

# Jesus the Prophet

M. W. Bassford, 6-13-10

As many of you know, in my spare time, I like to read a lot of science fiction and fantasy novels. One of the characteristics of that genre is that many of the novels in it are written as part of a series. The author will start out with some premise, and then he'll write three books, or ten books about it. My theory is that authors do this because they like to eat. They know that if you pick up some standalone novel, you can be satisfied without reading another book by the author ever. On the other hand, if you pick up Book One in a series, you're naturally going to want to buy Book Two to see how the story turns out, and if you start with Book Five, then you're going to want to read Books One through Four to figure out what's going on. You have to buy all these books, and the author gets to pay his mortgage.

In many ways, it's helpful if we understand the New Testament as Book Two in a series. Even though the Bible was written by several dozen different men, it is really the work of the same eternal Author, and from beginning to end of the Bible, He's telling the same story. Just like we need to read Book One of the fantasy series to figure out why Princess So-and-So is stuck in the Dark Lord's tower, we have to read the Old Testament to figure out the New Testament.

Nowhere is this more critical than in our quest to understand Jesus. Nearly everything that the New Testament says about Jesus comes with loads and loads of Old Testament backstory. In many ways, He is the culmination and completion of story and thematic threads that run through the entire Bible. Just a couple of weeks ago, we considered the sacrifice of Jesus in light of the Old Testament pattern of temple sacrifices. This week, we're going to consider Jesus by way of comparison to the Old Testament leader Moses. We're going to see what the Bible says about Jesus the prophet.

## Moses.

Of course, in order to compare Jesus to someone else, we first have to understand the object of our comparison. We have to begin by studying Moses. We see a nice little Cliff Notes description of the career of Moses in Psalm 105:25-27, 43-45. This is probably one of the top five most famous stories in the entire Bible—the story of how God spoke to Moses in the burning bush and sent him to Egypt to rescue Israel from captivity. After the ten plagues and the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea, Moses led Israel in making a covenant with God at Mount Sinai and accepting the Law. After that, because of the people's sin, Moses guided them through the wilderness for 40 years, until they had purified themselves to the point where they could enter Canaan, though Moses himself died before they crossed the Jordan.

This is the story of the founding of the Israelite nation, and in the time of Christ, every Jew with half a brain would have known what Moses stood for. First of all, Moses was the deliverer of his people. They were slaves in Egypt, but God chose to set His people free, and He used Moses as His instrument in doing that. Even thousands of years later, Moses is still widely identified as the bringer of freedom. For example, back during the bad old days of slavery in the American South, the story of Moses was a favorite among the slaves, because they hoped that someone would come and lead them to freedom, and when Abraham Lincoln did free the slaves, they commonly did call him "Moses."

Just as important, though, was Moses' role as lawgiver. Today, when we talk about some decision we've reached that isn't final, we will commonly say, "But that isn't written in stone." By contrast, the Law that Moses brought to his people was literally written in stone. We're so used to hearing about the Law of Moses that it's tough for us to grasp how revolutionary this was. For the first time in human history, an entire nation now had a complete description of what God wanted them to do and the way that He wanted them to interact with Him. Nobody had to guess anymore. They knew, and this huge shift in the relationship between man and God was accomplished through Moses.

However, there was something else just as important that every Jew knew about Moses. They knew he was going to have a special successor. Look at Deuteronomy 18:17-19. This passage isn't about a whole bunch of prophets. It's about *a* prophet, a prophet who would be like Moses. Just like God gave the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, God was going to use this second prophet to relay a second law. The Jews were warned that they couldn't afford to reject this prophet, because if they did, they were going to be destroyed just like the Israelites who disobeyed the Law of Moses.

## Jesus.

There were a lot of prophecies that the Jews of 2000 years ago got wrong, but Deuteronomy 18 is a prophecy that they got right, and we can see their search for the prophet like Moses in the way they interacted with Jesus. Perhaps the best example of this in Scripture doesn't come from a Jew at all. We see it in what the Samaritan woman says to Jesus in John 4:19-20, 25-26. This is just an excerpt, but it gives us a sense of the way the Samaritan woman's mind is working. Jesus tells her about her personal life, so she recognizes Him as a prophet and asks Him a doctrinal question. He responds to that question with such authority that she asks Him if He is the Christ who is going to tell them all things. Even though it doesn't seem like it, she's still running down the Deuteronomy 18 track. Remember, friends; Christ isn't a

last name. It's a title. It means "Anointed One", and in the Old Testament, three classes of people were anointed: priests, kings, and also prophets. Once this woman sees that Jesus is a prophet who speaks with such authority, she naturally wants to know if He is *the* prophet, the prophet who is going to tell them all things just like Moses did. Jesus, of course, answers her question in the affirmative, because His people were supposed to understand Him as that prophet.

We see Jesus setting Himself up as the successor to Moses in a number of places, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount. Look, for example, at Matthew 5:21-22. In context, Jesus has just finished announcing that He has not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill the Law. This was true in several senses. First, Jesus fulfilled the Law by being the only man who ever obeyed it perfectly, without sin. Second, though, Jesus fulfilled the Law by fulfilling the prophecies of the Law. Deuteronomy 18 foretold a prophet like Moses. Jesus came to earth as that prophet. We see Him asserting at least equality with Moses in the passage up on the screen. When Jesus talks about murder and being liable to the judgment, He is, of course, quoting the Law of Moses. When He says, "But I say to you," He is claiming that His words have just as much legal and spiritual force as the words of Moses did. This is unprecedented. There are dozens of prophets quoted in the Old Testament, but not one of them ever used this kind of language to put himself on the same level as Moses. That's why the multitudes were so astonished by the teaching of Jesus. That's why they perceived that He spoke with authority. They knew that He wasn't just claiming to be a prophet. They knew He was claiming to be *the* prophet.

When the apostles continued to proclaim Jesus after His ascension, they also relied on the prophecy of the prophet like Moses to explain who Jesus was. Peter actually quotes Deuteronomy 18 during his second gospel sermon in Acts 3. A little later on, Paul uses the theme of the successor to Moses in Acts 13:38-39. Here, he makes plain what Jesus had implied in Matthew 5. Jesus wasn't just a prophet like Moses; He was a prophet better than Moses. Just as Moses had come to Egypt to free his people from slavery, Jesus had come to earth to free His people from slavery. However, the freedom that Jesus promised was freedom from the very Law that Moses gave. The revelation of this prophet like Moses didn't just add to Moses' revelation. Instead, it replaced it. Neither the Jews nor anyone else were bound to the ceremonies of the Law anymore. Instead, they could find forgiveness through the blood of Jesus. In short, Jesus was both deliverer and lawgiver like Moses, but in both cases, He took over Moses' role entirely.

### **Our Application.**

This takes us, then, to the take-home, to our application for these things. First, this should teach us about the superiority of Jesus and the superiority of the faith He founded. The Hebrews writer makes this point in Hebrews 3:3-6. Moses was certainly sent by God and did His work, but even so, Jesus is greater than Moses was. If Jesus is greater than the founder of a religion that God actually established, how much more is Jesus greater than the founders of all the religions God did not establish? This is not a culturally popular idea. In modern America, it's just sort of assumed that all religions are equally good, that each one offers a valid path to God. We should certainly be respectful of others and their different beliefs, but the fact of the matter is, friends, that those other beliefs are not useful and not valid. Only One speaks for God, that is, Jesus. He is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him.

Second, if Jesus is the prophet like Moses, then that makes us the New-Testament equivalent of the people who followed Moses, and when we consider what happened to those people, it should really make us cautious about our own salvation. Paul elaborates on this theme in 1 Corinthians 10:1-6. His point is that just as Christ was the spiritual version of Moses, we are the spiritual version of the children of Israel. They passed through the cloud and the sea; we are born of water and the Spirit. They ate manna and drank miraculously provided water; we partake of the bread and the fruit of the vine. However, even though they were consecrated to God by those things, those things alone weren't enough to save them. Of the 600,000 men who left Egypt, only two passed into Canaan. The rest died in the wilderness, and they died because they disobeyed God. They fell to idolatry, immorality, defiance of Moses, and general grumbling. Brethren, all of those things have their spiritual counterparts today too, and every day, Christians die spiritually in the wilderness and never make it to the promised land. Unless we accept that it could be us, we guarantee that it will be us. Unless we guard against the allurements of the devil, we make it certain that we will fall prey to one of those allurements. Christ has given us a perfect law to follow, but He isn't going to force us to obey it, and if we don't, we will pay the price.

Finally, if Christ is a prophet like Moses, just as Moses led his people to the promised land, Christ is leading us to a promised land too. The Hebrews writer explores this idea in Hebrews 4:8-10. To appreciate the beauty of this promised rest, we need to look once again at its Old-Testament counterpart. The wilderness where the children of Israel wandered is called the Sinai Peninsula today. It is one of the most forsaken places on earth. It's all desert and mountains and rock, with hardly a blade of grass to be seen. It's viciously hot during the day and bitterly cold at night. Even today, practically no one lives there. From that horrible place, Moses brought his people to a land that flowed with milk and honey. Today, we struggle through a spiritual wasteland, a place where the soul that longs for God can find no rest, where we are constantly in danger from every kind of temptation. However, on the far side of that, we can find a rest that makes Palestine pale in comparison. Let's keep focused on that rest, so that we don't fall away through forgetting.