

Why Choose a Chosen People?

What Was God Doing with Israel? Why Not Just Jump Right to Jesus?

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The Question

If Christian faith is universal, then why did God choose Israel to be a chosen people? Why didn't God just skip directly to Jesus? This question, which comes in various forms, does pose a challenge to any Christian who desires to relate the existence of Israel to the larger issue of the character of God revealed in Jesus. We know that there was some preliminary understanding that needed to be laid down in order for Jesus to be properly understood and interpreted. Yet why then did it take so long for God to send Jesus to Israel? And why Israel, indeed? The answer, though not located in any one passage, can be found by following various literary themes through the Hebrew Scriptures. Here is my outline:

Reason #1: Chosen to Be a Non-Racial, Non-Ethnic People

Reason #2: Chosen to Live by God's Word and Expect a Happy Ending

Reason #3: Chosen to Diagnose the Evil Internal to Human Nature

Reason #4: Invited to Suffer On Behalf of the World

Reason #5: Chosen to Document the Diagnosis

Reason #6: Chosen to Anticipate God Dwelling Within People

Reason #7: Chosen to Oppose Pagan Temple Systems and Glimpse the Structure of God's Being

Reason #8: Chosen to Anticipate the Messiah, His Ethics, and His Mission

Reason #1: Chosen to Be a Non-Racial, Non-Ethnic People

I want to tackle a preliminary question first about the nature of biblical Israel itself: Was Israel a racial or ethnic group? Was Israel a chosen race? This may seem to be a strange way to start, but I suspect that the Western world's tragedy-filled history of race relations, as much as any other factor, influences our reading of the biblical story and the narrative of Israel. When we ask, 'Why did God choose a chosen people?' we often presume that Israel was an ethnic or racial people group in the same way that we think of other ethnic or racial groups. So our deeper, and often unarticulated, questions include the following: 'Did God reveal Himself to one ethnic-racial group?' – the answer to which is 'no' since knowledge of God extended farther than Israel even in the biblical texts. Or, we ask, 'Did God initiate racism by forming the Jewish people and making them exclusive?' – which presumes the premise of the question is correct, that biblical Israel was in fact a racial or ethnic group. Moreover, contact with Islam – with its emphasis on Arab people, holy places in Arabia, the Arabic language needed to properly read the Qur'an and thus worship Allah, and the centrality of Arab culture – frequently leads observers to parallel Judaism and Islam. They assume that when we speak of 'Israel' we are speaking of a Jewish ethnicity and faith equivalent to that of Arab Muslims in the early years of Islam, except through Isaac instead of Ishmael.

The significance of our modern tendency to think of Israel as an ethnic-racial group is developed by J. Kameron Carter in his book *Race: A Theological Reflection*. Carter argues – convincingly, I believe – that the modern discussion about race stems from an earlier view of Jews as a genetic 'race' in Western Europe. In order to stigmatize Jews as 'other' and reduce their status from citizens to aliens, and from fully human to sub-human, Western Europeans developed a racial classification tied to religion whereby darker-skinned 'Jews' were distinct from 'Christians.' When the Enlightenment sought to ground knowledge and politics in reason apart from Christian faith, this racial classification was intensified. Jewish flesh was seen as 'other' than White European flesh, and in fact constituted the opposite pole against which 'whiteness' was constructed as a racial category that transcended European tribe and nation. Carter demonstrates how this race awareness was abundantly present in Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant and postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault. I was surprised, however, that Carter did not refer to the development of the idea of race in Spain at about the time of the Spanish Inquisition. Prior to Kant, theories about blood purity had already emerged in Spain and Portugal, whose tortured history led to an early nationalism and an impulse to cleanse Spain and Portugal of Jews. The forced conversions of Jews to the Christian banner led to the fear that such Jews were practicing Judaism in secret, and the surest way to identify them was

through the test of 'blood purity.'¹ The Western 'anxiety' over the Jews and, more recently, moreover, sorrow over European Jewish suffering reinforces a fear of discussing the theological implications for the character of God that He initiated an ethnic-racial project in history. If it is true that God's purpose for 'ethnic Israel' was for the Jews to kill Jesus the Messiah, then has not God in some sense turned the Jews into villains Himself? Whatever else human beings added to that racial drama, God took the first step and essentially laid the foundation for the race problem of the Western world.

The irony of this way of reading Israel's story is that biblical Israel was not an ethnic or a racial people, but a covenantal people. That is, Israel was never actually determined by genetic lineage from Abraham and Sarah, but by a peculiar association with God through the covenant. Hence, Ishmael was not part of covenant Israel, despite being a son of Abraham along with Isaac. Neither was Esau, despite being the son of Isaac and Rebekah along with Jacob. Moreover, Gentiles from outside the covenant joined Israel. The tribe of Judah in particular seemed to be unusually welcoming towards non-Israelites who acknowledged the God of Israel and who converted to Judaism. This might be traced to the experience of the tribe's ancestor, Judah himself. Judah married a Canaanite woman named Shua (Genesis 38:2). He arranged for one of his sons to marry another Canaanite woman, Tamar (Genesis 38:6). Judah came to denigrate Tamar's presence in the family because he wanted to prevent his deceased son's inheritance from passing to her. However, she tricked Judah into having sexual relations with her, and she thereby became an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:3). Judah's redemptive role in the story of Genesis 37 – 50, not least his self-sacrificial posture on behalf of his half-brother Benjamin before a disguised Joseph in Egypt, seems to hinge on the fact that he learned a critical lesson from Tamar's role in the family, her claim on his blessing and inheritance, and his own sin in trying to deny it. From that time, a remarkable pattern emerged. One of the only two faithful servants of Moses was Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who was identified with the tribe of Judah but was ethnically a Kenizzite, one of the Canaanite tribes (Numbers 32:12; Genesis 15:19)! The Canaanite Rahab and her whole household joined Israel during the conquest of Canaan (Joshua 6:17 – 25); Rahab married Salmon – of the tribe of Judah – and became an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Ruth was a Moabitess who married Boaz – who was of the tribe of Judah (Ruth 4:13) – and became an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Bathsheba the Hittite became a wife of David (2 Samuel 11 – 12) – who was of course of the tribe of Judah – and became an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:6). The tribe of Judah seemed to demonstrate a particular affinity for absorbing God-fearing Gentiles who became part of Israel. This is notable given that the tribe of Judah was considered the 'firstborn' of Israel and contained the lineage of Jesus.

Other God-fearing Gentiles could join the community of Israel by undergoing circumcision (if male) and baptism. Even at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, a time of great conflict between Israel and Egypt, God's protection for families against losing their firstborn was not based on bloodline but by observance of the Passover (Exodus 12:7 – 13). The institution of the Passover feast, in fact, already looked forward to not only native Israelites but the 'alien' in the land (Exodus 12:20). In addition, 'a mixed multitude' from Egypt accompanied Israel during the Exodus (Exodus 12:38) and ostensibly became part of Israel through circumcision (Exodus 12:43 – 49). Thus, Israel was never actually an ethnic or racial people. They were bound together by covenant commitment to God's promise to Abraham, and then by the Mosaic Law revealed at Sinai.

Hence, biblical Israel was already a microcosm of all humanity. The distinction between Israel and the Gentiles was not an ethnic-racial one but a religious-theological one. Biblical Israel was defined by God's covenant with Abraham and its outworking. To this was added the Mosaic Law (Exodus 19ff.) which made Jews more distinct in their behavior, and I have already offered an interpretation for what purpose the Law served: to show up the internal flaw in the very humanity of the covenant people. There was concern for marrying foreigners to the extent that those foreigners drew Israelites away from the Law and towards idols. But at no point in time were Gentiles barred from joining Israel simply because of their ethnic-racial background.

Sadly, however, some Second Temple Jews seem to have defined themselves primarily as an ethnic or racial group. Their criticism of Samaritans and Romans did not occur simply on the grounds of theological-cultural factors like entrance into Judaism by baptism and circumcision, Sabbath observance, eating kosher, or worship in the Jerusalem

¹ David Bryon Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.70 – 73. See also James H. Sweet, 'The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought,' in 'Constructing Race,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 52 (January 1997), p.159 – 166. 'Iberian racism was a necessary precondition for the system of human bondage that would develop in the Americas during the sixteenth century and beyond.'

Temple. If it had been only theological, they would have been eager to welcome Gentiles into the community of Israel on the condition of their reception of circumcision, Mosaic Law, the covenant hope, etc. Instead, some Jews at the time of Jesus denigrated Samaritans and Romans on the grounds of ethnic ancestry. Such Jews could not stand the thought of the Romans benefiting from the grace of God, so they tried to kill Jesus when he announced such a move (Luke 4:14 – 30). Their repeated claim, ‘We are children of Abraham’ (Luke 3:8, John 8:33) demonstrates their interpretation of Israel as an ethnic-racial community based on physical lineage from Abraham. Jesus’ disciples themselves demonstrated bigotry and dismissiveness towards the Samaritans (Luke 9:51 – 54; John 4:27), probably for the same reasons.

This interpretation of ‘being Israel’ was precisely what John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles disputed with their contemporaries. They carried the debate back to Abraham himself. What do we see when we read Abraham’s story? God’s explicit intention in changing the name of ‘Abram’ to ‘Abraham’ – ‘father of nations’ (Genesis 12:5) – was to highlight the worldwide scope of His intended blessing and the family God intended for Abraham. But that scope of God blessing ‘the nations’ through Abraham did not only occur through Jesus alone, enacted by the apostolic mission to the Gentiles. It existed in a smaller but nevertheless authentic form prior to Jesus in Israel. In fact, the Abraham narrative (Genesis 12 – 22) itself seems to be trying to explain why God selects a chosen people, and is at pains to show that God also blessed Hagar and Ishmael though they remained outside the covenant. The development of the narratives of the chosen family also wrestles with the incorporation of Gentiles. Already in the story of Joseph and Judah (Genesis 37 – 50), God’s promise to bless the world results in the incorporation of Canaanites into the family of Judah, the incorporation of Egyptians into the family of Joseph, and the provision of food for the entire world of Egypt and its surroundings through the mediation of Joseph. This focus on all people is what we would expect given that the calling of Abraham and the chosen family narratives occur as God’s response to Babel (Genesis 11). Indeed, although the Mosaic Law appears to have slowed the influx of Gentiles into Israel, Gentiles could still and did convert to worship the God of Israel. They could and did enter the community of Israel through circumcision. Hence, John the Baptist and Jesus both argued that one became a child of Abraham by imitating the *faith* of Abraham (Luke 3:8, John 8:56); this was not – and never was – a matter of physical lineage from Abraham. Paul added that since the Mosaic Law did not exist in Abraham’s time, one could simply imitate the *faith* of Abraham, apart from doing works measured against the Jewish Mosaic Law, and that this was sufficient to be a full member of the family of God now constituted around Messiah Jesus (Romans 4:1 – 15). In other words, John the Baptist’s position, Jesus’ ministry towards ‘outsiders,’ and the apostolic outreach to Gentiles which brought Gentiles to Jesus apart from the Mosaic Law, were not theological innovations departing from the Hebrew Scriptures, but the true meaning of those very sacred texts, a claim I will examine in the next section. They were cheerfully reasserting that ‘descent from Abraham’ was distinct from ethnicity or race and based on faith in the Messiah.

In fact, Jesus’ physical redemption of his Jewish flesh could be said to be for *all humanity* precisely because Israel was *already a microcosm of all humanity*. Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus highlights this: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba are listed as ancestors of Jesus (Matthew 1:3 – 6). If one mistakenly takes the view that biblical Israel was an ethnic-racial group, then Jesus must simultaneously be interpreted as a biracial or mulatto Savior, who opens the door to the Gentiles *despite* Israel’s ethnic Jewishness, which was only a handicap to Israel from the very outset. The view of Israel as an ethnic-racial group can be provocative for those Christians who are first being introduced to the world-wide, multi-ethnic mission of Jesus, and also to what is called ‘racial reconciliation’ today, but such people fail to see biblical Israel and the Hebrew Scriptures themselves for what they truly are. At best, they reduce Israel to ‘ethnic Israel’ because they operate within a sociological framework (because it had a majority of people genetically descended from Abraham) and not a theological one (and hence representative of the whole world). But soon afterwards, such an interpretation must eventually blame God Himself for reinforcing the ethnic-racial patterns from ancient civilization, or initiating an ethnic-racial project whereby God’s condition for Israel’s very existence was its very failure *as an ethnic-racial group*, which of course had profoundly tragic implications for Jews in Western history. But if one more accurately sees, instead of this, that Israel was never an ethnic-racial group to start with, but a microcosm of all humanity placed temporarily under the Mosaic Law, then we can more easily see Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel, not its negation.

In fact, the great advantage of this understanding of Israel is that we can now interpret God as challenging the prevailing basis of human community in the world from the start of Israel, at the time of Abraham. Most, if not all, peoples in ancient times had a sense of blood relation, around which they also developed religious views (sometimes including a descent from a god, or a sense of being a special chosen people justifying their conquering of other

peoples), political views (tribal order, empire), and cultural outlook (ethnocentrism). It would raise questions indeed if God were shown to simply be reinforcing that tendency by His choice of Israel. To the contrary, God initiated a project in Israel that countered and challenged the prevailing tendencies in the world at the time. It continues now in Christ.

Who redefined biblical Israel to mean 'ethnic Israel'? In a sense, this revisits the question of who contributed to the 'race problem' of the Western world. A combination of people: Gentiles who, for years, marginalized Israel as a peculiar people prior to Jesus; Jews who wanted to become an *ethnicity* or a *nation like other nations* (*ethnos*) rather than the *people* (*laos*) of God; Jews who rejected Jesus and set the rabbinical course of mining the Torah for Jewish cultural and ethnic distinctive customs; European Gentile Christians who ignored Paul's Letter to the Romans and did not fully grasp these matters, and finally Western European philosophers and politicians who used Christian faith as a unifying social principle for nation-building but could not incorporate the Jew, who refused to be assimilated. We can say that, while some European Christians and non-Christian philosophers like Kant were responsible for a misinterpretation of the ongoing presence of a Torah-observant Israel, the issue of race was a construction of men; it was not a problem located in the text of Scripture, nor in the character of God. In fact, we can state that God's true intention for Israel was to be a counter-response to the tribal-ethnic-racial tension already building in the ancient world.

I am aware of how challenging this is to ethnic groups who have had a tendency to read themselves into the story of Israel as if they were a new chosen people, or an oppressed people that God would deliver. This has profound implications for the modern State of Israel, for example. On what basis can the State of Israel define 'Jewish' as an ethnicity, and then discriminate against ethnic Palestinians? Surprisingly, not on the basis of the Hebrew Scriptures! Have advocates of Jewish Zionism or Christian Zionism considered this position? But let me focus my comments on historic Christian traditions. The first Puritan settlers to Massachusetts viewed themselves as the New Israel – fleeing from persecution, crossing a wide body of water – and claimed America as their God-given Promised Land. John Winthrop, Massachusetts's first governor, ended his famous 'City on a Hill Sermon,' with a quotation from Deuteronomy 30 in support of this way of thinking: 'to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it. Therefore let us choose life, that we and our seed may live, by obeying His voice and cleaving to Him, for He is our life and our prosperity.'² But as this seemingly innocent appropriation of Deuteronomy became firmly entrenched in the American national myth, it produced less-than-innocent results. It laid the foundation for the ideas of 'Manifest Destiny' where White Americans were supposedly entitled by divine right to the land from sea to shining sea.³ Just as Israel marched westward to dispossess the Canaanites of the land, many white American Protestants marched westward to dispossess the Native Americans of the land, through trickery, warfare, the intentional spreading of disease, and government treaties broken time and again. Wealth and life were taken away or withheld from ethnic minorities in a variety of ways. This is the foundation of 'American Exceptionalism' where the U.S. is seen as a new 'chosen people' in the world, which has a messianic role to play by spreading democracy and capitalism abroad. This was a clear mistake and a product of the type of confusion that can result from a faulty exegesis of the role of Israel.

But the critique does not end there. As much as I deeply appreciate how theologically and politically subversive it was for African-American Christians to see themselves in the role of a New Israel oppressed in a New Egypt, and as much as I agree with the devastating critiques of American racism and history leveled by theologians who draw inspiration from that tradition, I do not think that reappropriating the narrative of an 'ethnic Israel' out of the Hebrew

² John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*, 1630

³ An early example occurred during the Pequot War (1634 – 1638). Captain John Mason massacred 600 – 700 Pequot women, children, and older men by setting the village of Misistuck (present day Mystic) on fire. Mason justified his action against the Pequot by saying it was the act of a God who 'laughed his Enemies and the Enemies of his People to scorn making [the Pequot] as a fiery Oven . . . Thus did the Lord judge among the Heathen, filling [Mystic] with dead Bodies.' He quoted Deuteronomy 20:16, which referred to Israel's conquest under Joshua: 'The Lord was pleased to smite our Enemies in the hinder Parts, and to give us their land for an inheritance.' (*A Brief History of the Pequot War: Especially of the Memorable taking of their Fort at Mistick in Connecticut in 1637*) Deuteronomy 20:17, is implicit because of Mason's readers' assumed knowledge; it reads, 'You shall utterly destroy them.' This demonstrates how White Puritans read themselves into the story of Israel's conquest.

Scriptures is hermeneutically and exegetically valid. The reason for this, as J. Kameron Carter points out, is that, while African-Americans making that association poses a powerful and clever counter-story to the prevailing metanarrative of White American Protestants, it simultaneously validates their hermeneutic as well, *because it makes the same type of contemporary group association based on the same assumption of an 'ethnic Israel.'* In fact, it does not expose the fundamental mistake of White American Protestants and correct that mistake; by itself it merely sets up an opposite pole from which the theological dialog cannot proceed any further. Where the critique should really start is separating 'ethnic Israel' from biblical Israel, and then calling for a full embrace of the radical teachings of Jesus because Christians cannot simply rewind the clock and place ourselves into the biblical story at whatever point we most enjoy. Biblical Israel was a representation and actualization of *all humanity* that prefigured the much fuller way that Jesus would be for *all humanity*. Precisely because Jesus took Jewish flesh, his flesh was non-ethnic and non-racial.