

**FROM AKHENATEN
TO MOSES**

**ANCIENT
EGYPT
AND
RELIGIOUS
CHANGE**

JAN ASSMANN



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JAN ASSMANN

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To Fayza Haykal and Salima Ikram
with friendship, gratitude, and admiration

CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Introduction	1
1. Structure and Change in Ancient Egyptian Religion	7
Cult	8
Theology	10
The Guidance of Life	19
2. Myth and History of the Exodus: Triumph and Trauma	25
The Mnemohistory of the Exodus	25
Narrative Structure	29
Remember the Exodus	32
The Seder Liturgy	36
Exodus and Utopia	41
3. From Polytheism to Monotheism: Evolution or Revolution?	43
Evolution in Nature and Culture	43
From Monolatry to Monotheism	48
Egypt and Religious Change	52
4. Moses and Akhenaten: Memory and History	61
Moses and Akhenaten	61
Akhenaten	67
The Egyptian Trauma	69
The Legend of the Lepers	71
The Reinterpretation of the Pyramids	72
Exodus and Trauma	75

5. Ancient Egypt and the Theory of the Axial Age	79
The Theory of the Axial Age	79
Writing as an Agent of Change	81
Literacy and Cultural Memory	83
Secondary Canonization and the Rise of Exegesis	88
6. Egyptian Mysteries and Secret Societies in the Age of Enlightenment	95
The “Mystery Fever” in the Late Eighteenth Century	95
The Imagined “Egyptian Mysteries” and Their Grammatological and Topological Basis	98
<i>The Magic Flute</i> and the Egyptian Mysteries	107
7. Total Religion: Politics, Monotheism, and Violence	113
The Concept of <i>Ernstfall</i>	113
The Religious <i>Ernstfall</i>	116
The Maccabean Wars: An Early Case of Religious Violence	119
Depoliticizing Religion	126
Notes	131
Index	149

PREFACE

Five of the seven chapters of this book (1, 3, 4, 6, 7) are based on lectures delivered at the American University in Cairo in November 2012. I am grateful to my colleagues Fayza Haikal and Salima Ikram for the invitation and for all they did in order to make my stay in Cairo as agreeable as possible. Chapter 2 has evolved out of papers given at the universities of St Andrews, Tallinn, and Prague, and a first version of chapter 5 was presented at Boston University. All chapters profited enormously from the discussions at the various places of their first presentation in the course of the year 2012. I am also indebted to Fayza and Salima for correcting my English and suggesting modifications and clarifications where my formulations seemed all too dense or misleading. The red thread that runs through these chapters, and which will be explained in more detail in the introduction, is the topic of change in religion, beginning with ancient Egypt and ending with a dynamism that is as active in modern times as it was in antiquity.

INTRODUCTION

Akhenaten and Moses—two names that stand for the abolition of polytheism and the introduction of monotheism, a turn not only in religion but in the general intellectual orientation of humanity that changed the ancient world and brought about the world in which we are still living. All seven chapters of this book deal with this fundamental transformation. Their common subject is the question of change in the religions of Egypt and Israel and the search for the aspects and agents of religious transformation that affected not only the respective religions but the world in general. That this transformation was not so radical as is commonly thought, however, is shown in chapter 6, which deals with the European eighteenth century and its image of the Egyptian mysteries and shows that a repressed Egyptian polytheism continued in western thought as an undercurrent, gaining particular strength at the end of the eighteenth century.

The first chapter, “Structure and Change in Ancient Egyptian Religion,” focuses on ancient Egyptian religion, seeking the specific traits of Egyptian religion in the frame of a general definition of religion. Religion is defined as containing at least three aspects or dimensions that must be realized in a specific way in any given religion in order to deserve the title ‘religion’: cult, theology, and a normative orientation concerning the guidance of life or moral conduct. There is no religion without any form of cult, there is no cult without any ideas of the divine it is serving and addressing, and there is no religion without impact on the way of life of its believers. In all three dimensions, ancient Egypt shows an outstanding and highly original profile. Whereas in the cultic dimension, there is an enormous amount of stability and continuity, fundamental and far-reaching changes may be observed in the fields of theology and lifestyle.

The implicit ‘cosmogonic monotheism’ typical of ancient Egypt, deriving everything that exists (including the gods) from one single divine source, the sun god, is made explicit in two ways: in a radically exclusivist form by the revolution of Akhenaten, and in an inclusivist form with the rise of the theological discourse that eventually arrived at the idea that all gods are One. This monistic theology of All-Oneness lives on as a countercurrent to western monotheism in the Hermetic and Neoplatonic traditions until today.

In the same way that chapter 1 is dedicated to ancient Egypt, chapter 2, “Myth and History of the Exodus: Triumph and Trauma,” concentrates on ancient Israel and its foundational myth: the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The Biblical book of Exodus and the myth behind it are the narrative version of the great transformation that the turn from polytheism to Biblical monotheism meant for the ancient world. The interest of the story, in which ancient Egypt plays such an important and sinister role, lies not in what really happened but in how, by whom, when, in what form, and for what purpose it was told in the course of millennia.

The transformation from polytheism to monotheism with the Christianization and Islamization of the ancient world is mostly interpreted in terms of cultural evolution by historians of religion. Chapter 3, “From Polytheism to Monotheism: Evolution or Revolution?” confronts this concept with the idea of religious revolution. Evolution is a concept that (in spite of the antagonism between evolutionism and Christian creationism) is in itself strongly related to Christian thought. Religious evolutionism is born of a Christian perspective that gives the new precedence over the old. A more complete picture is gained if we complement evolution with revolution. In the turn from polytheism to monotheism, both dynamics are involved. This can be shown with regard to the Hebrew Bible in the coexistence of two seemingly contradictory trends: the covenant theology of loyalty, presupposing the existence of other gods but requiring exclusive faithfulness to Yahweh alone, and the true monotheistic universalism of Deutero-Isaiah, for whom there are no other gods. In Egypt, also, we meet with both dynamics. There is an unmistakable evolution of theological ideas, leading from the idea of a theology of creation and primacy (the creator acting as chief of the pantheon) to a theology of manifestation (the hidden God manifesting himself in the divine world), interrupted in the middle of the fourteenth century BCE by King Akhenaten’s overthrowing of traditional religion and installation of the monotheistic cult of the Aten, a clear irruption of revolutionary monotheism.

The monotheist revolution of Akhenaten and the founding of Israelite monotheism by Moses have often been brought together, most famously by Sigmund Freud in his last book, *Moses and Monotheism*. Chapter 4, “Moses and Akhenaten: Memory and History,” investigates the historical and mnemohistorical foundations of this problematic rapprochement. Akhenaten is a figure exclusively of history who was denied any tradition and memory in ancient Egyptian culture, having been subjected to a complete *damnatio memoriae*. Moses, on the other hand, is a figure exclusively of memory, accruing an immense importance as the founding father of monotheism in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, of whose historical existence, however, not the least traces have been found. It is, therefore, small wonder that the two figures, complementing each other in such a perfect way, have often been brought together. There is, however, even a late Egyptian tradition identifying Akhenaten (called Osarseph) with Moses: Manetho’s legend of the lepers, whose reference to the Amarna experience is corroborated by a passage in Diodorus on the pyramids. These and other sources show that there was a strong tradition in Egyptian cultural memory about three great catastrophes and times of suffering in the past and their triumphant overcoming, the Amarna experience being one of them. These traditions concerning Egyptian suffering and final triumph show striking parallels to the Biblical story of the Exodus that point to the fact that the Late Egyptian tradition (ca. 600 BCE onward) about Akhenaten-Osarseph and the Biblical tradition about Moses and the Exodus did not arise completely independently of each other.

The most comprehensive and influential theory of spiritual and intellectual change in the ancient world is the theory of the “Axial Age,” which is dealt with in chapter 5, “Ancient Egypt and the Theory of the Axial Age.” The great transformation that changed the ancient world and brought about the religious and intellectual foundations of the world in which we are still living started not in Egypt but in Palestine, with the rise of Judaism and Christianity. Since the late eighteenth century this event has been seen in the context of similar innovations and transformations that occurred in different civilizations—China, India, Persia, Israel, and Greece—at about the same time, around 500 BCE, the “Axial Age” (Karl Jaspers). Why did Egypt, unlike Israel, remain outside this spiritual revolution? This chapter focuses on the question of cultural memory and its media, and identifies canonization and exegesis as the decisive agents of change that created new means of relating to the past and thereby shaping the future.

However radically the world was changed by its Christianization in late antiquity and the extinction of the pagan cults, an undercurrent of Egyptian cosmotheism continued to haunt the west. Chapter 6, “Egyptian Mysteries and Secret Societies in the Age of Enlightenment,” deals with European “Egyptomania” and its apex in the late eighteenth century. From the Renaissance onward, ancient Egypt came to be seen, on the basis of Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic texts, as a “dual culture,” split into a popular and polytheistic culture and a secret and mono- or pantheistic one. This image was embraced by the secret societies of the eighteenth century as a model and mirror of their own situation and intellectual mission, imagining themselves as the true heirs of the ancient Egyptian priests. What brought about this identification with ancient Egypt was mainly the political interpretation of the ancient, especially Egyptian, mysteries. They were thought to secretly preserve and transmit the true (“natural”) religion under the conditions of a state, based on a cult of fictitious deities that were believed to protect the law and to represent national power and identity. This theory had an enormous appeal to the Freemasons, Rosicrucians, and Illuminati, and found expression also in works of music (Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*), literature (Schiller’s “The Veiled Image at Sais” and many other poems and novels of initiation), and philosophy (C.L. Reinhold’s *The Hebrew Mysteries*).

The last chapter, “Total Religion: Politics, Monotheism, and Violence,” addresses the most immediate and disquieting aspect of religious change: the use of violence. Where does religious violence (violence committed in the name of God) come from? Its roots lie obviously in the polarizing power typical of monotheistic religions, dividing people into Jews and Gentiles, believers and non-believers, orthodox and heretics, and so on. The question is, what dynamism turns distinction into polarization, and polarization into mutual enmity, hatred, and violent conflict? The answer proposed here is based on Carl Schmitt’s theory of political totalization. Under the conditions of *Ernstfall* (case of emergency, i.e., war), people associate and dissociate in terms of friend and foe and are ready to annihilate each other with physical violence. Schmitt uses this dynamic as an argument for the hegemony of the political over all other spheres of culture, such as law, economy, science, art, morality, and religion, and pleads for the total state.

This theory may be applied to religion, if there is something like a religious *Ernstfall* that triggers the dynamics of polarization. The idea of

an “apocalypse”—an imminent end and judgment of the world, separating humankind into friends and foes, saved and condemned, that arose at the same time as the first outbreaks of religious violence—exactly fulfills this condition of religious *Ernstfall*. Under these conditions, religion claims hegemony over the other spheres of culture, including politics, and becomes “total religion.”

Although the dynamics of polarization and totalization under the auspices of an *Ernstfall* seem to be restricted to monotheism with its concept of absolute, revealed truth, there is no reason why truth should necessarily turn to violence. Since the eighteenth century, and building on older traditions such as the “parable of the rings,” ways have been devised to overcome the innate intolerance of truth and its polarizing effects.

