



The Jewish Moses

The figure of Moses in Rabbinic Judaism

Wengst, Klaus | 01.07.2011

In Rabbinic Judaism, Moses takes the dominant position among all biblical characters. Through him, God leads his people out of Egypt; through him, he gives his people the Torah at Sinai.

Moses steps into the breach for the people when they are to be rejected because they had venerated a bull's golden image. He argued passionately with and against God. It is part of his greatness that he is extraordinarily modest and humble.

1. "It is Halacha of Moses from Sinai." Moses as mediator of the Torah

Moshe rabbejnu ("Moses our teacher") is a term increasingly used in the tradition. Particularly in his teachings, in giving the Torah, he is seen as a prophet like no other: "God ceased to talk with all the prophets, but he never ceased with Moses" (ShemR 2:6). In the same context and from the double call, "Moses, Moses" in Ex 3:4 is derived "that he taught Torah in this world, and he will teach it in the world to come." In addition, he was also ready for priesthood and kingship. He acted as priest "in the seven days of consecration" (Ex 29:1-34) and as king during the 40 years in the wilderness (Deut. 33:5). But his desire that "kings and priests would come from him," was denied.

"Moses received Torah from Sinai" is the first sentence in Mishnah Avot (1:1). Elsewhere, it is continued, "not from the mouth of a messenger, not from the mouth of a Seraph, but from the mouth of the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be he" (ARN [B] 1). Yet, one can speak about Moses in human terms, in that he is helpfully brought in context with those who have learning difficulties. "The entire 40 days that Moses spent on the mountain, he learned Torah – and he forgot it. Eventually it was given to him as a gift. Why did it all happen like this? To bring the simple people (to learn) again" (jHor 3:9 [48b]). At the same time, the gift character of the Torah is expressed quite beautifully. Of course, Torah is to be learned and acted upon. But if learning has been successful and has actually been put into practice, it is still gift.

The first sentence of mAV 1:1 establishes the construction of a chain of tradition, which leads from Moses to Joshua, to the elders and the prophets, to the "men of the great assembly," and from them to named teachers. It's not just about the painstaking tradition of the Torah's text but, at the same time, about its interpretation. This manifests itself, for example, in a narrative that legitimates the transition of the teaching authority from Moses to Joshua, where Moses at the end of his life makes himself a disciple of Joshua. "Early in the day, Moses stands before Joshua's door. Joshua sat down and interpreted (a portion of Torah), but Moses stood, made himself small and put his hand on his mouth. When the Israelites see this, they say to Joshua, "Who do you think you are that Moses, our teacher, stands, and you sit?" Finally, a voice from heaven demands, "Learn from Joshua!" (TanB Waetchanan 6 [6b]).

Its own, even greater weight of the oral Torah than that of the written one given through Moses, is perhaps most strongly expressed in the story of Moses in the Beit Midrash (the teaching house) of Rabbi Akiva: "In the hour when Moses went up on high, he met the Holy One, blessed be He, as he sat there, binding little crowns to the letters (= affixed ornamental lines to certain letters of the Torah). He asked before him, 'Lord of the world, who hinders your hand?' He said, 'There is a man, Akiva ben Joseph is his name, who will be there at the end of a series of generations, who will, out of little hooks in the script develop heaps and heaps of halachot (= the life-regulating directives of the

oral Torah).' He said before him, 'Lord of the world, show him to me!' He said, 'Turn around!' He went and sat down at the end of eight rows (in the Beit Midrash of Rabbi Akiva) and did not understand what he said. Then his strength waned. When he (Akiva) came to a specific topic, his students said, 'Rabbi, where did you get that?' He told them, 'It is halacha of Moses from Sinai.' This calmed his (Moses') mind. He returned and came before the Holy One, may he be blessed. He spoke before him, 'Lord of the world, you have such a person and you give the Torah through me.' He said, 'Be quiet! So I have decided'" (bMen 29b).

This story first demonstrates the need for interpretation. The same never remains the same, when it, in other situations, is only repeated; it must be said differently, in order to remain the same. If Moses – as he was in his time – were now among the interpreters of the Torah that was given through him, he would not understand anything. Yet, these interpreters hold firmly to the fact that they are nothing but faithful interpreters of Moses. What is more – and this is the other aspect of this story, in as far as it is God himself who on Mount Sinai affixes the decorative lines in the Torah from which Akiva will develop the halachot – the oral Torah is shown to have the same dignity as the written one; both are equally original. When this tradition says that Rabbi Akiva developed halachot from the decorative strokes, it clarifies yet another aspect. Halacha – the mandatory directive for the concrete formation of life – is not simply concerned with interpreting Scripture; it can also speak independently of the biblical text, and sometimes decide against it. It is considered to be Torah – since God himself has placed the decorative strokes. Thus it says in mHag 1:8, "(The halachot on) the solution of vows float in the air, they have nothing to be based upon. The halachot on shabbat, feast sacrifices and embezzlements are like mountains hanging by a thread: a little Bible, many halachot. (The halachot on) legal matters, the Temple service, pure and impure and illegitimate sexuality all have something on which they are based." In conclusion, it is said in relation to all, "These and those are essential parts of the Torah." From the peculiar phrase in Deut. 9:10 (literally: and on them like all the words), which relates to what God's finger had written on two tablets, is in jPea 2:6 (17a) derived what Moses said: "Scripture, Mishna, Talmud and Haggada (the narrative interpretation), even all that which an able student in the future will give out as directive before his teacher, has already been said to Moses at Sinai."

The faithfulness to Torah and the freedom of its interpretation here form a fascinating unity. In mAv 1:1 is cited – as the last of the three words of the great assembly of men – the call, "Make a fence for the Torah!" It can be understood as a fence that surrounds the Torah, in the sense that something that according to the Scriptures has to be done before dawn, should already be complete at midnight, "to keep the people from transgression" (Bo Mekhj 6 in regard to Ex. 12:8). But the fundamental intention of this challenge is, to open a wide space for the interpretation and observance of Torah. Thus Rabbi Akiva can couch it in these words, "The traditions are a fence (enclosure) for the Torah" (mAv 3:13). They provide space for teaching, learning and life for those who again and again are referred back to the Torah. "It is halacha of Moses from Sinai."

2. "Who believes in the faithful Shepherd ..."

Moses as God's agent for the salvation of his people

Moses' action in saving the people at the Red Sea is crucial, but the real actor is actually God himself. According to Ex. 14:21, "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea." Immediately afterwards, it is said that God drove the sea back. The midrash takes this as opportunity to tell us that the sea had initially resisted Moses. "Moses spoke to it in the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, that it should divide, but it did not accept that. He showed it his staff, but it did not accept it, until the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed himself above the sea in his glory." Only then "the sea began to flee. For it is said: *The sea looked and fled* (Ps 114:3). Moses said to the sea, 'All day I have spoken to you in the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, but you have not accepted it; what is it, O sea, that makes you flee now? *Why is it, O sea, that you flee?* (Ps. 114:5). It said to him: 'Not from you, son of Amram, I flee, but rather: *Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water*' (Ps.

114.7 f.)" (MekhJ Beschallach [Wajehi] 4).

Moses is in an extraordinary way the agent of God; in his actions, God himself comes into play. This is shown in an interpretation at the conclusion of Ex 14:31: ... *and they believed in the Lord and in Moses his servant*. In that connection it is said in MekhJ Beschallach (Wajehi) 6: "If they believed in Moses, the conclusion is from light to heavy, they also believed in the Eternal One. This has come about to teach you that anyone who believes the faithful shepherd is, as if he believes the word of him who spoke and the world came into being. The same you should think of the word: *And the people spoke against God and against Moses* (Num 21:5). When they spoke against God, the conclusion applies from the light to the heavy that they also spoke against Moses. But that has come to teach you that anyone who speaks against the faithful shepherd is, as if he speaks against Him who spoke and the world came into being. In Moses, God Himself appears on the scene. What is being done to Moses, is thereby done to God. Moses is the "faithful shepherd."

Moses does not act on his own authority; he can act the way he does only because God acts in him and through him. This is emphasized in the parallel interpretations of the biblical stories about the raised arms of Moses during the battle against the Amalekites, and about the raising of the brazen serpent. "*Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed*" (Ex 17:11). But can the hands of Moses really promote or inhibit the struggle? Much rather, whenever the Israelites looked up and lined up their hearts with their Father in heaven, they won, and if not, they lost. And likewise: *And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a serpent and set it on to a pole and everyone who is bitten and looks up, will live"* (Num 21:8). Can a serpent really kill or make alive? Rather, whenever the Israelites looked up and subjected their hearts to their Father in heaven, they were healed, and if not, they were wasting away (mRHSh 3.8).

3. "I do not leave you, until you forgive them." Moses in an engagement for his people

The biblical text in Ex 32:11-13 already presents Moses as a vigorous and skilled advocate of his people, when God wants to destroy them after the incident with the golden image of the bull. In Psalm 106:23, it is said in view of the same situation, the Israelites would have been destroyed by God, *had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him*.

The verse of the Psalm is interpreted in ShemR 43:1 in such a way that Moses as Israel's counsel for the defense overcomes the accuser before the judging God. In bPes 119a, the statement of the Psalm is understood in such a way that God himself was defeated by Moses, and along with it is noted, "Come and see that the nature of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not like the nature of flesh and blood. When a man of flesh and blood is conquered, he mourns, but when the Holy One, blessed be He, is conquered, he is glad."

In view of what God says to Moses in Ex 32:10: *Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them etc.* It is said in bBer 32a: "If it was not written as Bible, it would be impossible to say this. "It (the Bible at this point) teaches that Moses took the Holy One, blessed be He, like a man taking his fellow man at his clothes, and told him, 'Lord of the world, I do not leave until you forgive them.'" Further on in this text, it is derived from Ex 32:32 that Moses had "delivered himself to death for them." God's counteroffer to Moses in return for the destruction of the people, to make "a great nation" of Moses, is countered by him, saying, "Lord of the world, if a chair with three legs cannot stand before you in the hour of your anger, how should a chair with one leg be able to stand?"

This argument, which refers to God's covenants with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is found in ShemR 44:9 in a larger context. There Moses concedes to God that the Israelites had, by worshipping the image of the bull, canceled the beginning of what was said in Ex 20, to honor no other gods. But then he accuses God that he, on his part, now wanted to cancel what was said at the end of Ex 20. In a connection of Ex 20:6 and Jes 41:8 Moses wins the argument, as the Word of God to Abraham is: "I

will have mercy on your children to the 2000th Generation.”

And then, before God, he counts up just seven generations that have passed from Abraham to him, Moses. Responding to the objection that God's vow would stand, even in spite of Israel's destruction, since Moses is also a descendant of Abraham, Moses argues that three, namely the patriarchs, have more weight than only one, Moses. Finally, he emphasizes in connection with Hab 3:9 and Lev 26:45 that God's covenantal oath was given to all twelve tribes, while he, Moses, only belongs to one tribe, the tribe of Levi; and he asks God, "What will You then say to the tribe of Reuben and the other tribes?" The text continues: "Then he (God) could not answer him any longer.”

Time and again, the Rabbis let Moses wrestle with God for Israel. When God, according to Ex 32:7 tells Moses, "Your people have acted perversely," Moses replies, "Now you call them *my* people; however, they are not mine, but Your people." Thereto is added, "Moses did not give up on prayer to the Holy One, blessed be He, until he called them his people "(ShemR 41:7).

According to Ex 23:23 God says to Moses that, on the journey to the promised land, *my messenger will go in front of you*. By interpreting this announcement ShemR 32:8 has Moses reply, "You send a messenger with me? Such were the conditions? Did you not say, 'I will come down to save Israel from the hand of Egypt and lead them out of this country?'" Then he comes up with his own condition, "If your face (= You Yourself) will not go with us, You will not lead us out of here." Upon God's contradiction, Moses replies again, "Behold, You said, a messenger; yet I say, if not your face comes along. We will see whose words will endure." And God admits that Moses is correct. According to ShemR 43:4, Moses even dissolved the vow of Ex 22:20, in the face of Israel's sin when it worshiped the image of the bull: *Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the LORD alone, shall be given to destruction*.

In a conversation with God according to bSan 11a.b, Moses loses the argument first, but when he eventually takes refuge in what God had said, he again makes Israel the winner: "When Moses ascended on high, he met the Holy One, blessed be He, as he sat and wrote down 'long-suffering.' He said before Him, 'Lord of the world, long-suffering for the righteous.' He replied to him, 'Also for the wicked.' He said to Him, 'The wicked shall perish.' He said, 'Soon you will see what you have wished.' When the Israelites sinned (by veneration of the golden image of the bull), he (God) said to him, 'Did you not say, long-suffering for the righteous?' 'He said before him, 'Lord of the world, but did You not say to me, 'Also for the wicked?'"

4. "Even more than the fathers" The outstanding greatness of Moses

In several aspects, Moses is elevated above all other people, yet every now and then also set in relationship to others. Deut 34:10 states, *Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses*. This is first confirmed in SifDev 357, "In Israel, no one arose," however, then it is continued: "But among the nations of the world one other arose. And who was that? Balaam, the son of Beor." Of all people Balaam, who otherwise has decidedly a bad press in rabbinic literature, is found to be superior to Moses in one prophesy.

Num 12:3 states: *Now the man Moses was very anáv* (basic meaning "bent [forward]"). This statement is discussed in SifBam 101 and clarified by the addition of: He was "bent [forward] in his mind," meaning "humble." This is distinguished from "bent in his body," namely, "weak", and from "bent in his money," namely "poor," by the use of biblical passages. Physically weak and financially poor, Moses was not; but humble he was and, as the Bible text proceeds, *"more than any other person on earth."* The midrash argues against it: "But no more than the fathers," namely Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. "Rabbi Josse says, 'Even more than the fathers' ... But no more than the ministering angels." In MekhJ Jitro (Bachodesch) 9, the stated humility of Moses in Num 12:3 is generalized: "The Scripture indicates that, after all, everyone who is humble allows God's presence (*sh'chináh*) to dwell

with the people on earth.”

Although in Deut 34:5 it is said, *Then Moses ... died there*, it says at the end of the interpretation of this point in SifDev 357: “But there are those who say, ‘Moses is not dead, but he stands and serves above.’” They justify this by connecting Deut 34:5 to Ex 34:28 because in both instances appears the word *there*: *And there he was with the Lord* (cf. bSot 13b). This idea then is the precondition for the story of the transfiguration of Jesus; Moses can appear next to Elijah (Mk 9:4 parr.).

That Moses, according to Deut 34:7, was 120 years of age when he died, has not only in Israel and the Diaspora lead to the common birthday wish: “Until 120.” But principally, Moses was, through his lifespan and its periodization into three times 40 years, related to the great teachers of the rabbinic tradition: “He is one of the four who died, when they were 120 years of age; and these are: Moses, Hillel the Elder, Rabban Jochanan ben Sakkaj and Rabbi Akiva. Moses was 40 years in Egypt, 40 years in Midian, and 40 years he cared for Israel.” Varying things are said of the three teachers about each of their first 40 years; but of their second and third period it is concurrently said that they served the sages for 40 years and for 40 years they cared for Israel (SiDev 357). Again, the written and the oral Torah are implicitly linked with each other. The teachers of Israel continue the work of Moses, they offer “Halacha of Moses from Sinai.”

5. “... nothing except what the prophets and Moses taught” Moses in the New Testament

As in Judaism so represents Moses also in the New Testament writings first and foremost the Torah. “The Torah indeed was given through Moses” (John 1:17). Mk 12:26 mentions “reading in the book of Moses.” He embodies the Torah, or vice versa, the Torah embodies Moses.

Accordingly, “In every city for generations past, Moses ... has been read aloud every sabbath” (Acts 15:21; cf 2 Cor 3:15). The phrase “Moses and the prophets” covers the whole of Scripture (Lk 16:29.31; 24:27.44; Jn 1:45; Acts 28:23). It forms the basis; thus Paul says, according to Acts 26:22 f. “... saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place: that the anointed one must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the nations.” What is said here, is put in the picture in the narrative of the transfiguration of Jesus. Moses and Elijah are here representative of Torah and prophets; in the light of Scripture, Jesus becomes transparent for God.

What Moses says in the Torah has, of course, to be observed. Thus, Jesus prompts the healed leper “to offer for his cleansing what Moses commanded” (Mk 1:44 parr.; Cf. further Mk 7:10; 12:19 parr.; Lk 2:22). In John 7:23, Jesus argues “that the Torah of Moses should not be broken.” In Mk 10:2-9 parr. he sets a different accent compared to a regulation of Moses. According to the Gospel of Matthew, not only the written Torah counts (cf. Mt 5:17-18), but also the oral one. In 23:2 Jesus remarks, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat,” meaning the rabbinical teachers at the time of the evangelist, who shape the oral Torah. According to verse 3, Jesus demands, “Therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it.” Verse 23 shows that even the tithing of mint, dill and cumin “ought to have been practiced.” Yet, the tithing of herbs is not a commandment of the written, but the oral Torah.

Some statements made about Moses serve as aids for understanding the interpretation of Jesus. “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (Jn 3:14). The correlation is particularly strong in statements in which Moses or Jesus are like transparency or a go-between for God himself. The challenge of Jesus in John 14:1, “Believe in God, believe also in me,” refers to the statement of Exodus 14:31 that the Israelites *believed in the Lord and in Moses his servant*. At this point the interpretation given in the Mechilta de Rabbi Jishmael (under the number 2. above) has to be compared. That Jesus as little as Moses simply stands next to God, is shown in Jn 12:44, where he says, “Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him

who sent me." This statement is not reversible. Accordingly, whoever believes in Moses, believes in the one "who spoke and the world came into being." As Moses in this tradition as "faithful shepherd" represents God as shepherd of Israel, so also does Jesus, according to John 10. This and other statements do not show any particularity of Jesus in relation to Jewish tradition. His particularity – even in relation to Moses – is based solely on the witness of his resurrection from the dead, understood as eschatological new creation.

Summary

The oral Torah was, according to the rabbis, already revealed to Moses at Sinai. This is expression of a concept that binds to Scripture and, at the same time, grants freedom of interpretation. The work of God and Moses in saving the people go so much hand in hand that anyone who trusts Moses, trusts also God. The arguments that the rabbis ascribe to Moses as advocate of Israel after the sin of worshipping the image of the bull, have their pinnacle in the reliability of God's promises and therefore of God's loyalty to his people.

Editorial remarks

By kind permission of the author. Also published in 'Bibel und Kirche', magazine of the 'Kath. Bibelwerk' in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, 1st Quarter 2011

Translation from the [German](#) by Fritz B. Voll with editing by Beth Balshaw.