

The Jews as a Chosen People Tradition and Transformation, by S. Leyla Gürkan, (Routledge Jewish Studies Series), (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), xiv + 246 pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-46607-3, £75 (hardback)

The notion of chosenness, that God has chosen one religious community from among all the peoples of the world, is a cornerstone of monotheistic religions and has become a point of contention and polemic between them. All monotheisms include this notion in one form or another, but Judaism seems to contain the earliest expression and has openly struggled with its meaning in the face of a long history in which the Jewish people have seemed to be anything but chosen. Destruction, dispersion, exile, and the demolition of the most sacred religious shrine of the Jerusalem Temple all would seem to demonstrate that the Jews have lost any possible status as chosen people. And yet the notion has survived among Jews, who have tried to make sense of the meaning of chosenness for thousands of years.

Professor Leyla Gürkan's meticulous scholarly account follows that intellectual and spiritual journey through the ages from its appearance in the earliest layers of the Hebrew Bible to its most recent expressions among Jews in the United States and the State of Israel. This is an important book, and for a number of reasons. It is the first longitudinal study of this core creedal concept from biblical to modern times, and it is one of the first truly scholarly studies of Judaism conducted by a modern Muslim scholar of religion. It is also an excellent case study of a religious notion as it evolves in relation to the evolution of human history from ancient to contemporary expressions. The very attempt to treat such a complex, sensitive and variegated subject as divine election and its resulting sense of chosenness in such a fashion is a bold act, but with rare exception, the author succeeds in carrying it out.

The work is divided into three sections that correspond to three periods: ancient, modern and post-Holocaust. Each period is defined by a dominant theme, which reflects a response to a dominant challenge. In the ancient period the theme is holiness and it is developed in late antiquity as a response to the emergence of Christianity. During the transition to modernity and the emancipation of Jews in the West it is mission, and after the Holocaust the theme is survival. These thematic developments reflect trends in Jewish responses to

the historical, intellectual and socio-political influences that they experienced. Specific inclinations are noted, from an early stage of Jewish separation from other peoples in the pre-modern period to an attempt to find a way to integrate into modern society after emancipation, to the current situation in which the major thrust of thinking is articulated in terms of both physical survival after the Holocaust and spiritual survival in a post-modern world. While the last period is defined as post-Holocaust because of its overwhelming influence upon contemporary Jewish thought, the actual period during which the specter of the Holocaust actually holds sway is triggered by the Six Day War of 1967 and the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

The author is really interested in modern and contemporary Jewish thought, and this is where she concentrates her efforts. The first section on ancient Judaism establishes the paradigm for the notion of chosenness, and is half as long as each of the latter two sections. The medieval world is virtually untreated aside from passing references to Saadia, Judah HaLevy, Maimonides and Gersonides. The strength of the book lies in the second and third sections treating the last two to three hundred years.

The book is extremely dense and nearly encyclopedic in both breadth and depth. It is not for undergraduates or anyone who is not already familiar with Judaism, Jewish history and Jewish religious literatures, as it does not define many concepts or explain trends, developments, and changes that Jews and Judaism have undergone over the millennia. On the other hand, it is very stimulating for the advanced student, and will be extremely challenging for most knowledgeable Jewish readers.

More needs to be said about the latter. Jews have subjected themselves to the harshest self-criticism, certainly since the beginning of the nineteenth century and arguably for centuries prior as well. It is part of the Jewish "culture of *machaloqet*," a methodology of debate or dispute wherein two parties take different positions and argue them *leshem shamayim*, literally "for the sake of heaven." This means that by debating all possible angles to an argument or legal interpretation of divine law or the meaning of scripture, Jews believe that they come closest to making sense of the ultimately inscrutable mind (or meaning or intent) of God. So Jews are quite accustomed to hearing very heated arguments and critiques of their positions over issues such as chosenness rendered by their fellows, and this culture of de-

bate and dispute has spilled over into modern and secular Jewish cultural expressions as well. It is at the core of the (secular) academic Jewish critiques of Judaism as found published in countless monographs and scholarly articles. But Jews are also accustomed to hearing slanderous critiques leveled against them by non-Jews, so we tend to have a particular sensitivity to outside critique. Because one of the topics around which defamatory accusations of Judaism were constructed was exactly the topic of chosenness, this phenomenology of critique and hyper-sensitivity always lurks behind such a study. Professor Gürkan's critical scholarship has no agenda and no prejudice. Her approach in this regard differs, for example, from that of the Egyptian encyclopaedist, 'Abd al-Wahhāb Muḥammad al-Masīrī in his eight volume *Encyclopedia on Jews, Judaism and Zionism* published in Cairo by Dār al-Shurūq in 1999 (for his treatment of chosenness, see Vol. 5, pp. 72-77).

One drawback of the book, which also explains the need to assume prior knowledge of Judaism in the reader, is its attempt to cover the entire range of thinking on such a large and complex topic in a single volume of less than 200 expository pages. It attempts to be so comprehensive in its effort to capture such a broad range of thinking on the notion of chosenness that it simply cannot treat the subtleties of the various positions thoroughly enough to avoid some question as to whether it reflects them adequately, particularly since the complex Jewish expressions often reflect deep internal arguments about profound subtleties of religious meaning.

Professor Gürkan's analysis of chosenness in Zionism is a particularly interesting case. The initial discussion on p. 93 is excellent, but the resumption of the discussion toward the end of the book loses the fine balance of the previous analyses. Her usual scholarly objectivity seems to falter when treating expressions in the radical Zionist camp post 1973. Her exposition and analysis of the radicals was not inaccurate, but she failed to treat the counter-positions in the Orthodox community, thereby suggesting that there are none. She cites the most radical critics such as Israel Shahak, whose agenda was to shock and "wake up" the Israeli Jewish community to the destructive direction he believed that Zionism and Jewish religious radicalism had taken, and which he condemned in the harshest terms. I found her resonating so personally with the critique of Shahak, for example, that it seemed as if she could not remove herself from the discussion,

thereby appearing as if she is inserting her own strong opinions into the discourse. As soon as this occurs it is no longer an analytically discursive critique but rather becomes a subjective political or religious critique.

This section is the only part of a long and careful study that I found questionable or problematic, though the English is somewhat awkward and could have used better editing by the publishers. With these caveats, I highly recommend this important study. Professor Gürkan demonstrates knowledge of Jewish primary sources in original languages and deep control of secondary sources written by Jews and non-Jews alike. Her study is indeed encyclopedic in its scope while focusing successfully on a narrow but extremely complex topic. One of Gürkan's great strengths is the success with which she establishes a paradigm for analysis of a religious phenomenon as expressed in its classic formulations and then observes how it evolves in response to societal and social-political developments in history. Professor Gürkan provides an intellectual journey through the history of Judaism through the vehicle of the notion of divine election, observing how religion responds to the dynamics of history through development and change in religious thought.

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