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REVELATIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

MANUSCRIPT REVELATION BOOKS

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The Making of Modern Scripture: Latter-day Saints and the Book of Commandments and Revelations

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In September 2009, the newly established Church Historian's Press of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints published the second of several projected volumes of *The Joseph Smith Papers*. Heralded by reviewers as a stunning landmark in documentary editing generally, and Mormon studies specifically, the over-sized facsimile volume, reproduced for the first time the manuscript Book of Commandments and Revelations, an archive of Joseph Smith's earliest written revelations. Its rediscovery and publication provide a rare opportunity to examine the making of modern scripture. This essay is not concerned with the content of the important revelation texts, a topic dealt with ably by Grant Underwood,¹ but with the reception of the texts by Joseph Smith's followers. The receipt by Latter-day Saints then and now of Smith's texts as revelations is what makes them scripture.

Latter-day Saints never seem to tire of telling each other the story of the Rollins sisters, fifteen-year-old Mary Elizabeth and thirteen-year-old Caroline. They could not stand idly by as a mob destroyed the printing office and press on which William W. Phelps was publishing Joseph Smith's revelations in Independence, Missouri, in the summer of 1833. Rather, while hostile backs were turned, the Rollins sisters seized some of the printed sheets and fled into a corn field, fearing for their lives.² In this event's recital by Mary Elizabeth in her autobiography, and in its frequent retellings, we find the stuff of scripture-making. Wilford C. Smith declared that scripture "is not a quality

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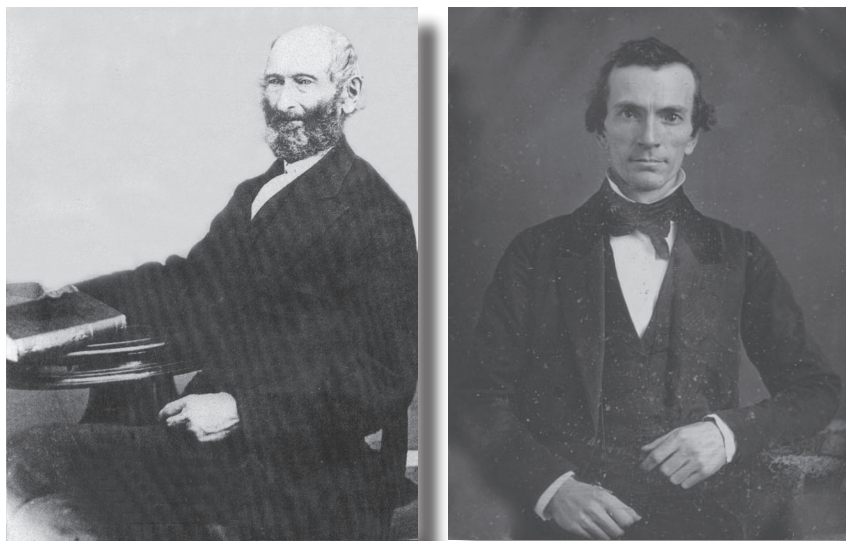
inherent in a given text, or type of text, so much as an interactive relation between that text and a community of persons.” The very idea of scripture “necessarily involves a relationship.”³³ Stephen Stein asserted that “scripture is scripture only insofar as it is recognized and understood as such by a given community. Texts without such an interactive group are mere texts, ancient texts perhaps, or even modern texts, but not scripture.”³⁴

Mary Elizabeth Rollins joined the community of believers in Joseph Smith’s revelations before she risked her life to rescue them. She tells of an evening meeting in the home of A. Sidney Gilbert (her uncle) in Independence, where “the brethren came . . . to converse upon the revelations that had not been printed as yet, [and] but few had looked upon them, for they were in large sheets, not folded. They [the brethren] spoke of them [the printed revelations] with such reverence, as coming from the Lord; they felt to rejoice that they were counted worthy to be the means of publishing them for the benefit of the whole world. While talking they were filled with the spirit and spoke in tongues. I was called upon to interpret it. I felt the spirit of it in a moment.”³⁵ Joseph Smith was eight hundred miles away in Ohio, but there on the western edge of the United States, a fledgling group of his followers were acting out the instructions in his revelation texts to build the New Jerusalem. They revered the revelations. They had in their possession the pages of the Book of Commandments and Revelations, the manuscript from which they had set type, the pages Mary Elizabeth and Catherine would shortly rescue from firebrands.

The Book of Commandments and Revelations had been carried to Missouri from Ohio by John Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery, its principal scribes. They made the journey after participating in a series of council meetings in which early Mormon leaders planned to publish Smith’s revelations. Conscious of the costs and controversy of such an audacious enterprise, the council determined to publish ten thousand copies of the Book of Commandments and Revelations. Joseph Smith and everyone else in the room must have recognized how their decision might appear to an outsider. A poorly educated,



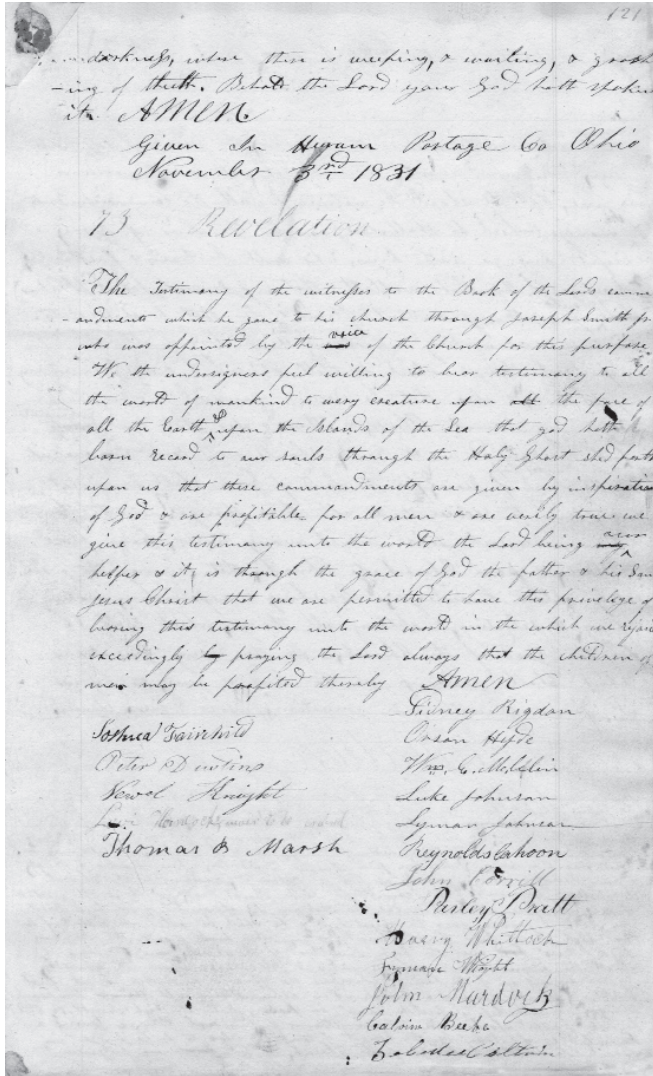
Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, date unknown.



John Whitmer (left) and Oliver Cowdery (right) were the principal scribes for the Book of Revelations and Commandments. They also carried the manuscript revelations to Missouri to be printed.

twenty-six-year-old farmer planned to publish revelations which he unequivocally declared to be the words of Jesus Christ, which words called their neighbors *idolatrous*, and commanded them all to repent, while foretelling calamities upon those who continued in wickedness. Moreover, the revelations were not properly punctuated. The orthography was haphazard, and the grammar inconsistent. Reflecting on this council, Joseph later called it an “awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord.”⁶ The council minutes tell us that he asked the men present “what testimony they were willing to attach to these commandments which should shortly be sent to the world. A number of the brethren arose and said that they were willing to testify to the world that they knew that they were of the Lord.”⁷

Smith’s later history records that a discussion ensued “concerning Revelations and language,” perhaps after his request for testimonials and prior to the expression of willingness. The discussion apparently led to a revelation that invited the members of the council to confirm their faith in the manuscript revelations by an experiment, an effort by the wisest among them to duplicate the simplest of the revelation texts. Joseph’s later history says that William E. McLellin tried but failed.⁸ The revelation that proposed the experiment promised condemnation to any who refused to testify that the revelations were true after failing to convincingly counterfeit one of them.⁹ The minutes of this council record that “a number of the brethren arose and said that they were



Book of Commandments and Revelations, page 121, containing the testimony of eighteen men who signed their names as witnesses to the truthfulness of the revelations: Sidney Rigdon, Orson Hyde, William E. McLellin, Luke Johnson, Lyman Johnson, Reynolds Cahoon, John Corvill, Parley Pratt, Harvey Whitlock, Lyman Wight, John Murdock, Calvin Beebe, Zebedee Coltrin, Joshua Fairchild, Peter Dustin, Newel Knight, Levi Hancock, and Thomas B. Marsh. The signatures of Rigdon, Hyde, McLellin, and the two Johnson's were penned by John Whitmer. The remaining thirteen signatures were inscribed by the elders to the document after John Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery brought it to Missouri. Image courtesy LDS Church History Library and Intellectual Reserve.

willing to testify to the world that they knew that they [the revelations in the Book of Commandments and Revelations] were of the Lord,” and also that Smith then produced a statement of testimony.¹⁰ The only known manuscript of that statement is the one copied into the Book of Commandments and Revelations, which John Whitmer introduced as “The Testimony of the witnesses to the Book of the Lord’s commandments which he gave to his church through Joseph Smith Jr.” It reads, “We the undersigners feel willing to bear testimony to all the world of mankind to every creature upon ~~at~~ the face of all Earth & upon the Islands of the Sea that god hath born record to our souls through the Holy Ghost shed forth upon us that these commandments are given by inspiration of God & are profitable for all men & are verily true we give this testimony unto the world the Lord being ~~my~~ ~~<our>~~ helper.” McLellin signed, along with four others. John Whitmer copied the revelation and their signatures into the Book of Commandments and Revelations, and subsequently entered the revealed instructions for him to accompany Oliver Cowdery to Missouri with the manuscript revelations and money to print them. Thirteen more elders signed the statement in Missouri when the book arrived there for printing.¹¹

Joseph Smith undoubtedly appreciated this community of believers. He needed them to create scripture. On November 2, 1831, after listening to his associates “witness to the truth of the Book of Commandments,” Joseph “arose & expressed his feelings and gratitude.”¹² He knew what was at stake. He subsequently wrote to printer William W. Phelps that he felt imprisoned by what he called the “total darkness of paper, pen and ink.”¹³ He readily acknowledged that the revelation texts were imperfect. So did his associates. At the end of the council they appointed him to edit them for publication as he felt inspired to do so.¹⁴

This history highlights the way Joseph and many of his followers conceived of his revelation texts. In his mind there was a distinction between the veracity of a revelation and the “crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language” in which it was recorded.¹⁵ At least some of the men in the November 1831 council meetings knew Joseph intimately, knew his literary limits and his imperfections, and thought that his expressions could be improved. These were the very same men who felt willing to proclaim publicly the revelations’ divinity and who obeyed them at considerable inconvenience to themselves.¹⁶ They discerned a difference between Joseph the farmer and Joseph the Seer, even when they could see evidence of both in the texts of his revelations on the pages of the Book of Commandments and Revelations.

That Book of Commandments and Revelations found its way back to Kirtland, Ohio, having somehow survived the violence that ended its printing. There, in September 1834, a high council appointed Joseph Smith to head a committee to prepare the revelations for publication in another volume. In one

sense, Joseph Smith was now becoming secondary to the texts of his revelations. After 1834 he dictated relatively few more revelations before his death in 1844, and none of them were entered in the two manuscript books used to prepare the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. The council appointed Smith on behalf of the Church, and considered itself empowered to instruct him.¹⁷ He was absent on business in Michigan in August 1835 when the other members of the committee appeared before a general Church assembly to seek consent for the book—to make it scripture. Believers had invested the revelations with scriptural status in 1831 by accepting them at face value. Would they do so again? Would the priesthood quorums and general membership unanimously accept the manuscript as the words of God? Would they make them canonical?

Oliver Cowdery held up an unbound copy of the revelations and asked the Saints for their consent to publish them. William W. Phelps said “that he had examined it carefully, that it was well arranged and calculated to govern the church in righteousness, if followed would bring the members to see eye to eye. And further that he had received the testimony from God, that the Revelations and commandments contained therein are true, wherefore, he knew assuredly for himself having received witness from Heaven & not from men.” John Whitmer followed with a similar expression of certainty, adding “that he was present when some of the revelations contained therein were given, and was satisfied they come from God.” Others followed. Levi Jackman “arose and said that he had examined as many of the revelations contained in the book as were printed in Zion, & as firmly believes them as he does the Book of Mormon or the Bible and also the whole contents of the Book, he then called for the vote of the High Council from Zion, which they gave in favor of the Book and also of the committee.” Newel K. Whitney, bishop of the Church in Kirtland, rose and testified that he knew the revelations “were true, for God had testified to him by his holy Spirit, for many of them were given under his roof & in his presence through President Joseph Smith Junr.”¹⁸ Thus continued “an elaborate ritual” by which Smith’s revelation texts became scripture for the body of his believers.¹⁹ It culminated with a consensus “of all the members present, both male & female, & They gave a decided voice in favor of it & also of the committee. There being a very large portion of the church present.”²⁰

Years later, Church historians carried the Book of Commandments and Revelations to Utah and kept it in their office until Joseph Fielding Smith made the transition from Church Historian to president of the Church and apparently took the manuscript with him. Editors of the Joseph Smith Papers Project became conscious of its existence after President Gordon B. Hinckley

had the First Presidency's holdings inventoried "as part of the effort to publish the papers."²¹

From the formal 1835 canonization of Smith's revelations to the present, the community of believers that receive Smith's revelations as scripture has become increasingly distant from the revelation texts. Whereas Smith's earliest, well-informed followers chose to reorient their lives to follow his revelations, leaving prospering farms and mills to say nothing of families, most believers today know little of the content of the most recent edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, to say nothing of the manuscript revelations. Far from engaging the Book of Commandments and Revelations itself, as that early group did in their discussion of revelations and language, today's believers often regard Joseph Smith, in Grant Underwood's apt description, as a "mere human fax machine through whom God communicated revelation texts composed in heaven."²² The publication of the Book of Commandments and Revelations may change that. Every page challenges the fax machine assumption. But there in the middle is "The Testimony of the witnesses," subscribed to by men who knew Smith's literary limits, one of whom had written as Smith dictated a revelation, and then later tried and failed to produce a text on par with the least of those in the Book of Commandments and Revelations.²³

Scholars and believers alike have not yet paid much attention to what we might call the anthropology of scripture making—the dynamic human relationships to the texts. Wilford C. Smith asserted that scholars have studied scriptural texts carefully, but "rarely have they considered the human involvement with them."²⁴ To examine the Book of Commandments and Revelations, either textually or historically, brings one face to face with its anthropology. Few scholars and fewer believers have analyzed the human element that made Smith's revelations into scripture, nor the renegotiation of that status by each generation of believers.

Some of today's believers who experience dissonance between fax machine assumptions and the evidence will likely look to those early believers who knew Joseph and his texts well and choose to believe that they were "given by inspiration of God & are profitable for all men & are verily true."²⁵ As they consider their relationship to Joseph Smith's revelations, Latter-day Saints will likely continue to resonate with the Rollins sisters who risked their lives to rescue the printed pages. In this event and in its frequent retellings, we find the stuff of scripture-making. Scripture, let us remember, "is not a quality inherent in a given text, or type of text, so much as an interactive relation between that text and a community of persons." Further, "scripture is scripture only insofar as it is recognized and understood as such by a given community."²⁶

Reflecting in 1841 on Joseph Smith's production of sacred texts, one Latter-day Saint noted that "it is difficult to imagine a more difficult literary task than to write what may be termed a continuation of the Scriptures."²⁷ Joseph Smith called it an "awful responsibility," and he thanked those who made it possible by putting their faith in the texts he produced.²⁸ To have so much nineteenth-century evidence of scripture making is rare. What is more, we may witness the process with our own eyes. The publication of Joseph Smith's manuscript revelations will bring many of today's believers to renewed consciousness of their nature. This, in turn, will lead some to renegotiate their own positions relative to the revelations, remembering once again that "texts without such an interactive group are mere texts, ancient texts perhaps, or even modern texts, but not scripture."²⁹

Notes

1. See Grant Underwood, "Revelation, Text, and Revision: Insight from the Book of Commandments and Revelations," *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 67–84.

2. See Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, "Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 17, no. 3 (July 1926): 196–97.

3. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture?: A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), ix.

4. Stephen J. Stein, "America's Bibles: Canon, Commentary, and Community," *Church History* 64, no. 2 (June 1995): 171.

5. Lightner, "Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner," 195.

6. Manuscript History, Book A–1, 161–62, handwriting of Willard Richards, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; see also Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:226 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

7. Far West Record, November 1, 1831, Church History Library; also published in Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 27.

8. Manuscript History, Book A–1, 161–62; also in *History of the Church*, 1:226. See also Jan Shippis and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Urbana and Provo: University of Illinois Press and BYU Studies, 1994), 251.

9. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 114–15, Church History Library; also published in Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations: Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile edition (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009), 200–03; part of the series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman, eds. See also Doctrine and Covenants 67:6–8.

10. Far West Record, November 1, 1831; also in Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 27.

11. No original is known. The signatures of the five men who signed in Ohio are all in the hand of John Whitmer. See Book of Commandments and Revelations, 121; also in Jensen, et al., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, 214–15.

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12. Far West Record, November 2, 1831; also in Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 28.
 13. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, in Dean C. Jessee, compiler and editor, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and BYU Press, 2002), 286. The words were later struck out.
 14. Far West Record, November 8, 1831; also in Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 29.
 15. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 286. The words were later struck out.
 16. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 114–15, also in Jensen, et al., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, 200–03. See Doctrine and Covenants 67:5.
 17. Minutes of August 19 [17], 1835, Kirtland Council Minute Book, Church History Library; also published in Fred C. Collier and William S. Harwell, eds., *Kirtland Council Minute Book* (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 1996), 122.
 18. Minutes of August 19 [17], 1835, Kirtland Council Minute Book; also in Collier and Harwell, *Kirtland Council Minute Book*, 126–28.
 19. For a fuller discussion see, Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 282–85.
 20. Minutes of August 19 [17], 1835, Kirtland Council Minute Book; also in Collier and Harwell, *Kirtland Council Minute Book*, 129.
 21. Robert J. Woodford, "Introducing A Book of Commandments and Revelations, A Major New Documentary 'Discovery,'" *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 7.
 22. Underwood, "Revelation, Text, and Revision," 78.
 23. See Shippo and Welch, *The Journals of William E. McLellin*, 45–46.
 24. Smith, *What is Scripture?*, ix.
 25. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 121; also in Jensen, et al., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, 214–15.
 26. Stein, "America's Bibles," 171.
 27. Josephine, "The Book of Mormon," *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 7 (February 1, 1841): 306.
 28. Manuscript History, Book A–1, 161–62; also in *History of the Church*, 12:226.
 29. Stein, "America's Bibles," 171.