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The Solomon Goldman Lectures

Volume VIII

Edited by Dean Phillip Bell and Hal M. Lewis

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Freud, Women, and Jews: Viennese Jokes and Judaic Dream Interpretation

Ken Frieden

SIGMUND FREUD PUBLISHED The Interpretation of Dreams in 1899-1900, and when he published Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious in 1905, he applied his dream theories to jokes. The Interpretation of Dreams argues that manifest dream contents are a disguised expression of latent contents, which consist of repressed thoughts. His derivative book Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious extends this theory to include jokes. According to Freud, our dreams conceal aggressive and sexual impulses that we cannot acknowledge to ourselves or to other people; in telling jokes, he claims, we both express and conceal similar impulses. Freud's affinities to Judaic sources are evident in his book on jokes but suppressed in his book on dreams.

It is often interesting to redirect Freud's psychoanalytic methods back at Freud. Analysts have repeatedly reinterpreted his dreams, many of which he retells in The Interpretation of Dreams. Similarly, some scholars have reinterpreted his jokes. Especially impressive is the work by Elliott Oring, The Jokes of Sigmund Freud: A Study in Humor and Jewish Identity.² Oring's chapters on "The Schadchen" (marriage broker) and on "The Ostjude" (eastern European Jew) shrewdly analyze Freud's attitudes toward women and Jews. In the spirit of Oring's research, we may ask: What are the concealed thoughts regarding women and Jews that Freud expresses through the jokes he tells? I raise this question without meaning to debunk Freud—a too popular pastime since the 1980s. If nothing in mental life is ever accidental, as Freud suggests, then it may be possible to find the hidden significance of his favorite jokes. In Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious, Freud tries to show the generalized mechanism of humor, as he had shown the mechanism of the dream work. Instead of following Freud's quest to discover why jokes are funny, however, we may wonder instead why Freud finds them funny, or why he chooses these examples. What are the more specific disguised contents behind the jokes he tells?

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Many of the characters in Freud's jokes are women and Jews. For instance, he constantly refers to potential brides, matchmakers, beggars, and other characters drawn from the repertoire of Viennese and Yiddish humor. It should be feasible to reinterpret Freud's jokes without merely reducing them to a label such as "sexist" or "self-hating." There is little doubt, however, that Freud's relationship to women and Jews may be described as "ambivalent."

Freud's skepticism regarding sexuality and social institutions is epitomized by a comic simile he discusses: "A wife is like an umbrella. Sooner or later one takes a cab." Freud quotes this witticism and explains it in accordance with his views of sex, "civilization and its discontents:"

One marries in order to secure oneself against the onslaughts of sensuality, but then it emerges that marriage provides no gratification of a somewhat stronger need—just as one takes along an umbrella to protect oneself against the rain, and then one gets wet in the rain anyway. In both cases one must look for stronger protection, either a public vehicle or women who are accessible in return for money. Now the joke is almost completely replaced by cynicism. One does not allow oneself to say openly that marriage is not the arrangement that will satisfy a man's sexuality...⁴

Although a man marries "to secure himself against the onslaught of sensuality," Freud indicates that marriage is not destined to satisfy his desires. According to Freud, the second part of the witticism—"sooner or later one takes a cab"—alludes to frequenting prostitutes. A man's wife satisfies a need, but only partially.

The biographical tradition since Ernest Jones suggests that Freud had a happy marriage with few conflicts: "There can have been few more successful marriages." Yet Jones commented on the early demise of "the passionate side of Freud's marriage." In this connection, Oring speculates that, after 1895, "there was a general withdrawal of Freud's libido from the object of Martha and a redirection of his energies to the development of psychoanalysis." His jokes may tell a different story, however,

and Oring makes a strong case regarding "Freud's underlying antipathy toward his wife."8

Rather than probe further into Freud's marital life, this essay looks closer at the less specific attitudes that may be indirectly expressed by his book on humor. At the core of Freud's Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious is his emphasis on "tendentious" jokes. Chapter 3 is entitled, "Die Tendenzen des Witzes," which is only partially translated by Strachey as "The Purposes of Jokes." Tendenz, in Freud's discussion, is the underlying (sexual or aggressive) impulse that motivates a joke.

Most of the jokes Freud tells pertaining to women involve matchmakers. Usually in poor taste, they make fun of the prospective bride and of the matchmaker's exaggerations. Freud explains that the job of a marriage broker—or *Schadchen*, in Viennese German, from the Yiddish and Hebrew—is to make people appear better than they are. In Freud's compendium of comic anecdotes, humor arises when the matchmaker gets a chance to tell the truth and to disclose the bride's flaws.

For example, a young man goes to meet a prospective bride; while waiting to see her, he notices valuable silver objects on display. The matchmaker comments, "You can see from these things how rich these people are." The man answers that maybe they have just borrowed the valuables to make an impression. "What an idea!" the matchmaker says. "Who would lend these people anything?" Aggression is right below the surface of the matchmaker's pretense, as he shifts the man's suspicion from the poverty of the bride's family to their untrustworthy reputation. When the matchmaker speaks aggressively against the family he represents, he shatters the favorable impression he is supposed to convey. Perhaps this humorous anecdote suggests that the matchmaker's pleasure of speaking aggressively may outweigh his possible loss of livelihood.

In several other instances, Freud's jokes express negative views of women. They center on women whose deformities make them undesirable matches. In the first case, the matchmaker has brought along an assistant whose job is to confirm the bride's virtues:

[&]quot;She is straight as a pine-tree," said the Schadchen.

[&]quot;As a pine-tree," repeated the echo.

"And what eyes she has—you've got to see them."

"Really, what eyes she has!" confirmed the echo.

"And she is educated like no other."

"How educated!"

"But it is true," the matchmaker admitted, "that she has a little hump."

"And what a hump!" the echo confirmed again. 10

Freud's ostensible point here is to show how some jokes use "faulty reasoning" as their humorous technique. But humor often does involve putting down other people, and the weakest of the "weaker sex" make an easy target. Among the array of defective brides, another is lame. In a similar example, a prospective groom tells the matchmaker that he is dissatisfied with the girl he has met:

"Why have you brought me here?" he asked him reproachfully. "She's ugly and old, squints and has bad teeth and bleary eyes."

"You don't need to whisper," the broker interrupted. "She's also deaf." 11

Do we laugh at a joke in such poor taste? Are we allowed to admit it in polite society, if we do? Why is some humor based on aggression at the expense of helpless people? Speaking cynically, one might say that putting someone else down soothes our own battered egos by making us feel better than someone else. This seems to be one reason for the effectiveness of some slapstick humor.

* * *

Freud was not afraid to show his attraction to Jewish humor, though he apologizes briefly for the crudeness of his Jewish bathhouse jokes. 12 He comments that Jewish jokes often refer to the "manifold and hopeless misery of the Jew." In discussing Jewish jokes, however, he observes that they often involve self-criticism. He clarifies that this "self-criticism" may include jokes at the expense of a person "in whom one has a share—a collective person, that is (one's own people, for instance)." In the case of

Jewish jokes, Freud's examples generally involve eastern European Jews (Ostjuden). Because Freud's own parents had moved to Vienna from Galicia, Freud was at pains to distance himself from the lower-class Jews from eastern Europe, who spoke Yiddish rather than German. Hence when Freud tells jokes about "dirty Jews," he sets himself apart from them. Jewish jokes, Freud writes, recognize Jews' "real flaws" in the context of their other good qualities. The problem in Freud's book is that most of the Jewish flaws seem to fall upon the Ostjuden. This confirms the impression that "tendentious jokes" function, in part, by making the hearer feel better than the people who are the butt of such jokes. In this instance, jokes about Ostjuden seem designed to shore up the superior position of assimilated Viennese Jews like Freud.

One joke about a pretentious Baroness combines the motifs of women and Jews. The woman has apparently been concealing her Jewish identity, and Freud calls this humorous anecdote an example of comic unmasking. A doctor and the Baron are playing cards while waiting for the Baroness to go into labor. They hear her say in French, "Ah, mon Dieu, que je souffre [Oh, my God, how I am suffering!" Her husband jumps up, but the doctor says it is not time yet, so they go on playing. Later they hear the woman cry out in German, "Mein Gott, mein Gott, was für Schmerzen [My God, my God, what terrible pains!" Again the husband expects the doctor to check on his patient, but the doctor says that it still is not time. At last they hear the woman cry, "Ai, waih, waih" ["Oy vey, oy vey]." The doctor throws down his cards and says, "Now it's time."15 The woman's civilized cries in the cultivated languages of French and German do not count for much; only when she regresses to déclassé Yiddish does the doctor credit the seriousness of her labor pains.

In this instance, the English translation clouds the issue. Rather than translate "Ai, waih" in a manner that shows that it derives from Yiddish, Strachey renders the Baroness' outcry "Aaee, aa-ee, aa-ee!" Moreover, Strachey mistranslates Freud's comment that the woman's original [that is, Jewish] identity breaks through the layers of her education and breeding; he refers to her "primitive nature." It seems that Strachey did not recognize or did not want to convey the unmasking of the Baroness' Jewishness.

Perhaps Freud's most telling Jewish joke, in connection with questions of Jewish identity, is a story about an unwilling Jewish soldier. From other writings by Freud, we know that he was familiar with the Zionist cause; he once wrote to Herzl (who for a time lived on the same street as Freud) and expressed his admiration. Beneath the surface, however, one of Freud's dreams shows a more complex picture. ¹⁸ One of his jokes may also reveal Freud's ambivalence about Zionism.

A man named Itsik (which makes it evident that he is Jewish) is in the artillery, but he is an uncooperative "loose cannon." An officer notices his uncooperative behavior and says: "Itsik, you're no use to us. I'll give you some advice: buy yourself a cannon and make yourself independent!" 19 This is nonsensical advice, since Itsik obviously cannot become an independent army; the joke is meant to teach him the error of his ways. But against the background of rising Zionist activity in 1905, the joke might be construed as anti-Zionist, as if it were telling Herzl's followers that it was useless to try to go independent.

* * *

Freud's interpretations of humor are based on methods outlined in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and there were several affinities between Freud's theories of dream interpretation and ancient Judaic interpretation. Some of Freud's methods resemble those of rabbinic commentary. Moreover, specific Talmudic dream interpretations anticipate Freudian interpretations. Freud knew about the similarities to Judaic commentary and downplayed his links to the Judaic tradition—because of Viennese anti-Semitism and for other reasons. I will de-emphasize the biographical element and focus on how Freud's ambivalence appears in his texts.

On the most basic level, Freud identified with the biblical Joseph. In a footnote to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he comments that "the name Joseph plays such a great role in my dreams. My ego very easily hides itself behind people of that name, because Joseph was also the name of the dream interpreter known from the Bible." Yet Freud generally downplays his links to Judaic traditions.

Freud's notion of "overdetermination" resembles rabbinic

assumptions. According to his analysis, brief dream texts are full of meanings that need to be uncovered; they are "overdetermined" by innumerable associations and causes. The dream is like a sacred text that must be understood by midrashic commentary. The Talmud tells the story of a man who dreamed a dream and went to 24 interpreters in Jerusalem. All of them gave different interpretations, and all of them proved true.²¹ The dream is "overdetermined."

Freud's emphasis on puns and wordplays has much in common with Judaic interpretation. One biblical instance is Daniel's interpretation of the mysterious writing on the wall, mene mene tekel upharsin.²² Daniel gives meaning to each word by wordplay; for example, he determines that upharsin indicates that the kingdom will be "divided" (prisat) and given to the Medes "and Persians" (upharas).

Similarly, when Freud dreamed of a composite word, Autodidasker, he broke it into the words "author," "autodidact," and the name Lasker. There are several analogous talmudic examples. For example: "I dreamed they were telling me: Your father has left you money in Cappadocia. A. Ishmael breaks the place name Cappadocia into Greek and Aramaic words and says: "Kapa means beam' and deka means ten. Go and examine the beam which is at the head of ten, for it is full of coins."

Freudian free association, as applied to dream interpretation, also has similarites to midrashic commentary. The dreamer spins out meanings of a dream by associating it with other things. Meaning is not just "inside" or "behind" a text; it emerges together with associations and interpretation, as in Oral Torah. In one of his own dreams, Freud dreamed the enigmatic phrase, "Auf Geseres," which he explains by associating it with the Hebrew word, gezerah, decree.²⁵

The idea of dreams as wish-fulfillments is present in a Jewish proverb, which Freud quotes: "What does the goose dream of? Of millet" (He uses the Rumanian and Yiddish word kukuruz, for millet). One opinion in the Talmud asserts that a dream is shown to a person only from "the thoughts of his heart." This might be likened to the Freudian ideas of "day's residues" or wishfulfillments in dreams.

In terms of specific interpretations, there are some precedents to Freud in the Talmud. Tractate Berakhot includes open

discussions of sexual dreams. Moreover, the midrash Lamentations Rabbah tells a pertinent story of a fraudulent dream interpreter. Rabbi Ishmael ben Rabbi Yose counters the fraud and includes striking sexual interpretations:

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A Samaritan (kuti) made himself out to be an interpreter of dreams. Rabbi Ishmael ben Rabbi Yose heard this and said, "Shall I not go and see this foolish-hearted Samaritan who tricks people?" He went and sat by him. A person came and said, "In my dream I saw an olive tree feeding oil." The Samaritan told him, "The olive denotes light and oil denotes light; you will see light in much light." Rabbi Ishmael said to the interpreter: "May that man's spirit faint! [The dream signifies that] he had intercourse with his mother." Another person came and said, "I dreamt that one of my eyes swallowed the other." He told him, "You will see light in much light." Rabbi Ishmael ben Rabbi Yose said to the interpreter, "May that man's spirit faint! That man has two children and one of them had intercourse with the other."28

The skeptical Rabbi Ishmael shows an awareness that dreams may contain sexual meanings. This story also shows a larger issue, in a nutshell: bogus, prophetic interpretations stand in contrast to interpretations that refer back to the dreamer's past. Freud's skepticism about prophetic interpretations is anticipated by ancient Judaic sources.

The element of self-fulfilling prophecy in one talmudic story might have made Freud uneasy. Bar Hedia is a dream interpreter who gives positive interpretations to people who pay him and negative interpretations to people who do not. Two rabbis, Abaye and Raba, put him to the test: Abaye pays and Raba does not, and they come to Bar Hedia with identical dreams. Sure enough, Abaye gets good interpretations and positive results in his life. Raba gets bad interpretations and catastrophes. This story suggests that dreams do not have intrinsic prophetic meaning; an interpreter may impose a future.

One day, Raba and Bar Hedia are traveling in a boat. When the interpreter disembarks, a book falls out of his coat and Raba sees written in it "All dreams follow the mouth." Raba takes this

to mean that the interpreter influences the future, and that Bar Hedia was to blame for all of the negative interpretations and subsequent catastrophes.29

* * *

Freud knew about the resonances with Judaic commentary and tried to downplay his links to the Judaic tradition. In a 1914 footnote to later editions of The Interpretation of Dreams, 30 Freud cites two articles on Judaic dream interpretation. One of them he even printed in the psychoanalytic journal Imago. It is certain, then, that Freud knew about his Jewish forerunners.

The crux of the problem is the prophetic dimension of ancient dream interpretation. Freud rejected this future orientation and showed how dreams derive from the dreamer's past. But could Freud entirely reject a future orientation? Without it, there could be no cure. And yet the prospect of self-fulfilling prophecy casts doubt on the scientific pretensions of dream interpretation. In any case, a rabbinic tradition suggests that the interpreter may influence the meaning and consequences of dreams.

Hence Freud could not have accepted the talmudic notion that "All dreams follow the mouth." In short, this terse dictum indicates that the meaning is partly shaped by the interpreter, A midrashic commentary on Genesis illustrates how this may be the case. The midrash is trying to explain what it means when the cupbearer and baker tell Pharaoh: "As he [Joseph] interpreted to us, so it was."31 The obvious meaning is that Joseph got it right. But this story of Rabbi Eliezer gives a new sense:

A certain woman went to Rabbi Eliezer and said to him: "I saw in my dream that the second [beam or story] of my house was split." He said to her: "You will conceive a male child"; she went away and so it was. A second time she dreamed thus and went to Rabbi Eliezer, who told her: "You will give birth to a male child"; and so it was. A third time she dreamed thus and came to him again but did not find him. She said to his students: "I saw in my dream that the second [beam or story] of my house was split." They said to her: "You will bury your husband," and so it was. Rabbi Eliezer heard a voice of wailing and said to them:

"What is this?" They told him the story, and he said to them: "You have killed a man, for is it not written, 'As he interpreted to us, so it was'?"³²

Referring back to Genesis, this story suggests that Joseph did not merely get it right; his interpretation may have played a part in causing the future consequences.

In order for Freud to make dream interpretation appear scientific, he had to renounce all traces of prophetic or self-fulfilling interpretation. But even his interpretations, directed to the past, have bearing on the future. Also, free association may be understood as helping the dreamer create a new meaning. The rabbis had a keen sense of the hazards of interpreting dreams, since the dreamer is all too easily influenced. Freud could not reconcile this skepticism with his scientific aspirations.

At a distance from his all-important dream theory, Freud was more willing to show his interest in things Jewish. As we have seen, his book on humor is full of Yiddish jokes about the schadchen, matchmaker, and shnorrer, beggar. In a way, Freud's theory of humor repeats his theory of dreams, but with markedly Judaic contents. The "tendentious" joke includes underlying sexual or aggressive motives, which are concealed by the joke.

Freud experienced some financial difficulties, and according to one theory (Oring, chapter 2), Freud identified with the defiant shnorrers in his jokes. I conclude with his joke about eating salmon and mayonnaise—a tasty combination that was apparently the Vienese equivalent of lox, cream cheese, and bagels in New York. A poor man borrows money from a rich man. Later, the rich man sees the impoverished man in a restaurant, eating an expensive meal of salmon and mayonnaise. The rich man says indignantly, "That's what you've used my money for?" The poor man's response combines illogic and defiance. "I don't understand. When I'm broke I can't eat salmon with mayonnaise. And when I do have money, I shouldn't eat salmon with mayonnaise. So when am I supposed to eat salmon and mayonnaise?"33 Freud presents this as an example of illogic in humor, but it also conveys the shnorrer's aggression and subversiveness.

* * *

To summarize, there was an affinity between Freud's theories of dream interpretation and ancient Judaic interpretation. Freud identified with Joseph, though he avoids discussing resonances between his theories and rabbinic thought. His interpretations use wordplay and free-association, typical rabbinic strategies. The Talmud and Midrash even anticipate some explicit sexual interpretations. Freud knew about the resonances with Judaic commentary and tried to downplay his links to the Judaic tradition. In particular, he rejected all "prophetic" dream interpretation. But this does not take account of ways in which any interpretation may influence the future.

Freud's Jewish jokes convey some of his own skepticism and his subversive streak. One joke even allows him to poke fun at the mystical bent of some Jews: In a supposedly telepathic revelation, the Great Rabbi of Cracow announces the death of the Rabbi of Lemberg. It turns out not to be true, but a disciple defends his rabbi: well, the view from Cracow to Lemberg was magnificent, anyway.³⁴ Freud delighted in attacking superstition, although he found traces of it in himself—as when he considered the telepathic or prophetic powers of dreams.³⁵

There were definite affinities between Freud and Judaic traditions. But Freud felt compelled to play these down both to bolster his theories of dream interpretation and because of his ambivalent relationship to Judaic traditions. Under the star of anti-Semitism in turn-of-the-century Vienna, it was nearly inevitable that an ambitious researcher like Freud suppressed public displays of his affiliation with Jews and Judaism. Though he did lecture at the B'nai Brith organization and expressed some positive sentiments in a preface to the Hebrew edition of Totem and Taboo, Freud was uneasy about connections to the Judaic tradition. His fear that "confessional considerations" would hinder his promotion to the rank of professor motivated some of his dreams and even led Freud to consider converting to Christianity. But Freud was especially concerned that psychoanalysis would not be taken seriously if his Jewish identity was too much in evidence.

From another standpoint, then, it is remarkable that Freud ventured to publish his book on humor, with its incessant

reference to Yiddish and Jewish jokes. This was his continuation of a line of thought developed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but it may also have reflected his disappointment during the years after his masterpiece was published. Only a few hundred copies of *The Interpretation of Dreams* were sold in the first five years after it was printed, and Freud's thought was not being taken seriously in Viennese medical circles. The low opinion in which his work was held, in the early years, is evident from the embarrassingly amateurish appearance of his book *On Dreams* (*Über den Traum*, 1901). I suspect that by 1905 Freud felt that he had little to lose by publishing his odd joke book, since the medical establishment was, in any case, ignoring him. One might even say that this book, which is so full of veiled and explicit aggression, gave Freud a chance to vent the frustration he was experiencing in the effort to achieve recognition.

Even among American and British doctors, Freud's theories have fallen from the high position they held in the mid-twentieth century; they never received the same kind of recognition in Germany or Austria. Attacks on the "unscientific" character of psychoanalytic speculation have meant that today Freud's work is probably more influential in art and literary criticism than in academic departments of psychology. In this context, it seems to me that we can drop Freud's pretense of universalism in his methods of interpreting dreams. Dream symbols are deeply influenced by the dreamer's culture, and Freud's interpretive methods show the influence of his Judaic traditions. Freud was engaged in a wide-ranging denial of the links between psychoanalytic interpretation and rabbinic commentary.³⁶

NOTES

- ¹ For example, Alexander Grinstein, On Sigmund Freud's Dreams, and William J. McGrath, Freud's Discovery of Psychoanalysis: The Politics of Hysteria.
- ² 1984; reprinted 1997.
- ³ The abbreviation "W" refers to Sigmund Freud, Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten; "J" refers to Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. I have modified slightly the translation of most passages I quote. The original German for the cited passage reads: "Eine Frau ist wie ein Regenschirm. Man nimmt sich dann doch einen Komfortabel"; W, pp. 76 and 105; J, pp. 78 and 110-111.
- ⁴ W. p. 105; translation modified from James Strachev's in J. p. 111.
- ⁵ Ernest Jones, The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, p. 102.
- ⁶ Cited by Elliott Oring, The Jokes of Signumd Freud: A Study in Humor and Jewish Identity, p. 28, note 9.
- ⁷ Oring, The Jokes of Signumd Freud, pp. 29-30; cp. The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence Between Signund Freud and C. G. Jung, p. 456.
- 8 Oring, The Jokes of Sigmund Freud, p. 32.
- ⁹ W, p. 63; J, pp. 64-65.
- ¹⁰ W, p. 63; translation modified from J, p. 64.
- ¹¹ W, p. 63; J, p. 64.
- ¹² W, p. 49; J, p. 49.
- ¹³ W, p. 108; J, p. 114.
- ¹⁴ W, p. 106; modified from J, p. 111.
- ¹⁵ J, p. 81; W, p. 78.
- ¹⁶ J. p. 81.
- 17 ursprüngliche Natur, W, p. 78.
- ¹⁸ Cp. Ken Frieden, Freud's Dream of Interpretation, 1990, pp. 120-126.
- ¹⁹ W, p. 56; J, p. 56.
- ²⁰ The abbreviation "Td" refers to Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*; "ID" refers to *The Interpretation of Dreams*. I have, however, modified the translation of most quoted passages. Td, p. 466n; ID, p. 522n.
- ²¹ Ber. 55b.
- ²² Book of Daniel 5:25-28; see Frieden, Freud's Dream of Interpretation, p. 68.
- ²³ Td, pp. 299-300; ID, p. 334.
- 24 Ber. 56b.
- 25 Td, pp. 426-429; ID, pp. 477-480.
- ²⁶ Td, p. 150; ID, p. 165.
- ²⁷ Ber. 55b.
- ²⁸ Ber. 56b; translation modified from the Soncino edition of the Babylonian Talmud, volume 1.

- ²⁹ Ber. 56a.
- 30 Td, p. 32; ID, p. 38.
- 31 Gen. 41:13.
- ³² Gen. Rabbah 89:8; translation modified slightly based on the Chanoch Albeck edition of *Bereshit Rabbah*.
- ³³ W, p. 50; J, pp. 49-50.
- ³⁴ W, p. 62; J, p. 63.
- 35 See Frieden, Freud's Dream of Interpretation, pp. 97-106.
- ³⁶ See also Frieden, Freud's Dream of Interpretation, pp. 126-132.

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