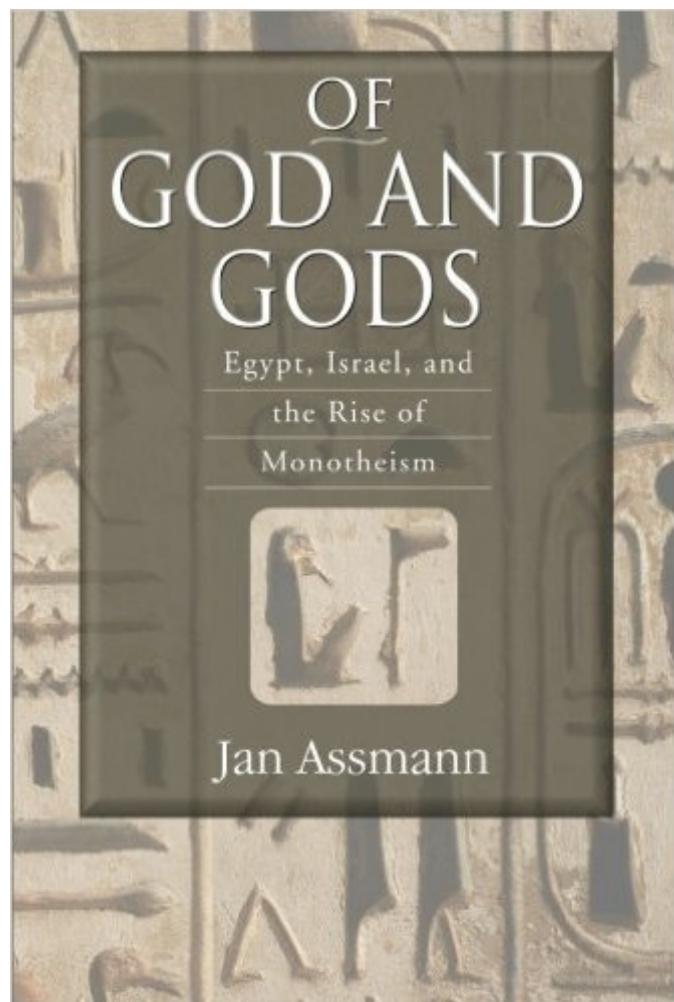


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Of God And Gods: Egypt, Israel, And The Rise Of Monotheism (George L. Mosse Series)



Synopsis

For thousands of years, our world has been shaped by biblical monotheism. But its hallmark--a distinction between one true God and many false gods--was once a new and radical idea. Of God and Gods explores the revolutionary newness of biblical theology against a background of the polytheism that was once so commonplace. Jan Assmann, one of the most distinguished scholars of ancient Egypt working today, traces the concept of a true religion back to its earliest beginnings in Egypt and describes how this new idea took shape in the context of the older polytheistic world that it rejected. He offers readers a deepened understanding of Egyptian polytheism and elaborates on his concept of the Mosaic distinction, which conceives an exclusive and emphatic Truth that sets religion apart from beliefs shunned as superstition, paganism, or heresy. Without a theory of polytheism, Assmann contends, any adequate understanding of monotheism is impossible

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It's ironic but also appropriate that an Egyptian specialist has written a definitive defense of the revolutionary character of ancient Hebrew monotheism (contra the "evolutionary" view that monotheism is a "natural" development of polytheism, via the recognition that "all gods are one") His key claim, here and in his other books, is what he calls the "Mosaic distinction," that Mosaic monotheism divides the world into good and evil, true worship and idolatry, the one, only true God and false idols. The truth of this claim should be apparent to readers of Homer. Homer doesn't demonize either side of the Trojan war. There are no "good guys" and "bad guys" as such, just more

or less flawed yet heroic warriors (as well as priests, women, children, parents, gods, etc.) The larger question is whether the Mosaic distinction fosters more religious violence than otherwise. He considers both sides without taking a definite stand. He does claim, however, that monotheism taken rightly should critique religious violence. Frankly, I found the issue of violence to be a side issue and more or less a concession to a sensational topic after 9/11. Assmann really knows the Egyptian and Near Eastern polytheistic background to Judaism, and the key differences between them. For example, in polytheistic religions, the King stood in for god and administered justice. Also, the legal system was separate from religious cultic practices. In Judaism, justice is integrated deeply into religion, with the prophets constantly denigrating sacrifice in favor of taking care of orphans and widows etc. At the same time, the Hebrew God doesn't support the institution of kingship but just the opposite. Overall, the book is full of valuable insights. I don't agree with some of his points, but his work is mostly solid and well-nigh essential for scholars writing on this period. It is also of interest for anyone who is seriously interested in monotheism (Judaism, Christianity, Islam).

This is a scholar's book parsing the relationship between religion - both polytheistic and monotheistic - and violence, obviously written under the vast shadow of 9/11. Jan Assmann is a German Egyptologist with a smile-inducing last name, but he is interested in understanding his subject rather than scoring points against religion. Neither monotheism or polytheism are inherently violent. Both, as practiced in ancient Israel, Egypt, and the Fertile Crescent, inspired violent outbursts at times. By the depth of the author's knowledge and the fairness of his judgments, this book stands above and apart many of the recent rants inspired by this subject.

Great study, good service

This book is dry and to the point. One read through and you will have a leg up on most people, especially Bible Thumpers.

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