

Freud's Hypothesis that the Jews Killed Moses

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When ... I asked him why the man who wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams* could now have such doubts [about *Totem and Taboo*] he wisely replied: "Then I described the wish to kill one's father, and now I have been describing the actual killing; after all it's a big step from a wish to a deed."

— Ernest Jones¹

I work for an hour a day at my Moses, which torments me like a "ghost not laid."

—Sigmund Freud, vis-à-vis his on-going work, *Moses and Monotheism*; Freud to Ernest Jones, letter dated 28 April 1938.²

On 13 March 1938, two days after Germany invaded Austria, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) disbanded the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. On that sad occasion, he advised his disciples to flee the country. To give them courage, he recalled a similar time long ago:

After the destruction of the [Second] Temple in Jerusalem by Titus, Rabbi Jochanon ben [Z]akkai asked for permission to open a school at Jabneh, for the study of the Torah. We are going to do the same. We are, after all, used to persecution by our history, tradition and ... by personal experience....³

Three months later, the 82-year-old father of psychoanalysis emigrated from Austria to England, where, his mouth and jaw ravaged by cancer, he completed the third and concluding essay of *Moses and Monotheism*, which he had begun in 1934. Indeed, as early as 1934, Freud had completed a publishable version of this essay, but, fearing a devastating backlash, he chose to "hold over the finished work ... in an atmosphere of Catholic orthodoxy":

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.... Thus we might be risking a ban on psychoanalysis and the suspension of all our publications.... (Letter to Arnold Zweig, dated 9 September 1934)⁴

By "nothing new for me after *Totem and Taboo*," Freud is alluding to his theory that religion stems from the first patricide: the killing, in prehistory, of the despotic father of the primal horde by his sons. In the following quote from a famous passage of *Totem and Taboo*, this (hypothe-

sized) patricide of great consequence is denoted by "the same great event":

Totemic religion arose from the filial sense of guilt, in an attempt to ally that feeling and to appease the father by deferred obedience to him. All later religions are attempts at solving the same problem. They vary according to the stage of civilization at which they arise and according to the methods which they adopt, but all have the same end in view and are reactions to the same great event with which civilization began and which, since it occurred, has not allowed mankind a moment's rest. (1912-1913)⁵

According to Freud's reconstruction in the second essay of *Moses and Monotheism*, which was published originally in *Imago* in 1937, the Israelites repeated that first patricide, that is — *Exodus* through *Deuteronomy* notwithstanding — they killed Moses. (Cf. *Deuteronomy* 34:7-8: "Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died.... And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab....") Now, in Freud's view, which he introduces in the third essay, "Moses, His People and Monotheistic Religion," Jewish monotheism stems from the corresponding filial sense of guilt and remorse: each and every Jew possesses indestructible unconscious memory — traces of that traumatic event, the killing of Moses by the Fathers; accordingly, the piety of the Jew, his abiding by the Mosaic code is the Jew's way of expiating unconsciously that liberating misdeed, the (repressed) murder of Moses (cf. "the filial sense of guilt ... deferred obedience to him"); hence, the enduring imprint of Moses, that is, of the Law or the Mosaic legislation on the Jews. In other words, with his Lamarckian-based hypothesis that Jews possess a collective or inherited Jewish Father complex stemming from that terrible event, the killing of Moses by their ancestors, Freud accounts for Jewish monotheism.

Now, in *Moses and Monotheism*, in addition to hypothesizing that Moses was killed by the Israelites, Freud also puts forward the theory that Moses was not a Hebrew but a high-born Egyptian (Ch. 1), deriving his religion from the monotheistic pharaoh, Akhenaten, and giving this Egyptian religion to the Israelites, whom he adopted. (Ch. 2)

Of these three hypotheses, the essential one is the "patricide" hypothesis, for, again, it provides Freud with his psychological explanation for the origin of Jewish monotheism. Yet the evidence he adduces for this essential hypothesis is thin: Goethe's early novel, *Israel in the Wilderness*, and Biblical scholar Ernest Sellin's radical interpretation of some Biblical verses, especially in the

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book of *Hosea*. (Even after learning that the Biblicist had recanted, Freud held to Sellin's early interpretation.⁶)

Pertinent is Freud's explanation for antisemitism, which he reveals in the third essay:

[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 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....⁷

In other words, the good Christian, disavowing his hatred for his religion, which obliges him to renounce his sexual and aggressive desires, displaces this unconscious hatred onto the ones responsible for his misery, the ones who handed him his religion, the Jews. But it all goes back to Moses and the Law:

... 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*.⁸ (Italics mine)

Accordingly, in Freud's view, there is no alternative: Moses and the Law must be sacrificed.

Now, Freud had no illusions about how the majority of his Jewish readers would receive *Moses and Monotheism*, which, were it to achieve its purpose, would deprive the children of Moses of the Law, of Judaism itself. On the other hand, as the last sentence of his 1930 Preface to the Hebrew Edition of *Totem and Taboo* suggests, Freud clung to the hope that "the new Jewry" would accept his findings:

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 new Jewry.⁹

Decidedly not "at one" with Freud were the eminent Jewish scholars Morris Raphael Cohen and Martin Buber. In his review of *Moses and Monotheism*, which apparently appeared soon after its publication, Cohen wrote:

If anyone else had written this book, we should have been justified in dismissing it as the work of an opinionated crank who is more interested in torturous speculation than in getting the verifiable facts....¹⁰

Similarly, Buber (1946), in his *Preface to Moses, the Revelation and the Covenant*, stated:

That a scholar of so much importance in his own field as Sigmund Freud could permit himself to issue such an unscientific work, based on groundless hypotheses ... is regrettable.¹¹

Buber notwithstanding, Freud didn't "permit himself" to issue *Moses and Monotheism*; he was compelled to issue it. For with this, his last major assault on religion — and with the psychoanalytic movement in general — Freud intended to redeem himself for having played Cain to his infant brother Julius's Abel. On 3 October 1897, Freud, at that time deep into his systematic self-analysis, wrote his then-best friend and confidant, Dr. Wilhelm Fliess, "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."¹² By convincing humankind that Jewish

monotheism originated in the murder of Moses by the Israelites, Freud would redeem future Juliuses — and himself: no God the Father (only the murdered Primal or Ur-father, Moses); no divine law (only a mere human one); no Judaism; no Christianity; no miserable antisemitism (to distort or destroy the lives of future Juliuses).

Freud, who was date-sensitive and thoroughly familiar with the Jewish holy days,¹³ completed *Moses and Monotheism* on Sunday, 17 July 1938, or the civil date of the fast of the seventeenth of Tammuz,¹⁴ a day of mourning in memory of both the Babylonian breach (586 BCE) and the Roman breach (70 CE) of the walls of Jerusalem, which, three weeks later, on the ninth of Av (Tisha b'Av), resulted in Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the First Temple and Titus's destruction of the Second Temple. And with his just-penned assault on religion, Freud intended to ultimately destroy the "stone" fortress of the Jews, the Torah, which, of course, would mean killing Moses once and for all.

In Freud's enlightened, atheistic Promised Land — which he envisioned his movement, the psychoanalytic movement, establishing — future Juliuses (and Sarahs) would be at home everywhere on earth. So it is fitting that immediately after penning the last sentence of "Moses, His People and Monotheistic Religion," Freud wrote his one remaining brother, Alexander, informing him of that fact: "Have just written the last sentence of my Moses III."¹⁵ The previous month, on their way to England, Freud, Martha, and their daughter Anna had stopped off in Paris (5 June 1938), where Freud retrieved from his disciple, Princess Marie Bonaparte, who had smuggled it out of Austria for him, his favorite figurine: a four-and-one-eighth-inch bronze statuette of Athena, the Olympian goddess of wisdom and warfare.¹⁶ (After penning the last sentence of *Moses and Monotheism*, did this weary warrior-sage and professed "out-and-out-unbeliever,"¹⁷ in addition to writing his brother, lift the virgin goddess and, to her, make a silent prayer?)

Six months later, 21 January 1939, Freud refused a Polish-Jewish psychologist's request to submit a piece for a section in a Polish-Jewish encyclopedia; he even claimed not to have a suitable photo of himself to send the editor.¹⁸ Given the grave plight of Poland's Jews — in September, Germany invaded Poland — Freud's refusal seems cold-hearted indeed.

But for his movement to succeed, a movement that would save the children, it was essential that psychoanalysis not be perceived as a Jewish science; accordingly, he did not contribute to that proposed section, "the most prominent Jewish savants."

On 5 March 1939, Freud wrote Arnold Zweig, who had emigrated from Germany to Palestine, "I am only waiting for [the English edition of *Moses and Monotheism*], which is due to appear in March, and then I need not be interested in any book of mine again until my next reincarnation."¹⁹

It was not until six months later, however, that Freud gave up the ghost. On Thursday, 21 September, Freud, wasting away — with at most a few days to live — told Dr. Max Schur, "without a trace of emotionality or self-pity, and with full consciousness of reality," that the time had

come. "Now, it's nothing but torture and makes no sense any more."²⁰ Whereupon, Dr. Schur kept his promise and injected his cancer-ravaged friend and mentor with the fatal morphine. (Dr. Schur gave Freud two injections, twelve hours apart.) That date was the anniversary of the death of Virgil, the singer of Aeneas, the hero whose descent into the underworld led to the saving of his wandering and homeless people, the Trojans.²¹ But instead of dying on Virgil's death day, as he had intended, Freud died two days later, on Saturday, 23 September, at 3 A.M.²²

To die on the Sabbath — indeed, to die on any Jewish holy day — is a good sign. It means that one has led a

righteous life. In the Jewish calendar, that fateful Saturday was the tenth of Tishrei or Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement; it is, according to tradition, the anniversary of Moses's descent from Mount Sinai with the second set of tablets of the Law — the ones that Moses had hewn and did not break.²³

From Virgil's death day to the Day of Atonement is a time span that bridges the two worlds of Sigmund Freud. Jakob Freud was right when, paraphrasing from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, he cautioned his brilliant son, "There are more things on heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy."²⁴ •

Notes:

1. Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 2. New York: Basic Books, 1955, p. 354.
2. Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 3. New York: Basic Books, 1957, p. 225; p. 511.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
4. Ernest L. Freud, ed., *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970, p. 92.
5. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*. Standard Edition, 1913-14, vol. XIII, p. 145.
6. Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life of Our Time*. New York: Norton, 1988, p. 647.
7. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*. Standard Edition, 1937-39, vol. XXIII, pp. 91-92.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
9. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, op. cit., p. 16.
10. Morris R. Cohen, "Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*," in *Reflections of a Wandering Jew*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1950, p. 139.
11. Martin Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946, p. 7 n.
12. Freud, S. and Fliess, W., *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. 219.
13. Ernest L. Freud, ed., *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*. New York: Basic Books, 1964. See Freud's letter of 23 July 1882 to his fiancée, Martha Bernays, where, in addition to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Succot, Freud referred with easy familiarity to Tisha b'Av. (pp. 17-22)
14. Arthur Spier, *The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar*. New York: Feldheim Press, 1986.
15. Gay, 1988, op. cit., p. 633; p. 73; cited in Moshe Gresser, *Dual Allegiance: Freud as a Modern Jew*, Albany: SUNY, 1994, p. 236.
16. Ernest Jones, 1957, op. cit., p. 228.
17. On 31 October 1938, Freud wrote the following to Charles Singer, a professor of history of science, vis-à-vis *Moses and Monotheism*, then at the printer's: "It can be

called an attack on religion only in so far as any scientific investigation of religious belief presupposes disbelief. 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 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!'" (In E. L. Freud, 1960, op. cit., p. 453.)

18. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, p. 97.

19. *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig*, op. cit., p. 178.

20. Max Schur, *Freud: Living and Dying*. New York: International Universities Press, 1972, p. 529.

21. It was from Virgil's *The Aeneid* that Freud (1900) appropriated the motto for his classic, *The Interpretation of Dreams*: "If I cannot move the heavens, I'll move Hell." In his relationship with Carl Jung, Freud's identification with Aeneas was in play as well. On 19 September 1907, the day after Yom Kippur, Freud wrote Jung from Rome, "One day you will remember the years of struggle as the best." Doesn't this call up Aeneas's words of encouragement to his people?:

Someday, perhaps, even remembering this
Will be a pleasure. (*The Aeneid*, Book I, line 10)

In Book VI, Virgil predicted that Aeneas's son Julius [Iulus] Ascanius would sire a line that is "just ... by choice." (Cf. Freud's fratricidal sense of guilt vis-à-vis his brother Julius.) Moreover, in my view, Freud intended to conceive his own brotherly "Julian" line.

22. Schur, 1972, op. cit., p. 529.

23. S. Y. Agnon, *Days of Awe*. New York: Schocken Books, 1975, p. 185.

24. Jones, 1957, op. cit., p. 381.