

Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets

by Kevin Christensen

Most of us tend to see parts of a form hierarchically. The parts that are *important* (that is, provide a lot of information), or the parts that we *decide* are larger, or the parts we think *should be* larger, we *see* as larger than they actually are. Conversely, parts that are *unimportant*, or that we *decide* are smaller, or that we think *should be* smaller, we *see* as being smaller than they actually are.¹

The Biblical keys for discerning true and false prophets are useful and plentiful, and for the most part, surprisingly neglected. This study includes a hypertext list of Bible [tests for true and false prophets](#). The best known tests turn out to be the ones most qualified by precept and abused in practice. However, most can be applied without careful qualification, each positive test being balanced by complimentary tests for false prophets. Modern use calls for consideration of the Mote-Eye rule (Matthew 7:2-5), that no interpretation or application of a Biblical test for prophets can be correct if it requires us to reject Biblical prophets. Overall, these Biblical tests should focus attention on the truly important points by which we can discern the true and false.

Because the attitudes and actions of each individual shape what we can know and perceive, I also include a section on Bible passages that describe [what a person should do in order to see truth](#). In all cases, the recommendations contrast with contrary behavior and attitudes we should avoid.

The Bible also includes many² of the [arguments made to justify rejecting true prophets](#). I discuss some of the most instructive of these. They demonstrate that what people think and want often emerge as obstacles to their perceiving what is real. Additionally, other objections based on actual Bible tests often demonstrate what Jesus meant when he said that those who do not know what it means to “have mercy, and not sacrifice” may condemn the guiltless. In practice their examples show how the letter kills, and the spirit gives life.

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1. Betty Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, rev. ed. (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1989), 134.
 2. Over 70, last time I counted.

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The overall picture includes all three elements—tests to apply, actions and attitudes to demonstrate, and mistakes to avoid—and reveals an organic interaction between them. That is, those who use the appropriate tests for prophets also demonstrate the behavior recommended for seeing truth. Those who reject true prophets fall short of the recommended behavior. In consequence, they miss or misapply the actual tests for true prophets, and repeat the kinds of arguments used by those who rejected true prophets anciently. This shows why Jesus said “He that receiveth you receiveth me.” (Matthew 10:40). Despite the passage of millenia, that same issues arise. We too quickly congratulate ourselves for being modern.

I include a section on the implications these tests and Biblical examples have for [testing the claims of Joseph Smith](#).

One final point is that these are not “proof-texts” by which anyone can compel another person's thinking.¹ Rather they provide essential contexts for the questions we ask about true and false prophets. Each scripture I quote here can and should be further considered in its own cultural and literary context. In some instances, where context is crucial, I have added information from modern scholarship. With respect to both scripture and commentary, I offer a beginning, not an ending. The soil in which we plant such seeds (the “word” in the parable of the Sower) and the care with which we nurture them over time affects our personal harvests.

Now, on to the study.

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. ²

And how shall they preach, except they be sent?...³

- [Bible tests for true and false prophets](#)
- [Bible passages that describe what a person should do in order to see truth](#)
- [Bible arguments made to justify rejecting true prophets](#)

1. For a discussion, see the link to my detailed essay “Paradigms Crossed” provided in the Author's Note section.

2. Matthew 24:14. Also see Ephesians 1:10, Acts 3:21, Deut. 27:30, Isaiah 29:9-24, 2:2-3, 28:7-16

3. Romans 10:15

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- [Considering Joseph Smith in light of these tests](#)
- [Author's Note](#)

Note: This study is designed with hypertext links and bookmarks to allow you to survey top-level summaries with or without going down into detailed quotation and discussion, according to your own pace and interests.

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Bible Tests for True and False Prophets

Amos 3:7

Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.

Also Rev. 19:10, Ephesians 4:13, Ps. 25:24, Jeremiah 3:15, Numbers 11:2

Matthew 7:15

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly, they are ravening wolves.

Also Matt. 24:11, 2 Tim. 3:1-9 and 4:3-4. 2 Thes. 2:1-12 and 4:1-3

Wherefore, by their fruits shall ye know them.¹

Claim a True Prophet must make:

- [Revelation and Vision](#)
- [Witnesses](#)
- [Chosen by God](#)
- [Ordained by prophesy and the laying on of hands by those in authority](#)

Teaching of Christ

- [Christ ordained by God to judge all men, and](#)
- [Teaches belief on him for remission of sins](#)
- [Testifies that Jesus is "come in the flesh"](#)
- [Apostles and prophets given "till we all come in a unity of the faith"](#)
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Character of Teaching

- [Preaches Repentance](#)

1. Matthew 7:20

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Bible Tests for True and False Prophets

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- [Teaches by the spirit, so that your faith stands in the power of God](#)
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- [Teaching consistent with scripture](#)
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Personal Character

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- [Teaches with authority, and not as a scribe](#)
- [They lead as willing ensamples to the flock, not for filthy lucre](#)
- [Recognizes and is united with authorized prophets](#)
- [They admit to being men of passion, like us, liable to sin](#)

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Revelation and Vision

Of True	Of False
<p>Numbers 12:6-8</p> <p>If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream.</p> <p>My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house.</p> <p>With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?</p> <p>Also Exod. 24:10, 33:11; Gen. 17.1 48:3, Isaiah 6:1, Acts 7:55-56, 2 Pet. 1:16, 1 Cor. 9:1, 1 Sam. 3, Rev. 1:10. Matt. 7:1-16, Ezek. 40:2-3</p>	<p>Ezekiel 13:2-3</p> <p>Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel that prophesy, and say thou unto them that prophesy out of their own hearts, Hear ye the word of the Lord;</p> <p>Thus saith the Lord God; Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!</p> <p>(Also Luke 6:39, 2 Cor. 11:12-15, Jer. 23)</p>

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Micah 3:5-7

Thus saith the Lord concerning the prophets that make my people err, that bite with their teeth, and cry, Peace; and he that putteth not into their mouths, they even prepare war against him.

Therefore night shall be unto you, that ye shall not have a vision; and it shall be dark unto you, that ye shall not divine; and the sun shall go down over the prophets, and the day shall be dark over them.

Then shall the seers be ashamed, and the diviners confounded: yea, they shall all cover their lips; for there is no answer of God.

(Jer. 23, Ezek. 13 and 34, 2 Cor. 11:14)

Jer. 23: 30-33

Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that use their tongues, and say, He saith.

Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that steal my words every one from his neighbour.

Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the Lord, and do tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the Lord.

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Jude 10

But these speak evil of those things which they know not: but what they know naturally, as brute beasts, in those things they corrupt themselves.

2 Peter. 2:10-19, 2 Cor. 7:12. 1 Cor. 2:14, 1 John 4:19

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Witnesses

Of True	Of False
<p>Matthew 18:16</p> <p>But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.</p> <p>(Exod. 24:9-11. Luke 24:48. Acts 1:22, 1 Peter 1:16, 2 Cor. 13:1, 2 Cor. 14:29-32, Matt. 17:1-7, Acts 9 (the reality of Paul's conversion confirmed to Ananias).</p>	<p>1 Corinthians 14:46</p> <p>What? Came the word of God out from you? Or came it unto you only?</p> <p>(1 Cor. 14:39, Eph. 4:11-14)</p>

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Chosen by God

Of True	Of False
<p>John 15:15</p> <p>Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye ask the Father in my name, he may give it unto you.</p> <p>(See John 15)</p>	<p>Matthew 7:22-23</p> <p>Many will say unto me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name done many wonderful works? And I will profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.</p> <p>(2 Cor. 11:4, Gal.1:6-12)</p>

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Ordained by prophecy and the laying on of hands by those in authority

Of True

Hebrews 5:4

No man taketh this honor unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.

(that is: "The gift that is in thee, which was given by prophecy, with the laying on of hands of the presbytery.")

See 1 Time. 4:14. Also Exod. 28:1, Deut. 34:9, Num. 27:18-22, Mark 3:14. Acts 1:21-26, 13:1-4.

Of False

2 Corinthians 10:12

For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

(2 Cor. 10:7, 11:12, 2 Peter 2.)

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Teaches Christ ordained by God to judge and to believe on him for remission of sins

Of True

Acts 10:42-44

And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the judge of quick and dead. To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.

(Rev. 19:10, John 8:56)

Of False

2 Peter 2:1

But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, bringing upon themselves, and bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

(Acts 20:29-30, Luke 22:33-44, 22: 1-14, Gal. 1:6-12, 2 Thess. 2:1-12)

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Testifies that Jesus is “come in the flesh”

Of True	Of False
<p>1 John 4:2</p> <p>Hereby ye know the spirit of God: every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God:</p> <p>(Luke 24:39-43, 1 Cor. 15:1-15)</p>	<p>2 John 7</p> <p>For many deceivers are entered into the world who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.</p> <p>Matt. 27:17</p>

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Apostles and prophets till in “a unity of the faith”

Of True

Eph. 4:11-14

And he gave some apostles; and some prophets: and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; Till we all come in a unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of Christ. That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine. And by the slight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.

Of False

Matthew 12:30

He that is not with me is against me; he that gathered not with me, scattereth abroad.

(Also Ezek. 34)

Compare Mark 9:38-41

But Jesus said, forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part.

Note: The difference in the passages has to do with context. The Matthew text describes formal “gathering” by chosen disciples, called to preach and baptize. The Mark text describes how those disciples should accept the performance good works by anyone, even one not called and ordained as part of the formal gathering.

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Accepts the Biblical God

Of True	Of False
<p>Deut. 18:18</p> <p>I will raise up a prophet among their brethren like unto thee, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak unto them all I shall command him.</p>	<p>Deut. 13:1-3</p> <p>If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet or dreamer of dreams.</p>
<p>Gal. 1:11-12</p> <p>But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.</p>	<p>Gal. 1:6-7, 8</p> <p>But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than ye have received, let him be accursed.</p>

Note: Each of these passages come from specific historical contexts which have implications for how these tests should be understood. That is, Deut. 13: 7 specifies “the gods of the people which are round about you, nigh unto thee, or far off from thee,” who were Baal, Molech, and Dagon. In Galatians, Paul contends with Peter over the issue of circumcision, though not over the gospel of faith, repentance, baptism, and reception of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands.

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Preaches repentance

Of True	Of False
<p>Jer. 23:22</p> <p>But if they stood in my council, and caused my people to hear my words, they should have turned them from their evil way and the evil of their doings.</p> <p>(Jer. 23:17, Micah 3, Luke 6:46-49, Ezek. 33:7-10, John 15)</p>	<p>Ezek. 13:22</p> <p>Because with lies ye have made the hearts of the righteous sad, whom I have not made sad; and strengthened the hand of the wicked, that he should not return from his wicked way, by promising him life.</p> <p>(Also Isa. 30:8-10, Jer. 23, Ezek. 34)</p>

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Teaches of one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all (the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ)

Of True	Of False
Eph. 4:5-6 (3:14) There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all.	Matthew 24:23 Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there: believe it not. (Matt. 7:21, Isa. 29:13, Gal. 1:6-7, 1 Thess. 5:21, "Prove all thing: hold fast to that which is good.")

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Teaches by the spirit, so that your faith is in God

Of True

1 Corinthians 2:4-5

And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of spirit and power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of man, but on the power of God.

(1 Cor. 2:9-14, Luke 24:32. Jer. 20:9)

Of False

2 Peter 2:18-19

For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure thought the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, that those that were clean escaped from them who live in error.

While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same he is brought in bondage.

(Also Titus, 1:10-11, Isa. 5:11-25)

1 John 4:5

They are of the world: therefore they speak of the world, and the world heareth them.

Colossians 2:8

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

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Opens understanding of the scriptures

Of True	Of False
<p data-bbox="46 288 204 320">Luke 24:45</p> <p data-bbox="46 341 655 411">Then he opened their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures.</p>	<p data-bbox="711 288 887 320">2 Peter 3:16</p> <p data-bbox="711 341 1359 523">And also in all his epistles speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.</p> <p data-bbox="711 544 1079 576">(Luke 11:52, Matt. 23:13)</p>

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Teaching Consistent With Scripture

Of True	Of False
<p data-bbox="39 277 310 316">2 Timothy 3:15-16</p> <p data-bbox="39 331 656 595">And that from a child thou had known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.</p>	<p data-bbox="702 277 866 316">Isaiah 9:20</p> <p data-bbox="702 331 1339 443">To the law and the testimony, if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.</p>

Note: In Acts 18:13 we have this said of Paul: "This fellow persuadeth men to worship God contrary to the Law." The test for consistency must be applied with a tolerance for different views at least equal to the differences evidenced within the Bible.

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Provides Knowledge of the Heavenly Council

Of True	Of False
Amos 3:7 Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret [<i>sod</i>] unto his servants the prophets.	Jer. 23:22 But if they stood in my council [<i>sod</i>], and caused my people to hear my words, they should have turned them from their evil way and the evil of their doings.

Here “secret” is a translation of the Hebrew *sod*. Professor Daniel Peterson has explained that “an understanding of the Hebrew term *sod* is crucial for appreciating these passages. In the Old Testament, that word denotes confidential discussions or secrets (as at Proverbs 3:32 and 11:13). It also refers to the council setting in which such confidential discussions are conducted.”^a

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- a. Daniel Peterson “Ye Are Gods: Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witnesses to the Divine Nature of Human Kind” in Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges, eds., *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson* (FARMS, Provo, 2000), p 506-7.

Provides knowledge of the Lord's Covenant

Of True	Of False
<p>Psalm 25:14</p> <p>The secret (<i>sod</i>) of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will show them his covenant.</p>	<p>Proverbs 1:29-31</p> <p>For they that hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD: They would have none of my counsel. They despised all my reproof. Therefore, they shall eat of the fruit of their on way, and be filled with their own devices.</p>

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They teach their followers to expect trials in this life

Of True	Of False
<p>1 Peter 4:12</p> <p>Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing which happened to you. But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings, that when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.</p> <p>1 Peter 3:17</p> <p>For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing.</p> <p>(also James 4:12)</p>	<p>Job 4:2, 7</p> <p>Then Eliaphaz... said...Remember I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? Or where where the righteous cut off?</p> <p>Compare Job 16:11-2 (Job speaking) and Job 42:7 where the Lord supports Job against his accusers.</p>

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Seeks to please God, not men

Of True	Of False
<p>1 Thess. 2:4-6, 20</p> <p>But we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so as we speak; not as pleasing men, but God which trieth our hearts. For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloak of covetousness; God is witness; nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor yet of others, when we might have been burdensome, as the apostles of Christ.</p>	<p>Matthew 23:5-7, 23-24, 34</p> <p>But all their works they do to be seen of men;... and love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets, and to be called Rabbi, Rabbi,...</p> <p>Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and yet have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith. These ye ought to have done, and not leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain at the gnat and swallow the camel....Wherefore I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes; and some of them shall ye kill and crucify...</p>

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Teaches with authority, and not as a scribe

Of True

Matthew 7:28-29

And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Of False

Jer. 8:8-9

How do ye say, we are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us? Lo, certainly in vain made he it; the pen of the scribes is in vain...lo, they have rejected the word of the LORD; and what wisdom is in them?

(Also Isa. 5:18-20, John 8 and 9.)

2 Tim. 3:5, 6

Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away...ever learning, but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.

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They lead as willing ensamples, not for filthy lucre

Of True

1 Peter 5:2-3

Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind: neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.

(1 Sam. 12:3-4)

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul discusses at length the Lord's ordaining that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel, (Matt. 10:10), and his declining to use that power in recognition of the danger for abuse that it represents. We can distinguish between "those who partake of the milk of the flock" for the sake of the work (Acts 6), and the traffic of religion.

Of False

Micah 3:11

The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the LORD, and say, is not the LORD among us? None evil can come upon us.

(Ezek. 34, Matt. 23, Titus 1:10-11, 16. Jer. 5:30-31)

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The former recognizes the need for being called as was Aaron, that he who does not work should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10), that he should be not burdensome, and not exceed his needs (Acts 4:35), that he not compromise (1 Kings 22:14).

The latter involves being self-appointed, puffed up (1 Cor. 4:7), catering to appearance (2 Cor. 5:12), having man's hearts in admiration because of advantage, supposing that gain is godliness (1 Tim. 6:5), lay heavy burdens on men's shoulders and will not move them with one of their fingers, make broad the phylacteries and enlarge the borders of their garments (Matt. 23), and preaching smooth things easy to hear (Isa. 30:10 and Titus 1:11), and in general, failing to meet the tests of a prophet.

Ezekiel 34:2-4

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God unto the shepherds; *Woe be* to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks?

Ye eat the fat and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: *but* ye feed not the flock.

The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up *that which was* broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them.

Note: The early Christian text called the Didache included several other tests for prophets along these lines, implicitly witnessing to real dangers faced by the early communities by those who would exploit their generosity.

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Recognizes and is united with authorized prophets

Of True

1 John 4:6

We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us. He that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

(1 Cor. 14:37, Isa. 8:14-22)

Of False

1 John 2:19

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that it might be manifest they were not of us.

Luke 17:31-37. 3 John 9-10

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Note that this test presupposes a body of men who meet the test for true prophets. That is, this test depends on the others, and cannot be used prior to them.



They acknowledge that they are men of passion, like the rest of us, and prone to sin

Of True

Acts 14:15

We are men of like passions with you

Of False

1 John 1:8

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

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God bears them witness with signs and gifts of the Holy Ghost according to his own will

Of True

Hebrews 2:3-4

How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him;

God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?

Note: signs may be given according to God's will, not on skeptic's demand.

Of False

Matthew 24:24

For there shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.

Note: Given this list of Bible tests for prophets, consider signs or miracles as part of the evidence, not the whole of it

Deut. 13:1-3

If there arise among a prophet...and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee saying, Let us go after other gods which thou hast not known, and let us serve them, thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet... for the LORD your God proveth you to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul.

John 10:41

And many resorted unto him, and said, John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this man were true.

Matthew 13:54-56

And when he was come into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this [man] this wisdom, and [these] mighty works? ...

And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

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A prophet may do works “none other man did”

Of True	Of False
<p>John 15:24</p> <p>If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not sin: but now they have been seen and hated both me and my father.</p> <p>(Deut. 4:32-39)</p>	<p>Job 15:9</p> <p>What knowest thou that we know not? What understandest thou, which is not in us?</p>
<p>John 10:38</p> <p>If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him.</p> <p>John 9:33</p> <p>If this man were not of God, he could do nothing.</p>	<p>Jer. 18:18</p> <p>Then said they, Come, and let us devise devices against Jeremiah; for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, and let us smite him with the tongue, and let us not give heed to any of his words.</p>

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Listeners must keep his words to learn the truth of them

Of True

John 7:16-17, 8:31-32, 15:7

Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me.

If any man do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.

Then said Jesus to those Jews who believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;

And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.

If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what you will, and it shall be done unto you.

Of False

Jer. 18:18

Come and let us smite him with the tongue, and let us not give heed to any of his words.

Luke 11:52-54

Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.

And as he said these things unto them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to urge him vehemently, and to provoke him to speak of many things:

Laying wait for him, and seeking to catch something out of his mouth, that they might accuse him.

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Prophecy

Of True

Jeremiah 28:9

...when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known, that the LORD hath truly sent him.

(Ezek. 33:32-33, Isaiah 55:8-12)

2 Peter 1:20-21

Knowing first that no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation. For prophecy came not in old time by will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved upon by the Holy Ghost.

Of False

Deuteronomy 18:22

When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing happen not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.

Note: A presumptuously spoken word is simply a word which the LORD hath not spoken: NOT utter refutation of otherwise prophetic performance. See the examples following. We will discuss this in connection with the humanity of prophets and the warnings against seeking to "make a man an offender for a word."

Note: In practice, this is the most qualified test, the most subject to abuse, even within the Bible.

Prophets can be misunderstood (for example, John 3:18-22)

Prophecy may have its fulfillment contested, either through misinformation, or cunningly devised fables. (Matt. 28:12-13)

Prophecy may be distant fulfillment. (For example, 2 Peter 3:9)

Prophecy may be of conditional fulfillment (Jer. 18:8-10)

Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets

Bible Tests for True and False Prophets

Prophets may speak their own opinion. (2 Cor. 8:8)

Prophets may even speak presumptuously on occasion. (2 Samuel 7:14)

Prophets may disagree among themselves on some matters. (Acts. 15:39)

A prophet's words may be recorded imperfectly. (Compare Acts 9:7 and 22:9)

Finally, even prophets may misinterpret prophecy. (It is clear that much of the New Testament presumes an immanent return in glory, necessitating eventual warnings not to expect such.)

(Overall, see Isa. 55:11)

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Teaches that we must pray

Of True	Of False
<p>James 1:5</p> <p>If any of ye lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given them. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering... for let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord.</p> <p>(also vs 6-7, 2:14-26, 4:3, 5:16, John 15:17, Matt. 7:7, Matt. 21:22, Deut. 4:29-30, Eph. 1:17-18)</p>	<p>Jude 10</p> <p>But these speak evil of those things which they know not: but what they know naturally, as brute beasts, in those things they corrupt themselves.</p>
<p>Matt. 16:16-17</p> <p>And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.</p> <p>And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.</p> <p>(1 Cor 2, 1 John 5:9)</p>	<p>1 Tim. 6:4-5</p> <p>He is proud, knowing nothing but doting about with questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.</p>

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Over time, arguments against true prophets fail and demonstrate confusion.

Of True

Isa. 54:17

No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness is of me, saith the LORD.

Jer. 20:11

The LORD is with me as a mighty terrible one: therefore my persecutors shall stumble and they shall not prevail: they shall be greatly ashamed; for they shall not prosper: their everlasting confusion shall never be forgotten.

Note: Because prophets can suffer reverses including death, this promise is demonstrated over time.

Of False

2 Tim. 4:15-17

Of whom thou be aware also; for he hath greatly withstood our words.

At my first answer, no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding, the Lord stood by me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known

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A Biblical Approach to Seeing Truth

I have compiled principally Biblical scriptures¹ that describe both the means to see truth, and contrary passages that describe how to avoid it. These should serve as common ground for discussion.

- [Be interested](#)
- [Listen with Purposeful Intent: Seeking Knowledge of God](#)
- [Study with Open Minds and with Faith \(where faith is hope for that which is not seen\)](#)
- [Examine the works](#)
- [Listen to all the witnesses \(not selecting to justify a desired result\)](#)
- [Consider the credentials and motives of the authorities and witnesses involved](#)
- [Be as concerned with measuring yourself as with measuring the prophets](#)
- [Receive the prophets and their followers for what they are, not requiring them to be something else](#)
- [Pray](#)
- [Persist whatever the cost](#)

Taken together, these show the sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit.

Return to [Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets](#)

1. In two instances I have included Book of Mormon passages which compliment corresponding Bible passages perfectly.

Be Interested

May we know what this new doctrine is whereof thou speakest is? For thou speaketh strange things to our ears: We would therefore know what these things mean...but we desirest to hear of the what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against.

Acts 17:19-20, 28:22

And they said, There is no hope: but we will walk after our own devices, and we will everyone do the imagination of his ... heart.

Jer. 18:12

No man also having drunk old wine straightaway desireth new: for he saith, the old is better.

Luke 5:6

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Listen With Purposeful Intent: Seeking Knowledge of God

And ye shall seek me and find me when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

Jer. 29:13

Therefore say they unto God, depart from us, for we desire not knowledge of thy ways. What is the Almighty that we should serve him? And what profit should we have if we pray unto him?

Job. 21:14-15

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Study with Open Minds and with Faith (where faith is hope for that which is not seen)

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica in that they received the word with readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether these things were so.

Acts 17:11

...[they] began to urge him vehemently, and to provoke him to speak of many things: laying in wait for him, and seeking to catch something out of his mouth, that they might accuse him.

Luke 12:53-54.

Ask and it shall be given unto you, seek and ye shall find; knocketh and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

Luke 11:9-10

But they understood not this saying, and it was hid from them, that they perceived it not: and they feared to ask of him that saying.

Luke 9:45

Even so it is with my words. Ye cannot know of their surety at first, unto perfection, any more than faith is a perfect knowledge.

But behold, if you will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion my words.

Alma 32:27

Many of his disciples when they heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?

John 6:60

(Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.)

Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets
A Biblical Approach to Seeing Truth

If any man will do his will, he will know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.

John 7:17

Then said they, Come, let us devise devices against Jeremiah; for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come and let us smite him with the tongue, and let us not give heed to any of his words.

Jeremiah 18:18

If ye continue in my word,... then are ye my disciples...and ye shall now the truth,

And the truth shall make you free.

John 8:31-32

For how knoweth the man the master whom he hath not served, and who is a stranger from the thoughts and intents of his heart?

Mosiah 5:13

And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee [as] my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, [but] their heart goeth after their covetousness.

And, lo, thou [art] unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not.

Ezekiel 33:31-32

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Examine the Works

But if I do [the works of my Father, works none other man did] though ye believe not me, believe the works, that ye may know and believe.

John 10:38 (and 15:24)

...the scorner is consumed, and all that watch for iniquity are cut off: that make a man an offender for a word, and lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate, and turn aside the just for a thing of nought.

Isaiah 29:20-21

...If this man were not of God, he could do nothing.

John 9:33

Then arose Peter, and ran to the sepulchre;...he beheld...and departed wondering in himself at that which had come to pass.

Luke 24:12

And their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not.

Luke 24:11

Is it not written in your law, I said, ye are Gods... though ye believe not me, believe the works, that ye may know and believe... see John 10:33-38.

For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy, because thou, being a man, makest thyself God.

John 10:33

Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets
A Biblical Approach to Seeing Truth

	<p>For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But Wisdom is justified of her children.</p> <p>Matthew 13:54-58</p> <p>...into his own country... they... said, Whence hath this man this wisdom, and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? ... and they were offended in him.</p> <p>Matthew 13:54-58.</p>
<p>But if I cast out devils by the spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you. Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man.</p> <p>Matt. 12: 28-29.</p> <p>Note: Azazel means "the strong one." So this is a reference to the fallen angel identified with the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement ritual.</p>	<p>And many of them said, He hath a devil, and is mad. Why hear ye him?</p> <p>John 10:20</p> <p>This fellow doth not cast out devils but by the prince of devils.</p> <p>Matthew 12:24</p> <p>How can a man that is a sinner do such miracles?</p> <p>John 9:16</p>
<p>Others said, these are not the words of him that hath a devil. Can a devil open the eyes of the blind?</p> <p>John 10:21</p>	<p>And some of them said, could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that this man should not have died?</p> <p>John 11:37</p> <p>(No satisfying some people. Watch for arbitrary unfilled expectations.)</p>

Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets
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...ye have the poor with you always and whensoever you will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always.

Mark 14:7

(Accepting a kindness on a ritually significant occasion, "against the day of my dying." The indignation clearly confuses special instances with general principles.)

"How often I would have gathered [you]..., and ye would not."

Matthew 23:37

(Confusing ideals and expectations. "Now they have no cloak for their sin." John 15:22. Ask after God's purposes (Isaiah 55:8-12, and Moses 1).

But when his disciples saw it, they had indignation, saying, To what purpose is this waste? This...might have been... given for the poor?

Matthew 26:8-9

Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather divisions:

Luke 12:51

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Listen to all the Witnesses (not selecting only to justify a desired result)

But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouths of two or three witnesses, every word may be established.

Matthew 18:16

For many bare false witness against him, but their witness agreed not together.

Mark 14:56 (inconsistency of testimony)

He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses?

Matthew 26:65

The judges shall make diligent inquisition: and behold, if a witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely...do unto him as he had thought to do unto his brother.

Deuteronomy 19:15-19

(when they had...taken counsel)... they gave large money unto the soldiers, Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night and stole him away while we slept. And if this come to the governors ears, we will secure you.

Matthew 28:12-14

(Collusion. Behavior inconsistent with witness. Being asleep, how did they recognize the disciples, and being soldiers, how did they escape punishment?)

Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets
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	<p>Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. And they stirred up the people...and set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: For we heard him say Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.</p> <p>Acts 6:11-14</p> <p>(Note: It is a matter of interpretation, born of hostile intent, which makes these false witnesses.)</p>
	<p>Then he began to curse and swear, saying, I know not the man... and the cock crew...And Peter went out and wept bitterly.</p> <p>Matthew 26:74-5</p> <p>(Tolerate human weakness, and consider the life more than the incident.)</p>

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Consider the Credentials and the Motives of the authorities and witnesses involved

<p>Take heed that no man deceive you... Matthew 24:4</p>	<p>Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly, they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Matthew 7:15-16</p>
<p>...whosoever shall gather against thee shall fall for thy sake...No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD. Isaiah 54:14-17</p>	<p>The coppersmith did me much evil:...for he hath greatly withstood our words. At my first answer, no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding, the Lord stood by me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known. 2 Timothy 4:14-17</p>
	<p>Ye build the tombs of the prophets... and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers we would not have been partakers of the blood of the prophets...I send unto you prophets, and wise men...and some of them shall ye kill and crucify. Matthew 23:34</p>
<p>Refrain from these men, and let them alone. For if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God. Acts 5:38-39</p>	<p>What do we? For this man doeth many miracles. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation. John 11:47-48</p>

Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets
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	<p>These words spake his parents because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, that he should be put out of the synagogue.</p> <p>John 9:22</p>
	<p>...among the ...rulers many believed on him; ...but did not confess him...for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.</p> <p>John 12:42-43</p>
<p>Ye cannot serve God and mammon (mammon = Hebrew for banking.)</p> <p>Matthew 6:24, 19:22</p>	<p>...when the young man heard that saying, he was very sorrowful, for he had great possessions.</p> <p>Matt. 19:20 (It could be anything that a person is not willing to give up: social status, power, sex or drug addiction)</p> <p>Also see the special interest rhetoric in the story of the Silversmiths in Acts 19:24-27.</p> <p>First a word about economics, then alarm over the growth and influence of the church, then the personal affront to their interests, and finally an appeal to patriotism and religious zeal.</p> <p>The formula still works, as shown during the backlash against the Proposition 8 vote in California.</p>

Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets

A Biblical Approach to Seeing Truth

	<p>When her master saw that the hope of their gains was gone, they caught Paul...saying, These men... exceedingly trouble our city. And teach customs which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe.</p> <p>Acts 16:19-21</p>
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Be as Concerned with Measuring Yourself as you are with measuring the prophets

The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be filled with light... Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not of darkness.

Luke 11:34-35

Hear ye indeed, but understand not; see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.

Isaiah 6:9-10

For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall also be judged:... first cast the beam out of thine own eye; then shalt thou see clearly.

Matthew 7:2, 5 (see Matt 7:1-27)

And why beholdest thou the mote which is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam in thine own eye?

Matthew 7:3

If ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless.

Matthew 12:7 (also see the similar Matt. 9:13. Both passages allude to Hosea 6:7 and Micah 6:7-8)

All that watch for iniquity are cut off: that make a man an offender for a word...

Isaiah 29:20-21

for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.

2 Cor. 3:6

For if these things [diligence, faith, virtue knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity] be in you and abound, they make you that ye shall be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 1:8.

He that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off.

2 Peter 1:9

Thou shalt not wrest judgment;

Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.

Matt. 23:24

Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets
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	<p>A false balance is an abomination to the Lord.</p> <p>Proverbs 11:1</p>
	<p>[in Paul's epistles] are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do the other scriptures unto their own destruction.</p> <p>2 Peter 3:16 (No prophecy of scripture is of private interpretation...holy men spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. 2 Peter 1:20-21)</p>
thou shalt not respect persons,	<p>Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him?</p> <p>John 7:48</p>
	<p>For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.</p> <p>2 Cor. 10:12</p>
neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous. Deuteronomy 16:19.	<p>Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil...which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him.</p> <p>Isaiah 5:2-23</p>

Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets

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	<p>Then answered the LORD, ...wilt thou also disannul my judgment, wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous?</p> <p>Job 40:8</p>
<p>Bring therefore fruits meet for repentance. And think not to say within yourselves, we have Abraham for our Father...</p> <p>Matthew 3:8-9</p>	<p>They sit before thee as my people, and they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after much covetousness.</p> <p>Ezekiel 33:31</p>

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Receive the Prophets (and the followers) for what they are, not requiring them to be something else

Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature. 2 Peter 1:3-4	Every plant which my Father hath not planted shall be rooted up...they be blind leaders of the blind, both shall fall into the ditch. John 15:13-14
We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place. 2 Peter 1: 19	...clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots. Jude 12
We also are men of like passions with you. Acts 14:15	Thou wast altogether born in sin, and does thou teach us? And they cast him out. John 9:34.
The man that trusteth in the Lord... shall be as a tree planted by the waters...and shall not see when heat cometh...neither shall cease from yielding fruit. Jeremiah 17:5-13. Also 1 Cor 3:4-7. D&C 3.	Cursed is the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord...he shall not see when good cometh. Jeremiah 17:5
	Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? ..For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you. Romans 2:21, 24
If I speak the truth, why do ye not believe me John 8:46	They are of the world: therefore they speak of the world, and the world heareth them. 1 John 4:5

Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets
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Who are thou to judge another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or faileth. Yea,...God is able to make him stand.

Romans 14:4

This man seeketh not the welfare of the people, but the hurt.

Jeremiah 38:4

In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and Earth; some to honour, and some to dishonour.

2 Timothy 2:20

All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them: wherefore then lift ye [that is Moses] above the congregation of the LORD [that is, Korah and various famous men]?

Numbers 16:3

(Compare also, "We are Abraham's seed..." "We are of Paul, or Apollos..." and "For many shall come in my name... and shall deceive many...")

He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him.

1 John 2:10

But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not where he goes because darkness hath blinded his eyes.

1 John 2:11

I hate him, for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.

1 Kings 22:8

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Pray

If ye then...know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him.

Luke 11:14

What knowest thou that we know not? What understandest thou which is not in us?

Job 15:19

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, which giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

James 1:5. Also Matt. 21:22.

Therefore they say unto God, Depart from us; for we desire not knowledge of thy ways. What is the almighty that we should serve him? What profit should we have if we pray unto him?

Job 21:14-15

It is the spirit which beareth witness, because the spirit is truth.

2 John 6

These speak evil of those things which they know not: but what they know naturally.

Jude 10

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Persist Whatever the Cost

But continue in the things which thou hast learned and been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them.

2 Timothy 3:14

When one heareth the word and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart...

Take, my brethren, the prophets who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience.

James 5:10

...stoney places...(he)...with joy receiveth it; Yet he hath not root in himself,... for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by, he is offended.

Whom shall he teach knowledge? And whom shall he make to understand doctrine? Precept must be upon precept; line upon line, line upon line...

Isaiah 28:10-11

...among thorns... the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.

Matthew 12:18-23

Whoso hath [knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven] to him shall be given more abundantly...

Matthew 13:12

(also see 1 John 2:20-27, Luke 8:18 and 2 Peter 1.)

...whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have.

Luke 8:18

Again, the Kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man seeking goodly pearls, who when he had found one pearl of great price sold all he had, and bought it.

Matthew 3:44-46.

wherefore do ye spend your money for that which is not bread? And labor for that which satisfieth not?

Isaiah 55:2

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Biblical Arguments Made to Justify Rejecting True Prophets

In practice the rejection arguments all boil down to people rejecting a prophet's claims on the basis of either [fear](#) or [desire](#). That is, the prophets did not fit their preconceptions of what a prophet should be (that is, what they think or "fear" is so), or, the prophets say things that they did not want to hear (that is, contrary to their desire). There is a direct relationship between the failures to use appropriate tests, and the failure to inquire in the ways that lead to truth. Each failure leads to corresponding arguments against true prophets.

Taken together, all of the arguments given against prophets show that rather than looking at what a prophet is, people judge them against false standards or false information. That is, those failing to recognize a prophet either apply inappropriate tests, or they misapply appropriate tests. What a person thinks or fears inevitably becomes barrier to discovering the real. Hence, the call for a sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit, a willingness to at least offer what a person wants and thinks as a necessary prerequisite to discover what is real.

- [Desire as an Obstacle](#)
- [Fear as an Obstacle](#)

Scholars of religion describe the process of religious conversion as one of reorientation and reconciliation. Reorientation is a change of thinking. And reconciliation is a change of feeling. So it fits that resistance to conversion derives from opposing fear and desire. And this is why "The Sacrifices of God are broken heart, and a contrite spirit" (Ps 51:17).

Desire as an Obstacle

Those who reject true prophets based on rival desires argue on these kinds of bases:

- Distaste for the prophet's words or person, or both: For example, in 1 Kings 22:8 reports of a king who said, "There is yet one man, Micaiah... by whom we may inquire of the LORD: but I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil."
- Unwillingness to sacrifice in order to follow: Recall the "certain ruler" who asked Jesus, "What lack I yet?" He was very sorrowful in hearing an answer that called for him to give up something he desired (see Luke 18:18-25). In other cases the sacrifice can be social position, sexual or other behavior, or political power.
- Rival desires and allegiances, whether political or personal -- "If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him, and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and our nation." (John 11:47-48)
- Unconventional behavior by the prophet, "The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners" (Matthew 11:19) or "This man is not of God, because he keepeth not the sabbath day" (John 9:16)
- Objectional behavior by their disciples, where the failures to meet an ideal replace the actual tests for a prophet. (Romans 2:21-24)
- Economic issues -- "And when her masters saw that the hope of their gains was gone, they caught Paul and Silas...saying these men being Jews do exceedingly trouble our city." (Acts 16:19-22) or the story of the silversmiths opposed to Paul in (Acts 19:24-29).

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Fear as an Obstacle

Those who reject true prophets based on faulty thinking (what they fear is so) do so by:

- Irrelevant measures-- "Is this not the carpenter's son?" (Matthew 13:54-58) Or, "Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?" (Mark 14:5)
- Misinformation--"Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept." (Matthew 28:12-14)
- Misinterpretation --"This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and build it in three days." (Matt. 26:61)
- Tradition or mental inertia --"No man having drunk old wine straightway desireth the new: for he saith, the old is better," (Luke 5:39), or "We know that God spake unto Moses: as for this fellow, we know not from whence he is..." (John 9:29)
- Charges of blasphemy --"...because thou, being a man, makest thyself God." (John 10:33)
- Incredulity-- "And their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not" (Luke 24:11) or "This is an hard saying; who can hear it?" (John 6:60)
- Appeals to authorities--"Are ye also deceived? Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him?" (John 7:47) In this case, an appeal to authority circumvents direct consideration of the fruit that should be considered.

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Considering Joseph Smith in Light of Biblical Tests

In this section, I survey some of the implications that the information in the previous sections has for considering the claims of Joseph Smith.

- [A Preliminary Test of Joseph Smith](#)
- [A Brief Guide to Paradigm Debate in Religious Circles](#)
- [Jesus and Joseph Smith: Context and Perception](#)
- [Abuse of a Bible Test for Joseph Smith: A Case Study](#)
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A Preliminary Test of Joseph Smith

Those familiar with even Joseph Smith's 1838 testimony, as published in the Pearl of Great Price, the Articles of Faith, and the Book of Mormon should see much that indicates that his claims should be taken seriously in light of the Bible tests.

Claims a True Prophet must make

- He recounts his first vision of deity
- He reports that he has been visited by an angel and called by God for a work.
- His most important claims come with witnesses, not just people he convinced, but people who have seen what he had seen. This includes the three witnesses of the angel and the plates, the eight formal witnesses of the plates, other informal witnesses, and the important shared visions with Sidney Ridgon and Oliver Cowdery.
- He reports ordinations to the priesthood following the pattern of Aaron.

Teaching of Christ

- He testifies that Jesus is the Christ, that he came in the flesh., that he will judge all men.
- He talks about faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism.
- He affirms the need for apostles and prophets.
- He affirms the Bible witness in his use of the Bible, his prayers, his identification with Paul, his fulfillment of the Bible prophecy of the sealed book.

Character of Teaching

- He teaches belief in God the Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, and that these constitute in unity One God.
- He teaches the need for faith, repentance, baptism, and the laying on of hands for the Gift of the Holy Ghost.
- He restores knowledge of the covenants and ordinances. (See D&C 1)
- He teaches about the heavenly council.

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- His revelations teach us to expect trials, and that our sufferings can be “consecrated to our gain” (2 Nephi 2:2).

Personal Character

- He lived his life in the face of constant, often violent, and ultimately fatal opposition, demonstrating that he learned by experience (D&C 3, D&C 121-2, and D&C 135) to fear God more than men.
- He led by example, including working with his own hands, facing danger, placing himself in danger rather expending his followers for his benefit.
- He freely admitted his own personal weakness, even including, in his official history, his involvement in money digging.

Evidences provided

- He reports a prophecy, now unambiguously fulfilled, that his name should be had for good and evil among all nations.
- He produced the Book of Mormon
- He admits his own personal weakness, including his celebrated money digging. He provides accounts and revelations of the secrets of the divine council in 1 Nephi 1, Moses 4:1-4, Abraham 3:19-28, and D&C 76.
- Many of his prophecies have been fulfilled.
- He provides knowledge about the ordinances and covenants.
- He provides insights opening understanding of the scriptures.
- He makes impressive predictions about the Book of Mormon (such as D&C 3) and in the Book of Mormon.
- Many of the objections raised against him and against the Book of Mormon have been superseded by later events and discoveries. A recent example has been the recent collapse of the claims for DNA evidence against the Book of Mormon.
- He teaches by example and precept that we should pray to find the truth for ourselves.

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In comparison with the Biblical standard, all of this invites further consideration. Not only does Joseph Smith impress compared to the Biblical standard, but I have found no rival candidates that come close. This does not prove his claims, nor exhaust the testing that can and should be done. It should invite us to take Joseph Smith seriously, to consider his works, such as the Book of Mormon, to explore the testimony of the witnesses, to try living the gospel, to carefully compare LDS teaching with the scriptures, and to pray.

Participation in a religious tradition also demands a more total personal involvement than occurs in science. Religious questions are of ultimate concern, since the meaning of one's existence is at stake. Religion asks about the final objects of a person's devotion and loyalty, for which he will sacrifice other interests if necessary. Too detached an attitude may cut off a person from the very kinds of experience which are religiously most significant. Reorientation and reconciliation are transformation of life-pattern affecting all aspects of personality, not intellect alone. Religious writings use the language of actors, not the language of spectators. Religious commitment, then is a personal response, a serious decision implicating one's whole life, a willingness to act and suffer for what one believes in.¹

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1. Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study of Science and Religion*, p 134-5.

A Brief Guide to Paradigm Debate in Religious Circles

One of the things that my original study of the Bible tests, recommendations, and critical practice did was to prepare me to appreciate the importance of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and later to Ian Barbour's important work comparing Kuhn's model to religious debates. Here, I want to briefly survey some important issues, before looking at a specific critical response to Joseph Smith.

- [Paradigm Debate and Religious Differences](#)
- [Defining Our Paradigms](#)
- [Within a Paradigm](#)
- [Between Paradigms](#)
- [The Limits of Verification](#)
- [The Limits of Falsification](#)
- [Deciding "Which Problems are more significant to have solved?"](#)
- [A Pragmatic Approach to Paradigm Debate](#)
- [Ian Barbour's Critical Realism](#)
- [Values Applied in Paradigm Debate](#)

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Paradigm Debate and Religious Differences

Most religious debate takes place at the level of paradigm differences. A paradigm is a framework for ordering and interpreting experience. Thomas Kuhn compares normal science to puzzle solving, like a chess puzzle, with the board, pieces and rules in place and agreed upon. Puzzle solving occurs within a paradigm. Another apt description of a paradigm is the relation of map and territory. We use our religious paradigms as maps to guide us through the territory of life and the hereafter. Exploration of the territory may demonstrate both strengths and weakness in our current maps. The best way to test the validity of maps is the exploration of the territory, though, not always the territory we have

already explored. We may need to move into the unknown to best compare competing maps.

Defining Our Paradigms

In the sciences, paradigms are defined by "standard examples of scientific work that embody a set of conceptual, methodological, and metaphysical assumptions." (Kuhn, 103). Paradigms in religious life are defined in much the same way, via stories, such as Bible accounts, or later accounts of the early Christian fathers, key teachers, and reformers. Ian Barbour observes that "Every community celebrates and re-enacts particular historical events which are crucial to its corporate identity and its vision of reality" (Barbour, 55).

In the sciences and in religion, paradigm testing is between rival paradigms, and concerns both the playing field (or territory) and the rules to use in evaluating the map. Because the setting and rules themselves are in question, we face problem of self-reference in unconsciously using the rules that govern one paradigm to reject those of another.

- [P]aradigms differ in more than substance, for they are directed not only to nature, but also back upon the science that produced them. They are the source of the methods, problem-field, and standards of solution accepted by any mature scientific community at any time. (Kuhn, 103)
- When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm in that paradigm's defense. (Kuhn, 94)

Within a paradigm

- Paradigms unify a scientific community around "a group-licensed way of seeing," (Kuhn, 189) a shared set of standards and rules for scientific practice. (Kuhn 11)
- Additionally, these paradigms are extensible, mapping the known in satisfying detail, but "sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve." (Kuhn 10)
- Paradigms provide the background of expectation against which anomaly appears. (Kuhn, 65)

Between paradigms

Debates between paradigms display:

- Chronic debate over fundamentals. (Kuhn, 48)
- Disagreement about both problems and solutions (Kuhn, 109)
- “The proponents of competing paradigms are always at least slightly at cross purposes. Neither side will grant all the non-empirical assumptions that the other needs in order to make its case... The competition between paradigms is not the sort of battle that can be resolved through proofs.” (Kuhn, 148)

This is why I emphasize that readers should not treat these passages as proof texts, able to control the outcome of a debate with those operating in another paradigm. Anyone can simply shrug and say, “So what?” Once we appreciate better how and why we lack the power to compel belief, we can move on to understand what can invite and persuade belief.

The Limits of Verification

No scientific theory can be verified. One cannot prove that a theory is true by showing that conclusions deduced from it agree with experiment since:

1. future experiments may conflict with theory,
2. another theory may be equally compatible with present evidence.

“From a finite set of particular observations, one cannot derive a universal generalization with certainty.” (Barbour, 98)

The Limits of Falsification

“The empiricists had claimed that even though a theory cannot be verified by its agreement with data, it can be falsified by disagreement with data. But critics showed that discordant data alone have seldom been taken to falsify an accepted theory in the absence of an acceptable alternative; instead auxiliary assumptions have been modified, or the discrepancies have been set aside as anomalies.” (Barbour, 7)

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- “Every problem that normal science sees as a puzzle can be seen, from another viewpoint as a counterinstance, and thus, a source of crisis.” (Kuhn, 79)
- “Since no paradigm ever solves all the problems that it defines, and since no two paradigms leave all the same problems unsolved, paradigm debates always involve the question: Which problems are more significant to have solved?” (Kuhn, 110)

Deciding “Which Problems are more significant to have solved?”

While there are no rules for deciding even which “problems are more significant to have solved,” Kuhn often saw these issues as prominent:

- Issues for Fundamental Generalizations (Kuhn, 79)
- Anomaly Related to Specific Practical Applications (Kuhn, 82)
- Research Puzzles That Currently Resist Solution (Kuhn, 82)

One of the reasons I compiled these references is that the Bible tests for prophets should be high on the list of problems that are most significant to have solved. They provide fundamental generalizations, define practical applications, and generate research puzzles.

A Pragmatic Approach to Paradigm Debate

- Theories are neither verified, nor falsified, but assessed by a variety of criteria. (Barbour, 116)
- It makes a great deal of sense to ask which of two actual and competing theories fits the facts better. (Kuhn, 147).

Paradigm choice is a value-based tentative decision (that is, faith), not rule-based final decision (that is, not perfect knowledge).

Ian Barbour’s Critical Realism

- Theory influences observation with the result that all data are to some degree theory-laden. Although proponents of rival theories inevitably talk through each other to a degree, adherents “of rival theories can seek a common core of overlap . . . to which both can retreat.”

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- “Comprehensive theories are indeed resistant to falsification, but observation does exert some control over theory; an accumulation of anomalies cannot be ignored indefinitely.”
- “There are no rules for choice between paradigms but there are criteria of assessment independent of particular paradigms.” (Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 113-15)

I suggest that the Bible keys collected here can provide a beginning core of overlap to which people can retreat in discussing prophets. For those who may not accept the authority of the Bible, I have suggested other places of common ground to which we can retreat for which I have links in the Author's Note.

Values Applied in Paradigm Debate

The existence of values that are not paradigm dependent provides the only way to escape the self-referential standards within paradigms. Kuhn and Barbour identify the most important of these as follows.

- Accuracy of key predictions (Kuhn 153, 185. Cf. Alma 32:27, 33)
Those who accept the authority of the Bible should accept the tests as the key predictions to test.
- Comprehensiveness and Coherence (Kuhn, 169, 185, Barbour 92, 143. Cf. Alma 32:34)
These values come into play with further study, experience, and comparisons.
- Fruitfulness (Kuhn, 154-5. Alma 32:36-41)
“Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before.” (T. Kuhn, 111)
- Simplicity and Aesthetics (Kuhn 155-6, Barbour 92. Cf. Alma 32:28, 42)
- Future Promise (Kuhn 157-8. Cf. Alma 32:41)
“The man who embraces a new paradigm at an early stage must often do so in defiance of the evidence provided by problem solving. He must, that is, have faith that the new paradigm will succeed with the many large problems that confront it,

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knowing only that the older paradigm has failed in a few. A decision of that kind can only be made on faith." (Kuhn, 157-8)

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Jesus and Joseph Smith: Context and Perception

In a survey of a wide range of Jesus scholarship,¹ Professor John McDade observes that:

There is then a radical dependence between the reconstructed Jesus and the reconstructed context/model: how the context and social model are understood determines how Jesus is understood. 'Determines' is not too strong a word, for one of the problems with this approach is that the grid of social and economic context is such a strong factor it can inhibit responsible handling of the actual textual evidence we have for Jesus.

That is, the selections that scholars make for foreground and background data not only provide the context for their discussions, but they also determine the Jesus that they see as a result. McDade includes a discussion of Foreground data for Jesus:

I point you to Telford's summary of how Jesus emerges as a social type if he is considered in the light of 'foreground data' (the narrative tradition, especially the miracles, sayings and the traditions surrounding his death) and 'background data' (the elements of general context posited as appropriate to understanding him in his first century setting). Here, weighting is all and what should strike us about this helpful taxonomy is the selective and constructed character of the images of Jesus offered by historians, depending on their choice of emphasis, what counts as primary data, which heuristic models are used.

- If weight is given to the miracle tradition, then Jesus emerges as an ancient magician (Morton Smith) or as a Jewish charismatic healer and exorcist (Vermes).
- "If the weight is given to the sayings tradition, then a range of images of Jesus is adduced."
- If the wisdom sayings (proverbs, parables, aphorisms etc.) are given prominence, then Jesus emerges as a sage (Vermes, Flusser) or even an itinerant subversive sage (Borg, Robinson, Funk).

1. Jesus In Recent Research by John McDade, delivered at the Catholic Theological Association Conference 1998, published in *The Month* (December 1998), 495-505, citing W.R.Telford, 'Major Trends and Interpretative Issues in the Study of Jesus' in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of current Research*, eds. B.Chilton & C.A.Evans (E.J.Brill, 1994), pp33-74;

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- If an emphasis on the authenticity of the prophetic and apocalyptic sayings is retained, then Jesus emerges as an eschatological prophet (Meyer, Sanders, Charlesworth).
- If his Kingdom saying are interpreted apocalyptically (following Schweitzer), and linked with the Son of Man sayings, then Jesus is an other-worldly figure, expecting cosmic catastrophe and relatively indifferent to social concerns.
- If the Kingdom sayings are not interpreted apocalyptically, and the Son of Man sayings are viewed as secondary, then Jesus emerges as a this-worldly figure, a social prophet, with a social programme (Borg, Horsley, Hollenbach).
- If the emphasis is placed on the opposition to him and his death at the hands of the Romans, then Jesus emerges as a para-Zealot revolutionary (Brandon) or the pacifist victim of oppression.

McDade then looks at the effect of the Background data:

“The choice of context in which to place Jesus affects the estimate given of him:”

- When emphasis is placed on the Palestinian Jewish context and within that on the Rabbinic tradition (although that did not flourish till after 70AD), then Jesus can be seen as the inspired Rabbi (Flusser, Chilton) or the Pharisee (Falk).
- If the choice is made to place him in the context of apocalyptic Judaism, then he can be seen as the ‘humane apocalyptist’ (Charlesworth) or the ‘reasonable visionary’ (Sanders).
- If his Galilean provenance is emphasized, then he becomes a charismatic holy man or hasid in the same tradition as Honi the Circle-Drawer or Hanina ben Dosa (Vermes).
- If Hellenistic influences in Galilee are emphasized, then he can be seen as a Cynic teacher (Mack, Crossan)
- If it is judged that he conforms to no particular social type, he cannot be placed in one of these categories (Hengel)

McDade continues, observing that “The Jesus who is envisaged in these accounts is the pre-canonical Jesus, arrived at through certain judgements about the nature of the Gospel traditions (both canonical and extra-canonical -- the Gospel of Thomas is now a

controversial card in the game), and set in the dynamics of the religious, social and economic life of Palestine.”

What all of these approaches have in common is that they generate a historical Jesus who is not the Jesus of faith, who is not the Jesus of the Gospels, but something less. After looking at the weaknesses of some of these approaches McDade offers the example of Margaret Barker who contextualizes Jesus in a new way, drawing on the traditions of the First Temple.

In her book *The Risen Lord*, Barker's view of him in this context leads her to conclude:

What Jesus believed about himself was identical with what the young church preached about him, even though he had been imperfectly understood at times. It makes Jesus himself the author and finisher of the faith, rather than the early communities, a supposition which has been fashionable for some time. The great message of atonement was not just a damage limitation exercise on the part of a traumatized group of disciples who could find no other way of coming to terms with the death of their leader. The sources do enable us to see how Jesus understood his own death, if only we listen to what they are saying and do not sit in judgement upon them with preconceived notions of what could and could not have been the case. The predictions of the Passion were made by Jesus himself, even though the details may have been added later. (Barker, 109-110)

McDade approves of her case because “If Barker is right, then the principal Jewish context in which we must place Jesus is not that of Galilean healers and teachers, but that of mystical Judaism and Temple traditions. Her case, of course, depends upon certain hypotheses and certain connections being made, but in my view it has considerable merit in proposing a context within which Jesus may have come to a grasp of his ultimate significance.”

I cite McDade's study in the hopes that Christians will grasp the importance of Richard Bushman's talk given at the Conference at the Library of Congress in 2005. As McDade had surveyed Jesus scholarship, so Richard Bushman surveys a range of Joseph Smith biographies. Bushman sees the same relationship between the context a scholar chooses as background and foreground, and the appreciation they show for Joseph Smith.

As you can imagine, the context in which he is placed profoundly affects how people see the prophet, since the history selected for a subject profoundly colors everything

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about it. Is he a money digger like hundreds of other superstitious Yankees in his day, a religious fanatic like Muhammad was thought to be in Joseph Smith's time, a prophet like Moses, a religious revolutionary like Jesus? To a large extent, Joseph Smith assumes the character of the history selected for him. The broader the historical context, the greater the appreciation of the man. If Joseph Smith is described as the product of strictly local circumstances--the culture of the Burned-Over District, for example--he will be considered a lesser figure than if put in the context of a Muhammad or Moses.¹

Bushman argued that Joseph Smith came to understand himself best when he put himself in a Biblical context. Like Paul, he had seen a vision, and he knew it, and knew that God knew it. After Martin Harris returned from his visit with Professor Anthon, he saw himself as fulfilling Biblical prophecy. Those who look at Joseph Smith in the context of Biblical prophets make note of their participation in some of the same practices that modern critics condemn in Joseph Smith.²

And while any particular context may provide a seemingly valid and useful explanation for a prophetic figure, whether Jesus or Paul or Joseph Smith, the real question is "which paradigm is better?" For example, anyone can try to explain the rise of Christianity as "a damage limitation exercise on the part of a traumatized group of disciples," but is that the best explanation? Does it provide accurate predictions? Is it comprehensive and coherent? Is it fruitful both in terms of scholarship and personal faith and practice? Is it aesthetically appealing and simple? Does it have future promise? Is such an explanation better than, for example, Margaret Barker's reading of the evidence that makes the Jesus of history the Christ of faith?

The same issue arises in the different explanations of Joseph Smith. Richard Bushman observed that "Mormon writers are more inclined to put the reports from people close to Joseph Smith into the story. Because the recovery of the Book of Mormon is a sacred story, every detail is relished...Most of the detailed sources were written by believers, and to follow them too closely infuses a narrative with their faith. Secular historians are, therefore, more likely than Mormons to suppress source material from Joseph's closest associates."³

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1. Richard Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories" *BYU Studies* vol 44 n4. p 4.
 2. For example, Joseph of Egypt practiced divination comparable to Joseph Smith's use of seer stones (Gen. 44:5, 15). Abraham, Issac, Jacob and David practiced polygamy.

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A secular explanation of Joseph Smith, like a secular explanation of the resurrection of Jesus, calls for ignoring or discounting the words and behavior of eye witnesses. What skeptics suppose “must have happened” take priority over what eyewitnesses insist did happen.

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3. Richard Bushman “The Recovery of the Book of Mormon” in Noel Reynolds ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited* (Provo: FARMS, 1997) 23-24.

Abuse of a Bible Test for Joseph Smith: A Case Study

An incident during an online discussion at the Mormon Apologetics Discussion Board in November 2008 prodded me to prepare this study for publication. Richard Abanes had claimed that his rejection of Joseph Smith had a Biblical basis. When asked "What are the criteria for being a Prophet of God?" he responded:

How about having the right "God." That's a good start. JS said Christendom had the wrong God. Christendom said Joseph had the wrong God. So, basically, make your choice. I choose the God of the Bible.

He further claimed that "We really don't need to go beyond that"¹ test and asserted that "far from being some kind of hair-brained notion of my own, I refer you to the Bible's qualifications of a prophet, which apparently also thinks it's important that they have the right God:

"If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, 13:2 and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, "Let us follow other gods" (whom you have not known) "and let us serve them," you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul" (Deuteronomy 13:1-3).

In response to Abanes, a well-informed LDS poster called Pahoran wrote that in Abane's use of the Deuteronomy reference,

It blatantly misrepresents the Bible passage it wrests, I mean rests, upon. The ancient Hebrews understood exactly what it meant: do not listen to prophets of Baal, or Dagon, or Molech, or any other false gods. It warned the Lord's covenant people about those who served deities other than him; it does not even remotely contemplate prophets who speak in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but whose understanding varies from "traditional" orthodoxy.²

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1. When I offered to share the Bible tests I have found, Abanes showed no interest. Others participating did indicate interest, so I have provided this version of the study.
 2. Parohan, Mormon Apologetics Board, November 2008.

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Pahoran makes a strong point. The context against which Abanes interprets the Deuteronomy 13 test is that of later Orthodox Christianity, not of the ancient Israelites being addressed. In the thread, Abanes made this context explicit when he says that “JS said Christendom had the wrong God. Christendom said Joseph had the wrong God.”

But how was God known and understood in ancient Israel? We can safely assume that none of those to whom Deut. 13 was directed had read the New Testament, nor did they vote in the fourth century councils that decided Christian Orthodoxy. What happens if we inquire into the ancient Israelite understandings to which the Deuteronomy 13 test applied?

LDS scholar Kevin Barney wrote an essay that surveyed recent scholarship in comparison to “Six Concepts in Joseph Smith’s Understanding of Genesis 1:1.”¹ In the essay Barney notes that “revelation often results after wrestling with ideas, and Joseph’s struggle with the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1 seems to have yielded six key concepts, which he expressed either in the King Follet Discourse, or in a parallel discourse he gave on June 16, 1844. These six concepts may be summarized as follows. “

1. The creation was effected not “out of nothing,” but from pre-existing matter.
2. In the very beginning, there was plurality of Gods.
3. Among this plurality, there was a head God (or there were head Gods).
4. These Gods met in a grand council.
5. These Gods in council appointed one God over us.
6. The idea of a plurality of Gods, which is most easily seen “at the beginning,” is found throughout the Bible.²

Barney’s essay notes that “when propounded in 1844, each of these six ideas was no doubt considered unusual or unorthodox by other religious traditions... Yet the first five are widely acknowledged by current Biblical scholars to be accurate expressions of religious beliefs among the Hebrews during the time of the patriarchs. The sixth concept, while still representing a minority view, has also received strong scholarly support in recent decades.”³

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1. Kevin Barney, “Six Concepts in Joseph Smith’s Understanding of Genesis 1:1,” *BYU Studies* vol 39, n3 (2000), 107-124.
 2. *Ibid.*, 107.

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After reviewing a wide array of Old Testament commentators on these six points, Barney observes that “this scholarship appears to have answered a long standing problem in New Testament Studies: How was it possible that Jewish-Christians in the early church were able to acknowledge Jesus as divine? If, as many believe, the Jews of that era held to an iron clad monotheism, such a result would have been very problematic. ¹ If, however, the pluralistic, dualistic elements of historic Hebrew theology had a continued vitality until and beyond the Christian era, then it becomes more understandable how the earliest Jewish-Christians were able to worship both the Father and the Son as readily as they did.”²

Barney then makes a statement that shows the real implications of the Deut. 13 test for appreciating Joseph Smith:

It is one thing today for scholars to identify the persistence of ancient Hebrew pluralism and to write papers and books on the subject (each building on the work of earlier scholars). It is quite another thing for Joseph Smith to have made these claims, against his own earlier pietistic perceptions of monotheism and without any discernible support from the learned of the day, and to have committed the Church to this position as a principle of doctrine. That no scholar ever did... That Joseph should have articulated these ideas so well and so forcefully in the middle of the nineteenth century is, in my view, nothing short of remarkable.³

The implication of the discoveries of recent scholarship is that if the test in Deuteronomy 13 calls for considering a true prophet against the understanding of God had by the ancient Israelites then it turns out that this particular test provides a profound endorsement of Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims. It shows Joseph Smith accomplishing something that “no other man did.” It also illustrates the process by which a prophets persecutors “shall stumble and shall not prevail” and how the word given by the prophets is strengthened. It

3. Ibid., 108.

1. Margaret Barker explains the problem as follows: “Where in the tradition available to the original disciples in Palestine do we find a belief or hope that it was a divine being or even the LORD himself who was the atonement sacrifice?... it is a very big step indeed from the goats and lambs in the temple to the human sacrifice of one declared to be the LORD, the Son of God. This step is unacknowledged in any account I have read of atonement in the New Testament.” Margaret Barker, *The Risen Lord*, 9.

2. Barney, 118. For a non-LDS take on the importance for understanding the origins of Christianity, see [Margaret Barker](#).

3. Barney, 118-119.

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shows how Joseph helps us understand scripture. Rather than decisively failing one test, this incident shows Joseph Smith fully passing that test, and at least three others.

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Living with Differences and Uncertainty

“by proving contraries, truth is made manifest” (Joseph Smith to Daniel Rupp., June 1844)

Earlier in this study, I quoted to apparently contradictory scriptures from the New Testament.

Matthew 12:30

He that is not with me is against me; he that gathered not with me, scattereth abroad.

Compare Mark 9:38-41

But Jesus said, forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part.

I noted that the apparent contradiction can be reconciled if we read each passage in context. The passage in Matthew shows Jesus calling his appointed apostles, and commencing the work of preaching and gathering. The passage in Mark shows Jesus urging his apostles to accept the virtue and goodness of those “who followed” not. The same apparent difference, and the same contextual solution appears in the teachings of Joseph Smith.

In the accounts of his first vision, Joseph Smith reported that Jesus told him that he was to join none of the sects, “for they were all wrong” that “all their creeds were an abomination in his sight” (Joseph Smith History, 1:19).

On several occasions, Joseph explained how he understood the problem with creeds:

I cannot believe in any of the creeds of the different denominations, because they all have some things in them I cannot subscribe to, though all of them have some truth. I want to come up into the presence of God, and learn all things; but the creeds set up stakes, and say, "Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further;" which I cannot subscribe to.¹

1. *History of the Church*, Vol.6, Ch.3, p.57

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Not only does Joseph assert that “all of them have some truth” here, but in a similar discussion on creeds, he added “It does not prove that a man is not a good man because he errs in doctrine.”¹

While the vision accounts are personal reminiscences, given at different times, the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants contains a formal revelation, declaring the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to be “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, which I, the Lord, am well pleased, speaking unto the church collectively, and not individually.” D&C 1 as a whole explains that along with this distinction, though God has called Joseph Smith for a great work, he has also spoken to “others” and is “no respecter of persons,” and is “willing to make these things known unto all flesh.” The revelation says of LDS leaders that “inasmuch as they have erred, it might be made known.” This should set our expectations, and hence, the way we go about testing. We should see neither truth, nor virtue as exclusive to, nor excluded from the LDS gathering. The distinction is expressly of “well pleas[ingness]” relative to priesthood, revelation, ordinances, covenants, and fullness of the Gospel.

Regarding those who rejected his claims, Joseph Smith commented that:

If I esteem mankind to be in error, shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning, for truth will cut its own way. Do you believe in Jesus Christ and the Gospel of salvation which he revealed? So do I. Christians should cease wrangling and contending with each other, and cultivate the principles of union and friendship in their midst; and they will do it before the millennium can be ushered in and Christ takes possession of His kingdom.²

In another discourse he offered this:

The great designs of God in relation to the salvation of the human family, are very little understood by the professedly wise and intelligent generation in which we live. Various and conflicting are the opinions of men concerning the plan of salvation, the requisitions of the Almighty, the necessary preparations for heaven, the state and condition of departed spirits, and the happiness or misery that is consequent upon the

1. *History of the Church*, Vol.5, Ch.17, p.340

2. Joseph F. Smith, ed. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p 313.

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practice of righteousness and iniquity according to their several notions of virtue and vice.

But while one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of man, causes "His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." He holds the reins of judgment in His hands; He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but, "according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil," or whether these deeds were done in England, America, Spain, Turkey, or India. He will judge them, "not according to what they have not, but according to what they have," those who have lived without law, will be judged without law, and those who have a law, will by judged by that law. We need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the Great Jehovah; He will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed, the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information, and His inscrutable designs in relation to the human family; and when the designs of God shall be made manifest, and the curtain of futurity be withdrawn, we shall all of us eventually have to confess that the Judge of all the earth has done right.¹

The one place for certainty comes from the same source that Joseph Smith sought and found it.

If any of ye lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who upbraideth not, but giveth to all men liberally. (James 1:5).

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1. *History of the Church*, Vol.4, Ch.35, p.595

Author's Note

The current version of this paper is based on personal scripture study I did between 1974 and 1981, during and after my LDS mission. As the long lists of scriptures grew, so did my realization that few people would want to wade through pages and pages of scripture references. For several decades, I let it slide, and over many moves, I lost much of my original typewritten work. Many of my later interests and published essays grew from insights I found from pondering these passages.

However, I kept running across people who showed some interest, and a few people who did not, but should have done so. Plus, in my work as a technical writer, I became increasingly familiar with hypertext, I realized that this format could solve some of the problems in presenting this kind of material. If time permits, I may update and improve this material. Any Bible study can be improved. And the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants include additional tests for prophets. (For example, Alma 30-33.)

Among my other essays which further explore some of the implications of this study, I include a link to a detailed study I did called "[Paradigms Crossed](#)" which explores in more detail there ways and means by which different people viewing the same subject can come to such different conclusions.

And I include links to a three part study on "A Model of Mormon Spiritual Experience."

Part 1: [Myriad Answers to Prayer](#)

Part 2: [Encountering Order and Creativity in the Physical World](#)

Part 3: [Personal Dialogue with Deity](#)

For those interested in scholarly issues surrounding Joseph Smith:

FAIR -- an important site maintained by LDS volunteers at www.fairlds.org

Neal Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, formerly the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, at www.farms.byu.edu

Jeff Lindsay's Website site includes valuable Frequency Asked Questions at www.jefflindsay.com

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