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## 6 Freud, Sellin, and the Murder of Moses

### 1. Freud

IN SIGMUND FREUD'S last book, *Moses and Monotheism*, published in the year of his death (1939), he laid down some rather bold theses:

- That Moses was an Egyptian, a follower of Akhenaten and his new solar monotheism, who organized the Exodus from Egypt in order to rescue the new religion from being extinguished in Egypt
- That he was subsequently murdered by the Jews, who did not bear the high moral demands of Moses's abstract religion
- That this murder meant for the Jews a kind of retraumatization, being a reenactment of the "primal parricide" in the "primal horde" that had left its traces in the human soul (the thesis Freud had expounded in 1913 in *Totem and Taboo*)
- That this retraumatization resulted in a repression of Moses's monotheism and a long period of latency after which the

monotheistic religion returned with the compulsory power of the return of the repressed

It does not seem worthwhile to engage again in a discussion of Freud's arguments concerning the historical Moses, because they lack any evidence both in the biblical text and in extrabiblical sources. They function as a heuristic construction in the psychoanalytical sense and are meant to shed light on a present situation, to clear up an actual problem. One aspect of the present situation that Freud had already dealt with in *Totem and Taboo* is the diagnosis of religion as a compulsory neurosis that is rooted in the repressed experience of the primal parricide:

Early trauma—defence—latency—outbreak of neurotic illness—partial return of the repressed. Such is the formula which we have laid down for the development of the neurosis. The reader is now invited to take the step of supposing that something occurred in the life of the human species similar to what occurs in the life of individuals: of supposing, that is, that here too events occurred of a sexually aggressive nature, which left behind them permanent consequences but were for the most part fended off and forgotten, and which after a long latency came into effect and created phenomena similar to symptoms in their structure and purpose.<sup>1</sup>

Along the pattern "Early trauma—defence—latency—outbreak of neurotic disorder—partial return of the repressed," Freud felt himself able to explain the general course of religious history with the stages of totemism, polytheism, and monotheism. This diagnosis is now applied to Moses and the Mosaic religion:

It would be worth while to understand how it was that the monotheist idea made such a deep impression precisely on the Jewish people and that they were able to maintain it so tenaciously. It is possible, I think, to find an answer. Fate had brought the great deed and misdeed of primaeval days, the killing of the father, closer to the Jewish people by caus-

ing them to repeat it on the person of Moses, an outstanding father-figure. It was a case of "acting-out" instead of remembering, as happens so often with neurotics during the work of analysis. (SE 23:88)

What he really wanted to explain is the structure and genesis of the Jewish character. At the end of his book, he summarizes: "We wanted to explain the origin of the special character of the Jewish people, a character which is probably what has made their survival to the present day possible" (SE 23:123). Freud's book belongs to the genre of Jewish self-thematization and is triggered by the outbreak of violent anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany. In letters to Lou Andreas-Salomé and Arnold Zweig, he wrote, "In view of the new persecutions one wonders again how the Jew came to be what he is and why he attracted this undying hatred," and the answer he found was "Moses hat den Juden geschaffen": Moses created the Jew.<sup>2</sup>

Freud wants to explain with his theory of the "return of the repressed" how the monotheistic religion was able to assert itself with such overwhelming power. The Jewish people had not forgotten the message of monotheism that Moses had brought them but had only repressed it. This means that they had always, albeit unconsciously, known it. For this reason, the message, when it returned with the later prophets whom God sent to remind them of what had been revealed to them at Sinai, could meet in the Jewish soul with such an overwhelming and compulsive resonance:

A tradition that was based only on communication could not lead to the compulsive character that attaches to religious phenomena. It would be listened to, judged, and perhaps dismissed, like any other piece of information from outside; it would never attain the privilege of being liberated from the constraint of logical thought. It must have undergone the fate of being repressed, the condition of lingering in the uncon-

scious, before it is able to display such powerful effects on its return, to bring the masses under its spell. (SE 23:101)

In another passage, he expresses himself in even more unequivocal terms:

It is worth specially stressing the fact that each portion which returns from oblivion asserts itself with peculiar force, exercises an incomparably powerful influence on people in the mass, and raises an irresistible claim to truth against which logical objections remain powerless: a kind of "credo quia absurdum." This remarkable feature can only be understood on the pattern of the delusions of psychotics. We have long understood that a portion of the forgotten truth lies hidden in delusional ideas, that when this returns it has to put up with distortions and misunderstandings, and that the compulsive conviction which attaches to the delusion arises from this core of truth and spreads out onto the errors that wrap it round. We must grant an ingredient such as this of what may be called *historical* truth to the dogmas of religion as well, which, it is true, bear the character of psychotic symptoms but which, as group phenomena, escape the curse of isolation. (SE 23:85)

The "curse of isolation" would be the necessary consequence of any liberation from the constraints of logical thinking, because this constraint is nothing else but the principle of socialization. The religious illusion, however, does not have isolating effects because as a collective neurosis, it is shared by the entire society.

Moses, however, did not just create the Jews by having caused their retraumatization through his violent death. He also and above all created them by his religious instruction (his Torah). In the first place, Freud identifies a peculiar ethnical narcissism. The Jews, he writes, "have a particularly high opinion of themselves, that they regard themselves as more distinguished, of higher standing, as superior to other peoples—from whom they are also distinguished by many of their customs. . . . They really regard

themselves as God's chosen people, they believe that they stand especially close to him; and this makes them proud and confident" (SE 105). For Freud, it is evident

that it was the man Moses who imprinted this trait—significant for all time—upon the Jewish people. He raised their self-esteem by assuring them that they were God's chosen people, he enjoined them to holiness and pledged them to be apart from others. . . . It was this one man Moses who created the Jews. It is to him that this people owes its tenacity of life but also much of the hostility it has experienced and still experiences. (SE 23:106)

Of equal importance as chosenness is for Freud the drive renunciation imposed by the prohibition of images and its subsequent progress in intellectuality:

Among the precepts of the Moses religion there is one that is of greater importance than appears to begin with. This is the prohibition against making an image of God—the compulsion to worship a God whom one cannot see. In this, I suspect, Moses was outdoing the strictness of the Aten religion. Perhaps he merely wanted to be consistent: his God would in that case have neither a name nor a countenance. Perhaps it was a fresh measure against magical abuses. But if this prohibition were accepted, it must have a profound effect. For it meant that a sensory perception was given second place to what may be called an abstract idea—a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality or, strictly speaking, an instinctual renunciation, with all its necessary psychological consequences. (SE 23:112–113)

According to Freud, the Jewish character is formed by two different motives: a progress in intellectuality and a specific susceptibility to the neurotic father-religion of monotheism. It is obvious what an important role the murder of Moses plays in this theory. However, Freud was not the first to come to such a conclusion concerning the death of Moses, which, by the way, is left in the

dark by the biblical report in a rather striking way. This fact led others before Freud to a similar conclusion, among them the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the Old Testament scholar Ernst Sellin. Freud mentions both briefly in footnotes but relied especially on Sellin much more heavily than is commonly assumed.

## 2. Goethe

IN AN ESSAY written in earlier years but published only in 1819 in "Noten und Abhandlungen zum besseren Verständnis des West-östlichen Divan," titled "Israel in der Wüste,"<sup>3</sup> Goethe held that after years of aimlessly wandering in the desert, Moses was slain by Joshua and Caleb, who could no longer bear his weak and hesitant style of leadership and wanted to enter and conquer the Promised Land as soon as possible. In this hypothetical murder, Goethe saw the culmination and logical consequence of the numerous scenes of rebellion, mutiny, and infidelity that interrupt the march from Egypt to Canaan. These scenes of "murmuring," as they are traditionally called, led him to the following conclusion: "The proper, sole and deepest motive of global and human history, to which all the others are subordinate, remains the conflict of disbelief and belief."<sup>4</sup> In the same way as Freud, Goethe arrived at a very general theory, not of human history in general, as he believed, but of monotheism in particular. In the horizon of "Abrahamic" monotheism, not so much perhaps in Judaism but very much so in Christianity and Islam, history is stamped by the conflict of belief and disbelief. The conflict that broke out during the wandering through the wilderness continued in the Promised Land and is virulent until today. Goethe's diagnosis of monotheism comes closer to the truth, I think, than Freud's, but Freud comes closer to the tragic aspects of the figure of Moses.<sup>5</sup> Freud has Moses die for his message, as a martyr of monotheism, as it were (though Freud does not use this term,

as far as I can remember). This term, however, plays a dominant role in the book that Freud quotes as his authority for the murder of Moses, the book by Ernst Sellin *Mose und seine Bedeutung für die israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte* (Moses and his significance for the history of Israelite-Jewish religion; 1922).

### 3. Sellin

SELLIN (1867–1946)<sup>6</sup> CULLED from passages primarily in Hosea that Moses must have been slain at Shittîm, the last resting place of the Israelites after the forty years of wandering through the desert. There, they participated in a feast that the Moabites held to the local god Baal Peor and raised thereby the jealousy and anger of YHVH, who sent a plague killing twenty-four thousand people and ordered Moses, “Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the Lord, so that the Lord’s fierce anger may turn away from Israel” (Num. 25:4). In order to prevent Moses from executing this cruel order, the Israelites—according to Sellin—killed Moses and his Midianite wife, Zippora, and had this crime covered up under the story of Zimri and his Midianite lover Cozbi, whom Phineas had killed, by which deed he stilled God’s anger and stopped the plague. Sellin’s construction is as fantastic as Freud’s construction of an Egyptian Moses. But the conception of a murder covered up in the tradition by a screen memory may have set Freud on the track of constructing his case history of monotheism.

“Hosea,” Sellin writes, “is still acquainted with the continuation of Numbers 25:3–5 in its original form; he knows that Moses has been killed at Shittîm by his own people after their defection to Baal Peor when he called them to penitence and demanded atonement. The whole is a tragic, gripping story par excellence.”<sup>7</sup> With Moses, Sellin assumes, his message was also forgotten. “At most,” he writes, “we may expect that here and there a spark pops up of the spiritual fire that he once ignited, that his ideas

did not wholly disappear . . . until they later broke through under the impression of special events or personalities that were moved by his spirit and won influence on the population at large.<sup>8</sup> The possibility that the memory of Moses, his message, and his violent death has been preserved in a small and marginalized group has also been considered by Freud, whose lines read as a paraphrase of Sellin:

The religion of Moses, however, had not disappeared without leaving a trace. A kind of memory of it had survived, obscured and distorted, supported, perhaps, among individual members of the priestly caste by ancient records. And it was this tradition of a great past which continued to work in the background, as it were, which gradually gained more and more power over men's minds, and which finally succeeded in transforming the god Yahweh into the god of Moses and in calling back to life the religion of Moses which had been established and then abandoned long centuries earlier. (SE 23:124)<sup>9</sup>

Freud, however, eventually discards this interpretation in favor of his own theory of repression. However, Freud's theory about the pathogenic effects of the repressed memory of Moses also has its precursor in Sellin's book, which influenced Freud much more strongly than he himself admits. Sellin is convinced that not only the memory of Moses but also and above all the remembrance of the grievous sin of his murder and all the crimes that have been committed against the prophets would have lingered on in the memory of the people and would eventually have caused a kind of collective psychic disease. He takes it for certain "that in spite of all the cover-up from the side of the priests the tradition of Moses' martyrdom stayed alive, that this murder and defection was resented as the great sin of the people which made them deadly ill and which has to be atoned for first before salvation may come."<sup>10</sup> The impression to live under the curse of the break of the covenant and under the wrath of God produced a "sick theology" of sorts, informed by a guilt complex. These feelings of

guilt also play a major role in Freud's analysis of biblical religion. He related them to the ambivalence of the father-son relationship:

Ambivalence is a part of the essence of the relation to the father: in the course of time the hostility too could not fail to stir, which had once driven the sons into killing their admired and dreaded father. There was no place in the framework of the religion of Moses for a direct expression of the murderous hatred of the father. All that could come to light was a mighty reaction against it—a sense of guilt on account of that hostility, a bad conscience for having sinned against God and for not ceasing to sin. (SE 134)

“The bad conscience for having sinned against God and for not ceasing to sin”: this is exactly what Sellin has in mind when he speaks of the “deadly illness” of the people and its guilt-stricken theology. Since the situation of the Jews did not change with the building of the Second Temple, since they did not regain their political sovereignty but remained under foreign dominion, first by the Persians, then by the Seleucids, and finally by the Romans, they could not but feel that the curse and the wrath of God did not yet end.

For Sellin, the murder of Moses was not only the culmination of the scenes of rebellion during the march through the wilderness but also the beginning of violent acts against the prophets who followed Moses in the Promised Land and shared his tragic lot. His boldest claim was not so much that Moses was murdered—the biblical record is suspiciously vague about Moses's death—but that this murder was remembered and that this memory stayed alive until the times of the New Testament. For the historical Moses remains a mystery, and one cannot even be sure whether he ever lived; but the cultural memory of Israel is codified in the Bible—both testaments—and open to investigation and critique. In this respect, Sellin goes so far as to draw a line of tradition that leads from the alleged passion of Moses via the

tradition about the violent fate of the prophets to the passion of Jesus of Nazareth. He quotes, for example, Nehemiah, who gives a recapitulation of YHVH's *magnalia* for Israel, including the gift of the law through Moses, his servant: "But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they turned their backs on your law. They killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies" (Neh. 9:26). This passage does not refer to the murder of Moses but to the murder of the later prophets, his followers, and it therefore testifies to the tradition of sinful opposition against the law. The same reproach occurs in the New Testament, in which Luke and Matthew have Jesus saying, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you" (Luke 13:34 = Matt. 23:37), and in which Stephen in his great speech before his execution by stoning says, "Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it" (Acts 7:52–53). Sellin, thus, connects the scenes of murmuring in the wilderness and the topic of the violent fate of the prophets in Canaan, and he even includes the four songs about the suffering servant, the man of sorrows, in Deutero-Isaiah, chapters 52–53, in this tradition. Nobody seems to have followed him in this construction except Klaus Baltzer in his commentary on Deutero-Isaiah.<sup>11</sup> Moses is never mentioned by name in these songs. But if we think not of a repressed tradition about the death of Moses but of a cultural pattern about the suffering that those who plead YHVH's cause, live by the law, and stay loyal to the covenant may incur by the hands of an infidel people and government, the idea that the suffering servant tradition also belongs to this pattern seems anything but absurd. There is not a literary but an associative connection that allowed Jesus to be seen by his disciples and followers both as a new Moses and as the paradigmatic suffering servant.

In 1967, forty-five years after Sellin and twenty-eight years after Freud, the New Testament scholar Odil Hannes Steck, who turned in the course of this project into an Old Testament scholar, took up this theme in his dissertation on "the violent fate of the prophets."<sup>12</sup> In this book, he does not mention Freud, which is small wonder, but he also never mentions Sellin, which is a crime. Sellin's pioneering work seems to have fallen into complete oblivion. Steck is able to substantiate the line of tradition from Nehemiah to Luke—that Sellin only briefly adumbrated—by a plethora of passages referring to the idea that Israel not only neglected the message of the prophets but even killed them. For an explanation, he points to the tendency to interpret the disasters of Israelite history as God's punishment for Israel's continuous disobedience, which characterizes the "Deuteronomistic history" (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings). This leads to the formation of a fixed pattern that Steck reconstructs like this:

- A The stiff-necked, disobedient people,
- B warned by the prophets to turning back,
- C remained resistant/C<sup>1</sup> killed the prophets
- D and incurred God's punishment.<sup>13</sup>

In the form ABCD, this schema penetrates the whole Deuteronomistic history and the book of Jeremiah; in the exacerbated form ABC<sup>1</sup>D, it occurs first in Nehemiah and then not only in the New Testament but in striking abundance in intertestamentary and postbiblical sources such as Qumran, Midrash, Talmud, and Flavius Josephus. Sellin could not wish for a better confirmation of his general thesis, which is not so much about the murder of Moses, the only point for which Sellin is mentioned by Freud, but about the tragic side of the "Israelite-Jewish history of religion." Both Sellin and Steck connect the topic of the "sin of the fathers" that YHWH is visiting on the next generations with a general feeling of guilt that kept haunting the Jewish people, because their

sufferings were in no way over with the return to Jerusalem and the building of the Second Temple. Foreign domination continued with the Persians and assumed much more repressive forms under the Seleucids and finally under the Romans. Thus, the feeling of living under the wrath and curse of God persisted. While Freud feels able to treat this feeling or mentality like a neurotic illness by tracing it back to repressed traumatic experiences in primal history, Steck connects it with contemporary experiences and the Deuteronomistic view of history that stayed alive in liturgical confessions and penitential prayers.

Steck and Sellin are certainly right. We do not need the primal trauma and the Mosaic retraumatization. The historical traumas of experiencing the collapse of, first, the Northern Kingdom in 722 at the hands of the Assyrians and then the Southern Kingdom 587 at the hands of the Babylonians; the total loss of state, kingdom, territory, city, and temple; fifty and more years of exile; and continuous foreign domination under changing empires are quite sufficient to stress the tragic side of the new religion. It is not the ambivalence of the father-son relationship that is at play here but the ambivalence of the concept of covenant with its polarity of belief and disbelief, as Goethe had it, as well as loyalty and betrayal, blessing and curse, love and wrath.<sup>14</sup>

Goethe, Sellin, and Freud depart from the scenes of “murmuring” as they occur in the books of Exodus and Numbers, but only Sellin and Steck are able to give an explanation of this perplexing tradition. In connecting these problematic scenes with the tradition about the violent fate of the prophets and the Deuteronomistic critique of history, they integrate them into a comprehensive view of biblical history. This complex that Freud in his psychoanalytical approach interpreted as repression they interpret as resistance, with which the concepts of law and revelation met in the formative periods of early Judaism.

If seen in this broader context, the scenes of “murmuring” during the Exodus from Egypt receive their full importance. There

are no less than fourteen of them. In closing, I propose to inspect them in more detail. They start in Exodus 14, when the Israelites arrive at the shore of the Yam Suf and see the Egyptian army approaching from afar. They lose faith immediately and want to return, but Moses splits the sea by God's command, and they pass through on dry ground, whereas the Egyptian army is drowned in the returning water. On the Israelites' way to Sinai occur three similar scenes of rebellion prompted by thirst and hunger. At Mara, they find brackish water that Moses, however, is able to transform into drinkable water by throwing into it a piece of wood. Later they rebel because of hunger, and YHWH sends quails and manna, but the murmuring does not subside. At Meriba, they are thirsty again and are on the verge of lynching Moses when at the last moment he draws water from the rock on God's command by hitting it with his rod. Up to here, these rebellions proceed without consequence. YHWH gives in and puts things right. This, however, changes in the most radical way once the covenant at Sinai is sealed. From then on, similar events raise YHWH's anger and are severely punished.

This new system of causality hits first the Israelites, who lose faith in seeing Moses again after forty days of his absence on the mountain and have Aaron make them a Golden Calf to represent their lost leader. Only after killing three thousand people and with much persuasion is Moses able to dissuade God from annihilating the whole people and to win him over to continue the broken covenant. On the Israelites' way from Sinai, the rebellions continue and are punished by fire and plague. Even Aaron and Miriam protest against Moses, reproaching him for his "Cushite wife," and Miriam is punished by a fit of leprosy that lasts for a week. The severest of these crises occur when the scouts return whom Moses had sent on God's command to spy out the land of Canaan. Some of them spread a rumor that the land is inhabited by giants. The people are stricken by fear and decide to kill Moses and Aaron and to choose other leaders who would lead

them back to Egypt. This time their revolt is not about hunger and thirst but the central covenantal values: belief and disbelief, trust and betrayal, shedding doubt on the sense of the whole project. Again YHWH is resolved to annihilate the whole people but is persuaded by Moses to turn the death penalty into a life sentence: God says about the whole generation of those who set forth from Egypt, "Not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors" (Num. 14:22–23). "In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who . . . has grumbled against me. . . . Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the wilderness" (Num. 14:30, 33). This punishment intones the generation theme that also underlies the returning formula of the "sin of the fathers" for which YHWH is resolved to punish the sons through the third and fourth generation. Forty years designate the time span in which the murmuring generation will have died out so that only their children will enter the Promised Land.

It is significant that God speaks of ten such scenes of murmuring. The number is symbolical and puts the scenes of murmuring in parallel to the ten plagues and the ten commandments. Here, as elsewhere, the number ten has a mnemonic function: ten mighty deeds has God performed to liberate his people, ten commandments has he given them for a constitution as partner in his covenant, and with ten acts of infidelity or "harlotry" they have offended him.

But the scenes of murmuring continue even after the crisis of the scouts. Soon afterward occurs the rebellion of the Korach clan against the monopoly that Moses and Aaron are claiming in conversing with God. God punishes the whole clan, which is swallowed by the earth, and 14,700 people die of the plague that is sent by God. When the people revolt because of the many

who had to die, God is again resolved to annihilate the whole people, but Aaron manages a quick expiation. A revolt because of thirst follows, doubling the scene at Meriba. This time Moses and Aaron are ordered to speak to the rock instead of hitting it, which they were however doing. For this mistake, they are punished by being forbidden to enter the Promised Land. Aaron is to die in the desert, Moses on Mount Nebo, from which he is permitted at least to see into the land.<sup>15</sup> The next murmuring is about hunger. The people are fed up with the eternal manna and long for meat. God sends them poisonous serpents for punishment but advises Moses to make remedy in the form of the Nehushtan, the brazen serpent the sight of which will heal the bites. At the end of the wanderings, the scene at Shittîm occurs that equals the scene of the Golden Calf as to the gravity of the offense. God sends a plague, calls for execution of all the leaders, and is only reconciled by Phineas, who transfixed Zimri and Cozbi in the act of lovemaking.

Let us consider again these fourteen scenes of rebellion against the will of God, from the western shore of Yam Suf up to the eastern shore of river Jordan. Four occur before sealing the covenant, *ante legem*, as Augustine has it, and remain without consequence. Ten scenes occur after the covenant ceremony, *sub lege*, attracting God's anger and entailing terrible punishment. Three scenes stand out among them: the Golden Calf (5), the scouts (9), and Shittîm (14). The Golden Calf at the beginning and the feast of Baal Peor at the end infringe the first commandment of absolute loyalty—no other gods!—the first by the Israelites' making and worshiping an image, the last by their "whoring" with another god. The scene of the scouts offends the command of absolute faith and trust—the Hebrew word *'aemunah* means both.

THE EXODUS MYTH is the founding myth of the Jewish people—this point is uncontested among scholars. What, however, in this context could these continuously repeated scenes of rebellion mean? What

could be the sense of such an unfavorable self-representation of the Chosen People? Michael Walzer, the political philosopher, reads the Exodus narrative as a political myth and as a blueprint of political revolutions.<sup>16</sup> He sees in the scenes of murmuring an expression of the typical difficulties and drawbacks with which every revolution, every attempt at a radical political innovation, has to struggle. After each revolution, there are deserts to traverse if the arduous way toward a new order meets with deprivation, constraints, and violence. These counterrevolutionary crises are expressed by the scenes of murmuring. This is without any doubt a most ingenious interpretation, but it falls short of accounting for the continuation of such scenes in the Promised Land, which has to be seen in the context of the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments included.

Psalm 106, for example, is a liturgy of penitence enumerating the salvatory deeds of God and opposing them with the sins of the ungracious people, starting with the sins of the fathers during the Exodus from Egypt and continuing in Canaan:

They did not destroy the peoples  
as the Lord had commanded them,  
but they mingled with the nations  
and adopted their customs.  
They worshiped their idols,  
which became a snare to them.  
They sacrificed their sons  
and their daughters to false gods.  
They shed innocent blood,  
the blood of their sons and daughters,  
whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan,  
and the land was desecrated by their blood.  
They defiled themselves by what they did;  
by their deeds they prostituted themselves.  
Therefore the Lord was angry with his people  
and abhorred his inheritance.  
He gave them into the hands of the nations,  
and their foes ruled over them. (34–41)

The whole Exodus narrative has a triumphant and a tragic side. It is both a story of liberation and a story of passion. Liberation and passion belong inextricably together. Goethe identified this tension as the conflict of belief and disbelief. Freud saw in it the ambivalence of the father-son relationship and diagnosed monotheism as a collective neurosis. Neither Goethe nor Freud, however, were careful readers of the Bible; neither of them was interested in an exegesis of the biblical text. This was the merit of Sellin, who as an Old Testament scholar was able to reconstruct from a plethora of biblical passages a thick and well-attested tradition about the suffering servants of God, from Moses to Jesus, both of whom, one might add, appear in Christian tradition as liberators and as sufferers, as "men of sorrows." That this line of tradition, however, is not a purely Christian construction has been shown by Steck, who was able to adduce an additional plethora of references from extrabiblical Jewish sources. Jesus and his followers were firmly rooted in Jewish tradition when they interpreted the figure and fate of Jesus in the light of the passion narrative, seeing in Jesus both a second Moses and the paradigmatic suffering servant.

It is revelatory to read Sellin's book—which met with very little approval in its time and was soon forgotten—in the light of Freud. Freud—without fairly acknowledging this most important source—brings to the fore its central theme, which is the pathogeny of monotheism that we find already in Sellin but without the unfortunate mythology of the primal horde. Sellin's book deserves a better fate than surviving in a footnote of Freud's book (where he appears as "Ed. Sellin") and in footnotes of books on Freud. It is much more important for the theory of religion, especially of monotheism, than one would have guessed before Freud exploited it in his way.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, London 1953–74, vol. 23, 80. Subsequent references to the *Standard Edition* are cited parenthetically in the text as SE.
- <sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud to Arnold Zweig, Sept. 9, 1934, in *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*, trans. W. D. Robson-Scott, London 1970, 91. For Freud to Lou Andreas-Salomé, Jan. 1, 1935, see Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, *Freuds Moses-Studie als Tagtraum*, Verlag Psychoanalyse, Weinheim 1991, 21–24.
- <sup>3</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Israel in der Wüste," in *West-östlicher Divan*, ed. Hendrik Birus, Berlin 2010, 229–248.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 230 (my translation).
- <sup>5</sup> The tragic aspect of Moses does not seem to have played any role in the tragedy *Exagoge* by Ezekiel the Tragedian, because this drama was based on Exodus 1–15, in which the scenes of rebellion have not yet set in.
- <sup>6</sup> Ernst Sellin, *Mose und seine Bedeutung für die israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte*, Erlangen 1922; cf. also id., "Hosea und das Martyrium des Mose," in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 46, 1928, 26–33.
- <sup>7</sup> "Hosea kennt die Fortsetzung von Num 25,3,5 noch in ihrer ursprünglichen Gestalt, er weiß, daß Mose in Schittim, im Heiligtum seines Gottes, von seinem eigenen Volke nach dessen Abfall zum Baal Peor, wegen dessen er es zur Buße gerufen und jedenfalls Sühne verlangt hat, hinterlistig getötet ist. Mit ihm haben vielleicht seine Söhne den Tod erleiden müssen. Das Ganze ist eine tragische, ergreifende Schilderung sondergleichen." Sellin, *Mose*, 49–50 (my translation).
- <sup>8</sup> "Wir können von vornherein nur damit rechnen, daß bald hie bald da einmal ein Funke wieder auftaucht von dem Geistesbrande, den er einst entzündet hat, daß seine Ideen nicht ganz ausgestorben, sondern hie und da auf Sitte und Glauben eingewirkt haben, bis sie etwa früher oder später unter der Einwirkung besonderer Erlebnisse oder von seinem Geiste besonders erfasster Persönlichkeiten einmal wieder stärker hervorbrachen und Einfluss gewannen auf breite Volksmassen." *Ibid.*, 52–53 (my translation).
- <sup>9</sup> "Die Moses-Religion war aber nicht spurlos untergegangen, eine Art Erinnerung an sie hatte sich erhalten, verdunkelt und entstellt, vielleicht bei einzelnen Mitgliedern der Priesterkaste durch alte Aufzeichnungen gestützt. Und diese Tradition einer großen Vergangenheit war es, die aus dem Hintergrunde gleichsam zu wirken fortfuhr, allmählich immer mehr Macht über die Geister gewann und es endlich erreichte, den Gott Jahve in den Gott Moses' zu verwandeln und die vor langen Jahrhunderten eingesetzte und dann verlassene Religion Moses' wieder zum Leben zu

erwecken." Sigmund Freud, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion. Drei Abhandlungen* (1939), ed. Jan Assmann, Stuttgart 2010, 152.

<sup>10</sup> Sellin, *Mose*, 124.

<sup>11</sup> Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Jesaja: Kommentar zum Alten Testament*, Gütersloh 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Odil Hannes Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten: Untersuchungen zur Überlieferung des deuteronomistischen Geschichtsbildes im Alten Testament, Spätjudentum und Urchristentum*, WMANT 23, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1967.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 63–64:

A Das widerspenstige, ungehorsame Volk,  
B durch Propheten zur Umkehr ermahnt,  
C blieb halsstarrig/C1 tötete die Propheten  
D und zog sich die Strafe Gottes zu.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed exposition of this interpretation of biblical history, see my book *Exodus: Die Revolution der Alten Welt*, Munich 2015; translated into English by Robert Savage as *The Invention of Religion: Faith and Covenant in the Book of Exodus*, Princeton, NJ, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> This is presumably the first case of mountaineering for the view's sake in literary history, two thousand years before Petrarch climbed Mount Ventoux.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, New York 1985.