

Section 70

Section 70 created what is often called the Literary Firm, a corporation assigned by the Lord to receive, write, revise, print, bind, and sell the revelations according to the law of consecration. Section 70 has to be read in light of the law of consecration in section 42, which says that everyone who devoted themselves full time in Church service could be “supported out of the property which is consecrated to the Lord.”¹ So when the plan was laid for six members of the Church to form a firm dedicated to publishing the revelations, section 70 was given to apply the law of consecration specifically to their case. It solves the problem of how to pay the bills when you spend all your time, talent, and energy working for the Lord’s Church.

Church leaders had counseled for nearly two weeks early in November 1831 about publishing Joseph’s revelations. They had decided to send the manuscript revelations with Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer to Independence, Missouri, where Church printer William Phelps would publish them on a press he was to purchase in Cincinnati.

Books don’t publish themselves. Joseph was thankful for those who had helped him with the Church’s publishing projects. He noted that Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris had labored with him from the beginning to scribe and publish the Book of Mormon and that John Whitmer and Sidney Rigdon had long scribed and transcribed

¹ “Revelation, 9 February 1831 [D&C 42:1–72],” p. [1], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

revelations and Joseph’s new translation of the Bible. Joseph then explained that if the Saints valued the revelations enough to want them published, the Church should compensate those who gave their time and means to get them published.²

Section 70 appoints and ordains the revelator, the financier, scribes, a transcriber, and an editor as “stewards over the revelations and commandments which I have given unto them, and which I shall hereafter give unto them; and an account of this stewardship will I require of them in the day of judgment.”

Members of the Literary Firm had the stewardship of managing the revelations from receipt to publication to sale. The Lord commands them not to give the problems of getting the revelations published, or the profits from selling the Book of Commandments, to anyone else. Rather, they are to use the profits to provide for their families. Whatever is left after that they are to consecrate by giving it to the storehouse for the Saints in Zion and their descendants who obey the laws of God. This is what the Lord requires of every steward that he appoints.

No Latter-day Saints are exempt from this law of consecration—not Bishop Partridge, nor his agent Sidney Gilbert, nor anyone the Lord appoints to do any job, whether the work is physical or spiritual.

Joseph modeled and taught his brethren the law of consecration as section 70 sets it forth. When William Phelps began acting like the owner of the Lord’s press rather than a steward over the revelations (D&C 70:3), Joseph gently but directly sent him the following postscript. It penetrates to the heart of consecration and section 70:

Bro. William – You say “my press, my types, &c.” W[h]ere, our brethren ask, did you get them & how came they to be “yours”? No hardness, but a caution, for you know that it is We, not I, and all things are the Lord’s, and he opened the hearts of his Church to furnish these things, or we should not have been privileged with using them.³

² “[Minutes, 12 November 1831](#),” p. 18, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

³ “[Letter to Edward Partridge and Others, 30 March 1834](#),” p. 36, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

Most of the six members of the Literary Firm had already been deeply involved in the publishing work and remained so through the 1833 publication of the Book of Commandments and, along with others, the 1835 publication of the Doctrine and Covenants. Martin Harris funded the publication of the Book of Mormon and perhaps the Firm's later projects. Sidney Rigdon often scribed revelations and Joseph's new translation of the Bible, and he proofread the manuscript revelations. John Whitmer transcribed these texts as a human copy machine. Oliver Cowdery assisted in all stages of receiving, editing, and printing. He and John Whitmer carried the revelations and money to print them to Missouri where the Lord's choice for an editor, William Phelps, printed the Book of Commandments.

Joseph received the revelations. He also edited and amended them as he saw fit. One of Joseph's stewardships in the Literary Firm was to "correct those errors or mistakes which he may discover by the holy Spirit."⁴ Joseph believed in his revelations more than anyone, but he never believed that any scripture was literarily pristine.⁵ He edited his own revelations because he regarded them as his best efforts to represent the voice of the Lord condescending to speak in what Joseph called a crooked, broken, scattered, and imperfect language.

Most of the other members of the Firm were more literary than Joseph. That was a blessing that occasionally annoyed him. After William Phelps criticized one revelation, Joseph responded defensively in behalf of himself and Oliver Cowdery.

We would say, by way of excuse, that we did not think so much of the orthography [spelling], or the manner, as we did of the subject matter; as the word of God means what it says; & it is the word of God, as much as Christ was God, although he was born in a stable, & was rejected by the manner of his birth, notwithstanding he was God.

Joseph implicitly and a bit defensively blamed the revelation's spelling and punctuation errors on his limited education and explicitly on his the fatigue of his

⁴ "[Minutes, 8 November 1831](#)," p. 16, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

⁵ Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 174.

proofreader, Oliver, he having recently returned from Missouri and then New York, where he purchased a new press for the Church amidst opposition.⁶

The members of the Firm gave their best efforts to publish the revelations, impoverishing themselves in the process. Then, when William Phelps had nearly finished printing the Book of Commandments, a mob of Missourians destroyed the press and burned his home and office and as many copies of the revelations as they could. Some of the printed sheets were rescued by various Saints and a few incomplete copies of the Book of Commandments were published.

Today there are fewer than thirty known copies, and they sometimes sell for astronomical amounts. We should remember what the revelations originally cost. Joseph and the other members of the Literary Firm made themselves poor and persecuted by publishing them. They all voiced their conviction just prior to organizing the Literary Firm according to section 70. Joseph made a motion, and the other brethren approved it unanimously, that they should “prize the revelations to be worth to the Church the riches of the whole earth.”⁷

⁶ “[Letter to Edward Partridge and Others, 30 March 1834](#),” p. 31, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

⁷ “[Minute Book 2](#),” p. 18, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.