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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.

Richard J. Bernstein is Vera List Professor of Philosophy in the Graduate Faculty at the New School for Social Research, New York. His many publications include *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Polity Press, 1996), *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Polity Press, 1991), and *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Polity Press, 1986).

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For Skylar, Tessa, and Maya

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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)

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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

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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

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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.

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Abbreviations

WORKS BY SIGMUND FREUD

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

SECONDARY WORKS

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

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