
In this very learned and highly engaging study, world-renowned Egyptologist Jan Assmann (emeritus professor of Egyptology at Heidelberg University) attempts to address one of the most impenetrable problems in biblical studies and in the history of religions generally, that is, the question surrounding the emergence of monotheism in Israel, Egypt and the ancient Near East broadly in the 2nd to 1st millennia BCE. During the process of categorising the world’s religions – a process begun during the Enlightenment and marked by all of the baggage traditionally associated with the Enlightenment project generally – scholars have often made sharp and programmatic distinctions between ‘monotheistic’ (one god) and ‘polytheistic’ (many gods) religions; in this bipartite division, Israel was typically identified as the original or sole ‘monotheistic’ religion in the ancient world. Studies of monotheism in the late 19th century became increasingly complex, and Israel remained the focal point. The Dutch scholar Abraham Kuenen famously posited a tripartite evolutionary development, from ‘fetishism’ to ‘polytheism’ to ‘monotheism’ as the process of religious development in ancient Israel, and similar evolutionary schemes were adopted by many prominent thinkers well into the 20th century. Others, however, such as the mid-20th century American scholar W.F. Albright, saw monotheism not in evolutionary terms but as a kind of revolution or radical innovation (though not without some precedent) introduced onto the world stage by the Israelites – more specifically, by Moses and his multitude of acolytes fleeing from Egypt.

Assmann’s study does not delve too deeply into this history of scholarship, but rather begins by introducing his readers to what he calls ‘the Mosaic distinction’, a concept with which the author has been working for over a decade (see Assmann’s ‘The Mosaic Distinction: Israel, Egypt, and the Invention of Paganism’. Representations 56, 1996). Briefly put, the Mosaic distinction 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, and that sets religion apart from what comes to be shunned as superstition, paganism, or heresy. This idea finds its clearest expression not in the phrase “God is one!” but “no other gods!”’ (p. 3). The words ‘exclusive’ and ‘emphatic’ seem to be important words here, since one would otherwise be left with the (misleading) impression that there existed polytheistic groups across Egypt and the ancient Near East who worshipped every rock and tree in sight, or that every ancient conception of divinity was tantamount to pantheism. At any rate, Assmann’s study revolves around the central question of violence in monotheistic and polytheistic religions, and the author claims that we ‘must distinguish between so-called pagan and monotheistic violence. Pagan violence stems from the indistinction between state and religion’ (p. 29), such as in the situation in ancient Egypt. Monotheism, on the other hand, ‘implies a strict separation between religion and state. Monotheistic violence...is directed against paganism – typically against the “pagan within” – and not against political enemies’ (p. 29).

Assmann is especially instructive when discussing the ancient Egyptian religious situation. In Chapter 2 (‘Seth the Iconoclast’), we learn of the fascinating transformation in the image of Seth (the ‘prototype of the sacrificial animal’, p. 36) and the political and religious transformations within Egypt that prompted these changes. In the Egyptian conception, Seth murdered his brother Osiris, the King, for which he had to be punished. Osiris’s son, Horus, avenged the murder, and thus the mythical act of overcoming Seth was later transformed into the moral principle of conquering death by leading a good life and avoiding evil’ (p. 36). This ‘evil’ was later politicized during a period of trauma, when the Assyrian Esarhaddon subjugated Egypt briefly and the image of Seth became that of an absolute devil’ (p. 43) and thus personified the cultural trauma. Assmann is then able to fruitfully compare this situation with the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE by the Assyrians, though the comparison is not drawn out in great detail.

Chapter 3 (‘All gods are one’) discusses the issue of the ‘translatability’ between deities across national lines in the ancient world, and Assmann concludes by noting that by ‘distinguishing between God and the world, revolutionary monotheism [..] severs the links between creation and sovereignty as well as between cosmic and political order [in contradistinction to the situation in ancient Egypt]’, and the ‘original impulse of revolutionary monotheism [..] seems to me to consist in tearing apart the archaic unity of creation and domination, or cosmic and political power, and to conceive of religion as a means of emancipation from the politico-cosmological power structure of the ancient world’ (p. 75). The discussion of the Axial Age concept in Chapter 4 is also particularly illuminating, as Assmann posits that the distinction between true and false in religious terms ‘was the great innovation that transformed the ancient world in the form of an axial breakthrough’ (p. 84) and he discusses the rise of Akenaten’s putatively monotheistic cult during the Amarna period. Though the separation between state and religion (Herrschaft und Heil) can be identified both as the hallmark of biblical monotheism and simultaneously as “axiality”, Assmann is quick to point out that “this revolutionary quality of monotheism has historically proven to be least stable” (p. 89).

Worthy of note is Assmann’s attempt to ground his broader project in contemporary concerns; the shift of religion from the ‘opium of the people’ to the ‘dynamite of the people’ (p. 5) has prompted a re-examination of monotheism. The topic is fraught with anxiety and peril, and Assmann recounts that his earlier attempt to address the meaning of monotheism in his work Moses the Egyptian (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1997) was met with accusations of anti-Semitism and of degrading monotheism by calling it ‘counterreligion’. Assmann returns to the modern contexts of monotheism and violence at the end of the book, arguing that since monotheism is, at heart, a rejection of the ‘political’, that violence ‘belongs to the sphere of the political’, and that ‘a religion that uses violence fails to fulfill its proper mission in this world and remains entangled in the sphere of the political’ (p. 145). This somewhat homiletical tone, which presumes to define what...
of the transcendent point beyond these distinctions in relation to which true tolerance becomes possible’ (p. 142).

These are fascinating statements on several levels; implicit in such assertions is an assumption that what counts as ‘surface forms’ of a religion are basically obvious and self-evident categories, an assumption with which many scholars of religion – not to mention religious adherents – would strongly disagree. However, it is very difficult to imagine how religions that have (or just profess to have) radically different conceptions of key transcendental categories could meet together in harmony at the same imaginary, abstract transcendental point. One could argue that such a move is politically necessary in this nuclear age, and there is a certain kind of humanism apparent in any call to drop our differences, stop the violence, and just get along. At any rate, the ‘weak notion of truth’ (p. 145) that Assmann advocates – which is now a stock part of virtually all postmodern discourse regarding religion – leaves one in a correspondingly weak position to launch bold claims regarding religious normativity, even if that includes an a priori rejection of violence. One gets the distinct impression, at points, that Assmann’s homilizing commentary on religion and violence is directed at Islam specifically (p. 5), though arguably the critique works for Christianity as well (but not Judaism, according to Assmann).

Moreover, biblical scholars – an often contentious and territorial lot – may find themselves annoyed with several aspects of Assmann’s presentation, including: the non-standard transliteration techniques for Hebrew words (pp. 3, 113, and so on); an overly simplistic dichotomy between prophetic texts, which promote ‘justice’ and priestly texts that are concerned solely with ‘sacrificial cultism’ (contra Assmann, see, e.g., Leviticus ch. 19) (p. 12); generalizing and misleading statements such as, ‘in the Bible sacred history (historia sacra) takes the place of myth (historia divine)’ and ‘Many of the biblical books are pure historiography’ (p. 21); the questionable assertion that ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ really were (or could ever truly be) separated in ancient Israel (p. 85); un-argued assumptions about the dating of many biblical materials (e.g. ‘Covenant theology (and monotheism) developed after the fall, first of Samaria and then of Jerusalem [. . .]’, etc.), when the dating of the biblical texts is perhaps the most highly contested of the many contested issues within the field. More examples could be added to this end, and yet it must be said that, in order for a study such as Assmann’s to succeed and move efficiently toward its stated goals, an author must be given leeway to accept certain premises and proceed with the comparative project at hand.

Nevertheless, Assmann shows himself to be a savvy interpreter of biblical texts in his conclusion (see pp. 127–133), and his chapter on the ‘five steps toward canonization’ (i.e., codification of law; the 587 BCE destruction; Persian authorization of local law; the rise of an enclave culture as a textual community with libraries; and the rejection of idolatry) eloquently summarizes what many would agree to be key stages in the canonization process. Although there is nothing particularly unique or disagreeable in Assmann’s five stages – except with regard to the idea of Persian authorization of local law, which is a disputed point in Achaemenid studies – Assmann’s formulation of these stages is significant in at least two respects. First, Assmann’s comparison with the textual and cultural situation in Egypt provides some very instructive parallels and juxtapositions with Israel. Whereas the ‘principle of canonization’ [. . .] appears to be ubiquitous, natural, and self-evident’, comparisons with the situation in Egypt show that the phenomenon of canonization is ‘a virtually inexplicable process resulting from an unpredictable and improbable concatenation of events’ (p. 92). There ‘is no natural path leading from text to canonization. Impulses must come from without, not from within’ (p. 93). Second, Assmann elucidates the connection between monotheism and canonization in provocative and interesting ways. ‘Writing is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for transformations of “Axial” magnitude and importance’ and ‘there is not a single monotheistic religion that is not based on a canon of holy writ’ (p. 90). Thus, there ‘seems to exist a necessary connection between “revelation” and “canon”, between “secondary religions” (i.e., religions based on the distinction between true and false that reject every older and foreign tradition as falsehood or ignorance), and that specific form of written and highly normative codification of cultural memory called canonization’ (p. 91). ‘Monotheism, therefore, is primarily a matter of memory’ (p. 92).

Ultimately, Assmann’s view of the rise of monotheism dovetails nicely with the recent formulation of Mark S. Smith in his Origins of Biblical Monotheism (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001). Therein, Smith posits that ‘in the face of the great empires and then in exile, Israel stands at the bottom of its political power, and it exalts its deity inversely as ruler of the whole universe’ (p. 165), and Assmann describes a similar path toward monotheism in his assertion that covenant theology and monotheism emerged only ‘following the complete failure and break-down of the kingdom [. . .] after the most traumatic series of experiences that could possibly befall a society in those times’ (p. 83).

Although it is appropriately admitted (in a cursory fashion) that ‘there is no such thing as “the” biblical monotheism, that the Bible contains many different traditions and, correspondingly, many varieties of monotheism or monolatry, and that one is dealing here with something rather special that may be called “Deuteronomism”’ (p. 114; see also p. 139), Assmann is still forced to treat the biblical tradition in an overly monolithic fashion in order to make certain points. For example, Assmann uses the categories of an ‘intrasystemic other’ and an ‘extrasytemic other’ to draw a distinction between the Egyptians and Assyrians who viewed the other intrasystemically, that is, essentially as an other with whom one could communicate and whose deities could be translated into native vernacular, while the Israelites saw the other extrasytemically, belonging to ‘a system with which such conditions of translatability are not given and are even impossible’ (p. 30).

In an intrasytemic system, the ‘enemy’ may be integrated into one’s own political system without being forced to convert to a different construction of reality. The “idolater” and the heretic, conversely, are extrasytemic others who can be integrated only through conversion [. . .] The Assyrians act within the system, however violently, taking the gods of the enemy seriously, whereas the Hebrew prophets posit themselves outside the system’ (p. 31). Indeed, most of the canonical Israelite prophets seem to have viewed themselves as outside this ‘system’, but there are a number of fairly clear texts that demonstrate the ancient Israelites could operate intrasytemically and accepted the ancient basic Near Eastern and Egyptian view that the universe was populated with a plurality of deities (see, for example, Deut. 4:19–20, 32:8–9; Judg. 11:22–24; Mic. 4:5; Pss. 29:1; 82:1; 83:6–7; 89:5–7, etc.), even possibly during later periods in history.

Assmann concludes his study by asking the question of whether monotheism is inherently violent. Assmann’s answer is that a specific kind of violence, ‘religious violence, meaning violence with reference to the will of God’, and which ‘stems from the distinction between friend and foe in a religious sense’ is indeed the exclusive territory of monotheism (p. 144). At only 145 pages of text, one may rightly complain that the work is too short, given the depth of insight Assmann is often able to produce – and there are many other scintillating observations in this book that cannot receive comment here. Of God and Gods deserves to be studied carefully by all scholars and students of the history of monotheism, and Assmann’s unique ability as a scholar of comparative religion and as an Egyptologist has allowed him to

‘religion’, ‘monotheism’, and ‘politics’ should or should not be in our contemporary setting, may not appeal to everyone, and indeed such sermonising appears increasingly throughout the book. For example, Assmann seems to view all religions as having the same ultimate goal, that is, ‘absolute Truth, which is the transcendent and necessarily hidden goal of every religion’ (p. 126), and claims that what ‘we need is a form of “wisdom” that enables us to look past the surface forms of concrete religions, with their irreducible differences and distinctions, and focus upon that transcendental point beyond these distinctions in relation to which true tolerance [. . .] becomes possible’ (p. 142).

Of God and Gods

Assmann, Johannes

Origins of Biblical Monotheism
access the biblical texts with an insight and vigour mostly unmatched by those who have attempted to study the Hebrew Bible in isolation on this very relevant topic.

Brian R. Doak
Harvard University (U.S.A.)
E-mail address: doak@fas.harvard.edu