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# Deuteronomy 18— God's Chosen Prophet

By NORMAN C. HABEL

A survey of the periodical literature of the past 25 years reveals that Deut. 18 has neither been the object of close scrutiny nor the focal point of any significant controversies in the scholarly world.<sup>1</sup> While some scholars may consider the designation of Moses as a נָבִיא (prophet) in Deut. 18:15 an anachronism,<sup>2</sup> the pertinence of this passage for an appreciation of the prophetic movement of the Old Testament cannot be ignored. Nor can we avoid coming to grips with the New Testament allusions to the pericope under discussion. We shall attempt, within the brief scope of this essay, to analyze the meaning of Deut. 18 in its contextual setting and to discuss how the promises of the passage were fulfilled by God in the course of subsequent history.

## THE SETTING OF DEUTERONOMY

Any serious treatment of Deut. 18:15-22 demands an understanding and appreciation of the character of the Biblical book to which it belongs. Deuteronomy defines its own character as a sermonic exposition of that תּוֹרָה (1:5) which was an integral part of the covenant renewed by the Israel-

ite tribes on the plains of Moab (29:1) at Beth Peor (3:29; 4:46). The Sinaitic covenant had been broken at Beth Peor by an Israelite defection to certain fertility cults which worshiped Baal of Peor (Num. 25:1-5; cf. Deut. 4:3). A constant polemic against the practices of similar fertility religions of Canaan pervades the Book of Deuteronomy. Deut. 18 is closely related to this basic concern of the book, a concern which was prevalent from the time of Moses until the exile of Judah.

Inasmuch as Deuteronomy is associated with the question of covenant renewal, the structure of the book reflects, to some extent, the basic sequence of ancient Near Eastern covenant treaty forms.<sup>3</sup> In 1:1-5 Moses is identified as the covenant *mediator* and *spokesman* for Yahweh, the covenant Overlord of Israel (1:3). Deut. 1:6 to 3:29 incorporates the historical prolog in which the covenant Overlord outlines the history of His past relations with the vassal people in question and underscores those magnanimous deeds designed to evoke a response of gratitude and a sense of indebtedness on the part of the people. The conditions and regulations of the cove-

<sup>1</sup> The generally accepted position of Roman Catholic scholars on the passage is summarized by Roderick Mackenzie, "The Messianism of Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, XIX (1957), 301: "The prophet of Deut. 18:15-20 is of course to be understood as a collective figure (like the "king" in the previous chapter), individualized in such men as Samuel."

<sup>2</sup> For example, Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> For ancient Near Eastern covenant treaty forms see George Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: The Biblical Colloquium, 1955). Meredith Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1963), relates almost every phase of Deuteronomy to the covenant treaty forms and practices. For a more scholarly treatment see D. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963).

nant treaty are included in Deut. 12—26. The initial sermons in this book (4—11) deliberately relate the covenant in question to that of Sinai (Deut. 5) and forcefully exhort the Israelites to accept the way of life delineated by God's covenant instructions for those who would live in Canaan. These instructions, outlined in Deut. 12—26, are frequently designated the Deuteronomic Code. Deut. 18 is an integral part of this covenant code for life in Canaan. The blessings and curses usually affixed to these ancient covenant treaties have their counterpart here in the curses of Deut. 27 and the blessings of the next chapter. In the same context the covenant witnesses of heaven and earth are invoked when the final covenant alternative of life and death is posed for the Israelite tribes (30:19). Attendant upon the ceremony there were sometimes regulations pertaining to the perpetuation of the office of covenant mediator, the committal to writing of the covenant stipulations, the deposit of the covenant document in the local shrine, and the periodic reading of its contents. (Deut. 31)

The various regulations for life in Canaan (Deut. 12—26) which surround the pericope of Deut. 18:15-22 in their immediate application are not eschatological in nature. They speak of customs, practices, institutions, promises, and conditions which will involve Israel's daily activities within the confines of Canaan. These chapters are not direct predictive prophecies in the narrow sense but rather "the statutes and ordinances which you shall be careful to do in the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess" (12:1 RSV). The legislation concerning the future establishment of

the office of king is introduced by a similar expression, "When you come to the land which the Lord, your God, gives you . . ." (17:14 RSV). The numerous conditional clauses which pervade these chapters are typical of casuistic law and underscore their immediate historical relevance rather than any predictive character. "If" in many of these chapters can be legitimately translated "whenever." It must always be remembered that Deut. 18 is set in this context of casuistic law and of the paraenesis of the book as a whole.

#### THE CLOSER CONTEXT OF DEUT. 18:15-22

Deut. 17:14—18:22 offers regulations for *three institutions* in Canaan, that of king (17:14-20), levitical priest (18:1-8), and prophet (18:9-22). A fourth institution, that of judge, is mentioned in 17:9. The instructions dealing with the office of prophet are introduced by the recurring protasis, "When you come into the land which the Lord, your God, gives you . . ." (18:9 RSV). In other words, the prophet of whom the text speaks in its immediate application is a figure whose word will be directed to the people of God in Canaan. The Lord is to provide a **נָבִיא** precisely because the Israelites will be tempted to follow the numerous Canaanite modes of communication with the divine. It was the destiny of Israel as the people of God to be **קָדוֹשׁ**, ("holy," "unique") and **תָּמִים** ("complete," 18:13). This was a necessary corollary of Israel's election (Deut. 7). Thus the promise of a prophet like Moses, chosen to meet the needs of the Israelites, is quite naturally preceded by an urgent warning against Israelite participation in any Canaanite worship rites and, above all, by an appeal to shun all methods of divina-

tion and necromancy associated with the fertility cults of Canaan. Deut. 18:14 summarizes the relevant introduction to the promise of a prophet, "For these nations, which you are about to dispossess, give heed to soothsayers and diviners; but as for you, the Lord, your God, has not allowed you to do so." For Israel, God would provide His own spokesmen.

#### THE PROPHET OF DEUT. 18:15-18

The urgent need of Israel to learn the will of Yahweh is to be met through the divinely approved office of the prophet and not through any pagan means of divination. God promises, "I will raise up (אָקִים) a prophet." The special divine activity of "raising up" chosen personnel continues throughout the history of Israel (Judg. 2:16; 2 Sam. 7:12). The divinely appointed prophet of God dare not be Canaanite (even though the Canaanites may have appeared much more proficient in the techniques of prophecy and divination), but must be an Israelite, "from among you, from your brethren. . . ." Israel's need for a prophet also derives from the people's original request at Mount Horeb that someone mediate between them and Yahweh, the jealous and terrible God of fire, whose naked voice they were afraid to hear directly a second time (cf. Deut. 5: 23-27). Inasmuch as the chosen prophet is to take Moses' place as spokesman and mediator, he is "like Moses" (18:18a). The text in no sense demands that Moses' successor will be like Moses in greatness. The "likeness" consists in the role of the prophet as God's mediating spokesman, as the ensuing context confirms.

In contrast to the mode of operation championed by the Canaanite prophets and

diviners, who had devised a variety of techniques in their effort to control and manipulate the will of the gods, the Israelite prophet will be given the message he is to speak. God Himself will take the initiative; "I will put My words in his mouth." Nor is there any escape from the driving compulsion of that imposed דְּבַר (word), whether it be for good or for evil. The דְּבַר, moreover, is not usually a private oracle elicited on behalf of specific individuals but God's relevant proclamation for the people (18:18b). The unsolicited prophetic word carries its own authority; in the last analysis no attendant signs and miracles are necessary. If anyone refuses to heed the דְּבַר of the chosen prophet, he stands in jeopardy of God's personal retribution. The prophet represents God; his oracle has mysterious power. As a corollary to this jealous assertion of Yahweh, any prophet who dares to employ His name (keeping in mind the connotations of the שֵׁם ["name"] in the ancient Near East) as a means of propagating an oracle which God has not revealed, or any Israelite prophet who presumes to make oracular pronouncements in the name, and hence the authority, of a non-Israelite deity, is to die.

Thus each successive generation of God's people was called upon to test the prophets to see whether they were of God: either a prophet was "like Moses," or he was a false prophet. The touchstone for testing a prophet's claim to authority had two sides: whether the prophet's predictive oracles actually happened in accordance with the conditions outlined by God, and whether the prophet's declarations led to any breach of the covenant by worshiping other deities than Yahweh or by indulging

in similar aberrations (18:20-22; cf. 13:1-5; Jer. 28:9). Moreover, in Deut. 13 God indicates that false prophets may at times survive in Israel to test His people's exclusive devotion to His will.

In short, Deut. 18:15-22 enunciates the character of that succession of true prophetic witnesses like Moses which God has promised for future generations of His people, and of those false prophets, whether Canaanite diviners or Israelite imitators, against whom all Israelites must be on guard. Israel could look forward to the future with the assurance that God would continue to provide a spokesman and a mediator in the tradition of Moses. In other words, the Israelite audience was to understand the term נָבִיא in Deut. 18 first of all in a collective rather than an individual sense.

#### JOSHUA, A PROPHET LIKE MOSES

While there is no longer any strenuous debate among most scholars about the collective interpretation of the נָבִיא of Deut. 18 in its immediate sense, it is nevertheless profitable to reconsider some of those prophetic figures whose lives reflect an express fulfillment of the promise of a spokesman like Moses. In the case of Joshua a direct and conscious comparison between Moses and Joshua is apparent in the presentation of his life; Joshua is not only a prophet like Moses in terms of his office but also in terms of his greatness.

Joshua, the faithful servant (Ex. 33:11) and mighty warrior (Ex. 17:8-16), was appointed as Moses' successor to perpetuate the authority and spirit of Moses (Num. 27:15-23; Deut. 31:1-8; 34:9). The Book of Joshua develops a meaningful comparison between Moses and Joshua at many

points. The promises to Moses are repeated to Joshua. God insists, just "*as I was with Moses, so I will be with you*" (Joshua 1:5). Several of the tribes reply to Joshua's orders in terms reminiscent of Deut. 18: "*Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we will obey you; only may the Lord, your God, be with you, as He was with Moses. Whoever rebels against your commandment and disobeys your words, whatever you command him, shall be put to death*" (Joshua 1:17, 18 RSV; cf. the Hebrew wording of Deut. 18:19, 20). Just as the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea exalted Moses in the eyes of Israel (Ex. 14:31), the miraculous crossing of the Jordan (with its many parallels to the Exodus) led to the confirmation of Joshua in his office. Joshua 4:14 reads: "On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they stood in awe of him, *as they stood in awe of Moses*, all the days of his life" (cf. 3:7). Throughout the Book of Joshua it is God who takes the initiative, imparts His word to Joshua, and instructs him. The prophetic call falls upon Joshua from the beginning (1:1,2), and on one occasion he, like Moses, is confronted by the angel of Yahweh and must, like Moses before him, remove his shoes because he stands on holy ground. (5:13 to 15)

Other parallels between the life patterns of these two men could be cited. One event in particular demands further attention. In the covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem, Joshua operates as a covenant mediator similar to Moses at Horeb or in Moab. In so doing, Joshua mediates laws and stipulations from God which become binding legislation upon Israel through the public affirmation of the people in the

covenant ceremony (Joshua 24:1-28; note vv. 25, 26). The author of the Book of Joshua concludes his portrait of the prophet Joshua by giving him the title "the servant of the Lord" (24:29), a term used elsewhere to designate the prophets of Yahweh (2 Kings 17:13). Surely Joshua qualifies as a prophet "like Moses" in more areas than those specifically outlined in Deut. 18.

#### THE PROPHETIC SUCCESSION

Numerous prophets of the Old Testament explicitly claim that the Word of God has come to them, that Yahweh has commanded them to speak, and that God will call for retribution upon any Israelite who dares to oppose their oracles. Samuel, like Joshua and Moses, was a covenant mediator, a lawgiver, an intercessor, and a prophet to whom God revealed Himself by His דְּבַר (1 Sam. 3:21). Micaiah's word from God echoes the thoughts of Deut. 13 and 18. The true prophet is here compelled by the "Word" to stand alone before King Ahab, while a band of false prophets arises to test Israel. Micaiah concludes, "If you return in peace, the Lord has not spoken by me" (1 Kings 22:13-28 RSV), and King Ahab fell in the battle, as Micaiah had announced.

Amos insists that God takes the initiative whenever He wishes to reveal His heavenly plans to a human mediator, but once He has spoken to a prophet, the "Word" is in his mouth, and he has no way of escape, he cannot but prophesy (Amos 3:7, 8). When Micah discusses his role as an inspired prophet of God, he compares himself with the false prophets, diviners, and seers in a manner which recalls the comparison made in Deut. 18:

9-22. Micah insists that prophetic inspiration is not for private ends, that is, it is not to produce ecstasy, to practice divination, or to sell palatable political oracles, but above all the prophet is to preach, to speak the Word which God has given, and in his own case that meant, first of all, "to declare to Jacob his transgression" (Micah 3:8). The overriding concepts of the divine Word implanted in the prophet's mouth, the compulsion to speak, and the authority of that Word are explicit in Ezekiel also. Ezekiel even eats the scroll to symbolize the truth "that you shall speak My words to them" (2:7). He is compelled to speak to the exiles of Israel, "whether they hear or refuse to hear" (3:11). In the end, however, the prophet's Word would be vindicated as authoritative, and "they would know that a prophet has been among them." (33:33)

The call of the prophet Jeremiah is not only remarkably similar to the call of Moses but seems to express an implicit fulfillment of the oracle of Deut. 18 under discussion. In particular God says to Jeremiah, "Whatever I command you, you shall speak" (as in Deut. 18:18), and "I have put My words in your mouth" (as in Deut. 18:18). God further promises that while the people may want to put Jeremiah to death as a false prophet He will protect him (1:8, 18 f.). Jeremiah was convinced that the Word of the Lord "came to him" and that he was possessed by the Word in such a way that he was unable to keep silent (15:16; 20:8). He was unwavering in his stand as God's spokesman (26:12 to 15), condemning the false prophets who presumed to speak God's Word (23:18-22), foretelling the exposure of their duplicity when the events predicted failed

to materialize and using the same touchstone of fulfillment to test the words of these prophets (28:9). When the fate of Israel was sealed, Jeremiah was told he could no longer function as mediator and intercessor to God (14:11; 11:14). Just as Moses stands as the monolithic prophetic figure at the Exodus, the great day of redemption in Israel, so Jeremiah stands as the mighty prophet at the fall of Jerusalem, the great day of judgment upon God's people.

#### THE COMING PROPHET<sup>4</sup>

God kept His promise; many spokesmen of God arose who, like Moses, were prophets and mediators for God's people and thereby fulfilled the basic requirements of the promise of Deut. 18. We have mentioned but a few of the most obvious examples. After Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the voice of prophecy allegedly ceased from Israel.<sup>5</sup> Aspirants to the prophetic office were discredited (cf. Zech. 13:1-6). In the light of this development the prophecy of Joel (2:28-32) that the return of prophecy would be one of the decisive signs of the advent of the eschatological age took on new significance (cf. Acts 2). The appearance of an authentic prophet would therefore be portentous indeed; he would be the herald of God's final irruption into history. In some circles the reappearance of the prophet Elijah as the

forerunner of God's final advent was eagerly awaited (Mal. 4:5; Eccles. 48:10 ff.). In other areas the coming of an eschatological prophet to precede the arrival of the Messiah was also expected (cf. John 1:25; Mark 8:28). The sectarians of Qumran fostered this hope in particular (Manual of Discipline, 9:11). It is noteworthy that a relevant section of Deut. 18 was found in the Testimonia of Messianic passages discovered in Qumran cave 4.<sup>6</sup> In general, however, the text of Deut. 18, as such, does not play a major part in the eschatological expectations of the intertestamental period. In some of the literature of this period the Messiah is identified with the prophetic herald. In the Testament of Levi, the Messiah is entitled "the Prophet of the Highest." Rabbinic sources preserve a further tradition of the Messiah as a "deliverer like Moses." The Samaritans seem to have viewed Deut. 18 as one of the major prophetic oracles of Scripture. Its insertion in the decalog of the Samaritan Pentateuch substantiates this judgment. The Samaritans apparently expected the return of a "prophet like Moses" or of Moses *redivivus*.

#### A PROPHET AND THE PROPHET

The prophetic  $\text{נָבִיא}$  of Yahweh did not lose its dynamic efficacy with the passage of time; the promise of God remained alive and valid to meet the ultimate needs of God's people. The promise of an eschatological prophet like Moses was therefore also expected on the basis of Deut. 18, even though the eschatological intent was not explicitly enunciated when this oracle

<sup>4</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), offers an excellent summary of many of the intertestamental and New Testament passages relating to this subject. For the rabbinic expectations see J. Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel* (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

<sup>5</sup> George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), I, 237-241. Note also 1 Macc. 4:46; 14:41; 9:27; Ps. 74:9.

<sup>6</sup> J. M. Allegro, "Further Messianic References in Qumran Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXV (1956), 174 ff.

was first given. We must be careful, however, to distinguish between the preliminary fulfillment of Deut. 18:15-22 in the initial corporate sense of the passage and its climactic fulfillment by one final Prophet. Preparation for this interpretation and fulfillment of Deut. 18:15-22 in the New Testament can also be seen in many of the hopes and concepts current in the intertestamental period, some of which we noted above. Such a statement does not nullify our affirming that in the total dispensation and plan of God the eschatological meaning was latent in the promise of Deut. 18.

Thus John the Baptist could be viewed, on the one hand, as a prophet in the succession of Old Testament prophets, inasmuch as "the Word of the Lord came to John" (Luke 3:2) as it did to Moses or Jeremiah and inasmuch as he disclaimed being *the* final Prophet (John 1:21). On the other hand, John is elsewhere exalted as "more than a prophet," the herald of God's decisive, historical appearance (Matt. 11:9 f.). In this sense he fulfills the promise and tradition of Elijah's return (Matt. 11:13 f.; 17:10 ff.). From the beginning he is hailed as "the prophet of the Highest." (Luke 1:76)

Similarly Jesus was regarded both as *a* prophet and as *the* eschatological Prophet. In His role as *a* prophet Jesus becomes the most illustrious and perfect fulfillment of the promise of a prophet like Moses. As *the* Prophet Jesus fulfills the דָּבָר under discussion in a dimension that only His advent *fully* discloses. Jesus interprets the passage eschatologically and Christologically; all previous interpretations remain partial.

Jesus' actions often reflect a similarity

with the symbolic actions of the classical prophets (John 2:13-22); His miracles, too, belong to the category of prophetic signs and evoke the ejaculation, "A great prophet has risen among us" (Luke 7:16). His oracles have power and authority (Matt. 7:29). The crowds acknowledge His distinctive prophetic character (Matt. 21:46). As Jesus enters Jerusalem, He is aware of His role as a prophet about to be killed in the prophetic tradition (Matt. 23:37). By some Jesus is also identified as *the* long-awaited Prophet. One segment was apparently tempted to identify Christ with Elijah (Mark 6:15; 8:28). Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as the Messiah of David is accompanied by the public confession "He is *the* Prophet Jesus, from Nazareth." Elsewhere the people acknowledge Jesus as "*the* Prophet who is to come into the world" when He, like Moses, effects a miraculous feeding in the wilderness (John 6:14). Apart from the two references to Deut. 18 in the early chapters of Acts (3:22, 23; 7:37) the concept of Jesus as *the* eschatological Prophet is virtually absent outside the gospels in the New Testament, but reappears in early noncanonical Christian writings. Alongside the themes mentioned above, the discerning reader will notice numerous places in the New Testament where Jesus is compared with Moses, not in the sense of being a "prophet like Moses" according to the promise of Deut. 18, but as "the One greater than Moses" whose words and authority superseded those of Moses. (Matt. 5—7; 19:3-9; John 6:32-35)

#### GOD RAISED UP HIS SERVANT

Stephen's quotation of Deut. 18:15 in Acts 7:37 treats the passage as a prophetic oracle which finds its ultimate fulfillment



in Jesus of Nazareth. Suggested Samaritan associations in Stephen's sermon would support this conclusion.<sup>7</sup> It is of interest, moreover, that the Messiah expected by the Samaritan woman is also a prophetic figure (John 4:25). Peter's sermon in Acts 3 asserts that the testimony of the prophets leads to Jesus Christ. From Deut. 18 Peter discerns the divine promise of a definitive spokesman for His people. He indicates that the fulfillment of this oracle is especially meaningful for his audience, because God has "raised up" for them a "servant." A double *entendre* of Christological import is involved. "Raised up" (ἀνίστημι) in Acts 3:26 and the hiphil of קָוִים, אָקִים, in Deut. 18:18 can mean both "cause to happen or fulfill" and "resurrect," while "servant" can have reference either to a prophetic servant or to the suffering Servant. The passion and resurrection of Christ are thereby suggested. This explicit fulfillment of Deut. 18:15-22 in the person and life of Jesus Christ in no way precludes the earlier collective interpretation of the passage.

In conclusion we must reaffirm the dynamic nature of the promises of God as

<sup>7</sup> Martin H. Scharlemann, "Stephen: A Re-appraisal." Unpublished doctoral dissertation presented to the faculty of Union Theological Seminary, April 1964.

well as their apparently inexhaustible depth and intent. A divine דְּבָרִים is not necessarily expended after an initial fulfillment. Hence it must be reaffirmed that the directives and attendant promises concerning a prophet like Moses had reference to an immediate fulfillment in a succession of Israelite prophetic figures. The early Israelites quite naturally understood this passage in this sense. In the economy of God, however, the outcome of this promise included wider ramifications. Both John and Jesus were prophets in the succession of prophetic figures like Moses. In these individuals the inherent eschatological intent of the promise of Deut. 18 was fully revealed.

The "raising up" of Jesus Christ as the prophetic "Servant" in accordance with other oracles of Scripture confirms the deeper import of Deut. 18:15-22. The overarching plan of God included both the primary and the ultimate sense of the passage. Jesus, our Lord, discloses the depths of this promise of a "spokesman like Moses," for as the writer to the Hebrews affirms, "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son."

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