

The Test of a Prophet  
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The word *prophet* translates the Hebrew word נָבִי *nabi* (Grk. προφήτης *prophetes*), which means “speaker, herald, preacher,”<sup>1</sup> and refers to one who served as the spokesman for another. For example, נָבִי *nabi* was used of Aaron who was the spokesman for Moses (Ex 7:1-2). When called of God, the prophet communicated a message directly from the Lord. Sometimes the prophet engaged in *forthtelling*, in which he addressed sinful behavior within a community, calling God’s people to stop their evil practices and turn to righteous living. But sometimes the prophet engaged in *foretelling*, in which he revealed the future actions of God, either for judgment or salvation (i.e., The Exodus, the Rapture of the Church, the Tribulation, Millennial Kingdom, etc.). The prophets were primarily men, but did include women such as Miriam (Ex 15:20), Deborah (Judg 4:4), Huldah (2 Ki 22:14), and Anna (Luke 2:36). God’s prophets received His revelation directly and then communicated it to others (Ex 4:12; Jer 1:9; Amos 1:3), and sometimes they served as intercessors to God (Gen 20:7; Ex 32:10-14; 1 Sam 12:17, 19). Throughout Scripture there were true prophets to be obeyed (Deut 18:18; 34:10-11; 1 Sam 3:20; 2 Ch 25:15; 28:9; Hag 1:13; Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11) and false prophets to be ignored (Deut 13:1-5; 18:21-22; Neh 6:12-13; Jer 23:25-28; Matt 7:15; 24:24; Acts 13:6; 2 Pet 2:1-3; 1 John 4:1-3; Rev 2:20). In the NT, the gift of prophecy was for the edification of others, as Paul wrote, “one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation” (1 Cor 14:3).

It is important to understand that prophetic revelation always originates with God, as the prophet is merely the mouthpiece of the Lord. The Lord told Moses, “I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say” (Ex 4:12). To Isaiah the Lord said, “I have put My words in your mouth and have covered you with the shadow of My hand” (Isa 51:16a). And He told Jeremiah, “Behold, I have put My words in your mouth” (Jer 1:9b). We’re not exactly sure how this happened; however, what is clear, is that the words the prophet spoke originated with God. The apostle Peter stated, “No prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet 1:21; cf. 1 Sam 10:6; 19:20). The word *moved* translates the Greek word φέρω *phero*, which means “to bear or carry from one place to another.”<sup>2</sup> Luke used the word φέρω *phero* to refer to ship that were propelled by a wind (Acts 27:15, 17). Paul wrote, “when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe” (1 Th 2:13). Prophecy that was written became Scripture. And the prophets

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 661–662.

<sup>2</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1051.

who wrote were not robots who merely dictated what God revealed, but maintained their personality, literary style, emotion, and volition.

In the OT, Moses knew there would be false prophets that would arise and seek to lead God's people away from their covenant agreement with the Lord. Concerning the false prophets, God said, they "are prophesying falsehood in My name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds" (Jer 14:14; cf. Jer 23:16, 21). This deception derives from Satan and his demons who are active in the world and constantly seeking to subvert God's activities and programs. God, in His sovereignty, permits Satan to have his way for a time. Ultimately, false prophets are agents of Satan and can appear as messengers of light (2 Cor 11:14-15). But God has equipped His people to be able to identify false prophets so they can be rejected. In Deuteronomy, Moses gave two objective tests that could be applied to the person who claimed to be a prophet and said, "Thus says the Lord."

**First was the doctrinal test.** In this test, there would appear someone who claimed to be "a prophet or a dreamer of dreams" (Deut 13:1), and would even perform a miraculous sign or wonder (Deut 13:2a). The miraculous sign or wonder performed by the false prophet functioned as a means of persuading others. However, the ability to perform a sign or wonder by itself proves nothing. When Moses was executing God's plagues upon Egypt, it is recorded three times "the magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret arts" (Ex 7:10-11; cf., 7:21-22; 8:6-7). Jesus warned, "false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect" (Matt 24:24). And Paul spoke of the coming Antichrist, "whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved" (2 Th 2:9-10).

Though able to perform a supernatural act, the deceiver would reveal himself as a false prophet by his words, saying, "Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them" (Deut 13:2b). When the self-proclaimed-prophet teaches something that clearly violates God's written Word, he/she reveals the source of their connection. To call God's people to serve other gods is in violation of the first commandment, which states, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Deut 5:7), as well as the great commandment which states, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut 6:5). Moses said, "you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut 13:3). Here is a test of allegiance. Those who love God will remain loyal to Him (Deut 13:4). Because Israel was a theocracy, and God was their Judge, Lawgiver, and King (Isa 33:22), He directed His people to execute the false prophet or dreamer of dreams

(Deut 13:5a), “because he has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you” (Deut 13:5b). Only those who know God’s Word and live by it will guard themselves against the deceiving power of false miracle workers.

**Second was the short-term-fulfillment of a prophecy.** On another occasion, God spoke about “the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak” (Deut 18:20a). Like the previous example of a false prophet, God prescribed the death penalty for such an action, saying, “that prophet shall die” (Deut 18:20b). Naturally, the Israelites would ask, “How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?” (Deut 18:21). The Lord’s answer was, “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him” (Deut 18:22; cf. Jer 28:9). Apparently, the prophet would be able to predict a short-term event that everyone could see for themselves and verify. Once the short-term prophecy was fulfilled in exact detail, the prophet’s long-term prophecies could be accepted and relied upon as valid. Jesus adhered to this test, providing short-term prophecies that came to pass (Mark 11:12-14, 19-20), which validated His long-term prophecies which are still pending (Matt 24:3—25:46).

### **Example of a True Prophet:**

Now behold, there came a man of God from Judah to Bethel by the word of the LORD, while Jeroboam [King of Israel] was standing by the [pagan] altar to burn incense [to false gods; cf. 1 Ki 12:28-33].<sup>2</sup> He [the true prophet] cried against the altar by the word of the LORD, and said, “O altar, altar, thus says the LORD, ‘Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and on you he shall sacrifice the [bones of the dead] priests of the high places [pagan worship centers] who burn incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you [fulfilled 300 years later; cf. 2 Ki 23:15-20].’”<sup>3</sup> Then he gave a sign the same day [proving to everyone he was a true prophet], saying, “This is the sign which the LORD has spoken, ‘Behold, the altar [used by King Jeroboam] shall be split apart and the ashes which are on it shall be poured out.’”<sup>4</sup> Now when the king heard the saying of the man of God, which he cried against the altar in Bethel, Jeroboam stretched out his hand from the altar, saying, “Seize him.” But his hand which he stretched out against him dried up, so that he could not draw it back to himself.<sup>5</sup> The altar also was split apart and the ashes were poured out from the altar, according to the sign which the man of God had given by the word of the LORD. (1 Ki 13:1-5)

In this example of a true prophet, we see where he spoke against the worship of false gods in agreement with written revelation (Deut 13:1-5; cf. Ex 20:1-5a), and validated himself by performing an observable short-term prophecy for others to witness (Deut 18:22).

### **Beware of False Prophets:**

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you [in the Church], who will secretly introduce destructive heresies [false doctrines], even denying the Master who bought them [attacking the Person of Jesus Christ and His redemptive work on the cross; cf. 1 John 4:1-3], bringing swift destruction upon themselves. <sup>2</sup> Many [in the church] will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned [outsiders will spurn Christianity]; <sup>3</sup> and in *their* greed they will exploit you [to get your money] with false words [πλαστοῖς λόγοις *plastois logois* – lit. *plastic words, easily molded to accommodate the hearer*]; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. (2 Pet 2:1-3)

False prophets/teachers will arise in churches and will seek to introduce false doctrines alongside true ones (2 Pet 2:1a; cf. Acts 20:28-30). These false prophets will attack the incarnation of Jesus Christ (2 Pet 2:1b; cf. 1 John 4:1-3), as well as His redeeming work of the cross (2 Pet 2:1). On this basis we know Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are cults. Unfortunately, many in the church will be misled by false teachers, and this will cause the Christian way to be maligned (2 Pet 2:2). The motivation of false prophets is greed, in which they will exploit others for money (2 Pet 2:3a). Their power lies in their false words which they employ to subjugate their hearers. But these false prophets/teachers have not escaped God's notice, and their judgment is coming (2 Pet 2:3b). Exposure to false teachers is inevitable; however, the Christian mind is guarded and remains stable as the believer continually learns and lives God's Word (Matt 7:24-27; 2 Cor 10:3-5; 2 Tim 2:15; 3:16-17; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). Some false teachers may be won to Christ (Acts 8:9-13), but others are to be resisted or avoided (Gal 2:4-5; Phil 3:2; 2 John 1:9-11).

There are some Christians today who believe God continues to reveal Himself directly to His people. However, other Christians believe God reveals Himself today only through nature (general revelation), the Bible (special revelation), and providentially through circumstances. The Bible is the only source of special revelation, and God's providential acts are only discernable by the Christian mind saturated with Scripture. Concerning faith and practice (orthodoxy & orthopraxy), the Bible is the only dependable source of divine revelation, and the Christian does well to know it from cover to cover. Christians are instructed to know God and His will through Scripture (Eph 4:11-16; 2 Tim 2:15; 3:16-17; 1 Pet 2:2), and the believer who knows and lives God's Word will prove to be a blessing to others.