judged a textual matter; it is an

The story of Balaam also teaches us something profound about the nature of prophecy and discernment. Within the larger book of Numbers, the question arises intermittently and our story addresses a question asked earlier: Is the hand of the LORD cut short? (11:23) That is, is YHWH's power limited? Can God enable others, in addition to Moses, to speak for him? In that story, seventy elders of Israel join Moses as prophets when the spirit falls upon them and they prophesy (11:24-25). When two men continue to prophesy, the people protest and plead with Moses to restrain them as they fear it threatens Moses' unique role (11:26-28). Moses' answer is firm and speaks to our story: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!" In the next chapter, Moses' special status as prophet is again addressed (and challenged—"Has the LORD only spoken through Moses?") but there again the text wishes to make clear: others too will speak for God; God will speak with them in visions and dreams (12:2, 6).[65] God will speak through whom he pleases and will open the eyes as he sees fit. To make the point evermore powerful, in our story God even opens the mouth of a donkey; if a donkey can speak, so too can a non-Israelite diviner speak for YHWH. As in the story of Saul and David, we learn that the divine spirit will fall upon whom God desires, and even a farmer or shepherd can experience God's power in this way (e.g. 1 Sam 10:10:1-13). The Bible shows, not irregularly, that God will use so-called 'unclean vessels' as his instruments though most are from within Israel.[66] Balaam's story shows that the unchosen can discern truth, give divine utterance, and that true prophecy lies not only in Israel. However, Balaam's story also demonstrates that such prophecy will only confirm tenets aligned with Israel's revelation—here the message is clear, God's love for Israel is irrevocable and will not fail. Had it spoken otherwise, it would not stand as instigated by God. Such words would put God's very nature at stake.

---

interpretation, a prejudice on the part of the Alexandrian. Balak may attribute Balaam's oracles to YHWH, but the Greek knew better. The diviner can transmit divine messages indeed, but no omens are available to him from YHWH.

[65] Of course the main point of these stories is that Moses' role as prophet is unique, but in making this point the text also clarifies that others too will speak for God.

[66] I use the term 'unclean vessels' in reaction to the words of Allen ("Theology," 109): "It is sometimes said that God never uses an unclean vessel. But remember Balaam. Perhaps it might better be said that God rarely uses unclean vessels." Although it would probably be overstating the case to say rather that God 'rarely uses clean vessels', I can't help but think that the latter idea is not far from the biblical view. Here I simply am contending that the biblical picture of who receives favour or a special position before God is not usually determined by character strengths (at least the text does not occupy itself with such matters).

The oracles of Balaam are important in that they speak faithfully, poetically, and richly concerning the special love God has for his treasured possession Israel. I think, however, that the content is only part of the picture, in that they are spoken by one who stands outside this relationship yet desires to be in it. Balaam is unchosen, he belongs not to the people, and despite his wishes his end will not be like Israel's. The idea is all the more poignant when we consider that Balaam not only stands outside Israel, but proves to be (in the story itself) an upright, God-fearing, non-Israelite. This does not change the outcome, however, and the point about a familial election (rather than one based upon belief or action) is all the stronger, perhaps more painful. Balaam may be upright, he may prove to discern and exclaim truth from the most high God, yet he is not a descendant of Abraham, he does not bear the special mark of YHWH's love. The content of the oracles spells this relationship out; the elaborate story and dynamics at play in Num 22-24 make the point I think important. The unchosen learns something about what it means to interact with Israel. Balaam blesses Israel and I think we can assume that had this been the end of the story, Balaam would find himself blessed. In the end, however, he treats Israel with disdain and leads them astray (Num 31:16). Because of this, Balaam receives what we might deem a curse; he is slaughtered with the kings of Midian (31:8). The HB preserves his important words regarding Israel yet also preserves his shameful end. His story shows us that the non-Israelite can be in relationship with Israel's God, speak for him and utter profound truth. It also shows that despite these things, mistreatment of Israel will reverse everything and result in a curse, as promised by YHWH.

chapter six

ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS IN DEUTERONOMY

In our study of Genesis, we attested an open and inclusive understanding of the nations in light of the chosen characters, particularly Abraham. Absent there is any real sense that the chosen characters or people are to be distinctly different from those they encounter in the land they traverse. Indeed, the text indicates no unease with such ideas as non-Abrahamites making oaths to a common God with the Abrahamite (e.g. Gen 21:22-33), nor with, for example, the idea of Joseph becoming a leader in Egypt, serving a Pharaoh that seems to know his God (Gen 41:38-45). The idea of separation, or holiness, is altogether absent. Such is not the picture in Deuteronomy. The idea of holiness (even if not in the specific language of קדשׁ) is persistent throughout the book, and Israel is to be set apart from those nations it encounters in the Land. It is here that Israel's election takes its most articulated form and it is also here that many of the unchosen nations Israel encounters are not only to be avoided but (if my reading is correct) destroyed. As Thomas Mann has noted, although Israel's relationship to the nations in Deuteronomy involves not "*keeping up* with the Joneses," it also has to do with "*getting rid* of the Joneses."[1] The latter idea plagues the sensitive reader who wishes to understand the nature and purposes of Israel's God. The unchosen do not fare well, to say the least.

This, however, is not the full picture and we will also see that Deuteronomy permits (even if it does not formulate) an understanding of the nations that is neutral, at least with respect to the nations more generally (though not the seven nations in the Land). We will explore this dynamic by looking at three passages in Deuteronomy, all passages that speak of Israel in relation to the nations. The passages are Deuteronomy 4:1-40 (esp. vv. 15-20), Deuteronomy 7 (esp. vv. 1-12), and Deuteronomy 10:12-22. We will treat them in sequence.

---

[1] See his section on the chapter, *Deuteronomy* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 62-69; the quotation is from 68.

DEUTERONOMY 4: ALLOTTED TO WHOM AND WHY?

Deuteronomy 4 is somewhat anomalous in the larger book. The chapter appears independent from its preceding and following chapters and the content could stand alone as a sermon.[2] The link to chapters 1-3 is not altogether clear (to be discussed), and chapter 5, a reiteration of the ten words, does not strictly require chapter 4 to be itself coherent. Scholars vary in dating the text (though the majority regards it to be a late entry in the book, addressing exilic Israel)[3] though there is something of a consensus that the chapter is a compositional unity (save perhaps verses 41-49).[4] For our purposes, such dating and compositional analysis will be accepted though our reading is more interested the chapter's placement theologically and canonically. From this point of view, the chapter may be seen to summarize the book as a whole, containing its key message. Tigay rightly calls the chapter "the theological heart of

---

[2] I use the term 'sermon' here in a non-technical sense. The term is regularly applied to the chapter, often without discussion, and usually in the same way I use it: informally and not strictly form-critically (e.g. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 5; New York: Doubleday, 1991], 215; Levenson, "Who Inserted the Book of the Torah?" *HTR* 68 [1975]: 17; Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy* [NIBCOT 4; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson; 1996], 45; and Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 37). Brettler argues that the term should not be applied to the passage as the chapter's "extremely learned nature ... likely points to its existence as a written work, rather than as a sermon;" he also states that such a learned work "almost demands that it be studied rather than heard—it simply could not have been appreciated as a popular, public sermon" (Marc Z. Brettler, "A 'Literary Sermon' in Deuteronomy 4," in *'A Wise and Discerning Mind': Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long* [ed. Saul M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley; BJS 325; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2000], 33-50, here 48 and 49). Apart from the underestimation of the ancients' capacity for comprehension of oral discourse, Brettler's argument seems to assume that sermons can only be oral presentations without prior (written) preparation or that deep reflection leading to a complex sermon is no longer a sermon. A more inclusive definition of sermon is preferred and retained herein.

[3] Weinfeld, for example, regards exile and repentance as the central concern of the chapter (*Deuteronomy 1-11*, 216); see also Levenson, "Inserted," 203-33, esp. 221, as well as the more general overview of Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9* (WBC 6a; 2nd ed.; Dallas: Word, 2001), 72-73. With particular respect to Deut 4:15-20 and the exile, see the remarks of Norbert Lohfink, "Verkündigung des Hauptgebots in der jüngsten Schicht des Deuteronomiums (Dt 4,1-40)," in *Studien zum Deuteronomium und zur deuteronomistischen Literatur 1* (SBAB 8; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1990), 182-83; Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 65; and A. D. H. Mayes, "Deuteronomy 4 and the Literary Criticism of Deuteronomy," *JBL* 100 (1981): 50-51.

[4] For an overview discussion on the compositional unity of the chapter, see Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9*, 72-73; compare also Mayes, "Deuteronomy 4," 23-30; Levenson, "Inserted," 203-33; J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 100-01; and Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 29-30, note 5. For alternative proposals (i.e. compositional expansions), see Nelson, *The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History* (JSOTSup 18; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 90-94; and Dietrich Knapp, *Deuteronomium 4: Literarische Analyse und theologische Interpretation* (GTA 35; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987).

Deuteronomy," while McConville observes that it "can be seen as an anticipation, or even a summation, of the scope and themes of the whole book."[5]

Of specific interest to our study is the unusual attention the nations receive in the chapter. To be sure, they are not *the* focus, but they are a concern, one that recurs frequently. We might say that the nations serve as the backdrop against which YHWH's preferential treatment of Israel is set. A quick perusal illustrates the phenomenon: in verses 5-8 Israel's obedience to the statutes and judgments of YHWH will cause the nations to recognize Israel's wisdom and the nearness of Israel's God; in verses 15-20, Israel is instructed not to worship images or anything in the heavens, whether sun, moon, or stars, things that YHWH allotted to the nations; finally, in verses 32-40, Israel is reminded that they were rescued from slavery by mighty acts, were taken to be God's special people, and God spoke to them directly from the fire; these deeds are (rhetorically) deemed to be without precedent among the nations (vv. 32-34). Although each of the above three examples are important (and will be touched upon), our primary interest is 4:15-20, specifically verse 19, which discusses the nations and their allotment by YHWH. Before we look at the verses specifically, we begin with a few words on their context.

Deuteronomy 4:15-20: Context

Despite what might seem like a distinct shift in 4:1 from a historical survey to an exhortative sermon, the two genres are not unrelated. The connecting use of "And now Israel ..." (ועתה ישראל) indicates that the preceding story, in which Israel's exodus from Egypt, their wandering in the desert, and their regular disobedience are recounted, should turn the people to "listen" (שמע) or, better, obey. The convention, i.e. a transition from historical discourse to moral lesson, will surface again in the book, as we shall see in our discussion of Deuteronomy 10:12-22.[6] What is interesting here is something that might seem unusual up to this place canonically in the Pentateuch: Israel is told that their taking possession of the land is dependent upon giving heed to the following commandments. Although the Pentateuch (and places in Deuteronomy) usually forwards Israel's *status* as an elect people—as descendants of

---

[5] Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1996), 41; McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 102; compare also Brettler, "Literary," 46-47, who calls the chapter "a type of epitome of the book."

[6] See pp. 196ff. below. For more on the transitioning convention here, consult Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 199 and the full-scale recent study of Nathan MacDonald, "The Literary Criticism and Rhetorical Logic of Deuteronomy I-IV," *VT* 56 (2006): 203-24.

Abraham—as its basis for taking the land,[7] here the text deems obedience to be the operative criterion.[8] Such a tension, at least within Deuteronomy, can be interpreted rhetorically, the text emphasizing that which is required by context. As Brueggemann and McConville both note, the book contains "a dynamic in which the gift of land and duty of obedience are interdependent."[9] Verse 5 will reverse the order and thus invert the sense, indicating not disagreement but highlighting the writer's rhetorical skill in maintaining the tension.[10]

Obedience means life; disobedience brings death. In noting the Baal-Peor incident,[11] the speaker illustrates this point, then notes the importance of Israel's Torah, *this whole Torah*,[12] and that obedience will cause wonder among the surrounding nations. As noted by others, however, it is not the law itself that is wisdom, nor is it the law alone that will cause this wonder among the nations; it is Israel's *obedience* to the commands that will bring this action.[13] In obeying these statutes and judgments, the nations will recognize Israel's understanding, and will see the nearness and personal character of Israel's God, something deemed *sui generis* among the nations:

> Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people! For what other great nation has gods so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call on him? And what other great

---

[7] The pentateuchal texts illustrating the land as a gift and inheritance are legion; see e.g. Gen 12:7; 13:14-15; 15:7, 18; 17:8; 24:7; 28:4; 35:12; 48:4; Exod 6:6-8; 13:5; Lev 20:24; 25:38; Num 33:53; Deut 1:20-21; 3:18-20; 6:18; 12:1; 26:1-3; and 31:6-8.

[8] For more on Deuteronomy and the shift from promise to promise under condition, consult Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90 (1970): 184-203, esp. 195-96. Additional deuteronomic examples of the shift include 4:25-27; 11:13-17; 28:58-63; and 30:17-20.

[9] McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 103. Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 51, essentially affirms the same. Compare also Brueggemann's *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), esp. ch. 4, for fuller discussion.

[10] Again see McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 103.

[11] The Baal-Peor incident is of particular relevance to the section here for a number of reasons, two of which we note. First, from the story's point of view the event would be recent and the topographic site would likely still be within view (see 3:29 and the further remarks of Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 42). Second, if Numbers 31:16 is to be taken on face value, the apostasy of the people at Peor apparently was the result of some form of trickery, that is, a leading astray through Balaam. Such a threat not only fits well with what follows (being led astray, or seduced; see note 48 below), but may also fit with an exilic concern not to be duped to follow the gods of the nations with whom they now dwell (see further below).

[12] See 4:8 and its כל התורה הזאת; the wording is distinct, attested elsewhere only (but differently) at Num 5:30. More commonly Deuteronomy uses כל דברי התורה הזאת; compare Deut 17:19; 27:3,8; 28:58; 29:28; 31:12; 32:46.

[13] The point is made by Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 55-57 and expanded upon by MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of 'Monotheism'* (FAT 2.1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 174-75, 180-81.

> nation has statutes and ordinances as righteous as this entire law that I am setting before you today? (Deut 4:6b-8)[14]

The nations, though not the focus, are clearly the background against which Israel is to recognize the specialness of their law, and the nearness of their God.[15] The text then moves to instruct Israel that their actions should not be like those of the nations, leading us to our passage.

Deuteronomy 4:15-20

There is likely merit to Fishbane's contention that Deuteronomy 4, verses 16-19 specifically, includes a powerful polemic "away from the images of the eye and towards the sounds of the ear."[16] The discussion here (4:9-20) seeks to emphasize that as God did not appear to Israel in any form (תמונה), worshiping what is seen (ראה), or images (תבנית), is forbidden; sound (קול), words (דבר) and instruction (למד) are to be the distinguishing marks of Israel's identity and its understanding of their deity.[17] It is also plausible that the prohibition of images for Israel is linked to the idea that because humanity is created in the image of God, no other images of God are acceptable.[18] Although the idea would require fuller treatment and argumentation, it is interesting in that it seems a natural reading of the text.[19] The language of verses 16-18 echoes closely the words of Genesis 1:20-27 in reverse order, indicating more than mere coincidence.[20] The objects prohibited in Israel's worship are images of

---

[14] I slightly modify the NRSV, using 'gods' for אלהים (as context implies; see further Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 45 and 352, note 32) and 'righteous' for צדיק, a term usually reserved for persons, perhaps pointing to the law's personal nature (Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 195; and Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 65).

[15] In commenting on this passage, Wright, once again, uses the text to further his missiological reading of Deuteronomy. He states that, "missiologically, these verses [Deut 4:5-8] articulate a motivation for obedience to the law that is easily overlooked. The point is that if Israel would live as God intended, then the nations would notice. Israel existed for the ultimate purpose of being the vehicle of God's blessing the nations. That was in their 'genetic code' from the very loins of Abraham" (*Deuteronomy*, 48-49). Although it may be that blessing would come to the nations through their witnessing of Israel's law and Israel's obedience to it, Wright's words and his idea concerning Israel's "ultimate purpose" are not grounded in the text (nor Gen 12:1-3 for that matter; see further my discussion in pp. 117-19 above).

[16] Michael Fishbane, "Ancient Wisdom and Modern Man - with Special Reference to the Hebrew Bible," *Christian Jewish Relations* 20:2 (1987): 44; compare Joachim Schaper, "A Grammatology of Israelite Religion" (paper presented at the University of Durham Old Testament Seminar, Durham, England, 14 March 2006), who argues that the move is toward *written* text. Though important, Deut 4 itself supports Fishbane's model more succinctly.

[17] The terms תמונה, ראה, תבנית, קול, דבר, and למד (in their various forms) occur 3, 4, 5, 2, 6, and 3 times in this short section (4:9-20) respectively.

[18] The idea is proposed briefly by McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 107-08.

[19] I hope to address the matter in a future study.

[20] On this idea see Mayes, "Deuteronomy 4," 29, note 24; and McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 108.

things created by God, whether male or female (זכר או נקבה), beast (בהמה), bird (צפור), creeping thing (רמש), or fish (דגה). For completeness, verse 19 adds those things that were created earlier in Genesis (1:14-19): the sun, moon, and stars—the whole host of heaven—(את השמש ואת הירח ואת הכוכבים כל צבא השמים), but in this instance it is not the image of, but the actual object, or being, that is proscribed. All of these things are excluded from Israel's worship because their God, the LORD, did not present himself in any form and was not seen when he spoke to his people at Horeb (Deut 4:15). Israel's God is revealed through speech; Israel "heard the sounds of words but [they] saw no form—only a voice" (Deut 4:12).

The fact that it is not an image, but the actual sun, moon, and stars that are prohibited is perhaps significant as the text immediately indicates that these things were allotted, or apportioned (חלק), to all the peoples under the whole heaven (לכל העמים תחת כל השמים). This allotting appears to be set in contrast to Israel, who benefits from being the possession (נחלה) of YHWH himself. Verse 20 makes this clear:

> But *you* [in distinction to the others] has the LORD taken and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people for his own possession, as you are today.

My italics indicate the emphatic sense of the Hebrew and the contrast of 'all the peoples' to Israel through חלק and נחלה.[21] Though this idea may be clear, the interpretation of verse 19 is not straightforward. Problems arise in understanding

---

[21] Compare Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 67, 60, note m, who gives the translation: "But you are the ones Yhwh has taken ..." (58). The contrast might have been even stronger had the author used חלק and מחלקת (allotment) yet that would have altered the strength and sense of Israel's position as YHWH's possession. On the terms and Deut 4:19-20, no discussion would be complete without mention of Deut 32:8-9, a passage that similarly uses חלק and נחלה and contrasts the nations to Israel:

> When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance (נחל),
> When He separated (פרד) the sons of man,
> He set the boundaries of the peoples
> According to the number of the sons of Israel.
> For the LORD's portion (חלק) is His people;
> Jacob is the allotment of His inheritance נחלתו. (NASB)

The passage is worthy of a study in itself, as are the textual issues related to 'sons/angels of Israel/God/gods' in verse 8 (for brief overviews, consult Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: YHWH and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* [2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 32, note 43; and Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 514-15). MacDonald rightly concludes that although the wording is not identical with 4:19 (Tigay [*Deuteronomy*, 515] suggests that 4:19 revises 32:8), the picture presented is consistent: the nations have their legitimate gods while Israel belongs to YHWH. See his *Meaning*, 90-91 and further discussion below.

what is allotted and to whom, *why* it is so, and further whether such an allotting is for good or ill. We will look at each problem in turn.

The Host of Heaven (צבא השמים)

The question of what is indicated in Deuteronomy 4:19 becomes problematic in light of biblical usage of the term 'Host of Heaven'. The verse lists the sun, moon, and stars, and then appears to gloss these (there is no additional *vav* or direct object marker) as כל צבא השמים. The problem is that the term is regularly used elsewhere in the HB (and other literature) to indicate a divine retinue of heavenly beings, sometimes used interchangeably with the designation 'sons of God' (בני אלהים or [בני אל[ים).[22] Full discussion would deter our focus, but a few important factors may bear on our discussion. First, although not used in the Pentateuch, the term 'YHWH of Hosts' (יהוה צבאות) as a description of YHWH gains widespread currency outside this corpus, most notably in the prophets.[23] YHWH is usually portrayed as the highest in the assembly or heavenly court (e.g. Psa 82:6 and Deut 32:8-9 appear to refer to YHWH as the most high of the beings: עליון), and those within the court are described as subordinate to him.[24] Second, these beings appear, according to various biblical passages, to serve and offer worship to YHWH. In 1 Kings 22:19-23, the Host of Heaven is ready to serve, standing to the right and left of YHWH who is seated at his throne, while in Nehemiah 9:6 the Host of Heaven is said to worship the LORD (וצבא השמים לך משתחוים).[25] Third, although some assume otherwise, the Heavenly Host is not necessarily made up of 'fallen', or evil, beings. Although Genesis 6 may indicate that the 'sons of god' are in some way engaging in inappropriate acts, connecting this group to the 'Host of Heaven' is less certain.[26] (Moreover, although the Accuser is mentioned in

---

[22] For discussion on the connection between the 'sons of God' and the Host of Heaven, consult E. Theodore Mullen Jr., "Hosts, Host of Heaven," *ABD* 3:302; and Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 514.

[23] According to Mullen ("Hosts" 3:303), of the 285 occurrences of term 251 (88%) occur in the prophetic works).

[24] Mullen, "Divine Assembly," *ABD* 2:215-16; compare Smith, *Early*, 144; and the still important discussion (if problematic in aspects) of Wright, *Against*, 30-41.

[25] Compare also Psa 103:19-21 and Luke 2:13-14 (the latter of which uses στρατιᾶς οὐρανίου, a regular equivalent used in the LXX translation of צבא השמים—see Jer 8:2; 19:13; Zeph 1:5; Neh 9:6; 2 Chron 33:3, 5). Note that the Lukan passage lends support to the idea that the Host of Heaven offers God praise and service. It is also likely no coincidence that the Host appears at night, when the stars would have been visible.

[26] Michael S. Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God," *BSac* 158 (January-March 2001): 71, offers little support (his note 80 notwithstanding) for the idea that the Host of Heaven is a group of

conjunction with the Heavenly Host on occasion [Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6], his connection to the group is unclear.) Fourth, and lastly, the Heavenly Host appears, according to the ideology of the canon, to be the creation of God, not something necessarily preexistent.[27] As noted by numerous commentators, the creation narrative emphasizes the creation of the luminaries as an act of God, and these lights, though not specifically noted as such, become what is later termed the 'Host of Heaven' in Hebrew imagination.[28]

This last point brings up something implicit in the bulk of the observations presented above: the Host of Heaven is more than mere lights, or a starry constellation in the sky—that is, the Host of heaven is likely perceived as some form of gods or angels.[29] Such an idea is perhaps made clearer from other biblical passages, such as Deuteronomy 17:3 and 29:24-28 though some commentators, perhaps troubled by the idea that gods could be allotted to others for worship, interpret the passage differently. Wright, for example, notes that nowhere does the passage mention that the allotting of the Heavenly Host is for *worship*; the lights may very well serve the purpose intended in Genesis 1:14-18: to illuminate the skies.[30] So too argues Rashi, and the idea is found in the Vulgate and various rabbinical writings as well (which discuss a now untraceable variant of the LXX).[31] In other readings, discomfort with allotting the Host for worship appears so great that it is reinterpreted to mean that *Israel* will be distributed to the peoples (in order to bring knowledge) or that God did *not* allot the Heavenly Host to the nations at all.[32]

"fallen sons of God," resulting in a less than convincing reading of Deut 4:19; he argues that the allotment of YHWH is a punitive act against the nations. Discussion to follow.

[27] See Mullen, "Hosts," 3:302; he cites Isa 40:26; 45:12; Psa 33:6; and Gen 2:1 as evidence.

[28] For more on Gen 1:14-19, and its polemic to subordinate the luminaries to YHWH, consult von Rad, *Genesis*, 53-54 and Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *EvQ* 46 (1974): 88-89.

[29] Dale C. Allison, "What Was the Star that Guided the Magi?" *BRev* 9:D (1993): 20-24, 63, makes an interesting case that in antiquity a star and an angelic being were not something that would necessarily be distinguished. Understanding stars as "inanimate, energetic masses millions of light-years away" is clearly a modern, not antique, idea.

[30] See Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 52.

[31] The Vulgate is not explicit with regard to 'light' but essentially implies the same with its "in ministérium cunctis géntibus." The apparent LXX variant is discussed in *b.Meg.* 9a-b, and *Midr. Hagadol*, which Tov reconstructs as τοῦ φωτίζεσθει / להאיר ("The Rabbinic Tradition Concerning the 'Alterations' Inserted into the Greek Pentateuch and Their Relation to the Original Text of the LXX," *JSJ* 15 [1984]: 82,84). The variant, however, is not in any extant Greek source nor in any other Greek reference to the LXX, causing Goodman to conclude that it should likely "be attributed to the rabbis themselves" (*Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], 116; cf. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 197). For brief critiques of the light/service idea, consult Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 435 and Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895), 71.

[32] See *Tg. Neof.*, *Tg. Ps.-J.* and discussion in Israel Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Deuteronomy: An English Translation of the Text with Analysis and Commentary* (New York: Ktav, 1982), 88-89.

Such readings seem to import concerns onto the text, ones that reveal a natural discomfort with the idea that God would allot anything to the nations for worship other than himself. We shall return to this in a moment, but for now it may be wise to address the question of whom 'to all the peoples' (לכל העמים) concerns (4:19). MacDonald, in his work on Deuteronomy and monotheism, examines the question in a lengthy footnote.[33] After surveying the options and noting problems (e.g. if it was meant to be all nations but Israel, הגוים would have served the purpose better), he concludes that context likely implies that 'all the peoples' refers to non-Israelite nations. His case is compelling and appears to be favoured by the majority of scholars.[34] His argument is made stronger in the light of the following verse (20) which, as noted above, contrasts Israel through its use of the emphatic 'you' (i.e. the nations receive the Heavenly Host, but Israel [you] was taken from the iron furnace by God himself to be his possession). What MacDonald does not ask, at least not explicitly, is *why* YHWH allots the Heavenly Host to the nations or if such an action is for their good, ill, or serves some greater purpose. Others answer the question in a number of ways, of which we examine a few.

Allotting for Redemption or Destruction or?

To begin with a positive proposal, we should note the two-fold work of Miller in which he argues, through his reading of this and other Deuteronomic passages (Deut 1-3, esp. ch. 2), that God works 'redemption' in nations other than Israel; these are "God's Other Stories."[35] Miller pays special attention to the parenthetical remarks of Deuteronomy 2 which reveal how God maintained land for certain non-Israelite nations, particularly Edom, Moab, and Ammon. In our passage (Deut 4:19), Miller notes that the allotting of the nations is an ambiguous idea, but one that can be understood positively, in some sense similar to God's possession of Israel. He states,

> There is a clear distinction between the relation of YHWH to Israel and the host of heaven to all the peoples. But the distinction points also to a significant similarity, one that is clearly reinforced in the following texts: YHWH is the god of Israel, because he took them out of the iron furnace of Egypt: the astral hosts are the deities of all the peoples because YHWH

---

[33] MacDonald, *Meaning*, 172-73, note 91.

[34] See his list on p. 172. We might add Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 435; Lohfink, "Verkündigung," 183-84 and Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 55 to his list.

[35] The two studies are: "The Wilderness Journey in Deuteronomy: Style, Structure, and Theology in Deuteronomy 1-3," in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* (JSOTSup 267; Sheffield: Academic Press, 2000), 572-92; and "God's Other Stories: On the Margins of Deuteronomistic Theology," in ibid., 593-602. 'Redemption' is Miller's language, though he uses the phrase "God's redemptive work" (See "Other," 593).

allotted them to the peoples. The particularity, distinctiveness, and especially the election of Israel are the context in which reference is made to the nations as having been allotted their gods by YHWH of Israel.[36]

He states further,

> … The report on God's allotting the gods to the other nations is precisely in the context of polemic against those other gods vis-à-vis Israel, strongly forbidding any contact with them. … The polemic is not primarily against the gods per se. … The primary Deuteronomic polemic is against Israel's connecting in any way with these gods. The vehemence of the Mosaic voice on this matter, therefore, is in behalf of the peculiar relationship between Israel and the Lord.
>
> Thus in a kind of paradoxical but comprehensible way, the claim about the Lord having allotted the other gods to the other nations and so placing their activity within the sovereign rule of the Lord is not put forth in behalf of a tolerance of other religions. On the contrary, it is a part of a critique of Israel's interest in and attachment to those other gods. There are other things going on, but Israel must have nothing to do with the Lord's other business.[37]

There is something attractive in Miller's work here as the picture in Deuteronomy does seem to affirm that Israel's role is to be loyal to YHWH while the nations have their own religious activities with other gods allotted to them by God. The main issue, as Miller rightly notes, is that Israel not follow them; YHWH is their God. If Miller has distorted matters here, I think it may be in emphasis. It seems unclear to me that Deuteronomy is as interested in "God's other business" as the thrust of his article implies, nor can the relationship necessarily be read as positively (i.e. concerning 'redemption') as Miller seems to want to say. That is not to say that 'redemption' could not take place, it is simply to state that Deuteronomy has little interest in spelling this out. It is also to say that in Deuteronomy there is more to Israel's responsibility than 'minding its own business' regarding the nations. The religious activities of these nations are not only abhorred, but are to avoided, or banned, or even removed through destruction, as we shall see. We will return to this in a moment but first Miller's view should be contrasted with extreme views to the contrary.

Some interpreters view the allotting of the Heavenly Host not as good but as punitive; God's allotting does not further his redemptive acts but punishes, or brings destruction to the nations, perhaps even barring their entrance to the 'world to come'. Ancient traditions often proposed explanations along these lines though modern adherents surface from time to time. Among older traditions, two standout. Jubilees

---

[36] Miller, "Other," 595.
[37] Miller, "Other," 601.

15:31 states that while God chose Israel for himself, "He made spirits rule over all [nations] in order to lead them astray from following him."[38] In the talmudic tractate *Abodah Zara* God's allotting objects to the nations is "for the purpose of barring their worshippers from the world to come."[39] Among modern and more recent commentators, Keil and Delitzsch argue that 4:19 concerns a "giving up" of the heathen "to idolatry and shameful lusts, because, although they knew Him from His works, they did not praise Him as God ..."[40] and Heiser, in a recent article, affirms the same. Heiser states: "Rather than electing them to a special relationship to Himself, God gave these nations up to the idolatry ... in which they willfully persisted."[41] Heiser's support, in this case, is partially self-referential in that he uses the same passage (4:19) as evidence[42] and then quotes Tigay's work as if to bolster his case. Unfortunately, Tigay is discussing a possible reading and concludes quite differently.[43]

The two ends of the spectrum, allotting as a redemptive act and allotting as punishment or a 'giving up', can be tempered by positions of a *via media*. For some, the divine allotting is a provisional act, one that points to a time of a fuller, more appropriate, worship of YHWH in the future. The classic view here is that of Clement of Alexandria. He deems the allotting of the heavenly host as a means "to rise up to God" and to keep from atheism.[44] Wright discusses the idea as a possibility; it was worship "intended to be replaced by the true worship of the living God ... [revealing] another dimension of Israel's role as the agent of God's blessing the nations."[45] Perhaps most creative here is the thinking of Origen. He argues for a multi-tiered system consisting of four classes, beginning with those who worship God directly, to those who worship idols. He states:

---

[38] James C. Vanderkam, *The Book of Jubilees* (CSCO 511; Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 93.

[39] Michael L. Rodkinson, trans., *New Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Original Text Edited, Corrected, Formulated, and Translated into English* (Boston: Talmud Society, 1903-18), 9:122.

[40] Keil and Delitzsch, *Penteteuch*, 3:312. They point to Rom 1:21, 24 and 26 as prooftexts.

[41] Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8," 71-72. The "giving up" concept is not particular to recent Christian interpretation. Compare e.g. Chrysostom *Hom. Jo.* 63.

[42] A full discussion is beyond our scope. In addition to Deut 4:19, Heiser claims that Babel and Gen 6 serve to support his idea. For full discussion see Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8," 70-72.

[43] In quoting Tigay through ellipses and without comment, Heiser obscures the fact that Tigay is discussing one way the passage *can* be read, or what the passage *seems* to say; Tigay's ultimate conclusion is quite different, however: "In the Torah the nations are held guilty for what they do in the name of their religion, such as child sacrifice, but not for what they worship" (*Deuteronomy*, 435-36). In other words, God's action is not necessarily punitive or a 'giving up'; only when the nations' religious *practices* are inappropriate are the nations guilty.

[44] *Strom.* 6.14. See the discussion of Driver, *Deuteronomy*, 70-71.

[45] Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 51-52. Tigay discusses the "stepping stone" idea unfavorably, explaining that the Torah gives no indication of such an idea (though he admits the prophets do). See his *Deuteronomy*, 435-36.

> Is it not the case that some have for their God the God of the universe, while a second class, after these, attach themselves to the Son of God, His Christ, and a third class worship the sun and the moon and all the host of heaven, wandering, it is true, from God, but with a far different and a better wandering than that of those who invoke as gods the works of men's hands, silver and gold, — works of human skill. Last of all are those who devote themselves to the beings which are called gods but are no gods.[46]

Origen's idea is not only creative but seems, when compared to the other views presented, to be the most sustainable from the text. It captures the sense of the comparison between Israel and the peoples in verse 19 and 20, the peoples being allotted the Host of Heaven while God takes Israel to be his own. It also implicitly recognizes the difference between humanly created gods and those present in the heavenly realm. Further, to round it off, Origen's model places Christian worship within the spectrum, in conjunction with its sister Judaism while not superseding.[47] Such accomplishments should be noted, if only for their scarcity.

All of the above seems to hinge upon whether the nations can appropriately worship the celestial realm and whether the practice is only harmful for Israel. The latter, Israel worshipping anything other than YHWH, is clearly proscribed in our text. There is little discussion on the possibility to do otherwise: death awaits, as at Beth-Peor. The former idea, questioning whether the nations can appropriately worship their gods, is actually not a concern of the text. Although Miller's study, for example, uses a sophisticated framework to discern subtleties of the text, ultimately his idea is based upon conjecture. That 4:19 implies divine 'redemptive acts' is likely going too far. To be sure, Deuteronomy 4 is interested in the nations, as mentioned, but they mainly surface to highlight the special relationship Israel has with their God. What people has gods so close, or laws so righteous (4:7-8)? Intended answer: No one. Has anything this great been done or heard before; has any people heard the very voice of God from the fire and lived (4:32-33)? Intended answer: No. So, our passage reminds its people: Beware not to serve others gods, those whom the LORD apportioned to everyone else; for *you* are his own personal possession, taken from the furnace in Egypt through mighty deeds. My paraphrasing hopefully clarifies the thrust of our chapter. The nations are not the concern, nor is what they do, unless it

---

[46] Origen *Comm. Jo.* 2.3 (translation by Allan Menzies, *ANF* 10:324).

[47] Note however that Origen's class distinction is not clear-cut. It appears that 'true' Christians can belong to the first class as the second class contains "those who know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified, considering that the Word made flesh is the whole Word, and knowing only Christ after the flesh." (*Comm. Jo.* 2.3). It is also interesting that Origen's view that the sun, moon and stars were (at one time) 'reasonable creatures' was pronounced heretical by the Second Council of Constantinople (553). See Anathema 3.

affects Israel's devotion to YHWH.[48] The restraint of the text is remarkable, especially when we take into consideration what might have been said. It does not overtly pass judgment upon the nations' practice of worshipping the celestial realm but attributes its permission to YHWH, deeming this realm under his control. It does not judge the nations for failing to recognize YHWH, nor does it solicit an active plan to Israel to draw the nations to their God. Israel's obedience to God's laws will display wisdom and the nations will notice; the text leaves unexplained any larger potential repercussions. The crux here appears to be that worship of this realm is acceptable for the nations but lethal for Israel.[49] The concern is something more akin to 'nationalism': Israel belongs to YHWH; the nations have their gods, though theirs are subordinate to Israel's.[50] If we may draw one other conclusion, however, the text does seem, albeit subtly, to cast judgment, perhaps universally, upon the worship of *images*. Nowhere does the text say that worship of images is permissible for the nations, only the worship of the Heavenly Host. Perhaps the strong resonances of 4:16-18 to divine creation serve, implicitly, to argue that no people should make images of God or gods, for all bear the creator's image. While this may strain the text unduly, at any rate the artistry and subtly of the speaker is worthy of further reflection and, I think, admiration.

If this reading is along the right lines, it implies that the nations, in a book that is often deemed the most exclusive and xenophobic of the canon, are left in an ambiguous light. There is room to argue, as I suggest above, that the text is restrained in what it says in that it could have condemned the nations and their worship of the heavenly realm. To be sure, the interpretation of Miller, that God is working redemptively with the nations independent of Israel, would fit our thesis conveniently;

---

[48] The sense of the Deut 4:19's passive verb נִדַּחְתָּ is to 'be driven away', or, perhaps as mentioned by Knapp, 'be seduced' or 'tempted' ("verleiten, verführen"— see further his *Deuteronomium 4*, 72). Similarly to the issue at Peor, where Israel is 'seduced' (Numbers 31:16), the nations are problematic insofar as they drive Israel away from YHWH through worship of their gods. The nations' own worship of these gods does not seem to be the issue. For more on the idea that worship of the Heavenly Host is permissible for the nations, but not Israel, consult Lohfink, "Verkündigung," 183-84; Olson, *Deuteronomy*, 143-45; Fishbane, "Ancient," 46; and the brief remarks of Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 55. Compare Levenson, "Inserted," 215 who bluntly states that the exilic hand here deems the nations "too stupid or degenerate" to recognize the bogus nature of their allotted gods.

[49] See note 48 above. The model is not incontrovertible from an OT perspective; one might wish to prove the rule by looking at an exception like Job 31:26-28. There Job, a non-Israelite, speaks of looking at the sun and moon in worship as iniquity (עון) worthy of judgment, "For I would have denied God above" (כי בחשתי לאל ממעל).

[50] I use the term 'nationalism' loosely for lack of a better term, aware of its potential problems and anachronism in such a context. The idea that the HB is more concerned with national concerns than theological abstraction is a point made frequently by Robert Goldenberg, *The Nations that Know Thee Not: Ancient Jewish Attitudes Towards Other Religions* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 9-27.

yet, our work has suggested that such a reading presses this particular passage too far. However, our reading—suggesting ambiguity and openness—does *permit* and not extinguish our larger thesis that the unchosen, whether individual or nation, can operate appropriately in relation to God, perhaps showing 'fear' of him. Again, the nations are not the focus, and neither should we make them. But they are an emphasis, even if used primarily to contrast Israel's special status to God. If Israel is obedient to their law, the nations will recognize Israel's wisdom and, as the Queen of Sheba did in recognizing Solomon's (1 Kgs 10:8-9), recognition of YHWH's blessing, and praise of him, may come from the nations' lips. Although it is not the purpose of the passage, nor the "genetic code" of Israel's existence (as in Wright's analysis), the potential for YHWH adoration among the nations is present, though it would appear to be only in conjunction with Israel in some way.[51]

How, we might ask, do we reconcile this neutral, potentially positive, view of the nations with what will follow imminently? That is, how can we read this passage in conjunction with the command in two chapters' time for Israel to utterly make *ḥerem* the nations in the land they will possess? Where, to be specific, will the nations that recognize Israel's wisdom come from if they are to be destroyed? Levenson provides an answer when he points out that there is no reason to believe that "it is the same peoples who admire Israel's wisdom (v. 6) whom Israel is to dispossess (v. 38)."[52] We shall address this question in more detail after having examined the prime text, Deuteronomy 7. That passage's significance for the concept of election should not be underestimated. Contained therein is what has become for many writers a *locus classicus* for election.

DEUTERONOMY 7: *ḤEREM* AND ELECTION?

In our earlier section on Christian interpretation, we noted a number of interpreters that defined, whether explicitly or implicitly, Deuteronomy 7 as a *locus classicus* for election. What was of particular interest for our work was the way some then forwarded this election as something for the benefit of the nations, even while

---

[51] Here we touch upon the important conclusions of MacDonald, *Meaning*, 174-76, who rightly points out that if the nations do exist in relationship to YHWH, "it is to be found through Israel" (174). MacDonald also points to 1 Kgs 10 as exemplifying the idea.

[52] Levenson, "Inserted," 207. Levenson makes his remarks in an argument for the unity of Deut 4:1-40. He states further: "...it is more probable that the admirers are, like the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10), from some far-off land to which Israel's reputation for marvelous wisdom has penetrated. The Canaanites hardly fit that description."

working from the passage at hand. The *ḥerem* described within was often wholly ignored.

What will be of even greater interest are those interpreters that *do* tackle the question of the *ḥerem* within the passage and *still* regard the passage capable of supporting a larger thesis that Israel's election serves the primary purpose of bringing all nations into relationship with YHWH. We shall encounter three voices within this section who argue just that, albeit to varying degrees. Until that point, however, the text itself demands our close attention, in a number of respects. First, the passage necessitates, even in a study concerned primarily with the 'final form' of the text, some attention to the question of its composition. As we will see, how one understands such questions may determine the function and purpose of the *ḥerem* within Israel's story and history. Second, we will spend some time examining questions of definition, most notably in such ideas as the 'seven nations' in 7:1. After working through the passage and noting a number of ways interpreters handle the idea of *ḥerem* (metaphorically, for example), I detail my own reading of the chapter, working inner-biblically with Genesis and the Pentateuch as a whole. In doing so I argue that the *ḥerem*, though repugnant to the contemporary reader, shows YHWH's absolute loyalty to his oath made to Israel's foreparents.

The Composition of Deuteronomy 7 and Related Issues

There is probably nothing more certain today in source criticism than the lack of consensus on the sources and dating of Deuteronomy. Perhaps such a statement assumes too much in that Deuteronomy itself is often proposed to be a very stratigraphical book, its many layers dating later or earlier, depending on one's point of view or theory of analysis. While there is no consensus on the exact dating, many agree on the relatively late nature of the text. Although de Wette's seminal thesis gains little scholarly attention today, the connection between Deuteronomy and Josiah's reform retains its voices, though many would view the overall book to be later while containing older traditions.[53] To be sure, our section here will not overcome the larger difficulties presented with regard to the book; we shall essentially limit our discussion to Deuteronomy 7.[54]

---

[53] For an overview of the issues involved, consult the concise overview of Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9*, lxviii-lxx.

[54] Of course one cannot simply delimit a chapter in such a discussion. As will be argued, the immediately surrounding material of chs. 6 and 8, in addition to the larger corpus of 4-11 must be used to address the question.

Weinfeld argues that the Deuteronomic author of chapter 7 "is dependent upon the Gilgal tradition of Exod 23, but he reworked it in accordance with his particular tendency."[55] Weinfeld places much of the chapter side by side with Exodus 23:20-33 and argues that Deuteronomy 7 is a coherent whole which builds upon the material there, omitting only minor aspects for ideological reasons, for example details related to the angel in 20-23a.[56] Deuteronomy 7 adds verses 6-11 and 17-19, sections that are, according to Weinfeld, deeply Deuteromomic. Election is tied into the idea of rooting out the Canaanites, but the earlier 'expelling' (גרשׁ) spoken of in Exodus is replaced with ideas of *ḥerem*, to accommodate the Deuteronomic view.

Hoffman, in his study on "The Deuteronomistic Concept of the Herem,"[57] looks first to Deuteronomy 20:10-18, and argues that the meaning of the passage is determined from the unambiguous dictum in verse 10 that commands Israel to offer peace to the nations before engaging in battle; the inclusion of the qualification of verse 15 indicates a later accretion, material added to open the way to the *ḥerem* idea.[58] Having determined this, Hoffman then moves to argue that the same holds true for Deuteronomy 7:1-5. He analyzes Deuteronomy 6:20-7:11 and regards 7:1-5 to interrupt the natural flow of the passage that tells, in 6:20, of the son who asks why these burdens (of the law) have been placed upon Israel. The question is answered in 6:21-25 but continues in 7:6 to explain that the laws are justified in YHWH's choosing of Israel to be a holy people to himself, a people chosen from all the nations of the earth. "This logical dialogic argumentation is breached and disturbed by the law of the *herem* in 7,1-5, which should therefore be recognized as a later accretion."[59] Should the reader wonder when the material arose and how it fits into a historical framework, Hoffman answers that too. The *ḥerem* material was added to transmit contemporary ideas, ideas Hoffman believes were to thwart a xenophobic zeal in the period between the later seventh and early fifth centuries B.C.E. While

---

[55] Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 377-82, here 379; compare also his "The Ban on the Canaanites in the Biblical Codes and its Historical Development," in *History and Traditions of Early Israel: Studies Presented to Eduard Nielsen, May 8th 1993* (ed. André Lemaire and Benedikt Otzen; VTSup 50; Leiden: Brill, 1993), 142-60.

[56] Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 380-82. On the exclusion of the angel motif, see his "The Emergence of the Deuteronomic Movement: The Historical Antecedents," in *Das Deuteronomium: Entstehung, Gestalt und Botschaft* (ed. Norbert Lohfink; BETL 68; Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1985), 76-98, here 84.

[57] *ZAW* 111 (1999): 196-210.

[58] A similar case with regard to 20:15-18 is argued by Alexander Rofé, "The Laws of Warfare in the Book of Deuteronomy: Their Origins, Intent and Positivity," *JSOT* 32 (1985): 28-30.

[59] Hoffman, "Deuteronomistic Concept," 202.

this may sound paradoxical (i.e. introduce the idea of *ḥerem* to counter xenophobia), Hoffman argues:

> A reasonable explanation to the motivation behind the *herem* concept may be derived through means of awareness of the most unequivocal messages of the *herem* combination — that is, the combination of the law with its full execution by Joshua. The message is: there are no more Canaanites, Girgashites, Perizites, etc., and consequently any law concerning them — and not only the law of the *herem* — is no longer valid. In other words: the Deuteronomist used a kind of a Machiavellian tactic. When depicting Moses as a militant nationalist who claimed that the 'Canaanites' should be destroyed, the Deuteronomist pragmatically preached against the concurrent political implication of this notion by removing its actual relevance. In other words: the Deuteronomist raised the *herem* concept in a polemic against supporters of a nationalistic, anti-foreigners policy.[60]

Stern, in his full length monograph devoted to the subject of the *ḥerem*, argues a somewhat similar case.[61] Stern's hypothesis, however, dates the substance of the *ḥerem* material much earlier, and ascribes it, unlike Hoffman, to an ancient historical practice. The inclusion of the material suits a comparable purpose however, even if for a different situation:

> ... it might seem on the face of it, that the laws of war in Deuteronomy provide grounds to consider the חרם an institution, in the sense of a legal institution. I have argued the opposite. The texts of Deuteronomy 20 and 7 were designed to help make the חרם a thing of the past, without application to the challenges faced by the law framers' contemporaries, although the laws themselves reflect many of the most important *realia* of the חרם—an indication that the memory of the living practice was still fresh. For one result of this investigation has been the conclusion that these laws date back to a time when the חרם was still something that loomed large in the memory, if not the praxis, of Northern Israel in the period following the Moabite חרם described in the MI [Moabite Inscription]. The aim of the laws was to prevent the inappropriate use of the חרם at a time when the "primordial" seven nations and Amalek, the barrier to Israel's world order in the Land, no longer constituted a threat. It was those nations who inhabited the Land (east of the Jordan) who were the proper object of the חרם, not Moab ...[62]

The above two theories suggest that the *ḥerem* material of Deuteronomy 7 functions to prevent its misuse or, better, use of any kind. Both argue, albeit with variation, that the *ḥerem* applied to a time past, not to a contemporary setting. The idea in itself is not problematic (indeed commands some credence, as will be argued below), yet with regard to Hoffman's work an exception must be made. Much of his thesis rests upon the idea that the *ḥerem* material within chapter 7 is disjointed from the surrounding material, indicating its accretive nature. The work of O'Connell, however, argues

---

[60] Hoffman, "Deuteronomistic Concept," 205-06.
[61] Philip D. Stern, *The Biblical Ḥerem: A Window on Israel's Religious Experience* (BJS 211; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991).
[62] Stern, *Ḥerem*, 217.

something quite different, and does so persuasively. O'Connell shows that chapters 7 and 8 correspond to each other by way of their similar structural architecture and show their coherence through their central position within the larger parenesis of chapters 4-11.[63] Also important is the theological contribution the chapters make to the larger section, and the *ḥerem* idea cannot be separated from its surrounding context. After showing how the chapters correspond to each other and function within the larger work, O'Connell concludes:

> Despite the increased complexity of Deut. vii, as compared with ch. viii, both chapters follow the same basic pattern of asymmetrical concentricity and both end with chiastic double closures. Both chapters use the device of sequential displacement to achieve concentric asymmetry. It is difficult to imagine that these chapters came into their present form and into juxtaposition with each other apart from the design and intention of a single author or compiler. I am aware that there is evidence of redactional processes in the development of the present form of Deuteronomy, but are such processes likely to have given rise to chapters so architecturally analogous and, at the same time, so mutually integrated with their context? ...
>
> Deut. vii and viii not only correspond in their juxtaposition and asymmetrical concentric structure but complement each other in rhetorical design. Deut. vii, taken as a whole, is a theological antecedent to Deut. viii. ... These two chapters, in juxtaposition, complement each other in that they appeal to two complementary human responses to the divine offer of the land: one promoting courageous action, the other, the acknowledgement of complete dependence.[64]

The problems of composition with regard to chapter 7 are far from answered but the above, at least, gives a taste for some of the questions involved and perhaps indicates a means to read the chapter coherently within its surrounding context. In addition to the above, I will argue that chapter 7 is linked conceptually with the material that precedes it, the Shema. In understanding the *ḥerem* (and its justification: election) as a mechanism through which favourable conditions are obtained for Israel to practice YHWH's commandments in the Land, we will begin to see precisely how connected the material of Deuteronomy is, particularly chapters 4-11.

Deuteronomy 7:1: Seven Nations

Although chapter 7 introduces its material in briefer terms than chapter 6, it too indicates that the commands that follow are ones to be observed in the long promised

---

[63] See Robert H. O'Connell, "Deuteronomy VII:1-26: Asymmetrical Concentricity and the Rhetoric of Conquest," *VT* 42 (1992): 248-65, esp. 262ff.

[64] "Asymmetrical," 264-65.

land.[65] Our chapter begins by stating that YHWH will bring Israel to the land and will clear away (נשל) many nations (גוים רבים) before them. These 'many nations' are then defined, resulting in a list of seven, the precise meaning of which has baffled interpreters and historians alike for centuries. Some have deemed the list to be typological, indicating fullness or completeness;[66] others have called such lists "stereotypical and an ideological construction";[67] Driver believes the intention of the list "is obviously rhetorical, rather than geographical or historical;"[68] Lemche matter-of-factly deems it "meaningless to invest much energy in studying the identity and history of the nations mentioned as if they had ever played a role in the history of Palestine;"[69] Brueggemann, on the other hand, calls the list "an archaic slogan that represents, in context, any alien culture with its religious temptations for Israel."[70] Although there have been attempts to reconstruct the peoples behind the lists,[71] the overwhelming sense of the secondary literature is that the list functions in a way other than literally. The question, however, is made difficult in that the list is partially sensible, and partially puzzling. That is, three of the seven nations are attested outside the Bible, while four are only mentioned within it.[72] If the list was wholly verifiable extra-biblically, or wholly imaginative, we might find ourselves more capable of casting judgment. From where we stand the exercise will inevitably end without concrete answers.

Lack of concrete answers, however, should not discourage at least some engagement with the problem, particularly as it may affect our understanding of the *ḥerem* command that follows. Perhaps it is instructive to determine how the biblical material itself uses the lists. Ishida, in his detailed look at the topic, notes the extreme flexibility with which the lists are used.[73] There is no real pattern and the lists vary

---

[65] We will note below however that although there are similarities, the commandments in ch. 6 indicate ongoing action *while in the land*, whereas the commandment of the *ḥerem* (7:1-5) largely reads as an action *upon entering the land*.

[66] Hoffman, "Deuteronomistic Concept," 204-05.

[67] MacDonald, *Meaning*, 112.

[68] Driver, *Deuteronomy*, 97; compare Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 119-20.

[69] Niels Peter Lemche, *The Canaanites and Their Land: The Tradition of the Canaanites* (JSOTSup 110; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 84.

[70] Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 94.

[71] Some interpreters work through each people as though there is no real problem. See e.g. Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976), 177-78; and Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 362-64.

[72] The Canaanites, Amorites, and Hittites are generally well attested extra-biblically while the Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, and Girgashites are not. Consult further the discussions of Tomoo Ishida, "The Structure and Historical Implications of the Lists of Pre-Israelite Nations," *Bib* 60 (1979): 461-90; and Philip E. Satterthwaite and David W. Baker, "Nations of Canaan," *DOTP* 596-605.

[73] Ishida, "Structure," 461-90.

from three to five, to six, seven or even ten. A list of six nations is common, but the ordering is not uniform. When seven nations are included the list remains relatively consistent, though the order varies here too. One will notice that the Girgashites are regularly added to the six name lists, perhaps for typological completeness.[74] Ishida argues that the varying order likely indicates not different sources but time periods. There appears to be some pattern to the lists, the first three nations are usually larger, historically identifiable nations, while the latter are smaller and lesser known. He notes that depending on the time period, the people of Canaan were referred to generically as either the 'Canaanites', the 'Amorites', or the 'Hittites'.[75] Ishida also suggests that some of the names may be symbolic; for instance, Perizzites may mean "those living in unwalled towns or hamlets", while the Canaanites those "in fortified cities."[76] To oversimplify an aspect of the argument here, the Perizzites may symbolize the minor rural nations, while Canaanites the larger city dwelling ones.

While such ideas are speculative, they again point to the idea that the list functions symbolically, at least to some degree. To state that the seven nations are typological for completeness would not be far off the mark. The list likely indicates 'all' and does so in a way that would emphasize completeness, while at the same time rhetorically drawing attention to the idea that Israel is smaller than they ("seven nations greater and stronger than you" [7:2]).[77] While the historical identification of the nations is dubious (at least for the Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, and Girgashites), we might do well to remind ourselves of the narrative setting of the passage. Regardless of whether the text is late, the story is told as if a speech from the other side of the Jordan, prior to any settlement in Canaan. The nature of the speech is to encourage and exhort the people to take on the difficult task that awaits. That the story's speech-giver, Moses, would use names that are symbolic would not be out of place, anymore than when the story speaks of the Anakim (long-necked or neckchain ones [or giants]), the Emim (frightening ones), or the Rephaim (perhaps ghostly or

---

[74] It is interesting to note that the LXX and SamP. regularly include seven name lists where the MT has six. It is difficult to determine the reasons why, though it is not altogether implausible that it added the seventh (Girgashites) because it understood the list as prescriptive. For exact details, see Ishida, "Structure," 464, note 4.

[75] Ishida, "Structure," 477-78.

[76] Ishida, "Structure," 479; the link for the Perizzites is made through the Hebrew פְּרָזִי, meaning 'rural person' (see e.g. the definition of *HALOT*). Further discussion and references are in Satterthwaite and Baker, "Nations of Canaan," 603.

[77] So Driver, *Deuteronomy*, 97.

shaded ones).[78] It is unlikely that the list intended to have encyclopedic accuracy to the extent that within the story Israel was to determine, before laying siege to a city, if the given people group 'made the list'. If the people were in the specified land, it is likely that they constituted one of the seven.[79] The list, in all likelihood, is purposely and overtly symbolic (perhaps even somewhat humorously so),[80] and we would do well to give the benefit of the doubt to the storyteller's ingenuity here. At a minimum, such a list cannot simply be read as 'mere' rhetoric, thus artificial, used to interpret what follows, the *ḥerem*, as something likewise artificial. The list of seven contains seven symbolic and real nations that are indeed "many nations" (Judg 3:5, though a list of six, likewise suggests that the list functions rhetorically to denote 'many', or 'all'). They are said to be greater and stronger than Israel but, as the speech will make clear very soon, Israel is not to fear their greatness as YHWH will do to them as he did to "Pharaoh and all Egypt" (7:17-19).

Deuteronomy 7:2-5: You Shall Utterly Make Them Ḥerem

As noted initially, these 'many nations' will be cleared away by YHWH and the speech continues by indicating that YHWH will give them over to be defeated (נכה). It is then that Israel is commanded, הַחֲרֵם תַּחֲרִים אֹתָם, 'to utterly devote them (to destruction)'. My translation (particularly the words in parentheses) is disputable, and not to be accepted simply on face value. The chapter uses the more common verbs relating to destroy in a moment, but for now the speaker sums up the entire action commanded of Israel, maintaining a religious emphasis as חרם implies. I outline this and other reasons for reading the term חרם as 'devote to destruction' in Appendix 2, though I touch on some below. Another way of reading the text has surfaced recently, however, one that regards חרם not as 'to destroy', but as a metaphor. We briefly examine the proposal before looking at *ḥerem* and election in the passage more generally.

---

[78] Consult e.g. Deut 1:28; 2:10-12; 3:11; and 9:2. My definitions here are speculative and provisional. Consult the definitions of *HALOT* (for Emim, see אימ); for the 'Rephaim' consult the meticulous entry by Michael L. Brown, "רָפָאִים," *NIDOTTE* 3:1173-80.

[79] Here we encounter the difficult problem of determining what the borders of the land were to be. As Weinfeld shows, the 'ideal land' and the 'real land' are two different things. See his *The Extent of the Promised Land—The Status of Transjordan* (GTA 25; ed. Georg Strecker; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 59-75, as well as the interesting discussion by Yehezkel Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), 245-55.

[80] We might surmise that some of the names would have carried the sense of 'you name it, they're included'.

The Ḥerem *as Metaphor?*

In a brief but cogent way, Moberly, in his examination of Deuteronomy 7, has argued for a metaphorical understanding of the *ḥerem*, a reading that suggests *ḥerem* is a metaphor for religious fidelity.[81] To be sure, Moberly's idea does not imply the all too common diminution of "mere" metaphor, whereby the result is somehow a weakened idea of the intended or real. Moberly permits the likelihood of a literal understanding of *ḥerem* within the OT but sees its significance shift, at least in Deuteronomy 7, toward a metaphor for religious fidelity, a real practice involving practical action, "which demonstrates and enables Israel's unreserved love for YHWH."[82]

McDonald, in his recently published doctoral work under Moberly, presents a similar reading, building upon the above.[83] Just as Moberly reads verse 2 as a statement and negative restatement of the *ḥerem* (i.e. "Israel 'shall utterly make them *ḥerem*,' making no covenant and showing no mercy")[84] so too does MacDonald, reading what follows, verses 3-5, as stipulations of the *ḥerem*.[85] In such a reading, the problem of a seemingly superfluous command not to intermarry (vv. 3-4) is removed; the long noticed apparent tension of utterly destroying a people, but then being commanded not to intermarry with them, is eliminated—the latter becomes a stipulation of the *ḥerem* metaphor. There is more to the argument, to which we will turn in a moment, but for now we will investigate this idea as it relates to 7:2-5. As MacDonald maintains, the reasons for reading Deuteronomy 7 as a metaphor of devoted love to YHWH "must not be based upon preference or emotional reaction to the problems of a 'literal' reading but on exegetical observations about the chapter."[86] While I do not wish to accuse MacDonald of the former ideas, I would suggest that exegetically such a reading is open to question.

The main issue at hand with regard to these verses is the idea that there is a junction or shift between verse 2 and 3. While the language of junction is not employed by MacDonald, it is implied when he states that the *ḥerem* in 7:1-5 "is

---

[81] Moberly, "Toward an Interpretation of the Shema," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, 124-44, esp. 133-37.

[82] Moberly, "Toward," 136.

[83] MacDonald, *Meaning*, 108-23.

[84] Moberly, "Toward," 135. Moberly is less explicit in his description as 'negative restatement' (though it is implicit) but uses the language of 'stipulations' for vv. 3-5. Compare MacDonald, *Meaning*, 113.

[85] See MacDonald, *Meaning*, 113ff.

[86] MacDonald, *Meaning*, 111.

given content through a negative restatement and two concrete stipulations."[87] The problem is that the text itself gives no indication of a change in mode of discussion—from statement to stipulation—between verses 2 and 3. The Hebrew merely contains a *vav* (ו) and there is no reason to believe that it is disjunctive or introducing a stipulation different to what preceded it (i.e. to make no covenant with and show no mercy). If the text were unaccented (i.e. without *silluq* and *soph passuq*), we might read each as three separate but coupled ideas as all three ideas are separated by *vavs*. The idea forbidding intermarriage is not separate from making covenants or not showing mercy. All three ideas (make no covenant, show no mercy, do not intermarry) represent actions that may have been foreseen as enticing to the people by the speech-giver, all things he warns the addressees not to do instead of utterly destroying the people. In verse 5 the text *does* wish to separate what follows from the above (כי אם כה תעשו—"but thus you shall do ..."), in that it is a positive statement of what is involved in the *ḥerem*, that is, the breaking down of religious objects. From sentence structure, therefore, there is little reason to think that verse 2 contains a restatement while verse 3 is a stipulation. They are indicative of the same thing—all actions that must not happen when the people enter the land. The actions are likely *alternatives* to *ḥerem* that should not be followed.

Perhaps, to avoid abstractions and speak from a concrete example, we might try to envisage a similar speech given in a contemporary situation today. Having a background in homebuilding, an example comes to mind. Suppose I were a construction supervisor, ready to instruct my crew in the demolition of a building; I also happen to have a fondness for biblical idiom:

> When you enter the house for demolition, you shall remove every piece of timber and utterly destroy it. Do not take the wood into your home and use it for the beams that support your walls or your roof. For it is wood that is tainted with wormwood, though invisible to your eye. It will collapse and bring destruction upon you and your family. Do not use the wood as paneling, for it will contaminate the beams that support your walls and roof; its disease will spread and bring destruction to your family. You are workers that shall live in well built homes, made from the oaks of Canada, timber that bears no sign of wormwood or disease. Your homes shall be strong and stand the test of time, bringing happiness and long life to your family.

No analogy is perfect, but if nothing else my little example suggests that it is not completely illogical to command the destruction of something and then to add negative alternatives that should not take place. In this case, the alternatives indicate

---

[87] MacDonald, *Meaning*, 113.

that the one commanding realizes the temptations that await his workers. The wood appears good, is suitable for construction, and is easily accessible. The one commanding, however, knows better. The wood of the building will lead to destruction; it is invisibly destructive to the ones called to destroy it. Would the workers have any reason to believe that the command, because it was followed by alternatives not permitted, was not to be taken literally?

There is more to the argument of MacDonald and we should briefly examine his supporting evidence. MacDonald, as I understand his work, presents four main points to support his case. Although the above is a component, it is only a partial point of a larger argument.[88] The four points may be summarized:

> 1) indications in 7:1-2 suggest that the *ḥerem* is to take place while in the land (similar to chapters 6 and 8), not as Israel enters it.
>
> 2) The seven nations listed in 7:1 are representative, not historical, and suggest size and power in contrast to Israel.
>
> 3) The prohibition of intermarriage makes little sense if the nations were completely eliminated.
>
> 4) Reading Deuteronomy 7 as a metaphor reduces the tension between it and Exodus 23 and 34, passages where it is said that the angel of the LORD will destroy and drive out the nations while Israel is to destroy religious objects and shun alliances.

First, the argument that *ḥerem* is to be an ongoing observance while in the land, not while entering it, is, to my mind, to misunderstand the nature of *ḥerem*. If the *ḥerem* is a devoting of the enemy after a battle victory, the *ḥerem* cannot take place before or while defeating them. *Ḥerem* and defeating are not the same action, as could be implied from MacDonald's reading. *Ḥerem* is best understood as an action of devotion after the battle took place in which certain objects and/or people were given over to YHWH, almost as an offering or sacrifice. MacDonald's concluding statement that to understand the *ḥerem* "literally as a command to eliminate all the Canaanites" would mean it "could only have had a limited duration" is exactly the point. There is little reason to view it as an ongoing command; nowhere do later prophets or other areas of the biblical text call for a reenactment of it.[89] It was a

---

[88] And to be sure, MacDonald's overall reading of Deuteronomy need not be discarded due to his work on the *ḥerem* is a metaphor for devoted love. For more on his astute work, particularly regarding monotheism, consult the flattering review of Levenson, *SJT* 58 (2005): 237-40.

[89] Compare Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (London: SCM, 1992), 146; and *Old Testament Theology*, 77-79. From a theological standpoint I believe this may be the only surviving hope for contemporary communities of faith seeking to make sense of OT *ḥerem*. That is, the *ḥerem* was a one-time event (*einmalig*) that the

temporary measure usually, if not always, connected with taking possession of the land.[90]

Secondly, we have looked briefly above at the list of nations and suggested that although the list is representative, it need not be understood as automatically less than real. To state that the list is "stereotypical and an ideological construction" does not prove that it was meant to be taken figuratively only.[91] It may, as suggested above, simply mean that it represented all, in totality, but real nations nonetheless.

Thirdly, I believe we have at least raised some possibilities as to why the command to utterly destroy the nations need not be read in tension with the idea of not intermarrying with them. The idea is an alternative (like cutting a covenant and showing mercy) that is not permitted.

Fourthly, and lastly, Exodus 23 and 34 do point to expelling and dispossessing in a way that differs from Deuteronomy. There is no disputing that Deuteronomy uses the idea of *ḥerem* in a way that the rest of the Pentateuch does not (note, however, the important parallel of Num 21:1-3). Similar to the idea of election, Deuteronomy takes an implicit idea and makes it explicit, then develops it for its ideological purposes. To argue that election is not present in the rest of the Pentateuch would be technically correct (from a standpoint of language) though incorrect conceptually. The case may not be quite as clear with *ḥerem* though there are hints. Although Exodus 23 and 34 do not use the language of *ḥerem*, the idea that the autochthonous nations would be destroyed is hinted at, even if unaccentuated (e.g. Exod 23:23). To be sure, the nature of the fighting is different in that God plays a much more active role. Deuteronomy's tendency to diminish the divine role in warfare (or show Israel's synergistic cooperation) is well known[92] and the specific commands to destroy therein are likely a result of this. Part of the issue relates to the fact that even within Deuteronomy the picture is not unified. Deuteronomy 6:10-11 suggests that Israel will live in cities it did not build, with houses filled with things they did not place there (and with cisterns they did not hew, vineyards they did not plant, etc.) yet Deuteronomy 8:12 seems to suggest that Israel will build the houses they live in. Deuteronomy 7 itself is also indicative in that it uses so many ways to describe Israel's commanded activity in the

---

Bible portrays as commanded by God. While I may object to the idea that God would command such a thing, I am encouraged that it is not to be reenacted again.

[90] This, of course, is not completely true in the case of Num 21, though one could argue that it is connected with the journey to the Land, or that the *ḥerem* there was different in that it was a vow devised by Israel.

[91] MacDonald, *Meaning*, 112.

[92] See discussion in Appendix 2 below; consult also Rofé, "Laws of Warfare," 25-26.

land: there is a smiting (נכה—v. 2); Israel is to devote the nations to destruction (חרם—v. 2); Israel shall consume, or devour, the peoples (אכל—v. 16), until they perish (אבד—vv. 20, 24), are destroyed (שׁמד—vv. 23, 24), and eventually have been put to an end (כלה—v. 22). Moreover, Deuteronomy's regular language of dispossessing (ירשׁ) is not altogether dissimilar to the action of YHWH's angel in Exod 23 and 34. Deuteronomy's broad spectrum of language suggests that it did not regard there to be a conflict or necessarily a different outcome in mind; perhaps we too should be careful before pointing to inconsistencies between the books. While there may be good reason to argue that Deuteronomy emphasizes, indeed even introduces, the idea of the *ḥerem* in a way different to the rest of the Pentateuch, it does not follow that this lack of uniformity rules out a reading of *ḥerem* as destroying (i.e. taking human life) in Deuteronomy 7, as MacDonald implies. Furthermore, the canonical ordering of the story regarding the conquest of Joshua (whether actualized to the extent described or not) makes best sense if the *ḥerem* spoken of in Deuteronomy 7 is understood to be a real, religious, action involving destruction, divinely commanded by Moses.

All of this does not rule out that the *ḥerem* commanded in Deuteronomy 7 can be read metaphorically today, or that it was in history. What it does say is that within the story itself, in the mouth of Moses as a divine command before the crossing of the Jordan, the *ḥerem* is best understood as a command to destroy the nations Israel will encounter there. There is, I would argue, good reason to believe that the one who was responsible for this portion of Deuteronomy wished to imply that the foreparents of Israel were unfaithful in completing the *ḥerem*, in that they did not destroy the nations, but instead made covenants with them, showed them mercy, and intermarried with them. Perhaps the author tried to reconcile a *ḥerem* tradition associated with Joshua and the fact that there remained nations who lived in and amongst Israel, as a snare. That snare—and cause for the snare (i.e. disobedience in applying the *ḥerem*)—may have been a convenient point to propound in a time when Israel was looking to explain their exile from the land. To paint the early Israelites as unfaithful would not be uncharacteristic of the larger biblical story. Although the book of Joshua suggests the totality of the *ḥerem* (10:40), it also implies that it was not complete (13:1; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12-13), and other biblical traditions purport the same (Judg 1:21, 27-28, 29, 30, 31-33; 1 Kgs 9:20-21; 2 Chr 8:7-8). To view Deuteronomy as intending a metaphor of devoted love to YHWH (even if a strong and active one to

remain religiously devoted to YHWH and separate from the nations) does not fit the larger canonical story. The story of Joshua and his campaign, that which immediately follows Deuteronomy, then needs to be read metaphorically as well, something that becomes not only confusing, but probably misleading. At any rate, the idea of metaphor makes some sense theologically but fails narratologically.

Deuteronomy 7:6-8: Ḥerem and Election

Having explored the idea of *ḥerem*, we now engage the concern of our thesis, election. Purposefully, I have sought to apportion adequate space to the idea of *ḥerem* as the text construes Israel's election not merely as related, but *the* reason for this action. Furthermore, the chapter as a whole is primarily occupied with the idea of *ḥerem* rather than election. Election, however, serves as the basis for the subject matter of the chapter—how Israel will deal with the nations when entering the land promised to their foreparents.

Some exegetical observations are due. First, as mentioned, the ideas presented in 7:1-5 are causally connected with what follows through its use of כי ('for', 'because'). It is *because* Israel is a holy people (עם קדוש) to YHWH that the above is to take place.[93] Holiness is central to this passage, indeed to Deuteronomy (at least conceptually), something we will return to momentarily. Second, it is because YHWH chose (בחר) Israel to be his people from all the peoples of the earth as a special possession (סגלה) that Israel is holy, and thus to execute the *ḥerem* on the nations. They are set apart as something treasured, as a king treasures something above his other possessions (compare 1 Chron 29:3; Ecc 2:8); because they belong to YHWH they must remain holy and pure. It is here that we can better understand the purpose of the *ḥerem*. As the *ḥerem* is closely connected with the idea of Israel's holiness, it also functions to preserve that holiness. Through the *ḥerem* Israel is able to be what God intended Israel to be: a people set apart and devoted to him. In destroying the nations and their religious objects, the threat of undoing God's purpose is removed. In theory, Israel is able to remain what God had chosen them for—a people set apart as a treasure, a holy people.

---

[93] Commentators often notice the connection between Israel's election and the *herem* but in the end do not explore its significance (e.g. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 367; Driver, *Deuteronomy*, 99-101; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 86); others explore the significance to varying degrees (e.g. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 40-42, 110-14 ; and Robert Martin-Achard, "La signification théologique de l'élection d'Israël," *Cahiers de la revue de théologie et de philosophie* 11 [1984]: 81-89, esp. 83).

It seems clear to me that although it may appear to be for the benefit of Israel that YHWH chose them, this is not the primary point. The purpose of the election seems to be for God's pleasure; any benefit Israel receives is secondary. Israel is chosen to be YHWH's possession; along with this came a less than easy task, a task they are continually reminded of: to remain pure, be set apart, and, if our reading is along the right lines, to destroy the nations in the Land in order to do so. To be sure, there are benefits of being specially loved and blessed by God, yet it becomes clear throughout the biblical story that Israel is often less than excited about its special relationship to YHWH. They are led into a wilderness, encounter lack of water and food, and often complain that it was better to be slaves under Pharaoh. While we might be quick to condemn Israel in this, it may also be instructive simply to allow the story to communicate something quite natural. Israel did not find its being a possession of YHWH particularly easy or advantageous. By and large Israel does not seem to recognize the gift that YHWH is giving to them as their life now has very high expectations. Israel often prefers not to listen. Israel is described as a 'stiff-necked people' (עם־קשה־ערף), an idiom that no doubt implies someone not willing to turn the head to pay attention.[94] Life would probably be easier without such obligations. To maintain otherwise reads against the thrust of the story as the Bible presents it. Although readers often focus on Israel's disobedience, I suggest we might listen, for a moment, to what this disobedience tells us about being God's treasured possession. Although the people were promised a good land and a relationship with YHWH, at times it was likely easier not to be a סגלה.

The election of Israel is also something, it seems, that could lead to self-aggrandizement. The immediately following verses of 7-8 make clear that the reason for Israel's election relates not to its size but rather has to do with YHWH's loyalty. Israel is called the smallest of the peoples, something undoubtedly used to contrast them to the nations, particularly true if we remember Israel's origins.[95] What follows are biblical axioms of YHWH's faithfulness. He brought Israel out of Egypt; Israel is to 'Know therefore that YHWH your God, He is God, the faithful God ..." The

---

[94] Exod 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9; Deut 9:6, 13. See Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 407.

[95] Weinfeld (*Deuteronomy 1-11*, 369) notes that this idea stands in contradiction to 1:10 and 10:22 (numerous as 'the stars of the heavens') though Nelson rightly notes the different context of ch. 7 and the rhetorical function served in each case (*Deuteronomy*, 101). As an aside, it is interesting to note how interpreters sought to rationalize Israel's election through this verse; some Rabbis viewed the 'smallest' idea as pertaining not to size but humility. That is, God chose Israel because it was the most humble and modest of the peoples (!) (Discussed, with references, in Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 369).

regular pattern of Deuteronomy to call for obedience on a covenantal level is rehearsed (7:12), again rooted in God's faithfulness to Israel. This recurring motif highlights that Israel is to be faithful as YHWH has been faithful. They are to keep his commandments as YHWH has kept his promises to the fathers. If they are obedient, YHWH will bless them in the land. If they are not, a curse awaits.[96] The content of this blessing is found in verses 12-15, a hyperbolic description of the blessing Israel will experience in the land if obedient. Verse 16 then serves to recap the section, linking it to opening verses of the chapter: Israel is to devour (אכל) the nations and is not to allow their eyes to have pity upon them (לא תחס עינך עליהם) lest they serve other gods and ignore their destiny as YHWH's special people.

What follows (vv. 17-26) is a reassurance to Israel that YHWH will fight for them and that they need not fear the size—already emphasized in 7:1—of the nations. God will do to them as he did to Pharaoh and the Egyptians (7:18). But, the text reveals, Israel will not be able to perform its task immediately. Verse 22 interrupts the narrative's natural flow, indicating that the conquest will happen little by little, lest the beasts of the field become too great. The verse reads like a later addition, though is now part of the story; the basic sense here is that a quick slaughter of the people would bring about a large, indeed overwhelming, population of scavenging beasts. The final verses of the chapter conclude by again restating the idea of the *ḥerem*, which will include man (איש), king (מלך), and religious objects (פסילי אלהיהם), the latter of which are abominations (תועבה) to be burned with fire, lest the *ḥerem* transfer to the one who keeps it (vv. 25-26). Within this section, direct language of destroying is used (אבד—vv. 20, 24; שׁמד—vv. 23, 24) in what can only seem like an attempt to employ every verb possible for destroy. If we had any reason to doubt the idea of *ḥerem* as destroy, these verses ensure it is unambiguous.

Larger Deuteronomic Themes

The larger theme of Deuteronomy 4-11 presents itself acutely within our chapter. The theme is that God is *the* God, Israel is *the* people, the land they are going to is *the* land, where they will obey *the* commandments, and worship at *the* place. We might

---

[96] Deuteronomy is replete with the idea of covenant and may truly be called a 'book of the covenant', even if not technically so. See e.g. 5:22-33; 6:1-4, 16-19, 24-25; 7:12-15; 8:18-20; 11:13-15; 11:26-28; 26:16-19; 27:9-10; 28:1-30:20; 32:45-47.

also restate it as: YHWH is one, the *one* God; Israel is his treasured possession, the *one* people; the land flowing with milk and honey is the land Israel will possess, the *one* land; the commandments are righteous and the prize of the nations, the *one* law; the place YHWH will choose and put his name will be Israel's place of worship, the *one* location.[97] Oneness is an overarching theme, and this has little to do with monotheism as it has historically been construed.[98] The theme is about YHWH's oneness, but this has more to do with his engagement with, and importance to, Israel than his singularity with regard to polytheism. All of this can largely be subsumed under the idea of holiness, a theme seemingly absent from Genesis, though full-blown here. God is holy, the people are holy, the land is a place in which to be holy, the commandments are righteous and make one holy, and the place is where holy things are and holy worship takes place.

The other nations, under such a model, are decidedly not the 'one' nation. They are certainly not holy, but perhaps are the reverse: *they are negatively holy*, *ḥerem*, an abomination. To state the obvious, the nations in the Promised Land do not feature well in Deuteronomy. They are to be destroyed and are viewed as nothing but snares to Israel. It would seem that God has little or no interest in them other than to see them removed and destroyed in order to make room for his treasured possession in the land. Here we enter into our larger question.

What does it mean to be unchosen in Deuteronomy? Although some have pointed to the wickedness of the nations and their just punishment through the *ḥerem*, such a view, though not without some biblical warrant, does not give the complete picture. Deuteronomy leaves one with the impression that even had the nations been upright there would still be little room for them. We must here raise what is probably the most problematic of ideas: the nations in the Land had no choice, in the end, to alter their destiny. The story makes clear that God hardened the hearts of the nations in order to ensure their *ḥerem*, their destruction (Deut 2:30-31; Josh 11:20). The idea that the nations were to be removed or destroyed in judgment thus faces a challenge: even if the nations desired to turn (שׁוּב) or make peace, it seems apparent from the

---

[97] Specific examples of these are throughout Deuteronomy (particularly 4-11) though we note that the idea of the 'one' place of worship comes largely within 12-26 (esp. ch. 12). One might argue that the concept of the 'one place' links the sections, the laws contained within largely constituting those to be used in conjunction with the one place. For more on the idea above (one God, one people, one land, one law, and one place), see esp. 6:4-15; 7:9; 10:17; / 7:6-8, 14; 9:26-29; 10:14-15 / 4:21; 8:7-10; 9:6; 11:8-12 / 4:5-8; 6:20-25; 10:12-13 / 12:1-27; 14:23-27; 15:20, etc.

[98] For more on this idea consult MacDonald, *Meaning*, esp. his conclusion, 210-21.

story that God ensured it would not happen.[99] Where, the theologically sensitive reader might ask, is the God of Jonah, "a God gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, one who relents in sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2)?

If the reader seeks answers, I offer none. What I propose to do however, is to describe, as best I can, what I believe the story also tells us about the fierce love and loyalty of YHWH, how this affects the nations and why. The entire matter, I believe, relates to promises made on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, promises God will keep at all costs.[100] It relates not only to the giving of land, but also to a promise to bless Abraham and make him a great people. The nations too had a place in the promise though theirs included a possibility of curse. Whether the nations deserved the curse is difficult to answer, though open to question. Before we look to our conclusion, we make one last stop to explore an important idea, one prevalent among conservative protestant scholars.

Excursus: The Ḥerem as a Blessing to the Nations?

If ever there was something peculiar to argue concerning Deuteronomy 7, it would be that the *ḥerem* described within ultimately serves the benefit of the nations. A number of Christian interpreters wish to argue just that. Three stand out: McConville, Wright, and, to a lesser extent, Goldingay. While each presents his case in a distinct way, each essentially argues that the election of Israel and their putting of the nations to the *ḥerem* in Deuteronomy ultimately serves the larger purpose of bringing salvation to gentiles. The economy of God's love for the nations seems to require the annihilation of the people in the land in order to bring salvation to all. To be fair, each interpreter acknowledges that Deuteronomy does not place stress upon the theme of salvation or blessing for the nations. Nevertheless, each feels compelled to

---

[99] There is an interesting exception with the Hivites in Gibeon, as is clear from Josh 11:16-20. Herein we encounter an important thread within the fabric of the biblical story. That is, some are able to defy their situation and attain a blessing, even, at times, against what appears to be a divine plan. Rahab and her family fit here as well (Josh 2, 6:22-25). Such an idea is akin to the NT story of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-30, a woman who is able to convince Jesus to heal her daughter—even though Jesus is not willing because she is Greek and (apparently) not Jewish. (As my former professor, Craig Evans, used to say in jest in class: 'She is the only person known to have ever successfully outsmarted Jesus'). Such blessing for the unchosen—blessing that has been wrestled for—is an important nuance of the biblical story, as I argue in our concluding chapter.

[100] I have employed the language of 'promises' throughout the chapter, though of course Hebrew does not have such a word. What I indicate is the oath (הִשְׁבָּעָה) which YHWH swore (נִשְׁבַּע) to the fathers.

demonstrate that Deuteronomy not only permits such a theme but can, if read in a particular way, show and support the theme itself.

Goldingay's inclusion within this section is most open to question as his work tends to appreciate more fully that Deuteronomy is less than positive to the nations. As he states, "While [Deuteronomy] sees YHWH as Lord of the nations ... its perspective is almost entirely Israel centered. It concerns itself with the nations only to the extent that they are relevant to Israel."[101] He does believe it "hints" towards a positive purpose for them, but it is not altogether clear, from his work, where this takes place. The gist of Goldingay's idea surfaces in his understanding that the promises of blessing in Genesis 12:1-3 are directly being fulfilled in Deuteronomy. In order for the blessing to come about, Israel must be set up and established in the land. In order to be properly established, Israel must be separate from the nations.[102] In Goldingay's model, the establishing of Israel involves temporary unfairness (destroying the nations, exclusive love to Israel) to bring about a long-term benefit and equal love to the other peoples. He states:

> ... Israel's occupation of Canaan forms part of a story about the blessing of the world and about YHWH's bringing *tôrāh* and *mišpāṭ* to the world (Isa. 2:2-4). Paul hints at this point in that midrash on the Old Testament in Romans 9-11, where he includes some discussion of God's fairness. He, too, assumes that God has always been concerned for the blessing of the whole world and that Israel is the means of intention becoming realization. The Pharaoh of the exodus acts, then, as a kind of necessary foil to Israel in the story of how that realization comes about. Paradoxically, Gentile salvation is thus achieved only through Gentile loss.
>
> Perhaps the Canaanites may be looked at the same way. Genesis assumes that for the world to regain blessing it is necessary for Israel to flourish. Deuteronomy assumes that for Israel to flourish it is necessary for the Canaanites to be removed. ... A temporary unfairness that discriminates for Israel and against Canaan is designed to give way to a broader fairness. Election is exclusive in the short term, but it is designed in due course to benefit others than its short-term beneficiaries. This does not imply that Israel ever ceases to be God's first love, but it could imply that other peoples can be equally loved in their own way.[103]

Wright, in his recent commentary, argues something comparable to the above, though he views Israel as much more active, or called, in bringing a blessing to the nations. Although Goldingay shies away from ideas of Israel having a 'mission' to the nations,[104] Wright makes this his overarching theme, or key to reading

---

[101] John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 146.

[102] Goldingay, *Diversity*, 152.

[103] Goldingay, "Justice and Salvation for Israel and Canaan," in *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium*, 186.

[104] Goldingay, "Justice," 182; compare his recent *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 213-20.

Deuteronomy.[105] Here too Genesis 12:1-3, read in a particular way, is used as a basis for the entire work. Wright's reading of the passage is extreme, and thus worthy of attention:

> God's call was explicitly for the ultimate purpose of blessing the nations (Gen 12:1-3). This fundamentally missionary intention of the election of Israel echoes through the OT at almost every level. There was a universal goal to the very existence of Israel. What God did in, for, and through Israel was understood to be ultimately for the benefit of the nations.[106]

Such a reading colours Wright's work in Deuteronomy in general, and chapter 7 in particular. Wright, like Goldingay, believes that God makes temporary sacrifices in order to bring about a larger plan and better good.[107] Wright also seeks to understand and alleviate the problematic nature of the *ḥerem*. In the end, Wright views the "sharp edge" of the Abrahamic covenant, the curse to the nations that treat Israel lightly, as the reason for the *ḥerem*.[108] Furthermore, he argues that although the Abrahamic covenant speaks of a blessing to the nations, it does not exclude that certain nations would be judged.[109]

Lastly, and most explicit in propounding this theme, is the work of McConville. It is difficult to know where to begin as the idea recurs not only throughout his commentary, but also in essays he has contributed to the topic.[110] Perhaps we will present a few samples, with commentary, before moving to evaluate the theme as a whole.

First, McConville's work clearly bears the marks of a heartfelt struggle to understand how the *herem* (or idea of conquest) in Deuteronomy can be reconciled with a loving God. Further, the reader will see throughout his work a concern to understand God's ways as portrayed within Deuteronomy in connection to the NT. His proposed solution is not to isolate the book of Deuteronomy, but rather to

---

[105] See his remarks in the preface and introduction, *Deuteronomy*, xi, 8-17.

[106] Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 11. Wright argues that the Abrahamic covenant alone should keep us from reading Deuteronomy too narrowly (*Deuteronomy*, 12). I will argue below that the Abrahamic covenant is in fact the reason for the *ḥerem*.

[107] See his *Deuteronomy*, 113ff, where he discusses the idea that God's truth was at stake and syncretism would betray it.

[108] This Wright draws from the story of Sihon and Og, where he regards their resistance to Israel as ultimately responsible for their fate. He never mentions or explores the explicit point within the story that God hardened the heart of the king in order to bring about the *ḥerem* of his people. Nor does Wright make clear how his idea relates to Deut 7's explicit command not to show the nations mercy (it is possible that Israel's offer of peace in Deut 2:26-29 was not divinely wanted). Consult his *Deuteronomy*, 112.

[109] Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 113.

[110] See e.g. his *Grace in the End: A Study in Deuteronomic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); and "The Shadow of the Curse: A Key to Old Testament Theology," *Evangel* 3, no. 1 (1985): 2-5.

understand how it "feeds into the theology of the more inclusive parts of the OT, and indeed the NT."[111] His list of "more inclusive parts of the OT" includes, without surprise, Genesis 12:3, as well as Isaiah 40-55 and the book of Jonah.[112]

Perhaps the overarching theme for McConville is that of sin, in particular the so-called curse that came through the fall. McConville regards these largely Christian ideas as central to the OT, indeed a sort of key to its understanding.[113] After having worked to show the theme's significance, he turns to difficult questions of the OT, not least of those the *ḥerem* in Deuteronomy 7. The logic is important, thus we quote him at some length:

> When we have accepted that the curse has left its mark on everything pertaining to the human situation in the Old Testament, including even the mode of its salvation, we have laid a groundwork which prepares us to come to terms with some (perhaps all) of the phenomena in the Old Testament which are usually regarded as problems. The most obvious of these ... is the necessity that is laid upon Israel—by divine command—to drive out, and indeed destroy, the inhabitants of the land which *they* are to possess. ... It seems to me that we can only come to terms with the horrific implications of a command from God to destroy men, women and children if we see it as a necessary corollary of the setting in train of a plan for salvation in the context of a fragmentation in humanity, viewed as a mark of its vitiation.
>
> This is to say rather more than that God was justified in exterminating the Canaanites because they were sinful. The point is not incompatible with this (which is indeed required by Exod. 17,14-16, 1 Sam. 15.2f.). But it seeks to go a little further, specifically to do justice to the fact that God's instrument in the annihilation of nation X is nation Y, which, by the very doctrine of election, is no better than any other nation (Deut. 7.6ff.). The understanding of "holy war" in relation to a nationalism which is a product of the curse provides an explanation of it as an inevitable consequence of the first human disobedience. Israel destroys the Canaanites by divine command indeed, yet also because, as one nation among many, it is part of the curse upon mankind. The Israelite action, though commanded by God, is not "good" in any absolute sense. ...
>
> This view also provides us with a means of understanding Deut. 7 as part of a unified theological perspective which in addition embraces those prophetic passages which foresee salvation coming to all mankind, most notably in Isa. 40-66. ... On the premisses which we have postulated ... it can follow that the nation which will ultimately be a blessing can also from time to time bring upon other nations the effects of the curse. Israel's destruction of her enemies, therefore, is not evidence for the "primitiveness" of her conception of God, nor of the "bloodthirstiness" of the God of the Old Testament, but a corollary of one step in the process towards the salvation of all mankind (namely the acquisition of a land for a people

---

[111] McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 48. His view here assumes his elsewhere stated idea that Deuteronomy has a less developed sense of YHWH's "universal interest" (*Deuteronomy*, 90).

[112] McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 48.

[113] This is worked out in his McConville, "Shadow," 2-5. Although the essay may represent some of McConville's earlier work, my survey of his recent commentary indicates that it still guides much of his work, even if now more nuanced and refined.

> of God)—a corollary which may be called *inevitable*, given the fact that human sin produced the *need* for salvation in the first place.[114]

In his commentary, McConville also works to show how God's love functions universally, to all people, and yet exclusively, to Israel. The answer, in the end, clearly resembles that encountered above in the work of Goldingay. It involves something I term "stepping stone" theology. God works first in a particular people, Israel, as a model to be followed later with all nations. The establishing of Israel as a people in the land (and thus the *herem*), are precursors to a larger more inclusive picture. McConville's words on this idea will conclude our discussion before evaluating:

> The relationship between election and universality has been pursued in a rather different way. Against the view that Israel's account of God's dealing with it is merely anachronistic and even offensive is the belief that the particular is a necessary precondition of the universal. God shows his interest in the whole world by showing it in the case of one people. On this view, God's history with Israel becomes a 'paradigm' for his dealing with any or every nation.[115]

Evaluation

The problems here are many and complex. Although each of the above three interpreters present their case in their own way, all essentially argue the same idea: the *herem* should be viewed as something used temporarily in order to bring about a greater good for the nations. While I recognize why they maintain their readings, I fear there is simply little precedent within Deuteronomy to do so. Not only are such categories as universal salvation foreign there, but they are also foreign to Genesis 12; all three interpreters misread that blessing passage, and in turn skew their reading of Deuteronomy. As I point out in chapter three above, the promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 are made against the backdrop of the nations, and there is little reason to suggest that it was for "the ultimate purpose of blessing the nations," as Wright maintains. The ultimate purpose of the call was to bless Abraham. His descendants are of utmost importance (they too will be blessed and possess a land), but the nations feature secondarily, at best. Verse 3 contains a blessing for the nations, obtained through active blessing of Abraham (and his people—there is no mission involved). Abraham is depicted as passive and the idea of blessing the nations, by all contextual indications, is there to show Abraham precisely how blessed

---

[114] McConville, "Shadow," 3.
[115] McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 163.

he is—even the nations, all of them, will find blessing through Abraham, depending on their treatment of him! To read this as a universal passage is to misunderstand the context and tone of God's speech.[116]

As to the idea that there is a mission to the nations within Deuteronomy, again this smacks of importing ideas and categories onto the text. To be sure, Israel's wisdom acquired through law keeping is intended to cause the nations, in some way, to recognize Israel's greatness and God's nearness (Deut 4:5-8), but the text is entirely reticent with regard to an active mission to the nations.[117] If we seek to find an active Deuteronomic mission to the nations, at least those in Canaan, it is to destroy them. This is indeed a message utterly repugnant to the modern reader, but is a particular emphasis of the book, structured as a speech given to Israel before entering the Land. The emphasis of such commands could not be stronger. If the Christian interpreter is looking to apply this text to a contemporary setting, it involves, to my mind, not trying to fit Christian ideas of universal mission or love into it, but to point to the loyalty and love of YHWH for his people Israel. One might also point out that the literature is explicitly and unequivocally occasional. Although many of the commands within the book should be interpreted as constituting enduring truth (e.g. the central words of 6:4ff.), some commands were strictly to deal with a specific situation. The interpreter's task is to describe all faithfully and accurately, and (for those interested) to suggest ways to determine and then appropriate its enduring truths for today. Such interpretations, however, should not run counter to the thrust of the text itself, as I fear those above do.

The problem with the work of Goldingay, Wright, and McConville here is *not* that they seek to understand the idea of *ḥerem* through a larger theme within the OT, but that the theme they advocate is altogether missing within Deuteronomy, perhaps the Pentateuch. In what follows, I wish to propose an alternative, one that draws from the text of Deuteronomy, but also understands the *ḥerem* and the nations within the larger framework of the OT and the idea of election (and nonelection). The *ḥerem* does achieve a larger purpose: it works to fulfill an important promise to Abraham and his descendents.

---

[116] See further pp. 117-19 above.

[117] See also Deut 28:9-10, where it is said that the nations will witness Israel's law-keeping and then be afraid of them (ויראו ממך).

YHWH: The Ultimate Oath-keeper

As mentioned, a recurring feature of Deuteronomy is its reminding Israel that God is bringing them to the land because of an oath made to their ancestors. MacDonald, in looking at 7:7-8 rightly points to two events as inseparable from Israel's election: the Exodus from Egypt, and the oath to the fathers.[118] Both are true but the former is really an outworking of the latter. The mention of the Exodus would remind the people of God's recent work in the life of Israel, but it too worked to fulfill the larger and earlier promises God made to the fathers.[119] MacDonald notes that when Deuteronomy mentions God's oath, it "in all but a few cases, refers to the promise of the land."[120] Although it often does, the oath is not limited to it. In a footnote, MacDonald lists the cases where the oath refers to land and then mentions two variant cases (where it refers to descendants [13:18] and being YHWH's people [29:12]) yet he misses others.[121] In 4:29-31 it refers to God's promise that Israel will always remain his people; 7:12-15 refers to health and blessing; in 8:17-18 it is a power to make wealth. Furthermore, there is room to believe that when the oath refers specifically to the land it refers to much more. It involves establishing YHWH's people and blessing them in abundance; it involves obedience to YHWH's commandments, and giving the people a place to worship. The idea, though it may appear nitpicky, is important. The theme of Deuteronomy, I believe, rests upon it. When MacDonald mentions that the theme of Deuteronomy 6-11 is "whole-hearted devotion to YHWH" he is not altogether wrong, but the idea of devotion is intricately connected to the earlier oaths and covenant with the fathers, particularly Abraham. Genesis, where the oath is made, shows that the larger plan of God was not only to love, bless, and give Abraham and his descendants land, but it suggests that they would obey his commandments.[122] The promise of land is made most clear in Genesis 15; the call for obedience in the light of God's promises is a central concern of the covenant made in Genesis 17, which begins with a command for obedience:

---

[118] MacDonald, *Meaning*, 159.

[119] This is something discussed above in the work of Levenson (see Chapter 2 above); MacDonald too recognizes and uses Levenson's point (*Meaning*, 158-59).

[120] MacDonald, *Meaning*, 159.

[121] MacDonald, *Meaning*, 159, note 36.

[122] I speak here of oath in the singular as technically God only swears (נשבע) to Abraham once, in Genesis 22:15-18 (for more on this idea, consult David R. Blumenthal, "Confronting the Character of God: Text and Praxis," in *God in the Fray*, 38-51, esp. 38-42). Throughout this section, however, I refer to God's promises in Genesis more generally, those that he speaks (אמר and דבר) to Abraham on numerous occasions regarding the land, progeny and stature.

אני אל שדי התהלך לפני והיה תמים
ואתנה בריתי ביני ובינך וארבה אותך במאד מאד

> I am God Almighty; *walk before me and be blameless*. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly. (Gen 17:1-2)

God's intention in choosing Abraham was to bless and multiply him, but it also entailed that he (and all children of the covenant) would live a life devoted to YHWH, walking blamelessly before him. To 'walk' (הלך) undoubtedly entails that Abraham would shape his entire way of life to be blameless before YHWH. This is what it means to be in covenant with YHWH and why Abraham (and his descendants) has been chosen by him. This idea is made explicit in the very next chapter of Genesis, where the narrator permits the reader an insight into the thoughts of God before he judges Sodom. There it becomes clear why God is interested in Abraham and has invested in him: "For I have chosen/known him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the YHWH by doing righteousness and justice, so that YHWH may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken about him" (18:19). The divine plan from the beginning, it would seem, was a reciprocal relationship of love and devotion. God would be faithful to his promises to bless Abraham; Abraham and his descendants are expected "to keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice." Abraham is to "be blameless," and God will "multiply him". The idea is made particularly clear in the details of the covenant that God makes with Abraham. God states to Abraham that the covenant is

> ... between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.
>
> God said further to Abraham, 'Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.' (Gen 17:7-9)

While the covenant is one of circumcision, it is clear that the command made to Abraham to be blameless in the verse earlier is connected with it. The context of the passage, and the Bible itself, indicates that circumcision without obedience was not the goal (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4). All of this is important to Deuteronomy as it permeates the book as a whole. The giving of land is part of the promise to Abraham, but it too seems to serve the larger goal of Israel living in "the ways of YHWH". They are to pass these ways on to their children as well, and speak about them in every place at every time. The Shema is the center of the book, but it is anticipated in

Genesis 17 and 18. Israel's very existence is inseparable from obedience to YHWH's commandments.

As mentioned, it seems that the land promised to Abraham would enable the people to live and flourish as a special community of YHWH's people. Our passage, Deuteronomy 7, must be read against this larger story and perhaps even the foretold events of Genesis 15:12-16 (esp. v. 16). Although it is easy to focus on the death of the inhabitants of the land (indeed as we have done), such an idea is secondary to the larger fulfillment that YHWH seeks to bring about. As the faithful God (Deut 7:9) he intends to make good his promises. The costs may seem high, but within the story of Israel they are secondary to God's larger purposes. This will undoubtedly still appear problematic, particularly if one were to witness the slaying of human life commanded in order to bring about God's plan.[123] The biblical story, rightly or wrongly, does not permit this to be the focus as a larger plan is in view. The larger plan is not, at least according to Deuteronomy, the universal salvation of the nations, though that may, in time, be connected (I would prefer to speak of worship, or a recognizing of God through Israel, connected to Israel's appropriate living under torah).[124] The larger plan is the fulfillment of God's promises made to Abraham long ago. The promises, however, include expectations—high ones—upon the one receiving; Abraham and his descendants must live in the ways of YHWH, be completely devoted to him—with heart, soul, and might. The continual covenantal language of Deuteronomy conveys this idea,[125] and the idea of Israel's 'election for obedience' is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the summative passage of Deuteronomy 10:12-22.[126] Rendtorff argues that if there is a *locus classicus* for election in Deuteronomy, it is contained therein (10:14f).[127] Because of its importance for election, we will shift our attention to that

---

[123] Unless one is willing to imagine, with full seriousness, the terror that would be present in awaiting one's death by sword, perhaps first having watched or heard the slaughter of those you love, he or she likely has not come within sight of the problem.

[124] Consult the discussion on Deut 4 above. Compare also the astute remarks of MacDonald in his conclusion to his chapter on election, dealing with the nations, *Meaning*, 180-81.

[125] See note 45 above.

[126] The idea of 'election for obedience' fits well with the idea that God did not bring the Israelites out of Egypt to be 'free', but to change ownership in that they are now 'Slaves of God', not of Pharaoh (see further the work of John Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity: A Traditio-Historical & Exegetical Examination* [WUNT 2.162; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003], ch. 3).

[127] As he states: "Wenn man von einem »locus classicus« der Erwählungstheologie im Sinne der deuteronomischen Theologie reden wollte käme dafür am ehesten Dtn 10.14f in Betracht" ("Die Erwählung Israels als Thema der deuteronomischen Theologie," in *Die Botschaft und die Boten: Festschrift für Hans Walter Wolff zum 70. Geburtstag* [ed. J. Jeremias and L. Perlitt; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1981], 82, note 30). Rendtorff's recent 750 page plus monument, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2005), is unsatisfactorily thin, however, on Israel's election and *herem* as it relates to the nations. His section 'Israel, the

passage in a moment, concluding the chapter. But before doing that, a few brief words to conclude our discussion on Deuteronomy 7.

Conclusion

Bringing God's plan for Israel into being is dirtied in its logistics. The Bible is largely prepared to put the issue aside though we as readers cannot. We will likely never feel comfortable with the idea of *ḥerem*, particularly as something commanded by God and ensured through divine hardening. The text asks us to overlook that, even if for a moment, to glimpse into the faithfulness of God, his loyalty to his people, and his love for his chosen. The unchosen do not feature well, here perhaps the least well of the OT. For a moment, God's larger concern to fulfill his oath takes precedent over these particular nations' fate. This does not suggest a complete hatred of, or general disinterest in, the unchosen on the part of God. The larger picture of the Bible does not permit such an idea (the stories of Cain, Ishmael, Esau, Jonah, etc.) and the nations as a whole are called, through the Psalms, to join in Israel's praise of YHWH (e.g. Psa 47, 66, 96, 98, 99, 117). In Deuteronomy, however, whether we as contemporary readers like it or not, the nations of Canaan, ones said to be wicked, are to be sacrificed for the sake of making good YHWH's promises to Abraham and his descendants.[128] The message to Israel (and by implication the reader) is to be loyal to YHWH as he is loyal and to walk in his ways—with fullness of heart, soul, and everything one has.

DEUTERONOMY 10:12-22

At best, Deuteronomy 10:12-22 tends to function as a footnote to discussions on election. In theological dictionaries and articles on election, authors often mention the text as important with little discussion.[129] Deuteronomy 7:6-8 holds the privileged status as *locus classicus* without qualification. But, as noted above, if Rendtorff is correct, 10:12-22 is likely as good or better a candidate for a *locus classicus* for election in Deuteronomy, indeed the Bible. It is a text that grounds Israel's election in

---

Nations, and the Gods' (667-75), for example, largely avoids the issue as does his sections on Election (432-44) and even Deuteronomy (74-89).

[128] I use the language of 'sacrifice' here where one may feel tempted to use 'punish'. I have avoided the term for reasons noted above (also, see Appendix 2, esp. note 58). As Israel is said not to be righteous compared to the nations who are killed (i.e. they are wicked as well), the ultimate reason for the nations' annihilation is not judgment so much as fulfilling God's oath, though wickedness is in view.

[129] Bergman, Ringgren and Seebass, "חָרַם," 2:83, for example, calls it one of the "important passages" concerning Israel's election but apart from a passing reference or two, does not discuss it.

creation, providing a universal horizon from which to understand this very particular doctrine. Indeed, it is a passage that speaks of the love YHWH had for Israel's foreparents yet it also distinguishes this love from those now under discussion, those to whom the message is addressed: Israel. Although Israel cannot be separated from its predecessors, Israel's special election is now brought to the fore, set in contrast to the nations of the world.

To be fair, *commentators* tend to place heavier emphasis on, and take greater interest in, the passage. Calvin, in his harmony of Exodus to Deuteronomy, looks at 7:6-8 and 10:14-17 together, reading both as a unit.[130] Others understand the passage as one of scripture's most profound or all encompassing statements on the relationship between God and Israel. Brueggemann calls it "one of the loveliest, most powerful, most freighted summations of covenantal theology" in Deuteronomy.[131] Wright states that 10:12-22 "is unquestionably one of the richest texts in the Hebrew Bible;"[132] McConville calls it "one of the profoundest expressions of deuteronomic theology;"[133] while von Rad notes the passage's "theological achievement" of providing "an independent and novel attempt to define Israel's total relationship to YHWH."[134] We should also observe the profound influence the text has had on Jewish tradition. The presence of the text in the *tefillin* found at Qumran attests that it has long been recognized for its axiomatic teaching; the text has also been incorporated into many of the prayers and liturgy of Judaism down through the ages.[135] The import of the passage could not be greater.

But what exactly does the text say? The passage follows Moses' summary of Israel's rebellion in the wilderness and their receiving the law (9:6-10:11). The introductory link of 'And now Israel,' (ועתה ישראל) indicates that the story just told is closely connected: 'What does the Lord ask of you?' After the lack of appropriate response by Israel to God's deliverance from Egypt (9:6-14), YHWH has

---

[130] See Calvin, *Harmony*, 1:354-59. In doing so, Calvin, as elsewhere, tends to read the texts out of context, particularly apparent in Deuteronomy 7 where vv. 1-5 are treated altogether independent of vv. 6-8, resulting in doctrinal-like expositions of *ḥerem* warfare and election respectively (compare *Harmony*, 2:389-99).

[131] Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 128.

[132] Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 144.

[133] McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 207.

[134] Von Rad, *Deuteronomy* (OTL; London: SCM, 1966), 84.

[135] For more, consult Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 107, 363 note 51; and Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 436-37. It is interesting to note, however, the recent trend within branches of Judaism (e.g. Reform, Reconstructionist) that has sought to remove election from Jewish prayers and liturgy. As Kaminsky argues, however, such a tactic is a near impossible one as election is a defining factor of Judaism, whether cherished or not. Consult his "Attempting the Impossible: Eliminating Election from the Jewish Liturgy," *Midstream* 51, no. 1 (2005): 23-27.

still decided, through the intercession of Moses, to remain with the people and be their God (9:15-10:11). Israel has received much, and because of this Moses replies with what is expected of them. Calvin, in commenting on this and 7:6-8, notes, in almost textbook form, the idea that much is expected of those to whom much has been given:

> ... in proportion to the abundance of grace with which any one is endued, he is solemnly bound to live piously and justly. For God does not wish the gifts He bestows upon us to lie idle, but to produce their appropriate fruits ...[136]

As noted by many, the question Moses poses ('And now, what does the LORD ask of you?') chimes familiar to that of Micah 6:8.[137] There are similarities in sense and feel (and both respond with כי אם—'except', or 'only this') yet the passages also differ. Although Micah certainly is addressed to Israel, the passage could appear to be more universal in religious application through its use of 'human', or 'man' (אדם) as addressee (Mic 6:8). Deuteronomy may contain broad moral principles but it is addressed strictly to Israel, in particular to the very people who had seen the acts of God with their own eyes (as 11:2-7 makes clear). The verbs used in the initial questions vary only slightly in that Deuteronomy uses 'ask' (שאל) while Micah uses 'seek' or 'desire' (דרש); the answers, however, are different. Deuteronomy's language of the four obligations, 'fear' (יראה), 'walk' (הלך), 'love' (אהב), and 'serve' (עבד) indicate something of a covenantal language (and ring back to earlier commands to Abraham) when compared to Micah's. Although Micah certainly has Israel primarily in view, the language is slightly more general, particularly with its eventual call for honest scales and righteous living in the city (Micah 6:11ff). All this is to say that Deuteronomy's charge is closely connected to Israel's status as God's special people, a people chosen by YHWH and given special treatment through YHWH's acts in Egypt and the wilderness.

As mentioned, the answer to Moses' question begins with 'only this' or 'except' (כי אם), yet what follows can hardly be taken to mean something negligible or easy. Perhaps a translation of 'only' obscures the sense of the Hebrew which seems to

---

[136] Calvin, *Harmony*, 1:355. In the reformer's classic 'worm theology' form, Calvin later remarks that God elects those who are "miserable and worthless creatures," demonstrating that God "creates out of nothing 'things which are not'..." (1:355-56).

[137] E.g. Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 129; Lohfink, *Das Hauptgebot: Eine Untersuchung literarischer Einleitungstragen zu Dtn 5-11* (AnBib 20; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963), 220; McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 199; Beth Laneel Tanner, "Deuteronomy 10:12-22," *Int* 55 (2001): 60; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 435; Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 145.

imply something more of 'but this specifically', *in contrast to what Israel had done before.*[138] They are to 'fear the LORD their God', 'to walk in all His ways' and 'love him', and 'serve the LORD' their God with all their 'heart' and with all their 'soul'. The following verse (10:13) serves almost as a summary of these four requirements: 'to keep the LORD's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good.' The addition of a *vav* (or equivalents) to the beginning of verse 13 in the Samaritan Pentateuch, Vulgate, and Syriac likely indicates confusion over whether the verse should continue as another command following the four. Without the *vav* however (as in MT) the idea can be taken to be a gloss on, or summary of, the four vocatives that preceded it.[139] In other words, to fear the LORD, walk in his ways, to love and to serve him is what it means to keep the commandments and statutes Moses is giving the people.

The content of these verbs warrants comment. Although the idea of 'fearing YHWH' (or 'fearing God') is not new to the OT, placing the command alongside another to 'love' YHWH is. In fact, such usage is unattested elsewhere in the Bible (the Shema a few chapters earlier, however, connects 'loving' and 'fearing' YHWH as well, though the verbs are there separated).[140] Miller believes that the four commands (fear, walk, love and serve) speak of "completely synonymous acts," all indicating wholehearted commitment to God.[141] This likely goes too far as analysis of each term is productive exegetically; perhaps such an idea is true more generally or rhetorically, provided we do not flatten the nuance of each or terminate discussion prematurely.[142] Christensen, in an instance where his prosodic analysis exposes its

---

[138] כי אם often contrasts what follows it from what precedes it, translated 'but (rather)'. To translate כי אם as 'except' or 'only' (as many do), could wrongly imply that the task is a small or simple one. Interpreters then seem obligated to comment on how it is not that the task is easy, but that it is not complicated or esoteric (see e.g. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 145; Driver, *Deuteronomy*, 124-25; Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 136; Keil and Delitzsch, *Penteteuch*, 3:343). Contrasting through a translation of 'but' eliminates the problem (as most naturally do in the translation of Micah 6:8, where what is required is contrasted to the speech-giver's hypothetical offerings).

[139] No commentators, to my knowledge, comment on the issue (Christensen mentions the variants in a textual note without comment [*Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9*, 200]). To be sure, there is a similar variant in vs. 12, though the *vav*'s inclusion or absence there does not weaken my idea necessarily.

[140]Compare Deut 6:4 and 6:13. Of course, commands to 'fear' and to 'love' YHWH are regularly used in the OT (the latter is introduced in Deuteronomy) but I speak here of placing the two directly side by side. The only other possible exception to the rule is Sirach 2:15-16 (which uses φοβέω and ἀγαπάω—the same vocabulary as the LXX of Deut 10:12), though there loving and fearing are not commands to be followed but objectives that result in good.

[141] Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 125.

[142] I am here reminded, for example, of the often coupled החקים והמשפטים ('statutes and judgments') which may function rhetorically as synonyms (e.g. Deut 6:1), yet may be important separately under closer analysis.

value, shows something not dissimilar to Miller's idea, that "the fear of the LORD" is here defined by wholehearted obedience to YHWH. His words are worth recounting:

> The "fear of the Lord" is a dominant theme in the wisdom literature, particularly the book of Proverbs (cf. Prov 1:7, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge"). Careful prosodic analysis suggests that the term is defined here by means of poetic parallelism: "to fear YHWH" is "to walk in all his ways." This phrase is explained by the words that follow: "to fear God" means "to love him and to serve YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your being" (v 12). In terms of the prosodic analysis presented here, the command "to love him" stands at the structural center of the rhythmic unit. It is also the central one among the five vocatives used in 10:12-13—"to fear," "to walk," "to love," "to serve," and "to keep." The words of the commandment here are essentially a restatement of the great commandment to love God with one's whole being ...[143]

The ideas of Miller and Christensen (among others) point to the synonymous, yet rich and varied, descriptions of what is required of Israel in this passage. Similar to the Shema, we have a diversity of commands placed together defining what it means to fear the LORD, all essentially pointing to a wholehearted commitment to YHWH. Perhaps we might say that here the case is more explicit in connecting obligations to fearing YHWH (though admittedly Deut 6:1-2 makes a similar point). Of primary interest to our study is that these ideas are intimately linked to another rare and profound putting together of concepts: God is the universal ruler and creator of all things, yet he set his love upon Israel's foreparents and chose Israel to be his special people. Here we enter, to use Levenson's phrase, a 'universal horizon' from which to understand Israel's election.

Verses 14-15 explain that everything ('the heavens, indeed heaven of heavens, the earth and all that is in it') belongs to YHWH—*yet* (רק)—upon the fathers did YHWH set his affection, and he chose their descendants after them (וּיִבְחַר בְּזַרְעָם אַחֲרֵיהֶם): you *out of/among/above all peoples* as it is this day (בְּכֻם מִכָּל הָעַמִּים כַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה). The superlative 'heaven of heavens' (and what follows) indicates nothing less than YHWH's universal dominion and points to his creation, while the conjunction רק contrasts this with the idea that YHWH set his love upon not all peoples, but Israel; verse 14's introductory הֵן ('Behold', 'Indeed')

---

[143] Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9*, 204. Christensen, in his *Explanation*, makes some further insightful comments on the idea of 'fear of YHWH', where he persuasively argues that Jonah serves as a kind of midrash on Deut 10:11-12. Although Jonah claims to be one who 'fears YHWH' (Jonah 1:9), the story goes on to show that to fear God is the opposite of Jonah's actions in the story. See his *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9*, 205-06 for fuller discussion.

operates in conjunction with רק to emphasize this idea.[144] As in 7:7-8, the election of Israel is connected to God's love of the fathers, set in contrast to the other peoples of the earth, yet this love and election is now seemingly a distinct act involving the people Israel ('and he chose their [i.e. the fathers'] seed after them'—ויבחר בזרעם אחריהם). This love and election concerns *you* (Israel) above all peoples, as it is this day (בכם מכל העמים ביום הזה—10:15). These verses give the impression that God, as creator and ruler of all, could have done whatever he wished, with whomever he pleased, yet Israel was the beneficiary of his special relationship. Such a privilege is not without corollaries, as the following verses make clear.

The short verse 16 ('so circumcise the foreskin of your heart and do not stiffen your neck any longer') could appear to interrupt the flow of the discourse (some argue it is an insertion[145]) yet its connection is clear theologically: election has corollaries. God's love for and election of Israel entails a divinely prescribed way of living and holistic requirements for the chosen people's living are assumed—those already commanded in the Shema. Christian interpreters regularly mention Paul's use of the deuteronomic idea here (Rom 2:25-29) and that, for Paul, membership in Israel belongs to those who perform the metaphorical incision.[146] Although it is clear that Paul draws from the idea here, one must be careful not to confuse cause with corollary. Israel must circumcise their hearts *because* they are God's special people; the reason for God's election does not appear to be dependent upon Israel's willingness to do so.[147] Moreover, in a later instance that emphasizes God's grace in maintaining the God-Israel relationship, Deuteronomy 30:6 states that *God* is the one who will circumcise Israel's hearts—and the hearts of their descendants—in order

---

[144] So McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 199-200. He suggests that the verses point to a concession: 'although … yet' (compare the translations of RSV and NRSV). See also Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 136.

[145] See e.g. Georg Braulik, "Deuteronomy and the Birth of Monotheism," in *The Theology of Deuteronomy* (N. Richland Hills, Tex.: Bibal Press, 1994), 109, 112; dependent upon Lohfink, *Hauptgebot*, 225. *BHS* suggests deleting vv. 16-19 based upon the change to plural pronouns. Such an idea reveals an unwarranted literary rather than text-critical judgment (e.g. there is no mss evidence nor is the idea in congruence with the basic principle *lectio difficilior lectio potior*). The question of plural-singular differentiation in Deuteronomy has long been viewed as an indicator of different literary hands. Recent scholarship, however, rightly questions this and suggests the phenomenon is best understood in relation to aesthetics and matters of liturgy, prose, and poetry (see further e.g. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9*, xcix-ci).

[146] See e.g. Calvin, *Harmony*, 1:358; McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 208; and Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 126.

[147] And here I think (the canonical) Paul would not necessarily disagree, particularly in the light of Ephesians 1-2.

that they might love him with wholeness of heart.[148] As others have observed, it was not *despite* Israel's being stiff-necked that YHWH continued to be Israel's God, but *because* they were stiff-necked that God would lead them from Sinai (Exod 34:9).[149] The point made earlier that our section should be understood in conjunction with Israel's (often rebellious) story just summarized ('And now Israel') becomes clearer in light of the charge to circumcise the heart. God's election is not dependent upon this circumcision, yet his election demands the action.

In what follows (10:17), we observe that YHWH is again described not as *a* god, but *the* God, the God of gods, and Lord of lords, the great *El*, who is mighty and terrible.[150] This God is then said, despite his just declared favouring of Israel, not to 'show partiality' or take a bribe (אשר לא ישא פנים ולא יקח שחד). Can it really be said that God shows no partiality, even though what just preceded makes clear that God *is* partial to Israel, in contrast to all the peoples of the earth?

For many interpreters there appears to be no problem. Many do not see a tension here, though usually this appears to be more an oversight or lack of interest than a conscious decision or judgment.[151] Others, such as Tigay, admit uncertainty as to why such an idea is mentioned at this point.[152] Weinfeld is somewhat anomalous in that he recognizes the issue and seeks to resolve it (even if in one sentence) by implying that the discussion changes from the realm of election to the administration of justice.[153] It is unclear why, in the next sentence, Weinfeld points out (without

---

[148] Brueggemann notes that "the ritual practice of circumcision is [here] transformed into a metaphor for intense loyalty to YHWH. It may be that cutting away of the foreskin serves to make the organ more sensitive and responsive. Thus to 'circumcise the heart' may be to make the organ more sensitive and responsive to YHWH" (*Deuteronomy*, 130). We might also note that in circumcision, one now has exposed something otherwise kept private, except for intimate (sexual) encounter. In the same way, circumcision 'of the heart' is to make one's heart (or better, 'mind'—compare Moberly, "Toward," 126, note 5) completely exposed, open and ready for intimate encounter with God. Though often overlooked, the sexual association involved with circumcision, whether in the flesh or the heart, is likely fundamental to the concept and the relationship between God and his people.

[149] Compare Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 147 and the fuller discussion of Moberly, *At the Mountain of God : Story and Theology in Exodus 32-34* (JSOTSup 22; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 89-94.

[150] My translation of 'terrible', though potentially misleading, is meant to remind the reader of the difficulty in translating הַנּוֹרָא (from יראה). The English word 'terrible' partially conveys the Hebrew ambiguity, though admittedly modern usage of 'terrible' for 'inspiring fear', 'formidable', or 'awesome' wanes. The Russian word 'grozny' (as in 'Ivan the Grozny', or the city name) seems to capture the sense.

[151] While such a statement risks arrogance or presumption, one cannot help but get the impression that many interpreters simply fail to engage the issue. For example, Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 130-31; Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 126-27; and Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9*, 204-05 make no real comment.

[152] See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 108.

[153] Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 439. Wright (*Deuteronomy*, 148-49) also recognizes the issue but ultimately dismisses the idea that there is a tension because he regards election to be unrelated to favouritism. While 'favouritism' admittedly evokes negative connotations, it is less clear that God's

explanation) that the Hebrew idiom 'to lift the face' (נשא פנים) can mean 'to show favour'. This raises the important issue of translation, to which we now turn.

The portion of verse 17 in question states that YHWH is a deity

אשר לא ישא פנים ולא יקח שחד

'who does not lift face(s) and does not accept a bribe.'

Although the idiom נשא פנים is relatively common in biblical Hebrew, it is not always straightforward to translate.[154] Part of the difficulty lies in determining whether it is God's face, or the face(s) of others that is referred to. In biblical examples where it is God's own face that is lifted, the idiom seems to have a sense of showing favour or blessing, even smiling, as in Numbers 6:26 ("May the LORD lift up his face upon you ..." [ישא יהוה פניו אליך]). Similarly, when someone lifts his or her face to someone, the sense is that the recipient is accepted, or received with favour (e.g. Gen 32:21 [20]). In other instances, someone may lift the face of another (or say that they are), and the result appears to be the same: they, or their requests, are accepted (e.g. Gen 19:21). When someone or a people are said *not* to lift the face, it appears that they do not show compassion, as in the case of Deuteronomy 28:49-50. It is still unclear how such ideas relate to our example, one where God is said *not* to lift the face. Perhaps there is something to Weinfeld's observation that the context shifts to that of administering justice. The immediately following verse continues, after stating that YHWH does not lift faces or accept bribes, that YHWH executes justice for the orphan and widow, and loves the alien by providing for him. In a similar instance prescribing justice in Leviticus 19:15, the hearer is told not to lift the face of the low one or to honour the face (תהדר פני) of the high one. In a brief article, Schwarz argues that lifting the face in this instance is best translated as discriminate, either in a good (*sensu bono*) or bad (*sensu malo*) way, determined by context.[155] In Leviticus 19:15, Schwarz deems the sense negative, as in 'disadvantage', in contrast to honouring the face of the high one (he is likely right that rarely does one need warning against favouring the low one). In our case, we might

---

special favour toward Israel is really that far from the word's definition (e.g. if a school teacher continually bestowed a special love upon one particular child, even if disciplined for poor behaviour, would such action not constitute favouritism?).

[154] For more on this consult, Mayer I. Gruber, "The Many Faces of Hebrew נשא פנים ‹lift up the face›," *ZAW* 95 (1983): 252-60.

[155] Günther Schwarz, "«Begünstige nicht ...»? (Leviticus 19, 15b)," *BZ* 19 (1975): 100.

then suggest that God is one who does not discriminate (in judgment, whether negatively or positively) or accept bribes. Such a reading helps relieve the tension within the passage in that, despite seeming similar to the English 'does not show partiality', our translation suggests that the discrimination is related to judgment or tribunal justice, whether positive or negative. But, while we may have come closer to a suitable translation of the idiom, we have yet to determine why such an idea is prominent within what appears to be a passage concerned with God's election of Israel.

The answer is likely, and quite simply, that within this passage two ideas are working hand in hand, with equal force. God has chosen Israel, and obligations are therefore to be followed. Some of these obligations are given without explanation, or deemed to have self-evident merit ('fear', 'walk', 'love', 'serve' and 'keep'), while others, such as the following command of verse 18 ("So show love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt ..."), are best understood in light of God's own action toward Israel. The people are to recognize that their God is an upright God who executes justice, and they are to imitate his example. Israel benefited from this justice in Egypt, and so too should those Israel encounters, at least those on the margins of their own communities.[156] The text does not regard it to be a problem that God chooses Israel over others, as though it were a morally questionable act. In fact, God's bringing Israel out of Egypt is implied to be an act of justice and righteousness, something Israel is to follow. There is something here of the principle *imitatio dei*, as well as a striking declaration that memory is our best moral teacher.[157] In any case, it is not without significance that rarely, if ever, does the Bible speak of Israel's election

---

[156] The context is clearly those who dwell *within* Israel, not all people encountered in the land (something important to our topic, as will be seen in our concluding chapter).

[157] For further discussion on *imitatio dei* as it relates to this passage, consult the classic treatment of Nachmanides, (but note the astute warnings of MacDonald, *Meaning*, 170). Sacks, in a recent informal essay ("Values We Share," in *Celebrating Life: Finding Happiness in Unexpected Places* [London: Continuum, 2000], 115-18), astutely summarizes how the HB differs from other human approaches to morality, arguing that *memory* is our best moral teacher:

> Western civilization has suggested two approaches [to morality]. The first was the way of Immanuel Kant, who argued that reason has the power to make us see that human duties are universal. The second was the route taken by David Hume, who suggested that it is not reason but emotion - empathy, sympathy, feeling with and for others - that leads us to recognize the humanity of our fellow human beings.
>
> The Hebrew Bible takes a third approach, in some ways more powerful than the others. It speaks not of reason or emotion, but of memory: 'Do not oppress the stranger, for you understand the heart of the stranger. You were once strangers in the land of Egypt.' When we remember the suffering we or our ancestors experienced, we learn not to inflict it on others. What we forget, we can repeat; what we remember serves as the voice that says, 'Never again.' Memory, suggests the Bible, is the moral tutor of mankind.

apart from Israel's obligation to live in wholehearted obedience (or to be 'blameless') before the one who elected.[158] Further, God's action of loving Israel over others is here assumed to be a just action.

The section concludes by (again) instructing Israel to fear, serve, cling to (דבק), and swear by (שׁבע) YHWH (10:20), and by (again) reminding Israel of the great deeds he has done (10:21-22).[159] More could be said regarding the passage, the treatment of the alien, orphan and widow, etc., but for now we may draw some preliminary conclusions.

Summary

As with Deuteronomy 7, Israel's election is here nestled tightly within commandments which Israel must follow in the land they will possess. In that passage, Israel, after being instructed to love God with wholehearted devotion (Deut 6), is commanded to make utterly *ḥerem* the nations they encounter beyond the Jordan. God's special choosing of and love for Israel (7:6-8) stands in causal relationship with the *ḥerem* command (i.e. Israel shall make *ḥerem* the nations and possess the land *because* they have been specially chosen by God). Our passage is not dissimilar. Israel is again commanded, through a variety of modes and metaphors, to commit themselves wholeheartedly to YHWH. Their God is the creator of all and supreme God, and yet he loved Israel's fathers and chose Israel, the very people hearing the parenesis. There is no discussion within our passage on the nations other than that Israel was chosen from/among/above them. Those Israel would encounter in the Land are assumed to be put to the *ḥerem*, but in this passage those who have the potential to be marginalized *within* Israel are discussed as having a special place in the heart of God. Israel was a group of aliens that God loved and rescued, and Israel is to do the same to those in their community. An apparent tension—put the nations to the *ḥerem* yet treat the alien justly—indicates, to my mind, that the nations to be destroyed are specific nations *in the land.* This concerns a one time event in the conquest yet the text also looks forward to a time when aliens would surface, or it is aware of those already travelling with the people (see e.g. Excursus on the 'Mixed

---

[158] Balaam's oracles may be an exception, but note that the Book of Balaam seems firstly to be concerned with telling a story from outside of Israel's context. That is, the story and the oracles themselves are not addressed directly to the people, thus the correlative admonitions to be obedient are absent.

[159] I say 'concludes' but this is for our purposes, and is not meant to imply that the chapter division necessarily delimits the passage. Chapters 9-11 are best read as a whole.

Multitude', pages 93-96, above). God will establish his beloved people Israel in the land by liquidating the autochthonic nations, yet Israel must obey God's command to bring this about, and must live by God's commands once possession is obtained. The relationship between God's love for and election of Israel and obedience to God has been noted continually throughout this chapter. It is a relationship that must be observed if we are true to the thrust of Deuteronomy.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

We now take a moment to reflect on our theme as it relates to these three passages from Deuteronomy, particularly in the light of Kaminsky's tripartite division of elect, non-elect, and anti-elect. The theme is the nations in relation to Israel. There appears to be a very clear agenda put forward with regard to the nations that dwell in the land at the time of Israel's entering. And yet the nations more generally, even those aliens who dwell among Israel when they finally possess the land, seem to be presented in a neutral light in the book—apparently even benefiting from Israel's keeping of God's Torah.

Although I expressed some doubt concerning the usefulness of Kaminsky's categories in my evaluation of his work, it may be observed that there is much in the model that is helpful in relation to Deuteronomy. To class all the unchosen together within this book is clearly to misunderstand it. The 'seven nations' (or symbolically, the 'many nations' who posses the land prior to Israel's conquest) indeed seem to be 'anti-elect'. They appear to be beyond recovery, beyond a divine second chance, and are to be obliterated, liquidated, scattered. Although the language of judgment is raised periodically (that is, these nations' fate is the result of inappropriate action), the thrust of the text implies that they are simply people who dwell in a land promised to Israel. They must be removed because Israel is to possess their land; further, their staying will prove to be a snare according to the speaker. The nations more generally, however, seem potentially to benefit from Israel's obedience to Torah, though this is secondary to the main point that Israel is to be obedient. God loved Israel from out of all the nations, and indeed, his love runs deeper for this people than any other. Although God may work in other nations, this is neither the focus of Deuteronomy nor even a substantial point in the exposition. The focus is Israel. However, non-Israelites who will live in the midst of Israel (it is implied that this refers to those on the margins of the community) are to be treated as nationals. Israel is to love the alien

in imitation of God's love to Israel in bringing it out of Egypt. There seems to be no logical inconsistency (to the speaker) that this is the case.[160]

In some ways, our chapter on Deuteronomy does not fit so neatly within our overall thesis concerning the unchosen. I wish to argue that the unchosen constitute an important dimension to the worldview of the OT, particularly the Pentateuch, and that they too can fear God, to be included (at least at times) in the economy of his workings. Deuteronomy's focus on taking the land, and stipulations on how to live therein, however, skew the picture slightly, prima facie at variance with our earlier work concerning Abimelech, Pharaoh's Daughter, and Balaam. My idea, however, is not as vulnerable as it might first appear. The apparent difficulty of Deuteronomy must be acknowledged though doing so may strengthen rather than weaken my idea, having accounted for the difficulty. It would have been convenient to ignore Deuteronomy or treat it, say, as Miller does, arguing a more positive view of the nations than Deuteronomy allows. I address this momentarily in our concluding chapter, raising also the issue of those anti-elect (to use Kaminsky's term) who seem to bless Israel and in turn 'wrestle' for a blessing, somehow exempting themselves from the *ḥerem*. I also guide our discussion back into conversation with our earlier sections on Christian and Jewish interpretation more closely. What can we now say regarding election and non-election, having explored some important test cases in the Pentateuch? What does it mean to be chosen and unchosen?

---

[160] For more on Deuteronomy's perception of the alien, along these lines, consult Christiana van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law* (JSOTSup 107; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 68-108.

CHOSEN AND UNCHOSEN: CAN GOOD COME FROM A GOD THAT FAVOURS?

There seems to be a basic human tendency to discard entire concepts or ideas that are determined to be problematic rather than to wrestle with the difficulties, perhaps resulting in a position of tension. Election in the OT is one such idea. According to some, as implied for instance in the thinking of Clines in our preface, it would be better to acknowledge the deeply problematic nature of election—the unchosen are destroyed, humiliated, or ignored—and reject its value for the church rather than to retain it, in all its difficulties. I hope that my thesis, particularly in my work with the text, points to a different option. It should be clear that there is more to the picture than meets the eye. The unchosen are not always destroyed, humiliated or ignored. At times the story focuses on their integrity, their value and divine purposes. At times the unchosen get 'better press' than the elect, as it were.

Perhaps it would be helpful to recount what our biblical test cases illustrate. Before I do, I should note that although I have been selective in choosing cases that demonstrate something about the unchosen, something usually positive, I also sought simply to choose what seemed to me important examples in which an unchosen character (or people) interacts with the chosen, from within the Pentateuch.[1] I had initially intended to look at Jethro in relation to Moses as well (as his character is certainly interesting, he seems to demonstrate that God works outside of YHWHism, and he influences Israel's law), but in the end it became clear that his example would perhaps be too obvious, or too convenient to expound. I therefore opted to look at the

[1] I am reminded here that although I deem my test cases to be important examples, I resist using the language of 'key' examples (or "keys"), however much this may be true. In critiquing Moberly's book, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, Brueggemann notes (*ThTo* 58 [2001]: 257-58) the problems involved in naming one's selected texts to be 'keys' or *the* prime examples regarding a theological matter (that is, another interpreter may choose to emphasize other texts, to different effect). I therefore resist such labelling, even while acknowledging that some examples are more important for a discussion than others.

less obvious case of Pharaoh's daughter. I think it is often in the lesser-known, less obvious, instances that we appreciate the nuance of the text. I think this is also true in the case of Abimelech, our first test case.

The story of Abimelech might seem to be a minor one within that of Genesis, or of Abraham, but I would suggest not. It is one of three stories retold in the ancestral narratives and this should give us pause. Why retell it? What might this say about its significance? If what I argued is along the right lines, and can be applied more broadly, we find that in each case the chosen (and we as readers) learn something fundamental about the nature of the chosen's interaction with the nations (or unchosen) and how God will treat those in relation to his specially chosen person or people. Abimelech learns that Abraham is not someone to treat lightly, even when Abraham acts with less than integrity. The king may have operated in the integrity of his heart, yet God would have had him dead for his treatment of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham is even, despite his actions, responsible for removing the divine curse through intercession, an assuredly paradigmatic picture. The same might be said for the other two 'wife-sister' stories, albeit with variation. In each case the one who encounters the Abrahamite learns that this person is under special protection by God and is not to be mistreated. The chosen's actions (even if inappropriate) do not negate this responsibility. The stories seem to be particular outworkings of the more abstract dictum that God makes to Abraham in Genesis 12:3. Even the nations will experience blessing or curse depending on their treatment of Abraham. The divine blessing exhibits its abundance in its power to bless beyond this chosen foreparent. "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who treats you with disdain I will curse. In you all the families of the earth will bless themselves."

The story of Pharaoh's daughter highlighted precisely how important the actions of one person can be, however seemingly minute. I am reminded of another story, that of the young Israelite girl who is taken captive as a slave by Israel's enemy, Naaman (2 Kgs 5). Her seemingly insignificant, indeed almost unnoticeable, action of helping her adversary—she suggests that he seek healing from his leprosy in Israel—brings about Naaman's great confession: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel!" (2 Kgs 5:15). Life and healing comes by way of one person's seemingly minor, but faithful, response. The daughter of Pharaoh decided to act against all that her people and family assumed was good and right. She discerned that the child before her demanded her compassion, despite being the enemy, and despite the fact that her single action would probably not (at least prima facie) alter

her father's edict to drown all Israelite newborn sons. God used her faithfulness to raise up a leader, bringing about his larger plan and promises. We also noted that the edict seems to die with the daughter's actions. Perhaps small actions can bring about larger ones. In any case, the name Moses should continually remind us of her role in Israel's story. The unchosen made life for the chosen possible. To overlook this is to neglect an important element of the story.

And what of Balaam? What can we say about this controversial figure? Perhaps our reading stressed his positive action in the story more than most would yet, as I argue in chapter five, the story itself—*read in its own right*—permits it (I would suggest necessitates it). He blesses Israel with words that enrich our scripture, words spoken from the outside that concern God and those inside. He acts in obedience and his oracles proclaim Israel's special relationship to God. At a time when the reader might despair concerning Israel's future because of its rebellion, Balaam reminds us that God's love for his people is sure, irrevocable, and not determined by Israel's action—however important that action is, and however much grave consequences follow when the people sin. Perhaps what makes Balaam such an intriguing character is the subsequent indication of his end. Despite his deepest longings to find himself in Israel's position—specially loved by God, blessed in abundance—this hope escapes him. The point, especially having read his character positively in the story, is tragic. The unchosen tastes of the love God has for Israel and he sees that it is good. His own perversion, in the end, leads him on another path. He is killed in battle for his involvement in leading Israel astray.

The most difficult test case of our thesis, without a doubt, was Deuteronomy. Herein Israel's status as elect is clearly articulated, and often this special position before God is contrasted to that of the nations. Some of the nations are even met with hatred, are reviled, and are to be utterly obliterated as a sacred act in taking the land. This is not the whole picture however. As we noticed in our discussion on Deuteronomy 4, it is clear that not all nations are grouped within the seven to be removed in entering the land. There will be those who witness Israel's keeping of Torah and will recognize the nearness of Israel's God and the righteous nature of God's law. There are also those who are accorded special treatment as Israel enters the land, in all probability because of their status as Abrahamites (Edom, Moab, and Ammon—Deut 2). What is more, even Egyptians are not to be mistreated—because they hosted Israel in Egypt (Deut 23:8 [7]). These nations are not the focus in Deuteronomy, yet it would be premature to contend that all nations are universally the

subject of the *ḥerem*, are to be reviled, and are thought of nothing but a snare. The nations are considered negatively to the extent that they cause Israel to depart from their devotion to YHWH.

It is also significant to note, though the scope of the thesis did not permit developing the idea, that there are examples of those who are among the seven nations (or are 'antielect' to use Kaminsky's language) that overcome their position within the larger story. Although the examples fall outside of the Pentateuch, it is not insignificant that two people, Rahab and her family and the Gibeonites, overcome their fate through, in the first example, blessing Israel, and in the second, misleading Israel into making a treaty. The second example would require deeper engagement to make my point, but the case of Rahab is clear. Her proclamation, in conjunction with her faithful (and life-endangering) actions, brought her and her family life and prosperity. She joins Israel and, despite retaining what would seem to be a status as an outsider (she is said to live 'in the midst of' Israel), she is blessed for blessing Israel. It is interesting and perhaps worth noting that the NT even accords her an important standing within the bloodline of Jesus, the anointed one of Matthew's gospel (see Matt 1:5). The decree of God to utterly make *ḥerem* the seven nations seems to have permitted a complex exception, pointing to a slightly more fluid picture of the seven nations than the stern commands of Deuteronomy suggest (provided they bless Israel). It also suggests that God's initial promise to bless those who bless Abraham trumps the *ḥerem* command.

How might we synthesize all this with our first section? How might we integrate our test cases with what we encountered in Christian and Jewish interpretation?

I think there is much to learn from both interpretational sections, yet I think the emphases of the Jewish interpreters seem to make better sense of the overall picture in its own right. Admittedly, the issue is complex as Christians will read the text through a Christian lens. The question involves the extent to which the lens should affect our reading. I think I have made clear that reading mission into Deuteronomy, or even Genesis 12, is not a warranted reading of the text. There is a difficulty here as this does not suggest that the nations are therefore unimportant, it simply means that the nations are not the object of some larger mission according to this material. The nations are important in that they are to treat God's elect with blessing, not disdain. The nations appear to be able to respond to God appropriately *while remaining outside of God's people*; the text nowhere suggests that the nations can only please God by becoming part of Israel. To be sure, and as I mention above, the Psalms speak

of a time when the nations will join in Israel's song and recognize Israel's status, yet even here it is not clear that the lines between the people are erased, or that all become one undifferentiated body. In this respect, our Jewish interpreters made important observations in reading the HB, even while there may be room within some of their work to better appropriate certain Psalms involving the worship of the nations.

There is, however, a development within the OT whereby the nations gain a focus in the larger scheme of God's plan, something made particularly clear in Second Isaiah. It would be incorrect not to recognize this, yet it is equally inappropriate to overemphasize or to read this back into every step of Israel's life. It is something developed in Israel's story, something taken and developed in the NT (and in later Christian mission). There is room for this in a Christian reading of the OT, provided it is done responsibly while acknowledging the particular interests and presuppositions of the reader. It is not responsible, however, to read this everywhere or where it is contrary to the thrust of the text itself, as some do. Even in places where the nations are in positive view, or seem to be the object of God's work in Israel, such emphases do not alleviate the 'problem' of election as if bringing in the nations undoes or 'makes right' God's choosing of Israel. The NT, in my understanding, does not suggest a diminishing of Israel's status. There is a mysterious grafting of gentiles onto the vine, yet the vine and the promises to Israel remain alive and true.

What then of testing? I have tried not to overemphasize the idea, yet I think there is much to commend it. The linkage between the terminology of בחר and בחן is interesting in itself, yet it is the content of the stories that interests me most. Israel and chosen figures seem to be tested recurrently, and it would even appear that the all-important giving of the law is a test of sorts (e.g. Exod 20:20).[2] What then of the unchosen? I think if we look at each of our test case stories, it is clear that a test for the unchosen is also in view. Abimelech is tested in his taking Sarah, yet he has an integrity that God acknowledges. Provided he continues in this way, gives Sarah back and blesses Abraham, the king will live and prosper. Pharaoh's daughter also faces a challenge, or a test of sorts. How will she respond to the life that is threatened, directly in her path? Will she succumb to the status quo of her people and her father's tyrannical orders, or will she defy them to show fear of God? She proves upright and

---

[2] For more on the connection between the giving of the Law and testing, consult Moberly, *Bible*, 81-84.

has compassion; she meets her test well. And Balaam? His tests are many. He is faced with the prospect of cursing a people that he is divinely instructed not to curse ('they are blessed'). Yet he is again asked to go, and God instructs him to do so in a dream. To complicate matters, God tests him along the way to ensure he understands the seriousness of the matter—he is to speak only the words God tells him. This he does; this test he passes. His end will prove less positive and if we deem that a test as well, he fails. Balaam learns that blessing Israel results in blessing. Treating lightly, or disdainfully, results in a curse, as his end indicates. Lastly, what about the nations in Deuteronomy? There is probably little ground to speak of testing more generally, yet if we keep in mind the above-mentioned idea of Rahab, there is room, even here, for the idea of testing. Put in the difficult situation Rahab finds herself—will she help *her* people or those about which (and whose God) she has heard great things?—Rahab responds to her test by blessing Israel. She fights for a blessing, she demands it (Josh 2:12-14), despite being part of the antielect. In this case we learn that even a strict command to destroy can be overruled by an appropriate response to Israel and Israel's God. Rahab is tested and succeeds.

And so we have learned much through reading the text in dialogue with Levenson and Kaminsky's work. Although I raised some hesitations regarding Kaminsky's tripartite division of divine election (the elect, nonelect and antielect), I think when we keep in mind that the model is primarily a heuristic one, one that helps us in making sense of the material, there is perhaps good reason to reconsider. Our reading of Deuteronomy is enhanced when we distinguish between the antielect and nonelect therein, not grouping all people into one large antielect whole.

I think my earlier criticism of Levenson—that the testing of the unchosen involves more than playing a "subordinate role with grace and with due regard for the common good"—still stands, yet it is also clear that the elect *are* the focus of the text. Perhaps here I simply wanted to demonstrate that the unchosen are at times accorded more responsibility than the word 'subordinate' would suggest. The tests of the unchosen can, at times, involve a primary role in God's workings, and can, for instance, bring about the survival of the chosen. Maybe this is not to disagree with Levenson as the role is still in service of the chosen. What I do think requires further examination and support is Levenson's idea that God's tests of the chosen "demonstrate not God's injustice … but … the fairness of his choices." While the idea somewhat fits his example of Abraham in the *aqedah*, I remain unconvinced that scripture illustrates this more generally (or stands up, for example, in the case of

Abraham and Abimelech). The stories of Isaac, Jacob, and Israel as a people are not, to my mind, "proof positive that their special destiny is based on other than caprice"; in fact, their stories could suggest the opposite. That God has made a 'fair' choice seems to me to import a concern onto the text. Even in the case of Abraham and the *aqedah*, I think there is good reason, if we read the story at face value, to believe that God was genuinely interested to know how Abraham would respond ("*Now* I know …").[3] The same might be said of Israel throughout scripture. God is genuinely concerned to be in a relationship with a people that is responsive to him and his law. The people do not always succeed (indeed a keynote of the text is the people's disobedience), and scripture nowhere emphasizes that Israel is somehow superior to other peoples in its ability to obey. That Israel is and remains in a responsive relationship to YHWH demonstrates not so much the "fairness of God's choices" as it does God's loyalty and grace in the face of rejection and rebellion. At any rate, the question of 'fairness' in relation to God's testing does not seem to be a concern of the text itself.

What value, then, does election have for the church? What good can come from a nationalistic god, a God of favourites? The value, I think, lies in the struggle, in the attempt to grapple with difficult questions while recognizing that the answers are not always easy. The slaughter of the Canaanites, something raised by Clines in our preface, is surely difficult, eminently difficult, yet I think there are constructive ways to engage this while acknowledging the immense problem. I have suggested that the one-time nature of the events does not lessen the problem, yet it should give us hope that history will not repeat itself. The picture is messy as is our church's history. May we learn from our past; may memory be our hope for the future. The God of favourites is a God who is deeply loyal and a God who makes good his promises. This involved an act of taking the land, but it is in the stories along the way that we learn something about how those outside can live faithfully and upright before God: In their doing so, the reader discovers that at times being unchosen can be an important position in the economy of God's workings. Being unchosen does not equal damnation or God would have made Abimelech a 'dead man', and Pharaoh's daughter would be a pointless character without a story worth retelling. Balaam, a foreign prophet, clearly knew the God of Israel and the text reveals no unease with such an idea. Perhaps this is instructive for contemporary life when encountering

---

[3] The issues related to the omniscience of God and testing are many and complex. Although I depart from his reading here, consult the discussion in Moberly, *Bible*, 102-07.

those outside the 'chosen', outside the community of faith in which one finds herself. This does not remove the idea of exclusion, but it does necessitate caution in our understanding of the other.

To be unchosen is to be on one side of the equation in relation to God. To be chosen is to be on the other, but both sides entail responding to God and a responsibility to the other. Our examples showed us something of this, and experience teaches it as well. Our study is not the end of the story; in fact, it is only a taste of what scripture teaches on this important idea. As a Christian, and as a gentile, I am reminded of the challenge that awaits both chosen and unchosen: to grapple with the One who tests and to bless the people that He loves.

appendix one

THE TENDENCY TO RATIONALIZE BALAAM AS SINNER

The villain of our piece is Balaam, as everyone knows.[1]

Knowing our own weaknesses, we may grant the possibility of flaws in the personal lives of the greatest of the prophets ... But in the case of Balaam it is difficult to find anything right.[2]

In Numbers 22-24 [Balaam] never wavers from his resolve to report only what God has communicated to him, whether for good or ill, and whether it pleases the king or not. Balaam is portrayed as a man of integrity, a seer completely open to the divine message, whatever it may be.[3]

It is only proper to acknowledge at this point that the issue at hand is not the essence of the Balaam narrative. Our interest and effort here reflects not an admission that Balaam's character is the central theme of the Book of Balaam, but simply that it is important. And, as our overall study is concerned with the way the unchosen are portrayed in the OT, particularly the Pentateuch, we will linger on this question for a moment here. In some ways, the problem would not be under discussion if it were not for the years of abuse the character Balaam has been subjected to. This appendix aims to challenge the time-honoured negative portrayal of Balaam while recognizing that positive construals also have their limits.

First, however, we must substantiate something mentioned just above. That is, I claim that Balaam's character is not the primary focus of the larger Book of Balaam and (not mentioned) I believe it should not dominate more important issues of seeing, speaking for God, and—primarily—the message of God's irrevocable blessing upon Israel. There are a number of interpreters, however, who believe that Balaam's

---

[1] Judah Goldin, "In Defense of Balak: Not Entirely Midrash," *Judaism* 40 (1991): 455.
[2] Allen, "Theology," 107.
[3] Barré, "Portrait," 259.

character *is* the focus of Numbers 22-24, and for convenience sake I mention two representative views, one negative and one positive.

The question of whether Balaam's character is the focus of Numbers 22-24 is complicated by the fact that two interpreters can both say 'yes', yet one argues the Book serves to highlight the nature of true prophecy, something to be emulated in Israel—Balaam being a saint worthy of admiration, while the other argues that the text highlights Balaam's waverings, his greed, and his faithlessness—the story's inclusion in Scripture probably shows that the nations will be excluded from prophecy. Both interpreters' words are worth citing as they summarize their own thinking best on the matter. Beginning with Margaliot,

> The first question must be whether there is *one theme which governs the whole of the BN [Balaam Narrative]*, prose and oracles. The answer is affirmative: it is the theme of the faithless prophet who betrays his prophetical task, and, of course, finally his God. This one theme governs and permeates the whole of the BN, including all its apparently divergent parts, all its prose and all the four oracles.[4]

It is later, in his conclusion, that Margaliot raises the idea that Balaam's failure is included in the Bible, perhaps, to answer whether there will be prophecy outside Israel:

> Balaam's failure as a prophet may have caused the LORD to withdraw his gift of prophecy from the nations forever, and to limit it thereafter to Israel. No prophet of the nations is ever mentioned later in the Bible; all prophets were exclusively Israelites. Then the exclusion of the nations from prophecy because of Balaam (he may not have been the only one of his kind) may have been one of the original reasons for the composition of the BN and its inclusion into the Pentateuch.[5]

It is fascinating to contrast the diametrically opposed viewpoint of Coats, who agrees that Balaam's character is central to the story, but states:

> Structure in the story thus shows that if a story with a plot lies in the background of the text, its plot line has been totally subordinated to the recurring emphasis on Balaam's devotion to YHWH's word. The purpose of the story as it now stands is not to spin a tale about a foreign diviner who came to curse Israel, but to depict a foreign diviner as a prophet who spoke YHWH's word and nothing else, regardless of the consequences. ... The narration characterizes a particular virtue in the hero as a virtue desirable by all generations of faithful. Would that all of YHWH's prophets were so faithful to the word! Moreover, the hero appears typically as slightly less than superhuman. He never wavers to the right or the left. Balaam is, in short, perfect in his devotion. He is a saint.[6]

---

[4] Margaliot, "Literary," 76.
[5] Margaliot, "Literary," 82.
[6] Coats, "Balaam: Sinner or Saint?" in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable,* 60-61.

The immediate question is whether the Book of Balaam can uphold either thesis. Leaving aside for now the question of whether Balaam is a sinner or saint, we must challenge the overall premise that Balaam's character is central. To be sure, in reading the story, one cannot help but notice the attention paid to Balaam and his interaction with the emissaries and Balak. The donkey episode likewise raises questions as to its inclusion. As we have seen, however, the theme of seeing and speaking at God's instigation takes precedence. The donkey episode reinforces the idea that it is God who opens, or unveils, the eyes and that God is to be obeyed in speaking his words; later in the oracles we again will meet the theme of seeing when Balak repeatedly, like Balaam on his donkey earlier, does not perceive God's way. Balaam and Balak are both used to demonstrate this but they are not the primary focus. In the end, the issue is that God is faithful to his promises and to his people. Nothing will change this, nothing or no one can challenge it; God will reveal this to whom he wishes in his way.

But we are still stuck with the problem of arriving at such differing views on Balaam and his character from the same story. The problem, I think, stems largely from tradition and other biblical passages that perceive Balaam negatively.[7] Taken in its own right, the story reads straightforwardly positive towards Balaam.[8] Had Balaam been an Israelite prophet, and later tradition not vilified him as greedy, it is difficult to imagine deriving a reading of Balaam as avaricious from the story itself. Interpretations attributing greed to Balaam must read deeply between the lines and reach for motives that the narrator simply does not include. But the problem goes deeper. The narrator, I think, includes material to challenge the idea that Balaam was greedy. He consistently relates Balaam's words that he will not allow money to entice him to change his course. Balaam does not appear upset when he fails to receive payment for his services, but rather insists matter-of-factly that Balak should know better as this was never his interest.

Part of the issue relates to whether we, as readers, should take Balaam's words at face value. Some interpreters say we should not. Perhaps the most important recent proposal that Balaam, at least for a time, suffered from greed, is that of Moberly. His reading is important in that he resists the tendency to view Balaam negatively throughout the story, but understands the donkey episode as a divine lesson in which

---

[7] Num 31:8,16; Deut 23:3-6; Josh 24:9-10; Neh 13:1-2; and in the NT (which introduces the idea of greed), 2Pet 2:15; Jude 1:11; Rev 2:14

[8] I try to demonstrate this, though for more, see the balanced work of Olson, *Old*, 153-64.

Balaam learns to give up his hopes of personal gain so as to become a true prophet (which Moberly believes he does). Aspects of his reading have been addressed above, though there are still a number of issues that require attention. Foremost is the idea that Balaam's words are not always to be taken at face value; that is, they contain "pious smokescreen" and reveal his true intention of finding an opening to achieve his deeper desire of personal gain.

The heart of the issue here is the interchange between Balaam and the second group of leaders sent by Balak (Num 22:15-20). After the leaders inform Balaam that nothing should hinder him from coming and that Balak would reward him richly, Balaam replies that even if Balak were to offer him his entire house of silver and gold, he cannot do anything contrary to the command of YHWH his God. Some see here a naming of a price; that is, Balaam was essentially asking for "the equivalent of 'all the silver and gold in his (Balak's) house.'"[9] Wenham concurs and regards Balaam's response to parallel that of Ephron's naming of a price to Abraham for a burial site for Sarah in Genesis 23:11-15.[10] But surely the logic breaks down here. If Balaam was naming a price, would it not have served his purposes better to state something similar to that of Ephron? That is, would he not have rather said something like "Even is Balak were to offer me 3000 talents of gold, I could not …"? To name a price of (essentially) 'all the riches in the world' is not naming a price; at the very least Balaam's response does not bear enough resemblance to that of Ephron to be convincing.

In Moberly's reading, Balaam's words here are deceptive, and Balaam's petition that the riches make no difference to him is "pious smokescreen," offered in order to negotiate for gain while hoping "that people will not see through him but take him at his word."[11] According to Moberly, Balaam should have dismissed the delegation immediately, as God had already informed him that the people are blessed and this was non-negotiable.[12] Together with Balaam's desire to have YHWH add words to his initial vision, and God's later anger in the donkey episode, Moberly believes his

---

[9] Margaliot, "The Connection of Balaam Narrative with the Pentateuch," in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (ed. Malka Jagendorf and Avigdor Shinan; Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977), 287.

[10] Wenham, *Numbers*, 167. Wenham also speaks of the "constant harping on money matters" as suggesting a more sinister meaning to Balaam's actions. But here we must point out that it is not Balaam who raises the money issues but Balak; Balaam consistently silences those who use riches as a ploy to entice him.

[11] Moberly, *Prophecy*, 141.

[12] Moberly, "Learning," 9. Moberly's states that it "was not a contingent matter dependent on time or circumstance," though 'non-negotiable' essentially captures the thrust of his contention. See note 32, Chapter 5, above for more on the idea that Balaam should have immediately dismissed the men.

interpretation is complete: Balaam succumbed to greed but learns a lesson to relinquish hope for gain through the episode with the Angel. Even though Balaam's attitude shows no sign of adjustment after the event (e.g. his later refusal of riches is no different in 24:12-13), and the donkey episode makes no mention of greed, Moberly holds fast the traditional and NT view that Balaam was "*bōtsēa' betsa'* ('greedy for gain')."[13] A number of reasons suggest otherwise.

First, the story gives no reason to indicate that Balaam's words should not be taken at face value. In fact, the story makes the point of suggesting something else. Nowhere does Balaam accept payment or even express interest in it; he consistently, before and after the donkey episode, refuses any reward and responds that he will only speak what YHWH tells him (Num 22:18, 38; 23:12, 26; 24:13). To be sure, *Balak's* actions and words suggest that *he* believes money is at issue but the story makes clear that Balak's perception is less than reliable, and on this matter he is utterly mistaken. His failure to understand the nature of prophecy, the ability to curse at will, and his repeated attempts to goad Balaam on again (and again) to curse, indicate that he grossly misunderstands the nature of speaking for God, let alone doing so for money.

Secondly, as mentioned above, Balaam's desire to enquire again of the LORD regarding the issue could simply have been a polite nicety; Balaam may have had no intention of going. It is God who approaches Balaam—Balaam does not plead to go and the story itself gives not one reason to suggest that he had a desire to curse Israel. We have also noted that seeking God a second time in a matter is not always perceived negatively in Scripture and we have raised the possibility that seeking a second confirmation of a vision or dream was conventional for diviners and Balaam was, conceivably, not amiss in doing so.[14]

Thirdly, had the story wished to present Balaam as negatively as interpreters suggest, it would have been easy to do so. As Coats notes, the story could have,

> ... described the magician hurrying off to meet Balak at Balak's invitation, delayed perhaps by divine obstruction visible only to the prophet's ass, then arriving in the honor Balak had prepared only to find his repeated efforts to curse Israel turned miraculously into blessing.[15]

---

[13] Moberly, *Prophecy*, 143.
[14] See pp. 141ff. above.
[15] Coats, "Sinner?" 57.

But alas, it does not. Balaam is instead portrayed as willing only to speak YHWH's words and in the end his character is vindicated in that he pronounces YHWH's words of Israel's blessing—some of the most beautiful and rich sayings of the OT.

Finally, integration of the donkey episode with the larger story is not only possible but most plausible when we keep in mind that God's anger is not always discernible in the OT. God becomes angry as Balaam was going, yet in the end it is still not clear that God's anger is appeased by a change in Balaam's character, or even why the anger was kindled (the years of interpretive speculation here support this idea). We have suggested above that the episode concerns what the episode itself emphasizes: Balaam must take seriously—deadly seriously—the charge only to speak the words the LORD will give him. Balaam (and the reader) also learns that seeing and speaking (i.e. discernment and prophecy) occur at the instigation of God, and God will gift whomever he pleases. Though not an Israelite (and in the donkey's case, not even a human), Balaam sees and speaks at the LORD's instigation. This addresses a larger concern at work in the book of Numbers regarding who speaks for God, a theme I discuss in chapter five above.

To conclude, we must clarify that not all positive construals of Balaam in Numbers 22-24 are equal, or even acceptable. Although I have cited Coats' work positively, his overall reading obscures the central theme of blessing and makes the story to be a legend about the hero Balaam.[16] Others who interpret Balaam positively in Numbers 22-24 often do so at the expense of the donkey episode, some ignoring it altogether (as a later negative tradition), while many fail adequately to account for its purpose. Others simply fail to do much with the story at all other than to note Balaam's positive points while underemphasizing the central themes of seeing, speaking, and blessing.[17] Lastly, though of a different nature, readings that fail to reckon with later biblical and religious traditions regarding Balaam, deeming them of little importance (or the work of later xenophobic editors) are also inadequate.[18]

---

[16] Typical are his words in "Way," 55: "... the point of the scene is not the blessing, not the word of God. The virtue at center stage in this legend returns in Balaam's speech in [Num 23] v 12: 'Must I not be careful to speak that which the Lord puts into my mouth?' This obedience is the central focus of the story."

[17] In this regard, consult e.g. Helen Kenik Mainelli, "Numbers," in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary: Old Testament* (ed. Dianne Bergant; Collegeville Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 144-95, here 179-84, who parrots Coats' conclusions with insufficient engagement with the text.

[18] On the idea that negative biblical traditions probably reflect the work of a later xenophobic editor, consult e.g. Rösel, "Bileamgestalt," 515-18. An acute problem exists here in that scripture, both the Old and New Testaments, portray Balaam negatively, even while Num 22-24 portrays him positively. Our reading does not depend on Balaam remaining an upright non-Israelite, in fact it is all the more powerful when we keep in mind his end (as I argue in the conclusion to Chapter 5).

Although it might have been advantageous for our reading, and our larger study, if Balaam remained a faithful servant of God, the biblical story reports something different. Although the remarks are clearly parenthetical, i.e. not of primary concern to the storyteller, Numbers 31:8 and 16 reveal that Balaam did not remain upright but helped bring about one of Israel's greatest apostasies. Balaam's actions in this case are likely responsible for his later vilification; readers probably could not separate the once inspired, faithful, Balaam from the later wicked one.[19]

---

[19] It would be impossible to outline and discuss the development of later tradition on Balaam in our short study. Among the many studies, consult esp. Judith R. Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counsellors: Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition* (BJS 47; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983), 75-113; Vermes, "Story," 127-77; as well as the more narrow in scope, but helpful, study of Feldman, "Josephus'," 48-83.

appendix two

Ḥerem in the Old Testament: An Overview

חרם, in both its noun and verbal forms, is undoubtedly a deeply religious term. Whether used in the context of war or in the sanctuary, the word evokes the idea of an "irrevocable surrender to God."[1] This separating or devoting of something to God is absolute, irrevocable, permanent, complete.[2] Once something is devoted, it cannot be redeemed.[3] The thing devoted is taken from profane or common use and is given over, or dedicated to be something set apart, or sacred.[4] A connection to the idea of holiness, whether positive or negative, is inevitable.[5]

Such a description of חרם would be relatively unproblematic if it only applied to inanimate objects, or, perhaps, even animals. The difficulty is that the term is regularly used in the context of war, and thus applied to human beings. What exactly does the term indicate when used in this way? The basic sense of the term described above must in some way hold true. The person, or people, is devoted to God, and is no longer to be part of profane use. There must be a sense of giving something up that would have otherwise been valuable to the one, or ones, devoting it. Perhaps here we enter into the idea of renouncing; usually only something valuable can be renounced with significance.[6] To move the discussion from the realm of abstraction, I suggest we look to a few OT examples that indicate this to be the case.

---

[1] See *TWOT*, חֵרֶם, 1:324; compare Greenberg, "Ḥerem," *EncJud* 8:345.

[2] Lohfink, "חָרַם ḥāram; חֵרֶם ḥērem," *TDOT* 5:180-99, esp. 188.

[3] Lev 27:28-29; consult also the conclusion of J. P. U. Lilley, "Understanding the Ḥerem," *TynBul* 22 (1993): 177.

[4] On this idea, consult Lilley, "Understanding," 170-71.

[5] I discuss the idea of holiness with relation to *ḥerem* (and Israel's election) in Chapter 6 above.

[6] Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 109, rests much upon the idea of *ḥerem* as renounce, but then states that this precludes destroying. I will suggest that ultimate renouncing according to Deuteronomy involves destroying.

The first reported act (not command) of *ḥerem* in the Bible canonically is Numbers 21:1-3. The report is brief, and one might almost miss it, nestled between stories of Aaron's death and YHWH's sending fatal fiery serpents to quell Israel's complaining.[7] The plot is relatively simple. When passing through an area of the Negev, the Canaanite king Arad decides to fight Israel and manages to take some of Israel captive. The text is reticent with regard to the motive for Israel's subsequent action, but it seems apparent that Israel felt helpless or simply defeated. So, Israel makes a vow (נדר) to the LORD:

אם נתן תתן את העם הזה בידי והחרמתי את עריהם

(If you will give this people into my hand, then I will devote/destroy their cities.)[8]

The story recounts that YHWH hears Israel's plea; YHWH gives the Canaanites over to Israel, ויחרם אתהם ואת עריהם, 'and he devoted/destroyed them and their cities'. An event not to be forgotten, the place is given a name, one which conveniently commemorates the first reported act of *ḥerem* by Israel: חרמה (devoted thing, destruction, Ḥormah).

This first act of *ḥerem* is not one commanded by God, but one that Israel appears to have devised, as a vow to YHWH. The terms are simple, if God will aid in the battle and deliver the enemy, Israel vows to devote them. It is unclear what exactly Israel was promising. The idea of destroying the enemy seems to fit the situation best, yet it is unclear how such action functioned religiously. Was it that Israel promised to give up something they valued, such as booty, or wives, or POWs as slaves? Or was it that Israel believed the idea of slaughtering the enemy would please God, was something he would delight in, perhaps akin to animal sacrifice? The narrator makes no comment and we are left not only without answers, but also with the possibility that the God of Israel will answer to vows promising the destruction of human life, conceivably with pleasure. But perhaps such an idea is not as foreign to the Bible as we might initially suspect.

The story of Jephthah (Judg 11) is remarkable in that it too suggests that God will answer vows promising a human sacrifice.[9] The details would deter us, but for now

---

[7] The odd placement of the story regularly mystifies interpreters. See e.g. Gray, *Numbers*, 272 (who calls it "badly placed") and Milgrom, *Numbers*, 456-58 (Excursus 51).

[8] The use of the first person singular for Israel here strikes me as odd though most commentators make no comment. Milgrom nonchalantly remarks, "For the vow to be effective it had to be taken by every soldier" (*Numbers*, 172). Some translations simply substitute plurals (e.g. NRSV and NIV).

we note that nowhere does the Bible disapprove of Jephthah's action. (The NT, in its peculiar listing of the faithful in Hebrews, goes so far as to include Jephthah [Heb 11:32]). Jephthah vows to offer something as a burnt offering to YHWH (והיה ליהוה והעליתהו עולה—Judg 11:31), something (or better, someone) that must have been valuable to him (see Judg 11:35). Although this case is less clear regarding whether YHWH gave Ammon into Jephthah's hand as a result of his vow (though the sense of the text suggest so), the possibility is not without warrant: YHWH will answer vows to destroy, vows that take human life.

Jephthah's act seems to fit another in the biblical story, though not that of an Israelite. Mesha, the Moabite king, like the Israelites in the above story, finds himself being defeated in a battle, this time with Israel (2 Kgs 3). Recognizing his fate, Mesha decides to take is oldest son and offer him as a burnt offering on the wall (ויעלהו עלה על החמה). The result is somewhat obscure, but in some way or another a great wrath (קצף גדול) is said to come upon Israel and they retreat. Although it is not clear that YHWH answers a vow or is the one who sends the great wrath, a suggestion may be that the Moabite god Chemosh answered Mesha's vow in the way Israel's God answers theirs.[10] As Levenson has said: "Mesha's sacrifice worked."[11]

All this may seem tangential to *herem*, but it does indicate the biblical record's lack of clarity with regard to taking of human life, provided it is done to the LORD, or similar deity. Levenson's work on child sacrifice elucidates this theme in a powerful way,[12] and there may be reason to believe that the taking of enemy life in devotion to YHWH was, at least at some point within Israel's story, acceptable.[13] More work

---

[9] Suggestions that Jephthah was hoping to encounter an animal upon arriving home depletes the story of real significance. Robinson explores the question and concludes similarly (based upon the Hebrew idiom used in 11:31 and other factors). See Bernard P. Robinson, "The Story of Jephthah and his Daughter: Then and Now," *Bib* 85 (2004): 331-48, here 338.

[10] For more on this idea consult the discussion in Gerald L. Mattingly, "Moabite Religion and the Mesha Inscription," in *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (ed. Andrew Dearman; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 229-30.

[11] *Death*, 15.

[12] Levenson, *Death*.

[13] Compare also the ideas of Kaufman, *Religion*, 136-37, who concludes:

> Human sacrifice is viewed by the Bible as pagan, but to devote persons to destruction (Lev. 27:29), and to hang ceremonially "before YHWH" (Num. 25:4; 2 Sam. 21:6, 9; cf. Samuel's slaughter of Agag "before YHWH" [1 Sam. 15:33]) is not. Even the account of the near sacrifice of Isaac fails to manifest an outspoken objection in principle to the idea of human sacrifice. That one *can* show absolute submission to God by offering his child to him is, after all, a legitimate inference from the story. Nor does the narrator of Judges 11:30ff. show repugnance against Jephthah's performance of his vow. Thus, while biblical religion

would be needed to make the case watertight, but for now we note the idea simply as a small piece of inductive evidence. The idea of destroying human life in devotion to God is not without precedent in the OT and is likely our best translation of חרם, in the context of warfare.[14] The ideas presented in the examples above naturally raise questions as to whether *ḥerem* can be understood sacrificially.

Ḥerem as Sacrifice?

The biblical story has no qualms in portraying warfare as a religious activity. To state that war can be viewed as a form of worship is not to manipulate the stories unduly. The initial military encounters of Israel are portrayed as acts of divine fighting, and the first, Israel's exodus from Egypt, is a prime example. The miraculous is almost wholly responsible for the fate of the Egyptians, their firstborn sons, and the riders in the sea (Exod 7-12, 14:17-31). The people are to trust that God will deliver them (14:10-14) and Moses takes part through prayers and physical gestures (stretching out hands, staff, etc.).[15] The idea that YHWH will fight for Israel is part of Israel's story from the beginning. In this foundational story, Israel is to remain silent, " .. the LORD will fight for you" (Exod 14:14). That God is the warrior of Israel is a theme all too familiar to readers of the OT and a number of studies treat the subject in depth.[16] For our purposes, we simply note the foundational role YHWH is said to have in Israel's battles and this continues to be the case as Israel nears and enters the land.

Israel's role, however, was not always to remain silent. As von Rad has outlined, the idea of synergism becomes prevalent in the story, and often, although God is said

---

rejected human sacrifice on the basis of its new appreciation of the cult in general and its new moral sense, until this attitude crystallized there was room for regarding even human sacrifice as an expression of highest devotion to the one God.

[14] I here follow convention of rendering חרם as 'destroy' (or better, '*devote* to destruction'), though such a definition is not without its dissenters. Some prefer a meaning of 'ban', 'put to the ban', or similar (see for example the general sense of C. Brekelmans, "חֵרֶם," *TLOT* 2:474-77). Lohfink argues, however, that a definition of 'ban' fails to account adequately for the biblical material; "The usual translation, 'ban,' is and always has been false and misleading. It was an appropriate rendering of the medieval Jewish *ḥērem*, corresponding to secular outlawry and ecclesiastical excommunication, but is based on a later development of the word *ḥērem* that is unattested in the OT" (Lohfink, "חָרַם," 5:180-99, here 188). For discussion on the word's development in the Second Temple period, the medieval age and beyond, consult William Horbury, "Extirpation and Excommunication," *VT* 35 (1985): 13-38, esp. 18ff.; and Haim Hermann Cohn, "Ḥerem," *EncJud* 8:350-55.

[15] E.g. Exod 7:19-20; 8:5-6; 16-17, etc; 14:16, 21, 26-27, etc.

[16] Millard C. Lind, *YHWH is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1980); Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (HSM 5; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973); and also Miller's "God the Warrior: A Problem of Biblical Interpretation and Apologetics," *Int* 19 (1965): 39-46.

to fight for Israel, Israel fights as well.[17] Particularly in Deuteronomy (e.g. 1:30; 3:22; 20:4) Israel is commanded to fight but is given courage that God is fighting for them. YHWH the warrior will win the battle but somehow Israel is active with swords. The transition from a wholly miraculous divine fighting to the synergistic model could not be more apparent that in the memorable battle with Amalek (Exod 17:8-16). There Moses must raise his hands (eventually with the help of Aaron and Hur) to ensure the victory but Israel below fights as well. The earlier purely miraculous story at the Sea of Reeds (hands raised and water closing in on the army) is gradually replaced in the story with a synergistic model. Israel now fights as well but God fights for them.

We cannot explore this question adequately here due to the constraints of our scope and purpose, but numerous other suggestive examples in the OT (consecrating the people and offering sacrifices before battle; taking along religious objects such as the ark; keeping a war camp clean because God is in the midst of the army; refraining from sexual relations during war, etc.) heighten our awareness to the religious nature of Israel's wars.[18] Of importance to our discussion, however, is how the *ḥerem* is told to function within such settings (when it does), even if the picture may not be uniform. It is clear that the act of putting an enemy to the *ḥerem* was not consistently commanded or observed in all of Israel's battles. As Brekelmans and others have shown, the *ḥerem* was not a permanent element of Israel's wars but was executed only in special or extreme cases.[19] Brekelmans connects this to the idea of a vow or promise made, something we discussed above. Many interpreters make the apt connection that as YHWH the warrior has fought (or will fight) for Israel, he is the rightful owner of the spoils of war.[20] The spoils of war, of course, include possessions *and* people. So, in particularly extreme cases, everything is to be put

---

[17] Von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); compare Miller, *Divine*, 156-61; and Goldingay, *Gospel*, 483-85. Note also von Rad's idea that the primary duty for the soldier was to trust that YHWH would fight for them. Von Rad goes so far as to suggest that the biblical idea of 'faith' finds its roots here. He states (*Studies in Deuteronomy* [London: SCM, 1953], 48):

> ... the fighters' chief duty was to submit confidently to JHWH's sway and not to be afraid in face of the enemy's superior numbers—in a word, to have faith. A proper subjective attitude of spirit in the individual which would enable him to play his part in the undertaking was apparently more important than arms or military skill. ... in all probability the biblical demand for faith has its proper origin here in the Holy War of ancient Israel.

[18] The examples listed are far from comprehensive. For more on this idea (with biblical references) consult von Rad, *War*, 41-51.

[19] Brekelmans, "חֵרֶם," 2:475-76; compare Greenberg, "Ḥerem," 8:347; and Stern, *Ḥerem*, 64, 217.

[20] E.g. Brekelmans, "חֵרֶם," 2:476; and Nelson, "Ḥerem and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience," in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature: Festschrift for C.H.W. Brekelmans* (ed. Marc Vervenne and Johan Lust; BETL 133; Louvain: Peeters, 1997), 47-48. Our work will challenge Nelson's idea, however, that the booty could no longer be sacrificial as it already belonged to YHWH (see below).

under the *ḥerem*, men, women, children, and property. The prime example in the biblical story is that of Jericho (Josh 6-7), a story that goes to great lengths to show a paradigm of Israel's religious or holy war.[21] Here it is difficult to distinguish the war from a worship ceremony.[22] There is a procession, including priests and the ark, and there is the blowing of rams' horns as trumpets. The procession is to take 6 days, and then on the seventh, a day regularly reserved as holy to the LORD, the people are to shout, an action also associated with worship.[23] On this special day, a miraculous event takes place—the wall falls flat and Israel puts the entire city, save Rahab and her family,[24] to the *ḥerem* with the edge of the sword (Josh 6:20-21). In the following story of Achan (Josh 7), the totality of the *ḥerem* is again emphasized when he is punished for keeping a small amount of plunder, an action, oddly enough, permitted in the very next battle (see Josh 8:1-2).

What we observe, then, is that the act of *ḥerem* was rooted in a deeply religious idea. The battle was sacred, God was fighting, and the spoil belonged to him. But because the battle was also synergistic, it might be conceivable that some of the spoil belonged to the people. Perhaps this is where the connection to sacrifice once again surfaces, for if the people felt any ownership of the spoil, giving it to YHWH likely involved some sense of giving it up, perhaps sacrificially. There seems to be some scholarly resistance to such an idea.[25] I believe the issue may largely relate to terminology, in that the *ḥerem* is generally not referred to specifically as such. Because Nelson's work deals with the question as it relates to ours, his words require our attention:

---

[21] Here we must be careful to distinguish the 'holy war' of Israel from modern conceptions of holy war, the latter of which is often understood to spread the religion of the one fighting (something quite foreign to the Pentateuchal narratives and Joshua; on this consult further Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961], 262-63). Because of the confusion, I avoid the term when possible. There may also be reasons to avoid the term as it implies a dichotomy between sacred and secular war when the Bible does not. On that issue, consult Lilley, "Understanding," 171-73.

[22] On the idea that theological and religious factors are at the forefront in Josh 7-8, consult Stern, *Ḥerem*, 145-56, esp. 154; compare also the work of Goldingay, *Gospel*, 492-95.

[23] Although the text does not indicate whether the seventh day of battle is 'the' seventh day, the storyteller likely alludes to such an idea. Some show a comparison to a seven-day cultic festival, perhaps the Passover (see the discussion in Trent C. Butler, *Joshua* [WBC 7; Dallas: Word, 1984], 69). Minimally, the repeated use of 'seven' (seven horns, seven days, seven encirclements) is likely being used to emphasize some aspect of cultic worship.

[24] The idea that Rahab was spared is of utmost importance to our discussion. While we cannot explore it here, we must note that for reasons not altogether clear, a family that chooses to bless Israel is spared in something that is otherwise commanded to be absolute and complete. A connection to Gen 12:3 is not only possible, but is likely the best reading (see further our concluding chapter).

[25] See e.g. Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:139; contrast Goldingay, *Gospel*, 492, 495-96; and to some degree Stern, *Ḥerem*, 107.

ḥerem was not sacrifice. It involved no altar and no shrine. The foundational notion in sacrifice is a transfer in ownership from human possession to divine possession. But for the animals and humans involved, *ḥerem* entailed no transfer to the heavenly world by means of burning. What was *ḥerem* was killed or destroyed in order to render it unusable to humans, not to transfer its ownership. Burning was used only for inanimate items, and again only in order to make them unavailable for human use. The logic of *ḥerem* meant that no sacrificial transfer could be conceived of, because anything in the *ḥerem* state was already in the possession of YHWH as spoil of war or by some other means. To sacrifice *ḥerem* would be to try to derive a human benefit from it. This is the precisely [*sic*] the problem behind Saul's lapse in 1 Sam 15. The people had spared for sacrifice what was already explicitly in the *ḥerem* state ... One cannot sacrifice to YHWH what is already his.[26]

In some ways there is little to dispute in Nelson's words. Indeed there is no altar, shrine, or burning of people mentioned in execution of the *ḥerem*. Where I think there may be room for movement is in the idea that there could be no transfer of ownership to YHWH as the spoil already belonged to him. Is it not conceivable that the warriors would have felt some sense of ownership after their fighting, even if through the help of God? To be sure, we need not necessarily speak of ritual or formal sacrifice but simply a giving over to God something that has value to the one offering. In giving over of the enemy property and people to YHWH, a clear recognition that YHWH won the battle was pronounced. The battle was the LORD'S. It is apparent that objects given over were items highly desired by the people. For example, as Stern mentions, the giving up of the nubile women was an ultimate act of devotion as they were the most desirable of the booty.[27] The story of Achan highlights the value of possessions encountered by the people, and surely we can imagine that the command to destroy 'all' was, at times, met with less than complete enthusiasm.[28] The repeating of the commands and the qualifications given in various circumstances attest to this idea.[29]

---

[26] Nelson, "Ḥerem," 47-48.

[27] Stern, *Ḥerem*, 33-34.

[28] The story of Saul and the *ḥerem* of Amalek (1 Sam 15) lends credibility here as it is clear that the people were only willing to destroy the objects that were "despised and worthless" (1 Sam 15:9). Also related, it is interesting to note how Samuel's action of cutting up King Agag "before the LORD" (וישסף שמואל את אגג לפני יהוה —1 Sam 15:33), likely suggests a sacrificial meaning (*pace* Stern, *Ḥerem*, 175).

[29] See e.g. Deut 7; 13:12-18; 20:10-18; Josh 6:17-19; 8:1-2. As space will not permit an extensive discussion above, we might also note two examples here that lend credible support to the idea of *ḥerem* as sacrifice. Although I have tried to stress a non-technical sense of sacrifice, there are examples where the *ḥerem* seems linked to sacrifice in a more technical way: Deut 13:12-18 and in the Mesha Stele (lines 11-12). Although Nelson ("Ḥerem," 47) dismisses the former as metaphor and the latter as something in distinction to *ḥerem* (i.e. the term ריח in line 12 is referring to something other than *ḥerem*), both cases as not as clear cut as Nelson implies. The case of Deut 13 may refer to sacrifice metaphorically (and this is not 'mere' metaphor) but such an idea does not weaken my argument (perhaps strengthens it). The booty of the wicked city is said to be piled up and burned (along with the

Preliminary Observations

Warfare in Israel was a deeply religious idea, one that was initiated through wholly miraculous events. In certain cases the people are to remain still and trust in their God; YHWH, who is a warrior, will fight for them. Later in the story, this model of warfare shifts somewhat to that of synergism, indicated notably in the battle with Amalek, but also made clear in Deuteronomy's language calling Israel to participate. Although the people now participate in battle, YHWH remains the warrior who fights for Israel.

The idea of *ḥerem* indicates an irrevocable dedication of something to YHWH, and in warfare likely entails the destruction of property and people. Such an idea may have initially been inspired in vows of desperation, as seen in Numbers 21. It is likely that within Israel's religious warfare, and because YHWH was the ultimate victor, the booty belonged to him. In acknowledgement of this, the people gave something up that was valuable or desirable, almost sacrificially. Through such an act the people made an ultimate pronouncement of loyalty to YHWH.

Despite what these observations might tell us, within our passage (Deut 7) the *ḥerem* reads as something slightly different in that it is a command—*a divine command*—given through the mouth of the speaker, Moses. The idea of destroying human life in devotion to a god is problematic enough without it being something that the deity, a purportedly compassionate, gracious, loving and truthful one (Exod 34:6), commands. But the text is unequivocal; there is no ambiguity—God demanded that the Israelites utterly devote the people in the land to destruction. The idea is important, particularly as election, we soon find out, is intricately linked to the *ḥerem* and God's commanding of it. We now turn to this theological question.

Ḥerem as a Divine Command?

Theologically, we here reach some of the Bible's most difficult questions. Did God really demand the slaughter of whole nations, men, women and children? If so, why? Was there anything heinous enough that the nations could have done to deserve such

---

city) as a כליל ליהוה אלהיך ('whole burnt offering to the LORD your God'), which suggests a giving over of something of worth to God (i.e. the people are to 'sacrifice' it, and it appears pleasing to God). The case of lines 11-12 in the Mesha Stele also read most naturally as analogous to the *ḥerem* it describes just below (in lines 14-17). Although it is not clear if כל. העם in line 11 includes women and children (as compared with lines 14-17), the idea is still certain that in defeating Ataroth—and then slaying the inhabitants of the city—a sacrifice, or satiation (ריח) was made to/for Chemosh and Moab. See further the discussions of Mattingly, "Moabite," 235; and Jacob Liver, "Wars of Mesha, King of Moab," *PEQ* 99 (1967): 24-25.

treatment? Do not all humans bear the image of the God who created them, and thus worthy of life, or at least an option to seek it? If the *ḥerem* was punishment, does not God always permit an opportunity for turning, or repentance (שוב), before destroying? How can contemporary readers possibly maintain the love of God if he indeed sanctions such action? Lastly, how should such texts function as scripture?

There are a number of ways interpreters approach the problem and we mention a few, first some less weighty, then those more substantial. The first is the suggestion of Goldingay (among his many) that, contrary to my confident statement above, God does not really command the *ḥerem*. He argues that the *ḥerem* is a largely human institution, like sacrifice, one devised by people, not God. God commissions not the *ḥerem* but a dispossessing; although God goes along with instances of it (as in Num 21), "Yhwh is still distanced from the command …" "Only Deuteronomy 7 and 20 commission the devoting of these people, and even then it is Moses, not Yhwh, who does so."[30] Although an aspect of Goldingay's idea may be correct with regard to *ḥerem* being a human institution, (even if only initially, as I suggest above), such an argument falls rather flat if we wish to play 'pick and choose' with divine verses human commands in Deuteronomy. Although theologically appealing, hermeneutically it places the interpreter of scripture in a real conundrum. The task of determining when the command is divine and when it is 'merely' Mosaic becomes an overwhelming challenge as the narration is far from straightforward. The section at hand follows from the Shema (Deut 6) and I believe is to be read in light of it, as a continuing exposition. It is unclear that the following commands of chapter 7 are somehow different, or not divinely sanctioned. Furthermore, the speech in Deuteronomy 7 includes some indications that the command is directly divine. The use of the divine 'me' in verse 4 (כי יסיר את בנך מאחרי — "For he will cause your son to turn away from [following] after me") lends support to the idea that the speech-giver gives the commands as words directly from YHWH.[31] To challenge the idea of *ḥerem* on this level raises hermeneutical questions beyond our scope. As Goldingay has written extensively on hermeneutics and the interpretation of Christian

---

[30] Goldingay, *Gospel*, 500.

[31] Driver calls the shift to first person divine speech here insensible but common (*Deuteronomy*, 99) and lists similar occurrences of Deuteronomy: 11:14; 17:3; 28:20; 29:4-5 (so similarly Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 366). Tigay also notes the practice, stating, "Moses, when transmitting God's commands, often shifts between speaking of God in the third person and quoting him directly" (*Deuteronomy*, 85). Some translations (e.g. REB) regard the *yod* to be an abbreviated form for YHWH (consult further the notes of Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 96 and Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 359).

scripture, I find the tactic odd, to say the least. However, it may indicate that I have misunderstood his earlier work, or that his hermeneutics are radically evolving.[32]

Another strategy to mitigate the *ḥerem* as a divine command is to understand it as conditional. Greenberg and Tigay mention the rabbinical idea that if the autochthonous nations abandoned paganism and agreed to practice Noahide Law they could be spared.[33] A similar tactic is to understand the *ḥerem* as executed only after peace has been offered.[34] An interesting example is that of Maimonides, who understands Deuteronomy 20:10-18 as commanding an offer of peace to *all* cities; the later 'qualification' for nearby, Canaanite, cities does not rule out the offer of peace, it simply regulates how the *ḥerem* is executed if not accepted (i.e. in the lands far away,

---

[32] Such ideas seem difficult to reconcile with other aspects of his work, particularly his stated method of interpretation. For instance, Goldingay states, "The Joshua narrative [i.e. the difficulty of the *ḥerem*] is present in the canonical Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity. ... [the task is] to see how it can be understood in a way that recognizes its status but reexamines the implications that have been drawn from it" (*Gospel*, 491). While the theory is admirable, his practice in essence challenges it. A similarly problematic example is his treatment of Josh 11, where he again argues, through questionable use of the text, that God did not intend the *ḥerem*. Goldingay claims that God subverts the *ḥerem* in that he commands the hamstringing of horses and burning of chariots, not slaying of people. His argument is worth quoting (*Gospel*, 482):

> Instead of commissioning the *ḥērem* or devoting of Hazor, the annihilation of everything as a kind of offering, Yhwh prescribed that after the promised victory over the king and his allies, "you shall hamstring their horses and burn their chariots with fire" (Josh 11:6). Joshua goes on to devote Hazor and other cities with their populations in keeping with Moses' instructions, but Yhwh's novel commission at Hazor works within a different frame of reference. Hazor's possession of horses and chariots is a mark of its paramount military might. Disabling horses and destroying chariots is the ancient equivalent of disabling tanks and destroying missiles. It takes weapons of war out of action. It hints at a distinctive theology and ethic that we shall not come across again until we reach Isaiah 2 and Micah 4.

Goldingay's argument amounts to something like, YHWH never intended the *ḥerem*, in fact the text hints that his way is that of peace; he prefers the disabling of weapons over fighting. Now to read a larger theology and ethics of peace at Isa 2 and Mic 4 is understandable, indeed compulsory. To read it here, however, is misleading. YHWH's words to Joshua are not a new command (to subvert the *ḥerem*), but are words of reassurance. Joshua himself understood that well, in that he still devoted the enemy completely (as Goldingay observes), and nowhere does the text suggest that he should have done otherwise. To be sure, the reference to hamstringing horses and burning chariots *is* referring to "paramount military might." The opening verses of the narrative go to great length, hyperbolic and near comical length, to stress the size and strength of the enemy armies. Indeed, every people in the land, it would seem, has gathered to fight Israel ("on the east and on the west," [11:3] from "north in the hill country" to the south, and "in the lowland and on the heights ..." [11:2], etc.); they are "many people, as the sand upon the seashore, with exceedingly many (רב מאד) horses and chariots" (11:4). Such overemphasis serves to heighten the readers' awareness of the overwhelming size and strength of the enemy that YHWH would deliver to Israel. After describing the tremendous army, YHWH tells Joshua 'not to fear'; his next words would encourage: "by this time tomorrow ... you will hamstring the horses and burn the chariots with fire." We might loosely paraphrase the sense of YHWH's words this way: 'see all those armies and their numerous horses and chariots, their fancy weapons which you don't have? By this time tomorrow I will deliver them slain before you; you will hamstrung those horses and burn the chariots with fire ...' As promised, God delivers them over to Israel and they "struck them until no survivor remained" (11:8). To read the story as something akin to the ethic of peace in Isa 2 and Mic 4 is surely to force the text.

[33] See Greenberg, "Ḥerem," 8:349; and Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 470-72; 539, note 13.

[34] Consult the discussion in Weinfeld, "Ban," 154-55 and again, Greenberg, "Ḥerem," 8:349-50.

the women, children, animals, and booty may be spared).[35] Although few interpreters explicitly endorse these views (most point to the unconditional nature of the command in Deut 7), they mention them to point to the inherent problem of divinely sanctioned killing and how later jurists sought to alleviate it.

There are other strategies, and here we mention them quickly before moving to those more substantial.[36] First, the least articulated but perhaps most widely practiced among Christians is the tendency simply to ignore. This could be said of attitudes concerning much of the OT, but seems particularly pronounced with texts about *ḥerem* and a violent God. Another somewhat related tactic is to pit the God of the Old Testament against the New and then deem the Old obsolete, whether through conscious or inadvertent means. The OT 'God of violence' has been miraculously replaced by a NT 'God of love'.[37] If one did not know otherwise, he or she might surmise that the two were not one and the same God. As these two tactics concern praxis, i.e. something we might observe yet rarely encounter in print, we merely mention them without critical assessment. Another more significant strategy is to note that the obsession with theodicy is a distinctly modern and western one, one foreign to the text. There is much that one could say here, the first being that such a criticism may appear prima facie correct. Within the biblical story it is remarkable that very little is lamented with regard to human suffering, or with taking human life. As something almost intrinsic to contemporary thinking, it is difficult for the modern reader to accept that ancients were not concerned with the suffering of the innocent, or, for example, corporate punishment. I think there may be room for discussion here as the biblical picture, though admittedly not of the same orientation as contemporary thinking, does reveal some sense of sympathy for the innocent, at times even the guilty. The story of Cain (Gen 4:1-16) reveals that God is concerned even for the murderer of a brother, and will not permit anyone to take his life in retribution. The story of Hagar and Ishmael reveals that the unchosen wife of Abraham and her son are not beyond God's concern and his ear attends to their cries (Gen 21:15-21).

---

[35] For a fuller explanation, see Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 472. For a list of rabbinical sources on similar ideas, see his note 13 on p. 539.

[36] There are other ways interpreters approach the issue of *ḥerem*, though as largely unconcerned with divine commanding I leave them out of the larger discussion. For instance, Gelb ("Prisoners of War in Early Mesopotamia," *JNES* 32 [1973]: 70-98) argues that in the ANE the largely rural agricultural communities could not maintain nor control POWs, thus it was more prudent to slay captured warriors (and in some cases civilian populations). Stern brings up another idea (and criticizes it) that the *ḥerem* was a medical solution to deal with spread of disease (see *Herem*, 143).

[37] Goldingay, *Gospel*, 490-91, also discusses this idea and shows that the NT would approve, not disapprove, of the Joshua narrative (i.e. *ḥerem* warfare).

Esau's portrayal in Genesis 27 likewise shows a deep concern for the fate of the one not blessed, one who is cheated of his primogeniture. The book of Job is likely the greatest theodicy ever written, one concerning a non-Israelite, someone who is abandoned (seemingly) by God. In addition, other passages envisage a time when children will no longer be punished for the sins of their parents (Jer 31:27ff). These examples are few (though there are others), and they admittedly reveal not so much a sense of theodicy on the part of the reader or recipients (save perhaps Job) as they do a sympathy and justice for the suffering.[38] We lack something clearly comparable to what our contemporary sensitivities crave. I do think that the continual lack of clarity with regard to who was to be included in the *ḥerem*, whether men, women, children, and animals, may reveal some sense of theodicy or similar concern, even if less than we might wish for. Of course that issue may also simply relate to a desire to retain valuables for personal use rather than to destroy them (cf. 1 Sam 15:9). The story of the Midianite slaughter in Num 31 is not conclusive, however, as to why the army wanted to spare the women and children. The eventual sanctioned killing of the young boys and non-virgin women by Moses appears to go against the people's instinct, but we cannot be sure.[39] Again, it is a basic dictum that what modern readers find utterly repugnant the ancient text leaves largely without comment. Such stories are much more at home in cultures the western world regularly regards as barbaric, those that implement genocide (or other 'cides') as a means to political or social advantage.[40] At any rate, the biblical idea of *ḥerem* is a distinctly non-western idea, and our culture will likely never understand it in the way the ancient non-western world did. As Stern notes, this often affects our basic understanding of biblical stories. He notes the case where our instincts as western readers regularly fail us: in viewing Saul's action in 1 Sam 15 with sympathy and Samuel's as savage and without

---

[38] I here mention a few examples, though the issue of theodicy in the OT is examined more closely in the collection of essays edited by Crenshaw (*Theodicy in the Old Testament* [IRT 4; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983]). See esp. the first three essays (by Crenshaw, Eichrodt, and Williams) which suggest theodicy is more prevalent in the OT than we might suppose.

[39] Again, the reasons may have very little to do with sympathy and a great deal to do with desire for valuables, or just plain lack of motivation to take on the enormous task of putting people to the sword (Num 31:35 claims there were 32,000 [!] virgin women alone).

[40] Some contemporary readers suggest that the ancient biblical stories should not be compared to modern day genocide. While the differences may be great (e.g. not strictly racially motivated), the similarities generally outweigh them. When we imagine the ancient period with complete seriousness, considering the terror that must have been present when the invading armies approached, then to hear the screams of children, or a sister or brother or parent or grandparent put to the edge of the sword, I am unsure why this vile and troubling picture should be completely disassociated from modern 'geno-' or other 'cides'.

compassion. The text actually seeks to explain Saul's downfall, and to show the reader of his lack of judgment.[41]

A God that Gets His Hands Dirty?

One related idea intended to alleviate the issue of God commanding the *ḥerem* is the idea of, yet again, Goldingay. Among the many ideas Goldingay presents, this is an earlier one, one he may be less committed to today.[42] The idea is that God is so concerned to participate in the life of his people that he engages in activity otherwise deemed not his nature. Goldingay states,

> A theological understanding of Deuteronomy's attitude might begin from its realism. Talk of love and forgiveness in the context of international politics can look like escapist romanticism. War is a fact of international relationships and thus of national life. Nations come into existence through war and maintain their existence through war; even a nation that seeks to remain neutral does not thereby avoid being involved. The question then is, does God involve himself in human life as it actually is, and thus in war as a recurrent feature of it? The assertion that he is a God of war expresses the conviction that he is so involved and can be known. "To describe God as a warrior is thus to say that God participates in human history, through sinful human beings, and through what have become the 'normal' forms of human activity."[43]

The idea is powerful and may remind the Christian of something close to an incarnational theology. God is so concerned to be involved in the life of his people that he is willing to become a warrior, a fighting God, who will fight for his people Israel. Such an idea is difficult to evaluate. We might challenge the idea and ask why the master of the universe could not have used different means. I think the crux of the matter is that according to story, God chose the people Israel and is committed to them with passion. In order to keep oaths made, he will go to great lengths to bring about the truth of his promises, lengths we may question to be worth taking.[44] The problem may arise when looking specifically at the *ḥerem*, and determining, according to such thinking, the cost God puts to himself against the benefit. What does the *ḥerem* accomplish and is his commanding of it really justified, based upon its result? The question is unanswerable, particularly as our standards will undoubtedly vary, and perhaps be quite removed from those of God himself. What might seem

---

[41] See further Stern, *Herem*, 170-77.

[42] The idea is found in his published PhD dissertation, *Diversity*. The idea does not feature strongly in his recent *Gospel*.

[43] Goldingay, *Diversity*, 162. The final quotation within his words is from Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 41. Goldingay returns to a similar idea in his "Justice," 184ff.

[44] See further Chapter 6 above.

wrong to us may be well justified to the divine council. This is certainly the case, I think, with Job (e.g. Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6), and perhaps Micaiah Ben Imlah (1 Kgs 22:19-23). Similarly, the biblical story tells us, for example, that God was willing to command the sacrifice of the promised son in order to test Abraham (Gen 22), something unimaginable to us as readers. Could God have commanded the *ḥerem* in order to demonstrate his concern for being known, and to show his commitment to his people? I find the idea difficult to maintain, but ultimately unanswerable.

The Smoking Gun (or Bloody Sword): The Ḥerem Never Happened

Within the interpretations of many, one will encounter a recurring argument (or statement) that the *ḥerem* is really a theoretical idea, something never fully implemented.[45] A full-scale *ḥerem* of the nations in the land is dubious historically, let alone a people entering the land via conquest, so such thinking purports. Even those biblical theologians that make it a matter of principle to treat the final form of the text and side-step historical questions often make exceptions here; Goldingay, as a striking example, does so in his recent theology of the OT. He states,

> In general in this Old Testament theology I do not discuss historical questions, but here I make a large exception. I write in a context when discussion of the process whereby Israel became Israel in the land is particularly convoluted, and it would seem unreal simply to ignore that when considering the story's theological implications.[46]

The logic of such a stratagem usually serves to show that as the *ḥerem* was not implemented in history, the idea of the *ḥerem* is really theoretical and not potent (or at least diminished in potency). If the slaughter of thousands of people at the hands of the faith community to which one associates was not actualized, there is less guilt to be had. I think Miller sums up the problems with such thinking well, even if his views on the historical nature of the *ḥerem* are not conclusive:

> What kind of God would order the wholesale slaughter of groups of people? The answer that "in actual fact" the ban or slaughter of the enemy was rarely carried out is not only historically questionable, but it begs or avoids the question. Yet this answer is often given by reputable Old Testament scholars. Whether in fact the ban ever took place at all—and there

---

[45] Weinfeld, for instance, regularly calls it a utopian ideal of a later period, never actualized (See Weinfeld, "Deuteronomy, Book of," ABD 2:168-83, here 179; Weinfeld, "Ban," 154, 159-60; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 365, 382-84). Compare also Kaminsky's discussion in Chapter 2 above; Levenson, "Is There a Counterpart in the Hebrew Bible to New Testament Antisemitism," *JES* 22 (1985): 250-51; and among Christian interpreters, Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 66-67. Goldingay and others will feature below.

[46] Goldingay, *Gospel*, 485.

> is no real question that it did—the Old Testament is explicit in affirming that God demanded it and was for it.[47]

Theologically, a problem still remains, at least for those who wish to understand the nature of God. If historically the *ḥerem* did not take place, it could simply point to the disobedience of the people; what God demanded the people failed to carry out. If anything, the sense of the biblical picture (as articulated in places like Judges 2:1-5) would be that the Israelites sinned in not being faithful to the *ḥerem* in totality.

Here is not the place to enter into the historical debate on *ḥerem*. The picture does not appear to be complete and there may be more room to accept *ḥerem* as an ancient practice than one might think, as is well known from the Mesha Stele.[48] Stern's work helpfully shows that the *ḥerem* described therein points to a moral-religious act, one that sought to replace chaos with order, reasserting the rule of the Moabite God, Chemosh.[49] As Levenson observes, there is little difference between the presentation of Mesha's God and YHWH, and the manner of war (*ḥerem*) is clearly reminiscent of Deuteronomy.[50] Though Stern regards *ḥerem* to have mythic like qualities, he also regards it to have been an authentic ancient practice, one "actualized in history."[51] Whatever we make of the evidence, history—even recent history—gives us no reason to place the practice of *ḥerem* outside the realm of possible human behaviour. It is certainly the case that our attempts to reconstruct Israel's history are far from complete.[52]

---

[47] Miller, "God the Warrior," 41.
[48] See *ANET*, 320-321.
[49] See Stern, *Ḥerem*, 19-50, esp. his conclusion, 50.
[50] Levenson, "Counterpart," 257.
[51] Stern, *Ḥerem*, passim, here 221.
[52] With the historical debates raging on questions of pre-exilic Israel and Israel's emergence as a people, it is refreshing to read (from amidst the prevailing so-called minimalist or revisionist scholarship) the evenhanded approach of Anthony J. Frendo, "Back to Basics: A Holistic Approach to the Problem of the Emergence of Ancient Israel," in *In Search of Pre-exilic Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. John Day; JSOTSup 406; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 41-64. Frendo's work is important in that he not only attempts a holistic approach to the topic (i.e. treating biblical, archaeological and extra-biblical evidence with comparable weight), but he argues that a great deal of the prevailing scholarship neglects to engage the biblical material critically enough when comparing it to extra-biblical and archaeological evidence. That is, only when we pay proper attention to the ideological dimensions and resultant hyperbolic reporting of events in the Bible will convincing synthesis occur. In the end, Frendo's evaluation of the evidence leads him to conclude that Israel's emergence involved mostly indigenous Canaanite hillside villagers but also "a small group of Hebrews [who] joined these villagers after having been freed from slavery in Egypt and after having picked up Yahwism in the desert areas to the south-east of Canaan. They entered the land (bringing the Yahwistic faith with them) mainly in a peaceful manner, though at times they took part in military attacks" (61).

Perhaps Judgment?

Goldingay acknowledges that a problem still exists.[53] As he notes, whether or not the *ḥerem* took place, the narrative stands and "continues to influence people. 'History is no longer with us. The narrative remains.'"[54] What then can we make of *ḥerem* as a divine command? Among interpretations aimed to answer that question, we should note one last idea before concluding. It is an idea that tends to circulate in conservative protestant circles, so at least my brief survey indicates. The idea is that God commanded the *ḥerem* as a punishment for the wickedness of the nations.[55] Within modern scholarship, its seems Calvin's articulation of this idea has been deeply influential; the nations to be destroyed are those who are being punished—these nations have transgressed so far from God's expectations that God uses Israel, though imperfect as well, to bring about his judgment.[56] Some interpreters, like Wright, emphasize that as Israel could likewise be placed under the *ḥerem* should they practice wickedness, it reveals "not an arbitrary act of inter-ethnic violence" nor one of "divine favoritism toward Israel." Rather, the *ḥerem* demonstrates "divine moral consistency in ultimately dealing with both groups in the same way."[57]

There is much that could be said here but we will limit our discussion as reasons for rejecting the idea become more apparent when looking directly at the text (see Chapter 6 above). But first, it must be said that such a view appears credible as a number of passages seem to say just this (e.g. Deut 9:4-5; 18:12).[58] With regard to

---

[53] *Gospel*, 489; "Justice," 177-78. Compare his earlier work, *Diversity*, 163-64.

[54] Goldingay, *Gospel*, 489. The embedded quotation, used also by Schwartz in our Chapter 2, is from Warrior, "Native," 280.

[55] Among interpreters, the words of Eichrodt (*Theology*, 1:140) are indicative:

> It is because the Canaanites are ripe for judgment and the Amalekites are cruel plunderers, or because the idolatry of their enemies might become an occasion of stumbling to Israel, that they are delivered to destruction. Thus the ban becomes the execution of YHWH's sentence, and by means of it he takes vengeance on his enemies; to deliver up to the ban and to punish are the same thing.

Compare the earlier work of Goldingay, *Diversity*, 143, 160, 163 (who is more careful in his later work: consult his "Justice," 169-87); and Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 132-33. See also the work of Levenson, "Counterpart," 248-49, 50, who shows the tendency of the HB to demonize the Canaanites, something he sees paralleled in the NT portrayal of Jews.

[56] See esp. Calvin, *Harmony*, 2:394-95. Texts used to support the idea often include Gen 9; 13:13; 15:16; 19; 34; Lev 18; etc. Calvin's admonition regarding the matter is worth recalling: "when [God] declares to us the just grounds of His vengeance, let us learn to subscribe to His decrees with the humility and modesty that becomes us, rather than to oppose them in vain, and indeed to our own confusion" (*Harmony*, 2:395).

[57] Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 133. Compare Goldingay, *Gospel*, 212. This idea will be challenged in our interpretation below.

[58] I use the language of 'seem to say' purposefully as the passages are not as straightforward as one might first imagine. The prime example of this is Deut 9:4-5, a passage often identified to show that God is giving the land to Israel because of the wickedness of the Canaanites. The passage, however,

Wright's idea, there is good reason to believe that Israel too could be placed under the *ḥerem* should they fail to obey the commandments YHWH is giving them (e.g. Deut 7:26; 13:12-18).[59] The story of Achan (Josh 7) reveals how those within Israel who transgress can be placed under the same treatment as those who are under the active *ḥerem*.[60] While such ideas may seem compelling, they are only compelling insofar as they are not taken as the *primary* reason for the *ḥerem*. It does appear that only those nations who are wicked will be placed under the *ḥerem* (though it never seems difficult to find them), but it is always a sort of secondary, or related, reason. Is it not reasonable to suppose that the nations God instructs Israel to leave in peace (Deut 2:3-5, 9, 16-20) were as wicked as the native Canaanites? Is it not plausible to suggest that there must be something to the fact that they were Abrahamic, or that God had allotted them specific land as a possession (ירשה —Deut 2:5, 9, 19)?[61] On a similar plane, there is little reason to believe that the nations of Canaan were much more wicked than other surrounding nations.[62] There is nothing to indicate that Israel is on a moral campaign to wipe out global idolatry; they are going in to possess a land promised to their foreparents on oath—the people of Canaan are in the 'wrong place at the wrong time'.[63] Furthermore, Israel as a people does not fare particularly well when it comes to wicked behaviour either. That God remains with Israel (rather than abandoning them) is complicated and relates intricately to Moses' intercession.[64] It must be remembered that a primary part of Moses' prayer was his insistence that God be faithful to *his* character and *promises*, those made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

---

argues more the case I maintain that wickedness of the nations is not the primary reason, but only secondary (or better, related). The translation of the NRSV is typical, and the NIV goes so far as to add a "No" (v. 4) where I think the text suggests a continuation of thought, best translated simply as 'and' (ו). The issues are conveniently laid out by McConville (*Deuteronomy*, 176, 182), and his argument there needs to be taken seriously. He reads all of v. 4 as the words of Israel, and shows that although the nations are wicked, the inverse is not true that Israel is innocent. It is not on account of this that YHWH's decision was made, "but only because of his ancient oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob..." (182).

Although I follow McConville's reading here, I do not find his overall views on *ḥerem*, the giving of the land, and election compelling, in fact I believe they run contrary to his work here (see e.g. his *Deuteronomy*, 90-91 where he calls the giving of land ethical, not cultic). See further Chapter 6.

[59] And as MacDonald notes, in the case of Deut 13:12-18 the "application of the *ḥerem* ... is strikingly harsher..." (*Meaning*, 115).

[60] Lohfink, "חָרַם," 5:185, points to this story and that of the Amalekites in his discussion on *ḥerem* as punishment.

[61] ירשה is used here with regard to Esau, Moab and Ammon, a term otherwise reserved in the OT for God's allotment to Israel (Deut 2:12; 3:20; Josh 1:15; 12:6,7; 2 Chr 20:11).

[62] Compare the discussion in MacDonald, *Meaning*, 116.

[63] The idea is similar to Goldingay, "Justice," 183-84.

[64] See Widmer, *Moses*.

(see Exod 32:11-14; Num 14:13-21; Deut 9:25-29). In so reminding God of these things (i.e. 'praying them back') God agrees to stay with his people.[65]

Conclusion

We have surveyed only some aspects of OT *ḥerem*, the problem of *ḥerem* as a divine command, and possible solutions to the theological problem. We have noticed the deeply religious nature of the *ḥerem*, that often it involved an irrevocable giving up of something valuable to the conquering army, and that in a few instances it was commanded by God. We have noted problems in solutions to the theological problem of *ḥerem*, from the idea that the *ḥerem* never happened to the idea that God did not really command it to the idea that God commanded it because he is a God that gets his hands dirty. All of the above seems to read something into the text that is not present. The OT overall sees no real theological problem with a good God commanding the slaughter of people, even though there are hints that the people itself had reservations about the action at times. The real concern of the text, to my mind, is the fulfillment of God's blessings to Abraham, one of which included a land that his descendants were to possess but was populated (I develop this in Chapter 6). If *ḥerem* and election are as intricately linked as I contend in chapter six, however, it is important to know what the action entailed, however repugnant to the modern reader. To devote a people or nations to destruction is something we will likely never find acceptable (with good reason). The time and circumstances, *from the story's point of view*, required the action, and brought about God's long promised land. Perhaps our only consolation is that the action of *herem* itself is never celebrated or commanded as an enduring action of God's people.

---

[65] The idea of "praying back" is Widmer's (*Moses*, ch. 11).

bibliography

Ackerman, James S. "Numbers." Pages 78-91 in *The Literary Guide to the Bible.* Edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987.

Ackerman, James S. "The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story." Pages 74-119 in *Literary Interpretation of Biblical Narrative.* Edited by Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, James S. Ackerman, and Thayer S. Warshaw. Volume 1. Nashville: Abingdon, 1974.

Alexander, Patrick H., John F. Kutsko, James D. Ernest, Shirley A. Decker-Lucke, and David L. Petersen, eds. *The SBL Handbook of Style.* Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999.

Alexander, T. Desmond. "Are the Wife/Sister Incidents of Genesis Literary Compositional Variants?" *Vetus Testamentum* 42 (1992): 145-53.

Allen, Ronald B. "The Theology of the Balaam Oracles." Pages 79-119 in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg.* Edited by John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg. Chicago: Moody Press, 1981.

Allison, Dale C. "What Was the Star that Guided the Magi?" *Bible Review* 9:D (1993): 20-24, 63.

Alter, Robert. *Genesis: Translation and Commentary.* New York: W. W. Norton, 1996.

Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative.* London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary.* New York: Norton & Co., 2004.

Anderson, A. A. *2 Samuel.* Word Biblical Commentary 11. Dallas: Word, 1989.

Ashley, Timothy R. *The Book of Numbers.* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

Barber, Katherine, ed. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary.* Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Barré, Michael L. "The Portrait of Balaam in Numbers 22-24." *Interpretation* 51 (1997): 254-266.

Barr, James. *The Semantics of Biblical Language*. London: Oxford University Press, 1961.

Baskin, Judith R. *Pharaoh's Counsellors: Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition*. Brown Judaic Studies 47. Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983.

Ben-Dasan, Isaiah. *The Japanese and the Jews*. Translated by Richard L. Gage. New York: Weatherhill, 1972.

Berger, David. "Jewish-Christian Relations: A Jewish Perspective." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20 (1983): 5-32.

Bergman, J., H. Ringgren, and H. Seebass. "בָּחַר." Pages 73-87 in vol. 2 of *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974.

Biddle, Mark E. "The 'Endangered Ancestress' and Blessing for the Nations." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990): 599-611.

Bimson, John. "Old Testament and Sociology." Pages 125-55 in *Interpreting the Old Testament: Principles and Steps*. Edited by Craig C. Broyles. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.

Blenkinsopp, Joseph. "YHWH and Other Deities: Conflict and Accommodation in the Religion of Israel." *Interpretation* 40 (1986): 354-66.

Blumenthal, David R. "Confronting the Character of God: Text and Praxis." Pages 38-51 in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*. Edited by Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998.

Blum, Erhard. *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*. Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 57. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984.

Borowitz, Eugene B. "Recent Historic Events: Jewish and Christian Interpretations." *Theological Studies* 44 (1983): 221-40.

Brekelmans, C. "חָרָם." Pages 474-77 in vol. 2 of *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. 3 Volumes. Edited by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997.

Brettler, Marc Z. "A 'Literary Sermon' in Deuteronomy 4." Pages 33-50 in *'A Wise and Discerning Mind': Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long*. Edited by Saul M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley. Brown Judaic Studies 325. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2000.

Brown, Michael L. "רָפָאִים." Pages 1173-80 in vol. 3 of *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 5 Volumes. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Brueggemann, Walter. Review of R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus*. *Theology Today* 58 (2001): 257-58.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Deuteronomy*. Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries. Nashville: Abingdon, 2001.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997.

Brueggemann, Walter. *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*. Overtures to Biblical Theology. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977.

Brueggemann, Walter. "Election." Pages 61-64 in *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002.

Brueggemann, Walter. "'Exodus' in the Plural (Amos 9:7)." Pages 15-34 in *Many Voices, One God: Being Faithful in a Pluralistic World: In Honor of Shirley Guthrie*. Edited by Walter Brueggemann and George W. Stroup. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998.

Braulik, Georg. "Deuteronomy and the Birth of Monotheism." Pages 99-130 in *The Theology of Deuteronomy*. Translated by Ulrika Lindblad. Bibal Collected Essays 2. N. Richland Hills, Tex.: Bibal Press, 1994.

Braaten, Carl E. and Robert W. Jenson, eds. *Jews and Christians: People of God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Butler, Trent C. *Joshua*. Word Biblical Commentary 7. Dallas: Word, 1984.

Byron, John. *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity: A Traditio-Historical & Exegetical Examination*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2 Reihe 162. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003.

Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*. Translated by John King. 2 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948.

Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*. Translated by Charles William Bingham. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

Carr, David M. Review of Keith N Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in its Narrative Context*. *Review of Biblical Literature* 8 (2004).

Carr, David M. *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996.

Carson, D. A. *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*. London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981.

Cassuto, U. *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*. Translated by Israel Abrahams.

Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967.

Cassuto, U. *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*. Translated by Israel Abrahams. 2 vols. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964.

Childs, Brevard S. *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970.

Childs, Brevard S. *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible*. London: SCM, 1992.

Childs, Brevard S. *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*. London: SCM, 1985.

Childs, Brevard S. *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*. Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster, 1974.

Childs, Brevard S. "Birth of Moses." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965): 109-22.

Christensen, Duane L. *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9*. Word Biblical Commentary 6a. 2nd ed. Dallas: Word, 2001.

Clements, Ronald E. *God's Chosen People: A Theological Interpretation of the Book of Deuteronomy*. London: SCM, 1968.

Clines, David J. A. *The Bible and the Modern World*. The Biblical Seminar 51. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997.

Clines, David J. A. "The Ancestor in Danger: But Not the Same Danger." Pages 67-84 in *What Does Eve Do to Help? and Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 94. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990.

Clines, David J. A. "What Happens in Genesis." Pages 49-66 in *What Does Eve Do to Help? and Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 94. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990.

Clark, Ira. "Balaam's Ass: Suture or Structure?" Pages 137-44 in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*. Edited by Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis and James S. Ackerman. Nashville: Abingdon, 1982.

Cohen, Shaye J. D. *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Cohn, Haim Hermann. "Ḥerem." Pages 350-55 in vol. 8 of *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Jerusalem: Keter, 1971.

Cohn-Sherbok, Dan. *Judaism*. Religions of the World. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999.

Collins, John J. "The Exodus and Biblical Theology." Pages 247-61 in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*. Edited by Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky. Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 8. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000.

Coats, George W. "2 Samuel 12:1-7a." *Interpretation* 40 (1986): 170-75.

Coats, George W. "Balaam: Sinner or Saint?" Pages 56-62 in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature.* Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985.

Coats, George W. "The Birth Tale and the Moses-Midianite Tradition." Pages 43-56 in *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988.

Coats, George W. "The Way of Obedience: Traditio-Historical and Hermeneutical Reflections on the Balaam Story." *Semeia* 24 (1982): 53-79.

Coats, George. W. "A Threat to the Host." Pages 71-81 in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature.* Edited by George. W. Coats. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 35. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985.

Coats, George. W. "The Curse in God's Blessing: Gen 12,1-4a in the Structure and Theology of the Yahwist." Pages 31-41 in *Die Botschaft und die Boten.* Edited by J. Jeremias and L. Perlitt. Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981.

Crenshaw, James L., ed. *Theodicy in the Old Testament.* Issues in Religion and Theology 4. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.

Craigie, Peter C. *The Book of Deuteronomy.* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976.

Craigie, Peter C. *The Problem of War in the Old Testament.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.

Dahood, Mitchell. "Abraham's Reply in Genesis 20:11." *Biblica* 61 (1980): 90-91.

Dennis, Trevor. "Unsung Heroines: The Women of Exodus 1-4." Pages 84-114, 185-88 in *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament.* London: SPCK, 1994.

Dijkstra, Meindert. "Is Balaam Also Among the Prophets?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 43-64.

Dijkstra, Meindert. "The Geography of the Story of Balaam: Synchronic Reading as a Help to Date a Biblical Text." Pages 72-97 in *Synchronic or Diachronic:A Debate on Method in Old Testament Exegesis.* Edited by Johannes C. de Moor. Leiden: Brill, 1995.

Driver, S. R. *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament.* New York: Scribner, 1891.

Driver, S. R. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy.* The International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895.

Driver, S. R. *The Book of Genesis.* Westminster Commentaries. 4th ed. London: Methuen, 1905.

Drazin, Israel. *Targum Onkelos to Deuteronomy: An English Translation of the Text*

with Analysis and Commentary. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982.

Durham, John I. *Exodus*. Word Biblical Commentary 3. Dallas: Word, 1987.

Eichler, Barry L. "On Reading Genesis 12:10-20." Pages 23-38 in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*. Edited by Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997.

Eichrodt, Walther. *Theology of the Old Testament*. 2 vols. Old Testament Library. Translated by J. A. Baker. London: SCM, 1961-1967.

Exum, J. Cheryl. "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10." *Semeia* 28 (1993): 63-82.

Exum, J. Cheryl. "Second Thoughts About Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8-2.10." Pages 75-87 in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. Edited by Athalya Brenner. Feminist Companion to the Bible 6. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994.

Fabry, H. J. and H. Lamberty-Zielinski. "ערב." Pages 331-34 in vol. 11 of *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

Feldman, Louis H. "Josephus' Portrait of Balaam." *Studia Philonica Annual* 5 (1993): 48-83.

Fishbane, Michael. "Ancient Wisdom and Modern Man - with Special Reference to the Hebrew Bible." *Christian Jewish Relations* 20:2 (1987): 37-48.

Freeman, Gordon M. "Wives and Sisters: A Contemporary Exegesis." *Conservative Judaism* 44 (1992): 50-55.

Frendo, Anthony J. "Back to Basics: A Holistic Approach to the Problem of the Emergence of Ancient Israel." Pages 41-64 in *In Search of Pre-exilic Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*. Edited by John Day. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 406. London: T&T Clark, 2004.

Fretheim, Terence E. *Exodus*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: John Knox, 1991.

Friedman, Richard Elliott. *Who Wrote the Bible?* London: Jonathan Cape, 1987.

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, and Michael A. Signer, eds. *Christianity in Jewish Terms*. Theology in a Postcritical Key. Oxford: Westview Press, 2000.

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva, David Novak, Peter Ochs, and Michael Signer. "Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Jon D. Levenson & Critics." *Commentary* 113, no. 4 (2002): 8-21.

Gelb, I. J. "Prisoners of War in Early Mesopotamia." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*

32 (1973): 70-98.

Goldenberg, Robert. *The Nations that Know Thee Not: Ancient Jewish Attitudes Towards Other Religions*. New York: NYU Press, 1998.

Goldingay, John. *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003.

Goldingay, John. *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.

Goldingay, John. "Justice and Salvation for Israel and Canaan." Pages 169-87 in *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium: Form, Concept, and Theological Perspective*. Edited by Wonil Kim, Deborah Ellens, Michael Floyd, and Marvin A. Sweeney. Studies in Antiquity & Christianity 1. Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 2000.

Goldin, Judah. "In Defense of Balak: Not Entirely Midrash." *Judaism* 40 (1991): 455-60.

Goodman, Martin. *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

Goodnick, Benjamin. "Balaam: Some Aspects of His Character." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 24 (1996): 167-72.

Gowan, Donald E. *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994.

Greenberg, Moshe. "Ḥerem." Pages 344-50 in vol. 8 of *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Jerusalem: Keter, 1971.

Greenberg, Moshe. "Mankind, Israel and the Nations in Hebraic Heritage." Pages 15-40 in *No Man Is Alien: Essays on the Unity of Mankind*. Edited by J. Robert Nelson. Leiden: Brill, 1971.

Gruber, Mayer I. "The Many Faces of Hebrew נשא פנים ›lift up the face‹." *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95 (1983): 252-60.

Grüneberg, Keith N. *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in its Narrative Context*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 332. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003.

Gray, George Buchanan. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*. International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912.

Gunkel, Hermann. *Genesis*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997.

Haley, John Owen. *The Spirit of Japanese Law*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.

Harrisville, Roy A. "What I Believe My Old Schoolmate Is Up To." Pages 7-25 in

Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs. Edited by Christopher R. Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Harrisville, Roy A. and Walter Sundberg. *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Hartley, John E. *Genesis*. New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament 1. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000.

Hasel, Gerhard F. "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology." *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974): 81-102.

Hackett, Jo Ann. "Balaam." Pages 569-72 in vol. 1 of *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 Volumes. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Hackett, Jo Ann. "Some Observations on the Balaam Tradition at Deir 'Alla." *Biblical Archaeologist* 49 (1986): 216-22.

Heinzerling, Rüdiger. "On the Interpretation Of The Census Lists by C. J. Humphreys and G. E. Mendenhall." *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000): 250-52.

Heiser, Michael S. "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (January-March 2001): 52-74.

Helyer, Larry R. "The Separation of Abram and Lot: Its Significance in the Patriarchal Narratives." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26 (1983): 77-88.

Hepner, Gershon. "Abraham's Incestuous Marriage with Sarah: A Violation of the Holiness Code." *Vetus Testamentum* 53 (2003): 143-55.

Hertz, J. H. *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Exodus*. London: Oxford University Press, 1930.

Hoffmeier, James K. "Moses and the Exodus." Pages 135-63 in *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Hoffmeier, James K. "The Wives' Tales of Genesis 12, 20 & 26 and the Covenants at Beer-Sheba." *Tyndale Bulletin* 43 (1992): 81-99.

Hoffman, Yair. "The Deuteronomistic Concept of the Herem." *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 111 (1999): 196-210.

Hoftijzer, Jacob. "Prophet Balaam in a 6th Century Aramaic Inscription." *Biblical Archaeologist* 39 (1976): 11-17.

Horbury, William. "Extirpation and Excommunication." *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985): 13-38.

Houten, Christiana van. *The Alien in Israelite Law*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 107. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991.

Houtman, Cornelis. *Exodus*. 3 vols. Historical Commentary on the Old Testament.

Translated by Johan Rebel and Sierd Woudstra. Kampen: Kok, 1993.

Hughes, Paul Edward. "Moses' Birth Story: A Biblical Matrix for Prophetic Messianism." Pages 10-22 in *Eschatology, Messianism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Edited by Craig A. Evans and Peter A. Flint. Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.

Humphreys, Colin J. "The Numbers In The Exodus From Egypt: A Further Appraisal." *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000): 323-28.

Humphreys, Colin J. "The Number Of People In The Exodus From Egypt: Decoding Mathematically The Very Large Numbers In Numbers I And XXVI." *Vetus Testamentum* 48 (1998): 196-213.

Ishida, Tomoo. "The Structure and Historical Implications of the Lists of Pre-Israelite Nations." *Biblica* 60 (1979): 461-90.

Jackson, Melissa. "Lot's Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 98 (2002): 29-46.

Jacob, Benno. *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus*. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1992.

Jost, Franklyn L. "Abimelech." Pages 6-8 in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003.

Kaminsky, Joel S. *Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 196. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.

Kaminsky, Joel S. *The Chosen: Biblical Portraits of Divine Election*. Nashville: Abingdon, forthcoming.

Kaminsky, Joel S. "Attempting the Impossible: Eliminating Election from the Jewish Liturgy." *Midstream* 51, no. 1 (2005): 23-27.

Kaminsky, Joel S. "A Light to the Nations? Was there Mission and/or Conversion in the Hebrew Bible?" Paper presented at McMaster University Colloquium 'A Covenant to the People, A Light to the Nations': Universalism, Exceptionalism, and the Problem of Chosenness in Jewish Thought, Hamilton, Ontario, 18 May 2005.

Kaminsky, Joel S. "Did Election Imply the Mistreatment of Non-Israelites?" *Harvard Theological Review* 96 (2003): 397-425.

Kaminsky, Joel S. "Some Jewish Theological Reflections on Gerstenberger's Sociological Approach to the Hebrew Bible." *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 25 (2003): 95-99.

Kaminsky, Joel S. "The Concept of Election and Second Isaiah: Recent Literature." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 31 (Winter 2001): 135-44.

Kaminsky, Joel S. "The Sins of the Fathers: A Theological Investigation of the Biblical Tension Between Corporate and Individualized Retribution." *Judaism* 46 (1997): 319-32.

Kaminsky, Joel S. "Wrestling with Israel's Election: A Jewish Reaction to Rolf Knierim's Biblical Theology." Pages 252-62 in *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium: Form, Concept, and Theological Perspective*. Edited by Wonil Kim, Deborah Ellens, Michael Floyd, and Marvin A. Sweeney. Studies in Antiquity & Christianity 1. Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 2000.

Kaminsky, Joel S. and Anne Stewart. "God of All the World: Universalism and Developing Monotheism in Isaiah 40-66." *Harvard Theological Review* 99 (2006): 139–63.

Kaufman, Yehezkel. *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*. Translated by Moshe Greenberg. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961.

Keil, C. F. and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*. Volume 1 of *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*. Translated by James Martin. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973.

Kellenberger, Edgar. "Jahwes unerwarteter Widerstand gegen seinen Beauftragten: Erwägungen zur Episode von Bileams Eselin (Num 22:22-35)." *Theologische Zeitschrift* 45 (1989): 69-72.

Kessler, Martin and Karel Deurloo. *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginnings*. New York: Paulist Press, 2004.

Kidner, Derek. *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1967.

Knapp, Dietrich. *Deuteronomium 4: Literarische Analyse und theologische Interpretation*. Göttinger theologische Arbeiten 35. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987.

Koch, Klaus. *Growth of the Biblical Tradition: The Form-Critical Method*. Translated by S. M. Cupitt. London: Black, 1969.

Layton, Scott C. "Whence Comes Balaam? Num 22,5 Revisited." *Biblica* 73 (1992): 32-61.

Lemche, Niels Peter. *The Canaanites and Their Land: The Tradition of the Canaanites*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 110. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991.

Levenson, Jon D. Review of Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament*. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 306-08.

Levenson, Jon D. Review of Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of 'Monotheism'*. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58 (2005): 237-40.

Levenson, Jon D. *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The*

Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

Levenson, Jon D. *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993.

Levenson, Jon D. "Exodus and Liberation." Pages 127-59 in *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993.

Levenson, Jon D. "How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue." *Commentary* 112, no. 5 (2001): 31-37.

Levenson, Jon D. "Is Brueggemann Really a Pluralist?" *Harvard Theological Review* 93 (2000): 265-94.

Levenson, Jon D. "Is There a Counterpart in the Hebrew Bible to New Testament Antisemitism." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22 (1985): 242-60.

Levenson, Jon D. "Liberation Theology and the Exodus." Pages 215-30 in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*. Edited by Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky. Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 8. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000.

Levenson, Jon D. "The Conversion of Abraham to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam." Pages 3-40 in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*. Edited by Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman. Supplements to the Journal of the Study of Judaism 83. Leiden: Brill, 2004.

Levenson, Jon D. "The Exodus and Biblical Theology: A Rejoinder to John J. Collins." Pages 263-75 in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*. Edited by Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky. Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 8. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000.

Levenson, Jon D. "The Perils of Engaged Scholarship: A Rejoinder to Jorge Pixley." Pages 239-46 in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*. Edited by Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky. Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 8. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000.

Levenson, Jon D. "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism." Pages 143-69 in *Ethnicity and the Bible*. Edited by Mark G. Brett. Biblical Interpretation Series 19. Leiden: Brill, 1996.

Levenson, Jon D. "Who Inserted the Book of the Torah?" *Harvard Theological Review* 68 (1975): 203-33.

Levenson, Jon D. "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology." Pages 33-61 in *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993.

Levine, Baruch A. *Numbers 21-36: A New Translation with Introduction and*

Commentary. Anchor Bible 4a. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Lilley, J. P. U. "Understanding the Ḥerem." *Tyndale Bulletin* 22 (1993): 169-77.

Lind, Millard C. *YHWH is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel*. Scottdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1980.

Liver, Jacob. "Wars of Mesha, King of Moab." *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 99 (1967): 14-31.

Lohfink, Norbert. *Das Hauptgebot: Eine Untersuchung literarischer Einleitungstragen zu Dtn 5-11*. Analecta biblica 20. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963.

Lohfink, Norbert. "חָרַם ḥāram; חֵרֶם ḥērem." Pages 180-99 in vol. 5 of *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986.

Lohfink, Norbert. "Verkündigung des Hauptgebots in der jüngsten Schicht des Deuteronomiums (Dt 4,1-40)." Pages 167-91 in *Studien zum Deuteronomium und zur deuteronomistischen Literatur 1*. Stuttgarter biblische Aufsatzbände 8. Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1990.

Mainelli, Helen Kenik. "Numbers." Pages 144-95 in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary: Old Testament*. Edited by Dianne Bergant. Collegeville Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992.

Mann, Thomas W. *Deuteronomy*. Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995.

Margaliot, Meshullam. "Literary, Historical and Religious Aspects of the Balaam Narrative, Numbers 22-24." Pages 75-82 in *Proceedings of the 10th World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division A*. Edited by David Assaf. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990.

Margaliot, Meshullam. "The Connection of Balaam Narrative with the Pentateuch." Pages 279-90 in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*. Edited by Malka Jagendorf and Avigdor Shinan. Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977.

Marshall, Paul, with Lela Gilbert. *Heaven is Not My Home: Living in the Now of God's Creation*. Nashville: Word, 1998.

Martens, Elmer A. "תעה." Pages 319-20 in vol. 4 of *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 5 Volumes. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Martens, Elmer A. "Eichrodt, Walther (1890-1978)." Pages 482-87 in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*. Edited by Donald K. McKim. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998.

Martin-Achard, Robert. "La signification théologique de l'élection d'Israël." *Cahiers de la revue de théologie et de philosophie* 11 (1984): 81-89.

Marcus, David. *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible.* Brown Judaic Studies 301. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995.

Matthews, Victor H. "Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 12 (1985): 185-95.

Mattingly, Gerald L. "Moabite Religion and the Mesha Inscription." Pages 211-38 in *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab.* Edited by Andrew Dearman. Archaeology and Biblical Studies 2. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.

Mayes, A. D. H. "Deuteronomy 4 and the Literary Criticism of Deuteronomy." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981): 23-51.

MacDonald, Nathan. *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of 'Monotheism'.* Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2. Reihe 1. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003.

MacDonald, Nathan. "The Literary Criticism and Rhetorical Logic of Deuteronomy I-IV." *Vetus Testamentum* 56 (2006): 203-24.

Macchi, Jean Daniel. "La naissance de Moïse (Exode 2/1-10)." *Études théologiques et religieuses* 69 (1994): 397-403.

McConville, J. G. *Deuteronomy.* Apollos Old Testament Commentary 5. Leicester: Apollos, 2002.

McConville, J. G. *Grace in the End: A Study in Deuteronomic Theology.* Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.

McConville, J. G. "The Shadow of the Curse: A Key to Old Testament Theology." *Evangel* 3, no. 1 (1985): 2-5.

McEntire, M. "A Response To Colin J. Humphreys's 'The Number of People in the Exodus From Egypt: Decoding Mathematically the Very Large Numbers in Numbers I And XXVI'." *Vetus Testamentum* 49 (1999): 262-64.

McEvenue, Sean E. "The Elohist at Work." *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 96 (1984): 315-32.

Mendenhall, G. E. "Election." Pages 76-82 in vol. 2 of *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible.* 4 Volumes. Edited by George Arthur Buttrick. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.

Merrill, Eugene H. "יָרַד." Pages 534-35 in vol. 2 of *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis.* 5 Volumes. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Merwe, Christo H. J. van der, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze. *A Biblical Reference Grammar.* Biblical Languages: Hebrew 3. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.

Milgrom, Jacob. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers.* Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990.

Milgrom, Jacob. "Numbers." Pages 1146-55 in vol. 4 of *Anchor Bible Dictionary.* 6

Volumes. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Milgrom, Jacob. "On Decoding Very Large Numbers." *Vetus Testamentum* 49 (1999): 131-32.

Miller, Patrick D. *Deuteronomy*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: John Knox, 1990.

Miller, Patrick D. *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*. Harvard Semitic Monographs 5. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973.

Miller, Patrick D. "God the Warrior: A Problem of Biblical Interpretation and Apologetics." *Interpretation* 19 (1965): 39-46.

Miller, Patrick D. "God's Other Stories: On the Margins of Deuteronomistic Theology." Pages 593-602 in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 267. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

Miller, Patrick D. "The Wilderness Journey in Deuteronomy: Style, Structure, and Theology in Deuteronomy 1-3." Pages 572-92 in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 267. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

Miscall, Peter D. *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative*. Semeia Studies. Fortress: Philadelphia, 1983.

Moore, Michael S. *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development*. Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 113. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990.

Moore, Michael S. "Another Look at Balaam." *Revue biblique* 97 (1990): 359-78.

Moore, Michael S. "Balaam the 'Prophet?'." *Restoration Quarterly* 39 (1997): 101-06.

Moberly, R. W. L. Review of Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*. *Journal of Theological Studies* 55 (2004): 158-62.

Moberly, R. W. L. *At the Mountain of God : Story and Theology in Exodus 32-34*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 22. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983.

Moberly, R. W. L. *Prophecy and Discernment*. Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine 14. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Moberly, R. W. L. *The Bible, Theology and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus*. Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine 5. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Moberly, R. W. L. *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism*. Overtures to Biblical Theology. Minneapolis: Fortress,

1992.

Moberly, R. W. L. "Genesis 12-50." Pages 100-179 in *Genesis and Exodus*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001.

Moberly, R. W. L. "How May We Speak of God? A Reconsideration of the Nature of Biblical Theology." *Tyndale Bulletin* 53 (2002): 177-202.

Moberly, R. W. L. "Is Election Bad for You?" in *With Mighty Wrestlings I Have Wrestled: A European Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*. Edited by Jill Middlemas and David J. A. Clines. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, forthcoming.

Moberly, R. W. L. "Is Monotheism Bad for You: Some Reflections on God, the Bible and Life in the Light of Regina Schwartz's The Curse of Cain." in *The God of Israel: Studies of an Inimitable Deity*. Edited by Robert P. Gordon. University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 64. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Moberly, R. W. L. "On Learning to be a True Prophet: The Story of Balaam and His Ass." Pages 1-17 in *New Heaven and New Earth: Prophecy and the Millennium. Essays in Honour of Anthony Gelston*. Edited by Peter J. Harland and C. T. R. Hayward. Leiden: Brill, 1999.

Moberly, R. W. L. "'God is Not a Human That He Should Repent' (Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29)." Pages 112-23 in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*. Edited by Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998.

Moberly, R. W. L. "The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah." *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988): 302-23.

Moberly, R. W. L. "Toward an Interpretation of the Shema." Pages 124-44 in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*. Edited by Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Mullen Jr., E. Theodore. "Divine Assembly." Pages 214-17 in vol. 2 of *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 Volumes. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Mullen Jr., E. Theodore. "Hosts, Host of Heaven." Pages 301-04 in vol. 3 of *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 Volumes. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Muchiki, Yoshiyuki. *Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic*. Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 173. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999.

Nelson, Richard D. *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*. Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002.

Nelson, Richard D. *The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 18. Sheffield: JSOT Press,

1981.

Nelson, Richard D. "Ḥerem and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience." Pages 39-54 in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature: Festschrift for C.H.W. Brekelmans*. Edited by Marc Vervenne and Johan Lust. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 133. Louvain: Peeters Press, 1997.

Niditch, Susan. *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

Nicholson, Ernest W. *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Nicole, Emile. "בחר." Pages 638-42 in vol. 1 of *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 5 Volumes. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Novak, David. *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Novak, David. *The Election of Israel: The Idea of a Chosen People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Novak, David. *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: An Historical and Constructive Study of the Noahide Laws*. Toronto Studies in Theology 14. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983.

Olson, Dennis T. *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading*. Overtures to Biblical Theology. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994.

Olson, Dennis T. *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch*. Brown Judaic Studies 71. Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985.

Olson, Dennis T. "Negotiating Boundaries: The Old and New Generations and the Theology of Numbers." *Interpretation* 51 (1997): 229-40.

Olson, Dennis T. "Numbers, Book of." Pages 611-18 in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 2003.

O'Connell, Robert H. "Deuteronomy VII:1-26: Asymmetrical Concentricity and the Rhetoric of Conquest." *Vetus Testamentum* 42 (1992): 248-65.

Parker, Isaiah. "The Way of God and the Way of Balaam." *Expository Times* 17 (1905): 45.

Patrick, Dale. "Election, Old Testament." Pages 434-41 in vol. 2 of *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 Volumes. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Patterson, Richard D. "The Old Testament Use of an Archetype: The Trickster." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (1999): 385-394.

Petersen, David L. "A Thrice-Told Tale: Genre, Theme, and Motif." *Biblical Research* 18 (1973): 30-43.

Pietersma, Albert. "Jannes and Jambres." Pages 638-40 in vol. 3 of *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 Volumes. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Pixley, Jorge V. *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987.

Pixley, Jorge V. "History and Particularity in Reading the Hebrew Bible: A Response to Jon D. Levenson." Pages 231-37 in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*. Edited by Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky. Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 8. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000.

Plastaras, James. *The God of Exodus: The Theology of the Exodus Narratives*. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1966.

Preuss, Horst Dietrich. *Old Testament Theology*. Translated by Leo G. Perdue. 2 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995.

Pritchard, James B. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.

Price, Robert M. "An Evangelical Version of the 'Double Covenant': New Possibilities for Jewish-Fundamentalist Dialogue." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20 (1983): 33-42.

Propp, William H. C. *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible 2. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

Rad, Gerhard von. *Deuteronomy*. Old Testament Library. Translated by Dorothea Barton. London: SCM, 1966.

Rad, Gerhard von. *Genesis: A Commentary*. Old Testament Library. 2nd ed. Translated by John H. Marks. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961.

Rad, Gerhard von. *Holy War in Ancient Israel*. Translated by Marva J. Dawn. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.

Rad, Gerhard von. *Studies in Deuteronomy*. Studies in Biblical Theology. Translated by David Stalker. London: SCM, 1953.

Rabinowitz, Jacob J. "The 'Great Sin' in Ancient Egyptian Marriage Contracts." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 18 (1959): 73.

Rendsburg, Gary A. "An Additional Note to Two Recent Articles On The Number Of People in The Exodus From Egypt and The Large Numbers in Numbers I and XXVI." *Vetus Testamentum* 51 (2001): 392-96.

Rendtorff, Rolf. *Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology*. Overtures to Biblical Theology. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis:

Fortress, 1993.

Rendtorff, Rolf. *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament.* Tools for Biblical Study 7. Translated by David E. Orton. Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2005.

Rendtorff, Rolf. "נָבִיא in the Old Testament." Pages 796-812 in vol. 6 of *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.* 10 Volumes. Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968.

Rendtorff, Rolf. "Die Erwählung Israels als Thema der deuteronomischen Theologie." Pages 75-86 in *Die Botschaft und die Boten: Festschrift für Hans Walter Wolff zum 70. Geburtstag.* Edited by J. Jeremias and L. Perlitt. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981.

Rendtorff, Rolf. "The GĒR in the Priestly Laws of the Pentateuch." Pages 77-87 in *Ethnicity and the Bible.* Edited by Mark G. Brett. Biblical Interpretation Series 19. Leiden: Brill, 1996.

Rodkinson, Michael L. (translator). *New Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Original Text Edited, Corrected, Formulated, and Translated into English.* 10 vols. Boston: Talmud Society, 1903-18.

Rofé, Alexander. "The Laws of Warfare in the Book of Deuteronomy: Their Origins, Intent and Positivity." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32 (1985): 23-44.

Ronning, John. "The Naming of Isaac: The Role of the Wife/Sister Episodes in the Redaction of Genesis." *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991): 1-27.

Rosenbaum, M. and A. M. Silbermann, eds. *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary: Genesis.* Louisville: Shapiro, Vallentine & Co., 1946.

Rosenbaum, M. and A. M. Silbermann. *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary: Exodus.* London: Shapiro, Vallentine & Co., 1946.

Rowley, H. H. *The Biblical Doctrine of Election.* London: Lutterworth, 1950.

Robinson, Bernard P. "The Story of Jephthah and his Daughter: Then and Now." *Biblica* 85 (2004): 331-48.

Rösel, Martin. "Wie einer vom Propheten zum Verführer wurde: Tradition und Rezeption der Bileamgestalt." *Biblica* 80 (1999): 506-24.

Sanders, E. P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism.* London: SCM, 1977.

Sandmel, David F., Rosann M. Catalano, and Christopher M. Leighton, eds. *Irreconcilable Differences: A Learning Resource for Jews and Christians.* Oxford: Westview Press, 2001.

Sarna, Nahum M. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus.* Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991.

Sarna, Nahum M. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis.* Philadelphia: Jewish

Publication Society, 1989.

Satterthwaite, Philip E. and David W. Baker. "Nations of Canaan." Pages 596-605 in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003.

Sacks, Jonathan. "Righteousness Knows No Racial or Religious Boundaries." *The Times* (24 May 2003): 48.

Sacks, Jonathan. "Values We Share." Pages 115-18 in *Celebrating Life: Finding Happiness in Unexpected Places*. London: Continuum, 2000.

Schmidt, Ludwig. "Bileam: vom Seher zum Propheten Jahwes: die literarischen Schichten der Bileam-Perikope (Num 22-24)." Pages 333-51 in *Gott und Mensch im Dialog: Festschrift fur Otto Kaiser zum 80. Geburtstag*. Edited by Markus Witte. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 345 1. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004.

Schwartz, Regina M. *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Schwarz, Günther. "«Begünstige nicht ...»? (Leviticus 19, 15b)." *Biblische Zeitschrift* 19 (1975): 100.

Schaper, Joachim. "A Grammatology of Israelite Religion." Paper presented at the University of Durham Old Testament Seminar, Durham, England, 14 March 2006.

Scharbert, Josef. "קלל." Pages 37-44 in vol. 13 of *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.

Scobie, Charles H. H. *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Seebass, Horst. "À titre d'exemple: réflexions sur Gen 16 // 21,8-21 et 20,1-18 // 26,1-33." Pages 215-30 in *Le Pentateuque en question*. Edited by Albert De Pury. Genève: Labor et Fides, 1989.

Seebass, Horst. "Zur literarischen Gestalt der Bileam-Perikope." *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 107 (1995): 409-19.

Seidl, T. "רָעֵב." Pages 533-43 in vol. 13 of *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.

Shafer, B. E. "The Root bḥr and Pre-Exilic Concepts of Chosenness in the Hebrew Bible." *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89 (1977): 20-42.

Siebert-Hommes, Jopie. "But if She Be a Daughter ... She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1-2." Pages 62-74 in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. Edited by Athalya Brenner. Feminist Companion to the Bible 6. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994.

Skinner, John. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*. International Critical Commentary. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930.

Smith, Gary V. "חָלַם, חֲלוֹם." Pages 153-55 in vol. 2 of *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 5 Volumes. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Smith, Mark S. *The Early History of God: YHWH and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. The Biblical Resource Series. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Sohn, Seock-Tae. *The Divine Election of Israel*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.

Speiser, E. A. *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*. Anchor Bible 1. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964.

Stern, Philip D. *The Biblical Ḥerem: A Window on Israel's Religious Experience*. Brown Judaic Studies 211. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991.

Stansell, Gary. "The Gift in Ancient Israel." *Semeia* 87 (2001): 65-90.

Talmon, Shemaryahu. "Particularity and Universality: A Jewish View." Pages 36-42 in *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Six Years of Christian-Jewish Consultations*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975.

Tanner, Beth Laneel. "Deuteronomy 10:12-22." *Interpretation* 55 (2001): 60-63.

Taylor, John B. *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1969.

Tigay, Jeffrey H. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996.

Tov, Emanuel. "The Rabbinic Tradition Concerning the 'Alterations' Inserted into the Greek Pentateuch and Their Relation to the Original Text of the LXX." *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 15 (1984): 65-89.

Trible, Phyllis. "The Pilgrim Bible on a Feminist Journey." *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 11 (1990): 232-39.

Turner, Laurence A. *Genesis*. Readings: A New Biblical Commentary. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

Van Seters, John. *Abraham in History and Tradition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975.

Van Seters, John. "From Faithful Prophet to Villain: Observations on the Tradition History of the Balaam Story." in *A Biblical Itinerary: In Search of Method, Form, Content: Essays in Honor of George W. Coats*. Edited by Eugene E. Carpenter. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 240. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997.

Vaux, Roland de. *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*. 2 vols. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961.

Vanderkam, James C., trans. *The Book of Jubilees*. Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium 511. Leuven: Peeters Press, 1989.

Vermes, Geza. "The Story of Balaam: The Scriptural Origin of Haggadah." Pages 127-77 in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies*. Studia Post-Biblica. Leiden: Brill, 1973.

Vriezen, T. C. *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970.

Waltke, Bruce K. "Samaritan Pentateuch." Pages 932-40 in vol. 5 of *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 Volumes. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Waltke, Bruce K. and Cathi J. Fredricks. *Genesis: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.

Waltke, Bruce K. and M. O'Connor. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990.

Warrior, Robert Allen. "A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians." Pages 287-95 in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*. Edited by Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah. London: SPCK, 1991.

Way, Robert J. "רָעַב." Pages 1133-37 in vol. 3 of *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 5 Volumes. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Weinfeld, Moshe. *Deuteronomy 1-11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible 5. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Weinfeld, Moshe. *The Extent of the Promised Land—The Status of Transjordan*. Göttinger theologische Arbeiten 25. Edited by Georg Strecker. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983.

Weinfeld, Moshe. "Deuteronomy, Book of." Pages 168-83 in vol. 2 of *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 Volumes. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Weinfeld, Moshe. "The Ban on the Canaanites in the Biblical Codes and its Historical Development." Pages 142-60 in *History and Traditions of Early Israel: Studies Presented to Eduard Nielsen, May 8th 1993*. Edited by André Lemaire and Benedikt Otzen. Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 50. Leiden: Brill, 1993.

Weinfeld, Moshe. "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East." *Journal Of The American Oriental Society* 90 (1970): 184-203.

Weinfeld, Moshe. "The Emergence of the Deuteronomic Movement: The Historical Antecedents." Pages 76-98 in *Das Deuteronomium: Entstehung, Gestalt und Botschaft*. Edited by Norbert Lohfink. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 68. Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1985.

Weisman, Ze'eb. "The Nature and Background of bāḥūr in the Old Testament." *Vetus Testamentum* 31 (1981): 441-50.

Wenham, Gordon J. *Genesis 1-15*. Word Biblical Commentary 1. Waco: Word, 1987.

Wenham, Gordon J. *Genesis 16-50*. Word Biblical Commentary 2. Dallas: Word, 1994.

Wenham, Gordon J. *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1981.

Wenham, Gordon J. *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically*. Old Testament Studies. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000.

Westermann, Claus. *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*. Translated by John J. Scullion. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981.

Wevers, John William. *The Balaam Narrative According to the Septuagint*. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 144. Edited by Jean M. Auwers and André Wénin. Louvain: Peeters Press, 1999.

Whiston, William, trans. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987.

Widmer, Michael. *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer: A Study of Exodus 32-34 and Numbers 13-14*. Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2. Reihe 8. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004.

Wildberger, Hans. "בָּחַר." Pages 209-26 in vol. 1 of *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. 3 Volumes. Edited by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997.

Willi-Plein, Ina. "Ort und literarische Funktion der Geburtsgeschichte des Mose." *Vetus Testamentum* 41 (1991): 110-18.

Williams, James G. "The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type-Scenes." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 17 (1980): 107-119.

Wright, Christopher. *Deuteronomy*. New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament 4. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996.

Wright, G. Ernest. *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*. Studies in Biblical Theology 2. London: SCM, 1950.

.Wyschogrod, Michael. Review of David Novak, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of a Chosen People*. *Modern Theology* 12 (1996): 491-93.

Wyschogrod, Michael. *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel*. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1996.

Wyschogrod, Michael. "Letter to a Friend." *Modern Theology* 11 (1995): 165-71.

Yaure, L. "Elymas-Nehelamite-Pethor." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79 (1960): 297-314.

Zannoni, Arthur E. "Balaam: International Seer/Wizard Prophet." *Saint Luke's Journal of Theology* 22:D (1978): 5-19.

Zimmerli, Walther. *Old Testament Theology in Outline*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978.