



Books, Briefly Noted

Michael Zank

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BOOKS, BRIEFLY NOTED

MICHAEL ZANK

Boston University

Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1997 (276pp)

It takes a major intellect, thoroughly embedded in a disciplinary context yet towering above it and capable of synthesizing the observations afforded by such an elevated vantage point to produce, in a foreign language to boot, a masterpiece of intellectual history. The Heidelberg Egyptologist, together with Aleida Assmann (née Bornkamm), constitutes one of the epicenters of Kulturwissenschaft, the rejuvenated branching out of contemporary German intellectuals from greying academic institutions recovering from decades of ideological disorientation. "Cultural memory" — one of the major buzz-words coined by the Assmann's (as in *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*) — as applied by Germans to German history must meet anti-Semitism head on, and no less is intended in *Moses the Egyptian* than a mnemo-historical accounting for the origins of anti-Semitism.

The strength of the book is also its weakness. Assmann anchors anti-Semitism in the Western discourse on the primordial break with polytheistic tolerance, the reforms of Amenhotep IV = Akhenaten, using the Freudian topos of transference to explain why the Egyptian revulsion

for the henotheist revolution turns into pagan revulsion of Jewish monotheism. The idea of monotheism is thus the cause of a perennial conflict in Western mnemo-history, a conflict acted out by and on its symbolic representatives.

Aside from the clearly exaggerated monocausality of this account of the origins of anti-Semitism, the book nevertheless has a ton of fascinating insights to offer into matters ranging from Akhenaten and Egyptian theology, to pagan anti-Semitism, to John Spencer and the Cambridge neo-Platonists' revival of the Moses-Egypt discourse, to Moses Mendelssohn's use of hieroglyphics as an example of ideography, to Sigmund Freud, neo-Platonic discourses on hen-kai-pan, and many other non-trivial topics.

I cannot recommend this work warmly enough and hope that it will find the broad discussion it deserves.

Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination. On Jewish Thought and Theology*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1998 (235pp)

A few scant notes cannot do justice to this collection of recent studies by Michael Fishbane on midrashic themes. Limiting the technical matters of his approach to a single introductory chapter ("Midrash and the Nature of Scripture"), Fishbane continues his exploration of the midrashic imagination as the well-spring of insights that are, in a way, already implanted in Scripture. The radically mythopoic liberty applied by the rabbis to perfectly plain scriptural passages expand what is found in the more atavistic layers of biblical religion and retrieve it in a world that is thoroughly monotheistic to the degree that it is undaunted by its mythic abilities. In general, myth, mythmaking, and exegesis holds a particular fascination for Fishbane who threads together the mythological inclination of Jewish literature ranging from midrash, to Talmud, to the Zohar, to R. Nachman of Bratzlav. In his own words, the first few essays collected here serve to explore mythopoesis as a form of speculative rabbinic theology. Here the central intention, and the most interesting for

TR, is to show the interconnectedness of exegesis and thought. The second group of essays (chapters 7- 11), deal less with speculative theology rather than with Jewish ritual spirituality or, in Fishbane's words, "the exegetical construction of ritual reality" and "Jewish practical theology." It would take a thorough review to examine whether Fishbane succeeds in presenting us, through the study of texts, with an adumbration of theological disciplines that would provide a basis for comparison with their Christian counterparts that are, of course, the origin of such categories.

Steven Kepnes, Peter Ochs, and Robert Gibbs, *Reasoning After Revelation. Dialogues in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy*. Westview Press, 1998 (163pp)

This manifesto of Textual Reasoning was published in a series called Radical Traditions: Theology in a Postcritical Key, edited by Stanley M. Hauerwas and Peter Ochs. Other books published in this series are *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* by David Toole, *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* by Stanley Hauerwas, and a remarkable essay by the eminent Talmudist David Weiss-Halivni on *Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and Critical Responses*. Kepnes, Ochs and Gibbs explore the elusive topic of postmodern Jewish philosophy in several ways: in conversations, in monologues, and in dialogues. Among the dialogic 'others' and challenges calling for postmodern Jewish thought appear the tension between 'Enlightenment and Suffering', the need for *t'shuvah*, the Holocaust, and the primordial otherness of freedom. After the initial trialogue, the voices of others are brought in as respondents. Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, Susan Shapiro, Elliot Wolfson, Almut Bruckstein, and Edith Wyschogrod all take up the baton and carry the conversation further. A full discussion of the book is forthcoming in a future issue of TR.

Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (ed.), *History of Jewish Philosophy* (Routledge History of World Philosophy, Volume II). London and New York, Routledge, 1997 (934pp)

Hardly less monumental in plan than its still larger companion, the new Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the History of World Philosophies series expands on the editorial idea that philosophy is more and must be considered more broadly than the traditional Western canon of footnotes to Plato. Among 'world philosophies' and in the philosophical world, Judaism represents a case in its own right, and the volume edited by Dan Frank (the Kentucky philosopher, not the English Karaism scholar) and the Liverpoolian Oliver Leaman is an energetic and ambitious collection of essays by outstanding scholars that goes a long way towards proving it. Between the time when the important work of Julius Guttman on the Philosophies of Judaism went out of print and the advent of the Routledge volume there was nothing a course on Jewish philosophy could fall back on as a solid comprehensive exposition that would cover antiquity, middle ages, and modern times in equal depths. Moreover, Frank and Leaman take into account the much changed sensibilities and the current lack of apologetic interests that allow to include previously neglected sources of religious thought such as the Talmud (David Novak) and medieval mystical speculation (Elliot Wolfson) as well as to give room to more recent developments such as post-Holocaust philosophies (Steven T. Katz), feminist thought (Judith Plaskow), and postmodern thought (Richard Cohen). The relevant historical epochs are introduced by general essays (Dan Frank on "What is Jewish Philosophy?" and on "The Future of Jewish Philosophy", Alexander Broadie on "The nature of medieval Jewish philosophy", Ze'ev Levy on "The nature of modern Jewish philosophy", on "Zionism" and on "Jewish nationalism"), and the volume provides a useful index of names and terms.

David Weiss Halivni, *Revelation Restored. Divine Writ and Critical Responses*. Westview Press, 1997. (Series: Radical Traditions: Theology in a Postcritical Key) and idem, *The Book and the Sword: A Life of Learning in the Shadow of Destruction*. Westview Press, 1996

A talmudic genius from Sighet, the Hungarian *shtetl* in Romania made famous by his compatriot and friend and Elie Wiesel, Halivni looks back on a long and distinguished career of traditional and critical study of the Talmud at traditional and modern Jewish and secular institutions. His work has been brought to the attention of our readers through Peter Ochs who, in Steven Kepnes's volume *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age* (NYU Press, 1996), distinguishes Halivni as one of the most significant voices in the attempt of moving to a form of exegesis that is both critical in a modern sense and guided by the inherent rationality of rabbinic discourses. *The Book and the Sword* goes a long way towards explaining the roots of Halivni's method and sensitivities. Without being too technical, it also serves as a window into the mind of a sophisticated, competent and committed halakhist whose struggle with modernization is not with the legitimacy of modernity but with the justification of methods.

In *Revelation Restored* Halivni applies his trade-mark combination of traditional and historical exegesis to the important subject of the transmission of the Torah itself, more precisely to the possibility of reconciling critical and traditional readings of the role played by Ezra the Scribe in promulgating the Torah. Halivni builds on the unabashed recognition in rabbinic tradition of the 'maculation' of the Torah, i.e., of all those irritating surface irregularities and inconsistencies with the ideal of a smooth single-author text that have provided Higher Criticism since the days of Msr. Astruc with the ammunition to deny Mosaic authorship of the Torah. The notion of Ezra's 'restoration' of an originally Mosaic revelation is mythological in that it implies more than critical scholarship can accept as factual (among others, Mosaic authorship of a perfect Torah received at Sinai, corrupted due to the sins of Israel), yet it allows one to

maintain the sense of authority with which rabbinic tradition imbues both the maculated Torah and its 'repair' through interpretation and oral tradition. Halivni's interest in the 'restoration' of the Torah under Ezra is correlated to an interest in the early Jewish community that (finally) accepted the Mosaic legislation as its basic constitution, a generation of interpreters no longer tempted by (the classical forms of) idolatry and no longer in need of direct prophetic guidance. The gesture implied in Halivni's reading is, in my view, comparable to the one presented by David Novak in *The Election of Israel*, where the notion of a covenanted community is likewise balanced between two historical communities, namely the one at Sinai and the one in the days of Esther and Mordecai which affirmed the Torah by accepting it anew. What is expressed here in traditional exegetical terms is the notion of a self-consciousness community of interpreters that, after the fashion of the pious sons of Noah, cover up the nakedness of their father and restore his dignity. We are confronted with the same puzzling attitude. Revelation is vulnerable: to the wicked, it is an occasion for derision and destruction, to the righteous one for respect, love, and redemption. The quality of the reader is revealed in the reading.