

Fall 2009

Review of Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* and J. Assmann, *Of God and Gods*

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Recommended Citation

Bernstein, Richard J. (2009). Review of "Review of Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* and J. Assmann, *Of God and Gods*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 8 : No. 1
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol8/iss1/3>

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Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008. 196 pp. (+x) ISBN 9780299225544.

Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. 140 pp. (+8) ISBN 9780804761604.

Reviewed by Richard J. Bernstein, New School for Social Research

In 1997, Jan Assmann, one of the world's leading Egyptologists, published an extraordinarily provocative book, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*. The subtitle provides the essential clue about its contents. Assmann's primary concern is the memory of Moses and how Egypt has been portrayed and remembered throughout the course of Western history. Although there is no independent historical evidence--other than the biblical account--that Moses ever actually existed, the memory of Moses has exerted an enormous influence on Western history. Assmann proposes a new discipline, a new subfield of history that he calls "mnemohistory."

Unlike history, mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as remembered. It surveys the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of the reading of the past. Mnemohistory is not the opposite of history, but one of its subdisciplines Mnemohistory is reception theory applied to history. But "reception" is not to be understood merely in the narrow sense of transmitting and receiving. The past is not simply "received" by the present. The present is "haunted" by the past and the past is modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present. (Assmann 1997: 8-9)

Assmann knows that "memories may be false, distorted, invented, or implanted" but that nevertheless they can be enormously powerful in shaping our beliefs and actions.

In *Moses the Egyptian* Assmann sought to illuminate an obscure episode in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that centered on the figure of Moses--one that "culminated in the audacious idea that biblical monotheism had its roots in Egypt and represents a transcoding of Egyptian mysteries" (Assmann 2010: 5). His project was to "retrace this newly discovered chapter in the history of memory of Egypt in the West, from its early origins right down to present-day consequences" (Assmann 2010: 5). But there is a deeper motivation for this inquiry. Assmann's starting point is the extremely negative characterization of Egypt in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the story of Exodus. Egypt is the symbol of idolatry, scorn, and abomination. "Israel embodies truth, Egypt symbolizes darkness and error" (Assmann 1997: 7) This stark opposition is based on what Assmann calls "the Mosaic distinction"--the distinction between the true and false in religion--between the true and only one God and all the other false idolatrous gods. He probes the prehistory of this distinction, the background of polytheism against which it arose and its revolutionary significance. This is why the Moses discourse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is so important for Assmann's narrative. It "deconstructs" the Mosaic distinction. By tracing biblical religion back to Egyptian mysteries as the source of all religion, this discourse challenges the exclusivity of biblical monotheism. The culmination of this deconstructive Moses/Egypt discourse is Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. "In making Moses an

Egyptian and in tracing monotheism back to ancient Egypt, Freud attempted to deconstruct the murderous distinction" (Assmann 1997: 6).

As soon as *Moses the Egyptian* was published, it provoked heated discussion and severe criticism. Assmann was vigorously attacked--sometimes from opposing perspectives. On the one hand, he was rebuked for introducing the Mosaic distinction because it mischaracterizes biblical monotheism. On the other hand, he was attacked for calling into question a distinction that is constitutive for biblical religion, "as well as for all the Western values that are based upon it" (Assmann 2010: 5). "Both objections, although diametrically opposed to each other, tar me with the brush of anti-Semitism: one sees an implicit intolerance in the concept of the Mosaic distinction; the other sees, in the demand that it be rescinded, a call for a return to Egypt, a plea for polytheism, cosmotheism, and a reenchantment of the world" (Assmann 2010: 5-6). Theologians argued that Assmann fails to understand--and indeed distorts--the true character of biblical monotheism. [1] Historians of religion objected that Assmann neglects to consider how monotheism evolved out of polytheism. Given the current global concern with religion, it is not surprising that a book intended to make a scholarly contribution to a relatively obscure historical episode should draw so much fire.

Assmann concedes that he may have "overstated" his case; he did not anticipate that he would be embroiled in theological controversy. But regardless of his original "subjective intentions," Assmann now recognizes that he must deal with the potential meanings of his text--the ways it has been read, interpreted, and misinterpreted. In *The Price of Monotheism*, Assmann confronts the issues raised by his critics and responds to their objections--especially the questions provoked by the concept of the Mosaic distinction. And in *Of God and Gods*, Assmann approaches the Mosaic distinction from the perspective of the polytheism that preceded it.

To appreciate fully what Assmann means by the Mosaic distinction and its revolutionary significance, we need to sketch the overarching narrative of *Moses the Egyptian*. [2] Although the expressions "monotheism" and "polytheism" were invented in the seventeenth century and need to be used with caution, Assmann argues that ancient polytheisms, especially in Egypt and Mesopotamia, were not exclusive. They developed what he calls "techniques of translation" (Assmann 1997: 2). "The gods were international because they were cosmic. The different peoples worshipped different gods, but nobody contested the reality of foreign gods and the legitimacy of foreign forms of worship" (Assmann 1997: 3). There was even the practice of translating the names of foreign gods.

But all this changes with the coming of monotheism. Assmann (like Freud in *Moses and Monotheism*) claims that monotheism can be traced back to the short reign of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten in the fourteenth century B.C.E. Akhenaten, unlike Moses, was a figure of history whose memory was virtually obliterated until his rediscovery in the nineteenth century. The reason why Akhenaten is so important for Assmann's narrative is that he actually did something that is very similar to what has been ascribed to Moses. He introduced a form of monotheism that excluded other gods and idols. "[H]e had abolished the cults and idols of Egyptian polytheism and established a purely monotheistic worship of a new god of light, whom he called 'Aton'" (Assmann 1997: 23). This is a theme that Assmann underscores when he introduces the Mosaic distinction. There are anticipations of the oneness of god in ancient

polytheisms, but it is only with the counterreligion of monotheism that the emphatic claim to exclusivity appears: There is only one true religion and all other religions are false. Assmann calls this the Mosaic distinction because this radical claim is associated with Moses and with the first two commandments: "What seems crucial to me is not the distinction between One God and many gods, but the distinction between truth and falsehood in religion, between the true god and false gods, true doctrine and false doctrine, knowledge and ignorance, belief and unbelief" (Assmann 2010: 2).

Following a suggestion of Theo Sundermeier, Assmann calls the varieties of polytheism that existed prior to monotheism the "primary religions."

Primary religions evolve historically over hundreds and thousands of years within a single culture, society, and generally also language, with all of which they are inextricably entwined Secondary religions, by contrast, are those that owe their existence to an act of revelation and foundation, build on primary religions, and typically differentiate themselves from the latter by denouncing them as paganism, idolatry and superstition. (Assmann 2010: 1)

Monotheism is a "secondary religion." It is a "counterreligion" because it sets itself against what it condemns as "paganism." From the perspective of the Mosaic distinction, Egypt is the symbol of false gods, false religion, false doctrine; it is "paganism, idolatry and superstition." The expression "Moses the Egyptian" calls attention to the discourse that implicitly and explicitly challenges the Mosaic distinction. It arose in the Renaissance with the discovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a growing fascination with all things Egyptian. But what was much less known and appreciated is the contribution of John Spencer who--despite his Egyptophobia--nevertheless initiated a discourse that laid the foundations for a subversive historical investigation of the origins of Hebrew and Christian rituals. To the extent that Spencer and those who followed him traced Hebrew and Christian religion back to its "source" in the arcane theology of Egypt, they were, in effect, undermining the Mosaic distinction. This is the obscure chapter of the Moses discourse that Assmann sought to recover and highlight in *Moses the Egyptian*. He subtly illuminates the contributions of John Spencer, Ralph Cudworth, John Toland, William Warburton, Karl Leonard Reinhold, and Friedrich Schiller to the undermining of the Mosaic distinction. The culmination of this challenge and deconstruction of the Mosaic distinction is Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*.

Assmann's narrative of the memory of Egypt in Western monotheism is dependent on his understanding of the meaning, origin, reaction to, and consequences of the Mosaic distinction. Most of his critics have directed their criticism to this all-important distinction. I want to show that despite the clarification, modification, and even rejection of some of his earlier views, the significance and potential danger of the Mosaic distinction emerges with even greater sharpness in his recent publications.

Assmann now claims that we need a more nuanced narrative of the origins of monotheism--one that distinguishes two main types of monotheism: "evolutionary" and "revolutionary." In many ancient cultures, there was a gradual tendency to privilege one god above all others and even to assimilate other gods to a single god. Nevertheless, they did not claim exclusivity; nor did they claim that all other gods and religions are false. Evolutionary monotheism must be sharply

distinguished from the revolutionary monotheism of the Mosaic distinction. This form of monotheism represents a rupture, a break, and a radical departure from the past. Revolutionary monotheism is a book religion, one based on a sacred canon of texts; it is not a cult religion.

But when precisely did this revolution occur--with Akhenaten, with Moses? Assmann now gives a more subtle answer. Assmann now speaks of "monotheistic moments" rather than a single historically datable revolutionary event.

Rather than speaking of a single "monotheistic shift" with an unambiguous "before and after," one could therefore refer with equal justice to "monotheistic moments" in which the Mosaic distinction is struck with all severity--the first and second commandments, the story of the Golden Calf, the forced termination of mixed marriages under Nehemiah, the destruction of pagan temples in Christian late antiquity--before being watered down or even almost forgotten in the unavoidable compromises that determine the everyday practice of religious life. . . . The Mosaic distinction is not a historical event that revolutionized the world overnight, but the regulative idea that exerted the world-changing influence in fits and starts, so to speak, over a period of hundreds and thousands of years. Only in this sense can we speak of a "monotheistic shift." It does not coincide in any datable way with the Mosaic distinction, and certainly not with the biographical particulars of any historical "man Moses." (Assmann 2010: 2-3)

Characterizing the "monotheistic shift" as one that occurs in "fits and starts" throughout history provides an illuminating perspective for how Assmann understands the Hebrew Bible. For Assmann now claims that we find evidence of both evolutionary and revolutionary monotheism in it. He makes this point quite dramatically when he asks the question: "How many religions stand behind the Old Testament?" And he answers: "Not one religion but two stand behind the books of the Old Testament" (Assmann 2010: 8). The first "scarcely differs from the primary religions that coexisted with it at the time in its adoration of a supreme god who dominates and far exceeds the other gods, without however, excluding them in any way, a god who, as creator of the world and everything in it, cares for his creatures, increases the fertility of the flocks and fields, tames the elements, and directs the destiny of his people" (Assmann 2010: 8). But superimposed on this is the religion insisting One God be worshipped to the exclusion of all others. This religion is most evident in the prophetic books and especially in Deuteronomy. But these two religions do not just stand side by side; they are opposed and antagonistic to each other. "That this antagonism does not break out into open contradiction is due to the fact that neither unfolds in full purity and rigor in the writings of the Old Testament" (Assmann 2010: 9). The first religion then is a form of evolutionary monotheism, but the second religion represents a rupture with all older traditions. It is the revolutionary monotheism of the Mosaic distinction. But in what sense is the monotheism of the Mosaic distinction revolutionary? It is not a political revolution or even a datable historical revolution.

[O]ne is dealing here with the phenomenon of retrospection (*Nachträglichkeit*), to use the Freudian term, revolution a posteriori, after the fact; and a feat not of history but of memory. . . . [In] the Hebrew Bible, the codified cultural memory of the Jewish people, successful realization of monotheism is represented as a leap and a revolutionary break as radical as one can possibly imagine. (Assmann 2008: 108)

If we follow Assmann's argument thus far, we have to confront difficult issues concerning truth, exclusion, intolerance, and violence. Assmann now goes over this ground much more carefully. It is, of course, true that the Mosaic distinction is exclusionary. This is its point. It excludes all "false" gods and religions. It is "intolerant," but Assmann seeks to demystify or neutralize this sense of "intolerance." There is a sense in which any conception of truth is "intolerant" because it excludes and rejects what is false. "To put it bluntly, scientific knowledge is 'intolerant'" (Assmann 2010: 13). Assmann distinguishes four kinds of truth: truths of experience, mathematical and historical truths, and truths conducive to life. All of these are "intolerant" insofar as they reject what is incompatible with them. Revolutionary monotheism introduces a fifth kind of truth: "absolute, revealed, metaphysical, or fideistic truth" (Assmann 2010: 15). Whatever reservations one may have about Assmann's all too brief classification of the different kinds of truth, his main point is that the logical grammar of truth is "intolerant"--it excludes what it takes to be false. Secondary counterreligions "must be intolerant, that is, they must have a clear conception of what they feel to be incompatible with their truths if these truths are to exert the life-shaping authority, normativity, and binding force that they claim for themselves" (Assmann 2010: 14).

When we turn to the question of violence, matters are more complicated and fraught with dangers. In *Moses the Egyptian* Assmann did not hesitate to describe the Mosaic distinction as a "murderous distinction." It would seem that the Mosaic distinction--especially in its revolutionary purity--is a perfect justification for violence. One has an obligation not only to destroy idols but to eliminate infidels in the name of the one true religion. Throughout history (right up to the present) violence has been practiced and justified in the name of the one and only true religion. And there are those who--like David Hume--have argued that there is an essential connection between monotheism and violence. Assmann is fully aware that he is raising dangerous questions in light of "the wave of religiously motivated violence that is presently descending on the world" (Assmann 2008: 109). Furthermore, the Bible is filled with incidents of brutal violence. There are approximately "six hundred passages mentioning internecine violence"--"scenes of violence that orchestrate the institution of monotheism" (Assmann 2008: 111).

To clarify the relevant issues, Assmann introduces a key distinction between "consequences" and "propensities." "Consequences are a matter of necessity and inevitability; they will sooner or later become real in one form or another. Propensities, conversely, are a matter of potentiality and probability; they leave us free with respect to how to deal with them" (Assmann 2008:109). Violence is not a consequence of monotheism; it is not part of the essence of monotheism to be violent, but it is a real potentiality of the Mosaic distinction. Assmann also notes "that among the three so-called Abrahamic religions, Judaism is the only one that has never turned the implications of violence and intolerance into historical reality precisely because it has relegated the final universalizing of truth to eschatology and not to history" (Assmann: 2008: 111). But still we may ask, "Why does biblical monotheism see itself as violent?" (Assmann: 2008:112).

The question I wish to pose is not "Why has monotheism been instituted with so much violence? But rather "Why has the story of its institution been told and remembered in the Bible in so many scenes of violence? Why do the central texts that proclaim the exclusive Oneness of god use the language of violence?" (Assmann 2008:111-12)

Closely examining some of the most notorious scenes of violence in the Bible, Assmann argues that they reveal that violence typically is directed against one's own group or against oneself. What is most prominent is the internal violence against one's people rather than external violence against foreigners. Violence is directed against Israel's own pagan past. For example, Moses initiates a violent punitive action when he discovers what the Israelites have done in worshipping the Golden Calf.

Then Moses stood at the gate of the camp and said, "Whoever is for the Lord--to me!" And the Levites gathered round him. And he said to them, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel: Put every man his sword on his thigh, and cross over and back from gate to gate in the camp, and each man kill his brother, and each man his fellow, and each man his kin." And the Levites did according to the word of Moses and about three thousand men of the people fell on that day. (Exodus 32:27-28)

In short, Assmann argues that the mnemohistorical function of the biblical scenes of internecine violence is to affirm the absolute commitment to the one and only true God. The violent potential of the Mosaic distinction is the price of monotheism.

But Assmann reminds us for what this price has been paid.

Monotheism means exodus, that is, enlightenment. It means the liberation of mankind from the constraints of the powers of this world, of the given. It means the discovery of an alternative realm of human commitment and investment beyond traditional realms of state, society, and nature. It means the discovery of inner man and new dimensions of subjectivity. (Assmann 2008: 125)

Assmann wants "to sublimate the Mosaic distinction, not revoke it." We can no longer rely on absolute truths but only on relative pragmatic truths. "The Mosaic distinction stands, as Freud has taught us, not just for trauma, repression, and neurosis, but equally for "progress in intellectuality" which ought not to be relinquished, no matter how dearly it may have been purchased" (Assmann 2010: 120). Assmann is walking a very fine line here. Although monotheism did not introduce violence and hatred into the world, it does introduce "religious violence" associated with the will of God. But Assmann's purpose is "to deconstruct, by means of genealogical reconstruction, the connection between religion and violence" (Assmann 2008: 144). And he concludes *Of God and Gods* by passionately declaring:

It has become imperative to dissociate religion from violence. Violence belongs to the sphere of the political, and a religion that uses violence fails to fulfill its proper mission in this world and remains entangled in the sphere of the political. The power of religion rests on nonviolence. Only through a complete rejection of violence is monotheism able to fulfill its liberating mission of forming an alternative counterpower to the totalizing claims of the political. (Assmann 2008: 145)

There is a deep tension in Assmann's reflections on violence. On the one hand, he affirms that with revolutionary monotheism a new kind of violence was introduced: "religious violence" associated with the will of God. But on the other hand, Assmann wants to dissociate violence

from religion, relegating it to the sphere of the political. The sharp distinction that he draws between religion and politics is questionable. As he demonstrates, there never was a time when religions (including ancient polytheist religions) were completely divorced from politics. This entanglement of religion and politics has taken many different historical forms and is certainly evident in our contemporary world. Assmann never squarely deals with the religious violence that erupts when there is a clash of monotheisms--when proponents of different monotheistic religions act as if they and they are alone are committed to the one true religion. All other religions are false! Too much of the history of the West has been a violent clash among monotheistic religions.

* * *

The specter of Freud, especially the Freud of *Moses and Monotheism*, haunts Assmann's mnemohistorical reflections. In *Moses the Egyptian* Assmann interpreted Freud as a culminating chapter in the deconstruction, abolishing, and overcoming of the Mosaic distinction. He now acknowledges that this was not quite right. Rather, he stresses the importance of Freud's insistence on the "progress in intellectuality" as primarily the contribution of Jewish monotheism.

I now think that Freud was trying, on the contrary, to present the Mosaic distinction . . . as a seminal, immensely valuable, and profoundly Jewish achievement, which ought on no account to be relinquished, and that his own psychoanalysis could credit itself precisely with taking this specifically Jewish type of progress a step further. (Assmann 2010: 86)

But even this admission does not reveal the extent to which Assmann's mnemohistory is shaped by Freudian themes. Although critical of a number of Freud's historical claims about Akhenaten and the murder of Moses by the Israelites, Assmann thinks that Freud had profound insight into the genealogy and legacy of monotheism. He was right to realize that Akhenaten advocated an early form of monotheism and insightfully perceived that there are traces of polytheism as well as the new revolutionary monotheism in the Hebrew Bible. Assmann strongly endorses Freud's stress on "the progress of intellectuality" (*Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*) as the legacy of biblical monotheism. But what is even more striking is how Assmann appropriates the Freudian themes of trauma, repression, latency, and the return of the repressed in his own mnemohistory and theory of cultural memory. "[T]he concepts of latency and the return of the repressed are indispensable for any adequate theory of cultural memory" (Assmann 1997: 215). The Mosaic distinction may be repressed and suppressed for long periods (centuries) but it can burst forth with the renewed vigor of the return of the repressed. The logic of Assmann's argument entails that we cannot rule out the possibility that new forms of the Mosaic distinction will violently erupt--like a long dormant volcano. Under what conditions does this potential violence become actual historical violence? "Monotheism," he tells us, "originally meant liberation of man from political power The basic idea behind biblical monotheism is to erect a counterpower against the all-encompassing power of the political" (Assmann 2008:145). But the actual history of monotheism--or at least one dominant strain in this history--has been the entanglement of monotheism with political power. Contrary to Assmann's explicit claim that religion can be dissociated from violence, his overall argument shows that the potential for violence is constitutive of the Mosaic distinction. Assmann challenges all those theories of modernization

and secularization that suggest that there is a progressive enlightenment in the learning processes of the West that will *necessarily* overcome the potential religious violence of revolutionary monotheism. These theories underestimate the cultural significance of the return of the repressed.

The affinity between Assmann and Freud is even deeper. Freud raises incisive questions about whether it is ever really possible "successfully" to sublimate human aggressiveness and violence. And yet Freud stands squarely in the Enlightenment tradition, which he--like Assmann--traces back to the legacy of monotheism. Freud is steadfast in his conviction that we can further the progress of intellectuality and that we can mitigate the lethal consequences of violence. Assmann knows that we cannot eliminate the violence of the Mosaic distinction. But this doesn't mean that we must resign ourselves to the permanence of this potential violence. Rather, by understanding the power of the Mosaic distinction we can achieve a deeper realism. And this can become an incentive to develop those enlightenment reflections and practices that counter the lethal explosive mixture of religious and political violence. This is clearly the message that Assmann wants to convey--and it is certainly a timely one.

Notes

[1] Although Assmann occasionally uses the general term "biblical monotheism," he is primarily concerned with one strain of monotheism in the Hebrew Bible--what he calls "Deuteronomism."

[2] I discuss this narrative in greater detail in my review of *Moses the Egyptian* in the *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 21:2 (1999), pp. 233-253.