



Type: Book Chapter

"A World in Darkness": Early Latter-day Saint Understanding of the Apostasy, 1830-1834

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Source: *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*

Editor(s): Noel B. Reynolds

Published: Provo, UT; Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005

Page(s): 67-99



“A WORLD IN DARKNESS”: EARLY
LATTER-DAY SAINT UNDERSTANDING
OF THE APOSTASY, 1830–1834

Richard E. Bennett and Amber J. Seidel

I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said 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 they deny the power thereof.”

(Joseph Smith—History 1:19)

So wrote the Prophet Joseph Smith of his first vision experience that occurred early in the spring of 1820. Of the many transcendent truths the young boy prophet learned that fateful morning in the grove about the nature of God, about himself and his budding mission, we wish to comment on but one—namely, the apostasy: how he and his earliest associates regarded its causes, consequences, and possible implications.¹

1. Perhaps still the best-known doctrinal study of the Latter-day Saint position of the apostasy is that by James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy: Considered in the Light of Scriptural and Secular*

Our first purpose will be to show that Joseph Smith's sense of an apostasy from the true Christian faith was ratified in the first vision; furthermore, that this understanding changed and developed during the early years of his prophetic training. Our second objective will be to examine how the doctrine of the apostasy was understood and taught by both leaders and missionaries within the first four years of the organization of the Church of Christ in 1830. Although this is a subjective rather than a quantitative study, we have concluded, after an extensive review of many of the contemporary sources, that early church views of the apostasy were very pronounced and multifaceted. In particular we note their teaching of the universality of the apostasy, of so great a corruption and contamination of the Christian church as to beg the imminent return of Christ, that more attention was given to the fallen state of Christianity than merely the loss of priesthood, and, finally,

History. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1909). While scores of missionary tracts, sermons, and conference addresses have addressed the doctrine of the apostasy, surprisingly little has been written in a formal academic way on the topic as understood and taught by early church leaders and missionaries. Two of the most ambitious studies of early Latter-day Saint missionary efforts are George S. Ellsworth's "A History of Mormon Missions in the United States and Canada, 1830–1860" (PhD diss., Berkeley, University of California, 1950) and Rex Thomas Price Jr.'s "The Mormon Missionary of the Nineteenth Century" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1991). While excellent for their information on missionary travels, habits of preaching, persecution, and style, neither work emphasizes the message of the missionaries to any great extent, although Price does discuss the importance of Zion and of gathering out of Babylon to Zion. Nor is the topic of central emphasis in any of the more notable biographies of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

that the apostasy extended to a scattering of an ancient covenant people as much as it was a retreat from theological truth.

The First Vision and the Apostasy

Joseph Smith's early sense of an apostasy stemmed from his deep distress with competing Christian faiths revivalistically warring one against another. Their divisions were, to him, far more than academic; they posed a very serious personal obstacle. Knowing which of the churches he should join was a matter of personal salvation. "He perceived that it was a question of infinite importance," said Orson Pratt "and that the salvation of his soul depended upon a correct understanding of the same. . . . To decide, without any positive and definite evidence, on which he could rely, upon a subject involving the future welfare of his soul, was revolting to his feelings."² Joseph Smith himself put it this way:

When about fourteen years of age I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon enquiring [about] the plan of salvation I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society they referred me to one plan, and another to another . . . considering that all could not be right . . . I determined to investigate the subject more fully.³

2. Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 170–72. Orson Hyde's 1842 account of the first vision parallels that of Orson Pratt's in his reference to Joseph's concern "for a future state of existence" and "in what way to prepare himself" Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, 173–74. Spelling and punctuation have been normalized throughout.

3. Extract from the John Wentworth letter in Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, 168.

Such confusion explains his frustrations and his fears. “In the midst of this war or words and tumult of opinions,” he later wrote, “I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?” (JS—H 1:10).

Unquestionably, nearby contemporary religious revivals had aggravated his soul. The more he listened and compared, the more his frustrations deepened, leading him into despair. He was clearly convinced that he, like so many others, had sinned and was in need of forgiveness. “I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world,” he later remarked. “Therefore I cried unto the Lord for mercy.”⁴ However, where was he to turn for a remission of his sins? “My mind became exceedingly distressed,” he said in his first recorded account of the first vision, “for I became convicted of my sins and by searching the scriptures I found 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 as recorded in the New Testament.”⁵ Put another way, the confusion in his mind begged to be settled before the confession of his heart.

To be sure, Joseph was not alone in seeking forgiveness. Almost every contemporary camp meeting and revival enjoined its listeners to seek the Lord in prayer. Not only in the so-called “Burned Over District” of upstate New York but also in scores of hamlets elsewhere in America and, indeed, in many other parts of the world, were other young men and women seeking for forgiveness of sin and for personal salvation. Wrote one Eliza Higgins of her 1818 experience:

4. Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 156.

5. Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 156.

I attended a Camp-meeting, resolved not to leave the ground until I was blessed with a change of heart. I thought if I perished, I would perish at the feet of sovereign mercy . . . after a sleepless night, I went early to one of these praying circles. For a while I *stood* as a critic and then went without an invitation and *knelt* as a *penitent*. . . I soon felt a firm belief that my Heavenly Father heard, and would answer to the joy of my heart.⁶

In June 1820, another young lad in Georgia “about thirteen or fourteen years old” told of how reading Ecclesiastes 12:1—“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth”—brought him to seek forgiveness:

It came with such weight on his mind . . . that he was soon brought to see the wickedness of his heart, and how just it would be in God to cut him off in that state. But at length, after continuing in that state of distress and despondency for a long time, he said that as he was walking alone one evening he thought he would go and try for the last time to pray once more. But before he could find a suitable place, these words passed sweetly through his mind, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” With these words he had a view of the Lord Jesus Christ, who satisfied the law for him.⁷

Yet another account, this one from England written in 1821, tells of another conversion story.

I opened the Bible . . . so intolerable was the burden of guilt under which I labored . . . that in the most fervent manner I was constrained to agonize with God in prayer. I continued

6. From a memoir of Miss Eliza Higgins, *Methodist Magazine* 5, May 1822, 290.

7. John Hamrick to A. Davis, 24 June 1820, *The American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer* 3/1, January 1821, 37.

... for three days, when the Lord . . . graciously favored me with a sense of redemption, through the blood of Jesus, by forgiving all my sins. Being in the field, in the exercise of prayer, I heard, as it were, a voice, saying, “Ho! Every one that thirsteth, let him come and drink of the waters of life freely”; when by faith I beheld the Son of God evidently as crucified before me, was delivered of the burden of guilt, and was enabled to exclaim “Lord, I will praise thee.” Thus was my darkness turned into light, and my mourning into joy, which was unspeakably great.⁸

Indeed, the religious literature of the day is replete with such accounts of men and women seeking and obtaining divine forgiveness, evidence of the remarkable effect of revivals among the people.

However, what Joseph Smith sought first was to know which church to join in order to submit himself to grace. The one issue could not be settled in his mind without addressing the other. In his official account, written in 1838, he wrote: “My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join” (JS—H 1:18). The answer given him to “join none of them, for they were all wrong,” would certainly address one of his concerns and that of many of his later followers, but in his earlier accounts, he seems to have stressed the more personal aspect of the vision. In his first recorded account of the vision, written in 1832, Joseph Smith emphasized this theme of atonement and personal forgiveness. “I saw the Lord,” he said. “And he spake unto me saying ‘Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way walk in my statutes and keep my commandments.

8. From a short biography of Mr. Stephen Butler and of his 1800 conversion experience, see *Methodist Magazine* 4, May 1821, 167.

Behold . . . I was crucified for the world that all those who believe in my name may have Eternal life.”⁹

Orson Hyde, in his account of the first vision, alluded to the double meaning of this experience: he “received a promise that the true doctrine—the fulness of the gospel—should, at some future time, be made known to him; after which, the vision withdrew, leaving his mind in a state of calmness and peace indescribable.”¹⁰ Thus Joseph’s theophany was both personal forgiveness and religious instruction.¹¹

It would be grossly incorrect to argue that a sense of the apostasy began with Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints. For centuries, churches of the Reformation had been teaching that an apostasy had long ago occurred in the Christian world. The very essence of Calvinistic and Lutheran Protestantism had been to protest against corrupt, if not apostate, claims and beliefs that they believed had corrupted the Roman Catholic Church and to initiate essential reforms to purify and redeem the Christian

9. Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 157.

10. Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 175.

11. Elder Henry B. Eyring of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles alluded to this truth when dedicating Avard T. Fairbank’s sculpture of the Prophet Joseph Smith in the grove located in the Joseph Smith Building on the campus of Brigham Young University. Said Elder Eyring: “From studying the various accounts of the First Vision, we learn that young Joseph went into the grove not only to learn which church he should join but also to obtain forgiveness for his sins, something he seems not to have understood how to do. And in more that one account the Lord addressed the young truth seeker and said, ‘Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee.’” Henry B. Eyring, unveiling ceremony of “The Vision,” a statue by Avard T. Fairbanks, 17 October 1997, as inscripted in stone monument, first floor, Joseph Smith Building, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

church. The following excerpt from the September 1820 issue of the American religious periodical, *Christian Disciple*, is but one of hundreds of examples of how many contemporary American Protestants, even the more liberal denominations, were then viewing the apostasy:

Religion is not respected because it is not understood, because a low, earth-born rival has assumed the name and place of that principle whose origin is from heaven. . . . It is not necessary to consider the condition of Catholic countries where the monstrous corruptions which have been connected with Christianity, have left it scarcely any disciples, except among the lower and more ignorant classes of society. We may see enough of the disastrous consequences of error in Protestant countries, in our own neighborhood, among those whom we meet in the common intercourse of life. . . . The dark ages were the triumph and consummation of the errors and vices which were in the world when Christianity was introduced.¹²

Joseph Smith, therefore, was certainly not the author of the concept of an apostasy from the original Christian church.

Yet of all the many truths of the first vision, two stood out in his mind: first, that the resurrected Christ forgives sins upon the principle of repentance, and, second, that God affirmed the reality of a universal apostate world. In fact, the depth and decay of that apostasy were far greater than the young prophet could have ever realized for, as he himself later admitted, “at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong.”¹³ In Joseph Smith’s dawning understanding he learned that something terribly wrong had happened to original Christianity and that despite every good intention and reform, a “calamity” had overtaken the world.

12. *Christian Disciple* 11 (September/October 1820): 346, 358.

13. Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 163.

Moroni and the Translation of the Book of Mormon

During the ensuing three years, Joseph once again fell into various transgressions and “foibles” of youth “which brought a wound upon [his] soul”¹⁴ so much so that on the evening of 21 September 1823, he “betook [him]self to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness” (JS—H 1:28–29).

In response, a light began to appear in his room “which continued to increase until the room was lighter than at noon-day” (JS—H 1:30) in which light the resurrected angel Moroni appeared. Inherent in Moroni’s subsequent instructions concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the role Joseph Smith would play in that unfolding drama, was a renewed forgiveness of his sins and a reiteration of several gospel truths, the apostasy included.

Moroni’s instructions and teachings from the Holy Bible, repeated in several consecutive visits that occupied the entire night and part of the following day, included many warnings and prophecies. He informed him that terrible consequences were inevitable because of the calamity of the apostasy, that “great judgments . . . were coming upon the earth, with great desolations by famine, sword, and pestilence; and that these grievous judgments would come on the earth in this generation” (JS—H 1:45).

In a remarkable series of letters published in the *Evening and the Morning Star* in 1834, Oliver Cowdery spoke freely of Joseph Smith’s early visions. He said that Moroni quoted liberally from Isaiah about “a marvelous work and a wonder,” and apparently expanded their view of the apostasy and its consequences. Moroni confirmed that according to:

14. Reproduced in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 12.

his covenant which he made with his ancient saints, his people, the house of Israel, must come to a knowledge of the gospel, [and be] gathered in to rejoice in one fold under one Shepherd. . . . He then proceeded and gave a general account of the promises made to the fathers, and also gave a history of the aborigines of this country, and said they were literal descendants of Abraham. He represented them as once being an enlightened and intelligent people, possessing a correct knowledge of the gospel, and the plan of restoration and redemption.¹⁵

Yet despite this fall,

it will come to pass, that though the house of Israel has forsaken the Lord, and bowed down and [worshipped] other gods . . . and been cast out before the face of the world, they will know the voice of the Shepherd when he calls upon them this time.¹⁶

From Moroni, then, Joseph Smith learned that the apostasy encompassed more than the loss of a true Christian faith in the old world; it also included the dwindling of ancient covenant peoples, specifically the scattering of Israel, “in a cloudy and dark day” (D&C 109:61), and in such divergent and forbidden paths as to obscure their nobility, dignity and place as God’s chosen people. And as with Ephraim and Manasseh, so, too, with Judah. Furthermore, Cowdery asserted that “calamity would fall upon that people,” and that “the wrath of heaven

15. Letter IV from Oliver Cowdery to W.W. Phelps. First published in the *Evening and Morning Star*, 1834. Reproduced in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith, Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:52–53.

16. Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:67, Letter VI.

[would] overtake them to their overthrow.”¹⁷ “In consequence of their rejecting the gospel, the Lord suffered them to be again scattered; their land to be wasted and their beautiful city to be trodden down of the Gentiles.”¹⁸

The prophecies of Nephi as found in the early pages of the Book of Mormon refer often to the apostasy in words and images not easy to overlook. At the risk of equating Book of Mormon doctrine to their translator’s understanding of them (not always nor necessarily the same), one is quickly made aware that the Book of Mormon says much about this catastrophe. While the term *apostasy* is not found in the Book of Mormon, it speaks often of “captivity,” of perversion, of an “awful state of blindness” (1 Nephi 13:32) among the Gentiles, of a “great whore of all the earth” (see 1 Nephi 14), of “the mother of abominations” (see 1 Nephi 14) and of such “sinning” that “an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them” (1 Nephi 13:29). Pending further study, it would appear that the Book of Mormon itself was a primer on the apostasy and likely was a major source of the unique Latter-day Saint view of the breadth and depth of the apostasy, especially when compared to contemporary interpretations.

The process of translating the Book of Mormon was itself a catalyst for further revelation. “No men in their sober senses, could translate and write the directions given to the Nephites,” Cowdery wrote, “from the mouth of the Savior of the precise manner in which men should build up his church, and especially, when corruption had spread an uncertainty over all forms and systems practiced among men, without desiring”

17. Cowdery to Phelps, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:39, Letter II.

18. Cowdery to Phelps, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:59, Letter V.

baptism, or, as he defined it, “to answer ‘a good conscience by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.’”¹⁹ “After writing [translating] the account of the Savior’s ministry to the remnant of the seed of Jacob,” Oliver recalled: “it was easily to be seen, as the prophet [Moroni] said it would be, that darkness covered the earth and gross darkness the minds of the people. On reflecting further, it was easily to be seen that amid the great strife and noise concerning religion, none had authority from God to administer the ordinances of the gospel.”²⁰

What followed was the vision of John the Baptist and the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood. Oliver summarized the effects as follows:

What joy! what wonder! what amazement! While the world was racked and distracted—while millions were groping as the blind for the wall, and while all men were resting upon uncertainty, as a general mass, our eyes beheld, our ears heard, as in the “blaze of day.”²¹

Later, in 1834, he put it this way:

This gospel has been perverted and men have wandered in darkness. That commission given to the apostles at Jerusalem . . . has been hid from the world, because of evil, and the honest have been led by the designing, till there are none to be found who are practising the ordinances of the gospel, as they were anciently delivered.²²

19. Cowdery to Phelps, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:30, Letter I.

20. Letter I from Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:30.

21. *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834), 14 (p. 59 of the PoGP).

22. Cowdery to Phelps, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:59, Letter V.

Joseph Smith's later work in revising the Holy Bible also clarified their understanding further. "It will be seen by this that the most plain parts of the New Testament have been taken from it," wrote W. W. Phelps in June 1832, "by the Mother of Harlots . . . from the year A.D. 460 to 1400. This is a sufficient reason for the Lord to give command to have it translated anew."²³ Added Oliver Cowdery,

I am ready to admit that men in previous generations have with polluted hands and corrupt hearts, taken from the sacred oracle, many precious items which were plain of comprehension, for the main purpose for building themselves up in the trifling things of this world.²⁴

The very work of biblical translation gave rise to their argument that the sins of the apostasy were more than those of unfortunate omission and loss.

Even at this early date, Joseph Smith saw the apostasy in more than denominational or even solely religious terms. "The plain fact is this," he added later in January 1833,

the light of the latter day glory begins to break forth through the dark atmosphere of sectarian wickedness and their iniquity [rolls] up into view and the nations of the Gentiles are like the waves of the sea casting up mire and dirt or all in commotion.²⁵

While it would be totally unfair to argue that Joseph Smith saw wickedness in all the priests and teachers of the day, there is no question that sin, universal sin, was a characteristic of the apostasy which he saw as both rampant and tragic.

23. *Evening and Morning Star*, June 1832, 3.

24. Cowdery to Phelps, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:72, Letter VII.

25. Joseph Smith to "Mr. Editor," 4 January 1833, as quoted in Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 296.

The apostasy had also corrupted secular knowledge. Joseph wrote:

For some length of time, I have been carefully viewing the state of things as now appear throughout our Christian land and have looked at it with feelings of the most painful anxiety while upon the one hand beholding the manifest withdrawal of God's Holy Spirit and the veil of stupidity which seems to be drawn over the hearts of the people.²⁶

Furthermore its contaminating effects had spread to nations and governments. "For not only the churches are dwindling away, but there are no conversions, or but very few, and this is not all, the governments of the earth are thrown into confusion and division and destruction."²⁷ Thus Joseph Smith's view of the apostasy had developed from a religious deterioration to include decay in secular learning, government, and authority.

And with this deterioration, the Prophet taught the urgency of declaring the restoration and the need for a gathering to Zion (Missouri) in expectation of the millennial return of Christ, if for no other reason than to blunt the wrath of Providence upon a world intent on the willful disregard of truth and disobedience to command. Joseph Smith was quick to argue that the restoration of Gospel truths and the reestablishment of the church did not signal the immediate end of the apostasy; rather its intensification.

Some may pretend to say that the world in this age is fast increasing in righteousness; that the dark ages of superstition are held by only a few. . . . But a moment's candid reflection

26. Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 295.

27. Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 296–97. This latter view, affecting the legitimacy of government, would come under close scrutiny.

. . . is sufficient for every candid man to draw a conclusion in his own mind whether this is the order of heaven or not.²⁸

Who can look at the Christian world and see the apostasy therefore 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?” The plain fact is this, the power of God begins to fall upon the Nations. . . . And now what remains to be done . . . in order [to] escape the judgments of God which are almost ready to burst upon the nations of the earth—Repent of all your sins and be baptized . . . that ye may receive the Holy Spirit of God.²⁹

By way of review, then, after years of instruction Joseph and Oliver’s understanding of a loss of truth had deepened to a sense of a great and global apostasy, that gross darkness blanketed the entire world and that the world lay in sin and captivity, that religious corruption had contaminated much of Christian communication and standards of behavior, that there had been a subtraction of priesthood legitimacy and authority, that the apostasy extended to the diminution and scattering of God’s ancient covenant people Israel, and finally, if a less developed doctrine, that modern nations and governments acted without authority.

Proclaim the Word

Many of the earliest converts to the church could empathize with Joseph Smith’s quest for religious truth. They, too, had explored the scriptures, compared the teachings in the New Testament with those of other faiths, and had sought a

28. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 48–49.

29. Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 297.

forgiveness of sins. Joel Hills Johnson wrote in his diary, “When reading the New Testament I would often wonder why people did not baptize for the remission of sins.”³⁰ Parley P. Pratt likewise said, “My mind was drawn out from time to time on the things of God and eternity. I felt deeply anxious to be saved from my sins, and to secure an interest in that world ‘where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.’”³¹ With the church still in its infancy, many of its newest converts sought to spread the word while at the same time gather to Zion. Jonathan Crosby, for instance, prayed that, “the Lord would rend the heavens and come down, and remove the darkness which covers the earth, and gross darkness the minds of the people.”³² Among the doctrines these earliest converts preached, the apostasy was prominent, if not paramount.³³ These included the loss of truth, resultant false religion, the absence of authority, and the scattering of Israel.

But can we answer particulars about such teachings? And can we be more specific about the time frame? In answer to this second question, it would appear that the apostasy was

30. Diary of Joel Hills Johnson, 1802–1882, 1:32, L. Tom Perry Special Collections Library, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. Hereafter referred to as BYU Special Collections.

31. Scott Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor, *Autobiography of Parley Pratt*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 24.

32. *Evening and Morning Star* 2/23, August 1834, 181. Letter from Jonathan Crosby Jr.

33. Of 16 missionaries who served in the period from 1830 to 1834, according to their diaries 75 percent taught various elements of the apostasy. These included Calvin Beebe, Jonathan Crosby Jr., Peter Dustin, William Draper, William Huntington, Joseph G. Hovey, Orson Hyde, Joel Hills Johnson, Wandle Mace, William E. McLellin, John Murdock, W. W. Phelps, Parley P. Pratt, Samuel H. Smith, Sylvester Smith, and Brigham Young.

understood and taught somewhat differently, or least with different emphasis, at various stages in early church history. In the very formative years of the church, from 1830 until the expulsion of the Saints from Independence, Missouri in late 1833 and their resultant sufferings in exile in Clay County, Missouri, in 1834, the literature—both printed and unpublished—emphasized the “gathering” to Zion and the earnest expectation of the second coming and millennial return of the Son of God. Indeed, the stress was on the wickedness of the surrounding world, the urgent need to come out of “Babylon” in advance of the “overflowing scourge” (D&C 45:31) God would soon send upon the earth. After 1834, there comes a subtle, yet distinctive change in tone and interpretation of the doctrine, a topic beyond the scope of this present study.³⁴

Specifically then, for our present purposes, we wish to address the following four questions:

34. Preliminary studies indicate that the expulsion of the Saints from Independence, Missouri in late 1833 and their subsequent wintry exile in Clay County in 1834 may have rigidified or made more shrill Mormon comments about the world and its evil state. Note the following editorial comments, its tone and contents, after the persecutions of Jackson County: “The fact is established, that those who persecute are the children of ‘that wicked one.’ . . . Those who persecute this church . . . have forsaken his house, left the fold, and like wandering stars, filthy dreamers, or beasts of corruption, [are] abandoned to be taken and destroyed in their own wickedness.” *Evening and Morning Star* 2/24, September 1834, 185. The enormous disappointment of their shattered dream of Zion can hardly be overstated. How much of their later views of the apostasy were really aimed at Missouri is hard to determine. Thus, for this study, our efforts are to try to ascertain how the Saints viewed the apostasy before their Missouri difficulties occurred.

- Did the early missionaries and church writers (1830 to mid-1834) teach the universality of the apostasy? What effect had it wrought upon other faiths and upon the lives of people all over the world? How pervasive and contaminating were its effects?

- Was the call to gather to Zion in part a result of the apostasy?

- In these early years, did they emphasize the loss of priesthood authority as a critical element and characteristic of the apostasy?

- Finally, did they teach the two apostasies, i.e., the scattering of Israel as well as the loss of the true Christian church?

That many missionaries inferred such negative consequences while teaching the happier news of the restored Gospel cannot be denied. The tone of their declarations is much more a positive than a negative declaration. Nevertheless we argue that in the angel of the restoration was the devil of the apostasy.

How Universal the Apostasy?

In a letter to an inquirer, Joseph Smith wrote that “the Gentiles have not continued in the goodness of God, but have departed from the faith that was once delivered to the Saints, and have broken the covenant in which their fathers were established.”³⁵ To his way of thinking, the apostasy was the result of broken covenant. As stated in his revelation of 1 November 1831, the “Preface” to the Book of Commandments, the effects had been both universal and devastating,

For they have strayed from mine ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant; They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that

35. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 15.

of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great, which shall fall. (D&C 1:15–16)

The early missionary force of the church spoke of the apostasy in very strident tones. They taught that it was a reality, long prophesied and now fulfilled, that the Christian world had lost its way, the results of which were spiritually and morally devastating. To minimize this fact is to misunderstand our history.

Joseph Smith's younger brother, Samuel, sometimes referred to as the "first missionary" of the restoration, fairly well echoed his brother's perspective in the following statement:

I have written . . . to prove that the Gentiles have broken the everlasting covenant and that darkness has covered the earth since the days of the Apostles and to show the calamity that is coming upon them and to prove that while in this situation the Lord was to lift up a standard to the people which should . . . come forth to throw light into the minds of the people and to deliver them from the darkness that had happened unto them and to show the way of deliverance from the judgments that are coming upon the Gentiles.³⁶

Wrote W. W. Phelps,

The reformers of these last days, among those who call themselves reformers, are very near a ridiculous farce, possessing scarcely one feature of primitive Christianity, and savoring very much of Paul's apostasy, that is a form of godliness without the power. This seems to be the common failing of all the sects in Christendom, so called.³⁷

Orson Hyde spoke in 1832 of "the blindness that had happened in consequence of the falling away from the faith that

36. Samuel H. Smith Journal, LDS Church Archives (written after 15 October 1832) np; typescript in BYU Special Collections, 22–23.

37. *Evening and Morning Star* 2/17, February 1834, 131.

was delivered to the Saints.”³⁸ And Sylvester Smith, writing in May 1833 from his missionary labors in southern New York state added the following,

I am sensible that the word will not grow and flourish upon the barren rocks of pride and unbelief, which is almost the only characteristic of the old churches. When I view the situation of the sectarians of the day, my heart cries, wo, wo, wo, to the scribes and pharisees, hypocrites, who build and garnish the sepulchers of the apostles! But alas! Their building upon the old covenant will not save them if they reject the new! Their crying out against the murderers of Christ and his apostles will not save them, while they stone those whom the Lord sends to warn them of the desolation which await the wicked.³⁹

In 1834 William McLellin quoted from Jude 1:3 when he addressed a congregation “about an hour and a quarter on the situation or confusion of the world and on the faith once delivered to the saints.”⁴⁰ Orson Hyde, referencing the same scripture but on another account, “show[ed] them the blindness that had happened in consequence of the falling away from the faith that was delivered to the Saints.”⁴¹

Said W. W. Phelps in 1834,

The world . . . was to wander far from God, and righteousness was so far to depart from the earth and the true principles of the religion of heaven to be so neglected, as to leave the world in a state of apostasy . . . Isaiah says in [60:2], “For

38. Samuel H. Smith Journal, 27 August 1832, 17.

39. *Evening and Morning Star* 2/14, July 1833, 109. Letter from a missionary serving in Chenago Point, New York.

40. Jan Shippo and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin: 1831–1836* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1994), 31 August 1834, 136.

41. Samuel H. Smith Journal, 27 August 1832, 17.

behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people.” Any man who will read this . . . will see . . . it was at this time that darkness was to cover the earth and gross darkness the minds of the people.⁴²

Orson Pratt, active in proselyting activity since late 1830, summarized his teachings of the apostasy and of “the falling away of the Church of Christ,”⁴³ and the fact that “there could not but one church be correct”⁴⁴ in the following jubilant letter he wrote to Oliver Cowdery:

Who could have supposed five years ago that truth would have spread so rapid . . . it moves in majesty and power, and continues its steady course, pulling down the strongholds of Babylon, and leaving her mighty towers, exposing the creeds, systems and inventions of men, exhibiting the extreme ignorance, follies and errors of all sects, which causes their priests to rage and their mighty ones to tremble.⁴⁵

Admitted Parley P. Pratt,

At the commencement of 1830, I felt drawn out in an extraordinary manner to search the prophets, and to pray for an

42. *Evening and Morning Star* 2/22, June 1834, 162; and 2/23, July 1834, 169. Again from Phelps: “In consequence of the religious world having lost the power of getting revelations for themselves they have fallen into their present state of confusion, each partly manufacturing duties for themselves. For instance, the Presbyterian, the Episcopalian, the Methodist, and the Catholic god with the god of some other sects, requires them, (or at least they think he does) to sprinkle their children, while the Baptist . . . god is greatly offended with it” (*Evening and Morning Star* 2/23, July 1834, 171).

43. Elden J. Watson, comp. and arr., *The Orson Pratt Journals* (Salt Lake City: Watson, 1975), 13 March, 1835, 52, and 2 June 1835, 65.

44. Watson, *Orson Pratt Journals*, 23 August 1835, 70.

45. Watson, *Orson Pratt Journals*, letter of Orson Pratt to Oliver Cowdery, 16 February 1835, 47.

understanding of the same. . . . I began to understand the things which were coming on the earth—the restoration of Israel, the coming of the Messiah, and the glory that should follow. I was so astonished at the darkness of myself and mankind on these subjects that I could exclaim with the prophet: surely “*darkness covers the earth, and gross darkness the minds of the people.*”⁴⁶

Nor was it only the Christian world that had so suffered. Oliver Cowdery, writing in 1834, clearly described it in universal terms:

No man in his sober senses, with the word of God in his hand, can reflect one moment upon these scenes without being filled with awe! In distant lands, now abandoned to darkness, where human beings bow down and worship the work of their own hands, and call for assistance upon a block of wood of their own carving, have also felt the *sting* of pestilence, the angel of death, and the calamity of war! . . . Century has slept after century: wickedness has borne its accustomed sway; the great deceiver has blinded and led captive his millions; truth has fled, virtue ceased, and righteousness failed from off the earth, and the boaster against God has raised his head in blasphemies, from age to age, and the end is not yet!⁴⁷

The perceived rise in criminal activity was also viewed as a result of the apostasy. Note the following editorial comments, presumably by Phelps, written in the summer of 1833,

The Lord has said, that he is holding his Spirit from the inhabitants of the earth, and when we see a robbery in one paper,

46. Proctor and Proctor, *Autobiography of Parley Pratt*, 33. Italics preserved from original.

47. *Evening and Morning Star* 2/24, September 1834, 185. From an “Address to the Patrons of the *Evening and Morning Star*,” arguably written by Oliver Cowdery, then editor.

and a murder in another, yea, and all manner of crimes following each other, in quick succession, we are led to exclaim: “The Spirit of God has nearly done striving with man! Surely great things await this generation. . . . Notwithstanding man has been laboring for centuries, to preach the gospel to all nations, it has not been done; and the Lord has now commenced his strange act.”⁴⁸

Perhaps no one paints a more catastrophic picture of the omnipresent evil and ubiquitous wickedness in the world than Oliver Cowdery,

Consider for a moment, brethren, the fulfillment of the words of the prophet: for we beheld that darkness covers the earth, and gross darkness the minds of the inhabitants thereof—that crimes of every description are increasing among men—vices of every enormity are practiced—the rising generation growing up in the fulness of pride and arrogance—the aged losing every sense of conviction, and seemingly banishing every thought of a day of retribution—intemperance, immorality, extravagance, pride, blindness of heart, idolatry, the loss of natural affection, the love of this world, and indifference toward the things of eternity increasing among those who profess a belief in the religion of heaven, and infidelity spreading itself in consequence of the same—man giving themselves up to commit acts of the foulest kind, and deeds of the blackest dye; lying, blaspheming, stealing, robbing, murdering, defaming, defrauding . . . forsaking the covenant of heaven, and denying the faith of Jesus Christ—and in the midst of all this, the day of the Lord fast approaching when none except those who have on the wedding garment shall be permitted to eat and drink in the presence of the Bridegroom, the Prince of Peace! . . . Who but those who can see the awful precipice

48. *Evening and Morning Star* 2/14, July 1833, 107.

upon which the world of mankind stand in this generation, can labor in the vineyard of the Lord with a feeling sense of their deplorable situation? Some may presume to say that the world in this age is fast increasing in righteousness; the dark ages of superstition and blindness have passed over, when the faith of Christ was known and practiced only by a few, when ecclesiastical power held an almost universal control over Christendom. . . . But, a moment's candid reflection, . . . we think, is sufficient for every candid man to draw a conclusion.⁴⁹

The apostasy, then, had thoroughly corrupted virtually all of the Christian world. And because of it “surely, gross darkness covers the earth, and wickedness greatly prevails among the people, and the truth makes them angry, for they are joined to their idols.”⁵⁰ Seen as far more than a mere decayed institution, or loss of a validating priesthood, or even the absence of gospel truths, it had ushered in a time of sin and corruption, a terrible state of affairs which missionaries viewed as confirmation of that calamity.

Was the Gathering to Zion Taught as Evidence of the Apostasy?

The very earliest revelations of the restoration speak in no uncertain terms of the corruption in the world because of the apostasy. And because of it, the saints were to gather to

49. *Evening and Morning Star* 2/17, February 1834, 135. It is not absolutely certain that Oliver Cowdery wrote the above editorial. The conclusion is drawn from the fact that his name is given as editor of the *Star* once it was relocated to Ohio.

50. *Evening and Morning Star* 1/9, February 1833, 69. Letter from “Calvin and Peter,” missionaries serving in Union, Missouri. Understood to be Brothers [Peter] Dustin and C. [Calvin] Beebe from a letter dated Cole County, Missouri, December 11, 1832, 1:8:63.

Zion (Missouri) to escape God's wrath. The one was the result of the other. The following is taken from a revelation dated September 1830:

Wherefore the decree hath gone forth from the Father that they shall be gathered in unto one place upon the face of this land, to prepare their hearts and be prepared in all things against the day when tribulation and desolation are sent forth upon the wicked. For the hour is nigh and the day soon at hand when the earth is ripe; and all the proud and they that do wickedly shall be as stubble; and I will burn them up, saith the Lord of Hosts, that wickedness shall not be upon the earth. (D&C 29:8–9)

In a subsequent revelation, one month later, the fallen, “corrupted” state of the world is given as one key reason for the gathering.

For verily, verily, I say unto you that ye are called to lift up your voices as with the sound of a trump, to declare my gospel unto a crooked and perverse generation. For behold, the field is white already to harvest; and it is the eleventh hour, and the last time that I shall call laborers into my vineyard. And my vineyard has become corrupted every whit; and there is none which doth good save it be a few; and they err in many instances because of priestcrafts, all having corrupt minds. . . . And even so will I gather mine elect from the four quarters of the earth, even as many as will believe in me, and hearken unto my voice. (D&C 33:2–4, 6)

And from yet another revelation of March 1831,

Wherefore I, the Lord, have said, gather ye out from the eastern lands, assemble ye yourselves together ye elders of my church; go ye forth into the western countries, call upon the inhabitants to repent, and inasmuch as they do repent, build the churches unto me. . . . And it shall be called the New

Jerusalem, a land of peace, a city of refuge, a place of safety for the saints of the Most High God. (D&C 45:64, 66)

This theme of gathering out of corruption unto safety, a refuge from the “desolating” “scourge” about to be poured upon the world (D&C 45:31), dominates much of the earliest literature of the church.⁵¹ Even the Mormon apostate, Ezra Booth, writing in 1831 in the *Painesville Telegraph*, understood this point clear enough to say: “‘The land of Missouri’ . . . is also to be a city of Refuge, and a safe asylum when the storms of vengeance shall pour upon the earth.”⁵² In October 1832, Samuel H. Smith taught,

of the situation in which the Apostolic churches were established . . . and then compared them with the churches at the present day and showed them that they had all gone out of the way and were involved in darkness and showed the means that God had provided for their deliverance from the confusion.⁵³

A few months later, Seymour Brunson wrote from his missionary labors in Ohio: “O that the Lord would make bare his arm, and bring in that happy day, when Christ shall come in the clouds of heaven. The time is nigh, and the wickedness of the people is great. The fields are white already to harvest, and Babylon will soon realize her destruction.”⁵⁴

John F. Boynton, missionary and future apostle, wrote much the same sentiment in the form of a prayer

O! That God would rend the heavens and come down to deliver his Saints; that the mountains might give way before

51. Price, “Mormon Missionary,” 15, 21–23.

52. From an article in the *Painesville (Ohio) Telegraph*, 1 November 1831, 5.

53. Samuel H. Smith Journal, 28 October 1832, 25.

54. From a letter by Seymour Brunson, 6 May 1833. Published in *Evening and Morning Star* 2/13, June 1833, 100.

him; and flow down at his presence; that the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ might roll forth till it fills the whole earth! I long to see the time when the saints of the most high God shall take the kingdom, and possess it forever.⁵⁵

The gathering was, therefore, a necessary act, not only to prepare for the second coming of Christ but also to leave behind the sinking vessel of a ruined world.

What of Authority?

We come now to the related question: was the loss of priesthood authority taught as a critical element of the apostasy in these early years? Considering the fact that a revelation given to the infant church on the day on which it was organized addressed this issue, one might conclude that this must have been a major point of discussion. After all, section 22 of the Doctrine and Covenants indicated to the earliest church members the need to be rebaptized, even though they had been baptized into other churches earlier.

Behold, I say unto you that all old covenants have I caused to be done away in this thing; and this a new and an everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning. Wherefore, although a man should be baptized an hundred times it availeth him nothing, for you cannot enter in at the strait gate by the law of Moses, neither by your dead works. For it is because of your dead works that I have caused this last covenant and this church to be built up unto me, even as in days of old. Wherefore, enter ye in at the gate, as I have commanded. (D&C 22:1–4)

Phelps editorialized in 1833 on this subject:

When the Savior came to the Jews, he called and chose twelve, . . . gave them authority to build up his church; and they by

55. Letter of John F. Boynton, 20 January 1834, *Evening and Morning Star* 2/17, February 1834, 134.

his authority, commissioned others, and so the gospel was preached. This state of order in the church of Christ, lasted for some time; perhaps till the Nicean Council, and from that time till the Book of Mormon came forth . . . there were many sects, that had a form, in some degree, of godliness, but none declared . . . that they were inspired by the Lord.⁵⁶

Certain it is that they taught of the true church being upon the earth. From the preface to the Doctrine and Covenants, dated 1 September 1831:

And also those to whom these commandments were given, might have power to lay the foundation of this church, and to bring it forth out of obscurity and out of darkness, the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased, speaking unto the church collectively and not individually. (D&C 1:30)

Just three months later, one observer put it this way, speaking of church leaders: “These are the men sent forth, to promulgate a new revelation, and to usher in a new dispensation. . . . These are the leaders of the Church, and the only Church on earth the Lord beholds with approbation.”⁵⁷

This new knowledge came as quite a revelation to some of those who had been searching. Albeit writing years after the fact, Parley P. Pratt said of Hyrum Smith’s early teachings,

He also unfolded to me the particulars of the discovery of the Book [of Mormon] . . . the rise of the Church of the Latter-day Saints, and the commission of his brother Joseph, and others, by revelation and the ministering of angels, by which the apostleship and *authority* had been again restored to the earth. After duly weighing the whole matter in my mind I

56. *Evening and Morning Star* 1/11, April 1833, 83.

57. *Painesville Telegraph*, 6 December 1831, 1. From a letter by Ezra Booth.

saw clearly that these things were true; and that myself and the whole world were without baptism, and without the ministry and ordinances of God; and that the whole world had been in this condition since the days that inspiration and revelation had ceased.⁵⁸

Pratt's words are poignant and informative but nevertheless autobiographical and certainly not contemporary to our time. If the very earliest missionaries taught the loss of authority, it seems not to have been an area of particular emphasis or even the distinguishing characteristic. More often they taught the evil effects of the apostasy, the immediate need to come out of the world, and to gather to Zion. Early Mormonism was not presented as merely a denomination per se in contrast with all other churches, but as the restoration of all things, the very dispensation of the fullness of times, modern Israel preparing for the millennial day.

The Scattering and Loss of Israel

But what of the scattering and loss of Israel? Did missionaries include in their teachings of a universal apostasy the scattering of the ancient tribes of Israel? Once again, the answer was more often expressed in the positive declaration: that the restoration was more than that of a New Testament Christian church, that it marked the return of an ancient Old Testament covenant people. Indeed, their new Zion would be the place for the restoration of such people.

Wrote missionaries Eliel Strong and Eleazer Miller in early 1833:

We rejoice that the time has come, that the Lord has set his hand again the second time to gather his elect. That he

58. Proctor and Proctor, *Autobiography of Parley Pratt*, 38; emphasis added.

has already set up the ensign and lifted the standard for the gathering of the nations; that the covenants and promises made to the fathers concerning the remnants of his people . . . might be fulfilled. . . .We long to see the time when we can see the tribes of Israel’s remnants coming up to Zion with songs of everlasting joy . . . when Jesus shall come in the clouds of heaven.⁵⁹

Orson Pratt’s journals are instructive in this matter. He often combined the apostasy of faith with the scattering of Israel as if they were two separate expressions of the same phenomenon, both evidenced in the Book of Mormon. Note the following: “Preached at Norwich upon the coming forth of the Book of Mormon,” and “the prophecies that have been fulfilled in the scattering of Israel and apostasy of the gentiles.”⁶⁰ On the 21st of June 1833, he preached “upon the scattering of Israel and the miracles that are to be wrought at their gathering.”⁶¹ Two days later, he spoke “upon the restoration of Israel and the blessings on Joseph.”⁶² His preachings were laced with references to Isaiah 29, Ezekiel 37, and Daniel 2, three of the most favorite scriptures used in the period from 1830 to 1833. To his view and that of several others, there would be two places of gathering: “the Jews to gather in unbelief [at Jerusalem]; the Saints at Mount Zion.”⁶³ Orson Pratt in these very early years saw the church as part of modern Israel—the tribe of Joseph—called literally to gather to a new Zion upon the American continent.

59. Eliel Strong and Eleazer Miller to the editor, dated 19 March 1833. *Evening and Morning Star* 1/12, May 1833, 94–95.

60. Watson, *Orson Pratt Journals*, 7 August 1835, 68.

61. Watson, *Orson Pratt Journals*, 21 June 1833, 18. See also 20 and 22 February 1835, 48.

62. Watson, *Orson Pratt Journals*, 23 June 1833, 18

63. Watson, *Orson Pratt Journals*, 16 August 1833, 23. See also 19 January 1834, 31.

When approached by a Baptist minister claiming that there was no need for new revelation, Parley P. Pratt related,

We asked him to open the New Testament and read to us a history and destiny of the American continent and its inhabitants, and the origin and lineage of the same; also, the history of the ten tribes of Israel, and where they now were. We also asked him to read to us from that book of his own commission and that of other ministers of this age to preach the gospel.⁶⁴

Not only did Pratt pinpoint the lack of authority claimed by this minister, he also testified of the scattering and loss of Israel.

Before his baptism, William Draper emphasized this very point.

After being in full Baptist membership for fifteen years, [I] began to be criticized for believing and teaching that the scriptures were to be understood in accordance to their obvious purpose, that the prophecies in the Bible were going to be fulfilled, and that the Israelites would be gathered. . . . [When I] heard Brigham Young preach [in 1833] . . . [I] recognized the truths that [I] had been searching for.⁶⁵

The Book of Mormon was regarded as evidence of a scattered and lost Israel. Wrote Phelps,

When darkness covered the earth, and gross darkness the people; when no man did walk in the old paths, nor did search out the everlasting gospel; when the church of Christ, and the gifts which he left in it, could not be found . . . , the Lord our Savior, saw it fit in his great goodness, endless mercy, and infinite wisdom, to send an angel and signify unto man, that

64. Proctor, *Autobiography of Parley Pratt*, 84–85.

65. “A Biographical Sketch of the Life and Travels and Birth and Parentage of William Draper who was the son of William Draper and Lydia Luthdrop Draper,” 172, BYU Special Collections.

there was a sacred record to be unfolded in the eyes of all the nations, containing the fulness of the gospel. It was the [B]ook of Mormon.⁶⁶

Conclusion

The purpose of this very exploratory study has been to show two things. First, that Joseph Smith's understanding of the apostasy played a key role in his quest for truth, and that it deepened as the years of his instruction intensified. Indeed, from his own account, it is clear that to Joseph Smith the first vision remained a divine affidavit of the apostasy. And from later periods of instruction and interpretation, his sense of a falling away only intensified. It was made manifest to him through visions, priesthood restorations, the Book of Mormon, and Biblical translations.

Second, we have attempted to show that early Latter-day Saint missionaries and writers in the period from 1830 to early 1834 taught various elements of the apostasy. To them, it was more than doctrine: it was historical fact, a tragedy that had compromised and contaminated the teachings of both the Christian and non-Christian world. The apostasy was a universal phenomenon, one that had negatively affected behavior as much as doctrine. Further, the apostasy had extended to the scattering of the tribes of Israel who were now to be restored in fulfillment of both Biblical and Book of Mormon prophecy. Because of it, the whole world lay in sin, necessitating the gathering to Zion, in part to escape a lost world in advance of the second coming of Christ.

In conclusion, we quote from Charles C. Rich,

How little do mankind realize their situation! How easy they are satisfied without knowing whether they are born

66. *Evening and Morning Star* 1/8, January 1833, 57.

of water and the Spirit or not! O that God would grant that they might humble themselves before him, that they might know the plan of Salvation.⁶⁷

67. *Evening and Morning Star* 2/14, July 1833, 108. From a letter by Charles C. Rich, 25 May 1833, written in Pleasant Grove, Illinois.

This is a version of a paper published in *Window of Faith: Latter-day Saint Perspectives on World History*, comp. Roy A. Prete (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2005). We wish to thank the BYU Religious Studies Center for permission to reproduce it here.