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Introducing A Book of Commandments and Revelations, A Major New Documentary “Discovery”

Robert J. Woodford

President Gordon B. Hinckley authorized the research of historical documents in possession of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as part of the effort to publish the papers of Joseph Smith. Among these documents was A Book of Commandments and Revelations (referred to hereafter as the BCR),¹ which book proved to be the manuscript collection of revelations Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer took to Missouri in November 1831 from which the Book of Commandments was to be published.² Additional revelations were entered into the volume as they were received, and the BCR was also used as one of the sources for the revelations printed in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C). Hence, the BCR contains the earliest surviving manuscript versions of many of Joseph Smith’s revelations and the only prepublication manuscript copies of some of them. The BCR also contains seven revelations never published as part of the scriptural canon of the Church.³

Except for a few pages in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery, the BCR was written by John Whitmer. Similar to the manuscript of the Book of Mormon, revelations as originally copied into the BCR lacked punctuation, thus indicating the revelations were dictations to the scribes, not written compositions. Many other clues within the volume itself inform us these revelations are copies and not the originals, including the order in which some are placed in the BCR and a few cases in which the revelation is not in the handwriting of the one identified as being the scribe of the original.

Regarding the origin of the BCR, several possibilities have been explored. Researchers for the first two volumes of the documents series of

The Joseph Smith Papers have posited the summer of 1830 as being the time when the BCR was started; that is when the *History of the Church* records Joseph Smith saying, “I began to arrange and copy the revelations, which we had received from time to time; in which I was assisted by John Whitmer, who now resided with me.”⁴ As another possibility, archivists at the Church History Library of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints postulate that John Whitmer began recording in the BCR after he was called by revelation on March 8, 1831, to “write and keep a regular history, and assist you, my servant Joseph, in transcribing all things which shall be given you” (D&C 47:1). Other researchers will want to study the evidence now that the book has become available for their use and weigh in on this issue.

The BCR is probably the document listed as “Rough Book—Revelation History &c.” in the 1846 inventory of historical documents to be shipped across the plains to Utah.⁵ Joseph Fielding Smith, Church Historian from 1921 to 1970, kept the BCR among his papers, and when he became the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1970, the BCR became part of the papers of the First Presidency.

Unfortunately, 26 of the BCR’s 208 pages are missing.⁶ Fortunately, 8 of those pages are in the Community of Christ archives at Independence, Missouri. Those pages were purchased from the Whitmer family at the beginning of the last century and have been commented on by several researchers. A partial index at the end of the BCR provides the information needed to deduce what revelations were included on those pages whose whereabouts are still unknown.

When the BCR was turned over to the Church History Library of the LDS Church in 2005, those in charge of the Joseph Smith Papers Project decided to not announce its existence until basic research about it was accomplished. Senior LDS Church archivist Glenn Rowe was assigned to make a complete typescript of the BCR. This took several months. His work was verified at different stages by *Joseph Smith Papers* editors Robert Woodford, William Hartley, Grant Underwood, and Steven Harper. *Papers* senior editor Dean Jessee and LDS Church archivist Christy Best used their expertise to determine who wrote the basic text and who made the numerous corrections. *Papers* editor and archivist Robin Jensen did the tedious work of making the final verification of the transcribed texts and determining the provenance of the volume.

The complete BCR contained all of the revelations included in the Book of Commandments with the exception of the revelation to Joseph Knight, which is section 12 of the current LDS edition of the D&C.⁷

Because the BCR was taken to Missouri, Church authorities in Kirtland purchased another ledger book in which to continue to record subsequent revelations. This second volume is traditionally known as the

Kirtland Revelation Book, or the KRB. The first revelation in the book is section 76 of the current D&C. Many of the revelations recorded in the KRB were also later added to the BCR as copies were carried or mailed to Missouri, where the BCR was located at the time. Careful text comparisons demonstrate that the revelations published in the 1835 edition of the D&C were taken from both the BCR and the KRB and possibly a few other manuscripts. The BCR contains all of the revelations in the 1835 edition of the D&C except those now known as sections 12, 32, 91, 92, 100 and 102 in the current LDS edition.⁸ Of these, five are found in the KRB, with section 12, the revelation to Joseph Knight, again being the only exception. In addition to those revelations found in the Book of Commandments and the 1835 edition of the D&C, the BCR also contains sections 77, 87, 103, and 105 of the current LDS edition of the D&C.⁹

Publication of the Book of Commandments and the 1835 Edition of the Doctrine and Covenants

Besides the verse numbers added in the BCR that match those in the Book of Commandments, there are other indications in the text showing the BCR was used to publish that book of scripture. One of the more interesting ones is that of the “take mark” made by the printer at the end of each signature. A take mark can best be described as a sideward “u” bracketing the last word or words of a signature. The sheets on which the Book of Commandments was printed were large enough to print sixteen pages on one side, or thirty-two pages in one signature. The signature was then folded four times, sewn to the backing, and the other three sides trimmed. Thirty-two pages then fell into their proper order. Five signatures of the Book of Commandments were finished, and they were probably setting the type for, or even beginning to print, the sixth when antagonists destroyed the printing press on July 20, 1833. The first signature ends with the words “fulness of my gospel from the,” found in what is now D&C 14:10. The page from the BCR on which those words would be found, page 17 or 18, is missing; thus we have no take mark. The second signature ends with the words, “may naturally” from what is now D&C 29:33. They are on page 39 of the BCR, fourth line from the top of the page, and are bracketed with the printer’s take mark. For whatever reason, the last words of the third signature, “may not be,” from what is now D&C 43:6 on the second line of page 68 of the BCR, are not bracketed, but “contrite,” from what is now D&C 54:3, found in the middle of page 90 of the BCR, is bracketed with a take mark, thus signaling the end of the fourth signature. Finally, “Ephraim” at the end of the fifth signature, from D&C 64:36, found on the eighth line of page 111 of the BCR, is bracketed with a take mark.¹⁰

After the BCR was brought back from Missouri, both the BCR and the KRB were used in publishing the revelations in the 1835 edition of the D&C. In the BCR, there are corrections to some of the revelations that match those in the 1835 edition. Also, some revelations have numbers inserted matching the verse numbers of that edition, and several of the later revelations in the BCR have paragraphs that match those in the 1835 D&C.

Future Access to A Book of Commandments and Revelations

Scholars will want to know about the availability of the BCR for research. The first volume of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* contains the complete text as well as that of the KRB. This volume was released on September 22, 2009.

The BCR is a very fragile document; thus, when the editors of *The Joseph Smith Papers* counseled together as to the best format for publishing the BCR, they gave serious consideration to the fact that it would not sustain constant handling by researchers. A typescript of the document would not satisfy the situation since scholars would need to check the typescript against the original if their research were to have validity. With this in mind, the editors decided on the following configuration. Each page of both the BCR and the KRB was photographed and placed in the volume (see fig. 1). The camera and lens used to do this are the finest available, and the images are extremely clear and in color. The format of the book is also larger so there is not a great reduction in size from the BCR and the KRB. Thus researchers will have little or no need to consult the originals.

A second text in the book is a typescript (see fig. 2) that has been verified at least three times. Additions, deletions, alterations, and corrections are all included. Each page of text is on the opposing page of the photographic facsimile. Researchers can instantly check on words and phrases in the original that may be hard to read. Importantly, the handwriting of most of the scribes who made alterations to the text has been identified, and the researcher will know who made a specific change by the color of the alteration. For example, corrections by William W. Phelps are in cyan, John Whitmer, green, and Sidney Rigdon, blue.

The first two volumes of the Documents Series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* will also contain most of the text of the BCR but in a much different format. All of the later alterations are stripped away so that only the original remains. These two volumes in the Documents Series contain all of the revelations dated before 1834, plus letters, certificates, minutes of meetings, and other extraneous documents. Where it can be demonstrated that the BCR or the KRB has the earliest manuscript of a revelation, that particular

one is the featured text. There are a few manuscripts of revelations that are earlier than those in these two volumes, mostly from the Newel K. Whitney collection at Brigham Young University and a few in the collection at the Church History Library. Any major departure from the featured text that is found in the BCR, the KRB, or published versions of the revelations is footnoted.

Future Research

If just one manuscript of a revelation had been found that was definitely the earliest known for that revelation, it would be heralded as a major find, but the BCR has over one hundred revelations, many of which are the earliest or the only manuscripts. This is probably the most important document in the Church History Library other than manuscripts of the Book of Mormon. Thus it opens up exciting possibilities for additional research on Joseph Smith and the revelations he received. The work that has already been accomplished is sufficient to launch the volume into the arena, but there is much left to be done. The insights and the conclusions of others who research any part or all of the BCR in depth will provide interesting reading for some time to come. Following are a few topics that may generate a great deal of interest.

- Alterations made in the revelations have many historical and theological implications. The reasons for editing revelations are almost as numerous as the changes themselves. With the BCR, we now have an assemblage of some of the earliest alterations, and we gain new insight as to when and in whose hand the changes were made.

- Several researchers over the years have written about the attempt to sell the copyright of the Book of Mormon in Canada. David Whitmer was critical of the failure to sell it, and later in life he wrote:

[Joseph Smith] received a revelation that some of the brethren should go to Toronto, Canada, and that they would sell the copyright of the Book of Mormon. Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery went to Toronto on this mission, but they failed entirely to sell the copyright, returning without any money. Joseph was at my father's house when they returned. I was there also, and am an eye witness to these facts. Jacob Whitmer and John Whitmer were also present when Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery returned from Canada. Well, we were all in great trouble; and we asked Joseph how it was that he had received a revelation from the Lord for some brethren to go to Toronto and sell the copyright, and the brethren had utterly failed in their undertaking.¹¹

This revelation is not found in any of the literature of the Church, and so researchers have only been able to write about this event with the main piece of the puzzle missing. But the revelation is in the BCR, and now they

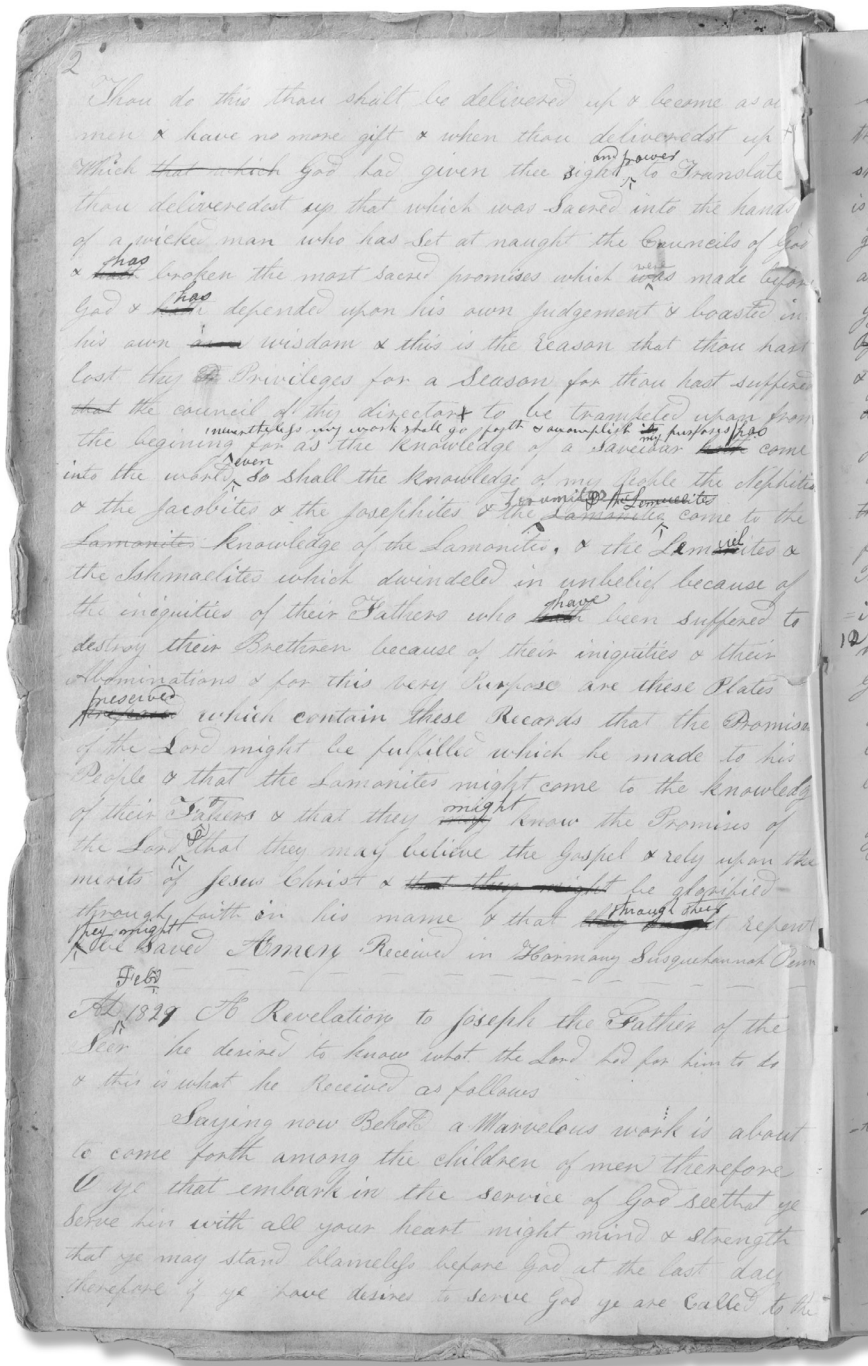


FIG. 1. Photograph of page 2 in the Book of Commandments and Revelations as published on page 10 of the first volume of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*.

2 [verso]

Thou do this thou shalt be delivered up & become as other
 men & have no more gift & when thou deliverdest up that
 Which that-which God had given thee ^{and power} [r]s]ight to Translate
 thou deliverdest up that which was Sacred into the hands
 of a wicked man who has Set at naught the Councils of God
 & hath broken the most Sacred promises which ^{were} was made before
 God & hath depended upon his own Judgement & boasted in
 his own ~~own~~ wisdom & this is the reason that thou hast
 lost thy ~~Pr~~ Privileges for a Season for thou hast suffered
 that the council of thy directors to be tramped upon from
 nevertheless my work shall go forth & accomplish ~~its~~ (my) purposes /⁶ has
 the beginning ^{even} for as the knowledge of a Saveiour hath come
 into the world so shall the knowledge of my People the Nephiti[s]es
 & the Jacobites & the Josephites & the Lamanites ^{Zoramites & the Lemuelites} come to the
 Lamanites knowledge of the Lamanites, & the L[ame]manites &
 the Ishmaelites which dwinded in unbelief because of
 the iniquities of their Fathers who ^{have} hath been suffered to
 destroy their Brethren because of their iniquities & their
 Abominations & for this very Purpose are these Plates
^{preserved} prepared which contain these Records that the Promises
 of the Lord might be fulfilled which he made to his
 People & that the Lamanites might come to the knowledge
 of their Fahers & that they ^t may ^{might} know the Promises of
 the Lord that they may believe the Gospel & rely upon the
 merits of Jesus Christ & that ~~they~~ might be glorified
 through faith [i]o}n his name & that ^{through their} they might repent
 & be Saved Amen Received in Harmony Susquehannah Penn

Feb^r
 ♦ AD 182[8\9] A Revelation to Joseph [Smith Sr.] the Father of the
 Seer he desired to know what the Lord had for him to do
 & this is what he Received as follows

Saying now Behold a Marvelous work is about
 to come forth among the children of men therefore
 O ye that embark in the service of God see that ye
 Serve him with all your heart might mind & Strength
 that ye may stand blameless before God at the last day
 therefore if ye have desires to serve God ye are Called to the [pages 3–10 missing]

REVELATION BOOK 1

July 1828 [D&C 3]
 February 1829 [D&C 4]

ORIGINAL INSCRIPTION
 John Whitmer

REVISIONS
 Oliver Cowdery
 William W. Phelps
 Sidney Rigdon
Joseph Smith
 John Whitmer
 Unidentified

4. Two layers of deletion:
 first layer by John Whitmer at
 the time of original inscrip-
 tion and second layer by
 Sidney Rigdon.

5. "Pro" wipe-erased and
 then stricken.

6. Sidney Rigdon inserted
 "r" to separate insertions in
 the manuscript.

FIG. 2. Typescript of BCR page 2 as it appears on page 11 of the first volume of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*.

can examine the revelation for any additional evidence to either justify their conclusions or to adjust their arguments.¹²

- Orson Pratt's reference in 1855 to a revelation on the name of God in the pure language has been the basis for numerous articles wherein the words *Ahman*, *Son Ahman*, and *Adam-on-di-Ahman* have been discussed.¹³ Now that we have a source in the BCR, additional research may make a valuable contribution.¹⁴

- The dates of the reception of many of the revelations are given more precisely in the BCR than in other sources. Several of these dates have the potential of changing our views concerning some events in Church history. The same is also true of a few of the places at which revelations were received. For example, those who have used the dates and location found in the Book of Commandments for what are now D&C 21 and 23¹⁵ as part of their argument for placing the organization of the Church at Manchester instead of Fayette may need to rethink their conclusions based on what is found in the BCR.¹⁶

One revelation, D&C 74 in the current edition,¹⁷ is dated almost thirteen months earlier in the BCR than elsewhere, and the site at which it was revealed is given as Wayne County, New York, rather than Hiram, Ohio.¹⁸ Our suppositions about it being revealed as part of Joseph Smith's work on the JST will now need to be reexamined.

- Some of the headings to the revelations in the BCR also need to be studied. The introduction to D&C 29 in the BCR indicates the revelation was given to settle differences of opinion concerning the transgression of Adam.¹⁹ The heading in the BCR of D&C 41 includes an invitation from Leman Copley to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon to reside at Thompson.²⁰ This places him on the scene at Kirtland earlier than other records indicate. And the heading to D&C 61 calls the Missouri River the "River Distruction."²¹ This may give us different insights into the revelation itself.²²

- The testimony of the witnesses of the Book of Commandments, which is found in the BCR,²³ is also a subject for further research. It is supposed that this testimony was intended to be placed at the end of the Book of Commandments as were the testimonies of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon in the 1830 edition. Since the book was unfinished, the testimony was not published, but it was included in the introduction to the D&C from 1921 until 1980, when it was finally removed. In the BCR, the testimony is recorded as a revelation and has the names of six of the men attending the November 1831 conference listed at the end of it. What is unusual is that five of those names are in the handwriting of John Whitmer. This raises the question as to why they did not sign for themselves. Also unusual is that only some of the men attending the conference have their names attached. Why did not the others also sign? It is interesting that all those

who did not sign were witnesses for the Book of Mormon. Is that of any significance? An additional twelve men, who were not at the conference, also later signed the document. We know that all but one of them attended a conference in Missouri in January 1832 at which Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer were also in attendance. Cowdery and Whitmer had the BCR with them, and so this is the most likely occasion for them to sign. The last person to sign was Thomas B. Marsh, and it is not certain when he endorsed it. What is the significance of these other men signing?

- There are two basic sources reporting the events of the conference of high priests in November 1831 that authorized the publication of the revelations. One is found in the *History of the Church* and the other in the *Far West Record*.²⁴ When compared, there is some variation in the order of events and other details related to this conference. The BCR includes all the revelations received at the conference with the precise dates they were received. Since the BCR is the earliest source for these revelations and predates by several years both of the other two records cited above, a better reconstruction of the events is now possible.

- It is frustrating that the first three pages in the BCR for D&C 10 are missing from the volume.²⁵ Since there has been considerable discussion over the years as to the correct date this revelation was received, it would have been a valuable piece of information to have the precise date given in the BCR. However, the index at the back of the BCR places this revelation among those received in April of 1829, which is not one of the dates given in other sources. The editors of volume 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* have accepted April 1829 as the correct date it was written, which sheds some interesting new perspectives concerning the revelation and the events occurring when it was written.²⁶

- One final illustration will suffice. Seven revelations in the BCR each have a number in parentheses inserted at the beginning of the revelation, as follows: D&C 68 (“N° 1”), 65 (“N° 3”), 67 (“N° 4”), 70 (“N° 5”), 57 (“N° 6”), 69 (“N° 7”), and 73 (“N° 8”).²⁷ There is none with the number 2. We have not been able to determine the purpose of these numbers but have discovered in the 1835 edition of the D&C they are sections 22 and 24 through 29, and they are in the same order as the numbers, with what is now D&C 51 in the place where a number 2 would be found between D&C 68 and 65.²⁸ We question why these were the only ones so numbered and if there is some common thread running through these that we have not been able to discover that would cause them to be grouped as they are. Someone out there may be able to see what we have failed to see and shed additional light on this matter.

Conclusion

There are many other topics that could be mentioned, but now that the BCR is available, each researcher will find his own area of particular interest. Scholars who have examined available documents for this period of Church history will welcome the additional vistas the BCR opens to their view. It is with great pleasure that we now introduce this volume to you. We look forward to years of continued research into the document and discussion about its contents that will help us come closer to the people and events of that day.

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1. This short title has been accepted and used by those who have done research on the document to date. In *The Joseph Smith Papers*, the BCR is also titled Revelation Book 1, and its companion volume, commonly known as the Kirtland Revelation Book or the KRB, is titled Revelation Book 2. KRB is also used in this article. Other abbreviations include D&C for the Doctrine and Covenants, LDS for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, JST for the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, and CoC for the Community of Christ, formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. *The Joseph Smith Papers* are also referred to as Papers.

2. The formal title of the book is A Book of Commandments for the Government of the Church of Christ.

3. These seven revelations include the following BCR pages (original manuscript pagination used throughout):

- 23–24 (the “articles of the Church of Christ,” which is incomplete in the BCR, but there is a complete copy in the Church History Library that has been published in Scott H. Faulring, “An Examination of the 1829 ‘Articles of the Church of Christ’ in Relation to Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants,” *BYU Studies* 43, no. 4 [2004]: 57–91; transcription on pages 76–79);
- 30–31 (the “Canadian Copyright” revelation, which has never before been published);
- 85 (a revelation to Joseph Smith Sr. and Ezra Thayre, which is also in KRB, 91–92);
- 121 (testimony of the witnesses of the Book of Commandments, which was published in the introduction to the D&C from 1921 to 1980 but never as a revelation; it is listed in the BCR as a revelation to Joseph Smith);
- 144 (“A Sample of Pure Language,” commented on by Orson Pratt, but never before published);
- 148 (a revelation concerning the purchase of paper for printing the Book of Commandments, also found in KRB, 19); and
- 198 (a revelation on the United Firm, also found in KRB, 111).

4. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:104.

5. Church Historian's Office inventory, 1846, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

6. The missing pages unaccounted for and therefore not published in volume 1 of the Revelations and Translations series of the *Joseph Smith Papers* are 3–10, 15–22, and 25–26; pages in possession of the Community of Christ but included in the *Joseph Smith Papers* volume are 111–12, 117–20, and 139–40.

7. This is section 11 in the Community of Christ (CoC) D&C. There is no known manuscript of this revelation, and the Book of Commandments is the earliest source for it.

8. These are sections 11, 31, 88, 89, 97, and 99 in the CoC D&C.

9. The CoC D&C does not have the first two of these, but D&C 103 and 105 are sections 100 and 102 in that volume.

10. The references in this paragraph for the CoC D&C are: first signature, D&C 12:5b; second, D&C 28:8e; third, D&C 43:2b; fourth, D&C 54:1b; fifth, D&C 64:7b.

11. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ by a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Richmond, Mo.: David Whitmer, 1887), 40.

12. Book of Commandments and Revelations, Church History Library, 30–31.

13. Orson Pratt, "The Holy Spirit and the Godhead," in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 2:342–43 (Feb. 18, 1855).

14. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 144.

15. Sections 19 and 21 in the CoC D&C.

16. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 28–30. See pages 57–59 herein.

17. Also section 74 in the CoC D&C.

18. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 60.

19. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 36.

20. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 61.

21. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 101.

22. The sections in this paragraph are sections 28, 41, and 61 in the CoC D&C.

23. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 121.

24. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:221–37. Far West Record, 15–19, Church History Library; see also Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 26–32.

25. Section 3 in the CoC D&C.

26. 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), 11–13. The 6th Commandment (D&C 8), which follows the revelation now known as D&C 10 in the BCR, is dated April 1829, as are the 7th Commandment (D&C 7) and the 8th Commandment (D&C 9). Other sources give May 1829 or summer 1828 as the date of D&C 10; see pages 56–57 herein.

27. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 113, 112, 114, 124, 93, 122, 146.

28. These are the same section numbers in the CoC D&C.