Semites and Semitism: From Philology to the Language of Myth

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Abstract

This contribution analyses the transition from the “Semites”, which were derived, in early Semitic philology, from linguistic classification, to “Semitism,” a category combining linguistics, psychology, and cultural history. Goldziher's critique of Renan's understanding of Semitism not only led to a new logic of peoples in an economy of invention, transformation, and circulation but also, through the analysis of the names of the gods, to the reconstruction of a language of myth characterized by an inherent duality. With Carl Abel's work on contradiction in primeval words, this question of duality in the language of myth is linked to Freud's research on the language of dreams, conceived as remnant of an old primitive stratus of language. Karl Abraham's Myths and Dreams (1909) and Otto Rank's The Birth of the Hero (1909) also reveal the inspiration early psychoanalysis found in some reflections on Semitism: both combined insights from Semitic philology and the science of mythology with those of dream interpretation. When Freud finally offered his own interpretation of Moses in Moses and Monotheism (1939), his psychoanalytical reading revealed the potential of the philological and psychological reconstruction of the language of myth: he also read the names as traces of circulation and the canonical text as an archive of conflicts, but transformed traces into symptoms.

Keywords

semitic philology – linguistics – science of mythology – psychoanalysis – interpretation of dreams
It is well known that Ignác Goldziher’s *Mythology among the Hebrews*, published in German in 1876 and translated into English the following year,¹ was written partly to contradict Renan’s description of Semitism as given in his *History of Semitic Languages* (*Histoire des langues sémitiques*, 1855). A special object of Goldziher’s criticism was the opposition Renan established between the Semites, whom he conceived of as deprived of mythology, and the Greeks, whom he conceived of as endowed with mythology because of their rich imagination. The first thing one has to acknowledge when referring to this opposition is that Goldziher didn’t really contradict Renan on the point that there is, or was, such a thing as “Semitism” and such a thing as “Aryanism”. In his book, he himself used these terms as notions of cultural history and was convinced that there was an important difference between the cultures to which they referred. But he placed this difference on a secondary historico-cultural level, whereas to him mythology belonged to a primary universal cognitive level and constituted the first stage in the history of human mind. This explains that the main aim of his book was to contradict the idea that the Semites should have had no myths, to reconstruct the lost mythology of the Hebrews, and to show that monotheism and the whole religion of the Hebrews, far from stemming directly from life in the desert as a kind of naturalized revelation, were derived from Semitic mythology. To achieve this, Goldziher developed what he called a “science of myth” (*Mythoswissenschaft*) applied to the Hebrews. How far did this science of (Hebrew) myth, conceived as a combination of history, psychology, and linguistics, change the conception of Semitism? Did it lead to a reconfiguration of the Semites as a linguistic family and a cultural group? Did it change the conception of philology itself? And what is the relation between Goldziher’s analysis of the language of myth and the new perspectives about myth opened by psychoanalysis (Abraham, Rank, Freud)?

To answer these questions, it is first necessary to go back in time and recount the emergence of the terms “Semite” and “Semitic” in the context of Biblical studies, study of myth, and early ethnology in Göttingen at the end of the 18th century. These notions were based on a correspondence between language, people, and territory, which was in some way naturalized by Renan. He in turn achieved what could be called the philological invention of the desert in the form of an essential unity of language, mind, people, and natural

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¹ Ignaz Goldziher, *Der Mythos bei den Hebräern und seine geschichtliche Entwicklung: Untersuchungen zur Mythologie und Religionswissenschaft* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1876); Ignaz Goldziher, *Mythology among the Hebrews and its Historical Development*, trans. from the German, with additions by the author, by Russell Martineau (London: Longmans, 1877). Russell Martineau was also the translator of Jacob Grimm into English.
environment. Goldziher criticized this system, operated a deconstruction of the assumed unity, and he did it through philology itself. Far from having a strictly linguistic dimension, his analysis of the names of the gods led him to reconstruct a language of myth characterized by an inherent duality. We find a similar idea in the work of the lexicologist Carl Abel on contradiction in the original words (Über den Gegensinn der Urworte, 1884), which he discovered mostly in the Egyptian language. This question of duality is linked to early psychoanalysis, because Abel’s essay was interpreted by Freud as a linguistic confirmation of his own notion of dream as a language of the unconscious, which knows no contradiction and is linked to a primeval form of language. Goldziher’s revision of Semitic philology and the science of myth to which it leads were also acknowledged in early psychoanalytical works on myths, as exemplified by Karl Abraham’s Myths and Dreams (1909) and Otto Rank’s The Birth of the Hero (1909). We will finally ask how Freud integrated all these reflections in his The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion (1939), what it reveals about his method, and what it shows about the potential of Goldziher’s cultural history as a combination of philology and psychology.

The Emergence of the “Semites” in the Context of Biblical Studies, Study of Myths and Early Ethnology in Göttingen

It may not be fortuitous that the terms “Semite” and “Semitic” were coined in Göttingen, as this central university of the German Enlightenment2 played a major role in the emergence of modern Biblical criticism, in the definition of early forms of modern ethnology, and in the first rudiments of the modern study of myths (Mythosforschung). The invention of the Semites is placed at the crossroads of these disciplines.

In Göttingen, the philologist Christian Gottlob Heyne combined his research on classical texts with reports on “primitive” religious practices found in travelogues, developing a notion of myth that he associated with a historico-cultural theory on the “childhood of humanity” (Kindheit des Menschengeschlechts). This made him one of the founders of the history of religions and the study of myth (Mythosforschung). As for the emerging ethnology, it was closely linked to the idea that the best way to classify people was by using their languages, as

Leibniz had already advised to do. The Leibnizian legacy, often combined with the model of Linnaeus's classification of animals and especially plants, was applied in Göttingen at the end of the eighteenth century but had been tested earlier during the expeditions German scientists undertook in the remote regions of the Russian Empire under the auspices of the tsars. In Siberia, the historian and geographer Gerhard Friedrich Müller developed what he called the "description of peoples" (Völker-Beschreibung), which was developed into a "system of peoples" (Völker-system) by the Göttingen historian August Ludwig Schlözer. If the Vocabulary Linguarum totius orbis vocabularia comparativa (1787-1789) of the naturalist Peter Simon Pallas, produced for Catherine the Great, was established with a kind of linguistic naivety on the principle that one object could correspond to one word in every language. This idea would soon be contradicted by the complexities revealed by empirical research: seldom did one people actually correspond to one language and one territory, even if this unitary logic of identity seemed to be the only one, at that time, to allow classification.

August Ludwig Schlözer is said to have been the first to use the term "Semitic." In his article "About the Chaldeans" (Von den Chaldäern), published in Johann Gottfried Eichhorn’s Repertorium für biblische und morgenländische

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Litteratur, he spoke of “a Semitic and a Japhetic family of languages” ("semitische" und "japhetische" Sprachfamilie), thus combining Biblical genealogy and Leibniziano-Linnean linguistic classification. But he did this more or less on the margins of his main fields of interest and research. It was the Göttingen Biblical philologist and Orientalist Johann Gottfried Eichhorn himself who made the notion of “Semitic” fruitful for his research and popularized the term in his Introduction to the Old Testament (Einleitung ins Alte Testament, 1787). There, he considered that “the language which the Hebrew spoke (...), was a dialect of the widespread Semitic language.” In Eichhorn’s case, this linguistic grouping is associated with Biblical criticism and, to a certain extent, with the contextualization and de-canonization of the Bible. In this epistemological context it only seemed possible to situate the text in time and space, which was the aim of the historico-critical method, through the study of language. Thus, from this time on, the characteristics attached to the Semites were linked to their language, all the other aspects being derived from it: religion, social structures, etc. Another possibility lay in fieldwork. The Göttingen Biblical scholar and Hebraist Johann David Michaelis for example was convinced that in the highlands of the Yemen could be found “a variant of Arabic,” an “Eastern dialect of the language that was closest to Hebrew and therefore a link with the original language of the Scriptures.” He planned a scientific expedition to the Near East to verify the tellings of the Bible and established a list of a hundred questions, which is considered to be the first attempt at sociology of religions. This expedition eventually took place from 1761 to 1767, Carsten Niebuhr being the only one to come back alive. Still, the “Semitic family” seemed most of all to follow an Orientalist imagination about an “Arabia Felix” and the ideality of a place of origins, based on a specific understanding of poetry and religion. It adhered to the internal necessities of textual critique and classification, more than to any historical or archaeological discoveries about the past of the Hebrews or the present of the Arabs, and was over-determined by its function

in a system of opposition. All this may explain Michaelis’s disappointment about the huge amount of information brought back by Niebuhr.

The invention of the Semites thus seems to be part of a broader historization and philologization of the Orient at the end of the eighteenth century. This opened the way for a transformation of Semitic philology into cultural history, which tried to get to the core of the link between languages, peoples and territories. It led from the “Semites” to “Semitism,” from a family of languages and the corresponding peoples to a “race” or a mentality rooted in life in the desert.

From the “Semites” to “Semitism”: Goldziher vs. Renan, or Science and Religion

Deeply influenced by German philology, Renan tried to achieve with his history of the Semitic languages what Bopp had achieved with his comparative grammar of the Indo-European languages. He was convinced that Semitic languages were more apt for comparison than Indo-European ones. Compared to the beginnings of Semitic philology, Renan appears as someone who radicalized the process of decanonization and contextualization. He linked the linguistic characteristics of the “Semites” and their religious traditions directly to the natural environment of the desert. The idea of a “monotheistic instinct”\(^\text{13}\) of the Semites would urge the German linguist and cultural anthropologist Heyman Steinthal to react violently and to condemn a vision of Man where the latter’s cultural achievements seemed to be driven by a racial instinct similar to those attributed to animals.\(^\text{14}\) If Renan reacted with a kind of surprise to the harsh criticism provoked by his work on Semitic languages, it might be because when speaking of the ancient Hebrews he didn’t think about the Jews of his time, and had no intention of transforming the Jews into an accursed race.\(^\text{15}\)

In his answer, he referred to the freedom of science and said he would not submit to what he called dogmatism. Renan seems to functionalize Semitism first and foremost in order to draw a line from the Greeks and their mythology


\(^{15}\) Ernest Renan, “Nouvelles considérations sur le caractère général des peuples sémitiques,” 448.
to modern science, and thus to exclude monotheism and its by-products from science. It may not be indifferent to recall here that Renan’s defence of science (*L’avenir de la science*, 1890) was written first in 1848, approximately in the same years as his *History of the Semitic Languages*. The double genealogy, from Semitism to monotheism and the different religions deriving from it on the one hand and, on the other, from Greek mythology to science, may thus have also been determined by his conflicts with the descendants of monotheism in the Catholic religion and its Church, which he interpreted as result of a fundamental heterogeneity between monotheism and science.

Like Renan, Goldziher was also concerned about the relation between religion and science, but he saw it in a completely different way. In the introduction of his book on *Mythology among the Hebrews*, he insisted on the difference between mythology and religion and referred to the distinction established by Steinthal. But, differing on this point with Renan, Goldziher’s aim when distinguishing between religion and mythology was to defend an essential affinity between science and what he understood as (true) religion. This was important for him in order to establish also, specifically, a relation of the “science of myth” (*Mythoswissenschaft*) with religion. Far from being blasphematory, as some of his coreligionists suggested when his book was published, the science of myth was essential to him for the “religious life of the present age”:

> It is my earnest conviction that not only the interests of learning, but also preeminently the religious life of the present age make it important to gain for this subject an acknowledged position in learned literature. For he who feels the true meaning of religion must welcome these studies as a step in advance towards the highest ideal of religion, towards Monotheism pure and unsullied by anything coarse or pagan, which is independent of legends and traditions of race, and has its centre, its exclusive element of life, and its impulse towards never-resting enquiry and self-perfection, in aspiration after the single living source of all truth and morality. I am convinced that every step which we take towards a correct appreciation of the Mythical brings us nearer to that centre.

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The distinction between myth and religion was important for Goldziher because it allowed him to imagine a future for religion in a scientific era. To forbid mythological research would have meant a misunderstanding of religious interests and a naive identification with “Biblical literature.” The truth was that “the true interests of religion are advanced, not imperilled, by the results of science.” Moreover, Goldziher considered that “the confusion of the Mythical with the Religious makes religious life centrifugal, while it is the duty of the progressive tendency in this domain to confirm a centripetal tendency.” One may understand what he meant when outlining this personal vision of a science of myth and of religion—and this is not far from “Zukunftphilologie” as an actualization of the potential of philology “to challenge exclusivist notions of the self and the canon” in the program of this journal—by reading what one of Goldziher’s students wrote about his peculiar way of understanding and teaching the history of religions:

More than once did he voice his conviction that just as the study of post Biblical Judaism needs an intrinsic knowledge of the New Testament and the Church Fathers, so the study of early Christianity needs the knowledge of the Talmud, and the study of Islam needs the study of both the Jewish and the Christian extra-Biblical early literature.

For Goldziher, the most problematic aspect of Renan’s vision was that, with his opposition between Semites and Aryans-Greeks, he cut the Hebrews and monotheism away from science, thus destroying the whole conception he had constructed of himself: a Jew practicing science as an actualization of the ideal (ethical) force expressed by monotheism, in a complex continuity with the spirit of the Ancient Hebrews. One way of maintaining this connection was to prove that myth, in its polytheistic diversity and cognitive richness, was not an exclusivity of the Greeks (Aryans), to prove the “capacity of the Semitic race to form myths,” thus allowing to draw a line from this mythology to monotheism and to science.

To prove that the Hebrews had created myths and that monotheism, instead of being a product of the desert, was based on Semitic mythology, Goldziher had to fully integrate the Hebrews into the Semitic family, to confirm in some way “Semitism.” He thus intertwined the same threads as his

18 Ibid., I.
19 Ibid., xxx.
21 Goldziher, Mythology among the Hebrews, xxix.
contemporaries—cultural history, people, language, territory, myth, and religion—but operated a reconfiguration. By doing so, he put an end to the exclusivity of the Hebrews in the Semitic family and set in motion a movement that brought them closer to the Egyptians, much more than in the works of the first Semitic philologists and inscribed monotheism in a Semitic, but not only Semitic, circulation.

From Semitism to the Language of Myth: The Names of the Gods and the Logic of Peoples

Goldziher didn’t quite agree with Max Müller’s idea of mythology as a disease of language, or as the product of a “diseased language,” the expression suggesting that myth transforms linguistic concepts into beings and stories, personifies and ossifies metaphors. But like Müller, he considered that the most important source for a science of myth could be found in language and, more specifically, in the names of the gods. There he followed Steinthal, who had used the work of the mythology specialist Adalbert Kuhn to develop the idea of an “originary polytheism of the Semites” confirmed by the numerous names of the divinity in the Semitic languages and even in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. Steinthal admitted that Sanskrit polytheism was different from Semitic polytheism, but he didn’t see in this fact a reason to consider, like Renan, who was following Max Müller on this point, that the Semitic gods were only derived from an originary Semitic monotheism, the Semites themselves being “incapable” of developing a mythology. Referring to Kuhn, Steinthal on the contrary operated a link between Prometheus (who gave fire to humanity) and Moses (who let water flow from a rock), a link that he defined as genetic more than comparative.

In a similar way, the names of the gods were supposed to allow Goldziher to show, with the help of etymology, as Steinthal had done for example with Samson and the sun, both words sharing the same root, that the figures of

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25 Heymann Steinthal, “Die Sage von Simson,” Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft 2 (1862), 129-178. Because of the following it seems important to remark here that Steinthal insisted much more on the sexual symbols in the myths
the Old Testament were, in their first stage, representations of natural forces perceived (or “apercipirt” in the vocabulary of Herbartian psychology) through anthropomorphization. Because for the mythological mind every action needs an obstacle or a counter-force, natural forces are always represented, according to Goldziher, as couples: sun and moon, night and day, etc. Duality thus appears as a fundamental feature of mythological thinking, while Goldziher considered that the opposition between good and evil took place only at a secondary level as the result of an ethicization of the primary duality. But as soon as he ventures into this field, things become very complicated, since every singular phenomenon in nature had, in a first stage, a thousand names, depending on the feature that was most present during one single act of perception. The sun for example had a huge number of different names. The process through which this “endless multitude of names” (endlose Polyonymie) is reduced—a thousand names then become only one—is called, following Steinthal, “fusion” (Verflechtung) and means a combination of psychic formations (i.e. representations) that have certain elements in common. At the end of this process only one word is associated with the natural phenomenon, the others still existing phonoetically but having lost their correspondence with the natural phenomenon. They become proper names, names of mythological figures. To illustrate his method, which consists in a reconstruction of the myth in all its strata, that is, all its stages of development, and in a psychological deconstruction of myths, Goldziher chooses one example. The Old Testament describes how Abraham was ready to sacrifice his only son Isaac because Elohim ordered him to, and how an angel sent by Jahve stopped him. This narrative is analysed by Goldziher as “the product of the religious polemic waged by the Prophets against the popular view of religion which still clung to the Canaanitish system.” The obstacle is no longer a natural force but another people, Abraham thus becoming a national figure in the struggle against

related to the creation of fire than Goldziher. This was noticed by Carl Gustav Jung in “Die Freudsche Hysterietheorie [1908],” in Gesammelte Werke 4: Freud und die Psychoanalyse (Olten / Freiburg: Walter Verlag, 1971), 28: “ausgezeichnete Arbeiten Steinthals in den Sechziger Jahren, welche eine in mythologischen und sprachgeschichtlichen Relikten allgemein verbreitete Sexualsymbolik nachweisen.”

26 Goldziher, Mythology among the Hebrews, xxv.
27 Ibid., 37.
28 Herbart had considered “fusion” (Verflechtung) and “densification” (Verdichtung) as fundamental processes of individual psychology, while Steinthal and Lazarus tried to transfer them to collective psychology and its productions, namely languages, myths, epics, etc.
29 Goldziher, Mythology among the Hebrews, 46.
the Canaanites. Behind this national figure Goldziher reconstructs what he calls a “cosmopolitan figure” and the first form of the myth: Abraham kills his son Isaac, meaning the father kills his laughing son, meaning the night kills its child, the day. If the first stage of the myth is thus strongly associated with language, the second stage is linked with the creation of national heroes, the “awakening of the national spirit.”

By linking the study of Semitic mythology to linguistics, psychology, and cultural history, as he explains in the methodological chapter of his book, Goldziher inscribed the relation between the Hebrews and other Semitic peoples into a new linguistic and psychological economy. As seen above, Goldziher was ready to accept many premises in Mythology Among the Hebrews, but one theory he opposed vehemently was that of the art historian Julius Braun who, in his Naturgeschichte der Sage. Rückführung aller religiösen Ideen, Sagen, Systeme auf ihren gemeinsamen Stammbaum und ihre letzte Wurzel (1864), had considered among other things that the “fundamental law of the nature of human mind is never to invent anything as long as one can copy.” It was on this ground that Braun tried to demonstrate that all existing legends came from a stock of Egyptian legends. Goldziher’s economy can be defined, on the contrary, as an economy of transformation and reinvention.

The real originality of Goldziher’s analysis of mythology among the Hebrews seems to lie in his application of the notion of “invention” to the history of Hebrew myths and religion, which constitutes a far-reaching application of the psychological and historical consequences of the philological study of the Bible (Bibelkritik) and the deconstructive tendencies in philology in general. In contradiction to Julius Braun’s economy of imitation, Goldziher considered invention to be the fundamental principle of culture and tradition. It may seem close to the way in which Steinthal considered that: “There is no substance or force named Judaism which makes of certain human beings Jews but some human beings produce Judaism among them, and they produce it in different ways, differently today than in the Middle Ages and also than in the time of the prophets.”

This remained an essential feature of Goldziher’s method: many years later, the Orientalist Theodor Nöldeke still had the feeling that sometimes his colleague went too far in seeking an “invention” in every tradition, in this case the

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31 Ibid., XXVIII.
legend of a saint. It is nevertheless this insistence on invention that allowed Goldziher to establish a link between different spheres (religious, political, poetic) and different sciences (history, linguistics, psychology), and to underline the circulation between different cultural areas.

**From the Language of Myth to the Language of Dreams: The Egyptian Mediation**

One feature of mythological thinking that Goldziher found difficult to explain was the contradiction that appears in the language of myths: for example, when “early” and “late” mean the same thing, etc. He linked these contradictions to the absence of causality in mythological thinking, but this explanation may seem insufficient. The same problem was tackled by the linguist Carl Abel. In his lexicological study on contradiction in the original words (*Über den Gegensinn der Urworte*, 1884), he developed the idea of a fundamental binarity in the early stages of human mind. Abel believed that in the Egyptian language especially one could find traces that primary words meant one thing and its exact opposite at the same time, thus having an antithetical meaning. If Goldziher saw in binarity a fundamental structure of mythological thinking and of original polyonomy, Abel thought that in a primary stage binarity was inscribed in the words themselves, the corresponding language knowing no contradiction. Abel's theory didn't encounter any approval among linguists, neither at his time nor later. It was contradicted by the linguist August Friedrich Pott in a lengthy book in which the latter underlined that Abel started with the Egyptian language but then took examples also from Latin, German, and English and thus demonstrated that his theory was grounded on the false hypothesis that “Indo-Europeans, Semites and Egyptians still constituted in prehistoric times a unified people with a common language” and that “the separation in the evolution of sounds took place only later.”

For Pott, who defended an etymological comparatism, it was an essential principle that the meaning grounded in the etymon was unitary and not differential. In 1956,

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it was Emile Benveniste who included a critical commentary on Abel in his essay on the function of language in Freud’s discovery of the unconscious.\footnote{35 Emile Benvéniste, “Remarques sur la fonction du langage dans la découverte freudienne,” *Psychanalyse: revue de la société française de psychanalyse* 1 (1956), 3-16; also In *Problèmes de linguistique générale* I (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 75-87.}

It is true that Abel’s short text is mostly known today as one of the sources of Freud’s work. The latter wrote a commentary on Abel’s book under the same title in 1910, because he believed that it explained the absence of contradiction in dreams, which he had reamarked upon in a note to his *Interpretation of Dreams* (*Die Traumdeutung*, 1899/1900). Following Abel’s *Urworte*, he explained in this article that the language of dreams was linked to a primary stage in the history of humanity,\footnote{36 Sigmund Freud, “Über den Gegensinn der Urworte,” *Jahrbuch für psychoan. psychopath. Forschung* 2,1 (1910), 179-184.} thus announcing the connection established later by some of his disciples between the language of dreams and the language of myths. Among those were also read the contributions of Steinthal on Semitic polytheism and mythology and those of Goldziher on mythology among the Hebrews. Otto Rank’s *The Birth of the Hero* and Karl Abraham’s *Dreams and Myths*, both published in 1909, integrate Freud’s developments on the language of dreams and combine them with folk psychology (*Völkerpsychologie*) and the science of myth (*Mythoswissenschaft*) applied to Semites, as these resulted from the critical confrontation with the distinction between Indo-Europeans and Semites.

Presenting his book as a “study in race psychology” (*Studie zur Völkerpsychologie*), Karl Abraham made use of Steinthal’s articles on Semitic mythology in his chapters on Prometheus (iv and x) and on Prometheus, Moses, and Simon (vii) and expressed his thanks to the latter for taking the defence of Kuhn’s analysis of the sexual origin and meaning of some myths.\footnote{37 Ibid., 32.} More generally, he was convinced that the method developed by Freud, which established the dream as the “fulfilment of a repressed wish,” could be applied to myths.\footnote{38 Karl Abraham, *Traum und Mythus. Eine Studie zur Völkerpsychologie* (Vienna/Leipzig: Franz Deuticke, 1909); *Dreams and Myths: a study in race psychology*, trans. by William A. White (New York: Journal of nervous and mental disease, 1913), 6.} He examined and rejected different objections: the difference between wake (myth) and sleep (dream), individual (dream) and collective (myth), one occurrence (dream) and repetition (myth, which is elaborated through several generations).
As for Otto Rank, he explained that his book on the birth of the hero, of which Moses was a paradigmatic example, had been inspired by Freud's considerations on the interpretation of dreams. He nevertheless began by reviewing the main philological or anthropo-philological explanations given to explain analogies between myths about kings, founders, etc. that could be found among different peoples worldwide. As was the case for Goldziher, Rank's main opponent was Julius Braun and his economy of imitation. He did not see any necessity to choose between Adolf Bastian's notion of universal "elementary ideas" (Elementarideen) and Theodor Benfey's notion of a center from which myths radiate through borrowing and migration (Entlehnung und Wanderung). He did not want to consider, as a cultural anthropologist would, migrations or original community; what he wanted was to seek the origin of these common myths in psychic life, by transferring the method of Freud's interpretation of dreams to myths:

The manifestation of the intimate relation between dream and myth—not only in regard to the contents, but also as to the form and motor forces of this and many other, more particularly pathological psyche structures—, (...) entirely justifies the interpretation of the myth as dream of the masses of the people, which I have recently shown elsewhere ("Der Künstler", 1907). At the same time, the transference of the method, and in part also of the results, of Freud's technique of dream interpretation to the myths would seem to be justifiable, as was defended and illustrated in an example, by Abraham, in his paper on “Dream and Myth” (1909).

For Rank, myths were a product of the human imagination (and as such reminiscences of infantile representations). They had no astral origin, then projected on nature. Those who elaborated these explanations—he quotes Max Müller and Goldziher’s Mythology among the Hebrews—were embarrassed, according to him, by histories of murder and incest and found consolation in interpreting them as personifications of natural phenomena rather than as child fantasies.

40 Ibid., 6-7.
41 Ibid., 10.
Moses was one of the heroes whose legend Rank explored. When Freud in turn analysed the myth of Moses and the origins of monotheism, he revived his reflections on the absence of contradiction in the language of dream and its link to primeval stages in the history of humanity, further associating it to the question of the birth of a new religion and people as "dream of the masses of the people" in the sense of Rank.

Moses: From the Language of Myth to Cultural Memory

One of Freud's main sources on the Hebrews was the historian Eduard Meyer (Die Israeliten und ihre Nachbarstämme, 1906). He also used Rank's Birth of the Hero, but not Goldziher himself. Nevertheless, one may ask how the considerations of Freud on Moses and monotheism relate to Goldziher's revision of Semitic philology in Mythology among the Hebrews and its concern with the essential duality in the language of myth, his reading of the name(s) as traces of circulation and of texts as archive of conflicts. This helps on one side to understand the potential of Goldziher's science of myth derived from philology and psychology and on the other to stress Freud's use of a philological method but also its transformation in a pathological perspective.

Goldziher's understanding and use of philology introduced a hiatus into the reading of canonical corpora. Drawing from the legacy of Biblical criticism and Homeric philology, which he associated with psychology, he developed a specific method in the reading of sources. It is important to remember here that in their study of textual corpora, philologists were aware of the time gap between, on the one hand, the moment of creation, or recitation, of these texts and, on the other, the moment when they were written down, the collage and/or unifying of the various versions. Goldziher, who was especially conscious of sedimentation in cultures, as Steinthal noticed in his review of Der Mythos bei den Hebräern, even complexified this indirect lecture of texts and the seeking for traces it allows. Every set of canonical texts can thus be seen as the result of three phases: the time when they were written, the time when

43 Ibid., 16.
they were rearranged, and the time when they are read. Goldziher believed that one can never reconstruct the initial stage and the initial meaning, but that the traces of rearrangements reveal the meaning the text had for those who transformed it, or the meaning they wanted to give it. The temporality of the text is thus also characterized by an inherent multiplicity, and the figure of Moses becomes a figure of memory allowing the study of historical memory, as shown by Jan Assmann.45

In between the lines, Goldziher discovered traces of censure, repression, and rearrangement resulting from political and religious conflicts. This is what he did, as seen above, when he analysed the transformation of figures of Semitic mythology into national heroes of the Hebrews (for example Abraham), but what he would also later turn into a principle of his science of Islam (Islamwissenschaft) as described admiringly by his colleague and friend, the Orientalist Carl Heinrich Becker:

The enormous collections of hadîth are deprived of their direct historical value, but through this they become nevertheless first rank indirect historical sources; the facts they are relating are not historical truth, but the tendencies that speak through them are. Political and religious fights are fought with the weapons of hadîth. This being recognized, the possibility to treat the religious history of Islam in a truly scientific manner was given to us for the first time.46

Like Goldziher, Freud believes that truth lies hidden in between the lines of the text and seeks traces in the disfigured text: “Thus almost everywhere there can be found striking omissions, disturbing repetitions, palpable contradictions, signs of things the communication of which was never intended.”47 The case of Moses becomes the cornerstone of a new philological, but not only philological, paradigm associating Judaism, archive and psychoanalysis, as has been underlined by Jacques Derrida.48

For Goldziher and for Freud the name itself functions as an archive: the names of the gods in the case of Goldziher, or the name of Moses himself in the case of Freud, bear the traces of complex circulations. They introduce confusion in the logic of identity, which was characteristic of the older philological

47 Freud, Moses and Monotheism, 70.
tradition. The name of Moses functions as a sign, but showing that Moses was an Egyptian, it points out an essential duality and reveals that it is someone coming from the outside who became the leader of the Hebrews, allowed them to become a people, and gave them their god. Just like Goldziher shows that the names of the gods are multiple, and Abel shows that the Egyptian “Urworte” bear contradiction within them and have a dual nature; Freud’s analysis of the name of Moses reveals that monotheism is double in its Egyptian-Hebrew nature. The logic of identity as a logic of unicity (one people, one language, one territory, and even one religion) is subverted. Instead, we must envision a fundamental duality stemming from the first double nature of Moses:

With this I have come to an end, my sole purpose having been to fit the figure of an Egyptian Moses into the framework of Jewish history. I may now express my conclusion in the shortest formula: To the well-known duality of that history—two peoples who fuse together to form one nation, two kingdoms into which this nation divides, two names for the Deity in the Source of the Bible—we add two new ones: the founding of two new religions, (…) two founders of religion (…).49

It is this double character that determines the psychic energy residing in this tradition, the circulation it allows, and the “interminability” of Judaism.50

This question of “interminability” wasn’t discussed directly by Goldziher, but it played a certain role in Steinthal’s study of the “return of the legend,” which also combined philology and psychology. Steinthal began by recounting the fact that in the turmoil of 1848 a certain legend, that everyone thought had been forgotten, was revived and transformed with some new variations.51 This fact is interpreted as a proof of the existence of a collective memory, but Steinthal concludes that it is very difficult to determine whether the latter is conscious or unconscious. Freud will address this question of latency in his Moses, but in a clearly pathological perspective. There, the trace leads above all to a trauma and is thus seen as a symptom. If Freud considers that “the distortion of a text is not unlike a murder,”52 the beginning of a new tradition is related to a murder, not

49  Freud, Moses and Monotheism, 84.
52  Freud, Moses and Monotheism, 70.
only in a figurative sense but in reality. For Freud, the rearrangements in the text are the result of a repression due to the traumatic memory of Moses’ murder.

Both Freud and Goldziher were working with memory, archive and the name(s). Freud’s analysis, leading to the “fourth humiliation” afflicted on humanity by modern thinking—Moses was an Egyptian—seems the most provoking, but in fact, in its consequences, it has a very classical outlook: not so much because Moses is a hero, because the story of his life resembles a novel, or because the continuity of the Jewish people is guaranteed by a certain “substance,” but above all because in his view monotheism stands at the beginning of a movement leading from the renunciation of instincts (Triebverzicht) to mind (Geist) and to language (Sprache) as the most important steps in becoming human. In some way, one could apply Goldziher’s understanding of tradition as invention to Freud and say that the latter is reinventing the Jewish tradition, maintaining and confirming the link.

Strangely enough, as has been noticed by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi among others, saying that Moses was an Egyptian doesn’t dissolve the Jewish people in the case of Freud but gives it a new solidity and confirms the link of Freud himself with the Ancient Hebrews.53 One may notice here that Freud, who wrote these texts on Moses between 1934 and 1938, is far less historicising or following a constructivist perspective than Goldziher. He speaks of the Jewish “substance” and does not always distinguish between the Ancient Hebrews and contemporary Jews, thus presupposing a much stronger continuity. But the common point between him and Goldziher is that by studying the Ancient Hebrews and their relations to their neighbours, they both seek to understand the deep functioning of tradition.

Carl Heinrich Becker said that the aim of Goldziher’s Islamic studies was to understand “the essence of tradition” (das Wesen der Tradition).54 And we must recall here that, far from being limited to the past, the new, reconfigured “Semitism” of Goldziher’s study on myth gained some reality for him during the journey he undertook to Istanbul, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Cairo from September 1873 to April 1874.55 While Goldziher began to work on Mythology among the Hebrews in 1873 while still in Budapest and Vienna, he continued

53 See Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses*.
writing during his “Oriental, Islamic year,” as he called it. This book therefore not only results from his earlier scholarly studies—in particular on Arabic culture before Islam, which allowed him to reconstruct Hebrew mythology from Arabic sources—and his reflections on the philosophy of religion, but also from a certain identification with the “Orientals.” Thus, a strange relation of reciprocity emerges between his interpretation of the Old Testament as transformation of a Semitic mythological material into a heroic national narrative and his support for the emerging Arabic nationalism against European imperialism.

Strangely enough once more, one could thus also apply to Goldziher a Freudian interpretation and say that he illustrates the “boomerang effect” Freud speaks about when referring to the fact that some people think that if the Hebrews received monotheism from the Egyptians, then before that the Egyptians themselves might have received it from some esoteric Oriental tradition (or mysteries), to which it returned with Moses. In some way, Goldziher, as founder of the science of Islam (Islamwissenschaft), then appears as a kind of inverted Moses.

Bibliography


“Weiter können wir die Verkettung nicht verfolgen, aber wenn diese ersten Stücke richtig erkannt sind, dann ist die monotheistische Idee bumerangartig in das Land ihrer Herkunft zurückgekommen,” ibid. 557.


