

Joseph Smith and the Revelations: From Manuscripts to Publication

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The forthcoming publication of the papers of Joseph Smith is, for me, the most exciting event ever in Mormon historical research. At the outset, the vision was to have most of the volumes on the shelf by the two hundredth anniversary of his birth, but the sheer weight of the material available and the desire to be accurate and complete have extended the deadlines well beyond that time frame.

I was not trained in historical research and writing, and I suppose the invitation to participate as a coeditor for two volumes of the Joseph Smith Papers project was extended because of the work I had done on the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants. It has been a painful experience to learn how to write the history as objectively as possible and to put aside so many romantic stories that thrive in our culture. But Grant Underwood and William G. Hartley, the other editors of the two volumes with which I am participating, have taken me in hand, and together we are writing what I think is a very complete but, more importantly, a very interesting account concerning the documents connected with Joseph Smith through 1833.

There is a line in the 1962 John Ford movie, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, that says, "When legends become fact, print the legend."

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Thus, the film raises questions concerning the role of folklore and tradition in forging the history of the West. We could raise the same issues with regard to folklore and tradition in Mormon history. Now, with the publication in the immediate future of all the papers of Joseph Smith, we have the chance to write the events related to him as accurately as the past records allow. Although the final result may not be as colorful as some of the so-called “popular history” of the period, at least we will be brought closer to the actual events than ever before.

Of particular interest to me are the accounts related to Joseph Smith’s receiving, recording, and publishing revelations. Raised in the faith, I had been taught, and believed, the revelations were word-for-word dictations.¹ In particular, Parley P. Pratt’s account of Joseph Smith receiving Doctrine and Covenants section 50 had influenced my concept of how the revelations were received. I suppose this is true of many others as well. He said:

After we had joined in prayer in his translating room, he dictated in our presence the following revelation:—Each sentence was uttered slowly and very distinctly, and with a pause between each, sufficiently long for it to be recorded, by an ordinary writer, in long hand.

This was the manner in which all his written revelations were dictated and written. There was never any hesitation, reviewing, or reading back, in order to keep the run of the subject; neither did any of these communications undergo revisions, interlinings, or corrections. As he dictated them so they stood, so far as I have witnessed; and I was present to witness the dictation of several communications of several pages each.²

Ignoring his qualification, “so far as I have witnessed,” this statement, placed on the balance, has carried great weight. There are additional statements such as the following from William E. McLellin:

I, as scribe, have written revelations from the mouth of [the Prophet]. And I have been present many times when others wrote for Joseph; therefore I speak as one having experience. The scribe seats himself at a desk or table, with pen, ink, and paper. The subject of enquiry being understood, the Prophet and Revelator enquires of God. He spiritually sees, hears, and feels, and then speaks as he is moved upon by the Holy Ghost, the “thus saith the Lord,” sentence after sentence, and waits for his amanuenses to write and then read aloud each sentence. Thus they proceed until the revelator says Amen, at the close of what is then communicated. I have known [Joseph], without premeditation, to thus deliver off in broken sentences, some of the most sublime pieces of composition which I ever perused in any book.³

Also from William E. McLellin:

A committee had been appointed to draft a preface, consisting of . . . O. Cowdery and, I think, Sidney Rigdon, but when they made their report . . . the Conference then requested Joseph to enquire of the Lord about it, and he said that

he would if the people would bow in prayer with him. This they did and Joseph prayed.

When they arose, Joseph dictated by the Spirit the preface found in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants while sitting by a window of the room in which the conference was sitting [John Johnson home in Hiram, Ohio]; and Sidney Rigdon wrote it down. Joseph would deliver a few sentences and Sidney would write them down, then read them aloud, and if correct, then Joseph would proceed and deliver more, and by this process the preface was given.⁴

Most of the students I have taught initially believed the revelations were dictations from God and were not, indeed could not, be altered.

Pertaining to the other extreme, I remember in the 1960s being handed a composition entitled “The Doctored Covenants.” The author, obviously playing upon the belief of many that the revelations were word-for-word dictations, verified that many alterations had been made. His conclusions were twofold. First, these are not revelations from God because there was a need to edit them, and God would not be involved in imperfect language. And second, if they ever were revelations, they are not now because they have been edited.

Means by Which the Revelations Were Received

Various means were used to impart these revelations to Joseph Smith. He communed in open vision with both God and Jesus Christ (that is, the First Vision). The ancient Book of Mormon prophet Moroni personally guided him over an almost seven-year period in translating the Book of Mormon. Other angelic messengers came to him (see D&C 27, for example) and to both him and Oliver Cowdery (D&C 13 and 110). Together with Sidney Rigdon, he saw a vision of the future state of mankind after this life (D&C 76). Others were in the room with them at the time, and at least one of them reported he “saw the glory and felt the power, but did not see the vision.”⁵ Joseph Smith’s prophecy on war was given him by an audible voice (D&C 131:12–13), and he received at least six revelations (D&C 3, 6, 7, 11, 14, and 17) through divine instruments such as the Nephite interpreters and the seer stone that he had in his possession. However, the great majority of the revelations were given to him through inspiration to his mind, and it was left to him to write them so others could also obtain the same message. Former RLDS (now Community of Christ) Church Historian Richard Howard states:

It is important to note that we have always distinguished between the experience of revelation and the recording of the experience. The record is not the revelation! But the record does preserve the verbal interpretation of the experience, enriching the under-

standing of those who study the record and offering guidance to those who share in the spirit of the original experience.⁶

It is interesting that most of the revelations to Joseph Smith were given him in the presence of other people. The Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible, and the books of Moses and Abraham were all dictated to scribes; and several witnesses, even congregations, observed as he received some of the revelations found in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Recording, Copying, Compiling, and Preparing the Revelations for Publication

Joseph Smith wrote that in July 1830, "I began to arrange and copy the revelations which we had received from time to time; in which I was assisted by John Whitmer, who now resided with me."⁷ When composing these revelations, Joseph Smith evidently used the language of the King James Bible to express the revelations in sacred terms and then formulated most of them in the first person as though Deity were speaking directly. One of these revelations even pointed to the influence of human vocabulary: "Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding" (D&C 1:24). Orson Pratt, who also assisted Joseph Smith in this work, reported later in life, "Joseph . . . received the ideas from God, but clothed those ideas with such words as came to his mind."⁸

Initially, the Prophet did not record all his revelations at the time he received them, but he was instructed in a revelation given in July 1830 to "continue calling upon God in my name, and writing the things which shall be given thee" (D&C 24:5). He then began "copying and arranging the revelations received up to that time, evidently with a view to their publication in book form" (D&C, 1921 edition, iii). But some of the revelations he retained in his mind for years before he caused them to be written,⁹ and others were never written at all. Only a very few of his original manuscript revelations still exist, and nothing is known of what happened to the rest of them. Perhaps they were discarded after the revelations were published. Those that can positively be identified as originals are, for the most part, contained in letters preserved in the LDS Church Archives. However, many contemporary copies of the original manuscripts are found in various collections—some as single manuscripts and others in handwritten booklets.

Church leaders decided to publish the revelations in the fall of 1831; however, handwritten copies were already being circulated. Typical of others, Orson Pratt reported: "We often had access to the manuscripts when boarding with the Prophet; and it was our delight to read them over and over again, before they were printed. And so highly were they esteemed by us, that we committed some to memory; and a few we copied for the purpose of reference in our absence on missions; and also to read them to the saints for their edification."¹⁰

Knowing that the revelations needed wider and more reliable distribution, Joseph Smith called for a conference of Church leaders on 1 November 1831. They decided to purchase a press and print the revelations in Independence, Missouri. The book was to be known as *A Book of Commandments*, of which they decided to print an ambitious ten thousand copies. This figure, however, was later reduced to three thousand copies. Because problems had developed when handwritten copies of the revelations were shared and recopied, publishing the revelations gave the leaders assurance of accuracy. Some of these errors crept in through inaccurate copying and poor handwriting or through spelling and punctuation errors; unfortunately, however, there were also questions connected with the originals. When the decision was made to print them in the *Book of Commandments*, it was "Resolved by this conference that Br. Joseph Smith Jr correct those errors or mistakes which he may discover by the holy Spirit while . . . reviewing the revelations & commandments."¹⁰ There was also a need to bring some of the former revelations up to date with later ones as the Church grew and matured.

Publishing the Revelations

The plans to publish the revelations also included using the same press to print a monthly newspaper, *The Evening and the Morning Star*. Several of the revelations intended for the *Book of Commandments* were also printed in the *Star*, some of which were featured on the front page of early issues, indicative of the importance attached to them. Unfortunately, on Saturday, 20 July 1833, the press was destroyed by antagonists, thus bringing the printing of the *Book of Commandments* and *The Evening and the Morning Star* to an end. Undaunted, Church leaders recommenced publication of the *Star* the following December at Kirtland, Ohio, and continued until September 1834. At that time, they decided to reprint all the issues of the *Star*, and they also began a second time to print the revelations in a book. They formed a committee to superintend the publication, with Joseph Smith at the head. When final-

ly completed in the fall of 1835, the book was entitled *Doctrine and Covenants*.

Interestingly, Oliver Cowdery was a member of this committee and, at the same time, was publisher of the reprints of the *Star*. In this dual capacity, he was able to compare the revelations as printed in the original *Star* with the manuscripts being used to publish the *Doctrine and Covenants*. The prospectus for the reprint of the *Star* included this statement: "It is also proper for us to say, that in the first 14 numbers, in the Revelations, are many errors, typographical, and others, occasioned by transcribing manuscript; but as we shall have access to originals, we shall endeavor to make proper corrections."¹² The first copy of the reprint (January 1835) then noted: "We believe they are now correct. If not in every word, at least in principle."¹³ Parenthetically, we must also add that other considerations need to be taken into account to explain the extensive editing done on the revelations between the *Book of Commandments* and the 1835 edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*.

Alteration of the revelations is a fact, but various reasons are behind such changes. Obvious scribal errors (most often mistakes in spelling and grammar) had to be corrected. Similarly, typographical and typesetting errors were common and were corrected in later editions. Because English is a fluid language and the rules and because accepted practices regarding punctuation, spelling, and grammar have changed over the years, the text of the revelations has been modernized. Joseph Smith updated some revelations as the Church grew and expanded. On occasion, portions of some revelations were disguised to protect the Church and its members from enemies, but most of these passages have been brought back to their original text in later editions. Also, according to Orson Pratt:

Joseph, the Prophet, in selecting the revelations from the Manuscripts, and arranging them for publication, did not arrange them according to the order of the date in which they were given, neither did he think it necessary to publish them all in the *Book of Doctrine and Covenants*, but left them to be published more fully in his *History*. Hence, paragraphs taken from the revelations of a later date, are, in a few instances, incorporated with those of an earlier date. Indeed, at the time of compilation, the Prophet was inspired in several instances to write additional sentences and paragraphs to the earlier revelations. In this manner the Lord did truly give "line upon line, here a little and there a little."¹⁴

Discoveries

As we have been working on the Joseph Smith Papers volumes, we have made some very interesting discoveries concerning the early manu-

scripts and printing of the revelations. The following are just a few cursory examples.

The earliest publication of D&C 20 (The Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ) was in a non-Mormon source, *The Telegraph*, published in Painesville, Ohio, 19 April 1831. There are words and phrases found there that are not in any other contemporary manuscript, nor are they found in *The Evening and the Morning Star* and the Book of Commandments, but they are found in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants and in all later editions.¹⁵ We feel this outcome is very significant, but we do not yet know the connection between the two, as there are other variations found only in *The Telegraph* or in *The Telegraph* and other sources—but not in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants.

We have been impressed with, and have written about, the number of revelations, letters, and conferences it took to correct the extravagant spiritual phenomena of the kind commonly displayed at camp-meeting revivals that began in Kirtland early in 1831. These so-called spiritual experiences had already drawn scorn from local antagonists of the faith, but they continued in pockets of resistance for months following the Prophet's arrival in Ohio in spite of his efforts and those of others to stamp them out.

We have also been impressed with biblical phraseology found in most of the revelations and in the text of many letters. This word usage was not just a pattern of Joseph Smith's writing style, but we noted it in others, especially Oliver Cowdery. Their familiarity with the Bible is evident in the prose that flowed naturally from them.

We have also been able to correct mistakes that have been perpetuated by some over the years. There is a letter addressed to "Bro. Carter," dated 13 April 1833, which contains the following two well-known statements by Joseph Smith: "it is contrary to the economy of God for any member of the Church, or anyone, to receive instruction for those in authority, higher than themselves" and "we never enquire of the hand of God for special revelation only in case of there being no previous revelation to suit the case." Some readers have made an obvious error in naming Jared Carter as the one to whom this was written; however, we now know that it was his brother, John Sims Carter.

Finally, it has been satisfying to be able to fit many of the alterations of the revelations into a historical context, thus giving logical explanations for the changes. For example, the discussion of the property rights of the transgressor found in D&C 51:5 was first added to this revelation in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. It resulted from challenges in implementing the law of consecration in Missouri during

1832–33 and was added to safeguard donations given to the Church. In Missouri, Bishop Partridge, according to Milton V. Backman Jr., “leased land to the Saints. Under the provision of these contracts, stewards were not permitted to transfer their inheritances to their wives, children, or heirs, or to sell their property. The contracts further stipulated that if an individual left the Church, he had no legal claim to his inheritance.” Several times, “Joseph Smith wrote to Church leaders in Missouri informing them that their application of the law of consecration and stewardship was not correct.”¹⁶ Leonard Arrington notes, “As might be expected, the church encountered legal difficulties as the result of the ‘lease and loan’ policy. Judges on the frontier viewed properties held in trust with noticeable disfavor. Some apostates successfully sued in the courts for the return of their consecrated properties.”¹⁷ Finally, on 2 May 1833, Joseph Smith wrote to Bishop Partridge, “Concerning inheritances, you are bound by the law of the Lord, to give a deed, securing to him who receives inheritances, his inheritance for an everlasting inheritance, or in other words to be his individual property, his private stewardship, and if he is found a transgressor and should be cut off, out of the Church, his inheritance is his still. . . . But the property which he consecrated to the poor, for their benefit and inheritance and stewardship, he cannot obtain again by the law of the Lord. Thus you see the propriety of this law, that rich men cannot have power to disinherit the poor by obtaining again that which they have consecrated, which is the residue signified in the law.”¹⁸

Conclusion

The Joseph Smith Papers project is adequately funded, is suitably staffed, has open access to the LDS Church Archives, and has the time allotted so that, given the documents available, the most scholarly, accurate, and complete documentation possible of Joseph Smith and his work will be available. Personally, I am appreciative for all those who are cooperating in gathering the material and for those who are making it available. I am also appreciative of all of those who have done research in the past from whose work we have benefitted.

Notes

1. I well remember sitting in a religion class at the Institute of Religion at the University of Utah and hearing for the first time of a comma (not the one in D&C 89 on the Word of Wisdom) that was inserted into the text of some verse in the Pearl of Great

Price with the result that it affected the meaning. I do not now recollect the location of this comma. The instructor, Albert Payne, was very careful in his explanation, but this was the first time I had ever heard about changes in revelations, and it caused me some consternation. I do not remember any previous teacher discussing the issue of the revelations being altered or not altered.

2. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 48.

3. William E. McLellin, "Revelations," *Ensign of Liberty, of the Church of Christ* (Kirtland, Ohio), 1, no. 7 (August 1849): 98–99.

4. William Kelley to the Editor, 16 January 1882, in *Saints' Herald* 29, no. 5 (1 March 1882): 67.

5. Philo Dibble, "Recollections," *Juvenile Instructor* 27, no. 10 (15 May 1892): 303.

6. Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1969), 1.

7. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–1992), 1:319.

8. Minutes of the School of the Prophets, Salt Lake Stake, 9 December 1872, LDS Church Archives, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

9. As examples, the canonized version of the "First Vision" was written eighteen years after the event, and D&C 132 was written about twelve years after he received it. When Joseph was urged by his brother, Hyrum, to use the Urim and Thummim to write this particular revelation, William Clayton reported that Joseph replied, "He did not need to, for he knew the revelation perfectly from beginning to end." Clayton added, "After the whole was written, Joseph asked me to read it through, slowly and carefully, which I did, and he pronounced it correct. He then remarked that there was much more that he could write, on the same subject, but what was written was sufficient for the present." "William Clayton's Testimony" (16 February 1874), in Andrew Jenson, *The Historical Record* 6, nos. 3–5 (May 1887): 225–26. Later, LDS Church President and nephew to Joseph Smith, Joseph F. Smith, said in 1878, "When the revelation was written, in 1843, it was for a special purpose, by the request of the Patriarch Hyrum Smith, and was not then designed to go forth to the church or to the world. It is most probable that had it been then written with a view to its going out as a doctrine of the church, it would have been presented in a somewhat different form. There are personalities contained in a part of it which are not relevant to the principle itself, but rather to the circumstances which necessitated its being written at that time. Joseph Smith, on the day it was written, expressly declared that there was a great deal more connected with the doctrine which would be revealed in due time, but this was sufficient for the occasion, and was made to suffice for the time. And, indeed, I think it much more than many are prepared to live up to even now." Joseph F. Smith in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–1886), 20:29.

10. Orson Pratt, "Explanation of Substituted Names in the Covenants," in *The Seer* 1, no. 1 (January 1853): 228.

11. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 29.

12. *The Evening and the Morning Star* 2, no. 24 (September 1834): 192.

13. *The Evening and the Morning Star* (Kirtland, Ohio), reprint (January 1835), 16.

14. *Millennial Star* 17, no. 19 (25 April 1857): 260.

15. For example:

Verse 17: All other sources begin with "Wherefore."

Verse 19: All other sources begin “and that he gave unto the children of men,” whereas these two have, “and he gave unto them.”

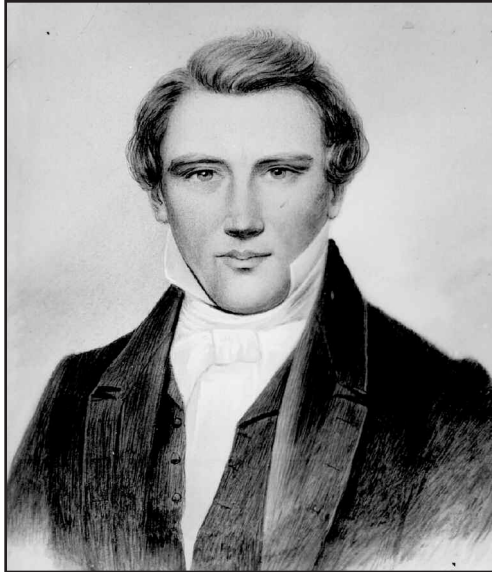
Verse 19: *The Telegraph* and the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants include the wording, “love and serve him only living and true God, and that he should be the only being.” Other sources render this, “love and serve him the only being.”

Verse 25: All other sources begin with “therefore” instead of “that.”

16. Milton V. Backman Jr., *The Heavens Resound: A History of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio, 1830–1838* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 74.

17. Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 25.

18. Joseph Smith to Edward Partridge, 2 May 1833, LDS Church Archives.



Joseph Smith, Jr. in a photograph retouched by artist Dan Weggeland from an alleged original daguerreotype. Photograph courtesy LDS Church Archives.