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Harstine's "Moses as a Character in the Fourth Gospel: A Study of Ancient Reading Techniques" - Book Review

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Moses as a Character in the Fourth Gospel: A Study of Ancient Reading Techniques.

By Stan Harstine. JSNTSup 229. London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.

Pp. 194. ISBN 0-8264-6026-7. \$95.00.

In a clear and readable revision of his Baylor dissertation, profiting from the input of Alan Culpepper and Charles Talbert, Stan Harstine contributes a characterological approach to other analyses of Moses in the Fourth Gospel. In doing so, he begins with outlining the historical and methodological studies (ch. 1), showing how the study of Moses as a literary character in John has not been dealt with in typological and historical/comparative studies. He then covers the latest literary approaches to John and gospel narrative, including analyses of characterization and a methodological treatment of the study of Moses as a character in ancient Jewish narrative. This is followed by an analysis of how ancient readers would have responded to the presentation of Moses in the text of John, and Harstine outlines the goals of his study: "(1) to investigate the function of Moses as a character in the Fourth Gospel and (2) to examine the probable responses of ancient readers to that characterization" (p. 37).

In his second chapter, Harstine analyzes seven texts in John where Moses figures explicitly in the narrative (John 1:17, 45; 3:14; 5:45–46; 6:32; 7:19–23; 9:28–29), leaving indirect references untreated (1:21; 6:14; 12:34; 17:12; 18:28) for the sake of brevity. In this part of his book, Moses as a "legendary character" in John is analyzed, showing how he functions in the furthering of the Johannine plot. Despite being a figure from over a thousand years earlier, Moses in John nonetheless gives the law, prophesies about Jesus, acts salvifically (as does Jesus—lifting up, giving manna, etc.), serves as a prosecuting attorney, and serves as founder of a philosophical school (p. 72). Moses therefore provides a historical anchor for the Johannine narrative, and he plays the role of authoritative witness regarding Jewish concerns as exemplified and challenged by Jesus. Finally, Moses plays the role of a supremely contested authority figure in John, being of special relevance to those who accept or reject the authority of Jesus within the Johannine audience.

In chs. 3–5 Harstine continues to explore the characterological presentation of Moses in contemporary literature. With relation to the Synoptic narratives (ch. 3), several similarities exist, although Moses in John is not presented as a "speaking" character. Slightly contrastive to Second Temple Judaism (ch. 4), Moses is portrayed in John as "lawgiver, cult founder, philosopher, and

prophet" functioning to "authorize the law, to authenticate religious activity, to serve as an exemplar for piety, and to stand as the prophet *par excellence*" (p. 126). Regarding Greco-Roman narratives (ch. 5), despite some dissimilarities Moses does serve in John in ways similar to the characterological roles of Homer, namely: as the source of citations, as an authoritative figure, and as an expert witness (pp. 156–57). In plausibly the most suggestive of his studies, citing nine Greek and seven Latin authors, Harstine draws many parallels between the roles of Moses and Homer as authoritative characters in literature casting new light on the literary conventions applicable for characterological studies in John.

Harstine concludes his monograph (ch. 6) with an overview of his findings and a listing of ways of taking his investigation further. These include: addressing the five untreated passages, working more extensively with Philo's treatment of Moses, exploring Egyptian literature on Moses, doing further analyses of the gospels and their general audiences, a consideration of other figures in John (such as Abraham), and further methodological considerations. What I might add is an analysis of the sending motif and debates around Jesus' authority as the Prophet like Moses prophesied in Deut 18:15–22 as a subject for further consideration.

Along these lines, some analysis is serviceable. First, a strength: Harstine has successfully applied a new methodological approach to John in ways that are profitable. Characterological studies help the reader attend to particular emphases in the text that may otherwise be muted or lost, and Moses as a religious authority is certainly a subject worthy of investigation. Second, a possible weakness: one wonders about the degree to which characterological studies pose a real improvement over typological studies. When comparing Harstine's work with Glasson's and Boismard's works on Moses in the Fourth Gospel, for instance, I find that many of the features attended to by characterological studies are already addressed by typological studies, although literary analysis does make a contribution. In addition, one also wonders about the degree to which Moses as a long-deceased historical figure can be effectively analyzed characterologically. These limitations, however, are not a reflection of Harstine's work; they are dictated by the confines of applying a fresh literary methodology to typological analyses of religious authority within the Johannine narrative.

Overall, Stan Harstine has done an excellent job in addressing the task he undertakes. Moses certainly is a subject of major importance in John and for Johannine audiences, and finding ways to get at the presentation of and the literary function of Moses in ancient narrative—and John in particular—is a worthy venture indeed. This book is recommended, and it deserves to be a part of serious Johannine and literary collections.

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