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The Origins of Chosenness

The indigeneity of an ancient idea



NE of the most prominent facets of the Jewish character is their exaggerated conceit and selfishness, rooted in their belief that they are the chosen people of God.”

Thus opined Haj Amin al-Husseini, the grand mufti of Jerusalem and leader of the Palestinian national movement during the pivotal decades before Israel came into being. The mufti went on to add that the Jews have “no limit to their covetousness...have no pity and are known for their hatred, rivalry and hardness.” He was the decisive figure behind Arab opposition to Jewish immigration. So strong was his hatred that he teamed up with Hitler during World War II in an attempt to import the Nazi extermination of Jews to the Middle East. As far as the mufti was concerned, the Jews and their notion of chosenness had no place in Arab Palestine.

Ironically, this notion of chosenness that the mufti so hated is

native to the land he loved. And it wasn't unique to the Jews. At the heart of the Arab–Israeli conflict is a profound misunderstanding of what chosenness is and where it comes from. It is intrinsic to many of the ancient indigenous peoples of the region.



On the east bank of the Dead Sea once lay the kingdom of Moab. There, the Moabites had a special relationship with the god Chemosh. As told in the sole surviving document from ancient Moab, the Mesha Stele, when Mesha, king of Moab, went to battle, he did so at Chemosh's command. When he conquered territory, he did so not just for Moab, but for Chemosh as well. When Moab lost territory to Omri, king of Israel, Mesha attributed it to the fact that "Chemosh was angry with his country." And when the Moabites retook territory, Mesha declared that "Chemosh restored it." The only other god that is clearly named in the Mesha Stele is the Israelite god, YHWH, but only in the context of Mesha having stolen YHWH's altars and having "brought them before Chemosh" after Mesha took Nebo from Israel at Chemosh's command.

In this ancient artifact of one of the Israelites' closest neighbors, we see not only that the Moabites considered themselves, like the Israelites, to have a special and reciprocal relationship with their national god, but that they also understood the Israelites to have the same special relationship with YHWH. It was understood that the Israelites were the chosen people of YHWH, and that the Moabites were the chosen people of Chemosh.

Such was the biblical world of the ancient Fertile Crescent, where nations were chosen by gods who fought for and alongside them. The Hebrew Bible describes this arrangement very clearly. In Deuteronomy, for instance, the presiding priest is said to declare to the

Israelites before they go off to battle, “Let not your courage falter. Do not be in fear, or in panic, or in dread of them. For it is YHWH your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory” (Deuteronomy 20:3–4).

Sometimes the Bible even offers a play-by-play of the teamwork. Watch the action in 1 Samuel 7:10: “As Samuel was presenting the burnt offering and the Philistines advanced to attack Israel, YHWH thundered mightily against the Philistines that day. He threw them into confusion, and they were routed by Israel.”

This explains why YHWH was called “a jealous god” and why idolatry was compared to adultery in the Hebrew Bible — why idolatry was such a grave sin in ancient Israelite culture. To offer sacrifices to another people’s god was literally to feed the enemy. It was an act of profound infidelity.

In this ancient world order, every nation believed (and wanted) their god to be the strongest. When nations fought, the winner often attributed the victory not only to their god’s superior might but also to their special relationship with that god. The battle was about convincing the enemy neighbors not only of the god’s strength but of the people’s ability to call on it. In 1 Samuel 4, for example, the Philistines become frightened when the Ark of the Covenant is brought into the Israelite camp, crying, “God has come to the camp. . . . Woe is us! Who will save us from the power of this mighty God?” (1 Samuel 4:7–8). As the young David put it when he faced Goliath in battle, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come against you in the name of YHWH of Hosts, the god of the ranks of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day YHWH will deliver you into my hands. . . . The whole land shall know that Israel has a god” (1 Samuel 17:45–46).

When we read the Mesha Stele in this context, it makes sense that when the Moabites lost to the Israelites, they attributed it to Che-

mosh's anger with them rather than to his defeat by YHWH. This logic allowed the people to maintain hope in their god's strength and the possibility that he would prevail another day, once his people had repented. An angry god can be appeased, but a weak god can never save his people. Rather than acknowledge that YHWH might be stronger than Chemosh, which would mean the Israelites were stronger than the Moabites, the Moabites could retain a sense of control over their destiny.

The Israelites of course employed the same logic, making it the central drama of their national literature, the Hebrew Bible. According to 2 Kings, the Northern Kingdom of Israel lost to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. not because the Israelite god, YHWH, was weaker than the Assyrian god, Ashur, but because the Israelites violated their relationship with YHWH: "This happened because the Israelites sinned against YHWH their god...and worshipped other gods" (2 Kings 17:7).

When warring peoples share this logic, they weaponize it against each other, as the Assyrian imperial emissary does in his argument to the people of Jerusalem right before the Assyrian siege of the city (2 Kings 18:22): "And if you tell me, 'We are relying on YHWH our God,' is he not the one whose shrines and altars Hezekiah did away with?" The enemy emissary is scaring them into doubting that their god will come to their aid, since YHWH is still angry with their king for having removed his altars. The emissary also taunts them, appealing to their fear that their god may not be able to withstand the Assyrian king (backed by his god):

Do not listen to Hezekiah, who misleads you by saying, "YHWH will save us." Did any of the gods of the other nations save his land from the king of Assyria? Where were the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where were the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Did

they save Samaria from me? Which among all the gods of [those] countries saved their countries from me, that YHWH should save Jerusalem from me? (2 Kings 18:31–35)

This list of nations and their gods is yet another illustration of the fact that various peoples of the Fertile Crescent shared the theology of chosenness, each applying it to themselves. (In the Sennacherib Prism, written in the early seventh century B.C.E. but from the Assyrian perspective, Sennacherib credits *his* god, Ashur, for his victories.)

These gods were largely territorial. YHWH not only had a special chosen relationship with the Israelite people, but he also had that same special relationship with their land on the west bank of the Jordan River. As described in 2 Kings 17, when the Assyrians moved foreign peoples into the newly conquered Israelite territory, replacing the Israelites they had forced out, lions attacked the newcomers until the Assyrians brought a priest of YHWH back to teach them how to properly serve the god of that land.



The notion of the Jewish people as “the chosen people,” then, distinctively marks it as indigenous to the region. Multiple peoples of the Fertile Crescent — especially those in the southwestern tip of the crescent that in 1922 would briefly become British Mandate Palestine — saw themselves as the chosen people of their god. The only reason why the Jews became “*the* Chosen People” is that their god, YHWH, came to be considered *the* universal God by billions of people via Christianity and then Islam. When the Christians and Muslims chose to follow the Jewish god, the Jewish people came with him. In other words, it was Christian and Islamic civilizations that made the Jews *the* Chosen People. Had Jesus been a Moabite or Ammonite, the

world might have come to consider Chemosh or Milcom rather than YHWH as the universal God, and the Moabites or Ammonites might have come to be seen as the Chosen People.

And why weren't they? Because they couldn't be. The Moabites, Ammonites, and most other identities that had preceded the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests were long gone by the time of Jesus. The Jews are the last people of this region to preserve this ancient indigenous theology. That, too, is a quirk of history—or really geography. Because Judah was at the southwestern edge of the Fertile Crescent, it was one of the last kingdoms to have been conquered by the empires from the north and east. As these empires—the Assyrian and the Babylonian—expanded across the crescent, they conquered many “chosen” peoples before expelling them one by one into captivity and forced assimilation into the new empire.

That assimilation was extensive. The Sennacherib Prism records the Assyrian king's conquests of the numerous peoples of the Fertile Crescent.

The Arabs, Arameans, and Chaldeans, who were in Erech, Nippur, Kish, Harsagkalamma, Kutha and Sippar, together with the citizens, the rebels, I brought out, as booty I counted them. On my return (march), the Tu'muma, Rihihu, Iadakku, Ubudu, Kibrê, Malahu, Gurumu, Ubulu, Damunu, Gambulu, Hindaru, Ru'ûa, Pukudu, Hamrânu, Hagarânu, Nabatu, Li'tâu, Arameans (who were) not submissive, all of them I conquered....As for Hezekiah, the Jew, who did not submit to my yoke...like a caged bird, I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city.

How many of these peoples have you heard of? While their descendants may still live on, their distinctive national or tribal identities, cultures, and writings are lost to history. The two notable exceptions

are, as fate would have it, the Arabs and the Jews, though they survived for different reasons.

The Jews survived because Sennacherib never actually conquered Jerusalem. After destroying the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.E., the Assyrians assimilated its 10 tribes the same way they did all the other peoples, hence the term “the 10 lost tribes of Israel.” Not so the other ancient Israelite kingdom to the south, the kingdom of Judah, with its seat in Jerusalem. According to both the Sennacherib Prism and 2 Kings, when the Assyrians reached Judah in 701 B.C.E., they conquered most of the towns, taking away their inhabitants, but the capital city of Jerusalem just barely managed to survive the siege. This remnant regrouped, reestablished the Kingdom of Judah, and reigned for another 115 years. They and their descendants are the ancestors of the Jewish people.

The Arabs survived the Assyrian conquest for two key reasons. First, not because they held firm to their cities but because they had no cities to hold. The ancient Arabs were mostly nomadic, making them harder to conquer than urban or agrarian peoples. Once conquered, they didn’t stay in place: They simply went back to being nomads. Second, desert is much less valuable than agrarian lands, especially to an agrarian people like the Assyrians. So the Assyrians didn’t spend nearly as much of their effort conquering the vast desert regions of the Middle East, where the Arabs lived.

For these separate reasons, the Jews and the Arabs would be the only two Semitic peoples from the ancient Near East to survive with their ancient languages and cultures largely intact (though both would continue to change and evolve in the ensuing millennia). By the time the Babylonians finally conquered the kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C.E., it was only a few decades before the Persians would arrive to conquer the Babylonians in 539 B.C.E. And when the Persians came, they introduced a very different political and

theological system, one that allowed the Jewish people to embrace their culture again.



Unlike the Assyrians and Babylonians who had uprooted and assimilated the conquered peoples, the Persians fostered religious pluralism within the empire. Instead of the “my god can beat up your god” mentality of the Fertile Crescent peoples (including the Assyrians and the Babylonians), the Persians conceived of a unified empire of gods above to reflect their empire of peoples below, all working together to support the welfare of the empire as a whole. In this conception, there was national harmony under the rule of a single supreme king, the Persian king, and religious harmony under the leadership of a supreme god, Marduk. You might say it was their form of chosenness.

Upon defeating the Babylonians and taking control of their lands, the Persian Cyrus the Great proclaimed the restoration of regional indigenous practices, including that of the Jews in Jerusalem. The Cyrus Cylinder, an artifact that records this proclamation, portrays this decision as not of Cyrus but of the Mesopotamian deity Marduk, “the great lord” and head of all the other gods of the empire (presumably including YHWH). Instead of competing with the other gods, Marduk is now worried about how the other gods have been treated: He hears their complaints and is disturbed that they have been uprooted from their traditional shrines. This becomes the theological pretense for the radical change in political strategy. Cyrus seeks to let each people return home to their traditional worship of their respective ancestral gods. It is for this reason, Cyrus explains:

From [Shuanna] I sent back to their places . . . the sanctuaries across the river Tigris—whose shrines had earlier become dilapidated, the gods who lived therein, and made permanent sanctuaries for

them...at the command of Marduk, the great lord, I returned them unharmed to their cells, in the sanctuaries that make them happy. May all the gods that I returned to their sanctuaries, every day before Marduk and Nabu, ask for a long life for me, and mention my good deeds.

It may have helped create the political harmony Cyrus sought, but by the time of his proclamation most of the conquered peoples had already been under Assyrian and Babylonian assimilationist rule for two or even three centuries, far too long for them to maintain their old identities and ways. This includes the 10 tribes of Israel, who were conquered 136 years earlier than the kingdom of Judah, which had been in captivity for only a few decades when the Persians freed them. This span of decades was long enough that reconstituting the old ways was a daunting task that required the aid of a written record (the Torah—which suddenly appears on the scene at this time), but not so long that the Jews had become lost to history. The story of Purim takes place during this Persian period and is a cautionary tale of conflict between peoples within the empire mediated by the monarch.

It's not by accident that this shift away from Semitic competition between the gods would be introduced by the Persians, who were from an Indo-European rather than a Semitic culture. For the Indo-Europeans, including the Greeks and Romans who would conquer the region after the Persians, there were gods of different forces, but not of different peoples. The god of war was the universal god of war, whether one called him Ares or Mars, and the goddess of love was the universal goddess of love, whether one called her Aphrodite or Venus, or any other name. Indo-Europeans expected everyone to offer a sacrifice to the god of the sea before going on a voyage, regardless of the name they gave that god.

Cyrus intentionally hybridized the two systems to accommodate

his empire: a system of gods particular to each of the peoples of his empire participating in an empire-wide cooperative. Jewish identity with its fidelity to a particular god could thus continue to develop and find its place under Persian pluralism, until the arrival of the Greeks in the fourth century B.C.E. ushered in a millennium of Greek and Roman pure universalism in the place of Persian pluralism. By the time of the Greek and Roman conquests, the Jews were the last of their theological type still standing. These later European conquerors never understood Semitic theology the way the Persians had.

The story of Hanukkah takes place during this period, and it represents a confrontation between the Jews' fealty to their particular god, on the one hand, and the Greeks' adoration of all the gods of the universe, on the other. This conflict persisted into the Roman period, leading to multiple revolts and ultimately the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. This is the world Jesus was born into.

So, by the time of Jesus, YHWH was the only indigenous god left in the Fertile Crescent, and the Jews one of the last remaining indigenous identities (Arabia still had indigenous gods, but they would be displaced by Islam). With the Christianization of the Roman Empire, and the Islamic conquest of large swathes of the Middle East and North Africa a few centuries later, YHWH became the God of two imperial religions and their billions of followers the world over.

But the story of YHWH and his people in the Hebrew Bible remains the pre-colonial literature of a small Israelite kingdom from the ancient Fertile Crescent. They and their indigenous notion of chosenness have survived nearly three millennia of imperialism. And people like the mufti, who now worship that god, can't stop blaming them for it. *

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