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Joseph Smith Papers. Manuscript Revelation Books, facsimile edition

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Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and
Steven C. Harper, eds. *Manuscript Revelation Books*.
Facsimile edition of the Revelations and Translations series
of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee,
Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman.
Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009.

Reviewed by James B. Allen

Who does not feel a special thrill when given the opportunity actually to see and handle an original document related to some vitally important piece of history—or, at least, something vitally important to them? What scholar does not feel a sense of disappointment when he or she asks an archivist for permission to see a particular important document but is told that it is so fragile that it cannot be seen and handled but, rather, must be studied via microfilm or digital copy? The material is there, but the scholar wants to examine it more closely, looking for nuances that may not be immediately apparent in the less-than-ideal copy. In America, many of our most sacred documents, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, can be viewed at the National Archives only under glass, in specially protected vaults, and virtually no one can ever touch them. That is how seriously we revere our founding documents.

In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, our most precious founding documents are the handwritten manuscripts of the revelations that constitute the scriptures. However, like so many old manuscripts, those that are still extant are not available for public scrutiny, as constant handling could damage and perhaps even destroy them. The next best thing would be a near-perfect, full-size, full-color facsimile that could be examined at will by anyone. That is what the Church Historian's Press has provided with the publication of two manuscript revelation books dating from 1828 to 1834; these books were the basis for the publication of the 1833 Book of Commandments as well as the 1835 and 1844 editions of the Doctrine and Covenants.

The Church Historian's Press continues its highly important Joseph Smith Papers Project with this volume, *Revelations and Translations: Manuscript Revelation Books*. This is a unique and momentous publication, done in a way unlikely to be duplicated. It is also one that every scholar seriously interested in the founding documents of the Church must inevitably examine. Editors Robin Jensen, Robert Woodford, and Steven Harper, along

with numerous others involved in this project, are to be warmly congratulated on a job extremely well done.

Researchers on the project anticipate that when complete, the multi-volume *Joseph Smith Papers* will include six different series: Documents, Journals, Administrative Records, Revelations and Translations, Histories, and Legal and Business records. The reader is encouraged to visit the Papers website, <http://www.JosephSmithPapers.org>, for a full explanation and description. This book is part of the first volume of the Revelations and Translations series. Volume 1 of the Journals series was published first; this book appeared next as a two-part edition—volume 1 and the facsimile edition—and the second volumes of both the Journals series and the Revelations and Translations series have since appeared, as well as the first volume of the Histories series.

However, this volume is different from anything else likely to be produced. The first thing an observer may notice is the size of the book. At 705 pages, it measures 12.3 x 9.5 x 2 inches and weighs 7.5 pounds. Its pages present, in the exact size as the originals, facsimile reproductions of Joseph Smith's manuscript revelation books: the "Book of Commandments and Revelations" and the "Kirtland Revelation Book." In the publication they are referred to as Revelation Book 1 and Revelation Book 2. Also included are meticulously accurate transcriptions.

These elegant facsimile reproductions are pure primary sources. They are presented without individual historical introductions or contextual annotations. Such trappings will be added in the ongoing Documents series, which will present all of Joseph Smith's revelations in chronological order, along with other contemporary documents, a myriad of supplementary resources to aid in understanding, and an index.¹

This is not a volume intended for casual reading. In fact, most Church members will probably never see it, and many of those who do will consider it interesting but not something they want to spend much time with. On the other hand, scholars and other serious students of LDS history will look at these documents with excitement as they hold in their hands and are able to analyze in detail the next best thing to the originals.

1. Volume 2 of the Revelations and Translations series, published in March 2011, includes high-quality photographs of all pages in the Book of Commandments, the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, and sections 101–7 of the 1844 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Its two important appendices include a reconstruction of what the final thirty-two pages of the Book of Commandments would have included if the press had not been destroyed by a mob. It also includes some photographs of Oliver Cowdery's copy of the Book of Commandments, marked up in preparation for the publication of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants.

The value of this publication for scholars is enhanced by the presentation of the documents. As noted, they are the pure primary sources, where the reader can see the original manuscripts with all their misspellings, mispunctuation, corrections, crossings-out, and erasures. As you turn each page you will see on the left sheet a full-size photo of one of the pages of the revelation book. On the right sheet is a meticulously accurate transcription as well as some important transcription notations. Line breaks in the original document are precisely repeated in the transcript, so that each line of transcript is directly across from its original manuscript position. The editors have identified the handwriting of each person who wrote in the manuscript. Each is color coded, so the reader can immediately tell who wrote what originally, and who made what emendations. In addition, the right page identifies which section of the current Doctrine and Covenants, if any, the revelation belongs to.

As explained in the volume introduction, in the summer of 1830 Joseph Smith and John Whitmer began the process of copying and arranging the Prophet's revelations into a manuscript book that was taken from Ohio to Missouri in 1831. There it was continually updated as more revelations were received and sent from Ohio. This became the basis for the first publications of the early revelations, first in the *Evening and Morning Star* (1832–33) and then in the Book of Commandments. Meanwhile, in Ohio, other revelations were received and recorded in a second revelation book, along with copies of some of those that were also in Revelation Book 1. These two books became the basis for the publication of the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

However, it must be noted that these books do not contain the very first transcriptions made of the revelations. The material here was copied from earlier transcripts, most of which no longer exist. With few exceptions, this publication provides the earliest copies of these revelations extant. For example, what we now know as section 3 of the Doctrine and Covenants was originally given to Joseph Smith in 1828. Clearly, however, the transcription in Revelation Book 1 is of a much later date, for the book was not even in existence until after the Church was founded in 1830. The editors of the volume make the following very important observation:

Preparing the revelation texts for publication was no simple matter. Joseph Smith dictated the words of these texts to a scribe, who committed them to paper. A scribe then copied them into the manuscript books, portions of which were eventually typeset and published as scripture. Sometimes the process was more complicated. For example, Joseph Smith dictated a revelation on 6 December 1832 as Sidney Rigdon wrote it. Frederick G. Williams then made a copy of the text. Orson Hyde copied that copy, and John Whitmer then recorded Hyde's copy into Revelation Book 1, from which it was edited for publication. It is unknown how many

of the revelations in Revelation Books 1 and 2 made such an arduous textual journey, but it appears that few, if any, of the revelations are originals in pristine form. Changes both intentional and inadvertent were made throughout the process. (xxviii–xxix)

The volume begins with a series introduction that provides a brief discussion of Joseph Smith's various activities as a revelator and translator. Then follows a volume introduction that discusses the two manuscript revelation books—their origin, how they were compiled, and how Joseph and his associates prepared them for publication. This is followed by an explanation of the careful editorial method used.

Scholars will be grateful for the editors' rigorous editorial work, described at length in the next six pages of introductory material. They note that aging and sometimes damaged texts as well as imprecise penmanship and sometimes hurried writing presented problems for transcription and verification. Ultimately their transcripts were verified three times, each by a different set of eyes. They used a variety of methods, including ink analysis, to identify handwriting. Anyone making a serious study of the volume should read this section carefully, for it clarifies the various kinds of notations and symbols used in the transcription. Illegible words, letters that have been written over (changed from lower case to upper case, for example), and many other anomalies in the manuscript all had to be dealt with in order to make the transcription as true to the original as possible.

Editing the revelation books was a major challenge, but photographing these old, deteriorating pages and then preparing the photos for publication was another. A description of how this was done constitutes the final section of the introductory material. Weldon C. Anderson did a masterful job of photography, including some careful digital editing. Charles M. Baird prepared the images for printing. As you look at the facsimiles, you will see no evidence at all that they were photographed while resting on a table or that some pages had to be held in place by a microspatula while being photographed. This is because Baird used photo-editing software to remove the image of the tabletop from the background and also to add a thin shadow at the bottom of each image. He did the same with the image of the microspatula as well as with a certain page that presented special problems because of a slip of paper attached to it.² As a result, the viewer looks at each page in the most realistic sense possible.

2. See pages 104–7. The photograph of the manuscript shows where a slip is attached and cannot be removed. But on page 106, that slip has been digitally photographed and the transcription appears on page 107. See pages xxxix–xl for a full description of how this was accomplished.

Though no introduction accompanies each separate revelation, the editors have provided some valuable introductory material that includes a source note and a historical introduction for each revelation book. Each source note offers a detailed description of the book in its current state, indicating which leaves are missing, the general condition of the book, any special markings or notations on or in the book, the nature and state of the binding, and a note on the custodial history. In the historical introduction, the editors tell us when, how, and by whom the book was created, in addition to other kinds of information. For example, they explain the pinholes and adhesive wafers, where pins or wafers once attached notes that were used as the manuscripts were prepared for publication. In the body of the book, the editors make specific comments whenever such pinholes or wafers appear. If the original slips are extant, they are transcribed as separate leaves at the point where they appear in the manuscript book.

Sometimes the revelations as published are amalgams of a series of commandments recorded separately in the manuscript revelation books. For example, the manuscript contains five separate commandments, recorded one after the other in April 1830, to Oliver Cowdery, Hyrum Smith, Samuel Smith, Joseph Smith Sr., and Joseph Knight. In the Doctrine and Covenants these are amalgamated into section 23.

The two revelation books also include nine revelations that have not been canonized by the Church and therefore are not included in the Doctrine and Covenants. One of them, for example, was recorded sometime in early 1830 and is reproduced and transcribed on pages 30–33. It is a commandment given to Oliver Cowdery, Hiram Page, Josiah Stowell, and Joseph Knight, commending them for assisting Joseph Smith and commanding them to secure a copyright of his work.³

It is intriguing to examine these revelation manuscripts with an eye toward discovering who wrote them, who made editorial changes, what changes were made, and how they compare with the current edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Some aspects of what is now section 20 provide interesting examples.

In the early years of the Church, section 20, together with section 22, was called the “Articles and Covenants” of the Church, and because of its importance, it is still sometimes called the Church’s “constitution.” It is in the handwriting of John Whitmer, with a few minor word and punctuation changes inserted by Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and William W. Phelps. The

3. See Stephen Kent Ehat, “‘Securing’ the Prophet’s Copyright in the Book of Mormon: Historical and Legal Context for the So-called Canadian Copyright Revelation,” *BYU Studies* 50, no. 2 (2011): 4–70.

manuscript includes a title, “Church Articles and Covenants,” followed by a heading, in the writing of John Whitmer, that says “Received in Fayette Seneca County New York April 10th 1830[.] Given to Joseph the seer by the gift & power of God &c;” then a phrase was crossed out by Whitmer. Inserted above the line, after the word “seer,” are the words “& Oliver an Apostle,” in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery. He actually prepared an early draft, called “Articles of the Church of Christ,”⁴ which may account for his insertion of his own name in the manuscript. When the revelation appeared as chapter XXIV in the Book of Commandments, the heading simply read “The Articles and Covenants of the church of Christ, given in Fayette, New York, June, 1830.” The specific date, April 10, was deleted, probably because this revelation actually came on more than one date but was amalgamated before it was presented to the Church for a sustaining vote on June 9, 1830. When it appeared as section II of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, there was no heading. In the current edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, the heading reads, “Revelation on Church organization and government, given through Joseph Smith the Prophet, April 1830.”

In the manuscript, the revelation was not divided into verses; these divisions were added in the Book of Commandments. The divisions are much different in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, while the current Doctrine and Covenants uses divisions somewhat similar to the Book of Commandments, except that there are eighty-five verses instead of the earlier sixty-five. The substance remains the same.

There were several other minor changes inserted into the manuscript of this revelation before it was published in the Book of Commandments. Examples: the word “which,” now at the beginning of verse 2, was inserted by Oliver Cowdery; the word “were” now in verse 8 was changed from “was” by Oliver Cowdery. Several such grammatical changes occur, which only shows how careful these men were to make their printed work as accurate and readable as possible. In addition, between the time the revelation was first printed and when it appeared in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, several more changes were made, and these remain in the current edition. Of particular interest to historians is the fact that in verses 2 and 3 of the current section 20 in the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery are referred to as the “first elder” and “second elder of this church,” respectively. The comparable passage in the 1835 edition reads the same, but in the original manuscript and in the Book of Commandments,

4. See Scott H. Faulring, “An Examination of the 1829 ‘Articles of the Church of Christ’ in Relation to Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants,” *BYU Studies* 43, no. 4 (2004): 57–91.

they are each referred to simply as “an Elder of this Church.” The insertion of the phrases “first elder” and “second elder” reflected what these two leaders were actually called in the earliest days of the Church.

All these are relatively minor changes. A more substantive change is seen in the fact that what now constitutes verses 65–67 of section 20 was not included in the manuscript revelation or in the Book of Commandments. This material was incorporated into the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. It refers to presiding elders, traveling bishops, high councilors, and high priests, none of which existed in the Church the day it was organized. The editors of this volume do not discuss any of this, but it is mentioned here because many students will inevitably make such comparisons. This is only evidence that Joseph Smith was not averse to improving transcriptions of his own revelations as well as updating them according to changing circumstances.

A few additional examples should suffice to show how interesting a careful perusal of these documents can be. In Doctrine and Covenants 3:10, relating to Joseph Smith’s loss of his first Book of Mormon transcripts, the Lord says, “thou art still chosen, and art again called to the work.” The original (and the Book of Commandments) reads “will again be” instead of “art again.” A more extensive change is found in connection with what is now section 102, which is the same as section V of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. Verses 30–32 (verse 13 in 1835) are not in the revelation book. However, there is an asterisk in the manuscript at that point, presumably indicating where that material should be inserted. One cannot help but wonder when it was written and what happened to the original.

In most cases the revelation manuscripts do not give any indication of a division into verses for publication purposes, though there are numerous exceptions. The first one comes in connection with what is now section 10 of the Doctrine and Covenants. At that point there are several pages missing in the book of manuscripts, so what is there begins with what is now the fourth word in verse 42. The revelation was transcribed by John Whitmer, but William W. Phelps inserted numerals indicating division into nineteen verses. That division was reflected in the Book of Commandments (chapter IX). The same revelation was divided into eighteen verses in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants but was subdivided further at a later date so that it constitutes seventy verses in the current edition.

At the end of this volume, the editors have provided some worthwhile additional material. A scribal directory gives a brief biographical sketch of each of the seven men whose handwriting appears in the revelation books along with a description of his handwriting characteristics. This is followed by a bibliography and then a very useful correspondence table that lists

each revelation in order; the page numbers where it appears in the revelation books (note that a few are included in both books); the date it was published in the *Evening and Morning Star*; the relevant chapter numbers in the Book of Commandments; and the relevant section numbers in the 1835, 1844, and 1981 editions of the Doctrine and Covenants and the Community of Christ's 2004 Doctrine and Covenants.

Those who may not have thought deeply about the process of recording and then preparing revelations for publication may, at first, be a bit discomfited or confused when they hear that original revelation manuscripts were altered in any way. Hopefully they will soon realize that Joseph Smith was well aware that in the process of dictating, recording, copying, and often recopying his words all kinds of errors could creep in. Further, one should not assume that the revelations were always dictated in some kind of pure divine language. Rather, in section 1 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord reminds the Saints that “these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24). The need for editing was recognized at a special conference in Hiram, Ohio, on November 8, 1831. There it was resolved that “Br Joseph Smith Jr correct those errors or mistakes which he may discover by the holy Spirit while . . . reviewing the revelations & commandments.” It was also resolved that Oliver Cowdery should copy, correct, and select those writings that should be published.⁵

Joseph himself, then, was well aware that the recorded revelations were not perfect. All he had to do was look at them in order to detect errors of grammar, punctuation, and spelling, and also, at times, substantive errors. In addition, as he received further revelation, “line upon line,” he could see the need for modifications in what was written earlier. The additions to section 20, noted above, are good examples. As Elder Marlin K. Jensen, Church Historian at the time this volume appeared, wrote:

Joseph knew from experience that the human process of writing down revelations, copying them into manuscript books, and then passing them through various hands in preparation for publication inevitably introduced unintentional errors. Sometimes changes were required to clarify wording. . . .

Joseph seemed to regard the manuscript revelations as his best efforts to capture the voice of the Lord condescending to communicate in what

5. 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.

Joseph called the “crooked, broken, scattered, and imperfect language” of men.⁶

There is an oft-quoted statement by Parley P. Pratt that may affect how some Saints perceive the process of recording Joseph Smith’s revelations. Elder Pratt was present when section 50 of the Doctrine and Covenants was received, on May 9, 1831. As he prepared his autobiography several years later, he wrote:

Each sentence was uttered slowly and very distinctly, and with a pause between each, sufficiently long for it to be recorded, by an ordinary writer, in long hand.

This was the manner in which all his written revelations were dictated and written. 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.⁷

While Elder Pratt was probably correct in his report of how Joseph spoke, without hesitation or repetition, he was not fully aware of what happened as a scribe put the words down on paper. Section 50, as recorded in Revelation Book 1, flows nicely and contains some beautiful and powerful admonitions. But there is virtually no punctuation (which, of course, reflects the scribe, not Joseph Smith), and there are several interlines as well as word corrections, though not as many as in most of the other revelations. There is no indication of who the original scribe was, but John Whitmer copied it into the revelation book and the minimal corrections were made by him, Sidney Rigdon, William W. Phelps, and Joseph Smith. None of the corrections, however, detracts from the power and importance of the revelation. They only make the revelation more readable. With all this in mind, the faithful Latter-day Saint should feel comforted, not concerned, with the knowledge that Joseph and his associates carefully edited and refined the revelations before they were published.

The scholarly excellence and importance of this volume is self-evident. But its significance lies partly in the fact that it is only one of a projected thirty volumes that will come from the press in the ongoing Joseph Smith

6. Marlin K. Jensen, “The Joseph Smith Papers: The Manuscript Revelation Books,” *Ensign* 39 (July 2009): 49. The quotation is from Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. and comp. Dean C. Jessee, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 287.

7. Parley P. Pratt Jr., ed. *The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 62.

Papers Project. The Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, along with the leaders of the Church itself, must be commended for their recognition of how important it is that these founding documents, including all the papers of Joseph Smith, be made available to the public. It is to be expected that as more documents become available, many questions will be raised about things that were heretofore not known. There is no question in my mind, however, that the documents will have only a positive effect on the image of the Church and upon Joseph Smith's reputation as one of the great religious leaders of nineteenth-century America.

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