

How Did God Hate Esau (Malachi 1:2–3)?

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Abstract

The antonyms “love” and “hate” in biblical covenant contexts and ancient Near East political texts refer respectively to keeping and not keeping covenant or treaty commitments. This same general sense is found in the marital covenant framework. One case involves Leah being described as “hated” and Rachel as “loved.” As Jacob’s first wife, Leah had covenantal matriarchal rights, which were disregarded in deference to her younger sister, Rachel, Jacob’s second wife. Against this background, the proposal made here is that the diametrically opposite divine disposition regarding Jacob and Esau in Malachi 1:2–3 has to do with covenant succession—God’s disregard for the right of primogeniture of Esau, said to be “hated,” in deference to his younger twin, Jacob, said to be “loved.”

Keywords

Malachi 1:2–3, Romans 9:13, Genesis 29:30–33, Deuteronomy 21:15–17, love, hate, Jacob, Esau, Rachel, Leah, covenant, marriage, primogeniture

I. Introductory Remarks

“**Y**et I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated” (Mal 1:2–3). Did God really hate Esau? The apostle Paul’s citation in Romans 9:13 of the Lord’s pronouncement made by the prophet Malachi casts no doubt.¹ Indeed, God did!

In current usage “hate” is synonym with extreme dislike, antipathy, enmity, and antagonism. Many biblical occurrences connote extreme dislike even, in some cases, violence done to the one hated (e.g., Gen 37:4; 2 Sam 13:15, 22; also see Gen 51:15; Deut 19:11; Judg 11:7; Prov 29:10). Most commentators, however, would concur with a view like that voiced by Ralph Smith: “The usual rendering of the word, *san’e* (= hate), is too strong here [Mal 1:3].”² But Carl Keil warns that it “must not be weakened down into ... loving less ... [Hate] is the opposite of love. And this meaning must be retained here.”³ John Merlin Powis Smith affirms, “But it is a question, not of degrees of love, but of love or no love.”⁴ Such comments illustrate that an answer to the question—What does “to hate” mean in the proclamation “Esau I have hated”?—is difficult to pinpoint.

So, the question raised here is, *how* did God hate Esau? A key to finding an answer lies in the antonymic relationship of “love” and “hate” in this and other contexts involving people in a covenant bond.⁵ The working hypothesis is that the usage of these terms in such contexts should inform the response to this question.

II. Antonymic Relationship of “Love” and “Hate” in Covenants and Political Treaties

“To love,” from *’ahav* (אָהַב), in a covenant relationship is especially expressed in action by adhering to the covenant stipulations by an inferior to a superior or vice-versa. “To hate,” from *sanē* (שָׂנֵא) expresses the opposite action, as

¹ Douglas Moo observes that the Romans 9:13 quote of this statement is the only time in the New Testament where it is said God hates someone. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 587, n. 73.

² Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, WBC 32 (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 305.

³ Carl F. Keil, “Malachi,” *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, in Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 10:40.

⁴ John Merlin Powis Smith, “The Book of Malachi,” *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 21.

⁵ Andrew Hill concurs with those who find these words “best taken as ‘covenant language’ in Mal 1:2–3.” Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi*, AB 25D (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 152. Moo adds that statements in the Old Testament of God’s hatred of sinners “lack the covenantal flavor of Malachi and Paul.” Moo, *Romans*, 587. Cf., e.g., Ps 119:113.

illustrated by its juxtaposition with “love” in the Sinai covenant Decalogue (words italicized for emphasis):

For I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who *hate* me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who *love* me and keep my commandments. (Exod 20:5–6 *ESV*; cf. Deut 5:9–10)

These antonyms are also paired in ancient Near Eastern political language.⁶ In the fourteenth century BCE El-Amarna correspondence, the Canaanite ruler of Jerusalem, Abdu-Heba, complains to Pharaoh about his lack of assistance: “Why do you love the ‘Apiru [Abdu-Heba’s adversaries] and hate the mayors [rulers of other Canaanite city-states needing help]?”⁷ In another El-Amarna letter, the king of Byblos writes to Pharaoh about the rebellion in his city: “Behold the city! Half of it loves the sons of ‘Abd-Asir-ta [the rebellion leader], half of it loves my lord.”⁸ The seventh century BCE Assyrian Esarhaddon treaty reads, “(You swear) that you will love Ashurbanipal, the crown prince, son of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, your lord, as you do yourselves.”⁹ The same treaty warns against anyone who would incite the father and his heir designate “to hate each other.”¹⁰ Saul Olyan succinctly states, “To ‘hate’ in a treaty context means to violate covenant; to ‘love’ means to conform to covenant stipulations.”¹¹

This contrast is also seen in examples drawn from biblical texts involving political affairs. Jonathan loved David (1 Sam 18:1; 20:16–17). David expressed Jonathan’s love for him as “surpassing the love of women” (2 Sam 1:26). This language expresses their covenant bond (1 Sam 18:3; 20:16). Jonathan willingly relinquished his right to succeed to his father’s throne. He acknowledged David as God’s heir designate and did all he could during his lifetime toward that end. (1 Sam 23:17–18). To express his faithful covenant relationship, it is said that King Hiram “loved David” (1 Kgs 5:1). The “lovers” Ephraim hired were treaty-allies of Assyria (Hos 8:9).

⁶ William L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25.1 (1963): 77–87.

⁷ See William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 326–27.

⁸ Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” 79–80.

⁹ Donald J. Wiseman, “The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon,” *Iraq* 20.1 (1958): 50.

¹⁰ James B. Prichard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. with supplement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 537.

¹¹ Saul Olyan, “Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations in Ancient Israel and Its Environment,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115.2 (1996): 210.

To summarize, love and hate in biblical covenant contexts and ancient Near Eastern political language are not understood as states but as actions. To love is to act in accord with the covenant or treaty. Hate is not doing so.

III. *Antonymic Relationship of “Love” and “Hate” in Marriage Covenants*

Terms used to describe covenant relationships are rooted in kinship. Political figures were spoken of and addressed each other anthropologically as kinsmen—fathers, sons, and brothers—as seen in many biblical texts (2 Sam 24:11, 16; 1 Kgs 9:13; cf. 5:26; 20:32; cf. v. 34; Ps 89:27–28; Isa 22:21; Amos 1:9) and other ancient Near Eastern documents,¹² even as son-in-law and father-in-law.¹³ The latter case obviously expresses a covenant relationship formed by marriage. Kings allied by treaties are said to have married. “Jehoshaphat ... made a marriage alliance [reflexive form of קָתַן “to get married”] with Ahab” (2 Chr 18:1; 2 Kgs 8:27; see also 1 Sam 18:21; 1 Kgs 3:1).¹⁴ Of course, these kings did not really marry each other. The treaties involved lesser kings marrying daughters of greater kings, thereby creating a covenant bond expressed in nuptial kinship terms. The former became the son-in-law and the latter the father-in-law.

According to Frank Moore Cross, kinship language was adopted into legal, political, and religious institutions.¹⁵ This position inverts the popular idea “that the concept of ‘the love of God’ in the book of Deuteronomy is actually borrowed from the political life of the ancient Near East.”¹⁶ On Cross’s foundation can be built a case that terms like covenant love and hate—and the correlation of these antonyms—worked their way into those other socio/religio-political spheres from the family unit.¹⁷

¹² G. N. Knoppers, “Ancient Near Eastern Royal Grants and the Davidic Covenant: A Parallel?,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116.4 (1996): 681–84.

¹³ For example, see Jacques Briand, *Traités et serments dans le Proche-Orient ancien*, Supplément – Cahiers évangile 81 (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 110.

¹⁴ In such a context, קָתַן (*khtn*) could be rendered “become the son-in-law of.” See David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 137b; hereafter, *CDCH*.

¹⁵ Frank Moore Cross, “Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel,” in *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 8, 11.

¹⁶ Moshe Weinfeld approvingly refers to Moran’s notion (put forth in Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy”). Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 81.

¹⁷ Cf. Ron Bergey, “Dieu peut-il commander d’aimer? Le grand commandement dans le contexte de la parenté de l’alliance,” *La Revue réformée* 67.3 (2016): 19–28. For the Puritan Thomas Goodwin, the Incarnate Christ “is the pattern and exemplar of all these our relationships [husband, father, brother], and they all are but the copies of his.” Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 83.

The suggestion made here is that it was particularly the matrimonial bond that gave rise to the use of kinship terms in other covenant contexts. Admittedly, this is sociologically narrower than the kinship domain posited by Cross. But the marital relationship would better explain, it seems, why familial terms describe members in covenant relationship. Marriage gave birth to all that vocabulary.

An implication is that the covenant concept itself was adopted into other domains from marriage. Biblical texts show that marriage creates a bond-qualified “covenant.”¹⁸ For example, “Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by *covenant* . . .” (Mal 2:14; cf. Deut 7:2–3; Prov 2:17).¹⁹ Moreover, marriage is a common metaphor portraying the covenant bond between the Lord and his people (e.g., Jer 31:32; Ezek 16:8; cf. Isa 54:5; Hos 2:16; Eph 5:31–32; Rev 21:9).

A further proposal can be made: the connotations of “love” and “hate” in covenant contexts are also derived from marriage. These antonyms are juxtaposed in conjugal contexts.

“If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved [lit., “hated”] . . .” (Deut 21:15; cf. Judg 14:16). Comments on this text will follow.

In this regard—and in connection with Malachi 1:2–3—a key text is Genesis 29:30–33:

So Jacob . . . *loved* Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. When the LORD saw that Leah was *hated*, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, “Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will *love* me.” She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the LORD has heard that I am *hated*, he has given me this son also.” And she called his name Simeon.

It is important to note that the text does not say Jacob did not love Leah. It says he loved Rachel “more than [he loved] Leah.” That comparison does not define hate, but it certainly delimits it and removes it from the realm of animosity. Some lexicons attenuate here the sense of “hate”: “be unable (unwilling) to bear one’s wife, distain”; “be unloved, of wife.”²⁰ But the description of Jacob’s hating Leah is not one of repudiation, distaining or, in fact, not loving her. So, in what way or *how* was Leah hated?

¹⁸ A well-recognized point emphasized by Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, 323.

¹⁹ Cf. Steven L. McKenzie and Howard N. Wallace, “Covenant Themes in Malachi,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45.4 (1983): 549.

²⁰ This is the order given in Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 925b–926a; *CDCH*, 439a.

In this marriage covenant context, Leah was deprived of her rightful rank and privileges. As Jacob's first wife, Leah was the *de jure* matriarch. She was denied that status. Also, Leah gave birth to Reuben, Jacob's firstborn. A father's firstborn son was the legitimate heir. Instead, Jacob's second wife, Rachel, became the *de facto* matriarch. Her firstborn, Joseph, became heir and through his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, received the firstborn double portion. In short, in deference to Rachel, Leah was relegated to the second rank. She was deprived of her rightful privileges. The suggestion here is that Leah was "hated" by being deprived of her marriage covenant rights.

This understanding can be seen in two Deuteronomic laws. The first mirrors Leah's case:

If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved [lit., "hated," so elsewhere below], and both the loved and the unloved have borne him children, and if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, then on the day when he assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons, he may not treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn, but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his. (Deut 21:15–17)

The second law also aims at stemming the deprivation of a wife's legitimate marital rights.

If any man takes a wife and goes in to her and then hates her and accuses her of misconduct [not being a virgin] [By his false accusation] he has brought a bad name upon a virgin of Israel. And she shall be his wife. He may not divorce her all his days. (Deut 22:13–14, 19)

This latter law is behind Malachi's exhortation which also reflects the suggested understanding of "hate":

For the man who does not love [lit., "who hates"] his wife but divorces her [lit., "by divorcing," an infinitive in Hebrew with no complement], says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. (Mal 2:16)

The prophet calls out unjustified (arbitrary) divorce as violence done to the woman.²¹ She is stripped of matrimonial rights ostensibly guaranteed by the marriage covenant.

²¹ Despite the difficult syntax opening verse 16, this conclusion appears certain. On the interpretive issues, see Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage, Developed from the Perspective of Malachi*, VTSup 52 (New York: Brill, 1994), 48–73.

If it were argued that “hate” in these passages describes acrimony, thus the motive behind the action (disenfranchisement of a firstborn and groundless divorce) rather than a word-description of the deed itself, the question would still remain: *How* is hate manifested?²² Hate here boils down to disregard of the marriage covenant in part or in whole. Deuteronomic law and Malachi’s remonstrance were intended to safeguard the covenant rights of a wife described as hated.²³

IV. Antonymic Relationship of “Love” and “Hate” Involving Jacob and Esau

The point made up to this juncture is that “love” and “hate” in covenant contexts—be they in nature religious, political, or marital—correspondingly involve respecting (love) or disregard (hate) of covenantal responsibilities or privileges.

Viewed from this angle, Malachi 1:2b–3a is a theological crux: “Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.” In context, the focus is on Israel (Mal 1:1, 5; 2:11) and Edom (Mal 1:4). Rather than employing those names of nations, Jacob and Esau appear since they, twins by birth, were the eponymous ancestors and representatives of the two nations in question. The past tense “loved” and “hated” underscores this.²⁴ These factors point back to what had occurred in the case of these twins born to Rebecca, wife of Isaac, even while the two were still in her womb. It is important not to lose sight of this antecedent as the setting of the statement in Malachi 1:2–3.

Behind the scenes and before their birth the Lord had stipulated, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger” (Gen 25:23). All this was part of God’s sovereign plan of covenant succession through Jacob, not Esau. Its outworking encompassed the deceitful schemes of Rebecca and Jacob’s collusion with his mother’s machinations to trick

²² On the Romans 9:13 quote of Malachi 1:2–3, Moo says, “‘Love’ and ‘hate’ are not here, then, emotions that God feels but actions that he carries out.” Moo, *Romans*, 587.

²³ A case involving marital and political situations is that of the wife that Rehoboam loved more than his other wives, including his first wife. He made Abijah, the son of the wife he loved more, his successor (2 Chr 11:21–22). As a result, his firstborn son, born to his first wife, was deprived of his right of succession (cf. 2 Chr 21:3 on the succession to the kingship of the firstborn). In other words, the son of the “loved” wife was beneficiary of the right of legitimacy denied the firstborn.

²⁴ The context requires the past-tense translation, even though the same form of both Hebrew verbs, in some contexts, means “love” and “hate” continued from the past into the present (e.g., Gen 27:4; 1 Kgs 22:8).

the aged Isaac into bestowing the birthright and blessing upon Jacob, the son Rebecca loved (Gen 25:28). The net result was that Esau was not the designated successor—which was his natural right—in the covenant line established by God through no fault of his own. In that sense he was “hated”: deprived of that legitimate heirship privilege. By God’s choosing, covenant succession was granted to Jacob through no merit of his own. In that sense he was “loved.” These two opposite actions on God’s part are described by these antonymic terms in Malachi 1:2–3.

In context, God’s bestowal of covenant succession upon Jacob was an apt response to the people’s query, “How have you loved us?” “Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” (Mal 1:2). Implicitly, God should have loved Esau as firstborn. But—here is the proof he loved “us” (Israel)—he loved Jacob (and his lineage) by bestowing on him the rights of primogeniture.

V. Do Other Interpretations Better Respond to the Question, “How Was Esau Hated”?

Some other interpretations of Malachi 1:2–3 have been noted in passing. These and others will be treated here.

The first maintains that the phrase “Esau I have hated” is explained in the contemporary post-exilic context of Malachi. Keil remarks, “Malachi does not expressly state in what the love of God to Jacob (i.e., Israel) showed itself; but this is indirectly indicated in what is stated concerning the hatred towards Edom. The complete desolation of the Edomitish territory is quoted as proof of his hatred.”²⁵ Similarly, John Smith says, “The love for Jacob is demonstrated by the hatred toward Esau The prophet here in all probability refers to some calamity that has recently befallen Edom and cites it as indisputable evidence of Yahweh’s love for Judah.”²⁶ A description of Edom’s desolation for her aggression against her sister nation immediately follows the statement of Esau being hated: “I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert” (Mal 1:3b; cf. vv. 4–5). Pieter Verhoef states, “The effect of ‘love’ and ‘hate’ will be that Jacob’s descendants would be established in their country and those of Edom would be uprooted.”²⁷

²⁵ Keil, “Malachi,” 430.

²⁶ Smith, “The Book of Malachi,” 21–22.

²⁷ Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 202.

Coupled with this demise-of-contemporary-Edom interpretation, some see in God's "hate" of Esau "malevolent actions" and "hostility."²⁸ In view of their exile, God had said of Israel, "I began to hate them [Ephraim]" and "I will love them no more" (Hos 9:15). Andrew Hill approvingly quotes the comment of Francis Andersen and David Noel Freedman on "hate" in this verse from Hosea: it "describes hostility in a broken relationship," which Hill then applies to Esau and his descendants in Malachi 1:3, saying, "That same emotion and hostility color this text as well."²⁹ But "hate" in Hosea 9:15 (even if rendered "love no more") can be understood in context as God denying Israel what he had covenanted for obedience: life in the land. In that sense, God's "hate" would be expressed in his applying the covenant curse of exile (cf. also Jer 12:7–8, where God's "beloved" and his saying "I hate her" refer to his people [heritage] and his bringing the covenant curse upon them). In other words, Israel would be denied the expected covenantal privileges in the land of promise.

There can be little doubt that Malachi's statement did not have reference only to the past described in the Genesis 25 narrative. Just as Jacob was the head and representative of Israel, so too was Esau with reference to his people and nation. The Edomites and Israelites had a long history of conflict up until the then-present time (cf., e.g., Ps 137:7–9; Obad 1:10). The position presented here, however, is that the response to the question—*how* God hated Esau in Malachi 1:3—lies in an antecedent (Gen 25) rather than in contemporary or near-future Edomite circumstances. To reiterate, the reference to Israel and Edom was made by using the ancestors' names and that in the past tense: "Jacob I have loved but Esau I have hated." If the eponymic case were not intentionally foregrounded, would not God's disposition have been directly expressed instead to Israel and Edom, as is characteristically the case? In addition, as regards Esau, there was no divine malevolence or hostility involved before his birth, the time to which this statement refers. Although the contemporary or future vicissitudes of those two nations were not unrelated to those opposite divine dispositions, they were so only consequentially.

A second interpretation promotes a comparative idea. God's hating Esau means he was "loved less" than Jacob.³⁰ The comparative notion explains in

²⁸ Mignon R. Jacobs, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 165.

²⁹ Hill, *Malachi*, 152. Cf. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea*, AB 24 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 545.

³⁰ Cf. Ebenezer Henderson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets* (1858; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 448; Charles L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1951), 251.

some cases the juxtaposition of antonyms, even love and hate, where the latter involves a lesser degree of the former (2 Sam 13:15; Prov 13:24; Matt 6:24; 10:37). In the key Genesis 29 passage, viewed as informative for understanding Malachi 1:2–3, it is said that Jacob “loved Rachel more than Leah” (Gen 29:30). If comparison were the point, why was it not said Leah was “loved less”? Likewise, in Malachi 1:3, would it not be said that Esau was “loved less”?

If automatically applied, the comparative notion would lead to a wrong understanding. Concerning the antonymic “good” and “evil” or “bad” (e.g., Rom 9:11; cf. Gen 2:17), would “less good” be an acceptable substitute for “bad”? Would “hate less” be an acceptable replacement for “love”? Substituting “loved less” for “hate” is tantamount to saying “cold” means “less hot”—which may define “warm” but certainly not “cold.” The comparative notion neither defines “hate” nor explains its antonymic use in a covenant context—which is the main point.

Related to the above comparative idea is the understanding that “hate” means, as briefly mentioned above, “unloved” or “not loved.” On Malachi 1:3, Herbert Wolf states,

The meaning of God’s hatred has perplexed and confused many, but a solution is readily available from Scripture [pointing to Gen. 29:30–33]. ... [Leah] was “hated” in the sense that she came out second best in her rivalry with Rachel. The New American Standard Bible is correct in translating the word “unloved” rather than “hated.”³¹

But how could Leah, loved less than Rachel, be unloved? How could Jacob not love someone he loved albeit less?

In the “two wives” Deuteronomy 21:15 passage cited earlier, it was seen that the quoted version refers to the “hated” wife as “unloved” (ESV; cf. “loves one but not the other” NIV; “loves more than the other” NET). “Unloved” or “not loved” expresses the opposite of “love.” But if that semantic opposition were intended, why did Genesis 29:31, Deuteronomy 21:15, and here, Malachi 1:3, rather than *sanē* (סַנֵּה, “hate”) not simply read *lo’ ahav* (לֹא אָהַב, “not love”)?

John Calvin rightly explains that for Malachi, “Jacob had obtained the right of primogeniture contrary to the order of nature.” In deference to his brother, Esau “was not loved by God.”³² Apart from his rendering “not

³¹ Herbert Wolf, *Haggai and Malachi*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 64.

³² John Calvin, “Zachariah and Malachi,” *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 5:465.

loved” rather than “hated,” Calvin draws the right conclusion: Esau was denied his firstborn rights.

A different interpretation equates “hate” with “reject.” This view is inextricably bound up in semantically equating “love” and “election.” The two are viewed as so indissociable that God’s love for Jacob is defined as “elective love.”³³ A. H. Konkel affirms that the prophet “is emphasizing the sovereign choice of God.”³⁴ Ralph Smith unequivocally states,

When Yahweh says, “I have loved Jacob,” he means, “I choose Jacob, and when he says, “I hated Esau,” he means, “I did not choose Esau.” ... This is certainly election language. “Loved” means chosen and “hated” means not chosen.³⁵

In Deuteronomic terms, within the covenant framework, election proceeds from God’s love and election precedes the application of his redemptive work (Deut 7:7–8).³⁶ But love and election, while theologically systemically related, are not semantically one and the same any more than redemption and election are. It naturally follows that, if election is semantically assimilated to “love” for Jacob (see the following interpretation), the semantic counterpart to his “hating” Esau would indeed be “reject.”³⁷

Commenting on the citation of Malachi 1:2–3 in Romans 9:13, C. E. B. Cranfield, after ruling out the comparative “love less” idea, states,

“Love” and “hate” are rather to be understood as denoting election and rejection respectively, God has chosen Jacob and his descendants to stand in a positive relation to the fulfilment of His gracious purpose: He has left Esau and Edom outside this relationship.³⁸

If that were the intended meaning, it is strange that the common word pair—“choose” (*bakhar*, בָּחַר) and “reject” (*ma’as*, מָאַס)—was not used in

³³ Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi*, 201.

³⁴ A. H. Konkel, “שָׂנֵא,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1257.

³⁵ Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, 305.

³⁶ Ron Bergey, “L’Élection dans le Deutéronome,” *La Revue réformée* 59.5 (2008): 49–64. In Hosea 11:1, love is the fountainhead of redemption.

³⁷ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 223. Douglas Stuart says hate “could well be translated ‘reject’ or ‘oppose’...” Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC 31 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 153. Samuel Bénétreau views love and hate here in Paul’s thought as “practically synonymous of to choose or let aside.” Samuel Bénétreau, *L’Épître de Paul aux Romains* (Vaux-sur-Seine: Edifac, 1997), 2:43. On Romans 9:13, Moo says, “God’s hatred of Esau is best understood to refer to God’s decision not to bestow this privilege on Esau. Its might best be translated ‘reject.’” Moo, *Romans*, 587.

³⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 2:480.

Malachi 1:2–3 as elsewhere (2 Kgs 23:27; Job 34:33; Ps 78:67–68; Isa 7:15–16; 41:9; Jer 33:24).³⁹ Using those two words would have unequivocally answered the question raised in verse 2, “How have you loved us?” Moreover, judging from the covenantal contexts mentioned above, “hate” and “reject” are no more synonymic than “love” and “choose.” In short, translating “hate” with “reject” conflates two semantically distinct terms resulting in the loss of the specific sense of hate in covenantal contexts.

Finally, in tandem with the preceding interpretation is the view that “loved” and “hated” point to the eternal destinies of Jacob and Esau. Do these terms portend respectively the election of Jacob (unto salvation) and the rejection of Esau (leading to his eternal condemnation) in these passages?⁴⁰

Well aware of this issue, Keil warned against watering down the sense of these terms in Malachi 1:2–3, especially “hate,” “to avoid the danger of falling into the doctrine of predestination.”⁴¹ Robert Jewett made the following observation on Romans 9:13: “The extraordinary arbitrariness of double predestination in Malachi 1:2–3 combined with the use of the allegedly ‘un-Christian’ word ‘hate’ has led commentators to tone down as far as possible what Paul is saying here.”⁴²

Concerning the quotation of Malachi’s affirmation “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” in Romans 9:13, John Murray finds “a distinction between salvation and the coming short of the same” and concludes, “We are compelled, therefore, to find in the word a declaration of the sovereign counsel of God as it is concerned with the ultimate destinies of men.”⁴³

³⁹ Concerning the latter, Eugene Merrill says, “Frequently it appears in contrast to vbs. meaning ‘choose,’ especially *bhr.*” Eugene H. Merrill, “חָנַן,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:833.

⁴⁰ The question is then raised concerning their descendants and individuals in general, matters that are well beyond the scope here.

⁴¹ Keil, “Malachi,” 430. According to H. L. Ellison, “The love and hate, as Paul quotes Mal. 1:2 [*sic*], are the election choice before they were born, a love and hate not necessarily expressed in final destiny but worked out in the history of their descendants.” H. L. Ellison, *The Mystery of Israel: An Exposition of Romans 9–11* (rev. and enlarged edition; Exeter: Paternoster, 1968), 46. John Piper states that Romans 9:6–8 provides an “ongoing principle” of unconditional election, not only of the nation of Israel but also within that nation, creating a sphere in which God’s word is effective resulting in a true Israel distinct from Israel at large, and deals with “election unto eternal salvation.” John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 48–49.

⁴² Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 580.

⁴³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2:24. As concerns the quotation of Malachi 1:2–3 in Romans 9:13, Murray disagrees with Charles Hodge, for whom “hate” means “to love less, to regard and treat with less favour” (2:21). Murray adds, “The divine reaction stated [concerning Esau] could scarcely be reduced to that of not loving or loving less” (2:22).

Calvin juxtaposes Paul's quote of Malachi 1:2–3 in Romans 9:13 with the promise made to Rebecca, “the older shall serve the younger” (Rom 9:12; quoting Gen 25:23), and opines, “The spiritual condition of Jacob was witnessed to by his dominion, and that of Esau by his bondage.”⁴⁴ On the transfer of the right of primogeniture from Esau to Jacob, Calvin fully acknowledges the physical dimension of inheritance. However, he also sees it as a type of a spiritual dimension; in his commentary on Romans 9:12, he says, “Although the promise had reference to the right of primogeniture, yet God declared His will in it as the type of something greater.”⁴⁵ In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he states, “Here was a change like a portent, which, as Paul contends, testified to the election of Jacob and the reprobation of Esau” (3.22.4).⁴⁶ He adds, “God willed by an earthly symbol to declare Jacob's spiritual election” and Paul “did not hesitate to seek in the outward blessing evidence to prove the spiritual blessing.” He concludes, “Jacob, therefore, is chosen and distinguished from the rejected Esau by God's predestination” (3.22.6).⁴⁷

First and foremost—and germane to the present study—Calvin emphasizes God's overruling Esau's primogeniture both in Malachi 1:2–3 and in the quotation of those verses in Romans 9:13. As indicated earlier, apart from his rendering the Hebrew for “hate” as “not loved,” Calvin holds the same position as posited here: the word refers to Esau as firstborn not being the covenant successor. Second, he understands Paul to say that Esau's being denied that right pointed to a spiritual dimension, namely, his not benefiting from the covenant promise of salvation typologically or symbolically portrayed in the firstborn right of inheritance. The matter underlined here is not the extent to which Calvin expounded this passage. It is rather that he kept the inversion of primogeniture and the typological import separate. The former is the focus here in response to the question: *How* did God hate Esau?

⁴⁴ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 201–2. Cranfield also sees 9:13 as referring to “the older shall serve the younger” (v. 12), “but expressing it more clearly and pointedly.” Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:480.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, 201.

⁴⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles; LCC 21 (1960; repr., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 2:936. Verhoef says, “We disagree with Calvin, et al., that reference is made in our text to the predestination of Jacob to eternal life and the reprobation of Esau unto eternal damnation.” Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi*, 201.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:938.

Does such an understanding of Paul’s citation of Malachi 1:2–3 in Romans 9:13 militate against or mitigate the position posited here? Bearing in mind the answer sought to the question of *how* God hated Esau, the two interpretations—as framed by Calvin—are not mutually exclusive. The view espoused here is that Malachi appealed to God’s overturning Esau’s privilege as the firstborn to respond to the earlier question raised by his contemporaries, “How have you loved us?” (Mal 1:2), which inversely corresponds to “but Esau I have hated” (Mal 1:3). Paul appeals to God’s overturning the privilege as the firstborn of Esau, in light of majority Israelite unbelief, to demonstrate that “it is not as though the word of God has failed” (Rom 9:6a), which leads to the clarification “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Rom 9:6b) since, like Esau, the majority of Israelites stand outside the inner covenant circle of the word of promise through unbelief but nonetheless remain within the outer covenant circle as offspring of Abraham.⁴⁸ In the context of Romans 9–11, Paul will define the minority of Israelites in the inner circle as the remnant (9:27; 11:5).⁴⁹ Thanks to God’s elective purposes, there always was, is, and will be a remnant (9:27–29; 11:2–5, 25–26).⁵⁰ It cannot be said that God’s word, his covenant promise, failed because the majority of Israelites rejected Jesus as the Christ.⁵¹

Summary and Conclusion

The working hypothesis here is that the marriage covenant bond is the fountainhead of the use of the antonyms “love” and “hate” in other covenant (and treaty) contexts, be they religious or political. Based on Genesis 29:30–33, it is suggested that “hate” juxtaposed with “love” refers to Jacob’s disregard of Leah’s privileges of matriarchy in deference to Rachel, who is described as “loved.” As concerns Malachi 1:2–3, “But Esau I have hated,” *how* God did so was by disregarding Esau’s firstborn covenant right as

⁴⁸ On these issues, see Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:479–81; Murray, *Romans*, 2:xii–xv, 8–24; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, WBC 38B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 544–49; Moo, *Romans*, 587; Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 570–86; N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Book II, Parts III and IV (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013), 1156–58.

⁴⁹ The remaining part of chapter 11 is devoted mainly to Gentile ingrafting, a subject broached in chapter 9:14–26, 30.

⁵⁰ One can say that that is how “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26), that is, “all” who will be saved. The Hebrew expression behind “all Israel” does not mean every single Israelite (cf., e.g., Num 16:34; Josh 7:24–25; 8:24; 2 Chr 11:3).

⁵¹ Paul uses “word” (Rom 9:6) in typical Hebrew fashion as referring to the “promise” (vv. 8–9; cf. 1 Kgs 8:20; 2 Kgs 15:12) or the “covenant” (e.g., 1 Chr 16:15; Ps 105:8).

covenant successor. It was bestowed on Jacob, who is described as “loved.” The Romans 9:13 citation of Malachi’s statement can be understood as consonant with this position even though its scope is enlarged.

On the lexical level, definitions of *sanē*’ (סנֵׁ) contrasted with “love” that require explanations like “hate may simply express the feelings of affection for one wife in contrast to the aversion for another (Deut 21:15, 17),” or “the attitude toward a preferred wife as opposed to the one who was tolerated or even rejected (Gen 29:31, 33)”⁵² illustrate the difficulty in finding a concise and correct way to render “hate” in the matrimonial context. Replacing “hated” with “unloved” or “not loved” or “loved less” simply attenuates “hate” as normally understood and fails to do justice to the covenantal marriage context governing its employ and, by extension, to its usage in Malachi 1:3.

Clearly, there was no hatred of Esau on the part of God in the visceral or vindictive sense. He was not hated for any vice any more than Jacob was loved for any virtue. Malachi’s statement concerning them refers to a time before their birth. Moreover, Esau enjoyed God’s blessings. He was loved by his father (Gen 25:28). Hebrews says, “By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau” (Heb 11:20). In the final chapter of Genesis involving Jacob and Esau—where God renews his covenant promises to Jacob (Gen 35:11–12)—it is reiterated that Esau is Jacob’s “brother” (35:1, 7) and that Isaac was buried by “his sons Esau and Jacob” (35:29). Esau became the father of a great nation (Gen 36:1–43). He and his descendants inherited a land of their own (Deut 2:5; Josh 24:4). God protected Esau’s land and forbade the Israelites to dispossess the Edomites (Deut 2:5). The Israelites were not to abhor the Edomites given their kinship ties (Deut 23:7).⁵³ God promised to care for Edomite orphans and widows.

As indicated, the rendition “reject” pushes “hate” into another semantic domain in antonymic relationship to “choose” or “elect.” Doing so leaves “hate” undefined as an act in and of itself. Again, defining “hate” in antonymic relationship with “love” as respectively “reprobation” or “eternal condemnation” and “election unto salvation” uses language that differs from the divine edict in Genesis 25:23 and the reversal of primogeniture, God’s action understood as the basis of the declaration about the twins in Malachi 1:2–3.

⁵² Konkel, “סנֵׁ,” 3:1257.

⁵³ Because Jacob ended up with his blessing (Gen 27:41), Esau did begrudge him—not *sanē*’ (סנֵׁ) but *satam* (סצֵׁ), the latter rendered “hate” in the esv (but cf. Ps 55:3 esv “bear a grudge”). But Esau’s actions years later showed that he had forgiven Jacob. He showed Jacob affection and kindness when he could have easily avenged the wrong done to him by his vulnerable brother (Gen 33:4, 12, 15).

It is suggested that Romans 9:12–13, which quotes both Genesis 25:23 and Malachi 1:2–3, reads in the same way. Calvin astutely distinguished the physical act (reversal of primogeniture) from the spiritual domain with his type-antitype reading.

Admittedly, it is hard to find an alternate term or expression for “hate.” But in a covenant context a lexical functional equivalent for *sanē*’ (סָנַעַ) may be the locution “to disregard the covenant rights of.”

Finally, where did Esau, being “hated,” stand in relation to the promise as a descendant of Abraham? As concerns Ishmael and Esau, Calvin says,

First, the promise of salvation given to Abraham belongs to all who trace their natural descent to him, because it is offered to all without exception. Since it was the will of the Lord that his covenant be sealed [by circumcision], as much in Ishmael and Esau as in Isaac and Jacob, it appears that they were not altogether estranged from [God].⁵⁴

As concerns God’s covenant promise, Esau was outside the pale of God’s grace no more than other descendants of Abraham and certainly no more than anyone from the nations with whom God made no covenant.⁵⁵ God’s sovereign bestowal of covenant succession on Jacob—his “love” for Jacob—was not a guarantee of his or any of his descendants’ salvation. Nor did God’s “hate” of Esau—his disregard of his Esau’s covenant rights of primogeniture—necessarily exclude him or any of his descendants from salvation. In Paul’s argument, Esau served to illustrate the descendants of Abraham who had not believed. Their unbelief did not make the covenant promise void. The gracious promise still stood and could be appropriated by any and all by faith. Paul himself was a prime example. His personal experience and testimony (e.g., Acts 26:4–23) is reflected in Romans 9–11.

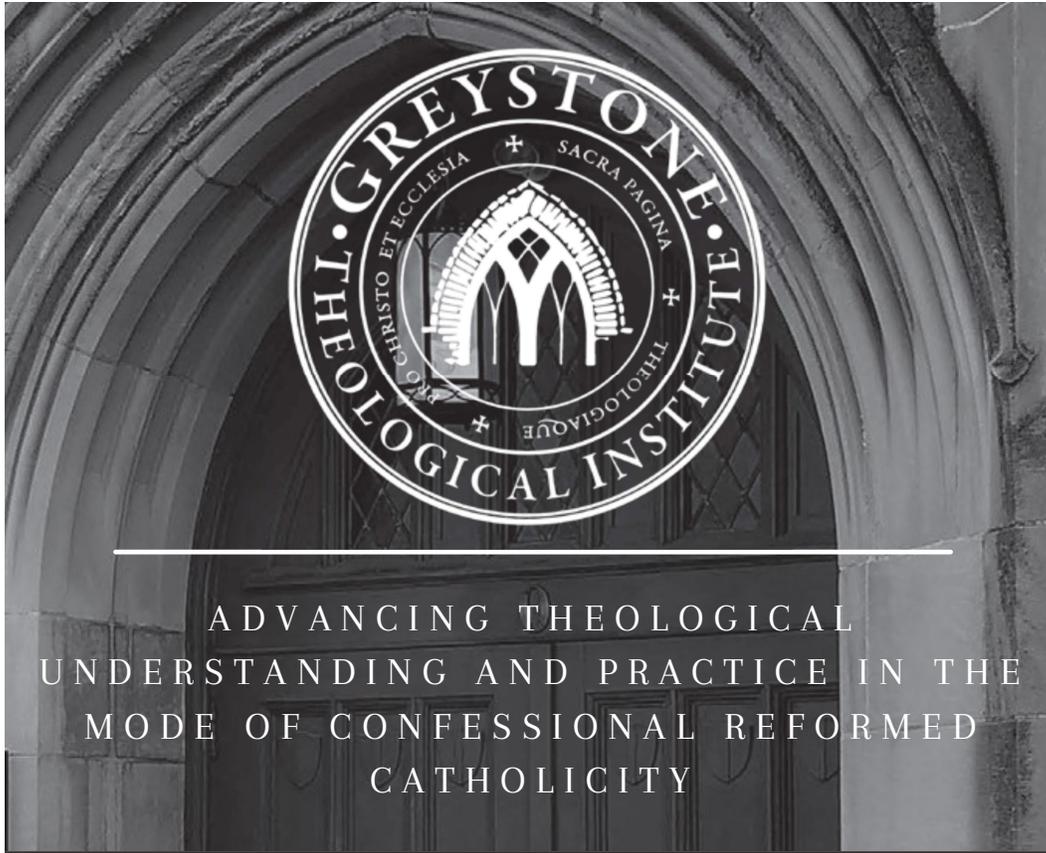
Sadly, like many of Paul’s compatriots, there is no evidence that Esau ever did lay hold of that grace. The commentary on Esau from Scripture bears witness:

⁵⁴ Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, 197. Calvin assumed Esau, like Ishmael, was circumcised, the “seal” referred to. He distinguished two degrees of election: on the one hand, national or general election of a people, an intermediate between rejection of mankind and election of a meager number of the godly, and on the other hand, individual or effectual election to eternal life. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.21.6–7.

⁵⁵ Esau was not part of the nations with whom God had no covenant, a conclusion differing with Verhoef for whom, as distinguished from Jacob, Esau “merely became part of the nations on the fringe of the covenant people, and as such again entered into the scope of God’s redemptive purposes (Gen. 12:1–3).” Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi*, 201–2.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God ... that no one is ... unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. (Heb 12:15–17)

This commentary lends support to Calvin's view that God's disregard for Esau's right of primogeniture—with the full and willing cooperation of Esau himself!—was a type of his rejection of God's gracious promise of life, thus a warning to any who rejected God's grace appropriated by faith alone in Christ alone. To this can be added Paul's words which aptly apply: "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death" (2 Cor 7:10).



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