

Why Choose a Chosen People?

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

Mako A. Nagasawa

Last modified: August 3, 2014

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 #4: Invited to Suffer On Behalf of the World

The voluntary covenant Israel entered into with God from Sinai onwards resulted unquestionably in Israel's suffering. The suffering came from three different sources: the Gentiles around them, Satan, and God. Because I am writing this paper with an eye towards evangelism, I find that I must address more deeply the question of Israel's suffering at the hand of God, and the question of the character of God as revealed throughout Israel's covenant history. What I find is that the Hebrew Scriptures present the relationship between God and Israel in a way that Christians find difficult to explain. They either try to avoid it out of a discomfort or embarrassment, or they effectively threaten the non-Christian with the wrathful side of God displayed in the Old Testament that is the backdrop, i.e. the necessary flip side, of God's mercy and grace found in Jesus in the New Testament. They then proceed with this dichotomy in their minds, which is, in my opinion, erroneous. Let me quickly summarize Israel's suffering at the hands of the Gentiles and Satan.

First, Israel was attacked by the Gentile powers around them. On a purely sociological level, one can understand this fairly easily. When Israel experienced some kind of blessing from God, the Gentile people roundabout wanted to acquire, control, or dismantle that blessing. The Egyptian Pharaoh, for instance, felt threatened by Israel's population (Exodus 1:9). God had enabled Israel to 'be fruitful and multiply' (significantly noted in Exodus 1:8) because God made them a partial restoration of His creational plan for humanity, and thus He empowered them with His creational blessing (Genesis 1:28). Yet the Egyptian Pharaoh interpreted Israel's large population as a political and military threat. He therefore forced them into hard slavery and later attempted to kill all the infant boys (Exodus 1:10 – 21).

The two greatest blessings that God gave to Israel were the land of Canaan and the Temple in Jerusalem, the physical representations of the original garden and Eden, respectively. The land itself was always attractive to other peoples (the Philistines/Phoenicians, etc.) and the major world empires who saw the Middle East as the land bridge between continents. In fact, God had to protect the Israelites from themselves: He stopped the Israelites from taking over each other's portions of land by requiring land to return to families every 49 years (see especially Leviticus 25). Although the erection of the Tabernacle was a 'Plan B' (see below), and although the shift from the portable Tabernacle to the fixed Temple was ambiguous – as David's commitment to build God a house did not receive an endorsement from the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 7) – the Temple came to signify a real and tangible blessing of God to Israel. However, Hezekiah's folly in bringing the Babylonian envoy into the Temple to see its riches put the wheels of Babylon's imperial designs in motion (2 Kings 15; Isaiah 39). Babylon invaded the southern kingdom of Judah, raided the Temple, burned it and the city of Jerusalem to the ground, and deported part of the Jewish

population to Babylon. After the Jews rebuilt Jerusalem and the Temple, the Gentile empires that still held Israel captive as a vassal people interpreted the city and the Temple in purely political terms, and thus vied with the Jews over possession of the city and the Temple. In this way, the Gentile powers around Israel kept trying to acquire, control, or dismantle God's blessings upon Israel.

Second, Israel was subjected to attacks by 'the Satan' (the accuser), the supernatural enemy of all humanity. In Christian tradition, Satan initiated the fall because he refused to follow God's command that the angels serve humanity. Wanting to demonstrate humanity's fallibility, he instigated the fall of Adam and Eve. God then pronounced humanity's redemption and Satan's doom in the garden (Genesis 3:14 – 15). From that point onward, Satan attempts to thwart God's plan of redemption. Because God desired to bless Israel, and through Israel all humanity, Satan desired to thwart that blessing. Christians later saw continuity between Israel's persecution by 'the great dragon...the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan,' and their own persecution, since they had inherited the blessing and commission of God (Revelation 12), but this begs the question of how Israel understood its own suffering at the hands of Satan.

In the Hebrew Scriptures outside of Genesis, Satan appears most actively in the book of Job. Job as a character seems to me to be a representation of Israel as a whole. Job certainly behaves as an ideal Jew – offering bountiful offerings to God, praying and interceding for others, etc. Just as God had blessed Job with fruitful land and fertile family, God had brought Israel into the 'garden land' to enjoy the fruits of His gardening and to become a fruitful people. Moreover, Job was targeted by Satan, just as Israel was, as a bearer of God's praise and prophetic hope. Satan is, at least, an indirect cause of misfortune, disease, and death. The question of whether Job would love God without material and relational blessing was a question very pertinent to Israel, especially during its exile in Babylon. And God's response to Job emphasizing His wisdom and love – not His justice – was part of God's reply to Israel (see below). Thus, it seems relatively easy to see the place of Job in Israel's Scriptures. Job's theodicy raised the same questions that Israel asked: Is this what it means to be God's covenant partner?

Because I believe Job represents Israel, I believe Job shares a similar role with the Messianic King, who would also represent Israel. It is not too difficult to see, not a perfect one to one correspondence, but a categorical similarity between Job and Jesus. Jesus was the ideal Jew; he prayed and interceded for others. Jesus' supreme test was to forego the material and relational blessings of his Jewish heritage and ultimately give up his very life while still remaining committed to God. Jesus was targeted by Satan, but in a way that even Job was not: whereas God prevented Satan from taking Job's life, such protection was not extended to Jesus. Finally, the vindication of Jesus through his death and resurrection is seen as God's supreme demonstration of His wisdom (Romans 11:33, 1 Corinthians 1:22 – 24). Hence Job is a Messianic-Davidic figure because he sums up Israel's experience and questions in himself.

Therefore, difficult questions about the character of God raised by the book of Job (does God cause or allow evil) must be reframed. Job is focused on the question of being God's covenant partner. Who does Job represent? Job does not represent 'everyman' or 'any person.' It is not appropriate to generalize that God causes or allows evil for everyone, or that God causes or allows evil in general. Rather, God makes a covenant with a human partner – represented by Job – which exposes that human partner to Satanic attack, because Satan desires to stop God from redeeming humanity through this human covenant partner. God nevertheless maintains and protects His chosen humanity, for the sake of all humanity. It is painful and costly to be God's covenant partner, which Israel and, supremely, Jesus, discovered. Yet there is blessing and hope involved, for this is God's wise way of unfolding His plan to redeem the world.

Any treatment of the book of Job would have to account for God's response to Job in Job 38 – 41. What is it about this speech that stops Job's complaining? Unfortunately, most commentators see God's response as stressing His sheer power in creation, as if God were saying to Job, 'I am more powerful than you, and I know more than you,' as if this intimidating and obvious fact is what stopped Job's mouth. If such were the case, God would be justifying various evils and calamities based on some purported 'good' that He were bringing out of it, as if to say, 'The ends justifies the means.' Much to the contrary, along with Professor Elenore Stump, in her lecture *Job and the Problem of Evil*,¹ I find just as much evidence in God's speech that stresses His ongoing love and care for His creation, not His direct efficient 'control' of it: 'Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the

¹ Professor Elenore Stump, *Job and the Problem of Evil*, <http://www.veritas.org/media/talks/151>.

deep?’ (38:16); ‘Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions?’ (38:39); ‘Do you know the time the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer? Can you count the months they fulfill, or do you know the time they give birth? They kneel down, they bring forth their young, they get rid of their labor pains. Their offspring become strong; they grow up in the open field; they leave and do not return to them’ (39:1 – 4). Job stopped his complaints because he was persuaded that God does indeed care about His entire creation, that God is involved in an ongoing way, and that God would not abandon His creation because of His great love for it. Job was not silenced by God’s sheer power as if God had just bullied him into silence. God’s response to Job, and to us, in our painful questions about human suffering and evil, is not to claim that He is ‘in control’ so that we had better just be silent about it. His response is to say, ‘I am involved. I am affected.’ God’s response stresses His ongoing involvement with, love for, and care for His creation.

This is why God’s ultimate response to suffering is to *show* that He is personally involved out of love, in the human person of Jesus. Jesus entered into the suffering of Israel and all humanity. He enacted the suffering of God in God’s love for His broken world, suffering personally in order to bring forth a new humanity. Then Jesus drew his people into his suffering, in partnership with himself. He spoke to his disciples about being persecuted because of their loyalty to him (Matthew 5:9 – 12, Luke 6:20 – 26), and Paul spoke about the persecution falling on him as ‘filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions’ (Colossians 1:24). The apostles were saying that the task of being God’s covenant partner now falls on the church. The suffering Israel sustained from human and spiritual enemies trying to thwart God’s purposes now fall upon the body of Christ, the locus of God’s purposes being carried out by God’s human partners. However, there is one form of suffering that Israel suffered that does not fall on the church: the punishment that came from God for disobeying the Mosaic Law. To that subject I now turn.

Third, as I have already begun to elaborate, ‘Israel’ as a corporate entity entered into a covenant with God in which the corporate community called ‘Israel’ was subjected to refinement and chastisement from God Himself. Individual Israelites could defect from the corporate community, and many apparently did especially during the diaspora, ignoring the rite of circumcision, or trying painfully to undo it, for example. But for those who stayed within the corporate community ‘Israel,’ we observe the occurrences in the Old Testament where God actively judged specific sins of Israel. He took the lives of Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu because they offered strange fire before the Lord in the priestly service (Leviticus 10:1 – 3). He slew disobedient Israelites in the wilderness for complaining (Numbers 11:1 – 2). God caused the earth to open under Korah and his rebellion (Numbers 16). He sent snakes to bite the Israelites after they longed to go back to Egypt (Numbers 21). God withdrew His protection from Israel in the face of various Canaanite peoples: the inhabitants of Ai in Joshua 7; the enemies roundabout in Judges; and the Philistines in Samuel. God took the life of Uzzah who touched the ark (2 Samuel 5). He brought Assyria and Babylon to the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah, respectively, to punish them for their idolatry, oppression, injustice, and reliance upon Gentile military powers. They invaded Israel and took them captive.

God’s judgments on Israel had a double meaning. On the one hand, they were active movements of God to judge and purge something out of the people, to probably remove the ‘worst offenders.’² On the other hand, these incidents were moments when God was revealing and making visible something that was already happening in the hearts of the Israelites. For example, the incident of the snakes in Numbers 21:5 – 9 is contrasted with Numbers 21:1 – 4 where God delivered the Israelites from the Canaanite king Arad. The strange response of the Israelites in 21:5, longing for the captivity under Egypt, was perfectly inappropriate. Something in them was turning away from God, and dying. God made that visible and concrete through this incident where some Israelites died. In that sense, God was revealing what was occurring within the hearts of those Israelites. He was pointing out an ontological reality and danger deep within the hearts of the people, namely, their choice of death, and not simply taking offense over a bad behavior.

Thus, the Israelites suffered at the hands of God because of their sins, and because *they agreed* in the Sinai covenant to be chastised by God (Deuteronomy 27 – 29) in hope that God would also eventually remove their resistance to Him (Deuteronomy 30:6). Isaiah said that Jerusalem and its people had ‘received of the Lord’s hand double for all

² Let me be quick to add that I do not think God was instantly consigning them to hell. If God offered people who died during the Flood another chance to accept the lordship of Jesus (1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6), it is my hope that this principle is extended to others whose lives God took in the Old Testament. See below. In addition, the nature of hell needs to be clarified; along with the Eastern Orthodox Church, and C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce*, I understand the hell to be a state of being in which human beings can place themselves, in which the love of God is experienced as torment.

her sins' (Isaiah 40:2). The writer of Hebrews said retrospectively about Israel's history, 'Every transgression and disobedience [of Israel] received a just penalty' already (Hebrews 2:2). Why did Israel suffer this way? Because Israel repeatedly failed the moral dimension of the Mosaic Law, which was not even as high an ethical standard as Jesus' own teaching, but was enough to condemn Israel before God; this led Moses to speak of Israel's future exile as certain (Deuteronomy 27 – 30).

Hence, when we read the Jewish authors' reflections on these judgments of God on Israel, we must be sure to remember that these were Israel's experiences alone. Take the proverb:

'In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider – God has made the one as well as the other...' (Ecclesiastes 7:14).

In trying to develop an understanding of God's role in human suffering, Mark R. Talbot mentions this proverb as if it were universal and applicable to all people everywhere at any time.³ Yet the proverb cannot be divorced from its context as part of Israel's experience under the Mosaic covenant. The same principle applies when we read the following proverb:

'The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD' (Proverbs 16:33).

Casting lots had a special purpose in the Law of Moses: to choose between the two goats on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:8 – 10) and to divide up land inheritance portions (Numbers 26:55 – 56; 33:54; 34:13; 36:2). The last people to use this in Scripture were the Jewish apostles, who used this method to select a replacement for Judas Iscariot (Acts 1). This way of deciding matters was specific to Israel.

Likewise, when we find a more serious-sounding verse in Isaiah which apparently says that God causes calamity – 'The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these' (Isaiah 45:7) – we must clarify what Isaiah really meant: God brought calamity upon *Israel*. We see this in the context of Isaiah 45:1 – 13. God wanted Cyrus the Persian to know that the time of calamity *for Israel* was over, and the time of restoration and release was at hand. God was the important agent behind Israel's destiny, and He was telling Cyrus to 'let My exiles go free' (Isaiah 45:13). Anyone who applies this thought of Isaiah about calamity to everyone, everywhere is mistaken. Isaiah was referencing Israel alone. Similarly, Moses' comment in Deuteronomy 32:39 ('See now that I, I am He; and there is no god besides Me; it is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal; and there is no one who can deliver from My hand'), along with Hannah's comment in 1 Samuel 2:6 ('the LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up'), were statements *to Israel about God's covenant with Israel*. In the context of his poem, Moses was reminding Israel of their identity as God's chosen people (Deuteronomy 32:1 – 8), God's care for them in the wilderness (32:9 – 14), Israel's disloyalty and rebellion against God (32:15 – 18), which brought on God's judgment (32:19 – 35); but on the other side of judgment is God's restoration (32:36 – 43). They had seen specific instances where God took human life. All these judgments came upon Israel specifically because of their disobedience to the Mosaic covenant. I repeat the observation of the author of Hebrews: 'Every transgression and disobedience [of *Israel* already] received a just penalty' (Hebrews 2:2).

God's holiness and love cut into the flesh of Israel, represented by the rite of circumcision, and His chastisement of the flesh of Israel went deeper and deeper until He entered into human flesh as Jesus of Nazareth. Notably, the last commandment barring covetousness, or jealousy, revealed all manner of coveting in the hearts of each Israelite, as it did for the apostle Paul (Romans 7:7 – 13). Covetousness was the primal sin that led Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit; they coveted God's authority and wanted to displace Him from the creation and become their own 'gods.' But from a cursory glance at any of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures, God did not punish covetousness per se, but the outward actions that resulted inevitably from coveting: a lust for control that led to idolatry, a lust for wealth that led to injustice and oppression of the poor, a lust for power that led to corruption in the official leadership, a lust for sex outside the vision of God for human sexuality, a lust for security that led to Israel's kings making foreign alliances, including using marriage as a political tool, etc.

³ Mark R. Talbot, 'All the Good That is Ours in Christ: Seeing God's Gracious Hand in the Hurts Others Do to Us', edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), p.42

God did not punish covetousness per se until He punished it in the very flesh of Jesus. Jesus never coveted anything, and the very faithfulness and innocence of Jesus was the just wrath of God poured out on covetous human flesh, and the very judgment of God on human sin at its source. But Jesus suffered what he did not deserve in a manner that involved far more internal struggle and battle than Israel did, for his struggle was to cleanse out covetousness and all sinfulness from his own humanity, to become the source of victory over sin at the source. 'In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.' (Hebrews 5:7 – 9)

Thus, Jesus judged and put to death the sinful flesh that he had taken on. Put the other way round, all the judgments of God that were poured out upon the flesh of Israel pre-figured and made externally visible God's future judgment on the flesh of Jesus. Israel's experience of suffering under the Mosaic Law and God's wrath pre-figured, to a limited and partial degree, Jesus' own experience of suffering. Jesus' sinless life was not effortless; it came at great cost to him. Nor did Jesus remain sinless simply to take the judgment of God upon the cross. Rather, he embraced the judgment and wrath of God at every moment of his life, precisely by struggling at every single moment of his life against the human flesh he had taken on. Even Calvin noted this: 'When it is asked how, after abolishing sins, Christ removed the discord between us and God and acquired a righteousness, it may be replied generally that he provided us with this by the whole course of his obedience...From the moment he put on the person of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation for our redemption...In order, however, to define the manner of salvation more surely, scripture ascribes it to Christ's death as its property and attribute. Yet there is no exclusion of the rest of the obedience which he performed in his life; as Paul comprehends the whole of it, from the beginning to the end, when he says, 'he made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross'...Nor was this without inward conflict, because he had taken our infirmities, and it was necessary to give this proof of his obedience to his Father. And it was no mean specimen of his incomparable love to us, to contend with horrible fear, and amid those dreadful torments to neglect all care of himself, that he might promote our benefit.'⁴ Calvin himself says that Jesus' whole life, not just his death, was atoning and purifying. His whole life was the undoing of human sin and the forging of a new humanity in himself. The cross simply made visible what was happening in the flesh of Christ all along. The suffering of Jesus on the cross made visible what he was suffering all along. And it also made visible what was happening to the flesh of Israel to a lesser and limited extent.

People who read the Bible in a flat, linear way often get the impression that God deals with all people the way He dealt with Israel, though perhaps to a lesser degree. That is, on an individualistic reading, they interpret bad circumstances as the wrath of God, and, not surprisingly, they interpret material blessing (for instance) as the blessing of God for themselves as *individuals*. Read and interpreted corporately, when events happen in nature or politics, people often ascribe an interpretation of those events to the wrath of God *on an entire people*: the earthquake in Haiti signifies the judgment of God on Haiti's voodoo and supposed pact with the devil; the Al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Towers and Pentagon on September 11th, 2001 signifies a judgment of God on the U.S. for allowing abortion and gay marriage, etc. Also involved is the tendency to think, as Calvin thought and the Reformed Theonomists (including the American Puritans) did after him, that Israel represents a blueprint for a Christian civil society, i.e. a theocracy. And once that paradigm is the lens through which people see, they interpret national disturbances as bad omens of God's failure to live up to His laws, and national fortunes as God's approval for their moral righteousness. The tendency to read one's self into the story of Old Testament Israel is strong, but wrong-headed.

The questions we must ask are: Does God deal with other people, whether individually or corporately, the same way He dealt with Old Testament Israel? Does Israel provide us with God's blueprint for how Christians ought to influence every society? I would insist that the answer is absolutely 'no' to these questions, because the tendency to read *one's self* into the story of Israel is founded on a faulty understanding of the role of Israel. God's special covenant with Israel made them absolutely unique among all peoples of the world (Deuteronomy 11). This special relationship where God and Israel agreed to the covenant in order to purify Israel made them different. And over time, God drew the cords of His transforming, purifying love closer and closer around Israel: He dealt with the chosen family of Genesis 12 – 50 more 'loosely' than the whole nation from Exodus 19 onward, etc. But because

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.5. See also T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation*, p.56 – 82.

this did not solve the immediate issue of Israel's sinful flesh, they also resisted. The chastisement of God upon Israel was a direct result of the special covenant that bound together God and Israel. The tighter God drew His cords of love around Israel, drawing them to Himself and His purposes, the more they resisted, sinned, and were judged. When God was shaping Israel to have no dynastic kingship (a bureaucratic state!), Israel insisted that they have one. When God condescended to give them a dynastic kingship, God condescended but drew the king into a radically different posture from the kings of the nations roundabout Israel. But the kings of Israel became jealous of the Gentiles and acted like them, so God judged the Davidic kings. Even when God eliminated idolatry from Israel through the Babylonian captivity, they still developed a nationalistic and ethnocentric rebellion to God's plan to redeem the world. This became part of God's preparation of Israel for His personal coming to them in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It made them reject Jesus precisely because His love extended to the Romans (Luke 4:14 – 30) as well as the marginal within Israel. Hence the covenant between God and Israel 'was paradoxical in character – the more particular it became, the more universal it also became; the deeper the bond between God and man was driven in the human existence of Israel, the closer redemption made contact with creation; the more intimately Israel was tied to the one and only God, the God of all, the more the activity of grace broke through the limitation of national Israel and reached out to all the world. That was particularly apparent in the election of Israel to be God's *laos*, people, upon which Israel's aspirations to be *ethnos*, nation, were shattered again and again.'⁵ That is the suffering of Israel at the hands of God. It was unique among all peoples, and it reached a culmination and finality in the suffering of Jesus.

Once again, I reiterate my conviction that Israel is not 'every man' or 'every woman' or 'any Christian nation.' It does *not* represent God's active involvement in the affairs of all humanity to judge specific sins with suffering. God does not judge nations through the outcomes of international politics and the catastrophic wars one nation wages against another. Circumstances and historical events do not reflect the will and character of God. Rather, God's judgment on Israel before Jesus represented God's active involvement in the physical body and mind of Jesus to judge the humanity he had taken on, taking it all the way to its death. So the suffering was specific to Israel, and then concentrated in Jesus, and brought to an end through his death and resurrection. Paul's exhilarating statement, 'There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1) is exact because, as a Jew speaking to those who 'know the Law' (Romans 7:1), he can fully appreciate the fact that, because he is joined to Jesus who stands on the other side of the Law's condemnation, he no longer lives under the Mosaic Law and its threat of exile and punishment because of the displeasure of God. Israel struggled under the Law, and then Jesus assumed sinful flesh and concentrated the great struggle and suffering of Israel within himself, leaving no remainder. The suffering of Old Testament Israel in this third aspect, that which came by the angry chastisement of God for breaking the Mosaic Law, was unique and has been completed by Jesus.

In fact, the above three points offer a fascinating response to the question of why God did not have multiple 'chosen people' groups. More on this larger question can be found below in my summary, but with regards to the suffering of Israel, I believe such a scenario to be theoretically impossible. Why? For one, the fact of Jesus' unique incarnation and personal significance makes it logically impossible to have multiple 'chosen people' groups. Jesus had to inherit a history of people who had borne the brunt of God's chastisement upon their flesh to make it his very own. There is no disconnecting Jesus from the Mosaic Law, for it was the Mosaic Law which articulated the judgment of God that was ultimately executed within and upon the human flesh of Jesus. Had God established another covenant with another people, He would have had to make either group's suffering a waste and a lie, because Jesus would only be conceived once and carry out his saving mission once for all. The Word of God become flesh in Jesus could not shed humanity and then take on another human flesh, for that would render the union between God and humanity mere whim rather than the bond of permanent saving significance. Secondly, although this hypothetical scenario is already ruled out, if God had another 'chosen people' in addition to Israel, He would have exposed more of humanity to attack from their own neighbors or from Satanic forces arrayed against Him. The suffering of Israel was quite enough.

Our subject merits a much longer treatment than can be given here, but I wish to move onto the relevance of this conclusion for tackling the topic of God's character. At this point, we have almost fully extricated God Himself from being a cause of evil and suffering, generally. I focused here on Israel's direct experience as a community. But I must also say a brief word about God's taking of non-Israelite life at the Flood of Noah, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plague on the firstborn of Egypt at the time of the Exodus, and the war with the Canaanite

⁵ T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation*, p.51

military fortresses at the time of Joshua. I think we can make three observations about these incidents affecting non-Israelites in Scripture: First, God did each event to protect and preserve people of faith. If Noah and his family had been killed by the rampant violence of his day, then there would be no faith left on the earth, no Israel, and no Jesus. If Pharaoh had succeeded in killing all the firstborn boys of Moses' generation, and then probably the next, there would be no Israel in a meaningful sense, and no Jesus. If Sodom and Gomorrah and the Canaanite, with their cult of child sacrifice and tribal violence had not been removed from the land of Canaan, this would have threatened Israel, and threatened the future existence of Jesus. If there were no Jesus, then there would be no healing of human nature. If there were no Israel, then there would be no one to document the diagnosis and be so committed to the cure and God's mission to send His followers out into the world to risk life and limb to proclaim the cure. Jesus was necessary because of the fall. Israel was necessary because Jesus was necessary. God therefore needed to protect Israel.

Second, these events were unique and are not repeatable. For example, God said He will never again bring about a flood (Genesis 9:12 – 17). Israel's Exodus deliverance from Egypt and the conquest of Joshua are unrepeatable because the history of Israel is unrepeatable; they have run the course of their history as Moses foresaw it. The events of Sodom and Gomorrah are unrepeatable because they were intertwined with interactions God had with Abraham and Lot. Hence, none of those incidents serve as models for God's interactions with us in the present. In fact, now that Jesus has come, the covenant with Israel reached its climax and the people of God no longer need the same kind of protection that God extended to Israel. Unnerving as this might be to say and to read, God does not extend that protection to His people after Jesus.

Third, we must quickly consider Peter's comments in 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6 about Jesus meeting those who were slain during the flood. Peter's remarks indicate that when God took life in the Old Testament, He did not simply cast them into hell and damnation. Rather, God took their lives before they hardened their own hearts so firmly to the point that they could not choose Jesus. I believe they had a chance at choosing Jesus when he appeared to them and presented himself. God's mercy was severe, yes, but it was still a form of mercy. Thus, God ultimately treats everyone the same: Everyone gets a chance to choose Jesus and receive his new, healed humanity. Again, much more about this can be said, but I think my comments address those loose ends.

God does not cause human suffering, and the experience of Israel actually proves that point rather than calls it into question. In the natural world, suffering is the result of Adam and Eve's choice to disobey in the garden and plunge the creation into disharmony. The natural world and the created order is wracked with convulsions because humanity pushed off God, the source of life, to a distance, and death has set into the cosmos in such a way that human life is marked by suffering. The world had its own geologic processes, but in the creation, there appeared to be some kind of divine protection and blessing afforded to humanity in the garden – perhaps the role of angels as Psalm 91 suggests – and apparently on the created world too if humanity moved outward in obedience to God to spread the garden. That divine protection appears to have been rejected once the fall occurred. Paul summarizes this by saying, '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). In this corruption of creation, God was simply according the wishes of humanity, whom He had placed in real authority over the creation. Adam and Eve wished to kick God out of the creation by becoming their own authorities. Thus, the pains in childbirth and the thorns and thistles are not simply 'retribution' from a God who felt spited; they were ontological consequences of pushing the life-giving life-source, God, out of the creation: All life-producing activities would now happen with pain and sorrow, because God was not in the center of humanity's life-producing activities. Even human beings would be directly affected by the physical world's suffering through disease, genetic mutation, and death.

God, out of His love for humanity, did not consent to this rejection, but immediately began to redeem humanity. He did not allow death and sin to have the final word, nor did He destroy the rebellious world, nor did He remain at a distance. Such courses of action would have violated His very character of love for us. Instead, He did what His love and very being required: He re-engaged humanity, summoned a community of people to voluntarily stay within a covenant relation as a community to prepare themselves for the decisive event where God would take a corrupted human nature to Himself, suffer on our behalf, and, by embracing the fullness of death, defeated sin at its source: in us. This is why Israel's history took its glorious and often painful route. Israel suffered on behalf of the world. God's chosen people – which was still of voluntary membership – bore the role of representing God in the world and being His human partner in His purposes. But Israel was also the obstacle to God. God overcame that

resistance in and through Himself, by coming personally as the king of the Jews, Jesus of Nazareth. And the suffering of Israel from all three sources climaxed in a tidal wave of suffering upon and within the one man, Jesus. He suffered redemptively and calls His people to suffer redemptively with Him for the sake of His purposes. There is only one sense in which we can say 'God allows suffering': He does not send Jesus back to earth right now to end it all immediately. Otherwise, God in Christ is working by the Spirit in us to undo human evil at its source and the suffering it has directly or indirectly caused.