



7-1-2009

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Holzapfel, Richard N.; Underwood, Grant; Fluhman, J. S.; Harper, Steven C. and Woodford, Robert J. "The Doctrine and Covenants: A Roundtable Discussion, Part 1." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 10, no. 2 (2009). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol10/iss2/17>

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A roundtable discussion on *The Joseph Smith Papers* and the Doctrine and Covenants

Courtesy of Richard B. Crookston

The Doctrine and Covenants: A Roundtable Discussion, Part I

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Holzappel: Several of you are editors on the Joseph Smith Papers Project. What do you see as the major contributions of this project?

Woodford: The Joseph Smith Papers Project will not only provide these core documents—these essential documents transcribed with annotations—but also explain the impact of the revelations in their context. In other words, the Joseph Smith Papers Project provides not only a narrative history but also a documentary that will allow narrative to be written.

Underwood: Our particular volumes in the Documents series include the first hundred revelations dictated by Joseph Smith. Our assignment has been to make all the documents we deal with, including the revelation texts, understandable in their 1830s context. Often when people talk about using history to understand the Doctrine and Covenants, it boils down to, “Let’s talk about the setting of the revelation. What was the immediate context and setting?” Much less is done to actually interpret particular passages within the revelation in a historically nuanced way. Some of that is done in these volumes; some of it will be new and fresh and interesting. There is still more that can be done in the aftermath.

Holzappel: Could you each tell us a recent discovered insight that you gained regarding the Doctrine and Covenants, something fresh that you have come to realize or started to investigate?

Woodford: One thing I have noticed while going through the papers is that we are able to date a lot of the revelations with a greater precision than ever before. Not that the dates are off a great deal, but we are able to put them in their historical context, and we have made some great strides. I think there are thirty or forty sections of the Doctrine and Covenants that we can date more precisely.

Holzappel: *Is that because the revelations themselves are mentioned in documents, so you can put a window on the revelation—in other words, it has to be at least by this date or it cannot be before this date?*

Woodford: Yes. We now have the manuscript book of revelations that John Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery took to Missouri in order to publish the Book of Commandments. We also have numerous other manuscripts from various collections. These have aided us immeasurably in dating the revelations.

Underwood: A specific example is the word we did on the Law, now section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Because of his apostasy, Simonds Ryder bears a black mark for most Latter-day Saints, but there was a brief period where he was in good standing, and during that period he copied a number of revelations, including what we call section 42. The theory arose that he stole the revelations while Joseph was gone, but the best analysis now is that his copies were made when Ryder was in good standing. His copy of D&C 42 includes a little paragraph that is most revealing. It shows that the Law proper was given on February 9 and essentially includes up through what is now verse 73, while the rest of the revelation, verses 74–98, includes a series of instructions received on February 23 about “how to act upon the points of the Law.”

Indeed, if you go back and scrutinize verses 74–98, you can see that these do not really enunciate new Law, they clarify how to act upon it. What do we do with people who have committed fornication or murder or violated this or that aspect of the Law? How do we handle someone who has abandoned or divorced their companion? Or how do we handle public confession or administer public reprimand? All of that is how to *act* upon the Law. Presently there is only the single date of February 9 attached to section 42, so readers have no awareness that the latter segment was written on February 23. Prior to February 23, section 43 was given, in which a phrase that was subsequently modified or revised invites the elders then present to meet together about how to act upon the Law and to “write with a pen” what they decided on and that this would become a law unto them. Shortly thereafter, presumably in direct response to that now-lost phrase out of section 43,

seven elders met on the 23rd to ascertain how to now implement and act upon the Law. So this is one example of the kind of enrichment that has come by engaging these early manuscripts closely.

Holzappel: For a long time, biblical scholars have been very interested in trying to get back to the original text, comparing manuscripts for variations. That is what New Testament studies is per se. We are now at the point in the Doctrine and Covenants where we have the sources and the skills to be able to do the same, which will not only enrich but also help us better apply the principles, because if we do not have the context we miss a lot.

Underwood: I would direct folks to the number of the interesting articles in the Sperry Symposium book [*The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*]. Bob summarizes many of the insights in his chapter, laying them out one after another. The chapter that I wrote on section 42 likewise grows out of the research that we have collectively done in recent years. So while individual names are tagged to these, it reflects the kind of collective and consensual work over a number of years and is well worth consulting.

Holzappel: Steve, what is something that you have learned?

Harper: Well, I think if I had to single out one insight that the Doctrine and Covenants gives me, it would be the way that it shows that God uses his omniscience to preserve agency. Most theologians have thought that if God is all-knowing, then there is no such thing as what Latter-day Saints would call individual agency. Calvinists would reject it. Luther would reject it. And the idea there, the presumption is that if God knows everything in advance, then how can anybody be acting, in any way, of his own volition—individual actions are just extensions of God’s will. Speaking in Washington DC, Joseph Smith said, “I reject the notion that foreknowing is the same as fore-causing.” It is a profound insight, especially for Joseph Smith, who was so much less learned than the world’s greatest theologians, but it was an insight from the revelations. And in Joseph Smith’s revelations, we have a God who clearly foreknows—he foresees. Instead of using that foreknowledge to limit our choices, this is a God who seems infinitely capable and anticipates endless permutations. He uses that foreknowledge to preserve individual agency, to make sure that his children can act for themselves independently of his will and to choose of their will, whether to obey or disobey.

Now, the example that most comes to our attention may be the loss of the 116 pages and the way section 10 reveals that God thought that might happen and had Nephi prepare an alternative source of

knowledge. God inspired Mormon to include that alternative source of knowledge, and he elaborated the whole thing to Joseph Smith in section 10. My favorite line, I think, is in verse 43 where he says, “My wisdom is greater than the cunning of the devil.” In fact, he says, “I will show unto them,” speaking of these conspirators who have tried to undermine the Book of Mormon project by taking those pages and waiting to see if Joseph would retranslate them, “I will show unto them.” This revelation is remarkable for the way it illustrates that God foreknows and that because he foreknows he can preserve and protect individual agency. He doesn’t have to limit people to narrow options. He is a great God. He is vast. Sometimes, as humans, we limit God to our limitations, but the God that Joseph Smith reveals to us is an infinite God.

Fluhman: In my research, I examine how members of other faiths perceived the revelations in Joseph Smith’s day. For example, one day I came across a Universalist newspaper editor’s response to “the Vision,” now section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Universalism was a movement, not a fully realized church, that came together in the time of Joseph Smith. It had long been an approach to Christianity—to some in New England, a heretical approach. Joseph Smith’s father and some of his family had been influenced by this approach to Christianity that was essentially a rejection of Calvinist orthodoxy. This Universalist newspaper editor briefly noted the reception of the section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants and added a comment like, “Heaven help us if the Mormons are now in our camp.” The way he perceived the revelation as reflecting Universalist views changed the way I saw section 76. Other historians had noted that section 76 rather dramatically reoriented Latter-day Saint perceptions of the afterlife, but this comment made me wonder how that revelation would have been viewed at the time.

Today my students typically focus on the three degrees of glory in section 76, but that Universalist’s comment made me wonder what he agreed with. It made me wonder, in what sense would a Universalist latch onto it? Rather than being surprised by the idea of a multitiered heaven, he may have become enthused that the Mormons believed that salvation was more widespread than most people believed and that the sons of perdition were “the only ones on whom the second death shall have any power” (v. 37). “All the rest,” says verse 39, “shall be brought forth by the resurrection of the dead.” In other words, those early Saints may have been surprised by the vast reach of Christ’s saving power. For me, that has become the new core of the section, the extent

to which Jesus saves. Verses 40–44: “This is the gospel . . . , that he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world, and to sanctify the world, and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness; that through him all might be saved whom the Father had put into his power and made by him; who glorifies the Father, and saves all the works of his hands, except those sons of perdition who deny the Son after the Father has revealed him. Wherefore, he saves all except them.” For me, this middle part of the section sums up the scope of Christ’s saving mission: he saves more, redeems more, sanctifies more than many of those formerly traditional Christians had thought, and I think that was the real radicalism in the section.

Underwood: Yes, I think your historical context helps. It shows how early LDS views had more in common with Universalism (the idea of universal salvation) than with traditional Christianity. Most Latter-day Saints today do not have any awareness of Universalists, but back then Joseph Smith and others were part of a dialogue, so to speak, about the extent of salvation. Joseph’s grandfather Asael Smith had Universalist leanings.

Harper: You can see similar dialogues throughout section 20. There is a clear response to Calvinism; for example, the Calvinists believe in the perseverance of the Saints, or as they say, “once saved, always saved.” Section 20 flatly rejects that idea even as it agrees with part of the terminology of Calvinism to some degree. We believe in sanctification through the blood of Christ, we believe in justification, but we reject the perseverance of the Saints. So it behooves Latter-day Saints to know Christianity, to know doctrine well enough to see what the fruits of the Restoration are and to see that we have a lot in common with a lot of good folks out there, even as we differ in some ways.

Underwood: Section 19 also clearly engages Universalism and redefines “eternal punishment” or “endless punishment” as not interminable but simply of divine origin and execution. It is a wonderfully sensitive move that positions the Saints much closer to a Universalist sentiment—actually, a subdivision of Universalism called Restorationism, which refers to being restored to God’s favored grace. And there was a subdivision of Universalism where the traditional Universalists would have said, “All suffering for sin takes place in mortality. It is the natural consequence of disregarding divine law. There is no postmortal punishment.” The Restorationists believed there is enough in the Bible to indicate something about afterlife punishment, but they could not envision it lasting forever, so after a period of punishment, the sufferer would be restored to salvation and God’s presence.

Harper: Some members of the Knight family were Restorationists. Those ideas were in the air, and they were in the minds of several Latter-day Saints.

Underwood: It's probably human nature, but we can be very myopic. We try to apply every revelation to ourselves and think *me* or *my*. Sometimes we forget that actually the people who receive the revelations themselves had their own issues. Quite honestly, God wasn't just speaking to somebody living in the year 2009; he was speaking to people living in the 1830s. When we read prophecies from Isaiah, sometimes we think they are all about our day. God speaks through his prophet to real people who live in a real world, and he is in dialogue with them, and they are learning and adjusting their thinking and seeing new insights.

Fluhman: To build on your point, it becomes helpful, then, to a modern Latter-day Saint to see what was being rejected and what was being validated, lest we think that the Restoration, as we understand it, is just an utter rejection of everything that came before. That is simply not the case, so it helps us both see what people believed and then the new revelations, such as the distinctive doctrine of exaltation and a multitiered heaven in section 76.

Harper: Section 10 was revealed before the Church was restored. And the Lord, in section 10, talks about his Church. He essentially says, "I am not bringing forth the Book of Mormon to destroy my church. I am doing it to build up my church." It seems to me that he is referring to Christianity. If, as Latter-day Saints, we have the impression that there is nothing useful in Christianity and that the Restoration is starting from scratch, then perhaps we are not thinking along the same lines that the Lord is thinking. He's trying to save Christianity by restoring the Church. I heard a beautiful metaphor the other day. It drew on the idea of restoring a house. When you restore an old house, you do not demolish the thing and start over, you preserve the wonderful parts. You keep as much of it intact as you can. You do not want to throw the whole thing away, and the restoration of the Church does that with Christianity.

Holzappel: *That brings up a good point. Let's talk about the words elder and apostle, which are ubiquitous through the revelations. Today we use these terms in a certain way, but their meanings were not always so specific. In New Testament times, for example, the term apostle was initially used as a Greek secular word with a specific meaning, but then the Church appropriated it, sanctified it, and created a new meaning for the*

office. So let's talk about elder and apostle. How do you discuss these terms so we do not see them through the lens of today's terminology?

Underwood: Let's take *elder* to begin with. In the Restoration, understanding clearly came line upon line. One of the really delightful dimensions of engaging the Doctrine and Covenants in its context and the manuscripts and the early version and changes and clarifications is that you see so repeatedly and powerfully the principle of line-upon-line disclosure. One of the matters that we have spent many conversations wrestling with in our work on *The Joseph Smith Papers* has been this interesting dimension of a deepening, ever-broadening understanding of priesthood. Naturally these early leaders began with the knowledge they brought in to the kingdom—their understandings, perceptions, and conventional usages. In that sense, *elder* was a synonym for a minister, a church leader. The modern distinction that an elder is an office in the Melchizedek Priesthood took a few years to come into play. So in the earliest revelations, in the early months of the Restoration, there was the sense of *elder* as a Church leader or minister, but they had not yet created the taxonomy—the kind of priesthood organizational chart that makes *elder* a subset of the Melchizedek Priesthood. That came a few years later and has blessed us ever since, but it was not there in the very first months of the Church's history, when the term had a more conventional meaning as an ordained minister or also, more generically, as the ministry of the Church.

Fluhman: The word *apostle* was often used this way in the earliest revelations, in the earliest usage in the Church. John Whitmer's license to preach has him listed as an apostle. For modern Saints who have a very specialized sense of what *apostle* meant, the more general usage of the word *apostle* can be very confusing. Many of those early brethren were called apostle in a more informal way that is often equated with *elder*. I think in several early documents, *apostle* and *elder* are used virtually synonymously. So it is important to recognize that the specialized meanings that we come to attach with these terms were not entirely clear. For example, it took some years to sort out the Protestant definition of priesthood as a group of priests to the more general sense that it is the power or authority given to man.

Woodford: The Prophet equates *elder* with *apostle* in section 84: "You are mine apostles, even God's high priests." So it gets elevated until eventually we get a Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Underwood: The priesthood, in the way that Latter-day Saints now understand it, was a new concept that took time to understand. The word *priesthood* was not the initial term used to describe this

power, this force, this divine empowering. It first appears in that sense in section 84 in the fall of 1832. In the original ordination certificate, terms like *power* or *liberty* or *license* were used. The word *authority* appears once in a while, but it is not the dominant term. The word *priesthood* in the Book of Mormon refers to the office of high priest, just as it did in the early months of the Restoration. It was also used to refer to those men who held the office of high priest.

In the twentieth century, Church members began to emphasize that you do not refer to a group of men as “the priesthood.” Priesthood is a thing—it’s a power. There was a period in the twentieth century when we were trying to make that distinction and preserve priesthood solely for that power, force, gift, authorization, and not have it represent a group of men, which was its original connotation both in the Bible and early LDS usage. By 1832 we see the beginnings of our modern usage. In 1832 it had not yet become common to use the terms *Melchizedek* and *Aaronic*. We began to talk about priesthood, yes, but as the “greater” or “lesser” priesthood, and in the period between 1832 and 1835, those concepts were refined and clarified so that by the revelations in 1835—the classic section 107, for instance—we have clearly in place the nomenclature of Melchizedek and Aaronic or Levitical Priesthood.

Harper: *Kingdom* is an interesting term. The revelations are political, largely.

Underwood: You had better define *political*.

Harper: Well, the revelations are political in the sense that they deal in power. When these revelations were received and Joseph Smith was received by people as a prophet, he became a political figure. Now, his goal in life was not to become a political figure, but he gained a following, and, in that sense, he gained power. Among other things, he gained economic power. When he received the revelation that said, “Gather to Ohio,” people gathered. It’s remarkable, the power in these revelations. When he received one that said, “Gather to Missouri,” within three years the Latter-day Saints controlled the balance of political power on the western edge of the state of Missouri. That means that these revelations are political. Now, I am not trying to say that was their primary value, but to understand them historically is to recognize that they had powerful influences and still do. We still are trying to obey these revelations, and it makes a huge difference in our lives that we try to act on them, so they are extraordinarily influential, including in political ways. And you can think of that in economic terms too. These are economic documents, a lot of them, and power-

fully so. Section 119 may be the least understood and poorest obeyed of Joseph's revelations, and *still* it is extraordinarily powerful in the way it generates revenue and loyalty to the Church.

Underwood: Let me give you one other word that does have a different nuance, too, and that is the word *wicked*. There are several places in the Doctrine and Covenants where the phrase "congregations of the wicked" is utilized. To the modern mind, that humorously invokes a question like, "What? A church in the red-light district?" Originally the term *wicked* had a much broader, generic connotation as anyone who was not responding to the will of God. Now, a subset of that would be the degenerate, the morally bankrupt, but that is only a tiny subset. That is what the word has shrunk to mean today, but one must look very sensitively at that in these revelations and not assume that when the Lord talks about the congregations of the wicked in Cincinnati or in some other place, that he is saying these are all morally degenerate people. That was often just a synonym for an unbeliever.

Harper: "Unrepentant" is another close reading of it.

Woodford: And there is one definition in *Webster's Dictionary* that suggests slight or little blame. People used to say "a wicked child." Well, the "wicked" were people who did not understand the truth. I have often wondered if that was how he used it with Martin Harris, that he just did not understand the program.

Harper: And notice these are people to whom the Lord is *sending* his word. He was not saying, "Oh, they're wicked—stay away from them." He was saying, "Go give them the good word."

Fluhman: The upshot of this portion of our discussion is that students of the Doctrine and Covenants have the opportunity to watch their own preconceptions at work as they're reading. Sometimes we will read a word and assume that we know exactly what it means, only to find that the word is more powerful or it has multiple meanings or it has shades of meaning that bring the revelations even more to life, even more vivid, more palpable.

This discussion could keep going. The word *seal* is that way. The concept of sealing is bigger, grander, more complicated than we ever thought. The word *salvation* in the Doctrine and Covenants is the same way. Sometimes it's equated virtually with *exaltation*. In other times it's got a much more general meaning. Section 76 is a good example. *Salvation* in that section does not mean exaltation as we've come to understand it. And so I think it's a good call to action for any student of the Doctrine and Covenants just to be aware that these words are diamonds. They are multifaceted.

Woodford: Emma Smith is ordained.

Fruhman: Another great example—*ordained* has all sorts of meanings.

Harper: There is a list of synonyms that grows out of sections 84, and especially 88 and 93, that we can probably spend the rest of our lives profitably thinking about: *light, truth, life, power, intelligence, glory*. There is something deep and interesting there. I am sure I have not plumbed the depths of it yet, but it is a useful way to study the Doctrine and Covenants, to think about the meanings of these words.

Fruhman: A practical point, and all of our students have recognized this at one point or the other, because we all have, and that is to slow down. You have to slow down—as a student, as a seeker with these revelations. You cannot browse these particular documents. They are unbrowsable. You can't do it. They demand more of us.

Underwood: You know, something that keeps coming up here is the question of interpretation. When a student asks a teacher, “What does this verse mean?” the teacher has to ask, “What are you fishing for? Would you like a discussion of the original historical meaning, would you like us to try to reconstruct what that text, what that verbiage, probably meant to Joseph Smith and those immediate recipients of the revelation? Or would you like us to explore the much larger arena of modern application—using Nephi's words, “the likening unto us”? (see 1 Nephi 19:23). I think that that leads to an important point. We are all historians of one kind or another. We cherish, love, and have devoted years of our lives to trying to reconstruct what the historical meaning likely was. But the reality is—talking devotionally, behaviorally, personally, spiritually—historical discussion should never trump the modern application, or likening the scriptures unto us. It may tether but should never trump the modern application because modern prophets and apostles, under inspiration, can find meaning in those words that was not available to the early audience or that was not of value or interest to the early audience.

One simple example of that is in section 59, where the Lord says, “Thou shalt not . . . kill, nor do anything like unto it” (v. 6). As historians explain, that Missouri society was rough-and-tumble, a violent frontier society. Thou shalt not kill or do any violent, maiming thing. What was *not* discussed by Joseph Smith or does not appear in any surviving contemporary document is that the passage was understood to have any reference to abortion. At about the middle of the twentieth century, the Brethren begin to see something new and important in

that phrase, “nor do anything like unto it.” For the last fifty years, we have been blessed and enriched by the further light and knowledge that sees in those words a contemporary problem and what to do about it. So we do not want to close off meaning-making to the 1830s. It really does not matter if the Brethren, under inspiration, are construing a text, or discerning something in it, that was not noticed or emphasized in the early years. That is why we affirm continuing revelation, so that we can benefit from this much broader and much richer application of the text, under inspiration, to modern circumstances.

Woodford: The Lord says, “What I say unto one I say unto all” (D&C 93:49). I use a pond analogy. You throw a rock in it and the rock hits at a specific time and place. If I want to come back in ten to fifteen years, I’d better look where the impact was, because that is where it is going to be. But, as soon as it hits that pond, emanating from it are these wakes that go over time and space, and that is the application. The other thing I think is important—and I agree with you about not trumping—is to distinguish those two. Because when a student says, “What does it mean?” what do you *mean* what does it mean? You want to know what they meant at that time? Which is an important endeavor, and I think the Lord challenges us to try to reconstruct this world, to appreciate it, because I think of all the things we have said so far, in the original context, we do appreciate the marvels of the Restoration. It allows us to make connections that enrich our own current spirituality, but then also apply those words to our own time.

Harper: As I listen to you speak, it strikes me that section 68 has this definition of scripture embedded in it, which is radical. Compared to orthodox definitions of scripture, the revealed definition sounds radical by contrast, but this is the definition of scripture, “Whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation” (see D&C 68:4). If you speak under the influence of the Holy Ghost, you can’t but help to speak the mind, the will, the power of God. And that is a distinctive doctrine—that is a doctrine revealed to us through Joseph Smith the Prophet. That is the restored definition of scripture, which is alive. Isn’t that a wonderful idea? The scriptures are *alive*. They can certainly be alive in our lives.

Fluhman: And those verses connect the Doctrine and Covenants with the later prophetic and apostolic interpretive tradition that Grant talks about. That passage in the Doctrine and Covenants is the bridge

between the two endeavors, to understand both moments of interpretation—both then and since. We are called to do it by that very verse.

Woodford: That is a great point, Spencer, because sometimes our students say, “Why haven’t we had a pile of revelations since the early period?” Well, we do not need a pile of additional canonical scriptures—we are receiving living scripture all the time. Does everything have to become canonical, printed on paper, and sewn into the triple combination? No. We should be wise and attentive to *all* utterances under inspiration—from those made in Sunday School class to those made in general conference. If we are disciples, we want to attend to whatever will bring us into discipleship with the Lord and take it from whoever speaks under that inspiration. In a very real sense, we receive new scripture each time we have general conference. **RE**