

# MOSES: INTERMEDIARY OR TEACHER ?

JACOB CHINITZ

In Exodus 24:15 we read: *And Moses went up into the mount, and the cloud covered the mount.* Obviously, Moses goes higher, deeper, more apart than the rest of Israel. The question arises: Is Moses the divine or semi-divine intermediary, or is he what we call him: *Moshe Rabbenu*, our human teacher?

Ginzberg cites several sources which actually attribute divine status to Moses:

Moses did not die . . . . Moses was half terrestrial, half celestial . . . . *Ish Elohim*, Man of God, means Master of the angels . . . . The perfect man is neither God nor Man but something between the uncreated – God – and the perishable . . . . The man who is wholly possessed of the love of God is no longer a man. but actually – God.<sup>1</sup>

Philo, in his writing on the life of Moses, speculates as follows:

Those who associate with him . . . being astonished as at a novel spectacle, inquiring what kind of mind it was that had its abode in his body . . . . whether it was a human mind or a Divine intellect, or something combined of the two . . . .<sup>2</sup>

This passage was undoubtedly influenced by rabbinic, midrashic, and aggadic comments on the nature of Moses, which in turn were inspired by the biblical texts themselves, as well as by Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy. It stimulates examination of the question whether Moses was what official theology, as well as popular notions of religion, call an intermediary, or whether he was totally human, only more so; in fact, supremely so. The Jew, it has been said, is human, only more so.

In relation to Christianity, Judaism is naturally moved to stress the humanity, the total humanity, of Moses, so that no confusion with the total divinity of Jesus should ensue. So we proudly proclaim that we do not have inter-

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mediaries: we pray directly to God. Even Moses was only human, and only an Israelite among Israelites, although he was "first among equals."

However, if we go beyond this contrast to Christian doctrine, and examine our own sources dispassionately, we find less than certainty or consistency on this question. Consider, for example, these passages in the Torah:

1. וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ בַּיהוָה וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ [And they believed in the Lord and in Moses His servant] (Ex. 14:31): How do we interpret this? We may differentiate between faith in God as faith in Divinity, and faith in Moses as faith in human agency or mission. Yet the coupling in this phraseology, repeating the same verb, has overtones of intermediaryship, especially when Moses is given the title *avdo* [His servant]. Is he simply God's servant as we are all God's servants? It is difficult to say that.

2. וְגַם בְּךָ יֵאֱמִינוּ לְעוֹלָם [ . . . and may also believe thee forever] (Ex. 19:9). How do we interpret this? We can say God is telling Moses that the people will believe in his prophecy. But does the use of the word *gam* [also] somewhat elevate Moses toward God's level?

3. לֹחֵם לֹא אָכַל [He did neither eat bread nor drink water] (Ex. 34:28). This describes Moses' fast of 40 days and 40 nights. We can say this is merely stretching of human capacity by God's grace, but we get the feeling that Moses was slightly superhuman here.

4. עֹמֵד בֵּין ה' וּבֵינֵיכֶם [I stood between the Lord and you] (Deut. 5:5). How much closer to the concept of intermediary can we get than that? When we speak of *Torat Moshe*, are we lowering Torah from *Torat HaShem*, or are we raising Moses closer to the Lord?

5. וְלִכְלֵל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וְלִכְלֵל הַמְּוִרָא הַגְּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה [and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed] (Deut. 34:12). This last verse in the Torah almost explicitly makes Moses not the messenger of miracle, but the actual implementor of miracle:

On the other side, the Torah goes to some length to emphasize the humanity of Moses, in his birth, in his life, and in his death:

1. וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת בַּת לֵוִי וַתְּהַר וַתֵּלֶד [A certain man of the house of Levi . . . married a Levite woman (who) conceived and bore a son] (Ex. 2:1-2): This makes it clear that there was nothing supernatural about the parentage, conception and birth of Moses.

2. הַשָּׁמַיִם וְעַל הָאָרֶץ [And Moses died there] (Deut. 34:5): Here, too, it is clear that Moses died a natural death, without any resurrection or elevation to immortality.

On one side, Moses is given divine or almost divine features. On the other side, he is plainly, fully, really human.

Nevertheless, we discern in Philo echoes of superhuman dimensions. In the superiority of Moses over ordinary mortals, we have the following:

God honored him and gave him the greatest and most perfect wealth, and this is the wealth of all the earth and sea, and of all the rivers, and of all the other elements . . . for having judged him deserving of being made a partaker with Himself in the portion which He had reserved for Himself, He gave him the whole world as a possession suitable for his heir. Therefore, every one of the elements obeyed him as its master, changing the power which it had by nature and submitting to his commands . . . . If the prophet was truly called the friend of God, then it follows that he would naturally partake of God Himself and of all His possessions . . . . [T]he good man has a share granted to him of the treasures of God . . . for he is a citizen of the world, since . . . he has for his inheritance not a portion, but the whole world.<sup>3</sup>

We should recognize an essential difference between Philo's notion of the lordship of Moses over nature, granted to him because of his superior behavior and mind, and the lordship of the world granted to Jesus, based on his divine sonship.

We should also recognize that logically we could separate the concept of supernatural powers from the concept of intermediary. We could say that a being is totally human, and yet can serve as an intermediary between God and man. That might be comparable to the other prophets of Israel, who deliver God's word to Israel, and to the priests who make the offerings of Israel to God on the altar. However, there is a natural tendency to associate the position of intermediary with a measure of supernaturalism. Thus, angels become intermediaries in implementing God's will in human affairs, and, in turn, transmit human prayer to God. In Hasidism, we have the phenomenon of treating the rebbe or the tzaddik as an intermediary for petitions to God, and in the process ascribing to him something close to superhuman status.

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When Moses tells Israel that he stands between them and God at Sinai, he could mean as a totally human being, or he could hint at elements of divinity within himself.

What about the life of Moses, between his human birth and his human death? Aside from not eating for 40 days, his life is chock full of human foibles, weaknesses, even outright sins. Moses is not an angel, and he is not even a perfect man. Here are five examples of sins of Moses in faith or action:

1. *Why have you dealt harmfully with this people?* (Ex. 5:22)
2. *How will it be known that I have found grace in Your eyes?* (Ex. 33:16)
3. *Will one man sin and shall You be incensed with the entire congregation?* (Num. 16:22)
4. *Shall we bring forth water from this rock?* (Num. 20:10)
5. *How shall I bear by myself your bother and burden?* (Deut. 1:12)

In Midrash Rabbah (Devarim 11:10) Moses thinks, mistakenly, that he is free of sin: "I who have not sinned since my youth, God would certainly accept my prayer on my own behalf . . . ." But Midrash has Moses sinning in five ways: He smites the rock; he calls the people *mordim* [rebels] against God; he delays the circumcision of his son; he does not acknowledge his Israelite identity when the daughters of Jethro refer to him as an Egyptian. Even his slaying of the Egyptian taskmaster, which we usually praise as the first act of defense of his people, is in one place held as a failing on the part of Moses which justifies his not entering the land of Israel: God: "Was it I perchance that counseled thee to slay the Egyptian?" Moses: "Thou didst slay all the firstborn of Egypt, and shall I die on account of one single Egyptian?" God: "Art thou perchance My equal? I slay and restore to life, but canst thou perchance revive the dead?"<sup>4</sup>

So we see that Moses during his lifetime is accepted by the tradition as being human, failing in some respects, and falling short of divine perfection. Yet, in Jewish lore, the nature of Moses ranges from total humanity to partial divinity. He serves as mediator between God and Israel. He listens to the Divine voice and transmits the words to Israel. He receives the Decalogue inscribed on the tablets and brings them down to Israel. He receives all the Torah and *mitzvot* and brings them and teaches them to Israel. In the other direction, Moses transmits to God the words of the people: *And Moses related the*

*words of the people to the Lord.* (Ex. 19:9). He prays for Israel after the sin of the golden calf. As quoted above, he describes himself as standing between God and Israel at Sinai.

Martin Buber, in his book on Moses,<sup>5</sup> presents the status of Moses in dramatic fashion, when he is on his way from Midian to Egypt, to begin his mission of liberation:

Sent as bearer of the Word, intermediary between heaven and earth through the Word, Moses possesses no mastery over freely coursing speech. He has been created thus and has been chosen thus. By this, a barrier is raised between him and the human world . . . he remains . . . alone in the last resort with the word of heaven . . . . Yet . . . Moses is made a "god" in regard to Aaron. It is laid upon the stammerer to bring the voice of Heaven to Earth.

Here we find the functions of divinity and intermediary mingled. In delivering his message, Moses is an intermediary, a status between God and Man.

#### NOTES

1. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. VI (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1947) p. 166.
2. *Philo*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1971).
3. *Philo*, Section XXVIII, Book I.
4. Ginzberg, Vol. III, p. 69.
5. Martin Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: East and West Library, 1946).