

## JESUS &amp; MOSES

In the late 1980s and early '90s I was privileged to visit Israel three times. These were incredibly rich experiences for me. Everywhere I turned, I was seeing the settings for the endless stories and events in the Bible that I had been studying all my life. It was too much to take in. I was also privileged to share with our group some of the thoughts and reflections that arose as we visited the various sites. Often it was a struggle to weed out things that might well have been mentioned, in order to leave some peace – some space for enjoyment and reflection.

Then one day it crossed my mind that while we were busy seeing landscapes, shrines, tombs, and monuments both obvious and subtle, nothing was causing us to honor the memory of Moses. Moses stands head and shoulders (as we say) above all other Old Testament personalities. Judaism is not really conceivable apart from Moses. But we could travel all over Israel for two weeks of pilgrimage and never stop to remember Moses. Moses was not forgotten by everyone who lived there, I hasten to add. They were still attending synagogues and pondering the Books of Moses and the Covenant he had established. But Moses never made it into the Promised Land. So no monument or headstone, no palace or garden, was there in his honor. Perhaps if the temple had not been destroyed, that might have made a connection.

Anyway, from then on, whenever we drove south from Jericho or stopped at Qumran, I would gather the group, point off across the Dead Sea, and say, “Off somewhere in the distant haze lies Mount Nebo. And there, in an unmarked grave, lies the greatest architect and founder of Judaism that ever lived. We would do better, perhaps, to remember him alive and well and coming to greet Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. But however you decide to remember him, I suggest we pause for some time of silence to remember and thank him. He is one of those men who, if we tried to subtract him from our heritage and traditions – from our values and our religion – it would be difficult indeed to imagine what would be left.”

This morning we are contemplating the connections between Jesus and Moses. More specifically, what kind of impact do we imagine Moses had on the life of Jesus? Was it possible for Jesus to grow up in Palestine (Israel) and not be deeply influenced by the memory and legacy of Moses? Certainly the presence of Moses is felt throughout the New Testament:

in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, First Corinthians, Second Corinthians, Second Timothy, Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation. So what is the relationship between Jesus and Moses?

I have already mentioned the Mount of Transfiguration, where Jesus and Moses seem to be allies and friends. My opinion is that Jesus held Moses in extremely high regard. Does any of that still spill over onto Jesus' followers? Yet Jesus is in constant controversy with people who claim to be upholding the principles and rules of Moses. Clearly Jesus disagrees with what many of the scribes and Pharisees are telling people about what Moses taught. Jesus is continually accused of breaking the commandments of Moses, like when He heals on the Sabbath, and when He allows His disciples to "harvest" wheat as they walk along on the Sabbath. We could make a strong case for the claim that Jesus breaks fully half of the Ten Commandments – IF (and it is an important if) we allow the Pharisees to interpret the meaning of the Commandments.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus runs through a number of the precepts of Torah and reinterprets their deeper meaning and intention. "*It was said to you by the men of old,*" you shall not kill, lie, commit adultery, etc. – "*but I say to you,*" you shall not even disparage a brother; look at a woman with lust; swear by anything rather than tell the truth, etc. Jesus does not set aside the Law; Gospel *supersedes* the Law – lives a level beyond or different from the Law. But Gospel never gives us an excuse for living beneath the Law – for trying to suspend or ignore the Law. "Oh, I'm a Christian, so I can murder, lie, cheat, or steal if I want to." Ludicrous, you say. Yet it is a thing thousands of Christians have not come to terms with, or at least that's what it sounds like when they talk about "grace" or "forgiveness." Christians make all kinds of promises to God and to each other and then break them at will, claiming it's okay to fall back on grace or mercy. They did not pick that up from Moses or Jesus. They pick that up from their own wanton and sinful urges. It's bad enough to be sinners, but to have no sorrow for our sins? That is not acceptable in Christianity any more than it is in Judaism.

The New Testament proclaims Jesus as a Second Moses. That is, Jesus is the bringer of a New Covenant. There is no way to pretend that this did not cause controversy, misunderstanding, and huge rifts between the followers of Jesus and those who were still convinced that following Moses was the highest and most godly way to live. From the perspective of those who believe in the First Covenant, the Second Covenant is blasphemy. There is no way around that. Moving from one way of life to another way of life is never peaceful in this world.

On the other hand, and despite all the tension and pressure that Jesus was under all through His earthly ministry, I still believe – as I suspect many of you do – that Jesus held huge admiration and appreciation for Moses, and huge admiration and appreciation for the First Covenant.

“Ah,” you say, “but the trouble with the First Covenant is that nobody can keep it. The Second Covenant is for people who have tried but failed to keep the First Covenant. And the Second Covenant restores them in love and grace to be accepted and redeemed – brought fully back into relationship with God and with each other – instead of being rejected, punished, and damned for their many mistakes, errors, and flaws.” Isn’t that what you were about to say? It was right on the tip of your tongue, yes? Of course, God does not start forgiving in the New Testament. The Old Testament is also full of God’s forgiveness, or it would have been the shortest book in history of the world.

If we get behind in life, we can never make it back up. We never ever get to live a day over again. The secret of the New Covenant is even greater than sheer mercy. Without the love, encouragement, forgiveness, and presence of God (in Christ, many of us would add), some of us would not be able to find the interior wherewithal to get up again – to keep trying. And yet, as with forgiveness, grace and mercy do not activate until we are repentant. Most of us need the love, or how could we go on? Where else would we find sufficient gratitude to motivate us? It still requires our response, or nothing happens. What is our Responsible Intention once we have found God’s offered grace and forgiveness? Often that comes awake within us far beyond anything we have known before; it comes awake *because* of the love and forgiveness – the grace and mercy. But repentance is the catalyst. In the language of the Prodigal Son, we turn and head for home. If it were not for repentance, we would be content to go on doing damage – content to go on living in our same old ways, for our own desires and self-centered purposes.

There is a form of Christianity, growing more and more rampant in our time, that claims this very error as the Gospel truth. It claims, in the name of “grace and mercy,” that we don’t have to get up again, that we don’t have to keep trying. We can relax into the mercy and grace and just stay the way we are – grow content to keep all our flaws and faults; go on shafting ourselves and others because that’s the easier, softer way. It is okay to lie, cheat, steal, screw, gossip, live by excuses, and let others carry the load and pay our way. But that’s not grace, that’s crap. The

kind of life it produces is horrible for everybody, most of all for those who are content to live this way.

Every new beginning on the Christian Path begins with REPENTANCE: REPENT! TURN! Figure out what went wrong and head back toward light and truth. No spiritually awake person wants to go on doing wrong or being wrong. Forgiveness does us no good whatsoever unless we repent. No new chance, no redemption, no love will do us any good whatsoever unless we repent. Grace is not about staying bad. Mercy is not about us being content to stay bad. Grace is undeserved, but it is an undeserved offer to try again, to make amends, to heal, to get back on track, to head back toward the light.

Some of us know this is true for us. But do we know it is also true for our children? Do we know it is true for our friends and our relatives? Christianity is losing its power to heal because it has lost the clarity of its own Message. God loves us. But God does not love us to stay miserable, or wrong, or irresponsible, or evil. So God keeps building new ways for us – new chances, new opportunities – to grow, to change, to mature, to do better than we have in the past. If we close down all those ways in the name of grace or mercy or forgiveness, then we have corrupted the Gospel beyond recognition.

In short, Jesus and Moses are not as far apart as is often portrayed. Paul's letters are constantly calling us to live what we would call moral, ethical, and responsible lives. Jesus says clearly and adamantly that He has not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it.

Time for a digression, wouldn't you agree? Sometimes it is fun to compare two founders. Moses founded the Old Covenant at Mount Sinai. George Washington is often called the "founder" of our country. I don't mean he did it all alone, or without God. But it's hard to imagine it happening without George. He was the agent – the miracle-worker. And it really does look like a miracle. It was impossible: George had no chance. He was outclassed at every point. There were never enough men or supplies to defy the British army. His friends betrayed him; the Congress would not pay his troops; his men kept deserting; the outcome was obvious and disastrous. George just kept on losing, and retreating, and losing ... until he won. George and his army were so pathetic, the British never could make themselves take him seriously.

Two Pisces gentlemen with more in common than we sometimes notice. Moses is the George Washington of Judaism. What did he have going for him? An unreliable brother, and an unstable walking stick that kept thinking it was a serpent. And if you know anything about the Garden of Eden, you know that serpents aren't always to be trusted. Of course, Moses had friends in high places, but that was altogether unseen and uncertain. So with this, Moses walked into the presence of Pharaoh, the most powerful leader of the most powerful empire on earth, and, in the name of *The Unknown*, *The Unseeable*, said, "Let my people go."

All Pharaoh had to do was snap his fingers and Moses would be dead. But Pharaoh could not take him seriously. It was amusing, even entertaining – at first. The story says God hardened Pharaoh's heart. That means Pharaoh was proud. He could not imagine that Moses represented any threat to his might and power. Yes, Moses had grown up in the royal palace, but that was years ago. Now he wore shepherd's clothes and still smelled of sheep. What had Pharaoh to fear from this false prince, turned Bedouin, with delusions of grandeur?

But like George, Moses kept losing, and retreating, and insisting ... until he won. How could this possibly happen? Simple: The Unseen One was real. So the slaves went out of Egypt. And on the Holy Mountain in the wilderness, they received the Covenant – they married The Unseen One, becoming his people, for better or for worse ... and forever. A lot of it has been for worse, because they have not kept the Covenant (Torah). But breaking the precepts does not break the Covenant itself, not with this God. The connection holds – however tenuous, however denied. At least it has for the last thirty-three hundred years or so.

What would a young Jewish boy from Nazareth think about Moses? A boy more thoughtful, more sensitive, more connected to the history and religion of His people than most any boy we can imagine? Moses – the delivered one who delivered others. That was the very essence of his name. He had been saved as a baby in the bulrushes, when Pharaoh had ordered his men to kill all the male babies of the Hebrews. Later we would tell stories to claim that Jesus was a new Moses: how He also escaped being killed when all the male babies were being slaughtered; how His parents would take Him to Egypt, that He might come out of Egypt like the great Moses had.

Moses grew up like a young prince in Egypt. But he murdered an Egyptian guard who was mistreating the Hebrews, and then fled into the vast wilderness of the Sinai. For many years he was a nomad, attached to a Midianite priest named Jethro, and he even ended up marrying Jethro's daughter, Zipporah (bird). He had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. A quiet, peaceful, uneventful life – perhaps the only happy years of his life. Then one day on the slopes of the mountain, Moses ran into the Living God: a burning bush that was not burning. And the delivered one became The Deliverer – of plagues and Passover, of Torah and testing – and out of it Judaism was re-formed and re-founded.

Thirteen or fourteen hundred years later, the boy Jesus was trying to understand. Could any mortal man be greater than Moses? Could God do more to show compassion and caring for the world than he did through Moses and freeing the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt? Could God in any way make his will plainer than he did in the Covenant? It was all so clear and beautiful and compelling. And no human could have dreamed it up or pulled it off. It was a beacon to the whole world – a light to the nations. Incredible! Wonderful!

Only, Jesus must have wondered: What went wrong? How do you explain the Roman soldiers all over Israel so many generations later? How do you explain the endless defeats by Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, and now Romans? How do you explain the split between North and South, and the bitter civil wars after Solomon? How do you explain the long list of wicked and apostate kings, the continuing idolatry, the endless injustice against everything Torah commanded? For that matter, how do you explain the long history that also contained times of incredible heroism, faithfulness, and sacrifice ... but for what? For this travesty of a holy nation, with bad priests, rotten kings, and a corrupt temple? And what manner of future or hope did Israel have now? Moses was real, but what had it all come to? Where was the God who had delivered them from Egypt so long ago? What chance was there for any kind of deliverance now? Even if there was, was there any kind of deliverance that could last for more than a few years?

Maybe we don't think little boys think such thoughts? This one did! Lots of people don't imagine that Jesus thought about such things. He just mindlessly stumbled, by accident, into being the kind of Savior He was, and into framing the Gospel and the church which He invites us into – and incredibly, His invitation stays open, year after year, generation after generation. But seldom do people suspect that Jesus thought it through – that He had a plan; that He knew what He was doing,

and did it on purpose. Seldom do people imagine that Jesus knew and learned from the experiences of His people – from the culture and history in which He grew up.

Some people think Jesus was divine and perfect, but they still don't have much gratitude or appreciation for Him. If He was divine, then everything here on earth was easy and automatic for Him, and that doesn't draw our allegiance or loyalty to Him. But I cannot read the Bible that way. Nothing about Jesus' life looks easy or automatic to me. I think Jesus was wrestling with it all long before His baptism, and the baptism only set it all in motion. But what did it set in motion? A very different plan, built on very different patterns and principles from anything the world had ever seen before. Yes, of course, Jesus prayed – more and better than anyone ever had before. But He had also learned from, paid attention to, and both honored and doubted everything in His history and tradition. Could we start another rebellion? Could we fight another war? What would come of it? Could we reform the temple? How long would it last? Would God raise up a new Moses? What could a Moses do in this situation? What did we really need: A new Elijah? A new Gideon? A new King David? A new Isaiah? What kind of hope could ever last in this world? Was there no help for all the suffering and confusion and despair?

Then came John the Baptist and his incredible reform: Let's go back to the Jordan, wash all the past away, come into the Promised Land again, clean – only this time to keep the Covenant and really mean it. The Covenant was wonderful, but already it was clear: people could not keep it – not well enough to make the difference. “God, why don't you *do* something! Why don't you send us a new leader, a new Moses, a Messiah?!” Well, Jesus came out of the water, the dove descended, and God said, “I *am* doing something, and it's you.”

Jesus is the new Moses – a Moses of a different dimension. It is the major theme of the Gospel of Matthew. It is a frequent awareness in all Christian perspective. Moses established the Covenant on Mount Sinai. Jesus establishes a New Covenant, only it is on the inside, in the heart: a life of prayer for every believer; a new kind of community for His followers to live in, based on personal relationship with God, on personal love, and on personal obedience to the Holy Spirit.

Moses tried to establish a Holy Nation on earth – a nation that would become a light to all the nations. Jesus tries to establish a Kingdom not of this world – a people, a faith family, not connected to any place or possessions or political success. Nevertheless, to see the key

(oversimplified): Jesus takes what Moses did and translates it from the physical world to the spiritual dimension. Moses delivered the people from an evil Pharaoh – from earthly slavery. Jesus delivers from spiritual bondage – Sin, Death, and the Devil. Moses declared that the great goal was moving into the Promised Land, where the Covenant would be enacted and demonstrated. Jesus talks about a Promised Land of a different dimension – eternity in Heaven. Moses revealed a Law – a pattern of behavior – that all must keep and that, if kept, would bring peace and prosperity and a good life to everybody on earth. Jesus reveals a Gospel – a relationship with the Holy Spirit – that each individual carries “in the heart.” And it is to guide each person in a world that will neither honor nor understand such love and behavior. Moses thought that life on earth could be redeemed – could be made beautiful – if we would all obey the Covenant. Jesus knows that life here will never be good – that obeying God will get us into more trouble than ever – but He invites *us* to be redeemed, to let ourselves be changed by the presence of God, to live for an unseen Kingdom no matter what is going on all around us.

Every Christian is supposed to know that the ethical precepts of the Torah are right and good, and that behavior which falls beneath this standard is unacceptable to any of God’s people. But the Christian knows that life is subtle, and that this realm is alienated from God. Therefore the Holy Spirit may have many instructions, assignments, appeals, and requests that go beyond, or put new perspective on, what we are to be about on any given day or in any situation. Often we fall back on Torah when the channels are clogged and we cannot “hear” or “feel” the Spirit’s guidance. But we are living servants of the living Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Nothing stays static or cut-and-dried for very long.

Hopefully you are seeing, if you have not already seen it for years, that the parallels are numerous, if not endless: Deliverance from earthly slavery, and deliverance from spiritual bondage. Torah, and Gospel. Covenant on the mountain, and Sermon on the Mount. A holy nation, and a holy spiritual community. Promised Land or Promised Love for the Chosen People, and a LIFE of growth and challenge and joy forever.

If I asked you what was the most dramatic moment in Moses’ story, what would you say? Some people say it was the crossing of the Red (Reed) Sea. It is at least the top runner for the most stupid move in history on the part of the Egyptians. I mean, the slaves had been freed – they had gone off because of the might and mayhem of some power far greater than Pharaoh himself. Then at the last minute came this bright idea: “We have lost our firstborn; let’s not lose our slaves as well. Maybe the

power that wrested them from us will have gone to sleep.” So off went the soldiers after the slaves. Stupid, and they all died. So when does Judaism celebrate the parting of the Reed Sea? It never does. It is just an interim story between two huge events: the Passover, and the establishment of the Covenant.

When does Israel celebrate Passover? Right about the time we celebrate Easter. Is that an accident? Nobody could be that naive! The “destroyer of life” passes over all the firstborn children of the Hebrews; having died at our hands, the firstborn Son of God is restored to Life. Resurrection! Same story; different dimension. Only, in different dimensions, it is not really the same story at all.

So what is Passover in the story of the new Moses? There is no escape; no blood on doorpost or lintel can save the firstborn Son of God. For the first Moses, there is Passover – and then freedom. For the new Moses, there is Crucifixion – and then a freedom too big for us to grasp.

But the timing goes beyond all accident or coincidence, and calls us to make the connection. The dimensional leap is staggering. From our firstborn to his firstborn. The transformation of principle knocks the breath out of us. At least it does mine. I try to grasp it, and think I will never be able to breathe again. At least not for fifty days, when the *Ruach* – the breath of the Spirit – comes again, far clearer than ever before. What has been won, or bought, by the blood of the Passover? Life for our children for a few more years. What has been won, or bought, by the blood of the new Moses, the firstborn Son of God? Life for all of us – forever. It is not a competition. They are not in a fight. The first lays the groundwork which illuminates and makes possible the second.

There it is! That’s the big one! The death of the firstborn is what finally secures the release of the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt. The death of God’s firstborn is what finally secures our own release from a far greater bondage: our bondage to Sin, Death, and the Devil. Or in a different language: our release from fear, addictions, loneliness, and pointless lives.

But if Jesus is the new Moses, what is the counterpart to Jewish Pentecost? Jewish Pentecost is the giving of the Law – the establishment of the First Covenant. Jewish Pentecost is the WEDDING – the celebration of the marriage between God and Israel. They take vows together. That’s what covenant means. Torah is given and received on Jewish Pentecost. Don’t you find it just a little bit interesting that Jesus chooses this day

for His followers to receive – to be given – the Holy Spirit? Is there some way to miss the realization that Jesus is raising the ante, from Old Covenant to New Covenant – from Torah to indwelling Holy Spirit – and on purpose? “I am the New Moses – this is the New Covenant, written on your hearts.” Why do they call the church “The Bride of Christ”? Pentecost is about weddings – sealing the bonds – both the Old Pentecost and the New. Only, there is a slight jump in dimensions. Don’t we find that just a little bit interesting? I very rarely hear this connection mentioned. Nevertheless, it still lights my life. I hope it lights your life as well. I hope it will light the life of *The New Church*. “Behold, I am making all things new.”