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“God Has Made Me Ruler over Egypt”: Joseph and Moses as Royalty

Danny Mathews

A substantial narrative of the life of Joseph in Genesis 37–50 is juxtaposed with an even more substantial account of the life of Moses that is the subject of the four books following Genesis, namely, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.¹ These two large-scale accounts of Joseph and Moses are joined explicitly by Exodus 1.6–8, a text that uses a transition formula to signal the end of a previous era, the time of Joseph under a supportive Egyptian king, to a new era marked by hostility from a new king (a similar formula is used in Judg 2.8–10).²

However, the accounts of Joseph and Moses tend to be read and analyzed independently of each other despite the clear linkage made between the two through texts such as Exodus 1.6–8.³ Hence, the rationale for the composition and juxtaposition of these two accounts has received comparatively little attention in contrast to analyzing the composition of each account individually. In this essay we will examine the question of why these two accounts have been joined. One important observation that will be noted is the portrayal of both characters as royal figures. After discussing possible historical contexts for the joining of these two accounts, we will conclude by noting some important theological claims that emerge when these two accounts are read side by side.

Comparing Joseph with Moses

A number of interesting parallels and other points of contact emerge upon a close comparison of Joseph and Moses. These include the following eight observations:

1. Both Joseph and Moses dwell in a foreign land as sojourners (Gen 37.1; Exod 2.15, 22). In the case of Joseph, he is a member of the family of Jacob, who are living as aliens in the land of Canaan. In the case of Moses, he describes his experience after fleeing Egypt and settling in Midian through naming his first son *Gershon* (“a stranger there”) with the explanation “I have been an alien residing in a foreign land.”
2. During their sojourn as resident aliens, both are portrayed as shepherds (Gen 37.2 and Exod 3.1). Both passages use the same phrase: “Joseph/Moses *was shepherding the flock . . .*” This phrase is

1. These four books begin with the birth of Moses in Exodus 1–2 and conclude with his death in Deuteronomy 34. For a detailed argument of considering the Pentateuch as a biography of Moses, see Rolf P. Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Method and Cases* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 351–79.

2. For a detailed analysis of Exodus 1.6–8, see John Van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus-Numbers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 16–19.

3. This is especially true in recent scholarship (mostly in Europe) that emphasizes a drastic literary break between the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, leading to a view of the two representing distinct and incompatible history of Israel’s origins. The main arguments are detailed in Konrad Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story: Israel’s Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010).

used only once again in the Old Testament in the portrayal of King David as a shepherd in 1 Samuel 17.34, “Your servant [David] *was shepherding the flock* . . .” The role of a shepherd is a ubiquitous image of the king in the ancient Near East that is a stock phrase in royal propaganda.⁴ This, as well as the identical phrasing in these three texts, suggests some kind of royal vocation for Joseph and Moses similar to that of King David.

In the case of Moses, it is interesting to note the use of the royal shepherding motif not only at the beginning but also at the end of Moses’s career, where his office—described as a shepherd of the Lord’s people—is now transferred to Joshua in Numbers 27.17.

3. The activity of shepherding provides the context for the calling and sending of both Joseph and Moses. Although the nature and purpose of this calling is different, the calling itself uses a similar sequence of words and phrases in Genesis 37.12–14 and Exodus 3.1, 4, 10, highlighted in bold:

Now his brothers went **to pasture their father’s flock** near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? **Come, I will send you to them.**” He answered, “**Here I am.**” (Gen 37.12–14)

Moses was **keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro**, the priest of Midian; . . . God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “**Here I am.**” . . . “**So come, I will send you to Pharaoh.**” (Exod 3.1, 4b, 10a)

The phrase, “Come, I am sending you to . . .” appears only in these two texts. This along with the common use of shepherding and exclamation “Here I am!” strongly suggests some kind of association of Joseph with Moses.

In both cases, this sequence of summoning and sending sets into motion a life-altering chain of events. For Joseph, this includes the abandonment in the pit, slavery, imprisonment, and his royal exaltation among the Egyptians and his family in Egypt. For Moses, the commissioning by God eventually results in Moses’s exaltation in the sight of Pharaoh and the Egyptians (e.g., 7.1; 11.3) as well as the Israelite community (e.g., 4.16, 31; 14.30–31). This basic sequence of the controversial public emergence of an unknown figure into an exalted position of power is a typical pattern in a number of royal biographical accounts in both the Old Testament (such as Gideon, Saul, David, Jeroboam I) and ancient Near East (such as Esarhaddon and Nabonidus).⁵

4. Both Joseph and Moses are described as very attractive: “Joseph was handsome and good looking” (Gen 39.6) and “he [Moses] was a beautiful baby (Exod 2.2). This terminology appears in descriptions of primarily royal characters in the Old Testament such as Saul (1 Sam 9.2), David (16.12, 18), Absalom (2 Sam 14.25), Adonijah (1 Kgs 1.6), Esther (Est 2.7), and Daniel (who, as part of the “royal family and of the nobility” is described as “without physical defect and handsome” in Dan 1.4). The handsome appearance of a king is richly documented in ancient Near Eastern and classical sources. One suggestion is that the king’s physical health and vigor is due to the manifestation of the king’s *melammu*, that is, his radiance or light granted to him by the deity (cf. Exod 34.29–35; Deut 34.7).⁶ While this feature alone does not demand an intentional connection between Joseph and Moses, the description of their beauty is one of several aspects that suggest the portrayal of both as royal figures.
5. Both encounter hostilities with their “brothers.” The phrase *his brothers* is used frequently in Genesis 37, describing the hostility and plotting of Joseph’s brothers. This phrase also appears in Exodus 2.11 (though it is typically translated more generically as “his people”), framing the second half of this

4. See the overview by Jack W. Vancil (“Sheep, Shepherd,” in *ABD* 5:1188–89). On the human king as a shepherd in the Old Testament, see Numbers 27.16–21; 1 Samuel 16.11; 17.15, 34–37; 2 Samuel 5.2; 1 Kings 22.17; Isaiah 44.28; and Ezekial 34. The image becomes the standard designation of various religious and political leaders in Jeremiah (2.8; 3.15; 10.21; 23.1–8; 25.34–38).

5. Konrad Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story*, 56–61.

6. *Ibid.*, 48–50, see discussion and cited literature.

verse to emphasize Moses's solidarity with his people. In both accounts, the "brothers" resent the possibility of submitting to the royal authority of one of their own by posing hostile questions. The brothers of Joseph ask, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" (Gen 37.8). To Moses, one of the Hebrews (lit. "one of his brothers") asks, "Who made you ruler or judge over us?" (Exod 2.14). This threat of fraternal rule results in the endangerment of the lives of Joseph and Moses. Moses is forced to flee to Egypt and Joseph is cast into an empty pit and later sold into slavery. (Interestingly, the Midianites play a role in both cases: a Midianite priestly family provides a place of security for Moses after his flight from Egypt [vv. 11–22] and the timely arrival of the Midianite caravan leads to the decision to sell Joseph instead of killing him [Gen 37.28, 36].) And then both find safety from their "brothers" by living in a foreign setting apart from their family—Moses in Midian and Joseph in Egypt.

6. Joseph's endangerment also parallels the abandonment of the infant Moses. Both predicaments result from being the target of a group plot of extermination (cf. Exod 1.9 with Gen 37.19–20). Joseph and Moses each initially suffer from the planned fate, but under controlled conditions under the supervision and care of a sibling, i.e.; Moses is placed in a protective buoyant basket under the watch of his sister (Exod 2.4, 7–8) and Reuben, Joseph's brother, persuades the others not to kill Joseph and returns to the pit in an apparent attempt to save him (Gen 37.21–22; cf. v. 29).
7. After escaping death through chance encounters with foreigners, Joseph and Moses find advancement through assimilation into a foreign culture. While clearly recognized as Hebrew at first (Exod 2.6; Gen 39.14, 17; 41.11), each later successfully assimilates into Egyptian culture (cf. Exod 2.19). More specifically, Joseph and Moses eventually ended up as members of Egyptian families (though Moses later joins a Midianite family). Both obtain an Egyptian name. The name *Moses* is given by Pharaoh's daughter and is based on an Egyptian term that means "is born." (This word is typically joined with the name of a deity in the names of a number of Egyptian kings. Thus the name *Rameses* means "Ra is born." Other examples include Thutmose and Ptahmose.⁷) Likewise, Joseph obtains the Egyptian name Zaphaneth-Paneah (Gen 41.45). Both married a daughter of a priest. Joseph marries Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, a priest of On (Gen 41.45). Moses marries Zipporah, daughter of Reuel, the priest of Midian (Exod 2.16–21). Both fathered two sons and gave them names related to the struggle of surviving in a foreign environment. Joseph fathers *Manasseh* ("God made me forget all my hardship") and *Ephraim* ("God made me fruitful"; Gen 41.50–52). Likewise, Moses fathers *Gershom* ("I have been a stranger in a strange land"; Exod 2.22; 18.3) and *Eliezer* ("God of my father was my help"; Exod 2.22 [LXX; Syr; Vul]; 18.3–4). In sum, the basic narrative accounts of Joseph and Moses share the similar sequence of abandonment, rescue, assimilation to a foreign community, and rise to an exalted royal position over Egypt and Israel.
8. Finally, the Joseph narrative shares a similar theological outlook with the first section of the Moses story in Exod 1.8—2.22. These two sections seem to have more of a "natural" view of the world where events happen apparently by chance and human characters appear to make choices that are not religiously or theologically motivated. Explicit references to God's activity in the world are rare in both sections. These characteristics have led scholars to classify both accounts as an example of a "wisdom narrative."⁸ The wisdom literature of the Old Testament affirms equally both the natural working of the world as well as God's involvement in the world.⁹ Another characteristic is a positive view of foreigners, such as Pharaoh and Egypt in the Joseph account and Pharaoh's daughter and the Midianites in the Moses account.

7. See J. G. Griffiths, "The Egyptian Derivation of the Name Moses," *JNES* 12 (1953): 225–32.

8. Gerhard Von Rad, "The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (Eisenburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 292–300; Brevard Childs, "The Birth of Moses," *JBL* 84 (1965): 109–22.

9. The classic investigation of the relationship in the Old Testament wisdom literature between the secular view of the world and the theological affirmation of God's involvement is Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1972).

To be sure, major differences do exist between the two accounts. For example, God communicates to Joseph through dreams (Gen 37) and Joseph is endowed with “the spirit of God,” according to Pharaoh (41.37), which enables the interpretation of dreams. By contrast, Moses is shown to have a more direct access to God as a “friend,” which enables him to apprehend and communicate with God more directly than Joseph (cf. Num 12.6–8; Exod 33.9–10; Deut 34.10). Consequently, Moses as a “man of God” (Deut 33.1; cf. Exod 4.16; 7.1) is empowered to perform signs and wonders in opposition to Pharaoh. Joseph functions as the agent of Pharaoh (e.g., second-in-command over Egypt) to save both Israel and Egypt through his quality as the “wise administrator.”¹⁰ In contrast to the positive view of Egypt in the Joseph account, Moses is commissioned as God’s agent in opposition to Pharaoh and Egypt to destroy Egypt in order to deliver Israel. Nevertheless, the numerous linguistic and conceptual connections between the Joseph and Moses narratives argue for viewing both as royal figures who, in their own different ways, have been rescued and attained a high exalted status in order to save God’s people.

Possible Historical Contexts for Joining the Two Accounts

This overview shows a number of connections between the two accounts that portray both as royal figures, who in different ways, are used by God to save Israel. Why, though, are both portrayed in this way? Why do we have an extended account of Joseph juxtaposed with Moses? The biblical text does not provide an obvious answer for this, and any attempt must remain on the level of educated guessing based on a close examination of the text.

What seems clear, however, is that both accounts were not cut of the same cloth. Both accounts contain clues that suggest that one was written in a different situation from the other.¹¹ And other clues suggest that the current form of each account is the result of a process of editing and altering previous versions. In the case of the Joseph account, a close examination of the portrayal of Judah and Joseph suggests at least two editions, one that is pro-Joseph and another that is pro-Judah. This observation is based, in part, on the apparent contradiction between the destiny of the brothers to bow down to Joseph in the dream reports in Genesis 37 with Jacob’s prediction in Genesis 49.8 regarding Judah that “your father’s sons shall bow down before you”(!). Additional clues of a pro-Judah view include Judah’s extended plea in Genesis 45.18–34 for the release of Benjamin as well as an earlier attempt to save Joseph’s life in chapter 37, verses 26–28, that appears to be an alternate version of an account where it was Reuben who tried to save Joseph in verses 29–30.

Another observation is the apparent use of characters to represent tribes and nations in the context of the readers of Genesis. An early example is the explicit claim that Jacob and Esau represent two nations and two peoples who are divided (Gen 25.23). In a similar way, the phrase “house of Joseph” is a common designation for the northern kingdom of Israel (e.g., 2 Sam 19.20; Amos 5.6; Obad 18) while “the house of Judah” is a common designation of the southern kingdom that split from the northern kingdom (e.g., 2 Sam 2.4, 7, 10, 11; 1 Kgs 12.21, 23; 2 Kgs 19.30). All of these observations suggest the existence of an earlier version that is pro-northern kingdom by extolling the virtue and destiny of Joseph (which includes the two largest tribes in northern Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh) to rule over the northern and southern kingdoms. This pro-Joseph version would not have included the pro-Judah sections and would likely have been written in context of the separation of the northern kingdom from the south during the reign of Jeroboam I, shortly after the death of Solomon, around 922 BC. Later, pro-Davidic writers sympathetic to Judah’s destiny to rule probably added the Judah sections to the Joseph account, perhaps after the fall of the northern kingdom.¹²

10. According to George W. Coats, *From Canaan to Egypt: Structural and Theological Context for the Joseph Story* (Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1976), 19–32, Genesis 39–41 is a well-designed digression that portrays Joseph as an ideal administrator.

11. See Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story*, for a detailed presentation of evidence that suggests the independent composition and transmission history for the bulk of the Joseph and Moses accounts before their joining by priestly editors.

12. This brief summary of a possible understanding of the formation of the Joseph account is based on David M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996). The discussion of the Joseph story on pages 271–89 contains much more detailed analysis of the text beyond that offered in this essay.

This early version of the Joseph account could have functioned to affirm the legitimacy of the first king of the northern kingdom, Jeroboam I. Jeroboam's asylum in Egypt under the protection of Pharaoh Shishak and his return to rule the northern tribes provides a plausible explanation for a positive view of Egypt and the detailed familiarity with the Egyptian language, customs, and objects throughout the Joseph narrative (1 Kgs 11.26–40). It is likely that the Pharaoh's installation of Joseph as his second-in-command in Genesis 41 represents Shishak's sponsorship of the establishment of Jeroboam as king over the northern tribes, perhaps in anticipation of eventual rule over the south (cf. 1 Kgs 14.25–26). This context also explains well the initial, positive view of the establishment of Jeroboam's northern dynasty, where God establishes a covenant of kingship with Jeroboam through the prophet Ahijah (11.29–40). The figure of Joseph, then, represents the legitimation of the rule of Jeroboam in the early stages of his reign and stresses forgiveness and "brotherly solidarity" among the tribes of Israel in an attempt to unify and heal a nation fractured by the reign of Solomon.

This scenario provides a plausible explanation for the composition of an early form of the Joseph narrative as a legitimation of the rise of Jeroboam I to power over the "house of Joseph." What circumstances, then, led to the composition of the Moses narrative and its linkage with the Joseph narrative? A full discussion of the formation of the Moses account in Exodus through Deuteronomy lies outside the scope of this essay¹³ but we offer here a brief suggestion that hopefully can be developed in more detail in future scholarly conversation. As with the career of Solomon, the positive view of Jeroboam's reign was short-lived. As a result, the Moses story reflects a negative view of Jeroboam in contrast to the Joseph account. This is quite explicit in the golden calf account where the curious use of the plural *gods* in the exclamation "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt!" in Exodus 32.4 can be understood not only to refer to the single calf constructed by Aaron but as an allusion to the *two calves* installed in the cultic sanctuaries of Dan and Bethel and acclaimed with the same words in 1 Kings 12.28–29. Another clue is Jeroboam's appointment of non-Levitical priests that stands in contrast with the Levitical identity of Moses (Exod 2.1).¹⁴ The negative view of Jeroboam in the Moses story suggests that it was composed subsequent to Jeroboam's acts of apostasy and with reference to a pre-existing Joseph narrative (before the addition of the pro-Judah sections).

The composition of the Moses narrative and subsequent linking with the Joseph story now represent a critique of the rule of Jeroboam and his disenfranchisement of the Levites by portraying the rise of Moses as a Levitical figure from Egypt that acts as a model king in the manner of, but also superior to, Joseph. Starting with this early stage, the figure of Moses then functions to serve perhaps as a prototype for the ideal king. This would account for the comparison of Moses with Old Testament royal figures in addition to Joseph (such as Joshua and Josiah) as well as the close affinity between Moses and ancient Near Eastern kings, such as Sargon II, where both are portrayed as infants being abandoned in a reed basket, later to be discovered and raised in obscurity before rising to power.

In conclusion, an early form of the Joseph and Moses narrative were linked together during a context of hostility to Jeroboam I. This could perhaps be as early as the reign of Jeroboam I but also just as likely during the time of the composition of the final version of 1–2 Kings that is structured around a harsh view of Jeroboam as a model of all apostate kings in Israel's history. The opening chapters of Exodus assume a familiarity with the Joseph narrative in Genesis 37, 39–50 and have intentionally included a number of explicit literary indications to signal the reader that the Joseph narrative will form the backdrop and point of departure for the subsequent Moses story. Exodus 1.8, then, shows that with the absence of Joseph, Israel's identity is threatened. Because a new king did not know Joseph, he orders the extermination of

13. A useful sketch of a hypothetical reconstruction of the formation of the Moses story in context of classical and contemporary scholarship is provided by David Carr, "The Moses Story: Literary-Historical Reflections," *The Journal of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 1, no. 1 (March 2012): 7–36.

14. For additional connections between Jeroboam and Moses, see Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period: Volume 1; From the Beginnings to the End of the Monarchy*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 141–43.

Israel through three different actions narrated in Exodus 1.9–22. Questions are immediately raised through the reading of chapter 1: How is God going to lead Israel out of the land, as promised by Joseph at the end of Genesis? Will there be another royal figure like Joseph who will again rescue Israel? In reply to these questions, the first literary segment of Exodus (chapters 1—7.7) shows how Moses becomes commissioned and empowered by God in order to bring Israel out of the land.

Some Theological Implications

A number of theological implications emerge when considering closely the juxtaposition of the Joseph and Moses accounts. On a basic level, this investigation shows the need to retrieve a more accurate doctrine of Scripture that is based on the textual evidence. Rather than originating as a pristine word of God from above (a view more consistent with the Koran or Book of Mormon), the Joseph and Moses accounts show that the word of God is given from below, from the midst of the culture and ideology of the day. This includes especially the context of kingship—the biblical text draws from well-known ancient Near Eastern royal motifs to portray Joseph and Moses. Furthermore, the biblical text carefully preserves ideological interests, even if it clashes against the agenda and interests underlying other texts. We can observe this in the competing portrayals of Judah and Joseph with opposing claims of their sovereignty over their brothers as well as opposing evaluations of the rule of Jeroboam. Finally, we have observed that the biblical text was not written as a final product in one setting, but rather is the end result of stages of writing and editing, fully consistent with what we know about textual production in the ancient world.¹⁵ All of these observations are consistent with the understanding of God working in the world as it currently exists, warts and all. Taking care to note the human and cultural aspects of the process of scriptural production actually enhances the doctrine of scripture and provides a means of hearing a word from God, not from above, but through flawed human agency and tested through time through the long process of composition. In short, there is an incarnational aspect of scripture as God's word enfolded in human culture.¹⁶

Second, the affinities between the Joseph account and the first section of the Moses account (in Exod 1.8—2.22) with the wisdom traditions of the Old Testament suggest taking seriously the natural, perhaps even a secular, view of society. This view assumes a basic order of how things work in the world without any explicit reference to God's activity as well as the important quality of wisdom in being able to act decisively at the right time in the right place. This is especially evident in Joseph's actions of quick thinking in taking advantage of each situation as it presents itself in his rise to power as well as the actions of Moses's mother in making the most of a dire situation to protect her three-month-old infant. The rare though explicit theological testimony to the activity of God in texts such as Genesis 39 as well as Exodus 1.20–21 and 2.23–35 shows that a secular, or natural, understanding of the world by no means diminishes a theological view of God's direct activity in the world. The making of these claims, such as attributing the hardening of heart to Pharaoh's free will or to God's direct intervention, shows that both are legitimate ways of viewing reality, without one competing with or canceling out the other. In short, the Joseph and Moses accounts as understood here present a view of the real world that is more like the society we live in today as opposed to a world of direct divine intervention that is typical in the earlier sections of Genesis.

Finally, both accounts deal seriously with the nature of human conflict that characterizes the community of both Joseph and Moses and raise the question of what is needed to resolve the conflict and unify the community. In the case of Joseph, importance is placed on the role of forgiveness in ending the destructive cycle of conflict. In the case of Moses, emphasis is placed on the belief in Moses and

15. Perhaps the most accessible discussion of the nature and function of scripture along these lines is by John Walton and D. Brent Sandys in *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013).

16. On the incarnational view of the Old Testament, see especially Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (2005; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

submission to him as God's true agent (e.g., Exod 4.31; 14.31; 19.9; 34.29–35). In both accounts, it is instructive that royal motifs used to portray the "great king" of the day—such as Hammurabi, Sargon II, and Cyrus—are applied to Joseph and Moses, each of whom are clearly not functioning as a supreme leader over the community of God's people. This perhaps shows that people are endowed with the freedom and wisdom to live in harmony with each other in awareness of the larger and enduring reality of the rule of God.

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