

Why Choose a Chosen People?

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

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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 #5: Chosen to Document the Diagnosis

Remarkably, Israel's own self-interest resulted not only in their willingness to let God transform them internally, but also resulted in an accurate diagnosis written down and preserved throughout the Jewish community in the form of the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures. This is quite remarkable given the human tendency to ignore or destroy self-incriminating evidence, from ancient to modern times. We are aware, for example, of Turkey in the 20th century destroying evidence of the Armenian genocide, and from the ancient period, of Egypt's priests destroying evidence of the short-lived, sun-god monotheism of Pharaoh Akhenaten (who began to reign in 1379 BCE), which challenged the pantheon of Egyptian gods and which bore a curious resemblance to the monotheism of the Israelite captives.¹ We know from within the biblical record of Israel's story that the Torah of Moses fell into disrepair and was forgotten for quite some time, until priests rediscovered it in the Temple under the reign of King Josiah (2 Kings 22:8). Hence, the documentation now known as the Hebrew Scriptures or Christian Old Testament, from a sociological perspective, is impressive and quite significant because, as a literature of a people, it is an anomaly.

I think we are required to say that the Jewish motivations to canonize the Hebrew Scriptures were plainly mixed and strongly tilted towards the negative side. I regard as a pious fiction the notion that Israel was reverentially led by the Spirit of God to disseminate and preserve their Scriptures. Surely some Jewish nationalists believed they would inherit their national freedom, land, security, and victory over enemies through God's promises. In fact, we know that the Essenes of Jesus' day held those beliefs and absolutely treasured the Hebrew Scriptures, leaving for us to discover the well-preserved set of scrolls now called the Dead Sea Scrolls. A few others, the more measured and pious among them, believed they would be a part of something even larger than that, for God's promises to Israel always involved the restoration of the entire world to the good purposes for which God had intended it; therefore, God's promises could never simply be a pretext for Jewish ethnocentrism. Regardless of which Jews had which attitude, however, the covenant gave rise not only to an accurate diagnosis, but also the voluntary preservation of the Hebrew Scriptures and its dissemination throughout the entire community. Even the more nationalistic and ethnocentric among them developed a thorough and wholehearted devotion to Israel's sacred texts. This is quite significant, for, unlike the myths and stories that circulated among other people groups legitimizing their empires, kingdoms, and prerogatives to rule others, Israel's Scriptures condemn Israel for being just as flawed as everyone else, and unworthy of the blessings of its God. That is to say, Israel's sacred texts, though they certainly hold that

¹ Rodney Stark, *Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief* (New York: Harper One, 2007), p.157 – 162.

Israel had a special role to play at the behest of its God (election), serve the remarkable purpose of condemning Israel (sin) and blessing the world (universal scope).

The condition that gave rise to this literature within Israel was *God's progressive revelation*. Over time, God progressively clarified Himself and His promises to further bless both Israel and the world. For example, God's promise to Abraham to bless his descendants and, through them, the world in Genesis 12:1 – 3 is rather vague, as anyone must admit. It is nothing like the Suffering Servant prophecy of Isaiah 53, which came centuries later and which also carried incredible ramifications for Israel and the world. But even the majestic Isaiah 53 did not have a time frame associated with it, did not exactly specify the type of death the Servant would die, did not allude to the Servant's vindication birthing Israel's missionary advance in love to the Gentile nations rather than causing an automatic elevation of Israel's power over those stubborn Gentiles. As Paul mentions in Ephesians, this truth 'in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel' (Ephesians 3:5 – 6). God did not, and I would argue, *could not* disclose all at once the full meaning and implications of His coming in Jesus of Nazareth for the sake of the whole world, even Israel's enemies, precisely because Israel would have not only killed the prophets, which happened in many cases anyway, but destroyed the prophetic documents in protest and anger, and perhaps abandoned the covenant, too. So God provided enough vagueness into the coming work of Jesus and mission of his people so that the Jews would not destroy the Scriptures and abandon the covenant outright. It was this progressive nature of God's revelation to Israel, combined with Jewish self-interest, which provided Israel with the incentive to collect and canonize these documents. All Jews would respect and preserve the Scriptures, though most did so because of their self-centeredness, ethnocentrism, and national pride.

The progressive revelation that God employed made a certain impact on Abraham at his time, and other Israelites at their times, because of their own tendencies towards self-preservation, parochialism, and ethnocentrism. Who would not but leap at the promise of land and family? And Abraham and Sarah were old, childless people when God spoke to them and gave them the promise of land and family. But this is not the only way to understand the promise of God; God was also appealing to the creational blessing that He had pronounced over Adam and Eve and all humanity, so there is always a point of connection and small overlap between human self-interest and God's desire to bless us. And God was forthright about wanting to bless the nations in a significant way, so He was appealing to what still remained of His image within Abraham, i.e. what was best about him. So Abraham welcomed the promise of God, probably because it sounded better than anything he could imagine on his own, and traveled with his family to Canaan. But God also constantly subverted and overturned all the self-centered proclivities of the humanness of this chosen family at the time by continuing to keep the whole world before Israel as a focus. By watching God bless Lot, Hagar and Ishamel, and Abimelech, Abraham learned to care just a bit more about all peoples, to keep his heart open to the world through the God who kept the world before him. Abraham interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah in order to protect his nephew Lot, but in the process, became a model for God's chosen people to plead for God's mercy on behalf of others. Jacob learned that God was connected somehow to his enemy, his brother Esau. Only by facing his brother again could he face God. Joseph, too, learned to give up his enmity against Egypt and his brothers, and God used him as an agent for Egypt's blessing, the blessing and restoration of the family of Jacob, and the development of a godly other-centeredness of each of his brothers and even his father as they had to relive the threat to the half-brother Benjamin. God called Israel, as a whole, to love all peoples, especially as Israel listened to its own stories, psalms, and prophetic hopes on its Sabbaths and holy days. David, too, learned to love all peoples; although I suspect he wrote his Psalms calling the nations to acknowledge his God with a thrill of personal vindication because God had delivered him from the hand of his enemies, I also suspect that as time passed, he discerned in his own songs a genuine call of God to those Gentile nations in love. And so on. God called Israel to the world through the Scriptures.

When the time came for Jesus of Nazareth to be born, there was at least one spiritually and theologically sensitive, virgin Israelite woman who was ready to receive him by faith into her womb, and perhaps even raise him without prejudice against the oppressive Romans. This is suggested by Kenneth Bailey in his observation of Mary's *Magnificat*: The song is in an inverted parallel form, but is missing a line that could have called for explicit denunciations of the Gentiles, and there is a remarkable absence of such a line.²

² Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p.191

Luke 1:46 And Mary said: 'My soul exalts the Lord, ⁴⁷ And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. ⁴⁸ For He has had regard for the humble state of His handmaid;	Praise Salvation Humble
For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. ⁴⁹ For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and holy is His name.	Are blessed Salvation Praise
⁵⁰ And His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him. ⁵¹ He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones, And has exalted those who were humble.	Mercy To Israel Salvation Judgment Humiliation Exaltation
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things; And sent away the rich empty-handed. ⁵⁴ He has given help to Israel His servant, [and cast down the Gentiles who gloat over Israel]? in remembrance of His mercy, ⁵⁵ as He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and his descendants forever.'	Exaltation Humiliation Salvation (Judgment) Mercy To Israel

To the extent that the thought omitted in 1:54 is not a strategic omission by Luke the writer, Mary appears to have been shaped by more thoughtful reflection on Israel's Scriptures. Perhaps Zacharias and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, and a few others shared the same insight. On the whole, however, given the traumatic pressures upon Israel from Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and finally Roman occupation over the centuries, Simon Peter and the other disciples did not understand Jesus' own role at first. They, too, read the Hebrew Scriptures from a nationalistic and ethnocentric lens, largely by favoring some passages over others. Thus, they did not really expect Jesus to die at the hands of the Romans, but instead to vanquish them and subjugate them to his will and the welfare of Israel.

However, those same disciples were sufficiently tied to the Scriptures that when Jesus was raised from the dead, and clarified the true intent of the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g. Luke 24:13 – 51), they resubmitted themselves to him with great joy, gladly received the internal change by his Spirit that their own Scriptures pointed towards, took up their sacred texts with fresh clarity, and bent all their heart, strength and voice to Jesus' worldwide purpose: to go forth in love and vulnerability to all nations, and, by inviting others far and wide to acknowledge the reign of Jesus in the Spirit, to call forth God's new humanity throughout the whole world. Not only their words, but their sacrificial actions, would bear witness to the character of God.

Jewish devotion to their sacred texts gave the apostles the basis by which to persuade other Jews that this Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Messianic heir of David that now lays a claim to the entire world. Luke shows us in Acts that the proclamation about Jesus that Peter, Stephen, Paul, and others uttered in synagogues throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean region took the form of reasoning and sustained debate about the true meaning of Israel's Scriptures. All the speeches to the Jews in Acts involve the convergence of the hopes of Israel with the events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth. Note that mere possession of the Hebrew Scriptures and acquaintance with it did not make Jewish belief in Jesus automatic. Some insisted on the military and/or racial-ethnic interpretation, and later, in the face of the Roman victory at Masada in 135 AD, took the rabbinic path of ethnocentric pietism. But some did believe. Their attachment to all of the Hebrew Scriptures provided the impetus for them to align the prophetic hopes concerning the Messiah with the historical facts about Jesus. For some, the same attachment to the Hebrew Scriptures forms the basis of conversation today.