Perhaps, then, the memory of anyone distinguished in life would be enough to fill our need for a beacon light and to show us how we can bring our soul to the sheltered harbor of virtue where it no longer has to pass the winter amid the storms of life or be shipwrecked in the deep water of evil by the successive billows of passion. It may be for this very reason that the daily life of those sublime individuals is recorded in detail, that by imitating those earlier examples of right action those who follow them may conduct their lives to the good … Let us put forth Moses as our example … (Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses)¹

The church fathers—early Christian writers, pastors, and bishops living between roughly 100–700 CE—admired Moses deeply. For many church fathers, Moses symbolized what a faith-filled human being looked like in attitude and action. Moses humbly received God’s call and courageously persisted in faith across the years, despite the mysteries of God’s providence that unfolded in his life and the life of the nation he led, Israel: “he who struggles with God.” For the fathers, Moses illustrated the hardships and hopes of the pilgrim believer in God, journeying through the wilderness toward home with a troublesome, often faithless pilgrim people. The life and teachings of Moses provided significant biblical, theological, and spiritual fodder for patristic reflection. The figure of Moses and the world he represented also posed a number of questions and problems to ancient Christian interpreters.

The task facing the fathers as they pondered the life of Moses was a difficult one. On the one hand, if they were to affirm the Old Testament (which the vast majority read in Greek translation) as authoritative for the life of the church—a disputed point in early Christian history—the fathers had to acknowledge and applaud Moses and the people he led as specifically chosen by God to accomplish many of God’s purposes in history. Simultaneously, though, in light of the fathers’ belief that Christ was the promised

Messiah and the fulfillment of the Old Testament narrative, they were compelled to argue that the story of Israel was the first act in a two-part play. Moses was indeed a man chosen by God for a special, unique task—to lead Israel to the land promised to Abraham and to provide the nation with the Law to govern and bless their relationship with God. Yet Moses’ person and work were still the first chapter in a much broader and deeper narrative, the story of God’s redeeming act in Jesus Christ to save the entire world. For the fathers, then, Moses’ life—and the specific words used to describe that life in the Scripture given to Israel—pointed in surprising detail to the entrance of the eternal Word into human history. In a manner of speaking, from the fathers’ perspective, Moses and the events of his life were the first word about the eternal Word, type to antitype, prelude to the main act.

The fathers linked these two narratives—that of the old covenant, introduced and symbolized by key figures such as Abraham and Moses, and that of the new covenant in Christ—by making the apostolic tradition their hermeneutical lodestar. They viewed apostles such as Paul and Peter as uniquely authoritative interpreters Christ had personally chosen to explain the meaning of his ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. Here—in the apostolic tradition gradually canonized in the New Testament documents—was the starting point for the exegetical labors of the fathers and their attempts to fully comprehend the meaning of Moses.

But the challenge facing the church fathers as they looked at Moses was more than simply exegetical. Groups such as the Marcionites, Gnostics, and Manichees—all claiming to be Christian and contemporary to the church fathers—looked askance at Moses and the biblical narrative concerning Israel. All three groups expressed grave reservations concerning the validity and value of the Old Testament narrative and the God it portrayed. Marcion, writing in the second century CE, contended that the God of the Old Testament was a different deity from the God revealed in Jesus Christ. The God of the Hebrews, in Marcion’s opinion, was a petty, mean-spirited, unpredictable, graceless, wrath-filled deity. For Marcion and others like him, the Old Testament story was not preamble or prologue to the new covenant. It was a narrative gone mad, a gross misinterpretation of history and divinity, discontinuous with the redemptive story of Jesus of Nazareth. Other Christians such as the fathers strongly disagreed.

The task the fathers faced, then, was making sense of the Old Testament narrative and its key figures. Moses stood at the top of the list. Not only so, but Moses, the nation of Israel, and Jesus were inseparable. Moses was a Jew; Jesus was a Jew; the earliest Christian community was almost entirely