Moses As Priest and Apostle in Hebrews 3:1-6

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1. Introduction

The only explicit comparison of Jesus and Moses in Hebrews, is in 3:1-6. This passage identifies Jesus as ὁ ἀρχιερεύς τῆς ὀμολογίας, “the Apostle and High Priest of our confession.” The author does not give these titles to Moses, but after calling on his readers to “consider Jesus” as both “apostle and high priest,” he immediately compares this Jesus to Moses. It would be reasonable to suppose that Hebrews also sees Moses as an apostle and high priest. ¹ I will argue for this possibility.

It is obvious that Hebrews only tenuously connects Moses with these offices. The question is whether the recipients of Hebrews would recognize such a tenuous connection, and this is the question I want to explore here. I will discuss evidence that Jews in the Second Temple Period esteemed Moses in both these roles, and conclude that a Jewish audience would readily recognize and accept an association of Moses with both offices: apostle and high priest.

In the first section of this paper I will explore Jewish views of the priesthood of Moses, and in the second Jewish conceptions of Moses as an apostle. Then, I will return to Hebrews chapter 3. The payoff, I believe, is a clearer picture of ancient Judaism, deeper insights into the development of the earliest Christology, and a more complete understanding of the book of Hebrews.

2. The Priesthood of Moses

2.1 The Bible

In the Bible, the priesthood of Moses is explicit only in Ps. 99:6, which says plainly, “Moses and Aaron were among his priests.” But OT tradition (as it might be viewed in the Herodian age) leaves little doubt about

¹ E. L. Allen, “Jesus and Moses in the New Testament,” The Expository Times 67 (1955-1956): 105, argues that the author here has in mind a Christology that “comes near to equating Jesus with Moses.”
Moses’ prerogatives. In a Tyndale Monograph of 1953, H. L. Ellison explores the Moses narratives with an eye to the sensibilities of the Greco-Roman period. Many of the subtleties of those tales, when read from an ancient viewpoint, place Moses squarely in the role of a priest.\(^2\) In the Pentateuch, when Moses inaugurates the covenant, he acts as the presiding priest. The priesthood of Aaron, which Moses also inaugurates, appears as the delegated priesthood of Moses. Then, when Aaron’s son Eleazar takes up the high priesthood he again receives his office from Moses, not from his father.

Josephus implies a view of Moses as priest when he emphasizes it was Moses who was in the tabernacle (Exod. 25:22; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.212, 222) receiving oracles and enjoying access to the divine presence that exceeded the privilege given to Aaron and his successors (Lev. 16:2).\(^3\) This is more striking in light of Josephus’s decided hostility to the notion of non-Aaronic priesthood. (More on Josephus in a moment.)

Outside the Pentateuch, in Judges 18:30 the Danite priesthood claims Mosaic lineage, which signals that Moses was a priest, and perhaps superior to Aaron (else what use is his lineage).

Clearly, in the Pentateuch Moses is a Levite, a feature of Moses’ CV which Jews in the Herodian period greatly stressed.\(^4\) We ordinarily distinguish priests from Levites, but in the Herodian period that distinction had so worn down that it was a distinction without a difference. The terms were nearly interchangeable.\(^5\) Certainly, the sharp pentateuchal distinction

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\(^2\) Exod. 24:6; Lev. 8:30-9:24; H. L. Ellison, *The Centrality of the Messianic Idea for the Old Testament*, Tyndale Monographs (London: Tyndale Press, 1953), 17. “At the solemn conclusion of the Sinaitic covenant he is the priest (Ex. xxiv. 3-8). The twelve young men who kill the sacrificial oxen are merely the representatives of the people, for the sacrifices were normally killed not by the priest, but by the persons bringing the sacrifice. It is Moses who performs the priestly task of manipulating the blood. Equally it is Moses who consecrates Aaron and his sons to their priestly office. It is Moses who finds fault with Aaron when he does not carry out his tasks to the full (Lev. x. 16-20). Most significant of all, it is Moses, not Aaron, who passes on the high-priesthood from Aaron to Eleazar on Mount Hor. In other words, though after the consecration of Aaron Moses did not act as priest, he had only delegated the office”; see also Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, ed. W. F. Albright and D. N. Freedman, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 555-58.


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no longer obtained, so that for Moses to be a Levite facilitated a view of him as a priest even more strongly than one might suppose.

It would be reasonable then to suppose that when Hebrews was written Jews would have inferred that Moses was a priest, even if the Pentateuch never gives him that title. But how strongly did Jews draw such a conclusion, and how dearly was it held?

2.3 Philo

Even if the organic links between Hebrews and Philo have at times been exaggerated, the numerous affinities between the two make Philo useful for the study of Hebrews. Similarities between the two have risen in importance because it has become difficult to view Philo as the marginal Jew he was once deemed to be.

Philo corroborates much of what we concluded about what Jews would make of the biblical portrait of Moses. Philo explicitly states that Moses functioned as high priest at the ratification of the covenant.6 According to Philo, he also officiated as priest during the installation of the Aaronic priesthood, as demonstrated by his manipulation of the blood of the sacrifices.7 As high priest, Moses receives the divine instruction in all priestly duties,8 builds and furnishes the sanctuary,9 and appoints and instructs the priests.10

Philo believed that Moses’ intercession for the people, and his mediation with God on their behalf can be attributed to his priesthood.11 Philo picks up a number of cases from the Pentateuch, for example in the affair of the Golden Calf (Vita Mos. 2.166), where Moses takes the part of a mediator and reconciler (μεσιτὴς καὶ διαλλακτής) and of a protector and intercessor (ὁ κηδεμών καὶ παρακλητής), functions which Philo deems priestly.

At the risk of understating an important conclusion, the priesthood of Moses is very important to Philo. He does not simply assume it. He prizes it.12

2.4 Josephus

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6 Quis Her. 182.
8 Mos. 2.71.
9 Mos. 2.71, 75.
10 Mos. 2.141, 153.
11 See above, pp. 38-39, 49-50; Philo, Plant. 46; Som. 1.143; Mos. 1.128; 2.166.
12 Sac. 130; Spec. Leg. 4.192; Mos. 1.334; 2.2-7, 16, 76, 187, 292; Praem. 53, 56.
Josephus, to keep things interesting, takes a different view. The priesthood in Josephus is emphatically the possession of Aaron: no one, including Moses, is qualified for high priesthood (Ant. 2.210; 3.188-91, 307). For example, in the dream announcing the birth and the great calling of Moses, Amram learns of another great privilege Moses will enjoy: “he shall have a brother so blessed as to hold my priesthood” (Ant. 2.210). It surprised me to see how much space Josephus gives to the rebellion of Korah over the conferral of the priesthood on Aaron. It is one of the longer narratives in the *Antiquities*, and Josephus uses it to emphasize, over and over and over, that God’s design was always for Aaron to have the high priesthood. In noteworthy divergence from the biblical account, Eleazar receives the priestly attire directly from Aaron himself, and not from Moses (Ant. 4.83). In general, Josephus is very concerned with defending Aaron’s priesthood.

Despite Josephus’s absolute defense of the Aaronic high priesthood, he depicts Moses carrying on the same priestly activity that we find in other sources. Moses sanctifies the new priests and tabernacle, Moses manipulates the blood (Ant. 3.197, 204-206). On many other occasions, it is Moses who offers sacrifices (Ant. 2.269, 275, 349; 3.60; 4.101), or intercedes for the people (Ant. 3.22-23, 34, 310, 315; 4.194). Josephus describes him carrying out priestly activities, and Moses remains a leader with outstanding priestly credentials.

2.5 Pseudo-Philo

Pseudo-Philo’s retelling of the Exodus story incorporates many of the same instances of priestly or mediating activity found in other first-century sources. Once more, in the *Biblical Antiquities* (or *LAB* 11.3) Moses sanctifies the people before Sinai, and (13.1) consecrates the priests. Repeatedly (*LAB* 11.15 and 12.8-10) Moses approaches God to intercede for the people, and (19.3) makes atonement for their sins.

In a telling redaction, Pseudo-Philo (51.6) rather pointedly introduces Ps. 99:6 into his rendition of the Song of Hannah.

Hannah prayed and said, … “Who is Hannah that a prophet should be born to her? … Asaph prophesied in the wilderness about your son, saying, ‘Moses and Aaron were among his priests, and Samuel was there among them.’ Behold the word has been fulfilled.”

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13 One can imagine my disappointment upon discovering this.
14 *Ant*. 4.15-16, 19, 23, 24, 26-33, 46, 58, 66.
As mentioned earlier, Ps. 99:6 is the one biblical text that speaks explicitly of the priesthood of Moses.

2.6 Graeco-Roman Writers

The description of Moses as a priest crops up repeatedly, starting with “pseudo-Manetho” (that is, an interpolator in Manetho’s work quoted as Manetho in Josephus, Ap. 1.250). This pseudo-Manetho, probably writing early in the first century A.D., equates Moses with a Heliopolitan priest of Osiris named Osarsiph.\(^\text{16}\)

The description of Moses as either a disaffected or diseased Egyptian priest became a common feature in Alexandrian expositions of Jewish history.\(^\text{17}\) Strabo describes Moses as an Egyptian priest who became dissatisfied with animal worship.\(^\text{18}\)

The testimony of Graeco-Roman writers is important because their sources on Moses were most likely Jews — either Jewish acquaintances, or Jewish writings designed for consumption by the wider imperial public.

2.6 Samaritans

The Samaritans thought a great deal of the priesthood of Moses. Problems of provenance and especially of date plague the use of Samaritan literature for illumination of the New Testament. Nonetheless, the importance given to Moses in Samaritan thought combined with the close links between Jews and Samaritans in the Second Temple period already suggests that Samaritan literature can contribute something here.

Samaritan teachings about Moses play a corroborative role here, by echoing the thrust of Jewish evidence more definitely linked with the NT setting. Additionally, it is encouraging encouraging to find Samaritan literature interpreting the Pentateuch in just the ways we predicted.

Thus, the Samaritans remind us that Moses was a priest, and that Aaron only enjoyed priestly duties delegated to him by Moses.

Two frequent Samaritan titles for Moses are “the Levite,” and “the son of Amram,” the former of which, we have seen, implies his priesthood, and the latter of which at least calls his lineage to mind.\(^\text{19}\)

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\(^{17}\) Ibid., 121.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 38-39. Pompeius Trogus alludes to Moses’ priesthood with the statement that Arruas (=Aaron) succeeded him as priest of the Egyptian holy rites (ibid., 54). Lacantius Placidus may be the only pagan Latin to make Moses out as “priest of the Highest God,” *Moyses, Dei summi antiquus*. Menachem Stern, ed. and trans., *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 2, *From Tacitus to Simplicitus*, Fontes and Res Judaicas Spectantes (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1980), 682, 685.

\(^{19}\) MacDonald, *Theology of the Samaritans*, 152-54.
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_Memar Marqah_ 4 (4.6.14-16) describes the priesthood of Moses in a way that rings of Heb. 3:1-6. He says:

Where is there the like of Moses, and who can compare with Moses, the Servant of God, the faithful one of His House (הָעַבְדֵּי יְהוָה, הָעַבְדֵּי יְהוָה, וָאָמָה, הָעַבְדֵּי יְהוָה, ואָמָה), who dwelt among the angels in the Sanctuary of the Unseen? ... He was a holy priest in two sanctuaries (יהוה מלך התיי לְהֵרָדָה מַעַנְיָה).

Note the link between the terms “Servant of God,” “faithful one of his house,” and “holy priest.” This triad could easily sum up the depiction of Moses in Heb. 3:1-6.

The idea of Moses as a priest on earth and in heaven is not uncommon in Samaritan texts, though the further one goes into Samaritan literature the more difficult it is to defend its utility for New Testament study, since all too quickly one finds oneself reading texts from the late Middle Ages. In these late texts too, Moses is a heavenly priest. For example, in a poem from the fourteenth century the angels address Moses saying, “Begin, O priest; make proclamation!” — a striking scene but one of uncertain value for New Testament study.

Moses as a heavenly priest also appears in a Samaritan marriage document (ketubah) where he is called, “the priest of the angels.” Now marriage contracts, by virtue of their traditional and stylized language, are likely to preserve old ways of speaking. The antiquity of the wording of this one is indicated by the use of obsolete monetary units to assess the dowry, and more especially by the appearance of two Greek terms in the text (alas, the manuscript dates from the eighteenth century).

2.7 Rabbinic Literature

The Rabbis were interested in the same biblical data on Moses’ priesthood that their predecessors had been. Use of rabbinic traditions to elucidate the

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21 Quoted by Macdonald, _Theology of the Samaritans_, 175.


23 Ibid., 309-312. One term is “rhetor” (ibid., 318 n. 27), describing the groom; the second is not identified by Bowman. On the priesthood of Moses in Samaritanism, see also James Alan Montgomery, _The Samaritans, the Earliest Jewish Sect: Their History, Theology and Literature_, intro. by Abraham S. Halkin (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1968; reprint from 1st ed., 1907), 229-30 and Bowman, _Samaritan Documents_, 318 n. 21.
New Testament is easier than using Samaritan literature, but for the sake of time I will be brief.

I find it encouraging to see numerous rabbinic texts, too many to survey here, that conclude that Moses presided as priest during the seven days’ inauguration of the Aaronic priesthood, demonstrating again that our own suppositions about what the Pentateuch implies are in touch with more ancient sensibilities. Some texts which address this week-long priesthood also maintain that Moses lost the priesthood to his brother. Others, however, maintain that he continued as high priest for the rest of his life thereafter. Sifra [Shemini Mekhilta deMiluim] commenting on Psalm 99:6 affirms that Moses and Aaron were of equal merit in their priesthoods.

Thus, the only matter unresolved among the Rabbis regarding Moses’ priesthood is whether it lasted his whole lifetime or ended with the accession of Aaron. As Exod. Rab. 37.1 sums up, “Our sages have said that Moses ministered as High Priest all the forty years that Israel was in the wilderness; but others hold that he only did so during the seven days of the consecration of the Tabernacle.” The Mosaic priesthood itself is (virtually) uncontested in the rabbinic corpus.

I am not reading the rabbinic literature straight back into the New Testament. Rather, I simply note the strength of the view of Moses as priest in an age in which the priesthood of Moses, like priesthood generally, was less important than it once had been. I also note that the details of the rabbinic view, or views, of Moses display a great deal of continuity with earlier characterization of Moses and thus probably witness to the vigor of those earlier descriptions.

2.8 Conclusion

We see, then, a broad spectrum of Jewish literature in which Moses is depicted as a priest. The exception that proves the rule is Josephus, who is adamant that the high priesthood belongs by natural right to Aaron, and yet

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24 E.g., b. Zeb. 101b on Lev. 8:29. The names of R. Eleazar b. Jose, R. Tanhuma, R. Judah, and R. H!elbo recur over and over in such traditions, e.g., Lev. Rab. 11.6; y. Yoma 1.38b.46-48; 1.38b.76-1.38c.2; Sifra Shemini Mekhilta deMiluim; b. Ta’anit 11b; Pesiq. Rab Kah. 4.5; Midr. Pss. 99.4 on 99:6; Exod. Rab. 2.6. Tg. Ps.-J. Deut. 34:5 also allots him priesthood seven days.

25 E.g., Cant. Rab. 1:7 § 3; Exod. Rab. 3.17.

26 E.g., Lev. Rab. 11.6, and the same or very similar in Pesiq. R. 14.11; Pesiq. Rab Kah. 4.5; Midr. Pss. 99.4 on 99:6; Exod. Rab. 37.1; also b. Zeb. 102a and similar Midr. Pss. 18.22 on 18:27. Ps. 99:6 and 1 Chron. 23:13-14 are commonly appealed to.

27 A few rabbinic opinions deny priesthood to Moses, e.g., Gen. Rab. 55.6 (but cf. Exod. Rab. 2.6); Deut. Rab. 2.7 on 3:24.

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acknowledges Moses’ priestly function at the inauguration of that priesthood. Greco-Roman evidence for the view of Moses as a priest is significant since the most important source for non-Jewish appraisals of Moses must have been Jews. Samaritans are certainly prominent in the New Testament, and the Samaritan evidence strikingly reminds us why some scholars think that the influence of Samaritan religion and thought was pronounced among early Christians. The Samaritan evidence strongly suggests that Heb. 3:1-6 depicts Moses as a priest.

3. The Apostleship of Moses

3.1 The Biblical Background

In the Old Testament, God “sends” Moses in Exod. 3:10 — using הַלַּשׁ in the MT and ἀποστέλλω in the LXX— (.stopPropagation, ἀποστέλλω σε; Exod. 3:10), who therefore says to the captive Israelites, “The God of your fathers has sent me (.stopPropagation) to you” (Exod. 3:13, 15; cf. 4:28). In the Old Testament, however, no noun for one who is sent, such as מלי or מלי, or ἀπόστολος or ἀγγέλος, is used of Moses. Such nouns, however, are exceedingly rare in the LXX generally, and the sparsity of “sentness” language has not prevented a few scholars from tracing notions of Moses as an apostle, or a “Sent One” to these texts.

The key issue here, of course, is not the language used by the Old Testament but the impact that it had in the period of Hebrews.

3.2 Literature of Second Temple Judaism


30 See Jarl E. Fossum, The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord: Samaritan and Jewish Concepts of Intermediation and the Origin of Gnosticism, WUNT 36, ed. Martin Hengel and Otfried Hofius (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1995), 145. It is apparently on the basis of these verses that Geo Widengren asserts that “even in the O.T., Moses is looked upon as an Apostle, a Sent One” (The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book [King and Saviour III], Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, no. 7 [Uppsala: A. B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1950], 47). Fossum points out the importance of “sentness” to prophets (which would include Moses) in the Old Testament, e.g. Judges 6:8; 6:14; 1 Kings 2:3; 1 Kings 1:7; Hag. 1:12; Zech. 2:12. See also Widengren, 31-34.

The evidence in the literature of Second Temple Judaism for a conception of Moses as an apostle is very thin. There is a fragment of Artapanus in which God is called “The one who sent Moses,” ό πεμψας αὐτόν.\(^{32}\) Like I said, it’s thin.

In the first century, Moses’ “sentness” appears in Josephus (\textit{Ant.} 2.274), where God exhorts Moses to “convince all men that thou art sent by me” (ὅτι πεμφθείς ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ).

Much more impressive is the reference in \textit{Assumption of Moses} 11:17, which terms Moses the \textit{magnus nuntius}. This title, while not the same as \textit{apostolus}, still implies his divine commission.\(^{33}\)

### 3.3 Samaritan Literature

In sharp contrast, “The description of having been ‘sent’ by God and being God’s ‘Sent One’ was a common way of representing Moses in Samaritanism.”\(^{34}\) Occasional references to Moses as God’s \textit{mūs} appear both in the \textit{Memar Marqah} and in the \textit{Defter} (the Samaritan liturgy).\(^{35}\) For example, \textit{Memar Marqah} 2.9 refers to the apostleship of Moses, either as an office he filled, or as a mandate he carried: “They believed in the True One and knew that the apostleship of Moses (mūs) was true.” Again, the difficulty in dating Samaritan traditions makes it hard to know how far back such language goes, and we have only sparse corroborative testimony from Jewish literature, including Hebrews.

### 3.4 Rabbinic Literature

Turning to rabbinic literature, perhaps the oldest, proper, (non-Christian) Jewish reference to Moses as an apostle comes in a passage in \textit{Sifra} (Behuqotai Pereq 8 [end]), which says, “Moses had the merit of being made the \textit{mūs} between Israel and their father in heaven.” [Here, however, it may be that Israel is the commissioning authority, not God.]

\begin{footnotes}
\item[34] Fossum, \textit{Name of God}, 144.
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Another reference, probably of similar antiquity, comes in one of the older *piyyutim*, “Ezel Moshe” (אֶזֶל מֹשֶׁה), based on Exodus 14:30. This acrostic poem identifies Moses as “the apostle of the Creator of the Beginning” (אֶזֶל מֹשֶׁה שֶל הָאֱלֹהִים וּרְאוּיָה בְּרָאָם הָיָה; אֶזֶל מֹשֶׁה שֶל הָאֱלֹהִים וּרְאוּיָה בְּרָאָם אֱלֹהִים), or “the apostle of the King of Glory” (אֶזֶל מֹשֶׁה שֶל הָאֱלֹהִים וּרְאוּיָה מִיעֲלֵה). Both times the word שֶל הָאֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים is used. The relevant lines are extant in two manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah, but the base text to the poem (with these particular lines unfortunately lost in a lacuna) appears in a papyrus. The *piyyut* is thought to go back at least to the fourth century A.D.

Starting from here, a minor flowering of such language takes place in Jewish literature written in Semitic languages. Several rabbinic texts (the earliest being *Mekilta de-Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai*) designate Moses as God’s שֶל הָאֱלֹהִים. Eventually, the apostolate of Moses forms the background to the title of Mohammed as apostle, which is his title in the Qoran.

In the Passover Haggadah, which as a liturgical text likely conserves old traditions, appears the comment on Deut. 26:8, “And the Lord brought us out of Egypt”: not by means of an angel (אָנֵגָל), and not by means of a seraph (שֶרֶף), and not by means of the apostle (אֱלֹהִים הַשָּׁלֹשָׁה). Only the last term is determined by the article. This implies that the Apostle is set apart as a special agent of God, over against the general classes of angels and seraphs, which also figure in the New Testament as

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36 “Apostle of the Creator of the Beginning”: Oxford Bodleian Ms. Heb. c. 74v, lines 34-35, and 75r, lines 6-7 in Michael L. Klein, *Genizah Manuscripts of Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1986), 1.236-37. This shelfmark appears to be defective, as it lacks a numeral after “c.” In the photograph in Klein the tag giving the shelfmark is cut off at the bottom, leaving only “MS Heb.” Presumably, Klein worked from the photograph and the defect was not noticed. (The MS is cited as Ox. MS 2701/9 folios 63-64 in Joseph Yahalom, “Ezel Moshe — According to the Berlin Papyrus,” *Tarbiz* 47, nos. 3-4 [Apr.-Sept. 1978]: 173-84 and Michael Sokoloff and Joseph Yahalom, *Jewish Palestinian Aramaic Poetry from Late Antiquity* [Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences, 1999], 82, but this catalog number is also an error, since it belongs to the MS we cite next). “Apostle of the King of Glory”: Oxford Bodleian Ms. Heb. e.25, folio 63v, line 15 (Klein, 1.238-39); in this MS, 64r, line 2, Moses cries, “The King of Kings has sent me” (אֶזֶל מֹשֶׁה; Klein, 1.238-39; Sokoloff and Yahalom cite — now correctly — catalog number Ox. MS 2701/9 folios 63-64).


agents in the Exodus. Needless to say, the simplest solution is to see in the words “the Apostle” a reference to Moses.

4. The Priesthood and Apostleship of Moses in Hebrews 3:1-6

Now I return to Hebrews 3, which gives Jesus the titles Apostle and High Priest. Both titles are governed by a single article, which suggests that Hebrews has turned both into one grand title. The fused expression introduces a comparison of Moses and Jesus.

In the New Testament only Hebrews calls Jesus “priest.” This is not boilerplate christology. I can find no other instance in early Christian literature where Jesus is called “apostle.” The peculiarity of the two titles in NT christology, and the uniqueness of the title “apostle,” suggest that Hebrews is not drawing on contemporary Christology at all. I would contend that the fusion of the two titles stems instead from their prior connection with the other individual named: Moses.

Hebrews intends to portray Jesus possessing the same glory as Moses, only more of it. Moses is not used in Hebrews as a foil for Jesus. The two are equivalent figures. In Heb. 3:1-6 particularly, Jesus transcends Moses only in that Jesus is worthy of glory to a greater degree than Moses. Both are worthy of glory, and for the same basic reason. P. R. Jones suggests that in Heb. 3:1-6 both Moses and Jesus are apostles, being distinguished only as “servant” and “Son.” I would refine that position by saying that both Moses and Jesus carry the same joint title, “Apostle
and High Priest,” with again the sole, but pivotal, distinction that one is a servant and the other a son.

As already noted, Hebrews 3:1-6 contains a number of epithets of Moses popular among the Samaritans. Samaritans call Moses “apostle” (of the Truth [i.e. of God]), “holy priest,” “the faithful one of the house of God,” God’s “servant,” “son of the house of God,” and other, similar things many times. The titles occur together in the same contexts in Samaritan literature, even in the same sentences, just as they do in Hebrews 3.45 The similarities between the views of Moses in Hebrews and in Samaritan texts have led some scholars to postulate a relationship, either between Hebrews and Samaritanism generally, or else between Hebrews and certain Samaritan Christians.46 Another possibility is that the Samaritan texts and Hebrews independently preserve once-common ways of speaking about Moses.

The last possibility is made more likely by the fact that other Jewish writers of the period speak of Moses in ways hauntingly similar to the language of Hebrews 3. Compare, for example, Philo, Det. 160, who says that Moses erects the tabernacle in order that therein he might become “a perfect suppliant and servant of God” (ικέτης καὶ θεραπευτής ἐσεσθαι τέλειος θεοῦ). Here the tabernacle, God’s house, is the place where Moses is God’s servant (that is, his priest) just as in Hebrews 3.

Josephus also connects Moses’ service to God with his work in the tabernacle. He writes: “Moses, for his part … devoted himself solely to the service of God (τῇ τοῦ θεοῦ θεραπείᾳ). Desisting from further ascents of Sinai, he now entered the tabernacle and there received responses on all that he besought from God” (Ant. 3.212).

Hebrews appears to be one of many texts that interact with a familiar, perhaps even stock, Jewish image of Moses as a faithful, priestly “servant in God’s house.”

The fusion of the two titles in Heb. 3:1 is especially important. As in Samaritan thought, so among Jews it would not have been exceptional to link priesthood with the role of an apostle. See, for example, Mal. 2:7, where the priest is the “messenger” (ἀγγέλος) of the Lord. Assumption of Moses 10:2 refers to a messenger, or nuntius, whose “hands are filled” by God (Tunc implebuntur manus nuntii qui est in summo constitutus). The “filling of the hands” is a standard technical expression for the consecration of a priest. The best explanation for this text is that the nuntius is an individual consecrated by God (hidden reverently in the

45 Fossum, Name of God, 150-51.
46 Discussion in Fossum, Name of God, 150-152. See also MacDonald, Theology of the Samaritans, 445.
47 Cf. QE 2.105.
words *in summo*) as emissary and priest, fusing these two roles in one
divine commission, just as in Heb. 3:1. The particular nuance of
“emissary” (*nuntius*) involved here is very distinguished; the term might
well be translated “apostle.” As already noted, *As. Mos.* 11:17 dubs Moses
the *magnus nuntius*, which we should translate either “the great emissary,”
or, “the great apostle.”

The resilience of the concept is illustrated by the rabbinic literature,
where apostleship and priesthood continue to be linked. *Bavli Ned.* 35b-
36a carries a debate in the *gemara* over whether or not priests are
“apostles of heaven,” while *b. Kid.* 23b gives the opinion (of
R. Huna b. R. Joshua) that, “The priests are apostles of the All-Merciful
One” (*גַּלְגַּלְגֵל הַגָּדוֹל שֶל הַשָּׁלוֹם*); both references use the word
*שלוחים*.

The term “apostle” seems to have been part of both Jewish and
Christian practice in the first century. By the time Hebrews was written
Jewish synagogues had long had officials called “apostles,”
though the term seems, at least in the first century, to have been more a technical term
than a formal title, and I know of no evidence that this office was linked
with priests. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine a Christian using
the term “apostle” unconscious of its importance among Christians, for
whom the apostles had a foundational importance. But the total absence of
Christian references to Jesus as an apostle, beside this one (except very
possibly Eph. 2:20), suggests that the christological formulation in
Hebrews does not derive from typical Christian usage.

Heb. 3:1-6 seems to use *ἀπόστολος* and *ἀρχιερεύς* to describe
Jesus in sense essentially unparalleled in contemporary Jewish and
Christian practice. In particular, the two titles, fused here into one, seem
not to derive from any contemporary Christology. Instead, I would argue,
they stem from Jewish ideas about Moses, with whom Hebrews wished to
compare Jesus.

The NT passage which implies the high priesthood of Moses appa-
rently includes in the same breath the earliest extant allusion to Moses as
an apostle. Throughout the New Testament and other early Christian
literature the term *ἀπόστολος* bears its familiar, exalted connotation.

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48 See above, p. 38.
49 According to Rengstorf, “*ἀποστέλλω*,” 414, the Jewish *נעדים* probably goes back
to pre-exilic times (compare 2 Chron. 17:7-9 with Matt. 10:1-7; Luke 9:1-6, 10), and in
the first century A.D. had become an institution, Rengstorf, 414-20. Cf. the caution
against linking the Jewish and the Christian offices in Walter Schmithals, *The Office of
with additional bibliography.
50 Rengstorf, “*ἀποστέλλω*,” 418.
51 Ibid., 413.
one disputes that its application to Jesus in Heb. 3:1 is meant to extol Jesus. Since Heb. 3:1-6 parallels Moses and Jesus, the title that glorifies Jesus would also seem to glorify Moses.

3.5 Conclusion

What we gain from all this:

First we have sharpened our interpretation of Hebrews. It is clear how our passage portrays Jesus: he is “the apostle and high priest whom we confess (NIV).” But when Hebrews follows these words with the statement, “Jesus was faithful just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house,” we easily forget that we are still speaking in terms of both priesthood and apostleship. We focus on the terms “servant” and “Son” in Heb. 3:1-6 to sum up what Hebrews says about Moses and Jesus, but forget that a servant in God’s house is a priest, and that all these figures carry God’s commission. Here, we should now see, Hebrews sets forth both Jesus and Moses as priests and apostles of God.

Second, we have added to our understanding of ancient Judaism. Jewish thought links priesthood with apostleship. Hebrews looks very Jewish as it does this. The link is explicit in the opening statement about Jesus. But once we have found the priesthood of Moses in the succeeding verses, the apostolate of Moses is implied as well. Hebrews emerges as the earliest extant text to identify Moses as an apostle.

The incidental and solitary manner in which the priesthood of Moses appears in the New Testament does not mean it was unimportant to early Christians. Although Hebrews spends more time discussing the priesthoods of Aaron and Melchizedek, the priesthood of Moses actually provides the jumping-off point for those discussions. It had a higher profile among Jews than has often been supposed, and evidently provides the starting point for exploring the teaching of Hebrews on the priesthood of Jesus.

Finally, evidence suggests the depiction of Jesus in Heb. 3:1-6 as apostle and high priest is most likely dependent on traditions about Moses, rather than the reverse. I find here another way in which Jewish ideas about Moses influenced the Christian portrayal of Christ.