Roundtable ‘Moses’ EuAre Bologna, March 5, 2018

**The controversial image of Moses in rabbinic literature**

dr. Lieve M. Teugels, PThU Amsterdam, Netherlands

Moses is in the Jewish tradition undoubtedly the most undisputed leader and the main spiritual ancestor of the Jewish people. *Moshe rabbenu* has become the epitome of leadership in Judaism up to the present day. And even outside Judaism. In the Netherlands, my colleague Marcel Poorthuis has just published this book which translates the story of Moses to the situation of the bankers and managers of the Amsterdam business center: Managing with Moses.[[1]](#footnote-1) And this is only one of such books; there are many more.

On the tomb of the great 12th century Jewish leader and philosopher Moses Maimonides’, in Tiberias, one can read the inscription: ‘From Moses to Moses, no one like Moses stood up”.



The same adage was used, somewhat adapted, with respect to the leader of Jewish enlightenment in the 18th century, Moses Mendelsohn. About this third Moses it was said that “from Moses to Moses there was no one wise like Moses”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Like Moses Maimonides, Moses Mendelsohn was a Bible scholar and a philosopher. And like the Biblical Moses, Mendelsohn was apparently a stutterer. To be a Jewish leader, therefore, it helps if your parents gave you the name Moses. And yet this is not evident. Because Moses was not born as a natural leader.

In this presentation I want to look, briefly, at some biblical texts, then move on to an early rabbinic biblical commentary, called Midrash, from ca. the 3rd cent CE, and finally to a somewhat later rabbinic text, from the Babylonian Talmud.

In the book of Exodus, Moses is depicted as a remarkably human figure, with occasionally low self-esteem, and doubts about his suitability as leader. This already starts in Exodus chapters 3 and 4, even at the burning bush. In Exodus 3:11 we read:

“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?

And in 4:1:

“What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The Lord did not appear to you?

In Exod 4: 10:

“Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”

And, finally, in v. 13:

“Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent.”

In verse 12 and 14 we read that God loses his patience and gets angry at Moses. Not a good start for a great leader, it would seem. And yet Moses is considered as the example of all leadership. How did that come to be?

If we look at the earliest rabbinic Midrashim, we see that they depict Moses in an equally ambivalent way, and they even magnify his doubtful leadership qualities.

I have selected a typical text that relates to Moses’ dubious authority and especially to his ambivalent relationship with God. This texts pertains to Moses’ calling at the burning bush, but it connects this to Moses’ last hours, and especially to the question why Moses was not allowed to enter the Land of Israel. A specific characteristic of this midrash is that it contains a parable. Parables in midrash, as in other contexts, are excellent ways to relate difficult things in an indirect way.

Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, pressed Moses for six days and on the seventh he said to Him, *Make someone else Your agent !* (Exod 4:13). As it says, *But Moses said to the Lord, ‘Please, Lord, I am not a man of words’* (Exod 4:10)*.*

**They told this parable**. To what is the matter similar? To a king who had a servant and he loved him with a complete love. And the king sought to make him his administrator, to take care of the maintenance of the members of the king ’s palace . What did that king do? He took the servant by his hand and brought him into his treasury and showed him silver vessels and golden vessels, fine stones and gems and all that he had in his treasury. After this, he brought him outside and showed him trees, gardens, orchards and enclosed areas, and all that he had in the fields. Afterwards, the servant closed his hand and said: I cannot be made administrator to take care of the maintenance of the members of the king ’s palace. The king said to him: If you could not be made administrator, why did you put me through all this trouble? And the king was angry at him and decreed over him that he should not enter his palace.

**So** the Holy One, blessed be He, pressed Moses for six days and on the seventh he said to Him, *Make someone else Your agent!* (Exod 4:13). The Holy One, blessed be He, swore over him that he would not enter the Land of Israel. As is said: *Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them* (Num 20:12 ).

A very brief word about rabbinic parables may be due first. As a rule, a rabbinic parable consists of two parts, the parable, called mashal; and its application, called nimshal. Both are introduced with stereotypical formulae. I have marked these in the text for easy recognition. Since the parable is part of a midrash, the biblical verse or verses that are the focus of the commentary are first quoted. We call this the base text: in this case this is Exodus 4:10-13. Often, as in this case, there is a piece of midrash before the mashal. The mashal is as a rule a fictional story, usually with stereotypical characters such as a king (who stand for God), and his son, or his servant (who in this case, stand for Moses). The nimshal, the application, brings the focus back to the biblical base text, such as is the case her also.

The base text Exodus 4:10-13 is quoted in the beginning of the passage. Because of the repeated hesitations of Moses, the midrash concludes that God was pressing Moses for sixdays. This is not stated in the Bible: this is typical midrashic gap-filling.

The comparison in the mashal is rather straightforward: Moses is compared to a beloved servant who is chosen by the king to administer his household but, after a tour of the property, refuses to take up the job because he ‘cannot do it’. The king is angry because he has put in time and effort to prepare the servant for the job. Therefore he forbids the servant to enter his palace.

In the nimshal, this is reverted again to the relationship between God and Moses. Because Moses initially refuses to be God’s agent (Exod 4:13), he will not be allowed to enter the land.

The interpretation offered by the mashal, and especially the nimshal, adds something to the biblical text: in the Bible, Moses’ initial refusing to be the representative of his people is never adduced as the reason that he will not be allowed to enter the land. Rather, other reasons are given such as Moses’ (ambiguous) reaction to the people in Numbers 20:10 when he is about to strike a rock to bring out water on God’s command and Moses says: *“Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?*

God’s reaction to this in Num 20:12 is quoted at the end of our text. *Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them* (Num 20:12 ). Thus, Numbers 20:10-12 is connected with the situation in Exod 4, whereas in the biblical text these events are unrelated. This is again the typical gap-filling and connecting of passages that we often find in rabbinic midrash.

The fact that Moses was never allowed to enter the land of Israel is a major issue in rabbinic Midrash. It is consistently argued that this was very disappointing for Moses. This probably teaches us more about the rabbis who composed these commentaries than about Moses: it is evident that the ancient rabbis, who saw Moses as their great leader, found this a very harsh decision from God’s part; they saw it as a ordeal that Moses had not deserved. Thus, the midrashim relate *at nauseum* how Moses begged God to change His plan, and offered various alternatives, such as to let him enter through a tunnel, or in disguise, or even as a dead body in a coffin. But God did not give in.

How do the Rabbis make sense of the two facts that are addressed in this Midrash: first, that Moses was initially very reluctant to be a leader; and second that he was not allowed to enter the land?

As we have seen, in the earliest rabbinic commentaries, these two events are connected: because he first refused to be a leader, he was not allowed to enter. This is a different reason than was given in the Bible: there it is said that he was not allowed to go in because he was angry at the people, and because he claimed ownership over a miracle, whereas in fact only God can do miracles. None of this is found the tannaitic Midrashim: they present him as a very human and humble, even unsecure leader, who does not receive the reward he so much hoped for: to enter the land. In his recent book about Moses in the Rabbinic tradition[[3]](#footnote-3) Gunter Stemberger explains this in the following way:

“The image of the leadership of Moses is not only based on the biblical image, but also on the presuppositions of the rabbis about how an ideal leader of the Jewish community should act. Because these were themselves usually not yet in a leadership position, they were interested in a conciliatory, service-minded community leader, who does not become angry, who does not follow his own interests, who is not authoritarian. All this may have played on the background of the passive image that Moses has in rabbinic literature”.

In later rabbinic literature, notably in the Babylonian Talmud, we see that this passive, even suffering, image, receives a very specific interpretation. In tractate Sotah, the place of Moses’ death, and the fact that he was not allowed to go in are read as manifestations of the biblical prophecy of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Moses is presented as the one who suffered to atone for the sins of his people.

R. Hama son of R. Hanina also said: Why was Moses buried near Beth-peor? To atone for the incident at Peor (see Numbers 25)

(…)

R. Simlai expounded: Why did Moses our teacher yearn to enter the land of Israel? Did he want to eat of its fruits or satisfy himself from its bounty? But thus spoke Moses, 'Many precepts were commanded to Israel which can only be fulfilled in the land of Israel. I wish to enter the land so that they may all be fulfilled by me'. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, 'Is it only to receive the reward for obeying the commandments that you seek? I ascribe it to you as if you did perform them'; as it is said: *Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out his soul unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bare the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors* (Isaiah 53:12).(…) 'Because he poured out his soul unto death' — because he surrendered himself to die, as it is said *Now, if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written!* (Exod 32:32) 'And was numbered with the transgressors' — because he was numbered with them who were condemned to die in the wilderness. 'Yet he bare the sins of many' — because he secured atonement for the making of the Golden Calf. 'And made intercession for the transgressors' — because he begged for mercy on behalf of the sinners in Israel that they should turn in penitence.

Even though there is no proof, this presentation of Moses seems to be a reaction to the Christian application of this text to Jesus, such as in Luke 22:27 and Hebr. 9:28.[[4]](#footnote-4)

To conclude. Moses entered Jewish history as *moshe rabbenu*, but this does not mean that the classical rabbinic texts present him as an infallible leader. Quite to the contrary: they seem to emphasize that a leader can be human, and must be compassionate rather than authoritarian.

It must, however, be said that there are certain strands in Jewish interpretation, even very early ones, that present him differently. In the Hellenistic Jewish texts, Moses is often pictured as an almost divine figure, who did not die but was ‘taken up in heaven’, and sat on a throne next to God. This image is also found in Christian views of Moses, who is presented next to Elijah at Jesus’ transfiguration. It seems likely that the rabbinic strand of interpretation, which became the most influential strand in Jewish thought up until the present day, was a reaction against this Hellenistic and Christian quasi-divinization of Moses, and also against the Christian interpretations of Jesus, who is on the one hand identified with the the suffering servant, and on the other presented as a divine savior.

1. M. Poorthuis, *Managen met Mozes. Lessen uit de woestijn voor leiders van vandaag*, Amphora Books/Stichting Pardes, Amsterdam, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Hame’asef* II, 1784, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. G. Stemberger, *Mose in der rabbinischen Tradition*, Freiburg in Bresigau: Herder, 2016, 184-185. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)