



The 2015–2016 Essay Prize for Doctoral Students

The Boy Who Lived: Transformation of a Theological Motif in Biblical Tradition

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A Jewish legend of uncertain antiquity holds that until his anointing by the prophet Samuel, David was regarded as illegitimate.¹ The story is likely triggered in part by creative interpretation of certain psalms that were read as containing hidden biographical details from David's life. Why would David say that he was a "stranger" to his brothers and a "foreigner" to his mother's sons in Ps 69:8? Might David have been tipping us off to something far more serious—that he was regarded not merely as a "stranger" (*muzar*) but in fact as a "bastard" (*mamzer*)? This would explain what David meant when he said, "in sin my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:5).²

As the legend goes, David's father, Jesse—aware that his grandmother, Ruth, was a Moabite convert—decided to divorce his Israelite wife, Nezbeth, after they had had all but the last of their sons, since his lineage compromised the status of her and her children (cf. Deut 23:3–6). Jesse still desired another son, however, so he made plans to marry his wife's Canaanite servant. Nezbeth was opposed to this,

¹Yalqut HaMakiri Psalm 118:28, see also b. Bava Batra 91a, which provides the name of David's mother, "Nezbeth."

²Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

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so the two women conspired to switch places on the wedding night with the result that Nezbeth conceived David. When the older brothers learned that their mother was pregnant (now supposedly outside of marriage), they desired to stone her and kill the baby (cf. Lev 20:10; John 7:53–8:11). However, Jesse intervened and instructed that the baby David be spared but regarded as illegitimate. Risking death, Nezbeth decided not to reveal her plot in order to avoid shaming her ex-husband. In this way, David's true heritage was not revealed until his anointing in 1 Sam 16 (conveniently explaining also why he was not present at the prophet Samuel's initial roll call of Jesse's sons).

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This clever story combines familiar elements from a variety of biblical narratives (Abraham and Hagar, Jacob and Leah/Rachel, Judah and Tamar, and the birth account of Jephthah). It also promotes David into a prestigious fraternity of biblical savior figures who narrowly escape death near the time of their birth. Moses and Jesus come to mind immediately, but they are not the only occurrences of *the boy who lived* motif in biblical tradition. On the one hand, the motif is quite familiar, not only from Israel's environs (for example, Sargon, Horus) and Greco-Roman literature (Oedipus, Romulus, Apollo), but also from later folklore (King Arthur, Siegfried), and even in popular media today (Star Wars, Harry Potter). On the other hand, there seems to be a special affinity for the motif within Jewish literature. As evidenced by the David legend above, characters that did not originally have miraculous birth stories often acquired them in later tradition. In other instances, established birth narratives accumulated additional details that served to heighten their drama or in other ways deepen the imprint of the motif.

A variety of critical methods have been utilized to investigate the ubiquity of these literary types. For example, one must admit that there is something universally human in these stories in that we often look for hints of future greatness in our children. For evidence of this, one need only ask proud parents about their son or daughter's youth or consult a biography of Abraham Lincoln. As William Propp observes, there is a "deep psychological resonance" in these stories that transcends any particular Jewish milieu.³ Attempts have been made at exploring the motif as a folkloric "type," often using the birth narrative of Sargon as the prime example.⁴ Scholars have also noted the political implications of these stories and have sought to identify how *the boy who lived* origin story could have served to legitimate a ruler, sacred text, or ideology.⁵

³William Propp, *Exodus 1–18* (Anchor Bible 2; New Haven: Yale University, 1999) 155–160, 157.

⁴See, for example, Brian Lewis, *The Sargon Legend: A Study of the Akkadian Text and the Tale of the Hero Who Was Exposed at Birth* (Cambridge: ASOR, 1980) 149–210.

⁵See Eckart Otto, "Die Geburt des Mose: Die Mose-Figur als Gegenentwurf zur neuassyrischen Königsideologie," in *Die Tora. Studien zum Pentateuch*, ed. Eckart Otto (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009) 9–45.

Each of these methods informs the present study to some degree, but my primary goal is to lay out what I see as the central theological claims made by these stories as they occur in Judeo-Christian tradition. The *boy who lived* motif served as a sign that legitimated the God of Israel as the God of history whose authority was executed not through the ascendancy of any particular ruler or party but through miraculous survival in impossible situations. This is an ambitious claim, and it is God's people who must live in the tension it creates. By better understanding how this theological motif was transformed in biblical tradition, Christian leaders can better identify those times in their ministries when God is calling them to proclaim boldly that God is present and active even when circumstances seem precisely the opposite.

The remainder of the essay is divided into three sections. First, I lay out the paradigm for the motif in Exod 2. Next, I discuss further iterations of the story in the Old Testament, including Joash, Hadad the Edomite, and Jeroboam. I then conclude with an overview of the motif in Early Jewish and Christian tradition, including examples from *1 Enoch*, the Dead Sea Scrolls, early *midrashim*, and the New Testament.⁶

THE MOSAIC PARADIGM

The first example of the motif in the canonical story is the birth of Moses and, consistent with the overall paradigmatic nature of the exodus, its imprint can be detected in other accounts. The story begins in Exod 1:8 where an unnamed Pharaoh seeks to prune the fruitful Israelites living within his borders. His three solutions—escalating in ruthlessness from harsh servitude, to infanticide at birth, to casting newborns into the Nile—are reminiscent of the deity Enlil's solutions to dealing with the problem of noisy/rebellious humans in the prebiblical Atrahasis epic. Many interpreters have rightly pointed out the political overtones of this story, not just in its ancient Near Eastern context but also in the wider exodus narrative. The king's murderous grasps at self-preservation ironically bring about the ascendance of the savior who will eventually topple Egyptian imperial power.

As mentioned above, one purpose of this story was to legitimate the figure of Moses. Eckart Otto argues that, like the Sargon narrative, the original layer of Moses' birth story told of an illegitimate child who rises to lead a people against a dominant political force with divine blessing.⁷ Even if we grant Otto his hypothetical historical reconstruction, we are right to ask what kind of legitimation this is. Like Sargon, Moses is a baby and thus has little agency in his own fate. Rather, his clever mother avoids the Pharaoh's decree (Exod 2:3), Pharaoh's own daughter has

⁶This essay is largely focused on synchronic issues of interpretation. Thus, diachronic details will be mentioned only when they are especially relevant to the thesis.

⁷Otto posits the dependence of the first layer of Exod 2 on the Sargon narrative and thus recreates an "original" kernel devoid of what he sees as later embellishments (e.g., infanticide, watchful sister) designed first to dilute the more embarrassing aspects of Moses' origins and later to accommodate the story into the evolving text of Exodus. "Die Geburt des Mose," 18–21.

mercy (Exod 2:6), and Moses' sister ingeniously provides for his well-being (Exod 2:7). Each individual act is fortuitous but together they demonstrate a pattern: God acts through human agents, whether they are aware of it or not. In this way, it is not just Moses who is legitimated but also God.

God's nonintervention in human events is not to be interpreted as God's absence. Rather, it is evidence that God's blessing of creation and of Abraham's descendants triumphs despite the meddling of destructive forces.

This conception of God is not limited to the first few chapters of Exodus. Numerous diaspora and diaspora-like stories make similar theological claims, including Esther, Daniel, and Judith. Exodus 1:1–7 explicitly connects what follows back to the Joseph cycle, where God works “behind the scenes” enabling favor with foreign authorities and reversing adverse situations from imminent annihilation to abundant blessing. It is due to these repeated themes and verbal echoes that Terence Fretheim calls the remarkable flourishing of Jacob's descendants in these opening chapters of Exodus “a microscopic fulfillment of God's macroscopic design for the world.”⁸ In these cases, God's nonintervention in human events is not to be interpreted as God's absence. Rather, it is evidence that God's blessing of creation and of Abraham's descendants triumphs despite the meddling of destructive forces.

There are cues here that anticipate the story of Israel as well. Verbal and thematic elements foreshadow Moses' later meetings with Pharaoh along the Nile (Exod 7:14; 8:16), the tenth plague (Exod 12:29–32), and the destruction of Pharaoh's army at the sea (Exod 13:17–15:21).⁹ These references serve to juxtapose two ways that God acts in the world: plagues of pests and darkness can deliver salvation but so can the faithful actions of a few ordinary women who risk their lives in defiance of a tyrant.

OTHER OCCURRENCES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the historical literature, the motif can be detected in the lives of Joash (2 Kings 11:1–21 par. 2 Chr 22:10–23:21) and Jotham (Judg 9) and is particularly prominent in the stories of Hadad (1 Kings 11:14–22) and Jeroboam (1 Kings 11:26–43; cf. 12:25–33). The latter two examples are all the more significant because both Hadad and Jeroboam, while living into a Mosaic template, inhabit precarious positions in relation to God's will.¹⁰ Each of these figures are treated briefly in turn below.

⁸Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991) 25.

⁹As Michael Fishbane notes, Exod 1–5 seems designed to foreshadow the entire Exodus narrative that follows in chapters 5–19. *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979) 73–76.

¹⁰On connections between these narratives and the exodus, see Yair Zakovitch, “*And You Shall Tell Your Son*”: *The Concept of the Exodus in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991) 87–97.

While God's role in the story of Joash's birth and coronation in 2 Kings 11 par. 2 Chr 22:10–24:1a may seem muted, the prominence of the *boy who lived* motif subtly witnesses to a theology of divine providence. The sudden and violent end of the Omride dynasty in 2 Kings 9–10 leads to a reshuffling of power both in the North and the South. King Ahaziah of Judah (a descendant of both David and Omri) is killed in Jehu's rebellion (2 Kings 9:27–29). In response, his mother, Athaliah, attempts to massacre all of her grandchildren in a bid to seize the throne. As in the Moses narrative, a boy, Joash, survives through the heroic action of a handful of female saviors.¹¹ After a period of exile, Joash returns to his people triumphantly (2 Kings 11:4; cf. Exod 4:27–31). A “testimony” (*'edut*) is placed in the hands of the newly anointed child king, suggesting, among other things, that this Davidic leader represents a new start for Judah—an opportunity for a king once again to “do what is right in the eyes of the LORD all his days” under the direction of a faithful priest, Jehoiada (2 Chr 24:1–2).

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A similar story of succession intrigue can be found in Jotham, son of Gideon/Jerubbaal. While not a particularly famous savior, the boy Jotham survives the massacre of his siblings by Abimelech (Judg 9:5) and utters the curse that eventually topples the would-be ruler's power grab (Judg 9:20). Once again, a woman provides deliverance, this time through the fortuitous heaving of a millstone (Judg 9:53).

In these narratives, the motif functions as a sign indicating that though these events may seem chaotic, God is still present. In the very last verse of the Jotham story, God insures that Jotham's curse is carried out justly (Judg 9:57). Likewise, after Athaliah's defeat, the subsequent repairs to the temple (2 Kings 12:1–16 and 2 Chr 24:1–14) confirm that God's purposes can be accomplished through human agents; that, in fact, their success against overwhelming and deadly odds is a sign of God's continued provision.

The stories of the next two *boys who lived* more clearly mirror the story of Moses, but their respective allegiances are far more dubious. First, Hadad's narrow escape to Egypt in his youth clearly evokes Moses' escape from genocide:

Then the LORD raised up an adversary against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite; he was of the royal house in Edom. For when David was in Edom, and Joab the commander of the army went up to bury the dead, he killed every male in Edom (for Joab and all Israel remained there six months, until he had eliminated every male in Edom); but Hadad fled to Egypt with some Edomites who were servants of his father. He was a young boy at that time. (1 Kings 11:14–17 NRSV)

¹¹His father's sister, Jehosheba, “took” (*tiqqah*) Joash (cf. Exod 2:3) from the other children who are about to be killed (2 Kings 11:2) together with his nurse. They go on to “hide him” (*tastirehu*) (cf. Exod 2:2) from his grandmother until he is seven years old (cf. 2 Chr 22:11).

The story goes on to explain how Hadad receives a home and an allowance of food from Pharaoh. The boy grows up in Egypt's royal court, "finding favor" with Pharaoh and marrying into his family (1 Kings 11:19–20). When he learns that David has died, Hadad seeks to return to his own country. As in Exodus, Pharaoh initially refuses. The narrative of Hadad then drops off suddenly, but the motif does not end there.

A short pericope from 1 Kings preserved only in the Old Greek elaborates on the motif in the very similar flight story to Egypt in the biography of Jeroboam, the first king of the northern tribes (OG 3 Rgn 12:24^{c-e} par. 1 Kings 11:21–22; cf. 1 Kings 11:40). As some commentators have noted, this textual fragment could be additional evidence that at some point in the tradition, Jeroboam was conceived of as a second Moses. Even without the evidence from the OG, the parallels are unmistakable. As Yair Zakovitch explains, "Like Moses, who became the leader of the Israelite slaves in Egypt, so Jeroboam was the leader of the northern slaves who were enslaved to Solomon."¹² Rare verbal cues and conspicuous constructions lead to this conclusion. For example, the Israelites are subjected to "forced labor" (*sebel*) in 1 Kings 11:28 in the construction of Solomon's "storage cities" (*'arey hamiskenot*) (1 Kings 9:19; cf. Exod 1:11). Both savior figures are forced to flee because the ruler seeks to kill them, Moses *from* Egypt, Jeroboam *to* Egypt (Exod 2:15; 1 Kings 11:40). Both return after that ruler dies (Exod 4:19; 1 Kings 12:2) and make a request of the new king on behalf of their people (Exod 5:1; 1 Kings 12:4), with the result that the people's labor is harshened (Exod 5:7; 1 Kings 12:13–14). For these reasons, some commentators have suggested that the Mosaic birth story was reassigned to Hadad by Judean archivists seeking to further discredit Jeroboam.¹³

How then are Hadad/Jeroboam to be understood in light of the motif? Regardless of how Jeroboam may have been portrayed in the history of tradition, he now appears in the narrative of Kings as a colossal failure. Though he is promised a chance at becoming a king like David (1 Kings 11:37–38), he leads the new nation into apostasy when he erects golden calves in Bethel and Dan and proclaims blasphemously, "Here, oh Israel, are the gods who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:28). This final of the mosaic parallels (cf. Exod 32) confirms how the *boy who lived* motif has been transformed. God's presence is not dependent on the success of earthly political powers, even when they are inaugurated with a miraculous sign.

THE MOTIF IN EARLY JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION

It was in the Second Temple period that canonical interests began separating out the key texts known today as the Hebrew Bible. However, the firming up of canonical borders did not slow the proliferation of the *boy who lived* motif. Rather,

¹²Zakovitch, "And You Shall Tell Your Son," 87.

¹³See the edition published by Z. Talshir, *The Duplicate Story of the Division of the Kingdom (LXX 3 Kingdoms XII 24a–z)* (Jerusalem: Simon, 1989) 129–134 (Hebrew).

the motif reoccurs in the forms of rewritten Bible stories, apocalyptic literature, and later *midrash*.

As in the David story shared above, Noah eventually received his own *boy who lived* legend, which survives most completely in the pseudepigraphic *1 Enoch* 106–108. A different version was also discovered at Qumran in the fragmentary rewritten Bible scroll *Genesis Apocryphon* in columns ii–vi. Both compositions likely originated in the third to first centuries BCE.¹⁴ As narrated in these expansionist accounts, when Noah is born, his father, Lamech, is suspicious due to the boy's appearance:

[Noah's] body was white as snow and red as a rose; the hair of his head as white as wool and his *dedema* beautiful; and as for his eyes, when he opened them the whole house glowed like the sun—(rather) the whole house glowed even more exceedingly. (*1 Enoch* 106:2)¹⁵

He is concerned that the child's true father may actually be one of the beings described in Gen 6:1–4 who descend from heaven to mate with the daughters of men (so-called "fallen angels"). However, exceptional appearance at birth was a somewhat prevalent trait among extraordinary children in later Jewish tradition. Philo, for example, notes that it was Moses' beautiful and noble form that convinced his parents to save him.¹⁶ In the much later collection of *midrashic* commentary called *Exodus Rabbah*, luminosity specifically is included at Moses' birth: "At the time that Moses was born, the whole house was filled with light."¹⁷ The Rabbis also connect Moses' birth to the creation of light. Exodus 2:2b reads "and [Moses' mother] saw him that he was 'good' (*tob*)."¹⁸ On this final word "good" the rabbis hear echoes of creation in Gen 1:4a, "God saw the light, that it was good."¹⁸ We are reminded of the light imagery that surrounds Jesus' birth, including the astral event in Matthew (Matt 2:2, 7, 10) and Simeon's song in Luke, which states that Jesus would be a "light of revelation to the nations" (Luke 2:32; cf. Isa 49:6).

Thus, this potentially dangerous aspect of Noah's birth allows the story to make the theological import of *the boy who lived motif* explicit in the form of a prophecy. Lamech takes his concern to Methuselah, his father, who then inquires of Enoch, his father. The old prophet confirms the legitimacy of Noah and tells of a vision of the upcoming flood, prophesying that, "the son who has been born is in-

¹⁴On relative dating, see Loren T. Stuckenbruck, "The Lamech Narrative in the *Genesis Apocryphon* (1Qap Gen) and *1 Enoch* 106–107: A Tradition-Historical Study of Two Ancient Accounts about Noah's Birth," in *The Myth of Rebellious Angels: Studies in Second Temple Judaism and New Testament Texts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014) 58–77, 207.

¹⁵Translations of *1 Enoch* from Ephraim Isaac, "Pseudo-Philo," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, ed. James H. Charlesworth (1981; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009) 86.

¹⁶Philo, *On the Life of Moses*, 1.III.9.

¹⁷*Exodus Rabbah*, I.20, cf. I.22.

¹⁸Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno, *Commentary on the Torah*. In his commentary on Exod 2:2, the medieval Rabbi Sforno connects the same word instead to the legend of fallen angels referenced above, "The sons of God saw that the daughters of men were 'good/beautiful' (*tobot*)" (Gen 6:2a). For Sforno, this connection is taken as evidence of Moses' perfection of form, whereas for Lamech, Noah's "goodness" at birth is a cause for concern.

deed righteous” (cf. Gen 6:9); “for he shall be the remnant for you” (1 Enoch 106:18; cf. Gen 5:29). In this, the *boy who lives* eventually becomes *the boy who saves*.

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This last aspect of the motif is heightened in the New Testament. Matthew’s Gospel, in particular, eagerly embraces it in Jesus’ escape from infanticide.¹⁹ In part, Matthew wishes to address the question of Jesus’ legitimacy, a concern that was likely raised during his ministry (cf. Matt 12:24–27 and parallels).²⁰ Later in the Gospel, God works in and through Jesus in more direct ways (most spectacularly in the resurrection). In the birth narrative (Matt 1:18–2:23), however, God works in ways we are familiar with from the *the boy who lived* stories discussed above: through prophetic visions, uncanny coincidences, and human defiance of authority. In some sense, for Matthew, it is necessary that Jesus must undergo the trials of Moses in order that he might also save Israel.

In Rev 12, we see the motif transformed again, this time mythologized in the story of a newborn who escapes from a dragon. The apocalyptic text makes explicit what was originally implicit: these events are meant to be taken as a “sign” (*semeion*, Rev 12:1). The woman likely symbolized Israel originally (cf. Isa 26:17–18), but in the course of Christian tradition, she came to be interpreted as the church²¹ and eventually as the Virgin Mary. In each case, she embodies the story of God’s people. First, she escapes to the wilderness (Rev 12:6), then she is given wings (Rev 12:14; cf. Exod 19:4), and rescued by means of the earth swallowing up her watery enemy (Rev 12:16; cf. Exod 15:12). In this way, *the boy who lived* motif becomes not just an origin story of the defeat of a tyrant in the hoary past but an inaugurated promise that the birth of a child will defeat primeval evil once and for all in the eschatological future.

THE MOTIF IN CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

In what ways does *the boy who lived* motif persist today? Arguably, the Christian sacrament of baptism is one echo—particularly in traditions that practice infant baptism. The sacrament’s complex web of symbolism (among them death,

¹⁹The parallels between Matthew’s birth narrative and Exod 1–2 have been well documented. See, for example, Dale C. Allison Jr, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

²⁰It is possible that, echoing Lamech’s concern, some were suspicious that Jesus’ miraculous birth was, in fact, demonic. See Stuckenbruck, “Conflict Stories: The Spirit Origin of Jesus’ Birth,” in *The Myth of Rebellious Angels*.

²¹Hippolytus of Rome, *Treatise of Christ and Antichrist*, 61.

new birth, salvation, and water) combined with the witnessing presence of family, sponsors, and community could be seen as an embodiment of the motif in ritual form. The newly baptized are no longer viewers but performers in the same salvation story that spared the infants Moses and Jesus when all seemed lost. However, the remainder of the drama will be neither predictable nor easy. Jeroboam's subplot as the failed "New Moses" is a testimony to this: while miraculous survival (through baptism or otherwise) is extraordinary, it is not the climax of the narrative. The Apostle Paul knew this when he explained that the calling of the *boy (or girl) who lives* in baptism is not only to new life but also to self-sacrifice (Rom 6). Christian ministers are tasked with challenging those they lead to embody both the extraordinary victory and the common service that their baptism has inaugurated—usually at times when one emphasis feels more dominant than the other. Only then can the full transformation of the motif over the course of biblical tradition be realized: *The boy who lives* and often saves, eventually becomes the son who suffers and often dies.²² ⊕



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²²Cf. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).