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Prof. Dr. Manfred Oeming (Heidelberg)

Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. mult. Gerd Theißen (Heidelberg)

und / and

Prof. Dr. Moisés Mayordomo (Basel)

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And God Saw That It Was Good

(Gen 1:12)

The Concept of Quality in
Archaeology, Philology and Theology

edited by

Filip Čapek and Petr Sláma

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8. Abraham and Moses, A (not so) Friendly Competition¹

Thomas Römer

There is no doubt that Moses is the most important figure of the Pentateuch. Since the beginning of the book of Exodus (Exod 2:1–10) recounts his birth and the end of the book of Deuteronomy (Deut 34) his death Rolf Knierim went as far to suggest the Torah should be characterized as a “biography” of Moses.² Indeed, if one considers the book of Genesis as a prologue of sorts, the four other books of the Pentateuch (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) are bound together by the figure of Moses and tell a story that lasts 120 years, because Moses dies at that age.

This view, however, does not acknowledge the importance of the book of Genesis, and especially of the figure of Abraham. Although, Abraham’s story is told in much fewer chapters than Moses’s, his importance in Judaism and also in Christianity can certainly compete with the reception of Moses.

According to current (European) Pentateuchal research, the Patriarchal traditions in Genesis and the Moses story in the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy, were originally independent in origin and had been combined at a quite late stage in the formation of the Pentateuch.³ When Genesis and the other scrolls of the Pentateuch were brought together, the figures of Abraham and Moses entered into a competition of sorts, and this competition is still discernable today in the final form of Pentateuch.

The following contribution, which I offer as a sign of my high esteem for and friendship to my colleague Martin Prudký, I would like to explore this competition, not in order to determine the winner, but to understand the reason for bringing together Abraham and Moses in the first place.

¹ I would like to thank Robert Kashow (Brown University, Providence, RI) for his careful editing of the English text.

² Knierim 1985.

³ Although there is no new diachronic model that has replaced the so-called Documentary hypothesis, which is, strangely enough, still used in some parts of the world, there is quite an agreement that the literary link between the Patriarchs and the Exodus traditions was established by the so-called “priestly writers” during the first part of the Persian period; for the late link between Patriarchs and Exodus cf. Römer 1990a, 545–566; de Pury 1994; Schmidt 1999; Otto 2000; Blum 2002; Gertz 2006; Albertz 2018; Jeon 2018.

8.1 Birth, age and death

Although, Moses' birth and adoption are described in some detail (Exod 2:1–10), the Pentateuch does not contain narratives about his childhood and youth; he only enters the scene as an adult man. According to Acis 7:23 he was forty when he went out to meet his kinsmen in Egypt, but this information is not given in the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, such an estimation makes some sense, since he is eighty years old when his age is first mentioned (Exod 7:7). At that moment he meets with Pharaoh to ask for the release of the Hebrews. He dies at the age of 120. It is thus possible that the redactors of the Pentateuch divided his life in three stages of life, which probably corresponds to three generations (cf. the 40 years in the wilderness of the Exodus-generation).

As for Abraham, his birth is narrated very briefly in the priestly genealogy of Genesis 11 (specifically Gen 11:26–27). The first time one encounters his age is in Gen 12:4, where he is said to be 75 years old, at the moment he leaves Haran for the land of Canaan. Like Moses, his life is organized in three stages, for he is said to have been 100 years when Isaac was born, and 175 at the time of his death. The priestly author of the Abraham narratives thus appears to organize the life of Abraham in three stages: 75 years in Ur and Haran, 25 years in Canaan before the birth of Isaac, and 75 years in Canaan after the birth of (Ishmael and) Isaac.⁴

The biblical authors and redactors do not show any interest neither in Abraham's nor in Moses' childhood and youth. This changes very quickly in texts from the time of nascent Judaism. According to the book of Jubilees little Abraham is chasing ravens that are about to devour the harvest; later he tries to turn his father away from idolatry at the age of 60 when he burns all idols in the temple (Jubilees 11). Little Moses on the other hand takes the crown from the head of Pharaoh, anticipating the defeat of the Egyptian power, and later convinces the king of Egypt to apply the law of the Sabbath to the Hebrew workers.⁵

8.2 The call

Both Abraham and Moses receive divine calls, which made them leave the place where they resided at the time. In Gen 12:1, Abraham (still Abram) is told to leave his land, his family, and his father's house, which in the context of the passage means the people belonging to his father in Haran. The land in which he needs to go is not indicated in the divine speech: it is simply the land that *Yhwā* will show him.⁶ As for Moses, his call is mentioned twice: Exod 3:1–4, 19 and Exod 6:2–9 ("P"). He is ordered to leave the land of Midian (Exod 3) and the land of Egypt

(Exod 6).⁷ Whereas Moses is to be the liberator of the Hebrews, Abraham is to become the ancestor of a great nation and a blessing for all the people of the earth (Gen 12:2–3). This shows that Abraham and Moses play different roles: Abraham is an ancestor, whereas Moses is a liberator and mediator. This is also shown by the different structure of Genesis on the one hand and the other books of the Torah on the other. The book of Genesis is structured by genealogies, but Exodius and the following books show no interest in such lineages of descent.

Another difference between the call of Abraham and Moses' commission is their relationship to the Promised Land. Moses is told to bring the Israelites into a land flowing with milk and honey, although since it is populated by other nations, they must be expelled (Exod 3:8 and 17). In Gen 12:1–3, however, there is no promise of land. Later the land is promised or even given to Abraham (Gen 13:15, 15:18; etc.), but this does not imply the driving out of the people already living there. According to the Abraham narrative living in the land does not imply conquest. And in the priestly version of the Abraham narrative, Abraham and his offspring (Ishmael and Isaac, and later the sons of Qeturah) receive the land as an *ittān*, a loan (Gen 17:8), since the real owner is *Yhwā*.⁸ The reactions of both protagonists also differ: whereas Moses is advancing all kinds of objections in order to avoid his mission (Exod 4:1–17), Abraham "went as *Yhwā* has told him."

It is quite possible that the short passage consisting of Abraham's call was inserted at a late stage. It interrupts the priestly opening of the Abraham narrative in 11:27–32 and 12:4b–5, so it may have been added into the Abraham narrative in a post-priestly stage,⁹ together with Gen 22:1–19*.¹⁰ If this is the case the author of Gen 12:1–4a knew the call narratives of Moses and constructed his short account as a response to Exodius 3 (and Exodius 6). Like Moses, he constructs Abraham as royal figure ("the great name")¹¹ and anticipates here an "exodus" from Ur Chaddim via Haran to the land of Canaan, constructing Abraham as a figure for the Golah that would like (at least theoretically) to return to the land. Understood as such, the call of Abraham functions as a prolepsis and correction to the call of Moses. While Moses shows some reluctance, Abraham immediately executes the divine order.

⁷ In the context of P, where Exod 6:2 directly follows Exod 2:25, Moses' call takes place in Egypt. In the present form of the Pentateuch where the P- and non-P-texts have been combined this is no longer true. According to Exod 5:22 Moses returns to *Yhwā* in order to complain about the Hebrews. And this complaint triggers now his (second) call. One should not take Exod 5:22 in a symbolic sense (he returned in prayer), but as traveling to *Yhwā*, who is supposed to reside on the mountain of God. For the last redactors both calls of Moses took place at "the mountain of God."

⁸ Banks 2004.

⁹ For a post-priestly date of Gen 12:1–4a see Ska 1997; Blenkinsopp 2016, 10.

¹⁰ The link between Gen 12:1–4a and 22:1–19 has often been observed. Both passages were probably added in order to frame the Abraham cycle by the theme of Abraham's faith. For Gen 22 see also Pouch 2009.

¹ There are however more chronological markers in the life of Abraham. According Gen 16:16, he was 86 years old, at the time Hagar gave birth to Ishmael. Gen 17:1 and 24 state that he was 99 years of age when God changed his name and ordered him to initiate the ritual of circumcision.

⁵ For references see Ginzberg 1977.

the prophets"). These references to the prophets are clearly related to Deuteronomy 18 and present the prophets as successors of Moses. This is also the case for Jeremiah. First of all, the structure of Jeremiah's call (Jer 1:5–8) has a close parallel in Moses' call in Exod 3:10–12. But the installation of Jeremiah as Yhw'n's prophet also refers to Deuteronomy 18 (cf. Deut 18:18 with Jer 1:7 and 9).²⁰

When the book of Deuteronomy was separated from the corpus of the Former Prophets (the other books of the so-called Deuteronomistic History) and constructed as the conclusion of the Pentateuch, Moses' function as the "first prophet" was challenged. In Genesis 20, which is probably the latest of the three versions of the narrative of the Patriarch presenting his wife as his sister,²¹ Abraham is called a prophet and intercedes for Abimelech (v. 7 and 17), resulting in God healing him from his illness (sterility or impotence?). In the context of the Torah, therefore, Genesis 20 makes Abraham the first prophet, not Moses. One also observes this in Genesis 15. The chapter opens with a prophetic formula: $\text{וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֲבְרָהָם וְיָחִיד אֲנִי לְךָ}$, "Yhw'n's word came to Abram." This *Wortereignisformel* links Abraham to the prophets, especially Ezekiel and Jeremiah, where this formula occurs constantly. The prophetic context is underlined by the fact that the divine word is accompanied by a vision (see for instance Jeremiah 1). The fact that Yhw'n informs Abram about his plans can also be understood against the background of Amos: "Certainly the Lord Yhw'n does nothing without first revealing his plan to his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7; Gen 18:17 probably also alludes to this text), Genesis 15 and 20 (perhaps also 18:17) thus construct, contrary to Deuteronomy 18, Abraham as the first of Yhw'n's prophets.

In reaction to such a portrait of Abraham, some passages in the Pentateuch try to show that Moses is, in contrast to the assertion of Deuteronomy 18, more than a prophet. This is the case in Exod 7:1, where Moses is presented as an *elohim*, whose prophet is his brother Aaron. The same phenomenon appears in Num 12:6–8, where Moses also surpasses the regular prophets because of his immediate relationship with God.²² Finally Moses appears as an incomparable mediator in the epigraph of Deut 34:10–12, which distinguishes him from all the other prophets:

¹⁰ Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom Yhw'n knew face to face.¹¹ He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that Yhw'n sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land,¹² and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

This passage, which concludes the Pentateuch and belongs to its final redaction,²³ emphasizes that Moses is a "super-prophet" and very close to divine status: the signs and wonders that the author of 34:10–12 attributes to Moses are executed

by Yhw'n himself in the book of Exodus. There were (Abraham) and there will be other prophets (in the Nebim) but none of those prophets can compare to Moses. Therefore, in the context of the Torah, Moses is no longer Israel's first prophet, but more than a prophet, Israel's incomparable mediator.

In the prophetic competition between Abraham and Moses, Moses finally wins.

8.6 A royal figure

In the Book of Exodus, Moses is presented as a royal figure from the very beginning. The story of his birth and exposure appears to be literally dependent on the birth legend of Sargon, the legendary founder of the Assyrian Empire. The links between the birth legend of Sargon and the birth narrative of Moses have often been observed²⁴ so that it is quite possible that the author of Exod 2:1–10 drew upon the Sargon legend. After his birth story, royal traits are ascribed to Moses in the story of his call in Exodus 3. In this account, he is presented as a shepherd, which is a royal title. In the prologue to the Code of Hammurabi, the king presents himself as "shepherd and the one chosen by Enlil." Moses is also called Yahweh's servant and is "entrusted with his house" (Num 12:8); just as Hammurabi and other ancient Near Eastern kings are called the servants of their patron gods and act as overseers of their earthly realms.²⁵

As the stela and inscriptions of Hammurabi demonstrate, a king in the Ancient Near East is the lawgiver *par excellence*. The gods transmit their laws to the king, who becomes the mediator, legislator, and supreme judge in regard to the Law. In the Hebrew Bible, however, no king ever receives a law from Yhw'n. The only mediator of the Law is Moses. All the laws in the Pentateuch are attributed to him so that for nascent Judaism, Moses was identical to Law. No new laws are given in the Prophets; Joshua and the kings are expected to follow the "law of Moses." Therefore Moses appears in the books of Kings as the lawgiver,²⁶ and kings are evaluated in light of their adherence to or disregard for the Mosaic law. Through the transfer of a royal function to Moses, who before the conquest of the land and the foundation of monarchy transmitted all laws to Israel, Judaism was able to exist as a religion without land and without state, because such royal functions (especially the mediation of the law) did not require political autonomy and a state, since they were assumed by Moses.

However, the traditions of the Abraham traditions also tried to depict the Patriarch with royal traits. It has been demonstrated that the theme of the great name and the blessing in Gen 12:1–3 is taken over from royal ideology.²⁷ This is also the case of Genesis 15, where Abraham not only appears as a prophetic but also royal figure. In his first speech to Abraham Yhw'n promises to reward him and presents himself

²⁴ Cohen 1972; Maechi 1994; Gerhards 2006.

²⁵ For royal ideology in Numbers 12 see also Uehlinger 2003.

²⁶ For Moses in the books of Kings see Davies 2007a.

²⁷ See above. Further, for royal ideology in the ANE and the Hebrew Bible, see Ruckl 2016a esp. 131–147.

Köckert 2000.

Blum 1984; Köckert 2015.

Uehlinger 2003.

See Kömer 2007; Schmid 2007; Otto 2016, 2284–2285.

as Abraham's shield. The root *m-g-n* in Pentateuch is only found here, Gen 14:20 and Deut 33:29. In Gen 14:28 Abraham appears as on par with the greatest kings of Mesopotamia, as he is victorious and magnanimous. In Genesis 15 Abraham's royal status is reinforced by the divine exhortation: "do not fear," which parallels Assyrian and Babylonian *Heilsorakel* given to the king. And he is even constructed as a forerunner of King David.

YHWH's unconditional promise to Abraham anticipates his promise to David in 2 Sam 7:29

Gen 15:4 The one who shall come forth out of your entrails (תַּרְחֵלְךָ אֲנִי תַּרְחֵלְךָ) shall be your heir.

2 Sam 7:12 I will set up your seed after you, that shall come forth out of your entrails (תַּרְחֵלְךָ אֲנִי תַּרְחֵלְךָ)

The priestly version of YHWH's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17 also contains some royal features. YHWH changes the name of Abram to Abraham, which is reminiscent of the new name given to a king when he is enthroned. In v. 6 YHWH announces that kings will descend from him. If this alludes to the Davidic Dynasty,³⁰ the author of Genesis 17 would have presented Abraham as the "founder" of the monarchy.

The transfer of royal ideology to Abraham probably reflects a democratization of a sort of royal ideology, which was possible after the events of 587 BCE. The transfer of royal ideology to Abraham may partially be understood as a response to the royal presentation of Moses.

However, contrary to Moses, Abraham is not a mediator of law. The priestly writer of Genesis 17 tried perhaps to compensate for this by making Abraham the initiator of a custom that is not addressed in the law, the circumcision.

8.7 Circumcision

The priestly covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17 is established for all the offspring of Abraham. This raises the question of the relationship between the two sons of Abraham. Contrary to the opinion of many commentators, Ishmael is not excluded from this covenant. He is put into parallel with Abraham³¹ in order to show that he will become the Patriarch of Arabic tribes (cf. Gen 25) whereas Isaac will continue the "Israel-line" (v. 19). The difference between Ishmael and Isaac also appears with regard to the circumcision, which is presented as sign of the Abrahamic covenant. Although some scholars argue that the divine commandment of circumcision does not accord with the "priestly covenant of grace," it

makes perfectly sense in the context of the priestly attempt to present circumcision as a (necessary) sign of the covenant.³²

Most biblical and extra-biblical sources indicate that circumcision was practiced in Egypt and in the Levant as a "rite de passage" as transition from boy to man, making his new status of sexual maturity.³³ For the priestly writers, however, circumcision is a ritual for the newborn male baby, marking his integration into the male community – a kind of baptism of sorts. This change in the function of circumcision can be seen in the fact that Ishmael is 13 years old when he is circumcised, whereas Isaac is circumcised the eighth day after his birth (Gen 21:4).³⁴

The theologization of circumcision in Genesis 17* can easily be understood as a reaction of a minority group which must legitimate a rite that is not practiced by a majority. The change of the rite from puberty to birth can be understood in the context of making circumcision the sign of a covenant between God and Abraham, which was certainly not the original function of circumcision.³⁵ In transferring the date of the circumcision to the eighth day after birth, P is able to distinguish the "Israelite circumcision" from the people of the Levant and in Egypt who were practicing circumcision as a puberty-aged ritual.

Contrary to Abraham, the status of Moses' circumcision is somewhat doubtful. There is no account about Moses' circumcision, except for a very strange text, in which Moses is attacked by YHWH himself, who wanted to kill him:

On the way [back to Egypt], at a place where they spent the night, YHWH met him and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet³⁶ with it, and said, "Truly you are a bridegroom [or: kinsman] of blood to me!" So he let him alone. It was then she said, "A bridegroom of blood by circumcision."³⁷ (Exod 4:24–26).

Exod 4:24–26 and Genesis 17 are the only texts in the Hebrew Bible that provide competing explanations or etiologies for the rituals of circumcision.

The strange text of Exodus 4:24–26, which raises many questions,³⁸ seems to indicate that the blood of circumcision has an apotropaic function. In Exodus 4,

³² This very protestant idea has been rightly criticized by Krause 2018.

³³ For more details see Blaschke 1998 and Römer 2016.

³⁴ Isaac is, according to the priestly narrative, the first male who is circumcised according to the new rules established by P. The priestly writers indicate the age of Abraham as 99 when he was circumcised and 100 when Isaac was born in order to show that he was already circumcised when he fathered Isaac. P is not interested in the question of who circumcised Abraham, contrary to later Jewish commentators. According to the Greek translation and the Targum, Abraham circumcised himself. According to Midrash Tanhuma A, a scorpion circumcised Abraham. According to Tanhuma B, God helped Abraham.

³⁵ Propp 1987.

³⁶ Euphemism for the genitals.

³⁷ LXX has quite a different text; instead of YHWH the Greek reads "the angel of YHWH."

³⁸ See the presentation of scholarly opinions in Willis 2010.

⁸ For a Persian period setting for Genesis 14 see Na'aman 2015.

⁹ Besides 2 Sam 6:11, Gen 15 and 2 Sam 7 are the only biblical texts that speak about a son coming out of his father's entrails.

¹⁰ Blum 1984, 457–458.

¹¹ The same terms that are used for Abraham in vv. 2–6 are applied to Ishmael in v. 20.

Moses' Midianite wife Zipporah saves her husband from the divine attack by circumcising her son. This means that Moses is supposed to be circumcised; however, for an "orthodox" reader, the status of Moses could have been equally problematic. Since Moses grew up in Egypt, the question could be raised, whether he had been circumcised in an "Egyptian way" and not according to the (new) "orthodox" rite of Genesis 17. Zipporah's rite then functions as a symbolic circumcision, demonstrating the validity of Moses' circumcision.³⁹ It is possible that the author of Exod 4:24–26 already knew the priestly text of Genesis 17 and tried to harmonize it with the fact that there is no biblical account about Moses' circumcision as a newborn.

8.8 Death and burial

In regard to the age of death Abraham beats Moses since he dies at the age of 175; Moses' death at the age of 120 years (Deut 31:2 and 34:7), however, points back to Gen 6:3 where God limits human life to 120 years.⁴⁰ And contrary to Abraham, who dies "old and full of years" (Gen 25:8), Moses "vigor had not abated" (Deut 34:7). Further whereas Abraham is buried by his sons Ishmael and Isaac, Moses is buried by YHWH himself. Moses' death thus appears to be much more "extraordinary" than Abraham's even if the latter lives 55 years more than Moses.

Another difference between the two concerns their place of burial: Abraham is buried in the cave in the cave of Machpelah, east of Mamre (Gen 25:9), in which all the Patriarchs are buried (cf. Gen 35:27–29; 49:30 and 50:13). The Patriarchal tomb is therefore known and remains a place of pilgrimage even today.⁴² Since Moses is buried by YHWH himself,⁴³ "no one knows his burial place to this day" (Deut 34:6).⁴⁴ The fact that Moses is buried outside the land is significant for the Jews from the Diaspora who would have otherwise lamented not having their tomb in the land of Israel.⁴⁵ For the message of Moses' death is that there is no need to be buried in the land, since even Moses was buried outside the land. By

³⁹ This is similar to the symbolic circumcision called "tippat dam," practiced even today by orthodox Jews. On this topic see also Diebner 1984a and 1984b.

⁴⁰ Deut 34:7 probably belongs to a pentateuchal redactor who wants to frame the whole Torah and to present Moses as the "ideal human being," whose death corresponds to this divine decision; cf. Römer 2007 and Schmid 2007.

⁴¹ The burial notice of Isaac does not mention Machpelah; but since he dies in Mamre it is clear that he is also supposed to rest in the same cave.

⁴² Even if the modern place stems from the time of Herod. Cf. Jericke 2013, 156–157.

⁴³ For later Jewish interpretation (Moses did not really die; he was taken to heaven, etc.), cf. Schäfer 1974.

⁴⁴ Diebner 1992 suggests that the fact that the burial place is unknown contributes to the compromising character of the Torah because its presents Moses "als Vermittler der beiden Israel – Gartzim- und Zions-Gemeinde" (125). Since Moses dies outside the land, Deuteronomy 34 presents Moses more as a figure with whom the Diaspora communities can identify.

Meyers 1971.

underlining the fact that nobody knows the place of his sepulcher, the author of Deut 34:6 wants to prevent any pilgrimage to and any worship of Moses' tomb, in contrast with the tomb of the Patriarchs.

8.9 Conclusion

Abraham and Moses are the two prominent human figures in the Torah. The traditions that concern these figures were transmitted by different groups of traditions across a lengthy period of time, and brought together only by the priestly writers at a late stage. Such a "unification" of the Patriarchal and Exodus-conquest traditions triggered a competition between Abraham and Moses.

In the context of the so-called deuteronomistic History, Moses was constructed as Israel's first prophet; in the Torah, Abraham appears as the first prophet, and therefore Moses became more than a prophet.

Moses was constructed as a royal figure quite early, and late texts of the Abraham cycle try to attribute royal traits also to the Patriarch. However, Abraham cannot become a lawgiver, contrary to Moses. Therefore he becomes the initiator of circumcision.

Moses was certainly the mediator par excellence, but he did fail once in his faith (Numbers 20). Genesis 15 (as well as 12:1–3 and 22) insist that Abraham surpasses Moses in regards to faith.

This competition apparently ends with a draw, and indicates that, even if Abraham and Moses share several characteristics, they have different roles and thus can serve as figures of identification for different groups.