Introduction

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Section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants purports to be something momentous. It claims to present nothing less than God’s revelation of his law to his people—a law meant to bring about the gathering of Israel, the establishment of the New Jerusalem, and the preparation of the church for the second coming of Christ. Any serious consideration of this fresh revelation of law should therefore raise the question of the general significance of divine law in the Christian world. For many Christians, the gospel of salvation is emphatically not a revelation of law but a revelation of grace. Other Christians, such as Catholics, understand grace as a part of the new law of Christ, but for them this new law revealed in Christ is the last and final law; no further law should be revealed between the time of Christ and the final judgment. Thus section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants makes Mormonism stand apart from the Christian tradition, setting forth something novel in its announcement of a new revelation of divine law.

As is customary in publications of the Mormon Theology Seminar, we open this volume with a summary report of our collaborative findings. Each project sponsored by the seminar generates a handful of guiding questions, focal points of interest that help to direct joint study of the text under investigation. As collaborative work on the text comes to a conclusion, the contributors to the project jointly author a short summary of the sorts of answers, if any, they have discovered along the way of their research. Immediately following this introduction, the reader can find preliminary answers to the questions that drove our discussions. The summary report of course cannot convey the richness of our months of textual analysis, but it provides at least a general sense for the kinds of things we discussed. Perhaps more usefully, it also provides a basic orientation for the remainder of the book. It lays out a number of textual, historical, and theological data points that this book’s several essays use again and again.

A few words might be useful by way of introducing the several essays in this volume as well. The subjects of the essays, although they are all rooted in close study of Doctrine and Covenants 42, range widely.

Nathan Oman’s essay, “’I Will Give unto You My Law’: Section 42 as a Legal Text and the Paradoxes of Divine Law,” appears first in this collection. Oman draws on his training as a legal scholar to assess the peculiar status of Doctrine and Covenants 42 as law. Placing the revelation in a longer history of differing conceptions of divine law, he especially focuses on the complicated relationship between any divine law and the many systems of human law with which divine law might come into conflict. He argues that D&C 42 displays many features common to legal texts but also that it reveals a series of paradoxes or tensions as it carves out a unique relationship to secular law. In the end, he insists that the Doctrine and Covenants ultimately makes what might appear to outsiders as a series of historical accommodations to nondivine law into a direct feature of divine law.

In “’That My Covenant People May Be Gathered in One’: The Law of Section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants,” Jeremiah John also attempts to understand the status of D&C 42 as law. But rather than putting the revelation’s claim to be law into the larger historical context of a conversation about the tangle of divine and secular law, John asks how the revelation might speak to the longstanding conversation in Christian history regarding the fulfillment of law and advent of grace. Framing these questions in terms of political theology, he suggests that the Doctrine and Covenants, like passages in the Book of Mormon and occasionally in the Bible, outlines the possibility of a higher law, one that outstrips law’s natural tendency to condemn and to cut off, rather than to redeem. Key to John’s reading is a Thomist notion that allows for a reconciliation of law and grace through a divinely granted
orientation to the good. This allows him to interpret the use of the ambiguous auxiliary verb shall as it is used in the law of D&C 42.

After these first two essays address themselves to the question of law, Karen Spencer turns her attention to a rather different feature of Doctrine and Covenants 42, focusing on what it has to say about the task of teaching in an ideal community. In “Teaching in Zion,” she investigates the injunction in the revelation to teach by the Spirit—and especially not to teach if the Spirit is not received. Drawing on numerous related revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants (especially sections 20, 46, and 50), as well as on direct echoes of the Book of Mormon (and in particular of Moroni), Spencer argues that D&C 42’s instructions regarding teaching should be understood as part of a larger attempt on God’s part to organize the Latterday Saint community around Spirit-driven meetings. This was, it seems, in direct response to a fraught culture of charismatic enthusiasm that had developed in Kirtland, Ohio, in the years immediately preceding the arrival of Mormonism there. Spencer shows that the response to this situation was careful and deliberate and that there remains much to learn from it.

In his contribution, “‘Thou Wilt Remember the Poor’: Social Justice and a Radical Reading of ‘The Laws of the Church of Christ’ (Doctrine and Covenants 42),” Russell Arben Fox looks at how D&C 42 might be profitably placed in conversation with the social justice tradition developed in Catholic and Reformed Christian circles. While traditional attempts to interpret the political ramifications of the law of consecration tend to contrast it with secular socialism, Fox forcefully traces the relevance of the basic commitments of the social justice tradition to the basic concerns of the revealed law of the Doctrine and Covenants. Focusing in particular on three commitments of the social justice tradition—producing a rough economic equality of persons, understanding persons as inextricably contextualized by community, and privileging those most economically compromised by current social conditions—he shows that these concerns are amply present in D&C 42. Illuminatingly, he shows that revisions made to the revelation between 1831 and 1835 tend to strengthen rather than to weaken these connections.

Robert Couch similarly focuses on the need to make D&C 42’s call for the assistance of the poor particularly relevant in a contemporary context. In “Consecration, Holy War, and the Poor: An Apocalyptic Approach to Doctrine and Covenants 42,” he draws on the biblical genre of apocalypse to highlight the way in which the work of reading scripture requires a change in the reader’s view of the world—something particularly relevant if the poor are to be redeemed. For Couch, the apocalyptic tradition reprises still more ancient attempts to deter mine the boundary between Zion-like communities and “the world,” and in this sense it assists in determining the meaning of the law divinely given to the early Mormon community. At the same time, he argues that the modern law of consecration represents a certain transformation of ancient Israelite notions of consecration—those bound up with the Israelite Holy War tradition—in part because the boundaries between Zion communities and the secular world are murkier today than in the ancient world. In the end, Couch calls for a full embrace of consecration in the deepest sense, transcending merely economic and ultimately pragmatist motivations because it is driven by the divine guarantee of fulfilled promises.

Finally, in a more telescoped view of the text of Doctrine and Covenants 42, Joseph M. Spencer’s “Remnants of Revelation: On the Canonical Reading of Doctrine and Covenants 42” concludes this volume by asking how editorial changes, made both to D&C 42 in particular and to the whole of the Doctrine and Covenants as a collection, shape the meaning and understanding of the revealed law. What draws Spencer’s attention in particular is the fact that editorial changes made directly to the text of D&C 42 (in preparation for its canonical publication in 1835) are in tension with editorial decisions made with regard to the whole collection of revelations (beginning in 1876 and continuing into the present). On his account, however, these tensions productively complicate traditional understandings of the distinction between the historical and the canonical, between supposedly pure
origins and supposedly impure traditions. Spencer’s reading of D&C 42 within the larger canonical history of the Doctrine and Covenants thus concludes with a suggestion that Mormon theology works with a distinct notion of history more often than is supposed.

Obviously, these essays come nowhere close to exhausting the meaning and richness of section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants. There are more verses in the revelation that these essays collectively ignore than there are verses on which they severally comment. Yet we hope that the philosophical and theological perspectives outlined here, rooted in substantial historical awareness and careful study of the textual tradition, provide a model for how Latter-day Saints might more productively make sense of a revelation like that of the law of consecration. Here we attempt together to consecrate something of our own training, and we can only hope to see that it helps in some way to spur consecrated study among others.

—Jeremiah John and Joseph M. Spencer