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# Introduction to "The Chosen People: A Study of Jewish History from the Time of the Exile until the Revolt of Bar Kocheba"

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## Introduction

The bibliographic record for Doubleday edition of John Allegro's *The Chosen People* [TCP] mirrors the complex intellectual biography of its author. While the title page records the book's official subtitle, *A Study of Jewish History from the Time of the Exile until the Revolt of Bar Kocheba, Sixth Century B.C. to Second Century A.D.*, the cover strikes a different tone: *A Controversial History of the Jews*. As the dual headings suggest, throughout his career Allegro deliberately tried to span, not always successfully, the chasm separating the community of scholars and the audience of popular readers. On the one hand the academic establishment offers formal legitimacy and ego-vindicating recognition, intangibles every student has been trained to value over crass material gain. But the true power to drive political funding and bureaucratic support for research arises from securing mainstream interest. Allegro appreciated this fact more than his peers did, even if he was not always adept at finding an efficient balance between respectability and populism. In his eagerness to bring attention to important projects he could be too hasty in appealing to laypersons at the cost of alienating the experts.

*The Chosen People*, Allegro's attempt to uncover the historical sources for the world's enduring anti-Semitism, bears the marks of this wish to appeal to two disparate readerships. Allegro's fluent command of the relevant primary literature is more than sufficient reason for his arguments to be taken seriously. He knows whereof he speaks. He spins the details, however, into a story more akin to a gripping potboiler of palace intrigue and political machination than to a dry recitation of long-forgotten events. Relying upon in-text citations, Allegro was scolded by reviewers for eschewing the fully footnoted scholarly apparatus usually found in such serious works. Yet it is arguably these concessions to the nonspecialist that make the text so compelling and ultimately more effective at conveying the author's broader lessons.

John Marco Allegro (1923-1988) is perhaps best known for his work studying the Dead Sea Scrolls. Judith Anne Brown, Allegro's daughter, provides in *John Marco Allegro: The Maverick of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (2005) a full description of his life and intellectual journey. Allegro originally intended to receive ordination in the Methodist church, until his reflective honesty drove him to realize that he could not urge other people to adhere to the tenets of the faith unless he was certain about the meaning of the texts upon which the tradition stood. Such questions led him to leave the seminary and enroll instead in courses of Semitic languages. This problem of relating religious belief to deep reading of the charter texts would guide his whole career.

In 1953, while still a doctoral student, Allegro was selected as the British representative on the team to edit and analyze the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls. Plotting a Google Ngram of his name, we see that that initial appointment triggered the first notice of Allegro. His later impact, measured by citations in published books within the Google database, saw three peaks. Two of these, in 1957 and 1995, correspond with increased mentions of the Dead Sea Scrolls themselves, suggesting that Allegro's rising profile at those times should be attributed to the ebb and flow of discussions of those ancient texts. More interesting for our purposes is that while mentions of the Dead Sea Scrolls generally declined in the early seventies, Allegro saw a spike in his popularity in 1973. Credit for this uptick must be due

primarily to the publication in 1970 of his controversial work, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* [SMC], the book that Judith Anne Brown forthrightly states “ruined John’s career.”

Religion, according to Allegro, is fundamentally a fertility cult endeavoring to manipulate the divine powers through ecstatic rituals involving the use of mind-altering mushrooms, specifically the *Amanita muscaria*, or fly agaric. This first assertion is not excessively controversial. The relationship between altered states of consciousness, whatever their cause, and religious ritual has a solid scholarly pedigree. Casual perusal of my shelf yields the following random examples: I.M. Lewis (*Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, 3rd. ed., 2003); Gilbert Rouget (*Music and Trance: A Theory of Relations between Music and Possession*, 1985); Clarke Garrett (*Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Camisards to the Shakers*, 1987); and finally R. Gordon Wasson (*Persephone’s Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion*, 1986). (Allegro in fact was accused of stealing his thesis from Wasson, a claim discredited by Jan Irvin’s *The Holy Mushroom* (2009).) This list could be greatly expanded; the point is that the seed idea within SMC draws upon an established tradition.

The career-killing move was how Allegro related this idea to the history of first-century Judaism. The secrets of proper cultic practice were, by definition, kept hidden, and rarely written down except in the most exigent circumstances. As he tells the story:

Such an occasion, we believe, was the Jewish Revolt of AD 66. Instigated probably by members of the cult, swayed by their drug-induced madness to believe God had called them to master the world in his name, they provoked the mighty power of Rome to swift and terrible action. Jerusalem was ravaged, her temple destroyed. Judaism was disrupted, and her people driven to seek refuge with communities already established around the Mediterranean coastlands. The mystery cults found themselves without their central fount of authority, with many of their priests killed in the abortive rebellion or driven into the desert. The secrets, if they were not to be lost forever, had to be committed to writing, and yet, if found, the documents must give nothing away or betray those who still dared defy the Roman authorities and continue their religious practices. (SMC, pp. xiii-xiv)

Due perhaps to his work on the Scrolls, which regularly used code names to refer to individuals and groups (James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, 2nd ed., 2010), Allegro may have been open to the possibility of similar layers within the Gospels. From that view, the rebels’ solution had been to concoct a coded story “of a rabbi called Jesus, and invest him with the power and names of the magic drug.” Christianity, SMC argues, began as a conspiracy to communicate mushroom lore through allegory and wordplay. However, the point of the hoax became forgotten: cult members took the concocted stories literally, developed them into the narrative of a new religion, and called it Christianity. With the publication of SMC, Allegro sought to restore to the world the true meaning behind the Gospels; here he thought he had found the answer to the question that first led him away from the seminary so many years earlier.

Allegro can be faulted for the literalness of his claims; textual analyses usually call for softer interpretive tools. He also relied too much on a single line of argument. Even if his philological arguments had been fully convincing, a significant leap is still required to assert that as late as 66 they reflected active religious beliefs rather than lingering traces of more primitive beginnings, a vocabulary for speaking about certain ideas whose origins had been long forgotten before Christianity emerged. Had his argument been buttressed by evidence from a social psychological or cultural perspective, that support may have rendered his theory both more palatable and more feasible. Lacking such backing, and given the provocative assertions he continued to make – e.g., the “whole of the Jesus story is quite fictional” (TCP, 245) – Allegro’s magnum opus was never to receive the serious consideration he believed it deserved.

To describe TCP as a sequel to the controversial SMC would be an overstatement, although its publication one year afterwards might suggest such a relationship. The text at points reviews the primary SMC thesis (Chapters 1 and 16 particularly), but these cursory mentions are not central to the primary goals of this later book. At most, Allegro believes the mushroom hypothesis clears the table and makes room for a new appraisal of Jewish history, but even this small contribution proves unnecessary to his larger tale. We hear little to nothing about mushrooms until the need to explain the enthusiasm (perhaps literal) of the Zealots that would drive much of the drama of the final chapters. In this bounded context of prototypical religious fanaticism the possibility of a drug-induced frenzy sounds quite plausible. A survey of the contemporary reviewers, however, reveals a lingering obsession with the SMC thesis to the extent that it detracted from their reading of the new book. As a consequence TCP, too, did not receive the academic notice that its quality merits and that Allegro had hoped for. Perhaps sufficient distance from the SMC controversy will now allow *The Chosen People* to be evaluated on its own terms.

Allegro’s purpose in this book is something quite different from a reiteration of his claims concerning fungus. His thesis concerns the dangers of religious exclusiveness and of pursuing a politics of separatism. The Babylonian Exile forged among the Jews a “new philosophy of racial and religious exclusiveness.” Expressed in the doctrine of the “Chosen People,” who had a special relationship with the deity, purity became the obsessive concern. While other “cultures had their heroic mythology[,] only the Jew made his tribal legends episodes in the one God’s unfolding plan for all mankind.”

It is in this light that we have to understand the fierce intolerance and ruthlessness of Nehemiah’s measures [upon the return from Babylon] to protect the supposed racial purity of the restored community in Palestine. Wives of foreign extraction were wrenched apart from their husbands, children of mixed marriages made outcasts, and the priesthood was cleansed of “everything foreign” (Neh. 13:23-30). These terrible walls that Nehemiah and Ezra build around Judaism in the fifth century before our era have lasted until the present day. Unwittingly the master-planners of Babylon and their administrative and religious executors laid the foundation of an anti-Semitism which was thenceforth to blot the pages of human history. (TCP, 61)

The tale gets seriously underway, though, with the revolt by the Maccabees in 167 BC. The connecting theme is that Jews of Jerusalem resisted the principle of religious tolerance that usually served to

placate the territories conquered by successive hegemonic regimes. Under that policy populations were normally allowed to retain their local gods but expected also to pay deference to the state's deities in the name of national unity.

Over the centuries, however, the Jews demonstrated an unwillingness to be subsumed into this universal culture or to respect the religious practices of others as equal to their own. Instead, they manipulated opposing empires against one another, hoping to leave the Jewish kingdom unmolested to realize its unique destiny. This strategy succeeded unevenly, and ended disastrously with the final revolt of Bar Kocheba (alt. Bar Kokhba) in AD 132. "The kind of warfare the Jewish freedom-fighters had forced upon the Roman legions brought its inevitable toll in mutual bitterness... . Small wonder that the very name of 'Jew' was thereafter an anathema to the Romans. It was banished even from the name of the province [by Hadrian], to be known thenceforth as the land of the Philistines, or 'Palestine'" (TCP, 300).

The argument that the exclusionary practices required by the Jewish faith are the source of anti-Semitic attitudes is not novel. In his review of ancient anti-Semitism, John Gager, for example, recognizes a traditional argument that "pagan polemic against the Jews was rooted 'in the special social consequences of the Jewish religious law,' that is, religious exclusiveness and social separatism" (*The Origins of Anti-Semitism*, 1983, p. 19). Few scholars, however, have depicted this phase of the history of anti-Semitism in monographic detail. Most begin their own tales from the founding of Christianity, which is often taken as the true source of modern anti-Semitism, only skimming the pagan precursors in their first chapters. On this score, then, Allegro's comprehensive treatment in the present volume is a singular and valuable contribution to the discussion.

Recognizing TCP's enduring relevance, we should still ask whether Allegro succeeds in his primary objective to explain the anti-Semitism we witness today. If we understand that term to connote some irrational antagonism toward persons of the Jewish faith, we surmise that there is more to the story than can be read in these pages. Where Allegro leaves us, the pagan world has a bitter revulsion toward Judaism that it has acquired through experiencing successive bloody revolts (but see Gager's account in which he argues that this disfavor has been overstated and may not accurately reflect attitudes toward the Jewish faith among the common Roman folk). At this point the negative attitudes seem solidly grounded on recent experience, and not what we would recognize as an irrational prejudice. Indeed, were repeated belligerence sufficient explanation, we might expect to see today an enduring antipathy toward the German people, whose leaders waged considerably more recent and deadly campaigns in their name. Yet as we have been able to put the German actions behind us, how are we to be satisfied by Allegro's conclusion that lesser actions done two millennia ago are sufficient to fuel a timeless hatred?

As Allegro argues, Judaism's enduring concern with purity and social exclusion certainly plays a significant role in the genesis of anti-Semitism. Though it may have appeared remarkable during the days of Hellenic internationalism, self-segregation in the interest of preserving cultural and religious identity is no longer uncommon. Nor is the anxiety that such actions provoke. The Islamic practice of *hijab* was criticized by then British Prime Minister Tony Blair as "a mark of separation and that is why it makes other people from outside the community feel uncomfortable" (BBC News, Oct. 16, 2006). We

witness the same negative dynamics in the anger targeting immigrants who are slow to assimilate and learn the dominant national language (Deborah J. Schildkraut, *Press "ONE" for English: Language Policy, Public Opinion, and American Identity*, 2007).

While demonstrably a consistent and powerful social force, reactions to separatism cannot fully explain anti-Semitic bigotry. This criterion no longer singles out Jews from many other groups. Without other factors, separatism cannot explain a prejudice that targets the Jewish people alone.

Allegro documents a vivid example of the manner in which a project to define oneself in opposition to the Other inevitably generates antagonism. But a thorough understanding of the genesis of anti-Semitism requires more than mapping the tensions that arise between co-existing communities. It must also explain the fear we find associated with anti-Semitism, and how these emotional presumptions are communicated to populations that have little direct contact with members of the Jewish faith. Allegro does not take us as far as this, and thus the account is unfinished. He has perhaps brought us as far as documentary texts will permit, but further analyses from additional disciplines will be required to bridge the gap from the pagan to the modern consciousness.

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