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# Stories BEHIND the Revelations

*The Joseph Smith Papers helped us make minor adjustments in the Doctrine and Covenants section headings. But these small things can also yield great insights for our lives.*

**By Matthew J. Grow**

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In March 2013, the Church announced the release of a new edition of the Latter-day Saint scriptures (see “The New Edition” on page 71), which includes updated historical information in nearly 80 section headings of the Doctrine and Covenants. Most of these adjustments came from research done by historians with the Joseph Smith Papers in the Church History Department. Many changes involve refinements in the dating of the revelations or in their historical context made possible by close study of two manuscript revelation books used in the 1830s as well as other historical sources.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest manuscript revelation book is known as the “Book of Commandments and Revelations.” John Whitmer likely began copying revelations in this book around March 1831, after his appointment as Church historian. His dating of the revelations and his brief historical commentaries about them help us to better understand the context in which Joseph Smith received them.

The factual corrections and expanded historical context in the 2013 Doctrine and Covenants section headings help us to better understand the story behind the revelations and the questions that prompted Joseph Smith to inquire of the Lord. This information can often help us relate to

the people involved and better understand the doctrines contained in the revelation. Here are a few examples of what we can learn from some of these seemingly minor adjustments.

## **Section 19: Admonition and Obedience**

Doctrine and Covenants section 19 commanded Martin Harris to sell his property to pay for the printing of the Book of Mormon. Section 19 was traditionally dated March 1830, but recent research suggests that Joseph Smith likely received this revelation in the summer of 1829. Why is this change significant?

In June 1829, Martin Harris and Joseph Smith had negotiated with several printers regarding the publication of the Book of Mormon, finally reaching an agreement with E. B. Grandin of Palmyra. John H. Gilbert, the typesetter who worked for Grandin, recalled that Harris had promised to pay for the cost of the printing, which would come to \$3,000 for 5,000 copies. According to Grandin’s brother-in-law, “Harris became for a time in some degree staggered in his confidence; but nothing could be done in the way of printing without his aid.”<sup>2</sup> Grandin refused to begin the work unless Harris paid up front.

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## SECTION 19

Revelation given through Joseph Smith, at Manchester in the summer of 1829. In his history, the Prophet declared the commandment of God and not of man, to Martin Harris, who is Eternal.”

1–3, Christ has all power; 4–5, All men must repent or suffer; 6–12, Eternal punishment is God’s punishment; 13–20, Christ suffered for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; 21–28, Preach the gospel of repentance; 29–41, Declare glad tidings.

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4 And su  
<sup>a</sup>repent or  
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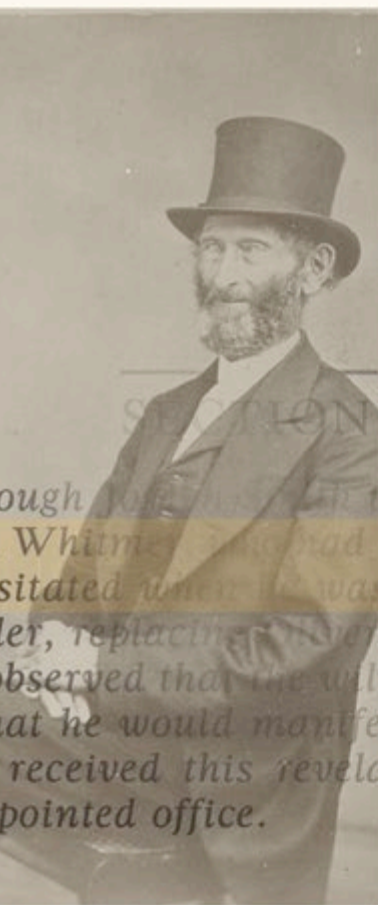
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## LEARN MORE

For more information on the historical context of the Doctrine and Covenants, see the “Revelations in Context” series on [history.lds.org](http://history.lds.org) and the first two volumes of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (see also [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org)).

### John Whitmer



It was likely during this time of Harris's hesitation that Joseph Smith received the revelation urging Harris to pay the printer. Harris followed the Lord's instructions. On August 25, 1829, he mortgaged his property and gave the mortgage to Grandin, who then sold it for cash. At this point, the printing of the Book of Mormon was paid in full. By March 1830, the payment had already been made, Harris had no more land, and the books were already rolling off the press, so it would make little sense for this revelation to have come then. In the summer of 1829, however, as Harris hesitated, the Lord's chastisement and encouragement led to his going forward with the difficult decision to mortgage his property so the Book of Mormon could be published.<sup>3</sup>

### Section 47: Calling and Comfort

The early Saints had great confidence in Joseph Smith as a revelator. Section 47, received by Joseph Smith in March 1831, called John Whitmer, who was already serving as a clerk to Joseph Smith, to keep a history of the Church. Joseph Smith had asked Whitmer to also keep a narrative history (rather than to simply record or copy records), but Whitmer initially hesitated. The new heading to the section quotes from Whitmer himself and demonstrates both his internal struggle and his faith. In his history, he wrote, “I would rather not do it but observed that the will of the Lord be done, and if he desires it, I desire that he would manifest it through Joseph the Seer.”<sup>4</sup>

The Lord then spoke through Joseph Smith, extending and explaining this calling to Whitmer and also promising him the aid of

the Comforter. Whitmer, now assured that the calling came by revelation, accepted it and began to keep the Church history.<sup>5</sup>

### Section 49: Immediate Obedience

One change to the heading of section 49 is the date: May 7, 1831, rather than March 1831.<sup>6</sup> Why does it make a difference whether the revelation was received in March or on May 7?

In section 49, the Lord directs Parley P. Pratt, Sidney Rigdon, and Leman Copley to take a revelation to the nearby Shaker community of North Union near Cleveland, Ohio, and call the people to repentance. The three men chosen for this mission all had knowledge of and ties to Shakers. Copley had been a Shaker briefly, Rigdon had admired Shaker communalism and interacted with them, and Pratt had grown up in the shadow of their main community of New Lebanon, New York. Furthermore, Pratt, along with Oliver Cowdery and a few others, had visited the Ohio Shakers and left several copies of the Book of Mormon with them many months earlier.

Why is the date of their receiving this assignment significant? Historical records demonstrate that Sidney Rigdon and Leman Copley arrived in North Union on the evening of Saturday, May 7, and Parley P. Pratt arrived the following morning. If the revelation was given in March 1830, this would indicate a delay of some two months between the time it was given and the time the men acted on it. Such a delay would be understandable, given the daunting assignment they had received to travel to the Shakers and call them to repentance.



## SECTION 49

...th Joseph Smith the Prophet to Sidney Rigdon,  
...eman Copley, at Kirtland, Ohio, May 7, 1831.

...braced the gospel but still held to some of the  
...United Society of Believers in Christ's



However, we now know the revelation was received on May 7, the same day that the men left to preach to the Shakers. After Joseph Smith received the revelation, the men did not pause and consider their difficult assignment for weeks. Rather, they left immediately. This simple date change gives us a glimpse of the faithfulness and obedience of these men.<sup>7</sup>

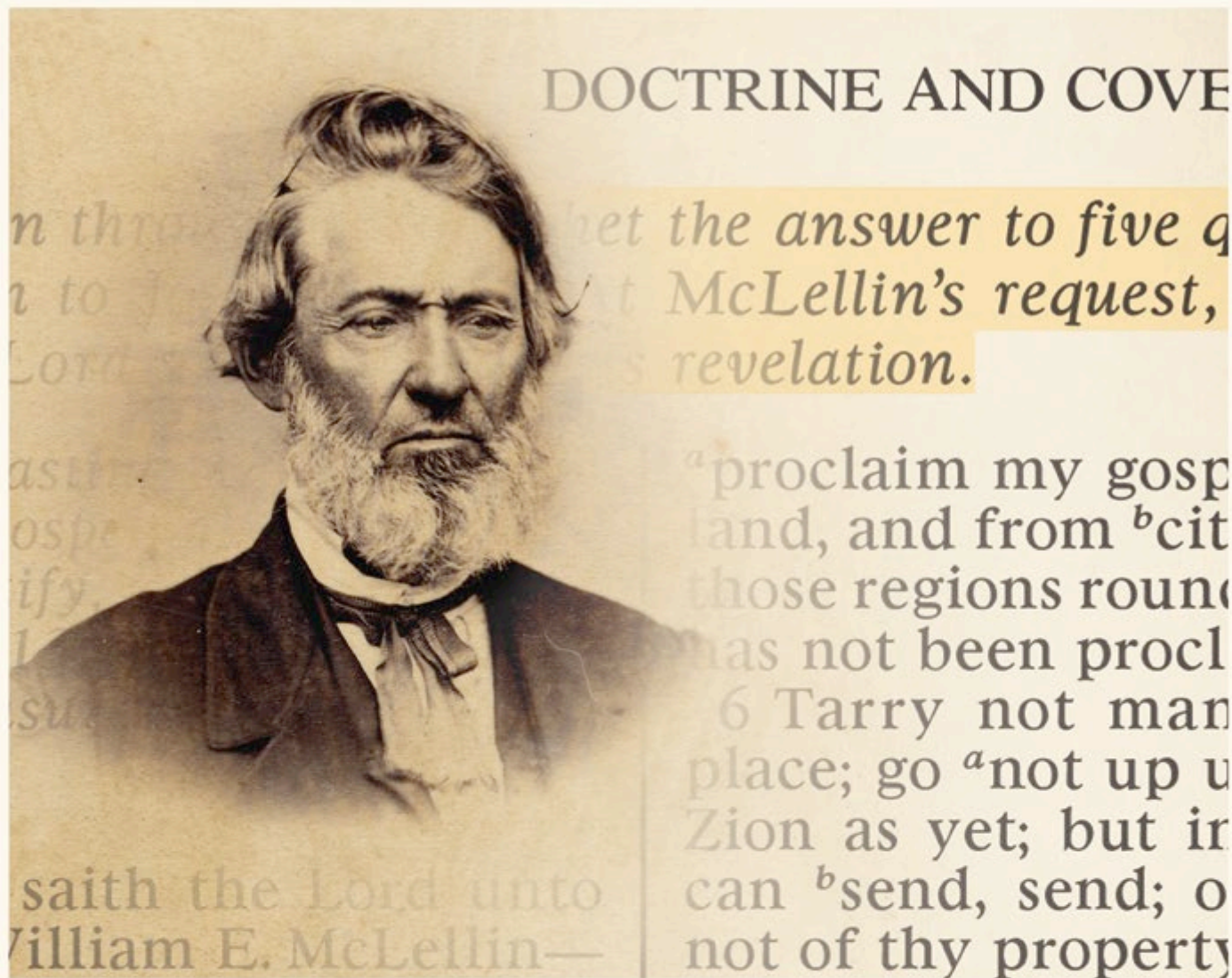
### Section 66: Questions and Answers

Information in the manuscript revelation books led to a refinement in the traditional date and place given for the revelation in section 66. Rather than being received on October 25, 1831, in Orange, Ohio, the revelation was actually received four days later, on October 29, in Hiram, Ohio. Research in William McLellan's journal and his later writings also provide a richer context to this revelation.

A recent convert, McLellan first met Joseph Smith at a conference in Orange, Ohio, held October 25 and 26, where

McLellan was ordained to the high priesthood. McLellan then traveled with Joseph to Hiram, Ohio, where he "went before the Lord in secret, and on my knees asked him to reveal the answer to five questions through his Prophet." Like many other recent converts, McLellan then asked for a revelation that would provide direction in his personal life. Joseph Smith received a revelation, now known as section 66, which McLellan said answered his questions "to my full and entire satisfaction."<sup>8</sup> In his journal that day, McLellan wrote that the questions "had dwelt upon my mind with anxiety yet with uncertainty." He also wrote, "The Lord condescended to hear my prayer and give me a revelation of his will, through his prophet or seer (Joseph)."<sup>9</sup>

McLellan's writings demonstrate that he believed the Lord answered the five specific questions he wanted Joseph Smith to answer, questions he had not shared with Joseph. This interaction shows how deeply the early Church members believed in Joseph's ability to receive revelation.<sup>10</sup>



*William McLellin*

### The Value of the Revelations

The revised section headings give us insight into the people the revelations were directed to. Perhaps we can relate to the hesitation of Martin Harris or John Whitmer when Harris was asked to sacrifice for the gospel and Whitmer was directed to take on a difficult assignment for which he may not have felt qualified. Perhaps we sometimes feel like Sidney Rigdon, Parley P. Pratt, and Leman Copley in their enthusiastic and immediate response.

The historical record demonstrates how greatly the early Saints valued Joseph Smith's revelations. This is partly shown in the painstaking way in which John Whitmer and others recorded the revelations in the manuscript revelation books and by how other Saints recorded copies for themselves before the revelations were published.

In a Church conference in November 1831, in which members decided to publish Joseph Smith's revelations and

print 10,000 copies (at a time when the members of the Church could be counted in the hundreds), the conference declared that the revelations were “worth to the Church the riches of the whole Earth.”<sup>11</sup> We see this in the responses of individuals to the revelations. When the Lord spoke through Joseph the Seer, Martin Harris mortgaged his property to pay for the Book of Mormon; John Whitmer took up his pen to write Church history; Sidney Rigdon, Leman Copley, and Parley P. Pratt left immediately to take the revelation to the Shakers; and William McLellin believed his private questions were answered.

If we take these revelations as seriously as the early Saints did—and if we take the principle of revelation and the possibility of revelation in our own lives just as seriously—we, like them, will be able to declare that the revelations are truly “worth to the Church the riches of the whole Earth.” ■



## NOTES

1. In the early days of the Church, Joseph Smith's revelations were written by scribes generally using loose sheets of paper. They were then copied in other books to ensure that a permanent record would be preserved. The early Saints used two of these revelation books between 1831 and 1835. These books served as the basis for the first publications of Joseph Smith's revelations, the Book of Commandments (1833) and the Doctrine and Covenants (1835).
2. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism: Biography of Its Founders and History of Its Church* (1867), 51.
3. For more on the dating of Doctrine and Covenants 19, see Revelation, ca. Summer 1829 [D&C 19], in *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2013), 85–89; josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-circa-summer-1829-dc-19.
4. John Whitmer, History, 1831–ca. 1847, in *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847*, vol. 2 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2012), 36.
5. For more on this section, see Revelation, ca. Mar. 8, 1831–B [D&C 47], in *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, 284–86; josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-circa-8-march-1831-b-dc-47.
6. The Book of Commandments in 1833 and the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants both date this revelation to March 1831. However, the presiding Shaker elder at North Union, Ashbel Kitchell, recorded the revelation in his journal and dated it May 7, 1831 (see “A Mormon Interview: Copied from Brother Ashbel Kitchell’s Pocket Journal,” 3–5, Church History Library, Salt Lake City). Revelation Book 1, the earliest copy of the revelation, confirms the May 7, 1831, date.
7. For more on this section, see Revelation, May 7, 1831 [D&C 49], in *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, 297–303; josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-7-may-1831-dc-49.
8. William E. McLellin, Editorial, *Ensign of Liberty*, Jan. 1848, 61.
9. Journal entry for Oct. 29, 1831, *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836*, ed. Jan Shippy and John W. Welch (1994), 46, 45; spelling standardized.
10. For more on this section, see Revelation, Oct. 29, 1831 [D&C 66], in *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, vol. 2 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2013), 87–92; josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-29-october-1831-dc-66.
11. Minutes, Nov. 12, 1831, in *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, 138; josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/minutes-12-november-1831.
12. In Bruce T. Harper, “The Church Publishes a New Triple Combination,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1981, 19.
13. First Presidency announcement letter, Mar. 1, 2013, scriptures.lds.org.

## THE NEW EDITION

More than 30 years have passed since the important foundational work of the last edition of the scriptures. That effort, which was completed in 1981, took more than a decade and included revisions to section and chapter headings as well as the addition of significant study aids such as the Bible Dictionary and the Topical Guide.

At the time, President Boyd K. Packer stated, “The Latter-day Saint publication of the King James Version of the Bible and the new triple combination with all their helps are of monumental importance to all members of the Church.”<sup>12</sup>

The refinements in the 2013 edition mostly consist of minor adjustments and additions to the scriptural study aids. Some spelling and punctuation corrections have also been made to the scriptural text. Since the changes are minor and the pagination remains the same, and since the content is available in digital forms, the First Presidency explains that Church members “are not expected to obtain a new set of scriptures.”<sup>13</sup>

## RECENT HISTORY OF SCRIPTURE PUBLICATION

### 1979

#### *LDS Edition of the King James Bible*

This years-long, multifaceted project included the Bible Dictionary, Topical Guide, footnotes, maps, Joseph Smith Translation, and other study aids.

### 1981

#### *New Edition of the Triple Combination*

This new edition included new chapter summaries, index, and footnotes. “Another Testament of Jesus Christ” was added to the Book of Mormon title. Sections 137 and 138 and Official Declaration 2 were added to the Doctrine and Covenants.

### 1999

#### *New Maps and Photographs*

New maps and photographs from Bible lands and Church history sites were added, including explanatory text and an index.

### 2013

#### *New Edition of LDS Scriptures*

Begun in 2004, this project corrected minor spelling and punctuation errors in scripture text and also made minor corrections and revisions to cross-references and chapter and section headings. All the standard works were newly typeset. For more information, including a complete summary of adjustments, go to scriptures.lds.org.