

## **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: Chosen 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 #8: Chosen to Anticipate the Messiah, His Ethics, and His Mission**

If Christian faith is universal and for all, then why did God choose a chosen people, Israel? Why couldn't God simply disclose Himself personally to everyone? In this section, I will summarize the observations and conclusions I made above into an integrated response to the question of Jewish particularity.

First, I must make a preliminary point: There is anthropological and sociological data that strongly suggests that there was some kind of very early revelation of God among 'primitive peoples.' Rodney Stark ably chronicles the growth of anthropological studies about 'primitive peoples' and the study of their religious practices and theological reflections. Stark groups the major pioneering efforts of the anthropologists into four major schools of thought: naturism, animism, ghost theory, and totemism. Once the social scientists moved past observing the outward religious rites, and, arguably, their own cultural bias against 'primitives,' however, and carefully listened to what 'primitive people' believed about deities, their studies became much more robust. Andrew Lang, in his 1898 book *The Making of Religion*, broke with and overturned all previous studies of primitive religions. 'Having carefully sifted through the most recent and reliable ethnographic accounts of religion in surviving primitive societies, Lang discovered that many of the most primitive groups, scattered in all parts of the world, believed in the existence of High Gods: "moral, all-seeing, directors of things and of men... eternal beings who made the world, and watch over morality." This was not fully expressed monotheism, since the existence of subordinate Gods was accepted, too – a perspective sometimes referred to as henotheism (literally, "one-Godism") because of the emphasis on the High or primary God.'<sup>1</sup> Although some of Lang's examples were incorrect, by the 1920's, anthropologists could no longer deny that primitive peoples believed in what was known as 'High Gods' where a Supreme Creator serves as the basis for human morality. Paul Radin, in his 1924 publication *Monotheism Among Primitive Peoples* corroborated much of Lang's work, as did Mircea Eliade and Ninian Smart in their studies of primitive peoples all over the world. Lang went so far as to propose that this kind of theology represented not a later, more evolved theology and religion, but the earliest form. He interpreted animism and crude idolatry as a de-evolution from this higher, earlier belief. Then, Catholic scholars led by Wilhelm Schmidt in his twelve volume work *The Origin of the Idea of God*, published between 1912 and 1955, then connected all of this massive ethnographic data to the basic thesis: 'The Supreme Being of the primitive culture is really the God of monotheism.' Schmidt proposed that at one time all humanity knew and worshiped the same God. Variations between one religion and another are due to the insertion of human ideas, misunderstandings, or faulty transmission. The guild of anthropologists, however, being some of the most godless folk in any one discipline, quickly retreated from this massively documented and brilliantly argued

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney Stark, *Discovering God*, p.55 – 56

work. Andrew Lang, at the end of his career, suddenly and inexplicably reverted to the animistic interpretation of 'primitive peoples' which he had argued against years before. Other anthropologists suddenly became agnostic about their ability to know anything about what 'primitive people' believed in earlier times. This insight into 'primitive people' and the 'sophisticated, cultured anthropologists' who observed them and then retreated from their own conclusions is a telling example in many ways about what people do with their 'awareness of God.' I will have reason to make more remarks about this in just a moment.

In addition to what we know from the anthropological literature, there is ample biblical data that God did not limit awareness of Himself to just Israel, which ran in parallel with His unfolding relationship with Israel. While we cannot be absolutely sure what Abraham, for example, believed about God, and we can be still less certain what other figures in the biblical narrative believed or understood about God, we know Melchizedek (Genesis 14), Pharaoh (Exodus 5 – 12), Balaam and Balak (Numbers 22 – 24), the Ninevites (Jonah 3 – 4), and Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5) had some kind of interaction with God and a meaningful understanding of Him. The Psalmist says that the heavens declare the glory of God (Psalm 19). And Paul concurs that the created world provides some kind of rational knowledge about God to all (Romans 1:20) and says, moreover, that some kind of knowledge of God was evident within people, presumably by the conscience (Romans 1:19; 2:12 – 16). Thus, a general knowledge of God, and even faith in God, has never been completely synonymous with membership in Old Testament Israel. The biblical evidence thus corroborates the secular findings; Scripture shows that God was not inactive in calling for people's attention. Especially when one considers the internal witness of the conscience, and its connection to God in some form or fashion, the matter becomes intriguing. Despite the intrusions of falsehood into the initial revelation, whatever it was, God maintains some kind of connection with each individual person.

Why, then, choose a 'chosen people' and press on towards a 'special revelation' in Christ? Why not stop with 'general revelation'? For one thing, Christian theology holds that God's personal incarnation in Christ is essential for God to offer an ontological change in humanity's self-centered nature to reconcile us to His divine other-centered nature. If God were not compelled by His own love to do this, then He would not be love at all, but rather some arbitrary being of indeterminate character, and He would simply consign humanity and the creation to non-existence. Given the necessity of Jesus, then, if God's goal were to provide human beings with more information about Himself than the mere fact of His existence, how would He lay a foundation for us to have such knowledge, and not just knowledge, but emotional and rational conviction? Such a foundation is not easy to lay.

I believe we underestimate the diversity of 'spiritual voices' and theologies that people considered and entertained. Spiritual experiences abounded, then as now. The key question, to me, is how any true self-disclosure of this Triune God can be faithfully carried out by a vision, dream, or experience that has very little stable, verbal interpretation connected to it. The second century Christian heresy called Montanism serves as an intriguing point of reference. Montanus spoke in the first person as God. Whether or not this reflects the view that a prophet spoke as the passive mouthpiece of God, or whether or not Montanus wanted people to believe that he was another incarnation of God, is a subject of some debate. Notably, Montanus interpreted Jesus' words about the coming of the Holy Spirit in John 14:16 as referring to *himself*. He traveled with two female associates, Prisca and Maximilla, and together they spoke in ecstatic visions, and urged their followers and other Christians to fast and pray in order to receive supernatural visions and personal revelations. Prisca claimed that Jesus had appeared to her in female form. When she was excommunicated, she responded, 'I am driven away like the wolf from the sheep. I am no wolf. I am word and spirit and power.' The Montanists were more morally rigorous than the orthodox, believing that those who left the church could not be redeemed. Although Eusebius of Caesaria was not a neutral observer of Montanism, it is worth noting that he claims that the Montanists' practices included the following: They emphasized chastity, forbade remarriages, and promoted the dissolution of marriages in which their prophetesses abandoned their husbands; Montanus paid the salaries of those who preached his doctrine, which was forbidden by the orthodox, and Montanist prophets lent money on interest, which was also forbidden.<sup>2</sup> What intrigues me about the Montanist movement is that, while the doctrines differ, there are very human tendencies that reappear in some theologically charismatic and Pentecostal Christians today: a high degree of hierarchical authority perceived in leaders, resulting in unchallenged charismatic personalities; self-centered and self-referential ways of reading the biblical text; questionable ways of funding their organization; and strong emotional reactions, not only to whatever might be authentic about the Spirit's promptings, but against other Christians and non-Christian culture – evident in their overreactions towards

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<sup>2</sup> Eusebius of Caesaria, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 5, chapter 18

'backsliders' and loose sexual morals in the pagan culture around them. If such tendencies reared up in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, what tendencies were present in the ancient world during the time of Abraham, or Moses?

One can also consider not just Holy Spirit doctrines but ethical doctrines that God has wanted to bestow on people. Although this is a section about the role of Israel, I will consider Christian ethics because the ethics of Jesus are decidedly more challenging than the ethics of the Mosaic Law, and they are rooted directly in the character of God as more fully disclosed by Jesus, not least in the call to love as God loves: 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48). Hence, since the Mosaic Law was a penultimate vision for human relationships relative to the Law of Christ, I will consider Christian ethics as the ultimate. What would have happened if God simply gave the commands of the New Testament? The history of Christian theological ethics is a subject of supreme importance to all Christians, because once Christian ethics begin to get deformed by our own sinfulness, then justifications for our own disobedience are articulated, and those excuses and rationalizations are defended using the name of Jesus, the language of Scripture, and the energetic power of sin. In eleven hundred years, Christians dismantled forced labor slavery in England, France, and the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries in another two centuries, but then suddenly accepted chattel slavery, this time in the New World; but that was widely rejected in another two hundred years, by early Anabaptist groups and then in abolitionist movements in Great Britain and the U.S. It took a total of fifteen hundred years for Christians to move from defending the weak to using political state power to persecute unbelievers and heretics – in the Inquisition of Catholic Spain and in the Swiss Genevan theocracy of Calvin and Beza, and this was largely corrected in another two hundred years with the 1689 English Bill of Rights and Toleration Act and the 1787 American First Amendment. It took three hundred years for Christians to move from a solid anti-war stance to the point where they started to embrace a 'just war' position under Constantine, and the debate continues to be lively on that issue. One might say that Scripture and theological reflection did not prevent such gross mistakes from occurring, and that is absolutely true. But I would also turn the argument around: If Christians had such a difficult time historically, working with the documentation of Scripture and the monumental event of God's Trinitarian self-revelation in Christ and all its implications, how much more quickly would people have taken Jesus' name in vain if they had only some personal experience to go on? I find it difficult to believe that people would maintain strong, clear, and faithful commitments with only their intuition and a voice in their heads to go on. If the history of Christian theology is any indicator, one may say that the clarity and focus that the patristic writers and the early theologians struggled for lasted for centuries, but the slow encroachment of political concerns and pagan and Muslim influences gradually deformed Christian theology and the practice of the church. How much more quickly and easily would all these deformations have happened if there were no Scriptures, or if God downplayed the rational, verbal content connected to Himself?

I have already described the direct relationship between *ethics, eschatology, and theology*. *Ethics* rest upon the *story* in which one lives (*eschatology*), which in turn is a direct result of one's view of God/god/gods as being good or evil (*theology*). As such, how can the one true God – who respects human freedom – help human beings shift from a circular story where people expected to meet the 'god' in the afterlife – a 'god' who leaves the earth torn between good and evil – to a linear one whereby God reclaims the earth, purifies human beings of the corruption within their very own natures, and brings a messianic era of goodness and justice upon the earth? How can the one true God help human beings develop a radical Christian conviction and hope in spite of all the present evidence to the contrary? If this fallen world is all anyone has ever known, the much more likely conclusion that anyone will make about 'god' is that 'god' is both good and evil because the world has both good and evil, that history is circular, that hope is about withdrawal during this life and soul-escape in the next, and that for all practical purposes your family is how you live on. After all, myths of dying and rising gods failed to stimulate very much devotion or action, for they were simply used to explain the changing of the seasons. From my limited understanding of ancient civilizations and some contemporary ones, the circular story and the idolatry of family go hand in hand, for the only way to live on is through your descendants. In an unfriendly, unpredictable world, with an ambiguous 'god,' nothing was more important to people than their own patriarchal order, whether it was manifested in small clans or large empires, and a sense of shame and honor within those limited circles. This then reinforced ancient people's tendency to focus on blood-ties and blood-feuds, which would have made the task of community-building and disciple-gathering impossible across those lines of hostility. Without the Jews, the Christ-event for all humanity would have drowned out humanity's fatalism, because their circular view of history made hope for a 'happy ending' impossible to sustain and articulate. How else could God help human beings think theologically about His character, understand the story He was telling, and live empowered in the radically different ethical posture He calls them into?

We must note that this comparison to the Christian narrative is not just relevant as we consider ancient narratives, but contemporary ones as well. For Enlightenment modernism, which still is the dominant competitor with the Christian story in the West, progressively dismantled Western theology, replacing the Trinity with a Unitarian deity, replacing a God who intervenes in our history with a Deist 'god' who does not intervene, replacing the personal salvation for humanity that had been wrought in the physical body of Jesus with a social salvation that had been wrought in the Western liberal democratic-capitalistic tradition, replacing the missionary advance of the church with the cultural advance of the white man all over the world, replacing the spiritual community of the church with the rational community of the nation-state, replacing a call to universal human concern with individualistic citizens' rights, and replacing the final victory of Christ with dreams of a human utopia. All this happened in the name of 'God', 'Jesus,' 'Christianity,' and so forth. In fact, those Christians in the West who conflate the Christian metanarrative and the Western Enlightenment metanarrative – for example, in the context of the U.S., those on the 'religious right' who believe that the Christian God orchestrated the American Revolution, inspired the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, and now marches with American soldiers to spread democracy and capitalism around the world – still put up stiff resistance to the suggestion that these two stories are actually opposed to one another. However, what is abundantly clear is that the Enlightenment storyline is a thin parody of the Christian story and an attempt to subvert it. It claims to be a linear story, and not a circular story, but the environmental, ecological, and political-economic disasters that punctuate the spread of Western culture now and loom threateningly on the horizon tomorrow expose the story for what I believe it truly is: circular. This suggests how difficult it is to maintain the Christian story in the face of circular stories and competing linear stories.

The bottom line is that the 'knowledge of God' at whatever level, and even the more murky 'awareness of God' are not neutral bits of information that people can just ponder objectively. At any and every level, the 'knowledge of God' of whatever sort makes a claim and a demand on us in terms of how we respond to Him, how we treat others and ourselves, how we view our own human nature, and how we tell our own personal story and the story of the world. The further difficulty is that we are not neutral agents considering news that only distantly relates to us; the corruption in our nature now inclines us to personally rebel against God, even while our conscience (the lingering voice of our truest nature as God's image-bearers) hears God. A spiritual battle thus exists within us so that 'knowledge of God' is not neutral to us, and we are not neutral to it. This is why God appears to us, in a limited but very real sense, in our enemy, whom He calls us to love; or in the poor, for whom He calls us to sacrifice; or in the alien, whom He calls us to welcome, or in the stranger in a distant land, to whom He calls us to learn their culture in order to contextualize the gospel; etc. Jesus told his disciples that they would be poor, homeless, naked, and imprisoned, and that the rest of the world would be judged by how they responded to them, for within and behind them lies Jesus himself (Matthew 25:31 – 46; cf. 10:40 – 42; 28:20). Jesus is radical and startling to both the world and the would-be disciple, but such is the reality that God appears to us as our enemy, not because He truly wishes us harm, but because we wish Him to be under our control. Perhaps this partially explains the resistance of professional anthropologists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the idea that the theology of 'primitive peoples' might validate the God who revealed Himself to Israel and in Christ. There appears to be no legitimate academic reason for many of them to become suddenly agnostic about their ability to know anything about the theology of 'primitive peoples.' I would interpret this as an intentional self-blinding to the very people who had become an opportunity to consider and behold God Himself. In other words, the very subjects of their study had become an enemy of sorts.

To complicate matters, it appears to me that God must follow a 'structure' in His activities that derives from His nature. Namely, He always seeks a particular kind of divine-human partnership, which is this: He relates in and through a Temple pattern. This has always been true. God has a Temple structure in Himself. He patterned humanity in a Temple-like relational structure to Himself where He intended to reveal Himself through us. He placed humanity in an original creation that was designed like a Temple and described like one. He initiated the redemption of all humanity in Jesus Christ, who was a Temple-like person, who in this manner revealed the Father by the Spirit. Jesus himself revealed God to have a Temple-like Triune structure, after all. And our relationship with God is restored to the Temple configuration that God intended. All this has a bearing on the unique physical structure of Tabernacle and later Temple in the midst of Old Testament Israel. It is an essential foundation for a preliminary understanding of God's future coming in Jesus Christ. Could God have set up multiple Temples like the one at Jerusalem? The answer to this question is most certainly 'no': Even though the Temple manifested His presence only in part, there could not be simultaneous disclosures of His personal presence in that way. For to multiply Temples would necessitate not a Triune God but a 'god' whose internal relations involved a Father and multiple Sons. This is simply not the case. The particularity of the eternal Son of God within the Godhead gives rise to the particularity of Israel's Temple, which gives rise to the particularity of Israel.

Put this way, the task for an internally coherent God to engage a rebellious humanity seems rather large. This God, because of His own internal nature, desires people who would be freely and personally committed to Him in love, to manifest His love as His image-bearers to each other. But this now also involves human beings surrendering their own self-centered natures to Him, and refusing to subvert the name of God to some other selfish or political purpose. But if our very being is ontologically polluted, and no longer desires this kind of relationship with God, then we might resist receiving His love; and we will certainly resist being a conduit of His love for others. In this fallen state, Satan appears to us as our Friend, and God as our Enemy. This God would have to train people in a new epistemology based on His spoken word-promise to help them distinguish between the bright thread of His actions and the darkness of the world of mute idols and the corrupted creation. He would then have to help people internalize and tell a linear story where God's goodness would triumph over evil, not a circular story. He would have to get some people to be on His side enough to document both His diagnosis of humanity and His future remedy. He had to ensure that such documentation would be treasured, preserved, and disseminated by its custodians despite the fact that it bore a judgment on those very same custodians within its pages; and He was committed to the personal freedom of those custodians. He had to manifest a real, local appearance in the Tabernacle-Temple. He had to eliminate idolatry to ensure that His presence in that Tabernacle-Temple was interpreted as unique, so that His eventual coming in human flesh would be interpreted as unique. These were at least some of the necessary pre-conditions for humanity to properly interpret His own action that would amount to giving them a new human king that would usher in God's presence in a new and profound way. This investment in expecting His personal appearance and action on their behalf seems to have been vital to keep them invested in His word, promises, story, laws, documentation, Temple, and judgment of them with resurrection promised on the other side. In essence, the agenda for His coming had to be sufficiently vague that it could wrongly be interpreted in a self-interested way, yet sufficiently concrete that it would ultimately have to be interpreted to mean that God would come to bless their enemies as well, i.e. all people. Could this have happened through multiple 'chosen peoples'? It seems to me that the answer to this question is 'no,' for the simple reason that God could not commit personally to all peoples in this way. The particularity of the eternal Son of God within the Godhead gives rise to the particularity of Him being Israel's king, and theirs alone, which again gives rise to the particularity of Israel.

In essence, I believe that the Triune God *had* to choose a chosen people, Israel: once again, I must stress, a non-ethnic, non-racial Israel, for the openness of Israel is based on the openness of the Son of God to all humanity. I believe that, given the Trinitarian nature of the Christian God and what we are required to say about God's character and humanity because of the structure of His being, there was no alternative way for God to precede His own coming other than by forming Israel. The particularity of Israel is based on the particularity of the Son of God. Jewish particularity is the very foundation of Christian universalism.