

Changing Revelatory Messages: A Mormon Example

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Introduction

This article makes clear that there were changes in Joseph Smith's revelations and early story. Messages were later amended and redacted. First, a brief review will be made of the 1835 changes in Smith's revelations and how they related to a new condition. Second, an examination will be made of Smith's history and how modifications occurred in the story of his visions.

"Behold, this is mine authority, and the authority of my servants, and my Preface unto the Book of my Commandments, which I have given them to publish unto you, O inhabitants of the earth."¹ These words were uttered by Mormonism's founding prophet Joseph Smith on November 1, 1831, at a conference held at the John Johnson Sr. home in Hiram, Ohio.² Though the printing of Smith's revelations was disrupted in July 1833, there were enough copies put together in makeshift bindings that indicate that copies were sold and referred to as late as 1835.³

Divine revelation is usually characterized as the imparting of truth to men and women through mystical means that are distinct from ordinary human thought. But for Joseph Smith, revelation seemed to come from day-to-day experience, from interactions with other people, and from the study of biblical texts. Richard Van Wagoner explained, "Upgrading [of] revelations and retrospective editing the past are hallmarks of early Mormonism."⁴

On December 31, 1833, twenty-nine-year-old Wilford Woodruff was baptized into the

¹ A Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ (Zion [Independence, MO]: Published by W. W. Phelps & Co., 1833), chapter 1:2, hereafter cited as Book of Commandments; also in *The Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1981), section 1:6, hereafter cited as LDS D&C; and *Book of Doctrine and Covenants* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1990), Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, section 1:2 (hereafter cited as RLDS D&C). Subparagraph letters of RLDS D&C not included.

² The Conference Minutes, and Record Book, of Christ's Church of Latter Day Saints, 15–16, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Lastter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, hereafter cited as Church History Library. See 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), 26–27. The minutes were recorded in this record book in 1838.

³ See for example 1835 D&C, Lecture of Theology, Lecture 3:10.

⁴ Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 129n5.

Church of Christ.⁵ In August 1834 he purchased a copy of the Book of Commandments from John Whitmer in Clay County, Missouri.⁶ Woodruff recalled two decades later, “I saw the book of commandments or revelations given through Joseph Smith, and I believed them with all my heart, and rejoiced therein.”⁷ A few smaller organizations, such as the Church of Christ (Temple Lot) and churches of Christ (with the Elijah Message) use the Book of Commandments as part of the Restoration story.

Early Texts of Revelations

On April 6, 1830, at Manchester, New York, a revelation regarding Joseph Smith Jr., and the Church of Christ, declared: “Wherefore, meaning the church, thou shalt give heed unto all his words, and commandments, which he shall give unto you, as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me.”⁸ By comparing early texts, one can often reconstruct the original wording. Smith’s revelations did not have to be revised since early copies were available for examination. But by examining the messages that were changed, we may gain insight into why these revisions were made.

The sacred word, relayed through fallible prophets, was neither inerrant nor static in Joseph Smith’s view—so as the need arose, he revised the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and his autobiography and revelations. Smith revised his revelations in accordance with his developing theology. Clare Vlahos, among others, questioned this approach: “That Joseph Smith *in general* made changes in the written revelations can tell us only one thing: that he did not believe the particular words he put down on the page were literally God’s.”⁹

Changes were made in many of the 1828–33 revelations. They reflected Smith’s theology, modifications in church government, recognition of former discrepancies, and sensitivity to criticism engendered by the originals as reconstructed in early 1835.¹⁰ The modified wording departed from what was expressed at the time the revelations were written, representing ideas current at the time the revisions were made. Such clear-cut redactions indicate ideas out of their proper timeframe and may be characterized as anachronisms.

In 2009 a handwritten manuscript book titled “A Book of Commandments & Revelations” (hereafter cited as BCR), which had been in the possession of the Church of Jesus

⁵ Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, typescript, 1833–98, vol. 1 (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983), 6.

⁶ John Whitmer Account Book, under the date of August 12, 1834, Church History Library. Wilford Woodruff was ordained a priest on November 5, 1834, his license being signed by John Whitmer. See Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 1:14.

⁷ “History of Wilford Woodruff (From his own pen),” *Deseret News*, July 7, 1858, Fillmore City, Utah Territory.

⁸ Book of Commandments 22:4; LDS D&C 21:4; RLDS 19:2.

⁹ Clare D. Vlahos, “A Question of Methodology,” *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action* 2, no.3 (Spring 1972): 465, emphasis in original.

¹⁰ See Robert J. Woodford, “How the Revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants Were Received and Compiled,” *Ensign*, January 1985, 27–33 and Karl F. Best, “Changes in the Revelations, 1833 to 1835,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 87–112.

Christ of Latter-day Saints since the 1830s, was published by the Church Historian's Press.¹¹ The record contains handwritten modifications to the prophet's revelatory messages. This is the earliest known compilation of Smith's revelations or commandments. As Richard L. Bushman explained, "He revised his own revelations, adding new material and splicing one to another, altering the wording as he saw fit. He felt authorized to expand the revelations as his understanding expanded."¹²

Through textual criticism, scholars may determine what the early wording of texts contained and may thereby confirm that revelatory documents have been modified subsequent to their reception. As in the case of scholars who compare biblical texts, this method can be used in comparing handwritten manuscripts and printed works to deduce the early text. Joseph Smith was authorized to make simple corrections for the forthcoming Book of Commandments. Historical research indicates that there were modifications in Smith's revelations beyond simple copying errors. Theologians can evaluate which changes were made on purpose and how such changes relate to differing concepts of revelation in the Latter-day Saint community.

Individuals involved in the printing of Smith's revelations included Oliver Cowdery and William W. Phelps, whose handwritten notations are contained in the BCR. Cowdery worked on printing the Book of Commandments and also the *Evening and the Morning Star*. Cowdery's copy of the Book of Commandments contains notations for the new edition of the revelations for the forthcoming work titled Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints. Many of the revisions by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were made during the months of January through June 1835, nearly a year before John Whitmer and W. W. Phelps brought the BCR back to Kirtland from Missouri.¹³ A reprint of the *Star* contains the revised text for a few revelations that were used for the Doctrine and Covenants.

In preparing the revelatory messages for the new publication, Smith wanted to include in this work a better image of his organization. By this means he could provide new meaning to his messages. Revising prior revelations gave him new interpretation with clearer understanding to the church he founded. The 1835 Doctrine and Covenants contained the doctrine as presented in a series of lectures on the theology of faith authored by Sidney Rigdon, who was the church theologian.¹⁴ The second part of the Doctrine and Covenants was the Covenants and

¹¹ Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations: Manuscript Revelation Books, Facsimile Edition* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009).

¹² Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 285.

¹³ This includes the Kirtland reprint of the *Evening and Morning Star* for the issues printed from January through June 1835.

¹⁴ Sidney Rigdon's contribution included a number of series printed in the *Evening and the Morning Star* and *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, Kirtland, Ohio. The titles of a few of the articles were "Millennium," "Faith of the Church," and "The Gospel." Readers were informed about the articles, "they are from the pen of our worthy brother and friend, S. RIGDON, one of the Presidents of the church of the Latter Day Saints." *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 2 (November 1834): 26. On the authorship of the lectures on faith see Noel B. Reynolds, "The

Commandments. As the preface explains, it “contains items or principles for the regulation of the church.”¹⁵ This helps explain why the locations where many of the revelations were received were omitted with only a month and year included. Omitting that information focused the universality of the message.

The church’s changing situation is reflected in the 1835 alterations of the revelations. Knowing the historical background of the revelations makes it is easy to understand why Smith wanted to alter the original rendering to a new situation—because most of the revelations were given during the primitive period of the church’s development. The altered format helps us understand the doctrinal, historical, and theological shifts made in the modified 1835 text.¹⁶

Oliver Cowdery was blessed in April 1834 “to assist brother Sidney [Rigdon] in arranging the church covenants.”¹⁷ In September Cowdery was selected to join Joseph Smith, Frederick G. Williams, and Sidney Rigdon in the formation of a committee to arrange items of doctrine and revelations for the church.¹⁸

In the September 1834 issue of the *Evening and the Morning Star*—printed in Kirtland—a “PROSPECTUS FOR RE-PRINTING THE FIRST AND SECOND VOLUMES OF THE EVENING AND THE MORNING STAR” appeared. According to the editor, the twenty-four numbers were to be reprinted with typographical corrections.¹⁹ Cowdery further explained to the reader:

On the revelations we merely say, that we were not a little surprised to find the previous print so different from the original. We have given them a careful comparison, assisted by individuals whose known integrity and ability is unexcusable. Thus saying we cast no reflections upon those who were entrusted with the responsibility of publishing them in Missouri, as our own labors were included in that important service to the church, and it was our unceasing endeavor to have them correspond with the copy furnished us. We believe they are now correct. If not in every word, at least in principle. For the special good of the church we have also added a few items from other revelations.²⁰

Careful study shows that if any original manuscripts (previous to 1835) were used, their

Case for Sidney Rigdon as Author of the *Lectures on Faith*,” *Journal of Mormon History* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 1–41.

¹⁵ 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, iii.

¹⁶ The 1835 Doctrine and Covenants is the text that the following works are based upon: John Whitmer History, History of Joseph Smith, Lucy Mack Smith History, Joseph Knight Sr. History, Newel Knight Autobiography, Joseph Knight Jr. History, and John Murdock Autobiography.

¹⁷ Joseph Smith journal, 78, April 19, 1834, Church History Library; Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 41.

¹⁸ Kirtland Council Minute Book, 76, Church History Library. Minutes of a meeting held on September 24, 1834.

¹⁹ Prospectus dated Kirtland, Ohio, September 26, 1834, in the *Evening and the Morning Star* 2, no. 24 (September 1834): 192. The prospectus was dated two days after the September 24 high council meeting.

²⁰ *Evening and Morning Star* (Kirtland reprint) 1, no. 2 (June 1832): 16, reprinted January 1835.

exact wording was not adhered to. Issues reprinted between January and June 1835 contained altered texts, deleted previously published material, and inserted editorial comments by Cowdery. As stated in a recent publication, “Despite the implications of Cowdery’s statement, very few of the changes in the reprint represent a restoration back to the earliest text, though Cowdery consulted early manuscript sources when reprinting some of the revelations. Because the revelations were meant to be used as a guide for the current operations of the church, they were edited in 1835 to reflect current organization, doctrine, and practice, which had continued to develop since the revelations were first dictated.”²¹

When the typesetting was completed as far as it could go, a hastily called general assembly was called together on August 17, 1835. The assembly voted on the book as a whole, thereby canonizing the Doctrine and Covenants. There was no indication that anyone realized that the text of some of the revelations had been revised, deleted, or enlarged. The revelations were accepted in their altered form without comment, apparently in the belief that they were identical to those originally given to the church. No explanation was made by the committee, either in the preface or within the text of the revelations, as to why alterations had been made. Contrary to Oliver Cowdery’s editorial comments, it seems that revelatory texts differing from those that had been previously published were changed without regard to the wording of those earlier documents.

It is a well-established canon of textual criticism that in order to uncover the original text, one must follow the earliest and best manuscripts available.²² The biblical textual critic works with versions from various scribes in an attempt to determine which reading is most likely closest to the original.

In applying these principles to the revelations of Joseph Smith, two distinctly different approaches must be applied to the texts themselves. The first approach involves comparing among the various versions of the printed texts. Instead of peeling back layers of scribal variations, as one would do with the biblical texts in an attempt to restore the original, the critic in this case peels back various layers of editing in an attempt to restore the original text of the revelation.

The second step of textual criticism regarding Joseph Smith’s revelations is similar to biblical text criticism. Various extant scribal manuscripts of the revelations are compared in an attempt to uncover the text of the revelation as Joseph Smith originally stated it. These principles would allow the re-creation of the original text of the Smith revelations and to understand better the revelations in the context in which they were given.

In recent years there has been a growing willingness on the part of some LDS writers to

²¹ Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Riley M. Lorimer, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2: Published Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 199.

²² For text critical methods, see Kurt and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament, An Introduction to the Critical Edition and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans/E.J. Brill, 1987); Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament, Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, Ger.: German Bible Society, 1994).

admit the existence of variant readings of the early revelations.²³ This has been evident even though in the past there has been reluctance by some to accept this possibility. For example, Parley P. Pratt gave the impression that the words Joseph Smith used while dictating remained the same.²⁴

My study will focus on three areas. First, revelations not contained in the Book of Commandments; second, examples of textual changes starting in January 1835 for the Doctrine and Covenants; and finally, how the redactions in the revelations have significance when considering the manuscript history of Joseph Smith.

Previous to the BCR publication one could determine that there would be some textual revision to LDS sections D&C 17 and 57 since they were not published in the Book of Commandments. LDS section 17 states that the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon would see the plates by faith. The text was modified by adding the biblical term Urim and Thummim, which had not been in use in 1829. LDS section 57 had a note, “Not to be printed at present.”²⁵ This is the revelation that designated Independence, Jackson County, Missouri as the center place location for the New Jerusalem and its temple. The redactions made are not consistent with the prospect of bringing the gospel to the Native Americans. The original wording contained instructions on taking the gospel to the Lamanites:²⁶

let my servent Sidney [Gilbert] obtain a license (behold here is wisdom & whoso readeth let him understand) that he may send goods also unto the Lamanites even by whom he will as clerks employed in his service & thus the gospel may be preached unto them²⁷

The 1835 revision reads in part:

let my servent Sidney gilbert obtain a licence . . . that he may send goods also unto the *people* even by whom *he* will as clerks, employed in his service & thus *provide for my saints, that my gospel may be preached unto those who sit in darkness and in the region and shadow of death*²⁸

²³ See, for example, Robert J. Woodford, “How the Revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants were Received and Compiled,” *Ensign*, January 1985, 27–33 and Melvin J. Petersen; “Preparing Early Revelations for Publication,” *Ensign*, February 1985, 14–20; Marlin K. Jensen, “The Joseph Smith Papers: The Manuscript Revelation Books,” *Ensign*, July 2009, 47–51; Robert J. Woodford, “Introducing A Book of Commandments and Revelations, A Major New Documentary ‘Discovery,’” *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 7–17; and Grant Underwood, “Revelation, Text, and Revision: Insight from the Book of Commandments and Revelations,” *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 67–84.

²⁴ Parley P. Pratt [Jr.], ed., *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 48.

²⁵ Book of Commandments & Revelations, 93, Church History Library.

²⁶ “Lamanites” is a Book of Mormon term for Native Americans.

²⁷ Book of Commandments & Revelations, 94, reading before modification, Church History Library. Here it is understood that clerks will be employed under license in the Gilbert store to bring goods to the Native Americans and thereby obtain entrance and do missionary work among them.

²⁸ Book of Commandments & Revelations, 94, revised text, Church History Library; 1835

Three manuscripts then exist of the July 20, 1831, revelation regarding the gathering to Missouri and concerning A. Sidney Gilbert. The thrust of the passage was altered. First, all the goods were now to be sent to the “people,” which obscures the meaning. Second, the people are more specifically designated as being the saints. And third, the purpose was to provide means for preaching to the lost anywhere.

Examples of Textual Revision, Starting in January 1835

What follows are some examples of revisions in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. They are presented in numerical order of the sections.

Section 1; source: Oliver Cowdery’s Book of Commandments, chapter 1.

Section 2 (LDS D&C 20); source: *Evening and Morning Star* (June 1832), reprinted January 1835.

By January 1835 there were references to offices instituted after their acceptance at the conference held in June 1830. Included in the revision were bishops, high counselors, high priests, and president of the high priesthood. The 1835 office of apostle was not added.²⁹

Instructions on Priesthood

Section 3 (LDS D&C 107)

How much of section 3 was presented in its 1835 form to the twelve apostles is not known. The citation to a revelation given on November 11, 1831, but not printed as a separate message in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, illustrates how textual redactions of 1835 could give the impression that the wording used is what the original 1831 revelation contained. The early text says that “a bishop must be chosen from the high priesthood,” meaning from those who hold the office of high priest. The idea of a bishop being a descendant of Aaron was added to the November 11 revelation and is also repeated in section 22 (LDS D&C 68), which is another November 1831 revelatory message.

Who Baptized John the Baptist?

Section 4 (LDS D&C 84); source Kirtland Revelations Book (hereafter cited as KRB): “To go into th[e] covenants.”

The early text said that John the Baptist was to be “raised up being fillid [filled] with the holy ghost from his Mother[’]s womb, for he was baptised while he was yet in the womb.”³⁰ For

D&C 27:4; LDS D&C 57:9–10; RLDS 57:4.

²⁹ *Evening and Morning Star* 1, no. 1 (June 1832): 4, reprinted January 1835; 1835 D&C 2:16–17; LDS D&C 20:65–67; compared with Book of Commandments 24, between verses 44 and 45.

³⁰ Newel K. Whitney Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

this section the words “the womb” were omitted and replaced with “his Childhood.”³¹

High Council of the Church of Christ

Section 5 (LDS D&C 102); source KRB: “To go into the coven[an]ts.”

The minutes of the February 17, 1834, meeting of the Kirtland High Council were read at least twice two days later. Joseph Smith was authorized to make corrections at the time. The minutes were corrected and recorded in the KRB. Eight months later, after April 28, 1835, a reference was added to the minutes about “a distinction between the high council of travelling high priests abroad, and the travelling high council composed of the twelve apostles.”³²

Laws of the Church

Section 13 (LDS D&C 42); source: Oliver Cowdery’s Book of Commandments; Book of Commandments chapters 44 and 47; *Evening and Morning Star* (July 1832): 9, reprinted February 1835; and (October 1832): 34, reprinted June 1835.

This section is a revision of instructions given four years previously. When this section was first reprinted in February 1835, changes were made to the law of consecration. The words “high council,” not in the revelation of 1831, were added; wording relating to Joseph Smith’s Bible revision was again modified, and the office of “high priest” inserted.

Firstborn son of Aaron

Section 22 (LDS D&C 68); source BCR, 113–14, *Evening and Morning Star* (October 1832): 73, reprinted June 1835.

The 1831 text stated that other bishops could be set apart and they would need to be “an high priest who is worthy” and “be appointed by a conference of high priests.” The conference is changed to being appointed by “the first presidency of the Melchizedek priesthood, except they be literal descendants of Aaron.” A descendant of Aaron would have legal right to the bishopric. In this addition there is further clarification than what is found in section 3.

Again the incorrect impression is that this is the identical revelation given on November 1, 1831, to Orson Hyde, Luke Johnson, Lyman Johnson, and William McLellin. The early wording gave the instructions, “These sayings are true and faithful: wherefore transgress them not, neither take therefrom.” In the revision words like “conference” and “high priests” were omitted and replaced. The reason why these words were changed is that since March 1832 there had existed a new council known as the presidency of the high priesthood and designated in 1835 as the first presidency, usually composed of three high priests. This redaction was done after May 16 and near the end of June 1835 with the publication of the reprint of the *Evening and Morning Star*.³³

³¹ Kirtland Revelations Book, 23. See revision in 1835 D&C 4:4; LDS D&C 84:28.

³² Kirtland Council Minute Book, 32–35, corrected minutes of February 17, 1834, Church History Library. A copy of the minutes was made by Orson Hyde in Book of Commandments Law and Covenants, Book C, Church History Library, and Kirtland Revelations Book, 111–15, both recorded August 27, 1834. See 1835 D&C 5:13; LDS D&C 102:30–32.

³³ Book of Commandments & Revelations, 113–14.

May the Kingdom of God go Forth

Section 24 (LDS D&C 65); source BCR, 112.

Another revelation of interest is a prayer that was revealed and copied in the BCR, KRB, and printed with the same wording in Independence, Missouri, in 1832 and in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835.³⁴ The BCR contains the minor change which helps us determine that the words crossed through “hewn from” and replaced with “cut out of” would have been done shortly after May 16 in time to set the type for the Doctrine and Covenants.³⁵

Restoration of All Things

Section 50 (LDS D&C 27); source: Book of Commandments, chapter 28; with additional wording.

The shortest text supports the basic wording that was printed in the Book of Commandments. Of all of the revision this one was very important since the organization of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was completed at the end of April 1835. The names of those who would partake of the fruit of the vine with Jesus were added to the early text. The 1835 revision lists Moroni, Elias [Gabriel], John the Baptist, Elijah, and other patriarchs. Also mentioned were Michael (or Adam), Peter, James, and John. The New Testament apostles Peter, James, and John, who held “the keys of your ministry,” now first appear in a church record. Although there is no known account of the Peter, James, and John being sent to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, the names of the three apostles were added to an 1830 revelatory message after May 16, 1835.

The redaction makes sense in advancing the idea of priesthood keys. Moroni holds the “keys of the record of the stick of Ephraim,” and others having their keys committed to men on the earth. Each key would help in the anticipated restoration of all things.

The 1835 printed text is not the message presented by an angel in the voice of Jesus given in September 1830. No church member is known to worry that this revelation represented a new tradition of changing earlier messages in the light of new understanding since the church had its own Quorum of Twelve Apostles. Book of Commandments, chapter 28 “was greatly expanded when it was printed in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. The material added to the 1835 version included updated and expanded doctrine on priesthood keys that was not known at the time the revelation was originally dictated”³⁶

³⁴ Book of Commandments & Revelations, 112; Kirtland Revelations Book, 87; *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 4 (September 1832): 26; *Evening and Morning Star* 1, no. 4 (September 1832): 62, reprinted April 1835 before John Whitmer and W. W. Phelps arrived in Kirtland with the Book of Commandments & Revelations. The text is the same before revisions in Book of Commandments & Revelations. William E. McLellin’s copy contains the same early text. See Jan Shippy and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies/Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 242–43.

³⁵ Book of Commandments & Revelations, 112.

³⁶ Jensen, Turley, and Lorimer, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2: Published Revelations*, xxxi.

Michael, Your Prince

Section 75; (LDS D&C 78); source: BCR, 145–46, in part.

This revelation given in Kirtland, Ohio, on March 1, 1832, included pseudonyms, so the heading for the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants said: “The order given of the Lord to Enoch, for the purpose of establishing the poor.” This was not a revelation given to ancient Enoch although it gave the impression in the heading that it was. The words “Jesus Christ to” were changed to “the Son Ahman.” The largest insertion mentioned the Lord God “who hath established the foundations of Adam-on-di-Ahman; who hath appointed Michael, your prince, and established his feet, and set him upon high; and given to him the keys of salvation under the counsel and direction of the Holy One, who is without beginning of days or end of life.”³⁷ It is possible that the addition was on a pinned note in the BCR. This addition is of interest regarding the place of Adam in Latter-day Saint theology.

The above historical examples help establish the original texts and show us how changes were made to those revelations. The textual history of the revelations as a living document shows them changing and expanding. Every stage of the development provides us with valuable insights. However, the earliest texts are essential in uncovering the original intentions and meanings of the revelations and of the historical circumstances surrounding them. A better text leads to a greater appreciation of the early history of the Restoration movement.

Revelations have been changed as has the Joseph Smith Story

Besides revising his own commandments and revelations, Joseph Smith also revised the Bible and the first edition of the Book of Mormon. It should not come as a surprise that Smith revised the early story of his visionary experiences. This is evident in the accounts of a number of persons who heard him tell about his early life. At times events were modified, omitted, and expanded. There are basically four accounts of the visions known to have come from Joseph Smith:

1. 1832 account, recorded in a record book by Frederick G. Williams and Joseph Smith.
2. 1834–35 Oliver Cowdery letters, containing information that came from Joseph Smith, as printed in the *Messenger and Advocate*. (The letters were later copied into Smith’s large journal.)
3. 1835 account, written into Joseph Smith’s Journal, recorded by his scribe.
4. 1838 History of Joseph Smith, commenced in 1838 and copied by a clerk in 1839 (also considered Smith’s journal).³⁸

³⁷ 1835 D&C 75:3; LDS D&C 78:15–16.

³⁸ “In the last number,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842): 726, Nauvoo, Illinois. Joseph Smith’s direct involvement in the history includes from his birth to July 1828, as copied in Manuscript History, book A-1:1–10, Church History Library. This would include the “History of Joseph Smith” published serially, *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 12 (May 16, 1842): 786.

Revival and First Vision

Joseph Smith told in his 1838–39 history about an excitement on the subject of religion (a revival) taking place before his first vision. He placed it in the spring of 1820. He said that he was told that all churches were an abomination. Members of his family joined the Presbyterian Church because of this religious excitement while he was drawn to the Methodists.³⁹ Later, according to Smith, an angel appeared to him and gave him instructions, leading eventually to the discovery of a religious and historical record written on plates of gold. Like the revelatory messages that were changed, the early story was also revised.

The first published history of early Mormonism was written by Oliver Cowdery and printed in the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*. This consisted of a series of eight letters to W. W. Phelps. The third letter explained what occurred in the fifteenth year of Joseph Smith's life in 1820:

One Mr. Lane, a presiding Elder of the Methodist church, visited Palmyra, and vicinity. Elder Lane was a tallented man possessing a good share of literary endowments, and apparent humility. There was a great awakening, or excitement raised on the subject of religion, and much enquiry for the word of life. Large additions were made to the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches.

Cowdery continued, "In this general strife for followers, his mother, one sister, and two of his natural brothers, were persuaded to unite with the Presbyterians."⁴⁰ In his fourth letter Oliver Cowdery said there "was an error in the type" and corrected the date to Smith's seventeenth year which, he said, "would bring the date down to the year 1823."⁴¹ Peter Crawley wrote, "Whatever was intended in Letter III, certain problems persist. Joseph Smith's seventeenth year was 1822, not 1823. And Rev. George Lane was most prominently in the Palmyra area in 1824–25. It is conceivable that Cowdery shifted the date after realizing he had introduced Lane at the wrong time."⁴²

In Lucy Mack Smith's draft of her history, she added details that also suggest an 1824 date for the revival. She began by linking the revival to the death of her son Alvin, who died in

³⁹ The fact that the names of Smith's mother and brothers appear later as members of the Palmyra Presbyterian Church, who were dropped for nonattendance, is further evidence that the revival Joseph Smith had in view affected the local Presbyterian Church. See "Records of the Session of the Presbyterian Church in Palmyra," vol. 2:11–12, Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra, Palmyra, New York; microfilm, film 900, reel 59, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. Volume 1, which may have listed the Smiths as members, has been missing since at least 1898.

⁴⁰ "Dear Brother," *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 3 (December 1834): 42–43, Kirtland, Ohio.

⁴¹ "Dear Brother," *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 5 (February 1835): 78.

⁴² *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Mormon Church, Volume One 1830–1847* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1997 [1998]), 240.

November 1823 (subsequently crossed out), “About this time their [there] was a great revival in religion and the whole neighborhood was very much aroused to the subject and we among the rest flocked to the meeting house.”⁴³

An examination of newspaper accounts, religious periodicals, church records, and personal narratives show that there were no significant gains in church memberships or any other signs of excitement or revival in Palmyra in 1820. There was a stirring and momentous revival there with all the features that Joseph Smith’s history mentions during the fall and winter of 1824–25. At the beginning of his manuscript history Joseph Smith stated:

In this history I will present the various events in relation to this Church in truth and righteousness as they have transpired, or as they at present exist, being now the eighth year since the organization of said Church.⁴⁴

The Palmyra excitement or revival was the backdrop for Smith’s first vision. This history was a theological or faith-oriented account telling the events “as they have transpired, or as they at present exist.” David Thelen wrote concerning memory, “What is important is that the memory be authentic for the person at the moment of construction, not that it be an accurate depiction of a past moment.”⁴⁵ Another historian, Marvin S. Hill, concluded that the 1838–39 account was “streamlined for publication,” making the story “more logical and compelling.”⁴⁶

In the account written by Smith in 1832, a revival was not the motivating factor for his first vision and receipt of absolution.⁴⁷ Likewise, in his 1835 telling he mentioned that a personage had told him “thy sins are forgiven thee.”⁴⁸

Once it is realized that the revival and the first vision are two separate events, we begin to get closer to the personal experience of Joseph Smith in his religious quest. How much of Smith’s 1838–39 account recalls his feelings around the time of this vision is hard to determine. But when other events are taken into consideration, it appears that using the word “abomination”⁴⁹ in reference to the creeds is language too strong for that time period, especially since members of Smith’s family joined the local Presbyterian Church after 1820.

⁴³ Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 357.

⁴⁴ Manuscript History book A-1:1, Church History Library; Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith* 1:267–68.

⁴⁵ David Thelen, “Memory and American History,” *Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989): 1,123.

⁴⁶ Marvin S. Hill, “The First Vision Controversy: A Critique and Reconciliation,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 39.

⁴⁷ 1832 account, “A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr.,” Church History Library, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:5–6.

⁴⁸ Joseph Smith journal, 24, November 9, 1835, Church History Library, in Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, 88. Smith also told about the gold plates, “When I was about 17 years old I saw another vision of angels.”

⁴⁹ Manuscript History A-1:3; Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:273; Joseph Smith-History, 1:19, Pearl of Great Price.

Second Vision

Smith's second vision about an angel revealing to him the location of the gold plates included words of the messenger that must have been post-1823. Using Joseph's story as a guide, we can see more clearly how the words in his history fit 1838 rather than pre-1827. The reason for this is that in 1836 Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery reported a vision of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. The messenger quoted the following for Malachi chapter 4, verse 5: "Behold I will reveal unto you the Priesthood by the hand of Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord."⁵⁰

Would the personage have spoken these words in 1823? If not, then their absence would confirm that we are dealing with a theological story. It means that those actual words would not have been spoken during the visionary experience. The official 1838–39 account, the latest redaction, is currently what the majority of believers accept. It becomes a story of faith if critical analysis remains absent from Smith's story.

A simple examination makes it clear that the words attributed to the angel would not have been used in 1823 but at a time after the publication of the Book of Mormon.⁵¹ There would have been no reason to quote the passage differently. Sidney Rigdon in 1830 was looked upon as a preparer, like John the Baptist, to prepare the way "before Elijah which should come."⁵² When Joseph Smith made his revision of Malachi in July 1833, he considered the book "Correct."⁵³

When one of the early commandments received on September 4, 1830, was prepared for the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, wording was added relating to biblical individuals who would drink wine with the returned Savior, indicating that Elijah held priesthood keys with the words, "and also Elijah, unto whom I have committed the keys of the power of turning the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers, that the whole earth may not be smitten with a curse."⁵⁴

On April 3, 1836, it was recorded that Elijah the prophet appeared in a glorious vision to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery and committed to them "the Keys of this dispensation."⁵⁵ Looking back to 1836, Smith later explained that the promise of Elijah coming to reveal priesthood keys was a fulfillment of a promise made in connection to the time he first learned about the Book of Mormon plates. The added words relating to the future promise of obtaining

⁵⁰ Manuscript History A-1:5; Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:278; LDS D&C 2; Joseph Smith-History 1:38.

⁵¹ Malachi 4:5–6 (KJV) is quoted in the 1830 Book of Mormon, 505; LDS 3 Nephi 25:5–6; RLDS 3 11:26–27.

⁵² Book of Commandments & Revelations, 46; LDS D&C 35:4; RLDS D&C 34:2 (December 7, 1830).

⁵³ Old Testament Manuscript 2, 119, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri.

⁵⁴ 1835 D&C 50:2; LDS D&C 27:9; RLDS D&C 26:2.

⁵⁵ Joseph Smith journal, 193, Church History Library, in Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, 222; LDS D&C 110:16.

the priesthood from the hand of Elijah are an anachronism.

Joseph appeared to perceive his 1823 experience as an important indicator of his prophetic role. As he retold the story to family, acquaintances, and eventually to church members, the initial experience took on special characteristics.



The hill in the township of Manchester, Ontario County, New York

In Smith's longest account he stated that in September 1823 a vision was opened to his mind, he saw where gold plates were deposited, and he would go on to remove them from the ground four years later in September 1827.

One of the earliest persons who heard the story from Joseph Jr. was Joseph Knight Sr., a resident of Colesville, New York. Knight, for whom Smith worked briefly in 1825–26, recounted elements of the early story, as related to him in the fall of 1826. Joseph Smith while at the hill was told by the personage:

you Should have took the Book and a gone right away you cant have it now
Joseph Says when Can I have it[?] the answer was the 22nt Day of September
next if you Bring the right person with you Joseph Says who is the right person[?]
the answer was your oldest Brother⁵⁶

Joseph Smith's mother Lucy added her own recollections about the gold record in her memoir. She dated Joseph's first trip to the nearby hill as just before the death of Alvin, who died in November 1823, and emphasized Alvin's place in these events.

In the excitement of the moment he laid the record down in order to cover up the box least some one should come along and take away whatever else might be deposited there. When he turned again to take up the record it was gone but where

⁵⁶ Joseph Knight, "Reminiscences," written between 1835 and his death in 1847, Church History Library. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," *BYU Studies* 17 (Autumn 1976): 30.

he knew not nor did he know by what means it was taken away.⁵⁷

Mother Smith reported that Alvin was especially interested in the record. She stated that on his deathbed he had told Joseph, “I want you to be a good boy & do everything that lays in your power to obtain the records be faithful in receiving instruction and keeping every commandment that is given you.”⁵⁸ In his redaction Joseph Smith omitted laying the record on the ground, “I made an attempt to take them [the gold plates] out but was forbidden by the messenger.”⁵⁹ He also did not mention being told on that occasion to bring Alvin with him next time to the hill. Six years earlier, in 1832, Smith said he attempted but did not remove the plates as he “straightway made three attempts to get them.”⁶⁰ The early story told by his mother Lucy, and friend Joseph Knight, Sr., indicated that Joseph said he removed the record and laid it down.

At the hill in 1827 and the fallen treetop

Another redaction as revealed by Joseph Knight Sr. was the time when Joseph Smith finally asked when he could have the book and was told again to bring the right person. “Joseph Says who is the right Person[?] the answer was you will know then he looked in his glass and found it was Emma Hale.”⁶¹ According to Lucy Smith’s narrative, on September 20, 1827, Joseph Knight Sr. and his friend Josiah Stowell arrived at the Smith family frame house. Knight said that he had heard that Joseph was to get the record on September 22.⁶²

On the morning of the twenty-second, according to the narrative, Joseph and Emma left the Smith home, “taking Mr. Knight’s horse and wagon” without his knowledge, to travel to the hill about two miles away.⁶³ When they arrived at the hill, Joseph left Emma with the wagon while he went to the side of the hill. Joseph said he then took the plates out of the box in the ground and hid them in a fallen treetop, concealing them with the bark of the tree.⁶⁴ He then reportedly returned to Knight’s wagon where Emma was waiting, and they started back to the house.

The plates were now, according to Joseph, hidden in a fallen treetop, but a better place to deposit them was needed. According to Lucy, Joseph “asked my advice what it was best to do

⁵⁷ Lucy Mack Smith, draft manuscript, Church History Library. See Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 346–47.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁵⁹ Manuscript History A-1:7; Joseph Smith-History 1:53 in Pearl of Great Price.

⁶⁰ Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:8.

⁶¹ Joseph Knight, “Reminiscences,” Church History Library. Jessee, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection, 30.”

⁶² Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 376. See Jessee, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection,” 31.

⁶³ Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 376.

⁶⁴ This follows Martin Harris in *Tiffany’s Monthly* 5 (August 1859): 165 and Affidavit of Willard Chase, December 11, 1833, in E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: privately printed), 246.

about getting a chest made.” They decided to have one made but lacked the money to pay for it.⁶⁵

It was nine days later when Joseph ostensibly walked by himself to where he said he hid the gold plates. Several people remember the story they heard of how he brought the plates back to the Smith home. According to Lucy’s version, Joseph:

took the plates from their [hiding] place and wrapping them in his linen frock put them under his arm and started for the house.... he concluded it would be safer to go across through the woods.... He had not proceeded far in this direction till, as he was jumping over a log, a man spran[g] up and gave him a heavy blow with a gun. Joseph <leveled> him to the ground.⁶⁶

Smith claimed he knocked down several men as he ran home, arriving out of breath. When all the commotion settled, Joseph showed those present his dislocated thumb, which his father put back in place. After this Joseph went to Willard Chase’s house and talked with him. Chase recalled the story that Smith told him, which is similar to the accounts of Smith’s mother and Joseph Knight:

On his return home, he said he was attacked by two men in the woods, and knocked them both down and made his escape, arrived safe and secured his treasure.—He then observed that if it had not been for that stone, (which he acknowledged belonged to me,) he would not have obtained the book.⁶⁷

This interesting story was not included in any of Smith’s accounts. Whatever was under his work smock or in the chest was concealed. Other members of the Smith family did not see a physical object. None of the scribes indicate that Smith used the gold plates during the dictation of the Book of Mormon.

The Gold Plates

How necessary the gold plates story was to the process of writing the Book of Mormon is a valid question for further study. A recent author, Brant A. Gardner, stated that the translation process “did not include the physical examination of the plates as part of the translation.”⁶⁸ Over time Joseph Smith omitted certain elements and expanded the words said to have been told him, thereby changing the story from how it was first told. From the visionary instructions originally told in a treasure-seeking context Smith transformed that initial story into a religious saga featuring an angel guiding him into a prophetic ministry. The prophetic saga from the earliest days of the movement reinforced

⁶⁵ Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 379. Lucy stated, “There was not a shilling in the house.”

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 386.

⁶⁷ Affidavit of Willard Chase, December 11, 1833, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 246.

⁶⁸ Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 134. In note 37 Gardner explains: “The number of testimonies about the face-in-the-hat method indicate that, even if the plates were nearby, Joseph was not consulting them during the translation.”

his followers' belief that he was a prophet. This story was that important.

A great way to understand how a story can change is to know that the Smith family was considered visionary. That is, through the eyes of their understanding or second sight, they perceived hidden treasures underground, in the mountains, and in caves. This perception was the mindset of their treasuring-seeking projects and also their religious thinking. While the Book of Mormon was being printed, Solomon Chamberlain visited members of the Smith family. He recounts his first contact with them:

I soon arrived at the house, and found Hyrum [Smith] walking the floor; as I entered the room, I said peace be to this house; he looked at me and said "I hope it will be peace." I then said is there any one here that believes in visions and revelations. He said yes, we are a visionary house.⁶⁹

Summary on Revelations and Story

In Joseph Smith's history he omitted his use of a stone in locating buried treasure, in finding the gold plates, in interpreting Egyptian writing, and in receiving revelatory messages. He added in 1838-39 that he was using the Urim and Thummim in "translating" and also in receiving revelations for his followers.

Joseph Smith, like many other leaders, showed development in expressing his ideas. As the recollection of events in his early life took on a more theological bent than historical reality, his story grew in the telling. The words that he said an angel had spoken to him about Elijah in 1823 became of primary significance as he looked back to his early life. It was not an issue to him that some of his ideas had changed or contradicted what he had said at an earlier time. Joseph was able to reinterpret events as he presented new ideas in a revelatory manner. As an oracle to his followers, he came to see his theological development become the word of God. And as he developed his thought, he introduced new meaning and understanding to church members in his newly adopted role as prophet and seer.

These two Mormon examples, on revelatory messages and storytelling, usually have negligible impact on the believer because critical studies play minimal roles in the final authorized text. To the faithful all that is important is how the official story is told.

⁶⁹ Recorded in John Taylor journal; in Dean C. Jessee, ed., "The John Taylor Nauvoo Journal: January 1845-September 1845," *BYU Studies* 23 (Summer 1983): 45.