

## CHAPTER THREE

THE LORD'S PREFACE  
(D&C 1)

ELDER JEFFREY R. HOLLAND

"The births of all things are weak and tender," said Michel de Montaigne, "and therefore we should have our eyes intent on beginnings."<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I wish to draw our attention to the beginning of the Doctrine and Covenants—section 1 specifically—revealed by the Lord as the "preface unto the book of . . . commandments" (D&C 1:6).

In looking at section 1, it is as obvious as it is important to note that this was not the first of the Prophet Joseph's revelations, nor the twentieth, nor the fiftieth. As you well know, it was received at Hiram, Ohio, on November 1, 1831, after more than sixty of the revelations now comprising sections of the Doctrine and Covenants had been received. In sequence it was received *after* what we now call section 66 and *before* section 67.

What was there in this divine instruction that set it apart, that justified its removal from the midsection of the compiled revelations and suggested its insertion as "the beginning" or "the preface" of the modern revelations? Perhaps the answers are obvious, but suffice it to say here that this is, by every standard, a remarkable introduction to a remarkable book, and we enthusiastically endorse Elder John A. Widtsoe's appraisal: "A good preface should prepare the reader for the contents of the book. It should help him understand the book. It should display in a concentrated manner the full contents of the

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book. Section 1 of the Doctrine and Covenants is one of the great prefaces in the possession of mankind.”<sup>2</sup>

It is not known just when the Prophet began writing down the major revelations he received, but his personal history indicates that early in 1829 he was regularly doing so and that on April 6, 1830, while in the process of organizing the Church, he received a revelation commanding the Church to keep a record of its activities. Because that counsel is important to what later developed in the Hiram Conference, let me quote:

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

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

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

“For by doing these things the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; yea, and the Lord God will disperse the powers of darkness from before you, and cause the heavens to shake for your good, and his name’s glory” (D&C 21:1, 4–6).

The language and direction is repeated nearly twenty months later when there was more tension in the air and less inclination to fully accept Joseph’s prophesied role. We will refer to this later.

#### **CRITICISM OF THE PROPHET**

During 1830 and 1831 the Prophet continued to receive revelations, putting the most important of them into writing. By the fall of 1831 he felt that these, together with earlier recorded revelations, were of sufficient importance to justify publication in book form. With that purpose in mind, Joseph invited the priesthood members to gather at Hiram during the first and second days of November 1831. To that body he then proposed that these sixty or more revelations be accepted as scripture and published under the title *Book of Commandments*. As a result there was some study of these collected writings made by the group. And, although our information

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is not fully adequate, the minutes indicate there was some criticism of the language of the revelations by certain members present.

As a revealed preface to the proposed compilation, section 1 was received during the course of these deliberations, and forbearance in the matter of language was encouraged there: "Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding" (D&C 1:24).

But William E. McLellin was still not satisfied and finally challenged the Prophet openly, charging that Joseph had fabricated some elements of the revelations entirely out of his own mind. In response to that challenge, section 67 was then received:

"And now I, the Lord, give you a testimony of the truth of these commandments which are lying before you.

"Your eyes have been upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and his language you have known, and his imperfections you have known; and you have sought in your hearts knowledge that you might express beyond his language; this you also know.

"Now, seek ye out of the Book of Commandments, even the least that is among them, and appoint him that is the most wise among you;

"Or, if there be any among you that shall make one like unto it, then ye are justified in saying that ye do not know that they are true;

"But if you cannot make one like unto it, ye are under condemnation if ye do not bear record that they are true.

"For ye know that there is no unrighteousness in them, and that which is righteous cometh down from above, from the Father of lights" (D&C 67:4-9).

Here I ask you to remember the commandments and cautions of section 21, given nearly twenty months earlier: light being promised those who support Joseph and the revelations, darkness promised in any denial of them.

Of course, McLellin felt he was equal to the challenge. Only a schoolteacher would have thought himself so well prepared, a sobering reminder to those of us in the Church Educational System. In seclusion, he attempted to write what he thought sounded like a revelation. But he proved to have, in the Prophet Joseph's language, "more learning than sense."<sup>3</sup> After a long night he appeared before

the conference participants on November 2 and, with tears in his eyes, begged the forgiveness of the Prophet, of his brethren, and of the Lord. He had been devastatingly unsuccessful, virtually unable to write a word. Such abject failure by one so respected had a profound effect upon the conference. Each priesthood bearer, in his turn, arose and bore testimony concerning God's dealings with the Prophet Joseph and the revelations which had been given. Following these testimonies the conference authorized the publication of the revelations of the Book of Commandments and appointed Oliver Cowdery to go to Independence, Missouri, to supervise their publication.

So the crucial testimony of section 1—regarding the prophetic role and the divinity of the revelatory process—lies not only in its contents, which we will examine, but also in the historical context in which it was received. In that sense what it *is* is as important to the Restoration as what it *says*. In a very real way, the faith of the early brethren and their commitment to these revelations hung in the balance as these sections were being compiled. They simply had to know—or had to come to know—that issues of grammar and usage and phrasing notwithstanding, these revelations were not simply manufactured from a vivid and fruitful imagination. The new church's future was on the line. Or more precisely, the salvation of individual souls was on the line. To them and to us, the Lord's command is simple and unambiguous: "Search these commandments, for they are true and faithful, and the prophecies and promises which are in them shall all be fulfilled. What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same" (D&C 1:37–38).

This may seem a minor thing to fourth- and fifth-generation Latter-day Saints, but I suspect it was no minor thing to the Prophet Joseph and no minor thing to either the faithful or the skeptical who had to muscle through it and make peace with their own conscience and with the Lord. Indeed we sense a painful poignancy in the Prophet Joseph's phrase written on that day, "It was an awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord."<sup>4</sup> Surely it was, and now William E. McLellin and the others understood it also. Perhaps here once again we see the Lord's wisdom in choosing virtually an unlet-

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tered lad to be the vessel through which He would speak. In light of the educated McLellin's failure, it seemed compellingly clear that neither the Prophet Joseph nor any other man was capable, on his own, of revealing prophecies that come true or of writing revelations that bear the familiar spirit of divinity. Elder Orson F. Whitney once noted that a vain boaster, ridiculing the proverbs of Solomon, had said, "Anybody can make a few proverbs." The reply was simply, "Try a few."

So both in terms of its internal message and the brief but dramatic confrontation out of which it came, section 1 establishes for the rest of the book and the rest of our reading the prophetic role, the divine process, the reality of revelation from the Almighty, and the virtual impossibility of pretense and posing and chicanery. Any man, who is only man, will be found out soon enough in this business.

**THE JOURNEY MOTIF**

Now about the revelation itself. Ever since Homer first sent Odysseus off to war and then tried to get him back home again, the suggestion of a journey or a quest or an odyssey is one of the great motifs in the world's literature. But even without that general review, it is perhaps even more obviously true in the world's great religious literature.

One of the great religious poems is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and those of you who know that poem—and all of us should—know that it is not only a journey but it is in a sense an autobiography of a soul.

The decline and rise of the *Divine Comedy*, intentionally biblical, points toward the Fall and Atonement, death and resurrection, and underscores the familiar doctrine of Christ's "journey." Dante, accompanied by Virgil, begins his descent into hell on the evening of Good Friday. They descend rung by rung into the deepest circles of hell, then emerge on Easter Sunday morning, ready to ascend. Up the steep mountainside, Dante drags himself. On the ledges are other repentant souls preparing themselves by discipline for a heavenly life. As Dante and Virgil are approaching the summit, they are joined by Statius, who has just completed his penitence, and the three mount together to the top, where they find paradise.

Some two and a half centuries later, John Bunyan would use

aspects of this same journey to write the most influential Christian allegory ever penned in the English language, his *Pilgrim's Progress*.

I allude to these nonprophetic, unscriptural writings so that I might focus on what I consider to be a similar but far more literal kind of experience in section 1, received by divine revelation to a living prophet of God. These opening passages are in a very real way, both in themselves and as a symbol for the rest of the Doctrine and Covenants, a *divine comedy*. That does not mean the section is comical. Comedy, after descending, ascends, leading to happiness and peace and fulfillment. Tragedy, on the other hand, after ascending, descends, leading to pain, impediment, and frequently death.

#### AN OMINOUS BEGINNING

Section 1 is, understandably, more like Deuteronomy than Dante, but the movement of God's people is there, whether in poetry or in the sands of Sinai or on the ragged edge of the Ohio reserve. Israel—and for our purposes, modern Israel—is always on the move. Note the ominous tone of the passages, quite literally the hell into which we are allowed to look and against which we must warn. The section is very grim at the outset and quickly gets grimmer.

“Hearken, O ye people of my church, saith the voice of him who dwells on high, and whose eyes are upon all men; yea, verily I say: Hearken ye people from afar; and ye that are upon the islands of the sea, listen together.

“For verily the voice of the Lord is unto all men, and there is none to escape; and there is no eye that shall not see, neither ear that shall not hear, neither heart that shall not be penetrated.

“And the rebellious shall be pierced with much sorrow; for their iniquities shall be spoken upon the housetops, and their secret acts shall be revealed.

“And the voice of warning shall be unto all people, by the mouths of my disciples, whom I have chosen in these last days.

“And they shall go forth and none shall stay them, for I the Lord have commanded them.

“Behold, this is mine authority, and the authority of my servants, and my preface unto the book of my commandments, which I have given them to publish unto you, O inhabitants of the earth.

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"Wherefore, fear and tremble, O ye people, for what I the Lord have decreed in them shall be fulfilled.

"And verily I say unto you, that they who go forth, bearing these tidings unto the inhabitants of the earth, to them is power given to seal both on earth and in heaven, the unbelieving and rebellious;

"Yea, verily, to seal them up unto the day when the wrath of God shall be poured out upon the wicked without measure—

"Unto the day when the Lord shall come to recompense unto every man according to his work, and measure to every man according to the measure which he has measured to his fellow man.

"Wherefore the voice of the Lord is unto the ends of the earth, that all that will hear may hear:

"Prepare ye, prepare ye for that which is to come, for the Lord is nigh;

"And the anger of the Lord is kindled, and his sword is bathed in heaven, and it shall fall upon the inhabitants of the earth.

"And the arm of the Lord shall be revealed; and the day cometh that they who will not hear the voice of the Lord, neither the voice of his servants, neither give heed to the words of the prophets and apostles, shall be cut off from among the people" (D&C 1:1–14).

It is obvious after these first fourteen verses that we are in *big* trouble. We have descended, as it were, to a frightful moment in time where the arm of the Lord is revealed, His anger kindled, His sword bathed in heaven with an imminent fall upon the inhabitants of the earth. It will fall *at least* (William E. McLellin, take note) upon those "who will not hear the voice of the Lord, neither the voice of his servants, neither give heed to the words of the prophets and apostles." *These* shall be "cut off from among [my] people" (D&C 1:14). Obviously the sword of heaven was hanging not only over the world but also over the little gathering at the Hiram conference. Remember the opening of section 1, "O ye people of my church."

**DESCENT INTO IDOLATRY**

But back to the hellish descent. It is here we see the ultimate transgression of our times, the sin of our dispensation, indeed the cardinal sin of every dispensation. In verses 15 and 16 we come to bedrock, to the final circle where people, including those in the Church, can descend if they are not faithful in every way to the revelations of

God. The Lord says, "They have strayed from mine ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant; they seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own God, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great, which shall fall" (D&C 1:15–16). Babylon is, of course, the figurative symbol of decadent life in the scriptures, all that is unworthy in this world. And it is Babylon to which we have descended in verse 16. Amidst great sin and sinners, we find the greatest sin of all: unfaithfulness and disobedience in its most flagrant form—idolatry.

Of the ten great commandments given on Sinai, the first, the foremost, the ever abiding one, is "Thou shalt have no other gods before me"; and, in case we did not understand, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" (Exodus 20:3, 4). With only ten laws to get on twin tablets, Jehovah consumes two-tenths, one-fifth, 20 percent of that precious space by establishing two commandments which if not understood and obeyed will render every other commandment in time or eternity useless. As important as honoring our parents and keeping the Sabbath day holy and being honest and remaining chaste and preserving life are, none will have the saving, sanctifying power they must have if we do not first understand that God is our Father, that we are His children, that there must be no other loyalty in this world great enough to turn us away from Him.

And yet that was the disloyalty of a world entering the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the world seems clearly more unfaithful today. As a people we have strayed from the ordinances and broken the covenants and are *not* seeking the Lord to establish His righteousness. We are indeed walking in our own way, after the image of our own gods, whose images are in the likeness of the world and whose substance *is* that of an idol. The flame and the finger of Sinai point accusingly at our time. You will remember this editorial from President Spencer W. Kimball:

"The Brethren constantly cry out against that which is intolerable in the sight of the Lord: against pollution of mind, body, and our surroundings; against vulgarity, stealing, lying, pride, and blasphemy; against fornication, adultery, homosexuality, and all other abuses of



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the sacred power to create; against murder and all that is like unto it; against all manner of desecration.

"That such a cry should be necessary among a people so blessed is amazing to me. And that such things should be found even among the Saints to some degree is scarcely believable, for these are a people who are in possession of many gifts of the Spirit, who have knowledge that puts the eternities into perspective, who have been shown the way to eternal life.

"Sadly, however, we find that to be shown the way is not necessarily to walk in it, and many have not been able to continue in faith. These have submitted themselves in one degree or another to the enticings of Satan and his servants and joined with those of 'the world' in lives of ever-deepening idolatry.

"I use the word *idolatry* intentionally. As I study ancient scripture, I am more and more convinced that there is significance in the fact that the commandment 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me' is the first of the Ten Commandments.

"Few men have ever knowingly and deliberately chosen to reject God and his blessings. Rather, we learn from the scriptures that because the exercise of faith has always appeared to be more difficult than relying on things more immediately at hand, carnal man has tended to transfer his trust in God to material things. Therefore, in all ages when men have fallen under the power of Satan and lost the faith, they have put in its place a hope in the 'arm of flesh' and in 'gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know' (Dan. 5:23.)—that is, in idols. This I find to be a dominant theme in the Old Testament. Whatever thing a man sets his heart and his trust in most is his god; and if his god doesn't also happen to be the true and living God of Israel, that man is laboring in idolatry. . . .

"In spite of our delight in defining ourselves as modern, and our tendency to think we possess a sophistication that no people in the past ever had—in spite of these things, we are, on the whole, an idolatrous people—a condition most repugnant to the Lord."<sup>5</sup>

Men are, as Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, idolaters at heart, and if we are not conscious of and do not guard against the tendency towards this most grievous sin, as this great preface to the Doctrine and Covenants indicates, then we will not benefit from any of the

counsel that follows in any other section or any other book. There simply will not be ordinances or revelations or teachings enough to save our souls if we have failed to abide by that first and great commandment: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). This unyielding fact seems central to the message of the Lord’s preface.

These verses (D&C 1:15–16), this rock-bottom confrontation with our sins in a world facing the flames of hell and fearing a sword bathed in heaven, are the turning point of the revelation. They are also a turning point for everyone who takes the journey. If we wish to respond, if we wish to do something about our lives and the future of the world and the meaning of this dispensation, then verse 17 surely comes as water to the tongue of the tormented. I quote: “Wherefore, I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments” (D&C 1:17).

#### **ASCENSION FROM BABYLON**

There is the moment of truth for an entire dispensation. Was Joseph what he said he was? Are these revelations what they claim to be? Is this the way of the Master? This verse marks the moment in this “story” where, if we will, we may begin to ascend out of the circles of hell, out of the bonds of Babylon. Our Father, the God of heaven and earth, knowing the calamities in which this world has so consistently entangled itself, once again spoke to a prophet and gave him commandments. There and there only—in those revelations regarding the principles and ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ—lies our safety. That is the Latter-day Saint message to a sinful and idolatrous world.

Once again it is noted that such a prophetic voice may be human and immediate and living just next door or on the neighboring farm. He may even use less-than-perfect language, but that is because “the weak things of the world shall come forth and break down the mighty and strong ones” (D&C 1:19). And so the Prophet Joseph and his successors have proceeded to do, “that every man might speak in the name of God . . . ; that faith also might increase in the earth; that

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mine everlasting covenant might be established; that the fulness of my gospel might be proclaimed by the *weak* and the *simple* unto the ends of the world, and before kings and rulers" (D&C 1:20–23; emphasis added). With that kind of accelerated step, we see the ascension up the mountain toward the "promised land," and that is indeed the object and promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Section 1 reassures us that these revelations will correct those who have been in error. They will instruct those who have honestly sought wisdom. They will chasten the sinful onto the redeeming road of repentance. And all along the way those who are humble will be made strong and receive knowledge from time to time from on high. Thus with this increasing progress, up out of the long night of apostasy and error in which this world had lived, power comes forward to lay the foundation of the Church, and to bring it out of obscurity and out of darkness.

In all of this the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance, but as the Prophet Joseph said, "When men have sinned there must be allowance made for them,"<sup>6</sup> if not necessarily for their transgression. The promises are to all: "I the Lord am willing to make these things known unto all flesh; for I am no respecter of persons, and will that all men shall know that the day speedily cometh . . . when . . . the Lord shall have power over his saints, and shall reign in their midst, and shall come down in judgment upon Idumea, or the world" (D&C 1:34–36). And then, closing the circle where we began: "Search these commandments, for they are true and faithful, and the prophecies and promises which are in them shall all be fulfilled. What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same. For behold, and lo, the Lord is God, and the Spirit beareth record, and the record is true, and the truth abideth forever and ever" (D&C 1:37–39).

Whatever else it is, the book of Doctrine and Covenants is a revelatory document, revelations abounding, a promise of prophetic utterance. These communications are delivered through the Urim and Thummim, by open vision, through the still, small voice, by audible voice, through translated scripture, by angels, through dedicatory prayers, by letters, by items of instruction, by declarations of

belief through historical items, by priesthood ordinations, by answers to scriptural questions, by prophecies, in minutes of meetings, and on, and on, and on to impress in bold relief that undergirding and inevitable and absolutely essential principle of revelation to the gospel of Jesus Christ in its fullest dispensation. And why are these revelations given? To tear down the graven images of our time, to reenthrone God as Father to His children, to reestablish those covenants linking heaven and earth which the prince of darkness beneath the earth would have us mutilate. In the language of the Doctrine and Covenants itself, the revelations are given so “that you may understand and know how to worship, and know what you worship, that you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness” (D&C 93:19), *to know how to worship and what we worship so that we might come unto Him and receive of His fulness*. To that end the dispensation and its doctrines and these compilations are dedicated. To that end the preface, the first section, is committed. Surely it is one of the great prefaces in the possession of mankind. This is my prayer: that such a successful journey through the rest of the revelations might be our happy lot, that we might individually and collectively turn ourselves and our world away from Babylon and ascend the mountain of the Most High, and that we might enjoy His presence in righteous living.

#### NOTES

1. Montaigne, “Of Managing the Will,” *Essays*, trans. Charles Cotton, ed. William Carew Hazlitt (1877).
2. John A. Widtsoe, *The Message of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 11–12.
3. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., rev. (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1957), 1:226.
4. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:226.
5. Spencer W. Kimball, “The False Gods We Worship,” *Ensign*, June 1976, 4, 6.
6. Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:24.