

How the Revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants Were Received and Compiled

By Robert J. Woodford
Institute instructor at LDS Business College
Ensign, Jan. 1985, pp. 27-33

[Original endnotes have been included within the text in brackets.
References found within parenthesis are original.]

Many revelations recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants do not now appear as when they were first recorded. However, a correct understanding of the nature of the revelations the Prophet Joseph Smith received and how he updated them in light of continued revelation explains why many changes occurred. Indeed, each of the sections has been edited to some degree, demonstrating that Joseph Smith did not receive all these revelations as word-for-word dictations from the Lord (although he may have received some this way). Rather, he received inspiration and wrote the revelations using his own words, often couched in Victorian English.

The first thing to understand is that the Prophet Joseph Smith did not receive the revelations apart from those who labored with him.

Participants in the Revelations

Research into the historical background of the Doctrine and Covenants shows that Joseph Smith did not receive all his revelations in the privacy of his own room or in the seclusion of a wilderness setting. On several occasions there were witnesses present—some of whom recorded in detail what they saw and heard as the Prophet revealed the word of the Lord. At other times, persons close to Joseph Smith actually participated with him in receiving revelations. The best-known example is that of Sidney Rigdon seeing the same visions as the Prophet when section 76 was received. The record of this shared experience is found in the revelation itself, verses 11 to 18. Others participated with the Prophet in receiving sections 20, 42, 88, 102, 109, and 137. And Brigham Young received section 136 while sitting in council with other members of the Quorum of the Twelve.

Let's look at some of these sections a little more closely.

Section 20

The historical background of section 20 is somewhat clouded, as indicated by the various dates suggested for its reception. These vary from March through June of

1830, but, in actuality, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery probably received parts of section 20 in 1829. And those portions that are quoted from the Book of Mormon were received prior to that.

Most of the Christian churches located in New York at the time Joseph Smith received his first revelations had “confessions,” “creeds,” “platforms,” or “articles of faith.” These documents contained brief statements of basic beliefs, doctrine, duties of members, and other information useful to investigators and members. Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants (which was known as the Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ during the first decade of the Church) has many parallels to the confessions of the Christian churches of the day and appears to have been written for the same purpose. It is composed of short statements about basic doctrines, ordinances, duties of members and priesthood bearers, and the baptismal and sacrament prayers.

What appears to be an early draft of the Articles and Covenants (in Oliver Cowdery's handwriting and dated in 1829) is in the Archives of the Historical Department of the Church. It is titled: “A True Copy of the articles of the Church of Christ.” Oliver Cowdery wrote at the beginning of this document that he composed it by commandment. If the procedure was the same then as now, such a commandment would have come through the Prophet. This document contains quotations from the Book of Mormon and from earlier revelations. Most of the Book of Mormon quotations are retained in the current form of section 20.

The existence of this document helps solve two matters concerning the text of section 20. First, when a comparison is made between the current text and various earlier printings of section 20, it is clear that this section has had numerous additions and deletions. For example, section 22 was included as part of this section when it was first published in the *Evening and Morning Star* [*Evening and Morning Star* [Independence, Missouri], June 1832, pp. 1–2. Sources cited throughout the article contain the spelling and punctuation of the original]. Similarly, verses 14–15, 41, 50–52, and 61–67 are either

additions to the text or are verses that were completely revised over the years.

The second matter involves a letter that Oliver Cowdery wrote to Joseph Smith in July or August of 1830, asking that a part of verse 37 which he considered to be in error be taken out of the revelation [Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, *The Doctrine and Covenants Commentary*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957), p. xx. See also *History of the Church* 1:104–5]. A portion of this early document is similar to verse 37 in section 20, but does not contain that part of the verse Oliver Cowdery wanted removed. The portion questioned by Oliver was later reinserted by the Prophet.

Thus, section 20 is an example of the principles taught in sections 67 and 68 of the Doctrine and Covenants. In section 67, we are informed that the revelations were given in the language of the Prophet Joseph Smith with all the normal imperfections of human communication. In section 68, we are told that when a servant of the Lord is moved upon by the Holy Ghost, what he says is the mind and the will of the Lord, and is scripture. The historical background of section 20, therefore, appears to be centered in an effort to put into words the basic beliefs and tenets of the Church. The document was drawn from earlier revealed sources and was thus inspired by the Spirit over a period of time; it is, therefore, scripture.

On 9 June 1830, the first conference of the Church was held as directed in the Articles and Covenants of the Church (section 20). The complete Articles and Covenants were read in this conference by Joseph Smith as one of the first items of business. This document was then received by the “unanimous voice of the whole congregation” [*Far West Record*, ed. Donald Q. Cannon & Lyndon W. Cook (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983), p. 1]. Thus, section 20 became the first revelation of this dispensation canonized by the Church. It was also the first revelation of this dispensation to be printed in the first edition, and was printed on the first page of the first newspaper of the Church, the *Evening and Morning Star* (vol. 1, no. 1, June 1832). From that point on, basic practices of the Church have been conducted in accordance with this section. In succeeding conferences, the Articles and Covenants were read in order that the Latter-day Saints might be reminded of the policies and procedures they were to follow [*Far West Record*, pp. 3, 20, 39, 54, 57].

Section 42

Prior to the reception of section 42, the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith that he would give his law to the Saints once they had moved to Ohio (see D&C

38:32); however, after Joseph Smith arrived in Kirtland, the Lord revealed that the elders had to agree upon the word of the Lord and unite in a prayer of faith for that purpose (see D&C 41:2–3). Only then would they receive the law of the Church.

On 9 February 1831, Joseph Smith, in the presence of twelve elders who had prepared themselves according to the Lord’s command, received the law of the Church. With the exception of a short deleted portion, this revelation is currently published as verses 1–72 of section 42. The remainder of section 42 (D&C 42:73–77 and D&C 42:78–93), is a compilation of two other revelations received on 23 February 1831 and added to the law by Joseph Smith when he prepared it for publication in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

There is an interesting variation in two of the extant manuscripts of the law that may give a clue as to how the elders involved in the reception of this revelation were agreed concerning the word of the Lord. From the text of these manuscripts, we learn that:

“*Question 1st*—Shall the Church come together into one place or remain as they are in separate bodies? [D&C 42:1–10 follow this question.]

“*Question 2d*—The Law regulating the Church in her present situation till the time of her gathering—[D&C 42:11–69 follow this question.]

[There is no question #3 in these manuscripts.]

“*Question 4th*—How the Elders are to dispose of their families while they are proclaiming or otherways engaged in the Service of the Church—[D&C 42:70–73 follow this question.]

“*Question 5th*—How far is it the will of the Lord we should have dealings with them [meaning the world]—

[A small deleted portion of the Law follows this question. It is no longer printed in the Doctrine and Covenants, but may be read in the Book of Commandments (an earlier version of the Doctrine and Covenants), chapter XLIV, verses 55–56.]

“*Question 6th*—What preparation shall we make for our Brethren from the East & where & how?”

The remaining small deleted portion of the Law follows this question. It is no longer printed in the Doctrine and Covenants, but may be read in the Book of Commandments, chapter XLIV, verse 57 [*Book of Commandments, Laws, and Covenants*, Book B., pp. 13–23, located in Church Archives. See also the Laws of the Church of Christ, Kirtland, Geauga Ohio, May 23rd 1831; A Commandment to the Elders, located in Church Archives].

Section 88

The account of others assisting Joseph Smith in receiving section 88 is best related in the minutes kept on that occasion. They are as follows:

“A conference of High Priests assembled in the translating room in Kirtland Ohio on the 27th day of Dec A.D. 1832—Present—Joseph Smith,—Sidney Rigdon—Orson Hyde—Joseph Smith, Jr.—Hyrum Smith—Samuel H. Smith—N. K. Whitney—F. G. Williams—Ezra Thayer—& John Murdock commenced by prayer, Then Bro. Joseph arose and said, to receive revelation and the blessings of heaven it was necessary to have our minds on god and exercise faith and become of one heart and of one mind therefore he recommended all present to pray separately and vocally to the Lord for to receive his will unto us concerning the upbuilding of Zion, & for the benefit of the saints and for the duty and employment of the Elders—Accordingly we all bowed down before the Lord, after which each one arose and spoke in his turn his feelings, and determination to keep the commandments of God, And thus proceeded to receive a revelation concerning the [not legible] above stated 9 o clock P.M. the revelation not being finished the conference adjourned till tomorrow morning 9 o clock A.M.—27th meet according adjournment and commenced by Prayer thus proceeded to receive the residue of the above revelation and it being finished and there being no further business before the conference closed the meeting by prayer in harmony with the brethren and gratitude to our heavenly Father for the great manifestations of his holy Spirit during the setting of the conference.

“F. G. Williams clk of con” [Kirtland Council Minute Book, pp. 3–4, located in Church Archives].

The revelation in the above minutes is section 88:1–126. Verses 127–137 form a separate revelation given to Joseph Smith on 3 January 1833. These two revelations, plus verses 138–141, were combined by the Prophet when he prepared them for publication in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

Section 102

Section 102 of the Doctrine and Covenants contains the minutes of the formation of the first high council of the Church. The original manuscript of these minutes is found in the Kirtland Council Minute Book (the manuscript minute book of the Kirtland High Council) and is in the handwriting of Orson Hyde. Immediately following the original is a corrected set of the same minutes followed by this explanation:

“The council assembled pursuant to adjournment. Joseph Smith Jr. opened the council by reading the 3rd Chap. of Joel’s prophecy, and prayer. After which he

arose before the council, and said, that he had laboured the day before with all the strength and wisdom that he had given him in making the corrections necessary in the last council minutes, which he would now read before this council. He asked the council for their attention, that they might rightly judge upon the truth and propriety of these minutes, as all were equally interested in them &c. He also urged the necessity of prayer that the Spirit might be given, that the things of the Spirit might be judged thereby; because the carnal mind cannot discern the things of God &c. He then proceeded to read the minutes and afterward, made some remarks, when it was decided by the members of the council present, that it might be read a second time. Sidney Rigdon then proceeded to read the minutes or constitution of the high council the second time, remarking at the time, that it could not be justly urged to be read at this time, as the hour was passed which was appointed for the council to assemble. An impropriety by some was discovered in the commencements of the minutes, as it says, a council of high priests, and afterwards says, that elders, priests and private members acted in said council. Said objections were corrected, and the minutes read the third time by Oliver Cowdery. The questions were then asked, whether the present council acknowledged the same, and receive them for a form, and constitution of the high council of the Church of Christ hereafter. The document was received by the unanimous voice of the council, with this provision, that, if the president should hereafter discover any lack in the same he should be privileged to fill it up” [Kirtland Council Minute Book, p. 36].

Even though the names of Orson Hyde and Oliver Cowdery are given as the clerks who wrote the minutes, Joseph Smith and the complete council made extensive corrections of the original.

A year later, after the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was organized, the prophet inserted what are now verses 30–32 into this section, explaining the quorum’s duties as a traveling high council.

Section 109

Joseph Smith also received assistance in obtaining section 109 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Oliver Cowdery write in his journal:

“From Saturday 19th attended Heb. School, up to Saturday the 26. Nothing of note’s transpiring. This day our school did not keep, we prepared for the dedication of the Lord’s house. I met in the president’s room, pres. J. Smith, jr. S. Rigdon, my brother W. A. Cowdery & Elder W. Parrish, and assisted in writing a prayer for the dedication of the house” [Oliver Cowdery Journal (March 1836), located in Church Archives].

Section 136

Section 136, the only revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants that was received by Brigham Young, was given on 14 January 1847. Prior to its reception, Brigham Young sat in council with others of the General Authorities, and they discussed freely the subject of moving the Saints to the West in the spring of the year. In this council meeting, section 136 was received. Minutes kept at the time record the following:

“Pres. Young commenced to give the Word and Will of God concerning the emigration of the saints and those who journey with them. At 4:30 P.M., the council adjourned.

“At seven, the Twelve met at Elder Benson’s. Pres. Young continued to dictate the word and will of the Lord. Council adjourned at ten P.M., when Pres. Young retired with Dr. Richards to the Octagon and finished writing the same which is here inserted [section 136]” [Journal History of the Church, 14 January 1847, located in Church Archives].

Section 137

Section 137, added to the Doctrine and Covenants in 1981, was received by Joseph Smith in the Kirtland Temple, 21 January 1836. Present in the room were about a dozen other men who also received revelations. Joseph Smith wrote:

“Many of my brethren who received the ordinance with me saw glorious visions also. Angels ministered unto them as well as to myself, and the power of the Highest rested upon us, the house was filled with the glory of God, and we shouted Hosanna to God and the Lamb. My scribe also received his anointing with us, and saw, in a vision, the armies of heaven protecting the Saints in their return to Zion, and many things which I saw.

“The Bishop of Kirtland with his Counselors, and the Bishop of Zion with his Counselors, were present with us, and received their anointings under the hands of Father Smith, and this was confirmed by the Presidency, and the glories of heaven were unfolded to them also.” (*History of the Church*, 2:381–82.)

Joseph then invited the members of the presidencies of the stakes at Kirtland and Zion into the room along with their associated high councils. The number in the room now exceeded forty and once again the visions and revelations began.

“The visions of heaven were opened to them also. Some of them saw the face of the Savior, and others were ministered unto by holy angels, and the spirit of prophecy and revelation was poured out in mighty power; and loud hosannas, and glory to God in the

highest, saluted the heavens, for we all communed with the heavenly host.” (*History of the Church*, 2:382.)

These eight revelations serve as examples of a principle that has been long understood in the Church: when men who are called and authorized sit down in council together, the will of the Lord can be revealed, decisions of eternal consequence can be made, and scripture can be written.

Edited Revelations

Sections 42 and 88 have already been shown to be compiled from two or more revelations. Sections 23, 27, 30, 72, 75, and 107 are similar compilations. Section 23 was originally printed in the Book of Commandments as five separate revelations—chapters XVII to XXI. In a like manner, section 30 was printed as three revelations—chapters XXXI to XXXIII.

Newel Knight said that the first part of section 27 was revealed by a heavenly messenger in August 1830, and the remainder was given in September of the same year [Journal History of the Church, August 1830, located in Church Archives]. Joseph Smith considered it to be one revelation. (*History of the Church*, 1:106.) Verses 1–5, 14, the first portion of verse 15, and the middle portion of verse 18 were first published in the *Evening and Morning Star* as a complete revelation. When Joseph Smith arranged the revelations for publication in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, he and the committee who worked with him included the verses that now make up the remaining portion of the section.

Section 72 is a composite of two revelations received by the Prophet on 4 December 1831. Verses 1–8 are a revelation calling Newel K. Whitney to be a bishop, and verses 9–26 are an addition to the law (section 42) making known the duties of the bishop. A careful reading of verse 9 shows that the remainder of the section was received after Newel K. Whitney was called and ordained as directed in verse 8. It is interesting that when section 72 was first published in the *Millennial Star* [*Millennial Star* (Liverpool, England), 15 April 1852, pp. 114–15], verses 9–15 were not part of the main body of the revelation, but an introduction to verses 16–26.

Section 75 is also a combination of two separate revelations received by Joseph Smith on 25 January 1832. The first comprises verses 1–22, and the second, verses 23–36. These have never been published separately, but manuscript copies in the handwriting of Sidney Rigdon (possibly the original manuscripts of these revelations) show section 75 was given as two revelations.

Probably the most complex combination of revelations occurs in section 107. Verse 59 to the first part of verse 69, and verses 71, 72, 74, 75, 78–87, 89, 91–92, 99 and 100 were received as a complete revelation in November 1831 [*Kirtland Revelation Book*, pp. 84–87, located in Church Archives]. The last part of verse 69, and verses 70, 73, 76, 77 and 88 were received sometime between November 1831 and March 1835. These verses contain material about the duties of bishops and about bishops being literal descendants of Aaron. (Section 68, which was also received in November 1831, did not have any references to bishops being literal descendants of Aaron. Verses 16–21 of that section, which contain such information, are, therefore, later additions.) Section 107:90 and 93–98 is about the vision of the seventy that the Prophet Joseph Smith received sometime between November 1831 and 8 February 1835, when he mentioned to Brigham and Joseph Young that he had had such a vision. (*History of the Church*, 2:180–82.) Section 107:53–55 is part of a blessing Joseph Smith bestowed on his father on 18 December 1833 [*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. by Joseph Fielding Smith, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1938), pp. 38, 39]. The rest of section 107 seems to be original material received on 28 March 1835, when the Quorum of the Twelve requested this revelation. Thus, section 107 contains portions of at least five different revelations. The heading of the 1981 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants states:

“Although portions of this section were received on the date named (28 March 1835), the historical records affirm that various parts were received at sundry times, some as early as November 1831.”

Combining revelations is only one form of editing found in the Doctrine and Covenants. A second type is the opposite—at least three revelations published in the Doctrine and Covenants are only a part of what was originally revealed. As an example, a few years after Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon received section 76, the Prophet said:

“I could explain a hundred fold more than I ever have of the glories of the kingdoms manifested to me in the vision, were I permitted, and were the people prepared to receive them.” (*History of the Church*, 5:402.)

The Prophet also said of section 132 “that there was much more that he could write on the same subject, but what was written was sufficient for the present.” (*History of the Church*, 5:xxxii–xxxiii.) It is important to note that President Joseph F. Smith commented that this section “would have been presented in a somewhat different form” if Joseph Smith had originally written it

for publication. (*Journal of Discourses*, 20:29.)

Section 115 also appears to be only a portion of a larger revelation, the remainder of which is still unidentified. When this section was first published in the *Elder’s Journal* in August 1838, it was noted as an extract [*Elder’s Journal* (Far West, Missouri), August 1838, pp. 52–53]. Similarly, in a letter from Thomas B. Marsh to Wilford Woodruff, this revelation is described as a lengthy one [Thomas B. Marsh to Wilford Woodruff, 30 April 1838, located in Church Archives].

Some of the letters and writings of Joseph Smith included in later editions of the Doctrine and Covenants were edited when they first appeared in the book. Sections 121, 122, and 123 are extracts from two letters sent from Joseph Smith to Bishop Edward Partridge while the Prophet was confined in Liberty Jail. The actual letters are still extant and are in the Historical Department of the Church. Elder Orson Pratt was authorized by Brigham Young to edit these letters and include certain portions in the 1876 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Although the basis of selection is not known, President Brigham Young evidently felt they were of sufficient importance to be published for the Church. Once they were included in the Doctrine and Covenants, the book was presented to the Saints assembled in general conference, who voted to accept it as the word of the Lord. Thus, by common consent, these and other inspired writings of the Prophet have become scripture.

A concern that has been noted in connection with these three sections is the difference in the current text and the same parts found in the original publication of these two letters in the *Times and Seasons* [*Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, Illinois), May 1840, pp. 99–104 and July 1840, pp. 131–34]. Unfortunately, most critics assumed that the account in the *Times and Seasons* was accurate, and that Orson Pratt made unwarranted changes in the text. However, a comparison of the two texts with the original letters shows that Orson Pratt preserved the text and that the editors of the *Times and Seasons* altered the original letters.

Obscured Texts

There are some verses in the sections of the Doctrine and Covenants which the Prophet Joseph Smith purposely altered in order to disguise the text. The best known examples of this are found in sections 78, 82, 92, 96, 103, 104, and 105 previous to the 1981 edition, although only in section 82 (D&C 82:11) in the 1981 edition. In these sections are found fictitious names of people, places, and things, with their real identification following in brackets. The real names were given in the

revelations when first written, but fictitious ones were substituted when the revelations were printed in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Elder Orson Pratt explained that the fictitious names were used “in consequence of the persecutions of our enemies in Kirtland and some of the regions around.” (*Journal of Discourses*, 16:156.) The real names were added by Orson Pratt in 1876. The correct names of four persons mentioned in section 82:11—Alam, Mahalaleel, Horah, and Shalemanasseh—were not added until a 1983 printing of the 1981 edition, following research that identified the persons [David J. Whittaker, *BYU Studies*, Winter 1983, pp. 103–12]. We know from the History of the Church that Alam was Edward Partridge (*History of the Church* 1:363), but there is no record of who the others were.

In one other example of obscured text we can only surmise what the Prophet had in mind when it was edited. Perhaps it was a case of revealing too much, thus allowing his enemies opportunity for ridicule or opposition. In an earlier text of section 57:9–10, the verses read as follows:

“And also let my servant Sidney obtain a license [sic] (Behold here is wisdom and whoso readeth let him understand) that he may send goods also unto the Lamanites even by whom I will as clerks employ all in his service and thus the gospel may be preached unto them” [*Kirtland Revelation Book*, p. 90, located in Church Archives].

Conclusions

Many who discover a difference in an earlier text of the scripture assume that either the earlier text is the most correct since it is closer to the time of reception, or that the change was made by designing men who were trying to change the scriptures of the Lord to suit their own purpose. Neither of these opinions is valid in the light of recent research. The majority of changes that have some significance were made in the days of Joseph Smith, and were made under his direction. The most important thing that must be kept in mind is that we accept the revelations as they are now written. Knowing about earlier texts and changes which have occurred may aid the researcher in his studies of Church history, but the earlier versions have no claim upon our faith—it is the current edition upon which we rely. The fundamental concepts upon which our faith rests are not affected by the variant readings. Elder Boyd K. Packer has said:

“Some have alleged that these books of revelation are false, and they place in evidence changes that have occurred in the texts of these scriptures since their original publication. They cite these changes, of which

there are many examples, as though they themselves were announcing revelation, as though they were the only ones that knew of them.

“Of course there have been changes and corrections. Anyone who has done even limited research knows that. When properly reviewed, such corrections become a testimony for, not against, the truth of the books.

“The Prophet Joseph Smith was an unschooled farm boy. To read some of his early letters in the original shows him to be somewhat unpolished in spelling and grammar and in expression.

“That the revelations came through him in any form of literary refinement is nothing short of a miracle. That some perfecting should continue strengthens my respect for them.

“Now, I add with emphasis that such changes 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” [In Conference Report, April 1974, p. 137].