

**FREUD'S "DISTURBANCE OF MEMORY
ON THE ACROPOLIS" REVISITED***

So much for [*Moses and Monotheism*] . . . I have been very much besought to write something for Romain Rolland's 70th birthday. . . . I managed to write a short analysis of "a feeling of alienation" which overcame me on the Acropolis in Athens in 1904, something very intimate But combine the two proverbs about the rogue who gives more and the beautiful girl who will not give more than they have [sic] and you will see my situation.

—Sigmund Freud's letter to Arnold Zweig in Haifa, January 20, 1936; in Freud and Zweig, 1970, p. 119.

On June 5, 1938, en route to exile in England, Freud (1856–1939), his wife, Martha, and their daughter Anna stopped off in Paris, where they had a pleasant twelve-hour visit with his disciple, Marie Bonaparte. By the time they left her home, Freud retrieved from Bonaparte, who had smuggled it out of Austria for him, his 4⅛-inch bronze statuette of Athena (Jones, 1957, pp. 227–228), the Olympian guardian of Athens, where, on his first and only visit to that immortal city, he had an odd experience on the afternoon of September 4, 1904 (Jones, 1955, p. 24):

When, finally, on the afternoon of our arrival I stood on the Acropolis and cast my eyes upon the landscape, a surprising thought suddenly entered my mind: 'So all this really *does* exist, just as we learnt it at school!' (Freud, 1936, pp. 240–241; emphasis in original.).

The preceding is a quote from Freud's 1936 Open Letter to Romain Rolland on the occasion of the renowned French author's seventieth birthday (January 29), "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis." In the Open Letter, Freud offers an analysis of his fleeting disbelief in the material reality of the Acropolis. This 'analysis' is actually a smoke screen to keep Freud's readers, including Rolland, from knowing what

*This essay was previously published in *The Psychoanalytic Review* (95:3, June 2008), and appears here with the requisite rights and permissions of that journal, and those of of the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis.

he is about. For, as I intend to show, at the time of his momentary astonishment, Freud's secret ambition to topple and replace Moses, both as lawgiver and as deliverer of the Jews, was stirred up on the Acropolis. According to Freud, that summer he and his brother Alexander, ten years his junior, hadn't intended to visit Athens. On their way to the Greek island of Corfu they stopped off at Trieste, where a business acquaintance of Alexander's advised them "strongly" to change their plans: rather than go to Corfu, which "would be too hot . . . to do anything," it'd be "far better to go to Athens instead." Though perturbed by this "quite impracticable" proposal, Freud and Alexander booked passage for Athens.

At the time of his disbelief in the objective reality of the Acropolis he was, Freud (1936) states, overwhelmed by a "feeling of derealization":

. . . the whole psychological situation, which seems so confused and is so difficult to describe, can be satisfactorily cleared up by assuming that at the time I had (or might have had) a momentary feeling: '*What I see here is not real.*' Such a feeling is known as 'a feeling of derealization' [*Entremdungsgefühl*, literally, a "feeling of alienation"] (p. 244; italics in original).

Asserting that all derealizations "aim at keeping something from the ego, at disavowing it," Freud (1936, p. 245), in the Open Letter's last few sentences, states that his standing on the Acropolis in Athens signified the fulfillment of a forbidden wish, the wish to excel one's father, and that the derealization or his fleeting disbelief in the Acropolis kept him from acknowledging that this impious wish has been realized:

I might that day on the Acropolis have said to my brother: 'Do you still remember how, when we were young, we used day after day to walk on the same streets on our way to school, and how every Sunday we used to go to the Prater or on some excursion we knew so well? And now, here we are in Athens, and standing on the Acropolis! We really *have* gone a long way!'. . . It must be that a sense of guilt was attached to the satisfaction in having gone such a long way: there was something about it that was wrong, that from earliest times had been forbidden. . . It seems as though the essence of success was to have got further than one's father, and as though to excel one's father was still something forbidden.

. . . The very theme of Athens and the Acropolis in itself contained evidence of the son's superiority. Our father had been in business, he had had no secondary education, and Athens could not have

meant much to him. Thus what interfered with our enjoyment of the journey to Athens was a feeling of *filial piety* . . . (pp. 247–248; italics in original.)

It is here that Freud is holding back: the “feeling of *filial piety*” which interfered with his enjoyment on the Acropolis pertained not only to his deceased father, Jakob, whom he has excelled, but also to Moses, whom Freud, since before the turn of the century, has been secretly bent on surpassing.

After relating the derealization on the Acropolis, Freud refers to “a marginal case” of derealization, the Moorish King Boabdil’s refusal to acknowledge a portent of the end of his kingdom Granada, the fall of the fortified city of Alhama:

You remember the famous lament of the Spanish Moors ‘*Aye de mi Alhama*’ [Alas for my Alhama], which tells how King Boabdil received the news of the fall of the town of Alhama. He feels that this loss means the end of his rule. But he will not “let it be true,” he determines to treat the news as ‘*non arrive*’. The verse runs:

‘Letters had reached him telling that Alhama was taken.
He threw the letters in the fire and killed the messenger’
(James Strachey’s translation; in Freud, 1936, p. 246).

The fall of Granada in 1492 brought to an end 800 years of Muslim dominion on the Iberian Peninsula. From this significant triumph of Christendom—following which the victorious Catholic sovereigns, Ferdinand and Isabella, banished the Jews from Spain—Freud turns to a symbolic vanquishing of the Church, Napoleon’s self-coronation in Notre Dame as Emperor of France on Sunday, December 4, 1804:

. . . if I may compare such a small event [Freud standing with Alexander on the Acropolis] with a greater one, Napoleon, during his coronation as Emperor in Notre Dame, turned to one of his brothers—it must no doubt have been the eldest one, Joseph—and remarked: ‘What would *Monsieur notre Pere* have said to this, if he could be here today?’ . . . (p. 247).

During the ceremony, just as Pope Pius VII was about to place the Bourbon crown on his head, Napoleon “took care to put the crown on his head himself” (Butterfield, 1966, p. 62), thereby, symbolically

castrating the Holy Father (hats, according to Freud, symbolize male genital organs). This allusion to Napoleon's 'castration' of the Pope suggests strongly that at the time of the derealization a similar 'castration' was evoked, that of his father, Jakob, by the Christian in the small Catholic city of Freud's birth, Freiberg in Moravia. Again, it was on one of their Sunday walks, when Freud was "ten or twelve," that Jakob related the incident which occurred on the Jewish sabbath:

When I was a young man . . . I went for a walk one Saturday A Christian came up to me and with a single blow he knocked off my [new fur] cap from my head into the mud and shouted, "Jew! get off the pavement!" "And what did you do?," I asked. "I went into the roadway and picked up my cap," was his quiet reply. This struck me as unheroic conduct on the part of the big, strong man who was holding the little boy by the hand. I contrasted this situation with another which fitted my feelings better: the scene in which Hannibal's father . . . made his boy swear to take vengeance on the Romans. Ever since that time Hannibal has had a place in my fantasies (Freud, 1900, p. 197).

In the Open Letter Freud refers to his Sunday walks with his father, Jakob ("how every Sunday . . ."). So, it is reasonable to assume that Jakob's 'castration' on the Jewish sabbath was evoked during the derealization, as well as Freud's 'Hannibal' phantasy "to take vengeance on the Romans"—that is, the new Romans, the Catholic Church.

According to legend, when Boabdil burst into tears while casting his eyes one last time at his palace-fortress, the Alhambra, his mother, the Sultana, reproached him: "You do well to weep like a woman for what you do not defend like a man." Like the Sultana, Amalie Freud too had given birth to a "Moor": "(. . . It appears that I came into the world with such a tangle of black hair that my young mother declared I was a little Moor)." (Freud, 1900, p. 337, n.1).

But unlike the Sultana's Moor, who "weeps and does not defend," Amalie's Moor, her "*Goldener Sigi*," who was born in a caul and so is destined to become "a great man" (Freud, 1900, p. 192), would not only "defend," he would destroy their common enemy, Christianity. And thereby avenge—according to the *lex talionis* ("an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth")—the humiliation of his beloved papa, for he will have perpetrated the ultimate castration on the papacy, the killing off of the papal line.

Introducing the Open Letter's subject matter, the derealization on the Acropolis, Freud states: "*During the last few years* [an odd experience] . . . which I had never understood, has kept on returning to my mind" (p. 239, my emphasis). But why—after three decades—the "returning to [Freud's] mind" of the derealization? This reasonable question—"Why now? . . ."—the father of psychoanalysis does not address, as though it had never entered his mind, which is hard to believe, as is his claim that he "had never [before] understood" the derealization. "During the last few years" Freud had been writing and researching *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), a draft of which he had completed in 1934, and which he, moreover, had seriously considered writing since at least as early August 1933 (Schur, 1972, p. 91). Because it is intimately related to his secret messianic ambition, Freud secretly understands that the surfacing or "returning" of the three-decades-old derealization was instigated by his preoccupation with this ongoing work which would be his last major assault on religion—and in which he asserts that Christianity and the scourge of anti-Semitism are inextricably linked:

The [Christians] have not got over a grudge against the new religion which was imposed on them; but they have displaced the grudge on to the source from which Christianity reached them. The fact that the Gospels tell a story which is set among Jews, and in fact deals only with Jews, has made this displacement easy for them. Their hatred of Jews is at bottom a hatred of Christians. . . (Freud, 1939, pp. 91–92).

In other words, the good Christian, not having the moral courage to acknowledge his hatred for his religion which obliges him to renounce his aggressive and illicit sexual impulses, displaces this disavowed hatred on to the people who had made his life miserable by shackling him with his chains, the Jews. This hostility, Freud adds, can be traced back to Moses: ". . . we venture to declare that it was the one man Moses who created the Jews. It is to him that this people owes its tenacity of life and also much of the hostility it has experienced and still experiences." (Freud, 1939, p. 106). Hence it follows: In order to annihilate anti-Semitism, it is essential that the Jews' Tree of Life, the Torah—and their Great Man Moses—be sacrificed. Or to paraphrase the Boabdil verse: He [Amalie's Moor] threw the letters [the Law] in the fire and killed [Yahweh's] messenger [Moses]. This then is Freud's secret solution

to the Jewish Problem: no Law, no Judaism, no Christianity, no miserable anti-Semitism.

Which brings us to the essential premise or speculation of *Moses and Monotheism*: Jewish monotheism can be traced back to a patricide, the killing of Moses by the Jews [Deuteronomy 34:7–8 notwithstanding (“Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died . . .”)]; the Jews rose up and killed the stern and demanding Moses; it is from the corresponding filial sense of guilt and remorse vis-a-vis this (alleged) patricide that Judaism arose. Universal acceptance of this ‘patricide’ theory regarding Judaism’s beginnings would eliminate Judaism’s miserable offshoot, Christianity—albeit, again, at a great double cost, the Law and Moses. After completing the book two years later, Freud in an unguarded moment will show his hand:

Neither in my private life nor in my writings have I ever made a secret of my being an out and out unbeliever. Anyone considering the book [then at the printer’s] from that point of view will have to admit it is only Jewry and not Christianity which has reason to feel offended by its conclusions. For only a few incidental remarks, which say nothing that hasn’t been said before, allude to Christianity. At most one can quote the old adage: “*Caught together, hanged together!*” (letter of October 31, 1938, to Charles Singer, a professor of history of science; in Freud, 1960, p. 453; emphasis added.)

Years earlier, in *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud (1927) alluded to his enlightened Promised Land:

... New generations, who have been brought up in kindness and taught to have a high opinion of reason, and who have experienced the benefits of civilization at an early age . . . will feel it as a possession of their very own and will be ready for its sake to make the sacrifices as regards work and instinctual satisfaction that are necessary for its preservation. They will be able to do without coercion from their leaders. If no culture has so far produced human masses of such a quality, it is because no culture has yet devised regulations which will influence men in this way, and in particular from childhood onwards (p. 8).

Later in the book, Freud (1927) continued:

As honest smallholders on this earth they will know how to cultivate their plot in such a way that it supports them. By withdrawing their expectations from the other world and concentrating all their liberated energies into their life on earth, they will probably succeed in achieving a state of things in which life will become tolerable for everyone and civilization no longer oppressive to anyone. Then, with one of our fellow-unbelievers [Heine], they will be able to say without regret:

[“We leave Heaven to the angels and the sparrows.” Translation, James Strachey.] (p. 50).

Sandwiched between these two ‘Promised Land’ passages, Freud refers to his derealization experience on the Acropolis:

I was already a man of mature years [48] when I stood for the first time on the hill of the Acropolis of Athens, between the temple ruins, looking out over the blue sea. A feeling of astonishment mingled with my joy . . . [M]y astonishment . . . has to do with the special character of the place (1927, p. 25).

And what better setting than the preceding scene—Freud, standing for the first time “between the temple ruins” of the Acropolis in Athens, the fountainhead of Western Civilization—to excite this striver’s vast ambition to institute his boundless Promised Land, a socially just world grounded in Reason, wherein all abide freely by his one law, the Delphic precept, “Know thyself,” and for whose realization it is essential that this hero annihilate religion, leave it in the dust?

Bearing in mind the preceding scenario, please consider this partial reconstruction of Freud’s derealization experience: Standing on the Acropolis, Freud is initially in a state of exaltation (“my joy”), which is instigated by a subconscious delusion: his passionately longed-for peaceable kingdom—his boundless, harmonious Promised Land in which at long last the seed of Abraham are truly at home—is now within range or on the horizon (cf. “looking out over the blue sea”), for he has destroyed Christianity, the seedbed for anti-Semites like the good Christian who had knocked off Jakob’s new *shabbes* hat. But in a flash, before Freud can fully savor this passionately longed-for moment, the delusion disappears—owing to his filial sense of guilt (“a feeling of *filial piety*”) vis-à-vis his Promised Land’s great double cost: the Law (“the temple ruins”) and that great man, Moses. Consequently, to paraphrase this impious striver, “a feeling of astonishment [is now] mingled with my joy.” Here

it is worth noting: the Freud family Bible, the illustrated German-Hebrew Phillipson Bible, whose frontispiece depicts Moses holding the Tablets of the Law (with rays of light emanating upward from both sides of his forehead), contains a picture of the Acropolis (Vitz, 1988, p. 196).

Now, behind Freud's pleasure-sabotaging "feeling of astonishment" not only is there "a feeling of *filial piety*." There is also, Freud's closing words betray, his fear of Yahweh, of His terrible Justice:

. . . what interfered . . . was a feeling of *filial piety*. And now you will no longer wonder that the recollection of this incident [*erlebnis*, experience] on the Acropolis would have troubled me so often [*mich . . . so oft heimsucht*] since I myself have grown old and stand in need of forbearance [*nachsicht*] and can travel no more. (pp. 237–238; emphasis added.)

Pertinent here is S.S. Praver's (1983) comment on James Strachey's rendering of *heimsucht* as "troubled" above):

"Heimsuchen" is the verb Luther's Bible uses as its equivalent for God's "visiting" the sins of the fathers on future generations [2 Moses 20:5] and any appropriate German dictionary will furnish plenty of examples in which "heimsuchen" has to do with "smiting", "afflicting", "being stricken", and "suffering", as well as "being favored with benefits" . . . There *is* something troubling about the sudden irruption, the "Auftauchen," of the memory image. . . . (p. 812).

When writing the Open Letter, Freud, whose writings contain many references to Luther's Bible, probably suspects that Yahweh's visitations have already begun. And with a vengeance! On January 25, 1920, Freud's middle daughter, Sophie Halberstadt, died at the age of 26 after a bout with the grippe. Two and one-half years later, and just two months after Freud had undergone the first of 33 surgical procedures for cancer of the mouth and jaw (April 20, 1923), Sophie's 4½-year-old son Heinele, who was his favorite grandchild, died from an acute miliary tuberculosis on June 19, 1923. Almost five years after his beloved Heinele's death, Freud wrote the following in his letter of March 11, 1928, to Ernest Jones who had just lost his daughter, an exceptionally brilliant little girl:

. . . Only when . . . little Heinele died did I become weary of life

for good. He . . . was of superior intelligence and indescribable spiritual grace, and repeatedly said that he would die soon! How do these children come to know those things? (Schur, 1972, p. 406).

Despite fearing that he is to blame for the deaths of his beloved "Sunday child" Sophie and his precious "little Heinele," Freud to the very end (he will die three years later on Yom Kippur, September 23, 1939) sticks to his rebellious path, hoping against hope that his mighty weapon, his theoretical knowledge about God's humble beginnings, is not itself what he asserts God to be, a hollow wish fulfillment, that his other little ones "unto the third and fourth *generation* . . ." (Exodus 20:5) won't suffer Yahweh's vengeance, won't pay for their father's rebellion. How then can we account for Freud's staying on this potentially calamitous path?

After Jakob passed away at the age of eighty-one on October 23, 1896, Freud, feeling uprooted, began to study himself in depth. In 1897, several months into his detailed self-analysis, Freud discovered to his horror that he is a Cain, a brother-killer: "I welcomed my one-year-younger brother (who died within a few months) with ill wishes and real infantile jealousy, and . . . his death left the germ of guilt in me." (Letter dated October 3, 1897; Freud and Fliess, 1954, p. 219). Oppressed by his fratricidal sense of guilt, Freud secretly resolved to redeem himself by making the world a better place for future Juliuses (and Sarahs), a world without anti-Semitism. This, then, vis-à-vis his messianic ambition, is the determinative factor: Freud's need to make an atonement for having 'killed' his rival, baby Julius.

(On April 15, 1908, the fiftieth anniversary of Julius's death, the six-year-old Psychological Wednesday Society, as per Freud's carried motion, was re-named the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society (Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 373). In this manner Freud dedicated to the memory of Julius the psychoanalytic movement, which would, were all to go according to plan, institute his brotherly world, an enlightened and healed socially just world in which reason overrides passion—or to paraphrase Freud, "Where id was, ego reason is." At any rate, this is his secret game plan.)

With death near, and dreading Yahweh's retribution, Freud closes the Open Letter with an apt plea, "I . . . stand in need of forbearance [*nachsicht*]." According to *The New Cassell's German Dictionary*, *nachsicht* means "indulgence, forbearance, leniency, clemency, pity, respite." But undeterred, this tormented and weary freedom fighter, his Job-like cancerous sores ravaging his mouth and jaw, continues on his impious

and perilous path, penning the last sentence of *Moses and Monotheism* in his temporary London home (39 Elsworth Road, N.W. 3) on Sunday, July 17, 1938—or the civil date of the Fast of Tammuz, the day of mourning commemorating both the Chaldean breach (586 B.C.E.) and Roman breach (70 C.E.) of the walls of Jerusalem, which led to the destruction of the First and Second Temples (Spier, 1986). And this is fitting, for to repeat: universal acceptance of the book's essential premise—Judaism stems from a patricide—would result in destruction of the Jews' 'stone' fortress, the Torah.

After writing the last sentence of *Moses and Monotheism* and placing his pen on his antiquities-covered desk, did this lonely and unknown fighter for the human rights of his besieged nation lift his precious "Athene," and to that virgin goddess of wisdom and of war make a silent prayer?

REFERENCES

- BUTTERFIELD, H. (1966). *Napoleon*. New York: Collier Books.
- CASSELL'S GERMAN DICTIONARY, THE NEW (1962). New York: Funk and Wagnalls.
- FREUD, S. (1900). The Interpretation of Dreams. In J.S. Strachey, ed. and Trans. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 24 vols. London: Hogarth Press.
- (1927). The Future of an Illusion. *Standard Edition* 21.
- (1936). A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis. *Standard Edition* 22.
- (1939). Moses and Monotheism. *Standard Edition* 23.
- & Fliess, W. (1954). *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes, 1887–1902*. (M. Bonaparte, A. Freud, & E. Kris, eds.; J. Strachey & E. Mosbacher, trans.) New York: Basic Books.
- (1960). *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*. Selected and edited by E. Freud. New York: Basic Books.
- & Zweig, A. (1970). *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig*. (E. Freud, ed. E. & W. Robson-Scott, trans. New York: Harcourt Brace and World.
- JONES, E. (1955, 1957). *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*. New York: Basic Books.
- NUNBERG, H., & FEDERN, E., eds. (1962). *Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, Vol. I, 1906–1908*, New York: International Universities Press.

- PRAWER, S.S. (1983). The Psyche in Transition. In *Times Literary Supplement*. 29 July.
- SCHUR, M. (1972). *FREUD: Living and Dying*. New York: International Universities Press.
- SPIER, A. (1986). *The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar*. New York: Feldheim Press.
- VITZ, P. (1988). *Sigmund Freud's Christian Unconscious*. New York: Guilford Press.