

Freud, the Law, and Michelangelo's Moses

by

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... All we can legitimately add, amidst all the possible biographical speculation, is that neither Freud nor Hannibal did conquer Rome (Freud merely went there as a tourist).--Adam Phillips, Becoming FREUD: The Making of A Psychoanalyst. (New Haven, Yale, 2014), 39.

... the realization of a secret wish . . . might mature at the same time as Rome . . .

--Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, in his letter dated 2 March 1899.¹

... there is plenty of evidence that the fulfillment of this great wish was opposed by some mysterious taboo which made him doubt that if the wish could ever be realized.

--Ernest Jones, Sigmund Freud's official biographer.²

... the totem is the common ancestor of the clan . . .

--Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo.³

This paper is a slight revision of my 2003 Midstream essay, Volume XXXIX, (No.1, January), pp, 32–5.

On Sigmund Freud's thirty-fifth birthday (6 May 1891), his father, Jakob, gave him an illustrated German-Hebrew Bible, the Philippson Bible. For this happy occasion, Jakob had had this, the family Bible, rebound in a new leather cover; up until then, according to the dedication, which Jakob penned in Hebrew, "the book had been lying about like broken tablets . . ." ⁴ Mercifully, Jakob wasn't able to foresee that his brilliant son will resolve to destroy the Torah, see to it that there'll be no remnants of it to rebind, not one leaf, not one law.

After Jakob passed away five years later on 23 October 1896 at the age of eighty-one, Freud, feeling uprooted, began to study himself in depth, mainly by interpreting his dreams. In 1897, several months into his self-analysis, he made a discovery about his early childhood which revolution- ized his soul:

. . . 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 to Wilhelm Fliess, dated 3 October 1897.)⁵

Oppressed by his fratricidal sense of guilt, Freud secretly resolved to make an atonement by saving the children, future Juliuses (and Sarahs), from persecution and oppression.

And that same year, 1897, he not only arrived at the Oedipus complex, but also a dazzling derivative: the God-idea stems from the father complex.⁶ That is, God the Father is a projection out on to the universe of the Oedipal boy's idealized perception of his father. Armed with this discovery of God's humble beginnings, Freud intended to cut

the ground out from under Christianity, and, thereby, deliver, for once and for all, the seed of Abraham: no God, no Judaism, no Christianity, no miserable antisemitism.

But before setting others free from their religious chains, Freud must set himself free from the Law--by visiting Rome, and, there, face, in the form of Michelangelo's Moses, the shade or ghost of Moses. In his interleaved copy of the 1904 edition of his The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, Freud (1901) jotted for his eyes only, "My own superstition has its roots in suppressed ambition (immortality) . . ."7 And what better object to excite the superstitious tendencies of this would-be Moses than Moses? The imposing figure of Moses was for Freud a symbol in the same sense that the bread Jesus of the Eucharist is a symbol for Roman Catholics: for the devout--like his Czech nanny who, after Julius died, took him to Mass regularly in his birthplace, Freiberg in Moravia (now Pribor in the Czech Republic)--the Host or Communion Wafer is Christ; for Freud, Moses is Moses.⁸ In other words, Michelangelo's huge (8 ft., 4 in.) horned Moses was Freud's personal totem, the biblical Moses himself. When Freud was preparing for Rome, the Vienna Museum of Plastic Arts had on display a large plaster cast of Moses; as Rome drew nearer, Freud's visits to the museum probably followed one another more closely.)⁹

Now before heading for Rome, Freud, self-aware as he was, must have known that his atheism sprang from his emotions; that, at bottom, his denial of the existence of God can be traced back to Julius's death: "If there was a God in Heaven, would He have allowed Julius to die? Cause me to suffer so?" Moreover, he must have realized that his brilliant discovery--how the idea of God the Father came into existence--may be, itself, what he claimed God to be, a hollow wish fulfillment, an illusion derived from his most

passionate wishes. For this revolutionary notion, the Oedipal beginnings of God, promised too much for it not to be suspect. It guaranteed the realization of his avenging Hannibal phantasy, the annihilation of the Roman Catholic Church¹⁰; the deliverance of his people from anti-Semitism (albeit at the cost of their Tree of Life, the Torah); self-redemption; immortality (by becoming, vis-a-vis his envisioned movement, the psychoanalytic movement, the new Moses or moral educator of humankind); and the grandest promise of all, the undoing of his "killing" Julius (for so long as Freud's own enlightened or brotherly line lives, Julius lives).¹¹

Moreover, under the strain in Rome, Freud, who had had signs of heart trouble dating from 1893, probably realized he could suffer a fatal heart attack. Dr. Max Schur, who was his personal physician from 1928 until his death in 1939, believed that Freud, in 1894, "suffered an organic myocardial lesion"¹² Were his heart to give out, his wife, Martha, and their three boys and three girls would be left destitute.¹³ And what if he were to suffer a breakdown, have a psychotic break?

But any question of backing out was resolved by an incident in Thumsee (near Salzburg) where Freud and his family were vacationing: on the lake, Freud's ten and eleven year-old boys, Oliver and Martin, are jeered by Christians who accuse the Jew-boys of stealing fish.¹⁴ And that summer, 1901, from Thumsee, Freud set out for Rome.

On September 2, Freud (accompanied by his brother Alexander, ten years his junior) at long last entered the Eternal City. Three days later, on Thursday, September 5, he crossed the threshold of the Church of St. Peter in Chains, and there, faced Moses/Moses. Freud had prepared for this moment for four years, but who can be prepared for Moses or his ghost?

In "The 'Uncanny'" Freud (1919) asserts that an uncanny impression, which is characterized by "dread and horror" (p. 219), may occur "when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes" (p. 244); moreover, the factors which can produce an uncanny impression are "silence, solitude and darkness" (p. 252)¹⁵ For "The 'Uncanny'," did Freud, as I suspect, draw on his trials before Moses/Moses? Please consider the following quote from the famous passage of "The Moses of Michelangelo":

. . . no piece of statuary has ever made a stronger impression on me than [the marble statue of Moses, by Michelangelo, in the Church of San Pietro in Rome]. How often have I mounted the steep steps from the unlovely Corso Cavour to the lonely piazza where the deserted church stands, and have essayed to support the angry scorn of the hero's glance! Sometimes I have crept cautiously out of the half-gloom of the interior as though I myself belonged to the mob upon whom his eye is turned . . . (Freud, 1914, p. 213; italics mine.)

The "uncanny" factors of "silence, solitude and darkness" were then present, which made the Church of St. Peter in Chains a fitting setting for "a symbol [to take] over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes." Accordingly, it is easy to infer: whenever Freud "crept cautiously out of the half-gloom of the interior" psychical reality was in play: Moses was Moses.¹⁶ In this regard, consider the following:

. . . I used to sit down in front of the statue in the expectation that I should now see how it would start up on its raised foot, dash the Tables of the Law to the ground and let fly its wrath.

(Freud, 1914, p. 220)

By referring to the original paper, "Der Moses des Michelangelo," which, at Freud's insistence, was published anonymously,¹⁷ we get a better sense of his trials before Moses/Moses:

. . . How often have I mounted the steep steps from the unlovely Corso Cavour to the lonely piazza where the deserted church stands, and have essayed to support [standzuhalten] the angry scorn of the hero's [Moses'] glance [Blick des Heros]! Sometimes I have crept cautiously out of the half-gloom of the interior . . . (Freud, 1914, p. 213 [p.175])

According to The New Cassell's German Dictionary,(1962) Blick ("glance") means "touches of light," and Blicken, in addition to meaning "to glance," means "to shine." (Cf. Exodus 34: 30: "And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; they were afraid to come nigh him.") And in the Cassell's edition of 1914, the year that "Der Moses Des Michelangelo" was published we find that anblitzen, which stems from the same root, in addition to meaning "to cast a furious look upon," means "to throw a ray upon."¹⁸ This mysterious and terrible force or mana is comparable, then, to lightning or Blitz. Apposite here is the following from Freud's Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego:

. . . Even Moses had to act as an intermediary between his people and Jehovah, since the people could not support the sight of God; and when he returned from the presence of God his face shone--some of the mana had been transferred on to him, just as happens with the intermediary among primitive people. (1921, p. 125)¹⁹

Freud's 'choosing' standhalten ("How often have I . . . essayed to support [standzuhalten]. . .") suggests strongly that in the gloomy church Freud attempted to resist the Blick or mana of Moses/Moses. For Cassell's (1914) defines standhalten as follows: "To withstand; to resist; to hold one's own; to stand firm." By withstanding the sight of Moses/Moses, Freud intended to free himself from the Law, and, thereby, become a person in his right. (Cf. the lead quote: ". . . the realization of a secret wish . . . might mature at the same time as Rome. . .") In his last major attack on religion, Moses and Monotheism, Freud (1939) added a pertinent note:

It is historically certain that the Jewish type was finally fixed as a result of the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah . . .

(p. 42 n; italics mine) ²⁰

It was Ezra, of course, who brought the the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, from Babylon to the Israelites in Jerusalem in 458 B.C.E. And if the Law of Moses "finally fixed" the Jews, then Moses is the ancestor of the Jews. By withstanding the sight of Moses/Moses, Freud intended to "unfix" himself.

Freud's proud mother, Amalia, never let her Goldener Sigi forget that he had been born in a caul and so "with her first-born son she had brought a great man into

the world."²¹ Which raises the question, Did Freud superstitiously believe that from birth on he possessed mana, and, so, may be able to "support" the terrible mana of Moses/Moses? Consider the following from Totem and Taboo:

. . . kings and chiefs are possessed of great power [which is transmissible by contact and may be liberated with destructive effect], and it is death for their subjects to address them directly; but a minister or other person of greater mana than common can approach them unharmed

. . . This power is attached to all special individuals, such as kings, priests or newborn babies, to all exceptional states, such as the physical states of menstruation, puberty or birth, and to all uncanny things . . . (Freud, 1913, p. 20; p. 22; Freud's italics.)

Now, at the time Freud held to the cathartic method of treatment:

. . . [we] lead the patient's attention back from his symptom to the scene in which and through which that symptom arose; and having thus located the scene, we remove the symptom by bringing about, during the reproduction of the traumatic scene, a subsequent correction of the psychical course of events which took place at the time. (Freud, 1896, p.193).²²

In other words, when a patient relives a traumatic event in the safety of a psychoanalyst's office there is a purging of the emotions which sustain the neurotic symptom which arose from that event; hence, the symptom collapses. Freud's symptom was sub-

mission to the father, be he Jakob Freud, Moses or Jehovah. And because the situation before Moses/Moses would be the same as when he had wanted to kill his father to possess his mother, Freud, bent as he was on killing Moses to possess Mother Earth, understood that there would be uprushes of feelings and attitudes from his own childhood concerning his father, Jakob. It was essential that he stay in control as they resurfaced: the parricidal rage; the terror while awaiting the anticipated retribution, castration²³; the inclination to passively submit to his father; the love and longing for his father, wanting to be held and comforted by him.

Moment-by- moment he must stay alert, understand that these feelings and attitudes are merely new editions of earlier ones from his childhood and remain calm as they surfaced. If, when they resurface, he could contain himself he would be his own man--that is, he would set himself free from the will of the father; again, whether that father be Jakob Freud, Moses or Jehovah.

Moreover, because he loved his father, Jakob, Freud realized that his filial sense of guilt or filial piety could sabotage his intention to destroy the Law and replace Moses.

One momentary lapse, and it's all over. Like Janus, the two-headed Roman guardian of the threshold, Freud must be ever vigilant, or he'd never resolve his father problem.

And in addition to all of the above there was Freud's fear of meeting his double, for to come into contact with one's double means one is about to die.²⁴ And Freud's ultimate double was, of course, Moses. And isn't death the ultimate castration?

Remarkably, like the biblical Jacob who had "seen God face to face" and who had prevailed despite gaining a limp, Freud had seen Moses face to face and prevailed.

At age 45, Freud—who enjoyed quoting the German poet Ruckert's line, "The Book tells us it's no sin to limp"—emerged from that gloomy Roman church not only a man, but an exceptional being who possessed Moses' mana, the divine, terrible, biblical radiance of Moses. In the gloomy church, through his self-imposed task or initiation rite, this impious hero withstood Moses' radiance. It follows, then, that the radiance was transferred to him. At any rate, that's what Freud had intuited:

The source of taboo is attributed to a peculiar magical power which is inherent in persons and spirits and can be conveyed by them through the medium of inanimate objects. . . .The strangest fact seems to be that anyone who has transgressed one of these prohibitions himself acquires the characteristic being prohibited--as though the whole of the dangerous charge had been transferred over to him. . . .

(Totem and Taboo, 1913; p. 20; p. 22; my italics)

Upon returning to Vienna, Freud, on 19 September 1901, wrote Fliess, "Rome . . . was a high point of my life."²⁵ The "high point" would have been more accurate. Who can stop him now, this striver who had prevailed against Moses? One moment he is a Jew-boy from the miserable streets of Vienna and the next a Moses with the qualities and attributes of the venerable prophet ²⁶, including his mana. In the fall of the following year Freud gathered disciples,²⁷ and he was on his way. To the very end of his life, however, Freud dreaded Jehovah's visitations. For his wish to "mature" was never realized. That is, this self-proclaimed "out-and-out unbeliever"²⁸ never did succeed in "unfixing himself" or setting himself free from the Law.²⁹

NOTES

1. The Origins of Psycho-Analysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes, 1887-1902, edited by M. Bonaparte, A. Freud, and E. Kris, translated by J. Strachey and edited by E. Mosbacher, New York: Basic Books, 1954, p. 280
2. Ernest Jones, The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, New York: Basic Books, 1955, p. 16.
3. Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo, London: Hogarth Press, 1913, p. 2.
4. William J. McGrath, Freud's Discovery of Psychoanalysis: The Politics of Hysteria, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 318.
5. Origins, loc. cit., p. 219
6. Freud first alluded to the Oedipus complex in a working paper (Draft N), which he sent Fliess on 31 May 1897; twenty-six days earlier, on May 5, one day before his forty-first birthday, Freud had written Fliess:

Another presentiment tells me, as if I knew already--though I don't know anything at all--that I am about to discover the source of morality. (Origins, 1954, p. 206; my italics).

Seven months later, on December 12, Freud writes to Fliess about "endopsychic myths":

Can you imagine what "endopsychic myths" are? . . . The dim inner perception of one's own psychical apparatus stimulates illusions, which are naturally projected outwards, and characteristically into the future and a world beyond. Immortality, retribution, the world after death, are all reflect-

ions of our inner psyche, psycho-mythology. (p. 237.)

In a parallel passage in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, Freud (1901 p, 259) lists God as one of the "endopsychic myths."

7. Sigmund Freud, The Psychopathology of Every Day Life, London: Hogarth Press, 1901, p. 260, in editor's note.
8. After baby Julius died on 15 April 1858, Freud's nanny probably became, in all but name, the 23 month-old's mother; for just four weeks earlier, his twenty-two year-old mother, Amalia, had lost her younger brother who was also named Julius. At any rate, following Mass at Freiberg's Mariae Geburt (the Church of The Nativity of Our Lady), Freud "preached" to Amalia and Jakob "all about how God conducted His affairs" (Origins, p. 221). Forty-two year-old Jakob, a textile merchant, then struggling to make a living, in all likelihood did not give much thought to his son's churchgoing, even though he had named him Schlomo after his father, a pious Hasid. When Freud was 2^{1/2} years old his Catholic mother was dismissed for stealing, even his toys
9. Sigmund Freud, "The Moses of Michelangelo," London: Hogarth Press, 1914, p. 226 n. When Freud was growing up in the small Catholic town of Freiberg-- where he learned that a symbol can be what it represents (the Communion Wafer is Jesus Christ)--a statue inspired by Michelangelo's Moses was in its town square: this imposing Israelite writes on a stone tablet and wears a helmet with horn-like projections. (See Harold P. Blum, "Freud and the Figure of Moses: The Moses of Freud," Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 1991, 39 , pp. 513-35.)

10. In The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud (1900) referred to his identification with the Semitic avenger Hannibal, "the favorite hero of [his] later school days":

. . . And when in the higher classes I began to understand for the first time what it meant to belong to an alien race, and anti-semitic feelings among the other boys warned me that I must take up a definite position the figure of the semitic general rose still higher in my esteem. To my youthful mind Hannibal and Rome symbolized the conflict between the tenacity of Jewry and the organization of the Catholic Church. And the increasing importance of the anti-semitic movement upon our emotional life helped to fix the thoughts and feelings of those early days. Thus the wish to go to Rome had become in my dream-life a cloak and a symbol for a number of other passionate wishes. . . . (pp. 196-7).

11. In The Future of an Illusion, Freud (1927) alludes to his brotherly line; see pages 8 and 50 in the Standard Edition.
12. Max Schur, FREUD: Living and Dying, New York: International Universities Press, 1972, p. 62.
13. Though Martha's paternal grandfather, Isaac Bernays, had been the Chief Rabbi of Hamburg, Martha's widowed mother hadn't even been able to provide Martha with a dowry. (An aunt left Martha a small dowry.)
14. Martin Freud: Sigmund Freud: Man and Father, New York, Vanguard Press, 1958, p. 70.

15. Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," London: Hogarth Press, 1919.
16. In James Strachey's Standard Edition translation of "Das Unheimliche" (listed above) an uncanny impression is characterized by "dread and horror," but in his wife, Alix Strachey's 1925 translation it is characterized by "dread and creeping horror." (Cf. "Sometimes I have crept cautiously out of the half-gloom of the interior. . .") See Sigmund Freud, Collected Papers, Vol. 4, New York: Basic Books, 1959; p. 368.
17. Sigmund Freud, "Der Moses des Michelangelo," Gesammelte Werke, London, 1914. In my view, it was primarily as a protective measure that Freud published "The Moses of Michelangelo" anonymously. In Totem and Taboo, whose subtitle is Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics, Freud (1913), who admitted to being a neurotic of "the 'obsessional' type" (letter to Carl Jung dated 2 September 1907), writes:
- . . . [Mourning savages] feel that to utter [the dead person's] name is equivalent to invoking him and will be quickly followed by his presence. . . . They disguise themselves so that the ghost shall not recognize them, or they change his name or their own . . . (pp. 57-8)
- Were his name and that of Moses in close proximity--as in "The Moses of Michelangelo" by Sigmund Freud--then the ghost of Moses would appear in Freud's presence. And why unnecessarily court disaster, namely, death? Hence the anonymity or disguise, "'The Moses of Michelangelo' by ***.."
18. A New German and English Dictionary, Karl Breul's revision of Cassell's German Dictionary, compiled by E. Weir, New York: Funk and

Wagnalls, 1914.

19. Sigmund Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.
London: Hogarth Press, 1921.
20. Sigmund Freud, Moses and Monotheism, London: Hogarth Press, 1939.
21. Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, London: Hogarth Press, 1900,
p. 192.
22. Sigmund Freud, "The Aetiology of Hysteria," London: Hogarth Press,
1896.
23. When the Bible was translated into Greek, the Hebrew word for "rays of light" was mistranslated as "horns." In the fourth century, this error found its way into the Vulgate, the Latin version of the Scriptures. Thus, the dreaded mana and the dreaded retributive castration are called up by one and the same feature: the horns of Moses. In "Der Moses des Michelangelo" Freud (1914) unwittingly reveals his castration anxiety before Moses/Moses:

. . . Sometimes I have crept cautiously out of the half-gloom of the interior as though I myself belonged to the mob upon whom his eye is turned--the mob which can hold fast no conviction [das keine Uberzeugung festhalten kann] . . . (213 [175])

According to Cassell's (1962), Zeugung means "generation, begetting, procreation; reproduction"; Zeugungslied means "penis"; and Zeugungsorgone means "reproductive, sexual or genital organs."
24. In The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud (New York: Basic Books, 1955) Ernest Jones relates:

In August 1902, at Bozen, on his way to Naples, [Freud] related meeting his double . . . and in one of his superstitious moods asked: 'Does this signify Vedere Napoli e poi morire [See Naples and die]?' Death was seldom from his thoughts. (p. 21)

25. Jeffrey M Masson, J. F. The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, Cambridge: Harvard, 1985, p. 449.
26. According to Jones (1955, p. 15), "Freud could on occasion create a formidable impression with a stern and somewhat scowling glance."
27. Peter Gay, FREUD: A Life of Our Time, New York: Norton, 1988, p. 136.
28. Ibid., p. 526; quotation from Freud.
29. Robert L. Lippman, "Freud's 'Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis' Revisited." The Psychoanalytic Review (95: 3: June 2008); reprinted in The Unknown Freud: Five Plays and Five Essays (IPBooks, 2016.)

ADDENDUM

Freud never revealed how he arrived at the "analytic incognito." Did he, as I believe, come up with this stance from his 'sessions' with Moses/Moses?:

The doctor should be opaque to his patients and, like a mirror, should show them nothing but what is shown to him. (Freud, "Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis," 1912, p. 118.)

The psychoanalyst "should be opaque." Doesn't that sound like a statue, like Moses/Moses in the gloomy Church, a shadowy figure upon whom Freud threw

all his early feelings and attitudes that he had as a child towards his father, Jakob? In a letter to Sandor Ferenczi dated October 27, 1912, Freud, immediately after referring to the large plaster copy of [Michelangelo's] Moses in Vienna, refers to the above-quoted 1912 paper on technique:

The English book about Moses has arrived; I am now seeking admittance to the museum of the Academy of Fine Arts, where there is a large plaster cast of him. I am enclosing for you today the uncorrected paper on technique, and I seek your comments. . . . (Freud, 1993, p. 419.)

The proximity of "paper on technique" to "large plaster cast of [Moses]" suggests, according to the "contiguity" rule of psychoanalysis, an intimate relationship between the two:

an internal connection which is still undisclosed will announce its presence by means of a contiguity--a temporal proximity-- of associations; just as in writing, if 'a' and 'b' are put side by side, it means that the syllable 'ab' is to be formed out of them . . .

Sigmund Freud, Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria, 1905, p. 39)

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