

FREUD AND THE LEGACY OF MOSES

Freud's last book, *Moses and Monotheism*, was published in 1939 during one of the darkest periods in Jewish history. His scandalous and difficult book frequently has been vilified and dismissed because Freud claims that Moses was not a Hebrew but an Egyptian, and he also claims that the Jews murdered Moses in the wilderness. Bernstein argues that a close reading of *Moses and Monotheism* reveals an underlying powerful coherence in which Freud seeks to specify the distinctive character and contribution of the Jewish people. The legacy of the strict ethical monotheism of Moses is the progress of spirituality (the advance in intellectuality). It is the character that has enabled the Jewish people to survive despite persecution and virulent anti-semitism, and Freud proudly identifies himself with this legacy of Moses. In his analysis of Freud's often misunderstood last work, Bernstein goes on to show how Freud expands and deepens our understanding of a religious tradition by revealing its unconscious dynamics.

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Current events confirm the need to understand religious ideas and institutions critically, yet radical doubts have been raised about how to proceed and about the ideal of critical thought itself. Meanwhile, some prominent scholars have urged that we turn the tables, and view modern society as the object of criticism and a religious tradition as the basis for critique. Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought is a series of books intended to address the interaction of critical thinking and religious traditions in this context of uncertainty and conflicting claims. It will take up questions such as the following, either by reflecting on them philosophically or by pursuing their ramifications in studies on specific figures and movements: is a coherent critical perspective on religion desirable or even possible? What sort of relationship to religious traditions ought a critic to have? What, if anything, is worth saving from the Enlightenment legacy or from critics of religion like Hume and Feuerbach? The answers offered, while varied, will uniformly constitute distinguished, philosophically informed, and critical analyses of particular religious topics.

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FREUD AND THE LEGACY OF MOSES

RICHARD J. BERNSTEIN



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For Skylar, Tessa, and Maya

There is an element of grandeur about everything to do with the origin of a religion, certainly including the Jewish one, and that is not matched by the explanations we have hitherto given.

Moses and Monotheism (23:128)

We wanted to explain the origin of the special character of the Jewish people, a character which is probably what has made their survival to the present day possible. *Moses and Monotheism* (23:123)

Contents

| | |
|--|----------------|
| <i>Preface</i> | <i>page</i> ix |
| <i>List of abbreviations</i> | xii |
| 1 The Egyptian origin of monotheism and the murder of Moses | 1 |
| 2 Tradition, trauma, and the return of the repressed | 27 |
| 3 Anti-Semitism, Christianity, and Judaism | 75 |
| 4 “Dialogue” with Yerushalmi | 90 |
| Appendix: an exchange of letters between Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas-Salomé | 117 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 121 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 141 |
| <i>Index</i> | 147 |

Preface

Moses and Monotheism, the last book that Freud published, is one of his most difficult, perplexing, and thought-provoking works. Throughout his life Freud was deeply attracted to the figure of Moses. In his final years, he was literally obsessed with “the great man” Moses and his vexed legacy – a legacy that is rooted in the past, shapes the present, and extends its influence to the future. Freud was originally hesitant about publishing his *Moses* book, and there were those who pleaded with him to refrain from publishing it, or at least to modify some of his more shocking assertions. Writing on the eve of the Holocaust during the darkest period of Jewish history, Freud’s emphatic claims that Moses was an Egyptian and that the Israelites murdered Moses in the wilderness are not only scandalous but appear to be without any solid historical foundation. Why would Freud even publish such a book? And yet, there is also a compelling grandeur about Freud’s portrait of Moses and the monotheism that he professed.

When the book was first published in 1939, it provoked several polemical attacks. Even Freud’s admirers were embarrassed by this awkward and confusing work. Because Freud’s “arguments” were so manifestly outrageous, commentators tended to focus on the search for Freud’s hidden or unconscious motives, what the book revealed about his personal conflicts, rather than on a careful analysis of what he actually says.

For many years I have returned over and over again to Freud’s *Moses* study. I have long felt that the most important part of the story that Freud tells has to do with his struggle to articulate what he passionately believed to be the essence of (his) Jewishness, the key to Jewish survival, and the deep psychological reasons for anti-Semitism. The thesis that I seek to defend in this book is that Freud is attempting to answer a question that he posed for himself in the preface to the Hebrew translation of *Totem and Taboo*. Freud characterizes himself as someone who has

not only abandoned the religion of his fathers, but is estranged from all religion. He then asks: “‘Since you have abandoned all these common characteristics of your countrymen, what is there left to you that is Jewish?’” And he replies “‘A very great deal, and probably its very essence.’” He confesses that he cannot express that essence clearly in words, but he expects that someday the answer “will become accessible to the scientific mind.”¹ The answer to this question is to be found in *Moses and Monotheism* (or as I prefer to say, for reasons that I will indicate, *The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion* – the literal translation of the original German title of the published book).

During the first few decades after its publication, there was little serious detailed discussion of Freud’s *Moses* book. But during the past decade the situation has radically changed; there has been a virtual explosion of interest in it. It is almost as if there is now a belated recognition that *The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion* is one of Freud’s greatest achievements. Many thinkers, pursuing quite independent lines of inquiry, have been intrigued by the drama of Freud’s narrative of the Egyptian origin of Moses and the vicissitudes of his ethically demanding monotheism in shaping the character of the Jewish people. One book in particular, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s *Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*, has played an enormous role in raising the level of critical discussion. Yerushalmi brings his comprehensive knowledge of the Jewish tradition and his skills as a superb historian of Jewish history to bear on his analysis. Although I admire Yerushalmi’s eloquence and his judicious insight, I do not think he has done full justice to Freud. Indeed, I even think that when he criticizes Freud for basing his understanding of the Jewish tradition on a “discredited Lamarckism,” Yerushalmi obscures and distorts some of Freud’s most creative and fertile suggestions. I have also been influenced by Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* – a study in which Derrida comments extensively on Yerushalmi’s book. For reasons that I will set forth, I agree with many of Derrida’s critical and deconstructive remarks. When I completed the initial draft of this book, I had the good fortune to read the proofs of Jan Assmann’s *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*. Assmann is one of the world’s foremost Egyptologists. Although he employs his sophisticated knowledge of Egyptian history, texts, and theology in his interpretation of Freud, his primary concern is with what he calls “mnemohistory,” the history of the cultural memory of Moses as an Egyptian in Western monotheism. I have sought to take account of Assmann’s strikingly original approach

to Freud's *Moses* study. The fact that three such eminent thinkers from different disciplines and cultural backgrounds have been drawn to *The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion* is itself forceful testimony to the power of Freud's last book.

I want to clarify the interpretive stance that I have taken in this book. I am convinced that we have not yet fully come to grips with what Freud says, nor have we fully appropriated the fertility of Freud's rethinking of what a religious tradition involves, and of the unconscious dynamics of the transmission of a religious tradition. I also think that, in the final analysis, Freud does not do full justice to the meaning of Judaism and Jewishness. He tends to underestimate the creative importance of rituals, ceremonies, narratives, customs, and cultural practices that are the vehicles for (consciously and unconsciously) transmitting what *he* singles out as the great achievement of Mosaic monotheism, *Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit* ("The Advance in Intellectuality" or "The Progress in Spirituality"). I have refrained from developing these criticisms here because I believe that informed critique can be based only on an understanding of what Freud is saying in its strongest and most coherent formulation. This is the limited but complex task that I have set out to accomplish in this book.

When I completed my initial draft, I sent it to several friends. Their incisive comments and criticisms were more than helpful; they stimulated me to rewrite the entire draft. I have not answered all of their objections, but I am confident that this is now a much better book as a result of their perceptive criticisms. I am especially grateful for the care taken by colleagues from such diverse disciplines: Carol Bernstein (literary theory); Edward Casey (philosophy); Louise Kaplan (psychoanalysis); Wayne Proudfoot (religious studies); Joel Whitebook (philosophy and psychoanalysis); Nicholas Wolterstorff (philosophy and philosophical theology); and Eli Zaretsky (history). I also want to thank my research assistant, Lynne Taddeo, for her care and good judgment in preparing my manuscript for publication.

Assmann tells us that once he started writing his book, he could not set it aside to work on other projects until he had completed his final draft. He speaks of the Moses discourse as having a life of its own. I too have experienced this compelling power. I am sure that Freud would have profoundly understood this.

Abbreviations

WORKS BY SIGMUND FREUD

| | |
|------|--|
| MM | <i>Der Mann Moses und die Monotheistische Religion</i> |
| TT | <i>Totem and Taboo</i> |
| SFAZ | <i>The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig</i> |
| SFLA | <i>Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas-Salomé: Letters</i> |

SECONDARY WORKS

| | |
|------|---|
| AF | <i>Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression</i> , by Jacques Derrida |
| FM | <i>Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable</i> , by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi |
| HN | " <i>Freud on the Historical Novel</i> ," by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi |
| J | <i>The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud</i> , by Ernest Jones |
| ME | <i>Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism</i> , by Jan Assmann |
| MFMS | " <i>The Moses of Freud and the Moses of Schoenberg</i> ," by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi |
| Z | <i>Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory</i> , by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi |

CHAPTER I

*The Egyptian origin of monotheism
and the murder of Moses*

PROLOGUE

In December 1930, Sigmund Freud wrote a short, but remarkable preface for the Hebrew translation of *Totem and Taboo*.

No reader of [the Hebrew version 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 – and who cannot take a share in nationalist ideals, but who has yet never repudiated his people, who feels that he is in his essential nature a Jew and who has no desire to alter that nature. If the question were put to him: ‘Since you have abandoned all these common characteristics of your countrymen, what is there left to you that is Jewish?’ he would reply: ‘A very great deal, and *probably its very essence*.’ He could not now express that essence clearly in words; but some day, no doubt, it will become accessible to the scientific mind.

Thus it is an experience of a quite special kind for such an author when a book of his is translated into the Hebrew language and put into the hands of readers for whom that historic idiom is a living tongue: a book, moreover, which deals with the origin of religion and morality, though it adopts no Jewish standpoint and makes no exceptions in favour of Jewry. The author hopes, however, that he will be at one with his readers in the conviction that unprejudiced science cannot remain a stranger to the spirit of the new Jewry. (Vienna, December 1930)¹

Like so much of Freud’s prose, this passage is at once seemingly straightforward, elusive, and provocative. What does it mean when Freud affirms that he is in his *essential* nature a Jew even though he is estranged from “the religion of his fathers – as well as from religion”? What does it mean to suggest that this essence will someday “become accessible to the scientific mind”? One reason why this preface is so provocative is because Freud succinctly affirms what many godless secular Jews want to affirm – that even though they reject the religion of

their fathers, they are nevertheless, in essence, Jews. Yet it seems extraordinarily paradoxical to say that one is completely estranged from the religion of his fathers and yet “feels” that one is a Jew in “his essential nature.” Can one so neatly and rigorously distinguish the religion of Judaism from the essential nature of Jewishness? Our perplexity is increased when we realize that the book, *Totem and Taboo*, for which this preface was written, never mentions Judaism, Jews, or Jewishness.

Did Freud ever answer – or even seek to answer – the question he raises about the essential nature of being a Jew? Did he really think that such an answer “will become accessible to the scientific mind”? The thesis that I want to explore and defend in this book is that Freud did attempt to answer these questions. This attempt is found most explicitly in *The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion*,² a book that has troubled and offended many of his commentators; one that is awkwardly and hesitantly written; a book that many have taken to be written when Freud as an old man was losing his creative powers; a book whose historical claims seem like pure phantasy – where Freud builds “a magnificent castle in the air”;³ a book that many have read as an expression of Freud’s alleged Jewish self-hatred. My thesis may itself seem paradoxical, especially in the light of the opening sentence of the book: “To deprive a people of the man whom they take pride in as the greatest of their sons is not a thing to be gladly or carelessly undertaken, least of all by someone who is himself one of them” (23:7).

The grounds for the plausibility of my thesis have already been prepared by the illuminating interpretations of Yosef Yerushalmi, Jan Assmann, and Jacques Derrida.⁴ They have offered much more subtle, imaginative readings of what is surely one of Freud’s strangest books. Although I will not explore all of the by-paths which they open (and will indicate where I depart from them), I want to acknowledge my enormous debt to their fresh perspectives.

But first, an anticipation and a warning. When Freud indicates that the essence of Jewishness “will become accessible to the scientific mind,” and closes his preface by declaring “that unprejudiced science cannot remain a stranger to the spirit of the new Jewry” he is referring to psychoanalysis as a science. Freud strongly believed that we will never fully understand the phenomenon of religion (and Judaism in particular) without appealing to the insights achieved by the new science of psychoanalysis. But Freud avoids any suggestion of vulgar reductionism. He is explicit and emphatic in maintaining that there is not a single

causal explanation or single origin for religious phenomena. He begins the fourth essay of *Totem and Taboo* (where he advances the hypothesis that “totemic religion” originates when the “brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde”) by declaring:

There are no grounds for fearing that psycho-analysis, which first discovered that psychical acts and structures are invariably over-determined, will be tempted to trace the origin of anything so complicated as religion to a single source. If psycho-analysis is compelled – and is, indeed, in duty bound – to lay all the emphasis upon one particular source, that does not mean it is claiming either that that source is the only one or that it occupies first place among the numerous contributory factors. Only when we can synthesize the findings in the different fields of research will it become possible to arrive at the relative importance of the part played in the genesis of religion by the mechanism discussed in these pages. Such a task lies beyond the means as well as beyond the purposes of a psycho-analyst. (13:100)

There is a temptation, especially when considering the question of Freud’s Jewishness and the significance of his *Moses* (as the last book that he published), to apply the concepts of psychoanalysis to Freud himself. Some commentators have sought to put Freud “on the couch.” They speculate about the relationship between Freud and his father Jacob, and the relationship between Freud’s claims about the Jewish people and their father figure, Moses. I strongly believe that such a temptation should be resisted. Freud himself frequently refers to his arguments in the three essays that comprise *The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion*. What precisely are these claims and arguments? Are they persuasive? Because Freud’s assertions are (at times) apparently far-fetched or even repugnant, commentators have been too quick to search for hidden meanings and extraneous accounts for *why* Freud says what he does. The first task of a commentator is to pay careful attention to what is being said, and to do justice to the nature of the explicit claims and arguments of the text. This is why I will quote extensively from Freud’s text, and follow the exposition of Freud’s arguments. Furthermore, such a close reading will occasionally require repeating key passages from Freud’s work in order to bring out their full significance.

In his classic study, *Freud and Philosophy*, Paul Ricoeur introduced his now famous distinction between two extreme styles of hermeneutics – a reductive and demystifying hermeneutics, a hermeneutics of suspicion; and a non-reductive and restorative hermeneutics, a hermeneutics of trust.⁵ Given these extremes, there has been a tendency (especially in

dealing with Freud's *Moses*) to approach this text from the perspective of the hermeneutics of suspicion. But Ricoeur himself emphatically makes the point (which has been too frequently ignored) that there is a subtle dialectical relation between these extremes. They are mutually dependent. We cannot even begin the process of demystification unless we pay careful attention to what is manifest. This is what is required if we are to try to decipher and demystify a text. There are many places where Freud's arguments are open to serious – even devastating – criticism, and I will not hesitate to indicate them. But the primary stance that I have adopted in this study is to follow the hermeneutical principle of presenting the strongest possible case for Freud. I have done this not because I agree with him, or because I find his characterization of the essence of Jewishness fully persuasive, but because I am convinced that the power and significance of Freud's claims about religion, tradition, Jewishness, and Jewish survival have not yet been fully drawn out and confronted.

THE NARRATIVE PLOT

Yerushalmi has given an eloquent summary of the bare plot of Freud's *Moses*. In order to orient my own inquiry, I begin by quoting this summary:

Monotheism is not of Jewish origin but an Egyptian discovery. The pharaoh Amenhotep IV established it as his state religion in the form of an exclusive worship of the sun-power, or Aton, thereafter calling himself Ikhnaton. The Aton religion, according to Freud, was characterized by the exclusive belief in one God, the rejection of anthropomorphism, magic, and sorcery, and the absolute denial of an afterlife. Upon Ikhnaton's death, however, his great heresy was rapidly undone, and the Egyptians reverted to their old gods. Moses was not a Hebrew but an Egyptian priest or noble, and a fervent monotheist. In order to save the Aton religion from extinction he placed himself at the head of an oppressed Semitic tribe then living in Egypt, brought them forth from bondage, and created a new nation. He gave them an even more spiritualized, imageless form of monotheistic religion and, in order to set them apart, introduced the Egyptian custom of circumcision. But the crude mass of former slaves could not bear the severe demands of the new faith. In a mob revolt Moses was killed and the memory of the murder repressed. The Israelites went on to forge an alliance of compromise with kindred Semitic tribes in Midian whose fierce volcanic deity, named Yahweh, now became their national god. As a result, the god of Moses was fused with Yahweh and the deeds of Moses ascribed to a Midianite priest also called Moses. However, over a period of centuries the submerged tradition of the true faith and its founder gathered

sufficient force to reassert itself and emerge victorious. Yahweh was henceforth endowed with the universal and spiritual qualities of Moses' god, though the memory of Moses' murder remained repressed among the Jews, reemerging only in a very disguised form with the rise of Christianity. (*FM*, 3 – 4)⁶

At first glance (and even at second or third glance) this narrative seems so fantastic that it is difficult to take it seriously as an historical account. One may be inclined to think that this is nothing but a pure fiction or phantasy with little or no basis in historical fact, and that the only interesting question is what possibly could have motivated Freud to tell such a shocking tale – one which could (and did) offend his fellow Jews. For despite the pleas of some Jewish scholars to suppress publishing this book, Freud published it during one of the darkest and most threatening periods in Jewish history.

Although this is the bare plot of the story that Freud tells, it is not the way in which he tells it. We need to pay close attention to *how* Freud tells his tale. The first two essays of the three that comprise the book, "Moses an Egyptian" and "If Moses was an Egyptian . . .," originally appeared in the psychoanalytic journal, *Imago*, when Freud was still living in Vienna. The third, the longest and most substantial essay, "Moses, His People and Monotheist Religion," was only published in 1939 after Freud's arrival in England.

THE HYPOTHESIS: MOSES WAS AN EGYPTIAN

"Moses an Egyptian," a short (eight pages in the original German), modest essay focuses on the question of whether Moses was an Egyptian. Freud does not even discuss monotheism in this essay, although he does say that the man Moses "set the Jewish people free" and "gave them their laws and founded their religion" (23:7). To support the hypothesis that Moses was an Egyptian, Freud begins by citing those authorities (primarily J.H. Breasted) who claimed that "Moses" was an Egyptian name. Freud suggests that the authorities who traced the etymology of "Moses" to its Egyptian sources should "at least have considered the possibility that the person who bore this Egyptian name may himself have been an Egyptian" (23:9). This is a rather thin reed to support a serious historical claim, especially when we realize that throughout their history Jews have adopted names from the places in which they have been living. Furthermore, according to the biblical narrative (the primary source for our knowledge of Moses), it is the

Egyptian Princess who discovers the infant, and brings him up. It makes good sense that a child in the Egyptian royal court would have an Egyptian name. So the question arises: does Freud himself have any fresh arguments to support his controversial hypothesis? He believes that he does, but before proceeding, he tells us that what he has to contribute is an “application of psycho-analysis,” and the “argument” arrived at in this way “will undoubtedly only impress that minority of readers who are familiar with analytic thinking and who are able to appreciate its findings” (23:10).

Freud begins his argument by considering *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, a book published by Otto Rank in 1909 (“who was at that time still under my influence” [23:10]). Rank calls our attention to the “baffling similarity” in the narrative structure of the legends and poetic tales that glorify the origins of national heroes, founders of religions, dynasties, empires, or cities. Rank’s researches make us acquainted with the source and purpose of these myths. “A hero is someone who has had the courage to rebel against his father and in the end victoriously overcome him” (23:12). Presenting a generalized picture of this myth, Freud isolates a number of common features: a child’s birth by aristocratic parents; his conception preceded by difficulties; condemning the (male) child to death or exposure by his father; the child’s rescue by animals or by a humble family; the adventures of the child as he grows up and discovers who his parents really are; the revenge he takes against his father; and finally his achievement of greatness and fame. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this myth has the generalized structure of the “family romance” – “the source of the whole poetic fiction” (23:12).⁷

But what precisely does this have to do with Moses being an Egyptian? Freud himself calls our attention to a glaring contradiction between the structure of this exposure myth and the biblical account of Moses’ birth. In the generalized exposure narrative the “real” parents of the hero are aristocratic, and those who save him from death are quite humble. But Moses, the child of Jewish parents who were slaves in Egypt, is saved by the royal princess, and is brought up as a member of an aristocratic Egyptian family. How is this disparity, this contradiction to be explained? Freud lamely suggests that “we are in fact free to suppose that some later and clumsy adapter of the material of the legend found an opportunity for introducing into the story of his hero Moses something which resembled the classical exposure legends marking out a hero, but which, on account of the special circumstances of the case, was not applicable to Moses” (23:14). Freud seems to acknowledge how

flimsy this argument really is, for he tells us: “Our investigations might have had to rest content with this inconclusive and, moreover, uncertain outcome, and they might have done nothing towards answering the question of whether Moses was an Egyptian” (23:14).

But Freud does not leave us with this “uncertain outcome.” He suggests that there is “another and perhaps more hopeful line of approach to an assessment of the legend of exposure” (23:14). According to the analytic interpretation, the two families in the myth (aristocratic and humble) are really identical. When this myth is told about historical persons, then “[o]ne of the families is the real one, in which the person in question (the great man) was actually born and grew up; the other is fictitious, fabricated by the myth in pursuit of its own intentions. As a rule the humble family is the real one and the aristocratic family the fabricated one” (23:14). If we strictly followed the logic of Freud’s reasoning, then this pattern would accord with the way in which the biblical story of Moses is actually told. Moses’ real parents were humble Jews. But Freud makes a curious, wildly speculative leap when he says:

in every instance which it has been possible to test [Freud does not specify any instances, nor does he indicate what constitutes a test – RJB], the first family, the one from which the child was exposed, was the invented one, and the second one, in which he was received and grew up, was the real one. If we have the courage to recognize this assertion as universally true and as applying also to the legend of Moses, then all at once we see things clearly: Moses was an Egyptian – probably an aristocrat – whom the legend was designed to turn into a Jew. And that would be our conclusion. (23:15)

It is difficult to know whether one is expected to take any of this seriously – even as an application of psychoanalysis. An ungenerous reader might even say it sounds more like a *reductio ad absurdum*. At almost every stage in his argument Freud makes all sorts of unwarranted and speculative assumptions.

Freud concludes this first short essay by raising the very question his readers will surely ask: “If no more certainty could be reached than this, why, it may be asked, have I brought this enquiry into public notice at all?” (23:16). Why, indeed! Freud hints about what is to come, but refrains from explicitly telling us:

For if one allows oneself to be carried away by the two arguments which I have put forward here, and if one sets out to take the hypothesis seriously that Moses was an aristocratic Egyptian, very interesting and far-reaching prospects are opened up. With the help of some not very remote assumptions, we shall, I

believe, be able to understand the motives which led Moses in the unusual step he took and, closely related to this, to obtain a grasp of the possible basis of a number of the characteristics and peculiarities of the laws and religion which he gave to the Jewish people; and we shall even be led on to important considerations regarding the origin of monotheist religions in general. (23:16)

These are extraordinary hints. Freud seductively arouses our curiosity, but refuses to tell us anything more in this essay. Psychological probabilities are not enough to justify such consequential historical claims, and there is a paucity of objective evidence about the period in which Moses lived. In the final sentence of this essay, Freud tells us that because such objective evidence “has not been obtainable . . . it will therefore be better to leave unmentioned any further implications of the discovery that Moses was an Egyptian” (23:16).⁸ Freud’s readers had to wait several months for the next installment to find out what he meant by the hints that he dropped at the end of his essay. Significantly, this next installment was entitled “If Moses was an Egyptian . . .” The most significant part of this title is the ellipsis.

Before proceeding in our examination of his text, it is worth asking: why did Freud publish this brief and inconclusive essay? This work does not make any significant historical contribution, nor does it add anything substantial to our understanding of psychoanalysis. We know that Freud was genuinely apprehensive about publishing his hypothesis concerning Moses’ birth – and not only because he felt that there was so little “objective evidence” to support his claim. The circumspection of his first essay seems to have been a way of getting a hearing for the conjecture that Moses was an Egyptian, without, however, providing any clear indication of the inferences that Freud was to draw from this conjecture. In a sense, Freud (because he already knew what he was holding back) was cautiously “testing the waters.”

THE ELLIPSIS: IF MOSES WAS AN EGYPTIAN . . .

It is only in his second essay, “If Moses Was An Egyptian . . .,” that the full drama of the historical plot is revealed. This essay does read like a precis of a “historical novel,” in which the dramatic climax is reached when the Semites, whom the Egyptian Moses had led out of Egypt, slay him. Despite the shocking (and for a religious believer – Jew or Christian – the blasphemous) claims that Freud makes, he begins by speaking of his hesitations and conflicting motives in publishing his views. “The greater the importance of the views arrived at in this way [basing them on ‘psychological probabilities’], the more strongly one feels the need to

beware of exposing them without a secure basis to the critical assaults of the world around one – like a bronze statue with feet of clay” (23:17). It may jolt us (we will return to this statement) when Freud announces: “But once again this is not the whole story nor *the most important part of the whole story*” (23:17, emphasis added).

Considering that this essay was published in 1937, on the eve of one of the darkest periods of Jewish history, the very way in which Freud goes about narrating his historical reconstruction could scarcely avoid causing offense and anguish to his fellow Jews. In his opening paragraph, he makes a derogatory reference to those “[t]almudists who delight in exhibiting their ingenuity without regard to how remote from reality their thesis may be” (23:17). Freud seems to be anticipating and defending himself against the very charge that would be brought against him. As he begins exploring the implications of the hypothesis that Moses was an Egyptian, he characterizes the Semites (the Jews who were living in Egypt at the time of Moses) as follows:

But it is not easy to guess what could induce an aristocratic Egyptian [Moses] – a prince, perhaps, or a priest or high official – to put himself at the head of *a crowd of immigrant foreigners at a backward level of civilization* and to leave his country with them. (23:18, emphasis added)

The most striking characteristic of the second essay, “If Moses Was An Egyptian . . .,” is that it reads like a “purely historical study” (23:52) of what presumably really happened. Freud does not explicitly refer to psychoanalysis. On the contrary, he deliberately restrains himself from offering any psychoanalytic interpretations, even when the subject being discussed clearly invites such interpretations (for example, his discussion of circumcision). I suspect that if this essay had been published anonymously, a reader might have thought it was the work of a crackpot who invented an intriguing tale of how the Egyptian aristocrat, Moses, forced his adopted monotheistic religion upon the savage Semites who “took fate into their own hands and rid themselves of their tyrant [Moses]” (23:47). Freud refers selectively to the works of historians and biblical scholars (choosing those sources he can use to support his thesis that Moses was an Egyptian). He plays fast and loose with what he selects and uses from the Bible. He cavalierly justifies this practice in the following footnote:

I am very well aware that in dealing so autocratically and arbitrarily with Biblical tradition – bringing it up to confirm my views when it suits me and unhesitatingly rejecting it when it contradicts me – I am exposing myself to

serious methodological criticism and weakening the convincing force of my arguments. But this is the only way in which one can treat material of which one knows definitely that its trustworthiness has been severely impaired by the distorting influence of tendentious purposes. It is to be hoped that I shall find some degree of justification later on, when I come upon the track of these secret motives. Certainty is in any case unattainable and moreover it may be said that every other writer on the subject has adopted the same procedure. (23:27)

Why does Freud – who initially, in his first essay, describes his contribution as an “application of psycho-analysis” – now completely bracket the question of psychoanalysis and adopt the mantle of the scholarly historian who is seeking to establish what really happened in fourteenth century BCE? We find a clue if we go back to his first essay. Freud’s main argument in support of the hypothesis that Moses was an Egyptian depended on his psychoanalytic interpretation of the exposure myth of national heroes. Freud claims that recognizable fragments of this myth are found in the legends of Sargon of Agade, Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Oedipus, Karna, Paris, Telephos, Perseus, Heracles, Gilgamesh, Amphion, and Zethos. Note that this list consists primarily of *mythological* figures. But according to Freud, the Egyptian Moses was a *real* person who lived at a precise historical time; adopted the monotheistic religion from the Egyptian Pharaoh, Akhenaton; and, in order to save the Aton religion, forced it upon the Semites living in Egypt. Without establishing these “historical” facts, Freud would have *no* basis for the psychoanalytic interpretation that he eventually offers to explain these “facts.”

If we look back to the final paragraph of “Moses An Egyptian,” we will see that Freud has already indicated this need for historical evidence:

Even if one accepts the fact of Moses being an Egyptian as a first historical foothold, one would need to have at least a second firm fact in order to defend the wealth of emerging possibilities against the criticism of their being a product of the imagination and too remote from reality. (23:16)

Moreover, at the beginning of “Moses An Egyptian,” Freud discusses the need to establish the basic “historical” facts about Moses. “It is justly argued that the later history of the people of Israel would be incomprehensible if this premiss [that Moses was a real person and that the Exodus from Egypt associated with him did in fact take place] were not accepted” (23:7).

Although Freud repeatedly tells us that there can be no certainty

about what really happened in Egypt and the Exodus into the wilderness, he does not seem to have any *serious* doubts that the events he describes actually happened. There is a slippery slide in his prose from imaginative conjecture to established conclusion. For example, in the final sentence of his first essay he no longer speaks of his “hypothesis” that Moses was an Egyptian, but rather of “the *discovery* that Moses was an Egyptian” (23:16, emphasis added). In the opening paragraph of the second essay, where Freud recapitulates his “fresh argument” in support of the claim that Moses was an Egyptian, he now says: “What I added was that the interpretation of the myth of exposure which was linked with Moses *necessarily* led to the inference that he was an Egyptian whom the needs of a people sought to make into a Jew” (23:17, emphasis added).

The more closely we examine the details of Freud’s narrative of what supposedly really happened, the more outrageous it appears. There are all sorts of gaps, leaps, dubious assumptions, and wild guesses. For example, the Bible tells us very little about the origins of the Levites who play such an important role in the Exodus story (and in Jewish history). Freud himself acknowledges that “[o]ne of the greatest enigmas of Jewish prehistory is that of the origin of the Levites . . . one of the twelve tribes of Israel” (23:38). But Freud thinks he can solve this enigma. He proposes this solution:

It is incredible that a great lord, like Moses the Egyptian, should have joined this alien people unaccompanied. He certainly must have brought a retinue with him – his closest followers, his scribes, his domestic servants. This is who the Levites originally were. The tradition which alleges that Moses was a Levite seems to be a clear distortion of the fact: the Levites were the [Egyptian] followers of Moses. This solution is supported by the fact . . . that it is only among the Levites that Egyptian names occur later. (23:38)

So when it is declared in the Book of Exodus that Moses came down from Sinai and saw his people worshipping the golden calf, the sons of Levi who followed Moses’ command and slaughtered “three thousand men” were really Moses’ Egyptian retinue! (However, in Freud’s historical reconstruction, the Egyptian Moses was never even at Sinai. And Freud does not believe that Aaron ever existed.)

If we accept Freud’s claim that it really was the Egyptian Moses who imposed the monotheistic religion upon the hapless Semites, then we may well ask, how are we to account for the biblical references to the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Consider Freud’s tortuous explanation.

It was at Kadesh, an oasis in the desert, where the Semites who had already murdered their Egyptian leader, Moses, joined with other tribes who worshipped a different god, the Midianite volcanic god, Yahweh – “[a] coarse, narrow-minded, local god, violent and bloodthirsty” (23:50). There was now a need to glorify this new god, to work out some sort of compromise so that Yahweh – the fierce demon god – would “fit” with the monotheistic god that the Egyptian Semites worshipped. Consequently, in working out this compromise, the “legends of the patriarchs of the people – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – were introduced. Yahweh asserted that he was already the god of these forefathers; though it is true that he himself had to admit that they had not worshipped him under that name” (23:44). This was done for the “tendentious purpose” of glorifying the volcanic god, Yahweh, and fusing him with the monotheistic god of the Egyptian Moses.

We can now better understand the significance of what Freud wrote at the very beginning of his first essay. “The man Moses, who set the Jewish people free, who gave them their laws and *founded their religion*, dates from such remote times that we cannot evade a preliminary enquiry as to whether he was a historical personage or a creature of legend” (23:7, emphasis added). It is not God, or even Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who founded the religion of the Jewish people. It is the *man* Moses who founded their religion. It is not God (either the monotheistic god of Moses or the demon god of the Midianites, Yahweh) who chose the Jewish people. It is Moses who *chose* the Jews to be the worshippers of the monotheistic god, Aten. “Moses had stooped to the Jews, had made them his people: they were his ‘chosen people’” (23:45). Freud does not tell us what the religion of the Jewish Semites living in Egypt was *before* Moses chose them for his monotheistic religion, but he clearly indicates that it was not any form of monotheism.

Yerushalmi, in his plot summary, tells us that Moses gave the Semites “an even more spiritualized, imageless form of monotheistic religion and, in order to set them apart, introduced the Egyptian custom of circumcision” (*FM*, 3). This almost casual reference to the Egyptian custom of circumcision scarcely does justice to the crucial role that it plays in “If Moses was an Egyptian . . .” Freud refers to the evidence afforded by circumcision as a “key-fossil” which has “repeatedly been of help to us” (23:39). If one is aware of the psychoanalytic interpretation(s) of circumcision and its close association with castration – as certainly most of Freud’s readers of his essay would be – then we might think that here we will finally discover the opening for a psychoanalytic interpreta-

tion of Freud's historical reconstruction. But once again we are disappointed. There is no mention of castration in this essay. Freud restricts himself to the *conscious* motives that Moses had in circumcising the "backward" Semites. It is, so Freud claims, an established fact that circumcision was an Egyptian custom. In order to insure that the chosen Semites would not feel inferior to the Egyptians, Moses introduced the custom of circumcision.

We are familiar with the attitude adopted by people (both nations and individuals) to this primaeval usage, which is scarcely understood any longer. Those who do not practise it look on it as very strange and are a little horrified by it, but those who have adopted circumcision are proud of it. They feel exalted by it, ennobled, as it were, and look down with contempt on the others, whom they regard as unclean . . . It may be supposed that Moses, who, being an Egyptian, was himself circumcised, shared this attitude. The Jews with whom he departed from his country were to serve him as a superior substitute for the Egyptians he had left behind. On no account must the Jews be inferior to them. He wished to make them into a 'holy nation', as is expressly stated in the biblical text, and as a mark of this consecration he introduced among them too the custom which made them at least the equals of the Egyptians. And he could only welcome it if they were to be isolated by such a sign and kept apart from the foreign peoples among whom their wanderings would lead them, just as Egyptians themselves had kept apart from all foreigners. (23:29-30)

Here Freud does use, as partial support for his explanation of the introduction of circumcision, the biblical text. For this is the way he interprets the phrase from Exodus about making the Israelites into a "holy nation." But then we may ask: what does Freud say about the more traditional interpretation of circumcision as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham – as a physical mark of the covenant between God and the Jewish people? He categorically denigrates and dismisses this tradition.

Moses did not only give the Jews a new religion; it can be stated with equal certainty that he introduced the custom of circumcision to them. This *fact* is of decisive importance for our problem and has scarcely ever been considered. It is true that the Biblical account contradicts this more than once. On the one hand it traces circumcision back to the patriarchal age as a mark of a covenant between God and Abraham; on the other hand it describes in a quite particularly obscure passage how God was angry with Moses for having neglected a custom which had become holy, and sought to kill him; but that his wife, a Midianite, saved her husband from God's wrath by quickly performing the operation. These, however, are distortions, which should not lead us astray; later on we shall discover the reason for them. The fact remains that *there is only*

one answer to the question of where the Jews derived the custom of circumcision from – namely, from Egypt. (23:26 – 7, emphasis added)

Perhaps Freud's most ingenious account of circumcision is to show that this custom provides us with a further proof that Moses was an Egyptian. Freud argues as follows:

Herodotus, the 'father of history', tells us that the custom of circumcision had long been indigenous in Egypt, and his statements are confirmed by the findings in mummies and indeed by pictures on the walls of tombs. No other people of the Eastern Mediterranean, so far as we know, practised this custom; it may safely be presumed that the Semites, Babylonians and Sumerians were uncircumcised. The Bible story itself says this is so of the inhabitants of Canaan; it is a necessary premiss to the adventure of Jacob's daughter and the prince of Shechem. The possibility that the Jews acquired the custom of circumcision during their sojourn in Egypt in some way other than in connection with the religious teaching of Moses may be rejected as completely without foundation. Now, taking it as certain that circumcision was a universal popular custom in Egypt, let us for a moment adopt the ordinary hypothesis that Moses was a Jew, who sought to free his compatriots from bondage in Egypt and lead them to develop an independent and self-conscious national existence in another country – which was what in fact happened. What sense could it have, in that case, that he should at the same time impose on them a troublesome custom which even, to some extent, made them into Egyptians and which must keep permanently alive their memory of Egypt – whereas his efforts could only be aimed in the opposite direction, towards alienating his people from the land of their bondage and overcoming their longing for the 'flesh-pots of Egypt'? No, the fact from which we started and the hypothesis which we added to it are so incompatible with each other that we may be bold enough to reach this conclusion: if Moses gave the Jews not only a new religion but also the commandment for circumcision, he was not a Jew but an Egyptian, and in that case the Mosaic religion was probably an Egyptian one and, in view of its contrast to the popular religion, the religion of the Aten, with which the later Jewish religion agrees in some remarkable respects. (23:27 – 8)

We may feel uneasy about the way in which Freud so freely appeals to the Hebrew Bible when it suits his purposes, and dismisses it as a distortion when it contradicts his beliefs. Freud does open himself to serious methodological critique when he self-confidently asserts: "No historian can regard the biblical account of Moses and the Exodus as anything other than a pious piece of imaginative fiction, which has recast a remote tradition for the benefit of its own tendentious purposes" (23:33). It is never quite clear what Freud's criterion is for selecting those features of the biblical account which he takes to be reliable indicators of

the historical truth and those which he tells us are distortions. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that once Freud became convinced about what he thought really happened, he then scanned the Bible in order to select the evidence that would support his case. Throughout this second essay Freud repeats the charge that the pious scribes who wrote and edited the biblical account (centuries after the events occurred) had “tendentious purposes.” But he never even acknowledges that, despite his pose of being the disinterested historian seeking to establish the objective facts, he might also be accused of harboring such “tendentious purposes.”

I do think we can understand – although not *justify* – what Freud is doing in these essays. Suppose, for the sake of argument, we adopt the hypothesis that Freud had somehow guessed the truth of what really happened when Moses took the Jews out of Egypt into the wilderness. If the Egyptian Semites murdered Moses, then it seems to make sense that the scribes who authored and edited the Pentateuch would want to conceal this fact. They would seek to eliminate its traces from the biblical narrative.⁹ We can appreciate the significance of Freud’s famous analogy between a murder and a distortion of a text.

In its implications the distortion of a text resembles a murder: the difficulty is not in perpetrating the deed, but in getting rid of its traces. We might well lend the word ‘*Entstellung* [distortion]’ the double meaning to which it has a claim but of which to-day it makes no use. It should mean not only ‘to change the appearance of something’ but also ‘to put something in another place, to displace’. Accordingly, in many instances of textual distortion, we may nevertheless count upon finding what has been suppressed and disavowed hidden away somewhere else, though changed and torn from its context. Only it will not always be easy to recognize it. (23:43)

The analogy that Freud draws between the distortion of a text and a murder is used to characterize the (alleged) textual distortion of the murder of Moses. Because the pious biblical scribes tried to conceal the murder of Moses, then the task of the (psychoanalytic) detective historian is to discover those traces of the murder that have not been completely obliterated.

But we can also apply this analogy to Freud’s own text – a text in which there are also “almost everywhere noticeable gaps, disturbing repetitions and obvious contradictions” (23:43). What is being distorted and concealed here? Is Freud himself changing “the appearance of something” and putting “something in another place”? We have good

reasons for thinking that there is a distortion (*Entstellung*) when we recall that Freud began this essay by affirming “But once again this is not the whole story nor the most important part of the whole story” (23:17). What is the whole story? Do we find traces in this essay of the most important part of the whole story?

We will not be able to answer these questions adequately until we consider the third and most substantial essay, “Moses, his People and Monotheist Religion.” But I want to step back and reflect on the first two essays – the essays published when Freud was still living in Vienna, with an acute awareness of the ominous threats to European Jewry (and to the discipline of psychoanalysis).

Let us put aside our doubts and reservations, and assume that what Freud has related is more or less historically accurate. What has Freud established? This is his own concise summary:

And here, it seems, I have reached the conclusion of my study, which was directed to the single aim of introducing the figure of an Egyptian Moses into the nexus of Jewish history. Our findings may be thus expressed in the most concise formula. Jewish history is familiar to us for its dualities: *two* groups of people who came together to form the nation, *two* kingdoms into which this nation fell apart, *two* gods’ names in the documentary sources of the Bible. To these we add two fresh ones: the foundation of *two* religions – the first repressed by the second but nevertheless later emerging victoriously behind it, and *two* religious founders, who are both called by the same name of Moses and whose personalities we have to distinguish from each other. All of these dualities are the necessary consequences of the first one: the fact that one portion of the people had an experience which must be regarded as traumatic and which the other portion escaped. Beyond this there would be a very great deal to discuss, to explain and to assert. Only thus would an interest in our purely historical study find its true justification. What the real nature of a tradition resides in, and what its special power rests on, how impossible it is to dispute the personal influence upon world-history of individual great men, what sacrilege one commits against the splendid diversity of human life if one recognizes only those motives which arise from material needs, from what sources some ideas (and particularly religious ones) derive their power to subject both men and peoples to their yoke – to study all this in the special case of Jewish history would be an alluring task. To continue my work on such lines as these would be to find a link with the statements I put forward twenty-five years ago in *Totem and Taboo* [1912 – 1913]. But I no longer feel that I have the strength to do so. (23:52 – 3)

This is an eloquent, moving, and elusive conclusion. Freud does not explicitly mention the murder of Moses. He only refers to it indirectly: “one portion of the people had an experience which must be regarded

as traumatic.” We might even feel that there is a parallel between Freud and the biblical Moses – the Moses who leads the Israelites to the promised land, but does not enter it. This conclusion is also filled with promises – promises which the aged and dying Freud might never have fulfilled. Thus far Freud has told us a likely story, but its significance, especially its psychoanalytic meaning, has not been made explicit. Freud tells us that there is still a “great deal to discuss” – and only in light of this would “our purely historical study find its true justification.”

Let us also recall that at the end of his first essay, Freud indicated that if we “take the hypothesis seriously that Moses was an aristocratic Egyptian,” we would be able “to obtain a grasp of the possible basis of a number of the characteristics and peculiarities of the laws and religion which he gave to the Jewish people; and we shall even be led on to important considerations regarding the origin of monotheist religions in general” (23:16). But thus far Freud has not fulfilled this promise. What do the alleged historical events of the middle of the fourteenth century BCE have to do with the Jewish people today? And how does all this bear on the thesis that I announced at the beginning – that in *The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion* we will discover Freud’s attempt to answer the question: what is the essence of (his) Jewishness? It is only by examining the final essay that we will be able to answer these questions, but I do think that we can begin to discern traces of Freud’s answer.

MOSAIC MONOTHEISM: INITIAL HINTS

In order to show that there are already indications of Freud’s answer, I want to raise a fundamental question about Freud’s historical account which I have not yet directly considered. If the Egyptian Semites rose up and killed their leader Moses, what were their motives? Why did the Jews murder Moses? To answer this question, we need to examine Freud’s understanding of the monotheistic religion that the Jews had thrust upon them. Throughout his second essay (and even more explicitly in the third essay) there is a subtle but very revealing valorization of the superior “spiritual and intellectual” (*geistig*) significance of monotheism over more “primitive” forms of polytheism.¹⁰ Let us review some of the details of Freud’s historical account of the origin of the Aten religion in Egypt and how it is related to Jewish monotheism.

The “Jewish religion which is attributed to Moses” is a “rigid monotheism on the grand scale: there is only one God, he is the sole God, omnipotent, unapproachable; his aspect is more than human eyes can

tolerate, no image must be made of him, even his name may not be spoken” (23:18). Freud initially presents this characterization as an obstacle to his claim that the Jewish religion was originally an Egyptian religion. For prior to Akhenaten, the Egyptian religion was an “unrestricted” and “primitive” polytheism. There is a “violent contrast” (23:18) between the Mosaic religion and Egyptian polytheism.

In the Egyptian religion there is an almost innumerable host of deities of varying dignity and origin: a few personifications of great natural forces such as heaven and earth, sun and moon, an occasional abstraction such as Ma’at (truth or justice) or a caricature such as the dwarf-like Bes; but most of them local gods, dating from the period when the country was divided into numerous provinces, with the shape of animals, as though they had not yet completed their evolution from the old totem animals, with no sharp distinctions between them, and scarcely differing in the functions allotted to them. (23:18 – 19)

But the Mosaic religion condemns magic and sorcery in the severest terms, and there is a “harsh prohibition against making an image of any living or imagined creature.” In Egyptian polytheism, magic and sorcery “proliferate with the greatest luxuriance” (23:19). There is an “insatiable appetite of the Egyptians for embodying their gods in clay, stone and metal” (23:19). Furthermore, “the ancient Jewish religion renounced immortality entirely; the possibility of existence continuing after death is nowhere and never mentioned” (23:20). In the Egyptian polytheism “Osiris, the god of the dead, the ruler of this other world, was the most popular and undisputed of all the gods of Egypt” (23:20).

Freud stresses the contrast between Jewish monotheism and Egyptian polytheism in order to indicate what “stands in the way” of his hypothesis that the origin of Jewish monotheism is to be found in Egyptian religion. But this “violent contrast” also serves another purpose – to underscore the revolutionary significance of what the young Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (who changed his name to Akhenaten)¹¹ sought to introduce “in the glorious Eighteenth Dynasty.”

This king set about forcing a new religion on his Egyptian subjects – a religion which ran contrary to their thousands-of-years-old traditions and to all the familiar habits of their lives. It was a strict monotheism, the first attempt of the kind, so far as we know, in the history of the world, and along with the belief in a single god religious intolerance was inevitably born, which had previously been alien to the ancient world and remained so long afterwards. (23:20)¹²

Freud – in an almost quasi-Marxist fashion – relates this development to the spread of the Egyptian empire.

This imperialism was reflected in religion as universalism and monotheism. Since the Pharaoh's responsibilities now embraced not only Egypt but Nubia and Syria as well, deity too was obliged to abandon its national limitation and, just as the Pharaoh was the sole and unrestricted ruler of the world known to the Egyptians, this must also apply to the Egyptians' new deity. (23:21)

Freud also tells us that in the course of Akhenaten's reign, which lasted for seventeen years from 1375 BCE until 1358 BCE "[h]e introduced something new, which for the first time converted the doctrine of a universal god into monotheism – the factor of exclusiveness" (23:22).¹³ Freud even attributes a radical transformation of the sun cult of On to Akhenaten.

Amenophis never denied his adherence to the sun cult of On. In the two Hymns to the Aten which have survived in the rock tombs and which were probably composed by him himself, he praises the sun as the creator and preserver of all living things both inside and outside Egypt with an ardour which is not repeated till many centuries later in the Psalms in honour of the Jewish god Yahweh. He was not content, however, with this astonishing anticipation of the scientific discovery of the effect of solar radiation. There is no doubt that he went a step further: that he did not worship the sun as a material object but as the symbol of a divine being whose energy was manifested in its rays. (23:22)¹⁴

The measures taken by Akhenaten to destroy the traditional Egyptian polytheism and to displace it with a harsh, exclusive, intolerant monotheism eventually "provoked a mood of fanatical vindictiveness among the suppressed priesthood and unsatisfied common people . . ." (23:23). After Akhenaten's death there was a violent reaction and a period of anarchy. The priests of Amun, whom Akhenaten had sought to suppress, gained their revenge. Egyptian polytheism was re-established. And there was now an attempt to obliterate the traces of the Aten religion – Akhenaten's monotheism. This attempt might have been successful, if it were not for Moses who was a follower of the Aten religion. Moses could not expect to survive in Egypt. He needed to "choose" a new people, to lead them out of Egypt in order to insure the survival of the Aten religion. Akhenaten had "alienated his people and let his empire fall to pieces. The more energetic nature of Moses was more at home with the plan of founding a new kingdom, of finding a new people to whom he would present for their worship the religion which Egypt had disdained" (23:28).

Freud's narrative provides the background for understanding why the Jews murdered Moses. Jewish monotheism "behaved in some respects even more harshly than the Egyptian: for instance in forbidding pictorial representations of any kind. The most essential difference is to

be seen . . . in the fact that the Jewish religion was entirely without sun worship, in which the Egyptian one still found support” (23:25 – 6).

Ironically, despite Freud’s significant departures from the biblical account, in this part of his narrative he can draw some support from the Bible. Throughout the biblical account – not only in the famous story of the golden calf – we hear about the “murmurings” of the Jewish people in the wilderness. On several occasions, the Israelites complained and sought to rebel against Moses. They wanted to return to the “fleshpots of Egypt.” What does this desire to return to Egypt mean? According to Freud, it means the desire to be rid of the severe demands of monotheism and return to Egyptian polytheism.¹⁵ Just as the priests of Amun sought their revenge against Akhenaten, so the Jews who had been forced to leave Egypt and adopt a new, strict, harsh, exclusive monotheism with rigorous ethical standards, sought their revenge against Moses. But there is one consequential difference. In Egypt the reaction set in *after* the death of Akhenaten. But the Jews did not wait until Moses died; they murdered him. Although Freud cautiously introduces this crucial event, he is bold in the inferences that he draws from it.

[I]n 1922, Ernst Sellin made a discovery which affected our problem decisively. He found in the Prophet Hosea (in the second half of the eighth century BC) unmistakable signs of a tradition to the effect that Moses, the founder of their religion, met with a violent end in a rising of his refractory and stiff-necked people, and that at the same time the religion he had introduced was thrown off. This tradition is not, however, restricted to Hosea; it reappears in most of the later Prophets, and indeed, according to Sellin, became the basis of all the later Messianic expectations. At the end of the Babylonian captivity a hope grew up among the Jewish people that the man who had been so shamefully murdered would return from the dead and would lead his remorseful people, and perhaps not them alone, into the kingdom of lasting bliss. (23:36)

Freud, who is acutely sensitive to the accusation that he is spinning imaginative tales, tells us that he is not in a position to judge whether Sellin has interpreted the biblical passages correctly, but he acknowledges that Sellin’s hypothesis “allows us to spin our threads further without contradicting the authentic findings of historical research” (23:37). Once again we can detect the slide from conjecture to established conclusion. Freud begins the seventh (and final section) of “If Moses was an Egyptian . . .” as follows:

Of all the events of early times which later poets, priests and historians undertook to work over, one stood out, the suppression of which was enjoined by the most immediate and best human motives. This was the murder of Moses, the

great leader and liberator, which Sellin *discovered* from hints in the writings of the Prophets. Sellin's hypothesis cannot be called fantastic – it is probable enough. Moses, deriving from the school of Akhenaten, employed no methods other than did the king; he commanded, he forced his faith upon the people. The doctrine of Moses may have been even harsher than that of his master. He had no need to retain the sun-god as a support: the school of On had no significance for his alien people. Moses, like Akhenaten, met with the same fate that awaits all enlightened despots. The Jewish people under Moses were just as little able to tolerate such a highly spiritualized [*vergeistigte*] religion and find satisfaction of their needs in what it had to offer as had been the Egyptians of the Eighteenth Dynasty. The same thing happened in both cases: those who had been dominated and kept in want rose and threw off the burden of the religion that had been imposed on them. But while the tame Egyptians waited till fate had removed the sacred figure of their Pharaoh, the savage Semites took fate into their own hands and rid themselves of their tyrant. (23:47, emphasis added)¹⁶

I suggested earlier that throughout this second essay there is an implicit valorization of Jewish monotheism. This might seem to be belied by the adjectives Freud uses to characterize monotheism: “strict,” “rigid,” “intolerant,” and “exclusive.” But in the Freudian lexicon these are not necessarily pejorative expressions. Rather they are indicative of the rigorous “spiritual and intellectual” (*geistig*) demands that monotheism places upon us, demands similar to the rigorous intellectual requirements of psychoanalysis.

Freud's own praise for the Mosaic teaching, and his pride in the Jewish tradition of the Prophets, can clearly be discerned in a passage that comes near the end of “If Moses was an Egyptian . . .” – a passage that helps us to understand this ellipsis. Even Freud's prose assumes a biblical cadence:

Thereupon there arose from among the midst of the people an unending succession of men who were not linked to Moses in their origin but were enthralled by the great and mighty tradition which had grown up little by little in obscurity: and it was these men, the Prophets, who tirelessly preached the old Mosaic doctrine – that the deity disdained sacrifice and ceremonial and asked only for faith and a life in truth and justice (*Ma'at*). The efforts of the Prophets had a lasting success; the doctrines with which they re-established the old faith became the permanent content of the Jewish religion. It is honour enough to the Jewish people that they could preserve such a tradition and produce men who gave it a voice – even though the initiative to it came from outside, from a great foreigner. (23:51)¹⁷

This enlightened Mosaic teaching; this *geistig* teaching that abhors magic, sorcery, and the craving for graven images; this teaching that

asks “only for faith and a life in truth and justice” eventually triumphed. This is the tradition that was preached by the Prophets – one that the Jewish people (including Freud the Jew) can honor and be proud of. This is the “great and mighty” tradition with which Freud the “godless Jew” identifies. When we complete our analysis of Part III of *The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion*, we will see clearly that this is why Freud “feels that he is in his essential nature a Jew.” But already, Freud’s understanding of the Mosaic ideal and Jewish monotheism as establishing a tradition that places such a high and rigorous demand on living a life of truth and justice without falling back to any form of idolatry is anticipated in his first two essays.

HISTORICAL INTERLUDE: FROM VIENNA TO LONDON

In the opening paragraph of “If Moses was an Egyptian . . .” Freud uses the metaphor of “a bronze statue with feet of clay,” a recurring metaphor that Freud employs with slight variations in his correspondence. I agree with Yerushalmi that the “imposing” bronze statue refers to the third essay, Part III of *The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion* (*FM*, 22). But before turning to an examination of this essay, I want to consider the historical circumstances of Freud’s preoccupation with the Egyptian origin of Moses and the character of Jewish monotheism. Freud freely discusses the progress of his inquiry in his correspondence during the 1930s. This correspondence provides a rich source for discovering how Freud conceived of his work, why he was motivated to write it, and why he was so reluctant to publish it.

Freud’s first two essays were published in *Imago* in 1937 when he was still living in Vienna. In both essays, Freud gives us hints about the consequences he intends to draw from the “fact” that Moses was an Egyptian aristocrat who chose the Jews to be the followers of Akhenaten’s monotheism, but he writes as if drawing out these consequences is still work to be done in the future – work which he may never complete. In 1937, Freud was eighty-one years old, he was suffering from a painful and debilitating cancer, and anticipating his own death. In 1937, Freud was still resisting the pleas from his family and friends to escape from Vienna. We know now, however, that already in 1934, Freud “conceived, and for the most part wrote, his ideas on Moses and religion, ideas that were to engross him for the rest of his life.”¹⁸ Freud’s 1934 manuscript draft contains the central theses that we find in the third essay of *The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion* – the very

material that he referred to as *future* work to be done in the concluding paragraph of “If Moses was an Egyptian . . .” On 6 November, 1934, three years prior to the publication of the first two essays, Freud wrote to Arnold Zweig, “I need more certainty and I should not like to endanger the final formula of the whole book which I regard as valuable, by founding it on a base of clay.”¹⁹ On 16 December, 1934 he wrote again, indicating his hesitancy about publishing his results:

Don't say any more about the Moses book. The fact that this, probably my last creative effort, should have come to grief depresses me enough as it is. Not that I can shake him off. The man and what I wanted to make of him pursue me everywhere. But it would not do; the external dangers and inner misgivings allow of no other solution. I think my memory of recent events is no longer reliable. The fact that I wrote at length to you in an earlier letter about Moses being an Egyptian is not the essential point, though it is the starting point. Nor is it any inner uncertainty of my part, for that is as good as settled, but the fact that I was obliged to construct so imposing a statue upon feet of clay, so that any fool could topple it. (SFAZ, 98)

This frank admission supports what we have already discovered in the texts of the first two essays. Despite Freud's reiterated claims about the uncertainty of his historical claims, he was confident that he had correctly guessed and interpreted what happened to Moses in the wilderness. After completing his 1934 draft which he entitled *Der Mann Moses: Ein historischer Roman* (The Man Moses: An Historical Novel), Freud was still searching for evidence to support his historical claims. On 2 May, 1935, he wrote to Arnold Zweig that he had discovered in an account of Tel-el-Amarna the mention of a Prince Thotmes, “of whom nothing further is known.” “If I were a millionaire, I would finance the continuation of these excavations. This Thotmes could be my Moses and I would be able to boast that *I had guessed right*’ (SFAZ, 106, emphasis added).

Despite Freud's anxiety about the paucity of objective evidence to support his historical reconstruction, he was obsessed with his *Moses* study. When the book was finally published in 1939 Freud confesses: “Actually it has been written twice: for the first time a few years ago in Vienna, where I did not think it would be possible to publish it. I determined to give it up; but it tormented me like an unlaidd ghost . . .” (23:103). Freud did not want to submit to the public a bronze statue with feet of clay – to expose himself to ridicule. But this is not the main reason for holding back the publication of the “dangerous” third essay. In the first prefatory note to Part III of his book, a preface that was written *before* March 12, 1938 when the Germans marched into Austria, he

explicitly states: “So I shall not give this work to the public. But that need not prevent my writing it . . . It may then be preserved in concealment till some day the time arrives when it may venture without danger into the light, or till someone who has reached the same conclusions and opinions can be told: ‘there was someone in darker times who thought the same as you!’” (23:56). Why was Freud so reluctant to publish the third essay of his book, the part that he characterized as “full of content,” and “which included what was really open to objection and dangerous – the application [of these findings] to the genesis of monotheism and the view of religion in general . . .” (23:103)? One might think that, in light of what was happening to European Jewry, Freud hesitated to offend his fellow Jews. But this was not what was foremost in his mind. Freud was far more wary of what he believed would be the reaction of the Catholic authorities. In the same prefatory note mentioned above, he wrote the following:

We are living here in a Catholic country under the protection of that Church, uncertain how long that protection will hold out. But as long as it lasts, we naturally hesitate to do anything that would be bound to arouse the Church's hostility. This is not cowardice, but prudence. The new enemy, to whom we want to avoid being of service, is more dangerous than the old one with whom we have already learnt to come to terms. The psycho-analytic researches which we carry on are in any case viewed with suspicious attention by Catholicism. I will not maintain that this is unjustly so. If our work leads us to a conclusion which reduces religion to a neurosis of humanity and explains its enormous power in the same way as a neurotic compulsion in our individual patients, we may be sure of drawing the resentment of our ruling powers down upon us . . . It would probably lead to our being prohibited from practising psycho-analysis. Such violent methods of suppression are, indeed, by no means alien to the Church; the fact is rather that it feels it as an invasion of its privileges if someone else makes use of those methods. But psycho-analysis, which in the course of my long life has gone everywhere, still possesses no home that could be more valuable for it than the city in which it was born and grew up. (23:55)

Whatever judgment we may make about the soundness of Freud's reasoning, his own political assessment of the Catholic Church, and whether prudence was the appropriate response in such a situation, there is little doubt that this is what was uppermost in Freud's mind. Freud expressed the same concern in his correspondence. In a letter to Arnold Zweig dated 9 September, 1934, he writes:

Faced with the new persecutions, one asks oneself again how the Jews have come to be what they are and why they have attracted this undying hatred. I soon discovered the formula: Moses created the Jews. So I gave my book the

title: *The Man Moses, a historical novel*. . . The material fits into three sections. The first part is like an interesting novel; the second is laborious and boring; the third is full of content and makes exacting reading. The whole enterprise broke down on this third section, for it involved a theory of religion – certainly nothing new for me after *Totem and Taboo*, but something new and fundamental for the uninitiated. It is the thought of these uninitiated readers that makes me hold over the finished work. For we live here in an atmosphere of Catholic orthodoxy. They say that the politics of our country are determined by one Pater Schmidt . . . He is a confidant of the Pope, and unfortunately he himself is an ethnologist and a student of comparative religion, whose books make no secret of his abhorrence of analysis and especially of my totem theory . . . Now, any publication of mine will be sure to attract a certain amount of attention, which will not escape the notice of this inimical priest. Thus we might be risking a ban on psychoanalysis in Vienna and the suspension of all our publications here. If this danger involved me alone, I would be but little concerned, but to deprive all our members in Vienna of their livelihood is too great a responsibility. (*SFAZ*, 91 – 2)²⁰

And in his letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé (1 June, 1935) in which he gives a succinct account of his main theses concerning Moses and monotheism, he concludes:

And now you see, Lou, this formula, which holds so great a fascination for me, cannot be publicly expressed in Austria today, without bringing down upon us a state prohibition of analysis on the part of the ruling Catholic authority. And it is only this Catholicism which protects us from the Nazis. And furthermore the historical foundations of the Moses story are not solid enough to serve as a basis for these invaluable conclusions of mine. And so I remain silent. It suffices me that I myself can believe in the solution of the problem. *It has pursued me throughout the whole of my life.* (*SFLA*, 205; Appendix, p. 118, emphasis added)²¹

In retrospect, we can see just how politically naive Freud was in understanding what was really going on in Germany and Austria, but there is still a further question that we need to ask. Why was Freud so obsessed with his Moses study? What precisely was “the problem” that Freud thought he had now solved – the problem that had pursued him “throughout the whole of [his] life”? This does not refer to the hypotheses that Moses was an Egyptian, that he “created the Jews,” and was murdered by the Jews. For there is no evidence that Freud even formulated these hypotheses prior to the 1930s, although he did have a life long fascination with Moses.²² The problem that Freud thought that he had now solved was to give an account of the essential character of the Jewish people and their tradition inspired by Moses’ monotheistic ideals. He also believed that this would help to explain why the Jews had been the object of such virulent anti-Semitism and “undying hatred”

throughout their long history. But we will only fully understand the meaning of Freud's solution (one which answers the question raised in the preface to the Hebrew edition of *Totem and Taboo*), when we analyze Part III of *The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion*.

In June, 1938 – after some harrowing experiences in which the Gestapo searched his house and his daughter Anna had been arrested (but released) – Freud was finally allowed to leave Vienna and travel to London. Within a month after his arrival he wrote a second prefatory note for Part III of his *Moses* book. He was now determined to publish the entire book as soon as possible. This is how he explained his decision.

PREFATORY NOTE II
([LONDON], JUNE, 1938)

The quite special difficulties which have weighed on me during my composition of this study relating to the figure of Moses – internal doubts as well as external obstacles – have resulted in this third and concluding essay being introduced by two different prefaces, which contradict each other and indeed cancel each other out. For in the short space of time between the two there has been a fundamental change in the author's circumstances. At the earlier date I was living under the protection of the Catholic Church, and was afraid that the publication of my work would result in the loss of that protection and would conjure up a prohibition upon the work of the adherents and students of psycho-analysis in Austria. Then, suddenly, came the German invasion and Catholicism proved, to use the words of the Bible, 'a broken reed'. In the certainty that I should now be persecuted not only for my line of thought but also for my 'race' – accompanied by many of my friends, I left the city which, from my early childhood, had been my home for seventy-eight years.

I met with the friendliest reception in lovely, free, magnanimous England. Here I now live, a welcome guest; I can breathe a sigh of relief now that the weight has been taken off me and that I am once more able to speak and write – I had almost said 'and think' – as I wish or as I must. I venture to bring the last portion of my work before the public. (23:57)

Although there were those who urged Freud to suppress the publication of his book, or at least to modify some of his claims, Freud resisted these suggestions. The entire book was finally published in 1939 in Amsterdam. In the same year, an English translation by Katherine Jones (the wife of Ernest Jones) also appeared. It was the last book Freud published (although not the last manuscript that he wrote). Freud died on September 23, 1939.