

Hard Questions in Church History

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The Book of Commandments

Questions to Consider

- If Joseph was inspired to receive God’s Word as Commandments, why were changes made?
- What was Oliver Cowdery’s Rod of Aaron and why was it changed?
- Why did the name Change from Book of Commandments to Doctrine and Covenants?
- Why do awful things happen when you are doing God’s work?

Timeline Leading up to the 1833 Publication

1828	Joseph records his first revelation from the Lord (D&C 3)
1829	Joseph receives twelve revelations during the time of the translation of the Book of Mormon (D&C 6-18, with the exception of section 10, which is out of chronological order, as it was given in 1828)
1830	Joseph receives nine revelations that are canonized later this year
Sept 26	Church Conference appoint Joseph to receive and write Revelations
1831	Joseph receives seventeen revelations during this year
Feb 1	Joseph and Emma move to Kirtland OH
Mar 8	John Whitmer accepts call as Church Historian (D&C 47:1-3)
April 30	Emma delivers premature twins—Louisa and Thaddeus—they die three hours later
May 1	Julia and Joseph Murdock are born, mother dies; nine-day old twins adopted by Joseph and Emma
July 20	W.W. Phelps called as church printer, one month after baptism
Sept	Joseph, Emma, and four-month-old twins move to John and Elsa Johnson’s Farm in Hiram, OH
Oct 11	Conference in Hiram, Ohio
Oct 25-26	Conference in Orange
Nov 1-12	Hiram, Ohio Conference discusses publication of The Book of Commandments—receive six new revelations (D&C 1, 67, 68, 69, 70, 133)
Nov 12	D&C 70:1-3 Joseph, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, John Whitmer, Sidney Rigdon, and William W. Phelps called as “stewards over the revelations & commandments”.
Nov	Oliver and John Whitmer leave for Missouri with the Book of Commandments draft (D&C 69:2) W.W. Phelps purchases a press and type in Cincinnati, Ohio, as his family moved to Missouri
1832	Joseph receives ten more revelations this year
Jan 28	Oliver and John Whitmer arrive in Missouri and write to Joseph reporting they hope to start printing soon; they also hope that Martin Harris will provide the needed paper
Mar 20	Revelation calls Newel K. Whitney to purchase needed paper “by credit if necessary;” John Whitmer notes that there are 402 disciples living in Jackson County
Apr 1	Printing paper ordered from Wheeling, West Virginia is transported by Joseph and companions
Late Apr	Joseph and companions arrive in Independence, Missouri with printing paper. Literary Firm meet and decide to reduce print run to 3,000 copies (probably due to paper shortage)
May	Printing shop and materials formally dedicated for publishing the Book of Commandments
Nov 6	JS returns to Kirtland from trip to Albany, NY; Emma delivers son, Joseph Smith III
Dec	538 members of the Church living in Zion, Jackson County, Missouri
1833	Joseph receives seven revelations for including in the Book of Commandments
May	Organization of the Literary and Mercantile Establishments of the Church
July 20	Mob storm the church publishing house, destroy press, throw paper and type into the street, destroy all but about 100 sets of the pages thus far printed, burn the home of W.W. Phelps

September 1831 to September 1832: John and Elsa Johnson's Farm Hiram, Ohio

During the Summer of 1831, the Prophet became so inundated with assisting the saints in Kirtland, Ohio that it was hard to make time for the Bible translation. To help move the translation forward, the Johnsons invited him to live on their farm 35 miles south of Hiram, Ohio. Their home became a place of revelation both for biblical translation and the receiving of sixteen additional canonized revelations. The Johnson home became known as the birthplace of the Book of Commandments. For the year that the Prophet lived there, the Johnsons' farm also became the church headquarters. Imagine the sacrifice of the family hosting not only several conferences, but also the string of visitors who wanted to see the prophet.

John and Elsa Johnson

Owned a large, lovely farm thirty-five miles south of Kirtland. In 1831, at least six of their ten children (ages 10 to 23) were living at home when they came in contact with the Restoration. Six months later, their home became church headquarters.

In February 1831, son Lyman (age nineteen) became interested in the church—the same month that Joseph and Emma arrived in Kirtland. Lyman's enthusiasm motivated the family to investigate. John and Elsa Johnson visited the Prophet in Kirtland and Joseph healed Elsa's arm. They were baptized in March 1831 and seven other children followed.

The consecration of their land helped fund Zion's Camp.

In September 1831, Elsa Johnson rearranged her main floor parlor into a private bedroom for Joseph, Emma, and their adopted four-month-old twins. (By the time the Smiths left, Julia was sixteen months and Joseph had died.) Another room upstairs was reserved for as the translation room. Sidney and Phebe were given a small log home across the street for their growing family of six young children (which later grew to ten). For photographs of this home, see the relevant sections on doctrineandcovenantcentral.org.

Preparing Commandments / Revelation for Publication

In late October and early November, the important work of Bible translation was set aside for an even more important work. The Prophet worked with Oliver to prepare to publish the Lord's modern revelations. Even though the Book of Mormon had not found a welcome audience when it went for sale the previous year, the Lord inspired the church leaders to move ahead and publish another book of modern scripture.

At a church conference on September 26, 1830, Joseph "was appointd [sic] by the voice of the Conference to receive and write Revelations & Commandments for this Church." A year later on October 30, 1831, the Lord prophesied that the gospel would "roll forth unto the ends of the earth" (D&C 65:2). By November 1831, Joseph knew it was time to publish the Lord's revelations. For the three preceding years, the Lord sent over sixty revelations through the Prophet—usually in answer to someone's private question. Yet God's inspiration has broad application. As the Lord taught them on November 3, 1831, "[When] these commandments were given . . . they were commanded to be kept from the world in the day that they were given, but now are to go forth unto all flesh and this according to the mind and the will of the Lord" (D&C 133:60).

Initially, the word "commandment" instead of "revelation" was used by the Lord and in Joseph's, Oliver Cowdery's, and John Whitmer's records. For example, D&C 1:6: "This is . . . my preface unto the book of my commandments." Initially, Joseph also referred to the revelations from God's words as "commandments." The vast majority of Sections 1-100 include the word "commandment." However, by 1831, Joseph more often referred to the collection as "The Revelations."

November 1-12, 1831—Conference in Hiram, Ohio

From November 1–12 1831, several members and twelve leaders of the church gathered in Hiram, Ohio, to attend several days of meetings focusing on the publication of the Lord’s revelations to the Prophet. Joseph and Oliver had kept a manuscript copy of a “Book of Commandments” and presented to the Church leaders.

New convert William McLellin (1806-1883) later recorded: “Hours were spent” discussing until “it was finally decided to have them printed” (William E. McLellin, “From a Letter dated Dec. 14th, 1878,” University of Utah Library). Matthew C. Godfrey explained what happened next:

According to McLellin’s recollections, he, Oliver Cowdery, and possibly Sidney Rigdon had been appointed to draft a preface for the Book of Commandments. Yet when the men presented the preface to the conference, its participants “picked it all to pieces” and “requested Joseph to enquire of the Lord about it.” After bowing in prayer with the conference, Joseph, according to McLellin, “dictated by the Spirit the preface,” doing so as he sat by “a window of the room in which the conference was sitting.” McLellin remembered that “Joseph would deliver a few sentences and Sydney [Rigdon] would write them down, then read them aloud, and if correct, then Joseph would proceed and deliver more.” According to McLellin, “by this process the preface”—now Doctrine and Covenants 1—“was given” (Quoting: Wm. H. Kelley, “Letter From Elder W. H. Kelley,” *Saints’ Herald*, vol. 29, no. 5 [Mar. 1, 1882], 67).

Joseph and Oliver brought a collection of the revelations prepared in a book known as “Revelation Book 1.”

Revelations Become Scripture

Eighteen members who attended the conference signed their witness that they would support the publication of more scripture and that the revelations that had been chosen for canonization were divinely inspired. We get a glimpse of how daunting this task was for Joseph, as during the conference he meekly admitted, “It was an awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord” (josephsmithpapers.org, History, 1838-1856, p. 162).

The questions that arose at the Conference stimulated six more revelations where the Lord answered their questions (D&C 1, 67-70, 133). One acted as the preface and another as the appendix for the collection of the Book of Commandments (or Revelation Book 1). The message was a call to prepare for the Lord’s Second Coming by fleeing Babylon and becoming a Zion people (D&C 133:1-5, 7, 14). The Lord’s complete gospel was restored to save the Saints from the destruction of the wicked.

Overseers

Section 70:1 called five men to oversee the publishing of the Lord’s revelations: Joseph Smith, Jr., Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, John Whitmer, Sidney Rigdon, and W.W. Phelps. The minutes of the November 8 meeting include Sidney’s concern about a few scribal errors and the unpolished nature of the text:

Resolved by this conference that Br Joseph Smith Jr correct those errors or mistakes which he m[a]y discover by the holy Spirit while receiving the revelations wing reviewing the revelations & commandments & also the fulness of the scriptures. Resolved by this conference

that br Oliver Cowdery shall all the writings which go forth to the world which go through the Printing press (JosephSmithPapers.org, “Minutes, 1–2 November 1831”).

The Lord had prepared the way for this project. Four months earlier, on July 20, 1831, God had called W.W. Phelps to establish a printing office for the church (D&C 57:11). At the conference, the elders planned that Oliver and John Whitmer would take the revelations to Missouri and then help W.W. Phelps publish them.

Numbers

The conference members discussed how many copies of the book to print. Since January 1831, Church membership was still just shy of 1,000 members. The following year, membership tripled and by the time the book came to press there were nearly 3,000 members. These were not the numbers used to determine how many books to print. The number was adjusted twice: down to 3,000, most likely due to the amount of paper required, and then to less than 100 due to the mob violence.

Dedicate / Consecrate

On Saturday, November 12, the final day of the conference, Joseph verbalized his wishes to “dedicate” Oliver and John Whitmer as carriers of the sacred writings to Missouri and to dedicate the writings themselves to the Lord’s service. It sounds similar to our pattern of setting apart missionaries. The group supported Joseph’s request and noted it in their minutes:

Voted that Joseph Smith jr. be appointed to dedicate & consecrate these brethren & the sacred writings & all they have entrusted to their care, to the Lord: done accordingly. After deliberate consideration in consequence of the book of Revelation now to be printed being the foundation of the Church & the salvation of the world & the Keyes [sic] of the mysteries of the Kingdom, & the riches of Eternity to the church Voted that they be prized by this Conference to be worth to the Church the riches of the whole Earth. Speaking temporally (josephsmithpapers.org, Minute Book 2).

The Prophet Joseph asked the elders if they were willing to add their testimony to the Book of Commandments. Five brethren arose and signed. John Whitmer, recently called church historian, then copied their signatures into the manuscript Book of Commandments.

What Makes a Revelation Worthy of Canonization?

Joseph recognized the difference between the Spirit’s impressions and the revelations that should be recorded as the Word of the Lord. He also received many more visions and revelations that are not mentioned in our canon (see Alex Baugh, “Parting the Veil: The Visions of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies*, Vol. 38:1, 1999, Article 8). At other times, prepared documents or letters became canonized scripture (D&C 20, 128; etc.). The question of what should be included was carefully weighed by the Prophet Joseph.

In some cases, the commandments or revelations included a statement where the Lord included that the message given to one or two was applicable to all. In almost all cases, the principles present in any given revelation taught general truths from which all could benefit. This universal quality of canonized revelations qualifies them in part as scripture. Of course, personal letters of the Apostle Paul to small congregations in Thessalonica, as well as to individuals such as Philemon and Titus, address their

needs and circumstances. Yet the New Testament Epistles have long been considered worthy of general canonization in the Christian tradition.

As with a number of revelations in the New Testament—answers given by Jesus to specific questions directed to Him—several of the revelations of Joseph Smith came in answer to specific questions from theirs. When those divine words came to him, Joseph had someone present record them word-for-word as McLellin described in the example above. In a few cases, after Joseph read the printed copy, he felt the need to add slight clarifications or corrections. The same Spirit that directed him in the first place continued to inspire his mind during the editing process to expressing accurately what his words were intended to mean and to forestall misunderstandings. Just as the text of a patriarchal blessing is transcribed, written, punctuated, and edited, so, too, have our scriptures had refining finishing touches applied when further revelation requires it.

Those who find fault with this process of refinement are often confused about the meaning of infallibility when that word is applied to the Lord’s servants. The adversary has promoted this confusion for nearly two millennia. This plague has blinded disciples from recognizing God’s servants and seeking more truth. The Lord acknowledged, “These commandments are of me & were given unto my Servents [sic] in their weakness after the manner of their Language” (original spelling, which became D&C 1:24). Being weak in language is a pervasive problem. No statement exists that cannot be misunderstood or twisted. When spoken by the Spirit of the Lord and also heard and understood by that same Spirit, no revelation from God will be erroneous or fallible. The Lord stands behind His words, His prophets, and His promises.

John Whitmer as Historian 1831-1838

John Whitmer was called as the first Church Historian in March of 1831 but he was reticent to accept the call initially. He was a good choice; his family had been involved in the church from the time of the translating of the Book of Mormon. His mother was the first person to whom the angel Moroni showed the plates (after the Prophet Joseph). John himself acted as scribe for a short time and Joseph’s clerk. He was one of the eight witnesses who handled the golden plates from Joseph’s hand. When the four missionaries left Kirtland in November 1830, it was John whom the Prophet Joseph called to go to Kirtland and shepherd the 200 new converts.

Nevertheless, John Whitmer did not feel like he could adequately serve as a historian. His insecurity was rooted in measuring up to Oliver Cowdery’s earlier work. Yet John humbly submitted: “I would rather not do it but observed that the will of the Lord be done, and if he desires it, I desire that he would manifest it through Joseph the Seer.” The Prophet then received a revelation and John accepted the call (D&C 47, heading).

John’s first lines recorded in the church’s history began: “The Book of John Whitmer, Kept by Commandment.” Rather than starting his history by looking back and including his experiences as scribe, witness, missionary, etc., John began his history in the present, in 1831, as the Saints were moving from upstate and western New York to the area surrounding Kirtland, Ohio.

Eight-months after John Whitmer’s call as historian, in November 1831, he was present at the church conference in Hiram, Ohio when Joseph and those present felt inspired to publish the prophet’s revealed texts. John wrote some in the early 1830s, but most was not included until after 1835. He

wrote the most in 1838, the same year that he was excommunicated. His copy of the Book of Commandments appears to have been taken from the printed text.

Gathering the Manuscripts

Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and Sidney Rigdon had carefully recorded and prepared the sacred revelations for publication; later Frederick G. Williams joined the team. The revelations selected for canonization were recorded in Oliver’s handwriting in a book entitled, “Book of Commandments and Revelations” (which is also known as Revelation Book 1, see josephsmithpapers.org).

Joseph recognized his own lack of literary skills, while many of the others did not see their own weaknesses. Those with a better education often made multiple mistakes while scribing for Joseph, but did not have the humility to recognize their limitations. Joseph described feeling caged within the “total darkness of paper pen and ink[,] and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language” (josephsmithpapers.org, “Letter to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832,” 4).

800+ miles Again: Ohio to Missouri

Shortly after the November 1831 Conference, Oliver and John Whitmer were entrusted to transport the copied revelation texts and tithes from Ohio to Jackson County, Missouri. Oliver had traveled that same treacherous route (over 800 miles) as a missionary to the Lamanites just one winter earlier. Knowing full well what lay ahead on his voyage, he willingly accepted the assignment, as did his companion, John Whitmer. The two men carried out their assignment as the Lord commanded, delivering the revelation manuscripts to church printer W.W. Phelps in Independence. Oliver and John remained to help Phelps in the publication.

Printing Process for Pocketbook Size

W.W. Phelps, Oliver Cowdery, and their team printed on 8 ½ x 11-inch pieces of paper. Each sheet of paper (having sixteen printed pages—eight on each side) was called a signature. The signatures were then to be bound and trimmed into the text block for each book, which was intended to be truly pocketbook size, only 2½ ” x 4¾”, including the binding.

Because only ten signatures had been printed by the time the mob burned the building on July 20, 1833, the Book of Commandments, as it originally existed, contained only those 160 pages (on ten signatures times the sixteen pages in each signature). Subsequent litigation ensued to seek compensation for damages, but their effort resulted in only a token judgment.

Five Main Sources + Many Partial Sources

Between the time of receiving the revelation and publication, we have several overlapping documents that broaden our historical picture of the setting and message of each revelation. The five main sources include:

1. A few individual manuscripts
2. Church newspapers
3. Oliver Cowdery’s “Revelation Book 1,”
4. The 1833 publication of the “Book of Commandments”

5. John Whitmer’s “Book of Commandments and Revelations” (BCR—appears copied for published book)

A brief overview of each source follows.

1. *Personal Copies of the Revelation Texts*

Many handwritten copies of specific revelations were put into circulation. The Joseph Smith Papers Project explains:

When possible, traveling missionaries made handwritten copies of revelations for themselves and then showed or read these texts to others while verbally conveying information about the origins or meaning of the texts. Early church leader Orson Hyde referenced the interplay between oral and written texts in his journal. Shortly after ordaining Simeon Wymouth an elder, Hyde wrote, “[I] instructed him[,] wrote the articles Laws and commands for him and gave him all the information [I] could.” Orson Pratt another early convert, described the same interplay in a reminiscent account: “We often had access to the manuscripts [of the revelations] when boarding with the Prophet; and it was our delight to read them over and over again, before they were printed . . . and a few we copied for the purpose of reference in our absence on missions; and also to read them to the saints for their edification.” (www.josephsmithpapers.org/intro/introduction-to-revelations-and-translations-volume-2?p=1&highlight=Book%20of%20Commandments%20and%20Revelation)

One of the individual copies contained two revelations recorded on January 12, 1832. Within days of Oliver’s arrival in Missouri, Zebedee Coltrin asked Oliver to record a copy of the Articles and Covenants and Law of Consecration (what refer to as D&C 20 and 42). Oliver wrote out them out and then signed the copy.

2. *Newspapers*

Prior to the first publication of the Book of Commandments in 1833, many of the important revelations Prophet Joseph had received were first published in the Saints’ newspaper The Evening and the Morning Star. The same name was used for the saints’ newspaper elsewhere:

- June 1832-July 1833, in Independence, Jackson Co., Missouri
- December 1833-September 1834 in Kirtland, Ohio.

Both of these are now available online as part of the JosephSmithPapers.org.

3. *Oliver Cowdery’s “Revelation Book 1”*

Those who have studied the early manuscripts surmise that the primary source for the first publication of the 1833 Book of Commandments came from Oliver’s Revelation Book 1. Yet even that text has differences from the printed version. In addition to the corrections made by Joseph and his editing team in Revelation Book 1, the printers also felt licensed to make a few more. We have an account from Joseph that sounds like he allowed it, but was not pleased with it (Grant Underwood, “Underwood: Revelation, Text, and Revision: Insight from the Book of Commandments,” *BYU Studies*, vol 48.3, article 6).

4. *John Whitmer’s: Book of Commandments and Revelations (BCR)*

John Whitmer's history included a listing of 104 revelatory texts that Joseph received up through the summer of 1831. His record refers to this collection of revelations as *The Book of Commandments and Revelations* (BCR). It has become helpful in determining the dates and copying practices of the early manuscripts.

Most of John Whitmer's recorded revelations are in chronological order, which sometimes differ from the published order. He began his section with a number (which does not correspond to our current layout in the *Doctrine and Covenants*), a title for each "commandment" (as he called them, rather than "revelation"), and date. For example: "42nd Commandment Recd Jan. 5th, 1831."

At the back of John's history (on pages 207 and 208), he began table of contents of sorts that included the revelation's year, a title or description, and page number. We can see what John felt was most important by how he chose to title the revelation. These handwritten texts differ at times from the published text. John's table of contents lists fifty-eight of the of the book's 104 revelations. He ends the table of contents in the summer of 1831—prior to its publication.

Steven Harper, who worked on the Joseph Smith Papers Project as well as John Whitmer's History (BCR) describes working with the Whitmer document:

To read the BCR is to be not quite present at the creation, but it is awfully close. It transports us back in time to a series of council meetings convened in the Hiram, Ohio, home of John and Elsa Johnson. The BCR was there. In fact, it was the reason for the meetings. Conscious of the costs and controversy of such an audacious enterprise, the council nonetheless determined to publish ten thousand copies of it. They must have recognized how their decision might appear to outsiders. A poorly educated, twenty-six-year-old farmer planned to publish revelations that unequivocally declared themselves to be the words of Jesus Christ. The revelations called the neighbors idolatrous and the Missourians enemies, commanded them all to repent, and foretold calamities upon those who continued in wickedness. Moreover, the revelations were not properly punctuated, the orthography was haphazard, and the grammar was inconsistent." (Steven Harper, *DoctrineandCovenantsCentral.com*)

John Whitmer finished his seven-year service as church historian in Missouri in 1838. His release coincided with his excommunication. John Whitmer closed his history with this sad note:

"Some temporal [sic] movements, have not proved satisfactory to all parties has also terminated in the expulsion of [many] members, among whom is W.W. Phelps and myself. Therefore I close the history of the church of Latter Day [sic] Saints, Hoping that I may be forgiven of my faults, and my sins be bloted [sic] out and in the last day be savd [sic] in the kingdom of God notwithstanding my presnt [sic] situation" ("John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847," 85).

The church requested a copy of John's History of the Church, but John never cooperated. It was not until 1974 that the RLDS Church shared a microfilm copy. Then, in 2012, the same organization (using its current name: Community of Christ) agreed to share John Whitmer's history for the Joseph Smith Papers Project. We can now see each page online.

5. 1833 Publication of the "Book of Commandments"

In the summer of 1833, after a year and a half of work to prepare and publish the Book of Commandments, W.W. Phelps and his publishing team had only one third to go. The typesetters and printers had finished chapters 1 through 65 when things came to an abrupt halt. The non-believing locals found something in the church’s newspaper inflammatory and became very upset. Reacting violently against the article, some Missourians took the law into their own hands, destroying the church’s press, setting the building on fire, and eventually chasing the Saints out of Jackson County.

Some of the printed pages were saved by brave Saints—including Vienna Jaques, fifteen-year-old Mary Elizabeth and thirteen-year-old Caroline Rollins. The young girls’ stories are well known—they gathered the printed signatures from the Book of Commandments, ran from the mob, hid in a cornfield until dark, and then spent the night with other refugees in stable near the corn field. Later a few Saints helped salvage sacred pages from the book, and then individually bound them in a variety of materials up to chapter 65. Fewer than three dozen copies of the Book of Commandments currently exist. The Joseph Smith Papers explains how it happened:

Inside the print shop, each sheet would have been placed in an uncollated stack, with one stack for each gathering, meaning that the salvagers would have had to hurriedly gather a sample from each of the stacks after the stacks were thrown from the print shop. If the process of folding and collating the sheets had already begun, however, it would have been easier to collect all five sheets. John Whitmer’s daybook documents that he sold six copies of the Book of Commandments to various individuals for twenty-five cents each.

The extant copies of the Book of Commandments are the most rare and expensive church books in our day.

Variants in Sacred Texts—Expected and Unexpected

Textual Critical New Testament Scholarship

Scholars who carefully compare and contrast the earliest copies of the revelations have found minor editorial changes at each step of the publication. This should not come as a total surprise to anyone familiar with the hand-recording of documents. Critical scholars of the Bible find approximately 400,000 textual variations among the 5,800 different Greek manuscripts of the New Testament (which number includes fragments or portions of the Greek New Testament). Scholars have meticulously studied these differences for centuries. Even without a knowledge of this complex process, we can imagine the challenge of transcribing texts by hand with only quills and ink, with neither electricity nor prescription glasses. We can empathize with professional biblical scribes and less educated, non-professionals who agreed to help out when needed, like John Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery.

Textual Analysis of Book of Mormon Changes

We also know of similar challenges in the Book of Mormon. Remember that the punctuation for the Book of Mormon was added by the Grandin’s typesetter, John Gilbert. Oliver (with Joseph’s occasional input) read and granted approval for Gilbert’s punctuation choices. As discussed previously, Royal Skousen’s comprehensive and exhaustive study of every change made to the original and printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon sheds light on the subject of textual variants in modern revelation.

Textual Analysis of Changes to Book of Commandments and Doctrine and Covenants

When commandments or revelations were given, they were oral texts with known contexts. Those contexts have sometimes been added to headings and other times with additions to the text. As the first attempt to publish the book was halted by persecution, the second attempt to publish the revelations in 1835 included more revelations as well as updated organizational structure, doctrines, and church practices. Any serious questioner can track all changes between Revelation Book I and the Doctrine and Covenants JosephSmithPapers.org.

Some of the textual changes are not in Joseph Smith’s handwriting. Joseph delegated spelling and grammar changes to four scribes—Sidney Rigdon, John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and W.W. Phelps—all members of the Literary Firm. The scribal corrections were under Joseph’s direction, and it appears he reviewed and approved their changes. The changes were made in the handwriting of Joseph assigned them “to review the Book of Commandments [that is, the “Book of Commandments & Revelations,” or Revelation Book 1] & select for printing such as shall be deemed by them proper, as dictated by the Spirit & make all necessary verbal corrections” (JosephSmithPapers.org, Minute Book 2, Apr 30, 1832).

Those who attack our history, use these minor alterations to support their hypothesis that Joseph developed his theology gradually. A systematic study from a textual position demonstrates this hypothesis is not correct. However, we have always believed that the Lord taught Joseph line upon line and revealed milk before meat. We hope the church may continue to receive more revelation, light, and truth with each new prophet and in each of our lives.

Seven Categories of Changes Made to the Revelations—by Joseph and Others

Prior to July 1833, the changes in the text of the Book of Commandments “tended to be grammatical or stylistic in nature or they sought to clarify meaning, while the later revisions often had as their objective to update and amplify the texts by incorporating recently revealed polity or doctrine” (Grant Underwood, “Underwood: Revelation, Text, and Revision: Insight from the Book of Commandments,” *BYU Studies*, vol 48.3, article 6). Melvin J. Petersen published a good overview study on Joseph’s changes made to the revelations that were published in 1833 and 1835. He organized the changes into seven categories, which I have further edited into an abbreviated version (see “Preparing Revelations for Publication,” *Ensign*, Feb 1985):

1. **Grammatical Corrections:** For example, D&C 11:29 changed “my own” to “mine own”
2. **Surnames Added:** For example, D&C 52:12 changed “my servant Lyman” to “my servant Lyman Wight”
3. **Church Organization Updated:** For example, D&C 42:31 now reads, “the bishop of my church and his counselors, two of the elders . . .” where initially when this revelation was given, there was only one bishop, and he did not have counselors—so it read, “the bishop of my church, and two of the elders.”
4. **Clarification Words Added:** When the historical setting was no longer understood, words were added as clarification. At least eight times we find words added to the scriptural text. One instance is found in the 1835 edition of what we know of as D&C 10:1. The addition emphasized that the Book of Mormon was translated with the “Urim and Thummim.”

Now, behold, I say unto you, that because you delivered up those writings which you had power given unto you to translate by the means of the Urim and Thummim into the hands of a wicked man, you have lost them.	NOW, behold I say unto you, that because you delivered up so many writings, which you had power _____ to translate, _____ into the hands of a wicked man, you have lost them.
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5. **Deletions:** An example comes in D&C 19:15: “Therefore I command you to repent.” Yet initially the rebuke was longer, “Wherefore, I command you by my name, and by my Almighty power, that you repent” (1833, 16:13).
6. **Change in Calling:** Some people did not accept callings and another person had to be called in their place. For example, D&C 81 initially called Jesse Gause to serve—which he did briefly, but by the time the revelations were being published, he had been excommunicated. In the Joseph Smith Papers, we can see his name lined out in the Revelation Book and replaced with that of Frederick G. Williams (josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-15-march-1832-dc-81/1).

Other Changes: The cultural differences required a little explanation. In D&C 8, the description of Oliver Cowdery’s special gift was changed to explain it to an audience unfamiliar with the use of a divining rod—a system used centuries ago to find water.

Book of Commandants Chapter 7:3	Doctrine and Covenants Section 8:6-8
Now this is not all, for you have another gift, which is the gift of working with the rod: behold it has told you things: behold there is no other power save God, that can cause this rod of nature, to work in your hands, for it is the work of God.	Now this is not all thy gift; for you have another gift, which is the gift of Aaron; behold, it has told you many things; Behold, there is no other power, save the power of God, that can cause this gift of Aaron to be with you. Therefore, doubt not, for it is the gift of God; and you shall hold it in your hands, and do marvelous works; and no power shall be able to take it away out of your hands, for it is the work of God.

A thorough look at each change made by Joseph Smith between the 1833 and 1835 editions shows no attempt to alter the history or intentionally change facts. In addition, changes made since Joseph’s death have primarily dealt with spelling of names.

The Prophets Joseph and Brigham Young Explained the D&C Textual Changes

Some have been troubled by learning that the Prophet Joseph Smith made changes to a few of his revelations. Concern is justified, as Joseph claimed that these were the words of the Lord. Four times in the Bible we find warnings for those who intentionally alter God’s word to change its meaning (Deut 4:2-3; 12:32; Rev 22:19, etc.). The concern about changing words of Book of Commandments dates back to the days of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. We will look at how both addressed it.

On March 20, 1834, the Prophet addressed a similar complaint when others found fault in the revelations as recorded by his scribes:

Firstly, you have given us to understand that there are glaring errors in the revelations, or rather have shown us the most glaring ones which are not calculated to suit the refinement of the age, in which we live, of the great men, etc. We should say by way of excuse that we did not think so much of the orthography or the manner as we did of the subject matter; as the word of God means what it says. ... Now the fact is, if we have made any mistakes in punctuation, or spelling, it has been done in consequence of Brother Oliver having come from

Zion in great afflictions, through much fatigue and anxiety, and being sent contrary to his expectations to New York, and obtaining press and types, and hauling them up in the midst of mobs . . .” (josephsmithpapers.org, “Letter to Edward Partridge and Others”).

After Brigham Young became president of the church, he too addressed this lingering question of changes in God’s word:

When revelations are given through an individual appointed to receive them, they are given to the understandings of the people. These revelations, after a lapse of years, become mystified to those who were not personally acquainted with the circumstances at the time they were given. . .

This revelation [D&C 58] is as plain and clear to the understandings of those who know the circumstances that called it forth, . . . But a portion of this congregation have not been personally acquainted with the early experience and travels of this Church, and with the sayings and the doings of the Prophet Joseph, and it may be that they do not fully understand what this revelation really does mean” (Journal of Discourses, 3:333-4).

These concerns can be assuaged by understanding the nature of revelation, and by methodically studying each specific textual change made by the Prophet from 1833 to 1835.

Changes to the Order of the Revelations in 1833, 1835, and 1981 Editions

One specific change that the Prophet Joseph implemented in the 1835 edition was a change in order. In 1835, following the “Preface,” or section 1, the next first few revelations were placed in an order of importance, followed by a loosely chronological list.

Table: 1

1833	1835	1981	1833	1835	1981
Book of Commandments	D&C	D&C (LDS)	Book of Commandments	D&C	D&C (LDS)
Chapters 1-36	Sections 1- 102	Sections 1-138	Chapters 37-65	Sections 1- 102	Sections 1-138
1	1	1	37	11	35
2	30	3	38	57	36
3	31	4	39	58	37
4	32	5	40	12	38
5	8	6	41	59	39
6	33	7	42	60	40
7	34	8	43	61	41
8	35	9	44*	13*	42*
9	36	10	45	14	43
10	37	11	46	62	44
11	38	12	47*	13*	42*
12	39	14	48	15	45
13	40	15	49	16	46
14	41	16	50	63	47
15	43	18	51	64	48
16	44	19	52	65	49
17-21*	45	23	53	17	50
22	46	21	54	66*	52
23	47	22	55	66*	53

24	2	20	56	67	54
25	9	24	57	68	55
26	48	25	58	69	56
27	49	26	59	18	58
28	50	27	60	19	59
29	10	29	61	70	60
30	51	28	62	71	61
31-33*	52	30	63	72	62
34	53	31	64	20	63
35	55	33	65	21	64
36	56	34			

*Each of the sections labeled * was combined with other revelations in the 1833 edition.

For a digital copy of the 1833 Book of Commandments see: <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-commandments-1833/1>. For a digital copy of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants see: <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/1/#full-transcript>

Sources:

JosephSmithPapers.org. BookofMormonCentral.org; DoctrineandCovenantsCentral.org. Grant Underwood, "Underwood: Revelation, Text, and Revision: Insight from the Book of Commandments," *BYU Studies Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 3 (article 6 in this issue). Steven C. Harper, "Historical Headnotes and the Index of Contents in the Book of Commandments and Revelations," *BYU Studies Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 3 (article 5 in this issue). William E. McLellin, "From a Letter dated Dec. 14th, 1878," in John L. Traugher Papers, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah. Wm. H. Kelley, "Letter From Elder W. H. Kelley," *Saints' Herald*, vol. 29, no. 5 (Mar. 1, 1882), 67. Richard E. Turley Jr. and William W. Slaughter, *How We Got the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2012), 1-40.