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The Prophet Like Moses

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One of the most frequently quoted Old Testament passages in scripture is Moses's prophecy as recorded in Deuteronomy 18:15–19:

> The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; According to all that thou desiredst of the Lord thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. And the Lord said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him.

The New Testament, Book of Mormon, and modern revelations through the Prophet Joseph Smith declare that the prophet like Moses was Jesus Christ. What is curious, however, is that these other scriptural passages are worded differently at the end of the prophecy. For example, in Acts 3:22–23 Peter says, "For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be *destroyed from among the people*" (emphasis added; see the abbreviated version in Acts 7:37). Similar wording appears in the Book of Mormon citations of Moses's words:

"The words of Moses, which he spake, saying: A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass that all those who will not hear that prophet shall be *cut off from among the people*" (1 Nephi 22:20).

"Behold, I am he of whom Moses spake, saying: A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass that every soul who will not hear that prophet shall be *cut off from among the people*" (3 Nephi 20:23).

"Therefore it shall come to pass that whosoever will not believe in my words, who am Jesus Christ, which the Father shall cause him to bring forth unto the Gentiles, and shall give unto him power

that he shall bring them forth unto the Gentiles, (it shall be done even as Moses said) they shall be *cut off from among my people* who are of the covenant" (3 Nephi 21:11).

"For it shall come to pass, saith the Father, that at that day whosoever will not repent and come unto my Beloved Son, them will I *cut off from among my people*, O house of Israel" (3 Nephi 21:20).

Later iterations of Moses's words also employ the term *cut off* in reference to those who will not obey Christ (see Doctrine and Covenants 133:63; Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:55; Joseph Smith—History 1:40; see also the paraphrase in D&C 1:14).

Clearly, the phrase "cut off from the people" in the Book of Mormon and modern revelations is closer in meaning to "destroyed from among the people" in Acts 3:23 than to "I will require it of him," the wording in Deuteronomy 18:19 as it stands in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible. The skeptic might conclude that Joseph Smith merely copied (albeit not verbatim) the version used by Peter, but this does not explain why Peter's rendition differs from the Deuteronomy passage in both the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Septuagint used in his day.

The construction of the Hebrew, אדרש מעמו (*'edroš mē-ʿimmō*), KJV "I will require it of him," is difficult at best. If the verb were אדרשׂ (*'edroś*), it might be seen as a variant spelling of אדרס (*'edros*), which in modern Hebrew means "I will blot out, wipe out, extinguish." The interchange of sibilants such as *š*, *ś*, and *s* is well attested in Semitic languages such as Hebrew.

Part of the explanation for the scriptural discrepancies may lie in the fact that Hebrew was originally written without vowels, which were added a century or more after the time of the New Testament. Thus the word מעמו, vocalized *mē-ʿimmō* ("from him") in the Masoretic Hebrew texts, could just as well have been *mē-ʿammō*, "from his people," where the final *ō* is the possessive pronominal suffix *his*. Based on this evidence, it is likely that the Hebrew was originally intended to read "I will extinguish [him] from his people." Indeed, the verb may have the meaning of "cut off" in the sense of "excommunicate."

Note that in citing the Deuteronomy passage three times to the Nephites, Christ twice used the

term *my people* (3 Nephi 21:11, 20),[1] which would be מעמי (*mē-ʿammī*, "from my people") rather than מעמו (*mē-ʿammō*, "from his people") in Hebrew. Indeed, in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q175, also called 4QTestimonia), the word seems to be written with the letter י (*ī*) rather than ו (*ō*) in a quotation of Deuteronomy 18:19. The two letters are similar in shape and were often confused in early Bible manuscripts, especially among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Partial confirmation of the view expressed here is found in Ezekiel 14:7–11, which seems to have been inspired by Deuteronomy 18:18–22. Both passages speak of a prophet who, having lied to the people, will be punished: "The prophet will die"[2] (ומת הנביא, *u-mēt ha-nābī*'), according to Deuteronomy 18:20; and "I shall destroy him from the midst of my people" (והשמדתיו מתון עמי, *wᵉ-hišmadᵉtīw mi-tōk ʿammī*), according to Ezekiel 14:9. Of the idolator who consults with a prophet, we read in Ezekiel 14:8, "he will be cut off from the midst of my people" (והכרתיו מתון עמי, *wᵉ-hikrattīw mi-tōk ʿammī*). The double use of עמי in the Ezekiel passage supports the idea that this is the form used in the quotation of Deuteronomy 18:19 found in 4QTestimonia.[3] However, it is clear that Ezekiel 14:10 reads the root דרש (*drš*) in the traditional fashion, indicating that "the punishment of the seeker (עון הדרש) is as the punishment of the prophet (עון הנביא)."[4]

It seems clear that Peter rendered the Hebrew "from the people" rather than "from him." Because this is not the reading of the Septuagint (usually cited in New Testament quotations of the Old Testament), and because it is dependent on the Hebrew text rather than the Greek, it is significant that the Book of Mormon scribes understood it in the same way that Peter did. Peter's Hebrew source evidently read the same way as the Deuteronomy passage on the brass plates that Lehi carried out of Jerusalem about 600 BC.[5]

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Notes

1. In the third instance, recorded in 3 Nephi 20:23, Christ used the term "the people" rather than "my people."

2. Unless indicated otherwise, translations from the Hebrew are the authors'.

3. However, the reading of Deuteronomy 18:19 found in Acts 3:23 does not require "my people" as opposed to "his people" since the New Testament quotation does not include a pronoun at the end of the verse.

4. Compare Job 10:6, where תדרש parallels תבקש (and hence means "seek, inquire") and לעני parallels לחמאתי. We believe that two other Bible passages in which דרש has typically been rendered "require" may also reflect the meaning of "cut off, excommunicate." The first of these is Psalm 10:13, where the wicked person, reviling God, "said in his heart, You will not cut off" (לא תדרש). The second is found in 2 Chronicles 24:22, where King Joash, having slain the priest Zechariah, "said the Lord will see and cut off" (וידרש). In the first instance, the sinner said that God will not inflict the punishment, while in the second, he says that God will do so.

5. Mosiah 1:4 suggests that at least a portion of the plates of brass was engraved with Egyptian characters. The underlying text, however may have been Hebrew. For evidence of this practice see John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, "Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon,* ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 237–43.