

Freud, Oedipus and the Hebrew Bible¹

KALMAN J. KAPLAN, Ph.D. is Associate Editor of the *Journal of Psychology and Judaism*, and is on the editorial board of *Omega*. He has published widely in the area of Biblical psychology and in the area of suicide and suicide prevention. He is presently Professor of Psychology at Wayne State University and Adjunct Professor at Spertus College of Judaic Studies. He is a licensed clinical psychologist and is Director of the Suicide Research Center at Columbia-Michael Reese Hospital and Medical Center. He is coauthor of *A Psychology of Hope: An Antidote to the Suicidal Pathology of Western Civilization*, published by Praeger in 1993, *Jewish Approaches to Suicide, Martyrdom, and Euthanasia*, published by Jason Aronson in 1997, *Living with Schizophrenia* to be published by Accelerated Development in 1997, and is author of *TILT: Teaching Individuals to Live Together*, to be published by Taylor and Francis in 1998.



DANIEL ALGOM, Ph.D. is a professor of psychology at Tel Aviv University. He completed his graduate studies at Bar Ilan University, then spent a few years at the Pierce Laboratory at Yale University, first as a post-doctoral associate, later as a visiting professor. Dr. Algom has published extensively in the fields of psychophysics and cognitive psychology. He is also interested in the history of psychology, and has published a book on the subject.



The current paper examines the question of why Freud employed Greek rather than Hebrew foundation legends, specifically the story of Oedipus, as a basis for psychoanalysis. Freud's choice of Oedipus emanates from his deterministic view of the universe, paralleling the Greek rather than the Biblical story of creation. In the Biblical account God precedes and creates nature with no sign of an Oedipal conflict. In the Greek account, nature precedes the gods and the Oedipal conflict is inherent. Freud's choice has implications for his view of human psychology.

¹Presented at the Annual Meetings of The American Psychological Association, Toronto, Ontario, August, 1996.

It has been said that Freud's greatest discovery was the Oedipus Complex. Its central role in psychoanalysis is unquestioned. It comprises the third stage in Freud's view of psychosexual development and is critical to explaining how the individual identifies with his same sex parent and how the superego is formed. Indeed it is an adage of psychoanalytic theory that "the superego is heir to the Oedipus Complex."

Yet over the past forty years, the question has emerged as to what the implications would be of substituting a narrative from the Hebrew Bible for this Greek story. Erich Wellisch (1954) was the first to raise this question in his pioneering work "Isaac and Oedipus." As the title of the book implies, Wellisch proposes a Biblical approach to psychotherapy wherein "the Akedah" (Abraham's binding of Isaac and his ultimate non-sacrifice) is offered as an alternative to the legend of Oedipus. For Wellisch, the Biblical story offers a resolution of the father-son relationship not available to the Greek civilization. A covenant of love replaces the cold peace between father and son emerging out of the incomplete resolution of the Oedipus Complex. Much the same argument has been made by Kalman Kaplan and his associates (Kaplan, Schwartz, and Markus Kaplan, 1984, Kaplan, Kaplan, and Schwartz, 1993) and has been suggested by Yosef Yerushalmi (1991) in his recent book "Freud's Moses." More recently James Grotstein (1994) has raised this same question in his essay "Why Oedipus and not Christ?"

The question immediately leaps out at us as to why this alternative approach did not occur to Freud himself, who after all was a Jew, even if in his own terms he was a "Godless Jew." In other words why was Freud drawn to the Greek legend of Oedipus rather than a Biblical alternative as the basis of psychoanalytic theory? And, in general, why are the master stories of psychoanalysis borrowed from Greek mythology rather than from the Hebrew Scriptures? Freud's choice seems odd even on programmatic grounds because the latter tradition was better known to the general public than the former and could thus further more effectively the cause of psychoanalysis. A widespread misconception notwithstanding, Yerushalmi's work makes abundantly clear that Freud was no stranger to the Hebrew tradition, and Freud's obsessive attempts to keep psychoanalysis from being seen as a "Jewish National Affair" will not do either. Freud's fascination with the Greek Oedipus must have deeper roots.

The question is: Why did Freud believe the legend of Oedipus to have universal applicability to the human condition rather than a narrative emerging from the Hebrew Bible? Freud undoubtedly observed the Oedipal configuration in his patients. But this too provides an incomplete explanation of why Freud was so theoretically obsessed with the Oedipus Complex.

Examination of the Olympian story of creation (i.e. the Greek theogony) provides us with a key to understanding Freud's focus on the Oedipus Complex. In the Greek theogony, nature exists before the gods. Sky (the male) marries Earth (the female) and produces, first the hundred handed monsters, and then the Cyclopes. (Apollodorus, 1:1-2) The family pathology then immediately commences, as the father takes the children away from the mother. "Sky tied them (the Cyclopes) up and threw them into Tartarus, a dark and gloomy place in Hades as far from earth as earth is from the sky and again had children by Earth, the so-called Titans." (Apollodorus, 1:3). Such action of course breeds reaction and Earth repays Sky in spades.

Grieved at the loss of the children who were thrown into Tartarus, Earth persuaded the Titans to attack their father and gave Cronus a steel sickle. They all set upon him, except for Ocean, and Cronus cut off his fathers genitals and threw them into the sea... From the drops of the spurting flood were born the Furies: Alecto, Tisiphone, and Megaera. Having thus eliminated their Father the Titans brought back their brother who had been hurled to Tartarus and gave the rule to Cronus (Apollodorus, 1:4).

Thus, the Oedipal conflict is born and indeed, ingrained through the Furies into the fabric of the natural world. Indeed, it seems to be an unchanging law of nature, foretold by Earth and Sky. When Earth and Sky foretold that Cronus would lose the rule to his own son, he devoured his offspring as they were born (Apollodorus 1:5). The infant Zeus is saved through a ruse, as Cronus was misled by being given a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes instead. When Zeus reaches adulthood he makes war on Cronus and the Titans, (Apollodorus 2:1) fulfilling the prophecy of Earth and Sky.

The family pattern emerging from these stories is self-evident. First, husband and wife are estranged from each other. The husband is disengaged and hurtful. The wife is enmeshing and vengeful. Family triangulation occurs, pitting mother and son against father. Generation boundaries are blurred and transgressed. Moreover, the pattern seems a natural consequence of creation, and is destined to repeat itself cyclically throughout the generations.

The centrality of the Oedipal conflict to the Greek conception of creation is clear. It is indeed a natural law, and it is quite understandable that Freud focuses on it as a universal motif, given his strictly deterministic outlook. Indeed the Olympian creation story gives a much clearer statement of the Oedipal conflict than the legend of Oedipus itself. The creation story shows the conflict to be an integral and necessary part of the entire Greek world-view. Again, the question is why Freud is drawn to the Greek story

of creation rather than its Biblical counterpart which is, of course, much better known and markedly different.

In the Hebrew story, God exists prior to nature and in fact creates the heaven and the earth. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." (Gen. 1:1). God then proceeds to create order out of chaos. First, lightness is divided from darkness (Gen. 1:24). God then divides water from the land (Gen. 1:9). At this point, God begins to prepare this world for the entrance of man. First He has the earth bring forth vegetation (Gen. 1:11). He then places living creatures in the sea and fowls in the air (Gen. 1:20). Now God places living creatures on the earth, cattle, creeping things, and other beasts (Gen. 1:24).

The world is now ready for man in God's plan. God creates man, His ultimate handiwork, in His own image and gives him dominion over all in nature He has created.

And God created man in His own image in the image of God created He them. And God blessed them and God said unto them: "Be fruitful, and multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth. And God said: "Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed to you it shall be for food (Gen. 1:27-29).

In a second creation story, some lines further ahead, man is specifically described as being formed from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). Woman in turn is described as being taken from the rib of man (Gen. 2:22). And the man said: "This is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called Woman because she was taken out of man" (Gen. 2:23). Certainly there is no sign of an Oedipal conflict here nor any antagonism between man and woman such as exists in the Greek story of creation. So the question must be again asked why Freud was not influenced by this Hebrew view of creation rather than its Greek counterpart.

The answer to this question has been dramatically provided by the work of Lev Shestov, the largely ignored Russian-Jewish philosopher in his great work *Athens and Jerusalem*. European man, writes Shestov, even religious European man, is basically Greek rather than Hebrew. He shies away from the Biblical proclamation that God created the heaven and the earth, instead subordinating Him to the very nature and material laws He has created. To put it still differently, the creator of the world has himself become subordinate to Necessity, which He created and which, without at all seeking or discovering, has become the sovereign of the universe (Shestov, p. 85).

The Greek and Hebrew creation stories embody two radically different world-views. The former is deterministic, the latter is intrinsically open to

the possibility of change and transformation. The two views are perhaps best reflected in the role of God(s) in the respective traditions. Bruno Snell, in his classic work, *The Discovery of the Mind* (Snell, 1982, 1935) makes the distinction between the God of the Bible and a Greek deity clear and powerful. Before the Biblical God, nothing is impossible: He can cancel the natural order of things, alter it in any number of ways, or, indeed, create something out of nothing, just the way He created nature. A Greek god is confined to acts of precipitating coincidences, occurrences that are of low *a priori* probability, but that nonetheless rest completely within the confines of natural law. The upshot is embedded in the two creation stories we recounted: Nature precedes the gods in the Greek version, but God precedes nature in the Hebrew account. The differences in the respective orderings is not just chronological, but logical and psychological as well.

The radical conception that God created nature and is thus able to change what seems to be immutable natural laws is incompatible with that much more deterministic view that nature creates the gods and in fact governs them. Freud correctly understood that the latter, deterministic, alternative was immutably tied to an Oedipal conflict. "Earth and Sky foretold that Cronus would lose his rule to his own son." Freud had no ultimate faith in the transformative powers of the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob and thus was not able to use Biblical master stories as a basis for psychoanalysis. In Yerushalmi's terms "Like Sisyphus pushing his rock, Oedipus and Laius must contend forever. At one point in the cycle the father must be slain by the son, at another, that of the return of the repressed, the father returns, the return is only illusion, for the cycle will begin again" (Yerushalmi, p. 95). That ever-repeating cycle represents Freud's tragic understanding of the psychological processes intrinsic to a deterministic universe.

May contemporary psychology recover an understanding of the Biblical message of freedom necessary to overcome this deterministic and tragic view. Then truly, the words of the prophet Malachi will ring out:

...And He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children,
And the heart of the children to their fathers... (Malachi 3: 22-24)

REFERENCES

- Apollodorus. (1976). *The Library*. M. Simpson (Tr.) Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Freud, S. (1912-13). *Totem and Taboo*, Standard Edition of the complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 13, J. Strachey (Tr. and Ed.) London: The Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1914). *The Moses of Michaelangelo*, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 13, J. Strachey (Tr. and Ed.) London: The Hogarth Press.

- Freud, S. (1939). *Moses and Monotheism*, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 23, J. Strachey (Tr. and Ed.) London: The Hogarth Press.
- Gay, P. (1987). *A Godless Jew: Freud, Atheism and the Making of Psychoanalysis*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Grotstein, J. (1994). Why Oedipus and not Christ? Presented at the 102nd Annual Meetings of the American Psychiatric Association. Los Angeles, California, August, 1994.
- The Holy Scriptures*. (1917). 2 vols. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America.
- Kaplan, K. J., Schwartz, M. W. and Markus-Kaplan, M. (1994). *The Family: Biblical and Psychological Foundations*. New York: Human Sciences Press.
- Kaplan, K. J. and Schwartz, M. W. (1993). *A Psychology of Hope: An Antidote to the Suicidal Pathology of Western Civilization*. Westport, Conn., Praeger.
- Shestov, L. (1966). *Athens and Jerusalem*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Snell, B. (1982/1935). *The Discovery of the Mind*. New York: Dover.
- Wellisch, E. (1954). *Isaac and Oedipus: Studies in Biblical Psychology of the Sacrifice of Isaac*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Yerushalmi, Y. (1991). *Freud's Moses. Judaism: Terminable and Interminable*. New Haven, Conn. Yale University Press.