

False Teachers in Israel and the Church

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Introduction

False teachers, prophets and leaders have plagued the people of God from early times. God warns the people against false prophets in Deuteronomy 13:1-16. Jesus and the New Testament writers also expose and warn against false teachers. In this study we will examine some of the instances and look at some of the passages regarding false teachers and leaders. This is not to negate the good teachers, but rather to encourage discernment and testing of teaching and teachers.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1)

Old Testament Instances

While there are numerous instances, we will just look at some of the major ones. The leaders such as the kings, prophets and priests led the people astray and did not “shepherd” them the way that they should have. This resulted in the Northern Kingdom being exiled first in 723 BC, and then the Southern Kingdom in 586 BC.

Solomon

While Solomon generally has been regarded fairly positive, he did turn away from following God wholeheartedly because he disobeyed the command not to multiply wives for himself. (Deut 17:17) These wives turned his heart from God and he built high places for the foreign Gods. This instigated the Israelites worshipping false gods at the high places.

Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable idol of Moab, on the mountain which is east of Jerusalem, and for Molech the detestable idol of the sons of Ammon. Thus also he did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods. (1 Kings 11:7–8)

Jeroboam

In 1 Ki 12:26-33, after the splitting of the kingdom into the Northern and Southern kingdoms, Jeroboam, the first king of the Northern Kingdom, made two golden calves for the Israelites to worship because he was afraid that his people would go to the temple in Jerusalem and that his kingdom would then return to Rehoboam, son of Solomon. This was the start of the idolatry in the Northern Kingdom and continued to the exile.

Ahab

One of the most well-known leaders that led people astray is Ahab. He married Jezebel, daughter of the priest-king of Sidon. They introduced Baal worship in the Northern Kingdom. One of their offspring was Athaliah, who married Jehoram, king of Judah. This brought Baal worship to Judah, the Southern Kingdom.

Ahaz

Ahaz, who reigned in Judah just prior to Hezekiah, the godly king, also contributed greatly to the fall of Judah.

For the LORD humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had brought about a lack of restraint in Judah and was very unfaithful to the LORD. (2 Chr. 28:19)

Now in the time of his distress this same King Ahaz became yet more unfaithful to the LORD. For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus which had defeated him, and said, "Because the gods of the kings of Aram helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me." But they became the downfall of him and all Israel. (2 Chr. 28:22–23)

Manasseh

Another of the most well-known leaders that led Judah astray is Manasseh.

For he rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. (2 Kings 21:3)

"Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, having done wickedly more than all the Amorites did who were before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols; (2 Kings 21:11)

Other passages that talk about this subject

The head is the elder and honorable man, And the prophet who teaches falsehood is the tail. For those who guide this people are leading them astray; And those who are guided by them are brought to confusion. (Is. 9:15–16)

For the shepherds have become stupid And have not sought the LORD; Therefore they have not prospered, And all their flock is scattered. (Jer. 10:21)

"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!" declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: "You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds," declares the LORD. (Jer. 23:1–2)

"For both prophet and priest are polluted; Even in My house I have found their wickedness," declares the LORD. (Jer. 23:11)

"Her priests have done violence to My law and have profaned My holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the profane, and they have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they hide their eyes from My sabbaths, and I am profaned among them. (Ezek. 22:26)

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? "You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. "Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken

you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. "They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. "My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them."'" (Ezek. 34:2–6)

"For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. "But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi," says the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 2:7–8)

New Testament

The New Testament starts off with John the Baptist calling the Sadducees and Pharisees (the religious leaders of the day) a "brood of vipers". Jesus warned people to *"beware ... of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees"*. (Matt. 16:12)

These Pharisees and Sadducees perverted the truth and gave their traditions superiority over the Word of God.

And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. (Mk 7:6-9)

thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." (Mk 7:13)

Read Jesus' assessment of them in Matthew 23.

The epistles generally deal with false understanding or teaching about the Gospel and doctrine along with admonishing people to live godly and upright lives. There is not always a person or group mentioned that has the false understanding or teaching, it is nonetheless still present. In this study we will not go through all the specific issues, but rather concentrate more on the passages that specifically address false teachers.

One of the main false teachings in the church was the requirement to keep the law that was given at Mount Sinai to the Jews. Paul argues repeatedly that salvation is by faith alone. In the vision to Peter in Acts 10-11, God makes it clear to Peter that salvation is also for the Gentiles. In Acts 15, we have the account of some Jewish believers coming to Antioch and teaching that if the Gentiles were not circumcised, they could not be saved. This led to the Jerusalem council which affirmed that the Gentiles did not need to be circumcised.

Romans

In Romans chapter two, Paul addresses those that believe in the law and teach others, yet are hypocrites. He goes on to lay out the doctrine of salvation by faith through grace.

Corinthians

In 2nd Corinthians 2:17, Paul mentions that there are many that “peddle” the word of God. In 2nd Corinthians 10 through 12, he addresses the issue of false teachers and apostles. He refers to some of them “super apostles”. Apparently, they were really boasting about how good they were, especially in their speaking.

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. (2 Cor. 11:13)

Galatians

There were some in this church that were distorting the Gospel. (Gal 1:6-9) In chapter 2:11-14, he recounts the incident with Peter, where Peter distanced himself from the Gentiles because of those from the circumcision party that were present. In chapters 3 through 5, he really dives into this false teaching, which revolved around salvation being through the works of the law or through faith.

Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. (Gal. 6:12)

Ephesians

In chapter 5:6-7, Paul admonishes the believers not to become partners with those that deceive.

Philippians

While Paul is in prison, he wrote this letter to the Philippian church. There were some who were preaching from envy and rivalry. (Php 1:15) Their motivation is:

the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. (Phil. 1:17)

He also has a very sharp warning regarding those that teach that circumcision is necessary:

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; (Phil. 3:2)

It appears that there were many of these false teachers who would face eternal damnation:

For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. (Phil. 3:18–19)

Colossians

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. (Col. 2:8)

Thessalonians

There were people that were proclaiming that the “day of the Lord” had already come to the Thessalonians. (2 Th 2:1-5)

Timothy

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. (1 Tim. 1:3–4)

desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions. (1 Tim. 1:7)

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. (1 Tim. 4:1–3)

But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; (1 Tim. 4:7)

If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, (1 Tim. 6:3–4)

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called “knowledge” —which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith. Grace be with you. (1 Tim. 6:20–21)

and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and they upset the faith of some. (2 Tim. 2:17–18)

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. (2 Tim. 4:3–4)

Titus

For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain. (Titus 1:10–11)

Hebrews

While the writer of Hebrews does not specifically mention false teachers, the whole book focuses on the false teaching that was pervasive during this time, which is that the law given at Mount Sinai saves through works.

James

James gives a warning regarding becoming a teacher:

Do not many of you become teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive a stricter judgment. (James 3:1 LSB)

Peter

Peter specifically warns against false teachers and their motives:

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words, their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. (2 Pet. 2:1–3 LSB)

Peter goes on to describe the judgement that awaits them and how they distort the Scriptures.

John

The apostle John identifies some false teachers as those that deny that Jesus is the Christ. (1John 2:22, 26)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1 LSB)

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. (2 John 1:7 LSB)

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting, for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds. (2 John 1:10–11 LSB)

The 3rd letter of John specifically addresses Diotrephes, who had assumed an authoritarian leadership role in a church. He was self seeking and refused to accept the apostle or other Christians that came there. He also put people out of the church if they accepted these Christians.

Jude

Jude writes against those people that have “crept in unnoticed” and turned the grace of God into a license for sensuality. They also denied Jesus as Lord and master. These people were arrogant, lustful and caused division in the church.

Revelation

The book of Revelation has several references to false teachers.

The letter to the Ephesian church refers to those that called themselves apostles, but were not. There was also a group called “Nicolaitans” that had some heretical views and practices.

In the letter to the Pergamum church, the Nicolaitans are referenced again as well as those that promoted sexual immorality.

In Thyatira,

‘But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and deceives My slaves so that they commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. (Rev. 2:20 LSB)

In Rev 13:14, the beast deceives people by the signs that he performed. (He is later called the “false Prophet”)

Church Fathers

The church fathers after the apostles addressed false teachings and teachers as well. For example, Irenaeus in his book “Against Heresies” addresses some of these items.

Inasmuch¹ as certain men have set the truth aside, and bring in lying words and vain genealogies, which, as the apostle says,² “minister questions rather than godly edifying which is in faith,” and by means of their craftily-constructed plausibilities draw away the minds of the inexperienced and take them captive,¹

By means of specious and plausible words, they cunningly allure the simple-minded to inquire into their system; but they nevertheless clumsily destroy them, while they initiate them into their blasphemous and impious opinions respecting the Demiurge;³ and these simple ones are unable, even in such a matter, to distinguish falsehood from truth.²

Ignatius writes

For some are in the habit of carrying about the name [of Jesus Christ] in wicked guile, while yet they practise things unworthy of God, whom ye must flee as ye would wild

¹Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. *The Apostolic Fathers With Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*. Vol. I of The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Accordance electronic ed. New York: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

²Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. *The Apostolic Fathers With Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*. Vol. I of The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Accordance electronic ed. New York: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

*beasts. For they are ravening dogs, who bite secretly, against whom ye must be on your guard, inasmuch as they are men who can scarcely be cured.*³

The "Didache", written in the early 2nd century has a section dealing with false prophets and apostles. It should also be noted here that the word "apostle" has a narrow and wide meaning. The term itself really means "sent out" or one who is sent out, a messenger. The narrow meaning refers to the 12 apostles. The wider meaning includes others like Paul, Barnabas and others. In 2nd Corinthians, Paul addresses the issue of apostles. As you read the passage, you can see that Paul uses the term in the wider sense. He gives the qualification for being considered a true apostle as:

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. (2 Cor. 12:12)

Some excerpts from the Didache:

*Now, concerning the apostles and prophets, act in this way, according to the ordinance of the gospel*⁴

*Every apostle coming to you, let him be welcomed as the Lord.*⁵

*But if the one teaching is himself turning away so that he may teach a different doctrine leading to destruction, do listen not to him.*⁶

*And if he asks for money, he is a false prophet*⁷

Most of the time, when the church fathers wrote about apostles, they referred to the 12 apostles, Paul and James. From the writings, though it is obvious that there must have been true apostles (in the wider sense) and prophets after the death of the original apostles and prophets.

The Council of Nicea in 325 AD addressed the issue of a false teaching by Arius, who claimed that Jesus was the highest created being and not fully divine. There were other councils to deal with other teachings throughout the years.

³Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. *The Apostolic Fathers With Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*. Vol. I of The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Accordance electronic ed. New York: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

⁴ Rick Brannan, tran., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

⁵ Rick Brannan, tran., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

⁶ Rick Brannan, tran., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

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The Reformation to the Present

The reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin challenged the false teachings of the Roman Catholic church. Just like the Pharisees, the Catholic church had their teachings override Scripture. False doctrines have continued to be challenged through the years. Today, we have some ministries dedicated to addressing false teachers and teachings. Some of these are [Associates for Biblical Research](#), [Answers in Genesis](#) and [Is Genesis History](#) among others.

Predictions of False Teachers and Prophets in the Church.

These are some of the passages predicting false teachers.

“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. (Matt. 7:15)

“For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. (Matt. 24:24)

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. (2 Pet. 2:1)

“I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Acts 20:29–30)

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, (1 Tim. 4:1)

The Source

In Genesis 3:1-7, we have the account of Satan deceiving Eve. (Rev 20:2) Later we also have the apostle Paul writing to Timothy where the source is identified as “[deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons](#)”. (1 Ti 4:1) Human error is another source. (2 Pe 2:3, Col 2:8) See also 1 Ki 22:22-23, 2 Ch 18:19-22, 1 Co 10:20, 2 Co 11:3-4, 2 Co 11:13-15, 2 Th 2:9-12, 1 Ti 6:20-21, 1 Jn 4:1-3, Rev 13:14, Rev 16:14, Rev 18:2, Rev 18:23, Rev 19:20, Rev 20:3, Rev 20:8, Rev 20:10.

Characteristics of False Teachers and Leaders

Likely the most common trait of false teachers and leaders is a drive to have people follow them and gain power and/or wealth. Some things to look for that indicate false teaching and false teachers.

- They do not accept the inspiration of the Scriptures as being the inerrant word of God. (2 Tim 3:16, 2 Pet 1:20-21)

- They do not accept that Jesus is wholly man and wholly God, who was born of a virgin, was crucified on a Roman cross, physically rose again on the third day and ascended to be with God the Father.
- They do not accept that salvation is by faith alone, by grace through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.
- They will try to adapt and change the Scriptures to conform to today's culture and values and twist them to conform to their own worldview.
- They do not accept the Scriptures as plainly written and will come up with ways to get around the plain meaning of the text. For example, they will say that the creation in six-twenty-four days is allegorical or some other literary form, but is not actual history or that the flood was not worldwide, less than 6000 Years ago.
- They will let "science" overrule Scripture.
- The teaching moves people away from God. (Deut 13, Matt 24:24, 2 Cor 11:13-15, Gal 1:6-9, 1 Tim 4:1, 6:20-21, Tit 1:10-11)

Conclusion

False teaching and teachers have existed from Adam and Eve to the present and will continue on to the end of time. The questions then are "how do we spot false teaching?" and "how do we deal with it"?

In order for something to be false, there has to be truth to compare it to. So, what is truth and how can you know truth? When it comes to reality, history and doctrine, the only one that would qualify to establish truth is the creator and sustainer of the universe. The only way that we can know this truth is by the creator revealing it to us. The next question then is, how do we know that the creator has revealed truth to someone, especially considering how many people claim to have this truth and yet have different versions of it? There must be a verification process to validate the revelation. The validation has to be supernatural; God has to do something that is not natural in order to verify that He is speaking. The way that God has generally done this is through miracles. Think of Noah and the flood, the plagues on Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. In the New Testament it was primarily through healings and the casting out of demons.

Jesus said:

"If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father." (John 10:37–38)

Paul establishes what a true apostle is:

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. (2 Cor. 12:12)

The written word of God is the standard by which everything is to be judged. Satan's ploy is the same today as it was when he tempted Eve by saying "did God really say"? Just as Satan twisted the word of God, so the false teachers and prophets twist the word of God. In the book of Acts, we read of the Bereans, who provided an example for us to follow.

Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11 LSB)

John MacArthur makes the following observation

Sadly, because of apathy toward the truth and shallow biblical knowledge, the church today lacks discernment. It is astonishing and disturbing to see the things Christians believe and the people they follow.⁸

One of the key ways of discerning falsehood is by examining the Scriptures to see if the idea is true or false. It is important to note that Scripture must always be understood as it is plainly written and the way it would have been understood by both the author and the audience. If this is not done, then any interpretation would be valid. Scripture is "inspired by God" and "written as men were moved by the Holy Spirit". This effectually means that Scripture itself is the true word of God and is not corrupt in any way (other than minor copying errors. The original autographs were not corrupt). Secondly, the interpretation of Scripture is not up to individuals or groups for that matter. Scripture has a clear meaning which is distorted by false teachers.

But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, (2 Pet. 1:20)

as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Pet. 3:16)

Peter also acknowledges that some Scripture is hard to understand, but that does not mean that it does not have a clear meaning, it may just take some effort to understand it. Notice that the "distortion" is the result of not being taught or being unstable. The obvious inference is that they can be properly understood since "they do it to their own destruction".

Hebrews brings another dimension to the subject by indicating that distinguishing between good and evil requires effort and practice. A person needs to know the Scriptures and then compare all teaching to the Scriptures to evaluate them. Discerning would include checking teaching against Scripture itself as well as spiritual discernment.

⁸MacArthur, John, *Philippians*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 2001.

But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern both good and evil. (Heb. 5:14 LSB)

As we have seen, false teachers were frequently spiritual or religious leaders in Israel and the church. In light of this, it is important to test all teaching against the standard of Scripture. This therefore includes testing the teaching of pastors, Bible College and Seminary Professors and other religious and spiritual leaders. It also includes Bible commentaries, encyclopedias, “Christian music” and other “Bible” related material. Obviously, the teaching of sects, other religions and secular philosophies must also be tested.

False teachers must first be confronted in a gentle way.

with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may give them repentance leading to the full knowledge of the truth, (2 Tim. 2:25 LSB)

Those that refuse to abide by sound doctrine are to be avoided.

Now I urge you, brothers, to keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and stumblings contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. (Rom. 16:17 LSB)

Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, (Titus 3:10 LSB)

We conclude by looking at Paul’s word to Timothy again.

All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be equipped, having been thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17 LSB)