

“The Wisdom of the Egyptians”: Revisiting Jan Assmann’s Reading of the Early Modern Reception of Moses

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Moses the Egyptian was published nearly twenty-five years ago, to deservedly wide acclaim. It offered a compelling theory concerning a profound cultural trauma and its subsequent mutable memory, traversing between two momentous poles: the Amarna/Exodus story at one end, and the Holocaust at the other. The former had engendered what Jan Assmann terms the “Mosaic distinction”; the latter encompassed the horrible consequence of its dissolution three and a half millennia later. In between, Assmann identified two outbursts of Egyptophilia—the extended Renaissance era and Napoleon’s Egypt expedition—both of which flanked a period of intense scholarly activity that threw a dose of Egyptophobia into the mix.

To facilitate his investigation, Assmann availed himself of a new approach to the study of the past: mnemohistory. Whereas a more traditional historical approach, he explained, aims to investigate “the past as such”, recapturing past events as they truly were, mnemohistory is concerned with “the past as it was remembered”, seeking to tease out “the mythical elements in tradition and discovering their hidden agenda”. This approach is further informed by the conviction that any given present “is ‘haunted’ by the past, and that the past is modelled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present”. As Assmann amplified elsewhere, he considers the past to be “a social construction whose nature arises out of the needs and frames of reference of each particular present. The past is not a natural growth but a cultural creation”.¹

This mnemohistoric approach strikes me as persuasive insofar as the Amarna/Exodus story is concerned, or the Holocaust remembered. I do wonder, however, to what extent the approach is transferable to the early modern Republic of European Letters, whose denizens were certainly unaware of any initial “trauma”, and considered the Exodus narrative as historically veritable—much as they considered the surviving textual remains of antiquity,

¹ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: the memory of Egypt in western monotheism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9–10; Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 33.

including myths, to be properly denuded of their fictional elements. Thus, for example, from a present perspective Assmann may argue with considerable certainty that the Exodus story is apocryphal and, therefore, belongs squarely in the realm of memory. But any such conviction was not shared by John Spencer, Ralph Cudworth, or Isaac Newton. To them, the Bible *was* a valid historical source—in fact, the foremost historical source, at least insofar as the Israelites were concerned. Hence, early modern scholars differed both in kind and degree from those late eighteenth-century radicals who most interest Assmann.²

Assmann concedes that the “approach of mnemohistory is highly selective”. Seeking to establish “a vertical line of memory”—which essentially excludes “the horizontal continuum of history”—he selects a handful of texts that appear to him to highlight this line of transmission. Indeed, he writes,

I am reading Maimonides only in the light of Spencer, John Spencer in the light of William Warburton, Warburton in the light of Reinhold and Schiller, and of Freud insofar as he partakes in this discourse and reflects on its issues. For each of these men’s writings, a strictly historical approach would proceed in a very different way.³

This brings me to the point of this discussion. Is Assmann as selective in his choice of texts as he is in excerpting what seems to him to be pertinent? Does Assmann’s reading of later texts color his construal of earlier texts—and perhaps distort them?

Judging by Assmann’s methodology, this is indeed the case. He appears to mistake the doggedly interpretative approach to the past carried on by early modern scholars to be their willful construction of antiquity. For example, although Spencer’s researches into the origins of Jewish rituals were colored by confessional needs—as recent scholarship has shown—Spencer remained committed to an earnest and rigorous historical investigation which, he believed, would substantiate his cause. In contrast, John Toland and Karl Reinhold’s appropriation of Spencer’s work must be viewed as deliberate acts of subversion—even on those rare occasions when they happened to come nearer to the historical “truth”, which had eluded Spencer and other scholars whose

² Jan Assmann, *Religio Duplex. How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014); Jan Assmann, “Egyptian Mysteries and Secret Societies in the Age of Enlightenment. A ‘mnemo-historical’ study”, *Aegyptiaca* 1 (2017): 4–25.

³ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 10.

works Toland and Reinhold ransacked. Furthermore, since Assmann is committed to identifying the precise moment in which the image of “Moses the Egyptian” came into being—convinced as he is of its radical nature—he is led by his own agenda vis-à-vis the motivations and the labors of the individuals under consideration. Equally questionable, in my opinion, is Assmann’s understanding of the “wisdom of the Egyptians” to denote, almost exclusively, religion. As I shall contend below, contemporaries were far more expansive in their understanding of the character and content of such wisdom.

Assmann virtually ignores the period between late Antiquity and the Renaissance. The Middle Ages, he writes, “were safely contained within the bounds of Biblical monotheism. There was no place for a figure such as Moses the Egyptian who would blur the boundaries of counter-religion. Egypt was viewed as the ‘other’ and not as the origin.” Only after the rediscovery in the fifteenth century of Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica* and the *Corpus Hermeticum*—a discovery that purportedly unleashed “a process of fundamental cultural, religious, and historical reorientation”—did it become clear again “what was meant by ‘all the wisdom of Egypt’ (Acts 7:22)”.⁴ For Assmann, the phrase is of utmost importance: “the Moses discourse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries almost exclusively based its image of Moses not on Moses’ elaborate biography in the Pentateuch, but on this single verse in the New Testament.”⁵ Such a construal parallels a more theoretical formulation voiced by Assmann elsewhere:

Every substantial break in continuity or tradition can produce the past whenever the break is meant to create a new beginning. A Renaissance or a Reformation will always be shaped by a recourse to the past. Cultures rediscover this past while developing, producing, and constructing a future.⁶

The centrality Assmann ascribes to Acts 7:22, and his concomitant belief that the verse acquired significance only during the early modern period, necessitates the unfolding of a much longer, and different kind of narrative, which survived well into the eighteenth century. As I hope shall become clear, for the author of Acts 7:22, and certainly for subsequent Christian readers, the “wisdom” in question was secular learning and, as such, it posed no essential threat to the religious message. As one scholar put it,

⁴ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 55.

⁵ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 10.

⁶ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 18.

Often Moses' education at the Egyptian court is viewed as a preparatory study, hardly, or not at all, differing from the secular education the Christians deemed necessary for the study of Scripture or, as they expressed with predilection, of the divine mysteries. Where Moses is adduced as a standard example of studying first secular and then true, i.e. Christian, wisdom, he is often accompanied by the example of Daniel who was as expert in Chaldean wisdom as Moses was in Egyptian.⁷

Further to the point, not only did the verse become a central tool in the apologetic arsenal of the Church Fathers and of medieval theologians, but an embrace of the verse also implied an appreciation of Moses' Egyptian identity for the first four decades of his life.

Justin Martyr (100–165) appears to have inaugurated the apologetic agenda. In "Hortatory Address to the Greeks", Martyr sought to demonstrate Moses' antiquity from the writings of pagans, who "affirmed that their information was gathered from the Egyptian priests, among whom Moses was born and educated; in fact, he was given a very thorough Egyptian education, since he was the adopted son of the king's daughter."⁸ Several decades later, Clement of Alexandria (150–215) credited Egypt with inventing most branches of secular learning, the very learning that Moses had acquired as Acts 7:22 confirmed.⁹ In *Contra Celsus*, Origen (184–253) expounded on St Stephen's bearing "witness to the great learning of Moses, which he had obtained wholly from ancient writings not accessible to the multitude". In fact, Origen noted, it had been suspected that Moses wrought his miracles "not in virtue of his professing to come from God, but by means of his Egyptian knowledge, in which he was well versed". Pharaoh, "entertaining such a suspicion, summoned the Egyptian magicians, and wise men, and enchanters, who were found to be of no avail as against the wisdom of Moses, which proved superior to all the wisdom of the Egyptians". Origen's opinion was included in the mid-fourth century anthology of his

⁷ Ton Hilhorst, "And Moses was Instructed in all the Wisdom of the Egyptians (Acts 7.22)", in *The Wisdom of Egypt. Jewish, Early Christian, and Gnostic Essays in Honour of Gerard P. Luttikhuisen*, eds Anthony Hilhorst and George H. van Kooten (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 153–76, at 173.

⁸ *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 386.

⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis Books One to Three*, trans. John Ferguson (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 136–7.

writings, prepared by Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390) and Basil of Caesarea (330–379).¹⁰

Basil himself wove the trope into his “Address to young men on how they might derive benefit from Greek literature.” It is said he exhorted,

that even Moses, that illustrious man whose name for wisdom is greatest among all mankind, first trained his mind in the learning of the Egyptians, and then proceeded to the contemplation of Him who is. And like him, although in later times, they say that the wise Daniel at Babylon first learned the wisdom of the Chaldeans and then applied himself to the divine teachings.¹¹

Basil’s brother, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395), propagated the apologia in his “Life of Moses”:

After he had left childhood, and had been educated in pagan [outside] learning [παιδευθεὶς τὴν ἕξωθεν παιδευσιν] during his royal upbringing, he did not choose the things considered glorious by the pagans nor did he any longer recognize as his mother that wise woman by whom he had been adopted, but he returned to his natural mother and attached himself to his own kinsmen.¹²

Elsewhere, Nyssa praised the scholarly acumen of Gregory Thaumaturgus in a similar vein: “Just as Scripture says about Moses, ‘He was schooled in the wisdom of the Egyptians,’” so did Gregory receive instruction “in all the schooling of the Greeks”.¹³

The Latin Fathers concurred. According to St Ambrose (340–397), Moses was “a man learned in all the science of the Egyptians”, a man raised as an Egyptian and receiving instruction “in all phases of secular learning”. Such immersion “in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” notwithstanding, Ambrose hastened to reassure his readers, Moses ultimately “welcomed the Spirit of God. As His minister he preferred the way of truth to that vain and self-styled philosophical

¹⁰ *The Writings of Origen*, trans. Frederick Crombie, 2 vols (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1872), 2:128; *The Philocalia of Origen*, trans. George Lewis (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), 101.

¹¹ Saint Basil, *The Letters*, 4 vols (London and Cambridge MA: William Heinemann and G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1934): 4. 387.

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 34, 151.

¹³ Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Works*, trans. Michael Slusser (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1998), 47.

system.”¹⁴ St Jerome (347–420) addressed the topic in his commentary on Daniel 1, which recounts the training “in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science”, which the future prophet received in Babylon at the command of King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel and the other Israelite youth who were thus instructed, Jerome clarified, knew that the wisdom of the Chaldeans was fallacious, yet they learned it; “not that they may follow it themselves, but in order to pass judgment upon it and refute it.” They studied “the teaching of the Chaldeans with the same intention as Moses studied the wisdom of the Egyptians”.¹⁵

St Augustine (354–430) invoked on several occasions Acts 7:22 in order to affirm the lawfulness and the value of appropriating pagan learning for Christian ends, and his sanction proved exceptionally influential for centuries to come. In *De doctrina Christiana*, for example, he explained that just as God had commanded the Israelites to seize the

treasure of the ancient Egyptians, who possessed not only idols and heavy burdens which the people of Israel hated and shunned but also vessels and ornaments of silver and gold, and clothes, which on leaving Egypt the people of Israel, in order to make better use of them, surreptitiously claimed for themselves.

Such pious appropriation had been previously made by such virtuous Christians as Cyprian, Lactantius, Victorinus, Optatus, and Hilary—all of whom carried back with them the treasures of the Egyptians, just as it “had been done earlier by Moses himself, that most faithful servant of God, of whom it is written that he was trained in ‘all the wisdom of the Egyptians’”.¹⁶ Augustine returned to the topic in *City of God*. When discussing the dimensions of Noah’s Ark, for example, he invoked Origen’s “brilliant hypothesis” on the matter: “since Moses, the man of God, was also, as we are told, ‘instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians,’ which included a diligent study of geometry, he may have meant geometrical cubits.” In a subsequent chapter, Augustine added:

I must admit that [...] the Egyptians [...] had before Moses’ time a certain body of learning which might be called their ‘wisdom.’ Otherwise, Holy Writ could not

¹⁴ St Ambrose, *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1961), 5–6, 231.

¹⁵ *Jerome’s Commentary on Daniel*, trans. Gleason L. Archer (Eugene, OR, 2009), 21–2.

¹⁶ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 125, 127.

have said that Moses was schooled in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. It tells how he was born there, adopted and reared by Pharaoh's daughter, and put to learning letters.

Such an admission, however, did not imply origin: "if you remember that Abraham himself was a prophet, you will see that Egyptian wisdom, too, is posterior to the wisdom of our Prophets." Finally, Hermes Trismegistus, who had reputedly introduced philosophy to Greece, was not anterior to the patriarchs; in fact, he flourished two or three generations after Moses.¹⁷

A century later, Cassiodorus (485–c. 585) cited Augustine approvingly, before urging his co-religionists to imitate Moses and later Christians who greatly benefitted from Egyptian learning. Cassiodorus also embellished Josephus' claim that Abraham imparted mathematics and astronomy to the Egyptians:

The Egyptians, a people of sharp intellect, took up the seeds from him, and cultivated the other disciplines more broadly for themselves. Our holy Fathers properly persuaded men of a scholarly disposition to read these sciences since they do much to turn our appetite from carnal things and make us desire what with the Lord's aid we can see with the heart alone.¹⁸

Similarly, in a commentary on 1 Samuel 13:20, attributed to Gregory the Great (540–604), the author wrote:

We go down to the Philistines when we incline the mind to secular studies [...] Secular books are said to be in the plane since they have no celestial truths. God put secular knowledge in a plane before us that we should use it as a step to ascend to the heights of Scripture. So Moses first learned the wisdom of the Egyptians that he might be able to understand and expound the divine precepts.¹⁹

In the twelfth century, Gratian incorporated such pronouncements into his *Decretum*. For example, having cited several admonitions against pursuing profane literature, he countered: "But, on the other hand, one reads that Moses and Daniel were learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and Chaldeans." Just as God "ordered the sons of Israel to spoil the Egyptians of their gold and silver", so Christians "should turn it to the profit of useful learning". Further

¹⁷ St Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Daniel J. Honan, 3 vols (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1950–1954), 3:144 (bk 18 ch. 37).

¹⁸ Cassiodorus, *Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning and On the Soul*, trans. James Halporn (Liverpool, 2004), 160, 209.

¹⁹ Henry O. Taylor, *The Mediaeval Mind*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1914), 1:100 n.1.

commenting on Bede’s conviction that the clergy ought not be prevented from reading profane literature, Gratian added:

for whatever useful things are found in them it is lawful to adopt as one’s own. Otherwise Moses and Daniel would not have been allowed to become learned in the wisdom and literature of the Egyptians and Chaldeans, whose superstitions and wantonness nevertheless they shuddered at.²⁰

John of Salisbury found occasion to comment on Acts 7:22 when denouncing the popular manual of oneiromancy, the *Somniale Danielis*. Scripture, he insisted, explicitly banned dreams. Moses, he pointed out, who was “trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, either was ignorant of or spurned this art, since, detesting the error of impiety, he took pains to exterminate it from among God’s people”. Similarly, “St. Daniel learned the studies and wisdom of the Chaldeans, which, as a saint, he would not have done, had he thought it sinful to be instructed in their lore.”²¹

Erik Iversen, therefore, was correct to conclude that there existed “an almost mystic veneration for the wisdom of the Egyptians” during the Middle Ages, despite the fact that the memory of Egypt had been based primarily on “biblical stories and legends and the mostly polemical accounts of the ecclesiastical authors”.²² Iversen did not mention Acts 7:22, but the verse was, and remained, the *locus classicus* for such veneration. It conveyed, as a matter of fact, an awareness of Egyptian learning being antecedent to Moses—albeit with the proviso that the Egyptians, in turn, had been beneficiaries of earlier patriarchs—and that for the first four decades of his life Moses was, for all intents and purposes, an Egyptian. Noteworthy, too, is that the centrality of Acts 7:22 for the Christian perception of Egyptian wisdom was scarcely affected by the rediscovery of the Hermetic corpus. As I shall demonstrate below, the medieval interpretation of the verse retained its vitality well into the seventeenth century and beyond, and this ubiquity substantiates Dmitri Levitin’s cautioning against

²⁰ *Readings in the History of Education Mediaeval Universities*, ed. Arthur O. Norton (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1909), 64–8.

²¹ John of Salisbury, *Policraticus: sive de nugis curialium, & vestigiis philosophorum libri octo* (Leiden: Franciscus Raphalengius, 1595), 68, trans. Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923), 163.

²² Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 59.

falling “into the common trap of assuming that ‘Hermeticism’ was the standard Renaissance approach to the figure of Moses”.²³

Among Renaissance humanists, Erasmus served as an important conduit of the standard conception of Egyptian wisdom. In the *Antibarbarorum liber*, for example, he availed himself of the authority of Augustine and of Jerome in order to defend secular learning on the grounds that God had commanded the Israelites “to spoil the Egyptians” (Exodus 3:22).²⁴ More pointedly, in his paraphrase of Acts 7:22 Erasmus recounted how Pharaoh’s daughter had retrieved the infant Moses from the Nile and,

captivated by the baby’s comeliness, [she] brought him up as a son in her own home. Moses was accordingly *regarded as an Egyptian*; from his earliest years he was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful both in words and in deeds.²⁵

Protestant reformers followed Erasmus’ lead. Martin Luther not only expressed respect for the morality of the Egyptians—despite their permitting polygamy, “they appear to have lived more chastely than those who observed the monogamy”—but he accepted as unproblematic the notion that the Egyptians as well as the Chaldeans cultivated the natural sciences and the affairs of government. “Whether Abraham instructed the Egyptians concerning these sciences”, he continued, “or whether, like Moses, of whom Stephen declares (Acts 7:22) that he was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, he himself learned these matters from the Egyptians, is of no importance.”²⁶ Elsewhere Luther reflected more fully on Moses’ character: he

had the right to live in luxury and honour, and the privilege of spending his life in the court. For this is what the martyr Stephen says (among other things), that Moses had been brought up in all the wisdom of Egypt and was mighty in words and works, and was there till his fortieth year. From this it is clear that he was an important man in the king’s court, that he had been educated with great care, and that he was held in the highest regard by everybody. All these things, however,

²³ Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient wisdom in the age of the new science: histories of philosophy in England, c. 1640–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 117.

²⁴ Desiderius Erasmus, *Literary and Educational Writings* vol 23, ed. Craig R. Thompson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 89, 97–8, 107.

²⁵ Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraphrase on the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. John J. Bateman, trans. Robert D. Sider (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 51 (emphasis added).

²⁶ Martin Luther *Lectures on Genesis*, trans. George V. Schick, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 305.

together with all the elegance of the court he held in utter disregard on account of his faith.²⁷

John Calvin concurred. Though he could not explain why God had permitted Moses to be raised by, and enjoy the “courtly pleasures” of, the Egyptians, he remained convinced that since the outcome had proven “so wonderful”, it must have been divinely ordained. Since God had determined to redeem His people, “He doth [...] frame both the mind of Moses and all other things to finish His work.” As for the learning of the Egyptians, they certainly “bestowed great study” on astronomy [astrologia]—which considers “the wonderful workmanship of God”—yet, “being not content with the simple order of nature, they wandered also into many foolish speculations”, and Moses himself might have become “infected with these superstitions”. Nevertheless, Moses set down “sincerely and plainly”, that considering “the frame of the world [...] is appertinent unto godliness”. Justin Martyr, Calvin continued, was clearly wrong to make Moses a magician who led the Israelites out of Egypt “with juggling and enchantments”. Moses did only what “God had enjoined him”. Likewise, since Moses was a prince, not a priest, it is not to be assumed that he had been initiated into Egyptian “mystical divinity, wherewith they colored their doting inventions and monstrous abominations”; he was instructed only in the “liberal arts”.²⁸ Calvin expanded in his commentary on Jeremiah 10:2: “Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them.” The Egyptians and the Chaldeans, Calvin sermonized, “were true astrologers, and understood the art, which in itself is praiseworthy”. Such an art, he reiterated,

is not only to be approved, but is also most useful, and contains not only the most delightful speculations, but ought also to contribute much towards exciting in the hearts of men a high reverence for God. Hence Moses was instructed from his childhood in that art, and also Daniel among the Chaldeans. (Acts vii. 22; Dan. i. 17, 20.) Moses learned astrology as understood by the Egyptians, and Daniel as known by the Chaldeans.²⁹

²⁷ Martin Luther, *Early Theological Works*, trans. James Atkinson (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 219–20.

²⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Christopher Fetherstone, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844) 1:269–70.

²⁹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, trans. John Owen, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 2:8.

The value of the liberal arts was further emphasized by Theodore Beza, Calvin's protégé and successor, in a 1559 ceremony commemorating the foundation of the Geneva Academy. With Calvin presiding, Beza delivered an oration in which he traced the passing of "the torch of learning" from the "schools of the patriarchs and those in which Moses learned the wisdom of the Egyptians", to the Greek academies, the medieval universities, and now to the new academy, which was destined to impart learning free of superstition.³⁰

The humanist/Calvinist perception of the Egyptian wisdom percolated among English divines and scholars as well. Though Moses had been versed in "all the wisdom of the Egyptians", Egeon Skew sermonized, yet he preached nothing but what he received "from the mouth of the Lord".³¹ Such a distinction enabled Protestant divines—as it did the Church Fathers—to recommend secular learning. Thus, in a 1616 sermon, John Boys was of the opinion that though the Egyptians had excelled in "humane learning", yet they were "a most idolatrous people", having been "ignorant in the knowledge concerning the worship of the true God". As such, they differed little from Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, or Demosthenes.³² In a 1620 Nativity sermon, Lancelot Andrewes proved even more emphatic. The Magi of old, he emphasized, possessed great learning, and "Magus was a title of high knowledge"—meaning "Heathen knowledge", primarily astronomical. "This learning of theirs", the preacher insisted, "made them never the further from CHRIST [...] It did them no hurt, in their coming to CHRIST. No more then it did *Moses*, that *he was well learned in all the Wisdom of the Egyptians* (saith Saint STEPHEN, Acts 7.22.)"³³ In so arguing, Andrewes followed the line of argument which Richard Hooker had developed three decades earlier: No kind of knowledge

whereby any part of Truth is seene, but we justlie accompt it pretious, yea that principall truth [...] Whether it be that Egyptian and Chaldaean wisdom

³⁰ Hugh Y. Reyburn, *John Calvin: His Life, Letters, and Work* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914), 285.

³¹ Egeon skew, *Brotherly Reconcilement preached in Oxford* (London: George Bishop, 1605), 262.

³² John Boys, *An Exposition of the Proper Psalmes used in our English Liturgie* (London: Felix Kyngston for William Aspley, 1616), 145.

³³ Lancelot Andrewes, *XCVI Sermons* (London: Richard Badger, 1632), 135–6.

Mathematicall, wherewith *Moses* and *Daniel* were furnished; or that naturall, Morall, and Civill wisdome wherein Solomon excelled all Men.³⁴

Lay scholars assented. Francis Bacon singled out Moses as “the Law-giver, and Gods first penne”, who had been “adorned by the Scriptures with this addition, and Commendation: *That he was seene in all the Learning of the Aegyptians*; which Nation we know was one of the most ancient Schooles of the world.”³⁵ When Sir Walter Raleigh recounted the history of Moses several years later, he cited approvingly statements made by Basil of Caesarea, Josephus, and Philo regarding the excellence of Moses’ education—statements, Raleigh added, which St Stephen confirmed in Acts 7:22. As to the content of the learning which Stephen “commended”, Raleigh followed Sixtus Senensis, who interpreted חכמת מצרים [Egyptian wisdom] to encompass four categories: mathematics, natural philosophy, divinity, and moral philosophy.³⁶

Other examples abound, but most revealing perhaps is the widespread deployment of Acts 7:22 during the era of the English Revolution, when defenders of secular learning of all stripes weaponized St Stephen’s statement in order to counter attacks on such learning by religious radicals—who sought to strip the verse of its significance. On the eve of the Civil War, for example, Samuel How denounced the universities, and dismissed in no uncertain terms the relevance of Acts 7:22: “such of Gods servants, as have had such kind of learning, when as they came to know Christ, they forsook it all, as Moses when he came to age, though he was learned in all the wisdome of the Aegyptians.” Fifteen years later William Dell argued in a similar manner: Moses might have acquired the wisdom of the Egyptians, but did he “ever *teach* any of *that* Learning in the *Church*, or publish any of the *Doctrines* of it, or did he *command* or *encourage* any of the *people of God* to *learn* it?”³⁷

³⁴ *The Folger Library edition of the works of Richard Hooker*, eds W. Speed Hill et al., 7 vols (Cambridge, MA and Tempe AZ: Harvard University Press and MRTS, 1977–1998), 1:226.

³⁵ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. Michael Kiernan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 34.

³⁶ *The Works of Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed. William Oldys, 8 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1829), 3:64, 201–5. See also 2:289; Sixtus Senensis, *Bibliotheca sancta*, 2 vols (Lyon: Charles Pesnot, 1575), 1:57–9.

³⁷ Samuel How, *The Sufficiency of the Spirit’s Teaching without Humane Learning* (London: William Larnar, 1655), 3; William Dell, *The Tryal of Spirits Both in Teachers & Hearers* (London: Giles Calvert, 1654), 83–4.

In response to the likes of How, Henry Wilkinson, principal of Magdalen Hall, exhorted Oxford scholars in 1642 to heed the eagerness with which the apostles had pursued learning, by embracing the “spoyles of the Egyptians”. The sense of 1 Kings 4:30—concerning Solomon’s wisdom surpassing that of the Egyptians—Wilkinson averred, should assure his auditors that the arts and the sciences are “subservient unto Religion, and therefore of great price, dignity and value”. Moses, as St Stephen affirmed, “was learned in the Mathematicks, and all things that appertayn’d unto humane learning” and, therefore, if “any be enemies to University learning [...] *They speake evill of those things which they know not* (Jude 1:10).” According to another apologist of learning, Thomas Hall, “reading, study, meditation and humane industry is commanded by God, and commended to us by the example of his servants”—such as the learning Moses received from the Egyptians.³⁸ On the other side of the political spectrum, we can find John Milton defending the liberty of “reading Books, what ever sort they be”, by invoking “the examples of *Moses, Daniel & Paul*, who were skilfull in all the learning of the Egyptians, Caldeans, and Greeks, which could not probably be without reading their Books of all sorts.”³⁹

I’ve expounded in some detail the long tradition of Acts 7:22 in order to query Assmann’s conceptualization of a radically new discourse on Moses based on this verse. As should be clear by now, the verse was, and remained, seminal in any context pertaining to either Moses or Egyptian learning. But whereas Medieval and Renaissance commentators were only marginally concerned with the precise nature of that wisdom—beyond ascertaining its existence—by the second half of the seventeenth century there arose the necessity to explore more fully its content. The impetus was rooted in Joseph Scaliger’s extensive forays into Egyptian chronology and history, the results of which forced subsequent scholars to come to terms with the probability that Egypt was far more ancient than commonly believed which, in turn, forced them to ponder the ramifications of such antiquity for the history of neighboring nations, and for the Jews

³⁸ Henry Wilkinson, *Three Decads of Sermons* (Oxford: H. H. for Thomas Robinson, 1660), 5; Thomas Hall, *Vindiciae Literarum, the Schools Guarded* (London: W.H. for Nathanael Webb, & William Grantham, 1655), 11. Additional examples include: Anon, *A Vindication of Learning from Unjust Aspersions* (London: John Hardesty, 1646), 6; John Webster, *Academiarum Examen* (London: Printed for Giles Calvert, 1654), 2; Thomas Hall, *The Pulpit Guarded* (London: J. Cottrel for E. Blackmore, 1651), 22; Edward Reynolds, *A Sermon Touching the Use of Humane Learning* (London: Printed by T. N. for George Thomason, 1658).

³⁹ John Milton, *Areopagitica* (London, 1644), 9–10.

especially. The publication during the 1650s of Athanasius Kircher’s imposing Egyptian tomes, as well as the appearance in print of Isaac de la Peyrère’s Pre-Adamite theory, conferred new urgency on this new line of investigation. Kircher invoked Acts 7:22 in each of the three books he devoted to Egypt. Beginning with the *Obeliscus Pamphilius*—where Kircher also cited Philo of Alexandria to the effect that Moses had acquired such wisdom by the time he was 20 years old (in 1566 BCE); to the opening line of Caspar Schott’s preface to volume one of the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*—and Kircher’s insistence, on the title page of volume two, that the Egyptians encyclopedia had been equivalent to the “secret wisdom” of the ancient Jews and other oriental people; to the reiteration of the message in the *Obelisci Aegyptiaci*.⁴⁰

It should be noted, parenthetically, that Kircher ought not to be viewed as “the last of the Renaissance Egyptologists”, as Assmann insists,⁴¹ who fully and exclusively partook in the Hermetic discourse of Marsilio Ficino, Giordano Bruno, and Robert Fludd—a discourse, to reiterate, which was not particularly influential insofar as Moses and Egyptian wisdom were concerned, especially in England. Notwithstanding his penchant for esotericism of all forms, Kircher had incorporated into his imposing tomes a vast amount of historical and antiquarian learning, as well as intriguing conjectures, which were appropriated by subsequent scholars, who rarely acknowledged their debt to the Jesuit. However, whereas Kircher was an abashed admirer of ancient Egyptian learning, the emergent new historical scholarship found it increasingly difficult to find evidence for such exceptional wisdom. Such difficulty was owing, in no small part, to the “new science” and to the debate over the relative merits of ancient and modern learning, which drew into sharp relief the limitations of ancient knowledge.

Edward Stillingfleet’s *Origines Sacrae* was the earliest, and the most influential, English response to the Egyptian conundrum. He engaged only briefly with La Peyrère. In addition to insinuating plagiarism on the latter’s part—for lifting his chronological system from Claudius Salmasius’ *De annis Climactericis*—Stillingfleet summarily dismissed “the *author* of that Fiction” as someone who had attempted to “prostitute” Scripture, his design being simply to undermine

40 Athanasius Kircher, *Obeliscus Pamphilius* (Rome: Ludovico Grignani, 1650), sig. b3, e6, 101; Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (Rome: Vitale Mascardi, 1652–1654), vol. 1 sig. c2, vol. 2 TP; Kircher, *Ad Alexandrum VII* [...] *Obelisci Aegyptiaci* (Rome: Lazzari Varese, 1666), 81.

41 Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 18, 20, 55–6.

the authority of the Bible and denigrate the miracles therein recounted.⁴² The future bishop of Worcester was intent to defend the authority of Scripture, as well as the absolute fidelity of the Pentateuch narrative. Toward that end, he found it opportune to propose a slow evolutionary approach for the growth of post-diluvian nations, based on the chronology of the Septuagint, in order to maintain that the vaunted heights of Egyptian civilization were a myth. Not surprisingly, such a line of argument proved problematic, for it ran counter to the presumed meaning of Acts 7:22. Hence, Stillingfleet found it opportune to introduce a relativistic interpretative framework, which enabled him to posit a contingent, time-specific, Egyptian wisdom, superior only when compared with Egypt's more barbarous contemporary neighbours. In opting to do so, Stillingfleet may well have followed in the footsteps of his mentor, John Wilkins, who appears to have been the first Englishman to have belittled Egyptian wisdom. In a bold and concerted effort to defend Copernicanism, Wilkins highlighted in 1640 the profound ignorance of ancient philosophers and Church Fathers in scientific matters, ignorance that prevented them from grasping higher truths. Likewise, he elucidated, the "holy Men" of old did not obtain "humane Arts by any speciall inspiration, but by instruction and study, and other ordinary meanes", as did Moses, whose "skill in this kinde is called the Learning of the Egyptians". Consequently, Wilkins concluded, "because in those times all Sciences were taught onely in a rude and imperfect manner; therefore 'tis likely that they also had but a darke and confuse apprehension of things, and were liable to the common errorrs."⁴³

Wilkins did not concern himself with either Jewish or Egyptian primacy, but Stillingfleet did. He set himself to demonstrate, he declared,

that there were a certain original and general tradition preserved in the world concerning the eldest Ages of the World; that this tradition was gradually corrupted among the Heathens; that notwithstanding their corruption there were sufficient remainders of it to evidence its true original; that the full account of this tradition alone preserved in those books we call the Scripture: That where any other history seems to cross the report contained in them, we have sufficient ground to question their credibility; and that there is sufficient evidence to clear

⁴² Edward Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae, or a Rational Account of the grounds of Christian Faith, as to the Truth and Divine Authority of the Scriptures and the Matters therein Contained* (London: R. W. for Henry Mortlock, 1662), 80, 537–8.

⁴³ John Wilkins, *A Discourse Concerning a New Planet [...] The Second Booke* (London: R. H. for John Maynard, 1640), 13.

the undoubted certainty of that history which is remained in the sacred Records of Scripture.

His confidence derived from the absence of any recorded history among the gentiles, for the barbarism of the early ages prevented the cultivation of letters. As for the “little knowledge” possessed by the Egyptians, it was wrapped under “mystical representations”.⁴⁴

Having pronounced the impossibility that “Moses should be ignorant of the things he undertook to Write of”—for his was “a person of more than ordinary judgement, wisdom, and knowledge”—Stillingfleet felt compelled to scrutinize what Scripture had pronounced about Moses’ education and learning. There is nothing, he avowed, “which doth advance so much the repute of the antient *Aegyptian Learning*, as that the *Spirit of God* in Scripture should take so much notice of it, as to set forth a person (otherwise renowned for, greater accomplishments) by his *skill* in this.”⁴⁵ And yet, Stillingfleet was forced to acknowledge that “there want not grounds of suspicion, that the old *Aegyptian Learning* was not of that *elevation* which the present distance of our age makes us apt to think it was.” Grounding himself primarily on Hermann Conring’s *De Hermetica Medicina libri duo* (1669), Stillingfleet concluded that some parts of Egyptian “*Learning* were *frivolous*, others *obscure*, a great deal *Magical*, and the rest *short* of that *improvement*, which the accession of the parts and industry of after ages gave unto it.” Nevertheless, given that the world had “grown wiser” than to accept Hermes Trismegistus as the “Author of old *Aegyptian Philosophy*”, it must be concluded that it would be impossible to “maintain the justness of the repute of the antient *Aegyptian Learning* from any thing now extant of it”. Stillingfleet saw no reason to doubt the Egyptian reputation, “especially since it is so honourably spoken of in *Sacred Writ*, and seems in it to have been made the *standard* and *measure* of humane *wisdom*”. Further to confirm such a reputation is the statement concerning Solomon’s wisdom in 1 Kings 4:30, “that it exceeded the wisdom of all the children of the East Country, and all the wisdom of Aegypt”. Evidently, therefore, the wisdom of the Egyptians must have been “accounted the greatest at that time in the world”—unless one assumes it to be “the *greatest* in that age of the-world, when the *wisdom* of the *Graecians* [...] was not thought worthy the taking notice of”. Stillingfleet opted not to follow the latter route. Instead, he concluded

⁴⁴ Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 14, 18, 31.

⁴⁵ Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 120–1,

as from an irrefragable testimony, that the *wisdom* of the *Aegyptians* antiently was no *trivial Pedantry*, nor meer *Superstitious* and *Magical rites*, but that there was some thing in it *solid* and *substantial*, or it had not been worth *triumphing* over by the *wisdom* of *Solomon*.⁴⁶

Having thus awkwardly conferred dignity on Egyptian learning “from *Testimony*”, Stillingfleet turned to consider its source. The pursuit of learning in Egypt, he noted, had been the domain of priests, which “highly advanceth the probability of that *tradition*” preserved by Manetho and Chaeremon of Alexandria, “concerning *Moses*’ being a priest”. Stillingfleet attributed such a tradition to Moses’ reputation for “*learning* and *wisdom*, which being among them proper to their *Priests*, they thence ascribed that name to him, although probably he might come to the *knowledge* of all their *Mysteries* from the relation he had to *Pharaohs* daughter.” Nor was Stillingfleet willing to follow Sixtus Senensis’ quadripartite division of Egyptian learning in which Moses excelled, especially the inclusion of “*Hieroglyphical* and *Mystical Learning* [which] hath made the greatest noise in the world”. Notwithstanding the immense labours of “that otherwise learned man”, Athanasius Kircher, Stillingfleet scoffed, such learning deserves only “the highest form among the *difficiles Nugae*, and all these *Hieroglyphicks* put together, will make but one good one, and that should be for *Labour lost*”.⁴⁷

Noteworthy is that insofar as Moses’ wisdom was concerned, this skeptical survey of the Egyptian contribution to several branches of knowledge hardly mattered: “There is yet one part of *Learning* more among them, which the *Aegyptians* are esteemed for, which is the *Political* and *civil* part of it, which may better be called *wisdom* than most of the fore-going.” The good laws of the Egyptians, and their prudent management of them, was highly praised by Greek legislators, who had established much of their own constitutions upon it. In this context, Moses himself was a great beneficiary of this branch of learning as well. Thus, Moses’ possession of all the learning of the Egyptians stood as a cornerstone of Stillingfleet’s argument: Can one imagine that he, who had been,

bred up in all the *ingenuous literature* of *Aegypt*, conversant among their *wisest persons* in *Pharaohs Court*, having thereby all advantages to improve himself, and to understand the utmost of all that they knew, should not be able to pass a judgement between a meer *pretence* and *imposture*, and *real* and *important Truths*?

⁴⁶ Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 121–3.

⁴⁷ Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 126–9.

Could such a person forsake all these advantages “were he not fully persuaded of the certain and undoubted truth of all those things which are recorded in his books?” Could this wise man have embarked on his perilous mission unless he believed “that God who appeared unto him, was greater then all the *Gods of Aegypti*”? And could such a man not record faithfully only what “*God revealed unto him*”—from the Creation, to the Deluge and the propagation of the earth by the descendants of Noah, to the history of the Patriarchs? Surely, Moses could deliver nothing “inconsistent with *reason or undoubted tradition*”, else the learned Egyptian Priests would have “readily and plainly [...] triumphed over him”. Stillingfleet thus considered Moses to be more qualified than any heathen philosopher to discern truth from falsehood. Indeed, in all probability he towered above all Greek philosophers as well, for the latter merely garnered “scraps” of that Egyptian learning “which *Moses* could not have but *full meals of*”.⁴⁸

Stillingfleet, however, did not consider Moses to be “only a moderately learned man”.⁴⁹ In order to safeguard the elevated inference of Acts 7:22, he strained to insinuate that Moses had been endowed with unspecified superior learning—above and beyond whatever he might have gotten from the Egyptians—not to mention his being the beneficiary of the entire tradition that had reached him by lineal descent from Noah, or even from Adam.⁵⁰ Still, as laboured as Stillingfleet’s defence of the Mosaic narrative turned out to be, he cannot be grouped together, as Assmann posits, with Samuel Bochart, Pierre-Daniel Huet, and Theophilus Gale, engaged as they were in the same project “of reestablishing the priority of Biblical wisdom and theology over the Renaissance concept of *prisca theologia*”.⁵¹ As noted above, Stillingfleet was responding to a different set of historical and theological concerns, and the struggle to find a response led him to explicate Acts 7:22, by now an obstinate stumbling block for any proper scholarly interpretation of the intellectual character of ancient Egypt.

Gale, in contrast, remained committed to an unwavering defense of Judaic primacy. His *Court of the Gentiles* proclaimed a determination to prove that “the wisest of the Heathens stole their choicest Notions and Contemplations, both Philologic, and Philosophic, as wel Natural and Moral, as Divine, from the sacred Oracles.” Gale claimed to be following in Stillingfleet’s footsteps—“who

⁴⁸ Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 129–31.

⁴⁹ Levitin, *Ancient wisdom in the age of the new science*, 142.

⁵⁰ Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 132–4.

⁵¹ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 230 n.6.

yet does not professedly treat of this Subject, though he has given a great Advance thereto” —but their agendas are decidedly different.⁵² Nevertheless, Gale, too, found himself struggling with Acts 7:22. Though St Stephen stated that Moses “was learned in al the Learning of the Egyptians”, Gale would rather “persuade” himself that geometry had “received its first great *advance*, if not rise” from the Israelites during the conquest of Canaan, and that Moses invented letters.⁵³ Gale further convinced himself that Joseph was the legendary Hermes (Mercury), the “first Inventor of Arts and Sciences amongst the Egyptians”; that Moses acquired “the Wisdome of the *Egyptians*” in one of those “Schooles of Wisdome” which the patriarch had established centuries earlier; and that Moses much improved such wisdom. Still, when turning to discuss the content of Egyptian philosophy, Gale felt obliged again to heed Acts 7:22. The honourable mention St Stephen made of Egyptian wisdom, Gale professed, must mean that it had been “very considerable”, else “the spirit of God would not have made such use of it, to adorne Moses’s Character, who was otherwise sufficiently accomplished with many eminent qualities”.⁵⁴

Gale might have been a dying breed, but his struggle to find means to circumvent Acts 7:22 was shared by most contemporaries. Case in point is Samuel Parker’s critique of Henry More and of Platonism more generally. Parker feigned fear that his critique might unleash charges that by censuring Plato he indirectly reflected on Moses and on the Jewish prophets as well, as it was widely believed that the former had “borrowed his choicest and sublimest Theories” from the latter. As Numenius the Pythagorean summarized ancient perception, “what is Plato, but Moses speaking Attic Greek?” In an attempt to sever any such presumed relation, Parker thought it opportune to denigrate the scope and content of the Egyptian learning upon which Moses had been raised. However, just like Stillingfleet—on whom he relied for much of his information—Parker struggled to come to terms with St Stephen’s pronouncement and, just like Stillingfleet, ended up equivocating. “Old *Egyptian* Learning was so Famous”, he wrote—citing Acts 7:22 and 1 Kings 4:29–30—“that the Spirit of God, sets forth the Eminency of *Moses*’s knowledge by his skill in it, & the matchlesness of *Solomons* Wisdom by its exceeding it”. However, Parker concluded, such learning must refer to a body of knowledge far more profound than subsequently known.

⁵² Theophilus Gale, *The Court of the Gentiles*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: H. Hall for Tho. Gilbert, 1672), sig. *2-*2v, **1.

⁵³ Gale, *The Court of the Gentiles*, 16, 56–8.

⁵⁴ Gale, *The Court of the Gentiles*, 13–4, 18, 24. (fourth pagination).

Had "the Pristine Learning of *Egypt* been the same it was in latter Ages", he rationalized, "it had been as great a disparagement to *Moses*, as 'tis now justly reputed a commendation, that he was accomplished in all the *Egyptian* learning, and had amounted only to this, that he was a vain, trifling, superstitious Fellow". Following such a display of orthodoxy, Parker proceeded to extend backhand compliments to the Egyptians, who "seem to have had onely knowledge enough, to know that their neighbours had none at all". No disparagement is intended, Parker hastened to add; for although learning "in its Infancy, must needs be" inferior to the learning of subsequent ages, yet the ancients

should be allowed bigger Proportions of Honour and Renown, not only because they were very wise Men, considering the rudeness and ignorance of the times, in which they lived, but because they were the first founders and discoverers of that knowledge, which after Ages have but improved, and the world surely is much more beholding to those that first invent useful Arts and Sciences, than to those that onely improve them.⁵⁵

Thomas Burnet, too, could not believe that "Barbaric Philosophy" owed anything to the "Wit and Industry" of ancient nations, or that it had originated with Moses or with Abraham. The ancient Egyptians, Chaldeans, or Brahamins left behind no experiments or observations to suggest "a Sharpness of Wit, and Strength of Argument". Rather, the philosophy and manners of the first postdiluvian people was markedly simple and limited. Nor could philosophy have originated with Moses, for he was, as St Stephen made clear, "the Disciple rather than the teacher" of the learned Egyptians. As for Abraham, how could he, a stranger, be the teacher of the Egyptians during his two-years sojourn to their country—especially as the "Jews were not famous for either Natural or Mathematical Learning"? Rather than follow what he considered a Jewish attempt at self-aggrandizement, Burnet chose to trace back the origination of all knowledge to Noah, "the common Father of Jews and *Gentiles*". It stands to reason, he stated, that just as Noah had delivered moral precepts to his sons, so did he impart important doctrines concerning the natural world. Noah, the inhabitant of both pre- and post-diluvian worlds, had "delivered the Lamp of Learning" from one world to the other. That learning "propagated thro' the Universe, together with his Offspring, and primitive People". Subsequently, however, those "Seeds of Natural and Moral Doctrine [...] very much declined,

⁵⁵ Samuel Parker, *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie* (Oxford: W. Hall for Richard Davis, 1666), 92–9.

and [...] were almost choked by the prevailing Tares.” Ultimately, Burnet, too, felt the need to offer a nod to orthodoxy. He concluded his analysis, and the book, by acknowledging that in the absence of any evidence to corroborate his theory, only at the end of time would the truth emerge:

These cannot be easily restored from ancient Monuments, but rather all Things are to be renewed by the Principles of Nature and clear Reason, and amended and established by solid Theories; that so, when the End of all Things approaches, Truth, being revived, may shine with double Lustre, as the Prelude of a future Renovation.⁵⁶

It is against this backdrop that Spencer’s *De legibus Hebraeorum* must be understood. Assmann deems the contribution of the Cambridge scholar to be “the starting point of the discourse on Moses and Egypt”. Spencer was a “pioneer”, with whom “the discourse on Egypt leaves the confines of Hermeticism and other mystical and occult traditions and begins to speak the language of the Enlightenment.” The new discourse, Assmann contends, is firmly grounded on Acts 7:22: “For Spencer’s project, this short sentence was absolutely crucial. It was the one foundation on which he could build his entire edifice, and it was the one testimony that could save him from being accused of heresy.” Furthermore, this verse—joined with Philo’s testimony regarding Moses’ inculcation in the “symbolic” learning of the Egyptians—served “as leitmotifs throughout the whole line of the Moses debate, which started with Spencer and which ends with Freud”.⁵⁷ Although discussion of Spencer goes beyond the confines of this article, it is important to point out that recent scholarship has cast doubt on several assumptions and conclusions made by Assmann. Enlightenment figures found Spencer’s scholarship useful in their anti-clerical, anti-Scriptural campaign, but Spencer himself was an orthodox Anglican and an heir of older scholarship—not least of Kircher.⁵⁸ More importantly, Acts 7:22 was certainly not the cornerstone of Spencer’s project. He cited it once or twice, simply as scriptural corroboration of the cultural

⁵⁶ Thomas Burnet, *Archaeologiae philosophicae: sive doctrina antiqua de rerum originibus libri duo* (London: R. N. for Walter Kettily, 1692), 190–7, translations in: Thomas Burnet, *Doctrina antiqua de rerum originibus: or, an inquiry into the doctrine of the philosophers of all nations, Concerning the Original of the World*, trans. Richard Mead and Thomas Foxtan (London: Edmund Curl, 1736), 238–46.

⁵⁷ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 19, 56.

⁵⁸ Dmitri Levitin, “John Spencer’s *De legibus Hebraeorum* and ‘enlightened’ sacred history: a new interpretation”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 76 (2013): 49–92; Daniel Stolzenberg, “John Spencer and the Perils of Sacred Philology”, *Past and Present* 214 (2012): 129–63.

superiority of the Egyptians over the enslaved Israelites. Spencer was concerned only marginally with the nature and ultimate origination of Egyptian wisdom, focused as he was on the religious customs and rites that became encrypted unto the Mosaic dispensation.

In retrospect, Spencer’s extensive forays into Egyptian religion and rituals could be interpreted as if he considered these to comprise the Egyptian wisdom in which Moses had been instructed. However, this is not quite how Spencer, or his contemporaries, interpreted the historization of the Mosaic distinction. Still, Spencer’s work added to the urgency to come to terms with the antiquity of Egypt, as well as with the relative position of the Jews within that historical context. Coming on the heels of new debates over cosmogonies—initiated by Thomas Burnet—the Egyptian question now involved the accuracy of the Mosaic account of the Deluge, of the nature of postdiluvian society, and of the origins of religion and idolatry.

John Woodward became the last scholar to attempt to stem the new trend. A vocal participant in the cosmogony disputes of the 1690s, Woodward paid little attention initially to ancient wisdom. In the various editions of *An Essay toward a Natural History of the Earth*, which he published between 1695 and 1702, he merely commented on how the struggle to survive kept the postdiluvians in a state of profound ignorance:

Those first Ages of the new World were simple, and illiterate to Admiration; and ’twas a long time e’re the Cloud was withdrawn: e’re the least spark of Learning (I had almost said of Humanity) broke forth, or any Man betook himself to the promotion of Science.⁵⁹

However, in the first decade of the eighteenth century he devoted an entire treatise to the “Wisdom of the Egyptians”, in which he sought to rebut Spencer and Burnet, while retaining as much as possible the literal sense of Scripture. So what was the knowledge of the Egyptians? Very small indeed.

Not only was Egypt inhabited “very early”, Woodward conceded, but the Egyptians were “much in the same state, that mankind were before the universal deluge”. Moreover, the “fruitfulness” of the region had “allowed them time and leisure for thought and study, for improvement of science and arts”. And yet, Woodward jeered, all that leisure and wealth produced nothing except “vain

⁵⁹ John Woodward, “Of the Wisdom of the Antient Egyptians”, *Archaeologia* 4 (1777): 212–310, at 55–8.

amusement” and self-aggrandizement. The Egyptians bragged about their possession of “letters”, but this was a “mere loose tradition”—judging by the fact that “their antient history is so fabulous, and so much in the dark, beyond that of almost all other nations.” In fact, they enjoyed a reputation for “wisdom” only during the time when their “neighbours were savage, and had none”. For proof, Woodward turned to surviving Egyptian monuments. The pyramids, for example, exhibit much industry and labor yet “without any consideration of ornament or beauty”. As for the famous Labyrinth mentioned by Herodotus, it was “very wild, rambling, and without any good design”. What all these immense constructions prove, is that Egypt had been heavily populated, which rendered such labour-intensive works possible. Nevertheless, the “greatness of the work” bore little relation to the “judgement and understanding of the architects”. Even the massive Egyptian temples were utterly “confused, barbarous, and ill-contrived”, as befitting the monstrosity of their religion, “the wildest and most fantastic that the sun ever saw”.⁶⁰

Such a lowly estimation of the Egyptians’ mentality necessitated a reckoning with Acts 7:22. After all, since Woodward’s essay intended to evince “the truth of all [...] great events which are recorded in the Pentateuch”,⁶¹ how best to interpret St Stephen’s testimony? As far as Woodward was concerned, Moses was superior to the Egyptians in every sense. He may have been born and bred in Egypt, “educated from his infancy in all the wisdom of the Egyptians”—such as it was—but he quickly “much surpassed his tutors, and improved vastly upon their learning”. Furthermore, being wholly averse to the Egyptian constitution, Moses would not have derived “any thing thence to be added to the Jewish” one.⁶² In thus attempting to rebut John Spencer, who appeared to Woodward to mightily magnify the genius of the Egyptians at the expense of the Hebrews—describing them as “a people rude, barbarous, and destitute of almost all manner of learning, ignorant of all the genteeler arts”—Woodward went to the other extreme. No sooner did the Hebrews regain their freedom that, rather than being imitators, they “began to discover all the marks of the original genius and spirit of their ancestors”. So much so, in fact, that by Solomon’s time “they had extended their empire over a considerable part of the east, and were much superior to any nation then upon earth, as well in knowledge, learning, and

⁶⁰ Woodward, “Of the Wisdom of the Antient Egyptians”, 217, 219, 222, 223, 228, 229, 238.

⁶¹ Woodward, “Of the Wisdom of the Antient Egyptians”, 213.

⁶² Woodward, “Of the Wisdom of the Antient Egyptians”, 262, 267.

humanity, as riches, grandeur, and empire." Thomas Burnet and Spencer might well claim that Moses "was only a student in the Egyptian wisdom and learning of which their Thoyth was the author", but the truth was otherwise. There existed no evidence to prove that Toth had lived before Moses and, besides, even if true, much of the knowledge ascribed to him was not his at all. As for the Egyptian wisdom that Burnet spoke of, "if it were such as either their own works of all sorts, or the accounts of the Greeks, set forth, we may be very positive Moses would be far from copying any thing of it."⁶³

Having disposed of Burnet to his own satisfaction, Woodward returned to Spencer, whose great erudition did not prevent him from falling "into the greatest and most erroneous paradox that a man well could", inferring that the Jews derived their laws and their rites from the Egyptians: "whereas it is evident, at first view, the Egyptians might as well have derived theirs from the Jews. Nay, both might have taken them from some third original." Woodward preferred to locate that "original" with Joseph. The high office held by the patriarch, he reasoned, attests to the Egyptians' high esteem of his wisdom—an esteem that belies Spencer's claim regarding the rudeness of the Jews and their having been despised by the Egyptians. Just the opposite. The power that Pharaoh had invested in Joseph suggests that he "and his relations had it perfectly in their power to give the Egyptians any laws, doctrines, or rites, they pleased, relating to religion, manners, government, or the private conduct of life."⁶⁴

Ultimately, however, Woodward felt compelled to follow Burnet. It was not necessary for him to prove that the Egyptians had taken their customs from the Jews, he protested:

The reason of mankind is uniform, and every where the same; and different people reflecting in like manner upon the same thing, will all draw much the same conclusions, and fall into the same thoughts, without ever conferring together, or taking any hints from each other.

All the customs under dispute "had obtained among mankind while they were still in one company [...] before the division of nations at Babel, or ever there was one soul in Egypt".⁶⁵ Yet, even as Woodward conceded that the true source of ancient customs and learning remained obscure, he rejected Burnet's characterization of the Jews as a nation that "was never considerable for

⁶³ Woodward, "Of the Wisdom of the Antient Egyptians", 270–2.

⁶⁴ Woodward, "Of the Wisdom of the Antient Egyptians", 280–1, 285.

⁶⁵ Woodward, "Of the Wisdom of the Antient Egyptians", 286, 288.

philosophy or mathematicks, for the study of the other arts, or any remarkable production of human wit of that kind”. If nothing else, the magnificence of Solomon’s Temple proved “that the arts and learning of Judaea were, in truth, very considerable a long time before ever Thales, Pythagoras, or any of the most early of the Greek sages had ever visited Egypt”.⁶⁶

Strikingly, despite their close engagement with Egyptian and Jewish antiquity, none of the above-mentioned scholars—not even Ralph Cudworth for that matter—sought to tackle the thorny matter of technical chronology. John Marsham was the sole Englishman during the second half of the seventeenth century to attempt a solution to the conundrum generated by Scaliger’s Egyptian chronology. Assmann, too, avoids chronology. While noting that “Marsham’s book had the same chronological implications as Spencer’s argument and contradicted the orthodox view of history with its distinction between *historia sacra* and *historia profana*”—elaborating as he did on the anteriority of Egyptian religion and worship—Assmann does not consider it necessary to go further: Spencer and Marsham simply contributed to the “chronological revolution” which the likes of Toland and Tindal would later exploit.⁶⁷ Though dodging chronology might be justified by the eschewal of technical chronology by the scholars discussed by Assmann, the same cannot be justified vis-à-vis his eighteenth-century proponents, whose discourse on Moses was informed as much by their reading of Spencer and Cudworth as by their pondering the implications of the partly complementary, partly contradictory, technical chronologies devised by Marsham and his fellow traveler, Isaac Newton. Unfortunately, constraints of space prevent me from elaborating on the eighteenth-century discourse on Egypt, especially the extent to which William Warburton’s *Divine Legation of Moses* was designed to controvert Newton’s chronology.

One may argue, of course, that the context I’ve furnished in this article is irrelevant for Assmann’s reception/appropriation project. He himself acknowledges that for each of the individuals he discusses “a strictly historical approach would proceed in a very different way”, and intellectual historians “would have drawn a radically different picture” of Spencer, for example.⁶⁸ To my mind the disclaimer rings somewhat hollow. Surely, a full-fledged *historical*

⁶⁶ Woodward, “Of the Wisdom of the Antient Egyptians”, 307–8.

⁶⁷ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 91.

⁶⁸ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 10.

analysis of the motivation and scholarship of the individuals discussed is requisite before turning to evaluate how subsequent commentators read—or misread—them. Indeed, I would like to resist the notion that mnemohistory can be carried out independently of “proper” history. To read one author exclusively through the lens of a subsequent reader runs the risk of ascribing to the former a frame of mind and agenda that informed only the latter—at least by implication. Assmann occasionally falls into this trap. For example, postulating that the Enlightenment discourse of Moses included Reinhold, Spencer, and Warburton, Assmann assumes Reinhold’s mindset to be analogous to Spencer’s, and that since Acts 7:22 proved significant for Warburton it must have been so for Spencer as well.

Indeed, Assmann’s own agenda impinges on the interpretative structure as well as on the historical record. Moses “grew and developed only as a figure of memory”, he writes, “absorbing and embodying all traditions that pertained to legislation, liberation, and monotheism”. Such a realization, based on our current historical understanding, cannot inform our reading of early modern scholars, for whom Moses was certainly a veritable historical figure. Consequently, a project intent on “analyzing the mythical elements in tradition and discovering their hidden agenda” takes for granted, at every juncture, a profusion of a-historical agendas. Thus, according to Assmann, mnemohistory is not concerned with the question of whether Moses was “really trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians”, and focuses instead on “why such a statement did not appear in the book of Exodus, but only appeared in Acts (7:22)”. Not only does Assmann circumvent this question—let alone furnish an answer—he falls short on a related line of mnemohistorical inquiry: “why the Moses discourse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries almost exclusively based its image of Moses not on Moses’ elaborate biography in the Pentateuch, but on this single verse in the New Testament.” For all the verve of his presentation, Assmann is unable to substantiate such a claim, which brings me to my own conclusion: it is simply not true.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 23, 10.