

Sinai & the Sermon on the Mount

JESUS: THE PROPHET LIKE MOSES

The Gospel of Matthew's account of Jesus' extended teaching sitting on a high place sketches out an image of the Prophet-Like-Moses promised by God in Deuteronomy 18. Second in a year-long series.

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Any number of artists have created works in which there is a hidden face. Perhaps the scene looks like a mountain or a lake with overhanging tree branches, but hidden in the details is a face that is not immediately noticeable. Regardless of how carefully the face may be hidden, once you see it, you can never "un-see" it. In Deuteronomy 18:15ff, God promised to send a prophet-like-Moses who would carry God's own message and bear his own authority. Most Christians are not familiar with the prophecy and thus never consider that Jesus functioned as this Prophet in his earthly life. However, once you see this Moses-like Prophet in the Gospels, his words and actions take on a new depth of meaning.

Matthew records what has been called "The Sermon on the Mount," in Matthew 5:1-8:1. Regarding this account, Frederic Godet, writing in 1899, pronounced that "the mount where Jesus speaks is as the Sinai of the new covenant."¹ In his actions, as well as in the content and form of his message, Jesus was acting and teaching as the Prophet-like-Moses.

Before receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, Moses fasted for 40 days and nights. Prior to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did as well. In Deuteronomy 9:9, Moses reported, "I remained on the mountain 40 days and nights." The word translated "remained" can either mean



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“remained,” “abode,” or “stayed,” which is reflected in our translations. But the most basic meaning of the word is “sat.” Moses sat on the mountain. In the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount we read, “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to Him.”

After an examination of Jewish literature outside of the Bible, Dale Allison concluded: “The image of Moses sitting on Sinai . . . was firmly established in the imagination of pre-Christian Jews.”² He also points out that even as the opening words of Matthew 5 are similar to the biblical texts “about Moses and Sinai, the same is true of [Matthew] 8:1,” which concludes the Sermon on the Mount.³ From first to last, in delivering this sermon, Jesus has modeled His teaching to reflect His identity as the Prophet-like-Moses, delivering a new Torah.

This observation also leads us to consider the structure of the Sermon on the Mount. It is organized in such a manner that there is a parallelism between the first and last elements, the second and the next-to-last, and so forth. This is called a chiasm. Not only is the Sermon on the Mount itself a chiasm, but so also is the section of the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon. What adds to this interest is that Psalm 90, the Psalm of Moses, is also written as a chiasm. Even in the structure of his teaching, Jesus is alluding to his authority as the prophesied Prophet of Deuteronomy 18.

In this sermon, Jesus addressed topics that are also addressed in the context of the prophecy of the Prophet-like-Moses. First, Jesus warned against false prophets, who would come with deceit and whose prophecies would not produce the promised fruit.⁴ In Deuteronomy, just before the prophecy of the coming Prophet, God warned against false prophets who would speak “presumptuously,” and whose prophecies would fail.

In his sermon, Jesus emphasized the importance of “hearing these words of mine” and acting upon them. To really understand what he was saying,

we must turn to Deuteronomy 18:15-19, where the Prophet-like-Moses was prophesied and the importance of listening to him was emphasized. God says in verse 15, “You shall listen to him,” and in verse 19 he says, “and it shall come about that whoever will not listen to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.” The one who would not listen to him and heed what he would say would be in mortal danger, for this Prophet would speak with greater authority than even Moses.

In Matthew 5:17-19, Jesus specifically addressed the Pharisaic oral traditions. They claimed to be disciples of Moses and insisted that these traditions carried his authority. Jesus flatly rejected both claims. In fact, in his sermon, Jesus pointed to a radically redefined Torah observance. He taught his disciples about a way of life that is focused on internal attitudes of love for God and love for neighbor that go far beyond the external practices of the Pharisees, and even beyond those of the Mosaic Law, for a greater than Moses has come.

In Matthew 5:17-19, Jesus fundamentally shifted attention away from his view of the law to the law’s view of him. He is the Prophet to whom the Law pointed. To follow Moses would mean to follow Jesus. This is also true of the entire sermon. Once we understand that nothing else matters than to be a fervent disciple of Jesus, only then can we understand Torah. This is the new halakhah, the way of life to which Moses pointed, for the authoritative Prophet-like-Moses has made it clear. Once seen, it can never be un-seen.

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Footnotes

1 Frederic Godet, Introduction to the New Testament: The Collection of the Four Gospels and the Gospel of St. Matthew (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), 131.

2 Dale C. Allison, Jr., The New Moses: A Matthean Typology (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 179.

3 Allison, 179-80.

4 See Matt 7:15-20. See also 11:19c.