

The Evolution of the Concept of The Chosen People.

My dad was sorry he did not have time to lone me his tee-shirt from the synagogue in Alaska which claimed the members of the congregation were "The Frozen Chosen."

But where did the concept of the Chosen People come from? Most of us might think that the Hebrew Bible was the origin of this idea, but this is probably wrong. Every people over the course of pre-history and history has probably believed that their god loved them best.

But in Western history, this all changed with Sargon.

Let's take a step back to understand the Bible in the CONTEXT of the CULTURE in which it originated. Newly developing spiritual and religious systems are always trying to solve the current problems.

For example, Hinduism developed to try to manage a society that was made up of conquered and conquerors.

Often conquered were "recently" displaced people who were of a totally different ethnic stock and had a totally different way of life from the sword waving and horse riding conquerors.

Conquered had followed a more or less peaceful, mother centered sedentary lifestyle, while conquerors were militaristic partriarchs who made their women second class citizens.

The sword waver's answer was the caste system, and they put themselves at the top of the social hierarchy. Eventually, the top caste, the priests, developed a stranglehold on everyone else and rituals took up far too much time. The original spiritual aspect of the Hindu traditions, their search for truth was lost.

Judaism developed to try to get back to a more democratic social structure in the context of the land we now call Iraq, perhaps the first civilization. God's first recorded instruction to Abraham, his first follower, was "Go To Yourself." God then told him to "Get out of Sumer." God was not, at that

time, trying to overturn the second class status of women, but the fact is that at that time, 3500 years ago or so, women in Sumer didn't have it that bad. Sumer's most powerful traditional deity was Ishtar, a goddess, and Sumerian women had similar legal rights to men.

But Sumer was the place where the first historically known King and eventually the first Emperor emerged.

But how did the King convince the people that they should obey him? People in primitive tribes kept a close watch on the head man, to avoid his taking more power than they were ready to give.

One of the King's strategies was to CLAIM THAT HE WAS CHOSEN BY GOD TO BE KING. Of course it wasn't just a king and everyone else. The whole idea of civilization works as a result of a multi-level social hierarchy. Civilization allows a small group of people to basically lord it over everyone else. God was apparently not too happy about this human development.

So Abraham had to get out of Sumer, to clear his head, and realize how much better life is when each person has his own direct line to God. Even later in Judaism, the priests were there to do the rituals, but were never considered to be more beloved by God than the "regular" people. Abraham's god had a new idea. Instead of choosing the KING to be on top of everyone else in the country, God CHOSE the ENTIRE POPULATION OF ABRAHAM'S DESCENDANTS.

But somehow, within a short time (Well short in terms of ancient history) the Jewish people, with an edited Bible, managed to turn this Divine Democratization into a Divine Elevation. The Jewish way was not better because GOD LOVED EVERY JEWISH PERSON. The Jews turned the commandment to be a light to the nations, perhaps meaning that everyone on Earth was eventually to realize that all of HUMANITY was made up of CHOSEN individuals, into a belief that Jews were special. This caused a lot of pain and anxiety and push back. I think it is probably a significant factor in the prevalence over the centuries of Anti-Semitism.

Anti-Semitism used to nominally mean Anti-Jewish, but Arabs are also Semitic. It should be noted that Islam also has this idea that every Muslim has the spirit of Allah within, and Islam has no priests at all!

I don't know if I can adequately emphasize that the Jewish idea of the Chosen PEOPLE was intended to be a BROADENING from the CHOSEN KING.

Jesus came along and Jesus was a Jew, and from what I can tell, he bought into the idea of the Jewish people being specially loved by God. Of course the Torah repeatedly quotes God telling the Children of Israel how he'll give them the land of milk and honey and feed them with fat wheat. But carrot and stick psychology was all they had at the time. There was no Maslow's Hierarchy of progressive motivation.

Nevertheless, I still think that one of God's main intents with his support for the followers of Jesus was to BROADEN the group of chosen. To make the Jews from the theoretical, someday, light of the world, into the actual people who demonstrate how to live with a personal relationship with an all powerful God. What was Jesus' message? He did not promote giving up ritual, but he did promote seeing in a new way, being in a new way.

One example was the way that Jesus taught people to honor their parents. This was by following him in a new way of life, based in spiritual truth revealed to each individual rather than staying at home to comfort them by bringing their slippers when they wanted to put their feet up. Were the parents of the disciples honored by their offspring's action? We can't know, but if it weren't for their offspring's following Jesus, they would most likely be deeper in the darkness of the forgotten than they are. At least there are millions of Christians who remember their children every day, and bless their sainted memories.

But getting back to the chosen people idea... Think of the ramifications of having an all powerful God on your side, always ready to help out. You better be pure of spirit, or bad things will happen to others. As the belief in their God's power increased, the importance of ethics became more important. Even Sargon, the first emperor of Sumer, claimed that GOD PICKED HIM BECAUSE he was just, and treated the widows and orphans in a just manner.

And now, getting back to Jesus, once he was gone, and Christianity became a separate religion, rather than a sect of Judaism, in order to enlarge the fold, the original Christian leadership needed to embrace broadening the promise of "chosen-ness." Although I am not convinced

Jesus wanted to start a new religion, clearly Paul did. “You don’t have to have been born Jewish, you just have to accept Jesus, and you will be a part of community of the chosen.” Of course within a short time, the Jewish idea of Jesus being the Messiah, the Anointed, the one who brought an end to war and injustice, was seen to be incorrect. The followers of Jesus were compelled to come up with a new idea: INDIVIDUAL SALVATION.

Now we have to have a criterion for who is saved and who isn’t.

This is definitely NOT a Jewish idea. Jews believe that everyone is saved, everyone goes to Heaven. The only difference between the saints and the jerks is that the saints are remembered well and the jerks are probably cursed. But the souls of saints and jerks alike end up happily co-existing in heaven. As Jesus said, “My father’s house has many mansions.” The sign above the platform at the synagogue where I grew up said “This is the house of prayer for ALL the people.” On the holiest day of the year, the Day of Atonement, Jews make a COMMUNAL confession of every sin in the book. Literally. There are around three or four sins listed for every letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and every member of the congregation pounds his or her heart in contrition for EVERY ONE OF THOSE 75 or more sins. Judaism has no individual salvation. Everyone is saved in advance by the merciful God.

It’s really amazing, amazingly SAD, how quickly the Christian idea of broadening a chosen group of people, making the only entrance requirement a claim to be chosen, was so rapidly changed into a huge, millennia long argument about what you have to do, or not do, believe or not believe, to be saved.

And how many lives have been lost over this argument?

Certain groups of Muslims are now the one’s most vocally claiming to be the chosen, and killing each other over what it takes to get to Heaven. Again and again we see the idea of the chosen people being distorted and weaponized.

Hinduism had a similar revolution against the privilege of the priestly caste. Its name is Buddhism. The Buddha taught that freedom from suffering was available to anyone who could properly follow his Eightfold Path. The Buddha did not think that more than one person in 10,000 would be able to

follow the path, or even be interested in trying to follow the path, but after his own hard won liberation, he spent the rest of his life trying to help those who were willing to try. Eastern religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, do not so much focus on being saved by a personal God, but on following an ethical life to increase the chances that you will be able to control your mind, make it your servant, so that the spirit may readily merge with the All. While this does not eliminate pain, it has the potential to eliminate suffering. The Buddhist and Hindu paths to liberation do not result in the body's personality sitting at Jesus' feet, but they result in unification with God, or the Ultimate Consciousness, an idea that many religious people find blasphemous. People who truly understand the nature of spirituality understand, whatever their religious affiliation, that this is the ultimate peace and joy.