

Ouachita Baptist University

Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita

Honors Theses

Carl Goodson Honors Program

4-16-2021

The Not-So-Great Apostasy?: A Response to the Mormon Argument of the Great Apostasy

Rylie Slone

Ouachita Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Mormon Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Slone, Rylie, "The Not-So-Great Apostasy?: A Response to the Mormon Argument of the Great Apostasy" (2021). *Honors Theses*. 784.

https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses/784

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Carl Goodson Honors Program at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.

SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

The Not-So-Great Apostasy?

A Response to the Mormon Argument of the Great Apostasy

written by

Rylie Slone

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. Barbara Pemberton, thesis director

Dr. Doug Reed, second reader

Dr. Jay Curlin, third reader

Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

Introduction

When one takes time to look upon the foundational arguments that form Mormonism, one of the most notable presuppositions is the argument of the Great Apostasy. Now, nearly all new religious movements have some kind of belief that truth at one point left the earth, yet they were the only ones to find it. The idea of esoteric and special revealed knowledge is highly regarded in these religious movements. But what exactly makes the Mormon Great Apostasy so distinct? Well, James Talmage, a revered Mormon scholar, said that the Great Apostasy was the perversion of biblical truth following the death of the apostles. Because of many external and internal conflicts, he believes that the church marred the legitimacies of Scripture so much that truth itself had been lost from the earth.¹ This truth, he asserts, was not found again until Joseph Smith received his divine revelations that led to the Book of Mormon in the nineteenth century.

As this thesis continues, the intricacies of this argument will be fleshed out. Following that, the response to it will be clear. The research question to be presented is this: did the Great Apostasy claimed by the Latter-Day Saint church really happen? The hypothesis, to be tested by research using church history, church doctrine, and textual criticism, is that the Great Apostasy never happened. The hypothesis is that the loving, omniscient God of the universe would not allow his truth to be clouded and flawed by men and would instead preserve it. Jesus told Peter in Matthew 16:18, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”² The Lord, in all of his perfection, did not lie when he said that even death would not prevail against the church he established on the earth.

¹ Talmage, James E. *The Great Apostasy*. Project Gutenberg, 2011.

² *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2005.

The Life of Joseph Smith and the History of Mormonism

Let's begin by looking at the foundation of Mormonism. The story is as follows: the first vision that Joseph Smith claimed to have had was in 1820 after he had been afflicted by the sight of so many different Christian denominations. He was unsure how to know which one was right. He looked to James 1:5 which states, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."³ He then prayed and received the vision of a personage who told him that all of the sects of Christianity were wrong, and an abomination.⁴ This was the beginning of Joseph Smith's encounters with the divine and his ministry.

On September 21, 1823, Joseph Smith was praying in his family home in Palmyra, New York. As he was praying, he had a revelation from an angel by the name of Moroni, who told Smith that there were golden plates with the story of a people who inhabited the Americas in a time long ago. The location of these plates was a hill not far from his family home, called the Hill Cumorah. Upon receiving the plates, Smith noticed that the stories were written in what he called "reformed Egyptian." But Moroni told him to translate these tablets. Joseph Smith was not very educated and could not even write a "well-worded letter," according to his wife, Emma. Thus, one miracle of Mormonism was the fact that Smith could even translate these tablets. Between 1827 and 1829, almost all of what is now the Book of Mormon, named after the angel Moroni, had been translated by Joseph Smith. Along with the help of his scribes, most notably Oliver Cowdery, Smith used instruments called the "Urim and Thummim" that were found buried by the golden tablets as a device to aid in translation. Joseph Smith also used a seer stone,

³ NIV.

⁴ Martin, Walter, *The Maze of Mormonism*, (Regal Books, 1978), 26-27.

placed in a hat, to view the tablets and translate the Book of Mormon aloud to his scribes.⁵ Smith placed a curtain between himself and his scribe. While he looked through his seeing stones, he would articulate the translated words of the tablet to the scribe to be written. Only eleven total witnesses had seen the tablets besides Smith: three of them in a dream and the other eight had claimed to have seen them with their own eyes. Not even his own wife, Emma, was allowed to view the golden tablets.⁶

One important thing to note was that this seer stone used to translate most of the Book of Mormon was actually used previously by Joseph Smith. He and his family were well-known for participating in treasure hunting; there were plenty of holes around his hometown to prove their zeal for digging for treasure. He later regretted his delving into the supernatural and even went as far as to deny he had ever been involved.⁷ However, even his own mother stated that he had enjoyed participating in these activities because he “could discern things invisible to the natural eye.”⁸ He was well-known for participating in these peep-stone expeditions. His father, Joseph Smith Sr., was very clear that his son did partake in many treasure hunting activities, and that he attributed his massive success to his ability found in the seeing stones he used.⁹ Thus, Smith had been interested in the occultic practice of using peep-stones before he had even gotten the revelation from Moroni and later translated the Book of Mormon. Sixty of his neighbors in Palmyra, New York, even signed an affidavit describing that “Joseph Smith, Senior, and his son

⁵ “Book of Mormon Translation.” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Dec. 2013.

⁶ Ostling, Richard N., and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America*, (HarperCollins, 2000), 26.

⁷ Martin, Walter, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, (Bethany House Publishers, 1997), 184-185.

⁸ Smith, Lucy Mack, et al, *History of the Prophet Joseph by His Mother*, (Project Gutenberg, 2014), 91-92.

⁹ Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 185.

Joseph, were in particular, considered entirely destitute of moral character, and addicted to vicious habits.”¹⁰ Other neighbors said that Joseph was a known fraud, and that “his word was received with the least confidence by those who knew him best.”¹¹

Martin Harris, a farmer in Palmyra who received a dream of the golden tablets, agreed to publish the Book of Mormon, but only if it was verified to be true. Martin took some of the transcribed “reformed Egyptian” from Joseph Smith to Professor Charles Anthon at Columbia University. Harris claimed that Anthon testified that the document and translation was legitimate. However, Anthon actually wrote a letter claiming that he never said the document was legitimate and instead called it a fraud. Nonetheless, this confirmed to Martin Harris that the translation was true and accurate. So, in 1829, as it was finalized, a deal was made in Palmyra, New York, with E.B. Grandin’s print shop to print 5,000 copies of the Book of Mormon. The book was copyrighted in 1829 and began selling in 1830. Martin Harris sold his farm to raise enough money to pay for this printing of the book.¹²

Joseph Smith began his church when he and Oliver Cowdery, one of his trusted scribes, stated that they had seen John the Baptist, who told them both to baptize each other and to ordain one another into the Aaronic priesthood. Shortly thereafter, they claim to have received revelation from James, John, and Peter, who initiated them into the Melchizedek priesthood and instructed them to start their new church officially. What was initially called the Church of Christ began with about thirty members. Smith later wrote a book he titled Doctrine and Covenants that contain his later revelations not included in the Book of Mormon. He also retranslated and added

¹⁰ Howe, E. D., and Dan Vogel, *Mormonism Unveiled*, (Signature Books, 2015), 261.

¹¹ Tucker, Pomeory, *The Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism*, (Hansebooks, 2017), 16.

¹² Ostling, 26-27.

onto the King James Bible to make it align better with the theological teachings of the Mormon church.¹³

By the fall of 1830, the church was totaling at around 1,000 members thanks to the conversion of Sidney Rigdon in Cleveland, who brought his Restorationist congregation along with him. The next year, Joseph Smith received a divine revelation that he should move his church to Missouri. In 1831, many Mormons left for Missouri to spread their message further, even to native Americans.¹⁴ Smith declared that Independence, Missouri, was the “place for the city of Zion” and the location of the Garden of Eden.¹⁵ While the Mormons were there, they experienced persecution. They eventually left Jackson County, Missouri, for Caldwell County, Missouri, in 1836, a place initially created for them to inhabit. The Mormons began to build a city they called Far West. In April 1838, Joseph Smith had a revelation that Far West was a holy land and that they should create a temple there. For a time, this was the Mormon church headquarters. While in Far West, Joseph Smith received his revelation that would name his new restorationist church “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” Eventually, mob violence ensued, and they were forcibly removed from Far West without having finished their temple. During this time, Joseph Smith was arrested by the state militia.¹⁶ The goal of the state was to move the Latter-Day Saints out, as they were practicing a communal, new religious movement that had associations with polygamy and defying the government. While Joseph was

¹³ Ostling, 29.

¹⁴ Ibid., 30.

¹⁵ Smith, Hyrum Mack, *The Doctrine and Covenants: Containing Revelations given to Joseph Smith, Jr., the Prophet*, (Deseret Book, 197)., 57.

¹⁶ “Far West.” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

still imprisoned, his church complied with the requests of the government and left Missouri. He was imprisoned for a little over five months. After that, he fled the state of Missouri for good.

After the Mormons had escaped the violence in Missouri, they found shelter in Illinois in a town called Quincy. The Mormons created a settlement near there and called it Nauvoo. They were given much more authority and control in Nauvoo. Joseph Smith was even mayor from 1842 to his death in 1844. A main focus in Nauvoo was to complete the temple there, as it was a major part of the revelation given to Joseph Smith. In Nauvoo, many of the church's rituals and rites were created, including the "baptism of the dead." Nauvoo is also where the first temple rites were performed. Here, marriage sealings occurred, as well as the sealing of plural marriages (or polygamy). This was also where the organization of the Mormon church changed. Joseph Smith gave his twelve apostles much more control and leadership of the church. Although the Mormons were strong here, opposition seemed to be even stronger. Meanwhile, Joseph and Hyrum Smith were killed by a mob awaiting their trials in jail at Carthage, Illinois. While the Latter-Day Saints were obviously full of grief after Joseph Smith, their prophet, had died, they decided to give the church leadership to their twelve apostles. Against all odds, the church completed their temple in Nauvoo, but they finally had to abandon it in 1846 due to, again, outside pressure.¹⁷

Leaving Nauvoo, Illinois, many church leaders, including the notable Brigham Young, saw the Salt Lake City region of Utah to be a nice fit for them to be able to move to. When they arrived in Salt Lake City, many called it their promised land atop the mountains. This location was the final location and settlement of the headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

¹⁷ "Nauvoo (Commerce), Illinois." *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*.

day Saints. Finally, in 1890, about four years after the church officially disavowed polygamy, the United States Congress gave Utah its statehood authority. This was the location where the church flourished and where it was given much more leeway and authority.¹⁸

In summation, the Mormon church have experienced a lot of persecution in the United States throughout their history. The church began to form a common identity under their strict adherence to the revealed words of the prophet, their shared persecution, their communal livelihoods, and their goal to live out their “reformed Christianity”.

Overview of Mormon Theology

Now that the Mormon church’s general history has been explained, the real question lies in the theology of Mormonism. What do they believe? And what is so different between Mormonism and orthodox Christianity?

First, let’s begin with the Mormon view on original sin. While Mormons do believe that Adam was a sinner, they do not believe that “mankind” will be punished for Adam’s sins.¹⁹ They believe that men will be judged according to their own personal deeds. They do believe, however, that all people sin on their own and need redemption through Jesus. This differs from the orthodox Christian belief of original sin, that all humans are born sinners and are in need of grace by the atonement of Jesus Christ.²⁰ In fact, the Mormons view Adam’s transgression as a necessary event that serves an eternal purpose, and they differentiate between transgression and

¹⁸ “Utah.” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*.

¹⁹ Smith, Joseph, *Articles of Faith*, (Deseret Sunday School Union, 1878).

²⁰ Ostling, 325.

sin. Thus, they do not believe Adam sinned. So, although they tend to use the typical language of grace, limiting original sin begs the question of why grace is needed. Orthodox Christianity states that Jesus's atonement was necessary to remedy the consequences of the fall and original sin.²¹ Mormons do not have that doctrine.

Another major difference concerns the Trinity. Christians believe that the Godhead consists of three persons of one essence—God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Mormons believe that the Godhead are three very distinct personages that are not of the same essence. Mormon Christology also places Jesus as lower than God the Father.²²

Mormons believe that humans are spirit children, by nature, of God the Father and the “Heavenly Mother.” Before the world existed, humans were born from God and existed under a primordial covenant with Him. However, everyone forgot it once they got to earth, and their lives now are spent realigning itself to that covenant with God. Jesus, to Mormons, was the firstborn of God and the “Heavenly Mother”—thus he is just our older brother. To Mormons, the incarnation is not an explicitly unique event; rather, any *man* who works hard to continue his progression of faithfulness to the Mormon doctrine can, too, become exalted as a god.²³ Therefore, Mormons limit the uniqueness of Christ because any good Mormon man can become just like him.

On faith and works, Mormons definitely tend to lean on the side of works. They certainly make a point to affirm the salvation by grace doctrine; but, at the same time, they also claim that salvation is attained only by full obedience to the commandments and ordinances found in the

²¹ Ibid., 326-327.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

Mormon texts.²⁴ Thus, to them, adherence to the ordinances of the Mormon Melchizedek priesthood is just as important for salvation as the blood of Jesus Christ. Christians emphasize grace, restating the Ephesians 2:8-9 verses that state that believers are saved by grace through faith. But, at the same time, orthodox Christianity also affirms the book of James and the doctrine that works are the result of a legitimate faith.

Another major theological tradition of Mormonism is the idea of “continued revelation.” Mormons believe that their prophet has the ability to receive direct revelations from God. The Mormon church has used the doctrine of “continued revelation” to be able to amend, add, and update church doctrine as needed. The general, orthodox belief among Christians is the idea that continued revelation does not exist, and that God has already revealed himself in the Bible and through Jesus Christ. The canon, in orthodoxy, is closed.

In Mormon theology, Heaven exists in three tiers: the celestial kingdom, the terrestrial kingdom, and the telestial kingdom. The highest degree, celestial heaven, is where Latter-day Saints who have done all of their temple ordinances (these are also unique to Mormonism and include marriage ceremonies, baptism of the dead, and baptism of the living) and developed in obedience go. It is possible, in Mormon thought, to ascend through the distinctions (or better explained as the aforementioned “levels” or “tiers” of Heaven) up to the second highest degree in the afterlife if they hear the full Mormon gospel for the first time. Celestial heaven is reserved for faithful Mormons who will be able to live eternally with their families—this eternal family is the crux of their post-mortem goals. They do not desire to dwell solely with God, but instead to exalt themselves to godhood along with their family. Almost everyone will make it to Mormon

²⁴ Ibid., 329-330.

heaven. Very few “sons of perdition” will be sentenced to an eternal Hell.²⁵ This differs from orthodox Christianity, which believes in a dual eschatology: Heaven or Hell. In Heaven, believers will reside in the presence of God, which is the ultimate gift. In Hell, those who deny God will face eternal separation from God. Mormons do not align with this bimodal view of the afterlife.

The last, and most important, difference is the view of truth. Mormons believe that a Great Apostasy happened following the death of the apostles, and that biblical truth was perverted on earth and disappeared completely. Mormons believe that God reestablished his truth through the revelation he gave to Joseph Smith in the Americas. Orthodox Christians, instead, hold fast to the truth that Jesus established his church on earth that would never be destroyed, and that authoritative truth still resides in the words of the Bible.

Mormon View on the Great Apostasy

As we finish the clarification of their theological positions, this moves us into the core of this thesis: the Mormon argument of the Great Apostasy. As we begin, let us first look to what Mormons themselves believe about it.

One of the most prominent Mormon scholars on the Great Apostasy was James E. Talmage, a member of the Mormon Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the early 20th century. Talmage claimed that there were many instances throughout the Bible that predicted that the Great Apostasy was going to happen. He starts with Isaiah’s vision of the world in an era of spiritual darkness in Isaiah 24:5. He highlights Paul’s rebuke of the church in Galatians 3:7 and

²⁵ Ibid., 332.

the early church's confusion between the law and the fulfillment found in Jesus Christ. Using this logic of breaking the everlasting covenant, which is the covenant under Christ instead of the law, Talmage gets to the idea that the prediction in Isaiah was, at the time of its writing, unfulfilled until the Great Apostasy. Another biblical prediction he highlights is found in Amos 8:11-12²⁶, "The days are coming," declares the Sovereign Lord, "when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it."²⁷ Talmage also claims that Jesus warned of the Great Apostasy when he warned of false prophets in Matthew 24. Talmage, interestingly enough, highlights the section in Matthew 24 where Jesus says, "Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not"²⁸ though Joseph Smith said he saw the "personage" of Christ. But, for now we must consider the Talmage predictions. Talmage also states that Paul warned of the Great Apostasy in Acts 20 when he cautioned of perverse men who will try to draw away disciples. Talmage also states that Paul warned of the apostasy in 1 Timothy 4 when he warns of erroneous teachings to come which were called, by him, "doctrines of devils." James Talmage goes on to mention a plethora of so-called biblical evidence that warns of a Great Apostasy, where false doctrine will enter the church.²⁹

Talmage lists numerous reasons that caused the Great Apostasy of the early church. He looks to widespread persecution, Judaism's influence, pagan influence, Roman opposition,

²⁶ Talmage, 26-28.

²⁷ NIV.

²⁸ *Holy Bible: King James Version*. Christian Art Publishers, 2017.

²⁹ Talmage, 28-30.

Roman emperors, Constantine's control of Christianity, the obvious return to idolatry of some, Gnosticism, Sabellianism, Arianism, a general disregard for truth, changes of essential ordinances, transubstantiation, secular authority of the Pope, indulgences, blasphemy, and the banning of scripture reading by the ordinary. While this is a very long list, it is a wide range of reasons that Mormons use to assert that a Great Apostasy happened.³⁰ Mormons believe that the creation of denominations and division is the result of this Great Apostasy. Mormons truly believe that biblical truth left the planet during this period of rebellion and that it was not restored until Joseph Smith translated the golden tablets in Palmyra in the nineteenth century.

Mormons believe that, because there were no living prophets in the early church, the church did not have any form of established priesthood power. Thus, they think the early church members who were not prophets or apostles were unfit to lead people to the true knowledge of God and Jesus Christ. They believe that pieces of Scripture were perverted or lost altogether, and that God removed the authority of the priesthood and the "Holy Ghost" from the earth. They believe that God restored the key to the priesthood in Joseph Smith and that true Christianity had been restored. This time, they believe, they will not be overcome by a universal apostasy. The Mormon scriptures teach that doctrine.³¹

³⁰ Ibid., 6-8.

³¹ "Apostasy." *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*.

Response to the Mormon Argument

To begin, it is clear that the Mormon argument specifically hinges upon the idea that truth *completely* left the earth. For Joseph Smith to have needed to receive a secondary, restored revelation, there must have been absolutely zero remnants of truth on earth. Secondly, Mormon doctrine clearly affirms the veracity of the Bible and the legitimacy of the early church. Therefore, if I can prove that the foundational truths brought forth by Jesus Christ on earth that began in the early church did not completely leave, then the argument is resolved.

I will begin by responding to Talmage's biblical proofs that predicted the oncoming Great Apostasy. Talmage first uses Isaiah 24:5 to highlight an impending season of spiritual darkness that, under his lens of Galatians' explanation of the "everlasting covenant," had not yet been fulfilled in Bible times until the Great Apostasy. However, when one takes Isaiah 24:5 in context, one realizes that the words "eternal covenant" refer to the Noahic covenant found in Genesis 9:1-17 with its prevention of bloodshed. In totality, it is a general reference to the overall covenant between the Creator and the created.³² It is not so much a separation from truth altogether, but instead a separation from God because of sin. The original sin that resides in all of us will destroy us if we let it. Also, it is important to note that the historical background of Isaiah supports the idea that the warning language used here was to the people living in Isaiah's time, i.e., around 739 to 701 B.C.³³ Therefore, drawing it to refer to the period of the early church would be stretching the context of the original text.

³² Oswalt, John N., *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, (Eerdmans, 1986), 446.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

The second biblical proof used by James Talmage is Amos 8:11-12. Here, it says that a famine is coming when people will hunger for the word of God and they will not find it. Mormons will often use this verse as an example of a prediction of the Great Apostasy; however, this is also not likely. The way the Old Testament prophetic books are aligned is generally the same: you have broken the covenant; you better repent or judgement is coming; judgement comes; and then a restoration of peace is brought with repentance.³⁴ It's a cycle that goes on and on in ancient Israel. All this to say, this verse in Amos is specifically referring to the people of Israel during the time of Amos. They were being dishonest and greedy, so Amos was chastising them and telling them to repent. He then told them of the impending judgement if they do not repent.³⁵ They were entering a period of famine from the words of God because they were breaking the covenant. This verse should not be taken out of its context to refer to the Great Apostasy when this is clearly a prophetic response to the cyclical rebellion of ancient Israel.

James Talmage even claims that Jesus warned of an upcoming apostasy in Matthew 24 when he said, "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many."³⁶ Talmage takes this as a reference to the widespread apostasy that is to come. Instead, what Jesus is truly referring to is false prophets. By making this claim, Jesus is not saying that truth itself will be completely removed. He is instead warning that some will try to distort the truth. If anything, Jesus refutes Talmage's claim himself in verses 13 and 14 when he says, "but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and

³⁴ Hays, J. Daniel, "Biblical Interpretation: Old Testament" (Class lecture, Biblical Interpretation, Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, AR, 2018).

³⁵ Hays, J. Daniel, *The Message of the Prophets*, (Zondervan, 2010), 292-293.

³⁶ NIV.

then the end will come.”³⁷ Jesus himself says that the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. This logically follows from his statement in earlier verses. Although false prophets will come, there will still be faithful remnants. Another important thing to note here is that Jesus explicitly warns against false prophets in verses 23 and 24, “At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.”³⁸ Jesus himself warns of those to come who will perform great wonders in his name but are, in fact, false teachers. This statement directly links to the claims made by Joseph Smith and the early Mormons. Although they were performing many wonders such as their “continued revelation,” Jesus says they are deceitful because no one has the authority, but Jesus himself, to say that they have received a revelation from the Messiah. Thus, Talmage shot himself in the foot with this prediction.

Other Bible verses used by Mormons to predict the Great Apostasy are Acts 20 and 1 Timothy 4 which both warn believers of perverse men who will try to draw away disciples with erroneous teaching. This links back to the previous paragraph in that the warning against false prophets applies more strongly to Joseph Smith than it does to anything else. But alas, these verses do not refer to a general apostasy, but instead false doctrine and teaching used by some. This does not inherently and logically follow the idea that all believers will be deceived by these false teachings. As Jesus said in Matthew 24, the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

In summation, Talmage’s interpretation of the Bible verses he uses to support the Great Apostasy argument are just fictitious, noncontextually applied misinterpretations of Scripture

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

pieced together to convey a specific and desired outcome. This is a perfect example of proof texting, or the idea of making a decision on one set of standards and then finding biblical passages that support the decision made outside of the Bible. This logical fallacy committed by Talmage, which is the main support for his prediction of the Great Apostasy, makes his argument fall through.

Next, Talmage outlines a large number of external and internal factors that led to the Great Apostasy. First off is the idea of widespread persecution. This is actually likely a cause for the opposite of apostasy. It is a widely accepted idea that persecution caused Christians to be even stronger in the truths of their faith because they would be facing death itself for what they believe in. He then points to Judaism's influence. Although Judaism still had a major influence on early Christianity, it is important to note that many early Christians were ethnic Jews. In fact, the very first Christians were Jewish. Thus, they would inevitably be working out the convergence of true Christianity and their Jewish heritage. The book of Hebrews addresses this problem. The teaching of this letter to the Hebrews on how to navigate Jewish heritage under the new covenant is how the early church dealt with their confusion of identity. Talmage also points to pagan influence as a contributing factor. Although we see many early Christians being surrounded by pagan or occult practices, not all succumbed to them. An example of this is in Revelation 2:12-17, where John praises some members of the church of Pergamum for resisting the pagan influences that surrounded them at every corner. There will always be faithful remnants who remain steadfast. Talmage also mentions the Roman emperors and Roman opposition. Although many Roman emperors enforced strong rules against Christians and demanded emperor worship, this claim ties back to the persecution argument in that Christians' refusal to succumb to culture allowed their faiths to be purified. The early believers under this

Roman rule were truly willing to die for the genuine and authentic truth they had. Another cause for the apostasy Talmage claimed was Constantine's control of Christianity. Although one could question the legitimacy of his conversion, one cannot deny the political freedom that came with his edict to protect Christians in the Roman empire. This freedom allowed for Christians to spread letters and doctrine more widely. It allowed for public, reasoned discussion. This would have allowed for truth to persist even more harmoniously and publicly than before. Another reason given by Talmage was the obvious return to idolatry of some early Christians. Although some believers did fall back into idolatry, that does not mean that there were none who remained faithful. Also, humans are born with a sin nature that does not heal itself after conversion. We will not be sin-free until the return of Christ and the restoration of our earthly bodies in the New Heaven and New Earth. Therefore, sin will exist. The existence of sin does not negate the existence of truth; they are not mutually exclusive. Talmage also highlighted the entrance of Gnosticism, Sabellianism, and Arianism as a means to start the Great Apostasy. One thing to note here is that these are all heresies, and they were condemned under church edicts and creeds (see the Nicene Creed). Therefore, these heresies were denied, and the truth of the Bible remained intact. The existence of falsehood will never mean that truth is lost. Orthodox Christians do not believe in Gnosticism to this day; thus, it must not have been that successful of a heresy. Talmage also mentioned that there was a general disregard for truth during the period in which the Great Apostasy would have occurred, which is false. This was the time in which the New Testament letters were being written and churches were growing in doctrine and orthodoxy. This period was instead one that sought after truth. Talmage finished with the changes of essential ordinances, transubstantiation, secular authority of the Pope, indulgences, blasphemy, and the banning of scripture reading by the laity. These were all notions held by the Roman

Catholic Church. When Martin Luther wrote the 95 theses, he explicitly condemned the areas in which the Catholic Church was not being faithful to the orthodox truth of the Bible. Thus, following the Reformation, an emphasis on the Bible was restored. Protestantism arose as a response to this restoration of biblical emphasis.

All of this to say, these “causes” of the Great Apostasy do not really seem like accurate grounds for a widespread apostasy. Not to mention, there are clearly orthodox Christian beliefs that are held to this day. The Bible is translated using the most extant copies possible, the most ancient being the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran, which were written between 150 B.C. and 70 A.D.³⁹ Many Old Testament translations we read today were translated using those early copies that existed during the time of Jesus’s ministry. If that is not orthodox, then I do not know what is. Not to mention, the King James Version of the Bible, which is the only affirmed version by the LDS church, does not even use the oldest biblical copies. Therefore, it is more reliable to use the one that was very likely used during the time of the apostles. It is therein logical to assert that, if the extant copies we use to this date are from the apostolic period, then the Old Testament biblical truth that existed during the time of Jesus has not changed since then. The oldest complete New Testament the church has is the Codex Sinaiticus, which dates back to the fourth century. There is also a fragment from the gospel of John, Papyrus P52, that dates to the early second century. These books were canonized because many were written by the apostles themselves and the letters were used and read by the early church. These New Testament books and letters were always a part of church canon, and thus it is orthodox truth. Since the Bible has not changed since then based on the fragments and extant copies we have, the truth has therefore stayed intact.

³⁹ Israel Antiquities Society. “Introduction.” The Dead Sea Scrolls.

The next focal point of response to the Mormon argument of the Great Apostasy is found in Matthew 16:18 when Jesus says, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”⁴⁰ When Jesus made this statement, he was serious. Why would God, in all of his knowledge and mercy, send his Son to die only for the truth he delivered to be corrupted just a few years after his return to Heaven? An important textual note here is that the word Hades in Greek is typically used in reference to the abode of the dead, or death itself.⁴¹ The Mormon argument states that the death of these apostles led to the perversion of truth. But if Jesus himself, the author and perfecter of our faith, said that death would not prevail against his church—he was right. Therefore, the logical assumption to make is that death cannot be used as a support for the general apostasy of the church if Jesus himself said that Hades will not prevail against it.

⁴⁰ NIV.

⁴¹ Swanson, James A. “*Hades*,” In Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament), 87. Electronic Edition. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997.

Did the Great Apostasy Happen?

Based upon the evidence brought forward by both sides, it seems to be clear that a Great Apostasy never happened. That is because there were faithful remnants who remained, Jesus's command that his truth would withstand the ages, and the historical inaccuracies of Mormon theology.

First, there were faithful followers of orthodox Christianity throughout history. Even the most ostensibly Christian or the most critical biblical scholar would state that the gospel of Jesus Christ, although not always articulated perfectly by its adherents (see: sin nature) from the early church to present-day, has been overtly reliable in its claims and in the lives of those who adhere to it. Mormons like to believe that centuries of Christian leaders and believers were left to their own devices with an entirely incorrect theology of truth. Walter Martin, a famed Christian author who writes on new religious movements and the occult, provides a list of church fathers that Joseph Smith would say are complete and total frauds: "Origen, Justin, Irenaeus, Jerome, Eusebius, Athanasius, Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, Huss, Luther, Zwingli, Tyndale, Wycliffe, Knox, Whitley, Whitfield."⁴² Not even the harshest, atheistic historian would doubt that these leaders were following and affirming what was orthodox Christianity. God's truth never left the earth. Not to mention, his Holy Spirit helped guide his church in discernment.

Second, by stating that a Great Apostasy happened, Mormons actively deny the statement made by Jesus in Matthew 16:18. If Jesus said that his Church will be built on a rock that not even the power of death could prevail against, Mormons believe that a widespread apostasy happened, and they also affirm the legitimacy of the Bible, then they must logically believe that Jesus lied. Or they must believe that Jesus was incapable of establishing his church on earth.

⁴² Martin, *The Maze of Mormonism*, 30-31.

Either way, they extremely limit Jesus's sinlessness (did he lie to them?) or his authority. Jesus also promised in John 14:26 that the Holy Spirit will be given to the people and that this Spirit will remind us of all Jesus had taught us. Not only that, but in John 16:13, Jesus says that the Spirit of truth will lead us into all truth. Therefore, since Mormons accept the biblical story of Pentecost and the reception of the Holy Spirit, then they are stripping the Holy Spirit of its authority to guide believers in truth. The Holy Spirit of the Bible will lead believers in truth. Therefore, if the Holy Spirit indwells all believers to guide in truth, then truth must have never left. This argument leaves Mormons theologically suspect: they are limiting not only the authority of Jesus Christ, but the Holy Spirit as well. The clear answer to this dilemma is that Jesus was not a liar, and that he established his everlasting church on earth. The Holy Spirit was given to believers to allow them to be guided in truth and discernment, and therefore the will of God was enacted, and his truth was protected through the ages.

Lastly, Mormonism asserts that it is a reestablishment of the true gospel. Mormons claim that the Christianity of Jesus's time included temple ordinances such as the baptism of the dead and "sealings," also known as eternal marriage. However, they have absolutely no evidence to back up this claim. Although they support the idea that the truth left, we have already proven that it did not. So, by this logic, we must look to what we know to be true. We do know that the early church did not baptize on behalf of the dead. This was never an ordinance in an orthodox early Christian church. We also know that the New Testament view of marriage is very different from what is supported by Mormon doctrine. Only temple-married Mormons can enter their highest level of heaven. However, Jesus was unmarried. So was Paul. Paul even said he wished that all believers could be single as he was to avoid hindrance in ministry but advised marriage to those who cannot withstand temptation. Thus, marriage was not a saving ordinance in the early church.

Many of the most important early church figures themselves were unmarried. So, if the early church was nothing like the church that Joseph Smith established, why did it change? Malachi 3:6 says, "I the LORD do not change."⁴³ If God does not change, why would his doctrine change so drastically? And why would God, in all of his loving-kindness, send his Son to die and establish his church, just to allow it to be twisted? What about those centuries of Christians who followed the only text they knew to be true? Why would God change the saving truth he gave them? These are all questions that Mormonism cannot answer. Mostly because it did not happen, but also because it cannot logically be answered. It would make no sense. A great apostasy does not align with the character of God as shown in the Bible. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that the entire Christian church will be completely apostatized and that there will be a need for future restoration. Even during the period of the Antichrist in Revelation when persecution will be at an all-time high, God's truth will still remain steadfast.⁴⁴ God's truth has always remained, it never needed to change, and it will not change in the future.

In summation, using these three criteria for research, one can see how the Great Apostasy could have never happened. There is too much evidence to the contrary. And, Mormons would have to concede a lot of the authority found in character of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to make such a bold claim. God's truth never left the earth.

⁴³ NIV

⁴⁴ Martin, *The Maze of Mormonism*, 30-31.

Conclusion

In conclusion, using the lenses of church history, church doctrine, and textual criticism, one can see the unraveling of the argument of the Great Apostasy before one's very eyes. The tested hypothesis was correct: there is no absolute way that a widespread apostasy could have happened, especially with believers having the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Lord is unmoved, and his statutes do not change. He would not send a new revelation to someone that simply negates his previous decrees. God would not remove his authority from the world for centuries.

After critically viewing Latter-Day Saint history, theology, and doctrine, I would hope that you, too, understand the dilemma the Mormon church faces with its theory of the Great Apostasy. Because the Great Apostasy is untrue, this unravels the remainder of Mormon doctrine. If God's truth never left, Joseph Smith, Jr., is nothing more than a fortune-telling fraud. The Mormon faith is contingent upon the veracity of the notion that truth left the earth. Well, it did not leave. In fact, the same biblical truth that was written on the scrolls in the Qumran cave during the apostolic period and compiled by the early church in the Codex Sinaiticus is the same truth being read by many and applied today.

If you are reading this and you have been following the Mormon faith, heed this advice: follow the truth. The truth of the Bible is alive and well to this day. Trust that Jesus's atonement on the cross paid the ultimate price for you. Although you are a sinner, Christ died for you. And that salvation, by grace alone, is what gives you your eternal reward. Not marriage sealings or temple sacraments—but saving faith in Christ alone. Now, remember this word and go in peace.

Works Cited

- “Apostasy.” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*,
www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/apostasy?lang=eng.
- “Book of Mormon Translation.” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, Dec. 2013,
www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng.
- “Far West.” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*,
www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/far-west?lang=eng.
- Hays, J. Daniel, “Biblical Interpretation: Old Testament.” Class lecture, Biblical Interpretation, Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, AR, 2018.
- Hays, J. Daniel. *The Message of the Prophets*. Zondervan, 2010.
- Holy Bible: King James Version*. Christian Art Publishers, 2017.
- Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2005.
- Howe, E. D., and Dan Vogel. *Mormonism Unveiled*. Signature Books, 2015.
- Israel Antiquities Society. “Introduction.” *The Dead Sea Scrolls - Introduction*,
www.deadseascrolls.org.il/learn-about-the-scrolls/introduction.
- Martin, Walter. *The Kingdom of the Cults*. Bethany House Publishers, 1997.
- Martin, Walter. *The Maze of Mormonism*. Regal Books, 1978.
- “Nauvoo (Commerce), Illinois.” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*,
www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/nauvoo-commerce-illinois?lang=eng.
- Ostling, Richard N., and Joan K. Ostling. *Mormon America*. HarperCollins, 2000.
- Oswalt, John N. *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*. Eerdmans, 1986.
- Smith, Hyrum Mack. *The Doctrine and Covenants: Containing Revelations given to Joseph Smith, Jr., the Prophet*. Deseret Book, 1972.
- Smith, Joseph. *Articles of Faith*. Deseret Sunday School Union, 1878.
- Smith, Lucy Mack, et al. *History of the Prophet Joseph by His Mother*. Project Gutenberg, 2014.

Swanson, James A. “Hades,” In *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*, 87. Electronic Edition. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997.

Talmage, James E. *The Great Apostasy*. Project Gutenberg, 2011.

Tucker, Pomeory. *The Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism*. Hansebooks, 2017.

“Utah.” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*,
www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/utah?lang=eng.