

The Anatomy of Truth

Prophet, Prophecy, and the Ethics of Carriage

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Section I: Introduction: Redefining the Prophetic

A. The Popular Misconception: Separating Prophecy from Fortune-Telling

In contemporary cultural and religious discourse, the word "prophecy" is almost universally synonymous with prediction—a mystical forecast of future calendar dates, geopolitical events, or hidden outcomes. Popular media and centuries of speculative commentary have conditioned audiences to view prophets as ancient fortune-tellers gazing into a crystal ball of tomorrow.

However, this modern caricature fundamentally misunderstands the biblical text. When we strip away cultural overlays and examine how Scripture actually defines and deploys the prophetic office, a vastly different picture emerges. Prophecy is not primarily about time manipulation or future-gazing; it is about communication. It is the direct intersection of divine reality with human speech. To understand what it means to prophesy, we must first correct our lens and look at what the Bible calls a prophet.

B. Foundational Anchor: Deuteronomy 18:18 – The Authorized Mouthpiece

The definitive baseline for the prophetic office is established early in the biblical narrative, anchoring down in Deuteronomy 18:18, where God declares to Moses:

"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers, and I will put My words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him."

This single verse serves as the constitutional blueprint for every authentic prophet who would follow. God does not describe a prophet as an independent visionary or an analytical strategist who attempts to guess where history is heading. Instead, God defines a prophet by a strict operational mechanism: the divine placement of words into a human mouth.

The prophet is, by definition, a mouthpiece—an authorized agent whose personal agency is superseded by the exact words given to him by God. This architectural definition shifts our focus away from the calendar and places it squarely on the integrity of the message and the identity of the Speaker.

C. Thesis Statement

Building upon this foundational mechanic, this study argues that true biblical prophecy is not fundamentally about predicting the future, but about the accurate carriage of divine reality.

By tracing the trajectory of the prophetic office—from the ancient paradigm of the authorized mouthpiece in Deuteronomy 18:18, through the philosophical tensions of time and free will, the communal and individual ministries of the Old Testament, the New Testament shift toward local church edification (governed by the Word-Then-Wonder pattern), and the linguistic weight of carrying God's name (*nasa* in Exodus 20:7)—this thesis demonstrates that prophesying culminates in a lifelong vocational call to absolute honesty. Ultimately, it exposes both the ancient and modern dangers of the false public "mouthpiece," establishing radical integrity as the ultimate standard for bearing truth in the public square.

Section II: The Semantics and Mechanics of the Prophet

A. Linguistic Roots: The Mouth Analogy

To build an accurate theology of the prophetic office, we must examine the specific linguistic imagery Scripture employs. The biblical text repeatedly defines a prophet not by intellectual prowess or mystical intuition, but by physical and functional analogy: the human organ of speech acting as a vessel for another.

This pattern is explicitly established in the foundational relationship between Moses and Pharaoh, mediated by Aaron. In Exodus 7:1–2, God tells Moses: "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet." This structural dynamic is further clarified in Exodus 4:15–16, where God instructs Moses regarding Aaron: "You are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth... He will speak for you to the people, and he will be as a mouth for you."

Here, the scriptural definition of a prophet is laid bare: a prophet is a human "mouth" for a higher authority. The prophet does not generate the vocabulary or author the directive; he merely houses and releases it. This exact physical symbolism is mirrored centuries later in the prophetic commission of Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 1:9, the structural transfer is enacted when "the LORD reached out His hand, touched my mouth, and said to me: 'Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.'" Similarly, God guarantees the ultimate efficacy of His divine agency through Isaiah 51:16, declaring, "And I have put My words in your mouth, and covered you with the shadow of My hand..."

When God communicates the mode of this operational channel, as seen in Numbers 12:6–8, He emphasizes that ordinary prophets receive these divine impressions via visions or dreams, yet the underlying mechanic remains identical: the human mind and mouth are filled with a message originating entirely outside themselves.

B. The Boundary of Agency: Zero Autonomy

Because the prophet's mouth is tenanted by divine words, an authentic prophet possesses zero structural autonomy to alter, invent, or negotiate the message. The boundary of a prophet's agency is absolute submission to the given word.

This limitation is vividly illustrated through the reluctant prophet Balaam in Numbers 22:38: "See, I have come to you... but can I say just anything? I must speak only the word that God puts in my mouth." Balaam—despite his complex motivations—understands the core constraint of the office: a true mouthpiece cannot freelance. To

speaking outside of the delivered mandate is to cross the line from authentic representation to fabrication.

C. Forth-telling vs. Foretelling

This absolute restriction regarding the origin of the words clarifies the historic theological distinction between forth-telling and foretelling.

In popular terminology, prophecy is reduced to prediction. However, Scripture defines the core act of prophesying (*naba* in Hebrew, *propheteuo* in Greek) as forth-telling—the immediate, uncompromised proclamation of whatever message God currently places in the mouth. It is the declaration of divine truth, correction, or comfort into a present situation.

Foretelling, by contrast, is not a separate category of prophecy, but a consequence of divine perspective. Because God operates outside of linear time, His messages frequently describe future realities as current facts. When a prophet speaks a divine decree about tomorrow, it is because God has already declared the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10). Consequently, future fulfillment serves strictly as the structural verification or audit of the prophet's authenticity, as codified in the legal test of Deuteronomy 18:21–22: "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken."

Thus, foretelling authenticates the forth-teller, proving that the words spoken in the present originated from the eternal source.

Section III: The Philosophy of Time, Sovereignty, and Free Will

A. The Eternal "Now" vs. Human Confinement

To fully comprehend how prophetic utterance bridges the gap between heaven and earth, we must confront the philosophical fault line where human language, linear time, and divine eternity collide.

Human experience is rigidly confined to a sequential corridor. We possess only one true reference point—the present. We remember the past imperfectly and speculate about the future anxiously, moving forward one tick of the clock at a time.

God, however, exists entirely outside of this temporal prison. As Scripture asserts, He is the One who declares "the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done" (Isaiah 46:10). To the Creator, history is not a streaming sequence of events waiting to unfold; it is an integrated tapestry laid out all at once in an eternal "Now." When a prophet speaks a divine declaration, they are not "peeking" into a speculative future; they are downloading an eyewitness report from a timeless reality. The friction of prophecy occurs entirely on our end because we attempt to force God's timeless knowing into our narrow, sequential present.

B. Resolving the Paradox: Foreknowledge vs. Determinism

This temporal disparity introduces the most challenging knot in theological philosophy: the coexistence of divine foreknowledge and human free will.

When God reveals an event before it happens—such as the betrayal of Jesus by Judas—human logic frequently rebels, struggling with a deterministic paradox. Skeptics and logicians ask: If God knew it would happen, was it rigidly predetermined? And if it was predetermined, how can Judas bear genuine moral responsibility for his choice?

The resolution of this paradox rests upon distinguishing between awareness and coercion. God's foreknowledge of an event does not cause the event, any more than a human's memory of yesterday caused yesterday to happen. God's omniscience encompasses the totality of our free choices before we step into them, viewing our decisions from an altitude above time.

Using Judas as the test case, Scripture maintains a seamless balance: God foreknew and foretold the betrayal, yet Judas acted of his own volition, bearing absolute moral culpability for his malice ("Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!"). God's passive observation of an eternal reality does not strip humanity of free agency; rather, it underscores that our choices are real, weighty, and fully integrated into a sovereignly governed history. Prophecy, therefore, does not manufacture fatalism; it simply exposes the reality of our choices in light of eternity.

Section IV: The Historical Landscape: Communities and Individuals

A. The Communal Infrastructure: The "Sons of the Prophets"

Moving from abstract theology into the tangible landscape of the Old Testament text reveals that prophecy was not merely the domain of isolated hermits; it was embedded within structured, communal networks. Denoted in Hebrew as the *bnei ha-nebiim*—literally the "sons" or disciples of the prophets—these communities operated across the land of Israel during the monarchical period, serving as the spiritual heartbeat and educational infrastructure for God's covenant people.

1. **Regional Hubs and Institutional Networks:** As seen during Elijah's final journey with Elisha documented in 2 Kings 2, these guilds were established in distinct chapters across strategic cities such as Bethel, Jericho, and along the Jordan River. They functioned as connected local chapters rather than disconnected communes, sharing synchronized insights regarding Elijah's impending departure.
2. **Practical Communal Life:** Far from ivory-tower mystics, these members lived ordinary, integrated domestic lives. Scripture exposes the practical realities of their community: they faced housing shortages requiring building expansion by the Jordan River (2 Kings 6:1–7), shared communal meals out of a common pot (2 Kings 4:38–41), and relied on the collective network for social welfare when a breadwinner died, leaving a widow vulnerable to creditors (2 Kings 4:1–7).
3. **Spiritual Resistance and Intercession:** Operating during eras when kings institutionalized state idolatry, these communities served as an underground intelligence and prayer network. They preserved oral traditions, trained apprentices in listening to God, and stood ready to deploy when divine intervention was required.

B. Individual Ministries: Confrontational, Performative, and Unnamed

While the guilds provided the structural backbone, God deployed individual prophets into distinct, high-impact public ministries that shattered the status quo. These ministries generally manifested in three distinct modes:

1. **Confrontational State Prophets:** These figures stood directly in the halls of political power to challenge corrupt regimes. Nathan held King David accountable for murder and adultery using the sharp edge of a parable (2 Samuel 12); Elijah and Elisha waged a one-two public war against state-sponsored Baal worship under Ahab and Jezebel; and Micaiah ben Imlah stood entirely alone against four hundred sycophantic court prophets to declare God's true judgment (1 Kings 22).
2. **Performative and Symbolic Prophets:** God frequently called select prophets to make their physical bodies and daily routines living parables. Ahijah tore his cloak into twelve pieces to enact the division of the kingdom (1 Kings 11); Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years as a living sign against Egypt and Cush (Isaiah 20); and Ezekiel pushed performative prophecy to its absolute limit by lying on his side for hundreds of days, drawing maps on clay bricks, and packing exile luggage to force a stubborn nation to look at reality through heaven's lens.
3. **Unnamed Prophets:** Scripture deliberately leaves several pivotal messengers completely anonymous—such as the Man of God from Judah who confronted Jeroboam's altar (1 Kings 13) or the prophet who trapped Ahab with a bandage over his eye (1 Kings 20). This anonymity reinforces a core theological truth: the identity of the human messenger matters infinitely less than the absolute authority of the message placed in their mouth.

Section V: The New Testament Shift and the "Word-Then-Wonder" Pattern

A. Scaling Down to the Local Church: Paul's Redefinition

Transitioning from the Old Testament epoch into the early New Testament church shifts the landscape of prophecy from national statecraft and foundational canon-building to local pastoral edification. The Apostle Paul does not relegate prophecy to historical obscurity; rather, in 1 Corinthians 14:1, he issues an active command: "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy."

If a prophet's mouth was historically tenanted by absolute, binding divine decrees, what does Paul mean when he urges everyday believers to seek this capacity? The New Testament scales the primary functional output of prophecy down to three pastoral pillars. As Paul explicitly defines in 1 Corinthians 14:3:

"The one who prophesies speaks to people for their edification [building up], exhortation [encouragement and challenge], and comfort."

While canonical prophecy carried inerrant, foundational authority, congregational prophesying functions as Spirit-prompted insight, timely application of biblical truth, and piercing personal relevance brought by a

believer into the immediate life of another.

B. The Structural Rule in Acts: Word-Then-Wonder

To understand how New Testament prophecy operates dynamically within the early church, we must observe a rigid structural pattern established throughout the book of Acts: Word-Then-Wonder.

In modern religious culture, spiritual gifts or miracles are often chased as standalone spectacles to generate belief. Luke's narrative in Acts reverses this, demonstrating that the spoken word of God always takes structural precedence, while signs and wonders serve strictly as the secondary verification.

1. **The Spoken Word as Primary:** Whether Peter preaching at Pentecost (Acts 2), healing the lame man after declaring the message (Acts 3–4), or Paul and Barnabas speaking boldly before signs are released (Acts 14:3), the divine message is invariably delivered first.
2. **The Wonder as Confirmation:** A wonder or sign (semeion) has no intrinsic, independent value; its entire purpose is to act as a credential pointing back to the truth of the spoken word. The internal conviction or supernatural piercing of a heart—such as when an unbeliever's secrets are laid bare, causing them to fall down and exclaim that God is truly among them (1 Corinthians 14:24–25)—acts as its own internal "wonder," validating that the speaker relied on divine omniscience rather than human cleverness.

C. Testing and Evaluating the Spirit

Because congregational prophesying involves human articulation in a local body, Paul implements strict regulatory guardrails to prevent chaos or manipulation.

In 1 Corinthians 14:29, Paul commands: "Two or three prophets should speak, and the others weigh what is said." Prophecy in the New Testament church is never immune to critical evaluation. It must be actively weighed, tested against the standard of Scripture, and judged by the community to ensure it genuinely builds up the body without contradicting objective truth.

Section VI: The Weight of Carriage: Exodus 20:7 and Radical Honesty

A. Linguistic Recovery of *Nasa*: Carrying the Name

To bridge the gap between the divine words spoken by an ancient prophet and the daily existence of a New Testament believer, we must recover a critical Hebrew linguistic root. Exodus 20:7 is traditionally translated and interpreted as a simple prohibition against profanity or casual cursing: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain."

However, looking past modern translations to the underlying Hebrew text reveals a vastly heavier ethical demand. The word translated as "take" is *nasa* (נָסָה), which literally means to bear, to lift up, or to carry. Combined with *shem* (name)—representing God's character, reputation, and manifest presence—the

commandment transforms entirely: "You shall not carry the name of Yahweh your God in an empty, worthless, or deceitful manner."

Just as an Old Testament prophet was tasked with carrying God's words in their mouth, every believer is called to carry God's name in their very existence.

B. Avoiding the Empty Carriage

The Hebrew word translated as "in vain" is *shav* (שָׁו), meaning emptiness, falsehood, or worthlessness. Therefore, violating Exodus 20:7 is not merely about uttering a forbidden word; it is about living a hypocritical life that renders God's reputation weightless to the watching world.

When a person claims to represent God, bear His identity, or speak truth, yet lives in contradiction to His character, they are carrying the divine name in vain. They have reduced a sacred, weighty reality to an empty brand. Just as a physical sign in Acts served to validate a spoken message, a believer's daily conduct acts as the living proof—or the "wonder"—that either honors or compromises the truth of who God is.

C. The Ethical Baseline: Radical Honesty in Matthew and James

This theology of carriage culminates directly in the ethical demands issued by Jesus and James regarding human speech. If carrying God's name requires total integrity, then truth-telling cannot be a calculated performance.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:33–37), Jesus dismantles the use of elaborate oaths and religious posturing:

"But I say to you, do not swear at all... But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No' be 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."

Jesus strips away the human crutch of invoking sacred objects to add artificial weight to our words because our speech should inherently match reality. James echoes this standard verbatim just before closing his letter (James 5:12), warning against condemnation for failing to live up to simple truth.

Honesty is the baseline of carrying God's name. When a person's life and words align without deception, there is no "empty carriage." Radical integrity bridges the gap between human speech and divine reality, turning everyday life into an ongoing, unspoken prophecy.

Section VII: The Dark Side: False Prophets and Zechariah 13

A. The Source Breakdown: Manufacturing the Word

To fully grasp the integrity required to carry divine truth, we must examine its counterfeit: the false prophet. Scripturally, the corruption of the prophetic office begins at its source. While an authentic prophet is defined by God placing words directly into their mouth (Deuteronomy 18:18), a false prophet reverses this dynamic entirely by manufacturing a message out of their own mind, ambition, or cultural desires.

Scripture diagnoses this internal origin point with surgical precision:

1. **Jeremiah 23:16, 21:** God warns against listening to prophets who "speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD," noting that "I did not send these prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied."
2. **Ezekiel 13:2–3:** God pronounces woe against "the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!" who boldly declare "Declares the LORD" when God has given no such command.

Instead of operating as passive vessels for eternal truth, false prophets act as autonomous inventors, slapping divine packaging onto human agendas to secure popularity, influence, or safety.

B. Tickling Ears: Comfort Without Truth

Because false prophets originate their own messages rather than receiving them from God's eternal perspective, their content invariably adapts to what a fallen culture wants to hear. They offer cheap, unearned comfort while ignoring foundational reality.

As Jeremiah 6:14 critiques, "They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." By pandering to public sentiment and excusing moral drift, false prophets violate the core mandate of the prophetic office, choosing applause over objective truth.

C. The Brutal Purge of Zechariah 13

The ultimate seriousness with which God views this violation of *nasa* (carrying His name in vain) is vividly displayed in Zechariah 13. The text presents a brutal, unflinching picture of a future spiritual awakening where the institution of false prophecy is so thoroughly discredited that it faces absolute eradication:

1. **Extreme Family Accountability:** In Zechariah 13:3, deception becomes so toxic to the community that a false prophet's own parents will turn on him, declaring, "You cannot live, because you have spoken lies in the name of the LORD," and executing him to purge the falsehood.
 2. **The Shedding of Disguises:** The iconic "hairy cloak" of deception becomes an active liability. False prophets will desperately strip off their religious uniforms, deny their title entirely, and scramble to hide behind manual labor, claiming, "I am no prophet; I am a farmer" (Zechariah 13:4–5).
 3. **The Ultimate Purge:** God clears away the corrupted, human-manufactured mouthpieces entirely. This dramatic stripping away of the counterfeit clears the horizon for the ultimate, uncompromised Word made flesh, exposing how utterly incompatible self-serving falsehood is with the kingdom of God.
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Section VIII: Application: The Public Forum as a Prophetic Battleground

A. The Public Figure as a Modern Mouthpiece

When we extend the biblical mechanics of prophecy, carriage (*nasa*), and absolute truth into contemporary life, the ancient boundaries of the prophetic office expand directly into the modern public square. Every individual who commands a platform, a microphone, or a digital pulpit—whether politician, media commentator, cultural influencer, or institutional thought leader—operates functionally as a proxy mouthpiece.

By interpreting reality, framing narratives, and projecting what the future holds based on their worldview, public figures do precisely what ancient prophets did: they ask an audience to trust what they carry. They tell the public what to expect, what to fear, and what to strive for. Consequently, the public forum is not merely a theater of competing political strategies; it is a profound prophetic battleground.

B. False Public Carriage: Performative Manipulation

Applying our framework to modern public life exposes the prevalence of false carriage—the direct equivalent of manufacturing messages out of one's own mind (Jeremiah 23) to tickle ears and secure power.

1. **The Spin and the Performance:** Just as false prophets offered cheap comfort ("Peace, peace when there is no peace"), modern public figures frequently pander to tribal loyalties, offering simplistic solutions and sugarcoated illusions that appeal to what crowds want to hear rather than what objective reality demands.
2. **Violating *Nasa*:** When a public figure weaponizes moral language, champions justice while engaging in private corruption, or alters positions entirely for political expediency, they commit the ultimate violation of Exodus 20:7. They carry a sacred standard—truth, justice, or integrity—in an empty, deceitful (*shav*) manner, rendering integrity weightless and training the public toward cynicism.

C. True Public Carriage: Radical Honesty and Integrity

Against this backdrop of manufactured spin, true public carriage cuts through the noise with the laser precision of uncompromising truth.

1. **Alignment with Objective Reality:** A true public "mouthpiece"—whether a believer living out their faith or a cultural voice committed to unvarnished truth—refuses to pander. Their public rhetoric matches their private reality.
2. **The Power of the Simple "Yes":** Tethered to the ethical baseline of Matthew 5 and James 5, true carriage requires that words mean what they say without needing the artificial props of spin, coercion, or manipulative rhetoric. When a society is flooded with deception, a life and voice marked by absolute, radical honesty becomes a living, undeniable prophecy that exposes the counterfeit and anchors the culture back to reality.

Section IX: Conclusion

A. Synthesizing the Journey: From Ancient Mouthpieces to Everyday Life

This study has traversed a vast theological and linguistic landscape, dismantling the popular caricatures that reduce prophecy to mere fortune-telling. Beginning with the foundational blueprint of Deuteronomy 18:18, we established that an authentic prophet is not an independent visionary, but an authorized mouthpiece whose mouth is tenanted by divine words, operating with zero autonomy to invent the message.

We traced how this divine perspective transcends our linear experience of time, viewing history from an eternal "Now" without stripping humanity of moral agency. We observed how God preserved this voice historically through both the structured infrastructure of the *bnei ha-nebiim* (the "sons of the prophets") and the disruptive ministries of individual confrontational and performative messengers.

Transitioning into the New Testament, we saw the prophetic office scale down through Paul's pastoral pillars of edification, exhortation, and comfort (1 Corinthians 14), always anchored by the structural rule of Acts where spoken divine truth (Word) precedes its confirmation (Wonder). Finally, by recovering the true linguistic weight of *nasa* in Exodus 20:7—shifting our understanding from mere profanity avoidance to the heavy burden of carrying God's name without emptiness (*shav*)—we connected ancient mechanics directly to the radical, uncompromised honesty demanded by Jesus and James.

B. Living as a Living Prophecy: God's Words in Human Mouths

Ultimately, the sobering judgment seen in the dark purge of false prophets (Jeremiah 23, Ezekiel 13, and Zechariah 13) and its modern extension into the public forum reveals an enduring truth: prophecy is fundamentally about absolute integrity rooted in divine origin.

While God sovereignly grants direct, specific words to select individuals for foundational moments, we are all called, to a greater or lesser extent, to act as prophetic carriers of His message. True prophecy is never merely a product of human cleverness, psychological insight, or moral posturing; it remains what God designed it to be: God's reality intersecting human speech.

When applied to the modern public square, true carriage demands that we refuse to manufacture false messages for applause, choosing instead to anchor our speech to objective truth. By allowing God's reality to tenant our voice and living out radical, unvarnished integrity, everyday life ceases to be ordinary—it becomes a living, undeniable prophecy that cuts through the noise of a deceptive culture and carries the weight of God's truth back to the world.