Kaminsky, Joel S.

Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election


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It is an honor to be “chosen” to respond to such a fine study in biblical theology—as far as I know, the only full study of the theme of election we have (in English) from a biblical scholar. Of its many strengths, perhaps the one that underlies all the others is the fact that the work begins with careful exegesis of narratives in Genesis, and that exegesis is based on a sound understanding of biblical poetics. The result is that Joel Kaminsky’s comments throughout reflect the complexity, the unresolved tensions, and questions characteristic of biblical narrative. His detailed exegesis of the ancestral narratives may be an especially useful corrective for Christian readers, who might otherwise be inclined to think that the apostle Paul’s stark typological reading of these same narratives (the stories of Sarah and Hagar and their sons) constitutes all that needs to be said about election within the Christian Bible. His focus, then, is not on a “doctrine of election” considered in the abstract but rather on how the biblical writers wrestle with a matter that is of persistent and central concern to them. Moreover, by beginning with Cain and Abel, Kaminsky establishes the fact that already in the fourth chapter of the Bible, even before Israel’s particular ancestors enter the biblical story, the reader is confronted with the theological conundrum that some are favored over others, and for no apparent reason.
As the essential take-home insight of the book, I would pick this: the problem with election that most fully occupies the biblical writers is not the same one that troubles most of us, namely, divine unfairness. They are more concerned with inappropriate human responses to election, whether on the part of the elect or the nonelect. The elect may “misuse or fail to accept their special status and the responsibilities it entails” (17)—one instance being the young Joseph, the original insufferable pipsqueak. Equally, beginning with Cain and continuing through to Haman, those who are less favored may act viciously toward the special recipients of God’s favor.

It would not be possible for me to enumerate all the things I like about this book, all the points with which I agree, and also the points at which I receive welcome instruction from someone who has thought about election and these particular texts far more deeply than I have. Here I will highlight three aspects of the argument that seem to me more than useful—they are profound—and then I will try to draw on some of that profundity to indicate where further theological work might be done, building on some of his exegesis and perhaps also supplementing it.

First, I am struck by his suggestion that the notion of “undeserved chosenness” may itself be “one of the greatest achievements of the Israelite religious mind.” Kaminsky explains: “The ability to sense one’s chosenness and also to see one’s character flaws … creates a sense of ultimate meaning for one’s nation, but it does so in ways that mitigate movement toward an unfettered imperialism and triumphalism” (77).

Second, Kaminsky helpfully identifies three categories in the Hebrew Scriptures that pertain to election: (1) the elect; (2) the small category of the “anti-elect,” those who as a people refuse reconciliation with Israel and must be destroyed—the Canaanites, Amalekites, and Midianites (112); and (3) the nonelect, who may nonetheless experience divine favor to the extent that they are reconciled with the elect (57). There is both beauty and exegetical accuracy to his claim (based on a reading of the Joseph tale) that “election reaches its fruition in a humble, yet exalted divine service that benefits the elect and the non-elect alike” (78). Christian readers, who tend to be self-righteous about the Deuteronomic position on Canaanites, may well be instructed by his illuminating comparison between this threefold scheme in the Hebrew Scriptures and the standard dichotomy in Christian theology between those who are saved and those who are just plain damned.

A third important point is that election is ultimately grounded in the mystery of divine love. Yet I would question some aspects of the way Kaminsky develops this insight, chiefly his suggestion, following Michael Wyschogrod’s use of the analogy of human parenthood, that election bespeaks more divine love (67–68). We all apply the analogy of
human parenthood to God’s love, since the biblical writers do, including in matters of election. But Hebrew Scripture uses that metaphor rarely, and that should make us cautious, careful to observe what Brian Brock calls “God’s proper otherness”—especially in matters of the heart. But even if one accepts the analogy of human parenthood and accepts further that the parent loves different children differently, this need not in every case mean loving one more than another. Another possibility, not fully acknowledged here, is love that differentiates according to the character of different children but may not vary in degree. One child may be “favored” with more responsibility, another require and receive more overt attention and help in order to fulfill his or her destiny—for that is part of the dynamic of election as Kaminsky describes it (39).

This leads me to point to an aspect of election that does not I think receive direct mention from Kaminsky, namely, that divine election may be strategic, although not reducible to a purely instrumental relationship. Just as it may be strategic for a loving parent to give special responsibility to one child, for the benefit of the whole family, so Joseph is elected in order to save the lives of his brothers (and also Egyptian lives); Israel is elected to mediate God’s salvation to the nations. The notion of election as strategic is compatible with the assertion that it is grounded in love, a point to which I shall return.

However, just because election is grounded in love, a relationship that is to some degree at least reciprocal, I want to question the adequacy of this formulation at the end of the study of the Genesis narratives: “the sibling narratives as a whole suggest that, while difficult, those not chosen can learn to accept and live with the mysterious unfairness inherent in a world shaped by God’s gracious love” (78). Can we rest with that position? For Gentile Christians at least, the answer would seem to be no on two grounds. First, as I have already implied, “unfairness” is not an attribute that can readily be ascribed to God, even as a part of the divine mystery. Second, it seems unlikely and maybe undesirable that any committed readers of the Hebrew Scriptures should finally be content with acknowledging the reality of election and at the same time accept their own nonelect status. I am reminded of an exchange at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem when Paul van Buren asserted his famous simile that, for Gentiles, read the Hebrew Scriptures is “like reading somebody else’s love letters.” Rabbi Tzvi Marx responded, “If I were a Christian, that would be completely unacceptable to me. And as a Jew, I have to ask, if you really believe those ‘letters’ are addressed to me, then why the hell are you reading them?”

Regrettably, the Gentile church as a whole has a long way to go in accepting the election of Jews as a present reality. But I think this can and must be done even as Gentile Christians hold on to a strong notion of our own election. Indeed, taking more seriously our own claim to being God’s elect might possibly point the way to appreciating an election that is different from our own, but perhaps not completely “separate”—to quibble with a word that Kaminsky uses periodically (e.g., 57, 175). I think it is better for Gentile Christians to think of our election as distinct from that of Jews, although probably intertwined with it and equally grounded in divine love.

A sense of election means knowing one’s people to be loved by God and chosen for some unique role that is of benefit to the whole world (the strategic aspect of election that I mentioned earlier). Some speak of the three monotheistic faiths as “elective monotheisms” in that sense.\(^2\) If this is right, then a conviction of election has a clearly demonstrated potential for generating contempt and violence among us. But recalling Kaminsky’s insight that the genius of the biblical mindset is to see oneself and one’s faith community as simultaneously chosen and flawed, then taking our election more seriously—which is surely his intention—would require that we develop a habit of rigorous self-criticism. Elsewhere (if not in this book) Kaminsky evokes the wonderful notion of “a vigilant humility” as the necessary concomitant of election theology.\(^3\)

If such humility expresses itself within the community as self-criticism, then I suggest that it expresses itself with respect to the religiously other first as self-restraint and then by extension as blessing. One community’s self-restraint in pronouncing on the present status or eternal fate of the other coram Deo would reflect neither religious relativism nor universalism as it is often construed—these, as Kaminsky rightly says, being incompatible with the particularistic claims of both Judaism and Christianity (146). Rather, self-restraint in this matter is the necessary precondition for fulfilling God’s charge to Abraham, to “be a blessing!” (Gen 12:2). God continues: “And in you all the families of the fertile earth [‘adamah] shall experience blessing” (12:3; see Yet I Loved Jacob, 82–83). Disseminating or embodying blessing is a role that is more ontological than instrumental; further, it entails a deep and enduring particularism, which, as Kaminsky insists, must be the source of any “universalistic thrust” that can be judged genuinely biblical (146).

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A sense of election that is appropriately humble leads the “elect” to look beyond themselves to the good of the religiously other. As Kaminsky suggests, a sense of election thus provides a solid base for honest interfaith dialogue, and it does not exclude criticism. If it is the role of the elect to extend the sphere in which God’s blessing is effective, even to the ends of the earth, then a generous sense of election could be the basis also for cooperative or compatible efforts among the several monotheisms. I think of Christians and moderate Muslims I know in Southern Sudan who have for some years cooperated in founding and running secular schools in a war-ravaged society, so children of both communities can have a future. Looking to the global future (“all the families of the fertile earth”), probably the chief mandate is for each elective monotheism to promote a religious ethic of restraint and care with respect to the earth. Suppose each of the faiths that deems itself elect were to strive to outdo each other in good (to paraphrase the apostle Paul). Those efforts, cooperative and competitive, would cover most areas where the ‘adamah, the fertile soil, is now degraded—in biblical language, “accursed” (Gen 3:17) as a result of a pronounced lack of restraint among the industrialized nations. Such a commitment would also make war among the monotheistic peoples nearly impossible, since land itself is always one of the first casualties of war, as we have seen in recent years in the Middle East and also in Sudan.

Probably I have more hope than Kaminsky expresses (190) that Christians may yet grant “theological space” (191) to non-Christian Gentiles (Muslims being a key instance). One biblical warrant for this might lie within the Priestly tradition that humankind in its entirety is made in the image of God (Gen 1:26–28). In my view, that tradition does not point to the uniqueness of each person, as Kaminsky suggests (99), but rather to our essential likeness to one another; further, it may suggest that any of us might yet be reconciled to the God to whom we once bore some resemblance.

With some fear of religious presumption, I want to close by inquiring briefly into a possible aspect of election on which Kaminsky does not dwell, although it seems to be suggested by writers in both Testaments, namely, that there is in some instances a connection between undeserved chosenness, on the one hand, and undeserved suffering, on the other—suffering that is sustained, profound, and may even have some vocational aspect. I believe that the theological meaning of suffering is something that can be explored only from inside the faith community; no outsider has a right to pronounce on it. But there are multiple strands within the Bible that hint at such an understanding of the suffering of God’s intimates or chosen, mostly in poetic books (Psalms, Job, Jeremiah, two of the Servant Songs of exilic Isaiah). And among the Sudanese Christians I know, this connection between undeserved election and extreme undeserved suffering is drawn more or less directly. Maybe not incidentally, they draw the connection in the psalms they
themselves compose, song-prayers based on biblical themes—many of them written in flight or in exile, out of the experience of genocide.

Kaminsky does touch on the connection between election and suffering when he cites Jon Levenson’s work on the death and resurrection of the beloved son and again when he discusses the demonic representation of the anti-elect and the explanatory power this has for those, especially though not exclusively Jews, who have experienced irrational religious hatred (116). Yet again, he cites several lament psalms that say or imply that Israel “deserve[s] God’s attention and help” because they are “not just any nation, but God’s own people” (160). However, the particular lines Kaminsky cites from those psalms are not calls for help but rather accusations directed at God: “You have sold your people for a trifle” (Ps 44:12); “You have made your people suffer hard things” (60:3). One might construe these lines, and others he does not cite, to suggest that in the psalmists’ view the suffering itself is related to Israel’s status as God’s own people: “For your sake we suffer reproach; shame covers my face” (Ps 69:8); “Look away from me, so I may smile again” (39:14). The psalmist seems at that moment to be asking for less divine attention: “Give me a break! Choose somebody else.” So I conclude with a question: Is there more still to be said about deep suffering as the dark side of election?