

A Prophet like Moses: Early Christian use of the Moses tradition.

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Presentation to the Biblical Characters in the Three Traditions Seminar,
Society of Biblical Literature International meeting, Buenos Aires, July 2015

Abstract

Moses loomed large in Second Temple Jewish literature as the founder of the Jewish people. The first few generations of Christians had to engage with this reality and locate Jesus in a theological landscape dominated by the figure and the legacy of Moses. This paper will map some of the ways in which different Christian authors during the first 100 years after Easter configured Moses to serve their own purposes of promoting Jesus as the eschatological prophet. This study is not concerned with the historicity of either Moses or Jesus, but rather seeks to explore how the early Jesus communities engaged with the legacy of Moses in the first hundred years of Christianity.

Introduction

The abstract for this paper sets out a common assumption among biblical scholars that the figure of Moses so dominated Second Temple Jewish thought, that the early followers of Jesus would have had no option but to engage with that figure.¹ They could demote Moses to a lesser role relative to Jesus, or they could elevate Jesus to a role equal to or higher than Moses. They could coopt Moses as a witness to Jesus, or they could relegate Moses and his law as a passing phase, permitted due to the sinfulness of humans living without the grace that came through Jesus Christ. The one thing it is assumed that the early Christian could not do was to ignore Moses.

¹ For a discussion of the key recent studies on Moses in the New Testament, see (Lierman, 2004, pp., 10–22) or (Gillman, 1992).

This essay sets out to test that common assumption by paying attention to the explicit references to Moses in the New Testament. In doing so, this study takes a different path than many of the influential studies of the past 60 years. To my own surprise, when the question of Moses' influence within early Christianity is studied in this way it appears to have been far less than commonly assumed.

In this study I focus on the character or figure of Moses within the NT writings. In the first place I am looking for patterns of citation, as an indicator of significance, and then I consider the contents of each explicit reference to Moses. This focus on explicit references to Moses will not detect every allusion or even direct reference to Moses. For example, the reference in Galatians 3 is not included in this study even though there is no doubt that the 'mediator' in verse 19 was surely intended to be understood as Moses.

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one. (Gal 3:19–20 NRSV)

On the other hand, such a passage actually tells us very little about Paul's view of Moses that we would not already know from other explicit references: namely that Moses was the mediator of the covenant at Mt Sinai. Indeed, the identity and character of the mediator is actually irrelevant to the point Paul was making in this passage. It is, I suggest, ultimately not a Moses passage at all, but rather a passage about the temporary status of the biblical laws from before the time of Jesus.

This study will focus on explicit references to Moses, since I want to explore the way that the figure of Moses as a literary character functioned in early Christian

literature. Given the original context for this study at the 2015 session of the *Biblical Characters in the Three Traditions Seminar* of the Society of Biblical Literature, this strikes me as an appropriate constraint within which to work.

Perhaps because of the limited results that come from such a study, most investigations into Moses in the NT appeal to Moses typology rather than limiting themselves to explicit references to Moses.² I have no doubt that Moses typology and literary models from the Pentateuch—as well as models from other parts of the Tanakh—have influenced the composition of the early Christian traditions about Jesus. However, I think the more limited study of explicit references to Moses that I have attempted in this paper is a valuable ‘minority report’ that balances the enthusiasm for Moses typology explanations with a reminder of just how rarely the earliest Christian authors actually referred to Moses.³

To assist in the interpretation of the data for explicit references to Moses within the NT, I have undertaken a similar analysis of the biblical and post-biblical material that was either known to the earliest Christians or at least contemporary with the NT. This provides a control set of data from the following sets of religious literature: the Tanakh, the OT Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo of Alexandria, Flavius Josephus, and the Apostolic Fathers.

² See, for example, the previously cited work by Lierman, and his review of recent studies on this theme. Other examples would include (Brown, 1977), (Moessner, 1983), and (Sparks, 2006).

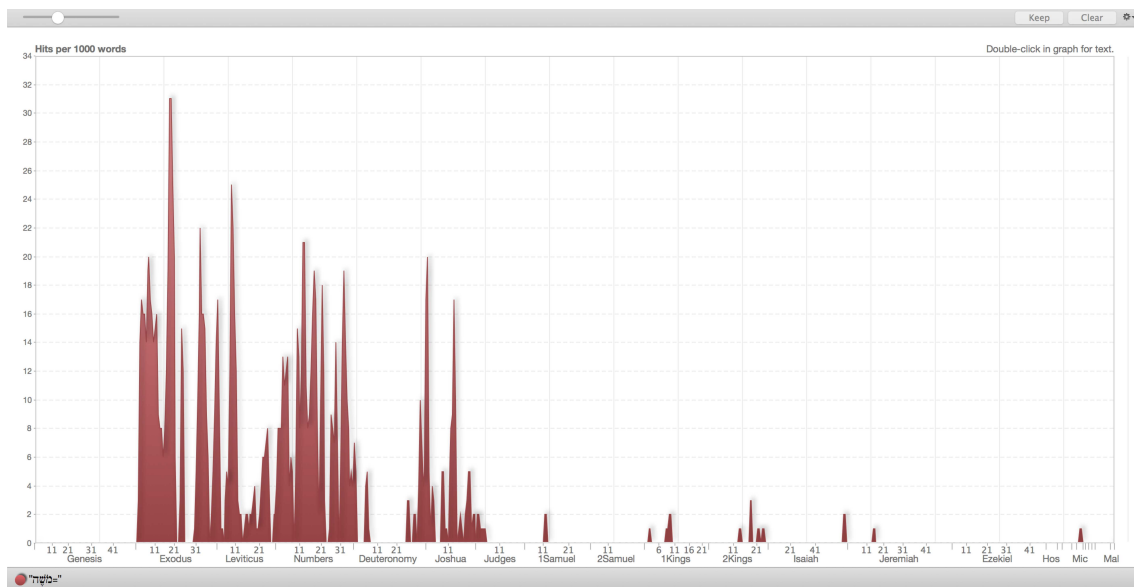
³ I am reminded of the aphorism, sometimes attributed to Benjamin Franklin: “You wouldn’t worry so much about what people really thought of you if you knew just how seldom they do.” NT scholars may care more about the significance of Moses for early Christians than the first Christians did.

Moses before the New Testament

Before I examine the references to Moses in the early Christian writings now preserved in the New Testament, it will be helpful to consider how the character of Moses functioned in Jewish literature prior to Christianity. Since the first Christians were mostly people of Jewish background, it will be reasonable to expect some continuity in the ways that the figure and authority of Moses was invoked in both sets of writings.

Tanakh

Not surprisingly, Moses is mentioned by name several hundred times (726 times, to be exact) in the Tanakh. Equally unsurprising, none of those occur in Genesis. What is somewhat surprising, however, is the relative paucity of references to Moses outside the Hexateuch (Genesis to Joshua). The broad patterns in the distribution of Moses in these pre-Christian biblical texts are as shown in this graphic.



Once we move beyond the traditions in Exodus to Joshua that are directly connected with the Moses character, the next most significant cluster of references to

Moses is found in 1 & 2 Chronicles.⁴ These are very late books with a particular interest in tracing the foundation of the Temple ministries back to Moses himself, so it is not surprising to find a large number of references to Moses. In fact, these are rarely references to Moses as a character, but rather a formula that grounds current practice in the regulations attributed to Moses. While Moses was the ultimate human authority for Temple operations, there was very little interest in the person of Moses or in traditions about Moses.

There is even less interest in Moses in other parts of the Tanakh, and especially once we exclude the passage written by the Deuteronomistic redactor. The hand of this editor is seen in those texts where a biblical character offers a prayer or speech that reviews the history of Israel/Judah (usually in negative terms), or in summary statements that describe a particular king as having done what was right, or failed to do so.⁵ When we look beyond these avowedly Mosaic layers within the biblical text, there are just a handful of passages that demonstrate any knowledge of Moses or any interest in traditions associated with Moses: Isa 63:11–12; Jer 15:1; Mic 6:4; Mal 3:22; Ps 77:21; 90:1; 99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16, 23, 32; Dan 9:11, 13.

This is a remarkably small number of attestations for knowledge of the Moses tradition during the Persian (and, in the case of Daniel, Seleucid) period. We have one paragraph in Isaiah 63, one sentence in Jeremiah (a prophet closely associated with the Deuteronomistic tradition), one reference to the exodus in Micah, and one reference in Malachi to Moses as the recipient of the laws revealed by God. In addition, there are a handful of references to Moses in six of the 150 Psalms (mostly in Psalms from a late

⁴ Along with the references in 1 and 2 Chronicles, I include those from the related books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Ezra 3:2; 7:6; Neh 1:7–8; 8:1, 14; 9:14; 10:30; 13:1; 1 Chr 5:29; 6:34; 15:15; 21:29; 22:13; 23:13–15; 26:24; 2 Chr 1:3; 5:10; 8:13; 23:18; 24:6, 9; 25:4; 30:16; 33:8; 34:14; 35:6, 12.

⁵ See especially: 1 Sam 12:6, 8; 1 Kgs 2:3; 8:9, 53, 56; 2 Kgs 14:6; 18:4, 6, 12; 21:8; 23:25.

stage in the development of that collection).⁶

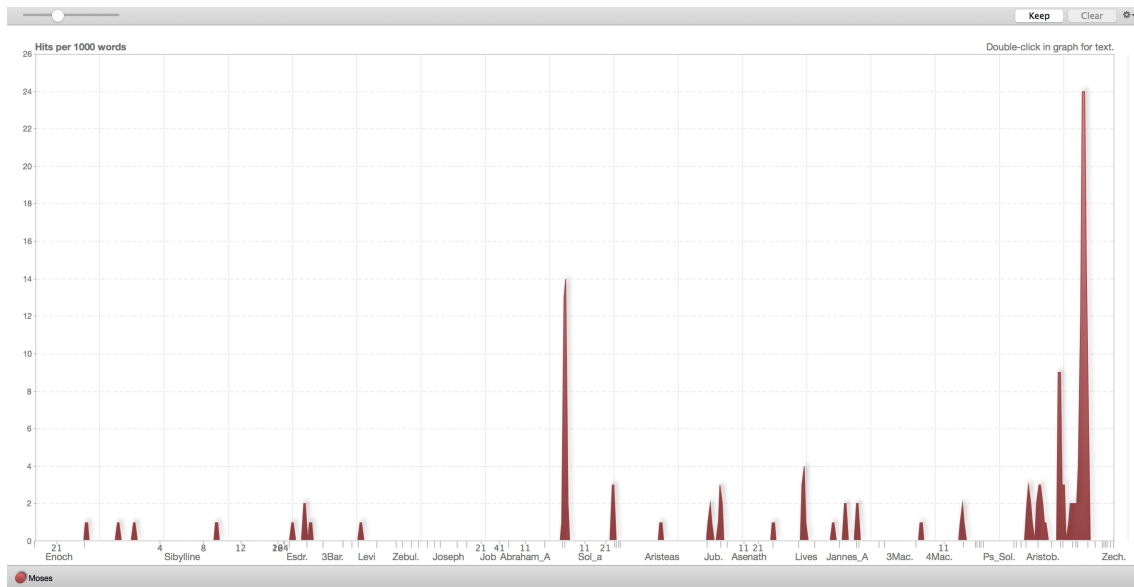
This data tends to suggest that Moses was not a character that dominated the religious imagination of Jewish people prior to late in the Second Temple period. Outside of those biblical books where Moses either was a key character in the narrative (Exodus to Joshua) or central to authority claims by the current priestly establishment in the Jerusalem Temple, we find very few references to Moses. Those that do occur often simply cite Moses alongside another character (Aaron, Miriam, or Samuel), or tend to be formulae such as “the law written by Moses”. It strikes me as especially significant that even the prophets mostly ignore the figure of Moses, and make only rare references to exodus and wilderness traditions, even though it would surely have served them well to invoke the Sinai covenant in their critique of their society’s failure to be faithful to the covenant with YHWH.

OT Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

The most recent digital edition of these texts includes 74 different ancient Jewish writings.⁷ Given the variable circumstances around their composition, transmission, preservation and discovery, this collection of work constitutes a random sample of Jewish religious thought from the Second Temple period. When supplemented by other data from the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo and Josephus, they provide a valuable window into the beliefs and practices of their communities.

⁶ Several of these are actually references to Moses along with Aaron, while one (Ps 90:1) is in the inscription rather than in the body of the psalm.

⁷ (Evans, 2009)



In the case of this data set, we can see that the 115 explicit references to Moses (found across 74 texts of varying length) indicate that many Jewish texts from this period made no mention of Moses at all, while some had a few references, and a small number of texts made more substantial use of traditions about Moses.

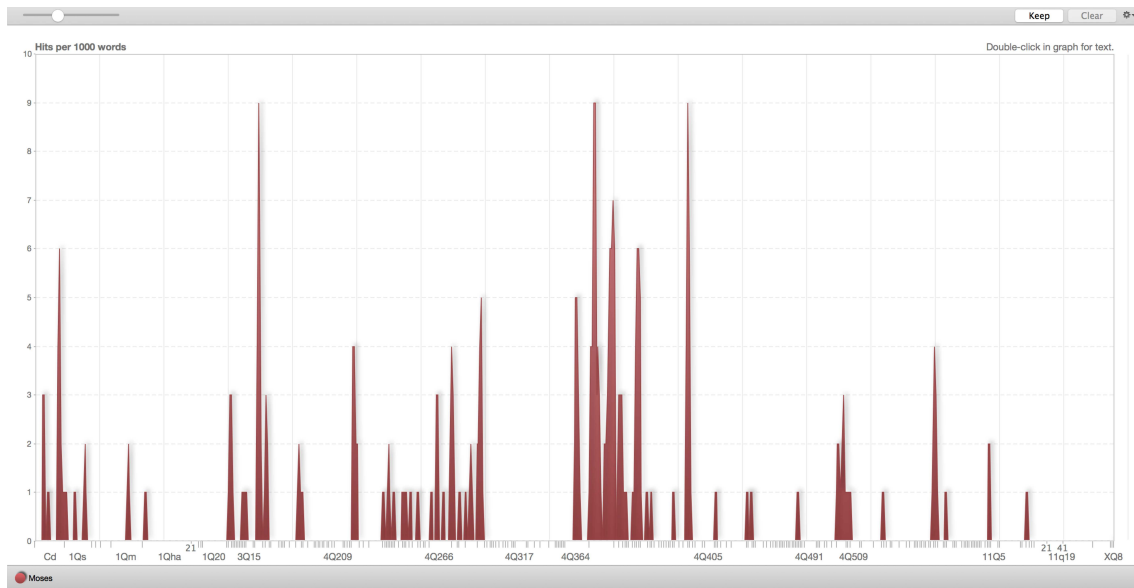
It is particularly significant that we now get, for the first time, a document written about Moses: the *Assumption of Moses*, also known as the *Testament of Moses*.⁸ Even though “Moses” occurs more than 29 times per 1,000 words in this document, it is a very short document and we get just 15 explicit references to Moses. However, its simple existence is sufficient to alert us to a growing interest in Moses, alongside the many other patriarchs of Jewish traditions, in the Second Temple period.

Dead Sea Scrolls

The sectarian documents among the Dead Sea Scrolls provide evidence about the theological mindset of this subset of observant Jews in the late Second Temple period. The community at Qumran seems to have read widely from the available religious texts

⁸ (D. M. Miller, 2007)

of their time as well as creating new texts of their own, and engaging in close study of the biblical writings. There are around 600 non-biblical texts from Qumran, so it represents a sample set that is both distinctive and extensive.

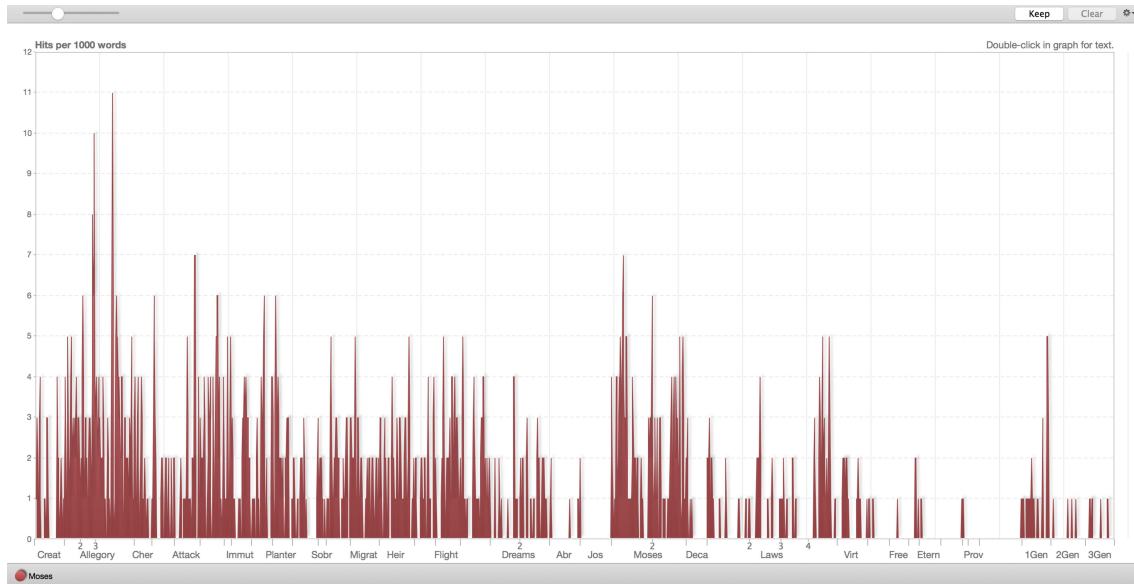


The Dead Sea Scrolls have 176 explicit references to Moses. A total of 52 separate writings refer to Moses, meaning that around 550 of the Dead Sea Scrolls do not do so. Most of these 52 texts have just a single reference to Moses, but a very small number of them have multiple references to Moses, most notably: CD (11), 4Q185 (11), and 4Q365 (37).⁹ The latter text is a rewriting of material from Exodus and Numbers. As such it could be expected to have a higher than usual number of references to Moses, although the text itself does not suggest any special reverence for Moses or any particular significance of Moses to the editors.

⁹ Both 4Q185 and 4Q365 seem to be related on various literary grounds, and they each have very high rates of references to Moses per 1,000 words (6.22 for 4Q185 and 6.32 for 4Q365).

Philo

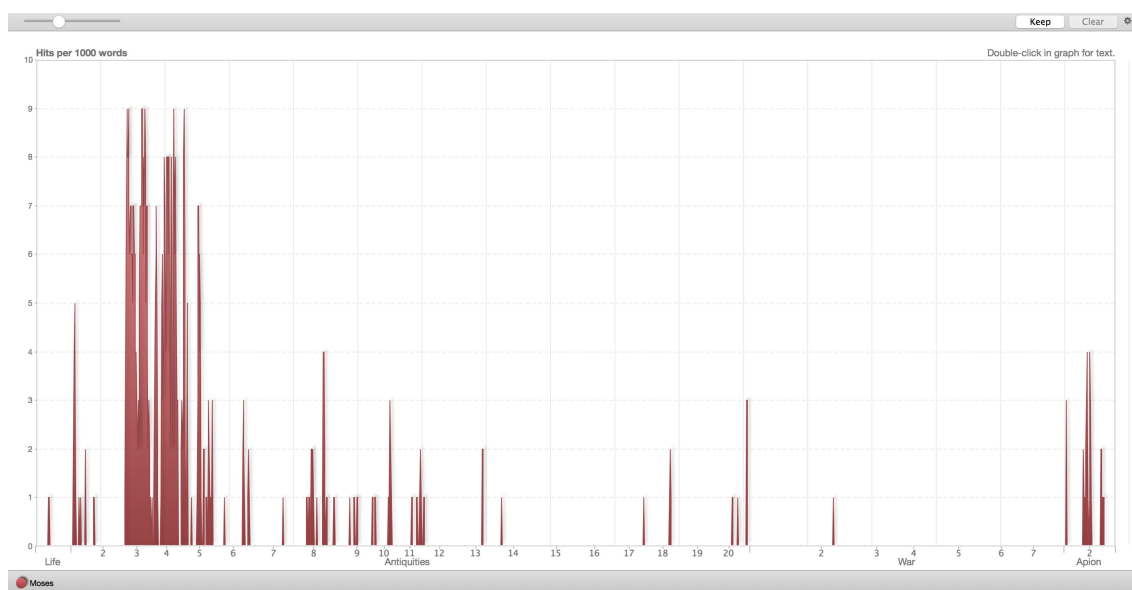
The Jewish writer, Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 BCE–c. 50 CE), created a substantial body of biblical and theological writings, much of it devoted to his allegorical interpretation of the Pentateuch. Not surprisingly, his work demonstrates a substantial interest in Moses. It is quite unlike anything seen in earlier Jewish writings.



Philo not only mentioned Moses explicitly 897 times, but—as this graphic illustrates—almost all of his writings reflect an interest in Moses. In particular, and most significantly, Philo wrote a *Life of Moses* that was highly regarded by later Christian readers. His extensive rewriting of the material from Genesis to Deuteronomy, together with his two-volume biography of Moses, represented a major reclaiming of Moses as a significant moral philosopher in the Hellenistic milieu of the Early Roman Empire. This was a substantial development beyond anything seen in the Tanakh or in other Jewish writings of the time. We might expect to see similar trends, or at least a response to such trends, in the NT treatment of Moses. However, as we shall see, that is precisely what the NT writings mostly fail to do.

Josephus

The final example of contemporary Jewish writer whose works that might serve as a control for our examination of the Moses traditions in the NT is Flavius Josephus (died c. 100 CE). Like his older contemporary, Philo of Alexandria, Josephus was a member of the Jewish elite and enjoyed good connections with the Roman ruling class. After initially serving as commander of the Jewish forces in the Galilee at the beginning of the rebellion against Rome, he successfully changed sides and secured a comfortable role within the Flavian administration. His works included an account of the Jewish War, a history of the Jewish people, and a defence of the Jewish religion.

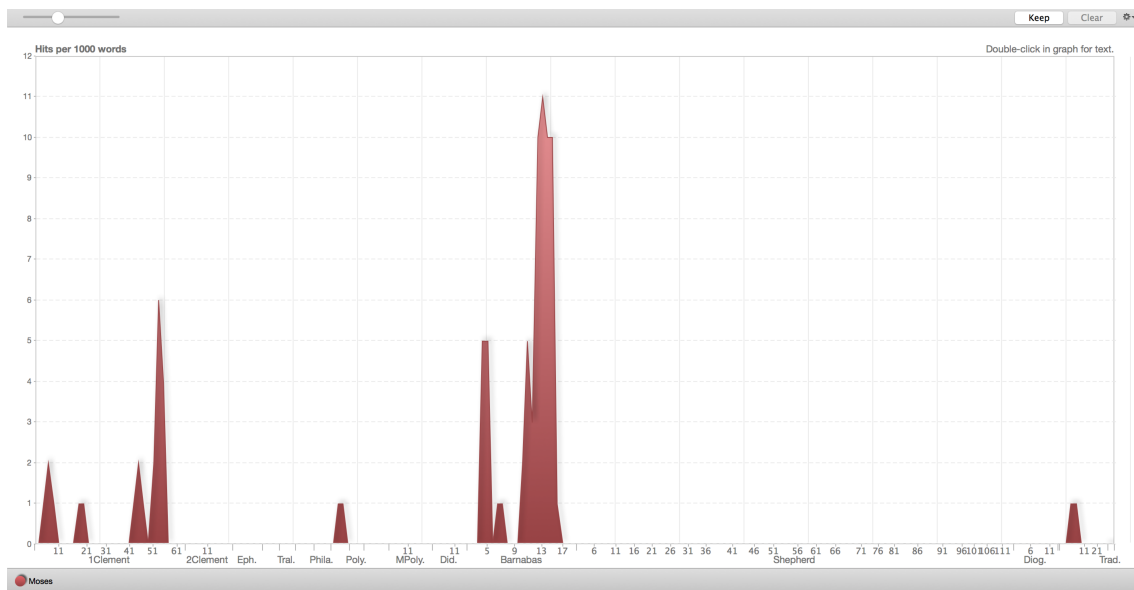


Not surprisingly, given the nature of his major works, references to Moses are spread unevenly across his corpus. However, there are 361 explicit references to Moses. The most significant aspect of Josephus' treatment of the Moses character is his portrayal of Moses as primarily a philosophical founder of the Jewish nation, which he supposedly set up to be ruled by a priestly aristocracy with marked similarities to the senatorial class in contemporary Roman society, complete with in-principle rejection of monarchy despite the realities of imperial power.

Moses beyond the New Testament

Apostolic Fathers

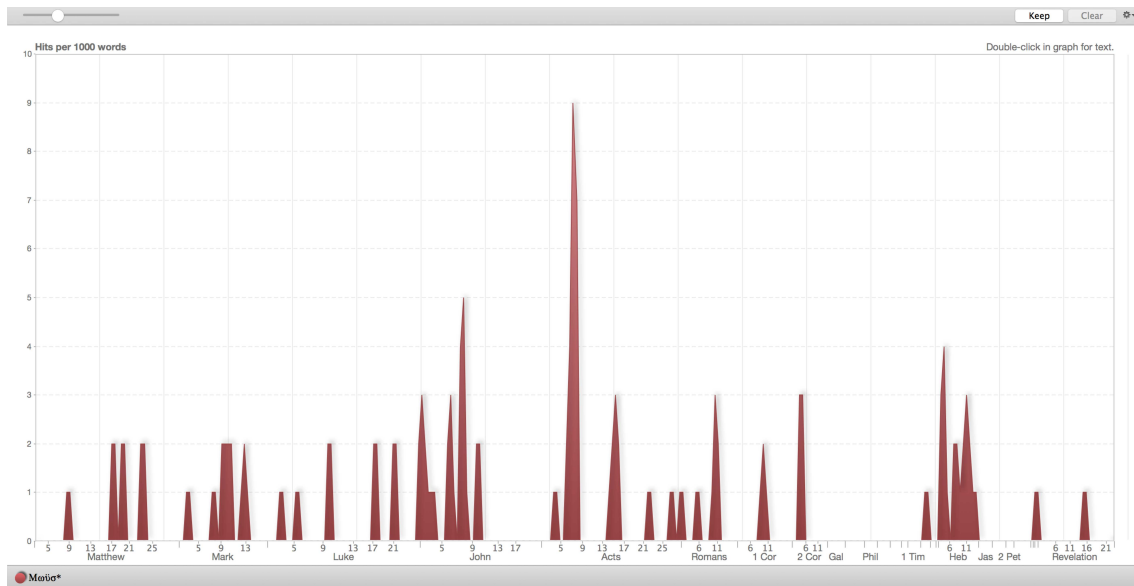
Before turning to the treatment of Moses in the NT, it will be appropriate to take a brief look at the way that Moses appears in the Apostolic Fathers, that set of post-biblical writings next in time after the NT. While outside of the final ecumenical canon of the New Testament, some of these works predate writings that made it into the NT canon. As such as they offer as valuable insight into early Christian thought in the second and third generations after Jesus.



It is immediately apparent that references to Moses occur unevenly across the 18 writings that comprise the Apostolic Fathers, with many of the writers having no need ever to refer to Moses. We find 45 references, but they are mostly concentrated in *1 Clement* (11) and the *Epistle of Barnabas* (32). However, even in the case of *Barnabas*, this represents a frequency of just 3.4 per 1,000 words. This compares to frequencies of 11.19/1000 in Exodus, 4.61/1000 in Leviticus, and 9.30/1000 in Numbers.

Moses within the New Testament

Having surveyed the related literature from Jewish and Christian communities contemporary with the New Testament, as well as the older biblical material shared by all these communities, it is now time to focus on the Moses tradition in the NT. The first thing to note is how few references to Moses occur in the New Testament.

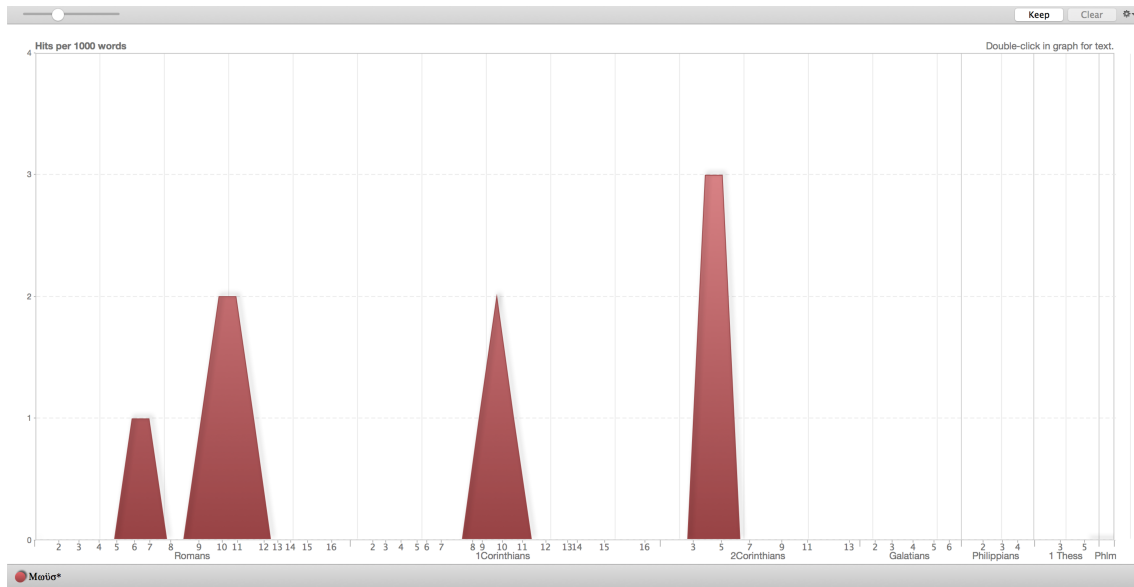


There are just 80 explicit references to Moses in the NT,¹⁰ and a number of them are duplicates due to the triple tradition with the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). In addition, since the NT itself is composed of quite different collections of work, it is essential to look at each of these in turn in order to appreciate the dynamics of the Mosaic traditions within the New Testament.

¹⁰ (Hay, 1990) notes that these 80 references are more than those to any other OT character, but Abraham gets 75 references and David gets 60.

Paul

We begin with the seven letters that are widely accepted as authentic works from Paul of Tarsus:¹¹ Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, and Philemon.



The Pauline letters can reasonably claim to be the first of the extant Christian writings. They provide us access to the first generation of the Christian movement, perhaps before it was even conscious of that identity. In these earliest examples of Christian literature we find just nine explicit references to Moses.¹² Four of them occur in Paul's letter to the Romans, and express the idea that Moses was the mediator or teacher of the Law: 1 Cor 9:9; Rom 9:15; 10:5, 19. The remaining five all occur in Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians. In most of his letters, including the polemic letter to the Galatians where observance of the Jewish Law by his converts was a major issue, Paul had no occasion even to mention Moses.

¹¹ (Dewey, Hoover, McGaughey, & Schmidt, 2010)

¹² Rom 5:14; 9:15; 10:5, 19; 1 Cor 9:9; 10:2; 2 Cor 3:7, 13, 15.

Three of those five references in 1 & 2 Corinthians, and one third of all Paul's references to Moses, occur in a single obscure passage in 2 Corinthians 3. In this passage Paul develops a theme from the biblical and post-biblical traditions about Moses' face being transfigured after his sessions in the presence of God. This shows a capacity to exploit the Moses tradition when it suited Paul's purposes (even if we do not find his argument persuasive).¹³

In another reference, "Moses" occurs as a simple chronological reference point: "... from Adam to Moses ..." (Rom 5:14). In the final example, Paul describes his Jewish peers as having been "baptized into Moses" when they passed through the waters of the Red Sea (1 Cor 10:2). This may be an early stage of a process that led to Christians referring to Jews as "disciples of Moses", a process that wrongly applied Christian discipleship language to the very different role that Moses played in Formative Judaism.¹⁴

Interestingly, there are no explicit references to the Moses character in the deutero-Pauline writings: Colossians Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians. This suggests to me that the Moses tradition was such a minor theme among Pauline communities in earliest Christianity, that second generation Pauline teachers had no reason even to mention Moses.

Similarly, there is just a single reference to Moses in the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus) that are best dated to the third generation of the Pauline tradition within early Christianity. In 2 Tim 3:8 we find a reference to the conflict when Jannes and Jambres, two of Pharaoh's magicians, opposed Moses during the series of plagues

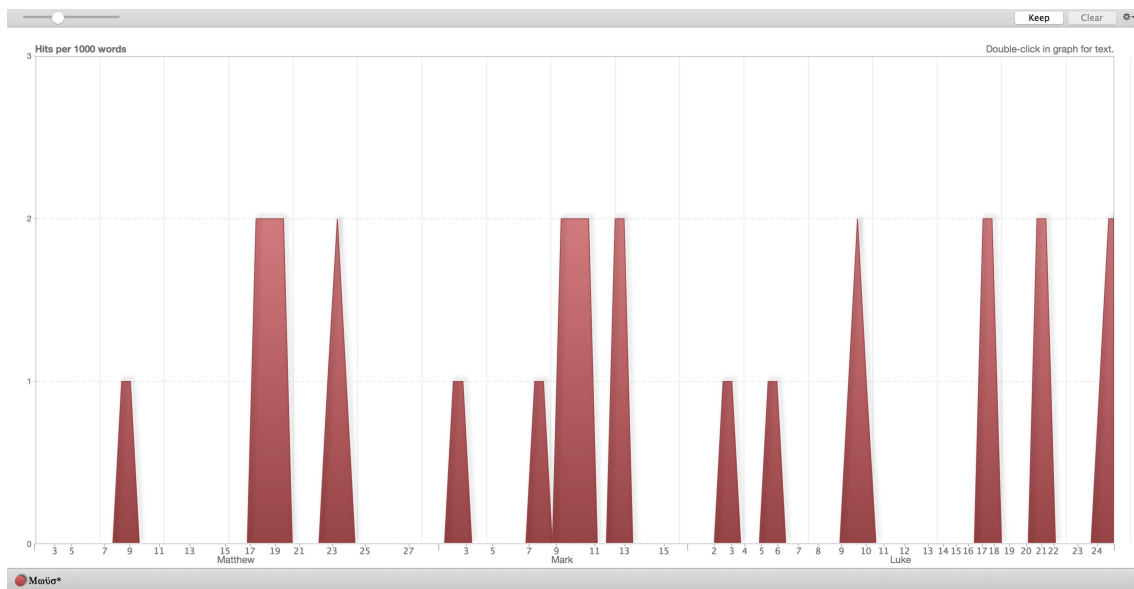
¹³ (Litwa, 2012) discusses a background for Paul's otherwise puzzling discussion in extra-biblical Jewish traditions about Moses using a mirror to see God during the theophany on Mt Sinai.

¹⁴ For a very different view of the meaning of this phrase, see (Lierman, 2004, pp., 175–208)

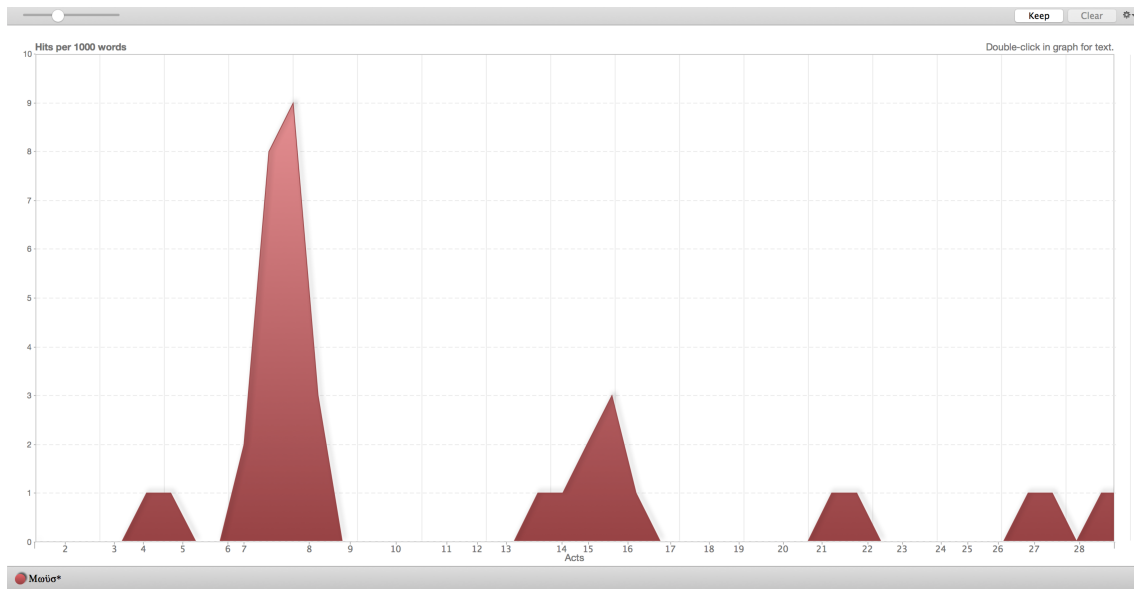
prior to the exodus from Egypt. Here the NT is actually citing a tradition known to us only from the *Assumption of Moses*, as none of the magicians of Egypt are named in Exodus. In any case, the point of the reference in 2 Timothy is not to reflect on the Moses character, but rather to suggest that those opposed to the authorized leaders within emerging Catholic Christianity were contemporary examples of the godless magicians who once (unsuccessfully) opposed Moses.

The Synoptic Tradition

The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and the Acts of the Apostles represent a distinct set of writings within the NT, and are best dated to the period after Paul even though they preserve traditions that originated as early as the life of Jesus. It is problematic to work with the hypothetical earlier stages of the synoptic tradition, so I will focus on their final canonical form.



In this case we have 25 references to Moses within the gospels (see the previous chart), and another 19 references in Acts (see the following chart).



These 44 references across 4 different writings need to be considered more closely. There are some duplicates between the three Gospels, while Acts presents its own set of issues. In very broad terms, I am working with a chronological sequence that suggests Mark was composed around 75 CE, Matthew around 100 CE and Luke-Acts around 125/140 CE.¹⁵ Matthew was a revised and enlarged edition of Mark, while Luke was an intentional “setting straight” of the earlier accounts, according to Luke 1:1–4. Luke also modifies the earlier Gospels by continuing the story beyond Easter to culminate with the arrival of Paul in Rome.

Given Matthew’s interest in how followers of Jesus might also be observant Jews, it is surprising to discover that he makes the least number of explicit references to Moses of any of the Gospels.¹⁶ In fact, the distribution of references to Moses across the four Gospels and Acts, is as follows.

¹⁵ While the dates that I am suggesting for Luke-Acts are later than conservative and conventional scholars have preferred, the sequence is not in question and a later date for Luke and Acts (whether as a two-volume work, or as a series of two volume separated by at least a decade) is increasingly favored by critical scholars. For two examples of major studies that establish a late date for Acts, see (Tyson, 2006) and (Pervo, 2006).

¹⁶ I am noting but leaving aside the influence of the Moses traditions on the infancy narratives in Matthew, or the possible influence of the Pentateuch on the structure of Matthew with its five blocks of teaching material. These matters will be addressed at a later stage.

	Total Hits	Hits / 1000 words
Matthew	7	0.38
Mark	8	0.71
Luke	10	0.51
John	19	1.03
Acts	13	0.83

Since we shall consider the Johannine references to Moses shortly, at this stage I shall focus on the Moses material in the synoptic Gospels and in Acts. We begin with Mark as the first Gospel to be written, and then deal with Matthew, Luke and Acts in turn.

Mark has no interest in the personal story of Moses.¹⁷ The miraculous survival after his birth, his education in the royal household, the contest with Pharaoh, or even the exodus from Egypt, play no part in his narrative of Jesus. Instead, Moses seems to occur in the Markan text only where there is explicit or implicit conflict with the Jewish religious leadership.

In Mark 1:44 a healed leper is to offer the gift prescribed by Moses (and present himself to the priests as someone healed by Jesus). In 7:10 Jesus criticizes those who evade the law's requirements to honor parents by dedicating their assets to God. Moses and Elijah are present at the transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:2–8) as the heavenly voice tells the disciples to listen to Jesus and—by implication—not to Moses or the Prophets. In 10:2–8 Moses' rules for divorce are set aside in favor of God's requirements in creation. At Mark 12:18–26 a question about Moses' rules for levirate marriage is the occasion for an appeal to God's words at the burning bush theophany as evidence that

¹⁷ The references in Mark are 1:44; 7:10; 9:4–5; 10:3–4; 12:19, 26.

there is life after death.

The Gospel of Matthew is effectively a revised edition of the Gospel of Mark. It follows the general literary arrangement of Mark, but adds a significant amount of teaching material not found in Mark as well as some additional narrative elements. These narrative additions include the infancy traditions in Matthew 1–2 and the post-resurrection appearances by the risen Jesus (Matthew 28).¹⁸

While the infancy traditions in Matthew are dripping with allusions to the Moses story,¹⁹ it is interesting to observe that the texts never mention Moses. Like the infant Moses, the Christ child is threatened with violent death as an evil king seeks to secure his own hold on the throne. While the chosen child escapes to safety, there is a massacre of the Jewish children in the area. In this case Egypt serves as a place of sanctuary as the Holy Family flees from Herod, and the pagan magicians are on the side of the angels rather than being opposed to God. While the parallels with the Moses story seem so strong, they remain understated. Indeed, when a biblical text is cited to explain the Egyptian sojourn of the messianic child, it is not a text about Moses but the enigmatic sentence from Hosea 11:1 that is chosen: “Out of Egypt I have called my son ...”.

It is common for NT scholars to suggest that the five discourses created by Matthew seek to portray Jesus as a latter day Moses delivering a new Torah for the people of God. However, this interpretation may be more in the eye of the (critical) reader than in the intention of the author. The allusion to Moses ascending Mt Sinai to receive the divine Torah is most clear in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), but even then the parallels are at best limited. Moses did not take the people with him on the

¹⁸ For an interesting discussion of Matthew 28 as an attempt to ameliorate the ethnic exclusivism of the Mosaic traditions, see (Sparks, 2006).

¹⁹ (For two very different studies of the Mosaic elements in the opening chapters of Matthew, see Brown, 1977) and (R. J. Miller, 2003). For a discussion of the parallels between the extra-biblical traditions concerning the birth of Moses and the Matthean infancy tradition, see (Kensky, 1993).

ascent, and did not deliver any instruction to the crowd from the mountain. The allusions to the Moses tradition may be less obvious than we often assume.

A similar caution might be applicable to the representation of Jesus facing temptations in the wilderness (Matt 4:1–11 || Luke 4:1–13). Again, it is common for NT scholars to note that each of Jesus' answers to the Devil are drawn from Deuteronomy, and observe that Jesus is reliving the wilderness experience of the Israelite tribes under the leadership of Moses, albeit without their proclivity to sin. Even if it were the case that the version of the temptation legend that is preserved in Matthew and Luke had such allusions in mind, this does not establish a connection to the character of Moses.

For Matthew's attitude to Moses we need to look at those few places where there is an explicit reference to Moses. In taking over the material inherited from the Gospel of Mark, Matthew has reduced the number of references to Moses from eight to seven.²⁰ For the most part, Matthew follows Mark's references to Moses, but he makes a couple of small changes. In the argument with Pharisees and scribes about what defiles a person, Matt 15:4 corrects Mark 7:10 so that it now reads, "For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother.'"

Matthew adds one additional item to the inventory of Moses references, when he affirms that the scribes and Pharisees "sit in Moses' seat" (Matt 23:2), but then warns his listeners not to follow their example even though they should adhere to their instruction. This seems to be a simple reference to the official seat for the leader of a synagogue,²¹ and does not indicate any particular interest in the Moses character. If anything, Jesus is portrayed as acknowledging the legitimacy of the regular synagogue

²⁰ Matt 8:4; 17:3–4; 19:7–8; 22:24; 23:2.

²¹ One such stone seat was found in a fourth-century synagogue at Chorazin, and is now on display in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

leaders, rather than affirming anything of significance about Moses.

In the case of Luke and Acts we seem to have more developed examples of the figure of Moses being deployed for Christian theological purposes. This is not surprising if Luke is from around 125 CE and Acts from a decade or two later. We know from other literature that there was tendency for Christians and Jews to define themselves over against the other, and to compose polemical writings.

With ten explicit references to Moses, the Gospel of Luke is not so different from Mark or Matthew. Luke's references include a Mosaic basis for the circumcision of Jesus (Luke 2:22), and a significant new Easter story in which the unrecognized but risen Jesus cites "Moses and the prophets" to explain his own death and resurrection while walking with two disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). Luke also adds a similar reference to Moses and the prophets in the story of Lazarus and Dives (Luke 16:19–31).

In all these references, Moses functions mostly as a cipher for the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Tanakh. There is no interest in the Moses character, nor any use of the Moses tradition to validate the ministry of Jesus. However, we seem to have a change in the way that the Moses tradition functions in the Acts of the Apostles.

There are 19 explicit references to Moses in Acts,²² and this represents a ratio of 1.03 per 1,000 words (double the rate in the Gospel of Luke). Apart from the change in content as the narrative moves from the ministry of Jesus to the story of his first followers, the major explanation for this change is in the repeated references to Moses in Acts 7, a speech that Luke created for Stephen prior to his murder as the first Christian martyr. Here we find an extended use of the Moses tradition, including

²² Acts 3:22; 6:11, 14; 7:20, 22, 29, 31–32, 35, 37, 40, 44; 13:38; 15:1, 5, 21; 21:21; 26:22; 28:23.

episodes from the life of Moses as well as his role as the great lawgiver and his witness against the Jewish leadership for their refusal to accept Jesus. It is not possible to quote that lengthy speech here, but it is worth reading to see just how differently the Moses character is now being used from anything we have seen before.

Elsewhere in Acts we find explicit references to Moses, two of which (Acts 3:22 and 7:37) directly raise the idea that Jesus might be understood as the prophet like Moses that is promised by God in Deut 18:18–22. In Acts 3 we find Peter speaking to the crowds after the healing of the beggar:

“... Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets. Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he tells you. And it will be that everyone who does not listen to that prophet will be utterly rooted out of the people.’” (Acts 3:20–23 NRSV)

Stephen makes a similar point in the speech that Luke crafted for him in Acts 7:

“He led them out, having performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up.’ He is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living oracles to give to us.” (Acts 7:36–38 NRSV)

Like all of the sermons and speeches in Acts, these addresses attributed to Peter and Stephen respectively were created by the author of Acts. They tell us nothing about the content of Christian theology in the first weeks after Easter, but a great deal about

the way that Christian theologians in the first half of the second century (100 years after Easter) were learning to draw on the biblical traditions for polemics with their Jewish protagonists. For the author of Acts, invoking the legacy of Moses was a good rhetorical tactic in the middle of the second century.

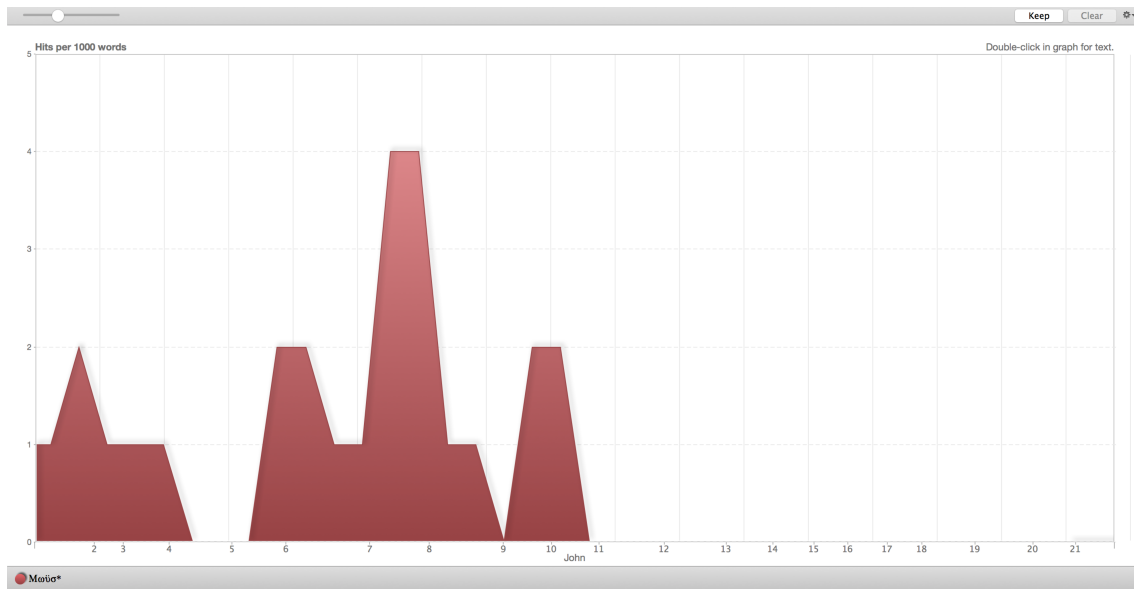
Elsewhere in Acts we find Moses mentioned as the mediator of the Law at several points (6:4; 13:389; 15:1, 5, & 21). There is also the familiar Lukan theme (cf. especially Luke 24) that everything written about Jesus in “Moses and the prophets” needs to be fulfilled (26:22; 28:23). Finally, and uniquely within the NT, there is the idea that a Christian such as Stephen could be accused of “blasphemy against Moses and God” (6:11). Here, as in a number of other examples we have noted already, “Moses” does not refer to the human character from the exodus traditions, but to the biblical laws associated with his name.

The Gospel of John

Before we examine the references to Moses in the Epistles and Revelation, that largely overlooked portion of the NT, we need to note how the Moses character is used in the Gospel of John.

There are 13 explicit references to Moses in the Gospel of John, giving a ratio of 0.83 occurrences per 1,000 words.²³ While the total is not much different from the data for the Synoptic Gospels, the way in which this evangelist used the Moses tradition is very different.

²³ John 1:17, 45; 3:14; 5:45–46; 6:32; 7:19, 22–23; 8:5; 9:28–29.



As we would expect, Moses continues to be invoked as the person who gave the Law to the Jewish people (John 7:19; 8:5), and the rules for Sabbath observance are traced back to Moses (7:22–23). All of these references to Moses in John 7 are part of a scene in which Jesus is in dispute with the Jewish crowd. The legacy and authority of Moses is invoked, with the assumption that Moses would side with Jesus while the Jewish crowd has failed to fulfill the law of Moses. This idea is made explicit in John 5.

Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?" (John 5:45–47 NRSV)

Although the Law was given to Israel through Moses (John 1:17), and Moses (with the Prophets) wrote about Jesus, the Gospel of John affirms that grace and truth have only become available through Jesus Christ, the beloved only Son.

The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (John 1:17–18 NRSV)

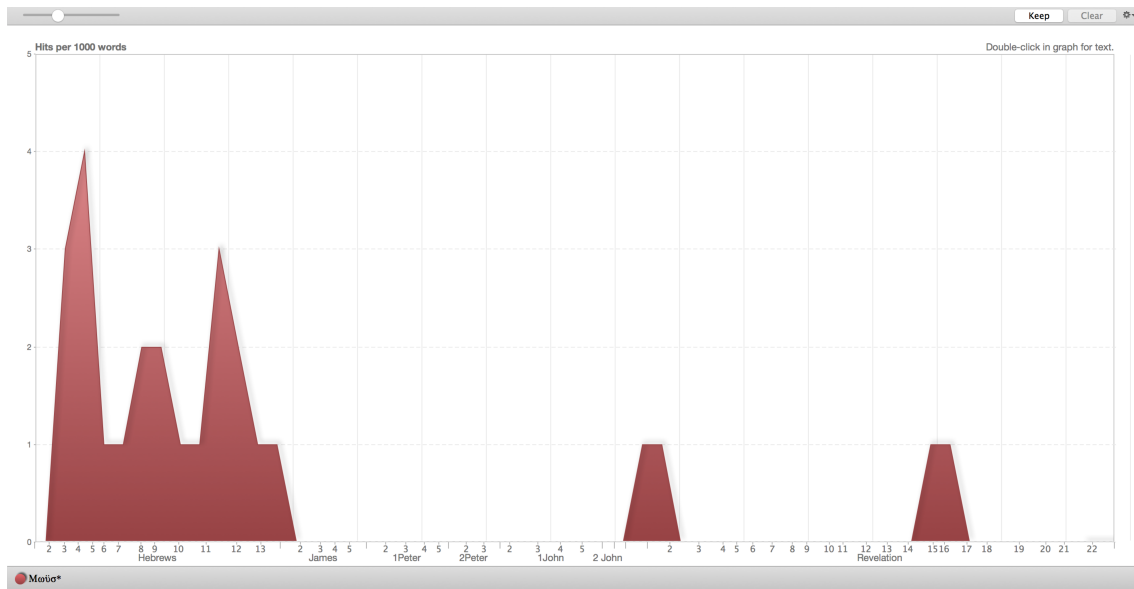
For John, the opposition between Jews and Christians can be expressed in the accusation that the Jews opposed to Jesus were “disciples of Moses” (9:28–29). John cleverly places this description on the lips of the Jewish religious authorities in Jerusalem.

Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” (John 9:28–29 NRSV)

In the Gospel of John it seems that Moses functions in both a negative light and in a positive way. Moses witnesses to the truth about Jesus, yet to be a disciple of Moses is to be an opponent of Jesus. The act of Moses in setting up a bronze serpent in the wilderness (Num 21:8–9) is a prophetic parallel to the Son of Man being lifted up on the cross (John 3:14–15). Yet it was not Moses that fed their ancestors with bread in the wilderness, but rather God; with Jesus himself being the true bread that comes down from heaven (6:32–33).

Epistles and Revelation

We conclude this survey of references to Moses in the NT with the data from the less familiar texts in the General Epistles and the Revelation to John. There are thirteen explicit references to Moses in these nine books, and all but two of them are found in the Letter to the Hebrews.



The two occurrences outside Hebrew can be discussed briefly.

In the short letter of Jude we have another reference to non-biblical traditions found in the *Assumption of Moses*. Like the reference to Moses in (the second century document) 2 Timothy, Jude 1:9 uses this apocryphal tradition to denigrate his opponents within early Christianity. Just as the use of these materials in 2 Timothy was more about Jannes and Jambres than about Moses, so in this case the passage is more interested in the proper respectful attitude shown by the Archangel Michael than in the figure of Moses, or the Devil for that matter.

The book of Revelation has a single reference to Moses, when 15:3 describes the victorious faithful, who have overcome the eschatological beast, as singing “the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb”. A reference to the “song of Moses” suggests similar traditions to those found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and especially 4Q365.

However, the more significant point to note is that Revelation imagines Moses and Jesus singing from the same hymn book. At ‘the End’, there is no dispute between Moses, the servant of God, and the Lamb. The words of these two figures provide the

lyrics for the faithful to celebrate redemption. This is poetic imagery, but a powerful expression of deep unity between Moses and Jesus.

As noted, almost all of the references to Moses from the Epistles are found in the Letter to the Hebrews.²⁴ This document is unique among the NT writings for its deep interest in the priestly traditions associated with the Temple, and its portrayal of Jesus as a priest from another world, a priest like Melchizedek. Not surprisingly, this letter reaches a ratio of 2.22 mentions of Moses per 1,000 words. Only a few of the Dead Sea Scrolls and one of Philo's works surpass that score.

Like the speech attributed to Stephen in Acts 7, Hebrews makes direct use of the traditions around the birth of Moses (11:23), his flight from Egypt (11:24), and the theophany at the burning bush (12:21). The text acknowledges his role as the leader of the exodus (3:16) and the mediator of the Law (7:14; 10:28), as well as his contributions to the construction of the tabernacle (8:5) and his role in the covenant renewal ceremony (9:19).

Perhaps the most interesting use of the Moses tradition in Hebrews is the description of Moses as a faithful servant in the household of God, while Jesus is described as the son of the householder.

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

²⁴ Heb 3:2-3, 5, 16; 7:14; 8:5; 9:19; 10:28; 11:23-24; 12:21.

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. (Heb 3:1–6 NRSV)

Here we find Moses being celebrated and honored, yet also placed firmly in a secondary position relative to Jesus. Continuity with Moses is affirmed, but Jesus is possessed of a status without peer. The opening paragraph of this letter seeks to eliminate any suggestion that Jesus has a peer among humans or angels.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. (Heb 1:1–4 NRSV)

Conclusion

In reviewing the significance of the NT references to Moses, I agree with David M. Hay that Moses is more likely to be cited as a witness to the significance of Jesus than as a christological model.²⁵ Rather than Moses serving as a template for Christian devotion to Jesus, early Christians seem to have exploited Moses (and the prophets) as biblical evidence in support of their claims that Jesus was the Messiah.

To the extent that a prophet like Moses (or indeed like Elijah) was expected to appear at the end of time, it would have made good sense for the early Christians to

²⁵ (Hay, 1990)

portray Jesus as the prophet like Moses. What is perhaps most remarkable about the way that the Moses character functions in the NT is limited extent to which the earliest Christian writers made use of Moses for Christology.

It is clear that the followers of Jesus after Easter considered him to be greater than Moses and greater than Elijah, yet they seem not to have found Moses to be a sufficient model for Christology. Other categories seem to be more important for early Christology. Within the Gospels, ‘Son of Man’ and ‘teacher’ seem to be dominant terms, while in the Pauline letters terms such as ‘anointed ruler’ (*christos ... kyrios*) and, Savior (*sōtēr*) seem to be favored.

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Appendix: Stephen's Speech in Acts 7

“Then the high priest asked him, “Are these things so?”

And Stephen replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, ‘Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you.’ Then he left the country of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After his father died, God had him move from there to this country in which you are now living. He did not give him any of it as a heritage, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as his possession and to his descendants after him, even though he had no child. And God spoke in these terms, that his descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others, who would enslave them and mistreat them during four hundred years. ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’ Then he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

“The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him, and rescued him from all his afflictions, and enabled him to win favor and to show wisdom when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who appointed him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. Now there came a famine throughout Egypt and Canaan, and great suffering, and our ancestors could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there on their first visit. On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. Then Joseph sent and invited his father Jacob and all his relatives to come to him,

seventy-five in all; so Jacob went down to Egypt. He himself died there as well as our ancestors, and their bodies were brought back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

“But as the time drew near for the fulfillment of the promise that God had made to Abraham, our people in Egypt increased and multiplied until another king who had not known Joseph ruled over Egypt. He dealt craftily with our race and forced our ancestors to abandon their infants so that they would die. At this time Moses was born, and he was beautiful before God. For three months he was brought up in his father’s house; and when he was abandoned, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. So Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds.

“When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his relatives, the Israelites. When he saw one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. He supposed that his kinsfolk would understand that God through him was rescuing them, but they did not understand. The next day he came to some of them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you wrong each other?’ But the man who was wronging his neighbor pushed Moses aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ When he heard this, Moses fled and became a resident alien in the land of Midian. There he became the father of two sons.

“Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning bush. When Moses saw it, he was

amazed at the sight; and as he approached to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ‘I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ Moses began to tremble and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the mistreatment of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them. Come now, I will send you to Egypt.’

“It was this Moses whom they rejected when they said, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ and whom God now sent as both ruler and liberator through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out, having performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up.’ He is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living oracles to give to us. Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him; instead, they pushed him aside, and in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make gods for us who will lead the way for us; as for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.’ At that time they made a calf, offered a sacrifice to the idol, and reveled in the works of their hands. But God turned away from them and handed them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: ‘Did you offer to me slain victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? No; you took along the tent of Moloch, and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; so I will remove you beyond Babylon.’

“Our ancestors had the tent of testimony in the wilderness, as God directed

when he spoke to Moses, ordering him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. Our ancestors in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors. And it was there until the time of David, who found favor with God and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the house of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says, ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?’

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.” (Acts 7:1–53 NRSV)