

FALSE PROPHECY-FALSE PROPHET? **Joseph Smith's Temple Prophecy**

INTRODUCTION

"Rob Langely" had been a long-time Mormon when he and his wife decided to leave the church and join a local Protestant congregation. We had developed a casual friendship through our association in a south Fort Worth, TX ward. He subsequently expressed some interest in discussing gospel principles with some of his fellow Mormon engineers. So a meeting was arranged, in the General Dynamics cafeteria, between Rob, his new pastor, myself, and another practicing Mormon. I wrote the following e-mail in the spring of 1992 to address a question Rob raised during that discussion.

LETTER

From: Poulsen, Victor M
To: Langely, Rob T
Date: June 8, 1992
Subject: Joseph Smith's Temple Prophecy

Rob,

Four points to Consider:

1. Bible Presents No Such Teaching.

The statement, *"If a prophet makes a prophesy that does not come to pass, he is a false prophet"* is generally presented as a Biblical quotation which, apparently, it is not. Neither I nor some of my Christian friends have been able to locate such a statement. Deut. 18:21,22 is sometimes given as a reference but even there the idea is implicit at best and false at worst. Read on to decide.

2. A Prophet May Speak "Presumptuously."

When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not nor come to pass, that is the thing the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him. (Deut. 18:22)

The Lord points out here that even a prophet may make uninspired statements in His name.

Are you prepared to call such a man a false prophet?

3. Lord May Change His Mind Due To Changed Circumstances.

An excellent counter-example to the teaching in question is presented in Jonah chapters three and four. The Lord commands Jonah to go to Nineveh and prophesy of its destruction. Jonah

obeys and when the people of Nineveh learn of the prophesy, they repent of their wickedness. The Lord has compassion on them and does not destroy the city. Jonah is furious with the Lord for making false his prophesy asking rather to die.

This same concept of God changing His mind is also presented in Jeremiah 18:5-10 and D&C 56:4.

Are you prepared to call Jonah a false prophet?

Zion and its associated temple were to be built by a righteous people. Severe persecution from without and iniquity from within caused the early Saints to suffer greatly. PERHAPS the Lord no longer deemed them worthy for so great a blessing. (D&C 101:2)

This is a bit reminiscent of the Lord's "*breach of promise*" (KJV) to the children of Israel when he denied them entry into the Promised Land because of their wickedness (Numbers 14:34), DELAYING this promise for a future generation.

Are you prepared to call Moses a false prophet?

4. "Generation" Can Mean "Dispensation" or "Era."

Genesis 2:4 refers to the "*generations, of the heavens and of the earth, when they were created,*" which, depending on your persuasion, could mean anything from six days to hundreds of millions of years. (Neither of which, incidentally, is incompatible with Mormon theology). We properly speak of "the *generation* of the dinosaur" referring, of course, to an era or age rather than the life-span of a man. By "generation," perhaps Joseph meant the "Dispensation of the Fullness of Times" which dispensation he ushered in.

Does this sound like a weak argument? Consider Matthew chapter 24. The Savior is prophesying of His second-coming and the signs that would precede it. He continues in verse 33:

33. *So Likewise ye, when ye shall see these things, know that the end is near, even at the doors.*
 34. *Verily I say unto you, THIS GENERATION SHALL NOT PASS, TILL ALL THESE THINGS BE FULFILLED.* (Upper-case added).

Almost identical words were spoken by the prophet Joseph when he prophesied of the temple construction.

Are you prepared to call Jesus Christ a false prophet?

Reconsider, then, my first point (and your interpretation of Deut. 18:22). The account of Jonah alone disproves the premise that a true prophet cannot give a false prophesy--that is unless you would argue that the Bible contradicts itself on this issue. Nor are we forced to conclude that Joseph's prophesy was false at all. The facts of his, as yet, unfulfilled prophesy are certainly mitigated by those of the Savior's--all of which illustrates another problem with judging prophets solely from their record of prophesy fulfillment. (Why do I want to say "batting average" here)?

Many prophecies, especially those of a Messianic nature, give no timetable for fulfillment. How can a prophet's skeptical contemporaries judge his prophetic calling by considering prophecies that, unbeknownst to them, would not be fulfilled for centuries? It is easy, in our position, to look back on Biblical history and conclude that Isaiah or Ezekiel was a true prophet. But how could their contemporaries apply such a test? Was there no way for them to know? Is there no way for us to know?

Of course I'm not suggesting that fulfilled prophecies are not a good measure of a prophet-- certainly they are. Clearly, however, there are other considerations. Furthermore, none of this proves that Joseph Smith was a true prophet, nor was it presented with that intent. His life and contributions speak for themselves.

D&C 84

4. Verily this is the word of the Lord, that the city of 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.

5. For verily this generation shall not pass away until an house shall be built unto the Lord...

Victor

P.S. It was characteristic of Joseph to use Biblical phraseology in his teachings.