

Old Testament Election:  
God's Exclusive Means of Bringing About Global Redemption

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### Abstract

This thesis will seek to explore the doctrine of election as it appears in the Old Testament. It will attempt to provide a robust, biblical conception of the doctrine, shedding light on its nature and purpose, viewing the Bible as a singular story of God's redemptive work. It will consider and assess election as God's act of divine prerogative—being at times individual but primarily corporate. While inherently partial, effort will be taken to defend the doctrine against common objections this partiality draws. Rather, it will be shown that as the means by which He initiated His gracious plan of salvation, God's elective acts were the means by which His character and ultimate plan of salvation was revealed to mankind.

## Old Testament Election:

## God's Exclusive Means of Bringing About Global Redemption

The Old Testament concept of election is grounded in the Hebrew root בָּחַר meaning ‘to choose, to elect.’<sup>1</sup> While the word itself is used to express choices of both the divine and man alike—including choices rather mundane (e.g., Gen. 13:11), its most theologically significant usage pertains to God’s use of divine discretion when intervening in the affairs of human history. To this effect, בָּחַר communicates a choice according to the specific will of God. At times, men (e.g., David [2 Sam. 6:21]) or places of worship (e.g., Deut. 12:18) are in view, but the most substantial occurrences refer to God’s choice of the patriarchs and the nation of Israel (Neh. 9:7; Deut. 4:37; Isa.44:1-2).<sup>2</sup> It appears to this effect 99 times.<sup>3</sup>

However, God’s unique relationship with Israel is expressed by a range of semantically related roots that extend much beyond בָּחַר.<sup>4</sup> Two of these roots specifically tie the concept closely with the biblical theme of covenant: יָדַע (‘to know’ [e.g., Gen. 18:19]) and קָרָא (‘to call’ [e.g., Isa. 51:2]). In the calling of Abraham, for example, the divine purposes of election are laid

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Wright, “Election,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 216.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph L. Smith, *Old Testament Theology: Its History, Method, and Message* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 132.

<sup>3</sup> Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. Leo G. Perdue, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 27–28.

<sup>4</sup> See Smith, *Old Testament Theology*, 132–33; Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, 31–32. Together they identify ten Hebrew roots which are used in relation to elective language. These words range from denoting the act of choosing in itself, the act of particular redemption through the Exodus, and also include other aspects such as the process of making Israel distinct through the law.

out and defined by the promises that God gives and sealed by covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; 17:7; 22:16-18).<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, whether explicitly or implicitly, the concept of election saturates the Old Testament. God's eternal plan for the redemption of the world hinges on His intervention in human history. Horst Preuss elevates this idea as a crucial portion of his Old Testament theology: "YHWH's activity of choosing compromises the most decisive, fundamental structure of the Old Testament witness."<sup>6</sup> From this foundational idea, the story of God's work is bound to His choice to establish a unique, covenanting relationship with His chosen people. Simply stated in the IVP *Dictionary of the Old Testament*, "election is the central concept used to recapitulate the story of God's promises to the people of God, Israel."<sup>7</sup>

### **Abraham as the Patriarch of God's Elect**

The story of election in the Old Testament began at the very beginning in the book of Genesis. Man's fall into sin brought with it a drastic upheaval of the good, orderly world God had created. With sin came pain, death, and, most crucially, a means of redemption. While casting Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, God gave them a hint of the salvation that was to come (Gen. 3:15).<sup>8</sup> Assuring His people of deliverance through the seed of the woman, the

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<sup>5</sup> Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 165.

<sup>6</sup> Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, "Election," 216.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* Wright suggests that the language of election is relatively limited prior to the book of Deuteronomy, but the concepts are present nevertheless, calling it "presupposed". However, this portion of the Pentateuch provides much of the undergirding for the theological themes and motifs which define the doctrine of election in the Old Testament.

Lord supplied a simple promise upon which His purposes in election would be built.<sup>9</sup> However, over the next several generations, the wickedness of man brought about chaos and suffering with no end in sight (Gen. 6:5). God's plan of election had yet to emerge as the "answer to the plight of humanity."<sup>10</sup>

Only after a catastrophic global flood, the confusion of world's languages, and the scattering of its people does the first chapter of God's elected plan begin to unfold. God's chosen vessel was Abram, a man given little introduction aside from a brief mention of his father and his homeland. In this man, called out from paganism and renamed Abraham (signifying his future identity as the father of many nations [Gen. 17:5]), humanity was introduced to the next step of the fulfillment of the promise made back in the garden. By choosing to covenant with Abraham, God established a covenant that is the first to explicitly link the concept of election, a chosen people of God, with the fulfillment of the redemption that was promised.<sup>11</sup>

### **Why Abraham?**

Most agree that the Bible never gives an indication as to why Abram was selected as the patriarch of God's people.<sup>12</sup> However, in his monograph on election, H. H. Rowley insists that this choice was far from arbitrary; he argues that in choosing Abraham God displayed His divine

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 346.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Old Testament Theology*, 136.

<sup>11</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 165.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, "Election," 216.

wisdom and matchless grace in selecting the vessel most fitting for His salvific purposes.<sup>13</sup> Asserting that an omnipotent and omniscient God can use divine, unspecified means to bring about His purposes is hardly controversial. However, he also oddly claims that “in so far as any reason for Abraham’s election could be deduced from the book of Genesis, it would be the loftiness of the character which he shows.”<sup>14</sup> Critic Jeremy Cott points out the absurdity of the statement, especially considering the fact that Rowley himself mentions Abraham’s own shortcomings in the very next sentence.<sup>15</sup> Even more confoundingly, Rowley later recognizes the “dilemma” created when attributing some sort of merit to Abraham: “If God chooses the worthy, then His grace is in question; while if He chooses the unworthy, then His justice is in question.”<sup>16</sup>

This question, however, is not merely an exercise in futility. If any reason can be ascertained concerning God’s choice of Abraham, it can be found in God’s original call and promise to him (Gen. 12:1-3). Here, God promised Abraham a divinely chosen land, innumerable descendants, and unique blessing among the peoples of the earth. In doing so, God lays out, in a preliminary sense, the purpose that He has set for Abraham’s life. Abraham is to

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<sup>13</sup> H. H. Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1964), 32–35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Jeremy Cott, “The Biblical Problem of Election,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, JES, 21 (1984): 222. The two mentioned transgressions are the fact that he is married to his sister and that he lied about their relationship multiple times to protect himself. Though far from related to the topic of this paper, I think it is worth mentioning that this is a fallacious, anachronistic critique as sibling marriage is not explicitly prohibited in the biblical text until some 400 years later (Leviticus 18) and sibling marriage is inevitable if a literal, historical person of Adam is to be argued for.

<sup>16</sup> Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election*, 39.

function as God's means of blessing all the nations of the earth. The elements of the Abrahamic covenant function as a guarantee of God's plan of deliverance still to be enacted through Abraham's descendants. This is the expressed purpose of Abraham's election.<sup>17</sup>

This, however, answers only the "who" but not the "why" of God's selection. The answer does not rest in anything Abraham had done to demonstrate his worth or anything he could do to prove his usefulness to the eternal plans of God. Rather, Abraham's significance, at least in part, is found in what he cannot possibly provide. In God's plan, an old man with a barren wife much past her childbearing years was chosen to be the father of many (Gen. 15:2-5; 17:3-8). Even though Abraham tried to bring about God's promises himself through the birth of Ishmael, God made it clear that His promises would be fulfilled through the birth of Isaac by Sarah (Gen. 18:9-15). In effect, God's election of Abraham ensured that it would be His own divine power and plan, not the efforts of Abraham or any other man, that would account for the redemption that He promised generations earlier in the garden.

### **Foreshadowing God's Purpose in Election**

Beyond this, the story of Abraham's calling to be the patriarch of the divinely chosen people of God bore two additional significant themes which will unfold further as the story of God's election progresses. First, though rooted in one individual, God used this specific family through successive generations—and despite somewhat substantial immorality—to underscore the corporate nature of His electing purposes and plan. John Goldingay presents the link between the election of a family and the redemption of mankind distinctly: "The way God will bless the

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<sup>17</sup> John Kessler, *Old Testament Theology: Divine Call and Human Response* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 162.



family and turn it into a great nation will lead to the world's seeking the same blessing. God's original intention to bless the whole world will thus find realization."<sup>18</sup> God built for Himself a covenant people based solely upon His grace. His work among Abraham's family demonstrates His faithfulness to His covenants and His intentions for reconciliation with all of fallen humanity.

Abraham's circumcision was a covenant act that points to God's holiness and foreshadows what God asks from His people. From Abraham's point of view and place in salvific history, the covenant of circumcision seemed straightforward. Routledge expounds on the importance of circumcision as an indication of the established covenant relationship: "Circumcision was, primarily, a mark of belonging to God. It was a sign of the grace by which God chooses and sets his seal on the covenant people he has called to be his own. It also points to the obedience to God that living in covenant relationship with him requires."<sup>19</sup> Circumcision was a symbol for identifying God's elect, but it is also indicative of the holiness and purity that is embedded in this covenantal relationship.<sup>20</sup> These latter emphases are more definitively defined in God's next major work in election in the bringing about of His redemptive promises.

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<sup>18</sup> John Goldingay, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Exploring Text, Approaches & Issues* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 72. See also, John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Faith*, vol. 2, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 176; Wright, "Election," 218.

<sup>19</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 167.

<sup>20</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1976), 139.

### **The Exodus as Demonstration of Election**

After only three generations, the chosen people of God—the descendants of Abraham through the son of the promise, Isaac—were once again far from their homeland and living in relative obscurity. Though they continued to become numerous, their subjection at the hands of the Egyptians casts doubt on the reality of their chosenness (Exod. 1:1-14). The Egyptians clearly saw the unique blessings of Israel and, in fear for their own nation’s prosperity, sought to smother them.<sup>21</sup> What started as a provision of God in the life of Joseph and his brothers for the sake of their family (Gen. 50:20-21), by all observable evidence, had waned and given way to generations of oppression and hardship. Their election, however, remained. It is at this point that God would reenter the story and intervene on behalf of His chosen people for the sake of His enduring salvific purpose. In the midst of the Israelites’ suffering, “God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Exod. 2:24).

Returning to the pattern of unlikely births (as started in Isaac and recapitulated through Jacob and Joseph), God selected for Himself the next leader of His chosen people. An outcast among both Hebrews and Egyptians, Moses was the ideal vessel for God to demonstrate His sovereign orchestration of Israel’s deliverance. Ten devastating plagues later, the Lord led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt through the leadership of Moses. Through the Exodus, God established His chosen people as a visible, unique nation being used for His purposes. This act also served as an act of revelation—and also a second proclamation of the promise made to

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<sup>21</sup> Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology*, 355.

Abraham. God proved Himself faithful to His promises so that this generation of Israelites, born and raised in slavery, could have their own faith in the God of their ancestors.<sup>22</sup>

This dramatic birth of a nation marked the beginning of the more visible and permanent portion of Israel's election. The Exodus marked the inauguration of a new chapter in the story of God's people in which His blessing and faithfulness would be nearly undeniable. James Muilenburg presents this principle well: "it is through his historical activity that YHWH elects a group, a people to enter into community with him...the 'election' of Israel took place originally in the foundational events of the exodus out of Egypt and the deliverance at the sea, but election also came to be experienced and then confessed in terms of other [future] events."<sup>23</sup> In this act, God's character and their relation to Him are grounded and rendered unquestionable; His purpose for them and His ability to render it certain has been adequately demonstrated.<sup>24</sup> God has reclaimed the descendants which He promised Abraham and has repositioned them on a path toward fulfilling His eternal purposes.

### **Aspects of Israel's Election**

#### **Election and Corporate Identity**

God's call of Israel centers around them as a people. Moses was clearly chosen as God's primary instrument of their deliverance from Egypt, but the totality of God's choice of Israel

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<sup>22</sup> James Muilenburg, *The Way of Israel: Biblical Faith and Ethics*, Religious Perspectives 5 (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1961), 48–49.

<sup>23</sup> Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Irwin W. Reist, "The Theological Significance of the Exodus," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1969): 224–25.

extends to all of its members. That is to say, “election is primarily a corporate concept.”<sup>25</sup> God has chosen for Himself a nation as the means of earthly influence, blessing, and redemption. This is reflected in both the way that they are referenced and the manner that He has called and covenanted with them. Fittingly, they find their importance therein.

The way the text speaks to this aspect of their election reflects its significance and further highlights its theological underpinnings. Firstly, this nation is the bodily representation of God’s faithfulness to His promise to Abraham.<sup>26</sup> In claiming them as a nation which is numerous, blessed, and under His divine guidance, God revealed His intention to continue unveiling His redemptive purpose promised in the garden and brought to the forefront in the calling of Abraham. From this foundational covenant with Abraham, the Israelites were claimed and associated with God to a greater extent. They were from here forward to be known as the “people of God” as a result of their relationship with the one true Lord.<sup>27</sup> More pointedly, God began to identify Himself as the “God of Israel,” that is to say, the God of *that* people.<sup>28</sup>

The corporate element of their election was an integral part of their self-identity their relationship with God. Given their national deliverance in the Exodus and the distinctive legal code that would come as they entered their promised homeland, it’s safe to say that “the concept

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<sup>25</sup> William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 35. See also Reist, “The Theological Significance of the Exodus,” 226; Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 72; Goldingay, *Israel’s Faith*, 2:192.

<sup>26</sup> Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God*, 73.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>28</sup> Goldingay, *Israel’s Faith*, 2:192.

of ‘peoplehood’ was the basic idea of Israel's self-understanding.”<sup>29</sup> They operated from this vantage point as a nation, and God chose to know and use them in accordance with His plan for their election. In that effect, Preuss sees the election of Moses as the leader of the Israelites pertains specifically to their national election: “the exodus from Egypt, election, covenant, and the gift of the land are directed toward Israel as a people. YHWH is the God of Israel. Even where and when YHWH elects an individual, this action serves the people as a whole.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Elected to be a Holy Nation**

Election did not merely mean that the Israelites marched out of Egypt to an idyllic life as God’s chosen nation. Rather, their election—both stemming from and in response to God’s sovereign and glorious work in their lives and those of their ancestors—required that the proper response be made to the covenant that God was initiating with them. Obligation, therefore, is deeply entrenched in the status conferred along with election.<sup>31</sup> This can be seen in two respects. Israel is once again reminded that they did not merit their status as the chosen people of God; they were redeemed from bondage in Egypt solely on account of God’s covenant with their forefathers (Exod. 2:24; Deut. 7:7-8).<sup>32</sup> Secondly, God delivered them from Egypt and claimed

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<sup>29</sup> Petros Vassiliadis, “God’s Will for His People,” *International Review of Mission* 77, no. 306 (April 1988): 182.

<sup>30</sup> Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, 60.

<sup>31</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 170, 261; Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 90, 98–100.

<sup>32</sup> Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology*, 353.

them as His own and consequently demands their sole allegiance; such a line of reasoning is given before each pronouncement of the Decalogue (Exod. 20:2; Deut. 5:1-6).<sup>33</sup>

Accompanying this was a simple vision for what Israel will be as a nation as a corporate ambassador for the Lord: a kingdom of priest and a holy nation (Exod. 19:6). The law subsequently given in the Mosaic covenant typified His own divine, holy nature and detailed how God desires His people to conduct themselves in their service and worship of Him and in how they represent Him before the other nations of the earth. In the Mosaic Law, the Israelites' obedient service and worship of God fulfills its second purpose of exhibiting the majesty of their God before the other nations. That is to say, the legal code is as demanding and detailed as it is to demonstrate truth about a God worthy of such reverence. As Robin Routledge puts it, "it is a revelation of God's own character, and of his will for the life of the people he has called into relationship with himself and chosen to bear his name...they are to reflect in their life in community the holy character of the God who has set them apart, and, by obedience to the Law, maintain their distinctiveness as the covenant people of God."<sup>34</sup>

As the Israelites eventually moved into the land that they would receive in accordance with God's promise to Abraham, the necessity of their holiness became paramount. Their moral distinction and physical separation from the wicked nations that occupied the land was embedded in their identity as a holy nation elected by God (Deut. 9:5). Thus, the law functioned as a guiding and preparatory directive intending to separate and distinguish Israel from the other

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<sup>33</sup> Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, 40.

<sup>34</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 242–43. See also Wright, "Election," 218; Goldingay, *Israel's Faith*, 2:187.

nations of Canaan as they prepared to enter the Promised Land.<sup>35</sup> This imperative to avoid the impurity of the other nations was joined to their election as demonstrated by the Exodus (Lev. 11:45). Their status as a kingdom of priest and a holy nation in the land that they were being given was fundamental to their purpose in the redemptive plan of God. As He revealed His nature and majesty through His work among them, they were to be a mediator between the nations of the world and the Lord. The Mosaic law served to direct the Israelites in this purpose; Allen Ross's work on Leviticus highlights the often overlooked importance of the Levitical code: "the regulations guided them into a way of life that put them in sharp contrast with the nations around them, for only when they were set apart from the world would they be useful in God's plan to restore his blessing to the world."<sup>36</sup>

This legal code served the newly established covenant between God and His chosen people.<sup>37</sup> Surrounding and extending beyond this legal code was a mutual relationship marked by service and worship in which Israel recognized and accepted their calling and in effect "elected" the Lord back as the God of their nation.<sup>38</sup> This was reflected, for example, in Exodus 19:8: "All the people answered together and said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do!'" (NASB).

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<sup>35</sup> Allan Moseley, *Exalting Jesus in Leviticus*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 118.

<sup>36</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 18.

<sup>37</sup> Obvious much more could be said about covenant, both in this instance and generally as it appears throughout the Old Testament. I am only touching on it here for centering the discussion of Israel's response to God as the chosen nation.

<sup>38</sup> Wright, "Election," 218. The "electing back" language is Wright's way of denoting the corporate acceptance of the covenant and the designation of being the elect nation of God.

While Israel's status as God's chosen means of eternal redemption for the peoples of the earth stood as eternal, "each generation had to renew the covenant for itself."<sup>39</sup> Subsequent disobedience to the law or disregard for the God who elected them would not terminate God's eternal promises and plan but would stifle blessings for His people in the present.<sup>40</sup> It is for this reason that conditional promises can be found throughout the Pentateuch (Exod. 19:5; Lev. 26:3ff.; Deut. 11:13ff.; 28:1). These warnings tie directly to Israel's role as a holy nation tasked with displaying God's holiness to the peoples of the land and how disobedience would hamper their effectiveness in doing so. Walter Kaiser points out the importance of such stipulations: "In short, it could qualify, hamper, or negate Israel's experience of sanctification and ministry to others; but it hardly could [affect] her election, salvation, or present and future transmission of the ancient promise to others."<sup>41</sup>

### **Elect and Favored**

In the Scriptures, there does exist an aspect of election that extends beyond God's choice of Israel as the corporate body through which His worldwide redemptive plan would be initiated. In being chosen by God, Israel is said to be uniquely loved and known by the Lord. Tied closely with this unique favor is the gift of the Promised Land. God chose the Israelites through their

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<sup>39</sup> Klein, *The New Chosen People*, 34.

<sup>40</sup> It is important to clarify that election here is not to be equated with salvation. See Klein, *The New Chosen People*, 32. God's election of Israel is based on His covenant with them and their ancestors and His eternal redemptive purposes. Men among the elect nation of Israel were saved just as everyone else was and has been since—by faith (Heb. 11:2). God's election of kings and priests in Israel is a fitting example of this phenomena. While God certainly chose who would lead and rule over Israel—both by selecting individuals and family lines—the Scriptures show that not all of them were faithful to the Lord and the covenant. Just as their election was not a guarantee of their salvation, so is the election of all of Israel not a guarantee of eschatological salvation for the entire nation.

<sup>41</sup> Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God*, 78.



father Abraham and made special provisions for them rooted primarily in His divine character and secondarily in His covenanting with them.

To a certain extent, the act of the Lord choosing for Himself one nation among all the nations of the earth was inherently partial. That is to say, that this partiality, or particularism, was a “fundamental element” of the Old Testament and inevitable in God’s electing act.<sup>42</sup> God’s relationship with Israel was unquestionably unique and defines His covenant and historical engagement with them (e.g., Amos 3:2). The relationship mirrored the exclusivity of a marriage: “He loved Israel—that is, He preferred her before all other peoples. She is His elected people.”<sup>43</sup> Once again, the language surrounding election plays a critical factor in how Israel’s chosenness is expressed. Their status as “firstborn” carries with it the idea of “first in preeminence.” Israel’s identity as God’s “treasured possession” certainly carried with it high esteem.<sup>44</sup>

It is important, therefore, to remember God’s purposes in election in analyzing the highly exclusive status bestowed upon Israel. The particular guidance and blessing of Israel was fundamentally rooted in God’s plan of redemption and is consequently beneficial to all the nations of the earth. Here Goldingay reiterates the core purpose of election: “It is also the case that God chose one people in order to further the divine purposes to bless the whole world. The broader context of Deuteronomy suggests that Yhwh’s particular love of Israel is designed to be

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<sup>42</sup> Joel N. Lohr, *Chosen and Unchosen: Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian Interpretation* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 33.

<sup>43</sup> Norman H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1964), 134. Snaith goes on to say, “There is an exclusiveness in God’s love. This idea of exclusiveness in God’s love has been part of the ‘offence of the Gospel’ since almost the first days. Such an idea must necessarily be involved in some degree as soon as the word ‘choose’ is used” (p. 139).

<sup>44</sup> Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God*, 71, 74.

inclusive not exclusive.”<sup>45</sup> God’s gracious work for and among Israel is His means of revealing Himself to the world. The story of Rahab provides a fitting example of this as the testimony she heard regarding God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt (an event that took place 40 years prior) inspired faith and pursuit of this God as she sought to be included among His people.

Stemming from the original promised made to Abraham, the Lord’s election of Israel also included the gift of the Promised Land. Israelite possession of this land, by default, required that those who previously occupied the land would be disposed and, according to the Scriptures, God’s hand played a major role in the conquest of the land of Canaan.<sup>46</sup> The purpose of this is manifold. First, it was promised to the Patriarchs and reiterated in the Exodus as a provision of God as a gift for the elect (Deut. 19:8). Second, having their own borders was necessary to their establishment as a legitimate nation in Ancient Near Eastern world. This provided the opportunity for them to be an independent people serving as a testimony to the holy God who freed them. Their role as a holy nation and kingdom of priests was contingent on having a land of their own; the location of such land was sovereignly chosen by God to best fit this purpose. Most plainly, however, was the simple truth that the land was a “central commodity of salvation”

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<sup>45</sup> Goldingay, *Israel’s Faith*, 2:200.

<sup>46</sup> This thesis does not permit a full treatment of the most common and serious objection to the doctrine of election: the Canaanite conquest. Please consult the following materials for more adequate and thorough treatment of this issue: Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011); Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Reading Joshua,” in *Divine Evil?: The Moral Character Of The God Of Abraham*, ed. Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010); Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*; James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2010); Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder, eds., *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2013); Richard S. Hess, “Joshua,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 165–71.

which God chose to include in their calling.<sup>47</sup> In the conclusion of the book of Joshua, these elements are stressed as the fundamental portions of the story of Israel (Josh. 24:2-13). G. Ernest Wright comments on this, saying, “It is the Hexateuch in miniature, in which the confessional elements emphasized are: God’s election of Abraham; his deliverance at the Exodus; and his gift of the land.”<sup>48</sup> The land serves as an integral aspect of Israel’s election in how it serves to both fulfill a promise to Abraham and also ground the nation of Israel to fulfill their other chosen purposes.

### **Election in the Prophets**

The prophetic books of the Old Testament speak on the concept of election in a fashion much different than the books which detail Israel’s history. They maintain and harken back to several key theological themes which define the story of Israel—in large part, Israel’s identity as the people of God—as the historical and theological context from which they wrote.<sup>49</sup> As a result, much of the prophetic writings, especially from the preexilic prophets, follow a cyclical structure. In such cases, Israel’s sin and repeated transgression against the covenant brought calls to repentance which, if not heeded, were to be followed by judgment. This is not the end of the story as a promise of future restoration and hope was given as well. Ultimately, such a cycle takes after the original story of humanity (Genesis 1-11) and Israel’s history as the people of

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<sup>47</sup> Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, 127.

<sup>48</sup> G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*, Studies in Biblical Theology 8 (London: Fletcher & Son Ltd., 1952), 72.

<sup>49</sup> J. Daniel Hays, *Message of the Prophets: A Survey of the Prophetic and Apocalyptic Books of the Old Testament*, ed. Tremper Longman (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 62.

God.<sup>50</sup> The promises and covenants made with the Patriarchs and the people of Israel after the Exodus provide the theological underpinning for the general message of the prophetic books.

In that same sense, the specific content of the prophets' messages relies heavily on the story of Israel and its election. The consistency of the message is rooted in God's faithfulness to them in their calling. Despite their repeated sin, idolatry, and unfaithfulness, their calling and purpose before God remained steadfast (Isa. 41:8-9).<sup>51</sup> Perhaps more so, their identity as the chosen people of God made the call to return to their God even more pointed. Just as He did repeatedly with the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, the Lord invoked the story of their relationship—His work in their deliverance from Egypt—as a sufficient reminder of their covenant with Him and their need to repent. Such can be seen pointedly in the book of Amos (3:1-2a; 9:7).<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, the prophets did accentuate an element of God's original promise to Abraham that is not emphasized in the history of Israel. In the final portion of God's promise to Abraham, the Lord declared that His calling of Abraham will eventually bring blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:3). The prophets incorporated this message into their proclamation of God's word, especially when telling of the future restoration of those who repent and turn to God.<sup>53</sup> This message is best seen in Isaiah 40-55. These chapters detail and recount what God has done in Israel so that, "not only will the nations observe what Yahweh has done

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>51</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 97.

<sup>52</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 386, 401.

<sup>53</sup> Hays, *Message of the Prophets*, 63, 69.

for Israel (Is 41:4; 42:11-12; 49:7), but also Israel will be a ‘light to the nations’ (Is 42:6; 49:6).”<sup>54</sup> This engendered thoughts of Israel’s initial calling as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19:6) and their purpose in election as the nation through which God reveals Himself as both ruler and redeemer.

### **Divine Election as Inclusive Act of Global Redemption**

Certainly, as laid out above, there is a definitive aspect in which election marks out Israel as the uniquely chosen people of God. It serves as a substantial theme within the grand narrative of the Old Testament. This is not symbolic, ceremonial, or temporary. God genuinely chose Israel from among the nations of the earth as His. This was in no way merited by the Israelites but rooted only in the Lord’s grace. God made a covenant with Abraham, it was perpetuated through his sons Isaac and Jacob, and finally, it was manifested in the nation of Israel.

In delivering His people through the Exodus, God more clearly demonstrated who He was and what His electing purposes entailed. This radical act of power and majesty publicly declared His selection of Israel as His people and showed His ability to intervene in the affairs of men to bring about His ultimate plan. As the Lord led His new nation toward the Promised Land, He made a covenant with them and gave them a law by which they were to order their steps. In doing so, He made them His kingdom of priests and a holy nation as a representative of Himself on the earth.

While all these things are certainly true and constitute a large portion of the Old Testament’s subject matter, it cannot be said, however, that therein lies the entirety of God’s

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<sup>54</sup> Paul M. Cook, “Nations,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 566.

purpose in election. According to Goldingay, the full truth is much broader than that: “Israel is Yhwh’s chosen and Yhwh’s beloved...It is chosen for its own sake, but also for Yhwh’s sake, and for the world’s sake because Yhwh’s intention is to reach out to the whole world through Israel.”<sup>55</sup> From the initial promise of redemption in Genesis 3, God had been planning to bring restoration to that which was broken by the Fall in Eden. In Abraham, more about God’s ultimate plan is revealed when it is said that through His seed “all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3b NASB). As that promised seed is shown to be Isaac and eventually grows to become the nation of Israel, God continued to use the children of His promise to bring blessing to the nations around them.<sup>56</sup> It is from this standpoint, rooted firmly in the promises of God in Genesis, that “the election of Israel is present as the answer to the problem of man.”<sup>57</sup>

Then, through the events of the Exodus and deliverance into the Promised Land, God made Himself known, as the Deliverer and Redeemer of Israel, to the whole world. In this sense, His claim to Israel and revelation to the world was made “functionally” and not merely as a belief of the Hebrew people.<sup>58</sup> Demonstrating Himself to be a God who is personally invested and intervening in the history of man, He decided to choose a people for Himself as the primary vessel by which He would achieve His purposes. In Israel, God found a small, insignificant nation through which He could move.<sup>59</sup> Through these fundamental parts of the plan, God was

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<sup>55</sup> Goldingay, *Israel’s Faith*, 2:192.

<sup>56</sup> Kessler, *Old Testament Theology*, 162.

<sup>57</sup> Wright, *God Who Acts*, 74.

<sup>58</sup> Vassiliadis, “God’s Will for His People,” 181.

<sup>59</sup> Wright, *God Who Acts*, 50.

showing His sovereign intent of reconciling Himself with the world He created. Routledge argues that through election, God showed that “the whole world belongs to [Him]. He owns it all, rules over it all and has a purpose for it all. Israel is called out as God’s special, but not his sole, possession, and Israel’s role within the divine plan is one that will involve every nation.”<sup>60</sup>

The specifics of this plan were revealed through the covenantal law that Israel was given. It was within the role as a kingdom of priests that God’s universal purposes were to be fulfilled. By nature, the calling of priest required that the priest stands as a mediator between man and God. Given the fact that the entire nation was to be priests for the Lord, it was quite apparent that the mediation was to be between God and the other nations of the earth. The Israelites served as bearers of God’s word to the world: “Israel was taken from the nations to be an intermediary: to be God’s representative to the nations to stand before God on their behalf. Israel was called to bring the nations closer to God and, by sharing the light of God’s revelation and the good news of his salvation, to bring God closer to the nations.”<sup>61</sup> Through interactions with the elect nation, the other nations of the world could come to a fuller knowledge of the only true God.<sup>62</sup> The purpose of being a holy, set apart nation was pictured here: holiness was at the foremost of their calling because they stood as the representative of a holy God.

Thus, many have defined Israel’s election according to the themes of mission and service, some seeing it as the primary facet of their calling.<sup>63</sup> This is not to belittle or lessen any portion

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<sup>60</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 171.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 172. Here Routledge cites Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, BST (Leicester: IVP, 2005).

<sup>62</sup> Kessler, *Old Testament Theology*, 269.

<sup>63</sup> Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election*, 43, 45, 60; Muilenburg, *The Way of Israel*, 50. Rowley’s promotion of this idea is particularly strong and, for him, their calling to service seems to dominate all other aspects

of their calling, but to further magnify an important component. In fact, all of the portions of Israel's election find their source in the person of God Himself. He is the one who gave the promise in the Garden. He is the one who called Abraham from his homeland and provided Isaac as the son of the promise. And He was the means for deliverance out of Egypt. All of God's election is tied to God's purpose and divine decree to use Israel as His means.

Stemming from this view of election as a means of God accomplishing that which He eternally willed to do, the ultimately inclusive nature of Israel's election is apparent. He always intended to offer mercy and forgiveness to all of humanity and used this as His divinely chosen means of doing so. God's nature and love for His creation shone through as the impetus for His work through Israel. In a broad viewing it can be understood that what appears to be partial, exclusive love from God directed to Israel is actually a demonstration of the inclusive love of God for the world world.<sup>64</sup> Despite the continued wickedness of man, elect or not, He maintained a constant offer of mercy and grace. In Israel's election, He called out a nation designed to demonstrate His nature for all the world to see. When the testimony of the chosen nation failed, He simply resorted to calling them directly, extending to the nations the opportunity to repent and rest in the salvation that God offers to His faithful.<sup>65</sup> Isaiah 45 puts this on full display. There

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of their election. This drew ire from Cott as he thought such an emphasis purposely evade the issue of the conquest and instead introduced a form of Christian "triumphalism," Cott, "Biblical Problem," 204, 222-223. Interestingly, Cott seems to capture the idea of God's saving purposes in the cross of Christ but rejects any sort of correlation between the cross and the idea of election in the Old Testament. In his view, the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, that being in light of Christ's work, has simply been more successful at winning converts. This also does nothing to validate a biblical view of election, even in a New Testament sense.

<sup>64</sup> Goldingay, *Israel's Faith*, 2:200.

<sup>65</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 109.



is still hope for the nations who are far from God: “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; For I am God, and there is no other” (Isa. 45:22 NASB).

### **Conclusion**

Perhaps in contrast to how it is often perceived, the concept of election in the Old Testament is a powerful story of a faithful God who keeps His promises and redeems His people. While many strive to paint the “God of the Old Testament” as an overly punitive and vindictive being who knows only chastisement, the fact of the matter is quite the opposite. In His most explicit self-revelation to Israel, He described His nature explicitly: “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6 ESV). This is a God who went above and beyond for His own creation who had spurred Him in rebellion.

Stemming from the initial foretelling of redemption in the garden (Gen. 3:15), the Lord remained faithful to His promises and eternal purposes throughout the story of Israel. This saga sees its beginning with Abraham in Genesis 12 where God calls him from his land and his family in order to establish him as a nation whose seed would one day bring blessing to all the nations of the earth (v. 3). Several generations later, God would redeem Abraham’s descendants from slavery in Egypt and publicly declare them to be his elect nation. As the chosen people of God, Israel was given the duty and honor of being a holy nation and a kingdom of priests on behalf of God before the other nations. In so doing, their laws and customs put the holiness of God on full display.

Counterintuitive as it may seem, the Lord’s choice of Israel as His beloved people provided a vessel—despite its inadequacies—for Him to demonstrate His holy character and divine power to the nations of the world. Beyond that, Israel’s election was a tangible

manifestation of a God who is gracious and merciful and intends to reconcile Himself to His creation. As the story of the Israelites progressed, the inclusive nature of this grace was progressively revealed in and through His intervention in the life of the nation of Israel. As the exilic and postexilic periods came, bringing with them the promise of Messianic deliverance, the message of the prophets grew to encompass a vision of God's reconciliation with all peoples. With the birth of Christ, the seed promised in the garden had arrived on earth and with His life and death came the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3).

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