

Narrating Religious Heritage

Apostasy and Restoration

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Latter-day Saints have a paradoxical relationship to the past. Even as Latter-day Saints invest their own history with sacred meaning—as the restoration of ancient truths and the fulfillment of biblical prophecies—they have traditionally repudiated the eighteen centuries preceding the founding of the Church as a period of apostasy. They believe that Christ’s original church fell into spiritual darkness that persisted until Joseph Smith restored Christ’s gospel and priesthood authority on the earth. Since the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, however, there has been a “spectrum of understandings” regarding the religious heritage of the Latter-day Saints, a spectrum that has included perceiving some continuity between the restored Church and traditional Christianity.¹ However, the story of radical temporal and spiritual rupture known as the Great Apostasy narrative has so dominated the last century of Latter-day Saint discourse that few members are aware of other precedents and possibilities for narrating their religious heritage.

Religious communities perform theological work when they tell historical narratives. Memorializing their divine origins is crucial for communities to maintain distinctive self-identities and to realize their divine mandate. When these stories become enshrined with the

1. Christopher C. Jones and Stephen J. Fleming, “‘Except among That Portion of Mankind’: Early Mormon Conceptions of the Apostasy,” in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, ed. Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 56.

authority of tradition, it is difficult to remember how much the cultural context and personal motivations of the initial narrators impacted the trajectories of the stories. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, Israelite narrators could recount the story of their ancestors' deliverance from captivity in Egypt in their sacred scriptures to affirm their collective identity as Yahweh's chosen people and as separate from gentile nations.² The division between Jews and Gentiles was called into question when Jewish Christians were commanded to preach the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles from whom they had been taught to keep themselves separate (see Acts 10; 13). Latter-day Saints have likewise employed and revised historical narratives as paradigms of self-definition, particularly during periods of institutional transformation.

Early Latter-day Saints, including Joseph Smith, framed their relation to historical Christianity and other religious denominations in a variety of ways. As missionaries, early Latter-day Saints competed with and were persecuted by Protestant evangelists in the public sphere, so they denounced these denominations as false, drawing on Protestant histories that traced the corruption of Christian doctrines, practices, and leaders in need of reformation. As converts, however, many felt that their former religious experiences prepared them to embrace the fulness of the gospel, and they perceived a degree of continuity with their new church. In the wake of renouncing polygamy and political sovereignty in the 1890s, Latter-day Saint leaders began to recalibrate the Church's identity by simultaneously assimilating it with and distinguishing it from mainstream American Protestantism. One aspect of this process was the systematic formulation of a salvation narrative that featured a period of universal apostasy preceding the founding of the Church in 1830. Adopting and modifying the Protestant histories of Catholic apostasy in need of reform offered the Latter-day Saints ways to construct a coherent narrative that framed the necessity of the Restoration and the restored Church's claims of exclusive access to divine truth and authority. This narrative proved so useful in this period of definition and transition that it was distilled into Church curriculum materials in the mid-twentieth century as "the Great Apostasy" and became embedded in the Latter-day Saint worldview during the era of correlation. The dismissive attitude toward other religious traditions sanctioned in the Great Apostasy narrative aligned less well

2. See Thomas B. Dozeman, *God at War: Power in the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

with the Church's increasingly international membership and ecumenical humanitarian partnerships in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Latter-day Saint leaders began to celebrate some earlier Christian and non-Christian figures, while Latter-day Saint scholars questioned the historical assumptions underpinning the Great Apostasy narrative. In 2009, the press release for the dedication of the Church History Library stated the following:

The Mormon worldview compels a historical consciousness. Upon joining the Church, each member becomes a participant in the great unfolding of God's redemptive plan. Since the beginning, individuals and societies have sought their place within the larger network of human relations and tried to make sense of divine interventions. . . .

An active engagement in historical processes eliminates barriers imposed by time and space and enables Latter-day Saints to situate themselves within the grand sweep of history. The Mormon historical consciousness impels one to step outside the comfortable confines of the present, develop empathy to understand the past, and in turn, lay the spiritual groundwork for future generations.³

The degree to which Latter-day Saints revise their historical narratives to align with these goals remains to be seen.

Nineteenth-Century Attitudes

Latter-day Saints did not invent the concept of a Christian apostasy. The term itself has been around for centuries. In ancient Greek, *apostasia* was the composite of *apo*, “away from,” and *stasis*, “standing.” The word initially referred to forms of physical separation and expanded over time to include the severing of social, moral, and religious allegiance. In the sixteenth century, Protestant reformers and followers believed that Christianity had fallen into apostasy and needed reformation. The concept of a Christian apostasy was ubiquitous in Protestant discourse. For example, Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan preacher whose attitudes shaped American Protestant discourse, wrote in 1757,

And the Apostles in their Days foretold a grand Apostacy of the Christian World, which should continue many Ages; and observed, that there appeared a Disposition to such an Apostasy, among professing

3. “A Record Kept: Constructing Collective Memory,” Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, June 11, 2009, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/a-record-kept-constructing-collective-memory>.

Christians, even in that Day. 2 Thess. ii. 7. And the greater Part of the Ages which have now elapsed, have been spent in the Duration of that grand and general Apostacy, under which the Christian World, as it is called, has been transformed into that which has been vastly more deformed, more dishonourable & hateful to God.⁴

These Protestant attitudes and rhetoric would have been part of the religious landscape with which early Latter-day Saint converts were intimately familiar. Echoing Protestants, many early Latter-day Saints wrote about the abhorrent state of apostate Christianity, while at the same time praising and borrowing religious models from other Christian denominations, particularly their former faiths.

Christopher Jones and Stephen Fleming traced early Latter-day Saint conceptions of Christian apostasy in sermons, articles, tracts, pamphlets, conversion narratives, and autobiographical memoirs. They concluded that, while Latter-day Saints believed that “a restoration of ecclesiastical authority and a new divinely mandated church were necessary,” there existed a spectrum of co-existing individual articulations ranging from “harsh and blanket condemnations to more conciliatory and nuanced views of Christian history.”⁵

In the public sphere, early Church leaders and missionaries “marshaled their understanding of Christian history to demonstrate the fallen condition and apostate character of their Protestant opponents and the churches to which they belonged” as they waged verbal attacks to defend themselves and to win converts in newspapers, doctrinal tracts, and sermons.⁶ In 1834, the leaders of the Church in Kirtland (including Joseph Smith) wrote a letter to missionaries abroad advising them about what to preach. One paragraph begins by contrasting the spiritual darkness dispelled by the light of the gospel.

Some may presume to say, that the world in this age is fast increasing in righteousness; that the dark ages of superstition and blindness have passed over, when the faith of Christ was known and practiced only by a few, when ecclesiastic power held an almost universal control over christendom, and when the consciences of men were held bound by the strong chains of priestly power; but now, the gloomy cloud is burst, and the gospel is shining with all the resplendent glory of an apostolic day;

4. Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended; Evidences of Its [sic] Truth Produced, and Arguments to the Contrary Answered* (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1758), 93.

5. Jones and Fleming, “Early Mormon Conceptions,” 56.

6. Jones and Fleming, “Early Mormon Conceptions,” 56.

and that the kingdom of the Messiah is greatly spreading, that the gospel of our Lord is carried to divers nations of the earth, the scriptures translating into different tongues, the ministers of truth crossing the vast deep to proclaim to men in darkness a risen Savior.⁷

Missionaries employed this framework. For example, Orson Hyde preached in 1838 that “a great apostacy, from the true apostolic order of Worship” had befallen Christianity and that it was their “duty to show the awful consequences of this apostacy.”⁸ Richard Bennett and Amber Seidel compiled preaching by Samuel H. Smith, Oliver Cowdery, W. W. Phelps, Orson Pratt, and other missionaries in the early 1830s who likewise condemned Christianity before the advent of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as corrupt and therefore inauthentic.⁹

Matthew Bowman explains that the most sustained discussions of Christian apostasy among early Latter-day Saints emerged when a few apologists began attempting to “bend the grand narrative of Christian history toward themselves” in an American print culture dominated by Protestant publishing societies.¹⁰ Latter-day Saint apologists, including Benjamin Winchester, Parley P. Pratt, John H. Donnellon, and William Appleby, surveyed popular Protestant church histories circulating in antebellum America. Then they published periodicals, tracts, and even books validating Latter-day Saint theological claims and historical legitimacy by pairing biblical prophecies with ecclesial changes identified in Protestant church histories.¹¹ These sharply worded denunciations of Catholic and Protestant beliefs and practices set the precedent for later Latter-day Saint salvation histories, histories that traced the unfolding divine plan through dispensations of human history.

7. “Letter to the Church, circa February 1834,” 135, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 4, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-circa-february-1834/1>.

8. Orson Hyde, broadside announcement, “A Timely Warning to the People of England, of Every Sect and Denomination, and to Every Individual into Whose Hands It May Fall,” August 19, 1837, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/NCMP1820-1846/id/293/rec/121>.

9. Richard E. Bennett and Amber J. Seidel, “A World in Darkness: Early Latter-day Saint Understanding of the Apostasy, 1830–1834,” in *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 67–99.

10. Matthew Bowman, “The Spectrum of Apostasy: Mormonism, Early Christianity, and the Quest for True Religion in Antebellum America,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 236.

11. Bowman, “Spectrum of Apostasy,” 241–42.

In private genres, Latter-day Saints told conciliatory narratives about their Christian heritage. Many early Latter-day Saints described their previous religious experiences in autobiographies and conversion narratives as preparing them to embrace the restored gospel; they perceived their new faith as “not so much a rejection of the contemporary Christian world as an expansion of its doctrines and gathering of its disparate parts.”¹² For example, Lucy Mack Smith distinguished in her history between her personal religious practice and denominational affiliation.¹³ She did not perceive her life or the lives of her family members before her son’s theophany as characterized by spiritual apostasy; she describes miraculous healings, heavenly visions, and spiritual revelation flowing from their deep faith in Jesus Christ. Early Latter-day Saint attitudes, public and private, toward their religious heritage were “multifaceted, complex, and at times, contradictory.”¹⁴

Joseph Smith’s attitudes were likewise complex. While the term “apostasy” occasionally appears in Joseph Smith’s papers in relation to Christian history, Joseph focuses on his divine mission of restoration. Like his parents and many Protestant Americans, Joseph was a primitivist who believed that Christianity had strayed from the pattern of the New Testament.¹⁵ In his earliest account of the First Vision made in 1832, Joseph describes reaching the conclusion while studying the scriptures as a young boy before his visions that humanity had “apostatised from the true and liveing faith.”¹⁶ Anxiety about this belief was a factor that motivated the prayer precipitating his vision in 1820 and the subsequent founding of the Church of Christ in 1830.

According to Terryl Givens, Joseph “conceived of apostasy as primarily the corruption of ordinances, and the loss of priesthood authority to perform them.”¹⁷ For example, Joseph wrote to newspaper editor

12. Jones and Fleming, “Early Mormon Conceptions,” 67, see also 66–71; and Janiece Johnson and Jennifer Reeder, *The Witness of Women: Firsthand Experiences and Testimonies from the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016).

13. “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” book 2, pages [2–6], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 8, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/20>.

14. Jones and Fleming, “Early Mormon Conceptions,” 71.

15. See Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 355.

16. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 2, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 30, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/2>.

17. Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, and Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 28. See also Terryl

Noah Saxton in 1833, “We may look at the Christian world and see the apostacy there has been from the Apostolic platform, and who can look at this, and not exclaim in the language of Isaiah, ‘the earth is defiled under the inhabitants thereof because they have transgressed the Laws; changed the ordinances and broken the everlasting covenant’ [Isaiah 24:5].”¹⁸ Joseph’s project of restoring authority and ordinances to realize ancient covenants between God and humanity differed from his contemporary American Restorationists whose focus was to expunge false accretions from Christian worship to realize the original primitive purity of Christ’s church.¹⁹

According to Philip Barlow, Joseph focused on mending, not entrenching, fractured relationships.²⁰ His project of restoration “included more than the return of principles, powers, doctrines, ordinances, and authority once allegedly lost through long-ago apostasies. . . . It included rendering things ‘as they should be,’ whether or not they once had been.”²¹ Joseph’s religion-making generated “doctrines, policies, priesthoods, keys, revelations, and ordinances . . . in the service of *restoring* proper relations and order in time and eternity.”²²

For example, Joseph rewound time when he instituted baptisms for the dead in 1840; no longer were the living and dead estranged.²³ A newspaper editorial in 1842, most likely by Joseph Smith, offers proxy ordinances as the key to understanding divine justice. This plan of human salvation “exhibits the greatness of divine compassion and benevolence” and renders moot the exclusive systems of belief religious communities jealously guard.²⁴

But while one portion of the human race are judging and condemning the other without mercy, the great parent of the universe looks

Givens, “Epilogue: ‘We Have Only the Old Thing’: Rethinking Mormon Restoration,” in Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 335–42.

18. “Letter to Noah C. Saxton, 4 January 1833,” 15–16, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 9, 2018, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-noah-c-saxton-4-january-1833/3>.

19. See Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 23–41.

20. Philip L. Barlow, “To Mend a Fractured Reality: Joseph Smith’s Project,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (2012): 28–50.

21. Barlow, “To Mend a Fractured Reality,” 49; see also 33–34.

22. Barlow, “To Mend a Fractured Reality,” 48, emphasis in original.

23. Ryan G. Tobler, “‘Saviors on Mount Zion’: Mormon Sacramentalism, Mortality, and the Baptism for the Dead,” *Journal of Mormon History* 39, no. 4 (2013): 182–238.

24. “Minutes of a Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Held in Nauvoo, Ill., Commencing Oct. 1st, 1841,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (October 1, 1841): 578.

upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care, and paternal regard; he views them as his offspring; and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men. . . . He . . . is a wise lawgiver . . . ; he will judge them ‘not according to what they have not, but what they have;’ those who have lived without law, will be judged without law, and those who have a law, will be judged by that law; we need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the great Jehovah, he will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed; the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information; and his inscrutable designs in relation to the human family: and when the designs of God shall be made manifest, and the curtain of futurity be withdrawn, we shall all of us eventually have to confess, that the Judge of all the Earth has done right.²⁵

Here Joseph offers new perspectives about divine justice and religious pluralism.²⁶ Every person remains capable of receiving revelation and performing righteous deeds; they will be judged fairly on their own terms, and they remain heirs to God’s promises and to the covenants made by their ancestors regardless of whether they were privy to God’s revelations and priesthood ordinances in mortality.

The Book of Mormon and other restoration scripture likewise testify that “peoples who live under conditions of apostasy remain participants in the covenants made by their ancestors, with the promise that the ancient covenant relationship eventually will be restored in full.”²⁷ Joseph’s project of restoration involved healing and welding together the human family.

And now as the great purposes of God are hastening to their accomplishment and the things spoken of in the prophets are fulfilling, as the kingdom of God is established on the earth, and the ancient order of things restored, the Lord has manifested to us this duty and privilege, and we are commanded to be baptized for our dead. . . . A view of these things reconciles the scriptures of truth, justifies the ways of God to

25. “Baptism for the Dead,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (April 15, 1842): 759. Thomas Bullock copied this editorial into Joseph Smith’s History: “History, 1838–1856, Volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842],” 1321 (April 14, 1841), Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/495>.

26. David D. Peck, “Covenantal Pluralism in Mormonism and Islam: Alternatives to the Binary Logic of Apostasy,” in Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 280–308.

27. John D. Young, “Long Narratives: Toward a New Mormon Understanding of Apostasy,” in Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 314.

man; places the human family upon an equal footing, and harmonizes with every principle of righteousness, justice, and truth.²⁸

Joseph reiterated his expansive vision in a letter to the Church in September 1842 clarifying how to perform baptisms for the dead: “For it is necessary in the ushering in of the dispensation of the fulness of times, which dispensation is now beginning to usher in, that a whole and complete and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and keys, and powers, and glories should take place, and be revealed from the days of Adam even to the present time” (D&C 128:18). Instead of parsing out blame for past apostasy, Joseph Smith here conceives of the restoration not as filling a void or healing a rupture but as gathering, linking, and building upon truths manifest throughout human histories and cultures. For Joseph, the Restoration was a process of revision and renewal.

After Joseph’s death, the Latter-day Saints survived expulsion from Nauvoo, weathered their exodus west, and solidified their distinctive domestic, political, and economic practices in their frontier settlements. In the 1890s, Latter-day Saints had to abandon some of these practices to integrate with the United States. Latter-day Saint leaders composed historical narratives to recalibrate their identity in ways that would simultaneously distinguish the Church from and assimilate it with mainstream American Protestantism. Formulating the doctrine of apostasy and its historical implications played a significant role in crafting a distinct Latter-day Saint identity as the Church moved into the twentieth century.

Twentieth-Century Attitudes

The Great Apostasy narrative became a historical paradigm of self-definition during two significant phases of institutional transition: the Church’s redefinition after the 1890 Manifesto and Utah statehood, and the Church’s global expansion after World War II. In the fertile era of theological definition and interaction with secular learning at the turn of the twentieth century, a group of scholarly Latter-day Saint leaders composed lengthy salvation histories to strengthen the coherence of the doctrine and the organizing principles of the Church after it abandoned cherished polygamy, political sovereignty, and economic communalism.²⁹

28. “Baptism for the Dead,” 761.

29. Miranda Wilcox, “Narrating Apostasy and the LDS Quest for Identity,” in Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 96–98.

According to Eric Dursteler, the chief narrators of the Great Apostasy and Restoration narrative institutionalized in the twentieth century were B. H. Roberts, James E. Talmage, and Joseph Fielding Smith.³⁰ These Latter-day Saint leader-historians turned to Joseph Smith's revelations and to "secular history" to replace the "nineteenth-century emphasis on theocratic and familial kingdom-building" with theological "claims regarding restoration of the primitive church, divine sponsorship, and living prophets."³¹ In doing so, they applied the methodology of the earlier Latter-day Saint tracts; that is, they linked "biblical prophecy and Protestant church histories together to validate Mormons' own theological claims," but they also aspired to write objective Progressive-era histories.³² They were confident that Latter-day Saint truth claims "could be proved through the arguments of historical method."³³

For example, B. H. Roberts lays out this methodology in the preface to his *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, published in 1893 as a study manual for the Seventies. He proposes "to sustain the position taken by the church of Christ in the last days," and this position "may be readily discerned by the very first revelation the Lord gave to Joseph Smith" when he was told that "all the sects of religion . . . were all wrong; that their creeds were an abomination in His sight; that those professors were all corrupt."³⁴ Quoting Joseph's 1838 account of his First Vision printed in the Pearl of Great Price in 1851, Roberts explains that "it has been to bring together the historical evidences of the truth of this divine announcement

30. Eric R. Dursteler, "Historical Periodization in the LDS Great Apostasy Narrative," in Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 23–54. B. H. Roberts edited or wrote *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1893); *The Falling Away, or the World's Loss of the Christian Religion and Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1931); *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century One*, 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Corporation of the President, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1965); and *The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 1st ed., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902–32). James E. Talmage wrote *The Great Apostasy: Considered in Light of Scriptural and Secular History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909). Joseph Fielding Smith wrote *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1922); and *The Progress of Man* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1936).

31. Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 115; see also 120–22.

32. Matthew Bowman, "Spectrum of Apostasy," 241.

33. Matthew Bowman, "James Talmage, B. H. Roberts, and Confessional History in a Secular Age," in Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 86.

34. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, v.

that, in part, this work has been written.”³⁵ After compiling historical evidence from a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century histories to corroborate Joseph Smith’s account, Roberts concludes that “the whole stream of evidence proves that there has been a universal apostasy from the religion taught by Jesus Christ and his apostles.”³⁶

Following Roberts’s work, subsequent salvation histories plotted a period of universal Christian apostasy as a prelude to Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Latter-day Saint salvation histories described the loss of priesthood authority in the early Christian centuries followed by the Dark Ages of apostasy from which the dawning light of the Renaissance and Reformation prepared the way for the Restoration. In 1909, James Talmage explained the doctrinal logic underpinning the Great Apostasy narrative: “The restored Church affirms that a general apostasy developed during and after the apostolic period, and that the primitive Church lost its power, authority, and graces as a divine institution, and degenerated into an earthly organization only. The significance and importance of the great apostasy, as a condition precedent to the re-establishment of the Church in modern times, is obvious. If the alleged apostasy of the primitive Church was not a reality, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not the divine institution its name proclaims.”³⁷

Talmage’s binary logic was distilled over a century to this stark statement in *Preach My Gospel*, the Church’s missionary manual published in 2004: “If there had been no apostasy, there would have been no need of a Restoration.”³⁸ Indeed, Roberts, Talmage, and Smith institutionalized a powerful narrative of Latter-day Saint self-definition that became deeply embedded in their communal historical consciousness through the twentieth century.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Latter-day Saint leaders responded to the Church’s international expansion by centralizing institutional authority and by standardizing its instructional resources.³⁹ The

35. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, v. Compare with Roberts, “An Introduction,” in *History of the Church*, 1:xl; and *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 1:xliv–xlv. See also Talmage, *Great Apostasy*, 163; and Smith, *Essentials in Church History*, 44, 48–49.

36. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, v–vi.

37. Talmage, *Great Apostasy*, iii.

38. *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 36.

39. Philip L. Barlow, “Shifting Ground and the Third Transformation of Mormonism,” in *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture*, ed. Peter W. Williams (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), 140–53.

lengthy salvation histories written in the early twentieth century were distilled to a few paragraphs about the Great Apostasy in Church manuals.⁴⁰ Latter-day Saint apologists, especially influential Apostle Bruce R. McConkie and scholar Hugh Nibley, reaffirmed the authority of the Great Apostasy narrative during the age of Church correlation. McConkie preached, “With the loss of the gospel, the nations of the earth went into a moral eclipse called the Dark Ages. Apostasy was universal. . . . And this darkness still prevails except among those who have come to a knowledge of the restored gospel.”⁴¹ Hugh Nibley collected primary sources to argue that the apostolic Church did not survive intact; he concluded that “as ‘the great lights went out’ the most devoted Christians engaged in a wistful ‘Operation Salvage’ to rescue what might still be saved of ‘those things which came by the living voices that yet remained.’”⁴² The binary logic of Great Apostasy and Restoration became a self-evident tradition in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, even as academic historians challenged and largely rejected the assumptions underpinning the historical periodization as inadequate to understand the complexity and richness of the medieval and early modern periods.

The simplified, standardized narrative of the Great Apostasy was easily communicated to members and converts. It promoted institutional unity by differentiating Latter-day Saints from other denominations competing for converts and by fostering a shared historical consciousness among members separated by geography, nationality, and ethnicity. Nevertheless, the narrative discouraged Latter-day Saints from seriously engaging with history before 1820, and it hampered friendships with people of faith whose religious histories and traditions were dismissed as “gross darkness” prophesied in Isaiah 60:2.

Such a stark narrative chafed as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints grew from a regional American church into a worldwide faith with diverse congregations and ecumenical humanitarian projects across the globe. Months before the priesthood ban was revoked in

40. See Wilcox, “Narrating Apostasy,” 100–102; Ryan G. Christensen, “Appendix D: Bibliographic Note on LDS Writings,” in Reynolds, *Early Christians in Disarray*, 375.

41. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 44.

42. Hugh Nibley, “The Passing of the Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme,” in *Church History* 30, no. 2 (1961): 140. Reprinted as Hugh Nibley, “The Passing of the Primitive Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme,” in *When the Lights Went Out: Three Studies on the Ancient Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 1–32. See also Hugh Nibley, “The Passing of the Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme,” *BYU Studies* 16, no. 1 (1975): 139–64.

1978, the First Presidency issued a statement “regarding God’s love for all mankind,” affirming that the founders of the world’s major religious and philosophical systems were inspired of God and that their teachings provide “moral truths” that “enlighten whole nations.” Echoing Joseph Smith’s cosmology, they confirmed that “God has given and will give to all peoples sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation.”⁴³ This inclusive affirmation anticipated redirections in the ways that some Latter-day Saints narrated their religious heritage in the twenty-first century.

Twenty-First-Century Attitudes

In the early twenty-first century, Latter-day Saint leaders and scholars reexamined and expanded the Great Apostasy narrative, a narrative that had been pared down to a doctrinal tenet by the end of the twentieth century.

In the years leading up to the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible in 2011, there was a surge of interest among Latter-day Saint leaders and scholars about the history of biblical translation, particularly in England and Germany during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. General conference talks, symposia, devotional books, and a television documentary praised some late medieval and Protestant reformers for promoting religious freedom and vernacular scriptural translations, two issues important to contemporary Latter-day Saints.⁴⁴ For example, Elder M. Russell Ballard preached that “devoted people were prompted to protect and preserve” the scriptures; “we owe much to the many brave martyrs and reformers . . . who demanded freedom to worship and common access to the holy books.”⁴⁵ This interest led to a slight expansion of the Great Apostasy narrative—the dawn of the Restoration was a bit longer and brighter—but the binary logic remained intact as did misunderstandings about the Middle Ages.

Brigham Young University faculty addressed some of the historical misconceptions fostered by the Great Apostasy narrative while defending its essential integrity. In 1996, Kent P. Jackson attributed internal

43. Spencer W. Kimball, N. Eldon Tanner, and Marion G. Romney, “Statement of the First Presidency regarding God’s Love for All Mankind,” February 15, 1978, in appendix of Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 343.

44. Wilcox, “Narrating Apostasy,” 111–12.

45. M. Russell Ballard, “The Miracle of the Holy Bible,” *Ensign* 37, no. 5 (May 2007): 80.

intellectualism among early Christians as a major cause of apostasy.⁴⁶ In 2001, Noel Reynolds organized a faculty study group to read early Christian texts in translation. The participating faculty produced a collection of essays that reevaluated Latter-day Saint assumptions about the process of apostasy in early Christianity, even calling some of these assumptions myths.⁴⁷ In 2004, Brigham Young University's annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, that year entitled "Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to Restored Church," featured speakers celebrating Christian reformers, including John Wycliffe and William Tyndale, who had been less familiar to Latter-day Saints.⁴⁸ In addition, two General Authorities, Elders Alexander Morrison and Tad Callister, published books in 2005 and 2006 tracing the Great Apostasy and affirming the Restoration.⁴⁹

Although historian Richard L. Bushman had observed in the 1960s that the Latter-day Saint narrative of apostasy was too dependent on Protestant and anti-Catholic sources,⁵⁰ this observation remained unexamined until Eric Dursteler's landmark essay "Inheriting the 'Great Apostasy'"⁵¹ Building on Dursteler's work, John D. Young and I organized a five-year collaborative research project in which fifteen Latter-day Saint disciplinary experts traced the development of and changes in Latter-day Saint narratives of apostasy within the context of Latter-day Saint history and American Protestant historiography.⁵² The project culminated in the publication of *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy* in 2014.⁵³ Contributors invited readers to consider their faith as deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions and not antithetical to other forms of Christianity.

46. Kent P. Jackson, *From Apostasy to Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996).

47. Reynolds, *Early Christians in Disarray*.

48. *Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to Restored Church: The 33rd Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004).

49. See Alexander B. Morrison, *Turning from Truth: A New Look at the Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005); and Tad R. Callister, *The Inevitable Apostasy and the Promised Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006).

50. Richard L. Bushman, "Faithful History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 4 (1969): 11–25; see also his review of *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism*, by Milton V. Backman, *BYU Studies* 7, no. 2 (1966): 161–64.

51. Eric Dursteler, "Inheriting the 'Great Apostasy': The Evolution of Mormon Views on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance," *Journal of Mormon History* 28 (2002): 23–59.

52. See also Bowman, "Spectrum of Apostasy," and Miranda Wilcox, "Sacralizing the Secular in Latter-day Saint Salvation Histories (1890–1930)," *Journal of Mormon History* 46, no. 3 (2020): 23–59.

53. Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*.

They suggested alternate ways Latter-day Saints might narrate their religious heritage that would engage with the past in generous and charitable conversation as well as recognize mutual concerns stemming from shared divine inheritance and humanity. Such narratives, they hoped, might offer new models of engaging with the past and building interfaith relations.

Joseph Spencer and Nicholas Frederick answered the call in *Standing Apart* to construct a new apostasy narrative “that is both intellectually defensible and pastorally productive.”⁵⁴ Turning to 1 Nephi 11–14, they argued that Nephi prophesied a fundamental flaw in early Christian self-understanding, the perception that Christianity replaced or superseded Judaism, and that “the Book of Mormon and other aspects of the Restoration correct the prevalent anti-Jewish *replacement* theology in Christianity by recentering the Christian message on covenantal Israelite foundations through the rehabilitation of a *remnant* theology.”⁵⁵

In the years leading up to the two hundredth anniversary of Joseph Smith’s First Vision, Church leaders invited members to recognize the unfolding of the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In April 2014, then President Dieter F. Uchtdorf reminded Latter-day Saints, “Sometimes we think of the Restoration of the gospel as something that is complete, already behind us—Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, he received priesthood keys, the Church was organized. In reality, the Restoration is an ongoing process; we are living in it right now.”⁵⁶ In April 2020, President Russell M. Nelson presented a proclamation in honor of the anniversary of the First Vision titled “The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A Bicentennial Proclamation to the World.”⁵⁷ Without mentioning the word “apostasy,” the proclamation outlines the unique mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to prepare for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the ongoing nature of the Restoration that began with Joseph Smith’s sacred prayer in 1820. This reframing invites Latter-day Saints to narrate

54. Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement? Outlining a Possible Apostasy Narrative,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2021): 107, emphasis in original. See Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 1–17.

55. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement,” 107.

56. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Are You Sleeping Through the Restoration?” *Ensign* 44, no. 5 (May 2014): 59.

57. The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A Bicentennial Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign* 50, no. 5 (May 2020): inside front cover.

processes of restoration extending across human history and culture rather than dismissing whole eras as apostate. Elaborating the themes of the Bicentennial Proclamation, Patrick Mason described the purpose of the ongoing Restoration as “nothing less than to restore God’s people—all of God’s children, not just the members of our church—to wholeness.”⁵⁸

Looking to the future, will Latter-day Saints continue narrating a radical rupture with the past in ways that discourage nuanced historical inquiry and encourage separatist attitudes toward other religious traditions, or will they narrate the unfolding process of restoration in ways that foster the charity needed to hasten the Church’s work of salvation in its third century? The worldwide Church of the twenty-first century is not the persecuted kingdom of the nineteenth century nor the emerging regional Church of the twentieth century. As was the case in previous periods of institutional transition, its narratives of religious heritage might be refashioned to aid the Church in responding to future challenges. Reframed narratives might help Latter-day Saints reorient their self-understanding to flourish in a multicultural and religiously diverse world. Could Latter-day Saints narrate an ongoing story of restoration as a divine redirection of existing Christian identities toward fullness in Christ?

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58. Patrick Q. Mason, *Restoration: God’s Call to the 21st-Century World* (Meridian, Idaho: Faith Matters Publishing, 2020), 88; see also 17–18.