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## “That They Might Come to Understanding”: Revelation as Process

*Steven C. Harper*

On a spring Sabbath in 1843, a gathering of Latter-day Saints opened their worship service with a hymn. Wilford Woodruff prayed, and “then Joseph the Seer arose & said It is not wisdom that we should have all knowledge at once presented before us but that we should have a little[. T]hen we can comprehend it.”<sup>1</sup> Joseph had learned early in his prophetic ministry about the power of transcendent revelatory events, like his First Vision or his visits from Moroni. But he also learned that such events were part of the process by which revelation distilled over time. Like compound interest on investments, light and knowledge accumulate as revelatory events combine with insight from experience and thought.

In November 1831, as Joseph was preparing to publish his revelation texts, he sought and received a preface for them. In a revelatory event, he dictated the text that is now Doctrine and Covenants section 1. It sets forth the Lord’s reason for revealing himself in process to Joseph as he did. “These commandments are of me,” the Lord said, speaking of the revelation texts, “and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their

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language, *that they might come to understanding*" (D&C 1:24; emphasis added). This passage is key in appreciating revelation as a process of communication between a divine being and mortal ones, a process that is not complete once the revelation text has been written or published or read, but rather once it has been internalized and acted upon. Revelation, in this sense, is best understood as a process that leads to understanding rather than an event in which knowledge is fully disclosed in an instant.

Elder David A. Bednar invited us to understand two patterns of the spirit of revelation. One is like turning on a light switch and dispelling darkness in an instant; this is what I mean by a revelatory event, like the First Vision or the reception of section 1. The other is like watching night turn into morning as the rising sun gradually and subtly replaces darkness.<sup>2</sup> This is what I mean by the process of revelation, which yields accumulated insight born of ongoing inspiration. Significantly, it was late in Joseph's life, not on his return from the Sacred Grove, when he articulated the idea that our wise Heavenly Father does not give us all knowledge at once, but in a process that we can understand. It was also late in his life that Joseph wrote reflectively about his remarkable, revelatory life. He reviewed his experiences with a veritable "who's who" of heavenly messengers—Moroni, Michael, Peter, James, John, Gabriel, and Raphael—"all declaring their dispensation . . . giving line upon line, precept upon precept; here a little, and there a little" (D&C 128:21). Joseph was remembering revelatory events in his past, but he had experienced enough to reflectively recognize that such events were part of the revelatory process.

"Revelation," according to Elder Bednar, "is communication from God to His children on the earth."<sup>3</sup> So a basic understanding of communication theory may help us understand the nature of revelation. In any communication there is an encoder that sends the signal, the decoder that receives it, and the noise between them that hinders perfect transmission and reception. In terms of communication, noise is not always audible. Sound can interrupt revelation, but other kinds of noise hinder communication too. One type, semantic noise, happens when the encoder sends signals that the decoder lacks the power to decipher. Imagine Joseph receiving revelation in Spanish or computer programming code; that would be an example of semantic noise. Another type, psychological noise, happens when a decoder's

assumptions, prejudices, preconceived notions, or emotions prevent an accurate interpretation of the signal.

Revelation is communication in which God is a flawless, divine encoder, but mortals are the decoders. Various kinds of “noise” prevent perfect understanding. There is no evidence that Joseph Smith thought in technical terms of communication theory, but he understood these ideas well. He did not assume as we might that his revelation texts were faxed from heaven. He understood that the Lord could certainly send signals seamlessly, but he knew better than anyone else that he lacked the power to receive the messages immaculately or to recommunicate them perfectly. He considered it “an awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord,” as he put it, largely because he felt confined by what he called the “total darkness of paper pen and Ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect Language.”<sup>4</sup>

Religion scholar David Carpenter described revelation as “a *process* mediated through language.”<sup>5</sup> The very language whose communicative inadequacies Joseph lamented was the means by which God condescended to Joseph’s level and condescends to ours. Remember the Lord’s rationale in section 1: he gave the revelations “unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, [so] that they might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24). Joseph rightfully regarded his language as a deeply flawed medium for communication. Even so, the Lord consciously revealed the sections of the Doctrine and Covenants in Joseph’s corrupt tongue, not his own “diction, dialect, or native language.”<sup>6</sup> He revealed in the language Joseph could come to understand so that we too could come, by a process, to understand (see D&C 1:24). A divine encoder chose to communicate with his servants in their weakness in order to maximize their ability to comprehend. The communicative limits of Joseph’s revelation texts are inherent not in the Lord who gave them but in the imperfect language spoken by his weak servants, who had to decode the divine messages with various kinds of noise inhibiting them. Brigham Young did not believe, as he put it, “that there is a single revelation, among the many God has given to the Church, that is perfect in its fulness. The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principle, so far as they go; but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low, grovelling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all its perfections. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our

capacities.”<sup>7</sup> No wonder Joseph felt the weight of his calling and longed for a pure language.

Joseph also longed for friends who would sustain him and the imperfect texts he made of the revelations he received. In November 1831, he convened a council at the Johnson home in Hiram, Ohio, and said that “the Lord has bestowed a great blessing upon us in giving commandments and revelations.” Joseph laid the manuscript revelations before his associates and asked for their help in getting them published. He testified that the contents of such a book should “be prized by this Conference to be worth to the Church the riches of the whole Earth.”<sup>8</sup> During the discussion Oliver Cowdery asked “how many copies of the Book of commandments it was the will of the Lord should be published in the first edition of that work?”<sup>9</sup> The council eventually voted for ten thousand. It was in these council meetings, which went on for more than a week, that the Lord revealed the preface for the book, Doctrine and Covenants section 1. In it he essentially said that though he was a divine being, he communicated to mortals in their language so that they could come to understand (see D&C 1:24).<sup>10</sup>

Joseph’s history tells us that the council engaged in a discussion “concerning revelations and language.”<sup>11</sup> The discussion may well have raised the same issues discussed here about the kind of writing that can be considered scripture. Everyone in the room must have recognized that they were being asked to support a nearly twenty-six-year-old poorly educated farmer who was planning to publish ten thousand copies of revelations that were unequivocally declared to be the words of Jesus Christ, revelations that called their neighbors idolatrous, referred to Missourians as their enemies, commanded them all to repent, and foretold calamities upon those who continued in wickedness. Moreover, the revelation texts were not always properly punctuated, the spelling was not standardized, and the grammar was inconsistent.

Though lacking confidence in his own language, or perhaps even because of his limitations, Joseph was sure that his revelation texts were divine, if imperfect, productions. He promised the brethren present that they could know for themselves as well. Just a few days earlier, Joseph had prophesied that if the Saints could “all come together with one heart and one mind in perfect faith the vail [*sic*] might as well be rent to day as next week or any other time.”<sup>12</sup> Seeking confirmation of the revelations, the brethren tried to rend the veil like the brother of Jared in the Book of Mormon. They failed.

Joseph asked the Lord why, and he received the answer in Doctrine and Covenants section 67.

In that text the Lord assured the Church leaders that he had heard their prayers and knew all the desires in their hearts. “There were fears in your hearts,” he told them, and “this is the reason that ye did not receive” (D&C 67:3). He then testified of the truthfulness of the Book of Commandments and Revelations lying before them. They had been watching Joseph, listening to him talk, observing his imperfections, and wishing secretly, or perhaps even assuming, that they could do a better job than he; the Lord offered them the opportunity. He told them to have the wisest man in the council (or any of them who cared to) duplicate the simplest revelation in the manuscript revelation book before them. The Lord told the elders that if they succeeded in composing a pseudo-revelation text equal to the least of Joseph’s, then they could justifiably say that they did not know the revelations were true. But if they failed, the Lord said he would hold them guilty unless they testified to the veracity of the revelations (see D&C 67). The Lord’s words led the men to recognize that whatever imperfections the revelation texts showed—communicated as they were in “their language” (D&C 1:24), not God’s—they conformed to divine laws, were full of holy principles, and were just, virtuous, and good. They could conclude on those criteria that even communicated with a “crooked broken scattered and imperfect Language,” such revelations came from God.<sup>13</sup>

Joseph’s history and other sources tell us how the brethren acted out the instructions in section 67 and became willing to testify before the world that the revelations were true, but not flawless literary productions. William McLellin, who had acted as scribe the preceding week as Joseph dictated section 66, now “endeavored to write a commandment like unto one of the least of the Lord’s, but failed.”<sup>14</sup> Joseph had asked the men present “what testimony they were willing to attach to these commandments which should shortly be sent to the world. A number of the brethren arose and said that they were willing to testify to the world that they knew that they were of the Lord,” and Joseph revealed a statement for them to sign as witnesses.<sup>15</sup> The resulting “Testimony of the witnesses to the Book of the Lords commandments which he gave to his church through Joseph Smith Jr” reads, “We the undersigners feel willing to bear testimony to all the world of mankind to every creature upon all the face of all the Earth & upon the Islands of the Sea that god

hath b~~or~~ born record to our souls through the Holy Ghost shed forth upon us that these commandments are given by inspiration of God & are profitable for all men & are verily true we give this testimony unto the world the Lord being my <our> helper.” William McLellin signed this statement, along with four others. Then other elders signed the statement in Missouri when the book arrived there for printing.<sup>16</sup>

The discussion about revelations and language concluded as “the brethren arose in turn and bore witness to the truth of the Book of Commandments. After which br. Joseph Smith jr arose & expressed his feelings and gratitude.”<sup>17</sup> With a clear sense that the revelation texts were both human and divine, the November 1831 conference resolved that Joseph “correct those errors or mistakes which he may discover by the holy Spirit.”<sup>18</sup> Joseph, and to some extent others (including Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and the printer William Phelps), thus edited his revelation texts repeatedly based on the same premise that informed their original receipt, namely that Joseph Smith represented the voice of God as he condescended to communicate in Joseph’s broken language.<sup>19</sup> Joseph only admonished his associates that they “be careful not to alter the sense” of the revelation manuscripts.<sup>20</sup>

Editing the revelation texts was no simple matter, even without textual variants and other complexities. For example, Joseph Smith dictated a revelation on December 6, 1832, as Sidney Rigdon wrote it (D&C 86). Frederick Williams then transcribed the text. Orson Hyde copied this transcription. John Whitmer then recorded Hyde’s copy in the Book of Commandments and Revelations, from which it was finally edited for publication. Few of Joseph’s revelations made their textual journeys so arduously, but none of them is an urtext, meaning a pristine original. By a process imbued both with God’s power and with faltering human mediation, Joseph somehow received the words of these texts and transmitted them to his scribe, who committed them to paper, then into manuscript books, and finally into published volumes of scripture. Not only were there both intentional and erroneous changes made at every step, but also, as a mortal decoder imprisoned by a broken language, Joseph originally received the revelations imperfectly. “He never considered the wording infallible” and he continued to revise and amend his revelation texts throughout his life to reflect his latest understanding and to increase their ability to communicate the mind of God.<sup>21</sup>

Revising, amending, and expanding earlier revelation texts is the prerogative of prophets, and Joseph Smith considered such revisions one of his major responsibilities. He revised the Bible, making hundreds of changes in the process that were designed not to restore lost or ancient text (as some of his revisions were) but rather to improve communication for a modern English-speaking audience. He edited the Book of Mormon after it was published in 1830, adding a clarifying clause to 1 Nephi 20:1 and revising numerous Hebraisms to communicate better with English readers, for example.

Similarly, Joseph edited his own revelation texts. He added information on priesthood offices or quorums to revelations that were originally received before such knowledge had been revealed to him. The current version of section 20 includes information about priesthood offices that was not known when that text was originally written on April 10, 1830. Section 42 now says that the bishop and his counselors should administer the law of consecration, but the Church’s lone bishop did not yet have counselors when that text was originally written. Section 68, originally revealed in 1831, said that bishops should be chosen by a council of high priests; it now puts that responsibility in the hands of the First Presidency, which was organized in 1832.

In addition to incorporating more material as it became clear to him, Joseph and other “stewards over the revelations” (D&C 70:3) edited his revelation texts in order to make them communicate more clearly. The revelation in section 20, for example, originally said that one duty of an apostle was “to administer the flesh and blood of Christ,” meaning the sacrament. Before publishing it in the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph amended this clause to its current reading, namely, “to administer bread and wine—the emblems of the flesh and blood of Christ” (D&C 20:40). Section 7 is another text whose original wording may have been clear to Joseph but whose meaning would be ambiguous to us at best if Joseph had not clarified it. Given to answer the question of whether the Apostle John lived or died, the text originally had John asking the Lord, “Give unto me power that I may bring souls unto thee.” Joseph amended it for publication in the Doctrine and Covenants so that it clarifies what John asked for and received: “Give unto me power over death, that I may live and bring souls unto thee” (D&C 7:2).

Joseph not only added newly revealed or clarifying text but also deleted some passages from his revelation texts that were no longer relevant, as in section 51’s original instruction to Bishop Edward Partridge to obtain a deed

for Leman Copley's land if Copley was willing, which he was not. Joseph apparently amended the law of consecration to reconcile its wording with changing legal dynamics. Moreover, he, Sidney Rigdon, and others made hundreds of simple changes for clarity of communication. For instance, they added surnames to given names mentioned in the texts so that readers who were not intimate with the situation and the subject of the revelation could make more sense of it. Oliver Cowdery reported to the Saints on the progress of this process, saying that the revelation texts "are now correct," adding, "if not in every word, at least in principle."<sup>22</sup>

Critics prey on the ignorance and assumptions of some Saints by writing about this process with clever titles like *Doctored Covenants*.<sup>23</sup> Why all the changes? they ask, but they are not on a quest for answers as much as they are trying to insinuate that the Church tries to keep its members ignorant of its sinister manipulations of scripture. Joseph, his associates, and their successors did not alter the revelation texts conspiratorially. Joseph revised his revelation texts with the sustaining vote of Church leaders and openly before the Saints. Noting that some critics present the many editorial changes made to the revelations as evidence that they are not true, President Boyd K. Packer observed, "They cite these changes, of which there are many examples, as though they themselves were announcing revelation, as though they were the only ones that knew of them. Of course there have been changes and corrections. Anyone who has done even limited research knows that. When properly reviewed, such corrections become a testimony for, not against, the truth of the books."<sup>24</sup>

William McLellin originally had that understanding, but he lost it. A week before he tried unsuccessfully to compose a pseudorevelation text, McLellin wrote the original dictation manuscript of section 66 as Joseph rendered the Lord's communication in the best words he had at his disposal. McLellin later testified that in this revelation the Lord answered every one of his intimate questions, which were unknown to Joseph. McLellin subsequently reported to his relatives that he had spent about three weeks with Joseph, "and from my acquaintance then and until now I can truly say I believe him to be a man of God. A Prophet, a Seer and Revelater to the church of christ." Later in the same letter, McLellin related, "We believe that Joseph Smith is a true Prophet or Seer of the Lord and that he has power and does receive revelations from



God, and that these revelations when received are of divine Authority in the church of Christ.”<sup>25</sup>

William McLellin knew as well as anyone that Joseph received revelations, that they were both divine and human products, and that Joseph had been appointed by the Church to prepare them for publication, including revising “by the holy Spirit.”<sup>26</sup> But in 1871, McLellin asserted that Joseph Smith had lost power to act for God in 1834 after Joseph and others edited the revelation texts for publication. “Now if the Lord gave those revelations,” McLellin reasoned, “he said what he meant, and meant what he said.”<sup>27</sup> Though he was present—a participant who knew better and who testified repeatedly with good evidence that Joseph’s revelations were true—William McLellin later assumed, as many Latter-day Saints do, that Joseph “simply repeated word-for-word to his scribe what he heard God say to him.” Grant Underwood, a careful analyst of Joseph’s revelation texts, wrote that “Joseph seems to have had a healthy awareness of the inadequacy of finite, human language, including his own, to perfectly communicate an infinite, divine revelation.”<sup>28</sup> McLellin, however, concluded that Joseph could receive revelation flawlessly and communicate it perfectly, and that everyone would understand the full import and meaning of his revelations in an instant, in a single event, as if by turning on a light switch.

Those who, like William McLellin, argue for perfect scriptures (which, notice, is not a scriptural doctrine) assume that divine communication is complete and perfect, that mortals can decode the divine without corruption. They do not recognize that it takes revelation to understand a revelation. Consider some examples. Six times in the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord says, “I come quickly” (33:18; 35:27; 39:24; 41:4; 49:28; 68:35). What does he mean? Does the adverb *quickly* mean “speedily” or does it mean “soon”? Both possibilities existed in Joseph’s language.<sup>29</sup> All six instances of that prophecy were revealed by 1832. Because it has been so long since then, at least by our sense of time, should we conclude that the Lord meant not that he comes soon but that when he comes, it will be speedy? Or should we consider that our interpretation of *soon* is not the intended one? Of course, we need not conclude that it is either soon or speedy. It may be both. But if so, how should *soon* be understood?

Some passages of Joseph’s revelations could not be understood well at the time they were received, not even by Joseph. The Lord, for example, told

the earliest Saints who were called to settle Jackson County, Missouri, that Zion would be built there, but not yet. Rather, it would “follow after much tribulation” (D&C 58:2–4). How much, they could not have imagined, as the Lord explained: “Ye cannot behold with your natural eyes, for the present time, the design of your God concerning those things which shall come hereafter” (D&C 58:3). Again the Lord prophesied “much tribulation” in anticipation of Zion, but the depth, breadth, and length of that tribulation would be finally understood only in the process of time and experience (D&C 58:4).

After the bewildered Saints were driven from Jackson County, the Lord reminded Joseph of this tribulation clause, which had much more meaning in that context (see D&C 103:12). Then the Lord told Joseph that Zion in Missouri would “come by power,” and he called for an army to march to Missouri to reclaim the Saints’ land (D&C 103:15). Every man who subsequently marched thought that he would provide the military power the Lord must have meant. But when they arrived, the Lord taught them more as part of his process of revelation. He taught them that Zion would not yet be redeemed, that the Saints must “wait for a little season” (D&C 105:9). He taught that the power he intended was an endowment waiting for them in the temple back in Kirtland, Ohio, and that they should return there. Why had the Lord not spared them the trouble? Perhaps the Lord let them make the journey because they became sanctified in the process and were better positioned to understand the Lord’s purposes after their tribulation than they were before. Joseph wrote, after several months of unjust imprisonment at Liberty, Missouri, “It seems to me that my heart will always be more tender after this than ever it was before.” He recognized that experiences “give us that knowledge to understand the minds of the Ancients,” like Abraham. “For my part,” Joseph wrote, “I think I never could have felt as I now do if I had not suffered the wrongs that I have suffered.”<sup>30</sup> Even though Joseph had been in the presence of God and Christ, and had entertained ministering angels and learned from them the mysteries of godliness, he still needed time and experience in order to process the revelations he had received and internalize their implications. Joseph processed much revelation in that stinking dungeon cell, where he learned that what had seemed like purposeless, interminable suffering to him was a small moment of exalting experience to God. He wrote, as a result of his revelations and reflections, that “the things of God Are of

deep import, and time and expeariance and carful and pondurous and solom though[ts] can only find them out.”<sup>31</sup>

In addition to time, experience, careful pondering, and solemn thought, the Holy Ghost is vital to the process of revelation. When elders were bewildered by strange, counterfeit spiritual gifts in the spring of 1831, the Lord invited them to come and reason with him, “that ye may understand” (D&C 50:10). The Lord asked the elders questions that caused them to think carefully and solemnly about their recent experiences, and to compare their experiences with the Holy Spirit with the manifestations they had observed but not understood. Having done such careful thinking, they were ready to understand that unless the Spirit of God mediated communication, that communication was not coming from God. “Why is it that ye cannot understand and know,” the Lord asked the elders, “that he that receiveth the word by the Spirit of truth receiveth it as it is preached by the Spirit of truth?” Only communication mediated by the Holy Ghost enables the encoder (“he that preacheth”) and the decoder (“he that receiveth”) to “understand one another.” Communication by the power of the Holy Ghost is edifying. It builds and grows and illuminates line upon line until understanding is full and complete and “perfect” (D&C 50:22–25; see also D&C 93:26–28). Without the Holy Ghost, communication can be a dark, confusing process. The Holy Ghost is the perfect mediator of otherwise imperfect communication; revelation is communication that is mediated by the power of the Holy Ghost. Reading a revelation text by the power of the Holy Ghost and thinking about it carefully over time and in light of experience will enable us to “come to understanding” (D&C 1:24).

In this way of thinking about revelation as a process by which we come to understand, the question is not whether the Lord said what he meant and meant what he said. The question, rather, is whether we have understood what he meant and acted obediently on what he said. The question is not whether words were accurately written “with ink” or “on tablets of stone,” but whether they were written “with the Spirit of the living God . . . on tablets of human hearts” (NRSV 2 Corinthians 3:3).

It seems likely that the Lord will continue to reveal to us in our language so that we might come to understand by experience and careful thought in light of the Holy Ghost. Such language is not stagnant. Unless enlivened by the Holy Ghost, ink on a page arranged into words will not communicate

with us all that the Lord intends, even if it was originally perfect. Prophets will continue to guide us as we continue to receive revelation actively in an ongoing quest for light and knowledge. They may amend the scriptures “by the holy Spirit,” as Joseph did, when they discern ways to communicate with today’s global congregation more clearly.<sup>32</sup>

The prophets have made changes to the scriptures throughout history, including in this dispensation. I remember how as a missionary I ignorantly tried to refute charges that there had been hundreds of textual changes made to the Book of Mormon. Today, thanks to the work of devoted, faithful Latter-day Saint scholars, it is clear that there have been thousands of such changes, including many by Joseph Smith and others by prophets since.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the recent publication of a critical edition of Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible shows that he made thousands of changes to the biblical text as well.<sup>34</sup> We can choose to recoil in ignorance and disbelief from such facts, or we can rejoice that we live in a time of wonderful discovery of our scriptural texts.

Perhaps we can learn from history about how to approach this moment of enlightenment. European scholars in the early modern period (1500–1800) began to study the Bible critically, using historical, textual, and linguistic analyses to assess the composition of biblical texts. They discovered that the oldest source materials for the Bible show the influence of several writers of what we casually call the books of Moses, all written from different periods and perspectives. It became obvious that the biblical texts had been revised and redacted again and again. As evidence and arguments mounted that biblical texts had been composed in a more complicated process than many believers had assumed, some concluded that mortal influence on scripture making precluded the possibility that the Bible was divinely inspired. Other people retrenched behind fundamentalism, the idea set forth by a group of American Protestants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the Bible is inerrant. These two camps created a false dilemma, unnecessarily concluding that the scriptures must be either divine or human texts.

Latter-day Saints are now faced with a similar situation regarding Restoration scripture. In 2009, the Church Historian’s Press published the *Joseph Smith Papers: Manuscript Revelation Books*, a massive eight-pound volume that includes painstaking transcriptions and high-resolution images of the earliest extant manuscripts of Joseph Smith’s revelation texts. As with the

oldest biblical manuscripts, these texts are full of evidence that the revelations were revised and redacted. Studying them leads to “a richer, more nuanced view, one that sees Joseph as more than a mere human fax machine through whom God communicated revelation texts composed in heaven.”<sup>35</sup> This is not a problem for believers who think of revelation as a process of communication between God and mortals whereby we come to understand the revelations. It is not a problem for Saints who believe the eighth and ninth articles of faith and the title page of the Book of Mormon. The definition of scripture set forth in the Doctrine and Covenants does not envision a pristine, unchangeable set of marks on a page but rather describes scripture as “the mind of the Lord” communicated “by the Holy Ghost” through fallible servants in their imperfect languages (D&C 68:3–4; see also D&C 1:24). However, the reality of these revelation texts and the process of revelation they evidence can be a problem for those who make fundamentalist assumptions about scripture—assumptions that are not doctrinal, scriptural, or consistent with the teachings of Joseph Smith.

The doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is that God has revealed himself in the past, does so now, and will yet, but that the records of such revelations are not the revelations themselves; they are but representations captured in our language so that we might come to understand them if we consider the words carefully and solemnly, in light of experience and the Holy Spirit. We make no claim that any scripture is inerrant or infallible. In fact, the title page of the Book of Mormon asserts that even that most correct book is a combination of “the things of God” and “the mistakes of men.” Such was Joseph Smith’s understanding of scripture, including the scriptures based on his revelation texts. Joseph knew better than anyone else that the words he dictated were both human and divine, the voice of God clothed in the words of his own limited, early American English vocabulary. He regarded himself as a revelator whose understanding accumulated over time. Joseph recognized as a result of the revelatory process that the texts of his revelations were not set in stone. Rather, he felt responsible to revise and redact them to reflect his latest understanding. He was always open, in other words, to receive more revelation. He knew, too, especially as he reflected with the aid of much experience, that a loving God sometimes turns on the lights in an instant, but even then it takes time for our eyes to adjust and then it requires experience for us to make sense of what we see.

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## Notes

1. Wilford Woodruff Journal, May 14, 1843, Yelrome, Hancock County, Illinois, in Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 200–202.
2. David A. Bednar, “The Spirit of Revelation,” *Ensign*, May 2011, 87.
3. Bednar, “Spirit of Revelation,” 87.
4. Manuscript History, Book A–1, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, handwriting of Willard Richards, 161–62. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, in Dean C. Jessee, comp. and ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 284–87.
5. David Carpenter, “Revelation in Comparative Perspective: Lessons for Inter-religious Dialogue,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 185–86; emphasis in original.
6. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 174.
7. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards; London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1855), 2:314.
8. Far West Record, November 1, 1831, Church History Library.
9. Far West Record, November 12–13, 1831.
10. Far West Record, November 1, 1831.
11. Manuscript History, Book A–1, 161–62, Church History Library; also in *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 1:224. See also Jan Shipps and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press; Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1994), 251.
12. Far West Record, October 15, 1831.
13. Manuscript History, Book A–1, 161–62, Church History Library, handwriting of Willard Richards. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 284–87.
14. Manuscript History, Book A–1, Church History Library, 161–62.
15. Far West Record, November 1, 1831.
16. Robin L. Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, Steven C. Harper, eds., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, vol. 1 in the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, eds. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 214–15.
17. Far West Record, November 1–2, 1831.
18. Kirtland Council Minutes, November 8, 1831, Church History Library.
19. Joseph’s journal entry for December 1, 1832, for instance, says that he “wrote and corrected revelations &c.” Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, eds. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 10.

20. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, July 31, 1832, in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 284–87.
21. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 174.
22. Oliver Cowdery, *The Evening and the Morning Star* (1835; repr., Burlington, WI: n.p., 1992), 16. Grant Underwood elaborates more examples of revisions in Grant Underwood, “Revelation, Text, and Revision: Insight from the Book of Commandments and Revelations,” *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 77.
23. Greg Anderson, *Doctored Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm, 1963).
24. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, April 1974, 137.
25. *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 79–84.
26. Minute Book 2, November 8, 1831, Church History Library.
27. Stan Larson and Samuel J. Passey, eds., *The William E. McLellin Papers, 1854–1880* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007), 474–75; *Joseph Smith Papers, Revelations and Translations, Vol. 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*, xxix.
28. Underwood, “Revelation, Text, and Revision,” 78.
29. *Noah Webster’s First Edition of an American Dictionary of the English Language* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1967), s.v. “quickly.”
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31. Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Lyman Wight, Caleb Baldwin, and Alexander McRae to Edward Partridge and the Church, March 20, 1839, Liberty, Missouri, Church History Library; *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 388–407.
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33. For example, see “The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 30.
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35. Underwood, “Revelation, Text, and Revision,” 78.