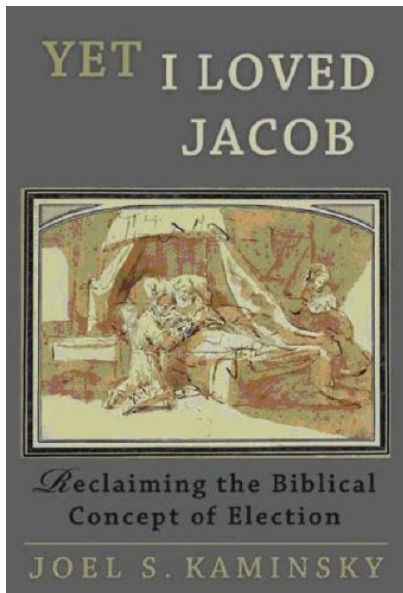


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Kaminsky, Joel S.

Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election

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B. J. Oropeza
Azusa Pacific University
Azusa, California

In *Yet I Loved Jacob*, the author laments that the biblical doctrine of election seldom receives the attention it deserves in scholarship. The subject remains unsavory for many Western thinkers because they consider the notion of God favoring individuals or a group of people as unfair and ethnocentric. Joel Kaminsky's aim in this book is "to provide a new and relatively accessible discussion of some of the most interesting aspects of this topic with the hope that others will be drawn into this theologically central but much-neglected area of study" (12). He focuses primarily on biblical election in the Hebrew Scriptures but interacts also with Christian perspectives, the New Testament, and rabbinic writings.

Kaminsky posits that the Enlightenment has influenced modern scholarship to seek universalism over particularism in reference to election. When combined with a view of Christian supersessionism, this tendency has led certain scholars (e.g., H. H. Rowley) to believe that Judaism failed in its responsibilities as the elect: their majority rejected Jesus as the Christ, and they neglected their duty as missionaries to the entire world. The assumption behind these alleged shortcomings of Judaism is that Christianity is the better religion because of its universal mission and inclusiveness over Judaism's intolerance and exclusiveness.

A reading of the Hebrew Scriptures through a Christian lens has likewise fueled the perspective that all people fall into the categories of either elect or damned. Kaminsky divides the notion of election from the Hebrews Scriptures differently into three categories: the elect (Israel), the anti-elect (e.g., Canaanites), and the nonelect (others who make up the majority of non-Israelites), which is a third group of people who are not to be equated with the damned. In this sense Judaism seems more tolerant than Christianity because the former allows for the nonelect to be of service to God independent of Jewish election, whereas the latter normally presents one way to salvation and often bifurcates people into the categories of saved and condemned (5, 135, 172–77).

The first section of the book focuses on election through the stories of sibling rivalry in Genesis: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac (and Hagar and Sarah), Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his siblings. Among others, Ishmael is presented as an example of a nonelect individual who nevertheless inherits some of the promises given to Abraham related to blessing, nationhood, and fruitfulness (Gen 17:20; 21:20; see also Gen. 12:3). In this case the nonelect is definitely not God's enemy; Ishmael, in fact, seems closer to the elect than certain others from the nonelect category, so Kaminsky raises the possibility that "there are degrees among the non-elect" (35). The stories from Genesis provide a critique of what happens when the elect are harmed by others (e.g., Esau wanting to kill Jacob, Joseph sold into slavery) and when the elect themselves do not live up to their responsibilities and favored status (e.g., Jacob's deceitfulness, Joseph flaunting his favoritism). The stories are thus bound up with human rebellion and undeserved chosenness. The elect have their flaws but still remain elect, and the narratives generally suggest that despite difficulties, even those who are not chosen "can learn to accept and live with the mysterious unfairness inherent in a world shaped by God's gracious love" (78).

The second section of the book discusses covenants and promises (ch. 5), election in Leviticus and Deuteronomy (ch. 6), the anti-elect and nonelect (chs. 7–8), election in prophetic and wisdom literature (chs. 9–10), and election in the New Testament and rabbinic literature (ch. 11). Of particular interest in this section are the anti-elect, which includes the Canaanites, Amalekites, and Midianites. Kaminsky admits that the killing of the anti-elect in Scripture remains problematic, even if such phenomena were never actualized in Israel's history, because such texts have been used in history to justify the persecution of the other. Even so, Kaminsky argues that such passages do not nullify the validity of election. It is doubtful that anti-elect polemics in Scripture are "central to the theology of Israel's election or the inexorable consummation of that theology" (119). More significantly, sometimes the very texts that promote these killings present us also with a very responsive treatment of foreigners and resident aliens (e.g., Deut 10:19; 24:17–22).

Kaminsky responds to scholarship that uncritically attests to passages in prophetic literature as examples of universalism. For Kaminsky these writings are not intended to nullify Israel's election; rather, they charge wayward Israel to behave appropriately as God's elect. Passages in the literature of Isaiah promote inclusiveness to foreigners and other nations (e.g., Isa. 19:18–25; 42:6, 22; 49:6; 56:1–8; 66:18–24), but other passages in the same writings are highly particularized and portray the nations in a negative light (e.g., Isa. 40:17; 45:23–25; 49:23–26; 60:1–16). Unlike modernistic notions, universalism finds its roots in biblical passages that maintain Israel's particularity, and for Kaminsky it is not clear from these writings that Israel is called to do missionary activities.

Some final observations in the book are that some texts associate Israel's election with divine purpose, and in this sense election is instrumental: Israel is called for service and to be a blessing to others (e.g., Gen. 12; Exod. 19). Yet Israel's chosenness is likewise undeserved and rooted in God's love (Deut 7:7–8; 9:4–9). In essence, Israel's election is not contingent on failing to live up to her responsibilities. While this theological perception of the elect may seem unfair, "it may also be taken as a sign of God's close and merciful relationship toward humanity as a whole, and of his profoundly *personal* character" (194).

Although the book covers New Testament and rabbinic views of election, with the exception of a brief sounding from wisdom theologies, the Septuagint is not a point of interest, nor is the literature of Qumran, Philo, Josephus, or other sources from the Second Temple period. Such an endeavor, according to Kaminsky in a footnote, would amount to writing another book.

A couple of ponderings are in order in relation to this book's understanding of the Christian view of election. Kaminsky brings up the bifurcation of Christian scriptures into two groups based on faith in Jesus as the Christ (e.g., John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Gal 2:15–16) and the fact that this provides an incentive for Christians to do missionary activities among nonbelievers. In the Christian view, salvation is said to be bound up with election. A possible exception not noticed by Kaminsky is the story of the sheep and goats in Matt 25. This passage includes a judgment on all the Gentiles or nations (Matt 25:32), and the phrase used here—"all the nations"—refers to non-Christian Gentiles in Matthew's Gospel (see also 24:9, 14; 28:19). Their access into the kingdom (the sheep) or exclusion from the kingdom (the goats) is not based on their faith in Jesus but on how they treated Jesus' "brothers or sisters." If so, are we looking at an early Christian example in the New Testament comparable with what might be identified by Kaminsky as the "nonelect"? Another New Testament foil is Paul's declaration that unbelieving Israel is still elect (Rom 11:28). Some fruitful discussions might center on the possibility that early Christian sources do not always directly connect salvation with election.

Kaminsky compares rabbinic Judaism and New Testament perspectives on election and holds that the former mitigates God's arbitrariness by explaining chosenness as a deserved status, whereas the latter "has chosen to elevate the motif of God's mysterious and inscrutable choice" (181). His leading support for this statement is a full citation of the often exploited Rom 9:3–16, in which Paul expounds on God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael and his loving Jacob and hating Esau. When read in light of the full context of Rom 9–11, however, what Paul stresses is that God's plan all along was to bring about mercy to all, both Jews and Gentiles. He unveils this "mystery" before his audience and gravitates away from arbitrariness in election to one of divine purpose and inclusive salvation (11:25–32). Hence, if Rom 9 is to weigh heavily on the Christian view of election, it needs to be explained in view of its conclusion in Rom 11, which emphasizes that God has a *purpose* in election, and that purpose is to provide salvation for both Jews and Gentiles.

This does not play down the particularity in election, because it is precisely through God choosing Abraham and Israel that the salvation of the whole world is achieved, and the story of God choosing Joseph to save "the world" may be seen as a prelude to this (Gen 50:20; see also 41:57). For the early Christians, of course, a major distinction is that God has also chosen Christ Jesus, and the nations become elect "in Christ" (e.g., Eph 1:3–14).

In any case, Joel Kaminsky's tripartite interpretation of election in the Hebrew Scriptures is commendable and will assist in further explorations and dialogues on the subject. He rightly suggests that authentic advancement in religious dialogues, especially between Jews and Christians, happens as a result of various traditions interacting with each other about their respective particularities. Both Judaism and Christianity should continue to affirm the particularity of election and not empty it of its theological meaning.

This book is a very important contribution to the subject of biblical election, and Kaminsky has fulfilled his objective: to open the discussion and draw others into it.