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New Research Pushes Christian Apostasy Earlier in Time

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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 25 | 2005

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Library of Congress Hosts Academic Conference on Joseph Smith, Part 2

This report covers the proceedings of the second day of “The Worlds of Joseph Smith,” an academic conference held on 6–7 May 2005 at the Library of Congress, in Washington DC, in recognition of the bicentennial of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s birth. For a report of the first day of proceedings, see the article in *Insights* 25/3 (2005).

Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World

Moderating the fourth session was Andrew Skinner, dean of Religious Education at BYU and the new executive director of ISPART, who remarked that this particular session was “a wonderful opportunity to consider the doctrines taught by Joseph Smith compared to those of other Christian denominations that surrounded Joseph as well as his successors.” The featured presenter of the session was David L. Paulsen, a professor of philosophy at BYU who delivered a paper titled “Joseph Smith Challenges the Christian Theological World.”

Paulsen said that theology was unnecessary before the death of the early apostles and that Joseph Smith posed many challenges to the “diverse and ambivalent world that we call Christian theology”—namely, God’s resumption of direct revelation in modern times; restoration of divine authority to speak and act in God’s name; a greatly enlarged and still open scriptural canon; deeper understanding of Jesus Christ as God and Savior; reaffirmation of the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as opposed to the God of the philosophers and theologians; an ennobling theomorphic understanding of humanity; and a comprehensive and inspiring soteriology (theology dealing with salvation) that, among other things, explains the fate of the unevangelized.

Of those challenges to the theological world, none is more fundamental than the belief in direct

revelation from God, a concept that challenges “every variety of Christian thought,” Paulsen said. He said that Smith’s greatest argument for extrabiblical revelation was his first vision, which informs a Christology that is similar to the apostle Paul’s and that at points agrees with, adds to, and repudiates contemporary Christologies. “The God who revealed himself to Joseph Smith is radically unlike the God of the

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New Research Pushes Christian Apostasy Earlier in Time

A much-anticipated book exploring the root causes of the early Christian apostasy is now off the press: *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds and published by FARMS and BYU Press.

This book is the culmination of several years’ work by BYU scholars who used manuscripts from the first few centuries of Christianity (some not discovered until the last century) to reevaluate the formative research on the apostasy by James E. Talmage, Joseph Fielding Smith, and B. H. Roberts.

Following them, most Latter-day Saint scholars and leaders previously understood the Christian apostasy through the findings of 19th-century Protestant historians and the claims of 18th-century anticlerical writings. Both sources provided a seemingly endless array of evidences of apostasy in Christian history. This reliance on Protestant writers produced in LDS accounts of the apostasy a heavy emphasis on the late-medieval corruption of the Catholic Church, typically described as having occurred during a time of severe spiritual darkness and intellectual backwardness.

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Christian Apostasy cont. from page 1

Over the last century, a wealth of new material and scholarship has been made available, giving a clearer picture of what the Christian experience was like during its first centuries. One result has been the view, set forth in *Early Christians in Disarray*, that the apostasy began much earlier than supposed—as early as the first century AD.

“It is as if you were to approach the aftermath of a car wreck,” Reynolds (political science, BYU) writes in his introductory chapter. “You can conclude from the debris . . . that an accident has occurred. But you would not say that the broken and scattered parts, the injured and dead bodies, and the twisted frame caused the accident. . . . Likewise, all the doctrinal changes, the subsequent corruption, the centuries of religious strife and schism may constitute good evidence that an apostasy occurred but may not be the cause of that apostasy.”

Reynolds argues in another chapter that a principal cause of the apostasy was the abandonment or breaking of sacred covenants by the Christians themselves. “The more we learn about the first decades after the passing of Christ, the more we can see internal rebellion against God’s covenants and against his authorized servants—much like the rebellions against Moses in the wilderness, or against Joseph Smith in Kirtland in 1836,” he writes. “The rebels were members of Christ’s church, sometimes leaders, who sought for earthly power, glory, and even justification for their own sins.” In examining the second-century transformation of covenant-based ordinances into Christian sacraments, Reynolds illuminates Nephi’s statement that many of the covenants were taken away (see 1 Nephi 13:26).

Contributor Eric R. Dursteler (history, BYU) traces the development of Mormon thought on the Christian apostasy and considers how earlier views are gradually giving place to a more balanced view emphasizing the “spiritual nature of the apostasy without embedding it in an ahistorical picture of accompanying intellectual and moral decline.” Richard E. Bennett (church history and doctrine, BYU) joins with Amber J. Seidel (MA candidate in family sociology, Eastern Michigan University) in surveying the wide range of early Mormon preach-

ing and missionary publications to ascertain how the apostasy was understood and discussed in the first years of the restoration.

John W. Welch (law, BYU) examines selected restoration scriptures as a means of reconstructing key elements of prophetic views on the apostasy, providing a guide to our own further research on this topic. He finds in Doctrine and Covenants 64:8 frequently overlooked evidence that the Christian apostasy may have occurred quite early due to unresolved conflicts among the disciples. His detailed analysis of 1 Nephi 13 shows that Jewish persecution of the disciples would contribute to their demise. Welch then turns his attention to the parable of the wheat and tares in D&C 86 as a prophecy of the apostasy.

James E. Faulconer (philosophy, BYU) discusses what the New Testament writers thought about the apostasy and what the associated terminology meant in their day. For example, the term *apostasy* meant “rebellion,” which was not the same as heresy or sin. More specifically, he notes, apostasy was the rejection of temple and priesthood. John Gee (ISPART, BYU) documents the evidence that many plain and precious things were taken away from the scriptures, as Nephi foresaw (1 Nephi 13:28). While a great deal of scholarly attention in recent decades has been concerned with how the New Testament writings were affected by theological politics in the third and fourth centuries (as the Christian canon gradually took shape), Gee focuses instead on the second century to document the extensive changing of the inspired writings that was already in process.

Daniel W. Graham (philosophy, BYU) and James L. Siebach (philosophy, BYU) address the widespread misunderstanding that the apostasy was caused by the Christian church’s incorporation of Hellenistic (Greek) thought. The authors note that the hellenization of Christianity enabled the faith, though changed in fundamental ways, to “survive the desperate times that marked the fall of the Roman Empire.” David L. Paulsen (philosophy, BYU) draws from three of his previously published articles to show that in the first and second Christian centuries, both Jews and Christians generally believed that God was embodied—a teaching of Joseph Smith that contradicts the teachings of all other Christian churches today.


Paulsen shows that “the loss of this knowledge . . . resulted from the attempt of early Christian apologists to reconcile their beliefs with their dominantly Greek culture.”

Readers will be interested in the insights the contributors provide regarding such questions as why there was an apostasy, how it came about, what it means, and what the significance is of new discoveries.

According to Reynolds, *Early Christians in Disarray* is “designed to support and encourage further systematic research on [the apostasy]. It is not designed to be a comprehensive or final treatment of any of [the] issues. The goals of the authors and editor will be achieved if Latter-day

Saints find its contents helpful for understanding this important topic and if it provokes some of them to pursue these and related questions with further research.”

Toward that latter end, the book provides a variety of reference materials in the form of four appendixes that treat important Christian documents and writers, Christian councils, New Testament evidences of apostasy in the first-century church, and LDS writings on the apostasy.

To order a copy of *Early Christians in Disarray*, go to the FARMS Web site (farms.byu.edu) and, at the bottom of the notice for this book, click on the link to the BYU Bookstore. 

Textual Analysis of Book of Mormon Continues

FARMS and Brigham Young University are pleased to announce the release of part 2 of volume 4 of the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*. Part 2 analyzes the text from 2 Nephi 11 through Mosiah 16.

Volume 4 represents the central task of the project—the attempt to recover the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon. Royal Skousen, the author, is an internationally respected linguist at BYU and has been the editor of the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project since 1988.

Grant Hardy, professor of history at the University of North Carolina, calls the project “perhaps the most important study of the Book of Mormon ever done. Two hundred years from now—long after people have stopped reading anything on the Book of Mormon now in print—students of the Book of Mormon will still be poring over Skousen’s work. What he has accomplished is nothing short of phenomenal.”

Part 2 of volume 4 includes a definitive treatment of the one passage that has caused more debate than any other in the history of the Book of Mormon text—namely, should 2 Nephi 30:6 read “a **white** and a delightsome people” or “a **pure**

and a delightsome people”? Skousen proposes an explanation for why Joseph Smith emended this instance of the word *white* to *pure* for the 1840 edition but left unchanged all other references to skin color in the text.

This second part also provides striking evidence that the vocabulary of the original text of the Book of Mormon dates from the 1500s and 1600s, not from the 1800s. For instance, Enos 1:18 has the Lord saying to Enos, “Thy fathers have also **required** of me this thing”. Here *required* means ‘requested’, which was the meaning of this verb until the late 1600s. Another example is the original occurrence of *but if* in Mosiah 3:19: “the natural man is an enemy to God . . . **but if** he yieldeth to the enticings of the Holy Spirit”. The 1920 LDS edition replaced the conjunctive *but if* with *unless*, which was actually the meaning of *but if* from about 1200 to 1600.

Part 2 of volume 4 examines 898 cases of variation (or potential variation). For 388 of these cases, the critical text proposes a change from the standard text (the current edition). Of these proposed changes, 66 have never appeared in any standard edition, while 23 would make a difference when translating the Book of Mormon. For 13 cases, the proposed changes make the entire text fully consistent in phraseology or word choice, but there are 5 readings that restore a unique phrase or word to the text.

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