The publication of Professor Kaminsky’s book marks an important juncture in biblical theology. I came to the work with interest in topics indicated by the book’s title, the election of Israel in the Hebrew Bible and divine election more generally, but it soon became apparent that it would address much more. Not only does Kaminsky examine the biblical material in a careful and engaged manner, but he also manages to produce an instance of Jewish-Christian dialogue that needs to be read by all interested in its positive development. In this review, I will comment on both of these aspects in Kaminsky’s work. As a theological interpreter of Scripture working from within the Christian tradition, I intend to show that Kaminsky’s book shows both careful theological interpretation and well-conducted Jewish-Christian dialogue. But I also believe that the discussion here is only beginning, and some areas need further thought and perhaps adjustment.

The book begins with, indeed devotes about a third of its space to, an examination of sibling rivalry stories in Genesis. The move is significant in that it reveals the author’s belief that these stories are foundational for how election in the Hebrew Bible is established and should be understood. It becomes immediately clear that Kaminsky is deeply influenced by Jon Levenson’s work in his Death and Resurrection of the Beloved.
In the first chapter Kaminsky looks at the story of Cain and Abel, and he rightly concludes that it is too enigmatic to be called a straightforward election story. However, he does think the story is a foretaste of those fuller election stories to come in Genesis in which the latter-born son receives divine favor while the status and role of the one not chosen are also highlighted. In the ensuing chapters Kaminsky examines the stories of Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and, finally, Joseph and his brothers. There is much that could be said for each of these chapters, but in some ways the most novel work comes in the last chapter of this section, that of Joseph and his brothers. I will comment briefly. Although one can critique aspects of his reading here, overall the story of Joseph works well in Kaminsky’s program. He highlights how the favored brother Joseph, endowed with multiple divine gifts, must learn to use his chosenness with maturity and wisdom. After failed attempts and foolish dealings with his brothers, Joseph learns to use his status for good, and there is a degree of reconciliation that takes place between Joseph and his brothers, those who must learn to accept their younger brother’s elevated status. Here we have echoes of the Jacob and Esau story in that the nonelect, or unfavored, brother learns to accept his role and status, but in this story it is clear that the brothers do not represent unchosenness in the same way as those previous—they are simply less favored within the chosen family. Joseph is specially loved and seems chosen for a unique role that will preserve Israel. The seeming “unfairness” of Jacob’s (and God’s) love for Joseph is felt throughout, yet, Kaminsky shows, the story reveals something about the workings of election and its tests for all concerned: those chosen and unchosen. God’s love is not universal and distant but is personal, relational, indeed very close to human love. “No human lover loves his or her beloved in the same way he or she relates to all other people in the world,” Kaminsky tells us. It is equally unlikely that a parent loves all his or her children identically, and, however difficult to accept, it is likely that one child is loved above others or is special to the parent in comparison. God too loves in a profoundly personal way rather than in an equal and generic way for all. Kaminsky builds up to his thesis (here we see a deep indebtedness to the work of Wyschogrod) and uses the rest of the book to hash out what this means and to show how election thus functions. Election is relational, personal, corporeal. God’s love is directed to one people, those who descend from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, and this means that some are not loved in the same way. If we could conclude here, perhaps readers could accept such a vision of election, even if theologically challenging. But the problem goes deeper. At times in the Hebrew Bible

God’s special love for the one people Israel entails what seems to be a divine hatred toward others, or at least a call for the destruction of certain unchosen people. How do we make sense of this?

The question is one of great import for Kaminsky. After looking at election through promise and covenant (ch. 5) and Leviticus and Deuteronomy (ch. 6), Kaminsky directs his attention to questions of elective function in chapters 7 and 8. Working from earlier research, Kaminsky develops his unique system of election through the introduction of three distinct categories: the elect, the nonelect and the anti-elect. I will summarize only briefly before evaluating. According to Kaminsky, the elect are those chosen by God, God’s special people Israel. “The anti-elect are those few groups who are deemed to be enemies of God and whom Israel is commanded to annihilate” (109). The nonelect is where the majority of non-Israelite people fit in, those not-chosen but who “were always considered fully part of the divine economy,” those whom “Israel was to work out her destiny in relation to … even if in separation from them” (109). Distinguishing between the nonelect and the anti-elect becomes the primary challenge for Kaminsky, and he seeks to demonstrate that, although there are indeed difficult passages regarding the anti-elect, their fate is not shared by all non-Israelites. The nonelect have a responsibility to God and to the chosen, while Israel too must work out its status in relation to the nonelect. The anti-elect do not enter the divine economy but are rare examples of people deemed enemies of God, those doomed for destruction.

There is something attractive about the model, yet there are areas to criticize. The model is attractive in that it helps makes sense of the gradation present within the Hebrew Bible regarding those who are not Israel. We should not confuse the “seven nations in the land,” or the Amalekites, with non-Israelites more generally. This makes sense, on the one hand, because one cannot help but notice that many nonelect characters (and, on rare occasions, nations) of the Hebrew Bible feature positively, or seem to know Israel’s God intimately, responding appropriately to him (e.g., King Abimelech, Rahab, perhaps Balaam, the people of Nineveh). On the other hand, it also raises questions. For instance, what about the anti-elect? Kaminsky admits that the issue is deeply problematic, one he will not resolve. He notes possible ways to alleviate the problem, for example, the fact that the conquest is likely more rhetorical than historical and that nations do remain in the land with Israel according to the story. But to my mind we are still left with the theological problem of divine hatred and its repercussions, as defined by others (e.g., Jeremy Cott, Regina Schwartz, and Gerd Lüdemann, those Kaminsky seeks to address).4

4. See his introduction to chapters 7–8 (107–10).
The problem only gets deeper when we consider that Kaminsky is clearly attributing the status of these hated nations to divine *election*.

What do we make of this? I think the problem may actually be one of election. In my work in this area, I try to make sense of the “nations in the land” as they relate to Israel’s election, and I conclude that there is an intimate connection. Although the nations are said to be wicked, the issue is one of land, *promised* land. These nations are (to put it bluntly) in the wrong place at the wrong time, as the land is YHWH’s promised gift to Israel. For the nations that occupy that space, Israel’s election means anything but favor.

I wish Kaminsky had worked this out a little more fully. To what extent is “anti-election” truly a category of election? Is it that nations are *chosen* for divine hatred, *chosen* for destruction, made to be enemies of God at his choosing? Is this really a category of divine election? I think it may be, or at least is a repercussion of one, and Kaminsky treats it as such. But here we lose hope of maintaining a tidy theological picture. The problems are deep and many. It also raises questions about gradation within these categories, as Kaminsky suggests can take place. But I am still unsure here. Could gradation cause a complete change in one’s status? Can a chosen person or people change their status to nonelect or even anti-elect, and does this really relate to election? To make the abstract concrete, I take an example that Kaminsky mentions briefly: Achan. He is part of Israel, the chosen, but he commits an act so heinous that he is deemed an enemy of God to be destroyed. The same could be said of Rahab, although in an opposite sense. She is categorically pronounced, along with the rest of her fellow Canaanites, to be made *herem*: an enemy of God to be destroyed. But she is able to overcome this through a daring righteous act, or at least one of self-preservation. God’s absolute command to destroy is overridden, and she, along with her family, gains nonelect status, perhaps even elect status, joining Israel in some way. Should these examples be spoken of in categories of election, or should we place these outside this realm? Perhaps we need to recognize that even wicked deeds or righteous actions can trump God’s choosing. There is need for clarification here.

To be sure, Kaminsky contends that his categories are heuristic and should not be held hard and fast. I am concerned, however, about the effectiveness of the program in tackling the problem it sets out to address, that of divine hatred toward non-Israelites and their destruction. In Kaminsky’s model the divinely hated group is rightly understood as smaller and only existent in rare situations. But to my mind, the issue remains. I guess I

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am playing the devil’s, or perhaps Regina Schwartz’s or David Clines’s, advocate. I am genuinely interested in an answer, and despite careful work and a valiant effort, I am not sure Kaminsky provides one.

Despite this reservation with Kaminsky’s tripartite distinctions within election, and because the issue is too large to address in full here, I will shift my focus to address the question of Jewish-Christian dialogue in Kaminsky’s work. The book presents something of a model for how Jewish-Christian dialogue should be conducted. Levenson has spoken to this issue more fully, and Kaminsky shows not only that it can be done but that this is \textit{the} road to fruitful dialogue. That is, true dialogue occurs \textit{not} when we seek out facile commonalities (e.g., so-called Judeo-Christian ethics or general notions of monotheism) or when we downplay our distinctive faith claims; \textit{real and honest dialogue occurs when both traditions together work through their most deeply particularistic ideas}. To my mind, no idea could be more particularistic, controversial, or troubling for our contemporary world than the idea that God chose one people above others, and the two faith groups often hold quite divergent views on election, not least in defining who constitutes God’s chosen people. Further, my own research in this area exposes just how differently Jews and Christians approach the topic of election: Christian interpreters often suggest that the election of Israel is not really as it seems—it is just a small step toward a more universal, inclusive plan of salvation for all people—or they ignore it all together. Often, when Christian interpretation does acknowledge God’s election of Israel, it is with the view that it has been transferred to the church. Or, when it is ignored, there is often apathy toward Jewish-Christian relations or (worse) a view that the Jewish populace is traveling somewhere comfortably in a hand-basket, unless they accept the Christian messiah. For Jewish interpretation, on the other hand, like that of Wyschogrod and Kaminsky, divine election is corporeal pure and simple. It is to Abraham and every child who is traced to him through Isaac and Jacob that God’s love is specially directed. It is not through faith or action that this love comes about. To be sure, Torah is central to the relationship, but God’s love for this special people is based upon God’s love, God loves, chooses, and desires Israel because God loves, chooses, and desires Israel. It is something David Novak refers to as the tautology of divine election, consistent with the logic of scripture.

6. These two authors stand out, since their contributions to the subject are penetrating and worthy of engagement. See Schwartz’s \textit{The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), and, e.g., Clines’s conclusion to \textit{The Bible and the Modern World} (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997). I address both in my forthcoming book (see n. 5 above).


Probably the most intriguing part of the book is Kaminsky’s engagement with Christian views of election, particularly in the last chapter. Kaminsky rightly notes that within much of Christian (particularly Protestant) thinking is the idea that the elect are saved while the nonelect are damned. That is, election equals salvation, and nonelection equals damnation. After reading the book, the Hebrew Bible itself, and much of the New Testament, it is clear that such ideas are untenable, more the remnants of bad theology than a biblical worldview. What is interesting is Kaminsky’s use of the entire Christian Bible, both Old and New Testaments, to counter such ideas and to show that there needs to be a corrective at work within Christian scholarship.

There is something challenging and moving about an interpreter who does not share the Christian faith yet works to help reform that tradition, out of what can only be taken as a heartfelt concern that this faith community understand Israel’s God appropriately and accurately. There is something compelling in a Jewish interpreter showing where Christian views of election have misrepresented the Old Testament and the New Testament as well. I am not convinced that Kaminsky has got it right everywhere (in particular, there is more within the New Testament itself that should help correct this binary opposition, in areas Kaminsky’s reading of Paul needs closer attention, and there are areas of the book that caricaturize Christian mission), but Kaminsky’s points are well taken and need to be heard.

There is much that is constructive here for Christian theology and interpretation. The main problem, as I see it, will come in implementing the program. There were times when, as a Christian interpreter, I could not help but feel, even with sympathies to Kaminsky’s work, that the corrective would still need to come more from within the New Testament, not only the Hebrew Bible. I found myself wishing that Kaminsky had shown more how the New Testament itself demonstrates that the binary opposition of the elect and the damned is not a primary emphasis, and stories within this corpus argue against it (e.g., the overarching emphasis of the Gospels, stories like the Syrophoenician woman, the sheep and the goats, aspects of John’s apocalypse). Kaminsky illustrates specific examples of how Paul’s reading of the Hebrew Scriptures is often stretched (e.g., in Galatians, where Israel becomes the unchosen son of Hagar while those “in Christ” are now the elect son of Sarah), but our readings need to be even further sharpened and more needs to be done. Kaminsky’s work is a needed wakeup call to reinterpret and reappropriate these problematic, oftentimes occasioned and potentially hate-inspiring texts.

Part of Kaminsky’s reform involves a suggestion that Christian interpreters not always allow the New Testament to trump the Old but rather to allow the Old (or Hebrew Bible) to speak new life into these texts. It is likely that many Christian readers’ sensitivities will
react here in that we are typically trained hermeneutically to read the Old through the New, not the other way around. Yet in the end, through much reflection, I had to come to agree with Kaminsky. The often highly occasional nature of the New Testament means that there are certain times when writers exert extreme readings, ideas, or theology, sometimes drawn from the Jewish scriptures, in an effort to take out a theological opponent of their day. But should such arguments always be taken as the final word on a matter? Had Paul known of future Christianity’s miserable, indeed abominable, record of oppression and anti-Semitism, would he have written as forcefully as he did regarding Israel, as in that Hagar and Sarah passage? Would he deem his writings here to be normative with regard to Christian-Jewish relations? I am doubtful. Some have made important adjustments in this area, but there is need for a wholesale reassessment in many quarters. If nothing else, reading the New through the Old or allowing the Old (or Hebrew Bible) to have the final word on matters can be instructive, at times transformative.

All this is just one way of saying that Kaminsky’s work is important and will challenge many Christian readers to rethink their understanding of the New Testament and Christianity’s relationship to Judaism. The way forward in Jewish-Christian dialogue has been rightly defined by Levenson and is demonstrated here by Kaminsky: we should not downplay our distinctives or simply seek out superficial commonalities; we must respectfully and honestly engage each other in all our particularisms, not necessarily with theological agreement as a goal. In doing so, both religious groups will better understand each other and perhaps move toward rapprochement and deeper mutual respect. As Kaminsky notes, complete theological reconciliation is probably not possible, and we need to acknowledge this in our discussions. Respect—perhaps some form of love—for each other is possible, however, and Kaminsky’s hope outlined in the last chapter bears repeating. He suggests that a special blessing will be enjoyed by both faith communities when, as Esau did in greeting his estranged brother, a reconciliation takes place with a heartfelt embrace, weeping, and recognition of the blessings we each possess and can share. The brothers remain separate but are brothers reconciled who bury their father together, as did Isaac and Ishmael. This book is an important step in a road that must be traveled. We are in Kaminsky’s debt for giving us a taste of this vision and leading us to that path.