

The common substrate to the narratives of Jacob and Moses

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1 Purpose

Identifying when similar things differ and how different things are similar is necessary for navigating life. The bible is a whetstone for sharpening this skill. In scripture we often encounter stories that strike familiar notes with others. It is good practice to examine similarities, identify differences, and seek to understand what is being communicated.

This paper examines the long trajectories in the narratives of Jacob and Moses. It identifies a number of similarities and peculiar details, that are brought out in similar order.

The narratives of Jacob and Moses are recounted in a manner that evoke associations with each other. The numerous ordered points of correspondence implies design, that the author intended for the similarities and differences between their stories to be compared and that there are lessons to be learned from the exercise. The paper concludes by offering what some of these lessons might be.

2 Contours

The lives of Jacob and Moses are metered by movements. Each story's broad strokes are similar, while details often contrasts. The material in their stories is organized under five stages or shared movements: birth, exile, return, exodus, and death.

I generically refer to Jacob and Moses as 'heros', not because of valor, but because they are the dominant character of their stories where they overcome challenges.

2.1 Birth

Jacob's birth narrative describes him passing through the birth canal while holding his brother's heel. Jacob's name means *heel*. Moses was given his name because he was drawn from the Nile waters. His name means *drawn*. Both names are derived from movements through waters.

Both Jacob and Moses have brothers who lead another nation. Jacob is the father of Israel, while his brother Esau is the father of the neighboring Edomites. After Moses

was born, he was raised in the home of Pharaoh. The relationship between him and the Pharaoh in the book of Exodus would likely have been essentially brothers. This explains Moses' easy access to Pharaoh's courts.

Both narratives include a scene where the hero's mom uses deception. Rebecca schemes to deceive Jacob's father Isaac to procure the family blessing for Jacob over Esau. She provides a covering of goat's skin to hide Jacob's smooth skin. Hebrew male babies were to be drowned in the Nile (Ex 1:16). Jochebed covers Moses in an ark, Pharaoh's daughter finds and adopts Moses. Jochebed then gets paid for the service of nursing her newborn son Moses.

	Detail	Jacob	Moses
1	Birth	Jacob's name derives from him holding his brother's <i>heel</i> as he passes through birth waters.	Moses' name recalls him being <i>drawn</i> from the Nile waters in his ark.
2	Brother	Brother Esau is father of Edomites	Pharaoh (from same house) rules Egypt
3	Mom's deception	Rebecca connive's for Jacob's blessing	mom delivers Moses from death, paid to nurse

2.2 Exile

Both Jacob (Genesis 27:41) and Moses (Exodus 2:15) flee their native land from a brother who expresses the intention of killing them.

As each crosses into a foreign land they come to a well where a sister or sisters seek to draw water. Robert Alter in his book the *Art of Biblical Literature* identifies these two episodes as being instances of the *Woman at a Well* type-scene. I count these episodes and the collection of similar details as a single corresponding event. Features from the type-scene included in our two stories: A hero arrives from a foreign land, he meets a woman, an obstacle is overcome, the flock is watered, they go to her home, a meal is had, a marriage is negotiated, births follow.

Each hero has an epiphany while outside of Haran and Midian. Jacob has a dream encounter with God. Jacob dreams of angels moving between heaven and earth on ladders. God identifies himself as the God of his fathers. He characterizes the land. It is the land that God will give to Jacob's offspring. Jacob awakes and identifies the land as holy and sets up a pillar and places oil on top of it. He will repeat this when he comes back into the land. Moses encounters God at a burning bush in the wilderness. God identifies himself as the God of his fathers immediately after God identifies the land he is upon as holy. He will return to Sinai

Jacob experiences his epiphany then the *woman at the well* scene. For Moses this order is reversed.

The same course of events is described in Genesis 24 when Rebecca is wed to Isaac.

The book of Ruth is a variation on this type-scene and Jesus' meeting of the Samaritan woman at the well is also. Some features of this type-scene are only found in Jacob's and Moses' instances. I bundle features that are part of the type-scene, but I break out the elements of the type-scene particular to only Jacob and Moses' *Woman at a Well* instance. I identify two:

- The bride in both cases is from a group of sisters. Jacob marries both Leah and Rachel, while Moses is given Jethros' daughter Zipporah.
- Both Jacob and Moses care for the flocks of their father-in-laws.

	Detail	Jacob	Moses
4	Flee	Jacob flees to Haran from murderous brother.	Moses flees to Midian from Pharaoh.
5	Epiphany	Jacob encounters God at stairway	Moses encounters God in burning bush
6	Woman at well	At Haran well Rebecca meets Jacob	At Midian well Moses meets Zipporah
–	obstacle	removes large rock	deliver from hostile shepherds
–	father-in-law	Laban	Reuel/Jethro
7	Sister wife	Jacob negotiates for sister Rachel	Moses given sister Zipporah
8	Shepherd	Jacob shepherds for Laban.	Moses shepherds for Jethro.

2.3 Return

Both Jacob (Genesis 31:3) and Moses (Exodus 3:10,12) are charged to return home by God with the promise that God will be with them. God comes by dream to God to Jacob. He sees exploitation of Jacob by the hand of Laban and similarly he tells Moses that he sees Pharaoh's affliction of Israel. God identifies himself. Each hero responds to God's calling with *hineni* / "Here I am!"

Jacob is called by God to return home to Canaan, while Moses returns to Egypt. Jacob is being called away from slavery, while Moses' call brings him back to the land of Israel's continued enslavement.

Along the way each man is confronted by a heavenly being while being at a place of sleep. An angel of God meets Jacob at his camp on the banks of the river separating him from Canaan. The angel wrestles and even injures Jacob's hip. God meets Moses at an inn and in one of the most enigmatic bits of scripture, seeks to kill Moses. Moses is saved by Zipporah who quickly circumcises their son and appeases God.

The injury in these two scenes is memorialized by a practice of the Israelites. There is a note in Jacob's narrative that Israelites don't eat the hip sinews in memorial to this event. Similarly Israel perpetually observed the rite of male circumcision.

Upon leaving these places of nocturnal divine encounters, each man meets his brother. Each brother bears some aspect of God for the brother. Jacob sees the face of God in

Esau. Aaron becomes the spokesman for God's words for Moses.

Detail	Jacob	Moses
9 Call	God calls Jacob's name & charges Jacob to bring Israel <i>down</i> to Egypt.	God calls Moses' name & charges Moses to bring Israel <i>up</i> from Egypt.
– <i>Hineni</i>	Jacob responds "Here I am."	Moses responds "Here I am."
– Message	"I've seen what Laban is doing"	"I have seen the affliction"
– Identity	"I am the God of Bethel."	"I am the God of your father.."
10 Enslavement	Jacob <i>delivered</i> from enslaving Laban	Moses is <i>sent</i> to enslaving Pharaoh.
11 Nocturnal meeting	Angel confronts Jacob while sleeping before entering Canaan.	God confronts Moses at Inn before entering Egypt.
12 Struggle	Angel (God) Wrestles Jacob	God seeks to kill Moses.
13 Injury	Dislocates Jacob's hip	Zipporah circumcises son.
14 Legacy	Israel does not eat hip socket sinew.	Israel circumcises sons.
15 Brother	Esau meets Jacob after crossing into Canaan	Aaron meet Moses after crossing into Egypt
16 Divine aspect	Brother Esau has face of God.	Brother Aaron has words of God.

2.4 Exodus

After returning to their native land, the narratives of both Jacob and Moses contain a captive-bride story. In these type-scenes an Israelite woman is held captive by a gentile ruler. The bride has a custodian who is usually a relative or her husband. The custodian for the bride is evaluated by his response to the captivity on a passive/active continuum in liberating the woman. In many of the instances, there is a brother-sister relationship (Gen 3, 12, 34, 2Sam 13) or a deceptive claim of a sibling relationship (Gen 26) in view. As with other biblical type-scenes, each instance rarely incorporates all distinguishing features of the set story. Often details and roles are reversed.

The first instance of this scene is the garden narrative. (Adam and Eve are sort-of siblings, Adam is passive, woman is captive to serpent) Further instances include Sarai in Pharaoh's court in Genesis 12, Sarah in Abimelech's court in Genesis 20, Rebecca with Abimelech in Gen 26, and Joseph with Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39. The books of Esther is a longer variation with nearly every signature element reversed or inverted.

Dinah is violated then taken by the son of a local ruler. Jacob is passive. His two sons Levi and Simeon take action, slaughtering the males in the ruler's house after some deception, which puts Jacob on the run once again. Compared to the corresponding Exodus account in Moses with the plagues and sea crossing, Jacob's captive-bride instance is compressed.

Israel is fashioned as the bride of Yahweh (Exodus 24:7-8, Isaiah 54:5-8, Jeremiah 31:31-

34). The law delivered at Sinai are the vows. But first God must deliver Israel from her captive Egypt. Moses is active. He confronts Pharaoh eight times. Pharaoh's heart hardens after each plague reduces his kingdom. The passover and subsequent crossing of the divided sea is God's deliverance of his bride.

Notice that ironically, Dinah is delivered through circumcision. The Hamorites become incapacitated due to recent circumcision. Israel is delivered by a baptism, again ironically, the Egyptians are drowned in the waters.

After their respective liberations, Israel as a family and as a nation commits itself to Yahweh. Jacob's family committed itself to Yahweh after liberating Dinah (Genesis 35:2). Israel committed itself to Yahweh (Exodus 19:8) upon arriving at Sinai.

After the exodus Jacob and Moses meet God. God appeared to Jacob (Gen 35:9). Moses ascended Mt Sinai and met with God. (Exodus 19 and 24) Each built a place of worship. Jacob builds a pillar and sacrifices oil and drink offerings upon it (Genesis 35:14). Moses returned from the mountain with detailed tabernacle plans.

Detail	Jacob	Moses
17 Captive-bride	Dinah is captive to the son of Hamor	Israel is captive to Egypt
18 Rite	Shechemites die from circumcision	Egyptian die in baptism.
19 Worship	Jacob builds altar at Beth El	Moses ascends mountain to meet God
20 Purge idols	Israel buries idols under Oak	Gold calves burned and ground
21 Talk	God talks to Jacob after leaving Haran	God talks to Moses face-to-face
22 Names	Jacob renamed Israel by God.	God knows Moses by name.
23 Erect	Jacob sets up a pillar, offers oil and drink	Moses erects tabernacle, Yahweh's presence enters.

2.5 Death

After Jacob and Moses create cultic sites to Yahweh both stories enter a different phase that describes their final days. Jacob steps-off center stage and his sons, particularly Joseph, take primary roles. The narrative of Moses' life moves from the pages of Exodus to that of Numbers. Their narratives both contain a third major migration.

The land of Canaan suffers from a prolonged famine. Jacob sends ten of his sons to Egypt to secure food. An unrecognized Joseph accuses his brothers of being spies. As Israel nears the end of its wilderness wanderings, Moses sends a representative of each tribe to Canaan to spy the land. Both groups of spies return with riches. A dispute about returning to the lands of plenty arises after the spies return to report their findings. In each case two from the number of spies advocates for returning. Reuben and Judah each pleas with Jacob to return to Egypt to get more food, which they can only do if Benjamin goes with them. Caleb and Joshua plead with the other spies and the people who fear the

land's inhabitants and refuse to take their inheritance.

As the death of Jacob approaches he blesses each of his sons. As the death of Moses approaches he blesses each of the tribes descended from Jacob's sons (Deuteronomy 32) except Simeon. Some suggest Simeon's exclusion springs from the anti-blessing of Jacob in Genesis 49:5-7.

Jacob dies in Egypt at 130yrs of age. Moses dies outside of Canaan at 120yrs. Genesis details that Jacob's eyes were heavy (Gen 48:10), Deuteronomy details that Moses' eyes were 'undimmed and his vigor unabated.' (ESV Deut 34:7). These seem to be mixed reports. Isaac's eyes dimmed as his judgement became increasingly clouded by his love for meat. But Jacob completed his final migration and died in the presence of his family. Moses died while strong, his resolve appears firm. But he dies outside of the land due to his rebellion at the waters of Meribah in Numbers 20.

Detail	Jacob	Moses
24 Spies	Jacob sends sons to Egypt who are accused of being spies.	Moses sends one spy per tribe to Canaan.
25 Blessings	Jacob blesses sons in turn	Moses blesses tribes, no Simeon
26 Death	Feeble Jacob dies in Egypt	Strong Moses dies outside of land.
– Eyes	Jacob's eyes are heavy	Moses' eyes were undimmed
27 Bury	Jacob buried in Abraham's tomb	Moses' grave place is unknown

2.6 Shared details not in sequence

Four old testament characters in scripture are addressed by God with a name doubling, the two subjects of this study along with Abraham (Genesis 22:11) and Samuel (1Sam 3:10). God calls Jacob by doubling his name towards the end of his life (Genesis 46:2), but God calls Moses with the double name while he is shepherding Jethro's sheep when he is a relatively young man. In both of these two cases, God identifies himself as the god of their fathers then charges them to go to Egypt and promises to accompany them.

Both Jacob and Moses have a significant water crossing that separates the land of their exile and their freedom. Jacob must cross the Jabbok river, while Moses crosses the red sea. Jacob's water crossing happens before the captive-bride scene of Genesis 34, while Moses crossing the Red Sea is the final element of the captive-bride scene in his story.

Both have encounters with God that bookend their migrations. Jacob meets God at the scene with the ladder to heaven in Genesis 28 and then again when he makes the pillar in Genesis 35. Moses meets God at the burning bush, then again on Mt Sinai in Exodus 19.

3 Summary

The total number of identified corresponding details here in the narratives of Jacob and Moses is 27, some mundane, some peculiar, presented in nearly identical order. There is room to argue for more, there is also room for objections, but I believe the weight of the evidence presented suggests that the presentation of these two stories is similar by design. We are left to speculate about what the design communicates. Here I speculate.

Both Jacob and Moses are fathers of Israel. Jacob is the natural father, while Moses is a national father. The house of Jacob is organized by sons while the nation of Israel is organized by tribes descended from those sons.

The lives of Jacob and Moses are both defined by migrations. Or perhaps we should see the major demarcations of their narratives defined by boundaries. Each patriarch's life included a number of obstacles, each migration included something that needed to be overcome. Even their births are presented as baptisms, a passing through hostile waters. They pass through waters where contention and division exists.

It is noteworthy that Jacob's last migration leads to the land that will enslave the nascent nation that follows Moses. Moses dies outside of the promised land in Moab, failing to reach the destination of his final migration. Jacob achieves the goal of the final migration but it is outside the land promised to Abraham. Each ends in the wrong place. These two *adams* return to the wrong *adamah*.

The correspondences highlight the differences. The migrations of Jacob and Moses move in opposite directions. Jacob starts in Canaan, then into exile, back into Canaan and finally into Egypt. Moses beings in Egypt, then into exile, back to Egypt and then dies at the threshold to Canaan. The book of Joshua completes the full circuit back to the land promised to Abraham that starts when the man Jacob/Israel leaves until when the nation Israel takes the land.

The accounts of these patriarchs describes two flawed individuals used by God to create a nation that was set apart. Both narratives show God faithfully delivering them, but each story arc is incomplete. Each arc must wait to be completed by another. They both die close to, but outside the land. They both stoke a hunger for a true deliverer to take them into the promised land. Just as there is a repetition, with Jacob and Moses each creating partial incompletions, Joshua and David match with partial completions. Joshua brings them into the land, but we must wait until David for Israel's enemies to be driven out. With David we have a completed unified kingdom, but it is the house of David, which is partially complete kingdom of God.

Table 1: Narrative parallels

	shared element	ref	Jacob father of family	ref	Moses father of nation
⊙	Birth narrative		in Canaan		in Egypt
	name story	G25:26	heal grabber	E2:10	drawn from waters
	two nations	G25:30	Edom & Israel	E2:5	Egypt&Israel
	mom's deception	G27	Steal blessing	E2:3,9	Slave mother becomes paid nurse
⇐	Exile		to Haran from Esau		to Midian from Pharaoh
	seeks to kill	G27:42	Esau plans to kill Jacob	E2:15	Pharaoh seeks to kill Moses
	destination	G28:2	to Paddan Aram/Haran	E2:15	to Midian
	epiphany	G28:11-22	Stairway	E3	Burning bush
	woman at well	G29:2	meets Rachel	E2:16	meets daughters of Reuel
	marriage	G29:23	Leah then Rachel	E2:21	Zipporah
	births	G29,30	twelve sons	E2:24	Gershom
	tends flocks	G31:8	Laban's goats	E3:1	Jethro's flocks
⇒	Return		to Canaan		to Egypt
	God speaks	G31:11	in dream	E3:4	from burning bush
	Response	G31:11	Here I am!	E3:4	Here I am!
	God sees	G31:12	I've seen all Laban is doing	E3:7	I have seen the affliction
	God identifies	G31:13	I am the God of Bethel...	E3:6	I am the God of your father...
	Hostile meet	G32:25	God wrestles Jacob	E4:24	God seeks to kill Moses
	kiss brother	G33:4	Esau at Peniel	E4:27	Aaron at Mountain of God
	proxy	G33:10	Face of God in Esau	E4:30	Words of God in Aaron
⇐	Exodus		To Canaan		To wilderness
	Captive bride	G34	Dinah from Hamor	E5-14	Hebrews from Egypt
	Altar	G35:1	built at Beth El	E27	instructions on Sinai
	Talk	G:35:10-12	Give land	E33:11	talks face-to-face
	Purge idols	G35:4	buried under tree	E32:20	idols burned & ground
	Names	G35:9	God renames Jacob to Israel	E33:17	God knows Moses by name
	Erect	G35:14	Jacob sets up pillar	E40	Moses sets up tabernacle
⊕	Ending		To Egypt		Moab near Canaan
	Sends before	G42	sons (spies 42:9) to Egypt	N13	a spy per tribe to Canaan
	Blessings	G49	blesses sons	D33	blesses tribes
	Death	G49:33	in Egypt at 130yrs old	N21, D34:5	in Moab at 120yrs old
	Burial	G50:13	Canaan in cave at Machpelah	D34:6	in Moab, unknown