Historical Headnotes and the Index of Contents in the Book of Commandments and Revelations

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The Book of Commandments and Revelations (BCR) will have an immense influence on the scholarly study of early Mormon revelations. It will reaffirm many former conclusions and undermine others. It will answer some heretofore unanswered questions, invite some we have not yet thought to ask, and cause us to reassess those to which we already (thought we) knew the answers. The purpose of this essay is not to finish the reassessment but to encourage it by orienting readers to two important features of the BCR: its index of contents and its historical headnotes. I will then conclude with an assessment of the BCR in light of the November 1831 Hiram, Ohio, conference where its publication was planned.

John Whitmer began to compile “The Index of the contents of this Book” in the back, on pages 207–8 (figs. 1 and 2). It covers only the book’s first 94 pages, slightly fewer than half, and only a few more than half (58) of the book’s 104 revelations, ending in the summer of 1831. Whitmer listed the year in the left column, a title for each revelation in the center column, and the beginning page number in the far right column of his index of contents. We can discern much from these data. Whitmer recorded several of the revelations in a different order than they appear in the Doctrine and Covenants. In some instances, it is obvious that he was not recording the revelations in their order of receipt. In other instances, particularly the earliest revelations, Whitmer’s order of recording reflects a chronology of some events that differs from what has been assumed to be the historical order. Several pages of the BCR are missing, but in some instances the index of contents tells us what they recorded. And Whitmer’s titles provide occasional clues to the identities of revelation recipients or ways early saints understood revelations.
Figs. 1 and 2. “The Index of the contents of this Book,” found on pages 207 and 208
of the Book of Commandments and Revelations. Courtesy Church History Library, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
From the very beginning of the BCR, with few exceptions, John Whitmer began his entry of each revelation with a title line that often assigned a number to each commandment (as he called most of them) and dated its receipt (as in “6th Commandment AD 1829,” or “42nd Commandment Rec’d Jan. 5th. 1831”). Whitmer then usually penned a brief preface identifying the person or subject the commandment addressed. Though I wish John Whitmer had recorded much, much more, his terse prefaces are invaluable. They reveal heretofore unknown dates, places, chronologies, intentions, causes and effects, and meanings. Often they simply reaffirm later sources, but in doing so they give us increased confidence in those sources and in some cases inform our interpretations of them. Occasionally the headnotes challenge later sources. Always the headnotes help us understand how the earliest Mormons and others related to and understood these revelations. One of Ezra Booth’s nine controversial letters to Reverend Ira Eddy, published in fall 1831 in the Ohio Star, emphasizes how important the revelations were to the early Saints and in doing so mentioned that Booth had a copy of what he called the “27th commandment to Emma my daughter in Zion,” a reference that has puzzled scholars. That is the number John Whitmer gave to the July 1830 revelation to Emma Smith (D&C 25). Ezra Booth was right about the fundamental importance of the revelations in early Mormonism, and it appears that he had, as his evidence, drawn on the BCR.

John Whitmer’s historical headnotes are unique to the BCR. The other revelation manuscript book (Revelation Book 2 or Kirtland Revelation Book) has nothing comparable. By consciously capturing context, Whitmer was perhaps acting on a revelation to him, which he copied onto pages 79–80. He introduced this text as “50th Commandment March 8th 1831,” then noted that it came because he was reluctant to write without a revelation commissioning him to do so. This revelation made it expedient for Whitmer to “write and keep a regular history” even as he assisted Joseph in transcribing revelations and the revised Bible. The headnotes and the index date several revelations for which we either had no specific date or have accepted a different date. For instance, Whitmer’s index of contents says that Joseph received in 1829 the revelation telling him not to retranslate the contents of the lost manuscript (D&C 10). Joseph’s manuscript history, the 1833 Book of Commandments, and 1835 Doctrine and Covenants date this revelation May 1829. But Joseph’s later history implies that the revelation came “a few days” after the summer 1828 revelation that rebuked Joseph for mishandling the manuscript (D&C 3). When Assistant Church Historian B. H. Roberts edited Joseph’s history in the twentieth century, he chose to disregard the 1829 date and accept the implied chronology of
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Joseph’s history, thus dating the revelation to summer 1828. Consequently, the current Doctrine and Covenants lists the date as 1828, but the BCR confirms that 1829 was the correct year after all.

Another significant chronological contribution of the BCR is Whitmer’s preface to the text he titled “Church Articles & Covenants,” Doctrine and Covenants section 20, which he dated April 10, 1830, four days after the Church’s organization on April 6 (fig. 3). In my judgment, the fact that this text was written after, not on or before April 6, strengthens the argument that its introduction is not necessarily revealing, as some have argued, the day and year of Christ’s birth. It also explains in part why we have no record of the Saints giving common consent to section 20 on April 6, but rather at the Church’s June conference.

John Whitmer wrote that the 17th commandment, revealed on April 6, 1830, was “A Revelation to Joseph the Seer by way of commandment to the Church given at Fayette Seneca County State of New York.” The 1833 Book of Commandments, heretofore the earliest source available,
located this revelation in Manchester, New York. Wesley Walters and Michael Marquardt thus argued that the traditional story of the Church’s founding in Fayette, New York, lacked foundation in the historical record. But in this case, tradition and the historical record match very well. The BCR gives Manchester as the location for a series of revelations addressed to Oliver Cowdery, Hyrum Smith, Joseph Smith Sr., Samuel Smith, and Joseph Knight (now combined into D&C 23). However, it gives Fayette as the location and April 6, 1830, as the date of the revelation that calls for a record to be kept and for Joseph and Oliver Cowdery to be ordained as the Church’s leading elders (D&C 21). Moreover, in the manuscript BCR, as in the most recent edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, this revelation precedes the several short ones (D&C 23; fig. 4). But for some reason, the published Book of Commandments (1833) put these revelations ahead of the April 6 revelation that precedes them in the BCR. It dates all of them April 6, though none of the short, personal texts is so specifically dated in the manuscript. The one to Oliver Cowdery is dated only to the month of April and all the others only to the year 1830. All were received in Manchester.11 Apparently in the process of printing the BCR, William Phelps or his associates changed the order of the revelations and confused or conflated their dates and places. Whatever happened, it is clear that the
earliest available source, the BCR, reaffirms Joseph’s later history in its explicit account of the Church being organized on Tuesday, April 6, 1830, at the Whitmer home in Fayette, New York. 12

John Whitmer did not date the “Explanation of the Epistle to the first Corinthians 7 Chapter & 14th verse,” now Doctrine and Covenants section 74, but he located it in Wayne County, New York, and copied it between a January 1831 revelation received in Fayette, New York, and a February 1831 revelation in Kirtland, Ohio. 13 Joseph’s later history, penned by Willard Richards, positioned the receipt of this revelation in January 1832 in Hiram, Ohio, and said it grew out of his New Translation of the Bible. 14 Whitmer’s context for this revelation, by contrast, predates Joseph’s revision of the New Testament and, by a few days at least, his move to Ohio.

Some of the most significant contributions of Whitmer’s headnotes come in the form of short statements that follow the date and place. These sometimes give details about the revelations that were previously unknown. Of all these, I am most excited about Whitmer’s historical heading for the September 1830 revelation he called the “29th Commandment,” which, conveniently, is D&C section 29 in the most recent LDS edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (fig. 5). Whitmer calls this “A Revelation to

![Fig. 5. John Whitmer’s headnote to what is now D&C 29, a portion of page 36 of the BCR. Courtesy Church History Library, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.](image-url)
six {elders/els/Elders} of the Church & three members they understood from Holy Writ that the time had come <that> the People of God should see eye to eye & they seeing somewhat different upon the death of Adam (that is his transgression) therefor they made it a subject of Prayer & enquired of the Lord & thus came the word of the Lord through Joseph the Seer <saying given> At Fayette Seneca County State of New York.”

I do not know of any other source that relates the reason why this revelation was given. But helping us see that this revelation answers a direct question about the nature of the Fall is only one of the BCR’s contributions. It portrays a fledgling church, not yet six months old. It captures a snapshot of early Saints, more theologically attuned, perhaps, than we have imagined them. It shows them reflecting the array of doctrinal opinions that was characteristic of their culture. And then it highlights for us a particularly Mormon response to that culture: namely, acting on the idea that they could unite in prayer, inquire of the Lord, and then listen as their twenty-four-year-old seer dictated scripture. “Listen to the voice of Jesus Christ your Redeemer,” the revelation begins. And they believed it. They captured the words and copied them into the BCR.

Whitmer’s headings sometimes emphasize cause and effect. For example, he wrote that the first revelation he transcribed, D&C 3, was “Given to Joseph the Seer after he had lost certain writings which he had Translated by the gift & Power of God.” That is not novel information, but Whitmer’s particular casting of it emphasizes that the revelation came because Joseph had lost the manuscript. Another example showing how Whitmer’s headings document the reasons for a revelation is his note on the May 9, 1831, revelation (D&C 50). He described this one as “A Revelation to the Elders of this Church given at Kirtland geauga Ohio in consequence of their not being perfectly acquainted with the different operations of the Spirits which are abroad in the Earth.” Whitmer later wrote a fuller description of what he meant, as did others. The later statements are more descriptive of what Whitmer called the “operations of the Spirits,” but do not surpass this earlier note on the relationship between the issue at hand and the revelation given to address it.

The March 1831 revelation through Joseph to John Whitmer is another example of linking historical context to revelation. Whitmer wrote that it was “Given at Kirtland Geauga Ohio = given to John in consequence of not <being> feeling reconciled to write at the request of Joseph without a commandment &c.” At some point an unidentified scribe crossed out all but the location and name of the recipient. Even so, Whitmer’s rationale for the revelation matches chapter 6 of his later history. There he explained that Joseph “said unto me you must . . . keep the Church history.” Whitmer
responded, “I would rather not do it but observed the will of the Lord be done, and if he desires it, I desire that he would manifest it through Joseph the Seer. And thus came the word of the Lord.”

The partial index of contents John Whitmer entered at the end of the BCR contains some information found in no other known Mormon-related documents. Joseph’s first known 1831 revelation invited a man named James Covill to receive the gospel covenant. Within days another revelation came, explaining to Joseph and Sidney Rigdon why Covill “rejected the word of the Lord, and returned to his former principles and people.” These events took place before Joseph began keeping a journal and after Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer, who served as the Church’s earliest clerks and chroniclers, had left New York for Missouri and Ohio, respectively. In other words, the events were not documented until nearly a decade later as Joseph and his clerks compiled this part of his history from their fallible memories.

Joseph’s history says that soon after the January 1831 Church conference at Fayette, New York, “a man came to me by the name of James Covill, who had been a Baptist minister for about forty years, and covenanted with the Lord that he would obey any command that the Lord would give to him through me, as His servant, and I received” the revelation for Covill. The index of contents lists the early 1831 text as “A Revelation to James a Methodist Priest.” With that little bit of knowledge, historian Sherilyn Farnes found a James Covel in Methodist records beginning in 1791, forty years prior to the revelation. That year, Methodists appointed him as a traveling preacher on the Litchfield, Connecticut, circuit. He rode various Methodist circuits for four years as an itinerant preacher. Then, in 1795, James married Sarah Gould, the daughter of a Methodist preacher. He rode the Lynn, Massachusetts, circuit for a year before he “located.” He settled, raised a family, and apparently practiced medicine but largely dropped out of the Methodist records. Sarah and James had a son, a namesake, James Jr., who followed his father into the Methodist ministry. The Covels moved to Maine, then to Poughkeepsie, New York, around 1808. It is not clear where they were when they heard of Mormonism about 1830, but most likely still somewhere in New York. We would not know any of that if Whitmer had failed to accurately capture Covill’s denomination in his index of contents. Moreover, we can see from this evidence that historical memories, including Joseph’s, are neither totally fallible nor completely accurate. Rather, historical memories are sometimes fallible and sometimes accurate and often a mixture of both.

To read the BCR is to be not quite present at the creation, but it is awfully close. It transports us back in time to a series of council meetings.
convened in the Hiram, Ohio, home of John and Elsa Johnson. The BCR was there. In fact, it was the reason for the meetings. Conscious of the costs and controversy of such an audacious enterprise, the council nonetheless determined to publish ten thousand copies of it. They must have recognized how their decision might appear to outsiders. A poorly educated, twenty-six-year-old farmer planned to publish revelations that unequivocally declared themselves to be the words of Jesus Christ. The revelations called the neighbors idolatrous and the Missourians enemies, commanded them all to repent, and foretold calamities upon those who continued in wickedness. Moreover, the revelations were not properly punctuated, the orthography was haphazard, and the grammar was inconsistent. Reflecting on this council, Joseph later called it an “awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord.”

Joseph’s later history says that a discussion ensued “concerning Revelations and language.” The discussion led to a revelation that invited the members of the council to confirm their faith in the BCR, which must have been present in the room, by attempting to duplicate one of the revelation texts. Joseph’s later history says that William McLellin tried but failed. The revelation that proposed this experiment promised condemnation to any who refused to testify that the revelations were true after failing to convincingly counterfeit one of them. The minutes of this council record that “a number of the brethren arose and said that they were willing to testify to the world that they knew that they [the revelations in the BCR] were of the Lord,” and also that Joseph then received by revelation the wording of that testimony. That revelation is not in the council minutes. The only known text of it is on page 121 of the BCR (fig. 6). Whitmer headed it as “The Testimony of the witnesses to the Book of the Lords commandments which he gave to his church through Joseph Smith Jr who was appointed by the voice of the Church for this purpose.” It reads, in part, “We the undersigners feel willing to bear testimony to all the world of mankind to every creature upon all the face of all the Earth upon the Islands of the Sea that god hath born record to our souls through the Holy Ghost shed forth upon us that these commandments are given by inspiration of God & are profitable for all men & are verily true we give this testimony unto the world the Lord being our helper.” McLellin signed along with four others, and John Whitmer copied the revelation and their signatures into the BCR; he subsequently entered the revelation instructing him to accompany Oliver Cowdery to Missouri with the BCR and money
Fig. 6. Book of Commandments and Revelations, page 121, which contains the only known manuscript of the testimony of the witnesses to the book of the Lord’s commandments, presumably a transcription of the original document. John Whitmer transcribed the first six signatures in the right-hand column. The remaining twelve signatures were added later. Note Levi Hancock’s penciled notation “never to be erased” next to his signature. Courtesy Church History Library, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
to print it (D&C 69). Twenty more elders signed the statement in Missouri when the book arrived there for printing.

Joseph undoubtedly appreciated these testimonies. On November 2, 1831, after listening to his associates “witness to the truth of the Book of Commandments,” Joseph “arose & expressed his feelings & gratitude.” He knew what was at stake. He felt imprisoned by what he called the “totel darkness of paper pen and ink.” He readily acknowledged that the revelation texts were imperfect. So did his brethren. At the end of the council, they appointed him to edit them for publication as he felt inspired to do so.

This history highlights the way Joseph and many of his followers conceived of the revelations in the BCR. In his mind, there was a distinction between the veracity of a revelation and the “crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language” in which it was recorded. At least some of the men in the November 1831 council meetings knew Joseph intimately, knew his literary limits, his imperfections, and thought that his expressions could be improved. These were the very same men who felt willing to publicly proclaim the revelations’ divinity and who obeyed them at considerable inconvenience to themselves. They discerned a difference between Joseph the farmer and Joseph the Seer, even when they could see evidence of both in the texts of his revelations on the pages of the Book of Commandments and Revelations.

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1. Book of Commandments and Revelations, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, 12, 58. Original manuscript pagination used throughout.

2. For Joseph Smith’s 1838 dissatisfaction with John Whitmer as a historian, see Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon to John Whitmer, April 9, 1838, Joseph Smith Papers, Journals, Church History Library.


5. Manuscript History, Book A-1, p. 11, Church History Library; A Book of Commandments (1833), 22; Doctrine and Covenants (1835), 163.


9. Far West Record, June 9, 1830, 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), 1.


17. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 82.


25. Far West Record, November 1, 1831; see also Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 27.


28. Far West Record, November 1, 1831; see also Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 27; *History of the Church*, 1:226.
29. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 121–22. No original is known. In the Book of Commandments and Revelations, page 121, the signatures of those who signed in Ohio are all in the hand of John Whitmer.

30. Far West Record, November 2, 1831; see also Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 28.


32. Far West Record, 1–13, November 8, 1831; see also Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 29.
