

## Review Essay

### **THE MOSAIC LEGACY OF SIGMUND FREUD: HOW TO READ MOSES AND MONOTHEISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

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*Freud and Monotheism: Moses and the Violent Origins of Religion*, edited by Gilad Sharvit and Karen S. Feldman (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018; ix + 250 pp.)

Sigmund Freud, faced with the coming to power of Hitler in 1933, the burning of his books in Berlin, the 1938 *Anschluss*, followed by his exile to London for just one year before he died, worked throughout the 1930s on his last controversial thesis: the biblical Moses, the founder of the Jewish people, was actually an Egyptian prince, he argued. Published in 1939, *Moses and Monotheism*, an ‘infamously unedited text’ (2018, p. 116), as one contributor to this volume describes it, presents the quite unfounded hypothesis that, as a prince, Moses served under the proto-monotheistic Egyptian pharaoh, Akhenaten. When the latter’s regime fell, Moses joined the marginalized Israelite people and imposed his proto-monotheistic views for creating what eventually would be known as the Jewish people. In line with his earlier work *Totem and Taboo*, Freud suggested that the new monotheistic religion was so prohibitive that the Israelite people decided to murder their founding father, Moses, in order to allow themselves a more permissive pleasure principle than the one that was offered to them by him. But a period of ‘latency’ – so central to Freudian developmental theory – can also play a role in the life of nations: the ‘returned of the repressed’, in the case of the people of Israel, was the emergence of a new Moses, this time to impose monotheism

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for good. The triumph of monotheism not only ‘created’ the Jewish people but also created what German Egyptologist Jan Assmann called the ‘mosaic distinction’ – the transition from a ‘tolerable’ polytheism that characterized the ancient world before Judaism, to the belief in one jealous God that represents one truth. As mentioned, Freud’s hypothesis has almost never been accepted by any serious scholar in the fields of Jewish history, biblical studies or Egyptology. Why, then, has this text turned into a classic for scholars in all these disciplines? To answer this and other related questions, the editors of this welcome volume bring together some of the most senior scholars from relevant fields to discuss Freud’s self-defined ‘historical novel’ for our time.

Is *Moses* really a ‘historical novel’? On the one hand, it is certainly not a novel in the classic definition of the term (although as we shall see, commentators have missed a lot here, as Yael Segalovitz argues in her very original reading of *Moses* as a literary text rather than an unsuccessful scholarly work). On the other hand, the historical thesis has been repeatedly refuted without much effort. Nevertheless, *Moses* enjoyed much attention in the 1990s and early 2000s (Assmann, 1998; Derrida, 1996; Said, 2004; Yerushalmi, 1991) which was part of a larger revival of interest in Freud among Jewish studies scholars in the same period. For some decades until the 1980s, historians of psychoanalysis were largely in agreement that Freud was a ‘Godless Jew’. This was the title that Freud’s biographer, Peter Gay, gave to one of his other books, in which he strongly advocated seeing Freud as a man of the Enlightenment. However, historians like Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1991), Sander Gilman (1991), Jay Geller (1993) and others were part of a historiographical shift in which they insisted that we should not leave unchallenged Freud’s self-perception as a ‘secular’ Jew. Freud represented – sometimes against his will – a whole generation of urban Central European assimilated Jewish intellectuals, who could not fully assimilate because of their Jewishness. Defining them as ‘secular’ or ‘godless’ thus misses their identity crisis – or their identity tragedy, one may say. Once the historiographical project turned in the 1980s into exploring the traces of Freud’s Judaism, *Moses* became a key text. What was more natural for historians desiring a better understanding of Freud’s position on Judaism than reading Freud’s version – fictional or real – of Moses (the Egyptian!)?

Freud, however, perceived monotheism not only as a religion that cannot be attributed to a specific nation, culture or geographical area, but also as a *Weltanschauung* – the one gate for understanding the Enlightenment and its core values: secularism, science and progress. If one can replace many visible gods with one invisible and abstract one, as Moses-the-Egyptian did, then one will be able eventually to get rid of the idea of God altogether and replace it with a civilization dominated by rationalism and scientific truth, so Freud wanted to think. Hitler, Freud tried to argue, was not only an enemy of the Jews but the enemy of the ‘modern’ as such.

But, as Edward Said (2004) reminded us in his reading of Freud, Moses was not only the founding father of Judaism and monotheism; he was also ‘foreign’ to the

Israelite people in the first place, and as such the Jewish people were constituted as 'others' from their very first moments. Freud perhaps wanted to celebrate the idea that his own people are the authentic 'modern', but the simple fact that Moses was a 'non-European' is much more significant than he, or many of his commentators, predicted. Said's seminal essay, *Freud and the Non-European*, aimed to challenge the idea that Moses in the Freudian version is mainly an episode in the history of European ideas. Some chapters in this volume suggest that scholars are still finding Said's suggestion to turn Freud's legacy into an even more universalistic one (namely global and non-European) a controversial proposition. Scholarly readings of *Moses* are often dictated, including some in this volume, by a double act of reading and dismissing the Freudian text at the same time. Scholars tend to begin any textual analysis of *Moses* by discrediting Freud as an amateur reader of historical texts and contextualizing it within other nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century German intellectual traditions; but then, nevertheless, some still claim the importance of *Moses* as an allegory of 1930s Europe that might be relevant to other periods in history, including our own, although mainly, if not only, in the Jewish context (i.e. for understanding anti-Semitism). The tension between this line of reading Moses and a 'Saidian' one is very visible in this volume in a way that makes it particularly interesting.

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Assmann's chapter is a tribute to Ernst Sellin, the biblical scholar who provided Freud with the outline for his *Moses*. Assmann suggests that Sellin's book, *Mose und seine Bedeutung für die israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte*, published in 1922, 'deserves a better fate than surviving in a footnote of Freud's book' (p. 154). According to Assmann, Freud as well as Goethe – who was perhaps the first to suggest, in 1819, that Moses was murdered by one of his own people, namely Joshua – were not 'careful readers of the bible' and 'neither of them was interested in an exegesis of the biblical text' (p. 154). It was only Sellin, he argues, who had the right tools to identify the long-term tensions ('murmurings') between the Israelites and their (new) God, as described in no fewer than 14 such incidents in the Bible. Assmann convincingly shows how in this formative time, during the establishment of a new religion and the creation of the Jewish people, there was no need to think of *one* defining repressed trauma, as Freud did, because there were all sorts of different traumatic events along the way from Egypt to the land of Israel. The Israelites had trouble with the polarized framework that their monotheistic God demanded. They found it hard to accept the new set of dichotomies of the Mosaic distinction: 'belief and disbelief, as Goethe had it, as well as loyalty and betrayal, blessing and curse, love and wrath' (p. 149). However, in the following chapter, Ronald Hendel explains in much more detail why Sellin is still remembered only with regard to Freud. His theory reflected 'his predilection to historicize Christian typology in his biblical exegesis' and therefore 'within biblical scholarship, Sellin's theory has been forgotten, for good reason' (p. 164).

When it comes to Freud's *Moses*, it seems as though Assmann and Hendel are in agreement that the Freudian 'historical novel' about Moses is a sort of 'embarrassment' that needs to be 'corrected', or even replaced by a more 'worthy' text, though it is still too important to be just ignored or allowed to fade away into oblivion. But while Assmann suggests replacing Freud with better readers of the biblical story, Hendel suggests replacing Moses himself with a different biblical figure, that is, biblical Hosea. Hendel, like Assmann, claims that although 'Freud's historical conjectures are unwarranted [...] his psychological categories may yet be fruitful for these issues if we reorient the analysis'. In fact, he argues that 'the subject should not be the historical Moses, to which we have little or no access; instead, it should be Mosaic discourse to which we have ample access' (p. 171). The 'Mosaic discourse' is better represented, according to Hendel, by the figure of Hosea, who 'defines Israel as God's chosen people' and by its 'rejection' of it which created also 'Jewish Guilt'. This discourse of 'chosenness' has also been the source of anti-Semitic tropes in Jewish history ever since, he claims. Hosea's 'Mosaic discourse' – 'trauma and guilt, memory and anxiety, text and transgression' – are all 'exemplary Freudian themes'. What is specifically Freudian in these themes Hendel does not say, but he credits Freud with facing problems such as 'how the Jews come to be what they are', 'why they have attracted undying hatred' and 'a theory of religion' – even if, he concludes, the answers to these questions in Moses are 'dubious' (p. 173). But the questions that Freud raised are not so original; it is precisely what Hendel calls Freud's 'dubious' answers that has compelled scholars and commentators to read *Moses* for more than 80 years now. It seems as if Hendel is either interested in the biblical text, or in a psychoanalytic text that has yet to be written (e.g. 'Hosea and Monotheism'), rather than reading the *Moses and Monotheism* that Freud left us with.

Willi Goetschel, in his chapter on Freud and Heine, is much closer to the Freudian text. Like Assmann and Hendel, he begins by discrediting *Moses* as 'a strange book, if we can, in fact, call this mix of uneven essayistic text a book at all' (p. 65), more of a 'literary performance' (p. 66). However, far from dismissing Freud's project altogether, Goetschel does acknowledge Freud's 'alternative approach to history' and his '[prime interest] in a history of the psyche rather than in brute facts' (p. 69). In terms of time and place, however, Goetschel keeps locating Freud only within the discourse of nineteenth-century German culture in a way that is historically justified and yet limits the options of using this text for our times. Freud's *Moses*, Goetschel argues, contains a hidden Oedipal acknowledgement of – or perhaps what he calls 'wrestling' with – Heine, rather than Moses: 'the Moses that Freud "inherited," as it were, came not from the "Egyptians" but from a notion of tradition that already viewed origins in a multiple, differential, and open form – a belated, as it were, but deeply original truth' (p. 82). In this reading, Heine is the 'real' object of investigation for Freud, not Moses or the 'Egyptians' – as if the ingredients of this story that preoccupied modern German

scholars has nothing to do with the ‘non-Europeans’ that did occupy Freud’s ‘historical novel’.

A different, nuanced reading of the biblical story alongside the Freudian one is given by Gilad Sharvit in his piece. Sharvit reveals an interesting blind spot in the way Freud characterized Moses’s leadership. The biblical Moses, he argues, was ‘defiant and strong-minded’ but not ‘domineering and controlling’, as Freud portrayed him. While for Freud, Moses was an authoritarian great leader – the ultimate father in the primal horde myth of *Totem and Taboo* – the biblical scene of the Burning Bush (in which Moses was reluctant to heed God’s calling) provides us with a totally different character of someone who is ready *not* to obey a tyrannical God in order *not* to become a tyrannical leader himself. Or, in Sharvit’s words, he insists on staying ‘outside God’s control’ (p. 208). Freud’s overlooking of the Burning Bush scene might not be a coincidence, as this episode does not fit the paternal figure that Freud saw in Moses. This in itself reveals the extent to which Freud was loaded with fantasies about the possibility of a Jewish ‘strong leader’, a figure not available in 1930s Europe when he was writing his book.

Several contributors pay attention to a well-known letter from Freud to Arnold Zweig from 1934, where the former presents his Moses project – not yet fully written yet already dogged by a real concern that it will be too controversial ever to be published – as motivated by the question of ‘why [the Jew] has drawn upon himself this undying hatred’ (Freud, 1992, p. 421). This question is quoted and presented as a ‘smoking gun’ for Freud’s ‘real’ intellectual motivations in several chapters of the book. For some contributors – but not all of them – it seems as though Jew hatred, namely anti-Semitism, is the only possible relevance *Moses* has for our own times. What else could qualify as the ‘return’ of our collective ‘repressed’? And yet, for the sake of not making historical errors or false comparisons, we might want commentators to be more specific about the nature of this ‘repressed’ and from whence it is ‘returned’?

For example, Richard J. Bernstein (the author of *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*) finds this question about the sources of the ‘undying hatred’ for the Jews, and Freud’s *Moses* as a whole, highly relevant for understanding ‘the recent disturbing outbreaks of anti-Semitic incidents’ (p. 32). Freud provided us with a legacy in which Moses was a prophet of progress which has been accompanied by ‘reactionary violence’ ever since (p. 40). Thus, the ‘outbreak of anti-Semitic incidents today and the new forms of Jew hatred’ are also ‘an outbreak of the return of the repressed’, Bernstein maintains (*ibid.*). However, while one can very clearly make the case for anti-Semitism as the major form of reactionary violence in the 1930s – and without denying a major growth of anti-Semitic incidents in recent years – it is unclear if today Jews are the one and only object of hate crimes and racism. One may argue that racism is not a competition, and in fact outbursts of racism against one minority group only inflame racism against others. But Bernstein refers only to anti-Semitism and does not use at all the term ‘racism’, as if *Moses* is a text only for and about the Jews and not applicable to any other form of hate crime. Moreover, Bernstein overlooks current debates over how

to define anti-Semitism, where many historians argue that a wide definition is all too often exploited to silence every criticism of the State of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

Bernstein argues that the ‘Jewish’ as presented by Freud in *Moses* is ‘epitomized’ by the title of the third section in *Moses*, ‘Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit’, which was initially translated by Katherine Jones as ‘The Progress in Spirituality’ and then by Strachey as ‘The Advance of Intellectuality’. But as Joel Whitebook shows in his contribution, the concept of *Geistigkeit* cannot go unchallenged. For Freud, *Geistigkeit* (in any of the translations) is related to the ban on idolatry and the monotheistic dematerialization of God (rather than the many materialized gods that existed before monotheism emerged as a new organizing principle for religion). For Whitebook, ‘*Geistigkeit* is too uncritical and affirmative – indeed, too unanalytic – and contains more than a whiff of sanctimony and self-satisfaction’ (p. 55). Furthermore, in Freud’s writing, *Geistigkeit* comes with ‘a denigration of *maternal Sinnlichkeit*’ in the false dichotomy between masculine/paternal capacity for ‘conceptualization’ and feminine/maternal inclination for the ‘sensual’. Whitebook claims that *Moses* was Freud’s opportunity to show his commitment to ‘cosmopolitan and universal values’ by refusing to “‘put the truth aside in favour of what are supposed to be [the] national interests” of his own people, regardless of the profound historical crisis that was threatening them’ (p. 54; Whitebook quoting Freud, 1939, p. 7). Paradoxically, turning Moses into an Egyptian, and turning monotheism into a core value of enlightened *Geistigkeit*, was a clear ‘national’ interest for Freud when writing *Moses*, as that was a way to make the Nazi attack on the Jewish people in Europe legible as a declaration of war against the Western values of progress as such. For that purpose, Freud was ready to write a selective history of Akhenaten that portrayed him – against some evidence for a more complex picture – as a masculine ‘patriarch’, thereby endorsing masculine patriarchy as an element which is part and parcel of *Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*.

A different anti-nationalist reading of Moses is offered by Gabriele Schwab in her thoughtful chapter. Freud was the first to admit how crucial the question of ‘belonging’ and ‘identity’ is to the story of Moses, but he himself also rejected such a reading in the very first sentence of his book. In Schwab’s translation, Freud states that ‘To deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of his sons is nothing that one will like to do light-heartedly, especially when one belongs to this very people’ (p. 102). Neither the otherness of Moses, nor the attempt at exploiting

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1. As historian Daniel Blatman (2019) of the Hebrew University has written recently (in the context of whether the Labour Party in the UK should or should not adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance [IHRA] definition of anti-Semitism), ‘this is no longer anti-Semitism that distinguishes between Jews and non-Jews based on criteria like religion, culture, nationality or race – but one that makes a distinction between anti-Semites and non-anti-Semites, based on criteria set by the Israeli government and by Jews and non-Jews who support it’. See also Goldberg and Raz (2019). See also, however, a reply to criticism of the IHRA by Yehuda Bauer (2019).

the Exodus story for national purposes, were hidden from Freud. Acknowledging the ‘non-European’ in Moses’s identity might be a starting point for assessing – as well as criticizing – the colonial roots of Zionism (which does not imply necessarily denying Zionism altogether). In Schwab’s words, ‘Said points to the symbolic murder at the heart of official narratives of the Jewish state, namely, its erasure of the non-Jewish heritage that Freud took such pains to expose’ (p. 95). Schwab’s reading shows that ‘encrypted histories’ such as *Moses* are not that interesting unless one is willing to take them seriously as a ‘psychic archive’ and engage with the political questions such ‘archives’ may include.

In a different – but not unrelated – chapter on the ‘archaic heritage’ of Moses and monotheism (with small ‘m’), Catherine Malabou suggests that *Moses* is not only a text on the intergenerational transmission of the Jewish people but also a prophetic text that provided an early hypothesis for what we would call today ‘epigenetics’, and what Freud called ‘phylogenesis’. One of the problems with *Moses* – and Freud was the first to admit it – was that it is unclear whether collective traumatic memory is inherited by biological or sociocultural forces. Epigenetics could be the ‘space of biological negotiation’ (p. 192) that Freud so much needed when he tried to answer the question of ‘how Jews have come to be what they are’, because it explains history as designating ‘not only a series of past events but also a specific type of biological inheritance’ (p. 193).<sup>2</sup> Traumatic events always leave epigenetic traces which inevitably will be transmitted to later generations. The implication, however, is that there is not any traumatic event to serve as an ‘origin’, and no primal scene that made it all possible or inevitable – all ‘events’ are always already ‘epigenetic versions of the trauma’ (p. 195). Following Said, Malabou claims that there are no ‘privileged moments in inheritance’ (p. 195). Thus, the Jewish people became what they are not only by merging Moses I (the ‘Egyptian’) with Moses II (the ‘Medianite’), but also through the appearance and disappearance of many other metaphorical Moseses that kept, and still keep constituting the archaic heritage of the Jewish people.

Perhaps the most ambitious and interesting chapter of this volume is Yael Segalovitz’s attempt to read *Moses* as a literary, and not necessarily historical, text. She suggests replacing a ‘close reading’ of the Freudian text – which is what most historians did – with a reading based on what Freud defined in 1912 as ‘evenly suspended attention’ (Freud, 1912, p. 111). This is the only state of mind, Freud claimed, by which the therapist can avoid being ‘selective’ in the materials provided by the patient’s free association. The Freudian therapist ‘is asked to invest all of his conscious energy in suppressing his “critical faculty” and its inclination to “reject” certain materials’ (p. 115). Allowing such a critical suspension is what characterized systems of *belief*. Indeed, Freud encouraged such forms of

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2. Malabou defines ‘epigenetics’ as the field that ‘studies the mechanisms that modify the function of genes by activating or deactivating them in the process of constituting the phenotype’ (p. 188).

*belief* between the therapist and her patient, and Segalovitz makes the case for extending this belief to Freud and his readers: ‘Freud’s *Moses*, a hunchback wandering through history in its clumsy and peculiar ways, provokes its readers to make their very act of reading an act of faith, to “take a plunge” into their internal otherness and follow its lead’ (p. 130). Segalovitz’s *Moses* is a text that invites ‘an unselective, sensory-oriented reading’ which requires a ‘leap of faith’ by the reader (p. 132). Faith is of course the major challenge of the monotheistic God. It also a major theme that is still so fundamental to our lives today, more than 80 years after the publication of Freud’s extraordinary ‘historical novel’. Freud was perhaps a ‘Godless Jew’, but not necessarily a faithless one.

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