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Moses and Jesus: The Old Adorns the New

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S. Kent Brown

Reading the pages of 3 Nephi leads one naturally to conclude that the resurrected Jesus regularly and consciously drew the attention of his hearers to Moses. But Jesus' attention was not intended merely to tell us what an important and wonderful prophet Moses had been. Rather, it is evident that Jesus' chief intent was to say that the ministry of Moses had foreshadowed or anticipated his own. Indeed, Jesus quoted an important prophecy of Moses and applied it to himself. The prophecy is recorded in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 18, and speaks of a future prophet, like Moses, whom the Lord would raise up among his people. In 3 Nephi 20:23, the resurrected Savior says: "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" (see also Deut 18:15, 18–19).

With these words, Jesus established the connection between Moses and himself. Moses had prophesied that a notable prophet would arise among his people. Moreover, that prophet would be like Moses himself. By quoting this passage, Jesus made it clear that Moses had been speaking of him. Thus, there exists an obvious prophetic connection between the two,

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including the fact that Jesus would somehow be like Moses. Hence, we are justified in speaking of Moses as a type of the Savior.¹

In a related vein, ancient authors, including the New Testament gospel writers, have noticed the resemblances between Jesus' ministry and that of Moses. For instance, Matthew recounts that like Moses, who ascended the mount to receive the law, Jesus ascended a mount where he dealt with the law (Matt 5:1). But in contrast to Moses who went up *to receive* the law, Jesus went up *to give* a new law, a law which is incorporated into his Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7). In addition, in his gospel account Matthew seems to have consciously divided the teachings of Jesus into five segments, thus emphasizing the similarity between Jesus' teachings and the five books of Moses, which are the repository of the Mosaic law. To achieve this purpose, at five key points in his narrative Matthew has used the following phrase, or a similar one, "And . . . when Jesus had ended these sayings," thus arranging Jesus' teachings into five sections (see 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

Having said this much, I would like to point out a subtle distinction between the treatment of Jesus' ministry and teachings in the New Testament and that which we find in the Book of Mormon. In the case of Matthew's gospel, to which I have made brief reference, Jesus himself is partly responsible for making the connection between Moses and himself. After all, it was Jesus who went up on the mount to deliver his sermon that is recorded in Matthew chapters 5 through 7, an action

¹ Because Jesus does not quote the passage precisely as it reads in the present text of Deuteronomy, the question arises: Was Jesus quoting the passage verbatim from the version preserved on the plates of brass or was he merely citing the passage as he knew it from the Hebrew Bible and then adjusting it to suit his present purposes? The issue, of course, is impossible to resolve. However, for an example of Jesus' use of the latter technique, see his composite quotation of passages from Isa 61:1–2 and 58:6 in Luke 4:18–19.

The issue naturally arises whether Deuteronomy, or a version of it, was part of the collection of scripture on the plates of brass. The answer has to be affirmative. Jesus here quotes a passage as if it were already known to his hearers. Moreover, in connection with the disappearance of Alma (Alma 45:18–19) there is discussion of the account of the death of Moses, an account that appears only at the end of Deuteronomy (34:5–7).

which consciously imitated the act of Moses ascending Mount Sinai. Moreover, we can recall that Jesus specifically addressed issues in his Sermon on the Mount that are subjects of the Mosaic law, subjects such as how one responds to one's enemies, what the definition of adultery is, and under what circumstances one properly swears an oath. For drawing these connections to Moses and to the Mosaic law, Jesus himself was responsible. However, Jesus did not write the gospel of Matthew. Matthew did. And it is Matthew who was responsible for making the further comparison between Moses and Jesus in his gospel by arranging the teachings of Jesus into five segments in imitation of the five books of Moses. As a result, we can conclude that not only Jesus, but also those who wrote about him in the New Testament drew analogies between him and Moses. And, using the Sermon on the Mount as an example, the intent of those analogies seems to have been to underscore the notion that in the person of Jesus one greater than Moses had come.

Let us now leave the New Testament and return to 3 Nephi. I believe that we have said enough in these brief examples from the New Testament to grasp the point that both Jesus and the authors of the New Testament were interested in making comparisons between Jesus and Moses. In the Book of Mormon the case is different. In every instance that I have found in 3 Nephi, it was the resurrected Jesus, either by word or action, who drew attention to connections between Moses and himself. Certainly Mormon, the compiler of the work, did not. We have already seen in the prophecy Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy concerning the prophet God would raise up "like unto" Moses that the resurrected Jesus consciously linked himself to Moses (3 Nephi 20:23). But there is much more.

I shall next draw attention to prophecies about the last days that were uttered by Isaiah, specifically those found in chapter 52, a chapter from which the resurrected Jesus quoted lavishly when he was speaking of the house of Israel and the Gentiles in

the last days (3 Nephi 16, 20–21).² Isaiah 52 is known as a chapter dealing with the so-called “new exodus” or “second exodus,” that is, the gathering of the house of Israel in the last days. In its own way, the new exodus of Israel is to resemble the old exodus under Moses because of its miraculous character and because the results will be the same: a return to the land promised to Israel’s forefathers and a return of the covenants that the Lord had made with them. If one were to read Isaiah 52 with care, one would see allusions in almost every verse to the exodus that took place in the days of Moses.³

A third ingredient, in addition to the prophecy in Deuteronomy 18 and the quotations from Isaiah on the new exodus, consists of Jesus’ role as lawgiver in his sermon at the temple in the land of Bountiful. Clearly his words disclose a close connection between himself and Moses. But they also communicate the fact that he is greater than Moses. Let us consider the following: “Behold, I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel; therefore, the law in me is fulfilled, for I have come to fulfil the law; therefore it hath an end” (3 Nephi 15:5). Moses was chiefly the transmitter of the Law, its recipient. Jesus on the other hand was its giver, its author. Further, it was only the divine Jesus who could fulfil the law which he himself had given, a task that Moses could not perform as the bearer of the law, carrying it as he did from the premortal Jesus—known as Jehovah—to his people who were

² In addition, Jesus quoted from the fourth and fifth chapters of Micah, chapters that also speak of the “second exodus” or “new exodus.”

³ For instance, verse 2 of Isaiah 52 speaks of “the bands of thy neck,” clearly a reference to enslavement. Verse 3 continues the same imagery of slavery by reference to selling oneself “for nought,” a condition of servitude that poor people frequently faced when they were unable to pay their debts. Moreover, the reference to redemption “without money” in the same verse echoes the rescue of the Hebrew slaves by the Lord. The command to depart in verse 11 recalls the departure of the Israelites from Egypt. Further allusions could be multiplied. The only verses not quoted by the resurrected Jesus are Isaiah 52:4–5, verses wherein the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt is described. While not all of the following match exactly our present Old Testament texts, the passages quoted by Jesus in 3 Nephi chapters 16, 20 and 21 are Isa 52:8–10; Micah 5:8–9; 4:12–13; Deut 18:15; Isa 52:1–3, 6–8, 9–10, 11–15; 3 Nephi 16:18–20; 20:16–19; 20:23, 32, 34–35; 20:36–38; 20:39–40; 20:41–45; 21:8.

camped at the base of the Mount Sinai (a summary of this topic can be found in Seely 2:720–21).

As if this were not enough, the resurrected Jesus said more: “Behold, I am the law, and the light. Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live; for unto him that endureth to the end will I give eternal life” (3 Nephi 15:9). The connections here to Moses and the exodus of the children of Israel are compelling. First, Jesus identified himself as the law. But he was and is much more. He is also the light. What does this recall to our minds from the exodus? Does it not remind us of the pillar of fire that was visible at night above the sacred tabernacle during the years of Israel’s wandering and camping in the wilderness? (see Ex 13:21; 14:24; Num 14:14; compare Ex 14:20). Further, Jesus says that we are to look to him and, if we endure well, we shall live. What do these concepts recall? On one level, they recall the brass serpent on a pole that was lifted up for all who had been bitten by serpents to see. Moreover, it was the Lord’s promise through Moses that those who looked to the raised serpent would live and not die (Num 21:4–9; 1 Nephi 17:41; 2 Nephi 25:20; compare the following passages in which the brass serpent on the pole is likened to Jesus on the cross: John 3:14–15; Alma 33:19–22; Hel 8:14–15). We can see, therefore, that virtually every word that Jesus said in this verse recalls a dimension of Israel’s experience while under the leadership of Moses.

A fourth element arises from Jesus’ miraculous provision of bread and wine to the multitude on the second day of his visit. This event is thrown into relief by the fact that on day one he had asked the disciples to bring bread and wine to feed the multitude (3 Nephi 18:1–3). On the second day it was different. The scriptural record recounts that “there had been no bread, neither wine, brought by the disciples, neither by the multitude; but he [Jesus] truly gave unto them bread to eat, and also wine to drink” (20:6–7). Can one miss the connection back to the experience of Moses and the children of Israel? We first note that the Lord had preserved the lives of the Israelites by mirac-

ulously providing water for them when Moses struck a rock in the desert. Actually, a similar miracle took place three times (see Ex 15:22–25 for the healing of the waters of Marah; 17:1–7 and Num 20:2–11 for instances of Moses striking a rock in order to bring forth water). Second, the book of Exodus informs us that after the Israelites had spent two weeks in the desert and had run out of food, the Lord generously provided bread, or manna, in the desert for the entire period that they wandered and camped there (see 16:1–6). Third, if we are not convinced that the bread and wine exhibit a link backwards in time to the period of the exodus, then we should consider the New Testament account of Jesus breaking the bread and blessing the wine during the Last Supper with his twelve apostles, an event during which Jesus instituted the emblems of the sacrament among his followers in the Old World. At this point, two questions are in order. Was not the Last Supper a Passover meal? Although the gospel of John seems to hold that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal, the Synoptic gospels are unanimous in affirming that it was (see Matt 26:17–19; Mark 14:12–16; Luke 22:7–13). Further, does not the Passover meal celebrate the deliverance of Moses and the children of Israel from bondage? The answers to these questions, of course, are affirmative. In this light, then, we readily see the connections between Jesus' actions among the Nephites and Lamanites and the earlier actions of the Lord for the children of Israel in preserving them from thirsting and starving in the desert.

A final, and perhaps the most intriguing component of our comparison, is grounded in an important and rather common legal function in the ancient world, that of one person sending an envoy or representative to recover a third person who has been enslaved in a distant place. The opening of the exodus account brims with the legal essentials required in cases wherein one seeks the release of another. In this instance, it was the Lord who sought the release of the children of Israel through his agent Moses.

In all such cases, the agent had to bear credentials from the sender in order to prove who he was and whom he represented. The reasons were twofold. First, the captor had to be convinced that the agent had authority to negotiate the release of the one held captive. Second, the captive too had to be reassured that the agent represented the person who was seeking the release, particularly if the agent was not known to the captive. Hence, we see the need for the agent to bear credentials which prove that he or she is an authorized representative of the one seeking the release of the captive. In the case of Moses, it is clear that he understood the need for such credentials. On the Lord's part, he willingly provided them. For as soon as Moses had been called at the burning bush to "deliver [the Israelites] out of the hand of the Egyptians" (Ex 3:8), he asked to know the Lord's name, a name that would be recognized by the Hebrew slaves. As the account says, the Lord revealed to him the name "I AM THAT I AM." Then the Lord instructed Moses, "Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you" (3:14). But the Lord gave to Moses more than his name, because the name would only serve to convince the Hebrew slaves of Moses' authority, and Pharaoh certainly would not accept the name as an indicator of legal or divine prerogatives. Hence, Moses was given power to cast down his staff, turning the staff into a snake. This miraculous power was exhibited both to the children of Israel (4:1-4, 30) and later to Pharaoh (7:9-12). For the enslaved Israelites, however, Moses received other powers or credentials from the Lord that were designed to convince them of his authority, namely, the power to make his hand leprous and the power to turn water to blood (4:6-9). This latter, of course, was subsequently exhibited to Pharaoh and the Egyptians (7:19-21). In the end, then, Moses bore credentials both to Pharaoh—the captor—and to the Hebrews—the captives—in the form of extraordinary powers from the Lord, who sought the release of the captives.

When we turn to the scene described for us in 3 Nephi, we are able to see rather quickly that all of the required elements

are present. We first must ask who the envoy was. In one sense, there was none. In another sense, we find the most important envoy ever to come to this world. In the first sense, the resurrected Jesus came for himself. He sent no one as his representative or ambassador. In the second sense, it was the Father who sent the Savior as envoy on his errand to the Nephites and Lamanites (see 3 Nephi 11:11; 17:4; 18:27).

A second question concerns the identity of the captor in 3 Nephi. Two possible answers appear. One consists of the devil and his angels. In this connection, one should contemplate the following passage: “Wo, wo, wo unto this people; wo unto the inhabitants of the whole earth except they shall repent; for the devil laugheth, and his angels rejoice, because of the slain of the fair sons and daughters of my people” (3 Nephi 9:2). These words were spoken by the voice that was heard throughout the land during the terrifying three days of darkness that followed the three hours of devastating storm and earthquakes. If one is looking for a living captor, one need look no further than the devil himself. But there is a second answer, and, in a way, it may make more sense. A hint of it is found in the words that we have just read. When the voice used the verb *repent*, it brought its hearers to the other captor, namely, their sins. For in the same passage, speaking of those who had been slain, the voice went on to say, “And it is because of their iniquity and abominations that they are fallen.” In this light, perhaps a better way to ask the question is, *what* is the captor? As a partial response and for more light on this subject, we should examine a passage which the Savior quoted from Isaiah 52. It reads, “For thus saith the Lord: Ye have sold yourselves for naught, and ye shall be redeemed without money” (3 Nephi 20:38; see also Isa 52:3). Here it becomes clear that those who are to be “redeemed without money” had “sold” themselves for nothing of value. Knowing the general tenor of Isaiah 52 to be that of the second or new exodus, one chief meaning would be that such persons had sold themselves into bondage, a bondage not unlike that of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. On a spiritual level, the reference

would be to persons who had sold themselves into spiritual bondage, or sin.

The case is clinched by Jesus' words spoken on day two of his visit and recorded in 3 Nephi 20:26. The resurrected Lord declared that the reason the Father had sent him was "to bless you [Nephites and Lamanites] in turning away every one of you from his iniquities." In light of this understanding and the earlier one about the devil and his angels, one must conclude that the captor or captors consisted of the devil and one's sins. It is from these that Jesus came to deliver his Nephite and Lamanite brothers and sisters.

If, then, Jesus was the envoy or representative who came in his own name and in that of the Father and if his purpose was to rescue his people from both Satan and their own sinful state, what, we might ask, did he bring as his credentials? We need not look far. He bore the proofs of his rescue mission in his own body. One need only repeat his words of invitation to the spellbound crowd who had gathered at the temple in Bountiful on the first day of his visit: "Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet" (3 Nephi 11:14). It is important to notice that it was the scars of the wounds inflicted during his crucifixion that the resurrected Jesus wanted the crowd to feel. Why? There was a reason, and he spelled it out in his next words: "That ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world" (v 14). Let me suggest that what the crowd would learn when they touched his old wounds, if the spirit of testimony were not present, would be that he had some deep scars. Nothing more. However, because of the spiritual dimension of the experience, Jesus' hearers would gain the testimony that he was who he said he was, namely, "the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth" and that he had "been slain for the sins of the world." From the account in 3 Nephi we learn that it happened as he said it would. For after "they had all gone forth, and did see with their eyes and did feel with their

hands,” they “did know of a surety and did bear record, that it was he, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come” (3 Nephi 11:15). It therefore becomes clear that Jesus carried two sets of credentials, as it were. One set was embedded in his body and consisted of the scars of his crucifixion. The other was evidently the power of the Spirit that brought testimonies to those who went forward and touched him—who “witnessed for themselves” (v 16). As I read the narrative, the overwhelming character of this physical and spiritual experience led those in the crowd to do the only thing that they could do in such a sacred setting: to sing. Now I realize that verse 16 says that “they did cry out with one accord.” Why do I conclude, then, that they sang? I do so for two reasons, context and unison. In my view, the sacred moment described here would invite song, even if it were loud singing, rather than calling out in a loud voice. Hebrew verbs of speech, even of loud speech, can be translated as references to singing, depending on the context. And I personally believe that the context warrants this understanding. Further, the context is defined by the implication that the crowd spoke in unison, for we are told that it was “with one accord” that they voiced their feelings. While it is possible that they simply recited aloud the words recorded in verse 17, it seems just as likely that they sang them. Perhaps significantly, indicators exist in the Book of Mormon that songs and hymns formed an important part of Nephite worship (see Brown 1:163–80).

The credentials of the resurrected Jesus included more than the physical and spiritual dimensions that his hearers experienced that day. They also included a name, the same name that Moses carried from the holy mount into the Hebrew slave camps. It was the name I AM. Please notice the words with which Jesus began his visit in the New World: “Behold, I AM” (3 Nephi 11:10; emphasis added). Of course, the fuller statement is, “Behold, I AM Jesus Christ” (emphasis added). Lest one say to me that I have made this up, please observe a few statements of Jesus about himself in 3 Nephi that sound very

much like what we read in the gospel of John: “And behold, I am the light and the life of the world” (11:11); “I am the God of Israel” (11:14); “Behold I am the law, and the light” (15:9); “Behold, I am the light” (18:16); “Behold, I am he of whom Moses spake” (20:23; see also 12:1–2; 18:24; 20:19, 31, 39; 27:27). Let me observe that scholars of John’s gospel are agreed that the so-called “I am” sayings of Jesus, which are quoted in that gospel, are all references back to the divine name that was revealed to Moses at the burning bush. That is to say, whenever Jesus used the “I am” clause of himself—whether to say that he was the light of the world, the resurrection and the life, or the true bread come down from heaven—he was consciously recalling the divine name and applying it to himself. He was therefore saying that one of his names is I AM and that he was the same person who had called Moses to be a prophet at the burning bush. In this light, I suggest that the same concepts apply in what Jesus said to his Nephite and Lamanite hearers (see Harris). In my view, the case is clinched by Jesus’ words in 3 Nephi 15:5: “Behold, I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel.” Who else could this have been except Jehovah, the great I AM, the premortal Jesus?

Conclusion

Let me offer some concluding remarks. As a person who grew up on the Bible, so to speak, I have been deeply impressed—even astonished at times—by what I have found in the pages of the Book of Mormon. By focusing on a single thread, that of the connections between Moses and Jesus, we have been able to explore the meaning of a number of passages whose depth and richness continue to unfold. The broad ties with the Old Testament, particularly with those of the era of Moses and the continuities with Jesus’ ministry in Palestine, form a luxurious tapestry which portrays the spiritual strength and consistency that the resurrected Jesus brought to his Nephite and Lamanite brothers and sisters. Perhaps the best reward of

all for studying 3 Nephi is that we are permitted to see the resurrected Lord and hear his words in a firsthand, personal manner. For me, in 3 Nephi, more than in any other scriptural source, Jesus becomes alive, real, complete with his wondrous quality of divine love, a love which brought him to rescue all of us from the grasp of Satan and from our own sinfulness, a rescue mission which we all desperately need. And the power of the resurrected Savior to deliver us from all bondage, physical or spiritual, is real.

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