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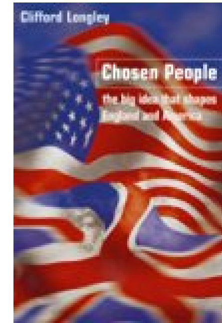
Clifford Longley. *Chosen People: The Big Idea That Shaped England and America.* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002. xi + 303 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-340-78656-7.



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The Big Idea

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Clifford Longley's *Chosen People: The Big Idea that Shapes England and America* is timely in its message even though much of its content may seem remote to contemporary readers. The source of this paradox is not hard to find. Written at the time of the events of September 11, it can be seen as a contribution to the debate about American identity and exceptionalism, the relevance of which were heightened by those extraordinary occurrences. The originality of Longley's approach, and thus its remoteness, rests in his search for the roots of American identity, which takes him back to the world of the ancient Israelites and the Old Testament, amongst other times and places. To understand modern America's sense of destiny, the author argues, it is necessary to excavate deep-seated (but largely disregarded) patterns of belief. The most important of these is the sense of being a chosen people which Longley traces through the history of the English and American people, amongst others. The implications of the encounter between modern identities and ancient beliefs gives Longley's account its interest and suggests a current relevance which will intrigue and challenge his readers.

The author begins conventionally enough with a review of the identities of the two Anglo-Saxon powers and the contrasts between them. Some of the claims here are familiar, although not wholly convincing: for instance, that the English imagination takes its inspiration from memory while American imagination pulls from possibility, in other words, "who are we" as opposed to "who do we want to be." This has some plausibility, but Longley's own evidence suggests moments in British history when the British also have been animated by a sense of possibility. Longley would have been wise to pay more attention to Angus Calder and the "People's war" or David Cannadine and the "invented traditions" of the British monarchy rather than the prejudices of Corelli Barnett and Roger Scruton. Where Longley comes into his own, as a writer and broadcaster on religious affairs, is not with mundane history but rather with what he calls "salvation history," which is less the philosophy of history than its theodicy (p. 132).

According to Longley, such history represents "a special category of history most people ... are unlikely to have heard identified as such," involving a narrative whose focus is the "interactive relationship between humanity and God" (p. 132). But to describe it thus is too bland: what is at stake for those engaging with this history is nothing less than a sense of providential destiny, attention to whose implications is a requirement of those "chosen" by God and compelled to fulfil his mandate. Such a compulsion requires a new way of looking at history: not, as with most historical writing post-1840 and post-Hegel with its search for rationality, reductive and metaphorical but prefigurative and allegorical. Longley describes this approach as one of typology or the identification of a Biblical person, object, or event–primarily from the Old Testament–as prefiguring persons or events in a new dispensation. Longley calls it "Protestantism's guilty secret," but this outlook can be found elsewhere (p. 105). According to Longley, recent presidents such

as Ronald Reagan and George Bush evoke ideas (p. 105) that lie behind the conception of a chosen people, which he traces from the Jews to the Britain of Elizabeth I and Cromwell to the America of the Puritans and contemporary fundamentalism–from Jonathan Edwards to Pat Robertson. But he also takes in South Africa's Boers, America's blacks and even Islam. Each has seen itself as blessed, being God's chosen, but condemned to the anxiety of falling into a state of "declension" and thereby losing God's favor, so that election passes to another "chosen people" (p. 156).

Being chosen has been a source of energy and ambition for those who retain or renew the conviction of their own "exceptionalism." But Longley's conclusion appears to be that such beliefs and the sense of history they produce are ultimately a nightmare, from which it is best to awaken. He points to ways in which the British lost, or abandoned, their sense of election and invites reflection as to how the United States might move beyond the constraining and coinflictual implications of their current "rendezvous with destiny," to adapt Eric Goldman's description. Longley's discussion of the shift in the U.K. during the 1950s, from a state-sanctioned religion to a society-defining secularity, seems especially relevant. Equally so is his powerful consideration of the way in which the campaign for civil rights led by Martin Luther King could evoke similar aspirations among oppressed communities, incluidng women, gays, and native Americans, so that a restrictive sense of chosen-ness gave way to an inclusive, potentially universal, solidarity. This reminds us of the liberatory potential of religious energies. More generally, Longley has performed a service in alerting contemporary readers to the continuing relevance of religious belief: remote in origin, such beliefs retain their significance, especially given the apparent exhaustion of secular convictions. In identifying the origins and warning of the dangers of the "Chosen People syndrome," Longley has provided a timely message (p. 155).

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