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Review Essay
A Matter of Distinction: On Recent Work by Jan Assmann

by

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The study of memory and its collaborators (history, narrative, and trauma) has been at the center of both the German- and English-language academic worlds for at least the last fifteen years.[1] While many of the "canonical" texts overlap, the anxieties and implications of recent scholarship have often been quite distinct, particularly in discussions of the memory and history of the Holocaust, and more generally, anti-Semitism, Jews, and Judaism. This phenomenon is played out in the debates about Jan Assmann's work, particularly since the publication of *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (1997).

Published first in English and subsequently in German (1998), *Moses the Egyptian* has attracted considerable attention, not only from fellow Egyptologists but also from scholars of psychoanalysis, Old Testament, and the overlapping fields of Judaic, religious, and cultural studies. While Assmann is one of the most highly respected and probably the most well-known Egyptologist living today, his book was greeted with anything but universal praise. In the wake of numerous reviews pointing out the dangerous turf on which he treads in *Moses the Egyptian*, Assmann published a number of follow-ups, including *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (2003), which included five of the more contentious German-language responses to his earlier book. This inclusion, it seems to me, demonstrates the generosity of spirit and scholarship that I encountered when I first met Assmann in 2003 and in the years since. Given that the text is in large part a rejoinder to his critics, it is unfortunate that these critical essays are not included in the new English translation, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford University Press, 2010).[2]

1. Many thanks to Joel Robbins and Anthony Burr for their editorial suggestions.

2. Throughout the essay, I cite pages from *Moses the Egyptian* and *The Price of Monotheism* within the text, using the abbreviations ME and PM respectively. Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung: oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Vienna: Carl

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The more vituperative responses seem to have largely come from German-language critics who focus on Assmann's apparent "attack" on monotheism as the source of religious violence, hatred, and difference. Unlike many scholars of the ancient world, Assmann explicitly acknowledges the relationships between his scholarly work and his own position as a German writing after the Holocaust. While he emphasizes that his hope is to "contribute to a historical analysis of anti-Semitism" (ME 6), his work has invoked a series of reproaches imputing that his work is itself anti-Semitic.[3] Understandably, much of the scholarship on anti-Semitism shies away from looking at the relationships between the xenophobic hatred *of* Jews and *by* Jews, but Assmann broaches this subject by focusing on the mutual religious antagonisms that emerged in the earliest years of monotheism. Instead of tracing the history of these animosities, he is more interested in tracing the ways they are textually encapsulated and expressed, particularly in those texts that also document the emergence of Mosaic monotheism. Assmann's work has important implications for the study of religious hatred and violence, but it may hold even more promise for the ways in which it combines academic historical narratives and speculations of the most cosmic importance. For scholars of Judaic studies—if not also other geographically, religiously, or ethnically focused disciplines—Assmann offers a model of scholarship, one that takes apparently esoteric knowledge into a more global sphere of discourse and debate. As Assmann is well aware, moving outside the boundaries of one's own field or community has its dangers, but they are dangers worth confronting, not only for the individual scholar but for the vitality of scholarship more generally.

Both prolific and thoughtful, Assmann's arguments can be difficult to pin down, at least in part because of his particular synthesis of various modes of interpretation and narration. As Geoffrey Winthrop-Young notes, it is often easier to disagree with Assmann than to accurately summarize his work.[4] However, there are two concepts that play out with varying implications in his numerous essays and books over the past thirteen years. First, Assmann repeatedly turns to the importance of "mnemohistory," the history of cultural *memory* rather than the history of "what really happened." In this case, cultural memory includes not only that which is consciously and actively recalled, but also those elements that hover just below the surface of collective (conscious) memory. If this sounds Freudian, it is. Assmann uses and critiques psychoanalytic concepts of memory, repression, and latency, ultimately arguing for a concept of cultural memory distinct from that of Freud's.

Hanser Verlag, 2003); Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

3. On the question of "anti-Semitism" and alternative terminologies, see Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 197–211. While Assmann more often discusses "anti-Judaism," he generally uses the term "anti-Semitism" to encompass all hatred of Jews, whether religious, cultural, or racial.

4. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, "Memories of the Nile: Egyptian Traumas and Communication Technologies in Jan Assmann's Theory of Cultural Memory," *New German Critique* 96 (2005): 103–33.

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In *Moses the Egyptian*, Assmann focuses on the mnemohistory of Moses, leaving aside the question of whether the man Moses ever "really" existed (i.e., outside the texts). While Assmann is (I think) responsible for coining the term *mnemohistory*, he readily acknowledges that he is neither the first nor the only one to consider this concept. The roots of mnemohistory can be found in the study of historiography (the history of history-writing) and studies of collective memory, both of which emerged in the mid to late nineteenth century with the rise of the distinct discipline of history in the university. In appealing to mnemohistory, Assmann moves far beyond Egyptian archaeological sites and into the world of Egyptomania, a world filled with speculative and spurious texts from the third century BCE to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Unlike scholars whose main domain is outside ancient Egypt, Assmann is able to weave together "regular" history (based on texts and shards of pottery from the fourteenth century BCE) with mnemohistory (based on texts written fourteen-plus centuries after the times which they describe). This gives his work a gravitas that is sometimes missing from other discussions of ancient Egypt: rather than merely analyzing our own and others' dreams of Egypt, we are awakened to find that Egypt was a real time and place, with internal affairs, independent of the dreams that followed. In shuttling between history and mnemohistory, Assmann does not allow the reader to rest content with expert testimonies of historians or with the heartfelt testimonies of witnesses, believers, and poets. Yet this approach also leaves his work vulnerable to critique from a wide range of angles.[5]

The mnemohistorical approach itself has not elicited so much controversy as Assmann's mnemohistorical analysis of the Mosaic distinction. Because he weaves together elements of history, memory, and theology, his analyses of the Mosaic distinction have elicited intense criticisms from a wide range of thinkers. According to Assmann, with the emergence of monotheism in the ancient world, there emerged a thoroughly new distinction "between truth and falsehood in religion" (PM 2) that came to define a series of other persistent distinctions such as those "between Jews and Gentiles, Christians and pagans, Muslims and unbelievers" (ME 1). What is absolutely revolutionary and earth-shattering is neither the singularity of this new god (or truth) nor the existence of distinctions between peoples, but rather the violent denunciation of all other religious truths and the peoples who believe in them. In the polytheistic world of ancient Egypt, religion had been a medium of translation and communication. (For example, the Greek sun-god Apollo corresponded to the Egyptian sun-god Re; Dionysus was another name for Bacchus; and Zeus was translatable as Jupiter).[6] By contrast, in the new world of monotheism, religion became a barrier to communication: the names for God became not only untranslatable, but also unpronounceable and unrepresentable. Thus, monotheistic religion created not only

5. See, for example, Peter Schäfer, "Geschichte und Gedächtnisgeschichte: Jan Assmanns *Mosaische Unterscheidung*," *Memoria—Wege jüdischen Erinnerns, Festschrift für Michael Brocke zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Birgit Klein and Christiane E. Müller (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2005).

6. Assmann's argument about the un/translatability of Gods in the ancient world has been extensively critiqued in Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

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barriers between peoples, but also the motivation for religious hatred and violence as represented in the Hebrew Bible.

Though some critics have claimed that Assmann seems to blame monotheism for violent hatred, his argument is, in fact, far more narrow (but not necessarily unproblematic): Violence and hatred existed in the polytheistic ancient world, but, he argues, it is only with monotheism that violent hatred becomes tied to *religion* per se. Much ink has been spilled about whether this argument is implicitly anti-Semitic (or in some cases, anti-Christian), but the question of exactly what is meant by *religion* is often left unaddressed. Assmann uses this term to designate the theistic elements of society, even as he is fully aware of the inextricability of theism and other defining elements of collective life. This allows him to claim, for example, that polytheistic societies may have differed in regard to cultures, languages and customs, but *not* in regard to religion: The gods (at least) were translatable if not always transportable.

Definitions of religion are particularly important to those thinkers intent upon separating religious from secular realms, whether in order to defend one or the other, or to distinguish "biased," theological scholarship from "unbiased" secular scholarship. Yet Assmann's distinctions between religion and secularism are idiosyncratic: The narrowly theistic definition allows him to argue that certain elements that are often assumed to be coterminous with religion—such as violence and hatred, but also ethics and justice—were only belatedly imported from the secular world into the religious world. As such, they need not be forever tied to religion. Thus, overcoming religious hatred and violence does not necessarily mean overcoming *religion* per se; likewise, insisting upon ethics and justice does not require that we establish theological norms. Despite the fact that Assmann vehemently shies away from taking any particular theological position, his work reads as if it is more engaged—theologically, religiously, ethically, it's hard to say—than most other scholarship on religion, particularly that on ancient religions.

It is no surprise, then, that while much of the work by other scholars and historians of religion has been of little interest to theologians, Assmann's work calls upon theologians to take his arguments seriously. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), for example, takes issue with Assmann's correlation of monotheism and violence on historical grounds, even if Ratzinger ultimately is more concerned about its troubling implications for Christian theology. Not only does Ratzinger insist that the polytheistic gods were far more involved with violence than Assmann suggests, but he also argues that Assmann's nostalgic yearning for premonotheistic Egypt is both futile and dangerous: "If we cannot know the truth about God," he writes, "then the truth about what is good and what is bad remains equally inaccessible. Then there is no good and evil; only the reckoning up of consequences remains: ethics is replaced by calculation."[7] In other words, the only "guarantee" of tolerance is to see that truth, love, and goodness are identical. In response, Assmann wields mnemohistory against history, arguing that his

7. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, ed. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 230–31.

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analysis of the Mosaic distinction is a matter of textual description rather than historical actuality. "The concept of a Mosaic distinction," he writes, "refers to a spiritual position, not a historical state of affairs. The ban on graven images, like god's oneness, is a theological rather than a religious affair" (PM 33). Perhaps more importantly, Assmann distinguishes between the monotheistic "regulative idea" as opposed to polytheistic practices and realities—that is, even as Ratzinger describes it, monotheism is a textually codified *ideal* to which reality can never measure up. By directly engaging with the religious texts themselves, Assmann develops an interpretation (and perhaps even a secular theology) that is not necessarily tied to any particular tradition. While this approach may be problematic to theologians and historians alike, Assmann uses it to develop a sort of secular mode of textual analysis that takes seriously the theologies of religious texts.

Assmann's theistic definition of religion is more problematic when he considers Jewish monotheism alongside Christian and Islamic monotheisms. This is most apparent if we compare his arguments about Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* in *Moses the Egyptian* with those in the later book, *The Price of Monotheism*. In the earlier work, Assmann generally avoids making distinctions between Judaic and non-Judaic monotheisms except to discuss how Christian theologians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were drawn to the figure of Moses the Egyptian, who, he argues, could overcome the age-old distinctions between Egypt and Israel, nature and culture, and Gentile and Jew. Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* emerges as the culmination of this Enlightenment tradition that seeks to "overcome" the Mosaic distinction, if not also anti-Semitism. Assmann follows Freud's explanation of the coercive power of guilt and repressed memory in "the semantics of religious antagonism," and concedes that Freud's theory about the origins of anti-Semitism, while historically improbable, is at least compelling, particularly in the context of the long mnemohistory of Egypt. According to Freud, anti-Semitism can be understood as a return of repressed anti-monotheism that lingered in the Ancient Near East ever since Akhenaten's brief rule in eighteenth-century BCE. Freud's argument about modern anti-Semitism is inseparable from his discussion of the persistent distinction between Jews and non-Jews, a distinction that is decisively nontheistic, at least in the context of Freud's Vienna and in our own contemporary time. For Freud, (modern) Jews are Jewish not because of any particular beliefs in the singularity of God, but because of their biological inheritance of a particular set of traumatic memories, including the memory of Mosaic monotheism. According to Freud, the persistence of these distinctions cannot be explained by any of the textual, oral, or ritual media that might have carried traces of the events from generation to generation. Instead, he (in)famously argues that the memory-traces must have been biologically passed on from one generation to the next. Despite its associations with anti-Semitic racism, the genealogical definition of Jewishness was an internal one, developed by the Rabbis and documented in the Talmud.[8] Neither

8. See Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Daniel Boyarin, "The Christian Invention of Judaism: The Theodosian Empire and the Rabbinic Refusal of Religion," *Representations* 85 (2004): 21–57; Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The*

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Freud nor Assmann address the historical origins of this distinction, but both contend with its consequences.

While Assmann affirms Freud's general theory of anti-Semitism and of the structure of memory and repression, he is unwilling to accept Freud's insistence on the biological transmission of memory, at least in part because it suggests a distasteful racialism that is more often associated with Freud's Nazi contemporaries than with liberal notions of the individual's right to define him- or herself.[9] Clearly, such racialism was not (and *is* not) limited to racists, whether anti-Semites or anti-Blacks or anti-Gentiles. Where other scholars have argued that Freud's insistence on the inheritance of memory was out of step with the scientific debates of the times, Assmann insists that Freud was compelled to turn to biology simply because his concept of cultural memory was too "weak": "Cultural memory," writes Assmann, "is not just a *mémoire volontaire*, but a *mémoire involontaire* as well; much is contained in its lower strata that can break out again and seize hold of people's imagination after a long phase of latency" (PM 96). Assmann argues that this was Freud's "blind spot," but it seems that this part of Freud's theory is less a matter of *his* "blindness" than of Assmann's: To insist on the genealogical definition of Jewishness is a matter of stating things *as they are*, not as he (or we) might wish they would be. That is, in Freud's Vienna, and in our own contemporary times, people continue to define themselves and others as Jewish based on genealogy, whether "real" or imagined. To this day, genealogy—ethnic background, racial descent, whatever you want to call it—functions as a medium of memory, one that is *experienced* and described as a *mémoire involuntaire*. In this case, "believers" are not those who believe in *god*, but rather those who believe in the power of race and genealogy.[10]

The fact that the genealogical definition of Jewishness was not yet established in the early years of Christianity—and was certainly not yet established in the years when the biblical texts were written down and collected—is central to understanding Assmann's revised and extended discussions of the Mosaic distinction in *The Price of Monotheism*. Whereas in the earlier book Freud emerges as the culmination of repeated efforts to dissolve and "overcome" the Mosaic distinction, in *The Price of Monotheism*, Assmann credits Freud with recognizing the "profoundly Jewish achievement" of monotheism, that is, the forward step in the progress of intellectuality (*Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*). Following Freud, Assmann explains that monotheism is defined not only by the singularity of one

Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

9. For a more detailed examination of Freud's claims about the inheritance of memory (and by extension, Jewishness), see Eliza Slavet, *Racial Fever: Freud and the Jewish Question* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

10. It is preposterous to insist that such beliefs are outdated, primitive, or barbaric, particularly when month after month (year after year) we hear of yet another scientific study that claims to "prove" the genetic unity of Jews from around the world. Most recently, see Nicholas Wade, "Studies Show Jews' Genetic Similarity," *New York Times*, June 10, 2010: A14.

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true God, but also by the distinction between the abstract and unrepresentable world of faith and intellectuality (on the one hand), and the concrete and sensory world of facts and humanity (on the other). This is most obvious in the ban on graven images which amounts to an absolute distinction between the divine (or spiritual) realm and the human (earthly and/or sensory) realms.

Rather than blame Moses—and by extension, the Jews—for the emergence of insurmountable differences between truth and falsehood, in Assmann's more recent work he applauds Moses' initiation of the (inevitable?) process of the disenchantment of the world. The Mosaic distinction, he argues, is akin to the Parmenidean distinction between truth and falsehood in science and to the Platonic distinction between the ideal and the real—distinctions that have allowed humanity to surmount cosmotheistic magic and mysticism and to open up a secular world of science and truth. Yet Assmann overlooks the links between the Mosaic distinction and other Jewish distinctions, namely between Jews and non-Jews and between belonging and belief. First, while the ethnic definition of the Jewish people has had some horrific consequences, one could argue that it is at least in part responsible for the emergence of a distinctly secular tradition of Jewish philosophy and culture. What makes this tradition *Jewish* is the fact that individual thinkers are regarded as Jewish (whether by themselves, their communities, or their historians) simply because of their genealogies. This gives the Jewish tradition a certain expansiveness, for secularists and heretics continue to be a vital part of the tradition. In other words, the Jewish tradition cannot be reduced to its theistic elements, and one reason for this is the persistent ethnic definition of the Jewish people.

Moreover, if we want to discuss Judaism in the realm of religion, we cannot afford to excise the "ethnic" elements from the conversation. Freud's insistence on the biological inheritance of memory may seem to belong in the realm of science (whether "good" or "bad"), but it is intimately linked to his delineation of the "progress in intellectuality" initiated by Mosaic monotheism. As he notes, "An advance in intellectuality consists in deciding against direct sense-perception in favour of what are known as the higher intellectual processes—that is, memories, reflections and inferences."[11] This statement affirms a truth that cannot necessarily be demonstrated to our sensory apparatuses—and this truth encompasses both the unrepresentable God and the notion that Jews are Jews because they have biologically inherited the memories and reflections of their ancestors. According to Freud's line of argument, neither of these "truths" can be proven via scientific experiments or physical evidence and neither is a matter of absolute fact; rather, they are matters of faith, hypothesis, and inference. While Assmann concedes that he had misunderstood the important link between Freud's understanding of the Mosaic distinction and of the "progress in intellectuality," he misses the connection between the "progress in intellectuality" and the persistence of "ethnic" definitions of community.

11. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud, vol. XXIII (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953), 117–18.

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For Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* is a sort of "mea culpa" and a large-scale defense of Judaic monotheism against the notion that it is responsible for introducing religious hatred and violence into the world. Instead, he argues that while the semantics of religious violence appear in the Hebrew Bible, it is only with the "Christian obligation to evangelize and the Muslim obligation to compel submission" that the violence of exclusion begins to matter (PM 18). Because Judaism defers universalism until a messianic end-time (PM 17), it maintains a sense of self-exclusion that prevents it from resorting to violence on Others. As provocative as this line of argument is, it begins to collapse when we consider the question of who these Others are (or were). Assmann claims that the massacres described in biblical texts, such as the massacre of the worshipers of the Golden Calf, "are an internal affair of the Jewish people; they are meant to wipe out the Egyptians or Canaanites who dwell 'among us,' in our midst and in our own hearts" (PM 17). The biblical text addresses, describes, and ultimately *invents* a people who were not yet entirely formed as a distinct entity. This is not to deny the fact that there were people who were known as Israelites or Hebrews, but the text itself produces the very distinctions that came to distinguish internal from external. It is only many centuries later that we can speak of such distinctions apart from the belief and practice of Judaic monotheism. While self-exclusion may seem less problematic than the exclusion of *others*, it requires that one knows who is one's "self" and who is "other." The distinction between Jewish and Christian–Islamic forms of exclusion begins to dissolve if we exclude the ethnic definition of Jewishness.

The matter of self-exclusion cannot be reduced to ethnicity, nor does it mean that those who exclude themselves are merely passive victims in the history of hatred, violence, and intolerance. (Simply put, it takes two to tango.) As Assmann notes, in "evangelical" religions such as Christianity and Islam, there are no "internal affairs" because the missionary drive to include all others signifies that the entire world is one's own affair. Thus, the only form of exclusion that remains—that is, for those who reject Jesus as savior or who refuse to submit to Allah—is self-exclusion. Once Christianity and Islam became powerful political agents, the theological question of exclusion became a political question of tolerance and intolerance. Assmann argues that at their core, all three monotheisms involve a form of intolerance "based on a new awareness of incompatibility," where "what matters is not that violence be inflicted but that it be endured" (PM 20). In other words, "What is important is thus not that divergent opinions and deeds are tolerated, but that one refuse to perform 'intolerable' actions demanded by others, such as eating the meat of an animal offered in sacrifice to the Roman imperial cult" (PM 20). Thus, the link between monotheism and violence has as much to do with *enduring* violence as it does with perpetrating it.[12]

12. As Assmann is well aware, he can easily be criticized for seeming to blame the victim by arguing that (Judaic) monotheism initiates a process of *enduring* violence (as much as one of perpetrating it). "But what else is martyrdom," he asks, "if not the responsibility of victims for their fate?" From here, he acknowledges that the Nazis were entirely uninterested in their victims' "faith," but he fails to

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It may seem like a big leap to go from a discussion of self-exclusion and tolerance to concluding remarks regarding Assmann's position on Judaic studies and the relationships between Judaic studies and other fields. Since much of this review essay has focused on the Mosaic distinction—and by extension, the Jewish distinction—it seems appropriate to address the Judaic studies distinction. As has been widely noted of late, Judaic studies has historically referred to scholarship done by, for, and about Jews, but in the last two decades, this has radically changed, particularly with the emergence of scholars of Judaism in Germany, China, and other places with less prominent Jewish communities.[13] Assmann may not be a scholar of Judaic studies, but his arguments open new possibilities for conversations between thinkers interested in—but not solely dedicated to—the study of Judaism. Despite my criticisms of his work, I want to emphasize that Assmann is far more than a straw man: He is one of the most engaging, thoughtful, and generous scholars writing today. In fact, I fear that this essay may be bit unfair to Assmann, since I insistently recommend his work to colleagues and students in anthropology, literary studies, religious studies, and Jewish studies.

Assmann's work can serve as a model for scholars of Judaic studies in a number of ways: First, rather than simply continuing a conversation with his colleagues in Egyptology, he has used his Egyptological knowledge to open much larger conversations with a much larger range of scholars and thinkers. In the process, he has demonstrated that it is impossible to fully understand the history of monotheisms without understanding that which was (supposedly) left behind (namely, ancient Egyptian polytheism). Second, he combines the sober voice of the secular historian with the sensitivity and concern that may be more common in religious or familial contexts. For example, while he carefully examines historical evidence, he also interprets religious texts in ways that do not necessarily align with any particular tradition. Third, and finally, in his work since *Moses the Egyptian*, Assmann engages multiple audiences and even as he has received lacerating criticism verging on opprobrium, he has not retreated.

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note that faith itself is generally not a primary category in the definition of Jews' own definitions of Jewishness.

13. See, for example, the work of Till van Rahden: "History in the House of the Hangman: How Postwar Germany Became a Key Site for the Study of Jewish History," Lecture presented at University of California, San Diego, March 1, 2009.

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