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Jan Assmann

From Akhenaten to Moses: Ancient Egypt and Religious Change

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Paul Sanders

Protestant Theological University

The German Egyptologist Jan Assmann is known for his assumption that exclusive monotheism implies religious intolerance and is even apt to sanction forms of brutality. He states that the rise of monotheism once led to new kinds of inhumane behavior, while admitting that religiously motivated violence existed already before its emergence. The radical monotheism of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten (fourteenth century BCE) was soon abolished and largely forgotten, but its Israelite counterpart—whose beginning the Bible localizes in the time of Moses and the exodus—has executed an enormous influence until the present day. Characteristic of these exclusive religious movements is the contrasting of true religion and false religion, in Assmann’s words “the Mosaic distinction.”

From Akhenaten to Moses comprises seven chapters. The introduction (1–5) offers a useful survey of these chapters and explains that they deal with the religious changes connected with the names of Akhenaten and Moses. Each chapter is based on a separate lecture, delivered as early as 2012. This explains why there is some overlap among several chapters. A large part of the subject matter is covered already in Assmann’s previous publications, such as *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (1997), *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (2008), and *The Price of Monotheism* (2010).

All of these studies, including *From Akhenaten to Moses*, make a connection between monotheism and violence. Biblical scholars held a heated debate about this aspect of Assmann's analyses. Mark S. Smith (*God in Translation*, 2008) and many others were quite critical of his conclusions but took his work seriously and appreciated his ability to compare religious changes in different times and contexts, both within and outside the ancient Near East. Assmann discusses the relationship between religion and violence once again, but more moderately, in chapter 7 of *From Akhenaten to Moses*.

Chapter 1 deals with "Structure and Change in Ancient Egyptian Religion." Assuming that every religion comprises at least three aspects—cult, theology, and lifestyle—Assmann demonstrates that in ancient Egypt's religion the cult constituted the most prominent domain, crucial for the maintenance of the cosmic order. Assmann, however, pays more attention to the theological developments in Egypt's religion. He divides the second half of the second millennium BCE into distinctive periods, each with its own theological characteristics.

In the era preceding Akhenaten's reform, polytheism already had a strong sense of unity. The sun god was regarded as the sole origin of the cosmos, and the other gods were thought to have emanated from this supreme deity. After creation, the maintenance of the cosmos became a matter of cooperation between the sun god and the other gods. However, during the last decades preceding Akhenaten's revolution, the perspective became more monistic. The sun god was described as maintaining the world on his own, without any cooperative actions with divine partners.

The theological shift under Akhenaten was much more radical. The veneration of the sun god Aten was imposed, while the other gods and their cults were abolished altogether. After Akhenaten's reign, the other gods were rehabilitated but could be seen as mere names, aspects, or manifestations of the supreme One. While in the Amarna period the world was assumed not to have divinity of its own, Egyptian theologians now introduced the idea that the cosmos is God's body, created by emanation and animated by the divine *ba*, or "soul." This form of inclusive monotheism, which had roots before Akhenaten's reform, remained widespread until late antiquity. Remarkably, this tolerant monotheism was a form of polytheism and did not feel the need to distance itself from the transmitted polytheistic traditions.

Chapter 2, "Myth and History of the Exodus: Triumph and Trauma," shifts the attention to the biblical exodus story and its importance for the people of Israel. The narrative was composed in the early postexilic period with the aim of reminding the Israelites of decisive events in a distant past. By remembering these events, the people realized again how their identity took shape and how its unique character can be maintained and revived. Although

the exodus is the most influential story ever told, it is largely fictional, and no contemporary documents refer to Moses or the traditions connected with him. However, Assmann believes that the biblical record includes traces from the distant past. In his view, it contains vague—and sometimes quite precise—memories of Akhenaten’s religious reform, which occurred around eight centuries earlier.

Chapter 3 convincingly shows that the turn from polytheism to exclusive monolatry or monotheism was not a gradual one, neither under Akhenaten nor among the Israelites. The rejection of the veneration of other gods expresses a fundamental break, a rupture. The Egyptian evidence shows that the path from polytheism to monotheism is much more evolutionary if it leads to an inclusive form of monotheism, in which the supreme One appears in the form of many deities. The transition from monolatry to explicit monotheism, which entails a denial of the existence of any other gods, is also evolutionary rather than revolutionary. It involves only a radicalization of the decision to allow the veneration of only one God.

Chapter 4 discusses the history of the connection between Akhenaten and Moses, which the author starts with a pithy observation: “Akhenaten is a figure of history without memory; Moses is a figure of memory without history” (61). While Akhenaten’s name was erased from the Egyptian king lists, Moses’s name never sank into oblivion. Assmann rejects Freud’s theory that Moses was an Egyptian follower of Akhenaten and argues that there was no direct relationship between the two. He stresses that the character of ancient Israel’s religion differed considerably from the religion of Akhenaten, despite some correspondences. Contrary to Akhenaten’s reformation, the Israelite religion was monolatrous rather than monotheistic and assumed that God acted in history, such as when he liberated his people from Egyptian bondage.

As in previous studies, Assmann here describes his interpretation of the “legend of the lepers,” which Flavius Josephus took over from Manetho’s Egyptian history and included in his pamphlet *Contra Apionem*. According to Assmann, the story, which largely dates from the early third century BCE, connects Akhenaten and Moses and, in a way, even identifies the two. Assmann admits that in Manetho’s time the memories of the Amarna period were vague and distorted, but he assumes that identifying Moses with the heretic Akhenaten, designated as the “priest” Osarseph, was still possible. Further, he points out that both the Egyptian and the Israelite religious traditions were highly influenced by traumatic experiences in the past.

Chapter 5 starts with a clear description of Karl Jaspers’s famous theory concerning a substantial cultural transformation around the middle of the first millennium BCE. For the pivotal period, Jaspers coined the expression “Axial Age.” Like some others before him, he

argued that within a time span of a few centuries a new way of thinking arose all around the globe. Of course, this is surprising in view of the distances between the areas in which the new ideas took root. The oldest texts that we still read, such as several books of the Hebrew Bible, all date from the Axial Age. According to Jaspers, this is understandable. The earlier texts are incomprehensible to us because of the intervening conceptual shift.

Assmann is critical of Jaspers's generalizations and offers a more convincing explanation for the strangeness of pre-Axial texts. Canonical texts from the Axial Age are relatively familiar to us since they were transmitted in an unbroken tradition of interpretation, while the ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts were only rediscovered during the last 150 years. Further, Assmann argues that, instead of a single decisive shift, there was a gradual evolution, including at least three successive steps. First, writing was invented to preserve administrative data. As a second step, writing was initially used for creating literary compositions such as the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh cycle with a complexity unthinkable in oral cultures. A following step concerned the canonization of authoritative texts, which were distinguished from literature that was regarded as irrelevant or even repugnant. Assmann rightly points out that the moment when each of the three steps was taken depends on the culture. An excellent example is Akhenaten's religious revolution, which took place long before similar ruptures in other cultures.

Chapter 6 describes the European Egyptomania of the late eighteenth century. The idea arose that ancient Egypt's priesthood clandestinely transmitted pantheistic or monotheistic traditions despite the state's policy of imposing its polytheistic ideology on every aspect of life. Eighteenth-century circles identified themselves with the Egyptian priests and saw themselves as the true heirs of their mystery religion. The priests were assumed to have used the sacred hieroglyphic script to transmit their secret knowledge. Of course, such interpretations appeared to be questionable as soon as hieroglyphic writing was deciphered and knowledge of ancient Egypt increased.

Chapter 7 readdresses the controversial assumption of a connection between monotheism and violence. Here Assmann explains the assumed relationship between the two with the help of Carl Schmitt's theory of political totalization. According to this approach, the conditions of an *Ernstfall* (case of emergency) cause two opposite developments. Within the same group, people start to associate and to see each other as allies and friends. At the same time, they dissociate from outsiders, whom they now regard as a severe threat that must be annihilated. Assmann applies Schmitt's theory to the sphere of religion and argues that it explains why traces of the same processes occur in the Bible. Especially the apocalyptic texts express the conviction that it is crucial to dissociate oneself immediately from God's enemies, people with different religious ideas. However, Assmann observes the same extremism in narrative texts, especially the story about Phinehas's spontaneous

killing of sinners in the name of God (Num 25). He remarks with regard to Phinehas's deed: "this is new, even revolutionary, and would have been impossible, I assert, in any other ancient culture" (118).

Assmann argues that the malicious distinction between friend and foe entered the realm of religion in ancient Israel. Here the concept of covenant was adopted from the political realm of the Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties and used to describe Israel's unique and exclusive relationship with God.

Assmann believes that monotheism can assume a more tolerant shape as soon as it rejects its traditional claim of an absolute truth. He calls attention to the dissenting voices within monotheism, such as Mendelssohn's and Lessing's moderate religiosity, and observes with relief that antitotalistic tendencies can already be found in the Bible itself, also in the Old Testament. "The Hebrew Bible is in any case safe from overly totalizing readings by virtue of the diversity of traditions that shaped it" (127).

Is Assmann's repeated assumption of a connection between monotheism and violence convincing? Of course, there is shocking hostility in the Bible, which constitutes a problem to those who regard the ancient book as authoritative. Once again, however, Assmann's survey of the biblical evidence appears to be quite limited and one-sided. The author fails to pay due attention to contrary tendencies in the Bible that imply empathy for outsiders and a radical undoing of hostility. Remarkably, the Bible connects its inclusive tendencies explicitly with the monotheistic belief that outsiders are loved by the one supreme God. Actually, this inclusiveness was quite exceptional in the ancient Near East, but in Israel it seems to have been widespread from an early age onward, as was recently shown once again by Jonathan Sacks in *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (2015).

It is fair to say that in the ancient Near East intolerant tendencies could arise on both sides of the borderline between polytheism and monotheism. Just like Israelites could see the veneration of gods next to their supreme One as a threat to the well-being of the nation, followers of the traditional Egyptian religion were apt to ascribe national disasters to the "impiety" of those who abandoned the traditional cults, as is shown by the radical rejection of Akhenaten's reform and, in a much later era, by the worries expressed in chapter 25 of the Asclepius Apocalypse (77–78). Fear of divine punishment among polytheists as well as monotheists could lead to the conviction that practitioners of deviant religions constituted a threat and incorporated evil. The evidence shows that it is simplifying to associate inhumane tendencies with either monotheism or polytheism or to dissociate such tendencies from either the one or the other.

What I missed in *From Akhenaten to Moses* is a discussion of the striking parallels between the Great Hymn of Akhenaten and Ps 104. How can these parallels be explained, and what light do they shed on the relationship between Akhenaten's reform and Israel's choice to serve a single God? Assmann's contribution to the discussion about the rise and character of ancient monotheism is groundbreaking, but it raises several questions that require more research.