Moses in Christian and Islamic Tradition

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OSES or Musa is an important figure in both the Qur'an and the New Testament. The religion of Moses, his books, and his people have a direct historical, theological and literary connection with both Christianity and Islam.

Probably there is more space given to Moses in the Qur'an than to any other Old Testament character, even Abraham the Friend of God. The figure and symbol of Moses in the New Testament also outweighs that of Abraham. Musa is named in thirty-four suras of the Qur'an and in twelve books of the New Testament. He is a popular topic of legendary material in the Hadith and the Church Fathers.

H. P. Smith¹, Bell², Torrey³, as well as Obermann4 and Jeffery5 more recently, have considered these relationships as part of the critical study of the sources and the significance of Our'anic materials and their relation to Judaism and Christianity. However, except for the Encyclopedia of Islam,6 no definitive study has been made on the person, character and significance of Moses in Islam or on the relationship of this great figure to Christian interpretation. Schapiro⁷ studied Joseph, and that work is the closest parallel in method and purpose to this paper, yet he, too, was primarily interested in the Jewish Haggadic sources and referred only incidentally to Christian elements.

This paper is not specifically directed at source criticism, but rather at the person and significance of Moses in Islam and in Christianity as this is reflected in the Qur'an and

early Hadith literature, in the New Testament and the Ante-Nicene Fathers. We can agree with Torrey⁸ that there is no evidence that Moses was less important in the Medina suras than in the Meccan, and so no discrimination is made in the following sections relative to dating.

I. MOSES' CHILDHOOD AND TRAINING

Moses was born of a Hebrew mother and placed in an ark in the river. He was found by an Egyptian woman who then secured his own mother to suckle him.9 Sura xxviii is one of the longest sustained narratives in the Our'an and follows the early chapters of Exodus closely. It suggests that Pharaoh's wife, not daughter, found Moses,10 and that Moses refused an Egyptian wet-nurse as in the Talmud.11 From the Haggada, the Islamic tradition notes that Moses' cradle had miraculous healing powers, and so was able to cure Pharaoh's daughter of leprosy.12 From the same source, it is noted that Pharaoh was scratched by Moses, that he intended to kill the child, that Moses was burned on the hand by a live coal given by Pharaoh in a test, and that on touching the hand to his tongue Moses became a stammerer.13

The education of Moses according to the apologetic writings of the Church Fathers made him greater in wisdom than Homer and all the Greek philosophers. He had training as a royal child in philosophy, art, religion, and warfare according to Justin and others. I Irenaeus, after Josephus (and more recently followed by Christopher Fry) saw Moses becoming an Egyptian general who after a campaign in Ethiopia, married an Ethiopian princess. His military strategy was praised in some Christian re-

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ports, but the Islamic literature is not concerned with this item.

Moses slew an Egyptian, and none of our materials overlooks this decisive event. After the second quarrel involving his Hebrew brethren, Moses fled from Egypt. 18 In Midian he lived as a shepherd, was married and had two sons and two daughters. 17 The Qur'an suggests that, like Jacob, Moses served a period of eight pilgrimage years for his bride. 18 The Qur'an does not name Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, but it is possible that Shu'aib is his Arabic name. Tha'labi notes that Moses had spotted lambs in his flock (perhaps again after the Jacob story). 19

Moses received a call from Allah at the burning bush. With the Haggada, the Qur'an identified the site of the call as on the Holy Mountain, perhaps identical with Sinai,²⁰ and the event takes place on his way back to Egypt after the years in Midian. Moses was chosen to be a messenger of God.²¹ The signs of the staff and the leprous hand are not mentioned in the Christian record, but the Islamic record follows the Hebrew, adding the story of a burning brand taken from the bush into Moses' home where he saw it glow at night.²²

II. THE EXODUS AND SINAI

The Passover was known by the Prophet of Allah and in several of his arguments with the Jews, Muhammad referred to it and suggested his own disciples should keep the feast.²³ Yet the Passover is not essential to the narrative of the Exodus as it is now recorded in the Qur'an. But to the Hebrew and Greek Bibles the Passover is the heart of the Exodus story.²⁴

Moses and the sorcerers of Egypt contested before the king. As a prophet Moses produced evidential signs or miracles.²⁵ The Fikh Akbar II reports that signs of the prophets and the miracles of the saints are a reality and are not merely spiritual symbols. But Ibn Hasun had some doubts about

these signs which the Egyptian magicians could duplicate. He is convinced that Moses is merely the best magician as Pharaoh suggested. In his polemic against the Jews and the Torah, Ibn Hasun has seen inconsistency in the plagues: if the water turned to blood, how did the people live? If the cattle all perished, how could they get boils? Yet even he says the Qur'anic account that Moses' rod became a real serpent is true, since they consumed the unreal Egyptian serpents.²⁶ There is uncertainty in Islam about the number of the plagues and the New Testament almost ignores all these preliminaries.

Moses' rod brought to him by an angel in Islamic tradition was the one used of old by Adam, Abel, Seth, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, etc.²⁷ This rod shone in the dark, gave water, produced milk and honey, and when stuck in the ground it became a fruit tree. It pierced rocks and led Israel in the dark. It protected Moses from dragons and assassins.²⁸

A fine epitome of Moses before Pharaoh is in Sura lxxix. Islamic tradition suggests that Pharaoh's rebellion against Allah included building a tower to heaven, and even shooting arrows at God.²⁹ In fact in Tabari he even claimed to have killed Moses' God. Moses tried to make Pharaoh repent and apparently one Egyptian knew of the possibility of messengers coming from God and supported Moses in the court against Pharaoh and Haman (sic) his counsellor.³⁰ Of course, Pharaoh claimed divinity, as was true in ancient Egypt and noted in the Midrash.³¹ Again, Pharaoh is quite incidental in the Christian tradition.

The Exodus across the sea and out of Egypt is in all the sources. The Hebrews crossed the sea³² and Pharaoh in pursuit was drowned.³³ The song of Moses and Miriam is not popular in Islam, but is used as a victory chant according to Rev. 15:3.³⁴ Sura ii, 58 suggests that some of the rebels in the wilderness actually returned to Egypt.

At Sinai Moses made a covenant with

God. In the Qur'an an oath is made "by Tur Sinai." A Muslim is to use the words expected from Israel, "We hear and we shall obey." Israel accepted the covenant only under protest and threat. God tilted the mountain over them as in the Haggada. Baldawi suggested that Israel thought the duties of the covenant too difficult. So the Hadith "If you accept them good, if not it (i.e., the mountain) will surely fall down upon you." The church fathers, like Muhammad, emphasized that Israel was unworthy of the Covenant and so lost it. In a way they say both Muslim and Christian are closer to Moses than the Jew.

Moses was on the mountain forty days and received a revelation from God. In Sura ii, 53-60 it is suggested that the people insisted on seeing God, and fell dead at the sight of his glory, only to be revived again. Hebrews 12:18-21 also reports this glory. Moses participated in the glory according to all the sources. While Moses was on the mountain the Israelites built the Golden Calf. The Qur'an says Miriam was the instigator.89 Because of the polemic situation, the golden calf and other Jewish rebellions were often made to overshadow the revelation at Sinai in the writings of Muslim and Christian. Ibn Hasun exonerates Aaron and Miriam and blames an unknown Samaritan (a play on Samiri-Miriam). Aaron, Miriam and the others such as Dothan, Korah, Jambre, are all rejected by God. 40 Because of the calf, Aaron and Miriam were reproved in the Our'an and in the apostolic constitution exiled from the Israelite camp for seven days. Korah's rebellion is used in all sources as a clear analogy for the Jewish rejection of both Jesus and Muhammad. The Sabbath violators were turned into apes, perhaps reflecting in the Our'an the Jewish legend related to the tower of Babel.41

Moses detailed the organization of Israel and he patterned the tabernacle.⁴² He passed on his leadership to Joshua.⁴³ Joshua was Moses' companion when they sought El

Khadir. Except for Hippolytus, Moses on Mt. Nebo is ignored by our sources.

III. MOSES' CHARACTER AND APPEARANCE

Except for the shining countenance referred to above, little is said of Moses' appearance. In the Night Ascent, Abou Horaira reports that Moses looked to Muhammad like a rawi, with a long, thin body and sleek hair. He was compared to the men of Genoa. In contrast, Ibn Omar says Muhammad saw Moses and he was brown, stout and had sleek hair. Ibn Abbas describes him as tall and ruddy. No description of Moses appears in the New Testament, not even in the transfiguration story.

Both Christian and Islamic sources emphasize the meekness and patience of Moses, following the Hebrew tradition.⁴⁵ He is the faithful one.⁴⁶ There are several Hadith which report how God cured Moses of his prudishness and bashfulness.⁴⁷

The Fikh Akbar II speaks of the impeccability of all the prophets: "All the prophets are exempt from sins both light and grave, from unbelief and sordid deeds." Therefore, Al 'Ash'ari said, "Moses who is an apostle was free from sin and cannot be supposed to have asked for an absurd thing (i.e., to see God)." But Moses was not listed by the Qur'an as among the "righteous ones" even though the other prophets were.

In Islam, Moses was the first to be raised, Muhammad the second. However, Abraham was the first to be robed on resurrection day. The entire Hadith literature is convinced that Moses will be near Allah's throne on that day. Charik ben'Abd'ullah reported that Ibn Malik heard hammad say, "Abraham was in the sixth heaven, and in the seventh heaven was Moses whom God had blessed by giving His words to him."49 Moses offered to help Muhammad, and cut the number of prayers in Islam from fifty to five daily. In the Revelation of Paul, Moses is introduced on such an ascent: "This is Moses, the lawgiver, by whom God led forth the children of Israel out of the slavery of Egypt."

Moses is numbered among the prophets of the three great monotheistic religions. All the prophets are chosen, and in heaven, Muhammad reported that Adam said to Moses, "God chose you to be his messenger and chose you for himself." A prophet frequently interceded for others. According to some of the Hadith this power was granted not only to Muhammad, but to all prophets, including Moses. However, in the Night Ascent, Moses claimed that he could not intercede for others since he had killed a man. The Church Fathers retell the story of Moses' intervention on behalf of Israel in the wilderness.

In both Christianity and Islam, Moses was the recipient of divine revelation. Furgan is a difficult word, but it is associated with revelation and divine wisdom.53 Moses received a scroll, perhaps the Torah complete and not just the decalogue.54 Most of this scroll is in the Qur'an, but tradition admits that there may have been some authentic verses revealed to Moses not in the Our'an. The Clementine homilies have a similar concept of a complete Torah sent down from heaven.55 In Sura lxxxv, 22 the idea of tablets appears as contrasted with the parchment scroll or book of suras lii, liii, lxxxvii. The ten commandments are not closely linked to Sinai by either Our'an or the New Testament, and Jesus does not use them as a special revelation.

Moses is a great lawgiver in both the New Testament and Qur'an with their traditions. The New Testament emphasizes this more than Islam. The laws of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy were often noted in Christian writings, but one would be hard pressed to cull the Laws of Israel from the Islamic sources, except perhaps the laws of usury and diet.

Moses was a writer of Scripture, containing revelation from God. One of the five pillars of Islam is that of the sacred book. The

Pentateuch is included among these, along with the Injil or Gospel. Moses was chosen to write these Scriptures according to Abou Houraira. He wrote the Pentateuch with the exception of the account of his own death. The Gospel is said to confirm or fulfill the Torah, while the Qur'an is a safeguard to the earlier scriptures. Many suggested that the Jews perverted their Mosaic law and scripture, yet Umar Ben Al Khaltab reported that Muhammad allowed one of his companions to read the Jewish Bible: "If you are convinced that it is that book which Allah sent down on Moses, then read it night and day." ¹⁸⁷

IV. RELATION TO JESUS AND MUHAMMAD

Christianity and Islam believe in a succession of prophets and messengers culminating in Jesus and Muhammad, respectively. Moses was a prophet in both traditions. To the Christian he was often the first prophet and earliest religious teacher.58 So Justin, "I will begin with our first prophet and lawgiver, Moses." Some twenty-five prophets are named in the Qur'an. But Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad lead all the rest.⁵⁹ So Sura iii, 85, "We believe in God, and in that which has been sent down on us, and on Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob, and the tribesmen, and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and the prophets of their lord." First Clement suggested all the other prophets merely followed Moses.60 All the prophets are said to have been on Sinai with Moses, and all they later received was but a repetition of what had first been given to him.61 The major and minor prophets of the Hebrews are hardly known in the Our'an.

Moses was related to Jesus. According to the Christians Moses foretold the coming of Jesus. 62 Jesus felt, as did the Christians of Acts 6, that they were closer to Moses than the contemporary Jews. God provided water out of the rock for Moses and this event was spiritualized by Paul into the presence of Christ.⁶³ The brazen serpent, which is a type of Christ in the New Testament, is omitted by Islam.⁶⁴ Moses is a type of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. The parallelism found between Jesus and Moses reaches its height in Archelaeus' disputation with Manes.⁶⁵ A greater than Moses is come in Jesus.⁶⁶ Muhammad apparently associated Moses and Jesus as near-contemporaries, perhaps because of similarity of Miriam and Mary.

Moses was related to Muhammad the Apostle of God. One Hadith says, "If Moses were alive and knew my prophecy he would follow me."67 In Sura vii, it is suggested that Moses and Jesus predicted the coming of Muhammad. In Sura ii, Moses and Muhammad are equal, yet Muhammad did not want to even be above Moses. Abou Horaira reported that Muhammad said, "Do not make me superior to Moses." And Ibn Abbas reported that Muhammad said, "It is Moses who is at the head of his people."68 Muhammad was a prophet like Moses sent by the Lord of the worlds in Sura xliii. Muhammad's companions were closer to Moses than contemporary Jews.69

It is the lot of the prophets of Allah to be repudiated and rejected by their people. Jesus and Muhammad saw an analogy to Moses in their own treatment by the Jews. Their enemies at times considered all three as mad or bewitched. In Sura ii, Moses' narrative was used against the Jews who were then rejecting Muhammad, exactly as Jesus spoke in the parable of Dives and Lazarus, or as Stephen preached in Acts. The enemies of Moses called him an impostor. In the postor of the postor of the prophets of Moses called him an impostor.

Jesus and Muhammad seemed to abrogate the Mosaic law, at least as interpreted by their contemporaries. Sometimes Jesus seems to be a new Moses who authenticated His mission with miracles and taught a new Torah. "The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

The continuity of the one God who did

not leave himself without a witness is confessed by Christianity and Islam. Perhaps Muhammad believed that there was one great prophet for each tribe or people. In Sura xx Moses' mission was given him by Allah. One of the oldest Muslim commentaries suggested that only Moses and Muhammad were spoken to face to face by God.⁷³ Ignatius said that the Holy Spirit worked through Moses, and Justin suggested that the Eternal Christ spoke at the burning bush.⁷⁴

Moses is significant in Christianity and Islam. In both he is significant as a prophet in the succession of messengers who were sent by God with His revelation. In Christianity God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt is related to the dramatic release of man from sin by the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. This theology of redemption through history is not clear in Islam. Moses is significant in the New Testament and church fathers because his life and character are a means of understanding Jesus better. In Islam such a parallel is not vital although it is present. The book of Moses is of course referred to in the Qur'an and in the Gospels and the Acts.75 But Moses to both Islam and Christianity represents an old way, even an old law, which has been superseded, if not fully abrogated.

Perhaps the difference in emphasis in Islam and Christianity on the part played by Moses can be explained simply. Jesus had direct roots in the Jewish community and faith, while Muhammad at best knew only a diasporate with a weakened if not perverted tradition of Judaism. The early church was also close to its Hebrew heritage, while the Hadith moves further and further away in spirit and in time. Moses could be eliminated and Islam would be unchanged, not so Christianity.

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- Derhaps based on Sybilline Oracle iii, 253 and Miriam's address to her as "queen" in Josephus, Ant. ii, 9, 5.
 - 12 Sotah 12b.
 - 13 Ibid.
 - ¹⁸ Yashar Shemot 131b-132b.
- ¹⁶ Justin to the Greeks, x (ANF i, p. 277) cf. Philo, Vita Mosis I, 5-7.
- ¹⁵ Frag. from Irenaeus, xxxii (ANF i p. 573) cf. Josephus. Ant. ii, 10-11. Targum Jerusalem on Num. 12:1.
- ¹⁶ Sura xxviii, 12-21, El Bokhari, lxv, 5. Acts 7:23-29, Heb. 11:26, I Clement iv (ANF I, p. 6).
- ¹⁷ Clement of Alexandria Stromata i, 22, cf. Philo, Vita Mosis I, 1 also Torrey, op. cit., p. 119.
- ¹⁰ Jewish Legend suggests Moses was incarcerated for seven to ten years by Jethro, Yashar Shemot, 138b.
 - "Tha'labi 112, cf. EI, Vol. III.
- ³⁰ Obermann, op. cit., p. 30, note 11. Cf. L. Ginsberg, Legends of the Jews, Vol. V, p. 415.
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 - Sura xx 20; xxviii 29 ff.
 - ²⁰ El Bokhari lx, 24.
- There before have thoroughly studied the Jewish antecedents to the Qur'anic Exodus narratives. Cf. Smith, op. cit. Torrey, op. cit. Obermann, op. cit. and J. W. Sweetman, Islam and Christian Theology, 2 vols., Lutterworth, 1947.
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- ²⁷ For the Jewish legends, see Abrahams, Rod of Moses.
- ²⁸ Kisa'i 208, Tabari 460, Tha'labi 111-112, cf. EI Vol. III, p. 415.

- ²⁰ Sura xxviii, 38, Tabari 469.
- ²⁰ Sura xx 73, lxxix 19, xl 31-36. Note that Baalam is Pharaoh's counsellor in many Jewish legends.
- ¹¹ He could not find the Hebrews' God in any list of gods, Ginsberg, op. cit., II 333 f.
- ³² Sura xxvi 55 ff., I Cor. 10:2, Heb. 11:29.
- ²⁸ Sura xxviii 40, xliii 55, xliv 24, li 40, etc. Heb. 11:22 ff., 8:9.
- ²⁴ Cf. Epistle on Virginity attributed to Clement, ii 14 (ANF viii p. 65) and Jewish expectation of this victory song in the world to come as in Ginsberg, op. cit., VI p. 11, 13.
 - 25 Sura lii and xcv.
 - * Sura v 7, xxiv 50, ii 285.
 - " Sura vii 170.
- ³⁸ Sura ii 60 f., 93, vii 171, cf. Obermann, op. cit., pp. 35-37.
 - ⁸⁹ Sura vii 148, xx 77-98.
- ⁴⁰ Sura xxix 39, Ignatius to Magnesians iii (ANF i p. 60) Apostolic Constitution VI, I, 1 (ANF vii p. 450) II Tim. 3:8.
 - 4 Sura ii 65, iv 56, vii 156 ff.
- ⁴³ Sura vii 154, ix 30, lii, xcv, Acts 7:44, Heb. 8:5, Smith, op. cit., p. 169, Sweetman, op. cit., II, i p. 228.
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- "Jewish accounts also make him "slender" cf. Ginsberg, op. cit. II, p. 285.
- ⁴⁵ Num. 12:3, cf. Ginsberg op. cit., III p. 84 f., 256, VI p. 91, 97. Ignatius Epistle to Ephesians x (ANF i p. 54) Apostolic Constitution VI i, 3 (ANF vii p. 451).
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- ⁴⁸ Wensinck, The Muslim Creed, Cambridge, 1932, p. 192, 217.
- ⁶ A minor Midrash sees an Ascension of Moses at the time of his call at the burning bush and a visit to all seven heavens, Ginsberg, op. cit., V p. 416. Another Jewish legend has Moses meet the Messiah on the day of his death, ibid., III p. 446 f., cf. El Bokhari xcvii, 37.
- ⁵⁰ El Bokhari lxv 1, cf. Similar Jewish statements in Ginsberg, op. cit. III p. 479 and VI p. 166.
- ⁵¹ Cf. Wensinck, *Creed*, pp. 182, 194. On Jewish debate over the ability of any to redeem another,

cf. Ginsberg op. cit. V p. 419. Also I Clement lii (ANF i p. 19). Fragment of Irenaeus xxxii (ANF i p. 573).

52 El Bokhari 1xv 5- on Sura xvii.

⁵² Sura ii, xxi, cf. Jewish Belief that the Shekinah came down from heaven at Moses' request, Ginsberg op. cit., II p. 260.

⁵⁶ Sura vii 142 ff., xxvii 21, xxviii 14, liii 36, lxxxvii 18, cf. Jeffery, op. cit., p. 16, 34, 67. In Jewish Legend Moses wrote the Law, Torah, Bible, Mishna, Talmud, and Haggadah, in fact all knowledge. Ginsberg op. cit., III p. 141 f., cf. 114 f. Also II p. 326, VI p. 284.

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⁵⁶ El Bokhari lxv 1, Clementine Homilies iii 47 (*ANF* viii p. 247).

⁸⁷ Sweetman, op. cit., II i p. 228, cf. Wensinck Creed, p. 78, further see Sura ii 42 and Jeffery, op. cit., p. 65.

⁸⁸ Justin to the Greeks ix (ANF i p. 277), xii (ANF i p. 278). Tatian to the Greeks xxxvi (ANF ii p. 80), Origen versus Celsus I 16 (ANF iv p. 403) etc.

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⁶² Luke 24:27, 44, John 1:45, 5:46, Acts 3:22, 7:37, 26:22, Ignatius to Antiochians ii (*ANF* i, p. 110) Epistle of Barnabas xii (*ANF* i, p. 145) Apology of Justin xxxii (*ANF* i, p. 173).

⁶⁵ I Cor. 10:4, cf. Seder 'Olam v. Also In Sura ii 93 the Israelites "drink in their hearts the calf by their unbelief." Cf. Sura ii 60, vii 160, Manna and bread of life I Cor. 10:3. Yet John 6:32 emphasizes that it was not Moses but God who gave supernatural food to Israel.

⁶⁶ John 3:14, Epistle of Barnabas xii (ANF i p. 145).

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⁶⁶ Mark 9:2 ff., Heb. 3:3, Tertullian versus Marcion II 28 (ANF iii p. 318).

⁶⁷ Mishcat I, i quoted by Smith, op. cit. p. 191.

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¹¹ Sura 1 12-13, xxiii 48-50.

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¹⁶ Sura xix 53, xiv 6, liii 36, lxxxvii 19, etc. Mark 12:26, Luke 16:29 ff., Acts 28:23, Rom. 10:5, etc.