



## “Better Together – Moses + Jesus”

*Deuteronomy 18:15–19; Matthew 5:1-5; Matthew 17:1–13*

### ***Who but God can speak with the authority of God?***

There are two figures who dominate the biblical landscape: Moses and Jesus. The Lawbringer and the Law-giver. The Exodus from slavery to Pharaoh and the New Exodus from slavery to sin and death. The one who spoke from Mt. Sinai and the one who delivered the Sermon on the Mount. If we can see the connections between Moses and Jesus, we are a long way to grasping what God has done

and is doing in this world. For the two are Better Together – Moses + Jesus.

#### ***Moses***

When the book of Exodus opens, Abraham’s descendants (through Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s twelve sons) have been enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years. Sometime around 1500–1300 BC, Moses is born, is raised in the Pharaoh’s house, murders an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew, and disappears into the desert. There, he marries and tends to his flocks.

One day, Moses sees, in the distance, a bush that is burning, yet is not consumed by the fire. When he investigates, Moses is confronted by God who tells Moses that he is to deliver the Hebrews from Egypt. It is in this meeting that God reveals his name to Moses, YHWH, which means “I am” or “I am who I am.” Moses resists and offers up some reasons why he isn’t the right guy, but God presses on. Thus, Moses, with the help of his brother, returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrews. As you’d expect, the Pharaoh resists, and relents only when God sends death to all the first-born of Egypt. Death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb. After the final plague, the Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or “sea of reeds”) to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the sea.

God then leads the Hebrews into the desert and after a few months, they arrive at Mt. Sinai where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and the rest of the covenant. Moses leads them to the edge of the land God has promised them. They send spies into Canaan to check things out and, being terrified by what they see, the Hebrews turn back. Rather than trusting in God, they trust in their own judgment. God is angry with them and tells them that they will not enter the Promised Land until all of that generation die. Even Moses will never enter Canaan. Thus, the Hebrews wander aimlessly in the wilderness for forty years. The book of Deuteronomy is largely Moses’ final speech to the new generation of the Hebrews, who will soon begin their conquest of Canaan. Moses’ death is recorded at the end of Deuteronomy.

#### ***Moses, Jesus, and the Law***

So . . . God led the Israelites to Mt. Sinai after their flight from slavery in Egypt. There, Moses ascended the mountain and received the Law from God. He then came down the mountain and presented God’s Law to the gathered people of God. Though we often refer to this Law as the Law of Moses, that is really a bit of a misnomer, for it is God’s Law, not Moses’s. He is the official spokesman, but it is the Law of God. Similarly, though Moses is the one who is chosen to be the agent of God’s work, it is God who frees the Israelite slaves and it is God, in the fiery pillar, who leads them to Mt. Sinai.

The parallels between Jesus and Moses are so striking that we often describe Jesus as a new Moses. But even this only goes so far. Yes, Jesus leads his disciples up a “mountain” to teach them (Matthew 5-7), but he does so with the authority of God, not that of a mere spokesman or prophet. Jesus speaks and acts as God! The Sermon on the Mount is spoken with the authority of God in every word. (See the text box on the next page for a leading rabbinic scholar’s take on this.)

#### ***The Sermon on the Mount***

Spanning three chapters, the Sermon on the Mount is the largest and longest block of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew’s Gospel. Though we may not realize it, much of the Sermon on the Mount is familiar even to Christians who don’t read the Bible. In it we find the Lord’s prayer, the Beatitudes, the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,” lust in the heart, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, “love your enemies,” “do not judge, or you will be judged in the same way,” the narrow gate, wolves in sheep’s clothing, houses built on rocks v. houses built on sand – all this and much more. With so much here, the obvious question is what do we do with it all? How do we begin to make sense of it?

Because there is so much in the Sermon on the Mount that seems far removed from the “real world,” many Christians tend to see the Sermon as an impossible ideal reflecting a world that will be great when it comes . . . but surely has little to do with the lives we lead right now! Even when we correctly understand that the Sermon is about the Kingdom of God, we think of the Kingdom as some future-only reality, rather than remembering that the Kingdom is present-but-still coming or already/not yet. In the end, reading the Law of Moses or Sermon on the Mount as if it is a wonderful, but impossible, ideal is the one thing we cannot do.

### **The Authority of Jesus**

Jacob Neusner was one of the most respected Rabbinic scholars of our generation. A few decades ago, he wrote a book about the Sermon on the Mount titled, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*. In it, he tried to imagine that he was a devout Jew of Jesus’ day. What would be his reaction to Jesus’ sermon?

Rabbi Neusner believes that had he heard Jesus teach he would not have become a follower of Jesus. It isn’t so much what Jesus taught. Other Jewish teachers of Jesus’ day expanded and elaborated on the Law of Moses. Other teachers interpreted the Law to be about the heart, not merely external conformance with rules. Rabbi Neusner’s argument with Jesus would have been with the authority Jesus took upon himself.

Rabbi Neusner put it this way, “Here is a Torah teacher who says in his own name what the Torah says in God’s name . . . So we find ourselves . . . with the difficulty of making sense, within the framework of Torah, of a teacher who stands apart from, perhaps above, the Torah . . . We now recognize that at issue is the figure of Jesus, not the teachings at all.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is doing far more than merely showing his followers a better understanding of God’s Law. Jesus is taking upon himself the very authority of God as he shapes and molds a community of the Kingdom of God.

### ***Training in the Kingdom of Heaven***<sup>1</sup>

Richard Hays<sup>2</sup> notes that Jesus as an authoritative teacher is a dominant theme of Matthew’s Gospel. The church is seen as a community of disciples, of those being taught to be evermore Christ-like. In this light, we see that the Sermon on the Mount is training in the Kingdom of God. Jesus provides the disciples plenty of on-the-job training as they carry out Jesus’ ministry. But Jesus also trains his disciples as a Jewish teacher would – by sitting them down and talking to them about the nature of the Kingdom. So it is no surprise that the Sermon opens with Jesus reminding his followers that they are the “light to the world” – the training has a purpose that goes beyond these individuals. Likewise, Jesus closes the Sermon with a call to obedience. What is the point of training if there is no action?

The Sermon on the Mount is not about how well we can conform to a set of rules. Rather, it is about our character, for our actions flow outward from our character. Selflessness is a matter of the heart, not a rulebook. But you might ask, isn’t what Jesus is asking of his disciples unrealistic and impossible? Jesus’ answer is “no.” We have been born from above (John 3); we are new creations. With God, all things are possible. With faith, nothing is impossible. By virtue of God’s creative work in our lives, the seemingly impossible becomes possible.

### ***Moses and Jesus together, with Elijah joining in***

Peter, James, and John had known each other for a long time. They had met in Capernaum, a small town on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. All three were fishermen and while they were working one morning, all three had been approached by a man from Nazareth named Jesus. “Follow me,” Jesus had said, “and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 4:19). And they had simply followed. All three of them.

Soon, the three of them were caught up in the enthusiasm of the crowds who came flocking to this new miracle-worker. As the months passed, and the miracles and the healings and the teachings mounted, the crowds began to wonder who Jesus really was. There was even speculation that perhaps Jesus was actually John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah. But

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew’s Gospel is the most “Jewish” of the four Gospels in the NT. Respecting the sensibilities of his Jewish readers, Matthew refers to the “Kingdom of God” as the “Kingdom of Heaven.” God’s name, even the word “God,” was so sacred to many Jews that they would not say it aloud. Even today, you can find ultra-orthodox websites that will only spell out “God” as “G-d”!

<sup>2</sup> Hays’s very important book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

Peter sensed that there was more to Jesus than even a great prophet. When confronted by Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter had replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Though Jesus had inexplicably told the disciples to keep this to themselves, Jesus as Messiah was something the disciples could handle. The Jews had waited a long time for the arrival of God’s Anointed One and all Jews knew the Messiah’s job description – cleanse the temple and drive out the pagan foreigners. The Jews knew that the Messiah would come in power and might and wonder and glory for all the world to see. Even fishermen from Capernaum knew all this. They might be surprised to be a part of such big doings, but they had things under control. Or so they thought.

How shocked and confused Peter and James and John must have been. No sooner had Peter declared Jesus to be God’s Messiah then Jesus had begun talking about suffering, how he must die at the hands of the temple leadership and be raised on the third day. Peter and the others couldn’t make sense of such talk. “Suffering Messiah” was an oxymoron – two words that simply didn’t go together. The Messiah was to lead an army in triumph, not die on a Roman cross. Jesus had even called Peter “Satan” for suggesting that Jesus need not suffer.<sup>3</sup> Take up your cross, Jesus said. Those who want to save their life will lose it, those who lose their life for Jesus’ sake will find it.

### **A Theophany?**

A theophany is a manifestation of God. A pillar of fire, a cloud, a burning bush, even a still, small voice (1 Kings 19:9-18). The cloud and the voice in the transfiguration story are theophanies. It is God made visible to our senses.

But Jesus’ transfiguration is not a theophany. D. A. Hare speaks of the transfiguration as a “Christophany.” Jesus’ transfiguration is not about his divinity, it is about his Messiahship. Jesus stands alongside Moses and Elijah. No Jew would have considered either of them to be divine. Jesus is a transformed human in the transfiguration, but he is still human. Peter speaks to Jesus as he always did. It is not Jesus’ transformed appearance that strikes fear in Peter and the others. They collapse only after the cloud and the voice.

This may seem rather unimportant to you. But this is one more example of how we can get off track unless we realize that no Jew of Jesus’ day conceived of the Messiah as being divine. The Messiah might have been God’s hand-picked #2, but the Messiah was to be human. When Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, he is not declaring Jesus to be divine. Our reading of the Gospels will be made much clearer if we keep this in mind.

Then, Jesus led the three of them up a mountain in Galilee. There, Jesus was transfigured, metamorphoosmai in the Greek. His face shone like the sun; his clothes dazzled. Alongside Jesus, Moses and Elijah appeared; the three of them talked amongst themselves. Nothing had prepared the disciples for this. Perplexed at the least, Peter asks an odd question – Can he build dwellings for the three?! But Peter is cut-off by a blinding light and a voice from the clouds saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” The disciples’ world was being blown apart. They thought they understood, but they did not. They thought they had things under control, but they did not. In utter terror and confusion, Peter, James, and John simply collapse to the ground. Then, as any loving friend or parent would, Jesus comes to them, touches them, and tells them to get up, they need not be afraid. They could trust Jesus. They must.

We are struck by Peter’s desire to set up tents for everyone on the mountainside, as if he could hang on to this moment for all time. Peter is ready to stand by Jesus’ side during this transcendent mountain-top experience. But he would prove unwilling to stand beside Jesus at the cross. We are like Peter in this. We are ready for all the moving, inspiring, uplifting mountains that God wants to give us. But when it comes to darkness and suffering, we have trouble seeing Jesus in any of it. Jesus will always call us to leave the mountain eventually, because that is not where the work is to be done.

Indeed, Jesus comes down the mountain. There is healing to be done and the disciples tried but failed to heal the demon-possessed boy. So, as Jesus always did, he took what was brought to him, blessed it, and gave it back -- here, returning the healed child to his father. Mountain or not -- Jesus is Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Jesus knows the path that lies before him. The last thing he needs is Peter tempting him to take another path, to avoid the suffering that lies ahead. Jesus will be faithful all the way to the cross and it is by his faithfulness that we are saved.