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*Moses As a Character in the Fourth Gospel:  
A Study of Ancient Reading Techniques*

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This work is a revision of the author's dissertation written at Baylor University under the direction of Dr. Charles Talbert and completed in 1999. In this volume, Harstine (currently Associate Professor of Bible at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas) uses a unique combination of elements from literary-critical approaches to examine the place of Moses as a character in the Gospel of John. Since Moses is something of a "fixed" character, Harstine is not primarily concerned here with the characterization of Moses in the Fourth Gospel but with his function. Though Moses is introduced indirectly at numerous stages in the narrative, his impact on the general tenor of those scenes is considerable. Harstine tackles the question of Moses' relation to the narrative plot of the Gospel and attempts to further draw out his relationship to Jesus, the protagonist of the Gospel. Once the question of Moses' function in the Fourth Gospel is answered, Harstine seeks to answer a second question: "Would an ancient reader understand how Moses functions as a character in the Fourth Gospel?" (1). Focusing on probable responses to the function of Moses in the Fourth Gospel, Harstine examines: (1) the readers of the Synoptic Gospels; (2) the readers of narratives from Second Temple Judaism; and (3) the readers of specific Greco-Roman narratives. The first two audiences share a familiarity with the Moses tradition, while an appreciation for the similar function of Homer in Greco-Roman narratives helps to inform the understanding and probable reading experience of the third audience.

In the first chapter, Harstine lays the foundation for his methodology by surveying pertinent studies that have preceded his own. He discusses several noteworthy volumes under the subheadings of typological studies, historical and

comparative studies on Moses, and literary-critical treatments of the Fourth Gospel. It is significant that both in his introduction as well as in chapter 1 Harstine acknowledges his great debt to the groundbreaking work of R. Alan Culpepper on literary criticism and the Fourth Gospel. This volume, in many ways, stands on the shoulders of the narrative work begun by Culpepper and continued by others in recent years. Harstine's survey of these previous contributions sets the stage for his own methodology, which incorporates elements of these treatments while seeking to move beyond them. He identifies the first step in his process as the task of locating Moses as a viable character in the text (26) and the second step as recognizing the presence of historic personalities in classical literature (27). These two steps allow Harstine to present Moses as a player in the story with a view toward elucidating his various functions. From there he seeks to establish the theoretical and methodological possibility of examining ancient audiences by once again surveying prominent studies that have preceded his own. Having established this possibility, Harstine precedes to the text of the Fourth Gospel.

In chapter 2, the methodology established in chapter 1 is applied to the text of John. Harstine systematically examines the seven passages in which Moses is directly mentioned (1:17, 45; 3:14; 5:45–46; 6:32; 7:19–23; and 9:28–29), and briefly mentions five other instances where a possible allusion to Moses is intended (1:21; 6:14; 12:34; 17:12; and 18:28). He chooses not to treat the five indirect "appearances" but briefly suggests that generalized references to "scripture" or the "Jewish law" in three of those texts are so closely connected to Moses that they could be understood as a metonymy for Moses (41). After examining the seven explicit "appearances" of Moses in the narrative, Harstine provides a brief characterization of Moses in order to explicate his various functions. He concludes that Moses is a historical, religious figure with multiple authoritative functions—not the least of which is the function of bearing witness to Jesus. In fact, in the context of the Fourth Gospel, the "dominant function" of Moses is as a witness to Jesus (72).

Chapters 3–5 aim at utilizing the conclusions of chapter 2 to examine the three different ancient audiences. This is clearly the most original portion of the book.

Chapter 3 sets out to ask the question, "Would an ancient Christian reader familiar with the Matthean (Markan, or Lukan) use of Moses comprehend Moses as he functions in the Fourth Gospel?" (76). Here the author examines each of the Synoptics and then looks at the specific instance of the transfiguration, where Moses makes a direct appearance in each narrative. Harstine concludes that there

is much overlap between the Johannine and Synoptic characterizations of Moses, but he also points out the dissimilarities between the traditions—which he says further bolsters the similarities. From this he locates three specific functions of Moses in the Synoptics that are identical to the major functions of Moses in John: “historical anchor, point of conflict, and witness” (95). Because of this significant overlap, Harstine concludes that the probable response of the Synoptic audiences to Moses in the Fourth Gospel should be the same as that of the authorial audience of the Fourth Gospel.

In chapter 4 Harstine applies the same question from the previous chapter to the authorial audience of narratives from the Second Temple period. Specifically, he is concerned with prose narrative written in Greek between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. These specific criteria help to narrow the scope of his study as the writings from this period are vast. He examines 1 Esdras, Tobit, 2 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, Daniel and Additions to Daniel, the *Letter of Aristeas*, the *Martyrdom of Isaiah* and the *Lives of the Prophets*, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, and the writings of Josephus. The examination of these texts is followed up with a detailed and insightful discussion of both characterization and function. Harstine concludes that there are instances where an audience of the Second Temple narratives could easily comprehend the function of Moses in John and instances where a probable response is impossible to predict. Nonetheless, Moses appears as an authoritative figure and a historical anchor, which leads Harstine to write that the authorial audience of the Second Temple narratives “would have negotiated its presentation of the character Moses with relative ease” (129).

Chapter 5 is, without question, the most compelling chapter in the book. Here the question from chapters 3 and 4 is slightly altered and applied to the audience of Greco-Roman narratives—none of which have anything to do with the historical figure or literary character of Moses. Instead, Harstine uses the frequent appearance of Homer as a similarly fixed “legendary” character to provide an analogous example to the frequent appearances of Moses in the texts already examined. The question to be answered in chapter 4 is, “How might an audience of pagan Greeks and Romans have responded when they encountered Moses in the Fourth Gospel?” (156). The chapter is divided into an examination of Greek texts followed by an examination of Latin texts. Not surprisingly, Homer stands out as an authoritative figure, and his function as a historical anchor who offers testimony mirrors that of Moses in the Fourth Gospel. Though quite different in numerous respects, these similarities cause Harstine to conclude that there is a high likelihood that the authorial audience of the Greco-

Roman narratives would have had some basis for responding appropriately to the presentation of Moses in the Fourth Gospel (160).

After a few concluding comments in chapter 6, the author points out several areas of critical study that may follow from his investigation. This discussion shows both insight and foresight. Not only does he recognize that his research may serve as the starting point for others, but he anticipates the possible direction of future works.

In the end, Harstine is to be commended for his work, which is original, creative, and extremely well-written. Because the goals of the book and the measures set forth to achieve them are so carefully plotted throughout the book, the reader will have few opportunities to wonder about the direction of the discussion. Not only does Harstine move with utility among the complex nuances and terminology associated with literary criticism, but he reintroduces them at key points in his presentation to develop and consistently sustain his own methodology. Among the more salient features of the book is the potential it holds for provoking further investigation among scholars with similar interests. The substance and quality of Harstine's very fine work will surely serve to inspire and inform those with interests in literary criticism, the Fourth Gospel, character studies and characterization, and the Moses tradition both in and outside of the New Testament. This will prove to be a helpful study for years to come.