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The Name of Moses in an Egyptian Context— A Hypothetical Etymology¹

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ABSTRACT: The etymological origins of the name “Moses” have been unclear, but an Egyptian candidate is the most likely hypothesis. In this article, a new proposal is given that finds the best candidate as the Demotic word, *mš'*, but only in the late Persian period or later would it fit the Hebrew *Mōše*. Evidence from Greek orthography and testimony from Manetho provide a stronger basis for this proposal over prior candidates. However, this results in a Hellenistic-era inclusion of “Moses” into the Exodus narrative.

Key words: Moses, orthography, Manetho, Exodus, Hellenistic era

Problematic Etymologies for “Moses”

The figure of Moses is integral to the Pentateuch, which begins to narrate his life in Exodus 2. However, the name “Moses” has proven to be of debatable etymology, even though Exod 2,10 provides an explanation for his name. Since at least the time of Philo and Josephus in the first century,² various other attempts exist to understand the name of the leader of the Israelites out of Egypt.

The traditional explanation for “Moses” or *Mōshe*/*Mōše* (מֹשֶׁה) as derived from the verb *maša* (מָשָׁה) because he was “drawn out” (מִן הַיָּרְדֵּן) of the Nile has three significant issues. First, the narrative in Exod 2 has Moses receive his name from the pharaoh’s daughter; presumably then, Moses would have had an Egyptian name, yet he is given a Hebrew name based on the circumstances of his discovery. Second, the narrative does not indicate he should be called *Mōše*,

1. I would like to thank Thomas Schneider and Carsten Peust for extremely helpful feedback on linguistic evidence central to testing the primary hypothesis of this article. Without their input, even more mistakes would have been made. Nonetheless, all errors in fact and interpretation are my own.

2. Philo, *Life of Moses* 1.17; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 2.288; *Against Apion* 1.286; (Pseudo-)Eustathius of Antioch, *Commentary on the Hexameron*, p. 780, 52f. See Thissen (2004) for discussion.

using the active participle of *maša*, because Moses was the one drawn out rather than the one doing the action. Instead, he should have been called *Mašui*, the passive participle of *maša*. This awkward explanation for the hero's name is indicative of a blind motif³ and folk etymology, suggesting another source for the name. Third, the act of saving a child left to the elements, who is then saved and grew up with a foster family is part of a pattern of birth stories of heroes, including Romulus and Remus from Roman myth and Sargon of Akkad from an older king's legendary account. The questionable historicity of such a tale about Moses means it is an implausible explanation for his name.

The transliteration of "Moses" into Greek as found in the LXX is odd as well, especially given other Greek witnesses to the name. Throughout the Old Greek, the name is Μωσῆς, but this is an odd orthography if it is derived from מֹשֶׁה. First, the *holam* is normally transliterated as a single vowel rather than a double vowel (i.e., Ἀαρών, Ἰακώβ, Ἰωσήφ), and in the few instances where there is a double vowel, *holam* is rendered as ου (i.e., Νουά (LXX Num 26,37); Ἰησοῦς). Second, names ending with ה and an associated *segol*⁴ do not regularly turn into the equivalent desinence in Μωσῆς/Μωσέως. Either they have a different vowel, are missing the ε where it is in an indeclinable form, or they are declined differently. For example, מִצְרַיִם becomes Μασρά (Jos 15,38), מִצְרַיִם becomes Ιαβνη (2 Chr 26,6 in the genitive), מִצְרַיִם as either Ιεφοννη or Ιφιννα (Num 13,6; 1 Chr 4,15 in the genitive; 1 Chr 7,38), מִצְרַיִם became Μανασσής or Μανασσή (Gen 41,51), and מִצְרַיִם became Χάλαζα (Neh 11,15). This contrasts significantly with מֹשֶׁה as Μωσῆς/Μωσέως and its irregular declension, such that both sets of vowels in the Hebrew of "Moses" are unexpected in their LXX form. Other Greek orthographies for "Moses," such as Μουσαῖος in Artapanus and Μωσῆ in the Murabba'at documents (Mussies 1982: 95), indicate that Μωσῆς was not necessarily the natural transliteration of the Hebrew name. Therefore, Μωσῆς is a loanword whose source is not Hebraic but Egyptian (Myers 2021: 39).

The combination of narrative and transliteration oddities are best explained if the name came from another word than the Hebrew *maša/mōše*. Given the Egyptian setting of Moses' life, the region's language is the most plausible candidate source. Looking at names from the New Kingdom period, Egyptologists have noted that *mōše* could have been derived from the verb *mśy*. Moreover, the use of *shin* rather than *samekh* to render *ś* has been understood as a sign that *mōše* is very ancient, as the *samekh* is more likely to render the Egyptian consonant in the time of the Hebrew Bible's composition than in the second millennium (Griffiths 1953; Hock 1994: 402-405; 409-410; Hoffmeier 1999: 141; Breyer 2019: 65-66). However, the vocalization is problematic, as *mśy* would follow the pattern CaCiy (consonant, *a*, consonant, *iy*) during the New Kingdom, giving a pronunciation of *masiy/mašiy* instead of *mōše*. Only after a vowel shift during the 6th and 5th centuries BCE would the vowels better match the Hebrew vocalization of מֹשֶׁה (Schenkel 1990: 87). There is a conun-

3. See Carr (2017: 41-53) for definitions, methods, and discussion.

4. Also, compare the Syriac orthography of "Moses" ending with an *alep*.

drum here: the consonants in *mśy* and מִשֵּׁי only match well in the pre-exilic period, but not the vowels; the vowels in *mśy* and מִשֵּׁי only match in the post-exilic period, but not the consonants. Thus, the most common Egyptian language-based suggestion for *mōše* does not work (Schneider 2023).

Other suggestions for the origins of Moses' name have been more speculative and unconvincing. De Moor (1997: 136-155) suggested that the figure of Moses can be connected to a 12th/11th-century Egyptian chancellor named Beya, but the hypothesis is not well-evidenced (Gnuse 1997: 108-109) nor does it provide a likely explanation for the name "Moses." Looking for other Semitic roots behind *mōše* (i.e., Jenni 2016; Schneider 2023: 1054-1055) is unlikely to be profitable, since there is no evidence of such candidates, nor would another Semitic verb help with the narrative incongruities mentioned above.

One final oddity that suggests another approach is the non-biblical narrative of a figure named "Moses" found in Hellenistic-era Egyptian folklore, as witnessed in Greek sources. The relationship between the Egyptian and biblical "Moses" is unclear, but several scholars argue that the Egyptian story is not a counter-narrative to the Jewish narrative (Assmann 1997: 29-44; Römer 2018: 37-50). As will be argued below, the Egyptian folklore appears to be independent of the biblical Exodus tradition.

As a new approach, the different stories of Moses will be examined, focusing on their dating and context. By exploring how the name "Moses" could have been naturally meaningful in one context over another may indicate its most likely origin. In order to test in what context the name best fits, the derived name will need to be meaningful in its original context, while it is awkward when moved into a new context, i.e., as a blind motif. Great attention will be given to textual history and orthography in our sources, as this will provide important clues.

Hebrew Sources for "Moses"

The figure of Moses is mentioned by name hundreds of times in the Pentateuch, dozens more in the Deuteronomistic History, in several psalms, and some of the prophetic and historical narratives such as Daniel and Ezra-Nehemiah. Sources for the Pentateuch almost certainly go back to the pre-exilic period, but the editing history of the first five books is complex and much debated. While Moses stories may go back to the pre-exilic period, the editing of the Pentateuch continued into the post-exilic era and arguably even into the Hellenistic period. This makes uncertain what things were said of Moses in the Pentateuch before the earliest Egyptian stories about "Moses" (to be discussed below).

Some evidence indicates that the biblical Moses story was still being revised in the Hellenistic period in response to other sources. Numerous scholars have argued for significant writing and editing of the Pentateuch in the Hellenistic period (i.e., Grabbe 2001; Gmirkin 2006; Wajdenbaum 2011; Gnuse 2021), and some of those proposed edits involves Moses. For example, Moses'

arm becoming leprous and then cured (Exod 4,6-8) was supposed to have been a sign for Pharaoh, along with the staff turning into a serpent, but this sickly sign was not performed. Römer (2018: 43-45) suggests that this was a counter-narrative to the story in Manetho about Moses' leprous army that was defeated by the Egyptians and forced to flee to Palestine.

Additionally, looking elsewhere in Hebrew literature, the name "Moses" is curious by its absence. There are no certain cases of "Moses" being mentioned by name in pre-exilic or exilic prophets,⁵ and he only appears in a few post-exilic prophets (Trito-Isaiah, Hebrew Daniel, Malachi). While the Exodus tradition is already discussed in 8th-century prophets, as well as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah, the figure of Moses is not mentioned. Ps 78, a post-exilic psalm that describes the parting of the Red Sea and the plagues found in the J-source (Van Seters 1986: 31-39), only ascribes the events to God and not Moses (cf. Ps 105,25-26), even though the psalm also names another servant of God performing deeds—David. Moses is also absent from the oldest layers of Deuteronomy, namely the Deuteronomistic Code (cf. Van Seters 2015: 83, 169-172); his missing authority is highly unexpected and is unlike what is seen in the Holiness and Priestly Codes. There is a conspicuous silence about the figure of Moses, which both reduces the evidence that the name was known in pre-exilic times and provides some evidence that he was not known then.

While an argument from silence may not be decisive, the silence does require a plausible explanation. If Moses was not yet a figure in Jewish stories and literature, then the silence is expected; if, however, he were the most important figure in pre-exilic Israelite stories, this is harder to explain. Additionally, Μωϋσῆς as a Hellenistic-era loanword instead of a transliteration from Hebrew is implausible if "Moses" had existed in Hebrew for centuries. This is more expected if the Greek and Hebrew versions of the name came to exist in Jewish tradition around the same time from a common, non-Hebrew or Greek source. That is, 'Μωϋσῆς would have been recorded in the LXX not long after "Moses" entered the biblical tradition. Coupled with the evidence that the Laws of Moses were not normative until the 2nd century BCE (Adler 2022), the silence about Moses and his actions allows for the possibility that he was not yet a figure of Jewish legend, let alone Israelite history, until the post-exilic period.

Early Egyptian Witnesses to "Moses"

Hellenistic authors who attempted to provide cultural histories of non-Greek lands began to mention Jews and Judaism in the 4th century BCE, often through

5. Only two prophetic texts before the Persian era mention Moses (Jer 15,1; Mic 6,4), but they are plausibly edited to include the figure. For Jer 15,1 as part of an interpolation, see Lemche (1985: 318); McKane (1986: 245, 328, 333-336; additional remarks in xlvii-li, lxii-lxxxiii). For Micah 6,4 as also interpolated, see again Lemche (1985: 315-316), as well as Wolff (1990: 23, 171-172); Miller (2014: 19).

the lens of other powerful civilizations. Egypt in particular was creating a narrative of their cultural exploits, which included creating the Jewish nation and religion as a colonization project. Either Egyptian scribes or common folk were claiming their ancestors founded the other major civilizations in their colonization efforts, but these stories only developed after Hellenistic influence. Before Alexander the Great, Herodotus tells us Egyptians claimed to have spread their culture far and wide in antiquity,⁶ but almost nothing was said of colonization. The only colonist from Egypt that the father of history mentioned was Danaus,⁷ but this was itself a Homeric-era Greek myth. In Herodotus' time, there appears to have been no native Egyptian claims of colonization. This suggests that the oldest the Egyptian colonization folklore could be is post-430 BCE.

The self-aggrandizement of these Egyptians is likely due to the political situation in Egypt after the Persian Empire had reconquered the country and established the 31st Dynasty in c. 343 BCE; later, Egypt would come under Macedonian rule and then controlled by the Ptolemies until 30 BCE, when it became a Roman territory. As Egypt was no longer an independent nation, claims to cultural superiority would relieve the distress of the Egyptian populace by finding solace in a grand history. Additionally, the model of colonization would follow Hellenistic norms (Van Seters 1997 [1983]: 23-24; Gmirkin 2006: 61), indicating a Greek influence that was unlikely to have existed before the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE. This confluence of political circumstances and cultural influence, along with the negative evidence of Herodotus, indicates the most likely window of time the Egyptians were first creating these colonization myths was between 332 and 315 BCE. The latter date is provided by Hecataeus of Abdera.

Writing his *Aegyptiaca* between 320 and 315 BCE after having visited Thebes (Gmirkin 2006: 66-67), Hecataeus was told that the Egyptians established numerous ancient civilizations, founding Babylonian, Greek, and Jewish cities.⁸ Hecataeus notes Egyptian folklore⁹ about Jerusalem and Moses, and this will be the first securely datable mention of "Moses."

Before turning to how Hecataeus describes Moses and his founding activities, it is best to compare other examples mentioned by Hecataeus, as quoted or paraphrased by Diodorus of Sicily.¹⁰ According to Egyptian sources

6. Herodotus, *Histories* 2.49-50, 54-57, 141, 144-145.

7. Herodotus, *Histories* 2.91.

8. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 1.28.1-3, 40.3.1-8.

9. The term "folklore" may not be ideal, as the stories related by Hecataeus might have been inventions of Egyptian scholar-priests, who would have been the most influenced by Greek ideas. These are the people that Hecataeus could have spoken with, crossing both the cultural and language barrier. Whether as products of elite or folk culture, which themselves have fluid boundaries, "folklore" will be used broadly in this article.

10. While not stated, Hecataeus is the most likely source for what Diodorus says about Egypt in Book 1 of his *Library*. The parallels between what he states here and what he writes later in Book 40 (which explicitly says the source is Hecataeus) include

(“Now the Egyptians say...”), the city of Babylon was founded by an Egyptian colonist named Belus.¹¹ This Belus, a son of Poseidon by Libya and a known figure in Greek tragedy,¹² established his city on the Euphrates River and founded the Chaldean priesthood. They were free from taxes, as this was the Egyptian custom. The Chaldeans are also shown to have been originally Egyptian because they were star watches, as were the Egyptian priests and astrologers. Therefore, the religious orders and laws of Egypt were the real foundations of the Babylonian civilization, or so the story goes.

The etiological function of the name ‘Belus’ in this folklore is two-fold. First, the connection to a previous founding figure according to Greek myth is utilized, indicating both a knowledge of these Hellenic stories as well as the desire to invert them. Second, and most important, “Belus” is likely derivative of the word *ba'al* or *bel*, which by this time had become the standard appellation for the chief Babylonian god, Marduk. Therefore, the name explains how the Babylonians got their chief deity, applying a euhemeristic model of deified founders.

The above example clarifies that in these colonization myths, their features include an explanation for the customs of a people, and the name of the founder was important in explaining either that culture’s history or what function the founder had in the story. This basic template follows for not just Belus, but also Danaus and Moses.

When describing the customs of the Jews, in particular the circumcision of male children, Egyptians alleged those traits came from Egyptian colonists.¹³ The story of Moses is later described by Diodorus, but his book does not rely directly on Hecataeus but an intermediary source. When pulling out the original material from Hecataeus, the following narrative emerges (Gmirkin 2006: 33-66):¹⁴

(3.2b) And the most outstanding and active among them banded together and [journeyed to] Greece and certain other regions; their leaders were notable men, chief among them being Danaus. (3.2c) But the greater number [settled in] what is now called Judea, which is not far distant from Egypt and was at that time utterly desolate. (3.3a) The colony was headed by a man named Moses, outstanding both for his wisdom and courage. On taking possession of the land, he founded, besides other cities, one that is now the most renowned of all, called Jerusalem. In addition, he established the temple that they hold in chief veneration, instituted their forms of worship and ritual, drew up the laws relating to their political institutions, and ordered them. (3.3b) He also

colonization activities by Egyptians (see below), indicating that Diodorus’ statements about Egyptian claims to colonial dominance derived from Hecataeus.

11. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 1.28.1.

12. Cf. Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women* 315-324; Apollodorus, *Library* 2.1.4 (citing Euripides).

13. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 1.28.2-3.

14. All material comes from Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 40.3.

divided the people into twelve tribes, since this is regarded as the most perfect number and corresponds to the number of months that make up a year. (3.4c) He picked out the men of most refinement and with the greatest ability to head the entire nation and appointed them priests; and he ordained that they should occupy themselves with the temple and the honors and sacrifices offered to their God. (3.5a) These same men he appointed to be judges in all major disputes and entrusted to them the guardianship of the laws and customs. (3.6b) Their lawgiver was careful also to make provision for warfare, and required the young men to cultivate manliness, steadfastness, and, generally, the endurance of every hardship. (3.7) He led out military expeditions against the neighboring tribes, and after annexing much land apportioned it out, assigning equal allotments to private citizens and greater ones to the priests in order that they, by virtue of receiving more ample revenues, might be undistracted and apply themselves continually to the worship of God. The common people were forbidden to sell their individual plots, lest there be some who for their own advantage should buy them up, and by oppressing the poorer classes bring on a scarcity of manpower. (3.8a) He required those that dwelt in the land to rear their children, and since their offspring could be cared for at little cost, the Jews were from the start a populous nation. (3.8c) Such is the account of Hecataeus of Miletus [sic] in regard to the Jews.

Hecataeus' sources explicitly make Moses out to be another Danaus, indicating that this Moses is a product of Hellenization in Egypt. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this narratives is how unlike the Hebrew narrative of the Exodus is. Here, Moses is not taking a Semitic people group out of Egypt to a promised land of milk and honey, but he is leading an Egyptian colony into desolate land. He is considered a wise and courageous Egyptian, and he is clearly not leaving a devastated land behind after a series of plagues¹⁵ and drowning its army.

This Egyptian folklore appears to be independent of the biblical narrative. Not only is there nothing to suggest this Moses is leading out an enslaved population against Pharaoh's will, but this Egyptian Moses enters Palestine, and he founds the city of Jerusalem, along with its temple and priesthood. The creation of the temple is not even a part of the Pentateuch, and it only appears later in the Deuteronomistic History.¹⁶ According to the Egyptians, Moses had the temple built, unaware that Moses never entered Palestine, let alone built its religious center. In further contradiction to the biblical narrative, the priesthood was meritocratic instead of patrilineal as in the Aaronite priesthood. Also, there

15. The plague and expulsion mentioned in Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 40.3.1b were likely not original to the narrative from Hecataeus, as it contradicts the heroic aspects of the colonization efforts of Danaus, Cadmus, and Moses. See Gmirkin (2006: 45).

16. מִקְדָּשׁ or ναός first appear in 1 Sam 1,9, which itself is not referring to the Temple of Solomon that was built later than the time depicted in 1 Samuel. Nonetheless, this is well outside of the Books of Moses.

was no long period of punishing travel through the wilderness. Instead, the leader of the expedition into Judea set up a country founded on law, religious tradition, economic security, and individual virtue. Other than making the Jews an offshoot of the Egyptians, the narrative is not anti-Semitic and fails to act as a counter-narrative to the Exodus tradition.

Overall, the differences between this Egyptian tale and the biblical narrative are vast, and yet there does not appear to be a polemic against the Exodus story. There is a lack of awareness of the older Jewish narrative.¹⁷ More likely, this Egyptian story was created independent of knowledge of the Israelite Exodus tradition, and instead these were Hellenized Egyptians trying to explain the customs of other cultures.

Hecataeus is not the only author describing a Moses from Egypt, as a few decades later Manetho would write his own history of Egypt. Manetho, himself an Egyptian priest, incorporated hieroglyphic sources of value to Egyptologists to this day. While only fragments of his work exist, the quoted materials include lists of pharaohs and several narratives. The best-preserved stories come from Josephus,¹⁸ who quotes (rather than paraphrases) Manetho at length about a priest named Osarseph and the expulsion of the Hyksos. The narrative appears to combine memories of the Hyksos, the battle against the Sea People, and the disastrous religious reforms of Akhenaten (Redford 1970: 1-52; Gmirkin 2006: 196-197; Assmann 2014: 69-72).

Osarseph was said to have been an Egyptian priest from Heliopolis, and he led a rebellion with the help of the Hyksos and an army of unclean or leprous laborers. As for the name of “Moses,” it is almost an afterthought that Osarseph was also later called “Moses” after he joined the rebellion (Assmann 1999: 33-34). Manetho’s story appears to have little in common with Judaism, and he does not appear to be creating a counter-narrative to the biblical Exodus (Assmann 1999: 29-44; Römer 2018: 37-50).

Elsewhere, Josephus notes that the “Egyptians who regard that man [Moses] as remarkable, indeed divine, wish to claim him as one of themselves, while making the incredible and calumnious assertion that he was one of the priests expelled from Heliopolis for leprosy.”¹⁹ Nowhere does Manetho say that Moses was considered wonderful (θαυμαστός), let alone divine,²⁰ which suggests that there are others talking about a remarkable man from Egypt up to the time of Josephus, indicating “Moses” was an Egyptian folk hero for decades. This is supported by the extra-biblical stories of Moses’ campaign in Ethiopia, which

17. While there may be an awareness of the twelve-tribe system, instead the Egyptians might have used the ideal number of tribes from Plato, *Laws* 5.745B-E. The narrative suggests the existence of twelve tribes because of the 12-month calendar instead of a narrative about the sons of Jacob, so it is plausible that the Egyptians did not know of Israel’s indigenous tribal associations.

18. Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.228-252.

19. Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.279-280. Loeb translation, H. St. J. Thackeray.

20. Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.2.6 summarizes from Artapanus that Moses was considered divine and called Hermes.

appears to be based on another Hellenistic-era folk hero, Sesostris (Tiede 1972: 153-168; Rajak 2001: 261-262).²¹ Also, Josephus noting the odd contradiction in considering Moses a remarkable figure but also a leader in an ancient calamity indicates a complex and contradictory folklore within Egypt about a figure named “Moses,” and Manetho might have been the first person to place “Moses” in a bad light. Perhaps the “Moses” of Manetho is not the same figure as found in Hecataeus or other Egyptian folklore. That is, the name “Moses” could be more flexible, indicating a person based on their function or narrative role.

One detail about the name of “Moses” that is worth noting here is that Osarseph changed his name “because he went over to those people” (ὥς μετέβη εἰς τοῦτο τὸ γένος).²² By “going over/departing” (μεταβαίνω), Osarseph changed his name, and perhaps that is a clue to the meaning of “Moses” to an Egyptian.

Potential Egyptian Etymology for “Moses” from Eg. mšʿ

If Egyptian folklore was composed independent of the Exodus tradition, then the name of “Moses” in that etiological narrative had to be comprehensible to the Egyptians who did not know about the Exodus story. This means that “Moses” must have meant something to the Egyptians without reference to a Jewish “Moses” figure. If that is the case, then “Moses” must have been a meaningful name to an Egyptian living in c. 320 BCE. Thus, for the name to have any etiological value, it needed to mean something in Egyptian that was connected to the narrative it explains.

A possible candidate was presented decades ago by Gottlieb (1999: 130), who considered the Demotic word *mšʿ* as the root of Moses’ name. She noted that *mšʿ* was part of the title of the commander-in-chief of the Egyptian army, and this may fit the context of Moses as warrior and leader. Since Hecataeus does depict Moses as the leader of an army, as did Artapanus and Josephus,²³ this supports the initial ideas of Gottlieb. However, her choice of following the Coptic term for an army, ⲙⲏⲏⲩⲉ (*mēše*), does not follow the vowels of “Moses” well. Instead, let us consider another term also derived from *mšʿ*.

The Sahidic Coptic term ⲙⲟⲟⲩⲉ (*mōše*) is a common word. Acting as a verb, it means “to go, to walk, to march;” as a noun, it means “going, pace, or

21. Most assume that Moses’ military exploits in Ethiopia were to explain how Moses had a Kushite wife (Num 12,1; however, see Runnalls 1983: 155), but this is undermined by Artapanus’ version of the story, which includes no such wife. Artapanus’ Moses was also a founder of Egyptian religion with a god for each nome (Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.2.4), an unlikely creation for a Jewish writer. Perhaps instead the Moses-in-Ethiopia legend was Egyptian and not Jewish in origin, much like Hecataeus’ Egyptian Moses.

22. Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.250.

23. Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.2.7-9; Josephus, *Antiquities* 2.238-253.

journey” (Crum 1939: 203-206). In the translation of the Greek Bible into Coptic, the verb $\mu\omicron\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\epsilon$ is used for the embarking described by Jer 10,5 (replacing $\epsilon\pi\iota\beta\alpha\acute{\iota}\nu\omega$), and several other Greek words with $\beta\alpha\acute{\iota}\nu\omega$ are similarly translated with $\mu\omicron\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\epsilon$.²⁴ As a noun, $\mu\omicron\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\epsilon$ is used to replace ‘journey’ in Greek.²⁵ The term also comes from the same consonantal root ($m\acute{s}$) for a marching army, so it also has a militaristic resonance. The Demotic word $m\acute{s}$ with the walking determinative not only means to walk or go, but it can also be used to speak of regulations or laws, both cosmic and human (Erichsen 1954: 181). Perhaps this would work well as the name of a colonist who “goes out” or who “journeys” to a new land at the head of a conquering army and establishes the rules of his newly founded city. $\mu\omicron\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\epsilon$ can thus fit the etiological goals of the Egyptian narrative.

Manetho and Μουσῆς

Providing evidence of an Egyptian origin to Moses’ name, as well as connecting it to $m\acute{s}$, an examination of the oldest sources discussing “Moses” reveals orthographic features that may indicate the suspected underlying Egyptian word. Manetho is particularly helpful, as he also provided the clue that the priest Osarseph became known as “Moses” because he went over to another people-group. That Manetho’s “Moses” goes somewhere is suggestive that “Moses” meant “to go.”

When Manetho mentions Osarseph/Moses, he writes the name as Μουσῆς. This spelling is confirmed by Josephus as he both quotes directly from Manetho ($\kappa\acute{\alpha}\pi\epsilon\iota\tau\alpha\ \kappa\alpha\tau\grave{\alpha}\ \lambda\acute{\epsilon}\xi\iota\nu\ \omicron\upsilon\tau\omega\varsigma\ \gamma\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\rho\alpha\phi\epsilon\nu$)²⁶ and then repeats the name later.²⁷ The consistent spelling indicates there is no likely textual corruption on this point. Elsewhere, when Josephus quotes Apion and other critics of Judaism concerning Moses (see note 29), another spelling is found, indicating Josephus is reproducing the texts as he has them rather than editing them for orthographic consistency. Therefore, the manuscript of Josephus’ *Contra Apion* likely preserves Manetho’s orthography. Interestingly, Μουσῆς is the same orthography found in the LXX and other Jewish sources.²⁸ However, Hecataeus and Greco-Roman writers not directly dependent on Jewish sources write the name without the upsilon—thus, Μωσῆς.²⁹

24. I.e., Gen 23,13; Exod 19,19; Deut 9,12; Josh 3,17; Jer 18,15; Ezek 41,7.

25. $\omicron\delta\acute{o}\varsigma$ in Lk 2,22; $\omicron\delta\omicron\upsilon\pi\omicron\rho\iota\acute{\alpha}\iota$ in 2 Cor 11,26.

26. Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.237.

27. Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.250, 266 (pace Gmirkin 2006: 50).

28. Nicolaus of Damascus (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.93-95); Philo in many places (i.e., *On the Creation* 1.2); Josephus in many places.

29. I.e., Hecataeus of Abdera (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historia* 40.3.3); Apollonius Molon (Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.19.1-3); Lysimachus (Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.304-311); Chaeremon (Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.288-292); Apion (Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 10.10.16; Josephus, *Contra Apion* 2.1-11, 15-17,

As Manetho is writing before the composition of the LXX, he could not have been dependent on the primary Jewish text in Greek. Conversely, he is not following the orthography of his predecessor, Hecataeus. Manetho's choice of spelling seems deliberate, and this is confirmed when the vowels of "Moses" are compared to Hellenistic norms. The double vowel $\omega\upsilon$ is very uncommon in Greek, especially in both the classical Attic dialect as well as Koine. However, papyri from Egypt show that this double vowel was used in numerous Egyptian names (Gignac 1976: 186-187). Among those examples include the month and deity, Thoth ($\Theta\omega\upsilon\theta$ vs. $\Theta\acute{\omega}\theta$),³⁰ as well as misspellings of other names normally written with just ω . This indicates that $\omega\upsilon$ was an indigenous Egyptian pronounced diphthong in words and names, but one that was difficult for non-native Greeks to pick up. This explains then why Hecataeus only spelled the name "Moses" with a single ω , as he only noticed a long o sound. Manetho, a native Egyptian speaker, would have followed the subtleties of his country's phonemes.

The deliberate spelling choice by Manetho suggests that he thought "Moses" was an Egyptian name, as his orthography matches that of other Egyptian names. For example, Manetho appears to write either the Horus name, Sanakht (Meyer 1965: 174), or (more likely) the name of Khufu as $\Sigma\acute{\omega}\upsilon\phi\iota\varsigma$ (Gundacker 2015: 105). Conversely, Manetho does not use $\omega\upsilon$ to spell the names of pharaohs with the root $m\acute{s}y$ in their names, and he rarely uses double vowels,³¹ providing additional reason to doubt that $m\acute{s}y$ is the origin of "Moses." The evidence indicates that Manetho did consider "Moses" to be an Egyptian name, but it was not related to $m\acute{s}y$.

Looking for possible evidence of the 'ayin from $m\acute{s}$ in Greek, the final ϵ in $\mu\omicron\omicron\upsilon\epsilon$ may help indicate something interesting. In Greek, there are no pharyngeal fricatives, but when imitating the sound, generally the pharyngeal fricative is rendered with either a zero, α , or ϵ (Steiner 2005: 232). This is true for both Semitic and for Egyptian pharyngeal fricatives. For example, the LXX has the π in Phinehas ($\Phi\iota\eta\eta\varsigma$) become an epsilon ($\Phi\iota\eta\epsilon\acute{\varsigma}$, Exod 6,25); the ν in Gideon ($\Gamma\iota\delta\epsilon\omicron\nu$) also becomes an epsilon ($\Gamma\epsilon\delta\epsilon\acute{\omicron}\nu$, Judges 6).

In contrast, the ϵ that ends numerous Egyptian names is not often rendered with an epsilon, including in lists of kings by Manetho. For example, Snefru was by the 3rd century BCE pronounced as $\acute{S}\acute{e}f\acute{o}r\acute{e}$ and written in Greek as $\Sigma\acute{\omega}\rho\iota\varsigma$ with an iota; similarly, Khufu ($\acute{S}w\acute{o}w\acute{f}\acute{e}$) was rendered as $\Sigma\acute{\omega}\upsilon\phi\iota\varsigma$ (Gundacker 2015: 110-117). The same observations hold for other pharaohs such as Thutmose and Ahmose. However, where Manetho does end a regal name with

20-21, 25, 28); Alexander Polyhistor (Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.30-31); Strabo, *Geographica* 16.2.34-46.

30. In Coptic, Thoth had vocalizations with and without the diphthong, i.e., $\Theta\omega\Theta$, $\Theta\omega\omicron\gamma\tau$, $\Theta\omicron\omicron\gamma\tau$.

31. Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.93-97 names several pharaohs with *mos/mes* in their names, such as Ahmose/Tethmosis ($\tau\epsilon\theta\mu\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$), Thutmose IV ($\Theta\mu\acute{\omega}\sigma\iota\varsigma$), and Rameses ($\rho\alpha\mu\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\sigma\eta\varsigma$). Only one name has a double vowel ($\mu\eta\phi\omicron\rho\alpha\mu\omicron\upsilon\theta\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$), perhaps for Thutmose III.

-ης, such as with Khafre (*ḥʿf-rʿ* > Κεφρέρης), the original ending is with an ‘*ayin*. Numerous examples of pharaohs with name suffixes -*rʿ* (Coptic -ρΗ) are rendered as -ρης, so long as the final syllable includes at least a *schwa* (Gundacker 2015: 117-122).³² While Herodotus tried to render nasalized vowels adjacent to ‘*ayin* with an extra *v* (i.e., Κεφρήν for Khafre), this convention did not last (Ray 1978: 77-78) and appears to have been dropped by the time of Hecataeus and Manetho. Instead, Hecataeus would write Khafre as Χαβρύης (from **Ḥ(ʿ)ǎf-Rīʿ*; see Gundacker 2015: 117), showing that the *schwa* was becoming a long *e* when transliterated. Concerning Manetho’s standard practices when writing desinences, Gundacker (2015: 97 n. 57) concludes: “Manetho graecized most Egyptian names as *i*-stems; accordingly, most names should display -ις as their nominative desinence (Peust 1999: 254). The nominative desinence -ης is only correct when it is the Greek equivalent of Egyptian word-final *-*ē*[#].”

Returning to Μωυσης, the -ης could be a combination of epsilon and omega, as seen in its genitive form in the LXX. Unfortunately, Μωυσης only appears in the extant parts of Manetho’s work in the nominative, so it is speculative if he would have declined the name in the same way as the LXX translators. However, given the above conclusions from Gundacker, a long vowel is likely in place at the end of Μωυσης. If so, then the ‘*ayin* in *mšʿ* may be lengthening the final vowel, not unlike what is seen with -*rʿ* as -ρης/-ρυης. In Μωυϣε, there is the short *e* or *schwa*, so if this term is behind Hecataeus’ as well as Manetho’s use of *eta* in the name “Moses,” then there must be something lengthening the final vowel.³³ There does not appear to be another Egyptian word like Μωυϣε with a different vowel after the *shai* (ϣ), leaving no other candidates. This provides some evidence that there was an ‘*ayin* in the Egyptian name of “Moses.” The remaining vowels and consonants in *mšʿ* are consistent with Μωυσης as a derived term.

As noted earlier, Μωυσης is not a likely derivation from מֹשֶׁה. That “Moses” is an irregularly declined noun is also strange.³⁴ There is no apparent reason “Moses” could not have been a first declension masculine noun, such as the Egyptian name Sousiscanes/Σουσιस्कάνης,³⁵ the Persian names Zoroaster/Zωροάστρης and Phraates/Φραάτης, or the Jewish name John/Ιωάννης in the

32. Note that Herodotus’ Μενερίνος (Menkaure) is likely rendering **Mḥ-kē-Rīʿ*, which lacks a vowel after the final ‘*ayin* and has neither a short nor long *e* in -*rʿ*. Later, Manetho has Μεγέρης (rendering **Mēn-kē-Rēʿ*), which has a long *e*.

33. Loprieno (1995: 39) for comparison of the vowels in *rʿ*. Also, compare the Coptic ρΗ (Sahidic, Bohairic), ρΙ (Akhmimic), and ρΕ (Fayyumic).

34. See Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.20-21, 26-29, which provides multiple other sources using a variety of declension methods for “Moses,” including the first declension. In the LXX, “Moses” is like the third declension, but it is declined more like the feminine noun πόλις/πόλεως, except for its nominative and accusative forms where an *eta* is in place of the *iota*; the similarity of “Moses” to the masculine third declension noun βασιλεύς/βασιλέως is not better.

35. Aeschylus, *Persians* 960.

NT. “Moses” also doesn’t follow the pattern of Μανασσῆς/Μανασσῆ from the LXX, nor how Josephus declines Παμέσσης when utilizing Manetho.³⁶ However, Μωυσῆς/Μωυσέως is analogous to how Manetho declines names in his story of Osarseph-Moses, namely, as Ὁσαρσιφ/Ὀσίρεως; and in a similar manner, the pharaohs Τέθμωσις/Τεθμώσεως and Ἀμενώφις/Ἀμενώφεως/Ἀμενώφει/Ἀμενώφιν.³⁷

In both orthography and declension, the LXX is more similar to Manetho than any other source. If it was not Manetho, then another Egyptian would have been the likely source of Μωυσῆς in the Septuagint (cf. Jeremias 1932: 853 n. 1). However, the hypothesis for the name “Moses” needs to explain the Hebrew as well as the Greek form of the name.

Hebrew Derivation from mš‘

Let us finally test the hypothesis that “Moses” came from an Egyptian word, and a Jewish listener heard this as close to the active participle of the verb “to draw out” in Hebrew.

The Coptic word ΜΟΥϢε is very similarly pronounced as the Hebrew name, מֹשֶׁה. The Demotic root is also a close pronunciation in the late first millennium. Like *mśy*, *mš‘* underwent a vowel shift during the Persian era. In its older form, *mš‘* should have been pronounced closer to *maš‘ai* (Černý 1976: 96; Schenkel 1990: 87; Loprieno 1995: 44-46), thus lacking the *o* in “Moses.” Furthermore, the syllable breaks differed, creating an even larger dissonance between the older version of *mš‘* and how it would exist in Coptic. This means neither *mśy* nor *mš‘* can be used for a pre-exilic reconstruction of “Moses;” conversely, this means that if “Moses” derives from *mš‘*, then the name must be post-exilic.

However, there are two notable issues with this etymology if it is related to the Hebrew name of Moses. First, *mš‘* will have its stress on the first or penultimate syllable, while מֹשֶׁה is stressed on the ultimate syllable. A shift in stress may be accounted for by the norms of each language (i.e., the French *hôtel* as a loanword into English as *ho‘tel*); Hebrew generally stresses the ultimate syllable, which may explain the shift with little difficulty.

However, the greatest issue is with the final ‘*ayin* in *mš‘*. If there were a direct transliteration from the Egyptian word to Hebrew, one might expect the name to have become מֹשֶׁע. If *mš‘* is at the root of מֹשֶׁה as a name, an explanation is needed. The ‘*ayin* has a complex history in Egyptian, with some significant changes happening in the last half-millennium of Pharaonic Egypt and into the Roman era (Kasser 1991: 45-47). By the late Ptolemaic or Roman period, the ‘*ayin* was shifting from a pharyngeal to a glottal (Peust 1999: 102-103),³⁸ but this is after the time that “Moses” appears in written sources. Nonetheless, in

36. Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.289-302.

37. Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.227-250.

38. Compare the variation in Roman era *mš‘* to Ptolemaic in Erichsen (1954: 181).

later Egyptian, the loss of the 'ayin is indicated by the duplication of the vowel, which explains the double-*o* in $\mu\omicron\omicron\upsilon\epsilon$.

There are signs of 'ayin being dropping or absorbed, indicating it was a relatively weak sound (Gottlieb 1999: 130),³⁹ and it was devoiced in some cases. For example, in Napatán Egyptian during approximately the 5th century BCE, the word *mš'* became *msh* (Peust 1999: 105), changing the ending from the voiced pharyngeal fricative to the voiceless. Also, as seen in Aramaic documents from the Persian era, the 'ayin was dropped when in the vicinity of *h* (Porten 2002: 285; Peust 1999: 103).

The preservation of the 'ayin is not necessarily expected in transliteration or as a loanword. Going back to the Amarna period, when *mš'* was used in Akkadian, the 'ayin was commonly dropped or reduced to a short vowel, becoming *miši*,⁴⁰ though Akkadian could otherwise indicate an 'ayin, such as with *ḥ*. As for the Hebrew Bible, there are some inconsistent transliterations of the weak Egyptian 'ayin, as can be seen when comparing the names Sisera (סִיסְרָא) and Ramesses (רַעֲמֶסֶס), both containing -*r'* but the former reducing the 'ayin to a mere vowel sound (Redford 1992: 258 n. 2). Therefore, it would not be irregular for 'ayin to drop out when an Egyptian word moved into another language, including the consonant cluster of interest.

How the 'ayin in *mš'* would have been lost is less clear. One possibility is that 'ayin could have been absorbed into another consonant and lengthened the vowel (Vycichl 1990: 196-200; Peust 1999: 235 n. 292).⁴¹ In this way, 'ayin is not dropped but lengthens the vowel and potentially acts as a glottal stop (Peust 1999: 205-210). This trend appears to exist with *mš'* transitioning to $\mu\omicron\omicron\upsilon\epsilon$, as the 'ayin is devoiced to *h*, having as an intermediary step something like *mašhe* in the 5th century (Peust 1999: 105).⁴² Along with the vowel shift happening around the same time, *mošhe* could have been a pronounced form of the word *mš'* by the early Ptolemaic period. Especially with faster speech, the *ḥ* would be difficult to notice when it follows *š*,⁴³ itself an unvoiced fricative. $\mu\omicron\omicron\upsilon\epsilon$ does not have a remnant of *h* (*h* > Coptic *hori*, ʕ), indicating that Egyptians may have

39. Perhaps it was more of an approximant rather than a fricative, or perhaps a sonorant at least in some cases. See Ladefoged and Maddieson (1996: 168); Peust (1999: 100); Kammerzell (1995: L).

40. Rib-Hadda of Byblos: EA 101:4; 101:33; 105:27; 108:38; 110:52; 111:21; 126:63. See Lambdin (1953a: 75-77).

41. One may compare this to the Yiddish pronunciation of some Hebrew words with an 'ayin; i.e., מַעֲרֵב, where the ע becomes more like *j* or *y*.

42. This form may exist in P. Cairo 30799, 7 (dating to the 27th Dynasty), as *mšh* has a walking determinative. However, the meaning is debatable. On the one hand, see Smith (1991: 104-105), where *mšh* is something botanical; on the other hand, this example had a different determinative relating to plants (and Smith suggests the spelling is defective), so the connection is unclear.

43. Unlike מִשֶּׁה, מִשֶּׁה, or מִשֶּׁה, there was not a vowel between the last two consonants of *mš'* or *msh*.

no longer noticed *h* when adjacent to *š* (Coptic *shai*, ⲩⲩ),⁴⁴ or otherwise *h* was on its way to acting as a glottal stop. However, *mšh* was at best a minority pronunciation in the 5th/4th century BCE, since the spelling of *mš*‘ is mostly consistent until the Roman period.

An additional, and perhaps more plausible, reason for the loss of the ‘*ayin* was that the Jewish listeners of Egyptian narratives about “Moses” could fit the word into their existing vocabulary. In particular, the word *mš*‘ (or perhaps *mšh*) would sound closest to the Hebrew verb מִשָּׁח, especially as its active participle, מִשָּׁחֵם. The Jewish listener, if they were not familiar with Demotic, would not have known what the word meant in Egyptian, but they could relate the term to something in Hebrew. This is even more plausible if the ‘*ayin* was in the process of being devoiced and all the harder to notice for a non-native speaker.

On phonetic grounds, Persian/Hellenistic-era *mš*‘ is consistent with מִשָּׁח. The verb *mš*‘ fits the *mem* and *shin* in מִשָּׁח, and the ‘*ayin* could have been reduced to a short vowel, not unlike other Egyptian loanwords with *aleph* in place of ‘*ayin*.⁴⁵ An additional observation concerning the vowels in “Moses” is that מִשָּׁח was always spelled defectively. Pete Myers suggests this is because the first vowel was known to have an Egyptian pronunciation and would not correspond to *waw*, so a full spelling would have been avoided. This appears to be confirmed by Artapanus in the 3rd/2nd century BCE, spelling “Moses” again with a double vowel as either Μώσσοϛ or Μουσαῖοϛ.⁴⁶ As for the *holem* in the MT for “Moses,” this appears after Greek manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible spelled “Moses” as Μωσῆς, indicating that the diphthong had been lost in pronunciations by the 4th century CE (Myers 2021: 39).⁴⁷ This evidence suggests that the 3rd century BCE pronunciation of “Moses” was only approximately preserved in the pointing of the MT. Overall, Persian-era and later Egyptian *mš*‘ would have sounded close to *mōše*, fitting the vowels in the Hebrew form of “Moses” but with an Egyptian diphthong. The hypothesis passes the test on linguistic grounds.

Birth of a Legend

Assuming *mš*‘ entered into Hebrew or Aramaic as *mōše* in the post-exilic period, its interpretation would have very few precedents as found in the extant literature. The verb מִשָּׁח is rare in the Hebrew Bible, and besides Exodus 2, it only appears in two other places: 2 Samuel 22,17 and Psalm 18,16(17), describing the salvation of David. However, these two places are copies of one another, so there is only one other biblical use of מִשָּׁח besides Exod 2,10. None-

44. Cf. Akhmimic ⲙⲁⲁⲥⲉ (Sahidic ⲙⲟⲟⲩⲉ) indicates that the ⲥ exists when there is no adjacent ⲩⲩ. The combination *-ⲩⲥ-* appears to be very rare in Coptic.

45. I.e., מִשָּׁח (āḥ, ‘brazier’; Jer 36,22-23) from Eg. ‘*h* (Lambdin 1953b: 146).

46. Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.27.3-4.

47. The loss of the diphthong may have been earlier, as the Peshitta includes *waw* in “Moses.”

theless, the imagery used in 2 Sam 22 is analogous to that of Exod 2, in that a beloved one of God is saved by being pulled out from treacherous waters. However, the imagery of 2 Sam 22/Ps 18 is much more primordial in describing David's plight and salvation (Gray 2014: 107). The waters are the seas of chaos, and they are dried up by the winds of God. The imagery is closer to Exod 14/15 than Exod 2, and the former has its imagery following from the ancient *Chaoskampf* (Ayali-Darshan 2022: 186).

This suggests that 2 Sam 22 did not have the Moses story in mind, and the author perhaps did not even know of it. Conversely, if a Hebrew speaker knew this story of David and they heard about a *mš'* from Egypt, they could have interpreted the word in light of the typology of someone drawn from water as an act of salvation. Thus, the origins of Moses' birth and his name can be explained by combining the sounds of the Egyptian term and the indigenous Hebrew term.

The awkwardness of the Exod 2 narrative indicates that the folk etymology of "Moses" was a blind motif. This suggests not only was "Moses" originally a foreign word or name in Hebrew, but it was forcibly interpreted and interpolated into a birth story about a child rescued from a river, not unlike Sargon of Akkad or the twins Romulus and Remus. Therefore, *mš'* can explain the phonology of "Moses" in both Greek and Hebrew, the phonology of *mš'* explains the narrative awkwardness of the infant being given an active name based on מִשְׁׁ when the child was passive, and the prior use of מִשְׁׁ explains how the birth story of Moses could have been invented.

Conclusion

The best candidate for the etymological root of the name "Moses" appears to be not Semitic but Egyptian, and the root did not exist in the expected form until the post-exilic era. The combination of testimony and orthography from Greek and Egyptian sources indicate that the figure of "Moses" was of Hellenistic Egyptian derivation, and later he came into the biblical Exodus story. If this thesis is sound, then it not only explains why Moses is absent from all the prophets until the post-exilic period, but it explains the peculiarities in the biblical narrative of how Moses got his name and the unusual orthography of "Moses" in the LXX.

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