

The Triumph of Pure Spirituality: Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism**

PETER SCHÄFER

The last work published by Sigmund Freud was the little book, or more precisely, the collection of texts which became known under the title of *Moses and Monotheism*.¹ The final version appeared in Amsterdam in 1939, not long before Freud died that same year on the 23rd of September. Now, some 60 years later, we have access to certain evidence about the story of the book's origins: in 1979 Pier Cesare Bori discovered the original draft, dated 9 August 1934, which, even in the light of later changes, already contains the essential theses of the final product. It bears the remarkable title *The Man Moses: An Historical Novel*.² In 1937 Freud published the first part in the journal *Imago* (the first issue of the 23rd volume) entitled "Moses, an Egyptian." Shortly thereafter, in that same year (in the third issue), the second installment appeared, "If Moses Was an Egyptian ...". The third and "final part, till now withheld," as he himself phrased it (p. 83), was entitled "Moses, His People and Monotheistic Religion" and was preceded by two short prefaces. The first one, written before the German invasion of Austria on 12 March 1938,³ states expressly that Freud was not originally intending

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¹ German edition: Sigmund Freud, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion. Schriften über die Religion*, Frankfurt a. Main 1975. The English translation used is the one by Catherine Jones, *Moses and Monotheism*, New York 1939, who noted that she "had the advantage of consulting the author on some doubtful points." All page numbers in the text with no further reference refer to this translation.

² *Der Mann Moses. Ein historischer Roman*. Yosef Yerushalmi discovered it again during the research for his monograph *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (1991), p. 16 with note 60 (p. 119).

³ More exactly he says (*Moses and Monotheism*, p. 86) that he penned the third part "once before, two years ago" and now only needed to revise and add it to the two already published essays.

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to publish the third installment of his essay because of his fear of repressive political measures (a ban on the practice of psychoanalysis). The second preface dates from June 1938 and reflects the wholly transformed state of affairs: in the meantime the Germans had marched into Vienna, whereupon Freud had left the city and found refuge in London: "Here I live now, a welcome guest, relieved from that oppression and happy that I may again speak and write – I almost said 'think' – as I want or have to. I dare now to make public the last part of my essay" (p. 88).

As if the history of the book's origins was not complicated enough, its crucial third part actually shows that Freud did not quite manage to get his subject-matter under control. Indeed he admits so frankly: "I have not been able to efface the traces of the unusual way in which this book came to be written" (pp. 162f.). This means, for instance, that the reader must put up with long, at times literal repetitions in the text. He even anticipates his audience's frustration by *not* wanting to console himself with the thought that it would do no harm to present his new and subversive insights several times, for:

"It should, however, be left to the reader's free will whether he wishes to linger with a subject or return to it. A conclusion should not be emphasized by the sly device of dishing up the same subject twice in the same book. By doing so one proves oneself a clumsy writer and has to bear the blame for it. However, the creative power of an author does not, alas, always follow his goodwill. A work grows as it will and sometimes confronts its author as an independent, even an alien creation" (p. 164).

Freud was thus quite aware of the undeniable fact that this work was no literary or conceptual masterpiece – and yet it was enormously important to him. We would be completely wrong to view it as the merely last and unsuccessful by-product of an otherwise flawless author. On the contrary, it should be seen, as I would like to demonstrate (and others have done before me), as Freud's legacy, the legacy of the father of psychoanalysis.

It is admittedly an unwieldy and not very appealing legacy, to which scholars in the various relevant disciplines have tended to respond with some embarrassment. Theologians quickly recognized the untenability of its historical reconstructions of the Egyptian Moses, supposedly murdered by his own people. Egyptologists failed to find anything much of the "true" Amarna Period and the "true" revolution of Akhenaton in Freud's account. Psychoanalysts had problems dealing with the transference of phenomena from individual to mass psychology, and scholars of cultural phenomena were puzzled by the thesis of phylogenetic "memory-traces," which reminded them of Lamarckism, the theory that ac-

quired characteristics could be genetically inherited. The 1970s then saw the start of a renaissance of the book, which reached a preliminary climax in the 1990s, a rebirth of interest that, as Jan Assmann comments, is tantamount to a "return of the repressed" and itself a brilliant example of the fact "that a text originates in the interaction of author and reader and that the meaning of a work unfolds in the history of its readings like exposed photographic paper in the developer."⁴ *Moses and Monotheism* is now "in," and it has thus been used to serve the cause of many different interpretations. Just to name some notable examples: Ilse Grubrich-Simitis reads the book as a "daydream" of someone marked for death who fears for his lifework (1991);⁵ Emanuel Rice (1990)⁶ and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1991) bring Freud as a prodigal son back to Judaism;⁷ Jan Assmann (1997)⁸ locates him, in the wake of Derrida (1995),⁹ as a forerunner and fellow advocate of a modern theory of cultural memory; and Richard Bernstein (1998)¹⁰ finds in his work a new concept of tradition that attempts to rescue Freud's core thesis of the murder of Moses by distinguishing between "historical truth" and "material truth."

To these interpretations I cannot and do not intend to add a new one. They are all very exciting and have all¹¹ presumably offered valid insights or have given prominence to new facets of this exceedingly complex and not unambiguous work, even if they do so somewhat one-sidedly to the neglect of certain other aspects (which is hardly surprising, considering the nature of the enterprise). Rather, I would like to peruse the book once again, paying special attention to Judaism, yet not Freud's own Judaism, but the view of the Jewish religion that he presents in *Moses and Monotheism*. As for Freud's own Judaism, I think

⁴ J. Assmann, "Tagtraumdeutung. Die Rezeptionsgeschichte von Sigmund Freuds Moses-Buch belegt, dass ein Text durch seine Lektüre entsteht," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* no. 149, 1 July 1999, p. 48.

⁵ I. Grubrich-Simitis, "Freuds Moses-Studie als Tagtraum. Ein biographischer Essay," in: *Die Sigmund-Freud-Vorlesungen*, vol. 3, Weinheim 1991 (Frankfurt a. M. 1994).

⁶ E. Rice, *Freud and Moses: The Long Journey Home*, Albany NY, 1990.

⁷ Long before Rice and Yerushalmi Ernst Simon did the same thing: "Sigmund Freud, the Jew," *Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute* 2, 1957, pp. 270–305.

⁸ J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge MA, 1997.

⁹ J. Derrida, *Mal d'Archive*, Paris 1995 (English edition: *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, transl. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago, 1996).

¹⁰ R. J. Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, Cambridge 1998.

¹¹ By "all" I mean the ones mentioned above, not necessarily all the many interpretations of *Moses and Monotheism* that have ever been voiced.

that Yerushalmi's attempt to fetch him home to the Jewish fold can probably be termed a failure. All the "Jewish" elements that Yerushalmi has brought together in his "case history"¹² are certainly important (at least to some degree), but they surely do not add up to a persuasive argument against Freud's own and constant insistence that he had been raised in an "un-Jewish" manner¹³ and above all that he knew no Hebrew.¹⁴ The most important piece of counterevidence cited by Yerushalmi – the Hebrew dedication in the Philippssohn Bible that Jakob Freud presented to his son on the latter's 35th birthday (i. e., on 6 May 1891)¹⁵ – does not convince me. Neither does the Hebrew *melitzah*-text of the dedication appear to me to be so "doubly precious," as Yerushalmi implies (since, with the exception of one single allusion to the Talmud, it consists exclusively of stock phrases from the Hebrew Bible). Nor would I infer, as Yerushalmi does, from the fact that the dedication is in Hebrew that the addressee also understood Hebrew. Jakob Freud wrote his dedication in Hebrew just because such dedications were traditionally written in Hebrew, and there is absolutely nothing to indicate that he might not have explained it to him orally. As for the message conveyed, it says simply that the father wants to express the hope that his son, who as a child had perused through this splendidly illustrated bilingual Bible with its German commentary, would again take up this activity as a thirty-five year old.

Now let us turn to Freud's view of Judaism in *Moses and Monotheism*. I will follow the train of thought in the book and summarize it, always keeping an eye on the Jewish religion. In the first part ("Moses an Egyptian") Freud deduces from the name "Moses" and from the legend surrounding Moses' birth and childhood that he must have been an Egyptian. Although he admits that neither argument is particu-

¹² *Freud's Moses*, pp. 58 ff.

¹³ "My education was so un-Jewish that today I cannot even read your dedication, which is evidently written in Hebrew. In later life I have often regretted this lack in my education" (letter to Abraham A. Roback, dated 20 February 1930, in Sigmund Freud, *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Ernst Freud, transl. Tania Stern and James Stern, New York 1960, no. 248, p. 395).

¹⁴ "No reader of this book will find it easy to put himself in the emotional position of an author who is ignorant of the language of holy writ, who is completely estranged from the religion of his fathers – as well as from every other religion ..." (Preface to the Hebrew translation of *Totem and Taboo*, dated "Vienna, December 1930," first [German] publication in 1934; the Hebrew translation appeared in 1939). Cited by Bernstein, *Freud*, p. 1, from Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., transl. under the editorship of James Strachey, London 1953–74, vol. XIII, p. XV.

¹⁵ *Freud's Moses*, pp. 71 ff.

larly convincing, he suggests that the idea of Moses' Egyptian origins nevertheless opens up new ways of perceiving the Jewish religion and the emergence of monotheism. Right away, therefore, in the second part ("If Moses Was an Egyptian ..."), the most important conclusions are drawn from this basic thesis:

Moses, the Egyptian, pressed the Jews into the service of a new religion, namely his own, the Egyptian religion. However, the two religions, the Egyptian and the Jewish, are diametrically opposed to each other, and it is here, for the first time, that the basic chord is struck that is to determine the substance of the whole book, the irreconcilability of the Jewish religion attributed to Moses and the Egyptian religion:

"The former is a grandiosely rigid monotheism. There is only one God, unique, omnipotent, unapproachable. The sight of his countenance cannot be borne; one must not make an image of him, nor even breathe his name. In the Egyptian religion, on the other hand, there is a bewildering mass of deities of differing importance and provenance. ... Magic and ceremonial, amulets and formulas dominated the service of these gods, as they did the daily life of the Egyptians" (pp. 24f.).

Thus the fronts are clearly drawn: "strict monotheism" versus "unlimited polytheism," whereby the former "soared to the heights of sublime abstraction," while the latter "is very near to the primitive." No wonder, therefore, that "the one religion severely condemns any kind of magic and sorcery," whereas these very primitive elements flourish "so abundantly in the other [religion]" (p. 25). This is the basic tone: the unbridgeable antithesis between Mosaic Judaism and the Egyptian religion, which Assmann in his book terms the "Mosaic distinction."

Now comes the next step in Freud's argument. He goes on to say that Moses cannot have given the Jews this terrifying picture of the Egyptian religion. For how could the Jewish religion have grown out of *this* Egyptian religion? The reasoned conclusion that he draws is inspired by the Egyptological discoveries of his time: it was not *the*, but *one particular* Egyptian religion that Moses gave to the Jews, namely the religion of Pharaoh Akhenaton (ca. 1375 BCE), the revolutionary figure who replaced the polytheistic religion of Egypt with a monotheistic counter religion: the exclusive worship of the sun god Aton, which emphasized ethics and, above all, rejected all the mythical, magic and divinatory elements of the old Egyptian religion (p. 33). In short, the religion of Moses was Akhenaton's Aton religion. Two striking features are cited as evidence for this, namely, that Moses' religion (initially) lacked a belief in the hereafter and that it adopted the custom of circumcision, which had likewise originated in Egypt. Freud's work might have ended

here if contemporary Old Testament scholarship¹⁶ had not obscured this beautiful picture and insisted that the new Jewish religion had arisen not in Egypt, but in Meribat-Qadesh. There, it was said that the Jewish tribes took over the worship of Jahve, the Midianite volcano god. The Moses who acted as mediator between the sinister, bloodthirsty demon Jahve and his new people was the son-in-law of the Midianite priest Jethro, who was anything but an Egyptian and pharaonic grandson; indeed, the Midianite Moses is as different from the Egyptian Moses as the Jahve demon is from the sun god Aton.

At this point, as Freud himself comments (p. 51), the thread of the story that he is weaving breaks off for the second time, and his book could have ended here. But now another Old Testament scholar comes to his aid, Ernst Sellin.¹⁷ Sellin claimed to have uncovered a tradition in the book of the prophet Hosea suggesting that the religious founder Moses met a violent end at the hands of his own unruly and obstinate people because they didn't know what to do with his religion (p. 52). Hence Freud's enthusiastic conclusion: it was the *Egyptian* Moses who had been beaten to death by the Jews, when the religion that he had imposed on them was dropped and replaced in Qadesh by the religion of Jahve (which was so similar to the old Egyptian religion). A new Moses was invented (Moses II), who was fused together with the Egyptian Moses (Moses I), even though Moses I had never been in Qadesh and had never heard the name Jahve, just as Moses II had never been in Egypt and had never heard the name Aton (p. 60).

One must admit that this is quite a brilliant reconstruction. Its claim is that the text of our Hebrew Bible does not provide the real story of Moses but was rather deliberately distorted, above all, in order to repress the terrible event that imprinted an indelible stain on the Jewish religion: the murder of the religion's founder. Neither the Egyptians nor the Jews were able "to bear such a highly spiritualized religion" and thus freed themselves from the yoke of the religion that had been forced upon them. However, "while the tame Egyptians waited until fate had removed the sacred person of their Pharaoh [i. e., until Akhenaton died a natural death], the savage Semites [the Jews] took their destiny into their own hands and did away with their tyrant [Moses]" (pp. 70f.). Nevertheless, in the Jewish people, there lingered the memory, even if vague and repressed, of the Egyptian Moses I, and from then onwards both "founders of religion," Moses I and Moses II, would be in conflict

¹⁶ Freud refers here expressly to Eduard Meyer, *Die Israeliten und ihre Nachbarstämme*, 1906.

¹⁷ *Mose und seine Bedeutung für die israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte*, 1922.

with one another. The priests, whose sacrificial rituals and ceremonies were basically nothing more than divination and magic, took up the cause of the Midianite Moses II, whereas the prophets, who scorned sacrifice and extolled the ideal of a life lived in truth and justice, followed the Egyptian Moses I. Thus, it came to be that along with the prophets, who represented the climax of Old Testament Judaism, the true religious founder, Moses I, ended up prevailing in Judaism and leading it to new moral heights and to “higher spirituality” [*höhere Geistigkeit*] (p. 100).¹⁸

The third part of the essay, published in 1939 (“Moses, His People and Monotheistic Religion”), offers a psychopathological explanation for the origins of the Jewish religion, using the instruments developed by Freud in his psychology of the individual: trauma, repression, latency, obsessive character, the onset of the neurosis, and the return of the repressed. In reality, Freud suggests, the birth of the Jewish religion in the murder of its founder, Moses, is only a replay of what was practiced in model form in totemism, the oldest concrete manifestation of religion:¹⁹ the killing and devouring raw of the father. In other words, Jewish (and hence Christian) monotheism is nothing more than the return of the religion of the primeval father and thus, at the same time, the return of the repressed (the first murder). Against monotheism’s “irresistible claim to be believed,” “all logical objections remain powerless”; the formula *credo quia absurdum* holds true here (p. 134). And once again there follows at this precise point the hymn of praise to Jewish monotheism as the perfected religion of the primeval father with the keywords (p. 135):

- rejection of magic and mysticism
- stimulus to progress in spirituality
- demand for sublimation
- possession of truth
- consciousness of being the chosen people
- deep respect for intellectual achievement
- emphasis on ethics

Yet, the repressed awareness of the murder of the primeval father (as well as the “second” religious founder Moses) also had to make itself

¹⁸ For “*Geistigkeit*” I prefer the rendering of “spirituality” (the choice of Catherine Jones) instead of “intellectuality,” as used by Strachey in his *Standard Edition* translation of Freud’s works. On the possible or rather impossible translation of Freud’s “*Geistigkeit*” see also Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses*, p. 51 with n. 43 (p. 127); Bernstein, *Freud*, p. 31.

¹⁹ Here insights gained from *Totem and Taboo* are taken up again.

felt – and this, according to Freud, is what happened particularly in Christianity. I cannot deal with Freud's view of Christianity here. The only important point for our present discussion is that he sees the new religion of Christianity as a "cultural regression" vis-à-vis the older Jewish religion²⁰ and thus as a victory of the old Egyptian Ammon religion over Akhenaton's Aton religion. In describing this development, he uses the very same keywords as in his account of the confrontation of the (old) Egyptian religion with the (new) religion of Akhenaton and Jewish monotheism:

"The Christian religion did not keep to the lofty heights of spirituality to which the Jewish religion had soared. The former was no longer strictly monotheistic; it took over from the surrounding peoples numerous symbolical rites, re-established the great mother goddess, and found room for many deities of polytheism in an easily recognizable disguise, though in subordinate positions. Above all it was not inaccessible, as the Aton religion and the subsequent Mosaic religion had been, to the penetration of superstitions, magical and mystical elements which proved a great hindrance to the spiritual development of two following millennia" (pp. 139 f.).

The main problem with Freud's reconstruction is, as he himself recognizes, the transference of concepts from individual to mass psychology. The key issue is the concept of tradition and, concretely, the question of how forgotten or repressed elements are kept alive not just over centuries but over millennia, exerting an on-going influence on people's lives. What were the effects of the tradition of Moses' murder or – if we can no longer fall back on the crutch of oral transmission – the tradition of the murder of the primeval father (p. 148)? Freud answers this question by reverting to the psychology of the individual and claiming an "almost complete" (p. 149) concordance between individual and mass psychology. Just as forgotten items in the individual are not obliterated but only repressed (with many consequences), so, too, in the "memory" of peoples "fragments of phylogenetic origin" survive as an "archaic heritage" (pp. 154 f.) in "unconscious memory-traces" (p. 149). And it is precisely in these "memory traces in our archaic heritage" that Freud sees "the gap between individual and mass psychology" being "bridged"; thus, in the end, "we ... can treat peoples as we do the individual neurotic" (p. 158).

²⁰ Paradoxically this is negligible because what is crucial is the degree to which the repressed is digested: "And yet Christianity marked a progress in the history of religion: that is to say, in regard to the return of the repressed. From now on, the Jewish religion was, so to speak, a fossil" (p. 140).

It is no coincidence that this was the point on which Freud encountered the most objections. In particular Yerushalmi accused him of “psycho-Lamarckism,” of echoing the evolutionary heredity theory postulated by Jean Baptiste de Monet Lamarck (1744–1829), whereby *acquired* characteristics are transmitted in a biological-genetic manner (through environmental influences) not only to human beings, but also to entire peoples or ethnic groups. Responding to Freud’s claim that “the archaic heritage of human beings comprises not only dispositions but also ideational contents, memory traces of the experiences of former generations” (p. 157), Yerushalmi comments that “even the most ardent and loyal admirer of Freud can only whisper to himself, ‘Certum, quia absurdum est.’”²¹ Those critics of Yerushalmi who get all excited by this barb²² have overlooked the fact that Freud himself uses the expression *credo quia absurdum* to conclude his interpretation of Jewish monotheism as the return of the repressed murder of the primeval father and of Moses, so that Yerushalmi in this sense reveals himself to be a loyal follower of Freud. By contrast, Bernstein tries to tone down the offensive Lamarckism²³ through a “heuristic distinction between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ Lamarckism”²⁴ and by holding Freud accountable only for the “weak” variety. According to Bernstein this soft form of Lamarckism is exemplified by Freud’s explicit reference to “*unconscious* memory traces” (as, indeed, on p. 149) and that therefore the alternative, either “a *conscious* handing down of a tradition” through oral or written communication or a “genetically encoded” and thus biological transmission, is wrongly posited.²⁵ Assmann has enthusiastically seized on this “rescue reading” of Freud (explicitly in distinction to a purely philological-historical exegesis) and has at once drawn the line via Gadamer and Derrida to the “cultural memory” of our time.²⁶

I must confess that I have difficulties with this “honorable rescue” of Freud. Whether the issue is “strong” or “weak” Lamarckism, or the “conscious” or the “unconscious” transmission of traditions, there can be no denying of the fact that, in Freud’s view, both an individual and a people or an ethnic group shlepp “fragments of phylogenetic origin” around with them – not just as a disposition, but even in concrete de-

²¹ Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses*, p. 31.

²² Bernstein, *Freud*, p. 55.

²³ Its offensiveness is perhaps less grounded in Lamarck’s theories themselves than in their resurrection and misuse by later racist theoreticians.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 58.

²⁶ Assmann, *FAZ* of 1 July 1999.

tails. Whether this happens consciously or unconsciously in no way alters the fact that it *does* occur and that it occurs through *heredity*. Perhaps this reading restricts the issue to a “flat reductionism in the Lamarckian sense” (which is what Assmann criticizes Yerushalmi for doing), but I fear it is the (undeniable) result of a philological-historical exegesis of Freud and cannot simply be interpreted away.²⁷ Of course, everyone is free to continue to spin out “Freud’s proffered meanings in the most fruitful manner possible” along with Gadamer, Derrida, Bernstein and Assmann,²⁸ but I would like to insist that such a “rescue reading” does not really render what Freud meant (yes, I do maintain that there are plausible and less plausible explanations of what Freud could have meant). Nor do I believe that another “honorable rescue” by Bernstein helps us any further, for Bernstein follows Freud (p. 202) in distinguishing between “historical truth” and “material truth.”²⁹ Material truth is the external factuality of an event, whereas historical truth is the truth that manifests itself in the psychic state of mind of an individual or a people. When this is applied to the problematic murder of the primeval father and of the Egyptian Moses, this means, according to Bernstein, that the factuality of the material truth is not necessarily the precondition for the emergence (and reality!) of the historical truth; in other words, the primeval father and Moses need not have been “really” murdered in order to produce the historical truth. In Assmann’s words: “The *intention* to kill is entirely sufficient, when it comes to developing a perpetrator’s trauma and to establishing the murder as the ‘historical truth.’”³⁰

Bernstein is well aware of the intellectual somersault that this interpretation involves. He expressly admits that hardly any serious scholar today would confuse Freud’s reconstruction of the “historical truth” with “factuality” and thus believe that “history” really had “happened” as Freud claims it did (there were not “really” any primitive primeval hordes who murdered and devoured their despotic fathers, and the Jewish tribes did not “really” treacherously murder Moses, the despotic founder of their religion). All this, he says, is a myth invented by Freud in order to explain the dynamic conflicts of the human psyche. The

²⁷ On p. 158 Freud states explicitly: “This state of affairs is made more difficult, it is true, by the present attitude of biological science, which rejects the idea of acquired qualities being transmitted to descendants. I admit, in all modesty, that in spite of this I cannot picture biological development proceeding without taking this factor into account.”

²⁸ Assmann, *FAZ*, 1 July 1999.

²⁹ Bernstein, *Freud*, pp. 64 ff.

³⁰ *FAZ*, 1 July 1999.

schema of “early trauma – defense – latency – outbreak of neurosis – partial return of the repressed” is a *presupposition* that

“is not based on any discoveries about the historical past. On the contrary, Freud’s interpretation of past events is itself based upon this formulaic pattern. It is the grid by which he reads the psychological prehistory of religion and morality. To put the point in a slightly paradoxical manner, Freud does not explain the character of the Jewish religious tradition by an appeal to the ‘historical truth.’ He explains the ‘historical truth’ of this tradition by an appeal to our present psychoanalytic understanding of the dynamics of the human psyche.”³¹

In other words: absolutely nothing in Freud’s presentation is “historical” in the usual sense of the word, and yet Freud is correct because his reconstructions correspond to the higher truth of psychoanalysis! Even Assmann is no longer willing to follow this particular “rescue reading” of Freud. Interestingly enough he appeals this time, however, to a philological-historical argument in order to refute Bernstein. He points out – perfectly correctly – that in Freud’s psychological schema it is essential that individuals as well as peoples *keep quiet* about the evil deed (since there is no repression without concealment); yet, in no way does the Bible stay silent about the *intention* to kill (whether directed against Moses or the prophets or the so-called Servant of God, or, in the New Testament, against John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth). From the perspective of historical-critical scholarship Freud’s construction thus reaches an impasse. Nevertheless, Bernstein would argue with Assmann against Assmann that one should “continue to spin out Freud’s proffered meanings in the most fruitful manner possible”; if one is not willing to do this, then it would be better to discard *Moses and Monotheism* altogether.

Back to reading Freud: The phylogenetic memory traces in the “memory” of humankind in general and of the Jewish people in particular mark the climax of Freud’s essay. There now follows a section,³² in which the material elaborated earlier is repeated, but also examined more closely. This deeper analysis proves especially valuable for our topic, Freud’s view of the Jewish religion. He suggests that, despite (or precisely because of) the murder of its founder, the religion of the Egyptian Moses (Moses I) prevailed during the course of time and led Judaism to unimaginable heights, to a “higher level of spirituality” (p. 181). This is described in detail in a subsection entitled “The Progress in Spirituality.”

³¹ Bernstein, *Freud*, p. 72.

³² Marked as “Section II” of the third Part of the whole work (pp. 162 ff.).

tuality" [*Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*].³³ More strongly than before, Freud stresses that complementary to the Jewish people's conception of "a more august God" is the "increase in self-confidence through the consciousness of being chosen" (pp. 176f.), in other words, their self-image as a more august people. Prominence is given to the aniconism of the Jewish God, "the compulsion to worship an invisible God," which is interpreted as a "precaution against magic malpractices. ... For it [the prohibition of images] signified subordinating sense perception to an abstract idea; it was a triumph of spirituality [*Triumph der Geistigkeit*] over the senses [*Sinnlichkeit*];³⁴ more precisely, an instinctual renunciation [*Triebverzicht*] accompanied by its psychologically necessary consequences" (pp. 177f.). This "new realm of spirituality" – this is how the virtually unsurpassable climax of this passage reads – "was certainly one of the most important stages on the way to [humankind's] becoming human [*Menschwerdung*]" (p. 179).

With its "triumph of spirituality over the senses," Judaism – and only Judaism, since Freud interprets Christianity as a regression from Judaism's "lofty heights of spirituality" (p. 139) – took a most decisive step in the process of humankind's "becoming human." If one creatively continued Freud's line of thought, one might add that the achievement of becoming human through the "progress in spirituality" represents the positive (Jewish) alternative to the incarnation of God's Son in Christianity. By raising God to a "higher level of spirituality" instead of anthropomorphizing him, by "dematerializing" the divine, Judaism has contributed decisively to the humanization of humankind. A spiritualized people is in keeping with a spiritualized God. And this spiritualization began – how could it have been otherwise? – after the destruction of the Temple:

"The Jews preserved their inclination towards spiritual interests. The political misfortune of the nation taught them to appreciate the only possession they had retained, their written records, at its true value. Immediately after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Titus, Rabbi Jochanan ben Sakkai asked for permission to open at Jabneh the first school for the study of the Torah. From now on, it was the Holy Book, and the study of it, that kept the scattered people together" (p. 181).

³³ This subsection was so important to him that he had it published as a separate article (in: *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse und Imago* 24,1–2, 1939, pp. 6–9) and read by his daughter Anna at the 1938 International Psychoanalytic Congress in Paris.

³⁴ On this translation (as opposed to Strachey's "triumph of intellectuality over sensuality") see also Bernstein, *Freud*, p. 33.

Freud's description of the origins and refinement of the Jewish religion throughout history could have ended with this pseudo-idyll. But it did not, because progress in spirituality came with a heavy price. Here again we see the transfer of an element of individual psychology – instinctual renunciation – to the psychology of peoples. For Freud, progress in spirituality can only be achieved by ignoring and repressing sensuality. There follows once again a definition of Judaism, the final and, no doubt, the decisive one:

“The religion that began with the prohibition against making an image of its God has developed in the course of centuries more and more into a religion of instinctual renunciation. Not that it demands sexual abstinence; it is content with a considerable restriction of sexual freedom. God, however, becomes completely withdrawn from sexuality and raised to an ideal of ethical perfection. Ethics, however, means restriction of instinctual gratification. The Prophets did not tire of maintaining that God demands nothing else from his people but a just and virtuous life – that is to say, abstention from the gratification of all impulses that, according to our present-day moral standards, are to be condemned as vicious. And even the exhortation to believe in God seems to recede in comparison with the seriousness of these ethical demands. Instinctual renunciation thus appears to play a prominent part in religion, although it had not been present in it from the beginning” (p. 187).

Although the Jewish religion is the fulfillment of the spirituality of God and humankind and, hence, the highest imaginable form of religion, it is nevertheless stained with the blemish of instinctual renunciation. Its most important demand, ethical behavior, necessitates the curtailment of instinct. Or, as Freud states elsewhere, it cannot deny its origin “in feelings of guilt,” since these are “due to the repressed hostility to God,” and it also “bears the characteristic of being always untermiated and interminable, as in the reaction-formations of obsessional neurosis” (p. 213).³⁵

Thus, in the final analysis, Freud presents the Jewish religion as an illness, too, waiting to be healed – and how could this illness be cured better than through psychoanalysis? Here Freud brings his own position into the game, finally revealing his own relationship to this so grand yet so sick Jewish religion. Despite all the attempts of Yerushalmi and others to fetch him “home” to Judaism and – against better judgment (not to mention his own wishes) – to make him out to be a clandestine Jew, Freud's final manifesto leaves not the slightest doubt that he be-

³⁵ Here my translation slightly differs from Catherine Jones who translates: “bears the characteristic of being never concluded and never able to be concluded with which we are familiar in the reaction-formations of obsessional neurosis.”

longs to those “who have little belief,” that is to say, those who are *not* “convinced of the existence of a Supreme Power” (p. 193):

“We can only regret it if certain experiences of life and observations of nature have made it impossible to accept the hypothesis of such a Supreme Being. As if the world had not enough problems, we are confronted with the task of finding out how those who have faith in a Divine Being could have acquired it, and whence this belief derives the enormous power that enables it to overwhelm Reason and Science” (pp. 193f.).

Freud, the “godless Jew,” as he termed himself as early as 1918 in a letter to Oskar Pfister,³⁶ was godless *and* a Jew, as Yerushalmi correctly puts it.³⁷ He was, however, a Jew who had put his Jewish religion behind him, seeking, at most, to explain its origins and thereby perhaps cure its illness.³⁸

Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* is thus his manifesto about the origins and development of the Jewish religion, but also, in the end, about overcoming it. It remains an open question whether and how Freud identified himself with Moses,³⁹ but in any case it is certain that in this, his last work, he liberates himself from Moses and the religion of Moses. It is no accident that in his idyllic depiction of the transition from Temple cult to a religion of the book, Jochanan ben Zakkai is mentioned as the rabbi who helps to usher in the new period of exclusively Torah-based piety and learning in Judaism, thus marking the first climax of Judaism’s progressive “spiritualization.” Out of the ashes of the catastrophe of the destruction of the Jewish nation and the loss of its center in Jerusalem and the Temple, there arises the “new Judaism” of the Rabbis that guarantees its survival and would be fated to lead it to unimaginable heights. This is the classically idealized view of the origins of Rabbinic Judaism, but Freud goes a decisive step further. Yerushalmi is absolutely correct in pointing out that Freud identified himself above all with Jochanan ben Zakkai,⁴⁰ and I would like to expand on this

³⁶ The letter is the source of the title of Peter Gay’s book, *A Godless Jew: Freud, Atheism, and the Making of Psychoanalysis*, New Haven and London 1987.

³⁷ Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses*, p. 8.

³⁸ “The psychoanalyses of individuals have taught us that their earliest impressions, received at a time when they were hardly able to talk, manifest themselves later in an obsessive fashion, although those impressions themselves are not consciously remembered. We feel that the same must hold good for the earliest experiences of mankind. One result of this is the emergence of the conception of one great God. It must be recognized as a memory – a distorted one, it is true, but nevertheless a memory. It has an obsessive quality; it simply must be believed. As far as its distortion goes, it may be called a delusion; in so far as it brings to light something from the past, it must be called truth” (p. 205).

³⁹ Gay, *A Godless Jew*, p. 150; Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses*, pp. 6, 75ff.

⁴⁰ Yerushalmi, *ibid.*, p. 6 with n. 26 (p. 116).

comparison: Shortly before the conquest of Jerusalem the Rabbi is said to have fled the besieged city and found the Roman commander Titus; having prophesized to the latter that he would become Emperor, he receives as a reward the coastal town Javne, the place to which he would eventually bring “spiritual” Judaism. Likewise Freud, the heir destined to complete the work of Jochanan ben Zakkai, flees from a Vienna invaded by the National Socialists, travels to London and rescues the new Torah, psychoanalysis, from the ruins of a world being destroyed. At one and the same time he is the new Moses and the new Jochanan ben Zakkai. In the guise of the new Moses, he founds the new religion of psychoanalysis,⁴¹ but he also takes on the mantle of the new Jochanan ben Zakkai, as the savior of Judaism and the instrument of its transformation. Psychoanalysis is the final and decisive “advance in spirituality” both of Judaism and of humankind.

Therefore I cannot agree with Assmann when he states, in response to Bernstein’s book: “Insofar as Freud professed his adherence to the prohibition of images and all its implications as to a ‘progress in spirituality,’ under which banner he also aligned his own project, he had drawn a dividing line whose ‘deconstruction’ he could not have intended.”⁴² Freud did not “profess” any adherence to the prohibition of images with all its ramifications for a “progress in spirituality”; he diagnosed this prohibition as a decisive stage on the way to the “victory of spirituality over the senses” (p. 178), but this victory was obtained, as we have seen, at great cost. Moreover, the highest level of spirituality attained by the Jewish religion stood in the need of being deconstructed, namely through psychoanalysis. Thus, with his psychoanalytic project Freud placed himself in the all-encompassing human program steadily progressing toward spiritual growth, but he deconstructed it in the end by eliminating its tragic birth defect, instinctual renunciation. Psychoanalysis is the highest imaginable triumph of spirituality – a triumph over the Jewish religion itself!

Today, at the dawn of the 21st century, we can look back at this reconstruction of the Jewish religion, developed in the 1930s, and dispassionately state that it contains virtually nothing that is true from a religious-historical standpoint. With respect to Freud’s view of biblical history and the Egyptian Akhenaton religion, this is sufficiently well-known. No less untenable is his grandiose, sharply contoured character-

⁴¹ Bernstein, *Freud*, p. 74: “The authority of Moses and his monotheistic religion is overthrown and displaced with the new authority of reason manifested in the science of psychoanalysis.”

⁴² Assmann, *FAZ*, 1 July 1999.

ization of biblical and post-biblical monotheism, with its rigid confrontation of namelessness and imagelessness, renunciation of immortality, and restrictions on sexual freedom versus ritual, magic, divination, mysticism and belief in the hereafter. Neither was this monotheism achieved with the prophets, nor was it finalized with Rabbinic Judaism for all the centuries to come (when the destruction of the Temple – fortunately, one ought to say with Freud – made the sacrificial cult impossible), nor did this “new Judaism” once and for all rid itself of all the terrible things that Freud associates with polytheism. In reality, Freud’s description of monotheism is a caricature of a situation that never existed, not in the Bible and certainly not in post-biblical Judaism. As late as the period of the Kings, according to the Bible itself, we still find the goddess Asherah being worshipped as the companion of God, and post-biblical Judaism forcefully re-incorporates the femininity of God into the divinity in the Kabbalah at the latest (a classic case of the return of the repressed à la Freud). The God of the Kabbalah, whose male and female elements are described in drastic sexual imagery, is anything but “completely withdrawn from sexuality” (p. 187). Mysticism, as an essential and historically powerful part of the Jewish religion, is in fact entirely ignored in Freud’s work. Not surprisingly, Freud’s idealized Jewish monotheism is conceived as intrinsically incompatible with magic – even though, from biblical times right up to the present, Judaism without magic is unthinkable, despite (or perhaps in defiance of) all its progress toward pure spirituality. The same holds true, of course, for the belief in the hereafter. Freud states cautiously but accurately that the “*early Jewish religion ... entirely relinquished immortality*” (p. 26; my emphasis), well aware of the fact that the belief in the immortality of the soul and later also of the body came to prevail only in postbiblical Judaism and, indeed, became one of its quite central elements. At least he did concede “that the belief in a life beyond can very well be reconciled with a monotheistic religion” (ibid.).

Now, finally, let us turn to the prohibition of images and to the aniconism of the Jewish God. Of course, we know that the Decalogue prohibits the creation of images of God, but this certainly did not prevent Judaism from doing precisely just that (just as the prohibitions of magic and divination similarly failed to serve their purpose). Along with Freud we could object that all the deviations from the ideal of a strict monotheism are just that: deviations from an ideal that in the course of time nevertheless managed to assert itself ever more successfully, towards the highest level of spirituality. However, we would be drawing precisely the wrong conclusion: in the Jewish religion there is no evolu-

tion from primitive forms of religiosity to pure spirituality; all of these allegedly “deviant” forms are different, but legitimate manifestations of the Jewish religion. One striking example is the antipathy to images purportedly essential to Judaism. In Late Antiquity – in the very same era in which Jochanan ben Zakkai allegedly established Rabbinic Judaism through his spiritual endeavors on behalf of the Holy Scriptures (p. 181) – the floors of the synagogues in Palestine were decorated with mosaics covered with unsurpassed pictorial representations, not only of birds and flowers, but also of biblical scenes such as the sacrifice of Isaac, the Temple with its cult objects, and the signs of the zodiac with the sun god Helios in their midst, riding on his fiery chariot. Now one could argue: if one choose to make pictorial representations at all (obviously against the biblical prohibition of images), why not pictures of Greek mythological themes? Unfortunately, things here are not so simple; for instance, in a contemporary magical (!) text we find a prayer to this very same Helios (a prayer in Greek, but written in Hebrew letters in an otherwise Hebrew-language text). At least some Jews of Late Antiquity obviously had no qualms not only about pictorially rendering this “pagan” sun god, but even about equating him with their Jewish God and praying to him. When all this is considered, not only does the Mosaic prohibition of images get left by the wayside, but also monotheism (at least the sort conjured up so powerfully by Freud). Judaism would have “fallen back” from the sublime heights of spirituality into the nether regions of superstition, magic and mysticism no less often than Christianity, which alone Freud accuses of “cultural regression,” adducing, among other things, its restoration of the great mother goddess (p. 139).

One could present many other examples that reduce Freud's idealized Judaism *ad absurdum*. Indeed, Freud's image of the Jewish religion, its origins, and its development towards the highest level of spirituality, has little in common with the historical reality of this religion. Of course, one could reiterate Bernstein's “rescue reading” of him and say: All this is irrelevant, for Freud does not need the *material* truth of the Jewish religion in order to prove its *historical* truth; in a material-positivist sense his theories may not be quite “correct,” but in the sense of the higher historical truth of the Jewish religious tradition it is indeed the real truth.⁴³ To cite Bernstein once more: Freud “explains the ‘historical truth’ of this tradition by an appeal to our present psychoanalytic understanding of the dynamics of the human psyche.”⁴⁴ In other words,

⁴³ Unfortunately Freud irritatingly uses the term “historical” (*historisch*) for the higher truth, although it is not exactly “historical” in the generally accepted sense.

⁴⁴ Bernstein, *Freud*, p. 72.

the historical truth of the Jewish religion can be established with the aid of psychoanalytic insights; historical developments in the sense of the historical and religious sciences are of no significance in this matter. In the light of such “insights” one finds it hard to muster counterarguments, and it is tempting to let Freud speak again: *credo quia absurdum*.

However, I do not yet wish to close here. The historian in me is curious and would like to know how Freud arrived at his “historical truth” of the Jewish religion. Of course, in so doing I am relativizing him enormously and assuming that his distinction between material and historical truth does not hold, that there is no material truth in the sense of mere factuality anyway, that every truth is a historically established truth, differently constituted at various times (this, too, is now a truism), and that there are many historical truths. It follows that we need to ask how Freud’s own “cultural memory” of the Jewish religion originated. This is a difficult question, not only because we can no longer ask Freud himself about it (although it might not have helped much anyway to do so), but also because we know much too little about his Jewish “education.”⁴⁵ So for the time being we are forced to resort to suppositions and speculations; perhaps we will never get any further. In conclusion, I would like to offer only some initial reflections on the subject.

The most comprehensive attempt so far to locate Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* on the spectrum of the history of ideas has been pursued by Jan Assmann, particularly in the chapter “Sigmund Freud: The Return of the Repressed” in his book on Moses.⁴⁶ In a deliberate departure from Yerushalmi’s effort to bring Freud back into the fold of Judaism, Assmann places Freud in a broader discourse about Moses and Egypt, which concerns the dissolution or abolishment of what he himself terms the “Mosaic distinction,” specifically in the sense of the Enlightenment ideals of “nature, reason and tolerance.” In his view, Freud stands in the line of those thinkers “who since the seventeenth century have sought to defuse the ‘undying’ hatred of other religions inscribed in the monotheistic idea as such by making Moses an Egyptian.”⁴⁷ Here, Freud thus appears as the last heir of an expressly Protestant Enlightenment:

“With this sublime idea of a Supreme Being, we are back to the God of the Enlightenment. This is the God Strabo attributed to Moses, the God of Cudworth and of Schiller, of the Deists, the free-thinkers, and the Freemasons, the God whose gospel forms the subtext of the Moses/Egypt discourse.

⁴⁵ The material that Yerushalmi collected remains much too vague and not very concrete.

⁴⁶ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, pp. 144 ff.

⁴⁷ FAZ, 1 July 1999.

Seemingly, a circle closes. Freud brings home from his 'Egyptian dig' a god such as Schiller and Strabo claimed him to be. Freud's characterization of Akhenaten's god is strongly informed by the ideas of God fostered by Spinozism, Deism, cosmotheism, and pantheism underlying the various versions of the Moses/Egypt discourse."⁴⁸

And finally:

"Religion as obsessional neurosis – what a strange idea. Was Freud aware of the fact that he was continuing the eighteenth-century struggle against fanaticism and enthusiasm? Was he aware of the fact that he was haunted to a considerable degree by the issues of the Moses/Egypt discourse, the issues of nature, tolerance, and reason,⁴⁹ 'of an education of the human genre' (Origen/Lessing), or 'Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit' (progress in spirituality/intellectuality) as Freud called it?"⁵⁰

There is little doubt that Freud belongs to the Enlightenment tradition. Nevertheless I would just as confidently answer "No" to the rhetorical question at the end of this quotation. Freud was not only unaware of the tradition constructed by Assmann, but I would like to claim further that his own concerns were even opposed to it. In making Moses an Egyptian and therefore (to quote the famous opening words of his book) in "(denying) a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons" (p. 3), Freud most certainly did not want to contribute something to the Moses-Egypt debate of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, the core of his argument is that this Egyptian Moses introduced the Jewish people to monotheism, and that this monotheism as the perfect expression of spirituality is reserved only for the Jewish people. Egyptian religion and Christianity strive towards monotheism only to sink back into polytheism (and Islam does not appear in Freud's picture at all). If, as Assmann writes, "the whole point of the Moses/Egypt debate is that it is neither Jewish nor Christian, but aiming at a point beyond these distinctions,"⁵¹ then one cannot call Freud a participant in this debate. Insofar as he sees monotheism as an exclusively Jewish matter, his stance seems more like a grandiose *sharpening* of the "Mosaic distinction" than its dissolution into a romantic Egypt ideal!⁵² This, however, does not mean that

⁴⁸ *Moses the Egyptian*, p. 157.

⁴⁹ "Nature" is omitted in the German translation, and rightly so, for one can hardly view Freud as a descendent of the nature religion of the Enlightenment. However, "tolerance" is no less problematic (see below).

⁵⁰ *Moses the Egyptian*, p. 166.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 149f.

⁵² In his newest publication on *Moses and Monotheism* Assmann, in a dramatic about-face, has revoked the chapter on Freud in his *Moses the Egyptian* and comes to the very same conclusion sketched above by me: "It now seems that Freud, quite the reverse, was concerned with presenting the 'Mosaic distinction' in the form of the

the rest of humanity is denied the blessings of monotheism. For after Freud “cured” (Jewish) monotheism of its pathological traits, transforming it into the new form of psychoanalysis,⁵³ it was liberated from its Jewish particularity and became the common property of humankind. Thus it came about that the world had to wait until Freud, the godless Jew, transformed Judaism into a general religion for all nations.

Here we return to the question that we asked at the outset: How was Freud’s picture of the Jewish religion and of the Jewish God nurtured? Even if we dismiss Assmann’s notion of the dissolution of the “Mosaic distinction,” the Enlightenment-Protestant line of inquiry may still point us in the right direction. I would like to extend this further by taking a look at Freud’s Jewish contemporaries. The most direct and most astonishing parallel (which scholars have noticed but not sufficiently appreciated) is that of Freud’s spiritual kinsman Arnold Schönberg (1874–1951), the creator of twelve-tone music. Unlike Freud, Schönberg left Judaism and converted to Protestantism in 1898 as a 24-year old – only to be reminded all the more emphatically of his Jewishness by anti-Semitic incidents in the summer of 1921, which led him to acknowledge that he was indeed Jewish and would remain so. This he expressed in his letter of 19 April 1923 to Kandinsky turning down the directorship of the Weimar College of Music [*Musikhochschule*]: “For I have at last learnt the lesson that has been forced upon me during this year, and I shall never forget it. It is that I am not a German, not a European, indeed perhaps scarcely even a human being ..., but I am a Jew.”⁵⁴ In May 1933 (after anti-Semitic episodes in the Prussian Academy of Arts) Schönberg left Germany for good and formally registered his membership in the Jewish Community of Paris before making his way to the United States – in order to save his new music in the New World.

prohibition of images as a decisive, indispensable and in any case profoundly Jewish achievement, which must be held on to under all circumstances”; and also the continuation of this “Jewish achievement,” which I rather regard as an “overcoming,” is hinted at in the following clause: “and that his own psychoanalysis could be understood as virtually the continuation of this Jewish progress” (Jan Assmann, “Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit. Sigmund Freuds Konstruktion des Judentums,” in *Psyche* 56, 2002, pp. 154f.) Even clearer is the last sentence of this article: “In returning to the prohibition of images Freud shows that this striving for spiritual liberation is both a profoundly Jewish project and a tradition that he himself with his psychoanalysis claims to be heir to and to surpass” (p. 169).

⁵³ Or more precisely: by means of psychoanalysis converted it into something new whose form remains to be seen.

⁵⁴ Jelena Hahl-Koch, ed., *Wassily Kandinsky und Arnold Schönberg: Der Briefwechsel*, Stuttgart 1993, p. 80. English translation by John C. Crawford, *Arnold Schoenberg and Wassily Kandinsky: Letters, Pictures and Documents*, London, 1994 (cited in Lucy Dawidowicz, “Musical Hebraism,” *Commentary* 44, 1967, pp. 73–77, here p. 76).

In his drama *The Biblical Way* [*Der biblische Weg*], written in 1926–27, and in the libretto scripted by himself shortly thereafter (1927–28) for his opera *Moses und Aron*, Schönberg spelled out his thoughts on the Jewish concept of God, which are strikingly close to Freud's.⁵⁵ The first scene of Act I begins, like a clap of thunder, with the theme that weaves its way through the entire opera:

“Only one, infinite, thou omnipresent one,
unperceived and inconceivable God ...!”

[*Einziger, ewiger, allgegenwärtiger,
unsichtbarer und unvorstellbarer Gott ...!*]⁵⁶

Moses is the one who utters this fundamental insight and is supposed to convey it to his people with the help of his spokesman and antipode Aaron. Aaron knows that the abstract invisibility of the inconceivable God cannot be accepted by the people:

“Chosen is this folk,
thus to love one great god ever and ever,
with a thousand times more devotion
than all other earthly peoples for their many godly beings.
Not be seen, not imagined.
Folk chosen by the only one, can you
Worship what you dare not even conceive?”

[*Auserwähltes Volk,
einen einzigen Gott ewig zu lieben
mit tausendmal mehr der Liebe,
mit der alle andern Völker ihre vielen Götter lieben.
Unsichtbar, unvorstellbar?
Volk, auserwählt dem Einzigen, kannst du
lieben, was du dir nicht vorstellen darfst?*]⁵⁷

The inevitable then occurs. Moses extols to his people the one, infinite, almighty, omnipresent, invisible, inconceivable God, but the people do not want a purely spiritual God; they want a God whom they can see:

“Keep away with your new god,
with the almighty one!
Through him we do not want our freedom!
Keep far away, like your god,

⁵⁵ Arnold Schönberg, *Moses und Aron. Oper in drei Akten*, Mainz etc. 1957. (The spelling of “Aron” instead of “Aaron” is deliberate because with this spelling the letters of the opera’s title amount to precisely twelve.) English translation by Allen Forte, reprinted in a booklet accompanying Sony Classical CD recording (Pierre Boulez conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra). It is Forte’s translation that is cited here.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 36 (German original, p. 5).

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 44 (German original, p. 7).

the all-present deity!
 We fear not, nor love we your god;
 so little does he give reward or chastise!”

*[Bleib uns fern mit deinem Gott,
 mit dem Allmächtigen!
 Wir wollen durch ihn nicht befreit sein!
 Bleib uns so fern wie dein Gott,
 der Allgegenwärtige!
 Wir fürchten und lieben ihn nicht!
 So wenig als er uns belohnt und bestraft.]*⁵⁸

Only Aaron with his miracles (he transforms Moses’ rod into a serpent and induces Moses’ hand to become leprous and then whole again) convinces the people of the superiority of the invisible God. But then, when Moses remains too long with his God on Mount Sinai, the people become impatient and demand from Aaron their old Egyptian gods back, and Aaron relents:

“O Israel,
 I return your gods to you,
 and also give you to them,
 just as you have demanded.
 Leave distant things to one infinite,
 since to you the gods have
 ever-present and always-common substance.
 You shall provide the stuff;
 I shall give it a form:
 common and visible, imaged
 in gold forever.
 Bring out your gold!
 Yield it! Call him forth!
 You then shall be happy!”

*[Volk Israels!
 Deine Götter geb’ ich dir wieder
 und dich ihnen;
 wie es dich verlangt.
 Lasset die Ferne dem Ewigen!
 Euch gemäß sind Götter
 gegenwärtigen, alltagsnahen Inhalts.
 Ihr spendet diesen Stoff,
 ich geb’ ihm solche Form:
 Alltätlich, sichtbar, faßlich,
 in Gold verewigt.
 Bringt Gold herbei!]*

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 64 (German original, p. 13).

*Opfert! Ruft ihn an!
Ihr sollt glücklich werden!*⁵⁹

The old god that Aaron gives back to the Jewish people is the Golden Calf of Egypt, to which they then pay homage in an orgiastic scene. Here, Moses does not even need to be put to death – the people consider him dead anyway. After Moses' surprising return, once again, in the last scene of Act II, Moses and Aaron clash, the representative of the pure idea of God without images or miracles against the propagandist for the image as the comprehensible part of thought. Act II ends with Moses' despairing realization:

“Inconceivable God!
Inexpressible, many-sided Idea,
Will you let it be so explained?
Shall Aron, my mouth, fashion
this image?
Then I have fashioned an image too,
false,
as an image must be.
Thus am I defeated!
Thus, all was but madness that
I believed before,
and can and must not be given
voice.
O word, thou word, that I lack!”

*[Unvorstellbarer Gott!
Unaussprechlicher, vieldeutiger Gedanke!
Läßt du diese Auslegung zu?
Darf Aron, mein Mund, dieses Bild
machen?
So habe ich mir ein Bild gemacht,
falsch,
wie ein Bild nur sein kann!
So bin ich geschlagen!
So war alles Wahnsinn, was ich
gedacht habe,
und kann und darf nicht gesagt
werden!
O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt!]*⁶⁰

The highest level of spirituality, the pure and abstract idea of God, can be thought but not uttered. Not only is the *name* of God ineffable, but even the thought of God is inexpressible, because every use of language

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 88 (German original, p. 21).

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 120 (German original, p. 29).

and interpretation ends with imagery. Thus it is only logical that at the end (in Act III, for which only a libretto exists that Schönberg did not set to music) *Aaron*, the advocate of the image, dies because he has betrayed pure thought:

“You have betrayed God to the gods,
the idea to images, this
chosen folk to others,
the extraordinary to the commonplace...”

[*Verraten hast du Gott an die Götter,
den Gedanken an die Bilder, dieses
auserwählte Volk an die andern,
das Außergewöhnliche an die
Gewöhnlichkeit ...*]⁶¹

All that is left for the people is to let themselves be led back into the “wasteland’s renunciation” [*Wunschlosigkeit der Wüste*] in order to serve pure Thought:

“But in the wasteland you shall be
invincible and shall achieve the goal:
unity with God.”

[*Aber in der Wüste seid ihr unüberwindlich
und werdet das Ziel erreichen:
Vereinigt mit Gott.*]⁶²

In his uncompromising elevation of pure spirituality Schönberg goes even a step further than Freud (or better, he remains a step behind Freud): the Jewish people here remain eternally enthralled in the service of the idea of God, the special task that has devolved on them as the Chosen People. Whenever they try to break out of this service, “as a result of that misuse” they “ever shall be hurled back” [*wieder heruntergestürzt werden vom Erfolg des Mißbrauches*]⁶³ and chased back into the desert wasteland. Whoever has attained the highest pinnacles of spirituality, the pure idea of God, can never fall back again; beyond the perfection of monotheism in Judaism there can be nothing else (not even Freud’s psychoanalysis). It is perhaps no accident that to the end of his life Schönberg never managed to set Act III to music.

I certainly would not want to claim that Freud knew Schönberg’s libretto for *Moses und Aron*, since we have no evidence for direct “influences.” What I would like to claim, however, is that the striking parallels between their ideas are probably not a coincidence. The two men likely

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 128 (German original, p. 32).

⁶² Ibid., p. 130 (German original, p. 32).

⁶³ Ibid.

derived their notions of the “historical truth” about the Jewish religion and the Jewish God from many of the same sources. We are still quite far away from having anything like a complete picture of these sources (by which I mean “sources” not only in the literary sense, but also the “cultural memory” of both), yet I believe that a search for evidence in this direction is much more promising than Yerushalmi’s rather positivistic listing of material “remains” of Jewish elements in Freud’s life and work and also more promising than Assmann’s alignment of Freud among the protagonists in the Moses-Egypt discourse.

In closing, I would like to give one further example. Shortly before his death Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) wrote his last and greatest work, *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (published posthumously in 1919),⁶⁴ in which he drafted a completely new philosophy out of the spirit of Judaism. Cohen, too, refers to the “man Moses,” but not as portrayed in Exodus 11:3 – which Assmann thinks is the basis of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (“Moreover, Moses himself was a man of great importance [*gadol me’od*] in the land of Egypt”) – but to Numbers 12:3: “Now the man Moses was very humble (*anaw me’od*), more so than anyone else on the face of the earth.”⁶⁵ According to Cohen it is the humble (and not the great) Moses who is the mediator of the *spirituality* of revelation,⁶⁶ and “spirit” (*Geist*) is Cohen’s key concept in discussing the Jewish religion. The incorporeal and only God is spirit, and, because of the correlation between the being of God and the becoming of man, it follows that also man is spirit: “This equation, however, is not to be misinterpreted as identity; for God’s being is unique. But his uniqueness, as spirit, establishes the becoming of man, as spirit. The spirit unites both members of the correlation.”⁶⁷

Like Freud and Schönberg, Cohen holds that the monotheism communicated through Moses represents the very highest form of human spirituality: “Monotheism created a spirituality of God and thereby also a spirituality of man’s soul.”⁶⁸ There is no escape from this spirituality, but Cohen differs from Freud and Schönberg in pointing out that not only Israel, but all humankind participates in it. Another idea he shares with Freud is the close association of spirituality with the ideal of ethical perfection: “In this way the principle of spirituality could and

⁶⁴ English translation by Simon Kaplan, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, based on the 2nd revised ed. of 1929, New York 1972.

⁶⁵ Both quotations from the Bible follow the *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁶⁶ Hermann Cohen, *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, Leipzig 1919, p. 89 (Engl. translation, p. 77).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103f. (Engl. transl., p. 89).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 144 (Engl. transl., p. 124).

had to become the principle of morality.”⁶⁹ But here, too, a major difference remains: whereas Freud reserves the most lofty expression of ethics for Judaism alone and saw it as leading to obsessional neurosis, Cohen’s principle of morality encompasses the perfection of every kind of religion and explicitly embraces the “Pious of the Nations.”

Here again, I would *not* want to claim that Freud knew Cohen and was “influenced” by him (although this possibility cannot be excluded). But I would like to propose that the two images of the Jewish religion and monotheism are closely related – with the single difference being that Cohen extends the monotheism that Judaism gave to humankind into a universal principle, whereas Freud seeks to “cure” it through psychoanalysis. For both it represents the highest form of spirituality. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that this picture of the Jewish religion was inspired by 19th-century Reform Judaism, which located the culmination of every religion in the dynamic interplay between spirituality and morality.⁷⁰ Insofar as the major model for this Reform Judaism was the Protestant Christianity of the nineteenth century,⁷¹ we might even dare to conclude that the “Jewish memory” of Freud, Schönberg and Cohen – with their deep roots in Jewish tradition, particularly in medieval Jewish philosophy⁷² – was not insignificantly influenced by Christianity.⁷³ In a sense, then, Freud’s “triumph of spirituality” can be seen as the birth of Jewish monotheism out of the spirit of Christianity.

⁶⁹ Ibid. (Engl. transl., p. 124).

⁷⁰ It is certainly not by coincidence that both, Freud and Reform Judaism, again and again refer to the prophets as the very essence of Judaism.

⁷¹ Of course this needs to be explained in more detail. Cohen regarded the spiritual relationship between Judaism and Protestantism as virtually God-given; see his famous 1880 essay “Ein Bekenntnis in der Judenfrage,” in *Hermann Cohens jüdische Schriften*, introd. Franz Rosenzweig, ed. Bruno Strauß, Berlin 1924, vol. 2, p. 75: “Before men of a religious, Protestant cast of mind, before men of a national cast of mind which is filled with the *spiritual* content of national culture, I dare to profess: that I am not able to recognize in the *scientific concept of religion* any difference between Israelite monotheism and Protestant Christianity” (see also *ibid.*, p. 79). On this, see David Myers, “Hermann Cohen and the Quest for Protestant Judaism,” in: *Leo Baeck Institut Year Book* 46, 2001, pp. 195–214.

⁷² This needs likewise to be looked at more closely.

⁷³ Assmann takes this decisive step, too, in his most recent publication (“Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit,” pp. 166f.). However, he thinks that here Freud is quite deliberately, “and not without a certain irony, using a Christian topos,” and “that what mattered to him was to wrest this central Christian tenet [the primacy of spirituality] away from the Christians and to give the Jews credit for it, in an ironic reversal of the Christian practice of declaring central Jewish motifs ... to be specifically Christian achievements.” It seems to me, however, that nothing could have been farther from Freud’s mind than irony and that also this “honorable rescue” of Freud overlooks the historical reality of his cultural memory. Freud does not directly confront Christianity here (and certainly not Paul in particular), but obtains his ideas about Christianity from 19th-century liberal Judaism.