Epilogue to *Standing Apart: Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*

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"We Have Only the Old Thing": Rethinking Mormon Restoration

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In 1795, the Scottish minister Alexander Fraser published his popular work, *Key to the Prophecies*, which included a gloss of a passage from the book of Revelation of special interest to Protestants of the era: "And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, . . . where she is nourished for a time" (Rev. 12:6). In Fraser's interpretation, this prophecy of the woman in the wilderness refers to the time when, "as the visible church declined from the doctrines and precepts of Christianity, the true Church of Christ gradually retired from the view of men, till at length, . . . the true church of Christ, considered as a community, wholly disappeared." This is not, Fraser believed, an unmitigated calamity. For the church in the wilderness, according to the words of prophecy, is "fed by the word and Spirit of God, without the outward ordinances, . . . which . . . were defiled," it is true. But otherwise, in his vision, the "true church of Christ" is rendered invisible, protected, nourished, and preserved.[1]

Fraser then took the unusual position of reading the further implications of his own interpretation. When *any* church becomes "visible as a society, she shall not be safe, but be corrupted more or less by the same artifices which overwhelmed the [first] great body of professed Christians." New reformations can occur, but inevitably the process of corruption will continue "ad infinitum," he writes—at least until the time of the prophesied years of exile come to an end. Then, and only then, will the church become

"visible as a community, extended over the whole earth, 'clear as the sun, fair as the moon, and terrible as an army with banners.'"[2] A few decades later, in 1825, an article appearing in an independent religious journal, *The Telescope*, picked up Fraser's argument, giving its interpretation of the woman's flight into the wilderness. "Whenever a people become organized into a visible body," it agreed, "they are no longer the true church of Christ but fall in with the grand apostasy."[3] Observing the condition of Protestant Christianity, the author agreed with Fraser's maxim, that conspicuous organization was only an invitation to new apostasy, and even quoted as corroboration the lament of John Wesley and John Fletcher that the breakaway Methodists had themselves so quickly fallen into strife and excess.

Some nineteenth-century interpreters of this passage believed that with the abdication of Austrian emperor Franz II in 1806, and the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, the wilderness sojourn of the church was at an end. William Coldwell wrote in 1831 that, according to promise, the church had not been "devoured; it was wounded and driven from the temple, but not slain. God himself prepared a refuge, and amidst that refuge . . . [protected] the Church in the wilderness." And now the era of its deliverance had begun.[4]

This background seems important context for Joseph Smith's understanding of apostasy and restoration, providing clues to how he might have seen his own project. Mormons have largely adopted an apostasy narrative that emphasizes radical loss and abrupt reinstitution. But Smith himself spoke and acted out of a context that gave particular interpretive value to the allegory of Revelation 12 along the lines of these predecessors.[5] Smith invoked the language of Revelation 12 (the coming out of the

wilderness) on several occasions and juxtaposed it with the triumphal language of Solomon's Song (the army terrible with banners), just as Fraser had a century earlier. The narrative Mormonism subsequently developed of a radical and emphatic rupture in the apostolic era, with a total de novo restoration, is not indicated in either Smith's language or his actions. What follows is only the briefest outline of what I think was his self-understanding.

We do not know when Smith first saw himself as inaugurator of a new dispensation. The directive to organize a church may have come as an unwelcome surprise at the very moment when the already onerous task of translating, under impossible circumstances, a sacred text from an ancient language had become overwhelming. In one and the same revelation, given March 1829, the Lord tells Smith that he may desist from the translation till rescue arrives, but he is at the same time told of an even larger enterprise soon to unfold. It is at this point that I would draw particular attention to the wording. The revelation's focus is on the Book of Mormon and its preparatory function of effecting what is called "a work of reformation," the putting down of "all lyings and deceivings and priestcraft." In sum, says the voice of God, "I will establish my church yea even the church which was taught by my disciples" (Book of Commandments 4).

But as you may have noted, this is not the version that appears in the 1835 *Doctrine and Covenants*. The language is revised fairly significantly. In D&C 5, the reference has changed to "this the beginning of the rising up and coming forth of my church out of the wilderness—clear as the moon, and fair as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners." (Smith will repeat this language verbatim in section 33 and later

109, showing just how critical to his thinking it had become.) Like his predecessors, Smith demonstrated an awareness that the ancient church was nourished, not abolished, and had in some sense persevered not disappeared. In this reading, many teachings and principles of the original church survived more or less intact, though clearly in retreat from the mainstream, underground, or on the peripheries of orthodoxy. And he did not understand this coming out of the wilderness as an abrupt event but, rather, as a gradual process of assimilation, differentiation, and development. In 1832, Smith gave his fullest account of how the process would unfold, in glossing the parable of the wheat and tares (D&C 86). Contamination drove the church into the wilderness, he wrote, the tares of priestcraft growing prolifically among much wheat of truth. Yet even now, two years after the incorporation of the church, the process of "bringing forth the word" was just beginning, the revelation declared. Joseph's own work, as he read in the Book of Mormon, was to bring "to pass *much [but not all] restoration*" (2 Nephi 3:24). The tares and wheat were still to grow apace, side by side. As any farmer knows, only fine discernment, not wholesale burning, can separate the two. And it was just such discernment that Smith was always enjoining upon his fellow Saints.

As illustrated above, Smith's predecessors and contemporaries believed that the church in the wilderness symbolized the reality of an invisible church, where righteous individuals, their spiritual gifts, and godly principles and practices persisted. One of the clearest confirmations of his understanding of a holy church in the wilderness that had never fully disappeared came by revelation in May 1831, when the Lord revealed that in the background, independent of the Latter-day Saint Restoration, God had reserved unto himself "holy men," whom Joseph knew nothing about (D&C 49:8). This echoes of

course the idea of the invisible church and earlier revelation that in the latter days the Lord's work would be temporal before it was spiritual, suggesting that one must not be confused with the other (D&C 29:32). We might note in this regard that Mormons have largely abandoned the equivalence of the Great and Abominable Church and Catholicism. They have not yet, as far as I can see, reconsidered the meaning of that concept's counterpart: the Church of the Lamb of God.

It is in this larger context that we need to take more seriously Smith's words, "If the Presbyterians have any truth, embrace that. If the Baptists and Methodists have truth, embrace that too. Get all the good in the world if you want to come out a pure Mormon."[6] Elsewhere, he called it "the first and fundamental principle of our holy religion" to be free "to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men, or by the dominations of one another":[7] "We don't ask any people to throw away any good they have got we only ask them to Come and get more."[8]

This catalog of his liberal statements on religious truth and holy men suggests that Smith's prophetic practice was neither the unstudied and erratic plagiarism of his caricaturists nor always the epiphany-driven receipt of "vertical revelation" imputed to him by his devoted followers. In Joseph's own conception of prophetic vocation, he emphatically resists facile notions of originality or intellectual theft. Smith believed himself to be an oracle of God, subject to moments of heavenly encounter and the pure flow of inspiration. But he also was insatiably eclectic in his borrowings and adaptations, with an adventuresome mind, prone to speculation and fully comfortable with the trial and error of intellectual effort. This method involved both inspiration and

experimentation. “By proving contraraties, truth is made manifest,” he wrote on another occasion.[9]

The grand project of restoration, then, relied upon a vision of apostasy as retreat and admixture, rather than absence. His task would involve not just innovation, or ex nihilo oracular pronouncements upon lost doctrines, but the salvaging, collecting, and assimilating of much that was mislaid, obscured, or neglected. Space does not permit of elaborating one crucial caveat to this position: Like Fraser, Smith believed that apostasy *did* involve the corruption beyond remedy of certain ordinances and covenants; and only the heavenly transmission of authority could recuperate those essentials.

The need to institutionally protect and safeguard those ordinances may explain why Smith resisted the lessons of precedent and Fraser’s warnings and gave tangible shape to the Restoration. In Smith’s program, Mormons thus become the equivalent of modern Sadducees, as we often understand the term, existing primarily as guardians of the temple and its ordinances.

But for the rest, Smith’s prophetic vocation included inspired borrowings, reworkings, collaborations, incorporations, and modifications of what he found about him, with many false starts, second-guessings, and self-revisions.[10] He even complained “that when he ventured to give his private opinion on any subject of importance his words were often garbled and their meaning twisted and then given out as the word of the Lord because they came from him.”[11] Two more examples reflect just how self-conscious Smith and his associates were about the nature of this process.

First, we might consider the year 1843, when the church came under attack—as it has in modern times—for its doctrine of salvation of the dead. “You are the bad as the

papists," Thomas Ward reported some as saying, alleging a suspicious similarity with the doctrine of purgatory. In a 1954 LDS manual, as Spencer Young has pointed out, James Barker felt it necessary to clarify why baptism for the dead is *not* similar to the doctrine of purgatory. But listen to the editor's 1843 response: "We believe, that fallen as the Roman church may be, she has traces of many glorious principles that were once in the church of Christ."[12] (Compare B. H. Roberts's insight that the Reformers "left more truth in the Catholic church than they brought out with them.")[13] This is not to suggest, necessarily, that Smith saw in purgatory the seeds of vicarious baptism. But his understanding of apostasy and restoration made it possible for Ward to note what contemporary Mormons would most likely miss: purgatory presumes that those who live may perform charitable actions that impact favorably the condition of those in the spirit world. Regarding this same world of spirits, Universalism similarly provided rationales for redeeming the dead that Smith would appropriate virtually verbatim.

The second, more obvious example is Masonry. According to Benjamin Johnson, Smith "told me Freemasonry, as at present, was the apostate endowment, as sectarian religion was the apostate religion."[14] Here the case is made explicit: Masonry is to the endowment as sectarianism is to religion generally; neither is to be discarded wholesale. Joseph joined the Masons, found much of value there, and modified and recontextualized what he had found. To be disturbed at such a process, as some Mormons are, one has to dismiss Smith's religious construct, which made such a strategy not just acceptable but natural and inevitable.

Smith's theological rationale seems exactly modeled on Augustine's gloss of the Old Testament story of the spoiling of the Egyptians. On the night of their exodus, the

children of Israel "borrowed" riches from their enslavers, "in order to make better use of them." Just so, Augustine argued, the pagans have truths that, like silver and gold, "were used wickedly and harmfully in the service of demons." It is the task of the Christians to put them to their proper use.[15] Smith was explicit and unapologetic in assimilating the scattered truths and practices he found, whether from contemporary writers such as Thomas Dick or from groups like the Masons, and "put them to their proper use."

It bears emphasis that in light of these considerations, it is historically misleading—and even erroneous—in one important regard to consider Mormonism another variety of restorationism. Parley P. Pratt made this seemingly obvious point: "We can never understand precisely what is meant by restoration, unless we understand what is lost or taken away."[16] But that is not how other restorationists would have articulated the challenge. The problem seen by other restorationists from Calvin and Servetus to the Campbellites was unwarranted accrual, not missing elements. That is what restoration implies in art and architectural restoration alike, where the remedy generally involves peeling away layers of accretion: lacquers, dirt, and grime that have accumulated or partitions, paneling, and paint that were deliberately imposed on an original structure. That was the sense suggested by the very word *Puritan* as well as by the simple motto of the nineteenth century's most prominent restorationists, Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone: "Where the holy Scriptures speak, we speak; and where they are silent, we are silent."[17] Ethan Smith, another contemporary, quoted the maxim, "Divinity consists in speaking with the scripture; and in going *no further*."[18] Restoration was in its essence the systematic removal of what Christ had never inaugurated and the New Testament had never authorized. And this is where we find a distinctive departure in Smith's thinking,

the first decisive development in his understanding of a growing religion-making project. The moment occurs early in his career—in 1823.

When the great light descended upon him for the second time, as he described the visitation of the angel Moroni, two momentous developments emerged out of the encounter. First, Smith was informed by the messenger that "God had a work for [him] to do." And then, in clarifying what this work would entail, Moroni turned Smith's understanding of restoration inside out: "He said there was a book . . . written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent."[19] Here is no paring away, no stripping back to essentials, but, rather, the hint of a vast expansion. This was no return to fundamentals or New Testament forms but, rather, an introduction of the first of many new scriptures into Mormonism's version of Christianity, in a process that would rupture the concept of *sola scriptura*, enlarge the scope of Christ's Palestinian ministry and words from one hemisphere to two, and signify boundless expansion rather than the studied contraction of sacraments, ordinances, and scripturally authorized practices. Next, Moroni quoted from Malachi, but significantly, "with a little variation from the way it reads in our Bibles." The Bible, in other words, was neither complete nor accurate. Neither was it sufficient. As Pratt would later develop the concept with vibrant but controversial imagery, scripture was demoted to the status of stream rather than fountain. Here we have an astounding, explicit rejection of *sola scriptura*. Mormonism, he suggested, was the true movement to return *ad fontes*. God's utterance preceded and superseded its incarnation as holy writ, tainted through the flawed vessel of human understanding and fractured language. Before he translated the first word of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith had already stepped outside any contemporary definition of

restoration. And so, when Pratt says, "We have only the old thing,"[20] he is of course being ironic. For in Smith's conception, the old thing means immeasurably more, not economically less.

And so, the work of interpreting the revelations of God and creating a coherent system of belief proceeded apace. Rigdon and the Pratt brothers in particular joined in the enterprise of theologizing, speculating, interpreting, and systematizing. What they all shared was the firm belief that an original church, "once indeed beautiful, pure, and intelligent;—clothed with the power and spirit of God," by their day "lay . . . in broken fragments scattered, rent, and disjointed; with nothing to point out its original, but the shattered remnants of its ancient glory."[21] For those with eyes to see, however, the world was replete with these scattered "fragments of Mormonism."[22] As with the "ancient palace" now reduced to ruins, to which they compared the primitive church, the work of restoration would entail bringing together the new and the old, the excavation and assemblage of what was sound and the replacement and incorporation of what had been irredeemably lost or corrupted from Eden forward.

Notes

1. Alexander Fraser, *Key to the Prophecies of the Old and New Testaments, which are not yet accomplished* (Philadelphia: John Bioren, 1802 [1795]), 157, 159.

2. Ibid., 164. This association of the church coming out of the wilderness, terrible as an army with banners, combining the language of Solomon and Revelation, appears in Matthew Henry's early eighteenth-century commentary on Joshua's invasion of Canaan. Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* (London: Joseph Ogle Robinson, 1828), 531.

3. "The Early Degeneracy of the Methodists," *The Telescope* 1, no. 48 (April 30, 1825): 189.

4. W. Coldwell, "Europe in the Summer of 1831," in *The Imperial Magazine* (London: Fisher, Son, and Jackson, 1831), 380.

5. Fiona Givens first drew my attention to the potential significance of this verse in reinterpreting the notion of apostasy.

6. The text is corrupt, but the sense is plain: "Presbyterians any truth. embrace that. Baptist. Methodist &c. get all the good in the world. come out a pure Mormon" (in Lyndon Cook and Andrew F. Ehat, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* [Orem: Grandin, 1991], 234).

7. *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1984), 420.

8. Wilford Woodruff Journal, January 22, 1843, in Cook and Ehat, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 159.

9. *Manuscript History of the Church*, F-1, p. 70, in LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

10. Other examples that could be cited include his starting and stopping polygamy (1830s then 1840s), his experiments with polyandry, his many scriptural revisions (including the one I discussed above), his initial embrace of the Kinderhook plates, etc.

11. Jesse W. Crosby, cited in Mark L. McConkie, ed., *Remembering Joseph: Personal Recollections of Those Who Knew the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2003), 99.

12. *Millennial Star* 11, no. 3 (March 1843): 177.

13. B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History: A Text Book* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons Co., 1893), 241.

14. Benjamin Johnson, *My Life's Review* (Independence: Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1947), 96.

15. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2.40.60–61, p. 65.

16. Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People* (New York: Sanford, 1837), 147.

17. Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1868), 239.

18. Ethan Smith, *View of the Trinity* (Poultney, Vt.: Smith and Shute, 1824 [originally published in 1814]), vii; original emphasis.

19. *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832-1844*, ed. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen. (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 222.

20. Parley P. Pratt, Miscellaneous Minutes from April 25, 1847, Meeting, cited in Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 242.

21. "The Religion of the Ancients," *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 9 (March 15, 1843): 137.

22. Not the Prophet, S.T.P., "To the Editor," *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 8 (April 15, 1844): 503.