

You shall be my Treasured Possession: The Genesis of the People of God

Jeff Griffin

Dr. Jeff Griffin is Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

The LORD has today declared you to be His people, a treasured possession, as He promised you, and that you should keep all His commandments; and that He will set you high above all nations which He has made, for praise, fame, and honor; and that you shall be a consecrated people to the LORD your God, as He has spoken. (Deut. 26:18-19)

Introduction

Israel had never been there before. Before her stood Mount Sinai, but towering even higher than the mountain was her God Who stood before the nation. “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, *you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples*, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:4-6; emphasis added). One might have expected YHWH to say, “I brought you to Mount Sinai,” or “I’ve brought you out so you can go to the Promise Land.” Rather, the objective for delivering Israel from Egypt was far greater than simply leaving Egypt or entering the Promise Land. The greater goal was bringing Israel to YHWH, “to Myself,” so Israel might become YHWH’s “treasured possession among all the peoples.”

The Genesis of Separation

The first two chapters of Genesis probably have been the subject of more study than any other portion of Scripture. Despite the extensive scholarship on early Genesis, scholars and laymen often have sought to isolate particular topics and elevate those topics to a degree not supported by the text. The age of the Earth, the length of the days of creation, the number of possible creation accounts in Genesis, and a myriad of other topics are certainly interesting, but early Genesis has a far more important concern: YHWH’s acts of separation. The acts of separation are noted by Moses because the God of Israel is separate.

Genesis presents YHWH as completely separate from His Creation. YHWH is in no way to be compared to the sun, the moon, any animal, or any inanimate object in heaven above or earth beneath (Ex. 20:4; Deut. 5:8). YHWH is, as scholars have termed, the “Wholly Other.” The separateness of YHWH was in complete contradiction from the common theology of the ancient Near East which held that gods were in various created things and often dependent upon humankind.¹ However, YHWH needed nothing; He was the Wholly Other, the One Most Separate.

This One Most Separate was in the separating business: “And God *separated* the light from the darkness,” “God made the expanse and *separated* the waters,” “There was evening and morning, the first day,” and “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” (Genesis 1:4, 5, 7, 9, emphasis added). The examples of YHWH separating one thing from another completely dominate each verse of the creation account. At the end, three additional acts of divine separation occur: the separation of Adam to God, the distinction of the woman from man, and the separation of Sabbath.

The account of Adam’s creation is so familiar that we often overlook one vital detail: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden” (Gen. 2:15). Adam was not created in the garden of Eden. YHWH created Adam outside of the garden.² Adam had to be relocated. The garden was a privilege, not a right. God never promised an unalterable nearness to Himself.

In many ways, the story of Israel was first told in the story of Adam. Being taken by YHWH and placed near His presence was a privilege that could be lost. This privilege would, in fact, be lost by Adam. He would be estranged from God. Although occurring a few millennia later, Israel would also be “taken” by YHWH and “placed” in the land of Promise, only to be exiled for her unfaithfulness. The story of Adam would be the story of Israel.

The genesis of separation continues with the seventh day, the only day “blessed . . . and sanctified” by YHWH (Gen. 2:3). This separation of the seventh day was done intentionally by YHWH’s declaration of personal “rest” (Gen. 2:3). The Sabbath was a day of and for God. The Sabbath was a time to “see” that the world was now “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Sabbath was a day both for God and man to enjoy all the good things of God, with YHWH Himself being the highest good. The Sabbath was a sacred day, a sanctified day, a day separated to and for God and to and for humankind to know, bless, and enjoy God.

The final act of separation occurs with the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib. Just as Adam was brought near to YHWH, now Eve was taken and “brought . . . to the man” (Gen. 2:22). Upon receipt of God’s gift, Scripture declared “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife” (Gen. 2:24). This “leav[ing]” and “joining” created the blessed institution of the family.

With each act of separation, YHWH established clear distinctions for the whole of the created order. The supreme distinction made by Genesis was YHWH’s distinction and separateness which is complemented by YHWH’s numerous acts of separation throughout His creation. God’s graciousness is seen as He draws to Himself what could otherwise never approach Him – humankind. This separation of Adam and Eve to God was the genesis of the people of God.

Judaism³ According to the First Jew

Genesis 24 is a pivotal chapter as it contains the final recorded words of Abraham. The overall theme concerns Abraham’s sending his servant to Mesopotamia to find a wife for his son Isaac. In his instructions, Abraham, as history’s first Jew (or Hebrew), succinctly stated the essence of Judaism: “The LORD, the God of heaven, . . . *took me*” (Gen. 24:7, emphasis added).

These profound words, “YHWH *took me*” described Abraham’s experience with God. His life with God was initiated and continued by YHWH’s loving grace. Why was Abraham chosen by and for YHWH? Fast forward a few centuries to Moses’ last words to Israel: “Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them” (Deut. 4:37). In ancient Israel, no word existed for *marriage*. Rather, the act of marriage was “to take a wife.” YHWH’s chosen expression to “take” Abraham coupled with Moses’ statement that YHWH “loved your fathers” (the Patriarchs), proves the former expression to be a powerful expression of YHWH’s endearing and eternal union with the Jewish people.

Fast forward again to Israel’s wilderness wandering and the building of the Tabernacle: “I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people” (Lev. 26:12). This life with God, lost by Adam and Eve, was restored and given to Israel. This privilege of access and proximity to God cannot be overstated. As He had loved the Patriarchs, YHWH now loved Israel (Deut. 4:37; 7:7-8; 10:15; 23:5; 33:3). He walked among Israel as He did with the first couple in the Garden. Interestingly, Moses explained Israel’s newfound relationship with YHWH in the same language as that of YHWH with the first couple: “Since the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp ... your camp must be holy; ... or He will turn away from you” (Deut. 23:14; see Gen. 3:8).

The great story of the Pentateuch is that YHWH’s restoration of humankind to Himself and to the Edenic blessedness has begun! YHWH’s grace was extended to Israel as an illustration of the grace and forgiveness YHWH has extended to everyone who will come to Him through faith. The story of redemption in the Pentateuch relates YHWH’s successive acts of “taking” individuals for Himself. YHWH’s eternal objective was to expand the realm of His redeemed for His own enjoyment and for the mutual blessedness of those whom He had taken.

Judaism according to Barney Fife and Karl Marx

Barney Fife (of *The Andy Griffith Show*) and Karl Marx are not exactly known for their theological reflections. Nevertheless, two quotes from them dramatically illustrate the conceptual world of the Jewish faith. In “The Big House” episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*, Deputy Sheriff Fife had a few choice words for the newly detained criminals: “Now men, there are a few things we ought to get straightened out right at the start to avoid any grief later on. Now here at the “Rock” we have two basic rules. ... The first rule is: ***Obey all rules!***”⁴

Barney’s admonitions help explain Judaism. Judaism has rules—lots of rules! In fact, Maimonides tallied 613 in his *Mishneh Torah*. Not to be overwhelmed by 613 commandments (*mitzvot*), Jews have always known just *one rule*: “Obey all rules.” Knowing the one rule makes life quite simple. Observance of the first rule provides the Faithful a “new life” with God.

Karl Marx came from a long line of rabbis dating back possibly to the fourteenth century. In a series of articles, Marx interacted with political issues of the day, especially statements made by Bruno Bauer about German Jewry. Marx illustrated the essence of the Jewish mind:

... The Jew ... can behave toward the state only in a Jewish manner, that is, as a stranger. He opposes to real nationality his chimerical nationality, to real law his illusory laws; he feels that his separation from the rest of mankind is justified; he does not participate in the movement of history as a matter of principle; he waits for a future that has nothing in

common with the general future of man; he regards himself as a member of the Jewish people and the Jewish people is for him the chosen people.⁵

The essence of Judaism is to *separate*. This separation creates a causal chain. To humanity, the Jew's separation creates a vacuum described as creating pressure and opposition. The ongoing Jewish behavior of separation makes the Jew a stranger in every setting. They don't want to belong because they already belong to God according to Torah. Having been taken by God, separation is not only justified, it is glorified as the highest good.

Judaism can be summed up with one principle: *separation*. The desire for *separation* within the Jewish heart traces to the founding of the nation. In most cases, separation is not consciously done. Judaism is about laws, lots of laws. The purpose of the laws is to guarantee *separation*.

Let My People Go: The Separation of Israel in the Exodus event as the Interpretive Key to the Law of Moses

Some verses in the Pentateuch are perplexing. For example, have you read Leviticus 19:19 lately? "You are to keep My statutes. You shall not breed together two kinds of your cattle; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor wear a garment upon you of two kinds of material mixed together." Really? Seriously? What possible interest does God have in my polyester/cotton shirt? What are we to make of Israel's laws? Moses explained the law in terms of the principle of separation:

When your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What *do* the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments mean which the LORD our God commanded you?' then you shall say to your son, 'We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the LORD brought us from Egypt with a mighty hand. . . . He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land which He had sworn to our fathers. So the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God for our good always and for our survival, as it is today' (Deut. 6:20-24).

I hoped Moses would give some grand theological, metaphorical, or symbolic meaning. Instead, Moses told the fathers to relate the story of the Exodus. Moses was convinced the telling of this story was so compelling that the basis for Israel's laws would be impossible to miss! Still, after reading the plague narratives repeatedly, I repeatedly missed the principle that explained "what the testimonies and statutes, and the judgments mean!" Whatever they mean, Moses and YHWH are agreed – to understand the laws, one need only to read and understand the story of the Exodus!

Several years ago, I read the Exodus narrative over and over again. On about my eighth reading, I began to see it:

If you do not let My people go, behold, I will send swarms of insects . . . and the houses of the Egyptians will be full of swarms of insects, . . . But on that day ***I will set apart*** the land of Goshen, where My people are living, so that no swarms of insects will be there, in order that you may know that I, the LORD, am in the midst of the land. ***I will put a division*** between My people and your people. Tomorrow ***this sign will occur*** (Ex. 8:21-23, emphasis added).

The pattern was set; these plagues were to accomplish two things. First, a distinction would be made between Israel and Egypt—the people of YHWH and the people of the Pharaoh. Second, the God of Israel was distinct from all the gods of the Egyptians: “For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and ***against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the LORD.***” (Ex. 12:12). The Exodus event was to demonstrate to the world that Israel was separate from all the peoples of the Earth and the God of Israel was separate from and above all the supposed gods of the Gentiles.

To drive the point that Israel was distinct from all the peoples of the Earth and that YHWH was distinct from all the gods of the Gentiles, the plagues upon Egypt continued by only affecting the people of Pharaoh, but not the people of God.

The LORD will make a ***distinction*** between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing will die of all that belongs to the sons of Israel. (Ex. 9:4).

The hail struck all that was in the field through all the land of Egypt, both man and beast; the hail also struck every plant of the field and shattered every tree of the field. ***Only in the land of Goshen***, where the sons of Israel *were*, ***there was no hail*** (Ex. 9:25-26).

[The Egyptians] did not see one another for three days, ... ***but*** all the sons of Israel had light in their dwellings (Ex. 10:23).

But against any of the sons of Israel a dog will not *even* bark, ... ***that you may understand*** how the LORD makes a ***distinction*** between Egypt and Israel (Ex. 11:7).

Now it came about at midnight that the LORD struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh ... the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, ... the firstborn of cattle. Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians, and there was a great cry in Egypt, ***for there was no home where there was not someone dead*** (Ex. 12:29-30).

Because Pharaoh would not allow Israel to separate by going into the wilderness to worship, Yahweh separated Israel, even while they remained in Egypt!

The interpretative key to understanding the laws of Moses is that the law was designed to do two things: (1) to ensure that Israel joined YHWH in setting apart (making distinctions, making holy) what YHWH had already set apart, and (2) to ensure that Israel remembered daily, even through the mundane activities of life, that God loved Israel and had set apart Israel to Himself. The issues of interbreeding cattle or interweaving cloth reminded the Jews of a much greater separation—the separation by YHWH of the Jewish people to Himself. YHWH was keeping Israel separate and distinct from the nations.

Sanctify to Me: Holding and Protecting What Was Near God's Heart

No one would ever compare Maimonides' *The Guide for the Perplexed* of 1190 to Arthur Kurzweil's 2008 popular work *Torah for Dummies*. The latter illustrates even dummies can comprehend the Pentateuch. Some time ago, I became familiar with "The Property Laws of a Toddler." No author was noted that I can credit, but, in a way, these "Laws" illustrate the goal and aim of the Mosaic laws. The essence was, "It's all mine." The property laws of a toddler are not exactly the Ten Commandments, but the list is not far off. Even when Israel was nationally and spiritually broken (which was most of the time⁶), Israel was nevertheless claimed and defended by YHWH. God was declaring, "Everything is mine."

YHWH told Abraham, "Know for certain that your offspring shall be *strangers* in a land that is not theirs" (Gen. 15:13). The Tanakh translation says to "know well."⁷ This admonition was given to the first Hebrew who said of himself "I am a stranger and a sojourner" (Gen. 23:4). Not only was Abraham a sojourner, all of his descendants would also be travelers: "I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojourning, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Gen. 17:8).

Isaac said to Jacob, "May [Yahweh] also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham" (Gen. 28:4). Years later, as an old man, Jacob would tell the most powerful man in the world "The years of my sojourning are one hundred and thirty; few and unpleasant have been the years of my life, nor have they attained the years that my fathers lived during the days of their sojourning" (Gen. 47:9). Once in the land, the Israelite was to perform the following ritual:

Then it shall be, when you enter the land . . . that you shall take some of the first of all the produce of the ground . . . and go to the place where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, 'I declare this day to the LORD my God that I have entered the land' . . . and say before the LORD your God, 'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there . . . ' (Deut. 26:1-5).

For the Jew, to be a stranger was nothing strange. Sojourners and strangers don't own a lot of possessions. For Israel that was just fine; her God owned it all. Throughout the Pentateuch, YHWH repeatedly made His claim to almost everything:

- My altar
- My Angel
- My appointed times
- My book
- My blessing
- My covenant
- My dwelling
- My firstborn
- My feast
- My food
- My glory
- My household
- My Instructions
- My land
- My name
- My people
- My rest
- My Sabbaths
- My servants
- My sons
- My tabernacle
- My words
- My wonders

The objective of Judaism was to join YHWH in making distinct and separating out as holy those things that belong to God. As long as Israel made distinctions between the sacred and profane (or common), God granted Israel the right to enjoy the things that belonged to God. The seemingly

endless laws of Moses involved making distinctions in every aspect of life: food, clothing, burial practices, skin rashes, and orphans and widows. Through keeping these laws, Israel was reminded of the simple but sublime truth: YHWH had made a distinction between Israel and the nations and declared Israel as His most treasured possession.

The History of Israel as the History of YHWH as Chooser-in-Chief

It may sound overly simplistic, but the history of Israel is actually the history of YHWH. Israel only becomes a factor *because* YHWH “took” Israel. As Todd Gitlin and Liel Leibovitz explain it, “In a way, the Jewish people invented the idea of chosenness, but in truth, the idea of chosenness has also invented the Jewish people.”⁸ More accurately, YHWH “invented the idea of chosenness” and YHWH just happened to be gracious by choosing the Jewish people: “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deut. 14:2). After declaring Israel as “holy” and “chosen,” Moses began the next verse by saying “You shall not eat any detestable thing. These are the animals which you may eat...” Once again, laws of distinction and separation were extended to food. Even the simple exercise of eating reminded Israel of her chosenness and her separation from the nations.

The history of Israel in actually is the history of YHWH’s choosing people, places, and things for Himself. For only a cursory list, consider the following:

- “Then ***I will take you*** for My people, and I will be your God” (Ex. 6:7).
- “You are therefore to make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean ... Thus you are to be ***holy to Me***, for I the LORD am holy; and ***I have set you apart*** from the peoples to be Mine” (Lev. 20:25-26).
- “Behold, ***I have taken the Levites*** ... So the Levites shall be Mine (Num. 3:12-13, 45; Deut. 18:5).
- “For all the firstborn are Mine; ... ***I sanctified to Myself*** all the firstborn in Israel, from man to beast. ***They shall be Mine***; I am the LORD.” (Num. 3:13).
- “Tomorrow morning the LORD will show who is His, and who is holy, and will bring *him* near to Himself; even ***the one whom He will choose***, He will bring near to Himself” (Num. 16:5).
- “The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, ***for the land is Mine***” (Lev. 25:23).

The history of Israel is the history of YHWH’s choosing to bring near to Himself those who were previously estranged from Him. In like manner, just as YHWH choose Israel for Himself, YHWH calls upon Israel to choose YHWH for herself:

So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them (Deut. 30:19-20).

Whereas YHWH is “Chooser-in-Chief,” Israel must reciprocate. Love must be matched with love in return.

Conclusion or History in the Making

Bringing Israel out of Egypt was far more than a compassionate gesture toward an abused people. It was YHWH's bringing Israel near to Himself to be His people. The choosing of Israel was not a spur of the moment decision, but had been planned much earlier: "For I have chosen [Abraham], so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him" (Gen. 18:19). Through Abraham "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3).

YHWH reaffirmed this promise to Abraham after he offered Isaac on Mount Moriah: "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (Gen. 22:18). Years later, when Isaac was an adult, YHWH would repeat the promise yet again: "By your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 26:4). Israel's third patriarch, Jacob, would be given the promise by both his father Isaac and YHWH on the same day, but independently of one another. Before fleeing his home due to his brother's threats on his life, Isaac said to Jacob, "May He also give you the blessing of Abraham" (Gen. 28:4). Only hours later, upon lodging at the end of his first day of running, YHWH spoke to Jacob and said:

Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen. 28:14-15).

Remarkably, rather than simply stating that Jacob's descendants would inhabit the land of promise known as the Holy Land, YHWH extended their territory "to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south." This promise to "not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" was expanded to a geographical dimension that was worldwide in its scope.

The promise for Jacob's descendants to inhabit the entire world must include the Gentiles becoming the people of God as well. Such a vision of God's people consisting of all peoples, races, and tongues is exactly what Israel's prophets foretold:

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third *party* with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance (Isa. 19:23-25).

Go through, go through the gates. Clear the way for the people; Build up, build up the highway, Remove the stones, lift up a standard over the peoples. Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth, Say to the daughter of Zion, "Lo, your salvation comes; Behold His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him" (Isa. 62:10-11).

This history in the making, which the prophets proclaimed, reaches to the ends of the earth and to all nations. This monumental pursuit of YHWH to take a people for Himself concludes at the end of Scripture with "[the twenty-four elders singing] a new song, saying, 'Worthy are You to

take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them *to be* a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth” (Rev. 5:9-10). In anticipation of this glorious day, Moses commanded the Gentiles, “Rejoice, O nations, with [YHWH’s] people” (Deut. 32:42).

¹ See the seminal articles by A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. ed. Erica Reiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 183-98; Morton Smith, “The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71.3 (September 1952): 135-47; John M. Lundquist, “The Common Temple Ideology of the Ancient Near East,” in *The Temple in Antiquity: Ancient Records and Modern Perspectives*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984), 53–76.

² Genesis makes clear geographical distinction between Eden and the garden of Eden: “Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden; and from there it divided and became four rivers” (Gen. 2:10).

³ Throughout this paper, Judaism refers to the religious faith of Israel regardless of historical period.

⁴ *The Andy Griffith Show*, “The Big House,” Season 3, Episode 32, May 6, 1963, Harvey Bullock writer, Bob Sweeney director.

⁵ Karl Marx, *A World Without Jews*, trans. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 2.

⁶ Years ago, Lee (Israel) A. Levine, one of my Jewish professors at Hebrew University stated that “the history of Israel was a story of a people who were at constant odds with their God.”

⁷ *The Jewish Study Bible: Tanakh Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁸ Todd Gitlin and Liel Leibovitz, “The Centrality of Jewish Chosenness,” *Tablet* June 7, 2010. On this same topic, but written from a Christian post-modern viewpoint, see Walter Brueggemann, *Chosen? Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).