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DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 21: METANARRATIVE OF THE RESTORATION

Steven L. Olsen

Abstract: *Joseph Smith dictated Doctrine and Covenants 21 at the inaugural meeting of the Church of Jesus Christ on April 6, 1830. The present study examines the literary craftsmanship of the revelation to plumb the depths of its role in the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The analysis explores the meaning of patterns of usage in the text from the most specific (diction, syntax, figures of speech) to the most general (tone, rhetoric, and structural logic). The hypothesis of this study is that Doctrine and Covenants 21 provides a metanarrative of the Restoration — that is, a set of governing principles and guidelines for keeping the official record of the gospel’s final dispensation.*

The revelation known as section 21 of the Doctrine and Covenants was dictated by Joseph Smith on April 6, 1830, during the inaugural meeting of the Church of Jesus Christ at the home of Peter and Mary Whitmer in Fayette Township, New York. The revelation:

- Provides crucial details about the order and identity of the Church of Jesus Christ and instructs Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery on its formal organization.
- Defines core spiritual responsibilities for Church members and leaders and promises sublime heavenly blessings for their faithfulness.
- Identifies the three members of the Godhead and clarifies their complementary roles in the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in this dispensation.

- Confirms Joseph Smith's central roles in the Restoration¹ and his qualification to perform them.

To illustrate the implications and complex interconnections of these points, the present study takes a “deep dive” into the canonized text of the revelation — that published in the current edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. While I acknowledge the analytical value of earlier editions of the text, this study privileges that which The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints accepts as scripture — the authoritative word of God.² In studying this sacred text, I explore multiple features of its literary craftsmanship, ranging from the most specific, e.g., diction, syntax, and figures of speech, to the most general, e.g., tone, rhetoric, and structural logic.

The present approach is greatly indebted to scholarly studies of the literary crafts manship of biblical texts from the mid-twentieth century to the present.³ Cultural studies of foundational texts from an array

1. “Restoration” is the specialized Latter-day Saint term for the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth in preparation for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. See Cory H. Maxwell, “Restoration of All Things,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Daniel H. Ludlow, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1218–19.

2. The first published edition of section 21 is almost identical to the current published edition in the Doctrine and Covenants. Textual changes between the two editions include a few examples of capitalization and punctuation and a few minor word changes, e.g., “our” (1833) to “your” (1981). Except as noted in footnote 21 below, none of these changes affect the present textual analysis. See “Book of Commandments, 1833,” pp. 45–46, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-commandments-1833/49>. See also W. D. Davies and Truman G. Madsen, “Scriptures,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1277–80.

3. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 3–23; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004); Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987); Jason P. Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr., eds., “Not in Heaven:” *Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991); Steven L. Olsen, “Birth and Calling of the Prophet Samuel: A Literary Reading of the Biblical Text,” *BYU Studies* 56, no. 1 (2017): 7–44.

of traditional and modern societies have also been influential.⁴ These sources ground the present study in the following perspectives:

- **Meaning.** The expressive value of texts is as crucial to their understanding as their evidentiary value. A full appreciation of sacred texts depends as much on their ideological as their empirical contents. The eminent early American historian Alan Heimert puts the point thus: “To discover the meaning of any utterance demands what is in substance a continuing act of literary interpretation, for the language with which an idea is presented, and the imaginative universe by which it is surrounded, often tells us more of an author’s meaning and intention than his declarative propositions.”⁵
- **Coherence.** Sacred texts are best understood as unified statements, rather than as assemblages of disparate comments, especially if their literary craftsmanship implies a high degree of integration. Even if inherited texts have received multiple edits and redactions, they may yet retain considerable interpretive unity. The analytical focus of the present study is the meaningful coherence of the received text of D&C 21 as expressed in its literary conventions.
- **Author.** The present study accepts Joseph Smith’s claim that God is the source of this text. While dictation by the Latter-day Saint prophet likely influenced its craftsmanship to some extent, this study does not attempt to parse the text’s purely divine and predominantly human sources. The meaning of the official text as reflected in its literary craftsmanship, not the history of its authorship, is my principal concern.

4. See Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963); Edmund Leach, *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969); James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1975); Steven L. Olsen, “Literary Craftsmanship of the Joseph Smith Story,” *Joseph Smith and His First Vision: Context, Place, and Meaning*, eds. Alexander L. Baugh, Steven C. Harper, Brent M. Rogers, and Benjamin C. Pykles, (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2021), 219–36.

5. Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 11.

- **Cultural context.** The meaning of a text is a complex “social fact.”⁶ That is, its meaning does not exist outside specific cultural contexts, whether of its creation, circulation, or transmission. Many contemporary scholars focus on textual meaning as reflected in its shared experience among living members of a social group.⁷ While I recognize the value of this perspective, the present study is based on an alternate premise that, consciously or not, authors inevitably communicate meaning in their literary creations. Attempting to recover authors’ meanings by examining the literary craftsmanship of their texts remains a worthy, if challenging, scholarly endeavor.
- **Comparative method.** The craftsmanship of literary creations includes mechanics, aesthetics, and patterns of usage, not only of the given texts themselves but also of the larger literary traditions from which they emerged.⁸ Thus, to plumb the “imaginative universe” of D&C 21, I consider literary conventions of not only the sacred text itself but also related scriptures of the Church of Jesus Christ.⁹ In many cases, the comparison of usage patterns among related texts reveals increased complexity and nuances of meaning for a given literary convention.

6. The eminent French sociologist Emile Durkheim coined the phrase to support the claim that social phenomena must be understood in sociological, not psychological, physiological, or ecological terms, see *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, ed. Steven Lucas, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1982).

7. See Andre LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xii.

8. See Neil L. Rudenstine, *Ideas of Order: A Close Reading of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014).

9. Expanding the scope of this study to include the literary qualities of other writings of Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ — including other scriptures, non-canonized revelations, letters and journals, sermons, epistles, and so on — may provide additional insights into the meaning of section 21. Practical considerations led the author to limit the comparative scope of the present analysis to Joseph Smith’s canonized revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants. Rudenstine (footnote 8) productively examined Shakespeare’s sonnets within the literary context of the sonnets themselves, not all of Shakespeare’s writings. If readers see interpretive value in this somewhat limited perspective, a more qualified scholar may discover deeper insights from a broader comparative analysis.

The following, then, is a detailed textual analysis of D&C 21 that illustrates the expressiveness of its literary craftsmanship. The “big idea” of this study is that the revelation provides Latter-day Saints with a metanarrative of the Restoration.

Metanarrative

Many divine communications, like much poetry, contain layers of significance that go far beyond the surface meaning. While ostensibly about the formal organization of the Church of Jesus Christ, D&C 21 cannot be reduced solely to a set of operational instructions. For example, its opening clause, “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you,” implies the presence of layers of meaning beyond the organizational and operational. This directive raises the core questions, “What does a record have to do with the Church of Jesus Christ in the latter days?” and “What kind of record will fulfill this lofty mission?” As was seen above, a literary analysis is especially suited to consider questions like these. In what follows I pay particular attention to the literary craftsmanship of section 21, especially its contents that explicate the interpretive focus of its opening clause.

As will be seen, D&C 21 does not provide explicit instructions about the record to be kept. Rather, it implicitly identifies a series of principles, guidelines, and building blocks that define an acceptable record to the Lord. The set of principles that guide the construction of an acceptable record is called a metanarrative. While its metanarrative is neither complete nor exhaustive, the revelation provides a sufficient foundation for subsequent revelations to build upon and subsequent records stewards to follow. The conclusion to this study further reflects on this analytical perspective and illustrates its impact on Joseph Smith and other Church leaders of the time.

“A Record Kept” (D&C 21:1–3)

Behold, there shall be a record kept among you; and in it thou shalt be called a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the church through the will of God the Father, and the grace of your Lord Jesus Christ,

Being inspired of the Holy Ghost to lay the foundation thereof, and to build it up unto the most holy faith.

Which church was organized and established in the year of your Lord eighteen hundred and thirty, in the fourth month, and on the sixth day of the month which is called April.

The first two sentences of section 21 define the spiritual identity of the Godhead and of the Church of Jesus Christ and the essential, God-given roles of its founder.

Behold. The text begins as many other modern revelations. *Behold* appears nearly 500 times in the Doctrine and Covenants, one-quarter of which predate the formal organization of the Church. Three-quarters of modern revelations contain at least one use of the term, and nearly one-third begin with the term either as the opening word or in the opening phrase.¹⁰ Such widespread usage and crucial placement reflect its traditional biblical meaning: This word “points generally to some truth either newly asserted or newly recognized . . . making the narrative graphic and vivid, enabling the reader to enter into the surprise or satisfaction of the speaker or actor concerned.”¹¹ Thus, the opening word of section 21 encourages readers to anticipate essential and newly revealed statements of divine truth.

There shall be a record kept among you. Despite the revelation’s attention-getting opening word, its initial clause seems rather prosaic. *There shall be* employs an uncertain subject and a passive verb, both rhetorically weak conventions. In addition, the prepositional phrase *among you* has an unclear pronoun referent. Who is the intended audience of the directive: Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, the limited congregation at the Whitmer home, Latter-day Saints generally, the Church as an organized religion, all these audiences together, some of them separately, or someone(s) else entirely? Not only is the principal audience of the opening clause uncertain, but the command itself lacks rhetorical strength.

Further investigation of this clause, however, reveals considerable semantic significance. For example, the prepositional phrase *among you* appears forty-eight additional times in the Doctrine and Covenants, almost exclusively in the context of such key religious actions as obeying commandments, administering emblems of the sacrament, performing

10. R. Gary Shapiro, comp., *An Exhaustive Concordance of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes, 1977), s.v. “behold.” Hereafter cited as “Exhaustive Concordance.”

11. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, rep. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2014), 2009. Hereafter cited as “BDB.”

priesthood ordinances, retaining spiritual purity, shunning evil, maintaining moral boundaries, and preserving sacred funds and other resources — all core spiritual practices of the Church of Jesus Christ.¹² In short, use of this prepositional phrase at the beginning of section 21 links the Church's *record* with a host of distinctive features of the restored gospel.

Furthermore, the general ambiguity of the initial clause effectively draws readers' attention to the noun phrase that serves as its interpretive focus. While *a record kept* does not specify its medium — is it to be written? oral? performative? visual? material? artistic? published? manuscript? some/all of these? or something else entirely? — the divine command, the first given to the newly organized Church, implies that its official *record* will be a crucial element of the Restoration.

Use of the collective noun “record” instead of “records” further implies that it is to be unified, integrated, and focused on a lofty purpose. The term's general pattern of usage in Latter-day Saint scripture reinforces this perspective. The Doctrine and Covenants contains 57 uses of *record*, more than half (34) occur in the verb phrase *bear record* (with variations), connoting profoundly spiritual roles for the *record* to “testify,” “witness,” and “declare,” not simply to “describe” and “document.” As a noun, *record* overwhelmingly refers to sacred Church documents — The Book of Mormon, latter-day revelations, and official lists of members who have either joined the Church through baptism or made eternal covenants through the performance of living or vicarious temple ordinances.¹³ Thus, as used in Smith's revelations, including section 21, *record* carries considerable spiritual weight, defining the divine identity of the Church of Jesus Christ and witnessing to its earthly mission, not simply documenting its history or tracking its demographics.

Reinforcing this spiritual focus, the verb *kept* is also full of spiritual significance. Variations of the verb find widespread use in the Doctrine and Covenants: *keep* (61 uses), *kept* (37), *keepeth* (10), *keeping* (10), and *keepeth* (1). The infinitive occurs most frequently in the phrase, *keep My commandments* and variations (68 uses). Other common expressions associate *keep* with *genealogy* or *history* (nine uses), the Lord's *treasury* or *storehouse* (7 uses), and *covenants* or *pledges* (4 uses), all central characteristics of the Church of Jesus Christ. Its widespread and diverse pattern of usage implies that the verb carries a range of deeply spiritual connotations, including “obey,” “guard,” “protect,”

12. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “among.”

13. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v.v. “record,” “records.”

“create,” “hold sacred,” and “preserve.”¹⁴ Thus, the entire phrase *a record kept* connotes more than a descriptive account and empirical evidence of Church history. Rather, “keeping the record” implies a sacred, perpetual stewardship for an official witness to the truth of the Restoration that identifies the Church of Jesus Christ as the institutional agent of the gospel’s eternal mission.

That the opening noun phrase in section 21 carries great spiritual significance, but considerable ambiguity implies that subsequent revelations will refine and expand the commandment and that the rest of section 21 nuances the contents and purpose of the prescribed *record*. While previous studies develop the former point, the present explores the latter one.

And in it thou shalt be called a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the church. The next clause in the revelation’s first sentence continues use of the passive voice: “shalt be called.” While often rhetorically weak, the passive voice can play a constructive semantic role, especially when the actor in a sentence is less important than the object of the action. For example, in section 21, record (the object of the action of being kept) is more important than its keepers, and the various roles of Joseph Smith’s mission (the object of the action of being known) are more important than those who know him by these roles. Thus, in the revelation’s opening sentence, the passive voice reinforces a single-minded interpretive focus on the record.

Called. This term appears 118 times in the Doctrine and Covenants, with roughly 70% of all uses connoting a “divine, spiritual, or sacred appointment” and roughly one-quarter connoting “to name or give a name or designation to.” Both uses of the term in Section 21 (vv. 1, 3) carry the “naming” connotation, which is also used throughout the Doctrine and Covenants to distinguish such central religious concepts as “Zion,” “New Jerusalem,” “Son of God,” “United Order,” “Holy Priesthood,” “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” and even “Perdition,” as a synonym for Satan.¹⁵ Thus, the “naming” convention along with its passive voice implies that the formal roles of Joseph Smith’s earthly ministry and the date of the Church’s official organization are of considerable spiritual value to the Restoration.

14. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv., “keep,” “keepest,” “keepeth,” “keeping,” “kept.”

15. *The Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), s.v., “called.” Hereafter cited as “OED.” See also *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v., “called.”

The clause also enumerates a specific detail of the record's principal contents. Five roles define and distinguish Joseph Smith's God-given ministry. By the time he receives this revelation, Smith had already assumed all five roles, and he magnifies and refines all five through his subsequent service in the Kingdom. While this study is not the place for a full exposition of these roles in early Church history, two details of the list affect the meaning of section 21:

- **Sequence.** The roles are listed in the chronological order in which Joseph Smith assumes them. He becomes a *seer* in the early spring of 1820 when he sees God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ in the incomparable spiritual experience known as the First Vision. He becomes a *translator* in the winter of 1827–28 as he begins dictating The Book of Mormon in English by “the gift and power of God” with the assistance of Emma Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and other scribes. He becomes a *prophet* in the summer of 1828 as he begins receiving revelations from and speaking in the name of God. He becomes an *apostle of Jesus Christ* in mid-1829 upon receiving the “keys of the apostleship” from Christ's ancient apostles, Peter, James, and John, shortly after being ordained to the “priesthood of Aaron” by John the Baptist. He becomes an *elder of the church* on April 6, 1830, through his ordination by Oliver Cowdery.¹⁶ Thus, the list of roles not only implies a multi-faceted and God-given ministry for Joseph Smith but also identifies another essential characteristic of the *record to be kept* — chronological precision.
- **Patterns of usage.** In the Doctrine and Covenants, *seer*, *translator*, and *prophet* appear six, three, and fourteen times, respectively, nearly always in combination with one another and with an additional God-given role — “revelator.”¹⁷ This pattern implies that *seer*, *translator*, *prophet*, and *revelator* complement one another in Joseph's ministry and are not ordained priesthood offices in the Church of Jesus Christ. Rather, they are complementary spiritual gifts or endowments of spiritual power received directly from God without the formal action of a human intermediary. As such,

16. See “Joseph Smith – History,” *Pearl of Great Price*.

17. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv., “prophet,” “revelator,” “seer,” “translator.”

their operation is not limited by time, place, or other earthly conditions.

By contrast, *apostle* and *elder* refer almost exclusively to ordained offices in the Church of Jesus Christ. *Elder* (32 singular and 85 plural uses) is the generic office of those who are ordained to the Church's "higher" or Melchizedek Priesthood. By far, revelations with the most frequent uses of *elder(s)* address crucial aspects of Church government.¹⁸ *Apostle* is the highest ordained office in the Melchizedek Priesthood, possessing all "keys," or formal authorities, to administer the Church and direct the performance of sacred ordinances of salvation. *Apostle* (singular) appears eight times in the Doctrine and Covenants, three of which refer to individual apostles from the Christian Bible (Paul, John, etc.) and five to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in their role as special witnesses of Jesus Christ in the present dispensation. *Apostles* (plural) appears 30 times in Joseph's revelations, mostly referring to members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles once this executive council of the Church is formally organized on 14 February 1835.¹⁹ In short, the list identifies five essential roles that distinguish Joseph Smith's God-given ministry. It also specifies crucial contents of the *record* that bears witness of *the church* as the Kingdom of God on earth, namely, a focus on its key offices, spiritual authorities, and essential operations.

Through the will of the Father and the grace of your Lord Jesus Christ, being inspired of the Holy Ghost. The next phrase of the revelation's first sentence addresses the questions, "By whose authority is the Church established, and what roles do they play in its earthly mission?" This is one of only a few passages from the Doctrine and Covenants that identify all three members of the Godhead and their distinctive roles.²⁰ From this perspective, the Savior Jesus Christ organizes and directs His Church on earth by the will of God the Father and through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. The complementarity of their divine roles is reinforced by the parallel construction of the respective noun phrases: "[role] of [identity]."

Your Lord. *Lord* is one of the most frequent proper nouns in the Doctrine and Covenants, used nearly 700 times, making it the most

18. D&C 20 (30 combined uses) and 107 (10 uses).

19. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv. "apostle," "apostles," "elder," "elders." See also S. Kent Brown, "Apostle," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 59–61.

20. Distinctive membership of the Godhead is enumerated three times in section 20 in the prayers of the ordinance of baptism and administration of the emblems of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (D&C 20:28, 73–79).

common title for Jesus Christ in the Doctrine and Covenants. Some 75 of these uses include the second-person possessive pronouns, *your* [or *thy*] *Lord*, as in section 21, reinforcing His intimate and personal relationship with the Church of Jesus Christ.²¹

To lay the foundations thereof and to build it up unto the most holy faith. The last phrase in the revelation's opening sentence identifies two distinguishing markers of the Church of Jesus Christ. *The church* is established on a firm *foundation* and thereby becomes *the most holy faith*. While section 21 does not elaborate either term, it implies that subsequent revelations will do so and that the official *record of the church* will feature both.

Uses of *foundation* in the Doctrine and Covenants (30 singular and 2 plural) connote both existential beginnings, e.g., “before the foundations of the world,” and structural stability, i.e., the basis of permanence, for example, of a building.²² Its use in section 21 aligns with both connotations. *Lay the foundations* of the Church of Jesus Christ relates to its inspired beginnings as authorized by God, implemented by heavenly messengers, and administered by earthly servants and to its permanence as secured by enduring spiritual features, key examples of which are identified in the rest of the revelation.

While *foundation* emphasizes the formal, structural, and enduring qualities of *the church*, *most holy faith* addresses its spiritual qualities. That both *foundation* and *faith* are collective nouns implies an essential integrity, coherence, and unity to *the church*. The whole clause identifies complementary, comprehensive, and distinctive features of *the church* and essential contents of the *record to be kept* — a multifaceted definition of *church*.

Together, these initial clauses of the revelation's first sentence (vv. 1–2) identify four crucial qualities of the Church of Jesus Christ:

- It is directed from heaven by the Godhead who play key, complementary roles in its mission.
- It is led on earth by a chosen servant of God who performs a variety of divinely directed roles.

21. Frequency of usage makes *Lord* also the most common title for Jesus Christ in the New Testament and Book of Mormon. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v., “Lord.” Stephen E. Robinson, “Jesus Christ, Names and Titles of,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 740–42.

22. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv. “foundation,” “foundations.”

- It is distinguished from all other earthly institutions by structural/formal (*foundation*) and spiritual/behavioral (*most holy faith*) qualities.
- It keeps an official *record* that features these and other defining characteristics of *the church*, thus performing essential documentary and testamentary roles.

Which church was organized and established. While the second sentence of section 21 may itself seem rather matter of fact, it fulfills three crucial rhetorical roles in the revelation:

- It authorizes the formal organization of the Church of Jesus Christ. In doing so, the sentence strengthens a central theological premise of the Restoration: if the Church that Joseph Smith founded is indeed the Church of Jesus Christ, then its genesis and operation should be directed by divine revelation.
- It specifies the kind of details to be included in the official *record of the church*: date-specific events essential to the Restoration. Thus, the record's documentary function, i.e., preserving crucial historical facts like times, places, people, and events, complements its testamentary function, i.e., witnessing to the pervasive influence of the Godhead in fulfilling its divine mission.
- It provides the revelation with a transition from its introductory declaration (vv. 1–2) to the rest of its contents (vv. 4–12), including (1) key roles of Church leaders and members, (2) sublime blessings that result from their faithfulness, (3) crucial qualities of its earthly head, and (4) essential events of its formal organization. These will be addressed below.

Organized and established. Before exploring these additional contents, we must examine the literary significance of two past participles of this transitional sentence. *Organized* appears eighteen times in the Doctrine and Covenants, all connoting the formal and official existence of an earthly institution, that is, “formed into a whole with interdependent parts, coordinated so as to form a system or orderly structure.” Its complement, *established*, appears 22 times in the revelations, all with the connotation of an institution's having not only formal existence but also permanent legal status. The complete phrase, *organized and established*, appears three times in the Doctrine and Covenants, the first two in sections 20 and 21 which together address the Church's

formal beginnings, central mission, revealed character, and essential operations.²³

In sum, the first two sentences of section 21 introduce key personnel of the Restoration — Joseph Smith and the Godhead — and an essential product of their combined mission — the Church of Jesus Christ. Its opening also identifies a distinctive feature of *the church* — an official *record* whose contents, media, stewards, and repositories may be diverse and diffuse, but whose God-given purpose and contents are single-minded and unequivocal. As commissioned by God, the *record* illustrates the diverse but complementary roles of the earthly head of the Church of Jesus Christ whose ministry witnesses to the will of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the inspiration of the Holy Ghost in fulfilling the covenant of salvation through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The rest of the revelation defines other distinguishing features of the Lord’s Church and specifies essential qualities of its earthly mission.

“Thou Shalt Give Heed” (D&C 21:4–6)

Wherefore, meaning the church, thou shalt give heed unto all his words and commandments which he shall give unto you as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me;

For his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith.

For by doing these things the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; yea, and the Lord God will disperse the powers of darkness from before you, and cause the heavens to shake for your good, and for his name’s glory.

The revelation’s next three verses clarify God’s covenant relationship with *the church* and its earthly head.

Give and *receive*. These complementary verbs each appear twice in the text and signify the covenant’s crucial, enduring, and mutual nature — parties to the covenant exchanging things of eternal value. Thus, God gives gospel truth and heavenly blessing to His prophet, who receives them from God and gives them to *the church*. *The church*, in turn, gives heed to and receives these things from the prophet, as if they had come from God’s *own mouth*.

The first use of *give* in section 21 occurs in the verb phrase *give heed*, instructing *the church* to accept, understand, learn from, and act on

23. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv. “organized,” “established;” *OED*, s.vv. “organized,” “established.”

the *words and commandments* of its divinely chosen and duly ordained leader as though they come directly from God. *Heed* appears thirty times in the Doctrine and Covenants, nearly all in the complementary verb phrases *give* [or *take*] *heed*, and variations, with connotations consistent with its use in section 21.²⁴

Give and *receive* with their variations are among the most frequent and widespread verbs in the Doctrine and Covenants, used 504 and 390 times, respectively.²⁵ While the verbs appear individually throughout Joseph’s revelations, their combined usage is concentrated in only four, to which they contribute significantly:

- Section 84 reflects on the promised glories of Zion, the New Jerusalem. The 47 combined uses of these verbs connect the intergenerational priesthood lineage from Adam to Moses (vv. 6–17), effect the transfer of heavenly blessings, including that of eternal life (vv. 28, 63–64, 73, 75–76), animate the oath and covenant of the priesthood (vv. 33–42), and strengthen the enduring covenant relationship between God and His children (vv. 77, 85, 88–89).
- Section 88 identifies the universe as a physical manifestation of the light of Christ and as the spatial ordering of the plan of salvation. The 41 combined uses of these verbs transmit or transfer heavenly blessings (vv. 4, 21, 44–45, 62–64, 99, 104, 107, 137), fulfill the plan of salvation (vv. 27–34, 126), bestow eternal spiritual status (vv. 36–42), and strengthen covenant relations (vv. 131–40).
- Section 124 explicates the identity and purpose of Nauvoo as the “cornerstone of Zion.” The 43 combined uses of these verbs fulfill the plan of salvation (vv. 34–39), manage sacred financial donations to the Church (vv. 61–72), and confirm the divine inspiration of key callings in the Church (vv. 123–44).

24. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “heed”; *OED*, s.v. “heed.” The three unrelated uses of *heed* as a standalone verb suggest how a series of civic officials (judge, governor, and president) are expected to attend Latter-day Saints as they importune for legal redress for the violent destruction and confiscation of their property and possessions in the Missouri persecutions, see D&C 101:87–89.

25. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv. “gave,” “give,” “given,” “gives,” “giveth,” “giving,” “receive,” “received,” “receives,” “receiveth,” “receiving.”

- Section 132 emphasizes the covenant of sealing as essential to the plan of exaltation for all humanity.²⁶ The 48 combined uses of these verbs transfer heavenly blessings (vv. 3, 12), fulfill the plan of exaltation (vv. 6, 18, 22–41), and establish eternal covenants (vv. 45–48, 61–65).

While the two verbs also have mundane connotations in the Doctrine and Covenants, their sublime connotations identify key features of God’s covenant of eternal life, a meaning consistent with their uses in section 21.

Words and commandments. In Joseph’s canonized revelations, the entire phrase *words and commandments* appears only here. However, the two nouns also appear frequently alone and in combination with other significant nouns. For example, *word(s)* and *commandment(s)* appear a total of 237 and 248 times, respectively, most in the possessive phrases, *my w.* or *my c.*, reflecting God’s personal ownership of these profoundly spiritual concepts.²⁷ In combination with other significant nouns, *word(s) of wisdom* appears 11 times;²⁸ *commandments and revelations* appears eight times with variations;²⁹ *covenants and commandments* appears four times with variations;³⁰ *law and commandments* appears four times with variations;³¹ *word of truth* appears twice;³² and the following meaningful phrases each appear once: *word of knowledge* (D&C 46:18); *word of exhortation* (50:37); *word of prophecy* (131:5); *calling and commandment* (36:5); *holy commandment* (49:13); *commission and commandment*, (75:7); *precepts and commandments*, (103:4); *counsel and commandment*, (104:1); and *will and commandments of God* (20:1). These patterns of usage imply that *word(s)* and *commandment(s)* comprehend all the divine communication designed to clarify and fulfill God’s mission in the latter days. Thus, their use in section 21 encompasses all truth that God shares with His children in mortality.

As if from mine own mouth. This phrase underscores the covenant relationship among God, His prophet, and *the church* as articulated above.

26. “Exaltation” is a specialized Latter-day Saint term for eternal life, see Margaret McConkie Pope, “Exaltation,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 479.

27. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “commandment,” “commandments,” “word,” “words.”

28. D&C 46:17; 50:1; 88:118; 89:1–4; 98:20; 109:7, 14.

29. D&C 20:45, 28:1, 43:5, 70:3, 75:4, 103:1, 109:60, 132:7.

30. D&C 68:13, 24; 107:12, 63.

31. D&C 43:8, 48:6, 103:35, 124:50.

32. D&C 50:17, 19.

The entire phrase *mine* [or *my*] *mouth*, with variations, appears ten times in the Doctrine and Covenants, all of which identify a principal source of God's divine authority and power. In addition, the possessive *mine* is used 195 times in the revelations, twice in section 21, identifying items of such spiritual significance that God claims as His own. The extensive use of first-person possessive pronouns (*mine*, *my*) in section 21 reinforces the heavenly significance of its sacred contents.³³

Walking in all holiness before me and *in all patience and faith*. Two additional phrases from this sentence deepen the covenant relationship with God. The gerund phrase, *walking in all holiness*, defines an essential pre-condition for the Lord's mouthpiece to *receive words and commandments* from God and to *give* them to *the church*. While this phrase places an immense spiritual burden on the prophet, the accompanying prepositional phrase *before me* indicates that God alone determines the worthiness of His servant to bear this crucial responsibility.³⁴

The complementary prepositional phrase, *in all patience and faith*, identifies two additional pre-conditions of the covenant that qualify *the church* to *receive* the prophet's *words and commandments* as if from God's *own mouth*. On the one hand, *all patience and faith* are essential for *the church* to *receive*, comprehend, and act on the holy word of God. While the scriptures acknowledge God's condescension to speak to his children "according to their language, unto their understanding" (2 Nephi 31:3), the scriptures also recognize God's inevitable superior position vis-à-vis His creations: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9). Thus, receiving God's *words and commandments* as intended is a "stretch" assignment at best, even for those with *all patience and faith*. Those lacking these virtues will likely fail to understand God's sublime truths. On the other hand, these godly virtues are crucial for *the church* to sustain the *prophet*, especially on the occasion that he falls short of *walking in all holiness* and thereby fails to *receive* and *give* God's *words and commandments as if from [His] own mouth*.

33. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv. "mine," "mouth."

34. The phrase *before me*, with variations, appears 104 times in the D&C, most of which imply the responsibility of judgment, as in this case, see *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. "before." The standard English definition of *before* which best fits this use is "open to the knowledge of, displayed to or brought under the conscious knowledge or attention of," *OED*, s.v. "before."

In short, the complementary pre-conditions, *all holiness* and *all patience and faith*, endow this sacred covenant relationship with sanctity, charity, perspective, and endurance in view of its glorious fulfillment. Reinforcing this sacred bond, the inclusive adjective “all” applies not only to these crucial pre-conditions but also to the breadth of God’s *words and commandments* which the prophet speaks on His behalf.

By doing these things. The next sentence in the revelation expands the definition of *church* and extends three incomparable blessings to *the church* thus defined. The prepositional phrase *by doing these things* indicates that *church* is more than the ecclesiastical organization that keeps an official *record* of the Restoration or the formal body of believers who profess Jesus Christ as their Savior and Joseph Smith and his rightful successors as the earthly head of His Church. *Church* is also the covenant community that embraces God’s *words and commandments* as though He speaks directly to them. This perspective implies that the Church’s spiritual and behavioral qualities are as central to its identity and mission as are its organizational, doctrinal, and demographic characteristics.

The church thus defined and distinguished realizes three sublime heavenly promises:

- *The gates of hell shall not prevail against you.* The entire phrase appears six times in the Doctrine and Covenants, half in revelations that precede the Church’s formal organization.³⁵ Canonized compositions of Joseph Smith imply that the phrase carries two complementary connotations: (1) resisting evil in all its forms and (2) extending the blessings of salvation to all mankind, including the dead, who are thereby released from hell, or “spirit prison,” in the afterlife.³⁶
- Expressed in the negative — *the gates of hell shall not prevail* — the phrase implies that the promised blessing entails necessary but not sufficient conditions. That is, while heeding the prophet’s words and commandments is required for the Church to prevail against the gates of hell in both senses, doing so does not by itself guarantee the promised outcome. Other spiritual conditions may also be required. These are found in the Church’s standard works and other official publications.

35. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv. “gates,” “hell.” See D&C 10:69; 17:8; 18:5.

36. D&C 109:24–28; 128:10–11, the latter passage quotes from the gospel of Matthew. For a summary of the Latter-day concept of hell, see M. Catherine Thomas, “Hell,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 585–86.

- *The Lord God will disperse the powers of darkness from before you.* In the Doctrine and Covenants, the verb *disperse* appears only here and connotes “dissipate [or] ... cause to disappear.”³⁷ The noun phrase, *powers of darkness*, appears twice in the revelations, initially in section 21. Its other use occurs in a revelation that contrasts the general wickedness of the world with the glories of Zion which the Church as a covenant community is commanded to establish on earth in preparation for the Savior’s Second Coming (D&C 38:11–22). Thus, this literary pattern implies that “establishing Zion” effectively disperses the powers of darkness and lays the foundation of the kingdom of God on earth.
- [*The Lord God*] *will cause the heavens to shake for your good, and his name’s glory.* Even though the verb *shake* has a variety of connotations in Smith’s revelations, all five uses of the entire phrase, *cause the heavens to shake*, are extremely positive, implying the bestowal of a multitude of divine blessings. The English definition of *shake* that most closely reflects this usage is “to cast out the contents of; to empty,” as with a salt or pepper shaker.³⁸ Thus, the entire phrase, used initially here, implies that God will “empty” heaven of its sacred contents to bless the Church defined as those who give heed to the words and commandments of the prophet as though they come from God’s own mouth. While the phrase does not specify what heavenly blessings the Church of Jesus Christ receives through its faithfulness, it implies that they will far exceed any earthly benefits.
- The second beneficiary of the heaven’s “shaking” is his name’s glory. *Name* appears 208 times in the Doctrine and Covenants, nearly all with reference to the identity, status, mission, authority, and power of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Similarly, *glory*, as both a noun and a verb, appears 171 times, all connoting a distinctive quality of godliness, especially that of preparing the earth and its inhabitants for eternal life, “the greatest of all the gifts of God.”³⁹

37. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “disperse;” *OED*, s.v. “disperse.”

38. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv. “shake,” “shaken;” *OED*, s.v. “shake.”

39. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv. “name,” “name’s,” “glory;” D&C 14:7.

Thus, the entire clause implies that God’s central mission is to sanctify all creation, including the earth, and that the Church of Jesus Christ is the institution to extend the blessings of life eternal to all mankind.

In sum, section 21 declares that to become the *most holy faith* the *church* must not only keep a *record* consistent with the commandment but also *give heed* to *all the words and commandments* of Christ as given through His chosen prophet, who walks *in all holiness* before God. At the same time, *the church* exercises *all patience and faith* to sustain the prophet and to understand and act on God’s lofty counsel, thereby filling its divinely ordained mission. This covenant with God further distinguishes the Church of Jesus Christ from all other earthly institutions and prepares it for incomparable heavenly blessings.

“Him Have I Inspired” (D&C 21:7–9)

For thus saith the Lord God: Him have I inspired to move the cause of Zion in mighty power for good, and his diligence I know, and his prayers I have heard.

Yea, his weeping for Zion I have seen, and I will cause that he shall mourn for her no longer; for his days of rejoicing are come unto the remission of his sins, and the manifestations of my blessings upon his works.

For, behold, I will bless all those who labor in my vineyard with a mighty blessing, and they shall believe on his words, which are given him through me by the Comforter, which manifesteth that Jesus was crucified by sinful men for the sins of the world, yea, for the remission of sins unto the contrite heart.

The revelation’s next three sentences endorse Joseph Smith as the Lord’s chosen servant to lead *the church* in its redemptive mission. The strategic placement of this endorsement within the text underscores its significance.

Thus saith the Lord God. Section 21 contains the first of 185 uses of this crucial clause in the Doctrine and Covenants. Nearly one-third of its sections open with this solemn declaration. Its frequency and pattern of usage in modern revelations are consistent with its widespread use in the Hebrew Bible — asserting that what follows comes directly from or is confirmed by God and reinforcing the authority of His earthly

spokesman.⁴⁰ That section 21 also closes with the same phrase (v. 12) reinforces the revelation's divine authority.

Him have I inspired. The importance of this clause is underscored not only by its placement immediately after the authoritative declaration *thus saith the Lord God* but also by its literary aesthetics and structure. Iambic meter accents, and thus emphasizes, the clause's most meaningful syllables:

/ ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘
 him have / I in / spired to / move the / cause of /
 / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘
 Zion in / might y / pow'r for / good.⁴¹

It thereby asserts the divine source of Joseph's spiritual capacities and reinforces a key role of the Holy Ghost — inspiration — introduced in the revelation's opening sentence. Moreover, the past perfect verb tense acknowledges that the essential action of the clause — divine inspiration — began with Smith in the past and continues to the present. Thus, the special relationship between the Lord and His *prophet* is ongoing, reinforcing the necessity of *the church* to understand and accept *all his words and commandments*.

To move the cause of Zion in mighty power for good. The infinitive phrase addresses the question, “what is the net effect of the prophet's divinely inspired mission?” For Latter-day Saints, “Zion” is the name of the Kingdom of God, identified as God's “abode forever” in the vision of Enoch (Moses 7:20–22), and as the millennial “New Jerusalem” in Christ's prophecies from the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 20–22).⁴² In the Doctrine and Covenants, *Zion* is one of the most frequently used and widespread proper nouns, appearing 210 times in roughly 40% of the canonized revelations, with 14 sections having six or more uses.⁴³ The last of five uses of the entire phrase, *cause of Zion*, appears in section 21, suggesting that “establishing Zion” is a primary focus of Smith's inaugural revelations. In short, two of the prophet's earliest and most sacred texts — the Book of Mormon and the vision of Enoch — and

40. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “saith;” *BDB*, s.v.v. #559, 5002.

41. See “Iamb (or Iambus)” and “meter” in William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, 10th ed. (New York: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 266, 323–24.

42. See also A. D. Sorensen, “Zion,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1624–26.

43. D&C 63 (9 uses); 64 (9), 68 (6), 72 (10), 84 (10), 90 (7), 97 (14), 101 (11), 103 (12), 105 (8), 107 (8), 119 (6), 124 (11), and 133 (10). All these revelations are received later than the formal dedication of Zion's “center place” in Jackson County, Missouri (see D&C 57–59).

several of his initial revelations identify “establishing Zion” as central to the latter-day mission of the Church of Jesus Christ. Its use in section 21 places “establishing Zion” as not only essential to the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ, but also central to the ministry of God’s *prophet*, and a major focus of the Church’s official *record*.

The complementary prepositional phrases, *in mighty power for good*, identify the desired outcome of establishing Zion and complete God’s initial endorsement of His prophet. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the entire phrase is used only here; however:

- *Mighty* appears twenty other times, all but one (1:19) as a key descriptor of God’s heavenly work.
- *Power* (singular) appears 228 times, nearly all with reference to God’s capability to accomplish His divine will.
- *Good* appears 87 times in 51 revelations, most connoting, as an adjective: “the most general adj. of commendation, implying the existence of a high ... degree of characteristic qualities which are either admirable in themselves or useful for some purpose,” and as a noun, “the resulting advantage, benefit, or profit of anything.” While section 21 does not enumerate the *good* that Smith’s ministry will accomplish, its benefits necessarily align with God’s eternal covenant and the mission to establish *Zion*. The prepositional phrase, *for good*, also has English connotations relevant to this literary context, “a final conclusion ... a fixed final act,” and “Highest (first, chief, etc.) good; SUMMUM BONUM.”⁴⁴ Thus, the phrase, *for good*, connotes a high moral quality to Joseph’s ministry and a teleological quality to his and, by implication, his successors’ prophetic ministries in earth’s final dispensation.

God’s endorsement of Joseph Smith continues with a series of his admirable qualities, including *diligence*, *prayers*, *weeping*, *rejoicing*, and *works*. In the Doctrine and Covenants:

- *Diligence* appears nine times, all connoting an essential quality of godliness.
- *Prayers* (plural) appears 25 times, nearly half (11) affirm that God hears the supplications of the righteous, as in this case.

44. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv. “good,” “mighty,” “power;” *OED*, s.v. “good.” Regarding the use of the Latin phrase in Joseph’s revelations, see D&C 128:11.

- *Weeping* appears six times, but this is the only use with a positive connotation, i.e., pleading for Zion's redemption. All others refer to lamentations of the wicked.
- *Rejoicing* appears 11 times, all with a positive connotation, with the entire noun phrase, *days of rejoicing*, appearing only here.
- *Works* (plural) appears 54 times across 33 revelations, referring variously to the meaningful actions of humans, devils, angels, and God. In section 21, the term refers to Joseph Smith's actions that are distinctive of his ministry and accepted of heaven.⁴⁵

Remission of his sins. Joseph's misdeeds are explicitly referenced, but not specifically detailed, in section 21 and four other latter-day revelations. Readers might ask, "what do Joseph's sins have to do with God's endorsement?" Exploring further these sacred texts reveals that all explicit references to Joseph's sins accompany examples of God's ringing endorsement of him. For example:

- Section 3 chastens Joseph, "how oft you have transgressed the commandments and the laws of God, and have gone on in the persuasions of men," immediately prior to God's confirming his identity and divine calling: "Behold, thou art Joseph, and thou wast chosen to do the work of the Lord" (D&C 3:6, 9).
- Section 20 acknowledges that Joseph "was entangled again in the vanities of the world" after receiving an initial "remission of his sins" in the same context in which he is "called of God, and ordained an apostle of Jesus Christ, to be the first elder of this church" (D&C 20:2, 5).
- Section 21 references God's "remission of [Joseph's] sins" immediately after declaring, "him have I inspired to move the cause of Zion in mighty power for good" (D&C 21:7, 8).
- Section 64 bluntly acknowledges, "he has sinned," in the context of the declaration that the atonement of Jesus Christ applies to all who repent of their sins, but "who have not sinned unto death." At the same time, the passage asserts the qualified blessing, "the keys of the mysteries of the kingdom shall not be taken from my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., through

45. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv. "diligence," "prayers," "rejoicing," "weeping," "works."

the means I have appointed, while he liveth, inasmuch as he obeyeth mine ordinances” (D&C 64:5–7).

- Section 132 indicates that Joseph will perform a “sacrifice which I require at his hands for his transgressions, saith the Lord your God,” almost in the same breath in which God entrusts him with the priesthood keys of sealing and promises him his own “exaltation” (D&C 132:45–49, 60).

While all five revelations acknowledge Joseph’s persistent imperfections, they also affirm his special standing before God and the eternal benefits that obtain from faithfully completing his earthly ministry. In fact, the above scriptural passages which acknowledge Joseph’s sins progressively increase the spiritual significance of his divine calling and its attendant blessings: (1) chosen of God, (2) ordained an apostle to lead the Church of Jesus Christ, (3) inspired to move the cause of Zion, (4) administers the mysteries of the Kingdom, and (5) holds the priesthood keys of sealing and receives the promise of exaltation.

An implication of God’s multifaceted endorsement of the Prophet in section 21 is that God chose him not because of his degree of perfection, i.e., the absence of sin in his life, but because of his capacity and willingness *to move the cause of Zion*, his abiding commitment to the divine purpose of the Restoration, and related personal character traits to complete his lofty ministry. It also implies that Joseph’s process of becoming perfect mirrors that of all God’s children — having sins remitted through repentance, the atonement of Jesus Christ, ordinances of His gospel, obedience to His commandments, and service in His kingdom. These latter points are further developed below.

The next sentence complements the definition of *the church* and the associated blessings addressed above. Its first clause, *all those who labor in my vineyard*, reinforces the behavioral definition of *the church*, namely those who *give heed unto all [the prophet’s] words and commandments ... as if from [God’s] own mouth* (D&C 21:4–5). While both phrases imply service as a defining characteristic of *the church*, the former phrase promises blessings to *the church* as a corporate body, i.e., a formally organized religion, and the latter recognizes *the church* as a collection of individual Latter-day Saints. The *mighty blessing* that *the church*, in the individual member sense, receives through gospel service is that Latter-day Saints will “believe on [the prophet’s] words, which are given him through me by the Comforter” (v. 9). Inspiration is the essence of the Comforter’s divine role mentioned two other times

in section 21 (vv. 2, 7) and as a key blessing of keeping the covenant of baptism (D&C 20:77).

This general rhetorical pattern implies that heeding the prophet's *words and commandments*, laboring in the kingdom, being inspired by the Holy Ghost, receiving remission of one's sins, and fulfilling the mission of *the church* in both corporate and individual member senses are complementary and interrelated. That is, individual Church members cannot truly believe in Jesus Christ without also laboring in His *vineyard* and seeking forgiveness of sins, and the covenant community cannot fulfill the Church's mission without heeding the prophet's *words and commandments* as if they come from God's *own mouth*.

The rest of this sentence addresses the question, "What is the essence of Latter-day Saint belief?" It is "that Jesus was crucified by sinful men for the sins of the world, yea, for the remission of sins unto the contrite heart." In the Doctrine and Covenants, only section 64, verse 7, referenced above, mentions sin more frequently than section 21, verse 9.⁴⁶ From this perspective, the atonement of Jesus Christ is not only the doctrinal foundation of *the church* and the essence of members' faith, but also the basis of the testamentary mission of the Holy Ghost, and the means of receiving a key gospel blessing — *remission of sins*.

Remission of sins is not only an essential outcome of the atonement of Jesus Christ but also a central purpose of baptism, which also serves as the foundational priesthood ordinance of the gospel, the ritual entrée into the Church of Jesus Christ, and the official beginning of the covenant path to eternal life. In the Doctrine and Covenants, *remission* appears seventeen times with variations but only in the context of this phrase.⁴⁷ The two uses of the entire phrase in section 21 — once in general reference to the atonement of Jesus Christ (v. 9) and once in specific reference to Joseph's own sins (v. 8) — imply that Joseph is a beneficiary with all mankind of the atonement of Jesus Christ and that the Prophet is the exemplar of baptism in the gospel's final dispensation as the Savior was in the meridian of time (see D&C 13:1 and 19:31).

Manifest with variations appears 38 times in the revelations, never more than twice in any single revelation, as in section 21 (vv. 8, 9). Its scriptural use implies formal, official actions of Jesus Christ and His

46. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv. "sin," "sinful," "sinned," "sinner," "sinners," "sinneth," "sins."

47. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. "remission," "remit," "remitted."

Church “to make manifest or visible or known what has been hidden or unknown.”⁴⁸

In sum, these sentences authoritatively endorse Joseph Smith as God’s earthly agent with the mission to restore to earth the gospel of Jesus Christ for the eternal benefit of all mankind. They also imply that the Church’s official *record* indicates that a testimony of Jesus Christ enables faithful Latter-day Saints to assist the Prophet to establish Zion, that devoted service in *the church* helps the Saints and their Prophet to obtain and retain a remission of their sins, and that gospel service by Latter-day Saints will be featured in the official *record*.

“He Should be Ordained” (D&C 21:10–12)

Wherefore, it behooveth me that he should be ordained by you, Oliver Cowdery mine apostle;

This being an ordinance unto you, that you are an elder under his hand, he being the first unto you, that you might be an elder unto this church, bearing my name —

And the first preacher of this church unto the church, and before the world, yea, before the Gentiles; yea, and thus saith the Lord God, lo, lo! to the Jews also. Amen.

The closing sentence of section 21 specifies the next major step in the organization of the Church of Jesus Christ and identifies the principal beneficiaries of its mission.

It behooveth me. This reflexive phrase appears three times in the Doctrine and Covenants, first in section 21. In each case, the phrase implies a moral necessity, obligation, or incumbent response.⁴⁹ Therefore, the archaic phrasing increases the imperative that Oliver ordain Joseph *first elder* of the Church of Jesus Christ and reinforces the significance of Smith’s ordination in the formal organization of *the church*.

He should be ordained by you. Once again, the revelation employs the passive voice. Rather than weakness, however, its syntax correctly places emphasis on Joseph Smith as the receiver of the ordination rather

48. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “manifest,” “manifestation,” “manifestations,” “manifested,” “manifesteth;” Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2014), s.v. #5319. The most relevant standard English definition of manifestation is, “the demonstration, revelation, or display of the existence, presence, qualities, or nature of some person or thing.” *OED*, s.v. “manifestation.”

49. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “behooveth;” *OED*, s.v. “behoove.”

than on Oliver Cowdery as the person performing the ordination, who is mentioned only in a prepositional phrase. The opening sentence of section 20 distinguishes Joseph and Oliver as *first elder* and *second elder*, respectively (D&C 20:1–3). While the final sentence in section 21 reinforces Oliver’s subordinate status, it also recognizes his complementary standing with Joseph as a fellow apostle because of their earlier ordination by the ancient apostles Peter, James, and John. The possessive (*mine apostle*) adds a term of endearment and intimacy to Oliver’s special relationship with the Lord. In addition, section 21 gives Oliver the distinctive role of *first preacher* in the Church of Jesus Christ. This is the only instance of *preacher* in the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Church of Jesus Christ has never had *preacher* as a formal office or calling.⁵⁰

Ordained appears 96 times in the Doctrine and Covenants, nearly all in reference to the formal ritual authorization for someone to act in an official capacity in the Church of Jesus Christ. While distributed among 38 revelations, its use is concentrated in three, each of which features the priesthood order and formal governance of *the church*.⁵¹ The ordination of Joseph Smith as *first elder* as specified by revelation is a crucial action in bringing *the church* officially into existence.

Unto the church, and before the world. The revelation’s final clause specifies the principal beneficiaries of the Restoration. Using ecclesiastical and ethnic idioms, respectively, two contrasting pairs of groups — *the church* and *the world*, on the one hand, and *Jews* and *Gentiles*, on the other — distinguish God’s covenant people from the rest of humanity.⁵² For example, *world* is one of the most frequent and widely used common nouns in the Doctrine and Covenants, appearing 211 times in half of the revelations and connoting either (1) the locus

50. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “preacher.” One respected commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants interprets the phrase thus: “Oliver Cowdery was to be the first to proclaim the gospel in this dispensation. He delivered the first public discourse on the 11th of April 1830, in the home of Peter Whitmer Sr., in Fayette.... Oliver Cowdery was called to go on a mission to the Lamanites.... And thus he became the first preacher to the Gentiles, and also to the “Jews,” as the Revelation says.” Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), loc. 1753 of 11023, Kindle.

51. D&C 20 (7 uses), 107 (13), and 124 (9); *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “ordained.”

52. Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

of Christ's redemptive mission, e.g., "Savior of the World," or (2) the unredeemed portion of humanity, e.g., "wicked world." In section 21, *world* carries the latter connotation, in contrast with *church* which is understood in this context as God's covenant people who have been redeemed through the atonement of Jesus Christ and the covenants and commandments of His gospel. Similarly, *Gentiles* represents the residual portion of humanity who have yet to make a binding covenant with God. By contrast, in section 21 *Jews* represents God's covenant community, regardless of their specific descent lines. Thus, this double-edged, covenant-based distinction reminds those who formally accept the gospel of Jesus Christ of their sacred obligation to participate in its redemptive mission for all mankind.

Amen. This word appears 150 times in the Doctrine and Covenants and is the final word in all but 20 of its sections. In scriptural and devotional settings in the Judeo-Christian tradition, *amen* affirms the truth of the preceding statement or action.⁵³ Through its use at the end of section 21, God assures Joseph Smith, *the church*, and all mankind of the revelation's divine origin and eternal value.

Metanarrative of the Restoration

D&C 21 plays a crucial role in the latter-day restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ — identifying essential components of the Restoration and specifying their core purposes. The Church of Jesus Christ is a key outcome of the covenant relationship between God and mankind as administered initially through Joseph Smith who performs a variety of crucial God-given roles. One of these roles, *prophet*, involves receiving from God the *words and commandments* of the gospel and giving them to *the church* who accept and act on them as though they come from God himself. By doing so, *the church* becomes the institutional means of extending the blessings of eternal life to all mankind, whether in mortality or eternity. Thus, the plan of exaltation distinguishes the Church of Jesus Christ from all other earthly institutions and commits Latter-day Saints to a life of holiness and gospel service. Section 21 directs *the church* not only to perform this multi-faceted, God-given mission but also to keep a permanent, official *record* that documents and bears witness of it. Thus, the ministries of its leaders and members are only incidentally pastoral, instructional, ecclesiastical, humanitarian, and administrative. Rather, the essence of their gospel service is redemptive. Whatever other

53. *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. "amen;" BDB, #543.

good the Church and its leaders accomplish in mortality, their principal purpose is preparing the earth and its inhabitants for life eternal.

The revelation's opening commandment, *there shall be a record kept among you*, prefaces all these truths, forecasts other truths, and anticipates an official account of this dispensation of the gospel. Whatever other things it preserves, the *record of the church* documents and bears witness of the fulfillment of the plan of exaltation as directed by the Godhead through the earthly head of *the church* in the last days. Key measures of success for this endeavor include prevailing over the *gates of hell* in two complementary senses, dispersing the *powers of darkness*, manifesting a multitude of heavenly blessings for its *good and his name's glory*, and realizing in their lives the blessings of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. The official *record* of this dispensation must also be accurate and true, that is, precise, detailed, ordered, and focused, with an eternal perspective on the dynamic relation between mankind and God, earth and heaven, and time and eternity, especially the intricate and intimate connections between earth's mortal existence and the plan of salvation.

It is uncertain whether Joseph Smith fully understood the revelation as he received it on April 6. Regardless, he understood it well enough to organize the Church and appoint trusted colleagues to begin keeping a record. While fulfilling both commandments encountered many challenges, keeping an acceptable record was especially fraught. Joseph's own strength was not in writing, so he appointed Oliver Cowdery to begin keeping the Church's record. Oliver's less than satisfactory effort resulted in Joseph's delegating the assignment to John Whitmer, who did his best but also fell short of Joseph's expectations. In early 1832, the Prophet assumed responsibility for the Church's record and produced a six-page autobiography that included the first written account of the First Vision and summarized his ministry to the beginning of the translation of the Book of Mormon.⁵⁴

The Church continues its efforts through the present to keep an official record expanded and refined. Record-keeping has become a major enterprise of the Church of Jesus Christ and its members. A summary of this widespread initiative goes far beyond the scope of the present study which focuses on defining qualities of the divinely acceptable record of

54. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 233; Dean C. Jessee, "The Writing of Joseph Smith's History," *BYU Studies* 11, no. 4 (1971), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol11/iss4/8>.

the Restoration. D&C 21 provides the initial impetus and grand vision of this remarkable mission.

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