

1831: A Flood of Revelations Grant Underwood

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While not all the revelations Joseph Smith dictated were canonized, it is a mistake to think his canonized revelations represent only the tip of the revelatory iceberg. There is no vast collection of unpublished, uncanonized revelations in the Church archives. The editors of the Joseph Smith Papers Project are grateful that the Church has made available every known document written or dictated by Joseph Smith. Nothing has been withheld. We have been able to look at everything that has survived, and I assure you that only a relative handful of revelations have not been canonized. [1]

Of the Prophet's 135 revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, 38 were received in 1831. That represents 28 percent of the canonized revelations, and a word count bumps this figure to over 30 percent. Think of that—more than a fourth of all the revealed words dictated by the Prophet Joseph Smith were received in a single year, 1831.

A few other years come close to that percentage but still fall short:

1829: 15 percent

1830: 19 percent

1831: 28 percent

1832: 18 percent

1833: 12 percent

Each of the other years during Joseph's life were 8 percent or less.

Thus we see that 1831 produced a marvelous flood of revelations. These revelations now constitute sections 38 through 72, as well as sections 1 and 133 (the revealed preface and appendix to the Book of Commandments) and what I would call 107b. Most of the verses from 59 to the end of section 107 are actually a separate revelation received in November 1831 that the Prophet and his associates decided to append to the revealed material from March 1835 that makes up the first part of 107. Today, it is a flowing, continuous revelation, but the latter portion was actually received in 1831.

What was it about 1831 that made this a year of such revelatory significance? First of all, at the beginning of the year, Joseph received a revelation directed to the small band of believers in New York who, in their three branches of Palmyra, Fayette, and Colesville, numbered less than one hundred. These Saints were to gather to Ohio, where the missionaries had visited Parley Pratt's old spiritual mentor, Sidney Rigdon, several months earlier. Rigdon, a number of his followers, and some others joined the Church, and in a matter of weeks, the Church counted over a hundred converts in Ohio. So, at the beginning of 1831, a large body of recent converts was residing in northeastern Ohio, and the Lord directed Joseph Smith to bring all the Saints from New York and move to Ohio.

Always on the horizon in the early part of 1831 was the promise made in the fall of 1830 that the location of the New Jerusalem, or Zion, would be revealed. Several revelations were given regarding the New Jerusalem as the ultimate gathering place; Ohio was only the interim gathering place. A large portion of revelations in 1831, beginning in section 52 and going through section 64, in one way or another pertains to the identification of Zion and the initial efforts toward establishing it.

Several other themes stand out in the 1831 revelations. One pertains to distinguishing legitimate spiritual manifestations, or spiritual gifts, from counterfeit, or false, manifestations. Another is keen interest in the end times—a sense of the approaching return of the Lord that was stimulated by this flood of revelations and by the wording in a number of the revelations. The Saints were concerned about prophecy, and several revelations addressing that topic were received in 1831. Toward the end of the year, another important matter engaged the Prophet and his associates: the publication of the revelations. The first compilation of revelations was known as the Book of Commandments. A series of November conferences in 1831 took up the task of deciding how and under what circumstances to publish the revelations received up to that point.

Reasons for the Gathering

Before the Saints could gather to Zion, they were to gather to Ohio. A revelation given in conference on January 2, 1831, now found in the Doctrine and Cove-

nants as section 38, gives reasons for the gathering that amount to a kind of “push-pull.” Verse 31 expresses the “push” factor: “That ye might escape the power of the enemy.” There had been persecution from the beginning—antagonism to the Prophet and to his work—but there had been a particular swirl of opposition to the Saints in Colesville, the southern New York branch. Joseph had gone to Colesville the previous summer to confirm the Church members, but they faced stiff resistance from their enemies. It took a number of weeks before he could confirm the Saints; so the phrase “that you might escape the power of the enemy” was the push to leave New York.

If we want to consider the “pull” toward Ohio, it was the ideal of being “gathered unto [God] a righteous people without spot and blameless” (v. 31). Significant spiritual progress can be aided and abetted by community—by togetherness. “Wherefore,” the Lord declares in verse 32, “for this cause I gave unto you the commandment that ye should go to the Ohio; and there I will give unto you my law.” That happened very soon after they arrived. Then, the promise continues, “And there you shall be endowed with power from on high, and from thence whosoever I will shall go forth among all nations” (vv. 32–33). So there we see the particular promises that pulled the Saints to Ohio. Significant spiritual moments awaited them there as well as shelter from persecution.

Gathering was the major theme of 1831—at least the one addressed in most of the revelations. The previous fall, in section 29, verses 7 and 8, the Lord tells the Saints that they “are called to bring to pass the gathering of mine elect. . . . Wherefore the decree hath gone forth from the Father that they [the elect] shall be gathered in unto one place upon the face of this land.” Note the rationale that follows—“to prepare their hearts and be prepared in all things against the day when tribulation and desolation are sent forth upon the wicked.” The first phrase, “to prepare their hearts,” suggests becoming a people without spot and blame, spiritually maturing into a united organization and group. The last phrase, to “be prepared in all things against the day when tribulation and desolation are sent forth upon the wicked,” addresses a theme stated even more forcefully in the next few

verses—the concept of shelter and preparation against a latter-day outpouring of divine judgment upon the wicked: “For the hour is nigh and the day soon at hand when the earth is ripe; and all the proud and they that do wickedly shall be as stubble, and I will burn them up, saith the Lord of Hosts. . . . For I will reveal myself from heaven with power and great glory, with all the hosts thereof, and dwell in righteousness with men on earth a thousand years, and the wicked shall not stand” (vv. 9, 11). Those few verses encapsulate key concepts among the early Saints. They had a powerful sense that the end was imminent and that the one place of safety, the one place of refuge, would be the gathering location: Zion, the New Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, reference to the gathering appears subsequently in many of the 1831 revelations.

Section 45, given in March 1831, directs, “And with one heart and with one mind, gather up your riches that you may purchase an inheritance which shall hereafter be appointed unto you” (v. 65). It was not for another four months, not until July that Joseph received the revelation identifying the precise location—hence the word hereafter. “And it shall be called the New Jerusalem, a land of peace” (v. 66). Notice the next image in that verse: “a city of refuge.” Refuge from what? From “tribulation and desolation” that shall be poured out on the world, as mentioned in Doctrine and Covenants 29. In the latter days, Zion will be “a city of refuge, a place of safety for the Saints of the Most High God. And the glory of the Lord shall be there, and the terror of the Lord also shall be there, insomuch that the wicked will not come unto it, and it shall be called Zion” (vv. 66–67). Exciting concepts were revealed in these months.

Gathering to Zion

In February 1831, after gathering to Ohio, the Prophet received what we now call “the Law,” a composite revelation published as section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants. A core part of the Law pertains to what we call the “law of consecration,” initially a kind of resource-sharing program outlined by the Lord. This revelation answered questions in the Saints’ minds: How do we finance this growing Church? How do we utilize our limited resources to advance the work?

In March, the revelation known as section 48 came. Beginning in verse 4, the Lord again tells the Saints to get their resources ready to purchase “land for an inheritance, even the city.” However, the Lord said, “The place is not yet to be revealed; but after your brethren come from the east” (v. 5). That is, after the Saints come from New York, “there are to be certain men appointed, and to them it shall be given to know the place, or to them it shall be revealed” (v. 5).

Not long thereafter the New York Saints began to arrive, and in early June of 1831 a very important conference took place. It probably constituted the largest gathering of ordained brethren in the Church to that point. Though it would be small by our standards—perhaps fifty brethren—important things took place. In that conference the first ordinations to the office of high priest occurred. At the tail end of the conference, a revelation was given commissioning several dozen elders to take up their journey for Missouri, where, as it says in section 52, verse 2, the next conference will be held “upon the land which I will consecrate unto my people, which are a remnant of Jacob.” Once there, the location of Zion would be revealed: “Wherefore, verily I say unto you, let my servants Joseph Smith, Jun., and Sidney Rigdon take their journey as soon as preparations can be made. . . . And inasmuch as they are faithful unto me, it shall be made known unto them what they shall do; and it shall also, inasmuch as they are faithful, be made known unto them the land of your inheritance” (vv. 3–5). This was the message they had been waiting for: go to Missouri, and there the location of Zion will be revealed.

Location of Zion

Joseph and a handful of elders arrived in Jackson County, Missouri, in mid July. There, in a small gathering, section 57 was revealed. Not all of the elders assigned had arrived, not even the majority, but those who were there heard these words: “In this land, which is the land of Missouri, which is the land which I have appointed and consecrated for the gathering of the saints. Wherefore, this is the land of promise, and the place for the city of Zion” (vv. 1–2). Then came the very specific answer, “Behold, the place which is now called Inde-

pendence is the center place; and a spot for the temple is lying westward, upon a lot which is not far from the courthouse” (v. 3). [2] Sixty-three acres in a somewhat triangular shape were purchased a few months later by Bishop Edward Partridge as part of his assignment to purchase land for Zion and for the temple. Those sixty-three acres were later known as the “temple lot.” [3]

Section 57 mentions only one temple. Two years later, in 1833, Joseph expanded his plans to build twenty-four temples. At this point in time, temples did not have the same meaning they do today. A temple was usually understood as a meetinghouse. It was not a site where members needed a temple recommend to enter and where special, sacred ceremonies were performed. The temple endowment, as it is known today among the Saints, was not revealed until May 1842. Thus, temples in the 1830s are better understood as meetinghouses or facilities for administrative purposes. In 1833, when Joseph had the city plan for Zion drawn up, he anticipated a future population of ten to fifteen thousand. In such circumstances twenty-four temples, or meetinghouses, would be needed to accommodate the Saints in their Sunday worship.

Sabbath Observance

While in Missouri, the Prophet received the revelation we now know as section 59, which deals with Sabbath observance. Missouri in the 1830s was a rough place. A missionary from another church described Missourians as a very uncivilized people—untrained, uncouth; indulging in gambling, horseracing, and cock-fighting. “Christian Sabbath observance here appears to be unknown,” he wrote. “When the Santa Fe wagon trains return here, or pass through on their way eastward, there is a multiplication of sin beyond the usual amount. There appears to be an overabundance of females here practicing the world’s oldest profession. . . .Gouging and more serious forms of violence are common.” [4] Concerns about these behaviors elicited this revelation, which was actually published very early as a broadside by the Latter-day Saints to affirm their vision of the Christian Sabbath. I believe today Sabbath behavior among the Latter-day Saints sets us apart from many other Christians who take Sabbath observance a little more lightly than we do.

Foundation of Zion

“On the second day of August,” while still in Missouri, the Prophet “assisted the Colesville branch of the Church to lay the first log, for a house, as a foundation of Zion in Kaw township, twelve miles west of Independence. The log was carried and placed by twelve men, in honor of the twelve tribes of Israel. At the same time, through prayer, the land of Zion was consecrated and dedicated by Elder Sidney Rigdon for the gathering of the Saints. It was a season of joy to those present, and afforded a glimpse of the future, which time will yet unfold to the satisfaction of the faithful.” [5]

Several sections in the 50s pertain to the Colesville Branch, the first branch to arrive in Missouri. Section 51 is about previously settling them on a piece of Ohio property that a particular individual had supposedly made available. When that individual withdrew his goodwill, the question arose: what happens now? Section 54 answers that question by saying, in essence: “You get to be the first branch to gather to Missouri—the first group of people other than those ordained elders commissioned in section 52 to go to Missouri as a group.” Section 56 has a few more things to say about that.

A point of interest in terms of understanding the emerging Church can be found in a couple of verses sometimes overlooked in section 57—verses 15 and 16. The verses are directed to Bishop Edward Partridge and Sidney Gilbert. Gilbert was designated as the “agent,” which essentially amounted to a real estate or business agent. He and Bishop Partridge were to work together to acquire the land for the beginning of Zion. The Lord says, “And now concerning the gathering—let the bishop and the agent make preparations for those families which have been commanded to come to this land” (v. 15). At this point in time, the only families aside from the Colesville Branch that had been commanded to come were the families of several of the leaders—Edward Partridge, Sidney Gilbert, and W. W. Phelps—addressed earlier in section 57. The leaders families were back in Ohio nearly a thousand miles away and now were commanded “to come to this land, as soon as possible,” after which the bishop and agent were to “plant them in their inheritance” (v.15). The revelation then concluded with these words: “And unto the residue of

both elders and members further directions shall be given hereafter” (v. 16). This set the stage for subsequent revelations that told the general membership that they were not intended to immediately race off to Zion. One imagines that many of the early Saints were hoping for just that, but by reason and revelation Joseph cooled their spirits a bit.

In section 58, received a few days later, more is said about bringing out the aforementioned families: “Now, as I spake concerning my servant Edward Partridge, this is the land of his residence, and those whom he has appointed for his counselors; and also the land of the residence of him whom I have appointed to keep my storehouse [Sidney Gilbert] Wherefore, let them bring their families to this land, as they shall counsel between themselves and me. For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things” (vv. 24–26). Remember that the word command had a richer meaning then. What was the first collection of revelations called? Not the Book of Revelations, but the Book of Commandments. Commandments, in Joseph’s usage, meant something far more than simply, “Thou shalt” or “thou shalt not.” It was any instruction, insight, or direction from God, so commandments served as a synonym for revelations. Thus, when the Lord says, “It is not meet that I should command in all things” (v. 26), it meant “it is not meet that I reveal or direct in all things.” Now, this was a wonderfully pragmatic statement. The Lord had to wean the Saints from constant dependence on the Prophet for revelation on every matter. Such a dependence would not work when Edward Partridge and Sidney Gilbert were a thousand miles from the Prophet, and the Lord apparently used this occasion to teach the brethren that “the power [was] in them wherein they [were] agents unto themselves” (v. 28).

The Law of Consecration

To build Zion, of course, would require money to purchase land and section 58 counseled the Saints to consecrate their money for the gathering: “And now I give unto you further directions concerning this land. It is wisdom in me that my servant Martin Harris should be an example unto the church, in laying his moneys before the bishop of the church” (vv. 34–35). It is in the

Law (Doctrine and Covenants 42) where the provision for resource sharing, for what we call “consecration,” is found, and Martin Harris, the great financial patron of the Restoration, was here once again being asked to lay his monies before the bishop of the Church. “And also, this is a law unto every man that cometh unto this land to receive an inheritance; and he [the bishop] shall do with his moneys according as the law directs” (v. 36).

Zion was not just a nice place to live; it was a consecrated community. In fact, the next year, after a number of Latter-day Saints had gathered there, not all of whom had done it the right way—by consecration—the Lord said in a letter later canonized as section 85: “A general church record is to be kept of all things that transpire in Zion and of all those who consecrate properties, and receive inheritances” (v. 1). Inheritance was the religious term for the plot of land members would receive in Zion once they had consecrated their property. All those who received inheritances were to receive them legally from the bishop. The Lord continued directing the Saints in verse 3: “It is contrary to the will and commandment of God that those who receive not their inheritance by consecration, agreeable to his law which he has given, that he may tithe his people, to prepare them against the day of vengeance and burning, should have their names enrolled with the people of God.” This verse uses strong language to say that it was against God’s will for the Saints to gather to Zion without authorization and without consecrating their property.

Counsel to Early Missionaries

Section 58 also mentions the elders not specifically addressed: “Concerning the residue of the elders, the time has not yet come for many years for them to receive their inheritance in this land, except they desire it through the prayer of faith, only as it shall be appointed unto them of the Lord” (v. 44). If they were not to gather to Zion in the near future, what were the elders supposed to do? The Lord commands them to “push the people together from the ends of the earth” (v. 45).

As for the Saints generally, the divine word was, “Let the work of the gathering be not in haste, nor by flight; but let it be done as it shall be counseled by the elders of the church at the conferences, according to the knowl-

edge which they receive from time to time” (v. 56). The knowledge needed would come from Zion: “Let the privileges of the lands be made known from time to time, by the bishop or the agent” (v. 55). The gathering was to take place in a regulated, sensible fashion. Sadly, not everyone paid attention to this, and a fair number of less-than-wise Saints gathered to Zion on their own initiative and without consecrating.

Now, I would like to turn to section 60 and draw your attention to a couple of smaller items. This revelation is directed toward the elders who had traveled to Missouri and were now told to go home, preaching the gospel along the way. In verse 15, a New Testament idea is invoked: “And shake off the dust of thy feet against those who receive thee not, not in their presence, lest thou provoke them, but in secret; and wash thy feet, as a testimony against them in the day of judgment.” At times certain expressions take on a life of their own that is beyond the original meaning of the text. “Dusting off” the feet is one such example. Many sensational stories have been generated among the Latter-day Saints about how God punishes the unresponsive after the missionaries have dusted off their feet against them. In reality, this practice is an acknowledgment that the elders have discharged their duty to proclaim the gospel and have turned matters over to the Lord to handle this situation on Judgment Day. Joseph Smith later wrote, “If a man forbid his wife, or his children . . . to receive the Gospel, then it should be the duty of the Elder to go his way, and use no influence against him, and let the responsibility be upon his head; shake off the dust of thy feet as a testimony against him.” [6] The missionary is no longer responsible for their salvation. We do not dust our feet in hope that some disaster will befall those who reject the Lord’s servants. Feet dusting is not Mormon voodoo. The Prophet says, “Use no influence against him.” We leave judgment to the Lord, but, oh, how at a popular level the idea of feet dusting has been sensationalized over the years!

Caution about Gathering to Zion

Next comes section 61. While the elders were on their way home, they were canoeing down the Missouri River, which occasionally had floating on its edges logs

and trees that had fallen over. In this instance, the elders crashed into such a floating tree and capsized the canoe. In a day when many people did not know how to swim, that was a very frightening and unsettling experience. The elders managed to pull themselves to land, but the whole experience shook them. There had also been some squabbling among the brethren earlier in the journey. The Lord used this occasion to give them some interesting counsel: “What I say unto one I say unto all, that you shall forewarn your brethren concerning these waters, that they [shall not come] in journeying upon them, lest their faith fail and they are caught in snares; I, the Lord, have decreed, and the destroyer rideth upon the face thereof, and I revoke not the decree. I, the Lord, was angry with you yesterday, but today mine anger is turned away” (vv. 18–20).

It is important to look at revelations in context and understand that certain passages may have had a particular meaning at that time. Here is an example. We can look at this and wonder, how did the Saints understand these words? Within a matter of months, a cholera pandemic broke out in the United States. It was one of the great pandemics in United States history, and the Lord here is giving them a forewarning. The Evening and Morning Star offers a glimpse at how this revelation was understood at the time: “Besides the saving of time and money, [as you travel by land rather than by boat to Zion], you save risks and many dangers: Firstly, of disasters upon the waters.” There were many steamboat disasters in those days, and the explosions burned and killed numbers of people. “And secondly, in some degree, the fear and trouble of the Cholera, which the Lord has sent into the world, and which may, without repentance, ravage the large towns near the waters, many years, or, at least, till other judgments come.” [7] Thus the early understanding of this text was, “The destroyer that rides upon the water is particularly the cholera. It’s much safer for us to travel by land.”

Some years ago at the Missionary Training Center, Elder Rex D. Pinegar responded to the question, “Why can’t missionaries swim?” Many missionaries probably thought he was going to quote section 61, “the destroyer rideth upon the waters.” But instead he quoted a statistic. He said that in the age-group of young adults eigh-

teen to twenty-five there are about eight or nine deaths per ten thousand (I can’t remember the exact number) from water accidents each year. He basically went on to say, “With thirty thousand missionaries, we don’t want to defy those odds. We can’t just assume that the Lord is going to protect us when we haven’t done all we can to protect ourselves.” That was a fine down-to-earth explanation. Let us never forget, as Elder John A. Widtsoe titled his book nearly a hundred years ago, that we have a “rational theology.”

Interestingly, the proscription against missionaries swimming has not always existed. Earlier in the twentieth century, missionaries sometimes went swimming. I particularly like a little quote I found in the Improvement Era, where mission president Samuel O. Bennion of the Central States Mission met with the South and West Texas Conference in the 1920s: “Three spirited, well attended meetings were held. Reports of the elders showed good work accomplished. Twenty-one baptisms reported for the past three months. On May 24 we enjoyed an excursion to Galveston and a swim in the Gulf of Mexico.” [8] Some missionaries today may wish they were back in the 1920s! But again, as with dusting off the feet, folklore proliferates like that little week, morning glory, we all deal with in our gardens. Many young people today just assume that water is the devil’s domain and that is why missionaries cannot go swimming. That is not our doctrine, however.

It Mattereth Not

On the topic of weaning members from dependency on the Prophet for all answers, there is an interesting phrase that appears in four successive revelations just following section 58, where the Lord said: “It is not meet that I should command in all things.” In section 60 verse 5, the elders wanted to know, “Should we buy or make a watercraft?” The Lord said, “It mattereth not unto me.” In 61:22, he said, “It mattereth not unto me . . . whether they go by water or by land” on their way home; “let this be as it is made known unto them according to their judgments”—in other words, using human reason and judgment. In 62:5 to the question, “Shall we go home as one big group or two by two?” the answer is, “As seemeth you good, it mattereth not unto me.” Finally, in

63:40, the Lord commands that “all the moneys which can be spared” should be sent to Zion, although he says the amount “mattereth not unto me.”

In these verses, the Lord is not saying he does not care about us, but he does want us to know we have the power within ourselves to make sound decisions. As he said in section 58, “Do many things of [your] own free will” (v. 27). In many decisions we make in life, the answer may well be “as seemeth you good; it mattereth not unto me.” The Lord actually shows he cares about us by allowing us to exercise our agency. It is interesting that the Lord taught this principle just at the time some of the Saints were moving to Missouri, hundreds of miles away from Ohio, where they no longer had convenient access to the Prophet to discuss their concerns or questions.

Warning about Gathering in Haste

After the Prophet returned to Ohio, he received a revelation in which the Lord reiterates to an expectant group of Saints that the gathering to Zion should not be made “in haste” (Doctrine and Covenants 63:24). Verse 41 says that Joseph Smith will discern by the Spirit who is to go up to Zion and who shall tarry in the east. An interesting twist on this was revealed several weeks later in section 64. Frederick G. Williams was told in verse 21 to keep his farm: “For I, the Lord, will retain a stronghold in the land of Kirtland, for the space of five years.” That time frame must have been disappointing to some folks who thought the gathering and Second Coming would take place in the very near future. In one article, Evening and Morning Star editor William W. Phelps recalculated biblical numbers and reasoned that as of 1832, the beginning of the seventh thousand years and the Millennium may only have been nine years away. [9] And compared to others at the time, Phelps’s view was conservative. Some were probably hoping it was only nine months away! Even Joseph himself can be read to have believed that the end was nigh. In his first published proclamation to the general American public, he declared: “the hour of his Judgement is come, repent ye repent ye and embrace the everlasting covenant and flee to zion before the overflowing scourge overtake you for there are those now living upon the earth whose

eyes shall not be closed in death until they see all these things which I have spoken fulfilled.” [10]

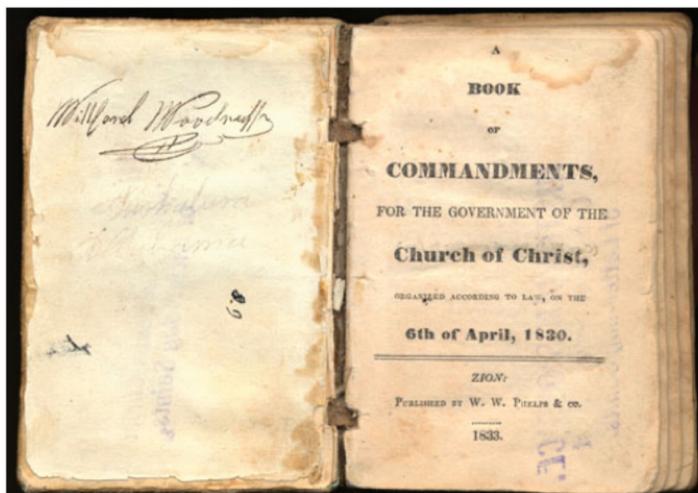
The Voice of Warning

The sense of an imminent end imparted urgency to the “warning voice” the Saints were to raise. Look in section 63, verse 33. Here the Lord says he is in his wrath and has decreed wars on the face of the earth in which the wicked would slay the wicked. Verse 34 adds that the Saints will “hardly escape,” and that the Lord “will come down in heaven from the presence of my Father and consume the wicked.” Again, we see this apocalyptic scenario. However, he notes “This is not yet, but by and by” (v. 35).

In verse 37, the Lord instructs the elders: “that every man should take righteousness in his hands and faithfulness upon his loins, and lift a warning voice unto the inhabitants of the earth; and declare both by word and by flight that desolation shall come upon the wicked.” The message of the elders in that day was a warning voice, warning all to repent or suffer the consequences. This was very biblical. We remember the prophet Jeremiah who was always warning of imminent judgments on Israel, which is how we got the English word jeremiad. We do not use it much today, but when someone is taking people to task, warning them of consequences, that is a jeremiad. And missionaries delivered more than a few jeremiads in the early years. In the emerging Church, we see a sense of urgency. Those early Saints felt it—saying, “We have got to get out and spread the word and share the gospel because of the judgments of God that will soon come upon those who do not respond to the Lord’s message.”

Book of Commandments

Let’s shift to November 1831 when a series of important elders’ conferences were held. They took place in the John Johnson home in Hiram, Ohio, in a very small room and involved just a handful of individuals. Let us just summarize what happened quickly. On the first day, they decided how many copies of the Book of Commandments to publish. The Lord gave a preface by revelation. We have it now as section 1 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Later the same day, he gave them a rev-



Book of Commandments

elation with the particular testimony he wanted them to affirm. Just as the witnesses signed a testimonial to the Book of Mormon, there were also to be witnesses who endorsed the Book of Commandments. But something apparently happened overnight—a few of the elders seem to have become convinced that they could not in good conscience sign that revealed testimony. And so sometime that morning, the Lord gave another revelation to them, section 67. In verse 3 he says: “Ye endeavored to believe that ye should receive the blessing which was offered unto you; but behold, verily I say unto you there were fears in your hearts, and verily this is the reason that ye did not receive.” Apparently, a few of the brethren did not receive the confirming witness they were hoping to receive, and the Lord explains in verse 3 that it was so because “there were fears in your hearts.” But there was more than fear. In verse 5, the Lord says: “Your eyes have been upon my servant Joseph Smith Jun., and his language you have known, and his imperfections you have known; and you have sought in your hearts knowledge that you might express beyond his language; this you also know.”

A few of the brethren apparently were having some qualms about some of the wording of the revelations. So the Lord essentially said, “We are going to do a little experiment here.” Verses 6–8 give instructions for the experiment: Pick out any one of the revelations in the Book of Commandments, and then appoint someone who is educated and wise, and if he can make one com-

parable, then you can say they are not true. But if he fails, then you are under condemnation if you do not sign this testimony or bear testimony.

William McLellin tried and failed, but seven or eight years later when this story was recorded in Joseph Smith’s history, McLellin was criticized for making the attempt. By that time, he had turned against the Prophet and was a bit of a traitor. So it was said of him, probably reflecting his later behavior more than his 1831 attitude, that McLellin was “the wisest man in his own estimation, having more learning than sense.” [11] That’s a strong statement and a real barb that McLellin actually may not have deserved in 1831.

McLellin arrived in Ohio just days before these conference meetings, and he was overwhelmed by the impressiveness of the brethren, including Joseph Smith. On Sunday, October 30, two days before this experience, he was called on to preach. He recorded in his diary: “It seemed to me as if I could not. Here was the Church who had been instructed by the first Elders in the church. Here was Brothers John, Sidney, Oliver, and Joseph and it did not seem to me as if I could instruct them or even entertain the Congregation.” [12] Does this sound like a man who was full of himself, the “wisest man” in his own estimation? Perhaps it might be good to consider McLellin, who was a schoolteacher and well educated, as being invited or asked to write a revelation. Then, when he could not produce one, the elders would be reassured that the Lord was inspiring the Prophet. So McLellin did it—perhaps not out of arrogance, but by assignment.

The Literary Firm

With the revelations for the Book of Commandments ready to go, Section 69 says, in essence, “I want John Whitmer to accompany Oliver Cowdery in carrying them to Missouri to get them published.” In so many words, section 70 says, “I want a group of men to take charge of the publishing of Church literature, beginning with the Book of Commandments.” This group was called the “Literary Firm,” and in section 70, verse 5, they were told, “This is their business, . . . to manage [Church publications] and the concerns thereof, yea, the benefits thereof.” They were to be supported or

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aided financially by the anticipated profits from the sale of Church literature. “Nevertheless,” verse 7 says, “inasmuch as they receive more than is needful for their necessities and their wants, it shall be given into my storehouse.” This was the same procedure all stewards were to follow.

Section 107

Embedded in the 1835 revelation now known as section 107 is another given in 1831. The revelation in question is mentioned at the end of verse 58 and begins in verse 59: “To the Church of Christ in the land of Zion in addition to the Church laws, respecting Church business.” Then it goes forward. When we look at Doctrine and Covenants 107:59 carefully, it has the 1831 name of the Church, and mention of the Church “in the land of Zion” makes sense for 1831, whereas by 1835 the Saints had been expelled from Zion. Most of the verses from 59 onward were given in November 1831. A few, however, like 70, 73, or 76 and 77, reflect later understandings that were inserted in the revelation, and verses 90 through 98 refer to the office of Seventy, which had only been constituted in 1835. This composite revelation illustrates that the Prophet seemed impressed to make the Doctrine and Covenant as comprehensive and up-to-date as possible. Elsewhere, he made a number of revisions to the revelations to update them or to clarify meaning. Literally hundreds of words in the earliest versions of the revelations were deleted and hundreds more were added to bring greater clarity, to make them consistent with current Church procedures, or to provide additional light and knowledge. It is a fascinating study. All of that took place sometime between initial dictation and final preparation for publication in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. Most Latter-day Saints have heard that there were little changes, commas here, a word there, changes in verb tense; but prior to 1835 there were a number of significant revisions. Since 1835, changes have been largely inconsequential and have had little effect on meaning. The earlier revisions, however, offer a wonderful window on how the Prophet worked under inspiration to refine and polish the revelations.

Dealing with Apostasy

Section 71 was received in December 1831. Ezra Booth, one of the elders assigned to travel the previous summer to Missouri, lost faith during that time, came home, and reverted to his former religion. He published a series of letters describing his dissatisfaction with the Saints. They appeared in a newspaper called the Ohio Star and were published serially for a number of weeks in late 1831.

Section 71 invites Joseph and Sidney to call upon their “enemies” to meet them “in public and in private.” We do not instruct missionaries to do that today. This was a special circumstance, and these were special individuals. They did as the Lord instructed them. Sidney Rigdon ran an ad in the Ohio Star in which he said, “The Lord willing, I will deliver a lecture on the Christian Religion in the village of Ravenna on Sunday, the 25th inst. at the brick school house, or at the school house owned by Dr. DeWolf. I give notice to Ezra Booth, that his attendance is desired, as I shall review the letters written by him and published in the Ohio Star, headed Mormonism, as those letters are an unfair and false representation of the subjects on which they treat.” [13] In the same ad, he challenged Symonds Ryder, a prominent citizen of nearby Hiram, Ohio, who had also apostatized, to a debate. In the end, neither one showed up, and the case was closed.

Conclusion

1831 was a wonderfully rich year, one in which a flood of revelations poured forth to guide the Saints in a variety of matters. The revelations instructed them to gather first to Ohio, then to Zion. They offered guidance on numerous temporal concerns and activities. At the same time, the revelations dealt with signs of the last days, explained how missionary work was to be done, and gave guidance on having the revelations printed—all this in thirty-eight glorious revelations in the year 1831. We thank the Lord that we have them.

Notes

- 1 These few revelations were not canonized for good reasons. Most are short and deal with administrative matters, such as how to obtain paper to publish the Book of Commandments or how particular individuals should complete their missionary labors.
- 2 As it turns out, “not far” really is not very far. Were you today to be able to go to downtown Independence, visit the old court site, and walk for ten minutes or so, you would be to the location of the original temple property.
- 3 Today, on that original acreage can be found the Community of Christ (formerly RLDS) auditorium, the Community of Christ temple across the street, and the Church of Christ Temple Lot, so known because it actually owns that tiny portion of the sixty-three acres where Joseph subsequently designated the first temple should be built.
- 4 Cit. in T. Edgar Lyon, “Independence, Missouri, and the Mormons, 1827–1833,” *BYU Studies* 13 [Autumn 1972]: 15–16.
- 5 Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 1:196.
- 6 Joseph Smith, *Messenger and Advocate*, November 1835, 211.
- 7 “The Way of Journeying for the Saints of the Church of Christ,” *Evening and Morning Star*, December 1832, 53.
- 8 “Messages from the Missions,” *Improvement Era*, February 1924, 973.
- 9 “Present Age of the World,” *Evening and Morning Star*, August 1832, 21–22.
- 10 Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 298.
- 11 *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:367.
- 12 Shipps and Welch, *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836*, 46.
- 13 Sidney Rigdon, advertisement, *Ohio Star*, December 15, 1831.