

## Moses and the Egyptian *Tale of Sinuhe*

[Dr. Richard Pratt](#)

President of Third Millennium Ministries  
Adjunct Professor of Old Testament at  
*Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida*

Studies of Exodus and the Egyptian *Tale of Sinuhe* have recently led some evangelical scholars to wonder to what degree the stories of Moses are true to actual historical events. In this view, significant literary affinities between the biblical account and this Egyptian text indicate that Exodus follows ancient literary conventions reflected in *Sinuhe*. Exodus presents accounts that are *basically* historical, but these historical threads are woven into a literary fabric according to conventions that do not require detailed historical veracity.

Of course, such a reconstruction raises the question as to what constitutes a “basically historical” account, but this is not my main concern. My interest is in the evidence upon which such a view is built. Unfortunately, students who are inexperienced in comparative ancient Near East literature are easily left with the impression that the similarities between Exodus and *Sinuhe* are substantial and warrant a reassessment of the literary conventions that governed Exodus. In my opinion, however, *Sinuhe* provides no significant evidence that discounts the long held orthodox Christian belief that the record of Exodus is entirely historically reliable.

The story of *Sinuhe* is fairly straightforward.<sup>1</sup> It portrays him speaking from his tomb and recounting events in his life. *Sinuhe* was a Middle Kingdom Egyptian official of the 12th dynasty (1938-1756 B.C.) who fled Egypt to Syria. As a guardian of Amenemhet’s harem, he went on an expedition to Libya. When he

---

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the *Tale of Sinuhe* see: James Peter Allen, *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); James Karl Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel In Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); R. B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems, 1940-1640 BC* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1997). For an online version of the text of the *Tale of Sinuhe*, see <http://books.google.com/books?id=AxXE65fIKPwC&pg=PA308&lpg=PA308&dq=%22hereditary+prince+and+count%22+sinuhe&source=web&ots=P5j8YTyRGM&sig=QfGc8FYAIOHB6QhUh6umfU2Iorc> (as of January 8, 2008).

learned of the Pharaoh's assassination he fled, either because he was a conspirator or because he feared false accusations. In all events, winds on the Nile blew him northward and he wandered through Palestine and Lebanon. He finally settled in southern Syria and married the oldest daughter of a chieftain in the region. Some years later, Pharaoh Sesostris I welcomed Sinuhe back to Egypt. The king forgave him and granted him gifts. From that point forward, Sinuhe remained in Egypt and was granted an honorable burial.

Now, the parallels between this story and that of Moses are evident. Both stories involve: 1) Pharaohs of Egypt; 2) a trusted figure in the royal courts; 3) a murder; 4) a flight; 5) a marriage to a first born daughter of a non-Egyptian; and 6) a return to Egypt. To this extent the accounts of Exodus and the *Tale of Sinuhe* parallel each other.

Yet, we must also keep in mind the obvious differences between these texts. Among others, 1) there are no strong linguistic connections. 2) The genre of Sinuhe is poetry and Exodus is narrative. 3) There are no geographical connections, except Egypt. 4) Moses served as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, not as an official of the king's harem. 5) Moses had not been sent on an excursion. 6) Moses was neither involved in nor accused of the assassination of a Pharaoh. 7) Moses did not flee by the Nile. 8) Moses did not go to Libya, Palestine, Lebanon or Syria. 9) Moses did not establish himself as a great leader and mighty warrior in his land of exile. 10) Moses received a call to return to Egypt from God, not from Pharaoh. 11) Moses did not go back to Egypt under Pharaoh's favor. 12) Moses opposed Pharaoh and delivered the people of God from Pharaoh. 13) The stories of Moses' early life and return to Egypt make up only a fraction of the text of Exodus. 14) The point of the Sinuhe story<sup>2</sup> is completely different from the point of the book of Exodus.<sup>3</sup> The lists of such discontinuities go on and on.

The questions before us are at least threefold. First, do we know to what extent the *Tale of Sinuhe* was intended to be taken as true to history? By and large, scholars generalize their assessment that, for ideological purposes, those who wrote such poems felt free to exaggerate and misrepresent what they knew had actually happened. In the very least, it is argued that ancient poets were not deeply concerned with historical veracity. There is often evidence that many sorts of Egyptian texts do in fact contradict historical data, but the historical dimensions of literary conventions are not discerned simply by comparing texts with historical data. Instead, literary conventions regarding historical reliability are discerned by focusing primarily on the *intentions* of the ancient writers as they met certain

---

<sup>2</sup> The popular point of the *Tale of Sinuhe* was that one should love Egypt, and that one who was truly successful in life would be included in the Egyptian court. See James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East, Volume I* (Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> As I have written elsewhere, the book of Exodus was written to demonstrate the divine authorization of Moses' covenant order for the nation of Israel. See Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *He Gave Us Stories* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1990), p. 283.

cultural expectations. Did they *intend* for every aspect of their texts to be true to history or not? In this case, we must ask what evidence we have that the writer of *Sinuhe* (or his sponsors) intended to misrepresent or to disregard what they knew to be actual historical events. In a word, there is no conclusive evidence that the *Tale of Sinuhe* was intended to propagate historical fabrications.

Second, is there any evidence that *Sinuhe* represents influential literary conventions in ancient Egypt that may have impacted the writing of Exodus? Do its plot, characters or motifs appear time and again in Egyptian literature? Are we dealing with a stream of storytelling that was so pervasive in Egyptian culture that it touched the ways other stories were told in Egypt? If so, then perhaps it had influence on the way the story of Moses was told in Exodus. Yet, no such pervasive literary influence can be verified. To say then that *Sinuhe* represents a significant resource for identifying literary conventions that influenced the writing of Exodus is to overstate the evidence of the cultural significance of *Sinuhe*.

Third, are there enough similarities between Exodus and *Sinuhe* to warrant the suggestion that the basic historical truths about Moses are somehow clothed in literary conventions represented by *Sinuhe* (whatever they may be)? To answer this question, we have to wonder how many times officials fell under the displeasure of Pharaohs. How many times did they flee from Egypt because of this disfavor? How many times did they return to Egypt at some later date? Of course, we do not know the answers to these questions for certain. Yet, it is not difficult to imagine that this kind of scenario occurred so many times that the scarce similarities between Moses and *Sinuhe* result from actual historical coincidence rather than literary convention.

On the basis of these observations, in my view it is irresponsible to suggest that a significant genre connection is likely between Exodus and the *Tale of Sinuhe*. While we must always be open to insights provided by comparative literary studies, we ought also to exercise greater caution when assessing the relationships between ancient extra-biblical texts and Scriptures. This ought to be true especially within evangelical circles where we value the Scriptures as divinely inspired.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

#### **Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine**

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [Reformed Perspectives Magazine](#), please select this [link](#).