

The Election of Israel : A Theological Critique

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Prologue

“It is debatable whether racism has its roots in the biblical concept of ‘election’. But the experience of God calling a people may be misinterpreted as a sign of racist superiority. Israel was castigated for this false perception of its ‘election’ ”. This was a comment made in a recent journal.¹ If we take this comment seriously, then we will find that there is an attempt to secularize and invalidate the Biblical doctrine of ‘*Election of Israel*’. Hence, there arises a theological issue which merits a further debate.

Three preliminary remarks may be made: *First*, the biblical idea of ‘election’ is seen as an act of choice whereby God picks an individual or a group out of a larger company for a purpose or destiny of his own appointment. As such, the ‘election’ of Israel as a particular race or a nation was within the divine-plan as it is explicitly shown in the Scriptures. *Second*, just as a racial group anywhere in the World does have an ideology or pursues its own cultural identity, Israel as a race focussed her attention on the ideology of Judaism in her formative stage in which the religion of Yahwism was the focal point. *Third*, the biblical concept of ‘election’ assumes a greater importance after having the present day state of Israel was branded as *a Racist and Apartheid State*² in the recently concluded World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) at Durban in South Africa, held from 31 August – 7 September, 2001. So, taking these three observations, we will begin our discussion on the idea of ‘election’ from an Old Testament perspective.

A. Etymological Study

The main Old Testament word for this is the verb *bahar*, which expresses the idea of deliberately selecting someone or something. There are various alternatives for this word: (a) divine choice of Abraham (Neh.9:7; cf. Gen.11:31-12:7) which implies his descendants becoming a people; (b) divine choice of Israel (Isa.41:8;44:1; Deut.7:7; etc.) which implies the choice of men, king and place of sacrifice; (c) divine choice of someone or inheritance (I Sam.2:28; Psa.47:5; etc).³ The word *bahar*, implies a decided preference for the object chosen (cf. Isa.1:29). For clarity, the Hebrew as well as the Greek meanings are given. The cognate adjectives are Hebrew *bahir*, and Greek *eklektos*, translated ‘elect’ or ‘chosen’. The New Testament also uses the noun *ekloge*, ‘election’. The Hebrew word *yada*, ‘to know’ is

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used to denote God's election in Genesis 18:19, which expresses God's affection and cognizance of person in love (cf. Amos 3:2; cf. 13:5). The Greek *proginosko* 'foreknow' is similarly used in Rom. 8:29 to mean 'foreknow'.

B. The Election of Israel

1. *Its Meaning*: Election is one of the central realities of the Old Testament; even though it is less frequently mentioned than the covenant, it is however the initial act by Yahweh comes into relation with his people and the permanent reality which assures the constancy of that bond. Every intervention by God in history is an election: either when he chooses a place in which to make more special manifestation of his presence, or when he chooses a man to be his representative of his messenger.⁴

To the writers of the Old Testament (OT), Israel is the chosen people of God; to the writers of the New Testament, the heirs of election is the Church.⁵ In the usage of the Old Testament, Israelite faith was founded on the belief that Israel was God's chosen. There is an argument among the scholars that there is ground for recognizing two elections: the *first* at the time of Abraham; the *second* at the time of the Exodus.⁶ As such, these two elections need to be elaborated further.

1.1. The election at the time of the Patriarchs: There are passages in the OT, which represent the divine choice of Israel as made in the time of the Patriarchs and especially of Abraham. There are others which represent it as made in the time of Moses.⁷ God chose Abraham and his seed by taking Abraham out of Ur and bringing him to the promised land of Canaan, making there an everlasting covenant with him and his descendants and promising his seed should be a blessing to all the earth (see Gen. 11: 31-12:7; 22:15-17). With Abraham, Yahweh declares the existence of the people, and so he throws the whole weight on the permanence of the race.

The verb *bahar* "elect, choose" is especially frequent in Deuteronomy. There we read, for example "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (Deut. 7:6). It is also emphasized that the election did not take place because of Israel's greatness or other merits of the people, but only because of God's grace and to express the special relationship of Israel with Yahweh (Deut. 14:2; 26:18). However, to the Israelites they are a chosen people. This idea of election is exemplified in the Exodus event.

1.2. The Election at the time of Exodus: The Biblical tradition has it that God chose Abraham's seed by redeeming them from slavery in Egypt under Moses, renewing the Abrahamic covenant with an amplified form at Sinai and setting them in the promised land as their national home (Exod. 3:6-10; Deut. 6:21-23; etc). The passage in Deut. 7:8 brings the deliverance from Egypt through Moses into relation with the election in Abraham, and declares that it was in loyalty to his oath to the patriarchs that he brought them forth. Rowley rightly defines this relationship by saying that the people was elected "in Abraham" and elected "through Moses"⁸ Through Moses the people received their consecration as God's people. The person of Moses plays a part of the first importance in the forming of the elected people, and it is the reality which cements the unity and the faith of the people. It is seen that Moses is only the intermediary but it is the people as a whole that is the beneficiary of election. In the same way, the deliverance from Egypt and the subsequent covenant upon Sinai were

probably considered God's act of election. Then, it would be difficult to separate the idea of election from the concept of the covenant.⁹

2. *Covenant*: The idea of a covenant occurs in various forms with great diversity of material through the history of the ancient Near East. Here, our focus will be on Biblical Covenants,¹⁰ especially to Sinaitic Covenant wherein the term 'election' constitutes the fundamental event.

In the Bible, two key words used for Covenants are Hebrew *berit* and Greek *diateke*. *Berit* usually refers to the act or rite of the making of covenant and also to the standing contract between two partners. *Diateke* is the Greek translation (LXX) of the word *berit*, which is taken over in the New Testament. Its meaning is 'testament'.¹¹ The Sinai Covenant was formed with Moses as the mediator at Sinai after the Israelites were miraculously saved by the Lord from their Egyptian bondage. The most detailed account telling of the Sinai Covenant is preserved in Exodus 19-24.¹² In ch.24, the actual rite of the Covenant is described.

However, the following elements are primary. The meaning of the Sinai Covenant is expounded in the introductory verses of ch.19 : the Covenant is an *election* "You belong to me from among all peoples"; it is a *bond*, the people will have with Yahweh the particularly close bond of belonging which characterizes the priestly function; it is an *obedience*, for if Yahweh is king, the members of the people can only be the subjects who will follow Him everywhere he leads.¹³ The covenant idea, then, was so basic to Israel that even the restoration of the broken relationship with God was conceived as a covenant. The Covenant became the normal form for Israel's association with God. Furthermore, the thought that the covenant is the binding factor for Israel's election is found in many of the prophetic books as well.

3. *The Election-theme with the Prophets*: The prophets, as elected to be the servants of Yahweh, made a large contribution to the theology of Election. Therefore, some of the pre-exilic and exilic texts are examined. Amos, one of the eight century prophets, emphasized on this concept: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth. Therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). The verb *yada* "know" here does not mean the ordinary process of becoming acquainted with something. The prophet states with this expression that Yahweh chose Israel and entered into a particular kind of relationship with Israel (Cf. Isa.1:2; Hos.11; and Jer.2; 7:23).

For the people, election implies the duty of loving Yahweh with a love worthy of that with which he has loved them, otherwise election will be turned to judgment.¹⁴ Whenever the Israelites disobeyed Him, they were repudiated. The way in which they were repudiated is found, for instance, in the name of the prophet Hosea's children (Hos.1:4-9). The name of the first child was *Lo-ruhama* meaning "She is not pitied" or "She no longer holds the love of the parent." The emphasis was on Israel's sin; but Yahweh intervened to save Jerusalem (cf. 2kgs. 19:35-37). Another name of Hosea's child was *Lo-ammi* which means "not my people". It is said that this is a reversal of the terms of the Covenant God made with Israel. The consequences of breaking the Covenant were clearly set out earlier (cf. Lev.26:14-39). By looking into these meanings, the election itself was called in question. That Yahweh had forsaken his people (Isa.40:27; 42:18; 49:14) must have been the state of mind of the majority of the exiles. To restore the certainty of divine election to the people was the message of Second Isaiah (chs.40-55).

The prophet regards the exodus of the redeemed from Babylon as “the new Exodus” which will far surpass the old one.¹⁵ Just as Yahweh did against the Egyptians at the first Exodus, at the new exodus He is miraculously to make water flow from the rock for his people to drink (ch.48:21), and Yahweh is to lead them in person (ch.52:12). Although Yahweh forsook them for a brief moment (ch.54:7,10), it is now past and He will choose them again (ch.40:2; cf.51:1), for a mission to the nations (ch.42:6). Israel is precious in the eyes of the Lord and, that Yahweh has forgiven his people (ch.43:4). The prophet looks upon this forgiveness as an unlooked for event which it is his task to voice in this special hour of history.¹⁶

4. *The Mission of Israel:* Throughout the Old Testament, the first corollary of the Divine election of Israel and the deliverance of the tribes that were in Egypt is that God has a claim to Israel’s service.¹⁷ Election implies a purpose. And thus in the course of time Israel came to understand its election as being purposeful. Israel was chosen in order that a particular plan of God might be realized. The promises made to the patriarchs define the purpose of the election as follows: “By you, all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen.12:3; cf.18:18; etc). In fact, they are most closely related to the ideas of Deutero-Isaiah, when the latter says that Israel is to be “a light to the nations”(Isa.42:6). This is a part of the first ‘servant song’, where the servant is associated with ‘Israel’ (cf.Isa.41:8f.).¹⁸ The responsibility given to the servant is to bring forth truth (mispat) to the nations. Moreover, Israel’s election was not merely for herself and God. It is that her election was for service to the world. For she had a mission to the nations. It is in Deutero-Isaiah that one finds monotheism as central to his whole theology (see Isa.45:5; 44:8). Monotheism necessarily implies universalism. That is to say, if God is one and there is no other, then He must be the God of all men, and if men are to have any true religion, He it is that they must worship. If, then, they are to worship rightly, they must come to know Him and His will.¹⁹

Strangely enough, the Israelites never really drew the logical conclusions that follow from this idea. Israel never attempted to contribute to the realization of this purpose through active missionary activity.²⁰ Although Israel did not engage in any world-wide mission and developed a spirit of exclusiveness, yet there are scholars like H.H.Rowley who maintains that “*the post-exilic Judaism was always prepared to share its inheritance with individuals who came to share its faith. It was ever ready to receive proselytes*”.²¹ Already, before the days of Nehemiah and Ezra, Zechariah had said: “*Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you*”. (Zec.2:11) Here the Gentiles are thought of as choosing Him to be their God, and then God choosing them to be His people, and the proselytes, i.e. the converts to Judaism, are thought of as sharing the inheritance of Israel.²² There are some other passages also which show of the initiative in proselytism as coming from the Gentiles. (see Zec.8:20-23; cf.Ruth 1:16f.)

It is believed that the proselytes were limited in numbers²³, because as is known so far, Judaism was never a missionary faith in the sense that organized efforts were made by the Jews as a whole to win others. Yet, these proselytes were accepted as children of the election of Israel, and the same loyalty to God was demanded of them as of the Jew by birth. If they were heirs of privilege, they were also heirs of the duty and task of Israel.²⁴

In summing up the teaching of the prophets, R.B.Y.Scott says: “*The religious group*

which only carries on the momentum in belief and practice of an age which has passed away, and has not made its own the covenant of the fathers, will find that the covenant is no longer valid, and the living God has passed on to seek a new people for himself".²⁵ It is the claim of the New Testament that this is what happened in the founding of the Christian Church, and that the Church is the heir of the election of Israel.²⁶ In view of the above, it may be said that the New Testament is not presenting a new point of view that is alien to the thought of Judaism when it declares the same thing. In some passages of the first Gospel, it is emphasized that the inheritance of Judaism had become the inheritance of the Church (Matt. 21:43; 8:11). Some familiar texts may be examined further. In the Pauline account of the Last Supper, we read that Jesus said: "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood*" (I Cor.11:25; cf. luk.22:20). The New Covenant was to supersede the Old Covenant, and therefore the Church believed that its election in Christ superseded the old election.²⁷

Throughout the New Testament, the term "elect" is found many times for the Church, testifying to the belief that the Church was the elect of God, and in the epistle to the Ephesians it is declared that election belongs to the eternal purpose of God, and that it was made before the foundation of the world (Eph.1:14f.). Yet, never is this election thought of as a rival to that of Israel, but as the continuation of that election, to which the Church had become the heir. It is in this sense maintained that "*out of the womb of Judaism was Christianity born*,"²⁸ and entered into its heritage. The Church is therefore the heir of Israel in the very nature of its establishment.

5. *Judaism vis-à-vis the Contemporary Times*: One important aspect that is closely related to the Biblical doctrine of election is Judaism, which has received so much of world attention in the contemporary times. But before we take a brief discussion on this aspect, let us see the literal meaning of it. According to Livingstone, Judaism "*is the faith and practice of the Jewish people. The word 'Jew' and 'Judaism' are ultimately derived from the name of Judah, the southern kingdom in Palestine which came to an end with the Babylonian Exile (586 BC). The changed circumstances of the Exile were the historical background of the rise of Judaism, though in a wider sense it may be said to go back to the Patriarchs and their election centuries earlier.*"²⁹ The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. was in many ways of decisive importance for the subsequent development of the Israelite religion. Thus the way Israelite religion developed among the exiles gradually became determinative for all Judaism.

By looking into the religious teachings of the pre-exilic prophets like Jeremiah and exilic prophet Ezekiel, their messages (e.g.: Jer.41:5;44; cf.Ezek.8) so continued to exist in the exilic period that these prophets are called "the fore-runners or the fathers of Judaism".³⁰ Since sacrificial worship and the Temple feasts had to be discontinued in a foreign land, the observance of sabbath and circumcision acquired special significance (see Jer.17:19-27; Isa.56:1-8; cf.Gen.17:9-14). Once the Jewish community was restored to her homeland, the works of Nehemiah and Ezra too contributed to the emergence of Judaism (cf. Neh.2:17-20; 13:23; 29; etc; Ezra 7:25). It was the purity and preservation of that faith that so exercised these founders of Judaism or particularism, and their work rested on no basis of nationalism or racialism, but on a basis of religion.³¹ It is believed that the establishment of Judaism was timely, and that in the providence of God it had a very real part to play in the fulfilment of the purpose of Israel's election.

When we examine the Biblical concept of election, we will find that it had been castigated in the past as history have it; but the challenge to Judaeo-Christianity as a whole is under greater challenge today.³² While we are conscious about the context and the reality of multi-faiths around the world, but the theology of religions is quite another matter.³³ However, this is not a place to discuss on the plurality of religions. But, what the present treatise attempts to emphasize is that the synthesis of the Biblical concept of election should be held in high esteem as long as we believe that Christianity is the by-product of Judaism.

C. Conclusion

In the discussion ensued so far, it is obvious that the Election of Israel is a biblical doctrine. This concept is so central in the Old Testament that Israel understood herself as the only “*chosen people of God*” basing on the religion of Yahwism, which is monotheistic. In fact, monotheism implies universalism. Universalism as examined in this treatise is entirely consistent with election because the concept of election implies a mission. On her part, Israel never really drew the logical conclusions that follow from this idea. However, the mission of Israel was actually fulfilled in the founding of the Christian Church, the heir of Israel. In the election of Israel, the Christian faith has an enduring significance for all time to come.

NOTES

1. *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol.65, No.9 , September, 2001, pp.641- 44.
2. ‘Racist’ is a term derived from the word ‘race’ – the descendants of a common ancestor. The term is related to having a distinct characteristic thought or language. While the term ‘Apartheid’ refers to segregation and separate development of races, especially a policy pursued by the imperial rulers in Africa.
3. Cf. *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (eds.) Francis Brown, et al, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951, pp.103-104.
4. Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, translated by Arthur W.Heathcote and P.J. Allcock, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1959, p.201.
5. Eichrodt quoted by H.H.Rowley in *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* , London: Lutter Worth Press,1950, p.15. To the N.T writers, the Church is the heir of divine election.
6. Jacob, *op.cit.*, p.205; Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol.II, Trans. By DMG Stalker.
7. Rowley, *op.cit.*, p. 19. For patriarchal narratives, see Gen. 15 and 17.
8. Rowley, *op.cit.*, p.31.
9. J. Begrich quoted by H.Ringgren, *Israelite Religion*, London: S.P.C.K., 1966, p.117.
10. *Firstly*, in the Ancient Near East (Ancient West Asia from the Indian point of view), Alliance or Treaty is found like the Hittite treaties, the treaties of Esarhaddon and the Aramaean treaty of Sefire. Cf. *New Bible Dictionary*, eds. I.Howard Marshall, et al, Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1962, pp.234-37. *Secondly*, Biblical Covenants include : Covenant between God and Noah (Gen.6:8; etc) Abrahamic Covenant and Davidic Covenant; etc.
11. See F.C.Fensham “Covenant, Alliance” in *New Bible Dictionary*, *ibid*, p.234.
12. Exod. 19 describes the Theopany; ch.20 deals with the Decalogue; chs. 21-23 are the stipulations.
13. cf. Jacob, *op.cit.*, p.212. Also see Exod.15:18; Num.23:21; Deut. 33:5; Judg. 8:23.
14. E. Jacob, *op.cit.*, p.207
15. Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. II, Trans.by. DMG Stalker, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965, pp.243-250. Also see Exod.12:11; cf.Deut.16:3.
16. Gerhard von Rad, *ibid*, p.250.
17. Rowley, *op.cit.*, p.45. cf.Exod.19:4f.
18. Commentators are in agreement that Isa.42:1-9 forms the first Servant Song; the other Servant Songs are

49:1-13; 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12. Towards the end of the 18th century. Christians regarded the identity of the 'servant' as to that of Christ. While Jews identified the 'servant' with the Jewish people themselves. Cf. Derek Kidner, "Isaiah" in *New Bible Dictionary*, (eds.) D.Guthrie, et al, 1953, pp.612-13.

19. cf. Rowley, *op.cit.*, p.62. Also see Mic.4 and Isa.2, which provides a universal task for Israel.
20. Ringgren, *op.cit.*, p.117.
21. Rowley, *op.cit.*, p.87. It is to be noted that the term "proselyte" is a term used for a convert to Judaism, and in a wider sense, a convert to any faith or sect. Cf. E.A.Livingstone, (ed.) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 418. The term "Judaism" will be treated later on under *Judaism vis-à-vis the Contemporary Times*.
22. Cf. Rowley, *op.cit.*, p.87.
23. It is said that the reason for its limitation was due to the strictures of Jewish faith. For instance, every male proselyte was required to be circumcized, and compelled them a visit to Jerusalem. Also cf. Acts 3:10.
24. Rowley, *ibid.*, p.90.
25. cf. R.B.Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets*, 1944, p.210.
26. Cf. Rowley, *op.cit.*, p.139.
27. Rowley, *ibid.*, p.142.
28. S.H.Hooke quoted by Rowley, *ibid.*, p.147.
29. E.A.Livingstone, *op.cit.*, p.281.
30. cf. H.H.Rowley, *The Rediscovery of the Old Testament*, London: James Clark & Co.Ltd, 1945, pp.114-115.
31. Rowley, *ibid.*, p.116.
32. No doubt, Judaism had been castigated in the past for many a times, for instance: Israel and Judah were subjugated by the Assyrians (ca.800-600 BC); the deportations in the years 597, 587/6, 582 BC. (cf. Jer.52:28-30). But, the Jewish faith is under greater challenge in the present times. The present state of Israel is under direct or indirect attacks from all corners, especially by the Arab and Islamic nations. Just recently, the United States of America was attacked by terrorists. It is strongly believed that Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda disciples were the masterminds behind the attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon. It is contended that America was attacked due to its one-sided West Asia policy, thereby supporting Israel. *Courtesy: Fox News Channel* – 8th Oct.2001. Also cf. "Attacks a warning: Saudi Prince" in *The Telegraph*, 24th Oct.2001, p.4.
In addition to that, the present campaign on terrorism led by America and the Coalition partners which has more than 40 countries, is branded by the Islamic Taliban and Osama followers as "a Christian Crusade". Consequently, more than 16 Christians were killed in a Church in Pakistan, which is seen as counter-attack by the Muslim fanatics, see *The Telegraph*, 29 Oct.,2001, p.1.
33. Almost all the major religions of the world had its origin in Asia, namely: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. These religions have their own distinctives and religious tenets, and therefore need to be respected for what they believe. But, whether is there a common ground for a convergence or for that matter, a comingling of the various faiths and follow a single religious principle is quite another question.