

Jesus: The Prophet Who Is Like And Greater Than Moses

Deuteronomy 18:15-22

Introduction

As one walks through the pages of Holy Scripture, he discovers an unfolding portrait of God's Messiah that grows in beauty as well as detail. Daniel Block well says, "Although complex, the Old Testament picture of the messiah gains in clarity and focus with time."¹ In other words it begins broadly but progressively narrows and becomes more specific and precise.

It begins with God's promise to send a deliverer who will be the seed of a woman and who will crush the head of the serpent/Satan (Gen 3:15; Rom 16:20). It then narrows successively telling us He will be: the seed of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 22:18), of the tribe of Judah (Gen 49:10), a prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15-17), the descendent of David (2 Sam 7:12-17; Isa 11:1), Yahweh's Anointed (Ps 2), One the Lord delivers from death (Ps 16; 22), a King-Priest (Ps 110), virgin conceived (Isa 7:14), the Suffering Servant of the Lord (Isa 52:13-53:12), the coming Son of Man (Dan 7:13-14), the ruler born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2), the pierced one who will cleanse from sin and uncleanness (Zech 12:10-14).

The portrait is breathtaking and overwhelming in both its promise and in its particulars. It is like one has discovered an array of magnificent pearls linked together to form a beautiful necklace. Each one invites careful study and inspection. For our purposes we will focus our gaze on the promise found in the second giving of the Law, the promise of a prophet like Moses found in Deuteronomy 18:15-22.²

¹ Daniel L. Block, "My Servant David: Ancient Israel's Vision of the Messiah," in *Israel's Messiah in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. R. S. Hess and M. D. Carroll R., eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 56.

² It should be noted that the esteemed colleague we honor in this book sees this text differently than do I (see his fine article noted in footnote 1). As was the case during the eight years we served together at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, we will graciously and respectfully disagree, rejoicing in our common love for God's Word and the wonderful challenges it often presents for serious students of Scripture.

Moses addresses the Hebrews in preparation for their entrance “into the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (18:9). They are warned that they will be confronted with all sorts of evil (“abominable”) practices that they must not follow or practice (18:9-14). To aid them in faithful devotion to the Lord, God promises to raise up a prophet, a series of prophets³ is most likely the thrust of the text, who will speak the Lord’s word to the people, a word they should hear and obey (18:18-19). Eventually, the nation of Israel began to look for and anticipate the prophet *par excellence* “who would be either a messianic figure or the announcer of the Messiah (cf. John 1:21, 25; Acts 3:22; 7:37).”⁴ The New Testament testifies to the fulfillment of this hoped for prophet like Moses in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth.⁵ My good friend Mark Dever in preaching a single message on the whole book of Deuteronomy confidently affirms, “Today we know who that promised prophet is: Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the one who speaks God’s words perfectly. He is the one sent from God to teach us the way to God.”⁶

Now, what I would like to do is walk through these verses in Deuteronomy 18:15-22 and see exactly what it is that God says we should understand concerning his gift of the prophets and the ultimate Prophet. What is their purpose? How do we recognize the true prophet from the false prophet? What should be our response in all of this?

³ Virtually all scholars view this in a collective sense. For just one example see Eugene Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 272.

⁴ Ibid. Merrill notes, “The ambiguity of the individual and collective both being expressed in the grammatical singular is a common Old Testament device employed to afford multiple meanings or application to prophetic texts.” Cf. also Walt C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 215-217. Merrill cites him in fn. 127.

⁵ Charles Erdman simply states, “This promise received its complete fulfillment when God finally spoke through His own Son...we find in Christ the final antitype of all these Hebrew mediators. He is the divinely appointed Prophet, Priest, and King, whose service is eternal [*The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 59].

⁶ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 174.

I. God Raises Up His Prophets And We Should Listen To Them 18:15-17

Our God is a talking God. He is a God who makes the first move in communicating with His creation. Because He is a great and awesome God, “the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations” (Deut 7:9), we cannot know Him exhaustively, but we can know Him truly and genuinely. We can know Him because He chooses to speak to us.

One means whereby God has revealed Himself is through His prophets, His preachers. These divinely called men were gifted by God both as forth-tellers and future-tellers on His behalf. Earl Kalland is correct, “Being the spokesman for God is the central characteristic of a prophet.”⁷ Moses highlights two aspects of the occupation of those who speak for God.

1) He speaks at God’s initiative 18:15

Moses informs us that it is the Lord (*Yahweh*) that raises up the prophets (Heb. *nabi*, “one who is called by a god”).⁸ The prophetic office is not something any man or any woman takes upon themselves. It is fully and completely at God’s initiative and His calling.

Further, these prophets (cf. 18:20, 22) will 1) be like Moses and 2) come from among the Hebrews themselves, “from among you, from your brothers.” As Moses, one of their own who faithfully declared the word of the Lord and they listened (at least some of the time!), so they are to listen to those who follow him who faithfully declare the word of the Lord. “The Lord your God will raise up for you a

⁷ Earl Kalland, *Deuteronomy*, EBC 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 121.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 123. See also “nabi,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 544.

prophet like me from among you...” The climatic one the Lord God raised up was His servant Jesus.

In John 8:28 the Lord Jesus said of His own prophetic ministry, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak just as the Father taught me.” He spoke, as do all true prophets, only at God’s initiative.

For those of us today called by God to proclaim His Word, our mandate is to be text-driven preachers who rightly handle the infallible and inerrant Word of God. Apart from this Word we have no message and basis by which to call our people to do anything. As Haddon Robinson well says, “When they [preachers] fail to preach the Scripture, they abandon their authority. No longer do they confront their hearers with a word from God.”⁹ Indeed, all they bring is another word from man, a word lacking divine authority, power and substance.

2) He speaks as God’s mediator

18:16-17

The prophet not only speaks at God’s initiative, he also speaks as God’s mediator. Verses 16-17 take us back to the giving of the Law as record in Deuteronomy 5:22-28. The people were terrified by the “glory and greatness” of *Yahweh*, by His voice and the fire out of which He spoke. They asked the Lord (“desired of the Lord”) to allow Moses to serve as a mediator on their behalf that they may not die. God commends them and honors their request noting, “They are right in what they have spoken” (v. 17; cf. 5:28). God then said in 5:29, “Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendent forever!”

⁹ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 20.

Moses, then, served in a mediatorial ministry as *Yahweh's* spokesperson to reveal God's word and will to the people. Those who followed him in the prophetic calling would serve in a like manner culminating in "the mediator" between God and man, "the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5). This mediator would serve not only as God's prophet, but also as God's priest (see the book of Hebrews). Here in Jesus Christ is God's voice we can hear and not die. Here in Jesus Christ is God's face we can see and not die. Here in Jesus Christ is the Word of *Yahweh* that "became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Who could have imagined the prophet the Lord God would raise up would also be God's Son!

"Moses promised the people that God would raise up other prophets as the nation needed them." And, he "was doing more than promise the whole line of prophets that the Lord would send; he was also announcing the coming of The Prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁰

II. God Speaks Through His Prophets And We Should Obey Them 18:18-19

Many student of the Bible have pointed out the numerous parallels and similarities between the life and ministry of Moses and that of Jesus of Nazareth. That our Lord is portrayed as a second and greater Moses in the gospel of Matthew, for example, is almost universally accepted. Samuel Schultz provides a helpful summary of these helpful parallels when he says,

In the New Testament era, Jesus was recognized as fulfilling the prediction by Moses (cf. Mt 21:11; Lk 7:16; Jn 5:46; Ac 3:22; 7:37; Heb 3:2-6). Jesus was like Moses in numerous ways. He was spared in infancy (Ex 2; Mt 2:13-23); He renounced a royal court (Heb 11:24-27; Phil 2:5-8); had compassion for the

¹⁰ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Equipped* (Colorado Springs: Christ Victor, 1999), 94-95.

people (Num 27:17; Mt 9:36); made intercession (Deu 9:18; Heb 7:25); spoke with God face to face (Ex 34:29-30; 2 Cor 3:7); and was mediator of a covenant (Deu 29:1; Heb 8:6-7). The greatest revelation of the Old Testament era came through Moses. This revelation was only surpassed in the coming of Christ, who not only revealed God's message but provided salvation through His death.¹¹

In our text, the emphasis is on divine revelation and Moses as the prophet and mediator of that revelation. Those who follow him will also mediate God's Word and because it is God's Word, the people who hear it have an obligation to receive it and obey it.

1) God gives the prophets the words to proclaim

18:18

Verse 18 parallels verse 15 in almost exactly the same words. However, a new and specific observation is made concerning those who mediate the Word of God at the Lord's initiative. God says: 1) "I will put my words in his mouth," and 2) "he shall speak to them all that I command him." The word the prophet proclaims is precise (God's words) and it is comprehensive ("all that I command").

I have often said that the best description of the substance of Scripture is "it is the Word of God written in the words of men." Such an affirmation finds support in Deuteronomy 18:15-22, especially verse 18. The prophet is called by God. The prophet is a mouthpiece for God. The prophet speaks exactly and completely all that the Lord commands him to speak. J. A. Thompson captures well the significance of this verse, "Gods method with His prophets was *I will put my words his mouth* (Je 1:9; 5:14; 20:8, 9, etc.). It is Yahweh who commissions and sends forth the prophet (Is 6:8). For that reason the prophet could say, 'Thus saith the Lord.'"¹²

¹¹ Samuel Schultz, *Deuteronomy: The Gospel of Love* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 64. See also Moishe Rosen, "A Prophet Like Unto Moses," in *Issues: A Messianic Jewish Perspective*, 11.4 (July 1997).

¹² J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 1974), 213.

For those of us called to the holy assignment of a modern day prophet, these are solemn and weighty words. Raymond Brown nails it when he writes, “The preacher’s task is not to confront the congregation with his own ideas but with the authoritative word of God.”¹³ God gives the prophets the word to proclaim. It is always to be His and never theirs! How we need to hear and heed this admonition when so much modern preaching is void of biblical content and theological substance.

2) **God expects His people then to respond** **18:19**

The prophet is the Lord God’s mouthpiece. His words have divine authority that demands our radical attention and obedience. “To reject the words that the prophet spoke was to reject God, and he would not permit such rebellion to go unchallenged.”¹⁴ Verse 19 is realistic in its assessment and ominous in its promise. The Lord acknowledges that there will be those who “will not listen to my words” that the prophet “shall speak in my name.” To say it again, “the people will not always fear the Lord and keep all His commandments that it might go well with them and with their descendents forever” (5:29). The people will not always “love the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their might” (6:5). God’s response? “I myself will require it of him. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrases, “I will personally hold [him] responsible.” Psalm 19:11 tell us there is “great reward” in keeping, obeying, and listening with a view of accepting, God’s word. On the other hand, there is great loss in disobeying and rejecting that Word. Christopher Wright is right, “those who heard the prophet heard God; whatever

¹³ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy*, BST (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 186.

¹⁴ Doug McIntosh, *Deuteronomy*, HOTC (Nashville: B&H, 2002), 224.

response they made to the prophet they made to God, and they would take the consequences.”¹⁵

And, as an aside, given the hearing that God commands His people to give all His prophets, what is the import of God’s words to Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration when the “voice from the cloud” said to them in the presence of Moses and Elijah concerning Jesus, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matt 17:5). God expects His people to respond in obedience to His word.

III. God Validates His Prophets And We Should Trust Them 18:20-22

When God raises up His prophets and puts His word in their mouths, we can be certain that Satan will raise up his prophets and put his word in their mouths. Moses has already warned the Hebrews about false prophets in 13:1-5. Jesus would do the same in Matthew 7:15-23; 24:11, 24. Paul would follow suit in 1 Timothy 4:1-5; Peter in 2 Peter 2:1-3; and John in 1 John 2:18-23; 4:1-6 and Revelation 13:11-18; 19:20. Even to the end of the age, the evil one will oppose the truth of God and counterfeit that truth deceiving those who do not exercise spiritual discernment. Wolves do come in sheep’s clothing as Jesus warned (Matt 7:15). What test might we apply then to discern the true prophet from the false, the genuine article from the counterfeit? Moses highlights two in particular for our consideration.

1) False prophets speak lies for other gods 18:20, 22

Moses warns us that self-proclaimed prophets may come on the scene claiming to speak for God. However, he warns us that they are presumptuous in their claim to

¹⁵ Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 218.

speak in the Lord's name. In other words, their appearance and declaration may be bold and even persuasive, but in actuality their words betray them because they are not consistent with what God has plainly revealed ("that I have not commanded him to speak"). Further, if their words lead to idolatry and allegiance to false gods, it is clear that they do not speak for Yahweh. Under the Mosaic economy, "that same prophet shall die" (cf. 13:15).

In addition, if they make a prediction "in the name of the Lord" of a future event and that event does not come true then 1) "that is a word that the Lord has not spoken," 2) "the prophet has spoken presumptuously," and 3) no matter how powerful the personality or compelling the orator, "you need not be afraid of him."

Consistency with the revealed Word and complete accuracy in predictive pronouncements will expose false prophets for the liars that they are! Peter Craigie points out that these criteria "represent the means by which a prophet gained his reputation as a true prophet and spokesman of the Lord. Over the course of a prophet's ministry, in matters important and less significant, the character of a prophet as a true spokesman of God would begin to emerge clearly."¹⁶

2) **True prophets speak truth for the One true God** **18:21-22**

Donna Ridge says there are at least four tests of a prophet: "(1) Do their predictions come true (Jer 28:9)? (2) Does the prophet have a divine commission (Jer 29:9)? (3) Are the prophecies consistent with Scripture (2 Pet 1:20-21; Rev 22:18-19)? (4) Do

¹⁶ Peter Craggie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 263.

the people benefit spiritually from the prophet's ministry (Jer 23:13-14, 32; 1 Pet 4:11)?”¹⁷

These four criteria expand but echo what Moses wrote. Moses takes for granted that we want to benefit spiritually (“if you say in your heart; ‘How may we know...!’”). Deep within we want to know what the Lord has said as well as “the word that the Lord has not spoken.” Again, the decisive factor is truth. Do the words of the prophet line up with divine revelation which, for us, is the totality of divine revelation which is contained in the 66 books of the Bible? And, if there is a predictive component to their message, does it come to pass and is it true? Gene Tucker plainly and accurately says, “A true prophet is, quite simply, one who tells the truth.”¹⁸

It was in Jesus Christ, that we see the true prophet of God in full truth, manifestation and glory. The people present when He fed the 5,000 (men) were correct, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world” (John 6:14). He spoke truth and only truth for the One true God. He is indeed the Word made flesh who has made the Father known (John 1:18). This is how Peter saw Him (Acts 3:22-23). This is how Stephen saw Him (Acts 7:37). This is how we should see Him too; Jesus “the Prophet who is to come into the world.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Donna R. Ridge, “False Prophets,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. eds. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Pub., 2003), 554. Harris, et al. list “Five certifying signs of a prophet,” (544-45). Their list is similar to that of Ridge.

¹⁸ Gene M. Tucker, “Expository Articles: Deuteronomy 18:15-22.” *Interpretation* 41 (July 1987): 292-297.

¹⁹ J. Daniel Hays, “If He Looks Like a Prophet and Talks Like a Prophet, Then He Must Be...” in Hess and Carroll, 57-69. Hays’ article is a response to Block in the same volume (17-56).

Conclusion

In John 5:39 Jesus said, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me.” The author of Hebrews would add, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” Again, who would have thought that the great prophet to come would also be God’s Son, not just a servant in God’s house, but a Son over God’s house (Heb 3:1-6)?

The wonderful Baptist preacher in London, Charles Spurgeon, captured perfectly what all Scripture is teaching concerning this prophet like Moses. He carefully and wonderfully informs us of what we need to know and what we need to do, when confronted with this prophet raised up by the Lord God.

The Lord knew that man would always be unable to hear his Maker’s voice and He, therefore, determined not only to speak by Moses, but to speak by His servants, the Prophets, raising up here, one, and there, another. And then He determined, as the consummation of His condescending mercy, that at the last He would put all the words He had to say to man into one heart and that word should be spoken by one mouth to men, furnishing a full, complete and unchangeable revelation of Himself to the human race! This He resolved to give by One of whom Moses had learned something when the Lord said to Him in the words of our text, “I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto you, and will put My words in His mouth; and He shall speak unto them all that I shall command Him.” We know assuredly that our Lord Jesus Christ is that Prophet like unto Moses by whom, in these last days, He has spoken unto us!... hear the Voice of God by this greatest of all Prophets... Brothers and Sisters, I beseech you not to reject the message which Jesus brings, seeing it is not His own, but the sure message of God! Trifle not with a single word which Jesus speaks, for it is the Word of the Eternal One! Despise not one single deed which He did, or precept which He commanded, or blessing which He brought, for upon all these there is the stamp of Deity!²⁰

²⁰ Charles Spurgeon, “The Prophet Like Unto Moses,” #1487. Delivered August 3, 1879. The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.