
PROPHETIC SPEECH FORMS

“thus saith the Lord” (2 Nephi 29:4)

Old Testament prophets used a number of speech forms, or formulaic expressions, when they revealed God’s word to their audiences. These speech forms, indicative of prophetic authority and prerogative, are largely unique to the prophets and their revelatory world. Forms such as “Thus saith the Lord,” “Hearken to the word of the Lord,” and “As the Lord liveth” signal a prophet’s mandate to speak in the Lord’s name. Those that do not invoke the Lord’s name are also authoritative since the Lord’s will is being revealed to his mouthpiece, the prophet.¹

The following chart features five prominent prophetic speech forms found in the Old Testament and identifies their form and purpose.

NAME OF FORM	FORM	PURPOSE
Messenger Formula	“Thus saith the Lord” (Exodus 4:22; 8:20; Isaiah 7:7; 22:15; 29:22)	Indicates the origin and authority of the revelation that God gives to the prophets.
Proclamation Formula	“Hearken to the word of the Lord” (various phrasings, Joshua 3:9; 2 Kings 7:1; 20:16; 2 Chronicles 18:18)	An emphatic summons for people to hear the word of the Lord as it is revealed through the prophets.
Oath Formula	“As the Lord liveth” (2 Kings 2:2, 4, 6)	Gives power to the prophets’ message since the oath is based on the Lord’s existence.
Woe Oracle	“Woe unto” (Isaiah 3:9, 11; 5:8; Jeremiah 13:27; Ezekiel 13:3)	A prophecy or statement of impending anguish, misery, and judgment to warn the wicked; characteristically includes an accusation, the addressee, the intent of the accusation, and the promise of judgment.
Revelation Formula	“The word of the Lord came unto . . . , saying” (various phrasings, Genesis 15:1; 1 Samuel 15:10; Isaiah 38:4; Jeremiah 1:4)	Emphasizes the revelatory process behind the message.

The same revelatory speech forms are also present in the Book of Mormon’s prophetic discourse.² Here are some representative examples:

Messenger Formula

“But thus saith the Lord God” (2 Nephi 29:4)

“For behold, thus saith the Lord” (Jacob 2:23)

“And thus saith the Lord” (Mosiah 3:24)

“Thus saith the Lord” (Helaman 13:8, 11)

Proclamation Formula

“Listen to the words of Christ” (Moroni 8:8)

“Hearken to the word of the Lord” (Jacob 2:27)

“Hearken unto the voice of the Lord their God” (Helaman 12:23)

“Hear the words of Jesus” (3 Nephi 30:1)

“Hearken unto the words which the Lord saith” (Helaman 13:21)

Oath Formula

“As the Lord liveth” (1 Nephi 3:15; 4:32; 2 Nephi 9:16; 25:20; Omni 1:26; Alma 54:10)

“As surely as the Lord liveth shall these things be, saith the Lord” (Helaman 15:17; compare Helaman 13:26)

Woe Oracle

“Wo, wo, unto Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 1:13)

“But wo unto him” (2 Nephi 9:27)

“Wo, wo unto him” (Mosiah 3:12)

“But wo unto him that repenteth not” (Helaman 13:11)

“Yea, wo unto this great city of Zarahemla” (Helaman 13:12)

Revelation Formula

“Thus came the word [of the Lord] unto me, saying” (Jacob 2:11)

“The word of the Lord came unto Alma” (Alma 43:24)

“Behold, the voice of the Lord came unto him” (Helaman 13:3)

“The word of the Lord came to Ether” (Ether 13:20)

Notes

1. For further study, see Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 88–100.
2. See Parry, “Hebraisms and Other Ancient Peculiarities,” 169–70; and Parry, “Thus Saith the Lord.”