

## CRÍTICA BIBLIOGRÁFICA

THEISM AND VIOLENCE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD: THE ARGUMENT OF JAN ASSMANN\*

This volume comes from the hand of one of the best-known figures in the field of Egyptology. Over the years, Jan Assmann has branched out into modern European cultural history and the Bible. This study reaps the fruits of these various lines of research for a broader readership. At 149 pages of text (followed by endnotes, bibliography and indexes), this book is aimed to address a broad academic audience.

According to the Introduction, the topic of this book is “the relationship between God and the gods” (p. 1). It is emphatically not about the history of biblical religion or the history of God in the Bible or ancient Israel. It concerns what Assmann calls the “Mosaic distinction,” which is “the idea of an exclusive and emphatic Truth that sets God apart from everything that is not God and therefore must not be worshipped” (p. 1). In other words, this “Mosaic distinction” involves the idea of exclusivity, of no other deities. He calls it “the foundation of Israel’s identity.” Assmann acknowledges that this conceptual opposition presupposes the existence of other gods. Exclusivity though is not exclusivity of divine existence, as the other gods exist; rather, it is the exclusivity of Israel’s belonging to God and not to any other deity. With this definition of Israel’s exclusivity, Assmann regards “monotheism” as “a misnomer” (p. 4). As for his method of study, Assmann engages “antiquarian” and “critical” modes of analysis of the past following Nietzsche (p. 2). The “antiquarian” mode venerates the past as the root of identity and “critical” history breaks away from the past “by subjecting it to the verdict of ‘life’” (p. 2). The “critical” mode, for Assmann, is particularly important in the wake of the Holocaust and 9/11. The “antiquarian” mode uncovers information that requires the “critical” mode for a proper assessment and appropriation of the past.

Chapter One surveys basic concepts of polytheism in the ancient world, specifically what Assmann calls the three-dimensional structure of the divine world: “shapes” (cult images and representations of a deity in the temple cult); “transformations” (cosmic manifestations as sun, moon, stars, the Nile and the like); and “names” (linguistic representations that include not only proper names, but also titles, pedigrees, genealogies and myths). On one level, this is a helpful way to look at polytheism and to appreciate it.

---

\* Jan ASSMANN, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (George L. Mosse Series in Modern European Cultural and Intellectual History; Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008). x + 196 pp.

On another level, it is unclear how “transformations” fits in with the other two categories. I would put this problem this way: according to Assmann, “shapes” are pictorial or iconographic and “names” are linguistic, but aren’t “transformations” represented in both pictorial and linguistic media? Still these categories can help modern readers think about how polytheism made sense to ancient peoples, gave them meaning and shaped their identity.

The categories help Assmann set up contrasts between Egyptian religion and Israelite religion where it shows further developments, for example in producing sacred history; here other parts of the ancient Near East such as the Hittites furnish closer parallels. These categories, which derive from particular Egyptian words, serve as rubrics under which various Hebrew words or concepts are subsumed, even though they may not correspond as neatly as the discussion would seem to suggest. Is it really true that Hebrew *be-reshit*, “in (the) beginning” (Genesis 1:1) corresponds to Egyptian *sep tepi* (“the first time”), which according to Assmann refers to “the first sunrise as the first time of a never-ending cyclical process” (p. 18)?

Chapter Two addresses the relationship between violence and various forms of theism. Assmann points out that polytheistic cultures are hardly peaceful, tolerant and non-violent and their violence may be sanctioned by deities, but that they do not promote religious intolerance. Assmann claims that while “pagan violence” stems “from the indistinction between state and religion” (p. 29), “monotheistic violence” rests on religion “constituted as a sphere with its own normativity” (p. 29). Scholars might demur at this distinction, which shows little sense of the situation in ancient Israel. The reality is that the distinction between ritual and political violence is not so neat, and fortunately Assmann notes the interrelated religious and political dimensions of Assyrian royal imperialism. In other words, the Assyrian case complicates, even undermines, the neat distinction with which the discussion of violence and theism begins in this chapter. Even in Egypt, the gods are invoked in military conquest. One of the more interesting developments is how Egyptian kings in the New used the names of non-Egyptian warrior gods and goddesses (such as Anat and Astarte) for military purposes. As Assmann observes, these cases are not expressions of “religious intolerance” of other deities, yet this distinction is not nearly as prominent in the corpus of biblical texts as Assmann’s discussion would suggest. (Later, on p. 114, Assmann tells us that there is no single biblical monotheism but “something rather special that may be called ‘Deuteronomism’.”) “Religious intolerance” was hardly the major trope of the vast array of works in the Bible or in ancient Israel itself. We will return to this problem below.

Chapter Two also contains a probing discussion of the god Seth, and how his mythology of life and death becomes a script for discussing good and evil. This leads Assmann to a consideration of religious norms in Egypt and how these compare with the Ten Commandments. Assmann suggests that the core of biblical monotheism in the

first, second and fourth commandments (no other gods, no images and Shabbat) have no parallels in Egyptian literature (see pp. 36-38). However, he does not tell us that scholars have noted an aniconic tendency in other quarters of the ancient Near East. Nor does he tell readers that the First Commandment does not in fact ban other gods. It bans having “other gods before me (*‘al panay*).” In other words, the First Commandment forbids having other gods in the cultic presence of Israel’s god, in other words at sites of worship of God. This is part of a rather complex religious history, one that hardly reflects the picture of religious intolerance that Assmann sketches for ancient Israel.

Assmann also raises the question of the intolerant monotheism of Akhenaten, which he sees reflected in some of the Seth traditions (pp. 44-48). In this respect Assmann shows an affinity for Freud’s theory, expressed in his 1939 work *Moses and Monotheism*, that the monotheism of Moses can be connected with the alleged monotheism of Akhenaten in the Amarna Age. This theory has enjoyed wide currency since Freud, and it is not uncommon to hear it expressed in scholarly and non-scholarly circles alike. To be clear, the nature of these “monotheisms” is so disparate that whatever connections are to be drawn between them, they are at best distant and arguably irrelevant to the formation of Israelite monotheism. One can trace a path of influence from the Amarna writings through letters of the Late Bronze Age Levant (especially from Tyre and Sidon) into the Bible (in particular, Psalm 104), but the impact of this influence has little to do with “monotheism” as such in Egypt or Israel.

Chapter Three shows Assmann at his strongest in this book. Here he looks at a number of texts from across the ancient world for their expressions of “translation” of divinity. Sometimes deities from different cultures were equated or identified with one another. Assmann suggests that this intercultural discourse about deities led to the idea that various nations basically worshipped the same deities. For this notion, Assmann moves from the Bronze Age to the Greco-Roman milieu (which suggests that this idea was not at work in the Bronze Age context). Assmann cites the notion of “the Highest God” in the later period, a sort of super-god recognized across the Mediterranean world. Assmann also notes deities with multiple names (“hyphenating gods”), as well as various expressions of hierarchy among deities that express unity within their divinity. This survey of these rather stunning texts shows that polytheism could be rather concerned with unity in divinity, in other words, with what is “mono” about polytheism. These texts are of course the products of elite, scribal culture, often in imperial contexts (especially, but not exclusively in early periods). Discussing their cultural contours would serve to make them more understandable in their historical contexts. Assmann remains focused, however, on the ideas of theism and offers little by way of cultural context to unpack their significance. He ends the chapter with a contrast with biblical monotheism, citing “the prophets and the Deuteronomic tradition” and “the Jesus movement” (p. 75). This monotheism does not assert that all deities are one, but that God is the One

and without others. For Assmann, this difference severs the link between God and the world, between the heavenly and earthly levels of reality, with the king no longer being God's representative.

Chapter Four addresses this connection between the heavenly and earthly levels and its severance. For this discussion, Assmann begins by drawing on the idea of "the Axial Age," a period around the middle of the first millennium when cultures from Rome to China questioned fundamental notions of reality. In this context, the political basis for the link between heaven and earth came to be undermined. Assmann notes cases in ancient Egypt, which makes for fascinating reading. The chapter ends with a brief consideration of ancient Israel. He attributes the development of biblical monotheism to an analogous series of developments, but unfortunately he does not address the story in ancient Israel. This would have included seeing political linkage between the Israelite king and the patron god (expressed for example in Psalms 2, 89, and 110). This story has been well rehearsed in scholarly studies clearly known to Assmann, but he offers little information about the biblical material. Yes, he is an Egyptologist, and so this is understandable to a certain point, but Assmann makes rather dramatic claims about biblical monotheism, how it operated and what it meant, but without sufficient discussion or documentation. This is adequate for a book that purports to relate the story of Israel as well as Egypt (as expressed in the subtitle and in the Introduction).

Chapter Five turns to the development of the Bible and its canonization of biblical monotheism and its expressions of violence. For Assman, five steps mark the path from tradition to Scripture: (1) codification of law; (2) the trauma experience of the exile; (3) the development of scribal collection of texts and a "culture of exegesis" in the Persian period; (4) the combination of what he calls "book culture" and "memory culture" in the Greco-Roman period; and (5) the Bible's "concept of idolatry." The chapter is designed to show how the Bible as a canonized work makes truth claims about biblical monotheism and violence. In its recollection of an Israelite past, it commemorates a linkage between Israel's god and divine violence and raises it to the level of revelation. Despite his clear intelligence, the discussion here offers little more than general information. Readers would do better to consult Karel van den Toorn's *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (2007) or David Carr's *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart* (2005).

Chapter Six is a general disquisition on theism and violence. Assmann rightly notes the proximity between Israelite monotheism and forms of monistic polytheism discussed in Chapter Three. From Assmann's comparisons with extra-biblical texts, it seems that biblical monotheism may be regarded as "evolutionary," just as many biblical scholars have interpreted it along these lines. He himself states, "biblical monotheism may have slowly evolved out of polytheism" (p. 108). However, he also characterizes it as "revolutionary" (p. 107). Assmann emphasizes that he is not speaking of biblical monotheism as a "political revolution, perhaps not a historical event at all" (p. 108).

The discussion on this point is a bit confusing. In highlighting the role of cultural memory in enshrining monotheism in the Bible, it seems that Assmann is really interested in monotheism and his “Mosaic distinction” as feats of textual “memory and not of history” (p. 126). Generally, it seems to matter less to Assmann whether or not they are not part of Israel’s history as such or inherent in the Bible. Instead, this discussion focuses on them as concepts enshrined in the Bible as the result of its canonization and interpretation. As textual concepts, they are “revolutionary” for Assmann. This presentation moves monotheism and its putatively “revolutionary” nature out of the historical or cultural sphere into the textual, in particular to the textual production and canonization of the Bible. “The Mosaic distinction” would seem to be post-biblical, a matter of the Bible’s interpretation and not really a feature of ancient Israel or of individual biblical books.

Chapter Six turns to a number of biblical passages to ask: “Why does biblical monotheism see itself as violent?” The passages discussed are Exodus 32:27-28 and Deuteronomy 13:7-10. Here Assmann notes that other cultures show similar representations of divine sanctioned violence; such comparisons undermine his general picture of biblical monotheism and violence. He then turns to the story of the Maccabees and post-biblical texts that likewise sanction violence.

The Conclusion offers a final summary of Assmann’s thinking about “the Mosaic distinction.” He begins by responding to critics who have criticized this idea of his since he offered it a decade ago. Despite criticisms, he still sees religious intolerance as significant in the Bible in a way that he does not see elsewhere. He then turns to what he calls “the biblical theory of paganism” as expressed in Psalm 82 and the critique of “idols” in Psalm 115, Isaiah 44:9-20, and Wisdom of Solomon 13-15. As Assmann notes, these passages are relatively late in Israel’s religious history (begging the question of what was going on before the seventh or sixth century).

Assmann then turns to normative questions: “Is Tolerant Monotheism Possible?” He suggests that underlying the surface religions of the world today lies “one ‘deep’ religion” (p. 139). In this distinction he is echoing what he sees in the ancient polytheistic religions, namely the idea that various nations basically worshipped the same deities. The impression that Assmann leaves –and here I am definitely filling in what I see as the implications of what he says– is that without radical reconceptualization of creedal beliefs and attendant practices, contemporary religions cannot achieve a “deep religion” and by default, they seem incapable of “tolerant monotheism.” Assmann closes his study by discussing different forms of violence, including religious violence. He insists (p. 144): “this form of violence occurs only in monotheistic religions.” Again, Assmann should recall his own citation of the Moabite stele (p. 118), which clearly reflects religiously, divinely sanctioned violence in a polytheistic culture. For his penultimate point in the Conclusion, Assmann expresses his championing of non-violence. In his final

note Assmann proposes “a religion that clings to the unity of God and commits itself to the moral commandments, while at the same time returning to a weak notion of truth in the sense expressed by Lessing and Mendelssohn: a truth beyond the absolute knowledge of human beings, one that can only be aimed at by never possessed” (p. 145).

This book is, in many ways, a wonderful survey of concepts and considerations about ancient religions. In it, various forms of theism, especially in ancient Egypt, come to life. Assmann’s brilliance in Egyptology shines in several chapters. The question is what the picture of Israelite monotheism and polytheism ends up looking like, whether the book captures the ancient evidence well and what is stake for modern readers for understanding monotheism. On these scores, this is a troubling work, and arguably a failure. Assmann’s academic background as an Egyptologist and not a biblical scholar does not stop him –perhaps it emboldens him– from putting matters in somewhat simplistic binary oppositions between Israel and Egypt or between Israel and the other nations, including contrasts between Israel’s monotheism and polytheism outside of Israel. To be sure, Assmann is to be credited with mentioning polytheism within ancient Israel, as biblical scholarship has shown in the past few decades. Despite the wealth of studies on the subject clearly known to him, Assmann can’t get himself to address whether or not what he calls “the Mosaic distinction” arose as an inner-Israelite cultural development within the larger context of Israelite polytheism and monotheism. He does not deal with monotheism and polytheism in Israel, but the relationship between “God and Gods” within Israel is a crucial piece for understanding “Mosaic distinction.” In other words, Assmann leaves out significant chapters in his own story.<sup>1</sup>

So what is the problem with Assmann’s picture of monotheism in ancient Israel? Most notably, it passes over fundamental evidence in biblical and extra-biblical sources about Israelite theism. More generally, the concepts and abstractions that Assmann addresses don’t receive adequate cultural and historical grounding. Assmann seems content with offering abstractions with little historical context and discussing textual ideas without authors and audiences or little connection to their cultures. Beyond these matters, there is a basic issue of whether violence in antiquity can be correlated with a form of theism. According to this book, monotheism has a particular penchant for violence (p. 144), but as Assmann himself notes (p. 118), Israel’s very own polytheistic neighbors (such as the Moabites) use the very same sorts of terms for divine violence. Indeed, the Moabite stele that Assmann mentions is hardly a model of religious tolerance. In other words, it is simply untrue to claim that violence in antiquity correlates with a form of theism. It may be true that the Bible contains expressions of “religious intolerance” as

---

<sup>1</sup> In the interests of full disclosure, I would mention my own efforts to remedy this gap in response to Assmann’s earlier work, in my 2008 book, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-cultural Discourse in the Biblical World*.

well as violence, and it is also true that it expresses monotheism, but this hardly adds up to a case of religious causality, namely that Israelite monotheism issues in religious intolerance that issues in violence. Most of Assmann's case here is focused on the book of Deuteronomy and is hardly representative of the Bible in general. The violence advocated in Deuteronomy or any other source, biblical or otherwise, is hardly laudatory, but for Assmann to make his case would require much more evidence and argument than he has mustered. Religious intolerance and violence are indeed unfortunate, but this is true no matter what religious form or theism accompanies them. In many cases inter-cultural polytheism was part of the ideology of empire (as he intimates on p. 75), and as Assmann says, this is no better. In other words, the form of theism is not really the point.

At the end of reading the book, I am left wondering about this book's purpose, apart from informing modern audiences about "God and Gods." This work shows a sophisticated and brilliant thinker trying to come to grips with both the massive landscape of the ancient past and the overwhelming events of the modern world. The volume offers rich and dazzling fare, and I can applaud the effort. Yet Assmann has so strongly arranged the ancient evidence in a series of contrasts between Israel and others that his "critical" mode seems to be aimed at the side of modernity that he does not like, in other words the traditional monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as he understands them (see pp. 123, 140, and 144).

In different ways, some readers of this journal may be concerned about biblical images of God. Whether for intellectual or religious reasons (or both), they may be engaged in efforts at the conceptual reform, reformation or reconstruction of traditional notions of God. At first glance, Assmann's book might seem to be attractive help with the biblical material. However, for all its conceptual virtuosity, it is not a reliable guide to either the Bible or Israel's past. This is not the book to turn to for scholarly guidance about the biblical images of God.

Mark S. Smith  
New York University