

ALLIANCE THEOLOGY SEMINARY

GENESIS 39-41 & THE TALE OF TWO BROTHERS

SUZANNE SILK

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BY

JULIE FORREST

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Abstract

The *Tale of the Two Brothers* and Genesis 39 have striking similarities as well as obvious differences. Comparing these texts provides Christians with the opportunity to experience texts that the Israelites were likely familiar with and use it to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural context of Genesis 39. The similarities of location - Egypt – and the fact that both main characters were accused of sexually assaulting women who had power over them. In addition, both Joseph and Bata were younger brothers that served those around them – whether it was the king or his own brother. This shows their place in society was not the highest in their family and were not naturally the ones to inherit wealth. In the end both do inherit wealth and they are redeemed. This happens in vastly different ways, however, and the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife is, in the end, only small part of God’s overarching story and plan throughout Genesis while the *Tale of the Two Brothers* is a standalone myth. Though there are theories regarding the reason for the similarities between the two works, readers must recognize one is a myth and the other is Scripture. God works in and through culture to relate to His people and reveal who He is. superiority of Scripture, however, does not mean Christians should simply ignore the *Tale of the Two Brothers* and others like it. Through the comparison of these texts, Christians have insight into the cultural context of Genesis, recognize Scriptural debates, and ultimately understand more about God’s character.

Reality TV is a guilty pleasure for many people (including me). Though it is not quality content and there is rarely anything real about these TV shows, there is something about the personal interactions, plot lines, and drama that draws viewers in. The plot is so unexpected, the viewer cannot help but watch. Surprisingly, this means that reality TV has more in common with ancient literature than many would think. While reading Genesis 39-41 and the Tale of Two Brothers, readers encounter drama and plot twists that reflect the culture. These two texts have a variety of similarities and differences and have been held in comparison for decades. Through the comparison of these texts, Christians have insight into the cultural context of Genesis, recognize continuing debates, and ultimately understand more about God's character.

Overview of Texts

Genesis 39-41

The last 13 chapters of Genesis, tell the story of Joseph. In chapter 39 of Genesis, Joseph is falsely accused of rape after he refuses to sleep with Potiphar's wife (7-16)¹. After hearing his wife's accusations, Potiphar responds by throwing Joseph in prison (39:19-20). Joseph is in prison for over two years, but "the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden" (39:21). Joseph encounters two prisoners, who have dreams they do not understand. God gives Joseph the ability to interpret these dreams (40:8-19). The men released from prison, and the dreams come true, yet Joseph is forgotten (40: 20-23). It is not until Pharaoh has dreams he cannot interpret or have his magicians interpret, that one of the men remembers Joseph (41:9-13). God gives Joseph the ability to interpret dreams, once

¹ NIV

again (41: 16-32). Joseph then gives Pharaoh advice, which he heeds (41: 33-38). Chapter 41 ends, by Pharaoh putting Joseph in charge of Egypt (41:39). These chapters are only a small part of Joseph story but provide great cultural parallels and insight to God's character.

The Tale of Two Brothers

The *Tale of Two Brothers* is a fascinating Egyptian tale that involves two brothers. The oldest brother, Anubis owns his own home and land while the younger brother, Bata, works for him. The wife of the older brother attempts to seduce Bata, but he refuses. The wife then accuses Bata of assault and Anubis is furious. He plans on killing Bata, but through the warning from a cow, Bata escapes. He runs until there is a river separating Bata and his brother trying to kill him. There, Bata explains he was framed, and he cuts off his own penis. He tells his brother he will go away and put his heart in a tree. If the brother receives beer that froths, he is to know that Bata is dead. Anubis then returns to his house and kills his wife. Bata lives peacefully and the gods give Bata a wife. The wife does not listen to the warnings of Bata to stay away from the river. The water grabs part of the wife's hair and the scent of her hair lingers on the clothes the Pharaoh's servants wash. Pharaoh desires the woman and eventually takes her from Bata. The woman then orders for the tree that holds Bata's heart to be cut down. Anubis then realizes Bata is dead and goes to search for his heart. After years of searching, Anubis is about to give up when he finds a pinecone. He takes the pinecone back to Egypt and waters it. It is the heart of his brother. His brother then becomes a bull to revenge the majesty. Upon discovering that the bull is Bata, the Lady requests the bull to be killed for a feast. During the slaughter of Bata, blood drops next to the doorposts and two trees grow. These trees are Bata. The Lady then requests furniture from the trees. As the trees are cut down, a splinter goes into the Lady and impregnates her. She

then has a baby, that is Bata. Pharaoh is pleased and gives all power over to the son. Bata then rules for thirty years and passes the rule to his older brother when he dies.

Are they really that similar?

There are countless articles and perspectives comparing Genesis 39 with *The Tale of Two Brothers*. The *Tale of Two Brothers*, however, cannot only be compared with Genesis 39, but must include all three chapters of the story. While it is not necessary to compare all thirteen chapters regarding Joseph to the Tale of Two Brothers, in order to get an accurate picture of the implications of the episode, one must look at Genesis 40-41 as well.

Story Structure

Both texts start off with a remarkably similar scene. In the *Tale of Two Brothers*, it is often called the “Potiphar’s Wife”² episode referring to Genesis 39 because they are almost the same story. The woman attempts to seduce the man and when he does not reciprocate, she claims she was assaulted. The man who is accused then flees the scene and is punished. It is clear to see the similarities in this regard. Victor Hamilton in his chapter, “Chapters 18-50” of *The Book of Genesis* commentary recognizes the similarities in the women choosing the younger brother over their husbands but claims after the men flee the similarities end³. Joseph does not get justice after he runs away, while Anubis’ wife is rightly killed. In this way the stories differ as, “the Egyptian

² Susan Hollis, Hollis, Susan. “Continuing Dialogue with Alan Dundes Regarding the Ancient Egyptian ‘Tale of Two Brothers’ .” *The Journal of American Folklore* (2003): 212–16. 213

³ Victor Hamilton, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995

story is plain and straightforward, with none of the nuances found in the narration or dialogue of Genesis 39”⁴.

Looking further into the story, however, the commonalities of the storyline is not as obvious, but they are still there. Though Bata makes a nice home for himself and Joseph is in prison, they both spend years away from their home as a result of the accusation. In addition, they both reign over Egypt at the end of the story. Bata’s story, however, is much longer and he dies three times between the time he is accused and the time he begins his reign. This is quite different than the three-chapter episode in Genesis, yet the result is the same.

Joseph & Bata

The main characters of each story, Joseph and Bata, have similar attributes and responses. Firstly, both Joseph and Bata serve the people around them. Joseph’s duties were that of a *major domo* and " a title carried by the chief servants in all noble households in Egypt”⁵. Bata served his brother and his wife. In addition to their role in society, they were strong, healthy, and blessed by a higher power. For Joseph, “The Lord was with [him] so that he prospered...” (Genesis 39:2). Similarly, Bata oversaw the land, produce, and prospered as “the cattle that were in his charge became so exceedingly fine that they multiplied their offspring exceedingly.”⁶ They were good at their jobs and took pride in their role.

⁴ Shimon Bakon, Subtleties In The Story Of Joseph And Potiphar's Wife, *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41 (November 3, 2013)173

⁵ William A. Ward, “Egyptian Titles in Genesis 39-50.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114, no. 453 (January 1957): 40–59.

⁶ Tale of the Two Brothers

The tale also explains that “a god’s virility was in him”.⁷ Bata and Joseph are different in the fact that Bata exercises godlike abilities to come back to life. Joseph does, however, interpret dreams from God given knowledge. Joseph completes the act, but it is not out of his power, but rather Gods. In Bata’s case, it appears he is acting out of his own power. Joseph and Bata are not the same person, but Alan Dundes notes the interesting fact that Bata reincarnates into a bull and “...Joseph in the Old Testament is also described as a bull with strong horns [Deuteronomy 5:]”.⁸ This may be due to their strength and stability displayed through their physical and spiritual characteristics. It could also be reflective of the culture as, “..most of the ancient Near Eastern cultures viewed the bull as extremely powerful and often, particularly in Egypt, identified their ruler symbolically as a bull.”⁹

Role Reversals

Though Genesis 39-41 is a Hebrew story and *The Tale of Two Brothers* is Egyptian, their cultural implications and family structure are important to note. The stories both begin with the younger playing the role he was expected to: serving. When threatened, Joseph stays within his boundaries and recognizes that Potiphar has already given Joseph more than he deserves, so he could not possibly take his wife as well.¹⁰ The stories end, however, having the younger brother eventually rule. In the Bata, eventually hands the thrown to his older brother. This is not typical customs. Likewise, Joseph is the youngest of 12. His brothers were irate when Joseph told them

⁷ Tale of the Two Brothers

⁸ Dundes, Alan. “Projective Inversion in the Ancient Egyptian ‘Tale of Two Brothers.’” *The Journal of American Folklore* 115, no. 457/458 (2002): 378–94, 389

⁹ Hollis, “Continuing Dialogue with Alan Dundes 215

¹⁰ Bekin, 381

he would be ruler Genesis 37 as the youngest would not be bowed down to. This reversal in the societal structure would have been surprising to the intended population.

Divine Intervention

Though in some ways Bata acts in the manor of a god, he still prays to gods and receives help from them. Bata prays to Pre-Harakhti, asking not to be killed.¹¹¹² Bata's prayer is answered and Pre-Harakhti shows causes alligator filled water to come between them. Later, when living in the villa alone, the god has compassion on Bata and has a woman designed for him. Though, this woman eventually causes harm to Bata, the gods provide her as a companion.

Joseph also gets divine help. The Lord is with Joseph through prison and provides a way for him to succeed. Joseph becomes overseer of prisoners (Genesis 39:22). Like stated above, God gave Joseph the ability to interpret dreams. This ability then leads to his freedom and results in him having more authority than before (Genesis 41). In both these stories, there is divine intervention, yet the purpose is vastly different.

The women

The involvement of women in these stories is integral to the plot, yet they simultaneously do not play a large role in the overall story. Potiphar's wife, for example, is not mentioned again after she accuses Joseph. While it is interesting that the truth of the accusation is never addressed in Joseph's story, the most memorable part of the story involves the interpretation of dreams rather than what made Joseph go to prison in the first place.

¹¹ The tale of Two Brothers

¹² The tale of Two Brothers

While Anubis's wife does face death as punishment for her accusations, she is ultimately forgotten by the end of the story. Her actions lead to the change of scenery in the story, but the story continues long after she is killed by her husband. In fact, another woman appears and takes the place of the antagonist. The new woman creates trouble for Bata, but eventually gives birth to him. It is ironic that the woman who tries to destroy and get rid of Bata is the one who puts him in the position, as a son of Pharaoh, to rule.

The insignificance of the women can be seen in the fact that none of the women are given names. They are referred to as the "wife of..." or the "Lady". In this way, these stories reflect the cultural perspective of women. Women were not viewed the same as men nor given respect. The phrase "the Lady" does give more dignity as it serves as a title rather than a name. This may be referring to her being the first lady of Egypt.

Though initially it appears that the accusations of the women are believed, Bakon suggests that Potiphar does not fully trust his wife¹³. Typically, a man charged with sexual assault would face death. Since Joseph only went to prison, there is suspicion if Potiphar believed his wife was telling the truth. Anubis does believe his wife but takes the word of his brother over the word of his wife. Both the Potiphar's wife and Anubis's wife are immoral tricksters that are insignificant in the larger picture.

Seduction & Projective Inversion

The issue of seduction and projective inversion in *The Tale of Two Brothers as well as* Genesis 39 passage provides either a similarity between the stories or a difference depending on

¹³ Bakon, "Subtleties In The Story of" 173

one's conclusion. Alan Dundes argues in "Projective Inversion in the Ancient Egyptian 'Tale of Two Brothers'" that when looking at *Two Brothers* from the psychological perspective, it is believable that Bata actually wanted to sleep with Anubis' wife.¹⁴ This is based off the Freudian idea that perceived trauma is actually an expression of deep sexual fantasy.¹⁵ One indication of this is Bata cutting off his own penis¹⁶. Though it is possible that Bata, felt it was his fault as the victim, so he made sure it could not happen again, it is possible that Bata had those sexually desires towards Anubis's wife and was ashamed of them. Dundes explains this could also be the case in Genesis 39. Bakon agrees with this perspective as he views Joseph's refusal in Genesis 39:8-9 "...like a case of Joseph protesting too much, saying out loud the reasons he must not succumb to the advances of Potiphar's wife in order to convince himself".

One critic of this theory, Susan Hollis, explains that it is not accurate to approach these texts from a psychological standpoint, because it disregards the cultural context and does not contribute to the overall understanding of the text:

Dundes has analyzed it according to his own preconceptions while neglecting to situate this part of the narrative into the larger context of the tale and its possible historical context (Egypt in the thirteenth century B.C.E. near the end of the lengthy reign of Ramesses II, sometimes called Ramesses the Great). While giving his readers several ways to look at the first part of the tale-the attempted seduction of the young man by his older sister in-law-Dundes does not tell his readers why or how this approach enhances their understanding of the text."¹⁷

¹⁴ Dundes, "Projective Inversion in the Ancient ,386

¹⁵ Dundes, 387

¹⁶ Dundes, 388

¹⁷ Hollis, 213

Whether or not one agrees with the projective inversion theory, it is valuable to understand how it can be applied to Genesis 39 and/or *The Tale of Two Brothers*. If one applies theory to Bata's situation and not in Joseph or vice versa, it creates a difference in the way characters are perceived. Joseph and Bata are considered noble men, though this is still the case as they did not commit sin, the reality of sexual desires humanizes them. It does not, however, impact the result of either story.

Which came first?

When comparing texts, it is important to note the date in which each work was created. *The Tale of Two Brothers* is one of the oldest folktales that we have today. According to Dundes, "It appears to have been recorded in the 13th century before the Christian era, which would make it more than three millennia old."¹⁸ This is one reason for the popularity.

Since there are similarities between Genesis 39 and *The Tale of Two Brothers*, naturally one could assume that Genesis 39 could be based of the tale as "... the Joseph story is a composition rather than a record, a novella, probably created sometime during the late Judean monarchy or the exile (seventh to sixth century B.C.E.)."¹⁹ It is not necessarily based off the tale as Bible archeology shows "...the numerous facts taken from the archeological and literary remains of the ancient Near East which show the Joseph story to be authentic."²⁰ An explanation,

¹⁸ Dundes, *The Journal of American Folklore*, 378

¹⁹ Redford, Donald. *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*. Princeton University Press, 1992.

²⁰ Ward, "Egyptian Titles in Genesis 39-50, 41

then, for the similarities lies in the cultural motifs. Both works were based off the same cultural motifs without being borrowed from each other.²¹

Why it Matters

Though we cannot take either of these texts as straight history²², through the comparison of texts the character of God is revealed. In recognizing similarities, modern readers can understand and appreciate the cultural influences on both works. God works in and through culture, so recognizing the cultural aspects of Genesis 39-41 and *The Tale of Two Brothers* enables readers to recognize the difference between God and the gods in folktales. The outlandish occurrences through *The Tale of Two Brothers*, served for entertainment as opposed to the moral or ecclesiastical purpose found in Genesis.²³

God was with Joseph and used the unjust situation for His glory. Though some argue that Genesis 39 does not fit into the larger structure of the Joseph story, "... the chapter is not out of place at the beginning of Joseph's transformative journey, and his success also mirrors his later rise within Pharaoh's court."²⁴ God prepares people in different ways. Often it is through unideal circumstances. Genesis 39 reflects how God works and interacts with our world even though justice does not directly occur.

Justice in the way humans expect does not occur in Genesis. Potiphar does not acknowledge the fact that Joseph was wrongly put in prison. This reveals that we will not always

²¹ Bedford, *A study of the Biblical*, 93

²² Bedford Genesis 37-50

²³ Pritchard, *Ancient Near East Texts*, 23

²⁴ Bekin, 395

have justice here on earth. The *Tale of the Two Brothers*, on the other end have direct punishment after the crime. This reflects more of the human way of dealing with situations. Though a god did intervene to prevent Bata from being killed, there was no direction as to what to do with Anubis' wife. He was left to his own actions. Additionally, when the gods tried to help Bata, they ended up creating the antagonist. After this scene, the gods do not appear again. God, however, remains with Joseph and actively communicates with him. It is through God's power and provision that Joseph can interpret the dreams. God works through unjust situation, He is faithful, and He has a greater plan.

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