

The opening of this week's haftarah, which is also the opening of the book of Malachi, seems to address many of the philosophic problems associated with chosenness head on

Note that while the book does not date itself, but is assumed by traditionalists and scholars alike to be written early in the Second Temple era. The book opens with the invocation "masa", translation unclear, "the word of Hashem to Israel.

Malachi 1:2-3

I have loved you, said Hashem, and you have replied: "*bamo* have you loved us?"  
"Is not Esav brother to Yaakov?" the speech of Hashem, "But I loved Yaakov!  
And Esav *saneiti*, so I have made his hills desolate and his inheritance an infested wilderness".

Questions:

- 1) Is Israel asking for a rationale for G-d's love, or for a evidence that it is real?
- 2) Why did G-d choose Yaakov, and is His choice of the original Yaakov sufficient as a response to Israel?
- 3) Is Esav hated by Hashem, or merely less beloved?
- 4) Is Esav's fate deserved?

Commentaries:

Rashi – "So I have made his hills desolate" – they do not bear comparison with the Hills of Israel.

Ibn Ezra – I loved Yaakov and gave him Canaan, which I promised his ancestors to give their descendants, but I expelled Esav from the land of Hashem. I gave him Mount Seir for the sake of his father's honor, but because of his wickedness I made his mountains desolate.

Radak – I chose Yaakov and his descendants even though they anger Me . . . but Esav I hate in accordance with his deeds and those of his descendants . . . and when they were very evil to Israel I made their land eternally desolate

Malbim – Because G-d has a prior love for Israel because of his love for their ancestors, he tells them here that his essential love for them is not grounded in that prior love, but relates to them directly.

Israel responds with a request for evidence that he loves them directly. Hashem responds that Esav shares in the ancestral love, but his land's desolation is evidence that His love of ancestors does not prevent him from hating descendants, and so His love for them must be direct.

My Comments:

Rashi may be bothered merely by a sense that Seir is not the most desolate of areas, but also possibly by a sense that Esav should not be punished simply because Hashem loves Yaakov better. This is also the import of Ibn Ezra and Radak's claims that the barrenness of Seir is not natural but rather the result of sin.

Ibn Ezra seems further to argue that the Land of Israel's only superiority is spiritual. Radak, however, indicates that chosenness does have the advantage of making Hashem treat our transgressions less seriously.

Malbim's complete transformation of the story has, on the one hand, the advantage of making chosenness completely deserved, but on the other hand seems (I suspect that this must be greatly qualified by comments elsewhere) to argue that chosenness is permanently conditional on behavior.

Note in that last regard that that many of these argument work in explaining Malachi's perspective writing at the time of shivat zion, but as eternal truths they need to explain the extended galut and desolation of eretz Yisrael. It is striking that, so far as I can tell, none of the medieval commentaries relates to this problem here.

Shabbat Shalom

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