

A Phenomenology of Chosenness  
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In other forums I have theorized an origin for the concept of chosenness that appears to be deeply imbedded in all expressions of monotheism I have encountered.<sup>1</sup> Today I am interested in considering how theological notions of chosenness work themselves out in terms of policies of relationship with non-believers in the three great monotheistic families. We'll begin by citing some of the classic scriptural texts upon which Jews, Christians and Muslims rely in order to justify their sense of being elected or chosen by God.

I have limited my citation of "chosenness texts" to those that are quite explicit by using language evocative of divine selection. Were I to add scriptural texts that argue over the closely related notion of divine covenant, the number would increase exponentially in all three scriptures.

### The Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible is riddled with chosenness texts, and only a few need to be cited here. They begin to appear at the very commencement of the biblical history of the Jewish people. Abraham is mysteriously chosen by God to engage in a physical and spiritual journey to and with the one great God. <sup>1</sup>*The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you..."* (Gen.12:1-3). As the community expands from a nuclear family to a clan, a tribe, and then a fellowship of many tribes, God reaffirms the unique relationship when giving the Torah to Israel at Mt. Sinai. <sup>3</sup>*Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying: "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: <sup>4</sup>You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me."*

That unique relationship is reaffirmed repeatedly throughout scripture. *"I, the Lord, am your God who has set you apart from other peoples"* (Lev. 20:24). <sup>6</sup>*For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God: of all the peoples of the earth the Lord your God chose you to be His treasured people"* (Deut. 7:6). *"The Lord your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be His treasured people"* (Deut. 14:2). *"Hear now, O Jacob My servant, Israel whom I have chosen!"* (Isaiah 44:1). <sup>2</sup>*You alone have I singled out [known] of all the families of the earth"* (Amos 3:2). *"Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people He has chosen to be His own"* (Ps. 33:12).

The sense and significance of chosenness represented by these texts are not all alike. Their meanings are shaped by the historical (including political, social, religion) contexts out of which they emerged.<sup>2</sup> Although the nuances of meaning and contextual background are

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<sup>1</sup> "The Problem of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity and Islam," The 2005 Sterling M. McMurrin Lecture on Religion and Culture, University of Utah (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2005). "Contextualizing Antisemitism in Islam: Chosenness, Choosing, and the Affects of the Birthing of New Religion," *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 4:3 (2007) ([www.interscience.wiley.com](http://www.interscience.wiley.com)); "Chosenness and the Exclusivity of Truth," Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Cite works treating these and their significance.

important for understanding the history and development of the notion, this is not the topic here, so we will leave them and observe simply that the concept is well-developed in the Hebrew Bible and serves as a kind of identifying factor for the religion of Israel.

The religion of Israel is the foundational expression of monotheism. It is the first and, until Christianity, the only sustained expression of monotheism that we know of.<sup>3</sup> Religion in the ancient Near East seems to have been defined and organized ethnically more than theologically. Most of the peoples in the region had unique, even "chosen" relationships with their own national Gods who would protect and sustain their particular ethnic communities in exchange for proper worship. The Moabites had their particular national God named Kemosh, the Ammonites had a national God called Milkom, the name of the Philistine national God was Dagon, etc. Religious identity in the ancient Near East was ethnic, and one worshipped according to one's ethnic or "national" identity.

Like all ancient Near Eastern ethnic religionists, the Children of Israel imagined themselves in a unique relationship with their God, but unlike the others, it seems, they considered their national God to also be the one and only God of all creation. Israel was the first religious community to arrive at this two-fold understanding, and Judaism today, along with all subsequent forms of monotheism, seems to retain some aspect of this unique perspective. On the one hand, God is universal and the sovereign creator-God for all things and all peoples. On the other, that universal God has a particular, unique and even exclusive relationship with the one and only religious community of believers that truly understands the acts out the will of that universal God.

### **The New Testament**

Because all scriptures reflect the particular historical (including political, linguistic, cultural, religious, social and technological) contexts in which they were revealed, the New Testament tends to express the notion of chosenness in a different manner and with a different discourse than the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, being chosen by God is no less important. The chosenness of Christianity begins with the unique chosen quality of God's own and only son. <sup>33</sup>*As these two were moving away from Jesus, Peter said to him, 'Master, it is good that we are here. Shall we make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah?' but he spoke without knowing what he was saying.* <sup>34</sup>*As he spoke there came a cloud which cast its shadow over them; they were afraid as they entered the cloud,* <sup>35</sup>*and from it a voice spoke: 'This is my son, my Chosen; listen to him'"* (Luke 9:33-35).

Chosenness in the New Testament tends to be removed from a single people (as with Israel) and applied to both the divine carnation and to the religious system that emerged from it. That is, chosenness is identified less with a people than with a trans-ethnic or trans-national community of believers. It is the Church (Gr., *ekklesia*, 'the chosen'), the spiritual rather than tribal community of believers that defines the chosen of God. This change is articulated famously through the parable of Jesus as the shepherd who gathers the chosen among all the nations. Anyone may enter the fold. Jesus is the door to the sheepfold and the source of entry to God the Father. <sup>1</sup>*In very truth I tell you, the man who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in some other way, is nothing but a thief and a robber.* <sup>2</sup>*He who enters by the door is the shepherd in charge of the sheep.* <sup>3</sup>*The door-keeper admits him, and the sheep hear his voice; he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out.* <sup>4</sup>*When he has brought them all out, he goes ahead of them and the sheep follow, because they know his voice.* <sup>5</sup>*They will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do*

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<sup>3</sup> Note Aknaton, Greco-Roman, pre-Islamic Arabian, but that they were not sustained.

not recognize the voice of strangers.' <sup>6</sup>This was a parable that Jesus told them, but they did not understand what he meant by it. <sup>7</sup>So Jesus spoke again: 'In very truth I tell you, I am the door of the sheepfold. <sup>8</sup>The sheep paid no heed to any who came before me, for they were all thieves and robbers. <sup>9</sup>I am the door; anyone who comes into the fold through me will be safe. He will go in and out and find pasture.... <sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own knows me, <sup>15</sup>as the Father knows me and I know the Father....

There remains, however, at least in some layers represented by New Testament scripture, an articulation of concern for the chosenness of a Christian religious peoplehood, even if not a tribal or ethnic religious peoplehood as the Hebrew Bible defines Israel. "Tell me now, you who are so anxious to be under the law, will you not listen to what the Law says? It is written there that Abraham had two sons, one by his slave and the other by his free-born wife. The slave-woman's son was born in the course of nature, the free woman's through God's promise. This is an allegory. The two women stand for two covenants. The one bearing children into slavery is the covenant that comes from Mt. Sinai: that is Hagar. Sinai is a mountain in Arabia and it represents the Jerusalem of today, for she and her children are in slavery. But the heavenly Jerusalem is the free woman; she is our mother!... Now you, my friends, like Isaac, are children of God's promise, but just as in those days the natural-born son persecuted the spiritual son, so it is today. Yet what does scripture say? 'Drive out the slave and her son, for the son of the slave shall not share the inheritance with the son of the free woman.' [Cf. Gen.21:10] You see, then, my friends, we are no slave's children; our mother is the free woman. It is for freedom that Christ set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and refuse to submit again to the yoke of slavery" (Gal.4:21-31).<sup>4</sup>

This sentiment is even stronger in 1 Peter 2:9-10: "<sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, a people claimed by God for his own, to proclaim the glorious deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people at all; but now you are God's people. Once you were outside his mercy; but now you are outside no longer." It is not clear to me whether the use of a peoplehood or "race" reflects a lingering ethnic sentiment or use of a metaphor to provide meaning and relevance to the Hebrew Biblical notion in a cosmopolitan Greco-Roman world. I tend to think the latter, but more work needs to be done to parse out the meaning in the Greek and possible Hebrew/Aramaic subtexts.

### **The Qur'an**

The Qur'an also finds meaning in divine chosenness, but as in prior scripture, it expresses the particularity of its historical context. "You are the best community that has been brought forth for humanity, commanding the reputable and forbidding the repugnant, and you believe in God. If the People of the Book believed, it would surely be best for them. Some of them are believers, but most are deviants" (Q.3:110). Only those within this particular community of believers merit a future of eternal bliss.

<sup>22</sup>Round up those who did wrong and their spouses, and what they used to worship <sup>23</sup>Aside from God, and guide them to the path of Hell [lit. "the hot place"]....<sup>34</sup>This is what We do to the sinners. <sup>35</sup>For when it was said to them, "There is no god but God, they made as if they were too great, <sup>36</sup>saying, "We should abandon our Gods because of a mad poet?" ....<sup>39</sup>You receive your recompense [punishment] only for what you do

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<sup>4</sup> See also Romans 9:7-9.

<sup>40</sup>except for the loyal/pure servants of God. <sup>41</sup>These receive well-known reward, <sup>42</sup>fruits, being well-honored <sup>43</sup>in gardens of delight...(Q.37).

The term in the Qur'an to describe the loyal or pure servants of God is مُخْلِصٌ. In another verse in the following chapter (38), the term is found in a kind of linguistic parallel with الْمُصْطَفَيْنَ الْأَخْيَارِ which clearly convey chosenness. They are all promised entrance into Paradise, which is called in the latter verse, "Gardens of Eden" (حَنَاتٍ عَدْنٍ).

<sup>45</sup>And remember our servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, endowed with ability and vision. <sup>46</sup>We purified them with a purity that is reminiscent of the Home [of paradise?]. <sup>47</sup>They are among the chosen, the elect in Our view. <sup>48</sup>And remember Ishmael and Elisha and Dhu al-Kifl, each one among the best. <sup>49</sup>This is a reminder; for the conscientious a good place of retreat. <sup>50</sup>Gardens of Eden, whose doors are open to them.

You may observe from the greater effort I need to put into identifying and working with the notion of chosenness in the Qur'an that it is not articulated as often nor as centrally as it is in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. It is nevertheless an important item. When I suggested (as a compliment, mind you) that chosenness is not as important a concept for Islam as it is for Judaism and Christianity a few months ago to a university audience in Cairo, the reaction was hostile. I was condemned for suggesting that perhaps the verse, "You are the best community that has been brought forth for humanity..." might be conditional on the second part of the sentence: *commanding the reputable and condemning the repugnant*. I will end this section with a final qur'anic verse: "God has promised those of you who believe and do good works that He will make them successors on earth, just as He made those before them successors. He will surely establish their religion for them that He has approved<sup>5</sup> for them, exchanging security for them in place of fear" (Q.24:55).

You will note that in the Christian and Islamic scriptures, the notion of chosenness is expressed in a manner that is no less polemical than in the Hebrew Bible. All three scriptures convey a sense that there can be only one truly chosen and that being chosen necessarily excludes the other religious communities from the equation. The latter two scriptures seem to agree that the chosenness of the Israelites expressed in the Hebrew Bible was accurate at one time, but that for reasons that we cannot explore here, they lost that standing as those responding to the new revelations assumed the extraordinary status once held by them. In the language of game theory, chosenness in scripture is often expressed as a "zero-sum" situation. There can be only one chosen at any time.

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The zero-sum nature of chosenness that is often (though not always) expressed in monotheistic religion is probably influenced by a number of human, or social-psychological factors, including the natural association of choosing with hierarchy (the one chosen takes a higher position than those that have not been chosen), the

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<sup>5</sup> It is tempting to rely on Cleary's translation here for *irtadaa*, "...which God has chosen for them" (Thomas Cleary, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (n.p.: Starlatch Press, 2004), but although Cleary's translation is often quite insightful, the use of *irtadaa* here approaches but does not equal the meaning of chosenness.

structural manner in which humans have conceived of the divine-human relationship, and with the polemical environments in which new religious movements emerge in history.<sup>6</sup> With what follows I wish to consider how chosenness seems to affect policies of relationship with non-believers. As with the contextual nature of scriptural discourse in general, thinking about policies of relationship must also take into consideration historical and cultural contexts.

Before entering that discussion, however, we must first digress slightly in order to clarify what three monotheistic systems are being treated here. These three are Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all three of which are distinct from what I will refer to here as Biblical Religion.<sup>7</sup> The reality is contrary to a persistent notion among many non-Jews and Jews alike, that the Judaism practiced today, even among the most traditional Jews, is virtually the same religion as that of the Bible. That notion is simply erroneous. The differences between Judaism and Biblical Religion are many and significant, ranging from matters of divine worship ritual to theology to the articulation of religious commitment in practice (*halakhah* and custom), concepts of the endtime and afterlife, and so on. There certainly is a profound continuity between Biblical Religion and Rabbinic Judaism in all of the fields just mentioned, but so can it be argued that there a profound continuity between Biblical Religion and Christianity and even Islam. I use the term, "even" in reference to Islam only because Muslims tend not to rely on the same quality of association with the Hebrew Bible that Jews and Christians claim.

What makes Judaism particularly different from Biblical Religion is the virtual extension of scripture into Rabbinic literature, which includes the Talmud but is not limited to the Talmud. I lump all the relevant Rabbinic literature together for the purposes of this discussion and call it "Talmud" for reasons of simplicity and rhetoric, and I use the term "virtual extension" because the Talmud is simultaneously a self-acknowledged extension of scripture and an interpretation of scripture. It is referred to consistently by rabbinic Jews as the "Oral Torah," a profound statement about its quality as scripture.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the sages who appear and speak within it acknowledge that it is also a complex interpretive enterprise whose goal is to make sense of tradition in its relationship to the scripture of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>9</sup>

This of course complicates the discussion, but it also allows for a kind of symmetry. The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament no longer represents any single living religious system, but rather serves as a kind of "Ur-scripture" for all three post-biblical monotheistic systems. It has a primary place in the scriptural canon of both Judaism and Christianity, even though it serves more as an authority that authenticates the next level of scripture in the New Testament and the Talmud than a scripture in its own right. It is referenced as divine in origin also by Islam, but is not relied upon to authenticate the Qur'an aside from its role as original revelation that has become corrupted by human manipulation, thereby opening the way for a third and final revelation in the Qur'an.

## **CHOSENNESS AND POLICIES OF RELATIONSHIP WITH THOSE NOT CHOSEN**

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<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the structural influence, see Martin Jaffee, "One God, One Revelation, One People: On the Symbolic Structure of Elective Monotheism" (JAAR 69:4 [2001], 753-775). For an analysis of the historical influence, see Firestone (articles cited above).

<sup>7</sup> Some scholars refer to the religion that is articulated in the Hebrew Bible as "Biblical Judaism." I prefer Biblical Religion in order to differentiate that from Judaism (or "Rabbinic Judaism").

<sup>8</sup> Sources.

<sup>9</sup> Sources.

We focus here on two closely related subjects: how the monotheistic systems have understood the chosen bond with God in terms of relations with other peoples or religions, and how this sense of relationship was played out in policy and action.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, a sense of elitism is deeply imbedded in the relationship between the "chosen" and the "non-chosen" Other. This elitism is not without its critics, even within the scriptures that overwhelmingly preach the special quality and nature of the chosen.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, elitism seems to be a *sine qua non* of chosenness. That superiority can and has been articulated differently in various scriptural verses. It may be triumphant or patronizing, arrogant and jubilant or aloof and even tolerant, but it is an essential part of having been chosen by the power that governs the universe. What follows represents some preliminary observations and thoughts about how various communities' sense of chosenness was acted out in relations with other, non-chosen communities.

### **In Ancient Israel**

In the Hebrew Bible the hierarchy is most clear: "Of all the peoples on earth the Lord your God chose you to be his treasured people" (Deut.7:6-8, Cf. 14:2). "You shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine" (Lev.20:26). This is elitism combined with separatism, and it reflects the historical context of the ancient Near East where all religions were ethnically organized and defined, and the particular status of Israel as the only community that considered its God both a tribal God and a truly universal God. The Israelites considered their bond with God unique and exclusive. Or at least, that was the goal. Very often, Israel is criticized by the voice of the Hebrew Bible for *not* remaining loyal to a unique and exclusive relationship with its God.

It must be recalled that one worshipped according to one's ethnic identity. In fact, the notion of religious conversion seems not to have been a conceptual possibility at the time. It emerged as an option only in the Hellenistic period, probably under the influence of the philosophic schools that one could study and determine which among them made most sense.<sup>12</sup> Because the history represented by the Hebrew Bible was earlier, the notion of religious conversion and therefore, proselytism, simply cannot be found there. The relationship of Israel to other nations, therefore, was never one of mission, and one finds no clear reference to proselytizing in the Hebrew Bible. Compare, for example, with the Christian New Testament or Jewish Rabbinic literature, both of which clearly acknowledge the notions of conversion and mission.

This lack of reference to mission in the Hebrew Bible may have also been related to the lack of a developed notion of reward and punishment in an afterlife. Modern Westerners tend to presume that such a notion was "always" operative, but the notion of divine salvation seems to have emerged only in the period of Late Antiquity following the biblical period.<sup>13</sup> Without such a notion, it would have been a conceptual impossibility to "save souls" of either believers or non-believers.

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<sup>10</sup> The literature treating the relationship between religionists and "the other" has grown significantly in the past few decades. See, for example, Laurence Silberstein and Robert Cohn (Eds.), *The Other in Jewish Thought and History* (NY: NYU Press, 1994), Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions* (NY: Oxford, 1999), [].

<sup>11</sup> Amos 9:7, Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a, & cite from NT & Q.

<sup>12</sup> A. D. Nock, *Conversion* (Oxford, 1933).

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In earlier layers of the Bible which seem to reflect a period in which our sense of monotheism was only emerging, local peoples and their Gods were treated as a fact of life and interaction between early biblical heroes and non-Israelites and their Gods was normative.<sup>14</sup> As the developing sense of monotheism became increasingly central among Israel, however, it became ever more important to separate from the tempting religious practices of neighboring peoples who worshipped other Gods and powers. It is likely that many social practices that emerged in the Bible did so, at least in part, in order to separate Israelites from social intercourse with other peoples. This represents quite a different situation from would have obtained had the Hebrew Bible been interested in mission.

In the ancient Near East, the only way to leave one's ancestral religion was to assimilate into another ethnic group or nation. If one's social and ritual practice required activities that discouraged social interaction with other peoples, one would be less likely to become attracted to them and their practices. Intermarriage was always a threat to the unity and survival of the small community. Even those groups such as the Egyptians and Ammonites, among whom Israel was permitted by biblical scripture to intermarry, exogamous relations were sanctioned only after three generations of the foreigners' assimilation into the Israelite cultural and religious system (Deut. 23:8-9).

These kinds of rules and behavioral expectations do not reflect a powerful political standing. As David Biale has so aptly written, "For most of the time from the beginning of the Israelite settlement in the land of Canaan to the fall of the Second Temple, the Jewish people lived in the shadow of great empires, rarely enjoying what would today be called full national sovereignty."<sup>15</sup> The elitism of Israelite monotheism with its sense of chosenness remained the trait of a small and often embattled community. Only in one instance during this period was mission or the imposition of Israelite religion directed to another community. This was the case of the forced conversion of the Idumeans under the Hasmonean ruler, John Hyrcanus, in the second century, BCE. Such a policy became a possibility only because of the influence of Hellenism and the temporary vacuum of political power caused by the collapse of the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire in the second century.<sup>16</sup>

### **In Rabbinic Judaism**

Rabbinic Judaism emerged during the late, Second Temple period after the notions of conversion, mission and salvation had entered into the conceptual repertoire of the Hellenistic world. Rabbinic Judaism emerged into history during an extended period of Jewish political powerlessness. With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70, CE, Jewish communities lived in political exile, even within the Land of Israel, among polities governed by non-Jews. There were two important stages in this period.

In the first, the Roman Empire was pagan, and many Greco-Romans were in search of a religious system that would be more meaningful than that of the increasingly irrelevant Greco-Roman systems. During this period, many non-Israelites began engaging in "Judaizing" practices that brought them into the orbit of Judaism. These included at least partial observance of Jewish dietary laws, ritual practices, study, and even circumcision among men, and it had become possible by that time to enter into the community of Israel as converts. So many Greco-Romans entered into

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<sup>14</sup> Nili Fox article.

<sup>15</sup> David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (NY: Schocken, 1986), 11-12.

<sup>16</sup>

emerging Rabbinic Judaism that historians estimate that some ten percent of the Roman Empire, and 20% of the area in the Eastern Mediterranean, were composed of Jews by the first century, CE.<sup>17</sup> There developed a sense of mission among many Jews in this environment, particularly in response to the claim of early Christians that they represented a new chosen people as those who had chosen Christ.

Both Greco-Roman Christians and Jewish Christians who accepted the messianic and later, divine nature of Jesus, were claiming to be the "true Israel" (*verus israel*). Most Rabbinic Jews, who represented the monotheistic religious establishment, felt threatened by the emerging competition, and some engaged in overt and covert acts to prevent the success of Christianity.<sup>18</sup> But both Jews and Christians were living under the rule of pagan Rome, which had little institutional love for either system. Mobilization by either side to gain influence and new members thus occurred under conditions under which political or military power could not be independently employed. Such influence was only possible by appropriating the power of Rome, which neither was able to do except in extraordinary and limited circumstances.

In the second stage of emerging Rabbinic Judaism, the Roman Empire had Christianized, with the result that Christianity absorbed and took on the power and influence of the empire. When the establishment religion of Rome became Christianity, Judaism continued in its status as a tolerated minority tradition, but that tolerated status began shortly to be eroded. In crude terms, Christianity had won the competition for the prize of the Empire. Judaism had lost. In this environment, the elitism of chosenness among Jews tended to become internalized, partly as a consolation for lack of outward religious and political success. Mission by Jews was no longer possible under Byzantine law, as it became a capital crime.<sup>19</sup> If anything, then, Rabbinic Judaism separated itself increasingly from non-Jews. But this does not represent a withdrawal from intellectual engagement with non-Jews. In fact, as Christian writers from this period convey, a nagging articulation of Jewish superiority continued to plague many Christian thinkers.<sup>20</sup> That sense of religious elitism, however, could not be applied to political, social or military policy. The reason for this is probably as simple as it was structural. Rabbinic Judaism was never a religion of an independent polity that could apply its sense of chosenness elitism to public policy. Mission was suppressed in the Christian world, and when it became a capital crime also in the Muslim world it became impossible. Those energies associated with chosenness elitism became sublimated and applied to other pursuits.

### **In Christianity & Islam**

As we have observed, Christianity emerged in the same general environment of political powerlessness under Roman rule as Rabbinic Judaism. In fact, Christians held less power and were held with far more disdain by Rome than Jews, and certainly by the middle of the second century they were persecuted far more as well. But Christianity was more successful in making inroads among Greco-Romans seeking a religion that would provide more meaning than the traditional religious options of the Greco-Roman world.

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<sup>19</sup> Theodosius II (439 CE), Novella III: Concerning Jews, Samaritans, Heretics, and Pagans, cited in Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook* (HUC Press, 1990), 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> Chrysostom? Augustine, etc..

By the middle of the fourth century, Christians found themselves the dominant and then ruling religion of the Empire. For the first time in human history, monotheists controlled a world empire with all of its institutions of power: political rule, administrative bureaucracies, tax collection, control of the media and education, and the military. This was the first opportunity for applying the religious ideology of monotheist elitism into imperial law, and it began to be done early on. Before the end of the century, pagan practices were outlawed, and monotheistic practices that were not in line with those in power were prohibited or restricted.<sup>21</sup>

The conceptual notion of conversion with its subsequent application to mission was not the operative issue in this change. Rather, the main motivator seems simply to have been the acquisition of power. Keep in mind that although mission, conversion and reward and punishment in the afterlife were not a part of biblical religion, they were important elements of the conceptual and practical repertoire of monotheism for both Jews and Christians in the first centuries of the common era. Both engaged in proselytism. When Christians gained the institutions of imperial power, Jews remained largely powerless and could not apply their religious ideas to the political realm.

When monotheism became the religion of empire, it naturally took on an imperialist worldview. This is ironic because although Christianity originated as a persecuted religious minority that struggled to survive in the face of the overwhelming power of an unsympathetic empire, it became an imperialist religion itself. The imperial codes of the Christian Roman emperors, from Theodosius and Justinian onward, for example, applied the power of the state to enforce religious ideology throughout the empire from the earliest period.

We can observe a similar phenomenon occurring when Islam became an imperial religion. Like all new religious movements, Islam emerged as a persecuted religious minority. It managed to prevail, however, and eventually became the established religion of Muslim empires called "caliphates." As in the case of Christianity, the elitist ideology of monotheism, combined with the power of the state and its state apparatuses, created an imperial religion that imposed its religious ideology by the power of the state. In the case of Christianity, the mechanism was the imperial codes mentioned above and reflective of the organization of the early Church. In the case of Islam, it was less centralized. Rather than caliphal decree, the political imposition of religious law and rule was authorized by the *shari`a*, the Arabic Islamic term for religious law, which developed only after Islam had become an imperial religion. The very worldview articulated by *shari`a* with regard to non-Muslims is universal, triumphant, and reflective of a world view shaped by the power of empire.

There is a major difference, however, between the imperialism of Islam and that of Christianity, and that difference seems to be based on the particular historical contexts of transition from opposition (or persecuted) religion to religion of state. We have noted previously how the elitism of chosenness may have been a common worldview of national religions in the ancient Near East. All religionists felt "chosen" by their particular God, and all observed that their neighbors had similar feelings of intimacy with their own deities. By the end of the Second Temple Period, however,

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<sup>21</sup> "We desire that all the people under our clemency should live by that religion which divine Peter the apostle is said to have given the Romans. ... We desire that heretics and schismatists be subjected to various fines. ... We decree also that we shall cease making sacrifices to the gods. And if anyone has committed such a crime, let him be stricken with the avenging sword." (Cod. Theod. xvi, 1, 2; v, 1; x, 4.)

the old national religions of the ancient world had died out or were absorbed by the dominance of Greco-Roman culture and religion. Only one of the ancient Near Eastern ethnicity-based religions survived, and that was the religion of Israel. Centuries earlier it had completed the transition from national polytheism to a vision of a single, monotheistic deity that ruled the universe, and it represented the only expression of monotheism when Christianity emerged as an independent religious movement. This Israelite monotheism included a variety of movements, each claiming to represent the true will of the one Great God, but all adherents of these movements called themselves Jews (or Judeans) and all retained the old feeling of a chosen relationship with their God – who was also the God of all creation.

This sense of chosenness, which had likely originated in the unique bond between ethnic groups and their ethnic Gods in the ancient Near East, was deeply entrenched in Israelite monotheism – Judaism. It appears that all movements within Judaism retained that sense of chosenness,<sup>22</sup> and chosenness became an identifying trait of monotheism in general<sup>23</sup> and with a sense of religious truth and true religion. The one Great God, who would not choose to be engaged in an intimate relationship with pagans who worshipped images of gods and powers, would engage in intimate relationship only with those who understood the truth of monotheism and who conceptualized and worshipped the one True God properly.

As new forms of monotheism emerged in history, chosenness became one of the authoritative motifs that were understood to validate them. In the earliest period, when only one or two discreet expressions of monotheism existed, chosenness was a zero-sum equation. We have observed how this was the case with the emergence of Christianity. According to both Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, only one of the two movements could be truly representative of the divine will. Only one was truly "chosen." If one was chosen, the other was rejected.

The zero-sum equation was a natural conceptual paradigm for the particular historical context in which Christianity emerged as an independent religion. There were two distinct expressions of monotheism, each claiming the unique status of being divinely chosen. Only one must be true.

Islam, however, emerged in a world in which there were a variety of competing expressions of monotheism. Not only were there "Judaism" and "Christianity," but there were competing expressions of both, each expression claiming to be the proper understanding and response to the divine will. There is evidence of other expressions of monotheism at the time as well that were neither Jewish nor Christian, including local Arabian monotheisms or proto-monotheisms,<sup>24</sup> and various streams or "sects" of Judaism and Christianity had found their way into the Arabian Peninsula by the 7<sup>th</sup> century. To the early Muslims, therefore, it was not natural to conceive of chosenness as a zero-sum equation. The many expressions of monotheism contemporary to emerging Islam prevented that notion from obtaining among the early believers in the religion articulated through revelations to the Prophet Muhammad.

The Qur'an represents the earliest layers of Islamic thought, and it mentions a number of times that any expression of monotheism merits the world to come (Q.2:62, 5:69, 22:17). Not so early Christianity. The notion of salvation is repeatedly restricted in the New Testament to those who accepted belief in the saving power of

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<sup>22</sup> Cite Josephus, Rabbinic Lit.

<sup>23</sup> Cite Stark & others on religious markers, compensators, etc.

<sup>24</sup>

Christ.<sup>25</sup> All others were excluded. Both the New Testament and the Qur'an were strongly influenced by the polemical environments out of which they emerged, but the Qur'an is less exclusive because of the particular multi-monotheistic environment out of which it emerged.

To summarize our schema, therefore, we find the following.

- Long before the emergence of monotheism, all adherents of ethnically organized religion in the ancient NE probably felt that they were chosen.
- As monotheism emerged from this ancient Near Eastern world, it naturally retained the traditional notion of chosenness inherent in national religion and even increased the sense of elitism because only Israelite monotheists understood the true nature of God.
- This notion of chosenness became associated with monotheism in general and became an authoritative trait of "true religion."
- Before the notions of reward and punishment in an afterlife, conversion and mission, such a view was virtually irrelevant. After the emergence of these notions, the elitism of monotheist chosenness took on new meaning.
- Without controlling the power of empire, mission occurred on a largely even playing field. Jews and Christians each had an advantage over the other at different periods during the first three centuries CE, depending on the political situation of each in relation to the Roman government.
- With the assumption of the tools of political power, it was natural for the sense of chosenness to be reflected in the policy of imperial law. Christianity, therefore, once it became the religion of empire, took on imperialist traits.
- Rabbinic Judaism, never the religion of empire, did not, although it is no less elitist and certainly would have if it could have.
- Because Christianity and Islam became the religions of great empires, they naturally engaged the powers of the state to increase their resources and numbers. Like Judaism, they developed expectations that they would become the universal religion of all humankind, but unlike Judaism, they were able to engage political and military power for the purpose of reaching this goal.
- Christianity, however, because of the particular historical environment in which it emerged, expressed the zero-sum equation in its imperialism. This resulted in an extreme form of imperialism – a kind of religious totalitarianism. This development did not occur with Islam only because of the particular religious context in which it emerged and took on power.

All monotheisms feel a sense of chosenness. All are elitist. The three different historical modes of expressing that sense of election and elitism toward the Other vary in relation to history, namely, the histories of their emergence as religious systems and the histories of their ascension (or lack of ascension) to political and military power.

This exercise is an attempt at a historical deconstruction of theologies of chosenness and monotheistic elitism. It is presented here simply as a model for

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<sup>25</sup> NT

thinking about what seems to be the unending argument and competition between monotheistic religions and religious movements. It is my hope that it may stimulate more thinking on the subject.