THE BIRTH OF MOSES

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LITTLE critical work has been done on the story of the birth of Moses (Exod 1 8–2 10) since the basic analysis of H. Gressmann.[1] Building on the work of E. Meyer,[2] Gressmann attempted to determine the relation of this tradition to the other traditions of the exodus and to clarify the nature of the story's *Vorlage*. Briefly his conclusions were as follows: The story of Moses' birth is a legend which belongs to one of the youngest strata of the exodus traditions and stands in tension with the earlier traditions. The motif of the Egyptians seeking to reduce the number of Hebrew slaves in ch. 1 is dependent on the birth narrative of ch. 2. The original motif had to do only with the king's attempt to destroy the promised hero-child. This motivation was secondarily expanded to include a threat to the whole people and thus to provide the backdrop for the birth legend of Moses. Gressmann concluded that the parallels, particularly the Babylonian legend of Sargon of Akkad, demonstrated that the common *Märchenmotif* of the promised child who was exposed and rescued, had been applied to Moses. By and large, the critical commentators have accepted Gressmann's analysis.[3]

However, in spite of this apparent consensus certain problems arise in connection with this analysis. In the first place, Gressmann's interpretation of the legend of Sargon needs re-examination. The line, "my *changeling* mother conceived me, in secret she bore me,"[4] is interpreted by him to mean that already at birth the child's life was threatened. However, a much more plausible interpretation of the text, which was suggested by Güterbock,[5] is that the child was illegitimate and was therefore concealed. The line, "my father I knew not," certainly points

[1] H. Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit*, pp. 1 ff. Cf. the bibliography in G. Fohrer, *Überlieferung und Geschichte des Exodus*, pp. 9 ff. Add A. Lacoque, "La Naissance de Moïse," *Veritatem in Caritate*, 6 (1961), pp. 111–20.

[2] E. Meyer, *Die Israeliten und ihre Nachbarstämme*, pp. 46 ff.

[3] Böhl, Beer, Auerbach, Rylaarsdam, Noth, Fohrer, and, with reservation, Clamer.

[4] *i-ra-an-ni um-mu e-ni-tum i-na pu-uz-ri u-lid-an-ni*, L. W. King, *Chronicles concerning Early Babylonian Kings*, p. 88. The meaning of *enītum* remains unclear; cf. the discussion of H. G. Güterbock, *ZA*, 42 (1934), pp. 62–64. The most recent English translation is by E. A. Speiser in *ANET*.

[5] Güterbock, *ibid.*, p. 62.

in this direction. In other words, Gressmann has read into the Akkadian text an alleged motif not actually present.[6]

Secondly, there is another reason which would raise doubts about Gressmann's theory that the original story included a prophecy of a coming child which provided the motivation for its exposure. A form-critical analysis of all the birth stories in the OT reveals that the announcement of a coming child, usually by a divine messenger, is a constant element in this form and one of its most characteristic elements.[7] Therefore, we would argue that if the original story had included this element, it is inexplicable why it was later removed. The tendency of subsequent redaction of tradition is to suppress or modify foreign material, but this is an element indigenous to Israel which could never have generated friction.

We conclude that the problem of the *Vorlage* of the Moses birth story has not been accurately described and that a re-investigation of the whole story is in order.

I

The first task must begin with the problem of the *Vorlage.* The Moses story reflects the common ancient custom of exposing unwanted children.[8] However, the striking parallel of the Sargon legend shows that more is involved than a common cultural practice. This element has become part of a literary motif which relates how a rejected child is exposed to danger, rescued, nurtured into manhood, and finally succeeds to a position of honor. It belongs to the *Märchen* type which illustrates the "rags to riches" theme. Gunkel called it an *Aussetzungsmärchen.*[9]

The question is whether there are any other traditional elements which have been inherited and used along with this general motif of the exposure saga. Are there any characteristic Near Eastern features? Gressmann pointed out the strong use of Egyptian local color.[10] Such features as the reeds of the Nile, the papyrus basket pitched with bitumen, the princess bathing in the river with attendants, reflect a knowl-

[6] Gressmann is correct in pointing out this motif in early Greek mythology, Josephus, Philo, and the NT; cf. the detailed discussion of the Perseus tradition in Roscher's *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie,* III, II, pp. 1986 ff. However, the relation between the Greek myth and the Near East is not clear and cannot be simply presupposed.

[7] Gen 16 11, 18 9; Judg 13 7; I Kings 4 16; Isa 7 14; etc.

[8] E. Ebeling, *Reallexikon der Assyriologie,* I, p. 322; *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft,* ed. Wissowa, II/2, pp. 2588 f.

[9] H. Gunkel, *Das Märchen im Alten Testament,* p. 116.

[10] Gressmann, *op. cit.,* p. 7.

edge of Egyptian culture, but they are not structural features with a form already fixed before their application by the Hebrew author.

However, there is a sequence within the story which does appear to be traditional and not the creation of the Hebrew author. The child is found (Exod 2 5), recognized as a foundling (vs. 6), delivered to a wet nurse for a set wage (vs. 9), weaned and returned to his owner (vss. 9, 10), and finally adopted (vs. 10). This is almost the identical pattern found in a series of bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian legal texts known as *ana ittišu*.[11] III, 21 ff. deals with the adoption of a foundling. The text specifies that the child is an exposed foundling: "der Vater und Mutter nicht hat, der seinen Vater und seine Mutter nicht kennt, in dem Brunnen ist er gefunden, von der Strasse hereingebracht, aus dem Munde eines Hundes hat er ihn entrissen, aus dem Munde eines Raben hat er (ihn) herunterfallen lassen" (28–36). In fact, the Sumerian expression *túlta pàdda* (found in a well) becomes the technical term by which to designate a foundling.[12] The foundling is then delivered to a wet nurse who raises him: "einer Amme hat er ihn gegeben, seiner Amme für 3 Jahre Kost, Salböl, Kleidung hat er festgemacht" (45–50). Finally, he is adopted and taught a trade: "zu seiner Sohnschaft hat er ihn aufgenommen, Erbschaftsverhältnis, sein Erbschaftsverhältnis . . . , zu seiner Erbschaft hat er ihn geschrieben, die Schreiberkunst hat er ihn lernen lassen" (61–67).

Naturally there are a number of significant problems involved in making any such comparison. The fact that two completely different genres of literature are involved, one narrative and one legal, cannot be lightly dismissed. At most the case can be defended that the sequence of the Moses story reflects a pattern which originally had a legal provenance. The present structure would be then a free adaptation of this traditional material within a narrative setting. Again, there are problems in determining how widespread such a legal tradition was and in what period. The specific series *ana ittišu* has been judged by Landsberger unique in the library of Assurbanipal.[13] Its transmission was localized in Nippur in the Dynasty of Isin, which would explain the scarcity of similar texts. Evidence is completely lacking which would establish any relationship to Egypt. This fact only emphasizes the great gaps in our knowledge of the Near East. Almost nothing is known about the practice of adoption in Egypt although its existence is cer-

[11] B. Landsberger, *Materialien zum sumerischen Lexikon*, I, *Die Serie ana ittišu*, pp. 43–47; cf. the earlier treatment of this text by M. David, *Die Adoption in altbabylonischen Recht*, pp. 6 ff.

[12] David, *ibid.*, pp. 15 f.; cf. A. Falkenstein, *Die neusumerischen Gerichtsurkunden*, III, p. 168.

[13] Landsberger, *op. cit.*, pp. 1 ff.

tain.[14] However, we would argue that, in spite of the lack of direct evidence, the cumulative effect of indirect evidence is such as to make highly plausible a common Near Eastern tradition which is reflected in Exod 2.

In the Ancient Near East infants were usually suckled by their own mothers. However, in certain instances among aristocratic families a wet nurse was hired. This practice was also common where the mother was unable to nourish her child or where the mother was unknown. The nurse assumed responsibility of raising the child as well as suckling it during the stipulated period. The technical legal term in Akkadian for the nurse's duties is *tarbītum*.[15] This includes both the obligation of nourishing the child physically as well as acting as its guardian during the period involved. *Tarbītum* is clearly distinguished from *mārūtum* which is the legal term for adoption, although the terms are closely related. There are texts whose concern is to protect the parents from losing the right of sonship because of a *tarbītum* relationship.[16] In an Old Babylonian text a child was sold to a wet nurse for *mārūtum* because the mother was not able to meet the payment for *tarbītum*.[17] The legal principle involved is that the right of possession belongs to the one paying for the child's upbringing.

While it remains still a question precisely when the technical usage of *tarbītum* developed, nevertheless, a clear distinction in practice between care and sonship seems to have been made at a very early date and constantly to have been maintained. M. David[18] has argued persuasively that the child's receiving of the name of his benefactor is decisive for the legal state of adoption and that the rights of inheritance are dependent on this. In spite of the lack of any additional evidence to confirm the pattern in *ana ittišu*, it seems likely that the act of adoption in the case of foundlings did follow the critical period of nursing since the loss of children in infancy was common.[19]

There is another aspect of the pattern found in the series *ana ittišu* which allows for more detailed parallelism, namely, the wet nurse contract. The bilingual text spoke of delivering the foundling over to a wet nurse for a specified time and it designated the salary. These are two important elements which belong to the set form of the contract.

[14] H. Grapow, *Die bildlichen Ausdrücke des Aegyptischen*, p. 132.

[15] A. Goetze, *The Laws of Eshnunna*, pp. 89 ff.; G. R. Driver and John C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws*, I, p. 388, n. 4.

[16] V. Scheil, "Les Nourrices en Babylonie et le § 192 du Code," *Revue d'Assyriologie*, 11 (1914), pp. 176 ff.; cf. Goetze, *ibid.*, p. 93.

[17] M. Schorr, *Urkunden des altbabylonischen Zivil- und Prozessrechts*, p. 122, #78.

[18] David, *op. cit.*, p. 25; cf. the discussion by Miles, *op. cit.*, pp. 389 ff., in which David's interpretation of the Codex Hammurapi is corrected.

[19] V. Scheil, *op. cit.*, pp. 175 ff.

The type of legal agreement which is reflected in the text belongs to a specific type of labor contract (*Dienstvertrag*).[20] The continuity of this widespread practice is confirmed by the fixed form of the contracts from the Sumerian period, through the Old Babylonian and Neo-Babylonian periods, down to the late hellenistic period in Egypt.[21] The constant features which characterize a wet nurse contract are as follows: 1) statement of the individuals involved, 2) length of time designated by the contract, 3) conditions of work, 4) specifications regarding nourishment, 5) fines for breach of contract, 6) amount of wages and how paid, 7) witnesses.

The status of the individuals involved in such a transaction shows great variety. The employee could be a noble or a slave. Likewise, the rôle of the wet nurse could be assumed by a free woman, slave, or hierodule. Several papyri from the first century B.C. mention Jewish women serving as professional wet nurses.[22] The period of nursing extended over a period of two to three years. The wet nurse raised the child in her home, but at times was required to return the child to its owner for inspection. The specifications for nourishment chiefly concerned the quality of milk and anything which would injure its quality was prohibited. The wages of the nurse consisted in rations of grain, oil, and clothing, with silver payment at times being used.

The parallel between this pattern and the Exodus account is of interest in spite of the fact that the biblical account is not a contract, but part of a narrative. The Hebrew technical term for wet nurse אִשָּׁה מֵינֶקֶת corresponds to the Akkadian *mušēniqtum*. The daughter of Pharaoh delivers the child into the care of the nurse (vs. 9).[23] It is clear from 9b that the child is to be taken to the nurse's home. The conditions of the work are then briefly mentioned: she is to suckle the infant. Next the subject of an appropriate wage is touched upon. Finally, a

[20] J. G. Lautner, *Altbabylonische Personenmiete*, p. 13, n. 41. San Nicolo's theory of a pseudo-adoption relationship is refuted.

[21] M. San Nicolo, "Ammenvertrag," *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, I, pp. 96 f.; Kohler und Ungnad, *Hammurabi's Gesetz*, III, pp. 13 f.; Driver and Miles, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 405 ff.; M. Schorr, *op. cit.*, p. 198; Scheil, *op. cit.*, pp. 175 ff.; Lautner, *op. cit.*, p. 109, n. 353; P. M. Meyer, *Juristische Papyri*, pp. 134 ff.; R. Taubenschlag, *The Law of Greco-Roman Egypt in Light of the Papyri*², p. 377, n. 7; V. A. Tcherikover and A. Fuks, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, II, pp. 19 ff.

[22] Tcherikover, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

[23] The MT היליכי is difficult. It is often emended to הוליכי and thought to have been influenced by the nearby היניקיהו. But as Ehrlich, *Randglossen*, p. 264, correctly observes, the hiphil of *hlk* is normally used of that which can move itself. Only in late Hebrew does it become synonymous with הביא. He follows the Syriac and Rashi in reading הא לך (here, it's yours!). Jöuon, *Mel. U. S. Jos.* 5, p. 453, suggests קחי לך. Perhaps a technical term is reflected here. An Akkadian formula from the act of adoption offers a parallel: "take the child, he is your child" (*ta-ab-li zu-ḫa-ra-am lu-ú ma-ru-ki*). Cf. M. Schorr, *op. cit.*, p. 122, #78, and David, *op. cit.*, pp. 79 f.

fixed period is implied in vs. 10 when the duties are terminated and the child is returned to its owner. Ehrlich[24] suggested emending וַיִּגְדַּל to וַיִּגְמַל (when it was weaned); however, the parallel in Gen 21 8 shows that the verb *gdl* can refer specifically to the age of weaning. These common features of the narrative shared with the contract would tend to confirm the theory that the biblical narrative is working with traditional material.

Vs. 10 reflects clearly a common Near Eastern adoption formula in spite of the fact that adoption played such a minor rôle in the OT.[25] The older attempt[26] to understand the expression ויהי לבן figuratively: he was to her *like* her own son, breaks down in the light of the increasing number of Near Eastern parallels.[27] In this connection, it is interesting to note that Philo, Josephus, and the NT, along with a number of later Jewish midrashim, add an interpretation regarding the nature of Moses' education at the court. "Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7 22). One is tempted to speculate that the origin of this midrash might go back to a common Near Eastern tradition, such as is found in *ana ittišu*, in which the foundling or adopted child is brought up to be a scribe.[28]

Finally, in regard to the name of the foundling we have suggested on the analogy of *ana ittišu* that its position after the weaning may be part of a traditional sequence in the act of adoption. Information regarding the adoption of foundlings is too meager to be certain. But if so, this would answer Jacob's objection that, if an act of adoption were meant, it would be logical for the naming to precede the weaning.[29] Regarding the name of Moses there is a growing consensus that the name is of Egyptian origin from the root *ms(w)* meaning to beget. It is a hypocoristic form of a theophoric name built on the pattern of Tutmose.[30]

To summarize: the evidence would seem to confirm the theory that

[24] Ehrlich, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

[25] M. David, "Adoptie in het oude Israel," *Mededelingen der kon. Nederl. Akad. v. Wetensch., Afd. Letterkunde*, 18. no. 4, 1955; *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. Klauser, I, pp. 99–111.

[26] So the Jerusalem Targum, and still defended by B. Jacob, *Essays in Honour of the Very Rev. Dr. J. H. Hertz*, p. 250, and S. Goldman, *From Slavery to Freedom*, pp. 108 f.

[27] A close parallel is the Aramaic adoption contract from Elephantine, *The Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri*, ed. Kraeling, p. 226: ברי יהוה. Cf. also the formula reflected in the Code of Hammurapi #192, and in the legend of Aqht, C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Handbook* (1947), p. 184 (3 Aqht rev.) line 24.

[28] Cf. the argument of H. Cazelles, *Moïse, l'Homme de l'Alliance*, pp. 14 ff.

[29] Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

[30] J. G. Griffiths, "The Egyptian Derivation of the Name Moses," *JNES*, 12 (1952), pp. 225–31, and Cazelles, *op. cit.*, pp. 13 f.

the Moses birth story is an exposure saga which reflects much traditional material common to the Near East both in the larger sequence of events as well as in its specific detail.

II

The purpose of studying the traditional material in the chapter has been to provide a perspective from which to understand more clearly the newer, nonconventional elements. Even Gressmann was concerned that the particular Hebrew stamp of the story be not overlooked. The task is now to analyze those features of the story which belong to the specifically Hebrew tradition.

One of the most delightful features of the present story is the rôle of the sister. Commentators have long noted a certain tension in the chapter caused by her appearance in vs. 4. Vs. 1 implies that Moses was the first and only child of this couple. Yet this element is neither to be harmonized nor relegated to different sources. Rather, it should be seen as a literary device of the author. The sister plays a key rôle as agent in the story and joins the introductory theme of the mother and child with that of the princess and child. The sister tempers the harshness of the exposure by keeping watch at a distance. From this position she appears instantaneously before Pharaoah's daughter to negotiate a Hebrew wet nurse. The conversation along with the ensuing scene bears the most unmistakable signs of the creativity of the Hebrew author. Not only is the child saved and returned to his mother with royal protection, but she is even paid for taking care of her own child! One wonders whether this is conscious irony being directed to the Egyptians. We have argued previously that a traditional wet nurse contract is reflected in the details of the conversation. But certainly the selection of the details and the rôle within the total story shows unusual, fresh creativity.

The description of the daughter of Pharaoh bathing in the Nile has evoked much discussion throughout the years whether this is historically plausible or not. Regardless of how one decides on the historical accuracy of this feature, the fundamental problem of interpretation remains to determine the perspective from which this part of the story is told. According to the common pattern of the exposure saga the foundling is rescued and raised by an unknown person and as a result remains incognito until he reaches manhood. Freud noticed that this pattern had been changed in the biblical story.[31] First, Moses is exalted and later returns to a position of humility by identifying with his people. The initial observation is correct; from a form-critical point of view it is

[31] S. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (Eng. trans., 1939), pp. 15 f.

surely not justifiable to join the two themes of "exaltation" and "humiliation" into one pattern (as incidentally the NT does). The latter theme is introduced in 2 11 ff. and is only secondarily joined to the tradition of the birth story which ends in 2 10.

Nevertheless, the divergence in the biblical story from the common pattern of its *Vorlage* calls for an explanation. The introduction of the princess as the rescuer of the child is certainly not characteristic of Egyptian folk tales where a goddess would be expected to play this rôle.[32] Rather, the Egyptian local color has been skillfully used in a story written from a Hebrew point of view. This is a picture of an Egyptian princess viewed by an outsider and not from within the Egyptian court. Not only does she speak Hebrew, but she is able to recognize the foundling as belonging to the Hebrews and is willing to seek out a nurse from among them. The introduction of the Egyptian princess as the rescuer emphasizes the strong alterations made by the Hebrew author to his *Vorlage*. The simple "rags to riches" motif is no longer applicable to Moses. He is not an unknown child who becomes a king; rather, the whole weight of the story has shifted. Rescue and adoption by the princess — again, as if there were only one — illustrates in the highest degree possible the special handling of this child. The rôle of the princess climaxes the theme which runs throughout the story. He is an unusually handsome child, exposed but with loving care. When discovered, he evokes in his alleged enemy deepest sympathy and he is returned to his mother and finally adopted by the princess. Nowhere in the story does God interfere directly. The action is confined to natural events. Yet the reader is led to feel that the significance of the events is not fully clear. The real action still lies in the future. These events are only preparation.

Again, the etymology of the name belongs to the newer elements of the story. As Noth has observed, the Hebrew writer was unaware of the Egyptian origin of the name. Otherwise he would have made use of this fact.[33] The naming follows the usual pattern of OT etymological etiologies, and derives the name from a loose association in sound. Noth suggests that the etiology of the name may have been the force which drew the various elements into its present form. That this is highly unlikely appears already from the previous analysis of the material. But in addition to this, the form of the etiology rules this possibility out.[34] A close parallel is I Sam 1 20 in which an etymological etiology is secondarily formed to independent traditions.

[32] G. Roeder, *Altägyptische Erzählungen und Märchen*, pp. 12 ff., 102 ff.

[33] Noth, *Exodus*, *loc. cit.*

[34] Cf. the study of the etiological forms by J. Fichtner, *VT*, 4 (1956), pp. 378 ff.; B. S. Childs, *JBL*, 82 (1963), pp. 279 ff. There is no organic connection between the

The final element to be analyzed is the motivation for the exposure. According to Gressmann's analysis, this theme belonged to the *Vorlage*. The king felt threatened because of the prophecy of a coming child and attempted to destroy it. Our initial criticism of Gressmann's position set in at this point. The evidence does not support the thesis that a prophecy was part of the original story. Rather, the *Vorlage* was simply an exposure saga. Then how is one to explain the motivation for the exposure in the present story? The force of Gressmann's argument at this point cannot be minimized. There is no tradition reflected anywhere else in the OT with the exception of Exod 1 and 2 that the Egyptians attempted to destroy the Hebrews during the period of their slavery. This is the decisive argument against assigning the biblical sequence in which ch. 2 presupposes ch. 1 to one level of tradition. In fact, it has often been observed that this motif is in obvious tension with the tradition of Israel as slaves in Egypt. Slaves are not destroyed, but maintained as a labor supply! Methodologically, Gressmann is right in insisting that this is a problem of history of *tradition*. The problem cannot be avoided, either by an appeal to archeological evidence: Egyptians did kill slaves in the XIX Dynasty, or by a psychological bridge: it was a temporary policy motivated by special circumstances.

We would argue that the motivation for the exposure is a motif created by the Hebrew author in order to make possible his use of the exposure saga in telling the story of the birth of Moses. There are several parallels within the OT which would tend to confirm this hypothesis. The theme of the exposed child, which we designated earlier a *Märchenmotif*, appears in its clearest form in Ezek 16, although it is used as an allegory of Jerusalem. The foundling is cast helpless into an open field. Yahweh, pictured as a wealthy benefactor, rescues her from certain death, raises the child to maturity, and takes her as his wife (cf. Deut 32 10; Hos 9 10).[35] A more distant parallel is Gen 21. The tradition is complex, but the main lines of the motif are still visible. Ishmael and Hagar are driven out into the wilderness. His mother, not wishing to see the child die, casts him under a bush. The messenger of Yahweh appears and saves the child who grows up to be the father of a nation. Finally, an even freer use of the motif is the Joseph story. The constant elements in the motif are the exposed child, the miraculous rescue, and the subsequent success, whereas the element which varies in each of these accounts is the motivation for the exposure itself. In Ezek 16 the child is the unwanted offspring of an unsavory union be-

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the event described in vss. 1–10a and vs. 10b. In this form of the etiology the motivation follows the name, rather than preceding it.

[35] The tradition of Israel's election in the wilderness is a problem for itself; cf. R. Bach, *Die Erwählung Israels in der Wüste* (Diss. Bonn, 1952).

tween an Amorite father and a Hittite mother. In Gen 21 a family strife causes the child's expulsion. In the Joseph story the cause of the "exposure" is the brothers' jealousy.

The narrator of the story in Exod 2 has tried to adapt the common motif of the exposed child into an account of Moses' birth. We have attempted to see his method of composition by distinguishing between the older and the newer levels within the story. The boldest innovation came with the task of providing a motivation for Moses' exposure. It was unthinkable to speak of Moses as a foundling with unknown parentage. Probably the connection of Moses with Levi had already been formed. Moreover, Hebrew parents do not willingly expose their children. This practice was repudiated at an early date in Israel. The only alternative open to the narrator was to provide an adequate reason which would force the parents to this action. Little imagination was needed to provide a realistic motivation. Enough was known in Israel regarding the lot of a slave to make an easy bridge from the tradition of Israel's slavery in Egypt to the pogrom of Pharaoh. But even after the grim motivation had been established, the narrator continues to temper the action of the exposure. The parents try unsuccessfully for three months to hide the child. It is with unusual care that the basket is pitched, the child is placed in it, set among the reeds, and watched by the sister. These elements, which are unique to the Moses story, point unmistakably to the creativity of the Hebrew narrator.

To summarize: Our study has confirmed the position that the birth story belongs to the latest stage of the collection of the exodus traditions. The dominant rôle of Moses as deliverer from Egypt had already been established in order to provide sufficient motivation for applying such a *Märchenmotif* to him. Moreover, we agree with Gressmann that the threat to the child in the birth story was secondarily expanded to the people in general in ch. 1. Our study emphasized the different layers of material employed by the Hebrew narrator. The ultimate factor which provided the force to combine these diverse elements into a unified story was not the etiology of the name (Noth), nor was it the traditional motif of "rags to riches" (Gressmann). Rather, the writer's creativity came to the fore in his theological interest. This child had a special preparation which was to equip him for his office as deliverer of a slave people.

III

There is one final set of questions to raise regarding the transmission of this tradition. The analysis has made evident that there was a period of oral tradition in which conventional material received its particular Hebrew stamp. The delineation of Moses in the birth story was made

on the oral level. This implies that there were bearers of this tradition, circles within Israel which were active in its preservation. Now the concern is to determine whether there are features of the story which offer aid in making more precise the nature of this transmission.

In the course of our analysis a newer level with a particular Hebrew stamp was described which was distinct from the conventional older material. There is no reason to suppose that the circle which preserved the birth story tradition was different from that which gave the initial Hebrew stamp. No later stages of reworking seem apparent except, as we have seen, a secondary development in which the birth story was connected to the exodus tradition in ch. 1 by an extension of the threat motif to the whole people. It appears probable that this connection was effected during the oral stage. In spite of repeated effort the internal tensions in ch. 1 have not been adequately resolved through the means of source criticism.[36] For this reason we feel justified to treat as the product of one circle both 2 1–10 and its secondary expansion in 1 8–10, 15–22.

The unusual fact to be explained in the birth story tradition is the particular quality of the Hebrew stamp which sets it apart from the rest of the exodus traditions. We would suggest as a working hypothesis that these elements bear a close relation to wisdom literature. From its *Gattung* it is immediately clear that the story is not itself wisdom literature, that is, *ḥokmah*, but a historicized wisdom tale. Its closest parallel is the Joseph cycle,[37] with a more distant parallel to Esther[38] and the story of Aḥiḳar.

The philological evidence is of interest but not conclusive in respect to this hypothesis.[39] The stronger evidence lies in a characteristic handling of material from a particular perspective and the use of typical wisdom motifs. Von Rad has noted that the older wisdom literature used direct theological statements concerning God's activity sparingly.[40]

[36] Once the P source has been determined, no consensus whatever has emerged in respect to the older sources; cf. the standard commentaries and the monographs by Bacon, Gressmann, Smend, Eissfeldt, and Fohrer. We agree with Rudolph that the problem cannot be solved on the literary level.

[37] G. von Rad, "Josephsgeschichte und ältere Chokma," *GSAT*, pp. 272 ff.

[38] S. Talmon, " 'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," *VT*, 13 (1963), pp. 419 ff.

[39] The verb נחחכם (1 10), which is to be understood as a denominative similar to התנבא "to act wisely," occurs only once again in the OT (Eccl 7 16) and with a similar meaning. (H. L. Ginsburg, *Koheleth*, p. 100, notes a slight shift.) In both of these verses the verb by itself has a positive connotation (cf. Ecclus 6 52), but from its context it soon takes on a negative flavor. In Ecclus it occurs twice in a typical wisdom warning against "playing the wise man." It has a close parallel in הסתכל in the words of Aḥiḳar (Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*, p. 217, line 147 — cited by Gordon, *Koheleth*, p. 267).

[40] von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

In the Joseph stories only twice is God referred to and then almost cryptically as ordering the affairs of men. The Moses birth story shares a similar perspective. Nowhere does God appear to rescue the child. In fact this reserve stands in striking contrast with the great bulk of the exodus traditions. Everything in the story has a natural cause. Yet it is clear that the writer sees the mystery of God's providence through the action of the humans involved.

One of the main themes in the birth story is the contrast between the purpose of God and that of man. Pharaoh would "act wisely" and set up a plan to eliminate the Hebrews. But first he is thwarted by the midwives, and finally by his own daughter who reverses completely his purpose by rescuing the coming deliverer. The programmatic statement of Joseph could apply to the Moses birth story as well: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive" (Gen 50 20).

It is furthermore characteristic of wisdom literature that Pharaoh represents the type of the "wicked fool." His diabolic nature is at first cloaked by the subtlety of his plan, but once this is frustrated the crass brutality of the tyrant emerges: "Every son which is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile." Pharaoh thinks to act wisely, but is duped by the clever midwives. One of the closest parallels is the rôle of Haman in the Esther story, whose cleverness misfires and reveals him as incredibly stupid.[41]

The significance of the counselor in wisdom circles has frequently been pointed out.[42] Within the intrigues of the court, the rôle of the wise adviser is decisive in directing the affairs of the state. Joseph impresses Pharaoh through the wisdom of his counsel. "There is none so discreet and wise as you" (Gen 41 39). In the Moses story the agility of the sister in speech is emphasized. She appears at the right moment to offer appropriate advice which is immediately accepted and executed.

Again, the piety of the persons involved reflects the religious ideal of the wisdom circles. The midwives' refusal to obey Pharaoh stems from a "fear of God."[43] This piety evidences itself in cleverness and in the ability to meet the accusation of Pharaoh with rational argument. Similarly, Joseph reveals the ultimate in self-control and repulses the advances of Potiphar's wife because of his fear of God (Gen 42 18). Von Rad[44] appropriately cites Prov 14 26 f. as a typical expression of this ideal:

[41] Talmon, *op. cit.*, p. 444.

[42] P. A. H. de Boer, "The Counsellor," *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, pp. 42 ff.

[43] Cf. the most recent treatment of the fear of God and its relation to wisdom literature in O. Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient* (1964), pp. 287 ff.

[44] von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

"In the fear of Yahweh one has strong confidence,
and his children will have a refuge.
The fear of Yahweh is a fountain of life,
that one may avoid the snares of death."

One might also suggest that there is a note of resignation involved in the birth story which is quite an opposite reaction, yet typical of wisdom piety. The mother tries to hide the child. When it becomes impossible, she exposes him. The sister stands at a distance, apparently helpless to aid, yet concerned to know "what will be done to him." This passive behavior reflects a deep sense of faith in the ultimate will of God which carries through its goal regardless of human intervention.

Another important feature of the story is the completely open and positive description of the Egyptian princess. It is not because of ignorance or deception that she adopts the child. The narrator emphasizes her spontaneous pity for the child, as well as her awareness that he is a Hebrew. Moreover, she is agreeable to the idea of hiring a Hebrew nurse which reflects a different attitude from the later midrash. According to *Exodus Rabbah*, only after Moses had rejected a series of Egyptian nurses was the princess forced to try a Hebrew one. This positive attitude toward the foreigner is also typical of the international flavor of the wisdom circles.

Although the passage has no mention whatever of the education of Moses — and therefore the point should not be pressed — at least his adoption at the court provides the basis for later speculation on his training as a prince. Perhaps the inherent possibilities might have contributed to the interest of court circles in this story. Indeed, the motif of an adopted child who was raised as a crown prince is frequent in Near Eastern wisdom literature.

There is one final argument which is of interest for its negative evidence. Form critically it can easily be shown that the birth story ends in 2 10 and that the two stories which follow in ch. 2 are of a different layer of tradition. These stories serve as bridges to link the birth story tradition with the Midian tradition of ch. 3. If one examines these stories, it seems clear that they do not show the same typical wisdom motifs; in fact, just the opposite. The picture of Moses rashly slaying an Egyptian and being discovered in his deed is certainly not the wisdom ideal. His reaction of fear and panic when he is discovered is also a direct opposite of how the wise man behaves. Similarly, his interference at the well is a hero motif with several biblical parallels, but not an action condoned or congenial to the worldly-wise court circles. "He who meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears" (Prov 26 17).

Finally, the attempt should be made to make more precise the nature of this wisdom circle within Israel. The fact that the tradition was incorporated in the oldest literary strand[45] would set a *terminus ad quem* to the date of the tradition. We are aware of the intense literary activity of this period which not only witnessed the collection by the Yahwist of the older pentateuchal traditions, but also the formation of such literary works as the "Throne Succession of David."[46] The parallels of the Moses story with the material of this latter cycle shows only a distant relationship while, in contrast, the affinity to the Joseph stories is striking. We would conclude that the circle responsible for the Moses story differed from the court circle which produced the Throne Succession narrative. However, the evidence appears too meager to allow for any further delineation.

[45] The older commentaries usually assigned Exod 2 1–10 to E. I would agree with Rudolph and Noth in arguing for J.

[46] The basic work is still L. Rost, *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids* (1926); cf. also von Rad, *GSAT*, pp. 159 ff.