

ANCIENT MYSTERIES, MODERN REVELATIONS

I THE STORY OF GOD

WITH MORGAN FREEMAN



 NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

EPISODE

“THE CHOSEN ONE”

Discussion Guide by OnFaith Experts

WHAT DO DIFFERENT FAITH TRADITIONS TEACH US ABOUT THE “CHOSEN ONE”?

CHRISTIANITY

For the world’s 2.2 billion Christians, the identity of the “chosen one” is simple: It’s Jesus of Nazareth, a historical figure whom Christians refer to as “the Anointed One,” or “Christ.” The story of Jesus’ life and death is the foundation of the Christian faith. Across their many diverse denominations today, including Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, Christians of all traditions believe that Jesus died on a cross and was raised from the dead after three days. All believe that Jesus is the “son of God” and the Messiah.

How this one historical figure — a Jewish man who lived and died in the eastern Mediterranean in the early first century — became the chosen one to his followers is not so simple, however. In the Jewish world of Jesus’ time, there was no agreement on who or what would define the Messiah. Some Jews believed that the chosen one of God would rise up as a powerful political figure — a new king for the Jewish people, like King David. Other Jews believed that the chosen one would be a priestly figure, someone who would come to purify the temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish group near Qumran who wrote the famous Dead Sea Scrolls believed in not one but two Messiahs. Still other Jews weren’t awaiting a chosen one at all.

What ultimately convinced Jesus’ followers to believe that this one carpenter from Nazareth was the chosen one? Both then and now, that question is truly a matter of faith.

DOUGLAS BOIN is a historian and associate professor at St. Louis University and the author, most recently, of “Coming Out Christian in the Roman World: How the Followers of Jesus Made a Place in Caesar’s Empire” (Bloomsbury).

ISLAM

Islam is the third of the Abrahamic faiths, following Judaism and Christianity. It ranks as the world’s second-largest religion, with more than 1.6 billion practitioners spread across a spectrum of geographically diverse regions including the United States and Europe. The majority of Muslims are either Sunni (80 to 90 percent) or Shi’a (10 to 20 percent). After the death of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, Muslims disagreed concerning who should serve as his political successor. Whereas the Shi’a believed that leadership should rest with the prophet’s descendants, Sunni Muslims supported his companions and closest advisers as most qualified.

While this episode explores Shi’a belief practices commemorating the tragic martyrdom of the prophet’s grandson, Husain ibn Ali, the concept of the chosen one transcends sectarian divide. Sunni Muslims view the Prophet Muhammad himself as chosen by God as the seal to a long line of messengers and prophets beginning with Adam. As Morgan Freeman notes, almost every religion has a figure its members believe was chosen by God. Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad led by word and deed, and his contemporaries emulated his conduct. After his death, many Muslims turned to the Prophet Muhammad’s conduct as an authoritative source of moral, spiritual and even legal guidance. To that end,



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a number of Muslims today strive to actualize the Islamic values that the Prophet Muhammad embodied and the moral lessons he taught through a commitment to public service, social justice, racial equality and religious pluralism.

ENGY ABDELKADER is faculty at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, where she teaches courses on international terrorism, human rights, civil liberties and national security. An award-winning attorney and scholar, she has worked with Muslims, Arabs and South Asians since 9/11 to address Islamophobia.

JUDAISM

The great prophet of our tradition was a Jew adopted by a gentile, with a speech impediment and minimal leadership experience. His task was to serve as God's mouthpiece, liberating an entire people from slavery and bestowing upon them sacred laws to guide their lives. As this archetypical leader put it rather candidly in his dialogue with God by the burning bush, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11, Jewish Publication Society translation).

It isn't easy being Moses. His work is overwhelming and at times frightening. He is a great person, but not a big personality. In fact, the book of Numbers describes Moses as "the most humble," and our sages indicate that this might be one of his most important attributes.



Yet Moses is stretched almost to the breaking point in leading the Israelites to freedom from slavery and on to the Promised Land. He exhibits outbursts of rage, smashing the tablets containing the Ten Commandments (Exodus 32:19) and striking a rock with his staff, rather than simply speaking to it (Numbers 20:11). Though time and time again he rises to the occasion, one can only imagine the stress, pain and uncertainty that his leadership role entails.

According to our sages, God chooses Moses because of his moral rectitude and perhaps also his innate capacities and unique vantage point. But we relate to Moses because of his very human foibles and moments of uncertainty. Not many of us would

want to lead the life of a prophet. Yet without such a visionary, imperfect exemplar and transmitter of sacred wisdom, we might be lost.

JOSHUA STANTON serves as associate rabbi at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Short Hills, New Jersey, and is a co-founder of Tribe, a group for young Jewish professionals in New York. He is on the board of governors of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations.

SIKHISM

As Morgan Freeman points out, the Sikh tradition is the world's fifth-largest religion, with nearly 30 million followers around the globe. Yet Sikhism remains largely unknown within the global context, and it is often overlooked in programs like these. This episode does well to visit the epicenter of the Sikh community, Amritsar, Punjab, which is home to the theo-political center — Darbar Sahib (i.e., the Golden Temple).

The episode focuses primarily on the Sikh scriptural canon, the Guru Granth Sahib, an anthology of devotional music and poetry ("shabads") that Sikhs believe to be revelatory. The Guru Granth Sahib is compiled by the Sikh Gurus themselves and is primarily composed of writings by the gurus. This collection also includes devotional writings from other religious figures, including Muslim Sufis and Hindu Bhaktas.

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After compiling the text and cultivating the community, the Sikh gurus transferred ultimate authority (i.e., guru-ship) to two entities, the Guru Granth Sahib and the Guru Khalsa Panth (the community of initiated Sikhs). Sikhs continued the tradition of honoring the guru as a sovereign leader, and to this day they preserve the decorum and practices that signify the scripture's royal status. In other words, while Sikhs do not view the Guru Granth Sahib as a living being, they honor it for the wisdom it contains and for the authority it maintains within the tradition.

SIMRAN JEET SINGH is an assistant professor in the Department of Religion at Trinity University. He is the senior religion fellow for the Sikh Coalition and a Truman national security fellow for the Truman National Security Project. He speaks and writes regularly on topics related to diversity, inclusion, civil rights, religion and hate violence.

BUDDHISM

One reason National Geographic's series *The Story of God* with Morgan Freeman is so valuable is because it helps to shed insight into the vast diversity of the world's religious traditions. And one of the greatest things about the United States is its breathtaking diversity. This diversity includes being one of the most religious and spiritually diverse nations in the world.

A reflection of this is Morgan Freeman's dialogue with the chief and chosen one of the Nakota, Lakota and Dakota tribes. This episode recounts how the chosen one was told by his grandmother on her deathbed that humanity is at a crossroads due to climate change and that if people do not start to protect and honor our planet he, as the chosen one, will be the last "bundle keeper."

One thing people of all religions and philosophies can learn from Native American religions is their respect and devotion to protecting our natural world. In Buddhism we believe that we are all interconnected, and Native American traditions are often inspiring in illuminating humanity's connection to nature. Global warming is real and measurable, and humanity's actions are contributing to it. Glaciers are shrinking. Plants and animals are dying. Sea levels are rising. And we are having longer and more intense heat waves.

Buddhism seeks to transform suffering and cultivate joy. One of the best ways we can do this is deepening our connection to the natural world. As Morgan Freeman observes, the chosen one of the Nakota, Lakota and Dakota tribes leads his people in an "epic struggle" requiring "superhuman endurance." Protecting our planet from environmental destruction is one of the most important struggles for transformation of our time. We are all interconnected. Let us emulate the wisdom of the chosen one and protect and honor our natural world.

DAVID ZUNIGA is an ordained Zen Buddhist priest, writer and licensed psychologist at MD Anderson Cancer Center. Previously, he earned a master's degree in comparative religion from Harvard Divinity School and worked for over a decade as a Zen/interfaith chaplain in pediatric and adult end-of-life health care.

HINDUISM

While Hinduism is not one of the faiths featured explicitly in this episode, the idea of chosen ones — people empowered by the divine to lead and inspire — is one that finds great resonance in Hindu thought and tradition. I am particularly



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struck by three themes that the episode raises, and feel that Hindu wisdom has much to contribute to the conversation about each of these.

First, the episode presents the chosen one as a mediator between divinity and people. In most Hindu traditions, this is precisely the role played by the guru (sacred teacher). Sikhism (like Buddhism before it) arose from a Hindu context and shares many concepts and definitions with its parent religion, including this one. The Sikh historian's definition of the guru as one who is empowered to guide others from darkness to light would thus hold true for many Hindus as well. How does one come to occupy such a role? How is one chosen, as it were? Some Hindu traditions hold that mystic occurrences, miracles or prophetic visions — such as the dream that the young Tibetan lama's mother had while pregnant — will mark such a person. Others take a more pragmatic approach: Some are destined to become chosen ones because of their humility, lack of ego, openness to serve, extraordinary compassion and fidelity to their own teachers and guides. These qualities are emphasized and elaborated on in the Bhagavad Gita, one of Hinduism's most beloved and venerated wisdom texts.



On a related note, the episode also seems to suggest that being a chosen one is more about serving duty than enjoying celebrity status. Both the 9-year-old lama and the Native American chief were entrusted with weighty responsibility to lead their communities when they were only children. The historical examples of Hussain and Jesus, and the contemporary one of the imprisoned Korean Christian missionary, also make it clear that such responsibility often means leaning into grave danger, perhaps even sacrificing one's life. I am again reminded of the Gita, in which Lord Krishna (God himself) inspires the warrior prince Arjuna (his devotee) to embrace his sacred duty and stand up to the forces of injustice. "Be my instrument," the deity Krishna exhorts Arjuna, his chosen one, "perform your duty as an offering of devotion to me." In one of the text's climactic con-

cluding passages, Krishna appeals to Arjuna to set aside all other considerations or concerns, and promises the warrior his divine protection. "Have no fear," Krishna assures him. Hinduism's devotional traditions especially emphasize this aspect of being a chosen one — fearless devotion in placing one's total trust in God and acting as his instrument.

As a final theme, the episode intimates the danger in applying the concept of chosen ones to fallible and corruptible religious leaders. The episode highlights Sikhism's innovative way of addressing this concern — replacing human chosen ones with a sacred text. Indeed, some Hindu traditions have done the same thing with their own guru lineages. Most, however, hold that a flesh-and-blood guru is essential, and so they choose to negotiate the tension in a different way. They suggest that chosen ones manifest in a multiplicity of forms — in the guru but also in the sacred texts; in other saints, sages and mystics; and even in the collective community of devotees ("sangha"). This understanding helps to guard against corrupt gurus by providing the devotee with a system of checks and balances. Those who are truly chosen ones will generally be in harmony with the larger body of teachings and practices.

VINEET CHANDER is the coordinator for Hindu life at Princeton University, the nation's first full-time Hindu chaplain and program director. He has also served as an adjunct professor, attorney and communications consultant. His areas of specialty include the bhakti movement, models of pastoral counseling and the Hindu-American diaspora.

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ABOUT ONFAITH

OnFaith is the online community for faith and spirituality. Started 10 years ago by Sally Quinn and Jon Meacham at the Washington Post, OnFaith is building a safe, respectful and engaging place to discuss faith and spirituality away from the noise of everyday life. We have built tools to foster meaningful engagement among our members and to help everyone with their search for meaning. Find yours at OnFaith.

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Additional Resources

To learn more about Tibetan Buddhism and the reincarnations of lamas ("tulku"), check out this video: <https://www.onfaith.co/video/tibetan-buddhist-teachings-on-reincarnation>.

For more on North Korea and its policies toward nonstate religions, see this video: <https://www.onfaith.co/video/world-watch-list-north-korea-country-profile>.

To understand more about Islam and the sects within it, check out <https://www.onfaith.co/discussion/10-things-i-wish-everyone-knew-about-islam>.

For more on Sikhism and excerpts from its chosen one, Guru Granth Sahib, read <https://www.onfaith.co/commentary/god-is-green-sikhi-the-care-of-nature>.

The Emperor Gods Festival that involves "masonry" piercing their bodies under possession comes from the Taoist tradition. Learn more about Taoism and one person's experience as a Taoist here: <https://www.onfaith.co/commentary/taoism-101-introduction-to-the-tao>.

For more on the origins and continuing influence of White Buffalo Calf Woman on the Lakota tribe, read <https://www.onfaith.co/text/white-buffalo-calf-womans-story-serves-as-a-blueprint>.

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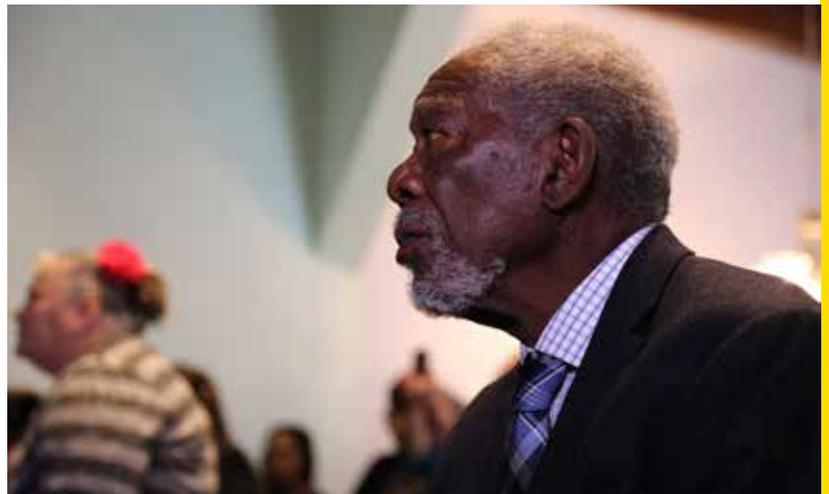
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The Story of God with Morgan Freeman: The Chosen One

Premieres Monday, Jan. 16, at 9/8c

Almost every faith has a figure its followers think was chosen by God. Muslims have Muhammad. Christians have Jesus. Jews have Abraham and Moses. Why do we rally around these chosen ones and how do they guide our faith? Morgan Freeman goes in search of the chosen people walking the earth today, including an American boy from the suburbs who is believed to be the reincarnation of a Buddhist lama who has been returning in different bodies for almost five hundred years.

The Story of God with Morgan Freeman: Heaven and Hell

Premieres Monday, Jan. 23, at 9/8c

What are heaven and hell? Do they await us in the afterlife or are they here and now? People of all faiths and backgrounds have contemplated these conundrums for thousands of years. Morgan Freeman sets out to learn how these unseen places have changed the way we live, by descending into the ancient Native American underworld, investigating the phenomena of exorcisms and the gift of tongues, and meeting a woman who believes she has seen heaven.

The Story of God with Morgan Freeman: Proof of God

Premieres Monday, Jan. 30, at 9/8c

Have we cut God out of our modern lives or are there still special moments when the divine breaks through and makes its presence known? Morgan Freeman meets a man who felt God's presence on Sept. 11, learns how Muslims hear God's voice in the Quran, comes across a tribe whose members believe they can channel the healing power of the divine and encounters a physicist who has faith that science will lead him to God.