

PROPHECIES AND PRINCESSES: MOSES IN EGYPT AND ETHIOPIA ACCORDING TO JOSEPHUS

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Josephus' account of Moses' birth and upbringing in the *Jewish Antiquities* includes much extra-biblical material, including an extended account of his military campaign in Ethiopia. This material has often been studied as independent episodes, particularly with a view to finding Josephus' sources. By reading the preliminary stages of Moses' life together, this article shows that Josephus' narrative is well-integrated in its themes and structure, as well as revealing the historian's core concerns about Moses' perceived ethnicity and capacity to be a loyal member of a foreign court, both reflecting Josephus' own writing context and immediate audience among the Greek speakers in Flavian Rome.

Keywords: Josephus; Moses; Exodus; infancy narratives; Flavian Rome

Introduction

In the preface to his *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus both explicitly and implicitly invites his audience to compare the figures and events of Judaeon history with their own. Writing for an audience familiar with Greek and Roman legends, myths, and histories, Josephus draws them into unfamiliar material with a promise that it will contain the sorts of things that they expect: wars, political revolutions, migrations (AJ 1.13).¹ He also introduces the legislator Moses as different from 'the other lawgivers' because of his commitment to truth over myth in his establishment of the Judaeon constitution (1.16, 22). The invitation to comparison is clear and particularly explicit when it comes to the figure of Moses.

This paper first responds to this invitation by investigating the early life of Moses in Josephus' *Antiquities*, in which he is born in Egypt and raised in the Egyptian court.² The story of Moses as it appears in the Hebrew Bible itself contains numerous well-recognised parallels with figures of legend: the foundling who escapes a murderous king as a baby only to overcome him fully as an adult is

¹ The question of Josephus' primary audience is a vexed one. Josephus refers to 'all the Greeks' (AJ 1.5) and characterises his patron, Epaphroditus, as an expert in *paideia* (AJ 1.8), suggesting a Greek cultural background. For Josephus' marginalisation from the Roman elite, see Goodman 1994:338; Cotton and Eck 2005:41, 52; Price 2005:106; Den Hollander 2014:40–41. On his need to have an interested primary audience based in Rome, see Mason 2005; Mason 2015.

² This paper expands on research done for my doctoral thesis: see Westwood 2020 chap. 3.

a common trope, with numerous variations on the theme.³ That parallels with Romulus and Remus, Oedipus, Cyrus, or Theseus can be detected in Josephus' version is hardly surprising. However, a methodology of close reading which focuses on the precise motifs and themes highlighted by Josephus, rather than the broad brushstrokes of the overall narrative, reveals a more complex picture than merely an attempt to ratchet up similarities for the sake of proving to a Greek audience that Moses is a familiar type of hero.⁴

The second aim of this paper is to assess the relationship between the birth and adoption narrative, and the episode immediately subsequent to it, the 'Ethiopian expedition'. Previous scholarship, often interested in Josephus' relationship with his sources more than Josephus' own narrative, has tended to read the Ethiopian expedition in isolation.⁵ Reading the texts together in light of the parallels with Greek and Roman legends mentioned above reveals a web of themes and literary motifs linking this second crisis point in Moses' life with the crises of his infancy.

The paper is formed of three parts. In the first, the birth narrative is examined and compared with accounts of the birth of Romulus and Remus, Cyrus, and others, showing that Josephus' adaptations to his source material tend to increase some parallels with Greco-Roman heroes while suppressing those that suggest hybridity in the identity of the hero. In the second part, this theme emerges more strongly as we consider the slightly bizarre way in which Moses' identity is revealed according to Josephus—a revelation which has no impact on his status as trusted member of the Egyptian royal family. Finally, the third section explores the interlinked motifs that appear in the Ethiopian expedition, to show that Josephus' core emphasis throughout this preparatory material is on Moses' ability to be loyal to the Egyptian nation without losing or compromising his Hebrew identity. The conclusion will then consider possible explanations for these findings, taking into account Josephus' writing context in Rome.

Birth

Stories about infants exposed at birth who go on to be legendary leaders populate the literature of the ancient world. Redford (1967:212–217) listed 32 examples of the topos in Greek, Roman, and Near Eastern sources, categorising them into three types, though they sometimes overlap: in the first, something shameful about the circumstances of the baby's conception leads to its exposure; in the second, a

³ See Radl 2011.

⁴ See Feldman 1998:82, who suggests that this is Josephus' response to claims that the Jews have no great men (cf. *Ap.* 2.135), and Spilsbury 1998:95 for this reading.

⁵ *E.g.*, Silver 1973; Rajak 1978; Runnalls 1983; Damgaard 2008; Petitfils 2014.

prophecy reveals that the baby's existence is a threat to a ruler, who then orchestrates its exposure, although in some cases it is the mother who exposes the child in hope of protecting it; finally, the third type involves a large scale massacre from which this child is rescued by means of exposure. This last category includes the story of Moses as it appears in Exodus; Josephus' version includes a prophecy, causing the story to fit more closely into the second group, which Redford (1967:215) associates with 'a more sophisticated, dynastic milieu' where succession is an issue of great importance. The adjustments and additions we find in Josephus' retelling of the story broaden the scope for comparison.

In the biblical book of Exodus (a necessary first point of comparison), the story of Moses' birth has three preparatory stages. First, the new king of Egypt, ignorant of Joseph, fears the Israelites are becoming too numerous, and so enslaves them (*Ex.* 1:10). When hard labour fails to restrain population growth, he orders the Hebrew midwives to kill all male new-borns (1:16). The midwives' piety and fear of God cause this scheme to fail, so he commands all his people that every male Hebrew baby should be thrown into the Nile (1:22). There is a steady escalation of the threat: the midwives' excuse for their failure to obey the king is that Hebrew women give birth before the midwives arrive: the implication is that the killings were to be presented as stillbirths, which suggests that once a baby was born, it was safe. The final command contains no limitations and no attempt at secrecy—all male babies are to be murdered, and by *all* the king's people (לְכָל־עַמּוֹ). Throughout the narrative, the reason given is the need to control and diminish a population regarded as too numerous (*Ex.* 1:9, 10, 12).⁶ There is no specific threat to the king—the fear is rather that the Israelites may join with external enemies (*Ex.* 1:10).

In Josephus' version, the goal of decreasing the Israelite population is not made explicit. Instead, the Egyptians are described as feeling envy at the Hebrews' prosperity (εὐδαιμονία) and wealth, which is the result of their capability for hard work (διὰ ... τὴν πρὸς τὸ πονεῖν εὐφυΐαν)—in contrast to the Egyptians' slackness (ῥαθύμοις πρὸς πόνους).⁷ It is this envy that leads to the forced labour, which is not here called slavery as such.⁸ The king is not presented as the primary instigator of

⁶ The point has been made (Cohen 1993:12) that the use of a population for slave labour is not compatible with a policy of infanticide.

⁷ *AJ* 2.201–2. Negative stereotypes about Egyptian laziness and avarice are common in Greek and Roman literature, e.g., Polyb. 39.7.7, Pl. *Resp.* 4.436A1–3; cf. Feldman 2004:186. Also note that Josephus uses the terms 'Israelite' and 'Hebrew' interchangeably in this section; see Spilsbury 1998:38.

⁸ On envy as a perennial theme in Josephus, see Mason 1991:226; Feldman 1998:200. On Josephus' avoidance of the term δουλεία as a response to the denigration of slaves and freedman in the culture of Rome, see Friedman 2014:542. It is worth observing, however, that avoidance of the term does not equate to avoidance of the concept.

this cruel policy; instead, culpability lies with the entire Egyptian population, and while their goal is certainly to damage the prosperity of the Hebrew people, it is not stated that they wish to diminish their numbers.

In the stories of Oedipus, Cyrus, and Romulus the paranoia of the ruler figure who orchestrates the exposure of the infant is directly related to his own position or fate. Thus, Laius orders his own infant son to be exposed because the child is destined to kill him; Astyages orders his grandson killed because of a dream which predicts Cyrus' replacement of him; Romulus and Remus are placed in the Tiber because they are the grandchildren of the legitimate ruler Numitor.⁹ Each of these stories reflects well the connection Redford (1967:215) makes between prophecies and concern about succession and dynasty.

The prophecy in Josephus' Moses narrative is a little different. It states that a child is about to be born who will 'raise up' (ἀνξήσει) the Israelites and 'bring low' (ταπεινώσει) Egyptian power (*AJ* 2.205). The fates of nations, rather than merely the king himself, are at stake, and the king's actions, while extreme, are not merely in self-interest—in theory, the king is attempting to protect his people, not his own position.¹⁰ On the other hand, the addition of the prophecy turns the infanticide from the brutal form of population control we see in Exodus, into a campaign targeting one child in particular—who is, of course, the one who escapes it.

Such prophecies are found in multiple retellings of and commentaries on the story of Moses. In the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (1:15), the king has a dream which is interpreted by the court magicians, while in Exodus Rabbah (1:18) astrologers tell the king about the approaching redeemer of Israel.¹¹ The prophetic mechanism is different in each case. Josephus' prophecy is mediated through sacred scribes (ἱερογραμματεῖς), experts who decode ancient writings for information relevant to their present context, and the author is determined that his readers should recognise the prediction as legitimate: he specifies (*AJ* 2.205) that these scribes were 'skilled at telling the truth about the future' (δεινοὶ περὶ τῶν μελλόντων τὴν ἀλήθειαν εἰπεῖν).

The obvious contemporary parallel for Josephus' account, both of the targeted massacre and the particular use of scribal experts to decode information

⁹ On Oedipus, see Soph. *OT* 711; on Cyrus, see Hdt. 1.108; on Romulus, see Livy 1.2–3; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.76–77; Plut. *Rom.* 3.4. Both Plutarch and Dionysius include, but also cast doubt on, prophetic material that points to the twins being strong and warlike, as this is linked with fabulous accounts of their conception by either the god Mars, or, in Plutarch's account, a phantom phallus.

¹⁰ Cf. Cohen 1993:47.

¹¹ Whether these versions were current in Josephus' time is not clear: the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan is sometimes dated to the Islamic period but its core exegetical traditions probably come from the first centuries of the common era: see Hayward 2009:109, 251, 257.

about the future, is the Gospel of Matthew, in which it is textual experts who interpret the scriptures to tell Herod where he can find the new-born Jesus, and so enable his slaughter of the innocents (Mt. 2:4–5). Another similarity lies in the fact that the child's father has a prophetic dream—Joseph is told in a dream to escape to Egypt (Mt. 2:13), and Moses' father Amram dreams of his son's future greatness, and this gives him the faith to protect the infant when he is born (*AJ* 2.212–217). There are, of course, clear differences: Matthew's scribes are consulted only after Herod has heard of the birth from the magi, whose knowledge of the infant comes from their study of the stars, and they direct him towards the child rather than announcing his impending arrival. Josephus' scribal experts discover the impending threat and bring the news to the king of their own volition. Nevertheless, the parallel suggests that a story of Moses' birth similar to the one Josephus tells was known to the gospel writer, so that it became part of the scheme which enables him to present Jesus as the new Moses, despite the absence of the feature from the biblical account.¹²

Another feature of the exposure legends is the attention paid to the mother of the child: her pregnancy is closely watched to ensure that the child cannot emerge into the world safely. We find this theme in Herodotus' account of the birth of Cyrus, as well as in both Dionysius and Plutarch's retellings of the birth of Romulus and Remus: the women are closely guarded.¹³ The narrative motif of the king orchestrating the surveillance of a pregnant woman in order to destroy her offspring is influential, as is made clear in a case where it is subverted: in Plutarch's biography of the Spartan Lycurgus, the eponymous legislator becomes king when his brother is killed, but his sister-in-law is found to be pregnant, meaning that her child will be first in line for the throne. Lycurgus, as we might expect, keeps her under surveillance, giving the guards strict orders that if she bears a male child, it should be brought to him immediately. We might assume that he wishes to remove the threat to his position that the child poses. In fact, when the child is born, Lycurgus immediately proclaims him king (*Lyc.* 3.4)—subverting the standard process and thus demonstrating his remarkable virtue.

In the Exodus narrative, there is no strong sense of threat attached to the period of pregnancy, either for Israelite women in general, or for Moses' mother in particular. It is true that the Egyptian king tries to make the midwives into a threat during labour itself, but they defy him, becoming protectors of the Hebrew babies through their deception (*Ex.* 1:17–18). In contrast, Josephus creates a significant sense of threat in two ways. The most extreme is in his adjustment of the role of

¹² On Matthew's typology of Moses, see Allison 2013:140–165.

¹³ *Hdt* 1.108, *Plut. Rom.* 3.3. In Dionysius' account (1.78), Ilia conceals herself to hide her pregnancy, but Aemulius sends in doctors and then his own wife because of his suspicions, and then has her guarded by armed men.

the midwives. When the king hears about the prophecy, he immediately orders both that new-born baby boys should be thrown into the Nile, and that the midwives should keep watch on Hebrew women during their labour. This combines the two steps of the Exodus account, in which the king only escalates his attempts at infanticide after being stymied by the midwives. More importantly, Josephus specifies not only that the midwives are Egyptian, but also that they obey the king's orders because of their ethnic connection to him (διὰ συγγένειαν).¹⁴

Various explanations for Josephus' changed version of events have been suggested—that Josephus wanted to avoid presenting Jews as disobedient to the law of the land, or that he felt uncomfortable with the absurdity of two midwives serving the entire community, or that he wished to keep any association even with potential infanticide as far from the Jews as possible.¹⁵ These are all potentially valid, but they do not get to the heart of the change, which is less about the ethnicity of the midwives, and rather about their role: they are transformed from protectors, standing between the king and the Hebrew babies, into a threatening arm of the surveillance state—one which focuses its attention not simply on the babies, but on their mothers during pregnancy.

Josephus goes on to describe the birth of Moses as painless for his mother (*AJ* 2.218), contributing to the reader's awareness of the threatening environment in which she is giving birth: God enables her to give birth silently in order to protect Moses, thus also providing evidence that Moses is special, as per Amram's dream (*AJ* 2.218).¹⁶ She escapes the notice of the 'guards' precisely because of this (λαθούσης τοὺς φύλακας διὰ τῶν ὀδίνων ἐπιείκειαν): these φύλακαί are best understood as the midwives who were ordered to 'guard' (παραφυλάσσειν) the Hebrew women. By turning the god-fearing midwives into threatening guards watching pregnant women, Josephus heightens similarity with the stories of pregnant priestesses and princesses in Greek and Roman myths.

¹⁴ There is 'netting' (so Exum 1983:72) ambiguity in the consonantal text of the Exodus passage: the phrase usually translated 'Hebrew midwives' is vocalised in the Masoretic Text as a noun and adjective, but could be vocalised as 'the midwives of the Hebrews', with 'the Hebrews' in the construct state—this is how it is translated in the Septuagint (ταῖς μαιαῖς τῶν Ἑβραίων) and Vulgate (*obstetricibus Hebraeorum*). Kottek 1994:20 therefore suggests that Josephus has 'voiced the implicit opinion' of the Septuagint translators. The names (Shiphrah and Puah) are Semitic, but narrative arguments can be made in either direction: the Pharaoh in asking Hebrew midwives reveals his own foolishness; if they are Egyptian, the story contains greater narrative tension, and the 'god-fearing' midwives join the ranks of righteous gentiles. For an argument that they must have been Egyptian, see Childs 1974; cf. Bellis 1994:84; Janssen 2018:15–16.

¹⁵ Rappaport 1930:25–26; Feldman 2004:189; Jackson 2012:74.

¹⁶ According to Plutarch (*Cic.* 2.1), the orator Cicero's mother experienced no pain in giving birth to him.

The difference, of course, is those women do not succeed at concealing their pregnancies: the babies are immediately taken and exposed by the threatened king. In Moses' case, his mother manages to conceal his birth, and he is placed in the river for his own protection—this is the case by implication in Exodus, and explicitly so for Josephus. Indeed, comparison with Philo on this point reveals the substrate of the story against which Josephus' version actively militates.

Philo, in his *Life of Moses*, tells of how after successfully concealing the baby for three months, Moses' parents come to the realisation that by protecting their child they are putting themselves at risk, because there are spies everywhere eager to take reports to the king. They do the calculation (one life or three), and, weeping, place their son on the banks of the river, lamenting the fact that they have been forced to become child-killers with their own hands (ἀπτόχειράς ... τεκνοκτόνους; *Mos.* 1.10). It is explicit, not only that they expect him to die, but also that this is, ultimately, the purpose of their action—they are obeying the command of the king.¹⁷ They even lament the fact that they kept him for three months, thus making the eventual exposure so much more painful both for them and for him (*Mos.* 1.11). Regretful infanticides they may be, but infanticides nonetheless.

There are various ways to interpret Philo's approach to the story. Familiar with Greek myths and legends, he may have been influenced by them as he read the story in Exodus. As a Jew living in Egypt he may wish to highlight the ultimate obedience of Moses' parents to the ruling authority even when unjust, and the reference to spying practices as customary in monarchies may have had particular relevance in the Tiberian period when *delatores* and accusations of *maiestas* were common.¹⁸ For our purposes, what really matters is that there exists an interpretation of the Moses story in which Moses' parents, however reluctantly, view their actions as infanticide rather than as salvation of the child.

In contrast, Josephus is insistent on the point that Moses is placed in the river for his own protection. The decision is made by Amram, his father: he considers it better to put the child's fate in God's hands rather than to trust their own ability to conceal him as he grows (*AJ* 2.219). The act of putting Moses into the river is thus an act of faith and an act of protection. Whereas Philo makes no reference to the basket in which the baby is placed, Josephus makes clear not only that it was safe and waterproof, but even that it was comfortable (*AJ* 2.220: εἰς τὸ εὐρυχωρίας ἐνανοκεῖσθαι τὸ βρέφος)!

It is worth observing that even as he militates against any notion that Moses was placed in the river as an act of infanticide, Josephus adjusts several details of

¹⁷ Notably, the king's command is (implicitly) directed to the Hebrew people themselves, and not to the Egyptians as such (*Mos.* 1.8)

¹⁸ Suet. *Tib.* 61.2; Tac. *Ann.* 4.32; but see also Rutledge 2001:43.

the Exodus story such that there are stronger parallels with mythical exposure narratives, especially those connected with Romulus. The basket containing the future lawgiver is, according to Exodus, placed 'among the rushes', and is seen in the same place by the princess when she comes: the basket does not move. In contrast, Josephus insists not only that the basket was placed into the river itself, but also that it travelled.¹⁹ The parents 'launch' (βαλόντες) it into the river, which 'receives' and 'carries' it (ὁ ποταμὸς παραλαβὼν ἔφερε). His sister Miriam follows not merely to 'see what would happen to him' (as in *Ex.* 2:4), but 'where it would go' (ὅποι χωρήσει), and the princess sees the basket 'being carried by the current' (φερόμενον ὑπὸ τοῦ ῥεύματος; *AJ* 2.221). Not only is there motion, but the river is an active participant.

In the various versions of the story of Romulus and Remus, the river also plays an active role. As described by Plutarch (*Rom.* 3.4–5), the servant is sent to throw the babies into the river, and places them in a trough, but when he arrives at the Tiber, it is in flood, and he does not dare to go too close, instead leaving the trough on the bank. The overflowing river (τοῦ ... ποταμοῦ κατακλύζοντος ἢ πλήμμυρα) then picks up the trough and carries it gently downstream to a soft place (πρῶτος κατήνεγκεν εἰς χωρίον ἐπιεικῶς μαλθακόν). The contrast between the violence of the river when the servant abandons the trough, and the gentle way in which it deposits the twins downstream may suggest supernatural protection over them. The river in Dionysius of Halicarnassus' version has a similarly active role, although the process is different: there (1.79.4), the servants observe the flooded Tiber and place the trough in the waves lapping the Palatine Hill. It floats there, and as the water subsides it hits a rock and overturns, leaving the babies in the mud where they are found by the notorious wolf. Again, the river's violent flooding prevents the intended infanticide, and the Tiber itself protects the infant founders. The same story is told by Livy, who highlights (1.4) the role of chance in the survival of the babies. The common versions of the myth tend to involve the river carrying the babies to the appropriate spot. Thus, while Josephus suppresses parallels with the motif of abandonment as such, he encourages his audience to recognise similarities with the common versions of the story of Romulus with respect to the role played by the river.

The final stage of Moses' infancy narrative is when he is found, saved, and adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh, whose name is given as Thermouthis.²⁰ She is struck by his size (μέγεθος) and beauty (κάλλος), and instantly comes to love this foundling baby (ὑπερηγάπησε): the aorist tense makes clear that we should understand this as an immediate reaction, a 'falling in love'. Josephus also makes

¹⁹ It is worth noting, as Feldman does (2004:194), that the synagogue at Dura-Europos portrays the scene with the basket clearly in the river itself.

²⁰ For the origins of this name, see Flusser and Amorai-Stark 1993:218.

explicit the role reversal that is implicit in the biblical narrative, stating outright that Moses is nurtured by precisely those who had tried to destroy him: this is evidence of God's concern for him (τοσαύτη ... ὁ θεὸς περὶ Μωϋσῆν ἐχρήσατο σπουδῆ; *AJ* 2.225).

This concern is also evident in the appointment of his own mother as his wetnurse. In the Hebrew Bible (*Ex.* 2:4), Moses' sister Miriam, who has been watching events unfold, immediately approaches the princess to offer her mother's services. Josephus' version is more complicated. Thermouthis demands that a woman (γυναίον) be brought to breastfeed the baby, but Moses rejects each of the many wetnurses who try to feed him. It is only then that Miriam intercedes, explaining that a Hebrew baby cannot be nursed by an Egyptian woman. Philo, who does not tell a similar story, simply notes (*Mos.* 1.17) that divine foresight ensured a 'natural' (γνησίας) source of milk. Given that there is little evidence of ethnic specificity in the choice of wet-nurses in antiquity, such a prohibition might have seemed a little strange to Josephus' audience, who would perhaps have recognised in this process simply a clever (divine?) orchestration of events which ensures that the child is ultimately cared for by his own mother.²¹ That Moses is 'remarkably reared' is one of the key features of the story as Josephus tells it.²² Josephus hones in so closely on the process of breastfeeding itself, describing how Moses gladly latches on and clings to his mother's breast (τὸ παιδίον ἀσμενίσαν πῶς προσφύεται τῇ θηλῇ) immediately after his rescue from the river, which may suggest a desire to highlight the link with the founders of Rome—although their remarkable nurture is of quite a different kind, with a wolf as the fabled source of milk (Plut. *Rom.* 4.3; *Dion.* 1.79.6).²³

The story of Moses' exposure and adoption in some ways necessarily looks similar to the narratives of foundling founders and heroes in the Greek and Roman tradition, particularly Romulus, but Josephus' version does interesting things with these parallels. The inclusion of a prophecy makes the Egyptian king's infanticide target Moses specifically, rather than being a brutal method of population control. The transformation of the midwives from subversive protectors into a threatening arm of the surveillance state creates similarities with the carefully guarded princesses and priestesses of myths and legends, and by making the river transport the infant's basket and highlighting his mother's role in breastfeeding, Josephus

²¹ A survey of evidence for ancient midwifery by Yee 2009:184 concludes that there is no evidence that midwives were expected to be of the same ethnicity as their charges.

²² Words cognate with τρέφω ('to nurture, nurse') populate the narrative: *AJ* 2.205 (τραφεῖς), 2.209 (τρέφεται λαθών), 2.216, 2.218, 2.220 (τῷ παιδί ... κρυφαίως τρεφομένῳ), 2.225 (τροφή), 2.227 (τὴν τρεφήν), 2.236, 2.238.

²³ Note also the story circulated by Cyrus' parents (Hdt. 1.122.3), that he was suckled by a dog (playing on the name of the cowherd's wife, Κυνώ).

again encourages his audience to compare and identify the Jewish lawgiver with the Roman founder.

At the same time, there is a profound difference in that Josephus, unlike Philo, is absolutely clear that the baby was placed in the river for his own protection. There is no true ‘abandonment’ or ‘exposure’ in this story: Josephus retains control over the message he wishes his audience to receive about who Moses is, a point which becomes more significant as we move to look into the unexpected and sometimes puzzling account Josephus provides of how Moses’ true identity is revealed within the Egyptian court.

Discovery

Stories of foundlings, whether in the ancient world, or even in modern film franchises such as *Star Wars*, tend to have as a climax the moment when the hero or heroine and their community come to know their true parentage and identity: this transformational self-knowledge enables, and often forces, the hero to fulfil his destiny. In the story of Romulus and Remus, as told by Plutarch, Dionysius, and Livy, Remus is recognised by his grandfather after a misadventure has resulted in his arrest: Numitor admires the captive’s kingly bearing and appearance, and therefore interrogates his origins, which are then proven by means of the trough in which the twins were exposed.²⁴ After this identification, the twins overthrow their wicked uncle, and then depart from Alba to found the city that will be Rome in the place where they had been abandoned as babies.

In the *Theseus*, paired by Plutarch with the *Romulus*, the Athenian hero grows up without knowledge of his father’s identity. As a young man, he proves his worth by lifting the large rock under which his father Aegeus had concealed his sword and sandals, thereby discovering who he really is—and therefore leaving his childhood home for Athens, where, despite his parentage, he is called an outsider and foreigner (ἐπηλως καὶ ξένος; Plut. *Thes.* 13.1). Cyrus, supposed to be the son of a cowherd, has his identity discovered when, as a ten-year-old, he is chosen as king during games with other children, and, as king, has a noble playmate beaten for failing to do as he had been told. Brought before Astyges to answer for this outrage, Cyrus speaks eloquently in his own defence, and as he speaks, the king begins to recognise his own features in this apparent slave-child, and so interrogates Cyrus’ ‘father’ leading to the discovery (Hdt. 1.114–116). Cyrus is then sent to live with his true, Persian parents—from which position he is then ready to lead the

²⁴ Livy 5.6: *minime servile incolem animam*; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.79.12; Plut. *Rom.* 7.3–4, 6.

revolt against his murderous grandfather, and so fulfil his destiny.²⁵ The story of Oedipus is a little different—his self-discovery reveals that he has *already* fulfilled his horrifying destiny, but as in the other examples, this revelation leads to a sudden change in his circumstances—this time in the opposite direction, from king to exile (Soph. *OT* 1518).

Some features of these stories are present in Josephus' account of Moses' childhood: that Moses had a strikingly beautiful appearance, for example, is emphasised by the author, with passers-by stopping their work simply to stare at him (*AJ* 2.231). Yet it is worth noting that while Romulus, Remus, and Cyrus are brought up in lowly (even servile) conditions, when their parentage is in fact kingly, the opposite, in theory, is true of Moses: his parents are Hebrew slaves, yet he is brought up in a palace. Of course, Josephus does not acknowledge that Amram and Jochebed are anything of the sort—Amram is introduced as being one of the 'well-born' (τῶν εὖ γεγονότων; *AJ* 2.210). At no point does Josephus suggest that there is anything humble about Moses' origins, nor even about the living standards of his parents. In the biblical narrative, Pharaoh's daughter pays for the services of Moses' mother as a wet-nurse; in Josephus' version no mention of payment is made, and she is 'asked' by the princess (δεηθείσης), and not ordered.²⁶ Moses' mother does not, it appears, need to take on paid work. His beauty and size as a three-year-old child both fit his immediate palace context *and* his noble origins—there is no contrast.

It is therefore no surprise that the revelation of Moses' identity in Josephus' story looks rather different from the stories of Romulus, Cyrus, and Theseus. His remarkable appearance does not lead to any questions about his origins, and, oddly, when his identity *is* revealed, it leads to no significant change in his circumstances. It is usually assumed both by those retelling Moses' story and by commentators on the biblical narrative that Moses cannot have grown up safely in the Egyptian court with his Hebrew identity generally known.²⁷ Indeed, the Hebrew narrative explicitly complicates Moses' identity—in particular in how he is perceived by others: Raguel's daughters tell their father about the 'Egyptian' who assisted them at the well (*Ex.* 2:19), and when Moses attempts to break up a fight between

²⁵ He is incited to do so precisely because of the attempted infanticide, encouraged by the courtier who had been entrusted with the task, and whose failure to complete the task Astyges punished monstrously (*Hdt.* 119).

²⁶ Cf. *Ex.* 2:9 (NRSV): 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.'

²⁷ Cf. Philo *Mos.* 1.19, where the king's daughter fakes a pregnancy to make Moses seem to be her own child. For this assumption in scholarship, see for example Jackson 2012:76: 'During the wet-nurse arrangement and as Moses was raised in Pharaoh's house, continually hiding his true ethnicity would have been paramount to his survival.' Neufeld (1993:50) goes so far as to suggest that in the biblical narrative Moses only realises his true identity during his conversation with God at the burning bush.

Hebrew men, the hostility he faces suggests that they reject not only his authority, but his kinship. The text (*Ex.* 2:11) explicitly links Moses' murder of an Egyptian overseer with that man's abuse of a Hebrew man, defined as 'one of Moses' brothers' (אֶיִשׁ מִבְּרָרִי מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל), yet the Hebrew man accused of starting the fight suggests that Moses intends to kill him, 'as you killed the Egyptian' (*Ex.* 2:14): this question rejects the kinship bonds which led to Moses' original action, and suggests that Moses as killer is a threat to Egyptian and Hebrew alike. Moses' Hebrew identity in Exodus is thus in question—despite the immediate recognition of the princess that 'this must be one of the Hebrews' children' (*Ex.* 2:6).²⁸

It is the need for Moses' 'true' identity to be hidden that leads to this complexity, as it does in the legends about Romulus, Theseus, or Cyrus. We might therefore expect that in Josephus' version, in which Moses is not merely a child from the group targeted for infanticide, but *the* child targeted because he is destined to bring low Egyptian civilization, the need to hide his identity would be heightened. It should perhaps be revealed only when he is on the point of taking up his position, as is the case for figures such as Romulus. But Josephus entirely subverts these expectations, insisting in his narrative that from the age of three, Moses was *both* recognised as the prophesied child *and* incorporated into the Egyptian royal family as the king's successor—indeed, these events occur in the same scene, which deserves to be described in full.

According to Josephus, the Egyptian princess takes Moses to her father, and explains that since she has no children, it is her intention to adopt him, and make him the successor to her father's kingdom: ἐμαυτῆς μὲν ἡγησάμην παῖδα ποιήσασθαι, τῆς δὲ σῆς βασιλείας διάδοχον (*AJ* 2.232). She frames her decision as based on consideration of her father's succession problem (ὡς φρονίσσειε διαδοχῆς) and on the child's divine appearance (μορφῆι τε θεῖον) and noble mind (φρονήματι γενναῖον)—both of which Josephus' narrative has already introduced (see *AJ* 2.230–231). She places Moses in her father's arms, and, hugging the child, the king places his diadem upon Moses' head 'to please his daughter' (χάριν τῆς θυγατρὸς; *AJ* 2.233). The scene is affectionate, and the king appears immediately to accept his daughter's decision and integrate Moses into the family.

However, in an act of childishness (κατὰ νηπιότητα), Moses pulls the crown off his own head, throws it to the ground, and stamps on it. This, Josephus tells us, seemed to be an omen for the kingdom. It also leads immediately to a crisis point in Moses' life—what had been a gentle domestic scene is suddenly revealed to have

²⁸ It is also worth observing that Moses is assumed to be Egyptian by external commentators such as Strabo (16:22) and Manetho (*apud* Joseph. *Ap.* 1.238), and that his name, despite the (Hebrew) etymology provided in Exodus, is almost certainly Egyptian, from the root *msy*, meaning 'to be born', as in Tuthmosis ('Tuth is born') and Rameses ('Re is born'). See Feldman 2004:196.

an audience including the very sacred scribe who had originally made the prediction about Moses' birth. Upon seeing Moses' action, the scribe leaps up with murderous intent, shouting as he does so that Moses is the child God had told them to kill (οὗτος ... βασιλεῦ, ὁ παῖς ἐκεῖνος, ὃν κτείνασιν ἡμῖν ἐδηλώσεν ὁ θεὸς ἀφόβοις εἶναι; *AJ* 2.235).²⁹ Moses' action in trampling the diadem is referred to as evidence, and his death is demanded, not only to end the fear of the Egyptians, but also to destroy the hopes of the Hebrew people (*AJ* 2.235). Thermouthis swiftly intervenes, snatching the child back from her father, and the king hesitates, which Josephus puts down to divine intervention, God protecting Moses once again, as he did when Moses was an infant.

Knowledge of Moses' identity is not limited to the court context: the Hebrews watch his growth with hope and expectation, while the general Egyptian population feel suspicion—just as they should, given the scribe's pronouncement. Perhaps aware that this situation is bizarre, Josephus attempts to explain the king's failure to act against Moses—he had no option for the succession, and in particular, there was nobody else so able to serve Egyptian interests, since Moses had knowledge of the future (τοῦ προειδέναι τὰ μέλλοντα). Given that 'the future' includes the damage to Egypt that will occur as the result of Moses' leadership of the Hebrew people's liberation, this is a somewhat ironic explanation. Yet it points to a core feature of Josephus' account, which will be fully developed in the account of the Ethiopian expedition. This is the insistence on Moses' loyalty and commitment to the welfare of Egypt.

As with the exposure of the infant, comparison with Philo reveals the extent of this theme. In Philo's version of Moses' childhood and upbringing, he has a wonderful (and exemplary Greek) education, with teachers brought from all around the world to contribute (*Philo Mos.* 1.26).³⁰ The student swiftly surpasses his teachers. Yet, as Moses becomes an adult (at the 'highest point of human good fortune'), his thoughts turn towards the παιδεία of his kinsmen and ancestry, and while remaining grateful to his adoptive Egyptian family, he comes to recognise the ill-treatment which is being meted out to his people by the Egyptian king and so turns towards his own people (*Mos.* 1.32–33).

It is thus noteworthy that Josephus' Moses does not appear to make this choice. His Hebrew identity does not interfere with his status as the heir to the Egyptian throne. He is viewed from both sides in light of the prophecy, yet there is not acknowledgement in Josephus' text of any conflict within the hero about his identity. Founder heroes such as Theseus and Romulus had divided identities, not quite fitting in with either their original or adoptive families and leading their

²⁹ A literal translation would be: 'This, o king, is that child by killing whom God has shown us we should be without fear'.

³⁰ Koskeniemi 2008:288, 293; Zurawski 2017:488.

people as outsiders. The biblical Moses is very similar, and the story can be told in ways that highlight these elements of the story, as is done by Philo. Josephus refuses to do so, however. His Moses is fully integrated, both into the national hopes and expectations of the Hebrew people, and into the royal Egyptian court—there is no suggestion that knowledge of his true identity should lead to a break with his adoptive family, and he is able to be both fully acknowledged Hebrew and loyal member of the Egyptian royal family, without this being problematic, except from the perspective of narrative logic. Moses grows up unconflicted and loyal—as he proves when he is appointed leader of the Egyptian army during the war with Ethiopia, an extra-biblical narrative to which we now turn.

Liberator

The Ethiopian expedition, as it is known, is the most extensive addition Josephus makes to the biblical narrative on Moses (*AJ* 1.238–253).³¹ Moses leads the Egyptian army in response to an invasion by the Ethiopians, defeating and pursuing them to the city of Saba, which he besieges. His success leads only to suspicion and envy, and soon after his return to Egypt he is forced to flee assassination (2.256). Structurally, therefore, the episode provides a basis for Moses' departure from Egypt without the murder which he commits in the biblical text (*Ex.* 2:12). Scholars have linked the story as it appears in Josephus (where no murder occurs, even in self-defence), with the reference in Numbers 12:1 to Moses' 'Cushite' wife. In Josephus' narrative, as we will see, Moses marries an Ethiopian princess.³² It has therefore been suggested that the story has its origins in exegesis, but that the narrative gained some independence, such that it appears in Artapanus with no reference to this wife, the focus instead being on Moses' military accomplishments and including Moses' killing of an Egyptian in an act of self-defence.³³ Runnalls, for example, highlights the value for Jews living in Egypt, of whom many were mercenaries, to be able to identify their founding hero as militarily successful.³⁴ Certainly Josephus did not compose the story from scratch—it is based on an earlier tradition.³⁵ However, the emphasis in previous scholarship on its provenance, and the tendency to treat it as a discrete episode, has meant that some of its more interesting features, especially in combination with the earlier narrative of Moses' birth and the revelation of his identity, have not been fully recognised.

³¹ Rajak 1978:111.

³² Thackeray 1930:269n; Rajak 1978:118; Runnalls 1983:150.

³³ Artapanus *Fr.* 3.18 (*apud* Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 9.27).

³⁴ Runnalls 1983:150. It is striking, however, that Philo, the Alexandrian Jew *par excellence*, makes no reference to any part of the story.

³⁵ See discussions in Silver 1973:125–30; Rajak 1978:120–22; Runnalls 1983:136, 140–143; Damgaard 2013:133–134, esp. notes.

That the Ethiopian expedition is, for Josephus, structurally important to the Moses narrative, is made clear by how it is introduced. Having established that despite his identity having been revealed, Moses remains and grows up as the honoured heir to the Egyptian throne, Josephus pulls the narrative forward in time. Upon coming of age, Moses 'made his virtue obvious to the Egyptians' (φανερὰν τοῖς Αἰγυπτίοις τὴν ἀρετὴν ἐποίησε), showing that he had indeed been born 'for the debasement of the Egyptians and the uplifting of the Hebrews' (ἐπὶ ταπεινώσει μὲν τῆ ἐκείνων, ἐπ' ἀυξήσει δὲ τῶν Ἑβραίων).³⁶ The phrasing is reminiscent of the prophecy before Moses' birth (*AJ* 1.137), and the reader is thus encouraged to interpret the coming story as the first evidence of the truth of the prediction.

There are three phases to the narrative. First, the Ethiopians invade Egypt, capturing territory as far as Memphis. Unable to fight them off, the Egyptians take to divination and are informed that they will need Moses' help. He agrees to become their general. In the second part, Moses leads the army through the interior rather than by the Nile, a route which is infested with winged snakes. To combat this threat, Moses cleverly makes use of the natural predator of the snakes, the ibis, ordering the soldiers to carry baskets containing the birds.³⁷ This stratagem allows the Egyptian army to surprise the Ethiopians and drive them back into their own country. Finally, Moses pursues them and besieges the capital, Saba. The city is eventually captured when the daughter of the Ethiopian king falls in love with Moses and agrees to betray her city if he promises to marry her. This he does, and with the Ethiopians firmly defeated, Moses returns to Egypt where the envious Egyptians convince the king to have him assassinated. Moses learns of the plan and flees to Midian.

The introduction to the story, which by linking it with the earlier prophecy presents it as a foreshadowing of Moses' ultimate role as liberator of his people, should make the reader alert to the ways in which the narrative interacts with the story of Moses' birth and infancy, as well as how it relates to his future role.

³⁶ *AJ* 2.238.

³⁷ The role of the ibis has been much discussed, in particular because of Josephus' observation (2.247) that 'the Greeks are not unfamiliar with the appearance of the ibis' (οὐκ ἀγνοούτων τῶν Ἑλλήνων τῆς ἰβίδος τὸ εἶδος). Rajak (1978:116) has even suggested that this note could be copied from Josephus' Hellenistic source text. The integration of the story into the broader narrative, however, as well as Josephus' many references to 'the Greeks' as his readers (*e.g.*, *AJ* 1.5, 1.8) suggest that it should instead be understood as a reference to Herodotus 2.75 and a knowing nod from Josephus. Artapanus mentions that Moses made the ibis sacred in the city of Meroe and notes that they 'help mankind', which Freudenthal (1874:160n; cf. also Rajak 1978:111) suggests is predicated upon a story such as that told by Josephus. Runnalls (1983:153), on the other hand, suggests that Josephus' ibis, which is emphatically natural (indeed, more so than the winged snakes!), actually is a subtle polemic against the Artapanus story, with Moses making use of rather than worshipping the birds.

In connection with Moses' birth, there is a strong parallel in the role played by princesses. The Egyptian princess Thermouthis saves a Hebrew baby from the Nile in defiance of her father's edict; Tharbis, the Ethiopian princess, betrays her father's city, leading to its capture. Love for Moses the baby motivates the one; the other is driven by love for Moses the man. In both cases, this love is based on sight: Thermouthis is struck by the beauty and size (μεγέθους τε ἔνεκα καὶ κάλλους) of the baby she sees in the river; Tharbis watches Moses lead his army, fighting 'nobly' (γενναίως). Both princesses are named, while their fathers remain the unnamed kings of Egypt and Ethiopia respectively. Both recognise Moses as a threat to their own people, but still act impulsively out of love: Thermouthis by snatching him from the avenging sacred scribe; Tharbis by sending a secret offer of marriage in the midst of a siege. Josephus also chooses to highlight the role of Thermouthis in allowing Moses to lead the campaign: the king approaches his daughter, as Moses' mother, to ask her permission, which she gives only when he swears (implausibly) that Moses will not be hurt (*AJ* 2.242). It is thus the Egyptian princess who enables the campaign to start, and the Ethiopian princess who brings it to a close. This set of parallels suggests that we should not see the Ethiopian expedition as a stand-alone narrative, or digression. Instead, the story repeats the themes of miraculous provision and role reversal which are core to Josephus' shaping of the infancy material.

But there is more to this narrative than this neat set of princess parallels. As Josephus tells us, the story is meant to provide evidence both of Moses' virtue (which as a narrative of military success, it straightforwardly does), and of his future role as one who will bring the Egyptians low (*AJ* 2.238). It is worth interrogating how the story illustrates this lesson; after all, it is actually a story of Moses aiding, and so (arguably) uplifting, the Egyptians. It works as proof of Moses' generic merit, but hardly as evidence that he will one day defeat them. But a closer examination of the narrative reveals a set of role reversals that might explain Josephus' confidence in the moral of his story.

The whole story begins with the Ethiopian invasion of Egypt. The Ethiopians are 'neighbours' (πρόσοικοι) of the Egyptians, who invade (ἐμβαλόντες) and capture their territory. The Egyptians respond in 'anger' (ὀργή), but are unable to drive them out, and after their defeat are pursued ever deeper into Egypt, no city holding them back. The Ethiopians, having 'tasted' good things (γευσάμενοι τῶν ἀγαθῶν), decide not to retreat, and invade as far as Memphis. At this point the Egyptians consult oracles and Moses is brought in. This account of the Egyptian invasion can be productively compared with the ensuing description of Moses' campaign.

Having taken his clever, ibis-defended route over the interior, Moses defeats the Ethiopians and then pursues *them* into their territory, overthrowing their cities.

At this point (2.248) the Egyptian army, 'having tasted' (γευσάμενον) success, shows such energy (πονεῖν οὐκ ἔκαμνεν) that the Ethiopians very nearly face enslavement (ἀνδραποδισμός). Given that one of the main characteristics ascribed to the Egyptians by Josephus (2.201) is their lethargy (ῥαθύμοις πρὸς πόνους), this is quite an achievement for Moses as general. More importantly, the repetition of 'tasting' brings out the role reversal: the Ethiopians are transformed from hunters to hunted, from enslaving to enslaved, and from oppressors to oppressed.

Moses' ability to enact this transformation through his leadership of the Egyptian army prepares us for his achievements as leader of the Hebrew people. This reading is supported by three other features of the story: first, when the oracles tell the Egyptians to make Moses the leader of their armies (2.241), he is referred to not by name, but as 'the Hebrew'. Aside from underlining again that Moses' ethnic identity is not a secret, this makes him into a representative of his people. Indeed, the oracle specifically tells the king to take Moses as an 'ally' (συμμάχος), implying that he is not of the same nation, despite his status as heir to the throne. Secondly, the Egyptian princess, when she agrees that Moses can be asked to become general, observes that the same sacred scribes (now called priests: ἱερεῖς) who named Moses their enemy and sought to kill him, are now begging for his help (2.243): role reversal is explicit as well as embedded in the narrative. Finally, the Ethiopian princess who falls in love with Moses as she watches him from besieged Saba recognises him (2.252) as the one to whom the Egyptians owe their 'freedom' (ἐλευθερία), and the Ethiopians owe their peril (κίνδυνος—cf. 2.248).³⁸ The term 'freedom' reveals that Moses is not only a great general for the Egyptians, but a liberator as well.

This, then, is what Josephus means when he refers to the story as providing 'proof' of Moses' future role, which is to be a general and liberator for his own people, after he has done this so impressively for the Egyptians. Josephus noted at the outset of the expedition that while Egyptian scribes hoped to do away with Moses by guile, those of the Hebrews watched him go hoping that their future escape from the Egyptians would be under his command (2.243). The story is thus better integrated into Josephus' overall narrative than is usually recognised, both reflecting the prophetic material from the earlier portion of the narrative, and foreshadowing Moses' future role.

Conclusion

Josephus' Moses is thus presented as a founding hero in the Greek or Roman tradition; parallels with figures such as Romulus, Theseus, and even Oedipus played up through the inclusion of a prophecy which ironically leads to the child

³⁸ On observations of and reactions to Moses in Josephus' narrative, see Petitfils 2014:204.

being brought up in the home of the king he threatens. Alongside a network of parallels—princesses and prophecies, Egypt and Ethiopia, role reversals and strange stability—Josephus tells a story of a Jewish hero who is born in remarkable circumstances pointing to a divine calling, who grows up in the Egyptian court being watched by both the Egyptians and the Hebrews with fear and hope respectively, yet manages to retain his loyalty to both communities so that, before serving as God’s chosen liberator for the oppressed Hebrew nation, he can first perform that function for the Egyptians in the face of Ethiopian aggression. In a tightly structured and engaging narrative Josephus suggests, by means of his refusal to conform either to genre expectations or to narrative logic, that Moses is the exemplary hero, not only in his beauty and military acumen, but also in his ability to balance his responsibilities to different communities—it is baseless hostility, and no subversion by Moses himself, that ultimately leads to his departure from Egypt.

It is difficult to know what Josephus’ audience was expecting from the story of Moses. The lawgiver appears in various guises in the Greek and Latin historical record—for Strabo, he is an Egyptian priest who develops superior religious ideas, while Lysimachus reports that he instructed his people to be hostile to all other people (μήτε ἀνθρώπων τινὶ εὐνοεῖν), and Tacitus has him implementing customs contrary to the rest of the world (*novos ritus contrariosque ceteris mortalibus*).³⁹

The traditions about Moses with which his audience may have been familiar, suggested that Moses was an Egyptian who implemented policies hostile to other nations. Josephus counters these two points in a well-integrated narrative of Moses’ early life: he was Hebrew, and nobody was ever in any doubt about this fact. At the same time, he was able and willing to contribute to the nation in which he found himself by performing his role as liberator for the Egyptians even before he did so for the Hebrew people. The structural integrity of Josephus’ narrative, with its nexus of interlinking themes and motifs, and its clear links to concerns raised in later writings, suggests that he carefully calibrated the extra-biblical material at his disposal to tell his own version of the Moses story.

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³⁹ Strabo 16:38 (for the point that while admiring, this account diverges widely from the biblical exodus, see Gruen 2016:200); Lysimachus *apud* Josephus *Ap.* 1.309; Tac. *Hist.* 5.3–4. Cf. Quint. *Inst.* 3.21 on Moses as the founder of a *gens perniciosa*. For Josephus’ concern about Moses (and Jews in general) being thought to have been Egyptian, see *Ap.* 1.279, 317, 2.10, and for his concern with ethnic purity, see *Ap.* 2.267, 69.

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