

Response from Abigail Gillman, Boston University:

Eliza Slavet spells out in a precise way the many tensions arising from Freud's seemingly simple claim that "Moses created the Jews." Judaism is a Mosaic religion in the positive sense, because it is a strictly monotheistic creed that values "Geistigkeit," intellectuality and spirituality, over materiality. It is Mosaic also in a negative sense, because the original (Egyptian) Moses had to be murdered for Mosaic Judaism to survive. A deed so primal and violent could not but leave permanent memory-traces that were transmitted unknowingly by generations of Jews. So powerful was this memory that it forced the re-conceptualization of the Mosaic God; the invention of the composite Egyptian-Israelite Moses in scripture; the merger of two distinct populations (only one of which had experienced Moses first hand); and, ultimately, the continued survival of this hybrid nation of Jews.

As Slavet writes, the scenario Freud describes is unscientific and ultimately unprovable. The same can be said for Freud's method. In fact, the tendentious way he treats his sources suggests that he may not have written this book in a scholarly mode (*Wissenschaft*). In the Bible, Freud finds only distorted clues. The Hebrew name *Mosche* (an Egyptian word) and the ritual of circumcision (an Egyptian rite) are two of Freud's "leading fossils" (*Leitfossil*); and yet, he notes that most historians have failed to interpret them correctly. Freud's most compelling evidence seems to be the simple fact that Jews are still Jews, and that they are still hated for being so—they are members of what Isaac Deutscher, in the *Non-Jewish Jew*, called the "negative community" of the exterminated and the persecuted. Other than the bare fact of Jewishness (—that which is nowadays called "Jewiness" in American popular culture—) what Jews retain that is of positive value is not the legacy of a just and merciful divinity, not Torah, language or culture, but rather an intellectual propensity that one might well associate with Spinoza, with Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg, perhaps even with the freethinking second-century Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah from the Talmud.

Is it possible that Freud resorted to the idea of racially inherited Jewish memory because he lacked an alternative explanation of its inescapable, irresistible, "compulsive" character? One thinks of Kafka's "Hunger Artist" who confesses at the end of his life that he devoted his life to fasting because he "couldn't find the food he liked." Freud was not able to be satisfied with how the biblical narrative, metaphysics, ethics, or existentialist philosophy constructed the origins and the grip of Jewishness. Moreover, his studies of unconscious memory taught him that nothing that is transmitted solely in words, or books, or in any kind of rational way, has that kind of staying power. The primal Jewish experience simply had to return from oblivion in order to "exercise an incomparably powerful influence on people in the masses, and raise[] an irresistible claim to truth against which logical objections remain powerless" (Freud).

It is worth recalling that in the same years in which Freud was writing about religion, another Austrian Jewish thinker, Martin Buber, likewise tried to redirect modern Jews to recover a suppressed and subterranean aspect of Jewishness which he called "religiosity," as opposed to religion. Religiosity denoted the creative, iconoclastic energy that shaped Moses' life (Buber published his *Moses* in 1946) and also Jesus', and that motivated the biblical prophets, the mystics in Safed, and the Hassidim in

Eastern Europe. Among Buber's contemporaries, one would count Gustav Landauer, Ahad Ha'am, Franz Kafka, Hermann Hesse, Franz Rosenzweig, and probably Freud himself.

Slavet calls attention to the dubious legacy of *Moses and Monotheism*, a book which in its time angered many Jews (Buber among them). Is it a "positive affirmation or an uncomfortable apprehension of the Jewish tradition," indeed? (Slavet 99)

As I argue in my book *Viennese Jewish Modernism: Freud, Hofmannsthal, Beer-Hofmann and Schnitzler*, an important contribution of the Moses essays is the understanding of "tradition" they put forth—a term Freud did not have to use but used nonetheless. Tradition is described as "fluid," "incomplete," "vulnerable to being crushed." It is always a hybrid of objective and subjective realities; it combines "delusion" and "truth" in a single word. Tradition, if one may put it this way, becomes the ultimate genre of Jewish religious memory in Freud's view. And the first principle of this form of memory is its commitment to compromise.

In *Moses and Monotheism*, tradition is aptly described as the "supplement and at the same time the contradiction of the writing of history." As a repository of Mosaic memory, tradition is finally no more or less reliable than the historical sources which Freud disparages, or the Hebrew Bible, a "poetically embellished narrative" which Freud likens to a "mausoleum." Indeed, the fraught text of *Moses and Monotheism* itself, insofar as it aspires to unearth and inscribe the memory of Moses for a new age, becomes the next chapter in this unreliable tradition. This intent becomes clear if one takes Freud at his word when he claims he is unable to define the proper genre of *Moses and Monotheism*.

*Moses and Monotheism* is ultimately an imaginative hybrid of "historical novel" (the work's original subtitle) and modernist epic. It reads like a wishful amalgam of past and present concerns, of memory and history, corporeality and *Geistigkeit*, of numerous disciplines and discourses. Freud incorporates all of them partially and imperfectly, without sublating the tensions. A precedent for this type of writing can be found in Freud's "The Creative Writer and Imagining" of 1907. In that essay, Freud argues that the artistic imagination, because not beholden to chronology, is able to manipulate and rearrange the events of the inner life—recent and earlier memories—in such a way as to fulfill a wish, and to produce a *Zukunftsbild*: an image of, and for, the future. Perhaps it was in this spirit that Freud devised his own creative, hybrid approach to the cultural hero, "the man Moses." Freud begins his book by stating that he will deprive the Jews of their favorite son; what he gives in return is a new genre of Jewish memory.