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*American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism* Milton V.  
**Backman**

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MILTON V. BACKMAN. *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1965. Pp. xvi, 466. \$4.95.

The apostasy-restoration cycle is one of the active organizing principles of Mormon thought. Our children learn its rudiments early in the Sunday School training. Investigators hear it in the first lesson of the Church missionary plan. Some of our most notable scholars, Roberts, Talmage, Barker, and Nibley, have given us highly erudite versions. Now Professor Milton Backman of the Department of Religion at Brigham Young University has taken up the theme, concentrating on the preparation for the restoration, a segment of the cycle previously slighted.

The apostasy-restoration concept compelled Professor Backman to start his account of American religions with the founding of the primitive church. More than a quarter of the book is devoted to the early church, to its metamorphosis into Catholicism, and to the Protestant reforms of the sixteenth century. Without recalling these events, the reader could not understand the direction of American religious development, that is, toward Joseph Smith's restoration of pure, first-century Christianity. To begin with the first settlements in America would rob the story of its meaning.

Though Professor Backman has compiled a good deal of useful information, his general treatment of the early period is familiar. The Protestants did not improve much on Roman Catholic doctrine, he points out, but they did re-establish the Bible as the standard of religious judgment, and post-Reformation diversity led to toleration, necessary preparation for the Restoration.

In a more original section, he describes trends in America which continued this preparation: 1) the evolution from uniformity to religious liberty; 2) the replacement of Calvinist doctrines with liberal views of divine and human nature more in accord with Mormon beliefs; 3) the prevalent quest for the true church in the midst of religious confusion—Joseph's question in the grove was typical, not exceptional. Some Mormons may be surprised to find liberal faiths like Deism and Unitarianism, usually classed as enemies of Christian orthodoxy, breaking ground for the Restoration.

Within this framework, the Restoration itself could be treated as the climax of Providential forces readying men for Joseph's revelations. Similarities between his teachings and earlier ones would simply evidence God's work in preparing the world. Even belief in the Israelitish origins of the Indians or the existence of manuscripts paralleling the *Book of Mormon* would fit. Though aware of this alternative, Professor Backman chose instead to discuss the unique features of Joseph's thought, not to prove divine inspiration, but to show that he made a contribution and was not simply eclectic. The book summarizes the unique aspects of the Mormon concept of God, of the Fall, of salvation for the dead, and so on.

Comparing this approach with the ordinary non-Mormon treatment of our origins suggests the futility of using history to prove or disprove the actuality of Joseph's revelations. Mormons can easily absorb any of the product-of-his-times arguments into the notion of Providential preparation for the Restoration. Moreover, one would expect similarities in a movement that purported only to restore what was taught anciently, especially when the guidebook to this tradition, the Bible, was the most widely read volume in America. On the other hand, little of Joseph's thought can be shown to be entirely unique. With the exception of the *Book of Mormon*, in its totality an anomaly in western America, Joseph's teachings examined piece by piece are only slight variants of beliefs held by one group or another. Even the materiality of God, which Professor Backman lists as unique, resembles ideas current in the Jeffersonian circle at the turn of the century. Mormons would err to build their faith on the assertion that Joseph taught a certain number of unique doctrines. It seems almost inevitable that research will turn up similar tenets in one corner or another.

Mormons and non-Mormons alike will best appreciate Joseph's contribution when they recognize that it lay not in the individual items he taught but in a total configuration of belief. The tone, the balance, the import were all exceptional, and, as Professor McMurrin's book has recently attested, the whole scheme answered some of the most troublesome problems of Christian theology. Historians will always differ on how to account for this remarkable flowering of doctrine in the American west, but all must take it seriously as theology.



Perhaps Professor Backman's work will awaken non-Mormons to the complexity of Mormon doctrine and turn them from the naive treatment of the Church as a strictly social phenomenon.

The usefulness of the apostasy-restoration theme is not exhausted with the establishment of the Church. Professor Backman describes the Seventh-day Adventists, Christian Science, and Jehovah's Witnesses as denominations whose founders rightfully sensed the failings of Christianity but who overshot the mark when they by-passed Mormonism and created their own theologies. A final chapter handles trends since the Civil War, the most important being the liberalization of Protestantism under the impact of scientific skepticism. Though Professor Backman might have pictured Protestantism dying on the vine after serving its historic purpose to seed the ground for the Restoration, he tells about the loss of faith without interpretation.

While the apostasy-restoration cycle thus enlarged frames the book, readers will find much more inside. Summaries of denominational histories and creeds fill most of the pages. Passing over the abstruse questions of philosophical theology, Professor Backman's description of religious tenets will make absorbing reading for Latter-day Saints interested in comparisons with their own beliefs. Indeed the book can be considered an extension of Rulon S. Howells' *His Many Mansions* into the historical dimension, and can stand as a convenient and trustworthy handbook of traditional Protestant and Catholic creedal doctrines.

Professor Backman's work shows how well the apostasy-restoration cycle serves as an interpretive tool, and we should be grateful to those who have written in this tradition. An immense amount of the religious history of western civilization fits into its rubrics. Of course, Latter-day Saint scholars cannot claim all the credit for developing this view. Protestants also wanted to demonstrate an apostasy, and a large part of Roberts' and Talmage's work was borrowed wholesale. The whig interpretation of history, which focuses on the growth of liberty, helped Professor Backman. Still and all, these men have made the most of the resources to create an intelligible past for Latter-day Saints.

Now perhaps we are ready to broaden the apostasy theme to achieve a more comprehensive interpretation of history. Standard procedure thus far has been to list the doctrines of primitive Christianity and to note departures as they occurred. So long as there was a consciousness of a lost truth to be recovered, or a conflict between the true belief and secular philosophy, this interpretation illuminates events. But as Dr. Backman's materials show, after a time theologians began to debate issues only remotely connected with primitive Christianity. Their frame of reference was quite different from ours and to explain them in our terms is to impose on them motives and tensions they never felt.

Perhaps we need to think of the apostasy as related to the fall, man's temporary spiritual death. Human strivings then become efforts to recover union with the divine. When revelation has been given, men conduct their quest in Gospel terms. Priesthood, the temple, and the true doctrines are the subjects at issue, and people continue to think in these categories as they apostatize. At other times men wander so far from the truth that they seek God in ways almost incomprehensible to us, though familiar elements—sacrifice, priesthood, and ritual—are still discernible. They resort also to ostensibly secular means, political power, wealth, science, and social eminence. Only by close attention can we see the similarity between these and the religious strivings we experience.

As we expand our vision, we will likely see that work by scholars like Dr. Backman is only a portion of the total picture. But that realization will in no way diminish our obligation to them for their pioneering efforts.

Richard L. Bushman