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The Dichotomy of Election

Amelia Huba

The differences between God's chosen and unchosen are more ambiguous than they may at first appear. There is the obvious distinction of election- the people that God has singled out and everybody else. Election creates a great disparity which puts characters from similar beginnings on entirely different paths. However, these distinct paths are not entirely separate; the elect and the non-elect both face tumultuousness and suffering, and often, their stories end in the same place. Siblings distanced and torn apart by God's choice can reconcile, in spite or perhaps because of their disparate lives, which is exemplified with Jacob and Esau. The chosen and the unchosen alike are often unethical, leading to similar punishments, as in the case of Moses and Aaron, as well as bringing into question God's preferences. Every biblical characters' actions, taken for selfish reasons or at God's behest, result in consequences and pain that can outweigh whatever they may have gained, a concept clearly seen in David's story. The corrupt chosen and unchosen face challenges and suffering that can overpower the benefits of the characters' elevation or lack thereof.

Jacob, grandson of Abraham, is chosen, though he is objectively unexceptional. Before he is even born, his mother receives a prophecy foretelling the "two nations... in [her] womb, and [the] two peoples born of [her that] shall be divided" (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Gen 25:23). Although he is the younger twin, and not favored by their father, Jacob is the one who is both elevated by this prophecy and, eventually, by God. The brothers are shown to be different in temperament and in objective, as "Esau is portrayed as someone with little concern for the future while Jacob is cleverly positioning himself" (Kaminsky 2007, p. 45). Jacob notably tricks his family on several occasions in order to gain primogeniture, or rightful succession. These deceitful actions culminate in Jacob's hasty departure from the family after Esau finally snaps and vows to kill him. While he is on the road escaping, Jacob dreams of a ladder to heaven, and of God promising to be "with [him] and keep [him] wherever [he] goes" (Gen 29:15). After receiving this unofficial covenant, Jacob arrives at his uncle's farm, falls in love with his cousin, Rachel, and enters into indentured servitude for many years. The labor, owed to his uncle, pays for his spouses- the three wives that Jacob does not love but has to provide for in order to be with the one that he does. At the end of this time of exile and of slavery, Jacob and his considerable family journey towards his former home, an expedition that leads to Jacob's eventual reunion with his brother.

When considering the flaws of Jacob's character and the selfish actions he takes, God's choice becomes questionable. Jacob is "naturally crafty and deceitful" towards his own family, even to the point of cruelty (Lockyer 1959, p. 166). Jacob extorts his brother and his dying father for blessings and birthright without any sign of regret or repentance. Although he is in turn deceived by his uncle and, later, his sons, this seeming lack of moral cognizance does not immediately correspond with being protected and elevated by God. Jacob is not a purely evil man; he is "good and bad; he rises and falls, yet in spite of his failures [is] a chosen instrument" to God. God's promise to be with Jacob is given in accordance with the covenant of "father[ing] a great people" inherited from his grandfather (Gen 17:4-5). This genetic preference, although apparently only passed to Jacob, coincides with the ambiguity of God's choices to justify his election. Jacob, like so many other chosen characters, is "seemingly undeserving of the position

[he has] been given... [which] suggest[s] the irrelevance of human merit” and instead implies that God’s plans can be carried out through any medium (Greenspahn 1994, p. 160).

Esau goes on a journey as well, although he does not stray far from his home or parents. Esau takes control of caring for the family homestead and for their mother, Rebekah, who favored and abetted Jacob. His storyline, although not as comprehensively described as Jacob’s storyline, is still influenced by his brother’s actions. Clearly frustrated with his family, Esau disobeys his parents’ wishes and marries two Canaanite women. While the distance between the brothers allows Esau to heal and to accept his life, Jacob’s continued superiority, here in the choice of spouses, sparks Esau to change. Esau marries his cousin, Mahalath, and presumably divorces his foreign wives. Mahalath serves as a symbol of Esau’s growth in more ways than one, as “her name means ‘forgiveness’” (Lockyer 1959, p. 114). Although he begins as a volatile, simple man, Esau evolves enough to let go of his grudge against Jacob. By the time the two brothers reunite, “Esau... is no longer the cruel and vengeful man Jacob escaped... he is now a person of consummate graciousness” (Levenson 1993, p. 67-68). The reformation of Esau’s character as a result of Jacob’s choices is ultimately positive, despite the pain his brother put him through.

The reunion of Jacob and Esau is powerful in its depiction of forgiveness and personal growth. Although they have been apart for many years, and each suffered at the other’s hand, the brothers “have finally been reconciled- an astonishing turn when one considers the circumstances of their estrangement” (Levenson 1993, p. 67). Jacob, deceived and subjugated, only uses trickery to get his family away from his manipulative uncle. Although he lies to Esau when they meet again, it is out of self-preservation and the remembrance of past threats. Esau, also deceived, is steadier, wiser, and outright friendly to his brother. The ways in which they have suffered and the paths that they have taken directly change their characters. Though they caused their estrangement together, the separation ultimately allows for their individual evolutions, and for them to be brothers again.

Moses’ position as a man of two worlds- the hierarchy of Egypt and the enslaved Israelites- is reflected in his election by God, which makes him a prophet of the Lord as well as an earthly human. Saved from drowning in a river by the Pharaoh’s daughter, Moses is raised out of infancy by his birth mother before becoming an official member of the royal household. After killing an Egyptian and returning to the Israelites, Moses is chosen by God to serve as a prophet, becomes the leader of the Israelites, and “deliver[s] them from the Egyptians” (Ex 3:8). Moses aids God in making his former people suffer, culminating in the deaths of all the Egyptian firstborns. Joining with his brother, Aaron, Moses leads his new people out of the desecrated remains of Egypt, going on to wander through the desert towards an ambiguous promised land. While wandering in the desert, Moses strikes a rock to produce water instead of speaking to it, as God commanded. This apparent expression of doubt leads to Aaron’s death: despite the brothers’ good intentions to care for the dehydrated and belligerent Israelites, Moses is forced to strip Aaron of his priestly vestments before watching as his brother “die[s] there on the top of the mountain” (Num 20:28). After leading the Israelites the rest of the way alone, Moses is allowed to see the promised land before he, too, is struck down by God for the same incident of doubt. After his death, Moses is praised highly, as “never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face” (Deut 34:10). Although he lives a long life, serves as leader to the chosen people, and has the “privilege of being known as ‘the friend of God,’” Moses’ elevation is still not enough to protect him or his family (Lockyer 1959, p. 247).

Even before God's official summoning, Moses seems to have been blessed, despite his imperfection of character. Out of anyone who could have found him in the river, the Pharaoh's daughter makes the discovery and has the compassion to choose to adopt him as her own. Despite murdering someone, Moses not only escapes unpunished, he goes on to lead God's chosen people. This protection, presumably divine, ensures Moses' survival and mortal elevation before any official holy connection has been made. Upbringing in a royal household does not entirely justify the role of leader of the Israelites; Moses himself does not think he is suitable for this position, as he tries to deny God's summons on the grounds of a lack of eloquence. Moses' apparent "ability to endure catastrophe marks him as blessed" while simultaneously marking him as the leader of the entire population of Israelites as they undertake their diaspora (Greenspahn 1994, p. 103). Lack of any significant traits of leadership, as well as Moses' occasional lapses in integrity, have no apparent significance to chosenness; "God's favor is unrelated to the character of the recipient," as is evident in the example of Jacob (Levenson 1993, p. 70).

Aaron is brought to God's attention due to Moses' inability to be both prophet and translator to the people and through this position helps his brother and the Israelites. It may at first glance appear that Aaron was chosen as well and was merely elected to a lower position than his brother. However, without Moses, Aaron would not have been chosen at all; he is familiar to his brother, and the two can communicate easily. Moses' mouthpiece could not have been a stranger: he needed someone who could understand him, someone with whom he had a bond. Aaron's life, irrevocably tied to Moses' chosenness, becomes dedicated to the preservation of the Israelites. Aaron's duty is to convey the word of Moses, and, therefore, of God, to the people. When Moses ascends the mountain to record God's laws, he leaves Aaron in charge of the faithless and hopeless people. After weeks without word, "Aaron suffered from the murmurings of the people," and aided them in the construction of a false god (Lockyer 1959, p. 20). Whether Aaron succumbed to the people's desire or simply wanted to placate them, his action evokes the anger of Moses and the dissolution of his tenuous relationship with God. The incident in which Moses strikes the rock, angering God, concludes Aaron's service in a harsh way. Dying before knowing whether or not his brother or his people will successfully reach a land without persecution is a painful enough punishment. Dying because of the actions of his brother and of his people makes everything that Aaron did for them seem futile. The shared guilt of the people and of the brothers should have made any punishment communal; very few, in the end, take the blame for the entire society, expiring so that the rest may reach the promised land.

Although only one brother is elected, Moses and Aaron work together to save their people. Their familial bond survives their differing natures as well as their inequality of status. Moses is chosen, yes, but "the divine preference, though never reversed, need not destroy the family," and in this case, it instead brings the family closer (Levenson 1993, p. 67). Unity in purpose, no matter how it was bestowed upon them, makes them both leaders of a lost and tortured people, as the brothers "stand as co-heralds of the Scripture's divine authority"¹. The solidarity extends beyond direction; Moses and Aaron suffer together as well. Each brother displays a lack of faith and misleads the people; neither breach of confidence is intentional, but both result in disastrous consequences. Aaron's choice to create the false god results in the punishment of eventual death bestowed upon him and those who worshipped the golden calf. Moses himself makes a similarly catastrophic decision when he disobeys God while bringing

¹ Merback 2017, p. 290

water to the Israelites, a choice which culminates in the promise of death for Moses and the expedition of Aaron's sentence. The brothers share not only the mission to save the Israelites, but also the "common fate as sinners punished by God, refused entry into the promised land" (Merback 2017, p. 291). Election, which in other cases tears siblings apart, here brings them closer together, joining their lives and their fates. Moses and Aaron prove that "the tension generated by divine favoritism can be mitigated or eventually overcome," even when the tension is of holy origin (Kaminsky 2007, p. 54).

David, born a common boy, proves himself to be exceptional when he is chosen by God to rule. The youngest of seven farmer's sons, David was anointed while still an adolescent. Though he was barely 15, and a commoner, David "was carefully chosen as Israel's second king by God Himself" (Lockyer 1959, p. 89). David shows great courage in battle, volunteering to fight the veritable giant of the Philistine army when no one else would step up. Though he is not yet the king, David does not shy away from leadership, gaining followers and supporters before he has a throne from which to rule them. These devotees stay with David, aiding him as Saul begins to turn against him. David's empathy towards his tyrannical and demented king establishes that he is worthy of the kingdom still being denied to him. He continues to assuage Saul's headaches and to support him even as the king descends further into insanity. David survives Saul's declining health and disintegrating trust, even though the future king is forced to flee as his mentor tries to kill him. Despite their father's torment, two of Saul's children form close bonds with David; Michal marries him and Jonathan becomes his closest friend. Both siblings make choices for David in defiance of their father; Michal lies to her father's soldiers to give her husband a chance to escape, and Jonathan deceives his father directly, claiming no knowledge of David's location despite knowing exactly where his friend is hiding. Jeopardizing his crown and inheritance, the prince still chooses the side of his father's rival, as "the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David" in a bond deeper than blood (1 Sam 18:1).

Being pursued by his mentor for years puts David in a desperate position, causing him to turn to drastic and inherently wicked measures. He allies with the Philistines, mortal enemies of Jerusalem. They do not trust him, yet they work with him to overthrow Saul. This necessary betrayal of his people has direct consequences for David when his allies "[kill Saul's] sons Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malki-Shua," although Saul's death follows closely after (1 Samuel 31:2). While the deaths free Israel and clear David's path to the throne, it is at the cost of his best friend. David goes on to claim his sovereignty, and to defend Israel against numerous threats and enemies. The Philistines are held at bay, and many who attempt to breach Jerusalem are crushed by David's military prowess. His rule grants David renown as one of the greatest kings of Israel. From poor and unimportant to rich and prominent, through a tumultuous rise to power and the loss of his closest friend, David's success "demonstrates his good fortune and shows how much fate was on his side" (Greenspahn 1994, p. 89). In these early years of his life and leadership, David validates God's choice, serving Israel as a just and powerful king for many years.

David begins to believe that God chose him because he is special, when in fact he is only special because God chose him. David uses this misguided conviction to justify acting outside of the law and giving in to temptation. While his country is at war, David lounges on his roof, sleeps with the wife of a commander in his army, then has that commander killed to cover up the pregnancy that results from his exploitation. As a sinner, "David violated a divine law, yielded to his gross sin in a period of ease, and... stained his character by his sin against Uriah," all of which bring God's displeasure upon David and his children (Lockyer 1959, p. 90). Although

David tries to make up for his indiscretion, begging God for forgiveness, the sins have already been committed. David's abuse of power, which he only has thanks to God, cannot be undone. As with Jacob and Moses, the question of whether "election [is] in any way facilitated by human action" is asked when David's choices are considered (Kaminsky 2007, p. 47).

David's sins do not bring him physical pain, death, or enslavement; instead, they put his children in peril, and each of them suffers immensely. The baby that led to David's murderous command in the first place dies only a few days after he is born. David's son, Amnon, rapes his half-sister Tamar, despite her pleas to marry her first and save her from a life of shame. After doing the unforgivable, Amnon "hate[s Tamar] more than he had loved her" and casts her out to fend for herself (2 Sam 13:15). Tamar's full brother, Absalom, kills Amnon in an act which at first appears to be vengeance. The fratricide, in reality, was committed to give Absalom a direct line to the throne. Absalom then rises up against David, despite his father's age and increasing frailty. David flees his city, leaving his people and his concubines to be taken by his power-hungry son. Eventually, Absalom is killed, quelling the rebellion, although David wishes "[he] had died in [his son's] place" (2 Sam 18:33). The prolonged and bloody destruction of David's family depicts a more brutal and extended punishment than the other chosen and unchosen received. While the actions of Jacob and Moses bring suffering to their families as well as to themselves, David remains almost entirely untouched, but is forced to watch his children turn on each other. In the view that David's actions are worse than those of Jacob and Moses, the king's punishment by proxy does not seem appropriate.

David's retribution extends beyond his children; Israel splits, and Jerusalem is eventually taken over. Part of God's covenant with David is the declaration that his "house and [his] kingdom will endure forever before [God]; [his] throne will be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16). David's reign, presumed to have been around 1000 BCE, ends with the throne being passed on to his son, Solomon. At the conclusion of Solomon's rule, Israel separates into two detached kingdoms, and David's succession is already disrupted. By 722 BCE, the northern half of what was formerly Israel is taken over, and David's descendants in the southern half are under threat of being usurped. The southern half of Israel was conquered around 587 BCE, marking the official end of the reign of the line of David. This relatively quick dissolution of his dynasty does not correspond with the covenant God had bestowed upon David. Although this could be initially taken as God breaking His oath, the truth is that the "promise to David [guaranteed that he would] always have a descendant on the throne, but disobedience [brought] negative consequences to the reigning monarch" (Kaminsky 2007, p. 88). David's own arrogant actions have repercussions that impact his descendants and Israel itself.

A major question in God's pattern of election relates to the order of birth; it is emphasized when looking at the accounts of Jacob, Moses, and David, all of whom are younger sons. Primogeniture and seniority were cause for distinction before the common era, yet God does not seem to have any respect for either concept. The Jewish people were "faced with a Deity who disregards the principle of order of birth," a principle which normally influenced life a great deal (Levenson 1993, p. 63). While the concept of choosing a representative based on character rather than age is admirable, morality is not a strong suit for any of the men God does elect. Eminence, although not based on primogeniture or on ethics, still depends upon age. Rather than a preference for the older, or a total lack of predilection, God seems to be inclined to elevate the younger brother. Therefore, since "the first-born and the chosen are not, of course,

synonymous,” usurpation of the conventional preference creates another level of tension between those chosen and those left untouched by God (Levenson 1993, p. 60).

Whether elected by God or not, biblical characters of faltering morality face challenges and suffering which have the potential to vanquish any benefit they receive from their individual elevations. Jacob being enslaved, Moses dying before reaching the promised land, David watching his family destroy itself; the fates of these chosen men prove that “blessings do not insulate one from all future suffering” (Kaminsky 2007, p. 51). Esau being left with nothing, Aaron also dying prior to seeing safety, David’s children succumbing to darkness; the non-elects experience the punishment without any of the reward. While for the chosen, “election involves suffering and humiliation, even if it often ends in exaltation,” the unchosen face the same suffering and humiliation with little to no exaltation (Kaminsky 2007, p. 57). God’s reasoning for choosing who to punish, and how much, is opaque. The characters are not perfect; they sin, therefore they are guilty. However, the issue of blame is not black and white; it is not a matter of good and bad, nor even one of justice. As befits an omniscient being, God punishes swiftly and severely, bringing “great suffering regardless of... previous behavior” (Kaminsky 2007, p. 52). The ambiguity of election presents a duplicity in elevation that removes any image of protection from divine judgment; the chosen suffer just as much as the unchosen, and rightly so.

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