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Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds.

The Joseph Smith Papers, Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839.

Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2008

Reviewed by James B. Allen

Several years ago, when I heard that the Joseph Smith Papers Project was approved for publication, I was delighted for at least two reasons. First, I considered Joseph Smith's papers to be the most valuable resource extant for researching early Latter-day Saint history. Making them available to all would enhance the accuracy of future scholarship. Second, it would be clear that the Church had nothing to hide concerning Joseph Smith. For too long, stories had circulated that the archives were closed, and the Church History Department did not allow access to important documents. The stories were partially true, though scholars who were not antagonistic to the Church could eventually obtain access to most of what they needed. With the announced publication of Joseph Smith's papers and a generally more open policy, that image was about to change. I understood, of course, that some things should still be restricted, such as private financial records, minutes of confidential General Authority meetings, and personal documents donated to the archives with specific instructions restricting their access. However, the openness with which Joseph Smith's papers would be handled was exhilarating, not just because of easy access, but also because my frequent assurances to friends—that the Church is not afraid of its own history—was now being verified.

When I began working on a volume of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, I was impressed with the exacting demands the general editors were imposing on the editorial process. I left the project due to my heavy involvement in other projects and commitments, including a semester teaching at BYU–Hawaii. Now that the first volume of *Papers* is out, I am impressed with the fact that the editorial demands are even more stringent than during my brief association. My hopes and expectations for the project seem more than fulfilled.

Because *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839* is the first volume of *The Joseph Smith Papers* to appear, a comment on the overall project seems appropriate.

Papers is the most important and ambitious publishing venture ever undertaken under the auspices of the Church History Department or its predecessors. Previous milestones include Andrew Jenson's four-volume *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia* and his nine-volume *Historical Record* series; B. H. Roberts's six-volume *Comprehensive History of the Church* and his editing of Joseph Smith's *History of the Church*; and the remarkable ten-year activity of Church historian Leonard J. Arrington and his associates. Their publications are important, but, for the most part, they keep readers one step away from the firsthand records of the past, the stuff from which history is created. Church historians have done a credible job of collecting such primary sources, and, in recent years, those working on *Papers* have located even more original documents pertaining to the founding prophet. The eventual publication of all these papers will provide scholars and others with unprecedented firsthand access to many aspects of Joseph Smith's life and thought.

The Joseph Smith Papers Project is rooted in Dean C. Jessee's early work on the papers, including his publication of three volumes. Eventually, a more comprehensive plan was approved, and the project became an integral part of the program of the Church History Department. Such an undertaking is very expensive; the projected volumes will take years to complete and will involve the full-time work of numerous scholars. Larry H. and Gail Miller generously offered to supply crucial funding. This ambitious venture will rival in quality and thoroughness the published papers of such important figures as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

Journals, Volume 1 includes an essay that describes the goals and editorial methods of the entire project. The goal, it affirms, is "to present verbatim transcripts of Joseph Smith's papers in their entirety, making available the most essential sources of Smith's life and work and preserving the content of aging manuscripts from damage or loss." It will include documents created by him, "whether written or dictated by him or created by others under his direction, or that were owned by Smith, that is, received by him and kept in his office." Further, the intent is to "publish, either in letterpress volumes or electronic form, every extant Joseph Smith document to which its editors can obtain access. Certain routine documents, such as some notes and certificates and some legal or business documents, will be calendared and published in their entirety online with only samples published in the letterpress edition" (lix). This suggests that everything of significance will be published in the series and that other "routine" materials will be made available online.

According to the Joseph Smith Papers website, <http://josephsmithpapers.org>, the papers will appear in six different series comprising possibly thirty-two volumes. The three-volume Journals series will incorporate all ten journals kept by Joseph Smith and his clerks from 1832 to 1844. A projected eleven-volume Documents series will publish all of Joseph Smith's correspondence, his revelations, reports of his discourses, and many other documents (such as notices, notes, and editorials) authored by him. It will also include selected minutes of meetings. A four-volume Revelations and Translation series will, reads the website, "present the earliest manuscript texts of Joseph Smith revelations, manuscript revelation books, the printed revelations as published during Joseph Smith's lifetime, and the Book of Mormon and the printer's manuscript from which it was produced." This series will be especially valuable to scholars interested in textual development of the scriptures. A Legal and Business Records series comprising three volumes will provide scholars with access to all known surviving records of judicial proceedings in which Joseph was involved. It will also include contractual and business documents of all sorts. A four-volume Administrative Records series will include minute books, letter-books, and other documents pertaining to Church institutions that Joseph Smith directed or was otherwise involved in personally.

Finally, of special value to those who have long relied on the six-volume *History of the Church*, a seven-volume History series in *The Joseph Smith Papers* will reproduce that history from original manuscripts, clearly identifying the various sources. Joseph Smith and some assistants began a history in 1838 and it was completed in 1856. Later, B. H. Roberts edited the history, and it was published as *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*.¹ Based on Joseph Smith's journals, it drew from several other sources that were transposed into a first-person narrative, making it appear as if it were all written by Joseph himself. As the *History* is a standard source to which scholars turn when writing about the early Church, they look forward to knowing the various sources on which it was based.

Since many, if not most, of the Joseph Smith papers are not in Joseph's own handwriting, one of the project's first important tasks was to identify scribes. Under the expert guidance of Dean C. Jessee, this has been done, and the person who wrote each document will be clearly identified in the texts.

Scholars will be impressed with how the editors insured accuracy in the entire *Papers* project. As explained in the introduction to the journals, the transcription of each document was verified by three different processes:

The first two verifications were done using high-resolution scanned images. The first was a visual collation of the journal images with the transcripts, while the second was an independent and double-blind

image-to-transcript tandem proofreading. The third and final verification of the transcripts was a visual collation with the original document. At this stage, the verifier employed magnification and ultraviolet light as needed to read badly faded text, recover heavily stricken material, untangle characters written over each other, and recover words canceled by messy “wipe erasures” made when the ink was still wet or removed by knife scraping after the ink had dried. (lix)

The “verified transcripts” thus “meet or exceed the transcription and verification requirements of the Modern Language Association’s Committee on Scholarly Editions and the National Archives and Records Administration’s National Historical Publications and Records Commission” (lix). Hence scholars are assured that spelling, punctuation, strikethroughs, insertions, word changes, revisions, and anything else in the original document are preserved as accurately as possible. This is imperative to scholars who do not have immediate access to the documents. In fact, these publications will probably be more useful than studying the originals, which are sometimes highly difficult to work with.

The essay also explains that “redactions and other changes made on the manuscript after the original production of the text, such as when later scribes used the journals for drafting history, are not transcribed. Labeling and other forms of archival marking are similarly passed by in silence” (lxi). However, anyone wishing to see such markings may go to josephsmithpapers.org where a detailed “diplomatic” transcript, “including all redactions and other subsequently added elements, along with letter-by-letter presentation of all revisions” will be included (lxii).

The painstaking editing process has been invaluable in assuring accuracy and also in correcting past textual errors. Ronald K. Esplin comments that early historians transcribed an entry in one of Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo diaries to read that “Emma had another child,” adding an explanation that the child had not survived. However, the diary actually reads, “Emma had another chill,” thus correcting a serious misimpression. In another example, an 1843 journal entry in the handwriting of Willard Richards noted what Joseph Smith said about certain legal proceedings that resulted in his release following a *habeas corpus* hearing. According to an earlier published transcription, Joseph described those involved as a “spiritually-minded circuit judge and a few fit men,” thus seeming to praise them. In the more careful transcription, however, we see that he was rather disgusted (or perhaps amused) by them, mocking them as a “spindle-shanked circuit judge and a few fat men.”²

Journals, Volume 1 deserves only the highest praise. It contains five journals: 1832–34, 1835–36, March–September 1838, September–October

1838, and 1839. Each includes a source note that describes the journal itself and its history. A historical introduction provides an overview of what was happening to Joseph Smith and the Church at the time, while editorial notes supply historical transitions between the journals. There are also photographs of each journal and several journal pages, and of people mentioned in the journal. In addition, the excellent footnotes give valuable context for the various entries. The substance of these notes attests to the careful scholarship of the editors.

Only the first two journals contain much of Joseph Smith's own handwriting, which appears mainly in the early pages of the first journal. Joseph often relied on his assistants to record his daily activities, and whatever they recorded became his "journal." The editors identify Joseph Smith's handwriting in boldface font and other writers with a footnote at the spot where their handwriting begins.

The editors have also provided 146 pages of reference material to help readers with almost any reasonable question they might have. The "Reference Material" section begins with a brief chronology for the years 1832–39. This is followed by a geographical directory that provides descriptions of nearly all the places—including landforms, waterways, and important buildings—mentioned in the volume. In addition, almost all specific locations named in the journals are included in a series of eleven maps. A biographical directory includes entries for nearly everyone mentioned in the journals. This is followed by a series of charts showing the development of ecclesiastical organizations during the period and a glossary identifying terms peculiar to Latter-day Saints. An essay on sources and a bibliography comes next, followed by a table providing corresponding section numbers for material canonized during Joseph Smith's lifetime with those contained in the current editions of the Community of Christ and LDS Doctrine and Covenants. The table also includes material that originated with Joseph Smith but was canonized in the LDS Doctrine and Covenants after his death (for example, section 137). Each section is listed chronologically according to the date it originated, so far as the editors have been able to determine.

The only serious problem with *Journals, Volume 1* is that it was published without an index. This is crucial for scholars and other serious students of Church history. Apparently the index simply was not finished before publication and distribution deadlines mandated that it go to press. However, it has since been published and made available to download at josephsmithpapers.org.

Since Joseph Smith and his scribes were somewhat sporadic in keeping his journals, this volume clearly does not touch on all that happened from

1832 to 1839. Simply reading the journals, therefore, can hardly provide a satisfactory view of Joseph's life or the history of the Church. However, with the fine historical introductions and the helpful editorial insertions and footnotes found in *Journals, Volume 1*, readers can follow at least the rudiments of the story. The six-volume *History of the Church* fleshes out the record further.

The first journal commences on November 27, 1832, nearly two years after Joseph Smith and the New York Saints moved to Ohio, and concludes on December 5, 1834. During that time Joseph received numerous revelations, conducted Church business in Missouri and other places, established the School of the Prophets, organized the First Presidency of the Church and the first high council, finished work on his inspired revision of the Bible, agonized over the persecution in Missouri, and led Zion's Camp in a failed effort to help the Missouri Saints regain their lost property.

Not much of this is reflected in the journal, though on the day he purchased the record book (November 27) he wrote on the front cover that he intended to keep a "minute account of all things that come under my observation." He then wrote a prayer: "oh may God grant that I may be directed in all my thoughts Oh bless thy Servent Amen" (9). He spent the next day reading and writing, and then recorded at the end of the day that "my mind is calm and serene for which I thank the Lord" (9). Such prayers and expressions of thanksgiving are common and certainly reveal, as well as anything could, the genuine Joseph Smith—his humility and his devotion to God and family.

However, for some reason Joseph was unable to keep a regular record. The first nine entries are disappointingly terse, and then, after December 6, 1832, he waited ten months before making another entry, on October 4, 1833. Entries continued, with sporadic and sometimes significant breaks, until April 30, 1834. The next entry was posted nearly three months later on August 21, 1834, a gap that occurred while Zion's Camp was organized and marched to Missouri. Three subsequent entries cover the period through September 4, then three more entries cover November 29 through December 5. Whenever such gaps occur in *Journals, Volume I*, the editors have provided brief historical notes regarding events that occurred during the hiatus.

Readers may find interest in comparing the journals with the published *History of the Church* in order to see how many journal entries actually went into the history, how these entries may have been modified or added to, and how they may throw additional light on what is in the *History*. A journal entry in the handwriting of Joseph Smith dated December 6, 1832, reads, "translating and received a Revelation explaining

the Parable the wheat and the tears [tares] &c” (11). The parallel entry in the *History* says “On the 6th of December, 1832, I received the following revelation explaining the parable of the wheat and tares,”³ and this is followed by what is now Section 86 of the Doctrine and Covenants. It seems apparent that this revelation was connected with Joseph Smith’s work on the inspired revision of the Bible, but it is the journal, not the *History*, that makes this clear.

Other accounts in the *History* are based solely on the journal. On November 13, 1833, Joseph describes, again in his own handwriting, his joy on being awakened at 4 a.m. to see the “stars fall from heaven yea they fell like hail stones” (16). This was the famous Leonid meteor shower that was seen across the country and viewed by many as a sign of Christ’s imminent Second Coming. Joseph, too, believed this and wrote, “Oh how marvellous are thy works Oh Lord and I thank thee for thy me[r]cy unto me thy servant Oh Lord save me in thy kingdom for Christ sake Amen” (18). Several other entries in the journal were obvious sources for entries in the *History*, though a few were not picked up at all.

The second journal begins on September 22, 1835, more than nine months after the first one ends. The longest of the five journals, it covers, with daily entries, Joseph Smith’s activities in and around Kirtland until April 3, 1836, the day Joseph and Oliver Cowdery beheld Jesus Christ, Moses, Elias, and Elijah in vision in the Kirtland Temple. Seven entries are in Joseph Smith’s handwriting, but it is the last journal in which his handwriting appears.

The *History* is based more heavily on this journal than on any of the other four journals in *Papers, Volume 1*. The *History* repeats all the entries, usually in modified form, though on numerous dates there is also considerable expansion in the *History* from other sources and in some instances part of the journal entry is left out. One example of an addition is in the *History* entry for December 31, 1835. Besides the short journal entry, the *History* includes a long entry concerning the Egyptian mummies and papyri that Joseph had earlier acquired. Another example is on January 29, 1836. The *History* lists several people to whom Joseph Smith Sr. gave patriarchal blessings that day.⁴ The journal records the actual blessings (176–78). An interesting omission occurs on November 9, 1835, where the *History* tells of the visit of a man calling himself “Joshua, the Jewish Minister.” After briefly describing the introduction and early conversation, the *History* then reads: “I commenced giving him a relation of the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, as recorded in the former part of this history.”⁵ However, instead of saying “as recorded in the former part of this history,” the journal says “as follows—” (87). It then

proceeds with an account of the First Vision and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon that does not appear anywhere in the *History*. Why the compilers of the *History* (Willard Richards and others) left out this part of the journal entry is not known, though it may be speculated that they saw no need for it since the *History* begins with the founding story. However, the account is worded differently in the journal and includes several details that Church members may be unfamiliar with. For example, in describing his “fruitless attempt to pray,” Joseph said that

my tounge seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some person walking towards me, [I] strove again to pray, but could not, the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprung up on my feet, and looked around, but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking, I kneeled again my mouth was opened and my tounge liberated, and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer, a pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon my [me] head, and filled me with joy unspeakable, a personage appeared in the midst, of this pillar flame which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed, another personage soon appeared like unto the first, he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee, he testified unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God; (and I saw many angels in this vision). (88)⁶

The story of the appearance of an angel announcing the plates of the Book of Mormon follows, but likewise it is not in the *History*, and the journal includes differences from the account at the beginning of the *History*.

On November 26, 1835, the *History* says that Joseph Smith spent the day “translating”⁷ Egyptian characters from the papyrus in his possession, but the journal uses the word “transcribing” (110). The editors of the *Journals, Volume 1* determined that “transcribing” is probably correct, for a footnote indicates that the transcriptions made that day may have been the manuscripts now known as the Kirtland Egyptian Papers.

The second journal is the source for Section 110 of the Doctrine and Covenants, which records the visions in which Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery beheld Jesus Christ, Moses, Elias, and Elijah on April 3, 1836. This and the previous day’s entry are in the handwriting of Warren Cowdery and, differing from other entries in the journal, they are recorded in third person rather than first person language. As a result, where the revelation reads “our minds” or “we” or “us,” the journal says “their minds” or “they” or “them” (219).

It was almost another two years before the Prophet began his third journal. This journal does not begin with daily entries but rather with synopses of various events, beginning in March 1838. This was about the time Joseph Smith arrived at Far West, Missouri, after being forced to leave

Kirtland in January. These events included the trials of certain Church leaders before a high council as well as a few revelations. The early pages of the journal also include some documents produced before Joseph left Kirtland, and they were inserted into the *History* in the proper place, chronologically. Beginning April 27 and ending September 10, the entries become almost daily. The substance of most of them eventually appeared in the published *History*, though expanded upon from other sources. The journal was written by George W. Robinson, the Church's general clerk and recorder. Robinson wrote in the third person, so Joseph Smith is referred to as "he" rather than "I," and "I" usually refers to Robinson himself.

The fourth, and shortest, journal overlaps the previous one by a week, covering September 3 through October 6, 1838. Recorded by James Mulholland, it does little more than tersely note the comings and goings of the Prophet for that month. The entries are all third-person in nature, such as the one on October 4 that reads, in part, "Saw him at home about sunrise, all the forenoon, and at noon" (330). These entries give no hint at all of Joseph Smith's intense legal activities during that time,⁸ some of which are clarified in the previous journal. None of the entries in this journal found their way into the published *History*.

The final journal, also kept by James Mulholland, covers the period from April 22 to October 15, 1839. During the interim, the Missouri war heated up as some Mormons plundered residences and businesses of their enemies; two Mormons were killed at the Battle of Crooked River; Governor Lilburn W. Boggs issued his infamous extermination order; Joseph Smith was arrested and incarcerated in Liberty, Missouri; the Saints migrated from Missouri to Illinois under trying circumstances; and Joseph Smith's captivity in Missouri ended. The journal commences on the day he and his companions were able to leave Missouri and then recounts his arrival in Quincy, Illinois. The six months covered by the journal were extremely busy for Joseph as, among other things, the land on which Nauvoo was built was purchased, he renewed working on his *History*, members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles prepared for their important mission to the British Isles, and Joseph prepared for his trip to Washington, D.C., to seek financial recompense for the Saints' loss of property in Missouri. The daily journal touches only lightly on most of these activities, but at least it is more detailed than the previous journal and, as usual, footnotes and editorial notes help fill in the gaps. This journal must be read carefully in order to determine whether Mulholland was writing about Joseph's activities or his own. Again, the editors have helped clarify the text.

The entries in this final journal are often very terse, yet most of them provided the basis for a daily entry in the *History*. In some cases, however,

the journal is considerably expanded from other sources. The journal entry for May 20–24, 1839, for example, reads, “Monday 20th this week at home and employed dictating letters and attending to the various business of the Church” (339). The *History* entry for May 20 reads, “At home attending to a variety of business,” but then the daily entries for May 21–24 are extensive.⁹ There are also several gaps in the journal, some of which were filled in from other sources by the *History* editors.

It is uncertain whether most Church members, even those who enjoy Church history, will want to pursue all the volumes of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, including the Journals series. These are scholarly editions designed primarily for scholars engaged in research. However, those who are willing to approach the journals in more than a casual manner will likely find them valuable and inspirational. Through the pages of *Journals, Volume 1*, we see the genuine Joseph Smith—the man who had visions and revelations, the man who constantly prayed for God’s help in promoting the gospel of Christ, the man who loved and prayed for his family, and the man who was deeply concerned about the well-being of his followers. Nothing in the journals smacks of deception or fraud. Instead, the journals reflect sincerity and honesty. Despite their spotty and incomplete nature, they are an essential source for both understanding and appreciating the founding prophet.

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1. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971).

2. Ronald K. Esplin, “Why a Joseph Smith Papers Project Now?” <http://josephsmithpapers.org/Essays/esplin.pdf>.

3. *History of the Church*, 1:300.

4. *History of the Church*, 2:347–48, 387–88.

5. *History of the Church*, 2:304.

6. This 1835 account of the First Vision was published in Dean C. Jessee, “The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press), 8.

7. *History of the Church*, 2:320.

8. For a chronology of Joseph Smith’s legal activities in the fall of 1838, see “A Chronology of the Life of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 46, no. 4 (2007): 98–99.

9. *History of the Church*, 3:356.