

Moses in Cairo



*The opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo calls for a repatriation of ancient Egyptian artefacts. At this moment, Sigmund Freud's last book, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), provides a guide for bringing Moses back to Egypt.*

The Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), devoted to ancient Egyptian civilization, which opened at the end of 2025 in Cairo, is located near the Giza Pyramids. An archeological museum, with enormous collections housing over 100,000 artifacts across a dozen main galleries, the GEM covers approximately 7,000 years, focusing on the pharaonic dynasties, through the Greek, Roman and Coptic periods, with some prehistoric and Predynastic objects. Parallel to its construction, spanning two decades, massive repatriation campaigns took place and efforts are being made continuously to bring back looted artifacts to Egypt. Still, major stolen or gifted pieces are waiting to be returned back to their own country—famed relics such as the Rosetta Stone in London's British Museum, the Nefertiti Bust in the Neues Museum in Berlin and the Dendera Zodiac in the Louvre in Paris, remain abroad. To this list of repatriated items in waiting, one can add a figure, maybe not a historical one, but still an Egyptian of ancient descent. Moses.

Being that Moses's story is detailed in the Hebrew Bible (which archaeological research generally supports only a fraction of), no one is surprised that there is no mention of Moses among the thousands of exhibits on display at the GEM, to say nothing of an exhibition dedicated to him. After all, the GEM is a historical museum, and Moses is a mythical person.

As much as Paris, London and Berlin are surprising resting places for the afterlives of ancient Egyptian rulers and artifacts, the itinerary of Moses in Cairo begins in an unlikely place as well—Vienna. Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) was written in the last years of his life, when Freud was forced to leave his home of Vienna and find refuge in London. Working in the context of trauma and memory, Freud's Moses is a “primordial father” who connects previous theories from *Totem and Taboo* (1913), and his 1921 essay *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, to the story of the Jewish people.¹

The book is an extraordinarily creative speculation on Moses, his life and his death, the origins of monotheism and antisemitism,



the making of the slaves in Egypt into a people and the creation of the religion of Moses—Judaism. When referring directly to antisemitism in this book, Freud provides a body-image related explanation, saying that castration anxiety inflicted by the reality of circumcision (which he notes has been an ancient Egyptian tradition) is what generates antisemitism.² As much as this might be insufficient as an explanation for social pathologies such as antisemitism, this example is indicative of the way Moses's story unfolds in relation to Freud's own political reality.³



Using a variety of works by Egyptologists, archeologists, theologians and geologists, Freud claims that Moses was an Egyptian—either a priest or a nobleman—who lived in the thirteenth century BC.⁴ Freud's Moses was not an Israelite, the son of slaves found by Pharaoh's daughter on the Nile. Freud's Moses was not adopted by the Egyptian princess and did not rise to power in the court not knowing he is of the sons of Israel, as the biblical story tells us. For Freud, Moses was a descendent of the proto-monotheistic cult of the sun god (Aten), which was formed by the Pharaoh Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV) who ruled in the fourteenth century BC (his main wife was Nefertiti and one of his sons was the boy king, Pharaoh Tutankhamun). Akhenaten's religion is noted for abandoning traditional Egyptian polytheism and introducing worship similar to monotheism. Amenhotep IV changed his name to Akhenaten to dedicate his rule to Aten, and



moved his court from Thebes (Luxor) to Akhetaten (Amarna) for this purpose.⁵ Freud's Moses was one of those still practicing this marginalized religion decades later, and after finding the slaves of Egypt to be useful for his political and religious goals, he then united them as a people around this religion. (In the biblical story, Moses's stutter required Aaron, his brother from his enslaved Hebrew parents, to act as translator. Freud explains this to be a late literary concealment of the fact that, being an Egyptian prince, Moses did not speak the language of the slaves!).⁶ So the Jewish people did not develop monotheism, but they were still the chosen people. Maybe not by God but by another man, an Egyptian prince.⁷

Moses's story is told in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible, which in the most general terms provides a moral code for a multitude of slaves as they become a nation of property owners and then disperse. Moses is considered the one who changed divinity itself. He abstracted it, turning idols into laws, turning the Egyptian temple to the Ark of the Covenant, replacing monuments with scrolls, making him a leader who is a philologist rather than an architect.⁸ Biblical Moses himself was both an Egyptian prince and a Hebrew slave, both the son of Yocheved and Amram and brother to Miriam and Aaron, as well as an adopted son and grandson of the Pharaoh's family. A Hebrew slave who passes as an Egyptian prince.⁹ Freud uses this hyphenated founding father to address his own predicament. Making Moses a diagonal figure, his story cuts through the origin story of the Jews in the Bible, all the way to the murderous antagonism facing Freud himself as a Jew and through our orientation today. In this book Freud undermines the ways in which the Jewish people have perceived their customs and origins. To destabilize the foundations of the horrific reality Freud is faced with as a Jew, he is compelled to redraw the lines that would alter the political conditions, in a way that inevitably must alter him as well. The hyphenated identity of German-Jewish and Austrian-Jewish people has been erased by the antagonistic polarity of "Jewish" or "German."¹⁰ Under National Socialism, this either/or equation sentenced Jews to death and to a space of extermination in the death camps, and Germans to life itself and the living-spaces of annexed territories and stadiums; Jew was sentenced to a bodyless and speechless existence, and German was granted an eternal body and the language of action.¹¹ As these extreme antagonistic relations were forming under Nazism, different approaches were developing on the "Jewish" side of the hyphen. Arnold Schoenberg, for example, found the reality he was facing in Vienna demanded he compose the unfinished opera *Moses und Aron* (1930-32) which was professed as a manifestation of Jewish identity.¹² Freud finds a way to undo the polarity he is faced with by going back to Moses, the founder of the Jewish people, and claiming that even he was not Jewish. By this Freud not only undermines Jewish tradition but betrays the polarity itself. He is working with a myth, analyzing its text to find the



stitches the story conceals, only to come up, not with a simple claim for a historical account behind the fictitious myth, but with another fiction to be presented in his own political present; an injected potential history undermining identities aligned along a destructive antagonism. The diagonal Moses of Freud is destabilizing. He embodies the pyramid as a structure that is a collapse.¹³

Freud's Moses is a bitter take on Groucho Marx's already bitter joke—he wouldn't want to be a member of a club that would accept him, nor a club he is forced into. Faced with the fundamental antagonism of his time, Freud destabilizes the opposition itself from within one of the variants of the equation. Read from the perspective of the contemporary Jewish state in Israel, the anachronism it offers activates the immediate political and social reality. When considering it, one finds himself suddenly on the other side of his own story. Freud's betrayal of the antagonism is a loyalty to Jewishness as an open-ended question, beyond the consolidation of language, territory, culture, religion, ethnicity and state. It returns the Jew as he who provokes the world, unsettles it. The Jew reminds us that maybe the Messiah did not yet arrive. That we might be wrong about the world—maybe what we know as truth is false. This is the basic hermeneutics of suspicion that the Jew embodies. The fact that Freud's Moses comes from a time when "Jewish" could still claim a universality that does not converge into a nation, an ethnicity or race keeps it as a question. Reading it today the earth shifts, the Syrian-African rift opens, parting the seas and opening new horizons. A diagonal looking glass of pyramids as collapses and ruptures, a Moses exhibition at the Grand Egyptian Museum is as inevitable as it is impossible.

Freud opens his book with these words:

To deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons is not a deed to be taken lightheartedly—especially by one belonging to that people.¹⁴

The opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum invites a repatriation of Moses as one of Egypt's greatest sons.

1. Unlike other works in which Freud has obfuscated Jewish cultural tropes and universalized them (for example in his 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*), his *Moses* is the only book to directly address Jewish themes. This is done amidst the rise of the Nazis in Germany and the annexation of Austria. See: Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, Routledge, 1991, especially chapter 5: "The Jewish Genius: Freud and the Jewishness of the Creative," pp. 128-149.

2. See: Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* [1939], trans.: Katherine Jones, Vintage Books, 1955, p. 116-117.

3. See: Samuel Weber, *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking*, Fordham University Press, 2005, pp. 63-89.



4. Jan Assmann's "mnemohistory" of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* includes direct uncredited references, such as to the work of Ernst Sellin from 1922, *Mose und seine Bedeutung für die israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte*. According to Assmann, the idea of "Moses-the-Egyptian" goes back to Friedrich Schiller, in his 1790 essay "The Mission of Moses." And then there is the proposition by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe from 1819 regarding Moses's murder, by none other than his disciple and right-hand man, Joshua. All in all, Assmann shows how Moses's story preoccupied the German Enlightenment. See: Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Harvard University Press, 1998

5. Thomas Mann's four-part novel, *Joseph und seine Brüder* (1933), used similar themes of Egyptian-Hebrew cultural blending. In this case, Mann aligns the timeline of the biblical story of Jacob and his sons in Genesis with ancient Egyptian dynastic genealogy to conclude that Joseph was an advisor in the court of Akhenaton (in the book: Amenhotep). Mann identifies Joseph as Osarseph, the well documented advisor to Akhenaton. Queen Nefertiti is juxtaposed with Mut-em-enet, the "moon-nun," wife of the Pharaoh's chief advisor Potiphar (Petepre) from the biblical story, supposedly captain of the palace guard in the Amarna royal court. The moon-nun, spurned lover of Joseph, is identified as the one who got Joseph thrown in prison the second time, resulting in his descendants being condemned to slavery. The story of Moses's birth and upbringing as told in Exodus supposedly takes place ten generations after Joseph, which would correspond with the time of Pharaoh Ramses II.

6. Freud's *Moses* produced an endless library. It came back into the field of cultural critique and historical evaluation through an analysis of what the work attempted to achieve. See for example: Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*, Yale University Press, 1991; Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, University of California Press, 1997; Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Trans.: Eric Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, 1998; Edward W. Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, Verso, 2003; Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, Princeton University Press, 2005; and Peter Sloterdijk, *Derrida, An Egyptian: On the Problem of the Jewish Pyramid*, Trans.: Wieland Hoban, Polity Press, 2009. Many of these books are in dialogue with one another. For Freud's contemporaries, the book was perceived as a mistake or an insult. Freud himself expresses his uneasiness with writing and publishing the book as he is completing the manuscript. This is documented in letters ("Moses will not let my imagination go... [It] has become a fixation for me," he wrote in a letter from May 2, 1935, to Arnold Zweig who had already fled to Haifa), and in the introductions to the chapters in the book itself ("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." Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 50). Jewish philosophy scholar Martin Buber opened his 1945 book *Moses* with a footnote which states: "One should wonder with regret that such an important scholar in his field as Sigmund Freud, has found it in his heart to publish such an unscientific book which is based on ungrounded speculation." See: Martin Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* [1945], Humanity Books, 1988, p. V

7. Following Goethe's speculation, Freud's *Moses* is murdered by his followers. As Gil Anidjar would have it, Jewish collective guilt is born out of the murder of Moses. In contrast, Christianity offers collective innocence (since Jesus, who was betrayed and executed, atones the sins of his followers). Anidjar explains this civilizational shift from guilt to innocence in a brilliant formula of substitutions: "If Freud was a Jew, then Moses was an Egyptian. But if Freud was a Christian, then Jesus was a Jew." See: Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity*, Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 248

8. Ute Holl called it the "Moses complex"—the structural intersection between medial change, migration and new legal structures. See: Ute Holl, *The Moses Complex: Freud, Schoenberg, Straub/Huillet*, Diaphanes books, 2016

9. Philosophy scholar Hamman Aldouri calls him "an Egyptian prince who lacks a genealogy."

10. Jewish-German theology scholar and philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), coined the term *Bindestrichjudentum* (the Judaism of the hyphen) to describe exactly this mode of existence.

11. See: Boaz Neumann, *Nazi Weltanschauung—Space, Body, Language*, Haifa University Publishing House and Sifriat Ma'ariv, 2002 [In Hebrew]

12. German-Jews and Austrian-Jews who were struggling against the polarization of their hyphenated identity presented various ways to operate by respecting the polarity—from Jewish nationalism, Zionism, to a disavowal of their Judaism. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's adaptation of Schoenberg's opera in their film *Moses und Aron* (1973), which insists on a kind of Semite aesthetics, proposes a Marxian reading of abstract divinity and idolatry. Their film portrays the Israelites as nomadic people of the desert, proposing a Jewish-Arab affinity through the theme of Semitism. In this sense the film follows Freud's *Moses* more than Schoenberg's original work. Hannah Arendt explains how, after the collapse of the empires of central Europe, having to operate at a moment of nation-state building for which they were designated the role of foreign outsiders, Jewish people who identified with universal values were perceived as a threat. See: Arendt, "The Jews and Society," in: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 55-88

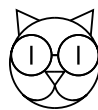
13. In his short book, Sloterdijk goes through a set of writers who interpret dreams (biblical Joseph, Freud, Derrida) and finds in the architecture of the pyramid the form most suitable to describe Derrida's deconstruction. He equates deconstruction to the ultimate structure of collapse saying of the pyramid: "It stands in its place, unshakeable for all time, because its form is nothing other than the undeconstructible remainder of a construction that, following the plan of its architect, is built to look as it would after its own collapse." See: Sloterdijk, *Derrida, An Egyptian*, p. 27

14. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 3



BIO

Joshua Simon is a writer and curator. Among his exhibitions: *Slime* (Secession Vienna, 2024), and *The Dividual* (Leuphana Kunstraum, Lüneburg and Los Angeles Contemporary Archive, 2021-22). He is the author of *Neomaterialism* (Sternberg Press, 2013), and the editor of *Solution 196-213: United States of Palestine-Israel* (Sternberg Press, 2011), *Being Together Precedes Being: A Textbook for The Kids Want Communism* (Archive Books, 2019), and co-editor with Ingo Niermann of *Solution 275-294: Communists Anonymous* (Sternberg Press, 2017), among others. These days, he is completing work on an anthology of essays he is editing, *The Digital Revolution as Counter-Revolution*.



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