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Traveling and Standing Ministers: The Commandment to Travel (or Not) in the Joseph Smith Era

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In mid-November 1831, while living in Hiram, Ohio, Joseph Smith dictated a revelation that would later be incorporated into what became known as Doctrine and Covenants 107 (1835), a lengthy discourse on the duties of the priesthood, including travel responsibilities. The revelation’s oft-quoted conclusion, verses 99 and 100, instruct priesthood holders to become familiar with their ecclesiastical responsibilities and to fulfill their assigned roles: “Wherefore, now let every man learn his duty, and to act in the office in which he is appointed, in all diligence. He that is slothful shall not be counted worthy to stand, and he that learns not his duty and shows himself not approved shall not be counted worthy to stand.” As Doctrine and Covenants 107 and many other early revelations make clear, church travel is a divine commandment for specific priesthood offices, a specific directive for how to act in certain offices. In this revelation alone, *travel(ing)* appears eight times, but the topic spills across dozens of additional verses. And when the same word search is expanded across the entire Doctrine and Covenants there are sixteen additional hits. Moreover, related verbs like *journey* or *go forth* are scattered throughout the early revelations. In the same revelation, *stand(ing)* is found several times as well. But Mormon historians have only briefly explored travel as a theme in the Joseph Smith–era revelations.¹

During a recent American Academy of Religion annual meeting, non-Mormon religious studies scholar Thomas A. Tweed proposed “that the Latter-day Saints offer an exceptionally generative case study for translocative history, historical accounts that trace cultural flows across geographical boundaries.” All religions, according to Tweed, have at their core the notions of crossing and dwelling. “They are about emplacement and displacement, about finding a place and moving across space. . . . And Mormonism seems to emphasize crossings of all sorts,” he continues. “To focus only on two terrestrial crossings—or the ways that religions propel devotees across the natural landscape—both *migration* and *missions* seem especially important in Mormonism.”² There is no question that Latter-day Saints and their historians have focused much of their research and writing on these two themes, which can be translated as “gathering” and “gleaning.”

In less than two centuries since its founding by Joseph Smith in 1830, the Church has emerged as a global religion, one with over fifteen million members of record worshipping in nearly thirty thousand local congregations around the world. By necessity, travel has played a major role in its transformation from a local religious movement to a global religious player. Since the earliest days of the Restoration, the Latter-day Saints have been move-oriented and missionary-minded. Leaders and laity have regularly crisscrossed national, cultural, linguistic, and religious borders and boundaries to fulfill their ecclesiastical duties. But Mormon travel has not been haphazard or a free-for-all, especially at the institutional level. So to Tweed’s categories of *migration* and *missions* should be added the term *ministry*.³ In other words, to administer what has become similar to a multinational corporation in size, structure, and finances, Church leaders travel on a regular *and* prescribed basis, according to their priesthood office. In short, some

brethren are commanded to act as “traveling ministers” abroad while others are instructed to serve as “standing ministers” at home.⁴

Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood Offices and Travel Responsibilities

On November 1, 1831, Joseph Smith dictated a revelation during a conference of elders gathered at Hiram, Ohio, which was designated as the official preface to the Book of Commandments (1833) and the Doctrine and Covenants (1835). In Doctrine and Covenants 1:24, the Lord declares that he has given the revelations in the language of his followers: “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.” Therefore, one can better appreciate the Doctrine and Covenants, including specific words used therein, by understanding how language was used in the antebellum period in the United States.

The word *office(s)* appears over sixty times in the Joseph Smith–era Doctrine and Covenants (1835 and 1844 editions). The early Latter-day Saints, including their founding prophet, used *office* like their fellow Americans. In his magisterial 1828 work, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, Noah Webster defined *office* primarily as “a particular duty, charge or trust conferred by public authority and for a public purpose; an employment undertaken by commission or authority from government or those who administer it. Thus we speak of the *office* of secretary of state, of treasurer, of a judge, of a sheriff, of a justice of the peace, &c. *Offices* are civil, judicial, ministerial, executive, legislative, political, municipal, diplomatic, military, ecclesiastical, &c.” His secondary definition took on a more ecclesiastical flavor—“A duty, charge or trust of a sacred nature, conferred by God himself; as the *office* of priest, in the Old Testament; and that of the apostles, in the New Testament”—and lists the New Testament example found in Romans 11:13: “Inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I

magnify my *office*.” Similarly, Webster’s tertiary definition read, “Duty or employment of a private nature; as the *office* of a midwife,” in reference to the Old Testament example found in Exodus 1:16.⁵

In keeping with Webster’s secondary, more ecclesiastical definition, Joseph Smith generally employed *office* in the context of priesthood callings, quorums, and stewardships in his dictated revelations. As a general rule, those Latter-day Saints holding General Authority priesthood offices, namely the Apostles and Seventy, enjoy greater travel mobility but heavier ecclesiastical responsibility as traveling ministers. And those holding other priesthood offices, including high priests, elders, priests, teachers, and deacons, are directed to serve as standing ministers in their local congregations.

It is interesting to note how often the scriptural injunction for LDS priesthood holders to travel (or not) is tied to their specific offices in the lower Aaronic Priesthood or the higher Melchizedek Priesthood. A resurrected John the Baptist restored the Aaronic Priesthood to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery on May 15, 1829, in Harmony, Pennsylvania. During the first year of the Church’s existence, the Lord instructed Joseph Smith to institute three offices within what would become associated with this lesser priesthood those of priest, teacher, and deacon. After the Prophet and his fellow believers organized the Church on April 6, 1830, they ordained the first Latter-day priests two months later on June 9. “The priest’s duty is to preach, teach, expound, exhort, and baptize, and administer the sacrament, and visit the house of each member, and exhort them to pray vocally and in secret and attend to all family duties,” an early revelation reads (D&C 20:46–47). And they were subsequently able to ordain other men to the offices of priest, teacher, and deacon and also perform all of the duties of teachers and deacons.

Along with the Aaronic Priesthood office of priest are those of teacher and deacon. Latter-day scriptures indicate “the teacher’s duty is to watch over the church always.” His authority is “to warn, expound, exhort, and teach, and invite all to come unto Christ” (see D&C 20:53–59). Like priests, teachers were to serve locally in the boundaries of their congregation but were not invited to minister beyond their local parishioners. And next to the office of teacher is that of deacon, according to the Doctrine and Covenants. Deacons are to assist teachers in their duties (see D&C 20:57–59), and they may be ordained by priests and elders (see D&C 20:39, 48). Like priests and teachers, deacons were not instructed to travel abroad, unlike their contemporary Melchizedek Priesthood counterparts. Their responsibilities were limited both in scope and by geography.

When John the Baptist restored the Aaronic Priesthood to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in May 1829, he also alerted them to future priesthood blessings and suggested that they would in the future be named the first and second elders of the Church (see Joseph Smith—History 1:72). Sometime thereafter, while they were engaged in prayer they received the hoped-for revelation on this matter and were instructed to ordain each other as elders. These priesthood ordinations took place when the Church was organized on April 6, 1830, at Fayette, New York (see D&C 20:1–4). Elders had duties as “standing ministers” (see D&C 124:137) in fulfilling the obligations of the Aaronic Priesthood, overseeing the local needs of the Church, conferring the gift of the Holy Ghost, ordaining others to priesthood offices, and giving priesthood blessings (see D&C 20:38–45). In addition, they could be called to other duties, including missionary service.

Since the earliest days of the Restoration, Melchizedek Priesthood holders have served as missionaries to preach the gospel and fulfill the resurrected Savior’s “Great Commission”

throughout the world (see Matthew 27:18–20). Evangelism often required Latter-day Saint men to travel beyond their hometowns and communities, crossing civic, cultural, linguistic, state, and sometimes national boundaries. An early scriptural example of divine instructions for elders to travel or “journey” as missionaries is found in a June 6, 1831, revelation dictated by Joseph Smith to the elders of the Church gathered in Kirtland, Ohio (D&C 52). In fact, it seems that there has always been a mandate to travel to preach the gospel. They were to proclaim the gospel in specific areas and with specific companions or circumstances. Often times these calls were made for a short season, typically (but not always) during the winter season when plants were no longer in the ground (see D&C 68:1–2, 7–8; 75:1–22, 26–28).

The priesthood brethren learned through Joseph Smith that a number of their fellow Saints were called to “take their journey” to Independence, Missouri, preaching along the way. “Wherefore, verily I say unto you, let my servants Joseph Smith, Jun., and Sidney Rigdon take their journey as soon as preparations can be made to leave their homes, and journey to the land of Missouri,” the litany of mission calls begins (D&C 52:3). “And again, verily I say unto you, let my servant Thomas B. Marsh and my servant Ezra Thayre take their journey also, preaching the word by the way unto this same land” (D&C 52:22), the revelation continues. This same invitation, for individual elders to “take their journey,” was extended more than twenty additional times in the revelation. The men were all commanded to “take their journey” as latter-day evangelists, following the lead of their prophet (see D&C 52:23–32). But they were to fan out as they commenced their missionary travels, to maximize their impact as they made their way to Missouri to learn of the location of Zion: “Yea, verily I say, let all these take their journey unto one place, in their several courses, and one man shall not build upon another’s foundation, neither journey in another’s track” (D&C 52:33). But the clarion call to travel was not extended

to all the elders gathered in Kirtland. “Let the residue of the elders watch over the churches, and declare the word in the regions round about them; and let them labor with their own hands that there be no idolatry nor wickedness practiced,” the revelation instructed (D&C 52:39).

About this same time—a year after the Church was organized and the original elders were ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood—the first men were ordained to the office of high priest in June 1831. Joseph Smith and nearly two dozen other men were ordained at this time, their authority having earlier come from Peter, James, and John. They would later be organized into their own quorum, perhaps by 1836. Doctrine and Covenants 107:65–66 makes it clear that the Church President is also the presiding high priest.

In the years following the formation of these Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood offices, the Lord gave further instructions to his growing corps of priesthood holders. On September 22 and 23, 1832, as the missionaries of the Church (see D&C 75) began returning from their missionary fields of labor through the eastern states of America, Joseph Smith dictated a detailed revelation on priesthood. It made clear that the senior brethren were to watch out for the more fledgling of the flock and to strengthen them, just like their New Testament counterparts had done as they laid the foundations for the spread of early Christianity. These seasoned brethren were to minister or administer the Church in the latter days as follows:

And if any man among you be strong in the Spirit, let him take with him him that is weak, that he may be edified in all meekness, that he may become strong also.

Therefore, take with you those who are ordained unto the lesser priesthood, and send them before you to make appointments, and to prepare the way, and to fill appointments that you yourselves are not able to fill.

Behold, this is the way that mine apostles, in ancient days, built up my church unto me.

Therefore, let every man stand in his own office, and labor in his own calling; and let not the head say unto the feet it hath no need of the feet; for without the feet how shall the body be able to stand?

Also the body hath need of every member, that all may be edified together, that the system may be kept perfect. (D&C 84:106–10)

Of course, by referencing ancient Apostles, this revelation also portended future Apostles and expanded travel responsibilities. To members of the 1832 Church, the Lord continued, “The high priests should travel, and also the elders, and also the lesser priests; but the deacons and teachers should be appointed to watch over the church, to be *standing* ministers unto the church” (D&C 84:111; emphasis added). In other words, not all priesthood offices were created equal or given the same privileges of movement and burdens of responsibilities. This pattern would continue until the Saints received further light and knowledge in 1841 regarding travel responsibilities.

Moreover, Newel K. Whitney, the bishop in Kirtland, “also should travel round about and among all the churches, searching after the poor to administer to their wants by humbling the rich and the proud.” In fact, he was encouraged to “employ an agent” to take care of his “secular business” while he was traveling and ministering on behalf of the Church (D&C 84:112–13). Bishop Whitney was specifically instructed to “go unto the city of New York, also to the city of Albany, and also to the city of Boston, and warn the people of those cities with the sound of the gospel,” in addition to overseeing the temporal affairs of the Church. The Lord promised that those who received Whitney’s gospel message would be blessed while those who rejected his

words would be rejected in heaven: “Let him trust in me and he shall not be confounded” (D&C 114–16). In this instance, Bishop Whitney, not bound geographically to a ward boundary, as other bishops would become by 1839 in Nauvoo, traveled by commandment. But the revelation continues, urging the priesthood holders of the Church to travel to preach the gospel: “And verily I say unto you, the rest of my servants, go ye forth as your circumstances shall permit, in your several callings, unto the great and notable cities and villages, reprovng the world in righteousness of all their unrighteous and ungodly deeds, setting forth clearly and understandingly the desolation of abomination in the last days” (D&C 84:117).

An Apostle (not apostleship) would be the next Melchizedek Priesthood office instituted through Joseph Smith by revelation. In June 1829, Joseph Smith dictated a revelation to Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer that portended the future calling of Twelve Apostles, mirroring the ecclesiastical structure of the primitive Christian Church. In what are now eleven verses (D&C 18:26–36), the Lord explained to Joseph Smith that Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were going to lead the calling Twelve Apostles to help proclaim the gospel message to both Jew and Gentile alike. Up to 1835, when the Twelve were finally called, there was growing ecclesiastical structure in the Church.⁶ These dozen men would be especially chosen to lead the New Testament’s Great Commission in the latter days.

In Doctrine and Covenants 18:26–28, the Lord explained that “there are others who are called to declare my gospel, both unto Gentile and unto Jew; yea, even twelve; and the Twelve shall be my disciples, and they shall take upon them my name; and the Twelve are they who shall desire to take upon them my name with full purpose of heart. And if they desire to take upon them my name with full purpose of heart, they are called to go into all the world to preach my gospel unto every creature.” These called men are to be properly ordained to go forth and

properly baptize, following the New Testament and Book of Mormon pattern, as later codified in the Articles of Faith. They are also supposed to “ordain priests and teachers; to declare my gospel, according to the power of the Holy Ghost which is in you, and according to the callings and gifts of God unto men” (v. 32).

After describing the role and calling of the future Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, which would not happen until February 1835 in Kirtland, Ohio, the Lord charged Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, his future brother-in-law, to “search out the Twelve, who shall have the desires of which I have spoken; and by their desires and their works you shall know them. And when you have found them you shall show these things unto them” (vv. 37–39). What is important to notice here, for the purposes of this essay, is that there is a clear travel arrangement pending: if they are to teach all nations and baptize in the name of Jesus, they are not going to be able to do this from Church headquarters—then located in New York and later located in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. The mission of the Church was to be global, transnational, and translocative.

The office of Seventy in the Melchizedek Priesthood was created at about the same time that Joseph Smith and his fellow leaders selected and called by revelation the first members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. In late February 1835, the selected men were “ordained and blessed at that time, to begin the organization of the first quorum of Seventies, according to the visions and revelations which I have received. The Seventies are to constitute traveling quorums, to go into all the earth, whithersoever the Twelve Apostles shall call them.”⁷ A spring 1835 revelation further explained that they were called to travel to preach the gospel first to Gentiles and then to Jews, acting under the direction of the Twelve Apostles (D&C 107:25, 34, 97).

According to revelation, Joseph Smith and his fellow leaders created the offices and constituted the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and Quorum of Seventy in February 1835, and

clarified the roles of these newly formed quorums of the Church. In Doctrine and Covenants 107, the Lord more fully defines these various priesthood offices and their responsibilities to travel. According to verse 33, “The Twelve are a Traveling Presiding High Council, to officiate in the name of the Lord, under the direction of the Presidency of the Church, agreeable to the institution of heaven; to build up the church, and regulate all the affairs of the same in all nations, first unto the Gentiles and secondly unto the Jews.” They are specifically commanded to travel to “all nations” on behalf of the Church. The Seventy are likewise instructed to follow the example of the Twelve, acting under their guidance as they travel, as described in verse 34 (see also verses 25 and 97): “The Seventy are to act in the name of the Lord, under the direction of the Twelve or the traveling high council, in building up the church and regulating all the affairs of the same in all nations, first unto the Gentiles and then to the Jews.” But the same revelation then clarifies that apostles, by virtue of their priesthood keys of administration, directs the Seventy and all others with regards to travel, according to verse 35: “The Twelve being sent out, holding the keys, to open the door by the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and first unto the Gentiles and then unto the Jews.” At the time this revelation was given, in 1835, the Twelve had not yet been sent to any foreign lands as a quorum, including Canada, as they had been a priesthood body for only a short time.

This grand revelation on the priesthood also clarifies, in verses 36 and 37 (emphasis added), that “the *standing* high councils, at the stakes of Zion, form a quorum equal in authority in the affairs of the church, in all their decisions, to the quorum of the presidency, or to the *traveling* high council. The high council in Zion form a quorum equal in authority in the affairs of the church, in all their decisions, to the councils of the Twelve at the stakes of Zion.” In other words, there were standing and traveling high councils in the Church. Some were to stay put or

“stand” locally, while others were to move or to “travel” globally, each according to their priesthood calling and office. Members of the Quorum of the Twelve or the “traveling high council” were further instructed to “call upon the Seventy, when they need assistance, to fill the several calls for preaching and administering the gospel, instead of any others,” according to verse 38. In later years Joseph Smith would work out the relationship between the standing high councils in Zion and Kirtland and the Quorum of the Twelve.

According to Doctrine and Covenants 107:98, the Melchizedek Priesthood offices of the Twelve and the Seventy alone have the mandate to travel globally to administer the Church: “Whereas other officers of the church, who belong not unto the Twelve, neither to the Seventy, are not under the responsibility to travel among all nations, but are to travel as their circumstances shall allow, notwithstanding they may hold as high and responsible offices in the church.” For example, the president of the elders quorum was to “preside” over and “sit in council” with his fellow elders and “teach them according to the covenants,” according to verses 89 and 90. An elders quorum presidency, in contrast to members of the Quorum of the Seventy, “is designed for those who *do not travel* into all the world” (emphasis added). In other words, the Melchizedek presidency of elders is not to tour the Church, or, as stated in other revelations, is to be a *standing* presidency.

The Lord concluded this revelation with this admonition: “Wherefore, now let every man learn his duty, and to act in the office in which he is appointed, in all diligence. He that is slothful shall not be counted worthy to stand, and he that learns not his duty and shows himself not approved shall not be counted worthy to stand” (D&C 107:99–100). Understanding which quorums are to travel abroad and which are not became increasingly important as these early priesthood holders learned to do their duties and act in their proper offices. The revelation also

suggests that in the future, increased travel would become more important, something that many early priesthood holders could probably barely fathom. Why worry about who is traveling to the nations of the earth, when the Church was struggling in Kirtland, Ohio, and Missouri?

More than two years after organizing the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and Quorum of the Seventy in Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph Smith called a number of Apostles to evangelize in Great Britain in the summer of 1837 by inspiration. This would be the Church's first transoceanic missionary foray. In a July 1837 revelation dictated to Thomas B. Marsh, President of the Quorum of the Twelve, the Lord further instructed the inexperienced Apostles on their priesthood duties, the very day that two members of their quorum preached in England for the first time. "I have heard thy prayers; and thine alms have come up as a memorial before me, in behalf of those, thy brethren, who were chosen to bear testimony of my name and to send it abroad among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, and ordained through the instrumentality of my servants," Doctrine and Covenants 112:1 begins. The Lord encouraged him and echoed his earlier commandment to fulfill the Great Commission to preach the gospel in verse 4. "Let thy heart be of good cheer before my face; and thou shalt bear record of my name, not only unto the Gentiles, but also unto the Jews; and thou shalt send forth my word unto the ends of the earth."

About halfway into the revelation, the discussion turns to a clarification of keys and their role in determining who travels on behalf of the Church. So even though one is ordained to a specific priesthood office, in this case that of Apostle, their travel is still regulated by keys of authority. Counseling Marsh, the Lord made clear the priesthood primacy of Joseph Smith, the senior Apostle, presiding high priest, and Church President.

Exalt not yourselves; rebel not against my servant Joseph; for verily I say unto you, I am with him, and my hand shall be over him; and the keys which I have given unto him, and also to youward, shall not be taken from him till I come.

Verily I say unto you, my servant Thomas, thou art the man whom I have chosen to hold the keys of my kingdom, as pertaining to the Twelve, abroad among all nations—

That thou mayest be my servant to unlock the door of the kingdom in all places where my servant Joseph, and my servant Sidney, and my servant Hyrum, cannot come;

For on them have I laid the burden of all the churches for a little season.

Wherefore, *whithersoever they shall send you, go ye*, and I will be with you; and in whatsoever place ye shall proclaim my name an effectual door shall be opened unto you, that they may receive my word. (D&C 112:15–19; emphasis added)

In other words, Marsh was the President of the Quorum of the Twelve and did “hold the keys of my kingdom, as pertaining to the Twelve, abroad among all nations,” but he could only exercise his apostolic keys at the direction of the First Presidency, then composed of Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Hyrum Smith (see also D&C 107:33). Again, the pattern became clear over several years: the First Presidency directs the Quorum of the Twelve (comprising their fellow Apostles), and the Quorum of the Twelve directs the Quorum of the Seventy. Together these three priesthood quorums preside over the Church and its membership, a lesson that Thomas B. Marsh (and the entire Church) needed to learn as the global nature of the Restoration unfolded during the final years of Joseph Smith’s lifetime.

Several years later, Joseph Smith dictated another revelation that touched on many of these same themes of priesthood office, authority, and travel responsibilities. In January 1841, the Prophet received Doctrine and Covenants 124 while living in Nauvoo, Illinois. In verses 124

to 126, the Lord again reconfirmed the primacy of Joseph Smith as “presiding elder over all my church, to be a translator, a revelator, a seer, and prophet,” and the supporting roles of the counselors in the First Presidency, and the Church’s patriarch. At this time the Quorum of the Twelve was formally given a president to preside over the other Apostles, in verses 127 and 128: “I give unto you my servant Brigham Young to be a president over the Twelve *traveling* council; which Twelve hold the keys to open up the authority of my kingdom upon the four corners of the earth, and after that to send my word to every creature” (emphasis added). After naming each individual member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the revelation continues to distinguish this *traveling* council from the *standing* council there in Nauvoo: “And again, I say unto you, I give unto you a high council, for the cornerstone of Zion” (v. 131). And then they are all named, all twelve of them.

The revelation, in verses 134 and 135, then names a president and two counselors over the high priests quorum “for the purpose of qualifying those who shall be appointed *standing* presidents or servants over different stakes scattered abroad.” Then this clarification: “And they may *travel* also if they choose, but rather be ordained for *standing* presidents; this is the office of their calling.” The same counsel holds true for the elders quorum, according to verse 137, “which quorum is instituted for *standing* ministers; nevertheless they may *travel*, yet they are ordained to be *standing* ministers to my church.” As if to put an exclamation point on the proper order of things, the Lord then contrasts the responsibilities of elders quorums with that of the Quorum of the Seventy. The latter priesthood office, according to verses 139 and 140, “is instituted for *traveling* elders to bear record of my name in all the world, wherever the *traveling* high council, mine apostles, shall send them to prepare a way before my face” (emphasis added). The Quorum of the Seventy (First and Second Quorums of the Seventy versus Area Seventy today) travels

globally at the direction of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. “The difference between this quorum [of Seventy] and the quorum of elders is that one is to travel continually, and the other is to preside over the churches from time to time” (v. 140).

The instructions given to priesthood holders in Doctrine and Covenants 124 (1841) mark an evolution from what was revealed in 1832, specifically regarding the expected travel of high priests and elders. “Not only did the Church organization gradually unfold as the Church grew in size and expanded in territory but some of the assigned duties within that organization have also changed over the years,” Robert Woodford points out. “In 1832, high priests, elders, and priests acted as *traveling* ministers while teachers and deacons served as *standing* ministers. . . . By 1841 high priests and elders were designated *standing* ministers but could travel if needed.”⁸ Finally, after explaining all of the particulars about the various priesthood offices and quorums, the Lord closed the revelation to Joseph Smith in verses 143 to 145: “The above offices I have given unto you, and the keys thereof, for helps and for governments, for the work of the ministry and the perfecting of my saints,” he explained. This is the last Joseph Smith–era revelation that has travel as one of its major themes.⁹

Additional Ecclesiastical Offices Mentioned in the Doctrine and Covenants

In addition to the Melchizedek and Aaronic Priesthood roles previously detailed, there are three other ecclesiastical “offices” described in the Joseph Smith–era Doctrine and Covenants. In several of the early revelations, the Lord called Emma Hale Smith, William W. Phelps, Oliver Cowdery, and John Whitmer to specific duties. While these were not priesthood offices in the traditional sense, they were also not “auxiliary”¹⁰ roles and deserve closer examination. As described above, Joseph Smith generally followed Noah Webster’s secondary, more ecclesiastical definition of *office* in the Doctrine and Covenants. Interestingly, all three

offices under review here were related to scriptural production and preservation, as well as Churchwide record keeping and publishing, and each entailed travel on behalf of the Church.

The first instance is the July 1830 calling of Emma Hale Smith to help sustain her husband's prophetic role in Harmony, Pennsylvania. To Emma, who had just been baptized days earlier, the Lord directed that "the *office* of thy calling shall be for a comfort unto my servant, [Joseph Smith], in his afflictions, with consoling words, in the spirit of meekness" (D&C 25:5), similar to Webster's tertiary definition of *office* as a private duty of a spouse. Emma and her husband had endured persecution and harassment as a young couple in Palmyra, New York, and Harmony, Pennsylvania, while Joseph translated the Book of Mormon. But in addition to being a supportive wife, Emma's revealed office later included acting as the Prophet's personal scribe on the inspired translation of the Bible (just as she had on the Book of Mormon translation when others were unavailable) and as his traveling companion, which enabled the second elder of the Restoration, Oliver Cowdery, to attend to other administrative duties:

And thou shalt go with him at the time of his going, and be unto him for a scribe, while there is no one to be a scribe for him, that I may send my servant, Oliver Cowdery, whithersoever I will.

And thou shalt be ordained under his hand to expound scriptures, and to exhort the church, according as it shall be given thee by my Spirit.

For he shall lay his hands upon thee, and thou shalt receive the Holy Ghost, and thy time shall be given to writing, and to learning much. (D&C 25:6–8; emphasis added)

In addition to comforting and writing for her husband, Emma was encouraged to "make a selection of sacred hymns" for the young Church, according to verse 11. She selected several hymns which, with the assistance of Church printer William W. Phelps, were published in early

1836 in Kirtland, Ohio.¹¹ These latter admonitions suggest that Emma's revealed office was both personal and ecclesiastical. As a woman in a church with an all-male priesthood, Emma was not functioning in a priesthood office, but rather in a role of spiritual responsibility. Moreover, she was not succeeded by anyone in this particular "office" in later years.

A second example of an additional ecclesiastical office in the Doctrine and Covenants focuses on the professional printing talents of William W. Phelps. In July 1831, Joseph Smith and a number of companions arrived in Missouri's western borderlands after being commanded to travel there from Ohio to locate the City of Zion (D&C 52). Although somewhat discouraged by the plight of local Native Americans and the condition of the Euro-American settlers his party encountered, Smith dictated a revelation declaring Independence, Missouri, the site of the future City of Zion and its temple (D&C 57). The righteous Saints were to buy up the surrounding lands and receive their temporal inheritances going forward. More specifically, Sidney Gilbert was to establish a mercantile institution and Oliver Cowdery was to prepare church materials for publication.

In Doctrine and Covenants 57, verses 11 through 13, the Lord then instructed: "Let my servant William W. Phelps be planted in this place, and be established as a printer unto the church. And lo, if the world receive his writings—behold here is wisdom—let him obtain whatsoever he can obtain in righteousness, for the good of the saints." The revelation then directed Cowdery to aid Phelps in his publication efforts: "And let my servant Oliver Cowdery assist him, even as I have commanded, in whatsoever place I shall appoint unto him, to copy, and to correct, and select, that all things may be right before me, as it shall be proved by the Spirit through him" (v. 13). The Lord further clarified Phelps's role less than two weeks later, when Joseph Smith dictated a follow-up revelation. Some of the Colesville Saints had arrived in Zion

and desired to know what the Lord would have them do in this new land (D&C 58 and 59). The gathered Saints were again told to buy lands for a store and printing office in Independence for the Church's printer, according to Doctrine and Covenants 58:37–40: “And also let my servant William W. Phelps stand in the *office* to which I have appointed him” (emphasis added; see also D&C 70:1–5). It is important to note here that Phelps, like Emma Smith, was neither ordained by the laying on of hands for his ecclesiastical office (he was already an elder in the Melchizedek Priesthood), nor was he succeeded by anyone. Clearly, his role as Church printer was never routinized in the Church's administrative structure, although it played a role in the United Firm and the Literary Firm in the early 1830s (D&C 82).¹²

The emergence of the role of Church Historian and Recorder¹³ is a third instance when Joseph Smith uses *office* to describe an extra-priesthood ecclesiastical role in the Doctrine and Covenants. When Smith and his associates organized the Church, the Lord had not yet extended priesthood offices to the general male membership. According to Doctrine and Covenants 20:2–3, the Lord and his angelic servants had called and ordained Smith and Oliver Cowdery as Apostles, and the men were serving as the first and second elders of the Church, respectively. On that foundational day, Smith dictated the Lord's first revelation to his newly restored Church: “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you,” which is now found in Doctrine and Covenants 21:1.¹⁴ In addition to helping lead the young Church as second elder, Cowdery subsequently acted as the original Church Historian and/or Recorder during 1830 and 1831, a responsibility he would again shoulder between 1835 and 1837. “Even in other years, he often kept the official minutes of meetings and was often editor and contributor for the first Church newspapers. [Cowdery] wrote articles for the *Messenger and Advocate* that helped document early LDS history,” explains historian Richard Lloyd Anderson.¹⁵

But within a year, the Lord passed Oliver Cowdery's record-keeping duties to a reluctant John Whitmer, Cowdery's future brother-in-law, who had served as one of Joseph Smith's early clerks. "I would rather not do it but observed that the will of the Lord be done, and if he desires it, I desire that he would manifest it through Joseph the Seer," Whitmer wrote of his calling.¹⁶ Thereafter, Joseph Smith dictated a revelation in March 1831, in response to Whitmer's hesitation to serve as the second Church Historian and/or Recorder. "Behold, it is expedient in me that my servant John [Whitmer] should write and keep a regular history, and assist you, my servant Joseph [Smith], in transcribing all things which shall be given you, until he is called to further duties" (D&C 47:1). In addition to writing history, transcribing records, and speaking in meetings, the revelation appointed Whitmer to replace Cowdery as the Church's official record keeper in verse 3: "And again, I say unto you that it shall be appointed unto him to keep the church record and history continually; for Oliver Cowdery I have appointed to another office." Convinced of the inspiration behind his calling, Whitmer accepted his new responsibilities. This transfer of ecclesiastical duties from one man to another marked the institutionalization of this particular calling in the Restoration. Unlike the temporary offices of Emma Smith and William W. Phelps, which seemingly expired after several years, the office of Church Historian and/or Recorder was subsequently passed down from March 1831 into the twenty-first century.¹⁷

In November 1831, at Hiram, Ohio, Joseph Smith dictated another revelation directed to the office of Church Historian and/or Recorder, including a mandate for regular Churchwide travel (D&C 69). Earlier that month, during a special Church conference, the Saints had agreed to publish Joseph Smith's inspired revelations as bound scripture. The Lord commanded Cowdery and Whitmer to travel together from Ohio to Missouri, to secure Church funds, and take the manuscript revelation book to W. W. Phelps so he could print the Book of

Commandments, a distance of over eight hundred miles as the crow flies. Specifically, the revelation instructed Whitmer to “continue in writing and making a history of all the important things which he shall observe and know concerning my church; and also that he receive counsel and assistance from my servant Oliver Cowdery and others. And also, my servants who are abroad in the earth should send forth the accounts of their stewardships to the land of Zion; for the land of Zion shall be a seat and a place to receive and do all these things” (D&C 69:3–6).

While Church members are instructed to send their ecclesiastical records and histories to Church headquarters in Independence, Missouri (Zion), the Church Historian and/or Recorder is directed to tour the Church to learn and capture its unfolding history. “Nevertheless, let my servant John Whitmer *travel many times from place to place, and from church to church*, that he may the more easily obtain knowledge,” the revelation instructed in verse 7 (emphasis added). Subsequent historians have interpreted this passage to mean that the Church’s appointed record keeper is not to be an armchair historian, merely summarizing reports as they come across his desk at the center of the Church in Zion, but an active leader in collecting, preserving, and sharing Church history via travel to the peripheries.¹⁸ Whitmer was further directed to fulfill his office, according to Doctrine and Covenants 69:8, by “preaching and expounding, writing, copying, selecting, and obtaining all things which shall be for the good of the church, and for the rising generations that shall grow up on the land of Zion.”

Although not a holder of priesthood keys like Apostles (unless he is already an Apostle at the time of his calling), the Church Historian and Recorder is an additional office in the Church’s administrative structure that has a scriptural mandate to travel Churchwide in performance of his duties.¹⁹ In subsequent years, including during Joseph Smith’s lifetime, new Church Historian and Recorders were sustained in General Conference (sometimes set apart, but not ordained,

given that they already held priesthood offices).²⁰ This pattern is in keeping with Noah Webster's 1828 definition of an office as a "charge or trust of a sacred nature, conferred by God himself," which clearly was the case when given by the Lord through revelation.

Traveling and Standing Ministers in the Doctrine and Covenants

Like Roman Catholicism and other global religious traditions, "Mormonism has become a transnational organization, and that has implications not only for studies that compare themes across periods and places, but also for histories that trace the crisscrossing flows of religious practices," Tweed concludes. "In fact, it's difficult to imagine a more interesting case for this sort of history."²¹ But his emphasis on comparative religious crossings and dwellings also encourages Latter-day Saint observers to examine their own history of how the related themes of *migration* and *missions* might be studied, together with the added category of *ministry* or administration, especially as found in the Joseph Smith-era revelations.

As noted previously, Church leaders traveled on a regular *and* prescribed basis during the Joseph Smith era, according to their priesthood office. In short, some brethren were commanded to act as "traveling ministers" abroad, while others were instructed to serve as "standing ministers" at home. Whether called to preach to the nations of the world, like the Apostles or Seventy, or instructed to "travel many times from place to place, and from church to church" like the Church Historian and Recorder, ecclesiastical travel was done by appointment and under the direction of those who hold the priesthood keys. As we read in Doctrine and Covenants 132:8, "Behold, mine house is a house of order, saith the Lord God, and not a house of confusion." This is especially true of Church travel. Throughout the Joseph Smith era, the Lord continued to teach and organize his Saints and priesthood holders "line upon line, precept upon precept" (D&C 98:12; 128:21) as he organized his Church. The Lord used a number of revelations to help his

priesthood leaders and holders appreciate their responsibilities to travel (or not) in the early years of the Church.

This close reading of a number of Joseph Smith–era revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, with an emphasis on the concepts of scriptural offices, traveling and standing ministers, and priesthood keys, helps enlarge our understanding of the concluding and oft-quoted verses of the “Revelation on Priesthood.” “Whereas other officers of the church, who belong not unto the Twelve, neither to the Seventy, are not under the responsibility to travel among all nations, but are to travel as their circumstances shall allow, notwithstanding they may hold as high and responsible offices in the church. Wherefore, now let every man learn his duty, and to act [*traveling or standing*] in the office in which he is appointed, in all diligence” (D&C 107:98–99).

Notes

I appreciate the colleagues who reviewed drafts of this essay, including Elder Steven E. Snow, Elder James J. Hamula, Richard E. Turley Jr., Matthew C. Godfrey, Robert J. Woodford, Scott C. Esplin, and R. Mark Melville.

¹ In addition to the landmark print and web publications of the Joseph Smith Papers, the following commentaries proved insightful in my research: Dennis L. Largey, ed., *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012); and Stephen E. Robinson and H. Dean Garrett, *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000–5). Historian Robert John Woodford authored the only short treatments that address the concept of “traveling” and “standing” ministers in the Doctrine and Covenants. “Traveling high council/bishops/elders/high priests/ministers/presiding high council”

and “Standing councils/ministers/presidents,” in *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion*, 657, 627–28.

² Thomas A. Tweed, “Beyond ‘Surreptitious Staring’: Migration, Missions, and the Generativity of Mormonism for the Comparative and Translocative Study of Religion,” *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (2014): 19–21; emphasis in original.

³ Noah Webster, in 1828, defined the verb to “minister” as “to perform service in any office, sacred or secular.” Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), s.v. “minister.” I use the term *ministry* here to indicate the administrative duties ascribed by revelation to specific offices of the priesthood in the Church. This is distinct from the broader command given to some Church officers to preach the gospel on missions.

⁴ Woodford also points out another sense of the word that should be considered in the modern Church: “In another sense, *standing* may also mean ‘permanent’ rather than ‘temporary.’ Historically, there were in the 1830s *traveling* high priests, who could organize into temporary, decision-making councils and then disband ([D&C] 102:24–26). Today, in the early part of the twenty-first century, these duties are among the responsibility of area and mission presidencies.” Woodford, “Standing councils/ministers/presidents,” in *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion*, 628.

⁵ Webster, *American Dictionary*, s.v. “office.”

⁶ For an overview of the ecclesiastical structure of the early Church, see “Church Officers, 1830–1839,” and “Church Officers, 1839–1843,” JosephSmithPapers.org.

⁷ Joseph Smith, History, 1838–1856, vol. B-1, created 1 Oct. 1843–24 Feb. 1845; Church History Library.

⁸ Woodford, “Standing councils/ministers/presidents,” in *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion*, 628; emphasis in original. The idea of “traveling ministers” had broad parallels to the itinerant tradition common to Protestantism during the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening. Despite democratic and lay appearances, the itinerant movement was propped up by denominational institutions like Baptist associations, Methodist conferences, and Presbyterian synods that oversaw evangelization efforts of their itinerants sent to the peripheries. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 274–77. In a reversal of traditional Protestant itinerancy, revelation mandated that the Church’s highest authorities travel and conduct business among branches of the Church.

⁹ After Joseph Smith’s martyrdom in 1844, senior Apostle Brigham Young led the Saints from Nauvoo to Salt Lake City and dictated one more revelation that dealt extensively with travel: Doctrine and Covenants 136 (January 1847). In this case it was “how” the Saints were to travel as the Camp of Israel to the safety of the Rocky Mountains during the Mormon Exodus.

¹⁰ During Joseph Smith’s lifetime, Latter-day Saints did not use the term *auxiliary* as it is employed today Churchwide. Definitions and policies have evolved and, in many cases, sharpened and solidified.

¹¹ Emma Smith, comp., *A Collection of Sacred Hymns, for the Church of the Latter Day Saints* (Kirtland, OH: F. G. Williams & Co., 1835). Her hymnbook was actually published in January 1836. For more information on how Emma Smith’s hymnal impacted the Church, see Nancy J. Andersen, “Mormon Hymnody: Kirtland Roots and Evolutionary Branches,” *Journal of Mormon History* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 145–71.

¹² For more on printing and printers among the Mormons, see David J. Whittaker, “The Rise of the Mormon Press in Ante-Bellum America,” in “Early Mormon Pamphleteering” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1982, reprinted in 2003 by BYU Studies), 1–14.

¹³ Following the services of Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer, along with a number of short time historians, recorders, and clerks, Joseph Smith named Willard Richards Church Historian in 1842 and Church Recorder in 1843. Thereafter, these two roles were generally linked together as a joint Church office. Between 1842 and 1972, the Church Historian (and Recorder) was a member of the First Presidency or Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Richard E. Turley Jr., “Historian, Church,” in *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History*, ed. Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 493–95.

¹⁴ Since the beginning of the world, the Lord has commanded his covenant people to keep a record of their ecclesiastical and personal experiences (Moses 6:5–8). See Marlin K. Jensen, “Making a Case for Church History,” in *Preserving the History of the Latter-day Saints*, ed. Richard E. Turley Jr. and Steven C. Harper (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 1–18.

¹⁵ Richard Lloyd Anderson, “A Brief Biography of Oliver Cowdery,” in *Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness*, ed. John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2006), 4.

¹⁶ Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, eds. *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847*. Vol. 2 of the Histories series of The Joseph Smith Papers, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 36.

¹⁷ For a list of past Church Historian and Recorders since Oliver Cowdery, see Marlin K. Jensen, “Church History: Past, Present, and Future,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 20–42. In 2012, Elder Steven E. Snow succeeded Elder Marlin K. Jensen as Church Historian and Recorder. See Richard E. Bennett and Dana M. Pike, “Start with Faith: A Conversation with Elder Steven E. Snow,” *Religious Educator* 14, no. 3 (2013): 1–11. For a list of past Assistant Church Historians beginning with Wilford Woodruff in 1856, see Richard E. Turley Jr., “Assistant Church Historians and the Publishing of Church History,” in *Preserving the History of the Latter-day Saints*, 19–47. In 2015, Reid L. Neilson was appointed as an Assistant Church Historian and Recorder.

¹⁸ See Richard E. Turley Jr., “Collecting, Preserving, and Sharing the Global History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Later-day Saints,” *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 1 (January 2015): 125–38.

¹⁹ In the past, Church Historian and Recorders, Assistant Church Historian and Recorders, and other staff members of the Church Historian’s Office (today known as the Church History Department) have sought to fulfill this record-keeping commandment to travel Churchwide (D&C 69:7). For examples, see Reid L. Neilson and Mitchell K. Schaefer, “Excavating Early Mormon History: The 1878 History Fact-Finding Mission of Apostles Joseph F. Smith and Orson Pratt,” in *President Joseph F. Smith: Reflections on the Man and His Times*, ed. Craig K. Manscill, Brian D. Reeves, Guy L. Dorius, and J. B. Haws (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 359–78; Reid L. Neilson, Justin R. Bray, and Alan D. Johnson, eds., *Rediscovering the Sites of the Restoration: The 1888 Travel Writings of Mormon Historian Andrew Jenson, Edward Stevenson, and Joseph S. Black* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015); Reid L. Neilson and Riley M. Moffat, eds., *Tales from the World Tour: The 1895–1897 Travel Writings of Mormon Historian Andrew Jenson* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012); Reid L. Neilson, “Around the World a Second Time: The 1912 Travel Writings of Mormon Historian Andrew Jenson,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 45–65; and Reid L. Neilson and Justin R. Bray, eds., *Exploring Book of Mormon Lands: The 1923 Latin American Travel Writings of Mormon Historian Andrew Jenson* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014).

²⁰ Tyson Thorpe, “The Calling and Sustaining of LDS Church Historians and Recorders, 1830–2015,” copy of research paper in author’s possession.

²¹ Tweed, “Beyond ‘Surreptitious Staring,’” 26.