

# JESUS SUPERIOR TO MOSES

Hebrews 3:1-6

It is important for us to remember that the original recipients of Hebrews were first century messianic Jews tempted to defect from Christ and return to Judaism. Throughout the book, the Preacher of Hebrews warns his readers not to return to Judaism, but to remain faithful to Christ and so receive their inheritance.

In Hebrews 3:1-6 the Preacher demonstrates that Jesus is superior to Moses. For us 21st Gentiles that may not seem like a big deal, but for first century Jews it was.

*At first, comparing Jesus to Moses may seem anticlimactic after the author of Hebrews established Jesus' superiority to angels. "It would seem to go without saying that he is greater than Moses." However, in first-century Jewish thought Moses was held in almost God-like esteem, even higher than angels. So contrasting Jesus to Moses is a step beyond 1:5-13, not a step backward. The comparison "was not simply a literary exercise that enabled the writer to speak of the excellence of Jesus or to exhibit his own exegetical skill.... He [the writer] chose to acknowledge the faithfulness of Moses because this appears to have been a significant consideration to the men and women whom he addressed."<sup>1</sup>*

It was a significant consideration; worn down by persecution, some were eyeing a return to Moses and the Law as a means of relieving their sufferings. But, as the Preacher is pointing out, to return to Moses is to go backwards spiritually and to incur divine discipline.

The Old Testament background to Hebrews 3:1-6 is Numbers 12:1-9. Aaron and Miriam, Moses' brother and sister, challenged Moses' authority. In defending him, God stressed both Moses' faithfulness and his uniqueness as a prophet with whom God spoke face to face. As we read, note the words *faithful* and *house*; the two words the Preacher will key on in Hebrews 3:1-6.

## Numbers 12:1-9 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. <sup>2</sup> And they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it. <sup>3</sup> Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth. <sup>4</sup> And suddenly the LORD said to Moses and to Aaron and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting." And the three of them came out. <sup>5</sup> And the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam, and they both came forward. <sup>6</sup> And he said, "Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. <sup>7</sup> Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. <sup>8</sup> With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" <sup>9</sup> And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, Brett R., "Jesus' Superiority Over Moses In Hebrews 3:1-6" in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June, 1998, p. 202-203.

In verses 1-4 of Hebrews 3, the Preacher demonstrates that Jesus is superior to Moses in both His person and His work.

### JESUS SUPERIOR TO MOSES IN HIS PERSON AND WORK (3:1–4)

Hebrews 3:1–4 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, <sup>2</sup> who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. <sup>3</sup> For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. <sup>4</sup> (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.)

The Preacher uses *therefore* in the sense of “In light of who Jesus is and what He has accomplished, why would you go back to following Moses?”

Two phrases clearly indicate the Preacher is speaking to messianic Jews – born again believers. They are *holy brothers* because they have been sanctified by Christ and made brothers in Him (2:11). They *share in a heavenly calling* because they believed the gospel and put their faith in Jesus for salvation; they are *sons* (and daughters) whom the Father is *bringing to glory* (2:9).

Because they are genuine believers, the Preacher calls upon them to *consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession*. The Greek word for *consider* means “to make a careful study or investigation of.” They had already made their *confession*, that is, they had at one time declared their faith that Jesus is the Messiah and Savior. It's possible they did this at their water baptism similar to the confessions of faith by our baptismal candidates. Whatever the case, the Preacher calls upon them to think deeply about Jesus and not on Judaism that was trying to pull them back in.

The Preacher refers to Jesus as *apostle* and as *high priest*.

First, Jesus is an *apostle*. The word *apostle* means “one who has been sent.” An *apostle* is a “sent one” who represents God to man. In this sense, both Moses and Jesus were *apostles*. God sent Moses to the Hebrew slaves and to Pharaoh (Exod. 3) and through Him gave the Law; God sent Jesus through Whom He has spoken in these last days (Heb. 1:2). The Apostle John picks up on the apostleship of both Moses and Jesus in John 1:17.

John 1:17 (ESV)

<sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Second, Jesus is the *High Priest*. A high priest represents men to God. In that sense, Jesus is like both Moses and Aaron. Moses served as the inaugural *high priest* in offering the sacrifices by which Aaron and his sons were consecrated to the priesthood (Lev. 8). Thereafter, Aaron represents the *high priesthood* under the Law of Moses.

Both Jesus and Moses were faithful to God as *apostles* and *high priests*.

In verse 2, the Preacher points out that Moses is the highest example of human faithfulness building upon Numbers 12:7 in that *Moses also was faithful in all God's house*. The *house* in Numbers 12:7 and here in Hebrews 3:2 is the House of Israel.

Moses was faithful in his work in the House of Israel. Jesus was greater in faithfulness than Moses because even Moses failed occasionally, but Jesus never failed. Jesus was *faithful* to God the Father who *appointed* Him *apostle* and *high priest*.

In verses 3-4 the Preacher demonstrates that Jesus is superior to Moses in faithfulness in the same way that the builder of a house is superior to a house he builds. Moses did not build the House of Israel; God built the House of Israel. The Son is the one through whom the Father created all things and the one to whom He gave all things as his inheritance (1:2-3). Therefore, Jesus is the builder and heir of the house in which Moses was a servant.

While both Moses and Jesus were faithful to God as *apostles* and *high priests*, Jesus is vastly superior to Moses as the divine builder, heir and Savior of the house in which Moses served.

### JESUS IS SUPERIOR TO MOSES IN HIS POSITION (3:5-6)

Hebrews 3:5-6 (ESV)

<sup>5</sup> Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, <sup>6</sup> but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

In verses 5-6, the Preacher contrasts the position of Moses with that of Jesus. Moses was *faithful in all God's house as a servant*. Interestingly, the Greek word used for *servant* describes "one who serves willingly regardless of whether he is a free man".<sup>2</sup> It is a very positive term describing Moses' faithful service in God's house. Among other things, Moses was faithful in his role as a prophet *to testify to the things that were to be spoken later*. Very likely these were the prophecies regarding the coming Messiah.

In verse 6 the contrast is made; Moses was a faithful servant in God's house while Jesus is a faithful Son over God's house. The *house* to which the Preacher refers in verse 6 is the Church. Whereas Moses was a *servant* in the House of Israel, Jesus is the *Son* over the House of the Church. As the *Son*, He is the owner and heir of this house.

And this is the *house* in which they should stay put!

This is the point of the last sentence in verse 6: *And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope*. Some interpret this to mean that if a believer does not hold fast their confidence they lose their salvation and are no longer a member of God's house. Others interpret this to mean that if a person is truly born again they will hold fast their confidence to the end proving that they are indeed born again. Yet another interpretation is that this final sentence is aimed at those in the church fellowship who might not be truly born again.

Quite frankly none of these explanations are very satisfactory. I am thoroughly convinced from many passages in the New Testament that we are justified by faith in the finished work of Christ. All our trespasses against God have been paid in full – past,

<sup>2</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

present and future – therefore there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For this reason I do not believe a born-again believer can lose their salvation.

But I also do not believe that every born-again believer will hold fast to the end evidencing that they are truly born again. We certainly have cases in the early Church of sinning Christians being disciplined with illness and physical death. This may not be exactly the same as “holding fast”, but it proves that believers can live in a state of carnality right up to the end of their physical lives. There are consequences to be sure, but to argue that a truly born again believer cannot persist in carnality does not square with the Scriptural evidence.

What I do believe is that Hebrews 6b is to be taken seriously.

**And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.**

It is a counter-measure to a presumptuous Christianity that says in effect, “I prayed the prayer so I’m good to go; it doesn’t really matter how I live now.” Crass as this may be, it describes the mindset of far too many people in the evangelical church in America. The very next section of Hebrews 3:7-19 stresses that it very much matters how we live. In that section the Preacher presents an example of faithlessness on the part of God’s people that lead to physical death. To think in such a way really does not reflect the thoughts of a person who knows they have been truly forgiven and feels the relief from the burden of their sin. A person who shows little concern or commitment to living the Christian life really has little to no basis for the assurance of their salvation.

The next section also leads me to reject the interpretation that failure to hold fast results in the loss of salvation. Though the Exodus generation failed to believe that God could bring them safely into the Promised Land, God forgave them. But He disciplined them with physical death in the wilderness. They did not lose their salvation; they lost their inheritance. Because of sin, Moses, also, did not enter the Promised Land. Who of us would argue that Moses lost his salvation and is not in heaven? He appeared to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration so we know he did not lose his salvation – he lost his inheritance.

Perhaps the warning, as it applies to the Jewish believers who were tempted to return to Moses and the Law, is that if they go back into Judaism they will no longer functionally be part of God’s house. God’s house is the Church. To step back into Judaism is to functionally/relationally step out of the community and fellowship of the Church into a community that is no longer God’s house. They are saved, but in practical day to day terms they will be living outside God’s house. Some of them had already begun to pull away from the church family (10:24-25). And to live outside God’s house has dire consequences as the next section will drive home.

I close with what I think is a really good summary of this passage followed by a final application. This summary is written by a brother, Brett Scott.

*Three parallels serve as a background to the Jesus/Moses comparison: Moses delivered the Israelites from the bondage of slavery and Egypt, while Jesus delivered all believers from the bondage of sin and damnation (2:14–15). Through Moses, God constituted the Israelites as the people of God, while Jesus*

*constitutes all believers as the sons of God (2:10). Moses brought the Israelites the Old Covenant, whereas Jesus brings all believers into the New Covenant, establishing a greater access to God for them (4:14–16), which had been only for Israel until Jesus came. In Jesus' superiority He replaced—and exceeded—all Moses did.*

*Hebrews 3:1–6 points to Jesus' supreme honor, faithfulness, and access to God the Father as a High Priest, and His position as Apostle and Son. Therefore in view of His superiority, believers, having entered a New Covenant with God, have gained greater access to Him than was ever possible under the Old Covenant. In response believers should be faithful to Him and should hold fast to their confession of, their hope in, and their faith in "Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of faith" ...<sup>3</sup>*

Are you, like the Hebrews, being hassled and pressured by the community out of which you were saved? Perhaps you're thinking life would be easier if you went back – don't do it! Think hard about Jesus; who He is, what He has done for you, what He Himself endured and what He received, what you have in Him. To turn away from Him is to go backwards spiritually and it is to bring upon yourself divine discipline from your loving heavenly Father. Instead of turning away from Him, turn into Jesus and continue to trust Him to meet your needs and to get you through. Turn into your church family, your brothers and sisters, for love, comfort and help.

Stay faithful to Jesus; endure and you will inherit.

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<sup>3</sup> Scott, p. 210.