

A Review of *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations and Translations, Manuscript Revelation Books, Facsimile Edition*, edited by Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, Steven C. Harper (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press and Deseret Book, 2009) [xliii, 707 pp. Hardback: \$99.95. ISBN: 978-1-57008-850-6]

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Published in *Irreantum*, Orem, Utah, 12:1 (2010):142 – 148. Used by permission of author.

The latest volume from the Joseph Smith Papers project, *Revelations and Translations*, has created quite a buzz in the Mormon historical community. Numerous articles in the *Church News*, *Deseret News*, *Mormon Times*, *Salt Lake Tribune* and the *Ensign* have covered the publication. *BYU Studies* published the papers presented at the May 2009 Mormon History Association conference, which discussed the publication of this volume. Many blogs have posted interviews with editors or presented reviews of the volume. The reason for all the excitement is manifold. The book is a beautiful example of printing. It provides Mormons with some of the earliest records of the church, and the contents of pages 8–405 are being made available for the first time with this publication. This volume consists of two revelation books recorded by scribes employed by the Prophet Joseph Smith. The manuscript books cover the years 1828 to 1834, a period in which a large percentage of Smith's revelations were received.

This new volume may be the crown jewel of the thirty-plus projected volumes. In this volume of "Revelations and Translations" the reader will find the raw manuscripts of one hundred and nine items in Revelation Book 1 and fifty three items in Revelation Book 2. The volume has two parts: the Book of Commandments and Revelations is designated Revelation Book 1, and the Kirtland Revelations Book is designated Revelation Book 2. The volume has a series introduction, a volume introduction, and each Revelation Book has an introduction. Each page of the two revelation books is reproduced in a color photograph on glossy paper. The facing page has a printed line-for-line, matching typescript. For easy identification, changes found in the manuscript are color-coded to the name of the person making the change.

The importance of these manuscript books can be illustrated with a letter written by Joseph Smith and the revelations themselves. On July 31, 1832, Joseph wrote a letter to W. W. Phelps, warning and instructing Phelps: "I will exhort you to be careful not to alter the sense of any of them for he that adds or diminishes to the prop[h]ecies must come under the condemnation writen therein" (qtd. in Jessee, *Personal* 273). The manuscripts themselves declare these are the words of Jesus Christ and they are not to be tampered with: "Behold, and lo, these are the words of Alpha and Omega, even Jesus Christ. Amen" (D&C 81:7), "listen to the words of Jesus Christ, your Lord and your Redeemer" (D&C 15:1), and "These sayings are true and faithful: wherefore transgress them not, neither take therefrom" (D&C 68:34). The preface to the Book of Commandments, itself a revelation, in Revelation Book 1, declares that the published volume of these manuscripts is the Lord's and his servants' authority, and those "who go forth bearing these tidings unto the Inhabitants of the Earth to them is power given to seal both on Earth & in Heaven" (223).

Exploring the manuscripts makes readers feel as though they have leaped into a Dan Brown novel. The volume invites readers down a number of avenues—research, critical text evaluation, theological development, historical context, or a search to understand the revelatory process.

Some revelations are recorded in both Revelation Book 1 and Revelation Book 2, like Sections 76 and 78, allowing readers to compare changes and track theological developments. Section 78 is found in manuscript form in both revelation books, and can also be found in manuscript in the Newel K. Whitney collection. The last could be the earliest manuscript of the three. Quite a number of changes occurred in Section 78 when it was published in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. The text about “Michael your prince” and “Adam ondi- Ahman” were additions to the revelation after these manuscripts were made. Section 76 is one of the most popular theological teachings for Mormons and is commonly called “The Vision.” Though neither manuscript is the original recording of the vision, each allows readers to get as close to the original as possible. And there is debate as to which of these two manuscripts is the earliest.

With the publication of this volume we have the earliest wording for the “Testimony of Witnesses” for the revelations of Joseph Smith, much like the testimonies for the Book of Mormon. The testimony is found on page 215 and titled “73 Revelation,” with the editors suggesting it was given about November 1, 1831. The testimony is signed by thirteen priesthood holders, most signing after November 1831. John Whitmer copied five additional names on to the testimony manuscript. It is interesting to note that none of the eleven witnesses of the Book of Mormon signed this testimony document. Some of the witnesses—Joseph Smith Sr., Hyrum Smith, Martin Harris, Hiram Page and Samuel Smith—were not in attendance for the meetings in November 1831 when this revelation was recorded. Other Book of Mormon witnesses—Peter Whitmer Jr, Christian Whitmer, David Whitmer, John Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery—were in attendance for these November meetings, but did not sign the testimony.

Why these Book of Mormon witness names are missing from this testimony calls for further study. The 1835 Doctrine and Covenants also contain this revelation, but it is called “the written Testimony of the Twelve” for the Doctrine and Covenants (255). The revelation can also be found in Dean Jessee’s *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (1:367–68). This manuscript version has some ten words missing from the manuscript found in Revelation Book 1. Having this testimony manuscript available allows us to see its original intent and how it was later used by Smith and the church.

The volume gives us an appreciation for the accuracy of Ezra Booth’s letters that Ira Eddy published in the *Ohio Star*. Booth wrote these letters from September 12, 1831, to December 6, 1831. Booth gives a brief history and some details about the early church not usually found in other works. In one of Booth’s letters he writes, “I have in my possession the ’27th commandment to Emma my daughter in Zion;” and in Revelation Book 1, John Whitmer has written “27th Commandment A Revelation to Emma” (38–39). Historians had often wondered what Booth meant by “27th commandment,” and now the reason he used this phrase is known.

Another more substantial comparison can be found with Doctrine and Covenants Section 28. This section is Book of Commandments Chapter 30 and is found in Revelation Book 1 (51–53). Comparing this document with the Book of Commandments and the “Ezra Booth letter” (*Ohio*

*Star*, December 8, 1831) one discovers some very important differences. The manuscript in Revelation Book 1 provides us with the source for these changes found in the Book of Commandments. Apparently, Sidney Rigdon went through the manuscript and made changes for its publication in the Book of Commandments. One of the important changes Rigdon makes is identifying the place for the city of Zion. The original revelation has “among the Lamanites”; the Rigdon change found in the Book of Commandments has it “on the borders by the Lamanites.” Booth’s letter has the original wording found in the manuscript. This does not mean Booth copied the revelation from Revelation Book 1. Revelation Book 1 has an error John Whitmer made in copying the revelation; Booth’s copy found in his letter does not contain this error.

It is important to put this new volume in perspective. One of the manuscript books, Revelation Book 1, has been housed with the First Presidency collection since Joseph Fielding Smith became church president in 1970. According to the introduction, Smith may have known about the manuscript book as early as 1907 (4). Church authorities like B.H. Roberts, who worked in the historian’s office and wrote extensively on church history, had no knowledge of this manuscript. From the beginning of the twentieth century to about 2005, the importance of this manuscript book and the information contained therein have been unknown to church leadership or its historians and scholars studying the texts of Joseph Smith’s revelations.

For years historians believed a manuscript collection or manuscript book existed for the publishing of the Book of Commandments. This collection was believed to have been written and organized in November 1831 at Hiram, Ohio. When Revelation Book 1 was first announced last year, many people came to the conclusion this must be the manuscript collection for the Book of Commandments. Internal evidence in the manuscript book itself shows it was used for the publication of the Book of Commandments. The editors of this volume have concluded the book was not intended as the manuscript book for the Book of Commandments publication. Revelation Book 1 was actually created and maintained as part of John Whitmer’s church calling. Whitmer was called to be Church Historian on March 8, 1831. In response to his calling, Whitmer began copying Smith revelations into the manuscript book. When Whitmer and Cowdery were called at the conference of November 1831 to publish Smith’s revelations, it was decided to use the manuscript book Whitmer had created for his calling as church historian. This is an example of how the publication of this important volume is providing new historical evidence that completely changes our understanding of the way the events occurred.

In the last few years, an avalanche of primary sourcebooks has been published. This volume fits quite well with books like *Early Patriarchal Blessings*, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journals*, *Far West Record*, *Kirtland Council Minute Book*, *The Nauvoo Endowment Companies*, and *Words of Joseph Smith*. All of the forgoing publications provide us with various types of documents that help Mormons understand their rich history. This new volume will help readers understand those first critical years of the church’s infancy. This book provides documents for a period in which the historical record is quite limited. Many questions will be answered and many questions will be raised because of this volume.

Church leaders have discussed and written about changes in Mormon scripture. This volume brings to light many changes in Joseph Smith’s revelations. Only forty-five years ago, President Hugh B. Brown as a member of the First Presidency wrote, “None of the early revelations of the

Church have been revised, and the Doctrine and Covenants stands as printed.” During this same period, Wilford Wood’s *Joseph Smith Begins His Work* was pulled from Deseret Book stores due to content suggesting changes in the revelations. Individuals were told the books were out of print when, in fact, the book was still in print and available to other stores. Those who inquired after the books were told that the Scriptures in their present format were identical in content (Wood; Openshaw). The Wood books reproduced the first edition of the Book of Mormon, the 1833 Book of Commandments, and the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. In a related statement, Elder Boyd K. Packer said this in the April 1974 General Conference: “Now, I add with emphasis that such changes [in the books of revelation] have been basically minor refinements in grammar, expression, punctuation, clarification. Nothing fundamental has been altered. Why are they not spoken of over the pulpit? Simply because by comparison they are so insignificant and unimportant as literally to be not worth talking about. After all, they have absolutely nothing to do with whether the books are true” (93).

Similar ideas about Smith’s first revelation, The Book of Mormon, can be found. In the October 1961 Conference, President Joseph Fielding Smith said,

It is true that when the Book of Mormon was printed the printer was a man who was unfriendly. The publication of the book was done under adverse circumstances, and there were a few errors, mostly typographical—conditions that arise in most any book that is being published—but there was not one thing in the Book of Mormon or in the second edition or any other edition since that in any way contradicts the first edition, and such changes as were made, were made by the Prophet Joseph Smith because under those adverse conditions the Book of Mormon was published. But there was no change of doctrine.

Recently Royal Skousen has written, “The original [Book of Mormon] manuscript supports the hypothesis that the text was given to Joseph Smith word for word” and “Joseph Smith’s editing for the second and third editions (1837 and 1840) represents human editing, not a revealed revision of the text.”

Other writers have felt differently about changes made to scripture. Joseph Anderson, secretary to the First Presidency, wrote in the 1970s attesting to the accuracy of Wood’s books. Anderson, in discussing changes made in the Book of Mormon, writes: “Smith made many corrections in the 1837 and the 1840 editions of the Book of Mormon.” Anderson then goes on to discuss the changes in the Doctrine and Covenants: “Smith, being the one who received these revelations and had them recorded, likewise would have a right to add or to subtract from, or change, the revelations and did so in some cases.” Currently, the FAIR wiki site states the following: “Joseph didn’t claim to be hearing a voice, and he didn’t claim to be quoting God or ‘taking dictation.’ Rather, impressions would come to him, which he would put into words. Joseph clearly did not consider them ‘direct quotations’ from God, since he was quite happy to revise them, edit them later, etc.”

How one handles the above comments in light of the redactions, changes in words and phrases, and theological changes will be an individual endeavor. This new volume will allow access to the revelations and allow readers to see for themselves the changes that have been made. By

seeing these pages of scripture in their early form, the reader can have an informed understanding of the revelatory process. This volume makes clear that the manuscript revelations are gifts from God. The printed volume is a gift from the church, and the editing and photographs are remarkable gifts from the editors and those working on the papers project.

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