

“A Revelation I Give unto You”

The Revelation of Jesus Christ to Emma Hale Smith

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Early in his Gospel, Mark reports that “many were gathered together” about Jesus in Capernaum, such that “there was no room to receive them” (Mark 2:2). Then, however, some came “bringing one sick of the palsy” (2:3), whom they lowered through the roof in order to bring him near to the thronged miracle worker from Nazareth. Mark reports, “When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee” (2:5). Some eighteen hundred years later, according to a key text in the Doctrine and Covenants, the same Compassionate One looked on another suffering person, marveled at that person’s faith, and announced the same joyful news: “Thy sins are forgiven thee” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:3). This time, however, he spoke not to one he called his son but to one he called his daughter (25:1). Christ’s healing word came this time to Emma Hale Smith.

The revelation we know today as section 25 of the Doctrine and Covenants is remarkable for many reasons; in the following pages, however, we will focus on just a few of the many implications of this revelation. Summarily put, we will consider how the revelation's words find Jesus Christ revealing himself to Emma Smith. As in the Gospels, so in this revelation: Christ shows his awareness of the plight of women, their social suffering, and their consequent longing to participate more fully in God's work. This self-revelation provides us with an image of Christ, of the Christ who told the first generation of Nephites and Lamanites that he had "seen the sorrow, and heard the mourning of the daughters of [his] people in the land of Jerusalem, yea, and in all the lands of [his] people" (Jacob 2:31). I hope to trace this image of Christ through a careful reading of the revelation to Emma Smith. That image can only take shape slowly, emerging after careful analysis of the context and content of the revelation. By the end of this paper, however, it will be, I hope, perfectly clear.¹

Historical Matters

On Monday, 28 June 1830, Emma Hale Smith was baptized by Oliver Cowdery. The ceremony took place in the morning while a crowd of fifty critics of the fledgling Church jeered. What began as a group of hecklers that morning, however, became a dangerous mob that night. The meeting during which Emma was supposed to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost was canceled when her husband was arrested and hauled away to face trial. Emma would not be confirmed a member of the Church of Christ for nearly two months. It was during the following weeks that the revelation we know as section 25 of the Doctrine and Covenants came to comfort Emma, whose "very heartstrings [had been] broken with grief."² It is difficult to know exactly what she felt or thought at the time. The fact that she waited so long to be confirmed, even though her husband was released from custody within days, led Fawn Brodie to a cynical interpretation: that Emma

was "racked anew with doubt," in addition to being "frightened by the rancor that greeted her husband's preaching."³ Brodie assumes too much, but she may be right in claiming that these events left Emma with questions.

An identifiable concern definitely bothered her. Just before the revelation to Emma came, her husband received a separate revelation explaining that members of the Church would support him, since he would "not have strength" in "temporal labors" (Doctrine and Covenants 24:3, 9). Brodie claims, without real evidence, that "the prospect of living off the dubious and intermittent charity of Joseph's followers was more than this proud girl could stomach. The Lord's command to leave their farm . . . filled her with fury."⁴ Donna Hill more moderately suggests simply that "it would have been understandable if [Emma] had begun to question the value of what [her husband] was doing."⁵ The revelation that subsequently came to Emma would thus address both her delayed confirmation and her concern about support, in addition to giving her specific assignments in the young Church.

The revelation, moreover, mentioned another key point of potential concern for Emma Smith. It acknowledged that there were things she had not seen that had been shown to others around her—perhaps especially the gold plates bearing the text of the Book of Mormon (Doctrine and Covenants 25:4).⁶ Because this issue appears early in the revelation and is addressed so directly, commentators have often taken it to be the primary motivation for the revelation, using it as a reason to criticize Emma for her supposed faithlessness.⁷ There is much to criticize in this traditional approach, but there is also something at least partially right about it, as we will see. There is no evidence that Emma was faithless or resentful, but it does in fact seem that verse 4 is the key to understanding the revelation.

We know a little about the revelation's aftermath. Emma Smith was indeed confirmed a member of the Church sometime after it was given, but she did not immediately take up the responsibilities it gave her. For instance, the revelation assigned her to assume Oliver

Cowdery's responsibilities as her husband's scribe, but due to a difficult pregnancy and then to Sidney Rigdon's baptism and arrival in New York, Emma never became an official scribe in the newly founded Church. Her well-known assignment to produce a collection of hymns was one she did not pursue for several years. And what may be the most interesting responsibility given her in the revelation—"to expound scriptures, and to exhort the church" (Doctrine and Covenants 25:7)—was not hers in the fullest sense until the organization of the Relief Society a decade later (although her work on the hymnbook gave her real opportunities to teach the Saints in important ways).⁸ Only then would the revelation to Emma come out of its shell, as it were, serving almost as the foundational document for the organization.⁹

Despite gaps in the historical record (and therefore in our knowledge), the basic content of the revelation—its instructions and promises to Emma, its appointments and duties for her—is fully available in the published text. A brief outline of this content might therefore be useful. It is in fact relatively easy to divide section 25 into a few different parts:¹⁰

- Verses 1–3: Introductory address to Emma
- Verse 4: Identification of temptation to avoid
- Verses 5–6: First appointment—As scribe
- Verses 7–8: Second appointment—As teacher
- Verses 9–10: Aside addressing a concern
- Verses 11–12: Third appointment—As collector of hymns
- Verses 13–16: Concluding exhortation

It is immediately clear that Emma Smith's appointments make up the heart of the revelation. They are, moreover, all presented as tasks she was to throw herself into in fleeing the temptation to murmur. Everything else in the revelation works either to introduce those appointments or to provide general words of exhortation.

Straightforward as the text might seem, however, it was not at first as stable as one might guess from a quick reading of it. That is, the

actual words of the revelation were in some cases changed between its original reception in 1830 and its first canonical publication in 1835 in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (although the text has remained basically unchanged since 1835). These changes (or at least the most important of them) prove important to any close reading of the revelation, so they require at least a few words of introduction and summary—especially because it was the altered, canonical text of the revelation that shaped the founding of the Relief Society in 1842.¹¹

The earliest existing manuscript of the revelation is not the original but a handwritten copy found in what is now called Revelation Book 1.¹² An equally early (perhaps earlier) copy—no longer extant—served as the prototype for a printing of the revelation in the critical work *Mormonism Unveiled*, published in 1834.¹³ Some small changes were made to the revelation before it was printed by the Church for the first time in the never-exactly-completed Book of Commandments in 1833.¹⁴ But most of the changes—and all the major ones—were made between the revelation's printing in 1833 and its publication in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835.¹⁵

The first two verses of what is now section 25 were altered most dramatically. They originally read as follows: "Emma, my daughter in Zion, a revelation I give unto you concerning my will."¹⁶ This was changed for the canonized 1835 version to read as follows: "Hearken unto the voice of the Lord your God, while I speak unto you, Emma Smith, my daughter, for verily I say unto you, all those who receive my gospel are sons and daughters in my kingdom. A revelation I give unto you concerning my will, and if thou art faithful and walk in the paths of virtue before me, I will preserve thy life, and thou shalt receive an inheritance in Zion." It should be noted right away that the canonical version expands the earlier text more than it replaces it. The clause "a revelation I give unto you concerning my will" is unaltered, although it is recontextualized through additions to the text. From the original's "Emma, my daughter in Zion," the first part ("Emma, my daughter") is retained and appended to "Hearken unto the voice of the Lord your god, while I speak unto you."¹⁷ And the

prepositional phrase “in Zion” from the same prefatory clause is displaced to a position *after* “a revelation I give unto you concerning my will,” where it comes to modify not *daughter* but *inheritance*: “and if thou art faithful and walk in the paths of virtue before me, I will preserve thy life, and thou shalt receive an inheritance in Zion.”¹⁸ There is the further addition in these opening verses of “for verily I say unto you, all those who receive my gospel are sons and daughters in my kingdom.” This addition is also not without relation to the original revelation. The clause “verily I say unto you” anticipates and echoes the use of the same phrase in what is now verse 16 (which appeared as it stands now in the earliest version of the revelation also). That concluding verse for the revelation similarly points toward the general applicability of the revelation. Thus, verse 16’s “this is my voice unto all” stands parallel to what is now verse 1’s “all those who receive my gospel are sons and daughters in my kingdom.”

The next passage to receive substantial editorial attention is what is now verse 6. Before 1835 it instructed Emma Smith to work with her husband as follows: “And thou shalt go with him at the time of his going, and be unto him for a scribe, that I may send Oliver whithersoever I will.” As the text was altered in preparation for its 1835 canonical publication, it read thus: “And thou shalt go with him at the time of his going, and be unto him for a scribe, while there is no one to be a scribe for him, that I may send my servant Oliver Cowdery, whithersoever I will.” One change here is particularly important: “while there is no one to be a scribe for him” has been introduced, apparently to clarify that Emma’s appointment as scribe actually proved to be temporary rather than permanent. (Less remarkable is the fact that “my servant” has been inserted before “Oliver.”) This change seems to indicate a process of displacing Emma from her original appointment as scribe in 1830.

The last significant change involves the alteration of a single word, yet it is the only revision to have received repeated attention from writers.¹⁹ It comes in what is now verse 9. The clause “thy husband shall support thee *in* the church,” as it has appeared in the

revelation since the 1835 printing, appears in all earlier versions of the text as "thy husband shall support thee *from* the church." This is a slight change that makes a real difference. When the revelation is altered to say that Emma Smith's husband would support her *in* the Church (particularly following her appointment as a teacher), it gives the impression that Emma's fear mentioned in the same verse concerns her ability to perform her duties well. The text seems to assure her that she could overcome her anxieties through the support of her husband. When the revelation says instead, as in the earlier versions, that Emma's husband would support her *from* the Church, it gives the impression instead that her fear was about finances and living conditions.²⁰ The text then seems to assure her that her fears would not be realized because the Church would provide the necessary means for her family to survive.²¹

What might explain these several alterations made to the revelation in preparation for its 1835 publication? Some could see in each of them evidence for a systematic attempt to displace Emma Smith from positions of authority originally and divinely granted to her in 1830. She goes from being the Lord's daughter in Zion in the original text to being the Lord's daughter with just the *possibility* of an inheritance in Zion;²² from being her husband's scribe to being a substitute scribe *only* when or as necessary; and from being a rightly worried woman with concerns about subsistence to being a potentially vacillating woman with doubts about her adequacy. Is this the right way to understand the several changes?

Revisions made in preparation for the 1835 publication of the Doctrine and Covenants often aligned the text of the revelations with what had taken place historically since their original reception.²³ Revelations that had been clarified or even altered by later revelations were edited to fit together. Some revelations were adjusted to reflect major changes in the Church's organization that had taken place with the loss of Jackson County in 1833.²⁴ In a few cases, revelations were revised to anticipate historical developments after a revelation was originally received. It seems that the changes to what is now verse 6

of Emma Smith's revelation are at least partially an example of this. Oliver Cowdery was indeed displaced from his position as scribe and expositor of scripture, but Sidney Rigdon joined the Church late in 1830 and soon took Cowdery's place. The adjustments to verse 6 make the revelation anticipate Rigdon's eventual centrality to the Church. Might this suggest, in fact, that the revisions to Emma's revelation served to displace her role in the Restoration? Is it not likely that Emma herself felt troubled by the changes to the text, which she would certainly have noticed? These are questions that require careful answers, and I will attempt to provide some as we look for the self-revelation of Christ in section 25.

Degendering a Revelation

With general historical matters out of the way, it is possible to turn directly to the text of section 25 to ask about the shape and bearing of the revelation of Jesus Christ to Emma Smith. What is the image of the Christ who reveals himself to this troubled daughter of God? What does he know of her suffering, and how does he respond to it? I will give my attention in the remainder of this paper to three distinct aspects of the revelation, all of which speak to these questions. First, I will look at the generalizing or universalizing gestures that appeared already in the original (1830) version of the revelation (in what is now verse 16) and that were worked into the later (1835) version of the revelation (in what is now verses 1 and 2). Second, I will reflect on the appointments given to Emma in verses 5–12, especially those that set her up to take over work that had been Oliver Cowdery's. Third and finally, I will consider in greater detail than above the relationship between these several appointments and the warning in verse 4 against murmuring.

As discussed above, the original version of Emma Smith's revelation concludes with a generalizing gesture: "And verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my voice unto all."²⁵ This final, generalizing note of sorts perhaps sounds a bit strange since most everything else

in the original version of the revelation is quite specific, addressed to a particular woman and her very particular circumstances. There are *some* other minimal gestures toward general concerns—most obviously in what is now verse 12, with its comment on “the song of the heart” being a prayer to the Lord. Nonetheless, at least as it was originally dictated, the revelation is largely local, particular, specific, and without (obvious) universal implications. One would have had to do a fair bit of “likening,” as Latter-day Saints say, to draw more general implications. Is it right, then, that “this is my voice unto all” really meant to imply that the whole of Emma’s revelation was of relevance to everyone—or even just to all women? Might it not in fact be important to insist that the revelation was intentionally and rightly directed originally just to this one woman in her rather particular circumstances?

It might in fact be wrong to understand the phrase “voice unto all” in verse 16 to have been an indication from the beginning that the whole revelation was intended to have universal implications. It may be better to see verse 16 as just explaining and expounding on a shift from *thou* to *you* at the end of the preceding verse: “And except thou [singular] do this, where I am you [plural] cannot come” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:15).²⁶ (This may be the best explanation, in fact, since the earliest extant manuscript of the revelation shows that there was some confusion about the pronouns in verse 15.)²⁷ There is thus reason to think, exegetically, that the “voice unto all” is not the one heard throughout the revelation, but the one heard specifically in verse 15: “Keep my commandments continually, and a crown of righteousness thou shalt receive. And except thou do this, where I am you cannot come.”

Even if the original revelation had no strong gestures toward generalization, however, we have already seen that editorial work on the revelation between 1830 and 1835 produced several such gestures. As we have seen, what was originally simply “Emma, my daughter in Zion, a revelation I give unto you concerning my will” became eventually the whole of what is now verses 1 and 2. Those two verses in

their final form include several generalizing traits. Such, for instance, is the expansion of “Emma, my daughter”: “Emma Smith, my daughter; for verily I say unto you, all those who receive my gospel are sons and daughters in my kingdom” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:1). This revision marks a clear shift from the particular (“Emma, my daughter”) to the general or the universal (“all those who receive my gospel are sons and daughters in my kingdom”). It is most significant that what had originally been exclusively gendered female (“my daughter”) becomes either degendered or both-gendered (“sons and daughters in my kingdom”).²⁸

Another generalizing gesture deserves mentioning or at least revisiting briefly. The alteration to verse 9 (“support thee *from* the church” to “support thee *in* the church”) also has a generalizing function. Only certain readers of this revelation can identify with Emma Smith’s particular concerns about her and her husband’s doomedness-to-poverty, but many or even all readers can identify with concerns about inadequacies in fulfilling divinely appointed responsibilities. With this particular editorial change, the revelation suggests that Emma had such a concern and so allows her to become a mirror in which readers can see themselves. The fact is that many people faced with serious responsibilities in the Church fear those responsibilities and hope for some sort of support. There may well have been unfortunate side effects of this change as already noted, but the gesture of generalization is of real practical significance, regardless of its other effects.

Why this emphasis on generalization or universalization? There is reason to think that this emphasis is due in large part to the aims of the 1835 publication in which the relevant changes first appeared. Earlier efforts at publishing the revelations (in Church-owned newspapers and in the Book of Commandments) involved little or no editing. The revelations were largely left as originally dictated, with a level of detail (and a tone of familiarity) that can make them feel irrelevant to a general readership. This was especially true in the 1833 never-quite-finished Book of Commandments in which Emma Smith’s

revelation first appeared in print. The revelations were there ordered chronologically, as if they could, without any historical narrative to frame them, chronicle on their own the Lord's interventions in the earliest history of the Church.²⁹ But when plans formed to produce the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835, the purpose behind publishing the revelations changed drastically. The Doctrine and Covenants was to be less a chronicle of the Lord's communications to the Saints and more what might be called a handbook for the Church. The revelations were dechronologized and arranged instead according to their relevance to the practical interests of the institution.³⁰ The editing to which many of the revelations were subjected was clearly aimed at fitting them into this institutional context. Revisions were often apparently aimed at introducing general applicability into revelations that were arguably too particular to be of general interest.

What is now section 25 was among those edited for inclusion in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Thus, that project's investment in making all revelations of general benefit and not just of historical interest seems to have motivated many of the changes to Emma's revelation. This, however, raises important questions. How are we to think about altering the historically accurate wording of a revelation in order to give it more universal appeal or applicability? And specifically in terms of the revelation to Emma, how are we to think about such an alteration when it degenders (or at least begins to degender) the only revelation addressed specifically to a woman in the whole Doctrine and Covenants? Do these changes amount to (the beginnings of) erasing women from the canonized revelations? And should we worry that the changes accompanied the institutionalization of the Church and the centralization of an exclusively male priesthood? Does that mean that the "general" being appealed to is more male than genderless?

Such questions perhaps focus especially on the alteration that introduces talk of sons into a revelation originally given to a daughter. Is it a productive or a positive thing to have men encroach on a revelation originally given to a woman? Is it a productive or a positive

thing even to have other women encroach on a revelation given originally to just one particular woman, Emma Smith? These are difficult questions. However, although there are ways in which these changes might or even should make us nervous, there is reason to explore a possible *positive* response to such difficult questions. What if we were to explore the possibility that the introduction of sons into a revelation given originally to a singular daughter gestures in the direction of *her inclusion* in a much broader community? Might it be that the changes, rather than erasing women or this woman from the revelation, help in some ways to emphasize women's or this woman's inclusion in the Restoration? This is worth exploring, but it requires looking at two other aspects of the revelation in some detail.

Serving as Scribe, Expounding Scripture

Section 25 details three responsibilities given to Emma Smith that promised to bring her out of the margins of the early Church. It is possible to give this series of appointments a very strong reading.³¹ We might argue (as we have already suggested several times) that Emma was originally given to take the place of Oliver Cowdery in the budding Restoration movement. To make this case and so to outline the possibility of the revelation's pointing in the direction of Emma's involvement—both originally and after revisions—it is necessary to provide a little background about the role Cowdery played in the early part of the Restoration.

Most Latter-day Saints are familiar with Cowdery's basic story. He stumbled onto the Restoration when he boarded with Emma Smith's in-laws in New York during the winter of 1828–29. The following April, he made his way to Pennsylvania to meet the Prophet and immediately assumed the task of writing down the dictated text of the Book of Mormon. From that point, Cowdery became a central figure in the Restoration. Only a month after beginning to serve as scribe, he joined the Prophet on the banks of the Susquehanna River to receive the Aaronic Priesthood at the hands of John the Baptist.

Sometime later, he was present too when Peter, James, and John appeared to give the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood. In connection with these events, Cowdery was divinely appointed to write what might be called the constitution of the Church—though what he drafted was replaced with a revealed document that is now section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants.³² Cowdery was also privileged to be among the three witnesses who themselves saw an angel bearing the gold plates.

Cowdery was thus the early recipient of a great deal of privilege. Matters became strained, however, between him and the Prophet in the months following the April 1830 organization of the Church. Cowdery fell in with Hiram Page and the famous revelations he claimed to receive through his own seer stone (see Doctrine and Covenants 28). He also wrote a high-handed letter criticizing the Prophet for his handling of the revelations that had been legitimately received.³³ The most egregious of these events (the Hiram Page episode) occurred after Emma Smith's revelation came, but even by the time the revelation was received, Cowdery's relationship to the Prophet—and to God—was in an increasingly precarious position. Several revelations from the summer of 1830 suggest that the Lord was beginning to ease Cowdery out of the central position he had held to that point—that of the "second elder" in the Church of Christ (Doctrine and Covenants 20:3)—thus freeing up the most privileged office in the Church next to seer, translator, prophet, apostle of Jesus Christ, and elder of the Church that Emma's husband was (see Doctrine and Covenants 21:1).³⁴ Finally, by the fall of 1830 Cowdery was sent away from the Church's eastern headquarters to serve a mission among "the Lamanites" in the West and was moved from the center to the margins of the Church (Doctrine and Covenants 32:2; see 30:5).³⁵

Who was to assume Cowdery's central position when the Lord moved him from the center to the margins of the movement? According to the revelation to Emma Smith, it was straightforwardly to be Emma. This is clearly the implication of verse 6 in the

original version of the revelation: “And thou [Emma] shalt go with him [Joseph] at the time of his going [to the churches in Fayette, Manchester, and Colesville], and be unto him for a scribe, that I may send Oliver whithersoever I will.” Emma was to be her husband’s new scribe. She was also to take over Cowdery’s other responsibilities, according to verses 7 and 8: “And thou shalt be ordained under his [Joseph’s] hand to expound scriptures, and to exhort the church, according as it shall be given thee by my Spirit. . . . And thy time shall be given to writing, and to learning much.” All of these responsibilities had previously been Cowdery’s.

It seems clear, then, that Emma Smith was not being granted a few token positions through the Lord’s revelation to her. She was instead being given the most central position in the early movement next to that of prophet. The revelation appointed her to assume a role that had been outlined, according to the Book of Mormon, more than three thousand years before Emma’s revelation was given. The Book of Mormon records a prophecy about a spokesman for the prophet of the Restoration, a spokesman interpreters routinely assume to have been Oliver Cowdery (or his eventual replacement, Sidney Rigdon): “And the Lord said unto me [Joseph of Egypt] also: I will raise up unto the fruit of thy loins; and I will make for him a spokesman. And I, behold, I will give unto him that he shall write the writing of the fruit of thy loins, unto the fruit of thy loins; and the spokesman of thy loins shall declare it” (2 Nephi 3:18).³⁶ It was this sort of scripturally mandated position into which Emma was being inserted in her revelation.

Unfortunately, as already mentioned, it seems that Emma did not actually assume the assigned responsibilities in 1830—at least not in any permanent fashion. This may be because she was, as she soon found out, in the beginnings of a difficult pregnancy with twins, who would eventually both die. Or it may be because Cowdery did not end up leaving to fulfill his missionary responsibilities for some time, giving him an opportunity to sort out some of the tensions between him and the Prophet. Or it may be because Sidney Rigdon arrived

as a kind of celebrity convert that December and immediately took over Cowdery's responsibilities, largely leaving Emma still at the margins of the movement. Or perhaps the roles and responsibilities given to Emma in her revelation were more than most members of the Church could handle at first in their social context, and it was easy for those in privileged positions to put off figuring out how to work for their fulfillment. Whatever the reason, however, Emma did not really become her husband's permanent scribe, nor did she become his spokesperson. And one of the apparent consequences of this fact is that in the preparation of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, verse 6 of the revelation was edited to conform to history as it had actually happened. As already noted, Emma's appointment was downplayed with the addition of the phrase "while there is no one to be a scribe for him."³⁷

From this history, it would seem that Emma Smith's revelation failed to have its intended effect. Rather than bringing her into the heart of the Church, it seems to have eventually given her a complicated position in an edited, canonical revelation—and little more. But then this sad history was, it seems, radically reversed—at least in important respects—in Nauvoo. On 17 March 1842 the Relief Society was organized, and section 25 of the Doctrine and Covenants served as its founding document. The minutes of that organizing event read as follows: "President Smith read the Revelation to Emma Smith, from the book of Doctrine and Covenants; and stated that she was ordain'd at the time, the Revelation was given, to expound the scriptures to all; and to teach the female part of community; and that not she alone, but others, may attain to the same blessings."³⁸ This is heartening, and one can find real comfort in this belated adoption of the revelation's value and force.³⁹

It is clear, at any rate, from the minutes of the earliest meetings of the Relief Society that the organization was intended to be the female counterpart to the male priesthood and that Emma was its president as her husband was the president of the male parallel. She and her counselors were to "preside just as the [First] Presidency,

preside over the church,” approaching the Prophet only “if they need his instruction.”⁴⁰ The Prophet in fact went so far as to say that “the Society should move according to the ancient Priesthood” in order “to make of this Society a kingdom of priests as in Enoch’s day.”⁴¹ And still more famously, a little over a month after the organization of the Relief Society, Joseph “spoke of delivering the keys to this Society,” announcing: “I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time.”⁴² At last Emma took a place like the one appointed to her more than a decade earlier.

Of course, the history of women in the Church after the beginnings of the Relief Society in Nauvoo is another complicated story. But if, as the Prophet told Emma Smith and her sisters in those early meetings of the Relief Society, the first serious fulfillments of Emma’s revelation constituted “the beginning of better days,”⁴³ there is reason to think that there is something about this revelation in particular that heralds real possibilities for moving women from the margins to the center of the Restoration, beginning historically with Emma herself. Her several appointments first announced in 1830 promised her a place at the heart of the movement. Her responsibility to assemble a hymnbook—the best known of her appointments in the revelation—was itself, as Rachel Cope has shown, already a remarkable gesture toward overcoming assumptions about women’s roles.⁴⁴ And we have seen that her other two appointments were ones that were held originally by Oliver Cowdery (and then later by Sidney Rigdon), but they came to be hers eventually through the Relief Society.

We might ask, though, whether overcoming assumptions is an intention native to the revelation itself. And with such a question, we might finally come to the questions raised at the outset of this investigation: Is there actually any reason to see in the self-revelation of Jesus Christ to this particular woman a real concern for a marginalized and emotionally suffering woman? Does the Christ of the New Testament’s Gospels show himself in this revelation to Emma Smith in a substantial way? To show that the answer to these questions is

positive, it is necessary to turn to one last feature of the revelation—the meaning of the warning to Emma not to murmur.

Moving Out of the Margins

We have already mentioned the unfortunate fact that a certain reading of verse 4 in section 25 has played a traditionally dominant role in the interpretation of the revelation to Emma Smith. Taking the Lord's injunction to Emma to "murmur not" as a clear indication that she *was* already murmuring, commentators have often taken this revelation as evidence that Emma expressed a wrongly inspired sense of entitlement as *the* wife of *the* prophet. Emma's biographers summarize this sad history of interpretation: "That single line urging Emma to 'murmur not' would later give rise to speculation that Emma had complained of not seeing the record. Future writers would use that phrase to condemn Emma, but nothing in the Elect Lady revelation approaches the chastisements Joseph occasionally received."⁴⁵ We might quote just one example of this interpretation: "The inference from this revelation is that Emma was a proud, fearful, murmuring woman, and later events corroborated this analysis to a large extent."⁴⁶

Such interpretations read far too much into the text of the revelation. It is especially of concern when commentators go on to suggest that the Lord's revealed response to the temptation to murmur is basically to tell Emma Smith just to be "obedient to her husband."⁴⁷ All the same, there is *one* thing that proves ironically right about such approaches to the revelation. We will consider briefly the possibility that they rightly recognize that the injunction not to murmur in verse 4 is a key for interpreting the text, even if they incorrectly gauge the meaning of the injunction.

Emma Smith's biographers note the important point in the words quoted above about the tradition of interpreting verse 4. Every conclusion drawn that "Emma had complained of not seeing the record" is ultimately a "*speculation*."⁴⁸ The revelation does not say to Emma that she *had* murmured and had therefore done wrong.

Rather, it simply tells her not to murmur. All that is implied here, strictly speaking, is that Emma faced a real—and, frankly, obvious—*temptation*. She would unquestionably have been tempted to murmur. But the crucial question is this: *What* would have tempted her to murmur? The answer is clear from the text. She was tempted to murmur *because of her marginalized status*. The full injunction reads as follows: “Murmur not because of the things which thou hast not seen” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:4). Emma has, despite her unflinching support for her husband, been left out of many things in the early history of the Church—first and foremost of seeing the plates, but this is arguably representative of many other things she had not yet been privileged to participate in. What is remarkable is that *the Christ of this revelation explicitly recognizes this fact*. It is therefore crucial to see that verses 5–12, containing Emma’s several appointments, immediately follow and appear to be in direct response to verse 4, containing the Lord’s explicit recognition of her marginalized status. This revelation thus not only grants empowering appointments and responsibilities to Emma but also serves directly and explicitly as a conscious *call for Emma to move out of the margins* as she assumes her new responsibilities.

Verse 4 may thus indeed be the key to understanding the revelation, though not in the sense traditionally assumed. It does not suggest that Emma Smith was proud or prone to complaining. It implies, rather, that she faced a real—and perhaps unavoidable—temptation just to mope on the margins, maybe even to use her marginalization as an excuse not to take up any serious responsibilities. It is a real temptation for every marginalized person to remain at the margins, if only so as to wear one’s marginalization as a badge—murmuring loudly to draw attention to one’s being left out. The revelation, however, cautioned Emma against such self-congratulatory murmuring, inviting her instead to move out of the margins and into the beating heart of the Church, appointing her to a series of remarkable responsibilities in the young movement of the Restoration. The Christ who reveals himself in this remarkable text sees her marginalization—reveals

himself as one who sees marginalization—and he works to overcome it. But as he does so, he calls on her to overcome her own self-marginalization. She must not covet her own having been left out or revel in the opportunity to complain.

Interestingly, this remarkable gesture is accompanied by a kind of *apology* in the same verse of the revelation. What Emma Smith had not seen (the gold plates, for instance) had been “withheld from [her] and from the world” specifically because it was “wisdom in [the Lord] in a time to come.”⁴⁹ Here the Lord provides an explanation of his sometimes painful decision to withhold certain things from his daughter. But that the Lord felt *an* explanation was called for is remarkable. The Lord himself apparently felt it necessary to justify not having given Emma a position of central responsibility sooner. He nonetheless explains—and herein lies a mystery—that this was “wisdom . . . in a time to come.” These words deserve the closest scrutiny, and there is reason to think they can bear delicious fruit for women who feel or simply are marginalized still in the forward motion of the Restoration. When is the time that was still “to come” when Emma’s passing marginalization, imposed but then removed, would serve the Lord’s wisest purposes? Might that time come again and again whenever a woman reads the revelation to Emma and sees in it the possibility of a divine call to participate directly and centrally in the work of building the kingdom of God? As the Lord taught Emma to embrace the summons to participate fully in the Restoration, this revelation teaches every marginalized soul—daughters and sons alike (see Doctrine and Covenants 25:1)—to embrace such a divine summons here and now.

Conclusion

It is often lamented that the Doctrine and Covenants contains only one revelation specifically addressed to a woman. And there is no doubt that we can find “great cause to mourn” in this fact (Helaman 15:2). As hard as it may be to hear it, however, there may be something

salutary in this situation as well. The marginalized status of one particular woman in the early history of the Church—representative in a real way of all women in the early history of the Church—allowed the Lord to draw the attention of every reader of the Doctrine and Covenants to the whole problem of marginalization, the marginalization of women and of every other category of persons those with privilege tend to ignore. We have in section 25 an explicit recognition on the Lord’s part of the sufferings that come with being left out of the work of the kingdom of God, and we have there too a recognition of the temptations that might accompany the same experience or status. The sad facts of historical sexism and misogyny are lamentable, to say the very least. But the God who speaks in the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants knows how to consecrate very real afflictions for gain (see 2 Nephi 2:2). Without valorizing the bad, we can see in the Lord’s way of addressing bad situations a reason to rejoice.

Jesus Christ revealed himself to Emma Smith in 1830, and he continues to reveal himself to every careful reader of the text that resulted from that experience. He revealed himself then, as he reveals himself now, to be a God of the marginalized and the overlooked. Those in power in nineteenth-century American culture might not have been attentive to the needs and hurts of so many surrounding them, but the Lord was aware, and he was doing something about it. The revelation to Emma really did mark the beginning of better days, better days for women and—if we read the revelation carefully and thoughtfully today—for everyone pushed to the margins of the Restoration in any way. We need not wait much longer for “a time to come” in which we embrace all those we tend to overlook. The revelation to Emma Hale Smith calls on us all to realize what we fail to see around us and to join with the Lord of revelation in calling absolutely everyone to be a part of the work of building the kingdom of God.

Notes

1. These reflections had their beginnings in 2011, when Nikki Hunter invited me to develop and to share my thoughts on the revelation to Emma Smith. Accordingly, I wrote a two-part blog post on the subject, published at the Latter-day Saint blog *Feminist Mormon Housewives*. The original posts can be read at <https://feministmormonhousewives.org/2012/01/emma-my-daughter-in-zion-a-preliminary-study-of-dc-25-part-1/> and <https://feministmormonhousewives.org/2012/01/emma-my-daughter-in-zion-a-preliminary-study-of-dc-25-part-2/>. I decided to return to these reflections and develop them, thanks to an invitation from Carter Charles, but also after and in connection with the 2019 project of the Latter-day Saint Theology Seminar, held at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. During that two-week seminar I had the opportunity to work with great care through the text of the revelation to Emma Smith alongside remarkable interlocutors, including Rachel Cope, Jenny Reeder, Robin Jensen, Katherine Payne, Hannah McLaughlin, and Timothy Farrant—along with Rosalynde Welch, who codirected the seminar with me and with James Faulconer, who joined us for the two weeks of discussion. This seminar culminated in a public symposium, “‘Given Thee by My Spirit’: Reading D&C 25,” held on 29 June 2019 at Union Theological Seminary. The papers from that conference are now in preparation for publication as part of the Latter-day Saint Theology Seminar’s published proceedings. I owe thanks to all these friends and colleagues, whose reflections on the text have sharpened my own reading greatly.
2. Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 33. These are the words of John Reed, the lawyer who defended Emma’s husband in the two trials mentioned and who, during the course of those trials, made a brief visit to Emma and subsequently commented on her emotional state.
3. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 89.
4. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 89.

5. Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 114.
6. The focus on the plates is present throughout the literature on the revelation. See, for instance, Stephen E. Robinson and H. Dean Garrett, *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 170; and Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow, eds., *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 20.
7. See, for instance, Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1946), 117. See the general comments on this trend in Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 33, a point to be discussed again in the last part of this essay. For a more recent handling of the passage, see Matthew J. Grow, "'Thou Art an Elect Lady': D&C 24, 25, 26, 27," in *Revelations in Context: The Stories behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 33–39.
8. See Rachel Cope, "A Sacred Space for Women: Hymnody in Emma Hale Smith's Theology," *Journal of Religious History* 42, no. 2 (June 2018): 242–64, who makes the case that Emma Smith's work on the hymnbook was a partial fulfillment of her responsibility to teach the Saints.
9. See Carol Cornwall Madsen, "The 'Elect Lady' Revelation (D&C 25): Its Historical and Doctrinal Context," in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Craig K. Manscill (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 117–33. See also the brief report on the use of the revelation at the foundation of the Relief Society in the official minutes of that founding meeting: Derr et al., *First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 32.
10. It is striking that commentaries on the Doctrine and Covenants have not provided an analysis of the structure of the revelation to Emma Smith. The divisions in the revelation tracked here are relatively obvious, however.
11. See, again, Derr et al., *First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 32.
12. See Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*,

- vol. 1 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 38–41. The same document, with focused historical notes, can also be found in Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 161–64; and in Derr et al., *First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 17–21.
13. See E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: Or, A Faithful Account of that Singular Imposition and Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time* (Painesville, OH: E. D. Howe, 1834), 101–2.
 14. See Joseph Smith, *A Book of Commandments for the Government of the Church of Christ* (Independence, MO: W. W. Phelps, 1833), 58–59. This can be seen in Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Riley M. Lorimer, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2: Published Revelations*, vol. 2 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 70–71.
 15. See Joseph Smith, *Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of the Latter Day Saints* (Kirtland, OH: F. G. Williams, 1835), 178–79. This can be seen in *JSP*, R2:488–89.
 16. In Revelation Book 1, the text was first copied as just “A Revelation I give unto you concerning my will.” The words “Emma my daughter in Zion” were added, apparently as an editorial addition or perhaps as a correction at some subsequent point. The text as it stands in *Mormonism Unveiled* is “A commandment to Emma, my daughter in Zion, A. D., 1830.—A revelation I give unto you concerning my will.” The two sources taken together suggest that the earliest text included both “Emma, my daughter in Zion” and “A revelation I give unto you concerning my will.” The combination of both lines appears in the 1833 Book of Commandments version of the revelation’s opening.
 17. “Smith” is added to “Emma” as well.

18. Clearly, the notion of Zion drew much attention from the early Saints during 1830. Its role in Latter-day Saint thought also changed in significant ways between 1830 and 1835. For some context, see Kerry Muhlestein, "One Continuous Flow: Revelations Surrounding the 'New Translation,'" in *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 40–65.
19. Fawn Brodie points to this change in a footnote; see Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 90. Even earlier, it was pointed out in Harry M. Beardsley, *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 94. See also Richard P. Howard, *The Church through the Years: The Reorganization Comes of Age, 1860–1992* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1993), 406.
20. See the comments in Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 86.
21. This last change might seem insignificant despite the different impressions the two versions of the passage give the reader. The implications for the flow and even the structure of the revelation are, however, somewhat larger than might seem at first. The revelation originally addressed Emma Smith's wholly legitimate worries about her husband's inability to provide substantially for the family. Verses 9 and 10 were in that context a reassuring aside appended to the words through which Emma received her first appointments in the Church (as laid out in the structure in the previous section of this paper). Emma was, like her husband, to forget temporal matters and take up the work of the kingdom of God, both as her husband's scribe and as a teacher in the Church. With the change of a single word, however, the revelation suggests that verses 9 and 10 were not an aside about Emma's temporal concerns but a direct comment on her relationship to her second appointment (and perhaps to her first appointment as well).
22. Throughout this paper, I use the title *Lord* instead of the more academically acceptable *God* (except where the latter seems more appropriate). I do

this because the revelation itself identifies the speaker as "the Lord" but also because the title *Lord* is less theologically fraught than *God* might be. It is traditionally—and I think rightly—understood that the Lord speaking in the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants is, generally speaking, Jesus Christ rather than God the Father. The revelation to Emma Smith thus contains the self-revelation of Christ, in my view, more than the self-revelation of God the Father. This is important in trying to understand the Christ of the Doctrine and Covenants.

23. For a good survey of the publication history of the Doctrine and Covenants, see Richard E. Turley Jr. and William W. Slaughter, *How We Got the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015).
24. A good example of both of these categories of change is the revelation now canonized as section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants. It contains two distinct revelations given a few weeks apart that were eventually stitched together as if they were a single revelation. The text also contains revisions that introduce into it references to institutions that did not exist—such as the high council—at the time of the revelations' original reception, but that were of great institutional importance by 1835. See, for extended analysis of this revelation in particular, Grant Underwood, "'The Laws of the Church of Christ' (D&C 42): A Textual and Historical Analysis," in *Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, 108–41; and Joseph M. Spencer, *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 81–157.
25. This is certainly how this line has been interpreted. See, for instance, Jill Mulvey Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenback Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 9; and Madsen, "'Elect Lady' Revelation," 120. The latter's comments are worth quoting at some length. After citing the phrase "this is my voice unto you," Madsen says, "Thus, in significant ways, [the revelation] transcends the merely personal, fitting the parameters of scripture and thereby acquiring permanence, authority, and universality. While its specifics are addressed to Emma, its principles are applicable to all." Against such interpretations, however, and for some helpful discussion of the problematic ramifications of introducing generalization into

- a revelation like this one, see Rachel Cope, “Ungendering the Text: An Historical Re-reading of D&C 25,” in *Given Thee by My Spirit: Reading D&C 25*, ed. Joseph M. Spencer and Rosalynde Welch (Proceedings of the Latter-day Saint Theology Seminar, forthcoming).
26. For some remarkable reflections on how this *thou* and this *you* are interconnected, see Rosalynde Welch, “Emma as Church, Emma as Christ: Kingdom and Salvation in Section 25,” in *Given Thee by My Spirit*.
 27. As can be seen in that manuscript, the scribe, John Whitmer, originally wrote *thou* instead of *you* in “where I am you cannot come”—then wiped it and wrote *ye* over the top of *thou*. Sidney Rigdon later crossed out *ye* and wrote *thou* above the line. After all this, what ended up in print in both the 1833 Book of Commandments and the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants was *you*. See *JSP*, RI:40–41.
 28. It seems clear that these editorial alterations were made in part with an eye to the “voice unto all” from verse 16. Slipped in between “Emma Smith, my daughter” and “all those who receive my gospel are sons and daughters in my kingdom” is a phrase that appears also in the potentially generalizing verse 16: “Verily I say unto you” (this phrase introduces “this is my voice unto all” in verse 16).
 29. This is exactly, according to the revealed preface to the Book of Commandments, what the revelations were meant to do when they were collected and published. See what is now Doctrine and Covenants 1:24–28.
 30. Revelations concerning the priesthood and the establishment of the New Jerusalem were privileged, and nonrevelatory material like the Lectures on Faith and several official statements of belief were included in the volume.
 31. For a similar reading of this portion of the revelation in many ways, see Carter Charles’s own essay, “‘Thou Shalt Be Ordained to Expound Scriptures and to Exhort the Church’: How Christ Includes and Empowers Women in Doctrine and Covenants 25,” 195–220, in this volume.
 32. For helpful background on this assignment, see Scott H. Faulring, “An Examination of the 1829 ‘Articles of the Church of Christ’ in Relation to Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants,” *BYU Studies* 43, no. 4 (2004): 57–91.

33. For a brief review of these dissensions, see Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 119–21.
34. The most important revelation raising questions about Cowdery's place in the Church at the time is Doctrine and Covenants 28, given in response to the Hiram Page incident. See also, however, Doctrine and Covenants 23:1–2; 24:10–12; and, of course, 25:6.
35. Cowdery was soon back in full favor, though there were other occasional tensions and a brief period of excommunication—favor enough, in fact, to take the lead in searching out and ordaining the members of the 1835 Quorum of Twelve Apostles, as well as to stand next to Joseph in 1836 when the next set of priesthood keys were granted in the newly dedicated Kirtland House of the Lord. Shortly thereafter, though, Cowdery reinvented his earlier struggles against Joseph's authority and found himself excommunicated by 1838; he was not rebaptized until after Joseph's death.
36. On the identification of this spokesman, see George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 7 vols., ed. Philip C. Reynolds (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955), 1:256; Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 129; and Monte S. Nyman, *I Nephi Wrote This Record: Book of Mormon Commentary* (Orem, UT: Granite, 2004), 423.
37. It is interesting to note that Oliver Cowdery was himself among those making revisions to the revelations in preparation for the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants.
38. Derr et al., *First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 32.
39. See especially, as before, Madsen, "Elect Lady' Revelation." For a rather different appreciation of Emma Smith's later reflections on the revelation, see Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants*, 88–89.
40. Derr et al., *First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 31.
41. Derr et al., *First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 43.
42. Derr et al., *First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 56, 59.
43. Derr et al., *First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 59.
44. See Cope, "Sacred Space for Women."

45. Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 33.
46. Francis M. Gibbons, *Joseph Smith: Martyr, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 90.
47. Smith, *Church History and Modern Doctrine*, 1:117. Note, significantly, that the revelation never speaks of Emma needing to exhibit obedience to her husband; it speaks only of being “a comfort” for him, serving as his scribe, being ordained by him, being supported by him from the Church, and “delight[ing]” in him.
48. Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 33; emphasis added.
49. For a heavily theological exploration of the phrase “a time to come” in this revelation, see my own “The Things of a Better,” in *Given Thee by My Spirit*.