

Sigmund Freud

Moses and Monotheism

*Translated from
the German
by Katherine Jones*



VINTAGE BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE

New York

Part III. *Moses, His People,
and Monotheistic Religion*

Prefatory Notes

1. *Written before March 1938 (Vienna)*

With the audacity of one who has little or nothing to lose I propose to break a well-founded resolution for the second time and to follow up my two essays on Moses (*Imago*, Bd. XXIII, Heft 1 and 3) with the final part, till now withheld. When I finished the last essay I said I knew full well that my powers would not suffice for the task. I was, of course, referring to the weakening of the creative faculties which accompanies old age,¹ but there was also another obstacle. We live in very remarkable times. We find with astonishment that progress has concluded an

¹I do not share the opinion of my gifted contemporary Bernard Shaw that men would achieve anything worth while only if they could attain the age of three hundred years. With the mere lengthening of the period of life nothing would be gained unless much in the conditions of life were radically changed as well.

alliance with barbarism. In Soviet Russia the attempt has been made to better the life of a hundred million people till now held in suppression. The authorities were bold enough to deprive them of the anodyne of religion and wise enough to grant them a reasonable measure of sexual freedom. But in doing so they subjected them to the most cruel coercion and robbed them of every possibility of freedom of thought. With similar brutality the Italian people are being educated to order and a sense of duty. It was a real weight off the heart to find, in the case of the German people, that retrogression into all but prehistoric barbarism can come to pass independently of any progressive idea. Be that as it may, events have taken such a course that today the conservative democracies have become the guardians of cultural progress and that, strangely enough, just the institution of the Catholic Church has put up a sturdy resistance against the danger to culture. The Catholic Church, which so far has been the implacable enemy of all freedom of thought and has resolutely opposed any idea of this world being governed by advance towards the recognition of truth!

We are living here in a Catholic country under the protection of that Church, uncertain how long the protection will last. So long as it does last I naturally hesitate to do anything that is bound to awaken the hostility of that Church. It is not cowardice, but caution; the new enemy¹—and I shall guard against doing anything that would serve his interests—is more dangerous than the old one, with whom we have

¹i.e., German National Socialism.—*Translator.*

learned to live in peace. Psychoanalytic research is in any case the subject of suspicious attention from Catholicism. I do not maintain that this suspicion is unmerited. If our research leads us to a result that reduces religion to the status of a neurosis of mankind and explains its grandiose powers in the same way as we should a neurotic obsession in our individual patients, then we may be sure we shall incur in this country the greatest resentment of the powers that be. It is not that I have anything new to say, nothing that I did not clearly express a quarter of a century ago. All that, however, has been forgotten, and it would undoubtedly have some effect were I to repeat it now and to illustrate it by an example typical of the way in which religions are founded. It would probably lead to our being forbidden to work in psychoanalysis. Such violent methods of suppression are by no means alien to the Catholic Church; she feels it rather as an intrusion into her privileges when other people resort to the same means. Psychoanalysis, however, which has travelled everywhere during the course of my long life, has not yet found a more serviceable home than in the city where it was born and grew.

I do not only think so, I know that this external danger will deter me from publishing the last part of my treatise on Moses. I have tried to remove this obstacle by telling myself that my fear is based on an overestimation of my personal importance, and that the authorities would probably be quite indifferent to what I should have to say about Moses and the origin of monotheistic religions. Yet I do not feel

sure that my judgment is correct. It seems to me more likely that malice and an appetite for sensation would make up for the importance I may lack in the eyes of the world. So I shall not publish this essay. But that need not hinder me from writing it. The more so since it was written once before, two years ago, and thus only needs rewriting and adding to the two previous essays. Thus it may lie hid until the time comes when it may safely venture into the light of day, or until someone else who reaches the same opinions and conclusions can be told: "In darker days there lived a man who thought as you did."

II. *June 1938 (London)*

The exceptionally great difficulties which have weighed on me during the composition of this essay dealing with Moses—inner misgivings as well as external hindrances—are the reason why this third and final part comes to have two different prefaces which contradict—indeed, even cancel—each other. For in the short interval between writing the two prefaces the outer conditions of the author have radically changed. Formerly I lived under the protection of the Catholic Church and feared that by publishing the essay I should lose that protection and that the practitioners and students of psychoanalysis in Austria would be forbidden their work. Then, suddenly, the German invasion broke in on us and Catholicism proved to be, as the Bible has it, but "a broken reed." In the certainty of persecution—now not only because of my

work, but also because of my "race"—I left, with many friends, the city which from early childhood, through seventy-eight years, had been a home to me.

I found the kindest welcome in beautiful, free, generous England. Here I live now, a welcome guest, relieved from that oppression and happy that I may again speak and write—I almost said "think"—as I want or have to. I dare now to make public the last part of my essay.

There are no more external hindrances or at least none that need alarm one. In the few weeks of my stay I have received a large number of greetings, from friends who told me how glad they were to see me here, and from people unknown to me, barely interested in my work, who simply expressed their satisfaction that I had found freedom and security here. Besides all this there came, with a frequency bewildering to a foreigner, letters of another kind, expressing concern for the weal of my soul and anxious to point me the way to Christ and to enlighten me about the future of Israel. The good people who wrote thus could not have known much about me. I expect, however, that when this new work of mine becomes known among my new compatriots I shall lose with my correspondents and a number of the others something of the sympathy they now extend to me.

The inner difficulties were not to be changed by the different political system and the new domicile. Now as then I am uneasy when confronted with my own work; I miss the consciousness of unity and intimacy that should exist between the author and his work. This does not mean that I lack conviction in

the correctness of my conclusions. That conviction I acquired a quarter of a century ago, when I wrote my book on *Totem and Taboo* (in 1912), and it has only become stronger since. From then on I have never doubted that religious phenomena are to be understood only on the model of the neurotic symptoms of the individual, which are so familiar to us, as a return of long-forgotten important happenings in the primeval history of the human family, that they owe their obsessive character to that very origin and therefore derive their effect on mankind from the historical truth they contain. My uncertainty begins only at the point when I ask myself the question whether I have succeeded in proving this for the example of Jewish monotheism chosen here. To my critical faculties this treatise, proceeding from a study of the man Moses, seems like a dancer balancing on one toe. If I had not been able to find support in the analytic interpretation of the exposure myth and pass thence to Sellin's suggestion concerning Moses' end, the whole treatise would have to remain unwritten. However, let me proceed.

I begin by abstracting the results of my second, purely historical, essay on Moses. I shall not examine them critically here, since they form the premisses of the psychological discussions which are based on them and which continually revert to them.

have to believe in it." All we learn from this process is that it needs time for the intellectual work of the Ego to overcome objections that are invested by strong feelings. This case, however, is not very similar to the one we are trying to elucidate.

The next example we turn to seems to have still less in common with our problem. It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a "traumatic neurosis." This appears quite incomprehensible and is therefore a novel fact. The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the "incubation period," a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease. As an afterthought we observe that—in spite of the fundamental difference in the two cases, the problem of the traumatic neurosis and that of Jewish monotheism—there is a correspondence in one point. It is the feature which one might term *latency*. There are the best grounds for thinking that in the history of the Jewish religion there is a long period, after the breaking away from the Moses religion, during which no trace is to be found of the monotheistic idea, the condemnation of ceremonial, and the emphasis on the ethical side. Thus we are prepared for the possibility that the solution of our problem is to be sought in a special psychological situation.

I have more than once traced the events in Qadeš when the two components of the later Jewish people combined in the acceptance of a new religion. With those who had been in Egypt the memory of the Exodus and of the figure of Moses was still so strong and vivid that it insisted on being incorporated into any account of their early history. There might have been among them grandsons of persons who themselves had known Moses, and some of them still felt themselves to be Egyptians and bore Egyptian names. They had good reasons, however, for "repressing" the memory of the fate that had befallen their leader and lawgiver. For the other component of the tribe the leading motive was to glorify the new God and deny his foreignness. Both parties were equally concerned to deny that there had been an earlier religion and especially what it contained. This is how the first compromise came about, which probably was soon codified in writing; the people from Egypt had brought with them the art of writing and the fondness for writing history. A long time was to elapse, however, before historians came to develop an ideal of objective truth. At first they shaped their accounts according to their needs and tendencies of the moment, with an easy conscience, as if they had not yet understood what falsification signified. In consequence, a difference began to develop between the written version and the oral report—that is, the tradition—of the same subject-matter. What has been deleted or altered in the written version might quite well have been preserved uninjured in the tradition. Tradition was the complement and at the same time the contra-

diction of the written history. It was less subject to distorting influences—perhaps in part entirely free from them—and therefore might be more truthful than the account set down in writing. Its trustworthiness, however, was impaired by being vaguer and more fluid than the written text, being exposed to many changes and distortions as it was passed on from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Such a tradition may have different outcomes. The most likely event would be for it to be vanquished by the written version, ousted by it, until it grows more and more shadowy and at last is forgotten. Another fate might be that the tradition itself ends by becoming a written version. There are other possibilities which will be mentioned later.

The phenomenon of the latency period in the history of the Jewish religion may find its explanation in this: the facts which the so-called official written history purposely tried to suppress were in reality never lost. The knowledge of them survived in traditions which were kept alive among the people. According to Ernst Sellin, there even existed a tradition concerning the end of Moses which contradicted outright the official account and came far nearer the truth. The same thing, we may suppose, happened with other beliefs that had apparently found an end at the same time as Moses, doctrines of the Mosaic religion that had been unacceptable to the majority of Moses' contemporaries.

Here we meet with a remarkable fact. It is that these traditions, instead of growing weaker as time went on, grew more and more powerful in the course

of centuries, found their way into the later codifications of the official accounts, and at last proved themselves strong enough decisively to influence the thought and activity of the people. What the conditions were that made such a development possible seems, however, far from evident.

This fact is indeed strange, so much so that we feel justified in examining it afresh. Within it our problem lies. The Jewish people had abandoned the Aton religion which Moses had given them and had turned to the worship of another god who differed little from the Baalim of the neighbouring tribes. All the efforts of later distorting influences failed to hide this humiliating fact. Yet the religion of Moses did not disappear without leaving any trace; a kind of memory of it had survived, a tradition perhaps obscured and distorted. It was this tradition of a great past that continued to work in the background, until it slowly gained more and more power over the mind of the people and at last succeeded in transforming the God Jahve into the Mosaic God and in waking to a new life the religion which Moses had instituted centuries before and which had later been forsaken. That a dormant tradition should exert such a powerful influence on the spiritual life of a people is not a familiar conception. There we find ourselves in a domain of mass psychology where we do not feel at home. We must look around for analogies, for facts of a similar nature even if in other fields. We shall find them I am sure.

When the time was ripening for a return of the religion of Moses, the Greek people possessed an

succeeded to the omnipotence of the primeval father. There were too many of them and they lived in larger communities than the original horde had been; they had to get on with one another and were restricted by social institutions. Probably the mother deities were developed when the matriarchy was being limited, in order to compensate the dethroned mothers. The male gods appear at first as sons by the side of the great mothers; only later do they clearly assume the features of the father. These male gods of polytheism mirror the conditions of patriarchal times. They are numerous, they have to share their authority, and occasionally they obey a higher god. The next step, however, leads us to the topic that interests us here: the return of the one and only father deity whose power is unlimited.

I must admit that this historical survey leaves many a gap and in many points needs further confirmation. Yet whoever declares this reconstruction of primeval history to be fantastic greatly under-estimates the richness and the force of the evidence that has gone to make it up. Large portions of the past, which are here woven into a whole, are historically proved or even show their traces to this day, such as matriarchal right, totemism, and male communities. Others have survived in remarkable replicas. Thus more than one author has been struck by the close resemblance between the rite of Christian Communion—where the believer symbolically incorporates the blood and flesh of his God—and the totem feast, whose inner meaning it reproduces. Numerous survivals of our forgotten early history are preserved in the legends and fairy-

tales of the peoples, and analytic study of the mental life of the child has yielded an unexpectedly rich return by filling up gaps in our knowledge of primeval times. As a contribution towards an understanding of the highly important relation between father and son I need only quote the animal phobias, the fear of being eaten by the father (which seems so strange to the grown mind), and the enormous intensity of the castration complex. There is nothing in our reconstruction that is invented, nothing that is not based on good grounds.

Let us suppose that the presentation here given of primeval history is on the whole credible. Then two elements can be recognized in religious rites and doctrines: on the one hand, fixations on the old family-history and survivals of this; on the other hand, reproductions of the past and a return long after of what had been forgotten. It is the latter element that has until now been overlooked and therefore not understood. It will therefore be illustrated here by at least one impressive example.

It is specially worthy of note that every memory returning from the forgotten past does so with great force, produces an incomparably strong influence on the mass of mankind, and puts forward an irresistible claim to be believed, against which all logical objections remain powerless—very much like the *credo quia absurdum*. This strange characteristic can only be understood by comparison with the delusions in a psychotic case. It has long been recognized that delusions contain a piece of forgotten truth, which had at its return to put up with being distorted and mis-

ment. I know myself that this reconstruction has its weak places, but it also has its strong ones. On the whole the arguments in favour of continuing this work in the same direction prevail. The Biblical record before us contains valuable—nay, invaluable—historical evidence. It has, however, been distorted by tendentious influences and elaborated by the products of poetical invention. In our work we have already been able to divine one of these distorting tendencies. This discovery shall guide us on our way. It is a hint to uncover other similar distorting influences. If we find reasons for recognizing the distortions produced by them, then we shall be able to bring to light more of the true course of events.

Let us begin by marking what critical research work on the Bible has to say about how the Hexateuch—the five Books of Moses and the Book of Joshua, for they alone are of interest to us here—came to be written.¹ The oldest source is considered to be J, the Jahvistic, in the author of which the most modern research workers think they can recognize the priest Ebjatar, a contemporary of King David.² A little later, it is not known how much later, comes the so-called Elohist, belonging to the northern Kingdom.³ After the destruction of this Kingdom, in 722 B.C., a Jewish priest combined portions of J and E and added his own contributions. His compilation is designated as JE. In the seventh century Deuteron-

¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica* (eleventh edition, 1910), article: "Bible."

² See Auerbach: *Wüste und Gelobtes Land* (1932).

³ Astruc in 1753 was the first to distinguish between Jahvist and Elohist.

omy, the fifth book, was added, it being alleged that the whole of it had been newly found in the Temple. In the time after the destruction of the Temple, in 586 B.C., during the Exile and after the return, is placed the rewriting called the Priestly Code. The fifth century saw a definitive revision, and since then the work has not been materially altered.¹

The history of King David and his time is most probably the work of one of his contemporaries. It is real history, five hundred years before Herodotus, the "Father of History." One would begin to understand this achievement if one assumed, in terms of my hypothesis, Egyptian influence. The suggestion has even been made² that early Israelites, the scribes of Moses, had a hand in the invention of the first alphabet.³ How far the accounts of former times are based on earlier sources or on oral tradition, and what interval elapsed between an event and its fixation by writing, we are naturally unable to know. The text, however,

¹ It is historically certain that the Jewish type was definitely fixed as a result of the reforms by Ezra and Nehemiah in the fifth century B.C., therefore after the Exile, during the reign of the friendly Persians. According to our reckoning, approximately nine hundred years had then passed since the appearance of Moses. By these reforms the regulations aiming at the consecration of the chosen people were taken seriously: the separation from the other tribes was put into force by forbidding mixed marriages; the Pentateuch, the real compilation of the law, was codified in its definitive form; the rewriting known as the Priestly Code was finished. It seems certain, however, that the reform did not adopt any new tendencies, but simply took over and consolidated former suggestions.

² Cf. Yahuda, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

³ If they were bound by the prohibition against making images they even had a motive for forsaking the hieroglyphic picture writing when they adapted their written signs for the expression of a new language.

as we find it today tells us enough about its own history. Two distinct forces, diametrically opposed to each other, have left their traces on it. On the one hand, certain transformations got to work on it, falsifying the text in accord with secret tendencies, maiming and extending it until it was turned into its opposite. On the other hand, an indulgent piety reigned over it, anxious to keep everything as it stood, indifferent to whether the details fitted together or nullified one another. Thus almost everywhere there can be found striking omissions, disturbing repetitions, palpable contradictions, signs of things the communication of which was never intended. The distortion of a text is not unlike a murder. The difficulty lies not in the execution of the deed but in the doing away with the traces. One could wish to give the word "distortion" the double meaning to which it has a right, although it is no longer used in this sense. It should mean not only "to change the appearance of," but also "to wrench apart," "to put in another place." That is why in so many textual distortions we may count on finding the suppressed and abnegated material hidden away somewhere, though in an altered shape and torn out of its original connection. Only it is not always easy to recognize it.

The distorting tendencies we want to detect must have influenced the traditions before they were written down. One of them, perhaps the strongest of all, we have already discovered. I said that when the new god Jahve in Qadeš was instituted, something had to be done to glorify him. It is truer to say he had

to be established, made room for; traces of former religions had to be extinguished. This seems to have been done successfully with the religion of the settled tribes; no more was heard of it. With the returning tribes the task was not so easy; they were determined not to be deprived of the Exodus from Egypt, the man Moses, and the custom of circumcision. It is true they had been in Egypt, but they had left it again, and from now on, every trace of Egyptian influence was to be denied. Moses was disposed of by displacing him to Midian and Qadeš and making him into one person with the priest who founded the Jahve religion. Circumcision, the most compromising sign of the dependence on Egypt, had to be retained, but, in spite of all the existing evidence, every endeavour was made to divorce this custom from Egypt. The enigmatic passage in Exodus, written in an almost incomprehensible style, saying that God was wroth with Moses for neglecting circumcision and that his Midianite wife saved his life by a speedy operation can be interpreted only as a deliberate contradiction of the significant truth. We shall soon come across another invention for the purpose of invalidating a piece of inconvenient evidence.

It is hardly to be described as a new tendency—it is only the continuation of the same one—when we find an endeavour completely to deny that Jahve was a new god, one alien to the Jews. For that purpose the myths of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are drawn upon. Jahve maintains that he had been the God of those patriarchs; it is true—and he has to