

## FROM ROYAL TRIBE TO LANDLESS TRIBE: ROYAL LINE OF LEVI (MOSES) BROKEN THROUGH YOUNG AIDE<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The Hexateuch projects the shifting social status of the Levites from that of a royal tribe, with Moses, Aaron, and Miriam playing leadership roles within the Israelite community as it makes its exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, to a tribe with no land inheritance, a tribe whose social status became lower than that of servants and in close affinity to the status of aliens, fatherless, and widows. This study examines the motivating factors behind the shift in social status of the Levites and argues that the Levites' loss of land was a result of a shift of power to Joshua, an Ephraimite, thereby privileging the Joseph tribes. Thus, in the final form of the Hexateuch, the loss of land is legitimised through the Joseph story, which ultimately privileges the Joseph tribes. The Hexateuch in this study is read through the hermeneutic of suspicion, considering the apologetic nature of the narrative in its legitimation of the Joseph tribes.

### INTRODUCTION

The Pentateuch in its final form, as Clines has observed, is a narrative whose theme is “the partial fulfilment – which also implies the partial non-fulfilment – of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs” (Clines 1997:30). Clines identifies the following as key elements of the promise: posterity, divine-human relationship, and land. Recently, Baden (2013:11) has argued that the patriarchal promise is nothing other than progeny and land. Whether the patriarchal promise is simply two interdependent parts or more, it is important for us to note that the promise of posterity and the promise of a divine-human relationship are fulfilled within the framework of the Pentateuch; however, the promise of land, as important as it is within the Pentateuch, remains an unfulfilled

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promise, finding its fulfilment at a broader level within the book of Joshua, that is, within the framework of what is generally referred to as the Hexateuch.<sup>2</sup>

There are different views as to the contribution of the land promise to the basic structure of the Tetrateuch/Pentateuch/Hexateuch. Within the documentary hypothesis framework, the theme of the land promise to the patriarchs is regarded to have emerged at the literary level of the Yahwistic source (J) (Wellhausen, Staerk, Galling, Alt, von Rad, Clark); others have argued that the land promise found its fulfilment during the patriarchal period at the pre-literary level (Noth, Zimmerli, Wolff, Westermann) and became extended to the exodus generation (Staerk, Clark). Thus, within this framework, the land promise and its non-fulfilment or fulfilment served to provide the basic structure of the Pentateuch as justification for the land conquest just after the conquest (Staerk, Noth, Wolff) or during the early monarchy period, the time in which J originated (von Rad, Clark), the Davidic/Solomonic period (see Boorer 1992:95–96). In this framework, Deuteronomy is regarded to have originated after J, during the time of Josiah. The conception of land espoused in the book Deuteronomy is conditional (in contrast to that in J, which is unconditional): the land promise will remain a fulfilled reality for as long as Israel is obedient to the law.

When focus shifted to the redaction layers, the land promise was still a subject of interest. For Rendtorff (1990:128), promise of land in the Moses story is introduced

as an unknown land ... There is not a word which mentions that the patriarchs have already lived a long time in this land and that God has promised it to them and their descendants as a permanent possession. Following the terminology of the land in Genesis, those addressed here would be the 'seed' for whom the promise holds good. But they are not spoken to as such.

References to the patriarchs in Exodus are regarded as late insertions into the Moses story, and such references are clustered at the beginning of the book of Exodus (three references in P, 2:24; 6:3, 8; four in non-P material, 3:6, 15, 16, 4:5; and in 32:13 and

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<sup>2</sup> The idea of the Hexateuch arose from the observation that the Pentateuchal sources J, E, D, and P are incomplete without the conquest narrative in the book of Joshua.

33:1). Therefore, the insertion of the land promise into the exodus generation signals a reinterpretation of this promise as one which continues from the patriarchs to the exodus generation. For Van Seters (1972; 1992; 1994) the merging of Genesis or the patriarchal ancestors' story with the exodus generation was an innovation of the Yahwist historian. The ancestors referred to in Deuteronomy are the exodus generation and not the patriarchs in Genesis, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus, for Van Seters (1972) the merging of the patriarchs and the exodus generation reflects a confessional shift during the exilic period: "In the period of the exile, there was a conscious confessional shift from Yahweh as the God of the exodus to Yahweh as the God of the patriarchs and to base God's covenantal promises on identity with them" (Van Seters 1972:456). In the same vein, Römer (2000) argues that the content of the promise in Deuteronomy to the "fathers," land, and progeny, is basically that of the patriarchs in the Genesis. However, reference to the "fathers" in Deuteronomy is mainly to the exodus generation and not to the forefathers in Genesis. The explicit references to the "fathers," Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in Deuteronomy 1:8; 6:10; 9:5; 29:12; and 30:20 are also regarded as secondary insertions.

While the promise of land is portrayed as a privilege to be enjoyed by all, internal politics turned the land promise into a commodity to be enjoyed by some at the expense of others. If the story of the Hexateuch is read along the grain and *prima facie*, the reason the Levites did not have inheritance of land was due to their election to serve in the tabernacle; they became thus the tithe of Israel. However, when the text is read against the grain through the hermeneutic of suspicion, which questions the oppressive structures within the text and in our context, an alternative reading emerges, as attention is paid to other textual indicators which highlight the oppressive elements which led to the Levites' loss of their share of the land inheritance. The promise of land, thus, within the framework of the Hexateuch, became a privilege, which the tribe of Levi was forced to lose, thereby moving from being a royal tribe to being a landless tribe. The tribe of Levi, unlike the other eleven or twelve tribes, would not have a *nahalah* (inheritance, possession) in the so-called Promised Land. The parallels between the Moses-Joshua story and the Saul-David story, as will be

argued in this paper, reflect that the royal transition from Moses to Joshua/Levi to Joseph was not an innocent transition, rather, we see a young aide to the royal figure usurping power. The cultic privileging of the tribe of Levi in Israel's cult in this sense probably reflects a subsequent attempt to assert the leadership of the tribe of Levi in the post-exilic period.

### **TRIBE OF LEVI: ISRAEL'S FIRST ROYAL TRIBE**

The Moses story covers a span of 120 years of his life – from his birth to his death. As Schmid (2012) notes, it is framed by the reports about his birth (Exod 2) and his death (Deut 34). However, it also needs to be viewed as a story of the rise to prominence of the tribe of Levi among the sons of Jacob. It is set within the context of the twelve sons of Jacob (Exod 1). The theme of promise – promise of land and promise of offspring – to the ancestors in the Genesis story is one of non-fulfilment and fulfilment. The Exodus–Deuteronomy narrative begins by highlighting the fulfilment of the promise of offspring.

Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them. (Exod 1:7–8, NIV)

Exodus 1 introduces the descendants of Jacob as a distinct group from the Egyptians in whose land they are living. It also highlights a significant turn of events as the Israelites are forced to transition from a state of freedom to that of slaves. Exodus 1:1–8 serve to link the books of Genesis and Exodus, thereby highlighting that the text in its final form presupposes the Genesis story (Schmid 2010:62–65; Davies 199:24–25; Blenkinsopp 1992:134). In addition, Exodus 1 also anticipates and necessitates the deliverance of Israelites from slavery. However, the deliverance is one which would come through the tribe of Levi. Exodus 2:1 shifts the focus to the Levite tribe:

Now a man of the house of Levi married a Levite woman. (Exod 2:1, NIV)

The birth story of Moses, while retaining a certain level of anonymity with regard to the identity of the infant, does reveal the ethnic identity of the infant. Exodus 2:1 emphasizes the Levitical ancestry of Moses through an unnamed man and woman, who are later identified as Amram and Jochebed (Exod 6:20). As Dozeman (2009:84) notes, by disclosing the ethnic identity of the infant the Moses birth story shifts from the common pattern of the legends, in which the identity of the child is revealed only later in adulthood, after the figure is accepted as a national hero. The daughter of Pharaoh, following her rescue of the infant from the water, adopts Moses into the royal family. However, it would only be forty years later that the adopted Moses would act consciously on the basis of his ethnic identity, resulting in his delinking from the Egyptian royal family to relink with his own ethnic people.

### **Birth of the King from the Tribe of Levi**

The birth of Moses in Exodus 2:1–10 reflects other ancient Near East stories of legendary birth. There are significant parallels between the Moses story and the Sargon birth story (Cohen 1972; Ardiñach 1994), which relates the birth of an Akkadian king who ruled the Sumerian city states. Sargon's mother is a high priestess and, similarly, Moses' mother is a descendant of Levi and thus a member of the priestly tribe. Sargon was born in secret and was placed in a reed basket and was found by Aqqi, who adopted him. Moses was also born in secret and was kept in secret for three months to save him from the impending killing of the Israelite baby boys. Father figures do not intervene in either story: Sargon did not know his biological father, and in the case of Moses, while the father is identified as a descendant of Levi, he does not intervene in the rescue of the baby boy. When the goddess Ishtar starts taking interest in Sargon, a stage is set for him, which leads to him becoming king. Similarly, Moses' path to his future role as leader/king is set when he is adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. Although there are variations between the stories of Moses and Sargon, it is significant to note that both figures are put in baskets in rivers and are rescued, setting them up to assume leadership positions.

It is significant for us to note that in the Moses story the lineage of Moses is presented as an important component to the story. Moses is presented as a pure Levite—his father was a Levite and his mother a Levite as well; however, the birth story does not give the identity of the parents nor the identity of his sister who was there when the Egyptian royal daughter discovers Moses, thus highlighting the legendary convention of the story. It is only in Exodus 6 that the genealogy of Moses is explicitly revealed.

Moses' birth story also parallels another royal birth story, that of Cyrus, who became a Persian king (Zlotnick-Sivan 2004). When Cyrus is born, the reigning king, Astyages, on the basis of a vision, recognises a threat to his kingship and so seeks to eliminate the baby. Harpagus, the king's trusted man, who is charged with task of killing the baby, cannot kill the baby himself, and so entrusts the task to Mitrdates, a herdsman. Mitrdates is to take the baby into the mountains and put him where he will be devoured by wild animals, but Mitrdates' wife, when she sees that the baby is "fine and fair," persuades her husband that they should rather give up their own baby to be devoured by the wild animals and raise Cyrus as their own. Cyrus' true identity is later discovered when he is ten years of age, and he is then reunited with his biological parents. Cyrus grows up to become a brave and popular person, eventually dethroning Asytages and taking up the throne of the Persian Empire.

The accounts of these three births, Sargon, Moses, and Cyrus, share similar motifs: a death threat of the infant at birth, the rescue of the infant, the adoption of the infant, and the infant growing to become a leader. As Mathews rightly notes, the Moses account "shares a number of conceptual features with the ancient Near Eastern account of the rise of Sargon and Cyrus to power that suggest the portrayal of Moses as a royal-like figure who is destined to lead and rescue Israel from Egyptian rule" (Mathews 2012:48). Thus, Moses, a Levite, is presented as more than just a tribal head or elder within the Hebrews or within the Israelite tribes. Having introduced himself to the elders of the Israelites in Exodus 4:29–30, Moses assumes the royal role over the Israelites as one who is sent by Yahweh to set them free from their misery.

## The royal family: Moses as co-leader of Israel with Aaron and Miriam

The importance of the Levitical tribe is also heightened by the fact that the co-leaders with Moses all come from the tribe of Levi, and even more so from a common ancestor, Amram. In Exodus 4:14 Aaron is introduced as a brother to Moses and as a Levite, “Aaron the Levite.” The importance of the Levitical tribe is also heightened by the genealogy of Moses and Aaron in Exodus 6. This genealogy in Exodus 6 has to be viewed as an example of royal genealogy and priesthood genealogy (Wilson 1975; Johnson 1969; Levin 2001; Alexander 1993). The emphasis on the maternal side in the genealogy to some extent reflects royal ideology in the crafting of the genealogy:

<sup>20</sup> Amram married his father’s sister Jochebed, who bore him Aaron and Moses. (Exod 6:20 NIV)

<sup>23</sup> Aaron married Elisheba, daughter of Amminadab and sister of Nahshon, and she bore him Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. (Exod 6:23 NIV)

<sup>25</sup> Eleazar son of Aaron married one of the daughters of Putiel, and she bore him Phinehas. (Exod 6:25 NIV)

The genealogy somewhat shifts the focus from Moses to Aaron, highlighting the continuity of the priesthood lineage beyond the Pentateuch into the book of Joshua. Within the context of the Hexateuch, the royal lineage through Moses does not continue through to the book of Joshua. The royal lineage of the Levitical tribe does not extend beyond the death of Moses, whereas the priesthood lineage extends beyond Aaron and beyond the Pentateuch through Phineas, whose name appears in the genealogy of Aaron in Exodus 6:25. The lack of a maternal note with regard to the descendants of Moses highlights the discontinuity of the royal lineage through Moses.

The notes, in Exodus 6:26, “*It was this same Aaron and Moses* to whom the Lord said, ‘Bring the Israelites out of Egypt by their division,’” and again in Exodus 6:27, “These were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt about bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. *It was the same Moses and Aaron*” tend to place emphasis on

the leadership role of Moses and Aaron over all Israel, not just as leaders over the tribe of Levi.

Another Levite figure who is central in the Pentateuch is Miriam, who first appears as an unnamed sister in the birth story of Moses. When she is named for the first time in the book of Exodus, she is called Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, leading a song of victory after the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod 15). In Numbers 26:59, Miriam is referred to as the sister of Moses (see also 1 Chron 5:29; Exod 2).

The leadership role of this Levite woman is also heightened by the incident recorded in Numbers 12, in which Aaron and Miriam are in a leadership conflict with their sibling, Moses (Fischer 2000). The contention between Aaron and Miriam on the one hand, and Moses on the other, does not deprive Aaron or Miriam of their leadership role; rather, it is an attempt underline the unrivalled authority of Moses as a prophetic figure.<sup>3</sup> In Micah 6:5, the three are credited with the deliverance of Israelites: "I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam." The references to Miriam in the Pentateuch and in the prophetic literature highlight her importance not merely as a prophetic figure, but also as a leader (Trible 1989; 1995). Leuchter (2017:69) notes that the mention of the three, Moses-Aaron-Miriam, in Mic 6:1–8 is likely "an original part of an older oracular tradition. The oracle's sentiments fit well with the appeal to the distant past throughout the Book of Micah, and in this case, the distant past is remembered with Moses, Aaron, and Miriam on par with each other."

Within the story of Moses, as confined within the books of Exodus and Leviticus, Amram's family dominates the political landscape; it was this Levitical family that was at the helm of leading the people both politically and cultically. It should also be noted that in the Moses story, as confined to the book of Exodus, when the priests are inaugurated to serve in the newly established cult, there is no hint that such a privilege would exclude the rights to land in the Promised Land for the Aaronite family or the Levites in general.

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<sup>3</sup> The Deuteronomistic tradition sets Moses as a prophet par excellence: "Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut 34:10).



Furthermore, in the book of Leviticus, which is a resumption of the inauguration of the priests, and the Levites in general, there is no hint that their role and function as priests preclude them from the right to land. Instead, the promise of land is stated in general terms:

You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. But I said to you, “You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey.” I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from the nations. You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground – those which I have set apart as unclean for you. You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own. (Lev 20:23–26 NIV)

In addition, in the instruction on land use for the Israelite community there is no hint that the priests or the Levites will not have a share in the land just as every other tribe. Therefore, the loss of land for the tribe of Levi reflected in Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua comes as an unexpected turn in the narrative.

### **Moses: royal lawgiver and temple builder**

Lawgiving in the ancient Near Eastern context was an activity associated with royalty (Römer 2013). In the ancient Near Eastern cosmic conception, the king occupied a place of privilege between the gods and humans. The Code of Hammurabi, which is connected to a Babylonian king, Hammurabi, is inscribed on a stele, a granite stone about seven feet tall inscribed with 282 laws. The Code has three sections to it: the prologue, the laws, and the epilogue. In the prologue, Hammurabi regards himself as a “god-fearing prince,” chosen by the gods to ensure that justice prevails over Babylon, and he does so by decreeing the laws. Furthermore, in line with the royal ideology of the ancient Near East, the Code also describes Hammurabi as the temple builder (Hurowitz 1992). In the epilogue of the Code, it is highlighted that he had built the

Esagila, a temple, as a place of justice in the land. It is further highlighted that the stele was placed at the Esagila so that the oppressed could come there and read from the inscription (Wiseman 1962).

In the Pentateuch, Moses, like Hammurabi and other kings, is depicted using similar royal motifs—he is a lawgiver and temple builder. Exodus 24:12–18 describes how Moses received from the Lord the laws which were written on the “tablets of stone.” The writing of the laws on clay tablets, as Smith (2010:94) observes, was a norm in the ancient Near East for the public display of legal code. The book of Exodus describes the first set of tablets of stones as “the work of God; the writing was the writing of God” (Exod 32:16), emphasizing the divine origin of the law, whereas the second set of tablets of stone are chiselled out by Moses, and Moses writes on the tablets ‘the words of the covenant—the ten commandments’ (Exod 34:4; 28). The tablets of stone were kept in the ark (Exod 25:21; Deut 10:5), which is in turn placed in the Tabernacle or the mobile temple during the exodus period. Lawgiving and temple construction go hand in hand; the temple or the Tabernacle becomes the locus of the divine laws. The construction of the tabernacle in Exodus 25–40 also sets the Tabernacle as the locus for the “testimony” (עֵדוּת) or the law. Thus, as lawgiver and temple builder, Moses is king *par excellence*, whose laws become the standard for future kings, just as Hammurabi’s laws became the norm for future kings.

The royalty of Moses is confirmed at the conclusion of the Pentateuch, where he is referred to as king:

This is the blessing that Moses the man of God pronounced on the Israelites before his death. He said: “The LORD came from Sinai and dawned over them from Seir; he shone forth from Mount Paran. He came with myriads of holy ones from the south, from his mountain slopes. Surely it is you who love the people; all the holy ones are in your hand. At your feet they all bow down, and from you receive instruction, the law that Moses gave us, the possession of the assembly of Jacob. *He was king*

*over Jeshurun when the leaders of the people assembled, along with the tribes of Israel.* (Deut 33:1-5 NIV)<sup>4</sup>

While this is another instance where the term “king” (מֶלֶךְ) is used with reference to Moses, it clearly highlights that Moses was viewed as the prototypical king of Israel (Meeks 1967; Porter 1963). As Römer (2013:85) observes:

In the entire Torah there is almost no mention of an Israelite or Judahite king to come; Moses is the only royal figure necessary. The only mention of a king occurs in Moses’ farewell discourse in the book of Deuteronomy, in which Moses re-enacts the Law and defines the role and the power of the people’s authorities. In this context, the ‘future’ king is mentioned, but his power is limited.

The tribe of Levi within the Moses story is projected as a royal tribe, with Moses at the helm as king. The legendary rise of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, Amram’s family, sets the tribe of Levi on a status of royalty among the exodus tribes. The three figures, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam all do not make it to the Promised Land—they all die outside of the Promised Land, this because in the Numbers story, they are disqualified from entering the Promised Land (Num 12; 13–14; 20). The story of the royal tribe of Levi takes a turn when it lost their royal status and ends up not having a share in the land of promise. With the disqualification and death of the three, Miriam, Aaron, and Moses, room was open for an outsider to take over the royal power. However, it is a cause of wonder as to how royal power transitioned from the tribe of Levi to the Joseph tribes.

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis added. The term Jeshurun is used here as another name for Israel, as in Isaiah: “This is what the LORD says – he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.” (Isa 44:2 NIV, cf. Deut 32:15; 33:26).

## ROYAL USURPATION: TAKEOVER OF ROYALTY FROM THE TRIBE OF LEVI BY THE JOSEPH TRIBES

Previous studies on Levites or priesthood have tended to focus on the hierarchical order of priests and Levites and on the history of development of priesthood in ancient Israel.<sup>5</sup> As Grabbe (1996) notes with regard to the issue of priesthood in ancient Israel:

Although the biblical text gives an overall impression of a priestly structure that goes back to Moses, many discrepancies between texts leave the critical scholar with no doubt that the temple priesthood reached a fairly stable configuration early in the Second Temple period only after a long period of struggle between rival factions.

Without minimising the literary complexities and historical developments of priesthood, our focus is on the tribal dynamics, which likely resulted in the exclusion of the tribe Levi from land allotment.<sup>6</sup> In the Hexateuch, the tribe of Levi is presented

<sup>5</sup> See among others, Gunneweg (1965), Cody (1965), Blenkinsopp (1995), Grabbe (2004; 2004). Blenkinsopp (1998), Nurmela (1998), Knoppers (1999), Schaper (2000), Hunt (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars tend to regard the Levites as originating from one of the tribes of Israel, which became extinct and its members scattered throughout Israel (cf. Gen 49:7). This landless group became the גֵּרִים (“sojourners”), who progressed from being the wandering גֵּרִים to the settled גֵּרִים. This group then made its livelihood from sacral duty as priests (Cody 1969; Bray 2006). Other scholars regard the Levites as a social movement of people who came from different tribes united by their function as priests rather than kinship (Gunneweg 1965; Stager, 1985; 1988). What is common in both positions is that the Levites are regarded as having functioned as the rural priests, while the other priests were operating in the urban and royal cults. As things developed, the rural priests could also come to the central urban and royal cult to officiate and share in the priestly duties. However, there were continued conflicts between the diverse priestly groups. Through Josiah’s reform, the Levites (the priests who ministered at the local cults) got equal rights with the Zadokite priests, who ministered at the central cult. However, some scholars tend to view the Josiah’s priestly reform project as not entirely successful, considering that the Levites apparently attained a lower status to that of the Zadokite priests. From that point on, the status of Levites continued to decline. In Ezekiel 40–48, the prophet regards Zadokites as the only priests who remained faithful to Yahweh and therefore worthy to serve as priests, a move which likely relegated the rest of the Aaronite priests to the status of Levites (Grabbe, 1996:195). Scholars consider the tensions among the various priestly groups to have carried into the Persian period, when finally a compromise was reached among the diverse groups through genealogical linkage as the Zadokites were incorporated into the Aaronite genealogy (Blenkinsopp 2009:145–152; Grabbe 1996:195). It should be noted that the reconstructions of the development of priesthood in Israel tend to overlook the

as a unit that initially formed part of the twelve sons of Jacob or the twelve tribes; however, the tribe comes to be excluded from the official twelve as the tribe of Joseph split into Manasseh and Ephraim.

The Moses story, or the story of the royal tribe, the tribe of Levi, as contained in the books of Exodus and Leviticus, projects nothing about the Levites not having the right to a land allotment in the Promised Land.<sup>7</sup> Considering the Pentateuch as a whole, Frevel (2013) notes, the Levites appear mostly in the book of Numbers. From the synchronic perspective, the exclusion of Levites from the official list of the twelve tribes takes effect from the book of Numbers. Numbers and Deuteronomy both presume the exclusion of the tribe of Levi from land allotment and serve to provide a justification for their exclusion. If such exclusion from the land is anything to go by, its absence in Exodus and Leviticus, in which Levites and Aaron together with his sons are set apart (Exod 32:26–29; 29–31; 40:12–15), is perplexing. It is for this reason that the editorial hand in Deuteronomy 10:8–9, in its reinterpretation or retelling, locates the exclusion of the tribe of Levi to the time when the Israelites were camped at Sinai/Horeb.

The argument that we make in this section is that the rise of the Joseph tribes within the context of the Hexateuch should also be linked with the rise of Joshua to power. Within the Moses story, as confined to the book of Exodus and Leviticus, Joshua is first introduced as a military leader who leads Israel's army against the Amalekites (Exod 17), then as a (young) assistant of Moses (Exod 24:13; 32:17) or Joshua son of Nun (Exod 33:11). The two identities somehow seem to be in conflict with each other. In the book of Numbers, Moses' young assistant is linked with Hoshea son of Nun, a tribal leader of the tribe of Ephraim. It seems highly unlikely that a young assistant of Moses would have at the same time been a military leader who leads Israel's army to battle and also a tribal leader of the tribe of Ephraim (Num

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dimension of the Levites' exclusion from land as this is often treated as a preliminary matter.

<sup>7</sup> The distinction, which Schaper (2000) makes, with regard to the term "Levite" is helpful. A "Levite" in a generic sense refers to anyone who is a descendant of the tribe of Levi, and on the other hand, it is used to refer to the tabernacle/temple officials who fulfilled the function as subordinates of the priests.

13:1-2, 8; cf. 11:28). It is no wonder that the author of Numbers clearly tries to solve this problem by having Moses change the name of the tribal leader of Ephraim from Hoshea to Joshua and so the note: “Moses gave Hoshea son of Nun the name Joshua” (Num 13:16). This merging of identities in Numbers seems to be a literary exercise in order to glorify the Joseph tribes by collapsing the identity of Hoshea the tribal leader of Ephraim with that of Joshua, Moses’ young assistant. Thus, this merging of Moses’ young assistant with Hoshea paved the way for the Deuteronomist to assert Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, to be the natural figure to take the royal sceptre from Moses:

But your assistant, Joshua son of Nun, will enter it. Encourage him, because he will lead Israel to inherit it. (Deut 1:38 NIV)

In the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua, Joshua, the assistant of Moses, is endorsed as the natural successor of Moses’ royal position. He gets the divine endorsement as the rightful successor of Moses (Deut 1:38; 3:28; 31:14–23; Josh 1:5; 3:7; 4:14) and the endorsement of Moses (Deut 3:26; 31:1–8). The shift of power from Moses, who belonged to the tribe Levi, to Joshua from the tribe of Ephraim, signals the Levites’ loss of political power. The transition from Moses to Joshua marks a discontinuation of the Levite royal house. The legitimisation of Joshua as the royal successor of Moses in Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua thus makes a Josephite a royal figure.

The shift of the royal position from the tribe of Levi to the tribe(s) of Joseph implies the loss of tribal power and authority. Usually such transitions are accompanied by tensions and violence. Though the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua seem to portray a smooth and peaceful transition from Moses to Joshua, there are indications that this transition was not as smooth and peaceful as the text projects it.

### **Patrilineal royal inheritance broken through young aides**

In ancient Israel, inheritance was passed through patrilineal lines. Thus, the father would pass his possessions, position, and land to his sons. In the case of the priests, the priestly lineage proceeded through the patrilineal inheritance of Aaron’s

descendants.<sup>8</sup> Surprising, however, is that the royal position does not continue through Israel's first royal figure, Moses. Thus, when the Hexateuch is read along the grain, Moses wilfully skips his own descendants and anyone from his own tribe of Levi to hand the royal baton to an Ephraimite, Joshua the son of Nun. Moses' action is at odds with the practice during his time.

The transition from Moses to Joshua to some extent parallels the transition from Saul to David. In 1 Samuel, King Saul takes the young David, who is from another tribe and cultivates him, just as Moses cultivates his young assistant from another tribe. The young assistants are brought under the royal wing; however, they ultimately end up usurping the power from the legitimate heirs. In the case of Saul, when he realises that the patrilineal succession is under threat, he attempts to eliminate David; however, unsuccessfully so. In the Saul-David narrative, Saul, like Moses, who set Joshua as army commander over Israel, sets David as a commander of the army (1 Sam 18:5, 13; cf. Exod 17; Deut 31:1–8). However, when Saul realises the threat of losing the dynastic succession, he even warns Jonathan:

Saul's anger flared up at Jonathan and he said to him, "You son of a perverse and rebellious woman. Don't I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you? As long the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he must die. (1 Sam 20:30–31)

The principle of patrilineal royal succession was common in the ancient Near East, and thus it is not surprising that Saul would have been infuriated when his attempt to establish a dynastic name was threatened. As Baden highlights, "kings who are succeeded by outsiders are denigrated; those who are succeeded by their offspring

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<sup>8</sup> Regarding the priestly genealogical succession as portrayed in the book of Numbers, Frevel (2013:157) observes: "The overall genealogical concept of the priesthood and the restriction within the very small family circle of father and son (or father and sons, father and son and uncle, etc.) implies the charge and function, if not appointment of a single priest of the highest rank. In the narrative world of the book of Numbers, these are in genealogical sequence Aaron and Eleazar. The book of numbers implies in several narratives the charge of a *הגדול הכהן* even if he is not addressed by this term."

have the royal line named after them and gain fame even in the eyes of non-Israelites” (Baden 2013:68). However, in an attempt to exonerate David’s usurpation of the kingdom, the Deuteronomistic author portrays David as an innocent figure who had no ambitions to violently take over the throne. From this perspective, David had ample opportunity to kill Saul but would not do it, saying, “The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord’s anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the Lord” (1 Sam 24:6). And when another opportunity presents itself to kill Saul, David again states,

Don’t destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed and be guiltless? As surely as the Lord lives, he said, the Lord himself will strike him; either his time will come and he will die, or he will go into the battle and perish. But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed. Now get the spear and water jug that are near his head, and let’s go. (1 Sam 26:9–11)

In 1 Samuel 24:16-22, Saul surprisingly acknowledges and accepts his fate, that he will not be able to establish a royal dynasty, but instead it will move to David: “I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands. Now swear to me by the Lord at you will not cut off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father’s family” (1 Sam 24:20–21). As some scholars have observed, Saul was in pursuit of David because of a coup attempt (Baden, 2013b; Halpern 2001; McKenzie 2000; Malul 1996). The Deuteronomistic picture of David suggests that David had nothing to do with Saul’s death; however, it is the same David who allows for the massacre of Saul’s descendants (2 Sam 21). The elimination of Saul’s descendants, as Baden notes, should be viewed as a biblical example “of a new ruler eliminating previous royal family” (Baden 2013:18).

In the context of the Hexateuch, the only time that Moses’ descendants are referred to is in the Moses story as contained in the book of Exodus. Moses’ lineage, unlike the priesthood lineage through Aaron, is not followed up on within the Hexateuch. The last that Moses’ descendants are heard of in the Hexateuch is when



Moses' father-in-law Jethro returns Moses' two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, and his wife Zipporah, while the Israelites are still in the desert journey (Exod 18).

The textual elimination of Moses' descendants in the rest of the Hexateuch sets Joshua, Moses' assistant, as the contending royal successor, but this would not have made him the legitimate contender. The textual elimination of Moses' descendants amounts to a silencing of the opposing voices, which raises doubts about the legitimacy of Joshua's succession (Greifenhagen 2002:171). For Greifenhagen (2002:171), the textual elimination of Moses' lineage is probably due to the Pentateuch's anti-Egyptian stance, as Moses' family is strongly associated with Egypt. *Pace* Greifenhagen, the exclusion of Moses' lineage should be viewed from the perspective of royal succession. The legitimate heirs to Moses' royal position were his sons. The textual elimination of Moses' lineage thus leaves room for an outsider to assume royal position.

In spite of the legendary nature of the Moses story, it is highly unlikely that the royal sceptre would have been taken by an outsider without causing an outcry from within Moses' own family and within the tribe of Levi. It is not unreasonable to suspect that attempts would have been made to wipe out potential rivals – Moses' descendants (the Mushites) – and those who might have opposed Joshua's legitimacy, just as in the case of the *coup d'état* by David on Saul's royal family (2 Sam 21:1–9), by Baasha on Nadab's royal family (1 Kgs 15:25–31), and by Jehu on Omri's royal family and any associates (2 Kgs 10:6–17). These *coups d'état* are all provided with justification and/or also approved of by God or the prophets. The legitimization of royal takeovers from outside reflects the power relations through which the negative features of power, such as massacre, exclusion, and restriction, are used to justify the powerful.<sup>9</sup> While the rise of Joshua, as an outsider, to power, does not seem at face value to have included the massacres of the *coups d'état* just noted, such a possibility cannot be ruled out in the case of the Moses-Joshua transition.

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<sup>9</sup> On issues of legitimation by those in power, I am indebted to Beetham (1991) and Oest (2011).

## **Exaltation of the Joseph tribes and the denigration of the Levites**

The rise of Joshua to royalty is also intertwined with the exaltation of the Joseph tribes in the Hexateuch. Within the context of the Hexateuch, the Joseph story in Genesis is intended to serve as an aetiology to justify the Joseph tribes' claim for more land in the Promised Land. Our focus, however, is going to be on the Joseph story, not as contained in Genesis, but rather as contained in Numbers through Joshua.

The rise of Joshua to royalty also implies a rise to privilege for the Joseph tribes. The Joseph tribes should not be presumed to have always been recognised as two separate tribes. The status of Joseph as two separate tribes seems to have only originated when the tribes had entered the land. This is particularly so considering the statement in Deuteronomy 27:12–14:

When you have crossed the Jordan, these tribes shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin. And these tribes shall stand on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali. The Levites shall recite to all the people of Israel in a loud voice.

This text clearly does not presuppose any special privilege towards the tribe of Joseph; any privileging of this tribe could only have happened when a Josephite was in a position of royalty or power. Thus, any reference within the Pentateuch to the Joseph tribes as already two should be viewed as retrojection back to the time before Moses (i.e., the Joseph story in Gen 37–40) or to the time of Moses (i.e., the census in Num 1 and 26, and Deut 33:16–17). Particularly noticeable in Deuteronomy 33:16–18 is that the tribe of Joseph is regarded as royalty; thus in this sense royalty is not just confined to the individual family within the tribe, but the tribe as a whole assumes the role of royalty:

About Joseph he said: “May the LORD bless his land with the precious dew from heaven above and with the deep waters that lie below; with the best the sun brings forth and the finest the moon can yield; with the choicest gifts of the ancient mountains and the fruitfulness of the

everlasting hills; with the best gifts of the earth and its fullness and the favour of him who dwelt in the burning bush. Let all these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince among his brothers. In majesty he is like a firstborn bull; his horns are the horns of a wild ox. With them he will gore the nations, even those at the ends of the earth. Such are the ten thousands of Ephraim; such are the thousands of Manasseh. (Deut 33:13–17 NIV)

The rise to power of the tribe of Joseph implies that that tribe became eligible for certain privileges. The tribe of Joseph is, in the text quoted above, exalted to the status of firstborn. In the Joseph story in Genesis, the young Joseph is privileged by his father as though he were the firstborn (see 1 Chron 5:1). Just as Jacob gives the status of firstborn to Joseph, when he blessed Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (Genesis 48:1–22), similarly Moses is presented in Deuteronomy 33:13–17 as endorsing such a privilege. This rise to privilege implies that Joseph would get a double portion of the land, as each of his descendants would get a share of the land as son. It is hard to imagine that the tribe of Joseph would have been able to get such a privilege if they were not in power. It is not surprising, therefore, that their right to a double portion is also tied to the status of royalty. It was under the dominion of Joshua, a Josephite, that the tribe of Joseph is able to claim a double portion of the land.

When the tribe of Joseph took the position of royalty under Joshua, the tribe of Levi had to become like the other tribes under the dominion of the tribe of Joseph; however, the condition of the tribe of Levi would become worse than that of any other tribe. To be a Levite was to belong to the damned of society, the marginalised others. The status of the landless Levites was comparable to that of the marginalised in society: aliens, fatherless, and widows.

And do not neglect the Levites living in your towns, for they have no allotment or inheritance of their own. At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and

the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. (Deut 14:27–29 NIV)

As Sheckman (2011:98) notes, the tithe system was “connected to the fact that the Levites have no tribal allotment of their own and thus no land on which to grow their own crops for food. The tithe was an integral part of a welfare system that helps support the landless cultic class.”

Under the reign of the tribe of Joseph, the Levites were left to beg for their survival. In Joshua 21, the Levites approach Eleazer the priest and Joshua the royal leader to request an allotment. The request is crafted as a reminder of what Moses commanded; however, it is in truth a request from the forgotten other. Like any tribe, the Levites needed to have land to utilise for essential purposes such as dwelling. What appears to be, in some sense an injustice, is that they had to ask for it. The fact that the Levites had to ask for small pieces of land to perform some activities means that the “Lord is [not entirely] their inheritance,” as the Pentateuch suggests.

We cannot help but suspect that the divide-and-rule tactic was being used to manage the tribe of Levi in order to prevent them from regrouping to reclaim their royal status. Cook (2011) observes that Levites were for the most part of ancient Israel’s history disenfranchised and only started to make their comeback towards the end of the history of Judah’s state. During the post-exilic period, the Levites’ status was significantly enhanced, as the office of High Priest became equated with royal function (Cody 1969; Goodblatt 1994; Rooke 2000; VanderKam 2004). As Maier (1993:141) notes:

In the post-exilic times, and especially following the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, this privileged position developed into a dominant one. The province of Judea in the Hellenistic and Roman times was a temple state, and its cult personnel were in charge of the temple, the cultic-religious and economically dominant institution.

It suffices at this point to simply note that it was especially in the post-exilic period that the status of the Levites changed from being marginalised to being privileged. However, during the pre-exilic period, and especially during the early phase of the tribal society, the Levites were the marginalised others—the landless of society.

The mere fact that the Levites were accommodated in the inheritance of the other tribes through the allotment of the forty-eight cities shows that they were relegated to the bottom of society. It is no wonder that in Deuteronomy, the Levites are classified with those at the bottom of society: aliens, the fatherless, and the widows (Deut 14:29; 16:11–14). The triennial tithe in Deuteronomy 14:28–29 and 26:13–15 was a means of catering to the poor in society. As Hiers (2002) notes, the triennial tithe was probably intended to function as a food bank, with the produce preserved and distributed over the three-year period. For Dahmen (1962) and McDonald (2015:102), the Levites, as referred to in the triennial tithe, should not be viewed as functioning in the status of sanctuary/temple servants, as in Numbers and Chronicles, but as the marginalised other—a landless group in society which lived out of the generosity of others.

The social status of Levites at the bottom of society as the landless of society should be viewed as a negative result of the power relations when the tribe of Joseph usurped the tribe of Levi from royalty. It is highly unlikely that the relegation of the Levites to the bottom of society would have happened peacefully, as projected in the Hexateuch.

## **CONCLUSION**

The promise of land was finally fulfilled in the book of Joshua when Joshua led the tribes into the land flowing with milk and honey. The promise was of land for the twelve tribes to enjoy; however, it became a commodity for only eleven tribes to enjoy, as the tribe of Levi was excluded. This was as a result of the shift of royal power from the tribe of Levi to the tribe of Joseph. The tribe of Levi in the process transitioned from being a royal tribe to a lower social class status—a tribe with no land inheritance, a tribe whose social status became that of the underprivileged. The

exaltation of the Josephite tribe through the ascent of Joshua into power resulted in the marginalisation of the Levites. The tribe of Levi was initially a royal-priestly tribe, which had within it the cultic leader and the royal leader. The shift of royalty from Moses to Joshua was a political shift of power through what was possibly a violent takeover of royalty through the massacre of the Levites.

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