Before launching into my responses to the various reactions to and critiques of my recent book, I want to express how deeply indebted I am to each of these scholars for carefully reading and thoughtfully commenting upon my work. I also wish to thank both the SBL for hosting the panel discussion at which these reviews and my response were originally delivered, as well as the editors of RBL, most especially Bob Buller, for bringing this discussion to a wider audience.

Response to Ben Sommer

Professor Sommer has delivered a clear, concise, and generous summary of my book. If I actually accomplished everything he claims I did, I think the book achieved its goal. One major criticism that Sommer raises concerns my failure to cite and directly engage the work of certain Israeli biblical scholars. Now the truth is, I did read a number of the pieces Ben mentioned; in fact, he sent me references at one point. But there are two primary reasons I did not work these references into my book. First, the footnotes as well as the bibliography I posted online include only perhaps a quarter of the material I read before writing this book. While I am open to the possibility that I underweighted this important body of scholarship, I feel the tendency found in a number of recent commentaries and biblical theologies to include everything is not a strength but a failure...
to do the necessary editorial work to make one’s book accessible to the lay reader. Thus I included only those sources most directly engaged with my immediate concerns.

Second, I did not focus at length upon Moshe Greenberg’s writings in particular, because I found some of them problematic and in places wrongheaded, yet I felt that arguing my point against Greenberg made less sense than arguing against the views of, say, Rowley, which are much more widespread. For instance, in his 1996 article “A Problematic Heritage,” Greenberg, concerned about Jewish triumphalism and its manifestations in contemporary Israel, ends up portraying election in almost completely instrumental terms. Although the idea of Israel’s election can, as Greenberg argues, lead to haughtiness, the Bible nonetheless asserts and much of later Jewish tradition rightly preserves the notion that Israel is specially beloved of God and remains so. Furthermore, I in fact do make use of one of Greenberg’s essays not mentioned by Sommer, and I do so because it advanced an aspect of my argument.1 While Sommer cites a host of Israeli scholarship he thinks I should have worked into my book, he never demonstrates where my failure to do so has undermined my argumentation.

Sommer’s other major criticism is that I failed to produce a Jewish theology of election or perhaps something that could be called Jewish biblical theology, because I do not engage the rabbinic tradition enough and postrabbinic Jewish tradition at all. Some of the shortcomings Ben points out are overstated, while others are not entirely relevant. He claims that I did not discuss rabbinic and later medieval Jewish attempts to ameliorate the anti-Canaanite polemic. Actually, on page 118 I cite a different passage from Maimonides that I believe better serves the purpose of ameliorating the Bible’s anti-elect theology. In characterizing my work as disproportionately Pauline, Sommer also charges that I, for example, finish chapter 5 with several paragraphs on later Christian appropriations of Israel’s covenantal theology but fail to include later Jewish reflections on this same theme. Yet in the penultimate section of chapter 7, I explore several postbiblical Jewish strategies to mitigate the Bible’s anti-elect polemic without including any comparable Christian reflections on this topic. Thus my treatment of later Jewish and Christian sources is much more balanced than his critique allows.

Now, could I have included a host of other rabbinic texts? Certainly! Are there medieval and modern thinkers worth discussing. Of course! But in a book like this, squarely focused on the Hebrew Bible’s election theology, it is not possible to do justice to all later Jewish or Christian developments. However, it is equally impossible to ignore such

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developments because they have shaped our reading of the biblical text. Thus I chose to briefly outline how matters played out in early rabbinic and New Testament texts, with only very occasional references to later Jewish and Christian thinkers. It seems to me to be an empirical, statistical fact that the readership for a book on the Bible (Hebrew Bible or New Testament) written in English and using historical-critical methods will be overwhelmingly Christian, so I opted to publish it with Abingdon, a Methodist press. That does not mean the book is directed toward Christians or irrelevant to Jews. My book is a work of biblical apologetics (in the higher sense of the term), a defense of an article of traditional Jewish (and, for that matter, Christian) belief against attacks on it, mostly but not exclusively those of Christian thinkers under the impression that Judaism is tribalistic and limited in scope, whereas Christianity is universal and inclusive. Does a work that sensitively explores and recovers the biblical roots of the most maligned Jewish theological concept really fall into the category of “Christian biblical theology”?

For the record, Menachem Kellner, an Israeli academic and perhaps the leading contemporary Jewish philosopher sent me the following e-mail:

Shalom, Thank you VERY much for favoring me with a copy of your new (and important) book. I plan to recommend it widely to friends and colleagues … and will circulate it among my friends in synagogue. I know that you did not write the book to be a source of divrei Torah in a synagogue in Israel, but there are so many attractive insights in the book that it will serve that need as well.

I believe Professor Kellner has rightly understood the aim of my book. As stated in my introduction, I sought to recover “a richer and more sympathetic portrait of the biblical concept of election” (10). If I succeeded in doing this, even to a limited degree, then such a book is indeed relevant to Jewish thinkers, apparently even ones who live and pray in the Land of Israel.

In sum, I had no intention of writing a specifically Jewish theology of election such as those authored by Wyschogrod and David Novak, scholars who probe postbiblical Jewish tradition but spend little effort exploring the biblical foundations of election theology. I wanted to rectify this lack of attention toward the biblical sources, thus my subtitle: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election. Furthermore, my book is not addressed exclusively to Jews or exclusively to Christians or exclusively to secular Bible scholars. Rather, I attempted to write a book focused on the Hebrew Bible’s election theology that could speak inclusively to the widest possible audience, an audience informed about and interested in the Hebrew Bible. While the more Judaically centered book Ben wished I had written would be a worthy project, it would have resulted in very different, and, in
Response to Jaqueline Lapsley

As Professor Lapsley correctly notes, my tripartite schema of the elect, the nonelect, and the anti-elect is a heuristic device. I think it helps provide a much-needed corrective to the tendency to assume à la Regina Schwartz and others that election spells doom for all non-Israelites. I am open to alternative nomenclature and recognize that the biblical evidence does not fit into easy-to-use categories. I am less sure about Lapsley’s contention that Ishmael’s relationship may be a covenantal one. Yes, Ishmael and his descendants have an ongoing story with God and the world that is beyond the purview of the Genesis text. But I believe that Gen 17 indicates that Isaac and his descendants through Jacob play not just some role the Bible happened to focus upon, but a truly pivotal and central role in the divine drama. This idea carries just as much if not more weight in the New Testament, where the identity and significance of Jesus as the Christ is contingent on Israel’s and, for the matter, David’s special status. While I am sympathetic to Lapsley’s concern about the way election language may create problems for balance in all power arrangements, I think this is a contemporary preoccupation that inhibits us from hearing the Bible’s message.

One of the more interesting issues that Lapsley raises concerns my occasional attempts to weigh both Judaism and Christianity on the modern scales of tolerance. Here I fear I have perhaps created a confusion. I have no problem with Christianity being a missionary religion. My problem resides in the Christian propensity to characterize this missionary impulse and Judaism’s lack of it in terms of Christianity’s tolerance toward others and Judaism’s lack of such tolerance. Weighing Israelite religion or classical Judaism and Christianity in such anachronistic terms creates more problems than it solves. But it seemed important to point out how Judaism’s exclusivism may be, on some measures, more tolerant than Christianity’s openness to converting outsiders.

Both Lapsley and Davis are distressed by my discussion of divine love being like human familial love. I will respond to this objection, then segue into my other specific comments on Davis’s reactions to my book. Both scholars seem particularly perturbed by my citation of Michael Wyschogrod’s claim that, while not widely acknowledged, a parent often loves one child more than another. Lapsley and Davis both point out that loving each child differently need not imply that one loves them in varying degrees. While I agree in theory a parent can love each child uniquely but with equal intensity, I think that Wyschogrod is right in asserting that often a particular parent is more closely attached to one specific child and in reality loves that child more. But rather than get into the
sociology of parental bonding I want to make two quick points. (1) Oddly enough, while a number of Protestants have been upset with my use of Wyschogrod’s description of unequal parental love, up to this point no Jew has yet raised this objection to me. Perhaps more Jews just live in dysfunctional families or more openly acknowledge them. Or, alternatively, maybe Jews are more comfortable affirming this offensive idea because the Jewish community liturgically proclaims its specially elect status with regularity. (2) I believe I can counter this critique by moving from the parental-love metaphor to the marital one, for no one would object to the idea of a husband and wife loving each other not only uniquely but more intensely than they love other people. The Bible often speaks of Israel as God’s wife (one only need think of Hosea’s use of this metaphor), and thus one cannot sidestep the implication that God loves Israel more than he loves other nations. Mutatis mutandis, the same can be said of the church’s perception of itself as Christ’s bride.

Response to Ellen Davis

I appreciate Professor Davis’s attempt to introduce a medial position into my binary categories that frame God’s election of Israel as either intrinsic or instrumental. I like her idea that election might be based on love but still be strategic, although I think this metaphor works better for the image of God as a king who loves his subjects than with those texts in which God is portrayed as a lover smitten by his beloved. I will return to this issue at greater length in my response to Professor Miller, who raises a more elaborate objection to the way in which I treated it.

I find Davis’s objection to my claim that election is unfair to be problematic, even while I understand what disturbs her. How can we attribute unfairness to the God of the Hebrew Bible? While counterintuitive, I nevertheless think unfairness is an attribute of the biblical God, because by definition God’s mercy trumps his justice, and this is truly unfair, as Ps 103, the parable of the vineyard workers (Matt 20), or Paul (Rom 9–11) all highlight. While I agree that it is difficult to imagine the other accepting their nonchosen status, I still maintain that the Bible calls for this. From a Jewish perspective, this means that only the Jews are the chosen people. From a Christian perspective, it means that non-Christians are perceived as nonchosen, although admittedly non-Christian Jews might occupy a gray area of those chosen but living in rebellion to God. I do not claim to know if either the Jewish or Christian claim is correct, only that both traditions have preserved the idea of their unique election at the center of their identities.

Doing theology is ultimately a matter for internal discussion in a specific religious community. Yes, one can and should always be exploring the way one’s theology construes those outside one’s faith community. But theology involves a type of grammar
and a set of assumptions to which no one outside the community of faith is likely to fully assent. One must recognize the limits of interreligious dialogue in helping a specific tradition think through its theology. Furthermore, we must be cautious about generalizing across religions. Both Judaism and Christianity have a concept of being the chosen people, but it is deployed in utterly differing fashions. Davis at one point uses Martin Jaffee’s term “elective monotheisms” to point to the closeness and commonality of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and argue for greater cooperation based on their theological affinity.2 I believe this term used by Jaffee is ill-chosen and is a false cognate to the Jewish and Christian ideas of election, which incidentally are distinct notions. In fact, the following Quranic citation from Surah 2:105ff. (The Cow) may well indicate that Islam dismissed the validity of election theology, albeit by wrongly assuming that Jewish and Christian elective claims are identical: “and they say, ‘None shall enter Paradise except be they Jews or Christians,’ Such are their fancies. Say ‘Produce your proof if you speak truly.’ Nay, but whoever submits his will to God, being a good-doer, his wage is with his Lord, and no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow.”3

I have no objection to a Theodore Lessing–like competition between the three so-called Western religions to heal the world’s ills, and I am overjoyed that someone as good-willed and as theologically informed as Davis is leading the charge. But I do not think this type of communal cooperation will resolve our theological differences nor serve as a substitute for wrestling with each other’s faith claims. Interreligious cooperation on social issues is a distinct task from conducting interreligious theological dialogue. One may feed the other, but they must remain distinct. One can see the danger of collapsing these two tasks when Davis suggests that “the role of the elect [is] to extend the sphere in which God’s blessing is effective, even to the ends of the earth.” While I agree that election in the Hebrew Bible includes the idea that the nonelect Gentile nations who respond properly to Abraham and his descendants receive a blessing, Jews and Christians understand this idea in radically differing ways. Classically Christians have seen Christ as the entry point for that blessing to reach the Gentiles, an idea requiring the conversion of the other. Jews have thought that God’s relationship to Israel is the means by which a blessing reaches the larger world. But here Israel’s primary mission is to be obedient to God, not to missionize the other. Furthermore, the Hebrew Bible makes clear that some will rebel and not accept Israel’s chosenness, and they will in turn be cursed, not blessed. Does this mean that Jews and

2. Martin Jaffee, “One God, One Revelation, One People: On the Symbolic Structure of Elective Monotheisms,” JAAR 69 (2001): 753–75. Jaffee’s attempt to fit Judaism, Christianity, and Islam into a single framework and then claim that this framework explains religious violence is highly questionable. Ancient Assyria, a polytheistic culture, was suffused with violent religious rhetoric that was regularly acted out upon its numerous enemies.

Christians cannot work together to save the environment? Absolutely not! But it means that they are doing so within distinct and sometimes conflicting theological frameworks.

Response to Joel Lohr

There are two areas that Professor Lohr raises that deserve comment. The first concerns my tripartite categorization of the elect, nonelect, and anti-elect. As he too rightly noted, these categories are heuristic, and, as I indicated earlier, I am not wedded to them. My main contention is that Israel’s treatment of the other, which itself flows from her sense of her own elect status, is vastly more complex than many previous commentators allowed. Lohr may be correct that the Canaanite problem is less one of anti-election and more one of the fact that they live in the land destined to be occupied by the Israelites. But I think biblical passages that describe the immorality of the Canaanites suggest that there is more going on here than just where the Canaanites live. In any case, his solution cannot explain the even harsher portrayal of the Amalekites. Annihilating them seems to be coupled to the fact that their actions against God’s people put them beyond God’s mercy (Deut 25:17–19). Here there is little sense that the location that this group lives in has anything to do with God’s call to eliminate them. The upshot of my comments should not be taken as a dismissal of those who feel my attempt to distinguish between the nonelect and the anti-elect needs nuancing. I am fully open to hearing refinements. Still, I feel that my tripartite schema, even while not as intellectually nimble as it might be, has hopefully moved the conversation forward. Clearly, Israel’s view of itself as chosen does not normally nor automatically spell intolerance toward, or worse yet doom for, all non-Israelites.

The other major point that Lohr raises is my treatment of Christianity and particularly my portrayal of the New Testament. This is a point also raised by Davis and Lapsley as well as by Miller, so with these reflections I will segue into my reaction to Miller’s critique. Here there are a number of things I should say. First, I recognize that I am in sensitive terrain as a Jew who is exploring Christian theological ideas and at times prodding Christians to rethink some aspects of their theological heritage. I also am a bit of a dabbler when it comes to the New Testament. In fact, one student in a Yale Divinity School seminar I taught this past fall suggested that to accurately unpack the New Testament’s election theology likely requires a separate monograph, a point also made by Lapsley. This student was mystified why in a book dedicated to election in the Hebrew Bible I introduced these forays into the New Testament. There are many reasons why I chose to do this; high on the list is that the scholarship surrounding the Hebrew Bible’s election theology has been pervaded and thereby somewhat distorted by importing Christian ideas from the New Testament into it. Therefore, it seemed useful to have at least some discussion of key election-oriented New Testament texts. But I openly
acknowledge that I am no New Testament expert, and thus this part of my book can be refined and expanded by more competent individuals. Still, I believe that, if we want to speak across the Jewish-Christian divide about the ideas that unite and divide us, someone on occasion has to swim out a bit beyond his or her comfort zone. As an aside, it is important to note that there is not an exact parallel between my critique of Christians who I believe are not hearing the full witness of the Hebrew Bible, which is part of their own scriptural heritage, and Christians who critique me for not hearing the New Testament’s full witness, a book that is not sacred scripture to me. Still, I hope my efforts to continue trying to learn from my Christian colleagues qualify me as a thinker who is still redeemable, if not in the ultimate sense, at least in an intellectual way.

Response to Patrick Miller

Turning to Professor Miller’s comments, let me first address his reading of the Cain and Abel story. I think the theme of divine favoritism is much more prominent than Miller’s comments allow. The fracture in the brothers’ relationship is set off by God’s favor of Abel and his offering and God’s lack of favor toward Cain and his. Furthermore, Cain is featured so prominently that he has two extended dialogues with God. This suggests that the narrative is concerned to articulate the notion that God’s favor toward some does not mean those not favored are beyond God’s interest and attention.

The most serious criticism that Miller raises concerns my interpretation of Gen 12:1–3, in particular my concern over the danger that I think Wolff’s reading may produce. Here I want to make a few points. I am indeed worried about reducing the purpose of Israel’s election down to service. I recognize that God’s choice of Israel remains mysterious even if Israel’s election serves a purpose. I also acknowledge that Israel does in fact serve God’s greater purposes for the world. However, Israel’s election is not reducible to her service, and I think Wolff’s formulation runs the risk of allowing readers, particularly Christian readers, to think this is the case.

In an earlier draft of my book, I had emphasized the service dimensions of election much more prominently. Jews, in fact, regularly harp on this idea. It was Walter Moberly, a Christian scholar, who convinced me that Gen 12:1–3 is primarily directed to Abraham as a message of assurance rather than toward those others with whom Abraham and his children will interact. Note Moberly’s words concerning Abraham in Gen 12:1–3: “He is a solitary figure, who in response to God is leaving behind the usual securities of territory and family. As such, he may fear rapid extinction and oblivion…. Because of God’s blessing the solitary and vulnerable Abraham will become a nation to be reckoned with,
and the object of extensive respect and prayer for emulation.” While Moberly’s reading of the niphal as implying emulation can be contested (although note that Gen 48:20 supports this reading), I think Moberly is correct that this passage is primarily directed to assuring Abraham. I am not arguing that the idea that all the families of the earth will somehow obtain blessing through their relationship to Abraham and his descendants is not an important or central biblical idea. I just think it is a consequence that flows from God’s promise to Abraham and his select descendants of their specially blessed status (an interpretation supported by Gen 18:18), rather than something that explains the purpose of Israel’s election. Even if one reads Gen 12:3 à la Miller and Wolff as an explanation for election, how this would work is never clearly articulated within the Hebrew Bible. In any case, much of the Hebrew Bible speaks against the idea that this passage authorizes the conversion of the nations to Israel’s religion or a total dissolution of all distinctions between Abraham’s family and the other nations of the world.

On this issue of instrumental versus intrinsic notions of election, an issue also broached by Davis and Lapsley, I acknowledge that perhaps I have underplayed certain instrumental aspects of election. But I also wonder whether perhaps we need some different and more pliable language to categorize the varying aspects of Israel’s election theology. One concern I have, as noted correctly by Lapsley, is that Christians often read instrumental to mean missional and that in turn often leads to supersessionism. I am comfortable affirming that election entails an instrumental aspect, but I want to stress that God never discloses the total meaning of his unique relationship to Israel and that a host of passages ground this relationship in God’s special love for the patriarchs and their later descendants, the nation of Israel.

I would like to conclude with a few words about how I came to be interested in this topic. I have long felt that biblical scholars, as well as Jews and Christians more generally, under the strong cultural pressures of the contemporary pluralistic situation, have too frequently either ignored the notion of Israel’s divine election, or, more troubling, they have felt compelled to reject it. From my angle, the idea of chosenness is one of the most compelling aspects of the Bible’s theology, and, in any case, it is so central to Judaism and Christianity that neither religion can afford to ignore or, worse yet, jettison it. While aspects of election theology remain problematic, the idea is widely misunderstood in an anachronistic fashion that fails to do justice to the nuances and richness of this important and pervasive biblical teaching. I am certain that my book has not captured the full meaning of the notion of biblical chosenness. But, having read these thoughtful critiques, I remain hopeful that Yet I Loved Jacob will spark renewed conversation about this

subject and lead others to correct my errors and build upon my observations in order to facilitate the recovery of election theology for Jews and Christians living today. Doing so will not only deepen the faith of both Jews and Christians but should also deepen the ongoing conversation between Jews and Christians about the meaning of the Hebrew Bible. For it is difficult to see how Judaism and Christianity can flourish if they are utterly cut off from the Bible’s election theology, a seminal idea that gave rise to and nourished these two traditions for millennia.