Method and theory

Assmann, Jan. *The price of monotheism* (trans. Robert Savage). ix, 140 pp., bibliogr. Stanford: Univ. Press, 2010. $55.00 (cloth), $19.95 (paper)

Jan Assmann, professor of Egyptology at Heidelberg from 1976 to 2003, has worked on cultural memory and 'political theology'; his German background has sensitized him to the problems raised by anti-Semitism. These concerns came together in *Moses the Egyptian: the memory of Egypt in Western monotheism* (1997). The present volume is a response to critiques of *Moses the Egyptian*, especially to Assmann's concept of the 'Mosaic distinction'; five scholarly critiques were incorporated in an appendix to the original German, but do not figure in Savage's fluent English version.

Fundamental to Assmann's methodology is the discipline of mnemohistory, or the history of cultural memory, in which there is a merging of 'mimetic memory' (action, custom, ethics), 'memory of things' (which creates individual identity), and 'communicative memory' (language, social interchange), described already in Assmann's 1992 work *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (English translation: *Cultural memory and early civilization*, 2011). Mnemohistory, in contrast to the positive history of interpretation, is highly selective; here, it is the history of Moses as a figure of memory, in a line stretching from Akhenaten (the 'Egyptian Moses'), through Israelite monotheism and its development in later Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and eventually via John Spencer, William Warburton, Reinhold, and Schiller to Freud (whose *Moses and monotheism* has enjoyed a recent revival) and the twentieth century. Both the beginning and the end of this genealogy will raise the eyebrows of biblical scholars, and indeed on p. 117 in the present work Assmann himself disclaims it.

Assmann's leading concept is the 'Mosaic distinction' (*Mosaische Unterscheidung*). This

originates with Pharaoh Akhenaten, in the fourteenth century BCE, since he was the first we know to have made the essential distinction between truth and falsehood in religion. Traditional dating of Moses, based on 1 Kings 6:1, puts him back as far as the fifteenth century BCE, earlier than Akhenaten, but the sources are considerably later. As Assmann aptly observes, 'Moses is a figure of memory but not of history, while Akhenaten is a figure of history but not of memory' (*Moses the Egyptian*, p. 2; see also p. 23).

Primary religions, such as the polytheisms of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, affirm the world and all its gods; they are cults, articulated in myths, not linked to exclusive truth claims. Secondary religions, specifically the monotheisms of Akhenaten/Moses and ultimately of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, *do* make exclusive truth claims; they rest on cognition, whether through direct revelation or through written texts, and depend on the rejection of primary religion.

Primary religions tend to mutual tolerance. Long before Romans noticed that Latin Jupiter was equivalent to Greek Zeus, diplomats and translators in Egypt and Mesopotamia had discovered the translatabiliity of pantheons; this enabled the writing of binding international treaties, for it was recognized that the gods were universal even though their names changed according to language.

Secondary religions, however, stress the uniqueness, incomparability, and non-equivalence of God with any pagan gods. Israel's God is *not* equivalent to Zeus; He is a 'jealous' God and demands the destruction of idols, for they are 'false'. This essential intolerance, with its social consequences in warfare and persecution, is the 'price' paid for monotheism.

Is this too heavy a price to pay? In response to critics who thought that this was what he was suggesting, Assmann stresses the positive value of monotheism, comparing Israel's advance in religion with Greece's advance in science: 'Just as monotheistic religion rests on the Mosaic distinction, so science rests on the "Parmenidean" distinction. One distinguishes between true and false religion, the other between true and false cognition ... Both concepts are characterized by an unprecedented drive to differentiation, negation and exclusion' (p. 12).

The biblical record, Assmann now concedes, is not simply a polemic against idolatry, however strongly that features in certain strands. Israelite polytheism, the popular religion of Israel, is never far from the surface; indeed, the polemic against idolatry articulates an internal Israelite struggle, notwithstanding how much priests and prophets attempt to portray it in terms of Israel versus the nations.

Assmann distinguishes between exclusiveness/intolerance as exhibited in Christianity, on the one hand, and in Judaism, on the other. Whereas Jews interpreted the Mosaic distinction as a border separating them from the outside world of falsehood, Christians sought to abolish the border by applying the distinction universally. Jews isolate themselves, in other words, while Christians (and Muslims) seek to convert; but for all, the distinction between true and false in religion remains paramount.

This is a stimulating book, posing significant questions about European cultural experience over three millennia; its brevity will be welcomed by the 'intelligent reader' but may annoy scholars who feel their specialties have been glossed over.

Norman Solomon *The Oriental Institute, University of Oxford*