

Harstine begins by noting that two figures, Jesus and Moses, dominate the biblical texts (p 1). His study concentrates on Moses’ presence in the account of Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospel of John (p 1). His study, however, branches out; it contains chapters as well on Moses as a character in the Synoptic gospels, Moses in the narratives in Second Temple Judaism, and the function of Homer in Greco-Roman narratives. In the latter section, Harstine provides a helpful comparison of Homer and Moses as literary figures; his goal in this section is to examine a probably response of the broader, pagan audience in the world at the time to Moses in the Fourth Gospel (p 130).

Harstine stresses that genre determines how a reader reads a text (p 15). This perception is in part determined by a reader’s familiarity with a larger literary library, he argues, and hence his examination of characterisation in the larger literary worlds of Jewish and Greco-Roman readers (p 15).

He focuses his study on two things – first on the function of Moses as a character in the Fourth Gospel and second on the reception of the Fourth Gospel in its original setting (p 14). His work seeks to determine how the ancient reader might have responded to Moses’ characterisation in John. Consequently, this is a speculative study. Within the confines of a literary approach, he achieves both goals. Because he limits himself to a literary approach, he sidesteps questions of authorship, inspiration, and applicability to modern life.

Harstine repeats himself frequently, a technique that probably helped him in the writing of his dissertation and serves now to keep the less observant reader focused on his argument. His study neatly breaks down into chapters. He handles with ease any textual crossings between Old and New Testaments. For biblical scholars, probably his most interesting and useful sections are chapter 2, which examines Moses as a character in the Fourth Gospel, and chapter 3, an examination of Moses as a character in the Synoptic Gospels.

Harstine finds that the Gospel of John presents a four-fold characterisation of Moses. Moses is a giver of the law, a prophetic voice, a prosecuting attorney, and
a philosophical teacher (p 126). He identifies three functions of Moses in John: historical anchor, witness, and point of conflict (p 161). He finds that Moses performs four tasks in the Synoptic narratives, that of historical anchor, point of conflict, witness, and synonym for Torah (p 161).

In the minds of the audience of John’s Gospel in Second Temple Judaism, Moses carries out four functions: authorising the law, authenticating religious activity, serving as an exemplar of piety, and standing as the prophet par excellence (p 161).

Harstine speculates that Homer, in the Greco-Roman texts in which he figured, functioned in three ways: as locating citations for the audience, serving as an authority in diverse areas of knowledge, and being an expert witness (p 161).

Harstine finds that the texts in which Moses and Homer figure help their audiences to understand the texts. Moses and Homer serve as anchors in known genres. The use of known ancient figures in ancient literature was a common literary technique. In other words, the writer of the Gospel of John was ‘in sync’ with his times. Each targeted community – whether Jewish or Greco-Roman – relates to Homer and to Moses as trusted authority figures (p 162). An ancient reader, Harstine believes, would easily understand the multiple functions of Moses and respond accordingly when meeting Moses in the Fourth Gospel (p 163).

Harstine encourages further exploration of Moses as a literary character. He cites a need for investigating Moses in Philo’s De Vita Moses? and of looking at Moses as a lawgiver in Egyptian literature (p 164).

In his concluding remarks, Harstine sides with Richard Bauckhman in challenging the view that each gospel had a targeted audience. Harstine says his findings agree with those of Bauckhman, at least in so far as ‘the function of Moses and Homer as legendary figures is not limited to a single hypothetical community’ (p 164).

Harstine encourages a scrutiny of other Jewish figures in the New Testament like Abraham from a literary perspective. Is the characterisation of Abraham in John, for example, similar or dissimilar to Abraham’s characterisation in other Jewish texts (pp 164-165)? For those interested in the literary aspects of a text – characterisation, narration, plot, conflict, tone, point of view, setting, etcetera – Harstine’s look at the functions and uses of Moses in the narrow sense of the Fourth Gospel and in the broader sense of ancient literature proves a fruitful study.

Robin Gallaher Branch, School of Biblical Studies and Bible Languages, University of the North West, Potchefstroom 2520, South Africa.

E-mail: sbbrgb@puknet.puk.ac.za