

Was Joseph Smith a Prophet?

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.—Matt. 7:15.

WAS Joseph Smith a prophet? Some say “No”; but many people who have investigated his work and his message would answer “Yes!” We ask you to consider some of the affirmative reasons why we believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet, and that he accomplished God's work.

It is a rule which can be traced through the Bible from beginning to end, that whenever God has been about to move to accomplish some great purpose, he has raised up prophets, one or more, has revealed to them that purpose, and commanded them to tell forth that purpose to the people. Whether his purpose was the destruction of wickedness, as in the days of Lot or of Noah, or Nebuchadnezzar or Titus; or the release of his people from captivity, as in the days of Moses; or the sending of his Son into the world as it was foretold by many Old Testament prophets and announced by

John the Baptist, God has always revealed his secret to his servants, the prophets. There is no reason to believe that he has ever rescinded that policy. (See Amos 3:7.)

First, let us define a prophet, and tell what he is required to do. Far too many people have the idea that a prophet is a foreteller, one who predicts the future, a fortune teller. This is *one* of the tests of a true prophet. If the thing he predicts comes to pass, that is one indication that he is a true prophet; if it does not come to pass, it is one indication that he is a false prophet. But many men can read the lessons of history and predict the future without claiming to be a prophet of God. The principal duty and function of a prophet is not to be a *foreteller*, but to be a *forthteller*, one who perceives the word of God and speaks it forth, one who reveals new truth, one who perceives the neglect of old truth and reinterprets it and tells it forth in a way adapted to modern needs and conditions. Incidentally, he may predict future events; and if he does, those events will come to pass to bear witness not alone to his foretelling, but to his forthtelling.

Judged by these standards, was Joseph Smith a prophet? Let us examine some of the things he told forth, and also some of the things which he predicted, to see whether he measures up to the standards of a true prophet. We have had over one hundred and thirty years since his first vision in 1823 in which to judge his claims.

THE FORTHTELLING BY JOSEPH SMITH

Joseph Smith came in a day when the world seemingly was rapidly becoming Christian. He began his work at the beginning of the great industrial and scientific revolution, when steam was just coming into its own, when science and invention began a tremendous upsurge which made men anticipate a golden age, when great foreign missionary societies anticipated that the whole world would soon be converted to Christianity. Men were pretty well satisfied with themselves

in those days. They thought that they were serving God acceptably, that they were good Christians. But Joseph Smith came saying that God had spoken to him and said, "Every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great" (Doctrine and Covenants 1:3 e).

Joseph Smith came back from his first vision in the woods with a declaration that God had told him that the creeds of the popular churches of his day were all wrong. That also aroused a storm of protest, denial, and persecution. A very interesting study which is far beyond the scope of this chapter would be the study of the changes which have come about in those creeds since 1823, and the changes and modifications and innovations in doctrinal belief which have come to every church in Christendom since Joseph Smith's day. There is hardly a church today which has not radically changed its creeds or its doctrinal beliefs in the last hundred and thirty years!

Joseph Smith gave as a reason for his forthtelling, a prediction of calamities that would come in judgment upon the earth unless men repented and truly and sincerely turned to Christ. Other men have looked at their Bibles and have predicted general calamities, but Joseph Smith was specific. He pointed to the predictions of calamity found in Malachi, chapters three and four, and in Joel 2:28-32, and said that they would soon be fulfilled. He pointed again to the warning of Acts 3:22, 23, that he who would not hear the words of Christ should be cut off from among the people, and said that that day had not yet come, but soon would come. In a day when it seemed that the Jews were soon to be accepted in Western civilization, and when almost no Jewish heart was turned to the homeland, Joseph Smith predicted the imminence of the return of the Jews to Palestine.

In a day when man looked confidently forward to the early establishment of world peace, Joseph Smith prophetically declared on November 1, 1831, "The day speedily cometh—the hour is not yet, but is nigh at hand—when peace shall be taken from the earth" (Doctrine and Covenants 1:6 b). In March, 1831, he said: "Ye hear of wars in foreign lands, but, behold, I say unto you, They are nigh, even at your doors, and not many years hence ye shall hear of wars in your own lands" (Doctrine and Covenants 45:11 c). On Christmas Day, 1832, Joseph Smith gave what is commonly called "The Prophecy of the War of the Rebellion" in which he predicted that war would begin with the rebellion of South Carolina—a prophecy which was fulfilled by the secession of South Carolina on December 20, 1860, followed by the bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor the following April. (See *Church History*, Vol. 1, p. 262.)

There are other interesting predictions in this prophecy, which agree with the prophecy noted above that "peace shall be taken from the earth." Joseph Smith said, regarding the rebellion of South Carolina, that "war will be poured out upon all nations, beginning at that place," that war and other judgments should continue to be poured out "until the consumption decreed hath made a full end of all nations." There have been momentary lulls of peace since that prophecy was given, armed truces in which nations formulated their World Courts, the Hague Peace Tribunal, and League of Nations, the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact, and finally the United Nations; but war after war has followed with unceasing and relentless regularity ever since that fateful year of 1860, and we live in perpetual tension and anticipatory terror of a still greater war which no one knows how to prevent.

In September, 1832, Joseph Smith said in the name of God, "I will rend their kingdoms; . . . ye can not see it now, yet a little while and ye shall see it, and know that I am" (Doctrine and Covenants 83:24 b, c). Has this prophecy

been fulfilled? We have lived so close to history that we sometimes fail to realize what has happened. Since that day dozens of nations and kingdoms have been rent asunder, governments have toppled, kings and empires have disappeared. Even the great British Empire has shrunk to a fraction of its former size and its naval, economic, and political power has dwindled. Russia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Austria-Hungary, India, China, Egypt, Arabia, Japan, Ethiopia, Cuba, the Philippine Islands, Alaska, Hawaii, and all of the smaller states now comprising the Union of Soviet States, all of these and many others have undergone radical changes in government since this prophecy was given in 1832.

Joseph Smith, as a part of his appointed task as prophet, seer, and revelator, translated and published the Book of Mormon. Many have passed off the Book of Mormon as a bold, arrogant, presumptive piece of fabrication. But the Book of Mormon is not to be dismissed so easily. Completely aside from its doctrinal teachings, the Book of Mormon makes over four hundred plain statements of fact having to do with the arts, sciences, works, inventions, buildings, domestic animals, religious observances, and the like, of prehistoric Americans. Not one of those facts was known, or could have been known with certainty by the scientists and archaeologists of Joseph Smith's day. Many were contrary to the accepted opinions of that day. All of them have since proved to be true statements of facts. Does not this prove some degree of prophetic insight?

A NEW REVELATION OF CHRIST

Perhaps the most important of all the prophetic missions accomplished by Joseph Smith was his new revelation of Christ. The churches of Christianity had been following a historical Christ, one whose words had been preserved in a book. But they had long since ceased to follow a living

Christ, or to expect the fulfillment of his promise that he would be with them by his Spirit even unto the end of the world. When the canon of Scripture was closed by action of the Council of Nicea in A.D. 397, men ceased to look for any further revelation from God. When they got into theological difficulty, they appealed to the closed Bible, not to the living Christ. They settled their controversies by means of church councils, by manufacturing creeds, and finally by appeal to the emperor, or the pope. They began to worship the idols of wealth, of political power, of military might. The cross on which Christ died became the symbol that led armies to bloody conquest in the name of the Prince of Peace. In due time reformers did their best to rediscover and reinterpret the ancient Christ, but, bound by their old traditions which said that his voice could no longer be heard, they sought him only as a historical reality described in a book and not as a contemporary living personality to whom men could appeal directly for a solution of their controversies and problems. Joseph Smith went directly to this living Christ. He sought God, claiming in expectancy the promise of James 1:5. He received the answer in a vision in which two personages appeared, and one, turning to the other, said: "This is my beloved Son, hear him" (*Church History*, Vol. 1, p. 9).

It was the voice of this living Christ which Joseph Smith heard as he gave his prophetic utterances to the world. It was the voice of this living Christ which he obeyed when he proclaimed the restoration of Christ's authority on earth, when he organized Christ's church according to the ancient pattern, complete with apostles and prophets as in the beginning. It was the voice of this living Christ which he was interpreting when he preached a new social gospel of equality in temporal things, when he proclaimed a restoration of the gifts of the Spirit, when he proclaimed a restoration of the ancient and simple rites and ordinances by which men became regenerated, born-again members of his church and kingdom.

The Voice of Warning

It was this voice which he heard when he gave to the church the basic law of monogamy in marriage, which some have tried to repudiate and change, and others have conveniently ignored: "Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shall cleave unto her and none else" (Doctrine and Covenants 42:7 d).

Joseph Smith was a great forthteller. He told forth the truths given to him by a living, contemporary Christ. He established the truthfulness of his forthtelling by foretelling certain events, some of which have already come to pass, and some of which are even now being fulfilled. Latter Day Saints do not worship Joseph Smith. Rather do we point beyond him to the living Christ whom he declared and to a God who does nothing save he reveal it to his servants, the prophets, a God who has prophetically warned the world of judgments in the last days, and who through his prophets calls all men to repentance and obedience to the voice of the greatest prophet of all, Jesus, the everliving Christ.

Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: and he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness. Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the Lord, as in the days of old, and as in former years. And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the Lord of hosts.—Mal. 3:1-5.

THE last chapter pointed to the promise of Amos, "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth the secret unto his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). We gave it as our considered and sincere belief that Joseph Smith was a prophet, who both forthtold and foretold the things which God wishes to be revealed to the world in this dispensation. We touched briefly on one phase of his prophetic ministry, which was a voice of warning of the calamities which were coming upon the inhabitants of the earth unless men and nations repented, forsook the gods of their own making, and turned again to a worship of God in full sincerity and truth.