

EXCURSUS TWO

THE BIRTH OF THE FOUNDING KINGS

The problem of the birth of the hero is presented as connected with several elements of the *Tale*, and often these have been interpreted from a chiefly pagan-mythological perspective. I have expressed my opinion on this question elsewhere in the book and will not repeat it here. I will only point out several examples so that these may be discussed further on. The first example is the story of the child Ispor, who was carried in a *basket* (or in a “cow” according to a different reading) for three years. Of less interest to scholars who have examined the *Tale* are the other stories it contains of marvellous birth/appearance in the world: the children born of widows, a fact that implies the absence of a father. Such is the case of the birth of Tsar Constantine, although it is later said his father was Constantine the Green (Chlorus); of the three brothers, Moses, Aaron, and Samuel, born by a widow prophetess. They have all been discussed in the respective sections of this book, and here I will be interested only in the theme of the miraculous birth of the hero and its importance in a religious-ideological context.

The basic message conveyed by the tales of miraculous birth of a hero is that his appearance in the world comes by the intervention of God or of a deity. This intervention usually has characteristics that fit into the framework of pagan or semi-pagan mythology, but we find similar tales in the Bible as well. Further below I will attempt to briefly trace this kind of *topos* both in a pagan and in a Judeo-Christian environment. This would help us understand the meaning of these texts and their emphasis of the power of God.

The floating child. The story of the child floating down the river in a basket is associated with the childhood of the Prophet Moses in Egypt; we saw that most authors believe this *topos* to be also present in the story of Tsar Ispor in the text of the *Tale of the Prophet Isaiah*, a tsar usually identified foremost with Khan Asparukh. Thus, the legend of Tsar Ispor is situated in a long tradition of similar stories about the miraculous appearance in the world of a child that will become a hero. In addition to Moses, we may mention the kings Sargon and Cyrus, as well as Miletus, Oedipus, Romulus and Remus, all of which are actually images of rulers and founders destined to perform great deeds.¹ However, in discussing them we should make distinctions between the various tales of child-heroes; they may be divided into several groups: those of a miraculous birth; foundlings; and children floating on or brought by a river. The last category fully corresponds to the biblical story of the childhood of Moses.

¹ I. Venedikov makes some interesting observations in two of his books (*Mednoto gumno na prabulgarite*, Sofia, 1983 and *Zlatnijat stozher na prabulgarite*, Sofia, 1987), but I find the ideas advanced there overall unacceptable. Regarding abandoned children, see Venedikov, *Mednoto gumno*, pp. 47–62.

We know the hardships undergone by Moses as a child from Holy Scripture (Exodus, 2:1–10).² In fact the story appears quite natural and seemingly without magical or miraculous elements in it. The events follow from Pharaoh's order that every newborn Hebrew male child must be slain and the girls alone left alive (Exodus, 1:16, 22). The purpose of this act was clearly to destroy the People of Israel, which threatened to become more powerful than the Egyptians. We then come to the birth of a male child from parents of the tribe of Levi; to avoid killing him, his mother placed him in a basket daubed with pitch and set him to float down the river. Pharaoh's daughter, as she was bathing in the river, found the child there and gave it for nursing back to its own mother. The latter named him Moses, a name thought to be derived from a verb close in meaning to "draw", "pull out", "depict", "describe" (see Exodus, 2:10).

Considering that the situation was controlled all along by Moses' mother and sister, there is clearly nothing extraordinary about the events. The child was left in a safe place and watched, and afterwards was raised by its own mother. Later it would grow into a man of high position in Pharaoh's court. Still, the part of the situation that all male children are ordered to be killed is out of the ordinary, and the saving of the child—as every extraordinary event—is accounted for by Divine intervention and connected with the prophet's mission.

It is the general opinion that the story of Moses' childhood is not an ordinary tale based on observation but a *topos* or wandering plot to be found as well in other texts of the literature of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean, telling of the miraculous appearing of heroes with a mission. In order to understand the special purpose of these divinely chosen men, we should examine other stories fitting the schema and seek the message they convey.

The story of Sargon, the founding king of the Akkadian state, is basically very similar to those of Moses and of Tsar Ispor, who according to the *Tale* founded the Bulgarian state. The legend relates that Sargon was born of a priestess who had vowed to remain a virgin and who, fearing punishment for having broken her vow, placed the child in a basket and set it floating on the river Euphrates. The goddess

² Regarding the story of Moses' childhood a great amount of literature has been written, of which I will cite only some more recent titles and those which have been accessible to me; they, in turn, contain references to older titles: *Exodus 1–18. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* by W.H.C. Propp, The Anchor Bible, 1998, pp. 136–160; D. Redford, "The Literary Motif of the Exposed Child (cf. Ex. ii 1–10)", *Numen*, vol. XIV, Leiden, 1967, pp. 209–228; I. Willi-Plein, "Ort und literarische Funktion des Geburtsgeschichte des Mose", *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. XLI, 1 (1991), pp. 110–118; S.E. Loewenstamm, "The Story of Moses' Birth", in: idem, *From Babylon to Canaan. Studies on Bible and its Oriental Background*, Jerusalem, 1992, pp. 201–221; J.-D. Macchi, "Péricopes. La naissance de Moïse (Exode 2/1–10)", *Etudes théologiques et religieuses*, t. 69 (1994), pp. 397–403; P.E. Hughes, "Moses' Birth Story: A Biblical Matrix for Prophetic Messianism", *Eschatology, Messianism and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. C. Evans and P. Flint, Grand Rapids-Cambridge UK, 1997, pp. 10–22; B. Gosse, "L'écriture d'Ex 2,1–10 en relation avec les rédactions des livres de la Genèse et de l'Exode", *Biblische Notizen*, 123 (2004), pp. 25–30; B. Gosse, "La naissance de Moïse, les premiers nés et la sortie d'Égypte, les plaies d'Égypte et le retour de la création au chaos", *Rivista biblica*, vol. LIV (2006), pp. 357–364.