

## Moses

Not everybody knows that besides the sublime frescoes of Michelangelo that adorn its ceiling the Sistine Chapel in Rome also contains frescoes painted between 1481 and 1483 by four other great Italian artists, including Domenico Ghirlandaio, to whom Michelangelo was for a time apprenticed, and Sandro Botticelli (not to mention several tapestries by Raphael). The paintings on the middle sections of the two side walls of the chapel portray a series of episodes from the Old Testament, opposite scenes from the New Testament they were thought to have prefigured. Moses, on the left (south) wall, confronts Christ, on the right. The original sequence began on the altar wall itself with the *Finding of Moses* and the *Birth of Christ* (events also associated in Matthew's Gospel), but both of these paintings were subsequently destroyed to make way for Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, painted over a half-century later in the new mannerist style. (The two final paintings on the entrance wall, opposite the altar, deteriorated so badly that they had to be replaced.) The remaining dozen paintings of the sequence, six on each wall, have survived and can still be seen today, starting with two paintings of Perugino, the *Circumcision of the Son of Moses* and the *Baptism of Christ*. Next come two pictures of Botticelli, one depicting the *Temptation (or Trial) of Moses* in the desert, the other the *Temptation of Christ*, in which the three temptations of Jesus are placed in the upper register of the painting. Then comes Ghirlandaio's *Crossing of the Red Sea* opposite his *Calling of the Apostles*. After that the *Dispensation of the Ten Commandments*, by Cosimo Roselli, showing the handing over of the tablets of the law, is paralleled by the *Sermon on the Mount*. (Although Roselli was undoubtedly the weakest of the four, he was still an artist of considerable talent.) Another pair of pictures by Botticelli represents occasions of disarray or rebellion (*conturbatio*): one in the life of Moses, based on the story in Numbers 16 according to which the rebellious Korah ends up being swallowed up into the ground (while his sons, in accordance with Num. 26:11, are shown tucked away in the lower left corner, relieved and somewhat bemused to be still

alive); and the other in the life of Christ (with the arch of Constantine in the background). In the last two surviving paintings the *Death of Moses* is shown opposite a painting of the *Last Supper*. Although four different artists were involved, the frescoes are broadly similar in conception: the scale of the figures is the same, and so are the range of colors and the style of the landscapes. Moses, a dignified and authoritative figure who appears in each of the paintings on the south wall (several times in some of them), is depicted throughout wearing a yellow robe and an olive-green cloak. There can be no doubt that the series was conceived from the outset as a unified whole.<sup>1</sup>

Sixtus's secretary, Andreas of Trebizond, who probably masterminded the whole series, summed it up as paintings of two legal systems, a summary borne out by the Latin inscriptions above the pictures: for five of the six captions on the south wall include the words *lex scripta*—the written law—and five of the six on the north wall contain the words *evangelica lex*—the law of the gospel. The caption above Roselli's picture of the Last Supper, for instance, reads, surprisingly, *Replicatio legis evangelicae a Christo*—Christ's repetition of the law of the gospel. The parallel picture, whose central scene shows Moses reciting the law to the assembled multitude on the eve of his death, bears the caption, *Replicatio legis scriptae a Moise*.<sup>2</sup> This makes the other title slightly more comprehensible; but it is still very strange.

It can hardly be doubted that, had Martin Luther ever seen the paintings on the walls of this chapel (completed thirty-five years before he posted the famous ninety-five theses on the door of a church in Wittenberg in 1517), he would have been no less offended by the assumption that the gospel was a system of law matching the law of Moses than he was by the sale of indulgences that helped to pay for the paintings. Some justification for this way of looking at the moral teaching of Jesus can be found in the declaration attributed to him in Matthew's Gospel (5:17) that he had come not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them (although the Sermon of the Mount is more concerned with ideals and principles than with prescriptive legislation). Luther, of course, was to insist on the absolute opposition between law and gospel; and although he may have exaggerated the extent of Paul's rejection of the law, Christians of every denomination have accepted the general thrust of

1. Most of this information comes from a multiauthored work entitled *The Sistine Chapel: Michelangelo Rediscovered* (London: Muller, Blond & White, 1986). The title is misleading, for one chapter of the book deals (not always accurately) with the decorations of the walls. The author of this chapter is John Shearman.

2. The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* does not include *repetition* under *replicatio*, nor *rebellion* under *conturbatio*. But these are the meanings required by the context.

his arguments concerning the incompatibility of Christian teaching with the Jewish law. I cannot be alone in my astonishment when I first read the captions above the frescoes decorating the walls of the Sistine Chapel.

Toward the end of the fifteenth century, which was when the walls and ceiling of the Sistine Chapel were painted, the Church of Rome, having recovered from the forty-year schism arising from the squabble of the three popes, was beginning to regain its authority. The prominence given to Moses in these paintings, whose every action in the frescoes on the south wall is positive, and often heroic, shows that Judaism was no longer thought of as a rival to Christianity, but simply as a precursor. In one obvious sense Jesus was now seen (as he had been by Matthew) as a second Moses.

### MOSES IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

Where does the Gospel of John, I now want to ask, stand in relation to the portrayal of Moses in the Sistine Chapel? It would be a mistake to assume that the positive, generally sympathetic attitude to Moses evident in these frescoes must also have characterized the very earliest Christian movement. Running throughout the present book will be the thesis that before, during, and after the painful break between the advocates of Jesus and their more traditional rivals in the synagogue around the end of the first century ce, the opposition between Moses and Jesus was at the heart of the conflict between these two groups. Commentators often speak of the Jesus group in the synagogue as Christians, and although they are not altogether wrong, the easy, anachronistic use of a name that had not yet been coined (or at any rate was not yet current) can be misleading, for it appears to suggest that the new religion had already made its mark even while the struggle for independence was still going on. It is true, I think, that in ousting Moses from his central place as God's representative in his dealings with his people, the fourth evangelist (along with those on whose behalf he spoke and wrote) was effectively establishing a new religion. But this needs to be demonstrated and should not simply be assumed. In the remainder of this chapter I will appeal to the Gospel itself for evidence that at the same time as promoting Jesus' new revelation the evangelist was deliberately repudiating traditional Judaism.

Written as it was by someone who worshiped in a Jewish synagogue, the account in John's Gospel of a complete and comprehensive religious revolution is truly astonishing. Its extraordinary nature is veiled from us largely because, reading the Gospel as a proclamation of the new religion, we are understandably more interested in how its author concluded his religious conversion than in how he began it. Moreover, this is one document of which

it can truly be said that its end is its beginning, insofar as the choice of one religion to replace another is tersely announced on its very first page. Since the uncompromising rejection of Moses and the law in favor of the grace and truth brought by Christ is stated in the Prologue, it is hard not to read all that follows in the light of this new revelation. But from the historian's point of view the Prologue should be seen as a conclusion rather than as a commencement. We should start our inquiry at a point where the evangelist and the group he represents are still "disciples of Moses," worshipping in the synagogue alongside people convinced that God's last word had already been uttered in the foundation document of the people of Israel that we call the Torah. Or, even better, we should go back to the source, namely, to a section of the Gospel that was taken over by the evangelist and adapted to form the beginning of his story—the sudden appearance of the man we call John the Baptist, whose dramatic gesture in pointing to the one of whom he said "he ranks before me" has been recorded thousands of times in Christian art.

Accordingly I propose in what follows to discuss the Moses passages in the Gospel in some sort of chronological order, starting from the missionary document generally known as the Signs Source, followed by what I believe to have been a second missionary document directed to the Samaritans. After that I will deal with some passages from the first edition of the Gospel, add a short comment about the Farewell Discourse, and conclude with two texts from the second edition,<sup>3</sup> first a few verses from chapter 6 and, second, the Prologue.<sup>4</sup>

3. That the Gospel underwent (at least) two editions will be fully argued in excursus III.

4. I will treat of most of the passages discussed in chapter 6 of J. Louis Martyn's *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 101–24 ("From the Expectation of the Prophet-Messiah like Moses . . .") along with most of Martyn's primary sources. I differ with him insofar as I attempt to trace some sort of chronological development in the evangelist's thinking about Moses, and also (more importantly) in that I hold the titles of Messiah and Prophet apart. The Mosaic prophet unquestionably has a major role to play throughout the Gospel, but what Martyn calls "the Moses-Messiah typology" is largely his own invention. It is true that the Samaritan woman uses the term *Messiah* when referring to the Taheb (4:25; see below), but the evidence from Jewish sources is restricted to a saying ascribed to Rabbi Akiba in a late midrash (*Tanḥuma 'Ekeb* 7), predicting that the Messiah will condemn his people to another forty-year sojourn in the desert, and a fuller but even later reference in *Qoheleth Rabba* 1.8 (both texts quoted by Martyn on p. 107). But John's Messiah is Davidic. The Messiah and the prophet appear not far apart in a number of passages in the Gospel but are never identified. In John 1 they are named separately by John the Baptist and discovered independently by two different disciples, Andrew and Philip. The questions concerning the two in John 7 come from different voices in the crowd, and *contra* Martyn (p. 111) there is no "easy modulation from the Mosaic Prophet to the Mosaic Prophet-Messiah." Nor are they directly associated in John 9. Yet despite the weakness of his "Messiah like Moses" thesis, Martyn's discussion is always illuminating and illustrates how the Johannine

Some of these passages will receive a rather summary treatment here, but I shall be focusing on them more intently later in the book.

It is not easy to stick to this program, because what may plausibly be regarded as the first edition of the Gospel already belongs to a period following the dramatic breakup of the opposing parties in the synagogue. In particular it includes the three great challenges to Jesus that figure prominently in chapters 5, 8, and 10. Not surprisingly, then, the first edition already contains many indications of the radical rejection of the authority of Moses expressed most clearly in the Prologue.

*JOHN 1:19—2:11*

Nevertheless there are two passages in the Gospel that were probably drawn from, or at least based on, missionary manifestos designed to promote faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the prophet like Moses foretold in Deut. 18:15, 18, verses of such importance that they should be quoted here:

[And Moses summoned the people of Israel and said to them:]

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed.” . . . And the Lord said to me, “They have rightly spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.”

The first of these passages (1:19—2:11), the commencement of what is commonly designated “the Signs Source,” begins with a denial on the part of John the Baptist that he was either the Messiah, or Elijah, or “the prophet” (1:20-22). John pointed instead to Jesus, who was soon discovered—by those who became his first disciples—to be both the Messiah and the one “of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote” (1:45). The role of Moses in this early source was simply and solely that of a prophet who predicted the coming of another prophet like himself. So far there is no controversy and no conflict.<sup>5</sup>

*JOHN 4:1-42*

The second passage is the story of the woman at the well. A well is in any case an obvious location for a dialogue about water; but this particular well was

group in the synagogue may have been constantly subjected to a series of probing questions concerning the claims they made for Jesus.

5. I will discuss this passage much more fully below in chapter 7.

selected because it had been given to the Samaritans by none other than the patriarch Jacob: “our father Jacob,” as the woman called him, “who gave us this well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle” (4:12). (A site at the foot of Mount Gerizim, the sacred mountain of the Samaritans, is identified to this day as Jacob’s well.) The more immediate ancestor of the Samaritans (as the father of Ephraim and Manasseh) was Jacob’s son Joseph, whom he called “a fruitful bough by a spring” in his final blessing (Gen. 49:22). So the well was ideally situated for a conciliatory conversation between a Samaritan woman and a man she explicitly designated as a Jew (4:9), belonging to the great tribe of Judah (all of whom were descended from Judah, another of Jacob’s sons), the long-standing enemy of the Samaritans.

In reading this chapter we should bear in mind the exceptional importance of the figure of Moses in Samaritan traditions. As Wayne Meeks says, Moses “dominates Samaritan religious literature to an extent scarcely equaled in any circle of Jewish tradition, with the possible exception of Philo.”<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 18:18, the key text in any explanation of the discovery of Jesus in John 1:45, lies behind the expectation of the Taheb no less than it does behind the Jewish expectation of a future prophet. Commentators are agreed that the woman’s use of the Jewish term *Messiah* when speaking of her own expectation (4:25) must be interpreted as a reference to the Samaritan Taheb,<sup>7</sup> not a Davidic Messiah but a Moses-like prophet. Moses, although not actually named in this passage, was considered to be the author of the Samaritan Torah, guaranteeing that their future expectations would be fulfilled.<sup>8</sup> Neither of these two missionary documents would have been welcomed or accepted if it did not accord somehow with the hopes of those for whom it was composed. A successful outcome of the mission is explicitly recorded among the Samaritans (4:39–42) and, in the case of the Jews, must be inferred from the subsequent presence in the synagogue of followers of Jesus. So two documents testifying to a calmly positive attitude to Moses have been taken over and included in the Gospel.

### JOHN 3:14

There is a further instance in the Gospel of Moses in his role as antitype or precursor, perhaps the most intriguing of all: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent

6. Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King. Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 216.

7. In a helpful note (*Prophet-King*, 250 n. 1), Meeks points out that the word **תהב**, active participle of the verb **תרב** (= Hebrew **שׂרב**) can be understood either transitively (“the Restorer”) or intransitively (“the Returning One”). Scholars disagree about which of these is more likely to be correct.

8. See further Martyn’s discussion of Samaritan expectations in *History and Theology*, 106–7.

in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up” (3:14). The reference is clear and undisputed: “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’ So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live” (Num. 21:8-9). But how did the elevation of the bronze serpent by Moses in the desert come to be associated with the elevation of Jesus on the cross? To put the question in this way may seem to imply that the association was suggested by the use of the word *elevation*; but in fact where John uses ὑψοῦν (“exalt”) the Greek version of Numbers uses the simple verb ἵστάναι (“set up”).<sup>9</sup> Commentators have had a field day in their search for a verbal connection between the two passages, and many different ambiguous Aramaic words have been proposed as a solution of the puzzle—though as Rudolf Bultmann remarks drily with regard to one such suggestion concerning 12:34 (where the word ὑψοῦν also occurs): “this verse was composed by the evangelist, who wrote Greek.”<sup>10</sup> It must be relevant that gazing at the bronze serpent was a guarantee of survival, since John saw the purpose of the lifting up of the Son of Man to be “that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (3:15). Bultmann thinks that “the Evangelist was probably acquainted with the typological interpretation which the Christian tradition had given to Num. 21.8f, for it also occurs in Barn 12.5-7; Just. *Apol.* I 60; *Dial.* 91, 94, 112.”<sup>11</sup> But Barnabas and Justin were second-century writers; and if someone had to be the first to associate the setting-up of a bronze effigy for the purpose of preserving life with the life-giving elevation of Jesus on the cross, why should it not have been the evangelist John? I began this paragraph by referring to Moses as an antetype or precursor, but this is not quite right.<sup>12</sup> For the (literally) crucial connection is the actual act of elevation, the lifting up of the pole in one case and of the cross in the other. If we were to push the comparison further we would have to conclude that what Moses actually prefigured was the action of the Roman soldiers in hoisting up the cross, and that Jesus, bizarrely, was being compared with a snake. (And indeed Barnabas and Justin, and, later, Tertullian, do treat the serpent as a type of Christ.) The real link is to be found in the notion of life, but the evangelist is very far from associating life with Moses.

9. For a fuller discussion, see my *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), 268–70.

10. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 354 n. 6.

11. Bultmann, *Gospel*, 152 n. 1.

12. See Howard M. Teeple, *The Mosaic Eschatological Prophet*, Journal of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 10 (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1957), 96; Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 292.

*JOHN 5:31-47*

We now turn to the conclusion of chapter 5, the chapter in which for the first time in the Gospel Jesus is accused by the Jews of claiming equality with God. From this it may be inferred that this chapter must have been composed after the breakup with the synagogue, and so may be expected to exhibit some hostility to the principles of its leaders.

We might conclude from a cursory reading of the first part of this passage (5:31-40), where the key word is *witness* (μαρτυρία), that Jesus is appealing here to a variety of witnesses. He starts by discounting his own witness,<sup>13</sup> but then, in rapid succession, he speaks of God (the one who sent him), of John the Baptist, of his own works, of Moses, and finally the Scriptures. A more attentive reading, however, reveals that John's testimony is rapidly set aside (v. 34: "I do not receive testimony from a human"), and that the three witnesses that Jesus does allow, his works (v. 36), the Father (v. 37), and the Scriptures (v. 39), can be reduced to the single witness of the Father, inasmuch as Jesus' works are performed only in obedience to the one who sent him, and the authority of the Scriptures comes from the God who inspired them.

At this point Jesus speaks to the Jews of the Scriptures as a whole: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (5:39-40). That Jews looked to find life in the Scriptures is almost a truism.<sup>14</sup> Yet Jesus does not enter into an argument here. Instead, almost as an afterthought, he closes his discourse in this chapter by talking of Moses—not, though, to attack him, for at this point he is relying on the authority of Moses to provide him with an argument his adversaries would be forced to accept. So the evangelist takes the opportunity of bringing Moses into the discussion in a sort of *argumentum ad hominem* that conceals a real opposition he is not yet prepared to disclose.

13. The usual translation of 5:31, "If I bear witness to myself, my testimony is not true," makes no sense. The word ἀληθής should be translated here as "valid." The same rendering is required in 8:14: "Even if I do bear witness to myself, my testimony is valid." Although these two verses appear to contradict each other, the contradiction is only apparent, for in both passages the underlying appeal is to the testimony of God. For a full discussion, see my *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 118-22.

14. Raymond E. Brown (*The Gospel according to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible 29, 29A [New York: Doubleday, 1966, 1970], 1:225) has two citations—strong ones—from *Pirqe Aboth*: "He who has acquired the works of the Law has acquired for himself the life of the world to come" (2:8), and, "Great is the Law, for it gives to those who practice it life in this world and in the world to come" (6:7). See too Bultmann, *Gospel*, 268 n. 2, and the literature cited there.

Yet there is no prevarication in his acknowledgment of the *witness* of the Scriptures, in particular of the Torah. Along with all the other writers of the New Testament, the fourth evangelist was fully conscious that the Christian message was not properly intelligible without support from Jewish tradition. So neither here nor at any other point in the long discourse in chapter 5, built out of the controversy surrounding the healing of the cripple, does he target Moses directly. Like all Jews at the time, John had no doubt that Moses was the author of the book of the law. Here, at the end of the chapter, he hits upon the idea of appropriating Moses' work, or rather of extracting from it the testimony he needed. He knew that he had somehow to separate the man and the book, but to do so openly would have weakened his own position. Hence the remarkable conclusion of this chapter, in which Jesus attempts to drive a wedge between *Moses* and *the Jews*: "it is Moses who accuses you, on whom you set your hope. If you believed Moses you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words" (5:45-47). It is an astonishing accusation: the Jews, asserts Jesus, did not truly believe what Moses had written, even though they pretended to put their trust in him. The book of the law on which they relied actually supported his own claim: "Moses wrote of me" (5:46).

We may recall that this was precisely what Philip said to Nathanael after Jesus had summoned him to follow him just after his baptism: "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth" (1:45). But that was in a context where there was not yet so much as a whisper of controversy. The situation is now one in which Jesus is directly confronting people who have accused him of making himself equal with God. And he introduces the name of Moses simply to score a point. As I have observed, it is an *argumentum ad hominem*.

The Jews might have been expected to respond to the claim that Moses had really written of Jesus by asking, "Where? Can you point to a single passage where he wrote of you?" And they would certainly not have been satisfied with a simple citation of Deut. 18:18. (As we shall see in relation to chapter 9, this was another contentious issue.) One would like to have been able to listen in to a debate between representatives of the two groups on this point, in the manner of Justin's *Dialogue against Tryphon*. But here, as elsewhere in the Gospel, the Jews speak the words dictated to them by the evangelist, and the chapter ends with a rhetorical question to which Jesus expects no reply: "If you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

## JOHN 7:15-24

From a structural point of view John 7 is among the most complex in the Gospel.<sup>15</sup> The main reason for its complexity is that, although it includes what was originally the direct continuation of chapter 5 (for 7:15 follows on from 5:47),<sup>16</sup> the subsequent insertion of chapter 6 compelled the evangelist to make certain alterations.

In the first place, the opening of chapter 7, the story of Jesus' reluctant decision to go up to the feast (once the commencement of a miracle story) has been adapted and extended to serve as a preface to the controversy material beginning in 7:11. This material, however, is quickly interrupted, as we have just seen, by the Jews' puzzlement at Jesus' learning (7:15), expressed in a question that originally furthered the argument that now concludes chapter 5. This question enables both the reintroduction of the motif of personal glory (7:18; see 5:44) and the reversal back to the main theme of chapter 5, Jesus' claim to be speaking with the authority of God (7:16-17; see 5:19, 30). Then comes Jesus' sudden question, "Did not Moses give you the law?" (7:19), which takes a different tack by once again introducing the name of Moses in an *argumentum ad hominem* adding to that of the conclusion of chapter 5, which it continues.

In the second place, the other question (in the same verse) that looks so abrupt and out of place in its present context—"Why do you seek to kill me?" (7:19c)—is readily intelligible if we see it as a reference back to the long opening paragraph of chapter 5 that climaxes in the first attempt upon Jesus' life (5:18). The reference is confirmed by Jesus' response: "I did one work [ἓν ἔργον], and you all marvel at it" (7:21). Jesus' one work, the healing of the cripple that caused all the trouble in the first place, is thus contrasted, in a typical rabbinic *qal wahomer* argument, with the behavior of the Jews in continually infringing on the Sabbath by practicing circumcision on that day.

Bultmann's concluding comment on this argument is masterly:

15. See my *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 233-39 (Excursus V: The Composition of John 7).

16. Bultmann, relying partly on the fact that the relatively rare word γράμματα occurs both in 5:47 and in 7:15, argues plausibly that this passage (7:15-24) is the response of the Jews to Jesus' appeal to Moses at the end of chapter 5: "How is it that this man knows his letters, when he has never studied?" Rightly understanding the word ἐθαύμαζον in 7:15 to express surprise rather than admiration, Bultmann picks up the inference: "He does not belong to the guild of the Scribes." C. K. Barrett (*The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. [London: SPCK, 1978] 317), supported by Barnabas Lindars (*The Gospel of John* [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972], 288), rejects this argument on the grounds that the reference is to specific writings in the first instance, to intellectual training in the second. But his knowledge of the law is what gives Jesus his authority to teach. See Bultmann, *Gospel*, 273 n. 3.

There is only one way in which we can attach any meaning to this confused speech, in which the Jews are accused on the one hand of breaking the Mosaic law (v. 19) and on the other of breaking the Sabbath in compliance with the Mosaic law (v. 23). It must mean that the Jews break the Mosaic law, because even though they act in compliance with the law of circumcision they fail to ask what Moses' real intention was.<sup>17</sup>

We should not infer from this passage that the evangelist himself continues to respect the actual legislation found in the Torah;<sup>18</sup> for Jesus clearly dissociates himself from Jewish practice—"Moses gave *you* circumcision," and "*you* circumcise"—just as elsewhere he refers to "*your* law" (8:17; 10:34; cf. 15:25). Similarly, when Pilate invited the Jews to assume responsibility for Jesus' fate, what he said was, "Take him yourselves and judge him by *your* law" (18:31). All that was left by way of a law for John and his community was the "new commandment" of mutual love enjoined upon them on the eve of Jesus' departure (13:34-35). Here in chapter 7, Jesus is simply using arguments that his opponents will find difficult to refute: Lindars comments on the clever use of the issue of circumcision, which "provides a double-edged argument: on the one hand, it gives a precedent for Jesus' action, which justifies him on the Jews' own ground; on the other, it adduces an example of the way in which the Jews themselves break the Law, which is Jesus' accusation in verse 19."<sup>19</sup> Moses is no longer the unchallenged spokesman of God, but simply a name to be conjured with when arguing with traditionally minded Jews.

#### *JOHN 9:27-28*

Passing over John 3:13 (which should arguably have been included here because although Moses is not named in this verse he must have been among those Jewish seers of whom it was denied that they had ascended into heaven),<sup>20</sup> we come to the most important passage of all—the angry response to the sarcastic question of the recently healed blind beggar: "Do you too want to become his disciples?" To which the immediate response is: "You are that fellow's disciple, but we are the disciples of Moses" (9:27-28). I will comment in chapter 7 on the momentous implications of this reply. Here it is enough to say that the man's

17. Bultmann, *Gospel*, 278 (punctuation altered).

18. Meeks (*Prophet-King*, 287-99) gives a very good analysis of the passage, but I think he is wrong to infer from 7:19 that "the Torah is not rejected."

19. Lindars, *Gospel*, 291.

20. This verse will receive a lengthy discussion later.

immediate expulsion was a signal instance of a more general excommunication that had already been determined. Jesus was now thought of as usurping the place of Moses.

#### CHAPTER 14

Moses is nowhere named in the second half of the Gospel, but his shadow is perceptibly present throughout the Farewell Discourse, for Jesus' parting words to his disciples, cast in the form of a testimony, are clearly modeled on Moses' final address to the whole people of Israel in the book of Deuteronomy. Paradoxically, although Moses is nowhere named in Jesus' discourse, Jesus is named in that of Moses (at any rate in the Greek version of this, for the Hebrew Joshua is rendered Ἰησοῦς in Greek). Joshua is Moses' successor, commissioned to lead the people into the promised land after his death. Taking on an analogous role in John's account is the Paraclete, who, as the Spirit of Truth, is thereby the spirit of Jesus (who has just declared himself to be the truth). In John 16 (which belongs to the second edition of the Gospel) the analogy is extended, for here the promise is made that the Paraclete will lead the disciples "into the truth" (16:12), a richer realm than the promised land.<sup>21</sup>

#### JOHN 6:30-33

"We would dearly love," remarks Barnabas Lindars in his comment on John 5:46, "to have a specimen of the way in which John understood the OT witness to Christ; fortunately, for the second edition of his work, he has provided precisely such an example in his great interpolation of chapter 6, in which the whole issue is treated at length. We generally think of chapter 6 as the discourse on the Bread of Life, but it is a much more a discourse on the interpretation of Scripture"<sup>22</sup>—an observation repeated on the next page of his book, where he says of chapter 6 that

its present position is peculiarly suitable because of the way in which it serves as an illustration of Jesus' claim in 5.39, 46f. For this is the most biblical section of the whole Gospel. The discourse is not merely a development of the implications of the miracle of feeding with which the chapter opens; on the contrary, that is really a brilliant use of traditional material as an opening gambit for a

21. These ideas are fully developed in the chapter of *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* entitled "Departure and Return."

22. Lindars, *Gospel*, 233.

discourse which is fundamentally an exposition of an OT text—the story of the manna in the Wilderness in Exod. 16.

Subsequent commentators have not taken up this suggestion of Lindars; but it provides an astute and satisfying solution to the puzzle of the present position of John 6: “an independent composition, inserted by John into the second edition of his work.”<sup>23</sup> Apart from the Prologue, to be considered shortly, this is the only additional occurrence of the name of Moses in what may be thought of as the second edition of the Gospel, and deserves our attention for that very reason.

Early on in their debate with Jesus in John 6, the people who found him on the other side of the lake (not yet called Jews in this chapter) asked him for a sign: “What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’ ” (6:30-31). Although this is probably a (slightly adapted) quotation from Psalm 78, the underlying text is undoubtedly the manna story in Exodus. And Jesus has the answer: “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven: my Father gives you the true bread from heaven’ (6:32). Peder Borgen has argued that this is a rabbinic-type exegesis of the pattern, “Do not read *that*, but rather read *this*.” That is to say, “Do not read the ‘he’ as Moses, but as the Father, and do not read ‘gave’ but ‘gives,’”<sup>24</sup> But this reading gives more prominence to Moses than he is allowed in the text. Jesus might have said (but did not), “Moses gave you manna, but my Father gives the true bread.” What he says instead is a simple denial: “Moses *did not* give you bread from heaven,” or rather, “not [οὐ] Moses gave . . . but [ἀλλά] my Father gives.” As J. Louis Martyn points out, “the emphatic negative by means of which [Jesus] introduces his reply stands immediately before the word ‘Moses.’ And the subject of the second line is changed. The ‘correction’ therefore is, ‘not Moses gave, but my Father gives.’ John is strongly contrasting Moses with God!”<sup>25</sup>—and in doing so taking Moses out of the story altogether. Although there is what looks like a form of midrash at this point, the evangelist is effectively denying Jesus’ interlocutors the right to make any typological comparison between Moses and Jesus. Jesus is about to say, “I am the bread of life” (6:39), and that bread is what God is giving now. Wayne Meeks says of this passage that “the polemical intent is evident: Moses is reduced to a mere

23. Lindars, *Gospel*, 234. See excursus II below on the problem of the position of chapter 6.

24. Peder Borgen, “Observations on the Midrashic Character of John 6,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 54 (1963): 232-40.

25. Martyn, *History and Theology*, 122. “Only in the final analysis,” Martyn says, “do I think Borgen’s suggestions are misleading” (121 n. 187).

mediator of the gift, and the gift itself is derogated in comparison with its Christian counterpart.<sup>26</sup> But the gift of the bread from heaven in the original quotation (6:31) is rapidly interpreted to refer to the true bread of life, a gift stated in such a way that even the name of Moses is deliberately excluded.

Earlier in the chapter, having seen the miracle of the loaves, the people had declared of Jesus: “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world” (6:14)—the clearest acknowledgment in the whole Gospel that Jesus had now taken over the role of Moses as *the* prophet of God. So in a story that, among other things, justified Jesus’ claim in the preceding chapter that Moses did indeed write of him, the evangelist pursues his own agenda: to refute the Jewish belief that Moses had the key role in the story of God’s revelation to his people, and to reassign that role to Jesus.<sup>27</sup>

It might be observed that if those responsible for the theological program behind the decoration of the walls of the Sistine Chapel had remembered the story of John 6 they might well have chosen the scene of the distribution of the manna as a parallel to the Last Supper instead of the end of Moses’ life, where in one part of the picture he is shown handing over his staff to Joshua and in another (the center of this fresco) reading out the law to the people. If the manna scene had been preferred Moses would have figured, as he does in the other pictures on the south wall, as the precursor or antetype of Jesus. But that is not how John read the story.

### THE PROLOGUE

The first mention of Moses in the Gospel as it has come down to us occurs in the Prologue. After the astounding statement in verse 14 that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; and we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father,” we read (in the RSV): “And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:16-17). The word χάρις (“grace”) comes four times in these two verses. There must be an allusion to the Hebrew coupling חסד (first word) ואמת (*hesed we’emet*) as found, for instance in Exod. 34:6—“a God abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,” even though the term חסד is generally translated ἔλεος (“pity, compassion”) in the Septuagint. Raymond Brown renders it as “love”: “And of his fullness we

26. Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 291.

27. In the same context Martyn also cites the following verse (6:15) concerning the determination of the crowd to make Jesus king. This verse, he says, may indicate that certain persons in the synagogue had gone beyond identifying Jesus as the Mosaic prophet “to the opinion that he is the Prophet-Messiah” (*History and Theology*, 110). But Jesus evades the attempt to make him king.

have all had a share—love in place of love. For while the law was a gift though Moses, this enduring love came through Jesus Christ.” Here is a positive view of the role of Moses, much the same as that of Pope Sixtus and of his theological advisers responsible for the design on the walls of his great chapel. But was this how the author of the Prologue saw things? Surely not. “For John,” as C. K. Barrett rightly concludes, “Jesus is certainly not a new Moses.”<sup>28</sup> Brown’s translation is skewed by his insertion of the noun “gift” (from the Greek verb “was given”) to define and describe the law. Judaism, unquestionably, saw the law as a gift and a grace bestowed by God on his people.<sup>29</sup> But this sentence from the Prologue, with its stark opposition between Moses and Christ, is a denial that the gift was a grace.<sup>30</sup> As I pointed out in the introduction, it is the clearest statement in the whole of the New Testament of the stark opposition between Christianity and Judaism. It is my task in the remainder of this book to try to explain it.

### THE RABBINIC VIEW

The article on Moses in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, after a pages-long analysis of all the biblical texts concerning Moses, concludes with a short section headed “Rabbinic View.” This is how it opens:

A marked ambivalence is to be observed in the Jewish tradition with regard to the personality of Moses. On the one hand, Moses is the greatest of all the Jewish teachers, a powerfully numinous figure, the man with whom God speaks “face to face,” the intermediary between God and man, the master of the prophets, and the recipient of God’s law for mankind. On the other hand, the utmost care is taken to avoid the ascription of divine or semi-divine powers to Moses. Moses

28. Barrett, *Gospel according to St. John*, 169.

29. Lindars (*Gospel*, 97) observes that according to rabbinic exegesis the grace and the truth of God are revealed in the law: he refers to a midrash on Ps. 25:10, which includes the phrase *hesed u’emet*.

30. *Contra* Brown, who argues against “the theory that vs. 17 contrasts the absence of enduring love in the Law with the presence of enduring love in Christ: on the grounds that it ‘does not seem to do justice to John’s honorific reference to Moses (i 45, iii 14, v 46)’” (*Gospel*, 1:16). Brown seems to have momentarily forgotten his own theory that the Prologue was an independent composition (see chapter 8 below); but in any case the verses he cites, as I have argued, do not really support the suggestion of “honorific reference.” It may be questioned, in fact, whether the concluding verses of the Prologue (1:17–18) were part of the original hymn or whether one or both of these verses were added by the evangelist. We cannot exclude the possibility that the evangelist inserted the verse we have been considering as a deliberate statement of the view he was now taking about Moses and the law. But even if it formed part of the hymn in the first place, he was unquestionably adding his authority to it.

is a man, with human faults and failings. Strenuous attempts are made to reject any “personality cult,” even when the personality in question is so towering as Moses. Judaism is not “Mosaism” but the religion of the Jewish people. God, not Moses, gives His torah to his people Israel.<sup>31</sup>

Yet the “utmost care” and the “strenuous attempts” would hardly have been necessary if the rabbis were not aware of tendencies in Judaism to place Moses too high. I will be looking at some of those tendencies later.

I will argue in excursus III that if we want to use the Gospel as a historical source, with the aim of reconstructing as far as possible the birth and development of the Johannine community, we have to read it diachronically: we cannot take for granted that the Gospel was composed in the order in which it is printed. Of every passage in the Gospel the historian is entitled to ask what it can tell us about the author and his community—what stage of the history of the community it reflects. If we take this approach (excluded a priori, of course, by the self-styled literary or narrative critics), the Prologue confronts us with an immediate challenge. For we are compelled to recognize that the statement in 1:17 we have just been looking at could not possibly have been written by a believing Jew. In attributing grace and truth to Christ rather than to Moses, the author of this sentence knew—cannot but have known—that he was dissociating himself from Judaism in any of its forms.

## CONCLUSION

What have we learned from this inquiry about the status of Moses in the eyes of the fourth evangelist?

1. In his prophetic role, Moses was the precursor of Jesus, who fulfilled the prediction that Moses would be followed by a prophet like himself.
2. Moses wrote of Jesus. In the Pentateuch, the Torah, there were stories that foreshadowed events in the life of Jesus.
3. It was through Moses that Israel received the law; but the legal prescriptions of the law, such as the Sabbath and circumcision, no longer had any relevance.
4. God’s revelation to Moses, the core and foundation of the Jewish tradition, has been superseded by the revelation of Jesus, and Jesus himself has taken the place of Moses.

31. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), 12:394.