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Modern Revelation: A Guide to Research about the Apostasy

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MODERN REVELATION: A GUIDE TO RESEARCH ABOUT THE APOSTASY

John W. Welch

Whatever is taught about the apostasy should be checked against the four standard works. As researchers explore new approaches and digest primary historical source materials from the early years of the Christian era, the scriptures are an important guide, helping scholars to formulate promising questions for investigation and directing students in understanding the complex story of what has gone wrong (and also what has gone right) in the history of Christianity. According to scripture, especially the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants, what were the causes of the apostasy? What were its characteristics? What were its consequences? The answers to these scriptural questions are not simple. For that reason, stereotypes and oversimplifications are not particularly helpful, as a close reading of key passages will demonstrate. In order to understand what the scriptures say about the unfolding of the apostasy, this paper focuses, in particular, on what the relevant passages in 1 Nephi 13 and Doctrine and Covenants sections 64 and 86 teach about the apostasy.

Unforgiving Disciples: Doctrine and Covenants 64:8

One important question is this: Was the apostasy the result of internal problems or external pressures? In other words, did it occur because of the rise of false teachings or conflicts from within, or because of the untimely deaths of the apostles or persecutions from without? Certainly, many factors played a role in the difficulties faced by early Christianity, but one interesting passage in Doctrine and Covenants 64:8 discloses that a major problem that stood at the heart of the matter came from the failure of high-ranking church officials to forgive one another.

Given in September 1831, Doctrine and Covenants 64 is addressed to the elders of the newly established Zion, encouraging them, as is often quoted, exhorting them to be obedient and to “be not weary in well-doing” (v. 33), forbidding them to “get in debt to thine enemies” (v. 27), and requiring them “to forgive all men” (v. 10). Standing at the head of this crucial administrative revelation of the fledgling kingdom, however, is a sober disclosure that “there are those who have sought occasion against [the Prophet Joseph Smith] without cause” (v. 6); although he had indeed sinned, he had also confessed and had been forgiven by God (v. 7). The brethren, therefore, were told that they should not accuse him or any others who are willing to repent and confess their transgressions.

The seriousness of the problem of these young priesthood leaders seeking to find fault and to accuse one another is then driven home by a chilling revelation. The Lord had seen this once before among his young disciples in the Old World, and he had little desire to see it again: “My disciples, in days of old, sought occasion against one another and forgave not one another in their hearts; and for this evil they were afflicted and sorely chastened” (D&C 64:8). Although this passage is brief and cryptic, it may uncover an important insight: troubles that

plagued the early Christian church seem attributable precisely to internal disharmony and aggressive confrontations among its leaders. Then, most problematical of all, they failed to forgive one another.

Such an insight can be used as a guide for research. Thorough examination of the New Testament and other early Christian records remains to be conducted to identify instances in which early leaders sought occasion against each other, but even a casual acquaintance with these texts produces promising prospects. For example, the early brethren scattered, one going one way, another going a different way. The inclination has been to see these missionaries going out on assignment in good faith to spread the word to their own corners of the world, but perhaps something more is going on here. Perhaps they split up because they were not getting along. Evidence of such tension is close to the surface in 1 Corinthians 1:12, “Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.” Concrete examples of disharmony can be sensed in the strong combative language used to describe the “no small dissension [*staseōs*] and disputation [*zētēseōs*]” that arose over the Gentile convert question (Acts 15:2), as well as in the disagreement between Barnabas and Paul over John Mark, where “the contention was so sharp [*paroxusmos*] between them, that they departed asunder one from the other” (Acts 15:39). The Greek words in these texts are strong words, strong enough to indicate not only verbal strife, discord, and controversy, but also provocation, irritation to the point of wrath, physical confrontation, and outright anger. While these contentions may have arisen over doctrinal debates and differences of theological opinion, the issue may have been or may have become more personal than intellectual. Polarization in a small, early religious movement can more easily occur at the personal level than at

the institutional or theological level, because institutional group structures are still forming and the religion's theological discourse has not yet matured to the point of clearly articulated theoretical positions.

To be sure, Paul and others plead for unity again and again in their letters: "Is Christ divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:13); "be of one mind" (2 Corinthians 13:11); "endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3); and "be ye all of one mind" (1 Peter 3:8). But for all these calls for unity, there are fewer admonitions for forgiveness: "forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32; some early manuscripts from as early as the second and third centuries even read "hath forgiven us"!). These passages seriously calling for unity take on a new and more urgent meaning when one understands that the early church was struggling to overcome grudges, petty jealousies, and hurt feelings. Thus, the instruction in the Epistle of James may reflect much more than simply good wisdom and common sense; it may reflect the existence of faultfinding, hard feelings, and the lack of forgiveness as a widespread condition throughout the church scattered abroad: "If ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not [i.e., do not assume superiority over others] and lie not against the truth" (James 3:14).

At the core of the matter, therefore, the primary cause of the apostasy may not have been philosophy, secularization, political corruption, or persecution, as one generally tends to think or to hear mentioned. From a closer look at what this scripture says, it would appear that the trouble began because Christian disciples failed to keep the basic teachings of the Savior regarding humility, love, and forgiveness, and that God will deliver men from evil only to the extent that

they forgive other people of their trespasses against them (Matthew 6:13–15).

A Closer Look at Nephi's Vision: 1 Nephi 13

The longest scriptural prophecy about the apostasy and the years between the first and the nineteenth centuries is found in Nephi's vision in 1 Nephi 13. Scholars seeking to understand the apostasy will benefit by using this text as a guide, step by step, in several important respects.

At the outset, the angel leading Nephi through his vision in 1 Nephi 11–14 (which was a repetition and interpretation of Lehi's vision in 1 Nephi 8 and 10; see 1 Nephi 14:29) makes it unmistakably clear that problems would ensue in the Old World after the death of the Messiah. Nephi saw “the multitudes of the earth, that they were gathered together to fight against the apostles of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 11:34), for this multitude was in the “large and spacious building” (1 Nephi 11:35). Nephi then beheld “the world and the wisdom thereof; yea behold the house of Israel” would gather together “to fight against the twelve” (1 Nephi 11:35). This prophecy seems to be completely fulfilled when persecution was immediately heaped by the Jewish potentates on Peter, John, Stephen, and others in Jerusalem; Christians in Damascus; and Paul in Pisidia, Thessalonika, Achaia, and elsewhere. The Christian “menace” seems to have brought Jewish factions together as never before; suddenly Pharisees and Sadducees in the Sanhedrin united against the Christians (Acts 5–7). As is often the case, nothing serves to draw squabbling sectarians together as does a new common enemy.

This revelation to Nephi draws attention of historians to the tensions and persecutions against Christians, not by Romans but by Jews, that occurred in the first three decades of

Christianity. These conflicts have been discussed to some extent by historians of the early church,¹ but the nature and possible consequences of these pressures in terms of the looming apostasy have not been fully examined by Latter-day Saints.

Indeed, Nephi did not see these immediate pressures on the Twelve as bringing down the church of Christ; rather he saw the fall of the great and spacious building, representing the pride of the house of Israel and of those who had initially fought against the apostles of the Lord (1 Nephi 11:36). This prophecy could then well relate to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 at the conclusion of the Jewish War, which was similarly prophesied by Jesus himself (Mark 13:1–2; Luke 21:20–24). Such external pressures and oppositions the disciples would apparently be able to withstand.

Next, Nephi’s vision turns attention to the posterity of Lehi in the New World during the years after the coming of the Messiah (1 Nephi 12). When the focus of Nephi’s vision returns to the Old World, it has jumped ahead to just before the fifteenth century when the Christian world would reconnect with the remnant of Lehi’s seed in the New World. At that time, Nephi beheld “many nations and kingdoms,” presumably in Europe (1 Nephi 13:1), and by then “the formation of a great church” had occurred (1 Nephi 13:4). Nephi mentions

1. Consider the imprisonment of Peter and John, the stoning of Stephen, and the warrant for the arrest of Christians carried by Paul to Damascus. See further Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 351–65, and also his *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). The harassment of Christians by Jews in its early years is discussed by W. H. C. Freund, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 90–91, 101, 123, 144, 182.

very little about this church, except that it was unacceptable to God and it killed, tortured, bound, yoked, and brought into captivity “saints” and smaller church congregations (1 Nephi 13:5, 9). The mere fact that saints were still present in Europe at this time signals the truth that the Middle Ages could not have been entirely dark.²

Indeed, the Book of Mormon commits Latter-day Saints to the view that much of the gospel of Jesus Christ was preserved among the Gentiles. In particular, Nephi records that the spirit and power of God was still with some of the Gentiles (1 Nephi 13:12, 13, 16) and that they still had an important book, which may not have been complete, but still is said to be “of great worth” to the remnant of his peoples (1 Nephi 13:23). Nephi was assured that God would not leave the Gentiles in a “state of awful blindness” (1 Nephi 13:32) but that the Nephite record and other books would come forth precisely to establish the truth of the records of the prophets and apostles which the Gentiles still had and to make known “the plain and precious things which have been taken away” (1 Nephi 13:40). Although these records in the hands of the Gentiles will not be perfect, they will still be of great worth and will be amenable to corroboration.

At this point in Nephi’s vision, the sequence of disclosures flashes back to the time when the words of the Bible first were spoken by the Savior. Most people who are generally familiar with Nephi’s prophecy understand that the words of the Bible, as they originally “proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew [the Lord],” originally came forth in purity (1 Nephi 13:24–25). What happened after that, however, needs to be followed carefully. Actually, Nephi’s vision reveals here three important stages in the process of the apostasy.

2. Latter-day Saint scholars, however, have not searched the records of medieval Europe to find who those saints might have been.

First, things would be taken away, not from the texts or proto-texts of the Bible, but from the gospel itself. In the words of the angel, the first thing mentioned is that Gentiles would take “away from the gospel of the Lamb *many parts* which are plain and most precious” (1 Nephi 13:26). This stage possibly could have occurred more by altering the meaning or understanding of the concepts taught by the Lord than by changing the words themselves. For example, when people lost the part of the gospel that teaches about the premortal life of mankind, the words of Jesus regarding the man who was born blind in John 9 lost some of their meaning. When people lost the gospel concept of sacred covenants, the words of Jesus in his instruction to the disciples that they should not leave Jerusalem until they had been “endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:49) lost their potential for covenantal significance. When people forgot about holy ordinances, the instruction that they should not cast their “holy thing” before the dogs (Matthew 7:6) became baffling.³ When people no longer understood the plan of salvation, the deeper meaning of various teachings, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan, would sooner or later pass them by.⁴ This changing of understanding, the loss of many parts of the gospel, was a fundamental problem foreseen by Nephi. Many people would stumble because of those things “taken away out of the gospel” (1 Nephi 13:29, 32). Perhaps, we may add, in light of Doctrine and Covenants 64:8, discussed earlier, the disciples stumbled because they lost a proper understanding of the atonement, repentance, and forgiveness, which are all essential to the plan of

3. John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 87–90.

4. John W. Welch, “The Parable of the Good Samaritan: A Type and Shadow of the Plan of Salvation,” *BYU Studies* 38/2 (1999): 50–115, esp. 99–105.

redemption, the clear articulation of which does not appear to have survived long after the first century.

Second, the angel said that the Gentiles would take away “many *covenants* of the Lord” (1 Nephi 13:26). This step, too, could be taken without deleting any words from the Bible as such. The knowledge and benefit of the covenants of God could become lost simply by neglecting the performance of ordinances, or priesthood functions, or individual covenants as the Lord had taught. Changing and ultimately eliminating the covenant aspect of baptism—for example, by moving to infant baptism in place of the previous outward sign of adult repentance and covenantal admission into the fold of God—would be symptomatic of the loss of one such covenant. Diminishing the dimension of individual covenant renewal linked to the remembrance of the flesh and blood of the Savior in connection with the eucharist (which in some early Christian communities seems to have been turned into an *agape* feast) might be an indication of another. Evidences of temple covenants amidst early Christians have also been educed,⁵ but these covenants also were lost. Latter-day Saint scholars would do well to focus on the consequences of the loss of these and other covenants in early Christianity. As has been shown by Hugh Nibley, baptism for the dead, the use of prayer circles, and the sacrament itself underwent transformation, if not elimination, in the early centuries. As is widely recognized, asceticism and celibacy enter Christianity at an early stage,⁶ which distorted the meaning of the covenant of marriage and

5. See, for example, Hugh W. Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987). See also Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple*.

6. See, for example, Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Knox, 1997), 152–55.

many passages in the Bible. These losses were crucial. Without the covenants, the teachings of early Christianity are removed from their settings in a covenant-based religion and are given more general, diluted roles.

Moreover, Nephi's text identifies the cause of the loss of these covenants: people would take them away "that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord, that they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men" (1 Nephi 13:27), that is, with the result that they would lead people into apostasy. When and under whose auspices the elimination of these covenants might have occurred remains a subject for serious investigation; but, at some time and in some way, certain covenantal practices were dropped, turning aside from the straight and narrow path that the Lord had prescribed. The result of blinding the eyes and hardening the hearts recalls the words of Isaiah, as he described the condition of apostasy in Israel, "seeing many things, but thou observest not; opening the ears, but he heareth not, . . . for they would not walk in his ways, neither were they obedient unto his law, . . . yet he laid it not to heart" (Isaiah 42:20, 24, 25). These motivations and conditions would likely accompany the condition of people who were seeking cause one against the other and not forgiving one another in their hearts.

Third, and finally, Nephi beheld that there were "many plain and precious things taken away *from the book*" (1 Nephi 13:28). This third step apparently should be understood as a consequence of the two preceding steps, since verse 28 begins with "wherefore." Thus, the eventual physical loss of things from the actual texts of the Bible was perhaps less a cause than it was the result of the fact that first the gospel and second the covenants had been lost or taken away. Writings that no longer made sense, or no longer sounded right, or spoke

of things no longer practiced would naturally fall into disfavor and out of use. As one can now see, significant losses of early Christian texts did in fact result. In some cases, entire books did not find their way into the canonical Bible,⁷ leading Christian theologians and scholars to ask why certain books were excluded. Thomas Hoffman has written of the theoretical possibility “that a lost epistle of an apostle could still be accepted into the canon.” He puzzled that the reasons “such books as the Shepherd of Hermas, the First Epistle of Clement, or the Epistle of Barnabas . . . were eventually dropped from the canon are not that clear.”⁸

Whatever the process, the results are again clearly stated by Nephi. The loss of these plain and precious parts (1) of the gospel, (2) of the covenants, and (3) of the textual record would cause a loss of “plainness” so that, when the gospel would “go forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles,” it would lack clarity, which would cause “many” to “stumble,” giving Satan “great power over them” (1 Nephi 13:29). Perhaps their stumbling was related to their failure “to forgive all men” (D&C 64:10).

7. See Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 26; Frank Moore Cross, “New Directions in Dead Sea Scroll Research II: Original Biblical Texts Reconstructed from Newly Found Fragments,” *Bible Review* (summer and fall 1985): 12–35. For a list of known books missing from the New Testament, see John W. Welch and John F. Hall, *Charting the New Testament* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), chart 18–9.

8. Thomas Hoffman, “Inspiration, Normativeness, Canonicity, and the Unique Sacred Character of the Bible,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982): 463.

Rereading the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares: Doctrine and Covenants 86

Matthew 13, sometimes labeled the “Parable Sermon,” contains an important series of parables in which Jesus depicted many details of future events pertaining to the kingdom of God on Earth. In “the parable of the tares of the field” as it is called in Matthew 13:36, or “the parable of the wheat and of the tares” as it is called in Doctrine and Covenants 86:1, the Savior himself gives an important roadmap to the coming apostasy. He knows that trouble will come soon to his kingdom. It remains, however, for Latter-day Saint scholars to use this roadmap as a guide for understanding what was to come, how it was to come, and what the consequences would be.

Immediately after the parable of the sower at the beginning of Matthew 13 comes the parable of the tares in Matthew 13:24–30. According to this parable, the sower’s “enemy” (Satan) comes into a recently planted wheat field and sows *zizania* seeds “in the sleeping of men” (*en de tōi katheudein tous anthrōpous*). The prediction of this disturbing development, although generally familiar to many people, is especially interesting to Latter-day Saints. While couched in the language of parable, in actuality it is a prophecy about the future of the church and contains significant disclosures about the coming apostasy in early Christianity. As Joseph Smith explained, the tares represent “the corruptions of the church” and that which binds them in bundles are “their creeds.”⁹ Elder Bruce R. McConkie has expounded: “In giving the parable of the wheat and the tares, Jesus was actually summarizing the doctrines of the apostasy, the restoration of the gospel in the latter-days, the growth and development of

9. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 98, 101.

the latter-day kingdom, the millennial cleansing of the earth, the glorious advent of the Son of Man, and the ultimate celestial exaltation of the faithful.”¹⁰

To understand the details of this prophecy about the apostasy, however, Latter-day Saints must carefully examine more than (1) the parable in KJV Matthew 13:24–30. In addition, we must consider (2) the explanation of the parable given by Jesus to his disciples according to KJV Matthew 13:37–43, (3) the Joseph Smith Translation emendations to the parable and explanation in Matthew 13, and (4) the version of the parable given by revelation to Joseph Smith on 6 December 1832, now found in section 86. On casual reading, these four texts appear to repeat generally the same information as if in quadruplicate.¹¹ On closer and more extended inspection, however, several important differences emerge. While these differences may reflect the fact that these texts were addressed to different audiences (the Matthean parable, to a general audience of Jews and early Christian converts; the Matthean explanation, to the Twelve Apostles; and the modern revelation, to readers in the last dispensation), the variations present two very different outlooks on the apostasy, as chart 1 (p. 114) with the following explication demonstrates.

10. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1981), 1:297.

11. Most LDS commentators offer no particular analysis of the differences between these four texts. See James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1915), 286–88; and Melvin R. Brooks, *Parables of the Kingdom* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 28–32. Some note only the general contours of their differences. Roy W. Doxey, *The Latter-day Prophets and the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), 3:127–28; and Richard O. Cowan, *The Doctrine and Covenants: Our Modern Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 128.

Chart 1: Matthew 13 and Doctrine and Covenants 86

Matthew 13			D&C 86
Parable	Explanation	JST Emendations*	Parable
a man [a sower] (24)	the Son of man (37)		apostles (2)
good seed (24)	children of the kingdom (38)		
field (24)	the world (<i>kosmos</i>) (38)		the world (2)
while men slept (25)			after they have slept (3)
enemy (25)	the devil (39)		great persecutor, apostate (3)
			whore, Babylon, her cup (3)
tare seeds (25)	children of the wicked <i>one</i> (38)	children of the wicked (49)	all nations who drink (3)
enemy went away (25)			
servants doubt sower (27)			Satan sits in hearts (3)
			tares choke the wheat (3)
			church driven out into the wilderness (3)
			blade is yet tender (4)

* Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2004), 192–93, 267–68. The five emendations shown on this chart all appear in Manuscript 2 (John Whitmer, scribe); only the first three appear in Manuscript 1 (Sidney Rigdon, scribe).

Matthew 13			D&C 86
Parable	Explanation	JST Emendations*	Parable
both grow together (30)			both grow together (7)
harvest (30)	the end of the world (<i>aiōn</i>) (40)	destruction of the wicked before the Son of Man shall come (39–42)	last days, fully ripe (7)
reapers (30)	angels (41)	the messengers sent of heaven (40)	angels (5)
			crying, ready, waiting (5)
tares in bundles (30)	offensive things, iniquity (41)		
	people who do iniquity (<i>anomia</i>) (41)		
to be burned (30)	in a furnace of fire (42)	cast out among the wicked (43)	
then the wheat (30)		gather wheat first then tares bound in bundles to be burned (30)	gather wheat first then tares bound in bundles (7)
			field remains to be burned (7)
			right of priesthood remained (8–9)
	then the <i>righteous</i> (43)		continue in <i>goodness</i> (11)
	will shine forth, as <i>the sun</i> (43)		<i>a light</i> unto the Gentiles (11)
	in the kingdom (43)		been hid from the world (9)
	of their <i>father</i> (43)		in lineage of your <i>fathers</i> (8)

Several observations can be made regarding these four closely related texts and the apostasy. Although other commentators have compared and contrasted these accounts,¹² none has focused primarily and thoroughly on what these texts say specifically about the apostasy. The following examination moves in that direction by addressing several issues of scriptural interpretation.

Preliminarily, one may wonder, Which came first: Doctrine and Covenants 86 or JST Matthew 13? The relationship between the words in these two passages is intriguing but uncertain. Joseph Smith first worked on Matthew 13 sometime in the spring of 1832.¹³ Doctrine and Covenants 86 was received on 6 December 1832. Although Joseph continued to work on his translation of the Bible after this time, he did not include the information contained in section 86 in the emendations to the text found in the Joseph Smith Translation.

Consideration of six differences between the wording of these four texts sheds light on how these texts relate to each other and which is more likely the original version of the parable given by Jesus during his Galilean ministry:

12. The most thorough is Danel W. Bachman, “Joseph Smith and the Parables of Matthew 13,” in *A Symposium on the New Testament* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1980), 34–38.

13. Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: Seventy’s Mission Bookstore, 1981), 179 and 317, comments that the initial draft of Matthew 13 JST was “sometime between 7 April and 19 June 1831” and that the passage was subsequently revised “to correspond with section 86” regarding the sequence of the harvest. The Prophet’s comments on the parables in Matthew 13, which appeared in the *Messenger and Advocate* on November 19, 1835, mainly follow the version in the King James Bible, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 97–98, 100–101.

1. *The “softer view” of the apostasy in Matthew 13.* Perhaps most significantly, the version of the parable found in the New Testament (which part of the parable was not modified in the Joseph Smith Translation) offers a “softer view” of the apostasy than does section 86. In the traditional text of the parable, the good seeds and the bad seeds grow together without any apparent difficulty for a long period of time. The tares are a serious nuisance in Matthew 13 but not a consequential problem.

Botanically speaking (and relevant to all versions of this parable), it is interesting that when tares sprout, they appear deceptively similar to wheat. Tares are practically indistinguishable from wheat, even after the head has begun to form. Not until the very end, when it finally becomes apparent that the weed has not produced kernels of wheat, is it possible to distinguish between the two without close inspection. Eventually, however, the heavy heads of wheat bend over and droop down, while the light and empty heads of the tares remain standing straight up. This may suggest the haughty pride of the tares, which stands in contrast to the humble bowing down of the wheat. This symbolism would usefully parallel and corroborate the visions of Lehi and Nephi in which the pride of the people in the great and spacious building was the source of their wickedness and the cause of their demise. But, other than the perennial problem of pride in the world and the need for church leaders to be patient in not trying to root out the tares too quickly, the situation presented in the familiar version of this parable does not appear to be grievous.

Even this soft view of the apostasy, however, may tell us something important. The problem would arise because people would not be able to distinguish in the early stages of Christianity between good “wheat” and useless “tares”; and perhaps, in response, some of the servants did not follow the

master's instructions to wait but began precipitously pulling out the tares, and with them (unwittingly but inevitably) came the wheat. By reexamining the historical evidence with this perspective in mind, Latter-day Saint scholars and students may uncover overlooked evidence of these very problems and developments. For example, various teachings about the Godhead or the mode of baptism were propagated among early Christian denominations; in such cases, the problem was that none of them were correct, but since no one could distinguish or authoritatively declare which was right and which was wrong, eventually the correct doctrine faded into obscurity. At the same time, LDS scholars could then detect ways in which the restoration brought back keys of knowledge that would cure that basic problem by enabling people to distinguish wheat from tare.

2. *The "tougher view" of the apostasy in Doctrine and Covenants 86.* In the Doctrine and Covenants, however, it is obvious that the wheat and the tares do not coexist for very long. Soon, "the tares choke the wheat and drive the church into the wilderness" (D&C 86:3). In this text, the tares have the effect of crowding out the righteous elements within the church and driving away its true and living powers. While some LDS commentators have passed over the dire implications of this revelation without being fazed,¹⁴ some others have recognized its tough consequences, especially in conjunction with Doctrine and Covenants 88:94,¹⁵ which speaks of "that great church, the

14. E. Keith Howick, *The Parables of Jesus the Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 31, makes no mention of the church being "choked" and even suggests that the operation of the parable "applies to the Church whenever it is in existence."

15. See, for example, Joseph Fielding McConkie and Craig J. Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 620.

mother of abominations. . . . She is the tares of the earth; she is bound in bundles; her bands are made strong, no man can loose them; therefore, she is ready to be burned.”

What can this point in section 86 tell us about the apostasy? Although a tare is a plant that looks very much like wheat, it lacks the essential kernel, the substance with which to produce a meaningful harvest for the master of the field. Once the wheat of the field has been choked out, although a few straggling stalks of wheat might still be found here and there in the world, the only effective cure is to replant the field with a new infusion of good seed.

The expectation that the church would suffer and would be forced into the wilderness is not without attestation elsewhere in the New Testament, as others have noted as well.¹⁶ In Revelation 12:6, the Apostle John prophesied and expected that, after the child was caught up unto God and to his throne (that is, after the resurrection of Jesus), “the woman [the church] fled into the wilderness where she hath a place prepared of God,” where she would remain under divine protection and preservation for an apocalyptic era. Accordingly, Doctrine and Covenants 33:5 speaks of the restored church as being “called forth out of the wilderness,” reversing the development foreseen by John of old.

The essential element of this apostasy, according to this view, would appear to be the loss of the priesthood.¹⁷ As section 86 explains, it was the priesthood that went into hiding: “The *priesthood* hath continued through the lineage of your

16. Sidney B. Sperry, *Doctrine and Covenants Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 416; Doxey, *Latter-day Prophets and the Doctrine and Covenants*, 3:127–28; McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:297; Bachman, “Parables of Matthew 13,” 37.

17. Discussed in Theodore M. Burton, “Salvation for the Dead: A Missionary Activity,” *Ensign*, May 1975, 71.

fathers—For ye are lawful heirs, according to the flesh, and have been *hid from the world with Christ* in God—Therefore your life and the priesthood have remained, and must needs remain through you and your lineage until the restoration of all things spoken by the mouths of all the holy prophets since the world began” (D&C 86:8–10; emphasis added). Here, according to this modern revelation which appeared as the sixth revelation in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants with the subtitle “On Priesthood,”¹⁸ the priesthood was hidden from the world with Christ, in the same manner in which he himself had been taken up into the presence and protection of God in Revelation 12.

During the time when the priesthood was absent, of course, other characteristics of Christianity could well have remained, even under this tougher view of the apostasy. Several elements of true Christianity certainly did remain, such as many of its basic ethical teachings, its pious reverence and devotion to Christ’s words, and its yearning for peace and heavenly salvation. Nevertheless, the loss of the priesthood, which was originally bestowed by Jesus upon his disciples, and the right to which continued down to the time of the restoration through the lineage of the fathers of those who would receive the priesthood in the last dispensation, was certainly the most monumental of losses.

3. *Who plants the good seed?* Whether the wheat would be strong enough and able to retain its place may relate to another difference between these two texts. In Matthew, the good seed is said to be planted by the Son of Man (Matthew 13:37). In the Doctrine and Covenants, the good seed is planted by the apostles: “the apostles were the sowers of the seed” (D&C 86:2).

18. *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints* (Kirtland, OH: F. G. Williams, 1835), 99.

This difference may be significant to our understanding of the apostasy in the following way: In Matthew (both in the KJV and the JST), the seed originally preached by Christ himself would have come with unmediated divine power and authority. Then, during Christ's lifetime and while men were asleep (or inattentive), the tares would be planted (Matthew 13:25). In this version, the sowing of the tares happens before the apostles die, for they (the servants) soon notice the tares growing and question the quality of the seeds the master had sown.

In the Doctrine and Covenants, however, the good seed was planted by the apostles, and it is only "after they have fallen asleep" (D&C 86:3) that Satan, who sits to reign, sows the tares that will choke the wheat and drive the church into the wilderness. The sleeping of the apostles "is generally interpreted by Latter-day Saints to mean after they were dead."¹⁹ This offers a plausible reading of the parable, for the Greek text uses an articular infinitive, "in *the* sleeping of men" (*en de tōi katheudein tous anthrōpous*), which may refer to death. The English rendition of the KJV follows the Latin Vulgate, "cum autem dormirent homines," which is a construction invented by Jerome not parallel to the Greek. Section 86 does not include any reference to the servants awaking and finding the tares in the field, so it does not imply that the apostles would wake up and find the tares. Instead, according to this version, the word that will be crowded out and fail is the word as it was spread by various apostles, not the word as it came forth in its purity from the mouth of Jesus (compare 1 Nephi 13:24). Although the words of the apostles still would have been true enough for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, their delivery may not have been as strong or as clear as had been the original proclamation of

19. Bachman, "Parables of Matthew 13," 36.

fathers—For ye are lawful heirs, according to the flesh, and have been *hid from the world with Christ* in God—Therefore your life and the priesthood have remained, and must needs remain through you and your lineage until the restoration of all things spoken by the mouths of all the holy prophets since the world began” (D&C 86:8–10; emphasis added). Here, according to this modern revelation which appeared as the sixth revelation in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants with the subtitle “On Priesthood,”¹⁸ the priesthood was hidden from the world with Christ, in the same manner in which he himself had been taken up into the presence and protection of God in Revelation 12.

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19. Bachman, "Parables of Matthew 13," 36.

the gospel by Jesus Christ, especially when those words were taken to the nations of the world in their various languages and cultures. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the tares were planted in earnest by the great persecutor of the church, the apostate, the whore, after the apostles were dead, not after just one night's sleep.

4. *When and how long do the wheat and tares grow together?* These two accounts also differ in terms of the duration over which they say that the wheat and tares will grow together. In the New Testament, which was written at a time when many disciples believed that the second coming of the Savior would happen within the first or second generation of Christianity, the parable leads readers to expect that the wheat and the tares will grow together continuously until the final judgment (Matthew 13:30), which need not have been understood in the days of Matthew as being a very long time away.

In section 86, however, the parable speaks of a new planting of wheat in the last days, when “the Lord is beginning to bring forth the word and the blade is springing up and is yet tender” (D&C 86:4). Thus, section 86 assumes that a second planting will occur at the time of the restoration.²⁰ Then, for a while, the new wheat will grow in the field (which at that time would have been full of well-established tares), will grow as the hosts of heaven wait for the final gathering and judgment.

Indeed, the overall emphasis in the two accounts is very different. In Matthew, the focus of attention in the parable is strictly on the final judgment, the separation of the wheat and the tares, the burning at the “end of this world” (Matthew 13:40), whereas

20. See Joseph Fielding Smith, “The Predicted Judgments,” in *BYU Speeches of the Year, 1966–67* (Provo, UT, 1967), 4: “The sowing of the seed occurred twice”; Bachman, “Parables of Matthew 13,” 37.

the JST and the Doctrine and Covenants are primarily interested in the separation of the wheat and the tares before the coming of the Son of man before the final burning, with greater emphasis on heavenly messengers, gathering, bundling, and preparation for the final judgment (D&C 86:7). Thus, JST Manuscript 2 removes the “furnace of fire” (Matthew 13:42) and says that those who work iniquity shall be separated “out among the wicked,” before the offending world is burned.

5. *Who are the harvesters?* The various accounts also present different possibilities for the identity of the harvesters. In the Galilean account, the harvesters are unidentified. It is possible that the servants mentioned in Matthew 13:27 and 28 are not the same people as the reapers in Matthew 13:30. Teams of reapers would typically be brought in at harvest time to augment the normal work force available to a land owner.

In the revelations to Joseph Smith, however, the harvesters are again dealt with more strongly, being identified as overeager angels, begging the Lord day and night hoping to be sent out to reap the field (D&C 86:5),²¹ while the Joseph Smith Translation identifies the reapers as “the angels, or the messengers sent of heaven” (Matthew 13:40 JST).²² Because the Greek word for *angels* literally means “messengers,” the JST may in fact be based on a good alternative translation of the term *aggelous* in Matthew 13:41. The implication in the JST is that these messengers will come with messages of warning and instruction before the overeager angels come for the actual harvest.

6. *Wheat before tares.* Indicative also is the difference in these two accounts between the order in which the wheat and

21. On their eagerness, see G. Homer Durham, comp., *Discourses of Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), 251–52.

22. JST Manuscript 2. JST Manuscript 1 reads “and messengers of heaven.”

the tares will be harvested. In the New Testament, the tares are cut first so that they can be bound into bundles and burned (Matthew 13:30), and then the reapers are told to gather the wheat into the man's barn. One must say, however, this seems an odd order in which to proceed. Going through a large field and cutting off the standing heads of the tares would be possible, but quite tedious. A more efficient way of harvesting, and thus a stronger natural order for the parable, would be for the wheat to be gathered, threshed, winnowed, and separated from the chaff (including the tares and its lighter-than-wheat grass seed), and then for all the chaff and the remaining stalks to be bound in bundles, leaving the stubble of the field to be burned.

In section 86, as well as in the Joseph Smith Translation, the latter order is in fact the sequence in which the harvest is prophesied to occur (D&C 86:7; Matthew 13:29 JST).²³ In these modern texts, it is expected that messengers will be sent from heaven and that a harvest or ingathering of wheat will first proceed throughout the world, after which it all becomes ripe for judgment.

With these six points in mind, one may then ask, Which, then, was the original version of this parable? Ultimately, Latter-day Saint interpreters of this parable are faced with a choice. Do these differences simply “illustrate the flexibility and levels of parable interpretation,” as Bachman proposes;²⁴ or do they show a “double allusion or application,” preferred by Robert Matthews;²⁵ or did the original version of this parable as given by Jesus look more like section 86 than like Matthew 13? Did

23. JST Manuscript only. As Bachman notes, the same order is followed in D&C 101:64–67. Bachman, “Parables of Matthew 13,” 37.

24. Bachman, “Parables of Matthew 13,” 36.

25. Robert J. Matthews, *The Parables of Jesus* (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 1969), 82.

Jesus prophesy only one planting of good seed, as in Matthew 13, or did he speak of two plantings as in section 86, one by his original apostles and another in the restoration? Or did Jesus possibly tell this parable on more than one occasion, speaking more softly about the apostasy when he addressed his public audiences and when he explained his general meaning to the disciples in the house, while spelling out the coming difficulties more drastically on other occasions to those who had ears to hear?

In whatever way these questions might be answered, for purposes of understanding the apostasy, section 86 is our strongest canonical guide. And in several ways, the version of the parable in section 86 may be preferable to, and actually makes better practical sense than does Matthew 13; for this reason this modern revelation might reflect a restoration of the original, making it an explanation²⁶ or “translation” in a strong sense, not merely an interpretation by the Prophet Joseph Smith.²⁷ Thus, the expectation advanced in section 86 might be relevant to what Jesus told some of his disciples would happen to the church after their deaths. This seems likely, for at least six reasons:

1. Doctrine and Covenants 86 allows readers to distinguish the plantings of wheat in the parable of the wheat and the tares (first by the apostles and then again in the restoration) from the plantings of seeds on four soils in the parable of the sower. In the

26. In his journal on 6 December 1832, Joseph Smith wrote that he spent the day “translating and received a revelation explaining the Parable [of] the wheat and the tears [*sic*] &c.” Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 5.

27. Joseph Fielding Smith assumed that we still lacked the original form of the parable: “If we had the parable just as He gave it, I am sure that this distinction [of the two sowings] would be in it.” Smith “Predicted Judgments,” 4.

parable of the sower, Jesus seems to speak of his own sowing of the seed. If both parables originally spoke of plantings by Jesus, then why do the stories go off in such different directions?

2. Doctrine and Covenants 86 clearly distinguishes between the initial servants and the reapers, and it places the harvesting of the wheat first. These points seem to reflect realistic agricultural practices and, therefore, would seem more likely to have been present in the original version of the parable. Moreover, Matthew 13 does not make particularly good agricultural sense by completely ignoring any consequences of the tares in the field. Patience is required, of course, but it has its costs.

3. According to section 86, two different eras are contemplated by the parable: the initial time of planting and the final season of harvesting. This duality may be reflected in the fact that the word for *world* shifts from *kosmos* in Matthew 13:38 to *aiōn* in Matthew 13:39, the first referring to a world set in order and the last pointing to an era or age. In other words, this difference in terminology allows for the understanding that the ordered world established in the field at the time of the first planting refers to a very different stage from the final conclusion of the overall era.²⁸

4. Doctrine and Covenants 86 puts the sowing of the tares after the deaths of the apostles. It does not attribute any

28. The view of section 86 is also consonant with the fact that sowing a field with two kinds of seed was not only bad farming practice but also was prohibited by the law of Moses: “Thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed” (Leviticus 19:19); “thou shalt not sow thy vineyard with divers seeds: lest the fruit of thy seed which thou has sown, and the fruit of thy vineyard, be defiled” (Deuteronomy 22:9). Jesus’s Jewish audience may have seen this element of defilement of the field by the evil enemy not only as an act of vandalism but as one of lawlessness and impurity.

negligence or inattentiveness to the Savior. Is it likely that Jesus would have told a story portraying such audacity by his enemy while he himself is still around but asleep on the job? As discussed above, the Greek in Matthew 13:25 points to something more than ordinary slumber.

5. Doctrine and Covenants 86 does not countenance any suggestion that the master was responsible for the presence of the tares in the field by planting poor seed; nor does it suggest that the initial servants had any doubts as to the goodness of the original seeds.

6. Doctrine and Covenants 86 speaks in terms similar to Revelation 12 regarding the apostasy, which adds yet another authentic ring. John may even have learned some of what he reports in Revelation 12 from the Savior's discussion of the parable of the tares.

From the Greek terminology in Matthew 13, it would have been more evident to original readers than it is to English readers that the parable contemplated an apostasy, for the Greek in Matthew 13 says that the reapers will come and rid the kingdom of *panta ta skandala kai tous poiountas tēn anomian*. These are strong words that invite further investigation. They say that there will be *things* in the field that are *skandala*, meaning "traps," "temptation to sin, enticement to apostasy, false belief," "that which gives offense or causes revulsion or opposition," or other desecrating or offensive things,²⁹ recalling "pervert" and "stumble" in 1 Nephi 13:27, 29. In addition, there will be people who do *anomia*. This word signals more than ordinary iniquity, describing complete lawlessness and

29. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 760.

apostasy. Workers of *anomia* are told to depart in Matthew 7:23; the man of *anomia* is the devil of the apostasy in the key scripture on this subject in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.

It also seems probable that some Christians living shortly after the deaths of the apostles would not have been comforted by the strong message of section 86. Some of those Christians, perhaps even Matthew himself, may have been tempted to modify the original story. They would have been saddened to hear the words “choke the wheat and drive the church into the wilderness” (D&C 86:3). As troubles mounted, they may have begun to wonder, “Didst thou not sow good seed?” and to look for someone else to blame. As they expected the end to come quickly, they could plausibly have foreshortened the time frame of the original parable. They also could have sought consolation in the idea that they should let the tares simply grow alongside the wheat, if they saw that they were losing the struggle to root out false teachings and false prophets in any event. If the stronger reading of the parable were the original, then this offers another example of a plain and precious part being taken from the gospel and then from the book.

In reshaping the parable to give a less drastic message, the early Christians may have found support in certain scriptures that speak of apostasy in the weaker, reversible sense. The strong version of the apostasy that stands behind the text in the Doctrine and Covenants and the weaker view of apostasy that is present in Matthew 13 reflect an ambivalence toward apostasy found elsewhere in scripture. This ambiguity may help to explain how these two readings of the parable of the wheat and the tares came into existence.

On the one hand, several passages in scripture view apostasy in a strong, disastrous sense. In these texts, apostasy is viewed as treason and rebellion against God, punishable by

death, eradication, banishment, or destruction. For example, actually worshipping false gods constitutes the rejection of the true God. Thus, under Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 13, worshipping idols or leading people into apostasy constitutes a capital offense. In the Book of Mormon, the people of the city of Ammonihah, who are put to death by the sword and whose city becomes a heap of defilement, and Korihor, who is convicted of blasphemy and apostasy and trampled to death by the people of Antionum, represent this kind of full-fledged, outright apostasy and rebellion.

On the other hand, apostasy is viewed in other passages as a curable lapse of faithfulness, from which it is possible to return through repentance and the termination of one's backsliding. In the Old Testament, Israel is depicted in its apostasy as an unfaithful wife, even a whore, who is still loved by her lord and husband, but whose unfaithfulness causes pain and humiliation and will eventually result in divorce if the unfaithful wife does not mend her ways. The love of the husband is deep. He has written the name of his wife on the palms of his hands and will not forget her if she wishes to return. In the prophetic lawsuits of the Old Testament, a guilty verdict is announced and judgments are proclaimed by the oracles of God against God's contract-breaking people, but the execution of the penalty is suspended in hopes that Israel will repent and return. In the Book of Mormon, both Alma the Younger and his son Corianton were covenant-breaking apostates who repented and became again acceptable to the Lord. Viewed in this way, apostasy is curable.

Accordingly, the parable of the wheat and the tares, as it was originally taught by the Savior and understood by his ancient listeners, could well have declared the reality of powerful consequences, while also leaving open the possibility of

repentance. Thus understood, the version preserved in the New Testament overemphasized the optimistic view of apostasy that, in spite of the tares being sewn by the enemy in the field, the difficulties might not be so drastic. That trajectory of seeing the tares in an increasingly positive sense is, indeed, traceable from Clement of Alexandria, who saw the field as the entire world and the tares as alien Greek philosophy;³⁰ to Cyprian, who saw the field as the church and the tares as lapsed Christians within the church who reverted to sacrificing to heathen gods;³¹ to Augustine, who interpreted the tares as the weaknesses found in each person, through which “the fruit of the wheat is increased.”³² Ultimately, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, and Cyril came to see the field only as the human heart and the tares as private evil thoughts or wicked desires.³³

In this parable, however, Jesus clearly anticipated that a public apostasy would surely come. He made it clear that the apostasy would affect the entire field or world. No corner of the world was singled out as a protected area or one where the tares could be selectively uprooted. But at the same time, there was hope. At the appropriate time, harvesters would come with instructions and authorizations from the Master of the field, allowing the works of the last days to go forth.

30. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.8; 7.15.

31. Cyprian, *Epistles* 50.3; see also 51.6; 51.25.

32. Augustine, *Psalms* 55.15.

33. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*; Jerome, *Epistles* 130.7; 122.3; Cyril, *Catechetical Lecture 4, On the Ten Points of Doctrine*, 1. The increasing tendency of the later Fathers to see apostasy—and hence the meaning of the parable of the wheat and the tares—only in individual personal terms, rather than in collective institutional terms, is at least consistent with the decline in the institutional vulnerability of the church as a whole.

Other Passages on Apostasy in the Modern Scriptures

No other passages of scripture in modern revelation are as specific on this topic as are 1 Nephi 13 and Doctrine and Covenants 64 and 86. Nevertheless, Latter-day Saint students of the apostasy may find general guidance in other passages of modern revelation that are helpful in generating clues or giving background perspectives for studies of the apostasy. Several different models and teachings about apostasy can be found in the Book of Mormon. For example, Zenos's allegory of the olive tree depicts the problem of apostasy in ancient Israel in terms of decay and the production of bitter fruit; the remedy involved pruning, grafting, and eventually burning of the dead wood. Lehi's dream, which is closely related to Nephi's vision, sees the negative behaviors of apostasy as becoming ashamed, leaving the tree, going over to pride, wandering into unknown paths, and becoming lost in mists of darkness. The remedy is to hold to the rod, the word of God, and to stay on the straight and narrow path. Nephi's criticisms of Jerusalem laid the blame on the shepherds who misled the flock, and the cure was to depart and begin a new flock. In the Nephite prophetic view generally, the underlying problem is rejection of the divinity of the Savior and of his eternal sacrifice; scattering is the consequence of such apostasy.

Likewise, prophecies in the Book of Mormon about the conditions that would prevail in Joseph Smith's day might be combed for indication of the characteristics of the late period of the apostasy. Thus, in 2 Nephi 26:20–22, one reads of pride, stumbling, putting down of miracles, relying on one's own wisdom, seeking to get gain, grinding on the poor, contending, envying, and forming secret combinations; 2 Nephi 28:4 portrays members contending with each other, priests contending with each other, teaching with their learning and denying the Holy

Ghost. Statements by Jesus in 3 Nephi 16:13 indicate the need for the Gentiles to repent and return to Christ. Predictions by Moroni in Mormon 8 repeatedly say that the restoration “shall come in a day when” people shall say miracles are done away; the blood of saints will cry out because of secret combinations; the power of God shall be denied, churches defiled, and leaders proud and contentious; fires and tempests shall rage in strange lands; pollutions shall be found in the earth, such as murders, robbing, lying, deceit, adultery, and abominations; and forgiveness will be offered for money (Mormon 8:26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 32).

Thus, modern-day revelation provides not only prophetic insights into the nature and conditions of apostasy preceding the restoration but also speaks rather specifically on the causes and steps of apostasy in the early years after the mortal ministry of Christ. These guideposts of scripture promise to be of great worth in the search for further understanding of the history of Christianity.