

JOSEPH SMITH—HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

HISTORY

At the organization of the Church of Christ (later The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) on April 6, 1830, a revelation directed that “there shall be a record kept among” the members of the Church (Doctrine and Covenants 21:1). This early catalyst for the Latter-day Saints’ historical enterprise resulted in the composition and publication of several histories of varying intent and scope during the Prophet Joseph Smith’s lifetime. Each of these histories (including the Prophet’s unpublished 1832 personal history and the published 1842 “Church History” editorial) preserve important reports of Joseph’s adolescence, the inaugural events of the Restoration, and the early years of the Church. But it is the history begun in the spring of 1838 and resumed in the summer of 1839 that has arguably had the most significant impact on the historical consciousness of the Latter-day Saints. This history, often referred to simply as the 1838 history and presented to the world as the “History of Joseph Smith,” stands out among the Prophet’s other projects to chronicle his life if for no other reason than it is the only such project to enjoy canonical status within the Church.

The 1838 history was begun in late April of that same year after Joseph Smith and the main body of the Saints had relocated from Kirtland, Ohio, to Far West, Missouri. As recorded in an April 27, 1838, journal entry, the Prophet on that day began “writing a history of this Church from the earliest period of its existence” with the assistance of Sidney Rigdon and George W. Robinson acting as scribe. Unfortunately, there are no known extant manuscripts of this initial undertaking. The earliest surviving manuscript copies of the 1838 history are two drafts composed by scribe James Mulholland, who began work as one of Joseph’s clerks in September 1838. Because the original manuscript composed in early 1838 is not available, it is impossible to know

with absolute certainty the relationship between it and Mulholland's copies prepared in the spring and summer of 1839 after the forced relocation of the Saints from Missouri to Illinois and the Prophet's imprisonment in Liberty Jail. It seems probable, however, that Mulholland's drafts prepared in 1839 are a continuation or otherwise faithful copy (with perhaps some revision) of the history began that previous year. After Mulholland's death in November 1839, supervision of the history fell into the hands of clerks including Robert B. Thompson, William W. Phelps, and Willard Richards, who continued to compose material and make revisions to the history during the Prophet's lifetime.

The 1838 history first appeared in print in the spring of 1842. The first portion of the history appeared in the March 15, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons*, the same issue that saw, among other things, the publication of the second installment of the book of Abraham (Abraham 2:19–5:21 and Facsimile 2). The history would continue to be published serially in the *Times and Seasons* until the Saints' exodus from Illinois in 1846, and by the time of the Prophet's death on June 27, 1844, the *Times and Seasons* had reached December 1831 in the history's narrative. Upon their settlement in Utah, the Saints resumed publishing the history from 1851–1858 in serial installments in the *Deseret News*.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic in Great Britain, the Church's newspaper *The Latter Day Saints' Millennial Star* had begun republishing the "History of Joseph Smith" as early as June 1842, initially under the editorship of Apostle Parley P. Pratt. This series (a reprinting of the *Times and Seasons'* installments) would run until 1845 and then pick up again between 1852–1863 by reprinting the *Deseret News'* run of the series. This web of publications and republications would eventually be stabilized in B. H. Roberts's six-volume *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (published between 1902–1912), which for practically the entirety of the twentieth century would serve as the principal edition of this material.

When Apostle Franklin D. Richards prepared his 1851 first edition of the Pearl of Great Price, he included, with some revision, the early installments of the series as "Extracts from the History of Joseph Smith." Unlike some of the other material in succeeding editions, the "Extracts from the History of Joseph Smith" (now Joseph Smith—History) has remained a mainstay of this book of scripture, having been retained in each of the major editions and undergoing comparatively minimal revision.

As Latter-day Saint historical consciousness has expanded with the work of the Joseph Smith Papers Project and other scholarly enterprises, appreciation for the 1838 history has not waned. Beginning in the 1960s, for instance, Latter-day Saints have benefitted from the rediscovery and publication of the Prophet's other histories, which relay different accounts of many of the same foundational events detailed in the canonical version. Instead of seeing these

different records as somehow undermining the canonical account, most lay members of the Church, to say nothing of historians, have welcomed these discoveries as contributing to a richer, fuller understanding of the Prophet's story. Still, until such a time when, if ever, any of these other histories are accepted into the canon, Joseph Smith's 1838 history will remain the preeminent retelling of his early life and prophetic calling.

STRUCTURE

As would be expected, Joseph Smith—History is told in the Prophet's autobiographical voice. It is entirely a prose narrative that is recounted, with the exception of one small portion (Joseph Smith—History 1:64–65), from the Prophet's own perspective. Although it seeks to “put all inquirers after truth in possession of the facts” (1:1), the history is far from a neutral, dispassionate chronicling of the events it describes. The composition of the history began between the bitter apostasies of Kirtland in 1837 and the mounting tensions in Missouri that would explode in late 1838 as the Missouri Mormon War. It was in this hostile, polemical environment that the Prophet opens his history by decrying the “reports which have been put in circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons” who wished “to militate against its character as a Church and its progress in the world.” Indeed, feeling “induced” to go on the record, the Prophet's stated intention with the history was to “disabuse the public mind” that was being excited against the Latter-day Saints with scurrilous claims coming from a less-than-sympathetic national press. This undoubtedly accounts for the defiant tone that runs throughout the history, the negative portrayal of those who opposed Joseph (whose actions are routinely described as “persecution” and “mobbing”), and the sense of persecution young Joseph felt in response to his visionary experiences that frames the opening and closing verses of the canonical text (1:21–26, 61, 74–75).

The canonical 1838 history draws partially from extant records, which it embeds into the narrative. This is seen most clearly with the retelling of Martin Harris's February 1828 visit with Charles Anthon and other scholars, which quotes verbatim an otherwise unattested account from Harris (see 1:64–65). The manuscript version of the history and the early publications of the same also embedded revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants as they were received at key points in the unfolding early events of the Restoration, but these were removed by Franklin D. Richards in the 1851 Pearl of Great Price and so are absent from the canonical text. Biblical quotations dot the text, sometimes explicitly quoted and other times silently alluded to or paraphrased. Beginning in the 1851 Pearl of Great Price, Oliver Cowdery's 1834 lengthy description of the translation of the Book of Mormon and the priest-hood restoration has footnoted the Prophet's narrative.

The influence of Joseph's memory in attempting to reconstruct the events of his early life is on display throughout the history, and especially in the

portions of the narrative that cover his early life and adolescence. This can be detected in how the Prophet sometimes uses qualifiers or approximations (for example, “I was in my tenth year, or thereabouts . . .,” “sometime in the second year after our removal to Manchester . . .,” “a little over fourteen years of age . . .,” “sometime in this month of February . . .,” “in due time [it would] be conferred on us . . .”) when giving some dates and details, while at other times providing details that are firm and concrete (see Joseph Smith—History 1:27, 59, 68, 72). This should come as no surprise since some of the events the Prophet recounts occurred when he was a young boy and a teenager nearly two decades earlier. It should also come as no surprise that the events of 1837–1838 may well have influenced his memory and how he retold his story, including, as mentioned above, the extreme sense of persecution Joseph remembers feeling as a young man that is not as pronounced in other histories. Rather than being signs of intentional misrepresentation or deceit, however, these features give the history a marked sense of authenticity and sincerity.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR LATTER-DAY SAINTS

After its canonization with the rest of the Pearl of Great Price on October 10, 1880, the impact (and importance) of the 1838 history on the Latter-day Saints’ historical identity grew significantly. Now the Saints had an accessible account of the founding events of their religion that carried with it canonical weight and authority. Sensing its importance, generations of Saints after the history’s canonization have endeavored to reproduce, retell, and disseminate its content and message as widely as possible. From the late nineteenth century and into the twenty-first, a veritable avalanche of missionary tracts and pamphlets; articles; books; Sunday School, priesthood quorum, and Relief Society curricula; videos; music; and other media reproduced, retold, and repurposed the canonical text of the 1838 history as the defining institutional and cultural narrative of Joseph Smith’s earliest visionary experiences.

Besides serving as the Church’s flagship story of its earliest years, Joseph Smith’s 1838 history has also served as a deep theological wellspring from which Latter-day Saints draw out significant doctrinal truths. For example, from the Prophet’s account of his First Vision (1:14–20) members of the Church have extrapolated important points that touch on the nature of the Godhead (that God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, are two separate, embodied personages) and the reality of modern revelation. Far from treating it as nothing but a dry historical report, the Saints have largely treated the canonical version of Joseph’s 1838 history as a sacred repository that can be used to formulate lasting theological paradigms.

But perhaps the most pronounced effect the 1838 history has had on the lives and faith of individual Latter-day Saints can be seen in how so many

have deeply internalized the Prophet's story as their own. As they are encouraged to do as children and young adults, or even as adults, Latter-day Saints universally personalize Joseph's story of seeking and finding God in a time of confusion and unrest through faith, humility, and prayer. The boy Prophet's account of approaching God as he sought answers to the deepest concerns of his soul has inspired generations of faithful Saints to follow his example. In this way among others, the 1838 history serves both as a sacred history that retells the past experiences of those who encountered the divine and as a living history that continues to carry profound spiritual relevance for modern readers.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviated designations for Joseph Smith—History manuscripts and other primary sources used in this study edition correlate to content on the Joseph Smith Papers Project website. The spelling and punctuation of these sources for Joseph Smith—History have been standardized unless otherwise indicated.

JS1832 = Joseph Smith, History, circa Summer 1832.

JS1835 = Joseph Smith, Journal, 1835–1836.

JS1838 = Joseph Smith, History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2] = History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834].

JS1842 = Joseph Smith, “Church History,” 1 March 1842.

OP1842 = Orson Pratt, *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*, 1840.

OH1842 = Orson Hyde, *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste* (A Cry out of the Wilderness), 1842, extract, English translation.

LR1843 = Levi Richards, Journal, 11 June 1843, extract.

DNW1843 = David Nye White, Interview, 21 August 1843, extract.

AN1844 = Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844.

OC1834 = Oliver Cowdery, eight letters to the *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, 1834–1835 = Joseph Smith, History, 1834–1836, pp. 46–103.

LMS1844 = Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845.

T&S = *Times and Seasons*, “History of Joseph Smith,” 15 March–1 August 1842.

MS = *Millennial Star*, “History of Joseph Smith,” 2 June 1842–9 January 1843.