REVIEWS


In this modest volume, the author, a pre-eminent Egyptologist interested in the religious and intellectual aspects of Egyptian history, explains the enigmatic meaning of the unveiling of the statue of Isis at Sais. Assmann's detailed analysis of the iconographic aspects of Schiller's 1795 poem is a remarkable exegesis of the Greek, Roman, Renaissance, Early Modern, and 18th century interpretations of an ancient Egyptian concept and its later transformations. Rather than concentrate upon the original native attributes of Sais and its goddess Neith, whom the Greeks equated with Isis, Assmann discusses the motif of the veiled image and its subsequent unveiling. The initiary aspects of the act, as Schiller's poem and various pictorial representations indicate, contain the double theme of initiation and mystery.

Assmann pursues Plutarch's comments about the image ('I am everything which was, is, and will be') over time and space. In contrast to Plutarch, Schiller equated the deity with Wisdom, not with Isis or Athena. The iconographic tradition preceding Schiller's foray into the mystical ideas of the Freemasons is likewise connected to the literary: witness Assmann's remarks with respect to Pausanius and Apuleius. As for the original of Schiller's interest, Assmann correctly turns back to the 1790 essay, 'The Legation of Moses' as well as Immanuel Kant's comments. Ideas of the German philosopher Karl Leonhard Reinhold are also cited, but the reader will find the references to Beethoven especially striking. Assmann includes Beethoven's brief handwritten words regarding the key sentence 'I am everything .....'.

This essay by Assmann is a more specific analysis of what he presented earlier in his brilliant work, *Moses the Egyptian* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1997, 125-39.) In that book Assmann traced Schiller's concept of the sublime to the unveiling myth. Here, the essential background and interpretations are restated with further information about the late 18th century's concentration upon the significance of the image itself. I therefore suspect that Assmann realized that this study, brief though it may be, was too digressive for inclusion in his earlier volume.
Concepts are raised here besides those of memnohistory and the conceptual constellation of Moses-Egypt-revealed religion. That is to say, these new ideas of Assmann round out the initial analysis of 1997 while focusing upon the non-Egyptological material. The reader, however, will find that both studies coincide to no small degree, even as to the duplication of the pictorial representations of the veiled image. Thus it is hard to appreciate this work independently of the first.

Assmann’s proficiencies, again demonstrated in his current research, are his depth of cross-cultural analysis and his mastery of the religious thought and symbolism of many cultures. Few scholars have such insight. In fact, the author’s decades-long research into every aspect of religion has made him the ideal person to tackle such problems. Egyptian Gnosticism in conjunction with Freemasonry are simply grist for his intellectual mill. According to Assmann, in Schiller’s ballad the young initiate saw Death, or to be more precise, his death, the unveiled truth of the condition humana, an interpretation that not only resolves the problematic crux of the poem but also connects the words to the older and original concepts of Isis, mummification, and the Afterlife.

I recommend this short essay to anyone interested in the vagaries of intellectual thought and its interrelationship to iconography. It is of great importance in deciphering the ambiguous puzzle first presented in Greek by Plutarch and then expanded by later Classical and Early Modern European scholars and artists. Equally, however, Assmann’s work reveals the necessity of carefully tracing the reinterpretations and shifts in meaning over the centuries of a native Egyptian source. For students of religion, mysticism, Renaissance conceptions about the ancient world, and German thought during the Romantic Era, this slim volume is a desideratum.

Anthony Spalinger
University of Auckland