



Type: Book Chapter

---

## Inheriting the "Great Apostasy": The Evolution of Latter-day Saint Views on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

Author(s): Eric R. Dursteler

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): 29-65

---



The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) existed as a California non-profit corporation from 1979 until about 2006, when it was allowed to go into involuntary liquidation, at which time copyrights held by FARMS and its authors and/or editors reverted back to their original author and/or editors. This chapter is archived by permission of editor Noel B. Reynolds.

INHERITING THE “GREAT APOSTASY”:  
THE EVOLUTION OF LATTER-DAY SAINT VIEWS  
ON THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE RENAISSANCE

---

*Eric R. Dursteler*

The idea of a universal apostasy is one of the foundational elements of Mormonism. Indeed, it is often privileged with an uppercase *A* and designated as the “Great Apostasy.” In this context the term refers specifically to what Latter-day Saints perceive as the “falling away”<sup>1</sup> from Christ’s original church and his teachings in the centuries immediately following his crucifixion. It is no exaggeration to say that the concept of apostasy is one of the linchpins of the Latter-day Saint faith: without an apostasy there would have been no need for Joseph Smith or for a restoration. The great doctrinal commentator and Latter-day Saint apostle Bruce R. McConkie stated, “The apostasy is the first great sign

---

1. 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Kent P. Jackson has recently suggested that this phrase, derived from the Greek *apostasía*, should be rendered more dramatically as “rebellion,” “mutiny,” “revolt,” or “revolution” (see his book *From Apostasy to Restoration* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996], 9; also Todd Compton, “Apostasy,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:56–57).

of the times.”<sup>2</sup> Among the Latter-day Saint faithful, the explanation and justification for this pivotal moment are historically based; indeed, as one acute observer has commented, “For Mormonism more than other religions, history evolves as part of the church’s canon.”<sup>3</sup>

The concept of a historical apostasy was most fully developed in the works of three influential Latter-day Saint doctrinal commentators and General Authorities—B. H. Roberts of the First Council of Seventy, apostle James E. Talmage, and apostle and future church president Joseph Fielding Smith—who wrote around the turn of the twentieth century. For each of these writers, the key moments of the apostasy were the first Christian centuries, when innumerable “plain and precious” truths were lost (1 Nephi 13:28). In their divine chronologies, however, the Middle Ages and Renaissance also play an important, if relatively brief, role in the historical evolution that led ineluctably to the restoration. All three writers point to the darkness of medieval times as the fullest expression of the effects of apostasy, in contrast to the light that the Renaissance revival of learning reflected into the world. The Renaissance set the stage for the Reformation, which, in turn, acted as a prelude to the restoration.

---

2. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 626.

3. Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 247; see Edwin S. Gaustad, “History and Theology: The Mormon Connection,” *Sunstone*, November-December 1980, 44–47. Historian Richard L. Bushman has noted, “Mormons have hung the course of western civilization since Christ” on the framework of the apostasy (“Faithful History,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 [fall 1969]: 19). See also Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 51, 73.

While this binary vision of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was common in the intellectual world of the late nineteenth century, scholars have since come to see it as an obsolete and outmoded historical paradigm. Despite this transformation, the ideas of the aforementioned triumvirate of turn-of-the-century thinkers continue to influence Latter-day Saint views of history. This essay historically situates these influential commentators’ viewpoints on the Middle Ages and Renaissance within their broader vision of the great apostasy. It also considers the enduring appeal of their views within the Latter-day Saint community. The question of the historicity of the Latter-day Saint view of apostasy or the specific events it purports to describe, while important and suggestive themes, are beyond the scope of this essay.

### **The Apostasy in Latter-day Saint Thought**

During Mormonism’s first sixty years, discussions of apostasy were very much a part of the faith’s dialogue, but it was not until the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century that more systematic and influential treatments of the apostasy appeared.<sup>4</sup> The most consequential were those of B. H. Roberts, James E. Talmage, and Joseph Fielding Smith, three of Mormonism’s most influential doctrinal and theological thinkers. These writers all attempted to historicize the nature and progress of the great apostasy. Largely as a result of their writings, LDS theories of apostasy were codified in the first decades of the twentieth century as part of an extremely fertile theological era of definition and

---

4. See the somewhat confusing book by Janne M. Sjödahl, *The Reign of Antichrist or The Great “Falling Away”* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1913); also George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjödahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Philip C. Reynolds (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955–61), 1:113–33; 3:376–82.

reconciliation with secular learning, described by Leonard J. Arrington as “the stage of creative adaptation.”<sup>5</sup> These three scholars and church authorities of the second generation of Mormonism were most responsible for systematizing LDS theology. All wrote widely and perceptively on many of the doctrinal issues of the day.<sup>6</sup> While Smith and Roberts disagreed fiercely about evolution and other issues, Talmage often staked out something of a middle ground between them. In marked contrast, their historical theologies were virtually identical, particularly in how these men understood the place of the Middle Ages and Renaissance in the apostasy and the relation-

---

5. Leonard J. Arrington, “The Intellectual Tradition of Mormon Utah,” *Proceedings of the Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 45, pt. 2 (1968): 358. See Thomas G. Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology,” *Sunstone*, July–August 1980, 28–32; and Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 272–306.

6. In their number must be included John A. Widtsoe, another influential theologian-apostle (see Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine,” 28). However, because he wrote little about the apostasy, I do not discuss him in this article. Most scholars emphasize the importance of the triumvirate of Roberts, Talmage, and Widtsoe in the development and definition of Latter-day Saint doctrines at the turn of the century but ignore Smith’s importance. Perhaps this is because of his conservative rather than progressive doctrinal positions, or because of his opposition to the other three scholars over key theological issues. Arrington, in “Intellectual Tradition of Mormon Utah,” 358–62, reports a survey of “some fifty prominent L.D.S. intellectuals” who ranked Roberts first, Talmage fifth, and Widtsoe sixth among the most influential Latter-day Saint intellectuals. Smith does not appear on the list of twelve.

ship of those periods to the restoration.<sup>7</sup> The church leadership and membership alike generally embraced the “priestly narratives” of Roberts, Talmage, and Smith as authoritative in their day; unquestionably, those works have provided the foundation for all subsequent discussions of the apostasy.<sup>8</sup> In many ways, this trio’s conceptualizations still inform how Latter-day Saints think about the apostasy.

### **The Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Latter-day Saint Writings on the Apostasy**

The first comprehensive treatment of the apostasy was that of B. H. Roberts, whom philosopher Sterling M. McMurrin has called “the intellectual leader of the Mormon people in the era of Mormonism’s finest intellectual attainment.”<sup>9</sup> In his *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, first published in 1893 as a Seventies

---

7. On the evolution dispute among Roberts, Talmage, and Smith, see Richard Sherlock, “‘We Can See No Advantage to a Continuation of the Discussion’: The Roberts/Smith/Talmage Affair,” *Dialogue* 13 (1980): 63–78; D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1997), 64; and Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 286–88.

8. The quotation is from Shipps, *Mormonism*, 2.

9. Sterling M. McMurrin, “B. H. Roberts: Historian and Theologian,” foreword to B. H. Roberts, *The Autobiography of B. H. Roberts*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1990), viii. See Robert H. Malan, *B. H. Roberts, a Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966); Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980); and Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 686–88. For a critique of Roberts as a historian, see Davis Bitton, “B. H. Roberts as Historian,” *Dialogue* 3/4 (1968): 25–44; for a less critical recent assessment, see Ronald W. Walker, David J. Whitaker, and James B. Allen, *Mormon History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 34–37.

quorum manual, with five subsequent editions following over the next thirty years, Roberts developed a wide-ranging and all-encompassing view of the apostasy. He restated and amplified his ideas—though not substantially altering them—in a 1929 series of radio lectures published as *The Falling Away*.<sup>10</sup> Reflecting the view common since Joseph Smith’s time, Roberts saw the apostasy primarily as the loss of priesthood authority—that is, the loss of divine sanction to act in the name of God in conducting such saving ordinances as sacrament, baptism, and temple sealings—and the end of continuing revelation. In these foundational works, however, Roberts attempted to historicize the theology of apostasy. He focused particularly on historical and doctrinal developments in late antiquity, changes in ordinances, the infiltration of pagan philosophies, the rise of the Mass, and variations from the original organization of Christ’s church. For Roberts, the first three Christian centuries were the key period in the great apostasy. By the time of Constantine, the church that Christ had organized had ceased to exist. Roberts’s ideas and approach, more than those of any other Latter-day Saint

---

10. See B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History: A Text Book* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons Co., 1893). I quote only from the first edition. See also his series of radio lectures published as *The “Falling Away,” or The World’s Loss of the Christian Religion and Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1931). Roberts also gave a brief overview of the apostasy in his introduction to *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Period 1* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902), 1:xliv–xcvi. *Outlines* has generally received less attention than Roberts’s subsequent works, but he had a very high opinion of them (see *Autobiography of B. H. Roberts*, 220–21, 229). Davis Bitton, in “B. H. Roberts as Historian,” classifies *Outlines* and *The “Falling Away”* not as history but as “works of polemic,” “highly tendentious,” and “historically naïve” (26).

scholar, effectively set the parameters and pattern for all subsequent discussions of the apostasy; indeed, his oeuvre provided the basic outlines of "a Mormon theology of history, nearly Augustinian in its vision."<sup>11</sup>

While Roberts's chief emphasis was on the first Christian centuries, he treated the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as important transitional moments in the lockstep evolution from apostasy to Reformation to restoration. In his discussion, Roberts concentrates on what he considered to be evidence of both the omnipotence and the depravity of the papacy as well as on the "state of morals" within the church.<sup>12</sup> Roberts also identifies a number of medieval events that he sees as preparing the ground for the all-important Reformation. He traces "the progress of popular liberty" to the rise of a "commercial class" around AD 1200 that financed the crusading movement in return for grants of "political privileges" from cash-strapped monarchs. This development, according to Roberts, led to the breakdown of the "Feudal Land Tenure System" and the ultimate weakening of the ecclesiastical stranglehold on European society. Despite these seemingly positive developments, however, Roberts's Middle Ages are painted overwhelmingly in murky, monochromatic tones. These are the Dark Ages, a backward bookmark between New Testament Christianity and the beginnings of its revival with Martin Luther. This period was, in his words, an "age of darkness," the "midnight period of our world." He exclaims: "A period of fifteen hundred years! In which a famine for the word of God existed; a period when men wandered from sea to sea, and ran to and fro to

---

11. Bitton, "B. H. Roberts as Historian," 42. See McMurrin, "B. H. Roberts: Historian and Theologian," xiii.

12. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, 210; also Roberts, *The Falling Away*, 90–128.



seek the word of the Lord, and found it not. How pitiful the picture of it!”<sup>13</sup>

In Roberts’s theological chronology, this fifteen-hundred-year “Age of Darkness” was not only spiritual but also intellectual, blighting all aspects of European life: “The intellectual stupor of Europe had been as profound as spiritual darkness had been dense.” Into this spiritual and intellectual obscurity, however, a ray of light began to break through with the “Revival of Learning” in the latter part of the fifteenth century, which set the stage for Luther’s theses and eventually Joseph Smith’s vision. Roberts points to a number of significant innovations in this period of awakening: the invention of gunpowder, the compass, paper, and printing; the discovery of the Cape route to India and Columbus’s discovery of the Americas; innovations in art; and “a greater knowledge of antiquity” spread by Greek refugees fleeing the fall of Constantinople after 1453.<sup>14</sup> These are the key elements in Roberts’s binary view of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Although Roberts effectively set the parameters of what came to be the view of the apostasy most widely held in the Latter-day Saint community, the most recognizable and noted work on the topic is not his but rather Talmage’s slender volume *The Great Apostasy*,<sup>15</sup> written in 1909, before his call as an apostle. Though in many ways quite derivative of Roberts’s earlier *Outlines*, Talmage’s book, intended “for use in the

13. Roberts, *The Falling Away*, 142, 145; see Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, 231–32. Roberts borrows this picture of benighted wanderers from Amos 8:11–12.

14. See Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, 229–30; and his *Falling Away*, 146–47.

15. James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy Considered in the Light of Scriptural and Secular History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909).

Mutual Improvement Associations,”<sup>16</sup> is still in circulation and is regularly referenced today. Indeed, it often appears on approved reading lists for Latter-day Saint missionaries.<sup>17</sup> Like Roberts, Talmage emphasizes the nexus of apostasy and loss of priesthood authority; he devotes the bulk of his historical exegesis to the initial stages of apostasy in the early Christian church, emphasizing both external and internal causes. In his final chapter, “Results of the Apostasy—Its Sequel,” however, he briefly surveys medieval oppositions to the church in Rome as a bridge to a discussion of the Reformation. When Talmage describes revolts against the “tyranny . . . [of] the thoroughly apostate and utterly corrupt . . . Church of Rome,” he uses language reminiscent of Roberts’s in describing the Middle Ages:

The awakening of intellectual activity . . . began in the latter part of the fourteenth century. The period from the tenth century onward to the time of the awakening has come to be known as the dark ages—characterized by stagnation in the progress of the useful arts and sciences as well as of fine arts and letters, and by a general condition of illiteracy and ignorance among the masses.

This era of darkness was enlightened by “the revival of learning,” which opened “the struggle for freedom from churchly tyranny.”<sup>18</sup>

---

16. John R. Talmage, *The Talmage Story: Life of James E. Talmage—Educator, Scientist, Apostle* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1972), 171. See Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 703–5.

17. For an example of Talmage’s reliance on prior authorities and the Victorian tendency to “borrow profusely” without attribution from the work of other scholars, see Malcolm R. Thorp, “James E. Talmage and the Tradition of Victorian Lives of Jesus,” *Sunstone*, January 1988, 8–13. For a synopsis of Talmage’s key arguments regarding the apostasy, see Compton, “Apostasy,” 1:57–58.

18. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy*, 150.

In his widely respected *Jesus the Christ* of 1915, Talmage makes even more explicit the relationship of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance:

Under the tyrannous repression . . . [of] the Roman church, civilization was retarded and for centuries was practically halted in its course. The period of retrogression is known in history as the Dark Ages. The fifteenth century witnessed the movement known as the Renaissance or Revival of Learning; there was a general and significantly rapid awakening among men, and a determined effort to shake off the stupor of indolence and ignorance was manifest throughout the civilized world. . . . [I]t was a development predetermined in the Mind of God to illumine the benighted minds of men in preparation for the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

The lockstep linkage of the three Rs—Renaissance, Reformation, and Restoration—at the center of Roberts’s depiction of the great apostasy is abundantly evident in Talmage’s writings.

The influential writings of Roberts and Talmage culminated in the work of Joseph Fielding Smith, the third prominent Latter-day Saint theologian of the apostasy in the early twentieth century. Smith was a son of President Joseph F. Smith and a grandson of Hyrum Smith; he was ordained an apostle in 1910 at age thirty-three and was ordained and set apart as the tenth president of the church in 1970 at age ninety-three. Called a “soldier of truth” by his biographer grandson,<sup>20</sup> Smith was also one of the most important doctrinal thinkers

---

19. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1915), 749.

20. Joseph Fielding McConkie, “Joseph Fielding Smith,” in *The Presidents of the Church*, ed. Leonard J. Arrington (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 321.

and probably the most influential conservative force of Mormonism’s second century. He published more books and articles than any other Latter-day Saint president,<sup>21</sup> and President Heber J. Grant considered him “the best posted man on the scriptures of the General Authorities.”<sup>22</sup>

Smith’s views on the apostasy first appeared in his 1922 publication *Essentials in Church History*. His introduction includes a brief overview of the “falling away,” which serves simply to set the stage for the real focus of his treatise: the restoration of all things by Joseph Smith and the subsequent history of the church he founded.<sup>23</sup> A decade later, Smith published a much more extensive study on the apostasy in *The Progress of Man* (1936). This rich treatise was commissioned by the board of the Genealogical Society of Utah, which, because of the “grave conditions” of the day, “thought it would be timely to have a course of study giving a brief outline of man’s history on the earth.” Smith’s text was no ordinary universal history, however; it was “an outline history of man interpreted in the light of revelation. It tells of . . . [the] everlasting conflict between good and evil, light and darkness, freedom and oppression, [and] . . . the final and destined triumph of truth.”<sup>24</sup> Smith’s striking litany of binary oppositions foreshadows his treatment of the medieval apostasy.

Smith devotes more attention than Roberts or Talmage do to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as they relate to

---

21. See Amelia S. McConkie and Mark L. McConkie, “Joseph Fielding Smith,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1354.

22. Quoted in McConkie, “Joseph Fielding Smith,” in *Presidents of the Church*, 329.

23. See Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1922), 6–21.

24. Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Progress of Man* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1936), 1, 4.

the Latter-day Saint understanding of the apostasy. In his discussion, he links the Renaissance's revival of learning to Europe's increasing encounters with Islam and the rest of the world through the Crusades, Mediterranean trade, and the travels of Marco Polo. Despite Smith's greater detail, however, he does not depart significantly from the path outlined by Roberts and Talmage. Like both of them, he finds divine technological intervention in the invention of the compass, paper, gunpowder, and printing, though in each case he goes into greater detail than the other writers do. The Middle Ages for Smith, as for Roberts and Talmage, are the "dark ages [which] commenced with the fall of Rome and continued during the greater part of the next thousand years." It was an era characterized by a "condition of mental and spiritual stupor and stupidity."<sup>25</sup>

As with his precursors, Smith also saw the "Springtime of the Renaissance" beginning to stir in the dark medieval winter. For him this thaw began in the twelfth century, when "the world was like a great giant who gradually began to stir from a long drunken stupor." The real awakening, he believed, occurred during the Renaissance of the fourteenth century—the age of Petrarch, Giotto, and Boccaccio. Smith even appropriates Roberts's language in describing this era as "The Revival of Learning." He departs from his predecessors in generally avoiding their often virulent anti-Catholic stance (especially characteristic of Roberts), and he also suggests that, despite what he perceived as the terrible darkness of the medieval era, "the Spirit of the Lord was working among the people," preparing the way for "the day in which the fulness of freedom

---

25. Smith, *Progress of Man*, 192, 194, 201–5, 211–15.

and religious liberty was to be ushered in.” This time of preparation, for Smith, was the Renaissance.<sup>26</sup>

Several key features of the Latter-day Saint view of the historical apostasy emerge from the writings of Roberts, Talmage, and Smith. All three emphasize that at its core the apostasy consisted of a loss of priesthood authority on the earth. All three devote most of their discussion to the early Christian centuries, which they see as the pivotal age of apostasy. In their often brief treatments of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, all three resort to the metaphor of light and dark. While their exact datings of the apostasy may vary slightly, in general the period from approximately AD 500 to 1500 is characterized as an undifferentiated mass and labeled the Dark Ages.<sup>27</sup> The Middle Ages, for these LDS observers, were an age of abject backwardness, of obscurity and apostasy. Roberts referred to this period as the “age of darkness,” the “midnight period of our world.” For Talmage, it was a “period of retrogression.”<sup>28</sup> Other contemporary Latter-day Saint authors embraced this language as well. Hugh B. Brown, in a 1941 discourse revealingly entitled

---

26. References for the foregoing discussion are found in Smith, *Progress of Man*, 197–98, 200, 206. Because of his long life, Joseph Fielding Smith’s views, while first expressed in *The Progress of Man* in 1936, reappeared over the next three decades in a number of the prolific author’s other writings, including *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1922), *Seek Ye Earnestly* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 315–31, and *Answers to Gospel Questions*, ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960), 3:170–84.

27. See Shipps, *Mormonism*, 2.

28. Roberts, *The Falling Away*, 145–46; Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, 229; and Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 749. For an earlier example of this widely shared view, see Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1874), 116.

“The Night of Darkness,” terms this period “the Dark Ages, a time which has been designated as the midnight of time, . . . in which not only the artificial lamps of men burned low, but also the celestial lights of God’s inspiration were extinguished.”<sup>29</sup>

The darkness of the era was twofold in Latter-day Saint apostasy literature. On the one hand, there was the spiritual darkness of apostasy created by the absence of direct revelation and priesthood authority. The roots of this view can be traced back to Joseph Smith’s accounts of his first vision, in which the spiritual darkness of his day was due to absent priesthood authority but was penetrated by the light of God and Christ breaking through to him in his moment of despair.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, there is the innovation of Roberts, Talmage, and Smith that expands this metaphor of darkness beyond the purely spiritual realm. In their depictions, not only were the Dark Ages spiritually benighted, but the backwardness and degeneration of the spirit were accompanied by an absolute decline in Western civilization. For Talmage, “the dark ages . . . [were] characterized by stagnation in the progress of the useful arts and sciences as well as of fine arts and letters, and by a general condition of illiteracy and ignorance among the masses.”<sup>31</sup> In “this period of retrogression” in Europe, “civilization was retarded and for centuries was practically halted in its course.”<sup>32</sup> For Smith, it was an age characterized by intellectual and spiritual “stupor and stupidity.”<sup>33</sup>

---

29. Hugh B. Brown, *Continuing the Quest* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1961), 385–86.

30. See Shipps, *Mormonism*, 2–3.

31. Talmage, *Great Apostasy*, 150.

32. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 749.

33. Smith, *Progress of Man*, 194.

In contrast to the dark of the Middle Ages, these Latter-day Saint writers emphasize the light of the period immediately preceding the Reformation, the Renaissance, which is a privileged age in this holy history. For Talmage, the intellectual revival of the late fourteenth century was part of a general trend of rebellion against tyrannical ecclesiastical power. This "rapid awakening among men, and a determined effort to shake off the stupor of indolence and ignorance" was predetermined by God "to illumine the benighted minds of men in preparation for the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>34</sup> For Roberts, "the intellectual stupor of Europe had been as profound as spiritual darkness had been dense. But with the close of the fifteenth century, literature, science and art seemed to spring into active life."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Smith writes of the Renaissance that "the Lord never intended that man should be kept in ignorance [as existed in the Middle Ages]. The time had to come when the minds of men were to be freed from the chains that enslaved them."<sup>36</sup>

In sum, the historical narrative of the great apostasy generated by these Latter-day Saint thinkers during the pregnant doctrinal and intellectual atmosphere of the early twentieth century emphasized a generalized view of the period from AD 500 to 1500 as a time of spiritual and intellectual darkness in

---

34. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 749; and Talmage, *Great Apostasy*, 150.

35. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, 229; and Roberts, *Falling Away*, 146.

36. Smith, *Progress of Man*, 197. Hugh B. Brown recycled this language of convergence and Roberts's line of argument almost word for word in a 1941 address (see Hugh B. Brown, "Divine Prophecy and World Events," *Deseret News*, Church Section, 5 April 1941, quoted in Brown, *Continuing the Quest*, 385–86, 389–90.



which all revelation and, indeed, progress of any sort disappeared. About 1500, the revolutionary changes associated with the Renaissance opened heaven's door a crack and allowed a beam of light to penetrate the gloom, thus setting the stage for the Reformation, which in turn blazed the trail for the restoration of all things by Joseph Smith. What I hope to show in the remainder of this paper is that the generally monochromatic discussion presented in LDS historical surveys of the medieval bridge between the great apostasy and the restoration is firmly planted in historical assumption of the nineteenth century and earlier. These ideas, while embraced in their day by many, perhaps even most, scholars, have largely been superseded by the scholarship of subsequent generations.

### **The Sources of Latter-day Saint Apostasy Literature**

An examination of the citations of these three influential Latter-day Saint writers shows clearly that they relied chiefly on two types of sources in crafting their viewpoints: the highly polemical, popular, confessional, historical literature of the nineteenth century and the anticlerical literature of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. While these authors often did not cite their sources, as was common in their day,<sup>37</sup> still a survey of their references is revealing. Roberts seems to have roamed most widely with his research, relying on a range of Protestant, Catholic, and Enlightenment authors.<sup>38</sup> His chief historical source was the Protestant theologian and historian Johann Lorenz

---

37. On the prevalence of this practice and the different definition of plagiarism in this period, see Thorp, "James E. Talmage and the Tradition of Victorian Lives of Jesus," 11. On modern citation practices, see Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

38. Because Roberts's books were preserved in the B. H. Roberts Memorial Library, part of the historical archives of the Church of

von Mosheim, especially his *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern*. Roberts supplemented Mosheim with other important Protestant histories, as well as several Catholic sources, though these were used to support his ultimately anti-Catholic position. As Richard L. Bushman has rightly observed, Talmage's and Roberts's ideas were conceived "with the liberal assistance of Protestant scholars who were equally committed to belief in the apostasy of the Roman Church." He adds, "It would be interesting to know if . . . [they] have added anything to the findings of Protestant scholars."<sup>39</sup> Latter-day Saint apostasy literature also owed a great debt to the anti-Catholic polemics that dominated turn-of-the-century historical writing in Protestant America.<sup>40</sup>

Roberts, as well as Talmage and Smith, was influenced by Enlightenment and Romantic historians and trends. Latter-day Saint theologians, like many Romantic writers, tended to view history as drama, "the unfolding of a vast Providential plan," and generally shared the Romantic belief that a historian's task was "to arrange apparently disconnected events in their proper order."<sup>41</sup> Influential in a different way were the great Enlight-

---

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is possible to get some sense of the range of his readings. For an illustrative selection of Roberts's library holdings, see John W. Welch, ed., *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, 2nd. ed. (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1996), 743–52.

39. Bushman, "Faithful History," 18–19. See Compton, "Apostasy," 1:57.

40. See Edward Muir, "The Italian Renaissance in America," *American Historical Review* 100 (October 1995): 1098.

41. David Levin, *History as Romantic Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959), 8–26, quoted in Bitton, "B. H. Roberts as Historian," 43. See J. B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 11.

enment histories, in which it was common to see “nothing but barbarism, ignorance, superstition, violence, irrationality, and priestly tyranny” from the fall of Rome to the Renaissance, which those writers viewed as the birth of the rational, secular, modern era—that is, their own day. The Middle Ages, for them, provided the perfect irrational foil for their own, enlightened age. This *philosophe* history of progress posited the “dark centuries” of the Middle Ages as the gloomy backdrop against which the first stirring of modern progress, the light of Renaissance Italy, burst forth.<sup>42</sup> Or as Voltaire, in his *Essay on Universal History* famously described it, the Italians “began to shake off the barbarous rust, with which Europe had been covered since the decline of the Roman Empire.”<sup>43</sup>

---

42. See Karl H. Dannenfeldt, ed., *The Renaissance: Basic Interpretations*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1974), vii–viii. For a discussion of Enlightenment historical thought and the place it assigned the Middle Ages and Renaissance, see Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), 78–112; also Paul F. Grendler, “The Renaissance in Historical Thought,” in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, ed. Paul F. Grendler (New York: Scribner’s, 1999), 5:260–61.

43. Voltaire, *An Essay on Universal History and on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*, quoted in Denys Hay, *The Renaissance Debate* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1965), 13. See Bullen, *Myth of the Renaissance*, 17–26. These anti-medieval, and often anti-Catholic, polemics were rooted in the thought of Italian humanist scholars intent on privileging their age by denigrating their medieval predecessors. On this topic, see Theodor E. Mommsen, “Petrarch’s Conception of the ‘Dark Ages,’” *Speculum* 17 (summer 1942): 226–42; Franco Simone, “La coscienza della rinascita negli umanisti,” *La Rinascita* 2/10 (1939): 838–71, continued in vol. 3/11 (1940): 163–86; Paul Lehmann, “Mittelalter und Küchenlatein,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 137/2 (1928): 197–213; Grendler, “Renaissance in

While the sources they cited tended toward outdated religious and philosophical works of a polemical nature, Roberts, Talmage, and Smith also relied to a degree on more recent general works, particularly those of a historical nature, to flesh out their understanding of the historical continuum of the apostasy. These included popular histories such as François Guizot's *History of Civilization in Europe* (1828) and general textbooks such as John J. Anderson's *A Manual of General History: Being an Outline History of the World from the Creation to the Present Time* and P. V. N. Myers' *Mediaeval and Modern History*, and *General History for Colleges and High Schools*. Treating the relationship between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as an evolution from dark to light, so characteristic of Latter-day Saint apostasy literature, is evident in these texts. Anderson, for example, wrote: "The epoch at which Modern History commences is the dawn of intelligence that broke upon Europe in the latter part of the 15th [*sic*] century. . . . [T]he West, emerging from the night of mediaeval ignorance, began to glow with the first beams of an intellectual and social illumination."<sup>44</sup>

Roberts, Talmage, and Smith were apparently quite unaware of the burgeoning professional historical literature of their age, and indeed it would be unfair and unrealistic to expect them as generalists and nonprofessional historians to have been up-to-date on the latest historiographical developments of the day. However, elements of their thought suggest clearly that they were indirectly influenced by the work of one of the great nineteenth-century historians, Jacob Burckhardt, and by the less innovative

---

Historical Thought," 259–60; and Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, 1–28.

44. John J. Anderson, *A Manual of General History: Being an Outline History of the World from the Creation to the Present Time* (New York: Clark & Maynard, 1874), 231.

though widely influential English scholar John Addington Symonds. This link may seem at first glance rather tenuous: none of the authors makes direct reference to Burckhardt, and only Smith explicitly cites Symonds.<sup>45</sup> All three, however, appropriate directly both the concept and wording of the title of the second volume of Symonds's *Renaissance in Italy*, "The Revival of Learning," in their histories.<sup>46</sup> Yet it seems clear that Burckhardt's seminal vision of the Renaissance permeated the views of these three Latter-day Saint thinkers. Some evidence of this can be found in the sources that these authors relied upon, but their reliance on Burckhardt is even more evident in their way of conceptualizing the medieval and Renaissance periods in relationship to the "great apostasy."

An examination of the ideas of Burckhardt and Symonds clearly reveals Latter-day Saint apostasy literature's debt to their work. Burckhardt was one of the most respected and influential historians of the nineteenth century, and his great 1860 masterpiece, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, was one of the most important historical monographs of that century.<sup>47</sup> With this work Burckhardt made his name. More

---

45. Smith, *Progress of Man*, 197.

46. John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy* (New York: Modern Library, 1935), 1:327. "The Revival of Learning" is the title of a section in Roberts's *Outlines* and in his *Falling Away*, as well as in Talmage's *Great Apostasy*. Smith, in his *Progress of Man*, composed an entire chapter under the same title.

47. Initially published in 1860 as *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien*, Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* was first translated into English by S. G. C. Middlemore in 1878. I use the 1954 Modern Library edition of Middlemore's translation, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York: Modern Library, 1954). On Burckhardt and the intellectual milieu of his time, see

importantly, he created a widely influential paradigm that must be dealt with by students of the Renaissance to this day. As Karl Brandi wrote, "Our conception of the Renaissance is Jacob Burckhardt's creation."<sup>48</sup> *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* is a varied and rich work that has often suffered from overly reductive treatments, so a summary of its ideas is challenging. At its core, however, is a simple question, Whence modernity? Burckhardt felt compelled to find the roots of modernity, and in his greatest work he argued that he had traced them back to Renaissance Italy: "The Italian Renaissance must be called the leader of modern ages."<sup>49</sup>

To make his case for a dramatically changed Renaissance world, Burckhardt had to contrast it clearly with the Middle Ages. Thus he resorted to a language and metaphor that should ring familiar to readers of Latter-day Saint apostasy literature: "In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness . . . lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil

---

Lionel Gossman's important *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 201–95; Grendler "Renaissance in Historical Thought," 261–62; Peter G. Bietenholz, "Jakob Burckhardt," in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, 5:288–91; and Hans Baron, "Burckhardt's 'Civilization of the Renaissance' a Century after Its Publication," *Renaissance News* 13 (fall 1960): 207–22.

48. Walter Goetz, ed., *Propyläen Weltgeschichte* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1931), 1:157, also quoted in Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, 179. As evidence of the continuing influence of Burckhardt's paradigm, see the recent lively forum discussion on the status of the Renaissance idea: *American Historical Review* 103 (February 1998): 51–124.

49. Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 416. See Felix Gilbert, *History: Politics or Culture?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 61–62.

was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession.” This was true for all of Europe except in Italy, where “this veil first melted into air.” Italian Renaissance culture freed itself “from the fantastic bonds of the Middle Ages” and witnessed the discovery of the individual.<sup>50</sup> The era was marked by a spirit of self-discovery, a recognition of human worth, and especially a dynamic outpouring of artistic activity by individualist geniuses, all of which emphasized the profound changes of nascent modernity and marked a sharp break with the past. In short, for Burckhardt the Renaissance represented the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern world.

Burckhardt’s *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* made such a powerful, paradigmatic statement that few posited any competing interpretations. Instead, most scholars devoted themselves to supplementing and fleshing out elements of the master’s vision.<sup>51</sup> For English-speaking readers, one voice rose above the others, that of John Addington Symonds, an English gentleman scholar and poet whose multivolume *Renaissance in Italy* (1875–86) developed a similarly broad and engaging portrait of the age. Symonds’s vision of the Renaissance was not as conceptually sophisticated as Burckhardt’s; indeed, he openly acknowledged his debt to the Swiss historian. However, while Burckhardt’s reputation grew slowly in the English-speaking world, Symonds’s “embarrassingly exuberant,”<sup>52</sup> if accessible, prose was much more widely read, and it was ultimately through him “that the Burckhardtian Renaissance

---

50. Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 100, 132.

51. See Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, 290.

52. Anthony Molho, “The Italian Renaissance: Made in the USA,” in *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 265.

came to life in the minds of generations of students."<sup>53</sup> And it was Symonds's exaggerated emphasis on the light/dark metaphor to characterize the medieval/Renaissance dichotomy that came to permeate late-nineteenth-century views in the English-speaking world.

While Symonds was certainly a fine literary stylist, as a historian he was often derivative and tended toward exaggeration, hyperbole, and high drama.<sup>54</sup> In contrast to Burckhardt's more subdued and careful tone, Symonds characterized the Renaissance as "the most marvellous period that the world has ever known."<sup>55</sup> In his view, art, innovation, and knowledge all "had long lain neglected on the shores of the Dead Sea which we call the Middle Ages." In contrast to this bleak medieval landscape,

---

53. Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, 204–5. See J. R. Hale, *England and the Italian Renaissance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 169–96; Philip Lee Ralph, *The Renaissance in Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's, 1973), 4–6; Bullen, *Myth of the Renaissance*, 15–16, 251–55; Grendler, "The Renaissance in Historical Thought," 5:262; and Paul F. Grendler, "John Addington Symonds," in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, 5:292–93.

54. See Molho, "The Italian Renaissance: Made in the USA," 265; and Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, 204. The nuances of Burckhardt's view are evident in his defense of the Middle Ages from overzealous "enemies." He writes that one can "misjudge the Middle Ages, to be sure, but in the long run one could not despise the period. . . . [O]ur existence had its roots in it, even though modern culture was derived predominantly from antiquity. . . . The Middle Ages were the youth of today's world, and a long youth" (Jacob Burckhardt, *Judgments on History and Historians*, trans. Harry Zohn (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 25, 32; see 26–27, 61–62).

55. J. A. Symonds, *The Renaissance: An Essay read in the Theatre, Oxford, June 17, 1863* (Oxford: Hammans, 1863), 8–9, cited in Bullen, *Myth of the Renaissance*, 252.



the Renaissance brought “the emancipation of the reason for the modern world, and . . . shattered and destroyed . . . the thick veil . . . between the mind of man and the outer world, and flash[ed] the light of reality upon the darkened places of his own nature.”<sup>56</sup> This passage suggests both the similarity of Symonds’s interpretation to Burckhardt’s and his expansion and exaggeration of it. In contrast to Burckhardt’s ultimately negative view of his age,<sup>57</sup> Symonds sketched a historical trajectory that celebrated the triumphant march of progress, connecting the Renaissance to the Reformation and eventually to the English Revolution, all three acts in the “drama of liberty” so dear to the liberal, Protestant historiographical tradition of the nineteenth century.<sup>58</sup> In this drama, the Middle Ages were a time of intellectual backwardness and darkness, a world in which the individual was limited by the corporate tethers of community, guild, family, and especially church. The Renaissance that began in Italy flashed brilliant illumination into this dark, medieval world, waking (and creating) the independent, freethinking, modern individual.

### **The Apostasy in Recent Latter-day Saint Literature**

This nineteenth-century view expressed most influentially by Burckhardt and Symonds, but shared and expanded by many others, should seem very familiar. In the Latter-day Saint apostasy literature, the treatment of this transitional era is clearly

---

56. Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy*, 1:4–5, 9.

57. See Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt*, 226–49; and Peter Gay, *Style in History* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 144–49.

58. See Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy*, 5–6; and Philip Benedict, “Between Whig Traditions and New Histories: American Historical Writing about Reformation and Early Modern Europe,” in Molho and Wood, *Imagined Histories*, 299.

shaped by these views, which were generally widely accepted in nineteenth-century historiography. As Anthony Molho has persuasively demonstrated, American historians and the public in general from the late nineteenth through much of the twentieth century were fascinated by the Italian Renaissance. Americans saw their new land as the culmination of the historical process, the epitome of modernity. Thus they enthusiastically embraced Burckhardt’s genealogy that traced the roots of the modern world—their roots—to the city-states of Renaissance Italy.<sup>59</sup> That Latter-day Saint authorities like Roberts, Talmage, and Smith should embrace this vision, then, is not at all surprising; their vision of the Middle Ages and Renaissance was in many ways entirely harmonious with the prevailing view of the contemporary historical community.

What is revealing is that, while scholars of the past century have increasingly distanced themselves from this Burckhardtian paradigm, Latter-day Saint treatments of the apostasy since the time of Roberts, Talmage, and Smith have retained much of their binary vision of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The persistence of this view is most evident in the writings of Bruce R. McConkie, perhaps the best-known and most influential LDS doctrinal commentator of the last half of the twentieth century.<sup>60</sup> McConkie’s rich and varied ideas span

---

59. See Anthony Molho, “Italian History in American Universities,” in *Italia e Stati Uniti concordanze e dissonanze* (Rome: Il Veltro, 1981), 205–8; Molho, “American Historians and the Italian Renaissance: An Overview,” *Schifanoia* 8 (1990): 15–16; and Molho, “The Italian Renaissance: Made in the USA,” 263–94. See also Hajo Holborn, “Introduction,” in Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, v–vi.

60. McConkie, a son-in-law of Joseph Fielding Smith, often cited Smith’s works, including *The Progress of Man*, in developing his own

a wide body of work. He initially developed his views on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in relation to the apostasy in the first edition (1958) of his ambitious and authoritative *Mormon Doctrine*,<sup>61</sup> but his most detailed exposition on the apostasy appears in his final work, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (1985). In the context of a discussion of the eleventh article of faith, McConkie addresses the rise of religious freedom, the apostasy, and the Middle Ages as a critical prelude to the Reformation and the restoration in ultimately familiar terms. For him, the period from Constantine until 1500 was “The Black Millennium,” in which “the world lay in darkness.”

It was a black and abysmal night; the stench of spiritual death poisoned the nostrils of men; and the jaws of hell gaped wide open to welcome the sensual sinners who loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. In our more enlightened day, it is difficult to conceive of the depths to which government and religion and morality, both private and public, sank in what men universally describe as the dark ages. . . .

[This was] such a decadent age that man, made in the image of God, was more like an animal than a divine being. Morality, culture, literacy, learning in general, even theological inquiry—all these were at a low ebb.<sup>62</sup>

---

views on the apostasy. He also regularly cited *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), a collection of Smith’s sermons and writings that McConkie himself compiled. See Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 166, 646–47.

61. See especially McConkie’s entries on “Apostasy,” “Church of the Devil,” “Dark Ages,” and “Signs of the Times” in his *Mormon Doctrine*, 40–44, 129–31, 165–66, 645–48.

62. McConkie, *New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 669–70.

In contrast to this gloomy medieval world is the Renaissance, “A Day of Awakening”:

The Black Millennium must end. A few hundred years thereafter, the gospel is to be restored. . . . Let the earth spin and the darkness pass, and a few rays of light will soon dawn in the eastern sky. . . . Then during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the first part of the sixteenth, there came an awakening. It began in Italy, where the darkness was deepest, . . . and resulted in “achieving freedom from the intellectual bondage to which the individual man had been subjected by the theology and hierarchy of the Church. . . . The Renaissance insisted upon the rights of the life that now is, and dignified the total sphere for which man’s intellect and his aesthetic and social tastes by nature fit him.”<sup>63</sup>

Clearly, the vision of Roberts, Talmage, and Smith, but also of the nineteenth-century scholars, has survived intact. The Middle Ages are still the Dark Ages, their inflated span lasting from AD 500 to 1500. The spiritual retardation of this age is still accompanied by material and intellectual backwardness. And the Renaissance is still privileged as the turning point in this history, the staging ground for the Reformation and restoration. McConkie is not unique among Latter-day Saint writers and authorities in his continued embrace of this dichotomous view; indeed, even today many within the broader Latter-day

---

63. McConkie, *New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 670–71. McConkie is quoting in part from David S. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 5, pt. 2, *The Middle Ages from Boniface VIII., 1294, to the Protestant Reformation, 1517* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), 559–60. Schaff, 555–60, cites Burckhardt and recommends him (and Symonds) as an important authority on the Renaissance. McConkie’s reliance on Schaff, then, provides a direct connection in 1985 to Burckhardt’s 1860 masterpiece.

Saint community probably still accept the image that Roberts, Talmage, and Smith created almost a century ago.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Twentieth-Century Historiography**

Although the nineteenth-century view seems to have been remarkably durable in the LDS historical vision of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, it has been abandoned by the broader historical community as a problematic paradigm. The suggestive formulae of Burckhardt and his followers set the parameters for a fruitful and energetic debate that emerged after 1900 over what many saw as his teleological, oversimplified, and binary depiction of history. Trying to summarize the very rich historical literatures about medieval and Renaissance Europe that have evolved in the past century would be impractical. Still, a discussion of several dominant trends may illuminate the chasm that has arisen between Latter-day Saint scholars of the apostasy and the work of the larger historical community.<sup>65</sup>

---

64. Most recently, see Arnold K. Garr, "Preparing for the Restoration," *Ensign*, June 1999, 34–45. See also Alvin R. Dyer, *Who Am I?* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 531–33; Alvin R. Dyer, *The Meaning of Truth*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 114–18; and Victor L. Ludlow, *Principles and Practices of the Restored Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 515. During the height of the cold war, Latter-day Saint leaders often emphasized the explicit link between apostasy in the Dark Ages, the Renaissance revival, the Reformation, and the eventual rise of the United States. See Mark E. Petersen, *The Great Prologue* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 1; and Ezra Taft Benson, *This Nation Shall Endure* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 142–43.

65. For a recent general overview of many of the themes and important figures of Renaissance historiography, see the excellent *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, especially Grendler, "The Renais-

In the Burckhardt/Symonds portrait, the Middle Ages do not appear in a particularly sympathetic light; consequently, medieval scholars were among the earliest to challenge the description of their age as "one long, dreary epoch of stagnation, of insecurity, of lawless violence."<sup>66</sup> This "revolt of the medievalists" became increasingly vocal after 1900 when medieval studies underwent a dramatic expansion that produced a significantly altered understanding of this period, leading one eminent medievalist to observe that "no book written about the European Middle Ages before 1895 or so is still worth reading except for curiosity's sake."<sup>67</sup> While perhaps a bit hyperbolic, this statement is revealing for what it suggests about Latter-day Saint reliance on views that the broader historical community now considers obsolete and dismissive of this important era. Where Latter-day Saint authors often emphasize the backwardness and darkness of this age, medievalists since 1900 "have sought to reveal and celebrate the ideas and institutions of the high Middle Ages."<sup>68</sup>

Not only have medieval scholars emphasized the complexity and diversity of medieval civilization, but they have also insisted on its direct relationship to the developments that Burckhardt situated in the Renaissance. Essentially, this medievalist response has argued for continuity over radical change, for evolution over revolution. Johan Huizinga elegantly stated

---

sance in *Historical Thought*," 5:259–68, and "Interpretations of the Renaissance," 5:286–305.

66. Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, 329 passim.

67. Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, 329; Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York: Quill, 1991), 44.

68. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages*, 27. See Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, 330.

this position in his 1919 Dutch classic, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*,<sup>69</sup> and it was also at the heart of Charles Homer Haskins's influential 1927 work, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*. Haskins argued that many of characteristics of the Renaissance—the revival of classical Latin literature, Greek science, and Greek philosophy—had medieval roots. He attacked the Burckhardtian paradigm head-on: “Do not the Middle Ages, that epoch of ignorance, stagnation, and gloom, stand in the sharpest contrast to the light and progress and freedom of the Italian Renaissance?” His response:

The continuity of history rejects such sharp and violent contrasts between successive periods. . . . [M]odern research shows us the Middle Ages less dark and less static, the Renaissance less bright and less sudden, than was once supposed. The Middle Ages exhibit life and color and change, much eager search after knowledge and beauty, much creative accomplishment in art, in literature, in institutions.<sup>70</sup>

Huizinga and Haskins led the frontal assault on the Renaissance, but others joined them, defending the Middle Ages by drawing explicit links to modern institutions. Frederic William Maitland, for example, traced English common law and the jury system of trials—institutions still in use in the United States and Great Britain—to the thirteenth century. Joseph Strayer emphasized the construction of rational, centralized governmental institutions and the rise of national identities during the medieval period. More recently, scholars have traced “a continuous rising stream of rationality from the military advances of feudal technology and the organization

---

69. First translated into English as Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London: E. Arnold and Co., 1924).

70. Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), v–vi.

of urban commerce in the tenth century, through the classical recovery and dialectical capacity of the twelfth century, to the culminating anticipations of the scientific revolution in the fourteenth century."<sup>71</sup>

The work of the medievalists in the first half of the twentieth century was primarily devoted to demonstrating the continuity and relevance between medieval and modern times. Since the sixties, this "highly overdetermined . . . discourse of continuity and progress" has been replaced by a rich and more particularized field that does not lend itself to easy categorization. Recent scholarship, influenced by postmodernist, anthropological, and feminist theories, has "demodernized" and "defamiliarized" the Middle Ages, emphasizing their fundamental alterity. To be sure, these new interpretations have not gone unchallenged, but as Norman Cantor has recently observed, "The one conclusion that everyone can agree to is the great complexity of high medieval culture, society, government, law, economy, and religion."<sup>72</sup>

This refashioning of the Middle Ages as "other" has been mirrored within the community of Renaissance scholars who have challenged the position posited by their intellectual forefather, Jacob Burckhardt. While his views still inform debates within the field, it is probably safe to say that during the past century scholars have effectively revised the majority of Burckhardt's most evocative hypotheses. Burckhardt is generally no longer read to understand the history of the Renaissance, but rather as an important figure in the historiography of the idea.

---

71. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages*, 369; see 66, 182, 251. See Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "In the Mirror's Eye: The Writing of Medieval History in America," in Molho and Wood, *Imagined Histories*, 243–47.

72. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages*, 27. See Spiegel, "In the Mirror's Eye," 247–51.



For example, in contrast to Burckhardt's vision of the progressive secularization of Italian society—and indeed its irreligiousness—scholars have emphasized the complex and profound religiosity of the Renaissance. With the medievalists, they have convincingly shown that Burckhardt's revival of antiquity, evidenced in humanist thought, had deep medieval roots and that so-called medieval philosophies persevered in popularity throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and beyond.<sup>73</sup> The Renaissance state, which Burckhardt characterized famously as “a work of art,” has been shown to have been a far cry from modern, centralized, rationalized, bureaucratic nation-states.<sup>74</sup> And finally, in the area of Burckhardt's most suggestive hypothesis—the rise of the individual—scholars have convincingly shown the importance of networks of relationships, patronage, and kin groups in the definition of self and in the construction of late medieval and early modern identities.<sup>75</sup>

---

73. Two scholars have been particularly influential in reworking Burckhardt's depiction of Renaissance humanism: Paul Oskar Kristeller and Charles Trinkaus. For a sense of Kristeller's work, see his *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic and Humanistic Strains* (New York: Harper, 1961). See also Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); and his *The Scope of Renaissance Humanism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1983).

74. On the Renaissance state see, among many important scholars, Giorgio Chittolini, *Formazione dello stato regionale e le istituzioni del contado* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979); and Chittolini, *Città, comunità e feudi negli stati dell'Italia centro-settentrionale (secoli XIV-XVI)* (Milan: Edizioni Unicopli 1996); also Julius Kirshner, ed., *The Origins of the State in Italy, 1300–1600* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

75. For example, see Jacques Heers, *Le clan familial au Moyen Age* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974); Francis W. Kent,

Where Burckhardt and subsequent generations of scholars sought to trace and link the Renaissance to the modern world, the most recent generation of Renaissance scholars, paralleling similar trends among medievalists, have generally abandoned the search for modernity in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy. Inspired by the work of anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas, they have sought to "defamiliarize . . . the Renaissance," emphasizing the alterity rather than the modernity of Renaissance Italy.<sup>76</sup> They describe the age as a "distant and alien reality," which must be penetrated and studied in much the same way as anthropologists studied the equally exotic Balinese or Berber cultures. The elaborate ritual life of the Renaissance, its criminality and violence, its witchcraft and superstitions are but a few of the areas of "alienness" or "pre-modernity" to which anthropologically inclined historians have turned their attention.<sup>77</sup> So complete, indeed, has been the refashioning of the Renaissance that the label itself has become a source of debate:

---

*Household and Lineage in Renaissance Florence: The Family Life of the Capponi, Ginori, and Rucellai* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Anthony Molho, *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); and Stanley Chojnacki, *Women and Men in Renaissance Venice: Twelve Essays on Patrician Society* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

76. Muir, "The Italian Renaissance in America," 1096. For a somewhat melancholy description of the waning of Renaissance studies, see William J. Bouwsma's 1978 presidential address to the American Historical Association, "Renaissance and the Drama of Western History."

77. Molho, "The Italian Renaissance: Made in the USA," 284. See also Anthony Molho, "Burckhardtian Legacies," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s., 17 (1991): 133–39; Molho, "American Historians and the Italian Renaissance," 18–20; and Molho, "Italian History in American Universities," 220.

increasingly, the less ideologically pregnant label “early modern” has come into favor.

The century since Burckhardt published *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* has seen a considerable change in the way the Renaissance is understood in its relationship to the Middle Ages. The Renaissance is no longer seen as the cradle of modernity, nor is it seen as separated by a chasm from the medieval world. Warren Hollister’s assessment seems a fitting epitaph:

A few generations ago the medieval centuries of European history were widely regarded as “The Dark Ages.” Western man was thought to have dropped into a deep slumber at the fall of the Western Roman Empire in A.D. 476, awakening at length, like Rip Van Winkle, in the bright dawn of the Italian Renaissance. . . . It was . . . a millennium of darkness—a thousand years without a bath.

Today this ungenerous point of view stands discredited, although it persists among the half-educated. Several generations of rigorous historical scholarship have demonstrated clearly that the medieval period was an epoch of immense vitality and profound creativity. The age that produced Thomas Aquinas and Dante, Notre Dame de Paris and Chartres, Parliament and the university, can hardly be described as “dark” or “barbaric.”<sup>78</sup>

---

78. C. Warren Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968), i. For a clever examination of the enduring misconceptions of the Middle Ages in modern culture, see Fred C. Robinson’s presidential address to the Medieval Academy of America, “Medieval, the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 59 (October 1984): 745–56; also Mommsen, “Petrarch’s Conception of the ‘Dark Ages,’” 226–42.

## Conclusions

What implications do these historiographical developments have for Latter-day Saint visions of the great apostasy, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance? It seems clear that Roberts’s views of Medieval darkness and Renaissance brilliance were formed in the bosom of nineteenth-century scholarship and religious polemics and that Talmage and Smith inherited his vision in large measure. Theirs is, as Davis Bitton has written, a “conception of history . . . of the past century.”<sup>79</sup> Though diverse opinion certainly persists among students of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, one would nonetheless be hard-pressed to find any historian who would argue that the Middle Ages were a period of political, technological, social, or cultural backwardness, or that the Renaissance was the moment that brought light back into a dark world. Yet curiously, this view has often persisted in LDS narratives of the “great apostasy.” Ideas clearly have remarkably long half-lives.

Despite the persistence of the turn-of-the-century paradigm of Roberts, Talmage, and Smith, recent years have seen the stirring of a more expansive and balanced view of the apostasy among some Latter-day Saint authorities and scholars. Though the familiar light/dark metaphor has not disappeared entirely, there have been some efforts to emphasize the spiritual nature of the apostasy without embedding it in an ahistorical picture of accompanying intellectual and moral decline. The Latter-day Saint apostle M. Russell Ballard, for example, has written that the darkness of the Middle Ages refers to the absence of “the light of the *fulness* of the gospel of Jesus Christ, including the authority of His holy priesthood,”

---

79. Bitton, “B. H. Roberts as Historian,” 43.

yet he also notes that good Christians lived during this time.<sup>80</sup> The apostle Dallin H. Oaks likewise affirmed that during the apostasy “men and women . . . kept the light of faith and learning alive” and that “we honor them as servants of God.”<sup>81</sup> Indeed, despite his affinity with the work of Roberts, Talmage, and Smith, McConkie too acknowledged that “many good and noble souls lived during the dark ages, . . . and they received guidance from th[e] Spirit.”<sup>82</sup>

While none of these recent entries can fairly be compared with the all-encompassing early historical narratives of apostasy, still they suggest perhaps the first stirrings of a change that may bridge the disjuncture between traditional Latter-day Saint and contemporary scholarly views of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. These and some other recent works are moving away from necessitating and justifying the restoration by depicting the apostasy as an age of complete degradation, moral stupor, and intellectual stagnancy. Instead, the apostasy is depicted simply as an age in which priesthood authority did not exist, a view that may be closer in some ways to the views of apostasy in Mormonism’s earliest days. By emphasizing the spiritual nature of the apostasy, Latter-day Saints may be able to acknowledge the historical complexity and richness of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance without challenging the need for God’s calling of Joseph Smith to effect a restoration of priesthood authority. In this new picture there is no disjunc-

---

80. M. Russell Ballard, *Our Search for Happiness: An Invitation to Understand the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 30–32.

81. Dallin H. Oaks, “Apostasy and Restoration,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 84–87.

82. McConkie, *New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 477. See also, Compton, “Apostasy,” 1:58.

ture between the accepted historical understanding of the age and Latter-day Saint ideas on apostasy. If justification for such a reevaluation is necessary, historical precedent and inspiration for further research into other vintage views of apostasy can perhaps be found in apostle John Taylor's 1873 statement:

I have a great many misgivings about the intelligence that men boast so much of in this enlightened day. There were men in those dark ages who could commune with God, and who, by the power of faith, could draw aside the curtain of eternity and gaze upon the invisible world[,] . . . have the ministering of angels, and unfold the future destinies of the world. If those were dark ages I pray God to give me a little darkness, and deliver me from the light and intelligence that prevail in our day.<sup>83</sup>

---

83. *Journal of Discourses* 16:197; see Compton, "Apostasy," 1:58.

This is an abbreviated version of an article that first appeared as "Inheriting the 'Great Apostasy': Medieval and Renaissance in Mormon Thought" in *Journal of Mormon History* 28 (Fall 2002): 23–59.