

Troubling Tradition: Wrestling with Problem Passages

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)

Has God Chosen only One People?

The Problematic of Chosenness in Interreligious Dialogue

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The notion of divine election, or God's having chosen one community from among many, is a basic part of monotheism. This essay is an attempt to examine how a member of a religious community that considers itself to be divinely chosen might come to terms with the religious Other who belongs to a different religious community with the same sensibility. Whatever one's personal view, membership in a community whose scripture and tradition has insisted on its unique stature before God requires an accounting of the meaning and significance of chosenness. When persons come together in dialogue who represent two or more religious communities claiming the same unique status before God, how can they be reverent of the religious claims of the Other while remaining true to one's own religious tradition?

CHOSENNESS AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

The Hebrew Bible, New Testament and Qur'an, those foundational religious texts that serve as scripture for all normative expressions of monotheism in the world today, emerged into history during periods in which humans organized themselves in groups that tended to be particularistic and exclusivist. Whether in reference to religion, nation or language, those who were defined to be within the group were more privileged than those outside of it. In many cases, it seems, the in-group considered itself more fully human than those outside. Scholars may disagree over the reasons for this exclusivism and how it developed, but it seems to have been a common worldview for most of humanity until only the most recent period of human history – with some notable exceptions where great individuals or small groups transcended the norm in their perspectives and behaviors. Even today, various expressions of religious, ethnic, national or racial elitism remain stubbornly normative in many if not most parts of the world. How can religious people understand the category of religious elitism, which by definition is authorized one way or another by God, in such a way that we transcend divisive barriers and come to an understanding of the religious other that is fully respectful. Can I understand my own scriptural tradition in such a way that I can envision my own religious community's status as a community with a special, particular blessing, but situated within a world of other peoples who feel that they too are blessed in a special way?

The "troubling text" I have selected to consider actually represents a series of texts from the Hebrew Bible that treat the People of Israel as "chosen," as an elect. There is nothing much more elitist or exclusivist than this notion. The problem is represented for this essay by one classic formulation.

Deuteronomy 7

⁶For 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. ⁷It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord set His heart on you and chose you – indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; ⁸but it was because the Lord favored you and kept the oath He made to your fathers that the Lord freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹Know, therefore, that only the Lord your God is God, the steadfast God who keeps His covenant conscientiously to the thousandth generation of those who love Him and keep His commandments, ¹⁰but who instantly requires with destruction those who reject Him – never slow with those who reject Him, but requiting them instantly.¹¹Therefore, observe conscientiously the Instruction – the laws and the rules – with which I charge you today.¹

This text of course does not stand alone in the Hebrew Bible. Many dozens of verses describe the relationship between God and Israel in elitist terms as exclusive and extraordinary. Only a few more need be cited here.

Exodus 19

¹On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt....³Moses 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: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. ⁵Now then, if you will obey Me conscientiously and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples for all the earth is Mine, ⁶but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Leviticus 20

²⁴And I say to you: You shall possess their land, for I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I, the Lord, am your God who has set you apart from other peoples....²⁶And you shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine.

This notion of extraordinary and exclusive relationship between God and a limited human group is not limited to the Hebrew Bible. Such sentiment exists also in the New Testament and in the Qur'an, as the following texts will illustrate.

Colossians 3

¹¹There is no question here of Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman; but Christ is all, and is in all. ¹²Put on, then, garments that suit God's chosen and beloved people: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience.

2 Timothy 2

⁸Remember the theme of my gospel: Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, born of David's line. ⁹For preaching this I am exposed to hardship, even to the point of being fettered like a criminal; but the word of God is not fettered. ¹⁰All this I endure for the sake of God's chosen ones, in the hope that they too may attain the glorious and eternal salvation which is in Christ Jesus.

¹ New Jewish Publication Society translation.

1 Peter 2

⁷So for you who have faith it has great worth; but for those who have no faith 'the stone which the builders rejected has become the corner-stone', ⁸and also 'a stone to trip over, a rock to stumble against'. They trip because they refuse to believe the word; this is the fate appointed for them. ⁹But 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. ¹⁰Once 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.

Qur'an 3

¹¹⁰You are the best community that has been brought forth for humanity, commanding the reputable and forbidding the disreputable, and believing in God. If the People of the Book had believed it would have been better for them. Some of them are believers, but most are degenerate.

Sura 5 (the Set Table)

³...This day I have perfected your religion for you, completed My favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.

Sura 22 (*al-hajj*)

⁷⁷O you who believe! Bow down, prostrate, and worship your Lord, and do the good, so that you may prosper. ⁷⁸And strive a sincere striving in God, He having chosen you.² He has not made religion a hardship for you, the faith of your father Abraham. He has named you Muslims before and in this [era?] so that the messenger will be a witness to you and will be a witness for the people. So keep up the prayers, give the required tax, and hold fast to God. He is your protector: the best protector and best help.

It is clear that these three sets of texts exhibit many differences within them as well as between them on the notions of election and exclusion, and while it would be valuable to deconstruct the nuances of meaning that they appear to reflect, that is not the goal of this forum and its resultant publication. My first objective, rather, is to consider how dialogers deal with such exclusivist scriptural texts in dialogue by treating my own emotions in dialogue situations as honestly and openly as possible. Only after consciously articulating the most common approaches that I have personally experienced can I treat the problematic of chosenness openly and fairly.

THREE EMOTIONAL APPROACHES TO DIALOGUE

I have encountered three approaches in my engagement in religious dialogue treating troubling texts and traditions: triumphalism, apologetics and repentance. Triumphalism is clearly not a friendly approach to dialogue, nor is it an effective means of eliciting open and giving discussion. I never have the intention of being triumphant in dialogue. It is of course true that I love and respect my own religious tradition intensely. In the interest of full disclosure, I consider my religious system better – at least for me –

² From *j.b.w* or *j.b.* – to collect or gather tribute. VIII بِيْتَجُّ "to choose."

than all the others that I have studied or experienced. This is a very strong statement, but it is how I feel, though I suspect that the reason I feel this way is because I relate to it as more culturally on target with my own personal history and the sense of spirituality and truth that I grew up with. I would expect that my dialogic partners might very well feel the same way with regard to their religion.

I do not want to avoid this point, so I will restate it bluntly. I personally love my own religious system more than yours (the "you" I am referring to is inclusive, including some others of my own religion who understand it and practice it differently than I). But although I personally love my own spiritual system more than yours, I cannot intellectually justify any objective superiority in Judaism (or my own practice of Judaism), and I have no intention of trying to do so. There is no way to prove the priority of Judaism over any other system because a proof, by definition, would demonstrate to anyone – not just an insider and "believer" – the truth of the matter. Because there is no proof, I suspect that my perception of the superiority of Judaism may in fact be wrong. I need to keep that possibility in mind. Therefore, because my evaluation of religion is intensely personal and necessarily subjective, there is no way I could bring myself to be triumphant about my religion.

While non-triumphant, I have no interest in being apologetic or defensive in my analysis of chosenness, despite the fact that the "election of Israel" is one of the most problematic aspects of Judaism in relation to the full world of humanity. I must acknowledge that I occasionally feel the need to defend Judaism against attacks that have historically be leveled against it on account of the sense of chosenness that is so clearly articulated within it. I try as best I can not to be defensive, though the entire project of this essay may be interpreted by some as a form of apologetic. I hope to treat the issue in such a way that is neither apologetic nor defensive of my religion and its general values.

I also do not intend to be repentant. That is, I do not believe that I need to regret the sense of chosenness that is so basic to Judaism. There is no need for contrition. On the other hand, while I want to avoid being triumphant, apologetic or contrite, I suppose that in my struggles with the notion of chosenness, at times I will be all three. Such sentiments may be unavoidable if one wishes to be honest in one's critical analysis and self-understanding of such troublesome issues in one's own much-loved religion. After all, this is my faith system in which and through which I have been raised since infancy and with which I so deeply associates my own family, history and self.

With these approaches and sentiments in mind, I respond to the classic formulation of chosenness articulated in Deuteronomy 7:6: *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*

THE PROBLEM OF CHOSENNESS

Why did God favor Israel? Why did God make the oath to my religious ancestors? The answer to these questions is not provided clearly in the text of the Hebrew Bible itself. Many suggestions are offered by its interpreters, beginning with later layers of the Hebrew Bible and continuing through Rabbinic, medieval and modern Jewish literatures, the New Testament and Christian interpretation, and the Qur'an and interpretations of the Hebrew Bible by Muslims. A project to work through the many layers of interpretation and polemic that are associated with divine chosenness between the monotheistic

religions would be, in my opinion, extremely valuable, but this is not the forum for that important endeavor.

I suspect that the real origin of chosenness has to do with the structure of tribal religion in the ancient Near East in general. Each one of Israel's neighboring communities seems to have had its own ethnic or national God. Just as Israel had its own God whose name we have forgotten how to pronounce, the God of Moav was named Kemosh (1 Kings 11:33, Jer. 48:46), the God of Ammon was Milkom (1 Kings 11:33), the Goddess of Tyre was Ashtoret (2 Kings 23:13), the God of Philistia was Dagon. Given that the Gods of these peoples fought battles for their worshippers in a similar way to which the God of Israel fought Israel's battles, I think it is fair to assume that each national religious community felt a unique or "chosen" relationship with its own ethnic God.

When Israel's God was conceived simply as the "God of Israel" rather than the God of the entire universe, it would be natural and logical for the relationship to be unique. Just as Kemosh favored the Moabites and kept the oath that he made to their ancestors, so did the God of Israel favor the Israelites and keep the oath that he made to *their* ancestors. We have evidence both from the Hebrew Bible (2 Kings 3) and from a famous independent Moabite text called the Mesha Stele, that, just as the God of Israel commanded Israel to battle and even fought Israel's wars against its enemies, the God of Moav commanded the Moabites to battle and also fought Moav's wars.³

But as biblical scholars now tend to agree, the God of Israel transformed in the eyes of the Israelites to become the God of the entire universe sometime roughly around the time of the destruction of the First Temple and the period of the classical prophets.⁴ The notion of divine chosenness of a single ethnic group that would be so natural in the particularist setting of ethnic polytheism, seems to have become problematic to some in the universal setting of monotheism.

Some parts of the Hebrew Bible itself express a certain ambivalent view of chosenness. The section from Exodus 19 cited above is one of those, particularly verse 5: *Now then, if you will obey Me conscientiously and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples for all the earth is Mine.* We find here the notion that God's unique relationship with Israel is not unconditional, but is predicated, rather, on Israel's willingness or ability to be true to the divine will.

The prophet Amos also expresses a certain critique or at least ambivalence about the notion: *You alone have I singled out [known] of all the families of the earth. That is*

³ This is an inscription in the name of Mesha, King of Moav (See 2 Kings 3): "Now [the Israelite king] Omri had possessed all the land of Medeba and dwelt in it his days and half the days of his son, forty years, but Chemosh restored it in my day. And I built Baal-meon and I made in it the reservoir and I built Kiryathaim. And the men of Gad had dwelt in the land of Ataroth from of old and the king of Israel had built for himself Ataroth. And I fought against the city and took it, and I slew all the people of the city, a sight pleasing to Chemosh and to Moab. And I brought back from there the altar-hearth of Duda and I dragged it before Chemosh in Kiryoth. And I caused to dwell in it the men of Sharon and the men of Meharoth (?). And Chemosh said to me: "Go take Nebo against Israel"; and I went by night and fought against it from break of dawn till noon, and I took it and slew all, seven thousand men, boys (?), and women, and girls, for I had devoted it to Ashtar-Chemosh." (George A Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible* [Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1916], p. 363-364). For a reproduction on-line, see <http://www.piney.com/BabMoabite.html>

⁴ Nili Fox, "The Concepts of God in Israel and the Question of Monotheism," in G. Beckman and T. Lewis (eds.), *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion* (Brown Judaic Studies, 2006), 341-343.

why I will call you to account for all your iniquities (Amos 3:2), and To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians. True, I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir. Behold, the Lord has His eye upon the sinful kingdom (Amos 9:7-8). The unconditional nature of chosenness and the covenant in other biblical texts may represent reactions to what appears to be a powerful sense of conditionality expressed here.

This question as to whether or not the chosen status of Israel is conditional became a major component of the historical polemic between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Both scriptures of the latter religious systems understand the conditional relationship articulated in some biblical verses to justify the end of the unique, chosen status of Israel and to support the replacement of that chosen status with their own religious communities.

Take Romans 11, for example. ¹*I ask then: Has God rejected his people? Of course not! I am an Israelite myself, of the stock of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.* ²*God has not rejected the people he acknowledged of old as his own. Surely you know what scripture says in the story of Elijah – how he pleads with God against Israel:* ³*"Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have torn down your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life."* ⁴*But what was the divine word to him? "I have left myself seven thousand men who have not knelt to Baal."* ⁵*In just the same way at the present time a "remnant" has come into being, chosen to by the grace of God.* ⁶*But if it is by grace, then it does not rest on deeds, or grace would cease to be grace.* ⁷*What follows? What Israel sought, Israel has not attained, but the chosen few have attained it. The rest were hardened...* ¹¹*I ask, then: When they stumbled, was their fall final? Far from it! Through a false step on their part salvation has come to the Gentiles, and this in turn will stir them to envy...*¹³

1 Peter 2:7-10 is even clearer: *for those who have no faith 'the stone which the builders rejected has become the corner-stone',⁸ and also 'a stone to trip over, a rock to stumble against'. They trip because they refuse to believe the word; this is the fate appointed for them.* ⁹*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood...* (cited above in full).

The Qur'an also teaches that the once-chosen status of Israel is not longer in force, but it adds that the Christian claim is likewise invalid. Qur'an 5:12-14:
God made a covenant with the Children of Israel, and We sent them twelve chiefs/leaders. God said: I am with you. If you engage in prayers, give zakat, believe in my messengers and help/honor them, and lend to God a good loan, I will absolve you from your evil deeds and cause you to enter Gardens through which rivers flow, so whoever of you disbelieves after that has strayed from the right way. But because of their breaking their covenant We have cursed them and made their hearts hard. They distort/change the words from their places and forgot part of what they were reminded [through revelation]. You will continue to discover the treacherous among them except for a few, but forgive them and pardon, for God loves the good. And those who say: 'We are Christians,' We made their covenant but they forgot a part of what they were reminded [through revelation]. So We incited enmity and hatred between them until the Day of Resurrection, when God will tell them what they have done.

One finds the same sentiment also in other texts, such as Q.3:110: *You are the best community that has been brought forth for humanity, commanding the reputable and forbidding the disreputable, and believing in God. If the People of the Book had believed it would have been better for them. Some of them are believers, but most are degenerate.*

When I read these I sense my own defensiveness. I have a personal inclination to take the critiques personally, and I feel the desire to call out, "why do you pick on me when my own elitist tradition demonstrates some much-needed humility, self-criticism and vulnerability?" At the same time, I know full well that my own tradition has attacked fundamental concepts of both Christianity and Islam in ways that are not so very different from these attacks on one of the core assumptions of my religion.

I have tried through these citations to demonstrate the ambivalence of chosenness in the Hebrew Bible and the kind of response that this notion elicited in newer expressions of monotheism. We need also to consider that new religions have an extremely difficult time attracting a following and demonstrating its own authenticity when the established religion insists that it and only it is chosen by the one great God. In what we could call the "history of the religious market," the notion of chosenness became a powerful tool in the repertoire of all expressions of monotheism in order to stake a claim to authenticity and to critique the claims of competitors.

I believe that all forms of monotheism are confronted with the problem of chosenness, and that we all need to work through this absolutely basic notion in each of our religious systems. The goal of this exercise, however, was less to treat a common phenomenon of religion than to treat a troubling text in my own tradition, so I continue in this line of thinking. I can rationalize some of the problems inherent in the notion of chosenness in Judaism historically, as I partially did in my suggestion that it arose organically and was not unique to ancient Israel and the Jews. By this suggestion, I may be considered to have engaged in a certain level of apologetic. And I can explain, as I did, that some Jews have been uncomfortable with the notion for millennia. I could also make a counter-accusation against Christians and Muslims for what appear to me to be similar expressions of elitism.

But I'm still stuck with the notion of chosenness that is so deeply imbedded in my religious tradition and is so basic to the complex network of factors that define being a Jew. I'm not able – nor am I willing – to throw it out. It is too much a part of me and my religion.

So I remain perched on the sharp and painful horns of a dilemma. I cannot simply disregard certain scriptural texts because they do not fit my own personal worldview. They are a part of the divine word as heard by my religious forbears, and they continue to speak to me and my religious contemporaries. They cannot simply be jettisoned. But they cannot be taken, in my opinion, as a simple truth. I end with some basic questions that I think Jews need to grapple with in a way that is neither overly triumphal, apologetic or contrite.

- How, in the face of competing claims to being chosen, can one know if one's own claim is true?
- How can belief in the election of a particular group of people be reconciled with belief in a universal God?

- How does chosenness of a particular group square with all of humanity being created בצלם אלקים – in the image of God?
- Does the concept of chosenness necessarily imply belief in the superiority of the chosen? Can a sense of chosenness become a quality that can be applied to other human groups in relationship to God?
- However chosenness might be extended – whether, say, to all monotheists or to all religious communities whether or not monotheist, or according to other criteria – one would expect a "chosen" status by definition not to be universal. If so, then what exactly is the status of the "non-chosen" among humanity? How does that square with a single, compassionate creator-God?

So I end without resolution, but I hope that this ending represents the beginning of a serious discussion.