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Freud's religion: Oedipus and Moses

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Abstract. *Moses and Monotheism* is Freud's last book on religion. It was published in its entirety only after his flight from Nazi-occupied Vienna. *Moses* is perhaps Freud's most controversial book on religion. It is both an apology and a curse. It is a critique of traditional Judaism (by way of an Oedipal analysis of a deified Moses), a defence of a modern humanistic Judaism (a Judaism of moral and intellectual values), and a bitter critique of Christianity (a religion not of the Father but of the sons, a failed religion, which expresses its failure in anti-Semitism). A defiant and rebellious book, one might say, one in which an old man rises to meet his fate and does so with surprising wilfulness and vigour. But *Moses* also reveals a dogmatic Freud defending a critique of religion that is intellectually flawed and politically misdirected.

I

Within months of Germany's annexation of Austria in 1938, Sigmund Freud and his immediate family fled their native Vienna to seek refuge in London. Secure in his new surroundings, Freud decided to publish *Moses and Monotheism* (the first two chapters had already been published in *Imago* in 1937).* *Moses* was not Freud's first book on religion, but it was his first and only book on Judaism. It would also be his last book, published only months before his death in September, 1939. It is, at least on the face of it, an odd book, an attempt at a devastating critique of Judaism, one in which Moses is portrayed as an Egyptian and monotheism is said to emerge with the Egyptian Aton religion, an account in which the Jews reject, murder and devour Moses in the desert.

Such claims would have sparked intense controversy in the Jewish world and beyond even in normal times. And these were not normal times. It was, as Freud's flight from Vienna indicates, a most dangerous period for the Jews of Europe. It is obvious from even the first 'Prefatory Notes' to the third essay, written in Vienna in 1938, that Freud was well aware of the 'new enemy', of National Socialism. But he seems more concerned with the threat posed by Nazism to psychoanalysis than to the Jews.[1] The old enemy, as

* All translations of and references to Freud's works are from the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 volumes (The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis: 1953–74). All references to Freud in the notes state SE and the volume, and the page number.

[1] This is not to suggest that Freud was unaware of the Nazi threat to the Jews. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) he notes that 'the dream of a Germanic world-dominion called for anti-Semitism as its

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Freud understands it, is the Catholic Church, which, he thought, had been consistently hostile to psychoanalysis, and Freud acknowledges that given his critique of religion the Church had good reason to be hostile. But the old enemy now ensures him shelter in Vienna and hence, Freud tells his readers, he is reluctant to offend the Church and so will refrain from publishing the essay he had decided to write.[2] Freud does not say, as one might have hoped, that, given the exceptional malice of the new enemy to the Jews and the threat it clearly poses, he will refrain from publishing a book that may aid those who threaten them.

Germany's annexation of Austria ends Freud's Vienna refuge and he flees to London. Now he does not have to be concerned about the sensitivities of the Church, he tells his readers in the second 'Prefatory Note' to that same third essay, and he announces his intention to publish the work. Freud observes that those Christians in his new place of refuge who have taken to proseletyzing him may be less welcoming when they read the essay, for they will find that he is still convinced of the truth of his critique of religion developed in *Totem and Taboo*, namely 'that religious phenomena are only to be understood on the pattern of the … neurotic symptoms' of the individual.[3] Freud is not about to become a Christian, even out of gratitude for British generosity. But if he is concerned about the impact of his essay on those Jews still in danger on the Continent, he does not say so. Spinoza, some might argue, had been excommunicated for less. As was the case with Spinoza, the issue posed by Freud was not that of entertaining heretical thoughts; the issue was not heresy *per se*, but heresy that becomes public and in doing so contributes to those forces that further imperil a community already at risk. It is the flip side, the messy political side, of what it means to put 'truth' above 'national interest', as Freud claims to do, when one is a part of the nation in question and when that nation is at risk.[4]

In *Freud's Moses*, Yosef Yerushalmi argues that Freud wrote *Moses and Monotheism* as a conscious and deliberate response to the rise of Nazism and anti-Semitism.[5] Quite aware of the political implications for the Jews of the collapse of Weimar and the rise of Hitler, Freud, as we see from the 'Prefatory Notes', although he had no inclination to embrace the Jewish religion also had no intention of renouncing his Jewish identity. *Moses and Monotheism* is Freud's investigation of the roots of this loyalty. Freud presents himself as a 'godless Jew',[6] a designation Yerushalmi perhaps too easily equates with 'secular Jew', i.e. an ethnic but not religious Jew. (The birth of this latter

complement' (SE XXI, p. 115). And remarking on the figure of the Devil as a device to rescue God from the charge of being the source of evil, Freud observes that the Devil 'would be playing the same part as an agent of economic discharge as the Jew does in the world of the Aryan ideal' (*Civilization*, SE XXI, p. 120).

[2] *Moses*, SE XXIII, pp. 54–56.

[3] *Moses*, SE XXIII, p. 58.

[4] *Moses*, SE XXIII, p. 7.

[5] Yosef Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (Yale University Press, 1991), p. 15.

[6] *Ibid.* p. 8.

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option is often associated with Spinoza who, Yerushalmi tells his readers, was the 'first great culture-hero of modern secular Jews',[7] a claim Yovel's recent *Spinoza and Other Heretics* does much to support and amplify.[8]) For Freud, Yerushalmi tells us, the affirmation of Jewish identity was quite compatible with a thorough-going critique of the Jewish religion. In fact Yerushalmi describes the possibility, which he sees expressed in *Moses*, of Jewish identity simultaneously strengthened by and freed from Jewish religion.

If one reads the three essays that compose *Moses* in the order they are presented in the book, one is struck by Freud's critique of Judaism as its principal, perhaps exclusive concern. But if one begins at the end, reading the last essay first, one is struck by the highly charged polemic that Freud launches in the name of the Jewish people and of the Jewish religion as well. Reading back to front, i.e. from 1938 to 1934, one can see Freud's critique of Judaism as a critique in the service of a defence of Judaism, as I think Yerushalmi argues. A tough-minded critique of Judaism may well be an element in a strategy whose purpose is the defence of the Jews and Judaism, and this, in fact, is what I think *Moses* is.

In *Moses* Freud expresses envy for those who believe in 'the existence of a Supreme Being' but regrets that science and reason have made it 'impossible to accept the premise of the existence of such a Supreme Being'.[9] The sarcasm is obvious. A godless Jew is, in Freud's view, an intellectually liberated Jew who can justifiably maintain that his enlightened views on religion elevate him above those who still believe in what science and reason have made unbelievable. In Freud's world a godless Jew is not less, but more a Jew than is a religious one. This attitude of non-religious superiority may account for at least some of the arrogance that Freud displays in the prefatory notes and opening pages of *Moses*. There Freud is both defender of the Jews and their would-be emancipator: marvelling at their capacity for survival, he wishes to relieve them of the encumbrance of their religion. The Jews alone among the peoples of the ancient Middle East, Freud tells his readers, continue to exist as a distinct people.[10] *Moses* is Freud's contribution to the task of their continued existence. Disciplined, resilient, intellectual, proud, contemptuous of others, immune to criticism from the outside, they are literally fashioned for survival. The Jews owe these character traits to their religion; it is Judaism that has enabled them to survive and it is Judaism that will insure their continued survival, Freud assures his readers. For Freud, Judaism is a two-fold enterprise. It consists, first of all, of values that make virtues of discipline, order and intellectual accomplishment. The achieve-

[7] *Ibid.* p. 10.
[8] Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, (Princeton University Press, 1989), Chapter 7, 'Spinoza and His People: The First Secular Jew?'.
[9] *Moses*, SE XXIII, pp. 122–3.
[10] *Moses*, SE XXIII, p. 105.

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ment of these virtues requires that strict limits be placed on the gratification of desire. Accomplishment is a virtue, but happiness is not, indeed happiness must be contained in the name of accomplishment. How can human beings, who are, after all, simply natural creatures, learn to place accomplishment over happiness, intellect over desire, renunciation over the gratification of instinct? This brings Freud to the second component of Judaism. The God that Moses sought to give to the Jewish people commanded fear and respect. He was the authority necessary to insure that a morality of self-denial or instinctual renunciation would not be ignored.

The hoary image of Judaism as 'ethical monotheism' comes into view. Freud wants to end this two-fold character of Judaism, to keep the 'ethical' and to drop the 'monotheism'. Monotheism, any theism for that matter, is, in Freud's view, painfully out of step with the onward march of science and reason. In a nation of believers, Freud would argue, God is an asset in the defence of morality. So we find in the Bible that Moses makes much of God as the author of the Law. But in a nation of unbelievers, and this certainly must be the direction that history will take the Jewish people (if it has not already done so), God is a burden on morality. A Judaism without God would be a truly modern Judaism, Freud believes, and such a 'religion', a pure ethical religion, would be a more effective instrument of Jewish survival than the ethical monotheism it would replace. In *Moses* Freud seeks to shift the basis of Judaism's authority from God to Moses.[11] A 'new Torah',[12] Yerushalmi calls it. But it is one quite familiar, at least in its general outline, to modern Jews, that is, a Judaism understood morally, 'cleansed' of its allegedly supernatural and superstitious elements.

In *Future of an Illusion* Freud moves the psychoanalytic or Oedipal critique to the background in favour of a more generalized psychological or fear-of-nature critique. In doing so, Freud removes the most contentious aspects of his critique of religion while preserving its main feature: that religion finds its source and its continuing role in human life in taboo or rules of conduct and in the power to enforce these rules. This move also serves to indicate, as Freud himself suggests, that the main elements of his position are not unique to him, that they originate in the work of other thinkers whose names Freud believes his readers will know, and that these ideas are 'mainstream' to modern European culture. Their critique of religion is part of the conventional wisdom of Freud's time.

A similar pattern can be observed in Freud's analysis in *Moses*. Here the Oedipal analysis is front-and-centre. The material on Darwin and the idea of the 'horde' from *Totem* are again introduced. There is also new material on the life and death of Moses and of course even on the fate of his body. One can be distracted by this analysis and fail to see that it is simply detail (admittedly detail of which Freud is very fond) to explain and amplify a

[11] *Moses*, SE XXIII, p. 106.

[12] Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses*, *Op. cit.* p. 35.

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familiar and rather conventional view of a positive or progressive religion, a Judaism, that might deserve to endure in the modern world, one that might enhance the fortunes of the Jewish people. This would be a religion that facilitates instinctual renunciation, social harmony, the cultivation of intellectual ideals and the progress of civilization, an idea of religion familiar to Freud's readers. Freud enhances this new Judaism by drawing on Feuerbach's idea of human history as emergence from a primitive religious mentality in which the human is nothing before the divine to a highly developed human self-understanding in which the human is understood to be the author of the divine. Freud seeks to preserve traditional Judaism as a stage in the historical process by which the Jewish people progress from worship of and submission to the transcendent Father to the rational and self-conscious appreciation of themselves as a people of great accomplishment descended from a great but human leader. The detail, then, the psychoanalytic or Oedipal analysis, is unique to Freud, but the broad lines of his analysis are not. Freud is a defender of what is, in his time, a conventional critique of religion and also a defender, in *Moses*, of a conventional view of a modern Judaism.

Freud contends that although there is no mention of him except in the 'sacred books of the Jews and their traditions as recorded in writing', Moses is to be understood as a genuine historical figure. He was the liberator of his people, and it was he who gave them their religion and their laws.[13] The biblical account explains the name of Moses as meaning '"He was drawn out of the water"', but Freud sets this explanation aside, arguing that the name is Egyptian, that, in fact, contrary to the biblical account and the traditions of the Jews, Moses was not a Jew[14] raised in the Pharaoh's court only to return an adult to his people as their leader; rather, he was an Egyptian of noble birth[15] who chose the Jews to be his people.[16] Moses is the teacher of monotheism, but he is not the originator of this view. The individual most deserving of the title, according to Freud, is Amenhotep IV, subsequently Ikhnaton, who became Pharaoh in 1375 B.C. Ikhnaton drew upon worship of Aton, the sun-god, an already existent religious cult, and grafted onto it monotheistic ideas. But the Aton religion did not survive the death of the Pharaoh and the vicissitudes of Egyptian politics. Enter Moses, an Egyptian of the court, who decides to save the new religion from extinction. Moses' solution is to co-opt one of the Semitic peoples living in Goshen and make them the bearers of monotheism.

Having effected an unimpeded exit from a crumbling Egypt, Moses brings his chosen people to the Sinai, to Mount Horeb and its volcano God, Jahve. Developing a thesis he attributes to Edward Meyer, Freud describes Jethro, the priest of Horeb, and Moses combining forces: a new synthesis takes place.

[13] *Moses*, SE XXIII, p. 7.
[14] *Moses*, SE XXIII, p. 8.
[15] *Moses*, SE XXIII, p. 15.
[16] *Moses*, SE XXIII, p. 45.

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Jahve is retained, not as a volcano god but as the monotheistic god of the Aton religion. But Moses loses control of his people and, advancing the view of Ernst Sellin, Freud concludes that 'the Egyptian Moses was murdered by the Jews and the religion he introduced [was] abandoned'.[17] The Jews turn to other gods. But Moses, the great leader, does not disappear from the historical-psychological consciousness of the Jews. The trauma of the murder is repressed, and the knowledge of that deed and the teachings associated with the murdered man sink below the surface. Following a period of latency, however, these events re-appear later in the life of the Jewish people, much as the dreaded character traits of a disliked parent can re-assert themselves in the adult life of the offended child. Resurfacing some eight hundred years after the events at Horeb, with the added power of imagination and the authority of memory, Moses and his religious and ethical teachings exert a far greater authority than they did during his lifetime. In psychoanalysis Freud believes he has discovered the instrument by which the Jews can at last understand Judaism's essential nature and its historical and psychological origins – a scenario biblical in its ethos and expansiveness, if not in the thrust of its interpretation.

II

For Freud, as one would expect, the Hebrew Bible (Freud's analysis is limited to Exodus) is not to be read literally. It is not to be understood, for instance, as the word of God communicated to Moses. It is this traditional religious view that Freud thinks no longer merits serious consideration. He does not contend, however, that the Bible is work of literature. Thomas Mann might write a novel about the Jews in Egypt, but the Bible is not a novel on the same subject. Freud adopts another approach – namely that the Bible is an account, a serious, albeit primitive, historical account compiled in ancient times of events that took place in those times. The Bible depicts a real people, the Jews (although this term does not appear in the biblical account, where they are called Hebrews or Israelites) living in a real place, Goshen, and the events that transpire as a result of the incursion into their lives of a real historical figure, Moses. The biblical account, Freud seems to believe, may well be partial, fragmentary, distorted and uncritical, but it is a historical account. It is a piece on the origins of the Jews written by the Jews at the time of their origins. The truth of the Bible for Freud, then, lies in the accuracy of its account.

Freud brings to the Bible not some general suspicion about its accuracy but a very firm idea about what is and what is not historically accurate. The Moses figure is real, but his lineage as presented is not. He was indeed a leader of the Jews, but he was not born a Jew. The Jews did leave Egypt for the desert, but there was no dramatic exodus as recounted in the Bible. The

[17] *Moses*, SE XXIII, p. 37.

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Horeb-Jethro account is to be accepted as found in the Bible, but the biblical idea of the God at Horeb is not. Moses as lawgiver is to be accepted, but the Moses who brought miracles is not. The account in the Bible of the Golden Calf is to be accepted, but the account of the death of Moses is not. Freud's analysis seems to be not only guided by the needs of an Oedipal interpretation of Moses but to be more broadly motivated by the desire, on the one hand, to deflate the Jewish religious interpretation of the events while, on the other, preserving the basic historical reality of those events.

Freud makes little pretence at a scientific or scholarly account of the biblical text. Unlike Spinoza, for example, he seems uninterested in the language, history, construction and authorship of the Bible. Freud expresses no interest in the conscious lives of the human beings he believed were the authors and preservers of the work. How did they understand the work and the role it played in their lives? Freud gives no answers to these questions, nor does he give any indication that these questions have any relevance in either the attempt to understand the Bible generally or even, more narrowly, in the attempt to consider the accuracy of the Bible's account of Moses. Freud is not attempting to understand those who constructed the biblical account; he wants actually to reach the events and people, especially Moses, described in it, to reach what he takes to be those events that explain the genesis of Judaism. This is an extraordinary extension of the parameters of psychoanalysis. It allows the psychoanalyst to claim access to events at the very dawn of human history. What gives Freud the confidence that he has such reach is a misplaced trust in analogy. Religious behaviour, he argues, is to be understood along the lines of his analysis of neurotic behaviour. This observation is made and developed in 'Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices'[18] published in 1907, five years before his first book on religion, *Totem and Taboo*. Religious behaviour, Freud concludes, is in fact a form of neurotic behaviour, and further, the origins of religion can be understood through research into the lives of neurotic patients. (The 'universal obsessional neurosis of humanity', he calls religion in *Future*.)[19]

Freud expands the range of his interpretation by way of another analogy – namely that the individual human being goes through a process of development analogous to the development of humankind generally. 'Ontogeny can be regarded as a recapitulation of phylogeny …'.[20] Freud believes, as did Feuerbach before him, that the various stages through which the human psyche has developed are preserved in and can be uncovered in the psyche of even the modern individual. 'The conceptual structures that rule early in childhood', Scharfenberg writes, 'throw a new light on the early period of human intellectual history'.[21] The human being of ancient times is like the

[18] See, for example, 'Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices', SE IX, pp. 115–27.
[19] *Future*, SE XXI, p. 43.
[20] Joachim Scharfenberg, *Sigmund Freud and his Critique of Religion*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 112.
[21] *Ibid.*

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contemporary adult who has never gone beyond childhood, and Freud, I think, believes that this is even more the case with the religious individual of ancient times. That individual is like a child, that is, with no abiding understanding of the difference between fear and desire or between the imagination and reality. Behind this is the dubious assumption, certainly not limited to Freud, that modern man is adult, mature, sophisticated, capable of understanding the world and himself in ways that ancient man was incapable of doing. Where ancient man could not understand even himself, modern man can and does understand ancient man. Freud's method reinforces the contention that the modern mind can have access to the primitive mind while denying that the primitive mind could think the same thoughts or have a culture of high intellectual, artistic, or spiritual accomplishment. The Bible is, in Freud's analysis, a primitive book, open to the inquiring mind of the modern researcher. Once the researcher has the keys (neurotic__religious, individual__race, child__ancient human being), then the book is explained. The researcher, even the one perhaps impressed by the difficulty of understanding the Bible and more tentative than Freud about drawing conclusions, can rest assured that the Bible is not a serious book, does not contain a serious teaching about the world and man, and certainly cannot challenge the beliefs of a modern reader.

Freud's approach to the Bible owes much to Spinoza. It is Spinoza who first championed the cause of a scientific approach to the Bible. The Bible, he asserted, must be studied in the same way that nature is studied – that is, objectively, free from special interests. 'The whole knowledge of the Bible must be sought solely from itself', as Spinoza puts it.[22] But for Spinoza, studying the Bible from within itself does not mean taking seriously what it has to say. For Spinoza and those in the tradition of the critique of religion, a critique which in the Enlightenment escapes the bounds of philosophical discussion and enters the mainstream of European culture, what the Bible has to say is little more than superstition, and as such it must be set aside. Freud has no trouble in doing so. Even when he seeks to defend Judaism he will do so only through a novel moral-psycho-analytic account of the Bible and of the events he thinks it recounts.

Freud is also indebted to Spinoza, I think, for the emotional tone of his treatment of the Bible. For Spinoza the Bible is not merely a book of superstitious teachings but a book that uses such teachings to enforce a repressive order on innocent, if ignorant people. The Bible is part of the (psychological, moral and political) machinery of 'human bondage', to borrow a term from the *Ethics*. It is a bondage from which Spinoza believes he has liberated himself. For Spinoza the salvation that is the subject matter of the last pages of the *Ethics* is possible only when there has been a prior escape from the Bible, from its mentality and theology. Spinoza's critique of

[22] Spinoza, *Treatise*, p. 103 (Shirley, p. 144).

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the Bible is built on an immediate and angry rejection, and I think there are echoes of that anger and rejection in Freud's *Moses*: One must first escape the Bible and then use science and reason to subdue it.

For Spinoza, escape from the Bible also meant escape from the marginal world of Amsterdam Jewry. Freud's situation is considerably more complicated. Rejecting Judaism, at least traditional Judaism, Freud nevertheless refuses to be separated from the Jewish people. Freud was a godless Jew, unlike Spinoza who, I think, was a philosophical theist who had once been a Jew (not merely in the sense that he was excommunicated but in that he had already separated himself from those who would excommunicate him). Unlike Spinoza, Freud was as intent on remaining a Jew as he was on his desire to reject Judaism. It is in this spirit of that Freud seeks to develop a renewed Judaism in *Moses and Monotheism*.

Freud's account of the origins of Judaism is both historically and theologically inaccurate. In his analysis Jewish history begins with Moses and monotheism in Egypt. This is not in accord with the account found in what Freud takes to be the 'popular religion' of the Jews, which, unlike what might be referred to as the theoretical, esoteric religion of the 'philosophers', he is committed to explain. According to the popular account, Jewish history begins with Abraham, who leaves his home and the gods associated with it and embraces the idea of one unseen God. This account is found in Genesis and, it is important to note, is repeated in the liturgy for Passover, a liturgy designed to tell the story of Moses, not that of Abraham. Abraham is introduced as 'a wandering Aramean' who 'worshipped strange gods', the first ancestor of those people who would ultimately find themselves in the land of Egypt. Abraham is 'Avinu', 'our father', while Moses is 'Rabbenu', 'our teacher'. It is surprising that Freud has nothing to say about Abraham – especially given this title and the importance given in the tradition to the sacrifice or 'binding' of Isaac, a potential murder of the son by the father, an apparent reversal of the Oedipal paradigm.

Beginning as he does in the middle of the story, Freud misses much that is important not only in the biblical account but in the popular religion of the Jews built around that account. It is through the line established by Abraham, whose history is recorded in Genesis, that the non-Egyptian people who are the subject of even Freud's version of the Moses story arrive in the land of Egypt. They are a coherent and distinct people with a religious life that centres on the One God, the legacy of Abraham. As depicted in Genesis they are a sprawling clan, and their history is marked by conflicts between fathers and sons, husbands and wives, wives and other wives, wives and concubines, and of course among brothers. According to the narrative, it is the jealousy among brothers, among the sons of Jacob, grandsons of Abraham, that sets in motion the historical process that eventually brings the whole clan to Egypt. Having resolved to kill their brother Joseph, whom

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they believe to be their father's favourite, the sons of Jacob are persuaded by the oldest brother to sell him to traders who are on their way to Egypt. Joseph's disappearance is explained to their father as the work of a wild beast, and they produce his bloodied coat to prove it. The account as presented in the Bible is lovingly told – without a hint of moral reproach. It is not, I think, a moral story, or a piece of moral pedagogy: the good Joseph is not pitted against the bad brothers. Joseph is arrogant and self-important. The brothers are hurt by their father's show of affection for Joseph and angry with the pretensions of their brother. The story is concerned with actions and their motives on the one hand and, on the other, the ways in which actions, however they were put into motion, produce consequences undreamed of by any of the participants.

Moral judgment, in the view of Joseph, misses the point. The events that brought them all to Egypt are events put into motion by God. The brothers meant to do him harm, but God used their harm for good. If there is a moral to the story it is that the perspective of individual life, with its (perhaps natural and unavoidable) tendency to resort to a moral point of view, often works to obscure what is, for Joseph, the fundamental fact of human existence – that human beings are caught up in a drama beyond their comprehension, a drama of which God, not man, is the author.

Freud ignores the rich detail of the biblical account – much of it about the relationships among parents and children, jealousy among brothers, predictions fulfilled, and dreams interpreted – detail one might have expected Freud (or any Freudian, for that matter) to find interesting. Freud, however, puts it all aside in favour of his theory that seeks to equate the Bible's moral and religious teaching more narrowly with Moses, the Law and renunciation. The morality of Moses, as Freud understands it, is a morality of 'instinctual renunciation' backed by, if not the idea of the One God, then by the memory of the murdered leader himself, which eventually resurfaces in the conscious life of the people.

Instinctual renunciation, however, a 'morality of accusation' Paul Ricoeur calls it,[23] does not exhaust Moses' contribution to the people he leads. According to the biblical account, Moses is also the great figure who leads his people from slavery to freedom. The Passover celebration commemorates this act of liberation, not the giving of the Ten Commandments (commemorated on the holiday of Shavuot). Even in 'the popular religion' of the Jews, Moses is associated with freedom as well as with the law. The very first of the ten commandments that Moses is depicted as presenting to the people does not actually command anything but makes it clear that it is the 'Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage'. For Freud, Moses is only the great teacher of the law, and

[23] Paul Ricoeur, 'Religion, Atheism, and Faith', in *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (Columbia University Press), 1969, p. 60.

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the law, as Freud presents it, does not contain the idea of civilization within it but only the negative morality the individual must accept to make civilization possible.

III

Moses and Monotheism ends with a critique of Christianity. This is not an issue dictated by Freud's critique or his defence of Judaism, but this move is integral to the logic of the emotion of the work itself. Having admonished the Jews to give up their traditional religion and offering them a modern humanistic account of those elements in Judaism that contribute to Jewish survival, Freud turns to those who he thinks are responsible for the new threat to Jewish survival.[24] Freud's critique of Christianity is not designed to make friends. With considerable determination and not a little glee, Freud applies the Oedipal analysis to Christianity. The result is a rejection of traditional claims of the superiority of Christianity to Judaism and a bold and belligerent affirmation of Judaism's superiority to Christianity.

Christianity emerges with Paul, who, according to Freud, recasts the guilt surrounding the death of Moses into the need for an act of expiation, the acceptance of death by one of the sons for the guilt of the others. Where Judaism is the religion of the Father, Christianity is the religion of the sons. Christianity, which allows for a renewal of the old totemic feast in the ritual of the Holy Communion, does not, in Freud's view, allow for an advance on the ethical, spiritual, or intellectual achievements of Judaism. Quite the contrary, Christianity, Freud tells his readers, is a regression from the standards of Judaism. Christianity slips back into polytheism, accepts a Mother Goddess, and re-opens the doors Judaism had closed to superstition. Successful at performing the task of religion, i.e. instinctual renunciation, Judaism produces disaffection from within. Saul, who becomes Paul, builds a new religion on the need to soften the guilt that underlies the power of renunciation in Judaism. This new religion, however, cannot sever its ties to Judaism in the way that Judaism had cut its ties to the religions of Egypt, for Christianity makes sense only as a psychological rejection of Judaism. The murdered Father is no longer at the centre, the repentant sons are, and for the sons the primary problem is not the Father but their own repentance. This repentance has its moral, social and cultural price, Freud believes; it weakens the power of restraint and brings with it the likelihood of volcanic social and political eruptions aimed at settling scores with the Jews.

Declining from the standards of Judaism, Christianity encounters Judaism's superior attitude and reacts with the attempt to humble the Jews; 'You killed our God', they charge. They are right, Freud says; this is one of

[24] It was this critique of Christianity that had led Freud to refrain from publishing the book while he was still in Vienna, because although he believed that the Catholic Church was hostile both to the Jews and to psychoanalysis he also saw the Church as an important bulwark against Nazism in Austria. (*Moses*, SE XXIII, p. 57).

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the few instances in which anti-Semitism can claim evidence for its charges. But, if I read Freud correctly, he believes that this charge is at best beside the point, because all religions begin in the murder of the one dominant male figure who will later become god, and at worst a self-destructive confession, for in admitting guilt in order to overcome responsibility Christianity has weakened the tradition that would have allowed it to be an effective agency in the resolution of psycho-sexual conflicts, the re-funnelling of libidinous energy, and the building of civilization. The sons have achieved a measure of consolation not possible within the religion of the Father, but this has been at the expense of high moral expectation.

Anti-Semitism, Freud argues, is a response to this failure in Christianity. Indeed, he wonders whether anti-Semitism has something to do with Christianity's inability actually to Christianize the world to which it laid claim. 'Badly Christianized', the still barbaric polytheists of Europe may express their hatred of the religion that has been foisted on them by their hatred of Judaism. 'The hatred of the Jews is at bottom hatred of Christians, and we need not be surprised that in the German National Socialist revolution this intimate relation between the two monotheistic religions finds such clear expression in the hostile treatment of both of them'.[25]

Freud's critique is raw, but *Moses* is a raw book. Pushed from the European centre, psychoanalysis derided as 'Jewish science', Freud has become a refugee, appreciative of those who have given him shelter and worried about those he has left behind. Freud's wounds are deep and his hurt and anger are very much on the surface. Pushed to the margins, Freud adopts an attitude of pride and defiance and lashes out against those he believes are responsible for his situation. But his analysis is remarkably conventional and shallow. Success provokes resentment, Freud contends, and of course those who experience resentment are truly inferior to those they resent, but, the world being what it is, those who succeed are not immune from the hostile actions of those who do not. His successful Jews and his resentful Christians are simply stereotypes and his analysis of the political situation of the Jews in Germany in the 1930s is shallow and misleading.

It was not 'a religion' that was being eliminated from Germany, the victim of 'another' religion; it was the Jews who were being eliminated. The Nazis were threatening war on the Jews, not simply on Judaism. Freud's critique of Christianity and its relation to anti-Semitism obscures this point. The irony is that Freud, I think, must have known as much. First of all, in *Future* he is quite certain that religious beliefs have been so weakened, have so little chance of surviving against progress and science, that religion ought to be consciously set aside as an instrument of political education. In 1927 he thought that religion was a spent force in European life and culture. Presumably Freud thought that religion could not be among the forces that

[25] *Moses*, SE XXIII, p. 92.

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were at work in the Europe of the 20th century. Second, Freud speaks with obvious concern and disapproval of the communist regime in Russia. They subscribe to a view of human nature which makes traditional morality merely an artificial restraint, an instrument of oppression which would disappear when the economic and political forces that made that oppression necessary would itself disappear. But clearly he also knew that in communism one found an aggressively anti-religious movement, one powerful enough to have had great impact on Europe. Freud must have seen that the forces of traditional religion were on the wane. It is therefore surprising that in *Moses* he sees the situation of the Jews in traditional religious terms, that is, as the victims of religious persecution.

Third, if those converted to Christianity were, as Freud insists in *Moses*, poorly Christianized, and if anti-Semitism is the response of these poorly Christianized Christians to Christianity, then Christian anti-Semitism may have to be judged a pagan reaction to Christianity rather than a Christian reaction to Judaism. If the Nazi regime dealt harshly with Christianity, as Freud says, then it is hard to imagine that Nazi anti-Semitism could have been understood to be Christian. Nazism as a movement was anti-religious, inclined to see Christianity as an alien and unwanted incursion into the life and culture of Germany. Of course the Nazis believed that a German rid of Christianity was still a German, and hence could play a role in a new German State, but a Jew rid of Judaism was still a Jew for whom there could be no role. Freud's attack on Christianity and his analysis of anti-Semitism seem misdirected. The issue is not one religion against another, as Freud saw it and as Spinoza had seen it (although, of course, it might have been more the case in Spinoza's time); the issue is a nationalism that explained previous failures as being the result of the incursion of other peoples into the nation's midst and which sought a re-affirmation of itself first of all by excluding 'alien' peoples and secondly by cultivating their own biological, racial, and national 'purity'. The cry of those who exiled Freud from the centre was not, 'You killed our God' but, 'You have polluted our race with yours'. Freud's polemic is directed at the wrong opponent.

IV

Paul Ricoeur contends that *Moses* 'stands as an exorcism. It marks the renouncement on the part of Sigmund Freud the Jew of the value that his narcissism could still rightfully claim, the value of belonging to the race that engendered Moses and imparted ethical monotheism to the world.' Ricoeur thinks Freud's stand to be heroic. 'One can guess how much it cost Freud to run counter to Jewish pride at the very moment when the storm of Nazi persecution was breaking out…'.[26] *Moses* is not an exorcism, a term that

[26] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, *Op. cit.* p. 244.

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might rightly be applied to Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*. There Spinoza develops a critique of Judaism and uses it as part of his passage, as Matthew Arnold puts it, from the House of Israel to modern Europe.[27] In *Moses* Freud develops a critique of Judaism and uses it as part of his passage from Europe to the House of Israel. Tough on what he would take to be traditional Jewish religion (although tougher still on Christianity), Freud recasts Judaism as a Mosaic religion purged of traditional theological elements and built around an Oedipal explanation of Moses, who is developed as the father who calls forth the best in his people. The Jews alone among the peoples of their time have survived, and in Freud's opinion they will continue to survive – presumably long after those who persecute them have passed from the scene. *Moses* is no exorcism. Ricoeur's *Freud* establishes a certain intellectual continuity in Freud's work that ignores the disruption that marks the last decades of Freud's life, a disruption of enormous consequences for the Jewish people and for Europe as a whole. *Moses* is an extraordinary window on those events and on how Freud as a modern Jewish European intellectual viewed them.

Moses is a vehicle through which Freud attempts a return, but it is not an embrace of either Judaism or of the Jewish people. *Moses* is a response to Freud's 'theological-political situation' – the rise of Nazism and anti-Semitism in the 1920s and 1930s. These events force an unravelling of Freud's German–Jewish identity. Pushed to the margins of German society and then forced to flee, Freud uses *Moses* to re-affirm his loyalty to a people whose religion he does not share but whose claim on him he steadfastly refuses to disavow. In *Moses* Freud, like some ancient tragic hero, rises to his fate, saying, in effect, '"They" have given me this fate and I will not run from it. Indeed I will rise to the challenge imposed upon me by their rejection of me. I will assume the identity they hate and wear it with pride. And I will attribute this capacity to the very identity which is engendered by being a Jew.' Freud does not act to reject Jewish pride, he takes refuge in it. It is both the strength and the weakness of his position.

In the *Treatise* Spinoza observed that the Jews 'have been preserved in great measure by gentile hatred'.[28] (It is an observation that Sartre will again make in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, published after the War in 1946.[29]) Freud would have done well to think about Spinoza's insight. *Moses* is, I think, not only a book motivated by the rise of anti-Semitism, it is also a book framed by the desire to persist as a Jew as a response to anti-Semitism. Freud's modern humanistic Judaism is, I think, little more than a defensive pride in his identity. Freud expresses pride – not simply pride in being a Jew but pride as a way of being a Jew. It is a Jewishness without religious or national

[27] Matthew Arnold, 'Spinoza and the Bible', in *The Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 3 (Macmillan, 1903), p. 337.
[28] Spinoza, *Treatise*, p. 55 (Shirley, p. 99).
[29] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (first published 1946), trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken, 1965), pp. 67–9.

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content. I attribute this lack of content to the power that his critique of religion had over him. This critique stands behind his analysis in *Moses* much as he imagines Moses to stand behind the Jewish people, as a stern master who demands compliance. It is a critique that gives Freud very limited options. The most pressing issue with which *Moses* leaves the reader is not the question of Freud's loyalty to the Jewish people but the value of his critique of religion, and this with regard to its limits both as an intellectual critique of religion and as an instrument of political change, specifically as an instrument for the advancement of liberal ideas and political institutions.

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