

Response to the Book of Commandments and Revelations Presentations

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The publication of the Book of Commandments and Revelations manuscript is extraordinary. It is a foundational document of the entire Restoration movement. The papers presented by *Joseph Smith Papers* editors Robert Woodford, Robin Jensen, Steven Harper, and Grant Underwood during the 2009 Mormon History Association conference afford important insights about the history, provenance, and early uses of the BCR manuscript. As current MHA president and as the former Archivist for the Community of Christ, I am pleased to respond to these papers.

The BCR manuscript has been in possession of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continuously since before the Church's move to Utah. Yet for many, this may be the first they have heard of the fortuitous discovery of the BCR and its import. The ongoing work of the Joseph Smith Papers Project may be directly credited for helping "uncover" the existence of this document and moving it out of its previously "unknown" status. Bob Woodford informs us in his presentation that President Hinckley (fig. 1) personally made the decision to include the BCR with the Papers project. From my perspective as a researcher, I may affirm that this was an inspired decision by President Hinckley. Much credit is also due to Elder Marlin K. Jensen (fig. 1) for his enlightened guidance of the Church History Department in his role as LDS Church Historian and Recorder. In the fall of 2008, Elder Jensen quietly announced the BCR on the Church's website and provided the first public knowledge of its existence, contents, and forthcoming publication. His statement was then published in the *Ensign* in July 2009 in anticipation of the September publication of the BCR in the first volume of the *Joseph Smith Papers Revelations and Translations* series.

The MHA presentations, reprinted here, launch an exciting period of ongoing discovery as scholars begin to develop a better understanding of the



FIG. 1. President Gordon B. Hinckley, who authorized publication of the BCR, and Elder Marlin K. Jensen, Church Historian and Recorder. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

nature of this manuscript and its historic role in the early Restoration movement. Scholars may rejoice that one of Mormonism's foundational scriptural manuscripts may now be accessed along with other extant sources.

Historical Uses of the BCR

Woodford observes that the BCR manuscript apparently had multiple uses during its early existence. First, it simply may have been intended as a historical record of Smith's revelations. Then, as Underwood alluded to, it became a printer's manuscript for the Book of Commandments during a series of councils held at Hiram, Ohio, in November 1831. Finally, it served as a supplementary source during the printing of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants.

Date of Origin

The insightful MHA presentations reveal much about the BCR. However, some central questions about the manuscript remain unanswered, including the date of the manuscript's creation. Woodford postulates that there are two plausible dates for when work began on the Book of Commandments and Revelations: either during the summer of 1830 or

after John Whitmer's (fig. 2) calling as Church historian on March 8, 1831. I lean toward an earlier start date. Even so, I applaud Jensen's application of the archival discipline of diplomatics in an effort to uncover the manuscript's origins; his analysis of the characteristics of a ledger versus a journal record is most insightful. Additionally, Harper's observation that the "Index of the contents of this Book" in the back of the manuscript is only partial encourages the possibility that at least the first portion of the manuscript may be of early origin.

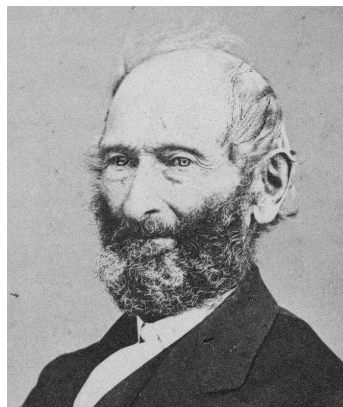


FIG. 2. John Whitmer. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Historical Location of the BCR

Woodford noted that 26 of the BCR manuscript's 208 pages were removed from the volume. This means that thirteen leaves were separated from the manuscript book at some point. We don't know just when, but we believe that John Whitmer removed at least four of these leaves and carried them away when the Whitmer and Cowdery families left Far West in 1838. Whitmer retained his manuscript history (*The Book of John Whitmer*) and some Joseph Smith New Translation-related materials. Likewise, Oliver Cowdery retained the printer's copy of the *Book of Mormon*. Some have suggested all of these materials passed from Oliver Cowdery to David Whitmer and then to the RLDS Church, now the Community of Christ. But more likely, John Whitmer retained some of these items, such as his history and BCR manuscript leaves. When he returned to Caldwell County following the expulsion of the Saints from Missouri in 1840, he brought the materials with him and lived the remainder of his life in Far West.

Shortly after John Whitmer died in 1878, Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith visited Far West, Missouri, in hopes of obtaining his manuscript "Book of John Whitmer." However, they were told by Whitmer's son, Jacob D. Whitmer, "We've got no history here, all [of] father's papers have gone to Richmond long ago."¹

At some point, some of John Whitmer's papers apparently passed into the possession of James R. B. Van Cleave (fig. 3), a Chicago newspaper reporter and Illinois politician.² In March 1881, Van Cleave conducted a significant interview with David Whitmer that subsequently appeared in the October 17, 1881, *Chicago Times*. Then Van Cleave successfully courted



FIG. 3. James R. B. Van Cleave. Courtesy Community of Christ Library-Archives.

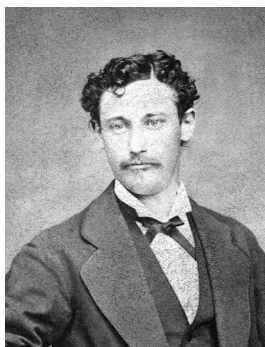


FIG. 4. George Schweich. Courtesy Community of Christ Library-Archives.

and married David Whitmer's granddaughter, Josephine Helen Schweich.³ Van Cleave planned to write a history of Mormonism from the Whitmers' perspective. In preparation, he "obtained consent of John Whitmer's daughters to remove the papers he had selected . . . and brought them to Richmond, Mo."⁴

John Whitmer's papers were deposited in a Richmond, Missouri, bank vault. But Van Cleave was ultimately unable to compile his book, and Whitmer's papers next passed to George Schweich (fig. 4)—Van Cleave's brother-in-law and David Whitmer's grandson. In 1903, when Schweich sold the printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon and "Caractors" document, four leaves of BCR materials also passed to the RLDS Church.

How many BCR manuscript pages did the RLDS Church obtain? Walter W. Smith, who was RLDS Church Historian from 1919 to 1923, initially suggested there were eleven pages. However, rather detailed descriptions from the mid-1920s by subsequent RLDS Church Historian Samuel Burgess indicate there were eight pages, meaning four leaves: pages 111–12, 117–20, and 139–40. All of these pages, except 111, contain content not published in the Book of Commandments.

Historical Responses to the BCR

Along with other primary scriptural manuscripts, the RLDS Church made much of the fact of possessing these papers, using information from the BCR leaves to relatively good effect.

During the 1920s, Church of Christ Temple Lot adherents argued that the Book of Commandments was complete when it was printed, adopting the doctrinal stance that the Book of Commandments was the most correct version of Smith's revelations. Daniel Macgregor (fig. 5), a Church of Christ Temple Lot apostle, published a pamphlet in support of this view entitled *Changing of the Revelations*.

RLDS scholars took issue with these claims. They countered Church of Christ Temple Lot assertions by drawing upon BCR content to affirm the superiority of the Doctrine and Covenants over the Book of Commandments. A printer's "take mark" drawn around the word Ephraim on page 111 of the BCR manuscript underscored the prime rationale for the RLDS Church's viewpoint. This mark corresponds with the last word in the Book of Commandments as published. The remaining text on page 111, complete with added versification, indicates that Church printers intended the Book of Commandments to contain additional chapters.

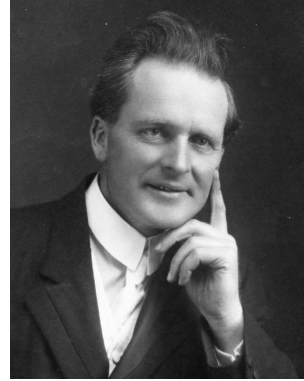


FIG. 5. Daniel Macgregor. Courtesy Community of Christ Library-Archives.

Mysteries Solved and Questions Raised

The BCR manuscript is already helping solve intriguing historical mysteries. Steven Harper's explanation of John Whitmer's numbering of the revelations in the BCR manuscript is an insightful example: Whitmer's headnote on page 34 of the manuscript reads, "27th Commandment AD 1830." This nicely conforms to Ezra Booth's allusion to the "27th commandment to Emma" in Booth's letter to Ira Eddy, October 2, 1831, published in the *Ohio Star* (October 20, 1831).

On the other hand, textual variants raise new questions for Mormon scholars. For example, the RLDS cache of documents included the manuscript revelation calling Jesse Gause into the Church presidency. In this text, the name Jesse Gause is struck through, with F. G. Williams inserted in its place (fig. 6).⁵ Access to this primary source for nearly a hundred years allowed RLDS scholars to become comfortable with the idea of

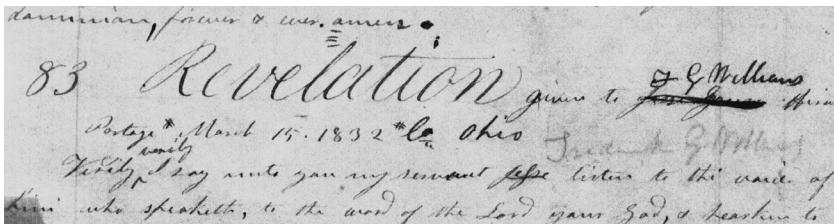


FIG. 6. A revelation calling Jesse Gause to the Church presidency. Later, Gause's name was crossed out and replaced by F. G. Williams. Courtesy Community of Christ Library-Archives.

perceived inconsistencies in our story. BCR textual readings may challenge some preconceptions of latter-day scripture, just as it led some RLDS students to consider the possibility that the calling of Jesse Gause in the BCR manuscript may not have been completely inspired. The presentations published here show some of the ways LDS scholars have dealt with the same issue. In Revelation Book 2, heretofore known generally as the Kirtland Revelation Book, the name Jesse [Gause] is also struck through and replaced by Frederick G. Williams.⁶ What are the best ways to explain these and the many other editorial changes in the texts of these early revelations?

Grant Underwood wisely begins to offer a rationale to guide students who may encounter these textual variations for the first time. And Steven Harper describes how Joseph Smith's revelation texts are mixtures of the prophetic and mundane, the voice of the Lord captured in what Joseph called a "crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language."⁷

Community of Christ President Stephen M. Veazey's (fig. 7) recent statement on Church History Principles speaks to this issue, affirming that "seeing both the faithfulness and human flaws in our history makes it more believable and realistic, not less."⁸



FIG. 7. Stephen M. Veazey. Courtesy Community of Christ Library-Archives.

A Wider Context

While RLDS scholars made good use of some of the content upon its BCR manuscript pages, without access to the larger manuscript, they were limited in their analysis. With the publication of the BCR as part of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, a broader interpretation of its contents is now possible. Access to information about scriptural textual revisions will ultimately grant scholars freedom to develop a more flexible view of Joseph Smith's revelatory technique and his humanity.

The Community of Christ Archives is allied with the LDS Archives to ensure that scholars have access to all known BCR content. We are highly pleased that the Community of Christ's eight pages of manuscript material are included in the first volume of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*. As an extension of this collaboration in the Papers project, the LDS Archives offered to help conserve the Community of Christ's eight pages of text. This valuable project is now complete, much

to the mutual benefit of the involved institutions and future generations of students and scholars.

In conclusion, I quote the Community of Christ's Affirmation Six: "Faith, experience, tradition, and scholarship each have something to contribute to our understanding of scripture. In wrestling to hear and respond to the witness of scripture, the church must value the light that each of these sources may offer."⁹

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1. "Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith" [visit to Far West, Missouri, 1878], *Millennial Star* 40 (December 16, 1878): 786.

2. "James R. B. Vancleave [*sic*], (a fine looking, intelligent young newspaper man of Chicago, who is paying his addresses to Miss Josephine Schweich grand-daughter of David Whitmer)." David Whitmer was interviewed by Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, September 7–8, 1878. This is the description given by Elders Pratt and Smith. Van Cleave was present at the interview. "Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith," *Deseret News*, November 27, 1878.

3. Whitmer Bible, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

4. Arthur Deming, "The Polygamy Revelation—Joseph Smith's Handwriting Still in Existence!" *Naked Truths about Mormonism* 1 (April 1888): 1.

5. Book of Commandments and Revelations, Church History Library, 139.

6. Kirtland Revelation Book, Church History Library, 17.

7. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, in Dean C. Jessee, comp. and ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2002), 287.

8. Stephen M. Veazey, "Perspectives on Church History," October 1, 2008, available online at <http://www.cofchrist.org/OurFaith/history.asp>.

9. "Scripture in the Community of Christ," available online at <http://www.cofchrist.org/OurFaith/scripture.asp>.