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0521416906 - The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People

David Novak

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In this book, David Novak conducts a historical, philosophical, and theological reflection on the central Jewish doctrine of Israel's election by God, also known as the idea of the chosen people. Historically, he analyzes the great change in modern Jewish thought brought about by Spinoza's inversion of the doctrine: that it was not God who elected Israel, but Israel who elected God. The development of that inversion is illustrated by the thought of the German philosopher-theologian Hermann Cohen. Philosophically, Novak explores the ontological implications of the two differing theologies of election. Theologically, he argues for the correlation of election and revelation, and maintains that a theology of election is required in order to deal with two central questions, namely: Who are the Jews, and how are Jews to be related to the world? The constructive picture which results leads to a new understanding of Jewish modernity.

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THE ELECTION OF ISRAEL

The idea of the chosen people

DAVID NOVAK

*Edgar M. Bronfman Professor of Modern Judaic Studies,
University of Virginia*



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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1995

First published 1995

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Novak, David, 1941-
 The election of Israel: the idea of the chosen people / David Novak.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 41690 6

1. Jews - election, doctrine of - history of doctrines.

2. Jews - identity. I. Title.

BM613.N68 1995

296.3'11-dc20 94-31954 CIP

ISBN 0 521 41690 6 hardback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

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[More information](#)

*To the memory of
George and Clara Eller Krulewitch
“Your children are like olive plants round about your table.”
Psalms 128:3*

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xvi
<i>General note</i>	xvii
Introduction	1
1 Spinoza and his challenge	22
2 Hermann Cohen's concept of election	50
3 Franz Rosenzweig's return to the doctrine	78
4 The retrieval of the biblical doctrine	108
5 The rabbinic development of the doctrine	163
6 Two medieval views of election	200
Conclusion	241
<i>Appendix 1 Some major Jewish thinkers cited</i>	256
<i>Appendix 2</i>	259
<i>Appendix 3</i>	262
<i>Appendix 4</i>	264
<i>Bibliography</i>	266
<i>Index</i>	278

Preface

I have learned over the years that theological reflection oscillates between personal isolation and communal participation. A theologian has to live an isolated life for much of the time because he or she is attempting to formulate a vision not yet seen by others of what lies beneath the surface of his or her tradition. But a theologian must also be a participant in a community or communities of discourse, being present in the attempt to answer some of the questions that have been raised by colleagues there. It is often impossible to identify the source of one's questions accurately, either inside or outside of oneself. Indeed, it seems better not to try to make any such identification. For too much identification with one's solitary vision might confuse theology with prophecy, and too much identification with one's communal response might confuse theology with ideology.

This book deals with a question that has concerned me for much of my life: What does it mean to be a Jew in the world, to be chosen by God, and is that true? And this book is equally about that same question as it concerns serious Jews – and non-Jews who have come in contact with Jews or Judaism or both. This question, whether mine or that of others, has obscure beginnings. I have been thinking about it since whenever I learned that my being a Jew means to be something distinct. The Jews – and many non-Jews – have been thinking about it since whenever the Jews became distinctly recognizable.

Nevertheless, the raising of this question that had led to the writing of this book does have some identifiable beginnings.

Cambridge University Press

0521416906 - The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People

David Novak

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

Preface

Personally, it seemed to be required by the trajectory of my own theological project, especially after I dealt with the question of what makes the emergence of Judaism possible in my books *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism* and *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*. In these books, I argued that the preconditions in the world that make this emergence possible do not explain its reality. So, without getting on to that most central issue, my claims about preconditions would become unfulfilled promises if I did not soon deal with *the Jewish reality*: God's election of Israel.

In the case of the communities of discourse to which I belong, my discussion in this book has a history. The Academy for Jewish Philosophy, of which I am a proud and active member, designated the question of election as the topic of its 1990 annual meeting to be held at Temple University in Philadelphia. This indicated to me renewed interest by a group of Jewish intellectuals in an issue that has always concerned me. So, in response to the call for papers, I delivered a paper in June of that year entitled "The Election of Israel: Outline of a Philosophical Analysis." That paper has been subsequently published in a collection of papers given at that annual meeting (and that of 1991), *A People Apart: Chosenness and Ritual in Jewish Philosophical Thought*, ed. Daniel H. Frank (Albany, N.Y., 1993). I am most grateful to my colleagues in the Academy for Jewish Philosophy who reacted to my paper with their suggestions and criticisms. The names of Elliot Dorff, Daniel Frank, Martin Golding, Steven Katz, Peter Ochs, Norbert Samuelson, Joseph Cohen, and Kenneth Seeskin come readily to mind. Also, at the annual meeting of the Academy in June 1993 at Northwestern University in Evanston, I delivered an earlier version of the chapter on Spinoza. In addition to some of the names just mentioned, I recall with gratitude the comments of David Shatz, Robert Gibbs, and Martin Yaffe.

In December of 1991, the section on Constructive Jewish Theology of the Association for Jewish Studies allowed me to present another version of the original paper on election (that has now been transformed into the introduction and conclusion of this book) at the annual meeting in Boston. I am

Cambridge University Press

0521416906 - The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People

David Novak

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xiii

grateful to David Blumenthal, who organized this session, and to Arthur Green and Michael Wyschogrod, who critically reacted to the paper. In the case of Michael Wyschogrod, our many conversations on this topic, which go back to our days together in the philosophy department of Baruch College of the City University of New York, have found explicit expression in the beginning of the conclusion.

At the time of writing this newer version of the original paper, Raphael Jospe was kind enough to share with me his as yet unpublished paper on the doctrine of election, which was most helpful to me. Also, when I was working on the section on Judah Halevi, Barry Kogan was most generous in sharing with me parts of his forthcoming translation of *Kuzari* and to comment on some of the points I make there. I learned much from his sound scholarship and gentle criticism.

The Dulles Colloquium on theology of the Institute on Religion and Public Life in New York brings together an extraordinary group of Christian and Jewish theologians for intense discussions several times each year. In 1991 and again late in 1993, I was able to present various sections of drafts of this book. These sessions have shown me more than any other experiences of mine in interfaith dialogue that Jews and Christians can engage in rewarding discourse about questions of faith, and that such discourse moves far beyond suspicion, condescension, patronizing, or minimization of *the* difference between our respective communities. I thank all of the members of the Colloquium, and especially Richard John Neuhaus (the president of the Institute and leader of the Colloquium), George Weigel, Fritz Rothschild, Robert Jenson, Russell Hittinger, Thomas Oden, Avery Dulles (in whose honor the Colloquium is convened), Edward Oakes, James Nuechterlein, and George Lindbeck.

Since 1989 I have been fortunate to learn and teach in an exceptional academic setting in the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Virginia. Conversations with colleagues, particularly with Robert Wilken, Nathan Scott, Gary Anderson, Daniel Westberg, and Eugene Rogers, have been resonating in my mind throughout the two years that I have

Cambridge University Press
0521416906 - The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People
David Novak
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xiv

Preface

spent in actually writing this book. In addition, I note with pride what I have learned from discussions with my students, especially two of my present doctoral students, Robert Tuttle and James Danielson.

Because of the specifically theological thrust of this book, I was surprised (pleasantly, to be sure) when the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., an agency of the United States Government, accepted my proposal of this topic and awarded me a fellowship for the academic year 1992/3. About one-half of the book was researched and written while I was in residence at the Center. For a remarkably supportive and stimulating environment, I thank the Center and its staff. I most fondly remember my many and helpful lunchtime discussions with Michael Lacey of the Center's staff, and some of the other fellows, especially Joseph Hamburger.

Since settling in Richmond, Virginia some five years ago, I have had the great privilege and pleasure to lead a Bible-study group that meets every Sunday morning in different homes. Many of the thoughts presented here have been tested and refined with the members of this group, especially the "regulars," Martin Graham, Leatrice and Bernard Kaplan, Brian Milner, Stephen Meyers, Charles Krumbein, Anita and Robert Schneider, Shelia and Marvin Weger, Morris Yarowsky, Robin Zeiger, and Jacob Joffe.

In addition to all the names mentioned above, I want to thank David Weiss Halivni, Lenn Goodman, Eugene Borowitz, Warren Poland, and Lewis Ford for all that I have learned from our many conversations over the years. I also want to thank my editor at Cambridge University Press, Alex Wright, for his cooperation in the writing and production of this book, and Pauline Marsh for her superb copy-editing of the typescript. As for my immediate family: Melva, Marianne, Jacob, and Noam, I hope they know by now what treasures they have given to me, which include what they have contributed to my work and my ability to do it.

Finally, the dedication. I do not remember just when the question of the election of Israel first presented itself to me. But

Cambridge University Press
0521416906 - The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People
David Novak
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

xv

I do remember who first taught me to appreciate election itself, the privilege of being one of the chosen people. This book, therefore, is dedicated to the memory of George and Clara Eller Krulewitch – Uncle George and Aunt Clara – who loved being Jews and at whose Seder table I received my first and best lessons in how to celebrate what God does for and with his people.

Charlottesville, Virginia

Cambridge University Press

0521416906 - The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People

David Novak

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Abbreviations

B. = Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud)

M. = Mishnah

R. = Rabbi

T. = Tosefta

Tos. = Tosafot

Y. = Talmud Yerushalmi (Palestinian Talmud)

Cambridge University Press

0521416906 - The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People

David Novak

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*General note*

All translations, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.

Two philosophically formulated terms appear regularly throughout this book and call for an explanation *ab initio*.

1. *Constitution*: “I use it in the fundamental sense that Husserl did – a reconstruction of a datum within consciousness, as opposed to representation in the empirical sense in which a datum is posited as being viewed as it immediately appears. See Husserl, *Ideas*, sec. 86 . . . I differ from Husserl in that the basis of this constitution is not the ego qua cogito, but a standpoint within Judaism as a living tradition to which I am primarily bound” (D. Novak, *Jewish–Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* [New York, 1989], 159, n. 24. See also D. Novak, *Jewish Social Ethics* [New York, 1992], 3–5).

2. *Relation*: By this term I mean “relation” in the sense of the German *Verhältnis*, namely, the connection of constituted essences as parts of a larger whole. Hence essences or ideas are “related”; and if the relation is symmetrical, they are “correlated.” I contrast this with the term “relationship,” which is used in the sense of the German *Beziehung*, namely, the interaction *between* persons. The structure of this interaction flows *from what is between* the persons and does not function as a prior enclosing totality of any kind. See D. Novak, “Buber’s Critique of Heidegger,” *Modern Judaism* (1985), 5:131–132.