Type: Book Chapter

The Decline of Covenant in Early Christian Thought

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Source: *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*
Editor(s): Noel B. Reynolds
Published: Provo, UT; Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005
Page(s): 295-324

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Noel B. Reynolds

In the late fourth century John Chrysostom (347–407) described Christian baptismal rituals in which the converts would stand and face west while renouncing Satan, and then turn east to declare their belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This verbal act was referred to as the candidate's "contract" (*suntheke*)—a term which is repeated more than twenty times in Chrysostom's *Baptismal Instructions*.[1] This ancient Christian ritual of renouncing the devil was associated with convert baptism in several sources through much of Christian history, which illustrates dramatically how ritual forms can persist long after their original meanings have been lost.

Nor was the ritual a late invention. Writing almost two centuries earlier, Tertullian (155–225) describes the same pre-baptismal ceremony: "When we are going to enter the water, but a little before, in the presence of the congregation and under the hand of the president, we solemnly profess that we disown the

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1. Hugh M. Riley, *Christian Initiation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1974), 92.

devil, and his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed."[2] Tertullian admits there is no scriptural basis for the ritual but justifies it as an ancient practice, "confirmed" by tradition. The writings of other third and fourth century writers support his claims. Hippolytus uses the standard language when he writes that through the ritual of confession and baptism, one "renounces the devil, and joins himself to Christ . . . puts off the bondage, and puts on the adoption."[3] Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 387) discusses the ritual in some detail, calling it a breaking of the covenant with Satan, with the clear suggestion that it was to be replaced by a covenant with Christ.[4] Basil (329–379) also makes reference to the rite of renunciation and profession. In his condemnation of those who deny the spirit, Basil points back to the confession and renunciation made before baptism and accuses the transgressors of "having violated the covenant of their salvation."[5]

Though not commonly known, this kind of ritual makes perfect sense to Latter-day Saints who understand their relationship with the divine in terms of personal covenants they have made with God. Further, they understand these covenants to be equivalent or even identical to the covenants made by Adam and the saints of God in every dispensation of the gospel since Adam's time. God's plan of salvation was set forth before this world was and has always been the same,

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2. Tertullian, *De Corona (The Chaplet)*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter *ANF*), ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 3:94.

3. Hippolytus, *The Discourse on the Holy Theophany*, *ANF* 5:237.

4. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures XIX*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter *NPNF*), ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 7:144–46.

5. *Basil, NPNF* 8:17.

however much the particular experience of successive dispensations might have differed. But, as will be demonstrated, this prebaptismal ritual apparently lasted as a Christian practice far beyond the time when baptism was understood to be linked to a fundamental covenant undertaken by repentant converts. By the time any of the writers quoted above were involved, baptism and the other ordinances had all been transformed theologically into sacraments, none of which were understood to be based in covenants. So when we look closely at the writings of the earliest Christians, we might naturally ask, "Where have all the covenants gone?" Though the writings of this period occasionally allude to covenants and even occasionally feature them, there is nowhere evidence that the concept of ordinances based in covenants is either central or pervasive.

While the defining treatment of the Christian apostasy in the Book of Mormon predicts that the covenants will be removed or lost (see 1 Nephi 13:26), this key element has never been systematically explored in Latter-day-Saint thought. I will show that the covenantal understandings of ordinances were lost or de-emphasized very early, and that this change made the later accommodation of Greek philosophy much easier for the third- and fourth-century Christians. But that only exacerbated the problem. As Christian thinkers turned increasingly to Greek philosophy after the mid-second century, they naturally shifted from the traditional Hebrew focus on history, including the covenants made at specific times and places, as a source of truth and obligation, to the Hellenistic contemplation of nature as a source of universal truth. And this shift solidified the attenuation of covenants in Christian thought and practice for the centuries that would follow.

The Absence of Covenant in Early Christianity

The Latter-day Saint concept of the sacred ordinances links them fundamentally to covenants. Baptism is "a witness and a testimony before God, and unto the people" (3 Nephi 7:25), that the candidate has repented and covenanted to obey the commandments of God and to take the name of Christ upon him (Mosiah 18:10). Confirmation publicly fulfills the eternal covenant of the Father—given to his spirit children before this world was—by which he promised to all who will repent and be baptized that he will bless them with his Spirit. The sacrament is a frequently repeated ordinance which enables the faithful to explicitly renew the covenant by witnessing again to the same things they first witnessed at their baptisms. Ordination to the priesthood establishes publicly that the recipient has entered into a special covenant to obey the Lord and labor in his service in love (D&C 84:39–41). And marriage explicitly stands on a covenant made between the husband and wife, individually and collectively with their Father in heaven, with great blessings promised by him for their future faithfulness in keeping that covenant. To lose the essential connection of each of these ordinances to these basic covenants would be to transform fundamentally the way in which the faithful would understand their relationship to their God.

Yet that seems to be exactly what happened in the first Christian century. The earliest Christian writings on the ordinances, including the *Didache*, Ignatius (d. ca. 110), Justin Martyr (d. ca. 163), and Irenaeus (ca. 115–202) barely hint at a covenantal understanding of the ordinances. For the most part, the explicit covenantal language Latter-day Saints would expect is almost completely absent. Across the centuries, there were sufficient echoes of the covenantal concept of ordinances to support LDS expectations that it must have been present originally.

In the second century, Justin Martyr mentions "promises" to live up to God's expectations that were associated with baptism. And in the fourth century John Chrysostom explicitly discusses repentance and baptism as a contract with Jesus and describes an elaborate ceremony depicting this to be conducted at the time of a convert's baptism. Basil, also in the fourth century, even referred briefly to the "covenant of baptism."[6] The short-lived resurgence of the rite in the fourth century, as evidenced in the writings of Chrysostom, Cyril, and Ambrose (339–397), may explain the contemporary spike in covenant language in the writings of Chrysostom, Gregory of Nanzianzus (329–390), and Basil. In the Protestant Reformation a millennium later, Zwingli (1484–1531) and his successor Bullinger (1504–1575) clearly promoted the concept that baptism was the public affirmation of a private covenant made by the individual Christian convert.[7] But their effort made little significant impact on the larger Christian world, which seemed to have excised the notion of personal covenants from its understanding of ordinances and of Christian life generally.

The scarcity of covenant language in Christian discussions of the ordinances may explain why Tertullian's introduction of the word *sacraments* to refer to the ordinances was so quickly adopted. Because *sacramentum* was the term Roman armies used for the oath of loyalty that soldiers made to their commanders, it might well have signaled to Christians an earlier covenantal context for their ordinances. All of the original Christian ordinances were transformed into noncovenantal

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6. *Basil, NPNF* 8:21–23.

7. For a detailed report and analysis of these sources, see Bryson L. Bachman and Noel B. Reynolds, "Traditional Christian Sacraments and Covenants," in *Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to the Restored Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004).

sacraments before the third century. Instead of communicating new covenants, or even fealty relationships, sacraments were understood to be the means by which infusions of divine grace could be transmitted to the recipient through the mediation of a priest. The recipient made no commitments, but only needed to request the sacrament. And in the case of infant baptism and last rites, someone else could make this request or decision for the recipient. The balance of theological authority over the centuries insisted that these sacraments would be effective for any recipients who did not actively create obstacles to their reception.[8]

If the results of this preliminary study hold up in more detailed analyses, the third-century hellenization of Christianity will prove to be an anticlimax for covenant theology. The crucial covenantal understandings of the Christian ordinances did not survive even into the second century, thus severing the intensely personal links each individual might have with divine history and changing the structure of Christian teaching in a fundamental way. With truth and right no longer derived from these personal covenantal events, the Christian world was in far greater need of new, independent, and stable sources of truth than we have heretofore realized.

Truth in History and in Covenants Made with God

The ultimate dependence of truth and right on historical events and witnesses of those events is clear in both Jewish and Christian scriptures. The Hebrew scriptures record, and the Christian scriptures confirm, that God has repeatedly offered covenants to his people by which he bound himself to bless them and them to obey him. Some scholars believe there is evidence

8. Bachman and Reynolds, "Traditional Christian Sacraments and Covenants."

for an original "cosmic covenant" given to all men from the time of the creation.[9] More clear in the biblical tradition are the covenants given to Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. The Jews in Jesus's day traced their genesis as a nation to the events at Sinai, in which they bound themselves by covenant with the Lord that he should be their God and they should be his people (Exodus 24:10, 27; Deuteronomy 4–5). The Book of Mormon features this same theme, referring repeatedly to "the covenant people of the Lord" (2 Nephi 30:2; Mormon 3:21; 8:15, 21).

This notion of covenant is central both to Old Testament theology and to Israel's self-conception as a nation. It was this historical event that united as a single entity the separate tribes that had fled Egypt.[10] Biblical accounts of the covenant at Sinai (and especially the extended treatment of it in the book of Deuteronomy) and its renewal under Joshua at Shechem (Joshua 24) are cast in the form of the ancient Hittite suzerainty treaties, by which a vassal king joined himself to a more powerful suzerain king.[11] A major element of these covenants is the recitation of the history of the parties involved and the provisions they

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9. Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1992), xx–xxi.

10. The group certainly was not naturally homogenous. In addition to identifying themselves into twelve (or thirteen, if Ephraim and Manasseh are counted separately) distinct families, "whole groups of the population of Palestine must have entered *en bloc* into the Israelite federation." George F. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh, PA: Biblical Colloquium, 1955), 36; see also 42. Newcomers were adopted by covenant into one of the tribes.

11. Because large numbers of treaties have survived only from the Hittite empire, Hittite treaties are our primary nonbiblical comparison source for ancient covenants. See Mendenhall, *Law*, 27–28.

both accept for the perpetuation of the covenant. A copy of the covenant is then placed in the temple and read periodically to the people, perhaps along with a ritual re-enactment. Thus the covenant itself is situated historically, looking both backward and forward; and those bound together by the covenant understand their relationship in terms of its history.

Biblical scholars generally believe that the original texts of the Pentateuch underwent significant revisions and rewritings, so it is difficult for them to determine whether the covenants originally exhibited the form of suzerainty treaties, or whether this form was later imposed on the text of Israel's sacred covenants. But whatever their form, for the ancient Israelites themselves the covenants were very real and tangible. Circumcision became a sign of the Abrahamic covenant, a reminder to the people of their covenantal obligations. The Sinai covenant was witnessed originally and renewed periodically by the shedding of animal blood. There was no place in this system for philosophizing about nature in pursuit of moral knowledge. God had revealed his commandments, and men had chosen to bind themselves to God—to keep those commandments. This choice was dated to a specific time and place, and involved both specific practice and periodic ritual renewal.

Another aspect of the secular covenants that seems to be in the content (not merely the form) of Israel's covenants with Jehovah is the curse formula. Jehovah's side of the covenant is everlasting, but Israel may break the covenant and incur the wrath of God. Many of the prophets warned Israel that she was breaking (or had broken) the covenant. Jeremiah taught that Israel's utter rejection of the covenant would leave Jehovah no choice but to reject her and establish a new covenant. This new covenant would not be written on stone, but would be written "in their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33). Early Christians saw their movement as the fulfillment of this new covenant foretold

by Jeremiah. Mark quotes Christ as saying, at the last supper, "This is my blood of the new covenant" (Mark 14:24).[12] Christ here repeats the rituals that formed Israel's acceptance of the Sinai covenant—shedding of blood and ritual meal: "And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled *it* on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you. . . . And they saw the God of Israel: . . . and did eat and drink" (Exodus 24:8–11). Paul quotes Christ as saying, "This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink *it,* in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:25). The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is thus the primary means of renewal of the new covenant. It is ritual memory, serving the same purpose as the sacrifices under the Mosaic law.

Through the middle of the second century, leading Christian spokesmen appealed consistently to the theological priority of those events for the Christian faith. The great martyr Ignatius, while en route to his own execution at Rome, wrote repeatedly enjoining Christians in many places to stand firm against the false wisdom of those debaters who boasted of their own intelligence—by remembering the historical facts on which the Christian message was grounded. "Jesus the Christ was conceived by Mary according to God's plan." Further, he was born and baptized that by his suffering he might cleanse the water (of baptism) so that men could be freed from sin. He died, and he "appeared in human form to bring the newness of eternal life."[13] Writing to the Magnesians, Ignatius again emphasized the historical and physical reality of Christ's birth, suffering,

12. The King James Version has "new testament"; the word translated "testament" is *diatheke,* the word used in the Septuagint to translate Hebrew *berit*, "covenant."

13. "The Letter of Ignatius Bishop of Antioch to the Ephesians," in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, ed. and rev. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 92.

and resurrection.[14] To the Trallians he insisted that Jesus Christ was a descendant of David and son of Mary, "who really was born, who both ate and drank; who really was persecuted . . . , who really was crucified and died . . . , who, moreover, really was raised from the dead."[15] To the Smyrneans he clarified further: "For I know and believe that he was in the flesh even after the resurrection." Not only did Christ prove this to Peter and others by inviting them to touch and handle his hands and body, but "he ate and drank with them" after his resurrection.[16]

Ignatius thus exemplifies the early Christian practice of witnessing and confessing to the teaching of the church, through which he "expresses a commitment and an obligation, a bond and a claim."[17] As Otto Michel goes on to explain, these proclamatory statements "all find their starting point in an event of history vouched for by a specific tradition. They interpret this event and prevent its evaporation into myth and theory. In the confession of the community is a new and genuine historicity far surpassing all false traditionalism and intellectualism, all the non-obligatoriness of mere opinion and all mythology."[18] These physical and historical realities in the life of Christ were linked through his gospel and his atonement to the baptisms of his adherents, who at some point in time and space made that commitment to God and began their new lives as his disciples, giving Christianity a continuing reality in the historical present.

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14. "Letter of Ignatius," 96.

15. "Letter of Ignatius," 100.

16. "Letter of Ignatius," 111.

17. Otto Michel, "ὁμολογέω, etc.," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffry W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 5:212.

18. Michel, "ὁμολογέω, etc.," 5:212.

The Fading Covenants of the Early Christian Era

Mendenhall agrees that "the early Christians did regard themselves as a community bound together by covenant."[19] However, he concludes that cultural forces worked to shift the Christian basis away from covenant after the first century. The term *covenant* itself was charged with political significance: "The covenant for Judaism meant the Mosaic law, and for the Roman Empire a covenant meant an illegal secret society."[20] As a result, "the old covenant patterns [soon became] not really useful as a means of communication, and may have been dangerous in view of the Roman prohibition of secret societies."[21] The temple ceremonies were changed or abandoned;[22] the meaning of the sacrament was altered; and the notion of covenant was abandoned.

Daniel Elazar speculated further that in establishing orthodoxy and unity, the concept of covenant may have "presented a number of practical and theological problems" for Christians. The church, he said, "de-emphasized covenant especially after it believed that it had successfully superseded the Mosaic covenant and transferred the authority of the Davidic covenant to

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19. George F. Mendenhall, "Covenant" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 722. Because of its formal differences with the Hittite treaties, Mendenhall and his followers are wary of referring to the Christian mode of relationship to God as "covenant."

20. Mendenhall, "Covenant," 722

21. Mendenhall, "Covenant," 723.

22. Margaret Barker has argued convincingly that the earliest Christians were restoring the true temple tradition. See her *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2004), 10. She points to Christian conflation of rituals and teachings that preserve the earliest temple teachings in one form or another.

Jesus. After Augustine (354–430), the Church paid little attention to covenant and, even though the Eucharist remained central to the Christian liturgy, it ceased to be a truly common meal and its covenantal dimension was overshadowed by other features and meanings attributed to the Last Supper."[23]

In spite of this early waning of the idea of covenant in Christianity, some third- and fourth-century writings evidence the persistence of covenant notions, however attenuated, within early Christianity. In particular, the rite of renunciation and profession included covenant undertones. The recurring verbal formula for the renunciation, which occurred before baptism, includes disowning "the devil, and his pomp, and his angels."[24] This renunciation is described by Tertullian,[25] who in one account adds that after the profession of disowning the devil, the baptismal candidate is immersed in water and makes a "pledge."[26] Supporting references by Hippolytus, Basil, and Cyril of Jerusalem are quoted in the opening paragraphs of this paper. John Chrysostom's (347–407) detailed description of the ritual made explicit the idea of a contract with Christ that baptismal candidates made before entering the waters of baptism. He tells how candidates would first face west to renounce Satan, and then east to declare their belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as well as in baptism. Hugh Riley concluded that for Chrysostom, "the notion of a contract is the central vehicle whereby he interprets the act of renunciation and profession. The term 'the contract (*suntheke*),' which

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23. Daniel Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth: From Christian Separation Through the Protestant Reformation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1996), 2:32.

24. Tertullian, *De Corona, ANF* 3:94.

25. Tertullian, *De Spectaculis (The Shows), ANF* 3:79–91.

26. Tertullian, *De Corona, ANF* 3:94.

occurs more than twenty times in the *Baptismal Instructions* of Chrysostom, is used to interpret several aspects of the rite of renunciation and profession. The verbal act by which the candidate expresses his turning away from Satan and turning toward Christ is called by Chrysostom his 'contract.'"[27]

Interestingly, this ritual has in some form or another continued over time. Apparently referring to the same customary ceremony, Aquinas called it a vow.[28] The "renunciation of the devil" persists today in various attenuated forms as part of the baptismal ritual in many Christian traditions, including Anglican, Armenian, Eastern Orthodox, Jacobite, Coptic, and Ethiopic, but was repressed by Lutherans for fear it would perpetuate superstitious beliefs in the devil. Even the contractual nature of the rite persists in modern language as godfathers and godmothers take the vow on behalf of the infant being baptized.[29] The lack of a scriptural foundation for the ritual was addressed by Tertullian through appeal to widely accepted tradition,[30] and by other early writers through appeal to 1 Timothy 6:12: "thou hast professed a good profession before many witnesses."[31] But even this persistence of covenantal language has not prevented the ordinance of baptism from being redefined and understood as a sacrament. Within the theological system that had emerged by the fourth century,

27. Riley, *Christian Initiation*, 92.

28. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 39:159–201, esp. 163 (Question 88).

29. W. Gilmore and W. Caspari, "Renunciation of the Devil in the Baptismal Rite," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge,* ed. Samuel M. Jackson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 9:488–89.

30. Tertullian, *De Corona, ANF* 3:95.

31. Gilmore and Caspari, "Renunciation," see esp. 488.

Greek philosophical ideas left little room for personal covenants made with God.

Transition and Hellenization: Christian History in the Absence of Covenant

When he first forged the pattern followed later by hellenized Jews and Christians, Philo recounted the stories of both Abraham and Moses without any mention of their famous covenants.[32] Though the Jews in Diaspora produced some early sympathizers to this philosophical approach, the Palestinian Christians who arose in the first century did not appear to pay much attention, since they found adequate grounding for their beliefs and practices in the nonphilosophical positions of the Hebrew prophets as these were articulated and affirmed across many centuries. From the time of their Mosaic origins, Israelites were taught the dangers of religious syncretism and accommodation to the worship of other gods. Further, for them there was no doubt of Jehovah's moral authority or worthiness. And their ancient covenant with him provided a sure and adequate guide for conduct and moral relations with one another.

The New Testament provides ample evidence that it was the fervor of their commitment to that ancient covenant that prevented the majority of Jews from accepting Jesus Christ, who reaffirmed this tradition, yet reformed it to make the covenant individual and personal. Every Christian convert could point to the time and place where he or she had determined to forsake the ways of the world and had undertaken a new covenant with God (signaled publicly through baptism) to follow Jesus and obey his commandments. Not only was the world

32. See *The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993): "On Abraham," 418–19; "The Decalogue," 518, and "On the Life of Moses II," 496–97.

ordered by the covenant at Sinai, but now each Christian was linked to God by an individual covenant that similarly gave structure and grounding to all other understandings and expectations. Because Jesus was the son of God, this new approach was not thought to conflict with the old, but only to make it more elevated and feasible. By trusting and following him and the apostles and prophets he had provided for their instruction and direction, men and women could transcend the vagaries and imperfections of this life and be prepared for a future life with God.

Here is the crux of the matter. Platonists, Stoics, and other Greeks sought to transcend the uncertainties and instabilities of the world and human life as we actually experience it by positing a higher and governing reality that does not change. Once the focus on history and covenant was lost, this stability was exactly what both Jews and Christians needed in their theologies. Such a nature is not the creation of the gods, but sets the limits of all possibilities, including the divine. While that nature may not be readily experienced by mere mortals in its full reality, philosophical reason was thought to provide a means by which the wise can access its higher truths. And so it was that philosophy (and later science) gained favor as a means of overthrowing uncertainty and relativism. According to that perspective, history becomes less important. Because history is only past human experience, it might be characterized by the same types of imperfections seen in our present experience, and we escape or transcend its defects most effectively through the appeal to nature and reason. Many philosophers thought it doubtful whether a god was even needed in this system, or whether one could even exist. The hellenizers in both Judaism and Christianity followed the more theistically inclined philosophers and assumed a place for an absolute god in such a

model. As Christian thought became hellenized, the concept of natural law gained predominance, and no significant role was left within Christian theology for the notion of covenants in history. The morality based on and understood in relation to covenants had been replaced by a morality that was supposed to be "naturally" defined and naturally discovered through reason. This Hellenistic approach was eventually completely and explicitly adopted in the work of Thomas Aquinas.[33] And it was not until the Protestant Reformation and the attempts to return to original pre-Hellenistic Christianity that the notion of covenant made even a modest comeback in Christian theologies—though in a novel form.

As nearly as I can determine, no one has yet attempted to construct a developed account of the connection between the early Christian revision or even abandonment of the notion of covenant, which was so central to ancient Israelite and early Christian understanding and theology, and this later process of hellenization. Hatch built his case against hellenized Christianity on its philosophizing of the concept of God and its incorporation of foreign rituals.[34] Adolf Harnack, in his attempt to recover the presuppositions of original Christianity and to contrast them with the philosophical doctrines that replaced them, focused on personal faith and spiritual experience as the common glue of the community, at the expense of any notion of covenant.[35] While my efforts might be seen

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33. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 40:3–9 (Question 92); 40:19–35 (Question 94); 40:37–69 (Question 95).

34. Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1957), is the most readily available edition of the 1888 Hibbert lectures.

35. Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 1:41–149.

as an extension of this same genre, I do not rely on these earlier approaches as I explore the unstated epistemological assumptions of the covenant framework of the Bible to show why these could be more easily exchanged for the rationalistic assumptions of a Platonized Stoicism once the focus on historical covenants had evaporated, leaving the Christians with a real need for new and stable standards of truth and virtue. Further, the studies demonstrating an earlier hellenization of Judaism, which probably contributed considerably to the eventual hellenization of Christianity by its Jewish converts, have paid little attention to the idea of covenants specifically.[36]

Traditional Christianity Turned to Hellenistic Thought in a Desperate Quest for Certainty and Stability

As traditional Christianity entered its third millennium, its theologians and historians had achieved rather general peace and reconciliation on one of the most contentious issues in its long tradition of self-interpretation. Tertullian first attacked the pride, vainglory, money-seeking, and theological wrangling in the early third-century church as the consequence of its budding romance with Greek philosophy and asked, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[37] Since that time, Christian thinkers have repeatedly raised radical questions about the validity of a biblical tradition that has so extensively incorporated elements of the Greek philosophical tradition into its core theology. The early twentieth century saw these issues sharpened and strengthened in the works of

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36. For a recent study of the Hellenism of Judaism and its effect on Christianity that brings together earlier scholarship on the subject, see Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002).

37. Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics*, *ANF* 3:246.

Edwin Hatch[38] and Adolf Harnack,[39] as well as many others, who have now been superseded by a tradition that finds more to celebrate than to criticize in what is without controversy regarded as Hellenistic Christianity.

The surprisingly irenic state of affairs that prevails among a broad spectrum of Christian writers in the early twenty-first century is a testament to the ability of Protestant thinkers particularly to broaden their view and find in the hellenization of Christianity after the third century the salvation of an orphaned and splintering Christian movement—and not its corruption. A recent history of Christian theology written from an evangelical perspective explains that had not the Christian apologists introduced philosophical categories into the defense and articulation of Christian teaching and practice, the church would have dwindled into a folk religion—languishing in cultic warfare and the ridicule of the intellectual and social elites of the Roman Empire.[40] As will be shown below, church fathers as early as Clement were embracing Greek philosophy as a parallel, divinely inspired movement. In their view, it was only through the union and integration of the two that Christianity could reach its highest and divinely intended form. It is less often noticed that these same apologists "had little to say about the historical Jesus."[41] This paper argues that the third- and fourth-century adoption of Greek philosophy as the language of Christian theology was only possible after the fundamental historical claims and understandings of the

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38. Hatch, *Influence of Greek Ideas.*

39. Harnack, *History of Dogma.*

40. Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999).

41. Olson, *Christian Theology,* 66.

first Christians, including their focus on covenant-based ordinances, had attenuated.

On all sides there is clear recognition of the basic facts. Before Clement of Alexandria, and during the first century and a half of Christianity, references to contemporary schools of philosophy by Christians served principally rhetorical functions in dealing with outsiders. Following a tradition going back to Paul (Acts 17:18–23), missionaries could cite beliefs of contemporary philosophers that were similar to the beliefs and practices of Christians as a means of introducing their own message. This was an attractive strategy because the philosophical community shared with the Christians a seriousness about living a good life and avoiding the vulgar excesses of pagan worship practices and the silliness of pagan mythologies. Second-century Christian apologists, such as Justin Martyr, found the philosophical beliefs of the Roman elites a most useful ground on which to defend their own religious beliefs and practices. In so doing, they paved the way for Clement of Alexandria, his student Origen, and their successors among third-century theologians to incorporate prevailing philosophical assumptions and methods into their understanding of Christianity.[42]

In the early second century, things were not going well for the increasingly divided Christians. The return of Christ was delayed. The generation of apostles and other eyewitnesses died. Then the disciples of that first generation died. No one had clear authority to speak for God. Christians in many areas experienced various forms of discrimination and even violent

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42. One of the best accounts of these developments is to be found in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Volume 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100—600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 25–41.

opposition or persecution. Entrepreneurial opportunists lured segments of the Christian community away to novel doctrines and practices. In the hope of persuading Roman elites to treat them with greater tolerance, Christian apologists wrote epistles and treatises arguing that the Platonized Stoicism of the times was not significantly different from the essential beliefs and practices of Christians. By the end of the second century, a few Christian thinkers were already turning to philosophy and adopting its rationalist strategy to stabilize and clarify their own tradition. And by the early fourth century, the marriage of Greek philosophy and Christianity was irreversible.

The twentieth-century reconciliation of Protestant and Catholic interpretations of hellenized Christianity would seem to vindicate the then-radical step taken by Clement of Alexandria near the end of the second century when he consciously adopted the rational methods of philosophy as the appropriate tools for Christians in pursuit of the truth. While this philosophical gambit was never uncontroversial, it spread rapidly throughout the Christian community and was both officially and firmly established by the time of the fourth-century councils as is especially clear in the creeds they produced. It is worth noting that Clement was consciously following the example of Philo, the Jewish philosopher and fellow Alexandrian from the early first century, who had allegorized the Old Testament systematically in his prolific writings to make it accord with contemporary forms of Greek philosophy.

Lacking faithful witnesses of the founding events of Christianity, Christians were left without authoritative voices to clarify scriptural ambiguities or to give divine direction in the resolution of new challenges for the community. Like his contemporaries, Clement recognized that "the prophets and apostles knew not the arts by which the exercises of philosophy

are exhibited."[43] Rather, he explained, the prophets and disciples were of the Spirit and knew these things infallibly by faith. But this is not possible for others, says Clement, disagreeing with some of his own contemporaries who insisted on avoiding contact with philosophy, logic, or natural science, "demanding faith alone."[44] Clement saw their approach as both sterile and ignorant. He urged instead the cultivation of the vine (Christ)—watering, pruning, and tending it that it might bring forth good fruit. So by bringing all disciplines to bear on the truth (geometry, music, grammar, and philosophy itself), "he guards the faith against assault." Only one educated in these things "can distinguish sophistry from philosophy" or the varieties of philosophical teaching "from the truth itself." From this he concluded it is necessary "for him who desires to be partaker of the power of God, to treat of intellectual subjects by philosophizing."[45]

Clement quite explicitly claimed that Greek philosophy was divinely provided for Christianity in his times. He called Hellenistic culture "preparatory" and argued that "philosophy itself . . . (had) come down from God to men."[46] This preparatory movement was illustrated for all Israel in the case of Abraham, who attained wisdom by "passing from the contemplation of heavenly things to the faith and righteousness which are according to God." So also Hagar (the young and fruitful maiden) was given to Abraham that, by allegorical interpretation, he should "embrace secular culture as youthful, and a handmaid."[47] "Philosophy is characterized by investigation

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43. Clement, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, ANF 2:310.

44. Clement, *Miscellanies*, ANF 2:309.

45. Clement, *Miscellanies*, ANF 2:310.

46. Clement, *Miscellanies*, ANF 2:308.

47. Clement, *Miscellanies*, ANF 2:306.

into the truth and the nature of things (this is the truth of which the Lord Himself said, 'I am the truth'); and that, again, the preparatory training for rest in Christ exercises the mind, rouses the intelligence, and begets an inquiring shrewdness, by means of the true philosophy, which the initiated possess, having found it, or rather received it, from the truth itself."[48] Hence the Christian view of philosophy as the (fruitful) handmaiden to theology.

Clement claimed not to be promoting any particular philosophical school of his day (Stoic, Platonic, Epicurean, or Aristotelian), but identified philosophy (the love of wisdom) with "whatever has been well said by each of those sects, which teach righteousness along with a science pervaded by piety,—this eclectic whole I call philosophy."[49] So rather than follow a particular non-Christian school, he strives to be "conversant with all kinds of wisdom" and bring "again together the separate fragments, and makes them one" in order that he might without peril "contemplate the perfect Word, the truth."[50] And so it was that Christianity—bereft of its eyewitnesses or even witnesses of its eyewitnesses—incorporated philosophy as an additional and much-needed source of truth and doctrinal stability.

Nature's Appeal as a Universal Standard

In seeking to understand why Christianity turned to Greek philosophy, it is helpful to consider what it was that the Greek philosophies had to offer a faltering Christianity. One of the most fundamental and perennially attractive contributions of early Greek thinkers was the concept of nature—the idea that behind all the variety and vagaries of human experience

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48. Clement, *Miscellanies, ANF* 2:307.
49. Clement, *Miscellanies, ANF* 2:308.
50. Clement, *Miscellanies, ANF* 2:313.

there might be a solid, regular, and permanent reality. Nor did they limit this insight to the physical and material world, but rather they also glimpsed (or diligently sought) the possibility of finding ultimate truth in matters pertaining to human morality and the good. This was an important quest in a Greek world where the gods (whether Olympian or of the family hearth) served better as examples of human weakness than as models of moral aspiration—and where the popular intellectuals of the day were exploring the implications of the surging relativism that arose from growing intellectual independence from traditional thought and the explosion in awareness of the varieties of belief and values among the cultures of their rapidly expanding world.

Though he did not develop the potential connection, Jaroslav Pelikan did notice how hellenized Christianity no longer needed the covenantal perspective of Judaism.

> In Judaism it was possible simultaneously to ascribe change of purpose to God and to declare that God did not change, without resolving the paradox; for the immutability of God was seen as the trustworthiness of his covenanted relation to his people in the concrete history of his judgment and mercy, rather than as a primarily ontological category. But in the development of the Christian doctrine of God, immutability assumed the status of an axiomatic presupposition for the discussion of other doctrines.[51]

In 1888, Edwin Hatch launched the twentieth century debate over hellenized Christianity and argued that by the third Christian century a philosophical blend of views derived from Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, and Epicureans had attained the status

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51. Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 22.

of dogma among the educated classes of the Roman Empire and was widely regarded as possessed of universal validity. The "subjective and temporary convictions" of the original philosophers "were thus elevated to the rank of objective and eternal truths." Further,

> It came also to be assumed that the processes of reason so closely followed the order of nature, that a system of ideas constructed in strict accordance with the laws of reasoning corresponded exactly with the realities of things. The unity of such a system reflected, it was thought, the unity of the world of objective fact. It followed that the truth or untruth of a given proposition was thought to be determined by its logical consistency or inconsistency with the sum of previous inferences.[52]

Though now outdated in some respects, Thorleif Boman's widely regarded investigation of the differences between Greek and Hebrew ways of understanding the world still makes some valid points for our inquiry. Boman noticed the respective emphases on nature and history and agreed with Reinhold Niebuhr's observation that "the classical culture, elaborated by Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, is a western and intellectual version of a universal type of ahistorical spirituality."[53] Boman identifies through linguistic analysis a fundamental contrast between these two cultures in that the Greek focus on *vision* and seeing leads to the association of truth with the unveiling of nature, of ideas and intellectual insight, while the Hebrew

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52. Hatch, *Influence of Greek Ideas*, 121.

53. Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, trans. Jules L. Moreau (New York: Norton, 1960), 168–70. The Niebuhr quote is from *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1949), 16.

focus on *hearing* associates truth with subjective certainty, which is achieved by being steady and faithful.[54] What Boman did not notice was the Hebrew reliance on covenant as a means of establishing stable expectations in a changing world.

This new system of ideas proved irresistible to the Christians who were fighting heresy on every side—when they were not fending off persecution. The appeal to nature as a universal and immoveable standard and to reason as an objective mode of access to nature could free Christians from their awkward dependence on an increasingly remote and unproveable history of God's direct contacts and interventions with or revelations to his people.

The Book of Mormon Illuminates the Christian Covenant and Its Demise

The God of Hebrew and Christian scripture is portrayed as Lord of both nature and history and human beings—whom he regards as his children. He created the world specifically to provide these children with the experience of uncertainty and instability at the level of human experience. The only way for them to transcend the conditions of mortality was to turn to God and to entrust themselves fully into his care. God is both loving and powerful and provides guidance and protection from evil by means of the covenants which he offers to mankind. Through these covenants, God provides his earthly children with commandments and writes his law upon their hearts by his Spirit (Jeremiah 31: 33, as interpreted in Hebrews

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54. Boman, *Hebrew Thought*, 200–204. Unlike Hatch and Harnack of an earlier generation, Boman chose not to see these as conflicting but as complementary ways of seeing the same underlying truth, as our five senses give us different access to the same world in which we live, p. 207.

8:10–11 and 10:15–17) as a means of countering their inevitable ignorance of what is right, or of what will lead to good in specific life situations.

Unfortunately, the nature and function of the covenant idea in biblical traditions has become more rather than less confused and controversial as scholars have worked on it over the years. There is as yet no clear agreement even as to the etymology or meaning of the Hebrew term for covenant (*berit*). And scholars widely believe that the covenant with Abraham was unilateral, not imposing an obligation of obedience on him or his descendants. Furthermore, theologians and scholars have not generally seen any connection or unity between the covenants of God with Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Israel at Sinai—or between any of these and Christian baptism. And while it is true that many Christians saw baptism as a replacement for circumcision, this view could not last long when baptism itself lost its covenantal basis. Some Reformation theologians such as Heinrich Bullinger attempted to recover the early concept of Christian covenanting, but their work never dominated mainstream Christian thought and was largely forgotten.[55] Small wonder that Nephi, in speaking of the scriptures as maintained by Christians after the apostasy, would emphasize that "they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb *many parts which are plain and most precious*; and also *many covenants* of the Lord have they taken away" (1 Nephi 13:26).

The situation which Nephi reports is largely responsible for the continuing confusions and disagreements among scholars on these basic issues regarding the nature and role of covenant in the Christian and Jewish traditions. It is helpful at this point to turn to the Book of Mormon treatment of the covenant idea

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55. See generally, Bachman and Reynolds, "Traditional Christian Sacraments and Covenants."

to get a clear notion of what, in fact, must have been taken away from the Bible. Nephi radicalizes the traditional notions of Israel's covenant with God by extending the covenant invitation to all peoples and making it an individual choice for each person: "For behold, I say unto you that as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off; for the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, who is the Holy One of Israel" (2 Nephi 30:2) "[For] the covenant people of the Lord . . . are they who wait for him" (2 Nephi 6:13). Here we have a clear focus on repentance, a clearly reciprocal action, as the principal identifying feature of covenant establishment. The covenant people of the Lord are all those, and only those, who have turned away (repented) from their worldly ways by making a covenant with God to obey him and take his name upon them. This then is the covenant that Christians witness to publicly when they enter into the waters of baptism. As Alma explained at the waters of Mormon, "what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments?" (2 Nephi 6:13). And as was recorded by a later Nephi, the repentant "should be baptized with water, and this as a witness and a testimony before God, and unto the people, that they had repented and received a remission of their sins" (Mosiah 18:10). The prayers used by the Nephites in "administering the flesh and blood of Christ" unto the church, clearly constitute a renewal of this covenant as participants witness again "that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him, and keep his commandments which he hath given them" (3 Nephi 7:25).

This consistent Book of Mormon characterization of the ordinance of baptism as the public witnessing of an internal covenant made at the moment when an individual repents, relies directly on the plan of salvation. It assumes that the Father of all men has extended to each individual an open invitation to repent and come unto him. Further, he has promised, through the power of the atonement of Christ, to forgive all who repent and are baptized and to sanctify them through the cleansing power of the Holy Ghost—that all who endure through faith on his name to the end will receive eternal life. So the gospel of Jesus Christ articulates the terms of this covenant, as it applies to men.[56] The covenant is clearly bilateral since it requires a response from any who will become "the covenant people of the Lord." And Nephi clearly explains that it has been the same for all men in all times and places.

This is the core of what is rejected or lost when men rebel against the Lord, falling into apostasy—and clearly what was lost from Christianity by the second century. In the absence of true covenants, theologians still focused much of their religious discourse on the sacraments or ordinances of the church, but the emphasis was now on Christ's grace, the importance of the clergy, and the primacy of the church—and not on the covenantal relationship of the individual to God. While Christianity certainly still included a strong moralistic element, the basis of this morality was transferred from personal covenants to the commands of the church. This situation helps account for the fact that, with the exception of the rite of renunciation described above, no clear description of

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56. See the analysis of the three Book of Mormon passages in which the Savior himself articulates this gospel or doctrine in Noel B. Reynolds, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets," *BYU Studies* 31/3 (1991): 31–50.

the Christian covenant survives in any New Testament text or in the teachings of the early Christian writers. With the Book of Mormon teaching in mind, we can see allusions to this idea of covenant throughout early Christian writing. But the allusions were insufficient to preserve the clear teaching, which has presumably been "taken away" (1 Nephi 13:26). The personal relationship element of the gospel was overshadowed and, in the centuries that followed, theological discourse would not include a prominent place for individual covenants with God.

The essence of covenantal relationships is that they are historical. They are artifacts of human and divine action at particular times and places. The principal New Testament term for covenant (*diatheke*) refers to the human activity of disposing of or arranging things by choice and by will.[57] The Israelites annually celebrated and re-enacted the covenant they had received at Sinai. Covenant renewal ceremonies emphasized the historicity of the originals they celebrated. Christians could tell you the date and place of their baptisms and, no doubt, the name of the particular authorized individual who had administered the ordinance in their behalf (1 Corinthians 1:12–16). Yet it was the commitment made to God that constituted these covenants—and not transcendent nature—that structured their moral universe. Grounding one's moral universe in historical events and human actions sounds like the sure road to relativism. But the Christians did not see this as a relativistic position. God's love, power, and goodness were all the security his children would need. Dependence on him, through the covenant relationship, is what provided their escape from the otherwise inescapable relativism and uncertainty that characterize life in this world. The combination of God's constant love

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57. Gottfried Quell and Johannes Behm, "διατίθημι, διαθήκμ," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:104–34.

and his children's consistent obedience was their answer to the dangers of a relativistic and morally uncertain world. Any attempt to validate the content of these covenants by appeals to reason or nature could be seen as an indication of weak faith or a failure to grasp the radical dependence on God and one's own commitment to him that the world of covenant required.

Conclusion

We have seen that the insight that late second- and early third-century theologians rearticulated Christian teaching in the language and categories of Greek philosophy is no longer controversial, and not even evangelical Protestant historians regret this development today. Rather, it is seen by a growing variety of Christians as a divinely enabled move that completed and preserved an endangered Christian movement, bringing it to its full glory as God's work. This paper assumes this historical hellenization of traditional Christianity and goes on to show that this development also replaced the earlier Christian and Jewish emphasis on history as the ground of truth and faith with a focus on nature and reason. The centrality of the Christian's covenant to repent of sin and obey God's commands had already been marginalized, and the traditional ordinances had lost their covenantal basis, being redefined as sacraments by which God's grace could be transmitted to a recipient through the mediation of a priest. The subsequent shift to a theology that found truth in nature through reason ensured that the original covenantal understandings of the Christian's relationship to the Father could never be recovered, though their echoes would reverberate hauntingly down through the ages, leading many dissatisfied Christians to long for a restoration of original Christianity.