

JOHN TAYLOR ON THE “DARK AGES”

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A foundational tenet and *raison d'être* of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is that a Great Apostasy occurred within the first few centuries of the early Christian era, resulting in the withdrawal of God's priesthood, i.e., divine authority, from the earth. Without this there could be no saving ordinances performed nor gift of the Holy Ghost with its attendant sanctifying and revelatory powers. It took a restoration of the priesthood and gospel back to the earth for these spiritual blessings to be enjoyed again. At least that is the standard Latter-day Saint doctrine of the Great Apostasy.¹ LDS scripture affirms that from the time the lights went out in the early Church to the time of Joseph Smith, “darkness cover[ed] the earth, and gross darkness the minds of the people” (D&C 112:23; see also Isa. 60:2). “For over seventeen hundred years,” wrote early-twentieth-century apostle James Talmage, “there appears to have been silence between the heavens and the earth.”² This spiritual blackout is routinely depicted in Church teachings as the very time prophesied by Amos when the Lord would “send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord,” and no matter how earnestly people seek his voice,

1. See Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Topics and Questions, s.v. “Apostasy,” <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/apostasy?lang=eng>.

2. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission According to Holy Scriptures, Both Ancient and Modern* (Deseret News, 1916), 745.

they “shall not find it” (Amos 8:11–12).³ Given such a disparaging view of “apostate” Christianity, it is little wonder the Church has struggled to win the good will of Catholics and Protestants who feel slighted by such a dismissive narrative. Even many faithful Church members find it incredulous that a loving, all-powerful God would withhold the blessings of the gospel from his children for more than seventeen centuries. Adding to the pushback by Christians at large, the LDS Great Apostasy narrative is also at odds with the scholarly consensus that the Middle Ages were not, as previously thought, a time of darkness and ignorance. Rather, the so-called Dark Ages are hailed as “a period of extraordinary human intellectual and artistic achievements comparable to, if not surpassing, those of the Renaissance.”⁴

Taylor-ing the Narrative

To placate critics who take umbrage at the LDS denigration of historical Christianity, several ecumenically sensitive LDS scholars have advanced a more conciliatory view of the Apostasy, disavowing the belief that God closed the heavens and asserting instead that open heavenly communication continued to bless Christian believers. The principal authority invoked in support of this revisionist narrative is a September 7, 1873 statement by then apostle John Taylor, which depicts even the “dark ages” as a time when men of faith were graced with extraordinary visions and revelations.

There were men in those dark ages who could commune with God, and who, by the power of faith, could draw aside the curtain of eternity and gaze upon the invisible world. There were men who could tell the

3. See, for example, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Great Apostasy,” <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/the-restoration/the-great-apostasy?lang=eng>.

4. Zachary Gubler, “Mormonism and the Possibility of a Materialist Apostasy,” *Dialogue* 54, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 71. See also C. Warren Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, 3rd ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), 1–2.

destiny of the human family, and the events which would transpire throughout every subsequent period of time until the final winding-up scene. There were men who could gaze upon the face of God, have the ministering of angels, and unfold the future destinies of the world. If those were dark ages I pray God to give me a little darkness.⁵

Taylor's high praise and holy envy for this remarkable spiritual outpouring during the "dark ages" clearly runs counter to the traditional LDS view of the Middle Ages as a time of spiritual blackout. Granted, the Church has always held that medieval Christians received a measure of spiritual illumination through the light of Christ, which "lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (D&C 93:2), but Taylor audaciously elevates medieval spiritual enlightenment to a whole new level rivaled only by the visions and prophecies one reads about in scripture. Taken at face value, one could infer from Taylor's remark that the Restoration provided no more spiritual enlightenment than what was already available over the previous 1800 years. This has led some LDS scholars to assert that, despite what the traditional LDS Apostasy narrative has been, the more enlightened LDS view is that Christians have always been privy to the same spiritual outpouring as Latter-day Saints.

The first recorded instance of Taylor's "dark age" remark being invoked to argue for a more palatable Apostasy narrative occurred in a groundbreaking 2002 essay by BYU history professor Eric Dursteler titled "Inheriting the 'Great Apostasy': The Evolution of Mormon Views on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance." Dursteler's thesis was that the Church should abandon its traditional, Protestant-inherited view of the Middle Ages as "a time of spiritual and intellectual darkness in which all revelation and, indeed, progress of any sort disappeared."⁶ In

5. John Taylor, Sept. 7, 1873, *Journal of Discourses*, 16:197.

6. Eric Dursteler, "Inheriting the 'Great Apostasy': The Evolution of Mormon Views on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance," *Journal of Mormon History* 28, no. 2 (2002): 38.

making a case for a more conciliatory view of the Apostasy, he invoked John Taylor's effusive adulation for "dark age" spirituality, calling it "the historical precedent" for justifying such a view.⁷ A version of Dursteler's essay, including his appeal to Taylor's "dark age" adulation, was subsequently included in a 2005 FARMS publication and later again in a 2014 Oxford University Press publication.⁸ In both of these scholarly anthologies reexamining the Great Apostasy, Dursteler's essay appears as the lead chapter, a nod to its significance in Apostasy scholarship.

Informed (and inspired) by Dursteler's work, other LDS scholars soon began appealing to Taylor's "dark age" remark to promote a more conciliatory Apostasy narrative. Among the earliest was Alexander B. Morrison, an emeritus General Authority seventy and respected academic. In his 2005 volume, *Turning from Truth: A New Look at the Great Apostasy*, Morrison quotes Taylor's "dark age" adulation to persuade readers to think of medieval Christianity more charitably. According to Morrison, Taylor understood that "mortals . . . still enjoyed at least a measure of spiritual enlightenment and blessings during the time between apostasy and restoration."⁹ Taylor's "dark age" remark has also been put into service by Robert Millet, a prominent BYU religion professor (now retired) who has had a long-standing dialogue with evangelical Christians in an effort to promote greater mutual respect

7. Dursteler, "Inheriting the 'Great Apostasy,'" 58.

8. Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy* (Provo: FARMS and BYU Press, 2005), 29–65; Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young, eds., *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 23–53.

9. Alexander B. Morrison, *Turning from Truth: A New Look at the Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 3. There is little question that Morrison was influenced either directly or indirectly by Dursteler's essay, making many of the same points to promote the same thesis. He even acknowledges enlisting the assistance of Noel Reynolds, who was editor of one of the anthologies containing Dursteler's essay and quotes Taylor himself in a 2004 speech (see note 15).

and tolerance. In response to evangelicals who criticize the uncomplimentary LDS view of “apostate” Christianity, Millet states, “I believe it is a gross exaggeration and misrepresentation to suggest that Latter-day Saints believe all of Christian practice and doctrine since the time of the original Apostles has been apostate.” Millet points to Taylor’s praise of “dark age” spirituality as the *real* LDS view, stating that Taylor was referring specifically to “persons during medieval times.”¹⁰ Millet appeals to Taylor’s “dark age” comment to defend a spiritually rich Christian legacy in at least five books he has published¹¹ as well as in articles and speeches he has given over the past two decades.

Terryl Givens has also frequently employed Taylor’s “dark age” comment to quell critics who find it incredulous “that God was sort of snoozing until 1820.” To such critics he replies: “Well, guess what? That sounds absurd to Mormons as well.”¹² To back up this disarming comeback, he quotes Taylor’s glowing praise for “dark age” spiritual enlightenment. In *The Crucible of Doubt*, he and coauthor Fiona Givens remarked that Taylor’s praise for “dark age” spirituality “should shame those moderns who believe the medieval church was a spiritual

10. Robert L. Millet, “Reflections on Apostasy and Restoration,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, edited by Robert L. Millet (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 19–41.

11. In addition to the above volume, the Taylor quote appears in Robert L. Millet, *The Vision of Mormonism: Pressing the Boundaries of Christianity* (St. Paul, Minn.: Paragon House, 2007); Richard J. Mouw and Robert L. Millet, eds., *Talking Doctrine: Mormons and Evangelicals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2015); Robert L. Millet and Shon D. Hopkin, *Mormonism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Robert L. Millet, “‘The Morning Breaks’: The Glorious Light of Restoration,” in *Foundations of the Restoration: The 45th Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, edited by Craig James Ostler, Michael Hubbard MacKay, and Barbara Morgan Gardner (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 1–22.

12. Terryl Givens, “Letter to a Doubter,” *Meridian Magazine*, Apr. 29, 2013, <https://latterdaysaintmag.com/article-1-12607/>.

wasteland.”¹³ The Givenses quote Taylor’s “dark age” remark to advocate for a more charitable Apostasy narrative in at least five of their published books as well as in other presentations and interviews over the years.¹⁴ Other LDS scholars have also appealed to Taylor’s “dark age” statement to elevate perceptions of medieval spirituality.¹⁵ MormonWiki.com, an online encyclopedia about Latter-day Saints, quotes Taylor under the page “Apostasy, Reformation, and Restoration” to show that “revelation continued” during the Dark Ages.¹⁶ Taylor’s quote even appears in the Church’s *New Testament Seminary Teacher Manual* with the observation that it was specifically “regarding those who sought truth during the Dark Ages.”¹⁷ This growing acknowledgement of spiritual

13. Terryl and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 88.

14. Taylor’s statement is quoted in *The Crucible of Doubt; The God Who Weeps* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012); “Letter to a Doubter,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 131–46; *Mormonism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 97; and *Let’s Talk About Faith and Intellect* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2022), 30.

15. See, for example, Noel B. Reynolds, “What Went Wrong for the Early Christians?,” Brigham Young University–Idaho Devotional, June 15, 2004, https://www2.byui.edu/Presentations/Transcripts/Devotionals/2004_06_15_Reynolds.htm; James Faulconer, “The Only True Church,” *Patheos*, Mar. 14, 2014, <https://www.patheos.com/latter-day-saint/only-true-church-james-faulconer-03-15-2014>; Jared M. Halverson, “A Marvelous Work and a Wonder,” course slides from Religious Education 501 at Brigham Young University, available at <https://www.coursehero.com/file/179862902/1-A-Marvelous-Work-and-a-Wonderpdf/>.

16. MormonWiki, “Apostasy, Reformation, and Restoration,” last edited Nov. 9, 2020, https://www.mormonwiki.com/Apostasy,_Reformation,_and_Restoration.

17. “Lesson 129: 2 Thessalonians,” *New Testament Seminary Teacher Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/new-testament-seminary-teacher-manual/introduction-to-the-second-epistle-of-paul-to-the-thessalonians/lesson-129-2-thessalonians?lang=eng>.

outpouring during the Dark Ages, largely on the authority of Taylor, is a significant concession given the history of univocal restraint when portraying medieval spirituality in LDS discourse.

Taylor's Documented View of Apostate Christianity

Compared to traditional Church teachings on the Great Apostasy, Taylor's glowing appraisal of medieval spirituality is clearly an outlier and seems to disregard the conditions on which gifts of the Spirit have been traditionally predicated, namely priesthood participation and gospel compliance. Simply put, Taylor accords medieval Christians far greater spiritual privilege than what traditional Mormon doctrine seems to allow.¹⁸ How could people living in the Dark Ages without the priesthood and gospel have the heavens opened to them, see God's plan from beginning to end, be visited by angels, and gaze upon the face of God? No Church leader has ever come close to attributing this level of revelatory outpouring to individuals devoid of the priesthood and gospel.

One wonders if Taylor's remark is really an accurate representation of how he viewed the era of the Apostasy. In his 1852 book *The Government of God*, Taylor makes his view explicit: "The world [has been] ignorant of God and his laws, not having had any communication with him for eighteen hundred years."¹⁹ His published denial of there being "any communication" from God for the last eighteen hundred years is clearly at odds with the profuse revelations described in his 1873 remark.

18. LDS scripture explains that the Melchizedek Priesthood holds the keys to the spiritual gifts of God and without the priesthood and its ordinances, "the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh" (D&C 84:19–22). Two exceptions in Mormon thought are (1) the spiritual outpouring afforded on rare occasions to little children, who are alive in Christ without the need of the Gospel (see, for example, 3 Ne. 17:21–25), and (2) the opening of a new dispensation to facilitate the restoration of the Gospel and priesthood keys.

19. John Taylor, *The Government of God* (S.W. Richards, 1852).

Taylor's dismissal of the presence of heavenly communication prior to the Restoration comports with traditional LDS teachings and Taylor's own belief about revelation—that it is the privilege only of those who have received the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. In December 1840 he denounced Methodists for their indifference toward this gift, contending that it was precisely through “the gift of the Holy Ghost [that New Testament Christians] . . . could have the ministering of angels, and the spirit of prophesy, . . . be wrapped in prophetic vision, have the curtains of heaven withdrawn[,] behold the opening glories of the eternal world, and prophesy of events that should transpire until the final winding-up scene.”²⁰ Notably, these are the very same heavenly manifestations Taylor ascribed to people of “those dark ages” in his now-popular 1873 remark, yet here he explicitly ascribes them to New Testament saints, attributing their presence to the gift of the Holy Ghost. He alluded again to these same spiritual manifestations and their dependency on the gift of the Holy Ghost in February 1874, observing that Christ's disciples were “inspired men—men who had the ministering of angels, the spirit of prophecy, and the principle of revelation; men who had the heavens opened to them, so that they could contemplate the purposes of God as they should roll along throughout every subsequent period of time until the winding up scene. Whence did they obtain this knowledge? They obtained it through obedience to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”²¹ As to how “this Gospel places man in communication with God,” Taylor explained, “[This] Gospel, when received and obeyed, imparts the Holy Ghost, which Holy Ghost takes of the things of God, and shows them unto us.”²² As he would emphasize in a February 1883 sermon, one “cannot come to a knowledge of God, nor

20. John Taylor, *Truth Defended* (Liverpool: J. Tompkins, 1840), 11.

21. John Taylor, Feb. 1, 1874, *Journal of Discourses* 16:372.

22. John Taylor, Oct. 9, 1881, *Journal of Discourses* 22:292.

become acquainted with eternal things without the Gospel; without the gift of the Holy Ghost."²³

The importance Taylor placed on the necessity of having the gift of the Holy Ghost in order to receive revelation is further evident from the distinction he made between the gift of the Holy Ghost, which only members of the Church possess, and the light of Christ, which everyone possesses. "We have something more than that portion of the Spirit of God [i.e., the light of Christ] which is given to every man," he said in a November 1882 sermon, "and it is called the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is received through obedience to the first principles of the Gospel of Christ, by the laying on of hands of the servants of God. . . . [T]his Holy Ghost . . . would cause . . . old men to dream dreams and . . . young men to see visions; and . . . servants and handmaids of God . . . [to] prophesy. These are the operations of . . . the Holy Ghost. It is this Spirit that brings us into relationship with God, and it differs very materially from the portion of spirit that is given to all men to profit withal."²⁴

Thus, for Taylor, only the gift of the Holy Ghost received by the laying on of hands by one holding the priesthood entitles one to receive revelations from God, and whenever this gift has been absent in the world, spiritual manifestations, beyond the dim intimations of the light of Christ, were also absent. Taylor noted that even the inspired leaders of the Reformation "groped, as it were, in the dark, with [only] a portion of the Spirit of God [i.e., the light of Christ]."²⁵ Because these reformers were without the gift of the Holy Ghost, "God did not impart to them the light of revelation which the ancient Saints enjoyed"²⁶ Given Taylor's consistent stance that no one can receive heavenly manifestations without the gift of the Holy Ghost, one can only surmise that

23. John Taylor, Feb. 11, 1883, *Journal of Discourses* 23:373.

24. John Taylor, Nov. 23, 1882, *Journal of Discourses* 23:323.

25. John Taylor, Feb. 11, 1883, *Journal of Discourses* 23:371.

26. John Taylor, Feb. 1, 1874, *Journal of Discourses* 16:375.

his attribution of spiritual gifts to medieval Christians must have been either a slip of the tongue, an inaccurate transcription, or a misreading of the text.

Decoding Taylor's 1873 "Dark Age" Remark

Assuming the transcription of Taylor's 1873 "dark age" remark is substantively accurate and that it was not a slip of the tongue, a closer examination of the text can help determine if Taylor is being correctly interpreted. It is significant first of all that Taylor didn't actually refer to men in "*the* dark ages," but to men in "*those* dark ages" (emphasis added). In searching back through his sermon for the antecedent of "*those* dark ages," it is telling that not once did Taylor mention anything about the life and times of people living in the Middle Ages, making it unlikely that the antecedent of "*those* dark ages" is the medieval period. What he did describe, rather, was the lives of "ancient prophets," including Abraham and Moses, who were given "many visions, manifestations and revelations."²⁷ He also extolled New Testament visionaries including Paul and John the Revelator. Even the Book of Mormon prophets Nephi and Alma received mention for their visionary experiences. Taylor explained that all these "men of God on the Asiatic continent [and] also on this [the American] continent" were "in possession of . . . truth in relation to God, the heavens, the past, the present and the future," and all because they had the "everlasting gospel" and received "revelation" concerning these things.²⁸ So the most logical antecedent of "*those* dark ages" is ancient biblical and Book of Mormon times, not the Middle Ages.

But why, one might ask, would Taylor use the term "dark" to describe biblical and Book of Mormon times? To be sure, Taylor's sermon makes clear that he himself did not consider biblical prophets to be living

27. John Taylor, Sept. 7, 1873, *Journal of Discourses* 16:195–96.

28. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 16:197.

in darkness, but allegedly many of his Christian contemporaries did, and that is what he is contesting. According to Taylor, these Christians were claiming that because prophets of old "lived before there was a Gospel,"²⁹ "they were degraded and in darkness"³⁰ and therefore needed special visions and revelations to show them the light.

Breaking down Taylor's sermon, he begins by showing "from [the] . . . Scriptures . . . that man did once possess a knowledge of God and the future."³¹ He further explains that "whenever a man had a knowledge of these things, they had a knowledge of the Gospel,"³² a point he makes at least ten times in his sermon. Taylor emphasizes that even "ancient prophets" of the Old Testament possessed the "everlasting Gospel" in order for them to have had such marvelous visions and revelations.³³ This leads Taylor to rhetorically ask, "If God revealed himself to men in other days, why not reveal himself to us?"³⁴ Characterizing the response he imagines his contemporaries would give, he states, "Say some—'Oh, we are so enlightened and intelligent now. In former ages [i.e., biblical times], when the people were degraded and in darkness, it was necessary that he should communicate intelligence to the human family; but we live in the blaze of Gospel day, in an age of light and intelligence.'"³⁵ What Taylor is obviously chiding here is the belief among Christian contemporaries that biblical prophets received visions and revelations because they lived in dark times and therefore needed it to compensate for their darkness. Modern Christians, on the other hand, profess to being so enlightened by the gospel as to not require

29. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 16:196.

30. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 16:198.

31. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 16:196.

32. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 16:196.

33. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 16:196.

34. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 16:197.

35. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 16:197–98.

revelations. For Taylor, just the opposite was true: ancient prophets had visions *because* they had the gospel, while modern Christians have no revelations because they lack the gospel. Taylor summarily dismisses his Christian contemporaries, contending that with all their so-called gospel enlightenment they don't have nearly as much light and knowledge as ancient prophets who lived in the so-called "dark ages."

Taylor spends the remainder of his sermon reiterating that knowledge of the things of God comes only "through the instrumentality of the Gospel"³⁶ and, more specifically, "the gift of the Holy Ghost, which Jesus said would impart a knowledge of God and his purposes."³⁷ He concludes his sermon with an appeal to Christians to aspire for the kind of revelations enjoyed in biblical times, saying, "This is the kind of thing that they had in that day [i.e., those so-called 'dark ages']. This is the Gospel that we have to proclaim to you."³⁸ The clear takeaway from Taylor's sermon is that the gospel is the means by which men are brought into a relationship with God to receive divine revelation, and where the gospel doesn't exist, no such revelation exists. The gist of Taylor's "dark age" comment clearly conveys the idea that, while some Christians have alleged that biblical prophets lived in a "dark age" devoid of the gospel, the visions and revelations these prophets received demonstrate otherwise.

It becomes even more evident that Taylor was alluding to biblical times when referring to "those dark ages" when his remark is read in light of similar comments he made elsewhere. In a May 1870 discourse, Taylor bemoaned: "Some men will stultify themselves with the idea that in ages gone and past the human race was in a semi-civilized or barbarous condition."³⁹ After showing that such a caricature is not

36. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 16:196.

37. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 16:199.

38. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 16:199.

39. John Taylor, May 6, 1870, *Journal of Discourses* 13:225.

borne out by the biblical record, he observed that if we go back to "these dark ages referred to . . . we find that the gospel was preached to Abraham . . . to Melchizedek . . . to Moses . . . [etc.]."40 He noted that these biblical prophets all had "the Melchizedek Priesthood" and "the everlasting Gospel" and "wherever the Gospel has existed, there has always been revelation."⁴¹ In December 1876 Taylor again refuted the idea that ancient prophets lived in the "dark ages" saying, "I have frequently heard people say, and Christians at that, 'We do not know anything about the future' . . . but there were men in former times that had very different ideas from this; they lived back, away back, in what they [i.e., contemporary Christians] now call the 'dark ages.' For instance, I will name Job [who lived] . . . away back in the dark ages."⁴² Then yet again in March 1880 he remarked, "Some people think that he [Abraham] was a kind of a shepherd with very few more ideas than a mushroom; that he lived in the dark ages and did not comprehend much."⁴³ Significantly, in every recorded instance that Taylor used the term "dark ages," he was merely parodying the Christian denigration of the biblical period. In none of his sermons and writings did Taylor ever use the term "dark ages" to denote the medieval period.

Who were these "Christians" Taylor alluded to that were dismissing the need for modern revelation and claiming it was only needed in "those dark ages" of the Bible? Those holding this view were (and are) referred to as *cessationists* and are found primarily in the Reformed tradition (Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Reformed Baptists, Anglicans, etc.). Cessationists maintain that visions, revelations, and other extraordinary gifts of the Spirit ceased when the Bible began to be available. As Congregationalist theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)

40. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 13:232–33.

41. Taylor, *Journal of Discourses*, 13:232.

42. John Taylor, Dec. 31, 1876, *Journal of Discourses* 18:309–10.

43. John Taylor, Mar. 21, 1880, *Journal of Discourses* 21:245.

explained, these extraordinary gifts were “bestowed on the prophets [of the Old Testament] and apostles [of the New Testament] to enable them to reveal the mind and will of God before the canon of Scripture was complete.”⁴⁴ Once the world had the Bible and Church for their guide, direct revelation was no longer necessary.

One rationale cessationists gave for the presence of extraordinary spiritual gifts in ancient times was that God was dealing with individuals who, according to Anglican preacher William Harness (1790–1869), “were for the most part poor and uneducated men,” and it required “extraordinary illumination” from God to compensate for their “habits and prejudices.”⁴⁵ Jonathan Edwards referred to the biblical era as “the dark times of prophecy,” meaning it was a time of ignorance and superstition when “immediate revelations” provided a much-needed spiritual boost.⁴⁶ Edwards believed that the “extraordinary gifts” of the Spirit were provisional only, imparting a “reflected light . . . in the night, or in a dark season” until the bright light of Christ’s gospel rendered them no longer necessary.⁴⁷ Taylor doesn’t identify the specific cessationists he was referring to in his 1873 “dark age” remark. He may have been speaking generally or perhaps had a specific person or group in mind. Perhaps he was alluding to Methodists, whose cessationism he criticized decades earlier in a December 1840 pamphlet. Parodying the way Methodists dismissed the need for apostles and prophets, he wrote: “Apostles, and prophets, and inspired men . . . were only necessary for

44. Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits: Christian Love as Manifested in the Heart and Life*, edited by Tryon Edwards (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1852), 29.

45. William Harness, *Modern Claims to Miraculous Gifts of the Spirit* (London: Longman, Reese, Orme, Brown and Green, 1831), 12–13.

46. Jonathan Edwards, *Dissertation of the End for which God Created the World*, 10 vols., edited by Sereno Edwards Dwight (New York, S. Converse, 1829), 606.

47. Edwards, *Dissertation of the End*, 605.

the dark ages, but as we have now got a more efficient ministry, we can perfect the saints without them."⁴⁸ He also mocked the way they supposedly discounted spiritual gifts: "Do not desire spiritual gifts, nor prophesy; it is not needed in this enlightened age."⁴⁹ Taylor repudiated cessationists on several subsequent occasions in this same way; however, this is the only time he targeted a specific denomination.

Taylor wasn't alone in denouncing cessationists for referring to biblical times as an age of darkness. Other Church leaders joined the refrain, most notably Wilford Woodruff, who in February 1855 enjoined in language similar to Taylor: "Ask any portion of Christendom why the ancient order of the Church of Christ is not among them—Apostles, Prophets, revelations, and other gifts, and they will inform you that

48. Taylor, *Truth Defended*, 11.

49. Taylor, *Truth Defended*, 12. Taylor's repudiation of Methodist cessationism may seem a bit puzzling, since Methodism has traditionally been anti-cessationist. Wesley believed that special revelation and other charismata disappeared in the early church, but not because the gospel light rendered them no longer necessary "as has been vulgarly supposed." Rather, he explained, "Christians were turned Heathens again, and had only a dead form left." John Wesley, "The More Excellent Way" (1787), in *Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, 12 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872), 7:27. Though early on, Methodists were among the most enthusiastic seekers of spiritual gifts, an increase in converts among the middle class in the first couple decades of the nineteenth century resulted in a growing disdain for dreams and visions, which may account for the Methodist minister telling young Joseph Smith "that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them" (Joseph Smith—History 21). Taylor is essentially echoing what Parley P. Pratt had written about Methodism in an earlier 1838 pamphlet in which he stated, "The gifts of the Spirit . . . are denied by them, and totally set aside—for instance, Apostles, Prophets, Miracles, Healings, Revelations, Visions, Prophecyings, Tongues, Interpretations, &c.; therefore, they have a form of Godliness, denying the power and gifts of God." Parley P. Pratt, "Mormonism Unveiled: Zion's Watchman Unmasked" (New York: n.p., 1838), 42.

they were only needed in the dark ages of the world, to establish the kingdom of God, but in this enlightened age are not necessary.”⁵⁰ Like Taylor, Woodruff also implored, “May the Lord give me such periods of darkness as were enjoyed by the Apostles and Saints of old, in preference to the Gospel blaze of modern Christianity. . . . [T]he Gospel of modern Christendom shuts up the Lord, and stops all communication with Him. I want nothing to do with such a Gospel, I would rather prefer the Gospel of the dark ages, so called.”⁵¹ Woodruff repudiated cessationists for derogatorily referring to biblical times as the “dark ages” on at least five subsequent occasions.⁵² He further claimed to have first raised this criticism against them at the early age of “about eight

50. Wilford Woodruff, Feb. 25, 1855, *Journal of Discourses* 2:194.

51. Woodruff, *Journal of Discourses* 2:196.

52. In an 1877 sermon, Wilford Woodruff enjoined his congregation: “Ask the ministers . . . why they do not enjoy the gifts and graces and the light of revelation from heaven, and what is the universal reply? It is in substance, ‘Oh, these things are all done away, they are no longer needed; it was necessary that they should exist in the dark ages of the world but not in these days of the blaze of Gospel light.’ Whenever God had a Church upon the earth these gifts were enjoyed by the people.” Woodruff, Sept. 16, 1877, *Journal of Discourses* 19:226.

Parodying Protestant ministers in a June 1881 sermon, Woodruff exclaimed, “You [Latter-day Saints] believe in revelation, you believe in prophets: we cannot bear these things, they are all done away with. These things were only given in the dark ages of the world, but today, living as we are in the blaze of the glorious Gospel, we do not need them.” Woodruff, June 12, 1881, *Journal of Discourses* 22:175.

In an April 1889 sermon, Woodruff related an experience he had while attending a revival meeting as a young man prior to his introduction to Mormonism, which was in late 1833. Standing before the group of Congregationalist ministers leading the meeting, Woodruff asked why they didn’t contend for the ancient religion of the Bible in which people were guided by “dreams and

years old.”⁵³ In addition to Woodruff, other Church elders also joined Taylor in expressing disdain for the cessationist relegation of biblical

visions, and constant revelation.” He was rebuffed by the presiding minister, who chided, “These things were given to the children of men in the dark ages of the world, and they were given for the very purpose of enlightening the children of men in that age, that they might believe in Jesus Christ. Today we live in the blaze of the glorious gospel light, and we do not need those things.” Woodruff allegedly responded, “Then give me the dark ages of the world; give me those ages when men received these principles.” *The Deseret Weekly*, Apr. 6, 1889, 450.

In a May 1892 sermon, Woodruff related what appears to be the same incident he related in April 1889. He described it as happening while a young boy living in Farmington, Connecticut. Woodruff confronted the ministers there saying, “‘Why is it that you don’t contend for the faith once delivered to the Saints? How is it that you don’t have those gifts and graces that were manifest in the days of Christ and His Apostles?’ They told me that these things were given in the dark ages of the world, to convince the children of men that Jesus was the Christ. But, said they, we are now living in the blaze of the great Gospel light, and we don’t need them.” *Deseret Weekly*, Salt Lake City, May 21, 1892, 719.

In an October 1895 sermon, Woodruff related what seems to again be the same incident related above. It was “[e]ighty years ago” when he “was about eight years old” while he was attending a Congregational Sunday School class. Learning about the great spiritual manifestations in the New Testament, he asked the ministers, “‘[W]hy is it, gentlemen, that you do not advocate in your day and generation that faith once delivered to the Saints? Why don’t you receive these things, if they were the servants of God and had the Gospel?’ They responded, ‘These things are all done away with. They were given in the dark ages of the world to convince the world that Jesus was the christ. We live in the blaze of the glorious gospel light of Christ; we do not need them to-day.’ ‘Then,’ said I, ‘give me the dark ages of the world.’” *Deseret Weekly*, Salt Lake City, Oct. 26, 1895, 578. Woodruff repeated this story yet again in an October 1896 sermon. *Deseret Weekly*, Oct. 17, 1896, 546.

53. Wilford Woodruff, *Deseret Weekly*, Oct. 26, 1895, 578.

figures to the “dark ages.”⁵⁴ In some instances their disdain was directed at anti-polygamists who denigrated the practice of polygamy as being an outdated artifact of the “dark ages.” Elder Henry Naisbitt observed, for example, “‘Ah, well,’ says one, ‘that [i.e., the ancient practice of polygamy] was in the dark ages,’” to which Naisbitt replied, “Just so. But it was when God made Himself manifest among His children; when angels communed with those that dwelt upon the earth; when the spirit of revelation was felt among mankind; when the institutions of God’s house and the ordinances thereof prevailed among the chosen people

54. As editor of the *Times and Seasons*, Taylor published an article in which a Mormon elder was quoted as saying, “the days of those [biblical] prophets, are by the sectarian world called the ‘Dark Age;’ . . . [but] those men were as familiar with the designs of God, and the future destiny of nations, as we are with the history of past events. Instead of darkness, God revealed himself to man, conversed with him, [and] told him what should come to pass in future ages.” *Times and Seasons*, Nauvoo, Ill., 1843, vol. 4, no. 11, 207.

On October 29, 1856, William Appleby wrote a letter to John Taylor, then editor of *The Mormon*, excoriating “the religious world at present, and for centuries past [for] . . . believing . . . that God will never again speak from the Heavens to man—that all we want in this enlightened age, is a small morsel of . . . what the ancient Saints received and enjoyed in the ‘dark ages,’ and which ‘now is done away, and no longer needed, in this enlightened age of Gospel liberty.” John Taylor, ed., *The Mormon*, New York, Nov. 8, 1856, 2. Elder Joel M. Berry wrote in 1856, “Ask any portion of Christendom why . . . apostles, prophets, revelations and other gifts, are not in the Church now, and they will inform you that they were only needed in the dark ages of the world to establish the kingdom of God; but in this enlightened age are not necessary.” *The Mormon*, New York, Nov. 15, 1856, 3. George Bywater stated, “‘Fear God and keep his commandments: this is the whole duty of man’ [Ecc. 12:13]. This sentiment was uttered long centuries ago, when men, according to modern writers and speakers, were supposed to enjoy only the light of Paganism, guided by the government of barbarism in the lower stages of the scale of human elevation—in the dark ages.” June 4, 1882, *Journal of Discourses* 23:144.

In October 1885 Moses Thatcher remarked, “Abraham talked with God face to face, and although it may be thought that he lived in the dark ages, would to God that the Christian world would walk in such darkness today!” Oct. 8, 1885, *Journal of Discourses* 26:332.

of God! And you call that a day of darkness! . . . Would to God we had again a renewal . . . of the dark ages of the past."⁵⁵

So, what Taylor and his associates so often raised their voices against was the cessationist disparagement of biblical times as an age of darkness, without the light of the gospel. With one voice they countered that the so-called "dark ages" of the Bible were instead a time of gospel light, far exceeding the so-called gospel light professed by contemporary cessationists.

Conclusion

Contrary to the growing assertion by Mormon intelligentsia that Taylor's 1873 "dark age" comment serves as a welcome corrective to the traditional LDS Apostasy narrative, which portrays the Dark Ages as a period devoid of revelation from God, Taylor's comment has nothing to do with spirituality during the Dark Ages of the world. Rather, it was an acknowledgement of God's spiritual outpouring to his ancient prophets living in biblical times, which cessationists in Taylor's time derisively referred to as the "dark ages" because, they claimed, these prophets were bereft of the gospel light. For Taylor and his associates, however, ancient prophets did have the full light of the gospel, otherwise they could not have had the remarkable visions and revelations described in the Bible. The uncritical adoption of Taylor's remark to promote the idea that the heavens were open to faithful Christians even during the European Dark Ages is therefore misguided and goes completely contrary to Taylor's actual view of the Middle Ages. For Taylor, just as for Church leaders living before and after, the Middle Ages were considered a time of spiritual darkness when the heavens were closed.

The nineteenth-century LDS polemic against cessationists for their derogatory use of the term "dark ages" to refer to biblical times has faded from LDS institutional memory. It is little wonder, therefore, that

55. Henry W. Naisbitt, June 7, 1885, *Journal of Discourses* 26:240.

many have hastily jumped to the conclusion that Taylor's "dark ages" must have reference to the historical Dark Ages, especially when such a reading serves to advance a more conciliatory Apostasy narrative. With the momentum and enthusiastic reception this presentist reading has had, it is also not surprising that it has persisted for over twenty years without being critically challenged.

Despite the fact that Taylor's September 7, 1873 sermon doesn't really support (and, in fact, actually undermines) the belief in a spiritually affluent medieval period, the revisionist Apostasy narrative that it has been instrumental in promoting is laudable nonetheless. The presumption that medieval Christians languished in spiritual darkness does injustice to the great spiritual legacy they left behind. Only time will tell if Mormonism will ever fully come around to replacing its disparaging, Protestant-inherited Apostasy narrative with one that is more conciliatory and historically based—one that acknowledges the same accessibility to spiritual gifts throughout Christian history, and one that doesn't rely on Taylor's 1873 "dark age" comment as a proof text.

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