

Prophetic Fallibility Does Not Invalidate Prophetic Authority: A Latter-day Saint Defense

LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

Critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints argue that if Latter-day Saint prophets can be wrong — about doctrine, about policy, about history — then there is no reason to trust them at all. The argument takes a simple logical form: a true prophet of God would not err; Latter-day Saint prophets have erred; therefore, they are not true prophets. This criticism is deployed against specific historical controversies (the priesthood and temple restriction, Adam-God teachings, etc.) and also against the general concept of ongoing prophetic authority. If the argument holds, it undermines the entire Restoration. But the argument depends on a premise — that biblical prophets were infallible — that is demonstrably false. The Bible presents a consistent picture of fallible human beings called to prophetic service who made significant errors in judgment, doctrine, and behavior while still serving as legitimate vehicles for divine revelation.

2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The strongest version of this argument proceeds as follows: The purpose of a prophet is to speak for God. If a prophet speaks erroneously — teaches false doctrine, institutes unrighteous policies, or contradicts previous prophets — then the prophetic claim is unreliable. Deuteronomy 18:20-22 provides the biblical test: "When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously." A true prophet's words come from God and are therefore reliable. If Latter-day Saint prophets can be wrong, then their words do not come from God in the way scripture requires. The Latter-day Saint fallback — "the prophet was speaking as a man, not as a prophet" — is an unfalsifiable escape hatch that makes prophetic claims immune to criticism. If anything the prophet says can be retroactively classified as "opinion," then the prophetic office provides no reliable guidance. Biblical prophets, by contrast, spoke with a "thus saith the Lord" authority that left no room for such equivocation.

This is a genuinely challenging argument. But it rests on a romanticized and unbiblical view of prophetic authority.

3. Biblical Response

Biblical Prophets Were Fallible

The Bible records numerous instances of prophets making errors, exercising poor judgment, expressing personal opinions that were wrong, and behaving in ways inconsistent with their divine calling:

1. **Moses** struck the rock in anger rather than speaking to it as God commanded, and was punished by being denied entry to the Promised Land (Numbers 20:7-12). Moses — the greatest prophet of the Old Testament — disobeyed a direct divine command in a moment of frustration.
2. **Abraham** lied about Sarah being his wife — twice (Genesis 12:11-13; 20:2). He also doubted God's promise of a son and took Hagar as a concubine at Sarah's suggestion (Genesis 16:1-4). Abraham is the "father of the faithful," yet he lied and doubted.
3. **Peter** was publicly rebuked by Paul for hypocrisy: "I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed" (Galatians 2:11). Peter, the chief apostle, was *wrong* about whether Gentile converts needed to follow Jewish dietary laws, and his error was serious enough that Paul confronted him publicly. If the chief apostle of the New Testament could be wrong on a matter of doctrine and practice, the premise that prophets cannot err is refuted.
4. **Jonah** refused God's call, fled in the opposite direction, and even after preaching to Nineveh, was angry that God showed mercy (Jonah 4:1-3). Jonah disagreed with God's own decision — and was still a prophet.
5. **Nathan the prophet** initially told David to build the temple — "Do all that is in thine heart; for the Lord is with thee" (2 Samuel 7:3) — and then received a revelation that same night correcting him: David was *not* to build the temple. Nathan gave David incorrect prophetic guidance and had to retract it.
6. **David** was an adulterer and murderer (2 Samuel 11), yet is called "a man after [God's] own heart" (Acts 13:22) and authored inspired Psalms.
7. **Paul** distinguished between his own opinions and the Lord's commands: "I speak this by permission, and not of commandment" (1 Corinthians 7:6); "To the rest speak I, not the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:12); "I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment" (1 Corinthians 7:25). Paul explicitly acknowledged that not everything he said was divine revelation. This is the same distinction Latter-day Saint theology makes — and Paul made it first.
8. **Balaam** was a genuine prophet who received authentic revelations from God (Numbers 22-24) but also led Israel into sin (Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14). A true prophet with real revelatory gifts acted contrary to God's will.

Deuteronomy 18:20-22 Does Not Require Infallibility

The Deuteronomy 18 test is often cited as if it establishes a standard of perfect inerrancy. But the test addresses a specific situation: someone who claims to speak a prophetic word "in the name of the Lord" that does not come to pass. It identifies *false prophecy* — claiming divine origin for a message God did not give — not *personal fallibility*. The test does not say, "A true prophet will never be wrong about anything." It says, "If someone claims God said X, and X doesn't happen, God didn't say it."

This is fully consistent with the Latter-day Saint position: when prophets speak under genuine divine inspiration, their words are trustworthy. When they express personal opinions, cultural assumptions, or

uninspired judgments, those words do not carry the same weight. The distinction is not an "escape hatch" — it is exactly what Paul practiced.

The Biblical Pattern: Calling, Not Perfection

The consistent biblical pattern is that God calls imperfect people to prophetic service and works through them despite their limitations. The prophetic office does not confer personal perfection — it confers a stewardship of revelation. The prophet's authority comes from God's calling, not from the prophet's personal worthiness or intellectual inerrancy. Moses stuttered and doubted. Jeremiah protested his youth. Isaiah declared himself a man of "unclean lips." Elijah fled in despair and asked God to kill him (1 Kings 19:4). The Bible consistently presents prophetic authority as residing in the divine calling, not in the human vessel.

4. Early Christian Evidence

The Early Church Acknowledged Apostolic Limitations

The earliest post-apostolic Christians did not treat the apostles as inerrant automatons. They recognized the humanity of prophetic leaders while affirming their divine calling.

Clement of Rome (c. 96 AD) wrote to the Corinthians about Peter and Paul, acknowledging their sufferings and trials without suggesting they were personally infallible (*1 Clement*, 5). His appeal to apostolic authority was institutional — the apostles established the order of the church — not a claim of personal inerrancy.

Irenaeus (c. 180 AD) affirmed apostolic succession and the authority of the church's teaching tradition, but his argument was that the *chain of transmission* preserves truth — not that each individual link was personally infallible (*Against Heresies*, 3.3).

Origen (c. 230 AD) openly discussed difficulties and apparent contradictions in apostolic writings, suggesting that the apostles sometimes accommodated their teaching to their audience's capacity. He treated apostolic authority as genuine without treating apostolic persons as omniscient.

The concept of absolute inerrancy — whether applied to scripture or to prophetic persons — is a much later development. The early church recognized that divine truth comes through human instruments with human limitations.

Conciliar Disagreements

The history of Christianity demonstrates ongoing prophetic and ecclesiastical fallibility. The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) reversed earlier positions. The Council of Ephesus (431 AD) condemned positions that had been previously tolerated. Popes have contradicted other popes. Protestant reformers disagreed with each other on fundamental doctrines. If institutional and individual fallibility disqualifies prophetic authority, then no branch of Christianity has legitimate authority.

5. LDS Doctrinal Position

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches:

- Prophets are human beings called by God to lead His church and receive revelation for the body of the church. They are not omniscient, infallible, or personally perfect.
- "A prophet is a prophet only when he is acting as such" (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:265). Not every statement by a prophet constitutes binding doctrine or revelation.
- Official, binding doctrine is established through the scriptural canon, official proclamations of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and sustained through the common consent of the church.
- Prophets can express personal opinions, reflect cultural assumptions of their time, and make errors of judgment — and these do not invalidate their prophetic calling, just as Peter's hypocrisy in Galatians 2 did not invalidate his apostleship.
- The Ninth Article of Faith: "We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God." Ongoing revelation means the church can correct, clarify, and expand previous understanding.
- The test of prophetic authority is not inerrancy but fidelity to the overall pattern of continuing revelation, the fruits of the prophet's ministry, and the confirmation of the Holy Spirit.

6. Key Scriptures

Biblical

- **Galatians 2:11** — Paul rebukes Peter publicly: "I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed"
- **Numbers 20:7-12** — Moses disobeys God, is punished, remains a prophet
- **2 Samuel 7:3-5** — Nathan gives David wrong prophetic guidance, is corrected by God that same night
- **1 Corinthians 7:6, 12, 25** — Paul distinguishes his opinions from the Lord's commands
- **Jonah 4:1-3** — Jonah disagrees with God's decision and is still a prophet
- **Genesis 12:11-13; 20:2** — Abraham lies about his wife — twice
- **1 Kings 19:4** — Elijah despairs and asks God to kill him
- **Acts 10:9-16** — Peter holds incorrect doctrinal views about Gentiles; God corrects him through vision

Latter-day Saint

- **D&C 1:24-28** — "These commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language"
- **Articles of Faith 1:9** — Belief in continuing revelation
- **2 Nephi 9:28-29** — Counsel against trusting in the "arm of flesh" — applies to prophets and scholars alike

7. Objection Responses

"If prophets can be wrong, why trust them at all?"

For the same reason the early church trusted Peter after Galatians 2, followed Moses after Numbers 20, and accepted Nathan's prophecies after 2 Samuel 7. Prophetic authority comes from divine calling, not personal perfection. The question is not "Is the prophet infallible?" but "Has God called this person to this office?" The test is the overall pattern of revelation, not the absence of any human error.

"Biblical prophets were infallible — they always said 'thus saith the Lord.'"

This is historically false. Nathan said "thus saith the Lord" implicitly in 2 Samuel 7:3 and was wrong. Paul explicitly said some of his counsel was *not* from the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:12). Peter was wrong about Gentile fellowship in Galatians 2. The idealized picture of inerrant biblical prophets does not survive contact with the actual biblical text.

"The 'speaking as a man' distinction is an unfalsifiable escape hatch."

Paul made the exact same distinction in 1 Corinthians 7. The existence of a distinction between inspired and uninspired speech does not make it "unfalsifiable" — it makes it realistic. The alternative — treating every word of every prophet as equally binding — is what would actually be unbiblical. Discernment is required, and the Holy Spirit provides it (Moroni 10:5; 1 John 4:1).

"Deuteronomy 18 says a false prophet's words don't come to pass — LDS prophets have made wrong predictions."

Deuteronomy 18 addresses someone who *claims God told them something specific would happen* and it does not. It does not say that a true prophet will never be wrong about anything. If that were the standard, Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Nathan, Peter, and Paul would all be disqualified.

"If the prophet can be wrong, how do I know when to follow?"

Through the same means the scriptures prescribe: personal revelation, the witness of the Holy Spirit, comparison with scripture, and the confirmation of the broader prophetic body (the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve acting in unanimity). Individual statements by a single leader do not constitute binding doctrine. The system is designed with checks and balances — collective revelation, scriptural consistency, and personal spiritual confirmation.

8. Conclusion

The claim that prophetic fallibility invalidates prophetic authority is refuted by the Bible itself. The biblical record is filled with prophets who erred, doubted, sinned, expressed wrong opinions, and had to be corrected — and who remained legitimate prophets throughout. The idealized picture of inerrant

prophets bearing a flawless "thus saith the Lord" at all times is a construction that does not survive close examination of the actual biblical text. The Latter-day Saint understanding — that prophets are inspired but imperfect human instruments, that not all prophetic speech carries equal weight, and that discernment through the Holy Spirit is essential — is more biblically grounded than the inerrancy standard critics attempt to impose. Prophetic fallibility is not a bug in the system; it is a feature of how God has always worked through human beings.

9. Further Reading

- [FAIR: Prophetic Infallibility](#)
- [FAIR: Speaking as a Man](#)
- [FAIR: Prophetic Authority](#)