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# Revelation, Text, and Revision

## Insight from the Book of Commandments and Revelations

*Grant Underwood*

The purpose of this essay is to explore how the textual revisions preserved in the Book of Commandments and Revelations (BCR) shed important light on the process by which Joseph Smith received, recorded, and published his revelations. A few definitional comments may be helpful at the outset. First, Joseph tended to use the term *revelation(s)* in a more focused manner than was common in the formal Christian theology of his day. In his own way, the Prophet did affirm, as Christian thinkers had for centuries, that God revealed himself to the world—that he manifested his character and attributes—in his Son Jesus Christ; in the created, natural order; and in his acts and deeds in human history. However, Joseph primarily used the word *revelation(s)* to refer to the verbal messages God communicated to human beings. Scholars of religion sometimes call this aspect of revelation “propositional” or “doctrinal” because it represents a “setting forth” (an older meaning of *proposition*) of the divine word or will, the disclosing of divine truths or teachings (the meaning of the Latin *doctrina*).<sup>1</sup> Another introductory observation is that throughout this essay I use the phrase *revelation texts*, rather than just *revelations*, to preserve a distinction commonly made in the academic study of scripture between the inner experience of divine revelation and the articulation as text of that divine disclosure.<sup>2</sup>

### Textual Revisions in the BCR

It has long been recognized that between publication in the 1833 Book of Commandments and the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants certain revelation texts were revised. Less well known is that those texts were also edited

prior to publication in the Book of Commandments or *The Evening and the Morning Star*.<sup>3</sup> What has been entirely unknown, however, until the BCR became available, is the *extent* of those earliest revisions. Literally hundreds of redactions, usually involving only a word or two but sometimes comprising an entire phrase, were inscribed in the BCR between 1831 and 1833. A corollary contribution of the BCR, therefore, is the possibility of seeing the wording behind the revisions. For dozens of revelation texts, this provides the earliest wording now extant. While we cannot be certain that the unrevised wording of the revelation texts in the BCR, or any other prepublication manuscript for that matter, corresponds exactly to the texts of the revelations as Joseph Smith originally dictated them, they appear to be very close.

The strongest support for this conclusion rests on comparison of the BCR with other early revelation manuscripts. For the revelation texts known to early Saints as “Articles and Covenants” (LDS D&C 20/CoC D&C 17) and “the Law” (D&C 42 in both editions<sup>4</sup>), a half dozen pre-1832 versions have survived, and in nearly every instance they all agree with the unrevised BCR in wording. Thus, either each was copied from some now lost urtext that had already been revised, or, as seems more likely, especially because in some cases the time lag from initial dictation to transcription into these sources was very short, the consensus wording of these earliest versions is probably very close to the original. Should additional confirmed dictation texts of a revelation someday turn up (and here it should be noted that almost none are presently extant), they will likely agree almost entirely with the unrevised BCR. Thus, having the BCR is truly the next best thing to having the originals.

As for revisions, it is important to point out that the BCR allows us to see that the bulk of all wording in the revelation texts remained unchanged from initial dictation to publication in the Doctrine and Covenants. Thus, while this article focuses on the revisions, perhaps the real story is that only a small part of most revelation texts was ever revised. Another observation providing perspective is that for the hundred revelation texts published in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835, most redactions, especially most of the conceptually significant revisions, were made in 1834–35 while they were being prepared for publication in that volume. A preliminary classification by type of all revisions, both early and late, suggests that redactions made prior to July 1833 tended to be grammatical or stylistic in nature or they sought to clarify meaning, while the later revisions often had as their objective to update and amplify the texts by incorporating recently revealed polity or doctrine.<sup>5</sup>

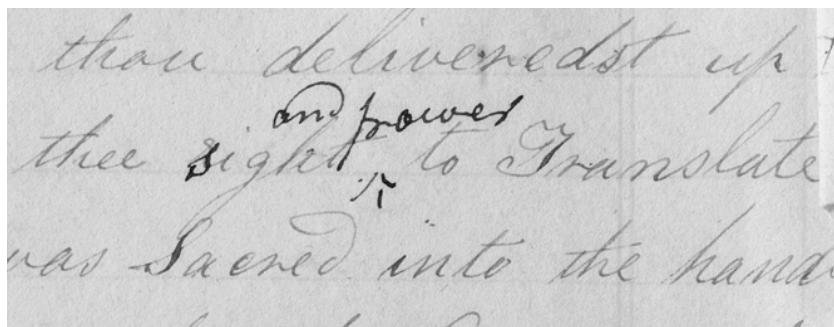


FIG. 1. Edited text from page 2 of the Book of Commandments and Revelations. Courtesy Church History Library, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Because the BCR appears to have been the primary source used in preparing the revelation texts for publication in the Book of Commandments, most of its revisions were made between 1831 and 1833. Volume 1 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* presents the entire BCR with photographic facsimiles of each page and an accompanying line-by-line transcription. This allows readers to view each and every redaction in the BCR. For purposes of this overview, however, a mere sampling will be given. Figure 1 shows a portion of the first revelation for which Joseph dictated a text—LDS D&C 3/CoC D&C 2.<sup>6</sup> Close examination reveals that beneath the overwritten “s” lies an “r.” Thus, prior to revision, the revelation text read, “God had given thee *right* to Translate,” and it was then changed to “God had given thee *sight and power* to Translate.”<sup>7</sup> Further down the same manuscript page, the addition of an entire line can be seen (fig. 2): “*nevertheless my work shall go forth and accomplish its <my> purposes.*” This emendation is unusual in that most early revisions, as previously mentioned, were simple grammatical changes such as from “ye” to “you” or “hath” to “has” or were stylistic revisions that had a negligible impact on the meaning most readers would have derived from the text.

Another of the rare phrase-length additions from the early period, and one that received subsequent revision as well, is found in an Articles and Covenants passage discussing elders’ conferences. The passage’s history provides a kind of textual stratigraphy enabling us to see several layers of revisions made between 1831 and 1835. The BCR text originally read, as did other early versions: “The several elders composing this Church of Christ are to meet in conference once in three Month to do Church business whatsoever is necessary &c.”<sup>8</sup> This is also the way the statement read when

~~man~~ <sup>who</sup> had set at naught the counsels of ~~the~~  
~~the~~ <sup>who</sup> broken the most sacred promises which ~~was~~ made ~~to~~  
~~me~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~his~~ <sup>has</sup> depended upon his own judgement & boasted  
 in ~~his~~ <sup>own</sup> ~~own~~ wisdom & this is the reason that thou ha  
 st thy ~~privileges~~ <sup>privileges</sup> for a season for thou hast suppe  
 red the council of thy directors to be trumpeted upon  
 the beginning for as the knowledge of a saviour ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> ~~not~~ <sup>not</sup>  
 to the world, so shall the knowledge of my people the chiefs  
 the Jacobites & the Josephites & ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~Lamanites~~ <sup>Lamanites</sup>  
 Lamanites Knowledge of the Lamanites, & the Lemuelites  
 the Ishmaelites which dwindled in unbelief because a  
 the iniquities of their Fathers who ~~had~~ <sup>have</sup> been suffered

Fig. 2. Examples of an entire line insertion and minor word changes from page 2 of the BCR. Courtesy Church History Library, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



Articles and Covenants was first printed in the *Star* in June 1832. However, when it was republished a year later in the June 1833 issue, to the phrase “once in three months” was added “*or from time to time as they Shall direct or appoint.*” In the BCR, this new phrase appears as a supralinear insertion in the handwriting of John Whitmer. That it is not found among the BCR revisions that Whitmer did include in a copy of Articles and Covenants he made in January 1832 is further evidence that he likely inscribed it in the BCR sometime between June 1832 and June 1833. Later, as Articles and Covenants was being prepared for publication in the Doctrine and Covenants, the word “they” in the Whitmer addition was further emended to read “*said conferences,*” and the original text line “to do Church business whatsoever is necessary” was edited to read “*and said conferences are to do whatever church business is necessary to be done at the time.*” Thus, in its final form, which has remained unchanged since 1835, the passage reads: “The several elders composing this church of Christ are to meet in conference once in three months, *or from time to time as said conferences shall direct or appoint; and said conferences are to do whatever church business is necessary to be done at the time*” (D&C 20:61–62).

A final example from among the handful of conceptually significant redactions made in the early period is located in D&C 8.<sup>9</sup> As with Articles and Covenants, this revelation text also exhibits layers of revisions. The two instances in which “*gift of Aaron*” in the Doctrine and Covenants replaced “rod of Nature” and “gift of working with the rod” in the Book of Commandments are well known. What the BCR now allows us to see (fig. 3) is that there was an even earlier version of the text in which “working with the rod” read “working with the *sprout,*” and “rod of Nature” read “*thing of Nature.*”

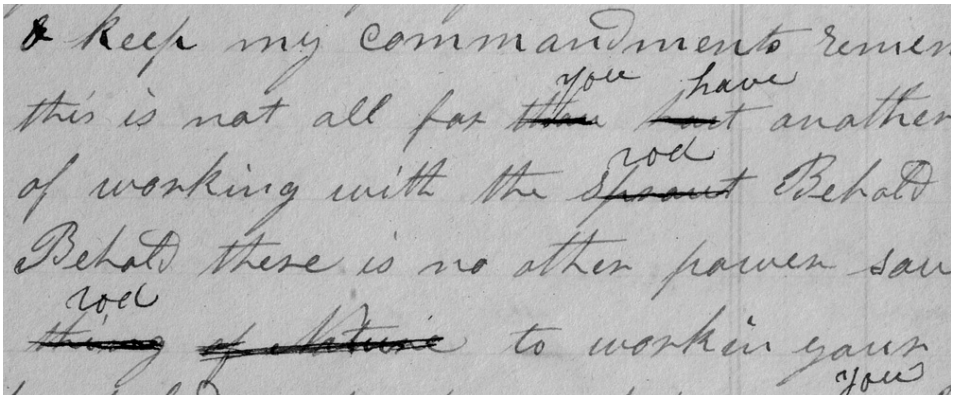


FIG. 3. Edits showing the “original” wording and earliest revisions to a portion of what is now D&C 8 (BCR, 13). Courtesy Church History Library, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

## Who Made These Changes

A truly significant contribution of the BCR is that it allows us to see the textual revisions in their original handwritten form. What immediately stands out is that nearly all redactions in the BCR are in the handwriting not of Joseph Smith, as many Latter-day Saints today might assume, but of his scribal associates Sidney Rigdon, John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and W. W. Phelps. Before the BCR became available, almost no redactions in extant revelation manuscripts could be considered revisions to the revelation texts. Rather, the occasional strikethroughs or insertions corrected transcriptional errors made by the copyists. The vast majority of the actual revisions were discernible only by doing a word-for-word comparison of the printed revelation texts in the *Star* or Book of Commandments with the consensus earliest wording of the extant manuscript versions. Yet where those revisions first appeared, and in whose handwriting, was unknown. Now that the BCR is available for examination, we can see that *it* was the place where nearly all of the revisions incorporated in the *Star* and Book of Commandments printings of the revelation texts were first inscribed. Moreover, careful handwriting analysis has, in most cases, determined *who* inscribed them. As it turns out, each of the known inscribers was a member of the Literary Firm constituted in November 1831 to publish the Book of Commandments and other Church literature (D&C 70). Their widespread involvement sheds light on two related matters of importance—the timing of the early revisions and Joseph’s role in revising the revelation texts.

## When These Changes Were Made

With respect to *when* the early revisions were made, comparing the redacted BCR texts with other early versions, where they exist, enables us in some cases to differentiate between revisions made prior to November 20, 1831, when John Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery departed Ohio with the BCR, and those that were made afterward.<sup>10</sup> In this analysis, revisions in the hand of Sidney Rigdon are key. Although redactions in the handwriting of other scribes also may have been made in 1831, it is almost certain that Sidney Rigdon’s were. Unlike the other redactors, Rigdon did not reside in Missouri when the BCR was being worked on in 1832 and 1833. More importantly, the fortunate survival of a small notebook belonging to Zebedee Coltrin enables us to pinpoint some of the Rigdon redactions to the period prior to the BCR’s removal to Missouri.

A week after Whitmer and Cowdery arrived in Missouri, Whitmer copied Articles and Covenants and the Law into Coltrin’s notebook and signed and dated his work (fig. 4). As can be seen in figure 5, the Coltrin

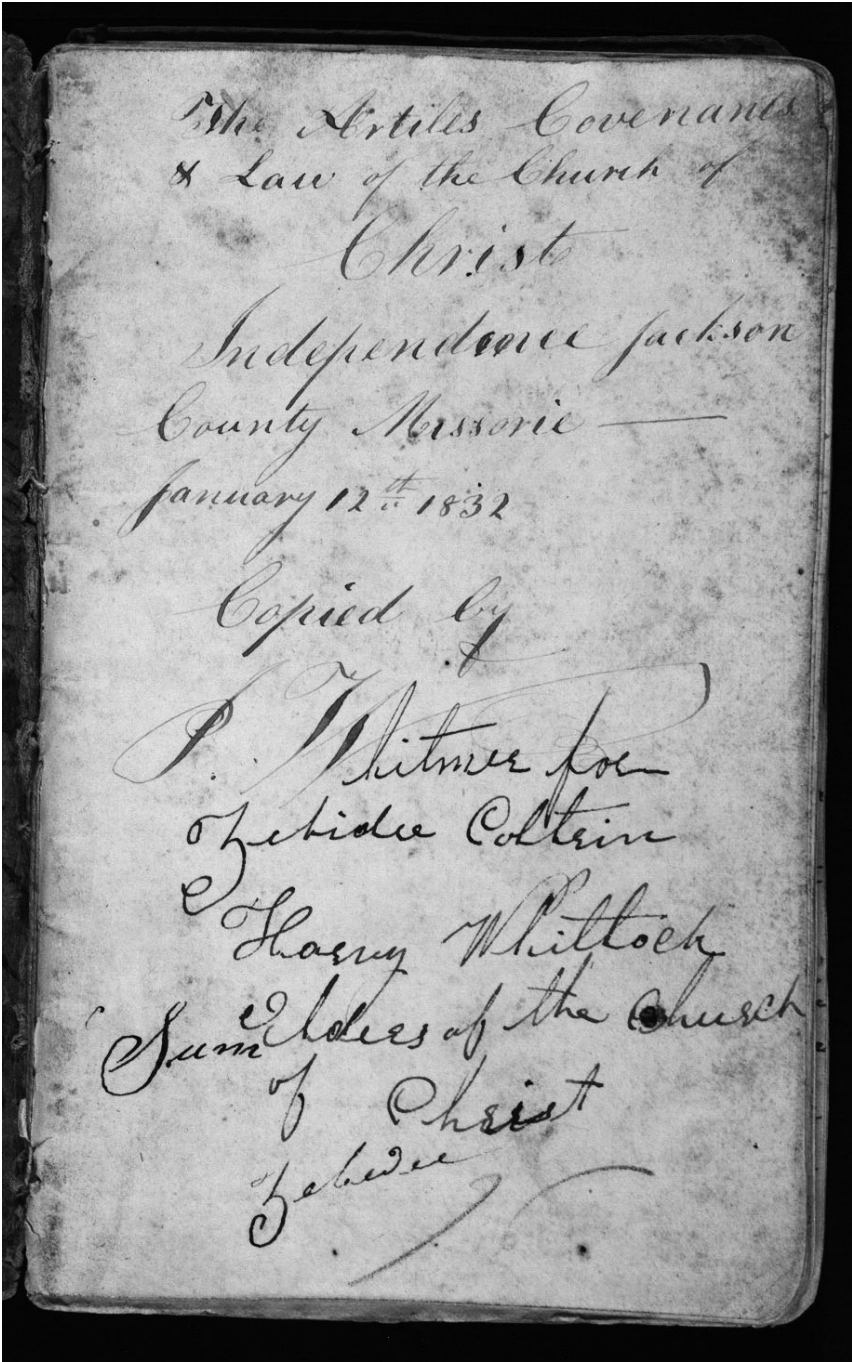


FIG. 4. The first page of one of Zebedee Coltrin's journals titled "Zebedee Coltrin, 1832-33." Courtesy Church History Library, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



any that which would be for thy support, thou shalt  
 give it into my store house, all things that ~~it~~ may be done according  
 to that which I have spoken. thou shalt ask & my scriptures  
 shall be given as I have appointed; & for thy <sup>safety</sup> ~~salvation~~ it is  
 a request that thou shalt ~~let~~ <sup>let</sup> thy peace concerning them, untill ye have  
 received them; ~~then~~ <sup>then</sup> I give unto you a commandment that

and if thou obtain more than that which  
 would be for thy support, thou shalt give  
 it into my store house, that it may be  
 done according to that which I have  
 spoken = Then shalt ask and my scriptures  
 shall be given as I have appointed, and  
 for thy, <sup>salvation</sup> thou shalt hold thy  
 peace concerning them till ye have received them,

and if thou obtain more than that which  
 would be for thy support, thou shalt give  
 it into my store house that all  
 things may be done according  
 to that which I have spoken thou  
 shalt ask & my scriptures shall  
 be given as I have appointed & for  
 thy safety it is expedient that thou  
 let thy peace concerning them

FIG. 5. Top: BCR revisions in Sidney Rigdon's handwriting (circa November 1831). Bottom left: Rigdon's revisions present in a manuscript copied or transcribed by Sidney Gilbert (circa June 1831). Bottom right: Rigdon's revisions present in Zebedee Coltrin's journal (January 1832). Courtesy Church History Library, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

texts contain the Ridgon revisions, whereas other earlier manuscript versions, such as one in Sidney Gilbert's hand, do not. This demonstrates that Ridgon must have inscribed them in the BCR prior to November 20 (and probably after June 1831, when Gilbert is likely to have made his copy of the Law). In contrast, many of the BCR revisions in the handwriting of John Whitmer or Oliver Cowdery were *not* incorporated by Whitmer into the Coltrin texts. Nor were Phelps's few redactions. What this seems to indicate, and what is corroborated by analyzing other texts, is that most of the revisions Whitmer, Cowdery, and Phelps made were inscribed in the BCR in Missouri in 1832 and 1833 while preparing the revelation texts for publication in the *Star* and Book of Commandments.

### **The Prophet Joseph Smith's Involvement**

This observation leads directly to the question of Joseph Smith's involvement in revising the revelations. Just as we have reason to believe he dictated, rather than wrote, most of the original revelation texts, it is possible that he dictated many of the revisions, particularly those made in November 1831 after being specifically charged to review the revelation texts and make such "corrections" as he felt impressed by the Holy Spirit to make.<sup>11</sup> There is also some evidence that thereafter he occasionally edited the revelation texts as well. For instance, a terse journal entry for December 1, 1832, reads: "wrote and corrected revelations &c."<sup>12</sup> The phrasing of this statement is intriguing. Are "writing" and "correcting" revelations to be understood as two distinct activities with two different groups of revelation texts? Or are the words meant to communicate that the same revelation texts were first corrected and then rewritten to incorporate the revisions?<sup>13</sup> More importantly, Joseph's journal entry raises a question about intent. *Why* was Joseph writing and correcting revelation texts at this point? Was it for use in Kirtland, or, as seems more likely given the clear commitment to publish the Book of Commandments as soon as possible, was he intending to send them to Missouri? In either case, his revised copies seem not to have survived.

There is a possibility that what Joseph did on December 1, 1832, and perhaps on other unmentioned occasions, is reflected in the BCR. In March 1832, the Prophet was directed to go to Missouri to further organize the financial affairs of the Church (LDS D&C 78/CoC D&C 77). He and his party apparently carried with them copies of the revelation texts that had been dictated between the time Cowdery and Whitmer left Ohio in late November and their own departure for Missouri in late March. The

sequence of these revelation texts in the BCR suggests that John Whitmer started copying them during the Prophet's stay in Missouri and completed the bulk of the transcription after Joseph left in early May 1832.<sup>14</sup> From then until December, when Joseph made his journal entry, the Prophet dictated only two revelation texts that have survived—LDS D&C 99/CoC D&C 96 (August 1832) and LDS D&C 84/CoC D&C 83 (September 1832). It may be that these two were the ones he corrected on December 1 and had a scribe rewrite for conveyance to Missouri, although that would be at a remove of more than two months from the time he dictated the later of the two. What might support this possibility is the fact that there are virtually no revisions in the BCR copies of these two revelation texts, even though LDS D&C 84/CoC D&C 83 is one of the longest Joseph ever dictated.<sup>15</sup> While surviving evidence allows us to trace very few 1832–33 BCR emendations to Joseph, his December 1832 journal entry does indicate that at least occasionally he was involved in revising the revelation texts.

Even if Joseph sent some corrections to Missouri, most of the 1832–33 redactions were made by members of the Literary Firm apparently without his direct involvement. This invites us to adjust our assumptions about the nature of Joseph's involvement with revising the revelation texts and, therefore, about how he viewed the nature of the revelation texts themselves. Borrowing a word from British ecclesiology, it may be helpful to characterize the Prophet's views toward these texts as "latitudinarian" and his views toward assistance from members of the Literary Firm as inclusive rather than exclusive. An argument can be made that Joseph focused on the message, the ideas, or, as he called it, "the sense" of the revelations, and welcomed assistance in the refinement of the language that conveyed those ideas.

To be sure, Joseph recognized that he had the ultimate responsibility, and he took the oversight. He was, after all, the "revelator."<sup>16</sup> That reality had been formally recognized in the November 1831 decision to have him lead out in revising the revelation texts where prompted. Five months later, however, Joseph presided at a council meeting in Missouri that directed that "brs. William [Phelps], Oliver [Cowdery] & John [Whitmer] be appointed to review the Book of Commandments [BCR] & select for printing such as shall be deemed by them proper, as dictated by the spirit & make all necessary verbal corrections."<sup>17</sup> Based on the evidence now available in the BCR, "verbal corrections" primarily, though not exclusively, meant grammatical and stylistic revisions. Despite the current, or even contemporaneous, connotations of the word *correct* and its cognates to suggest squaring with an original, actual practice construed the term quite broadly to include a variety of improvements or revisions. Because such redactions could

sometimes spill over into substantive changes in meaning, several months later Joseph warned W. W. Phelps regarding the revelation texts to “be careful not to *alter the sense* of any of them for he that adds or diminishes to the prop[h]ecies must come under the condemnation written therein.”<sup>18</sup> Significantly “altering the sense” of the revelations was the boundary line, and analysis of the BCR revisions made by members of the Literary Firm in 1832 and 1833 shows that most redactions respected that boundary.

The kinds of changes these men typically made can be seen in their revision of the Articles and Covenants’ description of a teacher’s duty. The original BCR wording was that teachers were to “see that there is no iniquity in the Church nor no hardness with each other nor no lying nor backbiting nor no evil speaking.”<sup>19</sup> This inelegant English phrasing is also found in the other earliest manuscripts. When John Whitmer copied the passage into Coltrin’s notebook in January 1832, “nor no” must have sounded awkward to him, so he dropped the “no.” Sometime after that, and prior to June 1832 when Articles and Covenants was printed in the inaugural issue of the *Star*, several instances of “nor no” in the BCR text were deleted and Oliver Cowdery inserted “neither” or simply “nor” so that the passage read: “see that there is no iniquity in the Church *neither* hardness with each other *neither* lying nor backbiting *nor* evil speaking.” During the same period, the next line was also revised. Originally the BCR text read: “& see that the Church meets to gether often & also that evry member does his duty.” Whitmer revised it to read: “& see that the Church meets to gether often & also *see* that *all the* members *do their* duty.” Whitmer then edited the concluding statement—“invite all to come to Christ”—to read “invite all to come *unto* Christ.” As with the Cowdery changes, Whitmer’s redactions appear for the first time in the June 1832 *Star* version of Articles and Covenants. Apparently, Joseph did not view his associates’ “verbal corrections,” their linguistic tidying up of the revelation texts, as tampering with their message or altering their sense, because he allowed their redactions to remain. Indeed, with the exception of a single deleted “nor” in front of “backbiting,” they still constitute the canonical wording of the text today.

That Joseph gave the Literary Firm some linguistic leeway in preparing the revelation texts for publication is implicit in another statement made in his July 1832 letter to W. W. Phelps: “You mention concerning the translation [of the Bible]. I would inform you that they will not go from under my hand during my natural life for correction, revisal or printing and the will of [the] Lord be done therefore you need not expect them this fall.”<sup>20</sup> What concerns us here is not Joseph’s expectation that the New Translation of the Bible would not be printed during his lifetime, because by the following summer, he had changed his mind. Rather, it is the expression



that captures what Joseph understood would happen to those texts once they went out “from under [his] hand,” that is, “correction, revisal [and] printing.” The BCR data causes us to take notice of this statement in a way that we may not have before. “Correction, revisal [and] printing” seems to be precisely what Literary Firm editor-printers Phelps, Cowdery, and Whitmer were doing with the revelation texts. As long as the fundamental “sense” of the revelations was not altered, Joseph apparently allowed these trusted associates to make whatever textual “revisals” they felt impressed by the Spirit to make. Joseph seems to have had a healthy awareness of the inadequacy of finite, human language, including his own, to perfectly communicate an infinite, divine revelation. As he wrote in another letter several months later to W. W. Phelps: “Oh Lord God deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison almost as it were total darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.”<sup>21</sup>

### Seeing the Revelation Texts as Both Fully Divine and Fully Human

So what does all this suggest about the revelatory process that eventually produced the final edited version of the revelation texts? Perhaps most significantly, it seems to encourage a view of those texts as the “word of God” (A of F 8) rather than the very words of God, or, as expressed in the title of a study of the biblical texts, that they are the “word of God in words of men.”<sup>22</sup> It may be an *a priori* assumption among some Latter-day Saints that the Prophet was not involved in any way whatsoever with the wording of the revelation texts, that he simply repeated word-for-word to his scribe what he heard God say to him,<sup>23</sup> but our *a posteriori* analysis has suggested otherwise. Examination of the BCR and the history of the D&C revelation texts from dictation to final form invite a richer, more nuanced view, one that sees Joseph as more than a mere human fax machine through whom God communicated revelation texts composed in heaven. Joseph had a role to play in the revelatory process. His associate Oliver Cowdery, after all, had earlier been corrected for assuming the revelatory process required no effort, for supposing that God would simply “give” him the words without any thought on his part (LDS D&C 9:7–8/CoC D&C 9:3a–c).<sup>24</sup>

It seems more suitable to see the Prophet Joseph Smith as the extraordinarily gifted servant of the Lord that he was, who, in the words of contemporary Orson Pratt, received messages from God and then had to “clothe those ideas with such words as came to his mind.”<sup>25</sup> Elder John A. Widtsoe of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles wrote: “Seldom are divine revelations dictated to man. . . . Instead, ideas are impressed upon the mind of the recipient, who then delivers the ideas in his own language.”<sup>26</sup>



If, therefore, Joseph's diction, vocabulary, and grammar, and even that of some of his associates, are discernible in the revelation texts, is that not an impressive testimonial of the fact that even in communicating his word and will to his prophets, God does not override their humanity? The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has no official statement on the nature of the interaction between Divine Revealer and human revelator in the genesis of scripture, but, as we have seen, a number of its leaders have offered explanations of the revelatory process that allow for Spirit-aided, yet still mortal, articulation and refinement of the divine message. Thus, to borrow an ancient Christological affirmation, the revelation texts can be seen to be both fully divine and fully human.

Such an insight takes cognizance not only of how Joseph Smith communicated his divine revelations but also how he received them. Linguists and linguistic philosophers, at least since the pioneering work of Ferdinand de Saussure at the turn of the twentieth century, have stressed that all communicable thought is mediated through language. That is, whatever the Lord chose to communicate to the Prophet necessarily entered his consciousness through ideas, concepts, and words that he understood, that were part of his mental and linguistic universe. God's inexpressibly perfect, infinite, transcendent thoughts become accessible to mortal minds only through their own imperfect, finite language. This reality seems to be acknowledged in the prefatory statement to the Book of Commandments that "these commandments are of me & were given unto my Servents in their weakness after the manner of their Language that they might come to understanding."<sup>27</sup> Thus, from present perspectives, we can see that God, working within the finite limitations of Joseph's language, itself a historically, culturally conditioned inheritance from the world in which he lived, guided *both* Joseph's apprehension of the divine message and his articulation of it in concepts and verbal expressions that were part of his linguistic repertoire.<sup>28</sup>

That the revelation texts thus doubly bear the marks of Joseph's mind was probably realized by few in his day. At least with respect to the wording of the dictated texts, however, there does seem to be contemporaneous recognition that they reflected his language. During the council meetings convened in November 1831 to consider publication of the Book of Commandments, "some conversation was had concerning Revelations and language."<sup>29</sup> This is echoed in the words of a revelation directed to the elders present: "His language you have known, and his imperfections you have known, and you have sought in your hearts knowledge that you might express beyond his language" (LDS D&C 67:5/CoC D&C 67:2a).

Subsequently, an encouraged attempt to improve upon Joseph's articulation "failed," as the elders seemed to realize that the inspiration of the revelation texts was more than merely a matter of language. Although particular words, phrases, or syntax may have been "weak" or "imperfect," the inspired whole, thanks to the special attendance of the Holy Spirit, was decidedly greater than the sum of its admittedly ordinary linguistic parts.

Latter-day Saints believe revelation comes in a variety of forms, verbal and nonverbal. The foundational Articles and Covenants makes reference to "the revelations of God which shall come hereafter by the gift and power of the Holy Ghost, the voice of God, or the ministering of angels" (LDS D&C 20:35/CoC D&C 17:6f). Most of the revelation texts in the Doctrine and Covenants seem to have come in the first manner, a method clearly affirmed in D&C 8: "I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you. . . . Behold, this is the spirit of revelation" (LDS D&C 8:2-3/CoC D&C 8:1c-2a). Even the "voice of God" is portrayed in scripture as something more often internally perceived than externally audible. Reflecting this perspective explicitly, one revelation text reads, "I speak unto you with my voice, even the voice of my Spirit," and the Book of Mormon prophet Enos's revelatory experience is described in these words: "The voice of the Lord came into my mind."<sup>30</sup> All of this draws attention to the phenomenological fact that revelation is something that is part of, not apart from, a prophet's mind.

Yet, to acknowledge that divine revelation is verbally communicated in historically, culturally constrained human language does not detract from its divinity. As renowned Catholic scholar Raymond E. Brown has observed regarding the scriptural word of God, "The fact that the 'word' of the Bible is human and time-conditioned makes it no less 'of God.'"<sup>31</sup> Even the conservative Evangelical Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy affirms that "in inspiration, God utilized the culture and conventions of his [prophets'] milieu." Otherwise, notes Fuller Theological Seminary professor Donald A. Hagner, "the genuinely human factor of the biblical documents is in effect denied in favor of a Bible that floated down from heaven by parachute, untouched by human hands or the historical process."<sup>32</sup> All too often, "the impassioned debate about inerrancy" says less about divine revelation "than about our own insecurity in looking for absolute answers."<sup>33</sup>

A view of the revelatory process, then, that sees scriptural texts as both fully divine and fully human allows ample room for regarding as inspired both the earliest wording of, as well as the revisions to, the revelation texts preserved in the BCR. This perspective was eloquently expressed by longtime twentieth-century RLDS Apostle and First Presidency member

F. Henry Edwards: “The revelation of God has come to men” in a variety of ways, “but to record the truth thus received has involved the . . . peculiar difficulty of putting spiritual truths into earthly language. . . . [Thus] we shall not be unduly concerned about the exact phrasing in which revelation is recorded, nor even when further light makes it possible to enrich this phrasing in the attempt to convey this further light. What is important is that the record shall prove the gateway to understanding, as it has to many thousands who have studied it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>34</sup> However one may view the composition of scriptural texts, Edwards reminds us that they should become a “gateway” to God rather than an idol that replaces him. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles put it this way in a 2008 general conference address: “The scriptures are *not* the ultimate source of knowledge for Latter-day Saints. They are manifestations of the ultimate source. The ultimate source of knowledge and authority for a Latter-day Saint is the living God.”<sup>35</sup> In the end, the written “word of God” must always lead believers to the Living Word himself.

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1. For many contemporary Christian theologians, “The language of divine self-manifestation indicates that the category ‘revelation’ is not to be construed primarily (as in many medieval and Enlightenment understandings of revelation) as uncovering ‘propositional truths’ that would otherwise be unknown (i.e., ‘supernatural’ or ‘revealed’ truths). Rather, in modern Christian thought since the Romantics and Hegel, revelation has been construed primarily on some form of encounter model as an event of divine self-manifestation to humanity.” David Tracy, “Writing,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 386.

2. A vast scholarly literature probes the various theories of revelation, inspiration, and scripture that have been advanced throughout Christian history. Major views are conveniently outlined in Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983). One of the ongoing challenges for both Christian and Jewish theology has been to adequately describe the interplay between the experience of revelation and the written texts that serve as witnesses or testaments to that experience.

3. *The Evening and the Morning Star* was the Church’s first periodical and was published monthly from June 1832 to September 1834. The Saints at that time

referred to it simply as the *Star*, a convention that hereafter will be followed in this article.

4. Hereafter, where a section number is the same in both the LDS and CoC editions, it will simply be cited as “D&C XX” without making repeated note of the fact that it is the same in both editions.

5. A comprehensive quantitative and qualitative analysis of all revisions in all revelation texts is underway. Portions of such an analysis for one revelation—D&C 42—are included in Grant Underwood, “‘The Laws of the Church of Christ’ (D&C 42): A Textual and Historical Analysis,” in *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, et al. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2008), 108–41.

6. Book of Commandments and Revelations, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1–2.

7. Throughout this article, new or revised text will be italicized.

8. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 56.

9. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 12–13.

10. In his history, John Whitmer wrote, “We left Ohio, on the 20 of Nov, 1831 and arrived in Zion Mo. Jan. 5, 1832.” Book of John Whitmer, 38, Community of Christ Library-Archives.

11. Far West Record, Church History Library, 16; 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), 29.

12. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 10.

13. This parallels how Joseph initially proceeded with his “new translation” of the Bible. Joseph had his scribe write out the entire biblical chapter, even though much of it might be unchanged, and incorporate in it such revisions as he directed him to make. See Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, Religious Studies Center, 2004).

14. See Book of Commandments and Revelations, 127–48.

15. This observation, however, is qualified by the fact that there is a noticeable decrease in the number of revisions found in the revelation texts that were inscribed in the BCR after it was taken to Missouri.

16. A revelation text dated November 11, 1831, indicated that Joseph was “to be a Seer, a revelator, a translator, & a prophet, having all the gifts of God which he bestoweth upon the head of the church.” Book of Commandments and Revelations, 123, italics added; first published in 1835 in *Doctrine and Covenants* 3:42. Today, the passage is LDS D&C 107:92/CoC D&C 104:42b.

17. Far West Record, 26; see also Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 46. The corresponding account, drawn from these minutes, in Joseph’s later History reads: “Our council . . . ordered that . . . William W. Phelps, Oliver Cowdery, and John Whitmer be appointed to review and prepare such revelations as shall be deemed proper for publication, for the press, and print them as soon as possible at Independence, Mo.” Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–92), 1:381.

18. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, July 31, 1832, reproduced in Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 273; for the whole letter, see 269–76.

19. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 56.

20. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, July 31, 1832, reproduced in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 273–74.

21. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, reproduced in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 287.

22. Jean Levie, *The Bible: Word of God in Words of Men* (London: Chapman, 1961).

23. An oft-cited reminiscence from Parley Pratt’s autobiography tends to promote this assumption. Pratt wrote that when Joseph dictated the revelation texts, “there was never any hesitation, reviewing, or reading back, in order to keep the run of the subject; neither did any of these communications undergo revisions, interlinings, or corrections. As he dictated them so they stood, so far as I have witnessed; and I was present to witness the dictation of several communications of several pages each.” Parley P. Pratt Jr., ed., *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 4th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 48. Strictly speaking, Pratt’s observations refer only to the *dictation* of the revelation texts, not to what happened to them thereafter, when, as textual analysis of the BCR makes abundantly clear, they *did* “undergo revisions, interlinings, [and] corrections” before publication.

24. The data pertaining to the history of the revelation texts from initial dictation to the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants is a bit different than that pertaining to the Book of Mormon, where relatively few revisions appear in the original or printer’s manuscripts. This leads Royal Skousen, editor of a multivolume, critical text edition of the Book of Mormon, to argue that in the case of the English text of the Book of Mormon, divine “control” of the scripture’s wording “was tight,” though it still was “not iron-clad.” Royal Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997), 90.

25. Orson Pratt, “Minutes of the School of the Prophets,” Salt Lake Stake, December 9, 1872, Church History Library.

26. John A. Widtsoe, “The Articles of Faith: X. Eternal Increase,” *Improvement Era* 40 (October 1937): 600–601. This perspective is comparable to conservative Christian positions such as that expressed in *Dei Verbum*, the 1965 Roman Catholic pronouncement on divine revelation. Therein the Holy Scriptures are declared to “have God as their author.” At the same time, it is affirmed that in “composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.” Catholic Church, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 18, 1965,” available online at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html) (accessed Sept. 3, 2009).

27. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 126. Compare LDS D&C 1:24/CoC D&C 1:5a.



28. David Carpenter calls revelation “a *process* mediated through language” and notes that throughout that process, from initial experience to canonical expression and beyond, “the language of revelation, precisely as language, participates in all the cultural and historical” particularities that constitute it. David Carpenter, “Revelation in Comparative Perspective: Lessons for Interreligious Dialogue,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 185, 186; emphasis in original.

29. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:367.

30. LDS D&C 97:1/CoC D&C 94:1a; Enos 1:10. Current LDS Apostle Boyd K. Packer once commented, “I have come to know that inspiration comes more as a feeling than as a sound.” Boyd K. Packer, “Prayers and Answers,” *Ensign* 9 (November 1979): 19–20.

31. Raymond E. Brown, “‘And the Lord Said’? Biblical Reflections on Scripture as the Word of God,” *Theological Studies* 42 (March 1981): 18.

32. Donald A. Hagner, “The Battle for Inerrancy: An Errant Trend among the Inerrancists,” *Reformed Journal* 34 (April 1984): 21.

33. Brown, “Biblical Reflections on Scripture,” 16.

34. F. Henry Edwards, *The Edwards Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1986), 17–18.

35. Jeffrey R. Holland, “My Words . . . Never Cease,” *Ensign* 38 (May 2008): 93; emphasis in original.