At least since the eighteenth century, when the critic Gotthold Lessing conjured the metaphor of the “ugly ditch” that separates historical events from truth claims, particularity in the Bible has been an ongoing theological problem.¹ How can universal, or at the very least, broad theological claims be made based on God’s having chosen a particular people, Israel? And for Christians, an added conundrum: How can God’s salvific action on behalf of the world flow out of the one man Jesus, who lived and died in first-century Palestine? This problem has not gone away.

And so the field of biblical studies owes a debt of gratitude to Joel Kaminsky for taking up the vexed question of Israel’s election, its particularity, in the Hebrew Scriptures, and for taking it up with such seriousness and expertise. Kaminsky ably demonstrates that the movement in the Hebrew Scriptures is not from particularism toward universalism (that Lessing struggled with so memorably) but “toward universalism through an ever deepening particularism” (157).

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In *Yet I Loved Jacob*, Kaminsky deepens our grasp of Israel’s election as reflected in the Hebrew Scriptures—not by skimming surface language, however—but by the thorough and penetrating examination of texts in all of their complexity. Yet even as he helps us to go deeper into particular texts, he also broadens our vision of which texts might actually be speaking to the theme of election. It is not just Deut 7 or 10 or certain prophetic passages, but all those accounts of sibling rivalry in Genesis, too, that help us understand how Israel saw itself as elect. And so we are helped to put on a pair of glasses that brings the normally fuzzy landscape of election into sharper relief—its contours and features appear with more clarity and distinctness through the Kaminsky lens.

But enough encomium. There are several areas where I see some need for further discussion and reflection. They are, in brief: (1) the adequacy of the categories of elect, nonelect, and anti-elect and the effects of that language; (2) the ultimate purposes of Israel’s election; (3) the question of whether God loves Israel more than the rest of the world; (4) the treatment of the New Testament witness; (5) the role of tolerance as the highest good; and (6) the account of Christian missional activity and the implications of Kaminsky’s work for Christian theologies of mission. This last area is not one I expect Kaminsky to take up but is rather a question for Christian scholars such as myself and other Christian theologians to address. Yet Kaminsky’s work demands careful consideration if Christian theology is to hear the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures properly, and not simply smother their voices by just yelling louder. I will say something about each of these concerns in turn.

1. The categories of “elect,” “nonelect,” and “anti-elect” are heuristically useful, especially as they help to distinguish groups that are often lumped together, namely, the “nonelect” (the nations in general) and the “anti-elect” (the Canaanites, Amalekites et al.). The language provides a way to focus, as Kaminsky does, on the way that some streams of Jewish and Christian tradition have tried to mitigate the negative effects of the anti-elect rhetoric. The difficulty with these categories is twofold, however.

First, the language ultimately does not do justice to the messiness of the texts themselves. Things seem to be a bit more complicated, and people or peoples have a way of transgressing the boundaries of the category they have been assigned. One example is Ishmael: while Kaminsky notes that Ishmael’s “dis-election” is the least clear-cut in the Bible, he is still “ultimately excluded from God’s covenant and thereby is non-elect” (34). Certainly Ishmael is not part of the covenant of which Isaac is the promise-bearer, but does that mean he is ultimately excluded from some other covenant with God? The text does not say so, and in fact the parallels between Isaac and Ishmael (the fact that they are both “nearly sacrificed” sons of Abraham in contiguous chapters [Gen 21, 22] and that God promises that both will become “a great nation” [regarding Ishmael: 17:20; 21:18])
suggest that Ishmael’s story is one of those “other stories,” those narrative loose ends that the Hebrew Bible dangles before us. Ishmael may well have a continuing relationship with God, maybe even a covenantal one, since God has made such a whoppingly big promise to him, or more exactly to his parents, just as God made concerning Isaac. This story is not one appropriately told in the Bible, though, because this is Israel’s story, and we must get on with it. To my mind this is not an argument from silence in so far as the text itself, by offering such clear parallels, points beyond its own narrative boundaries to another story left untold.

The second concern I have with the language of elect, nonelect, and anti-elect is not about how well they reflect the biblical material but about the cumulative effect of this language on the reader over time. Despite Kaminsky’s best efforts to clarify that election does not entail any intrinsic superiority on Israel’s part, the persistent repetition of this language sends off alarm bells about the ways that categories not unlike these have been used to wield power over groups of people. The Bible already has a distressing legacy along these lines and we do not need to add to it, even inadvertently. In short, I trust Kaminsky’s intent, but the power of language to shape identity in ways we do not control is not to be underestimated.

2. One of the features of Yet I Loved Jacob to be lauded is the way the nuances of Israel’s understanding of the purposes of election are distinguished and explored. While Kaminsky raises the issue of the purposes of Israel’s election at various moments in the book, I think this part of the argument is too muted. The impulse is understandable because Kaminsky wishes to disconnect the (usually Christian) tendency to highlight Israel’s service to the world from both supersessionist claims and from a reading of the Hebrew Scriptures as advocating missional activity, and this seems fair enough based on the texts he discusses (see esp. 153–56). Nonetheless, I remain convinced that the texts themselves see Israel’s election as in service to the world. In discussing the presence of

2. The parallels between Gen 21 and 22 have been noted by others. See, e.g., Phyllis Trible, “Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing,” in Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives (ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 46–54; and Terence Fretheim, “Genesis,” NIB 1:489–90. For other texts that gesture toward a complex relationship between YHWH and other nations and deities, see Patrick D. Miller’s “God’s Other Stories: On the Margins of Deuteronomic Theology,” in Realia Dei: Essays in Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Edward F. Campbell, Jr. at His Retirement (ed. Prescott H. Williams and Theodore Hiebert; Scholars Press Homage Series 23; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 185–94 (also cited by Kaminsky).
3. Kaminsky notes these parallels but still states that Ishmael is “not the chosen child and thus [is] excluded from the covenant” (41).
4. One example: the way “the curse of Ham,” extrapolated from Gen 9:25–27, functioned to rationalize the slavery of Africans.
women at the beginning of Exodus, Kaminsky observes that “God frequently uses the powerless to overcome the powerful” and that God’s plan “always prevails … frequently even by means of resistance to it or through those who seem to be totally marginal and powerless” (77). Marginality and powerlessness are crucial features of Israel itself, and the biblical texts often highlight the ways in which God uses precisely these characteristics to fulfill God’s purpose to bless the whole world (e.g., the sibling rivalry stories and the servant songs). One can lift this aspect up more prominently without bringing the supersessionist and missionary baggage with it or downplaying Israel’s continuing election.

3. On the nature of divine love. In the context of discussing the Joseph story, Kaminsky argues that God’s love for different nations and individuals will not be the same: “It is unlikely that God has an identical love for all nations and all individuals” (67). Like humans when they love, God relates differently to different people, loves them differently. I think this is fair enough in light of the biblical witness, but this idea is pushed further to suggest that God loves Israel more than the rest of the world. Michael Wyschograd is cited to support the idea that human parents inevitably love some of their children more than others and that divine love imitates human love on this score. I want to dispute this account of human parental love and by extension of divine love. It seems to me to be the case more frequently, although admittedly not inevitably, that the nature or character of a parent’s love for each child is different, but the quantity of love, if I may use such a crass expression, is the same. If we are to understand human parental love as the model for divine love (this in and of itself could be debated), then I would not want to see the distinction between the nature or character of divine love and its quantity elided so easily.

4. The discussion of New Testament texts. While the desirability of continuing the election trajectory into the New Testament is understandable, it simply would require more space than Kaminsky can allot it, and I do not think that comes as a surprise to him. The danger here is that the various understandings of election in the New Testament and how they might be in conversation with the Hebrew Scriptures are not given enough “air time” to make sense of their complexity.

5. “In some sense God’s special love for Israel reveals God’s ability to connect to humans in a much more profound and intimate way than the assertion that God has a generic and equal love for all humans” (67).

6. Kaminsky addresses the way that Egypt and Assyria are described in Isa 19:23–25 but still wants to see Israel as more special than Egypt and Assyria: “Thus, Israel’s elect status is maintained, and the other two nations are elevated nearer to Israel’s level” (152, emphasis added). The text does not seem to distinguish levels, although clearly Israel’s particularity and election are still affirmed, which seems to be the larger point.
5. On the role of tolerance as the highest good. An implicit assumption running through especially the last part of the book is the value Kaminsky places on tolerance. Tolerance and respect for other people seems to mean not bothering them with one’s religious convictions, leaving people alone (173, 176, 177). This is a quite understandable position for Kaminsky to take, given the shameful history of much Christian missionary activity, linked as it has been with imperialism and anti-Jewish violence. Nonetheless, it is not the only credible position to occupy, and it would be helpful if this value on tolerance-as-leaving-people-alone were at least named explicitly.7

6. A question not for Kaminsky, but for Christian theology in the present age—so a question to myself and to the church. The bell has been tolling for the death of Christendom for a while now, and many Christians have taken that as the signal that a new moment of “missional” activity is now upon us. This impulse is not for the most part like the old “missionary” aggressions, but a renewed focus on how the church can be in service to the world through its life and witness. How can the church, especially the Protestant mainline churches, bust out of their “maintenance lifestyle” to become and be agents of change in the world in the name of Jesus? How does Christian theology take seriously the contours and nuances of Israel’s election, as Kaminsky has outlined them, and go forward with this project? It seems to me that Kaminsky’s insistence on Israel’s election be taken with the utmost seriousness as Christians continue to reflect on the relationship between the particular and the universal in the economy of God. On this point, about the same time I was reading Yet I Loved Jacob, I was also reading Musa Dube’s Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000). At one point Dube charges that “the heart of biblical belief is an imperialist ideology, which operates under the claims of chosenness” (18). Kaminsky offers a compelling counter-claim to this bleak assessment: that universalism is only approached through an intimate and passionate engagement with the particular.

7. Perhaps a slight elaboration is helpful here: a credible posture for Christians is that the faith, the gospel, has liberating power to transform people’s lives—in the here and now—for the better, and if that is true, why would one not want to share that with others who seem to be in bondage to the debilitating powers of this world? Christian missional energy is not appropriately directed to persons already involved in a life-giving faith community. And finally, credible Christian theology does not see the election of Israel as imperiled.