THE WESTCAR PAPYRUS AND GENESIS 42–44: AN OVERLOOKED REFERENCE?

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Much controversy has occurred over the possible links that can be established between the Joseph cycle and its Egyptian background. While many studies have been chiefly concerned with dating the literary strata within the Joseph story, it is also possible to investigate the interpretive implications of possible allusions within the Joseph narrative to Egyptian texts. This study will propose a possible link between Genesis 42–44 and a motif in a cycle of stories found in the Westcar Papyrus. It will briefly review the provenance and contents of the Westcar Papyrus, survey previous scholarship on the relevance of the narratives found in Westcar for the study of the Pentateuch, discuss the necessary definitions of and criteria for literary “allusions” and “echoes,” and explore the potential implications of this connection for the reading of the Joseph narrative.

The Westcar Papyrus (also known as Papyrus Berlin 3033) dates to the Hyksos period (1640–1550 BCE), and is written in Middle Egyptian hieroglyphics. However, the story it contains was most likely composed a few centuries earlier.1 It contains a story known as “King Cheops and the Magicians” (hereafter KCM) and is set in the Old Kingdom in the middle of the third millennium BCE,2 in which the sons of King Khufu tell tales to amuse their father. After a fragmentary first tale, the second tale involves a chief lector named Webaoner, whose wife has an affair with a townsman. Hollis finds a connection between this aspect of KCM and the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife in Genesis 39.3 Webaoner catches the townsman by making a crocodile out of wax, which transforms into a real crocodile when it is thrown into the lake. Shupak suggests that this text lies behind the competition with the Egyptian magicians in Exodus 7–8,4 and Rendsburg specifically sees it as influencing Moses’ ability to turn his staff into a snake.5

The third tale is about King Snefru. Snefru hires a crew of women to row a boat around his lake but is distraught when one of the women loses a fish-shaped charm of turquoise in the water. The king’s chief lector and scribe, Djadjaemonkh, saves the day by dividing the waters of the lake through his
magical powers and finding the charm. Shupak connects this to the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus 14, as does Currid.

Most significant for the present study is the fourth tale, which begins with one of Khufu’s sons informing him of a man named Dedi who was 110 years old, had magical powers, and knew the numbers of the “secret chambers of the sanctuary of Thoth.” Hoffmeier notes that KCM is one of the many examples in which 110 years is considered to be the ideal life span in Egyptian texts. This parallels Joseph’s age at death in Genesis 50:22, a point also made by Guerin. Khufu immediately commissions his son to bring Dedi to the royal court, where he demonstrates his powers. When Khufu asks Dedi about the secret chambers of the sanctuary, Dedi states that the only person who can discover the number is the eldest son to be born to a woman named Reddedet, the wife of a priest named Rewosre. The narrative then focuses on the work of the goddesses Isis, Nephthys, Meskhenet, and Heket as they assist in the births of Reddedet’s three sons. Re promises that these sons are ordained to be kings. After the three sons are successfully born, Rewosre gives the goddesses a sack of corn as payment for their help. However, Isis decides they should instead do something to amaze the children. Together, the goddesses put three crowns into the sack, cause a storm to start, and store the sack in Rewosre’s house. Two weeks later, Reddedet discovers the corn while looking for provisions to make beer. To her amazement, the room where the corn is stored is filled with the sounds of royal music. The manuscript then abruptly cuts off as Reddedet gets into an argument with her maidservant. As a whole, this story collection serves to provide light entertainment as well as legitimate the Middle Kingdom dynasty. As Sparks states, “like most court tales, this one looked beyond the commoner and attempted to flatters its Middle Kingdom royal audience. It accomplished this through a playful ex eventu prophecy, which ‘predicted’ the fall of an Old Kingdom dynasty as well as the rise of a Middle Kingdom dynasty to replace it.”

Scholarly works on the Joseph cycle have mostly ignored the potential parallel between the crowns placed in the sacks of corn in KCM and Joseph’s placement of his brothers’ silver and his cup in the brothers’ sacks in Genesis 42–44. This connection is suggested by Thompson and Irvin, albeit in the context of arguing that since the Egyptian texts containing this and other parallels are intentionally fictitious, the Joseph narrative itself must likewise be ahistorical. Thompson and Irvin notably do not draw any implications from this connection for the interpretation of the Joseph story. Hoffmeier dismisses

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Thompson and Irvin’s overall approach as based on selective comparisons that fail to establish that the two sources have comparable genres. In the case of the relationship between the money in sacks in Genesis 42–44 and KCM, Hoffmeier is skeptical due to the fact that Westcar dates to the “seventeenth to mid-sixteenth century” BCE and there is no evidence of its being widely copied or used, making it a full millennium earlier than the date Thompson and Irvin would propose for the Joseph narrative.

However, it is worth noting the elements of KCM that have been recognized as having legitimate parallels to the Joseph and Exodus narratives. In the exposition of KCM above, several of these well-acknowledged connections were cited: the affair between Webaoer’s wife and the townsman and Joseph and Potiphar’s wife; Webaoer’s wax crocodile and Moses’ competition with the magicians; Djadjaemonkh’s dividing the waters of the lake and Moses’ parting of the Red Sea; and Dedi’s age and Joseph’s being 110 years old at death.

A minor supporting point may be found in the frequently posited literary dependence of the Joseph Cycle upon the story of Sinuhe, another Middle Kingdom text. Sinuhe is the story of a man who served in the Egyptian royal court and felt compelled to flee to Syria-Palestine. After becoming successful and even rising to political leadership in this foreign land, he eventually returns to Egypt. This movement from a homeland, to a foreign land, back to a homeland mirrors the large-scale structure of the Joseph narrative, although in the inverse geographical direction. The story of Sinuhe also communicates the lessons that “Egyptians in foreign lands always rise to the top,” and that “the only option left for the hero is a return to his Egyptian homeland.” While the widespread copying and proliferation of Sinuhe is well documented, its frequent comparison to the Joseph story should prompt re-investigation of potential allusions to KCM in the Joseph cycle as well. While scholarship has tended overall to consider parallels found in the Persian and Hellenistic periods more significant than earlier Egyptian texts, the presence of allusions to “late” texts does not diminish the validity of potential allusions to earlier Egyptian compositions as well. While the motif of placing treasure in a grain sack would in isolation not be sufficient for establishing possible literary dependence, these broader patterns of links throughout Genesis and Exodus to other aspects of KCM and other prominent Middle Kingdom texts make this proposal worthy of consideration.

Before considering how one might read the motif of the silver placed in the sacks in Genesis 42–44 in light of KCM, it is necessary to consider the nature
and significance of literary allusions and echoes. Sommer provides helpful definitions and discussions of these terms. For “allusion,” Sommer draws from Ben-Porat’s four-stage definition of how readers find allusions in texts. First, a reader will find a “marker,” which is “an identifiable element or pattern in one text belonging to another independent text,” itself linking to the larger phenomenon of a “sign.” Second, the reader will realize which text is being referred to, that is, the source of the marker they noticed. Third, the reader will read the sign in the alluding text in a new way as a result of this connection. Fourth (and optionally), the reader may generate other possible connections between the two texts that are not directly dependent on the marker or the sign. Crucially, the identification of a connection to another text does not itself constitute “allusion,” but only when this connection results in the alluding text being read in a new way. For these cases when no new reading is generated, Sommer uses the term “echo.” In other words, in an “echo” only the first two steps above are followed, and “the meaning of the marked sign in the source has little effect on a reading of the sign with the marker in the alluding text.”

With these definitions of “allusion” and “echo” in mind, it is necessary to review the possible reasons that authors may employ these devices. An author may seek to acknowledge the influence of the source work for the purpose of enhancing the respectability of either text. Such a literary connection may also demonstrate the cultural awareness of the author (and by extension, their readers). At the same time, allusions (and their discovery) can simply be sources of pleasure in and of themselves. This last purpose is often the point of many echoes. Sommer provides examples of popular advertisements that borrow phrases from high literature or theatre. While it is not the case that knowing the contents of the book or play in question would help one “understand” the advertisement more accurately, “it does engender a pleased, even amused, sense of recognition.”

This discussion of allusions, echoes, and their possible purposes will inform the reflections below on the relationship between KCM and the sacks in the Joseph cycle. The proceeding analysis will sketch out the different implications resulting from whether this literary connection is considered an “allusion” or a mere “echo.”

If there is reason to think that the author(s) of the Joseph cycle were aware of the narratives in the Westcar Papyrus, what implications might this have for the interpretation of the biblical story? This study will consider three aspects of the narrative that could be impacted.
First, since in KCM it is the goddesses of childbirth that put the crowns in the sacks, an implicit allusive comparison emerges (from the third stage of the process of allusion described above) in which Joseph takes the place of the Egyptian gods as one who performs a role of providing sustenance and guiding circumstances. This divine role is placed on the brothers’ lips in 42:28. More significantly, it is confessed by Joseph’s steward in 43:23 when he tells the brothers *Peace be to you, fear not; your God, and the God of your father, hath given you treasure in your sacks; I had your money.* Westermann states regarding this attribution of Joseph’s actions to the divine that “in the broader context of the Joseph story the steward is expressing what has really happened: God, the God of your father, has taken care of you; be at peace! . . . With a smile he says, ‘God . . . put a treasure in your sacks’; they [the brothers] can make of it what they will . . . “32 This divine, gift-giving role played by Joseph fits well within the overall theme of “the complexity of how human and divine actions are intertwined in the story.”33 On the other hand, if nothing more than an “echo,” this trope could simply have been borrowed without the intention to establish a deeper connection between the characters in the two texts, and as a result, Joseph’s performance of these actions may not necessarily need to lead to an implicit comparison of him with the goddesses.

Second, this allusion to KCM also provides a means of contrasting the consequences of Joseph’s repeated placement of silver and eventually a cup in the sacks (Gen. 44:1-2) with the goddesses’ placement of the crowns in the corn. This function of the potential allusion emerges from the fourth stage of the process of allusion given above. The discovery of the money in the sacks creates a literary connection to the silver for which the brothers originally sold Joseph into slavery in Genesis 37:28. Notably, Marzouk states “‘silver’ or ‘money’ is mentioned 20 times in Genesis 42–45 in relation to Joseph’s brothers, which is the exact number of the money they received for selling Joseph.”34 The discovery of the goblet also suggests comparison to Rachel’s theft of Laban’s gods (Gen. 31:19),35 an act that led to much trouble. The sense of shock over the punishment for taking these things (Gen. 44:17) would have initially caused much grief to Joseph’s brothers, (although it does eventually lead to the resolution of this tension in Gen. 45).36 In contrast, the goddesses’ placement of the crowns in the sacks in KCM was meant to cause delight and indicate the promise of kingship. This is argued by Holm, who states “The gods leave three crowns in a sack of barley as a sign of the royal future ordained for the three babies.”37 Simpson notes that this prophecy of
future kingship is the main point of KCM as a whole, stating “The real sub-
stance of the composition is certainly the prophecy of the birth of the kings,
and the other tales merely lead up to it.” At the same time, if this connection
is merely an echo, no explicit comparison of the immediate effects on Jo-
seph’s brothers and the family of Reddedet needs to be made.

Third and more distantly (and also within the fourth step of the allusion
process described above), the fact that the placement of the crowns in the
sacks in KCM was a promise of kingship could resonate with another aspect
of the Joseph story: Joseph’s hand in preserving the life of his family made
possible the rulers that were promised to come from them, specifically the
line of Judah, as promised in Jacob’s speech in Genesis 49:8-12. This could
be hinted at in the decisive leadership role performed by Judah in 43:3-10
and 44:14-34, as Judah is key in convincing Jacob to let the brothers take
their second trip to Egypt, and also gives a heartfelt appeal to Joseph to let
him remain prisoner in place of Benjamin. Some may object that there is no
convincing evidence that Joseph intended to imply a royal promise with the
silver and cup placed in the sacks. However, such evidence may not be nec-
essary if there is an underlying theme of royal language and royal shaping of
the characters throughout the patriarchal narratives (of which the Joseph story
is a part) as a whole, as Van Seters has argued.

In conclusion, this article has argued that sufficient possibility exists that
the author(s) of the Joseph cycle referenced the fourth tale of the Westcar
Papyrus, in which the fertility goddesses place crowns in a sack of corn in
order to bless the parents of the three future kings. Reading the Joseph story
as alluding to KCM could serve to clarify certain themes that are foreshad-
owed in the narrative, specifically, human and divine intention, the testing of
Joseph’s brothers, and the promise of future kingship. Alternatively, and
more plausibly, the author(s) of the Joseph cycle could simply have been
“echoing” this motif from KCM, and, as such, the literary link would provide
a source of delight and demonstrate the biblical author(s)’s (and some read-
ers’) familiarity with the traditions of Egypt. The implications of this connec-
tion for the dating of the Joseph cycle remain a question for another day.

NOTES:
1. T. L. Holm, Of Courtiers and Kings: The Biblical Daniel Narratives and Ancient Story-
Collections (Explorations in Ancient Near Eastern Civilizations, 1; Winona Lake, IN: Ei-
senbrauns, 2013) p. 114. An accessible translation (under the title of “King Cheops and the Ma-


8. Due to the fragmentary nature of the manuscript, the exact number of tales throughout is disputed. Holm, op. cit., p. 114, simply states that it contains “at least three stories.” Meanwhile, the headings in Simpson, op. cit., pp. 14–24 clearly delineate the four tales as described in the body text above, but insert an additional heading entitled “The Birth of the Kings” at the point in the story where Reddedet gives birth (p. 21). While it could be plausibly posited that a fifth tale begins here, the lack of an ending in the extant text makes this proposal uncertain. The convention adopted in this study is to refer to the beginning of the fourth tale through the end of the manuscript as the fourth tale, despite the apparent change in focus with the narrative of the birth of the kings.


13. Ibid., p. 254.
19. Simpson, op. cit., p. 54 states “With the exception of religious texts and various standard formulas, few other compositions are represented in as many copies or partial copies.”
24. Ibid., p. 12.
25. Ibid., p. 12.
26. Ibid., p. 12.
27. Ibid., p. 15.
28. Ibid., p. 15.
29. Ibid., p. 18.
30. Ibid., p. 19.
31. Ibid., p. 20.
34. Marzouk, op. cit., p. 90.
36. Westermann, op. cit., p. 133.
37. Holm, op. cit., p. 117.