



The Chosen People

John Allegro

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The Chosen People tells the history of the Jews from the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 587 B.C.E. to the Second Jewish Revolt of C.E. 132. John Allegro bases his account on traditional texts — books of the Old Testament, Josephus, Philo Judaeus, Dio Cassius, and others — and sets out the complicated parade of plots, counter-plots, betrayals, and insurrections in a brisk and highly readable sequence. His main theme is how the conception of the Jewish nation as a divinely chosen race was planted as a political ambition among the exiled Jews. Bringing together old customs and stories, the idea was fired by the longing of the Babylonian Jews for their traditional homeland. Many of them grew prosperous outside Palestine, and their wealthy communities manipulated the wish for identity in the idea of an exclusive Judaism embodied as a political state and fighting for autonomy against local and imperial neighbors — more dream than fact. The author writes that “When the ‘new Judaism’ came to be hammered out after the return from captivity, it was around these ancient customs and a historicized mythology that it was fashioned.” The religion was devised not, as popularly presented, by gift of the desert god Yahweh who had manifested himself in opposition to the Canaanite fertility god Baal but by reinterpreting the Sumerian idea of a life-giving god over many generations. For there was no fundamental opposition — the god-names originally meant the same. This second edition features a new introduction by James M. Donovan.

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