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The Concept of the Apostasy in the New Testament

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The Concept of Apostasy in the New Testament

James E. Faulconer

We frequently speak of the "great apostasy," and we recognize that apostasy was a concern for early Christianity. Less often do we ask what the writers of the New Testament meant by the term *apostasy*. I suspect that we seldom ask what *we* mean by the word. It is a term we take for granted, but being clear about how apostasy was understood in the early church would help us be clear about what we mean when we speak of the apostasy in the first and second centuries AD, and it might help us understand better what constitutes apostasy in our own times. I will implicitly argue that understanding its New Testament meaning is important for an additional reason: understanding how early Christians understood apostasy will give us a better understanding of what it means to be a Christian. We will understand better what was essential to the early church and, therefore, also to the restoration by asking ourselves, "From what do we fall away when we apostatize?"

The Greek word from which we get the English word *apostasy* (*apostasia;* ἀποστασία) means literally "to stand away"

or "to stand against," but those and "apostasy" are insufficiently nuanced translations. "Rebellion" is better.[1] The Book of Mormon seems also to think in these terms, as we see in 3 Nephi 6:18 ("they did wilfully rebel against God") and 4 Nephi 1:38 ("they who rejected the gospel . . . did wilfully rebel against the gospel of Christ"). We can understand apostasy in its widest sense as rebelling against God, and that meaning will be at the center of the following discussion of how early Christians understood apostasy: what characterizes rebellion against God?

Though we use the word *apostasy* regularly, the cognate Greek word *apostasia* occurs only twice in the New Testament, in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 and Acts 21:21. In the first of these, the King James Version translates *apostasia* as "falling away": Paul warns of a falling away that will come before the second coming. In the second, where the word is translated "forsake," James and the other elders in Jerusalem ask Paul to answer the charge that he teaches people to apostatize from the law of Moses. Nevertheless, though the Greek word we generally associate with apostasy is seldom used in the various texts of the New Testament, references to what we understand as apostasy are frequent. For example, in Mark 13:5, Jesus warns us not to be deceived (*planaō;* πλανάω) by false Christs; Romans 16:17 warns against those who would cause divisions (*dichostasia;*

1. "ἀποστασία," in Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and aug. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 98. See also Stephen Robinson's discussion of this in "Early Christianity and 1 Nephi 13–14," in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi: The Doctrinal Foundation,* ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 177–92.

διχοστασία) and offenses (*skandalon;* σκάνδαλον) in the church; Paul tells us that we must not be moved away (*metakineō;* μετακινέω) from the hope of the gospel (Colossians 1:23); and he also tells us that if we do not care for our own, then we deny (*arneomai;* ἀρνέομαι) the faith (1 Timothy 5:8); Hebrews 6:6 speaks of those who fall away (*parapiptō;* παραπίπτω) after receiving the Holy Ghost; while Hebrews 3:12 warns its readers against departing (*aphistēmi;* ἀφίστημι) from the living God.

To understand better the background against which New Testament writers were using these words, we will look all too briefly at the Septuagint, a translation of the Old Testament into Greek from the third century BC and later. We can assume that as a Bible commonly used by early Christians, the Septuagint gives us a good look at how pre-Christian Jews as well as those of the early Christian era understood the Old Testament. In the Septuagint, the two most commonly used words for apostasy are *planaō* (eighty-four uses) and *aphistēmi* (one hundred forty-eight uses). In contrast, *apostasia* is used only five times.[2] Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich give the meaning of *planaō* as "to mislead,"[3] but the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* argues that the word means specifically to instigate someone to idolatry.[4] *Aphistēmi* is used for both political rebellion (as

2. Two of these uses, Ezra 4:12 and 15, support the claim that the basic meaning of *apostasia* is "rebellion." In those two verses, the word is used to imply that the Jews who have returned to Jerusalem are in rebellion against Artaxerexes. See also 1 Maccabees 1:15, in the Apocrypha, which speaks of the rebellion of Mattathias and his followers as *apostasia.*

3. "πλανάω," in Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon,* 665.

4. "πλανάω, πλανάομαι, ἀποπλανάω, ἀποπλανάομαι, πλάνη, πλάνος, πλανήτης, πλάνης," in Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *New Testament Theological Dictionary,* trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 6:233.

in Genesis 14:4 and 2 Chronicles 21:8) and religious rebellion (as in Deuteronomy 32:15 and Daniel 9:9). Obviously these meanings are closely linked, since to worship an idol is to rebel against God by refusing to recognize him.

Considering this background, we can see that what we call apostasy covers a range of things, including leaving the faith because of persecution, creating division in the body of the church (the New Testament meaning of *heresy*), losing faith because one continues to sin in various ways, teaching false doctrine, blaspheming, and denying the Holy Ghost, all of which can be summed up in the phrase "turning against God" or "departing from God" as in Hebrews 3:12: "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from [*aphistēmi*] the living God." Turning against God is the central problem in each of these instances. It follows that to charge someone with apostasy is not to say that they have committed any particular sin. It is to say that person has rebelled against God in some way or another. Heresy and sin are ways in which one can apostatize, but they are not the same as apostasy.[5] This means that one can have or

5. In an important sense, all sin is turning one's back on God. It is no coincidence that the same Hebrew root מסל (*msl*, meaning "to be unfaithful") is translated in 2 Chronicles 12:2 as ἁμαρτάνειν (*hamartanein*, "to sin") and in 2 Chronicles 30:7 as *aphistēmi* ("to depart from the way"). But there is a difference between turning one's back on God through sin, which we have all done, and explicitly rejecting him. For a discussion of sin and turning away from God, see James E. Faulconer, *Romans 1: Notes and Reflections* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 88. For an excellent discussion of the New Testament understanding of sin and its Jewish context, see Jonathan Klawans, "Ritual and Moral Impurity in the New Testament," in *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 136–57.

sometimes even teach false beliefs without necessarily turning against Divinity. One can leave the church without apostatizing, as someone might do who has never had a testimony. One can lose one's faith without apostatizing, as happens to those whose faith is shallow and who do not receive sufficient spiritual nourishment.[6] Thus, in spite of the ways in which we can use the word *apostasy* to describe various things, strictly speaking neither heresy, leaving the church, nor losing one's faith are the same as apostasy—though it is impossible to apostatize without sinning since even if nothing else is involved, apostasy itself, rebellion against God, is a sin. In fact, one could say that rebellion is the fundamental sin. Perhaps the other things we think of as sins are best understood as *ways* of rebelling.

Given the Jewish context of early Christianity and their self-understanding as the fulfillment of Judaism rather than as an alternative to it—"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil" (Matthew 5:17)—we can expect early Christians to have understood both faithfulness and apostasy in terms that we find in the Old Testament, where faithfulness to God and apostasy from him are often spoken of in terms of covenant. To be faithful is to keep covenant; to apostatize is to break covenant.[7] The word *apostasia* is part of this way of thinking. For example, in Joshua 22:22 of the Septuagint, we see the word

6. See the parable of the sower: Matthew 13:3–23 and parallels.

7. See, for example, Genesis 2:16–17; 8:16, 20–22; 9:1–17; 12:1–3; 15; 17:1–22; 22:16; 26:3; 28:13–15; 50:24; Exodus 6:4–8; 19:5–6; 34:28; Leviticus 26; Numbers 25:12–13; Deuteronomy 4:23, 31; 5:2–3; 7:8–9; 9:9; 29:1–15; Judges 2:1; 1 Kings 8:23; 1 Chronicles 16:15; Nehemiah 1:5; Psalms 89:34–35; 105:8–11; 106:45; 111:5, 9; Isaiah 54:10; 55:3; 56:4–7; 59:21; 61:8; Jeremiah 11:2–3; 22:9; 44:26–27; Ezekiel 16:59–63; and Micah 7:20.

apostasia used to describe what those do who become idolaters. Second Chronicles 29:19 says that King Ahaz destroyed all of the temple vessels "in his apostasy" (ἐν τῇ ἀποστασίᾳ). And Jeremiah 2:19 speaks of the *apostasia* of Israel, using *kakia* (κακία), meaning "evil doings," as a synonym for *apostasia*: Israel's apostasy, its evil doing, will teach it, will prove to it, that forsaking God is a bitter thing. Only the last of these is explicitly a reference to rebellion against God, but it is reasonable also to understand Israel's idol worship and their king's destruction of the temple as acts of rebellion against him.

Just as the Old Testament often speaks of entering covenant relation as marriage, it often uses the metaphor of divorce to speak of apostasy, and the Septuagint uses the word *apostasion* (ἀποστάσιον), with obviously the same root as *apostasia*, as the word for divorce (Isaiah 50:1; Jeremiah 3:8; Deuteronomy 24:1, 3). *Apostasion* means, generally, "the relinquishment of one's claim," which is why the word can be used for divorce.[8] Apostasy, rebellion against God, breaks covenant with God in the same way that divorce breaks covenant with a spouse: in both cases, I give up my claim on another and reject that person's claim on me.

Though it goes against our ordinary understanding, it is important to recognize that the covenant with God makes Israel holy, in other words, dedicated to him. Israel is holy because it is in covenant relation with God; it is not the case that he enters into covenant with Israel because it is holy. The history of Israel, from the time it left bondage in Egypt until the coming of Christ, should be sufficient evidence of that. As the book of Hosea illustrates (especially chapters 1–4), the Lord continues to strive with Israel, continues to choose her as his own, despite her inconstancy. If there is a divorce, then she is the one who seeks it. Israel may abandon God, but he will not abandon her. She is chosen,

8. "ἀποστάσιον," in Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 98.

covenanted—holy—even when she is unworthy. Speaking to the Israelites, the Lord made the same point in Deuteronomy:

> [The Lord] set his heart on you and chose you not because you were the most numerous of all peoples—for indeed you were the smallest of all—but because he loved you and meant to keep the oath which he swore to your ancestors: that was why he brought you out with his mighty hand and redeemed you from the place of slave-labour, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. . . . *Hence*, you must keep and observe the commandments, laws and customs which I am laying down for you today. (Deuteronomy 7:7–11 New Jerusalem Bible; emphasis added)

Israel is a covenant people—lives in relation to God—and, therefore, must keep the law as the instantiation of that relation. The various commandments of the law are given *because* Israel is holy (chosen, or set apart), in other words, because Israel is a covenant people, not to make Israel holy, not to bring it into covenant relation. What is essential is the covenant, so rebelling against or disavowing that covenant—divorce—is apostasy.

One way to understand Exodus 19:5–6 is to see it as discussing the connection between covenant and priesthood service: "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." Just as the wife was the property of the husband, because Israel is covenanted to the Lord, it is the Lord's property ("peculiar treasure" = *sĕgūllâ*; סגלה: "possession, property"),[9] and he promises that he

9. See "סגלה," in Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford University Press, 1988;

will make it "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The root of the word translated "priest," *khn* (כהן), means "to set up or establish" and can mean "to stand." Thus, the word *priest*, *cohen* (כהן), "would probably denote the man standing before . . . and literally denotes one who stands serving God."[10] Though the priesthood was later limited to the tribe of Levi, we can understand Exodus 19:5–6 to suggest that the Lord intended that everyone be a priest, in other words, that all be prepared to stand in the presence of the Lord and serve him.[11] He gave the priesthood to Israel as part of making them a covenant people, and he gave them the law so that they could be ritually pure when they performed their priesthood service.

As the covenant people, Israel is in the presence of God, as the Ark and the Holy of Holies—God's dwellings among his people—demonstrate. Israel has God's priesthood because they have been made his, been brought into his presence. Similarly, because Israel has been brought into his presence, it must be obedient: one who is set apart for holy things must be pure, so the Lord has given Israel the law as a means for the nation to purify itself, but the law is not the essence of

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hereafter *BDB*), 688. See also "סגל," in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 617.

10. Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 271.

11. I am not the only one to understand Exodus 19:6 as foreseeing priesthood held by "all." That verse is an important justification for the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 2, chapter 7, section 1. See also Philip Schaff, "§42. Clergy and Laity," in *History of the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 2:123–30.

covenant: "Ye are the children of the Lord your God: ye shall not cut yourselves, nor make any baldness between your eyes for the dead. *For thou art an holy people* unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth" (Deuteronomy 14:1–2, emphasis added). The law is given *because* the Israelites are a people set apart, not to make them that people. That covenant brings Israel into the presence of God suggests it is a temple covenant, and the law is given so that Israel can be ritually clean as it serves God in the temple in ritual, sacrifice, and ordinance.[12]

Moses's call at the burning bush also shows that covenant was inseparable from ritual service in the presence of God: "And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord, Israel is my son, even my firstborn: And I say unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me" (Deuteronomy 4:22–23). Where the Masoretic Hebrew text uses the word *ʿābad* (עבד)—"to work" or "to serve as a slave,"[13] the Septuagint uses a narrower word, *latreuō* (λατρεύω). Originally, *latreuō* meant much the same

12. Doctrine and Covenant 84:19–23 agrees with this understanding of the purpose of covenant: "And this great priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God. Therefore, *in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh: For without this no man can see the face of God*, even the Father, and live. Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God" (emphasis added). Godliness requires priesthood and ordinances, which prepare us to stand before God.

13. "עבד," in *BDB*, 1104.

thing as *ʿābad*, namely work, service to another, or slavery.[14] However, particularly in this context, in the Septuagint it means "to serve in religious ritual, specifically in sacrifice."[15] Moses is commanded to tell Pharaoh that the Israelites are the children of God and that they are to serve God as priests, which Moses does in Exodus 5:1 and 3. Through Moses, we see that the promise to Abraham, "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3; see Genesis 22:18), was a promise that his seed would stand before God as priests mediating for the rest of humanity.[16] To be chosen is to be chosen for a work, in this case the work of officiating in priesthood ordinances before God. Such service requires that Israel be ritually pure, so the Lord has given the law as a guide to ritual purity.[17]

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14. See "λατρεύω," in H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1889), 466.

15. See "λατρεύω, λατρεία," especially "λατρεύω and λατρεία in the LXX," in *New Testament Theological Dictionary*, 4:59. See also "λατρεύω," in Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 467.

16. Of course, this is not to deny that this also means that the earth would be blessed because the Messiah would come through Abraham's lineage. As the Great High Priest, Christ is the type of which every other priest is a shadow. I am grateful to James Olsen for pointing out that being set apart to serve is the meaning of the birthright tradition in which the son received a double portion: he received a double portion so that he could serve his siblings, so that he could be a blessing to them. Israel is the eldest son of the nations of the earth. If the purpose of the gospel is to allow us to inherit all that the Son has (see, for example, D&C 84:35–39; 132:20), that means that it is to prepare us to serve our fellows.

17. I ignore here the modifications of the law made after Israelites worshiped the golden calf at Sinai. Those modifications complicate the function of the law, but they do not change the point I am making.

It is reasonable to describe the Old Testament's understanding of apostasy as breaking the covenant that begins with Abraham and is brought to fruition through Moses. Those who break covenant with God—who divorce him—refuse to perform the acts of covenant, namely obedience and priesthood service. Such things as corruption of the priesthood, desecration of the temple, and idolatry are notable signs of apostasy because in them Israel explicitly turns its back on its covenant relation with God.

But what does this pre-Christian, Hebrew understanding of apostasy have to do with early Christianity? How can we understand apostasy in the New Testament as a rejection of covenant and, especially, how can we understand apostasy as the loss of a person's or a people's status as priests serving God in temple sacrifice and ordinance? Given the historical context in which Christianity came to the world, we should expect the Christian understanding of apostasy to be closely linked to the understanding of the Old Testament. However, we seldom speak of apostasy in those terms, and the usual way we think of the New Testament seems to have little to do with the restoration of a covenant people who can perform priesthood ordinances. I will argue that the concept of apostasy in the New Testament continues the Old Testament's understanding of apostasy as not only rebellion against God, but specifically rebellion that rejects priesthood service, a service that was, in early Christianity, best revealed in temple priesthood and ordinances.[18]

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18. Though I think what I argue here is reasonable, I recognize that we know surprisingly little about early Christianity. An enormous amount of Christian literature from the first two centuries has been discovered in the past two hundred years, but our understanding of early Christianity has yet to be fully informed by those discoveries. See Wilfred Griggs, "Rediscovering Ancient Christianity," *BYU Studies* 3/4 (1999): 73–90.

Only recently have Bible scholars begun to notice the importance of the temple to early Christianity.[19] Nevertheless, the clues have been there all along. Consider, for example, one of the most obvious cases, namely Luke's account of the announcement of John the Baptist's birth (Luke 1:5–22, 59–79): While performing his priestly duties in the temple, burning incense, Zacharias saw an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the incense altar. The angel told him that he and Elisabeth would have a son and that they should name him John. As a sign in response to Zacharias's skepticism, the angel told Zacharias that he would be unable to speak until the prophecy had come to pass. At the baby's circumcision, when asked what to name him, Zacharias wrote "John," and having done so, he was again able to speak. Rejoicing, Zacharias said, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; . . . to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; the oath which he sware to our father Abraham, that he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, in holiness and

19. For example, see Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and David Rolph Seely, *My Father's House: Temple Worship and Symbolism in the New Testament* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), and Margaret Barker, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven: Temple Symbolism in the New Testament* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1995). Some of the discussion of esoteric elements in early Christianity is also relevant. See, for example, Gedaliahu Guy Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); also John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount: An Approach to 3 Nephi 11–18 and Matthew 5–7* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999).

righteousness before him, all the days of our life" (Luke 1:67–69, 72–75). As does the Septuagint version of Exodus 19:6, Luke uses the word for cultic, sacrificial service, *latreuō*,[20] in verse 74: "that we . . . might serve him without fear," and he puts that word in the mouth of one who has recently come from priestly service in the temple. Echoing the language of Exodus 19:5–6 and its mention of priests, Luke says that because Christ has come, Israel will once again be able to serve *before*—in other words, in the presence of[21]—God: "in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life" (Luke 1:75). The language and the setting both point us toward temple service, presumably as a synecdoche for priesthood service in general.

It is significant that Luke begins his account of Christ's life with this story: the prophetic announcement of the Savior's birth begins with events in the temple, and it is made by a temple priest who has recently officiated in the temple; that priest's prophecy tells us that the Savior will come to restore his holy covenant with Israel and that by doing so he will make it possible for Israel to serve in the temple once again. Luke's story begins in the temple and its beginning points us to the temple as one end of the story he will tell.[22] In addition, Zacharias's message suggests that at the time of the Savior's coming, Israel was no longer able to serve properly in the temple. By putting Christ's birth in a temple context, Luke gives us a reason for Christ's coming: to restore the covenant, and the sign of

20. Of course, *latrueuō* also has other meanings, but few of those other meanings fit the context as clearly as does "priestly service."

21. The Greek word translated "before" is *enōpion* (ἐνώπιον): "in the presence of" or "in the sight of" ("ἐνώπιον," in Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 270–71).

22. Luke's story also ends in the temple: "And [they] were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God" (Luke 24:53).

that restoration will be the restoration of the priesthood service, denoted for Zacharias by temple service. Christ came to apostate Judaism, not because it did not hold correct beliefs (it may or may not have) and not because it did not obey the law (its attempt to live that law scrupulously were at the center of the controversy between the Pharisees and Jesus). If we understand Zacharias's message in the context of Jesus's disputes with the Pharisees, we see that Christ came to restore covenant. Throughout the Gospels, we see that, for the Pharisees, the two signs of covenant, the law and priesthood service, had been reduced to one, law-keeping. Thus, to emphasize temple worship is to underscore the reinstitution of the covenant and the priesthood.

To understand why Zacharias's message was important, first consider the teachings of the Old Testament concerning the temple and the coming of the Messiah. Then consider briefly the history of Judah during the two or three hundred years prior to Christ's birth.[23] It is clear that the temple was significant as the abode of God. It was understood as the place from which he rules and judges the earth (see, for example, Micah 1:2 and Habakkuk 2:20). Given that, it would be difficult to imagine a messianic reign that did not include a purification and restoration of the temple. But besides an argument that the temple *ought* to have been central to messianic expectations among the pre-Christian Jews, we have texts that demonstrate those expectations.

A number of Old Testament scriptures speak of the Messiah and make it plain that he will restore not only the kingdom of

23. For an excellent book on the background and history of the New Testament, see Frank F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, NJ: Anchor, 1972).

Israel, but also the temple. For example, Haggai 2:6–7 and 22–23 make it clear that Haggai's prophecy is not only about the return of Israel from Babylon, but is also eschatological, concerned with the coming of the Messiah. Thus, as did pre-Christian, post-exilic Jews, we can read Haggai's discussion of the restoration of the temple and of the Lord coming to his temple (for example Haggai 1:8) not only as a prophecy about the return from Babylon, but also as a description of what the Jews expected to happen with the coming of the Messiah. Similarly, the prophecy in Isaiah 44:28 could be read in two ways: "[I am the Lord] that saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the Temple, Thy foundation shall be laid." But perhaps no scripture could be read as a messianic prophecy of the Temple more than Zechariah 6:12–13: "Behold the man whose name is The Branch; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord: Even he shall build the temple of the Lord; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both." Passages such as these show that, for those waiting for the Messiah in Zecharias's time, the expectation was that he would be a priest-king who would build (or restore) the temple just as he would institute (or restore) the kingdom of Israel.

We see a similar expectation in *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, specifically in the *Testament of Levi* 17–18. Though the textual history of the *Testament of Levi* is, as one commentary says, "Byzantine,"[24] and though chapters 17 and 18 show redaction by a Christian editor or interpolater, those chapters

24. Harm W. Hollander and Marinus de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 2.

also reflect pre-Christian ideas and messianic understandings.[25] In 17:8 through 18:1, the *Testament of Levi* describes an apostasy, and it describes that apostasy as a corruption of the priesthood. Then, in 18:2–3 it describes the restoration of the priesthood in a new priest-king. Even if the verses in question are Christian rather than pre-Christian, they show two things: first, that apostasy was understood to involve the corruption of the priesthood and, second, that the Messiah was understood as a priest-king who would restore the priesthood. In fact, these passages support my claim more strongly if they are Christian rather than pre-Christian, for in that case they show not just that the figure of the temple and the priesthood were important during the intertestamental period, but that they were probably a part of Christian understanding as well. If these passages are the result of Christian redaction, they show that the concern for what is represented by the temple and priesthood, namely covenant, was indeed a part of Christian and not only pre-Christian thinking.

Beginning at least at the return from Babylon, Judah's history and the resulting divisions in Judah—a result of problems centered on the temple and its priesthood—prepared the Jews to see the Messiah as bringing a restoration of temple worship. There had been considerable debate as to who could participate in rebuilding the temple (see, for example, Ezra 5) and various subsequent events, such as the exile of Onias III, the purchase of the priesthood by Jason and Menelaus, and the eventual self-appointment of the Hasmoneans resulted in serious questions and divisions over the legitimacy of the high priest. One of those divisions was that of the Pharisees, or separatists, who seem to have fought against the hellenization of Israel by appealing to

25. Robert A. Kugler, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (Sheffield: Academic, 2001), 47–52.

the oral tradition and the law, but went along with Hasmonean priestly rule while awaiting the return of a legitimate High Priest. Another was the party of the Sadducees (Zadokites) who seem to have supported the Hasmonean high priest, focused on the temple rather than the law, and rejected the oral tradition.

Against this background, Zacharias's prophecy stands out radically, for it is a rejection of both the priestly families with which the Sadducees were associated and the powerful Pharisees who opposed them. Couched in terms of temple service, because that was the language of priesthood and covenant with which he was familiar, Zacharias's message is that, as Messiah, Jesus has come to restore priesthood service to its proper place in religious life as the service in which covenant is established and re-established. Presumably he will do that by purifying the priesthood. Zacharias's prophecy also suggests that Jesus has come to put the written law in its proper place in relation to the covenant represented by the temple—as a work of purifying preparation—and it suggests no need for the oral law of the Pharisees. The confrontation with the Pharisees holds a prominent place in the New Testament, and scriptures such as Matthew 12:1–13 and Mark 2:23–28 illustrate well this difficulty. Zacharias's prophecy must be understood within that context.

The message that Christ has come to restore covenant is not only found at the beginning of Luke. It is also implicit in Matthew's references to him by the messianic title, Son of David,[26] a title that seems to have been a standard title for the Messiah at the time of Christ's birth.[27] Presumably, among

26. The relevant New Testament references are Matthew 1:1; 12:23; 20:15; 21:9, 15; 22:42; Mark 12:35; and Luke 3:31.

27. See, for example, the use of the title in the first-century BC work, *Psalms of Solomon* 17, and the scriptural references to the Davidic king in Isaiah 11:10; Jeremiah 23:5–6; 30:8–9; 33:15–16; Haggai 2:23; Zechariah 3:8–10; and Amos 9:11.

other reasons, the title was appropriate to the Messiah because Solomon was the shadow of the Messiah (the type), so the promises made to Solomon applied also to the Messiah: "I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. *He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever.* I will be his father, and he shall be my son. . . . And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever" (2 Samuel 7:12–16, emphasis added). I take it that the central part of the promise is the sentence I have italicized: the Son of David will build a temple for God, and God will make him king forever. By referring to Jesus as the Son of David, Matthew reminds his readers that the Messiah, as king, will restore the kingdom of Israel *and*, as priest, he will restore the temple and its priesthood service.

In this context, Matthew's account of the cleansing of the temple takes on a fuller significance. Unlike Mark, Matthew has juxtaposed the triumphal entrance into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple, putting no other event between them. Matthew wants us to see the connection between these two events: As Jesus rides into Jerusalem, the crowds acknowledge him as the Son of David: "Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest" (Matthew 21:9). Then Jesus goes to the temple, casting out the money changers and overturning the tables of those who sell doves (vv. 12–13).[28] The chief priests and the scribes are not happy with what has happened: "And when the

28. The healing of the blind and lame in the temple after its cleansing (Matthew 21:14) is fraught with messianic symbolism, but not directly relevant to the question at hand.

chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the Son of David; they were sore displeased" (v. 15). Putting this story in the historical context of the controversy over the temple, we can understand at least part of their displeasure to be evinced by the people's proclamation of Jesus as the Son of David, the builder of the temple—a proclamation to which he conformed by cleansing the temple.

John places the cleansing of the temple earlier in Christ's ministry than do Matthew and Mark, and he doesn't connect it to the triumphal entry (John 2:13–17). Nevertheless, some of the same themes can be seen in his account. The first thing to notice about John's version of this event is the ambiguity of his phrase "my Father's house." Of course, Jesus is referring to his Heavenly Father. But we may be able to read this as a reference to his father, David, appropriating to himself the position of Solomon, the son of David, as the king and the builder of the temple. Notice also the disciples' response to the cleansing. They quote Psalm 69:9, "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up," putting the cleansing in a messianic context.[29] Zechariah had prophesied that the messianic time would include the cleansing of the temple (Zechariah 14:21), and the disciples witness the fulfillment of that prophecy. As each of the other three Gospels teaches, one sign that Jesus is the Messiah is that he comes to cleanse and restore the temple, and he does so as its builder, the Son of David. For the Gospel writers, the language of the temple was the language in which to speak of the restoration of God's covenant with Israel and of priesthood service.

Though less apparent, the connection of Christ to the temple is also an important part of Paul's teaching. For example, in

29. Psalm 69 is the most frequently quoted psalm in the New Testament, invariably as a messianic text.

Romans 1:3, Paul uses a variation of the messianic and temple-builder title, "Son of David," and given his education (Acts 22:3), the connotations of that title could not have escaped him. I believe that priesthood service is also central to Paul's understanding of salvation. In the first eight chapters of his letter to the Romans, Paul seeks to put the law into perspective, and by doing so to counter the Pharisaic tendencies that he finds in the church, tendencies presumably brought in by converts from Judaism. He argues:

(1) No law can be sufficient to save us, agreeing with John: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

(2) This means that we cannot be pure without grace (which, when we have received it, obligates us to keep God's law).

(3) By grace we have the Holy Spirit, which makes possible a life that is not possible by mere obedience.

(4) Those with the Holy Spirit will be made the children of God.

Particularly in Romans 8, Paul explains how we come into the presence of God: the Law cannot purify us from sin, but we can be pure through Jesus Christ if we live by the Spirit (Romans 8:3–5), and—using a different familial metaphor than the Old Testament metaphor of marriage—if we are led by the Spirit, then we are the children of God (Romans 8:14).[30] Presumably, if we are the children of God, we stand in his presence and serve him with authority, for to become a child

30. We must distinguish between being children of the Father because we are his spiritual offspring and becoming the children of God by becoming inheritors of his kingdom. Like the Prodigal Son, we are children who have given up our inheritance and, so, must become children once again.

of God is no longer to be his slave.[31] It is to serve him as a child, as an heir. (Paul often speaks of his service to God in cultic terms, using the same verb that Zacharias uses, *latreuō* .)[32] As Deuteronomy 14:1–2 has already told us, to be a child of God is to be related to him by covenant: "Ye are the children of the Lord your God: . . . For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself."[33] For Paul, as for those in ancient Israel, the service of a covenant people, the children of God, is priesthood service. Though not as obvious in most of Paul's letters, temple service is the appropriate figure for all priesthood service: the point of true religion is to make us children and priests of the Father; true religion is to be in covenant relation with God, a relation manifest in priesthood worship.

Though there is not room here to do the analysis, one need not read the book of Hebrews very closely to see the centrality of priesthood and the temple in it as well: Hebrews specifically uses language of the temple and temple service to explain that the covenant God made with Israel has been renewed in Jesus Christ so that, finally, the promises of that covenant can be fulfilled. Unlike most LDS scholars, most non-LDS scholars take Hebrews to be a late document.[34] Even if they are right,

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31. See my discussion of the metaphor of slavery in the book of Romans in *Romans 1*, 6–9.

32. See Acts 24:14; 26:7; 27:23; 2 Timothy 1:3; Romans 1:9, 25; Philippians 3:3; and Hebrews 8:5; 9:9, 14; 10:2; 12:28; and 13:10.

33. That Israel is the son of God or that the Israelites are the sons of God is something we find in many scriptures, for example, Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 14:1; 32:5–6, 18–19; Jeremiah 3:4; 31:19–20; Isaiah 43:6; 45:11; 63:16; 64:7; Ezekiel 16:20; Hosea 2:1–4; and Malachi 2:10.

34. Since 1 Clement refers to Hebrews in many places and it was written in AD 95, Hebrews had to be written before AD 95. Most

the temple theme runs from the earliest New Testament texts to the latest. However, whatever the date of Hebrews, it is clear from its message that the importance of the covenant manifest through priesthood service is not something unique to Luke. The language of the temple and of temple service are central to New Testament Christian self-understanding.

Thus, though there are many ways of apostatizing, in the New Testament as well as in the Old, we cannot untangle the New Testament understanding of apostasy from turning one's back on God in covenant-breaking, and we cannot untangle covenant-breaking from refusing to stand as a priest before him to act in priesthood service. Paul helps us understand that the priesthood is, once again, offered not only to the Levites, but to all of Israel. And he teaches us that membership in Israel is no longer confined to those who are literal descendants of Jacob, though the inclusiveness of membership does not undo the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see Romans 11). Neither do these changes affect the fundamental purpose of covenant, to bring us into God's presence. That purpose is enacted in priesthood service, particularly in the temple.

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scholars agree that it could not have been written before AD 60, the approximate date to which most Latter-day Saint scholars would assign it. See "Hebrews, Epistle to the," for more information, in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:97. For an example of 1 Clement's reference to Hebrews, see chapter 19: "Wherefore, having so many great and glorious examples set before us, let us turn again to the practice of that peace which from the beginning was the mark set before us," which is almost certainly a paraphrase of Hebrews 12:1: "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us."

As noted in the beginning, any number of things can lead someone into apostasy: affliction and persecution (Matthew 13:21; 24:10); lawlessness (Matthew 24:12); the difficulty of Christ's teachings (John 6:66); a lack of spiritual discernment (Acts 28:26–27); blasphemy (1 Timothy 1:19); worldly empty chatter (2 Timothy 2:16); love of the present age (2 Timothy 4:10); as well as deception by false prophets and teachers, desire for followers, lust, resentment of authority, and promises of freedom from restraint (2 Peter 2:1–22). But these cannot be understood apart from also understanding apostasy as rejecting the requirement that we stand before God in priesthood service. This distinguishes Christianity as a religion from what we might describe as a merely Christian *ethos*. One could live according to the principles of Christianity, its law, if you will, without believing in God. In principle, one could even live according to those principles and believe in God and have one's mind attuned to spiritual things without being a Christian. In other words, one can be ethical or even spiritual without being godly—without being covenanted. In the end, however, the Father requires godliness of us, not merely ethics and not only spirituality.[35] To be ungodly is not to be apostate; insofar as we remain human we are, in a certain sense, ungodly. To *reject* godliness and its requirements is to be apostate, and in neither the Old nor the New Testament, can godliness, life in

35. I am indebted to Rabbi Noson Gurary for helping me see this distinction between spirituality and godliness. He said that to be spiritual is to live a certain kind of life. To be godly is to live a certain life because one loves God (personal communication, 18 June 2002). Though I use his distinction, I do not use the word *godly* exactly as he does. I take godly life to be life in covenant which, of course, is also a life in which one loves God. But it is also a life in which one serves God, and priesthood service is at the heart of service to God.

covenant relation with God, be understood apart from priesthood service.

Where, then, does heresy, false doctrine, fit? How is it related to apostasy? As early as the time of Tertullian (c. AD 160–c. AD 225), the concern for heresy and false teaching is obvious,[36] though as Wilfred Griggs points out, "No argument can be presented and defended which shows that doctrinal or ecclesiastical unity in the Christian church definitely was of great concern in the first and early second century Egypt."[37] One can reasonably suppose that if orthodoxy was of no great concern in Egypt in the first century and into the second, it was probably of no great concern in other regions either. On the other hand, the concern for orthodoxy did not arise only after the New Testament era. For if it did, then scriptures such as 2 Peter 2:1 would make no sense: "There shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction."[38] Thus, though there was concern over false doctrine in New Testament times, I do not believe that false doctrine is at the heart of New Testament thinking about apostasy.

Notice that when Jesus speaks of false teachers and prophets, he speaks of those who teach others to break commandments rather than those who have unusual or false doctrines: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least

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36. See, for example, Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics* 4 and 7.

37. C. Wilfred Griggs, "The Emergence of Orthodoxy and Heresy in Egyptian Christianity," in *Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 CE* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 46.

38. However, 2 Peter is perhaps the latest text of the New Testament and, therefore, may reflect a concern for false teachings that arises only relatively late.

commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19).[39] Of course, teaching someone to sin is teaching them a false doctrine. But the problem is not a problem of belief so much as it is a problem of action. Notice also that the word translated *heresy* in 2 Peter 2:1, *hairesis* (αἵρεσις), is also translated *sect* or *faction* (see Acts 5:17; 15:5; 24:5; 24:14; 26:5; 28:22; 1 Corinthians 11:19; and Galatians 5:20). In the New Testament, a heresy is not a false belief. It is something that creates a division or faction in the church, and, of course, a false teaching can do that. But the creation of division is apostasy, not necessarily holding the beliefs that occasion those divisions.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians gives an important reason for why divisions are a problem. In 1 Corinthians 1:11–12, we see that the Corinthian saints had created divisions among themselves, perhaps claiming different persons as their leaders. When Paul responds directly to this problem in the second part of chapter 11, he does so by pointing out that these factions in the church have made it impossible for the saints to

39. When the Lord speaks to Joseph Smith, he speaks in a similar way: "They teach for doctrines the *commandments* [not the teachings] of men, having a form of godliness, but *they deny the power thereof*" (Joseph Smith—History 1:19, emphasis added). Notice how often the New Testament identifies doctrines with commandments rather than with beliefs. See, for example, Matthew 15:1–9 and Mark 7:5–9; as well as Colossians 2:20–21. This also seems to be the spirit of the Lord's remark "he that is not against us is on our part" (Mark 9:40; see also Luke 9:50). We can also see this focus on practices rather than beliefs in Doctrine and Covenants 19:31: "And of tenets thou shalt not talk, but thou shalt declare repentance and faith on the Savior, and remission of sins by baptism, and by fire, yea, even the Holy Ghost."

partake of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. They partake, but what they eat and drink is no longer the sacrament: division in the church makes priesthood service impossible. Thus, teaching people to break the commandments and creating divisions in the church are condemned because they make service in the presence of God, service as one of God's children and priests, impossible.

We see a similar concern in the use of *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. The man of sin who will reveal himself before the coming of the Lord does not explicitly teach false doctrine. He rebels against God, setting himself above him (compare Daniel 11:36–37), and he gets others to do the same. True, the man of sin lies (2 Thessalonians 2:9) and causes many to believe a lie (vs. 11), and those who believe his lies are damned (v. 12). But the context shows that these lies are not merely false beliefs. Instead, they are lies that try to convince another to do evil. Presumably those who believe they should do evil will do evil; their acts condemn them. We see this in verse 12 where, in his summative description of those who follow the man of sin, Paul tells us that they take pleasure in *adikia* (ἀδικία). The basic meaning of that word is "unjust acts," and it can be translated as "lawlessness" or, as in Acts 8:23, as "iniquity." These people take pleasure in or choose (*eudokeō*; εὐδοκέω)[40] injustice and lawlessness. In other words, they rebel against God. In doing so, they reject the desire for truth (2 Thessalonians 2:10), which in this context is not so much a desire for true beliefs as it is a desire for God's righteousness.[41] Paul is not merely prophesying that people will have false beliefs. Instead, he is

40. "εὐδοκέω," Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon,* 319.

41. Compare this use of *truth* (*aletheia*; αλήθεια) with the Hebrew use of *ʾĕmet* (אמת) in passages such as Psalm 15:2; 86:11; Ezekiel 18:8–9. See "αλήθεια," in Kittel and Friedrich, *New Testament*

prophesying that they will rebel against God and choose to act wickedly (and, of course, holding false beliefs is often part of acting wickedly).

The problem of false belief arose as a primary difficulty, a difficulty *in itself*, only as Christianity began to deal with the response of the broader community in which Christians founds themselves, especially when they were faced with the fact that Christ's incarnation was a stumbling block to both the Jews and the Greeks (meaning those of Greek culture, including the Romans; see 1 Corinthians 1:23). As Christianity spread, the incarnation became increasingly difficult, for the claim that God is incarnate made no sense to *any* of those outside of Christianity.[42] For most Greeks, what was most real was what was intelligible. They believed that the body got in the way of intellecting the intelligible; for the Greeks, however one was to understand salvation, it was a matter of turning from the sensible world to the intelligible, and the body, being

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Theological Dictionary, 1:232–47. Note also the way in which this compares philosophy and true religion: philosophy is the desire for true beliefs; true religion is the desire for the righteousness of the Father. Presumably those who receive the Father's righteousness will also have true beliefs, but those who reach their quest for true beliefs will not necessarily become righteous by doing so.

42. For an excellent discussion of the problem of incarnation for those outside of Christianity in the first and second centuries and the importance of the body to Christian belief, see Michel Henry, *Incarnation: Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 9–32. Francis Ferrier, *What Is Incarnation?* trans. Edward Sillem (New York: Hawthorne, 1962), gives a good, general overview of the Catholic understanding of the incarnation and how that understanding developed historically. The entries for "Gnosticism" and "Incarnation" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* also have good information about this problem for early Christianity.

part of the sensible world, made that turn more difficult, if not impossible. Partly under the influence of Greek philosophy, Jewish intellectuals thought of God as absolutely transcending the world.[43] Thus, for Greeks and Jews, the central tenet of Christianity, that God had come to the earth in a human body, suffered, died, and was resurrected to return to his Father, was sheer foolishness at best: an affront to human intelligence for the Greeks, blasphemy for the Jews.[44]

In response, some Christians, primarily those in a constellation of groups that we label broadly *Gnostics*, tried to weaken the belief in Christ's embodiment. Some argued, for example, that he did not really have a body but only seemed to. Two things resulted from this response to intellectual opposition: schism and the need to defend Christian beliefs not only to those outside the church, but against those within the church—and those two were inseparable. The need to defend Christian beliefs was a response to the need to avoid schism, the need to preserve the unity of the church. That need for unity gave rise to the emphasis on doctrinal teachings and the emphasis

43. For a representative case, consider this from Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC–AD 50): In an imagined conversation between Moses and God, Philo has God say "I myself am invisible and only appreciable by the intellect. And what I call appreciable only by the intellect are not those which are already comprehended by the mind, but those which, even if they could be so comprehended, are still such that the outward senses could not at all attain to them, but only the very purest intellect. . . . Do not, then, ever expect to be able to comprehend me nor any one of my powers, in respect of our essence." *On the Special Laws*, in Philo, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996, 1993), I. 46–49.

44. I suspect that this Greek way of thinking about the body, combined with a paucity of clear references to resurrection in the Old Testament, was behind the Sadducee's rejection of resurrection.

on false belief as apostasy. Combined with the absence of the temple after AD 70 (a theological as well as a functional problem for Christians as much as for Jews), this need to prevent schism and to defend the church meant that apostasy gradually came to be understood differently than it had been. Rather than a sign of apostasy, holding false beliefs came to be central to its concept as Christianity gradually allegorized its understanding of covenant, the temple, and priesthood service.[45]

In sum, the essential element in the Old Testament understanding of apostasy and therefore also in the New Testament, was that to be apostate was to turn against God's covenant and that entailed the refusal to stand before him in priesthood service. After the exile and as a result of political difficulties and the corruption of the temple priesthood, many Jews, specifically those who identified themselves as Pharisees, began to understand apostasy as law-breaking, forgetting that worship for Israel is enacted in the temple through covenanted priesthood service, and replacing that worship with obedience to the law. For the Pharisees, all impurity, whether ritual or moral, became moral impurity, sin. Christ's confrontations with the Pharisees and Paul's preaching were directed at that change in the understanding of what covenant and worship require. Christ restored the covenant, manifest in the kingdom and its priesthood, and symbolically restored the temple. A bright thread running through the various ways of understanding apostasy in the New Testament is that inherited from the Old Testament: to apostatize is to refuse to be in covenant with God. This refusal of covenant is, at the same time, a refusal of the priesthood service

45. The disconnection of the covenant from priesthood ordinance is complete only with the Reformation and only with some of those who descend from the Reformation.

in which the covenant is enacted, as well as a refusal to understand that the purity necessary for priesthood service comes not by obedience to the law (in other words, not from us), but by the Holy Spirit (in other words, from God). With the problem of schism in the church and the need to explain Christianity to Greeks and Jews in times of pending and actual persecution, Christians gradually moved away from the biblical understanding of apostasy as the rejection of covenant and focused instead on apostasy as false belief. Belief rather than covenant manifest in obedience and priesthood service became central. In spite of that understandable shift in emphasis and understanding, it is a change from the New Testament's understanding. We cannot understand what apostasy means for New Testament Christians without understanding that it included the loss of the temple and, so, of the priesthood, for ultimately the rebellion of apostasy involves severing one's covenant relation to God, a relation manifest through the priesthood, through standing in the presence of God.