

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

Another common belief that people had in ancient times was that history is circular. Israel inherited a story and a confession that taught them that their God is wholly good and will one day defeat evil. Evil in the universe could not last forever, precisely because God is good and will one day be victorious over it all. This is the connection between ethical monotheism and messianism: a radical this-worldly belief that the good God would defeat evil and renew the world. This is the 'happy ending story.' God made the Jews absolutely unique in this way as well, among all their neighbors, if not all the peoples of the world.

The far more natural conclusion that people reached was that there was no such 'happy ending.' The 'god' or 'gods' that the ancients could best discern was/were both good and evil, since the world we live in plainly has both good and evil. What is the origin of this duality? The easiest explanation: the 'god' or 'gods' who made it all. The direct implication of that idea was that history was circular, locked in an eternal battle between good and evil. Every other religious system demonstrates this link. In Hinduism, a person cycles through various lives by being reincarnated. Eventually, if that person is ever good enough, she reaches some other state, perhaps. But it's about individual attainment. Evil doesn't go away per se. The Wikipedia article *Problem of Evil in Hinduism* says, 'This shows the existence of earlier cycles of creation, and hence the number of creation cycles is beginningless. Thus Sankara's resolution to the problem of injustice is that the existence of injustice in the world is only apparent, for one merely reaps the results of one's moral actions sown in a past life... On the higher level of existence, however, there is no evil or good, since these are dependent mainly on temporal circumstances. Hence a jnani, one who has realized his true nature, is beyond such dualistic notions.' That takes away rather quickly one's incentive to do social justice work, which has borne out in Asian history because Hinduism and Buddhism do not, on the whole, lead to social justice reform movements. Or, perhaps you can attain Nirvana and transcend suffering by meditation (Buddhism) or asceticism (Jainism). But this is also individual. Evil per se doesn't go away here either. There are only cycles, or circularity in history. In Zoroastrianism, or yin-yang type thinking, good and evil are co-equal, or eternal principles locked in eternal combat. This too gives rise to a circular story filled with inevitable pendulum swings at best. Popular historian Thomas Cahill in his book *The Gifts of the Jews* notes that the Jews alone bequeathed to us a sense of history because the Jews alone sensed a type of progress or linearity – as opposed to circularity – to human history. The God they knew was moving in history towards a goal. One stage in human history was not the same as all the others. There was no true repetition in history. The lesson is simple and clear: Reasoning about the character of 'god' (i.e. *theology proper*) is directly related to the type of story one expects to live in (i.e. *eschatology*).

It is also connected to a consistent *epistemology* about how one can discern God's activity. How did Israel distinguish God's actions from the ups and downs of all history? Or from every natural disaster resulting from the damaged creation? Through God's spoken word. The pattern of God speaking and then acting is one of the dominant patterns of the entire Old Testament. This pattern helps us know what God does and what people do, and how to separate them. This God acts by speaking. He said, 'Let there be light,' and there was. Ten times God spoke in Genesis 1 to bring about life and bless life.

1. ^{1:3} Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.
2. ^{1:6} Then God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'
3. ^{1:9} Then God said, 'Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear'; and it was so.
4. ^{1:11} Then God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them'; and it was so.
5. ^{1:14} Then God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years; ¹⁵ and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth'; and it was so.
6. ^{1:20} Then God said, 'Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.'
7. ^{1:22} God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.'
8. ^{1:24} Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind'; and it was so.
9. ^{1:26} Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' ²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.
10. ^{1:28} God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'

To Abraham, God said, 'I will redeem my people Israel from bondage' (Genesis 15:13 – 14), and then He did it. Every time God acted, He spoke about it first beforehand. As God engaged with human beings, He always spoke to some human beings first, who then proclaimed that word, and eventually God would fulfill His word. This gave rise to what Israel called 'prophecy.'

Amos summarized this pattern in Amos 3:7, 'Surely the LORD God will do nothing except that which He reveals to His servants the prophets.' Many people ignore that verse and this pattern, partly because (once again) they are too influenced by Augustine's monergism (God causes all), or Aristotle's idea of a primal cause that causes all other effects (God set up all dominos and then pushed the first one), as they defend a view of God's sovereignty that makes God the direct cause of everything that happens, both good and evil. Yet Amos did not say, 'Surely the LORD God is causing everything to happen that does happen, so that everything is a reflection of God's will and God's character.' This is absolutely important, because human beings have a tendency to attribute things to God that He has not spoken about. But God is not *causing* human evil – abuse, negligence, or whatever – of any sort, in any way. Rather, God has granted human beings a genuine will with genuine choices, so human beings are responsible for evil. Even natural disasters are best understood as the result of Adam casting God, the life-giver, out of the creation, and thus creating the phenomenon of human death and creational chaos. 'For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him [i.e. *Adam*] who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:20 – 21). I will address the chastisement by which God shaped Israel over the course of its pre-Christ history, below; that treatment of Israel was, again, God's great exception among all people and was a foreshadowing of what would happen in the very flesh of Jesus; it was not representative of how God 'chastises nations,' which I do not believe He actually does. In general, God said that He will crush evil and defeat it (Genesis 3:14 – 15), and rescue humanity from it, and this what He is doing right now through Jesus.

This is the doctrine of the *sovereignty of God's word*. God's *word* is sovereign. God is sovereign *through His word*. There is nothing that can stop God from fulfilling His word. So, it is a mistake to say that God caused any and all circumstances – especially moral evil – at any point in time, because God does not claim such a responsibility in the Scriptures. That kind of naïve doctrine of the sovereignty of *God*, which makes God the effectual cause of everything, is very different from a doctrine of the sovereignty of *God's word*. The doctrine of the sovereignty of

God, which sees God as causing the totality of history and human choices, is quite foreign to the biblical characterization of God. Suffice to say here that if we assign evil to God's causality, then we have assigned evil to God's character. And if we do that, then we have made God arbitrary and evil. And if that is the case, then the basis for prayer to God, trust in God, and hope for God's decisive victory over evil, is all gone.

In fact, as the long history of God and Israel unfolded, shades of complexity entered into Israel's discernment of how God acts in order to achieve what He had promised. Two major examples suffice to demonstrate my point. First, the selection of David as the king of Israel and his eventual enthronement present a puzzling picture. God, through the prophet Samuel, said to the young David, 'You will be king over Israel' (1 Samuel 16:12 – 13). However, it took years for David to win over every tribe of Israel to his leadership (2 Samuel 5:1 – 4). During that time, everyone had their own motivations and interests: Saul became paranoid and jealous of David, the people of Israel wavered this way and that between two regimes, Jonathan was a loyal friend to David who knew God had blessed David, Michal married David prematurely, probably with starry eyes, David himself had his own hopes and terrors, Gentiles had their own ambitions, etc. By the time David was thirty years old, despite much suffering and turmoil, he became king. God's word had been fulfilled. But we are hard pressed to read the account of Samuel and say precisely what God did to bring about this outcome. The same pattern held; God was faithful to His word, but we are not sure exactly how He acted to bring this about. That was one complexity. This dynamic did not cause Israel to doubt that God would fulfill His word, but they did seem to question their own ability to discern exactly what God was doing in the process of His fulfilling it. The second example is the Babylonian takeover of the southern kingdom of Judah and the city Jerusalem. God had certainly said that He would not protect the kingdom of Judah from the Babylonians because Hezekiah, king of Judah, did not trust God but rather trusted his own diplomatic ties with Babylon (Isaiah 39; 2 Kings 20:12 – 19). That was the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak; Hezekiah's mistake was the last of a long litany of sins that the Israelites had committed. The prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk announced that Babylon would successfully overcome Israel, and Babylon did. So the Babylonian invasion fits the pattern: God spoke about it, and it happened. However, Zechariah would say afterwards that the Babylonians, and subsequent Gentile empires, brought about too much destruction, more than God intended: 'I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster.' (Zechariah 1:14 – 15) This example shows that it was possible for the Gentiles to inflict *more destruction* than God intended. Even though God by His word brought chastisement upon the people of Israel, the Gentiles who played that role still had their own will and went far beyond what God wanted. Now the complexity deepened in another direction because Babylon had done *more* than what God had intended in His announcement.

I raise those two examples above to highlight how the Old Testament is not at all interested in proving the doctrine of the sovereignty *of God*. It labors to prove the doctrine of the sovereignty *of God's word*. How can we discern God's activity from the activities of all other beings, including sinful beings? By God's word. God announces what He will do before He does it. Though the basic epistemology Israel had to discern God's activity became complex, it still did not take away from the basic conviction that God is known – or more precisely, rather, God's *actions* are known – through His word. This Old Testament pattern laid the theological and epistemological foundation for God's Word becoming flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:1 – 5; 14 – 18). We would know not only God's activity, but God's very self, through His Word in human form, and the verbal description of that Word about himself. God is not revealed through the circumstances of our lives, and not even through miraculous events or the lack thereof. God is revealed solely in Jesus Christ. Israel's long experience listening for God's word prepared them to appreciate Jesus and his significance. Since God acts by His word, and because He has promised to be victorious over all evil, He must change *us* by His word.