The Prophet Like Moses

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 desirdest 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 me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hear that prophet shall be cut off from among the 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, אֲדֹּרֶשׁ מֵאָמֹּ (‘edros mē’amō), KJV “I will require it of him,” is difficult at best. If the verb were אֲדֹרָשׁ (‘edros), it might be seen as a variant spelling of מִדָּרֶשׁ (‘edreš), which in modern Hebrew means “I will blot out, wipe out, extinguish.” The interchange of sibilants such as š, š, and š 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 מַדָּרֶשׁ, vocalized מֵאָמֹּ (“from him”) in the Masoretic Hebrew texts, could just as well have been מֵאָמֹּ, “from his people,” where the final ŏ 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), which would be (mē-ʼammi, “from my people”) rather than (mē-ʼammō, “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  ( instead of  ( 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” ( according to Deuteronomy 18:20; and “I shall destroy him from the midst of my people” (w-ʼhismaditw mi-tōk ʼammi), 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” (w-ʼhikrattitw mi-tōk ʼammi). The double use of  in the Ezekiel passage supports the idea that this is the form used in the quotation of Deuteronomy 18:19 found in 4QTestimonia. However, it is clear that Ezekiel 14:10 reads the root (drs) in the traditional fashion, indicating that “the punishment of the seeker (ʼamrt) is as the punishment of the prophet (ʼammi)”.

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.

By John A. Tvedtnes, E. Jan Wilson

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  parallels (and hence means “seek, inquire”) and  parallels . We believe that two other Bible passages in which  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” (vrdt al). 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” (vrdyw). 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.

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