Jan Assmann. Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination. Cambridge UK, etc.: Cambridge University Press; 2011. ISBN 978-0-521-18802-9. \$29.99.

The importance of Jan Assmann's numerous forays into historical thinking, historical consciousness and religious spirituality has become known recently to a wide body of contemplators of the human condition. It has been, however, a slow process, owing to the gradual decline of German as an international language. It is not surprising that many advances in our knowledge have been impeded by the dearth of international scholarship written in languages other than English. This is sometimes encountered in the Anglo-American world owing to its present linguistic dominance. One particular case involves the post Logico-Positivistic school of English speaking philosophers, another is the virtual absence of Luhmannian Sociology among the same speaking community. The same may be said for Assmann's work in Geistgeschichte and the communality of human remembrance. This recent translation of his 1992 volume, Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen (Munich: C. H. Beck; 1992), is yet another example where Egyptologists may have read the original, but few outside Assmann's original field of expertise knew of it, owing to the ever-present monolingual attributes of modern Americans. Fortunately, this criticism can now be deflected, owing to the excellent translation ability of Henry Wilson, who, surprisingly, is not given credit on the title page.² This is a serious error on the part of the publisher.

To review such a work after reading the original so many years ago, as well as covering the follow-up studies on Cultural Memory by the same author, has been a pleasant experience to this writer. By affording us glimpses, detailed to be sure, of the human structure of memory as revealed mainly in writing, Assmann's studies, though somewhat dated now, nonetheless can be viewed as a history of the concept of the social and political imagination of remembrance. Hence, it cannot be usefully criticized from the vantage point of the presence or absence of this or that reference, or an ensuing scholarly disputation, and the like. A different approach is necessary.

Assmann commences his work by providing the reader with his two main predecessors, Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Vansina. By and large, it is the former that occupies Assmann's time. The research connection of Halbwachs to the Holy Land, Jerusalem, was by no means an outlying interest of that sociologist. However, it provided Assmann with a helpful entry into the vagaries of the *ars memoriae* that the Greeks, Hebrews and the Egyptians practiced. Useful criticisms are made in this book of the wrong-headed hypotheses of Eric A. Havelock's hyper-philohellenic

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¹ One can, however, refer to the English edition of Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*, trs. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press; 2006). Cf. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, "Memories of the Nile: Egyptian Traumas and Communication Technologies in Jan Assmann's Theory of Cultural Memory," *New German Critique* 96 (2005) 103-33.

² I have caught only one slip: "Armana" for "Amarna" (p. 194, n. 48).

argumentations, least of all of that author's inability to grasp the simple fact that all cultures formulated "history" and, indeed, talked if not wrote incessantly about it.³

The relationship of written communication, constrained within the boundaries of historical consciousness — for is that not what history reflects? — comes to the fore within this presentation, and Assmann does not shirk from the aim of his endeavor in an effort to acquaint us with the most disparate methods of the human memory. Although psychological ramifications are, for the most part, left aside — this work is, after all, a hallmark of a literary specialist — Assmann presents his evidence in an almost effortlessly way. The importance of culture for human survival, and by this I mean in the "correct" Darwinian way, is not explained thoroughly. Whereas Assmann sees with clarity the necessity of memory for cultural transmission over generations and its great significance in the preservation of one's individual and/or corporate identity, he seems to avoid linking those perceptions with their primary causes. If in Chapter 5 ancient Israel is associated with the "invention of religion," this is not proven because the author believes that modern religion commenced there. In fact, Assmann places his religious sensibilities upon transcendence instead of immanence, and sees the latter as reflecting the primary aims of cosmotheism and the former, for him the more significant of the two, to be a product of monotheism.

Here we must sidestep these issues because they are primarily ones of personal nuances and feelings. That is to say, the fair critic comes away from reading this book with the distinct impression that Assmann has mastered many a philosophic and religious approach without bothering to examine the core data of history; namely, the multifarious traces of humanity's records about itself. The author's reliance on a few secondary sources — first rate to be sure — most certainly will annoy and frustrate the open-minded historian. For example, Assmann repeats himself by including many scholarly references that he has done over many years. The discussions centered on Hittite historiography depend, as I have come to expect, a great deal upon Hubert Cancik, Assmann's former colleague at Heidelberg. (The same may be said with regard to Assmann's views on Cicero and Varro.) The connections between ethnic consciousness, the use of memory (both oral and written) and the power sense of a blind destructive monotheism — Christianity and Islam come to mind — are never explored. The dangers of the Prophet, as well as the Revolutionary, in contrast to the statesman, are shunned.⁴ Thus on the issue of an "Ecumenical Age," Eric Vogelin, a continuator of Arnold Toynbee, receives credit; modern Roman historians are avoided (p. 208). With regard to Christianity, has not Greg Wolf said it all: "The pagan gods did not wither away, they were murdered." 5

In one way this scintillating study remains, as Assmann's non-Egyptological works evince, an avoidance of *terra firma*. Instead, we are transported to a land in the

³ Havelock's understanding of ancient scripts and their languages is naïve, to say the least. At the minimum, there was little effort expended by him upon ancient (or modern) Chinese; the same may be said with regard to cuneiform scripts (Akkadian, Sumerian or Hittite, to list three prominent examples). This scholar lacked basic socio-historical training.

⁴ Classically, Henry Kissinger, The *World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-22* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin; 1957).

⁵ Greg Wolf, "How a man can be a god," *Times Literary Supplement* 5689 (April 13 2010) 25.

clouds where no great cleavages and vicious destruction and human extirpation are allowed to be discussed. True, the idolatry of the Egyptians can be contrasted with the "pure" if sterile concentration upon "the one," whether it be reflected in the Old Testament, Schiller, Karl Leonhard Reinhold, etc. Yet the wars of religion that such a simple premise engendered, and still do, are shunned. It is as if we see Athens from the eyes of Socrates and not dramatically from the pen of Thucydides or humorously reflected in the plays of Aristophanes. I myself have frequently found myself wondering why Assmann shuns conflict. Yes, there is fine detail provided by the author when he sketches the different "memory figures of confrontation" between Egypt and Israel (mythic to be sure) on page 189. But what about the rampant warfare engendered by the expanding Israelites and directed again the local Canaanites? Or the virulent hatred shown to Akhenaton by his immediate successors. Of course, such a perspective would entail the examination of the archaeological and historical data to such a minute degree that Assmann's themes would quickly be submerged by the historical data. It is as if for history writing Hegel instead of Ranke were preferred.

On the other hand, the reader interested in the twin issues of Egypt, its religion as seen from the outside, and the comparison between Egyptian monotheism, brief though it was, and that of the Hebrews can turn to his work with profit. After all, Assmann has provided his audience with two previous exemplary studies on these issues: Moses the Egyptian and the study on Jehova-Isis; Indeed, there is a third that is also applicable to the themes of this "memory book." But it is when we follow Assmann far away from his overarching concept of Cultural Memory that, I fear, the voyage risks foundering. How much is ancient Greece to be credited with "disciplined thinking," part of the title to the final chapter, for example, and not also to other peoples? What does "disciplined" mean, and how was that stricture applied in antiquity? Concrete evidence of a more sizeable nature is needed to support this hypothesis. Perhaps the "birth of history," whatever that means, was a product of the "spirit of the law," and thus is applicable to the spiritual nature of the ancient Hebrews, and just possibly for the Greeks, but do not these universalistic claims lack evidence? We need to embark on a far-ranging historical trip through space and time to see how amorphous many of Assmann's seminal presentations are. This is not to say that he subscribes to many of these generalizations. Yet the absence of much evidence — historical analysis is sparsely presented in the footnotes — combined with his overly extensive historical purview lead me to wonder whether this grandiose effort needed a series of empirically fixed points in order to support the farranging presuppositions offered.

⁶ Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press; 1997); and "Jehova-Isis; the Mysteries of Egypt and the Quest for Natural Religion in the Age of Enlightenment," in Irene A. Bierman (ed.), Egypt and the Fabrication of European Identity (Los Angeles: UCLA Near East Center Colloquium Series; 1995) 35-95.

⁷ Herrschaft und Heil: politische Theologie in Altägypten, Israel und Europe (Munich: C Hanser; 2000).

Assmann's study on Cultural Memory provides a stepping-stone to his further temporal and spatial disquisitions. But the latter can be questioned, if merely from an empirically-minded historian. We have been given a sparkling edifice of ancient and modern historical thinking, but lacking are the sources. To this critic that was to be expected. After all, when one is in the clouds of thought stubbing a toe on reality seems puerile and insignificant. But even Mary Baker Eddy realized life from such an incident. I enjoy the intellectual exercise practiced by Assmann, but I need more fare, historically speaking. Perhaps the author's desire to separate the volume into two parts, with "the theoretical basis," Cultural Memory, placed first, made excellent sense. On the other had, the second part, "Case Studies," presents a different aspect which, to be sure, is connected with the earlier section. Yet is there only a small thread which connects the former to the latter? Although Assmann's personal expertise is reflected in Egypt (Chapter 4), and his life-long juxtaposition of that culture's edifices of memory (pyramids, tombs) or culturally prominent literary texts (wisdom literature, liturgies) is always enjoyable to read, even if one disagrees with his wide-sweeping conclusions, it remains the case that he repeatedly juxtaposes pharaonic civilization with that of ancient Israel and Greece, in this work and elsewhere.

Hence, the reader must be aware of this author's intentions and methods of research. An expert can scoff at the statement that "The outstanding feature of the Egyptian late period temple is probably its richness of décor" (p. 161), for which there is no proof. But Assmann's subsequent discussion of temple requirements or temple law plus the societal aspects of this phase of Egyptian culture is what matters. Equally, one might question the entire scheme devoted to the "legacy of Moses," and argue that all of this is post-Exilic reconstruction, aimed at sustaining a greatly weakened people with a new identify, indeed a rebirth. Yet modern archaeological research has effectively provided a major refutation of earlier Biblical historians' reconstruction of ancient pre-Solomonic Hebrew society. Therefore, questions surround Assmann's understanding of the role of Cultural Memory in Israel during the latter half of the first millennium BC.

But it is within the theoretical-sociological dimension of Cultural Memory, covered in Part I, that Assmann excels. He has proven to be more than a continuator of Maurice Halbwachs, and even if his contribution in the Alexandrian orientation of the edited volume by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter; 2008), remains small, his importance is far greater than would be realized by the introductory researcher. Truly, after Halbwachs, and with Vasina in between, Jan Assmann looms prodigiously.

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