

The Blessing of Abraham and the *Missio Dei*: Reframing the Purpose of Israel's Election in Genesis 12:1–3

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FOR MANY YEARS I have understood the call of Abraham (Gen 12:1–3) as fundamentally missional or instrumental, in the sense that the ultimate purpose for which God calls this ancestor of Israel is to mediate the blessings of salvation to the nations.¹ Not only have I taught the book of Genesis with this orientation, but this understanding of Gen 12:1–3 has played an integral role in my framing of the canonical narrative of Scripture in my published writings, from *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (1995) through *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (2014); it can be found also in a variety of essays written in the intervening years. There is, however, an important qualification to the way I articulated Abraham's role in the *missio Dei* in *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, which calls for clarification.

When Brian Walsh and I wrote *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, we were attempting to contextualize the biblical message as a critique of western understandings of the centrality of the human subject, including the oppositional stance of the modernist subject vis-à-vis nature and the growing tribalism of postmodern culture, which pits one idealized group over against demonized others. This contemporary context (to which the church has become acculturated) attuned our ears to the way that Scripture often relativised the subject, challenging notions of exclusive privilege and oppositional identity. Instead, we highlighted the way the Bible reframed privilege as one moment in a larger framework of ethical responsibility toward others. We saw this as central to the prophetic critique of Israel in the Old Testament, which itself reflected the way that Israel's election or chosenness was framed in a variety of biblical texts. In this light, our missional reading of Gen 12:1–3 was meant to call into

1. Technically, his name is Abram, until Gen 17:5 when it is changed to Abraham. For convenience, I will use the name Abraham throughout this essay.

question any self-serving notion of Christian identity, challenging the church instead to its ethical vocation in the world.

Challenges to My Missional Reading of the Call of Abraham

However, my missional/vocational interpretation of Gen 12:1–3, and thus my instrumental understanding of Israel's election, was itself called into question—no less than three times.

The first time was after I presented a paper on an ethical reading of the canonical narrative of Scripture at the annual meeting of the Canadian Theological Society (CTS). The year was 1995 and the paper was a draft of material I was working on for *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be*.² After the conference I received a long, passionate, respectful letter from Canadian theologian Gregory Baum, who had attended my presentation. Baum interacted with my paper and called me to repent of my Christian supersessionism towards my Jewish brothers and sisters. I was humbled and challenged by this letter, since I had no inkling of such a point of view in the paper. Baum and I wrote back and forth a few times; it was a cordial exchange as I tried to understand his challenge and take it to heart.³

Later that year *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be* was published (with my CTS paper integrated into the analysis).⁴ A year after that (1996) I began teaching at Colgate Rochester Divinity School. In my very first year at Colgate, my colleague in Old Testament, Werner Lemke, took me to lunch and had a long discussion with me about the book, in which he challenged me in a manner similar to Baum. It turned out that both Baum (a Catholic theologian) and Lemke (a Protestant Old Testament scholar) had been engaging in regular dialogue with Jews on matters of Jewish-Christian relations. They were thus intensely attuned to the often-superior attitudes of Christians toward “Judaism,” which many Christians viewed an outdated religion that has been superceded by faith in Christ. A significant part of this attitude was rooted in an instrumentalist understanding of Israel's election. Now that Israel had produced the Messiah and the church was founded, Judaism had fulfilled its function and was now irrelevant.

2. The paper, entitled “Whose Story? Which Tradition? The Counter-Ideological Character of the Biblical Metanarrative,” was originally written for a conference on ethics and narrative in the thought of Alasdair MacIntyre, at Brock University, in St. Catharines, ON, February 1993. I presented it two years later at the Canadian Theological Society annual meeting at Université du Québec à Montréal, in Montréal, QC, June 1995.

3. I later discovered that Gregory Baum and I had similar backgrounds, in that we were both immigrants to Canada (him from Germany, me from Jamaica), and that we both had a Jewish mother and a gentile father.

4. Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be*. The title of the CTS paper (“Whose Story? Which Tradition?”) makes a brief appearance on p. 73.

Of course, the issue of the legitimate differences between Christianity and Judaism is a complex matter, as is an accurate account of the famous “parting of the ways” of these sister religions in the first centuries of the Christian era. The checkered history of Christian persecution of Jews and the silence of many German Christians during the Holocaust only complicates matters further.

The third event that challenged my missional interpretation of Gen 12:1–3 took place via an email exchange with Old Testament scholar Walter Moberly in 2007. That year I had planned to present a paper at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) on the call of Abraham, in which I wanted to give a nuanced account of my missional reading (taking into account the challenges of Baum and Lemke). I never did give the paper, since I found myself bogged down in the analysis, unable to complete the argument in the required 25 minutes of paper presentation. Instead, I gave a paper on a different subject.

Moberly, however, who did not attend the SBL that year, read the announcement of my paper and sent me an email requesting a copy; he was working on a book on the theology of Genesis, with a chapter on Gen 12:1–3, and was interested in what I had to say.⁵ Since I never completed the paper, Moberly asked if I would be interested in reading his draft chapter and giving my feedback.

I read the chapter and returned my feedback the following day. I was quite taken with Moberly’s analysis of the issues. I described his chapter as: “Absolutely brilliant—and gripping.” I concluded by telling him that he had *almost* persuaded me of his point of view; and that he had certainly “nudged and prodded me in ways that are extremely helpful.”⁶ It turned out that *this* was the analysis of the call of Abraham that I had been searching for in my own (incomplete) paper. Moberly’s chapter, with his forceful, yet gracious, challenge to Christian interpreters of Genesis 12, forced me to reconsider the basis for my missional/vocational interpretation of the text.

The result was that when I was composing my chapter on the plot of the biblical story for *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, I wrote a lengthy excursus on the call of Abraham that attempted to take into account Moberly’s analysis of the issues, while still maintaining (in the end) a missional reading of Abraham’s call.⁷ Once I had completed the excursus, however, I judged that it was too much of a sidetrack from the flow of the chapter and so I ended up simply summarizing the fruits of my analysis in two brief sections—one about the call of Abraham,⁸ the other about the place of the exodus from

5. Published as ch. 8: “Genesis 12:1–3: A Key to Interpreting the Old Testament?” in Moberly, *Theology of the Book of Genesis*. The book contained another chapter devoted to Gen 12:1–3, which addressed questions of Zionism and the land promise given to Abraham/Israel.

6. Email from J. Richard Middleton to R. W. L. Moberly, November 29, 2007.

7. Ch. 3 (“The Plot of the Biblical Story”) in *A New Heaven and a New Earth* was based on the plot summary I had given in an earlier essay (2006), entitled “A New Heaven and a New Earth” (esp. 81–82 on the call of Abraham).

8. Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 61–62. Here I affirmed that God’s blessing was intended first for the flourishing of Abraham and his family and secondarily that Abraham’s flourishing

Egypt in the larger biblical story.⁹ Although I did not abandon a missional reading of the role of Abraham/Israel in the story of salvation, I did affirm God's purposes for the flourishing of Abraham/Israel—on the way to this larger purpose.

Ever since writing this excursus, I intended to work it up into a published essay on the subject, but never got around to the task. I was, however, recently encouraged to do this by New Testament scholar Andy Johnson, who drew on my unpublished analysis for his chapter on the call of Abraham in *Holiness and the Missio Dei* (2016).¹⁰ I was further motivated to work on this material by my participation in an ecumenical Jewish Institute in New York City called Hadar, through which my respect has been greatly enlarged for Jews seeking to respond in faithfulness to God's covenant.¹¹ But the decisive impetus to rework the excursus for publication comes from my participation in this *Festschrift* dedicated to my colleague, Paul Livermore. I am delighted to offer the current essay in tribute to Paul, who has always been interested in how the New Testament and the early Christian tradition (articulated by the Church Fathers) are related to the Jewish context in which they were birthed.

The Problem of Interpreting Abraham's Call in Genesis 12:1–3

Let us begin by noting the explicit claims of Gen 12:1–3. Although I will later provide my own translation of the text, here I quote the NRSV; I have italicized two clauses (at the end of verses 2 and 3) that will require special investigation.¹²

¹ 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. ² 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.* ³ 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.*" (Gen 12:1–3)

At the beginning of Genesis 12 God instructs Abraham to leave behind his safe and secure land, along with his extended family of origin, in order to journey to an as-yet-unspecified place. To assure Abraham that this will be a worthwhile endeavor,

was in the service of God's purposes for the nations.

9. Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 63. Here I noted that the exodus was first for the sake of the flourishing of Israel as God's elect, but that it was also for the sake of Israel's vocation in the wider world.

10. Johnson, *Holiness and the Missio Dei*, ch. 2.

11. My connection to Hadar (formerly Mechon Hadar) came through one of its founding Rabbis, Shai Held. Having had email correspondence and an initial phone call with Rabbi Held (in 2015), and then reading many of his writings. I have twice participated in the week-long Executive Seminar sponsored by Hadar (in 2016 and 2017). At my request, Walter Moberly, along with other Christian Old Testament scholars, joined me in writing endorsements for Held's recently published two-volume commentary on the Pentateuch, entitled *The Heart of Torah*. I then organized a panel of Jewish and Christian scholars to discuss *The Heart of Torah* at the Society of Biblical Literature in November 2019.

12. All translations of the Bible in this essay will be the NRSV, unless noted otherwise.

God promises (not only in Genesis 12, but also on other occasions) to bless Abraham in a variety of ways.

The word *bless* occurs in some form no less than five times in Gen 12:1–3. God promises to *bless* Abraham (12:2) and to *bless* those who *bless* Abraham (12:3). In the NRSV (along with many other English versions), God also promises that Abraham will be a *blessing* (12:2) and that the entire human family will be *blessed* in Abraham (12:3). Although these last two occurrences of *bless* are the ones that will require further investigation, it is nevertheless clear that God wants to shower Abraham with blessing.

These blessings start with a promise of a *new land* (initially only hinted at in Gen 12:1), a promise that is repeated with more specifics in Gen 12:7; 13:14–17; 15:7, 18–19; 17:8; 22:17; 26:3–4; 28:4, 13; and 35:12. God also promises Abraham that he will have *many descendants* (Gen 12:2), a promise repeated in Gen 13:16; 15:5; 17:4–6; 22:17; 26:4, 24; 28:3, 14; and 35:11. Despite the initial childlessness of Abraham and Sarah, which we are informed of at the outset of the story (11:30), God promises that Abraham’s descendants will become as multitudinous as the dust of the earth (13:16; 28:14), the sand on the seashore (22:17), and the stars of the heavens (15:5; 26:4). More specifically, God promises that from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will come a great nation (12:2), indeed, many nations (17:4–6), even a company of nations (28:3; 35:11), including kings (17:6; 35:11).

In short, God promises to establish Abraham’s family as a flourishing people in their own land—as a microcosm of God’s intent for humanity. This can be seen by the analogy between God’s initial blessing on humanity, who are to multiply and fill the earth (Gen 1:28), and the various depictions of God’s blessing on Abraham’s descendants, which involves their multiplying and filling the earth (Gen 47:27; 48:4, 16; Exod 1:7); some of the very wording from Genesis 1 is used.

Beyond promising Abraham a people and a land, God promises to magnify Abraham’s “name” or reputation (12:2), and pledges to protect him by affirming that those who bless Abraham will themselves be blessed, but that anyone who treats Abraham disdainfully will be cursed (12:3). God is thus committed to the extraordinary flourishing of Abraham and his family, in the context of a world of threat.

But this raises an important hermeneutical question: Is the flourishing of Abraham’s family the sole (or even primary) focus of Gen 12:1–3? Or is Abraham’s family *also* to have a redemptive function in the larger biblical story?

The Meaning of the Blessing in Genesis 12:3b

An answer to that question might be inferred from the promise given at the end of our text: “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3b). This promise, given here to Abraham for the first time, is repeated in Gen 18:17–18 (in a divine soliloquy) and then restated to Abraham in 22:17–18. The promise is then given

to Isaac in Gen 26:4–5 and to Jacob in Gen 28:14. This repeated statement of blessing vis-à-vis the nations seems to suggest that the ultimate purpose of the call of Abraham (and his descendants) is to be a mediator or channel of blessing to the entire human race (as if this new family will function as God’s priests in the world).

However, a missional interpretation of the call of Abraham is not as obvious as I have typically assumed. In response to Walter Moberly’s incisive challenge for Christian interpreters to do justice to what the text actually says, instead of imposing a Christian reading from the outside, I intend to take a hard look at whether a missional reading of the call of Abraham is in fact supported by Gen 12:1–3.¹³ Here the discussion will, by necessity, become somewhat technical, as I examine issues pertaining to the translation of these verses.

Although Gen 12:3b is translated in many Bibles as “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed,” matters are not that simple. As is well known by biblical scholars, Gen 12:3b may legitimately be translated “and by you all the families of the earth shall *bless themselves*” or possibly “*bless each other*.”

The issue is that the Hebrew verb for “bless” (*bārak*) occurs in Gen 12:3 in the Niphal stem.¹⁴ The Niphal may generally be rendered either by the *passive* (“be blessed”) or by the *reflexive* (“bless themselves”) or the *reciprocal* (“bless one another”), depending on the verb in question.¹⁵ Whereas the passive involves the subject of the verb receiving, rather than, performing the action, the reflexive involves the subject of the verb acting on himself/herself (the reciprocal is a variant of this, where the plural subject of the verb, the nations, act on each other).

A *passive* translation of “bless” in Gen 12:3 (“be blessed”) would be compatible with viewing Israel as an instrument or channel of blessing to the nations (in the sense that blessing will somehow reach the nations through Abraham or Israel’s being blessed by God). However, a *reflexive* or *reciprocal* translation (“bless themselves” or “bless one another”) suggests something quite different.

The most likely reflexive or reciprocal understanding would be that the nations will pronounce (verbal) blessings on themselves or on each other, by citing Abraham or Israel as a paradigm or model of blessing (“May we/you be as blessed as Abraham/Israel!”). If this is the meaning, the point isn’t that the nations themselves will *receive* blessing through Abraham/Israel, but that they will *recognize* that Abraham/Israel has been blessed (Abraham and his descendants would be, for them, a prime exemplar of blessing); and it means, further, that they desire such blessing for themselves.

13. Moberly cites a variety of Christian interpreters who take the text as basically missional, including Gerhard von Rad, Claus Westermann, Brevard Childs, Richard Bauckham, and Christopher J. H. Wright. See Moberly, *Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 142–48.

14. The stems or *binyanim* of verbs in Semitic languages have no structural equivalent in English grammar, though they do have translation equivalents.

15. With some verbs it is translated as the simple active (equivalent to the Qal stem).

“Be Blessed” / “Bless Themselves” Passages in Genesis (NRSV)¹⁶

YHWH to Abraham (12:1–3)	Niphal	¹ 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. ² 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. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; <i>and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.</i> ”
YHWH to Abraham (18:17–18)	Niphal	¹⁷ The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, <i>and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?</i> ”
YHWH to Abraham (22:17–18)	Hittpael	¹⁷ I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, ¹⁸ <i>and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.</i> ”
YHWH to Isaac (26:4–5)	Hithpael	⁴ I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; <i>and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring,</i> ⁵ because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”
YHWH to Jacob (28:14)	Niphal	¹⁴ And your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; <i>and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.</i>

Of the five occurrences in Genesis of this promise of blessing vis-à-vis the nations, three are in the Niphal stem (12:3; 18:18; 28:14), while the remaining two are in the Hithpael stem (22:18; 26:4). There is widespread agreement that the Hithpael of the verb for “bless” (as found in 22:18; 26:4) is reflexive or reciprocal.¹⁷ The question is what to do about the Niphal.

Is There a Difference in Meaning between the Niphal and Hithpael of Bless?

We thus have a choice before us. Either we view the variation of the Niphal and Hithpael in the five Genesis texts as insignificant grammatically; they both mean basically

16. Chart adapted from Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament*, ch. 2.

17. There are six occurrences of “bless” in the Hithpael stem in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 22:18 and 26:4; Deut 29:19; Ps 72:17; Isa 65:16; and Jer 4:2). A reflexive or reciprocal meaning makes best sense of all of these.

the same thing, which would likely be reflexive or reciprocal. Or we view the variation as significant and translate the Hithpael as reflexive or reciprocal (in two cases) and the Niphal as passive (in three cases).

Some modern translations, such as the RSV and the NJPS translate all five occurrences as reflexive (“shall bless themselves”), while the NET Bible translates all five as reciprocal (“will pronounce blessings on one another using your name” [or “his name” or “the name of your descendents”]).

Many translations, however (such as the NIV, NASB, NLT, and Robert Alter¹⁸), continue to use the passive for all occurrences (“be blessed”). The TNIV and the most recent edition of the NIV (2011) also include a footnote in each case with the alternative rendering, “will use your name [or “his name” or “the name of your offspring”] in blessings.”

The reflexive sense of “bless,” however, might not require the specific idea of pronouncing verbal blessings. It could simply mean that the nations will “gain blessing for themselves,” although it is left open how exactly this is to be accomplished. This is the NRSV’s rendering in the case of Gen 22:18 and 26:4 (the two occurrences of the Hithpael).

The NAB is similar to the NRSV, in that it renders all five verses as “shall find blessing,” though it omits “for themselves.” The NAB thus opts for the middle voice (somewhere between the passive and the reflexive). A similar middle translation (“find blessing”) is proposed by Gordon Wenham in his Genesis commentary.¹⁹ While also opting for the middle voice, Everett Fox translates the Niphal and Hithpael somewhat differently; he renders the Niphal as “will find blessing” and the Hithpael as “shall enjoy blessing.”²⁰

Translations such as “gain,” “find,” or “enjoy” blessing suggest a meaning that goes beyond merely verbal blessing and could be compatible with viewing Abraham/Israel as a mediator of blessing. However, it would grant the nations a more active role in the process than the passive “be blessed,” perhaps by having them take the initiative in seeking this blessing.

The NRSV is the rare example of a modern translation that distinguishes between the meanings of the Niphal (as passive) and the Hithpael (as reflexive). Although it is possible to find scholarly arguments in favor of different meanings for the Niphal and Hithpael stems of “bless,”²¹ this is not typical. Against such a distinction is the fact that the three cases of “bless” in the Niphal stem (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 28:14) constitute

18. Alter, *Genesis*.

19. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 277. Wenham acknowledges that a reflexive or reciprocal translation is justified since the text probably means that the nations will use Abraham’s name to pronounce blessings, but still claims that it implies a middle sense, because through this they will themselves be blessed (278).

20. Fox, *Five Books of Moses*.

21. See the argument in Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations*.

the only such occurrences in the entire Bible. Hebrew typically has a different way of expressing the passive of “bless.”²² This strongly suggests that the traditional passive rendering (“be blessed”) found in many modern translations is suspect.

While I tend to think that a reflexive or reciprocal meaning in all five cases has the most plausibility as a translation option, the continuing disagreement among biblical scholars makes this a very difficult issue to resolve on linguistic grounds alone.²³ This requires us to look to the idiomatic meaning of being a blessing.

The Meaning of the Blessing in Genesis 12:2b

Along with the contested meaning of Gen 12:3b is the related issue of the meaning of the last line of Gen 12:2, “so that you will be a blessing.”²⁴ The English idiom of “being a blessing” suggests the idea of being a *source* of blessing to others (which would fit well with the passive interpretation of Gen 12:3b).

However, that is not the idea of the Hebrew idiom, which means to be a *model or exemplar* of blessing, someone that others may cite as a positive example or paradigm, whom they might desire to emulate (this fits well with the reflexive or reciprocal interpretation of Gen 12:3b). A good example of this meaning is found later in Genesis when Jacob says concerning Joseph’s two sons: “By you Israel will invoke blessings, saying, ‘God make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh’” (Gen 48:20).²⁵

This idiomatic sense of “being a blessing” is confirmed when we look at cases of *being a curse* (the opposite of blessing) in the Bible. These are clearly references to being cited by others as an example of curse, a byword, a negative example to be avoided. Thus, God says that after he has judged king Zedekiah and the inhabitants of Judah by the Babylonian exile, “I will make them a horror, an evil thing, to all the kingdoms of the earth—a disgrace, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them” (Jer 24:9). This sense of being a curse is further elaborated in Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles, concerning the fate of two false prophets, Ahab and Zedekiah (not

22. Since the active sense of “bless” in Hebrew is communicated by the Piel stem (often thought of as having an intensive meaning), the passive of “bless” usually uses the Pual (the passive of the Piel) or the Qal passive participle (in statements such as “blessed be x”).

23. Although Moberly also admits that the translation question is “probably insoluble on philological grounds,” he thinks there that the Niphal and Hithpael most likely have the same meaning. Not only is there nothing in the context of the five versions of the repeated promise to suggest a difference in meaning, but there are other cases of verbs in Genesis where the variation between the Niphal and Hithpael does not change the meaning (such as the two forms of the verb for “hide” in Gen 3:8 and 3:10). Moberly, *Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 151.

24. While the verb is technically an imperative or command (“be a blessing!”), Hebrew syntax allows this line to be translated as a result or purpose statement (“so that you will be a blessing”). I will return to this point.

25. Rashi, the famous eleventh-century Rabbinic commentator, cites Gen 48:20 to illustrate the meaning of Gen 12:3b. The TNIV and NIV2011 also cite this verse in the footnotes that give the alternative rendering of 12:3b, “will use his name in blessings.”

to be confused with the Judahite king of the same name), who are claiming an early end to the exile: “And on account of them this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah in Babylon: ‘YHWH make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire’” (Jer 29:22). To be a curse in these cases is clearly to be cited verbally as a negative example.

This understanding of being a curse makes sense of God’s promise in Zech 8:13 concerning the reversal of Israel’s fortunes: “Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you shall be a blessing.” In the context of the oracle of Zech 8:1–17, this prophecy means that Israel will fully experience God’s salvation (deliverance from exile with consequent restoration to wholeness), thus becoming an exemplar of blessing that the nations will look up to.

Given the complexity of the issues concerning the meaning of “blessing” in Gen 12:2b and 12:3b, we should perhaps be cautious in taking the call of Abraham as unproblematically specifying a vocation to the nations. Especially because of the idiomatic sense of being a blessing in Hebrew, we may be justified in taking the overall thrust of Gen 12:1–3 as assurance to Abraham of God’s faithfulness in bringing about the fulfillment of the promises of 12:2a and 12:3a. This assurance would be needed, given the evident difficulty and uncertainty involved in Abraham leaving his country, kindred, and father’s house and traveling to an unspecified land (Gen 12:1). The point seems to be that God’s promises of blessing in 12:2 (that Abraham will become a great nation with a famous reputation) and of protection in 12:3 (blessing those who bless Abraham and cursing anyone who disdains him) will be so effective that in the end all nations will recognize Abraham’s descendants as “a model of desirable existence” (a prime instantiation of blessing).²⁶ God’s promises in Gen 12:1–3 would be given in the first place *for the benefit of Abraham*, not the nations.²⁷

Evidence for the Priestly Vocation of Israel among the Nations

While this interpretation makes eminent sense of the text from the perspective of the one receiving the promises, the question remains whether the benefit or blessing of the nations themselves could also be in view in Genesis 12 (even if only distantly, on the horizon).

Within the book of Genesis itself we find the king of Gerar explicitly recognizing that YHWH has richly blessed Isaac (Gen 26:28–29; also 26:12–14). Other biblical texts, like Isa 61:9, claim that the nations will come to recognize the true source of Israel’s blessing: “Their descendants shall be known among the nations, / and their offspring among the peoples; / all who see them shall acknowledge / that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.”

26. Moberly, *Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 154.

27. Moberly, *Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 149–50.

Moberly, however, makes the important point that just because the nations may come to recognize that Israel's blessing is due to YHWH (Israel's God), there is no assumption that the nations will accept Israel's frame of reference and seek blessing by appeal to YHWH. Rather, given that the nations have allegiance to other deities, they might well say: "May Chemosh make you like Abraham."²⁸ The consequence of this is there is no guarantee that invoking blessing by citing Abraham/Israel will result in the nations actually receiving blessing.²⁹ This is a powerful argument, and it is correct as far as it goes.

However, when we go beyond Gen 12:1–3 and the Abraham story, we find a variety of prophetic texts that envision a day when the nations will actively seek YHWH and join Israel in allegiance to the one true God (for example, Isa 2:2–4, 19:18–25, 60:3; Jer 3:17; Mic 4:1–4; Zech 2:11, 8:20–23). Zechariah 8:20–23 is an instructive example, since it follows the Zech 8:13 passage about Israel becoming a blessing instead of a curse.

According to Zech 8:23, "In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'" (Zech 8:23). Given the placement of this oracle, we are warranted in thinking that it is precisely Israel's being an example of blessing that will attract the nations to YHWH. Therefore, whether or not the blessing of the nations is an explicit concern in Gen 12:1–3, such a concern becomes part of the larger vision of Scripture beyond Genesis 12 (and that is even before we get to the New Testament).

Do we then have to acknowledge Moberly's point that Genesis 12 itself does not envision the actual blessing of the nations? Or is there some way that Genesis 12 itself leads to the expectation that the nations may move beyond recognizing that YHWH has blessed Israel, and even beyond wanting this blessing for themselves, to actively seeking Israel's God as the source of this blessing—with the result that they themselves are blessed?

The fact that the reflexive of "bless" in Gen 12:3b could be translated to mean that the nations will gain/attain blessing for themselves (rather than verbally bless one another using Abraham as an example) opens the door to a positive answer. This is, however, only a translation possibility (it may not be the best rendering),

The Narrative Placement of the Call of Abraham

Instead, we would do better to attend to the narrative placement of Gen 12:1–3 immediately after the Primeval History (which culminates in the dead-end of Babel). Due to this placement, Terence Fretheim calls Gen 12:1–3 a "fulcrum text"

28. Moberly, *Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 151–54. The quote about Chemosh is from 154.

29. Moberly, *Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 155.

that links the family of Abraham with God's purposes for humanity and creation.³⁰ This suggests that the larger purpose of Abraham and his descendants is, narratively speaking, to aid in reconciling humanity to God and thus restoring humanity to its original purpose, by helping to remove or overcome the impediment of sin and violence, which has become endemic.³¹

If it is objected that Fretheim is a Christian interpreter (so this sort of reading is to be expected), we should remember the famous Jewish midrash on the creation of humanity in Gen 2:7 that links Adam and Abraham in terms of plot. According to *Genesis Rabbah* 14:6, God thought: "I will create Adam first, so that if he sins, Abraham may come and set things right."³²

Beyond *Genesis Rabbah*, the Jewish biblical scholar and theologian Martin Buber also links the election of Israel to creation, via the Bible's presentation of one comprehensive macro-narrative. According to Buber:

We are to trace the meaning of [Israel's] origin back to the meaning of the origin of the world, and back to the intention of the Creator for His creation. To be sure, the Bible does not present us with theological statements about this intention and this meaning; it presents us with a story only, but this story *is* theology; biblical theology is narrated theology. The Bible cannot be comprehended if it is not comprehended in this way.³³

In other words, while it might be theoretically possible to read Gen 12:1–3 as an independent literary unit focusing simply on the blessing of Abraham, to the exclusion of the nations, the placement of the Abraham story after the dispersion of Babel significantly reframes the meaning of Abraham's call in terms of God's purposes for the larger human family.

Abraham's own family comes from Ur (Gen 11:31), an important city in southern Mesopotamia, which is clearly intended to connect Abraham to the Primeval History, since Babel/Babylon is located in the same region (compare Gen 11:1 with 10:10). The fact that Gen 11:31 states that Abraham's family (led by his father, Terah) had already made the trip from Ur (in southern Mesopotamia) to Haran (in Aram/Syria) might even suggest they were part of the dispersion of Babel. It is only when Terah dies in Haran (11:32), and the journey seems to have come to a standstill, that God speaks to Abraham in Gen 12:1 about moving on.

30. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, 92.

31. Although how this is to be done is not explicitly stated in Gen 12:1–3, God later reveals that Abraham is to "charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice" (Gen 18:19), which would enable God's promises to Abraham to be fulfilled. I will come back to this.

32. *Genesis Rabbah* 14:6. Translation taken from Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah*, 114. This quote is meant to answer the question of why God didn't just start with Abraham, given his preeminent stature in Judaism (indeed, the text says he was worthy of being created before Adam).

33. Buber, "Abraham the Seer," 25–26 (his emphasis).

This narrative placement of the call of Abraham in the context of universal history from creation to Babel is clearly meant to indicate that Abraham's God is no petty national or regional deity, but the creator of the heavens and the earth.³⁴ Before he was Abraham's God, YHWH was already the God of all humanity with a concern for the blessing or flourishing of all people.

The narrative question therefore becomes: Is the creator God intending to ignore the needs of the human race and to focus now only on this one family? Or does God's calling of Abraham/Israel (with intent to bless) address in some way his creational purposes for human flourishing, which have been stymied by sin?³⁵

Or we could ask the question from the point of view of Israel's responsibility. Just as it would be unethical for humans to use their distinctive privilege and power as God's image to abuse (or ignore the needs of) their earthly environment, rather than caring for and positively developing the earth, so wouldn't it be illegitimate for Israel to hoard their privilege as God's elect people, rather than aiding the rest of humanity in attaining God's purposes for human life?

A positive answer to this question seems indicated; it suggests that Israel's vocation vis-à-vis the nations is analogous to the human calling as *imago Dei* vis-à-vis the earth. In fact, it makes sense to view election as a particular concentration of the human calling, a subplot in the service of the larger narrative. Whereas the human calling to image God was originally focused on faithful cultural development of our earthly environment (a calling which has not ceased), in a post-fall world the power of *imago Dei* is meant to be directed *also* towards redemptive living, to address the problem of human evil and brokenness, at personal, social, even international levels.³⁶

The Global Purpose of Israel's Salvation

That God's purposes for Israel are in the service of his concern for all humanity is evident when we turn to the book of Exodus.³⁷ There we find that Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage is framed with a global or universal purpose. The universal scope of the exodus is alluded to in numerous statements during the narrative of the plagues and the Sea crossing to the effect that not just Israel (Exod 6:7; 7:17; 10:2), but

34. Note also Gen 14, where the king of Salem calls God Most High (*'ēl 'ēlyōn*) "the creator of heaven and earth" (14:19), something then affirmed by Abraham, who identifies *'ēl 'ēlyōn* with YHWH (14:22).

35. Moberly himself admits the tension between what is explicit in Gen 12 and what is required by the larger narrative of Scripture: "The relationship between exegetical precision and canonical frame of reference is finely balanced here." *Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 148.

36. For an analysis of the parallel between the human vocation and Israel's purpose, see Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 62.

37. The next two paragraphs are adapted from Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 91–92.

also Pharaoh and all Egypt (Exod 7:5; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; 10:7; 14:14, 18), would come to know who YHWH is through these miraculous events.

This broad scope of the exodus is especially emphasized in connection with the seventh plague, when YHWH affirms that his name will be proclaimed in all the earth (Exod 9:14). Indeed, at this point universal statements accumulate: Pharaoh will come to know that there is no one like YHWH in all the earth (9:16) and that the earth belongs to YHWH (9:29). That is, the exodus is not just for Israel's sake (though it surely is for that), but also for the sake of the wider world.³⁸

After the exodus, when Israel arrives at Mt. Sinai, a universal claim precedes God's affirmation of Israel's calling. Although "the whole earth is mine" (19:5), says YHWH, Israel is to be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (19:6). While this could be taken to mean that Israel alone (from all the nations) is granted the privilege of ministering to God (like priests in his temple), the global scope of the exodus suggests that a better interpretation is that Israel has the vocation of mediating divine blessing and presence in a world that belongs to God.³⁹

The universal purpose of Israel's election becomes most explicit during the Babylonian exile in the so-called servant songs of Isaiah, where God, who identifies himself as creator of the cosmos and all humanity (Isa 42:5), articulates the calling of Israel (God's servant) to be "a covenant to the people, a light to the nations" (Isa 42:6; also 49:6), which will include their release from blindness and bondage (Isa 42:7). To speak of Israel as God's "covenant" to the peoples of the world is surely unusual, suggesting that the covenant God makes with the nations *is* Israel; the very existence of the elect constitutes God's covenantal pledge or oath to the nations that he hasn't given up on them or left them in the dark. The final servant song (Isa 52:13—53:12) even suggests the need for Israel's vicarious and efficacious suffering as God's servant on behalf of the world, something that the New Testament understands as fulfilled in Christ, the ultimate servant of the Lord (Acts 8:32–34).⁴⁰

The Witness of the Septuagint and the New Testament

But the case for understanding Abraham and his descendents in Genesis 12 as a source of blessing for the nations becomes even stronger when we turn to the Septuagint (LXX),

38. The best elucidation of this theme is found in the works of Terence Fretheim. See Fretheim, *Exodus*; "Plagues as Ecological Signs"; "Reclamation of Creation"; "Because the Whole Earth Is Mine"; and his *magnum opus*, combining the insights from many of his earlier studies, *God and World in the Old Testament*, esp. ch. 4: "Creation and the Foundation Narratives of Israel."

39. In his essay "The Election of Israel: A Biblical Inquiry" (*On the Bible*, 80–92), Buber understands Exodus 19:5–6 as connecting Israel's vocation as God's elect to the failed royal vocation of humanity. Whereas humanity was originally called to "serve as [God's] delegated governors on earth" (86), Israel is God's "unmediated dominion" (kingdom of priests), whose obedience is intended "to begin the preparation of humanity for [the reestablishment of God's] kingdom" (89).

40. For a brilliant study of the status and vocation of the servant of YHWH in Isaiah, see Janzen, "Ecce Homo."

which translates the Hebrew of “bless” in Gen 12:3b by what is clearly a passive verb in Greek. Indeed, the Septuagint translates all the repeated occurrences of this promise (in Gen 18:18, 22:18, 26:4 and 28:14), whether in the Niphal or the Hithpael, by the same passive Greek verb, meaning to “be blessed.” Whatever the original sense of the Hebrew in these passages, it is clear that some post-biblical Second Temple Jewish interpretation (represented by the LXX of Genesis) had come to understand the importance of the gentiles in God’s plan and read Israel’s election as instrumental to that purpose, mediating God’s blessings to all the nations or families of the earth.⁴¹

This instrumental or mediational understanding of the call of Abraham (which is not a Christian innovation) then finds its way into the New Testament. Both Gal 3:8–9 and Acts 3:25–26 explicitly quote the promise from Gen 12:3b combined with its restatement in 22:18 (the Greek combines elements of the LXX of both texts). The Galatians passage takes this to mean that the gentiles who believe will receive the same blessing Abraham did (he also believed God, according to Gen 15:6), while the Acts text understands Jesus as *the* descendent (or seed) of Abraham *par excellence* through whom blessing comes, first to Israel and then to the gentiles. Both texts, furthermore, interpret the blessing that comes through Abraham as equivalent to salvation.

The Vocation of Abraham according to Genesis 12

For a variety of reasons, then, we are warranted in viewing Abraham and his descendants as entrusted with the task of participating with God in the *missio Dei* to address (and overcome) the obstacle of sin among the nations, thus restoring the human race to its original purpose. That this is a *task* or *calling* given to Abraham, and not simply a promise of what God will unilaterally do, is suggested by the fact that the verb for “be” a blessing at the end of Gen 12:2 is technically in the form of an imperative or command (thus, “be a blessing!”). Although according to the rules of Hebrew syntax, the full sentence structure of verse 2 allows this line to be translated as a result or purpose statement (“so that you will be a blessing”), it might be important to feel the full force of this “unprecedented imperative,” as Martin Buber puts it.⁴²

Let us fully grant that the Hebrew idiom of *being a blessing* means to live as an example of blessing and not to be a source or channel of blessing to others. Nevertheless, if we let this imperative stand (as Buber thinks we should), this means that Israel’s living as an example is not simply a promise that God will bring about, but a calling or vocation that Israel must live up to.⁴³ Thus, in the midst of amazing promises of

41. Even Moberly admits this; *Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 157.

42. Buber, “Election of Israel,” 87. Another Jewish scholar who agrees with Buber on translating Gen 12:2b as an imperative (“be a blessing!”) is Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 55, while Shai Held suggests “You must be a blessing” as a possible translation (Held, *Heart of Torah*, 2:304, n. 29). Christian scholars who render Gen 12:2b as an imperative include Wright, *Mission of God*, 213, 216; Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 152, 175; and Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 213.

43. Buber, “Election of Israel,” 87.

blessing, protection, and flourishing for Abraham and his descendants, Buber nevertheless thinks that God expects “Abraham will bid the people he begets to adhere to the way of the God who strides before them by its practice of righteousness and its proof of worth.”⁴⁴ And this moral example will decisively benefit the nations. As Buber puts it: “This is what becoming a blessing for the other peoples means: setting a living example of a true people, a community.”⁴⁵

Thus, instead of taking the end of Gen 12:2 as a purpose statement, concluding the prior promises in that verse, it is possible to see “Be a blessing!” as a parallel imperative to “Go!” (at the start of 12:1), which thus begins a new thought (after all, verse numbering is a later phenomenon in the biblical text, and does not always represent the best division of ideas). God’s initial words to Abraham would then be structured by two imperatives, followed by a series of promises. The following is my proposed translation of Gen 12:1–3.

¹ YHWH said to Abram:

“GO from your country, and from your kindred, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great.

BE a blessing! ³ And I will bless those who bless you, (but the one who disdains you I will curse⁴⁶); and by you all the families of the earth shall bless one another.”

Although I have left the promises (in 12:2 and 12:3) joined with what precedes them by the non-committal word “and,” these promises could be plausibly construed as consequences or even purpose statements—what God will do if Abraham obeys these two commands.⁴⁷ The basis for this interpretation is the paratactic character of Hebrew prose. Parataxis is the phenomenon of laying down a string of clauses joined only by the multiple-duty conjunction *vav* (typically, “and”) attached to the beginning of the next word. The translation value of *vav* in any particular case must be interpreted by the context. It may have a conjunctive force (“and”); it may be contrastive

44. Buber, “Election of Israel,” 87. Here Buber cites Gen 18:19, where God reflects on the need for Abraham to teach his children and household “the way of YHWH,” which includes “righteousness and justice,” as a condition for God fulfilling his promises to Abraham.

45. Buber, “Election of Israel,” 87. See also 86.

46. Many translations correctly distinguish between the plural of “those” who bless Abraham from the singular of “the one” who disdains him. I have also kept the distinction between the verb for “disdain” (or treat lightly) and the verb for “curse” (which is stronger).

47. *Purpose* may be communicated by the fact that many of these verbs are in the cohortative, which communicates God’s intent or desire to accomplish what is stated (as opposed to just a statement of fact that it will happen). Two verbs that are not in the cohortative are God’s statement about cursing (which is why I rendered it as a parenthetical statement) and the final line about the families of the earth blessing themselves (this is technically excluded from being a cohortative since it is not a first person verb about what God will do); the end of verse 3 thus describes the ultimate *consequence* of Abraham’s obedience.

(“but,” “yet”); it may represent temporal sequence (“then,” “now”); it is often simply omitted in translation. But *vav* attached to an imperfect or cohortative verb may also signify consequence or purpose (“that,” “so that”).⁴⁸

This interpretation of Gen 12:1–3 (organized around two imperatives) would place significant responsibility on Abraham, not only to leave Haran and travel to Canaan (something he does in Gen 12:4), but also to live as a model of blessing. Blessing, for either Abraham or others, would not be an automatic outcome.

This is consistent with other texts in Genesis where Abraham has a positive role to play in living according to righteousness (“walk before me and be blameless”; Gen 17:1) and in teaching his family God’s ordinances for right living (Gen 18:19). At least three times in Genesis the fulfillment of God’s promises (including the nations blessing each other by Abraham and his offspring) is made dependent on Abraham’s obedience to God (Gen 18:18–19; 22:18; 26:4–5). And Exod 19 explains that it is only through obedience to God and faithfulness to his covenant that Israel will fulfill their elect role as “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exod 19:5–6).⁴⁹

Does Abraham’s Family Fulfill Their Calling?

The narrative question then arises as to whether Abraham (and Israel) will live in such a way as to mediate the blessing of God to the rest of humanity, thus enabling the nations to overcome the impediment of sin, which has prevented their fulfillment of the original human vocation. In the narrative of Genesis this question comes down to the issue of the righteousness of Abraham and his offspring.

While it is traditional to view Abraham as a paradigm of righteousness, the text portrays him as a more ambivalent figure. Having received specific directives from God, to *go* (Gen 12:1) and *be a blessing* (12:2), we find that Abraham does in fact go (12:4–9), thus obeying the first directive. In the very next narrative episode (12:10–20), however, he becomes a paradigm not of blessing but of *curse* (a negative example), when he deceives the king of Egypt out of fear, by pretending that Sarah is his sister, not his wife (she is technically both). This allows the king’s courtiers to take Sarah for the royal harem, which results in diseases coming on Pharaoh and his household (thus Abraham prevents, rather than mediates, blessing to the nations).

48. Alexander translates God’s promises as purpose statements, dependent on the two commands, “go” and “be a blessing” (Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 152, 175). Wenham views these promises as the purpose or consequence of Abraham’s obedience to the command to “go” (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 275).

49. I realize that my reading of Gen 12:2b as an imperative (“be a blessing!”) goes against the grain of the majority of Genesis commentaries. It is, therefore, worth noting that my interpretation of Abraham’s vocation to the nations does not depend on this reading. Nor does it depend on the New Testament. It is, rather, grounded in the narrative placement of Gen 12:1–3, the universal scope of the exodus articulated in the plague narrative and at Sinai, the prophetic vision of the nations turning to YHWH via the witness of Israel, and the LXX translation of Gen 12:3b. To which we can add the Genesis references to the necessity of Abraham’s obedience, referenced in the preceding paragraph.

Paradoxically, Abraham (who doesn't seem to learn from this experience) goes through the same charade again with Abimelech the king of Gerar (20:1–18), which results in barrenness on the king's household and a death threat from God, who offers the king mercy in a dream, but is nevertheless constrained by his promise to curse anyone who treats Abraham lightly (12:2). In both cases Abraham's actions (which are motivated by lack of trust in God's promises) have disastrous consequences for the royal families in question, consequences prevented or ameliorated only by the return of Sarah untouched by the king. In the second episode (with Abimelech), Abraham intercedes for the healing of those he affected adversely (20:17–18), thus functioning, in the end, as a mediator of blessing to counter the curse his own actions generated.

Similar ethical ambivalence dogs Abraham's descendents. Jacob deviously gets his older brother Esau (who is certainly not a faultless character) to give up his birthright for a pot of stew (25:29–34) and deceives his aging father Isaac into giving him the blessing reserved for the firstborn (27:1–40). Thus the sibling rivalry that began in the womb (25:21–26), abetted by parental favoritism (25:27–28), flowers into the desire of one brother to kill the other (27:41–45). Yet the deceiver can also positively impact others, as when the increase of Laban's flocks is attributed to blessing brought by Jacob (Gen 30:27–30).

In many ways Joseph is a more complex example. He endures the animosity of his brothers, which leads to his enslavement in Egypt (37:18–36), then a wrongful accusation of attempted rape, resulting in prison (39:6–20). We shouldn't forget, however, that it was Joseph's own adolescent boasting to his older brothers about his dreams of privilege (influenced perhaps by the favoritism shown him by his father) that led to (or fueled) their animosity in the first place (37:2–11). Yet Joseph undergoes significant character transformation over the course of the narrative, which ends with his emotionally fraught reconciliation with his brothers (Gen 42–45)—the very ones who sold him into slavery.⁵⁰

Even during his slavery Joseph brings blessing and prosperity to Potiphar's household (39:2–6); and after he is released from prison his rise to the position of Pharaoh's second-in-command allows him to preserve the life of the Egyptians (indeed, "all the earth") during a time of extreme famine (41:53–57). Blessing certainly comes to others through Joseph.

Yet Joseph seems to have instituted debt slavery in Egypt as a way for those impoverished by famine to receive food. After they had depleted their silver (47:13–15), then their livestock (47:16–17) to pay for the grain he stored, the text says that Joseph took their land and their "bodies" as payment (47:18–22), and instituted a one-fifth taxation rate for the yield they received from this grain (47:23–26). I

50. For an astute study of Joseph's character transformation, see Sykora, "The Mission that Transforms." For a profound reading of how the narratives of Genesis subvert sibling rivalry (including a study of Joseph's transformation), see Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, Pt. 2: "Siblings" (chaps. 6–9).

believe we are justified in wondering whether this is the very institution of slavery that the Israelites were later subjected to.⁵¹

And one could go on to read the entire history of Israel in terms of whether or not (and to what degree) Abraham's descendants live up to their calling to live as an exemplar of blessing. Indeed, the pervasive prophetic critique of Israel's failure to keep YHWH's covenant may be viewed in this light.

Jeremiah 4 even specifies that if God's people repent and turn to him in faithfulness, the result will be that Gen 12:3b will finally be fulfilled, in that the nations will bless themselves by Israel—or possibly even by YHWH himself (depending on the referent of “by him” in v. 2). YHWH declares through the prophet:

If you return to me,
if you remove your abominations from my presence,
and do not waver,
and if you swear, “As YHWH lives!”
in truth, in justice, and in uprightness,
then nations shall bless themselves by him,
and by him they shall boast” (Jer 4:1b–2; NRSV adapted).

A Jewish Understanding of Israel's Vocation to the Nations?

It is fascinating that having argued against a missional reading of Genesis 12 as a Christian distortion, Moberly concedes (at the end of his chapter on the blessing of Abraham) that there are prominent Jewish scholars who affirm the universal purpose of Israel's election, even in Genesis 12. He cites the commentaries of Nahum Sarna, Umberto Cassuto, and Jacob Benno.⁵² Although Sarna and Cassuto think that Gen 12:3b should probably be translated as passive, and Jacob takes its meaning as reflexive, all three affirm that Abraham's election is ultimately for the benefit of the entire world.⁵³ According to Jacob, the blessing that Abraham is to mediate to the nations “is an expression of a great-hearted religious universalism, not surpassed by any of the prophets. It is stated at the beginning of Israel's history.”⁵⁴

To these three Jewish voices I would add Martin Buber, whose writings on the election of Israel first helped me see the role of Abraham in the wider biblical story.⁵⁵ Particularly striking is Buber's elucidation of the line YHWH speaks (via Moses) to

51. For a nuanced analysis of this point, see Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:104–108.

52. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 159–161.

53. Sarna, *Genesis*, 89; Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Pt. 2, 315; Jacob, *Genesis*, 85–87.

54. Jacob, *Genesis*, 87. Moberly's version of this quote diverges somewhat from my own, since he gives his own translation of the 1934 German edition, whereas my quote is taken from the published English translation.

55. It is paradoxical that my missional reading of the Israel's election was initially prompted by reading Buber in the early nineties.

Israel at Sinai: “I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exod 19:4). Noting that the entire book of Deuteronomy could be viewed as a midrash on Exod 19:1–5 (which he designates “the eagle passage”),⁵⁶ Buber highlights the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32) for its elaboration of the eagle imagery:

As an eagle stirs up its nest,
and hovers over its young;
as it spreads its wings, takes them up,
and bears them aloft on its pinions,
the LORD alone guided him;
no foreign god was with him. (Deut 32:11–12)

The text vividly imagines God as an eagle teaching its young to fly. Although the “God-eagle,” Buber explains, has many offspring (the nations), he nevertheless “spreads his wings and sets one of the young upon his pinion, carries it away, and, by throwing it into the air and catching it, teaches it to fly freely.”⁵⁷ Teaching the young to fly is an allusion to obedience, even to *imitatio Dei*, learning God’s righteousness.

But then Buber asks: “Why the one?” In other words, why the election of Israel from among the nations?

I will let Buber have the last word: “Why else but that it may fly ahead, leading the way for the others!”⁵⁸

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56. Buber, “Election of Israel,” 89.

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