

Was Joseph Smith a Prophet of God?

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Thousands of Mormon missionaries throughout the land attempt to influence us to believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. For this reason, we ought to examine this man's claim to inspiration.

Investigation Encouraged by Mormon Leaders

As we enter into this examination, we ought to emphasize that both Jesus Christ and the leaders of the Mormon Church command such investigation. For years, many Mormon missionaries played a tape recording by Mormon Apostle Hugh B. Brown. Entitled "The Profile of a Prophet," the object of this tape was to convince us that Joseph Smith filled the Biblical description of a prophet of God. In that recorded speech, Apostle Brown made the following challenge to examine Joseph Smith's claims:

I submit to you as I submitted to him, that if any man who ever lived had a testimony of Jesus, and gave his life for that testimony, and was effective in spreading the testimony, and bringing convincing evidences of the truth of the statement that Jesus is the Christ, *I challenge any man to show one who has given more real evidence of the divine calling of Jesus Christ than did the prophet Joseph Smith* [emphasis mine—SGD].

Candor like Mr. Brown's is not new among Latter-day Saints. The Mormon Apostle Orson Pratt made a similar statement nearly a century ago about the *Book of Mormon*:

If, after rigid examination, it be found an imposition, it should be extensively published to the world as such; the evidences and arguments upon which the imposture was detected, should be clearly and logically stated, that those who have been sincerely, yet unfortunately deceived, may perceive the nature of the deception, and be reclaimed, and that those who continue to publish the delusion, may be exposed and silenced, not by physical force, neither by persecutions, bare assertions, nor ridicule, but by strong and powerful arguments—by evidences adduced from scripture and reason. (Orson Pratt, *Orson Pratt's Works*, Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1891, pp. 124-125.)

Investigation Encouraged by Teaching of Christ

Likewise, Jesus Christ commanded us to test thoroughly all religious teachings proposed for our belief (I Thes. 5.21). In addition, prominent Latter-day Saints writers have urged the same. For example, Mormon Apostle George A. Smith said:

If a faith will not bear to be investigated, if its preachers and professors are afraid to have it examined, the foundation must be very weak. (George A. Smith, *Journal of Discourses, XIV*, Liverpool: Albert Carrington, 1872, p. 216.)

When we reflect on the following statement of Jesus, we surely can see that only error has to fear public scrutiny and examination:

For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God. (Jn. 3.20-21)

Christ didn't just exhort us to examine everything proposed for our belief. He also commanded that we "should contend earnestly for the faith which was once delivered to the saints," (Jude 3) and that we are to "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (I Pet. 3.15). Again, this is consistent with Joseph Smith's statement in *Doctrine and Covenants* 71.7:

Wherefore, confound your enemies: call upon them to meet you both in public and in private; and inasmuch as ye are faithful their shame shall be made manifest.

Of course, this was the approach the saints in New Testament times took to expose false teaching. Jesus engaged in such, as did Stephen and Paul. In Ac. 18.28, Luke said, Apollos "powerfully confuted the Jews, and that publicly, showing by the scriptures that Jesus was the Christ."

So, an examination of the claims of Joseph Smith to be a prophet of God is consistent with both the teaching and practice of New Testament Christians and our Lord Himself. It is also consistent with the teaching given to Latter-day Saints by Joseph Smith himself. To obey them, we must examine Joseph Smith's teachings.

The Bible's Definition of a False Prophet

To carry out what both the Bible and the *Book of Mormon* and Mormon leaders encourage us to do, it is necessary to know what a false prophet actually is. In Dt. 18.20-22, we find God's definition:

But the prophet which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? 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: thou shalt not be afraid of him.

God defines a false prophet as one who makes predictions that don't come to pass. No dispute exists about God's definition of a false

prophet, but it remains to be seen whether Joseph Smith made any predictions that did not come to pass.

A particular prophecy that Joseph Smith made on September 22 and 23, 1832 while at Kirtland, Ohio, recorded in *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 84, verses 1-5, reads as follows:

A revelation of Jesus Christ unto his servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and six elders, as they united their hearts and lifted their voices on high.

Yea, the word of the Lord concerning his church, established in the last days for the restoration of his people, as he has spoken by the mouth of his prophets, and for the gathering of his saints to stand upon Mount Zion, which shall be the city of New Jerusalem.

Which city shall be built, beginning at the temple lot, which is appointed by the finger of the Lord, in the western boundaries of the State of Missouri, and dedicated by the hand of Joseph Smith, Jun., and others with whom the Lord was well pleased.

Verily this is the word of the Lord, that the city New Jerusalem shall be built by the gathering of the saints, beginning at this place, even the place of the temple, which temple shall be reared in this generation.

For verily this generation shall not all pass away until an house shall be built unto the Lord, and a cloud shall rest upon it, which cloud shall be even the glory of the Lord, which shall fill the house. (Joseph Smith, *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 84, 1-5, Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1921)

The specific city in which the temple was to be built is not mentioned here. However, we find from *Doctrine and Covenants* 57.1-3 that the terms Mount Zion and New Jerusalem are synonyms for Independence, Missouri:

Hearken, O ye elders of my church, saith the Lord your God, who have assembled yourselves together, according to my commandments, in this land, which is the land of Missouri, which is the land which I have

appointed and consecrated for the gathering of the saints.

Wherefore, this is the land of promise, and the place for the city of Zion.

And thus saith the Lord your God, if you will receive wisdom here is wisdom. Behold, the place which is now called Independence is the center place; and a spot for the temple is lying westward, upon a lot which is not far from the court-house. (Joseph Smith, *Ibid.*, Section 57.1-3.)

@QUOCONT = Summarizing the prophecy, then, Joseph Smith predicted, as a “revelation of Jesus Christ,” that a temple would be built in Independence, Missouri in the generation in which he spoke these words.

Has This Prophecy Come To Pass?

As a point of fact, this prophecy has not been fulfilled! The beginning of the temple hasn’t taken place, much less been completed during the generation in which Smith spoke. The Mormons left Jackson County, Missouri before the temple construction even started and the temple lot is vacant until this day. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not even own the temple lot and cannot construct the temple on that piece of ground.

What Mormons Said About This Unfulfilled Prophecy

In studies with Mormons through the years, the only explanation this writer has heard is that the term *generation* in the prophecy must mean something more than just 30-40 years or more than a group of people who live simultaneously.

In answer to this explanation, let us challenge the reader to find another passage anywhere in all of Joseph Smith’s writings where the word *generation* means anything other than a group of people who live contemporaneously. Having failed in that, let us suggest that Mormons show this prophecy to 1000 people and ask them whether they think the term “generation”, as used by Smith in this prophecy, means something other than a group of people who live simultaneously. Better yet,

let us now show that Mormons have universally understood that Smith prophesied that the temple would be constructed *while some of those then alive would still be living*.

On May 20, 1855, Orson Pratt, one of the original council of twelve apostles in the Mormon church, spoke these words about this same prophecy:

And when the Saints were driven out from Jackson County, almost all in the Church expected that they would speedily be restored; and a person was considered an apostate that would say, they would not come back in five years, or ten at the furthest. (Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses, III*, p. 17.)

In this statement, Apostle Pratt interpreted the prophecy exactly as any of us would. The term “in this generation” referred to the group of people alive when Smith gave the prophecy. In addition, Pratt identified as apostate anyone who didn’t interpret the prophecy in that way.

Heber C. Kimball, a member of the First Presidency of the Mormon Church, said on August 2, 1857 in a sermon in Salt Lake City:

...but if you cannot learn to keep the commandments of God in Great Salt Lake City,...how do you expect to keep them in Jackson County—for we are as sure to go back there as we exist. (Heber Kimball, *Journal of Discourses, V*, p. 134.)

Several months later, on December 27, 1857, Kimball said:

They are holy places, and they will be held sacred even as Jackson County; and there is not a man living there but this day has the spirit of fear upon him and expects that he will have to march some day; and to this day, no man has ventured to cultivate or build upon the Temple Block. Joseph the Prophet dedicated that land, and they felt the effects of that dedication; and the blessings will remain, and all hell cannot get it off, and I shall yet see the day that I will go back there, with Brother Brigham, and with thousands and millions of others, and we will go precisely according to the dedication of the Prophet of the living God. Talk to me about my having any dubiety on my mind about these things being fulfilled—I am just as confident of

it as I am that I am called to be a saviour of men, and no power can hinder it. (Heber Kimball, *Journal of Discourses*, VI, p. 190.)

Kimball did not go back to Jackson County, Missouri nor did Brigham Young. However, this statement shows that these leaders of the church interpreted the expression “in this generation” in *Doctrine and Covenants* 84.4 as a group of people alive at the same time.

In the 1870’s, nearly forty years after Smith gave the prophecy, and when most people expected the fulfillment, Mormon leaders like Apostle Orson Pratt still maintained that they would build the temple in his generation. On April 10, 1870, Pratt said:

...We have...confidence in returning to Jackson County and the building of a great central city...There are many of the old stock, who passed through all those tribulations I have named, still living, whose faith in returning to Jackson county, and the things that are coming, is as firm and fixed as the throne of the Almighty. (Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses*, VIII, p. 138.)

These statements show that Mormon leaders then did not plan to stay in Salt Lake City. They planned to return to the “City of Zion,” Independence, Missouri and build the temple as Smith had prophesied.

One month later, May 5, 1870, Pratt said:

...God promised in the year 1832 that we should, before the generation then living had passed away, return and build up the City of Zion in Jackson County; that we should return and build up the temple of the Most High where we formerly laid the corner stone... We believe in these promises as much as we believe in Jehovah. The Latter-day Saints just as much expect to receive a fulfillment of that promise during the generation that was in existence in 1832 as they expect the sun will rise and set tomorrow. Why? Because God cannot lie. He will fulfill all His promises. He has spoken, it must come to pass. This is our faith. (*Journal of Discourses*, VIII, p. 362.)

This is an important statement because it shows how Orson Pratt interpreted the prophecy we are examining. He believed God would

fulfill the promise “during the generation that was in existence in 1832.” He didn’t interpret “generation” to mean “race,” “1000 years,” or anything else. He understood it to mean “generation of people simultaneously alive.”

One year later, on April 9, 1871, Pratt said:

We just as much expect that a city will be built, called Zion, in the place and on the land which has been appointed by the Lord our God, and that a temple will be reared on the spot that has been selected, and the corner-stone of which has been laid, in the generation when this revelation was given; we just as much expect this as we expect the sun to rise in the morning and set in the evening; or as much as we expect to see the fulfillment of any of the purposes of the Lord our God, pertaining to the works of his hands. But says the objector, “thirty-nine years have passed away.” What of that? The generation has not passed away; all the people that were living thirty-nine years ago have not passed away; but before they do pass away, this will be fulfilled. (*Journal of Discourses, XIV*, p. 275.)

Two years later, on June 14, 1874, Pratt said:

God said, in the year 1832, before we were driven out of Jackson County, in a revelation which you will find here in this book, that before that generation should all pass away, a house of the Lord should be built in that county...This was given forty-two years ago. The generation then living was not only to commence a house of God in Jackson County, Missouri, but was actually to complete the same and when it is completed the glory of God should rest upon it...Now, do you Latter-day Saints believe that? I do, and if you believe in these revelations you just as much expect the fulfillment of the revelation as of anyone that God has ever given in these latter times, or in former ages...we Latter-day Saints expect to return to Jackson County and to build a Temple there before the generation that was living forty-two years ago has all passed away. Well, then, the time must be pretty near when we shall begin the work. (*Journal of Discourses, XVII*, p. 111.)

In the 1923 Edition of *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary*, by Hyrum Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, Mormons still expected that the prophecy would be soon fulfilled, even though it had been 89 years since Smith made it:

This generation shall not pass away, etc. This is a promise that some living at the time when it was made, in 1832, would still be on earth in the flesh, when the house of the Lord would begin to lift its spires toward the sky on that consecrated ground. A generation does not pass away in one hundred years, and every generation has a few who live over a hundred years. (Quoted by N. B. Lundwall, *Temples of the Most High*, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962, p. 234, cited by Gerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?*, Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Company, 1972, p. 189.)

As late as 1935, Joseph Fielding Smith, late President of the Mormon Church, maintained that God would fulfill the revelation:

I firmly believe that there will be some of that generation who were living when this revelation was given who shall be living when this temple is reared. And I do not believe that the Lord has bound himself to accomplish the matter within one hundred years from 1832...I have full confidence in the word of the Lord and that it shall not fail. (Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection*, Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1931, p. 270.)

So, here we find that Prophet Joseph Fielding Smith, as late as 1935, believed the term “generation” meant a group of people simultaneously alive. He also believed that some of those alive in 1832 when the prophecy was given, would survive to see the temple constructed.

Over 150 years have passed since Smith gave the prophecy and construction has not yet begun on the temple in Independence, Missouri. The gathering of the saints which Joseph Smith, Jr. prophesied has not yet begun. What of that generation that was alive then? In a more recent book, Joseph Fielding Smith, then President of the Mormon Church said:

It is also reasonable to believe that no soul living in 1832, is still living in mortality on the earth. (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions, IV*, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960, p. 112.)

Conclusion

Since Mormons have not even begun work on this temple, no possible way exists for Joseph Smith's prophecy to be fulfilled. Joseph Smith, according to the Bible's definition, was a false prophet.