



Assmann Jan, Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism
Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism by Jan Assmann
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'primitive' and 'childlike' up until the 1940s, so as to justify their continuing rule within their 'little empire.' This was despite the fact that an educated stratum had emerged from amongst the Christian Bhils by the late 1930s that was quite capable of taking over much of the education, medical and pastoral work of the mission" (235).

As in Hardiman's other publications, there is much in this volume about the history of Gujarat and Rajasthan, the Bhils, the Bhagat movement, and the intriguingly complex politics that resulted from the local competition of landlords, princely state rajahs, and colonial administrators. Anyone interested in the history of missionary medicine, colonial medicine, or tropical medicine will appreciate the text for its attention to significant (and sometimes gory) medical detail, and for the way it sheds light on the special challenges, unexpected comedies, and heart-wrenching inadequacies of jungle medicine. And mission historians will appreciate this text as well. It is as much a thorough history of the CMS mission in this region as it is a discussion of missionary medicine. That, in fact, may also be its chief weakness. Those with a more theoretical bent will perhaps complain that there is too little analysis here, proportionately speaking, and that Hardiman spends more time than necessary discussing, for example, the arrivals, departures, equipment, and expenditures of missionaries. There are indeed moments when the theme implied by the title of the book seems at risk of being swamped by a rather more straightforward mission history. But other historians may be impressed by this very same attention to detail and may applaud Hardiman's refusal to let theory overrun narrative.

Quite apart from the issue of missionary medicine, there is a compelling narrative here about the missionary-Bhil encounter that brings to life the different and sometimes contradictory projects in which the two communities were engaged during this period. Anthropologists and historians who study cross-cultural interactions will appreciate this text for never losing sight of the fact that the Bhil community's strategies and programs of change always coexisted with and even survived those prescribed by missionaries and colonial figures (244). And scholars of religion in general will applaud Hardiman for the sensitivity with which he treats both the Bhils and their missionary interlocutors. Without being overly romantic, Hardiman presents the Bhils as a noble people despite their poverty and lack of education. Similarly, Hardiman presents the missionaries as compassionate, generally capable, and hard working, without neglecting to attend to the arrogant and racist attitudes that prevented them, until long after Independence, from handing authority and responsibility for the mission over to the Bhils.

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Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism. By JAN ASSMANN.
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008. Pp xii+196. \$26.96.

In this stimulating, provocative, sometimes frustrating but ultimately rewarding work, Jan Assmann addresses sundry issues connected to monotheism, religious violence, and constructive theology. The most important contributions of the

book are Assmann's description of two types of monotheism and his sensitive and careful discussion of how one of them can promote religious violence. While the book's application of these models to concrete religions leaves much to be desired, Assmann's theoretical constructs remain quite valuable.

Assmann distinguishes between "inclusive monotheism," which evolves from polytheism as polytheists recognize all the gods to be manifestations of the one God, and "exclusive monotheism," which rejects the plurality of gods as false and seeks truth in the one God. The former is an evolutionary development within polytheism, while the latter is a revolutionary rejection of polytheism. Assmann asserts that both are evident in Egyptian religion, the former in New Kingdom texts focusing on Amun-Re, the latter in the religion of Akhenaten. Assmann assumes, with considerable justification, that the religion of the Hebrew Bible and classical Judaism displays the exclusivist/revolutionary sort of monotheism. He does not explore the extent to which the inclusivist model is also present in Hebrew scripture and later Judaism (for example, in Jewish mysticism, and in some pre-priestly and pre-Deuteronomic streams of biblical thought).

Assmann discusses the price that each of these types of monotheism pays to establish itself. Inclusivist monotheism, which sees God in all the gods and indeed in all creation, loses the personal element of God as the deity becomes so remote or so all-pervasive as to be inaccessible (106–7). Exclusive monotheism, with its rejection of falsity, becomes susceptible to religious violence directed against those whose beliefs are wrong (107–26). This critique of revolutionary monotheism runs the risk of devolving into essentialist platitudes or anti-Judaism, but Assmann takes pains, I think successfully, to avoid these pitfalls. He points out, for example, that rabbinic Judaism neutralizes the propensity toward violence by expelling the universalization of truth from history and pushing it off to an eschaton. Further, he acknowledges that both monotheism and polytheism promote violence. Rather than positing a thoroughly ahistorical picture of peaceful pagans who differ from bloodthirsty monotheists, Assmann avers that the true contrast that needs to be studied is one between the different types of violence that polytheism and monotheism tend to foster (30–33).

Assmann maintains that the revolutionary brand of monotheism entails the separation of truth and error; the distinction between the one God and other gods parallels, and engenders, a distinction between truth and falsity. Assmann is onto something important here, but the analogy does not work for biblical and even rabbinic monotheism as well as he presumes. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the other gods are not false but feckless, for it is Yhwh who created them, assigned them their roles, and lent them such power as they need to fulfill these roles. Even a passage as vociferously monotheistic as Deuteronomy 4 makes clear that Yhwh appointed the various gods to their nations. For this reason it is perfectly appropriate in the eyes of the biblical authors that Babylonians worship Marduk and Assyrians Ashur. What would be grossly inappropriate is an Israelite worshipping a deity other than Yhwh or using magic. The other deities and magic, according to the biblical authors, are real. But they are nowhere near as potent as Yhwh, and thus for Israelites (who have been granted direct access to Yhwh that other nations by and large lack) it would be both foolish and insulting to turn to these lesser powers. The Israelite distinction between Yhwh and lesser heavenly beings may

have eventually evolved into a distinction between truth and falsehood, but it has not yet done so within the Hebrew Bible or even within classical rabbinic literature. Indeed, this perspective endures as late as medieval thinkers like Nachmanides (as Alon Goshen-Gottstein in particular has shown). Assmann does his readers a disservice in attributing the much later distinction to the biblical texts themselves—and in failing to recognize the persistence of the rather more subtle biblical ideas in post-biblical Jewish literature. (The real roots of the attitude Assmann discusses are found in the denunciation of icon worship in the Hebrew Bible, though even these denunciations do not flower into a radical contrast between truth and falsity until late Second Temple literature.)

A similar problem appears throughout the book as Assmann asserts that the separation of religion from politics is a quintessential element of biblical monotheism. This assertion is patently false. The very notion of religion as a distinct element of a culture is (as many scholars of specific cultures and theorists of religion have long argued) a relatively recent invention—either a modern European one or perhaps (as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has argued) an Islamic one. Thus Assmann's assertion that biblical monotheism "sets itself apart not only from other religions . . . but also from such other spheres of culture as politics, law, and economics" (84) can only be seen as bizarre. To be sure, intimations of such a distinction may be found in a few passages in the Hebrew Bible. Assmann rightly notes the law of the king in Deuteronomy 17.14–20, which reduces the monarch from authoritarian ruler to a constitutional monarch (or rather, if I may speak with greater precision, a *yeshiva bocher*). Similarly, Assmann points to the political structure of Israel in the premonarchical era, which might hint at a rejection of a centralized state (though it may simply reflect the situation in proto-Israel before it had fully crystallized into the nation known from biblical texts). But much more of the Bible presumes the conceptual unity of kingdom and cult, of monarchy and monotheism. Contrary to Assmann's repeated assertions, many biblical authors regard the state and its monarchy as one of the main vessels through which Yhwh fulfills his covenantal promises to Israel. Has Assmann never heard of the Davidic dynasty and its central role in the religious imagination of the psalmists? Of the Davidic covenant that appears in 2 Samuel 7, to which other biblical authors allude again and again? Of the Deuteronomistic historians, for whom loyalty to the Davidic dynasty is a core criterion for evaluating loyalty to Yhwh? The state and its royal rulers play a no less central role in First Isaiah, who was critical of particular kings even as he emphasized the central role of the Davidic monarchy. Assmann claims to find this separation of church and state especially in Exilic and post-Exilic texts, and some movement in this direction might be seen in Deutero-Isaiah (whom, oddly, Assmann does not cite in this regard), but those same eras gave us the messianic royalism of Haggai and Zechariah, along with the Chronicler's obsession with the Davidic monarchy. In emphasizing the division between religion and politics, Assmann is really not talking about ancient Israel or the Hebrew Bible at all. He is talking about the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and those periods' very selective readings of the Old Testament. Assmann may be right that "the separation between state and religion . . . can be identified both as the hallmark of biblical monotheism and simultaneously as 'axiality'" (89), but if this is so we must admit, first, that

the earliest stirrings of what he terms “biblical monotheism” must be located in central and western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries CE and, second, that the Axial Age came into its own only in eighteenth and nineteenth century western Europe and North America.

Whenever Assmann refers to what he considers the core ideas of the Hebrew Bible, he is really talking about Protestant Christianity (or perhaps, a Protestant post-Christianity). Thus it comes as no surprise that Assmann’s reading of the Tanakh focuses overwhelmingly on Deuteronomy, for Deuteronomy is the most Protestant book in Hebrew scripture. Early in the book, Assmann identifies three modes of religious knowledge: cultic, cosmic, and linguistic (11–27). He then makes the remarkable claim that Israel knows only the third of these—a claim that works only if one defines Deuteronomy’s name theology as the true biblical theology and one ignores pretty much everything else in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, it is remarkable what a small role other streams of tradition play in Assmann’s assessment of the Tanakh. Priestly writings (which in Christian terms can be called the Catholic strand of Tanakh theology), with their thoroughly cultic worldview, are never mentioned in Assmann’s book. Prophecy and psalmody, with their cosmic worldview, play no role, except in a few cases where they speak with a Deuteronomic voice. Wisdom literature merits only passing reference.

Assmann’s discussion of specific traditions outside Egypt allows for a great deal of criticism. Yet this book has a great deal to teach biblical scholars, historians of Judaism and Christianity, and theorists of religion. Its bold proposals can be applied to specific religions in many ways, and specialists in biblical studies will be quick to point out the shortcomings of Assmann’s own use of the models he proposes. It is in the models themselves, however, that the book proves itself to be well worth studying.

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Hearing the Mermaid’s Song: The Umbanda Religion in Rio de Janeiro. By

LINDSAY HALE. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009. Pp. 192. \$26.95.

At long last, the exuberant and ever-inventive Brazilian religion of Umbanda has its champion in the English-speaking world, a writer whose eloquent prose conveys something of the imaginative scope of this heterogeneous—but not haphazard—bricolage and why so many Brazilians are drawn to it. Both a long overdue academic account of Umbanda and a perceptive analysis of the religious imagination, *Hearing the Mermaid’s Song* details the diversity, creativity, and pragmatic qualities of Umbanda in a manner that will enlighten the general reader as well as the specialist. In less than 200 pages, Lindsay Hale captures the vibrancy of a religious tradition that is as variegated as its individual followers.

As Hale notes, there is no one Umbanda, only Umbandas. Better understood as a living constellation of beliefs and practices related by a common concern to channel the wisdom and resources of the spiritual world to resolving the problems