

Abraham the Missionary? The Call of Abraham in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

By Joel N. Lohr

Now the LORD said to Abram,

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall [be blessed/bless themselves/find a blessing].” (Genesis 12:1-3)

Probably more than any other in the Hebrew Bible (or what Christians call the Old Testament), this passage—the so-called “Call of Abraham”—is regularly used to explain not only why God chose Israel but also what God’s larger plan is for the world. I should clarify, however, that this is almost exclusively with respect to Christian interpreters, or those with an interest in Christian theology. This is a crucial point, and in some ways is the crux of my reflections in this paper: *It seems to be taken for granted by many Christian interpreters that Genesis 12:1-3 is not only an important passage but a key passage, one that explains God’s election of Israel and unlocks the meaning of the rest of the Bible.*¹ Further, it needs to be underlined that this is in distinction to Jewish readers, those who usually understand the passage to be important, but for other reasons. In this short paper I will examine why this might be so and I will suggest that readings of this type can in fact be harmful for Jewish-Christian relations, inaccurate with respect to election theology, and can reveal a subtle form of supersessionism that is best avoided.

The passage itself is relatively well-known as are its translational difficulties. The main difficulty comes in how we are to read its final phrase, which is often translated as “in you all the families of the earth shall *be blessed*” (NRSV). The problem is that the verb *nivrekhu*—*be blessed*—is in the niphil form and could equally be translated reflexively as “bless themselves” (or, in the middle, “find blessing”). The question, then, is whether the nations are passive or active in finding their blessing in Abram (whom I will call by his later name, Abraham, in this paper²) and whether, by implication, Abraham (and thus his descendants) is to be active in helping the nations obtain that blessing. In other words, is Israel called to *actively* bring a blessing to all the families of the earth? Is Abraham’s call missional in any sense? And, given that 12:2b contains the “to be” verb (*hayah*) in the imperative (“be a blessing”), is Abraham the first of the Bible’s apostles, a “sent ones” to all the families of the world?³

¹ For more, see R. W. L. Moberly, “Genesis 12:1-3: A Key to Reading the Old Testament?” in *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 141-61. In this paper I draw from this piece and build upon it, much indebted to Moberly’s thinking and overall work.

² I do this for the sake of convenience, and to avoid possible confusion for readers. It may also help to facilitate interreligious dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, all of whom know this patriarch through this more common name (“Ibrahim” in Islam).

³ For a discussion suggesting that the imperative in 12:2b is significant, see David J. A. Clines, “What Happens in Genesis,” in *What Does Eve Do to Help? and Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 94; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 49-66 (here 56). Contrast Keith N. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in its Narrative Context* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 332; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 142-52, who examines

It seems the most influential readings of this passage in modern biblical scholarship have come from Hans Walter Wolff,⁴ Gerhard Von Rad,⁵ H. H. Rowley,⁶ Claus Westermann,⁷ and, in evangelical Christian readership—whose size and influence ought not be underestimated—from Gordon Wenham,⁸ Gordon McConville and Christopher Wright.⁹ All of these interpreters read the passage from a distinctly Christian theological perspective, and all of their readings share a commonality: all understand the passage to be of utmost significance for the Old Testament and the Christian Bible. Despite some variation,¹⁰ the passive reading of *nivrekhu*—which is present in the Septuagint and NT—is influential if not instrumental. In fact, for Wright in particular but also for von Rad, the passage comes to control the interpreter’s overall theology: “Mission” for Wright, and “Heilsgeschichte” (or Salvation History) for von Rad.

I raise this issue because although Jewish interpreters read the same passages¹¹ this passage has not, to my knowledge, captured the Jewish imagination in the same way, nor has it influenced Islam to the same degree. To be sure, the passage is important to Judaism, of utmost importance, but usually the focus is on Abraham’s obedience in responding to the call as manifested in his going (Gen 12:4). Or, some Jewish interpreters acknowledge that divine election is clearly at work here but that the passage does not necessarily explain or give

the issue but ultimately concludes that “the force of the imperative [here] is not to issue a command, but to state further the divine purpose” (146). See also Moberly, “Genesis 12:1-3: A Key to Reading the Old Testament?” 151-55.

⁴ Hans Walter Wolff, “The Kerygma of the Yahwist,” in *The Vitality of Old Testament Tradition* (ed. Walter Brueggemann and Hans W. Wolff; Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 41-66.

⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; 2nd ed.; trans John H. Marks; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), esp. 152-57.

⁶ H. H. Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London: Lutterworth, 1950). For a fuller examination of Rowley’s work, see my *Chosen and Unchosen: Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian Interpretation* (Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures 2; Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 12-15.

⁷ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 142-58.

⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word Biblical Commentary 1; Waco: Word, 1987), 264-83.

⁹ Neither Wright nor McConville have written commentaries or books directly on Genesis but it is clear from their monographs and other biblical commentaries that Genesis 12:1-13 is something of a controlling passage for their overall work. See J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary 5; Leicester: Apollos, 2002); McConville, *Grace in the End: A Study in Deuteronomistic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); McConville, “The Shadow of the Curse: A Key to Old Testament Theology,” *Evangel 3.1* (1985): 2-5; Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (NIBCOT 4; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996); and (especially) Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006). I discuss both author’s work in my *Chosen and Unchosen*, and critique their work on Deuteronomy and mission more fully in my “Taming the Untamable: Christian Attempts to Make Israel’s Election Universal,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 33 (2011): 24-33. And again, see Moberly, “Genesis 12:1-3: A Key to Reading the Old Testament?”

¹⁰ Wenham opts for the middle—“find blessing”—as does Wolff. However, both (Wolff in particular) find the blessing of the nations to be key to the passage, to which everything builds. Wolff puts it this way: “The syntactical gradient observed [in 12:1-3a] corresponds precisely to the movement of the whole toward verse 3b as the *conclusio*: in the people of Abraham all humanity can gain blessing” [139-40]). Although Wenham translates the passage in the middle (“find blessing”), and demonstrates his reasons for why in his commentary notes, in his concluding, final words reflecting on the passage (Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 283) he seems to return to the New Testament’s passive reading drawn from the Septuagint (Acts 3:25 and Gal 3:8).

¹¹ With important differences in how this is done, of course. See Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993). Especially pertinent is his: “Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology,” 33-61.

reasons for it.¹² However, if Judaism, and to some extent Islam, were to pick a foundational story from within Genesis that came to define the people, it would likely not be the “Call of Abraham” so much as the *Akedah*, or “the Binding”—which Muslims recall during Eid al-Adha and Jews read during Rosh Hashanah and other times throughout the year in their liturgy.¹³ And there again, the emphasis usually on Abraham’s obedience and God’s gracious providence. For most Jewish readers the “Call of Abraham” is important primarily for Abraham’s obedience (12:4) and how powerfully it speaks of God’s special love for and blessing of this patriarch.

So why so much ado about this passage within Christianity? Why is it understood not only as important but even *the* controlling passage of the Old Testament, perhaps even the whole Christian Bible? To give you a taste of how the passage is read, and how interpreters relate it to Israel’s election, let me provide a sample statement from Christopher Wright, who says the following:

“God’s call was explicitly for the ultimate purpose of blessing the nations (Gen 12:1-3). This fundamentally missionary intention of the election of Israel echoes through the OT at almost every level.”¹⁴

He then states:

“There was a universal goal to the very existence of Israel. What God did in, for, and through Israel was understood to be ultimately for the benefit of the nations.”¹⁵

My purpose in highlighting these statements is to provide a picture of how some Christians read a particular passage of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, and in distinction to Jewish readers in particular. (Though I will not outline Jewish interpretations for the sake of time, in my examination of rabbinic literature and modern Jewish interpretation, this line of interpretation, with its heavy emphasis on the blessing of nations and mission to them, is not emphasized in the same way.¹⁶) But Christians hearing this may be saying to themselves: well of course, this is how the New Testament reads this passage; this is a Christian reading of the passage. There is truth to this. This way of reading Genesis 12:1-3 comes not by way of a breakthrough of the historical-critical method of reading the Bible, getting back to its “original meaning,” but ultimately stems from Paul in the New Testament. In fact, for Paul this

¹² That God simply loved Abraham, electing him in Genesis 12, is a central tenet of the all-important work of Jewish scholar Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1996).

¹³ For a helpful overview of how Jews and Christians have interacted with the Akedah over the centuries, at times building upon the interpretations of each other, see Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On the Akedah in Jewish liturgy, see Meyer I. Gruber, “Love Conquers Anger: The Akedah in Rabbinic Liturgy” in *Unbinding the Binding of Isaac* (ed. Mishael Caspi and John T. Greene; Lanham: University Press of America, 2007), 1-6. For more on Abraham within Islam, see Tim Winter, “Abraham from a Muslim Perspective,” in *Abraham’s Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation* (ed. Norman Solomon, Richard Harries and Tim Winter; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 28-35. Compare also the recent work of Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 11.

¹⁵ Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 11.

¹⁶ Nahum Sarna, interestingly, does believe that the passive reading of *nivrekhu* is a “more likely translation,” and does suggest that this blessing will eventually be of great (“universal”) importance; however, he does not arrive at a Wright-like missionary reading. See Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 89.

passage, and Genesis 12:3 in particular, is the very gospel itself. Paul states in Galatians 3:6-9, working from the Septuagint:

Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.” For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

Paul may see things this way, and interpreters like Wright, McConville, and von Rad may agree. But my raising the issue today relates *not* to the fact that these interpreters agree but that they often operate as though their readings of Genesis 12 are the result of careful exegesis of the Old Testament, through use of the historical-critical (or a purportedly “neutral”) method *rather than Paul*. Here we encounter the problems outlined by Jon Levenson in his debates with Jorge Pixley over whether (in that example) the exodus story can be read as a universal story promoting liberation and a “preferential option for the poor,” or whether, as Levenson argued, it is an ethnically-dependent story focused on Israel as a special people loved by God, *that* being the reason for Israel’s being brought out of Egypt.¹⁷ The issue for me arises when Christian interpreters assume, or purport, that they are reading *exegetically* when in fact their readings are heavily influenced by the lens they undoubtedly and unwittingly look through. I am also uncomfortable when Christian interpreters seem concerned to correct other non-Christian interpreters who do not emphasize the nations, or don’t see the nations as the reason for God’s election of Abraham.¹⁸

I would like to end with an anecdote that shows a little something of this. When I first finished my PhD, I was invited to review Joel Kaminsky’s book *Yet I Loved Jacob*¹⁹ as part of a panel for the 2007 Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in San Diego.²⁰ One of the participants was a senior Christian Old Testament interpreter from whom I have learned a great deal and whom I respect immensely. What struck me was this Christian interpreter’s concern that Kaminsky, a Jewish interpreter, did not agree with Wolff’s reading of the passage whereby the nations are the focus. The reviewer also seemed puzzled that Kaminsky did not see the passage as explaining Israel’s election, something said to be “an almost inescapable reading.” Now, to be fair, the professor in question addressed his questions respectfully and honestly—we might say in an exemplary dialogical fashion, one from which we can all learn. And in response Kaminsky agreed that election is indeed at work here, but that the passage is primarily focused on Abraham and his descendants, with the nations finding a blessing as a

¹⁷ See the following: Jon D. Levenson, “Exodus and Liberation,” in *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 127-59; Levenson, “Liberation Theology and the Exodus,” in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (ed. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky; Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 8; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 215-30; “The Perils of Engaged Scholarship: A Rejoinder to Jorge Pixley,” in *ibid.*, 239-46; and “The Exodus and Biblical Theology: A Rejoinder to John J. Collins,” in *ibid.*, 263-75. Corresponding articles in the discussion are, Jorge V. Pixley, “History and Particularity in Reading the Hebrew Bible: A Response to Jon D. Levenson,” in *ibid.*, 231-37; and John J. Collins, “The Exodus and Biblical Theology,” in *ibid.*, 247-61. See my discussion on Levenson in *Chosen and Unchosen*, 71-90.

¹⁸ I here work with the assumption that divine election is at work in the book of Genesis, even if it comes to fuller expression in Deuteronomy. See further my *Chosen and Unchosen* as well as Nathan MacDonald, “Did God Choose the Patriarchs? Reading for Election in Genesis,” in *Genesis and Christian Theology* (ed. Nathan MacDonald, Mark W. Elliott and Grant Macaskill; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 245-66.

¹⁹ Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

²⁰ The papers presented were eventually published in the *Review of Biblical Literature*.

“consequence”—he strongly resisted the notion that this passage explains the purpose of Israel’s election. But I was still struck by a Christian interpreter who just could not help but attempt to correct, or minimally influence, a Jewish interpreter to see the blessing of the nations as the reason for Israel’s election, something understood to be clear in Genesis 12.

My hope for this paper is that Christian interpreters might come to acknowledge why they read Genesis 12:1-3 as they often do, and will come to understand why Jews do not always read it in the same way. My guess as to why Christians focus on the nations, and see them as the reason for God’s election, is that Christian interpreters, whether they choose to engage the issue or not, read the text *as* Gentiles. For them, Genesis 12:1-3 speaks deeply to their fate as nations, as Gentiles, those said to be blessed through Abraham. In short, they can’t help but see this as the focus. It also equates well with Christian notions of mission and evangelizing the nations. We might say that we can’t help but read with our own interests in mind. But I would like to suggest that doing so can risk making Israel’s election a mere stepping stone to something better, and can potentially become a type of anti-Judaism, at least when it is implied that Jews “just can’t see it” or that they are reacting to Christian readings. Christian interpretations that focus on the nations have their place, but we need to exercise intellectual honesty and critical awareness by acknowledging how and why such readings are achieved. It is often through an act of “engaged scholarship,” not strictly on the basis of some kind of neutral, plain-sense historical-critical exegesis of the passage.

Joel N. Lohr is the Director of the Department of Religious and Spiritual Life at the University of the Pacific, California’s oldest chartered university. He received his MA and PhD at the University of Durham (England) before completing a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Toronto. Most of his research has focused on Jewish-Christian Dialogue and Sacred Texts.