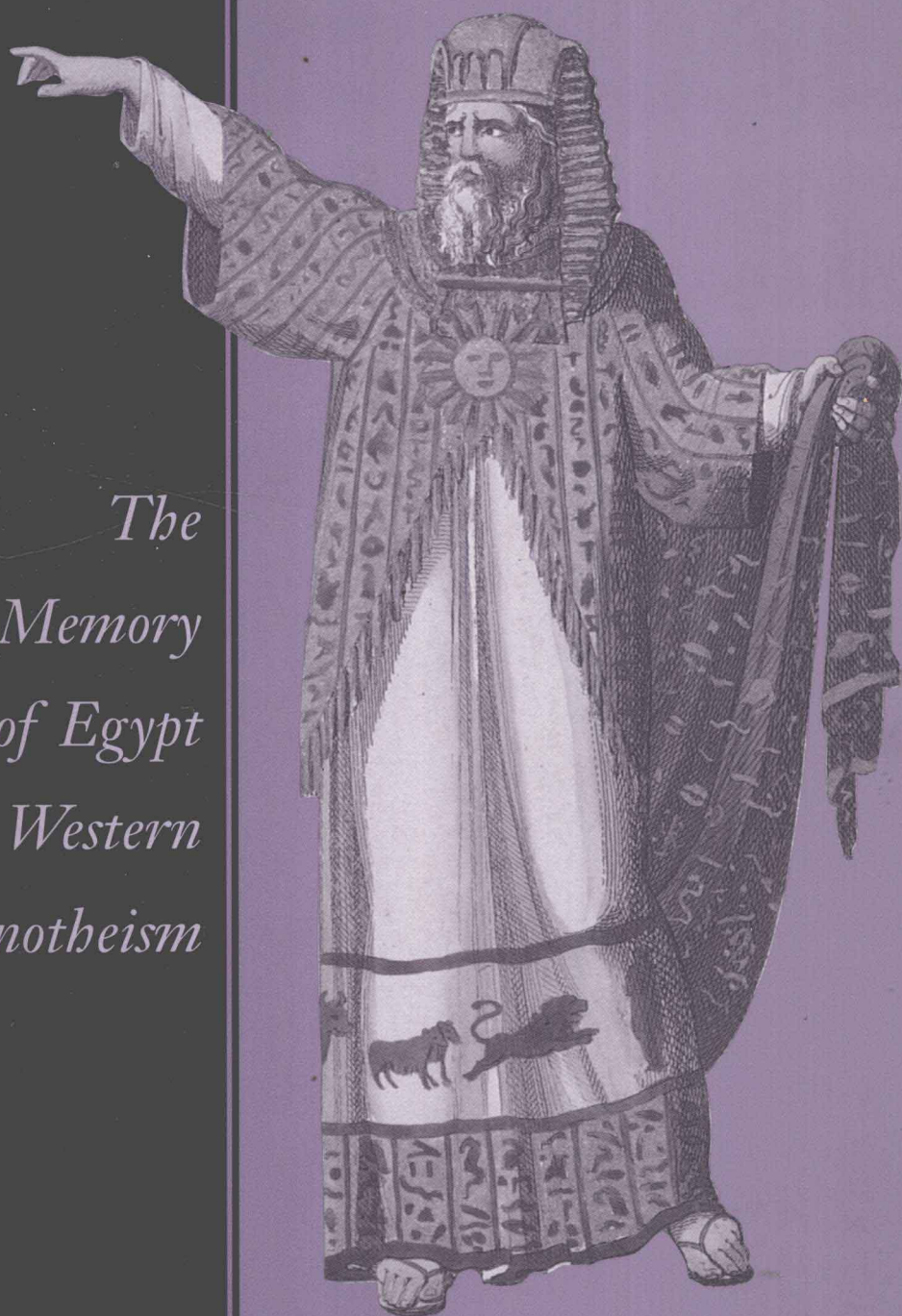


# MOSES THE EGYPTIAN

*The  
Memory  
of Egypt  
in Western  
Monotheism*



JAN ASSMANN

# *Moses the Egyptian*

THE MEMORY OF EGYPT  
IN WESTERN MONOTHEISM



*Jan Assmann*

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## Preface

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In the introduction to his book *Freud's Moses* (1991), Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi drew a line starting with Freud and leading backward via Friedrich Schiller and John Spencer to Strabo, Manetho, Apion, and Celsus which he suggests would be interesting to explore “had we but world enough and time.” In *Monotheismus und Kosmotheismus* (1993), I started from the opposite end with Akhenaten and his religious revolution and sketched out the story of Moses’ reception via Manetho, Strabo, Apion, and Tacitus up to Schiller and Sigmund Freud—only to break off with a similar feeling of resignation. But then, quite unexpectedly, I was given world enough and time in the form of an invitation to spend a year (1994–95) in California, and I used it for a preliminary exploration of this vast terrain between Akhenaten and Freud.

I am grateful to the J. Paul Getty Center for the History of Arts and the Humanities and especially to its director, Salvatore Settis, for the invitation, for the particularly fruitful atmosphere of cooperation and dialogue which he created, and for several stimulating discussions. I thank those who participated in the continuing discussions on “memory” (the topic for that year), especially Julia Annas, Mary Carruthers, Francois Hartog, Christian Jacob, Anne and Patrick Poirier, Krzysztof Pomian, Jacques Revel, Michael Roth, Carlo Severi, and also Aleida Assmann and Carl E. Schorske, with whom I had the chance to share some of the problems and concepts this book is about and who contributed many stimulating suggestions. I feel particularly indebted to my immediate office-neighbors at the center: to Carlo Ginzburg, whose seminars on “enstrangement” proved an inexhaustible source of information and stimulation and whose critical interest in my work forced

me to clarify my position and saved me from many imprecisions; and to Stuart Harten, who was working on the motif of the veiled image at Sais and who shared with me many of his bibliographical discoveries.

Cristiano Grottanelli and Mauro Pesce drew my attention to some recent Italian contributions and provided me with books and articles which I otherwise would have missed. My research assistant, Louise A. Hitchcock, not only provided books and photocopies but also read the manuscript, corrected my English, and contributed many valuable suggestions. A special word of gratitude is also due my friend and *collega in aegyptiacis* Antonio Loprieno, who was most helpful in making me feel at home in Los Angeles, even Egyptologically. On the occasion of a symposium on Ancient Egyptian Literature which we organized together, I met Dana M. Reemes. We discovered by chance that we shared an interest and a delight in a book which I was then reading in the Special Collections Room at the UCLA Research Library: Ralph Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe*. He not only gave me a copy of this book so that I could use it at home, but also provided a wealth of related material from his inexhaustible private library (which I acknowledge in the notes). Moreover, he read the manuscript of this book, made helpful suggestions, and did much to improve its style. I am grateful to Lindsay Waters for his encouragement during the preparation of this book and to Nancy Clemente for her skillful editing of the manuscript.

My stay in Santa Monica considerably increased the burdens of my colleagues at Heidelberg University who had to assume my duties; and among the many to whom I feel obliged, I am especially grateful to my assistants Martin Bommas, Heike Guksch, Andrea Kucharek, and Friederike Seyfried, as well as to Stephan Seidlmayer, who took on my teaching and administrative duties at the Institute of Egyptology, which prospered under his careful and stimulating directorship.

This book grew out of a project of the study group Archaeology of Literary Communication, concerned with secrecy and mystery, which Aleida Assmann and I have been pursuing in the form of a series of conferences and publications (*Schleier und Schwelle*, volumes 1–3). The discussions during these conferences contributed much to the formation of the basic ideas for this book. I feel particularly indebted to Aleida Assmann, Moshe Barasch, and Wolf-Daniel Hartwich. I dedicate this book to Moshe Barasch, whose encouragement kept me writing it.

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# *Mnemohistory and the Construction of Egypt*

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## The Mosaic Distinction

Draw a distinction.

Call it the first distinction.

Call the space in which it is drawn the space severed or cloven  
by the distinction.

It seems as if George Spencer Brown's "first Law of Construction"<sup>1</sup> does not apply solely to the space of logical and mathematical construction. It also applies surprisingly well to the space of cultural constructions and distinctions and to the spaces that are severed or cloven by such distinctions.

The distinction I am concerned with in this book is the distinction between true and false in religion that underlies more specific distinctions such as Jews and Gentiles, Christians and pagans, Muslims and unbelievers. Once the distinction is drawn, there is no end of reentries or subdistinctions. We start with Christians and pagans and end up with Catholics and Protestants, Calvinists and Lutherans, Socinians and Latitudinarians, and a thousand more similar denominations and subdenominations. Cultural or intellectual distinctions such as these construct a universe that is not only full of meaning, identity, and orientation, but also full of conflict, intolerance, and violence. Therefore, there have always been attempts to overcome the conflict by reexamining the distinction, albeit at the risk of losing cultural meaning.

Let us call the distinction between true and false in religion the "Mosaic distinction" because tradition ascribes it to Moses. We cannot



be sure that Moses ever lived because there are no traces of his earthly existence outside the tradition. But we can be sure that he was not the first to draw the distinction. There was a precursor in the person of an Egyptian king who called himself Akhenaten and instituted a monotheistic religion in the fourteenth century B.C.E. His religion, however, spawned no tradition but was forgotten immediately after his death. Moses is a figure of memory but not of history, while Akhenaten is a figure of history but not of memory. Since memory is all that counts in the sphere of cultural distinctions and constructions, we are justified in speaking not of Akhenaten's distinction, but of the Mosaic distinction. The space severed or cloven by this distinction is the space of Western monotheism. It is this constructed mental or cultural space that has been inhabited by Europeans for nearly two millennia.

It is an error to believe that this distinction is as old as religion itself, though at first sight nothing might seem more plausible. Does not every religion quite automatically put everything outside itself in the position of error and falsehood and look down on other religions as "paganism"? Is this not quite simply the religious expression of ethnocentricity? Does not the distinction between true and false in reality amount to nothing other than the distinction between "us" and "them"? Does not every construction of identity by the very same process generate alterity? Does not every religion produce "pagans" in the same way that every civilization generates "barbarians"?

However plausible this may seem, it is not the case. Cultures not only generate otherness by constructing identity, but also develop techniques of translation. We have to distinguish here between the "real other," who is always there beyond the individual and independent of the individual's constructions of selfhood and otherhood, and the "constructed other," who is the shadow of the individual's identity. Moreover, we have to realize that in most cases we are dealing not with the "real other," but with our constructions and projections of the other. "Paganism" and "idolatry" belong to such constructions of the other. It is this inevitable construction of cultural otherness that is to a certain degree compensated by techniques of translation. Translation in this sense is not to be confused with the colonializing appropriation of the "real" other. It is simply an attempt to make more transparent the borders that were erected by cultural distinctions.

Ancient polytheisms functioned as such a technique of translation.

They belong within the emergence of the “Ancient World” as a coherent ecumene of interconnected nations.<sup>2</sup> The polytheistic religions overcame the primitive ethnocentrism of tribal religions by distinguishing several deities by name, shape, and function. The names are, of course, different in different cultures, because the languages are different. The shapes of the gods and the forms of worship may also differ significantly. But the functions are strikingly similar, especially in the case of cosmic deities; and most deities had a cosmic function. The sun god of one religion is easily equated to the sun god of another religion, and so forth. Because of their functional equivalence, deities of different religions can be equated. In Mesopotamia, the practice of translating divine names goes back to the third millennium B.C.E. (as will be shown in Chapter 2). In the second millennium, this practice was extended to many different languages and civilizations of the Near East. The cultures, languages, and customs may have been as different as ever: the religions always had a common ground. Thus they functioned as a means of intercultural translatability. The gods were international because they were cosmic. The different peoples worshipped different gods, but nobody contested the reality of foreign gods and the legitimacy of foreign forms of worship. The distinction I am speaking of simply did not exist in the world of polytheistic religions.

The Mosaic distinction was therefore a radically new distinction which considerably changed the world in which it was drawn. The space which was “severed or cloven” by this distinction was not simply the space of religion in general, but that of a very specific kind of religion. We may call this new type of religion “counter-religion” because it rejects and repudiates everything that went before and what is outside itself as “paganism.” It no longer functioned as a means of intercultural translation; on the contrary, it functioned as a means of intercultural estrangement. Whereas polytheism, or rather “cosmotheism,” rendered different cultures mutually transparent and compatible, the new counter-religion blocked intercultural translatability. False gods cannot be translated.

All cultural distinctions need to be remembered in order to render permanent the space which they construct. Usually, this function of remembering the fundamental distinctions assumes the form of a “Grand Narrative,” a master story that underlies and informs innumerable concrete tellings and retellings of the past. The Mosaic distinction

between true and false in religion finds its expression in the story of Exodus. This means that it is symbolized by the constellation or opposition of Israel and Egypt. Books 2 through 5 of the Pentateuch unfold the distinction in a narrative and in a normative form. Narratively, the distinction is represented by the story of Israel's Exodus out of Egypt. Egypt thereby came to symbolize the rejected, the religiously wrong, the "pagan." As a consequence, Egypt's most conspicuous practice, the worship of images, came to be regarded as the greatest sin. Normatively, the distinction is expressed in a law code which conforms with the narrative in giving the prohibition of "idolatry" first priority. In the space that is constructed by the Mosaic distinction, the worship of images came to be regarded as the absolute horror, falsehood, and apostasy. Polytheism and idolatry were seen as the same form of religious error. The second commandment is a commentary on the first:

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
2. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.

Images are automatically "other gods," because the true god is invisible and cannot be iconically represented.

Both the story and the law code are symbolically expressive of the Mosaic distinction. The story is more than simply an account of historical events, and the Law is more than merely a basis for social order and religious purity. In addition to what they overtly tell and establish, they symbolize the distinction. Exodus is a symbolical story, the Law is a symbolical legislation, and Moses is a symbolical figure. The whole constellation of Israel and Egypt is symbolical and comes to symbolize all kinds of oppositions. But the leading one is the distinction between true religion and idolatry.

Both the concept of idolatry and the repudiation of it grew stronger and stronger in the course of Jewish history.<sup>3</sup> The later the texts, the more elaborate the scorn and abomination which they heap on the idolators. Some poignant verses in Deutero-Isaiah and Psalm 115 develop into whole chapters in the apocryphal *Sapientia Salomonis* and long sections in Philo's *De Decalogo* and *De Legibus Specialibus*.<sup>4</sup>

This hatred was mutual and the "idolators" did not fail to retaliate. Understandably enough, most of them were Egyptians. For example, the Egyptian priest Manetho, who wrote an Egyptian history under Ptolemy II, represented Moses as a rebellious Egyptian priest who

made himself the leader of a colony of lepers. Whereas the Jews depicted idolatry as a kind of mental aberration, of madness, the Egyptians associated iconoclasm with the idea of a highly contagious and bodily disfiguring epidemic. The language of illness continues to typify the debate on the Mosaic distinction down to the days of Sigmund Freud. In the following chapter, I try to show that this story about the lepers originally referred not to Moses, but to Akhenaten, who was the first to establish a monotheistic counter-religion and to draw the distinction between true and false. But after his death, his religion was abolished, and his name fell into complete oblivion. The traumatic memories of his revolution were encrypted and dislocated; eventually, they came to be fixed on the Jews.

It is important to realize that we are dealing here with a strong mutual loathing that is rooted not in idiosyncratic aversions of Jews and Egyptians but in the Mosaic distinction as such, which was originally Akhenaten's distinction. And while it is true that many arguments of the "idolators" lived on in the discourse of Anti-Semitism, and that the fight against the Mosaic distinction seemed to have anti-Semitic implications, it is also true that many of those who, in the eighteenth century, attacked Moses' distinction, such as John Toland or Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, fought for tolerance and committed themselves to the equality of the Jews. The struggle against the Mosaic distinction could also assume the character of a fight against anti-Semitism. The most outspoken destroyer of the Mosaic distinction was a Jew: Sigmund Freud.

When Sigmund Freud felt the rising tide of German anti-Semitism outgrowing the traditional dimensions of persecution and oppression and turning into a murderous attack, he—remarkably enough—did not ask the obvious question of "how the Germans came to murder the Jews"; instead he asked "how the Jew came to attract this undying hatred." He embarked on a project very different from his normal work. This "historical novel," as he first planned to call it,<sup>5</sup> was a rather private undertaking, a kind of "day-dreaming,"<sup>6</sup> which underwent many transformations before it was finally published as a book. It became a text on Moses in which Freud intended to come to terms with his own Jewishness in particular, and with Judaism and religion in general, by reflecting on the origins, the development, and the meaning of Moses' fundamental distinction between Jews and Gentiles. His quest for origins took him as far back as Akhenaten and his monotheistic revolution.

In making Moses an Egyptian and in tracing monotheism back to ancient Egypt, Freud attempted to deconstruct the murderous distinction. It is the same method of deconstruction by historical reduction that Nietzsche had used in his *Genealogy of Morals*.

I had always felt the challenge that Freud's book posed for both Egyptology and Comparative Religion and wondered why there had been so little response on the part of these disciplines.<sup>7</sup> It was a question not of correcting Freud's historical errors but of learning to remember the fundamental questions which the present addresses to the past and which Egyptology is at least expected to be concerned with, if not to answer. It is in a rather personal attempt to "come to terms with," similar to Freud's, that I embark on the writing of this study about Moses the Egyptian. The present text reflects my situation as a German Egyptologist writing fifty years after the catastrophe which Freud saw approaching, knowing the full extent of the genocide which was still unthinkable in Freud's time, and having turned to ancient Egypt thirty-five years ago with questions that are all too easily forgotten as soon as one enters an academic discipline. Disciplines develop questions of their own and by doing so function as a mnemotechnique of forgetting with regard to concerns of a more general and fundamental character. In this book I try to remember and recover the questions, not to answer them. I attempt a mnemohistory of religious antagonism insofar as this antagonism is founded on the symbolic confrontation of Israel and Egypt. In this respect, I hope to contribute to a historical analysis of anti-Semitism.

### A Tale of Two Countries

The Mosaic distinction is expressed as the distinction between Israel and Egypt. On the map of physical and political geography, Ancient Israel and Ancient Egypt were two neighboring countries in the eastern Mediterranean. Each of them had other neighbors as well. Sharing the common historical and political world that was the Mediterranean and the Near East, the two countries were related to each other as well as to their other neighbors by a network of political, commercial, and ideological ties which were sometimes friendly, often conflictual, but always complex. Yet on the map of memory Israel and Egypt appear as antagonistic worlds. The complexity and the plurality of a geopolitical

continuum disappear. Historical reality is reduced to a figure of memory which retains just the two of them as the basic symbol of the Mosaic distinction. Israel embodies truth, Egypt symbolizes darkness and error. Egypt loses its historical reality and is turned into an inverted image of Israel. Israel is the negation of Egypt, and Egypt stands for all that Israel has overcome. This antagonistic constellation assumed the form of a Grand Narrative: the myth of the Exodus. It is a "constellative myth," a "Tale of Two Countries," and the semantic focus of the tale is the tension which the constellation of these extreme poles creates. The construction of cultural otherness and confrontation which the myth of the Exodus effects in the course of its formation, transmission, and transformation cannot be reduced to some historical experiences in the late Bronze Age.

Monotheistic religions structure the relationship between the old and the new in terms not of evolution but of revolution, and reject all older and other religions as "paganism" or "idolatry." Monotheism always appears as a counter-religion. There is no natural or evolutionary way leading from the error of idolatry to the truth of monotheism. This truth can come only from outside, by way of revelation. The narrative of the Exodus emphasizes the temporal meaning of the religious antagonism between monotheism and idolatry. "Egypt" stands not only for "idolatry" but also for a past that is rejected. The Exodus is a story of emigration and conversion, of transformation and renovation, of stagnation and progress, and of past and future. Egypt represents the old, while Israel represents the new. The geographical border between the two countries assumes a temporal meaning and comes to symbolize two epochs in the history of humankind. The same figure reproduces itself on another level with the opposition between the "Old" and the "New" Testaments. Conversion presupposes and constructs an opposition between "old" and "new" in religion.<sup>8</sup>

Remembering Egypt could fulfill two radically different functions. First, it could support the distinction between true religion and idolatry. We may call this function of memory the "memory of conversion." In the context of Jewish and Christian ritual memory, the memory of the Exodus forms and supports an identity of conversion. Conversion defines itself as the result of an overcoming and a liberation from one's own past which is no longer one's own. Remembering their disowned past is obligatory for converts in order not to relapse.<sup>9</sup> "Those who

cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (George Santayana). Remembering is an act of constant disowning. Egypt must be remembered in order to know what lies in the past, and what must not be allowed come back. The theme of remembering is therefore central to the Exodus myth and to the constellation of Egypt and Israel. This is not only a myth to be remembered but a myth about remembering, a myth about past and future. It remembers the past in order to win the future. Idolatry means forgetting and regression; monotheism means remembering and progression.

Second, and inversely, remembering Egypt is important for any attempt to reexamine the Mosaic distinction. We may call this function of memory the "deconstructive memory." If the space of religious truth is constructed by the distinction between "Israel in truth" and "Egypt in error," any discoveries of Egyptian truths will necessarily invalidate the Mosaic distinction and deconstruct the space separated by this distinction. This method or strategy of historical deconstruction became especially important in the context of the Enlightenment, when all distinctions were viewed as opposed to Nature, and Nature came to be elevated to the rank of the highest ideal. Spinoza's (in)famous formula *deus sive natura* amounted to an abolition not only of the Mosaic distinction but of the most fundamental of all distinctions, the distinction between God and the world. This deconstruction was as revolutionary as Moses' construction. It immediately led to a new appraisal of Egypt. The Egyptians were Spinozists and "cosmotheists." Ancient cosmotheism as a basis for intercultural translation was rediscovered. In the discourse of the Enlightenment, it was reconstructed as an international and intercultural mystery religion in the fashion of Freemasonry.

The first form of memory functions as a means of cultural identity formation and reproduction, whereas the second form functions as a technique of intercultural translation.

### The Aims of Mnemohistory

The present study attempts to investigate the history of Europe's remembering Egypt, especially in the second form in which the remembering of Egypt is brought to bear on a modification or even deconstruction of the Mosaic distinction. We may call this particular form of historical investigation "mnemohistory." Unlike history

proper, mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered. It surveys the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of reading the past. Mnemohistory is not the opposite of history, but rather is one of its branches or subdisciplines, such as intellectual history, social history, the history of mentalities, or the history of ideas. But it has an approach of its own in that it deliberately leaves aside the synchronic aspects of what it is investigating. It concentrates exclusively on those aspects of significance and relevance which are the product of memory—that is, of a recourse to a past—and which appear only in the light of later readings. Mnemohistory is reception theory applied to history.<sup>10</sup> But “reception” is not to be understood here merely in the narrow sense of transmitting and receiving. The past is not simply “received” by the present. The present is “haunted” by the past and the past is modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present. To be sure, all this implies the tasks and techniques of transmitting and receiving, but there is much more involved in the dynamic of cultural memory than is covered by the notion of reception. It makes much more sense to speak of Europe’s having been “haunted” by Egypt than of Egypt’s having been “received” by Europe. There were, of course, several discoveries and receptions of Egypt in the same way as there were multiple discoveries and receptions of China, India, or Mexico. But independent of these discoveries there was always the image of Egypt as the past both of Israel and of Greece and thus of Europe. This fact makes the case of Egypt radically different from that of China, India, or “Orientalism” in general.

The aim of a mnemohistorical study is not to ascertain the possible truth of traditions such as the traditions about Moses but to study these traditions as phenomena of collective memory. Memories may be false, distorted, invented, or implanted. This has been sufficiently shown in recent discussions in the fields of forensic psychiatry, psychoanalysis, biography, and history.<sup>11</sup> Memory cannot be validated as a historical source without being checked against “objective” evidence. This is as true of collective memory as of individual memory, a fact which will be illustrated by a rather striking example in the next chapter. But for a historian of memory, the “truth” of a given memory lies not so much in its “factuality” as in its “actuality.” Events tend to be forgotten unless they live on in collective memory. The same principle applies to fun-



damental semantic distinctions. There is no meaning in history unless these distinctions are remembered. The reason for this “living on” lies in the continuous relevance of these events. This relevance comes not from their historical past, but from an ever-changing present in which these events are remembered as facts of importance. Mnemohistory analyzes the importance which a present ascribes to the past. The task of historical positivism consists in separating the historical from the mythical elements in memory and distinguishing the elements which retain the past from those which shape the present. In contrast, the task of mnemohistory consists in analyzing the mythical elements in tradition and discovering their hidden agenda. Mnemohistory does not ask, “Was Moses really trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians?” Instead, it asks, why such a statement did not appear in the book of Exodus, but only appeared in Acts (7:22), and why the Moses discourse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries almost exclusively based its image of Moses not on Moses’ elaborate biography in the Pentateuch, but on this single verse in the New Testament. In the Exodus story as it is remembered by the Pessah Haggadah, there is no mention of Moses at all. The Moses discourse of the Enlightenment, on the other hand, leaves God out of the narrative.

The approach of mnemohistory is highly selective. A historical—either Egyptological or Biblical—investigation of the traditions about Moses and Egypt would be far more comprehensive. It would certainly take into account the considerable amount of available epigraphical, archaeological, and philological evidence. As an Egyptologist, I am aware of what I am leaving aside in this study. I am dealing with the Amarna experience only insofar as it lives on in the tradition about the “lepers,” and I am dealing with this tradition, and Egyptian anti-Semitism in general, only insofar as it informs the later discourse on Moses and Egypt. I am reading Maimonides only in the light of Spencer, John Spencer in the light of William Warburton, Warburton in the light of Reinhold and Schiller, and of Freud insofar as he partakes in this discourse and reflects on its issues. For each of these men’s writings, a strictly *historical* approach would proceed in a very different way. There is certainly much more to be said about John Spencer than the reader will learn in the course of this study. Specialists of the intellectual history of the seventeenth century such as Frances A. Yates or Frank E. Manuel would have drawn a radically different picture. In the case of