

Before Jeremiah Was: Divine Election in the Ancient Near East

Dana M. Pike

FRAGMENTS OF GOSPEL TRUTHS are often detected by Latter-day Saint scholars studying ancient texts, especially texts from the ancient Near East. This essay focuses on one example of this phenomenon. Divine election—the academic designation for the choosing of people by deity for position and opportunity in mortal life—is a claim that is well attested in ancient Near Eastern texts, including the Hebrew Bible.¹ Latter-day Saints correlate certain aspects of this concept with premortal foreordination and are familiar with a few key biblical passages, such as Jeremiah 1:5, that feature divine election. However, many Latter-day Saints are less familiar with the variety of divine election claims found in the Bible, with the vocabulary of these claims, and with the many different types of election claims found in nonbiblical texts from the ancient Near East.

This study will illustrate the nature and variety of biblical and other ancient Near Eastern claims of divine

*Dana M. Pike is a professor of ancient scripture
at Brigham Young University.*

election and show how the Restoration informs a Latter-day Saint understanding of such claims. Following a survey of claims of divine election in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Near Eastern texts, a summary of how the restored gospel of Jesus Christ provides a unique view of these ancient claims concludes this study. Due to the wealth of material and the space limitations of this essay, what follows is selective.

People have long been confused by, have been misinformed about, and have disputed the veracity of the doctrine of election. Many people see election as a human creation, that has pride, pretension, privilege, and self-glorification as its basis and that produces envy, abuse, or apathy in those who subscribe to it. One scholar calls it “the myth of divine election,”² another remarks that “the concept sounds utterly outdated, . . . something confined to fundamentalist extremists,”³ and yet another claims election to be “nonsense.”⁴ It has also been argued that to believe in election “leaves us at the mercy of an arbitrary God.”⁵ There is no doubt that abuses and misuses of election claims have occurred in the past as well as the present. Assertions such as those just cited come from individuals who do not have a Restoration-based, eternal view of God’s work and methods and who lack the broader perspective of premortality and foreordination.⁶

However, even some Latter-day Saints are challenged by the doctrine of election. As Robert L. Millet observed:

In our democratic and egalitarian society, in a time when equality and brotherhood are all important, I fear that we are losing a feel for what it means to be a covenant people, what it means to be a chosen people. Too many even among the Latter-day Saints cry out that such sentiments are parochial and primitive, that they lead to exclusivism and racism. Others contend that to emphasize

Israel's chosen status is to denigrate and degrade others not designated as Israel. . . .

I feel that the words of the Lord to ancient Israel should be received by modern Israel with sobriety and humility, but they must be received and believed if we are to realize our potential to become a holy people.⁷

Thus, unique Latter-day Saint doctrinal perspectives have a great bearing on both how Latter-day Saints view the claims of election surviving from the ancient Near East and how they deal with modern election claims.

Divine Election in the Hebrew Bible

The election, or divine choosing, of Israel as God's covenant people is a dominant theme in the Hebrew Bible.⁸ However, the words "election" and "elected" do not appear in the King James Version of the Old Testament, and "elect" occurs only four times, always in a phrase wherein the Lord refers to "mine elect" (Isaiah 42:1; 45:4; 65:9, 22).⁹ The Hebrew word in each of these four passages is *bēḥēr*, a nominal adjective meaning "chosen (one)."

Verbal forms of the lexical root *bḥr*, "choose," occur about 170 times in the Hebrew Bible. These passages recount God and humans choosing people and things in a variety of contexts, the majority of which are religious. For example,

"Lot chose [*yibḥar*] him all the plain of Jordan" (Genesis 13:11).

"Moses chose [*yibḥar*] able men out of all Israel" (Exodus 18:25).

"The place which the Lord your God shall choose [*yibḥar*] . . . to put his name" (Deuteronomy 12:5).

"Choose [*baḥrû*] you this day whom ye will serve" (Joshua 24:15).

“Yet now hear, O Jacob my servant; and Israel, whom I have chosen [*bāḥartî*]” (Isaiah 44:1).

As evidenced by these few examples, the Hebrew word usually translated “choose” can refer to choosing just about anything, but in religiously oriented biblical texts the choice is usually people and places chosen by God.

Several biblical passages containing verbal forms of the lexical root *bḥr* are pertinent to this discussion. Key passages emphasizing the election of Israel are found, for example, in Moses’s last series of instructions to the Israelites, recorded in Deuteronomy: “For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee [*bāḥar*] to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you [*yibḥar*], because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the Lord brought you out . . . from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 7:6–8). “For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen [*bāḥar*] thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth” (Deuteronomy 14:2).

The Hebrew word *bēḥîr* occurs only thirteen times in the Hebrew Bible, sometimes translated “elect,” as noted above, but more often translated “chosen.” The chosen one or ones in these thirteen passages are always the Lord’s chosen—God does the choosing. Consider the following examples:¹⁰

“Let seven men of his sons be delivered unto us, and we will hang them up unto the Lord in Gibeah of Saul, whom the Lord did choose [*bēḥîr*]” (2 Samuel 21:6).

“Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect [bēḥîrî], in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles” (Isaiah 42:1).

“For Jacob my servant’s sake, and Israel mine elect [bēḥîrî], I have even called thee by thy name” (Isaiah 45:4).

“I have made a covenant with my chosen [bēḥîrî], I have sworn unto David my servant” (Psalm 89:3).

“O ye seed of Abraham his servant, ye children of Jacob his chosen [bēḥîrāyw]” (Psalm 105:6).

“Therefore he said that he would destroy them, had not Moses his chosen [bēḥîrô] stood before him in the breach, to turn away his wrath, lest he should destroy them” (Psalm 106:23).

“O ye seed of Israel his servant, ye children of Jacob, his chosen ones [bēḥîrāyw]” (1 Chronicles 16:13).

It is readily apparent from these examples of biblical passages containing forms of *bḥr* that individuals (for example, Abraham, Moses, Saul, David, “my servant”), as well as the whole covenant house of Israel, were chosen, or elected, by the Lord.¹¹

What is not evident from these passages alone, however, is when this election of Israel and individuals took place, why it occurred, and what the election actually, fully, was. Greater literary context helps partially answer these questions. The Bible clearly illustrates that the Lord chose Moses, for example, to be a prophet and deliverer (see Exodus 3:1–10), and David to be a king (see 1 Samuel 16:1–13). And Abraham and Sarah’s posterity through Jacob and his wives was chosen to receive favorable opportunities,

as well as the responsibility to be a blessing to all peoples of the earth (see Genesis 12:2–3; 28:13–14; Abraham 2:9–11). But most of the election passages in the Hebrew Bible merely assert election, they do not explain it.

Of course the *concept* of election is not limited to passages employing the vocabulary of the lexical root *bḥr*. The idea and ideal of God's election of Israel collectively, as well as of individual Israelites, is emphasized in many ways in the Hebrew Bible.¹² Key vocabulary used to convey election, in addition to *bḥr*, includes the lexical roots *yḏ'*, "know" (see Amos 3:2); *lqh*, "take" (see 2 Samuel 7:8); *qr'*, "call" (someone's name; see 1 Samuel 3:9); and the noun *səgullâ*, "treasured possession" (see Exodus 19:5).¹³

Three important election passages that do not employ a form of *bḥr* illustrate this point: Genesis 12:1–3; Exodus 19:4–6; and Jeremiah 1:4–5.¹⁴ Genesis 12:1–3 is the first biblical passage in which Jehovah announces His choosing of Abram and Sarai—whose names were subsequently changed to Abraham and Sarah—for an extraordinary relationship with Him: "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'" (New Revised Standard Version, hereafter cited as NRSV).

This passage clearly relates that Jehovah chose Abram (and Sarai), as is evident in the promise "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great" (v. 2), even though *bḥr* vocabulary is not employed. This passage emphasizes a favored, protected relationship as well as a universal outreach.

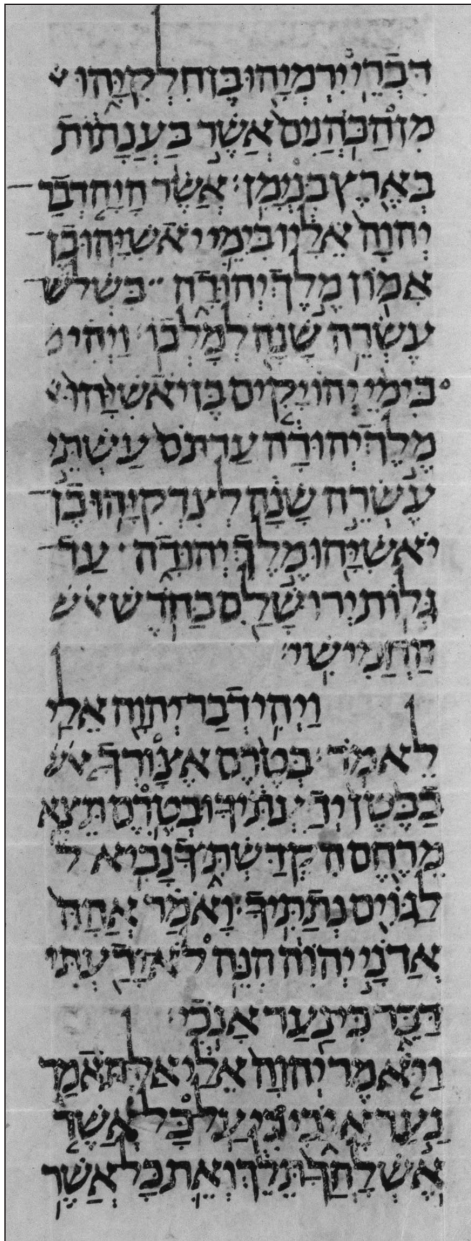
Similarly, Jehovah's instructive announcement to the Israelites via Moses in Exodus 19:3–6 conveys election without using the verb *choose*: "Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession [*sĕgullâ*] out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites'" (NRSV). This passage emphasizes an important factor: that Jehovah's election of Israel to a favored status with Him was conditional—loyal obedience was His ongoing requirement for this relationship to remain in force.

Most people would agree that the account of Jeremiah's prophetic call preserves one of the most obvious examples of individual divine election in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁵ The account of Jehovah's commission of Jeremiah begins: "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations'" (Jeremiah 1:4–5, NRSV). This is a fine example of a biblical passage that conveys the concept of election with vocabulary that is complementary to the Hebrew lexical root *bḥr*. The phrases "knew [*yḏ'*] you," "consecrated [*qḏš*] you" ("sanctified" in KJV), and "appointed [*ntn*] you" ("ordained" in KJV) combine to forcefully express the idea that Jehovah chose Jeremiah. The threefold repetition of the personal pronoun "I" (Jehovah) further emphasizes this point.

Jeremiah 1:5 is also one of the few passages in the Hebrew Bible in which the time of election is indicated.

In this case, Jeremiah was chosen by God before being formed in the womb. Somewhat similar in concept is the passage in Isaiah 49 in which “Israel” is designated the Lord’s “servant” whom He “called [*qr*] . . . from the womb” (Isaiah 49:1–3).¹⁶ Subsequent verses repeat the idea that the Lord’s servant was “formed . . . from the womb to be his servant” (Isaiah 49:5–6). While commentators dispute the identity of this servant, the points emphasized here are that the servant was chosen by Jehovah before birth to accomplish His will and that the vocabulary of election is broader than the lexical root *bhr*, “choose.”¹⁷

One last observation in this brief overview of election in the Hebrew Bible is worthy of note before moving to nonbiblical ancient Near Eastern claims. Emphasizing the universal nature of Jehovah’s rule, the Bible also recounts Jehovah’s election of non-Israelites—groups and individuals—to certain tasks. In such cases, premortal election is not likely at work, but there is an overlap in the literary description of these two phenomena. For example, Assyria was chosen in the sense of being employed by Jehovah to reprove rebellious Israel: “Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger. . . . I send him [Assyria], . . . I command him [Assyria]” (Isaiah 10:5–6, NRSV). And Jehovah refers to Nebuchadnezzar II, king of Babylonia, whose army conquered Judah and destroyed much of Jerusalem, including the temple (586 BC), as “my servant” (Jeremiah 25:9; 27:6; 43:10).¹⁸ Cyrus, the Persian king who allowed various conquered peoples—including Jews—to return to their homelands, is a classic example of this phenomenon: “Thus says the Lord to his anointed [*mšh*], to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him. . . . I will go before you and level the mountains, . . . so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls [*qr*] you by your name” (Isaiah 45:1–3, NRSV).



The text of Jeremiah 1:1–7 as it appears in the lefthand column of folio 245B of the Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) Codex. Jeremiah 1:4–5, discussed in this article, is in the paragraph that begins just below the middle of the column. The Leningrad Codex (B 19^A) is the oldest complete copy of the canonical Hebrew Bible, produced in Cairo in AD 1008. Both sides of each parchment page have three columns of biblical text, except for the books of Psalms, Job, and Proverbs, which are written two columns per page.

Photograph by Bruce and Kenneth Zuckerman, West Semitic Research, with the collaboration of the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center. Courtesy Russian National Library (Saltykov-Shchedrin).

The acts of grasping his right hand and calling his name are expressions of Jehovah's choice of Cyrus to accomplish His purposes, as is Cyrus's designation as one of the Lord's "anointed."¹⁹

Taken as a whole, the Hebrew Bible depicts Jehovah as the universal ruler of heaven and earth who elected, or chose, a particular lineage (Abraham and Sarah's descendants through Isaac and Jacob) and who chose particular individuals within that lineage to accomplish His purposes, all within a covenant relationship. Jehovah also chose groups and individuals outside this covenant lineage to provide assistance to the descendants of this chosen lineage and to impose negative consequences when they rebelliously exceeded the limits of His mercy.

Divine Election in Nonbiblical Ancient Near Eastern Texts

Despite many similarities, there were distinct differences in religion and culture among ancient Near Eastern peoples. The following general comments are intended to provide a summary overview of claims of divine election and thus do not take these differences into account. Hundreds of thousands of texts representing many different genres have survived from the ancient Near East on a variety of media. The concept of divine election is fairly well attested in texts from throughout the region; however, the following examples are primarily drawn from Mesopotamian texts (Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian).²⁰

Passages in these texts that deal with election show both similarities with and differences from expressions of election preserved in the Hebrew Bible. For example, claims of divine election in nonbiblical ancient Near Eastern texts are consistently in relation to political leaders, whereas the



Upper section of a 7.5-foot-tall stone monument depicting Babylonian King Hammurabi (1792–1750 BC) standing before the seated sun god Šamaš, the god of justice (with light rays emanating from his shoulders). The majority of the monument is inscribed with a collection of Hammurabi's laws (a portion of the prologue to these laws is quoted in this article). Originally erected in Sippar (a city in ancient Iraq), it was taken as booty in the twelfth century BC to Susa (a city in ancient Iran), where it was discovered by French excavators in early 1902. Louvre Museum, Paris, France; photo by Christian Larrieu; Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY

Bible preserves election claims about both royal and non-royal individuals, although all such individuals in the Bible are chosen for leadership of some sort. Another difference is that the Bible recounts the election of groups—the lineage of Jacob in general, Aaron’s male descendants as priests, and David’s male descendants through Solomon as kings—whereas surviving nonbiblical texts from the ancient Near East do not.

Election claims in nonbiblical ancient Near Eastern texts utilize a variety of terms and figures of speech, some of which, not surprisingly, share semantic or conceptual similarities with election claims in the Hebrew Bible. For example, Mesopotamian kings described themselves as “named” and “called by the god(s),” as “servant” of the gods, as “shepherd” of the people on behalf of the gods, and as “favorite” and “beloved” of the gods.²¹

Claims of election are always preserved in some literary-historical context. Usually, royal inscriptions commemorating royal activity provide the context of election claims, as is evident in the following two examples from inscriptions of Hammurabi (1792–1750 BC),²² the most famous king of the Old Babylonian dynasty: “When the god Šamaš, great lord of heaven and earth, king of the gods, with his shining face, joyfully looked at me, Hammurāpi, the prince, his favourite . . . at that time, I, Hammurāpi . . . raised the top of the foundation of the wall of Sippar with earth (until it was) like a great mountain, I built (that) high wall.”²³ “Hammurāpi, the one called by the god An . . . when the god Utu gave to him [Hammurāpi] the land of Sumer and Akkad to rule . . . for the god Utu, the lord in whom he trusts, in Larsa, the city of his rule, he built for him Ebabbar (“Shining-white house”), his beloved temple.”²⁴

Many claims, such as the two just cited, are rather general ones (when Shamash looked at me, when An called me) made in connection with a particular activity. Kings, it was believed, were able to accomplish such practical things as building walls, temples, and canals and winning battles because they had been chosen to rule with the sanction of the gods.

Some election claims, however, include a specific indication of the chronological point at which election is claimed to have taken place. The following examples, arranged chronologically but detached from their contexts, illustrate this point well:

- King Shulgi (2094–2047 BC), of the Ur III dynasty, declared in a royal hymn: “King am I; from the womb a hero am I.”²⁵
- Egyptian King Sesostri I (1971–1928 BC; 12th dynasty, Middle Kingdom) claimed: “I conquered as a fledgling, I lorded in the egg. . . . He [the god Harakhty] fashioned me as palace-dweller, [when I was] an offspring not yet issued from the thighs.”²⁶
- Middle Assyrian King Assur-nirari III (1202–1197 BC) claimed he was one “whom Aššur, the king of the Igigi [gods], had chosen in his childhood and entrusted to him a rule without rival.”²⁷
- Middle-Assyrian King Assur-resh-ishi I (1132–1115 BC) claimed to be one “whom Anu, Enlil, and Ea, the great gods, truly desired [that is, chose] (while still) in the womb of his mother.”²⁸
- King Pi, who conquered much of Egypt ca. 730 BC and established the 25th Egyptian dynasty, had an inscription

inscribed that reads: "It is [the god] Amun Re who is speaking . . . to his beloved son, king Pi, 'I said of you when you were still in your mother's body, that you would be ruler of Egypt, for I already knew you in the seed, when you were still in the egg, that you would become Lord.'"29

- Neo-Assyrian King Esarhaddon (680–669 BC) claimed to be one "whose name Assur, Shamash, [etc.] . . . have pronounced (as destined) to reign over Assyria (ever) since he was a youngster."³⁰

- Neo-Assyrian King Assurbanipal (668–627 BC) declared: "I, Assurbanipal, am the creation of Assur and Belit . . . whom Assur and Sin, the lord of the crown, already in the distant past had called by name for ruling, and who had created him in his mother's womb for the shepherding of Assyria."³¹

- Neo-Babylonian King Nabonidus (556–539 BC) claimed he was one "whose fate Sin and Ningal (while yet) in the womb of his mother had destined for dominion."³²

Such grand claims of election to royal reign demonstrate that there was an enduring tradition in ancient Near Eastern cultures for many, if not all, kings to claim they were chosen by deity to rule their countries or even larger regions. What is not presently clear, however, is what difference, if any, was implied when a ruler claimed election while in his youth rather than in the womb or even before the creation of the earth (see below).

Another example of divine election, one which has received relatively little attention in discussions of election, is the claim made by the Old Babylonian king Hammurabi (1792–1750 BC, about the time of Jacob, son of Isaac) in the prologue to his famous law collection, the so-called "Code of Hammurabi." This law collection is best known from

the wonderful, almost eight-foot-tall black stone monument which dates from the latter portion of Hammurabi's reign.³³ The prologue to this collection of 282 laws serves to demonstrate that Hammurabi was wise, powerful, active in doing the will of the gods—especially in caring for temples and shrines—and that he provided for the needs of his subjects. The first forty-nine lines of the prologue are the most relevant here.

When [*īnu*] the august god Anu, king of the Anunnaku deities, and the god Enlil, lord of heaven and earth, who determines the destinies of the land, allotted supreme power over all peoples to the god Marduk, the firstborn son of the god Ea, exalted him among the Igigu deities, named the city of Babylon with its august name [*šumšu šīram ibbiu*, “called its august name”] and made it supreme within the regions of the world, and established for him within it eternal kingship whose foundations are as fixed as heaven and earth, at that time [*inūmišu*], the gods Anu and Enlil, for the enhancement of the well-being of the people, named me by name [*šumī ibbû*, “called my name”]: Hammurabi, the pious prince, who venerates the gods, to make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, to rise like the sun-god Shamash over all humankind, to illuminate the land.³⁴

These introductory lines of the prologue specify three appointments made by the great gods Anu and Enlil: Marduk was given “supreme” control of the earth and its inhabitants, Babylon was named and designated as the preeminent city, and Hammurabi was chosen to be king of Babylonia to provide justice in the land. By “naming” or “calling” their names, Anu and Enlil identified and designated Babylon and Hammurabi. Therefore, when in the



Upper portion of a red sandstone stela erected by King Pi (sometimes Piankhy; 747–716 BC) in the ancient city of Napata (now Gebel Barkal, Sudan). Pi was the part of the 25th Egyptian Dynasty, Nubian rulers who conquered Egypt. On the stela, the king stands facing the seated god Amun-Re. The goddess Mut, Amun-Re’s consort, and their son, the god Khonsu, stand behind Amun-Re. Pi’s name, in the hieroglyphic text between the heads of Pi and Amun-Re, was defaced in antiquity, as was the upper portion of his body. The four columns of text between their heads preserves Pi’s claim of election quoted in the article. Photo from George Reisner, “Inscribed Monuments from Gebel Barkal,” *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 66 (1931): 76–100, Plate V (stela number 26).

divine assembly Anu and Enlil designated Marduk as pre-eminent god and determined Babylon to be a preeminent city, at *that* time, long before Hammurabi's birth, they also chose Hammurabi to be preeminent king.³⁵

The preceding examples of claims of divine election in ancient Near Eastern texts provide a representative overview of the types of claims that survive from an extended period of time. An in-depth study of these claims of divine election (a gigantic undertaking) first requires a thorough examination of election claims in all time periods of each country or region before broad assertions about specific similarities and differences can accurately be made. Hopefully these few examples are sufficient to indicate the general similarities and differences between ancient Near Eastern and biblical claims.

It is not now possible to fully determine how those living in the ancient Near East understood claims of divine election. While there is no doubt that these claims represent royal self-promotion in an attempt to increase legitimacy, the general population of a given country presumably gave some credence to this brand of "political theology."³⁶ Further study will hopefully answer many more questions about how these claims fit into the religious worldview of those people.

Modern scholarship assumes that Israelite claims of election in the Hebrew Bible were part of and were influenced by this larger ancient Near Eastern practice of claiming divine election and that uniquely Israelite aspects developed within Israel over the centuries: "Long before Israel stepped upon the stage of history, the idea of a god choosing a human was in circulation."³⁷ Thus, Israelite biblical claims of election are usually interpreted as variations on the larger ancient Near Eastern theme of election. However, the following statement by H. H. Rowley provides

an alternative opinion and an appropriate transition to the next portion of this study: “No superficial comparison of the words of [Near Eastern] kings announcing their divine vocation to rule and to conquer with words which may be culled from the Old Testament should be allowed to obscure the world of difference between the essential thought of election there and here [in the Bible].”³⁸

A Restoration View of Ancient Election Claims

The restoration of light and truth that began with the appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith in 1820 provides a unique doctrinal perspective that brings added insight to our understanding of ancient texts, scriptural and otherwise. It should thus come as no surprise that Restoration perspectives influence the interpretation of election claims in the Hebrew Bible and in other ancient Near Eastern texts.

It is not the purpose of the final portion of this study to provide a complete discussion of the Latter-day Saint understanding of the doctrine of election.³⁹ The following remarks presuppose some familiarity with this doctrine. Two key points that have a bearing on this discussion are that all humans are God’s spirit children who existed in a divine, premortal realm before life on this earth and that the gospel of Jesus Christ was revealed to the first humans on this earth, revelation that was subsequently repeated in succeeding gospel dispensations. Growing out of their conviction of these doctrines, Latter-day Saints believe that covenant opportunity in this life is related to premortal divine election (individual and collective) and that election is the result of God’s foreknowledge and purposes and is based on His children’s obedience to Him.

The doctrine of premortal election is not readily *explained* in the Hebrew Bible, but biblical election pas-

sages are in accord with the doctrinal perspective available through the restored gospel. The Restoration provides a broader context in which to view ancient election claims and thus enables a more complete and satisfying approach to questions about those claims in the Hebrew Bible, including when election occurred (generally in premortal life; “before I formed you in the womb”⁴⁰), why it occurred (to carry out God’s purposes to bless and save His children), and how it functions (God is not capricious; “election is for service”⁴¹ to His children by those who developed into “noble and great ones” in premortality because of “their exceeding faith and good works”⁴²).

The Restoration also helps explain why claims of divine election that sound somewhat similar to biblical ones appear in nonbiblical ancient Near Eastern texts. There was, of course, borrowing of some literary styles and forms among ancient Near Eastern peoples, including the Israelites. However, in the Restoration view, the concept behind election claims did not originate through human fabrication but through the dissemination of revealed truth. This viewpoint is clearly expressed in the following statement by Elder Neal A. Maxwell, who quotes President Joseph F. Smith:

Ponder this wonderful insight from President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918), which underscores this uniqueness [that Latter-day Saints believe in gospel dispensations on this earth before Jesus’s mortal ministry]: “Undoubtedly the knowledge of this law and of other rites and ceremonies was carried by the posterity of Adam into all lands, and continued with them, more or less pure, to the flood, and through Noah, who was a ‘preacher of righteousness,’ to those who succeeded him, spreading out into all nations and countries, Adam and Noah being the first of their dispensations to receive them from God. What wonder,

then, that we should find relics of Christianity, so to speak, among the heathens and nations who know not Christ, and whose histories date back beyond the days of Moses, and even beyond the flood, independent of and apart from the records of the Bible.” [“Discourse,” *Deseret News*, February 19, 1873, 36.]

This is why we sometimes find fragments of the whole truth in various cultures. The gospel was once a whole and precious totality, and then came the dispersion, diffusion, and distortion of these truths.⁴³

Thus, claims of election in nonbiblical texts can be understood as imitations or “corrupted echoes” of the true doctrine of election, which was revealed by God in past ages.⁴⁴ As illustrated in the quotations from royal inscriptions provided above, these “fragments of the whole truth,” these corrupted echoes of the true doctrine of election, appear in claims of ancient Near Eastern rulers declaring that their gods chose them to reign over their peoples. It would indeed be surprising if fragments of this significant doctrine did not appear in ancient nonbiblical texts.

Conclusion

The Restoration provides not only a view of how to understand biblical and other ancient Near Eastern claims of election but also a view of the ongoing, modern relevance of election, both for the mission of the whole house of Israel (more than just the Jews) and for individuals. As Joseph Smith taught, “Every man [person] who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the Grand Council of heaven before this world was.”⁴⁵ For those who accept the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, election, when correctly understood, is not a human invention, nor is it just the

inexplicable “miracle of Divine grace.”⁴⁶ It is one of the major means by which God brings His saving power and purposes to His children in this fallen, mortal world while still honoring their agency.

Notes

It is an honor to contribute to this Festschrift for Robert J. Matthews. I have always appreciated Bob’s friendly and supportive nature and the way he has employed the Restoration as a lens through which to better understand the ancient world. I express thanks to my Brigham Young University colleagues Kent P. Jackson and Paul Y. Hoskisson for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this study.

1. “Near East” is an older, alternative designation for the region now commonly called the “Middle East.” “Hebrew Bible” designates what Christians call the Old Testament.

2. Bruce Caughen, “Covenant and Continuity: Ethno-Symbolism and the Myth of Divine Election,” in *Nations and Nationalism* 10, nos. 1–2 (2004): 20.

3. Clifford Longley, as cited in Caughen, “Covenant and Continuity,” 21.

4. Robert P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant: Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (London: SCM, 1981), 45. Carroll claimed, in relation to Jeremiah 1:5, that “the metaphor of v. 5 has to be recognized as hyperbolic, because before Jeremiah was conceived he did not exist, so there was nobody to be known. Nonsense predicated of God remains nonsense, so the language must be treated as metaphoric.”

5. G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 53. Berkouwer cites this point and then argues against it.

6. Joseph Smith observed: “Here is the doctrine of election that the world has quarreled so much about; but they do not know

anything about it" (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957], 6:252–53).

7. Robert L. Millet, "The House of Israel: From Everlasting to Everlasting," in *A Witness of Jesus Christ: The 1989 Sperry Symposium on the Old Testament*, ed. Richard D. Draper (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 179.

8. Just reading the Bible is sufficient to confirm this observation. For those looking for discussions of this fact, see Dale Patrick, "Election, Old Testament," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:434–41; Seock-Tae Sohn, *The Divine Election of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 1–2; and H. H. Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London: Lutterworth, 1950). See also the Bible Dictionary in the LDS publication of the Bible, s.v. "Election," in which it is stated that election is "a theological term primarily denoting God's choice of the house of Israel to be the covenant people with privileges and responsibilities, that they might become a means of blessing to the whole world (Rom. 9:11; 11:5, 7, 28)."

9. The forms "elect," "elected," and "election" occur two dozen times in the King James Version of the New Testament.

10. The rest of the thirteen passages containing *bēhîr* are Isaiah 43:20; 65:9; 65:15; 65:22; Psalms 105:43; 106:5.

11. It is also apparent, and of interest, that the majority of the occurrences of *bēhîr* are found in certain chapters of Isaiah and Psalms, the two books of the Old Testament most often cited by authors of the New Testament.

12. This concept is self-evident to students of the Hebrew Bible and is so stated in such works as Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 3–4, 9; and Emile Nicole, "BHR," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. van Gemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 1:638. For an overview and discussion of

the variety of vocabulary and imagery used to convey election in the Hebrew Bible, see, for example, Sohn, *Divine Election of Israel*. While I do not accept certain aspects of Sohn's study—especially his developmental (evolutionary) approach to the concept of election—his work provides a convenient survey of election-related symbolism and vocabulary in the Hebrew Bible.

13. The noun *sēgullā* is usually translated as “peculiar treasure/people” in the KJV but is better rendered as “treasured possession/people,” as in the NRSV.

14. Other relevant passages can be found by reviewing Sohn, *Divine Election of Israel*, and Topical Guide, s.v. “Election, Elect.”

15. For a similar assessment, see Patrick D. Miller, “The Book of Jeremiah: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 6:580.

16. The expression “from the womb” (Isaiah 49:1) can technically be differentiated from “before . . . in the womb” (Jeremiah 1:5). The intent of both passages seems to be to indicate “chosen before birth,” and the two expressions may thus be equated as literary variations. Latter-day Saints see the language of Jeremiah 1:5 as indicating premortal choosing but expect that Isaiah 49:1 refers to premortal choosing as well. Another example of biblical pre-conception election involves Samson (see Judges 13:3–5).

17. For a convenient review of the explanations of who this servant of the Lord is, including Jesus Christ and Joseph Smith, see Victor L. Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, Poet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 408–10.

18. Examples of other non-Israelite nations chosen or employed by the Lord to punish Israel include Moab (Judges 3:12), Babylonia (Jeremiah 1:15–16: “For now I am calling [*qr*] all . . . the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord; and they shall come . . . against all the cities of Judah. And I will utter my judgments against them”[NRSV]), and an unnamed nation (Amos 6:14). This is, of course, a concept preserved in the Book of Mormon as well.

19. The Lord's grasping of Cyrus's right hand is intended to demonstrate commission and authorization. The language of this commission can be seen as an ironic play on a Babylonian practice in which the king would take or grasp the hand of the statue of the god Marduk in the annual *akītu* festival, thereby contracting to lead the people as the deity's representative; cf. Julye Bidmead, *The Akītu Festival: Religious Continuity and Royal Legitimation in Mesopotamia* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2004), 2, 154–62.

20. This is because I have had more experience with Mesopotamian claims of election than those preserved in Egyptian or Hittite texts.

21. A brief but convenient overview of such expressions is found in Shalom M. Paul, "Deutero-Isaiah and Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions," in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, no. 1 (1968): 181–82, with further references; cf. William W. Hallo, *Early Mesopotamian Royal Titles* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1957 [repr. 1988]).

22. This king's name is rendered in English as Hammurabi and Hammurapi. I use the former traditional form in this article, except when spelled otherwise in quotations. For a helpful discussion of the issues involved in the spelling and meaning of "Hammurabi," see Jack M. Sasson, "King Hammurabi of Babylon," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 2:902.

23. Douglas Frayne, *Old Babylonian Period (2003–1595 BC)*, vol. 4 of *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early Periods* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 334–35.

24. Frayne, *Old Babylonian Period*, 351.

25. Samuel N. Kramer, "The Oldest Literary Catalogue: A Sumerian List of Literary Compositions Compiled About 2000 B.C." in *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* no. 88 (1942): 14n1.

26. Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 1:116; compare the translation of Hellmut Brunner, *Near Eastern*

Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament, ed. Walter Beyerlin (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 28. Brunner provides three other examples of this motif.

27. Hayim Tadmor, "Autobiographical Apology," in *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures*, ed. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1983), 39n10.

28. Paul, "Deutero-Isaiah and Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions," 184.

29. Translation by H. Brunner, in *Near Eastern Religious Texts*, 29. (The name Pi was rendered Pianchi in older publications.) The similarity between this text and Jeremiah 1:5 was first noted by M. Gilula, "An Egyptian Parallel to Jeremiah i 4–5," in *Vetus Testamentum* 17 (1967): 114. In addition to Brunner's other examples, 28–30, see M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 3:91.

30. Tadmor, "Autobiographical Apology," 39.

31. Paul, "Deutero-Isaiah and Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions," 185.

32. Paul, "Deutero-Isaiah and Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions," 185.

33. This stela is housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris. There appear to have been at least a few other such stelae in antiquity, as well as copies of these laws on clay tablets. For the text of this law collection, see Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 71–142.

34. Roth, *Law Collections*, 76–77.

35. I am currently preparing an academic study of the grammar and vocabulary of the prologue to Hammurabi's laws that explains and supports this explanation.

36. Dale Launderville, *Piety and Politics: The Dynamics of Royal Authority in Homeric Greece, Biblical Israel, and Old Babylonian Mesopotamia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 2–5.

37. Dale Patrick, "Election, Old Testament," in Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:436. See also the comments of H. H. Rowley on the perspective of J. M. Powis Smith in Rowley, *Biblical Doctrine of Election*, 17; and Paul, "Deutero-Isaiah and Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions," 181: "Analogues to the language, phraseology, and ideology of [ancient Near Eastern] royal inscriptions in the writing of the prophet [to whom scholars refer as Deutero-Isaiah, the author of the latter part of the Book of Isaiah] who, more than any of his predecessors, was so strongly influenced by this literary genre."

38. Rowley, *Biblical Doctrine of Election*, 18.

39. For comments on this doctrine, see Bible Dictionary, "Election," 662; Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:448–49, s.v. "Elect of God" and 2:522–53, s.v. "Foreordination"; and Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Our Destiny: The Call and Election of the House of Israel* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993).

40. Jeremiah 1:5, NRSV. In other words, God formed Jeremiah and knew him as an individual in premortality; Jeremiah was known to God more than just in His mind.

41. Rowley, *Biblical Doctrine of Election*, 45. Rowley makes this point several times in his monograph.

42. See Abraham 3:22 and Alma 13:3, respectively. This at least partially contrasts with a common view expressed, without the aid of the restored gospel, by Rowley, that an individual's "election is not the reward of their worth" (*Biblical Doctrine of Election*, 95).

43. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Wondrous Restoration," *Ensign*, April 2003, 35–36. See similarly the thoughts of Hugh Nibley and John M. Lundquist, written in relation to temple practices in the ancient Near East: "Dr. Hugh Nibley has explained the probable reason behind such widespread diffusion of similar rites: the temple rites were revealed by God to the earliest parents of the human race, and from a center of earliest civilization spread to other centers by the dual processes of diffusion and usurpation. 'Comparative

studies . . . discovered the common pattern in all ancient religions,’ and ‘have also demonstrated the processes of *diffusion* by which that pattern was spread throughout the world—and in the process torn to shreds, of which recognizable remnants may be found in almost any land and time” (Lundquist, “Temple Symbolism in Isaiah,” in *Isaiah and the Prophets: Inspired Voices from the Old Testament*, ed. Monte S. Nyman [Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984], 34–35; emphasis in original). For the rare assertion that “fact [as reported in the Bible] became myth” in ancient Near Eastern cultures (in a discussion of creation accounts; scholars usually argue the other way around), an approach that shares similarities with the one presented here, see John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 32. For the suggestion that the universal influence of the light of Christ may help explain this phenomenon, see Douglas F. Salmon, “Parallelomania and the Study of Latter-day Saint Scripture: Confirmation, Coincidence, or the Collective Unconscious?” in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 2 (2000): 152–54.

44. In this approach, the truth went forth pure but came back corrupted, so to speak, in these ancient Near Eastern texts. “Corrupted echoes” is a phrase I have previously used to describe features in the Dead Sea Scrolls that have a familiar ring to Latter-day Saints because they represent corruptions of true gospel doctrines and perspectives; see Dana M. Pike, “Is the ‘Plan of Salvation’ Attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls?” in *LDS Perspectives on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Dana M. Pike (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 75, 90.

45. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 365.

46. Rowley, *Biblical Doctrine of Election*, 18.

