Kaminsky, Joel S.

Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election


Patrick D. Miller
Princeton Theological Seminary
Princeton, New Jersey

Introduction

The importance of this book is evident to any reader. Kaminsky has largely accomplished his task as indicated in the subtitle of the book, bringing to the fore, interpreting, and underscoring the importance of the notion of election in the Bible. The concept of election is a broad one—all the more so with Joel’s book—and present throughout Scripture. Kaminsky’s exegetical skills are crucial to the book in that his aim is not only to call attention to the concept of election but to interpret its meaning, raising questions along the way about misreadings of the concept. Indeed, the critique of misunderstandings is a large part of what the book is about. Those misreadings are found in the history of biblical criticism, in Christian readings of the Old Testament, in New Testament texts Christianity produced, and even in Jewish interpretations. Joel is not afraid to take up New Testament texts, both to interpret them as well as to challenge their perspectives at various points. The book is balanced while clearly reflecting the Jewish predilection of the author, something to be expected and affirmed, even if one may on occasion disagree with the way that predilection is reflected in certain interpretive moves.
Primary Contributions

Among the contributions that stood out to me as I read and reread the book were two that I will mention briefly, although I think they are major accomplishments. One is Kaminsky’s capacity for thoughtful critique of Christian ways of speaking about Jews in the New Testament and in general, without categorizing them as anti-Semitic (even though anti-Semitism has come out of that history and those texts). While that is what one would expect from Kaminsky, his irenic critique provides the possibility for serious conversation about each other’s traditions.

The other large contribution is his emphasis on the diversity of perspective on election in the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures and especially his identification of the categories of elect, anti-elect, and nonelect. Where he finds these different identities is not something new, but his labels help us see some of the complexity of election as we encounter it in Scripture.

Engaging the Texts—Cain and Abraham

There are two or three places where I found myself wanting to engage and build upon Kaminsky’s work. He gives much attention to the Genesis stories, particularly those involving brothers and their interrelationships. I wondered at times if these stories are as much about election as he suggests. That is, he gives us a complex and fruitful exploration of the Genesis narratives, but what we find seems often to be familial and filial interaction, often more about brothers and their interrelationships or about human favoritism than it is about divine choice, God’s special attention or affection, things that become very evident in the other books of the Torah and elsewhere. Let me take as one example Joel’s starting point: the Cain and Abel story. Joel has already recognized my own sense that this story is about divine favoritism rather than election. There are two vocations represented in the Gen 4 story, but this is not meant to be a competition between vocations. Cain’s vocation is not accidental. He is the “tiller of the ground”; that is, he is ’adam. One learns in the previous chapters that precreation is the situation when “there was no one to till the ground,” and when there is an ’adam and he disobeys the divine command, he is punished and sent from the garden “to till the ground from which he was taken,” that is, to till the ’adamah from which ’adam was taken. In other words, Cain is the representative human creature, not simply the eponymous ancestor of the agricultural industry. Only now the human creature is revealed to be one who not only disobeys the divine command (Gen 3) but who also murders his brother. For Abel is not here identified primarily in terms of his vocation either but in terms of his relationship to Cain. Six times in the story Abel is identified as “brother.” This story thus begins not the
history of divine election or even divine favoritism but the history of 'adam’s hatred and hurt of his brother. It is about the human creature and human relations.

I do not think we get to the story of election in the Old Testament until Gen 12, and there we get it full blast and the pivot on which the rest of Scripture swings. That is the text to which I turn next, because it seems to me to be one of the most crucial texts, one that Joel recognizes and interprets well, only, it seems to me, to pull back from the interpretation he rightly divines from the text because of the way he sees Christians taking it. “As Gen. 12:2–3 makes clear, Abraham’s and thus Israel’s election is closely bound up with God’s larger plan to bring blessing to the whole world, even while God’s purposes in choosing Abraham and his descendants are not exhausted by this linkage…. Clearly Abram is part of a larger divine plan that will bring blessing to the whole world” (82). And he points out how the word blessing is used five times in three short verses. Blessing is what the text is about. Then, however, Joel resists the emphasis here and particularly Wolff’s focus on the final verse: “And [so] in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed [or bless themselves].” There are certainly matters here of continuing interpretive debate, but the concluding and climactic force of the verse is hard to overlook, and to affirm it is not to deny the importance of the blessing on Abraham. Indeed, the blessing upon Abraham is so rich and large it smacks one in the face. To recognize that, however, is not to diminish at all the fact that Abraham is under divine command, and his response is the means by which blessing shall come to him and to many others. Indeed, the blessing to others is not confined to the final clause. It is there in the previous verse: “Go from your land … so that you may be a blessing and so that I may bless the ones blessing you.” The focus is upon Abraham as both recipient of large blessing and as the means of God’s bringing much blessing to the world and ultimately to “all the families of the earth,” all of this dependent upon how he responds to the divine command “Go,” which is why the passage is not complete without verse 4: “And Abraham went….” Hans Walter-Wolff’s important study of this text also then shows how the final part of the blessing, that is, all the families of the earth finding blessing through Abraham, is repeated five times in Genesis. Indeed, the stories that follow can be read as variously showing how it is that other nations find blessing through Abraham and his descendants.

Joel says of this that “Wolff seems to read this clause in a manner that turns it into an explanation for Israel’s election.” Yes, he does. It is hard to read the text any other way. Yet that does not dissolve the mystery of election. Why Abraham and not Nahor, for example? We do not know. There is indeed an inscrutability to divine election. Nor does Gen 22 provide some explanation for the divine choice of Abraham. Rather, it is the test that confirms the suitability of the already-chosen Abraham for the divine task, because he has totally committed himself to the God who has chosen and sent him to be blessed and the agent of blessing. Therefore, I find myself resisting the next sentence in Joel’s
chapter after his comment about Wolff reading Gen 12:3 as “an explanation for Israel’s election.” What is an almost inescapable reading of the text is seen by Joel as a biased reading influenced by the New Testament. With regard to Wolff’s interpretation, Joel writes: “Clearly, New Testament understandings of Christ’s death and resurrection as providing a way for Gentiles to become a part of God’s elect people are the driving force behind the Christian tendency to read the promise texts generally, and Gen 12:1–3 in particular, in a way that emphasizes Israel’s service to the nations” (85). He elaborates this more in the rest of the paragraph. While Christians, of necessity, look for ways by which the wholeness of the Christian Scriptures are manifest, that is not necessarily what is going on in the reading of Gen 12:1–3 as Wolff has done, and as I would also. Joel resists seeing the nations being blessed or blessing themselves as “a reason or an explanation of the purpose of Abraham’s and thus Israel’s election.” As an interpreter of the Old Testament, I find that hard to avoid, especially when the syntax with its sequence of imperative followed by cohortatives, clearly suggests that the blessings of God flow out of the response to the command “Go.”

Election as Intrinsic or Instrumental

This leads me therefore to raise questions about having to think of the matter of intrinsic election and instrumental election as an either-or. Joel does not do that altogether and seems to recognize texts that point in both directions. But he shies away from the instrumental notion, even though there are texts that point just as clearly in that direction as other texts point toward the notion of election as intrinsic or resting only in the divine choice and favor (e.g., Deut 7 and 9). I would include the Joseph story as an example. There are ways in which the story does not altogether fit the election theme in that Joseph is a favorite of his father and chosen by Jacob at the beginning of the story. But as the story goes on, it is clear that it is not simply about parental favoritism and filial jealousy, which is where it starts out. As it moves along, the reader discovers there is a much larger story here, intimated first of all in Joseph’s dreams. What is going on in the larger story, however, is discovered precisely in Joseph’s interpretation of all the events in Gen 45 and 50:15–21. As Joel rightly recognizes and develops, this is a story of divine providence. That providence, however, happens through the election of Joseph. As Joel says, he is “part of God’s plan to keep his estranged family alive” (65). This, however, is a highly instrumental election. Twice Joseph interprets what has happened to his brothers in Gen 45 as: “God sent me before you to preserve life,” and in Gen 50, when the brothers appeal to Joseph to lift up or forgive their sin, he says he cannot, for that is God’s work, and he is not in the place of God. There is a mystery in the evil they have done that somehow God has reckoned for good. In that process, Joseph has a clear role: “It is my task to provide for you and your children.” Once again, the chosen one has all along been set for a role in
God’s providential work. He has been sent by God to provide for, in effect, to bring blessing both to his own family and to the larger world.

There are plenty of texts that do not have an instrumental notion of election, but it is a large part of key texts, and there is little reason to resist it. And while it may be the case that the church brings things from the New Testament into the way it reads the Old Testament, as it should, it is also the case that the church reads the New Testament in the light of the Old.

The Scriptures as Critical Subject and Critical Tool

In that connection, a key point Joel makes near the end of his book is that the church, or Christians, may draw on the Old Testament for a critique of some of the more polemical and questionable forms of election theology in the New Testament (190–91). I think he is absolutely on target here. One of the features of Christian reading of Scripture is that Scripture interprets Scripture, and one may raise questions about some texts in the light of other texts or hear texts criticize other texts. I would join with Joel in citing Ishmael as a marvelous example of the nonelect as recipients of God’s blessing. The Lord is specific about establishing covenant with Isaac and not Ishmael, but in Gen 17:20 the Lord promises blessing upon Ishmael in a manner that is the strongest and largest echo of the promise of blessing to Abraham anywhere in the Bible. The covenant is with the chosen one, Isaac, but the great blessing is upon Ishmael, the not-chosen. And consistent with what we have seen in Gen 12, the divine blessing comes upon Ishmael, one of the families of the earth, precisely because of the divine intercession of Abraham (Gen 17:19–20).

The church has various interpretive tools to engage and criticize biblical texts and their content. Scripture is one of these. It also often acknowledges a canon within the canon that serves as a critical lens for the reading of Scripture. In this case, it is the word of good news that in Jesus Christ God has dealt with human sin and suffering. There is a universalism inherent in that, even though the dualism of election can be found in the Scriptures. One of the problems with the doctrine of predestination, a profound form of election theology, is that it is an experientially based recognition that is turned into a logical burden. The experience of predestination is a powerful sense that God has been the initiator of my faith, that God has moved my heart to hear and respond to the good news. So what often happens is that one then makes a logical move at that point to assume that, if that is the case, then others are also predestined to damnation. This ignores the inscrutable work of God, to which Joel alludes so often.

The church also has the rule of faith, that is, the creeds, as a guide to interpreting Scripture, and it has the rule of love, the latter, in my judgment, analogous to Joel’s
proposal of the Holocaust experience as a moral tool for Christians in reading Scripture. In one denominational document, the rule of love has been put this way:

> [A]ll interpretations are to be judged by the question whether they offer and support the love given and commanded by God. When interpretations do not meet this criterion, it must be asked whether the text has been used correctly in the light of the whole Scripture and its subject. (“Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture” [Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1992], 19–20)

While I assume it is not a self-conscious move, Joel’s interpretation of the election texts of Scripture often seems to manifest the rule of love. I do not know if he would regard that as a plus, but I certainly do.