

Sigmund Freud and Moses the Lawgiver by: Immanuel Velikovsky

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Twice Freud strayed away into a by-path off the high road of psychoanalytic investigation—once, many years ago, when he wrote a study of aesthetics, and the second time in his eighties, when he undertook an inquiry into biblical history. Both times the prophet Moses was the object of his investigation. In the first instance it was Michelangelo's statue of Moses, selected out of all the work produced by Michelangelo and from all the other creations of the plastic arts. Later it was Moses the law-giver, whose historic figure exercised a compelling effect on the spiritual vision of the creator of depth psychology.

Is this accidental? A man may accidentally meet another twice at the same spot, but it is not accidental when an old man returns to the place where once, in the full vigor of his manhood, a figure held him enthralled. What compelled the man who maintained that he was ignorant of the "oceanic feeling" of religious experience to approach the great religious founder and attempt to illuminate his spiritual aspect as well as the traits of his appearance? He said that religion was a neurosis; was he seeking the traits of neurosis in Moses? In not a single line has he given any indication of this. "I decided to put it away [the work], but it haunted me like an unlaidd ghost." ⁽¹⁾ Something profoundly personal is hinted at in such a confession.

Freud's work on Moses, the Egyptian, is not a psychoanalytical or psychological study. But we shall proceed in the manner of Freud when delivering over the author of a literary work to the tribunal of psychoanalysis.

Unless one follows the traditions which have been handed down, a reconstruction of the personality of Moses is not possible on the basis of the remainder of the available historical material. When such an attempt is made to mold anew a statue of this giant from the scraps of relevant history—to give not an analysis of the tradition, but a synthesis of the personality—then we have before us an artistic creation, just as Michelangelo's prophet with the tablets is an artistic creation. But by referring to such a statue we should not attempt to make an analysis of what is hidden in the mythical past, but rather an analysis of the artist.

Whatever is alien to Freud in the traditional figure of Moses will be regarded in his inquiry as alien to Moses; whatever there is in the figure of Moses that fails to reflect Freud's concept will be found in historical and exegetical excursions and bound up with the inquiry.

In analysis this is called projection. In order to project one's inner world onto some personality of the outer world, some similarity must first be found. The associations which lead to this may be positive and also negative. Correspondingly, the associations will be colored by love or negatively charged with hate, everything depending on which unconscious impulses are being outwardly projected. The projections may be on occasion divided up into two personalities: one is taken over by the "good" ego, the other by the "evil" ego; one is idealized and the other hated. Everything which does not correspond to the good or evil ego will either remain unseen or be denied.

“Moses is an Egyptian.” How is this proved? Two explanations are given in the first of the three essays, which bears the title of “Moses an Egyptian.” One is historical and philological, the other is psychological and folkloristic. The first one is: “Moses” is an element of many Egyptian names, such as, for example, Ramses (Ra-mose), Thut-mose; Mose in Egyptian means child. Hence, Moses was an Egyptian.

A man who is not an Egyptologist enters on a difficult excursion in order to demonstrate that an Egyptian name is a proof of non-Hebrew descent, but the very man making this endeavor bears the name of Sigmund and is a Jew. Is he aware of the striking inadequacy of his proof? On the basis of such a demonstration, anyone by the name of Sigmund is a Teuton; therefore this demonstration may be rejected, for the same reason that a child of Jewish parents born in Moravia may be called Sigmund.

In a footnote on page 23, Freud cites Eduard Meyer: “The name Moses is probably . . . Egyptian. This does not prove, however, that these generations were of Egyptian origin, but it proves that they had relations with Egypt.” To this Freud appends a remarkable question: “One may well ask what kind of relation one is to imagine.”

The other, psychological, demonstration that Moses belonged to the Egyptian people is as follows: In many legends about the origin and adulthood of famous men of the past, a stereotype is retained: the hero is of exalted descent; even as a child he is recognized by his father as a future danger to him, is compelled to flee, and is rescued and brought up by poor people; when he is fully grown his noble descent comes to light. Such is the echo resounding through the folk-tales. Since, according to the legend, Moses was born among humble people of an oppressed race, and rescued and brought up by the king’s daughter, Freud associates himself with Eduard Meyer’s idea that the legend was falsified and must be set right; and he arrives at the contention that the historic Moses was of higher descent, of the royal house of Pharaoh, and possibly even the son of the Egyptian princess.

Freud undertakes a detailed psychological demonstration with reference to folkloristic research into the legends of various peoples and heroes—without noticing that the emendation cannot be equated with the legendary stereotype, if he himself does not regard Moses as a legendary prince but as a real one. The fictional element is the princely origin of the hero. It is true that on the basis of history it can be proved that a legendary hero was no prince by blood, but on the basis of a legend about a non-prince can a scientific proof be adduced that the hero was, nevertheless, an historical prince?

In the countless folktales the lowly origin of the hero is denied and a nobler one poetically ascribed to him. Accordingly, in revision and correction doubt must be cast upon the princely blood of the hero. If Moses had been named as the son of royal blood in the biblical tradition, then skepticism would be in place and a suspicion justified that the legend had undergone a conventional distortion. But Freud recognizes Moses as an historical prince by blood, and so it is he who composes the legend according to its usual stereotype. He would like to maintain that Moses was the son of a princess.⁽²⁾ This anecdote is taken from Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900.

Freud quotes Rank: “As a result of ‘national motives’ the legend was reconstructed into the version we know.”

Freud is aware that the theory of Moses' Egyptian descent lacks a strong foundation.

. . . Further thought tells us that an 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? (p. 20)

The only thing left was 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." (p. 21)

With this unsatisfactory and even uncertain result our investigation would have to end, without having contributed anything to answering the question whether Moses was an Egyptian, were there not another and perhaps more successful way of approaching the exposure myth itself.

As a rule the real family corresponds to the humble one, the noble family to 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 is also 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!" (pp. 21f.)

At this point, where Freud hopes to find the necessary proof, we must expose a logical error. Let us repeat Freud's train of thought.

A. The legend has been falsified because of national motives; originally the legend had it that Moses was the son of an Egyptian king.

B. Since Freud considers this proof inadequate, he establishes another and more convincing one by setting up a rule: the first family is the fictitious one.

Then for what reason is the first family in the saga fictitious and the later one real? Surely because fantasies concerning noble descent are natural and belong to many people; fantasies concerning lowlier descent are unnatural, for what purpose would they serve? If it is desired to test the Moses legend coolly, critically, and with skepticism, then it would be more plausible to leave him his poor Hebrew parents, and to explain away princesses who discover poor children as figments of the imagination.

It is a wish-fulfilment that Moses was an Egyptian (and that Freud is free-born), and a second, infantile wish-fulfilment that Moses was of royal blood. Freud transforms the elite character of the people into the the "chosen" character of his own spiritual model.

According to Freud, Moses was not a Hebrew but an Egyptian child; his mother was not Johebed, the wife of Amram, but a princess (his father is unnamed). He was saved from the water and

adopted not by the princess but by poor Hebrews. The correction, however, is soon extended: no reason exists for assuming that he was adopted by a Hebrew woman, and so he would not need to have been exposed by the princess.

It was not Moses who spoke about God to Pharaoh, but Pharaoh who taught Moses about the unique God. Moses did not flee from Pharaoh into the wilderness. Instead of competing with Moses in the magical arts, the Egyptian priests taught Moses violently to oppose all magic and to reject all mysteries. Moses was slow of speech—this is to be understood to mean that he had to speak through interpreters, not with Pharaoh, but with the Hebrews.

And further, “our reconstruction leaves not room for . . . the ten plagues, [and] the passage through the Red Sea, and the solemn law-giving on Mount Sinai will not lead us astray.” (p. 54)

Since Freud does not perceive the inadequacy of his demonstration he is, according to psychoanalytic terminology, in a state of scotomization. But a psychic scotoma happens to be a proof that something touching the person very closely bears a disagreeable affect, which gives rise to a block in perception.

Such a lack of perception is in no case a defect of logical capacity, but rather a psychological phenomenon. In reality every scotoma retains its own logic. And there is logic in this case as well: Freud does not wish to recognize Moses as a Hebrew because he did not wish to recognize Sigmund as a Jew either. He does not consciously deny his adherence to the Jewish people at all; on the contrary, he emphasizes it at the very outset of the book. Nor would the idea of disowning his people ever consciously occur to him. But psychoanalysis has always taught us that it is not the conscious, but the unconscious material that is to be considered as decisive for the personality. That which is emphasized in the first few hours of the analysis often serves the precise purpose of masking the unconscious impulses; indeed, who taught us to hear “yes” in place of “no” and “no” in place of “yes” in such utterances?

In spite of the words in Freud’s introduction, “to deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons is not a deed to be undertaken lightheartedly,” there soon follows a slip of the pen: “We had *hoped* [our emphasis] the suggestion that Moses was an Egyptian would prove fruitful. . .” Accordingly, “Moses an Egyptian” would have to be translated as “Freud an Aryan, or free-born.” There is no illogic here: he would like to feel himself as not a pariah.

Freud wrote this study—we should like to mention briefly—during the flowering of the race-theories of the elite character of the Aryans. Subsequently we shall attempt to investigate the more profound reasons for this renunciation of his race.

As I have said, I do not wish to adopt any position with respect to the historical reconstruction. Yet the personality of Moses appears to be completely altered by Freud’s hand; much falls away, and something else is added, and a shape appears before us which is a reflected image. Even if Freud is right, the remarkable fact of his interest in a historical personality, and also of his wonderful, divining insight, would be a proof of a psychic affinity which approaches spiritual identity. If Freud is wrong he is wrong as a historian. He remains, however, in the right as a poet, ruling over his poetry by virtue of his imagination.

References

1. *Moses and Monotheism*, transl. by Katherine Jones (London, 1939), p. 164.
2. This conclusion of the essay called "Moses and Egyptian" was anticipated by a Jewish youngster in an anecdote: During the religious hour the instructor asked the class, "Who knows who Moses' mother was?" The class was silent. A Jewish pupil present raised his hand and said: "Pharaoh's daughter." "How is that? She was the one who found him." "That's what *she* said," answered the daring pupil.