

Introduction

The Old Testament is a very ancient book. Not only that—it took a very long time to write. Many of its great stories were told over and over again and written down at different times. Naturally each age added something of its own, according to its own understanding of the story. This is as true of Moses as it is of other great characters of the Old Testament. Much of what we know of him comes from the writing, not of those who lived at the same time as Moses, but of those who lived in later eras. In the narratives, as we now have them, we see the figure of this great man as it was reflected in the spirit and the faith of those later eras.

This means that we have no full biography of Moses; still less do we have any account of him written in terms of “strict historical method.” But God’s self-revelation to the people of Israel was inseparably connected with his name. This revelation was felt to have full authority for every later era, right up to the end of the Old Testament period. And so it came about that people of all these later eras felt that they too were concerned in the history of Moses; the ancient traditions that spoke of him were carefully preserved and passed on from one age to the next.

Now even a reader who does not read very carefully can observe that the figure of Moses and the office that he held are not depicted in exactly the same way in all the stories. There is nothing surprising in this. The portraits that later eras formed of Moses were naturally influenced by the spirit and the outlook of each age, and that means that they differ in detail from one another. One period stresses one aspect of the person and message of Moses, another period a different aspect. One group finds the essential thing in the stern and even terrifying element in the work of Moses; on others we see the impression left by the suffering that lay below the surface of his life and by his service as the mediator between God and his people. But, though these interpretations differ among themselves, each one has without doubt caught something that is true and valid in relation to Moses.

These later writers had in their minds questions and needs and answers to questions related to their own experiences, as they tried to follow Moses in the path of faith. The traditions about him were not stored in archives throughout the centuries; they were passed on as living traditions from mouth to mouth and from soul to soul. Now a picture handed on like this from generation to generation cannot remain unaltered. It is bound to be affected by the experiences of faith that the people of God have passed through in one period or another; in this way it may even come to be a more complete portrait than it was, just because it has been enriched by the discoveries and experiences of later eras. Thus it comes about that what we find in the books of the Old Testament includes something of Israel's own picture of itself and of its history. Consequently, Moses, as

he is presented to us, rises to gigantic stature; he surpasses the limits of ordinary human capacity; he stands as a colossus high above all others. And yet, for all that, here is the true and genuine figure of a man, a figure that has power to move us by its very humanity.

But we have not yet come to the most important point of all. Not a single one of all these stories, in which Moses is the central figure, was really written about Moses. Great as was the veneration of the writers for this man to whom God had been pleased to reveal himself, in all these stories it is not Moses himself, Moses the man, but God who is the central figure. God's words and God's deeds, these are the things that the writers intend to set forth. We shall find that this principle applies to all the early narratives of Israel; they are stories of God's great acts of salvation, of his enduring patience, and also of his judgments and vengeance; in no single case is a man—even the very greatest among the sons of men—the central figure. The aim of all these stories is to render honor to God, to glorify God's deeds, God's patience, and the faithfulness that God has been pleased to reveal. In other words, all the stories about Moses bear testimony to God. In them people are not presented in any ideal fashion; on the contrary they are realistically shown in every aspect of their human nature. Thus we should not be surprised to find that human imperfection casts deep shadows even upon these people, who were the recipients of the revelation of the living God; and that truth demands that the failures of these great people should be unsparingly shown up. If we realize this, we are less likely to make the mistake of imagining that the people about whom these stories were written were the really important actors in them.

Since Moses is not the principal actor in the Old Testament stories about him, then, we shall not make him the principal character in our book. First we shall sketch in broad outline the picture of Moses that has been handed down to us in the various strands of the tradition. But once this is done, we shall go on to consider the principal features in that revelation of God associated with his name.

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