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Appendix D: Bibliographical Note on Latter-day Saint Writings on the Apostasy

Author(s): Ryan G. Christensen

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Appendix D

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON
LATTER-DAY SAINT WRITINGS
ON THE APOSTASY

Ryan G. Christensen

The idea that Christ’s church no longer existed was central to Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims, and as such was among the earliest of the doctrines established in this dispensation. Joseph quotes Christ as telling him during the first vision that he “must join none of [the sects], for they were all wrong; . . . that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: ‘they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness but deny the power thereof’” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). While there may be some debate about the specifics (which creeds and which professors),¹ the overall message is clear: there has been a universal apostasy; the true church of Christ is no longer on the earth.

1. See John W. Welch, “‘All Their Creeds Were an Abomination’: A Brief Look at Creeds as Part of the Apostasy,” in *Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to the Restored Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 228–49.

It has been claimed that Joseph only later came to this understanding. His earliest account of the first vision, it is said, focuses not on this quest to find the true church but on a personal odyssey for forgiveness. But even this account states clearly that he had come to know that mankind “did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”² It may be true that he did not immediately understand this as a prophetic call, as were the theophanies of Moses, Lehi, and Isaiah (among many others); indeed, his initial reaction to his vision related only locally, if unequivocally, to the apostasy, in that he had “learned for [him]self that Presbyterianism [was] not true” (JS—H 1:20)

Later, the understanding of this concept was deepened to include a cosmic history, including the universal history of the earth as a cycle of dispensations and apostasies. Joseph understood himself as standing at the head of a chosen generation, a climax in this drama; following the greatest apostasy the world has ever seen comes the greatest dispensation the world has ever seen, the one in which all things would be restored, the one which would not end in apostasy, the one which would truly spread to all the world to prepare it for the great and dreadful day of the Lord. In a sense, this became the central teaching of Mormonism, what some scholars refer to as a “myth”; like the story of the fall and the atonement, for the followers of Joseph Smith the story of the apostasy and restoration came to define the world and their place in it.

Parley P. Pratt, for example, was quite emphatic that Mormonism is more ancient than traditional Christianity: Though

2. Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision: The First Vision in its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 156.

many refer to the beliefs of the church as Mormonism, “they might as well have called them, *Abrahamism*, *Enochism*, or *Isaiahism*; because the ancient Prophets, Patriarchs, and Apostles, held to the same truths . . . according to the particular circumstances that surrounded them.”³ He goes on to say, speaking specifically about the doctrine of angels, “It is astonishing then, to me, that the modern Christian world consider this a new doctrine, an innovation—a trespass on Christianity. No! it is as old as the world, and as common among the true people of God, as His every day dealings with man. We will leave that point, and say, it is the Christian world, and not the Latter-day Saints, that have a new doctrine, provided they discard that principle.”⁴

Many during the nineteenth century saw in the apostasy an illuminating precursor of contemporary apostasies. Just before he catalogues nineteenth-century apostates and their reasons for disaffection, George A. Smith speaks of the restoration: “When the Lord commenced his work, he . . . passed over the learned institutions of the day, and went into a field and laid his hand on the head of Joseph Smith, a ploughboy . . . whom he inspired, appointing him to translate the Book of Mormon, and authorizing him to proclaim the Gospel and administer the plan of salvation.”⁵ The apostasy was seen almost typologically, the great apostasy foreshadowing contemporary individual apostasies.

By the end of the nineteenth century, as part of the project to merge secular learning with spiritual truth, several attempts were made to historicize the doctrine of apostasy. Typically, the

3. *Journal of Discourses*, 1:298 (emphasis in original).

4. *Journal of Discourses*, 1:299–300.

5. *Journal of Discourses*, 7:111.

revealed doctrine of the apostasy was lined up with the available knowledge of history to explain or prove the apostasy within the conventions of secular scholarship. The first such attempts were by the great member of the Seventy and apologist B. H. Roberts, whose contributions to Mormon scholarship are arguably unparalleled. In addition to his *Comprehensive History of the Church*, he wrote several works on theology (*Seventy's Course in Theology*, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, and his masterwork *The Truth, The Way, The Life*), history (*Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, *The Falling Away*), and defense of the Book of Mormon (*New Witnesses for God*, as well as several manuscripts not meant for publication outlining his research program). His histories of the apostasy occur principally in his *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* and his radio addresses collected and published under the title *The Falling Away*. Though not a professional historian, Roberts read widely and brought a wealth of self-taught learning to the topic of the apostasy. He described the controversies surrounding the death of the apostles and the subsequent changes in hierarchy, doctrine, and practice; he explained the corruption of the church through the Middle Ages as evidence of the falling away from the church of Christ; he outlined the secular and ecclesiastical changes that took place to allow a farm boy to start a new church. While Roberts's work was not, from a scholastic point of view, groundbreaking (he depended heavily on Protestant historians who were equally committed to proving the apostasy and corruption of the Catholic Church), his studies were seminal among Mormon letters.

Perhaps more visible to most Mormons is the work of Roberts's contemporary, the noted scholar and apostle James E. Talmage. Talmage's *Great Apostasy* is still, perhaps, the most widely read book on the topic. Talmage's approach to the apostasy is very similar to Roberts's, and he largely uses the same sources. Also

dependent on Roberts's vision is Joseph Fielding Smith, who wrote on the apostasy in his capacity as church historian.

Following these early historicizing works, the apostasy was frequently the topic of instruction for priesthood quorums in the mid-twentieth century, with manuals being published in 1951–1956 and 1960. The basis of most of this work was the research of James L. Barker, a linguist and amateur historian. His three-volume *The Divine Church: Down through Change, Apostasy Reform, and Restoration* was studied from 1952 to 1954 and formed the basis of his posthumous 1958 work *Apostasy from the Divine Church*. The editor of this latter volume, T. Edgar Lyon, wrote the much briefer *Apostasy to Restoration*, which was used as the priesthood manual in 1960, and was based on the ideas in Barker's work.

In these works, the main focus is to identify causes or influences of the apostasy. Lyon lists the church's struggle for political power, changes in theology, a shift in the locus of salvation (from individual responsibility to a central church), and loss of priesthood authority.⁶ Welker, in his 1955–56 priesthood manual *The Divine Church Restored*, has a similar list,⁷ as do Barker and Milton Backman. It is during this period that serious scholarship begins on the historical apostasy, examining ancient sources and scholarly histories. The works of this period have been an important influence on later work.

Perhaps the greatest apologist since B. H. Roberts is Hugh W. Nibley, who has brought a stunning array of findings from many fields to his work of understanding the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the temple, and the apostasy. Three of his

6. T. Edgar Lyon, *Apostasy to Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960), 4–9.

7. Roy A. Welker, *The Divine Church Restored* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1955), 4:17–21.

papers written on the apostasy, originally published in non-LDS scholarly journals, have recently been collected in the FARMS publication *When the Lights Went Out*.⁸ These three articles take three different approaches to show that the early church did not survive, and that historical Christianity lost some essential components of first-generation Christianity.

In his “Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum: The Forty-day Mission of Christ—The Forgotten Heritage,” Nibley discusses the tradition of what happened during the forty days between Christ’s resurrection and ascension, the time during which Christ was seen by the apostles and spoke “of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). Nibley first argues (against some who doubt it) that this did in fact take place—something happened, after all, to transform the zealous but insecure apostles at the time of the crucifixion into the pillars of the church described in the book of Acts. Then Nibley turns to examining what this means for the historical church. A favorite theme of apocryphal literature is the teaching of Christ during these forty days, many of the various groups in early Christianity attempting to assert legitimacy by claiming to have preserved the teachings or practice revealed during this time. Implicit in these claims is that something has been lost from mainstream Christianity, and the success of the various groups reveals that many recognized this fact. Nibley sees the loss of any teaching from the forty days as striking evidence that something fundamental is missing in the Christian tradition.

Much of the teaching that Nibley finds in the forty-day apocrypha concerns the temple, a theme he would elaborate in his “Christian Envy of the Temple.” In this article he traces

8. Hugh W. Nibley, *When the Lights Went Out* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001).

various Christian views of the loss of the Jewish temple, finding ambivalence in these attitudes. On the one hand, Christians were embarrassed by the vestiges of paganism implied by a temple, but also envied the unity of the temple and were forced to result to rhetoric of a universal, intellectual, spiritual temple. They interpreted the temple's destruction in AD 70 to signify the triumph of Christianity over Judaism, but their excessive prohibitions against the Jews betrayed their fear that the temple ever should return. Through all this, Nibley discerns in the Christian writers a certain (often subconscious) envy, a feeling that God's church should have temples.

The piece in which Nibley argues most directly for his thesis that the early church did not survive is positioned first in the book, "The Passing of the Primitive Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme." In this paper, Nibley examines the practices of the early church and finds them strange if the early saints expected their church to survive, but perfectly natural if they expected it not to outlast them. For example, many essential matters of doctrine and policy were not published, the missionary program was not systematic (and the missionaries expected to be rejected and killed), and the church owned no property. Summing up, Nibley says, "The sensational change from the first to the second generation of the church was not, as it is usually depicted, a normal and necessary step in a long steady process of evolution. It was radical and abrupt."⁹ Nibley also garners an impressive bundle of biblical and noncanonical writings in which he finds evidence that the early apostles did not expect the church to outlast them.

Nibley's lush assortment of proof texts has attracted criticism. Many of the passages he cites do not seem to prove his points; many of them seem to be taken out of context or even

9. Nibley, *When the Lights Went Out*, 18.

to be irrelevant to his thesis. For example, Nibley says, “As soon as the Lord departs there comes ‘the lord of this world, and hath nothing in me’; in the very act of casting out the Lord of the vineyard the usurpers seize it for themselves, to remain in possession until his return;”¹⁰ as support for this claim he lists four scriptures: John 14:30; Matthew 21:38; Mark 12:7; and Luke 20:14.¹¹ These scriptures are prophecies of Christ’s coming death; if Nibley really intends for them to support his thesis that the church did not survive, he would have to date the apostasy at the death of Christ, something he probably does not want to do. In short, the criticism is that the New Testament does not provide evidence for the apostasy.

This criticism arises from the very nature of the New Testament itself. Unlike the Book of Mormon, in which a prophet outlasts the general apostasy of his day and chronicles the decline of the church, the New Testament was compiled and edited centuries after the texts were written by men who were committed to the thesis that the church had survived. While the Book of Mormon was written specifically for the benefit of saints of the distant future, the writings which became the New Testament were written for contemporary saints. Whatever the apostles may have written about the approaching apostasy or the eventual restoration would not have survived the textual controversies of those first few centuries. Rather, as contemporary scholars have argued, the texts that were selected and edited for the early Christian canon were shaped to support an emerging theological orthodoxy.¹² But as the appendix on “New

10. Nibley, *When the Lights Went Out*, 4

11. Nibley, *When the Lights Went Out*, 30, n. 18.

12. See Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Testament Evidences” demonstrates, a careful reading of the New Testament as it stands today provides a surprising quantity of often-overlooked evidence for disunity and corruption in the church within the first century after Christ. And the growing volumes of early writings that were not selected for the canon make this picture even more convincing.

In spite of the recurring criticisms, Nibley’s work provided a cosmic scope that has proved to be a watershed in Mormon studies. Many later works revisit ground Nibley has covered before, attempting to chart in more specific detail the landmarks Nibley first noticed decades ago. S. Kent Brown and Wilfred Griggs, for example, have jointly authored papers on the forty-day ministry and the perspectives on Christ portrayed in apocryphal works.¹³ Truman G. Madsen edited a volume containing Nibley’s essays on the ancient temple, one of his perennial topics.¹⁴ In many respects, FARMS itself is one of Nibley’s offspring, as it has pursued many of the lines of research that Nibley pioneered.

Other writers have been less influenced by Nibley and seem to fall into a more traditional cast. Joseph F. McConkie’s book *Sons and Daughters of God* explains in detail what amounted to a smaller section of the mid-century books, focusing on the loss of the doctrine of the literal fatherhood of God. He discusses

13. S. Kent Brown “Whither the Early Church?” *Ensign*, October 1988, 6–10; Brown, “The Postresurrection Ministry,” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Six: Acts to Revelation*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 12–23 (in collaboration with C.W. Griggs); Brown, “Whither the Early Church?” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Six: Acts to Revelation*, ed. Millet, 276–84.

14. Hugh W. Nibley, *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, ed. Truman G. Madsen and Gary Gillum, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2004).

different translations of the Bible from the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) to contemporary versions, showing how the wording obscures—and in some cases has been purposely changed to eliminate—what the translators saw as embarrassingly primitive conceptions of God. Kent P. Jackson also published *From Apostasy to Restoration*, in which he traces the causes and consequences of the apostasy. He is sharply critical of the internal divisions and intellectualism of the early church, saying that false beliefs played a more prominent role than apostate practices in the New Testament period, and that the apostasy was caused not by persecution, but by internal intellectualism.¹⁵ In a chapter in his comprehensive *Principles and Practices of the Restored Gospel*, Victor Ludlow treats the dispensation cycle, emphasizing the great apostasy and the restoration. Ludlow does not examine the causes of the apostasy, as other writers do, but he does propose a reason: Satan is trying to delay the second coming by keeping mankind in spiritual darkness. He also traces seven steps to apostasy and seven corresponding steps to restoration.¹⁶

Working independently of these traditions, Richard Bushman has critiqued many of the earlier approaches to investigation of the apostasy. He perceived that the approach of Roberts and Talmage was dependent on Protestant histories, themselves committed to demonstrating the falsity of the Catholic Church. “It would be interesting to know,” he wonders parenthetically, if Roberts and Talmage “added anything to the findings of Protestant scholars.”¹⁷ Against Nibley he has

15. Kent P. Jackson, *From Apostasy to Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 2–13, 21.

16. Victor L. Ludlow, *Principles and Practices of the Restored Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 511–17.

17. Richard L. Bushman, “Faithful History,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4/4 (1969): 19.

a different criticism. Though he is impressed with Nibley's accomplishments and regards him as a watershed in Mormon scholarship, he has reservations about the charity of his approach as history. Seeing in the Mass of the medieval church a remnant of the temple ceremonies may accurately delineate its genealogy, but does not explain what it meant to those involved—they did not see it as a corrupted fragment, but as a living sacrament. Bushman's criticism of all the mid-century writers is similar: "Standard procedure thus far has been to list the doctrines of primitive Christianity and note departures as they occurred."¹⁸ This comes in a review of Milton Backman's book, but applies just as well to Barker, and to Nibley, Talmage, and Roberts. Early in Christian history there is some concern about apostasy and the tension between revealed truth and philosophy, but these concerns soon disappear. It is unfair to them to impose on them our own framework for understanding their times, and thus "impose on them motives and tensions they never felt."¹⁹

Though he does not consider himself a student of the apostasy, Bushman has sketched an approach to the apostasy, seeing it as an expression of the fall. Mankind feels its fallen nature and so strives to recover its unity with God, and so long as revelation is forthcoming, that longing is fulfilled through the priesthood and the temple. Once revelation is severed, man seeks God in new ways, though originally the forms are the same. As time progresses, the content has changed so much it is only with difficulty that the forms can be recognizable as related to our own. But whatever the details, Bushman sees that much of the work

18. Richard L. Bushman, review of *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism*, by Milton V. Backman, *BYU Studies* 7/2 (1966): 164.

19. Bushman, review of *American Religions*, 164.

done has only been a partial view of the apostasy, that the scholars who have contributed thus far have been pioneers, paving the way for new views and new understanding.²⁰

The response of a range of LDS scholars to Bushman's call to new work on the apostasy, including the studies published in this volume, has been fueled by the impressive growth of new findings in early Christian history and related fields. In recent years, Latter-day Saint readers have seen a number of new works, more or less independent of the earlier traditions on the apostasy. In one example, Stephen Robinson wrote a paper challenging the usual reading of Nephi's vision of the apostasy in 1 Nephi 13–14, relying to some extent on New Testament apocrypha, and arguing against a facile equivalence of the "great and abominable church" with any specific group.²¹ The 2004 Sidney B. Sperry Symposium at Brigham Young University provided a forum for several new studies that explored elements of the historical apostasy in new and informative ways.²² Most recently, Alexander B. Morrison, an emeritus General Authority, has written a volume on the apostasy that is directed at the general membership of the church.²³ It draws on current scholarship, including a number of the papers now published in this volume, and early Christian writings to produce an updated and deeper LDS understanding of the great apostasy. It corrects many common misperceptions

20. See Bushman, review of *American Religions*, 161–64.

21. See Stephen E. Robinson, "Early Christianity and 1 Nephi 13–14," in *1 Nephi: The Doctrinal Foundation*, ed Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 177–91.

22. *Prelude to the Restoration*.

23. Alexander B. Morrison, *Turning from Truth: A New Look at the Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005).

while promoting greater appreciation for the contributions of faithful Christians across the centuries.

Annotated Bibliography

The following bibliography lists items that have been widely available or have had significant influence on the thinking of Latter-day Saints regarding the apostasy. It does not include a number of articles or manuscripts that are available in libraries or journals.

Backman, Milton V., Jr. *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965. Backman analyzes the causes of the apostasy and discusses the religious scene in America at the time of the restoration.

Barker, James L. *Apostasy from the Divine Church*. Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1960. T. Edgar Lyon produced this slightly reworked edition of *The Divine Church*. It marks a milestone in apostasy scholarship. This represents the first effort at reading and analyzing the primary texts.

———. *The Divine Church: Down through Change, Apostasy therefrom, and Restoration*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1952–56. This compilation of sources served as the basis for Barker's *Apostasy from the Divine Church*.

Chase, Daryl. *Christianity Through the Ages*. Salt Lake City: Department of Education of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1944. The first half is a typical account of the apostasy—describing the beliefs and practices of the primitive church and outlining the history of changes to those beliefs and practices. The second half is a comparison of major Christian denominations, including the Latter-day Saints.

Clark, J. Reuben. *On the Way to Immortality and Eternal Life*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1949. These transcripts from radio addresses emphasize the apostasy.

Jackson, Kent P. *From Apostasy to Restoration*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996. This is an overview of the apostasy and restoration for general audiences.

Lyon, T. Edgar. *Apostasy to Restoration*. Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1960. This Melchizedek Priesthood textbook was based on Barker's *Apostasy from the Divine Church*.

McConkie, Joseph F. *Sons and Daughters of God*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994. This book discusses the doctrine of God's physical body and literal fatherhood and how this doctrine was lost from mainstream Christianity.

Morrison, Alexander B. *Turning from Truth: A New Look at the Great Apostasy*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005. This synthesis of emerging LDS perspectives on the apostasy is both readable and up-to-date.

Nibley, Hugh. *When the Lights Went Out: Three Studies on the Ancient Apostasy*. Provo: FARMS, 2001. Three reprints of articles published in non-Mormon scholarly journals which inspired a new generation of LDS scholars and brought the growing corpus of noncanonical texts from the earliest Christian centuries into center stage.

Roberts, B. H. *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*. Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1902. This was the first LDS attempt at historicizing the doctrine of the apostasy and borrowed heavily from Protestant histories. This book provides the content for Roberts's *The Falling Away* and, largely, for Talmage's *The Great Apostasy*.

———. *The "Falling Away": Or the Loss of the Christian Religion and Church*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1929. These

transcripts of a radio lecture series have largely the same content as the earlier *Outlines*.

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Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1913. This derivative account of the atrocities carried out by agents of the Catholic Church identifies the period of apostasy with the reign of the antichrist foretold in the book of Revelation.

Talmage, James E. *The Great Apostasy: Considered in the Light of Scriptural and Secular History*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1909. For Latter-day Saints, this has long been the standard work on the apostasy.

Ward, J. H. *The Hand of Providence: As Shown in the History of Nations and Individuals, from the Great Apostasy to the Restoration of the Gospel*. Salt Lake: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883. A universal history, beginning with the fall of Jerusalem, continuing through the rise of Islam and the Middle Ages, and ending with Joseph Smith.

Welker, Roy A, *The Divine Church Restored*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1955–56. This Melchizedek Priesthood textbook for the two years following Barker’s *The Divine Church* focuses mainly on the restoration, but includes a brief overview analyzing the causes of the apostasy.

Young, W. Ernest. *Proof of the Apostasy*. Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1960. This volume presents quotations from the Spanish Catholic bible, both scriptures and footnotes (with very sparse commentary), in English and Spanish on facing pages, and claims to demonstrate differences between biblical religion and Catholicism.