

Beyond Sinai: The Oral and Esoteric Traditions of Moses Across Faiths

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Moses remains one of the most enigmatic figures in world religion—revered as prophet, lawgiver, mystic, and liberator. While the canonical books of the Old Testament present a powerful and cohesive narrative of Moses' life and mission, a vast landscape of oral traditions, extra-biblical texts, and esoteric teachings expands the portrait far beyond the familiar. These accounts span Jewish Midrashim, Kabbalistic lore, Samaritan liturgy, Christian apocrypha, Islamic Hadith, and Gnostic scripture. Each tradition imbues Moses with new roles: military leader, philosopher-king, proto-Kabbalist, visionary mystic, and even apocalyptic seer. This paper surveys these diverse accounts, categorizing them by source tradition and theological emphasis. From tales of Moses ruling Ethiopia to esoteric visions of divine emanation and angelic revelation, we find a Moses who transcends history and enters the realm of myth, mysticism, and political archetype. These stories not only reflect evolving views of divine authority and human agency but also underscore the intertextual richness of Abrahamic and Near Eastern traditions. In revisiting Moses through these lenses, we open new avenues for understanding how spiritual narratives are shaped, expanded, and preserved across generations and cultures.

Keywords: Moses, Midrash, Kabbalah, Samaritanism, Christian Apocrypha, Hadith, Gnosticism, extra-biblical traditions, esoteric Judaism, Islamic prophetology, mysticism, oral tradition, Mosaic law, pseudepigrapha

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I. Introduction: Moses Beyond the Bible

The figure of Moses stands at the crossroads of history, myth, and revelation. Within the canonical Hebrew Bible, he is portrayed as prophet, liberator, lawgiver, and servant of God—a man uniquely chosen to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, receive the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, and guide a covenant people toward their promised future. Yet this textual depiction, powerful though it is, leaves much unsaid. It omits the silences between the lines, the imaginative elaborations of later generations, and the alternative visions preserved by communities that operated outside or alongside the dominant rabbinic or ecclesial frameworks.

Canonical scripture, by its nature, is selective. It fixes certain narratives and excludes others, leaving ample room for oral traditions to flourish in the interstices. From the burned tongue of baby Moses to his mystical ascents beyond the veil of reality, oral and esoteric traditions have filled these gaps with theological imagination. These stories do not merely entertain; they interpret, extend, and sometimes challenge the canonical record. They reflect the spiritual anxieties, political hopes, and metaphysical aspirations of those who transmitted them.

This paper surveys these extracanonical traditions, not to validate them against scripture, but to understand how the story of Moses was kept alive—and made sacred—in radically different ways. Each tradition, from Jewish Midrash to Islamic tafsir, from Kabbalah to Gnostic vision, offers a window into how Moses became more than a prophet: he became a mirror for each community's highest ideals and deepest mysteries. This study aims to catalogue, contextualize, and compare these accounts to illuminate the full cultural and theological reach of the Mosaic legacy.

II. Jewish Midrash and Extra-Biblical Literature

The figure of Moses in Jewish tradition does not end with the Pentateuch. In the centuries following the redaction of the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic sages developed a vast corpus of interpretive literature—Midrashim—that filled narrative gaps, solved textual ambiguities, and reframed Moses as a figure of cosmic and political consequence. These stories, though not part of the canon, were deeply authoritative in shaping Jewish understanding and devotion. Many of these elaborations are preserved in Midrashic collections such as *Yalkut Shimoni*, as well as in medieval compendia like *Sefer HaYashar*, both of which expand Moses' biography into a tapestry of miraculous, heroic, and often mythic dimensions.

Moses as Ethiopian General and King

One of the most striking non-canonical traditions describes Moses' youth as a military commander in Ethiopia. According to *Yalkut Shimoni* (on Exodus 2), after fleeing Egypt as a

young man, Moses rises to power in the Ethiopian kingdom of Kikanos. He leads successful campaigns, becomes a national hero, and is eventually made king. During this time, he marries an Ethiopian princess—though he remains celibate, honoring a vow of chastity. This account dramatically expands Moses' résumé beyond the shepherd of Midian and casts him in the mold of a wise foreign ruler, echoing Joseph's own rise in Egypt and anticipating the universalist dimensions of Moses' prophetic mission.

The Divine Test of Burning Coals

Another deeply symbolic episode, preserved in several Midrashim, recounts a test devised by Pharaoh's magicians to determine whether the infant Moses poses a threat to the throne. Suspecting the child's destiny after he grabs the Pharaoh's crown in play, the magicians propose a trial: place before him a bowl of gold and a bowl of hot coals. If he reaches for the gold, he is knowingly rebellious; if he grabs the coal, he is harmless. According to *Yalkut Shimoni* and *Sefer HaYashar*, Moses instinctively reaches for the gold—but an angel redirects his hand to the coal. He burns his tongue, resulting in a speech impediment that later explains his hesitation to speak before Pharaoh (Exodus 4:10). This tale reconfigures his disability not as a flaw but as a mark of divine protection and intervention.

Magicians, Astrologers, and the Threat to Pharaoh

Several Midrashim elaborate on the role of Egyptian magicians and astrologers in foretelling Moses' birth. In these accounts, Pharaoh's advisors predict that a Hebrew child will rise to overthrow Egypt. Their fears trigger the massacre of Israelite male infants—a backstory that sharpens the theological stakes of Exodus 1. These seers often possess near-prophetic powers of their own, lending the Egyptian court an aura of dark wisdom that contrasts with divine revelation. In *Sefer HaYashar*, the astrologers even foresee that Moses' downfall will involve water, leading Pharaoh to avoid killing him directly and instead setting him adrift in the Nile—a detail that reframes the basket story as part of an intricate prophecy-war between human empire and divine purpose.

Influence of *Yalkut Shimoni* and *Sefer HaYashar*

The *Yalkut Shimoni*, a 13th-century anthology of earlier Midrashic traditions, serves as a major source for these stories. Drawing from the Talmud, Targumim, and earlier Midrashim, it preserves layers of interpretive tradition that might otherwise have been lost. *Sefer HaYashar*, often misattributed to ancient authorship but likely composed in medieval Spain, also compiles expansive retellings of biblical stories, including those of Moses. These works do not merely elaborate the biblical narrative; they build a Moses whose life touches royal courts, angelic domains, and hidden dimensions of divine history. They embody the Jewish theological

imagination in full creative bloom—where every textual ambiguity becomes an invitation to revelation.

Taken together, these Jewish sources construct a Moses who is not merely a prophet, but a cosmopolitan sage, a strategic mind, a mystically afflicted speaker, and a figure at the center of a spiritual conflict that spans nations and heavens. They remind us that, in Jewish tradition, the Torah is not only a closed book but an open invitation to holy storytelling.

III. Apocalyptic and Angelic Moses in the Book of Jubilees

The *Book of Jubilees*, sometimes called *The Little Genesis*, represents one of the most ambitious attempts in Jewish tradition to recast the foundational narratives of Genesis and Exodus through the lens of angelic revelation and apocalyptic order. Composed in the 2nd century BCE and preserved fully in Ge'ez (classical Ethiopic), Jubilees offers an alternative Torah—not to replace the original, but to systematize, harmonize, and elevate it through divine mediation. At the center of this literary-theological enterprise is Moses himself, not merely as prophet or lawgiver, but as the human recipient of a hidden cosmic order that predates and supersedes the Mosaic Law as publicly known.

The Calendar and Angelic Mediation

One of the core purposes of the *Book of Jubilees* is to restore what its authors believed was the correct sacred calendar: a 364-day solar year composed of exactly 52 weeks. This calendar, they argue, was given to the patriarchs and to Moses via angelic intermediaries, but was later corrupted by those who adopted lunar systems. This calendrical dispute is not merely administrative; it reflects a theological conviction that divine time is structured, perfect, and cosmically revealed. Moses receives this calendrical wisdom not directly from God alone, but through "the Angel of the Presence," who reads aloud from heavenly tablets. Thus, timekeeping becomes a sacred act, and Moses, by recording this hidden chronology, becomes the archivist of prelapsarian order.

A Rewritten Genesis–Exodus Framework

Jubilees retells the early chapters of Genesis and Exodus with careful attention to chronology and moral theology. It introduces a system of "jubilee years" (49-year cycles) and structures all history within them, creating a deeply deterministic view of salvation history. Moses is depicted as receiving these revelations atop Mount Sinai not just about Israel's immediate law but about the entire past: from Adam's fall to Noah's flood, from Abraham's covenant to Jacob's dreams. Each patriarch becomes a type in a grander eschatological scheme. The sins of the Watchers,

the origin of demons, and the unfolding war between good and evil are all exposed in this meta-Torah, expanding Moses' prophetic insight far beyond what is visible in Exodus alone.

Jubilees portrays Moses not as author of the Torah, but as transcriber of divine tablets dictated by angelic beings. The elevation of Moses to this scribal role underscores a shift in theological emphasis: from a Mosaic Law grounded in historical liberation to a Mosaic Law grounded in cosmic revelation. In this vision, Moses is less a shepherd of Israel and more a steward of divine memory—chosen to preserve the exact timeline, ethical expectations, and heavenly protocols ordained before the foundation of Israel's national identity.

Moses as Recipient of Divine Secrets

The *Book of Jubilees* reveals a Moses who is privy to divine secrets hidden from the masses. These include the names of fallen angels, the correct festivals and sacrifices, and the destinies of nations—all written on celestial tablets. Unlike the canonical Exodus, which focuses on laws and covenant, *Jubilees* transforms Sinai into a cosmic download. Moses is initiated into angelic realms and entrusted with mysteries that frame Israel not only as a chosen people but as actors in a preordained apocalyptic narrative.

This portrayal anticipates later mystical traditions in Judaism, where Moses becomes not only a prophet but a mystagogue—a guide who has seen the architecture of heaven and returned to instruct the righteous. In *Jubilees*, the authority of Moses is not just legislative or ethical; it is metaphysical. He is the one who, for a brief moment in history, stood between heaven and earth and wrote down what eternity demanded be remembered.

In sum, *Jubilees* reshapes the figure of Moses into a cosmic conduit, situating him at the intersection of history and apocalypse, law and liturgy, time and timelessness. This angelic Moses, unlike his Pentateuchal counterpart, bears not only the burdens of a nation but the secrets of the universe.

IV. Kabbalistic and Mystical Moses

Within the mystical currents of Jewish thought, particularly those that culminated in Kabbalah, Moses becomes not merely a prophet but a cosmic mediator—a being who bridges the finite and the infinite, matter and emanation, human intellect and divine wisdom. Whereas the Torah describes Moses as the one who “spoke with God face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10), Kabbalistic tradition interprets this intimacy as a metaphysical state: Moses achieved *devekut*—complete adhesion to the Divine. In the great flowering of Jewish mysticism from the 12th century onward, and especially in the 16th-century Lurianic system, Moses was re-envisioned as

the archetype of the enlightened human who could ascend through the *sefirot* and return to the world transformed, carrying hidden wisdom that sustained creation itself.

Lurianic Kabbalah and the Sefirot

In Lurianic cosmology, developed by Isaac Luria (the Ari, 1534–1572) and recorded by his disciple Hayyim Vital, creation unfolds through ten *sefirot*—emanations or attributes through which the infinite (*Ein Sof*) reveals and sustains the world. Moses, within this framework, is seen as the embodiment of *Tiferet* (Beauty or Harmony), the central sefirah that mediates between divine compassion (*Hesed*) and divine judgment (*Gevurah*). As *Tiferet*, Moses harmonizes opposites—law and mercy, heaven and earth, revelation and concealment. His ascent of Mount Sinai thus represents more than physical elevation: it is a symbolic journey up the ladder of the *sefirot*, culminating in union with the Divine Will.

Luria's followers taught that Moses achieved a degree of spiritual refinement that prefigured the messianic age. His radiance upon descending Sinai—the “skin of his face shining” (Exodus 34:29)—was interpreted not as a literal glow but as a visible overflow of *Or HaGanuz*, the “Hidden Light” of creation. Through him, this primordial light temporarily entered history. Hence, Moses' prophetic experience is not only revelatory but cosmogenic: he briefly restored the harmony shattered by Adam's fall, a harmony that Lurianic Kabbalah seeks to reconstitute through *tikkun*, the repair of the broken vessels of creation.

Moses as the First Kabbalist

In earlier mystical systems such as the *Zohar* (13th century, attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai), Moses is already presented as the paradigmatic mystic—the “faithful shepherd” (*ra'ya meheimna*) who perceives the inner structure of divine reality. The *Zohar* calls him *ish ha-Elohim*, “the man of God,” and identifies him as the prototype of those who can traverse the boundaries between worlds. He is said to have received not only the written Torah (*Torah shebikhtav*) but also the oral and secret Torahs (*Torah shebe'al peh* and *Torah nistarah*), which together constitute the full revelation of divine wisdom.

This view effectively retrojects Kabbalah into the biblical era: Moses is no longer the receiver of a legal code but of a cosmic blueprint. The mystical transmission from Sinai becomes the original *sod* (secret), passed down through an unbroken chain of initiates—from Moses to Joshua, from the prophets to the sages of the *Merkavah* mystics, and finally to the Kabbalists of medieval Spain and Safed. In this lineage, Moses is not a figure of the past but an eternal archetype, whose consciousness still permeates the inner dimensions of Torah study.

The “Hidden Torah” and Esoteric Teachings from Sinai

The concept of a *Torah nistarah*, a “Hidden Torah,” is central to Kabbalistic exegesis. While the written Torah is accessible to all, the hidden Torah—its inner symbolic architecture—is said to have been revealed only to Moses and a few elect souls. This hidden dimension encodes metaphysical laws about creation, emanation, and the interplay of divine energies. Midrashic hints of this idea are expanded in the *Zohar*, where Sinai is portrayed as both a historical mountain and an inward ascent into divine mind. There, Moses learns not only ethical commandments but the mechanics of being itself: how worlds emerge from *Ein Sof*, how language mirrors the structure of the cosmos, and how each Hebrew letter channels divine force.

Some later mystics taught that this esoteric knowledge was transmitted orally and remained suppressed until the appropriate cosmic moment—perhaps in the Messianic age—when humanity would again be ready to receive it. In this sense, Moses becomes both a revealer and a concealer, holding back truths too powerful for his generation to bear. The “Hidden Torah” thus functions as both myth and method: a symbol of the inexhaustible depth of revelation and a guide for those who seek the inner light within the scriptural word.

In the Kabbalistic imagination, Moses is not simply the first lawgiver of Israel but the prototype of all who ascend inwardly to God. His life represents the mystical drama of emanation, concealment, and return. Through the lenses of Lurianic and Zoharic thought, Moses becomes a microcosm of the divine process itself—standing not just before the burning bush, but within it, as the flame through which the Infinite makes itself known.

V. Christian Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

In Christian apocryphal literature and pseudepigrapha, Moses emerges as more than a prophet of the Old Covenant—he becomes a figure of eschatological insight, angelic confrontation, and hidden transmission. While the canonical New Testament reflects an inherited reverence for Moses as a central prophetic figure, early Christian writers and visionaries expanded his role into the realms of cosmic battle and revelation. These narratives often draw from earlier Jewish sources now lost or fragmentary, while reinterpreting Moses through a Christological or dualistic lens. The Moses of Christian apocrypha is not only the lawgiver who prefigures Christ but also the secret recipient of visions of the end times, the afterlife, and celestial hierarchies.

Assumption of Moses and Contest Over His Body

One of the most intriguing apocryphal traditions is the *Assumption of Moses*, a now-partially lost Jewish pseudepigraphal text preserved through fragments and referenced in early Christian writings. Though the original narrative is not fully extant, it is widely associated with the mysterious passage in *Jude 1:9*, where the archangel Michael disputes with Satan over the body of Moses. This episode, unexplained in canonical scripture, suggests a cosmic legal battle over Moses' fate after death.

This tradition implies that Moses' death was not ordinary—that his body was either assumed directly into heaven (as later traditions say of Enoch, Elijah, and Mary) or preserved from Satan's grasp as a vessel of divine sanctity. Early Christian interpretations saw this as typological: Moses, as the lawgiver, was to be honored even in death, while the battle between Michael and Satan symbolized the larger struggle between divine justice and demonic accusation.

The *Assumption of Moses*, though fragmentary, reportedly included a farewell discourse in which Moses prophesied the future of Israel and the coming of a Levite deliverer—sometimes interpreted messianically. In this light, Moses becomes both prophet and proto-apocalyptic seer, standing at the threshold of heaven and mediating the destiny of nations.

Moses' Eschatological Vision in *Jude 1:9*

The brief yet vivid reference in *Jude 1:9* has intrigued theologians for centuries. The verse reads: "But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare bring a slanderous judgment against him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'" This enigmatic episode, absent from the Old Testament, presumes an oral or written tradition familiar to Jude's audience.

Some scholars suggest this alludes directly to the *Assumption of Moses*, while others argue it reflects a broader mythos in Second Temple Judaism, wherein key figures like Moses are guarded by angels and contested by dark powers. In either reading, Moses' posthumous destiny is cosmologically significant. His body becomes a site of spiritual warfare, suggesting that Moses had an ontological importance beyond mortality—a vessel of revelation and a threat to the forces of evil.

In Christian typology, this scene also foreshadows Christ's descent into death and resurrection, reinforcing the idea that Moses not only prefigures Christ in life (as lawgiver and prophet) but also in death and glorification.

Moses in the *Apocalypse of Moses* and Angelic Transmissions

Though the *Apocalypse of Moses* (also known as the *Life of Adam and Eve*) does not primarily center on Moses, later redactions and mystical interpretations place Moses as the recipient of this revelation. In some Christian esoteric traditions, it is Moses—rather than Adam or Seth—who receives the knowledge of prelapsarian history through angelic intermediaries. This repositions Moses not only as a lawgiver but as a scribe of primeval secrets.

Within these transmissions, Moses is imagined as ascending into heaven or the spiritual realms to receive truths about Eden, the Fall, the afterlife, and the fate of souls. These angelic dialogues parallel Jewish *hekhalot* and *merkavah* literature, and they echo themes found in 2 *Enoch* and 3 *Baruch*. The Moses who speaks with angels, then, becomes a participant in a broader celestial economy of revelation—one that encompasses not just legal covenant but the metaphysics of death, sin, and redemption.

In this light, Moses is not merely a messenger of the Old Covenant but a transdimensional figure whose visionary capacities make him a forerunner of Christian mystical consciousness. His interactions with angels, his posthumous fate, and his eschatological prophecies all underscore his role as a liminal being—both man and more-than-man—standing at the juncture between old and new, flesh and spirit, heaven and earth.

Together, these apocryphal and pseudepigraphal traditions reshape Moses into a figure of cosmic drama, angelic communication, and theological mystery. In the Christian imagination, Moses does not vanish after Sinai or die on Mount Nebo—he ascends into myth, forever embedded in the unfolding of divine history.

VI. Islamic Traditions: Moses as Central Prophet

In Islamic theology, Moses (*Mūsā*) occupies a position of exceptional prominence. Mentioned more frequently in the Qur'an than any other individual, Moses is not only a prophet (*nabī*) but also a messenger (*rasūl*), a miracle worker, a lawgiver, and a paradigmatic figure of struggle against tyranny. His life is recounted across numerous *sūrah*s (chapters), from *al-Baqarah* to *Ta-Ha*, with significant narrative and theological emphasis. Unlike the linear accounts found in the Torah, Qur'anic renderings of Moses are episodic and thematic, often serving as moral exemplars or vehicles for divine instruction. Beyond the Qur'an, Moses also appears extensively in *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) and *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis), where his story is further dramatized and embellished. These Islamic traditions emphasize not only his prophetic

role but his spiritual maturation, direct conversations with God, and involvement in unseen divine wisdom.

Qur'anic Prominence of Moses (*Mūsā*)

Moses is referenced over 130 times in the Qur'an, far surpassing any other prophet, including Muhammad. His story is told and retold from multiple angles—his infancy in the river, his confrontation with Pharaoh, the parting of the Red Sea, the receipt of the Tablets at Sinai (*Ṭūr Sīnā'*), and the rebellion of the Israelites. These episodes are more than historical retellings; they function as divine archetypes for the Prophet Muhammad's own mission. Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh is repeatedly cited as a model of prophetic resistance against injustice, while the trials Moses faces with his people serve as analogues to Muhammad's struggles in Mecca and Medina.

Moses' characterization in Islam is both human and exalted. He is shown to experience fear, frustration, even anger (such as when he casts the Tablets down upon seeing his people worship the calf), yet he remains uniquely close to God—one of the *Ulū al-'Azm*, the prophets of firm resolve. His title *Kalīm Allāh* ("the one who spoke directly with God") underscores his elevated spiritual station. This intimacy with the Divine sets him apart even among prophets and situates him as a central conduit of revealed truth.

The Journey with al-Khiḍr (*Sūrah al-Kahf*)

Among the most mysterious and philosophically rich episodes in the Qur'an is Moses' journey with *al-Khiḍr*, found in *Sūrah al-Kahf* (18:60–82). In this account, Moses seeks out a servant of God "more knowledgeable than he," despite being himself a great prophet. Al-Khiḍr agrees to teach Moses but warns that he will not be able to remain patient with events whose meaning lies beyond surface appearances.

As they travel, al-Khiḍr commits a series of shocking acts: scuttling a boat belonging to poor fishermen, killing a seemingly innocent boy, and repairing a wall in a hostile village without reward. Each time, Moses protests, only to be reminded of his earlier promise to remain silent. At the end, al-Khiḍr reveals the hidden wisdom behind each action—what appeared evil was, in fact, divine mercy in disguise.

This narrative functions as a theodicy, illustrating that God's plan encompasses dimensions of wisdom inaccessible even to prophets. Moses here is not the master of law, but a student of divine paradox. The journey with al-Khiḍr stands as a cornerstone of Islamic mystical thought,

inspiring Sufi reflections on surrender, trust, and the unseen (*al-ghayb*). In this light, Moses represents the seeker whose enlightenment comes not from control, but from humility.

Negotiation of Daily Prayers in *Hadith*

Another celebrated Islamic tradition involving Moses is his role in the celestial negotiation of daily prayer during the Prophet Muhammad's *Mi'rāj*—his night journey and ascension into the heavens. As recorded in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and other canonical *hadith* collections, Muhammad is first commanded by God to instruct his followers to pray fifty times per day. On his descent through the heavenly spheres, he encounters Moses, who counsels him to return and ask for a reduction, citing the burden it would place on his community.

This exchange repeats several times, with Muhammad going back and forth between God and Moses until the number is reduced to five daily prayers. Moses urges him to push further, but Muhammad, out of reverence, declines. God affirms that the reward for fifty will still be granted for the five.

The narrative reflects Moses' continuing role in divine mediation, even after death, and affirms his solidarity with later prophets. It also reinforces Moses' prophetic insight into human frailty—he knows from experience that people will struggle with spiritual discipline. This story has deep theological resonance in Islam: it illustrates both divine mercy and the interwoven destinies of the Abrahamic prophets, with Moses acting as a wise elder and intercessor on behalf of future generations.

Dramatic Retelling of Pharaoh's Court

The Qur'anic account of Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh (*Fir'awn*) is vivid, dramatic, and morally charged. While the biblical Exodus also narrates this event, the Qur'an infuses it with heightened theological emphasis on divine signs (*āyāt*) and the tension between arrogance (*takabbur*) and submission (*islām*). In *Sūrah Tā-Hā* (20:9–98), Moses throws down his staff, and it becomes a “mighty serpent.” Pharaoh summons his magicians, who perform optical illusions, but they are ultimately overwhelmed by the divine power in Moses' sign.

In the Qur'anic version, the magicians—upon witnessing the truth—immediately fall in prostration and declare belief in the “Lord of Moses and Aaron.” Pharaoh, enraged, threatens them with crucifixion, but they remain steadfast. This dramatic twist—where Pharaoh's own agents convert—underscores the undeniable force of divine truth and the futility of tyranny.

Islamic *tafsīr* literature expands this scene further, emphasizing the cosmic scale of the battle: Pharaoh as the self-declared god (*ana rabbukum al-a'lā*), Moses as the servant of the True God, and the staff as a symbol of revealed power breaking through illusion. Some traditions say the serpent consumed not only the magician's ropes but their very sorcery, leaving no doubt about the authenticity of Moses' mission.

Across these traditions, Islam preserves and elevates Moses as a multifaceted exemplar: a prophet of law and mysticism, a voice of justice and humility, a spiritual traveler and mediator between heaven and earth. In Islamic consciousness, Moses is not a relic of the past but a living presence—whose lessons on trust, patience, and divine nearness remain essential for every seeker of truth.

VII. The Samaritan Moses and the Taheb

Among the world's smallest and oldest surviving religious communities, the Samaritans have preserved a distinct, deeply venerated vision of Moses that diverges significantly from both Jewish rabbinic and Christian traditions. For the Samaritans, Moses is not merely a prophet of the past but the singular, ultimate prophet—chosen once and expected to return again. Their theology is centered around Mosaic revelation alone, with no belief in subsequent prophets like Joshua, Isaiah, Jesus, or Muhammad. This gives rise to a powerful eschatological figure: the *Taheb*, the "Restorer," who is none other than Moses returned to fulfill a messianic role. The Samaritan Moses is thus not just foundational but future-oriented, embodying both the covenant and its ultimate consummation.

Samaritan View of Moses as Ultimate Prophet

The Samaritans revere Moses as the supreme and final prophet. Unlike rabbinic Judaism, which accepts a long line of prophets culminating in the post-exilic period, Samaritan belief holds that prophecy ended with Moses. He is viewed not only as the recipient of the Torah but as the perfect conduit of divine will, whose words require no later interpretation or supplementation. The Samaritan version of the Torah, known as the *Samaritan Pentateuch*, contains only the five books of Moses—without Joshua, Judges, or any prophetic writings.

This exclusive focus elevates Moses to near-divine status. He is the only prophet who spoke with God face to face, and the only one entrusted with the totality of divine law. In Samaritan liturgy and theology, all religious authority flows from Moses' revelation. His teachings are immutable, and all historical legitimacy is anchored in his covenant with Israel.

Expectation of His Return as Messiah

A unique and defining feature of Samaritan eschatology is the belief in the *Taheb* (Hebrew root: שׁוּב, meaning “to return” or “repent”). The Taheb is not a Davidic messiah or a heavenly redeemer but the return of Moses himself. According to Samaritan belief, Moses never truly died or was buried in a known location because he was taken by God and will one day return to restore the original faith, rebuild the sanctuary, and inaugurate a renewed covenant.

This messianic figure will come at the end of days to gather Israel (as the Samaritans understand it) and establish justice, truth, and purity of worship on Mount Gerizim. Unlike Christian views of the Messiah as a savior from sin, or Jewish views of a kingly redeemer, the Samaritan Taheb is a restorer of Mosaic law—his mission is not new revelation, but perfect renewal.

This belief profoundly shapes Samaritan religious identity. They see themselves as the faithful remnant, awaiting the return of their original prophet. Every generation is one step closer to the age of restoration, when the Taheb will vindicate the Samaritan path and restore unity between heaven and earth through the Mosaic covenant.

Unique Rituals and Mount Gerizim Traditions

At the heart of Samaritan religious life is Mount Gerizim, which they regard as the true and original holy mountain—not Mount Zion in Jerusalem. According to the *Samaritan Pentateuch*, God chose Mount Gerizim as the site for His sanctuary, and it was on this mountain that Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac, and where blessings were proclaimed to Israel.

As such, Samaritan rituals are deeply tied to the geography and sanctity of this mountain. Every year, they perform the Passover sacrifice (*Pesah*) on Mount Gerizim, following a ritual that closely resembles the biblical instructions in Exodus and Leviticus. Unlike mainstream Judaism, which discontinued sacrifices after the destruction of the Second Temple, the Samaritans have maintained the practice in its original form, using live lambs, specific timing, and ancient liturgy.

Their calendar, priesthood, and laws of ritual purity also diverge from rabbinic norms, reflecting an older stratum of Israelite religion. Their priests trace their lineage to Aaron through Eleazar, and their High Priest still performs key functions believed to descend directly from the Mosaic era.

Furthermore, their liturgy and prayers frequently invoke Moses not only as lawgiver but as intercessor and future restorer. Every major festival reinforces their covenantal bond with Moses and Mount Gerizim—a sacred geography that defines their spiritual and national identity.

In sum, the Samaritan vision of Moses is radical in its singularity and eschatological depth. By rejecting all later prophets and centering their theology on Moses as both origin and end, the Samaritans have crafted a rare and enduring religious worldview. In their eyes, Moses is not only the prophet of the past but the light of the future—a Taheb who will return, not to change the law, but to fulfill it in the purity of its first revelation. Through their faithful observance and mountain-centered rituals, the Samaritans live in quiet, persistent anticipation of Moses’ return and the restoration of divine order.

VIII. Hellenistic and Philosophical Portrayals

During the Second Temple period, as Jewish thought encountered Hellenistic philosophy and Greco-Roman culture, the figure of Moses was reframed through the lens of reason, virtue, and cosmology. This cross-cultural synthesis produced portrayals of Moses not only as a prophet or miracle-worker but as a philosopher-king, a master of ethics, and even a conduit of divine wisdom comparable to mythic figures like Hermes Trismegistus. These portrayals reflect a conscious effort by Jewish intellectuals—especially in the Greek-speaking diaspora—to bridge their ancient traditions with the philosophical ideals of the Greco-Roman world. In this context, Moses emerges as a universal archetype of the wise lawgiver, one who embodied both spiritual enlightenment and political harmony.

Philo of Alexandria: Moses as Philosopher-King

Philo Judaeus (c. 20 BCE – 50 CE), a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, is the most influential figure in articulating a philosophical Moses. In his multi-volume work *Life of Moses*, Philo recasts the biblical narrative to align with Platonic and Stoic ideals. For Philo, Moses is not just the founder of Israelite religion—he is the ideal ruler, educator, ascetic, and metaphysician. His leadership over Israel is presented as the embodiment of *aretē* (virtue) and *logos* (reason), harmonizing law with divine truth.

Philo constructs Moses in three progressive roles: (1) shepherd of sheep, symbolizing his humility and preparation; (2) shepherd of people, reflecting his ethical leadership; and (3) shepherd of the cosmos, symbolizing his contemplative ascent toward divine realities. Philo elevates Moses above all other sages—not by miracles or military victories, but through his understanding of the divine order.

This vision positions Moses as a “philosopher-king” in the Platonic mold, surpassing even Socrates in moral clarity. He leads not through coercion but by embodying the harmony between reason and revelation. In this way, Philo offered a version of Moses palatable to

Hellenistic intellectuals and imperial audiences—one who demonstrated that Jewish law was not barbaric or tribal but deeply rational and cosmically ordered.

Greco-Egyptian Syncretism with Hermes Trismegistus

Parallel to Philo's philosophical Moses, another strand of Hellenistic thought began to merge Jewish traditions with Egyptian mysticism and Greek philosophy. This convergence birthed the composite figure of *Hermes Trismegistus*—a legendary sage said to combine the wisdom of the Egyptian god Thoth and the Greek Hermes. In some Greco-Egyptian texts, Moses is subtly or explicitly aligned with Hermes Trismegistus, both seen as ancient initiates of esoteric wisdom, temple sciences, and celestial laws.

This syncretism was not random; it grew from shared symbolic associations. Both figures were seen as scribes of divine revelation, masters of sacred language, and mediators between heaven and earth. While Moses ascended Sinai to receive the divine law, Hermes entered the celestial spheres to read the stars and uncover the logos of the cosmos.

The fusion of Moses with Hermes was particularly attractive to theosophists and esoteric thinkers in Alexandria and beyond, who sought to universalize sacred figures into a common repository of ancient wisdom. This blending allowed Moses to be reclaimed not only by Jews but by Gentile philosophers, mystery cults, and later Christian Gnostics, all of whom saw in him a primordial teacher whose truths transcended ethnic and historical boundaries.

The Logos and Divine Intellect

Central to both Philo's philosophy and Greco-Roman metaphysics is the concept of the *Logos*—a mediating principle between the transcendent God and the material world. In Philo's system, the *Logos* is the rational blueprint of creation, the “firstborn of God,” and the channel through which divine wisdom becomes manifest. Moses, as the most intimate knower of God, is seen as a vehicle of this Logos. His reception of the Law is not a tribal phenomenon, but an act of universal metaphysical transmission: the *Logos* speaking into history.

Philo even suggests that Moses, through his contemplative ascent, apprehended the Logos directly—not merely through words but through a kind of intellectual union with divine mind. This mystical-philosophical Moses stands not just in the tradition of Hebrew prophecy but alongside Plato's philosopher-king, Aristotle's man of virtue, and the Stoic sage.

Later Christian thinkers—especially in Johannine literature—would take up this Logos theology. In the Gospel of John (“In the beginning was the Word [Logos]...”), the Logos becomes incarnate

in Jesus, but the philosophical groundwork had been laid in part by Philo's Moses, who embodied the Logos without being it incarnate. Thus, Moses becomes a theological bridge: a precursor to the Incarnation, a revealer of divine law, and a figure through whom the rational structure of the cosmos was momentarily revealed.

In summary, Hellenistic and philosophical portrayals of Moses transformed him from a national lawgiver into a universal sage. Whether as Philo's philosopher-king, the esoteric twin of Hermes, or the bearer of the Logos, Moses became an icon of cross-cultural aspiration—uniting Jewish revelation with Greek reason, Egyptian symbolism, and Roman ideals of justice. In this reframing, Moses was no longer only the prophet of Israel; he became the master of divine intellect and an enduring symbol of sacred wisdom available to all.

IX. Gnostic and Esoteric Reframings

In Gnostic and esoteric traditions of Late Antiquity, Moses is radically reinterpreted—no longer the faithful servant of the biblical God (*YHWH*) but often a liminal or ambiguous figure entangled in cosmic deception. These traditions arose in the second and third centuries CE in the Mediterranean world, especially in Egypt, where early Christians, Jewish sectarians, and Hellenistic mystics developed highly dualistic cosmologies. In this reframing, the God of the Hebrew Bible is often seen not as the ultimate divine source but as a lesser, ignorant, or even malevolent being known as the *Demiurge*. Moses, situated in this theologically charged terrain, becomes a contested figure: either a tragic agent of the Demiurge's law or a secret revealer of higher, hidden truths—an unwitting or enlightened bridge between illusion and gnosis.

Moses vs. the Demiurge

In classic Gnostic cosmology—such as that of the Sethian and Valentinian schools—the creator of the material world is not the true God but the *Demiurge*, a blind or arrogant being who believes himself to be supreme. This being, often identified with the Old Testament's *YHWH*, creates a flawed cosmos that traps human souls in ignorance and matter. From this perspective, Moses is initially viewed with suspicion: as the lawgiver of the Demiurge, the enforcer of an oppressive covenant designed to keep souls bound to the material order.

In texts like the *Apocryphon of John*, the Demiurge (also called *Yaldabaoth*) declares, “I am God and there is no other,” echoing Isaiah 45:5. But the Gnostic narrator reveals this to be the utterance of a deluded creator unaware of the higher *Pleroma*—the realm of divine fullness from which the true God emanates.

Thus, the Mosaic law becomes a tool of enslavement unless it is reinterpreted. Moses, in this framework, either serves the Demiurge unwittingly or is later awakened to a higher truth. This duality—Moses as both jailer and liberator—pervades many Gnostic systems and invites readers to question the nature of revelation itself.

Gnostic Moses as Revealer of Hidden Divine Order

Despite this critique, not all Gnostic texts reject Moses outright. In some esoteric currents—especially in more moderate Valentinian streams or Hermetic-Jewish hybrids—Moses is not a dupe of the Demiurge but a vessel for higher truth cloaked in allegory. He becomes a proto-gnostic: a figure whose revelation encodes the esoteric order of the cosmos beneath the surface of legalism.

Here, the Mosaic law is reinterpreted symbolically. The Exodus becomes not just a historical escape from Egypt, but a mystical metaphor for the soul's journey out of material bondage. The Ten Commandments represent emanations of divine thought rather than rigid decrees. The Tabernacle is read as a symbolic map of the heavenly realms, with its curtains, altars, and measurements revealing cosmic correspondences.

In this reframing, Moses is the recipient of secret knowledge—*gnosis*—which he transmits not through explicit teaching but through veiled symbolism, awaiting an elect who can decode it. He is thus re-elevated within Gnostic thought as a misunderstood bearer of the *aeonic* pattern—the divine architecture embedded within the false world.

Nag Hammadi Texts and Reinterpretation of Mosaic Authority

The *Nag Hammadi Library*, a cache of Gnostic and Hermetic writings discovered in 1945 in Egypt, contains several texts that implicitly or explicitly reference Moses and the Torah. These include *The Apocalypse of Adam*, *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, and *Zostrianos*. While Moses is not always named directly, the Pentateuchal tradition is reinterpreted in subversive ways, often undermining the authority of the Mosaic covenant.

In *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, for instance, Jesus mocks the rulers and principalities that claimed to create the world and impose false laws. He describes how true spiritual knowledge was hidden from the patriarchs, including those who received the law. The implication is that Mosaic authority is partial, provisional, and ultimately superseded by Christ's gnosis.

However, some texts—such as *The Thought of Norea* or *Allogenes*—suggest that earlier figures like Seth, Enoch, and Moses had access to partial revelations, serving as forerunners to the ultimate revealer. In these interpretations, Moses becomes a threshold figure—someone who touched the outer veil of the divine mystery, but whose followers misunderstood or misapplied the message.

Thus, the *Nag Hammadi* corpus does not present a unified picture of Moses but rather treats him as a cipher: a name that stands for divine communication, law, and spiritual power, but one whose meaning depends on the context of hidden cosmologies and radical reinterpretations.

In Gnostic and esoteric traditions, Moses is neither wholly revered nor wholly rejected. Instead, he is refracted through layers of mythic inversion and metaphysical critique. He becomes a contested symbol: of law and liberation, illusion and illumination, power and paradox. Whether as the pawn of a false god or the veiled herald of a higher truth, Moses serves in these texts not as a historical personage but as a theological mirror—reflecting each Gnostic school's deepest

X. Comparative Reflections and Theological Implications

The myriad portrayals of Moses across religious, philosophical, and esoteric traditions reveal a figure of extraordinary adaptability and symbolic power. Moses is not simply a historical or scriptural character confined to the Torah; he is an archetype—refracted through the lenses of diverse cultures, ideologies, and metaphysical frameworks. Whether he appears as a general leading armies, a mystic scaling the ladder of divine emanations, a legislator building sacred civilization, or a messiah destined to return and restore cosmic order, Moses becomes a canvas onto which communities have projected their highest ideals and deepest theological anxieties.

Moses as Archetype: Warrior, Mystic, Mediator, and Messiah

Across traditions, Moses assumes a range of archetypal roles. In Jewish *Midrashim*, he is a military hero and statesman, commanding armies in Ethiopia and navigating the political intrigues of Pharaoh's court. In *Kabbalah*, he ascends as a mystic, climbing through the ten *sefirot* to reach the divine light beyond form. In Christian and Islamic texts, he serves as a mediator—between heaven and earth, between divine command and human weakness, between prophetic vision and institutional law. For the Samaritans, Moses is the messianic *Taheb*, destined to return and restore the original covenant.

Each of these roles distills a particular function of spiritual leadership: the warrior fights for liberation, the mystic embodies divine intimacy, the mediator speaks on behalf of the ineffable, and the messiah brings closure to history's cycle. The versatility of Moses lies in his ability to inhabit all these modes without collapse. He can command armies and fall on his face in fear; he can ascend Sinai and be rejected by his people below. As such, Moses becomes not just a religious figure, but a universal human type: the one who bears the unbearable burden of revelation.

Political, Cosmological, and Esoteric Uses Across Traditions

The use of Moses varies not only by theology but by function. In political traditions, such as Philo's or the early Islamic narratives, Moses is cast as a just lawgiver and builder of the ideal state—a figure who channels divine will into social order. This mirrors the Platonic vision of the philosopher-king and becomes a model for religious polity: a kingdom grounded not in human decree but in transcendent wisdom.

Cosmologically, Moses becomes a stand-in for those who map the divine pattern onto the world. In the *Book of Jubilees*, he receives the celestial calendar; in Kabbalah, he transmits the coded structure of the *sefirot*; in Gnostic tradition, he either reveals or obscures the reality behind the material façade. In each, Moses is less concerned with ethics per se and more with metaphysics—delivering not just commandments but cosmic diagrams, sacred blueprints, and esoteric schedules for aligning earthly life with heavenly order.

Esoterically, Moses is the veil and the revealer. He writes in symbols, erects tents that mirror heavenly courts, and receives hidden Torahs that only initiates can decipher. In these traditions, the Mosaic text is not a boundary but an aperture—an encrypted record of spiritual truths that must be unlocked through mystical contemplation or divine illumination.

Continuity and Contrast with the Canonical Moses

The canonical Moses of the Hebrew Bible is already a complex figure—reluctant prophet, lawgiver, liberator, intercessor, and friend of God. Yet even within the Pentateuch, tensions emerge: Moses is both the leader and the outsider, exalted and punished, permitted to see the Promised Land but forbidden to enter it. These narrative contradictions invite expansion, speculation, and revision.

What the extrabiblical traditions do is amplify these tensions. Some resolve them—by suggesting Moses will return (*Taheb*), or that his death was only apparent (*Assumption of Moses*). Others deepen them—by questioning the God who gave him the law (*Gnostic*), or by

portraying him as a figure whose truth has been hidden from the masses (*Kabbalah*). There is a clear line of continuity in his role as mediator and vessel of revelation, but striking divergence in how that revelation is framed: as law, wisdom, illusion, or encoded mystery.

Thus, the Moses of tradition is simultaneously faithful to the canon and radically transformed by it. He is the fixed point around which the compass of theological creativity spins. The shared reverence across Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Samaritanism, and esoteric schools points to his enduring spiritual magnetism. Yet each tradition, in recasting him, also reveals its own preoccupations: with law and liberty, with knowledge and concealment, with history and destiny.

Moses remains a paradox: the man who saw God's back but not His face, who held the tablets yet shattered them, who brought the people out but could not lead them in. It is precisely this tension—between presence and absence, revelation and obscurity—that makes Moses endlessly generative across time. He is not just the past's prophet. He is the mirror of every generation's longing for truth.

XI. Conclusion: The Mosaic Mirror

The figure of Moses, refracted through the diverse lenses of religious, philosophical, and mystical traditions, reveals more than just the evolution of a biblical character—it unveils a living mirror of cultural memory, spiritual longing, and theological reinvention. Across time and place, Moses has been reimagined not merely as a prophet of the past, but as an ever-present cipher for what different communities most yearn to preserve, to contest, and to become.

What These Traditions Reveal About Cultural Memory

The persistence of Moses across Jewish Midrash, Samaritan expectation, Christian apocrypha, Islamic prophecy, Greco-Hermetic philosophy, and Gnostic speculation demonstrates that cultural memory is not static. Rather, it is dynamic and generative, reshaping foundational figures to meet the psychological, social, and metaphysical needs of each era. Every community that retold the story of Moses did so not simply to preserve history, but to sanctify their own vision of truth. His life and legacy became a template through which communities could interpret suffering, justify ritual, imagine political order, or explore metaphysical systems.

In this way, Moses functions as a living conduit of continuity and rupture. He binds communities to an imagined sacred past while also allowing that past to be retranslated for present and

future needs. His memory is not frozen but fluid, responsive to theological crises, colonial pressures, interreligious polemics, and mystical yearnings.

Moses as Spiritual Cipher

Throughout these reframings, Moses operates less as a historical figure and more as a *cipher*—a symbolic and often encrypted bearer of spiritual knowledge. His image is polyvalent: to some, he is the liberator of an oppressed people; to others, the bringer of celestial calendars or esoteric diagrams; and to others still, the tragic vessel of an incomplete or misunderstood revelation.

In esoteric traditions, especially, Moses becomes the prototypical initiate—one who ascends the mountain, communes with the divine, and returns changed. The tablets, the staff, the burning bush, and the veil over his face are interpreted not merely as narrative elements, but as encoded symbols of cosmic knowledge and sacred transformation. As a cipher, Moses does not offer one fixed meaning, but opens portals to multiple levels of interpretation. He conceals the truth as much as he reveals it—his figure inviting exegesis, his silence commanding contemplation.

Re-enchanting Scripture Through Alternate Traditions

The multiplicity of Mosaic traditions—oral, mystical, apocalyptic, philosophical—serves a vital function: they re-enchant scripture. In a world where sacred texts risk becoming flat, literal, or fossilized, these alternative visions breathe into them a new depth and dynamism. They remind us that revelation is never exhausted by a single telling. Midrash turns silence into speech; Kabbalah unveils dimensions beneath the surface; Gnostic writings invert the story to uncover hidden truths; Islamic retellings emphasize moral perseverance and divine intimacy.

By exploring these alternate traditions, we recover the imaginative, fluid, and dialogical nature of sacred storytelling. We realize that scripture lives not only in what is written, but in how it is received, reimagined, and transmitted across generations. The Moses who stutters before Pharaoh is also the Moses who negotiates divine mysteries with al-Khidr, who ascends the heavenly realms in apocryphal visions, and who returns at the end of days as the Samaritan *Taheb*. These stories do not compete with the canonical version—they expand it, illuminating its gaps, amplifying its silence, and restoring to it the fullness of human wonder.

In the end, Moses is more than a man. He is a mirror—held up to each generation’s fears and hopes, their thirst for justice, truth, and transcendence. To gaze into the Mosaic mirror is to confront the mystery of revelation itself: always incomplete, always generative, always calling us higher.

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