

The Book of Commandments as Literature

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Some years ago, I began reading scriptures in a new way. Instead of reading for doctrine or for the story, I became aware of scriptures as literary creations. I sensed that like science fiction, romance novels, and histories, scriptures invite us to enter alternative worlds. They imagine places quite different from the humdrum world where we live every day. In scripture, miracles occur, God and angels come to earth, voices from heaven speak to people, and God controls events. One way the scriptures influence us is by inviting us to inhabit a world where God reigns and where pleasing Him brings great rewards. The effectiveness of scripture in shaping our lives depends partly on its effectiveness as a literary creation.

I first began to think of scriptures as literature twenty years ago when I published an essay on Doctrine and Covenants, section 3, the first of Joseph Smith's revelations to be recorded and preserved. What struck me then was that while the words in section 3 came from Joseph Smith—he probably wrote the words himself—in the world of the revelation, they came from the mouth of God, and Joseph was merely a listener. The words of section 3 severely rebuked Joseph Smith for having lost the early pages

of the Book of Mormon translation. He listened while God spoke, though in the actual world Joseph wrote the words himself.¹

Still thinking in a literary vein, I have more recently compared the Book of Moses and the writings of Mormon.² All scriptures create a world where God reigns, but the texture of the various scriptural worlds can be quite different. The Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses, for example, have distinctly different flavors. The Book of Mormon is very much of the earth, with a geography, institutions, and events rooted in earthly details. Kings, prophets, generals, and villains parade across this stage. There are flights into the wilderness, military strategies, migrations to other lands, plots to bring down the government, and the building and conquering of cities. Mormon's writings create a recognizable human world. In that sense, they are mundane.

The Book of Moses, on the other hand, is filled with conversations with God. Communion with heavenly characters is common—it occurs on a high mountain, in the Garden of Eden, or in a long conversation between Enoch and God. In these visionary encounters, earthly details blur or fade away. There is almost no geography, no government, no earthly battles with body counts and prisoners. The world of the Book of Moses is heavenly rather than earthly. Prophets ascend into heaven and see the whole earth at once. They converse with God as one man speaking to another. The writing in Moses has an entirely different feel from that in the Book of Mormon even though the basic doctrines and the important figures are the same.

Latter-day Saints commonly marvel that Joseph Smith was able to produce the Book of Mormon in a short period of time without any practice or training. It seems almost beyond belief that one so inexperienced as he could so confidently create such an intricate textual world. But stepping back a little, we see that within the space of three years Joseph Smith created not just one scriptural world but three: those of the Book of

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1. Richard Lyman Bushman, "The Little, Narrow, Prison of Language: The Rhetoric of Revelation," *Religious Educator* 1, no. 1 (2000): 90–104.
 2. Richard Lyman Bushman, "Mormon, Moses, and the Representation of Reality," in *The Book of Moses: Inspired Origins, Temple Contexts, and Literary Qualities*, ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw et al., 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2021), 1:51–74.

Mormon, the Book of Moses, and the early revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants. He began dictating the Book of Mormon in the spring of 1828 and completed it by early July 1829. In June 1830, Joseph Smith began writing or dictating the Book of Moses, the first part of his revision of the Bible, which he completed in December 1830. In addition, in the summer of 1828 he dictated or wrote section 3 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the first of a continuing series. So it was that from 1828 through 1830, Joseph dictated the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses and initiated the series of revelations that would later be compiled into the Doctrine and Covenants. He produced a massive amount of text in a short period of time, and each of the three texts differed sharply in tone and structure.

After writing about the differences between the writings of Mormon and those in Moses, I became interested in the revelations that were compiled in the Doctrine and Covenants. How did they compare to the other two? In its totality, the Doctrine and Covenants is a complicated text with many formats and literary structures, so I decided to focus on the Book of Commandments, which is more uniform and was received closer to the period when the other two scriptures were created.

The Book of Commandments, as the Joseph Smith Papers editors now tell us, began chronologically with the current section 3 in the Doctrine and Covenants, given in summer 1828, and ran through section 75, given in late January 1832, plus section 1, given as a preface in 1832, and section 133, given as an appendix.³ Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer carried the manuscript revelations in early 1832 to Independence, Missouri, where William W. Phelps had set up a press. Work began in late November or early December 1832 and was probably near completion by midsummer 1833. While the book was still at the printer, a mob destroyed Phelps's press and scattered the pages. Most of them were gathered up and compiled again, but the book never circulated widely. Possibly more eyes read the twenty-six revelations that appeared in *The Evening and Morning Star*

3. Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Riley M. Lorimer, eds., *Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations and Translations, Volume 2: Published Revelations*, vol. 2 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011), ix–xi, 174–75. References to this work will hereafter be cited as *JSP*, R2.

than the versions of the same revelations printed in the Book of Commandments.⁴ The book had limited use, but for my purposes that is of no matter. I am less interested in the compilation as an influential volume than as representative of a revelatory style during the first three years of the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I find an overarching similarity in these revelations with a few exceptions: section 20 was heavily the work of Oliver Cowdery and represented an effort to establish a creed for the budding church, and sections 7, 48, and 74 are also anomalous.⁵ The remainder of the revelations in the Book of Commandments have a common feature: they are spoken in the voice of God. That may not seem unusual for scriptures, all of which in a sense convey the will of God, but they are not all spoken in the voice of God. The Book of Mormon opens with the ringing words “I, Nephi.” Throughout the remainder of the small plates, each author also speaks in his own voice. It is always “I, Jacob,” “I, Enos,” “I, Omni.” When Mormon takes up the story after Omni, he speaks as a historian recording what he learns from the records. Mormon writes in his own voice, not the Lord’s. Prophets convey what God has spoken to them, but only rarely does God speak directly to the people. The Book of Commandments differs from these other revelations. There is no “I, Joseph”; it is “I, the Lord.”

The voice in the revelations at first was not clear. Section 3 begins, “The works, and the designs, and the purposes of God, can not be frustrated, neither can they come to naught, for God doth not walk in crooked paths.” Is this God or Joseph Smith speaking? By verse 5 it becomes clear that it is not Joseph Smith: “Behold, you have been entrusted with these things.” The speaker, whoever it is, berates the Prophet: “How oft you have transgressed the commandments.” “You should not have feared man more than God.” But is it God or a messenger speaking? The text goes on in the

4. *JSP*, R2:xxvi–xxviii, 9–12.

5. The section numbers throughout the text refer to the Doctrine of Covenants rather than to chapters of the Book of Commandments. On section 7, see David W. Grua and William V. Smith, “The Tarrying of the Beloved Disciple: The Textual Formation of the Account of John,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 231–61.

admonitory tone until verse 16 offers a clue as to the speaker: “Nevertheless, my work shall go forth.” The Lord must be speaking.⁶

Section 4, given six months or so after section 3, similarly disguises the speaker in the revelations: “Now, behold, a marvelous work is about to come forth among the children of men.”⁷ It is a triumphant declaration by some heavenly being, but is it the Lord? This section, however, marked the end of the ambiguous speakers. Section 5, given in March 1829, does not hold back. “I the Lord am God, and have given these things unto my servant Joseph.”⁸ From then on, the identity of the speaker is clear: it is the Lord (whether that means God or Jesus is not always certain). Joseph Smith dictates these revelations, but he is not the speaker in the world created by the text. He is a listener along with everyone else. Later, in section 76, Joseph reports what he saw when he looked into heaven—God does not speak in His own voice. In the earlier revelations, the Lord speaks directly, as if He were present addressing people face to face or voice to ear. The “I” pronouns refer to the Lord. “Behold I say unto you, that all old covenants have I caused to be done away.”⁹ The book contains no historical accounts like that of Lehi and Sariah’s family fleeing from Jerusalem to the deserts, no elevations to a high mountain like Moses seeing God, no wars like Captain Moroni’s defense of his people; rather, it contains only the voice of the Lord speaking directly to the listeners.

I know of no other scripture in which the voice of the Lord is as immediate and omnipresent as it is in the Book of Commandments. God speaks in the book of Isaiah, but only as Isaiah tells us what he saw and heard: “For thus hath the Lord spoken unto me” (Isaiah 31:4). Not so in the Book of Commandments. No one introduces the voice and explains what is happening. The direct presence of God is so immediate that the revelations say

6. Wording of revelations in the text follows the Book of Commandments as published at <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-commandments-1833/1#full-transcript>. Book of Commandments citations refer to the facsimiles in *Revelations and Translation*, vol. 2, cited in note 3 above. For the convenience of the reader, chapter and verse numbering in the modern Doctrine and Covenants are also given.

7. Book of Commandments 3:1 in *JSP*, R2:21 [Doctrine and Covenants 4:1].

8. Book of Commandments 4:2 in *JSP*, R2:22 [Doctrine and Covenants 5:2].

9. Book of Commandments 23:1 in *JSP*, R2:59 [Doctrine and Covenants 22:1].

the hearers can bear testimony that they have heard God speak. “These words are not of men, nor of man, but of me: wherefore you shall testify they are of me, and not of man; for it is my voice which speaketh them unto you.”¹⁰ Although in reality the recipients often saw and heard Joseph Smith speak the words, he has so erased himself from the text that the words come directly from God. William E. McLellin described what he saw when the revelations were given:

I have been present many times when others wrote for Joseph; therefore, I speak as one having experience. The scribe seats himself at a desk or table, with pen, ink, and paper. The subject of inquiry being understood, the Prophet and Revelator inquires of God. He spiritually sees, hears, and feels, and then speaks as he is moved upon by the Holy Ghost, the “thus saith the Lord,” sentence after sentence, and waits for his amanuenses to write and then read aloud each sentence. Thus they proceed until the revelator says Amen, at the close of what is then communicated. I have known both those men mentioned above, to seat themselves, and without premeditation to thus deliver in broken sentences, some of the most sublime pieces of composition which I ever perused in any book.¹¹

Section 24, given in July 1830, offers clues about the prophetic mentality forming in Joseph as inspiration moved him after the summer of 1828. The revelation opened with nine verses spoken to Joseph himself. He was warned that he was “not excusable in thy transgressions; nevertheless go thy way and sin no more.” Then the revelation directed him to sow his fields and hurry off to the branches of the Church in Colesville, Fayette, and Manchester. He was to “continue in calling upon God in my name, and writing the things which shall be given thee by the Comforter.”¹² The

10. Book of Commandments 15:37–38, in *JSP*, R2:49–50 [Doctrine and Covenants 18:34–35].

11. *Ensign of Liberty* 1 (August 1849): 98–99, quoted in Mark R. Grandstaff, “Having More Learning Than Sense: William E. McLellin and the Book of Commandments Revisited,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 4 (1993): 40.

12. Book of Commandments 25:2–16, in *JSP*, R2:67–68 [Doctrine and Covenants 24:2–9].

verses were a combination of a to-do list and admonitions about how to conduct himself. We see here that the voice of God takes over functions that Joseph might have said were his own thoughts. Ideas and decisions that he might have formulated on his own he understands as coming from the Lord. Joseph in effect speaks to himself in the voice of God; he is a prophet to himself. His prophetic and his private selves overlap and blend. Translating the Book of Mormon must have accustomed him to listening to the godly voice within himself. That experience may have prepared him to use godly speech not only to manage the Church and theologize but also to assess himself and think through plans of action.

The reception of the first God-speaking revelation in 1828 marked the moment when Joseph assumed his prophethood. He had received messengers and divine commands before 1828, but when he spoke his first revelation, he functioned as a prophet: he spoke for God and was believed. A few years later John Whitmer turned down the call to be Church historian when Joseph extended it. “I must have a commandment,” Whitmer insisted. Joseph then wrote a revelation (or commandment, as revelations were called then), and Whitmer accepted the call.¹³ He sensed the difference when Joseph spoke as a human versus when he spoke for God. At the organization of the Church in April 1830, a revelation urged the Church to accept Joseph’s words “as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith.”¹⁴ Although in actuality all the voices were Joseph’s, he used the voice of God to commend his own human voice. His revelatory speech, though issuing from his mouth like ordinary speech, distinguished the words coming from God from the personal speech of everyday life.

I can scarcely imagine what combination of spiritual influences and force of personality enabled Joseph Smith to speak in the voice of God and be believed, even in the small circle around him. Why did anyone think that the words coming from Joseph’s mouth actually came from the mind of God? His followers’ faith may have been aided by the language: the words sounded like the voice of God. The revelations employed an elevated language familiar to Christians from the Bible. A revelation to Hyrum Smith in May 1829 drew on Hebrews: “Behold I am God and give heed to my

13. Book of Commandments 50, in *JSP*, R2:126 [Doctrine and Covenants 47].

14. Book of Commandments 22:5, in *JSP*, R2:57 [Doctrine and Covenants 21:5].

word, which is quick and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword, to the dividing asunder of both joints and marrow: therefore, give heed unto my word.” This is a formidable God, whose words are like a sword. Adding to the grandeur of the speech, the voice tells of great moments when decisive historical events are about to occur. “A great and marvelous work is about to come forth among the children of men.” Something powerful and marvelous is happening in which they, the hearers, are about to be caught up. “Behold the field is white already to harvest, therefore, whoso desireth to reap, let him thrust in his sickle with his might, and reap while the day lasts.”¹⁵ The grandeur of the language itself invests the words with rhetorical authority.

This language rolls forth most frequently in the introductions to the revelations. It depicts God in his might and power. “Thus saith the Lord our God, even Jesus Christ, the Great I AM, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the same which looked upon the wide expanse of eternity, and all the seraphic hosts of heaven, before the world was made.” He speaks as God the Creator. “I am the same which spake and the world was made, and all things came by me.”¹⁶ He is also the God who commands history and is redeeming the world. “I have sent mine everlasting covenant into the world, to be a light to the world, and to be a standard for my people, and for the Gentiles to seek to it; and to be a messenger before my face to prepare the way before me.”¹⁷

This language sounds as if it was meant for the whole world to hear, and much of it was, but many of the revelations specified particular recipients. The language moves from lofty proclamations to specific administrative details. The voice is pliable and multipurpose. Early revelations were directed by name to Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, Hyrum Smith, Joseph Knight, Emma Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Joseph Smith himself, and many others. Typically, a revelation to Orson Pratt began, “My son Orson, hearken and hear and behold what I the Lord God shall say unto you, even

15. Book of Commandments 10:1–2, in *JSP*, R2:40 [Doctrine and Covenants 11:1–3; see also 4:1, 5:1, 12:1, 14:1]; Hebrews 4:12.

16. Book of Commandments 40:1–2, in *JSP*, R2:92 [Doctrine and Covenants 38:1, 3].

17. Book of Commandments 48:11–12, in *JSP*, RT2:116 [Doctrine and Covenants 45:9].

Jesus Christ your Redeemer, the light and the life of the world.”¹⁸ Then the revelations go on to offer specific guidance. The words sometimes took on the air of personal counseling: what errors must be overcome, how to mend character flaws, and so on. Joseph Knight was told that he must take up his cross, “in the which you must pray vocally before the world, as well as in secret.”¹⁹ The Lord advised Joseph Smith to be “patient in afflictions, for thou shalt have many.”²⁰ The revelations admonished Emma to “murmur not because of the things which thou hast not seen.”²¹

At the same level of particularity, the revelations offered specific instructions about Church administration: where missionaries were to head and who their companions would be. Some revelations went into detail. John Whitmer was told to labor “at your brother Philip’s, and in that region round about.”²² A revelation in 1831 assigned fourteen pairs of missionaries by name for the journey to Missouri. “And again, let my servant Isaac and my servant Ezra (B.) take their journey, also preaching the word by the way unto the same land.”²³ Revelations gave broad directions about carrying the gospel to the world and minute instructions about fields of labor, leaving the impression that the great God who governs the cosmos was also administering day-to-day operations. Huge amounts of divine force keyed in on members of the infant church as it pulled itself together in New York and Ohio. The revelations left the impression that every elder was on God’s errand. Each one had a charge from heaven.

The voice was consistently the Lord’s, but it spoke in many registers. It could be resounding and magisterial or intimate and friendly; it brought good cheer and blessing but also reproof and judgment. The voice established a complex relationship with hearers. Many revelations could be classified as administrative, offering directions about how to organize the Church, where to assign missionaries, whom to appoint to certain offices.

18. Book of Commandments 36:1, in *JSP*, R2:86 [Doctrine and Covenants 34:1].

19. Book of Commandments 21:1, in *JSP*, R2:56 [Doctrine and Covenants 23:6].

20. Book of Commandments 25:12, in *JSP*, R2:68 [Doctrine and Covenants 24:8].

21. Book of Commandments 26:3, in *JSP*, R2:70 [Doctrine and Covenants 25:4].

22. Book of Commandments 33:2, in *JSP*, R2:82 [Doctrine and Covenants 30:10].

23. Book of Commandments 54:23, see also 2–35, in *JSP*, R2:137 [Doctrine and Covenants 52:23; see also 3–35].

But the instructions were anything but impersonal bureaucratic instructions. The revelations examined the souls of the hearers. In canceling an assignment to Ezra Thayre to travel with other elders to Missouri in the summer of 1831, a revelation told him that he must “repent of his pride, and of his selfishness.”²⁴ The same revelation revoked a commandment to Selah J. Griffin and Newel Knight “in consequence of the stiffneckedness of my people which are in Thompson.”²⁵ In telling Martin Harris to consecrate his property, another revelation added, “Let him repent of his sins, for he seeketh the praise of the world.”²⁶

The mingling of judgment and reproof with administrative directions reminded recipients they were moral beings, not just workers. They were children of a demanding God who required their whole hearts, not merely the completion of their duties. The Lord told Ezra Booth and Isaac Morley that He was angry with them because “they sought evil in their hearts.”²⁷ Much more was required than carrying out one’s responsibilities. “The Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind; and the willing and obedient shall eat the good of the land of Zion.”²⁸ Those who entered into the work subjected themselves to God’s judgment of their worthiness at any time.

The voice of judgment, however, was not unrelenting. As a revelation told the elders on their journey back from Missouri, “I the Lord was angry with you yesterday, but today mine anger is turned away.”²⁹ The voice often came in kindly, reasoned tones. “I speak a few words unto you, Samuel: for thou also art under no condemnation.”³⁰ Even though mighty and fearful, it could be warm and pastoral. “Listen to the voice of Jesus Christ, your Redeemer, the Great I AM . . . who will gather his people even as a

24. Book of Commandments 58:9, in *JSP*, R2:143 [Doctrine and Covenants 56:8].

25. Book of Commandments 58:7, in *JSP*, R2:143 [Doctrine and Covenants 56:6].

26. Book of Commandments 59:50, in *JSP*, R2:149 [Doctrine and Covenants 58:39].

27. Book of Commandments 65:18, in *JSP*, R2:170 [Doctrine and Covenants 64:15–16].

28. Book of Commandments 65:44, in *JSP*, R2:172 [Doctrine and Covenants 64:34].

29. Book of Commandments 62:21, in *JSP*, R2:159 [Doctrine and Covenants 61:20].

30. Book of Commandments 19:1–2, in *JSP*, R2:56 [Doctrine and Covenants 23:4].

hen gathereth her chickens under her wings.”³¹ “Fear not little flock, the kingdom is yours.”³² In 1831, a time of stress in Kirtland with excessive demonstrations of spiritual emotions, the revelatory voice spoke in the tones of calm reason. The revelation proposed that He and the elders “reason even as a man reasoneth one with another face to face.” The Lord was understanding and tolerant. “Behold ye are little children, and ye can not bear all things now; ye must grow in grace and in the knowledge of the truth.” At no time in this revelation did the Lord raise His voice or rebuke the Saints. At the end, He reassured them: “Fear not, little children, for you are mine, and I have overcome the world, and you are of them that my Father hath given me.”³³

The atmospheres the voice created differed. Sometimes the voice filled the air with judgment and reproof, other times with comfort and reassurance. But all these spiritual communications had one overriding quality. They were infused with the personality of the Lord. He spoke to the hearers personally, revealing how he felt about the hearers. Where did they fall short? Where did they do well? He announced His purposes and laid out a course of action. The person speaking was not merely a divine presence of power and love. He was a character in the story. He constantly scrutinized His servants’ behavior and attitudes and let them know how He felt. He insisted on their upright behavior as well as on the performance of their duties. The revealed words enveloped hearers in a world where God watched every move, scrutinized personal attitudes, gave directions, promised protection, and occasionally commended their work. The form of the revelations must have helped new members of the Church to believe. Christ was an outspoken presence, observing, judging, commanding, and comforting.

The point of view in the text was more than a literary device. The form of speech drove home the fundamental assertion of the Restoration—that the Lord had spoken again. Literary form and ecclesiastical assertion

31. Book of Commandments 29:1–2, in *JSP*, R2:73 [Doctrine and Covenants 29:1–2].

32. Book of Commandments 37:30, in *JSP*, R2:90 [Doctrine and Covenants 35:27].

33. Book of Commandments 53:11, 37, 38, in *JSP*, R2:132, 134–35 [Doctrine and Covenants 50:11, 40–41].

coincided. The consequences were clear: if the Lord has spoken, people must hearken. “And the arm of the Lord shall be revealed; and the day cometh, that they who will not hear the voice of the Lord, neither the voice of his servants, neither give heed to the words of the prophet, and apostles, shall be cut off from among the people.”³⁴ Those who refuse to hear will suffer. “Even so will I cause the wicked to be kept [in chains], that will not hear my voice but harden their hearts, and wo, wo, wo is their doom.”³⁵ A harsh judgment to our ears perhaps, but perfectly consistent with the structure of the revelations. When the Lord speaks, you must listen.

There was much more to the world that the early revelations created. Besides establishing relationships between speaker and listener, the Book of Commandments constructed a stage on which the dramas of the Restoration were performed. Viewed schematically, every text imagines a world with space and time dimensions. This appears most clearly in the theater, where the play or opera script calls for a living room, a town square, or a cabaret. The writer sets the scene wherein the story develops, whether in a small western town, a modern big city, the American South, or Moscow. Texts also structure time. To know who the characters are, we need to know their pasts. Often the histories of the characters only gradually emerge, but their pasts make a big difference in how the story unfolds. The forms of time and space shape the plot.

Even the most mundane texts envision spaces and imagine pasts and futures. The automobile handbook in the glove compartment of a car creates a very confined space bounded by a restricted world with a tiny geography and a very brief history. Manuals mostly imagine the car and its various mechanisms, making references to the dealer and perhaps to the manufacturer, but space does not reach much beyond the vehicle itself, and time extends back only to the car’s manufacture and perhaps forward to breakdowns and repairs. The manual’s only concern is to make the car work. The manual’s histories and geographies serve that end alone.

Christian scriptures extend much further in time and space because they have a much grander purpose. They create a long history reaching back to the Creation of the world and forward to its ending. The Bible’s

34. Book of Commandments 1:3, in *JSP*, R2:16 [Doctrine and Covenants 1:14].

35. Book of Commandments 40:5, in *JSP*, R2:92–3 [Doctrine and Covenants 38:6].

geography is likewise broad. Though concentrated in Palestine, the book speaks about Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, and the Mediterranean. The text imagines a spacious world with a long history and an extended future. Latter-day scriptures reach even further. They go back before creation and extend space across the globe and even other worlds. The Book of Mormon begins in the Middle East but soon moves to the New World and later tells stories of Jaredites in the Middle East and Asia. Both scriptures require a longer, richer history and a larger geography to realize their grander purpose. The fate of the whole world and of all humanity—past, present, and future—depends on actions within scripture’s pages.

The Book of Commandments has this same global sweep and wide temporal reach. For example, in August 1830, as we are told in Doctrine and Covenants 27, Joseph Smith set out to obtain wine for a sacrament service. En route, a heavenly messenger instructed him that wine was not necessary for the ordinance, implying water would do. Then suddenly, the revelation about sacramental wine for a small gathering in Harmony, Pennsylvania, exploded into a panoramic vision of historical characters coming back to join a grand communion of the faithful at some future time. “The hour cometh,” the voice said, “that I will drink of the fruit of the vine with you on the earth, and with Moroni, whom I have sent unto you to reveal the Book of Mormon.” The revelation goes on to name the figures who will gather around this future sacrament table: Elias, the restorer of all things; John, the son of Zacharias who came to Joseph and Oliver with the first priesthood; Elijah, with keys to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Michael, or Adam, the father of all; Peter, James, and John, restorers of the apostleship; and finally “all those whom my Father hath given me out of the world.”³⁶ A host of great characters from the Bible and Book of Mormon came tumbling into Harmony, Pennsylvania.

The second part of section 27 was written after the first, and the two were not joined in print until 1835. However, Joseph Smith apparently felt no discontinuity between the two; he joined them as if the vast time gap between his own era and the antiquity of the ancient prophets

36. Doctrine and Covenants 27:5–14. The extended description of the future gathering did not appear in the Book of Commandments.

could be instantaneously bridged.³⁷ Throughout the Book of Commandments, the time span is elastic. The text effortlessly stretches far back in time and forward into the future. The book operates on a large temporal stage, spreading out both a past and a future before readers. The text leads readers to realize that they are part of a grand historical drama directed by God, reaching back to Creation and pointed toward a momentous climax.

The history it invokes to create this drama is not the history that citizens of the newly formed American republic might think of if asked about the nation's past. Nothing is said of the American Revolution, the nation's independence, its presidential elections, the Enlightenment, the westward expansion, or war, monarchy, or democracy. The Book of Commandments is embedded in biblical, not American, history. One of the book's implicit aims is to absorb the American present into the biblical past so that events in the here and now are seen as a continuation of the Bible. The book blanks out Europe and Africa and wrenches American history out of the history of the nation as reconstructed by contemporary historians like George Bancroft and ties it to the history of Israel, Jesus Christ, and the apostolic church.

This is accomplished partly by bringing events involving Adam or Enoch into the story. The Lord speaks of taking “the Zion of Enoch into mine own bosom.”³⁸ Section 29 refers to a future time when a “trump shall sound both long and loud, even as upon Mount Sinai” and then a few verses later to “Adam being tempted of the devil.”³⁹ Biblical events serve as a recurring backdrop to the Lord's work in the nineteenth century.

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37. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2013), 165; Matthew C. Godfrey, Brenden W. Rensink, Alex D. Smith, Max H. Parkin, Alexander Baugh, eds., *Documents, Volume 4: April 1834–September 1835*, vol. 4 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 408–12.
38. Book of Commandments 40:3, in *JSP*, R2:92, 104–5 [Doctrine and Covenants 38:4], cf. Moses 7:62–64.
39. Book of Commandments 29:15, 45, in *JSP*, R2:77 [Doctrine and Covenants 29:13, 36].

The text also employs incidental biblical or Book of Mormon usages as if these texts were relevant allusions for nineteenth-century readers. Oliver Cowdery is to be obedient, even as Aaron.⁴⁰ The Native peoples are never Indians or Native Americans but are Lamanites.⁴¹ The revelations call the city that Latter-day Saints are to construct the New Jerusalem and liken it not to Philadelphia or St. Louis but to the city of Enoch.⁴² The bishop is to be a judge in Israel “as in ancient days.”⁴³ The missionaries may be scourged from city to city and from synagogue to synagogue.⁴⁴ The Indian Territory border in western Missouri is “the line running directly between Jew and Gentile.”⁴⁵ Names and descriptions attach the nineteenth-century American present to the Book of Mormon and the biblical past. All other histories are omitted.

The revelations also create a future taken from the book of Revelation. There is nothing particularly American about the envisioned future. The text says nothing about American democracy exceeding European monarchy or the new nation realizing its “manifest destiny” by spreading coast to coast. The revelations see only an apocalyptic sequel to contemporary life. In section 29, the Book of Commandment’s major statement about the future, the fate of the world looks grim. The revelation draws a terrifying picture of the last days. “Before this great day shall come, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall be turned into blood, and the stars shall fall from heaven. . . . I the Lord God will send forth flies upon the face of the earth, which shall take hold of the inhabitants thereof, and shall eat their flesh, and shall cause maggots to come in upon them, . . . and that great and abominable church, which is the whore of all the earth, shall be cast down by devouring fire, according as it is spoken by the mouth of Ezekiel.” All this is prelude to the moment when “Michael mine archangel,

40. Book of Commandments 30:3, in *JSP*, R2:79 [Doctrine and Covenants 28:3].

41. Book of Commandments 9:11, in *JSP*, R2:37 [Doctrine and Covenants 10:48].

42. Book of Commandments 48:14–15, in *JSP*, R2:116–17 [Doctrine and Covenants 45:11–14].

43. Book of Commandments 59:21, in *JSP*, R2:146–47 [Doctrine and Covenants 58:17].

44. Book of Commandments 64:32, in *JSP*, R2:165 [Doctrine and Covenants 63:31].

45. Doctrine and Covenants 57:4. Although section 57 was received July 20, 1831, it was not included in the Book of Commandments.

shall sound his trump, and then shall all the dead awake” and Christ return.⁴⁶ The horrors are never again so vividly recounted in the Book of Commandments as in this section, but the terrifying images did not have to be repeated; they were brought to mind by brief phrases. A May 1831 revelation filled with instructions about moving to Missouri ended briefly with the phrase, “I am Jesus Christ, who cometh quickly, in an hour you think not.”⁴⁷ The Saints knew what that meant.

The geography created in the Book of Commandments matched the impending future. The book’s space was less violent than its coming time but potentially was equally disruptive. The purpose of the book’s geography seems to have been to erase old maps and draw new ones. The revelations barely acknowledge the great places in the American world: Washington, D.C.; New York; Boston; or the North and South. The revelations rarely send missionaries to places with names. They go west, north, south, or to the eastern countries, vague, anonymous regions.⁴⁸ The Lord does command the Saints to move to “the Ohio,” a peculiar usage, and does refer to Zion as being in Missouri but seems reluctant to employ most standard names.⁴⁹ The text rather gingerly refers to “the place which is now called Independence,” as if to say the name was only temporary (Doctrine and Covenants 57:3). The Lord commanded the missionaries returning from Independence to travel speedily to “the place which is called St. Louis.”⁵⁰

These alterations to names and geography had a serious purpose. Maps always chart power and value. Conventional maps record economic and governmental centers where the wealth and the authority of the nation are collected. By erasing the names of conventional cities and creating a new geography, the Book of Commandments proposed a new map of the nation and, in effect, a new set of values. The city of Zion, the New

46. Book of Commandments 29:17, 22, 24, 29, in *JSP*, R2:74–76 [Doctrine and Covenants 29:14, 18, 21, 26].

47. Doctrine and Covenants 51:20. Section 51, dated May 20, 1831, was not included in the Book of Commandments.

48. Book of Commandments 44:48, in *JSP*, R2:107 [Doctrine and Covenants 42:63].

49. Book of Commandments 40:28, in *JSP*, R2:95 [Doctrine and Covenants 38:32].

50. Book of Commandments 61:8, in *JSP*, R2:155 [Doctrine and Covenants 60:5].

Jerusalem, is the central metropolis. It offers a new point to both space and time. The great project is to gather in Zion and construct a city. All else will fade away—or left in desolation like that coming to Albany, Boston, and New York if they refuse the gospel (Doctrine and Covenants 84:114).

The revelations reversed the priorities implied by conventional maps. In American minds in 1830, Independence lay at the edges of the United States and was a tiny village best known as the jumping-off point for travelers heading to Santa Fe. The centers of the United States were on the East Coast, where government and commerce had their capitals. In the revelations, New York, Boston, and Charleston scarcely figure. Independence, the site of Zion, is the key city, the center point. That geography, which is otherwise perplexing, made sense in terms of gathering. Independence was the great capital, and gathering was imperative. The configuration of space made the commandment to gather seem like an obvious necessity.

The future mapped out in the Book of Commandments told the same story. Section 29, given in September 1830, explained why, in temporal terms, the Saints had to gather in Zion. “The decree hath gone forth from the Father, that they shall be gathered in unto one place, upon the face of this land, to prepare their hearts, and be prepared in all things, against the day when tribulation and desolation are sent forth upon the wicked.”⁵¹ People had to gather to escape the fast-approaching calamities. In the future projected in the Book of Commandments, only in Zion could refuge be found when the Savior returned. “And it shall come to pass, among the wicked, that every man that will not take his sword against his neighbor, must needs flee unto Zion for safety.” The New Jerusalem shall be called “a land of peace, a city of refuge, a place of safety for the saints of the most high God.”⁵² The projected future of the world pointed to the same conclusion as the holy geography: gather to Zion.

The Book of Commandments, I conclude, appears to be a literary expression of a commanding vision. All its parts work together: the point of view of the prevalent voice, the structure of space and time, the book’s theological purpose. The jumbled nature of the revelations does

51. Book of Commandments 29:9, in *JSP*, R2:73 [Doctrine and Covenants 29:8].

52. Book of Commandments 48:59, 62, in *JSP*, R2:121–22 [Doctrine and Covenants 45:66, 68].

not prevent the unifying themes from asserting themselves. The medley of administrative directions, reproofs, and theological exposition all sustain the campaign to gather a people to Zion.

Most of the revelations in the Book of Commandments were occasional. They were given to individuals or groups to serve a specific purpose at a given point in time: move to Ohio, go on a mission, establish a press. But they all were spoken in a consistent literary form. The Lord speaks in a first-person voice that requires the world to listen. The book's configuration of space and time establishes the goal: gather. The future is apocalyptic, and in the coming storms, Zion will be the only refuge. Altogether, the words generated a compelling urgency. In warning the world, the Saints were on the Lord's errand. God was with them; His voice was in their ears. They had to act forcefully and immediately.

Soon after the Book of Commandments revelations were assembled for publication, an alternate form of revelation found brilliant expression. Doctrine and Covenants 76, the great description of the heavens, was given visually, not orally, to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon. They saw the three degrees of glory, and then the two gave their report in section 76 in their own voices as "we" (Doctrine and Covenants 76:11–15). Section 76 resembled section 7, the apostle John's brief account of his own translation. The two offered an alternate form of divine guidance to the customary personal voice of the Lord in the other revelations.

In the ensuing years, more variants to the original form were added to the Doctrine and Covenants: minutes of meetings, epistles, statements of policy, items of instructions. First-person revelations spoken in the voice of God, however, still predominated to the end of Joseph Smith's life. In the minds of the early Saints, first-person address seems to have stamped the texts as revelations. All the sections labeled "Revelation" in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, the successor to the Book of Commandments, were spoken in the voice of God. The exceptions, spoken from some other point of view, received another label. Section 76 was called a "Vision;" section 20, "Articles and Covenants;" section 102, "Minutes;" section 7, "Account of John;" section 74, "Explanation of Scripture;" section 134, "Of Governments and Laws in General."⁵³ The 1835

53. *JSP*, R2:xiii–xv, 598–600.

Doctrine and Covenants reserved “Revelation” for texts spoken by God in His own voice. That also held true for the sections added to the 1844 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Most came in the voice of God, and the remainder were suitably labeled. The two letters on baptism for the dead (sections 127 and 128) were called “Letter to All the Saints in Nauvoo” and “Letter to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.” Section 134 was labeled “Declaration of Belief,” and another section “Statement on Marriage.”⁵⁴ “Revelation” was still reserved for the sections spoken in God’s own voice.

The dominance of the first-person form receded after Joseph’s death. The introduction of miscellaneous materials became more common. In 1876, thirteen of the twenty-six new sections added to the Doctrine and Covenants were answers to questions, extracts from letters, prophecies, prayers, reports of visions, or instructions. Only half followed the traditional first-person form. Since 1876 none of the additions have assumed the traditional point of view. Rather than “revelations” spoken in the voice of God, they have been reports of a vision or declarations of new policies.

The change of voice, however, did not reduce the impact of the original first-person revelations. When present-day Latter-day Saints study the Doctrine and Covenants, the words they read most frequently are spoken by the Lord Himself. If they stop to think, readers will know that Joseph Smith actually spoke the words to the scribe who recorded them, but like John Whitmer, readers hear the voice of the Lord, not of Joseph Smith. One of the basic assertions of restored religion is that God speaks through His prophets. That is strong doctrine, but the Doctrine and Covenants revelations demonstrate the point. Prophetic authority is taught explicitly in the revelations—Joseph’s words, the Lord declared, were to be heard “as if from mine own mouth.”⁵⁵ But equally important, the doctrine is embedded in the revelations’ literary form. On page after page, the words couched in the first-person voice of the Lord enact the principle that the prophet speaks for God.

54. “Doctrine and Covenants, 1844,” pp. 418, 420, 438, 440, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1844/1>.

55. Book of Commandments 22:5, in *JSP*, R2:57 [Doctrine and Covenants 21:5].

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