

Moses and Monotheism: Guilt and the Murder of the Primal Father

The phenomenon of Jewish monotheism is as puzzling today as it was in the 19th century. It is, perhaps, even more so, because the rich discoveries in this century of the life and religions of near-eastern peoples of the first two pre-Christian millennia—peoples in close contact with the Hebrews—have shed no light on the matter. In fact, these discoveries, by revealing the close similarities between Hebrews and other peoples, have thrown into sharper light the uniqueness of Jewish monotheism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the conflicting theories on the origin of Jewish monotheism. It can be said, however, that almost without exception, the scholars remain convinced of the centrality of Moses' role. Yet, the scholars who accept the centrality of Moses' role are no better able to explain or assess it than they were before Freud published *Moses and Monotheism* some thirty years ago.¹

Moses and Monotheism is as heretical a book today as it was in 1939. Much—but perhaps not all—of the hostility the book has aroused is simply hostility to psychoanalytic theory. Part—but again not all—of the hostility is the result of anger aroused in theologians and historians of religion by the incursion into their fields of someone who should not have ventured there.² While many of these scholars have a tolerant acceptance

¹ Thus, Bruce Mazlish, in "Freud as Philosopher of History," in *The Riddle of History* (New York, 1966), notes that "As with *Totem*, only more so, the *Moses* thesis is hard either to prove or to disprove." This statement, as with several others to which I will refer, is to be found in a valuable and convenient collection of essays on the subject, *Monotheism and Moses*, edited by Robert J. Christen and Harold E. Hazeltin (Heath and Co., 1969), p. 58.

² Typical of such reactions is that of Martin Buber: "That a scholar of so much importance in his own field (emphasis added) as Sigmund Freud could permit himself to issue so unscientific a work, based upon groundless hypotheses, as his *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), is regrettable." Martin Buber: *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (New York, 1958), p. 7.

of psychoanalysis as a clinical affair, they refuse to accept its extension into the fields of anthropology, history, and religion. However, there have been objections raised which deserve answering. Let me say at the outset that I find the central argument in *Moses and Monotheism* fully convincing. In attempting answers to questions that have been raised and others which have occurred to me, I find that in all cases Freud's thesis is strengthened.

There are two principal points. First, it is argued that there is no inner relationship between the Aton religion practiced by Ikhnaton and 1. the religion of Moses himself (insofar as we can isolate it), 2. the religion of the Israelites in Canaan (from the period of the settlement to the Babylonian exile), or 3. the final form of the Jewish religion established by Ezra and Nehemiah after the return from the exile. Second, it is argued that the man Moses, although unquestionably "a tremendous father imago," must (according even to Freud's reconstruction) have been very different from the primal father (and I will add, that consequently the murder of Moses would have had rather a different effect than the murder of the primal father). Both objections are legitimate. Except for observing the fact that Moses apparently abandoned the notion of the Sun as either the god Aton or the manifestation of Aton's supreme and universal power, Freud quite literally identifies the two religions. In doing so, he has, I think, made an unnecessary mistake. This mistake (for there *are* large and manifest differences between Atonism and any of the subsequent forms of the Israelite religion) can be traced to a failure on Freud's part to distinguish consistently between the *origin* of the Mosaic religion in the Aton religion and the inevitable alterations the Aton religion would have to undergo the moment Moses took the unprecedented step of "adopting" a "chosen" people and wilfully forcing upon them a highly ethical religion. The question of the effect on this people of the murder of Moses—a man, by all criteria, essentially different from the primal father is intrinsically more important than the question of the relation-

ship between the two religions. Granting that Moses was indeed “an eminent father figure” or “a tremendous father imago,” and so, in one critical point like the primal father—the sharp differences between him and the primal father become the important points. This consideration forms no part of Freud’s discussion.

The Aton religion of Ikhнатon (insofar as we can reconstruct it) is significantly different from any stage of the Jewish religion. The following passage by a neutral observer, Norman K. Gottwald, points to central differences:

All in all a close comparison of the two men shows little reason to believe that Akh-en-Aton was a decisive influence upon Moses, or vice versa for that matter. In many dimensions the religion of Moses was far less sophisticated and developed than that of Akh-en-Aton: but in its historical activism, its consuming sense of the holiness of God, its powerful communal conscience, the religion of Moses far out-stripped Atonism in its appeal and vitality. Compared to the God of the Hebrews, Aton seems curiously placid and unexciting; it is of course the difference between nature religions and religions of history.³

These distinctions between the two religions are fair ones. But as proof of the opening sentence—that Atonism had no “decisive influence” upon Moses—it ignores the inevitable, critical differences that would come about by Moses’ imposition of that very religion on a culturally inferior people, and establishing a religion “of history.” This point is touched on by Freud:

It was probably not easy for them [the “chosen people”] to distinguish the man Moses from that of his God; and their feeling was right in this, for Moses may have introduced traits of his own personality into the character of his God—such as his wrathful temper and his relentlessness.⁴

With this, we come to the central question of the covenant. Certainly, it was Moses who imposed a covenant upon his peo-

³ Norman K. Gottwald: *A Light to the Nations: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York, 1959), p. 130.

⁴ Sigmund Freud: *Moses and Monotheism* (Standard Edition, 1961) XXIII, p. 110.

ple: one can not imagine him liberating them from bondage, assigning them his most precious possession, his religion, without expecting something in return—that is, obedience. Thus, at one stroke, a dynamic, a tension was established—something which no necessity imposed upon the worshippers of Aton. Whatever innovations Ikhnaton contributed to the Sun-worship of his father, Amenhotep III, and whatever obligations were assumed by Ikhnaton and his followers in living in “Maat,” there could (so far as we can gather or surmise) be no question of punishment from the Aton for those failing to live in “Maat.” The distance, the impersonality, the absence of any large sense of anthropomorphism in Ikhnaton’s conception of the Aton would have precluded this. But, once Moses imposed the Aton religion on his chosen people, something new, something perhaps unexpected, and certainly something very problematical—the idea of a bond in covenant—came into being. And it is this, first of all, which accounts for the “historical activism,” [the] “consuming sense of the holiness of God,” [the] “powerful communal conscience” which very clearly marks off the religion of Moses from that of Ikhnaton. But that was only the beginning. In the compromise at Qades, the violent anthropomorphism of the volcano god, Yahweh, reinforced the dynamic nature of the religion of the “neo-Egyptians” (as Freud appropriately calls those who had been in Egypt against those who had not), and removed that religion still further from Atonism. But the dynamic nature of the Mosaic religion had started with Moses, and it is perhaps here that the strict proscription against pictorial representation of the Deity becomes significant. Moses sensed the obvious danger of idolatry in the sudden (and perhaps unexpected) anthropomorphism that was the direct result of his undertaking.

The case of the differences between Moses and the primal father is far larger and more important than that of the correspondence between Jewish monotheism and Atonism. It is the central unexplored problem in Freud’s thesis. H. L. Philp has raised the point:

There is, however, one flaw in Freud's argument that Moses reanimated the experience of the primaeval family situation and the slaying of the primal father. He stated that the first Moses was not the Father of Israel, but an idealistic Egyptian who determined to continue the Aton religion through the foreign Israelites. His motives were propagandistic and so he was not a good substitute for the primal father. But the whole point of the argument in *Totem and Taboo*, repeated in *Moses and Monotheism*, was that the father of the horde was killed not because he was an aggressive and dominating figure but through sexual jealousy: "All females were his property, the wives and daughters in his own horde as well as perhaps also those robbed from other hordes. The fate of the sons was a hard one; if they excited the father's jealousy they were killed or driven out." After they revolted and killed him they realized the futility of killing each other to obtain the succession which they desired, so "Each renounced the ideal of gaining for himself the position of the father, of possessing his mother or sister. With this the taboo of incest and the law of exogamy came into being." There is not the slightest reason anywhere to think that anyone could even have wished to murder Moses through motives of this kind.⁵

This paragraph contains an accurate and valuable observation—that since Moses' motives were "propagandistic," he was not a "good substitute for the primal father," and a confused observation—that the father as "an aggressive and dominating figure" was somehow different from the father who held all sexual prerogatives. But it is the final sentence which is critical. It is correct, but misleading. Nonetheless, it does serve to bring into focus the underlying problem: the differences between Moses and the primal father. The sentence is misleading because it fails to recognize that Moses *also* imposed upon the Israelites important instinctual renunciations—sexual and non-sexual. These renunciations, we surmise, were greater than

⁵ H. L. Philp: "A Question of Method," included in *Monotheism and Moses*, p. 52.

they had known and were totally unexpected. It is, of course, impossible to unearth the instinctual restraints these people had practiced before the exodus. But the severe ethical precepts of the Mosaic law were imposed on a people whose ethical structures were far weaker than those of the Egyptian ruling class. Therefore, more than sufficient cause can be produced for the murder of the man who imposed on his adopted people, suddenly and without explanation, a well-nigh intolerable set of ethical commandments. And, as Freud makes clear, there is ample evidence in Exodus (and elsewhere) of the rebellious nature of the people.

Nonetheless, two facts remain: Moses had led them out of bondage and the ethical demands he made he himself practiced assiduously. In both of these points, he is radically unlike the primal father. We may gather a glimpse of the elation of the people, as they were liberated, by reading the episode called "Raid" in Faulkner's *The Unvanquished*, which presents an unforgettable picture of large groups of Negroes, suddenly freed, wandering in ecstatic expectation of the end of their misery. And the Israelites attached their deliverance to a *visible* man, Moses. But that elation was short-lived. Conditions in the wilderness were worse than they had been in Egypt, and they were ordered by Moses to live up to the ethical standards he practiced—ethical standards which were both alien and harsh. They then murdered him. Now, the reaction to the murder of the primal father was remorse. That remorse, as Freud points out again and again, was the expression of love for the murdered father; and it led in time to his deification. No such thing followed the murder of Moses. "To the suggestion that they should remember," says Freud, "which was made to them by the doctrine of Moses, they reacted, however, by disavowing their action;"⁶ The people denied the murder and the ethical commandments—and this was radically different from the response of the band of brothers to *their* crime.

We can elaborate further. The band of brothers both loved and hated their father. The Israelites could never have loved Moses. (Even today it would be eccentric for a Jew to

⁶ Freud: *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 89.

declare that he loved Moses.) However, they came to hate him for the renunciations he imposed on them. Now, the murder of the primal father, even though remorse followed it, was never seen as *exclusively* wrong. The primal father had deserved his fate. "So long as the pressure exercised by the primal father could be felt, the hostile feelings toward him were justified. . . ." ⁷ The reverse was true in the case of the murder of Moses by "his people." No matter how much they hated him, they could not *justify* their murdering him. After all, they had willingly let themselves be adopted by Moses as his "chosen people," and he had in fact led them out of bondage. Furthermore, the renunciations he imposed upon them were merely those which he himself practiced. The psychic results of a crime which *cannot* be justified (the murder of Moses) differ from the psychic results of a crime which *could* be justified (the murder of the primal father). We must therefore qualify the statement that Moses was "an eminent substitute." The essential ambivalence of the father-son relationship was lacking. The initial gratitude for the deed of liberation gave way to hatred for the renunciations which were expected in return. We know the burden of gratitude and its development into resentment. It will not serve to say that the Israelites transferred to the leader Moses their own charge of the oedipal love-hate. The sequence of events was so radically unlike either the phylogenetic or individual realities that one cannot attribute to it the awakening of emotions attached either to the phylogenetic or individual experiences. The situation under which Moses was introduced to these people was in fact the *inverse* of that which had led to the primal murder and which leads to the development of the oedipal conflicts in each son. As Freud points out, the primal murder—of the father by the sons—produced the *original* liberation. "In the beginning was the Deed"—the deed done by the sons. The consequences of that deed—the taboo of incest, the law of exogamy, the institutions of the Totem and the Totem feast—were the product of the psychic mechanisms of the sons. These consequences may properly be called a *covenant*—a covenant established by the

⁷ Freud: Totem and Taboo (Standard Edition, 1961), XIII, p. 160.

sons, from below, as it were. Freud uses that word in this connection: "The totemic system was . . . a covenant with their father, in which he promised them everything that a childish imagination may expect from a father."⁸ But in the present case, something far different occurred: *Moses* liberated the people (the sons) and then imposed *upon* them, from *above*, and because of his actual power, a whole series of instinctual renunciations. For this, as is clear but necessary to repeat at this point, they rose up in rebellion and murdered him. But, in the absence of the essential ambivalence, the psychic reaction to that murder could not have been the same as it had been with the primal murder. That is, there was no fund of love to create remorse—that remorse which was *conscious* and which went to produce the Totemic situation. What was produced in the Israelites was a guilt which was immediately repressed.

Now, in discussing the terms "guilt" and "remorse," we are treading on complex matters. In Chapter VII of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud attempts certain distinctions. Before proceeding, however, it will be helpful to look at the sense of guilt from another viewpoint. Franz Alexander, in "Remarks about the Relation of Inferiority Feelings to Guilt Feelings," summarizes what he calls the "psychological content of guilt feelings":

The psychological content of guilt feelings can be verbalized about as follows: "I am not good. What I want to do (or what I did) is mean or low. I deserve contempt and punishment." In this feeling, in a way, always a sense of justice is implied. One feels guilty because one wants to attack or has attacked somebody who does not deserve it. Such a sense of justice must be present if we are to speak of *genuine guilt feelings* (emphasis added) because whenever one feels that a hostile intention or attack is justified, guilt feelings disappear. Therefore self-defense is never connected with guilt feelings. Without feeling that one's hostilities are unjustified, there is no guilt feeling. Otherwise the phenomenon of guilt projection would be unintel-

⁸ Freud: *Totem and Taboo*, p. 144.

ligible. Whenever one can convince oneself that the object of one's hatred deserves the hate by giving adequate reason for being hated, the feeling of guilt is abolished.⁹

The application of this passage to the previous discussion of the murder of Moses will be apparent— and I will return to it. We must, however, at this moment, recall the dynamics of the Totem feast. Whatever momentous consequences derived from the awakening of remorse in the band of brothers, the annual repetition of the “deed of liberation” can attest only to the fact that it *was* indeed a liberation from oppression and was *justified*. The band of brothers possessed a very large sense that the murder of the father which was being celebrated was justifiable. In his discussion of “genuine guilt feelings,” Alexander finds no need to raise the question of what Freud calls “the part played by love in the origin of conscience and the fatal inevitability of the sense of guilt.”¹⁰ We will return to this discrepancy.

In Chapter VII of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud presents two apparently contradictory theories of the origin of “conscience.” First, he presents the obvious idea: that conscience arises from the introjection of parental values. Second, he presents the more novel idea that conscience arises “through the suppression of an aggressive impulse”¹¹—that is, that the hostility developed in the child toward his parents by his having to adopt their renunciative values cannot find expression and is taken over by the super-ego and directed against the “helpless” ego. For Freud's discussion of the whole subject, I refer the reader to the chapter itself. I will confine myself to citing the following passage:

When one has a sense of guilt after having committed a misdeed, and because of it, the feeling should more properly be called *remorse*. It relates only to a deed that has been done, and, of course, it presupposes that a *conscience*—the

⁹ Franz Alexander: “Remarks about the Relation of Inferiority Feelings to Guilt Feelings,” *The Scope of Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1961), p. 131.

¹⁰ Freud: *Civilization and its Discontents* (Standard Edition, 1961) XIII, p. 160.

¹¹ Freud: *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 130.

readiness to feel guilty—was already in existence before the deed took place. Remorse of this sort can, therefore, never help us to discover the origin of conscience and of the sense of guilt in general. What happens in these everyday cases is usually this: an instinctual need acquires the strength to achieve satisfaction in spite of the conscience, which is, after all, limited in its strength; and with the natural weakening of the need owing to its having been satisfied, the former balance is restored. Psychoanalysis is thus justified in excluding from the present discussion the case of *a sense of guilt due to remorse* (emphasis added), however frequently such cases occur and however great their practical importance.¹²

I will interrupt Freud's line of reasoning at this point and cite a central literary example of an "everyday case" of "a sense of guilt due to remorse"—Oedipus the King. At the end of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus experiences in the fullest extremity "a sense of guilt due to remorse." He extinguishes his eyes, as he says, because he could not face his father's look in the underworld.¹³ However, Sophocles dramatizes the typical outcome of such guilt and remorse. In his last play, *Oedipus At Colonus*, Sophocles presents us with an Oedipus, many years later, who no longer feels any guilt, although he is in full remembrance of his deeds. He asserts now that he had never *been* a guilty man, and produces a series of rationalizations to prove it:

I suffered them,
By fate, against my will! It was God's pleasure,
And perhaps our race had angered him long ago.
In me myself you could not find such evil
As would have made me sin against my own.
And tell me this: if there were prophecies
Repeated by the oracles of the gods,
That Father's death should come through his own son,
How could you justly blame it upon me?

¹² Freud: *Civilization and its Discontents*, pp. 131-132.

¹³ Needless to say, this act is simply one aspect of his confession of guilt.

a mother her son, a son his mother, or some other such action takes place—those are the situations to look for.¹⁶

For the cathartic effect of tragedy, Aristotle is, of course, correct. And in general, his three categories make sense. But in the case of Moses and his people, do we not have something exceptional? He and his people were certainly not indifferent to each other and they were certainly not enemies. *But they were not tied by love.* They had committed an *unjustifiable* act against a benefactor, against a man to whom they were tied not by love but by an intolerable bond of gratitude. This is admittedly an unusual case—one not to be looked for by the poets as a subject for tragedy, that literary form which has as its essential function the release of the pain of unconscious guilt. It is therefore to this situation we must look for the fact that the Jewish people, who became what they were through the murder of Moses and who were beset by a burden of unexpiable guilt, did not invent tragic drama. But we have always spoken of the uniqueness of Jewish monotheism. The guilt for the unjustifiable murder could not be tolerated, and so the deed, as Freud notes, was forgotten. But we must qualify Freud's statement: "To the suggestion that they should remember, which was made to them by the doctrine of Moses, they reacted, however, by disavowing their action." It could *not* have been a stimulus to their memory. That deed was essentially different from the primal murder, in which remorse and expiation were inevitable psychic developments. Instead, they repressed the deed and the teachings of Moses. The "return of the repressed" will be considered shortly.

Freud's central contention in his reconstruction of the dynamics of the primal murder was the ambivalence of the sons toward the father.

His sons hated him, but they loved him, too. After their hatred had been satisfied by their act of aggression, their love came to the fore in their remorse for the deed. It set up the super-ego by identification with the father; it gave that agency the father's power, as though as a punishment

¹⁶ Aristotle: p. 23.

for the deed of aggression they had carried out against him, and it created the restrictions which were intended to prevent a repetition of the deed.¹⁷

But the murder of Moses was unlike that of the primal father in that that very ambivalence was lacking on the part of Moses' chosen people. They did not develop a "sense of guilt due to remorse." I think that we may, at this point, begin to distinguish between a "sense of guilt due to remorse" and a sense of guilt, in Alexander's sense, resulting from an unjustified attack upon someone to whom one is not tied by love. The difference between Freud's interest in guilt and Alexander's interest in guilt derives from a difference of interest in the object of the hostile attack. Freud's interest is exclusively in guilt derived from attack on objects to which are attached the ambivalence of infantile relationships. Alexander's interest is apparently in guilt derived from attack on objects to which the accustomed ambivalence of infantile relationships can *not* be attached. But difficulties at once arise. We have not yet spoken of the motivation for the attack against the objects Alexander has in mind. The attack against either a loved object or an enemy presents no problems in motivation. But why should one be motivated to make an unjustifiable attack—that is, an attack against a person who is not the embodiment of the objects of infancy—a person for whom there exists no ambivalent feelings? This is not an easy question to answer, and perhaps it admits of none. The best one can say is that such cases must be most unusual. Perhaps Alexander's statement is too sweeping:

One feels guilty because one wants to attack or has attacked somebody who does not deserve it. Such a sense of justice must be present if we are to speak of genuine guilt feelings because whenever one feels that a hostile intention or attack is justified, guilt feelings disappear.

I think we must say that the phrase "genuine guilt feelings" applies in the prototypical situations which are at the center

¹⁷ Freud: *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 132.

of Freud's concern—those situations which allow for the expiation of guilt. If this is so, then we must take Alexander's phrase simply in a *temporal* sense and acknowledge that the emotional content of the guilt he speaks of is identical with that of the guilt Freud speaks of. The difference (dependent on the relationship between the actor and the object of his attack) would then be simply in the length of time the guilt remains operative. Thus the immediate, but not lasting, sense of absolute guilt ("remorse") which is Freud's concern, may rightly be taken as "genuine guilt" in Alexander's sense. But the guilt incurred by the murder of Moses by the Israelites was a lasting concern, one which would not admit of remission by remorse. Such guilt has no recourse but repression. And so it was with the Israelites.

But that guilt had to emerge from its repression. The history of that repressed guilt and its inevitable emergence into consciousness is the history of the Jewish people. It is the story of the development of the old Hebrew religion into its "offspring," Judaism. The importance of the murder of Moses, then, is not as Freud states, that in historical times a group of otherwise undifferentiated people murdered an "eminent father substitute" and so re-experienced the emotional conditions of the primal murder.

Let us summarize certain salient points of Israelite history, subsequent to the murder of Moses and the compromise at Qades.

1. Complete repression among the people of the murder of Moses, of guilt, and of Moses' teaching.
2. Settlement of Canaan; adoption of Canaanite practices, both religious and secular.
3. Beginnings of the oral tradition among the Moses people—the Levites—all of which had been repressed by the people.
4. Beginnings of the written tradition—which has come down to us in the Pentateuch.

5. Emergence of the oral tradition of Moses' teachings and concurrent accusation of guilt by the Prophets.
6. Destruction of the Northern Kingdom.
7. Destruction of the Southern Kingdom; Babylonian Exile; Return.
8. Re-establishment of the Temple and the finalization of the religion we now call Judaism under Ezra and Nehemiah—including especially acceptance by the people of a heightened sense of guilt, manifested in strict adherence to "Mosaic" law; the idea of a new covenant; concern with eschatology; interest in the Messiah and the coming of the Messianic Kingdom.¹⁸

Let us begin with the final point. The people now act *as if* they were guilty by willingly accepting ritual practices in the service of Moses' God. The guilt which had been repressed had re-emerged many centuries later. It was no longer hidden. In an attempt to expiate that guilt, the people accepted ever more severe restrictions on their instinctual drives. But this attempt could not succeed and it did not. I will return to this in a moment. But the question to be answered first is this: why did the guilt emerge at a particular point in history? what were the conditions favoring the "return of the repressed"? Freud, quite correctly, assumes a latency period, fully analogous to that of the individual. But he fails—surprisingly—to discuss the obvious temporal cause for the return of the repressed guilt. In *Moses and Monotheism*, he spells out very clearly the three "conditions" under which this will happen in the individual:

The repressed retains its upward urge, its effort to force its way to consciousness. It achieves its aim under three conditions: (1) if the strength of the anticathexis is diminished by pathological processes which overtake the other part [of the mind], what we call the ego, or by a different distribution of the cathectic energies in that ego as happens regularly in the state of sleep; (2) if the

¹⁸ Clearly this "reconstruction" pretends to be no more than the bare necessity for my purposes.

instinctual elements attaching to the repressed receive a special reinforcement (of which the best example is the processes during puberty); and (3) if at any time in recent experience impressions or experiences occur which resemble the repressed so closely that they are able to awaken it. In the last case the recent experience is reinforced by the latent energy of the repressed, and the repressed comes into operation behind the recent experience and with its help.¹⁹

After outlining these processes, Freud discusses *individual* development. He does not follow it with the expected application to the historical conditions which occasioned the return of the repressed guilt among the Jews. These conditions were the deportation of a large part of the population of Jerusalem to Babylonia, the period of the exile in Babylonia, and the return of the exiles. First: "if the strength of the anticathexis is diminished by pathological processes which overtake . . . the ego. . . ." Now, the period of the settlement in Canaan, the establishment of the Monarchy, and the successful campaigns against the Philistines were essentially positives for the people. All in all, we can assume a period of about 300 years (roughly, 1200-900) before decisive adversity set in with the division of the kingdom at the death of Solomon. This success and prosperity can be seen as an anticathexis which very effectively kept the guilt repressed. Freud's dictum can be applied here: "As long as things go well with a man, his conscience is lenient and lets the ego do all sorts of things."²⁰ But from the division of the kingdom to the deportation to Babylonia, a period, again of about 300 years (roughly, 900-600), the anticathexis weakened. Certainly, the destruction of the Northern kingdom (772) dealt a severe blow to the super-structure of narcissism of the people of the Southern kingdom, Judah—those with whom we are exclusively concerned. And finally, when the conquest of Jerusalem (587) resulted in the destruction of the Temple and the deportation of its leading citizens (including, presumably the Prophet Ezekiel and possibly the Second Isaiah) to

¹⁹ Freud: *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 95.

²⁰ Freud: *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 126.

Babylonian captivity, we may assume that the anticathexis well-nigh disappeared. We must now complete Freud's statement about the psychic reactions to prosperity and adversity: "As long as things go well with a man, his conscience is lenient and lets his ego do all sorts of things; but when misfortune befalls him, he searches his soul, acknowledges his sinfulness, heightens the demands of his conscience, imposes abstinences upon himself and punishes himself with penances. Whole peoples have behaved in this way, and still do."²¹ Thus, the first of Freud's three conditions for the emergence of repressed material—a diminishment of the strength of the anticathexis—was the decline in the fortunes of the people of Judah to the time of the deportation.

Second: "if the instinctual elements attaching to the repressed receive a special reinforcement (of which the best example is the processes during puberty;)" The "instinctual elements" attached to the repressed guilt for the murder of Moses were, simply, the instincts which the laws of Moses had sought to subdue. The "ethical decalogue" of Exodus 20 may be taken as representative of those laws. Now, we know that in Babylon, the exiled Jews witnessed a far freer display of instinctual satisfaction than they (particularly after Josiah's reform) had known. It is unnecessary to enumerate the particulars of the blandishments they encountered in Babylon, beyond noting that Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar was "the most beautiful city in the known world."²² Proximity to the less inhibited, idolatrous, luxury-prone Babylonians was the second condition favoring the return of the repressed guilt: witness of the instinctual freedom denied them by Moses and which had been the direct cause of their murdering him "reminded" them of the deed.

Third: "if at any time in recent experience impressions or experiences occur which resemble the repressed so closely that they are able to awaken it."

The victory of the Persians over the Babylonians, and the beneficence of Cyrus, the Persian king, in permitting the Jewish

²¹ Freud: *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 126.

²² Gottwald: *A Light to the Nations: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 372.

exiles to return to the “promised land,” could not have failed to impress upon those exiles that they were experiencing a startling repetition of the great deed of liberation some eight hundred years earlier—a deed belonging to the oral and written traditions. The repressed guilt for the murder of Moses now rose decisively in the people.

And so, with the return to Jerusalem, with the rebuilding of the Temple, the people, acting with communal guilt, subjected themselves to ever more stringent penance. But this penance did not bring relief. Furthermore, the benign rule of the Persians did not last. Unfortunately, the history of Palestine from about 400 to 168 is practically undocumented. But, from what emerged in the two centuries before Christ, the situation is clear enough for our purposes. The people became increasingly unhappy and desperate.

From 160 B. C. we are in a new age of extraordinary fervor and religiosity, in which almost every event, political, social and economic, was seized upon, scrutinized and analysed, to discover how and in what way it represented a Sign of the Times and threw light on the approach of the End of the Days. The whole condition of the Jewish people was psychologically abnormal. . . . Through the sources of information at our command we obtain a picture of the situation in Palestine towards the close of the first century B. C. which, if it could be put on canvas, would seem to be the work of a madman, or of a drug addict. A whole nation was in the grip of delirium. The King on the throne [Herod the Great] was a sick and gloomy tyrant. His embittered subjects feared and detested him to an extent that was almost maniacal. Religious fanatics fasted and prayed, and preached wrath and judgement. Obsessed with conviction that the Last Times had come, terror and superstition overcame all reason among the people.²³

And, increasingly, the notion of the Messiah came to dominate popular Jewish thinking. It is necessary at this point to retrace

²³ Hugh J. Schonfield: *The Passover Plot* (New York, 1965), p. 19; p. 23.

our steps, and to consider in their entanglement the questions of covenant, eschatology, and the Messianic Hope. These questions lie at the center of the subject of "Moses and Monotheism" and the development into Christianity. The Pauline doctrine of salvation through the sacrificial death of the Son of God is at the heart of only one part of the matter, and Freud's analysis of it is our starting point. But, once again, we shall have to amplify that analysis. Freud concludes his book with the following statement:

Only a portion of the Jewish people accepted the new doctrine. . . . A special enquiry would be called for to discover why it has been impossible for the Jews to join in this forward step which was implied, in spite of all its distortions, by the *admission* (emphasis added) of having murdered God. In a certain sense they have in that way taken a tragic load of guilt upon themselves; they have been made to pay heavy penance for it.²⁴

It is to this question that the remainder of this essay is addressed.

The history of Hebrew Prophecy is well known. The message was that since the people had broken the covenant with Yahweh, they could expect immediate punishment. Amos (ca. 750) announced that "The eyes of Yahweh are fixed against the sinful kingdom, [saying], and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground" (9:8). But despite recurrent disaster, the exile included, members of the "sinful kingdom" survived. This fact, obviously, is implied in my analysis of the guilt which erupted after the exile. Quite apart from obsessive religious *practices*, certain ideas became increasingly important among the survivors of the Babylonian exile. I have already stated what they were: a new eschatology, the question of nature of the covenant, and the Messianic Hope. I can deal only briefly with them and their entanglements. Suffice it to say, the new

²⁴ Freud: *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 136.

eschatology envisioned a definite end to the world in the foreseeable future and the establishment of a supernatural kingdom. Time would come to an end. This concept took hold of the Jewish people because of their burden of unexpiable guilt. They longed to be free of it, and as long as life went on, they yearned for release. Adhering strictly to the laws of "Moses," they entertained for themselves the felicities of the coming age. The *possibility* of their achieving such redemption was provided by Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Samuel Sandmel, in *The Hebrew Scriptures*, summarizes the psychic condition of the people at the time of the Babylonian conquest:

By the very nature of things, the old covenant had to end in doom. When the people fell short of their obligation, the cumulative tabulation, generation after generation, of their misdeeds was bound to lead to the rupture of the covenant and to defenselessness and destruction. To say this in another way, the old covenant could not possibly continue forever. When the Babylonians had invaded and captured and destroyed the awaited doom had arrived.²⁵

We are now in a position to draw together certain strands. The key word in this passage (and here I return to psychoanalysis) is "defenselessness"—psychic defenselessness. We have already traced, in the discussion of "the return of the repressed," the eruption of guilt at the time of the Babylonian conquest, the exile, and the return. The present discussion of covenant and eschatology provides us with the information as to how the people met the psychic defenselessness of the unleashed guilt, a guilt which had been freed from its centuries of repression but which remained unacknowledged. Ezekiel and Jeremiah provided the formulas which gave them intellectual assurance of redemption. Ezekiel spoke of an *individual* covenant which Yahweh had now instituted with the members of the community, an individual covenant which nullified the collective covenant instituted at Sinai: each man was now responsible for his salvation, and thus, by implication, the older communal guilt had been wiped out. Jeremiah spoke of an

²⁵ Samuel Sandmel: *The Hebrew Scriptures* (New York, 1968), p. 147.

enduring and unbreakable covenant which Yahweh had now instituted in place of the older partnership, a covenant in which Yahweh (this time) *swears* that under no circumstances will he abandon his people. Under the impulse of these new conceptions, the people returned to the great body of Priestly commandments which went under the name of Mosaic law. They abstained, they renounced, they practiced expiation. Jewish "sectarianism" begins importantly at this time. "It began to matter very much to the more spiritually sensitive that the Divine laws should be observed meticulously, and this inevitably gave rise to sectarianism, to *competition in holiness* (emphasis added)." ²⁶ But this "competition in holiness" did not, and according to my analysis of their guilt, could not lead to salvation. Here, in post-Exilic Judaism, we have the clearest picture of religious practice as obsessional cleansing of guilt. It has, as Freud says, "the characteristic—uncompleted and incapable of completion—of obsessional neurotic reaction formations. . . ." ²⁷

The new notions gave intellectual assurance of Yahweh's interest in his people. But these notions were born, as noted, out of the unleashed guilt. That unleashed guilt also created a decisive concern with eschatology. The guilt experienced now by the Jewish people was omnipresent and they longed to be free of it—they longed for time to end. The matter has never been put better than by a guilt-ridden, suicidal Jew, Franz Kafka. In an aphorism, he states: "Only our concept of Time makes it possible for us to speak of the Day of Judgment by that name; in reality it is a summary court in perpetual session." ²⁸ The new covenantal ideas failed, but the eschatological idea succeeded. Where, in this connection, does the idea of the Messiah fit in? We must first be clear as to what traditional and popular Jewish thought meant by that idea. The Messiah was to be a Prophet, an anointed one, who at Yahweh's bidding, would lead his chosen people to a righteous world sovereignty. That accomplished, the Day of Judgment would quickly follow. But the idea is at once more fluid and complex than this. What concerns us here is less the atten-

²⁶ Schonfield: *The Passover Plot*, p. 18.

²⁷ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, pp. 134-135.

²⁸ Franz Kafka: *The Great Wall of China* (New York, 1970), p. 169.

dant circumstances of the “last days” than the idea of the nature and mission of the Messiah—the Anointed One—himself. For most of the Jewish people, the Messiah was to be of Davidic ancestry, was to be a “righteous king,” was to fulfill certain prophetic oracles, and was to reign in judgment at the end of time. But the idea of the Messiah as either the “suffering servant” of Isaiah 53, or as the “son of man”—the archetypal “Son of Man” of Daniel 7 in human garb and hence subject to human suffering—did not play a dominant part in the popular conception of the Messiah. The fact that for Jesus of Nazareth, these became ultimately the essential points of his image as the Messiah has been the principal problem in assessing the Messianic question and the Christian doctrine. When Jesus revealed himself to the disciples as the Messiah, he charged them with secrecy—particularly about his coming suffering:

Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16: 20-21)

Jesus’ caution about publicity concerning his role as the *suffering* Messiah had its reason—and it is central to my subject. Immediately, Peter responds:

And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” (Matthew: 16:22)

Jesus’ well-known reply to Peter’s statement is, I believe, less important than what lies behind Peter’s reaction. Peter’s horror embodies far more a general response to the idea that the Messiah will suffer than his own personal response that Jesus, to whom he is so attached, will suffer. There is much to be said for Schweitzer’s assumption that Jesus’ conviction that he would himself have to suffer became manifest after the return of the disciples. In sending them out, Jesus had clearly announced the immanence of the Messianic Kingdom: “. . . for

truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of Man comes." (Matthew 10:23) Again, Jesus announces: "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (Matthew 16:28) We are not presently concerned with Jesus' apparently new (unplanned) decision that he must first suffer in order to inaugurate the coming age. But for an understanding that Jesus' particular Galilean background enabled him easily to associate the Messiah with the idea of the Suffering Just One and the Son of Man, I would refer the reader to *The Passover Plot*, by Hugh Schonfield.²⁹

The essential point is that the "woes of the Messiah"—the tribulations of the "last times"—were to be born by the people, not by the Messiah. "It is," say Freud, "plausible to conjecture that remorse for the murder of Moses provided the stimulus for the wishful phantasy of the Messiah, who was to return and lead his people to redemption and the promised world-dominion."³⁰ If this is so, it becomes clear why the idea of a suffering Messiah would be quite at odds with the wish-phantasy. But we must first ask the question: why with the decisive concern with the end of time should there be any concern with *worldly* sovereignty? Whence the concern that Israel shall be a "light to the nations" prior to the end of time? This was, as we have seen, a concern which gained enormous interest in the last two pre-Christian centuries. The answer is, I think, a simple one. If the conception of the Messiah was indeed born of the guilt for the murder of Moses, it was born of the hope for the expiation of that unresolved guilt. Then, the new deliverer could under no circumstances suffer as had his predecessor. The people wanted another chance. This time, when the great deliverer should come, they would not, as they had done to Moses, murder him. They would, therefore, *prove* to Yahweh that they had finally earned their deliverance from guilt. The Messianic impulse, then, did not arise out of a wish for worldly domination or to bring to the Gentiles a knowledge of Israel's God and his laws. It was attached solely to their unique guilt.

²⁹ Schonfield: *The Passover Plot*, Part II, Chapters 1-3.

³⁰ Freud: *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 89.

It is here, finally, that we come to the inability of the Jews to accept Jesus *either* as the Messiah, *or*, as Paul preached, the *Redeemer*. They could not accept Jesus as the Messiah, first, because he did not fulfill the essentially *conscious* idea of the Messiah's role—that he would lead his people to worldly sovereignty. With his arrival, conditions worsened. They could not accept Jesus as the Messiah, second, because he did not fulfill the essential *unconscious* idea of the Messiah's role—that he would not suffer. But Jesus was officially murdered at the insistence of the Jewish governing body, the Sanhedrin. Not only could they not accept Jesus as the Messiah, they could not accept him as the Redeemer. The inner meaning of Paul's message, so fully analyzed by Freud, was utterly alien to the nature of the guilt they suffered. That message made no emotional sense to the Jewish people. That message involved an open acknowledgement of guilt, and this was not possible for the Jews:

The poor Jewish people, who with their habitual stubbornness continued to disavow the father's murder, atoned heavily for it in the course of time. They were constantly met with the reproach 'You killed our God!' And this reproach is true, if it is correctly translated. If it is brought into relation with the history of religions, it runs, 'You will not *admit* that you murdered God (the primal picture of God, the primal father, and his later reincarnations).' There should be an addition declaring: 'We did the same thing, to be sure, but we have *admitted* it and since then we have been absolved.'³¹

It was no accident that Paul made himself the apostle to the Gentiles. It is, I think, strange that Freud should have felt that a "special enquiry" was required in order to explain "why it has been impossible for the Jews to join in this forward step which was implied . . . by the *admission* of having murdered God." All that is needed to answer the question is contained in his book.

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³¹ Freud: *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 90.