Question 1: What is the significance of the historical context and textual history of Doctrine and Covenants 42?

The historical context and the textual history of Doctrine and Covenants 42 are, in the end, inseparable. The earliest version of the current text was received on February 9, 1831, originally as a set of distinguishable answers to five different questions raised by the elders of the church. The bulk of that earliest revelation (corresponding to today’s D&C 42:11–69) was understood to be the law that the Lord had promised would be given to the Saints upon their arrival at “the Ohio” (see D&C 38:32). Within days of the reception of the law, Joseph Smith received another revelation that briefly explained how the church was to determine its application: “I give unto you a commandment, that when ye are assembled together ye shall note with a pen how to act, and for my church to act upon the points of my law and commandments, which I have given: and thus it shall become a law unto you” (Book of Commandments 45:8–9; cf. D&C 43:8–9). The result of this instruction was that, only two weeks after “The Laws of the Church of Christ” had been given (on February 23, 1831), the elders of the church produced what would become the first revision to the text of the Law (see Book of Commandments 47; cf. D&C 42:74–93).

Revisions of the same sort and in the same spirit were made to the originally received text with some frequency between 1831, when it was originally recorded, and 1835, when it received its final form. Revisions were made when leaders of the church learned the difficulties of implementing the law of consecration and stewardship in Missouri, when it was decided that Joseph Smith’s revelations should be officially published as the Book of Commandments (as well as in an official church newspaper), when the high priesthood was introduced to the church, when the United Firm (a joint financial venture undertaken by the leaders in both Missouri and Ohio) was formed, when the Saints were driven from their lands in Jackson County, when the priesthood was organized into quorums, and when it was decided to produce a kind of handbook of instructions for the church (in the form of the Doctrine and Covenants).

The heaviest revisions made between 1831 and 1835 are found in what is now Doctrine and Covenants 42:30–39, the passage outlining the law of consecration and stewardship. These revisions were obviously part of an attempt to keep the Law relevant as the church slowly shifted its attention from establishing a communitarian endeavor in Jackson County to establishing a priesthood-governed people organized around the Kirtland Temple. Thus what began as an order into which one entered by deeding all of one’s property to the bishop and receiving in return an assigned stewardship (while what remained over in the bishop’s possession was dedicated to outfitting the poor and building a gathering place for Israel) was slowly transformed into a general injunction that one help to assist the poor and to build a gathering place by deeding to the bishop only what was “more than [was] necessary for their support” (D&C 42:33). These changes were accompanied by an important—but subtle—deemphasis on the practical significance of the Law. Although the Law was regarded in 1831 as one of only two organizational documents for the church (the other was today’s section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants, then referred to as the “Articles and Covenants of the Church”), it was positioned in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants as section 13, coming not only long after its original companion (today’s section 20 was section 2 in 1835, after the revealed “preface”), but also after what today are sections 107, 84, 102, 86, 88, 6, 24, 29, 35, and 38. (This was further confirmed in a way when the Law was—along with the rest of Joseph Smith’s revelations—historicized through the chronological reordering of the sections in the Doctrine and Covenants in 1876, the reordering that assigned the Law to its current position as section 42.)
Every change made between 1831 and 1835 to the text of the Law obviously bears significance for theological reflection on the meaning of consecration. Should the final form of the text, due to its canonical status and its long-term stability (unchanged since 1835), be given greater weight than other versions? Should the original wording of the text be granted a certain privileged status, due perhaps to what might be called its “purity”? Is one of the intermediate versions of the text to be preferred—maybe the last revisions produced before the Saints were driven from their lands in Jackson County? Are there points of particular continuity across the several versions of the text that deserve special theological attention? Is there something to be learned from the very process of change and transformation that occurred during the first years of the revelation’s circulation? Might it be, perhaps, that there is still reason to ask how the revelation might be further revised in light of historical experience, collaborative discussion, and consultation with the Lord? Might the complications surrounding the canonical text on consecration be a spur to continuing revelation—whether in the privacy of personal application or through the public word of the Lord through a prophet? These are questions that will continue to call for theological reflection.

Question 2: How should Doctrine and Covenants 42 be understood in relation to the rest of the Doctrine and Covenants?

Several revelations contained in the Doctrine and Covenants prepared the way for the reception of what is now section 42. Section 28 features Oliver Cowdery’s assignment in September 1830 to leave for Missouri to preach to “the Lamanites” (D&C 28:8). Section 32 contains the commandment to Parley P. Pratt to join Cowdery, which resulted in a remarkably successful stopover in Kirtland, Ohio, where—among many others—Sidney Rigdon joined the fledgling church. After traveling to New York to meet Joseph Smith, as section 35 records, Rigdon became the Prophet’s scribe. The result was that Rigdon joined the Prophet in committing the vision of Enoch to writing, in which appears the earliest description of Zion as a city “of one heart and one mind,” among whom “there was no poor” (Moses 7:18). When instruction came a few weeks later for the Saints to “assemble together at the Ohio” (D&C 37:3). Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were thus prepared to receive section 38, a revelation riddled with allusions to Enoch’s vision, in which they were told to prepare themselves to have “no laws but my laws” (D&C 38:22), receiving the promise that in Ohio the Lord would “give unto you my law” and they would “be endowed with power from on high” (D&C 38:32). As the revelation made clear, the law to be given would help to ensure that “every man [would] esteem his brother as himself” (D&C 38:24) and that the Saints would be “one” (D&C 38:27), in that one would not be “clothed in robes” while another was “clothed in rags” (D&C 38:26). Section 41 then records a further promise, received just after Joseph Smith arrived in Ohio and only days before section 42 would be given, that “by the prayer of your faith ye shall receive my law” (D&C 41:3).

Moreover, as soon as it was received, the Law of section 42 became the focus of many subsequent revelations now contained in the Doctrine and Covenants. Section 43 contains instructions about how the Saints were to “act” on the Law in a way that they would “be sanctified by that which ye have received” (D&C 43:8–9). The Lord gave further, specific instructions in sections 44, 58, 83, and 98 about how to balance the law of the Lord with the laws of the country. Section 51 states, nonetheless, that the Saints had to be “organized according to my laws” or be “cut off” (D&C 51:2), and similar instructions are found in sections 70 and 85. The last of these even prescribes the production of a “book of the law of God” to be kept by the church (D&C 85:5, 7, 11). Sections 72 and 107 appropriately describe themselves as “addition[s] to the law” (see D&C 72:9; 24; 107:59), section 109 uniquely ties the Law revealed in section 42 to the Kirtland Temple, and an explicit reiteration and expansion of the Law can be found in section 119. Section 88 refers to the Law of section 42 as “the law of Christ” (D&C 88:21), and section 105 refers to the same as “the law of the celestial kingdom” (D&C 105:4, 5; cf. 88:22). Other direct references to section 42 as the law of the church can be found in sections 48, 51, 64, 82, 103, 104, and 107. Furthermore, because section 42 contains, in addition to the law it sets forth, instructions regarding teaching by the Spirit, it seems also to be related to sections of the Doctrine and Covenants that clarify the nature of spiritual gifts—in particular sections 46 and 50. Because the officers of the church were to pray for the Spirit but “not teach” if they
receive not the Spirit” (D&C 42:14), further revelation became necessary when some “received . . . spirits which ye could not understand, and received them to be of God” (D&C 50:15).

In the first years of the church's establishment, a different sort of relationship existed between section 42 (the “Law of the Church”) and what is now section 20 (the “Articles and Covenants of the Church”). This relationship seems to have been established in part by a reference to section 20 in the preamble to the portion of section 42 comprising the Law (see D&C 42:13). Sections 20 and 42 were jointly unique among Joseph Smith's earliest revelations, since they were addressed to and set forth instructions for the entire church, while most other revelations were addressed, patriarchal-blessing-like, to individuals seeking guidance from the Lord. Consequently, sections 20 and 42 were copied and circulated widely among members of the church before they appeared in print, and they were often used in missionary preaching and read in regional conferences held by the Saints. Likewise, these sections appeared, one after the other, on the front pages of the first two issues of the church's first official newspaper, *The Evening and the Morning Star*, in 1832. Their close connection, however, was largely broken by the increased attention given in the church to priesthood organization (section 20 is largely concerned with such organization, while section 42 is not). When the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants appeared in 1835, despite the fact that the revelations were arranged in order of organizational importance rather than date of original reception, many pages and ten lengthy revelations separated the two from each other.

Today the connection between the two revelations remains, for the most part, broken. Section 20 is still understood as a guide to the structure and organization of the church, while section 42 is largely regarded as a historical artifact whose relevance to the life of faith today is complicated, if not troubled. Nonetheless, given the trajectory of revelations leading up to section 42, as well as the many references back to and clarifications of section 42 in subsequent revelations, those who reflect on the theological significance of the Law should recognize its centrality to the entire project of the Doctrine and Covenants.

Question 3: What is the meaning of “consecration” in Doctrine and Covenants 42?

In this dispensation, consecration was first taught in what is now section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants and was elaborated on and emphasized in revelations that came after. Most obviously, consecration is at the heart of what is called the Law of the church. It is not a merely temporary project or a commandment given for a particular time and place, but an enduring element of God’s will for his people and a necessary dimension of the common life of church members. Church members today do not practice the specific form of “consecration and stewardship” described in section 42, and there is some doubt whether the church ever implemented something similar to this plan on a wide scale. For this reason, any interpretation of the idea of consecration must come to terms with the enduring significance of consecration, bound up as it is with a particular program of economic communalism that is not now and perhaps never was widely implemented. The teaching of consecration in section 42 is the most natural starting place for thinking through this question. Various forms of the word consecration are used six times in Doctrine and Covenants 42:30–39. The original readers of these verses would have understood the common dictionary sense of the term at the time, which is “to set apart, dedicate, or devote to the service and worship of God” (*Webster’s 1828 Dictionary*). In the original revelation, the Lord tells the Saints to “consecrate all thy properties . . . unto me” (Book of Commandments 44:26). But beyond this command, the revelation teaches that the proper way to dedicate properties to God is to remember the poor by contributing to a system that ensures their support. Consecration is also inseparable from stewardship, that is, providing diligently for our own support and for a surplus to be given to the bishop for building the kingdom of God. What Doctrine and Covenants 42 reveals about consecration is that dedicating ourselves and our property to God means giving it up for the support of the poor and using it ourselves for the purposes of God’s kingdom.
Revisions of the text between the 1831 revelation and the published text of 1835 make the demands of the Law somewhat less specific and increase emphasis on concern for the poor. A revision to verse 39 also makes clear what was already contained in the original revelation: that consecration is a willing commitment to God's church and its poor, not a forcible dedication or despoiling of nonbelievers to believers. In the wake of the historical and textual changes made to the revelation that now comprises Doctrine and Covenants 42, the meaning and connotations of the term *consecration* have shifted. For example, in the original 1831 revelation, only one act of consecration was called for, and it required consecration of “all thy properties” (Book of Commandments 44:26). For the 1835 edition, the word *all* had been changed to *of* (D&C 42:30). Moreover, in the 1835 edition, Doctrine and Covenants 42:33 refers to a “first consecration,” suggesting that the act of consecrating “of thy properties” should be understood as only the first step of a larger, more demanding law.

This shift from a unilateral to a more partitioned conception of consecration has implications for church members' responsibilities. In particular, the 1831 text mentions only a mediated responsibility between church members and “the poor and needy” (Book of Commandments 44:29; cf. D&C 42:34), whereas the 1835 text calls for more direct concern for the poor. This shift is implemented in the 1835 text by inserting the word *poor* four times (once each in verses 30, 31, 37, and 39 of D&C 42). This shift is also reflected in the textual change from God’s original call for a consecration of properties “unto me” (Book of Commandments 44:26) to a later call for consecration of properties “unto them,” meaning the poor (D&C 42:30). With the 1831 text, consecration entailed giving one's properties to God and then letting the church care for the poor. However, with the 1835 text, church members came to share more directly in this responsibility for the poor.

In a certain sense, the insertions of *the poor* into the text could be seen as increasing the responsibilities imposed on church members. As a practical matter, however, these textual changes coincided with a shift away from the original immediacy in the call to live the law of consecration. Church members to this day covenant to live the law of consecration, but this covenantal form of consecration has been uncoupled from the church-wide practice described in the Book of Commandments. This uncoupling might be understood as a reflection of a more general assimilationist tendency in Mormonism in which boundaries and tensions between Mormons and their neighbors have become more porous and less pronounced. This assimilationist trajectory can be traced back to an earlier section of the Law, D&C 42:18–29, where the commandments quoted from the Decalogue are taken only from the second tablet and contain ethical injunctions upheld by a wide range of non-Mormon religions and humanitarians.

If communal boundaries thus play an important role in how we understand Mormonism’s historically constituted understanding of consecration, then the textual changes pertaining to the relation of Israelites and gentiles have particular theological import. Originally, Book of Commandments 44:32 read, “For I will consecrate the riches of the Gentiles, unto my people which are of the house of Israel.” This text has resonance with Isaiah 61:6, which describes a day when the Israelites would “eat the riches of the Gentiles,” and was interpreted by some early Mormons in a way that fueled tensions between Latter-day Saints and their neighbors. This text was changed and expanded to the following in the 1835 edition of the Law (additions and changes are italicized): “for I will consecrate of the riches of those who embrace my gospel among the Gentiles unto the poor of my people who are of the house of Israel” (D&C 42:39). These textual changes describe a very different relationship between gentiles and Mormons/Israelites. On the one hand, these changes presage the eventual overcoming of cultural tensions between Mormons and their neighbors, a trajectory that culminated in the relative embrace of Mormons in the mid-twentieth century. On the other hand, these changes are a deferral of the original radical vision and call for a community of fully consecrated members living with “no poor among them” (Moses 7:18).
In what sense does section 42 embrace the law of the church? What is meant by law here? How is the giving of the law in section 42 related to the project of gathering and the establishment of the New Jerusalem?

In the fall of 1830, just a few months after the establishment of the church, the restoration of the gospel began to take on a political significance. Missionaries were called to preach in Missouri, and Joseph Smith told the Saints that the location of the “city Zion”—the biblical New Jerusalem—would soon be revealed (D&C 28:9). That same fall, in the revelation that is now Doctrine and Covenants 29, the Lord called the leaders of the church “to bring to pass the gathering of mine elect . . . that they shall be gathered in unto one place” (D&C 29:7, 8). A few weeks later, the church was commanded to assemble in Ohio (D&C 37:3), and in January of 1831, the Lord told the church through revelation that “there I will give unto you my law; and there you shall be endowed with power from on high” (D&C 38:32).

This law was revealed the following month and would become section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The revelations had contained “commandments” and even “church articles” and “covenants” before this time, so “the law” was something different. The first difference in the Law of section 42 was that it was explicitly connected with the task of gathering and building up the city Zion in preparation for the second coming of Christ. The second difference was that this new law (or newly revealed law) was to be something like a constitution for God’s people, or a framework for a way of life God’s people were commanded to live. “Church articles” (like those found in section 20) were much more like a set of bylaws, together with a discussion of the atonement of Christ and the restoration of the gospel. The Law, on the other hand, gives a discussion of legal rules, loosely based on parts of the Decalogue, together with consecration and stewardship, but proceeds to describe the character of gathered Zion and lays out the blessings that will come to God’s people as they are “gathered in one” and live God’s law. Like Deuteronomy, the Law would give prescriptions and prohibitions (including several that were given again, specifically in verses 18–29, which resemble parts of the Decalogue), along with promised blessings for obedience and punishments for disobedience. Finally, the Law was a different kind of revealed commandment in that it made suggestions toward the political and economic independence of God’s people. Initially the Law seemed to establish a system of justice and an economic community that was independent from the world. In this way, the Law was the fulfillment of Doctrine and Covenants 38, in which the Lord said that “in time ye shall have no king nor ruler, for I will be your king and watch over you. . . . You shall be a free people, and ye shall have no laws but my laws when I come, for I am your lawgiver, and what can stay my hand?” (vv. 21–22).

These suggestions of political sovereignty were softened later. For example, after first prescribing the punishment of murderers, the Law was revised to turn them over to the law of the land. More important, perhaps, the commandments regarding consecration and stewardship were revised too, in part to place properties held as stewardships on stronger legal footing in American courts. The ease with which these revisions took place is itself notable. The Lord had declared that the Saints would have “no laws but my laws when I come,” but in the meantime the sovereignty of God’s kingdom could not yet be realized. After all, the Law was a preparatory law, and the specifics of these preparatory arrangements could be adapted to the temporal realities of the church.

Doctrine and Covenants 42 was given in response to five questions asked by Joseph Smith and others at Kirtland, Ohio, in February 1831. Two of the questions directly concern gathering: “Shall the Church come together into one place or remain as they are in separate bodies?” and “[What is] the Law regulating the Church in her present situation till the time of her gathering?”

The first question should be interpreted as having an immediate, short-term significance. By the time of the Prophet’s arrival in Ohio, it had already been revealed that the Saints would “be gathered in unto one place upon the face of the land” (D&C 29:8) and that the “city Zion” would be built “on the borders by the Lamanites” (D&C
The question of the elders that prompted the revelation of section 42, then, was about the timing of the promised gathering. In answer to that question, verses 8–9 instruct the elders to build up the church "in every region . . . until the time shall come when it shall be revealed . . . when the city of the New Jerusalem shall be prepared." In verses 35–36, the Lord makes clear that consecration is for the purpose of "building up . . . the New Jerusalem . . . that my covenant people may be gathered in one in that day when I shall come to my temple." But out of necessity, consecration was only attempted in those places where the Saints were most concentrated in one area. Consecration and stewardship was first attempted in Kirtland and then later in Missouri.

An important change to the text between 1831 and 1835 that is relevant to the work of gathering is an increased concern for the poor in the discussion of consecration. While the 1831 text asks the Saints to consecrate their goods to God and explains that these donations will then be used to establish stewardships to care for the "poor and needy" (Book of Commandments 44:29; cf. D&C 42:34), the 1835 text calls for more direct concern for the poor. The 1835 text begins the discussion of consecration with the statement "thou wilt remember the poor" and inserts the word poor three additional times (once each in verses 31, 37 and 39 of D&C 42). In the original text the Lord calls Saints to consecrate properties "unto me" (Book of Commandments 44:26), but the same passage in the 1835 text has the Lord speaking of imparting properties "unto them," meaning the poor (D&C 42:30). Some historical context explains the shift in emphasis. The systems of consecration and stewardships are said to be established with a "covenant and a deed" that cannot be broken, but the legal form these arrangements took were unusual in the context of American law. Specifically, nonMormon courts took a dim view of the church’s claim upon the “stewardships” of former church members and almost always decided against the church’s claims.

On the other hand, emphasizing that consecration was the way to "remember the poor" was not merely a legal maneuver. The most urgent work of gathering in Kirtland and in Missouri was very often the task of providing for newly arrived members, who were often without means for their support. This was equally true in Nauvoo and later Utah, where building up the church meant providing livelihoods for “the poor of my people” (D&C 42:39).