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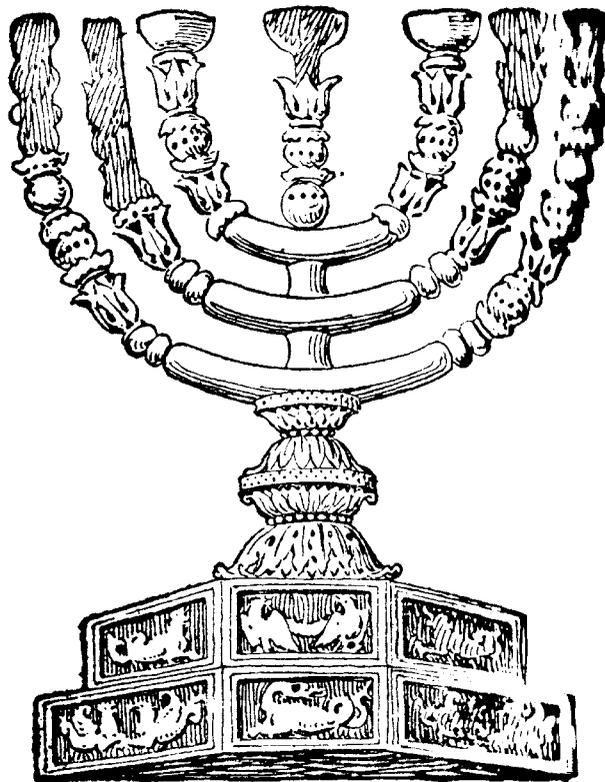
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Book Review by Benjamin Balint

OUT OF EGYPT

The Invention of Religion: Faith and Covenant in the Book of Exodus, by Jan Assmann, translated by Robert Savage.
Princeton University Press, 424 pages, \$35



Lampstand depicted on the Arch of Titus, Rome

IN JULY 1776, THE SECOND CONTINENTAL Congress created a committee to design the Great Seal of the United States. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson each proposed a seal featuring Moses leading the Israelites from the land of bondage toward the Promised Land.

As an enduring symbol of deliverance from persecution, and as a narrative template for the triumph of freedom over tyranny, the exodus from Egypt has informed the political reflections of such thinkers as Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, and John Stuart Mill—not to mention the American Founders.

In his latest book, Jan Assmann, a leading historian of ancient religion and professor emeritus of Egyptology at the University of Heidelberg, departs from this tradition. He reads the Book of Exodus as a story not of the birth of freedom but of the birth of religion, linking the exodus narrative to “the establishment of a completely new type of religion, or even ‘religion’ as such.”

In the telling of this consequential story, Assmann stresses revolution over evolution. He says he has become attuned both to the “discontinuous, antagonistic, revolutionary aspect of ancient Israelite and above all early Jewish religion,” and to how “entering into this new religion required turning one’s back on Egypt.” By informing Western ideas of liberty and liberation, he writes, the Book of Exodus has given us “not just the founding myth of Israel but that of monotheism as such, a key constituent of the modern world.”

Rather than reduce the Exodus story to its historical verifiability, Assmann prefers to understand how history is translated into collective memory. Rather than addressing “what really happened,” he asks “why, by whom, for whose sake, and in which forms this past became meaningful.” As French philosopher Henri Bergson once put it: “The call to which memory responds emanates from the present.”

This new reading involves reconceiving the canonized Book of Exodus, which resembles less a “seamless literary masterpiece,” Ass-

mann acknowledges, than “a collage repeatedly retouched by later brushes.” Its canvas bears traces of centuries of accretions and many-layered interpolations.

ASSMANN NONETHELESS DISCERNs IN that canvas two unprecedented ideas. First, he writes, “the Exodus myth founds a concept of the *people* as a religious idea and thus here too stands opposed to Egypt, which established the *state* as a religious idea.” In the Hebraic tradition, people and state are not the same. Like his forefather Abraham, the reluctant leader Moses is born outside the Promised Land. Even if the law is intended for the land (in fact, can only be fulfilled there), the people acquire the Torah—a shared constitution and commonwealth—while wandering in the wilderness in a condition of statelessness.

Second, apart from shedding light on the paradoxes of exile, the covenant transacted at Sinai represents what Assmann calls “the transposition of a political model—the treaty



of alliance—onto the relation between the human world and the world of the divine.” The nation—“founded not on common descent, language, or sovereign rule but on divine law”—is a kind of homeland, and every act of fidelity to its laws a return.

This second idea, Assmann suggests, “was probably just as important—if not more important—for the history of nation-building and nationhood in Europe than the ancient ideas of *polis* and *populus*”:

The theologization of the law—the idea, that is, of making God the *legislator*, not just the judge and guardian of the law—is a revolutionary step.... The notion that there might be such things as eternal, timelessly valid laws was simply inconceivable.... Whereas the validity of laws in the ancient Near East rarely outlived the reigning monarch, God’s laws are everlasting.

Or, to paraphrase Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, law is what God—who identified Himself to Moses as “I am that I am” (Exodus 3:14)—says it is. Here, for the first time, we find “a revolt against the political system of ancient Near Eastern sacral kingship.” It is only in the Book of Exodus and its Ten Commandments (20:1-14), Assmann contends, that “the ideal of an order of law that transcends state institutions and the vagaries of history comes into being.” And it is in this ideal, he says, that the Western tradition is still steeped.

THE QUESTION OF WHAT CALL ASSMANN himself is answering, however, draws us into a troubling theme that vibrates through his work. In *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (1997), Assmann introduced the “Mosaic distinction,” or “the idea of an exclusive and emphatic Truth that sets God apart from everything that is not God and therefore must not be worshipped.” Ancient Judaism, he wrote, “sharply distinguishes itself from the religions of its environment by demanding that its One God be worshiped to the exclusion of all others.” Assmann held that Mosaic distinction responsible for writing religious intolerance and violence into the Western tradition.

He is by no means the first to gesture in this direction. As early as the 18th century, David Hume had remarked in *The Natural History of Religion*:

By limiting the powers and functions of its deities, [idolatry] naturally admits

the gods of other sects and nations to a share of divinity, and renders all the various deities, as well as rites, ceremonies, or traditions, compatible with each other.... [By contrast] when one sole object of devotion is acknowledged, the worship of other deities is regarded as absurd and impious.

Others have pointed to the internal violence that served as midwife to the birth of the Israelite nation. Goethe, Sigmund Freud, and the Bible scholar Ernst Sellin each conjectured that Moses—precursor of the persecuted prophets and suffering servants of God—was murdered by his own stubborn people who, according to the Book of Exodus, murmured and mutinied, longing for the fleshpots of Egypt.

BUT SOME CRITICS FOUND SOMETHING unsavory in Assmann’s simplistic equation of polytheism with pluralism, and of Judaic monotheism with aggressive tribal intolerance. “A major failing of Assmann’s approach,” intellectual historian Richard Wolin wrote, “is that it systematically neglects ancient Judaism’s robust moral inclinations toward tolerance and neighborly love.... [He] serves up a peculiarly reductive and disappointing interpretation of biblical monotheism.” Calvinist writer Marilynne Robinson similarly saw Assmann as an heir to the 19th-century German tendency “to primitivize and demean the Old Testament, encouraging the belief that it was full of ideas Western culture would be well rid of, that it revealed the ‘negativity and intolerance,’ in Assmann’s words, of the Jewish mind.”

Assmann was forced to issue a conciliatory mea culpa. In *The Price of Monotheism* (2010), he took pains to disavow any notion that Jews may have earned the scorn they incurred for inventing exclusive monotheism.

In his new book, Assmann appears at first to have modified his views. He now allows that the Exodus story has nourished a tradition of tolerance unequalled among Israel’s neighbors. Commenting on the Bible’s unique mixture of the narrative and the normative, of storytelling and lawgiving, he cites the following verse to illustrate how legal texts take their justification from historical narratives: “You shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (23:9). “From now on,” he writes, “entirely different areas of human communal life, areas that ancient Near Eastern or Egyptian legal traditions had left untouched, are made

the subject of divine legislation. I refer to the norms of charity and almsgiving, of empathy with the proverbial widows and orphans, with the suffering, weak, and needy, with slaves and foreigners.” Assmann also remarks on the forging of a covenant at Sinai that bound together individuals into a nation, and a nation with God, “that they might jointly realize the project of a just society.”

Yet a reader expecting that all this will lead to a chastened view of violence conducted in God’s name will be disappointed. “The Book of Exodus,” Assmann reaffirms here, “takes a stance of exclusion, hostility, and violence, showing affinities to Deuteronomy in its antagonistic, confrontational identity politics.” To illustrate the “intrinsic link between monotheism and violence,” he cites the slaughter of 3,000 Israelites at the hands of the Levites in retribution for the sin of worshipping the golden calf; in this violent expiation, the vanguard of loyal zealots carrying out this purge at Moses’ command, he says, display “murderous militancy on God’s behalf.” (“He who reads the Bible with discernment,” Machiavelli writes in *The Discourses on Livy*, “will see that, before Moses set about making laws and institutions, he had to kill a very great number of men who...were opposed to his plans.”)

AT THE BOOK’S CLOSE, ASSMANN’S EARLIER views, only half subdued, well up again and tilt his rhetorical pitch into shrillness. “Violence is inherent to the monotheism of loyalty,” he concludes, “however vigorously theological apologetics may deny it.” In bringing the Exodus story to contemporary politics of loyalty, Assmann looks to various colonialist movements—including Boers in South Africa and fanatic Jewish settlers in the West Bank. Unlike the American Founders, who culled from the Bible the highest symbols of freedom from tyranny, such movements, he insists, “have drawn on the relevant passages in the Old Testament to justify their violent actions.”

Luckily, such brambles only partially obscure the main path Assmann clears in this book. *The Invention of Religion* offers a vigorous reminder of our debts to the Book of Exodus, however far removed we imagine ourselves to be from the theological upheavals of Sinai, and however attenuated the originality of its teachings.

Benjamin Balint is a writer living in Jerusalem, and the author, most recently, of Kafka’s Last Trial: The Case of a Literary Legacy (W.W. Norton & Company).

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