

# The Profile of a Prophet

BY PRESIDENT HUGH B. BROWN (1883–1975)

An excerpt from the edited and published version of a speech delivered at Brigham Young University on October 4, 1955; punctuation, capitalization, and spelling modernized.

*Hugh B. Brown was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, on October 24, 1883, to Lydia Jane and Homer Manly Brown. When he was 15, his family moved to Canada. On June 17, 1908, he married Zina Young Card, daughter of Charles O. Card (founder of Cardston, Alberta, Canada) and granddaughter of Brigham Young, in the Salt Lake Temple. They were the parents of six daughters and two sons. President Brown practiced law, first in Canada and later in the United States. He served overseas as a major in the Canadian army during World War I. From 1946 to 1950 he was a professor of religion and coordinator of veterans' affairs at Brigham Young University. In 1953, while working as president of Richland Oil Development Company of Canada, Ltd., he was called to serve as an Assistant to the Twelve Apostles. On April 10, 1958, he was ordained an Apostle, and on June 22, 1961, he was sustained as a counselor to President David O. McKay. He served in the First Presidency until President McKay's death on January 18, 1970, when he resumed his position in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He died on December 2, 1975.*

I should like to be for a few minutes a witness in support of the proposition that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored in our day and that this is His Church, which was organized under His direction through the Prophet Joseph Smith. I should like to give some reasons for the faith I have and for my allegiance to the Church. Perhaps I can do this more quickly by referring to an interview I had in London, England, in 1939, just before the outbreak of [World War II]. I had met a very prominent English gentleman, a member of the House of Commons, formerly one of the justices of the Supreme Court of England. In my conversations with this gentleman on various subjects, "vexations of the soul" he called them, we talked about business and law, about politics, international relations and war, and we frequently discussed religion. He called me on the phone one day and asked if I would meet him at his office and explain some phases of the gospel. He said: "I think there is going to be a war. If there is, you will have to return to America, and we may not meet again." His statement regarding the imminence of war and the possibility that we would not meet again proved to be prophetic. When I went to his office, he said he was intrigued by some things I had told him. He asked me to prepare a brief on Mormonism ... and discuss it with him as I would discuss a legal problem.

He said: "You have told me that you believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet. You have said to me that you believe that God the Father and Jesus of Nazareth appeared to Joseph Smith. I cannot understand how a barrister and solicitor from Canada, a man trained in logic and evidence, could accept such absurd statements. What you tell me about Joseph Smith seems

fantastic, but I think you should take three days at least to prepare a brief and permit me to examine it and question you on it.”

I suggested that we proceed at once and have an examination for discovery, which is briefly a meeting of opposing sides in a lawsuit where the plaintiff and defendant, with their attorneys, meet to examine each other’s claims and see if they can find some area of agreement, thus saving the time of the court later on. I said perhaps we could see whether we had some common ground from which we could discuss my “fantastic” ideas. He agreed to that quite readily.

I can only give you, in the few minutes at my disposal, a condensed and abbreviated synopsis of the three-hour conversation which followed. In the interest of time I shall resort to the question-and-answer method rather than narration. I began by asking, “May I proceed, sir, on the assumption that you are a Christian?”

“I am.”

“I assume you believe in the Bible—the Old and New Testament?”

“I do!”

“Do you believe in prayer?”

“I do!”

“You say that my belief that God spoke to a man in this age is fantastic and absurd?”

“To me, it is.”

“Do you believe that God ever did speak to anyone?”

“Certainly. All through the Bible we have evidence of that.”

“Did He speak to Adam?”

“Yes.”

“To Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Joseph, and on through the prophets?”

“I believe He spoke to each of them.”

“Do you believe that contact between God and man ceased when Jesus appeared on the earth?”

“No, such communication reached its climax, its apex at that time.”

“Do you believe that Jesus was the Son of God?”

“He was.”

“Do you believe, sir, that after Jesus was resurrected a certain lawyer, who was also a tent maker by the name of Saul of Tarsus, when on his way to Damascus, talked with Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified, resurrected, and had ascended into heaven?”

“I do.”

“Whose voice did Saul hear?”

“It was the voice of Jesus Christ, for He so introduced Himself.”

“Then, ... I am submitting to you in all seriousness that it was standard procedure in Bible times for God to talk to man.”

“I think I will admit that, but it stopped shortly after the first century of the Christian era.”

“Why do you think it stopped?”

“I can’t say.”

“You think that God hasn’t spoken since then?”

“I am sure He hasn’t.”

“There must be a reason; can you give me a reason?”

“I do not know.”

“May I suggest some possible reasons: perhaps God does not speak to man anymore because He cannot. He has lost the power.”

He said, “Of course that would be blasphemous.”

“Well, then, if you don’t accept that, perhaps He doesn’t speak to men because He doesn’t love us anymore. He is no longer interested in the affairs of men.”

“No,” he said, “God loves all men, and He is no respecter of persons.”

“Well, then, if He could speak and if He loves us, then the only other possible answer, as I see it, is that we don’t need Him. We have made such rapid strides in science, we are so well educated, that we don’t need God anymore.”

And then he said, and his voice trembled as he thought of impending war: “Mr. Brown, there never was a time in the history of the world when the voice of God was needed as it is needed now. Perhaps you can tell me why He doesn’t speak.”

My answer was: “He does speak. He has spoken, but men need faith to hear Him.”

Then we proceeded to prepare what I may call a “profile of a prophet.” ... We agreed, between us, that the following characteristics should distinguish a man who claims to be a prophet.

A. He will boldly claim that God [has] spoken to him.

B. Any man so claiming would be a dignified man with a dignified message; no table-jumping, no whisperings from the dead, no clairvoyance, but an intelligent statement of truth.

C. Any man claiming to be a prophet of God would declare his message without any fear and without making any weak concessions to public opinion.

D. If he were speaking for God, he could not make concessions although what he taught would be new and contrary to the accepted teachings of the day. A prophet bears witness to what he has seen and heard and seldom tries to make a case by argument. His message and not himself is important.

E. Such a man would speak in the name of the Lord, saying, “Thus saith the Lord,” as did Moses, Joshua, and others.

F. Such a man would predict future events in the name of the Lord, and they would come to pass, as did Isaiah and Ezekiel.

G. He would have not only an important message for his time but often a message for all future time, such as Daniel, Jeremiah, and others had.

H. He would have courage and faith enough to endure persecution and to give his life, if need be, for the cause he espoused, such as Peter, Paul, and others did.

I. Such a man would denounce wickedness fearlessly. He would generally be rejected or persecuted by the people of his time, but later generations, the descendants of his persecutors, would build monuments in his honor.

J. He would be able to do superhuman things, things that no man could do without God’s help. The consequence or result of his message and work would be convincing evidence of his prophetic calling. “By their fruits ye shall know them” [Matt. 7:20].

K. His teachings would be in strict conformity with scripture, and his words and his writings would become scripture. “For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pet. 1:21).

Now, I have given but an outline which you can fill in and amplify and then measure and judge the Prophet Joseph Smith by the work and stature of other prophets.

As a student of the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith for more than 50 years, I say to you ... , by these standards Joseph Smith qualifies as a prophet of God.

I believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God because he talked like a prophet. He was the first man since the Apostles of Jesus Christ were slain to make the claim which prophets have always made, [namely,] that God had spoken to him. He lived and died like a prophet. I believe he was a prophet of God because he gave to this world some of the greatest of all revelations. I believe that he was a prophet of God because he predicted many things which have come to pass, things which only God could bring to pass.

John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, declared, "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" [Rev. 19:10]. If Joseph Smith had the testimony of Jesus, he had the spirit of prophecy, and if he had the spirit of prophecy, he was a prophet. I submit to you, and I submitted to my friend, that as much as any man who ever lived he had a testimony of Jesus, for, like the Apostles of old, he saw Him and heard Him speak. He gave his life for that testimony. I challenge any man to name one who has given more evidence of the divine calling of Jesus Christ than did the Prophet Joseph Smith.

I believe the Prophet Joseph Smith was a prophet because he did many superhuman things. One was translating the Book of Mormon. Some people will not agree, but I submit to you that the Prophet Joseph Smith in translating the Book of Mormon did a superhuman work. I ask you ... to undertake to write a story on the ancient inhabitants of America. Write as he did without any source of material. Include in your story 54 chapters dealing with wars, 21 historical chapters, 55 chapters on visions and prophecies, and, remember, when you begin to write on visions and prophecies you must have your record agree meticulously with the Bible. You write 71 chapters on doctrine and exhortation, and, here too, you must check every statement with the scriptures or you will be proven to be a fraud. You must write 21 chapters on the ministry of Christ, and everything you claim He said and did and every testimony you write in your book about Him must agree absolutely with the New Testament. I ask you, would you like to undertake such a task? I would suggest to you too that you must employ figures of speech, similes, metaphors, narrations, exposition, description, oratory, epic, lyric, logic, and parables. Undertake that, will you? I ask you to remember that the man that translated the Book of Mormon was a young man who hadn't had the opportunity of schooling that you have had, and yet he dictated that book in just over two months and made very few, if any, corrections. For over 100 years, some of the best students and scholars of the world have been trying to prove from the Bible that the Book of Mormon is false, but not one of them has been able to prove that anything he wrote was not in strict harmony with the scriptures. ...

Joseph Smith undertook and accomplished other superhuman tasks; among them I list the following: He organized the Church. (I call attention to the fact that no constitution effected by human agency has survived 100 years without modification or amendment, even the Constitution of the United States. The basic law or constitution of the Church has never been altered.) He undertook to carry the gospel message to all nations, which is a superhuman task still in progress. He undertook, by divine command, to gather thousands of people to Zion. He instituted vicarious work for the dead and built temples for that purpose. He promised that certain signs should follow the believers, and there are thousands of witnesses who certify that this promise has been fulfilled.

I said to my friend, "... I cannot understand your saying to me that my claims are fantastic. Nor can I understand why Christians who claim to believe in Christ would persecute and put to death a man whose whole purpose was to prove the truth of the things they themselves were declaring, namely, that Jesus was the Christ. I could understand them for persecuting Joseph if he had said, "I am Christ," or if he had said, "There is no Christ," or if he had said someone else is Christ. Then Christians believing in Christ would be justified in opposing him. But what he said was, "He whom ye claim to serve, declare I unto you. ... I testify that I saw Him and talked with Him. He is the Son of God. Why persecute me for that?" ...

Perhaps some of you are wondering how the judge reacted to our discussion. He sat and listened intently; he then asked some very pointed and searching questions, and at the end of the period he said: "Mr. Brown, I wonder if your people appreciate the import of your message. Do you?" He said, "If what you have told me is true, it is the greatest message that has come to this earth since the angels announced the birth of Christ."

This was a judge speaking, a great statesman, an intelligent man. He threw out the challenge: "Do you appreciate the import of what you say?" He added: "I wish it were true. I hope it may be true. God knows it ought to be true. I would to God," he said, and he wept as he said it, "that some man could appear on earth and authoritatively say, 'Thus saith the Lord.'"

As I intimated, we did not meet again. I have brought to you very briefly some of the reasons why I believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. But undergirding and overarching all that, I say to you from the very center of my heart that by the revelations of the Holy Ghost I know that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. While these evidences and many others that could be cited may have the effect of giving one an intellectual conviction, only by the whisperings of the Holy Spirit can one come to know the things of God. By those whisperings I say I know that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God. I thank God for that knowledge.