

## What Did the Lord Mean When He Said Moses Would Become “God to Pharaoh” During the Plagues of Egypt?<sup>1</sup>

An Old Testament KnoWhy<sup>2</sup> relating to the reading assignment for Gospel Doctrine Lesson 13: Bondage, Passover, and Exodus (Exodus 1-3; 5-6; 11-14) (JBOTL013A)

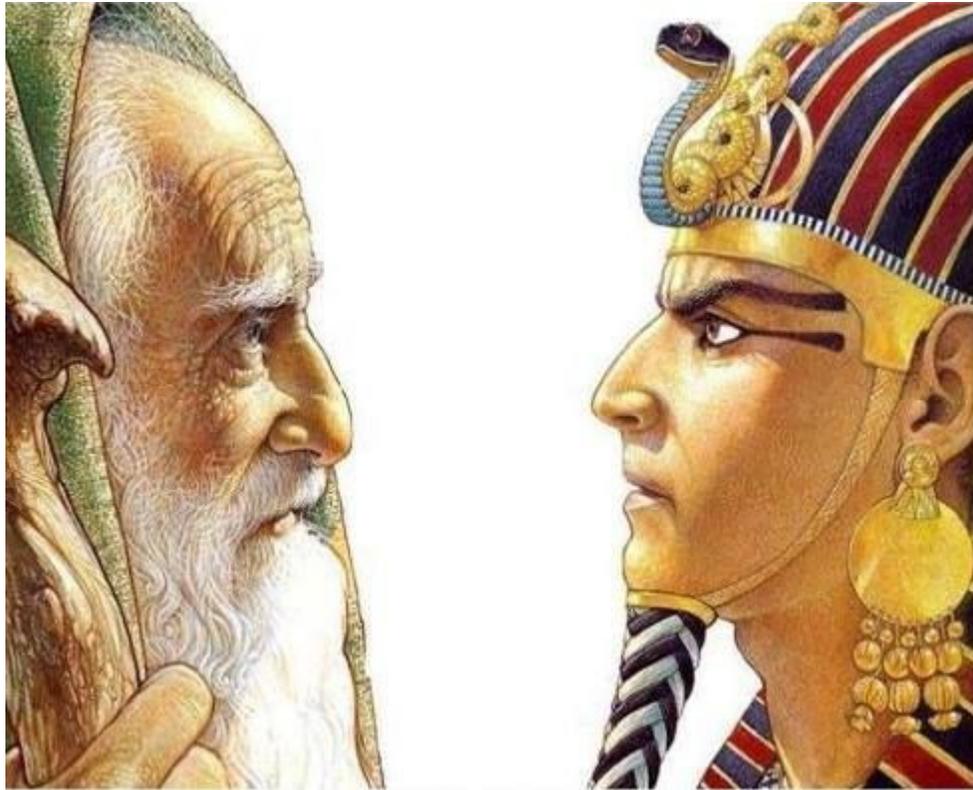


Figure 1. Moses and Pharaoh

**Question:** What did the Lord mean when He said Moses would become “god to Pharaoh”?<sup>3</sup> And how did the symbolism of the plagues undermine the worship of the Egyptian gods?

**Summary:** Surprisingly, Exodus 7:1 does not say that Moses was to be “like a god” to Pharaoh. Rather, the Lord’s words to the prophet in Hebrew read literally: “I have made you God/god to Pharaoh.”<sup>4</sup> To make sense of this statement, it must be remembered that Pharaoh was considered to be a god by his people, “the living embodiment of the god Horus, god of kingship, represented by the falcon.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, to prepare Moses for his summit meeting with the leader of Egypt, the Lord made him not only Pharaoh’s “equal” in rank but in addition also enabled him to demonstrate the greater potency of the true and living God whom he served. Because Pharaoh was divine in the eyes of the Egyptians, “he should have been the one to function as a god to Moses.”<sup>6</sup> However, in a display of power whose symbolism would have been understood both by the Egyptians and the people of Moses, Jehovah, the God of Israel, turned the tables against Ra, the supreme sun-god of Pharaoh. By means of the plagues, the great I AM executed His judgment “against all the gods of Egypt,”<sup>7</sup> a phrase meant to include Pharaoh and his firstborn son. Drawing primarily on the work of Rutgers professor Gary A. Rendsburg,<sup>8</sup> this article will describe the significance of the means by which Jehovah devastated Ra.



*Figure 2. Reed Basket*

## **The Know**

### **Moses as Pharaoh's Equal (or Better)**

*Moses as Horus, Pharaoh as Seth.* Many Bible scholars have discussed parallels in the birth story of Moses in the Bible and that of Sargon of Akkad given in Mesopotamian legend.<sup>9</sup> However, Gary Rendsburg observed that since Moses' birth story is set in Egypt a better analogue might be found in Egypt itself.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, one exists within the well-known traditions concerning Isis and Osiris.<sup>11</sup> Within these traditions we are told of how the Egyptian god "Horus,<sup>12</sup> the son of [the goddess] Isis, was hidden by his mother in a papyrus basket among the marshes to protect him from his wicked uncle Seth."<sup>13</sup>

Arguing further for the superiority of parallels for the birth story of Moses in Egyptian rather than Mesopotamian sources, Gary Rendsburg notes that in non-Egyptian examples of the "exposed-infant motif" "the goal is for the parents to be rid of the child that is exposed to nature."<sup>14</sup> However, by way of contrast, both Jochebed,<sup>15</sup> Moses' mother, and Isis, Horus' mother, are trying to *protect* the child. And who is the source of the danger? In the story of Moses it is Pharaoh, and in the legend of Horus it is the wicked Seth.

Thus, in a single narrative stroke, Exodus both likens Moses to young Horus, "the latter a mythic equal of the living Pharaoh," and, in a personal affront to the divinity of the Egyptian leader, also makes Pharaoh akin to Seth, a personification of evil and chaos in the Egyptian religion.<sup>16</sup>

God	-----	Yahweh/Elohim
Prophet	-----	Moses
Priest	-----	Aaron

Figure 3. *Moses and Aaron Before Promotion (after Rendsburg)*

God	-----	
Prophet	-----	Moses ↷
Priest	-----	Aaron ↶

Figure 4. *The Promotion of Moses and Aaron (after Rendsburg)*

*The promotions of Moses and Aaron.* In discussing the Lord’s statement to Moses that he will be elevated to assume the role of “god to Pharaoh,”<sup>17</sup> Rendsburg observes that “Aaron receives a [corresponding] promotion from his normal rank of priest<sup>18</sup> to that of prophet [“mouth”<sup>19</sup> or “spokesman”<sup>20</sup>]. Which is to say, each of the two leading figures in the narrative is advanced in rank for the purpose of this crucial meeting with Pharaoh.”<sup>21</sup> Figures 3 and 4 summarize Rendsburg’s understanding of how Moses and Aaron newly assumed these offices.

God	-----	Yahweh/Elohim
Melch. priest/king/god	-----	
Prophet	-----	Moses ↷
Aaronic priest	-----	Aaron ↶

Figure 5. *The Promotion of Moses and Aaron Clarified*

However, in light of Joseph Smith’s teachings, Rendsburg’s figure can be improved. In a discourse given on 23 July 1843, the Prophet briefly taught about the offices of prophet, priest, and king in the Melchizedek priesthood. He explained that individuals could “advance from prophet to priest and then to king, not to the kingdoms of this earth but [rather to the kingdoms] of the most high God.”<sup>22</sup> Joseph Smith said this in order to clear up public misunderstanding of an enigmatic statement he had made the previous week that Hyrum was henceforth to “be the prophet.” His close associates in the audience would have comprehended what the Prophet had been trying to say: namely, that while not renouncing his own role as a prophet, he was, in addition, soon to receive the fulness of the Melchizedek priesthood,<sup>23</sup> by which he would be made a priest and a king unto God.<sup>24</sup> Significantly, D&C 76:56-58 equates being made a priest and king in this sense with becoming a god or a son of God.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the joint advancement of Joseph and Hyrum serves as a fitting confirmation and analogue to that of Moses and Aaron. Figure 5 clarifies the promotion of Moses and Aaron by distinguishing between the office of priest in the lesser (Aaronic) and that of priest and king in the greater (Melchizedek) priesthoods.

The idea that kings and others, such as Moses, could become gods and sons of God through ritual was once widespread, not only in Israel but throughout the ancient Near East. In addition, Revelation 1:6 and 5:10 make it clear that becoming kings and priests unto God was something that all faithful Christians could eventually expect. For more on this topic as it relates to Moses, see the Appendix to this article.



*Figures 6a, b. Names of Allah on Wall of Abu Dhabi Mosque. The plaque with no name at top center represents the unknown name of Allah that will be given to the faithful after death.  
Photograph by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw*

*Moses as possessor of the unknown name of God.* Throughout the ancient Near East (and elsewhere), deities often have an “unknown” name, revealed only to a select few in specific circumstances.<sup>26</sup> The possession of the divine name is evidence that the recipient has spoken with God Himself, face to face.

Thus, when Moses meets with Jehovah at the site of the “burning bush” (representing God’s glorious appearance in the midst of the tree of life<sup>27</sup>), the second of the four objections he makes to his calling is that he will be unable to answer when the children of Israel ask him if he possesses God’s name as a proof of his divine commission. “God responds not with any of the standard divine names used in the Bible — [Jehovah, Elohim, Shaddai], etc. — but rather proclaims ... ‘I am that I am.’ This unique divine name is to be understood [in the context of the story of Exodus] as the ‘unknown’ name of [Jehovah]”<sup>28</sup>

Like Jehovah, the supreme sun-god Ra has an “unknown” name. For example, one Egyptian myth tells of how Ra refused to give his name to Isis. In her determination to learn it, Isis creates a snake to bite Ra. Ra suffers terribly and, eventually, to persuade Isis to heal him, he is forced to reveal it.<sup>29</sup> Why does Ra resist so firmly the disclosure of his name? By his own declaration in the story, he dreads the powerful magicians who might make use of his name in their spells. For this reason, even in the myth itself, the name is not given — the reader is told simply that Isis learned the name.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to the seeming vulnerability of Ra to the magicians, Exodus portrays Jehovah as having no fear of being subject to the power of anyone who might learn his name. Thus, God reveals it straightforwardly when the worthy and prepared Moses asks for it, and even allows readers of Exodus to learn it for themselves.<sup>31</sup> (Of course, the name revealed in scripture is not actually the “unknown” name of Jehovah. However, by including this story in the book of Exodus, readers are enabled to grasp the important concept being taught.)



Figure 7. Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902): *The Rod of Aaron Devours the Other Rods*

*Moses bests the magicians.* Moses' third objection to his calling is that the people will not believe that God sent him. "So, how best to impress people in Egypt with one's power, to instill belief in them? The answer: to empower the hero with the ability ... associated with the [Egyptian] lector-priest. Accordingly, God instructs Moses at this point to cast down his shepherd's staff, which turns into a snake ..., and then, upon Moses' grasping the snake by the tail, it reverts to a staff."<sup>32</sup>

In looking for priestly analogues to the biblical story of the staff that is transformed to a serpent, Scott Noegel references the Egyptian priestly ritual of casting down wax figurines of Apep, the primordial serpent of chaos. ... In the Egyptian context, the rite served to maintain the cosmic order by assisting the sun god [Ra] on his journey through the underworld."<sup>33</sup> "The biblical account appears to represent a literary inversion of the Egyptian priestly ritual. ...[D]epicting Aaron's serpent as devouring [the others] would signal a threat to the Egyptian cosmic order, a warning realized the next morning with the first plague."<sup>34</sup>

A similar maneuver to the casting down of the staff is performed by the chief lector-priest Webaoner and his caretaker in the Egyptian tale of "The Wax Crocodile."<sup>35</sup> In this story, Webaoner creates a crocodile of wax "seven fingers long," and instructs his caretaker to cast it into a lake when his adversary comes to bathe. Doing so, the wax crocodile becomes a live crocodile of "seven cubits" and swallows his enemy. Later, when the king visits, Webaoner catches hold of the real crocodile and it again becomes a wax crocodile in his hand. Although the story does not say explicitly that the crocodile is caught by the tail, images of magician-priests holding crocodiles by the tail have been found on Egyptian seals.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 8. Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902): *The Brazen Serpent*

But what does a crocodile have to do with a serpent? Significantly, although Moses' staff becomes a serpent when it is cast down in the desert, in Pharaoh's presence it is transformed instead into something described in Hebrew as a *tannin*.<sup>37</sup> This difference in terminology is obscured by the King James Version, which renders the two different Hebrew nouns with the same English word "serpent." Significantly, Rendsburg takes the meaning of *tannin* to be "crocodile," corresponding both to the story of the wax crocodile and the Egyptian figure of chaos.<sup>38</sup>

Leaving Egypt and returning to the desert, the snake symbolism once again becomes appropriate to the situation. In Numbers 21:6-9, Moses puts a serpent upon a pole, here representing the true God to which Israel should look and live.<sup>39</sup> The "superpositioning" of the serpent atop the pole may relate to royal iconographic materials in Egypt described by Noegel, where the item placed on top is a symbol of dominance and control.<sup>40</sup>

*Were Moses and Aaron performing magic?* Noegel answers this question as follows:<sup>41</sup>

[T]he magicians' use of "spells"<sup>42</sup> is contrary to Moses and Aaron's method, "which is unaccompanied by [any incantations]." [However,] this does not rule out the possibility that Moses and Aaron's acts may have been perceived as magic by the Egyptians, especially the magicians who were steeped in magical lore. ... Thus, while literarily the stories in Exodus conveyed to the Israelites a theological polemic in [Jehovah's] defeat over Egyptian magic and belief, they were also not without meaning for the Egyptians, who perceived in [Jehovah's] wonders a significance within the context of their own belief system.

The redactor of Exodus must have also presumed that prominent Egyptian traditions and priestly arts would have been recognized by at least some of his readers, or it would have made no sense for him to have included them in the account in the first place.



*Figure 9. Algae blooms offer one explanation of the waters turning to blood.  
Photograph by Adam Fritzler<sup>43</sup>*

### **The Plagues Through the Lens of Egyptian Tradition**

Scholars have looked at the Exodus account of the ten plagues from multiple perspectives. From a literary point of view, “the nine plagues of Exodus [in their current form] constitute a literary unity comprised of three parallel cycles, with the tenth plague functioning as the climax.”<sup>44</sup> In scripture, the number ten often reflects completeness.<sup>45</sup>

Some have tried to explain the plagues as natural phenomena,<sup>46</sup> the first six disasters forming “a progression of events, each of which naturally resulted from one of the plagues before it” and the next three plagues fitting “with the general pattern of the Egyptian agricultural and seasonable calendars. The last plague [of the death of the firstborn], of course, does not correspond to any natural phenomenon.”<sup>47</sup> Though the idea of framing the plagues in terms of natural events may have some merit, Wells concludes that there is “little in the plagues stories themselves to move the reader in that direction. Ultimately, the plagues are symbolic of chaos, and they overthrow the right ordering of life so prized by the Egyptians.”<sup>48</sup>

Below we will explore the plagues one by one as they might have been seen through the lens of Egyptian tradition. Each of the plagues except 5 and 7 have been previously discussed by Rendsburg and many others.



*Figure 10. Greenery along the banks of the Nile with desert beyond.  
Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock*

*Plague 1: Turning the Nile into blood.* The first plague is a perfect example of how the overthrow of order was symbolized in the plagues. Not only was the water of the Nile the literal “lifeblood” of Egypt’s prosperity, but in addition the change in color had terrifying religious implications. The word “blood” in Egyptian also means “red,” and in “Egyptian ritual practice, red [was] the color of Apep, the serpent of chaos, and it serve[d] as a synonym for ‘evil.’”<sup>49</sup> “The annual flooding of the Nile was ... associated with the resurrection of Osiris. Thus, the bloodlike waters might signal his death rather than his resuscitation, death for Egypt’s agriculture rather than verdant fields, a frightful prospect for the Egyptians.”<sup>50</sup>

A precedent for the plague appears in the Egyptian tale of Ipuwer. The tale laments that “the river is blood, yet one drinks from it. Men ... thirst after water. ... Indeed the desert is throughout the land, the [territories of Egypt] are laid waste. Foreign tribes<sup>51</sup> come into Egypt. They are really no people.”<sup>52</sup> Noegel observes: “As in the biblical text, the Egyptian story describes a bloody Nile and a defeat at the hand of foreigners.”<sup>53</sup>

*Plague 2: Frogs.* Rendsburg comments: “There is no parallel to the second plague of frogs in ancient Egyptian literature, but it is noteworthy that Heqet, the goddess of life and fertility, is represented by a frog in Egyptian art and iconography. The importance of this point is realized in the following interplay between Pharaoh and Moses and Aaron. The former requests that the two brothers pray to [Jehovah] simply to remove ... the frogs,<sup>54</sup> with the implication that they would return to the Nile. But the end result is not only the death of the frogs,<sup>55</sup> but the piles of rotting frog corpses so that the land stank.<sup>56</sup> Once symbols of the goddess of life, the frogs now embody the stench of death.”

*Plague 3: Lice.* A witness for the detestable nature of this plague with respect to the priests comes from Herodotus’ description of Egypt in *The Histories*. He reports that the “priests shave the whole body every other day, that no lice or aught else that is foul may infest them in their

service of the gods.”<sup>57</sup> Fortunately, the lector-priests were not able to duplicate Moses and Aaron’s actions or their infestation with lice would have been even more severe!<sup>58</sup>

*Plague 4: Gnats.* In his *Histories*, Herodotus reports that “Gnats are abundant,” and then describes at length the measures taken by the Egyptians to protect themselves from this pest.<sup>59</sup>

*Plague 6: Boils.* After failing to reproduce the plague of lice, the magicians disappear from the scene until we read that they were stricken with the sixth plague of boils. Rendsburg summarizes: “The significance of this is heightened for the reader when he or she realizes that the Egyptian priests shaved their entire bodies every day, to ensure perfect and hence pure skin, or else they would be considered impure and disqualified from temple worship. Priests with boils means no offerings in the temples; no offerings in the temples means distress for the gods; distress of the gods means chaos and collapse in Egypt – yes, all that from what appears at first blush to be an aside comment by the biblical author.”<sup>60</sup>

*Plagues 8 and 9: Locusts and darkness.* Rendsburg points out that these two plagues “share the motif of darkness descending upon the land.”<sup>61</sup> The King James Version translates Exodus 10:15 to read that “they [i.e., the locusts] covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened.” Significantly, the first part of the phrase in Hebrew reads literally “the eye of the whole earth,” corresponding to the Egyptian phrase “‘the eye of the sun,’ a metaphor for [the sun-god] Ra, and by extension, the land of Egypt.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, the darkening of the earth might be seen as impairing the eye of Ra.

A relevant Egyptian text is *The Prophecy of Neferti*,<sup>63</sup> which reads: “The sun is covered and does not shine for the people to see. No one can live when the clouds cover [the sun], every face is numb from lack of it. ... The land is burdensome with misfortune, because of those looking [?] for food, Asiatics roaming the land. Foes have arisen in the east. Asiatics have descended into Egypt.” Rendsburg comments: “Once more we note how the disorder, characterized by the concealment of the sun, is connected to the arrival of the Syrians/Asiatics (i.e., Semites).”<sup>64</sup>

The text of *Setne Khamwas and Si-Osire* is a late parallel with Exodus that contains motifs hearkening back to earlier Egyptian themes. Setne Khamwas was a son of Rameses II, the high priest of Memphis, and a renowned magician.<sup>65</sup> In the course of the story, a Nubian magician says: “Were it not that Amun would find fault with me, and that the lord of Egypt might [punish me], I would cast my sorceries upon Egypt and would make the people of Egypt spend three days and three nights seeing no light, only darkness.”<sup>66</sup> Rendsburg observes: “We have here another Egyptian tale centered on darkness, in fact, specifically three days of darkness, in accordance with the biblical description of the ninth plague”<sup>67</sup> — and also, of course, with the three days of darkness in the Book of Mormon.<sup>68</sup>

*Plague 10: Death of the firstborn.* References to the Exodus motif of the death of the firstborn occur both in the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom period and the Coffin Texts from the middle Kingdom.<sup>69</sup> For example, in one Coffin Text inscription we read: “I am he who will be judged with Him-whose-name-is-hidden on that night of the slaying of the firstborn (*wrw*).” Though we know little about the event being described, both the mention of “Him-whose-name-is-hidden” and also of “firstborn” are marked grammatically as references to a deity. Rendsburg agrees with the statement of Gilula that: “These passages are strong evidence that a mythological tale once circulated in which some or all of the firstborn in Egypt — whether gods, mortals, or animals — were slain on a certain day or night. Such a myth may very likely lie in the background of the biblical account.”<sup>70</sup>

## The Why

Exodus brilliantly conveys how Pharaoh and his gods were vanquished by Jehovah.<sup>71</sup> Knowing something about the Egyptian background of the biblical account helps one to appreciate why the particular choices made for the demonstrations of God's power would have hit home in power and precision with Israel's opponents.

Of course, it would be hypocrisy to take too much comfort in the story of Egypt's discomfiture, because, as a people, we engage in the same folly that has destroyed nations and peoples throughout history. In his trenchant sermon, *The False Gods We Worship*, President Spencer W. Kimball painted a self-portrait for each of us, idolators all. Not coincidentally the article was placed in the issue of the *Ensign* that was printed to celebrate the Bicentennial of the Constitution of the United States:<sup>72</sup>

[Many] have submitted themselves in one degree or another to the enticings of Satan and his servants and joined with those of "the world" in lives of ever-deepening idolatry. ... Few men have ever knowingly and deliberately chosen to reject God and his blessings. Rather, we learn from the scriptures that because the exercise of faith has always appeared to be more difficult than relying on things more immediately at hand, carnal man has tended to transfer his trust in God to material things. Therefore, in all ages when men have fallen under the power of Satan and lost the faith, they have put in its place a hope in the "arm of flesh" and in "gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know"<sup>73</sup> — that is, in idols. This I find to be a dominant theme in the Old Testament. Whatever thing a man sets his heart and his trust in most is his god; and if his god doesn't also happen to be the true and living God of Israel, that man is laboring in idolatry. ...

The Lord has blessed us as a people with a prosperity unequaled in times past. The resources that have been placed in our power are good, and necessary to our work here on the earth. But I am afraid that many of us have been surfeited with flocks and herds and acres and barns and wealth and have begun to worship them as false gods, and they have power over us. Do we have more of these good things than our faith can stand? Many people spend most of their time working in the service of a self-image that includes sufficient money, stocks, bonds, investment portfolios, property, credit cards, furnishings, automobiles, and the like to guarantee carnal security throughout, it is hoped, a long and happy life. Forgotten is the fact that our assignment is to use these many resources in our families and quorums to build up the kingdom of God — to further the missionary effort and the genealogical and temple work; to raise our children up as fruitful servants unto the Lord; to bless others in every way, that they may also be fruitful. Instead, we expend these blessings on our own desires, and as Moroni said, "Ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick and the afflicted to pass by you, and notice them not."<sup>74</sup> ...

In spite of our delight in defining ourselves as modern, and our tendency to think we possess a sophistication that no people in the past ever had — in spite of these things, we are, on the whole, an idolatrous people — a condition most repugnant to the Lord.

We are a warlike people, easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord. When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone

and steel — ships, planes, missiles, fortifications—and depend on them for protection and deliverance. When threatened, we become anti-enemy instead of pro-kingdom of God; we train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot, thus, in the manner of Satan’s counterfeit of true patriotism, perverting the Savior’s teaching:<sup>75</sup>

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.

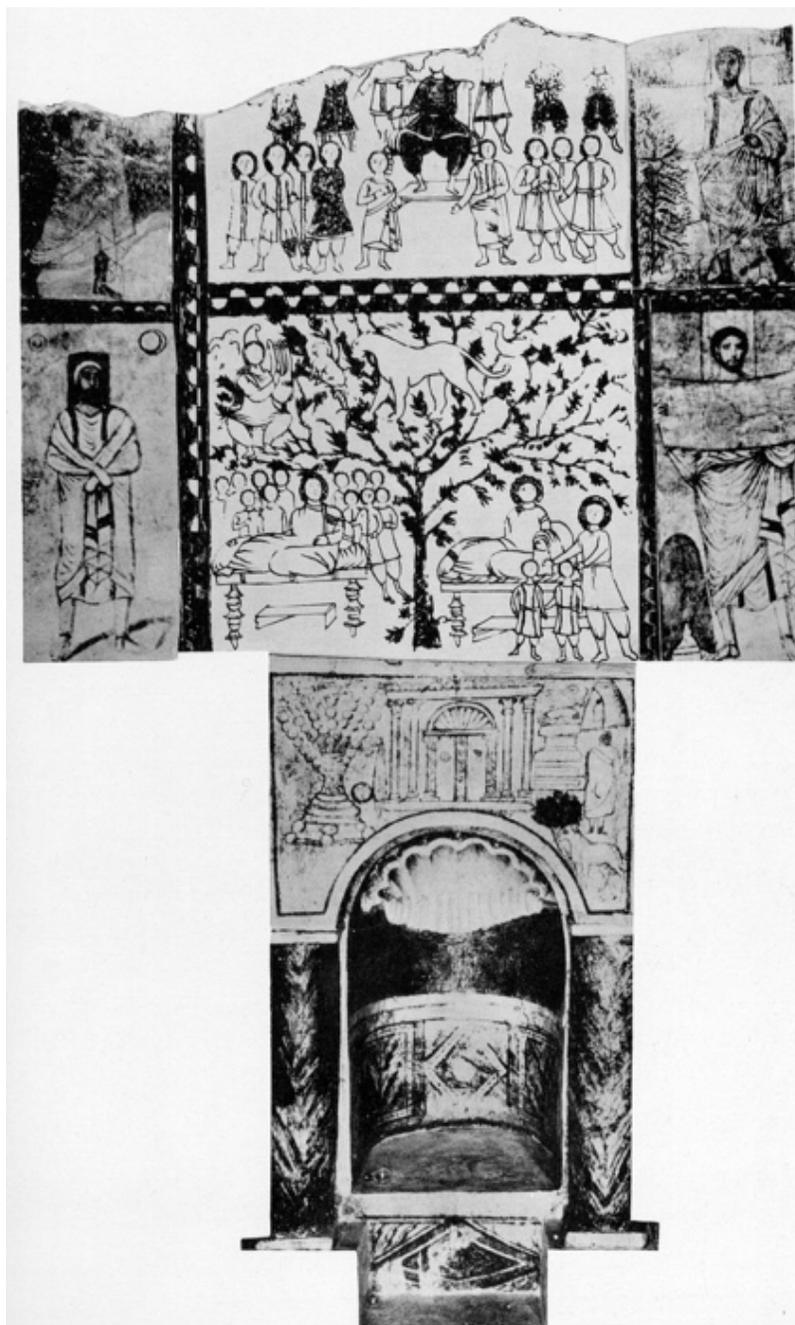
*Thanks to Kathleen M. Bradshaw, Chris Miasnik, and Stephen T. Whitlock for their proofreading and valuable suggestions.*

### **Appendix: Moses as God and King**

Mistakenly, Gary Rendsburg sees “Moses’ [temporary] elevation to the divine plane” as violating “a basic tenet of the ancient Israelites” in order to respond to “the exigency of the moment.”<sup>76</sup> However, there are both ancient and modern sources that argue that Moses’ divine status was neither exceptional nor temporary. For example, Wayne Meeks has written a classic chapter citing sources that portray Moses as “God and King.”<sup>77</sup> Geo Widengren cites Moses as the prototype of prophet, priest, and king in the Old Testament. Among other evidences, he notes Moses’ possession of three objects as emblems of these respective offices: the tablets of law<sup>78</sup> or covenant,<sup>79</sup> the pot (or jug<sup>80</sup>) of manna,<sup>81</sup> and the verdant rod or staff.<sup>82</sup> Regalia of a similar nature were possessed of prophets, priests, and kings in both ancient<sup>83</sup> and modern<sup>84</sup> times.

While Latter-day Saints will, of course, associate the offices of priest and king with the ordinances of modern temples, they may not realize the extent to which the broad outlines of temple ideology were ubiquitous in the ancient Near East. For example, Wyatt summarizes a wide range of evidence indicating “a broad continuity of culture throughout the Levant”<sup>85</sup> wherein the candidate for kingship underwent a ritual journey intended to confer a divine status as a son of God<sup>86</sup> and allowing him “*ex officio*, direct access to the gods. All other priests were strictly deputies.”<sup>87</sup> Bible scholar John Walton observes that “the ideology of the temple is not noticeably different in Israel than it is in the ancient Near East. The difference is in the God, not in the way the temple functions in relation to the God.”<sup>88</sup> In a previous study of the rites of investiture at Mari in 1800 BCE, LDS readers will recognize meaningful commonalities both with later Israelite rites of kingship that culminated in the Jerusalem temple and also with certain aspects of modern temple worship.<sup>89</sup>

Following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, its ideology was continued to a greater or lesser degree within the Jewish synagogue. The art of the Dura Europos synagogue, a structure abandoned following a siege in AD 256-257, constitutes the most convincing physical evidence available that the Jewish mysteries described in ancient sources may have had a tangible expression in ritual.



*Figure 11. The Dura Europos Torah Shrine topped with a tree of life mural that is surrounded by four portraits of Moses.*

The focal point of the synagogue's art is the Torah Shrine, which is decorated with an elaborate mural containing a "tree of life" that is straightforwardly interpreted as heralding the future exaltation of Israel as a people. In addition, the theme of individual exaltation was seen by Yale scholar Erwin Goodenough as being carried forward in four portraits that surround the "tree of life" panel.<sup>90</sup> Their importance can be inferred from their prominent position and the fact that they are the only individual portraits to be found anywhere in the synagogue.



*Figure 12. The Four Portraits of Moses*

Goodenough identified Moses as the subject of each of the four portraits,<sup>91</sup> as he is shown in what seem to be the progressive sacred experiences of (1) the burning bush, (2) the receipt of the Tablets of the Law, and (3) the reading of the Law<sup>92</sup>—“exactly the incidents most stressed in the mystic account of Moses by Philo.”<sup>93</sup> The final portrait (4) shows a figure standing on the earth with the sun, moon, and seven stars (i.e., planets) above his head.



*Figure 13. Sketch of Sun, Moon, and Stars Surrounding the Final Portrait of Moses.*

Goodenough took special note of the striking representation of the sun with its depiction of laddered rays, recalling the ubiquitous symbolism of the “divine ladder that connects man to God.”<sup>94</sup> He concluded that the subject of the mural is again Moses, “now in his old age, and ascending to heaven.”<sup>95</sup>

In the context of Goodenough's interpretation, the fourth portrait of Moses in the Dura synagogue constitutes not only a witness to his own exaltation, but also an implicit invitation to all those in the congregation to follow him. In his discussion of late Second Temple Jewish mysticism, Goodenough summarized Philo's descriptions of "two successive initiations within a single Mystery," constituting "a 'Lesser' Mystery in contrast with a 'Greater,'" as follows:<sup>96</sup>

For general convenience we may distinguish them as the Mystery of Aaron and the Mystery of Moses [cf. D&C 84:19-23, 31-34 where the ordinances taught by Moses are associated with the greater (i.e., Melchizedek) priesthood<sup>97</sup>]. The Mystery of Aaron got its symbolism from the great Jerusalem *cultus*. ... The Mystery of Moses ... led the worshipper above all material association; he died to the flesh, and in becoming re clothed in a spiritual body moved progressively upwards ... and at last ideally to God himself. ... The objective symbolism of the Higher Mystery was the holy of holies with the ark, a level of spiritual experience which was no normal part of even the high-priesthood. Only once a year could the high priest enter there, and then only ... when so blinded by incense that he could see nothing of the sacred objects within. The Mystery of Aaron was restricted to the symbolism of the Aaronic high priest. ... In a striking passage Philo contrasts this type of priest with Moses, who ... became the true initiate ..., hierophant of the rites ... , and teacher of divine things.

Philo taught that the experience of Moses was not meant to be unique; rather, he exemplified a pattern that previously had been followed by Abraham and would continue afterward for all who belonged to true Israel.<sup>98</sup> In his role as "teacher of divine rites," wrote Philo, "[Moses] will impart to those whose ears are purified. He [the one who receives these rites] then has ever the divine spirit at his side, taking the lead in every journey of righteousness"<sup>99</sup> or, in the translation of Goodenough, "to lead one along the 'whole road,' the entire way to perfection."<sup>100</sup>

More detailed discussion of the artwork of Dura Europos and its implications for the theme of ritual exaltation can be found elsewhere.<sup>101</sup>

### **Further Study**

To access Gary Rendsburg's 2013 video presentation of "Moses the Magician" at the UCSD Exodus Conference "Out of Egypt: Israel's Exodus Between Text and Memory, History and Imagination," see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYhNo1jC9Fg> .

For Rendsburg's 8 March 2007 BYU Kennedy Center talk entitled "Light from Egypt on the Exodus Story," see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_iwvTZnwSyo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iwvTZnwSyo) .

For more on how the story of Moses in Exodus touches on themes pertinent to Egyptian tradition and religion, see the relevant publications of Noegel (S. B. Noegel, *Moses and Magic*; S. B. Noegel, *Egyptian "Magicians"*) and Rendsburg (G. A. Rendsburg, *Egyptian Sun-God Ra*; G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses as Equal*; G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses the Magician*; G. A. Rendsburg, *Reading the Plagues*).

For a Book of Mormon Central KnowWhys related to this section of Exodus, see <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/lesson/old-testament/lesson-13-bondage-passover-and-exodus>

For a more extensive discussion of Jewish traditions of Moses as a god and king, see J. M. Bradshaw, *Ezekiel Mural*; W. A. Meeks, *Moses*, pp. 17-21.

For a discussion of Moses “song” and “ladder” of heavenly ascent in the context of temple ordinances, see J. M. Bradshaw, *Faith, Hope, and Charity*, pp. 44-46.

For other scripture resources relating to this lesson, see The Interpreter Foundation Old Testament Gospel Doctrine Index (<http://interpreterfoundation.org/gospel-doctrine-resource-index/ot-gospel-doctrine-resource-index/>) and the Book of Mormon Central Old Testament KnowWhy list (<https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/tags/old-testament>).

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## Endnotes

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- 1 Exodus 7:1. Cf. Exodus 4:16.
- 2 Used with permission of Book of Mormon Central. See <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/reference-knowhy>.
- 3 Exodus 7:1. Cf. Exodus 4:16.
- 4 B. Wells, Exodus (Zondervan), Exodus 7:1.
- 5 G. A. Rendsburg, Reading the Plagues.
- 6 B. Wells, Exodus (Zondervan), Exodus 7:1.
- 7 Exodus 12:12. Cf. Numbers 33:4.
- 8 In his articles, Rendsburg appropriately credits many previous scholars who have contributed to his arguments. Rendsburg has brought these scattered arguments together and extended them with his own research.

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9 W. W. Hallo *et al.*, *Context*, 1:461; B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:803-804.

10 G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses as Equal*, pp. 204-205.

11 For an online English translation of Plutarch's version of the story, see Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*. For an older version of the legend that is more germane to the story of Moses, see G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses as Equal*, p. 205 (English) and J. Vandier, *Papyrus Jumilhac*, p. 117 (French). For photos of the original, see <https://www.photo.rmn.fr/archive/13-581615-2C6NUo64EY42.html>.

12 In one source, an attempt is made to identify Horus as the god Anubis (G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses as Equal*, p. 205).

13 *Ibid.*, p. 206. The relevance of this story to Moses has been questioned by some scholars, including Redford (D. B. Redford, *Literary Motif*, pp. 221-224) and Hoffmeier (J. K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, Kindle Edition, Location 4166), because they claim it is "only known from a very late period. ... But elements of the Horus-Seth conflict and the Isis-Horus relationship appear already in the Pyramid Texts from the Old Kingdom and in the Coffin Texts from the Middle Kingdom. ... The only element of the Horus birth story that appears for the first time in late texts is the specific mention of the papyrus basket. In short, there is little or no basis for Redford's contention" (G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses as Equal*, p. 206 n. 9).

14 G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses as Equal*, p. 207.

15 Her name is given only in Exodus 6:20.

16 G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses as Equal*, p. 208.

17 Exodus 7:1.

18 Rendsburg notes here "that Aaron already is called 'the Levite' in Exodus 4:14."

19 Exodus 4:14-16.

20 Exodus 4:16. D&C 100:9, 11; 124:104. See also D&C 28:3. Note, however, that Exodus 4:15 and D&C 100:11 imply that being "spokesman" does not necessarily mean that one possesses the prophetic gifts of a seer and revelator.

21 G. A. Rendsburg, *Reading the Plagues*.

22 J. Smith, Jr., *Words*, *Joseph Smith Diary by Willard Richards*, 23 July 1843, p. 234, spelling and punctuation modernized. For a brief summary of how this related to the Prophet's "full concept of temple ordinances and the plan of the Millennial Kingdom of Christ," see the editors' note by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (*ibid.*, p. 294 n. 15). For more extensive discussions of the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God as revealed in the minutes of the Council of Fifty, see, e.g., J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, *Council of Fifty Minutes*; R. E. Smith *et al.*, *Council of Fifty in Nauvoo*; R. K. Esplin, *Understanding the Council of Fifty*. For an independent eyewitness testimony with summary discussion of selected events surrounding Joseph Smith's "Last Charge" and his overall effort to "roll the kingdom off [his] shoulders" prior to his martyrdom, see J. M. Bradshaw, "There's the Boy".

23 See J. M. Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Oath*, pp. 53-58; J. M. Bradshaw, *What Did Joseph Smith Know*, pp. 7, 76-78 n. 40.

24 See J. Smith, Jr., *Words*, *Letter of Willard Richards to Brigham Young*, 16 July 1843, p. 233, spelling and punctuation modernized. Specifically, Joseph Smith said he had learned that some people had mistakenly concluded from his statement about Hyrum in his sermon on 16 July 1843 that he "was no longer a prophet." But unfortunately they did not grasp that Joseph Smith had made the statement "ironically." He had not meant to imply that he "would renounce the idea of being a prophet" (*ibid.*, *Joseph Smith Diary by Willard Richards*, 23 July 1843, p. 233).

25 D&C 76:56-58 reads:

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56 They are they who are priests and kings, who have received of his fulness, and of his glory;  
57 And are priests of the Most High, after the order of Melchizedek, which was after the  
order of Enoch, which was after the order of the Only Begotten Son.

58 Wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God—

26 See J. M. Bradshaw, *What Did Joseph Smith Know*, pp. 8-15.

27 See J. M. Bradshaw, *Moses Temple Themes* (2014), p. 76.

28 G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses the Magician*, p. 244. See Exodus 3:14.

29 See W. W. Hallo *et al.*, *Context, The Unknown Name of Ra*, 1:33-34.

30 G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses the Magician*, p. 244.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 244. See Exodus 4:1-5. See further discussion of Egyptian parallels to this story in G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses as Equal*, pp. 208-215.

33 S. B. Noegel, *Egyptian “Magicians”*. See also S. B. Noegel, *Moses and Magic*, pp. 46-51.

34 S. B. Noegel, *Egyptian “Magicians”*.

35 Papyrus Westcar (Pap. Berlin 3033, ca. 1600 BCE, “though the composition is several centuries earlier”). Rendsburg’s “clean prose” translation (G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses the Magician*, p. 18) is based on W. K. Simpson, *Literature*, pp. 13-16. For a clear transcription of the Egyptian original, see <http://rhbarnhart.net/westcar-jsesh.pdf>.

36 G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses the Magician*, p. 247. For additional images of people and gods holding serpent staffs, see S. B. Noegel, *Moses and Magic*.

37 Exodus 7:9-10.

38 Rendsburg sees “crocodile” as the “only possible [translation] option here and in other Egyptian contexts” (G. A. Rendsburg, *Moses the Magician*, p. 245 n. 9). See Ezekiel 29:3; 32:2 for other examples of the clear meaning of *tannin* as crocodile in Egyptian contexts.

39 For further discussion of the meaning of this incident, see J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified*, pp. 128-131.

40 S. B. Noegel, *Egyptian “Magicians”*.

41 S. B. Noegel, *Moses and Magic*, p. 46.

42 Egyptologists generally equate the King James Version word “enchantments” to the term “spells” (Exodus 7:11, 22; 8:7, 18).

43 B. Wells, *Exodus* (Zondervan), Exodus 7:1.

44 J. K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, Location 4397.

45 S. E. Lowenstamm, *Evolution*, p. 188. More generally, see J. W. Welch, *Counting to Ten*.

46 G. Hort, *Plagues 1*; G. Hort, *Plagues 2*. For summaries of Hort’s views, see J. K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, pp. 146-149; B. Wells, *Exodus* (Zondervan), Exodus 8:15. The description of the purported chain of events in the first six plagues, one plague leading to the next, recalls the style of the cumulative song “Chad Gadya,” a 1590 inclusion in the Passover Haggadah ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chad\\_Gadya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chad_Gadya)).

47 B. Wells, *Exodus* (Zondervan), Exodus 8:15.

48 *Ibid.*, Exodus 8:15. Psalms 78 and 105 than in Exodus list fewer than ten plagues, probably due to their focus on worship rather than history.

49 S. B. Noegel, *Egyptian “Magicians”*. For more detail, see S. B. Noegel, *Moses and Magic*, pp. 50-51.

50 J. K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, Location 4512.

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51 Literally *pḏtyw* = bowmen.

52 Adapted by Rendsburg from W. W. Hallo *et al.*, Context, The Admonitions of Ipuwer (P. Leiden 344 (18th-19th Dynasty, translator Nili Shupak), 1:94.

53 S. B. Noegel, Egyptian “Magicians”. See also G. A. Rendsburg, Moses the Magician, p. 246.

54 Exodus 8:4.

55 Exodus 8:9.

56 Exodus 8:10.

57 Herodotus, The Histories, Book Two, section 37, Translation of A. D. Godley, *Herodotus* (Loeb Classical Library) 1:319, cited in G. A. Rendsburg, Moses the Magician, p. 247.

58 Herodotus, The Histories, Book Two, section 95, Translation of A. D. Godley, *Herodotus* (Loeb Classical Library) 1:381. See *ibid.*, p. 247.

59 See *ibid.*, p. 247.

60 G. A. Rendsburg, Reading the Plagues. See Exodus 9:11.

61 G. A. Rendsburg, Moses the Magician, p. 248.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

63 W. W. Hallo *et al.*, Context, The Prophecy of Neferti (Egyptian sage, ca. 1975 BCE) (P. Petersburg 1116B (18th dynasty, translator Nili Shupak), 1:108.

64 G. A. Rendsburg, Moses the Magician, p. 248.

65 See *ibid.*, p. 248.

66 M. Lichtheim, Readings, Setne Khamwas and Si-Osire (Setne II) (P. BM 604 [verso]), 3:144.

67 G. A. Rendsburg, Moses the Magician, p. 249.

68 Helaman 14:20, 27; 3 Nephi 8:3, 20-23; 10:9.

69 See translations and discussion in G. A. Rendsburg, Moses the Magician, pp. 249-250.

70 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 250.

71 Additional instances besides those we have explored here could have been mentioned.

72 S. W. Kimball, False Gods, pp. 4-6.

73 Daniel 5:23.

74 Mormon 8:39.

75 Matthew 5:44-45.

76 G. A. Rendsburg, Moses as Equal, p. 204.

77 W. A. Meeks, Moses.

78 Exodus 31:18.

79 Hebrews 9:4.

80 G. Widengren, King and Tree of Life, p. 40.

81 Exodus 16:33-34; Hebrews 9:4 — perhaps relating to the shewbread that only the priests were to eat (cf. Matthew 12:4; Mark 2:26; Luke 6:4).

82 Exodus 4:17; Hebrews 9:4.

83 See J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, Investiture Panel, pp. 34-39.

84 Joseph Smith encountered three emblems corresponding to the roles of prophet, priest, and king in September 1823, when he opened the stone box buried in the hill by Moroni (see D&C 17:1; Joseph Smith—History 1:35, 51-52). Significantly, Martin Harris called this box an “ark” (cited in D. Bradley, Piercing). The three items of Nephite regalia were the golden plates (corresponding to the prophetic “tables of the covenant”), the breastplate with its interpreters

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(instruments of priestly seership) (cf. Mosiah 1:15-16 where the Liahona was used instead of the breastplate as the corresponding symbol and instrument of seership — for more on this, see D. Bradley, August 21 2014) and the sword of Laban (corresponding to the sword of Goliath that was kept “behind the ephod” in the Israelite sanctuary (1 Samuel 21:9) — a symbol that can be interchanged with the kingly rod or staff).

Anciently, the sword (or some equivalent of the royal arms (see, e.g., N. Wyatt, Arms)) and staff were interchangeable symbols (B. M. Wheeler, Mecca, p. 43) — the former to be used in defense in times of war and the latter to be used as an instrument of measurement in the building of temples, palaces — and worlds — in times of peace (J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, Investiture Panel, pp. 31-39). Compare the dichotomy of the city of peace and the city of war on the shield of Achilles, given him in heaven, as described in Homer’s *Iliad* (see H. W. Nibley *et al.*, One Eternal Round, p. 396; see also pp. 395-400).

A biblical parallel to the dichotomy between the commission to build and the commission to wage war can be found in the story of King David, who was forbidden by God from constructing a temple because of his career as a fighter. Instead, David’s son Solomon, a “man of rest,” was eventually given the commission to build the earthly House of God. Speaking to David, the Lord said (1 Chronicles 22:8-9):

8 ... Thou hast shed blood abundantly, and hast made great wars: thou shalt not build an house unto my name...

9 Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about: for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days.

For more on the sword of Laban, see J. A. Tvedtnes, Workmanship; D. N. Rolph, Prophets; J. A. Tvedtnes, Rod and Sword; B. L. Holbrook, Sword of Laban.

85 N. Wyatt, Degrees, p. 192.

86 *Ibid.*. Postgate further explains (J. N. Postgate, Early Mesopotamia, pp. 266-267):

A ruler’s claim to divinity can be expressed in three ways: his name may be preceded by the cuneiform sign for god, in the same way as other deities’ names are, his headdress may be represented with horns, the mark of a god in the iconography, and in a variety of ways evidence may be seen that he was worshipped by the population in a cult of his own....

Another, attractive, hypothesis is that any rulers who were offspring of a sacred marriage could legitimately claim both divine and royal parentage. Gudea, for instance, says that he had no mother and no father and was the son of the goddess of Lagas, Garumdug; however, elsewhere he also states that he is the son of Ninsun, of Bau and of Nanse, which makes it hard to be sure of the implications of such statements. He, however, did not lay claim to divinity.

The seeming contradiction in Gudea’s claimed parentage might be explained by analogy to JST Hebrews 7:3 (“which order was without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life”), where the parallel sense is that although Melchizedek certainly had been born to earthly parents, he later had been reborn as a “Son of God” through priesthood ordinances (see J. M. Bradshaw, Temple Themes in the Oath, pp. 53-54, 60-62, 169-170 nn. 313-314).

87 N. Wyatt, Degrees, p. 220; cf. Eaton, commenting on Psalm 110:4: “He will be priest-king, the supreme figure for whom all the other personnel of the temple were only assistants” (J. H. Eaton, Psalms Commentary, p. 385). Nibley, commenting on Egyptian kingship: “kings must be priests, and candidates to immortality must be both priests and kings” (H. W. Nibley, Message (2005), p. 353).

88 J. H. Walton, Ancient, p. 129.

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89 J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, Investiture Panel.

90. Goodenough elaborates: “The difference between Jewish mysticism and Jewish messianic eschatology is essentially that in eschatology the cosmic as well as the personal transition is stressed, the destruction of the bad in all men along with the universal achievement of the good. [The tree of life panel], with its sacraments at its base, its great tree-ladder, the saving means of divine music and harmony—all leading to the Three at the top—present a scheme of salvation that need not await any ‘far off, divine event.’ It was to be consummated for everyone in the heavenly future, to be sure, but the design represented what those who painted it thought Judaism offered both here and hereafter to the faithful” (E. R. Goodenough, *Dura Symbolism*, 9:104). In this interpretation, Goodenough’s studies anticipated what Fletcher-Louis calls the “third phase” of apocalyptic scholarship, where stories of heavenly ascent are seen as attesting “the kind of revelatory encounter with the heavenly mysteries for which any Jew, Jewess, or proselyte might hope” (C. H. T. Fletcher-Louis, *Religious Experience*, p. 144).

91. Virtually all scholars accept the first two portraits as being of Moses. Weitzmann and Kessler argue that the third figure is Jeremiah, standing beside the covered ark and displaying the scroll of the new covenant, and that the fourth portrait is Isaiah (Isaiah 60:19-21) (K. Weitzmann *et al.*, *Frescoes*, pp. 170-173). However, Fine, who parts with Goodenough’s interpretations in most other respects, agrees that the third portrait is also Moses (S. Fine, *Liturgy*, pp. 178–179). Goodenough gives several reasons to conclude that the fourth figure would represent the same character as the first three (E. R. Goodenough, *Dura Symbolism*, 9:115). Goldstein also supports Goodenough’s identifications (J. A. Goldstein, *Judaism*, p. 122).

92. The third portrait shows a typical scene of Moses reading the Law, “except that at Dura, Moses’s audience is omitted, and Moses stands alone, so that he reads the Law to the living audience in the synagogue before him. ... Moses [is] presented as the mystic hierophant reading the *hieros logos* he graciously brought to Jews. That Moses reads the mystic text as a mystagogue means not that the Scriptures were literally kept secret, but that to these Jews in Dura, as to Philo, the true meaning of Scripture, the allegorical, was to be presented fully only to those ‘initiated’” (E. R. Goodenough, *Dura Symbolism*, 9:114)

93. *Ibid.*, 9:118.

94. *Ibid.*, 9:115. For a discussion of Moses “song” of heavenly ascent in the context of temple ordinances, see J. M. Bradshaw, *Faith, Hope, and Charity*, pp. 44-46.

95. E. R. Goodenough, *Dura Symbolism*, 9:116.

95. *Ibid.*, 9:101, 116–18.

96. E. R. Goodenough, *Light*, pp. 95–96. See Philo, *Giants*, 54, 2:473. See C. T. R. Hayward, *Israel*, pp. 156–219, regarding Philo’s explanation of the name Israel as meaning “the one who sees God.”

97 For more extensive discussion of these and related correspondences, see J. M. Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Oath*, pp. 99-110.

98. M. Barker, *Hidden*, pp. 7, 38–47.

99. Philo, *Giants*, 54–55, 2:473. See E. R. Goodenough, *Introduction to Philo*, pp. 147–148.

100. E. R. Goodenough, *Light*, p. 214 n. 105. See J. W. Welch, *Sermon*, pp. 57–62, and J. W. Welch, *Light*, pp. 116–120, for discussions of the ritual significance of the concept of “perfection.”

101 J. M. Bradshaw, *Ezekiel Mural*.