

Cognitive Conceptualizations of Moses' Sinai Tradition in the Gospel of John and Philo of Alexandria.

Li, Chun.

Chinese Theological College Australia

An affiliated College of the Australian University of Theology

chun.li@ctca.edu.au

Orcid. iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6578-8037>

Received: Dec. 10, 2025

Revised: Dec. 26, 2025

Accepted: Dec. 27, 2025

Abstract

Moses stands as a pivotal yet contested figure in first-century Jewish self-perception. While both the Gospel of John and Philo of Alexandria utilize Mosaic traditions, they construct different portraits of Israel's lawgiver. This study navigates this "traditionary competition" by moving beyond traditional textual criticism to employ a Cognitive Theory of Characters, drawing on the methodological insights of Rügge-meier and Shively. Focusing specifically on the Sinai Tradition (Exodus 19–40), the paper analyses how these authors guide readers to mentally construct, evaluate, and integrate complex representations of Moses through Conceptual Blending Theory.

The analysis reveals that while Philo blends Sinai narratives with Hellenistic philosophical ideals to elevate Moses as the "living law" and the "unpassable standard" of piety, the Fourth Gospel employs the same Sinai inputs, namely glory, tabernacle, and grace, to construct a Christological framework of supersession. In John, the cognitive blend results in the subordination of Moses, positioning Jesus as the exclusive locus of "grace and truth." Finally, the study demonstrates that these competing cognitive models serve distinct sociological functions: Philo's characterization cultivates an identity under the influence of Mosaic perfection, whereas John's re-reading of Sinai constructs a renewed covenant community defined by faith in Jesus.

Keywords: Gospel of John, Philo of Alexandria, Moses, Sinai Tradition, Cognitive Narratology, Characterization.

1. Introduction

Moses is described as the greatest yet most mysterious figure in the Bible.¹ He holds an integral and uniquely place in Jewish self-perception and cultural projection, having been an "enormously important figure for Jews of the first century CE".² Given this foundational status, it is unsurprising that two influential authors, Philo of Alexandria and the author of the Gospel of John, utilized Moses traditions extensively, though for profoundly divergent purposes. Philo, often writing in the cultural idiom of Hellenistic Greek and Middle Platonism, composed the substantial *On the Life of Moses* (*De vita Mosis*), lifting Moses to new heights of panegyric and esteem. Philo's exhaustive treatment led scholars to characterize him as "the most prolific commentator on Moses among Second Temple Jewish authors".⁴ In contrast, the Gospel of John, while mentioning Moses a total of thirteen times, deploys his image within a tightly controlled Christological framework. Although Moses makes "no actual appearance in the narrative", his presence is ubiquitous and becomes a "core symbol for Jesus' own identity".⁵

While both authors engaged in constructing and perpetuating Mosaic ideologies within the first-century Jewish imagination, their resulting portraits are starkly opposed. Philo constructs a maximal, idealized model of Moses,

¹ Large Language Models were used to assist in translating and polishing the author's original drafts. The author reviewed the final text to ensure the English expression accurately reflects the original intent and author's arguments.

² Louis Feldman, *Philo's Portrayal of Moses in the Context of Ancient Judaism*, (Notre Dame, IN:University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), xi.

³ Carson Bay, "Philo, the Gospel of John, and Two Moses Traditions: Traditionary Competition over a Cultural Icon," *Studia Philonica Annual* 33 (2021): 35.

⁴ Gregory E. Sterling, "The Interpreter of Moses: Philo of Alexandria and the Biblical Text," in *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism*, ed. Matthias Henze (Eerdmans, 2011), 415–35.

⁵ Dorothy A. Lee, "The Significance of Moses in the Gospel of John," *Australian Biblical Review* 63 (December 31, 2015): 66. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d8b380e0-ad49-32fe-9fb9-1d57a7da85b6>.

portraying him as the "greatest and most perfect man that ever lived"⁶, who simultaneously embodies the roles of king, lawgiver, high priest, prophet, and philosopher. John, however, subjects Moses to a "subordinate" portrayal, repeatedly limiting his function to emphasize Jesus's superior, exclusive divinity. For example, John's Gospel denies that he mediated grace and truth. (John 1:17) This fundamental theological disagreement between Philo's highly exalted "Mosaic piety"⁷ and John's polemical reframing constitutes a deep "traditionary competition"⁸ over the identity and meaning of this cultural icon.

As a starting point to investigate how the above competition can be formed in readers' cognition process, this study centres specifically on the Sinai tradition. The current paper moves beyond traditional textual analysis, which often treats characters as plot functionaries or focuses on literary devices. This paper utilizes the cognitive theory of characters, an approach within cognitive narratology that applies insights of cognitive linguistics to narrative analysis.⁹ It provides a framework to study how readers mentally construct, recognize, evaluate, and integrate these complex and often polemical representations of Moses related to the foundational events at Sinai.

2. Theoretical Framework: Cognitive Theory of Characters

Drawing upon the established critical tradition, characterization theory has provided Bible scholars with a productive lens for analysing the narrative figures and rhetorical strategies within John's Gospel.¹⁰ Early applications

⁶ Philo, *On the Life of Moses* Book I, I (1), in *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 459.

⁷ Bay, "Philo, the Gospel of John, and Two Moses Traditions," 39.

⁸ Bay, "Philo, the Gospel of John, and Two Moses Traditions," 50.

⁹ Jan Rügemeier and Elizabeth E. Shively. "Introduction: Towards a Cognitive Theory of New Testament Characters: Methodology, Problems, and Desiderata," *Biblical Interpretation* 29, no. 4–5 (2021): 403–429. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-29040001>.

¹⁰ Christopher W. Skinner, ed., *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). Steven A. Hunt, D. F. Tolmie and Zimmermann Ruben, ed.,

focused primarily on foundational categorical distinctions, such as classifying figures as major versus minor and assessing their psychological depth using the round versus flat dichotomy.¹¹

More recent scholarship has progressed to exploring intra-textual character development and intertextual connections. This shift stems from biblical scholars' adoption of cognitive narratology, a literary research approach that emphasizes the interaction between text and reader. A key theoretical voice in this area, David Herman, argues that narrative is not solely "something in the text," but is "cognitive as well as textual in nature," representing "structures of mind as well as constellations of verbal, cinematic, pictorial, or other signs produced and interpreted within particular communicative settings." He contends that narratives are the result of "complex transactions" between producers, texts, and interpreters working to make sense of them according to various cultural and textual protocols.¹² The cognitive theory of character emerged within this broader theoretical framework. Building upon these advances, the current study moves forward by employing Rügge-meier and Shively's cognitive theory of character.¹³ This approach aims to shed light on the dynamic mental operations performed by readers, specifically to explore and illuminate the complex characterization of Moses in John's Gospel and Philo's *Life of Moses*.

Rügge-meier and Shively demonstrate that "character construction is more

Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016). Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

¹¹ Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, eds., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), xiv.

¹² David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), Chapter 1 Getting Started, Section: Profiles of Narrative. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1007598>.

¹³ Jan Rügge-meier and Elizabeth E. Shively. "Towards a Cognitive Theory of New Testament Characters," *Biblical Interpretation* 29, no. 4–5 (2021): 403–429. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-29040001>.

dynamic than literary currents in New Testament studies has allowed",¹⁴ recognizing that the reader's knowledge from other texts and the real world contributes significantly to forming mental models of characters.¹⁵ They reorient the focus from the implied author to how actual readers construct dynamic, temporal mental models of characters by integrating textual cues with their pre-existing knowledge. This method operates under the premise that ancient and modern readers share similar, biologically based cognitive processes, allowing scholars to apply cognitive science to biblical texts.

The core of this methodology involves analysing the reader's dual processing model for character construction: Top-Down Processing (Categorization), where the reader fits a character into pre-stored cognitive frameworks (schemata or prototypes like 'prophet'), and Bottom-Up Processing (Personalization), where new textual data modifies the model in real-time. This process is recursive; the initial categorization is continually refined and recategorized as new, individuating textual cues are encountered, thus tracking a character's development within a narrative. For complex integration, the methodology utilizes conceptual blending theory to model how two input ideas are merged into a "blended space" that yields "emergent meaning."

The application of cognitive theory is categorized into four main areas relevant to New Testament exegesis: tracing character development within a single narrative, analysing character migration across different texts, investigating character emotions and empathy through simulation, and ultimately identifying the character's sociological function in shaping the intended community's identity. Given the limited textual evidence regarding Moses's inner life, particularly the scarcity of explicit emotional descriptions in the Gospel of John, the current study will focus its analysis exclusively on the three remaining dimensions listed above. With regards to the character development, the activation of foundational frames and schemata of readers will be explored. We will also look at how concepts around a character are blended with the presentation of our texts and thus explore the migration

¹⁴ Runggemeier and Shively, "Introduction: Towards a Cognitive Theory of New Testament Characters," 408.

¹⁵ Runggemeier and Shively, "Introduction," 411.

mechanism of the character. Lastly, we will investigate the sociological function of Moses in John's Gospel and Philo's writings.

Drawing upon the framework provided by Behrens' doctoral thesis concerning the employment of Moses traditions in the Gospel of John, the present investigation focuses on a comparative analysis. This analysis will scrutinize the Sinai tradition found within the Fourth Gospel in relation to their portrayal in Philo's *Life of Moses*.¹⁶

3. Moses in Sinai Tradition

3.1 Moses and Sinai Imagery in John

The use of Sinai traditions in John 1 and 2 refers primarily to the narratives found in Exodus 19–40. It is argued that at least two passages in this opening section of the Gospel—John 1:14-18 and John 1:19-2:11—allude to crucial aspects of the revelation of God at Mount Sinai.

3.1.1 Law Giver (John 1:14-18 and Exodus 33-34)

The passage John 1:14-18, part of the Johannine Prologue, is often read against the background of the theophanic events recounted in Exodus 33-34. The explicit declaration in John 1:17—"the law was given through Moses" (ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωυσέως ἐδόθη)—is the most conspicuous textual marker that evokes the Mount Sinai account.

The proposed link between John 1:14-18 and Exodus 33-34 is based on several elements. In Exodus 33-34, Moses was granted a partial vision of God, and this divine encounter revealed God as "full of mercy and truth." The phrases "grace and truth" (χάρις καὶ ἀλήθεια) in John 1:14 and 1:17 represent terminological similarities linking back to Exodus 34:6, though this

¹⁶ Rainer K. W. Behrens, *The Use of Moses Traditions in the Gospel of John: A Contribution to John's Use of the Old Testament* (PhD diss., University of Gloucestershire, 2004), 19-55. Among the different traditions presented by Behrens, namely Sinai, Wilderness and Passover, we will focus on the Sinai tradition in this paper.

connection is not without controversy.¹⁷ Beyond this lexical correspondence, several specific parallels reinforce the relationship between these texts: the use of ἐσκήνωσεν in John 1:14 evokes the tent of meeting in Exodus 33:7 (Hebrew: *מִוֶּשֶׁב־אֹהֶל*; LXX: σκηνή τοῦ μαρτυρίου); the phrase ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ in John 1:14 echoes Moses's request in Exodus 33:18 to see God's glory; and the statement θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε in John 1:18 corresponds to the limitations placed on Moses's vision in Exodus 33:20, 23.¹⁸ It is crucial to note, however, that while this divine disclosure in Exodus occurs in connection with Moses receiving the Law, the revelation itself and the Law are not synonymous—a distinction that John maintains by contrasting the Law given through Moses with the grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

3.1.2 Sinai Imagery (John 1:19-2:11 and Sinai)

The entire passage spanning John 1:19 through 2:11 can be read against the narrative of Exodus 19–24, which details the creation of the covenant and the revelation at Sinai.¹⁹ Arguments supporting this Sinai imagery interpretation are significant: the reference to "the third day" (John 2:1) is pivotal, recalling the day the Law was given in Exodus 19:11, 16, thereby framing the Cana story within the context of the Exodus covenant;²⁰ similarly, John 2:11 states Jesus manifested his "glory" (*doxa*), directly paralleling the traditional depiction of God's glory being revealed at Sinai. Furthermore, the purification motif is present through John the Baptist's baptism (John 1:19ff.), which

¹⁷ Hanson is positive about the relationship between this phrase and Ex 34.6, see A. T. Hanson, *The New Testament Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SPCK, 1980), 97-109. A. T. Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel: A Study of John and The Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 21-32. Bultmann is against such proposal, see R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), 50 n. 1.

¹⁸ Hanon, *The Prophetic Gospel*, 21.

¹⁹ Olsson used the term "Sinai-screen" to present this connection between John 1:19-2:11 and Exodus 19-24. Birger Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel: A Text Linguistic Analysis of John 2:1-11 and 4:1-42* (Lund: Gleerup, 1974), 109.

²⁰ Olson, *Structure*, 21-25. Olsson provides a detailed discussion of the term "the third day". The word order in Greek is said to be an emphasis of the term.

echoes the necessary cleansing of the people found in Exodus 19:14f and 24:5-8 to constitute Israel at the mountain, while Jesus' first sign at Cana (John 2:1-11) may be understood as mirroring Moses' water miracles in the wilderness (Exodus 15:22-26; 17:1-7).²¹

The use of Sinai imagery in John 1:19-2:11, therefore, serves to define the Christological redefinition of the people of God against the backdrop of Israel's constitution at Sinai. The transformation of water into wine at Cana, alongside the other allusions, implies a new development brought about by Jesus while simultaneously emphasizing continuity with the foundational events of Israel's history.

3.2 Moses the lawgiver in Philo

In Philo of Alexandria's portrayal, Moses is presented as the authoritative lawgiver who authored the Pentateuch. Philo asserts a profound connection between the Law Moses received at Sinai and Moses' own exemplary life, suggesting the written Law is an imitation of the inherent Law of Nature and establishing Moses as the ultimate embodiment of the legal-Scriptural ideal. Also, Moses was depicted as "but, perhaps, since Moses was also destined to be the lawgiver of his nation, he was himself long previously, through the providence of God, a living and reasonable law, since that providence appointed him to the lawgiver, when as yet he knew nothing of his appointment" (*De Vita Mosis* I.162).

This Lawgiver Frame is complemented by a narrative of ascent and divine proximity, rooted in the Exodus account of Moses' ascent of Sinai (20:21), which Philo uses to depict Moses achieving an unparalleled proximity to the divine. Specifically, Philo states that Moses "entered... into the darkness where God was" (*eis te ton gnogon, entha ēn ho theos*), leading the reader to visualize his ascent to the "unseen, invisible, incorporeal and archetypal essence of existing things." (*De Vita Mosis* I.158) This unique access to that which is concealed from "mortal nature" results in Moses displaying a godlike (*theoeidēs*) existence, culminating in his deification—being referred to as — which, achieved through his participation in the Logos, represents the apogee

²¹ Olsson, *Structure*, 102-114.

of human potential.

4. The Activation of Foundational Frames and Schemata

A reader engaging with New Testament or Hellenistic Jewish literature, especially one with a Jewish cultural background, which may include a "plausible historically informed modern reader"²² or first-century audience member, initially utilizes top-down processing, fitting textual cues into existing foundational frames and schemata concerning Moses and Sinai. In John's Gospel, explicit references to the Law given through Moses described above immediately activate a robust Moses character as a lawgiver alongside the Sinai as Foundational Script, which frames the covenant and Israel's identity found primarily in Exodus 19–40. Conversely, the reader encountering Philo's *On the Life of Moses*, undergoes a similar cognitive activation, but the schemata are instantly amplified and simplified by Philo's extravagant characterization. Philo employs explicit textual cues to define Moses as the ultimate Ideal, assigning him a complete set of roles, including high priest and philosopher, while reducing his essence to generalized traits like perfect (telios) and all-wise (sophos). This idealization enables the reader to rapidly process and remember Moses as the ultimate human, simplifying reality and reinforcing the maximalist potential of the activated character schema.

4.1 Conceptual Blending: Grace and Truth in Sinai and John's Gospel

The comparison of Christ and the Lawgiver within the Jewish milieu relies heavily on the reader's pre-existing cultural knowledge, a process best understood through the lens of Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT).²³ Conceptual blending theory (CBT) explains how the human mind processes and integrates multiple concepts or "input spaces" to create new, emergent

²² Cornelis Bennema, *A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative. A Proposed Paradigm for Character Reconstruction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 67–72.

²³ Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and The Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), v.

meanings. When readers encounter texts that deliberately evoke earlier traditions, their minds blend these reference points together, generating interpretations that transcend simple comparison.

4.1.1 Glory and Revelation (John 1:14–18 and Exodus 33–34)

The Johannine Prologue, functioning as a reading instruction for John's Gospel, sets the stage for a comparison between Moses and Jesus by utilizing the themes of "Glory and Revelation established in Exodus 33–34". The reader's first input space includes the Mosaic revelation, where God's character is proclaimed as full of mercy and truth (Exo 34:6). The second input space is the Logos, who is declared to be full of grace and truth. The assertion in John 1:14 that the Logos "became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we have beheld his glory" deliberately invokes the divine presence associated with the Tabernacle and the Sinai revelation.

This move acts as a retelling of the promise in the Sinai tradition: the blending process resolves the conceptual tension by generating the emergent meaning that God's permanent, ultimate presence, formerly located in the Tabernacle or Temple, is now uniquely and fully perceived in Jesus Christ. This blending establishes Jesus' actions and identity as superior to the Old Covenant forms, leading the reader to the theological conclusion that Jesus, mediated by the Word, is the true and final revelation of God's character.

4.1.2. New Covenant and People of God (John 1:19–2:11 and Exodus 19–24)

The subsequent narrative section, detailing the beginning of Jesus' ministry, continues the typological comparison by requiring the reader to process the events through a "Sinai screen"²⁴ (19–24), which provides the script for the constitution of Israel. Cognitive narratology suggests textual cues, such as the mention of the Cana story occurring "on the third day" (2:1), invite the reader to evoke the giving of the Law on the third day at Sinai. This comparison highlights the revelation of Jesus' glory in John 2:11, linking it to the

²⁴ Hanon, *The Prophetic Gospel*, 21.

manifestation of YHWH's glory associated with the giving of the Law. The required interpretation balances continuity (affirming the validity of Scripture) with supersession (the new developments brought by Jesus). The miraculous transformation of water-into-wine serves as an illustration of replacement and transcendence, suggesting that the new people of God are born from the old through Christ's transformative power, thus transcending the Mosaic dispensation. The cleansing ritual related to the Law of Moses is now renewed into the wine in a banquet for celebration.

4.2 Conceptual Blending: Grace and Truth through Moses in Philo

Philo's presentation of Moses offers target audiences yet another input space against Exodus portrayal of Moses. In Philo's writings, the core covenant concepts of grace and truth, which John 1:17 explicitly reserves for Jesus Christ, are blended directly into Moses' character model. Philo explicitly suggests that Moses received all sorts of wisdom and knowledge from God (*Life of Moses* I.21–24). He was admired to the extent that “Very naturally, therefore, those who associated with him and everyone who was acquainted with him marvelled at him, being astonished as at a novel spectacle, and inquiring what kind of mind it was that had its abode in his body, and that was set up in it like an image in a shrine; whether it was a human mind or a divine intellect, or something combined of the two; because he had nothing in him resembling the many, but had gone beyond them all and was elevated to a more sublime height.” (*Life of Moses* I.27).²⁵

Philo's Moses is the perfect philosopher and moral agent. It is described in *Life of Moses* I.29 that “he exhibited the doctrines of philosophy in all his daily actions, saying precisely what he thought, and performing such actions only as were consistent with his words, so as to exhibit a perfect harmony between his language and his life, so that as his words were such also was his life, and as his life was such likewise was his language, like people who are playing together in tune on a musical instrument”.²⁶ Furthermore, Moses was “a living

²⁵ Philo, *Life of Moses*, I.

²⁶ Philo, *Life of Moses*.

and reasonable law” himself (*Life of Moses* I.29).²⁷

4.3 Competing Frameworks: Johannine Supersession versus Philonic Elevation

The conceptual blending dynamics operative in John's Gospel and Philo's presentation of Moses reveal fundamentally competing cognitive frameworks for interpreting the Sinai tradition. John's Gospel employs the Exodus narratives as input spaces to generate an emergent meaning of Christological supersession: Jesus definitively replaces the Tabernacle, transcends Moses' mediation, and uniquely embodies the covenant attributes of grace and truth.

Philo's Moses, however, occupies precisely this contested conceptual territory. Where John 1:17 explicitly distinguishes Moses, associated with Law, from Jesus Christ as the exclusive locus of grace and truth, Philo's blending presents Moses himself as the direct recipient and mediator of these very divine attributes. This represents a fundamental divergence in how the same Sinai traditions are cognitively processed: John's framework demands a supersessionist reading that subordinates Moses to Christ, while Philo's framework elevates Moses to the status of supreme mediator through whom grace and truth flow. Both authors harness the power of conceptual blending to shape theological understanding, yet they generate diametrically opposed emergent meanings from shared source material. The result is that the Sinai tradition becomes a contested cognitive space where competing first-century Jewish communities negotiated questions of ultimate mediation, covenant continuity, and divine revelation through the very structure of their interpretive frameworks, each claiming hermeneutical authority over Israel's foundational narrative.

²⁷ Philo, *Life of Moses*.

5. Sociological Function and Identity Construction

5.1 John's Gospel: Constructing Johannine Identity Through Christological Re-reading

The cognitive approach to John's Gospel reveals that the Christological interpretation of Sinai traditions constructs and reinforces the identity of the Johannine community.

The use of Sinai traditions functions primarily as identity markers for the Johannine community, the intended recipients frequently invoked through the corporate "we" in passages such as John 1:14 ("we have seen his glory") and 1:16 ("from his fullness we have all received"). By cognitively processing the Exodus narratives through a Christological lens, these readers are equipped to understand themselves as participants in a renewed covenant community centered on Christ rather than the Torah alone.

The sociological dimension becomes particularly acute in contexts of community conflict. John 9:28 preserves a telling moment of identity contestation, where opponents declare, "We are disciples of Moses," implicitly denying this status to Jesus' followers. The Gospel's re-reading of Sinai traditions offers a cognitive resolution to this challenge: believers are reassured that they remain the *true* disciples of Moses precisely because Moses himself wrote prophetically about Jesus (John 5:46). The cognitive blending of Moses-as-prophet with Jesus-as-fulfillment allows the Johannine community to claim both scriptural legitimacy and theological innovation.

Furthermore, John's deployment of Sinai traditions supports a redefinition of the "people of God" along Christological lines. The assertion that believers become "children of God" (John 1:12) through faith in Jesus represents not an abandonment of Israel's identity but its renewal and reconstitution. By anchoring this claim in Sinai imagery, which has been the foundational moment of Israel's constitution as YHWH's people, the Gospel cognitively authorizes the community's self-understanding as the legitimate continuation and fulfillment of Israel's covenant relationship with God. The Cana narrative's evocation of the "third day" at Sinai, as discussed previously, reinforces this identification by suggesting that the new people of God emerge organically from the old through Christ's transformative work.

5.2 Philo: Establishing Mosaic Piety and Philosophical Discipleship

Philo's cognitive construction of Moses serves an equally deliberate sociological function, though oriented toward a markedly different community context and set of identity concerns. Where John's Gospel navigates the tensions of Christological innovation within Jewish tradition, Philo's presentation establishes Moses as the unassailable foundation for a particular mode of Jewish philosophical piety.

The sociological function of Philo's Moses operates primarily through the establishment of an ethical and contemplative standard. Because Moses attained perfection through his Sinai revelation and exemplary life, he becomes the "unpassable standard" in contemplation and various aspects.²⁸ and the definitive model for those "willing to copy it." (*Life of Moses I. 158*) This cognitive construction serves multiple identity-forming purposes: it associates Philonic disciples with the love of truth and rejection of foreign teachings, it provides an apologetic posture toward Hellenistic culture that simultaneously engages and transcends it, and it establishes a clear hierarchy of spiritual authority with Moses at the apex.

Critically, Philo's blending of God's attributes directly into Moses' character functions to make Moses himself the immediate locus of divine encounter, while John reserves these attributes exclusively for Christ. For Philo's readers, believing in Moses as the perfect divine agent of Sinai revelation becomes tantamount to believing in God. This cognitive move eliminates the need for any intermediary figure beyond Moses, effectively closing the conceptual space that Johannine Christianity occupies. Moses is not merely a prophet pointing beyond himself but the supreme mediator whose perfection cannot be surpassed.

The social identity constructed through Philo's presentation thus centers on philosophical virtue, unquestioned piety, and fidelity to Mosaic wisdom as the highest expression of both Jewish particularity and universal truth. This cognitive model provides Philo's community with the interpretive resources to maintain Jewish distinctiveness while engaging confidently with Hellenistic intellectual culture, positioning Mosaic tradition as philosophically superior to

²⁸ Bay, "Philo, the Gospel of John, and Two Moses Traditions," 42.

competing Greek schools of thought.

5.3 Competing Identities: Sociological Functions of Divergent Moses Traditions

The sociological functions of John's and Philo's respective presentations of Moses reveal how cognitive frameworks serve not merely as interpretive tools but as identity-constructing mechanisms for distinct first-century Jewish communities. Both authors deploy Sinai traditions to answer fundamental questions of communal self-definition: Who are the legitimate heirs of Moses? What constitutes authentic covenant faithfulness? How does one participate in God's revelatory purposes?

John's Gospel constructs a community identity that maintains continuity with Mosaic tradition while fundamentally reorienting it around Christological faith, offering cognitive resources for believers to understand themselves as both faithful to Scripture and participants in eschatological newness. Philo, conversely, constructs a community identity that elevates Mosaic tradition itself to unsurpassable perfection, providing cognitive resources for disciples to see themselves as participants in the highest form of philosophical and religious truth through devotion to the Lawgiver. The divergent sociological outcomes—Johannine believers as the renewed Israel through Christ versus Philonic disciples as perfected followers of Moses—demonstrate how competing cognitive models of the same foundational traditions generate distinct communal identities, each claiming authoritative continuity with Israel's.

6. Methodological Reflection: The Value and Limits of Cognitive Characterization

This study has demonstrated that the divergent portraits of Moses in John and Philo are not merely theological disagreements but involve some distinct cognitive operations. However, to fully appreciate the contribution of this approach to New Testament studies, it is necessary to evaluate both the value and the limitations of applying cognitive theory to ancient texts.

6.1 The Value

The primary advantage of the cognitive characterization approach lies in its ability to explain how meaning is generated in the gap between the text and the reader. Traditional historical-critical methods often focus on source criticism (where the Sinai tradition came from), while narrative criticism focuses on the text as a closed system (how Moses functions in the plot).

For both source criticism and narrative criticism, the readers are constructing their reading from previous cognitive foundational frames and schemata. Previously, the readers' cognitive process is not described in detail. The frames and schemata were assumed rather than explicitly proposed. The use of cognitive theory brings the process of activation of foundational frames and schemata to the front. This method does not seek to replace or nullify historical and narrative criticism, but to bring the cognitive process involved in the reader to the attention of scholars. It acknowledges that the text of John's Gospel does not explicitly state "Moses is inferior to Jesus in every way"; rather, the text provides cues (e.g., "grace and truth came through Jesus") that force the reader to perform a conceptual blend.

Moreover, this approach validates that these cognitive operations are already present in every reading process. Whether a reader is a first-century Jew or a twenty-first-century scholar, the act of reading inherently involves activating schemata (prior knowledge) and blending concepts. meaningful interpretation is impossible without these mental operations. By utilizing this framework, we provide a vocabulary to describe the subconscious, split-second mental connections that allow readers to make sense of the Sinai tradition. It slows down the "mental camera," allowing us to analyze *how* the author subtly rewires the reader's worldview.

Finally, by mapping this process, we can illuminate the sophistication of Johannine polemics. The author does not simply attack the historical Moses; he reconfigures the cognitive "files" (schemata) the audience holds regarding the Sinai event. The cognitive model explains how the author successfully shifts the "center of gravity" for divine revelation from the Mountain (Sinai) to the Man (Jesus). Similarly, Philo does not eliminate the role played by Moses in the Pentateuch. He provides more information on Moses status for readers to recognise the heightened status of the lawgiver. The cognitive model helps us to investigate how the new framework and schemata adjusts readers' expectation of the character in a narrative.

6.2 The Challenge

Despite its utility, the application of modern cognitive science to ancient literature faces the challenge of anachronism and the accessibility of ancient knowledge.

The cognitive approach relies on reconstructing the "encyclopedic knowledge" or "mental library" of the implied reader. In this study, we have assumed that the reader possesses a knowledge of the Sinai traditions (Exodus 19–40) similar to that of a first-century Jew. However, we cannot access the neural networks of a first-century person. Our reconstruction of their "foundational frames" (e.g., what they thought a 'Prophet' or 'Lawgiver' was) is inevitably mediated by surviving texts, which may represent an elite literary minority rather than the average cognitive landscape of the Johannine community.

This reconstruction is rendered even more dubious when considering the primary mode of early transmission: oral reading. Since the original audience would have encountered these narratives through communal listening rather than private reading, their cognitive processing was likely governed by aural constraints and memory patterns that differ significantly from the text-based models often assumed in modern literary analysis.

Furthermore, cognitive analysis can risk over-systematization. It may imply that ancient readers processed narratives in a linear, highly logical blending process, whereas actual reading experiences—especially in an oral/aural culture—might have been more fluid, emotional, and less structurally rigid.

Last but not least, the current and previous studies mostly assume readers reading Pentateuch's description with the target texts, whether it is John's Gospel or Philo's writings. However, even within the Second Temple period, the "Jewish" reading of the Sinai tradition is multi-faceted. For example, Najman's examination of Second Temple Jewish texts suggests that works like Jubilees and Sirach Ben Sira have their own input to the Sinai tradition.²⁹ Najman points out that jubilees and the Temple Scroll in Dead Sea corpus puts

²⁹ Hindy Najman, *Seconding Sinai: The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism*. Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 77 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 41, 68-69.

law over Moses, while Philo puts Moses over the Law.³⁰ Taking these proposals into account, we may raise questions about the assumption of cognitive space within the first readers of the texts. The readers may not only rectify the Gospel or works of Philo against Mosaic tradition recorded in the Pentateuch. It may be possible that other traditions, such as the text of Jubilee and other writings from the second Temple period, may be present in the readers' cognitive space. The inter-relationship of different texts within the readers may be difficult to establish. Further research will be needed to go beyond dual cognitive space analysis in the present paper, so that interactions between different traditions in the cognitive process can be investigated.

6.3 Synthesis: Cognitive and Historical Complementarity

Therefore, cognitive characterization should not be viewed as a replacement for historical-critical or theological analysis, but as a complementary framework. It requires historical criticism to establish the likely "input spaces" (what traditions were available), and it requires theological analysis to understand the "emergent meaning" (the doctrinal result).

In the context of the Sinai tradition, the cognitive approach provides the "mechanism" for the theological shift. If we could further establish the relationship between different texts and their traditions, the current cognitive analysis can be used to explain *how* a first-century reader could move from a worldview where Moses is the supreme intermediary (Philo) to one where he is a witness to the Incarnate Word (John), without discarding their foundational scriptures. However, the above sequence of influence will need to be established before more substantial claims could be made.

7. Conclusion

This study has employed a cognitive characterization framework to navigate the "traditionary competition" regarding the figure of Moses. By

³⁰ Hindy Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 106-107.

moving beyond textual analysis to cognitive narratology, this paper has illuminated how the authors of the Fourth Gospel and *On the Life of Moses* utilized shared cultural schemata to construct diametrically opposed mental models of Israel's premier icon.

Through the lens of Conceptual Blending Theory, we have demonstrated that the "Sinai Event" functions not merely as a historical reference but as a flexible cognitive input space. For Philo of Alexandria, the Sinai tradition generates a maximalist portrait of Moses. In this framework, Moses is not only the recipient of the Law but its living embodiment, effectively internalizing the divine attributes of grace and truth. Consequently, Philo's Moses serves as the "unpassable standard" of piety, allowing his community to navigate the Hellenistic world with a sense of philosophical and religious superiority.

Conversely, the Gospel of John utilizes the same Sinai inputs—the giving of the Law, the vision of glory, and the tabernacle—to construct a polemical, supersessionist reality. By guiding the reader to blend Moses's partial revelation with the totalizing revelation of the Logos, the Fourth Gospel fundamentally subordinates the Lawgiver. Here, the cognitive blending resolves tension by transferring the locus of "grace and truth" from the Sinai covenant to the person of Jesus Christ. Moses is thus cognitively repositioned from the *source* of revelation to a *witness* of it.

While textual analysis identifies the presence of Mosaic motifs, a cognitive approach reveals that for these early communities, 'reading Moses' was far more than a passive reception of tradition; it was an active, psychological process of communal self-definition.

However, it should be noted that readers' inner cognition may not be as simple as presented. In the case of Ben Sira, for instance, we see a 'wisdomized' reading of the Sinai revelation that identifies the Torah with divine Wisdom itself, thereby elevating Moses to a cosmic mediator. (Sir 24:23-29) This suggests that the cognitive 'inner world' of these early communities may be populated by a Moses more complicated than what is assumed in the present study. More works will need to be done to explore the Mosaic landscape in their cognitive space so that we can move beyond preliminary categorizations and achieve a more nuanced, convincing solution that accounts for the diverse hermeneutical layers and psychological complexities inherent in Second Temple Jewish and early Christian identity formation."

Received: Dec. 10, 2025; Revised: Dec. 26, 2025; Accepted: Dec. 27, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23364/JBAS.2025.1.1.55816>

Bibliography

Bay, Carson. "Philo, the Gospel of John, and Two Moses Traditions: Traditionary Competition over a Cultural Icon." *Studia Philonica Annual* 33 (2021): 35–71.

Behrens, Rainer K. W. *The Use of Moses Traditions in the Gospel of John: A Contribution to John's Use of the Old Testament*. PhD diss., University of Gloucestershire, 2004.

Bennema, Cornelis. *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John*. 2nd ed. Augsburg Fortress, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9m0t70>.

Bennema, Cornelis. *A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative. A Proposed Paradigm for Character Reconstruction*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

Bultmann R. *Das Evangelium des Johannes*. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956.

Faucounnier, Gilles and Mark Turner. *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and The Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Feldman, Louis *Philo's Portrayal of Moses in the Context of Ancient Judaism*. Notre. Dame, IN:University of Notre Dame Press, 2016.

Hanson, A. T. *The New Testament Interpretation of Scripture*. London: SPCK, 1980.

Hanson, A. T. *The Prophetic Gospel: A Study of John and The Old Testament*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991.

Herman, David. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Malden, MA :Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1007598>.

Lee, Dorothy A. "The Significance of Moses in the Gospel of John." *Australian Biblical Review* 63 (December 31, 2015): 52–66. Accessed 1 December 2025. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d8b380e0-ad49-32fe-9fb9-1d57a7da85b6>.

Meeks, Wayne A. *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, NovTSup 14. Leiden: Brill, 1967.

Hindy Najman. *Seconding Sinai: The Development of Mosaic Discourse in*

Second Temple Judaism. Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 77. Leiden: Brill, 2003.

Philo of Alexandria. *On the Life of Moses, I*. Translated by Charles Duke Yonge. In *The Works of Philo*. Early Christian Writings. Accessed 1 December 2025. <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book24.html>.

Rüggemeier, Jan, and Elizabeth E. Shively. “Introduction: Towards a Cognitive Theory of New Testament Characters: Methodology, Problems, and Desiderata.” *Biblical Interpretation* 29, no. 4–5 (2021): 403–429. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-29040001>.

Sterling, Gregory E. “The Interpreter of Moses: Philo of Alexandria and the Biblical Text.” In *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism*. Edited by Matthias Henze (Eerdmans, 2011), 415–35.

Skinner, Christopher W. edited. *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*. The Library of New Testament Studies. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Hunt, Steven A., D. F. Tolmie and Ruben Zimmermann. *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2016.