

Jesus as Moses

Deuteronomy 18:18, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him."

Question: Is Jesus the rightful ruler of Israel?

Key Verses: John 5:45-47; Acts 7:35-37; 1 Cor 10:1-4

Moses predicted the messiah would embody him: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him" (Deuteronomy 18:18). This prophecy not wasted on the Rabbis, "As the first redeemer was so shall the latter redeemer be" (*Midr. Ecc. 1:18*). Christians saw in Jesus the fulfillment of this promise. That is only natural since Jesus matched Moses' profile in a number of significant ways. Both were liberators, law-givers, shepherds, rescued as infants in Egypt, tempted in the wilderness, passed through water, and Suffering-Servants.

Given the obvious connections it is surprising that Luke alone cites Deuteronomy 18:15, 18 (in Acts 3:22 and 7:37). Even Jesus seemed reticent to directly compare himself to the George Washington of his country. After all, such a bodacious claim is better demonstrated than merely stated. That's why most of the comparisons in the New Testament are allusions rather than assertions. Even so, the sheer volume of these allusions offers a compelling case that Jesus fulfilled this Messianic prophecy of Moses.

So let's do a flyover to see how these allusions stack up through the New Testament. We can start with Jesus himself. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-48) six times we read something to the effect, "Moses said...but I say." Pretty gutsy given the political climate. "The words *ego de lego* (But I say) embody a claim to an authority which rivals and challenges that of Moses. But anyone who claims an authority rivaling and challenging Moses has *ipso facto* set himself above Moses; he has ceased to be a rabbi, for a rabbi's authority only comes to him as derived from Moses" (Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology*, 47). In short, Jesus must have seen himself not merely as an authoritative interpreter of the Mosaic Law, but as one who could fulfill and even extend that divine law.

Matthew seems to agree, shaping his entire book in the shadow of Moses. Beginning with Jesus' birth, Jesus mirrors Moses. He was rescued from a tyrannical despot in Egypt. He survived his testing in the wilderness after passing through water. Jesus's five major sermons mirror the Moses' five books of Torah. Both Jesus (Matt 11:29; 21:5) and Moses (Num 12:3; Sir. 45:4; Philo, *Mos. 1:26; 2:279; b. Ned. 38a*) were known as humble leaders. Moses and Jesus have a conversation on top of a mountain during the Transfiguration. And, of course, Jesus'

Last Supper was during the Passover meal that Moses established (see Heb 9:15–22). Clearly Moses is a strong motif in Matthew’s presentation of Jesus the Messiah.

While Luke has fewer Mosaic allusions, those he does include are even more pointed. (1) Only in Luke’s version of the Transfiguration does Jesus speak with Moses and Elijah about his “*exodus* in Jerusalem” (9:31). (2) Only in Luke does Jesus choose seventy delegates as Moses did (10:1–17; cf. Num 11:16–17, 24–25). (3) Luke 11:20 alone reads “finger of God” where Matthew has “the Holy Spirit”. This is an obvious reference to the miracles of Moses (Exod 8:19). (4) And in Luke’s second volume called “Acts”, Stephen’s sermon directly compares Jesus to Moses in a brilliant typological comparison (Acts 7). Here Moses, like Jesus, is portrayed as a suffering redeemer (cf. Acts 7:35 and Luke 24:21). For Luke, however, it is clearly not enough to equate Jesus with Moses. Jesus, in his view, is greater by far than Moses. First, at the Transfiguration he records God’s voice: “Listen to HIM.” Jesus is thus not Moses peer. He is the unparalleled Son of God. Later, Luke records Paul’s vivid declaration, “Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38–39).

Turning from Luke to John we see the same superiority of Jesus the Messiah over Moses the Prophet. In chapter 3:14–15 the John reminds his readers of the deadly vipers in Numbers 21:4–9. They went on a rampage striking the rebellious Israelites. Moses pleaded with God to relent. His solution was to have Moses caste a serpent in bronze and lift it up on a pole. Anyone who looked upon the raised serpent by faith was healed of the venom. John makes a comparison between Jesus’ crucifixion and Moses’ bronze serpent. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him” (John 3:14–15; see Numbers 21:9). This bronze serpent was type of Christ—a mere shadow of the promise to heal God’s people. Moses’ serpent on a pole was a temporary solution. Jesus lifted up on the cross was a permanent cure for all people from the curse of being bitten by sin. Two chapter’s later, we find Jesus in a vituperative debate with the religious leaders. Moses is called in to testify: “But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?” (John 5:45–47). Thus, in both chapters 3 and 5 Moses is Jesus’ servant, not his equal. He not only fulfills Moses’ prediction; he supersedes Moses’ person.

Second, there is a whole discourse on Manna (6:22–59) after Jesus’ feeding the five thousand. In the midst of the message he makes a poignant claim, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:32–33). Clearly Jesus claims to be superior to Moses. He wasn’t merely God’s messenger; he was God’s gift, the very bread of life (John 6:48). So John uses this story to

point toward Moses. What does he happen to say about Moses? Certainly not that Jesus is the second Moses. Rather, he says it was *not* Moses that provided the manna rather it was God (6:32). Furthermore, the Israelites under Moses ate manna and died, but he himself is the bread from heaven that provides eternal life (6:48–51). This text exalts Jesus well above Moses.

Paul, likewise, draws a parallel between the first and second redeemer. For him, Jesus is far superior. This is clearly seen in his allegory of 1 Corinthians 10:1–4 from Moses' wilderness wanderings. Here Jesus is not compared to Moses, the liberator (which seems like an obvious enough connection). Instead Jesus is the rock from which the Israelites drank. "All drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ," (1 Corinthians 10:4; see Exodus 17:6). In other words, Moses was God's messenger to Israel but Jesus was God's gift to Israel. John leans into Manna and the bread of life. Paul leans into the rock and the water of life. Both exalt Jesus as the gift of God while Moses is the mere agent of the gift.

Another example comes from 2 Corinthians 3:13–18. Paul recalls the incident in Exodus 34:33. After Moses met with God in the Holy of Holies, his face shone because of being in the presence of God. He somehow absorbed a bit of God's *shekinah* glory. The effect was not long-lived, however. Moses was concerned that his fading glory might reflect badly. So he covered it up by veiling his face after speaking to the crowd. Who knows how many times he repeated this cycle: talk to God, talk to the crowd, cover his fading face. Nonetheless, when Paul compares Moses to Jesus he does not say "this is that". Rather, the Apostle compares the fading glory of Moses with the unfading *shekinah* of Jesus on the Christian. "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Here the glory of the law is allegorically compared to the fading glory of Moses' face. It is fading specifically because Jesus replaces it. Notably, Moses is not compared to Christ, but to the *Christian*. Christ, rather, is the unfading glory itself, the embodiment of the new law which replaces the old. In summary, Jesus is not Moses. Instead, he is the Manna, the water, and the glory of God. Moses the messenger gives way to Jesus the means of connecting with God.

Finally, the author of Hebrews (3:2–6; cf. 8:5–7) gives a most explicit comparison: "Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also 'was faithful in all God's house.' Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken

later. Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope.”

Nearly every author of the New Testament picks up on Mosaic imagery. This is not surprising since Moses, along with David and Abraham, represent the key figures of Israel. What is surprising is the ease with which the early eye-witnesses portrayed Jesus as superior to Moses. The entire New Testament has a penchant for exalting Jesus over Moses. Moses instituted the Passover; Jesus is the sacrificial lamb. Moses offered Manna; Jesus is the Bread from Heaven. Moses miraculously provided water; Jesus is that Rock. Let's not let the gravity of this elude us. Moses was revered in Israel. In fact, in a number of Jewish texts and traditions he is given semi-divine status. He was a superhero. To assert that a peasant carpenter outmatched the founder of the nation was an assault on religious sensibilities. What tectonic shift allowed such an unprecedented exaltation of Jesus? What allowed the Apostles to come to this conclusion? How could they shift to such a position against all cultural expectations? How did the early eyewitnesses convince crowds to assent to such an assertion? Two things (and only two) can account for this tidal shift. First, Jesus' incomparable moral life demonstrated the power of God on human turf. Second, his irrefutable resurrection testified to God's unwavering acclamation of his son. Without Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, there is no valid explanation for how anyone could claim he fulfilled Moses' prophecy let alone that he surpassed Moses' status.

Key Points:

- Moses, along with Abraham and David, made up the “trinity” of Hebrew royalty. Therefore, any comparison of Jesus with Moses would have raised more than eyebrows. It would have raised religious ire.
- Nearly every author of the New Testament compares Jesus to Moses. All told, Jesus is not like Moses or the mere fulfillment of Moses. He is superior to this Hebrew superstar.
- Any explanation of this widespread and unilateral perspective of Jesus' superiority to Moses must be grounded in Jesus' impeccable moral life and his resurrection after death.

Action Step: Ask someone at work or school what the current president would have to do or accomplish in order to be remembered by historians alongside George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. This will help you see how massive a shift it was for Jesus to be compared to Moses.