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MOSES AND MONOTHEISM

MOSES AND

MONOTHEISM

SIGMUND FREUD

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY

KATHERINE JONES

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AND THE INSTITUTE OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

PARTS I and II of this book were published in German in Imago in 1937; Part III has not previously appeared in print.

I am indebted to Mr.

James Strachey and Mr.

Wilfred Trotter for

kindly reading through this

translation and for

making a number of valuable

suggestions. I have also had the advantage of

consulting the author on some doubtful points.

K. J:

,

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PART I

MOSES AN EGYPTIAN

Part I

MOSES AN EGYPTIAN

To deny a people the man whom it praises as
the

greatest of its sons is not a deed to be under-
taken

light-heartedly especially by one belong-

ing to that people. NO consideration, however,

will move me to set aside truth in favour of supposed national interests. Moreover, the elucidation of the mere facts of the problem may be expected to deepen our insight into the situation with which they are concerned.

The man Moses, the liberator of his people, who gave them their religion and their laws, belonged to an age so remote that the preliminary question arises whether he was an historical person or a legendary figure. If he lived, his time was the thirteenth or fourteenth century B.C.; we have no word of him but from the Holy Books and the written traditions of the Jews. Although the decision lacks final historical certainty, the great majority of historians have expressed the opinion that Moses did live and that the exodus from Egypt, led by him, did in fact take place.

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It has been maintained with good reason that the later history of Israel could not be understood if this were not admitted. Science to-day has become much more cautious and deals much more leniently with tradition than it did in the early days of historical investigation.

What first attracts our interest in the person of Moses is his name, which is written Mosche in Hebrew. One may well ask: Where does it come from? What does it mean? As is well known, the story in Exodus, Chapter ii, already answers this question. There we learn that the Egyptian princess who saved the babe from the waters of the Nile gave him his name, adding the etymological explanation: because I drew him out of the water. But this explanation is obviously inadequate. "The biblical interpretation of the

name

,

He that was drawn out of the water

5 "

thus an author of the
Judisches Lexikon

1

"is folk

etymology; the active Hebrew form itself of the
name (Mosche can at best mean only

,

the

drawer out

5

) cannot be reconciled with this
solution." This

argument can be supported by

two further reflections : first, that it is nonsensical
to credit an

Egyptian princess with a knowledge

of Hebrew

etymology, and, secondly, that the

water from which the child was drawn was most

probably not the water of the Nile.

1

Judisches Lexikon, founded by Herlitz und Kirschner, Bd. IV,
1930, Jiidischer Verlag, Berlin.

MOSES AN EGYPTIAN

13

On the other hand the suggestion has long been
made and by many different people that the name
Moses derives from the Egyptian
vocabulary.

Instead of

citing all the authors who have voiced

this

opinion I shall quote a passage from a recent

work

by Breasted,

1

an author whose

History of

Egypt is regarded as authoritative. "It is

important to notice that his name, Moses, was

Egyptian. It is simply the Egyptian word

,

mose

,

meaning

*

child/ and is an abridgement of a

fuller form of such names as

,

Amen -mose

,

meaning

c

Amon-a-child

5

or

,

Ptah-mose,

5

mean-

ing

c

Ptah -a -child,

5

these forms themselves

being

likewise abbreviations for the

complete form

*

Amon- (has-given) -a child

5

or Ptah

-(has -given) -

a -child.

5

The abbreviation

,

child

5

early became

a convenient

rapid form for the cumbrous full

name, and the name Mose,

c

child,

5

is not un-

common on the Egyptian monuments. The father

of Moses without doubt

prefixed to his son

5

s name

that of an

Egyptian god like Amon or Ptah, and

this divine name was

gradually lost in current

usage, till the boy was called

,

Mose.

5

(The final

s is an addition drawn from the Greek translation

of the Old Testament. It is not in the Hebrew,

which has

,

mosheh

5

).

55

I have

given this
passage literally and am by no means prepared
to share the

responsibility for its details. I am

a little

surprised, however, that Breasted in

1

The Dawn of Conscience, London, 1934, p. 350.

14 MOSES AND MONOTHEISM

citing related names should have passed over the
analogous theophorous names in the list of
Egyptian kings, such as Ah-mose, Thut-mose
(Thothmes) and Ra-mose (Ramses).

It

might have been expected that one of the
many authors who recognized Moses to be an
Egyptian name would have drawn the con-
clusion, or at least considered the possibility,
that the bearer of an

Egyptian name was himself

an

Egyptian. In modern times we have no
misgiving in drawing such conclusions, although
to-day a person bears two names, not one, and
although a change of name or assimilation of it
in new conditions cannot be ruled out. So we
are not at all

surprised to find that the poet

Chamisso was of French extraction,

Napoleon

Buonaparte on the other hand of Italian, and
that

Benjamin Disraeli was an Italian Jew as

his name would lead us to

expect. And such an

inference from the name to the race should be
more reliable and indeed conclusive in respect
of

early and primitive times. Nevertheless to the
best of

my knowledge no historian has drawn this
conclusion in the case of Moses, not even one of
those who, like

Breasted, are ready to suppose

that Moses " was

cognizant of all the wisdom of

the

Egyptians."

1

What hindered them from doing so can only

be guessed at.

Perhaps the awe of Biblical

1

Loc. cit.

9 p. 334.

MOSES AN EGYPTIAN

15

tradition was

insuperable. Perhaps it seemed

monstrous to imagine that the man Moses could have been

anything other than a Hebrew. In

any event, what happened was that the recognition of the name

being Egyptian was not a factor

in

judging the origin of the man Moses, and that nothing further was deduced from it. If the

question of the nationality of this great man is considered

important, then any new material for

answering it must be welcome.

This is what

my little essay attempts. It may

claim a

place in Imago

1

because the contribution

it

brings is an application of psycho-analysis.

The considerations thus reached will impress only that

minority of readers familiar with analytical

reasoning and able to appreciate its conclusions.

To them I hope it will appear of significance.

In

1909 Otto Rank, then still under my influ-

ence, published at my suggestion a book entitled

:

Der

Mythus von der Geburt des Helden.

2

It deals with

the fact " that almost all

important civilized

peoples have early on woven myths around and

glorified in poetry their heroes, mythical kings

and

princes, founders of religions, of dynasties,

empires and cities in short their national heroes.

Especially the history of their birth and of their

early years is furnished with phantastic traits;

1

See

Glossary.

2

Fünftes Heft der

Schriften zur angewandten Seelenkunde, Fr.

Deuticke, Wien. It is far from my mind to depreciate the value of Rank's

original contributions to this work.

1 6 MOSES AND MONOTHEISM

the

amazing similarity, nay, literal identity, of those tales, even if

they refer to different, COM-

pletely independent peoples, sometimes geo-

graphically far removed from one another, is well

known and has struck many an investigator.

55

Following Rank we reconstruct on the lines of

Galton's

technique an "average myth

55

that

makes prominent the essential features of all these

tales, and we then get this formula.

"

The hero is the son of parents of the highest

station, most often the son of a king.

"

His

conception is impeded by difficulties,

such as abstinence or

temporary sterility; or else

his

parents practise intercourse in secret because

of

prohibitions or other external obstacles. During

his mothers

pregnancy or earlier an oracle or a

dream warns the father of the child

5

s birth as

containing grave danger for his safety.

"

In

consequence the father (or a person

representing him) gives orders for the new-born

babe to be killed or

exposed to extreme danger;

in most cases the babe is

placed in a casket and

delivered to the waves.

"

The child is then saved by animals or poor

people, such as shepherds, and suckled by a

female animal or a woman of humble birth.

"

When full grown he rediscovers his noble
parents after many strange adventures, wreaks
vengeance on his father and, recognized by his
people, attains fame and greatness.

55

MOSES AN EGYPTIAN 1

7

The most remote of the historical personages
to whom this
myth attaches is Sargon of Agade,
the founder of
Babylon about 2800 B.C. From the
point of view of what interests us here it would
perhaps be worth while to reproduce the account
ascribed to himself:

"

I am

Sargon, the mighty king, King of
Agade. My mother was a Vestal; my father I
knew not; while my father's brother dwelt in
the mountains. In
my town Azupirani it lies
on the banks of
Euphrates my mother, the
Vestal, conceived me. Secretly she bore me. She laid
me in a basket of sedge, closed the
opening with
pitch and lowered me into the river. The stream did
not drown me, but carried me to Akki, the
drawer of water. Akki, the drawer of water, in
the
goodness of his heart lifted me out of the
water. Akki, the drawer
of water, as his own son he
brought me up. Akki, the drawer of water, made
me his gardener. When I was a gardener Istar
fell in love with me. I became
king and for forty-
five
years I ruled as king.

5'

The best known names in the series beginning
with
Sargon of Agade are Moses, Cyrus and
Romulus. But besides these Rank has enumerated
many other heroes belonging to myth or poetry
to whom the same

youthful story attaches either
in its
entirety or in well recognizable parts, such as
(Edipus, Kama, Paris, Telephos, Perseus, Heracles,
Gilgamesh, Amphion, Zethos and others.

B

18 MOSES AND MONOTHEISM

The source and the tendency of such myths are
familiar to us
through Rank's work. I need only
refer to his conclusions with a few short hints.

A hero is a man who stands up manfully against
his father and in the end
victoriously overcomes
him. The myth in
question traces this struggle
back to the very dawn of the hero's life,
by having

him born against his father's will and saved in
spite of his father's evil intentions. The exposure
in the basket is
clearly a symbolical representa-
tion of birth

; the basket is the womb, the stream
the water at birth. In innumerable dreams the
relation of the child to the
parents is represented

by drawing or saving from the water. When the
imagination of a people attaches this myth to a
famous

personage it is to indicate that he is
recognized as a hero, that his life has conformed
to the

typical plan. The inner source of the myth
is the so-called "

family romance " of the child,

in which the son reacts to the

change in his inner

relationship to his parents, especially that to his

father. The child's first

years are governed by

grandiose over-estimation of his father; kings

and

queens in dreams and fairy tales always

represent, accordingly, the parents. Later on,

under the influence of

rivalry and real disappoint-

ments, the release from the parents and a critical

attitude towards the father sets in. The two

families of the

myth, the noble as well as the
humble one, are therefore both
images of his OWN

MOSES AN EGYPTIAN 1

9

family as they appear to the child in successive
periods of his life.

It is not too much to
say that these observations
fully explain the similarity as well as the far-
spread occurrence of the myth of the birth of the
hero. It is all the more
interesting to find that
the
myth of Moses

5

birth and
exposure stands
apart; in one essential point it even contradicts
the others.

We start with the two families between which
the

myth has cast the child's fate. We know that
analytic interpretation makes them into one
family, that the distinction is only a temporal
one. In the
typical form of the myth the first
family, into which the child is born, is a noble and
mostly a royal one; the second family, in which
the child
grows up, is a humble and degraded
one, corresponding with the circumstances to
which the

interpretation refers. Only in the
story of (Edipus is this difference obscured. The
babe

exposed by one kingly family is brought up
by another royal pair. It can hardly be an
accident that in this one
example there is in the
myth itself a glimmer of the original identity of
the two families. The social contrast of the two
families

meant, as we know, to stress the heroic
nature of a

great man gives a second function
to our

myth, which becomes especially significant
with historical

personages. It can also be used

to
provide for our hero a patent of nobility to
20 MOSES AND MONOTHEISM
elevate him to a
higher social rank. Thus Cyrus
is for the Medes an alien
conqueror; by way of
the
exposure myth he becomes the grandson of
their
king. A similar trait occurs in the myth of
Romulus : if such a man ever lived he must have
been an unknown adventurer, an
upstart; the
myth makes him a descendant of, and heir to,
the
royal house of Alba Longa.
It is
very different in the case of Moses. Here
the first
family usually so distinguished is
modest
enough. ^He is the child of Jewish
Leyites. But the second family the humble one
in which as a rule heroes are
brought up is
replaced by the Royal house of Egypt; the
princess brings him up as her OWN son. This
divergence from the usual type has struck many
research workers as
strange. E. Meyer and others
after him
supposed the original form of the myth
to have been different. Pharaoh had been warned
by a prophetic dream
1
that his
daughter's son
would become a danger to him and his kingdom.
This is
why he has the child delivered to the
waters of the Nile
shortly after his birth. But the
child is saved
by Jewish people and brought up
as their own. " National motives " in Rank's
terminology
2
had transformed the
myth into the

form now known

by us.

However, further thought tells us that an

¹

Also mentioned in Flavius Josephus's narration.

²

Loc. cit., p. 80, footnote.

MOSES AN EGYPTIAN 21

original Moses myth of this kind, one not diverging from other birth myths, could not have existed. For the legend is either of Egyptian or of

Jewish origin. The first supposition may be excluded. The

Egyptians had no motive to glorify Moses; to them he was not a hero. So the

legend should have originated among the Jewish people; that is to say, it was attached in the usual version to the person of their leader.

But for that

purpose it was entirely unfitted;

what good is a legend to a

people that makes

their hero into an alien ?

The Moses myth as we know it to-day lags sadly behind its secret motives. If Moses is not of

royal lineage our legend cannot make him into a hero ; if he remains a

Jew it has done nothing

to raise his status.

Only one small feature of the

whole myth remains effective : the assurance that

the babe survived in

spite of strong outside forces

to the

contrary. This feature is repeated in the

early history of Jesus, where King Herod assumes

the role of Pharaoh. So we

really have a right

to assume that in a later and rather

clumsy

treatment of the legendary material the

adapter

saw fit to

equip his hero Moses with certain

features

appertaining to the classical exposure

myths characteristic of a hero, and yet unsuited

to Moses
by reason of the special circumstances.
With this unsatisfactory and even uncertain
result our
investigation would have to end,
22 MOSES AND MONOTHEISM
without having contributed
anything to answering
the"
question whether Moses was Egyptian, were
there not another and
perhaps more successful
way of approaching the exposure myth itself.
Let us return to the two families in the
myth.
As we know, on the level of analytic
interpreta-
tion
they are identical. On a mythical level they
are
distinguished as the noble and the humble
family. With an historical person to whom the
myth has become attached there is, however, a
third level, that of
reality. One of the families is
the real one, the one into which the
great man
was really born and in which he was brought
up.
The other is fictitious, invented by the myth in
pursuance of its OWN motives. As a rule the real
family corresponds with the humble one, the
noble
family with the fictitious one. In the case
of Moses
something seemed to be different. And
here the new
point of view may perhaps bring
some illumination. It is that the first family,
the one from which the babe is
exposed to danger,
is in all
comparable cases the fictitious one; the
second
family, however, by which the hero is
adopted and in which he grows up is his real one.
If we have the
courage to accept this statement
as a

general truth to which the Moses legend also
is
subject, then we suddenly see our way clear.
Moses is an
Egyptian probably of noble origin
whom the myth undertakes to transform into a
Jew. And that would be our conclusion! The
MOSES AN EGYPTIAN

23

exposure in the water was in its right place; to
fit the new conclusion the intention had to be
changed, not without violence. From a means of
getting rid of the child it becomes a means of its
salvation.

The divergence of the Moses legend from all
others of its kind
might be traced back to a
special feature in the story of Moses

5

life. Whereas

in all other cases the hero rises above his humble
beginnings as his life progresses, the heroic life
of the man Moses

began by descending from
his eminence to the level of the children of
Israel.

This little investigation was undertaken in the
hope of gaining from it a second, fresh argument
for the
suggestion that Moses was an Egyptian.

We have seen that the first argument, that of his
name, has not been considered decisive.

1

We

have to be
prepared for the new reasoning the
analysis of the exposure myth not faring any
better. The
objection is likely to be that the
circumstances of the
origin and transformation of
legends are too obscure to allow of such a con-
clusion as the
preceding one, and that all efforts
to extract the kernel of historical truth must be

1

Thus E. Meyer in Die Mosessagen und die Leviten, Berliner
Sitzber.

1905: " The name Mose is probably the name Pinchas in
the priest dynasty of Silo . . . without a doubt Egyptian. This
does not prove however that these dynasties were of Egyptian
origin, but it proves that they had relations with Egypt." (p. 651 .)

One may well ask what kind of relations one is to imagine.

24 MOSES AND MONOTHEISM

doomed to failure in face of the incoherence and contradictions

clustering around the heroic person

of Moses and the unmistakable

signs of tenden-

tious distortion and stratification accumulated

through many centuries. I myself do not share

this

negative attitude, but I am not in a position

to confute it.

If there was no more

certainty than this to be

attained

why have I brought this enquiry to the

notice of a wider

public? I regret that even my

justification has to restrict itself to hints. If,

however, one is attracted by the two arguments

outlined above, and tries to take

seriously the

conclusion that Moses was a

distinguished

Egyptian, then very interesting and far-reaching

perspectives open out. With the help of certain

assumptions the motives guiding Moses in his

unusual

undertaking can be made intelligible;

in close connection with this the

possible motiva-

tion of numerous characteristics and

peculiarities

of the

legislation and religion he gave the Jewish

people can be perceived. It stimulates ideas of

some moment concerning the

origin of mono-

theistic

religion in general. But such important

considerations cannot be based on

psychological

probabilities alone. Even if one were to accept it

as historical that Moses was

Egyptian, we should

want at least one other fixed

point so as to protect

the

many emerging possibilities from the reproach

of their

being products of imagination and too

MOSES AN EGYPTIAN

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far removed from reality. An objective proof of the period into which the life of Moses, and with it the exodus from Egypt, fall would perhaps have sufficed. But this has not been forthcoming, and therefore it will be better to suppress any inferences that might follow our view that Moses was an Egyptian.

PART II

IF MOSES WAS AN EGYPTIAN

Part II

IF MOSES WAS AN EGYPTIAN . . .

IN Part I of this book I have tried to strengthen by a new argument the suggestion that the man Moses, the liberator and law-giver of the Jewish people, was not a Jew, but an Egyptian. That his name derived from the Egyptian vocabulary had long been observed, though not duly appreciated. I added to this consideration the further one that the interpretation of the exposure myth attaching to Moses necessitated the conclusion that he was an Egyptian whom a people needed to make into a Jew. At the end of my essay I said that important and far-reaching conclusions could be drawn from the suggestion that Moses was an Egyptian; but I was not prepared to uphold them publicly, since they were based only on psychological probabilities and lacked objective proof. The more significant the possibilities thus discerned the more cautious is one about

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