

HOW PLUTARCH GAINED HIS PLACE IN THE TOSEFTA

Some Rabbis knew popular Greek literature as well as their Homer.¹ Some also knew about the death through entombment of the Egyptian and Hellenistic deity Osiris.² Meanwhile, we must be careful not to confuse the few Greco-Roman texts preserved today with the plethora of written and oral traditions that once were circulating – unless the evidence suggests it. I shall argue here that the retellings of Moses' discovery of Yosef's bones in Exodus in light of the Osiris myth found in the Tosefta and in the Samaritan text *Tevat Marqe* (further TM)³ is based on a source that reads a passage in the *Moralia* (356 A 9-358 B 8) of Plutarch (ca. 40-ca. 120 CE). Later rabbinic variants of the myth do not show familiarity with this text.⁴

In Gen. 50:26, Yosef receives an oath from the Israelites to take his (embalmed) remains with them upon leaving Egypt. This oath is recalled when Moses takes the bones during the Exodus (Ex. 13:19). The laconic

¹ My sincere gratitude to Rachel Neis for her invaluable suggestions and corrections, and to Menahem Kister who twice encouraged me to pursue this study. All translations in this paper are my own.

Cf. the work of S. Lieberman, D. Daube and H. Fischel. Cf. also J. Levinson, 'Bodies and Bo(a)rders: Emerging Fictions of Identity in Late Antiquity', *HTR* 93.4 (2000) 343-372 and, 'The Tragedy of Romance: A Case of Literary Exile', *HTR* 89 (1996) 227-244; and B. Jackson, 'On the problem of Roman influence on the halakah and normative self-definition in Judaism', in E.P. Sanders, ed., *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 2, London 1981, 157-203.

² Cf. M. Guedemann, *Religionsgeschichtliche Studien*, Leipzig 1876, 26-40; B. Heller, 'Die Sage vom Sarge Yosefs und der Bericht Benjamins von Tudela ueber Daniels schwebenden Sarg', *MGWJ* 7/8 (1926) 271-276; S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, New York 1950, 136ff.; idem, *Tosefta Kifshuta*, New York 1955, VIII, 647-651; G. Mussies, *The Interpretatio Judaica of Serapis*, Leiden 1979, 189-214. While initially Guedemann and later Mussies draw our attention to Plutarch, Guedemann disregarded the Tosefta material, while Mussies's broad study relies on Ginzberg, Billerbeck and Kittel for the rabbinic sources.

³ For further bibliography on this understudied text, cf. A.D. Crown, R. Pummer and A. Tal, eds, *A Companion to Samaritan Studies*, Tübingen 1993, 235f. and Z. Ben Hayyim's introduction in *Tibat Marqe, A Collection of Samaritan Midrashim*, Jerusalem 1988. Based on the language, the pertinent portion of the text that covers the Exodus has been dated by Ben Hayyim to roughly the same time as the Palestinian Talmud (Cf. *ibid.*, p. v and 15-26). Marqua collected materials from earlier times, he himself lived in the third to fourth centuries, thus more or less contemporary to the time of the Tosefta and the Mekhilta.

⁴ For a list of parallels cf. Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshuta*, *ad loc.*

biblical language is embellished in several rabbinic re-imaginings of the incident. Tosefta Sota 4.7, together with its close parallel in the roughly contemporary *petichta* of Mekhilta Beshallah,⁵ is the oldest rabbinic version. The passage under discussion and its larger context are structured almost exactly alike in Tosefta and Mekhilta. Nothing suggests that one text depends on the other; rather, they are probably based on a common source. Since both are written in mishnaic Hebrew and display similar sentence structures while their respective wording is congruent only rarely, I propose a Semitic, most likely an Aramaic source.⁶ I will focus on the following version of the Tosefta from the Venice Manuscript.⁷

Whence did Moses know where Yosef was buried?
They said Serah Bat Asher was in that generation⁸
And she went and told to Moses: 'In the river Nile Yosef is buried'
Since Egypt made him spits of metal (שפודין של מתכת) and joined
them with tin (והברום בבעץ)⁹
And Moses went and stood at the river Nile and said:
'Yosef, Yosef, the hour has come that the Holy One, Blessed be He,
delivers Israel,
For the *Shekhinah* is waiting for you and Israel is waiting for you
And the Clouds of Honour are waiting (מעוכבין) for you,
If you reveal yourself – good, and if not – we have fulfilled the oath
that you made our fathers swear'
The coffin of Yosef floated (צף) and Moses took it and went with it.

The story is preceded by praise of Moses, and followed by an *a minoris ad majus* comparison with the iron ax that Elisha let float, and a second version that has Yosef buried in the kings' tombs. The two competing

⁵ Cf. I. Horowitz, *Mekhila d'Rabbi Ismael*, Frankfurt am Main 1931 (reprint Jerusalem 1997) 78.

⁶ Both texts contain small expansions *vis-à-vis* each. These expansions, however, can all be traced to inner parallelisms and repetitions.

⁷ In S. Lieberman, *Tosefta al pi Ktav Yad Vina*, New York 1955, 171f.

⁸ She had lived from the time of Yosef to the time of Moses. The role of Serah Bat Asher has been treated in depth by J. Heineman, *Aggadot ve-Toldotehen*, Jerusalem 1974, 49-219.

⁹ The Mekhilta (*ibid.*) explicates what follows from the context in the Tosefta: Egypt made him a metal chest and drowned it in the Nile (עשו לו מצרים ארון של מתכת ושקעוהו בתוך).
(גילוס).

versions are a clear indication that the Tosefta processed material from different sources. Both locations of burial, the royal tombs and the Nile, indeed are no innovations. Kugel proposes that the motifs of the tombs of the kings might have been inspired earlier Greek literature such as the Testament of Simon.¹⁰ The Nile is the very essence of the Egyptian deity Osiris. Accordingly, it has been argued that the many coincidental affinities between Yosef and Osiris might have played a role in the adaptation of the Osiris material to the rabbinic retelling of Exodus. The long list includes their respective affiliation with the royals of Egypt, their association with water and the bull, their respective innocence in the face of charges of adultery, their deception by brothers, and their association with water and agriculture.¹¹ Mussies has shown that Melito of Sardis similarly connected the two characters in the late second century.¹² Furthermore, Tertullian euhemeristically claimed that Serapis ‘was formerly called Yosef’ and was deified by the Egyptians.¹³ The Egyptians’ deification of Moses is reported explicitly in the story of Artapanus.¹⁴ The Tosefta’s source might refer to similar traditions.

An analysis of Plutarch’s narrative of Osiris’ death at the hands of Typhon (the sequel of which follows below) illuminates how the Tosefta, too, nurtured this proximity between Yosef and Osiris.¹⁵ Typhon conspires against his brother and sister Isis and Osiris who are the parents of

¹⁰ J.L. Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House. The Interpretative Live of Biblical Texts*, New York 1990, 141ff.

¹¹ Cf. Guedemann, ‘Religionsgeschichtliche Studien’, 39f and Mussies, ‘The Interpretatio Judaica of Serapis’, 200-205 for a detailed examination of such parallels. They probably are partly caused by the Egyptian setting of both stories. Concerning the difficulty of speculations about the original relationship between the biblical Yosef cycle, the Exodus, and ancient Egypt, cf. the recent publications of J. Assmann and the criticism they have received. Cf. also I. Paredes, *Counter traditions in the Bible: a Feminist Approach*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1992, who argues that Zippora is modeled on Isis; and the work of Rivka Ulmer (Brigitte Kern).

¹² Cf. Mussies, ‘The Interpretatio Judaica of Serapis’, 193f. The text is preserved only in late Syriac translations, cf. W. Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum*, London 1855, 43f.

¹³ Apology II.8, dated to 197 CE. Cf. Mussies, ‘The Interpretatio Judaica of Serapis’, 194. Cf. also bAvZar 43a.

¹⁴ Cf. Eusebius, *Preparatio Evangelica* IX, 27. Cf. also J.J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem. Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, Grand Rapids 2000, 39-43 and E. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: the Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*, Berkeley 1998 and *Diaspora: Jews among Greeks and Romans*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2002.

¹⁵ Greek cited from W. Sieveking, *Plutarchi Moralia*, vol. 2.3., Leipzig 1935 (repr. 1971), 17.

Horus. Plotting Osiris' death he designs a beautiful chest that fits Osiris perfectly. Jestingly, he makes Osiris step in it. His conspirators shut the lid, fastening it with external bolts (γόμφοις)¹⁶ and using molten lead (θερμὸν μόλιβδον). They then carry the chest to the river (ἐπὶ τὸν ποταμὸν ἐξενεγκεῖν). Yosef's coffin in the Tosefta seems to have been similarly built: Egypt (or: the Egyptians) made him some kind of spits and closed the lid with hot metal. Both coffins end up in the Nile. The level of accuracy suggests the Tosefta's familiarity with a text akin to Plutarch. It would make perfect sense to posit knowledge of Plutarch text in second- and third-century Palestine, since around this time the popularity of this author peaked.¹⁷ Furthermore, it should have caught the eye of at least some Jewish readers that in the sequel of the very same text (363 C-D), Plutarch reports that his anti-hero Typhon allegedly is the father of 'Hierosolymos and Youdaios'. Even though Plutarch dismisses this attempt to bring Ἰουδαϊκὰ, 'Jewish matters', into the history, it would make good sense for Jews in general, and Samaritans as the sons of Yosef in particular, to eliminate any doubt about their origin. As Schäfer has shown, the association of the Jews with Typhon was not uncommon in Greek literature, e.g., in the Egyptian anti-Jewish Exodus version of Manetho.¹⁸ To place Yosef inside the coffin and to have the Egyptians closing it affiliates their father with Osiris and the Egyptians with Typhon, an inversion of the charge. Nevertheless, the Tosefta alone is too succinct for us to be sure of what it read and we now should turn to the Samaritans.

An analysis of the TM will reveal that Plutarch's story itself may have inspired an author to adapt the *Moralia* to his version of the Exodus. The TM retells parts of the Pentateuch, stressing narrative rather than exegesis. It expands the biblical account with the following details:

1. The pillars of cloud and fire prevent the Israelites leaving Sukkot by standing opposite them. This frightens (ודחלין) Moses and Aaron and stupefies (מבלידין) the elders. They wonder what confuses (עביר סכלות)

¹⁶ According to Lidell-Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford 1996, γόμφοις can be both 'a bolt for ship building' and the 'cross-ribs of the Egyptian canoes. [In comparison with the nail] they seem to differ in size, γόμφοις being the larger one'.

¹⁷ Cf. W.W. Briggs, *Ancient Greek Authors*, Detroit-London 1997, 329, also for further bibliography.

¹⁸ P. Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes Toward the Jews in the Ancient World*, Cambridge, MA 1997, 56-61.

the congregation who cry out their distress (גזעק) to the elders to no avail.

2. Concluding that there must be a secret involved they question all the tribes (שאלו בכל שבט); Serah Bat Asher steps forward and shows them the place of Yosef's burial at Sukkot.
3. After finding it, 'Moses opened Yosef's coffin (פתח... ארונו) with his right, leaned over (גען) him, and kissed (נישק) him, and wept (ובכי). At that moment', the TM repeats, 'he wept over him', (ביתה שהעתה מבכי לה) and in a lengthy speech tells him that his spirit can now rest, and that his offspring will carry him away.¹⁹

Beginning from its climax and proceeding in reverse order, we first should examine the biblical basis of the TM, and then analyse its relationship to the Tosefta.

ad 3. The TM's depiction of Moses' caressing Yosef's corpse seems to be partly modeled on Yosef's own actions in Gen. 50:1 (on the other part, cf. below). In the biblical narrative, when Jacob died, 'Yosef threw himself on his father's face, wept over him and kissed him' (ויפל יוסף על פני אביו) (ויבך עליו וישק לו). The following similarities as well as the differences between the TM and Genesis will prove extremely important for the TM's relationship to Plutarch. Both in Genesis and in the TM, the respective actors, thus Yosef and Moses, seek physical contact with the corpse by leaning over him. Moses kisses Yosef just as Yosef kissed Jacob. Moses weeps just as Yosef wept. But unlike in Genesis, the TM's Moses does not throw himself upon Yosef, Yosef's face is not mentioned, and he weeps after kissing him, not before. And of course, there is no coffin in Genesis.

ad 2. Serah Bat Asher and Moses appear in the same function at the very same time both in the TM and the Tosefta. Based on the fact that Serah Bat Asher also figures in this story (and on the assumption that the Samaritans might not have invented traditions of their own), Lieberman claimed that the story in the TM is undoubtedly Jewish in its origins,²⁰ a claim to which I will return shortly. In any case, the TM's and the Tosefta's close relationship is most evident in this aspect.

ad 1. In the Bible, the pillars of cloud and fire are only mentioned in Ex. 13:21, after Moses took Yosef's bones and after the Israelites left

¹⁹ According to Ben Hayyim's version of Mss Quf, Ben Hayyim, *Tibat Marqe*, 98ff.

²⁰ 'ברור שאגדה זו ביסודה יהודית היא' (Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshuta*, 648).

Sukkot, but not from the point at which the Exodus began. Lieberman suggested that their deferred appearance might have indicated to ancient readers that the pillars of cloud and fire stood still to enforce the Israelites' fulfillment of their fathers' oath.²¹ The Tosefta's phrasing of Moses' summon of Yosef, explicating that 'the Clouds of Honor are waiting for you' is close to the detailed story in the TM, hinting again towards a textual connection. In order to clarify the relationship between the rabbinic and the Samaritan texts one needs to examine their respective readings of Plutarch, the third element they share besides those described so far.

The reader is now asked to set aside the TM for a moment and consider the following sequel of Plutarch's story (357 D) from the perspective of the author responsible for the material the TM adopted: a second- or third-century Near Eastern intellectual with an intimate knowledge of Genesis, a creative mind and vivid imagination, and a typical Late Antique love for Euhemerism as well as for readings that nowadays would be classified 'cross-cultural'. As Isis finds Osiris' coffin, 'she threw herself on it (περιπεσεῖν) and laments'. Soon thereafter, as Isis finds seclusion, she 'opened the chest (ἀνοῖξει τὴν λάρναικα), and put the face on the face, (τῷ προσώπῳ τὸ πρόσωπον ἐπιθεῖσαν) and kissed (or 'hugged', ἀσπάσασθαι) him and cried (δακρῦειν)'. Our author may have noticed that, just like Isis throws herself upon the coffin, Yosef throws himself on his father. Both heroes approach the deceased's face. Both kiss. Both cry. In light of these 'striking parallels' and the aforementioned affinities between Plutarch's and the Bible's hero, what would have been more natural for this author than to reread and retell the entire passage in Plutarch with an eye towards similarities between Isis' travails and the Exodus? As I will shortly show in some detail, he may have found that in Plutarch there is a Divinity aflame that hovers over a divine pillar at night resembling the biblical nocturnal pillar of fire. He would have noted a strong wind and the drying up of a stream, just like the biblical wind that clears the path through the Sea of Reeds. And he may have found the death of an Egyptian king's firstborn, similar to the tenth plague that triggers the Exodus in the Bible. These three elements together with the 'smoking

²¹ Ibidem. The *Mekhilta* sustains Lieberman's assumption by explicating in the sequel: 'ר' עקיבא אומר אין סוכות אלא ענני כבוד, 'Rabbi Akiva says: Sukkot is but the clouds of glory.' Cf. also Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 141-144.

gun’ – the fourfold similarity of the heroes’ response to the dead bodies – will have caused this individual some amazement due to the entirely different contexts in which these elements appear in Plutarch and the Exodus. His use of the opening of the coffin as the structural key to its narrative suggests that our author included at least some of the correspondences in imagery and wording when writing his text. Moreover, I will now show that he furthered these similarities by appropriating and recontextualizing other random elements of Plutarch in his retelling of the Exodus. I will comb through the Plutarch story for each detail that he may have found to be already quite similar to the Bible along with the elements adopted in his retelling.

1. In Plutarch’s story, we learn that Typhon’s deeds were told by the Pans and Satyrs. Plutarch uses this to educate his reader that therefore the sudden confusion (ταραχάς) and dismay (πτοήσεις) of a crowd are called ‘panic’.
2. Isis mourns and starts wandering around (πλανωμένην δὲ πάντη) in great stupefaction (ἀποροῦσαν), not failing to address anybody (οὐδένα παρελθεῖν ἀπροσαύδητον), even little children (παιδαγίως).
3. These tell her that the chest floated seawards and where it was stranded.
4. For this reason the Egyptians think that little children possess prophetic power (μαντικὴν δύναμιν).

The emphasis on the fear (וּדְחִילִי), stupefaction (מְבִלְיִין) and confusion (עֲבִיר סִכְלוֹת) of both Moses, Aaron and the congregation, their helpless tour inquiring of all (שְׁאַלּוּ בְּכָל) the tribes separately – all without any basis whatsoever in the Bible – seems to be modeled not only on the main character Isis’ actions (2) but even on Plutarch’s etymology of the panic of a crowd (1). Serah, the ‘child’ of Asher, is the one that reveals the secret to them (3), which might reflect the prophetic powers ascribed to children in Plutarch (4).

5. Osiris’ chest was enclosed by heather that grew around it. The king of the country cut it down and used the part that contained the chest as a pillar to support his roof. Isis started socializing with the queen and began nursing her child. At night (νύκτωρ) she burned the mortal parts of the child, turned into a swallow and flew above the pillar (κίονι) until the queen saw her baby on fire (περικαιόμενον) and cried out.

6. The goddess then revealed herself, stopped the burning of the child, and cut Osiris' chest out of the wood. Then she threw (περιπεσεῖν) herself onto the coffin and uttered a dreadful lamentation (κωκυῖσαι).
7. She placed the coffin on a boat and left together with the king's oldest son. The river sent a bracing wind (πνεῦμα τραχύτερον), whereupon the goddess, angry, dried up its waters (ἀναξηροᾶναι τὸ ῥεῖθρον).

In the context of the adaptation, the author may well have associated the biblical pillar of fire at night (ולילה בעמוד אש) in Ex. 13:21 with the fiery Goddess nocturnally hovering over the pillar that enclosed the other divinity (5). In the immediate sequel of the biblical passage retold by the TM, Ex. 14:21, 'the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind (וירשם את הים לחרבה) all night and made the sea into dry land (ברוח... עזה)'. This comes very close both in conceptualization and in terminology to the action of the goddess who encounters a strong wind and dries up the stream (7).

8. As Isis found seclusion, she 'opened the chest (ἀνοιξαὶ τὴν λάρναικα), and put the face on the face, (τῷ προσώπῳ τὸ πρόσωπον ἐπιθεῖσαν) and kissed (or 'hugged', ἀσπασασθαὶ) him and cried (δακρῦειν)'.
9. The oldest son encountered her look and died of fear.
10. Others say he fell into the sea and drowned.

In (6), as described above, Isis threw herself upon the coffin just like Yosef did in the Book of Genesis. Like him, she touches the deceased's face (8). Our author was silent about these specific elements even though it is very likely he presupposed their fusion. When describing Moses as opening Yosef's coffin he relied on Plutarch much more than on Genesis, since the setting and wording corresponds almost exactly to (8). Both Isis and Moses open the coffin, an element absent in the Bible. Moses 'leaned over' Yosef, kisses him and cries – in Plutarch's, not the biblical order.²²

²² The following table highlights the three texts' similarities:

Bible: Yosef	threw him- self			on face	wept	kissed	
Plutarch: Isis	threw herself on the coffin	lamented	opened it	put face on face	kissed him	wept	
TM: Moses			opened Yosef's coffin	leaned over him	kissed him	wept	lamented

Moses' elaborate lament might correspond to Isis' lament in (6). The death of the Egyptian king's firstborn, caused by a deity in (9), has affinities to the tenth plague in Ex. 12. Plutarch's variant of the drowning in (10) evokes the eventual drowning of the king in Ex. 13.

The conceptual and terminological similarities between Plutarch and the Bible are indeed remarkable, and all evidence hints towards our author's intention to leave most of them untouched even though he supplements them at the same time. Only in the climax is one of the initial similarities explicated, Isis' action towards the dead Osiris in his coffin that so neatly mirrors Yosef's action towards Jacob. At this point, our author transposes this similarity into the new context of Moses finding Yosef, adds the coffin and perfects it. I would suggest that he expected his audience to know Plutarch's narrative and let them enjoy completing the missing links fusing the two stories themselves. The necessary obsession with detail for such a narrative strategy is amply illustrated in the rabbinic as well as the Greek literature of his time.²³

I shall now return to the Tosefta and its relationship to the TM and to Plutarch.

The aforementioned similarities between the Samaritan and the rabbinic text in terms of exegetical setting and actions – both expound Ex. 13:19-21; in both the Clouds of Honour, Moses, and Serah fulfill exactly the same functions; both recall Yosef's oath; and both present one of the two climaxes of Plutarch's story – are suggestive of a textual interdependence. Interesting to note, however, is the Tosefta's focus on a part of Plutarch's narrative that the TM probably assumes: the corpse's placement in the coffin. This, together with the TM's later dating despite its closer proximity to Plutarch, suggest that neither the Tosefta nor the TM should be credited with the original adaptation of the Osiris story. We cannot even be sure if they were aware of the implications of their adaptation, even though I would suggest they were. Instead, we might imagine a shared source that retold the story of Yosef's bones in light of Plutarch. This source would have adapted Plutarch consciously and carefully. It contained at least the details from the Tosefta and from the TM, the retelling of Osiris' murder and of Isis' finding him. Those two scenes are interdependent and undoubtedly the climax of the Osiris myth, another hint towards a single source.

²³ Cf. the work of Graham Anderson and Shadi Bartsch.

This source might of course have been not Plutarch but a similar Osiris myth. Plutarch collected older material, and the story of Isis was popular. I think, however, that the peculiarities of Plutarch (compared with, say, the Herodotus version of the myth) suggest that his proximity to the *Tevat Marqe*/Tosefta version is so precise in emphasis, context, wording and order of events that we would be dealing with a text closely akin to Plutarch. Given Plutarch's popularity in conjunction with the aforementioned Seth/Jerusalem connection to which he refers, I would still suggest that we should stay with Plutarch or quite accurate retellings of his version as the most probable hypothetical source.

If this be the case, we can even date the adapted story between some time after the publication of Plutarch's account and some time before the Tosefta's redaction, I would thus propose ca. 150 to ca. 250 CE. There is no reason to follow Lieberman's assumption that the Samaritan narrative is based on a Jewish one rather than *vice versa*. I have proposed Aramaic as the most probable language of the shared source, and chances are that the story was composed in one of the two cultures that preserved it and would have most interest in telling it. Since the extant Jewish works of the period are written in Hebrew rather than in Aramaic, I would opt for a Samaritan rather than a Jewish origin. Most importantly we can reconstruct some of our author's motivations in recasting Yosef in Osiris' image. The figures' similarities might have played a role. In a Euhemeristic manner, perhaps maybe influenced by the Church Fathers or by texts like Artapanus, he would have identified Yosef with Osiris. He might even have thought that Plutarch really spoke about a Yosef deified by the Egyptians. The greatness of this Egyptian hero and god would have resonated in the ears of a reader who understood the literary references. Furthermore, the association with Osiris would have retaliated for hateful associations of the Jews with Typhon. By adopting Osiris to Yosef, he also managed to 'domesticate' the Egyptian myth into a monotheistic, scripture-based narrative. Most importantly, when retelling the Exodus, the similarities between the Bible and Plutarch would have become obvious to him and compelled him to integrate them in his own work.

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