

Assmann, Jan *The Price of Monotheism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. 140 pages.

This book is Jan Assmann's response to the critics of his previous book, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Harvard University Press, 1998). Assmann states, "This book does not aim to provide an exhaustive account of the shift from polytheism to monotheism, from primary to secondary religions,... but rather to clarify and further develop the position I advanced in my book *Moses the Egyptian* by confronting it with a number of critical responses and objections." (p. 4) With this in mind, it is helpful for a reader to actually encounter Assmann's arguments in *Moses the Egyptian* before reading this book. This said, because the primary task of this essay is to examine *The Price of Monotheism*, it is going to be focus of my attention. Let me summarize briefly first the content of each chapter and then I will give my assessments of the book.

In Chapter 1 Assmann tries to re-articulate his argument on the distinction between primary religion (polytheism or cosmotheism) and secondary religion (monotheism). This is actually Assmann's effort to answer his critic's objection that he is an anti-monotheistic, or anti-Semitic, scholar that paints monotheism as a religion of intolerance and violence. For Assmann, both primary and secondary religions exist side by side, but in opposition to one another, in the Bible. The primary religion can be found in the Priestly tradition, whereas the secondary religion is seen in the Deuteronomic source and prophetic tradition. The break from the primary religion to the secondary religion took place through the mythical figure of Moses. Moses, an Egyptian who follows a strict monotheistic religion, introduced the Jews to the concept of an exclusive God. Moses imposes a strict law that separates between true and false religion, a concept that Assmann calls "Mosaic distinction" throughout the book. Assmann acknowledges that monotheism is a religion of intolerance. It operates similar to the law of the excluded middle (*tertium non datur*) introduced by the Greek philosopher, Parmenides, in the sixth century BCE. This law of logic is characterized in its very core by "differentiation, negation, and exclusion." (p. 12) Assmann explains further that the primary religion usually works within the hermeneutics of translation. The deity is translatable to other forms of deity. "Religion functioned as a medium of communication, not elimination and exclusion. The principle of the translatability of divine names

helped to overcome the primitive ethnocentrism of the tribal religions, to establish relations between cultures, and to make these cultures more transparent to each other.” (p. 19) Conversely, monotheism or the secondary religion functions within the hermeneutics of difference. It “assures itself of what is its own by staking its distance from the Other, proceeding in accordance with the principle ‘*Omnis determinatio est negatio*.’” (p. 23) For Assmann, explaining this exclusive and intolerant nature of monotheistic religion does not have to lead to anti-Semitism or anti-monotheism. Both monotheism and the Greek scientific understanding are “the civilizational achievements of the highest order.” (p. 13) They are good because they contribute to a people’s ability to “have their own criteria of validity, verifiability, and falsifiability” by which they make a distinction between truth and lies. Assmann argues that he is actually not advocating a return to the primary religion. He states, “I am not advocating anything; my aim is rather to describe and understand.” (p. 13)

In Chapter 2, Assmann deals with the question of the real opponent of monotheism by distinguishing between religion and theology. Theology is the conception about God, whereas religion is the translation of theology or doctrine in everyday life. On a religious level, the real opponent of monotheism (the belief in one God) is not polytheism (the belief in many gods), but rather cosmotheism. As an Egyptologist, Assmann traces the origin of monotheism not to Moses, but to Akhenaten, an Egyptian pharaoh who lived in the 14th century BCE. He is the “founding myth of monotheism.” (p. 35) Akhenaten is a very important figure because he “completely broke with the traditional religion and introduced in its place the cult of a single sun and light god, must be understood as an exclusive and revolutionary monotheism.” (p. 36) However, Assmann maintains that the understanding of how the gods relate with the world in our modern understanding is somehow different from that of Egyptian religious tradition. In ancient Egypt, “a world of gods does not stand opposed to the world made up of the cosmos, humankind, and society, but endows them with meaning as a structuring and ordering principle.” (p. 40) There are two things related to the relationship between gods and cosmos that Assmann proposes: First, “a world of gods constitutes the cosmos, understood as a synergetic process of converging and conflicting forces.” (p. 40) And second, “a world of gods constitutes society and the state insofar as the gods exercise dominion over worldly affairs. All the great deities are gods of their respective cities; every important settlement stands under the aegis of a deity.” (p. 41) In this sense, “Polytheism is cosmotheism. The divine cannot be divorced from the world.” (Ibid.) Thus, Assmann contends

that the real opponent of monotheism is actually cosmotheism. Behind monotheism, there is an effort to separate the world from gods. Borrowing from Max Weber, Assmann argues that monotheism at its very core is a project of “disenchantment of the world.” (p. 102) In addition, related to the idea of disenchantment of the world, Assmann argues that the law of justice in the Ancient Mediterranean world was actually a human institution. It has profane origins. Monotheism is not the inventor of justice. What monotheism achieved was “to have transferred them [laws and justice] from the earth and human experience, as the source of law, to heaven and divine will.” (p. 52)

The main premise of Chapter 3 is that anti-Semitism in Egypt is actually rooted not in the Jewish community itself, but in the psychohistory of the Egyptians. The monotheistic revolution that Akhenaten brought to Egypt in the Amarna period had caused a deep traumatic experience in Egyptian society. The story of Osarsiph and his leper followers preserved by Manetho, an Egyptian historian living in the Ptolemaic period, is the key to understanding the psychic of the Egyptians in the face of monotheistic violence. (see pp. 59ff) Josephus, a Jewish historian, makes a connection between Osarsiph and the Exodus because Osarsiph then changed his name to Moyses. Assmann, disagreeing with Josephus, argues that this story is not about Moses but rather about Akhenaten. Josephus and other non-specialists have misread the text. The persecution and pain during the monotheistic revolution in the Amarna period left a deep wound in the Egyptian psychic to the extent that the name Akhenaten was removed from the lists of kings of Egypt.

People no longer knew the name of the leader who had initiated the reforms; they forgot the extremely regrettable complicity of their own monarchy and drew on the semantics of illness to characterize the unnamable heresy as the worst form of impurity known to Egypt (and incidentally to Israel as well): leprosy. (p. 62)

So, when encountering the Jewish community, the trauma that had existed in their psychohistory for many centuries shaped the way the Egyptians engaged with the Jews. Assmann states, “The Egyptians were probably the first people in history to undergo this experience, in the fourteenth century BCE. I cannot imagine it to have been anything other than traumatic.” (p. 64) Assmann calls this the Egyptian “Amarna complex.” (p. 66) In addition, the clash of memories not only takes place in the psychohistorical level, but also in the political

and religious level. Monotheism is also closely related to the ban on graven images. As we have seen before, cosmotheism (or polytheism) sees the world and the gods as two entities that live together in one reality. “The ban on graven images... entails the rejection of cosmotheism.” (p. 69) It is obvious that images are intended to “establish contact between mortals and gods.” So the rejection of images is an act of separating the divine from the world. The different understanding of images has triggered a clash between iconoclast and iconolatry.

Chapter 4 is the expansion, as well as a somewhat of a revision of his previous book. It examines Sigmund Freud’s book *Moses and Monotheism*. Freud contends that Moses is an Egyptian, and Assmann agrees with that notion. He is not only an Egyptian, he was also killed by the Jews. Freud’s assessment of the monotheism in the Bible is done in the psychoanalytical frame of “repression, latency, and the return of the repressed.” (p. 85) The Freudian development of monotheism is a “progress in intellectuality,” a concept which Assmann acknowledges that he misunderstood in his previous book. Assmann thought that “Freud was trying to abolish Mosaic distinction between true and false religion.” (p. 86) After rereading Freud’s book a few more times, Assmann came to the conclusion that his suspicion of Freud was wrong and that the idea of progress in intellectuality is actually a positive move of monotheism. It is a stage that monotheism becomes a religion of intellectualism. So anti-monotheism is also anti-intellectualism.

Freud basically wants to know “how the Jews have come to be what they are and why they have attracted this undying hatred.” (p. 89) Freud finds the answer in the psychoanalytical analysis of the trauma of monotheism. For Freud, in order to know why the Jews became who they are, one needs to see the role of Moses as the father and creator of the Jews. The Jewish formation process cannot be found in the biblical text or historical sources.

Only the “archeological” apparatus of psychoanalysis can reach down to this subterranean realm of collective spiritual life to reveal an origin that has not just withdrawn from conscious memory, but must, according to all the rules of psychoanalytic theory, have been repressed as a profoundly traumatic experience. (p. 90)

Because monotheism is a patriarchal religion, the death of Moses is understood as the death of the primal father. Assmann explains that “the murder of Moses was thus important precisely because it was

repressed; it could only help bring about the eventual breakthrough of monotheism among the Jews thanks to the irresistible dynamic proper to the return of the repressed” (p. 94) The death of Moses inevitably became the ‘founding act’ of the monotheism. He became the founding father of monotheism because of his death. “Moses’ monotheism thus amounted to the return of the father, and the murder of Moses repeated the primal father’s own demise at the hands of his sons.” (ibid.) After the death of Moses, the “monotheism that he preached entered a period of latency lasting several centuries before finally returning to cast its spell over the masses.” (ibid.) The return of the monotheistic repression occurred during the time of the prophets in the post-exilic period. Assmann, moreover, raises a question concerning the location of this split. Is it in the “psychic structure of the individual, in this case the Jewish soul,... or in the cultural memory of written and oral tradition, which contains, beneath its surface meaning, a deeper meaning accessible only in traces?” (p. 95) Assmann introduces his theory of mnemohistory as a solution that “confines itself in the archive cultural transmission.” (p. 96) The weakness of Freud’s theory, for him, is that he “had too weak a concept of cultural memory.” (ibid.) Assmann proposes the idea that the trauma of monotheism is not the murder of the parents (parricide), but the killing of gods (deicide).

Chapter 5 is a summary of four points or results that Assmann’s psychohistorical analysis has brought to the surface. The first one concerns the scripture. Since monotheistic religions separate the world from gods, then there is not a sacred place in the world. Everything in the world is profane. Images that represent the gods are demonized. (p. 106) So, the only thing that is left is scripture as the word of God to human beings. “Writing is what matters more than anything else. Cultic enactment is reduced to the reenactment of scripture, in the form of common reading, remembrance, avowal, and exegesis.” (p. 107) The second is that there is not a monotheistic religious movement that has completely eradicated the primary religion. Assmann maintains, “They [monotheistic religions] adopted such traces and adapted them to their own purposes. (p. 109) So, here we can see “an organic syncretism at work.” (ibid.) Third, monotheistic religions are always “aware of their own novelty.” (p. 112) Fourth, because Mosaic distinction demands for a total fidelity, monotheism puts a strong emphasis of sin as infidelity, unfaithfulness, and untruthfulness.

Having summarized this book, there are several merits of this book that need to be discussed. First, Assmann has answered many of his critics in a very comprehensive way. He is able to use this space to

respond, clarify, and expand his view on this issue of monotheism. Concerning the charge of anti-Semitism, Assmann has used this book to show that he is not anti-Semitic nor anti-monotheistic. In chapter 4, he makes it clear that the monotheistic development from the perspective of the Freudian concept of progress in intellectuality is a positive development. Second, Assmann's explanation of the psychohistory that is rooted in the theory of cultural memory and mnemohistory is very helpful because it assumes the involvement of the community in forming their own history. His conversation with Freud's concept of repression and the return of the repressed shows that psychohistory is rooted in the Freudian psychoanalytical approach. This is his brilliant move. Many historians just collect facts and systematize those facts. Assmann is a different kind of historian because he approaches history as a way to dig into the collective memory of the people in order to explain their current condition. This is probably one of the most significant contributions Assmann makes to the study of monotheism. Third, concerning the Mosaic distinction, I also see it as a significant move in explaining the role of monotheistic religion in shaping a society. The concept of Mosaic distinction can explain why monotheistic religions behave in certain ways today. The tension in Christianity, for example, between orthodoxy and heresy from the early church period can be easily explained through the concept of Mosaic distinction. Fourth, Assmann's specialty on Egyptology has given a very significant contribution to the richness of this book. His proposal that Manetho's tale of Osarsiph is a symbolic story of the monotheistic revolution in the Amarna period is a clear example of his deep familiarity with the ancient Egyptian culture and literature.

In spite of the positive elements of this book, there are some other things that create drawbacks. First, the title of the book does not really represent its content. *The Price of Monotheism* gives a quite negative impression, and the book is actually trying to show the positive side of monotheism. In chapter 5, especially, it does not look like a "price" that one needs to pay in order to embrace monotheism. The entire book has very little to do with the "price" of monotheism. The German title is probably far more representative: *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (The Mosaic Distinction and the Price of Monotheism). It is quite unfortunate that the translator removed the first part of the title. Second, Assmann probably needs to maintain the consistency of thought throughout his book. One of the inconsistencies that stands out is the nature of primary religion. Is it a polytheism or cosmotheism? In the first part of the book, Assmann puts polytheism and monotheism as two opposing religions.

However, when he moves further, he argues that it is not polytheism but cosmotheism. It is probably better to be consistent from the beginning of the book that the shift from primary to secondary religion is the break of monotheism from cosmotheism. Third, I totally disagree with his proposal that monotheism is based on sacred text only. This is simply not true. The role of images and icons in Christianity is still very strong. Sacraments are still at the center of Christian tradition and spirituality. Even the ancient manuscripts of the sacred texts do not only contain words, but also a lot of art work. Thus, to say that monotheism is based only on sacred text is probably misleading. Another side note, when Assmann explains the sacred texts, he lists Buddhism as a non-western monotheistic religion. (p. 104) This is probably not right. Buddhism is not a monotheistic (or polytheistic) religion. Buddhism does not begin with the belief in God or the Ultimate Reality. Third, in several places Assmann's description of monotheism fits more with the characteristics of henotheism rather than monotheism. For example when he states that Jewish monotheism is political in its orientation as opposed to Egyptian monotheism, Assmann explains:

This new relationship can only be with a single god, hence monotheistic. This is not to say that there are no other gods, only that, having been shut out of the new relationship to god sealed in the covenant, they are consigned to political irrelevance. One should therefore speak more properly of a monoyahwehism, as is clearly expressed in the formula JHWH echad in the Shema prayer. Yahweh is unique, the one god to whom Israel binds itself. (p. 39)

A more accurate terminology for this description should be henotheism, and not monotheism. Henotheism believes in the existence of other gods, but demands the followers to worship only one deity. Gods are basically in the competition. In other words, henotheism does not deny or reject the existence of other gods.

To sum up, this book is very insightful and rich. One, however, needs to go back to his previous work in order to fully understand the entire conversation between Assmann and his critics in this book. I highly recommend this book to those who are interested in both the study of religion and ancient society.

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