

Freud and Judaism



BOKRECENSION • BOOK REVIEW

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.145206>

Risto Nurmela, **Sigmund Freud und sein Bekenntnis zum Judesein in 'Der Mann Moses und die monoteistische Religion'** (Lit Verlag, Wien, 2023)

In 1939, Freud finished his last book, *Moses and monotheism*, only months before his death in September in London, to which he had escaped from Austria the year before following the Anschluss by Nazi Germany. The fact that he chose to write about Moses and the origin of Jewish religion at this point in his life was directly motivated by the rampant antisemitism surrounding him. In view of this context, it came as a surprise for many – and he comments on it himself initially – that his overall thesis was that Moses was actually neither a Jew nor a believer in the Jahve-religion, but that he was an Egyptian, who had been a priest in the new monotheistic religion of Aton, who left Egypt after the downfall of its ruler Akhenaten. Furthermore, following the suggestion of the theologian and religious historian Ernst Sellin, in his *Mose und seine Bedeutung für die israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte* from 1922, Freud argued that Moses had, in fact, been killed by his own followers, who first refused his monotheistic message, only to be reinstated as their mythical religious founder much later in a process that followed the account of an original guilt-ridden totemistic religion that Freud had developed in *Totem and Tabu* (1913). This was argued despite the fact that Sellin

himself had backed down from his thesis in the meantime. For these and other reasons, the Moses-book was criticised harshly, notably by Martin Buber. Many readers saw it as a flawed work, tainted by Freud's age and deteriorating medical condition.

About this book, the Finnish theologian and Old Testament exegete Risto Nurmela has written a monograph in German. In it, he recapitulates, reconstructs and critically discusses Freud's argument in dialogue with some of the secondary literature. He begins and ends the book with a more general reflection on Freud's critique of religion generally, as first articulated in the 1927 study *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*, which had provided a psychoanalytical interpretation of the formation of religious beliefs. In the study, Freud had come out as a paradigmatic atheist in the sense that he not only disparages a belief in God or a supreme transcendent being but also provides what he takes to be a psychological account of why such conceptions are formed in the first place.

Nurmela's overall thesis is that the conception of religious belief that Freud criticises is actually based on a superficial and conventional Christian doctrine of a creator God who runs and regulates all human affairs. Opposed to this unsophisticated version of a religious mindset, he argues that through his book on Moses, as his most Jewish book, Freud had moved toward a more 'spiritual' (*geistig*) conception of the divine. This is illustrated in particular



Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

through how he presents Moses' God as the spiritual foundation for the Jewish people and stresses how the iconoclastic Mosaic law raises the concept of the divine to a higher spiritual order. Nurmela even suggests that the theory in *Totem and Taboo*, of how the original sacrificed father-figure through his transformation into a more abstract superior being, implicitly recognises the validity of a monotheistic conception of the divine. To this argument also belongs a thesis that runs through the entire study, that the version of Mosaic religion that Freud invented is a historical projection of the later rabbinic and exilic Judaism in which Freud himself was brought up.

The main part of the book, however, is a detailed critical account of the various steps in Freud's analysis that evaluates the hypotheses that underlie his argument, notably the relation between the cult of Aton and Jewish monotheism, the historical reality of Moses, and the idea of his murder. Since the historical sources are so scant and unreliable, there is no clear support for any of these hypotheses, which makes Freud's account, as well as any other account that claims to know the more exact origins of Jewish monotheism, uncertain. Nurmela argues for the standard historical narrative that Jewish monotheism was established only during the Babylonian exile, many centuries after the semi-mythical historical Moses. Also, Freud's central theoretical framework from *Totem and Taboo*, of how the concept of the divine issues from an original patricide, is taken apart as a discarded anthropological theory. Other topics addressed by Nurmela, and where he broadens the historical framework of Freud's study, concern the role of sacrifice and circumcision in earlier phases of Jewish religious life.

Nurmela's book provides a detailed reading of Freud's argument and its historical weakness. However, as a contribution to the contemporary discussion around the book on

Moses, it is unsatisfying. In its search for a hidden and more spiritual conception of religious belief in Freud's *œuvre*, it disregards the more contemporary debates around the book that have produced an interesting body of literature absent from Nurmela's references. In this more recent discussion, the actual historical argument that Freud presents, based on his time-bound and mostly irrelevant anthropological readings, is not the focus. Instead, it brings out other topics, concerning his understanding of Judaism, how to interpret history, the role of trauma, and cultural memory at large.

In relation to this more recent discussion, whether Freud was right or not on this or that historical topic is largely irrelevant. When, for example, Edward Said picks up Freud's argument, he does it to discuss the general idea of how a historically founding narrative of Jewish identity opens itself to the possibility of its own inner foreignness, which in modern critical cultural theory has become an important topic. In this regard, Freud can be seen as a forerunner through his attempt to forge a different historical narrative of the formation of ethnic and religious identity. Also, on the question of anti-Semitism and its relation to Christianity, Nurmela is insensitive to the more subtle level of Freud's argument as an attempt to forge a historical narrative of the Jews that could also point toward the possibility of a modern more secular Jewish identity. He even suggests that Freud's way of speaking about how the Jews murdered Christ brought him close to the antisemites of his time, which is a gross misrepresentation of where he stood on this issue.

The Christian roots of antisemitism are a central topic in modern critical Christian theology but are absent in Nurmela's presentation of the problem. In regard to this question, Freud's analysis of the different ways of looking at the psychological roots of the respective religions remains a valid framework for continued debate. For the reader who is looking

for a more modern and theoretically innovative perspective on Freud's Moses, I recommend the collection *Freud and Monotheism, Moses and the Violent Origins of Religion*, edited by Gilad Sharvit and Karen S. Feldman (Fordham University Press, Fordham: 2018). It contains a number of fascinating essays and a lengthy introduction to the current debates about

this puzzling and fascinating late study of the founder of psychoanalysis, including the issue of Freud and Judaism and his intricate and inverted identification with its presumed founder. ■

HANS RUIN

Professor of Philosophy
Södertörn University (Stockholm)