Moses is a figure who looms large in the Christian New Testament. Other than Jesus himself and his immediate circle plus Paul, there is probably no other figure that is as significant in early Christian literature as Moses is. This is in stark contrast to the Hebrew Bible. Outside of the Torah, Moses is mentioned in Joshua and Judges as a figure from the past, twice in I Samuel 12, briefly in I Kings 2, 8, 14, 18, 21, and 23, and twice in relation to the account of the finding of the scroll of the law in II Kings 21-23.¹ Jeremiah mentions him once. Surprisingly, those are all the references from the literature that could be called pre-exilic, the period before the Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE. With their emphasis on social justice and obedience to the covenant, the rest of the prophets are largely silent on Moses as well: Micah mentions him once, Malachi once, and Isaiah 63 once. If one were not specifically looking for Moses in the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible, one would probably not place him as a major figure in that section of the Scripture. Turning to the Writings, most of which are post-exilic, Moses is mentioned more often. The Chronicler gives his sons and descendants names and ties his hero Ezra to Moses, a scribe skilled in Moses’ law (Ezra 7:1). Post-exilic psalms also mention Moses, chiefly in association with the Torah.

Adding it all up, however, it would seem that the impact of the figure of Moses was not great in ancient Israel, and of course the Deuteronomistic History wishes to make that very point: the Babylonian Exile was the result of Moses not having a significant impact in ancient Israel. Certainly the importance of Moses, and the Law, increases in the post-exilic period as Judaism is born and becomes a religion of the book that becomes portable in the form of the Torah.

But it is in the texts produced after the fifth century BCE that Moses has increased significance as a figure quite apart from his role as recipient of

the Torah from God and as giver of the Torah to the people. One key text is Ben Sira, also known to older traditions as Sirach or Ecclesiasticus. In this text, Ben Sira portrays Moses as the recipient of the entire Pentateuch, not only those portions where Moses is a character in the story. Not only so, but Moses becomes a glorious saint in Ben Sira’s treatment. Likewise the book of Jubilees presents Moses as recipient of a full revelation on Mt. Sinai of the events in Genesis, and the book takes the liberty of reordering and recasting those events to tell a rather new story than the one in Genesis. The work that modern scholars call the Assumption of Moses is referred to in Jude 9 and depicts a heavenly battle between Satan and Michael the Archangel over the body of Moses in his secret grave.

In the crucible of Hellenistic Judaism, that strand of Judaism constantly defining itself against the “old” faith of the Semitic homeland and the Greek world of philosophy and religion, three writers in particular shape the way Moses’ is viewed by subsequent writers. Aristobulus the Historian wrote a treatise on the laws of Moses in Alexandria in Egypt, a work that sadly does not survive. There are a few snippets and citations in writers such as Eusebius and Clement of Alexandria. His reading of the Pentateuch, by now called o νόμος, the Law, is largely allegorical. Most importantly, however, Aristobulus champions Jewish tradition over Greek culture: according to him, Moses is the source that Plato and Pythagoras used in

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4 Sirach 24:23 reads: ταῦτα πάντα βίβλος διαθήκης διαθήκης θεοῦ υψίστου νόμον διὶ ἐνετείλατο ἡμῖν μουσῆς κληρονομίαν συναγωγαῖς ιακωβ. The first five verses of chapter 45 are in praise of Moses; I refer here to the first verse: ὡμοίωσεν αὐτὸν δόξῃ αγίων.

