Abraham, Israel and the Nations: The Implications of Abraham’s Blessings for the Nations

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ABSTRACT

The Biblical idea of election presents moral and theological difficulties that have resonated through history, particularly in the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Out of such theology rises the question of how a fair God can “elect” one group of people to the exclusion of the rest. This research seeks to deal with this question of election focusing on the story of Abraham in Genesis. Adopting a canonical approach that interprets the Abraham story as a whole, rather than as a collection of separate theological perspectives, this thesis argues that the election of Abraham and later Israel is not so much about God favoring one group of people over others, but rather, that there is a universal dimension to this story even if there is room to debate the implications of this universalism. Gen 12: 1-3 in particular addresses this issue in asserting that Abraham’s blessing has significance that extends beyond the chosen people to “all the families of the earth.” This idea is later alluded to in Genesis 17 where the Abrahamic covenant is described to have a wider scope that encompasses others than the covenant community. Even Genesis 15, which describes the fate of the Canaanites does not contradict the universal implication of Abraham’s blessing as it directly deals with the issue of justice for the Canaanites. Hence, the Abrahamic tradition does not endorse any election idea that serves the benefit of some people on the exclusion of the rest. Rather, behind the story of the divine choosing of a particular group of people lies a greater divine purpose that seeks to bless “all the families of the earth.”
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<td>BI</td>
<td>Biblical Interpretation</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBQ</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</td>
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<tr>
<td>HeBAI</td>
<td>Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel</td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td>Journal of Biblical Literature</td>
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<td>JETS</td>
<td>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</td>
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<td>JPS</td>
<td>Jewish Publication Society</td>
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<td>JSOT</td>
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<td>HS</td>
<td>Hebrew Studies</td>
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<td>PEQ</td>
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<td>SBeT</td>
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INTRODUCTION: METHODOLOGY

At the centre of my research is the topic of election, and especially the question of how a fair God can “elect” one group of people to the exclusion of the rest. This picture of election presents moral and theological difficulties that have resonated through history, particularly in the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Christian claims to have taken over Israel’s election present a similar kind of difficulty; supersessionism is a new kind of exclusivism. Nevertheless, biblical theology does indeed seem to assert some kind of election theology throughout the scriptures, and in my research I will focus on the beginnings of this theology in the story of Abraham.

The thesis will argue that the election of Abraham and later Israel is not so much about God favoring one group of people over others, but rather, that there is a universal dimension to this story even if there is room to debate the implications of this universalism. In making this case, the thesis will adopt a canonical approach that interprets the Abraham story as a whole, rather than as a collection of separate theological perspectives.

In a number of different episodes, Genesis 1-11 bears witness to the primeval history of human rebellion, which created a deep alienation between God, humans and nature. However, von Rad suggests that in each episode “in and after judgment, God’s preserving, forgiving will to save is revealed.”¹ This revelation of God’s grace, however, appears to be missing at the end of the primeval history. The story of the Tower of Babel ends with God’s judgment on humankind, without any provision to deal with the universal dispersal of the nations. The question raised by von Rad is this: “is God’s relationship to the nations now finally broken; is

God’s gracious forbearance now exhausted; has God rejected the nations in wrath forever?"²

The answer lies in a new beginning that follows, centering on a man whose promised destiny reversed the divine judgment at this point. In the promise that is given to Abram, God’s saving will and a blessing extending far beyond the limits of the covenant people to “all the families of the earth” is revealed. Accordingly, this thesis will examine the implications of the Abraham narratives for the unfolding of blessing or salvation in the Bible.

This thesis will adopt a canonical methodology that focuses on the received Hebrew text (MT) without denying the diachronic complexities of composition (discussed in source and redactional studies) and variation among the ancient manuscripts (text criticism). Canonical methodology is associated with the works of James Sanders and Brevard S. Childs. It is based on the assumption that “Biblical texts were produced, transmitted, reworked, and preserved in communities for which they were authoritative and that biblical criticism should include study of how these texts functioned in the believing community.”³ While source, form and redaction criticisms are interested in looking at the compositional history of biblical text before it receives its final form, canonical criticism analyses the text in its final form.⁴

Canonical criticism developed partly in response to the unsuccessful attempt of Biblical theologians in finding the locus of biblical authority in a single unifying theme, the growing dissatisfaction with the results of historical-critical scholarship and the unspoken hermeneutical assumption of historical criticism that authority rested in the earliest version of a biblical tradition.⁵ Canonical criticism is not, however, antithetical to historical-critical work because it

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² Von Rad, *Genesis*, 152.
⁴ Callaway, “Canonical Criticism,” 143.
⁵ Callaway, “Canonical Criticism,” 143-44.
does not ignore the results of literary and historical methods. Primarily, canonical criticism is theological in nature. Its main emphasis is to look for the locus of authority in the biblical texts by studying how the text functioned authoritatively in the believing communities that had received them as scripture. It examines how the believing communities and the developing traditions interacted with each other and thereby shaped each other. Accordingly, the text is seen as the product of the community and the community’s identity is understood to have been shaped and defined by the text as the community worked and reflected on the traditions. Hence, it is not individual authors or sources but the community that is the central focus. It is also not the earlier stages of the development of the text but the final form of the text that is prioritized in canonical criticism. Canonical criticism assumes that hermeneutics should be determined from within the scriptures themselves. Finally, canonical criticism insists that the locus of authority is found only in the full canon, which is the context in which every biblical text finally must be read.\(^6\)

Although canonical methodology shares the above common traits, the works of both Sanders and Childs are distinct in their interest and procedures. While Sanders emphasizes the role of the believing communities in preserving and producing the text, Childs focuses on the final form of the text (without entirely neglecting the possibilities of compositional history). Unlike Sanders, Childs avoids using the term “criticism” because his approach is not seen as one among the other critical methods of biblical interpretation. Childs’ canonical approach seeks to develop a vibrant biblical theology centering on the canonical text. He seeks to provide “fresh interpretations of the final form of scripture itself, interpretations which are relatively independent of any particular editor or community which has preserved it.”\(^7\) So, although the communities who shaped the text are fundamental, this approach is not simply a history of

\(^6\) Callaway, “Canonical Criticism,” 147.
reception. Childs does not deny the editorial works behind the text. But he argues that those who were behind the actual editing of the text did not leave behind their footprints and so, “the actual process by which the text was reworked lies in almost total obscurity.” Thus, what is left at our disposal is the final form of the text—the canonical text. The term “canonical” is used by him as “a cipher to encompass the various and diverse factors involved in the formation of the literature.” It refers to certain religious writings and traditions that were received and accepted as authoritative by the believing community. The term also denotes the process of collection leading to the final stage of literary and textual stabilization and the theological forces that were at work in its composition.

Although the canonical approach does not contest the results of historical criticism, it discourages the making of theology out of pure historical reconstructions or out of the atomization of texts in which the theologies of the text become irrelevant with each other. It encourages theologians to seriously consider the unity of the Bible, the source of which comes from the belief that the Bible as canon is throughout a witness to the Christian God. The canonical approach emphasizes that theology should be built on the final form of the text rather than any earlier reconstructed forms. Childs’ emphasis on the final form of the text is built on the fact that there is a relationship between Israel’s encounter with God and the way the text was canonized into the scripture:

The reason for insisting on the final form of scripture lies in the peculiar relationship between text and people of God which is constitutive of the canon. The shape of the

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biblical text reflects a history of encounter between God and Israel. The canon serves to
describe this peculiar relationship and to define the scope of this history by establishing a
beginning and end to the process. It assigns a special quality to this particular segment of
human history which became normative for all successive generations of this community
of faith. The significance of the final form of the biblical text is that it alone bears witness
to the full history of revelation.\textsuperscript{12}

Above all, it is only in the final form that the fullness of meaning resides, especially the
theological meaning. Such meaning is lost when the text is broken into different fragments and
read independently apart from the canonical text.\textsuperscript{13} The canonical approach seeks to treat the text
in its own right and understand the nature of the theological shape of the text. This is what is
distinct about canonical approach from other critical methods as expressed in Childs’ own
words: “The canonical study of the Old Testament shares an interest in common with several of
the newer literary critical methods in its concern to do justice to the integrity of the text itself
apart from diachronistic reconstruction. The canonical approach differs from a strictly literary
approach by interpreting the Biblical text in relation to a community of faith and practice for
whom it served a particular theological role as possessing divine authority.”\textsuperscript{14}

Taking Childs’ canonical approach, this thesis will nevertheless consider the various
portraits of Abraham in Genesis and the implications they have for the nations. The book of
Genesis comes to us with many complexities arising from the compositional history of the book.
Many efforts have been made over the last centuries to determine when, where, how and by
whom Genesis was written. One of the main questions that was debated was whether Genesis is

\begin{itemize}
\item Childs, \textit{Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture}, 75-76.
\item Paul R. Noble, \textit{The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs}
(Leiden: Brill, 1995), 42-44.
\item Childs, \textit{Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture}, 74.
\end{itemize}
composed of “a combination of different sources, or of original fragments put together at a later stage, or of an original kernel to which several supplements were added at different moments, or—possibly—a combination of these models.”¹⁵ There continues to be debates about the possibility of finding in Genesis a number of redactional works and traces of different editions, or the hand of real “authors.” These are the various kinds of diachronic exegesis to which Childs was responding.¹⁶

The old critical theory suggested, for example, that during the reign of Solomon an account of Israel’s history was composed by a writer known as the Yahwist (‘J’). After the division of the kingdom, the northern kingdom produced a work of its own history under the influence of a writer known as Elohist. When the northern kingdom fell into the hands of the Assyrians, the work of Elohist was brought to Jerusalem and merged with the work of the Yahwist (JE) in the seventh century. In the sixth century, the new work, JE was then combined with the Priestly account of Israel’s history by a post-exilic editor to give the present form of the book. The narrative comprises mostly of JE but it is P that gives the framework which extends from 1:1 to 50:12-13 of Genesis.¹⁷

This theory, or something close to it, enjoyed a scholarly consensus for many years but more recently a growing number of scholars have challenged it as recent developments are made in the field. There is no common consensus found on the priority of a source over the other, the interdependence of the sources, the traditions that the sources share, or the precise extent of the sources. The old dates of the Yahwist and Elohist were questioned, and even the existence of J and E have come to be doubted, especially in Europe. Likewise, the Priestly code and its dating

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have been disputed, as have the additions to P.\textsuperscript{18} Doublets, inconsistencies, antithesis, etc., were the primary tools of historical-critical exegesis in attacking the unity of the text. Konrad Schmid has rightly argued that “neither traditional nor newer theories can be taken as the accepted starting point of analysis; rather, they are, at most, possible ends.”\textsuperscript{19}

Recognizing the complexities involved with the composition of the book of Genesis, Brevard Childs argues that it is essential that the present shape of the book of Genesis is not understood simply as “a juxtaposition of independent literary strands which previously had had nothing to do with one another.”\textsuperscript{20} This might sound like a rejection of diachronic hypotheses, but he contends that the book has gone through a complex process of growth and change in which different literary traditions mutually influenced each other in a dynamic interaction with the community of faith. There is obviously a complex literary history behind the present structure of the book. Yet each text is assigned a different role within the new context of the book of Genesis. Literary and historical arguments are endless and do have a place in the critical study of the texts, but Brevard Childs argues that in their canonical context, texts are put in a new setting in which theology surpasses that of the historical context. It is undeniable that a text begins in a particular historical setting and it goes through a process in which different literary traditions influence its final form. However, such historical facts and literary compositions are given less importance as the canonical editors put the material together in its canonical setting. Despite the historical and literary complexities of Genesis, or any other book, they function as a unified whole within their canonical setting.

\textsuperscript{18} See, e.g., Christophe Nihan, \textit{From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch: A Study in the Composition of the Book of Leviticus}, FAT 25 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).
\textsuperscript{20} Childs, \textit{Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture}, 148.
This thesis does not seek to resolve any of the complex debates about the compositional history of Genesis, but as indicated above, it will acknowledge the possibilities for diachronic hypotheses and adopt a canonical methodology that in the end focuses on the text and its theology in its present form. Childs has made significant contribution in this regard but since the significance of his work continues to be debated, some other versions of canonical interpretation will also be considered where necessary.

The international blessing that this thesis seeks to explore is not confined to the ancestral tradition of Genesis; passages such as Amos 9:7; Isaiah 19:23-25; 42:6-7; 49:6 also affirm the witness of the prophets that God has other nations in mind and relates to them in distinctive ways. However, since it is not possible within the scope of this thesis to deal in detail with all these traditions, our focus will be on a number of selected texts from Genesis. In particular, we will focus on the contributions of Gen 12:1-3 and Genesis 17 in their canonical context.

Gen 12:1-3 will serve as the primary text in discussing the subject matter as many scholars following Gerhard von Rad have come to acknowledge that the promise made to Abram in Gen 12:1-3 is the bridge between the history of the nations in Genesis 1-11 and the history of Israel. Abram is chosen to fix the problem that was caused in the primeval history due to the rebellion of humankind. It is Abram who receives the promise but the effect of this is extended to future Israel and to all the families of the earth. Israel is reckoned to “be a blessing to the nations.” In what way will Israel bring that into completion? In other words, what is her role in the universal intention of God? Scholars have different opinions in regard to Israel’s elective role, which is expressed in various ways as in terms of service, model, mediator or instrument. This is one of the areas this thesis will be exploring. Gen 12:3 is significant in discussing Israel’s blessing for the nations. However, there are clashes of interpretation in regard to the root word,
brk in 3b, raising the question of whether the nations shall be blessed or shall bless themselves through Abram. This question requires a considerable amount of attention since an understanding of the international blessing hinges on this text. Therefore, a part of my thesis will focus on the exegesis of this text.

Another text this thesis will discuss is Genesis 17, because in looking at the implications of Abraham and Israel’s election the question of who belongs to the Abrahamic covenant is significant, a question that has recently become contentious among scholars. While there are scholars who suggest that the covenant belongs only to the Israelites from the line of Isaac, there are others who argue that the covenant goes beyond Israel to all the seed of Abraham. Apart from the question of Ishmael’s inclusion in the covenant, scholars like Jacob Wöhrle and Mark G. Brett draw attention to a particular class of foreigners in 17:12. These are “not the seed” of Abraham. They are the ones “bought with silver,” yet they are required to be circumcised. Hence, taking Genesis 17 as the basis and by looking at some scholarly discussions on the text, this thesis will argue that the Abrahamic covenant is extended not just to the biological descendants of Abraham but also to those outsiders who are willing to share in the blessings of Abraham.

Genesis 15 will be relevant to the extent that it raises questions about why the Canaanite nations are not blessed if the nations are the object of Israel’s blessing. A number of questions

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arise in relation to this chapter. Here the historical questions cannot be left out of account: Did the Canaanites really suffer the fate portrayed in the Bible? Were there really a violent conquest and expulsion of the native population of Canaan? If there were, why were the Canaanites excluded from the international blessing? On what ground has this been interpreted in the final form of the biblical texts? These are a few questions that demand our attention in considering the implications of Abram’s blessings for the nations.

Accordingly, the focus of the thesis will be on the textual study of Genesis 12 and Genesis 17, with some attention to Genesis 15. But the thesis will also explore some of the theological perspectives on the universal implications of Abraham and Israel’s election. In so doing, the thesis will examine the role of Israel in God’s providence, as understood through theological lenses. In this regard, the contribution of H.H. Rowley, Joel Kaminsky, R.W.L. Moberly and Jon D. Levenson will be discussed. I have chosen to discuss the work of these figures because they all make distinctive claims about Israel’s elective role, and three of them emphasize the universal implications of election. Moberly’s work is unique among the rest because he sees the beneficiary of the divine promises as primarily Abraham’s descendants rather than the nations, an unusual perspective among Christian commentators, and especially among commentators who have adopted the canonical approach to biblical interpretation.
GEN 12:1-3 (4A): BEGINNING WITH ABRAM

Genesis 12:1-3 is pivotal in the discussion of Abraham’s international blessing as it stretches the effect of Abraham’s blessing from him and his descendants to all the families of the earth. Even though scholars have argued about the form and structure of Gen 12:1-3,¹ the text is placed in such a way that it functions as a link between the primeval history and the sacred history pointing to a new beginning God is bringing about for the welfare of the whole world through the promised destiny of one person. The call and commission of Abram marks the beginning of Israel’s history² and reveals the divine will that seeks to bless the whole world.

There is no indication in the text as to why God chose Abram of all the people of the world. There is nothing special and distinct mentioned about him. He is simply introduced as a man with “no recorded personal achievements, no remarkable character traits, and no glorious religious past.”³ His family history is the only perspective provided (Gen 11: 26-32)—that he is the son of Terah from the line of Noah’s son, Shem, that he has two brothers, Nahor and Haran,

¹ For example, Westermann suggests that there are two introductions to the story of Abraham, Gen 11:27-32 and Gen 12: 1-3 (or 4a), which provides different details: Gen11:27-32 contains the genealogy of Terah telling the journey of Abraham as being initiated by Terah, and Gen 12:1-4a contains a divine call suggesting the journey of Abram as being initiated by God. These two perspectives are placed together as a coherent account but it is obvious that Gen 12:1-4a does not follow what precedes it. See Claus Westermann, Genesis 12-36, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 145. J.L. Ska also argues that 12:1-3 (4a) has no firm attachment to the preceding passage in Gen 11:27-32. The same is also true of the conclusion as 12:4a seems to have closed the pericope (Gen 12:1-4a) but the next verse (v.4b) begins with an idea that seems to possess a link with the journey initiated by Terah rather than the one initiated by the divine. Gen 12:1-4a is, therefore, a floating text with no connection with what precedes or what follows. However, it is a unified text. Firstly, the binomial expression of “order” (12:1) and “promise” (12:2-3) appears together in the same manner elsewhere in the patriarchal narratives (Gen 17:7; 26:3). Secondly, according to Ska, the work of just one author can be traced in the progressive expression of v.1 (leave your country, your relatives, your father’s household) and the five usage of the root, brk, to bless (12:2-3). J.L. Ska, Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 47.
² Westermann claims that Gen 12:1-3 (4a) functions not only as a link between the patriarchal and the primeval story (v. 3b “all the families of the earth”) but also as an indicator to the beginning of the history of Israel (v.2b “into a great people”). Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 145-46. Von Rad goes a step further and suggests that this passage not only tells the beginning of Israel’s history but also the reason for the whole existence of Israel: “In this call and this road which was taken, Israel saw not only an event in her earliest history, but also a basic characteristic of her whole existence before God.” Von Rad, Genesis, 159. See also, Terence E. Fretheim, Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 32.
that he has a barren wife named Sarah and a nephew named Lot, that his birth place is Ur of the Chaldeans and he is travelling with his family to go to Canaan but settled down in Haran.

God’s call of Abram came as the family stopped their journey in Haran. So then, God’s call comes to Abram as a continuation of the journey begun by his father. “God works in and with the forces and circumstances of human life.” Charles E. Van Engen ventures a theological summary in commenting that “all Israel knew that their forefather Abraham was chosen by God because he wanted to do something in Abraham’s life—but more profoundly, because YHWH wanted to do something in the lives of all the families of the earth. Israel’s ancestor was not only to be an example of blessing, but a channel, means, and cause of blessing.” God’s choice is not exclusive as at the very outset of God choosing Abram in Gen 12:1-3, God announces to bring about through Abram something that will affect not just him and his family but the whole humanity. Beginning with Abram and carrying down through Israel, God seeks to unleashed blessings to all the families of the earth.

The narrative begins with a divine command, “Go” and three concentric circles are implied here: “Go from your country,” which is a command to depart from his fatherland, the land that is owned by his people which provides safety and daily livelihood; “Go from your kindred,” a command to leave the clan, “that vast network of blood relationships that defines tribal loyalty” and; “Go from your father’s house,” a command to lose tie with the loved ones of one’s family. Abram is to leave all this because he is commanded to do so by God, a God whom he does not know (one might note that there is no revelation of the divine name at this point, such as the “I am Yhwh” in Genesis 15). Interestingly, this circle corresponds with the promise that follows. While the circle moves from the general to the specific in the command, the

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4 Fretheim, Abraham, 32.
promise has a widening focus of moving from the specific to the general—from Abram to his immediate contacts, then, to all the families of the earth.⁷

In the command “Go,” God demands something precious from Abram, but what God promises next in vv.2-3 are things that weigh much more than what he has to give up. It is contentious among scholars whether the promise clause is the purpose or the result of the command, “Go.”⁸ According to Joel S. Baden, the interpretation of the promise clause as connoting purpose or result cannot be based on the morpho-syntax of the verbal sequence but on the interpretation of scholars of the whole passage. Baden proposes that the promise clause represents that of simultaneity making the divine speech seems more like an agreement than a promise. This argument, however, does not sit very well with the imperative “Go” in 12:1, which denotes a command rather than an agreement. Moreover, Baden’s own interpretation seems to fall within the category of purpose/result: “Go…that I will show you, and let me make you a great nation and bless you and magnify your name, and you be a blessing, and let me bless those that bless you and curse the one who curses you; then all the families of the earth will bless themselves by you.”⁹ Most scholars agree that a cohortative following an imperative generally expresses purpose or result.¹⁰ If Abram is called so that he will be blessed and through him the rest of the families of the earth will be blessed, interpreting the promise clause as purpose/result makes better sense.

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⁸ Towner and Bill T. Arnold are among those who argue that it is in the promise that the purpose of the “Go” is found: “Go…so that I may make of you a great nation, so that I may bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” See Towner, Genesis, 134 and Bill T. Arnold, Genesis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 131. On the other hand, J. Gerald Janzen asserts that the promise that follows the imperative is not the purpose but the result of it: “Go…that I may make of you a great nation.” See J. Gerald Janzen, Genesis 12-50: Abraham and All the Families of the Earth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 15.
The key word of the divine speech in vv.2-3 is “blessing,” which is used five times demonstrating that God is in the business of blessing the world through the choosing of this one man, Abram and his descendants. It is obvious that Abram is the primary recipient of the blessing as he will become a “a great nation,” he will be blessed by God, his name will be made great, he will become a blessing, God will bless/curse others depending on their relationship with Abram and all the families of the earth shall be blessed (or bless themselves) through him. All these blessings concern Abram first of all but it is also extended to those outside. Westermann has rightly identified a gradual progression in the blessing clause in which v.2 speaks only of Abram, v3a of its effect on those with whom he comes into contact and v.3b of its effect on all the families of the earth. One might even perceive a logical tension between the universal claim in v.3b and the more national focus of the preceding verses. Such an idea, however, does not necessarily imply that v.2 is limited to Abram and v.3 to those outside. Below I will argue that the implication of Abraham’s blessing for others is not confined to v.3 but also in the blessing specifically mentioned to Abram in v.2. In the second part of this thesis, we will explore the various ways this problem has been articulated by Jewish and Christian biblical scholars – particularly Rowley, Moberly, Kaminsky and Levenson.

Gen 12:2 reports that God will make Abram into “a great nation.” The Hebrew adjective gdl represents greatness in extent, number, power or importance and a large part of the promise in Gen 12:2 designates a numerical growth which is also reiterated in later passages such as 13: 16; 15: 5. The word goy represents an entity involving government and territory. Accordingly, in promising Abram “a great nation,” God is ensuring that numerous descendants

11 Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 149.
12 The terms, “a great nation” occurs nine times in the Pentateuch (Gen. 12:2; Gen. 17:20; Gen. 18:18; Gen. 21:18; Gen. 46:3; Ex. 32:10; Num. 14:12; Deut. 4:6-8; Deut. 26:5) and each time it is used in reference to Abram and the descendants coming through him. In Gen 17:20, it is used specifically in relation to Ishmael.
13 Grüneberg, Abraham, Blessing and the Nations, 162-63.
will come through him, which will eventually form into a political entity, rightly denoting the nation Israel. Israel as a nation is then placed alongside the nations of Genesis10 who are the descendants of Noah’s sons as presented according to their families, languages, territories and nations. Israel is put in the midst of these nations so as to carry out the divine will among them. The promise of “a great nation,” is thus not limited to Abram and his descendants but has significance for the other nations in that it serves their benefits and not just Abram and the nation coming through him.

Some scholars agree that the “great name” that is promised to Abram is given against the backdrop of the story of the Tower of Babel where the builders sought to achieve a great name for themselves. Brett, in particular, argues that God’s promise to make Abram’s name great resonates not only with the story of the Tower of Babel but also with the story of “the divine-human hybrids” of Gen 6:1-4: “the tower builders wanted to make a name (shem) for themselves, so that they would not be scattered over the earth (11.4), and the hybrids were ‘men of renown’, or ‘men with a name’ (shem in 6.4).”14 In both the instances, the attempt to achieve a name incurred divine judgment as the builders sought to achieve it on their own and the “men with a name” achieved it through something that was not originally intended by the divine. If God’s promise of “a great name” to Abram is being given against the background of these stories, God seems to be reversing the judgment as Abram becomes “a great name” and his fame is recognized among the people scattered around the world. He is not just known but he becomes a blessing in their midst which is the ultimate goal of the divine plan. All the blessings that are prescribed in v.2, that of “a great nation” and perhaps material blessing, culminate in the phrase, “so that you will be a blessing.” God blesses Abram so that he in turn becomes a blessing to

14 Brett, Genesis, 49.
others. Hence, even in the blessings specifically ascribed to Abram, we see the divine blessing transcending beyond Abram’s circle. The nations, eventually, become the object of Abram’s blessing.

The next divine speech in v.3 plainly talks about the universal implications of Abram’s blessing. But v.3a gives the condition that others will profit from Abram’s blessing only on the condition that they treat Abram well, “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse,” which appears to contradict what follows: “all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.” This creates a tension since, on the one hand, one’s attitude matters in acquiring the divine blessing, while on the other hand, a universal blessing is implied in v.3 regardless of one’s attitude. This tension, however, becomes less controversial as we take the grammar of the sentence into consideration. The subject of “those who bless you” and “the one who curses” appears in plural and singular respectively, suggesting that the positive statement, “those who bless you” far outweighs the negative phrase, “the one who curses you.” So then, v.3a does not contradict so much with the universal blessing of Abram in v.3b. Ultimately, all the rest of the nations will be recipients of the divine blessing because YHWH’s intention is to bless all humans of the earth and not just Abram and his family and the ones who share solidarity with him.

V. 3b serves as the climax of the promise blessing. However, there has been a long-standing debate among scholars about how to understand the root verb of brk in v.3. The verb is a niphal which scholars have taken to be either passive (be blessed), middle (find blessing) or

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reflexive (bless themselves). Scholars who read the verb as passive or middle assume Abram to be the means through whom God’s blessing will be channeled to the nations. Whereas scholars who translate the verb in the reflexive terms suggest that Abram will become a model of blessing so that others will admire him and utter his name to invoke blessing on themselves.

Scholars who favor the reflexive reading read the niphal of Gen 12: 3b in the light of the hithpael in Gen 22:18 and Gen 26:4 which is obviously reflexive. Walter Moberly is a strong proponent of the reflexive reading as discussed above. He argues that “the ambiguous niphal (of Gen 12: 3) must be resolved by the unambiguous hithpael (of Gen 22: 18 and Gen 26:4).” Accordingly, Gen 12:3 should be taken in a reflexive sense as meaning, “by you they will bless themselves.” This means that Abram’s name will be used in invoking blessing on oneself. Jon D. Levenson also favors this interpretation and claims that Abram’s name will become “a byword” for others to use to pronounce blessing on themselves.

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20 For further details, see the chapter, Walter Moberly: Abram as a Model Blessing.

21 Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 31-32. Levenson advocates the reflexive reading although he strongly proposes the universal horizon of Abraham’s blessing. Likewise, Westermann and J.G. Janzen argue that the reflexive reading does not override the universal significance of the promise of Abraham. Westermann argues that the reflexive does not say anything less than the passive. When Abram’s name is used by the families of the earth to invoke blessing on themselves, automatically they receive the blessing. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 151-52. In the light of the Babel story, Janzen argues that the universal use of Abram’s name in blessing has “redemptive significance” as Abram’s name is used as “a seed word” to unify the human family scattered as a result of divine judgment. Despite the different language that they speak now, they will use this common word “Abram” to invoke God’s blessing upon themselves. Through this common word, they will receive what they originally seek to achieve using the common language—unity and solidarity. Janzen, *Genesis 12-50*, 18. See also, Jeff S. Anderson, *The Blessing and the Curse: Trajectories in the Theology of the Old Testament* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 111-12; Fretheim, *Abraham: Trails of Family and Faith*, 34; and Joel N. Lohr, *Chosen and Unchosen: Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian Interpretation* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 113.
Von Rad, on the contrary, argues that restricting the text to just this one meaning would not do hermeneutical justice to the text. Hence, he argues that while the reflexive meaning is undeniable, the passive is also possible.\textsuperscript{22} Von Rad is among the scholars who consider the variants in the verb, \textit{brk} as stylistic and suggest the viability of reflexive or passive meaning. But Chee-Chiew Lee insists on the passive meaning, arguing that the \textit{niphal} and the \textit{hithpael} can overlap sometimes in meaning but they bear distinct nuances. He asserts, “it is likely that the \textit{niphal} and the \textit{hithpael} of בָּרָכֶנָה in the Abrahamic blessing for nations bear slightly different nuances. A reflexive reading of the \textit{hithpael} need not entail a corresponding reflexive reading of the \textit{niphal}. Furthermore, it is important to read Gen 12:3b in the light of the whole patriarchal narrative in Genesis, which strongly favors a passive rendering of the \textit{niphal} in Gen 12:3b.”\textsuperscript{23}

Analyzing the Hebrew verbal stems, Noonan also provides a convincing argument against the reflexive rendering of the \textit{niphal} in Gen 12:3b. Given that the meaning of a Hebrew verb depends on whether the verb is active or stative, Noonan argues that if a \textit{niphal} is in active, it indicates passive or middle voice and if it is in stative, it usually implies ingressive (i.e. middle) action. Hence, in biblical Hebrew, the \textit{niphal} is best rendered as a medio-passive and not reflexive, which is correspondent to the N-stem of other Semitic languages, such as Akkadian and Ugaritic. On the ground that the \textit{niphal} is generally middle-passive rather than reflexive, Noonan argues that the \textit{niphal} of \textit{brk} is unlikely to be reflexive. There are few exceptional cases of the reflexive \textit{niphal} but they are limited to verbs that belong to the active class, which is not

\textsuperscript{22} Von Rad, \textit{Genesis}, 160.
analogous to the verb *brk* because *brk* belongs to the class of stative verbs. Basing on the Hebrew verb stem, Noonan has made a strong case against the reflexive reading.

While Noonan argues for the possibility for *brk* of Gen 12:3b to be both passive/middle, Lee insists on the passive meaning. Both of them have well argued why the passive/middle reading of the *niphal* of *brk* in Gen 12:3 should be preferred over the reflexive reading. Such a reading is well justified as the text is read against its immediate as well as its wider context. Gen 12:3a serves as the immediate context to Gen12:3b which explains that God will bless or curse others depending on their attitude towards Abraham. This suggests that Abram will be the means through which others will be blessed rather than the name by which others will invoke blessing on themselves.

The wider context in the passages preceding and following Gen 12:3b also seems to support this argument even more strongly. As discussed earlier, Gen 12:1-3 is a new starting point where God is initiating a new relationship that is different from that of what had happened in the primeval history. Against the theme of sin and punishment in the primeval history, God is accomplishing in Abram his original blessing of humanity (Gen 1:28). Abram is thus the means through which God is extending his blessing to the rest of the humanity. He is not just a mere figure of blessing that others will aspire to, or seek to use his name to bless themselves. Above all, if we consider the wider canonical context of Genesis, nowhere do we find in the patriarchal narrative “people seeking blessing for themselves by their association with Abraham or invoking his name as a formula and paradigm of blessing, as a direct reflexive reading would entail.”

The only time Abraham’s name was invoked in blessing was when Isaac blessed Jacob but even

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in that occasion, his name was not invoked as “a paradigm of blessing” but as an indication of inheriting God’s promise to Abraham.27 Hence, the context of the patriarchal narrative itself support the passive/middle rendering of brk affirming that Abraham will be blessed so that others will be blessed through him.28 He becomes the mediator of blessing and not the model of blessing.

This interpretation is perhaps put into question almost in the subsequent narrative, where Abram brings a plague on Pharaoh’s household in 12:17-20. This is the first of the wife-sister deceptions, a basic plot that is expanded more fully in Genesis 20. In the later context, Abimelech’s household is healed and in effect there is a mutual blessing. This later story reveals perhaps more clearly the idea that Abram is the mediator of blessing rather than a model. Even if Gen 18:19 suggests that Abram is chosen to model righteousness and justice, he does not seem to play that role at this point. The stories in Gen 12:10-20 and Genesis 20 indicate that he was not a good moral example. Rather, the texts portray him as a deceitful, self-seeking character. His deed led to the suffering of others and instead of admiring him, these people questioned his morality and integrity. This is reiterated on several occasions. Judith Plaskow notes that “(the) Torah… makes clear that our ancestors are by no means always models of ethical behavior that edify and inspire us. On the contrary, often the Torah holds up a mirror to the ugliest aspects of human nature and human society.”29 Nevertheless, even when his moral behavior is questionable, Abram manages to bring blessing. It was through his prayer that God acted to bring about order and well being in a stressful situation. Abram became an agent of blessing and it is in their

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28 This is the case even in Genesis 20, where initially Abraham brings trouble to the house of Abimelech, as will be discussed below.
relation with him that the blessing flowed to the nations and not through his example. Hence, rather than looking at Abram as an example or as a model, the nations are blessed in their interaction with him in more complex ways. This idea is well-summarized by Mark E. Biddle:

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 Yahweh’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.30

Biddle has rightly claimed that the nations are not passive recipients in seeing Abram and being blessed by him. When they bless Abram, they are blessed but when they curse him, they are cursed. The story serves as a paradigm of how “the chosen and the unchosen learn something fundamental about the nature of the chosen’s interaction with the nations, and how God will treat these nations in relation to his specially chosen people.” 31

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31 Joel N. Lohr, Chosen and Unchosen, 111.
In discussing Abraham’s “universal” blessing, it is significant to look at what implications can be drawn from Genesis 17 for nations other than Israel. Genesis 17 contains the climax of divine promises made to Abraham. It highlights earlier promises made to him and building on these promises, it adds new content to the promises and unlike Genesis 12, this is framed in a covenant language. The theme of a land, a great nation and a relationship mentioned in Gen 12:1-3 is taken up in Genesis 17 and is given a more concretized meaning. In this passage, God promises to increase the descendants of Abraham to the extent that Abraham will father not just “a single nation” (Gen 12:2) but “many nations” (Gen 17:4). This promise is marked by changing Abram’s name to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah (Gen 17:5) so that they become the parents of multitude of nations. Brett argues that it is possible to interpret this promise as effectively expanding the single “great nation” in Gen 12:2, since Abraham and Sarah become the father and mother of many nations.1 The land to which Gen 12:1 points Abraham is named as the land of Canaan in Gen 17:8. This land where Abraham now lives as an alien is apportioned to him and his descendants. Gen 12:3 envisions a relationship between Abraham and God where God ensures his safety by blessing/cursing those with whom he comes into contact. This relationship is bound into an everlasting covenant in Gen 17:7-8 in which God promises to be his God and the descendants coming after him.

This covenant is sealed with the rite of circumcision (Gen 17:10-14). This rite is given with certain requirements that every male in the household is to be circumcised, the time of the rite is to be on the eight day (v.12), both born in the household and purchased from outside is to

be circumcised (vv.12-13) and any uncircumcised male is to be “cut off” from the community (v.14). On this basis, David W. Cotter argues that, “The promise Abraham has been hearing since Genesis 12...now demands an active response from Abraham.”

2 Genesis 17 comes from the Priestly tradition, and in von Rad’s analysis of this tradition, the naming of God can be understood in terms of concentric circles. Following his work, scholars have recognized the Priestly writer also divides humankind into three circles. The widest circle, which includes all human beings as indicated in Genesis 1, is formed by the descendants of Noah. The covenant with the whole world is recorded in Genesis 9 encompassing both humans and animals. Within this circle, God is known only by his generic name, *Elohim.* The second circle is constituted by the descendants of Abraham (Genesis 17), which includes not just the twelve tribes of Israel, but also the twelve tribes of Ishmael and many other peoples of Arab and Edomite descent. God is known by the name *El Shadday* by those in this circle. They are the ones who belong to the covenant of Abraham, practise circumcision and share the promise of the land of Canaan. In the third and innermost circle stand the sons of Jacob/Israel, i.e, the Jews and perhaps, the Samaritans. They are the ones who knew and worshipped God by his personal and cultic name, *YHWH.* They are assigned the responsibility to build the temple and maintain its purity and holiness. It is the building of the sanctuary that concretizes God’s presence specifically for Israel. All of these observations about Genesis 17 rely on the theory of the Priestly source and especially the connection with Exod 6:3, which explains that the ancestors did not know the name YHWH.

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This idea of concentric circles coming from the Priestly source suggests the inclusion of people other than Israel in the covenant of Abraham, but the question of who belongs to the Abrahamic covenant remains contentious among scholars. Ishmael stands at the centre of the debate as scholars argue over whether he is part of the Abrahamic covenant. His inclusion in the covenant is explicitly declined in Gen 17:19-22 but Gen 17:23-27 describes him as the first son receiving circumcision with Abraham, which is labeled as the sign of covenant in Gen 17:9-14. There are scholars such as Carl Steuernagel and Otto Procksch who tried to resolve this tension by taking the law of circumcision as a sign of one’s relationship with Abraham and not as a sign of one’s inclusion in the covenant. This applies even to Ishmael, the firstborn of Abraham and every male born in the house other than Isaac. Thus, the Abrahamic covenant belongs to the Israelites only from the line of Isaac.4

On the contrary, other scholars claim that the covenant is wider than Isaac on the basis that all the males of Abraham’s household including Ishmael are circumcised. To these scholars, the law of circumcision is a sign of one’s inclusion in the covenant. Accordingly, Van Seters argues, “There is a certain amount of ambiguity in the matter of who is included within this covenant. Since all the males in Abraham’s household are circumcised, including Ishmael... the covenant would seem to be wider than Israel.”5 Likewise, Konrad Schmid argues that God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17 is a covenant with all his descendants including Ishmael and Isaac. Initially, the covenant of 17:2, 4 is concerned only with Abraham because only he will become “a father of many nations.” However, in Gen 17:7-8, the mention of “you and your offspring” implies that the covenant is extended to all the descendants of Abraham including Ishmael among the future descendants of Abraham.

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5 Van Seters, Abraham in History and Tradition, 291.
Nevertheless, Schmid argues that Ishmael is not “the same type of partner in the covenant of God as Isaac is.” Ishmael and Isaac hold equal share in the promise of fertility and land holding within the greater region of the “whole land of Canaan” but only to Isaac is given the cultic proximity – the privilege to live “before the face of YHWH.” Similarly, de Pury argues that only from Isaac will come those descendants of Abraham who will become YWHW’s priestly nation. This does not exclude the other nations in a general way. It is just that the former receives the special privilege of cultic proximity to God having received the divine name and having known the rituals to maintain the purity of the sanctuary.

Schmid and de Pury have rightly vouched for the inclusion of Abraham’s descendants in the covenant other than Isaac, but their argument that only Isaac and his descendants are eligible to the cultic practices is questioned by other scholars. Brett argues that H, the Holiness school which has edited the earlier work of P, allows even those who are not of Abraham’s seed to take part in cultic practices if they are interested in doing so: “In H’s view, there would be no ground to exclude Ishmael’s descendants from cultic participation, should they wish to join in particular ceremonies.”

Exod 12:43-49, which is likely an H passage, makes circumcision the primary requirement to participate in cultic ceremonies and the same ritual is mentioned in Gen 17:9-14 as the sign of covenant which is carried out on Ishmael. If cultic participation is what makes the status of Isaac and Ishmael different as claimed by Schmid and de Pury, the law of circumcision qualifies Ishmael for it making him part of the covenant in the full sense of the term. While this kind of redactional hypothesis is not central to a canonical methodology, it does throw light on the final form and we will therefore examine it in more detail.

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8 Mark G. Brett, “The Priestly Dissemination of Abraham,” 30. Brett’s argument on tracing H law in Genesis 17 is further discussed below.
The law of circumcision in Gen 17:9-14 may be a later insertion to Genesis 17 at least in the argument presented by Wöhrle⁹ and Brett, and it plays a significant role as it functions as the condition through which those who do not belong to the Abrahamic covenant are integrated into it. This idea of circumcision as playing an integrative role comes from Jacob Wöhrle. It is Wöhrle’s contention that the primary layer of Genesis 17 consists of vv.1-8 and vv.15-22 and it is this layer that describes the covenant as exclusively valid for Abraham and his descendants through the line of Isaac.¹⁰ Ishmael does not have a share in this covenant although he is given certain privileges. However, the secondary layer in vv.9-14 makes it possible for him to be integrated into the covenant. The redactional activity of Genesis 17 inserted the law of circumcision in such a way that it plays an integrative function through which Ishmael gets a share in the covenant. Thus, Ishmael becomes part of the covenant not because he is a son of Abraham but because he was marked with the sign of covenant, circumcision.¹¹

⁹ Wöhrle argues this on the basis of contradictions that are found in Genesis 17. Firstly, Gen 17:2-8 describes a covenant between Abraham and God with no condition but Gen 17:9-14 puts the same covenant under the condition of circumcision. Gen 17:2-8 reports that the covenant is made exclusively with Abraham and his descendants. But the law of circumcision counteracts that exclusivism by describing the possibility of including the foreign slaves. Thus, the law of circumcision found in Gen 17:9-17 (also in 17:23-27) are later insertion according to Wöhrle. See Wöhrle, “The Integrative Function of the Law of Circumcision,” 74-78. Idem., “Abraham Amidst the Nations: The Priestly Concept of Covenant and the Persian Imperial Ideology,” (forthcoming). Scholars assume that Gen 17:9-14 contains more layers. The verbs in 17:10ab, 11, 12a, 13b are plural whereas the verbs in 17: 9,10aB, 12b, 13a are singular. While there is contradicting argument over which category of verbal forms, whether plural or singular constitutes the primary layer and which form the secondary layer, Wöhrle argues that Gen 17:9-14 is a unified unit from a single author who worked with an older source that is written in a plural form and integrated it into the text with the singular verses. See also Israel Knohl, The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 102; Saul M. Olyan, Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 154-155; Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 263-64; and Nahum M. Sarna, Genesis: JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia, NY: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 125.

¹⁰ To Wöhrle, the promise of fruitfulness and of “many nations” (Gen 17: 2-6) is nothing more than the creation promise given to all humanity in Gen 1: 28. Thus, the main content of the covenant is in vv. 7-8 where God promises that He will be the God of Abraham and his descendants and will give them the land of Canaan (7-8). It is only these promises in vv. 7-8 that are everlasting and are given exclusively to Abraham and his descendants. It is these promises that Isaac alone inherits.

The later insertion appears to come from the hands of the H editors from Holiness school as evident from the usage of H languages in v. 7, 8,14.\(^{12}\) Notably, Brett has pointed out striking expressions in the chapter that are from H passages where H argues for the possibilities of social integration through circumcision. The only other time, the expression “bought with silver” in Gen 17:12 is in Exod 12:44 (cf. the word \(qnh\) (buy) is also used in Lev 25:44, 45 where purchased slaves are permitted to become their property) where H allows a certain group of foreigners to take part in the Passover after they are circumcised. The phrase “every male” in Gen 17:10, 12, 23 also resonates with H language in Exod 12:48 where H once again permits outsiders to participate in the cultic practices through the same ritual. Accordingly, Brett has made a convincing argument that the earlier work of P in Genesis 17 is reworked by an H editor in such a way that Abraham’s blessing is disseminated among others through circumcision.\(^{13}\)

These arguments support the view that Ishmael has a share in the covenant. Ishmael’s inclusion in the covenant can be further argued by the fact that Ishmael receives the promise of the covenant blessings as a descendant of Abraham, blessings of fruitfulness and a great nation (Gen 17:20). The promises were given in a context where Abraham intercedes for Ishmael to “live in the presence of God” (Gen 17:18). This request is turned down on the grounds that only the promise son is eligible to such a privilege. However, this does not mean that Ishmael is “cut off” from the covenant. Brett has made a notable point when he argued,

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\(^{12}\) The phrase, “throughout their generation, for an everlasting covenant”(v7) appears in Exod 31:16, “all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession (v. 8) in Lev 14:34 and Deut 32:49; “to be their God” (v. 8b) in Exod 6:7; 29; 45; Lev 11:45; 22: 33; 25:38; 26:12, 45; Num 15:41; “that life will be cut off from its people” (v. 14) in Exod 12: 15, 19; 31:14; Lev 7:25; Num 9:13. See Knohl, The Sanctuary of Silence, 102 and Olyan, Rites and Rank, 154. For H passages, see also, S. R. Driver, An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament, 7th ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1898), 59, 151; Thomas J. King, The Realignment of the Priestly Literature: The Priestly Narrative in Genesis and its Relation to Priestly Legislation and the Holiness School (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications: 2009),126-32.

Certainly, it is clear from Gen 17:15-22 that Isaac’s seed is the special focus of the Abrahamic covenant, and interestingly v.19 specifies that בְּרֵית עֶדֶם is “for his seed after him.” It seems misleading to suggest however, that Ishmael is therefore “dis-elected” at this point, because v.20 immediately reaffirms the Abrahamic blessing of fruitfulness, along with the implication that Ishmael will become a great nation.

The text is clear on asserting that the Abrahamic covenant will be carried down through the line of Isaac. However, that does not exclude Ishmael from the covenant because instead of being “cut off” from the covenant, Ishmael too receives the promises of blessings made to Abraham, that of fruitfulness and a great nation with twelve rulers corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. The implication of this is suggested by Westermann as follows:

The promise concerning Ishmael means that the effect of God’s blessing extends beyond Israel to other nations as well. That universal trait which appeared in Gen 1 and 10 continues here. Even though the covenant is carried on only in Isaac, that does not mean that God no longer acts in regard to nations outside Israel; he blesses, increases, and grants greatness to them too. Abraham then is father, not only the father of the people of Israel, but father in a broader sense, so that Ishmael, the tribal ancestor of the Ishmaelite people, remains Abraham’s son with not the least diminution. We have a truly wide-sweeping historical outlook: the God of Israel has to do not only with Israel, but also with other nations; God’s blessing is not confined to the borders of Israel.

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14 Brett, “The Priestly Dissemination of Abraham,” 31. John Goldingay also emphasizes that it is through Isaac that “a special covenant purpose” will be brought to fulfillment but Ishmael too belongs to the covenant because he is the first to receive circumcision, the sign of the covenant and he also receives the blessing of God as Abraham does. John Goldingay, Israel’s Gospel, vol 1 of Old Testament Theology (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 203.

15 Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 270.
Notably, another striking factor that enhances our understanding of Ishmael’s inclusion in the covenant comes from looking at the significance of circumcision in its historical context. The practice of circumcision was not unique to Israel because there were many in the Ancient Near East including the Egyptians, Canaanites, Ammonites, Moabites and Arabs who practised circumcision as a rite associated with puberty and preparation for marriage. In the pre-exilic time, Israel practised circumcision in the way it was practiced by her neighbors with no religious connotation. It was only after the collapse of the political order that circumcision obtained its religious meaning. The exile displaced the community and put its identity at stake. It was during this time that the rite became an identity mark for the Jews, a mark that defines their identity as the people of God. With the Semitic neighbors not practicing anymore, circumcision became a distinctive practice for Israel symbolizing one’s belonging to the covenant community. Against this background, it is crucial to note that the circumcision of Ishmael would not have been randomly inserted into the text by the later editors nor would the hearers of the text have taken his circumcision as a mere ritual performed on him. The rite was the sign of the covenant, a sign which affiliates people into the covenant. This is evident even from the penalty given for any noncompliant male. It is said that any uncircumcised male will be “cut off,” meaning excommunicated or excluded from the covenant. Hence, when Ishmael is circumcised, he is incorporated into the covenant. Through his circumcision, he gets a share in the covenant making the covenant wider than Isaac and his descendants.

Wöhrle has correctly pointed out that circumcision became not just a mark of Jewish identity but it became the primary condition through which others are assimilated into the Jewish

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Likewise, Genesis 17 draws attention to a particular class of foreigners who are integrated into the covenant through circumcision. They are “not the seed” of Abraham. They are the ones “bought with silver,” yet, they were also asked to be circumcised. The command is carried out in vv.23-27 where all the males in Abraham’s household were circumcised including “those born in Abraham’s household” or “bought with money.” The execution of the command is mentioned twice within this pericope (in v.23 and v.27) and in both the instances, the narrator makes sure to include those “bought with money” among those circumcised in the house of Abraham. The narrator must have intentionally repeated the phase to emphasize their inclusion in the covenant. Brueggemann has rightly suggested the inclusion of both the “born” and the “bought” as the most striking dimension of the rite. Regardless of being born in the blood line of Abraham or outside of it, the text affirms that both are “full members of the covenant community.”

Hence, Wöhrle says that circumcision was not just a symbol of Jewish identity but it had also become the basic condition for the integration of alien people into this community. We might infer from this that the Abrahamic covenant is wider than Isaac. It is extended not just to the biological descendants of Abraham but also to those outsiders who are willing to share in the faith of Abraham. Whether or not Brett is correct about the editorial activity of H, a canonical approach affirms this outcome.

17 LXX-Version of Esther (Est.8:17) records that “many from the nations were circumcised and became Jews” and also the book of Judith testifies that Achior the Ammonite became a Jew through circumcision (Jdt 14:10). See Wöhrle, “The Integrative Function of the Law of Circumcision,” 72-74.
The textual study of Gen12:1-3 and Genesis 17 shows that the blessing of Abraham is not confined to the covenant community but has a wider scope extending to the rest of the nations. Genesis 15, however, puts this conclusion into question as the text records God blessing Abraham and his descendants while setting some people at a disadvantage. The text apparently describes how this group of people is deprived of their right to land ownership when God promises to give away their land to Abraham and his descendants. The later traditions of Joshua give a distressing picture of how the promise was fulfilled, or partially fulfilled, in the driving out and slaughter of the native people. This has raised questions in the mind of readers throughout history of how a moral God could have no concern for the moral right of certain group of people and command their execution in favor of Israel. The way the Canaanites are treated in the Bible challenges the view of election that understands the divine choosing of a particular group of people as for the sake of blessing the rest of the nations. This chapter will, therefore, try to resolve some of the issues pertaining to the question of why the Canaanite nations are not blessed. Some of the questions raised by historians (e.g., was there really a violent conquest of Canaan?) are not directly relevant to a canonical approach to Genesis, but it is important to note that Genesis 15 does directly address the issue of justice for the Canaanites, and even the canonical shape of Joshua does not depict genocide.

In the explanatory clause, “for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (v.16), Genesis 15 explicitly deals with the question of theodicy in relation to the Canaanites. The Amorites represent the people of Canaan, and their wickedness is already recognized in this passage. The Canaanites have already been briefly mentioned in Gen 9:20-27 which records the story of the cursing of Canaan. The text not only describes Canaan as being cursed but also as
the one who inherited his father’s disposition to sexual immorality.\(^1\) This story might have been shaped in the context of the Israelites’ conquest of Canaan in order to justify the conquest.\(^2\) Accordingly, it is understandable why the Old Testament recurrently mentions the Canaanites’ iniquity when it talks about Israel’s possession of the land. Charlie Trimm suggests that the Canaanites’ sin is given greater attention because they occupy the land God promised to give to the Israelites,\(^3\) but this is not an explanation that fits with the canonical texts as we have them. Because of the sin of the people who previously inhabited the land, Deut 9:5 testifies that God is giving away their land to Israel, as do Lev 18:3, 24-30; 20:22-24 on the basis of a similar theology.\(^4\) God chose to give the land to Israel not only because of the geographical location and its resources but also because of the wickedness of its inhabitants, which God intends to bring into judgment.\(^5\) Accordingly, when Gen 15:17 reports that the iniquity of the Amorites has not reached its fullest measure, it implies a possibility that the sin of the Amorites will increase rather than decrease, eventually leading to their destruction and justifies the act of God in granting the land to Israel. The Israelites have legal ownership of the land because God promised it to the patriarchs and so the Canaanites are “squatters” in the land of Israel. They are

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1 Joel Kaminsky, *Yet I loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 117.
3 Charlie Trimm, “Did YHWH Condemn the Nations When He Elected Israel? YHWH’s Disposition Towards Non-Israelites in the Torah,” *JETS* 55 (2012): 531-32. See also, Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, *Did God Really Command the Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2014), 62-66. Copan and Flannagan suggest that the Canaanites are living in the land illegally as God had already promised the land to the patriarchs. It the Israelites who are the legal owners and the Canaanites are squatters in the land. This argument has its own problem as the patriarchal narrative consistently acknowledge the Canaanites to be the legitimate owners of the land as discussed further below. The israelites have legal ownership of the land because God promised it to the patriarchs and so the Canaanites are “squatters” in the land of Israel. They are trespassers. This is a weak case because the patriarchs themselves acknowledge the canaanites as the legitimate owners of the land and bought land from them 62. The israelites have legal ownership of the land because God promised it to the patriarchs and so the Canaanites are “squatters” in the land of Israel. They are trespassers. This is a weak case because the patriarchs themselves acknowledge the canaanites as the legitimate owners of the land and bought land from them 62.
trespassers. This is a weak case because the patriarchs themselves acknowledge the Canaanites as the legitimate owners of the land and bought land from them.

Anderson has aptly summarized these issues: “The text does not award a land to Israel in a manner that immorally voids all previous claims. Quite the opposite, the gift of the land to Israel can only take place when the sins of the Canaanites will be of sufficient number and magnitude so as to justify their expulsion.”⁶ Thus, the moral rights of the Canaanites were not entirely neglected, as some have suggested. However, the language of “expulsion” used by Anderson does not fit very well with the argument of scholars who observe that Genesis 15 does not actually mention expulsion or dispossession. Moreover, one would need to distinguish between the justification for expulsion and the realities of only a partial expulsion, as these are depicted even in the book of Joshua.

Thomas Römer argues that Genesis 15 criticizes the Deuteronomistic idea of dispossession by adding three more nations, the Kenites, the Kenizzites and the Kadmonites to “the traditional list of the peoples” inhabiting the land (vv.18-21). These nations had friendly relation with the patriarchs and were consistently put in a positive light in the Old Testament (Judg 1:16; 17-21; 1 Sam 15:6; Num 32:12; Josh 14:6 and 14; Gen 25:6). Their inclusion in the list stands against the idea that the land must be inhabited by entirely expelling the indigenous people.⁷ Hence, the list of nations in Gen 15:19-21 in itself does not support the ideology of dispossession, but could, rather, reflect a co-occupation of the land.⁸

Brett argues that Genesis 15 should be examined against the background of the surrounding texts in Genesis, which present a different picture from what we find in

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Deuteronomistic literature. “Abram’s dealing with the Amorites and with the king of Salem are indicators of a much broader pattern wherein the ancestral religion embodies an eirenic inclusivism rather than an ideology of dispossession.”⁹ There are a number of instances in Genesis where ethnic separatist ideology is undermined by a more inclusivist and accommodating passages. Likewise, Brett suggests that, “the vague allusions to the ideology of dispossession in chapter 15 are elsewhere ignored, and the divine promises are often developed in ways consistent with compromise and inclusivism.”¹⁰ Hence, even if Genesis 15 mentions the idea that the land of the Canaanites would be given to the Israelites, it does so without explicitly endorsing the idea of dispossession. So then, Abraham’s descendants may have a peaceful co-existence with the original inhabitants of the land.

This is more likely as we take into consideration how Abraham settled in the land and related with the locals of the land: Abraham never claims to be the owner of the land of Canaan in which he lives. He recognized the Canaanites to be the legitimate owners of the land and bought land from them. When referring to the land of Canaan, Abraham never says, “my land,” a term which he used to refer to the land from which he came (Gen 24:4), and accordingly, Abraham is said to be an alien in the land on several occasions (Gen 17:8; 21:23, 34; 26:3; 35:27). The military expeditions taken up by the patriarchs were never rendered in terms of conquest or occupation of the land.¹¹ All these observations are sufficient enough to prove the patriarch’s peaceful settlement and dealing with the indigenous people. In so doing, the patriarchs set a pattern of how the future descendants are to live in harmony with the natives and share the land with them. In this respect, Habel is right in claiming that the violent conquest of

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⁹ Brett, *Genesis*, 57.
¹⁰ Brett, *Genesis*, 57.
Joshua does not match with the patriarchal narratives, rather, it provides “an alternative tradition and ideology about possessing the land.”\(^\text{12}\) His argument explains why the Hebrew Bible gives contradicting report about the possession of the land. Joshua’s hostile invasion does conflict with the peaceful settlement of the patriarchal narratives. However, as noted above, it is significant to note that within Joshua, the book which describes the conquest at length, the idea of genocidal invasion is not represented. There are key chapters, which explain why not all the Canaanites were wiped out. Rahab and her family were spared (Joshua 2) and so too the Gibeonites (Joshua 9) and others (Josh 13:1-7; 16:10; 17:12-13). Rahab’s turning to YHWH demonstrates that the Canaanites are not in fact condemned as whole people. There are also other textual evidence and archaeological data, which further override the genocidal idea of the conquest of Joshua.

The first chapter of Judges shows the failure of the Israelites in driving out the Canaanites from the cities, which are said to have been conquered by Joshua (Josh 12:9-24).\(^\text{13}\) These cities continued to survive long after the alleged date of their conquest. For instance, Jerusalem was not conquered until the time of David (2 Sam 5:6-9) and so was Beth Shan occupied by the Philistines until the time of David (1 Sam 31:10). The Canaanites were not forced out from Gezer until the time of Solomon (1 Kgs 9:16). Taanach and Megiddo remained Canaanite cities during the time of Deborah (Jud 5:19) and so was Shechem during the time of Abimelech (Jud.9:28).\(^\text{14}\) Thus, these cities are not taken over according to the records of the conquest of Joshua. Precisely because of the Canaanites living in Israel’s midst, the Deuteronomistic history vigorously prohibits intermarriage with the Canaanites and worship of

\(^{12}\) Habel, *The Land is Mine*, 125.


their gods. Likewise, Hosea and Jeremiah denounce the way the Israelites inculcate the ways of the Canaanites and attribute the downfall of Israel and Judah to it. As mentioned above, passages in Genesis are even able to illustrate the possibility of friendly relationships with the Canaanites (e.g., Gen 23:38).

Besides textual evidence, most scholars have come to agree that archaeological findings do not support the biblical record of the conquest of Canaan. Many sites claimed to have been invaded by the Israelites under the leadership of Joshua are found to have been unoccupied at the time. The excavations at Heshbon and Dihon show that there was no Late Bronze Age occupation as the biblical record suggests in relation to the conquest of Heshbon (modern Hesban), the city of Sihon, and Medeba in Ammon, as well as Dihon in Moab (Num 21:21-31). The archeological evidence also suggests that Jericho was not occupied in the thirteenth century and there were no walls in Jericho as mentioned in the biblical text. Likewise, Ai, which Joshua and his troops are said to have taken over, is found to be unoccupied in the second Millennium. Of the 19 cities that are identified with excavation sites, only Hazor and Bethel are found to be destroyed in the thirteenth century B.C.

Historians even debate whether the Israelites originally came from outside the land, as recorded in the Bible, or whether they emerged from within Canaan itself. Gary Anderson is among the scholars who claim that the Israelites mostly originated from the indigenous population and were not migrants from outside. He argues that the Bible’s claim that the Israelites were totally distinct from the Canaanites is hard to accept historically, not least because the Hebrew language belongs to the family of Canaanite dialects known to us from extra-biblical

15 See Paton, “The Conquest of Canaan,” 7-8; and Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 113-114. 
16 Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 113.
sources. Moreover, there are also striking similarities between the material culture of the sites inhabited by ancient Israelites and Canaanites (as opposed to the Philistine material remains which are clearly different). Anderson proposes that “if this historical reconstruction is accurate, then the stories of a violent conquest and expulsion of the native population were written down long after the period they purport to document.” 18 All the historical evidence suggests that the Israelites did not penetrate Canaan in a violent manner, so the biblical texts need to be interpreted in more theological terms.

Many scholars have suggested that these stories were put together by the Deuteronomistic historians during the period of Josiah’s reform to urge the Israelites to wipe out idolatry from their midst, associating this idolatry with the horrific fate of the Canaanites. The idea of eliminating the Canaanites thus functions in a metaphoric way to call the Israelites to moral and spiritual purity. Generally, historical-critical scholars agree with Gary Anderson’s claim that the biblical records of the destructive occupation of Canaan are not historical, but his opinion that the Joshua narratives should be read as “literary fictions” is still open to debate. There is still evidence for the destruction of some cities in this period, so the idea of a completely peaceful infiltration is also problematic.

Nicholas Wolterstorff particularly questions Anderson’s claim that although the stories of the conquest were “made up,” the divine commands concerning the conquest were not invented in the same sense. Wolterstorff retorts, “what sense would it make for the Deuteronomistic writers to combine, into one narrative, made-up stories about the conquest told in the fictive mood with non-made-up stories about God’s mandating the conquest told in the assertoric

Wolterstorff argues that this dilemma is a false one. Neither the stories of the conquest nor the divine command were made up and told in fictive mood. The stories were never meant to be read literally, he suggests, because they are neither stories of “a brutal genocidal conquest of an entire land” nor stories about “God’s commanding such conquest.” They are rather, figurative language used by the writers, perhaps to project the world of the writers and their readers. Wolterstorff makes an admirable attempt to bring consistency to these issues, but in doing so, he interprets all the conquest literature as figurative, rather than straightforwardly historiographical, and this conclusion has its own difficulties.

Joel S. Kaminsky also seems to suggest that these texts need not be read literally. He asserts that, “such texts were never actualized in Jewish history.” He is of the view that the commands for the Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites were designed to “propagate a newly unified sense of identity during a politically insecure period, and were possibly addressed to members of the Israelites community whose dissent could threaten a fragile order.” Kaminsky is also open to the opinion of scholars who think that the texts are the result of the exiles’ reasoning of why they were displaced from the land the God of their ancestors gave to them. Thus, he contends that the conquest motif may be “a strategy for maintaining Judean social and religious identity by constructing that identity in contrast to either the Babylonians among whom

20 Wolerstorff, “Comments on ‘What about the Canaanites?’” 284. Wolerstorff argues that the stories celebrate Joshua as a great leader who was faithful to YHWH after Moses and thus, these stories represent a “Hagiographic” account of Joshua’s military expedition and were never meant to be read as though Joshua conquered the whole land of Canaan nor executed the whole population on the command of YHWH. See Wolerstorff, “Reading Joshua,” 252-56. Building on Wolerstorff’s argument, Copan and Flannagan argue that the stories are “exaggerated rhetoric.” See Copan and Flannagan, Did God Really Command the Genocide? 94-108; and Paul Copan, Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 2011), 170.
21 Brett, “Reading as a Canaanite: Paradoxes in Joshua,” 231-46.
22 Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 115; On the topic of the total destruction as being unrealistic; see also Moshe Weinfeld, The Promise of the Land: The Inheritance of the Land of Canaan by the Israelites (Berkely, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 91-98.
23 Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 115.
the exiles lived or the Judeans who were not removed from the land.” In making this claim, he is focusing on the implicit social function of the texts rather than their genre. He is concerned about reading the texts in their own historical context so that their meaning is not shattered by the modern day questions of ethics. However, if the annihilation of the Canaanites still poses questions for modern readers, Kaminsky argues that the moral problems were recognized already in early Judaism. The Wisdom of Solomon (12:3-11), for example, describes the degrading moral and religious practices of the Canaanites in order to justify their fate. However, the passage also speaks of divine mercy that had delayed their destruction in order for the Canaanites to have enough time to repent. So Kaminsky asserts that earlier Jewish writers were already troubled by the destruction of the Canaanites and they tried to find means to lessen the harshness inflicted on them. This idea of theodicy is already found in Genesis 15, as discussed above, where the degrading sin of the Canaanites and the delayed judgment is expressed in v.17.

So far, our discussion of Genesis 15 and other studies of archeological evidence have shown that there was no genocidal conquest of Canaan. In many respects, archaeological and canonical approaches can agree on this point. Even if there was some violence, Genesis 15 is clear in its defence of God’s justice: the indigenous people will lose their land by virtue of their own actions. However, as pointed out earlier, the passage itself does not encourage a violent conquest when it grants the land to the Israelites. Rather, it undermines any idea that espouses violence. It supports a peaceful co-existence with the people of the land, or at most, foreshadows the possibility of defensive wars. Therefore, when considering the canonical context of Genesis, the divine purpose to bless all the nations still remains intact, even including the Canaanites if

24 Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 115.
25 Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 117-118. See also Copan, Did God really command the Genocide? 91-92.
they choose to respond to the divine will as Rahab did. Even after reading Joshua, we can conclude that some Canaanite families were blessed.

The above textual studies in Genesis directly deal with the question of why God would single out a specific group of people over the rest. Even if it is morally and theologically challenging, the divine choosing is justified as the biblical texts testify to the fact that the choosing of the elect is to further the divine cause in which both the elect and the non-elect are to be equally benefitted. Gen 12:1-3 is clear in suggesting that the blessing of Abram has implications for those outside of his family, and Genesis 17 affirms this as it opens the possibilities for outsiders to be integrated and share in the blessing of the chosen. Even the Canaanites are not excluded and are not dealt with unfairly as Genesis 15 directly addresses the issue of justice for them and, in effect, overrides any idea that presupposes their annihilation. The patriarchal narrative, thus, conveys a message that is inclusive and embracing of those outside of the covenant. Having established these exegetical conclusions, we will now discuss the subject matter from the perspective of biblical theology, discussing a range of Christian and Jewish views.
THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

In this section, we will look at some of the issues raised in regard to Israel’s election by Christian and Jewish interpretations. In so doing, we will see how Christians and Jews understand the biblical concept of election as central to the thoughts and teachings of the Bible even though such an idea is disturbing in a modern world where equity is emphasized. The major problem lies in the way Christians have failed to do justice to the biblical text as they make supersessionist claims by reading the Old Testament through the lens of New Testament. No less problematic is the reading of the biblical text as warrant for mission. Even though, both Christians and Jews acknowledge that Israel’s election has broader implications, there is still the tendency to choose universalism over particularism, which has its own problems. These are some of the issues that we will discuss in detail below.

H.H. Rowley: Elected for Service

In *The Biblical Doctrine of Election*, H.H. Rowley emphasizes the idea of election as fundamental in the study of Old Testament as well as the New Testament. He draws attention to the centrality of the subject in both testaments. In spite of his stated intentions at the time, his work is still viewed as representing a deep-rooted Christian supersessionism by most contemporary scholars for the way he read the Hebrew Bible through the lens of the New Testament. Rowley’s view that the church has inherited Israel’s mission is questionable, but his work is relevant to the subject matter of this thesis as it directly deals with the question of why Israel is chosen over the rest of the nations.
The key argument of Rowley is that God was not arbitrary in choosing Israel; the divine choosing of Israel does not represent divine favoritism because Israel’s election is not based on any moral or religious uprightness on the side of Israel. Rowley argues, “Sometimes God chooses those who are not particularly choice. This is not the demonstration of his arbitrariness, but of his wisdom and his grace.”¹ Israel is neither chosen because of her inherent greatness nor out of divine indulgence or favoritism. For this reason, Rowley claims that the cause of divine choosing is not important but what is important is the purpose that underlies it. He argues that the divine election should be understood and interpreted teleologically. Accordingly, he suggests that the purpose of Israel’s election was for service, and her status as the elect is dependent on how she carries out that service. The nature of that service is to “to receive and to treasure the revelation of God given to her in the crucial experience of the Exodus and the uniquely significant events that preceded and followed that deliverance.”²

Rowley does not deny the privilege that comes with election. However, he insists that it is primarily for service and not a privilege that Israel is elected. Her election is not simply for herself but it is for the sake of the nations. Israel’s election serves God’s greatest purpose of self-revelation and she was chosen for that purpose.

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

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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 favorites, but because they were more suited for
this purpose… the uniqueness of His choice of Israel was the uniqueness of the degree in
which he purposed to reveal His character and His will through her, and for this she was
supremely suited. ³

In Rowley’s view, it is not that God does not reveal himself to other nations, but through
Israel God gives fuller revelation, and Israel is summoned to the task of sharing that revelation
with the rest of the world. He argues that God has a claim to Israel’s service by the way God
delivered Israel out of Egypt. Rowley’s argument seems to stem from the Exodus event rather
than from the patriarchal encounter with God, although he does not deny that the ancestors are
also chosen. It is the Exodus where Israel’s relation with YHWH is said to begin (although
Genesis 15 presents a different view), and it is the Exodus that defines the purpose for which she
is chosen. Israel is bound to God by a sacred covenant that requires an utmost loyalty. On failing
to meet that requirement, Israel repudiates her election: “But if she (Israel) repudiates the
covenant, then she will repudiate it. It will be terminated, because she terminates it. And in
terminating the covenant she will declare that she no longer wishes to be His people, and
therefore she will not be His people.”⁴ To Rowley, Israel’s status as an elect is dependent on her
loyalty towards the covenant (but his argument refers primarily to the conditional Mosaic
covenant rather than to the Abraham covenant) and the fulfillment of her mission as Israel is
called to “a conscious mission to the world and she can only fulfill the purpose of her election in
the execution of the mission. It was election for service and the rendering of that service was the

Rowley’s own words suggest that Israel has failed in her mission:

We see Judaism steadily turning its back on one of the corollaries of its election, and instead of going on to the active mission to the Gentiles frowning on the admission of converts and only sporadically seeking them… In the thought of the Old Testament it is always election to service, and it is held to be forfeited when it has no relation to that service.⁶

For this reason, Rowley asserts that the church is founded to carry out the task, which was failed by Israel. To him, the church is the heir of the election of Israel since to be heir of the election is not determined by physical descent but by one’s loyalty to the covenant and its obligation. Besides, Rowley thinks that the church was more receptive to the obligations of service.

The church not alone claimed to be the heir of Israel’s election; she accepted the obligation of Israel’s mission. It was not that she claimed to replace Israel in the seat of privilege, but that she acknowledged her call to take up the service to which Israel had been called. It is undeniable that the church has performed that service to a degree vastly greater than Judaism has ever even attempted to carry it through…. The church did accept the mission of Israel, and did address itself to it in a way and to a degree that Judaism has never done.⁷

Rowley further argues that the church which is the new community founded in Christ has replaced the old community, Israel, even though the quotation above points more towards the idea of inheritance than towards an overt supersessionism (“It was not that she claimed to replace

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As it was intended that the New Covenant would supersede the Old Covenant, the election of the church in Christ in practice superseded the old election. It is the “Israel of God,” chosen and called to receive divine grace and to carry out the service that was originally assigned to the old Israel. Thus, when he thinks Israel has failed to fulfill her service, he did not shy away from asserting that the church has replaced Israel and has done a better job in carrying out the service for which Israel was called.

The question we may raise at this point is if Israel’s service entails that of receiving and sharing the special revelation given at the Exodus, how can the Exodus be unique to the experience of Israel? Rowley seems to be making a weak case here. He claims that Israel forfeited her election because of her failure to carry out her service, but the apostle Paul says that God’s promise to Israel is irrevocable and Israel’s election remains intact regardless. Within the Old Testament itself, the key point is aptly summarized in Kaminsky’s words: “Even when it seems that God’s promises appear to be in danger of being abrogated due to human failings, the received form of the Torah consistently and without exception proclaims that God’s promises of special favor toward Israel persist in spite of any disobedience and can be fully reactualized after God’s judgment and Israel’s repentance.”

Rowley also affirms that although Israel’s election serves a larger purpose, Israel’s failure to fulfill that purpose does not terminate her election.

Rowley suggests that it is Israel’s task to “mediate to all men the law of her God and to spread the heritage of her faith through the entire world” and that the church has performed that task more sincerely. But the Torah does not suggest that Israel is to give her Mosaic law to the Gentiles. The apparent exception in Isaiah 2 is the exception that proves the rule: this torah from

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10 Rowley, The Biblical Doctrine of Election, 163-64.
Zion is eschatological. So, the question of Israel “mediating her law” does not arise as a matter of obligation to the particularities of Mosaic law. Indeed, the law says in Leviticus to be different from the nations. That is the nature of holiness: to be different from the nations.

To some extent, Rowley’s idea that God chose Israel for a service because she is best suited for the purpose addresses the theological question of why God chose one nation over the rest. He has rightly argued that the election of Israel is not out of divine favoritism but out of God’s universal love that seeks to bless the whole nations through the service of the chosen people. However, Rowley is guilty of not doing justice to the biblical text. On the one hand, he has overstated the passages that talk of Israel’s service, and on the other hand, he has understated the texts that testify to God’s mysterious love in choosing Israel. The major problem with Rowley’s argument lies in his effectively supersessionist claim of Israel being replaced by the church. The church is the new elected people of God who have replaced Israel. This is a grave mistake Christians have so long been committing. Christianity has its root in Israel and the existence of Christianity is incomprehensible without Israel.

Willie James Jennings has rightly pointed out that this supersessionist attitude of Christians arises out of our failure to read the Scripture as Gentiles. He argues that as Gentiles, we are “outside the conversation between Biblical Israel and its God, outside the continuing conversations living Israel has with that same God.”

We can only enter that conversation by entering the space of Israel, i.e., by reading the Scripture as participants in Israel’s story and not as ones who have replaced Israel. In trying to be part of Israel’s story, Jennings suggests certain things that we must acknowledge as Gentile readers: (1) We are Gentile readers reading the biblical narrative that is the story of Israel; (2) We are Gentile readers positioned to read the

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story of Israel as a result of the life of Jesus; (3) We are Gentile readers who should perceive living Israel through the lens provided by biblical Israel; (4) We are Gentile readers who should read our own existence by the lens provided by the Jewish Jesus.\(^\text{12}\) These ideas directly address the flaws with Rowley’s view. Israel has continuing importance to Christian existence and we cannot claim our existence outside Israel. Our election in Jesus is not the usurpation of Israel’s election. As Gentiles, we are outsiders who are included in the story of Israel to share her blessing and not to supplant her.

**R.W. L. Moberly: Abraham as a Model for the Nations**

In contrast with most Christian interpretation of Genesis 12:1-3 as a model for Christian appropriation of the Old Testament and a warrant for Christian mission, R.W.L. Moberly provides an alternative reading of the text. He discusses how Paul’s construal of the text, Galatians 3:8 in particular, has widely influenced the history of Christian interpretation, the crux of which is to view Abraham as a channel of blessing for others. One of the prominent proponents of such interpretation to whom Moberly devotes a considerable amount of attention is Gerhard von Rad. It is von Rad’s contention that what is promised to Abraham is “a salvation extending far beyond the limits of the covenant people to ‘all the families of the earth.’”\(^\text{13}\) While von Rad emphasizes the universal implication of the blessing which represents the general Christian understanding of the text, Moberly questions if that is what the text really means. To him the primary focus of the blessing is Abraham and the covenant people rather than the nations as expressed in his words: “May the real concern of the divine speech be not the benefit of the nations but rather the benefit of Abraham? May the nations constitute the backdrop in spite of

\(^{12}\) Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 252.

\(^{13}\) Von Rad, *Genesis*, 153.
whom Abraham will become a great nation, rather than for the sake of whom Abraham will become a great nation?"\textsuperscript{14}

Although an advocate of canonical approaches to the Bible, Moberly seems to read the text not as an antidote to what was done in Gen 1-11 but rather as an assurance of benefits to Abram for all that he was asked to leave behind in obeying the command of God: his family, country and people. Abram is commanded to relinquish his security and his identity to go to an unknown land. Such a venture involves risk and danger and therefore, Moberly argues that what was promised to Abram was God’s assurance of blessing him with more that what he had to give up. God will make him into a great nation (12:2) and be with him so that others will be blessed or cursed depending on how they treat him (12:3a). He will become great enough for everyone to know him and acknowledge him everywhere (12:3b). “Thus, if Abraham will but trust God, he can leave current security and identity behind in the confidence that greater security and identity lie ahead; if Abraham will relinquish now (12:1), he will receive in the future more that he had relinquished (12:2-3).”\textsuperscript{15}

Moberly argues that such a reading of the Hebrew text is well founded. His translation of the Hebrew verb, \textit{brk}, in Gen 12:3 forms the basis of his argument as discussed above. The verb is a \textit{niphal}, \textit{nibreku} as in Gen 18: 18 and Gen 28:14 which carries a sense of both reflexive and passive. Moberly prefers the reflexive interpretation on the ground that it is possible for the \textit{niphal} and \textit{hithpael} forms of blessing to have the same meaning.\textsuperscript{16} Since the blessings in Gen 22:18 and Gen 26:4 are not substantially different from Gen 12:3, and they are in the reflexive \textit{hithpael} form, Moberly argues that “the ambiguous \textit{niphal} must be resolved by the unambiguous

\textsuperscript{15} Moberly, \textit{The Theology of the Book of Genesis}, 150.
\textsuperscript{16}See the chapter on Gen 12: 1-3 for the different nuance \textit{niphal} and \textit{hithpael} carries.
Thus, he proposes that Gen 12:3 indicates a reflective sense, “pronounce blessing upon one another,” which is to say Abraham’s name will be invoked while blessing is pronounced upon one another. Moberly affirms his argument by quoting from Rashi’s commentary on Genesis 12:3b:

> There are many Agadoth concerning this but the plain sense of the text is as follows: a man says to his son, “Mayest thou become as Abraham.” This, too, is the meaning wherever the phrase wenibreku beka “And in thee shall be blessed” occurs in Scripture, and the following example proves this: (Gen XLVIII.20) beka yebarek “By thee shall Israel bless their children saying, 'May God make thee as Ephraim and Manasseh.”

Thus Moberly contends that Abraham will “become an object of admiration for others, a model of how people will want those whom they favour to become.” This to Moberly is the purpose of the divine blessing—assurance to Abraham.

Moberly provides further evidence for this from the book of Jeremiah. In Jer 29: 21-23, Jeremiah prophesizes that the two prophets, Ahab, son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah, son of Maaseiah will be handed over to the King of Babylon, and will be executed before the eyes of the exiled community for the false message they have been prophesying concerning the future of Judah.

And on account of them this curse shall be used by all exiles from Judah in Babylon:

“The LORD make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the King of Babylon roasted in the fire” (29:22).

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21 The translations quoted below are Moberly’s.
Here Zedekiah and Ahab are used as a reference point in pronouncing a curse, a reversal of Gen 48:20 where Ephraim and Manasseh are used as reference to express blessing. Another cross reference Moberly provides is Jer 24:8-9 where Jeremiah spoke against king Zedekiah of Judah, his officials and the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in the land instead of going to exile in Babylon.

I will make them a horror, an evil thing, to all the kingdoms of the earth—a disgrace, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them (24:9). 22

According to Moberly, the Jews who remained in the land will become a curse in “all the kingdoms of the earth” as against Abram being a blessing in “all the families of the earth” in Gen 12:3. In contrast to the curse that is invoked in reference to Zedekiah and the Judahites, Moberly argues that Abraham’s name “will be invoked on the lips of others as a model of desirability.”

Interpreting niphal as reflexive places Israel in the forefront as other nations recognize the blessing of God on her. However, Moberly does not intend to convey the implication that God has no concern for other nations. He does not shy away in claiming that the nations do benefit from the blessing.

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,

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23 Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 155. Moberly’s interpretation of the text has been attractive to a number of scholars, including the renowned Jewish scholar, Jon D. Levenson. Levenson gives high accreditation to Moberly’s work and agrees that the sense that the form of brk in Gen12:3 is that of “reciprocity or reflexivity: the families of the earth shall bless themselves or one another.” Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 24. Joel N. Lohr is similarly convinced by Moberly’s interpretation of the niphal in Gen 12:3, suggesting “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 (the story of Abimelech).” Lohr, *Chosen and Unchosen*, 113.
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.\footnote{R.W.L. Moberly, The Bible, Theology and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus, 125-26.}

Abraham and his descendents are the primary beneficiaries of the blessings for the way they respond to the costly call of God. Moberly’s interpretation questions the line of Christian interpretation that looks at the text of Genesis as mandate for mission and thereby limits the election of Israel simply to its missionary purpose. Against such endeavour, Moberly has interestingly allowed the text to speak for the right and privileges of the chosen people. By placing the central focus of election on Abraham and his descendants, Moberly confronts Rowley’s claims of limiting election to service. But he has paid too little attention to the implications that Abraham’s blessing has for the nations. He has made the nations passive beneficiaries of Abraham’s blessing as they admire him and use his name to bless themselves. His interpretation of the niphal of brk in Gen 12:3, as I have argued above, runs into exegetical problems as it misconstrues the function of the niphal in the Hebrew Bible.\footnote{See the chapter on Gen 12:1-3: Beginning with Abram.} It is also methodologically incorrect to claim that the niphal and the hithpael bear the same nuance just because the stems overlap semantically on several occasions. It does not follow that just because the hithpael in Gen 22:18 and Gen 26:4 is reflexive, the niphal of Gen 12:3 should be reflexive. Even contextually, the emphasis of the Gen 12:3 is different. The primary focus of Gen 12:3 is Abraham whereas the focus of Gen 22:17 and Gen 26:4 is on Abraham’s descendants. The niphal of Gen 12:3 suggests that the nations will be blessed through Abraham whereas the
hithpael of Gen 22: 18 and Gen 26:4 suggest that the nations will see the prosperity and fruitfulness of Abraham’s descendants and make themselves blessed by them.\textsuperscript{26}

**Joel S. Kaminsky: Chosen to Mediate Blessings**

Another critique of Rowley’s interpretation comes from Joel S. Kaminsky. Kaminsky contends that the election of Israel cannot be reduced to service. He critiques the way modern biblical interpreters elevate universalism over particularism, which overemphasizes biblical passages that appear universalistic, and devalues passages that are particularistic. The idea of divine favoritism in choosing some over the others appears indigestible among the modern interpreters, yet, Kaminsky insists that it is at the center of Hebrew Bible. The Bible recognizes that some are chosen and others are not. God does mysteriously favor some over the others. Such cannot be ignored if one is to do justice to the biblical text. However, the divine favoritism is neither at the expense of others nor utterly for the benefit of the elect.

Kaminsky argues that Israel’s election is grounded in the mysterious love of God and is not influenced by any other factors. However, Israel does have a role to play in the universal plan of God. Kaminsky holds that the choosing of Abraham and his descendants form a part of the larger divine plan that will bring blessing to the whole world even though that does not exhaust the purpose of their chosenness. The extensive use of the verb, “bless” in Gen 12:2-3 suggests that Abraham and his descendants are the ones chosen to lift the divine curses that are brought forth as a result of human rebellious actions. How this will be brought about is not explicitly explained in the text but Kaminsky claims that the later passages in Genesis provides evidence that blessings will be channeled to the other nations through the mediatorial service of Abraham.

\textsuperscript{26} Noonan, “Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations,” 90-92.
and his descendants (Gen 18:17-19; 20:7,17). Thus to Kaminsky, the elective role of Israel is that of mediator. One of the passages that supports such reading comes from Gen 18:17-19.

The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge 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 about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

This passage introduces the destruction of Sodom and it is clearly linked with Gen 12:3 in that God decides not to conceal his plan from Abraham because he is chosen to mediate divine blessings to the other nations. Withholding such plan from Abraham would mean that there is no credibility in their relationship and that will obstruct the mission of Abraham and his descendant to do righteousness and justice. As the story unfolds, Abraham is seen questioning God’s justice, which according to Kaminsky implies that “one part of Abraham’s and his descendants’ duty is to call God to account if he is acting unjustly.” The model of righteousness and justice is presupposed as part of Abraham’s call.

However, there are instances within the patriarchal narrative where the patriarch fails to exhibit a righteous and a moral life as discussed above. Genesis 20, being one of such example, shows how Abimelech, despite being an outsider and accused of being godless (v. 11), stands out to be a character with more integrity and righteousness than the patriarch himself. Nevertheless, it was through the intercession of the patriarch that blessings came to the house of Abimelech in

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27 Translation in this section of the thesis are provided by Kaminsky.
28 Mark O’Brien makes this point clearer, “In order that Abraham and his descendants can mediate universal blessing to all nations they need to know about and adhere to righteousness and justice. In order to do this, they must themselves know and obey the source of righteousness and justice.” Mark O’Brien, *Restoring the Right Relationship: The Bible on Divine Restoration* (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Theology: 2014), 46.
29 Kaminsky, *Yet I loved Jacob*, 83.
the form of healing and restoration. Despite Abraham’s unethical behavior, he emerges as a mediator between God and this outsider, affirming Kaminsky’s point that Israel’s elective role is that of mediator. The call to justice and righteousness does not exclude the possibility that Abraham will sometimes not meet the highest standards of behavior.

Kaminsky provides further evidence on Israel’s election as entailing a mediatorial role from the covenantal texts which formalize God’s promises to the ancestors and affirm Israel’s identity as the chosen people. But in making this point, Kaminsky has to move to Exodus, as did Rowley.

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that shall speak to the Israelites (Exod 19:5).

Here, Israel is reckoned as a priest which suggests her role as a mediator to the whole world and as argued by Kaminsky, “If one takes such language as more than mere metaphor, it implies that Israel not only intercedes for the nations, but she is also the means by which God’s blessings radiate out to the larger terrestrial world.”

Thus, Kaminsky suggests that Israel serving as a mediator between the Gentile nations and God is the universal implication of Israel’s election.

However, being troubled by interpretations that overemphasize the “instrumental” aspect of Israel’s election, and thereby reduce it to mere service, Kaminsky holds that the purpose of Israel’s chosenness is not exhausted by her role as a mediator. Gen 12:3 echoes the universal implication of the divine promises, but the central focus is on Abraham and his chosen descendants, the people of Israel. Kaminsky contends, “this passage (Gen 12:1-3) is directed to

30 Kaminsky, Yet I loved Jacob, 84.
Abraham as a message of assurance rather than addressed to those others with whom Abraham and his children will later interact.” This is an echo of Walter Moberly’s argument discussed above. Abraham is the central figure. However, that is not to deny the blessing that will flow to the nations through Abraham and his descendants as a consequence of God’s electing Israel. Abraham and Israel may play an intercessory role, but that does not mean that the purpose of Israel’s chosenness is reduced to this role. “God’s choosing Israel involves a mysterious act of divine love that precedes any call to service and persists even when Israel fails to respond to God properly.” Perhaps we could interpret the patriarchal failings in the wife-sister episodes as supporting this point. The faithless action of Abraham during his encounter with Pharaoh (Gen 12:10-17) and Abimelech, King of Gerar (Genesis 20), endangered not only his wife and the household of these kings but also jeopardized the divine cause. But God still worked in the favor of Abraham and delivered him. God was faithful to Abraham regardless and this expresses the elect’s special position before God.

While acknowledging the special status of the elect, Kaminsky also encourages an interest in God’s attitude to the “non-elect” in the Hebrew Bible. He is against the view that being outside of God’s election is equivalent to being damned. Exod 2:15-22; 18:1; Num 10:29

32 Kaminsky, Yet I loved Jacob, 85.
33 Kaminsky confronts the Christian’s two-tier idea of election which categorized some to be saved and others to be damned. He asserts that Israel’s election does not carry with it an idea that all those who are excluded are to be eliminated. He proposed a three-tier category: the elect, the non-elect and the anti-elect. Although our interest is with the elect and non-elect, it is worth mentioning something about the anti-elect at this point as Kaminsky has made a remarkable contribution in this regard. Kaminsky claims that there are certain individuals, families, groups or nations who are so “evil or dangerous” that their annihilation is called forth. They include the Canaanites, the Amalekites and the Midianites whom he labeled as anti-elect. The “less obviously” in this category are the Midianites. Although they are treated almost the same way like the Canaanites, they are sometimes put in a positive way as in Exod 2:15-22; 18:1; Num 10:29; Judg 1:16. The Canaanites are the ones who are dealt with more excessively as the anti-elect in the biblical texts as discussed above but it is the Amalekites who are treated in a more troubling way, even more than the Canaanites according to Kaminsky as their condemnation is put in terms of generational battle between them and YHWH (Exod 17:14-16). Kaminsky admits that these texts dealing with the anti-elect are disturbing but even “the harshest texts are more nuanced and ambiguous” than are usually perceived. These texts deserve a sympathetic reading and one cannot do away with the concept of election on account of these
Hebrew Bible does not endorse such an idea nor does it claim that the elect enjoy all the privileges of election. God’s “unfairness” in choosing some over others is not gain for the chosen and loss for the non-chosen. Kaminsky acknowledges that the way the Hebrew Bible deals with the non-elect is sometimes disturbing, but he claims that in most occasions, they are treated fairly. In fact, many non-Israelites have been moral models to ancient Israel and many of the passages dealing with them set the standard of how “the other” should be treated today. Although there may be different ways of portraying the status of the non-elect in the Hebrew Bible, there is no point arguing that the least exclusive passages are against or have transcended Israel’s particularistic theology of election. Kaminsky argues:

One cannot take a shortcut through these theological problems by associating election with certain passages that treat “the other” negatively and disassociating it from those that treat “the other” positively, for these are two sides of the same coin. When one grasps that all of these texts are expressions of Israel’s theology of election, it soon becomes clear that many of the more exclusive passages are not as intolerant as they first appear, and many of the more inclusive passages are not as tolerant as some believe.\(^\text{34}\)

Accordingly, Kaminsky argues that the resident aliens of the legal texts are treated in a positive way, even in contexts where it is least expected. It is noteworthy that passages such as Lev 19:33-34 appear in the work of the Priestly or Holiness strand of the Hebrew Bible, which belong to a group of people who are often considered highly ethnocentric and intolerant towards foreigners by scholars: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the

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\(^{34}\)Kaminsky, *Yet I loved Jacob*, 122.
The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

Another significant example is that even though Deuteronomy insists on the total annihilation of the native people of the land of Canaan, it speaks for the right of the resident aliens (Deut 10:19; 24:17-22). Likewise, the Covenant Code (Exod 22:21) calls for the protection of the resident aliens. Furthermore, one finds good treatment for certain foreign nations who are not expected to be treated in such a manner. For instance, the book of Deuteronomy exhorts the Israelites to show kindness to Egypt (23:8-9) and respect the borders of Edom, Ammon and Moab even though these nations repeatedly posed a threat to them.

Kaminsky claims that it could be because of divergence in the sources behind the texts that there exist divergent opinions regarding the resident aliens and foreign nations in the Hebrew Bible. There are several factors that need to be considered to see how these groups of people were treated in different contexts. One of such factors is the Hebrew term used for the non-Israelites. Quoting Christiana van Houten, Kaminsky proposes that it is possible that the biblical term, ger slowly evolved as it moved from its earliest uses in Exodus through its later uses in Deuteronomy and Leviticus:

The laws dealing with the alien developed and became more inclusive. What began as an appeal for justice for the alien in the Covenant Code (Exod 23:9) comes to be understood as a legal principle in the Priestly laws: “There shall be one law for the alien and the native born.” This then opened the door for the inclusion of the alien into all the rights and privileges of Israelites society… Although this tendency has not been perfectly
linear, it is still possible to conclude that the alien who began as an outsider and an object of charity has come to be included, if willing, among the people of Israel.\textsuperscript{35}

Looking at the narrative texts, Kaminsky comments that these texts present a more positive picture towards the outsiders than the legal texts. He claims that there are a lot of foreign figures such as Melchizedek, Queen Sheba, Rahab and others who are treated with much respect. These figures in most cases challenge the elect to recognize that the non-elect often have much to teach the elect about how one should act in the world and serve God. There are also characters who are portrayed in a more positive picture than the elect. Thus, the intoxicated Uriah is implied to have more sexual self-control than the sober King David, and Abimelech, King of Gerar, appears to be more pious and God-fearing than Abraham. Kaminsky argues that, “through these contrasts, the narrator of the Hebrew Bible calls into question the idea that one can enjoy the status of the elect without fulfilling the responsibilities of the elect, or that the non-elect cannot act in accord with God’s will.”\textsuperscript{36}

Besides, there are non-Israelite characters such as Jethro, Rahab and Namaan in the Hebrew Bible who remind Israel of God’s saving power when they start to doubt him. A foreign prophet like Balaam is also used to testify the special status of Israel as the elect. Kaminsky has notably pointed out that the way the Hebrew Bible portrays the non-Israelites in such a manner suggests that “Israel is aware that certain non-Israelites may have greater insight into God’s plan for Israel than many Israelites do. Far from being derogatory toward outsiders, these texts indicate that Israel needs the theological insight of non-Israelites to help her realize her unique status and fulfill her destiny.”\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36} Kaminsky, \textit{Yet I loved Jacob}, 125.
\textsuperscript{37} Kaminsky, \textit{Yet I loved Jacob}, 125-126.
Kaminsky also deals with some of the most exclusivist passages of the Hebrew Bible such as Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 12 and provides a nuanced understanding of Israel’s election. He asserts that Ezra and Nehemiah’s dealings with the foreigners are not signs of xenophobia (even though these books never mention protection for *gerim*). They were not trying to eliminate a threatened minority but trying to preserve a threatened minority.

Those who wished to limit membership in the people of Israel, either by excluding individuals of Israelite birth who were thought to have fallen away into sin or by preventing outsiders from assimilating through marriage or some other means, did not necessarily act out of malice toward those excluded from Israel. Rather, groups advocating either of these views were attempting to preserve the integrity of the elect so that they could function as God’s priestly people. They believed that if Israel failed to maintain sufficient obedience within her own ranks to the divine imperatives she had received, or if Israel became a homogeneous mixture of elements from several nations, God’s wider purpose in electing Israel would have been defeated.  

Thus, Kaminsky emphasizes the necessity of reading the text within its own context in order to avoid exclusivist claims. He admits that the idea of election poses serious challenges for modern critical interpreters, but any attempt to marginalize the idea of election by associating it with an ethnocentric hatred of those not chosen does even more damage. Such attempts fail to see that some of the most tolerant biblical ideas flow from the same election theology. If one is to talk of Israelite universalism, it can be achieved not by suppressing Israel’s particularistic identity, but through a deepening of Israel’s sense of her unique identity.

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38 Kaminsky, *Yet I loved Jacob*, 133.
While Jewish sources generally suggest that God’s singling out of the Jews is irrevocable and the specialness and the uniqueness of Israel do not depend on any mission, Jon D. Levenson, a renowned Jewish scholar, insists on that crucial aspect of Israel’s being and existence, the mission of Israel. Levenson sees Abraham as the man chosen to undo the damages caused in the first eleven chapters of Genesis as a result of human rebellion.

In Levenson’s view, Genesis 1-11 record the recurrent pattern of human rebellion resulting in divine punishment, which is then tempered by divine grace. This pattern breaks with the Tower of Babel and in such a context, Abram is chosen to make things right. His promised destiny does not only temper divine judgment but also reverses it. The theme of blessing in Gen 12:1-3 is a reversal of the theme of punishment and curse that runs through the primeval history. The promise of land granted to Abram reverses the cursing of the ground resulting out of Adam’s disobedience. The promise of a great nation, a multitude of descendants coming through Abram reverses the punishment pronounced on Eve, that of pain in childbirth. Levenson suggests that Abram leaving his country and kindred is connected with the universal exile of the Tower of Babel: in promising the land to his offspring, the universal exile is reversed. Likewise, in promising to make Abram’s name great, what the people of the Tower of Babel sought to achieve and had failed was promised to the patriarch instead.

40 Levenson, Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, 18-20.
Abram, the tenth generation from Noah, who, in turn is tenth in descent from Adam, is, no less and, in fact, more than Noah himself, the realization of the hoped-for reversal of the curses on Adam. The man without a country will inherit a whole land; the man with a barren wife will have plenteous offspring; and the man who has cut himself off from kith and kin will be pronounced blessed by all the families of the earth.\(^{41}\)

Levenson identifies Abram to be the person through whom God is making a new beginning. He marks a new relationship that God intends to have with all human beings which is different from the one reflected in the primeval history. This new beginning, this new relationship is centered on the “great nation” coming from Abram through Isaac and Jacob—Israel. The singling out of Israel and their ancestor Abram has created much controversy. But Levenson sees the chosenness of Israel as serving a larger purpose within the universal scope of YHWH’s sovereignty. The singling out of Israel does not imply the rejection of others. Rather, they fall within the universal horizon of God’s care. In any way, the singling out of Israel also does not imply God favoring Abram or his descendants over the others basing on any innate traits or merit they have earned. Levenson argues,

> Unlike later rabbinic exegesis, the Torah itself offers no grounds for the selection of Abram for this awesome assignment. It makes no claim that he had earned it or that he was endowed with some innate predisposition that made his selection rational. Instead, the Torah presents the revelation to Abram as sudden and unanticipated, and his obedient response as an unalloyed act of faith. The backdrop is still universal; the relevance of his fate to the nations is announced at the outset (12:3). Yet he alone bears the promise.\(^{42}\)

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Abram has not earned his position nor has Israel done anything for God to choose her over the others. Her very existence was out of divine grace, as even Deuteronomy is at pains to make clear.

“For you are a people consecrated to the LORD your God: of all the peoples on earth the LORD your God chose you to be his treasured people. It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord took a passion for you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; but it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he made to your fathers that the LORD freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh, king of Egypt” (Deut 7:7-8).43

This text affirms that the chosenness of Israel is out of God’s mysterious love or passion for Israel, and this is the basis of the oath made with their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We do not find this divine passion in Genesis; this is Deuteronomy’s perspective. But there is nevertheless a fundamental agreement: “Israel exists only because of God’s choice, and apart from God, it has not existence at all.”44

Having argued that the singling out of Abram and Israel has no basis in merit, Levenson argues that the purpose of God’s choice lies in a goal that extends beyond the covenant relationship—the essential goal of modeling a life of right action and justice: “That he might charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of YHWH by doing what is right and just, so that YHWH may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen 18:19).45 Interestingly, this ethical ideal is established in Genesis even before the law of Moses

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43 This translation is that of Levenson’s.
45 On Abraham as a model of righteousness and justice, see the discussion above on Gen 18:19. See also, Amira Meir, “Why did God Choose Abraham? Responses from Medieval Jewish Commentators,” in Universalism and Particularism at Sodom and Gomorrah, ed. Diana Lipton (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 53-70;
has appeared on the scene and it is implied also already in Gen 17:1 “Walk before me and be blameless”. The kind of ethical model that is presupposed here, therefore, cannot be identical with the Law of Moses.\textsuperscript{46}

Another rationale Levenson provides for the divine choice is that of Israel being a witness to the “uniqueness and eternity of YHWH,”\textsuperscript{47} a perspective that comes from Isaiah rather than Genesis:

You are my witness—oracle of YHWH—

And my servant whom I have chosen,  
In order that you may know and believe in me  
And understand that I am he;  
Before me no god was formed,  
And none will be after me. (Isa.43:10)

Such witness involves a third party who receives the testimony. Thus, Levenson claims, “the horizon of particularism is universal.”\textsuperscript{48} The chosenness of Israel is part of the universal purpose of God. As the chosen people, the Israelites are not to withdraw from the human family, but within it perform the special task given to them by the universal God who intends to channel out his universal will and plan to all through them. The chosen people are “the particular witnesses – and beneficiaries – of universalism.”\textsuperscript{49} On this note, Levenson argues that the election of Israel is instrumental, resonating with the argument of many Christian commentators. However, he holds

\textsuperscript{46} There is perhaps an exception to be noted in Gen 26:5, which blatantly proposes an anachronism.

\textsuperscript{47} Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” 155.

\textsuperscript{48} Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” 155.

\textsuperscript{49} Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” 155.

that Israel’s election is not altogether instrumental because her election is not abrogated even when she fails in her mission.

…Israel’s apostasy was not viewed as cancelling its original election; YHWH did not abandon it and try again with somebody else, though he did threaten to do so on occasion (Num 14:12, cf. Exod 33:14-15, Hos 1:9 and 2:25). Thus, although the election was sometimes articulated in terms of larger purposes, Israel’s failure to serve those purposes was not necessarily thought to have terminated election.50

This is the duality that Levenson suggests in the biblical concept of election. On the one hand, election involves larger purposes and goes beyond the chosen people. On the other, God does not give up on Israel even when she fails in its mission. “The purposes do not override the chosenness, and chosenness cannot be reduced merely to the commitment of certain values.”51

His argument about the election of Israel is grounded on the fact that Israel’s specialness is neither totally self-sufficient nor totally instrumental.

Should the Israelites imagine that their election is totally self-sufficient, they are reminded that their exodus is not unique (Amos 9:7) and that their relationship with YHWH brings with it greater accountability, not only greater privileges (Amos 3:2). And should they imagine that their election is totally instrumental, depending only on their own very flawed obedience, they are reminded that the covenant insures them an undeserved second chance (e.g., Lev 26:39-45). 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.52

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51 Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” 156.
Levenson agrees with many Jewish sources that the election of Israel is irrevocable and is not dependent on any mission they are to fulfill. However, he strongly holds that Israel does “have a mission to fulfill nonetheless—the universal and transcendent truth that has graciously been disclosed to them.”

Accordingly, the blessing of Abram does not stand in contradiction with the blessing of all the people; they are part of the same divine initiative.

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CONCLUSION

Ideas of election, despite being problematic for modern readers, lie at the heart of the Bible. It is core biblical teaching that God chose a group of people over others to be his special people. However, throughout our discussion of Genesis and the theological perspectives, we have seen that there is a universal dimension to Israel’s election. God has not initiated any unfair move in choosing Israel over the rest of the nations because in and through Israel God intends to release blessings to all. Israel’s very existence and election is part of God’s larger purposes for the whole earth. It remains mysterious why God would single out a particular group of people to serve those purposes, and why it was Abraham and his descendants that God chose.

Gen 12:1-3 serves as the key text in understanding the nature and scope of divine election. In narrating the call and commission of Abram, the text presents Abram as the person through whom God intends to bring about hope and new beginnings after the events of the primeval history. In the promises made to Abram, God announces blessings that concern not just Abram and his descendants but all the families of the earth, which reiterates God’s original intention to bless all humanity in Genesis 1. God promises to bless Abram so greatly that he will become a blessing to others. As such, Abram becomes the means by which God extends his blessing to those outside and not merely a name by which the nations invoke blessing on themselves. The nations are not passive recipients as in seeing Abraham and being blessed by him. They find blessing or curse depending on their relation with Abraham. When they bless Abraham, they are blessed but when they curse him, they are cursed. This very fact that others will be blessed or cursed depending on their attitude towards Abram affirms that Abram is the
channel through whom God will extend blessings.¹ The nations will be blessed in their relation with him in more complex ways. Abram is the primary recipient of the divine blessings but the implications of his blessing surpasses him and his family to reach all the families of the earth. The blessing of Abram culminates in the nations being blessed through him and his descendants.

Genesis 17 reiterates the blessing made to Abram in Gen 12:1-3 and further clarifies the scope of it particularly in mentioning that Abram will become the father of “many nations” and not just “a single nation.” Although the text places the chosen coming from the line of Isaac as the special focus of the covenant, it does not deny the inclusion of others. In including Ishmael in the covenant through the ritual of circumcision and in describing him as receiving the Abrahamic blessings, the text indicates that the covenant is wider than Israel and that God’s blessing goes beyond Israel. Even more significant is the inclusion of the foreign slaves who are integrated into the covenant through the same ritual, which affirms that the divine blessing is not confined to the biological descendants of Abraham. This perspective may have been articulated in later editing, but it is clearly evident in the received text.

Even the Canaanites are not excluded from the international blessing. The later traditions of the Hebrew Bible give evidence of those Canaanites who are saved as they acknowledge the sovereignty of YHWH and profess their faith in him. There is no genocidal conquest of Canaan and no annihilation of the Canaanite population. Genesis 15 directly addresses the issue of justice for the Canaanites by claiming that they lose their land because of their sin. However, our discussion on Genesis 15 has shown from the perspective of Genesis that the Canaanites were

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¹ While reflection on the reception of Abraham in the New Testament is beyond our focus, one could argue that the apostle Paul accepts this basic conviction and only adds the additional avenue of Gentile participation in the body of Christ as a way to inherit the promises of Abraham (Gal 3:29). See Christopher J.H. Wright, The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006), 220.
not destined to be dispossessed from their land, but rather, the text espouses the possibility of a friendly and peaceful co-existence with the Canaanites.

These patriarchal narratives show that God’s exclusive move made in Abraham encompasses goals that are inclusive beyond the covenant people. This idea is enhanced in the four theological views we have discussed. Although these four scholars have different things to say, they have contributed to our discussion by univocally speaking against the idea that divine choice involves preference for one group of people over the others. Rowley, Moberly, Kaminsky and Levenson have also helped to draw up the implications of our exegetical findings in more explicitly theological terms.

Although Rowley ended up making supercessionist claims, his contribution is still notable for suggesting that Israel’s election is not out of divine favoritism. Rather, Israel is chosen because she is “best suited for the purpose” for which she is chosen. Although it is not without problems to say that Israel’s election entails “service,” Israel does have a role to play in the larger purpose of God, an idea defended by both Levenson and Kaminsky. Whether that role is to do with Israel acting as a mediator or an instrument, it serves the benefit of those outside the circle of Israel. Lest we reduce Israel’s election to mere “service,” we are reminded that Israel shares a special relationship with God and holds a special position in the divine imagination, although that does not put the nations in the background. Although Israel is called to a “service,” Israel’s election is not exhausted by that role because her election is not forfeited even when she fails to fulfill it. The Torah testifies that Israel’s election is grounded in the mysterious love of God and such love would not give up on Israel despite her failures and shortcomings. In this sense, Moberly has rightly placed the central focus on Abram and his descendants. It is without question that there is a larger dimension to the blessings announced in Gen 12:1-3, but it is the
elect that the blessing concern first and foremost. The universal aspect of election does not undermine the particularistic dimension of that theology.

Nevertheless, divine election makes sense and reaches its goal only when it serves the benefit of both the elect and the non-elect. Kaminsky is well justified in saying that being outside of God’s election is not equivalent to being damned. God has not rejected the non-elect in choosing the elect. In fact, the Hebrew Bible bears witness to outsiders receiving special blessing from God and in a few instances in Genesis, presents these outsiders as moral examples to the elect. Even if there is such a thing as “divine favoritism,” as at least Kaminsky would not hesitate to say, it is still not to the disadvantage of other people nor completely for the sake of the elect. In Genesis, God has not forgotten the non-elect but is active and involved in their lives, even if choosing to carry out a special purpose through the elect.
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