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# İslâm Arařtırmaları Dergisi

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İcadiye Bağlarbaşı caddesi 40, Bağlarbaşı 34662  
Üsküdar-İstanbul  
Tel. (0216) 474 08 50 Fax. (0216) 474 08 74  
www.isam.org.tr

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ayrıldığı, Hz. Ömer'in müt'ayı yasaklayarak yerel ahlâki hükmün yerine evrensel/tarihüstü olanı ikame ettiği tarzında bir teoriyle temellendirmeye çalışır. Ancak kanaatimizce söz konusu teorinin içerdiği birtakım güçlükler bir yana, müt'a konusunda bütün İslâm mezhepleri içerisinde yalnız kalan İmâmiyye Şîası'nın delillerinin daha güçlü olduğu konusu ise ayrıca tartışmaya açıktır.

Sonuç olarak bu eser, Ehl-i sünnet ile Şîa arasında tarih boyunca polemik konusu olmuş hususlara dair tarihî seyir, gerisindeki siyasî, psikolojik ve sosyal faktörler, iki tarafın görüşlerini temellendirirken kullandıkları deliller hakkında bilgi sahibi olmayı, bunlara dair titiz ve eleştirel bir gözün değerlendirmeleri ışığında tefekkür etmeyi isteyen araştırmacılar için önemli bir kaynak eser konumundadır. İki mezhep arasındaki kalın buz tabakasının hamaset ve inat duygularıyla erimeyeceği âşikârdır. O yüzden hem Sünnîler'in hem de Şîîler'in bütün ön kabullerini ve kendilerine öğretilenleri bir kenara koyup hakikate ulaşma arzusuyla önce kendilerini sorgulama cesaretini göstermesi gerekmektedir. Taassup sahibi bir kimsenin elbette bu eserden alacağı hiçbir şey yoktur; ancak kimi zaman acı da olsa hakikati kabullenmeye hazır zihinlerin bu kaleminden istifade edeceği şüphesizdir.

Kadir Gömbeyaz

### **Who are the Real Chosen People? The Meaning of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity and Islam**

Reuven Firestone

Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2008, x + 158 s.

This is a non-polemical and very readable book on the idea of chosenness written from the perspectives of all three monotheistic religions, the religions that are almost exclusively associated with the idea. In this book, Reuven Firestone, an American Reform rabbi and a professor of Medieval Jewish and Islamic studies at Hebrew Union College, as well as being an active figure in interfaith dialogue, provides not so much a scholarly but a remarkably neutral and fairly analytical approach to the question of chosenness as it appears in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The starting point of the book is the reality of religious plurality and the inevitability of interaction between different religious groups, especially monotheistic ones, and how to make sense of chosenness and salvation, i.e., the claim to religious privilege or superiority, in a multi-religious world. In order to find an answer to the question of why the idea of chosenness exists, Firestone examines,

in an almost Ibn Khaldunian fashion, the histories of emergence of the three monotheistic religions and the early interactions between them. He particularly emphasizes the relevant socio-religious and political milieu as *the* force behind the dynamics that determine the notion(s) of chosenness in each Scripture. He apparently takes a historicist line by attributing the origin of the idea of chosenness to socio-religious factors. According to Firestone, chosenness was originated “as a natural part of old tribal religion” (p. 26) of the ancient Near East, where, as a matter of fact, not only the people of Israel, but all other peoples had entertained the idea of having a covenant relationship with, i.e., being chosen by, their national gods. As for the special or unique position of the religion of Israel in this matter, Firestone attributes it to the fact that it was the only monotheistic religion at the time. Thus, he argues that even after Israel’s tribal concept of God was eventually transformed into a universal monotheism, the notion of chosenness was still retained by the people of Israel “as a convenient and effective strategy” (p. 26) to maintain their unique, i.e., monotheistic, religious system as opposed to the polytheistic ways of other peoples. Such an interpretation makes the idea of an eternal divine chosenness, at best, a fantasy. Here one should remember Baruch Spinoza’s interpretation of chosenness, which can be formulated as ‘chosenness for the people, not the people for chosenness’.

As regards the uniqueness of the people of Israel, Firestone also draws attention to a significant fact, asserting that it lay not in their being “the only community to *have arrived* at the notion of monotheism”, but rather in their being “the only [and therefore first] community that *successfully held on* to this [monotheistic] view in the ancient Near East” (p. 21. The brackets and emphases are mine). This is, in fact, an important point that is usually confused or overlooked.

Firestone further states that “In a world of competing religions, being the one community *truly* chosen by God conveys a clear message to potential joiners” (p. 42). This is why the idea of chosenness, as a central idea in the Hebrew Bible, was later adopted by not only Rabbinic Judaism, but also Christianity and Islam, all being “heirs and successors to biblical religion” (p. 52). Accordingly, the notion of chosenness would well serve the purposes of proselytism and continuity during the immediate subsequent eras, in particular, those eras that witnessed the emergence of Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism. In the case of Christianity, which was born as a Jewish sect into a more religiously universal environment, a new form of chosenness would be promoted, a universal and voluntary one based on faith in a saving Messiah. In the case of Rabbinic Judaism, which came on the scene in the wake of the rival religion of Christianity, the ongoing claim to chosenness would mean “the continuation of Israel among the Jews” (p. 54). Islam,

on the other hand would put less –indeed, much less– emphasis on the idea of chosenness than either Judaism or Christianity. Here, when Firestone refers to Islam and chosenness, he must have been using chosenness in a broad sense, in terms of representing the religiously best, for, as far as the Qur'an is concerned, the appropriate concept to discuss should be 'covenant(s)', as a concrete idea that directly refers to the content of the religion(s), instead of chosenness or chosen people(s) as a vague or relative idea..

Firestone further notes that in Antiquity as well as in the Hebrew Bible chosenness was understood as a “zero-sum situation”, in which there could be “only one chosen at any time” and “only one form of monotheism” (p. 70). So, according to Firestone, it is quite normal and understandable that the religion of Israel, being the only monotheistic religion at the time, had to be exclusivist and Christianity, emerging as a rival movement, had to be supersessionist. As for Islam, since it was born into a largely monotheistic or, as Firestone puts it, multi-monotheistic environment, it could not claim an “exclusive truth”, as in the case of the religion of Israel, nor enter into a “bilateral competition with Jews”, as in the case of Christianity. Its goal rather “had to be to demonstrate superiority in its claim” (p. 83). So, Firestone rightly argues, Islam's position on monotheism and chosenness could be considered an “elitist” but “not supersessionist” one.

Firestone also deals with the question of merit, which is a fundamental concept in relation to chosenness and salvation. Once again, he indicates that all three religions interpreted the concept of merit in their own ways, in accordance with their particular character, which is something that resulted from their relevant milieus. Accordingly, in Judaism, due to the tribal nature of the religion of Israel, the merit was formulated, right from the beginning, as the “merit of the fathers” and was understood to be limited to the Jews as the members of what was apparently the one and only divine covenant. In Christianity, the merit was formulated in terms of “divine grace”, which was, in theory, available to all humanity, while in practice, only the Christian community, i.e., “the new chosen” of the new covenant, could be saved. In Islam, on the other hand, which accepted a plurality of covenants, the merit, as a non-static condition, was based mostly on individual behavior, i.e., on true belief and conduct as an ongoing endeavor --and not, apparently, on true progeny or true faith as a one-time (f)act. And the final verdict on salvation or redemption was, in principle, up to God via what is called “divine intercession”. However, Firestone also hastens to add that Islam, although less exclusive than either Judaism or Christianity in accepting the validity of previous covenants, still “limits the beneficiaries of intercession to members of the one chosen [or rather truly believing] religious community”, i.e., the Muslim community (p. 108). The

brackets are mine). His conclusion is that despite the existence of some inclusive interpretations in each religion, particularly in Islam, each scripture still “associates redemption first with the community of [its own] believers” (p. 144. The brackets are mine). But here, it should be taken into account that in Islam even being Muslim or a believer is considered to be a non-permanent situation (remember the Qur’anic passage [4:136] that asks Muslim believers to believe!).

Firestone further suggests that Rabbinic Judaism’s turn to the inside and adhesion to an exclusive chosenness was a consolatory move necessitated by Christian and Muslim prohibitions on Jewish proselytism, as these two religions “privileged their own forms of monotheism” when they became “imperial religions” (p. 128), but with one difference. Under Islamic rule, despite the second-class status of Jews and Christians, their religions remained legal, whereas under Christian rule other monotheistic religions were outlawed. “But in a surprising reversal of the modern Christian trend toward inclusion,” Firestone notes, “there is a certain movement among some radical politicized Muslims toward religious totalitarianism” (p. 130). This is correct. But, at this point, the latest stage of Jewish chosenness, especially the Zionist-religious interpretation of it, should have been mentioned.

Overall, Firestone’s book seems successful in many points, e.g., in its impartial standing and giving each religion their due, in indicating their particularities beyond commonalities, in its ability to depict the nature of new religious movements and their relationship to the old established religions, in indicating the close connection between chosenness and survival (both spiritually and physically) in the Jewish case, and between chosenness and redemption, particularly in the Jewish and Christian cases, and, most importantly, in demonstrating the actual separation and interdependence of monotheism and chosenness, and seeing the connection between them as “an accident of history”. Still, there are several points that need to be clarified. First of all, environment is, indeed, an important factor in the shaping of the idea of chosenness. But to attribute the difference between the attitudes of religions to both monotheism and chosenness to merely social factors does not seem so accurate, despite the simplicity and practicality of such theory. For this automatically would lead to a conclusion that a better environment *always* produces a better religion. In that case, what was the environment of Abraham which made him such a supreme example of monotheism for all three religions?

Secondly, the point on the effect of the Muslim prohibition of Jewish proselytism on Jewish chosenness seems a debatable one. For, if not Rabbinic Judaism as a whole, at least an exclusive Rabbinic interpretation of chosenness had already taken place before the rise of Islam. So even if Christian suppression might be

seen as a factor here, Muslim prohibition could not have been an issue, due to a chronological impossibility. Moreover, it might even be suggested that while the reaction of Rabbinic Judaism to the Christian supersessionism with a new version of chosenness created an increasing hold on and clear formulation of an eternal-mysterious chosenness, in response to Islam's rejection of the idea of an eternally privileged genealogy/community –for any reason - and its putting emphasis, instead, on true individual belief and conduct, most medieval Jewish scholars living in Muslim countries (e.g., Saadiah Gaon, Maimonides, etc.) refrained from making chosenness a fundamental discussion point (Judah Halevi is surely an exception). This topic, in fact, deserves a separate discussion.

Finally, the difference in their understandings of chosenness and monotheism is, indeed, the very point that makes these three monotheistic religions different and unique. However, as opposed to what Firestone suggests in the conclusion of his book, the “plurality” of religions, especially if taken as a result of social factors, may not be such an ideal condition in and of itself that goes back to the creation of the human being in the divine image. But it is certainly a human reality, which started, at earliest, with God's command to the first human couple to descend to the earth as rivals to one another (see Q 7:24). And this fact perhaps should be better appreciated by members of different religious groups; for rivalry might serve, as indicated in the Qur'an (5:48), as one of the most effective ways of motivating peoples to compete with each other to promote goodness on earth.

Salime Leyla Gürkan

### **Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Mu'tazilite Ethics**

Sophia Vasalou<sup>3</sup>

Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008, 252 sayfa.

2006 yılında tamamlanmış bir doktora tezine dayanan kitap, Basra Mu'tezilesi'nin ahlâk teorisini incelemektedir. Yazar kitabında felsefe nosyonu ile kelâm ve fıkıh literatüründen felsefî malzeme çıkarmaya çalışmaktadır. Bu açıdan ele alındığında bile eserin önemli bir misyonu üstlendiği görülmektedir. Bu

3 Londra Üniversitesi School of Oriental and African Studies'de (SOAS) Arapça, İslâmî çalışmalar ve felsefe alanlarında lisans öğrenimi gördükten sonra Cambridge St John's College'da doktorasını tamamladı. Hâlen Berlin'de European College of Liberal Arts'ta hocalık yapmaktadır. Son dönemin genç oryantalistlerinden olan yazar, Mutezile'nin özellikle Basra Ekolü üzerinde ihtisaslaşmıştır.