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A Book of Commandments and Revelations: Editorial Introduction to This Special Feature

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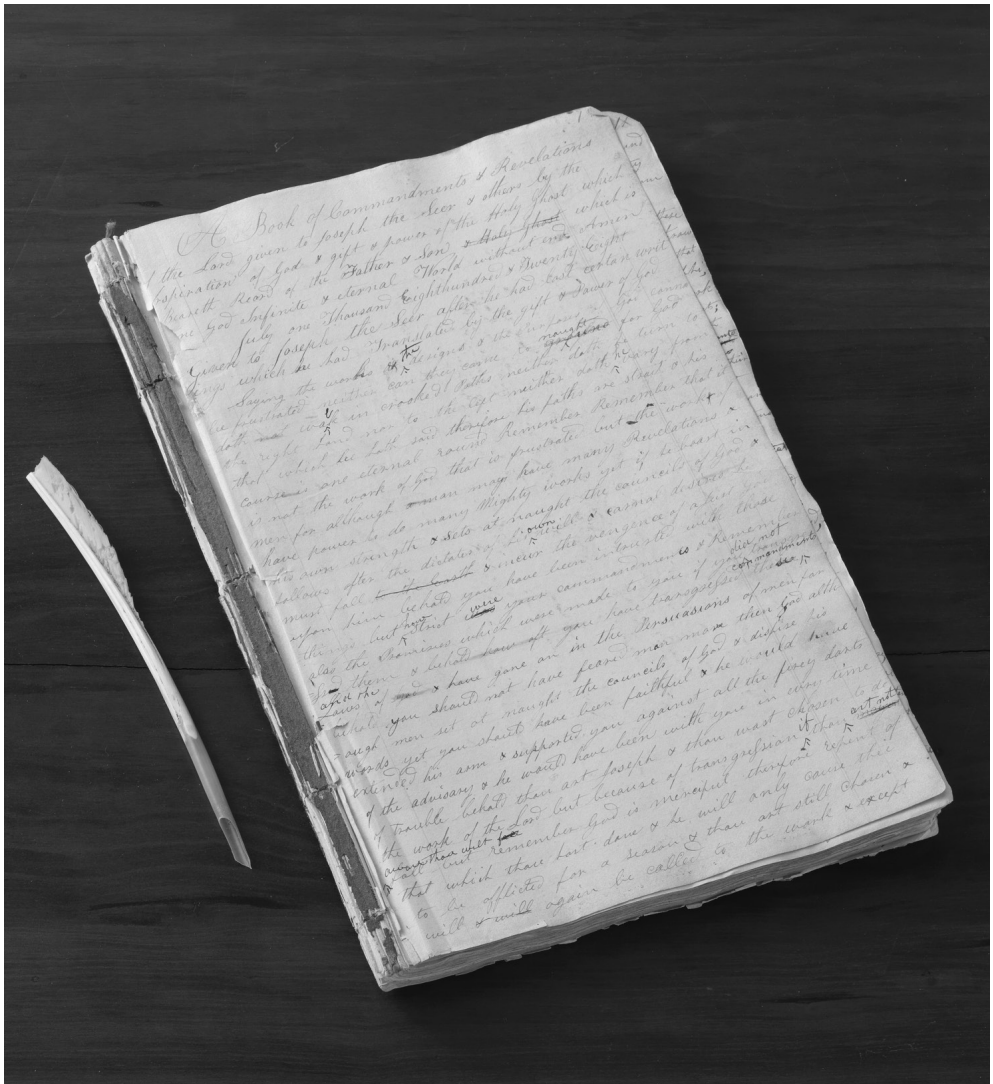
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A Book of Commandments and Revelations, shown here without its replacement cover, contains the earliest surviving manuscript versions of many of Joseph Smith's revelations. Courtesy Church History Library, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

A Book of Commandments and Revelations Editorial Introduction to This Special Feature

John W. Welch

We are very pleased to present in this issue of *BYU Studies* the following illustrated group of papers about the recently published Book of Commandments and Revelations, or the BCR as it is called by those who have prepared it for publication. Having the BCR takes us into the earliest transcriptional stages of revelations from 1829 to 1834 now found in the Doctrine and Covenants. Imagine! For textual scholars, having the BCR is something akin to uncovering a discarded draft of the Declaration of Independence or some of the missing records used by Luke in preparing his gospel.

Shortly after arrangements were finalized in May 2009 for the publication of the BCR, a plenary session about it was held at the Mormon History Association (MHA) meeting in Springfield, Illinois, at which the papers in this special feature were presented. *BYU Studies* thanks the MHA and the Church Historian's Office for making this special feature possible.

As Elder Marlin K. Jensen said in the July 2009 *Ensign*, the BCR "served as the principal source for the 1833 publication of *A Book of Commandments*,"¹ the precursor to the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835. The BCR contains the only surviving early manuscripts of some revelations, as well as a few that are previously unpublished.

This new volume in *The Joseph Smith Papers* is a stunning publication. As said by James Hutson, chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, "This volume is a model of modern documentary editorial practices. Every conceivable device, including color coding of editorial changes, has been used."² No expense has been spared in producing this monumental volume. Its substance will be of enduring value.

On April 6, 1830, the day the Church was organized, the commandment was given that “there shall be a record kept among you” (D&C 21:1). Here we have much of that record. Although it will take years to learn all that this important document can tell us, its value is immediately apparent. The dates and contexts of many revelations become clearer. The editorial care with which commas and periods were added, spellings were corrected, and meanings clarified or adapted all becomes open to view and contemplation. Some sheets contain several such editorial marks, while other pages, especially those at the end of the volume, stand unchanged in pristine condition.

Seeing the actual-sized, high-resolution, color-corrected images of the 210 pages of the BCR puts the viewer in touch with the beginnings of these revelations. Through these impressions, one may see indeed how Joseph Smith was “a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, [and] an elder of the church through the will of God the Father, and the grace of your Lord Jesus Christ” (D&C 21:1).

1. Marlin K. Jensen, “The Joseph Smith Papers: The Manuscript Revelation Books,” *Ensign* 39 (July 2009): 48.

2. From dust jacket (back cover) of Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile edition, first volume of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009).