

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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‘Thus it was, too, that God formed man at the first, because of His munificence; but chose the patriarchs for the sake of their salvation; and prepared a people beforehand, teaching the headstrong to follow God; and raised up prophets upon earth, *accustoming man to bear His Spirit [within him], and to hold communion with God*: He Himself, indeed, having need of nothing, but granting communion with Himself to those who stood in need of it, and sketching out, like an architect, *the plan of salvation* to those that pleased Him. And He did Himself furnish guidance to those who beheld Him not in Egypt, while to those who became unruly in the desert He promulgated a law very suitable [to their condition]. Then, on the people who entered into the good land He bestowed a noble inheritance; and He killed the fatted calf for those converted to the Father, and presented them with the finest robe. Thus, in a variety of ways, *He adjusted the human race to an agreement with salvation.*’

Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 14, paragraph 2

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 #1: Chosen to Be a Non-Racial, Non-Ethnic People

I want to tackle a preliminary question first about the nature of biblical Israel itself: Was Israel a racial or ethnic group? Was Israel a chosen race? This may seem to be a strange way to start, but I suspect that the Western world's tragedy-filled history of race relations, as much as any other factor, influences our reading of the biblical story and the narrative of Israel. When we ask, 'Why did God choose a chosen people?' we often presume that Israel was an ethnic or racial people group in the same way that we think of other ethnic or racial groups. So our deeper, and often unarticulated, questions include the following: 'Did God reveal Himself to one ethnic-racial group?' – the answer to which is 'no' since knowledge of God extended farther than Israel even in the biblical texts. Or, we ask, 'Did God initiate racism by forming the Jewish people and making them exclusive?' – which presumes the premise of the question is correct, that biblical Israel was in fact a racial or ethnic group. Moreover, contact with Islam – with its emphasis on Arab people, holy places in Arabia, the Arabic language needed to properly read the Qur'an and thus worship Allah, and the centrality of Arab culture – frequently leads observers to parallel Judaism and Islam. They assume that when we speak of 'Israel' we are speaking of a Jewish ethnicity and faith equivalent to that of Arab Muslims in the early years of Islam, except through Isaac instead of Ishmael.

The significance of our modern tendency to think of Israel as an ethnic-racial group is developed by J. Kameron Carter in his book *Race: A Theological Reflection*. Carter argues – convincingly, I believe – that the modern discussion about race stems from an earlier view of Jews as a genetic 'race' in Western Europe. In order to stigmatize Jews as 'other' and reduce their status from citizens to aliens, and from fully human to sub-human,

Western Europeans developed a racial classification tied to religion whereby darker-skinned 'Jews' were distinct from 'Christians.' When the Enlightenment sought to ground knowledge and politics in reason apart from Christian faith, this racial classification was intensified. Jewish flesh was seen as 'other' than White European flesh, and in fact constituted the opposite pole against which 'whiteness' was constructed as a racial category that transcended European tribe and nation. Carter demonstrates how this race awareness was abundantly present in Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant and postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault. I was surprised, however, that Carter did not refer to the development of the idea of race in Spain at about the time of the Spanish Inquisition. Prior to Kant, theories about blood purity had already emerged in Spain and Portugal, whose tortured history led to an early nationalism and an impulse to cleanse Spain and Portugal of Jews. The forced conversions of Jews to the Christian banner led to the fear that such Jews were practicing Judaism in secret, and the surest way to identify them was through the test of 'blood purity.'¹ The Western 'anxiety' over the Jews and, more recently, moreover, sorrow over European Jewish suffering reinforces a fear of discussing the theological implications for the character of God that He initiated an ethnic-racial project in history. If it is true that God's purpose for 'ethnic Israel' was for the Jews to kill Jesus the Messiah, then has not God in some sense turned the Jews into villains Himself? Whatever else human beings added to that racial drama, God took the first step and essentially laid the foundation for the race problem of the Western world.

The irony of this way of reading Israel's story is that biblical Israel was not an ethnic or a racial people, but a covenantal people. That is, Israel was never actually determined by genetic lineage from Abraham and Sarah, but by a peculiar association with God through the covenant. Hence, Ishmael was not part of covenant Israel, despite being a son of Abraham along with Isaac. Neither was Esau, despite being the son of Isaac and Rebekah along with Jacob. Moreover, Gentiles from outside the covenant joined Israel. The tribe of Judah in particular seemed to be unusually welcoming towards non-Israelites who acknowledged the God of Israel and who converted to Judaism. This might be traced to the experience of the tribe's ancestor, Judah himself. Judah married a Canaanite woman named Shua (Genesis 38:2). He arranged for one of his sons to marry another Canaanite woman, Tamar (Genesis 38:6). Judah came to denigrate Tamar's presence in the family because he wanted to prevent his deceased son's inheritance from passing to her. However, she tricked Judah into having sexual relations with her, and she thereby became an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:3). Judah's redemptive role in the story of Genesis 37 – 50, not least his self-sacrificial posture on behalf of his half-brother Benjamin before a disguised Joseph in Egypt, seems to hinge on the fact that he learned a critical lesson from Tamar's role in the family, her claim on his blessing and inheritance, and his own sin in trying to deny it. From that time, a remarkable pattern emerged. One of the only two faithful servants of Moses was Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who was identified with the tribe of Judah but was ethnically a Kenizzite, one of the Canaanite tribes (Numbers 32:12; Genesis 15:19)! The Canaanite Rahab and her whole household joined Israel during the conquest of Canaan (Joshua 6:17 – 25); Rahab married Salmon – of the tribe of Judah – and became an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Ruth was a Moabitess who married Boaz – who was of the tribe of Judah (Ruth 4:13) – and became an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Bathsheba the Hittite became a wife of David (2 Samuel 11 – 12) – who was of course of the tribe of Judah – and became an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:6). The tribe of Judah seemed to demonstrate a particular affinity for absorbing God-fearing Gentiles who became part of Israel. This is notable given that the tribe of Judah was considered the 'firstborn' of Israel and contained the lineage of Jesus.

Other God-fearing Gentiles could join the community of Israel by undergoing circumcision (if male) and baptism. Even at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, a time of great conflict between Israel and Egypt, God's protection for families against losing their firstborn was not based on bloodline but by observance of the Passover (Exodus 12:7 – 13). The institution of the Passover feast, in fact, already looked forward to not only native Israelites but the 'alien' in the land (Exodus 12:20). In addition, 'a mixed multitude' from Egypt accompanied Israel during the Exodus (Exodus 12:38) and ostensibly became part of Israel through circumcision (Exodus 12:43 – 49). An ordinary Israelite woman is noted to have married an Egyptian man (Lev.24:10). Thus, Israel was never actually an ethnic or racial people. They were bound together by covenant commitment to God's promise to Abraham, and then by the Mosaic Law revealed at Sinai.

¹ David Bryon Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.70 – 73. See also James H. Sweet, 'The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought,' in 'Constructing Race,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 52 (January 1997), p.159 – 166. 'Iberian racism was a necessary precondition for the system of human bondage that would develop in the Americas during the sixteenth century and beyond.'

Hence, biblical Israel was already a microcosm of all humanity. The distinction between Israel and the Gentiles was not an ethnic-racial one but a religious-theological one. Biblical Israel was defined by God's covenant with Abraham and its outworking. To this was added the Mosaic Law (Exodus 19ff.) which made Jews more distinct in their behavior, and I have already offered an interpretation for what purpose the Law served: to show up the internal flaw in the very humanity of the covenant people. There was concern for marrying foreigners to the extent that those foreigners drew Israelites away from the Law and towards idols. But at no point in time were Gentiles barred from joining Israel simply because of their ethnic-racial background.

Sadly, however, some Second Temple Jews seem to have defined themselves primarily as an ethnic or racial group. Their criticism of Samaritans and Romans did not occur simply on the grounds of theological-cultural factors like entrance into Judaism by baptism and circumcision, Sabbath observance, eating kosher, or worship in the Jerusalem Temple. If it had been only theological, they would have been eager to welcome Gentiles into the community of Israel on the condition of their reception of circumcision, Mosaic Law, the covenant hope, etc. Instead, some Jews at the time of Jesus denigrated Samaritans and Romans on the grounds of ethnic ancestry. Such Jews could not stand the thought of the Romans benefiting from the grace of God, so they tried to kill Jesus when he announced such a move (Luke 4:14 – 30). Their repeated claim, 'We are children of Abraham' (Luke 3:8, John 8:33) demonstrates their interpretation of Israel as an ethnic-racial community based on physical lineage from Abraham. Jesus' disciples themselves demonstrated bigotry and dismissiveness towards the Samaritans (Luke 9:51 – 54; John 4:27), probably for the same reasons.

This interpretation of 'being Israel' was precisely what John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles disputed with their contemporaries. They carried the debate back to Abraham himself. What do we see when we read Abraham's story? God's explicit intention in changing the name of 'Abram' to 'Abraham' – 'father of nations' (Genesis 12:5) – was to highlight the worldwide scope of His intended blessing and the family God intended for Abraham. But that scope of God blessing 'the nations' through Abraham did not only occur through Jesus alone, enacted by the apostolic mission to the Gentiles. It existed in a smaller but nevertheless authentic form prior to Jesus in Israel. In fact, the Abraham narrative (Genesis 12 – 22) itself seems to be trying to explain why God selects a chosen people, and is at pains to show that God also blessed Hagar and Ishmael though they remained outside the covenant. The development of the narratives of the chosen family also wrestles with the incorporation of Gentiles. Already in the story of Joseph and Judah (Genesis 37 – 50), God's promise to bless the world results in the incorporation of Canaanites into the family of Judah, the incorporation of Egyptians into the family of Joseph, and the provision of food for the entire world of Egypt and its surroundings through the mediation of Joseph. This focus on all people is what we would expect given that the calling of Abraham and the chosen family narratives occur as God's response to Babel (Genesis 11). Indeed, although the Mosaic Law appears to have slowed the influx of Gentiles into Israel, Gentiles could still and did convert to worship the God of Israel. They could and did enter the community of Israel through circumcision. Hence, John the Baptist and Jesus both argued that one became a child of Abraham by imitating the *faith* of Abraham (Luke 3:8, John 8:56); this was not – and never was – a matter of physical lineage from Abraham. Paul added that since the Mosaic Law did not exist in Abraham's time, one could simply imitate the *faith* of Abraham, apart from doing works measured against the Jewish Mosaic Law, and that this was sufficient to be a full member of the family of God now constituted around Messiah Jesus (Romans 4:1 – 15). In other words, John the Baptist's position, Jesus' ministry towards 'outsiders,' and the apostolic outreach to Gentiles which brought Gentiles to Jesus apart from the Mosaic Law, were not theological innovations departing from the Hebrew Scriptures, but the true meaning of those very sacred texts, a claim I will examine in the next section. They were cheerfully reasserting that 'descent from Abraham' was distinct from ethnicity or race and based on faith in the Messiah.

In fact, Jesus' personal redemption of his Jewish flesh could be said to be for *all humanity* precisely because Israel was *already a microcosm of all humanity*. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus highlights this: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba are listed as ancestors of Jesus (Matthew 1:3 – 6). If one mistakenly takes the view that biblical Israel was an ethnic-racial group, then Jesus must simultaneously be interpreted as a biracial or mulatto Savior, who opens the door to the Gentiles *despite* Israel's ethnic Jewishness, which was only a handicap to Israel from the very outset. The view of Israel as an ethnic-racial group can be provocative for those Christians who are first being introduced to the world-wide, multi-ethnic mission of Jesus, and also to what is called 'racial reconciliation' today, but such people fail to see biblical Israel and the Hebrew Scriptures themselves for what they truly are. At best, they reduce Israel to 'ethnic Israel' because they operate within a sociological framework (because it had a majority of people genetically descended from Abraham) and not a theological one (and hence representative of the whole world). But

soon afterwards, such an interpretation must eventually blame God Himself for reinforcing the ethnic-racial patterns from ancient civilization, or initiating an ethnic-racial project whereby God's condition for Israel's very existence was its very failure *as an ethnic-racial group*, which of course had profoundly tragic implications for Jews in Western history. But if one more accurately sees, instead of this, that Israel was never an ethnic-racial group to start with, but a microcosm of all humanity placed temporarily under the Mosaic Law, then we can more easily see Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel, not its negation.

In fact, the great advantage of this understanding of Israel is that we can now interpret God as challenging the prevailing basis of human community in the world from the start of Israel, at the time of Abraham. Most, if not all, peoples in ancient times had a sense of blood relation, around which they also developed religious views (sometimes including a descent from a god, or a sense of being a special chosen people justifying their conquering of other peoples), political views (tribal order, empire), and cultural outlook (ethnocentrism). It would raise questions indeed if God were shown to simply be reinforcing that tendency by His choice of Israel. To the contrary, God initiated a project in Israel that countered and challenged the prevailing tendencies in the world at the time. It continues now in Christ.

Who redefined biblical Israel to mean 'ethnic Israel'? In a sense, this revisits the question of who contributed to the 'race problem' of the Western world. A combination of people: Gentiles who, for years, marginalized Israel as a peculiar people prior to Jesus; Jews who wanted to become an *ethnicity* or a *nation like other nations (ethnos)* rather than the *people (laos)* of God; Jews who rejected Jesus and set the rabbinical course of mining the Torah for Jewish cultural and ethnic distinctive customs; European Gentile Christians who ignored Paul's Letter to the Romans and did not fully grasp these matters, and finally Western European philosophers and politicians who used Christian faith as a unifying social principle for nation-building but could not incorporate the Jew, who refused to be assimilated. We can say that, while some European Christians and non-Christian philosophers like Kant were responsible for a misinterpretation of the ongoing presence of a Torah-observant Israel, the issue of race was a construction of men; it was not a problem located in the text of Scripture, nor in the character of God. In fact, we can state that God's true intention for Israel was to be a counter-response to the tribal-ethnic-racial tension already building in the ancient world.

I am aware of how challenging this is to ethnic groups who have had a tendency to read themselves into the story of Israel as if they were a new chosen people, or an oppressed people that God would deliver. This has profound implications for the modern State of Israel, for example. On what basis can the State of Israel define 'Jewish' as an ethnicity, and then discriminate against ethnic Palestinians? Surprisingly, not on the basis of the Hebrew Scriptures! Have advocates of Jewish Zionism or Christian Zionism considered this position? But let me focus my comments on historic Christian traditions. The first Puritan settlers to Massachusetts viewed themselves as the New Israel – fleeing from persecution, crossing a wide body of water – and claimed America as their God-given Promised Land. John Winthrop, Massachusetts's first governor, ended his famous 'City on a Hill Sermon,' with a quotation from Deuteronomy 30 in support of this way of thinking: 'to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it. Therefore let us choose life, that we and our seed may live, by obeying His voice and cleaving to Him, for He is our life and our prosperity.'² But as this seemingly innocent appropriation of Deuteronomy became firmly entrenched in the American national myth, it produced less-than-innocent results. It laid the foundation for the ideas of 'Manifest Destiny' where White Americans were supposedly entitled by divine right to the land from sea to shining sea.³ Just

² John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*, 1630

³ An early example occurred during the Pequot War (1634 – 1638). Captain John Mason massacred 600 – 700 Pequot women, children, and older men by setting the village of Misistuck (present day Mystic) on fire. Mason justified his action against the Pequot by saying it was the act of a God who 'laughed his Enemies and the Enemies of his People to scorn making [the Pequot] as a fiery Oven . . . Thus did the Lord judge among the Heathen, filling [Mystic] with dead Bodies.' He quoted Deuteronomy 20:16, which referred to Israel's conquest under Joshua: 'The Lord was pleased to smite our Enemies in the hinder Parts, and to give us their land for an inheritance.' (*A Brief History of the Pequot War: Especially of the Memorable taking of their Fort at Mistick in Connecticut in 1637*) Deuteronomy 20:17, is implicit because of Mason's readers' assumed knowledge; it reads, 'You shall utterly destroy them.' This demonstrates how White Puritans read themselves into the story of Israel's conquest.

as Israel marched westward to dispossess the Canaanites of the land, many white American Protestants marched westward to dispossess the Native Americans of the land, through trickery, warfare, the intentional spreading of disease, and government treaties broken time and again. Wealth and life were taken away or withheld from ethnic minorities in a variety of ways. This is the foundation of ‘American Exceptionalism’ where the U.S. is seen as a new ‘chosen people’ in the world, which has a messianic role to play by spreading democracy and capitalism abroad. This was a clear mistake and a product of the type of confusion that can result from a faulty exegesis of the role of Israel.

But the critique does not end there. As much as I deeply appreciate how theologically and politically subversive it was for African-American Christians to see themselves in the role of a New Israel oppressed in a New Egypt, and as much as I agree with the devastating critiques of American racism and history leveled by theologians who draw inspiration from that tradition, I do not think that reappropriating the narrative of an ‘ethnic Israel’ out of the Hebrew Scriptures is hermeneutically and exegetically valid. The reason for this, as J. Kameron Carter points out, is that, while African-Americans making that association poses a powerful and clever counter-story to the prevailing metanarrative of White American Protestants, it simultaneously validates their hermeneutic as well, *because it makes the same type of contemporary group association based on the same assumption of an ‘ethnic Israel.’* In fact, it does not expose the fundamental mistake of White American Protestants and correct that mistake; by itself it merely sets up an opposite pole from which the theological dialog cannot proceed any further. Where the critique should really start is separating ‘ethnic Israel’ from biblical Israel, and then calling for a full embrace of the radical teachings of Jesus because Christians cannot simply rewind the clock and place ourselves into the biblical story at whatever point we most enjoy. Biblical Israel was a representation and actualization of *all humanity* that prefigured the much fuller way that Jesus would be for *all humanity*. Precisely because Jesus took Jewish flesh, his flesh was non-ethnic and non-racial.

Reason #2: Chosen to Live by God’s Word and Expect a Happy Ending

Another common belief that people had in ancient times was that history is circular. Israel inherited a story and a confession that taught them that their God is wholly good and will one day defeat evil. Evil in the universe could not last forever, precisely because God is good and will one day be victorious over it all. This is the connection between ethical monotheism and messianism: a radical this-worldly belief that the good God would defeat evil and renew the world. This is the ‘happy ending story.’ God made the Jews absolutely unique in this way as well, among all their neighbors, if not all the peoples of the world.

The far more natural conclusion that people reached was that there was no such ‘happy ending.’ The ‘god’ or ‘gods’ that the ancients could best discern was/were both good and evil, since the world we live in plainly has both good and evil. What is the origin of this duality? The easiest explanation: the ‘god’ or ‘gods’ who made it all. The direct implication of that idea was that history was circular, locked in an eternal battle between good and evil. Every other religious system demonstrates this link. In Hinduism, a person cycles through various lives by being reincarnated. Eventually, if that person is ever good enough, she reaches some other state, perhaps. But it’s about individual attainment. Evil doesn’t go away per se. The Wikipedia article *Problem of Evil in Hinduism* says, ‘This shows the existence of earlier cycles of creation, and hence the number of creation cycles is beginningless. Thus Sankara’s resolution to the problem of injustice is that the existence of injustice in the world is only apparent, for one merely reaps the results of one’s moral actions sown in a past life... On the higher level of existence, however, there is no evil or good, since these are dependent mainly on temporal circumstances. Hence a jnani, one who has realized his true nature, is beyond such dualistic notions.’ That takes away rather quickly one’s incentive to do social justice work, which has borne out in Asian history because Hinduism and Buddhism do not, on the whole, lead to social justice reform movements. Or, perhaps you can attain Nirvana and transcend suffering by meditation (Buddhism) or asceticism (Jainism). But this is also individual. Evil per se doesn’t go away here either. There are only cycles, or circularity in history. In Zoroastrianism, or yin-yang type thinking, good and evil are co-equal, or eternal principles locked in eternal combat. This too gives rise to a circular story filled with inevitable pendulum swings at best. Popular historian Thomas Cahill in his book *The Gifts of the Jews* notes that the Jews alone bequeathed to us a sense of history because the Jews alone sensed a type of progress or linearity – as opposed to circularity – to human history. The God they knew was moving in history towards a goal. One stage in human history was not the same as all the others. There was no true repetition in history. The lesson is simple and clear: Reasoning about the character of ‘god’ (i.e. *theology proper*) is directly related to the type of story one expects to live in (i.e. *eschatology*).

It is also connected to a consistent *epistemology* about how one can discern God's activity. How did Israel distinguish God's actions from the ups and downs of all history? Or from every natural disaster resulting from the damaged creation? Through God's spoken word. The pattern of God speaking and then acting is one of the dominant patterns of the entire Old Testament. This pattern helps us know what God does and what people do, and how to separate them. This God acts by speaking. He said, 'Let there be light,' and there was. Ten times God spoke in Genesis 1 to bring about life and bless life.

1. ^{1:3} Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.
2. ^{1:6} Then God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'
3. ^{1:9} Then God said, 'Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear'; and it was so.
4. ^{1:11} Then God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them'; and it was so.
5. ^{1:14} Then God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years; ¹⁵ and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth'; and it was so.
6. ^{1:20} Then God said, 'Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.'
7. ^{1:22} God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.'
8. ^{1:24} Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind'; and it was so.
9. ^{1:26} Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' ²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.
10. ^{1:28} God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'

To Abraham, God said, 'I will redeem my people Israel from bondage' (Genesis 15:13 – 14), and then He did it. Every time God acted, He spoke about it first beforehand. As God engaged with human beings, He always spoke to some human beings first, who then proclaimed that word, and eventually God would fulfill His word. This gave rise to what Israel called 'prophecy.'

Amos summarized this pattern in Amos 3:7, 'Surely the LORD God will do nothing except that which He reveals to His servants the prophets.' Many people ignore that verse and this pattern, partly because (once again) they are too influenced by Augustine's monergism (God causes all), or Aristotle's idea of a primal cause that causes all other effects (God set up all dominos and then pushed the first one), as they defend a view of God's sovereignty that makes God the direct cause of everything that happens, both good and evil. Yet Amos did not say, 'Surely the LORD God is causing everything to happen that does happen, so that everything is a reflection of God's will and God's character.' This is absolutely important, because human beings have a tendency to attribute things to God that He has not spoken about. But God is not *causing* human evil – abuse, negligence, or whatever – of any sort, in any way. Rather, God has granted human beings a genuine will with genuine choices, so human beings are responsible for evil. Even natural disasters are best understood as the result of Adam casting God, the life-giver, out of the creation, and thus creating the phenomenon of human death and creational chaos. '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). I will address the chastisement by which God shaped Israel over the course of its pre-Christ history, below; that treatment of Israel was, again, God's great exception among all people and was a foreshadowing of what would happen in the very flesh of Jesus; it was not representative of how God 'chastises nations,' which I do not believe He actually does. In general, God said that He will crush evil and defeat it (Genesis 3:14 – 15), and rescue humanity from it, and this what He is doing right now through Jesus.

This is the doctrine of the *sovereignty of God's word*. God's *word* is sovereign. God is sovereign *through His word*. There is nothing that can stop God from fulfilling His word. So, it is a mistake to say that God caused any and all circumstances – especially moral evil – at any point in time, because God does not claim such a responsibility in the Scriptures. That kind of naïve doctrine of the sovereignty of *God*, which makes God the effectual cause of everything, is very different from a doctrine of the sovereignty of *God's word*. The doctrine of the sovereignty of

God, which sees God as causing the totality of history and human choices, is quite foreign to the biblical characterization of God. Suffice to say here that if we assign evil to God's causality, then we have assigned evil to God's character. And if we do that, then we have made God arbitrary and evil. And if that is the case, then the basis for prayer to God, trust in God, and hope for God's decisive victory over evil, is all gone.

In fact, as the long history of God and Israel unfolded, shades of complexity entered into Israel's discernment of how God acts in order to achieve what He had promised. Two major examples suffice to demonstrate my point. First, the selection of David as the king of Israel and his eventual enthronement present a puzzling picture. God, through the prophet Samuel, said to the young David, 'You will be king over Israel' (1 Samuel 16:12 – 13). However, it took years for David to win over every tribe of Israel to his leadership (2 Samuel 5:1 – 4). During that time, everyone had their own motivations and interests: Saul became paranoid and jealous of David, the people of Israel wavered this way and that between two regimes, Jonathan was a loyal friend to David who knew God had blessed David, Michal married David prematurely, probably with starry eyes, David himself had his own hopes and terrors, Gentiles had their own ambitions, etc. By the time David was thirty years old, despite much suffering and turmoil, he became king. God's word had been fulfilled. But we are hard pressed to read the account of Samuel and say precisely what God did to bring about this outcome. The same pattern held; God was faithful to His word, but we are not sure exactly how He acted to bring this about. That was one complexity. This dynamic did not cause Israel to doubt that God would fulfill His word, but they did seem to question their own ability to discern exactly what God was doing in the process of His fulfilling it. The second example is the Babylonian takeover of the southern kingdom of Judah and the city Jerusalem. God had certainly said that He would not protect the kingdom of Judah from the Babylonians because Hezekiah, king of Judah, did not trust God but rather trusted his own diplomatic ties with Babylon (Isaiah 39; 2 Kings 20:12 – 19). That was the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak; Hezekiah's mistake was the last of a long litany of sins that the Israelites had committed. The prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk announced that Babylon would successfully overcome Israel, and Babylon did. So the Babylonian invasion fits the pattern: God spoke about it, and it happened. However, Zechariah would say afterwards that the Babylonians, and subsequent Gentile empires, brought about too much destruction, more than God intended: 'I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster.' (Zechariah 1:14 – 15) This example shows that it was possible for the Gentiles to inflict *more destruction* than God intended. Even though God by His word brought chastisement upon the people of Israel, the Gentiles who played that role still had their own will and went far beyond what God wanted. Now the complexity deepened in another direction because Babylon had done *more* than what God had intended in His announcement.

I raise those two examples above to highlight how the Old Testament is not at all interested in proving the doctrine of the sovereignty *of God*. It labors to prove the doctrine of the sovereignty *of God's word*. How can we discern God's activity from the activities of all other beings, including sinful beings? By God's word. God announces what He will do before He does it. Though the basic epistemology Israel had to discern God's activity became complex, it still did not take away from the basic conviction that God is known – or more precisely, rather, God's *actions* are known – through His word. This Old Testament pattern laid the theological and epistemological foundation for God's Word becoming flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:1 – 5; 14 – 18). We would know not only God's activity, but God's very self, through His Word in human form, and the verbal description of that Word about himself. God is not revealed through the circumstances of our lives, and not even through miraculous events or the lack thereof. God is revealed solely in Jesus Christ. Israel's long experience listening for God's word prepared them to appreciate Jesus and his significance. Since God acts by His word, and because He has promised to be victorious over all evil, He must change *us* by His word.

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."⁴

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 both 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:

⁴ T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p.39.

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:

Psalms 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	God promised to bless the world through Israel (Gen.12:1 – 3; Isa.42:1 – 4) and, at least
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		need of change (Gen.6:5).	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.

I call this articulation of the atonement ‘medical substitution,’ which is held by the Eastern Orthodox Church. Medical substitution holds that Jesus had to personally 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,⁵ but regardless,

⁵ 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.

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.

Medical substitution 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 medical substitution 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 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, medical substitution 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 medical substitution 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.⁶ 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 medical substitution 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.⁷ God is

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.

⁶ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p.110 – 136, especially p.117 – 126.

⁷ 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

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 medical substitution 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.

Reason #4: Chosen 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

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.

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*,⁸ 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 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.

⁸ Professor Elenore Stump, *Job and the Problem of Evil*, <http://www.veritas.org/media/talks/151>.

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.'⁹ 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 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).

⁹ 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.

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.¹⁰ 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.

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)

¹⁰ 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

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.'¹¹ 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 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

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.5. See also T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation*, p.56 – 82.

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.'¹² 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 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

¹² T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation*, p.51

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.

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.¹³ 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 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

¹³ Rodney Stark, *Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief* (New York: Harper One, 2007), p.157 – 162.

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.¹⁴

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

¹⁴ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p.191

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.

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.

Reason #7: Chosen to Oppose Pagan Temple Systems and Glimpse the Structure of God's Being

The Tabernacle/Temple foreshadowed the unique and radical solution by which God would uniquely purify humanity through Jesus, uniquely. If Jesus was only one among many incarnations of God, then an incorrect deduction about the character of God would ensue. Why? Because we would have multiple claims to a disclosure of God's very character. In Hinduism, for example, the one 'god' of Hinduism takes a multitude of forms. Invariably what happens in Hinduism and other religious systems like it is that the sum total of these incarnations comes out to equal nature and history, and nature and history comes to directly reflect the character of 'god,' including all natural disasters and human moral evils. Human beings in all our moral ambiguity come to reflect the

character of ‘god’ as well, so human actions and history – both our heroic and the villainous history – are a direct reflection of the character of ‘god.’ But if this is so, then the character of that ‘god’ must be both good and evil, or both, or neither. Objectively, then, good and evil are not realities in themselves but are in fact the same thing. Only human subjectivity calls something good and another thing evil, because this moral language is but another way of talking about our opinions, preferences, and feelings about our circumstances. This is in fact what Sankara, the Vedantic Hindu commentator, says about *Brahma Sutra* 2.1.34 – 36.¹⁵

Thus, God commanded Israel to reject pantheism, and to draw a hard line between the Creator God and the created universe. In Old Testament idiom, Israel had to be shaped into a community that rejected both idolatry and the pagan temple systems. Whether the ‘god’ was considered to be completely contained by a physical idol, or whether the idol was considered to be a device for summoning the god or an interface is not immediately important to tease apart at the moment. Rather, the important aspect of idolatry was that an idol and the pagan god it represented/contained purported to offer human beings the chance to control the world around them. This is what Israel firmly rejected. Sociologist Rodney Stark notes that temple religions like the Sumerian religion, or the Aztec for that matter, were state-funded monopolies that developed a clientele, but not a congregation. The performance of these sacrifices are understood to appease the gods so as to bring about favorable weather, more military victory, better crops, and higher fertility rates. The pagan orientation towards controlling the physical world of nature – and sometimes human fate – is significant. Agamemnon, in Homer’s *Iliad*, sacrificed his daughter to the gods to gain a good wind for the Greek fleet sailing to Troy. Likewise, a woman wanting to be fertile and bear children might sacrifice to the appropriate fertility goddess. ‘Propitiating’ the gods was connected to the desire to procure favor, avoid chaos, or ward off curses. Hence, the pagan system of idolatry was an extension of human fear and sinfulness, attempting to extend human self-assertion and power into the world of nature. In the case of the Aztecs, priests performed sacrifices to ostensibly fuel the sun’s rising and keep the world going. These led to grisly scenes to say the least. While some temple systems – in Greece, for example – came to accept money instead of human sacrifice, and/or offer sex in exchange, the same principles applied: the temple systems offered control in exchange by ‘propitiating’ the gods. Their anger would be ‘turned aside.’ Or the fertility hoped for in the crops would be connected to the sex happening within the temples. What then was Israel’s Temple system? Was it modeled on the same principles? Was it a symbolic representation of how God would be ‘propitiated’ through Jesus?

Advocates of penal substitution say that Israel’s sacrificial system symbolized a penal system whereby God commuted a death sentence from the human to the sacrificial animal, which symbolizes Christ.¹⁶ I disagree. I believe Israel’s sacrificial system represented a purification system, not a penal system. By enacting the sacrifices, Israel did two things: First, they symbolically offered God, by means of a spotless and clean animal, their sinful natures for Him to consume, and second, they received from Him a symbol of His creational blessing. God instructed the Israelites to offer various kinds of sacrifices, which can be categorized along the lines of who eats the sacrifice (Leviticus 6 – 7). Israelites ate the peace offerings, which were usually grain and wine. God ate (symbolically) the burnt offerings, which were animals completely consumed by fire. The priests ate the sin offerings, which were animals not completely consumed by fire. In the last case, an Israelite would lay his hand upon the animal, symbolically identifying himself with it before the animal is slain. After the meat is cooked, the priest would eat the sacrifice, symbolically taking into himself the sin of the Israelite who offered the sacrifice. The sin is then stored up inside the priests. Once a year, the high priest of Israel, representing all the priests, would go into the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle or Temple, and perform the Day of Atonement sacrifice (Leviticus 16) by which God would ‘eat’ the sin stored up in the priests. The two goats involved in the Day of Atonement ceremony, I believe, represent one entity and one reality: One goat is slain in God’s presence symbolizing how God gathers up the pollution of all Israel and eats it Himself, and the other goat who goes free into the wilderness symbolizes how the pollution is sent far away from Israel, precisely because God has consumed it. God is thus to be seen as the one who ‘eats’ human sin, who takes it into Himself! Correspondingly, God is also seen as the one who gives us a blessing to ‘eat,’ or internalize.

¹⁵ Swami Gambhirananda, *Brahma Sutra Bhasya of Shankaracharya*, published by the Ramakrishna Math; also J.N. Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). A distillation is found at www.wikipedia.org under ‘The Problem of Evil in Hinduism.’

¹⁶ See Thomas Schreiner’s contribution to *Four Views of the Atonement*, edited by James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p.82 – 93

Yet all this was symbolic of a future act where God would 'eat' human sin by taking it into Himself, and give us Himself to 'eat,' or internalize. He would forgive sin, but not in a distant, legal manner where He internally changes how He sees us. Instead, God would forgive human beings of sin by consuming the sinful corruption that had penetrated our human nature itself. God laid a foundation for Israel to understand how He would eventually purify humanity in and through Jesus. The Temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices were institutions that pointed forward to Jesus. Jesus became the new, living Temple in whom God dwelt in fullness. Jesus was the greatest priest who fully mediates between God and humanity, not as a go-between but in his very person. And Jesus became the ultimate sacrifice who purified his humanity of the corruption of sin on behalf of all. That is, God took on human *flesh* in Jesus, as I emphasized above. And, as the man Jesus of Nazareth, forced it into compliance with God's will, forced it to be transparent to God's love (as he said, 'I only do what I see my Father doing', etc.), and ultimately put this flesh to death to reveal the purification that he had been enacting throughout his whole life. In this way, through incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus purifies his humanity of the corruption that had taken root in human nature. Thus, when Jesus shares his Spirit after his resurrection, he shares his God-soaked, purified humanity by the Spirit. John's Gospel and the Letter to the Hebrews coordinate this Temple-priest-sacrifice language around Jesus, describing him in these terms. He is the absolutely unique incarnation of God, who came in human flesh.

Hence, Israel's sacrificial system was the inversion of the sacrificial system of the pagan gods. It was not a system by which Israel could control their natural environment or physical health. Instead, it was a system by which the one true God extended Himself into the fabric of Israel's social and intellectual life to draw them towards His future act of atonement for sin that He would accomplish in Jesus of Nazareth. Interestingly enough, their moral obedience – not their ceremonial, cultic, or ritual life – determined the productivity of the garden-like land that Israel inherited; for example, God warned Israel to observe His relational and sexual commands lest the land spew them out (Leviticus 18:24 – 30). In that sense, Israel's sacrificial system was separated from Israel's experience of the physical world. It was most decidedly not a system by which they could control their physical surroundings. Israel alone developed a Temple system that was prophetic towards a future act of God to purify humanity. In this, Israel was again unique among the nations. Their understanding of 'propitiating' their God involved not the external world of creation but the internal world of human nature, of personal ontological purification.

Perhaps not surprisingly, however, worship of other gods co-existed with worship of YHWH in Israel until the Babylonian Exile in 586 BC largely cured Israel of idolatry. We find repeated mention of idol worship – and its explicit or implicit denunciation – in the Hebrew Scriptures. Israel, led by Aaron, worshiped a golden calf just after the Exodus (Exodus 32). They worshiped goat idols and other false gods during the wilderness wandering (Leviticus 17:1 – 9, Amos 5:22 – 23, Acts 7: 42 – 43). The sin of Achan during the conquest of Joshua was to covet and keep Canaanite gold and silver (Joshua 7:20 – 21), some of which were probably in the form of Canaanite idols. Israel worshiped idols during the period of the judges (Judges 2:11 – 15). During the institution of the monarchy, idolatry was present, as evidenced by the fact that Saul named one of his sons Ish-bosheth, which was probably another rendering of Ish-Baal, meaning 'my lord is the Canaanite god Baal.' More concretely damning evidence concerning Saul is unearthed when we read that his daughter Michal possessed idols (1 Samuel 19:13). The inclusion of this detail was almost certainly a narrative critique of Saul and his house. After David, the kings of Israel and Judah alternated between idol worship and destroying the locations of idol worship. And Ezekiel condemned idol worship occurring in the Temple itself (Ezekiel 8). Although Israel frequently succumbed to idol worship, those who held tightly to God, especially the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures, did not endorse such practices. Quite the opposite: They rigorously condemned them.

This understanding of the preliminary foundation that God had to lay in the fabric of Israel helps us give an incomplete but still meaningful answer to the question of why God waited so long to come in Jesus. God had to eliminate idolatry from Israel. If Israel persisted in idol worship, they would have had a defective understanding of God's character and God's incarnation in Jesus Christ. Also, this provides us with another reason why Israel was unique: Since Jesus was unique as God's solution for humanity's salvation, God gave Israel a sacrificial system uniquely as well. A proliferation of sacrificial systems among other peoples would have blunted that connection between the sacrifice of the animals and the sacrifice of Jesus, especially because Jesus could only be offered up once to death as a perfect, spotless sacrifice, and that occurred by Israel's leaders giving him to the Romans. Finally, the Temple's connection to David and the line of Davidic kings (2 Samuel 7) also meant that this one institution was connected to others, like the Israelite kingship. It was not a stand-alone institution that could be abstracted from Israel and placed elsewhere. Just as King David built the Temple, so the Messianic heir of David would build the new Temple. Jesus fulfilled that hope.

The Tabernacle and later, the Temple, served as a basic foundation for Israel to understand how God can be personally known. Israel therefore glimpsed *the structure of God's being*. Solomon acknowledged that the Jerusalem Temple was where God revealed Himself personally and imminently while simultaneously remaining transcendent above the universe: 'But will God indeed dwell with mankind on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You; how much less this house which I have built' (2 Chronicles 6:18). For God to be both infinite and yet personally present within His creation and knowable by His creatures means that there is at least a 'binitarian' internal complexity to God. God is able to localize Himself while that local manifestation of God does not exhaust His being. A personal God who desires personal relationship with us requires both imminence and transcendence. Thus, God must be at least 'binitarian,' which He revealed of Himself through Israel's Tabernacle and Temple.

By contrast, the Allah of Islam is not personally understandable or knowable through a personal encounter. Muslim theology insists on a strict unitarian monotheism, that is, a denial of any internal complexity within Allah that would suggest anything like the Christian Trinity. But this is the very reason why a vast gulf is said to exist between Allah and the created world. Allah can only send his commandments through the words of the prophets, as opposed to sending himself and coming personally to human beings to be known personally. Fazlur Rahman, who was an academic apologist for Islam during the 20th century, writes, 'The Quran is no treatise about God and His nature: His existence, for the Quran, is strictly functional – He is Creator and Sustainer of the universe and of man, and particularly the giver of guidance for man and He who judges man, individually and collectively, and metes out to him merciful justice.'¹⁷ Allah reveals his will but not himself. Hence, Muslims refuse to say anything about the character of Allah or claim a personal knowledge of Allah, since Allah is beyond personal understanding. This is the direct logical consequence of the strict unitarian monotheism of Islam.

It is a short step from a 'binitarian' internal complexity within God to a 'trinitarian' complexity. The Father sent his Word/Son to humanity in a 'house' of human flesh, and the relation between Word/Son and Father is maintained by the Spirit (John 14:8 – 21). This makes it all the more significant to discern the 'Temple' thread in the New Testament. For example, Jesus said, referring to himself, 'Something greater than the Temple is here' (Matthew 12:6). Conceptually, Jesus himself is a Temple-like arrangement, where the Father dwells within the Word/Son and is revealed in and through the Word/Son, precisely what Jesus says in the passage before (Matthew 11:25 – 27). The significance of the 'new Temple' theme is also evident in the way God accomplished our salvation. The Father reveals himself by the Spirit through the Word/Son of God by accomplishing what he has always wanted for us: a new, redeemed, God-soaked, immortal humanity whereby the Spirit of the Son's new humanity can indwell us and cause us to dwell in the Son, and in the Son, present us as adopted children to the Father. The holy embrace by which God presents us to Himself is so intimate that our very beings overlap. A 'trinitarian' complexity within God is logically necessary in order for God to heal and transform us *from within us*. God accomplishes our ontological transformation (salvation from the corruption of human nature) and discloses Himself through the Temple structure opening up from within the human person Jesus of Nazareth in order to make us into living, human Temples as well. Again, a 'trinitarian' complexity within God is logically necessary to accomplish this very thing. God must be simultaneously the One who is wholly and inexhaustibly other than us (the Father), who becomes One of us in human flesh, in a unique, local, personally knowable appearance (the Son), in order to become One with us (the Spirit) and reveal himself through us. In this way, the Father, Son, and Spirit displace the corruption of sin in the fundamental place of our being and identity, displacing it with God's very own presence, to restore us to being the image-bearers of God that we were originally designed by Him to be. This is all foreshadowed by God's use of Israel's Temple.

The final steps lie in understanding how the Temple-structure is a pattern: a pattern both within God Himself and a pattern of God's creation of humanity. The two are interrelated. Completely apart from us and our salvation, before creation and independent of it, the Triune God appears to have a Temple structure within Himself. The New Testament authors speak with amazement that we have a true knowledge of God: Not simply God's activities, and most certainly not God's pass into a 'heaven' that exists at some distance from Him, but a personal knowledge of God Himself through a direct experience of Him. This is because the inner grammar of God's Triune relations is opened up to us in the act of His person coming in Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit. Because Jesus claimed, by the Spirit, to know and reveal the Father (Matthew 11:25 – 27; Luke 10:22; John 14:7 – 11), there is nothing about

¹⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Quran* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), p.1.

God that Jesus failed to reveal. Jesus revealed all of God and all of God's character. There is no fourth person of the Godhead lurking somewhere behind the back of Jesus. Hence the Nicene Creed emphasizes that the Son is eternally the Son, eternally begotten from the Father, and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father. Already in the dynamic inner relationships between the Persons of the Trinity, there exists a Temple structure where the Father eternally reveals himself in and through the Son, by the Spirit. In our salvation, we have come to know God as God knows Himself. To put this in a short memorable phrase, Karl Rahner developed the dictum called 'Rahner's Rule' which says that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity. That is, the Triune God in His saving action is the Triune God from all eternity. What we experience of God in our salvation is truly God Himself.

God created humanity in His 'image' (Genesis 1:28). Before and behind and under that reality, however, the eternal Son is and always has been the true 'image' of God, the firstborn over all creation (Colossians 1:15) and the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being (Hebrews 1:3). We might say that humanity was created specifically in the image of 'The Image.' Irenaeus, the earliest theological writer we know of outside of the New Testament authors, recognized this: the pre-incarnate Christ served as a pattern or model for humanity. Karl Barth took the bold step of saying that there has always been a certain Humanity of God, a divine Humanity that is within God from which He made and patterned humanity. That is, as the Son is related to the Father in the Spirit, *internally* to the Godhead, so humanity is to be related to God by the Spirit, *externally* to the Godhead but drawn up to participate in God (e.g. Ephesians 4:24 – where we 'put on the new self, created *in God*') as God reveals Himself in us. And because the Father does not coerce the Son within the Godhead, God does not coerce humanity and overpower us. It is not within His character to do so. Jesus said to his disciples, 'As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you' (John 15:9), which suggests many things to me, but lack of coercion is one. Jesus did not coerce his disciples by some fiat of 'irresistible grace.' No, for God's grace is resistible by us at this point, or else it is not truly grace at all. It is true that Jesus said, 'You did not choose me but I chose you' (John 15:16), but I think this refers to the chronological order of their respective decisions (Jesus chose them *first*), not a complete exclusion of the disciples' agency in responding to Jesus. This gracious allowance of human freedom was always present, at every single moment. There is an internal pattern of relationship within God that God extends beyond Himself in creating humanity. And God has drawn up and redeemed humanity by a pattern that fits the very pattern of His being. God laid the foundation for us to understand this in Israel through the temporary but physical dwelling of the Tabernacle, and later, the Temple.

Made in God's image, humanity was placed in a creation that was patterned after a Temple. Rikk Watts notes that the Genesis 1 account is patterned after the ancient stories of a god or hero who slays an enemy and builds a temple. The Genesis account has no enemy to serve as God's rival, but it does depict a Temple – the creation – in which human beings were designed to be priests.¹⁸ By bringing forth more human life and more of the garden in a wild creation, human beings were to understand partnership with God, and the pleasures of being like God by bringing forth life, beauty, order, and love; and at some point become a people fully indwelt by God by His Spirit. God designed them to become a physical representation of Himself, who had an authentic independent existence outside of God but who were freely connected to God who called and renewed them in love. But before humanity could grow into that likeness fully, and be elevated into an even higher and deeper life with God through the Tree of Life, Adam and Eve fell into sin. Their natures became corrupted, polluted, and curved in on themselves in self-centeredness. However, God's commitment to humanity was unbreakable, because it was patterned after the Father's unbreakable commitment to the Son in the Spirit. This commitment on God's part gave rise to God's commitment of 'covenant love' with humanity. God was absolutely free to create or not create humanity; but once He did, and Adam and Eve fell into sin, He had to do all He could to offer His redemption to us. God was not free to discard us, annihilate us, or otherwise do nothing to save us from our sin. In love, He had already bound Himself to us. He was still committed to giving us the choice to be one with Him. Thus, if God were to reveal Himself and start to re-invade the world, He would have to do so in a Temple-like structure.

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.

¹⁸ Rikk Watts, "Making sense of Genesis 1", *Stimulus*, Volume 12, Number 4, November 2004

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.’¹⁹ 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 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

¹⁹ Rodney Stark, *Discovering God*, p.55 – 56

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.²⁰ 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 ‘backsliders’ and loose sexual morals in the pagan culture around them. If such tendencies reared up in the 2nd 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

²⁰ Eusebius of Caesaria, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 5, chapter 18

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 20th 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.