

Why Choose a Chosen People?

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

Mako A. Nagasawa

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

At this point, we can move onward to consider the development of Israel's spiritual insight and preparation prior to the arrival of Jesus. I believe that the single most important thing that God was teaching Israel was this: the human condition needed an internal transformation at the hands of God. Although God had created humanity in His own image, and human nature was inclined towards Him and towards goodness, Adam and Eve's fall into sin had tarnished the image of God, and damaged human nature. This resulted in shame and blame with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:8 – 13), jealousy, bitterness, and murder as Cain killed Abel, (Genesis 4:1 – 16), and the defiant corruption of all human relations as Cain began a civilization marked by patriarchy, cruelty, and polygamy (Genesis 4:17 – 24). This resulted in massive violence and bloodshed, which God needed to wash away from the ground – thus the Flood and, afterwards, God's permission to set up a provisional system of human justice (Genesis 6 – 9). However, humanity once again set up an oppressive order in defiance of God at Babel (Genesis 11). God's assessment of the human problem, however, is found shortly afterwards, right before the Flood. God identified the problem as *internal* to humanity:

Genesis 6:5 Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶ The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.

Theologian T.F. Torrance remarks, "Mankind is out of gear with nature, and anxiety characterizes their life. But the consequences of broken fellowship with God extend deep into human life and keep spreading. The first brothers fall out with each other, and one slays the other. And so the story of the theological narrative goes on. It is a double story. On one side it is the story of the atomization of mankind, for the internal rupture results in individualization and conflict. On the other it is the story of human attempts at re-socialization, great attempts to mend the broken relations, to heal the internal rupture, to bind divided humanity together again, as at Babel. But all the attempts to heal man partake of our fallen nature and cannot but give new orientation in sin to the broken relationship with God, so that all attempts break themselves on the divine judgment and result in further disintegration. Mankind is unable to re-socialize itself, unable to heal its internal rupture for that which really makes man *man* is the bond between man and God."¹

¹ T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p.39.

Unfortunately, ever since Adam fell, human beings have demonstrated a strong tendency to blame other people and even God for our problems. Adam himself pointed the blame everywhere but himself, as he said to God, “This woman whom You gave to me...” (Genesis 3:12). Two recent studies confirm this: Cordelia Fine’s book *A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives* and Carol Tavris and Eliot Aronson’s book *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*. The titles alone say quite enough about our capacity for self-deception, and these authors document the lengths to which we will go to bias perceptions in our own favor. Thus, if human beings are evasive about the responsibility for their actions, how much more would we be evasive about the corruption of our nature? And if God was committed to honoring human choice, how would He persuade humanity to diagnose ourselves correctly and willingly desire the internal transformation to which God called us?

God’s response was to operate through a chosen people, Israel, for the sake of all humanity and the whole world (Genesis 12:1 – 2). God initiated an irrevocable covenant relationship with Abraham and Sarah and some of their descendants, and others who joined them, which involved an agreement by which God promised to be their Lord and they promised to be His people. However, not all of Abraham and Sarah’s descendants were automatically included in this covenant arrangement, and this is significant: By offering the Jews an identity as a people called Israel, God marked out an identifiable community through whom He worked, and allowed individual Jews to have a choice as to whether they would be a part of this people. At every point, the Jews who stayed within the covenantal identity called Israel were *choosing* to be part of the God’s covenant. Other Gentiles also chose to join biblical Israel by being circumcised and adhering to the Mosaic Law. And, from all appearances, especially after the Babylonian Captivity, some Jews chose to downplay kosher laws, intermarriage taboos, and holy calendar, and declined to return to the Promised Land.

The writers of the Hebrew Scriptures understood Israel to be a partial restoration of humanity-as-God-intended-it. Like Adam and Eve, they were given God’s commands (the Mosaic Law) and placed in a new garden (the Promised Land) to worship God around a specific but temporary manifestation of His presence (first in plain view as the Shekinah Glory-Cloud, then within the Tabernacle, and then within the Temple). They were a new people in a new garden centered around a new Eden. However, as Israel’s story unfolded, it became clear that they were not different from the rest of humanity, but rather, the same. The first person to see that Israel would ultimately need to be internally transformed by God was Moses. As part of his closing words to Israel, Moses said that Israel would one day repeat the sin of Adam and Eve, cast out the presence of God, and symmetrically, be cast out of the garden land into exile (Deuteronomy 27 – 30). Moses insisted that Israel needed to be transformed internally, and that this would happen after the exile, as part of the return from exile:

Deuteronomy 30:1 ‘So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the LORD your God has banished you, ² and you return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, ³ then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. ⁴ If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. ⁵ The LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers. ⁶ Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your **heart** and the **heart** of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your **heart** and with all your soul, so that you may live.

Every subsequent interpretation of Israel’s history in the Nevi’im portion of the Hebrew Scriptures – Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of Twelve Prophets – agreed that Israel would fail morally and spiritually.

King David was both an ordinary Israelite and a ‘new Adam’ who had been given a dominion similar but different to the original Adam. David ruled over the beasts of the field, noted in 1 Samuel 17:34 – 36, and triumphed over a great enemy, Goliath. Yet as much as David, too, is portrayed as a new humanity of sorts, he also came to the same conclusion about himself, that he was part of the old humanity. When he committed adultery and then murder to cover it up, King David also concluded that he had an internal problem that required an internal transformation:

Psalm 51:9 Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean **heart**, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

With this acknowledgement coming from the most celebrated and revered of all the kings of Israel, no descendant of David could claim a spotless pedigree. Each heir of David was a living contradiction: somehow a bearer of hope but yet part of the human problem. The line of David the ‘new Adam’ needed a truly ‘new Adam.’

Jeremiah and Ezekiel in particular had the most insight into Israel’s internal condition. On the cusp of exile into Babylon, the new Babel, they understood that Israel would geographically be identified with the masses of Gentile humanity. This relocation to Babylon corresponded with faced with the reality that Israel, too, needed an internal transformation along with the rest of humanity. They did not need better circumstances or better laws; can one improve much on the garden land and the Mosaic Law? Jeremiah and Ezekiel, looking out at urban injustice and oppression of the poor in particular, could only conclude that Israel’s problem was internal, just as Moses indicated, not external. Israel’s only hope, therefore, to fulfill the human side of its relationship with God and be the people God truly intended, was for God to internally transform them. Hence:

Jeremiah 31:31 ‘Behold, days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,’ declares the LORD. ³³ ‘But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the LORD, ‘I will put My law within them and on their **heart** I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Ezekiel 36:24 For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. ²⁵ Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶ Moreover, I will give you a new **heart** and put a new **spirit** within you; and I will remove the **heart** of stone from your flesh and give you a **heart** of flesh. ²⁷ I will put My **Spirit** within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

Israel’s recording of human history and the historical-literary pattern going first from garden, to sin, to exile, and then to the revelation of the sinfulness afflicting the human heart can be represented in this form:

Humanity		Exiled from the garden land (Gen.3:22 – 24), eventually in Babel (Gen.11). Hearts are in need of change (Gen.6:5).	God promised to bless the world through Israel (Gen.12:1 – 3; Isa.42:1 – 4) and, at least for some, restore them from exile (Isa.49:1 – 6).
Israel	Moses predicts exile from the garden land , sees the need for God to transform hearts (Dt.30:1 – 6).	Exiled from the garden land to Babylon (2 Ki.25, Jer.29). Hearts in need of change (Jer.9:26, 13:23; 17:1).	God promised to change Israel’s hearts , and restore them from exile (Dt.30:1 – 6, Jer.31:31 – 34, Ezk.36:26 – 36).
King David & his heirs	David was exiled from home (2 Sam.15 – 16), had asked God to give him a new heart (Ps.51:10). This is effectively a prediction of the failure of the entire line of David.	The Davidic dynasty was exiled from the garden land into Babylon (2 Ki.25) along with Israel because of their corruption (Jer.23, Ezk.34, Mic.3 – 4)	God promised to raise up a pure and holy King, the Messiah (Isa.9 – 11; Jer.23, Ezk.34), to rule as king over Israel and the world.

Israel was selected to be a case study example of how all humanity is in fact the same, even when some (Israel) are put in an ideal environment and given the best laws that humanity knew until that point. Israel was ‘chosen’ to fail, in a moral sense. They demonstrated to the rest of the world that our problem is fundamentally internal. God does not simply favor Israel. The reason for God’s choice of Israel as a chosen people was that they were chosen to have

an awareness of, and to create a literature about (see below), their need for internal transformation and healing. That internal transformation would become available at the time they were ready to encounter their God in human form, in the human person Jesus of Nazareth.

While Jesus maintained the use of the word 'heart' as the source of human evil, explicitly in Matthew 15:18, Mark 7:19 – 21, and while Paul also said that the 'heart' must be circumcised in Romans 2:28 – 29, the New Testament writers used a word that had broader resonance: the *flesh*. Paul understood Israel's experience prior to Jesus as one of constant struggle with its own '*flesh*.' By choosing this word, Paul was not agreeing with Plato and other Greek philosophers that our physicality was inherently bad, that our souls look forward to the day when it is freed from the prison of our physical bodies. Rather, Paul insisted, as any good Jew would, that our physicality was inherently good, since the good Creator God made us and said that we were good. Paul used the word *flesh* to mean what human nature had become because of the fall: corrupted both physically and spiritually. In Romans 7:14 – 25, Paul describes the plight of the Jew under the Mosaic Law. Although the Law was good and holy, and while Israel understood the Law as a blessing, Israel nevertheless could not fully come to terms with it. Whether Paul was speaking of his personal experience as an individual Jew or Israel's corporate experience under the Law is an interesting question, but irrelevant for the purposes of this discussion, for the one is connected to the other. Either way, Paul's conclusion was the question, 'For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my *flesh*; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not... Who will deliver me from this body of death?' That question led him to understand the work of Jesus: 'For what the [Mosaic] Law could not do, weak as it was through the *flesh* [of Israel], God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of *sinful flesh* and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh so that the requirement of the Law [i.e. new humanity] might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit' (Romans 8:3 – 4). Paul also said that Jesus was raised into a new kind of human life (Romans 6:4) because he put to death 'our old self, in order that our body of sin might be done away with' (Romans 6:5).

John's Gospel puts the matter the most bluntly. John said, 'The Word became *flesh*' (John 1:14). 'Flesh' is the most negative term with which to describe humanity, for it reflects humanity's *substance as impacted by sin*. John could have legitimately said that the Word became 'man' (Greek *anthropos*) or 'a body' (Greek *soma*) without such profoundly negative connotations. But John seems intent on provoking the discussion. The Hellenistic Jewish commentator Philo Judaeus of Alexandria, a contemporary to Jesus and the apostles, wrote: 'It is impossible for the Spirit of God to remain and to pass all its time, as the law-giver himself shows. "For," says Moses, "the Lord said, My Spirit shall not remain among men forever, because they are *flesh*." For, at times, it does remain; but it does not remain forever and ever among the greater part of us; for who is so destitute of reason or so lifeless as never, either voluntarily or involuntarily, to conceive a notion of the all good God. For, very often, even over the most polluted and accursed beings, there hovers a sudden appearance of the good, but they are unable to take firm hold of it and to keep it among them; for almost immediately, it quits its former place and departs, rejecting those inhabitants who come over to it, and who live in defiance of law and justice, to whom it never would have come if it had not been for the sake of convicting those who choose what is disgraceful instead of what is good.' (Philo, 'On the Giants,' *Commentary on Genesis*, V.19 – 21) Philo appears to be capitulating to the Hellenistic philosophical conclusion about human *flesh*. If John was aware of Philo, which I believe he probably was, he is refuting the essence of what Philo was saying, and doing so on the basis of the Hebrew Scriptures – for Philo was negating the prophecies that God would one day dwell by His Spirit within, and thus constitute, His new and true humanity.

Jesus' own self-understanding involved taking on Jewish *flesh* and repeating and redeeming Israel's *story* to finally create a truly new humanity. His baptism in the waters of the Jordan River and forty days in the wilderness (Matthew 3:13 – 4:12; Luke 4:1 – 13) are interpreted against Israel's own experience coming through the waters of the Red Sea and wandering for forty years in the wilderness. The fact that Jesus quoted three times from Deuteronomy lends more support to this claim, since Israel's time in the wilderness was marked by listening to Moses give the message we now call Deuteronomy. And, to make a deeper point, Israel's own episode of coming through water and eventually inheriting a garden land after the wilderness wandering is reminiscent of Adam and Eve being created by God after the primordial waters of creation were pushed back and inheriting the garden of Eden which God made for them. In that sense, Jesus is also repeating and redeeming Adam and Eve's story, because the story of Israel is already connected to the story of all humanity. But whereas Adam and Eve fell into temptation, and whereas Israel did the same in the wilderness, Jesus endured temptation under very strenuous conditions: not in the garden but in the wilderness, and not in community with others but alone. This initial victory represents Jesus' eventual victory to cleanse human nature itself through his life, death, and resurrection. In his resurrection, Jesus

would emerge as a God-drenched, God-soaked, new human being who is able to share his Spirit – the Holy Spirit of his new humanity – with those who receive him.

This articulation of the atonement is called ‘physical redemption,’ which is held by the Eastern Orthodox Church. Physical redemption holds that Jesus had to physically redeem the humanity of one sin-scarred human being – his own – in order to offer his Spirit of his new humanity to everyone, for the redemption of all sinful humanity. I place it here in contrast to the atonement theory called ‘penal substitution,’ which is held most strongly by those in the Augustinian – Reformed camp. Penal substitution states that Jesus absorbed a certain amount of God’s wrath on the cross in order to forgive sinners. This is important to reconciling God’s justice (demanding that sin be punished) and His mercy (demanding that sinners be forgiven). The difficulties I have with penal substitution are many, but the two most relevant here are as follows. First, in penal substitution, Jesus absorbs the *punishment* for sin, but it is less clear what he is doing about the *source* of sin internal to us. Usually, the issue of engaging with the source of our sinfulness is relegated to the work of the Holy Spirit in our sanctification, but there are problems associated with dividing up the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit this way.

Second, penal substitution advocates have difficulty explaining what God is actively doing about *all* human evil. The chief problem they encounter is the question of why God apparently grants salvation from sin to some but not all. For, in order to explain why everyone does not avail themselves of the forgiveness offered by Jesus, penal substitution advocates have to say either that the scope of the atonement was limited by the Father to begin with, or that Jesus’ work on the cross was ‘sufficient’ for all but ‘efficient’ only for some, which then sunders the work of Christ from the work of the Holy Spirit in applying the work of Christ to sinners, since the Holy Spirit applies the atoning work of Christ only, apparently, to the ‘elect.’ This divides the members of the Trinity one way or another, which makes it impossible for us to say to any particular non-Christian, ‘God loves *you*,’ because of the uncertainty injected into the theology: We would simply not know whether God in fact loves the person right in front of us. In the same vein, penal substitution makes it impossible for us to say, ‘God cares about *all* human evil.’ This is simply an extension of the problem. For penal substitution offers very little explanation for what Jesus is actively doing to address *all* of human evil. Once again, some argue that one can attribute ‘forgiveness’ to the atoning work of Jesus, and ‘transformation’ to the subsequent work of the Spirit in the believer, and therefore they have a God who is acting to undo human evil, but only in the ‘elect.’ I believe biblical exegesis proves that dichotomy false,² but regardless, the fundamental problem which I have raised, remains: What about the ‘non-elect’? Has God so arranged the mechanics of salvation so that He is only saving *some* of humanity, which means that He only wants to undo *some* human evil? If so, then it becomes disingenuous for a Christian who subscribes to penal substitution to claim that God wants to undo, heal, and transform *all* human evil, injustice, and brokenness at its very source: within each and every person. The theology simply does not support it. My basic contention is that penal substitution actually makes God complicit in human evil. For this theory posits that at the heart of Christian theology – the atonement – God is solving a problem internal to *Himself* in relation to *some* people, rather than a problem internal to *us* in relation to *all* people.

Physical redemption does not have this problem, for two main reasons. First, the objective of the atonement itself is to achieve an ontological compatibility and union between God and humanity within the loving relations of God’s Triune nature, that is, within God’s very being. This was God’s purpose from the creation, but after humanity’s fall, in order to accomplish this original purpose, God had to also destroy the corruption of sinfulness within each human being so that His love could be received as love and not as torment, since our self-centeredness would resist and resent the call of God to be as other-centered as He is. In the physical redemption theory, the wrath of God against the fallen humanity of Jesus was poured out *within* the person of Jesus, since Jesus was both divine and human, not *upon* the person of Jesus by God, as penal substitution advocates hold. The atonement was personal in the sense that Jesus atoned first for his own humanity through his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. Jesus forced his

² The Spirit therefore *applies* the achievement of Jesus in putting to death the old sin-corrupted human nature and giving birth to a fresh, new, God-soaked, God-purified human nature. Paul, in key passages like Romans 5:1 – 11 and 8:1 – 17, Ephesians 1:3 – 14 and 2:1 – 10, and Colossians 1:13 – 14, says that the basis of God’s forgiveness of us is not because a punitive transaction whereby – as in penal substitution – Jesus absorbs the punishment for our sins due to us under God’s wrath, nor because of an equivalent economic transaction – also in penal substitution – where Jesus ‘paid’ the debt that we owed to God in that sense. Despite the use of this language at times, forgiveness comes because we have died and risen again in Christ and have a radically new identity ‘in Christ’ and not ‘in sin.’ That is, by faith in Christ, we have participated in our own identity transformation whereby the old person we were no longer exists to God. Forgiveness and transformation cannot be divided up between the Son and the Spirit. Both members of the Trinity do both on our behalf.

humanity to adjust to the radical nature of God's other-centered love. Then and only then could he offer the Spirit of his atoned-for-humanity to all, genuinely, without any reservations or limits from God's side. The destruction of the corruption of sinfulness within other human beings therefore begins in us fundamentally with our conversion to Jesus whereby he comes to dwell in us by his Spirit and puts our 'old self' to death as Paul says in Romans 6:6. God's progressive victory against each person's sinfulness is developed subsequently in each person's active relationship with Jesus by his Spirit as we struggle against our own self-centeredness. Then it is consummated at Jesus' return when he will grant us renewed physical bodies akin to his own resurrection body. Jesus deals with a problem internal to us, not internal to God. For God has always been *for humanity*, desiring to draw us up and elevate us into Himself. Because of humanity's fall, He has also been against our sinfulness, evil, injustice, and brokenness because we contradicted our original good nature and, by this internal pollution, set ourselves ontologically against the purpose for which God created us: union with Himself.

Second, physical redemption holds that God by His grace constantly enables human free will rather than negates it, because it is against God's character to strip human beings of their free choice to accept Him in Christ. Those who reject God in Christ do so by their own free will, thus abusing God's grace, and will bring their unhealed, selfish human nature into the presence of the radically other-centered God who calls for all things to become consistent with His character. By seeing matters this way, the physical redemption theory is not 'Augustinian.' The later Augustine posited *monergism* (literally, 'one-will'), such that God's will alone is the sole, efficient cause of the salvation of people, apart from and without any human free will whatsoever. Augustine in the Latin West redefined words like 'predestined' in a way that no Christian had done before him.³ Augustine's contemporary John Cassian, held up in the Eastern Orthodox Church as the one who attempted to correct Augustine, held to the *synergism* (literally, 'working with' God's grace, with God's grace being prior) passed onto him by earlier Christian thinkers. This is why Eastern Orthodox theologians are neither Augustinian, nor Pelagian, nor Semi-Pelagian. Within the physical redemption theory, God is understood as not limiting the scope of the atoning work of Christ in any way. Each and every human being must respond personally and affirmatively Jesus' work of undoing human evil at its source in every human being is truly available to every human being, with no limitations from God's side.⁴ God is understood to be working by His grace within each person, enabling their free will and calling out to them to come to Christ and be transformed; it is their free choice in refusal that explains their ongoing rejection and their embrace of self-centeredness. Much more can and must be said about this comparison, but I offer a preliminary comment here: I believe physical redemption allows us to treat the Old Testament story and prophecies more naturally, and does a better job making sense of the various New Testament idioms surrounding the atonement, so as to firmly undergird the claim that God really and truly wants to bring *all* people to Himself and undo *all* human evil, at its source. This articulation of the atonement clearly gives us the ability to say God is against *all* human evil, and for *all* humanity – each and every person – and all this by His love.

³ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p.110 – 136, especially p.117 – 126.

⁴ This is a much more natural reading of the following Scriptures: 'He [Jesus] himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for those of the whole world.' (1 John 2:2). 'False teachers were...denying the Master who bought them.' (2 Peter 2:1). 'The living God... is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.' (1 Timothy 4:10). 'For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men.' (Titus 2:11) 'God our Savior...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.' (1 Timothy 2:3 – 4) 'The Lord is patient towards you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.' (2 Peter 3:9) 'Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked...rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?...For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies. Therefore, repent and live.' (Ezekiel 18:23, 32 – 33) Advocates of limited atonement ignore these Scriptures.