

Moses

The most important religious figure in Jewish and perhaps all of western history, Moses met God at the burning bush, brought the Ten Commandments into the world and led the Jews out of Egypt. Known as the “Giver of Laws,” his story influenced all three Abrahamic faiths, and he remains one of the central figures in the human quest for religious meaning.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Moses plays a central role in Islam, as well. For instance, he is preeminent historical figure in the body of the Koran – his name being cited more than 100 times. Stories about Moses, some recognizable to Jewish readers and others seemingly more obscure, pervade the Muslim Holy Book. Early Sufis used Moses as a model of mystical piety. The minutia of Islamic ascetic practice was based in Moses’ sojourn on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights.

Additionally, after the great Sufi saint al-Hallaj was crucified for his blasphemy for asserting that “he was He,” his actions were justified by Sufi chronicler Farid al-Din Attar (d. 1220) by the life of the Jewish prophet. He compared it to the burning bush seen by Moses, which uttered the phrase, “I am I, God;” although the words came from the bush, it was really God who was speaking. Moses appears in many Sufi stories, as well, which often built on Koranic tales, or were completely new.

While the history of Moses is certainly well known, what might come as a surprise is how very central was he to the development of Islamic mysticism – and how his presence in the center of that religion’s canon texts helped to cement medieval respect between the mystics of Judaism and Islam.