

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 #6: Chosen to Anticipate God Dwelling Within People

Discussion of how Israel knew of God's activity through God's word and promise gives us the occasion to demonstrate another facet of Israel's existence that made them unique: their Temple and sacrificial system of worship. What was God doing by establishing this institution that figured so prominently in Israel's life? I believe He was laying a foundation for understanding how He would make Himself known, and in particular as the One who would purify humanity in and through Jesus alone. This is also vitally important to understanding why God had to choose a chosen people.

Yet is this Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures indeed the true interpretation? Or is this merely a Christian attempt to wrest the Hebrew sacred texts away from rabbinic, ethnic Judaism and extend it in directions that it was never intended to go? Whether one conceives of Jesus as a marginal Jew who started a new Jewish sect and failed to cleanse the physical Jerusalem Temple, or Paul as a renegade Jew who went farther than Jesus and started a full-blown religion, the basic question must be answered: Is the Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures correct, or merely a violent appropriation of the material?

Unfortunately, these perspectives on Jesus as marginally Jewish, and Paul as a renegade, are offered (and sometimes believed) without serious consideration of what the Hebrew Scriptures themselves say. Although I cannot engage here with the diversity of questions raised in this general direction, I do think it is important to provide an analysis of the Torah of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). For example, the Pentateuch (Torah) itself says that Israel was predicted to fail, leading to its own exile at the hands of the Gentiles (Dt.27 – 29). The Torah indicates that neither the ethnic possession of the Mosaic Law nor the actual performance of the Law would be sufficient to maintain the favor of God in the garden land. That is, the laws given in the Mosaic Law code were not enough to reform Israel, both corporately and individually. As I said above, Israel needed to welcome an internal transformation by God Himself.

This is shown in the narrative of the Pentateuch (Torah). The Pentateuch as a narrative demonstrates a chiasmic – or inverted parallel – structure in its overall composition. This literary structure appears throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Readers familiar with this literary structure understand that the first point matches the last point, the second point matches the second to last point, and so on. The center of the chiasm, where the story typically turns, is the place of emphasis or the explanation for the course of the story.

Literary Structure of the Torah

1. God's Spirit 'hovers' as God creates heaven and earth; God places humanity in a garden land; origin of all nations, but in exile and with a corruption in human nature: Gen.1 – 11
2. Covenant inaugurated with Abraham – blessings and curses: Gen.12:1 – 8
3. God's faithfulness to the chosen family: Gen.12:9 – 50:26
 4. Deliverance of Israelites (first generation) from Egypt, arrival at Sinai: Ex.1 – 18
 5. Covenant Inaugurated, Broken, Re-Asserted: Ex.19:1 – 24:11
 - a. *God calls Israel to meet Him on the mountain on the third day: Ex.19:1 – 15*
 - b. *Israel's failure – to come up the mountain: Ex.19:16 – 23*
 - c. *God resumes with Moses and Aaron: Ex.19:24 – 25*
 - d. *God gives Israel the Ten Commandments: Ex.20:1 – 17*
 - e. *Israel's failure – Israel afraid of God's voice: Ex.20:18 – 20*
 - f. *God gives all Israel 49 laws (7x7): Ex.20:21 – 23:19*
 - g. *God and Israel agree to a covenant, and Moses, Aaron, and 70 elders see God, and eat and drink in His presence: Ex.23:20 – 24:11*
 6. Tabernacle instructions given to house the **veiled** presence of God: Ex.24:12 – 31:11
 7. God commands Israel to observe the Sabbath and the covenant is documented on stone tablets: Ex.31:12 – 18
 8. Covenant broken; Israel worships Aaron's golden calves: Ex.32:1 – 29
 9. Moses mediates for Israel, restores the covenant: Ex.32:30 – 33:23
 - 8'. Covenant affirmed: Ex.34:1 – 17
 - 7'. God commands Israel to observe three annual feasts and the covenant is documented on stone tablets again; Moses **veils** his face as a sign of judgment, hiding God's glory from the nation: Ex.34:18 – 28
 - 6'. Tabernacle built to instructions; presence of God comes **veiled**: Ex.35:1 – 40:38
 - 5'. Covenant Mediation Inaugurated, Covenant Broken, Re-Asserted: Lev.1:1 – 27:34
 - a. *God calls Israel to approach Him, gives priests a Code for sacrifices: Lev.1:1 – 9:24*
 - b. *Priests' failure – two of Aaron's sons offer strange fire, are consumed: Lev.10:1 – 7*
 - c. *God resumes with Aaron's two others sons: Lev.10:8 – 20*
 - d. *God gives Israel's priests a Priestly Code for the community: Lev.11 – 16*
 - e. *Israel's failure – God addresses worship of goat idols: Lev.17:1 – 9 (cf. Acts 7:42 – 43)*
 - f. *God gives all Israel a Holiness Code: Lev.17:10 – 25:55*
 - g. *God and Israel agree to a covenant: Lev.26:1 – 27:34*
 - 4'. Departure from Sinai, deliverance of Israelites (second generation) from sins (of the first generation): Num.1 – 36
 - 3'. God's faithfulness forms the basis for Moses' exhortation: Dt.1:1 – 26:19
2. Covenant offered to Israel – blessings and curses: Dt.27:1 – 29:29
- 1'. God must circumcise human hearts after Israel's exile (Dt.30:6); 'heaven' and 'earth' (Dt.32:1) witness destiny of Israel and nations; God's Spirit 'hovers' (Dt.32:11) over Israel as they enter garden land: Dt.30:1 – 34:12

My case does not rest on the chiasmic structure; John Sailhamer, in his book, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, focuses on the narrative spanning section 5 to section 5' and makes the same conclusions. But from treating the Torah as a narrative in this way, a few points become clear.

First, Israel failed to trust and obey God from Sinai (Exodus 19), failed to come up the mountain and meet God face to face (Deuteronomy 5:5), yet nevertheless entered into a covenant with God through the mediation of Moses. In response to this, God gave Israel laws. Sailhamer suggests that the number of laws is disproportionately larger in the latter half of the story because God responded to Israel's progressive failures with more laws. This is ostensibly the apostle Paul's own understanding: 'The Law was added because of [Israel's] transgressions.' (Galatians 3:19) In other words, laws were God's response to Israel's failure, to point out their sin to them until a future time when God would resolve the situation. Law-keeping was never meant to be used as a basis for self-justification (individual self-righteousness) or for ethnic distinctiveness (national self-righteousness). Hence the Pharisees were wrong on both counts.

Second, the Tabernacle (and later, the Temple) was not God's proverbial 'Plan A.' It was 'Plan B.' God wanted 'a Temple people', a people with whom He talked face to face. That was 'Plan A.' He did not initially want 'a people with a Temple.' God veiled His glory via the Tabernacle as a concession. And to also express this, Moses veiled his

face because his face shone with the glory of God to communicate to Israel that God was also veiling Himself among them. Paul's explanation of Moses' veil in 2 Corinthians 3 corroborates this: 'Moses...used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the *end* [i.e. goal, purpose, telos] of what was fading away [the temporary glory of the Sinaitic covenant with its Mosaic Law]...but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away...But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.' (2 Corinthians 3:14 – 18) Moses was not afraid or ashamed that the glory reflected on his face was fading. Rather, he was veiling his face so that his fellow Israelites would not see the *goal* of the Law, the Tabernacle, and his meeting God face to face. The goal of all those things in the old covenant, or the Sinaitic covenant, was to look ahead to the day of Christ where the Spirit of Christ would indwell the believer, writing the law of God within the new covenant in the heart, not upon stone tablets that were external to humanity. Moses veiled himself in a posture of judgment upon Israel. They would learn of this nevertheless through the other Hebrew prophets, and would learn to hope for it, but that generation would not glimpse it through Moses, who represented that very covenant that was 'Plan B.'

Third, Moses' mediation allowed for the presence of God to remain with Israel, but in a veiled way. They do not experience God 'face to face' as Moses did. 'Plan A' was to meet God on the mountain, as Moses did, face to face (in a manner of speaking). The mediation of Moses is central to the Pentateuch, and to the Mosaic covenant. In fact, the progressive growth of mediation is what stabilizes the covenant between God and Israel. Without Moses, God would simply give up on the nation and start over with Moses. However, the priests, who took over the role of mediator in an institutionalized way, are shown to be flawed human beings as well. Eventually, Moses himself is shown to be imperfect and flawed. Hence, the overall lesson of the Torah is that the existence of Israel and its major institutions are quite vulnerable to the fallen humanity of those who inhabit them.

Treating the Pentateuch as a literary unit – especially if one perceives the literary structure – contextualizes all other themes – even 'chosen people' and 'law-keeping' – around the failure of Israel and the necessity of a new mediator. The major theological points are: the failure of the chosen people, the insufficiency of the exodus to stimulate faith, the negative role of law-keeping, and the necessity for a new mediator and/or the need for God to transform human nature.

On these matters, Jesus and Paul agree and appear to be interpreting the Pentateuch not only in the same way, but in this *particular* way. Jesus viewed himself as the 'new Temple' of God, the dwelling place of God in humanity that both transforms that humanity into a new, resurrected humanity, and replaces the old Temple of Jerusalem (e.g. John 1:14 – 18; 2:13 – 25; 4:19 – 24; 7:37 – 39; 14:1 – 26). He also used the idiom of being the 'chief cornerstone' (Matthew 21:42 – 44; Mark 12:10 – 12; Luke 20:17 – 18) of the larger, new, and living human 'Temple' of God. From this point, Paul can be easily understood as faithfully carrying out the teaching and implications of Jesus. He called Christians, by virtue of their spiritual union with Christ, the new Temple of God in whom God dwells (e.g. 1 Corinthians 3:16 – 17; 6:18 – 20; Ephesians 2:11 – 22); Peter used the same 'new Temple' language for the Christian community (1 Peter 2:4 – 10). This is not just a clever rationalization for Jesus' apparent failure to cleanse Jerusalem's Temple, as the militant Jews between 163 BC – 135 AD wanted. Jesus and Paul and the other New Testament authors uniformly claim that this was God's intention all along, and it is manifest in the narration (and, if you will, the literary structure) of the Torah itself. Jesus brought us back to God's 'Plan A.'

This analysis substantiates the section above where God's intention for Israel was to correctly diagnose the internal human problem, and welcome their own transformation: God's bestowal of the Mosaic Law upon Israel was itself a product of a relational failure on Israel's part from the beginning, and did not lead to them being able to keep it. It only led Israel to the appropriate conclusion that apparent solutions given externally, even wonderful ones given by God, were not enough to deal with the fundamental problem of human existence. Humanity's problem was actually internal, in its very self-centered and spiritually alienated nature, and God was bringing Israel to the point of acknowledgment and admission of that central fact. For God to dwell in human flesh, and make human beings into bearers of His image once again, a more radical solution needed to be pursued, and it was.