



The

Joseph Smith

Papers: The Manuscript Revelation Books

The manuscript revelation books contain many of the earliest known copies of the revelations received by Joseph Smith and provide insights into the revelatory process.

BY ELDER MARLIN K. JENSEN

Of the Seventy
Church Historian and Recorder

In the 1970s Latter-day Saint scholars began to recognize the benefits of collecting and making available to the public documents related to the Prophet Joseph Smith's life and works. The Joseph Smith Papers Project is the culmination of this decades-long effort. Project scholars intend to collect all journals, diaries, correspondence, discourses, revelations, written histories, notices, and legal papers—everything of a written nature that Joseph Smith generated or directed to be created.

When finished, *The Joseph Smith Papers* will consist of about 30 volumes containing more than 2,000 documents. The volumes will be divided into six series based on areas of emphasis: documents, history,

journals, administrative papers, legal and business affairs, and revelations and translations. By providing transcriptions (typed versions) of all original documents, *The Joseph Smith Papers* will provide scholars and other interested persons with readable texts while also reducing the need to handle and potentially damage fragile historical documents. Each transcription undergoes a three-step process that meets scholarly standards designed to ensure accurately transcribed texts.

The study of these historical sources, particularly in their earliest forms, provides students of Joseph Smith with an enriched understanding of the Prophet's life and the development of the restored Church. *The Joseph Smith Papers* will also make detailed historical research easier. Documents housed in a variety of locations—including collections held by the Church, universities, historical societies, and private owners—will be published and available in many locations and eventually on the Internet. Because this comprehensive project will offer a deep pool of primary sources, including many that scholars would not otherwise have been able to locate, *The Joseph Smith Papers* will lift the standards and accuracy of future scholarship dealing with Joseph Smith and early Church history.



The study of these historical sources provides students of Joseph Smith with an enriched understanding of the Prophet's life and the development of the restored Church.

One of the Prophet's priorities after the organization of the Church in 1830 was the recording and preservation of his revelations.

Below: Revelation Book 1. Above right: Revelation Book 2. Below right: First edition of A Book of Commandments.

The Revelations and Translations Series

The volumes in the series titled "Revelations and Translations" will reproduce the earliest manuscripts of Joseph Smith's written revelations and translations, together with the official editions of these documents as they were published during his lifetime. These publications include the first edition of the Book of Mormon (1830); the first publication of a collection of Joseph Smith's revelations, called A Book of Commandments (1833); and the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (1835).

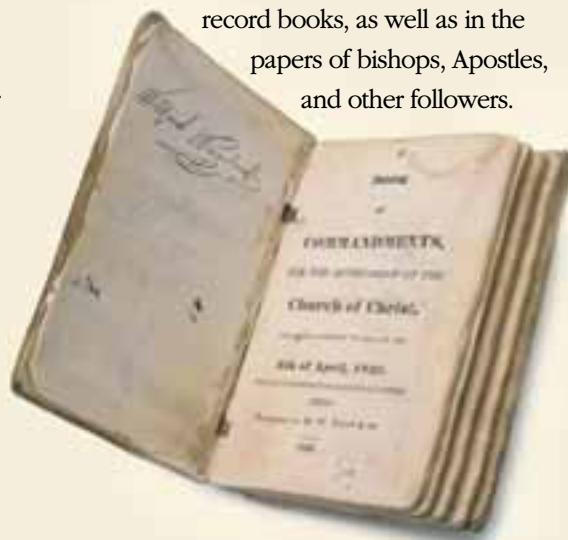
One of the Prophet's priorities after the organization of the Church in 1830 was the recording and preservation of his revelations. Although more comprehensive record keeping did not emerge until 1832, Joseph Smith and John Whitmer began in the summer of 1830 to assemble the revelations the Prophet had received to that point. By at least March of 1831, John Whitmer began copying this early collection of revelation manuscripts into what he titled the "Book of Commandments and Revelations." This manuscript book, which *Papers* editors have designated as Revelation Book 1, contains items that were copied from around March 1831 to the middle of 1835.

Commissioned during a November 1831 Church conference in Ohio to publish the collected revelations, John Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery carried the "Book of Commandments and Revelations" to Missouri where they, along with W. W. Phelps, set about publishing A Book of Commandments (see D&C 67). By early 1832, with the first book of revelation manuscripts in Missouri,



Joseph and his scribes procured another book in which to copy revelations. Known as the "Kirtland Revelation Book," this second book has been labeled as Revelation Book 2 by the *Papers* editors. It was created from late February or early March 1832 to the end of 1834. The first volume in the Revelations and Translations Series features these two books of revelation manuscripts.

Through careful study, Joseph Smith Papers Project scholars have determined that the "Book of Commandments and Revelations" served as the principal source for the 1833 publication of A Book of Commandments and that both the "Book of Commandments and Revelations" and the "Kirtland Revelation Book" became the basis for the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835. These manuscript books were no longer used after publication of the Doctrine and Covenants but were safely stored with other Church records. Later revelations were recorded in Joseph Smith's journals and record books, as well as in the papers of bishops, Apostles, and other followers.



Following the publication of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835, these two manuscript books were largely ignored because the published volumes were available. However, scholars in recent years have gained a strong interest in examining early manuscripts of Joseph Smith's revelations. Revelation Book 2 had not been readily accessible until the Church published images of the original manuscripts as part of its 2002 *Selected Collections from the Archives* DVD collection.¹ Also, only in recent years have scholars begun to assess the value of Revelation Book 1, which had been in the possession of the First Presidency.

Revelation Book 1 contains the earliest known copies of many revelations and, in some cases, the only surviving early manuscript copies. It was the source for the revelations published in the first issue of the Church periodical *The Evening and the Morning Star*. Four leaves that had been removed from the book at some point are currently owned by the Community of Christ Library-Archives in Independence, Missouri, and are being reproduced with permission in *The Joseph Smith Papers*.

Revelation Book 1 is a near comprehensive collection of early revelations, containing 64 of the 65 items published in 1833 in *A Book of Commandments*² as well as 95 of the 103 sections published in 1835 in the Doctrine and Covenants. Only 10 items from the manuscript book do not appear in either *A Book of Commandments* or the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants.



Joseph seemed to regard the manuscript revelations as his best efforts to capture the voice of the Lord.

Preparing the Manuscript Revelation Books for Publication during Joseph Smith's Time

One of Joseph Smith's tasks in reviewing the manuscripts prior to their publication was to "correct those errors or mistakes which he may discover by the Holy Spirit."³ 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. Occasionally, later revelations would supersede or update previously received revelations, necessitating the editing of documents to alter previous versions. Various other changes were also made from time to time. Most of these, such as dividing the text into verses or clarifying meaning, did not involve substantive corrections.

Joseph seemed to regard the manuscript revelations as his best efforts to capture the voice of the Lord condescending to communicate in what Joseph called the "crooked, broken, scattered, and imperfect language" of men.⁴ The revealed preface to the published revelations also seems to express this principle: "I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language" (D&C 1:24).

Joseph and his associates were appointed by the actions of Church conferences to prepare the revelations for publication by correcting

the texts. Recent analysis of both manuscript revelation books reveals how and when many of the changes were made. For example, some changes were made before selected items were published in Missouri, while others were made in Ohio before the 1835 publication of the Doctrine and Covenants.

One common example involves changes made by Sidney Rigdon. He often changed the language in the revelations from the biblical “thee,” “thy,” and “thine” to the modern “you,” “your,” and “yours.” Many of these changes

were later reversed. He also corrected grammar and changed some of the language to clarify and modify words and meaning.

In a few cases, more substantive changes were made as revelations were updated for the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. For example, section 20 was originally received in 1830, before much of the leadership structure of the Church as we know it today was revealed to Joseph Smith. By 1835 Joseph had organized many offices and quorums by revelation. To include this newly revealed ecclesiastical order, several text changes and additions were incorporated into section 20. Our current verses 65–67 on ordaining men to priesthood offices, for



Joseph Smith

instance, had been revealed after the 1833 publication and were subsequently added to the 1835 publication.

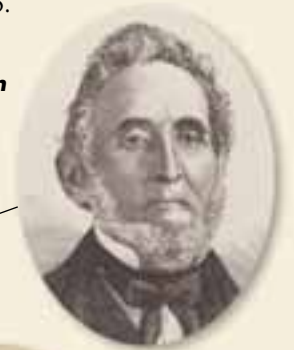
Joseph Smith reviewed many of his associates’ editorial changes and made slight alterations in his own hand before *A Book of Commandments* was published in 1833. He made additional changes, including adding surnames to individuals mentioned in the revelations, just before the Doctrine and Covenants was published in 1835.



John Whitmer



Sidney Rigdon



William W. Phelps

Sometime around 1834–35 in Kirtland, Ohio, Revelation Book 2 was used for the preparation of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, and all but eight items in the manuscript book were published in that 1835 volume. In contrast, just three of the revelations copied into the book were published in *A Book of Commandments* in 1833. Two of the manuscript book’s revelations were first published in the 1844 Doctrine and Covenants.

Subsequent editing changes through the

1981 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants involved occasional word changes, but the major substantive changes occurred under the Prophet Joseph's guidance for the 1835 edition.

New Information

In editing these manuscript books, *Papers* editors have uncovered new information. For example, scholars interested in the chronology of Joseph Smith's life have long relied upon the generic month-only dating of many early revelations. Revelation Book 1 provides the specific dates for many of these revelations. In addition, John Whitmer's brief historical introductions to many of the revelations also provide historical context for scholars.

Through careful analysis, editors have been able to identify the handwriting of most of the editing marks on the manuscript pages. When the Revelations and Translations Series is published, images of documents will be included with transcriptions on facing pages. Thus, readers will be able to see the original handwriting, editing marks, and even the texture of the documents but will not need to be experts in deciphering handwriting. The changes made in the original documents will be color coded in the transcriptions so readers can identify the handwriting of the individuals who wrote on each page.

Another interesting development from work on the Revelations and Translations Series has been the identification of a previously unpublished revelation on securing a copyright for the Book of Mormon in Canada. David Whitmer, after he left the Church, recalled that the revelation promised success in selling the copyright, but upon return of the men charged with the duty, Joseph Smith and others were disappointed by what seemed like failure. Historians have relied upon statements of David Whitmer, Hiram Page, and William McLellin for decades but have not had the actual text of the revelation. Revelation Book 1 will provide it.

Although we still do not know the whole story, particularly Joseph Smith's own view of the situation, we do know that calling the divine communication a "failed

revelation" is not warranted. The Lord's directive clearly conditions the successful sale of the copyright on the worthiness of those seeking to make the sale as well as on the spiritual receptivity of the potential purchasers.⁵

The Prophet's New Understanding

The editing and updating of revelation texts in the early years of the Church demonstrate the process of continuing revelation to Joseph Smith. The revelation manuscripts reveal how men grappled in trying to make certain that the ideas and doctrines Joseph received were transcribed and printed accurately—a process that for the publication of any work risks the introduction of error. In some instances, when a new revelation changed or updated what had previously been received, the Prophet edited the earlier written revelation to reflect the new understanding. Thus, as his doctrinal knowledge clarified and expanded, so did the recorded revelations. They were characterized by the changing nature of his understanding of the sacred subject matter. The Prophet did not believe that revelations, once recorded, could not be changed by further revelation.

The preservation and publication of these manuscript revelation books provide a significant resource for students of Church history. This project will lead to a greater understanding of how our printed revelations were organized and published, as well as greater insight into the mind and intent of Joseph Smith. A study of these books of revelations will increase not only our knowledge but also our testimony in recognizing the Lord's plan of continuing revelation that provides for the ever-changing needs of the growing Church. ■

The author acknowledges the assistance of Robin S. Jensen, of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, and Joshua J. Perkey, of Church magazines, in the preparation of this article.

NOTES

1. Richard E. Turley Jr., ed., *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (DVD, 2002).
2. The single revelation published in A Book of Commandments but not found in Revelation Book 1 is Revelation, May 1829–B, in A Book of Commandments 11 (see D&C 12).
3. Minute Book 2 (also called "Far West Record"), Nov. 8, 1831.
4. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, Nov. 27, 1832, in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, comp. Dean C. Jessee, rev. ed. (2002), 287.
5. See Revelation Book 1, 30–31.