

A Brief Analysis of False Prophets according to Scripture

(compiled by David McClanahan in November 2013 for a Bible College audience, with later edits in March 2021)

In the Bible, a 'false prophet' is typically a communicator having a devious message to convey, a receptive audience to convey it to, and a claim to either real or imagined supernatural enablement. In addition to these general characteristics, Scripture provides the following specific traits to help the LORD's people identify such a person:

Old Testament indications of a False Prophet

- A prophet or dreamer of dreams who performs a miracle and then encourages his audience to follow gods other than the LORD God of Israel (Dt 13:1-5). *Note: In this case, the performance of a miracle in itself is not a clear indication of a false prophet, except when it is accompanied by a call to rebellion against the LORD.*
- A prophet who speaks in the name of the LORD and his word does not come to pass (Dt 18:21-22). *Note: This 'test' would apparently require the possibility of a near-term fulfilment that is verifiable by the prophet's initial audience. Certain prophecies of Scripture have still not been fulfilled to this day, but that does not prove they were uttered by false prophets (consider, for example, Zech chaps 12-14).*
- They are known for committing adultery (Jer 23:14, 29:23).
- They often deliver false messages of hope to their unrepentant audiences (Jer 5:12-13, 23:16-17).
- They tend to place a strong emphasis on their own revelations and dreams (Jer 23:25-28).
- Male or female, they may prophesy in the name of the LORD but actually be inspired by false visions and lying divinations (Ezek 12:24, 13:1-23).
- The content of their message can be influenced by what people pay them (Mic 3:5), or by the expectations placed upon them by peer pressure or their employers (I Kg 22:1-28).

New Testament indications of a False Prophet

- Though they may appear harmless as sheep at first, the resulting bad fruit of their lives will reveal their true, wolf-like identity (Mt 7:15-23).
- They will arise at the end of the age in an increasing number, lead many astray through their miracles, and sometimes may even claim to be the Christ (Mt 24:11, 23-27, Mk 13:21-23).
- They can be false teachers within Christian contexts who secretly spread heresies (2 Pet 2:1, 13).
- They entice unsteady souls, have eyes full of adultery, and are motivated by greed (2 Pet 2:14).
- They revile angelic authorities, and deny the lordship of Christ, though they may have had some knowledge of (or association with) Him in the past (2 Pet 2:2-22, Jude 4).
- They follow their own sinful desires, are loud-mouthed boasters, and show favoritism in order to gain a personal advantage for themselves (Jude 16).
- They are inspired by the spirit of the antichrist and deny that Jesus Christ came in the flesh (1 Jn 4:1-3).
- They seek to turn inquirers away from responding to the Gospel through deceit and fraud (Acts 13:8-10).

A Biographical Case Study

Consider the mysterious character of Balaam as recorded in Numbers 22-31. He was hired by the king of Moab to pronounce a curse over Israel. According to the narrative, Balaam had some sort of understanding of the LORD God of Israel and obeyed His voice when forced to do so. However, he was also steeped in magical arts such as divination and the interpretation of omens (22:7, 23:23, 24:1). When his attempts to curse Israel failed, he returned to his homeland (24:25), but not before influencing the women of Moab to entice the men of Israel to worship Baal of Peor and commit adultery *just before they were to enter the Promised Land* (25:1-9, 31:15-16).

The New Testament speaks of the 'way of Balaam' as characteristic of false prophets who love gain through wrongdoing (2 Pet 2:15, Jude 11). Furthermore, Christ exposed Balaam-like sin in the church at Pergamum involving idolatry and immorality (Rev 2:14). He then confronted similar sin at Thyatira where the local church had fallen under the influence of a satanically-inspired false prophetess named Jezebel (Rev 2:20-24).

Assuming Balaam's example to be somewhat prototypical of false prophets in general, one could reasonably conclude that they can be highly gifted and influential, possessing enough prior knowledge of the LORD to craft a convincing but counterfeit message. They can tend to attract swayable audiences through their magnetic personalities, their cunning use of half-truths, and perhaps their performing of actual miracles. *What makes them so dangerous is that to the unwary, they can appear to be so true.* The Church must therefore be vigilant to recognize these messengers of Satan before extensive damage is done among the LORD's people.

Confrontations with False Prophets in Scripture

In both Testaments, we have examples of the LORD's messengers finding themselves in direct conflict with false prophets. For a sampling of such encounters, consider (with the false prophets listed second in each case):

1. Elijah versus the prophets of Baal (1 Kg 17:20-40)
2. Micaiah versus Zedekiah (1 Kg 22:1-28)
3. Jeremiah versus Hananiah (Jer 28:1-17)
4. Saul/Paul versus Bar-Jesus (Acts 13:6-12)

Except for Elijah's case, the above encounters were thrust upon the LORD's messengers with apparently no prior notice. Secondly, all of these examples involved some sort of 'power encounter' whereby the LORD vindicated His own reputation and the word of His true messengers while severely judging the false prophets. In another context we learn that the LORD shall keep such false messengers under punishment until the day of judgment (2 Pet 2:9). A word to the wise: *In none of the above examples do we find the LORD's messengers in advisedly in their own strength confronting these evil people.*

The last false prophet that shall be confronted is 'The Beast from the Earth' (Rev 13:11-18). He shall perform great signs and deceptively enforce worldwide worship of the 'Beast from the Sea' by gaining control of how people buy and sell. The LORD will decisively deal with this deceiver by throwing him alive into the lake of fire to experience everlasting torment along with Satan and the other beast (Rev 19:20, 20:10).

A Few Suggestions for These Last Days

As we move closer to the end of this age, we should expect increased activity from false prophets. In order to meet this challenge, the following guidelines are offered for serious consideration:

- We must keep careful watch for individuals with false prophet traits, particularly those who have access to our congregations (Mk 13:23). *Dare it be suggested that we also scrutinize our own life for such traits?*
- We should continuously saturate our churches with sound doctrine (1 Tim 3:1-4:5) so that any counterfeit messengers will be recognized, especially by our lay people.
- We should provide a means by which people with prophetic tendencies within our churches can be fairly evaluated and nurtured in the appropriate exercising of a potential gift of the Spirit (1 Cor 14, 1 Thess 5:19-22). This could lessen the chance of them possibly being ostracized, venturing into error, and apostacizing.
- As we shun false teaching, may we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:16-18) and regularly entrust our souls and the souls of those under our care to the keeping power of God: "*Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and present you blameless...*" (Jude 24-25a)