

Joseph Smith's Missouri Temple Prophecy

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Was Joseph Smith truly a prophet of God? Although there are several ways of seeking an answer to this question, one obvious way is to test Joseph Smith's accuracy in prophecies that were predictive of events to come. If Joseph, speaking in his capacity as a prophet, claimed to say on God's behalf that something humanly unpredictable was going to happen, and if it did, that would be impressive evidence that he was supernaturally inspired—and would count as evidence that his claim to be a prophet was true. On the other hand, if such predictive prophecies failed to happen as stated, this failure would be evidence against his claim to be a prophet of God.

One of Joseph Smith's most famous—or notorious—predictive prophecies was a “revelation” that Joseph Smith claimed to receive in 1832 from Jesus Christ concerning the building of a temple in Independence, Missouri. A year earlier, in another revelation spoken there in Independence, Smith had directed the Saints to buy up property in and around a lot near the courthouse in Independence as the future site of the temple:

1 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.

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

3 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 courthouse.

4 Wherefore, it is wisdom that the land should be purchased by the saints, and also every tract lying westward, even unto the line running directly between Jew and Gentile;

5 And also every tract bordering by the prairies, inasmuch as my disciples are enabled to buy lands. Behold, this is wisdom, that they may obtain it for an everlasting inheritance.

6 And let my servant Sidney Gilbert stand in the office to which I have appointed him, to receive moneys, to be an agent unto the church, to buy land in all the regions round about, inasmuch as can be done in righteousness, and as wisdom shall direct. (D&C 57:1-6)

According to this 1831 prophecy, Missouri was “the land of promise” (vv. 1-2); the Mormons’ “city of Zion” was to be in Missouri (v. 2), specifically in Independence (v. 3); and the Mormons’ temple was to be located on a lot near the Independence courthouse (v. 3). At Kirtland, Ohio, on September 22 and 23, 1832, Smith delivered his infamous temple prophecy:

1 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.

2 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.

3 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.

4 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.

5 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. (D&C 84:1-5)

In this prophecy, Smith reiterates that Zion was to be a city built in Missouri near its western boundary, at the place where the city of Independence stood at that time (vv. 2-3, cf. D&C 57:1-3). The centerpiece of this Zion would be a temple situated on the lot that Joseph had earlier designated as the site for the temple (vv. 3-4, cf. D&C 57:1-3). According to Smith, this temple was to “be reared in this generation” (v. 4); “this generation shall not all pass away until an house shall be built unto the Lord” (v. 5).

The apparent meaning of this revelation is that Joseph was predicting that a Mormon temple would be built on the temple lot in Independence, Missouri, before the generation of people living at the time in 1832 had all died.

Unfortunately for the Mormons, they were never able to build this temple. The authorities in Missouri drove the Saints out of the state. In 1841, Joseph Smith delivered another revelation, in which he explained that the Mormons were excused from building the temple in Jackson County, Missouri (the county where Independence was and is the county seat), because their enemies' opposition there had made it impossible:

49 Verily, verily, I say unto you, that when I give a commandment to any of the sons of men to do a work unto my name, and those sons of men go with all their might and with all they have to perform that work, and cease not their diligence, and their enemies come upon them and hinder them from performing that work, behold, it behooveth me to require that work no more at the hands of those sons of men, but to accept of their offerings.

50 And the iniquity and transgression of my holy laws and commandments I will visit upon the heads of those who hindered my work, unto the third and fourth generation, so long as they repent not, and hate me, saith the Lord God.

51 Therefore, for this cause have I accepted the offerings of those whom I commanded to build up a city and a house unto my name, in Jackson county, Missouri, and were hindered by their enemies, saith the Lord your God.

52 And I will answer judgment, wrath, and indignation, wailing, and anguish, and gnashing of teeth upon their heads, unto the third and fourth generation, so long as they repent not, and hate me, saith the Lord your God.

53 And this I make an example unto you, for your consolation concerning all those who have been commanded to do a work and have been hindered by the hands of their enemies, and by oppression, saith the Lord your God. (D&C 124:49-53)

Is that it, then? Not really. Joseph's followers historically have understood his 1832 revelation as a predictive prophecy that a temple *would* be built on the specified temple lot. Would this not mean, then, that the temple should have been built there within the lifetime of at least some of the people alive in 1832? Ever since it became clear that all of those people had died, Mormons have offered various explanations for the apparent failure of this prophecy. I am going to argue that these explanations do not withstand fair-minded examination.

Pick an Explanation, Any Explanation

Mormons have offered a bewildering variety of explanations for the apparent failure of Joseph Smith's Missouri temple prophecy. Here is a list of the explanations I have found:

1. A true prophet's words, even in scripture, need not be inerrant or infallible.
2. God has the prerogative of changing his mind or putting on hold what he earlier intended to do.
3. The Saints failed to build the temple because of opposition from their wicked enemies.
4. The Saints failed to build the temple because it was conditional on their obedience or spiritual readiness, a condition they failed to meet.
5. The "temple" of D&C 84:4 should be distinguished from the "house" of D&C 84:5, which refers to the Kirtland, Ohio temple dedicated in 1836, not to the Independence temple that has yet to be built.
6. The "temple" and "house" of D&C 84:4-5 refer to the temple in "this place," which was Kirtland, Ohio, not the place of the city and temple lot mentioned in verse 3.
7. The words "shall be reared" and "shall be built" (D&C 84:4, 5) may be imperatives rather than indicatives; that is, they may express commands of what the Saints were told to do, not predictions as to what would certainly occur.
8. The "generation" refers to a future generation, the one that would see the temple built, not to the generation alive in 1832.
9. The "generation" could refer to a long period of time, such as one hundred years.
10. As long as one person is still alive from that era, even more than a hundred years later, the prophecy can still be fulfilled.
11. The "generation" may refer to an age or dispensation.

The one thing that is clear is that it is far from clear to Latter-day Saints how to interpret Joseph Smith's statements in D&C 84:1-5. Most of these explanations are mutually exclusive. For example, if the generation specified is simply whatever future generation sees the temple built (#8), then "generation" cannot have any of the other suggested meanings in the prophecy (##9, 10, 11) and there is no reason to think God changed his mind (#2). If the Saints did not build the temple because of their lack of obedience or spiritual readiness (#4), then it cannot also be the fault of wicked enemies of the Saints (#3).

Of course, it is theoretically possible that one of these explanations is correct and the others incorrect. I will therefore consider carefully each of these explanations.

Don't Be So Picky: Fallible Prophets and Errant Scripture?

One basic strategy for explaining the apparent failure of Joseph Smith's Missouri Temple prophecy is to argue that someone goofed. Since God can't goof (though, according to at least some Mormons, he can change his mind), that leaves four possible suspects for the goof:

- The prophecy itself is a goof, either because the prophet goofed or whoever reported the prophet's words goofed.
- The Mormons goofed by failing to do what they were supposed to do in order to bring about the fulfillment of the prophecy.
- The enemies of the Mormons goofed (from the Mormon perspective) by preventing the Mormons from doing what they were supposed to do to bring about the prophecy's fulfillment.
- Mormon interpreters have goofed over the years by mistakenly understanding the passage to say something it really doesn't say.

One can find Mormons today advocating all of these apologetic strategies; in some cases, the same Mormon will propose or suggest two or more of these types of explanations. Realistically, at most only one of these explanations can be viable at a time. If it's the Mormons' fault, it doesn't make much sense to say that it's their enemies' fault as well. If the problem is a faulty interpretation, then presumably there's nothing wrong with the prophecy itself. If the prophecy is faulty, there is no point in blaming the Mormon people or their enemies.

In the interest of clearing away the least promising explanations first, let's set aside the suggestion that any criticism of the Missouri Temple prophecy is irrelevant because prophets and their prophecies are not infallible or inerrant. The FAIRMormon web site, a "wiki" site defending the LDS faith, makes [this comment](#):

The LDS do not believe that prophets and apostles are incapable of error, despite being called of God and receiving revelation. Joseph Smith himself taught that 'a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such'. The Church has always taught that its leaders are human and subject to failings as are all mortals.

This point, while accurately representing LDS belief, is irrelevant to the issue at hand, which is a passage in LDS scripture. We can and certainly do agree that prophets, including prophets in the Bible, were not infallible in all of their speech or personal opinions. However, when they wrote Scripture, they were "acting as" prophets, and their words are God's word, exempt from the failings to which mortals are otherwise pervasively subject.

Mormons, zealous to defend their scriptures, often go so far as to argue that there are similar problems in the Bible. The web article just quoted expresses agreement with the judgment that "the Biblical authors . . . made errors of expression even in the Biblical record," citing the allegedly contradictory accounts in Acts of Paul's Damascus encounter with the risen Christ (Acts 9, 22) as an example. It would be quite easy to get sidetracked with such (flawed)

criticisms of the Bible, but in fact they are totally irrelevant. Alleged minor discrepancies are one thing; flatly erroneous predictions in the name of the Lord are quite another. If D&C 84:1-5 does indeed predict that a Mormon temple would be built in Independence, Missouri, before all of the people who were alive in 1832 had died, that would be a false prophecy. “Inerrancy” in the narrow sense of the conservative evangelical view of the Bible (to which I firmly adhere) is not even the issue here. The problem is much worse than a “mistake” or a “goof.” A false prophecy clearly implies a false prophet. For that reason, few if any Mormons lean on this explanation alone in handling the Missouri Temple prophecy.

Who Sinned, the Mormons or Their Opponents, that the Temple Was Not Built?

As I have pointed out, Mormons have offered two similar but incompatible explanations for the fact that a temple was not built in Independence, Missouri, as Joseph Smith had predicted in 1832:

- The enemies of the Mormons goofed (from the Mormon perspective) by preventing the Mormons from doing what they were supposed to do to bring about the prophecy's fulfillment.
- The Mormons goofed by failing to do what they were supposed to do in order to bring about the fulfillment of the prophecy.

From what I have seen in the literature, these two explanations are the most common of those offered by Mormons.

Michael Fordham, in [a lengthy article](#) on the website of the Mormon apologetics organization FAIR, claims the Mormons' enemies were to blame:

D&C 124:49 states, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, that when I give a commandment to any of the sons of man to do a work unto my name, and those sons of men go with all their might and with all they have to perform that work, and cease not their diligence, and their enemies come upon them and hinder them from performing that work, behold, it behooveth me to require that work no more at the hands of those sons of men, but to accept their offerings." The Latter-Day Saints were driven out of the area by the mobs that violently persecuted them. In light of this scripture, the mobs are responsible for the temple not being built, not the LDS or God.

Notice that Fordham asserts here that the enemies of the Saints, “not the LDS,” were “responsible for the temple not being built.” That seems simple enough. But in the same article, further down on the very same web page, Fordham has this to say:

Why would God give instructions for the building a temple if He knew the Saints would be driven out of Missouri? God changed His mind because the Saints were not obedient. The Lord can change His mind depending on the obedience, or disobedience, of His children.... Obedience is the basis upon which all blessings are received. The Saints in Missouri were promised that they would prosper, become great, and not be moved out of their place if they would be obedient unto that which the Lord required of them in this

revelation. Unfortunately, the Saints did not act as they should have, and as a result, were driven from Missouri.

If you're confused, it's because you're paying attention. Fordham asserts *both* that the Saints were not responsible for the temple not being built and that the Saints' disobedience was responsible for the temple not being built. Nor does Fordham even seem to be aware of the apparent discrepancy between these two assertions.

It is, of course, possible for both the Mormons and their enemies to have been wicked, or disobedient, whether in the same or different measures. Unfortunately, that won't help here. Fordham, like many Mormons, understands Joseph's revelation in D&C 124:49-51 to mean that the Saints were prevented from staying and building the temple in Missouri because of their wicked enemies. Well, according to this same passage, the Lord did not hold the Saints accountable for not building the temple but was obliged "to accept their offerings," that is, to accept their diligent efforts to build the temple as meeting their obligation to him. The revelation states that if the people "go with all their might and with all they have to perform that work, and cease not their diligence," then the Lord accepts those efforts and does not "require that work" from them any longer. If this passage applies to the inability of the Mormons to build the temple in Independence, then it flatly contradicts the explanation that they were unable to build the temple because of their own disobedience.

The only LDS writer I have found who has seen the difficulty of combining both explanations is [Jeff Lindsay](#), who writes:

In applying Jeremiah 18:7-10 to the issue at hand (though I'm not sure it should be applied), one could argue that the Latter-day Saints in Missouri did not repent of their transgressions (as a community, anyway, though many individuals did) and lost the privilege of building the temple at the time (see D&C 105:2-6). However, the Lord later said to those who had sought to build it that their offering had been acceptable in the face of opposition from others and that it was not then required to attempt to build the temple at that time (see D&C 124:49-51). Different groups appear to be addressed in these two passages from the Doctrine and Covenants, so both may be compatible if we wish to apply D&C 105:2-6 to the issue of the temple. But I think the best approach is just to consider the issue of delayed fulfillment.

The two revelations in D&C that Lindsay cites were delivered seven years apart (in 1834 and 1841), but they appear to refer to the same thing—the delay in the building of Zion, which was to begin with the construction of a temple in Independence. I suppose one could argue that in 1834 the problem was the disobedience of the Saints while in 1841 the problem was the opposition of the Saints' enemies, but this is a strained harmonization at best. A straightforward reading of D&C 124:49-54 is that the Lord told the Saints to build the temple, they made every effort to do so ("with all their might and with all they have...and cease not their diligence," v. 49), but their enemies prevented them. There is no room in this revelation for the idea that the Saints actually had an opportunity to build the temple but failed to do so because of their own disobedience. This may be why Lindsay is not confident about the use of D&C 105:2-6 to explain why the temple was not built. Still, there is apparently some basis in Joseph Smith's revelations for both explanations, as difficult as it is to harmonize them.

The Missouri Temple Prophecy as a Conditional Prophecy

Both explanations—that it was the Saints' fault and that it was their enemies' fault—presuppose that the Missouri Temple prophecy was conditional, that is, a prediction that the temple would be built if certain conditions were met. Mormons frequently lecture their critics on the fact that biblical prophecies were sometimes conditional. [Michael T. Griffith](#) offers the following “rules” for properly interpreting prophecy:

1. Almost all prophecy is conditional to one degree or another, even if this is not stated in the prophecy itself (which is often the case).
2. In many cases human actions and choices can alter, postpone, or prevent the fulfillment of prophecy.
3. A prophecy is not always telling us what *will* happen, but what *could* happen under certain circumstances.

Mormons commonly cite various examples of biblical prophecies that seem to have been conditional as proof that their conservative evangelical critics are judging Joseph Smith's prophecies by a double standard. LDS scholar [John Tvedtnes](#), for example, makes this point quite emphatically:

The main problem is that the critics do not apply these same standards to biblical prophecies. And when we try to show that, by these standards, many of the biblical prophets fail the tests they have set up for Joseph Smith, we are accused of "Bible-slaming." To those who ascribe more divinity to the Bible than to God, such a "sin" is worse than blasphemy itself. Honesty, however, impels us to submit the biblical prophets to the same tests as those applied to Joseph Smith.... The double standard of the critics allows them to accept biblical statements without question, while denouncing Joseph Smith as a false prophet.

While it is true that biblical prophecies were sometimes conditional, this is not true for all types of biblical prophecies. A passage in Jeremiah that Mormons frequently cite is quite specific as to the types of prophecies that are conditional:

At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. (Jer. 18:7-10 NRSV)

Here the Lord speaking through Jeremiah specifies two parallel situations in which his declarations are conditional. If he declares that he will destroy a nation but it turns away from its wickedness, he will forego its destruction. On the other hand, if he declares that he will do build up a nation but it turns away from the Lord, he will forego its blessing.

The fact that some prophecies, especially prophecies of judgment and promise, can be conditional, does not mean that any apparently unfulfilled prophecy can be legitimately explained in terms of such conditionality. If it did, we could never judge a prophet to be a false prophet on the basis of an unfulfilled prophetic prediction. Yet the Bible explicitly tells us to apply such a test to prophets:

But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die. You may say to yourself, "How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?" If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it. (Deut. 18:20-22 NRSV)

One category of biblical prophecies that would clearly be unconditional is the category of Messianic prophecies. God's promises to send the Messiah, his Son as the Redeemer and Savior of his people, were unconditional prophecies. That the Messiah, God's Servant, was going to suffer and die for his people (Isaiah 53) was unconditionally true. The New Testament assurances that Christ will return in glory (Acts 1:9-11; 3:19-21; Heb. 9:26-28; etc.) are unconditional, not conditional.

The question to be asked, then, is whether it is plausible to understand the Missouri Temple prophecy (D&C 84:1-5) as one that was conditional in nature. I'm afraid the answer to that question is No.

Mormons sometimes argue, as already discussed, that the prophecy was not fulfilled because enemies of the LDS Church prevented the temple from being built. This is actually what happened, but as an explanation for the non-fulfillment of a supposedly divinely inspired prophecy, it really doesn't make much sense. Let's read it again:

4 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.

5 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. (D&C 84:4-5)

Nothing about this prophecy can be plausibly construed as conditional on the cooperation of the saints' enemies. A conditional prophecy is by definition one that is conditional on the cooperation or obedience of the person or group to whom it is addressed, for whose sake it is delivered. Jeremiah 18 states, for example, that if God tells a nation he will bless them and that same nation rebels against him, he will not deliver on the promised blessing. If God makes a promise to nation A but nation B defies him, that should have no effect on the fulfillment of the promise to nation A. It would be ridiculous to claim that this promised blessing might not be delivered if the faithful nation's enemies happen to interfere. Can we really imagine God telling a repentant and faithful Jewish remnant nation, "Look, I know I promised you could have your land back, but it's those blasted Persians"? If the Lord promised the Saints through Joseph Smith that they would have a temple in Independence, then the fulfillment of this promise cannot plausibly be conditional on the cooperation of the authorities of the State of Missouri.

We may therefore dismiss once and for all the suggestion that D&C 84:4-5 was a conditional prophecy that did not come to pass because of the interference of the enemies of Mormonism. This leaves us with the opposite suggestion, that it was unfulfilled because of the disobedience of the Saints themselves. This explanation has the merit of conforming (in theory) to the pattern described above, where God makes a promise to nation A and nation A forfeits said promise by its disobedience. But in other respects this explanation is just as flawed.

Since the prophecy states that the temple would be built before the generation alive in 1832 had all passed away, this means that the Mormons had decades from that date to build the temple in fulfillment of the prophecy. For our purposes here it doesn't matter exactly how long this was. At the shortest end of the hypothetical range of possibilities, the Saints had forty years to build the temple; at the longest end of that range one might suppose they had a hundred years or even somewhat more to build it. The problem will be the same regardless of how long exactly the generation might be reckoned to have continued. The explanation that the Mormons were too disobedient presupposes that the Mormons were disobedient not merely for the few short years between 1832 (when the prophecy was uttered) and 1838 (when the Mormons were driven out of Missouri) but for decades afterward. It requires us to infer that the Saints were unruly, hard-hearted people throughout the 1840s, 1850s, 1860s, and beyond.

Not only is such an assumption about the early Saints presumably unpalatable from the LDS perspective, it is flatly contradicted by Mormon leaders. The official LDS publication *Church News* in 1998 reported on comments made by LDS president Gordon B. Hinckley:

President Hinckley said that being in Ohio made him think of the times of Kirtland, and of the early days of the Church. He spoke of “a great winnowing process that took place in Kirtland, largely over financial matters, but it had a tremendous filtering effect upon the people. Those who were faithful, those who were true, those who were loyal stayed with the Prophet Joseph Smith and those who were otherwise drifted away. That process has been going on ever since and will continue to go on.”

According to President Hinckley, the Saints who followed Joseph Smith in the wake of the controversies in Kirtland, Ohio, were faithful, loyal people. So why were they not able to build the temple that God had promised, if the condition for that promise was faithfulness? Brigham Young, speaking in 1856, while admitting that there were wicked scoundrels in their midst in Utah, argued that they were the exception:

What fault could the world justly find with this people? Some have passed through here to California to dig gold, but they have received nothing at the hands of this people but kindness. What do they know about us? They cannot charge us with one evil.... The great majority of this people are righteous, but the worldlings seek out and mingle with the few wicked here, because both those classes love the spirit of the world.... We are hated, because we are righteous. (*Journal of Discourses* 4:76, 78)

The following year, Young offered a similar assessment of the Saints:

I remarked to brother Kimball last Sabbath, that this people are the best people that ever lived upon the earth; I am actually a good deal inclined to think so. Do not marvel at this remark. How long did it take Enoch to purify his people—to become holy and prepared

for what we want this people to be prepared for in a very few years? It took him 365 years. How long has this people lived? It will be 27 years on the sixth of next month, since this Church was organized. What do you think about this people? I say that the virtuous acts of their lives beat the whole world. Were the children of Israel ever so obedient to Moses, as this people are to me? No, they never began to be; for obedience they could not favourably compare with this people. (*Journal of Discourses*, 4:269)

Joseph Fielding Smith, speaking in 1913, had this to say:

We are, notwithstanding our weaknesses, the best people in the world. I do not say this boastfully, for I believe that this truth is evident to all who are willing to observe for themselves. We are morally clean, in every way equal, and in many ways superior to any other people. The reason is that we have received the truth, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not to us a dead letter, something perhaps to be followed on the Sabbath day and forgotten on the six other days of the week, but our religion is an everyday religion. We are expected to live in accordance with the principles of truth every day of our lives, for these principles are just as true in the middle of the week as they are on the Sabbath day. (*Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:236, emphasis in original).

Granted that the Mormons have never been perfect—and of course never claimed to be—their leaders' assessment of the faithfulness and obedience of the Mormon people in general for the century following the 1832 Missouri Temple prophecy would seem to be incompatible with the claim that the temple was not built because of Mormon wickedness.

Not *That* Temple, *This* Temple: Re-Reading the Missouri Temple Prophecy

The explanations for the apparent failure of the Missouri Temple prophecy that I have examined so far all agree that the prophecy does speak about the building of a temple in Independence, Missouri, within the lifetime of at least some of the people alive in 1832. Some Mormons, however, offer an alternative explanation of at least part of the prophecy. According to [Stephen Gibson](#), “the prophecy in (D & C 84:5-6) came to pass less than four years after Joseph Smith received it.” He points out that verse 5 speaks of “an house” rather than “the temple” and argues, “The use of words ‘an house’ indicate that the Lord is not necessarily referring to ‘the temple’ mentioned in verse 4.... The ‘house’ mentioned in verse 5 was dedicated in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1836.” Thus, the “temple” of D&C 84:4 should be distinguished from the “house” of D&C 84:5, which refers to the Kirtland, Ohio temple dedicated in 1836, not to the Independence temple that has yet to be built.

Unfortunately, as even Gibson seems to recognize, this still leaves verse 4 unexplained. About verse 4, he merely comments, “We simply do not know the length of that generation, and we have good reason to assume that this temple will yet be built.” And verse 4 clearly says that the temple would be built within the lifetime of that generation alive in 1832: “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.**” Gibson’s explanation of verse 5, then, really does nothing to eliminate or lessen the problem.

That having been said, it is dubious that verse 5 should be understood to refer to a different structure than the temple in verse 4. As even Gibson's interpretation recognizes, the "house" of verse 5 is a temple (albeit, according to Gibson, the one built in Kirtland, not the one that didn't get built in Independence). The parallelism of the two lines really demands that the "house" of verse 5 be understood as identical to the "temple" of verse 4:

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.

In both verses 4 and 5, Joseph Smith avers "verily" that a temple (called a "temple" in verse 4, a "house unto the Lord" in verse 5) will be built ("shall be reared," v. 4; "shall be built," v. 5) while the generation alive at that time still remained ("in this generation," v. 4; "this generation shall not all pass away," v. 5). Since a "house unto the Lord" is by definition a temple, as Gibson himself admits, it strains all credulity to claim that the temple in verse 4 is a different structure than the temple in verse 5.

Furthermore, later in the same chapter Smith refers again to this temple which would be built in that generation:

Therefore, as I said concerning the sons of Moses—for the sons of Moses and also the sons of Aaron shall offer an acceptable offering and sacrifice in the house of the Lord, *which house shall be built unto the Lord in this generation, upon the consecrated spot as I have appointed...* (v. 31).

Smith here refers to the temple lot in Independence, Missouri, which at the beginning of the chapter he had described as "the temple lot, which is *appointed* by the finger of the Lord" (v. 3). Thus, the "house" that was to "be built unto the Lord" was to be built on the "appointed" location which had already been identified as the temple lot in Independence, Missouri. Since the "house... unto the Lord" in verse 31 can only be the "house unto the Lord" in verse 5, and since the "house" in verse 31 is specified as the one to be built on the temple lot in Independence, we can only conclude that the "house" and "temple" in all these verses in D&C 84 refers to the same structure.

I conclude, then, that Gibson's interpretation of D&C 84:5 is not only of no help in eliminating the apparent failed prophecy, but is of no help at all in understanding the passage, since it introduces a distinction that is explicitly contradicted in the chapter. This means that Gibson's claim that Joseph Smith's prophecy in verse 5 came to pass four years after he gave it is mistaken. To the contrary, it did not come to pass at all.

A variation on Gibson's explanation, presented to me in an online forum by Mike Richardson, is that both verses 4 and 5 refer to the Kirtland temple. Verse 3 speaks of a "city" that was to be built—with no time frame given—beginning at the temple lot in Missouri. Joseph Smith's dedication of the prospective city at the site of the temple lot in a sense was the

“beginning” of the building of that city, which is of course yet to be completed. Verses 4-5 speak of other events that were fulfilled in Joseph Smith's day: the “gathering of the saints” and the building of a temple was to happen “at *this* place,” that is, at Kirtland, Ohio, where Joseph delivered the revelation recorded in D&C 84.

Richardson's explanation is better than Gibson's, but still does not work. It depends on viewing verse 3 as a separate prophecy from verses 4-5: verse 3 merely states that the Saints will begin the city in Independence starting from the temple lot, whereas verses 4-5 state that before that city can be built the Saints must gather in Kirtland and build a temple there. This separation of the text into two prophecies is attractive but appears to be incorrect. Verse 2 speaks of “the gathering of his saints to stand upon Mount Zion, which shall be the city of New Jerusalem.” As we all know, this is a reference to Independence. Then verse 4 says that “the city New Jerusalem shall be built by the gathering of the saints.” This clearly means the same thing as in verse 2. As far as I can tell, this is one prophecy about the gathering of the saints in Independence to build the city of New Jerusalem (vv. 2, 4). This makes it difficult to see verse 4 as introducing a separate prophecy from the one in verse 3. My point can be made clearer by noting the parallels between verses 2-3 and verse 4:

D&C 84:2-3

“the gathering of his saints...
the city of New Jerusalem
Which city shall be built,
beginning at the temple lot...”

D&C 84:4

“the city New Jerusalem
shall be built
by the gathering of the saints
beginning at this place, even the place of the temple...”

It really does seem that verses 2-3 and verse 4 are talking about the same things: the gathering of the saints to build the city New Jerusalem, beginning at the location set aside for the temple. The fact that it is called “the temple lot” in verse 3 and “the place of the temple” in verse 4 is a difference in wording but apparently not a difference in reference. In D&C 57:3 it is called “the center place” and “the spot for the temple.” Joseph Smith's revelations in D&C used a variety of similar expressions to refer to the same location, the temple lot in Independence, MO:

“the temple lot, which is appointed by the finger of the Lord” (84:3)

“the place of the temple” (84:4)

“the center place” (57:3)

“the spot for the temple” (58:57)

“the spot for the temple... upon a lot” (57:3)

“the consecrated spot as I [the Lord] have appointed” (84:31)

Richardson's strongest argument for interpreting verses 4-5 to refer to a temple in Kirtland is the use of the word *this* in verse 4, “beginning at this place.” However, the very next phrase, “even the place of the temple,” clarifies or explains what “this place” means. Up to this point, “the place of the temple” would have been understood to mean the temple lot in Independence. Thus, the word *this* in the expression “this place” must refer back to the place of which Joseph had just spoken, the temple lot.

It seems, then, that we should side with the vast majority of Mormons in understanding D&C 84:4-5 to refer to the building of a temple in Independence, Missouri, not to the temple in Kirtland, Ohio. The problem of an apparently unfulfilled prophecy, then, remains.

Directive, Not Predictive? Yet Another Explanation of the Missouri Temple Prophecy

One of the most interesting explanations of Joseph Smith's Missouri Temple prophecy is the suggestion that the words "shall be reared" and "shall be built" (D&C 84:4, 5) may be imperatives rather than indicatives. In other words, they may express commands of what the Saints were told to do, not predictions as to what would certainly occur. One [LDS apologetics web site](#) offers this explanation with some tentativeness:

It is unclear from the wording of the 1832 revelation whether Joseph Smith meant it to be a prophecy or a commandment. When he declared the "temple *shall* be reared in this generation," it's possible that he meant this as a directive (Compare to the ten commandments: "thou shalt.." and D&C 59:5-13). If this is the case, D&C 84 is not actually a prophecy.

The passages that present commands and to which this LDS article refers follow a standard literary form, known from ancient times, of apodictic laws. An apodictic law simply orders those to whom it applies to do or not to do specific things. These are very familiar from the Ten Commandments, as the article noted (see Ex. 20:3-17; Deut. 5:7-21):

"Thou shalt not commit adultery."

"Thou shalt not steal."

The passage in Doctrine & Covenants (59:5-13) quotes some of the Ten Commandments, as well as other biblical commands, and includes additional commands following the very same form:

"Thou shalt thank the Lord thy God in all things." (D&C 59:7)

The statements in D&C 84:4-5 in question simply do not fit this form, as a quick re-reading of them ought to make clear:

4 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.

5 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. (D&C 84:1-5)

Note that there is no "Thou shalt" in these statements at all.

What thoroughly discredits this explanation is the fact that in these very statements, other occurrences of "shall" clearly are indicative statements concerning the future, not imperatives issuing commands. The words "this generation **shall** not all pass away" obviously cannot be a command ("Don't you dare all die off until you finish this building!"). Even more clearly, the

words “which cloud **shall** be even the glory of the Lord, which **shall** fill the house”) are predictive in nature, not orders or commands.

LDS scholars do well to rethink their assumptions about the meaning of their texts, and there is nothing wrong with thinking “outside the box.” Such creative interpretations, however, should be subjected to scrutiny as well. In this case, the revisionist reading of the passage in D&C 84:1-5 does not withstand such scrutiny. As almost all Mormons have recognized over the years, the passage is indeed a predictive prophecy.

Redefining *Generation*: Can It Save the Missouri Temple Prophecy?

All of the explanations I have considered up to this point take it for granted that D&C 84:4-5 refers to an event that was supposed to happen (whether predicted or commanded) within the lifetime of some of the people living in 1832 when Joseph first delivered the revelation. Recognizing that these explanations all have problems, some Mormons suggest that this assumption should be reconsidered. They suggest that the difficulty can be resolved by stipulating definitions of the word *generation* that do not entail the predicted event occurring within the lifetime of Joseph Smith's hearers.

Mormons used to suggest, reasonably enough, that a “generation” might refer to a long period of time, such as one hundred years, or even slightly longer. Indeed, in the late nineteenth century this was as close to the official explanation as any. Thus, a [footnote to D&C 84:5 in late nineteenth-century editions](#) commented, “a generation does not all pass away in one hundred years.” Once the year 1932 had come and gone, this theory quickly began to lose any viability (and by that time the footnote had disappeared). Still, as long as even one person who had been living in 1832 was still alive, there was a chance that the prophecy could be literally fulfilled. By the mid-twentieth century this diminishing chance had evaporated to zero. Joseph Fielding Smith admitted as much:

“It may be reasonable to assume that in giving this revelation to the Prophet the Lord did have in mind the generation of people who would still be living within the one hundred years from the time of the announcement of the revelation, and that they would enjoy the blessings of the temple, and a glorious cloud would rest upon it. It is also reasonable to believe that no soul living in 1832, is still living in mortality on the earth.” (*Answers to Gospel Questions*, 4:112)

Joseph Fielding Smith's own explanation was that Christ had absolved the Church members of their obligation because of the opposition of their enemies. I have already shown why this explanation does not work.

In more recent years, some Mormons have suggested what turn out to be rather implausible explanations as to the meaning of “this generation” in Joseph Smith's prophecy. An [article on the Missouri temple prophecy](#) by the LDS apologetics organization FAIR suggests that the word might mean “race” or “progeny” or perhaps some other meaning listed in the 1828 Webster's dictionary. It also appeals to a Bible dictionary that lists various definitions, including “race, posterity,” and offers the following comment:

During his ministry in Jerusalem, Jesus revealed the signs of his second coming, and prophesied that “this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (Matthew 24:34). All those who heard his prophecy died nearly 2,000 years ago, so evidently Jesus meant “generation” to mean “age” or some other long period of time. It’s possible that Joseph meant the same thing in his revelation about the Independence temple, and therefore the time period for its fulfillment is still open.

Admittedly, Matthew 24:34 has been interpreted in a variety of ways in the history of Christianity. The best explanation, in my personal opinion, is that what Jesus prophesied would take place in “this generation” was the desecration and destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in AD 70, *not* the Second Coming. (Jesus does refer to the Second Coming, especially later in the discourse, but as I understand it, “all these things” refers to the events of the first century that culminated in the destruction of the temple.) As for its relevance to the issue here, the meaning of Matthew 24:34 really should not be controversial for Mormons. After all, Joseph Smith supposedly gave to the LDS Church an [inspired translation of Matthew 24](#) that is part of the LDS scripture called Pearl of Great Price. Joseph Smith’s version reads as follows:

Verily, I say unto you, this generation, in which these things shall be shown forth, shall not pass away until all I have told you shall be fulfilled. (Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:34)

According to Joseph Smith, the “generation” to which Jesus referred in Matthew 24:34 was not the generation living when Jesus spoke those words, but the generation that would be alive on the earth when the various events described in the preceding verses of the prophecy had occurred. In other words, Joseph Smith explained Jesus’ statement to mean that a single future generation would witness all of the events described in the prophecy in Matthew 24. This view is also held today by many evangelicals in the dispensationalist school of theology. Whatever one thinks of this interpretation, Joseph Smith clearly disagreed with the idea that *generation* in Matthew 24:34 meant “race” or “age” or some indefinitely long period of time. He understood it to mean the time span of a single generation of people. His only qualification to the verse was to place that generation into the distant future beyond the first century when Jesus made that statement.

As for Smith’s own prophecy in D&C 84:1-5, it clearly echoes Jesus’ statement in Matthew 24:34 (and the parallels in Mark 13:30 and Luke 21:32) as it appears in the King James Version and all other legitimate Bible versions. Note the obvious parallel wording:

“**Verily** I say unto you, **This generation shall not pass, till** all these things be fulfilled” (Matt. 24:34 KJV).

“**Verily** I say unto you, that **this generation shall not pass, till** all these things be done” (Mark 13:30 KJV).

“**Verily** I say unto you, **This generation shall not pass away, till** all be fulfilled” (Luke 21:32 KJV).

“For **verily this generation shall not all pass away until** an house shall be built unto the Lord...” (D&C 84:5).

The use of the introductory “verily” and the key words “this generation shall not pass away till (until)” together constitute an unmistakable allusion by Joseph Smith to the words of

Jesus in this famous discourse. If any further confirmation were needed, it is noteworthy that whereas Jesus' prophecy focused on the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, or Zion (Matt. 24:1-3; Mark 13:1-4; Luke 21:5-7), Joseph Smith's prophecy (in which Jesus allegedly is speaking) focused on the building of a new temple in the place that he identified as Zion (D&C 57:2-3; 84:2-3). This thematic parallel eliminates any possible doubt.

Since Joseph Smith does not add any qualification to his statement such as he would later add to Matthew 24:34 ("in which these things shall be shown forth"), we should surely understand him to mean that his own generation, the people living in his day, would not all die before the temple was built. Furthermore, D&C 84:4 allows no such qualification: "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." Here "this generation" cannot refer to a future generation. The temple, Joseph Smith says, is to be built "at this place" and "in this generation."

Conclusion

I conclude that there is no escaping the obvious meaning of the passage, the meaning that was accepted by all Latter-day Saints for the first several decades, at least, of the LDS Church's history. Joseph Smith predicted, in the name of the Lord, in LDS scripture, that a temple would definitely ("verily") be built in Independence, Missouri, before the people living in 1832 had all died. 176 years have passed since Joseph issued this prediction. As of September 27, 2009 (see [here](#)), the longest recorded life of any human being in modern history was 122 years (Jeanne Calment, 1875-1997), and the oldest human currently living (Kama Chinen of Japan) was born in 1895, 63 years after Joseph Smith's prophecy. Since none of the many explanations that LDS scholars and leaders have offered hold up, we are left with the conclusion that D&C 84:1-5 is a false prophecy.

Of course, this is just one of many issues of relevance to the question of whether Joseph Smith was a true or false prophet of God. It is perfectly legitimate for Mormons to say that we should take into account all of what Joseph Smith did and said, not just this one prophecy. By the same token, though, this failed prophecy *is* one element of Joseph Smith's prophetic track record. Therefore, it should be considered, along with the rest of his work, in assessing his claim to be the Prophet of the Restoration.