

Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2014.05.07

Finn Damgaard, *Recasting Moses: The Memory of Moses in Biographical and Autobiographical Narratives in Ancient Judaism and 4th-Century Christianity. Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity 13.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013. Pp. 276. ISBN: 978-3-631-63142-3. Hardcover. €54.95 / \$66.95.

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Recasting Moses, a slightly revised version of author Finn Damgaard's doctoral thesis, explores how the figure of Moses was shaped in Jewish and Christian discourse. It is not an exhaustive study of Moses traditions but rather an examination of the particular ways Moses is used in biography and autobiography. Damgaard focuses on three types of texts: biographies of Moses, biographies of someone else who is compared to Moses, and autobiographies in which the author explicitly or (more often) implicitly compares himself to Moses. Therefore, the study is less concerned with the Mosaic traditions and their development than the figure of Moses as a tool for understanding the lives of others.

To this end, Damgaard purposely excludes two uses of Moses that have already been extensively studied: Moses as a type of Jesus and Moses as a precursor to Greek culture, especially Plato. These two motifs account for the Christian use of Moses in the second and third centuries as well as later works, such as Gregory of Nyssa's *De Vita Mosis*. Instead, Damgaard begins with first century Jewish writings, which present Moses as a political and spiritual role model, before jumping to a revival of this tradition in Christian writings of the fourth century.

The book is divided into three parts comprising six chapters, not including an introduction (ch. 1) and a conclusion (ch. 8). The first part, which has only one chapter, is a study of the figure of Moses in the Septuagint (ch. 2). Damgaard includes this material because all of the authors considered here wrote in Greek and would have known this translation. The chapter's main focus is the presentation of Moses in the Greek Bible and the ways in which it differs from that of the Hebrew text. The figure that emerges in the LXX is ambivalent: in some cases Moses is more exalted than he is in the Masoretic Text, while in other cases the status of Moses is diminished. Thus the LXX does not have a unified portrait of Moses.

The second part is dedicated to three first century Jewish authors: Philo, Paul, and Josephus. Damgaard examines their works in chronological order beginning with Philo's *De Vita Mosis* (ch. 3). Philo's text belongs to the wider tradition of Greco-Roman biography where the moral qualities of the subject are the center of interest. Philo thus presents Moses as a philosopher king who should serve as a model for the Alexandrian Diaspora community. Philo's Moses is culturally separated from the Egyptians, not only because he belongs to a different people but because he is morally and intellectually superior to them. Despite Philo's polemical stance, Damgaard suggests that he may have also intended a Gentile readership.

Regarding Paul, Damgaard turns to his correspondence with the Christian communities of Corinth, Rome, and (briefly) Galatia (ch. 4). He argues that Paul's use of Moses is autobiographical, whereas his references to Adam and Abraham are theological. Paul views himself as Moses against his sometimes obedient, sometimes hostile interlocutors who stand in for Israel. Damgaard posits that Paul identified with Moses differently depending on the situation. For example, his use of this figure in 1 Corinthians elicited a negative response that required a new approach in 2 Corinthians.

Damgaard concludes the second part with the use of Moses in Josephus' *Antiquitates Judaicae*, which he believes informs Josephus' portrait of himself in the *Vita* (ch. 5). Whereas Philo saw Moses as the ideal king, Josephus sees Moses as the ideal general—much like himself during the war against Rome. Josephus' references to Moses' military capability are noteworthy in comparison to the absence of such a description in the Torah. Specific vocabulary is even shared between the portraits of Moses and Josephus in the *Antiquitates* and the *Vita*.

The third part is an examination of the Christian continuation of the Jewish use of Moses, beginning with Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* (ch. 6). Moses in this case is not applied to the author but to his subject, the Emperor Constantine, who, like his biblical forbearer, saved his people from pagan persecution. Damgaard seeks to explain why Eusebius chose Moses as a model rather than, for instance, King David. He argues that Constantine himself invited this comparison, but Eusebius refined this vision of Moses through the influence of Philo and Josephus.

The third part ends with the use of Moses in the works of the two of the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus (ch. 7). Damgaard begins with Gregory of Nyssa's encomium for his brother Basil, the third Cappadocian Father. In it, Gregory highlights Basil's imitation of Moses as a model for the entire Christian community. Gregory of Nazianzus also compares Basil to Moses in his own encomium, but in his other orations he is more apt to see parallels with Moses in his own life. Thus, Gregory of Nyssa uses Moses to look to the future, while for Gregory of Nazianzus Moses is a key to understanding his own past.

In the conclusion, Damgaard highlights two basic ways that the figure of Moses is used in biographical narratives. Moses is either employed as a model to be imitated—as in the case of Philo and Gregory of Nyssa—or as a figure who legitimizes the authority of the author or a third party—as in the case of Eusebius and Gregory of Nazianzus. In both cases Moses is treated as an ideal leader and so becomes a useful political figure. This picture of Moses in Christian discourse only became applicable in the fourth century following the end of persecution and the emergence of a Christian state, but it was also a continuation of the earlier Jewish tradition.

Damgaard's conclusions are not uniformly convincing. It is difficult to see the pertinence of the Septuagint chapter with regard to the overall argument. He misses the opportunity to discuss the Greek Pentateuch as a biography or even—considering the traditional attribution—an autobiography. Nor does he explain the presentation of Moses in the Septuagint in terms of a model to be followed or a legitimizing figure, which he does in all of the other chapters. In addition, the chapter on Paul hangs too many conclusions on too little evidence, including entirely hypothetical Corinthian responses to Paul. His claim that references to Moses in Paul are autobiographical rather than theological seems particularly forced.

The other chapters are more successful. He convincingly demonstrates that Philo, Josephus, Eusebius, and the Gregories have recast Moses in specific roles—that is, Moses as the model philosopher, general, political leader, and pastor—which they then apply to contemporary figures (including themselves). This is a valuable observation. I wish Damgaard had taken greater pains to prove direct dependence of the Christian authors on their Jewish predecessors. He asserts that Christians were reviving an ancient Jewish tradition, but the nature of this relationship is never the primary focus of the study.

The methods of Damgaard's study could be fruitfully applied to other subjects. It would be interesting to know, for instance, how often Moses is invoked vis-à-vis other biblical figures, and if Christians and Jews had different preferences for certain figures. Such an application need not be restricted to early Judaism and Christianity. The author of the Qur'an, for instance, certainly had an interest in the person of Moses, and the prophetic narratives of this book are often interpreted as being reflections of specific moments in the life of the Prophet of Islam. The "recasting" of biblical figures in biographical literature could help explain the development of interpretive traditions that were later attached to these characters.