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Abstract Review of *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy* (2005), edited by Noel B. Reynolds; and *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?* (2005), by Scott R. Peterson.

DISARRAY REVISITED

Alison V. P. Coutts

Review of Noel B. Reynolds, ed. *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*. Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU Press, 2005. x + 397 pp., with appendixes, citation and subject indexes. \$29.95.

Review of Scott R. Petersen. *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?* Springville, UT: CFI, 2005. xi + 399 pp., with appendix, bibliography, and index. \$34.99.

“The idea that Christ’s church no longer existed was central to Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims, and as such was among the earliest of the doctrines established in this dispensation.”¹

Although churches of the Reformation recognized that an apostasy had taken place in the early Christian church, the first vision gave Joseph concrete evidence that it had taken place—something he had not contemplated, saying “at this time it had never entered into my heart that all [churches] were wrong.”² Early in the twentieth century B. H. Roberts, James E. Talmage, and Joseph Fielding Smith published extensive commentary on the apostasy.³ But since then, apart

1. Ryan G. Christensen, “Bibliographical Note on Latter-day Saint Writings on the Apostasy,” in *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU Press, 2005), 371.

2. Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 163.

3. B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902); James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy: Considered in the Light of Scriptural*

from articles by Hugh Nibley and others, it would be fair to say that no book-length treatment of the apostasy has been published. Until 2005. In 2005, three books appeared that dealt with various aspects of the apostasy, and in 2006 a further volume appeared on the shelves. This review examines two of those four publications, all of which seek to answer the questions: “Why was there an apostasy? How did it come about? What does it mean? What is the significance of new discoveries on the study of the apostasy?”⁴ The other two books are treated by Jacob Rawlins.

Early Christians in Disarray

In 2001 an informal faculty reading group at Brigham Young University started meeting to discuss early Christian texts. Out of those early meetings grew a conference and a volume, *Early Christians in Disarray*, that explores the apostasy in the light of new discoveries in early Christian texts. In his introduction, editor Noel B. Reynolds sets out his purpose: “This volume 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 these 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.”⁵

In *Early Christians* Eric Dursteler examines the roots of the conceptions of the Christian apostasy accepted in the Latter-day Saint community over the last century. Surveying the literature from John Taylor to B. H. Roberts, James E. Talmage, and Joseph Fielding Smith, up to present-day Apostles M. Russell Ballard and Dallin H. Oaks, Dursteler details LDS thinking on the apostasy. He also brings in comments from many noted historians, including Jakob Burckhardt and John

and Secular History (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909); Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Progress of Man* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1936).

4. Noel B. Reynolds, “Introduction: What Went Wrong for the Early Christians?” in *Early Christians*, 26.

5. Reynolds, “Introduction,” 7.

Addington Symonds, to make the case that, although Roberts, Talmage, and Smith could not have been aware of the important studies by these historians, nevertheless they were “influenced by Enlightenment and Romantic historians and trends”⁶ in their attempt to “to flesh out their understanding of the historical continuum of the apostasy.”⁷

In accord with the theme of the book, Richard Bennett and Amber Seidel maintain that the idea of apostasy did not originate in the nineteenth century since “for centuries, churches of the Reformation had been teaching that an apostasy had long ago occurred in the Christian world.”⁸ Given this parameter, they survey the wide range of early Mormon preaching and missionary publications to “show that Joseph Smith’s sense of an apostasy from the true Christian faith was ratified in the first vision; . . . [and] that this understanding changed and developed during the early years of his prophetic training.”⁹ Citing accounts from both England and America, Bennett and Seidel describe the tenor of the religious revival of the time. But, importantly, they demonstrate that Joseph’s experience in the grove of trees was one comprising forgiveness, atonement, and religious instruction. Bennett and Seidel also “examine how the doctrine of the apostasy was understood and taught by both leaders and missionaries within the first four years of the organization of the Church of Christ in 1830.”¹⁰ As Joseph and Oliver’s understanding grew through the process of translating the Book of Mormon and the Bible and through revelation, their understanding

of a loss of truth had deepened to a sense of a great and global apostasy, that gross darkness blanketed the entire world and that the world lay in sin and captivity, that religious corruption had contaminated much of Christian communication and standards of behavior, that there had been a subtraction

6. Eric R. Dursteler, “Inheriting the ‘Great Apostasy’: The Evolution of Latter-day Saint Views on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” in *Early Christians*, 45.

7. Dursteler, “Inheriting the ‘Great Apostasy,’” 47.

8. Richard E. Bennett and Amber J. Seidel, “A World in Darkness: Early Latter-day Saint Understanding of the Apostasy, 1830–1834,” in *Early Christians*, 73.

9. Bennett and Seidel, “World in Darkness,” 68.

10. Bennett and Seidel, “World in Darkness,” 68.

of priesthood legitimacy and authority, that the apostasy extended to the diminution and scattering of God's ancient covenant people Israel, and finally, if a less developed doctrine, that modern nations and governments acted without authority.¹¹

This prevailing view characterizes the teaching of the brethren in the early years of the church.

With the introductory caveat that "Whatever is taught about the apostasy should be checked against the four standard works,"¹² John Welch examines selected restoration scriptures as a means of reconstructing key elements of the prophetic views of 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 because of unresolved conflicts between the disciples. His detailed analysis of 1 Nephi 13 shows that Jewish persecution of the disciples would contribute to their demise: "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."¹³ Welch then turns his principal attention to the parable of the wheat and tares in Doctrine and Covenants 86 as a prophecy of the apostasy. Examining this parable with the added insight from the KJV and the JST version of Matthew 13 both in chart form and with a detailed analysis, Welch concludes that in the original parable as reported in Doctrine and Covenants 86, "Jesus clearly anticipated that a public apostasy would surely come. He made it clear that the apostasy would affect the entire field or world. . . . 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."¹⁴

11. Bennett and Seidel, "World in Darkness," 81.

12. John W. Welch, "Modern Revelation: A Guide to Research about the Apostasy," in *Early Christians*, 101.

13. Welch, "Modern Revelation," 105.

14. Welch, "Modern Revelation," 130.

James Faulconer discusses what the New Testament writers thought about the apostasy and what was meant by the term *apostasy* and related terminology during New Testament times. He uses the Septuagint because it “gives us a good look at how pre-Christian Jews as well as those of the early Christian era understood the Old Testament.”¹⁵ Faulconer concludes that apostasy “covers a range of things, including leaving the faith because of persecution, creating division in the body of the church, . . . losing faith because one continues to sin in various ways, teaching false doctrine, blaspheming, and denying the Holy Ghost, all of which can be summed up in the phrase ‘turning against God’ or ‘departing from God’ as in Hebrews 3:12.”¹⁶ Most specifically, apostasy—at least for the writers of the New Testament and their contemporaries—was the rejection of temple and priesthood.

In his usual well-footnoted style, John Gee documents the evidence that many plain and precious things were taken away from the scriptures, as Nephi had foreseen (1 Nephi 13:26). While a great deal of scholarly attention has been focused in recent decades on the ways in which the New Testament writings were affected by theological politics in the third and fourth centuries as the Christian canon gradually took shape, Gee focuses on the second century to document the extensive changing of the inspired writings that was already in process. He surveys the writings of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria, to name but a few, concluding that “there were a variety of accusations of corrupting scripture made against every party, including the sect that eventually became the ‘orthodox’ or ‘Catholic’ one.”¹⁷ Looking at methods of and possible motivations for corruption, Gee finally remarks, “the books that were considered scripture, and some of the content of those books, changed from the beginning to the end of the [second] century.”¹⁸

15. James E. Faulconer, “The Concept of Apostasy in the New Testament,” in *Early Christians*, 135.

16. Faulconer, “Concept of Apostasy,” 136.

17. John Gee, “The Corruption of Scripture in Early Christianity,” in *Early Christians*, 172.

18. Gee, “Corruption,” 193.

With such intriguing subheadings as “Philosophy as a Tool of Self-Defense” and “Philosophy as the Handmaid of Theology,” Daniel Graham and James Siebach address the widespread misunderstanding that the apostasy was caused by the incorporation of Hellenistic (Greek) thought into the Christian church. Rehearsing the history of Christian converts from the largely unlearned early apostles, they note that “by the mid-second century some Christians began to see it as their duty not to wait in silence for the sword of persecution to fall, but to stand up and defend the faith in public forums. Justin Martyr had studied in several philosophical schools before converting to Christianity. Recognizing similarities between the teachings of the philosophers and the doctrines of Christianity, he determined to use his education to defend the faith against false charges.”¹⁹ Their conclusion after surveying the teachings of Clement and Origen is that “Clement and Origen see Greek learning as providing genuine insights but not as constituting a body of truth independent of the scriptures and revelation. We should learn what the world has to teach us of worldly knowledge but depend on revelation for our understanding of God and his ways.”²⁰ Graham and Siebach see the hellenization of Christianity as a result of the apostasy and not its cause.

Joseph Smith’s teaching that God has a body contradicts the teachings of all Christian churches today. David L. Paulsen demonstrates that this was not new doctrine: “Joseph testified that his view was a restoration of the biblical and primitive Judeo-Christian understanding of God, an understanding that was lost because of a ‘falling away’—an apostasy—from the truths once held by the earliest Christians.”²¹ Citing works from notable modern historians such as Adolf von Harnack and J. N. D. Kelly on the early church fathers,

19. Daniel W. Graham and James L. Siebach, “The Introduction of Philosophy into Early Christianity,” in *Early Christians*, 207.

20. Graham and Siebach, “Introduction of Philosophy,” 218.

21. See Donald Q. Cannon, Larry E. Dahl, and John W. Welch, “The Restoration of Major Doctrines through Joseph Smith: The Godhead, Mankind, and the Creation,” *Ensign*, January 1989, 27–33, cited in David L. Paulsen, “Divine Embodiment: The Earliest Christian Understanding of God,” in *Early Christians*, 240–41.

reviewing the writings of the early church fathers themselves, and drawing from Jewish traditions, Paulsen shows that, in the first and second Christian centuries, both Jews and Christians generally believed that God was embodied.

As part of an ongoing interest in covenant, Noel Reynolds examines the second-century transformation of covenant-based ordinances into Christian sacraments as a principal cause of the apostasy and thereby illuminates Nephi's statement that many of the covenants were taken away (1 Nephi 13:26). Reynolds points out that one would expect covenants to be part of the early church, "When we look closely at the writings of the earliest Christians, we might naturally ask, 'Where have all the covenants gone?' Though the writings of this period occasionally allude to covenants and even occasionally feature them, there is nowhere evidence that the concept of ordinances based in covenants is either central or pervasive."²² In this final chapter of a fascinating and comprehensive book, Reynolds looks at the demise of the covenant and the alternatives sought to fill its absence. His conclusion is a fitting one for a book on apostasy:

The centrality of the Christian's covenant to repent of sin and obey God's commands had already been marginalized, and the traditional ordinances had lost their covenantal basis, being redefined as sacraments by which God's grace could be transmitted to a recipient through the mediation of a priest. The subsequent shift to a theology that found truth in nature through reason ensured that the original covenantal understandings of the Christian's relationship to the Father could never be recovered, though their echoes would reverberate hauntingly down through the ages, leading many dissatisfied Christians to long for a restoration of original Christianity.²³

22. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Decline of Covenant in Early Christian Thought," in *Early Christians*, 297.

23. Reynolds, "Decline of Covenant," 324.

Where Have All the Prophets Gone?

Spanning the history of Christianity from the early church fathers to the nineteenth century, Scott R. Petersen has assembled many original and secondary sources in order to answer the question “Where have all the prophets gone?” His stated aim is “to present a condensed but accurate view of the evolution of Christianity and apostasy from pure, revealed religion, from the days of Adam to the modern world.”²⁴

In the first chapter, Petersen looks at Christian writings such as the Bible, Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and the apostolic fathers in light of the truth of their content. His next chapter reviews these writings to look at apostasy in the dispensations from Adam to Christ. Along the way, Petersen treats us to an analysis of why there is historical discrepancy in the number of dispensations (p. 38). The next two chapters, “The Apostolic Dispensation” and “Scriptural Predictions of Post–New Testament Apostasy,” as one might expect, rely heavily on scripture to show the establishment of the Christian church by Christ and to present the prophecies of an apostasy. But in his thorough way, Petersen also refers to Eusebius, Josephus, Ignatius, and Justin.

Turning once more to scripture, Petersen surveys prophecies in the Old and New Testaments of the great apostasy to take place after the death of the last early apostle. Although the majority of his evidence comes from the New Testament, the writings of Isaiah and Amos particularly more than hint at this coming apostasy.

In “Christianity in the First Century,” Petersen spends quite some time in the books of Enoch and other apocryphal and pseudepigraphical works. This longish chapter contains much useful information for Latter-day Saints on early Christian thought on such subjects as the premortal nature of man, the plan of salvation, baptism for the dead, authority, and eternal progression (pp. 86–117).

For a good introduction to the councils and creeds of early Christianity, appendixes in *Early Christians* provide succinct descrip-

24. Scott R. Petersen, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?* (Springville, UT: CFI, 2005), ix. Subsequent parenthetical references in the text are to this book.

tions. Petersen takes this further and devotes an entire chapter to the subject. He details the controversies facing the councils and those who constituted them, concluding that, during this period, “councils and creeds replaced divinely appointed authority, and scholarship replaced revelation” (p. 191).

This conclusion forms the lens through which Petersen reviews “The Church of the Middle Ages.” His harsh, but supported premise is that, “Beginning with the Donatists in the fourth century, continuing with the Crusades in the eleventh century onward, and ending when the activities of the Inquisition ceased in the eighteenth century, physical force was used to compel people to comply with the orthodox beliefs of the Universal Church” (p. 199). Interestingly, whereas Graham and Siebach staunchly defend Augustine’s motives,²⁵ Petersen pulls no punches in condemning Augustine as a prime mover in the corruption of early Christian doctrine (p. 212).

Equally, Petersen’s chapter on the Renaissance and the Reformation contains a harsh condemnation of the origins of the Anglican Church. Having my roots in that tradition, I found that a little heavy-handed, but I realize that my view is probably nostalgic. However, the chapter contains an excellent survey of the origins of the English Bible,²⁶ together with introductions to the key reformers.

The story now shifts to the colonization of the American continent, the religious persecution in England, and religion in the early days of America. Petersen gives us insight into such religious thinkers as Anne Hutchinson, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield and looks at the people of the *Mayflower* and the Massachusetts Bay colony.

The concluding two chapters deal with the religious revival in eighteenth-century America and the restoration of the true church. The survey of the different groups who led the revival is very interesting.

25. See Graham and Siebach, “Introduction of Philosophy,” 223–33.

26. For those wanting more on this subject, a new volume by Ray L. Huntington, David M. Whitchurch, W. Jeffrey Marsh, and Andrew C. Skinner entitled *Faith of Our Fathers: The History of the English Bible* should be forthcoming later in 2007 from Brigham Young University’s Religious Studies Center.

So if one were to pick between the four books on the apostasy currently under review, how would one do it? As indicated in the previous review, Elder Morrison's book is the most accessible for the reader wishing to gain an overview of the topic. Of the Reynolds edited volume and the Petersen book, I would pick *Early Christians*—not only (lest this is raised by the discerning reader of introductions) because I was deeply involved in it as the staff editor, but also because of the wide choice of viewpoints on the many different aspects of the apostasy it presents.