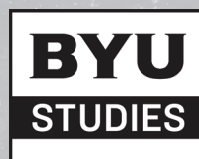


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BYU STUDIES

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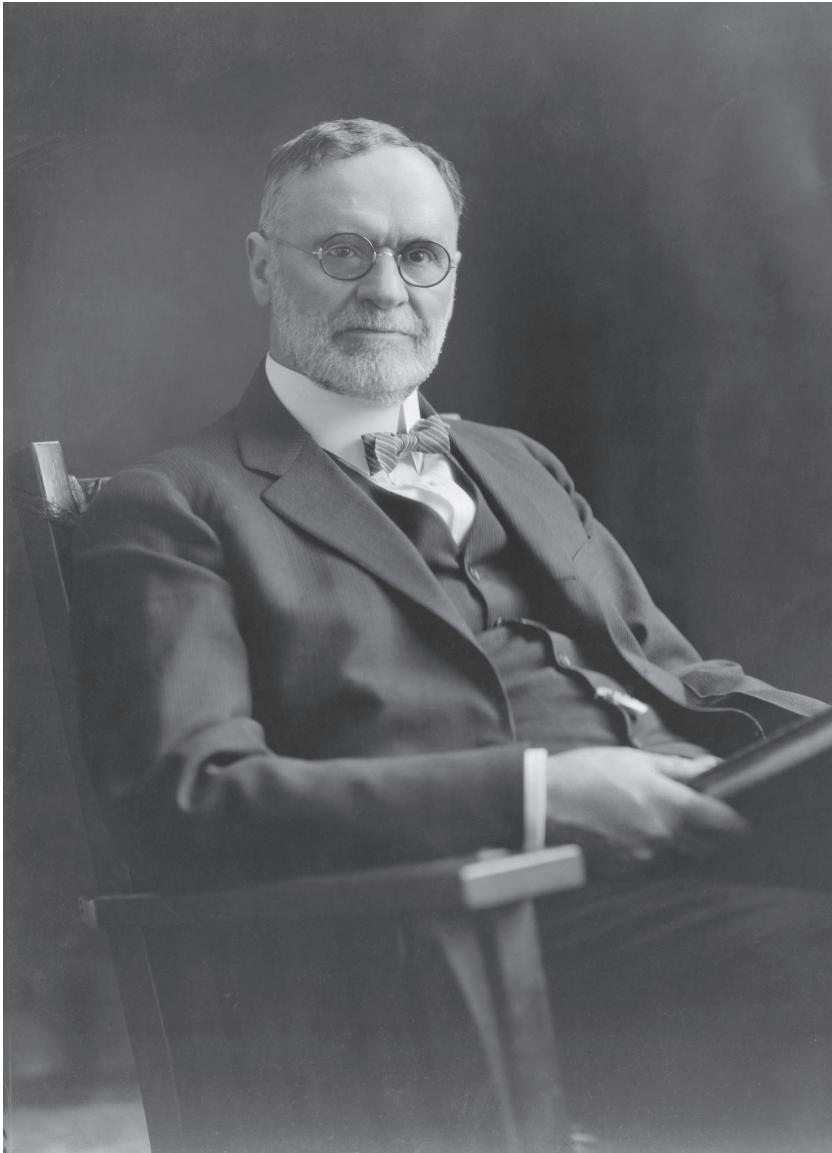


FIGURE 1. Undated photograph of Elder Orson F. Whitney, who served as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1906 until his death in 1931. Courtesy Church History Library.

“The Youth of Zion,” “A Word for the Wayward,” and “A Precious Promise”

**Elder Orson F. Whitney’s April 1929
General Conference Sermon on Righteous Parents,
Wayward Children, and Priesthood Sealings**

Reid L. Neilson

Elder Orson F. Whitney (fig. 1), a senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, gave a memorable sermon at the April 1929 general conference.¹ Elder Whitney, now seventy-three years old, was a beloved Church leader, having served as an Apostle for over two decades. He was widely regarded as one of the finest writers and speakers in the Church. Elder Whitney was “a master teacher, solidly grounded in faith and true doctrine, and he preached by the power of the Holy Ghost,” according to one of his biographers.² His sermon was published in the Church’s official conference report as follows:

THE YOUTH OF ZION

I have faith in the young people of this Church—not because I believe them without fault, nor because I think all are walking in the ways of wisdom and shunning the downward road. I have faith in them because of the character of their parents, because of the ancestry from which they have sprung, and because of the promise made by the God of Heaven, that “this Kingdom shall never be thrown down nor given to another people.”

A WORD FOR THE WAYWARD

You parents of the wilful and the wayward! Don’t give them up. Don’t cast them off. They are not utterly lost. The Shepherd will find his sheep.

1. Orson F. Whitney, in *Ninety-Ninth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1929), 109–15.

2. Dennis B. Horne, *The Life of Orson F. Whitney: Historian, Poet, Apostle* (Cedar Fort, 2014), 6.

They were his before they were yours—long before he entrusted them to your care; and you cannot begin to love them as he loves them. They have but strayed in ignorance from the Path of Right, and God is merciful to ignorance. Only the fulness of knowledge brings the fulness of accountability. Our Heavenly Father is far more merciful, infinitely more charitable, than even the best of his servants, and the Everlasting Gospel is mightier in power to save than our narrow finite minds can comprehend.

A PRECIOUS PROMISE

The Prophet Joseph Smith declared—and he never taught more comforting doctrine—that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity. Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return. They will have to pay their debt to justice; they will suffer for their sins; and may tread a thorny path; but if it leads them at last, like the penitent Prodigal, to a loving and forgiving father's heart and home, the painful experience will not have been in vain. Pray for your careless and disobedient children; hold on to them with your faith. Hope on, trust on, till you see the salvation of God.

Who are these straying sheep—these wayward sons and daughters? They are children of the Covenant, heirs to the promises, and have received, if baptized, the gift of the Holy Ghost, which makes manifest the things of God. Could all that go for naught?³

Of his participation in that April 1929 general conference, Elder Whitney noted simply in his diary: “Spoke Sunday afternoon first speaker [and at an evening meeting]. . . . Many compliments for both performances came my way.”⁴ This marked one of his final general conference sermons before his passing in May 1931.⁵

3. Whitney, in *Ninety-Ninth Annual Conference*, 110–11.

4. Orson F. Whitney, Diary, April 2–7, 1929, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Originals in the Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

5. “President Grant Makes Plea for Law Obedience,” *Deseret News*, April 8, 1929, 1–2; “Crowded Meeting Ends Session of 99th Annual L. D. S. Conference; President Grant Blesses World,” *Salt Lake Telegram*, April 8, 1929, 3; and “Ninety-Ninth L. D. S. Conference Comes to Close,” *Logan Journal*, April 8, 1929, 1.

In recent decades, Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon has become a beloved text in Latter-day Saint thought. It is perhaps his best-known doctrinal contribution today, although it seemed forgotten for nearly six decades during the middle of the twentieth century. Elder Whitney's themes of righteous parents, wayward children, and priesthood sealings have resonated with contemporary Church members, especially those who are struggling to keep their spiritually wandering posterity within the safety of the gospel sheepfold. Beginning in the late 1980s, General Authorities, religious educators, and other Latter-day Saints have referenced and repeated his "Youth of Zion," "Word for the Wayward," and "Precious Promise" statements to give hope to the covenantal parents of disobedient children. Elder Whitney's optimism and encouragement have buoyed up generations of discouraged parents striving to help gather their posterities in the hereafter.

At the same time, Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon (and—as will be shown—its apparent reliance on Joseph Smith's 1843 teachings) has been the subject of some doctrinal puzzlement and questions. In recent years, some Latter-day Saint observers have pointed out the seeming inconsistency of wayward children being pulled back to their righteous parents by priesthood sealings. Aren't individuals agents? If they choose or act unrighteously, how can "the tentacles of Divine Providence" draw them back against their own will? Can mercy rob justice for rebellious offspring? Can unrepentant children be saved *in* their sins through the righteous choices and priesthood sealings of their parents? Moreover, where is the locus of agency? Is it with the individual or with the family? Did the Prophet Joseph and Elder Whitney really teach that agency can be overruled by the Good Shepherd? Church leaders have perceived that some Latter-day Saints might be misinterpreting or putting too much emphasis on the merciful aspects of Elder Whitney's sermon and not on the justice components he also shared in general conference, as will be shown. They worried that this unbalanced usage of the Apostle's words could lead to doctrinal misunderstanding.

The answers to these questions require us to review the way Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon has been interpreted over time as well as the Joseph Smith source(s) for his teaching. The doctrinal foundation of Elder Whitney's teaching is complicated, involving both published and unpublished sources. An examination of these historical texts helps us better appreciate both Joseph Smith's teachings and Elder Whitney's understanding of those doctrines. In this article, I explore the generally accepted relationship between the Prophet's August 1843 discourse

given at the funeral of Judge Elias Higbee in Nauvoo on familial priesthood sealings, as published in the *History of the Church*, and Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon content. Moreover, I propose that the Prophet's earlier blessing to his plural wife Sarah Ann Whitney in March 1843 contributed to Elder Whitney's understanding of priesthood sealings and the role of repentance.

I will also offer a close reading of Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon, as well as his 1930 autobiography. Both heretofore unassociated Whitney documents reveal a great deal about his doctrinal views as an Apostle in the immediate years before his passing in 1931. Taken together, these sources imply that Joseph Smith and Elder Whitney consistently taught the doctrinal pairings of agency and accountability, as well as mercy and justice. Or, as Amulek taught Zeezrom in Ammonihah, "that the Lord surely should come to redeem his people, but that he should not come to redeem them *in* their sins, but to redeem them *from* their sins" (Hel. 5:10, emphasis added; see also Alma 11:37; 2 Ne. 30:2).

Moreover, I survey how Elder Whitney's published teachings on this subject echoed Church President Joseph F. Smith's relatively recent vision on the redemption of the dead, which would later be canonized by the Church's membership.⁶ In October 1918, just weeks before his passing, Joseph F. Smith revealed, "The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God."⁷ In addition, "after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions, and are washed clean, shall receive a reward according to their works, for they are heirs of salvation" (D&C 138:58–59). In historian Steven C. Harper's summary of Doctrine and Covenants 138, he wrote that both early and Latter-day Christians believe "that the dead could repent and be redeemed through exactly the same gospel of Jesus Christ that saves the repentant living. The determinant is not death but agency. Individuals are saved or damned based not on when they live or die but on what they decide to do with Christ's offer of salvation when they learn about it."⁸

6. See Mary Jane Woodger, "From Obscurity to Scripture: Joseph F. Smith's Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," in *You Shall Have My Word: Exploring the Text of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Scott C. Esplin, Richard O. Cowan, and Rachel Cope (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2012), 234–54.

7. See Joseph F. Smith, "Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," *Improvement Era*, December 1918, 170.

8. Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations* (Deseret Book, 2008), 511–12.

Elder Orson F. Whitney and Wayward Children

Orson Ferguson Whitney was born on July 1, 1855, in Salt Lake City, Utah, eleven years after a mob murdered the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum in Carthage, Illinois. As such, he never personally knew the Church's founding leader. Nevertheless, Whitney came from a privileged Latter-day Saint lineage: his grandfathers were Bishop Newel K. Whitney and Apostle Heber C. Kimball, who both served in the presiding councils of the Church under the leadership of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. A third-generation Latter-day Saint, Whitney was the son of Horace Kimball Whitney and Helen Mar Kimball, who was previously sealed as one of Smith's plural wives in Nauvoo. Sarah Ann Whitney, his paternal aunt, was another of the Prophet's plural wives. In 1906, Elder Whitney himself was called as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, a position he held for a quarter of a century.⁹

In addition to being one of the Church's leading expounders of the truth, Elder Whitney was a devoted husband, father, and grandfather. He had nine children with his first wife, Zina Beal Smoot. With his plural wife, Mary Minerva Wells, Elder Whitney had two more children.¹⁰ Although Elder Whitney's grown children and grandchildren were prospering temporally, the aging Apostle was increasingly concerned about their spiritual wellbeing. A number of his posterity—all who had been raised in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ—had ceased full activity in the Church. Several of his children had chosen to marry outside of the house of the Lord, and he believed many of his grandchildren were suffering spiritually as a result.¹¹

Notably, Elder Whitney's eldest and firstborn son, Horace (known as "Race"), was a source of deep parental pain for the Apostle. As an adult, Race wrestled with drinking, eventually becoming an alcoholic. He married and divorced twice. Race died unmarried, destitute, and without his Church membership or priesthood blessings in 1908, at the age of twenty-eight. One year later, a still-mourning Elder Whitney oversaw the posthumous rebaptism and reordination of his wayward son and was vicariously endowed for him in the Salt Lake Temple.¹²

9. Dennis D. Flake, "Orson F. Whitney," in *Latter-day Saint History Encyclopedia*, ed. Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan (Deseret Book, 2000), 1341.

10. Horne, *Life of Orson F. Whitney*, 415.

11. Horne, *Life of Orson F. Whitney*, 257–69.

12. Horne, *Life of Orson F. Whitney*, 267–68.

Twelve years after Race's tragic death, Presiding Patriarch to the Church Hyrum G. Smith reassured Elder Whitney, by then an Apostle, of his own spiritual standing in a final patriarchal blessing in 1920. "Be of good cheer, for the Lord loves thee, and is pleased with thy ministry, and thy devotion, and will continue to strengthen thee both in body and in mind." The patriarch also assured Elder Whitney that his descendants would be blessed by his continued righteous ministry as their father: "And because of thy teachings and thy firmness and thy humility, the answers to thy prayers will reach into the lives of thy children, touching their hearts, and bringing them to acknowledge their Creator."¹³

Given Elder Whitney's ongoing spiritual challenges with his growing posterity, it is not surprising that the Apostle addressed a good portion of his April 1929 general conference sermon on the wayward children of righteous, temple-covenant-keeping mothers and fathers. Elder Whitney was not, of course, speaking only to himself. Many second- and third-generation Latter-day Saints had raised their children in the Church at great sacrifice only to see them grow up and leave the faith. These departures had caused heartache and disappointment. What would become of these children in the afterlife? Were they cast off forever? The Church's teachings on eternal families made these questions even more acute. In Latter-day Saint thought, the ideal afterlife involved parents and children living together in righteousness. But waywardness disrupted the ideal by cutting family members out of the eternal family circle. The family would be incomplete. Knowing that parents needed comfort and reassurance, Elder Whitney spoke directly to the problem of family disunion.

Teachings of Early Church Leaders on Wayward Children

While Elder Whitney would specifically reference some Nauvoo teachings of Joseph Smith as the source of his doctrine in general conference, Elder Whitney contributed to a familiar doctrinal arc by the Prophet's apostolic successors. To begin with, Brigham Young, while serving as the second president of the Church, spoke in the Salt Lake Tabernacle on April 29, 1866, and taught the following to the gathered Saints: "I could say something encouraging to parents, if they would heed. Let the father and mother, who are members of this church and kingdom, take

13. Orson F. Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls: The Life Story of Orson F. Whitney As Told by Himself* (Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1930), 414.

a righteous course, and strive with all their might never to do a wrong, but to do good all their lives; if they have one child or one hundred children." The prophet continued with a conditional promise: "If they conduct themselves towards them as they should, binding them to the Lord by their faith and prayers, I care not where those children go, they are bound up to their parents by an everlasting tie, and no power of earth or hell can separate them from their parents in eternity; they will return again to the fountain from whence they sprang."¹⁴

Likewise, Lorenzo Snow, then serving as president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, taught the following in the October 1893 general conference: "God has fulfilled His promises to us, and our prospects are grand and glorious. Yes, in the next life we will have our wives, and our sons and daughters. If we do not get them all at once, we will have them some time, for every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus is the Christ." The senior Apostle sought to further comfort righteous parents with wayward offspring. "You that are mourning about your children straying away will have your sons and your daughters. If you succeed in passing through these trials and afflictions and receive a resurrection, you will, by the power of the Priesthood, work and labor, as the Son of God has, until you get all your sons and daughters in the path of exaltation and glory." Snow expressed his deep faith that wayward children could be redirected back onto the covenant path. "This is just as sure as that the sun rose this morning over yonder mountains. Therefore, mourn not because all your sons and daughters do not follow in the path that you have marked out to them, or give heed to your counsels. Inasmuch as we succeed in securing eternal glory, and stand as saviors, and as kings and priests to our God, we will save our posterity."¹⁵

Similarly, during the October 1919 general conference, Alonzo A. Hinckley, then president of the Deseret Stake (Millard County, Utah), spoke in a second overflow meeting held at the Assembly Hall on Temple

14. G[eorge]. D. Watt, "Remarks by President Brigham Young," *Deseret News*, May 10, 1866, 2. See also *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 163–64, 173, and 341; and "Hope for Parents of Wayward Children," *Ensign*, September 2002, 11. See also "Brigham Young, 29 April 1866," transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, typescript, Church History Department Pitman Shorthand Transcriptions, 2013–2024, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/effec3fd-45d5-45ef-9df4-592acff5e4cc/0/0>.

15. Arthur Winter, "Discourse Delivered by President Lorenzo Snow," *Deseret Weekly*, November 4, 1893, 610. See also "Hope for Parents of Wayward Children," 11.

Square.¹⁶ He based his sermon on the Savior's parable of the prodigal son featured in Luke. The previous week, Elder James E. Talmage, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, had visited Hinckley's stake in west central Utah and shared his feelings on the wayward children of the stalwart Saints.¹⁷ "Do not count any boy or girl lost. They are not," Hinckley disclosed to his audience. "Brother Talmage stated at our [stake] conference, a week ago today, as a servant of the Lord, and I wrote it down, and read it to him after the meeting was over and he said I had it recorded correctly."

According to Hinckley's stake conference notes, Elder Talmage made the following declaration: "I promise the Saints in the Deseret stake of Zion that if their lives are such that they can look their sons and daughters in the face, and if any of them have gone astray, that the parents are able to say, 'It is contrary to my instruction and my life's example; it is against every effort of love, long suffering, faith, prayer and devotion that that boy or that girl has gone,'—I promise you, fathers and mothers, that not one of them shall be lost unless they have sinned away the power to repent."¹⁸ As a member of the Quorum of the Twelve also in attendance, Elder Whitney would have also heard Elder Talmage's talk. It seems likely that these remarks influenced Whitney's 1929 talk a decade later.

Reconstructing Joseph Smith's History and Teachings

Elder Orson F. Whitney's April 1929 general conference sermon invoked teachings from Joseph Smith that did not appear in any canonized revelations. By the close of the nineteenth century, the Prophet had been deceased for over five decades. In 1898, the Prophet's nephew President Joseph F. Smith, then a counselor in the First Presidency, and Elder B. H. Roberts, then a member of the Council of the Seventy, encouraged aging Church members to carefully record their memories of Joseph Smith and his teachings.¹⁹ They urged the Saints to ensure "that the circumstances

16. For a description of the now defunct practice of holding overflow meetings during general conference, see Reid L. Neilson and Scott D. Marianno, eds., *A Voice in the Wilderness: The 1888–1930 General Conference Sermons of Mormon Historian Andrew Jensen* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 16–18.

17. See James E. Talmage, Journal, September 27–28, 1919, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

18. Alonzo A. Hinckley, in *Ninetieth Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1919), 161.

19. Editors [Joseph F. Smith and B. H. Roberts], "Shall We Record Testimony?," *Improvement Era*, March 1898, 372.

are well authenticated and carefully and accurately stated. We fear that many things that are reported as coming from the Prophet Joseph, and other early elders in the church, by not being carefully recorded or told with strict regard for accuracy, have lost something of their value as historical data, and unwarranted additions have sometimes been made to the original facts.”²⁰

Such concerns would encourage Church leaders to document, as best as possible, the history and teachings of Joseph Smith and the early generations of Latter-day Saints who lived in New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. This desire to record the history and teachings of Joseph Smith would lead to several major compilations of the Prophet's words beginning in the early twentieth century.²¹

B. H. Roberts, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (1902–1912)

As the nineteenth century closed, Joseph Smith's history was not available in book format for Latter-day Saints, so the First Presidency assigned President George Q. Cannon to prepare a multivolume history of the Church covering the Prophet's lifetime. However, President Cannon passed away in 1901. At this point, the senior Brethren turned the historical undertaking over to General Authority B. H. Roberts, a prolific author himself, and a committee composed of Church leaders and members who served in the Church Historian's Office.²² Over the next decade, Elder Roberts and his coworkers in the historian's office compiled and published the *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Period I, History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, by*

20. Editors, “Shall We Record Testimony?,” 372.

21. See *Joseph Smith's Teachings: A Classified Arrangement of the Doctrinal Sermons and Writings of the Great Latter-day Prophet*, comp. Edwin F. Parry, from the authorized “History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (Deseret News, 1912); and Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith: Taken from His Sermons and Writings as They Are Found in the Documentary History and Other Publications of the Church and Written or Published in the Days of the Prophet's Ministry* (Deseret News Press, 1938).

22. Ronald W. Walker, David J. Whittaker, and James B. Allen, *Mormon History* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), 8. In 1902, President Anthon H. Lund, a counselor in the First Presidency, was serving as Church Historian with Roberts, Orson F. Whitney, Andrew Jenson, and Amos Milton Musser working as his assistant Church historians. Whitney, as both an assistant Church historian and then as an Apostle beginning in 1906, was involved in the editorial selection and review process for this multivolume history and other Church publications. See Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls*, 293.

Himself (popularly known as the *Documentary History of the Church* by many Latter-day Saints).²³ This was a major accomplishment for these historians, but their impressive scholarship was not without its shortcomings.²⁴

It would be from Elder Roberts's multivolume work that Elder Whitney would apparently gain some of his understanding of Joseph Smith's teachings on righteous parents and wayward children that he featured in his 1929 sermon. Specifically, when Elder Roberts and his committee of fellow Church leaders and historians drafted the historical description of Joseph Smith's Sabbath discourse at the funeral of Judge Elias Higbee in Nauvoo on August 13, 1843, they simply published the earliest account, which first appeared in the *Deseret News* on January 28, 1857.²⁵ The preface to their entry in the *History of the Church*²⁶ reads as follows: "I went to the stand on Sunday morning, August 13, 1843, and preached on the death of Judge Higbee, a synopsis of which was reported by my clerk, Dr. Willard Richards." The relevant portion of the Prophet's 1843 discourse to our discussion of Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon continues as follows: "When a seal is put upon the father and mother, it secures their posterity, so that they cannot be lost, but will be saved by virtue of the covenant of their father and mother."²⁷ This transcript would become the standard account of the Prophet's teaching on the matter until 1980, when additional records would become available for Church members to study.

Two decades after Elder Roberts published Richards's account of Joseph Smith's August 1843 discourse in the *History of the Church*, Elder Whitney spoke in general conference on righteous parents and wayward children in 1929. He clearly references the teachings of the Church's founder but, as was common practice for the first 150 years of the Church, does not provide a source citation in his published conference

23. Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Bookcraft, 1980), 289–91. See also Gary James Bergera, ed., *The Autobiography of B. H. Roberts* (Signature Books, 1990), 221–23.

24. See Walker, Whittaker, and Allen, *Mormon History*, 8–9.

25. "History of Joseph Smith," *Deseret News*, January 28, 1857, 370, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-of-joseph-smith/513>. See also History, 1838–1856, Volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844], 1690, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/62>.

26. *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Deseret News, 1909), 5:529–31.

27. Roberts, *History of the Church*, 5:530.

report text.²⁸ In time, Latter-day Saint leaders and laity would associate the doctrinal teachings found in Joseph Smith's August 1843 discourse—as featured in Elder Roberts's *History of the Church*—with Elder Whitney's April 1929 sermon.

Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (1938)

Published historical accounts have a way of perpetuating themselves because readily available transcriptions are often repeated in subsequent publications. In 1938, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith,²⁹ then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the Church Historian, published a volume of what he considered to be the most important teachings of his great-uncle Joseph Smith, known as *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*.³⁰ It is unclear how involved Elder Smith was in the selection and editorial process, but the volume's structure and purpose bore the perspective of the Church Historian, who felt the Latter-day Saints were drifting from the foundational teachings of the founding Prophet of the Restoration.

Following Elder B. H. Roberts's earlier approach of copying Willard Richards's transcription into his multivolume history, Elder Smith directly copied and cited the *History of the Church* text. Again, the relevant passage reads exactly as it had in Elder Roberts's (and Richards's) earlier transcript: "When a seal is put upon the father and mother, it secures their posterity, so that they cannot be lost, but will be saved by virtue of the covenant of their father and mother."³¹ Given that Elder Smith's *Teachings* was published in 1938, it had no influence on the late Elder Orson F. Whitney's thinking or understanding given his passing seven years earlier. But it did have an impact on Latter-day Saints who looked to this volume as an authoritative source of the Prophet's teachings. Accordingly, Richards's transcript in the nineteenth century had become the standard text for Church members in the twentieth century.

28. See Scott L. Howell, Jesse Vincent, and Lauryn Wilde, "'How Beautiful Are the Feet': The Use of Footnotes in General Conference Reports," *Religious Educator* 24, no. 2 (2023): 14–32.

29. The following section is adapted from Reid L. Neilson and Scott D. Marianno, "Joseph Fielding Smith as Mormon Historian and Theologian," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2018): 43–45.

30. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*.

31. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 321.

Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (1980)

Amidst the Church's sesquicentennial anniversary celebrations, historians Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook published *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* in 1980.³² Previous to the release of this documentary edition, Latter-day Saints had relied on Elder B. H. Roberts's *History of the Church* or Elder Joseph Fielding Smith's *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* as the official transcripts of the Prophet's Nauvoo sermons. However, Ehat and Cook painstakingly reproduced not just one transcript but six contemporaneous accounts of Joseph Smith's funeral discourse on August 13, 1843, which many readers point to as the likely source of Elder Orson F. Whitney's 1929 sermon.³³ "The original source of these reports is the Joseph Smith Diary, by Willard Richards," Ehat and Cook clarify in footnote. "The accounts of this discourse by Howard [and Martha] Coray, Franklin D. Richards, William Clayton, Levi Richards, and Willard Richards (personal diary) are here published for the first time."³⁴ Suddenly, Latter-day Saints had additional accounts of the Prophet's teachings to compare and contrast in their studies.

With unprecedented access to several additional transcripts of Joseph Smith's 1843 funeral discourse, Ehat and Cook explored the doctrinal consistency of the Prophet's teaching. They believed that the previously unpublished Coray account helped clarify the Prophet's teachings on

32. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, Religious Studies Monograph Series 6 (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980).

33. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 238–42.

34. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 297n1. According to the editors of the *Joseph Smith Papers*: "Church members Willard Richards, William Clayton, and Franklin D. Richards, as well as Howard or Martha Jane Knowlton Coray, were likely in the audience that day [August 13, 1843], and each of them produced handwritten manuscripts that captured elements of Joseph Smith's discourse. Richards likely recorded rough notes of the discourse on loose paper or in a notebook before inscribing a more polished account in Joseph Smith's journal. The polished nature of Clayton's and Franklin D. Richards's versions suggest that they also reconstructed them from notes or memory. Martha and Howard Coray recorded several of Joseph Smith's discourses in the early 1840s, and one of them likely took nonexant notes of Joseph Smith's discourse. Martha Coray later copied them into a notebook sometime after 1853." "Discourse, 13 August 1843–A," in *Documents, Volume 13: August–December 1843*, ed. Christian K. Heimburger, Jeffrey D. Mahas, Brent M. Rogers, Mason K. Allred, J. Chase Kirkham, and Matthew S. McBride, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian's Press, 2022), 33, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-13-august-1843-a-as-reported-by-willard-richards/7#historical-intro>.

the blessings of priesthood sealings: were they unconditional, as many assumed, or were they actually conditional, based on repentance? Ehat and Cook explained, "When the Church historians [Elder Roberts and his committee] amalgamated the entries from the Joseph Smith Diary [kept by Willard Richards] and the William Clayton Diary to create the version of this discourse that was published, the passage that the blessings conferred by the ordinance of sealing parents and children was unconditional. The wording of the published version suggests that the children of parents who receive the fulness of the priesthood can never fall."³⁵ Given the Nauvoo texts available to them, all of which seemed to highlight the unconditional nature of priesthood sealings, it is not surprising that most Latter-day Saints considered the doctrinal matter settled.³⁶

Nevertheless, Ehat and Cook felt that the expanded Coray transcript shed new light on Joseph Smith's 1843 teachings. They reasoned that all of Heavenly Father's children, including rebellious sons and daughters, could only be saved *from* their sins by exercising faith and engaging in repentance through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. The relevant portion of the expanded Coray account—with conditions emphasized—reads as follows: "when a Father & mother of a family have entered into [the sealing,] their children *who have not transgressed* are secured by the seal wherewith the Parents have been sealed" (figs. 2–3).³⁷

Ehat and Cook explain their theological rationale for privileging the Coray's version of the Prophet's sermon over the other available transcriptions: "This previously unpublished, more complete account of the Prophet's idea *does* contain a conditional. Clearly this is a more reasonable and consistent doctrine: if it were not for such a conditional, the concept would contradict significant doctrines taught by Joseph Smith, not the least of which would be a contradiction of his [second] article of faith that 'men will be punished for their own sins.'"³⁸ According to the Coray transcript (and Ehat and Cook's analysis), the Prophet did

35. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 300n19. See also Elizabeth Ann Anderson, "Howard and Martha Coray: Chroniclers of Joseph Smith's Words and Life," *Journal of Mormon History* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 96–103.

36. For a thoughtful articulation of this viewpoint, see Jonathan A. Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 51–53; and Jonathan Stapley, "Providential Tentacles, Sacerdotal Perseverance, and Punishment for Sin," *By Common Consent* (blog), February 13, 2014, <https://bycommonconsent.com/2014/02/13/providential-tentacles-sacerdotal-perseverance-and-punishment-for-sin/>.

37. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 241, emphasis added.

38. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 300n19, emphasis in original.

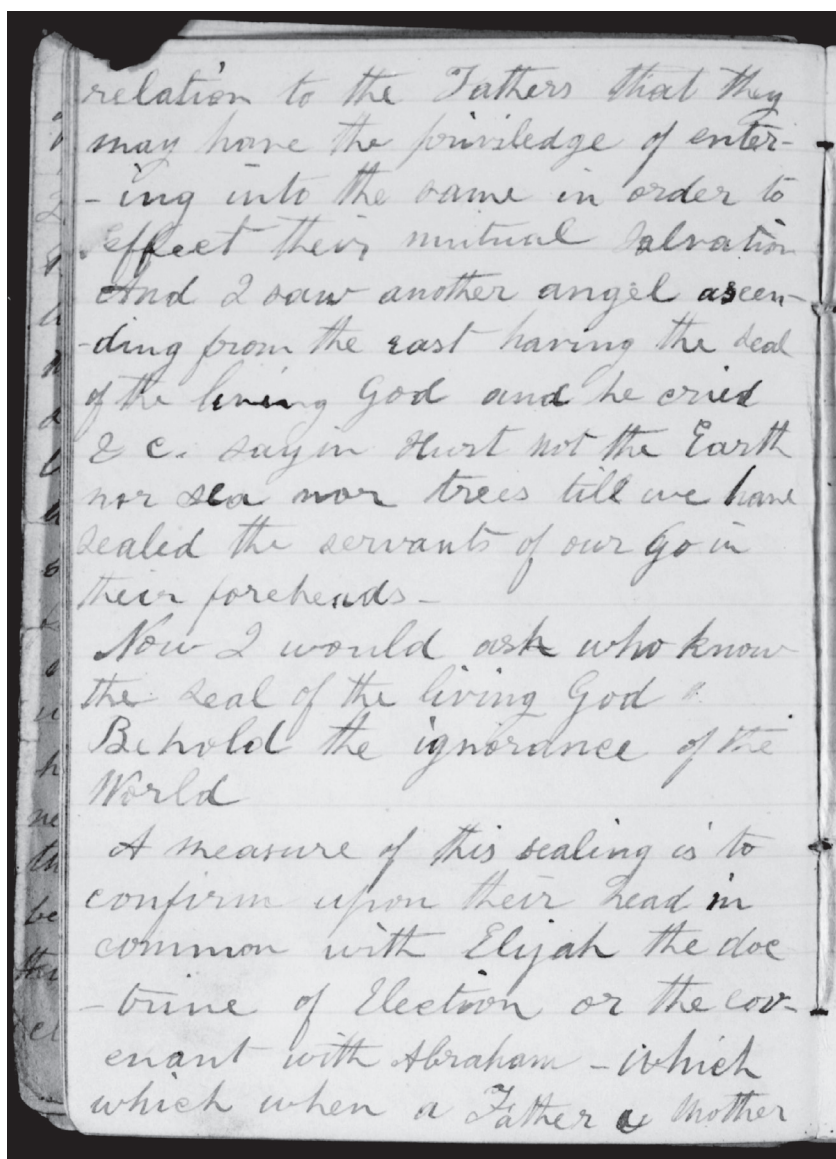


FIGURE 2. Photograph of Howard Coray and Martha Jane Knowlton Coray's transcript of Joseph Smith's "Discourse, 13 August 1843-A, as Reported by Martha Jane Knowlton Coray," page [34], <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-13-august-1843-a-as-reported-by-martha-jane-knowlton-coray/5>. Courtesy Church History Library.

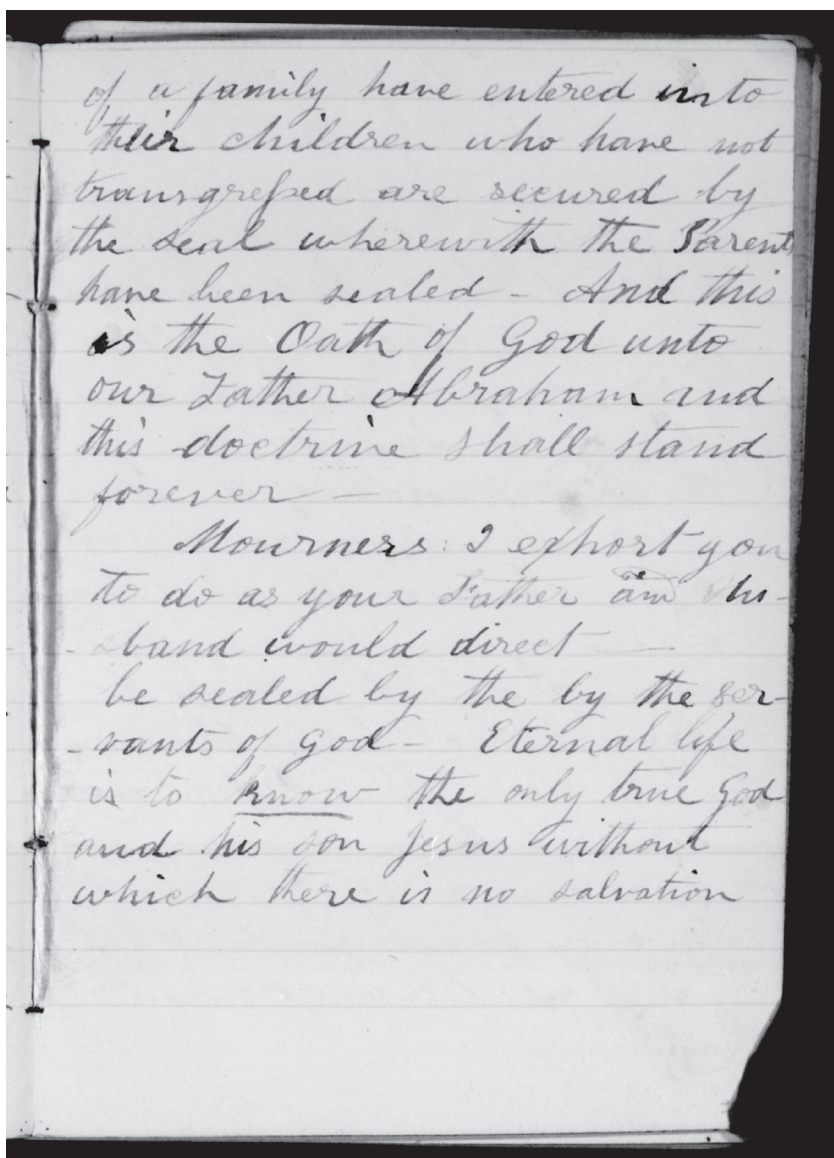


FIGURE 3. Photograph of Howard Coray and Martha Jane Knowlton Coray's transcript of Joseph Smith's "Discourse, 13 August 1843-A, as Reported by Martha Jane Knowlton Coray," page [35], <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-13-august-1843-a-as-reported-by-martha-jane-knowlton-coray/6>. Courtesy Church History Library.

not teach that unrepentant souls could be saved *in* their sins or that the agency of wayward children could be overruled by virtue of their parents' priesthood sealings. But was this concept of conditional priesthood sealings reinforced in any other Nauvoo teachings of Joseph Smith? If so, did Elder Orson F. Whitney have access to such a document before he spoke in April 1929 general conference? I believe that the answer to both questions is yes.

Additional Sources for Joseph Smith's Teachings and Elder Orson F. Whitney's Understanding

As historiographically documented above, Elder Orson F. Whitney's April 1929 general conference sermon has been traditionally linked to Joseph Smith's August 1843 discourse at the funeral of Judge Elias Higbee. A textual comparison suggests that the Prophet's Nauvoo teachings on righteous parents, wayward children, and priesthood sealings—as recorded by Willard Richards—was an underlying source for Elder Whitney's declaration nearly nine decades later. But I believe there are two heretofore unassociated texts that informed the Apostle's 1929 sermon and clarified his final thinking before his passing in 1931.

To contextualize these additional historical sources, one needs to further appreciate the cherished relationship between the Newel K. Whitney and Joseph Smith families in early Church history, especially during the Nauvoo years. This loving bond was very important to the identity of Orson F. Whitney, a grandson of Newel. Between October 1884 and September 1885, Orson Whitney published a twelve-part series of monthly articles on "The Aaronic Priesthood" for the Church's *Contributor* periodical. In part 4, he wrote extensively about his paternal grandfather, Newel K. Whitney, an early bishop of the Church in Kirtland, Ohio, who was later called as the Presiding Bishop of the entire Church. Orson wrote, "We have before spoken of the friendship and intimacy existing between the Prophet and Bishop Whitney. This bond of affection was strengthened and intensified by the giving in marriage to the former of the Bishop's eldest daughter, Sarah, in obedience to a revelation from God," Whitney wrote of his paternal aunt Sarah Ann Whitney. "This girl was but seventeen years of age, but she had implicit faith that the doctrine of plural marriage, as revealed to and practised by the Prophet, was of celestial origin. She was the first woman, in this dispensation, who was given in plural marriage by and with the consent of both parents."³⁹

39. Orson F. Whitney, "The Aaronic Priesthood. [Part] IV," *Contributor*, January 1885, 131.

As an unmarried young woman still living in her parents' household, Sarah Ann Whitney was sealed to Joseph Smith on July 27, 1842, in Nauvoo by her father, Newel K. Whitney, with her mother, Elizabeth Ann Whitney, acting as a witness.⁴⁰ In addition to providing specific instructions on how to officiate over the priesthood sealing, the Prophet's associated revelation "promised immortality and eternal life to Sarah Ann, and by extension her entire family, through her sealing to [Joseph Smith]. By uniting the Whitney family with [Joseph Smith], the marriage created kinship ties that promised to seal the two families together eternally," write the editors of the *Joseph Smith Papers*.⁴¹

Joseph Smith's Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney

Eight months after being sealed to Sarah Ann Whitney, Joseph Smith handwrote a priesthood blessing (fig. 4) for his young plural wife, which assured "blessings for her and her family" conditioned upon her faithfulness.⁴² "Of the several documents promising blessings to Whitney family members," the editors of the *Joseph Smith Papers* note, "the blessing featured here is the only document directed solely to Sarah Ann."⁴³ The Prophet's holograph document, dated March 23, 1843, reads as follows:

Oh Lord my God thou that dwellest on high bless I beseech of thee the one into whose hands this may fall and crown her with a diadem of glory in the Eternal worlds Oh let it be Sealed this day on high that She Shall come forth in the first reserrection to recieve the Same and verily it Shall be so Saith the Lord *if She remain in the Everlasting covenant to the end* as also all her Fathers house Shall be Saved in the Same Eternal glory and *if any of them Shall wander from the foald of the Lord they Shall not perish but Shall return Saith the Lord and be Saived in and by repentance* be crowned with all the fullness of the glory of the Everlasting gospele these promises I Seal upon all of their heads in the name of Jesus Christ by the Law of the holy preisthood Even so Amen.⁴⁴

40. "Revelation, 27 July 1842," in *Documents, Volume 10: May–August 1842*, ed. Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Jordan T. Watkins, Matthew C. Godfrey and Mason K. Allred, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2020), 308–14.

41. "Revelation, 27 July 1842," 311.

42. "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," in *Documents, Volume 12: March–July, 1843*, ed. David W. Grua, Brent M. Rogers, Matthew C. Godfrey, Robin Scott Jensen, Jessica M. Nelson, and Christopher James Blythe, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2021), 100–4.

43. "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," 101.

44. "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," 103–4, emphasis added.

Nauvoo City March 23^d 1843
Oh Lord my God Thou that
dwellst on high bless I beseech of Thee
the one into whose hands this may
fall and crown her with a diadem
of glory in the Eternal worlds
Oh let it be sealed this day on high
that she shall come forth in the
first resurrection to receive the
same and verily it shall be so
saith the Lord if she remain in
the Everlasting covenant to the end
as also all her Father's house shall
be saved in the same Eternal glory
and if any of them shall wander
from the fold of the Lord they
shall not perish but shall re-
turn saith the Lord and be
saved in and by repentance
be crowned with all the fullness
of the glory of the Everlasting gosp^l
=el These promises I seal upon
all of their heads in the name of
Jesus Christ by the Law of the
holy priesthood Even so Amen
Sarah Ann } Joseph Smith
Whitney

FIGURE 4. Photograph of Joseph Smith's handwritten "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/blessing-to-sarah-ann-whitney-23-march-1843/1>. Courtesy Church History Library.

It is important to note that both Joseph Smith's April 1843 blessing and his August 1843 funeral discourse were given during the same period that he was expounding the doctrine of priesthood sealings. That July, the Prophet also dictated a revelation on "eternal and plural marriage," which was later canonized as section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants.⁴⁵

Unfortunately, we do not know Sarah Ann's reaction to Joseph Smith's blessing or her thoughts about its promises to her and her family. "Few of Sarah Ann Whitney's own writings survive, and none is known to illuminate this blessing from her perspective. However, the Whitney family preserved a significant number of family and church records," the *Joseph Smith Papers* editors continue. "This document, along with a select few other records likely important to the family, was isolated from that larger collection, suggesting that Sarah Ann, her mother, and other family members assigned those select documents a special status."⁴⁶

I believe that this blessing by Joseph Smith to Sarah Ann Whitney was an additional historical source for her nephew Elder Orson F. Whitney's 1929 sermon.⁴⁷ There are a number of contextual and textual similarities between the two documents. To begin with, both Joseph Smith's March 1843 blessing and August 1843 discourse promise salvation to both the recipient and their entire family, based upon their faithfulness and repentance. While the assured blessings are similar, the trajectory of the priesthood sealing is opposite. Whereas the Prophet's August 1843 discourse suggests that the priesthood sealing of righteous parents will have salvific effects *forward in time on their posterity*, his earlier March 1843 blessing declares that the priesthood sealing of a single youth to a righteous priesthood holder, in this case Sarah Ann Whitney to himself, will have salvific blessings *backward in time on her ancestors*, or "all of her Fathers house." Regardless of these differences and directional sealings, the conditional promised blessings are the same for related family members.

Furthermore, both Joseph Smith's 1843 blessing and Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon feature imagery of the Good Shepherd found in John 10:1–21 (see also Ps. 23 and Ezek. 34:11–16). To Sarah Ann Whitney, the Prophet promised her family that, like sheep in the Holy Land, "if any of them Shall wander from the foald of the Lord they Shall not perish

45. "Revelation, 12 July 1843 [D&C 132]," in David W. Grua and others, *Documents*, Volume 12, 457–78.

46. "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," 103.

47. An earlier historian suggested this textual connection in a footnote in his encyclopedic history of Joseph Smith and plural marriage. See Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, Volume 1: *History* (Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 509n33.

but Shall return Saith the Lord and be Saived.” Similarly, Elder Whitney taught in the Salt Lake Tabernacle in 1929: “Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold.” In both cases, the Good Shepherd gathers his straying flock back to the safety of the sheep fold, a fenced enclosure to safeguard one’s livestock from predators, upon conditions of repentance (see Num. 32:24; 1 Chr. 17:7; and Ps. 50:9; 78:70). There the Savior would preserve and protect his sheep eternally, by virtue of priesthood sealings honored by his atoning sacrifice.

Table 1. Comparison of Joseph Smith’s 1843 Teachings and Elder Orson F. Whitney’s 1929 Sermon

Joseph Smith’s March and August 1843 Teachings	Elder Orson F. Whitney’s April 1929 Sermon
[August:] When a Father & Mother of a family have entered into their children <i>who have not transgressed</i> are secured by the seal wherewith the Parents have been sealed. ⁴⁸	<p style="text-align: center;">A PRECIOUS PROMISE</p> <p>¶The Prophet Joseph Smith declared—and he never taught more comforting doctrine—that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity.</p>
[March:] If She remain in the Everlasting covenant to the end as also all her Fathers house Shall be Saved in the Same Eternal glory and if any of them Shall wander from the foald of the Lord they Shall not perish but Shall return Saith the Lord and be Saived and <i>by repentance</i> be crowned with all the fullness of the glory of the Everlasting gospele! ⁴⁹	Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return. ⁵⁰

Due to his familial ties, Elder Orson F. Whitney became the physical custodian of both Whitney family plural-marriage-related documents from the Nauvoo era: (1) Joseph Smith’s July 24, 1842, revelation for Newel K. Whitney (his grandfather), which instructed him how to perform the priesthood sealing of his daughter, Sarah Ann Whitney (his

48. “Discourse, 13 August 1843–A,” 33, emphasis added.

49. “Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843,” 103–4, emphasis added.

50. Whitney, in *Ninety-Ninth Annual Conference*, 110.

aunt) to the Prophet; and (2) Joseph Smith's March 23, 1843, blessing for Sarah. It appears that the original copy of the 1842 revelation to Newel no longer exists. But Orson made a typescript in 1912 from a copy that belonged to his father, Horace Whitney, and believed that Horace had received a copy from Newel.⁵¹ By contrast, Joseph Smith's subsequent handwritten blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney is extant. Sarah Ann Whitney's mother, Elizabeth Ann Smith Whitney, obtained the document at an unknown time. Another daughter of Elizabeth, Mary Jane Whitney Groo, inherited the document and gave it to Orson, her nephew.⁵² In a very real sense, the extended Newel K. Whitney family, including Orson in the third generation, became the keepers of these documents containing the Prophet Joseph's Nauvoo teachings, which other Latter-day Saints did not have access to.

In the spring of 1912, Elder Whitney determined to donate a number of family treasures in his possession to the Church on behalf of his extended Whitney relatives, including these two featured Nauvoo documents.⁵³ The Apostle documented this extraordinary family bequest in his diary as follows: "Wrote to President Joseph F. Smith, presenting to him or to the Church a number of Nauvoo relics, for many years heirlooms in the Whitney family."⁵⁴

When the Whitney family documents are paired with the Prophet's 1843 sermon at Judge Elias Higbee's funeral, we get a fuller sense of his teachings on righteous parents, wayward children, priesthood sealings, and the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Read together, Joseph Smith's Nauvoo blessing and his discourse (as reported by Coray) both impart that priesthood sealings and their associated blessings for individuals and families are conditioned on Christian repentance.

51. "Revelation, 27 July 1842," 312; "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," 100.

52. "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," 100.

53. Orson F. Whitney to Joseph F. Smith, April 1, 1912, Whitney Family Documents Collection, MS 23156, Church History Library. He presented four items to Church President Joseph F. Smith: his prepared typescript copy of Joseph Smith's 1842 revelation to Newel K. Whitney; the original handwritten blessing of Joseph Smith to Sarah Ann Whitney in 1843; a wood chip spotted with what the family believed to be Joseph Smith's blood taken from the Carthage Jail grounds; and a lock of Joseph Smith's hair clipped from his body after his martyrdom.

54. Orson F. Whitney, Diary, April 1, 1912, Newel K. Whitney Papers, 1817–1910, Church History Library. See also Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls*, 283; and "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," 100.

Orson F. Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls: The Life Story of Orson F. Whitney* (1930)

In addition to Joseph Smith's handwritten blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, there is an additional historical source that we need to consider when trying to excavate Elder Orson F. Whitney's doctrinal understanding of families and priesthood sealings. During the final years of his life, Elder Whitney began writing his autobiography for distribution to his posterity and interested Latter-day Saints.⁵⁵ By the summer of 1930—a year after he spoke in April 1929 general conference—Elder Whitney had completed his memoir for publication, following four years of diligent drafting and editing. *Through Memory's Halls: The Life Story of Orson F. Whitney* was published in November 1930. "I am very pleased with the appearance of the book and hope it will prove, as designed, a blessing to my children and kindred and friends," the senior Church leader noted with satisfaction.⁵⁶ The book was well received by his loved ones and within Latter-day Saint circles in Utah.

In his autobiography's seventh chapter, "A Soul's Awakening," Elder Whitney focused on the year 1876, a hinge point in his own adolescent life in Utah. "I had made up my mind to embrace the dramatic profession, and as the Salt Lake Theatre was not running regularly, I decided to go to New York, that Mecca of theatrical aspirants, and there begin my career." He confessed that his concerned parents "were much opposed to it, but I was determined to do something, to be somebody, and the drama seemed the only opening for me at that time." But during that October general conference, twenty-one-year-old Whitney was unexpectedly called on a mission. His proselyting assignment "fell like a bolt from the blue," he admitted years later. "This was the turning point in my life, the virtual beginning of my career."⁵⁷

During his adolescent years, Whitney drifted from his spiritual moorings and the religious life his Latter-day Saint parents expected him to follow. "For several years I had paid little or no attention to religion, and though naturally of a spiritual turn and possessed of deep veneration, had become careless and indifferent, like many others, and had contracted a distaste for sacred things. This was due largely to the company I kept, but most of all to ignorance of the true meaning and import

55. Whitney, Diary, April 4–6, 1926.

56. Whitney, Diary, November 28, 1930.

57. Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls*, 66–68.

of religion," he described in a manuscript autobiographical sketch. Yet Elder Whitney clarified that while some observers in Utah thought him "an infidel," he was "only reckless and disobedient" like some of his fellow young Latter-day Saints as they matured unevenly into adulthood and Christian discipleship.⁵⁸

As Elder Whitney reviewed his own youthful conversion, accelerated by his unanticipated missionary service as a young elder, he wove into his recollections his tender feelings for his own posterity. Reflecting back more than five decades on his own spiritual struggles, he shared his belief that so many wandering youths are but a meaningful spiritual experience away from receiving a testimony and aligning their lives with gospel teachings. The Apostle implored the readers of his autobiography, Latter-day Saint parents with potentially wayward children themselves, to hold out hope for their youth, just as his parents had done for him in the mid-1870s. Remembering his younger, troubled self, Elder Whitney wrote, "I know now that I had a testimony, a deep conviction of the Truth; but it was latent, undeveloped, like a gold mine in the depths of the earth. Something had to occur to bring it out. That something was my mission. It bored the tunnel, sunk the shaft, and brought the precious ore to the surface."⁵⁹

Briefly pausing the narration of his personal spiritual development, Elder Whitney then weaved into his memoir the relevant text from his April 1929 sermon, given the previous year. He held up his own spiritual immaturity and his parents' longsuffering in 1876 as a cautionary tale: that righteous parents must not abandon their spiritually indifferent or wayward offspring, who nevertheless remained "children of the Covenant."

I cannot but believe that in the heart of every "Mormon" boy and every "Mormon" girl there is a spiritual gold mine, awaiting development. To some, the development comes early; to others, late. But come it will, sometime, somewhere. They are children of the Covenant; in their veins is the blood of Israel; and they have received, if baptized, the gift of the Holy Ghost, which manifests the things of God. How could all that go for naught?

The sons and daughters of faithful fathers and mothers in Israel are heirs to sacred and divine promises, made for valiant service here or

58. Orson F. Whitney, "Autobiography of Orson Ferguson Whitney, Written in 1885-6," 36-37, unpublished manuscript, quoted in Horne, *Life of Orson F. Whitney*, 24.

59. Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls*, 68.

elsewhere, and inherited by both parent and child for some good reason, rooted, perhaps, in the spiritual soil of a life that went before. Therefore are they entitled to great consideration at the hands of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who is “not slack concerning his promises.”⁶⁰

A careful reading of Elder Whitney’s 1930 memoir clarifies his final doctrinal understanding of the interplay between righteous parents, wayward children, and priesthood sealings just months before his death. A side-by-side comparison of the texts of Elder Whitney’s 1929 sermon and his 1930 autobiography is instructive for both his *inclusions* of—and *exclusions* from—his earlier teachings (see table 2).

To begin with, Whitney adds a paragraph that did not appear in his 1929 sermon that explains the necessity of individual agency and accountability: “True, the offspring of the righteous must show themselves worthy of such consideration. Men and women are not blessed and honored of God merely because their ancestors were deserving. Something for nothing is not a principle of eternal justice. We pay for what we get, even from the Divine Giver—pay to the limit of our ability to pay; and He does the rest, the part that we cannot do.” Next, after inserting this clarification, Elder Whitney then repeats his “Word for the Wayward” statement with only slight changes in wording.

Finally, what is even more interesting is the language Elder Whitney *excludes* in his last retelling. The aging Apostle does not include the original opening sentence from his “Precious Promise” testimony, cutting out completely the following sentence: “The Prophet Joseph Smith declared—and he never taught more comforting doctrine—that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity.” Instead, Elder Whitney simply includes the rest of his original statement. He makes no reference to Joseph Smith’s teachings on the matter.⁶¹

60. Whitney, *Through Memory’s Halls*, 68.

61. Whitney, *Through Memory’s Halls*, 68–69.

Table 2. Comparison of Elder Orson F. Whitney's 1929 General Conference Sermon and his 1930 Autobiography (with significant additions and subtractions to his 1929 statements in bold)

**Elder Orson F. Whitney's
1929 General Conference Sermon**

THE YOUTH OF ZION

¶ I have faith in the young people of this Church—not because I believe them without fault, nor because I think all are walking in the ways of wisdom and shunning the downward road. I have faith in them because of the character of their parents, because of the ancestry from which they have sprung, and because of the promise made by the God of Heaven, that “this Kingdom shall never be thrown down nor given to another people.”

A WORD FOR THE WAYWARD

¶ You parents of the wilful and the wayward! Don't give them up. Don't cast them off. They are not utterly lost. The Shepherd will find his sheep. They were his before they were yours—long before he entrusted them to your care; and you cannot begin to love them as he loves them. They have but strayed in ignorance from the Path of Right, and God is merciful to ignorance. Only the fulness of knowledge brings the fulness of accountability. Our Heavenly Father is far more merciful, infinitely more charitable, than even the best of his servants, and the Everlasting Gospel is mightier in power to save than our narrow finite minds can comprehend.

**Elder Orson F. Whitney's
1930 Autobiography**

¶ The sons and daughters of faithful fathers and mothers in Israel are heirs to sacred and divine promises, made for valiant service here or elsewhere, and inherited by both parent and child for some good reason, rooted, perhaps, in the spiritual soil of a life that went before. Therefore are they entitled to great consideration at the hands of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who is “not slack concerning his promises.”

¶ **True, the offspring of the righteous must show themselves worthy of such consideration. Men and women are not blessed and honored of God merely because their ancestors were deserving. Something for nothing is not a principle of eternal justice. We pay for what we get, even from the Divine Giver—pay to the limit of our ability to pay; and He does the rest, the part that we cannot do.**

¶ Parents of the wilful and the wayward! Do not give them up. Do not cast them off. They are not utterly lost. They have but strayed in ignorance from the Path of Right, and God is very merciful to ignorance. Only the fulness of knowledge brings the fulness of accountability. Our Heavenly Father is far more merciful, infinitely more charitable, than the best of his servants, and the Everlasting Gospel is mightier in power to save than our narrow, finite minds can comprehend.

**Elder Orson F. Whitney's
1929 General Conference Sermon**

A PRECIOUS PROMISE

¶ **The Prophet Joseph Smith declared—and he never taught more comforting doctrine—that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity.** Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return. They will have to pay their debt to justice; they will suffer for their sins; and may tread a thorny path; but if it leads them at last, like the penitent Prodigal, to a loving and forgiving father's heart and home, the painful experience will not have been in vain. Pray for your careless and disobedient children; hold on to them with your faith. Hope on, trust on, till you see the salvation of God.

¶ Who are these straying sheep—these wayward sons and daughters? They are children of the Covenant, heirs to the promises, and have received, if baptized, the gift of the Holy Ghost, which makes manifest the things of God. Could all that go for naught?

**Elder Orson F. Whitney's
1930 Autobiography**

¶ The wandering sheep will be found. The eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the Fold. Either in this world or the world to come, they will return. They must pay their debt to justice, must suffer for their sins, and may tread a thorny path; but if it leads them at last, like the penitent Prodigal, to a loving and forgiving Father's heart and home, the painful experience will not have been in vain.

¶ I cannot but believe that in the heart of every "Mormon" boy and every "Mormon" girl there is a spiritual gold mine, awaiting development. To some, the development comes early; to others, late. But come it will, sometime, somewhere. They are children of the Covenant; in their veins is the blood of Israel; and they have received, if baptized, the gift of the Holy Ghost, which manifests the things of God. How could all that go for naught?



FIGURE 5. Undated photograph of Elder Orson F. Whitney, who loved studying the scriptures, history, poetry, and literature. Courtesy Church History Library.

Someone or something had apparently influenced Elder Whitney (fig. 5) to clarify his position on this important doctrinal matter in the last years of his life. Perhaps he was speaking extemporaneously during general conference, as was often the case, and he recognized that some Latter-day Saints might misinterpret his remarks on the impact of mercy over justice for the salvation of wayward children. Maybe he received a letter from a Church member seeking for clarification following his general conference sermon. In the weeks and months following his remarks, did he reflect on what he had said and seek for an opportunity to nuance his statement? Did a member of the First Presidency or Quorum of the Twelve Apostles share their concerns with him about the Prophet Joseph Smith's 1843 discourse? As a former assistant Church historian and well-regarded writer himself, did he take the occasion to go into the Church Historian's office and search for fuller accounts of what Joseph Smith likely said? He may have found the Coray notebooks there, which had been donated to President Joseph F. Smith and the Church sometime before 1918. It is unclear what prompted Elder Whitney's doctrinal

clarification of his earlier statement in general conference. Regardless of the impetus, Elder Whitney publicly clarified his thinking in his 1930 autobiography. Unfortunately, Latter-day Saints have continued to reference his 1929 sermon as his authoritative teachings on the subject instead of his subsequent memoir published a year later.

Elder Whitney would speak in general conference one last time in April 1931. What began that spring as a severe cold developed into pneumonia, which required his hospitalization. He passed away on May 16, 1931, at the age of seventy-five, having served for about a quarter of a century as an Apostle.⁶² Elder Whitney was buried in the Salt Lake City Cemetery near his extended family, a modest headstone marking the grave of a covenant-keeping father who clung to hope for the Church's wayward children, including his own.

Quoting Elder Orson F. Whitney in General Conference, 1987–2009

Beginning in the late 1980s, more than fifty years after Elder Orson F. Whitney's death, a new generation of Latter-day Saints was introduced to his April 1929 general conference sermon, especially his "The Youth of Zion," "Word for the Wayward," and "Precious Promise" statements. The late Apostle's fellow General Authorities had not quoted his memorable teachings in general conference until nearly six decades after they were first spoken over the Tabernacle pulpit. However, between 1987 and 2009, Church leaders repeated some combination of Elder Whitney's statements eight times in general conference.⁶³ But none of the discussions cited the expanded Howard and Martha Coray notebook transcript of the sermon first published in 1980 as noted above.

Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone, then a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, was the first to recite Elder Whitney's "Word for the Wayward" assertion in his October 1987 general conference address.⁶⁴

62. Horne, *Life of Orson F. Whitney*, 403–4.

63. During these same decades, a number of religious educators from Brigham Young University likewise quoted Whitney's 1929 sermon in their publications, including Robert L. Millet, *When a Child Wanders* (Deseret Book, 1996), 114–16; Douglas E. Brinley and Daniel K. Judd, eds., *Eternal Families* (Bookcraft, 1996), 265; Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Joseph Smith: The Choice Seer* (Bookcraft, 1996), 198–99; Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions* (Deseret Book, 1998): 74; and Andrew C. Skinner, *Temple Worship: 20 Truths That Will Bless Your Life* (Deseret Book, 2007), 202–3.

64. Vaughn J. Featherstone, "A Champion of Youth," *Ensign*, November 1987, 27.

Three years later, Elder James E. Faust, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, paraphrased Elder Whitney's "Word for the Wayward" and "Precious Promise" statements in his October 1990 general conference address. He taught, "There are some great spiritual promises which may help faithful parents in this church. Children of eternal sealings may have visited upon them the divine promises made to their valiant forebears who nobly kept their covenants. Covenants remembered by parents will be remembered by God. The children may thus become the beneficiaries and inheritors of these great covenants and promises. This is because they are the children of the covenant."⁶⁵

In April 1992 general conference, Elder Boyd K. Packer, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, spoke on righteous parenting. He taught, "It is a great challenge to raise a family in the darkening mists of our moral environment. . . . It is not uncommon for responsible parents to lose one of their children, for a time, to influences over which they have no control. They agonize over rebellious sons or daughters. They are puzzled over why they are so helpless when they have tried so hard to do what they should." Next, he shared his "conviction that those wicked influences one day will be overruled." Elder Packer then quoted Elder Whitney's "Precious Promise" statement and emphasized the importance of parents keeping their covenants made in the house of the Lord. Packer testified, "We cannot overemphasize the value of temple marriage, the binding ties of the sealing ordinance, and the standards of worthiness required of them. When parents keep the covenants they have made at the altar of the temple, their children will be forever bound to them."⁶⁶

Elder Robert D. Hales, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, was the next to quote Elder Whitney's "Precious Promise" statement when he spoke on strengthening families at the April 1999 general conference. He noted, "Every family can be strengthened in one way or another if the Spirit of the Lord is brought into our homes and we teach by His example." He then shared a series of uplifting ideas, including the following: "While we may despair when, after all we can do, some of our children stray from the path of righteousness, the words of Orson F. Whitney can comfort us," and next shared Elder Whitney's "Precious Promise" statement. Elder Hales then added, "Knowing that we are in

65. James E. Faust, "The Greatest Challenge in the World—Good Parenting," *Ensign*, November 1990, 35.

66. Boyd K. Packer, "Our Moral Environment," *Ensign*, May 1992, 68.

mortality to learn and to develop our faith, we should understand that there must be opposition in all things. During a family council in my own home, my wife said, ‘When you may think that someone has a perfect family, you just do not know them well enough.’”⁶⁷

In his April 2004 general conference talk, Elder Hales again referenced Elder Whitney in his sermon. Testifying of Jesus Christ’s power to redeem mankind, he declared, “If we are seeking the salvation of special ‘ones’ in our own families, I bear testimony that they are within His reach. We assist Him in reaching them by faithfully living the gospel, being sealed in the temple, and living true to the covenants we make there.” The Apostle continued, “Parents can take great comfort in the words of Elder Orson F. Whitney relating the teachings of Joseph Smith” and then recited the “Precious Promise” statement.⁶⁸

Two years later, at the October 2006 general conference, Elder Richard H. Winkel, then a member of the Quorum of the Seventy, stated, “Like you, I don’t want to lose any of my children. I want to be together forever with all of my family. The temple gives all of us extra hope of continuing and improving these relationships, even after this life. Sealings bestowed in the temple promise additional blessings.” He then read Elder Whitney’s “Precious Promise” testimony and asked the Conference Center attendees, “Isn’t this statement encouraging news for parents whose children are sealed to them?”⁶⁹

Finally, President Henry B. Eyring, then First Counselor in the First Presidency, spoke on the perfect example of Jesus Christ at the October 2009 general conference. He said, “The story of the prodigal son gives us all hope. The prodigal remembered home, as will your children. They will feel your love drawing them back to you. Elder Orson F. Whitney, in a general conference of 1929, gave a remarkable promise, which I know is true, to the faithful parents who honor the temple sealing to their children.” President Eyring then shared portions of the late Apostle’s “Precious Promise” statement.⁷⁰

By the early twenty-first century, however, President James E. Faust, then Second Counselor in the First Presidency, sought to moderate how some Church leaders and members (including himself previously in general conference) were quoting too selectively from Elder Whitney’s

67. Robert D. Hales, “Strengthening Families: Our Sacred Duty,” *Ensign*, May 1999, 34.

68. Robert D. Hales, “With All the Feeling of a Tender Parent: A Message of Hope to Families,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 91.

69. Richard H. Winkel, “The Temple Is About Families,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 10.

70. Henry B. Eyring, “Our Perfect Example,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 72.

1929 sermon. Some Latter-day Saints were evidently believing that unrepentant children could somehow be saved *in* their sins (not *from* their sins), by virtue of their parents' righteousness and priesthood sealings. These parents hung their hope on the portions of Elder Whitney's earlier message that emphasized the Savior's mercy, but they overlooked the Apostle's call for repentance and the demands of justice. In other words, Elder Whitney's message was seemingly being taken out of doctrinal balance.

Previously, Church leaders had emphasized the importance of keeping gospel truths in equilibrium. For example, Neal A. Maxwell, then Commissioner of Church Education, had taught in an address to the Church's religious educators that orthodox "gospel principles are weaved together in a fabric which keeps them in check and balance with each other. You see, the doctrines of Jesus Christ by themselves are dangerous. Any principle of the gospel, isolated, spun off and practiced in solitude goes wild and goes mad." Maxwell further explained, "It is only the orthodoxy of the gospel that keeps it together, because these are powerful principles that need each other. Just as the people of the Church need each other, the doctrines of the Church need each other."⁷¹ Church teachings that should be understood together as doctrinal pairings include agency and accountability, mercy and justice, repentance and forgiveness, divine love and divine laws, and love for God and love for others.⁷²

Recall that back in the October 1990 general conference, then Elder Faust became the second General Authority to reference Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon when he paraphrased it in his general conference address, but with no nuancing of his own. However, in President Faust's April 2003 general conference address, "Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered," he prefaces his remarks as follows: "I believe and accept the comforting statement of Elder Orson F. Whitney," and then quotes his "Precious Promise" teaching. He then clarifies the associated truths by bringing them back into doctrinal equilibrium.

71. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Gospel Gives Answers to Life's Problems," address to Church Education System religious educators, July 1, 1970, <https://educationforeternity.byu.edu/general-religious-education-quotes#richtext-maxwell-neal-a>. See also Neal A. Maxwell, "The Simplicity of the Gospel," address given at a Brigham Young University eight-stake fireside, May 4, 1969, transcript, 8, Perry Special Collections.

72. See David A. Bednar, *Act in Doctrine: Spiritual Patterns for Turning from Self to the Savior* (Deseret Book, 2012), xvii; and Neil L. Andersen, "The Power of Jesus Christ and Pure Doctrine," CES Religious Educators Conference address, June 11, 2023.

A principle in this statement that is often overlooked is that they must fully repent and “suffer for their sins” and “pay their debt to justice.” I recognize that now is the time “to prepare to meet God.” . . . Mercy will not rob justice, and the sealing power of faithful parents will only claim wayward children upon the condition of their repentance and Christ’s Atonement. Repentant wayward children will enjoy salvation and all the blessings that go with it, but exaltation is much more. It must be fully earned. The question as to who will be exalted must be left to the Lord in His mercy.⁷³

The demands of mercy and justice, agency and accountability, repentance and forgiveness need to be properly balanced, President Faust cautioned Church members. Since October 2009, Elder Whitney’s relevant statements have not been quoted by any General Authorities in general conference. Moreover, when the Church published the *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* in 2007, this popular principle was not included.⁷⁴

Elder David A. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children” (2014)

In August 2011, Elder David A. Bednar, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, spoke during the annual training broadcast of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion. During the extemporaneous question and answer portion of his remarks, he addressed the most common question asked of him during his tenure as a Church leader and past university president at BYU-Idaho (formerly Rick’s College): how a child can help reunite their fractured family (shifting the possible responsibility from parent to child). Paraphrasing President Gordon B. Hinckley’s admonition during a 1999 Rick’s College devotional to not be a “weak link” in one’s family chain of priesthood blessings,⁷⁵ Elder Bednar taught: “Well, if there’s a break in the chain, then the new chain starts with you. And, as you forge your link in that chain, it will bless not only you, but it will reach in both directions to strengthen other links; so, it begins with you.”⁷⁶

73. James E. Faust, “Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered,” *Ensign*, May 2003, 62.

74. See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007).

75. See Gordon B. Hinckley, *Discourses of President Gordon B. Hinckley*, vol. 1, 1995–1999 (Deseret Book, 2005), 474–75, 477.

76. David A. Bednar, “A Discussion with Elder David A. Bednar,” Seminaries and Institutes of Religion annual training broadcast, August 2, 2011, The Church of Jesus

Elder Bednar continued his explanation to the gathered Seminaries and Institute personnel as follows: “We read the statement by the Prophet Joseph, and Orson F. Whitney, and the elaborations by President Packer, about the tentacles that will reach out to wayward children. Some parents, I believe, overinterpret that to mean that if I’m faithful to my temple covenants then my children will be okay,” he explained. “Well, that can’t be right; we believe that men will be punished for their own sins, not for Adam’s transgressions. And therefore you can’t be saved through the faithfulness of your parents.” Nevertheless, the Apostle offered hope to righteous children of wayward parents. “But the tentacles that reach out because of the faithfulness of parents in honoring temple covenants exert a spiritual pull and a tug on those wayward children. Well, couldn’t that work the same way from children who are faithful to temple covenants and the tentacles reach out to a mom and a dad who are not as faithful as they need to be? So it will extend both ways and they can help forge that chain of the generations, and help repair some of the broken links, regardless of the direction.”⁷⁷

Three years later, in the March 2014 issue of the *Ensign*, Elder Bednar published a more developed doctrinal article titled “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children: Sustaining Hope While Overcoming Misunderstanding.”⁷⁸ It was the most comprehensive review of the gospel teachings associated with Elder Whitney’s April 1929 general conference sermon to date.

Elder Bednar divides his article into three parts. In his introductory section, he begins by compassionately acknowledging the pain and suffering that righteous parents with wayward children experience while striving to live the gospel with their posterity. But like President James E. Faust before him, he cautions grieving parents to keep the associated teachings in doctrinal balance.

One of the greatest heartaches a valiant parent in Zion can suffer is a child who strays from the gospel path. . . . Statements by General Authorities of the Church describing the influence of faithful parents on wayward children have been and continue to be a source of great familial comfort. The consolation arises from the hope these messages seem to proffer that parents who honor gospel covenants, obey the Lord’s commandments,

Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/archive/satellite-training-broadcast/2011/08>, 39 min, 18 sec.

77. Bednar, “Discussion with Elder David A. Bednar,” 39:38.

78. David A. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children,” *Ensign*, March 2014, 28–33.

and serve faithfully can influence the salvation of their sons and daughters who go astray. However, the interpretation of these statements by some members of the Church has contributed to a measure of doctrinal misunderstanding. The confusion derives from the apparent inconsistency of these interpretations with the doctrine of the Atonement of Jesus Christ and the principles of moral agency and individual accountability for sins and transgressions.⁷⁹

In the second section of his article, “Prophetic Promises about Posterity,” Elder Bednar begins by referencing a specific teaching of Joseph Smith in 1843. “The following quotation appears in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith during his service as Church historian and recorder: ‘When a seal is put upon the father and mother, it secures their posterity, so that they cannot be lost, but will be saved by virtue of the covenant of their father and mother.’” The Apostle then references the now popularized “Precious Promise” statement. “A similar teaching, apparently based on the statement by the Prophet Joseph, was made by Elder Orson F. Whitney,” which he then quotes. Elder Bednar then analyzes how these two interrelated teachings have been misunderstood by some Church members:

The statements by Joseph Smith and Orson F. Whitney are construed by some members of the Church to mean that wayward children unconditionally receive the blessings of salvation because of and through the faithfulness of parents. However, this interpretation is moderated by the fact that the most complete account of the Prophet’s sermon was not available to Church historians at the time they compiled an amalgamated version of his teachings from the notes of Willard Richards and William Clayton. In the more complete set of notes recorded by Howard and Martha Coray, Joseph Smith is shown to have qualified his statement to make the promised blessings conditional upon the obedience of the children:

“When a father and mother of a family have [been sealed], their children *who have not transgressed* are secured by the seal wherewith the Parents have been sealed. And this is the Oath of God unto our Father Abraham and this doctrine shall stand forever.”⁸⁰

Elder Bednar thus becomes the first General Authority to reference the Howard and Martha Coray notebook transcript featured in the *Words of Joseph Smith* in relation to Elder Whitney’s 1929 general conference sermon.

79. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children,” 28.

80. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children,” 30.

Paraphrasing and citing the historical scholarship of Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, Elder Bednar states: "This clarification is more consistent doctrinally. Except for the additional information contained in the Coray records, the concept of unconditional salvation for disobedient children would contradict many foundational teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, including the second article of faith that 'men will be punished for their own sins' (A of F 1:2)."

The Apostle further advocates that the Coray's expanded transcription "is in accordance with numerous examples in the standard works," including several examples in the Book of Mormon. Elder Bednar relates the teachings of Alma to his wayward son, Corianton (Alma 39:8–9), as well as Samuel the Lamanite's declaration to the Nephites of the necessity for repentance (Hel. 14:29–31). "A number of additional scriptures likewise substantiate the principle that men and women are agents blessed with moral agency and are accountable for their own thoughts, words, and deeds," he explained in his *Ensign* article.⁸¹ Like President Faust before him, Elder Bednar emphasized the need for equilibrium between agency and accountability when it came to sin. It was this perceived lack of doctrinal balance that seems to make some of the General Authorities uneasy about the ways some members of the Church have understood Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon.

In the third section of his article, "The Tentacles of Divine Providence," Elder Bednar seeks to clarify additional points relating to Elder Whitney's 1929 teachings. He quotes the relevant passages from President Faust's 2003 general conference address, which "provided the most comprehensive explanation of this eternally important concept." Elder Bednar then closes his discussion of the matter with a synopsis of what has been revealed on the tender subject.

President Faust's teachings authoritatively summarize the things we do and do not know about righteous parents and wayward children. The influence of parents who honor covenants and obey commandments indeed can have a decisive spiritual impact upon children who stray by activating the tentacles of divine Providence—in ways that have not been revealed fully and are not understood completely. However, righteous parental influence (1) does not replace in the life of an individual the need for the redeeming and strengthening power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, (2) does not overrule the consequences of the unrighteous exercise of moral agency, and (3) does not negate the

81. Bednar, "Faithful Parents and Wayward Children," 30–31.

responsibility of an individual as an agent “to act . . . and not to be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:26).⁸²

Elder Bednar concludes his doctrinal overview by pointing Latter-day parents to the models of faithful fathers and mothers in the Book of Mormon who likewise struggled with wayward children millennia earlier. He cited the examples of Father Lehi with his sons Laman and Lemuel (1 Ne. 2:9–11; 2 Ne. 1:12, 14, 16–17, 19) and Alma the Elder with Alma the Younger (Mosiah 27:14, 24) in the Book of Mormon. “As parents are patient and persistent in loving their children and in becoming living examples of disciples of Jesus Christ, they most effectively teach the Father’s plan of happiness. The steadfastness of such parents bears powerful witness of the redeeming and strengthening powers of the Savior’s Atonement and invites wayward children to see with new eyes and to hear with new ears (see Matthew 13:43),” Elder Bednar concludes. “Acting in accordance with the teachings of the Savior invites spiritual power into our lives—power to hear and heed, power to discern, and power to persevere. Devoted discipleship is the best and only answer to every question and challenge.”⁸³

Conclusion: “Tentacles of Divine Providence”

Latter-day Saint parents striving for righteousness hold their temple blessings, especially their priesthood sealings, dear to their hearts. They are aware of and seek for the fulfillment of the incredible blessings associated with their temple covenants. To begin with, worthy individuals enter into the “new and everlasting covenant” when they are sealed as couples in temples by priesthood authority. They rejoice in taking this essential step towards gaining exaltation, which promises the highest degree of glory in the celestial kingdom of God to those who are faithful.

These couples are also promised that they can be together forever as an eternal family unit; as they honor their temple covenants, they never need fear separation at death. As they have children in mortality, these sons and daughters are likewise sealed to them for eternity. Families can be together forever as each member honors their own gospel covenants. Moreover, when righteous couples are sealed in the temple they are promised the blessings of Abraham, including assurances of eternal posterity and everlasting increase. They can enjoy confidence that their

82. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children,” 31–32.

83. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children,” 33.

children and their children's children will have access to the blessings of the gospel of salvation as they choose to exercise faith in Jesus Christ, repent, and accept salvific ordinances themselves, whether in this life or the life to come.

Finally, righteous parents gain spiritual strength and protection by participating repeatedly in temple ordinances, including sealings, for their deceased ancestors. Returning to the temple again and again provides patrons with an eternal perspective of the entire plan of salvation and reassures struggling parents of the divine love and mercy of our Father in Heaven and Savior Jesus Christ. The temple can remind them what Elder Patrick Kearon has taught: "God is in relentless pursuit" of both them and their posterity. "Everything about the Father's plan for His beloved children is designed to bring everyone home."⁸⁴

Righteous parents of wayward children in the twenty-first century Church continue to exercise faith in the Good Shepherd, just as Elder Orson F. Whitney had counseled in general conference. They hold out hope that Elder Whitney's so-called "tentacles of Divine Providence,"⁸⁵ the symbolic flexible limbs or appendages of God, will reach out and help guide their straying children back into the spiritual safety of the gospel sheepfold, even if they are unsure how this will be accomplished during mortality or in the hereafter.⁸⁶ Along with Elder Whitney these parents express optimism that "our Heavenly Father is far more merciful, infinitely more charitable, than even the best of his servants, and the Everlasting Gospel is mightier in power to save than our narrow finite minds can comprehend."⁸⁷ They put their trust in a loving God and Christ while acknowledging the need for doctrinal balance within the plan of salvation. They honor their own temple covenants, regardless of their children's choices.

In a pastoral February 1997 *Ensign* article, for example, Elder John K. Carmack of the Quorum of the Seventy acknowledged that Latter-day Saints "may not understand exactly how" their temple sealings may

84. Patrick Kearon, "God's Intent Is to Bring You Home," *Liahona*, May 2024, 87.

85. A Google Books search reveals that Whitney's memorable phrase, "tentacles of Divine Providence," was unique to him and first appeared in his April 1929 general conference sermon.

86. See Terryl L. Givens, "How Limited Is Postmortal Progress?," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 127–38. "Any postmortal progress at all—within or beyond the spirit world—would in no way suggest shortcuts, cheap grace, or exemption from all salvational requirements," Givens clarifies in his essay. "Progress would in any case require conformity to all the principles and ordinances of the gospel" (135, emphasis in original).

87. Whitney, *Ninety-Ninth Annual Conference*, 110.

influence their wayward posterity. “But we can understand that there is more to the relationship of righteous parents and their children than we fully understand in this life and more help available with the problems that arise in that relationship than we grasp with our worldly logic. We are not alone in our struggle to save and preserve the sealing between us and our children.”⁸⁸

Moreover, President James E. Faust in his April 2003 general conference address recognized the limitations of our mortal comprehension. He shared, “Perhaps in this life we are not given to fully understand how enduring the sealing cords of righteous parents are to their children. It may very well be that there are more helpful sources at work than we know. I believe there is a strong familial pull as the influence of beloved ancestors continues with us from the other side of the veil.” President Faust then concluded, “To those brokenhearted parents who have been righteous, diligent, and prayerful in the teaching of their disobedient children, we say to you, the Good Shepherd is watching over them. God knows and understands your deep sorrow. There is hope.”⁸⁹

Elder David A. Bednar, in his March 2014 *Ensign* article, likewise encouraged Latter-day Saints to honor their temple covenants and seek for the promised blessings. He counseled, “Though many subsequent Church leaders have differed in their emphasis on various aspects of the statements by Joseph Smith, Orson F. Whitney, and others, they agree on the fact that parents who honor temple covenants are in a position to exert great spiritual influence over time on their children. Faithful members of the Church can find comfort in knowing that they can lay claim to the promises of divine guidance and power, through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost and the privileges of the priesthood, in their efforts to help family members receive the blessings of salvation and exaltation.” Elder Bednar suggested that the “tentacles of Divine Providence” pronounced by Elder Whitney “may be considered a type of spiritual power, a heavenly pull or tug that entices a wandering child to return to the fold eventually. Such an influence cannot override the moral agency of a child but nonetheless can invite and beckon” them to exercise faith, repent, and accept the doctrine of Christ.⁹⁰

88. See also John K. Carmack, “When Our Children Go Astray,” *Ensign*, February 1997, 13.

89. Faust, “Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered,” 62.

90. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children,” 31.

During a general conference leadership meeting, Church President Russell M. Nelson spoke on the “Everlasting Covenant,” which seems to echo the hopes of Elder Whitney as a righteous parent. Covenants call for greater accountability but also provide increased privilege. “Once we make a covenant with God, we leave neutral ground forever. God will not abandon His relationship with those who have forged such a bond with Him. In fact, all those who have made a covenant with God have access to a special kind of love and mercy. In the Hebrew language, that covenantal love is called *hesed* (חֶסֶד).”⁹¹ The prophet continued to explain the blessings of these covenants, including to those souls who struggle to stay on the gospel path. “Because God has *hesed* for those who have covenanted with Him, He will love them. He will continue to work with them and offer them opportunities to change. He will forgive them when they repent. And should they stray, He will help them find their way back to Him.”⁹² President Nelson closed his remarks with the following promise, which should give every parent hope within the gospel plan: “The covenant path is all about our relationship with God—our *hesed* relationship with Him. When we enter a covenant with God, we have made a covenant with Him who will always keep His word. He will do everything He can, without infringing on our agency, to help us keep ours.”⁹³

Given Elder Whitney's reliance on the 1843 Nauvoo teachings of Joseph Smith for his 1929 general conference sermon, it seems fitting to conclude with a related teaching of the Prophet on the perfect goodness of God. In a Nauvoo newspaper editorial on baptism for the dead, Joseph Smith cautioned his fellow mortals to leave judgement of this world's children to their loving Heavenly Father:

But while one portion of the human race are judging and condemning the other without mercy, the great parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care, and paternal regard; he views them as his offspring; and without any of those contracted feelings

91. Russell M. Nelson, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Liahona*, October 2022, 5.

92. Nelson, “Everlasting Covenant,” 6.

93. Nelson, “Everlasting Covenant,” 11. President Dallin H. Oaks has likewise taught: “We have a loving Heavenly Father who will see that we receive every blessing and every advantage that our own desires and choices allow. We also know that He will force no one into a sealing relationship against his or her will. The blessings of a sealed relationship are assured for all who keep their covenants but never by forcing a sealed relationship on another person who is unworthy or unwilling.” Dallin H. Oaks, “Kingdoms of Glory,” *Liahona*, November 2023, 29. See also Noel B. Reynolds, ‘Biblical *hesed* and Nephite Covenant Culture,’ *BYU Studies* 60, no. 4 (2021): 143–72.

that influence the children of men, causes “*his sun* to rise on the evil and the good; and sends *his rain* on the just and unjust.” He holds the reins of judgment in his hands; he is a wise lawgiver, and will judge all men, {not according to the narrow contracted notions of men, but} “according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil;” or whether these deeds were done in England, America, Spain, Turkey[, or] India.⁹⁴

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94. Ed. [Joseph Smith], “Baptism for the Dead,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 12 (April 15, 1842): 759. “While [Joseph Smith] likely authored many of the paper’s editorial passages, John Taylor reportedly assisted him in writing content. No matter who wrote individual editorial pieces, [Joseph Smith] assumed editorial responsibility for all installments naming him as editor,” clarify the editors of the *Joseph Smith Papers*. “Selections from *Times and Seasons*, 15 April 1842,” in *Documents, Volume 9: December 1841–April 1842*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Christian K. Heimbürger, and Christopher James Blythe, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian’s Press, 2019), 372n271.

Getting to Know Brother Joseph

Resources from the Joseph Smith Papers for Latter-day Saints

Matthew C. Godfrey

I had just wrapped up a presentation on the Joseph Smith Papers (JSP) to an Education Week class at Brigham Young University. A woman approached me, somewhat timidly. After saying hello, she got right to the point. “I know the Joseph Smith Papers are a valuable resource,” she said, “but how can I use them? I’m just an ordinary member of the Church. Where do I start? How do I begin?”

Those questions were not unfamiliar to me. I had heard them many times before. People were aware of declarations from Church leaders such as former Church Historian Elder Marlin K. Jensen, who said that the JSP was “the single most significant historical project of our generation,” but they wondered what that meant for them.¹ This woman and others with similar queries wondered how lay, interested Church members could navigate the massive amount of information the JSP had produced.

As a trained public historian, I have frequently explored questions about the impact of history on the general populace. Scholar Michael Kammen noted “that history is an essential ingredient in defining national, group, and personal identity,” and “that individuals and small groups who are strongly tradition-oriented commonly seek to stimulate a shared sense of the past within their region” or communities.² In the

1. Trent Toone, “A Look Back at the History of the Joseph Smith Papers, Its Impact and What’s Coming in 2023,” *Church News*, published by *Deseret News*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/history/2022/9/27/23354978/joseph-smith-papers-project-history-2023/>.

2. Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (Vintage Books, 1991), 10.

case of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, history is a key component of the Saints' identity—and the identity of the Church itself. In fact, one of the first commandments Joseph Smith received after the formation of the Church was to keep a historical record (see D&C 21:1). But producing accurate and scholarly material that effectively engages the general Church membership can sometimes be challenging.

The JSP was conceived in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a way “to publish every extant document” composed by Joseph Smith “or by his scribes in his behalf, as well as other records that were created under his direction or that reflect his personal instruction or involvement.”³ The idea was to pattern the project after documentary editing projects at universities who publish the papers of the country's founders: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, to name a few.⁴ Over the course of roughly twenty years, more than six hundred individuals worked on the JSP, producing twenty-seven print volumes, a website, and a host of other resources. The print volumes themselves contain 1,306 journal entries, 643 letters, and 155 revelations. The volumes total 18,882 pages, 7,457,072 words, and 49,687 footnotes.⁵ With such an abundance of information, it is no wonder that some Latter-day Saints find it daunting to approach the JSP.

Yet there is certainly a desire among many Church members to get to know Joseph Smith better, especially in an age where, as the angel Moroni prophesied in 1823, his name is “had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues” (JS–H 1:33). Working on the JSP, I understood that the project's primary audience comprised historians and religious studies scholars interested in Joseph Smith's life, the workings of the early Church, and the religious history of the United States. But my colleagues and I also realized that we had a strong secondary audience. Because members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints revere Joseph Smith as a prophet of God and the one who restored

3. Richard Bushman and Dean C. Jessee, “Joseph Smith and His Papers: An Introduction,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, Church Historian's Press, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/joseph-smith-and-his-papers-an-introduction>.

4. “The Washington Papers,” University of Virginia, <https://washingtonpapers.org/>; “The Papers of Thomas Jefferson,” Princeton University, <https://jeffersonpapers.princeton.edu/>; “The Papers of Benjamin Franklin,” Yale University, <https://franklinpapers.org/>. All websites accessed May 27, 2025.

5. Trent Toone, “After Two Decades, Church Celebrates Final Volume of the Joseph Smith Papers Project,” *Church News*, June 27, 2023, 6–7, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/history/2023/6/27/23759796/joseph-smith-papers-final-volume-published-hyrum-smith-martyrdom-elder-david-a-bednar/>.

the true Church of Christ to the earth, many have a strong interest in his life. We hoped that the project would thus engage both scholars and Church members.

However, we also understood that the published volumes of the JSP were written as reference books, not as something someone would read from cover to cover. The annotation accompanying the primary historical documents is written in a scholarly tone that is not as accessible for general audiences. Moreover, some of the “barbed wire” that documentary editors place in transcriptions (to convey deletions, insertions, and other characteristics of original documents) can be overwhelming. In addition to the massive amount of information contained in the JSP, these are other reasons why Church members can find the project difficult to navigate.

Even with these challenges, there are ways that the JSP volumes can be useful resources for Latter-day Saints—both directly and through other projects that draw from the JSP. This article will discuss some of the benefits the JSP can bring to Church members. It will focus on how it has influenced other products, what resources the JSP has generated for Latter-day Saints, and the impact getting to know Joseph Smith through the JSP can have on Church members’ testimonies of prophets and Jesus Christ.

Influence on Other Products

The JSP has benefited Church members by influencing other publications geared toward a general Church audience. One of the most important of these was the 2013 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. As the Church was preparing that edition, members of the Church’s Scriptures Committee approached Elder Marlin K. Jensen, the Church Historian at the time, and Richard E. Turley Jr., assistant Church Historian, and asked for their input. The two informed the committee that the JSP had information that could correct dates and places of revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants headings as well as provide new or revised context for the revelations. Matthew Grow, the director of the Church History Department’s Publications Division, received the assignment to coordinate with JSP historians and prepare a set of recommendations.⁶

One reason why the JSP team was able to provide corrections to headings was because of its access to the Book of Commandments and

6. “The Genesis of the Joseph Smith Papers Project,” October 2, 2017, herein, 91.

Revelations, a record book that had long been out of the public eye. Church leaders purchased a blank book sometime in the year following the Church's organization in April 1830, and John Whitmer, who was appointed in March 1831 to "write & keep a regulal [regular] history" of the Church, probably began copying revelations in it around the same time as his appointment. The versions of many revelations in this record are the earliest versions we have. Whitmer "likely composed" his own headings to the revelations, providing dates and locations of where they were given. The record book was ultimately used as the source text for the printing of the Book of Commandments in 1833.⁷

For some revelations, the information provided by Whitmer and other scribes either differed from what was in the headings in the Doctrine and Covenants or provided more specificity. For example, the heading to section 48 stated that the revelation was given in March 1831. Because of the heading in the Book of Commandments and Revelations, we now know that Joseph Smith received the revelation on March 10, 1831.⁸

Changes to the heading of section 49 were even more significant. That heading had the date of the revelation as March 1831. However, the version in the Book of Commandments and Revelations clearly states that the revelation was given on May 7, 1831—two months later. This correction is important because the revelation commanded Sidney Rigdon, Parley P. Pratt, and Leman Copley to go to North Union, Ohio, and preach the gospel to a community of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing (also known as Shakers), a group to which Copley had previously belonged. If the revelation was given in March, then Rigdon, Pratt, and Copley would have waited two months before making their journey to North Union since they did not arrive there until early May. Because of the corrected date, it is clear that the three immediately obeyed the revelation's direction and traveled to the Shaker

7. "Revelation, circa 8 March 1831–B [D&C 47]," in Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2013), 286, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-circa-8-march-1831-b-dc-47/1>; see also Historical Introduction, "Revelation Book 1," in Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2011), 5–8, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/5#historical-intro>. Original spelling and strikethroughs are retained for all JSP documents herein.

8. The Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 87 (hereafter cited as Doctrine and Covenants [1981]); "Revelation, circa 8 March 1831–B [D&C 47]," 286–88.

community.⁹ The correction highlights how important obedience to these commandments was to early Church leaders.

Other changes to the headings came from deeper research by JSP historians regarding the context behind the revelations. Sections 78, 82, 92, 96, and 104 in the Doctrine and Covenants all refer to individuals belonging to an “order” that would “manage the affairs of the poor, and all things pertaining to the bishopric both in the land of Zion and in the land of Kirtland” (D&C 82:11–12, 20). Some sections refer to this as “the united order” (D&C 92:1; 104:1). Because Brigham Young established united orders in Utah Territory during the 1860s and 1870s, many believed that the word “order” in these sections referred to a united order. For example, the Guide to the Scriptures entry on churchofjesuschrist.org for “United Order” defines it as “an organization through which the Saints in the early days of the restored Church sought to live the law of consecration” and refers to verses in sections 78, 82, 92, 96, and 104.¹⁰

However, as JSP historians worked on these revelations, it became apparent that the earliest versions did not refer to an “order,” but to a “firm.” In addition, the earliest versions of sections 78 and 82 did not contain the language “regulating and establishing the affairs of the storehouses for the poor” (D&C 78:3–4; see also 82:12) when stating the purpose of the organization. Instead, the revelations referred to a “firm” that would “be an organization of the Literary and Merchantile establishments of my church.”¹¹

If these revelations did not refer to united orders that would later become prevalent in Utah Territory, what did they refer to? And why does different language now exist in the revelations? Work by JSP historians explained that the organization set up at this time was actually called the United Firm. Members of the firm each had stewardship over some aspect of the Church’s financial and literary endeavors, including the publication of the Book of Commandments in Independence,

9. Doctrine and Covenants [1981], 88; “Revelation, 7 May 1831 [D&C 49],” in MacKay and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 297–98, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-7-may-1831-dc-49/1#historical-intro>; Lawrence R. Flake, “A Shaker View of a Mormon Mission,” *BYU Studies* 20, no. 1 (1979): 94–99.

10. “United Order,” Guide to the Scriptures, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/united-order>.

11. “Revelation, 1 March 1832 [D&C 78],” in Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 198, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-1-march-1832-dc-78/1>.

Missouri, and the operation of Church stores (or storehouses) in Kirtland, Ohio, and Independence.¹²

Who were the individuals with those responsibilities? A revelation dictated by Joseph Smith in November 1831 appointed Joseph Smith, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, John Whitmer, Sidney Rigdon, and William W. Phelps as “stewards over the revelations”—those responsible for their publication.¹³ Other revelations designated Newel K. Whitney’s Kirtland store as a storehouse for the Church and directed Sidney Gilbert to establish a storehouse in Independence.¹⁴ Finally, Edward Partridge and Whitney were bishops in the Church, responsible for temporal matters.¹⁵ It made sense, then, that these nine men were the ones commanded to establish the United Firm in 1832. Later revelations added another two men to the firm: Frederick G. Williams and John Johnson, both of whom had large landholdings in Ohio necessary to help fund the Church’s literary and mercantile endeavors.¹⁶

For approximately two years (1832–34), the United Firm was an important administrative body in the Church. Not only did it help direct the Church’s finances, but since it included Church leaders in

12. The project built on the work of Lyndon W. Cook, who was one of the first historians to discuss the United Firm. Lyndon W. Cook, *Joseph Smith and the Law of Consecration* (Grandin Book, 1985), 57–70.

13. “Revelation, 12 November 1831 [D&C 70]” in Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 140, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-12-november-1831-dc-70/1>.

14. “Revelation, 4 December 1831–B [D&C 72:9–23],” in Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 151 and 152 n. 56, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-4-december-1831-b-dc-729-23/1#historical-intro>; “Revelation, 20 July 1831 [D&C 57],” in Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 11, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-20-july-1831-dc-57/1>.

15. “Revelation, 4 February 1831 [D&C 41],” in MacKay and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 241–45, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-4-february-1831-dc-41/1>; “Revelation, 4 December 1831–A [D&C 72:1–8],” in Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 146–50, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-4-december-1831-a-dc-721-8/1>; “Revelation, 11 November 1831–B [D&C 107 (partial)],” in Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 132–36, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-11-november-1831-b-dc-107-partial/1>.

16. “Revelation, 15 March 1833 [D&C 92],” in Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Brent M. Rogers, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 3: February 1833–March 1834*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2014), 37, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-15-march-1833-dc-92/1>; “Revelation, 4 June 1833 [D&C 96],” in Dirkmaat and others, *Documents, Volume 3*, 111–12, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-4-june-1833-dc-96/2>.

both Ohio and Missouri, it served as a way for Joseph Smith to obtain information about the progress of the city of Zion in Missouri.¹⁷ The assets of the firm were necessary for the financing of Church endeavors, such as the construction of the Kirtland House of the Lord.¹⁸ However, the expulsion of the Saints from Jackson County, Missouri, destroyed two important components of the firm: the printing office in Independence and Gilbert's storehouse. Mounting debts from the stocking of goods in the storehouses, the purchase of land, and a new printing press for the Church pushed the firm into financial turmoil.¹⁹ In April 1834, Joseph Smith dictated a revelation that assigned the different stewardships of the firm to individual firm members.²⁰ This effectively ended the United Firm. Apparently wanting to prevent creditors from holding other members of the firm responsible for its debts, Joseph Smith directed that language be changed in the revelations pertaining to the United Firm, including the names of the individuals involved, to mask the true purposes of the firm and to protect identities.²¹

With these findings, new information was added to the headings of sections 78, 82, and 104 in the Doctrine and Covenants. In addition, JSP historians published research on the United Firm in *BYU Studies* and *Revelations in Context*.²² This allowed Latter-day Saints to have a better

17. See, for example, "Letter to Edward Partridge and Others, 30 March 1834," in Dirkmaat and others, *Documents, Volume 3*, 488–98, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-edward-partridge-and-others-30-march-1834/1>.

18. Historical Introduction, "Revelation, 27–28 December 1832 [D&C 88:1–126]," in Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 335, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-27-28-december-1832-dc-881-126/1#historical-intro>.

19. Matthew C. Godfrey, "Newel K. Whitney and the United Firm," in *Revelations in Context: The Stories Behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants*, Matthew McBride and James Goldberg, eds. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 145; also available at Matthew C. Godfrey, "Newel K. Whitney and the United Firm," Doctrine and Covenants Study, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/revelations-in-context/newel-k-whitney-and-the-united-firm>.

20. "Revelation, 23 April 1834 [D&C 104]," in Matthew C. Godfrey, Brenden W. Rensink, Alex D. Smith, Max H. Parkin, and Alexander L. Baugh, eds., *Documents, Volume 4: April 1834–September 1835*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2016), 23–31, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-23-april-1834-dc-104/1>.

21. Max H. Parkin, "Joseph Smith and the United Firm: The Growth and Decline of the Church's First Master Plan of Business and Finance, Ohio and Missouri, 1832–1834," *BYU Studies* 46, no. 3 (2007): 33–34; David J. Whittaker, "Substituted Names in the Published Revelations of Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 23, no. 1 (1983): 103–12; Godfrey, "Newel K. Whitney and the United Firm," 146.

22. Parkin, "Joseph Smith and the United Firm," 5–66; Godfrey, "Newel K. Whitney and the United Firm," 142–47.

understanding of the contents of these sections and restored to the historical record an important administrative body of the Church that had largely been overlooked or misinterpreted.

In total, the JSP research corrected errors, added additional context, or made other adjustments to approximately eighty section headings in the 2013 Doctrine and Covenants. At the same time, headings were added to the two Official Declarations that provided important context for the Church's historical practice of plural marriage and the racial priesthood and temple restrictions.²³ These additions and changes help Latter-day Saints gain new insights into our history and provide more accurate context for the Doctrine and Covenants.

Another noteworthy publication to which the JSP contributed is *Revelations in Context: The Stories Behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants*, published by the Church in 2016. This book contains over fifty short essays on the historical context of nearly every section in the Doctrine and Covenants. JSP scholars wrote many of these essays, and nearly all were based on research and scholarship completed as part of the JSP project. Many of the essays relied on information from the historical introductions to revelations in the *Documents* series of the JSP about how, where, and why Joseph Smith received a revelation. The historical introductions also provide background about the individuals to whom revelations were directed—useful information for the context of the revelations.

For example, the essay in *Revelations in Context* on section 33—a revelation for Ezra Thayer and Northrop Sweet—cites the JSP to correct a mistake that some historians had made: identifying Ezra Thayer as hailing from Massachusetts and being married to Polly Wales. But *Documents, Volume 1*, and the biographical database of the JSP²⁴ correctly identifies Thayer as coming from New York and being married to Elizabeth Frank—a fact that the *Revelations in Context* essay points out

23. “Summary of Approved Adjustments for the 2013 Edition of the Scriptures,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 17, 2025, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/scriptures/approved-adjustments_eng.pdf; “Adjustments to the Introductory Material of the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 17, 2025, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/scriptures/scripture-comparison_eng.pdf.

24. “Revelation, October 1830–B [D&C 33],” in MacKay and others, *Documents Volume 1*, 205–8, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-october-1830-b-dc-33/1#historical-intro>; “Thayer, Ezra,” People, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/person/ezra-thayer>.

in a footnote.²⁵ Although some may believe that such details are inconsequential, they help preserve a more accurate historical record and ensure that early Church members are not forgotten or misidentified.

Another essay in *Revelations in Context* covers a few weeks in the fall of 1831 when William E. McLellin witnessed Joseph Smith dictating several revelations, including what are currently sections 1, 65, 66, 67, 68, and 133 in the Doctrine and Covenants. Drawing from the historical introductions to these documents in *Documents, Volume 2*, of the JSP, the article traces McLellin's involvement in the revelations, providing a personal face to the documents. Although McLellin would later leave the Church, he testified that he could not refute that these revelations came from God through Joseph Smith.²⁶

An important factor with *Revelations in Context* is its easy accessibility. In addition to a printed volume that is available through Church Distribution Services, the book is in the Gospel Library app. The *Come, Follow Me* manual also provides links to the essays in pertinent lessons. This allows Church members to readily access context behind the revelations based largely on the work of the JSP.

Another excellent resource for Latter-day Saints is volume one of *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*.²⁷ This volume covers the Church's history from Joseph Smith's First Vision in 1820 to the dedication of the temple in Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1846, shortly before the Saints departed that city for the Great Basin. Written in an accessible narrative style geared especially toward the rising generation, *Saints* tells the history of the Church during this time through accounts of individuals who lived through and experienced that history. Because Joseph Smith is a key figure in the volume, *Saints* relies heavily on the JSP to tell the story of Joseph and the Church. Footnotes throughout the volume point readers toward documents and analysis in the JSP, allowing readers to access the findings of the project more easily. Patrick Mason, current Leonard J. Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture at

25. See Matthew McBride, "Ezra Thayer: From Skeptic to Believer," in McBride and Goldberg, *Revelations in Context*, 61 n. 1, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/revelations-in-context/ezra-thayer-from-skeptic-to-believer>.

26. W. E. McLellin, *The Ensign of Liberty of the Church of Christ* 1, no. 4 (January 1848), 61; see Matthew C. Godfrey, "William McLellin's Five Questions," in McBride and Goldberg, *Revelations in Context*, 137–41, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/revelations-in-context/william-mcclellins-five-questions>.

27. *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, vol. 1, *The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018).

Utah State University, declared that *Saints* helps “the person who has never picked up a book of church history or a volume of the Joseph Smith Papers Project” learn more about the early history of the Church based on information in the JSP.²⁸

For example, chapter 6 in *Saints, Volume 1*, deals with the translation of the Book of Mormon. The endnotes to this chapter cite over thirty different sources, of which half are contained in the JSP. Though many of these citations are to revelations or histories, other chapters contain references to Joseph Smith’s correspondence, journals, discourses, and meeting minutes—all of which are included in the JSP. The bibliography of *Saints* lists sixteen published volumes of the JSP as references. As the acknowledgements page in *Saints* explains, “The historical analysis in the book depends particularly on *The Joseph Smith Papers*.”²⁹

Joseph Smith Papers Resources

When many people think about the JSP, they think of the twenty-seven published volumes that contain a host of documents and information about the life and ministry of Joseph Smith. These volumes are the backbone of the JSP, but they are not the only products or resources that the project developed. One of the most useful resources is the JSP website, josephsmithpapers.org, a state-of-the-art site that contains an abundance of information. About eighteen months after the publication of a volume, the project uploads its contents to the website, including introductions and annotation. That means every document found in the published volumes is available online—and more.

For example, in 1836, Joseph Smith signed hundreds of priesthood licenses for individuals. Since these licenses would fill at least a couple of published volumes—and believing few would want to buy a volume containing just priesthood licenses—the JSP did not publish in print every license signed by Joseph, even though they are all considered Joseph Smith documents. Instead, the project only printed representative

28. Quotation in Peggy Fletcher Stack and Scott D. Pierce, “Mormon Church Publishes Its First Official History in Nearly a Century, and the Result is an Easy-to-Read Volume That Tackles Some Hard Facts,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2018/09/04/mormon-church-publishes/>; see also “First Volume of ‘Saints’ Now Available: Official Latter-day Saint History Published in 14 Languages,” Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, September 4, 2018, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/first-volume-saints-now-available>.

29. *Saints*, 683.

samples of these licenses in the published volumes. However, every one of these licenses is available on the JSP website.³⁰

Likewise, there are numerous Joseph Smith documents related to land purchases in Nauvoo, Illinois, including promissory notes and bonds. Representative examples of these documents were published in the printed volumes, but all the extant promissory notes and bonds are on the website.³¹ The website thus provides access to more documents than the printed volumes, especially routine documents pertaining to the administration of the Church.

Another helpful feature of the website is its inclusion of guides to certain types of Joseph Smith documents. These guides, located under the “Reference” drop-down menu under “Featured Topics,” provide a brief introduction to the class of documents and then a listing of each pertinent document. For example, someone interested in finding every Joseph Smith document written in his own hand could visit the “Documents in Joseph Smith’s Handwriting” featured topic, read about how rarely Smith wrote documents himself, and find links to every document in his handwriting.³² Other topics include “Joseph Smith’s Correspondence,” “Religious Freedom,” “Joseph Smith and the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo,” “Priesthood Restoration,” and “Sources behind the Doctrine and Covenants” (which provides links to the earliest extant version of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants).³³

30. For an example of a license in a print volume, see “License, 21 March 1836,” in Brent M. Rogers, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Christian K. Heimburger, Max H. Parkin, Alexander L. Baugh, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Documents, Volume 5: October 1835–January 1838*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 186–88. For a listing of licenses on the website, see “Priesthood Licenses Signed by Joseph Smith or the First Presidency,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/priesthood-licenses-signed-by-joseph-smith-or-the-first-presidency>.

31. For an example of these documents in a print volume, see “Land Transaction with Jane Miller, 6 June 1840,” in Matthew C. Godfrey, Spencer W. McBride, Alex D. Smith, and Christopher James Blythe, eds., *Documents, Volume 7: September 1839–January 1841*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2018), 203–11. For examples of these documents on the website, see the listing of documents under “Browse the Papers,” then “Documents,” then “1840,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/documents/1840>.

32. “Documents in Joseph Smith’s Handwriting,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/documents-in-joseph-smiths-handwriting>.

33. “Featured Topics,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/finding-aids>.

An especially useful tool is “Sources for *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*,” which takes this well-known compilation of Joseph Smith’s teachings by Joseph Fielding Smith and provides links to the “earliest known primary sources” behind them. The hope is that the index will “aid researchers in finding more original texts for Joseph Smith quotations” since *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* “was based on B. H. Roberts’s *History of the Church*, which was in turn based on later copies of Joseph Smith documents found in his multivolume manuscript history.”³⁴

One other feature that might be of particular interest to Church members is a collection of short videos produced on various topics in the JSP. In these videos, most of which are under two minutes, a JSP historian shares information on topics such as attempts to extradite Joseph Smith to Missouri in the 1840s, baptisms for the dead in Nauvoo, the Kirtland House of the Lord, and the presence of women’s voices in early Latter-day Saint history. Individuals can watch the videos on the JSP website or on YouTube. They provide short, interesting snippets of Joseph Smith’s life and teachings.³⁵

Another JSP resource that can benefit Church members is the JSP podcast. In 2018, Spencer W. McBride, a JSP historian, received an assignment from the project’s management team to develop a podcast focused on the JSP. McBride’s podcast centers on themes or events in Joseph Smith’s life that are addressed over multiple episodes by scholars from the project as well as Church leaders and experts in the academy. The first event explored was the First Vision. This season was released in January 2020 and consisted of six episodes. Presented in a way to engage Church members interested in Church history, the podcast performed better than expected, leading to four more seasons covering the restoration of priesthood authority, the Nauvoo Temple, the Church in Kirtland, Ohio, and Joseph Smith’s martyrdom.³⁶

The JSP podcast is an excellent way for Latter-day Saints who are not academically trained in history or religious studies to access the findings

34. “Sources for *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 29, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/sources-for-teachings-of-js-by-joseph-fielding-smith>.

35. “Videos,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/media/videos>.

36. Each season of the podcast is available on the website and most streaming platforms. “Joseph Smith Papers Podcasts,” Media, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/joseph-smith-papers-podcasts>.

and analyses of the project. As McBride asked in the prologue to *The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast*, “Have you ever looked at the event [the First Vision] through the eyes of historians? . . . historians who have spent years immersed in Joseph Smith’s surviving documents—scholars, men and women who have walked the fields of history who can tell you what occurred thereon and why those events occurred the way that they did.” Doing so, McBride promised, would help listeners “find a story that is simultaneously familiar and new.”³⁷ This promise extends to the other podcast topics as well. Each episode is meant to be compact, interesting, insightful, and engaging.

In addition to the podcast, the JSP has numerous resources pertaining to the Doctrine and Covenants. An excellent way of finding these resources is by going to “Historical Resources” under “Doctrine and Covenants Study” through the “Church History” tab in the Gospel Library app. Divided into each *Come, Follow Me* curriculum week, this tool provides links to JSP study aids, including biographies of individuals and information about geographic places mentioned in the Doctrine and Covenants. It also links to transcripts and images of the earliest copies of these revelations. For example, for the week focused on Doctrine and Covenants 46 through 48, there are links to the essays in *Revelations in Context* pertaining to these sections as well as links to JSP biographies of Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer, who are associated with these sections. Other links provide a description of the Isaac and Lucy Morley Farm, a chronology of events surrounding the timeframe of these revelations, and the earliest extant copies of the three sections.³⁸ These resources can enhance a study of these sections and offer a deeper glimpse into their historical context.³⁹

37. “Introducing the First Vision’ (The First Vision Podcast, Prologue): Transcript,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/the-first-vision-podcast-episode-0-transcript>.

38. “Doctrine and Covenants 46–48,” Doctrine and Covenants Study, Historical Resources, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/doctrine-and-covenants-historical-resources-2025/20>.

39. Another useful Doctrine and Covenants resource is an ebook collection of all the historical introductions to and transcripts of revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants as found in the Joseph Smith Papers Documents series. The Church Historian’s Press published this compilation in 2020 and updated it in 2024. See Matthew C. Godfrey, R. Eric Smith, Matthew J. Grow, and Ronald K. Esplin, eds., *Joseph Smith’s Revelations: A Doctrine and Covenants Study Companion from the Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian’s Press, 2020); see also “Doctrine and Covenants Study Resources,” Joseph Smith

Showing Who Joseph Smith Really Was

To this point, this article has explored ways that the JSP can enhance our study and understanding of Joseph Smith, the era of Church history in which he lived, and the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants. If the papers provided information only on these subjects, they would be a valuable resource. However, an exploration of the JSP can also enhance spiritual knowledge and understanding about Joseph Smith and his prophetic mission. It can help us see more fully how God works through his servants to further his work and glory of bringing to pass the immortality and eternal lives of his children (see Moses 1:39). It can also deepen our testimony of Jesus Christ and his role in the plan of salvation.

Studying Joseph Smith's life through the JSP has helped me understand his character—who he was as a person. In the past and currently, there are many who disparage Joseph Smith as an impostor, a charlatan, and a megalomaniac. Yet my study of Joseph Smith's life has not revealed a person with these characteristics. Instead, it has shown me a man with flaws and imperfections, as we all have, but who did his best to do what he believed God had commanded him to do. He was a man who cared deeply about his family, the Latter-day Saints, and those in spiritual and temporal need.

One of the ways that we can better perceive Joseph's character is by reading descriptions of him by people who encountered him—especially those who had no reason or motive to depict the Prophet either in a positive or a negative way. To many of these observers, Joseph came across as a man who was sincere and unassuming. For example, in 1840, a Pennsylvania journalist named Matthew L. Davis was in Washington, D.C., as a correspondent. Joseph Smith was also in the nation's capital, having gone there to petition the president of the United States and Congress for redress for the Saints' expulsion from Missouri. While Joseph was there, he preached to a congregation about the tenets of the Church. Davis attended and wrote a letter to his wife, Mary, in Pennsylvania with his observations of “Joe Smith, the celebrated Mormon,” and “his doctrine.” Hoping to “understand his tenets, as Explained by himself,” Davis was favorably impressed with the Prophet. “He is not an Educated man,” Davis told Mary, “but he is a plain, sensible, strong minded man.” Davis continued, “Every thing [Joseph Smith] says, is said in a manner to leave an impression that he is sincere.” Joseph did not strike Davis as

Papers, accessed June 10, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/new-doctrine-and-covenants-study-resources>.

pretentious; instead, “his dress” marked him as “a plain, unpretending Citizen.” Likewise, Joseph did not portray himself as any kind of remarkable person, his calling and spiritual experiences notwithstanding. “He remarked that he had been represented as pretending to be a Saviour, a Worker of Miracles,” Davis stated. “All this was false. He made no such pretensions. He was but a man, he said—a plain untutored man; seeking what he should do to be saved.”⁴⁰

The politician Josiah Quincy Jr. had a similar impression of the Prophet. He visited Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1844, shortly before Joseph Smith was killed, and described him as “a man of commanding appearance,” “a hearty, athletic fellow,” and one who wore “the costume of a journeyman carpenter.”⁴¹ He did not appear to be anyone remarkable or someone who was prideful, egotistical, or narcissistic. Indeed, the descriptions given by Quincy and Davis are not of a megalomaniac; they are of a man who was sincere and unpretentious in his appearance and his mannerisms.

Of course, Joseph did not come across that way to all observers, especially those who already had formed an opinion of him. Julius Alexander Reed, a Congregational minister, for example, wrote a disparaging report about Joseph after seeing him preach in Nauvoo in 1842. Reed accused Joseph of wearing “rich and genteel dress,” called him a “buffoon,” and criticized his “levity and turpitude.”⁴² However, for disinterested observers, Joseph Smith’s demeanor and dress was in stark contrast to what Reed depicted.

This touches on another important aspect of Joseph’s life highlighted by the JSP: He was not a perfect individual and never described himself as perfect. He knew that he had faults and weaknesses just like anyone who lives on the earth, the Savior Jesus Christ excepted. George Washington Taggart, a member of the Church writing to family members in

40. M. L. Davis to Mary Davis, February 6, 1840, 1–2, holograph, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/bf97bc6f-31de-420b-8e45-82c12270814c/0/0>, emphasis in original; see also “Discourse, 5 February 1840,” in Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 7*, 175–79, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-5-february-1840/1>.

41. As cited in Richard Lyman Bushman, with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 3; see also Jed Woodworth, “Josiah Quincy’s 1844 Visit with Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 39, no. 4 (2000): 71–87.

42. [Julius Alexander Reed], “Letter to the Editor,” *Congregational Journal*, March 16, 1843, 2; “Discourse, 25 April 1841, as Reported by Julius Alexander Reed,” 1, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 29, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-25-april-1841-as-reported-by-julius-alexander-reed/1>.

1843, declared that Joseph “does not pretend to be a man with out failings and follies.” He was not “puffed up with His greatness as many suppose.”⁴³ Another observer commented that Joseph Smith “did not profess to be a *very good man*, but acknowledged himself a sinner like other men.”⁴⁴ But Joseph used his weaknesses to teach the Saints that they should help each other overcome their failings. As he said to a group of recently arrived members from New York, “they must not expect him to be perfect; if they expected perfection from him, he should expect it from them, but if they would bear with his infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, he would likewise bear with their infirmities.”⁴⁵

Joseph Smith was also not afraid to publish revelations that pointed to his imperfections and mistakes. When the Book of Commandments was printed in 1833, the second revelation in that compilation was one where God declared that Joseph had “oft . . . transgressed the commandments and the laws of God.” The revelation told the Prophet that he had “suffered the counsel of thy director to be trampled upon from the beginning.” If he did not repent, he would “be delivered up and become as other men, and have no more gift.”⁴⁶ This does not sound like something that a power-hungry man would publish.

Although Joseph Smith himself was gregarious and generally enjoyed being around people, he had experiences in his life that made him feel at times like an outsider. After his vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ in the Sacred Grove, a trusted spiritual leader told him that the experience was of the devil. “He treated my communication not only lightly but with great contempt,” Joseph recalled. This rebuke must have stung

43. “George W. Taggart to [his brothers in New Hampshire],” September 10, 1843, Albert Taggart Correspondence, 1842–1848, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Ronald O. Barney, “‘As Free from Dissimulation as Any Man’: The Authentic Joseph Smith,” in *Know Brother Joseph: New Perspectives on Joseph Smith’s Life and Character*, ed. R. Eric Smith, Matthew C. Godfrey, and Matthew J. Grow (Deseret Book, 2021), 191.

44. John Smith, “Mormonism,” *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 13 (May 15, 1843): 200, emphasis in original; see also Barney, “‘As Free from Dissimulation as Any Man,’” 191.

45. “Discourse, 29 October 1842,” in Spencer W. McBride, Jeffrey D. Mahas, Brett D. Dowdle, and Tyson Reeder, eds., *Documents, Volume 11: September 1842–February 1843*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2020), 190, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-29-october-1842/1>.

46. “Book of Commandments, 1833,” in Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Riley M. Lormer, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2: Published Revelations*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 19, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-commandments-1833/11>; see also Doctrine and Covenants 3:6, 15, 11.

the fourteen-year-old, as did the “great persecution” that followed.⁴⁷ Perhaps because of experiences such as these, Joseph sought out those who were feeling out of place and helped them feel a part of the larger group.

For example, there were two teenagers in the Camp of Israel (Zion’s Camp) expedition who recorded their interactions with Joseph Smith.⁴⁸ One of these was fourteen-year-old Lyman Littlefield. At one point on the expedition, Littlefield was feeling sorry for himself because he was not allowed to participate in a military parade with the men of the camp. He sat on a rock, feeling like he did not belong. Littlefield recalled what happened next: “While thus seated, the Prophet Joseph Smith, who happened to be passing by in quite a hurry, noticed me. He stepped to where I sat alone.” Joseph “really halted in his hurry to notice me—only a little boy. Placing one of his hands upon my head, he said: ‘Well, bub, is there no place for you?’” Then the Prophet walked off.⁴⁹

Though this was not a large gesture that Joseph Smith made, his willingness to notice Littlefield had a major impact. Littlefield later declared, “This recognition from the man whom I then knew was a Prophet of God created within me a tumult of emotions. I could make him no reply. My young heart was filled with joy to me unspeakable.”⁵⁰

Joseph Smith had a similar impact on his sixteen-year-old cousin George A. Smith. George did not have a lot of confidence when he joined the Camp of Israel. He was self-conscious about his appearance, especially his larger size, his unfashionable clothes, and not being able to see well. Perhaps recognizing George’s lack of confidence, Joseph Smith gave the teenager an assignment: Interact with curious onlookers who wanted more information about the group when it marched through

47. “History Drafts, 1838–Circa 1841,” in Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844* (Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 216, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/4>; see also JS–H 1:21–22.

48. “JS and a group of approximately one hundred men had left Kirtland, Ohio, on 5 May, bound for Missouri to aid the Saints who had been expelled from Jackson County in November 1833.” This group of men was known as “the Camp of Israel (and later Zion’s Camp).” “Letter to Emma Smith, 18 May 1834,” Historical Introduction, in Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 49, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-emma-smith-18-may-1834/1#historical-intro>.

49. L. O. Littlefield, “The Prophet Joseph Smith in Zion’s Camp,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27, no. 4 (February 15, 1892): 109; “Littlefield, Lyman Omer,” People, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 11, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/person/lyman-omer-littlefield>.

50. Littlefield, “Prophet Joseph Smith in Zion’s Camp,” 109.

their town. “Joseph invited me to throw myself in a position to answer . . . questions,” George remembered. The invitation helped George have “many amusing conversations with inquisitive strangers,” which he found enjoyable. Joseph’s invitation may have helped him gain self-assurance.⁵¹

These accounts indicate that Joseph Smith had both the tendency and the ability to help those who did not feel like they belonged. He was inclusive, going out of his way to notice individuals who were not part of the larger group and bringing them in. Of course, this does not mean that Joseph was perfect in his human relations. He had a temper and could sometimes act rashly in situations where he felt offended or belittled. But the JSP highlights another attribute of Joseph: the Prophet’s willingness to admit when he was wrong and ask for forgiveness.

One example of this is particularly instructive. In February 1835, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris called twelve men to serve as Apostles in the Church. Not long after, Joseph Smith directed the Twelve Apostles to serve a mission to the eastern United States where they were to solicit funds from Church members “for the construction of the House of the Lord in Kirtland, Ohio; for the redemption of church members’ lands in Jackson County, Missouri, from which the Saints had been violently expelled; “and for the printing of the Doctrine and Covenants.”⁵² After a few weeks, Joseph heard a report from Oliver Cowdery’s brother that the Twelve were not fulfilling these responsibilities. A letter from Apostle William E. McLellin to his wife, Emeline Miller McLellin, also apparently disparaged Sidney Rigdon’s leadership of a school in Kirtland. In response, Joseph, his counselors in the presidency of the high priesthood, and other Church leaders wrote a fiery letter to the Apostles, condemning them for not fulfilling their mission and accusing them of establishing themselves “as an independent counsel subject to no authority of the church—a kind of out laws.”⁵³

After returning to Kirtland from their mission, the Twelve asked to meet with the presidency of the high priesthood and the presidency of the Missouri high council about the letter and the accusation that the

51. “Memoirs of George A. Smith, circa 1860–1882,” 26 [image 34], holograph, Autobiographical Writings, George A. Smith Papers, 1834–1877, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/4c08ca0f-21d3-4f93-bce3-907010163446/0/33>.

52. “Letter to the Quorum of the Twelve, 4 August 1835,” in Godfrey and others, *Documents*, Volume 4, 372, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-quorum-of-the-twelve-4-august-1835/2#historical-intro>.

53. “Letter to the Quorum of the Twelve, 4 August 1835,” 376.

Twelve were not fulfilling their duties. At this meeting, held on September 26, 1835, the Twelve were cleared of the accusations. However, some lingering feelings of resentment remained, leading to another meeting on January 16, 1836, between the Twelve and the presidency of the high priesthood. At this meeting, the letter from Joseph Smith and other Church leaders to the Twelve was raised again, with several Apostles saying that the communication made them believe “that the presidency had lost confidence in them.” The Prophet responded by saying that he “had not lost confidence in them.” He acknowledged that “the chastning contained in the letter in question . . . might have been expressed in too harsh language; which was not intentional.”⁵⁴ He asked the Apostles to forgive him “in as much as I have hurt your feelings.” Joseph continued, “I have sometimes spoken to[o] harsh from the impulse of the moment,” and he asked again for forgiveness. “I love you and will hold you up with all my heart in all righteousness before the Lord,” he concluded.⁵⁵ This seemed to heal the discord between the presidency and the Twelve.⁵⁶ In this instance, Joseph Smith had no issue with admitting he made a mistake and that he was sorry for it. This was not an isolated event in his life. In fact, Joseph frequently seemed eager to rectify past mistakes and heal the friction caused by hasty words or actions.⁵⁷

Perhaps one of the most significant things that the JSP shows is how the Prophet’s teachings and life emphasize the importance of Jesus Christ. There are numerous examples throughout the papers of Joseph Smith where he speaks about Jesus Christ or witnesses of his life and Atonement. These include Joseph’s retelling of some of his earliest spiritual experiences. In his 1832 account of the First Vision, for example, Joseph explained that he “cried unto the Lord for mercy” after becoming convinced of his need for repentance “for there was none else to whom I could go and to obtain mercy.” After doing so, Joseph related that he “saw the Lord,” who forgave his sins.⁵⁸

54. “Minutes, 16 January 1836,” in Rogers and others, *Documents, Volume 5*, 151–52, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-16-january-1836/3>.

55. “Minutes, 16 January 1836,” 152.

56. “Minutes, 16 January 1836,” 149.

57. For another example, see Anthony R. Sweat, “‘The Spirit of Confession and Forgiveness’: Joseph Smith’s 1835 Reconciliation with His Brother William,” in Smith, Godfrey, and Grow, *Know Brother Joseph*, 104–9.

58. “History, circa Summer 1832” in Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 12–13, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>.

Joseph Smith bore a powerful testimony after seeing the Savior on other occasions. In the account of “the Vision” of the afterlife that the Prophet and Sidney Rigdon jointly experienced in February 1832, they declared that they saw Jesus Christ “on the right hand of God & we heard the voice bearing record that he is the only begotten of the Father that by him and through him and of him the worlds are made.”⁵⁹

After the dedication of the House of the Lord in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1836, the Savior visited Joseph and Oliver Cowdery. “His eyes were as a flame of fire,” Joseph’s journal reported, “the hair of his head was like the pure snow, his countenance shone above the brightness of the sun, and his voice was as the sound of the rushing of great waters.” The Savior told Joseph and Oliver that their sins were forgiven and that he was their “Advocate with the Father.”⁶⁰

In an editorial published in the July 1838 issue of the *Elders’ Journal*, Joseph Smith made another strong declaration of the importance of Jesus Christ. Answering the question of what the “fundamental principles” of the Church were, he stated that they consisted of “the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, ‘that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended up into heaven.’” “All other things,” the Prophet continued, “are only appendages to these, which pertain to our religion.” This clearly emphasized the centrality of Jesus Christ and his Atonement to the beliefs of the Latter-day Saints.⁶¹

The JSP, then, can help Latter-day Saints gain more information about Joseph Smith’s true character: how he was perceived by others, how he treated others, and how his teachings helped lead people to Jesus Christ. It does not depict a perfect Joseph Smith or a flawless Joseph Smith. Instead, it shows a man who did his best to try to fulfill what he believed God had asked him to do, regardless of the personal cost. It highlights a man who testified frequently of the importance of Jesus Christ to the world and tried to implement his teachings as he led the Church. All these things can help strengthen testimonies of Joseph Smith’s prophetic role.

59. “Vision, February 16, 1832 [Doctrine and Covenants 76:23–24],” in Godfrey and others, *Documents*, Volume 2, 186, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/vision-16-february-1832-dc-76/3>.

60. “Visions, April 3, 1836 [Doctrine and Covenants 110:3–5],” in Rogers and others, *Documents*, Volume 5, 226, 228, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/visions-3-april-1836-dc-110/1>.

61. “*Elders’ Journal*, July 1838,” 44, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 7, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/elders-journal-july-1838/12>.

Conclusion

The JSP is a treasure trove of information for both academics and Church members who want to know more about Joseph Smith. Although the JSP can seem daunting, there are resources for Latter-day Saints that will help them access the findings and information created by the JSP. These include books and projects that the JSP has influenced, such as *Revelations in Context*, *Saints* volume 1, and the revised headings in the 2013 Doctrine and Covenants. Additional resources include the JSP website with its finding aids, research helps, and videos, as well as the JSP podcast. Using these resources, Latter-day Saints can come to know who Joseph Smith really was and see his efforts to bring individuals closer to Jesus Christ.

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After: Air Raids on Kafr Dan & Refugee Camps near Bethlehem

—Headline, Israeli Palestinian War

It has already begun, the chord that will shiver glass. —Wm Stafford

Horizon-to-horizon demolition . . . I stop watching news
and walk out toward hills, thinking it may be better
to have lived when wars were fought on foot or horseback . . .
and not so far away children still played tag,
the apple harvest started.

I've turned more to books—Stafford, Berry, Yeats:
. . . the center cannot hold . . . rough beast slouching. . . .
Now comes a mending of my gloom and barren thoughts
while I hike among the trees. I've photographed white birch
lined up like choir rows in Oregon; seedlings thriving
out of cliffs near Banff, pushing through vast red-rock
reflecting heat near Burr Trail Road.

Perhaps it is a miracle I can still walk out
to thick-treed wilderness not far from home;
that my father taught beauty is essential as bread,
and other things peaceful, like camp where you can hear water.
That early on I heard the word wild in bewilder. . . .
My thriving times have been like trees flourishing
on the north slopes of hills behind the farm where I grew.
I have been a disciple of quaking aspen
and ponderosa, a fan of coyotes and crickets.
I wish such choices for all the shattering world.

Where I walk now in the dusk, soothing cricket-songs
stop when I stop. There's tension in that silence . . .
as though only my moving on is acceptable, as though
staying quiet and blissfully bewildered
cannot be sustained.

—Dixie L. Partridge

This poem won second place in the 2025 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.

The Joseph Smith Papers and My Christian Discipleship

Spencer W. McBride

I started working for the Joseph Smith Papers Project in 2014 as a historian assigned to volumes in the Documents series. In the years that followed, I joined the project's leadership team as associate managing historian and produced, wrote, and hosted the project's five podcast series. When many of my fellow members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints find out that I spent a decade immersed in the work of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, they ask about my faith. Over the years, I have responded repeatedly to some version of this question: How has your work on the Joseph Smith Papers affected your testimony? They want to know if such a deep dive into the history of Joseph Smith and the Church has weakened or strengthened my faith in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

The answer to that question is easy to give but harder to explain. My testimony is unequivocally stronger because of my work on the Joseph Smith Papers, but it is also more complex. It is that last point that typically elicits follow-up questions, some having assumed that a more complicated testimony is somehow inherently a weaker testimony. In fact, my testimony is stronger because my understanding of Church history is now more complex.

Of course, by more complex, I do not mean to suggest that people need to overthink the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is simple; it is meant to be simple. Simple testimonies can be strong testimonies. Yet, Latter-day Saints should not be afraid of complexity in the history of the Restoration of the gospel, as long as they understand its place in their pursuit of faith. As I researched and waded through the Church's

complex history and through the lives and faith of the first Latter-day Saints, I found that the events of the Restoration were carried out by a perfect God working with imperfect people. Although imperfect people relied on imperfect processes, the messiness of these historical events does not make the Restoration any less real. On the contrary, to me, it makes the events of the Restoration all the more miraculous and the mercy and kindness of God toward his children all the more apparent. To illustrate what I mean, I will briefly share three lessons that I learned about Christian discipleship from my decade of work on the Joseph Smith Papers.

Prophetic Authority and Humility

My deep study of Church history has influenced the way I think about prophets and prophetic authority. When Latter-day Saints say they have testimonies of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it also means they have testimonies of prophets. I believe in prophets, past and present; I believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet. However, spending so many years working on his surviving papers has complicated—in a good way—my understanding of what prophetic authority is and the humility it takes to sustain a prophet.

As Latter-day Saints, we generally recognize and accept that prophets are not perfect. But recognizing that truth is one thing and comprehending its practical application is another. How do we recognize that prophets are fallible men called to a divine work and still sustain them? How do we maintain our faith when a prophet says something that is hard for us to hear or with which we do not instantly agree?

To this end, I turn to one of my favorite documents in the Joseph Smith Papers, a discourse by the Prophet from October 29, 1842. On this occasion, Joseph Smith greeted a boat full of recent converts who had just arrived in Nauvoo, Illinois, from New York. He welcomed them to the city and then gave them a word of counsel that illuminates how Joseph understood his own prophetic authority. He declared, “[I am] but a man and [you] must not expect [me] to be perfect; if [you expect] perfection from [me], [I should] expect it from [you], but if [you will] bear with [my] infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, [we will] likewise bear with [your] infirmities.”¹

1. “Discourse, 29 October 1842,” in *Documents, Volume 11: September 1842–February 1843*, ed. Spencer W. McBride, Jeffrey D. Mahas, Brett D. Dowdle, and Tyson Reeder, Joseph

In this instance, Joseph Smith addressed common frustrations among Saints who had arrived in Nauvoo. New converts came to the city with very lofty expectations, assuming that a prophet residing in the city would mean that the community was free of the growing pains faced by other American communities at that same time. It was not. Many also assumed that Joseph would lead perfectly. He did not. What particularly draws me to this discourse is that in it, Joseph Smith understood his calling as a prophet of God and felt the need to recalibrate the Saints' expectations of prophetic authority.²

For me, this means that I do not expect perfection from those called to lead the Church. I do not expect to agree with every decision that leaders make. Perfection is not a prerequisite for my sustaining vote. I do not need to agree with every policy to sustain Church leaders. What I need to do is what Joseph Smith said: to bear with the brethren in their infirmities as they bear with me in mine. Following a prophet requires humility. It is a communal effort of imperfect people working together to hear the voice of God and to implement his will.

This is a more complex understanding of prophetic authority than I had prior to working on the Joseph Smith Papers. Still, it has resulted in developing a stronger testimony, one that is better equipped to endure the lamentable, but perhaps inevitable, tumult and debate that occurs in and around the Church.

Revelation as a Process

My academic study of Church history has not only enlarged my understanding of prophetic authority but also expanded my understanding of revelation. I now better understand revelation as a process.

This concept is readily apparent in the Joseph Smith Papers. For example, in the two earliest accounts of the First Vision (1832 and 1835), Joseph, stuck within the confines of imperfect mortal language, struggled to adequately describe what he saw in the grove of trees. In these instances, he worked to find the best words for describing the bright pillar that descended upon him. Was it fire, or was it light? He alternated between the two.³ In fact, in 1832, the same year that he composed his

Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2020), 190, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-29-october-1842/1>.

2. See "Discourse, 29 October 1842," Historical Introduction, 189–90 and nn. 1034–36.

3. "History, circa Summer 1832," in *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, ed. Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford,

earliest extant written account of the First Vision, Joseph lamented to his friend William W. Phelps about the “little narrow prison almost as it were total darkness of paper pen and Ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect Language.”⁴ Writing was hard for Joseph Smith. Writing about the things of God was even harder because words often failed to capture what Joseph experienced in his interactions with the divine.

The same process plays out in the manuscript revelations—that is, the handwritten versions of the revelations that are now canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants. There is evidence of Joseph Smith, his scribes, and his clerks working together and with the Holy Spirit to find the right words—the words that matched what the Spirit was prompting Joseph Smith and others to know and do.⁵

As it was for Joseph Smith, so it is for us. Have you ever felt the Spirit—and you knew in the moment that you were feeling the Spirit—but did not immediately understand what God was prompting you to know or do? Such instances often require us to work and pray to more fully understand God’s communication to us. The lesson for me is this: Revelation is a prolonged process more often than it is a miraculous moment. Revelation requires work.

This is a more complicated understanding of revelation than many Latter-day Saints commonly articulate. But this approach to seeking and receiving revelation is certainly more apparent to me after I worked on the Joseph Smith Papers. Again, a more complex testimony can be a stronger testimony. In this case, it is for me. Understanding revelation as a process and revelation as work gives me more patience with myself. It is a reminder that we all likely receive more revelation than we realize; we just need to be better at knowing what to look for.

and William G. Hartley, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 281, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>; “Conversations with Robert Matthews, 9–11 November 1835,” in *Documents, Volume 5: October 1835–January 1838*, ed. Brent M. Rogers, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Christian K. Heimbürger, Max H. Parkin, Alexander L. Baugh, and Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 43, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/conversations-with-robert-matthews-9-11-november-1835/3>.

4. “Letter to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832,” in Godfrey and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 2*, 320, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-william-w-phelps-27-november-1832/2>.

5. For examples, see Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian’s Press, 2011).

Seek and Understand

The third and final example for how my work on the Joseph Smith Papers has affected my Christian discipleship relates to the way that seeking new spiritual experiences informs our comprehension of past spiritual experiences. Just as the different accounts of the First Vision illuminate the nature of revelation, they also demonstrate that Joseph Smith's understanding of one of his most profound spiritual moments increased with time and experience.

Consider the progression in these different accounts. The earliest surviving account of the First Vision comes from a draft of an unfinished history Joseph wrote in 1832, in which he told the story of his vision to explain how he became converted to Jesus Christ.⁶ The next account that we have is from 1835, when Joseph Smith told a visiting religious leader about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. However, he did not start that story with an account of Moroni's angelic visitation on September 21, 1823; he started with the First Vision.⁷ By 1835, Joseph likely understood that while the vision was about his own Christian conversion, it was also a key moment in the history of the Book of Mormon. Then, in 1838, when Joseph Smith and his scribes were writing the history of the Church, Joseph did not start that history with the Church's official organization on April 6, 1830. Once again, he began by relating the First Vision.⁸

By then, Joseph may have seen that this spiritual moment during his adolescent years was at once about his Christian conversion, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the Restoration of the Church. There is no evidence to suggest that Joseph ever took the significance of the First Vision lightly. However, the way he framed different accounts of the event demonstrates that his understanding of the vision and its significance grew with time. As he sought and received further light and knowledge from God, the significance of his past spiritual experiences expanded.

I have never had a vision of comparable magnitude to Joseph's First Vision, but I have had spiritual experiences since my youth. While I

6. "History, circa Summer 1832," 279–85, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3#full-transcript>.

7. "Conversations with Robert Matthews," 39–47.

8. "History Drafts, 1838–circa 1841," in *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, ed. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2012), 204–14.

recognized their importance then, my understanding of their significance has grown. I look back on my life—on the moments that God guided me and spoke peace to my soul—and I now understand how God was blessing me in the moment while simultaneously preparing me for opportunities still to come.

It is only with time and experience that we can fully understand and appreciate the way God works within our lives. Seeking continued discipleship to Christ brings new spiritual experiences and magnifies the power of past spiritual experiences. It was like that for Joseph. It can be like that for us. I believe that it is like that for all who seek to follow Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

There are many more lessons that I have learned from the Joseph Smith Papers about Christian discipleship in our dispensation. Here, I have only offered a sampling. I hope that they demonstrate several reasons why the project is a valuable resource to Latter-day Saints seeking a deeper understanding of the Prophet Joseph and his Christian ministry. I feel that I am a better Christian because of the Joseph Smith Papers.

Still, as grateful as I am for the project, it is important to recognize that a deep knowledge of Church history is not required for salvation. As far as I can tell, there is no Church history test administered at the gates of heaven. This is important to remember because it prevents Latter-day Saints from stopping short of the mark—or, Jesus Christ (Jacob 4:14; John 14:6). Understanding Church history—and Joseph Smith’s ministry—is not the final destination of our spiritual journeys. Church history, like Joseph’s ministry, points us to a loving God and his loving Son, Jesus Christ. If we are studying Church history as part of our discipleship, let it be a way of remembering the marvelous works that God has accomplished in the past using imperfect but willing people. May it be a reminder that he can do the same with us in the present—if we exercise faith and humility as individuals and as a people.

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Brother Joseph

When Joseph knelt among the trees,
The hopes of all the centuries
Crescendood into one,
As from a fierce, effulgent flame
The Father spake the farm boy's name
And introduced His Son.

When Joseph pleaded through the night,
Moroni came and, clothed in might,
Revealed the plates of gold.
The Baptist, Peter, James, and John
With keys of power proclaimed the dawn
By prophets long foretold.

When Joseph built a House of God
And sent swift messengers abroad
With tidings of glad things,
The Lord restored His sealing power
And set a watchman on the tower
To hail the King of Kings.

When Joseph bled in Carthage Jail,
His spirit slipped beyond the veil
Into the realms of grace,
Where once again, as in his youth,
Amid a blaze of light and truth,
He saw his Father's face.

—Justin Collings

maternal excavation

trash nights, she was unstoppable at
curbside dig sites—
bag upon bag a layer to sift:
silver christmas trees, pool noodles,
filing cabinets with forgotten coupons inside.

you'll love me for this someday, she said,
hands brushing off grass & dirt,
like an archaeologist—
that's what I always wanted to be.

years later, my brother scoffed,
she raised you to love ruins,
because she is one, your mother.
Our mother, thanks.
—but maybe he's right.

i catalog her:
top stratum,
filled with recipe cards, bird brooches,
wedding photos where she's smiling.
below that,
garage strata,
wrapped wires (spares), quiet stereos,
side by side with vhs tapes
home video & Disney.

deeper still,
an autumn scent on floral scarves,
lap harp, butter dishes.
the bedrock isn't stable,
there are cracks.
life built up from a midden,
piles of the broken, the beloved.
i dig because she is buried there.

—Alicia Maskley

The Genesis of the Joseph Smith Papers Project

*Richard Lyman Bushman, Ronald K. Esplin, Dean C. Jessee,
and Richard E. Turley Jr.*

Moderated by Matthew C. Godfrey

The following is a transcript of a roundtable discussion on October 2, 2017, about the origins of the Joseph Smith Papers Project. This roundtable, held in the Church History Library classroom, was moderated by Matthew C. Godfrey and featured Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard L. Bushman, and Richard E. Turley Jr. The audience mainly comprised members of the project staff. The recorded remarks have been edited for clarity and readability.

Matt Grow:¹ The idea to have an event like this came as we realized that few of our staff knew Dean Jessee or Richard Bushman during the time that they were involved with the project. We thought this might be a way to help people renew acquaintances and learn some things about the project, its intent, and what happened in the early years. We're thrilled that everyone would come and be involved.

Staff members will briefly introduce our four panelists: Ron Esplin, Dean Jessee, Richard Bushman, and Rick Turley. Matt Godfrey will then introduce our staff and moderate the discussion.

Robin [Jensen] will introduce Dean; I'll introduce Ron; Jed [Woodworth] will introduce Richard; and Riley [Lorimer] will say something about Rick.

1. At the time this panel was held, Matt Grow was director of the Publications Division in the Church History Department and a general editor of the Joseph Smith Papers.

Robin Jensen:² Good morning. Dean Jessee began employment at the Church Historian's Office in 1964. His stories of "the cage," Andrew Jensen's archive, or seemingly daily discoveries of historic gems have been a rare treat to hear. On one level, the work done by Dean starting over fifty years ago is shown in the many articles and books he wrote or edited. However, for us today, his work is not only found on our shelves or our file cabinets; his influence permeates our daily work within the Joseph Smith Papers [Project], ranging from our editorial standards, our approach to annotation, and our document selection. Dean's humble attitude and exceptional scholarship offer a unique combination rarely found in academia, and we are blessed to have him here today. His mentorship, friendship, quiet leadership, and surprising dry wit have shaped the project, and for that I will be forever grateful to him.

Matt Grow: I think Ron [Esplin] is the person who needs the least introduction here. Reflecting back on my experiences with Ron, one incident came to mind, and that was a time when Ron shared his career broadly with us. It helped me realize that one of the things that drove Ron in his career was the sense of compiling the resources, compiling the people, and then protecting those people and those resources so that excellent history could be done. That required a certain personality, a tenaciousness, maybe a pugnacity at times in protecting those resources, in protecting the people so that the history could be done. It required his own depth of knowledge about the history, his own scholarly excellence so he could lead the group, but there's no way that this room would be here and that we would all have the positions that we do without Ron's leadership for the past thirty years.

Richard Bushman: Hear! Hear!

Jed Woodworth:³ Richard Bushman is often admired for the range of his great scholarly output. He was trained as a colonial historian, but more than half of his work is set in the nineteenth century. He is a social historian, but he also writes and plumbs a history of ideas. He writes on the history of gentility. From that you would think he is interested in top-down discourse, but then his latest book is on the history of farming, which suggests an interest in bottom-up discourse. So the question is,

2. At the time this panel was held, Robin Jensen was associate managing historian of the Joseph Smith Papers and a volume editor with primary responsibility over the Revelations and Translations series.

3. In addition to assisting Richard Bushman in the research and writing of *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, Jed Woodworth was the managing historian of *Saints*, the four-volume history of the Church.

What is Richard Bushman, really? He's sort of a schizophrenic character. *[audience laughter]*

I would suggest to you that, really, Richard Bushman is a truth teller. He tells the truths that other people do not want to say, are fearful of saying, or don't know how to say. I went back to my journal for examples of how this works out in Richard Bushman's career. I found an entry from the kickoff meeting, the meeting where the Joseph Smith Papers was launched by Elder [Neal A.] Maxwell in 2001. At that meeting, which was led by Rick Turley, Richard was the last person to speak. I think there were some final comments by Rick, but he asked Richard to say a few words. I just wanted to read what he said.

Richard said, "This project is a leap of faith. We are taking a chance, as Elder Maxwell said. Can we do it right? Can we do it convincingly? The Brethren are taking a chance on us." Richard then seemed to engage with Elder Maxwell's "heartburn" comment. (I'll have to explain that to you later.) "We will run into problems," he said. "The best way to get through them is to go right to their center, not to go around them, or over them, or to the side of them, but to go to the heart of them." By putting it this way, Richard imagined a space where both scholars and leaders agree on an approach to problems; avoidance or cowardice was the wrong way to go, he was saying. We should all agree on that.⁴

So I think the essence of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, which is to tell the truth and to not avoid problems, is Richard's stamp on the project.

Riley Lorimer:⁵ Rick [Turley], as many of you may know, is now managing director of Public Affairs. I confirmed with him this morning that it actually feels very calm and like a homecoming to come back to this building [Church History Library].

Rick is an attorney by training but has worked in Church History or Family History [Departments] for several decades. He was managing director of the Family and Church History Department when the Joseph Smith Papers [Project] began and when it moved up here to Church headquarters in 2005. Rick played an absolutely indispensable role in the creation of the project as it exists today. During his eight years as assistant Church historian and recorder, he served on the Joseph Smith Papers editorial board—and saying that doesn't quite give an accurate sense of how involved Rick was and how important he was to the project

4. Quote from Jed Woodworth's personal journal.

5. At the time this roundtable was held, Riley Lorimer was associate editorial manager of the Joseph Smith Papers.

during that time. He also coedited the second volume of the *Revelations and Translations* series and was heavily involved with volumes 1 and 3, which is where I got to know Rick—working closely with him and with Robin [Jensen] on those volumes.⁶

Rick's a hugely accomplished person, and I don't have time to list all of his many publications and his many awards, though you should check it out on Church Newsroom. I was even surprised. There were things there that I didn't know. He's done so much in his career. But I want to say just two things from my personal experience with Rick.

The first is that Rick is a person who knows the value of relationships. Over decades of work, he established relationships of trust with Church leadership that have opened countless doors for the Joseph Smith Papers [Project] and for the telling of history in the Church. Rick was the person that they trusted to come and take the picture of the seer stone that hadn't been seen for a hundred years⁷ [see fig. 1]. It's in part because of the relationships of trust that he built that we have been able to feature documents that haven't been seen before—feature things like the seer stone—and to have the leadership of the Church feel safe and trusting about that.

But it's not just relationships with the people above him—Rick also makes relationships with the people he works with every day. I was always amazed when Rick would see me in the hall; he'd be escorting someone through the Church History Library, and he'd stop and introduce me to whoever he was escorting that day. He would remember what I got my degrees in and that I redid my house all by myself and introduced me and made me feel more impressive than I probably really was.

6. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodward, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2009); Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Riley M. Lorimer, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2: Published Revelations*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2011); Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 1: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 1–Alma 35*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2015); Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 2: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Alma 36–Moroni 10*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2015).

7. See "Seer Stone," The Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/topic/seer-stone>; and "Note on Seer Stone Images," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/note-on-seer-stone-images>.



FIGURE 1. Seer stone belonging to Joseph Smith. Courtesy Church History Library.

The second thing I want to say is that Rick values good ideas. I was struck when I first came here—I was only twenty-two; I was fresh out of school; and because someone else left (because she had a baby), I was thrown very quickly into the leadership of a volume and immediately into another one that was published the year after that. Rick didn't care that I was twenty-two years old and very new. If I had something smart to say, he wanted to hear it, and he took it very seriously.

In *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2*, Rick wrote the first draft of the introduction—which was around seventy pages long—about three times longer than we wanted it to be. Rick didn't hesitate at all to hand me the seventy pages and say, “I know this isn't right. I know you can fix it. Take it and come back to me.” I've never seen him dismiss a good idea, regardless of where it came from, and that's something I really admire about him. He's an advocate and a distinguished scholar in his own right, and we're lucky to have him here today.

Matthew Godfrey:⁸ Thanks for those introductions. We thought for your [*the panelists*] benefit we'd do just a brief introduction of the staff to show how young our staff is. How many here, if you could stand up,

8. At the time this panel was held, Matthew Godfrey was the managing historian and a general editor of the Joseph Smith Papers.

have been with the project just one or two years? [*staff standing*] How many have been here three to five years on the project? [*staff standing*] So probably the majority of our staff has been here from one to five years. How many have been here six to ten years? [*staff standing*] And how many longer than ten? [*staff standing*] I think that shows that we have many staff members who have contributed to the project over a long period of time. We also have many staff members who are relatively new and have contributed to the project over the last one to five years.

We also wanted to give a couple of statistics (before we get into questions) that we thought you'd be interested in. We had Riley calculate how many total book sales of the Joseph Smith Papers we have had up to the present, so these are fresh numbers. We have sold over 150,000 volumes.⁹ So this project that you are all instrumental in beginning has had a rather large reach that way. In addition to our print volumes, of course, we have our website, which is just as successful as the print volumes. Ben Godfrey is going to show us a brief overview of some statistics with the website.

Ben Godfrey:¹⁰ The Joseph Smith Papers website saw significant growth this year. One of the reasons that happened is because we created a Church history study guide.¹¹ If you follow along with the lesson, which many [Church] members do every Sunday, there's a link right from the lesson material that says, "Would you like to learn more historical information?" That links over to a page that comes from our Church History staff and includes lots of links to the Joseph Smith Papers. So we're on track for a considerable number of more unique visitors this year than we've ever had before, both in terms of visits and page views. There are thousands of people every month that are reading from the primary sources that would have never had access to that previously.

Some of our most visited pages, of course, are "Search," which means visitors are actually looking for something. They are typing in something, a word, a phrase, and they're able to find it. Joseph Smith's accounts of the First Vision are in our top views. The print volumes, people finding those and ordering them, are in the top fifteen; our videos are, again, in

9. As of the end of 2024, the Joseph Smith Papers had sold approximately 225,000 copies.

10. At the time this roundtable was held, Ben Godfrey was the Joseph Smith Papers product manager for the Church History Department.

11. This document ("Church History Study Guide," 2016) was a predecessor of "Doctrine and Covenants Historical Resources," Gospel Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/doctrine-and-covenants-historical-resources-2025>.

the top fifteen. Something that I'm very proud of as well is that we translated the accounts of the First Vision into multiple languages. Those are in Gospel Library, so we don't see those statistics on this because they're not on the website. But even on our website we've had almost twenty-four thousand views in multiple languages of those accounts of the First Vision. So is the word getting out? Are people learning about it through the website? Absolutely. I'm grateful to the whole team here who does such a wonderful job in preparing these materials for the web.

Matthew Godfrey: Thank you, Ben. The major reason why we're all here is to hear from Ron, Dean, Richard, and Rick about the beginnings of the project, to give a sense of the history of how this project came about and what the objectives of it were. I wonder if maybe we could start, Dean, by asking you a question. When you started with the Church in 1964 and were doing quite a bit of work on Joseph Smith and his papers, what did you foresee happening?

Dean Jessee: How much time have we got? [*audience laughter*]

Matthew Godfrey: As much as you want to take.

Dean Jessee: At my age, people like to talk a lot. When I started in the [Church] Historian's Office, I had no idea that I'd be doing what I'm doing. I had spent some time in that place during my college years doing some work on a thesis, and it was kind of like going into a candy shop but not being able to get any of the candy. I thought it would be really neat because of my interest in history to be able to work in that place because I would be able to get access to the material I wasn't able to access earlier. There was an opening that came in the manuscript section of the Historian's Office. At that time, the Historian's Office was divided into three sections: the library section, the written records, and the manuscripts. The manuscript section contained all of the handwritten material and stuff, the primary sources that a lot of us were salivating to access when we went there. I was really excited about that. At that time, the atmosphere of history wasn't what it is today. It was this feeling of trying to protect the Church from those types of things that were considered not good for you. It was kind of like shielding your children from disease and that type of thing. I thought it would be a chance for me to access the material that I hadn't been able to access when I was there earlier. But I worked there for about eight years, and it was interesting to see.

For my first job after I arrived, I was given a stack of 3×5 library cards. Most of you don't know what a library card is. It's a 3×5 card containing everything that we get electronically now. I was told to type in the subject tracings. The card had already been printed with the author and the

title and so on, but you put the “tracing” up at the top for different topics that were in that particular collection. I had a whole stack of these. The subject tracing that I was told to type at the top of the card was “Church, about.” [audience laughter] I spent about three days typing those cards, and it seemed to me that it was kind of weird. I’d been in libraries before, but I’d never seen a subject tracing that said anything like “Church, about.” I figured that practically everything in the library could have that title. I got up enough courage to talk to my superior and mentioned it to him, and he decided then that it might not be a very good subject tracing. So the job changed.

Not too long ago, I had a chance to read the manuscript that you folks put out—*Documents, Volume 8*.¹² I was amazed by the talent that’s been arrayed in producing these volumes. I mention those two things because between those two events—my typing the “Church, about” cards and the reading of *Documents, Volume 8*—I’ve had a front row seat to a marvelous revolution in the Church, a revolution involving the care and use of the records, establishing the state-of-the-art archive, and the writing and preservation of our history. It’s been amazing. I have to pinch myself to think that I happened to be in that situation. The scripture that comes to mind is in the thirty-seventh chapter of Alma where it talks about simple things [see Alma 37:6]. I was certainly in that category. The rules and regulations and the way that the records of the Church were kept in 1964 were tremendously different from what they are today.

Ron Esplin: Do you know what he [Dean] said he did? He [Dean] got advice from a high-level person, who said, “Just make yourself part of the woodwork, and eventually they’ll forget you don’t work there.” [audience laughter] And he did that.

Dean Jessee: That’s where I first met Leonard Arrington. After I was in the manuscript section for eight years, in 1972, Leonard was appointed Church historian. There had been some rumors that a new historian would be selected because President [David O.] McKay passed away in 1970, and Joseph Fielding Smith, who had been the Church Historian since way back at the beginning of the century, became the president of the Church. In his place Elder [Howard W.] Hunter was the historian or the manager of the History Department. It was under him that things kind of loosened up a little bit as far as the archives were

12. Brent M. Rogers, Brett D. Dowdle, Mason K. Allred, and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, eds., *Documents, Volume 8: February–November 1841*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2019).

concerned. I knew that there would be better days ahead in the archives when Jeff Johnson and Max Evans were both hired as employees. Prior to that, there was one woman that had a master's degree in library science, but I don't think anyone else had any professional training. My background was in history, and I hadn't had any library science. When Leonard Arrington was appointed Church Historian in 1972, about a week after his appointment he requested that I transfer from the archives into the History Division that he was leading. He explained at that point some of the initiatives that he had in mind for the writing of history in the Church. One of those was to publish important documents in the archives, and we talked about topics.

Prior to that, when Elder Hunter was there, I had had an interest in publishing the first journal of Joseph Smith's, which is the one that has more of his personal handwriting than any of the other journals. I talked to Elder Hunter about it, and he said that it would be okay to go ahead, and I got started on it, but then he came back and said, "You better not do that now." He said it might be something that the Historian's Office will want to do in the future. So I didn't really develop that. But that was my first hint toward it.

When Leonard came, he talked about what came to be known as the Heritage series. It would be the publication of important documents in the archives. He asked, "What would be some possibilities?" Of course, I mentioned then that first journal of Joseph Smith and that Joseph didn't write very much himself. Compared to the entire weight of his material, it was practically nothing. We thought that it would be worthwhile to publish something that had the holograph writings of Joseph Smith, the personal writings of Joseph. So that became my first assignment in the History Division when Leonard was appointed. We spent some time on that.

My experience since then with Joseph Smith's papers has been in three categories. The first one, from 1972 to 1978, had to do with his personal writings. We finally published that volume, the *Personal Writings*, in 1984, and the reason it took so long for that was that after we got started on it, a question arose about the editorial rules.¹³ The question was, How are we going to treat the text itself? Are we going to present it exactly the way Joseph Smith wrote it, or are we going to give him a PhD in history or in English? The tendency was of course to clean it up, but

13. Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Deseret Book, 1984).

Leonard suggested that we better go slow on the project of the Joseph Smith personal writings until we could educate the Saints—prepare their minds for seeing Joseph Smith’s handwriting the way it was and the spelling and punctuation, and so on. So that’s why it took a length of time to publish that first volume.

Then in 1986, we obtained the authorization to publish Joseph Smith’s journals. At that time, we envisioned that as being three volumes.¹⁴ We really didn’t have a plan to go beyond that early on. I was hoping that we could do Joseph Smith’s papers at some point, for the reason that the papers of the Founding Fathers were being produced at that time, some of those for the third and fourth time. I thought, Of all the people in the universe who ought to have a collection of their papers produced, it would be Joseph Smith. But we started on that project of the journals of Joseph, and it ran into some problems. It fizzled along. It went in fits and starts from about 1986 until the turn of the century, until things started to change.

About 1999, things started to change. There were a whole series of things that took place that resulted in what we have today. That’s kind of an overview of where I’ve come on this.

Matthew Godfrey: That’s great, Dean. We appreciate that. Rick, maybe you could talk about how the project was brought up to the Church History Library from BYU and the effort to find a press to publish the papers.

Rick Turley: Sure. I became interested in the work that Dean Jessee was doing before I ever came to the Church Historical Department in 1986. When I came aboard, I was immediately interested in learning what else Dean was doing. He had a series of volumes he was working on. Given the lack of time, I won’t go into a lot of detail, but let me just point out a few highlights that get to your question and add a couple more things.

Ron and Richard and I began talking about the work of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at BYU and the papers. Along the way, slowly the idea of a new, supercharged Joseph Smith Papers Project developed. There were three things that we felt we needed to bring together in order to make the project successful. One was talent. We saw a lot of that talent at BYU in the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute. The second was money. This kind of project does not come cheap. The third was facilities. We needed to be able to bring the people and

14. Only two volumes would be published in this iteration. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Deseret Book, 1989–92).

the materials together in an environment in which those working on the project could do it well.

Some of the highlights that I think we need to emphasize, and others here on the panel will emphasize, are number one, the launching of the new Papers Project in 2001. It took a lot of groundwork to have that meeting happen. We held an event at the administration building at BYU to formally launch the project. We had there BYU President Merrill Bateman because we needed BYU's support. We had the commissioner of education for the Church Educational System, who was then Elder Henry B. Eyring. We had him there to say that not only did we have the support of the BYU administration, we had the support of the Church commissioner of education. We had Elders [Neal A.] Maxwell and [Jeffrey R.] Holland there and Elders [D. Todd] Christofferson and [Bruce C.] Hafen. Elders Maxwell and Holland, at the time, were the Quorum of the Twelve advisors to the Church Historical Department. Both had academic backgrounds, and so their presence there was helpful in two ways—one, as Church leaders and two, as academics. Elders Christofferson and Hafen were the Executive Directors of the Family and Church History Department at the time. They also had an enormous amount of influence.

We felt if we could get all of those people together in one room and launch this new, supercharged project, we wouldn't have any questions about whether this was an authorized project—that we had all of the lines involved that had approved all of this and were supportive of it. We ran into a snag, however, when the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute at BYU faced an administrative problem. The dean of the college [Family, Home, and Social Sciences] in which the institute was lodged did an evaluation of his college and decided to streamline it by shutting down the Smith Institute. Through a long series of negotiations that I won't chronicle here, we met with the academic vice president of BYU and offered to reacquire the Smith Institute. After all, it had been created from the old History Division, of which Dean and Ron were a part. So instead of shutting it down, why not bring it back to Church headquarters? A lot of work went into the negotiations and to the decision to finally bring it up here, but we decided to bring it up here and make the Joseph Smith Papers the major emphasis of the old Smith Institute when it was brought to Salt Lake.¹⁵

15. Carrie A. Moore, "Scholars Moving to S.L.: BYU Closing Research Institute Dedicated to Early LDS History," *Deseret News*, June 21, 2005, <https://www.deseret.com/2005/6/21/19898658/scholars-moving-to-s-l/>.

The timing was actually quite good because we had begun working on a new Church History Library. Beginning in 1994, we made a series of presentations to the First Presidency. The first presentation was well received, but the decision was made not to build it at that time. We made a second presentation and had a somewhat similar result. We finally got the approval in 2005 to build it, which was around the same time we were making the bid to reacquire the Smith Institute. So we were able to work into the planning process space that you occupy now for the Joseph Smith Papers Project. That all came together in a nice sort of way. We finished the building here in 2009.¹⁶

As far as the publication of the papers, we initially brought in an outside consulting team to talk about rebranding the department. The department had developed a reputation, as Dean mentioned, for being closed, for not being a place where publishing occurred, and we wanted to create a new brand for the organization. So we brought in a professional organization, and they gave us their advice on how to rebrand ourselves. As part of that, we asked them the question, Who should be the publisher of the Joseph Smith Papers? The conclusion they brought to us was, “You should absolutely have a well-established, high-profile university press publish the papers.” So we took that recommendation in hand, and we began to look at potential publishers.

One of the publishers we approached was Oxford University Press. I had a contract with Oxford at the time. I talked with Cynthia Read, who was the executive director for religious books at Oxford; she was highly interested in the project. She took it up through their system and finally replied, “We’re very interested in it, but what really puts us off is that you’re looking at a twenty-year horizon. The publishing world is undergoing such change right now, we’re not sure that we’re still going to be doing these large, multivolume projects in twenty years. So as much as we want this project, we’re going to have to decline. It’s just not knowing what the publishing world will be like in twenty years.”¹⁷

There were other university presses that we considered and even approached, and ultimately, we decided that we would publish the volumes ourselves. We felt that we would have better control over the final product, over the quality of it, and so we went against the decision of our

16. R. Scott Lloyd, “‘A Record Kept’ Among His People: Treasures of Church History Have a New Resting Place,” *Deseret News*, June 25, 2009, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/2009/6/25/23230024/a-record-kept-among-his-people/>.

17. This is Turley’s recollection of what Cynthia Read said to him.

outside advisors by creating our own press.¹⁸ We talked about what we needed to do to give this press the kind of cachet it needed to have the papers considered respectable. I made a long list of things that we had to accomplish for that to happen. One of the things was we had to meet the highest academic standards in producing it. A second was that the volumes needed to look highly professional from the perspective of the book arts. So we put a lot of time into choosing the boards, the cloth, the paper, the headbands, the type font, and other book arts features.

The same was true even with the leather volumes. Deseret Book, which we ultimately chose as our print and distribution partner, said that it could produce the leather-bound volumes. So we talked to the company's staff about our requirements for the volumes. By the time we finished the meeting, they said, "We can't meet your qualifications." Then Church printing came along, and its people said, "We can do this for you. We're sure we can meet your requirements. We print leather books all the time for Church employee gifts." And I said, "Well, this is a lot tougher than you think it's going to be. Here are the requirements you have to meet," and I gave them the details. They said, "Well, we're willing to give it a try." So they produced a volume and gave it to us, certain that it would meet our high standards. We rejected it and sent them back to the drawing board, saying, "Try again." Ultimately, they came up with what we felt was a very good product.

There was the question of what do we name this new press. Let me back up and say that in 2001, when Elder Christofferson was our Executive Director, he and I went before the First Presidency and made a report on the state of Church history in the Family and Church History Department. During that presentation, we made three recommendations. One recommendation was that we restore the office of Church Historian. That was taken under advisement. We kept on repeating this recommendation until 2005, when Elder Marlin K. Jensen was named Church Historian.¹⁹

The second thing that occurred in that 2001 meeting was that we said we needed to have a Church history presence on the internet. In 1999, when I was managing director of the Family History Department concurrently

18. R. Scott Lloyd, "New Era Dawns in LDS Publishing: Joseph Smith Papers Will Bear Church Historian's New Imprint," *Deseret News*, March 1, 2008, <https://www.deseret.com/2008/3/1/20787239/new-era-dawns-in-lds-publishing/>.

19. R. Scott Lloyd, "'Historian by Yearning' Collects, Preserves: Elder Marlin K. Jensen is Historian/Recorder," *Deseret News*, May 28, 2005, <https://www.deseret.com/2005/5/28/20790347/historian-by-yearning-collects-preserves/>.

with being the managing director of the Church History Department before we merged them in 2000, we had launched familysearch.org. Up to that time, the internet did not have a good reputation among Church leaders. They went out to stake conferences and heard horrible stories about people who had become addicted to pornography or young people who had been preyed upon in chat rooms, and so the internet wasn't even called that. Up before 1999, it was referred to at the Church offices as "the 'I' word." [audience laughter] You didn't want to say it out loud: it had that bad of a reputation.

So when we were about to go in to senior Church leaders in the 1990s to say we wanted to launch familysearch.org, there were people that looked at us and said, "You're absolutely crazy to go to the Brethren and suggest that you have an internet site on family history." But we decided that because it felt right, it was the thing to do. We went in, and we were later told by then Elder Boyd K. Packer that it was one of only three things during his tenure as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve that got approved instantaneously.

Having had the approval on familysearch.org, we made a pitch in 2001 that we also have a Church history presence on the internet, which eventually led to history.lds.org.²⁰

The third thing we suggested in the 2001 meeting was that we have a multivolume history, which is what led to the *Saints* project.²¹ Having made those proposals in 2001, and Elder Jensen having then been named the Church Historian, we were sitting around talking one day, and I said to him, "Well, let's name the new press after the Church Historian. Let's call it the Church Historian's Press." Elder Jensen was always very, very modest, and he said to me repeatedly, "Rick, if I were running for public office, I'd want you to be my campaign manager because you're always pushing me in front of cameras and in front of print reporters." So he was a little hesitant at first to have his title of Church Historian become the name of the press, but I said half jokingly, "Don't think about yourself, think about the office and the importance of the office."

So we called it the Church Historian's Press, and we decided that to receive that imprint, a volume had to meet two qualifications: Number one, it had to be the best that the academy had to offer. The outside

20. This website is now <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org>,

21. *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, 4 vols. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018–24), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/history/saints>.

advisory board we appointed helped to assure that it met that qualification. The second qualification was that it had to represent the best the Church had to offer and have full Church approval. So we continued the process of sending it up to Church leaders for them to approve as well. So that's how we got the press, the name of the press, and the Smith Institute up [to Church headquarters] to become the Joseph Smith Papers.

Matthew Godfrey: Rick, could you talk a little bit about putting together the advisory board and its involvement?

Rick Turley: Yes. We ended up with two advisory boards, as you know. We had our inside board and our outside board. Again, the intent with the outside board was to create a panel of expert historians and documentary editing experts whose very name on the documents could give them the kind of academic cachet that we were talking about. Really, Ron and Richard, I think, had more to do with actually selecting those people than I did.

Ron Esplin: We first started thinking, I believe, about having an advisory board when we were dealing with Yale University Press. We had a conversation with them that went far down the road. We figured the control issue could be handled if we had a board that the Church had confidence in, and the academic issue could be solved if the board was something the press had confidence in. We believed we could assemble such a board. So that was part of the discussion, although we did not yet have one. Exactly like Rick mentioned with the Oxford University Press, Yale University Press was also in turmoil. They had three different heads that I dealt with during the time we were negotiating, and they had not landed on a strategy or on institutional stability. In the end, they were not willing to make a long-term commitment.

Rick Turley: But they did send some other people out here to advise us, and they were instrumental in helping us establish the Joseph Smith Papers in the right sort of academic mode.

Richard Bushman: I have a story that I'd like you two to check on. There was Yale, and then I think we made a preliminary introduction with Johns Hopkins.

Rick Turley: That's correct.

Ron Esplin: Because you had a contact.

Richard Bushman: Yes. I had submitted a book and had it rejected: *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*.²² [audience laughter] So

22. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (University of Illinois Press, 1984).

I thought, Why not? But as I recall, in both those cases there was initial enthusiasm, it seemed like a great project to people, but then they got to some stage in their operation where usually one individual just said, “But can we trust the materials they send us?” They really thought that the Mormons would doctor the documents in order to erase any embarrassing episodes.

Ron Esplin: That is true. And with Yale especially, we finally got approval all through the institution of the university press, but their academic board had some scholars who had exactly that concern, and that was toxic.

Rick Turley: In the case of Johns Hopkins, curiously, the person who killed it said, “Well, didn’t the Mormons have some forgeries a few years ago that they published? How can we be certain that these materials are authentic?” It was the Mark Hofmann case that killed it with Johns Hopkins.

Dean Jessee: What about Oxford?

Rick Turley: Oxford really, really wanted it. It was only the practical twenty-year cycle that kept them from doing it. After we published *Journals, Volume 1*,²³ I was talking to Cynthia one day, and I said, “You know, that volume sold sixty-seven thousand copies.” She said, “Oh, I know. We’ve been tracking it.” [*audience laughter*] They really, really wanted to do it, but you can understand the practical requirements of twenty years of publishing when your publishing company is in turmoil with everybody else.

Ron Esplin: We really had two takes at the University of Oxford Press. The first, Rick initiated. By then, we had an advisory board, and with Richard’s help, we got Harry S. Stout with Yale University on the board, who had strong ties not only with Yale Press but also with Oxford. He said, “They need to rethink this, and I will open the door for you.” And he did. There was a fresh discussion, and in the middle of that discussion, the decision was made that we were going to go down the Church Historian’s Press path. I remember going back to Stout and saying, “We really appreciate you going to bat for us; it means a great deal to us, but we aren’t going to go forward,” and I explained why. His email back to me said [something like], “You know as a long-term plan, I can see how in the very, very, very, very, very long future that might work [*audience laughter*], but you’re missing an opportunity here.”

23. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2008).

Matthew Godfrey: Rick, I wonder, maybe you could give us your thoughts on the impact the project has made and any advice you'd have for us as we continue forward?

Rick Turley: In terms of the impact, I think I'll quote Elder [Steven E.] Snow, who refers to this as the lunar landing of the Church. You know, the 1969 landing on the moon was not just about getting a human footprint on that sphere, but it was about developing technology that benefited the rest of humanity; everything from aeronautics to the technology we have on our phones today benefited from the lunar landing effort. And the Joseph Smith Papers Project has had numerous impacts already and will continue to have impacts.

It was the Joseph Smith Papers and some work that I had done on the Greek New Testament and other things that led people on the Scriptures Committee to come to me and say, "We're about to do a new printing of the scriptures, and we want to know, are there any changes you might want to make?" I looked at some things they did in the other volumes of scripture and made some suggestions, but when it came to the Doctrine and Covenants, I said, "The Joseph Smith Papers volumes that have already been approved for publication are going to have different information than you have in your headings to numerous sections." They said, "Really?" I said, "Yes." I arranged a meeting with Elder Jensen and with someone from the Scriptures Committee, and Elder Jensen backed up what I'd said about the importance of the Joseph Smith Papers Project in all of this. They gave us a certain number of days to suggest changes to the headings. Matt [Grow] then took charge of the effort, with many of you, to go through and make suggestions for revising those headings. So the changes made in headings in the 2013 edition of the scriptures are definitely a result of the Joseph Smith Papers Project.

And then everything from *Saints*, which will have an enormous impact on how Church history is viewed, to what is done in curriculum in the future will be heavily based on the Joseph Smith Papers Project.

I might just say this: We had an opportunity during my time here as assistant Church historian, an opportunity that continues to this day, to begin to make presentations to the presiding quorums on Church history matters. Many of the matters that we took in for presentation were matters that we were able to elucidate because of research that we had done on the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Making those presentations before the presiding quorums helped to provide a greater uniformity of understanding among those brethren on the history of the Church and were extraordinarily helpful—not only in creating a new view of what

we do over here and a better understanding of the contributions that can be made here but also a newer and better understanding of our history and therefore what our doctrine and policy should be.

Matthew Godfrey: Well, Richard and Ron, I wonder if we could go back to the mid-1990s when discussions were occurring about doing a larger Joseph Smith Papers Project. Maybe just discuss a little bit about what thoughts you had at that time, what objectives you saw for a larger project, and why you wanted it to be done. Richard, perhaps you could start.

Richard Bushman: Well, I backed into this project, and in a way, I think the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute backed into it. I began, in 1997, teaching a summer seminar that had funding from the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute to bring in graduate students from around the country [to BYU] for six or eight weeks to work on Church history problems. Notably, I saw it as a way to study Joseph Smith's cultural context—such a huge task. I wanted to bring in people who would help us examine newspapers, pamphlets, everything under the sun that would bear on the whole Restoration process. Ron accepted the proposal immediately and started providing funding, and then there was some private funding that went along with it. As a result of that, I got involved in the process of talking about the institute. I think Ron enjoyed the idea of having someone he could talk through all the issues that were going on at that time.

Ron, I'm sure, will have his version, but basically the transfer of the History Division to BYU²⁴ seemed like a good solution at the moment to solve a problem up here and just plunk it down in BYU. But over the long run, the institute really was a square peg in a round hole. It didn't really fit for this reason: The members of the institute did very little teaching. They would teach a course now and again but not as a standard part of their duties. Their duty was to do research because that's what they'd done up here. But after a while, the dean, looking at this situation, thought, "What a cushy job you have. You don't have to do any teaching, and so you ought to be producing reams of research in publication." But the institute wasn't; it was producing stuff but not at the pace that the dean expected. So there became this intense pressure on the institute to produce—its life was at stake. There was a lot of argument over producing enough or too little. Where should we focus our efforts?

24. Richard is referring to the transfer of the history department from Church headquarters to BYU (renamed the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute) in the early 1980s.

Out of all this turmoil I remember thinking, and Ron was probably thinking the same way, the one thing that the institute can do that is suitable for an institute of this kind is to produce a documentary series; because all over the world when you do the Washington papers or the John Adams papers, you have a group of scholars who spend their whole time collecting these documents and preparing them for publication. So that's what would be expected. We wouldn't have to start producing all these little monographs that we were attempting to do at that time. So it seems to me that this was the one project that was defensible and [that] we were uniquely qualified to do. I can't remember the details of how this all worked itself out, but it was sort of the direction we were heading when Rick said, "Why not bring this whole operation up to Salt Lake?" At the time, it was one project that we loved. Dean was doing a good job, and Ron and I both battled many times to get the Joseph Smith journals finished but were hung up on volume 3. Volumes 1 and 2 had been published, but volume 3 had some difficult parts in it. There was Joseph's and Emma's scraps over polygamy, there was the whole polygamy issue, and there were temple matters in there. They weren't huge problems but little tiny passages.

Ron had been very ingenious in figuring out ways to work our way around these sensitive materials, and we would go up and present them, and [senior leaders] would take it under consideration. We thought we'd persuaded them, but we never got the final okay to do them. So what I'm saying is we had this array of things of wondering where we should focus our efforts, and among them is this project that we all valued down there, knowing we had a great prize in Dean, but we couldn't quite get it through. We were sort of stuck at that point. We had the dean, we were working with the problems with volume 3 of Joseph Smith's journals, and then we were trying to find a true mission for the institute. I'm going to stop there, Ron, because I think you're going to have other things that you'll add to that particular phase of the story.

Ron Esplin: That was chaos, and it stretched over several years. It's so complicated. I haven't quite yet figured out a way to distill it in a manageable few minutes. But Richard and I at one point went to Merrill Bateman, a member of the Seventy and president of BYU, and tried to sell him on the idea that we had to have this sort of work going on at BYU, that the university would be the poorer if we didn't do it, and that the Joseph Smith Papers was a vital part of this. One of the things that Richard said to President Bateman was, "If the Church is not on the playing field with our best scholars and our best information, we will lose this battle. And what is the battle? A lot of folks are interested in our story,

and other people will tell our story if we do not. We have to have our best out there, or we lose total control of our story.” These arguments convinced President Bateman of the value of the project.

I want to mention one thing that was a milestone in my own mind about how I viewed the importance of Dean’s work—and it was purely Dean’s work at that point. In 1984, when *Personal Writings* was published, we had a little affair on campus that Deseret Book helped promote. They brought books down for the dignitaries at BYU, and we invited deans and administrators over. Jeffrey R. Holland, who was then president of BYU, was there in 1984. I remember, in talking about it with that group, saying that I had a vision that with the publication of *Personal Writings*—some of the most intimate expressions of faith and personality that we have from Joseph Smith—with this book on the shelf, scholars can never again write about Joseph without some reference to his own materials. Yet, over time, it became clear that was not true. Because Deseret Book published it, it sold well. We got to a second edition. We sold fifteen thousand of the first edition, and I don’t know how many thousand on the second. But it was only in Latter-day Saint homes; it wasn’t in the scholars’ [hands]; it wasn’t in the libraries.

So one of my early expectations for the Joseph Smith Papers was we would finally do what I had hoped *Personal Writings* would help do but didn’t—and that is, get Joseph Smith’s materials into the libraries, into the hands of scholars, into the public awareness in a way that they could not write about Joseph without using, among all their other sources, Joseph’s own materials. That was one of the things that drove me, and I think was part of our vision as we tried to get this done.

Richard Bushman: I want to penetrate one of the mysteries of this account. Dean had been working for many years on *Personal Writings* and trying to get the three volumes of the journal out; Ron and I had been struggling trying to find a place for the institute and get the idea of the papers going. Somewhere along the line, out of the blue, came a four- or five-page outline of what the Smith Papers actually should be: multivolumed, requiring many editors, not just one. And it came from Dean Jessee. Tell me how that came about, Dean. You seemed to be on one course in pursuing it; we were trying to open the doors, clear the way for you, and then suddenly you come out with this brand-new plan. Ron and I hadn’t thought in those terms. Maybe you [Ron] were, but I never heard us discuss it.

Ron Esplin: Let me just tell you one backstory to that, and then Dean can respond. As I reviewed some of the early work of Jed [Woodworth]

(he was our first full-time employee), some of the early work of Mark [Ashurst-McGee] on essentially the remake of *Papers of Joseph Smith, Volume 1*—the historical, autobiographical writings—and the *Journals 1*, I raised all sorts of questions about how decisions were made and why they were made. Was this the only way? Was this the best way? I remember you [Richard] got me on the personal autobiographical writings. You had nothing but praise for all of Dean's work, but you said that that volume was a puzzlement because you couldn't quite figure out why some things were in it and some things were missing. So I raised all these questions and put together a document that contained lots of questions and some proposals and some possibilities. Dean took that home and came back with a new plan. Now that's the way I remember getting Dean primed so that he could come back and tell us what we should be doing.

Richard Bushman: I'm mixed up on the chronology, but give us your version, Dean.

Dean Jessee: During the 1990s when we were working on those three volumes of the journal and thought we'd include the historical writings also, I hadn't really obtained a vision of what the Joseph Smith Papers should include. I was very frustrated during that decade or more trying to get those three volumes done. It wasn't until after the turn of the century that I could see, then, why this plodded along so slowly. The reason was we'd never defined the Joseph Smith Papers; we'd never determined exactly what they should be. When we started, I was working on those three volumes, and we had some student help at BYU. Of course, Ron was directing the institute there, and he was overworked and wasn't able to spend a lot of the time necessary to ride herd on the details. When Richard Bushman came on the scene and things started to change, there started to be some movement in the whole project, and we could see that it was going to go forward.

One of the things that helped push the thing forward was to include multiple editors and bring people in who would be professional and working full time, rather than student help. As we got started on that, in those early years right after the turn of the century, about 1999 and 2000, questions started coming as to how we were going to proceed. The picture that I had in my mind as far as Joseph Smith's papers was we would have the journals, the documents, and some legal and business material, and that would be about it. Some of those working on the individual volumes had questions, and one of those questions was, "What about these statements of Joseph Smith in the meetings that he held?" that were in the Kirtland council book, for example. There were many

meetings in which he talked and gave important instruction. How are we going to deal with that? There was no place for that.

I think it was Richard Jensen, just before this happened, who raised the question of what constitutes Joseph Smith's papers? We haven't really defined what Joseph Smith's papers are. Ron asked me to think about that over a weekend, and then in November 2002, I went home and I thought about where we'd been and all that had gone into this thing. And suddenly, it was made known to me that we just had totally ignored the bigger picture of what Joseph Smith's papers were. We hadn't included the histories, we hadn't included these types of things, and we hadn't included the administrative materials. The entire umbrella of what Joseph Smith's papers were had escaped me. I regard this as providential that that work plodded along so slowly, and it seemed like there were all kinds of roadblocks that cropped up, such as not getting access to material for six or eight years. It was almost laughable to think of the types of things that were happening, and I was very frustrated about it. I'm sure Ron was. We tried to figure things out to see how this could go forward.

After Richard Bushman came and Ron was relieved of his work as director of the Smith Institute, and Larry [H.] Miller came along,²⁵ and we had the decision to bring in multiple editors, and all of these things—it just started to fall into place. I was just floored to think that I hadn't really thought about it in the past. Right at the beginning, we should have decided what Joseph Smith's papers were. But I'm grateful that the project didn't bear fruit the way we had hoped because we were trying to drive that old Papers of Joseph Smith Project to its conclusion, and that was the plan that we were using at the beginning in 2000–2001.

When the Brethren came and gave us the stamp of approval, that was the plan that we were going to use. Right after that, this question came up as to the definition of the Joseph Smith Papers. I thought, Well, why should I be making this decision? Because any fool can see that the Joseph Smith Papers includes more than just what we were working on under that old Papers of Joseph Smith project. That's when we changed the name of it from the Papers of Joseph Smith to Joseph Smith Papers, so it wouldn't be confused. But that was the context in which that took place.

25. See "How the Joseph Smith Papers Became a Project of Consequence," herein, 147–48.

Richard Bushman: I would just say that it's typical that this change came from a question from Richard Jensen because he's the king of pesky questions. [*audience laughter*]

Dean Jessee: That's right.

Ron Esplin: I was just going to say Dean mentioned access. Just one example about access involved the Book of the Law of the Lord, which you can now enjoy on the internet. Everybody in the world can see it, but in the past, nobody could see it. We had to have special permission from the First Presidency for Dean to have access.

Dean Jessee: We really had to look at it more than once because when you make a copy the first time, you can't publish it that way; you've got to check the original again. So we had to go back to check it against the original before it was printed. In the *Personal Writings*, there was one segment that I wanted; I had to get access for it then. I had to get access for it again when we did the journal because the 1842 Joseph Smith journal is in the Book of the Law of the Lord and so on. But it wasn't just our situation. When we went to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints²⁶ in 1972 to start collecting the holograph material of Joseph, they allowed me to copy all of the letters they had of Joseph Smith to Emma except the October 1832 letter. They wouldn't allow me to have that, and they didn't give me a reason for it. It wasn't until Leonard [Arrington] interceded with one of their apostles who came out here to the Mormon History Association meetings that they were able to work out a trade to allow us to see that.²⁷

So this matter of access was a real problem at the beginning. I think probably with more communication to start with and a better understanding with what we were doing, maybe we could have avoided some of that.

Ron Esplin: Speaking of documents, I consider it providential that the project went from BYU to the Church History Department. Had we not come back where the documents were, it would have been a different

26. The RLDS Church changed its name to Community of Christ in 2001. "RLDS Church Changing Its Name: 'Community of Christ' Comes into Being Friday," *Deseret News*, April 5, 2001, <https://www.deseret.com/2001/4/5/19579122/rlds-church-changing-its-name/>.

27. "Letter to Emma Smith, 13 October 1832," in *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, ed. Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian's Press, 2013), 304–14, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-emma-smith-13-october-1832/1>.

project. Here, we could have the conversations with General Authorities. We had those conversations in the 1980s and the 1990s, and at that time, you could not go from a BYU office or professorship to the General Authorities directly under any circumstances without the [BYU] administration. Had we not come up here where we could have those conversations and develop the trust, it would have been a different project.

Richard Bushman: And Rick and Elder Jensen were superb diplomats.

Ron Esplin: And Elder [Bruce C.] Hafen as well. Absolutely.

Richard Bushman: They were the ones who really brought it about.

Dean Jessee: I would add this: When we started on that journal project in 1986, that was the year that Ron Esplin took over for Leonard Arrington as the head of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute. If it hadn't been for Ron, this whole thing would have died on the vine early on. I think his impact was tremendous, and it was needed. He had the skill and the ability to communicate with the Brethren and with BYU's administration. He was able to keep the thing afloat even though it was on dialysis. I'm grateful to him.

Richard Bushman: He won the confidence of everybody.

Dean Jessee: Right. And then Richard Bushman too. The impact of those men on this whole thing was what gave it the thrust to really put it in orbit. I'm grateful for that. It's really a blessing.

Matthew Godfrey: Just going along with this notion of trust, was there any specific moment or event that made you realize that we had the full trust of the Brethren, or was that trust present from the start?

Richard Bushman: I'm sure we all have a version of that. I'm not sure that there was one turning point when we really knew, but there were different kinds of trust. One kind of trust was, Can we trust you with these materials to present them properly, in a way that will not be offensive but will be fair and scholarly? That was one kind of trust. The greatest form of distrust was, Will you turn these books out in time? They were making this huge commitment, and they could see us dribbling, drabbling along over the centuries trying to get the books published. *[audience laughter]*

Ron Esplin: On time or at all?

Richard Bushman: At all, because we'd sort of come out of this BYU background where the productivity of the institute was always under scrutiny. It was a question that would come up again here, and that led to strains within the staff. Mark [Ashurst-McGee] was the champion of rigor. He and Dean took the stand, "We've got to do this right while we're

doing it.” I and Ron (to a somewhat lesser extent) were the champions of expediency: “We’ve got to get these books out.” It caused a million questions. We knew what the issues were; there wasn’t antagonism but constant pull and strain to pull it off.

Dean Jessee: When I came up with the new plan and I took it to our meeting, it was totally opposite from what we’d been doing. Well, it wasn’t totally opposite, but it was kind of startling for the reason that the earlier plan had just been authorized, we thought, by the Brethren. Now all of a sudden, we had a new plan, and the idea was then to accept it, forge ahead with it, and act upon it, but not share it with the Brethren until we got down the road a little bit further. That’s the way I understand it. To me, the moment when everything seemed to be rosy and the final approval had been given was that meeting of the 28th of June 2001, when the four Brethren of the apostleship and the four men from the Seventy came and met with us and launched the thing. That was before we had this change in the definition of the Joseph Smith Papers.

I felt good about it then, and I could see that things were heading in the right direction. We finally had our arms around the Joseph Smith Papers. Then I had a feeling that it was going to be great, especially with the talented people that had been brought on board to work on the individual volumes. Mark was there at the beginning, him and Angela [Ashurst]; there were the Darowskis [Joe and Kay Darowski]; there was Richard Jensen; and there was Sharalyn [Duffin Howcroft]. But that’s really a big blessing in my estimation, to see the way that this has flowered forth and become what it is. In my estimation too, I don’t know of another edited work that is superior to this one. I think it’s marvelous what has been produced, not only content-wise but just in the way it looks and the way it’s put together.

When we got the first *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* and the old *Papers of Joseph Smith*, one day I opened up my book, and it came apart. I opened it up again, and it came apart in another place, and it was obvious to me that the binding was glued and not sewed. I thought, For Pete’s sake, here we’ve got Joseph Smith, the founder of this dispensation, and we can’t produce a book that would last longer than six months? [*audience laughter*] That was one of the things that bothered me when we went into this. To see just the craftsmanship of *The Joseph Smith Papers* today is marvelous. I have a copy of *Rough Stone Rolling*²⁸ that’s the same

28. Richard Lyman Bushman, with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

way—it's glued, and it's all coming apart. I have a copy of *Men with a Mission*,²⁹ and it's coming apart because of the glued binding.

In addition to the quality of the workmanship itself, just the quality of the research and the work that's gone into it is just marvelous. I believe what President [Henry B.] Eyring, or whoever it was in general conference, just said that “the Lord raises up angels”³⁰—and some of them are right here in this room—to do the work. That's the way I regard you folks. You're all angels, and the archangels are sitting here with me. [audience laughter]

Richard Bushman: I have a binding story. As Rick indicated, a lot of thought went into the design of the binding, every detail. At one point, we had pictures and models, and I looked at it and was a little uneasy about it because it seemed extravagant. It was sort of too elegant, too embellished. I pictured it on the library shelves, you know how you see these series all together, and I thought it would sort of outshine the George Washington papers. So I thought it was a little bit too much. I was trying to make this case, and Skip [Harry] Stout, who is the editor of the Jonathan Edwards Papers and was on our advisory board, was in the room. He said to me, “How would Joseph Smith have liked this binding?” I said, “He would have loved it!” [audience laughter] So that's how they look. [audience laughter]

Matthew Godfrey: I'd like to open it up for questions that anyone might have.

Richard Jensen:³¹ Just in connection with the issue of trust, might it be helpful to explain a little bit about the way in which we got permission to do the Council of Fifty minutes³² [see fig. 2]? How did that work out? Was it all downhill after what you've just been talking about?

Matthew Godfrey: Ron, do you want to address this question?

Ron Esplin: Richard Holzapfel and Alex Baugh at BYU were very interested in publishing “Declaration of the Twelve,” as the clerk filed

29. James B. Allen, Ronald K. Esplin, and David J. Whittaker, *Men with a Mission, 1837–1841: The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the British Isles* (Deseret Book, 1992).

30. Dean may be referring to President Eyring's April 2017 conference address titled “Walk with Me,” *Ensign*, May 2017, 82–85.

31. Richard Jensen was the former senior research and review editor of the Joseph Smith Papers.

32. The Council of Fifty was “an organization intended to establish the political kingdom of God on the earth.” “Council of Fifty,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 20, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/topic/council-of-fifty>; Council of Fifty Record Books, 1844–1846, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/81b63cd8-5249-4900-aebd-24ea05937605/0?view=browse>.

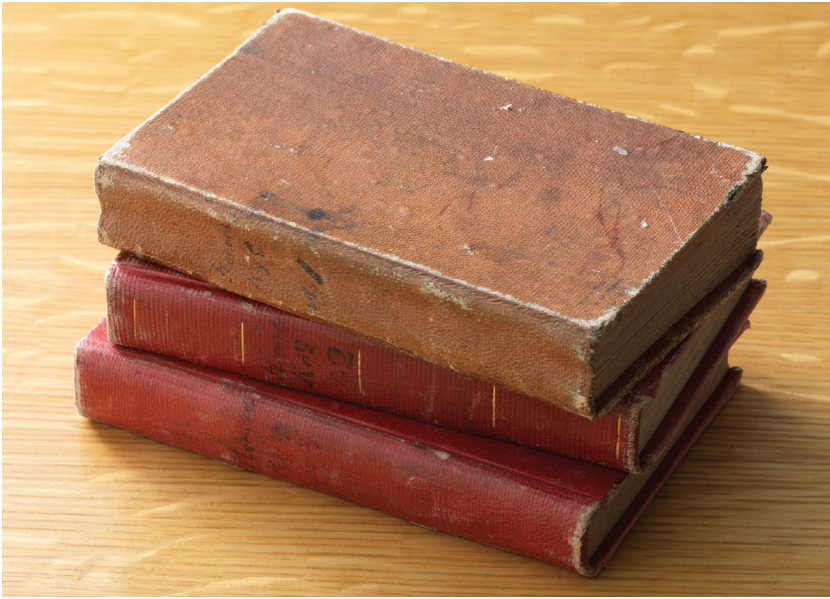


FIGURE 2. Council of Fifty Minutes. Photograph by Welden C. Andersen; courtesy Church History Library.

it—which we now know it was not—and enlisted me to work with them and see if we could sort out what it was. They wondered if maybe I could be a coauthor with them on a *BYU Studies* article. I said, “Yes—if we can get access to the Council of Fifty minutes and figure out indeed what it was.” Because on the face of it, it should have been associated with a meeting of the Council of Fifty. To make a long story short, I learned we couldn’t get access. We tried various things, and ultimately, it just seemed like it wasn’t going to happen. Richard Holzapfel had been called as a mission president in the South, and he was leaving. I said, “I’m not satisfied we know what it is. I can’t help you,” and they went ahead and published it.³³

Meanwhile, in 2009, I learned that Rick and Elder Jensen had type-scripts to the Council of Fifty minutes, and they had read them or were reading them. Susan Jackson was Neal Maxwell’s secretary, and when

33. Alexander L. Baugh and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, “‘I Roll the Burthen and Responsibility of Leading This Church Off from My Shoulders on to Yours’: The 1844/1845 Declaration of the Quorum of the Twelve Regarding Apostolic Succession,” *BYU Studies* 49, no. 3 (2010): 4–19.

he died, she didn't get reassigned to another General Authority but was attached to the Office of the First Presidency. She helped us out in a number of ways, one of which was making an inventory of everything that was over there so that Rick and Elder Jensen could go through it and say, This may pertain to us. We need to see it. She also was invited to do a transcript of the Council of Fifty minutes for the Office of the First Presidency, and it's that transcript that Elder Jensen and Rick were reading in 2009. When I learned this, I talked to Elder Jensen and said, "Will you help me figure out what it can tell us about the last charge of Joseph to the Twelve, which presumably occurred on the 26th of March 1844, and this document in Orson Hyde's hand? We don't know if he wrote it, and if you can shed some light on it, we really need to know that."

So one Sunday afternoon Elder Jensen was in Huntsville with the manuscript, and I was in Sandy, going back and forth over the phone. "Check the 26th of March." He fumbled around and said, "There isn't a 26th of March entry." I said, "There has to be. There was a meeting that day. And the official minutes don't even have an entry?" He said, "I'm sorry. It's not there." It turned out that in spite of doing a pretty decent job on that transcript—we made changes, of course, but she had a pretty good transcript—she had mistyped a really fancy "6" for a "1." So there were two 21 March entries, but one was actually the 26th. At any rate, that was the closest I got to the minutes since Elder [Joseph] Anderson told us in the 1970s his story of Heber J. Grant filing them away and telling him he wouldn't need to have access to them.³⁴

Eventually, Rick and Elder Jensen allowed me access to the minutes. I had access to those after 2010 and enjoyed reading them, learning about them, beginning to probe them, until the permission finally did come to publish them. Gerrit [Dirkmaat] and Mark [Ashurst-McGee] and Matt Grow and I, as well as Eric Smith and others, worked on that great volume.

Mark Ashurst-McGee:³⁵ And Jeff Mahas.

Ron Esplin: Jeff Mahas was crucial. He did a lot of great work on that. Access to the Council of Fifty minutes had become, as you all know, a litmus test.³⁶ The Church was newly open and transparent—it wasn't just public affairs that were using those words; General Authorities were

34. Ronald K. Esplin, "Understanding the Council of Fifty and Its Minutes," *BYU Studies* 55, no. 3 (2016): 7–8.

35. At the time of this roundtable, Mark Ashurst-McGee was the senior research and review editor for the Joseph Smith Papers.

36. Esplin, "Understanding the Council of Fifty and Its Minutes," 6–33.

using the words. But people would say, “We’ll believe it when we get the Council of Fifty minutes.” I was asked many times, “Well, what about the Council of Fifty? You say this is going to be comprehensive. Are you going to get those?” I said, “We’re still at Kirtland; it’s not relevant yet. I’m confident when we get there, we’ll have permission,” although none of us could know for sure. Even Elder Jensen didn’t know when. He got in trouble, you may remember, for a fireside he did in California that was on the internet the next morning about having made a comment that the Council of Fifty minutes would soon be available. It wasn’t soon, but it was eventually.

So I think the confidence that we’ve talked about already that Rick, Elder Jensen, and some of the executive directors of the department before Elder Jensen helped engender made it possible for us to get the final piece. They believed we would handle it right, and they believed it should be comprehensive.

Some of you will remember that we delayed publication of *Journals, Volume 3* because we figured we could not go forward and *not* use that record to annotate the last few months. So it was put quietly on the shelf, and then we did get permission and did use it to annotate with the full publication to follow.

Spencer W. McBride:³⁷ [This is] a question for all, but especially for Richard. As a historian on the project, I use *Rough Stone Rolling* all the time in my research and annotation of context of these documents. Now that we have sixteen print volumes—and I was looking ahead at biographies of Joseph Smith in the future but also your own—do you see anything drastically different in how you would approach *Rough Stone Rolling* if you were writing it today, or would it really just be minor tweaks here and there?

Richard Bushman: Well, I wanted to say first of all that I’m deeply grateful that I finished this book before these things were published. [*audience laughter*] My job would have been much, much harder. I will also say that I read all these things as a member of the advisory board. I’m always enthralled with the annotation; it’s just terrific. At this point, I haven’t stepped back far enough to sort of see the overall picture other than that there would be a lot more legal stuff that would have to be put in. But on one detailed point after another, the depth of research in that annotation is really awe inspiring. It’s fantastic work.

37. At the time this roundtable was held, Spencer McBride was a volume editor with the Joseph Smith Papers.

Ron Esplin: But you know we had the royal battle over how much to annotate and what was acceptable and what was too much. People would say, “You’re annotating much more than all these other projects.” Dean’s answer was, “Well, they would do it if they could, but they don’t have the resources we have, the talent. We can do it, and we will.”

Richard Bushman: Well, that’s true. We were really going upstream.

Ron Esplin: We were.

Richard Bushman: Because the whole tendency in documentary editing was to lighten annotation.

Ron Esplin: It was even more than Elder Jensen was prepared to accept, as you recall our battles over *Journals, Volume 1*. He got an anonymous reviewer, which still remains anonymous to me. I don’t know who it was, and when I find out, I’m going to talk with him or her. [audience laughter] At any rate, the anonymous reviewer said, “This is so overdone that it is impossible to use. I would take Dean Jessee’s original work over this any day, and anybody who’s thinking would.” So Elder Jensen said, “What about this, brethren?” (It happened to be men in the room.) Richard said, “Well, you can’t just dismantle it. This book has been prepared carefully brick by brick, and you can’t just start pulling out bricks.” You [Richard] held the line there.

The bottom line was I went through *Journals, Volume 1* very carefully, taking out words, taking out of the whole book maybe two dozen footnotes, consolidating all I could, and gave it back to Elder Jensen. It must have been a better day because he loved it then, and we hadn’t changed it that much. [audience laughter] So that’s the standard, and we’ve gone forward—except we’ve gotten worse.

Matthew Godfrey: I was going to say, it’s still our most lightly annotated volume. [audience laughter]

Richard Bushman: Do you have another comment, Mark?

Mark Ashurst-McGee: It seems like, about 2006 maybe, I was hearing little things from people that the project was in jeopardy.

Ron Esplin: When, 2016?

Mark Ashurst-McGee: No, around 2005 or 2006 or something like that—shortly after we moved to the Church Office Building.

Ron Esplin: I don’t think so. However, there was a time when the directors council ran the department. To show the respect we had with our colleagues in the department, the directors council made a list of priorities for the department, and we were not one, two, three, four, five—we were not on the list. So if it came to the directors voting, there

was a time in 2006 and 2007 that we would not have received any support. But we always had the support from Rick and Elder Jensen.

Matthew Godfrey: Maybe one last question, and then we'll close.

Audience question: Just wondering how it was decided that the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve would review Joseph Smith Papers volumes and not Correlation.

Ron Esplin: From the beginning, part of the authorization of the project included an agreement with the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve that these volumes would be reviewed by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve and approved by them—not by Correlation. As Rick used to put it, Correlation is a substitute for the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, who can't read everything. And because they're reading ours, nobody else needs to worry. That's been from the get-go, long before we had something for them to review.

Let me say one other little interesting anecdote to show how much things have changed. Style guides can be contentious, and no part of our style guide was more contentious than "JS" for an abbreviation or "Smith" instead of "Joseph the Prophet." A lot of folks had a lot of heartburn over that. One of the senior Brethren, whom I happen to know pretty well so that I could engage him on this question, sent back a review of *Journals 1* with big red writing all over a page or two saying, "Smith, Smith, Smith. I've had all the Smith I could stand." I sent him a long email explaining what we were doing and why we were doing it, and he said, "I knew when I expressed my heartburn I'd be giving heartburn to you. But now that you've explained it, I guess I could live with it."

Elder Jensen called me into his office with a member of the Seventy who'd been an academic at the University of Virginia (which was founded by Thomas Jefferson) and who was upset with our style guide on "Smith" and "JS." We sat across the table, and I told him about the convention in documentary editing. It's "TJ" in the Jefferson Papers. We can't be overly familiar, we have to have a scholarly discourse and distance, and he said, "Even at the university, it's Mr. Jefferson." But he could live with it eventually, too. Now it seems fine, although occasionally I see myself writing "Young" and "Young" and "Smith" and "Smith" too many times.

Matthew Godfrey: All right. I wonder if we could conclude by just having each of you offer any advice for us as we go forward.

Dean Jessee: Keep doing your push-ups, and keep up the good work.

Richard Bushman: Well, I think you should be proud of yourselves and don't stop. I also think you should be humble. I think you should pray about your work. This is not Thomas Jefferson. This is Joseph Smith, and it's very important that in all our words, we have inspiration to keep us on the right track. I think we have to be generous with one another. There has to be a brotherly and sisterly spirit here as well as a scholarly spirit.

Ron Esplin: Amen to that. I think what I would say is what I said to Matt Grow last week. I'm just finishing my review of *Documents, Volume 8* a little late. Matt was commenting that as volumes go down through the process, we get lighter and lighter feedback because people are comfortable with what we're doing, they know what we're doing, we know what we're doing, and we have quality work. I said, "Well, I've got quite a bit of feedback. A tremendous amount of great work in *Docs 8*, a wonderful volume. I couldn't be more pleased with it. I couldn't have written it," I told Matt, "but I can critique it. And I have critiqued it and do have feedback." But I will tell you that with every volume I've read, I've said to myself, If this was Dean and I alone doing it, it would never look like this. As much as I love what Dean did as a one-man show, much as I know a lot of the history, I could not produce what you are producing, and I praise you all.

I second Richard's comment that it is a sacred work and that if we do it prayerfully, using all of our academic and spiritual skills, we'll continue to be successful and we'll finish this in the grand style it's begun.

Dean Jessee: Now let me add that as members of the Church, we have here the papers of the founding of the dispensation of the fulness of times and the papers of the Prophet to establish that. I'm very grateful and very humbled by that thought—that here we have that kind of information and are engaged in this. I was born on the west side of town, and I can't imagine why I was involved in this at all. Yet I've been able to have a front-row seat in it. I'm grateful to all of you for all that you've done on this. I can see the providential aspect of it. I can see that in every volume that's been produced, and I appreciate it very much.

Matthew Godfrey: Join with me in thanking our panel. [audience applause]

Behind the Scenes of the Joseph Smith Papers Project

A Conversation with the Editors

*Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Scott Jensen, Elizabeth Kuehn,
Jeffrey Mahas, and Jessica M. Nelson*

Moderated by Nathan Waite

The following document is a transcript of a roundtable discussion on the work of the Joseph Smith Papers Project. The roundtable on June 10, 2023, moderated by Nathan Waite and featuring Robin Scott Jensen, Jessica M. Nelson, Jeffrey Mahas, Elizabeth Kuehn, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, was held in the Joseph A. Floreano Rochester Riverside Convention Center in Rochester, New York, as part of the annual Mormon History Association (MHA) Conference. In the conference program, this session was titled “The Work of the Joseph Smith Papers: A Roundtable.” The recorded remarks have been edited for clarity and readability.

Nathan Waite: Welcome to this session. My name is Nathan Waite, and I am on the editorial team for the Joseph Smith Papers and the Church Historian’s Press. I’m excited to talk today about the work of the Joseph Smith Papers with some of my colleagues here. We’ve got some prepared questions that I’ll give the roundtable members a chance to respond to. That might give us follow-up questions. We’ll go for about an hour with that. Then we will open it up for questions you [the audience] might have. We are looking forward to some really fun conversations today. But first, I want to introduce today’s panelists.

Robin Scott Jensen is a historian/archivist for the Joseph Smith Papers and coeditor of all five volumes of the Revelations and Translations series. He also served as an associate managing historian for the project. He has an MA in American history from Brigham Young University [BYU], a second MA in library and information science from the University of

Wisconsin at Milwaukee, and a PhD in history from the University of Utah. He knows nothing about sports but is incredibly good at connecting with and advocating for his fellow team members.

Jessica M. Nelson completed a BA in American studies at BYU and a master's in history at Utah State University, where she held the Milner/Butler Editorial Fellowship at the *Western Historical Quarterly*. She joined the Joseph Smith Papers in 2018 as a historian and documentary editor. Her current work includes editing the collection of Eliza R. Snow's discourses. She is also an avid cyclist and wins a lot of the road races that she competes in.

Jeffrey Mahas is a volume editor for the Joseph Smith Papers, contributing to several volumes of the Documents series, the Council of Fifty volume, and the Legal Records series online. He received his MA in U.S. history from the University of Utah. He can answer any question you have about Nauvoo. In another life, he would have made a great geologist or paleontologist. He is also probably the world's greatest dad.

Elizabeth Kuehn is the lead historian for the Financial Records series and a volume editor for the Documents series, including lead editor of *Documents, Volume 10*. She has an MA in European and women's history from Purdue University. She has basically held down two full-time jobs recently, because she's serving as MHA's program cochair. Also, if you're interested, she can take you on a tour of where all the merchants kept shop in Buffalo, New York, in the mid-1830s.

Finally, Mark Ashurst-McGee is the senior research and review editor for the Joseph Smith Papers. He is currently working on the Joseph Smith Bible translation. He is our documentary editing expert and developed many of the textual procedures and standards that we follow on the project. He holds a PhD in history from Arizona State University. He's an outdoor adventurer and has been mountaineering all over the place and once swam across the Rio Grande.

The first question. The aim of the Joseph Smith Papers is to gather, transcribe, contextualize, and make accessible every document that was created, authorized, or received by Joseph Smith. What benefits and what limitations have you seen with that documentary editing approach to Joseph Smith?

Let's start with that.

Jessica M. Nelson: Based on those criteria, there are some important documents in the Nauvoo era that just don't get included. One of

those is “The Voice of Innocence from Nauvoo.”¹ We debated for a while whether that should be included in some way because it did make it onto [Joseph Smith’s] desk. Ultimately, it wasn’t sent to him or authorized by him. So it’s not a part of our annotated Joseph Smith collection. That’s an example where a really important, relevant document about Joseph Smith doesn’t fit the criteria, so it’s not in the volume.

Elizabeth Kuehn: Unfortunately, I think that applies to a lot of women’s voices in the Joseph Smith era. We have really rich records for some time periods. For instance, in 1837, we have Vilate Kimball and Hepzibah Richards and Mary Fielding writing valuable, wonderful letters that talk about the tensions in the community and where Joseph is positioned and all these details that we drew from heavily. But they don’t meet our criteria for a Joseph Smith document because it is Mary writing to Mercy; it’s Vilate writing to Heber; later, [it’s] Hepzibah writing to Willard Richards, her brother. So those don’t fit our narrow criteria of going through or to Joseph Smith.

Unfortunately, the framing of documentary editing can leave out women’s voices, with it being a Joseph Smith–centered project. That’s not to say that there aren’t plenty of women who write letters to Joseph. Emma writes several letters that we have, of course. So there are women’s voices in the papers. It’s just those tangential voices that you know exist, but you have to find creative ways to bring [them] in and say, “These are happening too.” But they are not a featured transcript.

Nathan Waite: I think that’s a real benefit that annotation brings and a real reason the annotation of the Joseph Smith Papers is so important. Because it allows you to bring in those women’s voices and contextualize the documents even if they’re not featured.

Jeffrey Mahas: I have a lot of thoughts for this question. I joined the Joseph Smith Papers ten years ago, shortly before the first volumes in the Documents series were published. The first couple of volumes going through early Kirtland and Missouri had largely been written but hadn’t been published yet. I had a first-row seat to see how we approached the

1. “1.10 William W. Phelps with Emma Smith Revisions, ‘The Voice of Innocence from Nauvoo,’ February–March 1844,” in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women’s History*, ed. Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow (Church Historian’s Press, 2016), 151–56, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/church-historians-press/the-first-fifty-years-of-relief-society/part-1/1-10>.

challenge of selection. In these early volumes, we were including almost everything we have that met our criteria as a Joseph Smith document. There's so little in the early history of the Church that we were able to include these early licenses. We were able to include all of these minute entries. But as we approached Nauvoo, we just had the number of documents increase exponentially.

You look at everything Joseph is doing in Nauvoo. He's a newspaper editor. So we had to approach the problem: How do you represent his work as the editor of the *Times and Seasons*? How much do you attribute to him? How much do you think is being done by other people? How do you represent that? Those are questions that we had to answer.

He's the trustee of the Church. You suddenly have hundreds and hundreds of promissory notes, of deeds, of bonds, of mortgages, of all kinds of records. You can no longer put all of these in a book. He's the mayor of Nauvoo. He's passing ordinances, signing ordinances, signing pay orders for the city. You have thousands of documents relating to the administration of Nauvoo. How do you feature all of that? He's the judge of the Nauvoo mayor's court and the chief justice of the municipal court. How do you represent all of that?

We had to be creative. We came up with a list of the core documents we were including. Any revelation we will include. Any correspondence we'll include. Any sermon we'll include. Otherwise, we had to be selective about what we could include. That means that not everything that we have is featured in the print volumes.

There can sometimes be inconsistencies from one volume to the next. On one volume that I worked on, *Documents, Volume 13*, we were trapped into a certain time frame. We couldn't start the volume any earlier, and we couldn't move any later. We had these specific six months, and it just happened to be six months where there were fewer core documents. So we got to be less selective. We got to pull in a lot of minutes or financial records or legal records that wouldn't otherwise be included. But some volumes—*Documents, Volume 15* covers what, six weeks? So they had to be very selective. There's so much in that time frame.

One other thing I would add. The blessing and the curse of our approach is that it really ties us to contemporary documents. What's in the documents? Sometimes the most important events of a time or a period in Joseph's life are not going to be represented. In *Documents, Volume 13* that I worked on—probably the most important event for Joseph and for the history of the Church in that period occurs in late September when Joseph receives the fulness of the temple blessings. This is going

to be one of these pivotal moments in Joseph's life. The members of the Church who were privy to it saw it as a key turning point in the history of the Church and the Restoration. And there's not a single document that's going to talk about that. So we had to try to balance: How do you make sure that, for these key moments in Joseph's life, you're making people aware of them even when they are not represented in the volume?

Mark Ashurst-McGee: I think I want to take even another step back from where Jeffrey has been because this question is resting on some fundamental questions that you face at the very beginning of a documentary editing project. This might sound stupid, but the first thing is subject selection. That sounds really easy. Joseph Smith—he's the founder of the Church. But there are many examples of how quickly you get into the weeds there.

I'll give just a couple of historical examples. What's considered the first major professional modern documentary edition in the American history tradition of documentary editing is the Thomas Jefferson papers.² They decided that they were going to do Jefferson and move forward with that. Well, not too long after, what grew out of that was the John Adams Papers. Except when Lyman Butterfield started building the control file for that project, the correspondence was so dense between John and Abigail, and between John and John Quincy, between John Quincy and Abigail, and some other family members that he quickly realized this was not the John Adams Papers. This was the Adams Family Papers.³ Or consider Marcus Garvey: The Marcus Garvey project changed from the Marcus Garvey Papers to the Marcus Garvey and the UNIA [Universal Negro Improvement Association] Papers because his work with the UNIA was so enmeshed in terms of documentary production.⁴

2. The Papers of Thomas Jefferson is a project at Princeton University working to publish a comprehensive edition of Jefferson's papers. The first volume produced by the project was published in 1950. "The Papers of Thomas Jefferson," Princeton University, accessed April 23, 2025, <https://jeffersonpapers.princeton.edu/>.

3. The Adams Papers and the Adams Family Papers are produced by the Massachusetts Historical Society. "Adams Family Papers," Massachusetts Historical Society, accessed April 23, 2025, <https://www.masshist.org/adams/adams-family-papers>.

4. The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers Project is a documentary editing project produced at the James S. Coleman African Studies Center, University of California at Los Angeles. "The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers Project: A Research Project of the James S. Coleman African Studies Center," UCLA African Studies Center, accessed April 24, 2025, <https://www.international.ucla.edu/africa/mgpp/project>. See also C. Gerald

We could have done the Joseph and Emma Smith Papers or something like that. But in doing the Joseph Smith Papers, the fact of the matter is that it's largely documents by men, for men. It is what you get when you make that selection. The annotation does bring in a lot of women's voices and information about women because they're all around and they're significant and they factor into things. But we don't go out of our way to bring them in because we have a really consistent style of what kinds of things we annotate and how we annotate them. I think it's good. When the women come into the annotation, it's because they should be there. It's not gratuitous.

The other really fundamental early decision in documentary editing is whether you're going to do a comprehensive edition or a selective edition. We absolutely had an ideal of doing a comprehensive edition. But as Jeffrey said, we can't do everything in paper. You really wouldn't want to do everything in paper because there are hundreds of priesthood licenses and all kinds of routine documents that you just don't want to print.

I want to take this opportunity to point to the website, which has a much more comprehensive collection of [Joseph] Smith documents. Even more than that, it has a full comprehensive list of documents in what we call a calendar of documents. I think that's something that a lot of people don't know about that's really, really important. If you want to have a good understanding of the Smith corpus, you need to look at the calendar that's on the website.⁵

Nathan Waite: [It] shows a day-by-day chronology, essentially. It shows all the documents for this day and goes through the course of his entire life, document by document, day by day.

Robin Scott Jensen: Extant or nonextant documents.

Nathan Waite: Exactly.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: And even includes all the different *versions* of a document.

Robin Scott Jensen: Documentary editing is not a neutral act. Back to the question, at every single step of the gathering, transcribing, contextualizing, and making accessible, there are decisions that need to be

Fraser, "A 10-Volume Look at Garvey," *New York Times*, April 2, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/04/02/rts/a-10-volume-look-at-garvey.html>.

5. To view the calendar, see "Calendar of Documents," The Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed June 26, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/reference/calendar-of-documents>.

made. Some of those decisions are very obvious. Do we include a letter that's in Joseph Smith's own handwriting that is signed by him? That's a pretty obvious decision. Do we include a document written by W. W. Phelps because Joseph Smith told him to write it? That's a little bit harder decision. Do we transcribe this letter as a capital S or a lowercase s? Some of these decisions are monumental. Other decisions might not seem so important. But documentary editing is not neutral. It is decision after decision after decision. Where that matters is we have now published these volumes for you all to use, and they are tremendous resources. (Not to toot our own horn, but we have a panel here about tooting our horn.) We hope to see the scholarship on Joseph Smith balloon because of this. I think that will happen. The ease of access for scholars to go to their library or their shelf and pull out a volume of the Joseph Smith Papers is tremendous. This is a tremendous, monumental day in Mormon studies.

But pulling out a book of published sources fundamentally does not capture the state of the archival record. Documentary editing is not a perfect representation of what the records look like. Anywhere from the very obvious (materiality of the text is not the same) all the way to all these decisions that I talked about. Users of the Joseph Smith Papers are not confronted with those decisions. I have learned on the Joseph Smith Papers that in making those decisions, in discussing those decisions with my colleagues, we have learned things about Joseph Smith. Those lessons about Joseph Smith aren't always in the annotations or introductions or source notes or transcriptions. They're in our heads. They're on the cutting room floor. They're in how we live and breathe Joseph Smith.

As you pull down that volume and use the volume in your scholarship, it is so nice that rather than having to go to the archive and do all this primary research, you can just skim through the printed word. But as you are reading the printed word, you are distancing yourself from the archive, from the document itself. That is a tension—a challenge—that historians have grappled with forever. But it's a real challenge that I hope users of the Joseph Smith Papers will remember. So when we talk about the benefits and the challenges, the very act of using the volume contains both, I believe.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: That's another place where the website is good because the website has high-resolution scanned images side by side with the transcript. It doesn't have an index like the printed volumes. But you can do word searches and have the images. Between the

published paper volumes and the website, you have different angles for getting at different problems.

Jeffrey Mahas: Someone literally right before this session asked me a question at the Church Historian's Press booth: "Why is the Revelations and Translations series published differently from the Documents series?" I could explain: Well, there [in Revelations and Translations], we put the high-resolution printed photos of the texts side by side with a very detailed transcript, more detailed than usual. We figured these texts, these revelations, these books that are produced by Joseph Smith were where a lot of the interest was going to be. If you are reading Joseph's letter to Thomas Ford, you probably don't care about capitalization at all. But you might if it's the Book of Mormon or the book of Abraham. Or you might not care about punctuation. But on some of these other texts, you might care more. So you have the images there to look at.

Robin Scott Jensen: I forgot one point I was going to make. Another way that the Joseph Smith Papers [Project] is a misrepresentation of the archive is that at no time were all of the documents contained in the Joseph Smith Papers volumes on Joseph Smith's desk. This is a collation, a collection, a curation of the historical record that is not something that Joseph Smith himself confronted. This is a representation of his life, of his writings as best as we can. But it's also not a record of his archival work, his record-keeping work.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: And we're pulling stuff from here in New York all the way to the Huntington Library in California and everywhere in between. But I'd say we had about eighty-five percent of the corpus in Salt Lake City, or something like that. The Community of Christ, of course, had some very important documents. But there's stuff from coast-to-coast that we've collected.

Jessica M. Nelson: Just a plug for an interesting and unique document that fits with what Robin was saying. Sometime in the spring of 1844, Joseph signed an autograph book for a young woman visiting Nauvoo.⁶ Her name was Barbara [Neff], and her friends had signed it, and she had other people in Nauvoo sign it. Eliza R. Snow wrote a few poems in it. It's one of the few documents that we have written in his [Joseph Smith's] handwriting and signed by his own name in 1844. It ends up

6. "Poem to Barbara Neff, between circa 6 and circa 13 May 1844," in *Documents, Volume 14: 1 January–15 May 1844*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Adam H. Petty, Jessica M. Nelson, and Spencer W. McBride, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2023), 507–8, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/poem-to-barbara-neff-between-circa-6-and-circa-13-may-1844/1>.

with this autograph book that comes into Utah. So it was never something he even possessed or sent out. But it was retained in this other book that has a much different history than some of these other documents and the way they were stored.

Jeffrey Mahas: To piggyback off both these comments, one of the genres of documents that I think people are really interested in, which I actually think is really problematic but that we feature, is Joseph's sermons. When you go into our volumes, you're going to see categories: discourses or remarks. The challenge that we faced with the Joseph Smith Papers is that—from what we can tell, other than the Kirtland temple dedicatory prayer—Joseph never got up to give a discourse with a written text. So we're relying on, at best, scribes who are making notes and, at worst, just people who are in the audience who later write down what they remember Joseph saying. You'll often see people reproducing these sermon notes as if this is an exact quote of what Joseph said. I think it's important to remember this was mediated through probably several levels: What did they understand that Joseph was saying? What did they write down? And what has survived? I think there are a lot of challenges as we try to understand what Joseph is teaching in a public setting in these discourses. There's a challenge with the text that we have there. How do we represent them, and how do we understand them? Because other than one or two instances, Joseph doesn't review—that we know of—these notes of sermons and discourses that he's giving. So would Joseph agree with what the scribe wrote down? We have no way of knowing for sure.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Well, we have a clue. Because in the couple times that he does review it, he does make interventions.

Jeffrey Mahas: Yes. In April 1843, Joseph reviews William Clayton's conference minutes and [basically] says, "These are terrible. Start over."⁷ So we don't know if Joseph would agree with the notes we have of the King Follett discourse or any other discourse that Joseph gave.

Elizabeth Kuehn: And sometimes reception can be at opposite ends. There is a discourse in June of 1842 that we have John D. Lee recording,

7. On April 23, 1843, Joseph Smith "<heard read> minutes of special conference." According to his journal, these minutes "were not explicit enough," so he "said he would dictate them over again." See "Journal, December 1842–June 1844," in *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2011), 372, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843/182>.

and we have William Smith recording. John D. Lee says, Oh, he told us to repent, and we need to be better; this was a soul-searching sermon, and I need to do better to build the kingdom of God.⁸ In the *Wasp*, William Smith says, Joseph harangued all those sinners and gave them what for, and does not lump himself in with those being harangued.⁹ So you can see how reception is very mediated to the individual. John D. Lee is being called to repentance, and William Smith is saying, Yeah, call out all those sinners in Nauvoo. It's a fun kind of mediation.

Nathan Waite: I've never thought about it just this way. But one of [the] main things the Joseph Smith Papers is trying to do is say, Stop using the printed version of the *History of the Church* for your Joseph Smith quotes. Stop using *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. Let's get back to the original. Let's get back to what he actually said. But this is a good point. With a lot of the things, especially discourses, we're never going to get back to exactly what he said. It's always going to be mediated by the scribes or by the people recording him.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: There are no stenographic reports. It's all longhand reports.

Nathan Waite: Yes, this is before we had shorthand.

Jessica M. Nelson: Well, in taking a step back further, this presents itself as a unique papers project in that we're trying to capture spoken, verbal words in text because this man is a prophet and people look at him that way. Whereas in other projects that we compare ourselves with, work with, or model ourselves after, they are not doing the same thing—trying to capture what Thomas Jefferson said—in the same way because his words have different meaning from Joseph Smith's and someone like that.

Jeffrey Mahas: A simple comparison: the Jonathan Edwards papers. He wrote down all his sermons, so you can publish them and know what he said.¹⁰ Joseph doesn't do the same. [*agreement from panelists*]

8. "Discourse, 5 June 1842, as Reported by John D. Lee," in *Documents, Volume 10: May–August 1842*, ed. Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Jordan T. Watkins, Matthew C. Godfrey, and Mason K. Allred, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2020), 126–30, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-5-june-1842-as-reported-by-john-d-lee/1>.

9. "Discourse, 5 June 1842, as Published in *Wasp*," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 3, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-5-june-1842-as-published-in-wasp/1>.

10. The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University publishes the Works of Jonathan Edwards Online. This is a collection of sermons, manuscripts, and published works by Edwards, a prominent preacher and theologian in Massachusetts in the eighteenth

Nathan Waite: I wanted to ask what changes you've seen happen over the course of the project, such as decisions we made or course changes. What's happened along the way that's changed our approach to the Joseph Smith Papers?

Jessica M. Nelson: I've been here the fewest number of years, so I don't have as much of a perspective. I will defer to my colleagues.

Elizabeth Kuehn: Starting with the Kirtland Bank, we had to start tackling financial records. It's in 1836 that we have Joseph finally engaging in business ventures in any kind of large-scale way. With Sharon [Nielsen]'s help (I'll call her out in the audience), we had to navigate creating genres and ways to understand financial documents that the papers, to this point, had not engaged with at the same level.¹¹ There had been deeds; there had been promissory notes. But suddenly, we were dealing with bank ledgers and many different types of financial records. I think that was one big change that has now snowballed into a separate series that we're working on to try and represent trustee records, tithing records, and the full corpus of Joseph's financial papers.¹²

Another change—Mark has correctly noted that this is largely men talking to men, about men. But that's not to say that the women aren't there. There are ways that we worked to call them out a little bit more, to give them attention. In just about every deed of a married couple, a woman has to give up her dower rights to a property, and so she is signing it, if she can. If she is not able to sign her name, she's making her mark. A decision was made to include women's names with every deed that that applied to. So they were named there.¹³

Mark Ashurst-McGee: May I add a quick footnote to that? Whenever the journal says, Joseph Smith is staying at Brother So-and-So's house, the footnote will say, Brother and Sister So-and-So lived here. We did things like that.

century. "Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University," Yale University, accessed April 28, 2025, <http://edwards.yale.edu/>.

11. At the time of this roundtable, Sharon Nielsen was the web editorial lead for the Joseph Smith Papers Project.

12. See "Browse the Papers: Financial Records," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/financial-records>.

13. See "Deed from Daniel H. and Eliza Robison Wells, 4 February 1843," in *Documents, Volume 11: September 1842–February 1843*, ed. Spencer W. McBride, Jeffrey D. Mahas, Brett D. Dowdle, and Tyson Reeder, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2020), 388–93, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/deed-from-daniel-h-and-eliza-robison-wells-4-february-1843/1>.

Jeffrey Mahas: Because it's probably not Newel K. Whitney that's cooking for Joseph.

Elizabeth Kuehn: Right. And also, I think there was encouragement in the annotation. There's sometimes a scholarly negligence, where it's stated Newel K. Whitney and wife. Well, Elizabeth has a name. Let's call her Elizabeth Ann Whitney. Let's name her in the records. In that light, we've also worked to identify and give biographies to the plural wives of Joseph Smith in our biographical directory.

Jeffrey Mahas: One change that I noticed [is] that [readers are] the recipients of [staff knowledge] in the published volumes. By design, there was a lot of specialization over time among the staff. One of the changes that I saw over time is that you find specific people who would either be assigned to or latch on to a topic and would become the experts on that topic. I think Robin really became [the expert] with revelations and translations. He became someone that a lot of people went to. Elizabeth took it upon herself to get to know financial documents, and anytime anyone in the project was annotating the financial documents, one of the first things they would do is take it to Elizabeth and ask, "What is this?" [David] Grua specialized in legal, and he would review legal documents. If you want to know where someone lived in Nauvoo, I'm your guy. I can tell you that I helped a lot with maps and other things. Mark helped with everything.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Handwriting. Well, textual issues. Sharalyn Howcroft was our handwriting identification expert.¹⁴

Jeffrey Mahas: Yes. Whenever I got a tricky document, I'd take it to Mark and say, "What on earth is going on here?" And we'd try to figure it out. We benefited from the best collaborative environment I can possibly imagine. In the printed volumes, you're going to see sometimes three, four, five editors listed. But the reality is, each of those volumes is the product of a team of dedicated historians and editors and others who are really pouring themselves into it. We're all working together. It really feels like every volume, every publication, every web release is a joint victory lap for everyone on the project.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Looking back, I see two major changes over the course of the project. One was in the Documents series. We started out comprehensive and then had to become selective. And there was a big debate. Maybe it was a debate between Robin and me. Robin wanted

14. At the time of this roundtable, Sharalyn D. Howcroft was the project archivist for the Joseph Smith Papers.

to represent the corpus of Joseph Smith's documents. The Joseph Smith documents get, in general, more and more and more as time goes by. There are very few at the beginning and a whole lot more by the very end. If you're going to represent the corpus of documents, then you are selecting all the way through in order to represent the corpus as it grows.

There was the other point of view, which I took but never felt totally great about. We're doing the papers of Joseph Smith because we want to understand Joseph Smith. So there was an idea that early on in his life, where we have relatively few documents, we use all of that so we can get a better idea of those years. Later on, we'll have a much better idea of *those* years because of the wealth of documentation. So that was one change and that happened starting with *Documents, Volume 7*, as soon as we get to Nauvoo. Before Nauvoo, it's virtually comprehensive, and afterward, it's selective. That's one big change.

The other big change was that we had really big plans for a Legal series, including paper volumes. Our relationship with attorneys and the outside legal team didn't work out. It split into two different ways, with them going off in one way to draft print volumes with some legal commentary and us going another way and presenting the legal papers in our own consistent style on the website.

Nathan Waite: But one thing that [it] allowed us to do is be comprehensive, right? There is so much legal content on the website. Hundreds and hundreds of documents, dozens and dozens of cases. Maybe hundreds of cases, right?

Jeffrey Mahas: [Around] two hundred cases, I believe.

Nathan Waite: The fact that it went online meant that we could present all that documentation and do a great job.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Yes, and that's for all the series.¹⁵

Robin Scott Jensen: I just have one anecdote. There are a lot of things that changed. On this panel, Mark's been here the longest. I started a couple of years after Mark. But there have been a lot of things that have changed, including physical location. We used to be down at BYU, and then we moved up to the Church. A lot of things.

One example or anecdote that shows the conversation and the complexities of documentary editing: In the Documents series, we knew that

15. The Joseph Smith Papers website is organized in seven series: Documents, Journals, Administrative Records, Revelations and Translations, Histories, Legal Records, and Financial Records. "The Joseph Smith Papers," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org>.

we would present the revelations of Joseph Smith: Joseph Smith as revelator. That's a very important genre of documents. We knew that the revelations needed to be placed in their context. But the revelations were important to the early Latter-day Saints, so they were copied multiple times. There are a lot of different versions, all the way from when they were first recorded up through the end of his [Joseph's] life, when they're published in 1844 in an edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

Initially, we thought we would include the latest version of the revelations—or in other words, that 1844 edition—because that then shows the final word, as it were, on Joseph Smith's understanding of these revelations. He made changes, corrections to them, throughout their publication history. If we presented the 1844 version of the revelation, that would give a sense that this is the final word on these revelations by Joseph Smith. The more we thought about it, the more we realized that doesn't work. That's presenting an 1844 text, as it were, in the 1829 context.

It's possible to justify and to argue for that. I think that there is a case to be made. But since the Documents series are a chronological framework from beginning to end, we thought it made sense to go with the earliest version of the revelation we had access to. The challenge, of course (and this gets back to my earlier point), is that except for maybe one or two instances, we don't have any original dictated copies of the revelations. So we're still presenting documents that are not specifically tied to that particular date. We've got 1829 and 1830 revelations that are actually, technically, 1833 texts published in the Book of Commandments. But that is, again, the reality of the state of the records.

That's one change, and we had to do a lot of that work because we had already done a lot of annotation. Well, not for the 1844 text. But when we reverted back to the earliest text, some of that annotation changed because some wording changed. Then we had to make decisions of, Do we point forward to talk about anticipating changes to the text, or does that rip the readers out of the context? So these are the kinds of conversations that we had. Yes, there were a lot of conversations.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: I'll add that we did get that worked out before we had published any of them. So starting with the first volume of the Documents series, we had a consistent method. We can talk for hours about little changes. But I think the major takeaway should be that we spent half a decade getting all our ducks in a row, which is actually the usual situation for large documentary editing projects like ours. I hope your [the audience's] takeaway is that the product is remarkably consistent.

Nathan Waite: I wanted to follow up with what you were saying, Mark, about this big shift from comprehensive to selective. I think we have a real, tangible example of that.

When I started on the project, my first full-time assignment was to work on the Histories series. We ended up with two history volumes: the *Joseph Smith Histories* and the *Assigned Histories*.¹⁶ That second volume, which I love with all my heart, has the John Whitmer history; it has the John Corrill history. Some really interesting stuff in there. But if we were to go now and say, “Let’s do this volume,” we would say, “No way!” because our conception of the size of the project and what counts as those papers is very different. The *Assigned Histories*, I think, is a function of having been one of the earliest things we did because it is a little bit of a step away from Joseph Smith. I think it would have ended up on the website and not in a print volume. But I’m glad it ended up in a print volume because I love that volume.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Nate did maybe the lion’s share of work on that volume.

Nathan Waite: We need to credit Karen Davidson as well. She did an awful lot of work on that.¹⁷

Other thoughts on these questions? Or are you ready to tackle another one?

Okay. Will you talk about one specific document that you worked on that you think is really significant or illustrates something important? Jessica, tell us about that.

Jessica M. Nelson: I came onto the project in the summer of 2018 and started working on some of the documents as we were wrapping up volume 12. One of the documents in that little, small set that I was learning and that I worked on was a letter from a man named Thomas Rawcliff.¹⁸

16. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2012); Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, eds., *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2012).

17. Karen Lynn Davidson was the lead historian on the two histories volumes in the Joseph Smith Papers.

18. “Letter from Thomas Rawcliff, 24 May 1843,” in *Documents, Volume 12: March–July 1843*, ed. David W. Grua, Brent M. Rogers, Matthew C. Godfrey, Robin Scott Jensen, Christopher James Blythe, and Jessica M. Nelson, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2021), 328–42, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-thomas-rawcliff-24-may-1843/1>.

I think it gives a really interesting perspective on Nauvoo. He's someone whose parents had joined the Church in England, and he knew a lot of the people who came over and were settling in Nauvoo and those neighboring areas. He writes with a lot of concern for these people, who he felt had been told a lot of great things about what it would be like to be with the body of the Saints but who were struggling and trying to find jobs. It was really, really difficult. I've found his perspective and his advocacy for these poor British Saints, who had sacrificed a lot to be there, to be very informative because it's not a voice you would put in an antagonistic camp. He was very sympathetic but also kind of a neutral voice, advocating for a people he really loved and cared about. He didn't want them to be taken advantage of. That was, I thought, an interesting and important document that made it into that volume.

Similarly, another British-related document in *Documents, Volume 14* is a letter from a man supervising the mission over there.¹⁹ His name is Reuben Hedlock. He describes the Church activity and what it was like to try to facilitate emigration, making sure people had their information about that and trying to follow [direction] from Church leadership. But also, it tells us a lot about what people thought about the Church in that area. There is an interesting and really tragic story of someone drowning during a baptism. That got an elder in prison. Her husband, who tried to save her as she was drowning, also ended up in prison. There's a criminal trial for them. So it's a little bit about the opposition to the Church outside of the American context in these working-class neighborhoods in Great Britain.

Nathan Waite: And that's kind of unexpected. [A reader may think,] Using the Joseph Smith Papers, I'm not going to find out about the inner workings of the Church in England. But it's because they were sending reports to the Prophet.

Jessica M. Nelson: Yes, exactly. This is a very long and extensive document. It receives thirty-two pages of treatment in *Documents, Volume 14*. We are kind of biased because what you work on is what you know. Those were two that I thought were interesting and important perspectives on the Church, especially outside the United States.

19. "Letter from Reuben Hedlock, 10–21 January 1844," in *Documents, Volume 14: 1 January–15 May 1844*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Adam H. Petty, Jessica M. Nelson, and Spencer W. McBride, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2023), 53–85, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-reuben-hedlock-10-21-january-1844/1>.

Elizabeth Kuehn: One document in the last ten years is a little bit of a challenge for me. So I may take a leaf from Jessica's book and do two. But in 1842, we have some rare examples of documents connected to plural marriage. These are in *Documents, Volume 10*, and they are from the Whitney family archive. The Whitney family kept these, preserved them, even though they were told to destroy them. But they chose not to do that. One is the copy of a revelation that is essentially telling Newel K. Whitney how to seal his daughter Sarah Ann Whitney to Joseph Smith as a plural wife.²⁰ The other is an August 1842 letter that Joseph is writing to Newel K., Elizabeth Ann, and Sarah Ann Whitney, their daughter.²¹

These are some of the few primary source documents we have around plural marriage. But they also proved pretty daunting in trying to figure out the balance of annotation, how we talk through these things, and how we explain these to readers on a scholarly level, as well as provide a member-facing explanation. These, I felt, were some of the most trying documents I worked on but also, in some sense, the ones that I feel the most pastoral connection to. Because that then leads to a lot of conversations with those who are struggling with these topics in the larger picture of Joseph Smith's history.

I'll quickly do a second one. It's kind of a cheat because it's over four hundred pages long. But it's the Book of the Law of the Lord.²² These are Nauvoo tithing records that Joseph Smith instructed to be kept starting in 1842. The name of every single Saint at that time period who donated tithing is in these books, with what they donated and the degree to which they donated. They are often donating goods in-kind. So you get some really interesting entries that speak to the Nauvoo economy or how the Nauvoo economy is struggling when someone's paying their tithing in newspapers or in garden produce or they are giving a nickel because that's what they have. It's a very interesting insight to the sacrifice of Saints both in the Nauvoo area as well as many, many in the British Isles, who are also sending tithing and donations to the Nauvoo Temple.

20. "Revelation, 27 July 1842, in Unidentified Handwriting-B," in Kuehn and others, *Documents, Volume 10*, 308–14, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-27-july-1842/1#historical-intro>.

21. "Letter to Newel K., Elizabeth Ann Smith, and Sarah Ann Whitney, 18 August 1842," in Kuehn and others, *Documents, Volume 10*, 436–40, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-newel-k-elizabeth-ann-smith-and-sarah-ann-whitney-18-august-1842/1>.

22. "The Book of the Law of the Lord," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/the-book-of-the-law-of-the-lord/1>.

Nathan Waite: The Book of the Law of the Lord will be published later this year on the website. Because it will highlight everyday Saints, not just your top leaders, there are many people who will show up there who don't show up in other places.

Also, as a follow-up question to something you said, Elizabeth: The general kind of idea seems to be that documentation around plural marriage is—if it's contemporary, it was by someone with an axe to grind. It's from a hostile source. Then it's only our later documents that other [faithful] people were involved in. You've mentioned this little Whitney collection as an exception. Would you say, in general, that's one of the only exceptions? Is it generally true that we don't have in the Joseph Smith Papers any contemporary references to or documents about plural marriage?

Elizabeth Kuehn: It is a very small number, and I might invite Robin to speak on this too, since he's worked quite a bit on it as well. But we have very few from Joseph that I would consider authorized from Joseph. We, of course, have William Clayton's journal, which is a very rich resource but from a very unique perspective—singular, I might say. We have a handful of contemporary records, a majority of which are thanks to the Whitney family.

Jeffrey Mahas: We have one letter, for example, from Eliza R. Snow that she writes in her journal.²³ But it doesn't record any details of plural marriage. You can see affection and care is in this letter, but there's no mention of her relationship to Joseph in it.

Elizabeth Kuehn: Other than that she had been sealed the previous year.

Nathan Waite: You have to read between the lines.

Robin Scott Jensen: To Jeffrey's point (I think Jeffrey made the point), some events that we wish were documented better are not, and plural marriage was one of those. As I think about it, it's actually kind of remarkable. There's not many, but it's remarkable that there are some. I mean, Joseph Smith is telling the Whitneys to destroy this letter.²⁴ It makes me think immediately, Oh! How many other letters were written like that that were destroyed? If he's so careful in documenting these

23. "Poem from Eliza R. Snow, 12 October 1842," in McBride and others, *Documents, Volume 11*, 150–55, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/poem-from-eliza-r-snow-12-october-1842/1#historical-intro>.

24. In his letter to the Whitneys referenced by Elizabeth Kuehn earlier, Joseph Smith instructed them to "burn this letter as soon as you read it." "Letter to Newel K.," 436.

activities, he's clearly going to then *not* document certain things because of the sensitive nature of them.

Jeffrey Mahas: It was actually easy for me to come up with my favorite document that I've worked on. When I started the project ten years ago, I was hired by Mark to be his research assistant. We were originally putting together *Documents, Volume 6*. A week or so after I started, I was hard at work on that, and Mark brought me in and said, "We are changing tactics." I was only told, "I need you to help do research for *Journals, Volume 3*, the final volume of the Joseph Smith journals. I want you to work on background of the Council of Fifty for the annotation for *Journals, Volume 3*." I did not know (very few people on the staff knew at that point) that we had received permission to publish the Council of Fifty minutes.

I started researching, gathering all of the secondary and primary source literature that I could find that mentioned the Council of Fifty. One story I'll tell is while in the middle of this, I came across the references to there being three little books of minutes of the Nauvoo-era Council of Fifty. I went to Mark's office, and Mark had a little book on his desk that I didn't notice. I proceeded to say to Mark, "Where are these minute books? We know that there were these minute books." Mark patiently listened and was saying, "Yes, it would be very helpful." Mark was verifying the transcripts of the minutes at that very time, I later found out. I was very privileged to be one of the historians who got to ultimately work on that volume, and I, to this day, can't believe my luck.

I still think I died and went to heaven ten years ago because I would spend every day working with Mark, with Matt Grow, with Ron Esp-
lin, and Gerrit Dirkmaat. We would meet together, read the minutes together, try to figure things out, assign out annotation. But getting to be one of the first scholars to look at these records that no one had looked at for almost one hundred years was really an incredible privilege, and I just can't believe that I got to work on that. I think of all the things that I've done, that's probably the most important. Because those of you who have been in Latter-day Saint history a long time, how many people thought that the Church would ever publish the Council of Fifty minutes? I think that was assumed to be totally off the table, and now it's published.²⁵ It's out there. It's done. I mean, how incredible is that?

25. Matthew J. Grow, Ronald K. Esp-
lin, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat,
and Jeffrey D. Mahas, eds., *Administrative Records, Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–
January 1846*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2016).

Mark Ashurst-McGee: I'm just going add to that. It was really fun because Jeffrey said to me, "Is there any way we can get the Council of Fifty minutes? I just think it would be really helpful!" [audience laughter] I wasn't allowed to say anything. So I'm just saying, "I totally agree with you. I think that would be super helpful." And I had the volume on my desk. [audience laughter]

We're actually still collecting Joseph Smith documents. And if you know of any, please let us know, and we'll check and see if we know about it yet or not. But we just keep looking. On Thursday, I was at the [New York] Ontario County Records [and Archives] Center with Jeffrey and David [Grua], and they found a new document that we never knew of before. So we're still looking.

But back to the Council of Fifty minutes. That's different than finding a legal record or a line in a docket book or even a letter. It's just an incredible resource packed with hundreds of pages of information. I think a few more documents will keep trickling in through the years. But I highly doubt we will ever have something like that happen ever again, where we get such a huge wealth of information that we can add to public historical knowledge.

Robin Scott Jensen: With all due respect to my colleagues, I actually worked on the most important documents of the Joseph Smith Papers. [audience laughter]

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Which all Latter-day Saints already have in their scriptures. [audience laughter]

Robin Scott Jensen: At the Casper [Wyoming] meeting of the Mormon History Association in 2006, a couple of us were called into a hotel room, and it was announced to us that we had an item from the First Presidency's vault titled the Book of Commandments and Revelations. That became the second volume published—first *Journals, Volume 1*, and then second, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1*.²⁶ I was a really young scholar who had just barely been promoted from research assistant to historian, and I didn't know what I was doing. The impostor syndrome was extremely intense. But I went up to Ron Esplin, and I said, "Ron, I beg of you. Let me work on this volume." So I ended up working on that volume, and it changed my life.

26. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2008); Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations: Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile edition, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2009).

For those who don't know, the Book of Commandments and Revelations is the earliest compilation of revelations in book form that they took to Missouri to print the Book of Commandments in 1833. To have access to this source gave us access to, in many cases, the earliest versions of the revelations. Not only do we have the early versions of the revelations, but we see how they're editing them for publication. It just gives us a sense of understanding for [that] moment in time and of how the revelations were perceived at that time. It was an absolute treat and privilege to have worked on that important manuscript.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Also, [we] see how that early on, they were putting that much care, comparatively, into preserving those texts. It is really impressive. This was something special that they were doing, the care that they were putting into this at that time.

Jessica M. Nelson: So I'm in contrast with my colleagues, who have been able to work on a lot more cool and important things, and that suits them very well. [laughter] For me, I guess, one thing that was cool about the documents that I've worked on is they created a fuller picture of Joseph Smith in Nauvoo than we've had. A lot of times, when scholars go to cite things, they wouldn't have seen these kinds of documents before. Or they are talking about some of these other important texts or important projects, like the Council of Fifty—things that draw our attention a little more. There are these moments that are interesting, that tell a story or more of a story [to] fill things in, but they're not as significant in a sense. Also, they haven't been seen before or talked about widely by scholars or cited before. So the fact that these kinds of documents are presented along with some of the other ones—like in *Documents, Volume 14*, we have documents from the Council of Fifty alongside these other ones. It's just a cool aspect of the project.

Elizabeth Kuehn: Definitely. One of my favorites, maybe for whimsical reasons, is about a lost cow. It was donated to the tithing office and wanders off. Tithing can walk in Nauvoo. [audience laughter] So you have William Clayton writing in, saying, If anyone sees this cow, can you get it back to us? It's tithing.²⁷ It's like Jessica said: It's these singular moments that help put you on the ground in Nauvoo and remind you that this is a very different world than the one we live in.

Nathan Waite: I've got one more question, and then I will invite the audience to join the conversation.

27. See "Notice, 21 May 1842," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/notice-21-may-1842/1>.

Documents, Volume 15, the last print volume, is coming out later this month.²⁸ We've got the Legal series ending, whenever Jeffrey gets finished. It's projected for January of next year. We've got the Financial series wrapping up in the next couple of years. There's the Administrative Records series. So we really are drawing to a close on this project. But where does documentary editing go from here? Or where do you think it's going?

Robin Scott Jensen: Before I answer that, let me say one thing. The six of us here are a fraction of the representation of the Joseph Smith Papers. We weren't asked the question of what did we learn the most or what did we find most valuable. One of the most valuable things that I have experienced on the Joseph Smith Papers is working with my colleagues—the collaboration, the friendships. Hopefully it comes out that we enjoy one another's company, and we're friendly. We like working with each other. It has been an absolute treat working with my fellow colleagues—here up front but also in the audience and elsewhere. The Joseph Smith Papers has been a tremendous opportunity and blessing in my life.

So where does documentary editing go from here? Who was it that said historians make terrible prognosticators? There are so many possibilities. [*audience laughter*]

Mark Ashurst-McGee: We are historians of the Prophet. Not historians and prophets. [*audience laughter*]

Robin Scott Jensen: I have a million thoughts in my mind. Latter-day Saints are a record-keeping people. We have a lot of records. There are a lot of opportunities to reproduce and share those records with scholars and with Latter-day Saints. Yet I think that with improved technology and with cultural changes and whatnot, documentary editors also need to adapt.

One of the changes that we experienced was the implementation of the web presence. It was originally just a print series, and then we incorporated the web. What a tremendous blessing that has been. But I think as we see society use historical sources differently, we have to change. Documentary editing has done a lot for Latter-day Saint history. The practice of documentary editing is long and rich within Mormon

28. Brett D. Dowdle, Adam H. Petty, J. Chase Kirkham, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, David W. Grua, and Matthew C. Godfrey, eds., *Documents, Volume 15: 16 May–28 June 1844*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2023).

studies. I have a paper that I want to open, kind of jokingly, saying that the Book of Mormon is the first Latter-day Saint documentary edition. But we've had a long, rich history of documentary editing serving a particular purpose within our culture, in the writing of our history, [and] within society in general. So documentary editors need to be aware of those cultural changes and shifts.

We need to learn from a lot of different fields. Documentary editors are made up largely of historians, but there are a lot of things we can learn from our fellow English literary professors. I want to make a plug for archivists as well. There is a lot of overlap between what documentary editors do and what archivists do.

We have a conference this coming September at the end of the Joseph Smith Papers.²⁹ I might have a little bit smarter things to say at that point.

Jeffrey Mahas: I know Elizabeth has thought a lot about it, so I'm going to listen to her.

Elizabeth Kuehn: I would defer to Robin. I do think that the Joseph Smith Papers has presented a singular model of documentary editing. Yet for those more well-versed in the field, documentary editing can be a very dynamic approach to presenting documents, to presenting text. I hope the future includes some innovation. I would love to see us move more in the vein of some of the really innovative stuff like the Adams Family Papers, where you bring in multiple voices, where you weigh women's voices and men's voices as equally as you can, given the documentary record. I just think that there's a lot more you can do with the records and presenting records online than we've tried to do. So I hope there's innovation.

Robin Scott Jensen: Could I add one more thought? There is a danger in doing documentary history because documents are written by a certain subset of society. I would love to see what it would look like to incorporate material culture into documentary editing. I think some of the earliest sources we have in our early history are samplers done or created by the Whitmer women [see figs. 1 and 2]. What does that look like in the documentary editing world? If we're only focusing on documents,

29. The Joseph Smith Papers Project held a conference on September 15–16, 2023, titled “What Have We Learned from the Joseph Smith Papers Project?” Thirty-one speakers, including President Dallin H. Oaks of the First Presidency, presented at the conference. “2023 Joseph Smith Papers Conference in Review,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/2023-news>. See also “How the Joseph Smith Papers Became a Project of Consequence,” herein, 143–63.



FIGURE 1. Embroidered sampler by Mary Whitmer. Courtesy Church History Library.

on records, on written word, we're losing out on a lot of voices that we shouldn't be losing out on. So I would love to figure out what an expansive documentary edition looks like—you really can't call it "documentary editing"—but [more like a] material culture-type record.

Jeffrey Mahas: For example, you talked about plural marriage. There are not a lot of records in there. But what does it mean that when Helen Mar Kimball goes to get married to Horace Whitney, she stops at Carthage Jail and takes a shaving of the well curb where Joseph died that's bloodstained, chips it off, and treasures it for the rest of her life?³⁰ You

30. This wood chip is available in Whitney Family Documents, 1843–1912, images 6–7, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/473d6bd1-1a13-4010-b715-f6a192b7a118/0/5>.

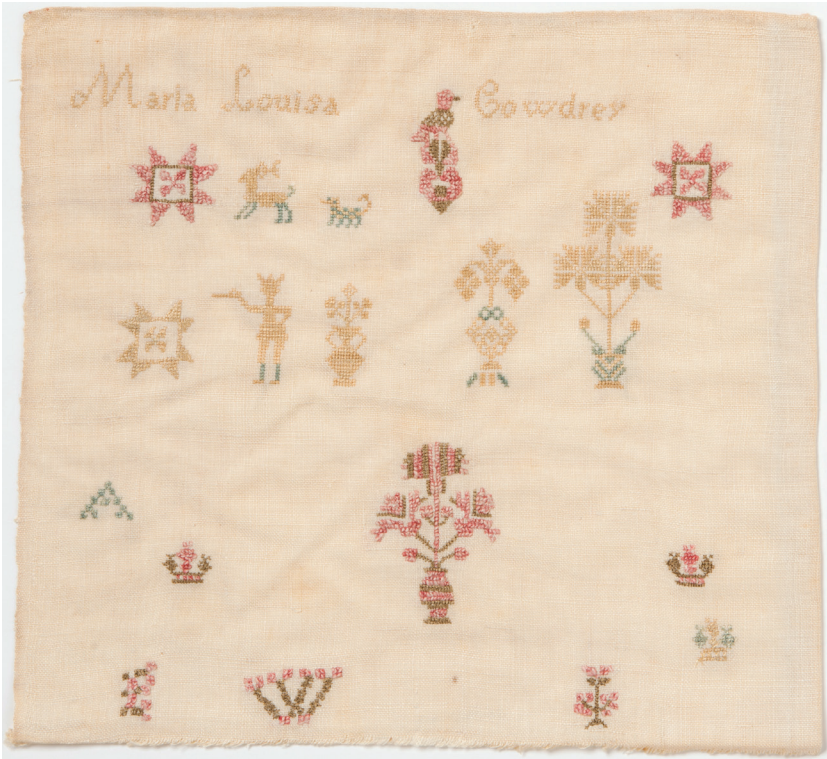


FIGURE 2. Embroidered sampler by Maria Louise Cowdery. Courtesy Church History Library.

may not have anything from Helen from Nauvoo, but you have her collecting that artifact.

Robin Scott Jensen: You have canes. You have hair. You have a lot of artifacts that tell stories that were meaningful, that convey history from one generation to another. That's what the written word did. That's what these artifacts do, [such as] the seer stone. We've got a lot of things that convey history that the documentary record ignores or we ignore because we are not expanding our view.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: And there's a continuum there. We have artifacts that have text on them, like a cup given to Joseph Smith with an inscription or a sword with an inscribed blade or hilt.

Robin Scott Jensen: He's signing a lot of books. He's not the author of that book, but there's an inscription or signature in the book. What does that mean?

Mark Ashurst-McGee: He has a cane with his initials on it. There's actually formal text on nonbook, nonmanuscript artifacts that we should include in our edition.

Jessica M. Nelson: The main crux of these kinds of products is to make sources available and for people to use them. This project is incredible for how productive it's been able to be [during] the tenure that people have been working on it. And it's very resource intensive. It is not likely that other projects will have the same amount of institutional resources behind them. But the impulse, direction, and work expected of us to put sources out there will remain and will continue, especially [with] women's collections. Some of that will hopefully be creative, like you were saying. But the idea is, technically, to get as many sources out there as we can. So a lot of that will be web facing. Some of it might have a print volume component to it. For example, I am working on Eliza R. Snow[s] discourses. Right now, we have over twelve hundred documents available on the website that you can view.³¹ There will be a reduced percentage available in a print volume, with some annotation in it, of course. What's great about all this is that these are reliable primary sources, and that's, hopefully, what we'll get to continue to do, although it will look a little bit different.

Nathan Waite: All right, what questions do you folks have? [*referring to the audience*]

Audience comment: A lot of comments. I'm overwhelmed by all that you guys have done. I hope you have a sense of how this is going to impact you all for the rest of your lives. So many of us are just so grateful for what you and a hundred-plus other people have contributed to this. The scholarship is amazing.

Back to your comments on the first question. I really appreciated Elizabeth and Mark both clarifying why women's voices aren't heard. And it makes sense. I mean, we all revere Joseph Smith in the same way. And any intelligent woman wouldn't want gratuitous women just added for the sake of adding women to it. We certainly understand why this is a male-focused collection of volumes, as it should be.

It occurs to me at the same time—this past year, we've been given *Saints* that has been so greatly driven by women's journals and women's voices, in a way we have never seen before. So I just wanted to remark on that.

31. See The Discourses of Eliza R. Snow, Church Historian's Press, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/eliza-r-snow>.

Also, I think there was a comment on samplers as documentary evidence. I'm there! What a wonderful notion that is! I think there should be a volume 28 or whatnot. It's kind of a cool notion. You have piqued my interest.

Audience question: Thank you all. This was fantastic. Really fun to actually see all your perspectives and everything you have shared with us.

I have two questions that came up as you guys were chatting. One: You mentioned, Mark, that from here all the way out to the West Coast, the documents were all over the place. Are there any Joseph Smith documents that you have found or that there might be that are not in the United States? And the second question: There are Joseph Smith documents in private hands. I think of people like Reid Moon and a handful of other private collectors and all their associates out there. I know that there have been some efforts to get images and things. But are there Joseph Smith documents out there in private hands that have been purchased for lots of money that you guys are still trying to get ahold of?

Audience member: Half of the Legal series came from private collections.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: And courthouses. But I would like to defer this question to Sharalyn Howcroft. She has the answers to both of your questions.

Sharalyn Howcroft: We have a lot of documents that come from various repositories. The big names on that list are the Church History Library, the Community of Christ Library and Archives, the Chicago History Museum, the State Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The New York Library also has some, as do the Huntington Library, Beinecke Library at Yale, and Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. We've had an individual who had material in his private possession that he brought to Salt Lake from Japan. He correlated that trip with his visit to Salt Lake City for general conference. He brought the document to the Church History Library to be scanned. That's the only one I can think of in terms of documents all over the world.

There were collections that we were aware of that we knew to have some Joseph Smith documents in them, but we did not know who the purchaser was. Those are the things that give me heartburn at night. It is one thing to know that something slipped out of your hands. It is another thing to know precisely what it was that slipped out of your hands, which is challenging. However, once we started gaining momentum with the [Joseph Smith] Papers Project, it was really amazing how

collectors and sellers of early Latter-day Saint documents realized what we were doing and really wanted to be part of it. You mentioned Reid Moon. He has been excellent to work with. In working with him on various things, we've been able to verify some documents that he was going to purchase. So it was advantageous for him to have information that we knew about these documents. We have a very good, healthy reciprocal relationship with him. Brent Ashworth has been great to work with too. There's a whole host of folks. I feel like by naming two, I'm slighting others, and that's not my intent because, on the whole, people have been fabulous to work with in the process.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Yes, on the whole, but not entirely. Some collectors and dealers have been horrible to work with. There are a lot of documents that have been stolen from the courthouses and enter the private market, and then you have to try to track those down. Or things pop up here and there and you wonder, How's that in the private market? That should be here. You're trying to track where these things have gone and been and where they might be.

Jeffrey Mahas: To that point, we've had to be careful with language because we've got detailed source notes. It's a running joke in the Church History Department about how boring our source notes are. But they're very important. With the Legal series, we have a lot of heartburn over the language in the source notes because many of these documents are in private possession after disappearing from courthouses and other government repositories under questionable circumstances. We have to be careful describing the provenance of these records, merely stating that at some time they left the courthouse.

Robin Scott Jensen: To be fair, to try to complicate that story, there have been instances where, through agreement—whether it's legal or not—people would go in and say, “Hey, I have a deal for you. I will microfilm all your original courthouse records. You don't have to have the cost of storage. All I ask in return is that you give me the originals.” Then all of a sudden, you have a bunch of Abraham Lincoln and Joseph Smith signatures. All you have to do is photocopy or essentially microfilm them. So there was some agreement, sometimes, with these. It's not always the case. So when we say “steal,” sometimes people assume the very worst, and in some cases, it was the very worst. With other cases, people in both parties thought this was kind of an agreement. And more and more common today, there are situations where the person who now owns the documents bought them in the private market and was not the one who originally obtained them from a courthouse.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: I just want to add that every single thing we've talked about here has rabbit holes that go as deep as you ever want to go. Every single one of these issues.

Sharalyn Howcroft: One of the things that needs to be taken into account, when it comes to these local government record agencies, is that they work under a records management policy. Records management and archives are connected disciplines but have distinct methodologies from each other. One thing with records management is that if documents no longer meet an administrative or operational value for the institution or organization and its day-to-day operations, they have the right to discard or destroy the records.

Now, some of these places also have state laws in force indicating that if they are going to discard or destroy things, they need to appeal to an oversight committee at the state archive level. That decision isn't made locally. The problem that we have is that those types of statutes began to be enforced in the late 1990s. That means anything before that, in some of these records places, the local agencies could have discarded or destroyed their legal records without state oversight, and we wouldn't even know what happened to the records. An example of records disposal that occurred is when local government agencies offloaded tens of thousands of loose court documents to manuscript dealer King V. Hostick to free up space in their county buildings.³²

Audience question: I was wondering if you could give us a little bit of a formal order of how you would work, like a given day. Would you start with prayer? Working individually? I mean, how was your day?

Nathan Waite: A day in the life of a Joseph Smith Papers staff member.

Robin Scott Jensen: I come to the office Monday morning, and I wonder where everybody is, because it's post-COVID, and we're all working from home. Just kidding. Yes, you know, none of us are actively working on the Joseph Smith Papers volumes anymore. It depends on the stage of your volume. So if you are doing actual volume production, you are looking at documents, you're doing a lot of research, or you're working on a particular document figuring out some context. Sometimes, if you're working on the transcription, you order down the original manuscripts and you're

32. King V. Hostick (1914–1993) was a manuscripts dealer in Illinois who specialized in Abraham Lincoln documents. He also wrote publications on Lincoln. Hostick was the director of the Illinois State Historical Society for a time, as well as the Abraham Lincoln Association. See “King Victor Hostick,” Find a Grave, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/102538435/king-victor-hostick>.

doing verification. The collaboration is usually walking up and down the halls saying, “Hey, Mark, I have a question about this,” or, “Hey, Jeffrey, can you help me find out where this person lived in Nauvoo?” “Elizabeth, I need help with this find.” Anyway, this is the specialization that they were talking about earlier. The collaboration is in volume meetings, where we meet regularly, sometimes once a week, sometimes more than that, sometimes less than that. We have staff meetings. What am I missing?

Nathan Waite: What I’d add to it is meeting with [the Joseph Smith Papers editorial staff].

Robin Scott Jensen: There’s a really close collaboration between the historians and the editors. So at a certain point in the collaboration, it is not so much between historians, but it’s between historians and editors. Nate’s teams go through and help with wording, source checking, all this stuff. There’s a collaboration—“Do you really need this phrase?” “Yes, I absolutely need this phrase.” “Are you sure?”—things like that.

And then there is the review process.

Nathan Waite: Yes, that’s what I wanted to talk about. So if you were in yesterday’s session, Matt Godfrey talked about this a little bit.³³ He’s never been reviewed as thoroughly as [when] he was on the Joseph Smith Papers. And that’s really true, right?

You go through your team of scholars just working on the book with you. Then it goes through the general editors. Then it goes through Mark as the research and review editor. It goes to outside reviewers. It goes to the executives of the department. You are having every word scrutinized in ways you wouldn’t if you were sending a book to a university press. Can every single fact here be backed up with a source that’s in a footnote? It is just extremely rigorous, every step of the way. So I think our historians probably devote a smaller portion of their time to actually working on the document than people might think. The rest is going through this process of making sure it meets the standard to be published.

Jeffrey Mahas: Yes. I would just add, What does a typical day look like for many of us? It’s very busy. Because you’ve got documents at all of these various stages of production. You’re going to sit down and say,

33. Matthew C. Godfrey was the managing historian of the Joseph Smith Papers from 2013 to 2021 and also worked on several volumes in the Documents series. At the time of this roundtable, he was a general editor of the papers. The session Mahas refers to was a panel discussion published as Grant Underwood, Matt Grow, Ron Esplin, Matthew C. Godfrey, Sharalyn D. Howcroft, and Elder Kyle S. McKay, “The History and Impact of the Joseph Smith Papers: A Roundtable Discussion,” *Journal of Mormon History* 51, no. 2 (2025): 37–64, especially 50–51.

Today, am I verifying a document? Today, am I writing an introduction for a document? Am I researching for that introduction? Am I writing annotation for that document? Am I responding to Mark's edits? Am I responding to my colleague's edits? Am I responding to my editors' edits? Am I responding to a source checker's edits? Am I responding to a higher-up review?

Robin Scott Jensen: Or am I going to sit in my office and cry because I'm too busy? [*audience laughter*]

Jeffrey Mahas: But the reality is all those steps are taking place at the same time. So your day is more like: I'm going to start by transcribing this document, then I'm going to work on this annotation. Then I'm going to work on this introduction. Then I'm going to respond to Elizabeth's comments because those were due two weeks ago. Oftentimes, historians would be assigned to multiple volumes at once. Not only are you doing that whole process but you're doing that process times two at the same time.

Elizabeth Kuehn: For different time periods.

Jeffrey Mahas: For different time periods.

Nathan Waite: And one more thought I'll add to that. The bread and butter of the Joseph Smith Papers is the transcripts, right? That is our core offering, and that takes a lot of time and a lot of effort. Because we are doing it online, everyone has had to learn how to encode documents in XML [Extensible Markup Language]. It means having specialized software to say, Hey, this is where the insertions are. This is where the strikethroughs are. It just takes hours and hours and hours of many, many people's effort to make sure that those transcripts are correct before they go online.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: So the hallmark of modern professional documentary editing in the American history tradition is independent verification of transcripts. This is not me in my basement making transcripts. Everything gets transcribed, and it goes somewhere else for first-level verification, somewhere else for second-level verification, somewhere else for third-level verification. There are different verification techniques, each of which has its advantages and disadvantages. So we use different verification techniques at different stages. They are never going to be absolutely perfect. Some handwriting is just simply illegible. But we hope that you feel confident that we are offering you reliable transcripts.

Audience comment: Mark, I transcribed one of the longest documents in your entire collection. It was 211 pages of the last lawsuit of all the real property in Nauvoo. I'm Joe Bentley, and we've never met. But we have worked together for five years. So I've had a question about that.

I've transcribed that. I took a whole month of vacation to transcribe the whole 211 pages. I've wondered what stage the verification was at.

Nathan Waite: I can answer that question best. What we ended up doing with that—because we wanted to make sure that we use your work, because, again, it has to be verified, right? We figured out the best way to use your work was to have someone else independently transcribe it. Now, we have an editor who is digitally using those two transcripts and comparing them. What comes out of the other end of that will be the verified transcripts. So your texts will be the base that ends up online.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: That really is the model method for first-level verification.

Audience question: With all due respect to all of you and the tremendous work you've done and are still doing—and it's priceless, the importance of the documents you've done—I must say that I think some of the most important and most interesting documents are in the Legal series.

The other thing I wanted to mention is the commentaries [annotations]. These documents are deadly dull, quite awful. Alex Smith said it yesterday. He said, "How do you read those nineteenth-century handwritten scripts? You can't understand the syntax, the context, or even the grammar."³⁴

It's a task that requires commentary. I have to commend those who wrote the commentaries, like Jeffrey and Elizabeth and David Grua. I think the commentaries have been inspired. They have been very effective. I think it helps to tell the story the documents don't always tell.

Nathan Waite: And some of the untold stories have been in the legal documents; those introductions are really doing more work than they were intended to.

Jeffrey Mahas: The original idea with our Legal series online was that we were just going to put up the documents. When we put up the first case, Matt Grow³⁵ looked at it and said, "What is this? I have no idea what this is." Then he said, "We need to provide some kind of introduction."

34. Alex Smith was a historian on the Joseph Smith Papers at the time of this roundtable. He spoke during a session on June 9, 2023, "'The Ball Struck My Watch and Forced Me Back': An Historical and Forensic Reexamination of John Taylor's Famous Carthage Jail Watch." Some of the information presented during this session was published in Brian A. Warburton, "A Forensic and Historical Look at John Taylor's Watch: Evidence of Divine Mercy," *BYU Studies* 63, no. 2 (2024): 41–67.

35. At the time of this roundtable, Matthew J. Grow was the managing director of the Church History Department.

So we've produced short, brief introductions to all of Joseph Smith's legal cases on the website to give you that introduction to what's going on.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: You have all these little pieces that come along in the legal process, and if you don't know the arc of that process, then you just have this collection of pieces. It just *has* to be introduced.

Jeffrey Mahas: I think David is presenting at the Joseph Smith Papers Conference in September. There's a great example of a case I helped him work on, where it seems like a really dry case; you have no idea what's going on. Well, the background for this case is there was a lynching in Nauvoo. A Black man is accused of robbing a store, and a bunch of men, a drunken mob, grab him in Nauvoo, take him out to the woods, and beat him. He comes to Joseph asking for help, and Joseph starts the process of trying to prosecute the men who were responsible for this lynching. It's a fascinating story. It's one that has not really been told before. By piecing together these legal documents, we were able to tell this story, to recover this man Chism's experience and Joseph's attempt to try and bring justice to his case.³⁶

Audience question: I have a couple of questions. The first question is, The commercial performance of the volumes—is that tracked? Have some sold more than others? The other question is, Have any of these volumes been quoted in general conference talks or at other places of general gatherings of the Church?

Nathan Waite: I'll answer the first question and let the others think about the second.

So the first volume, *Journals, Volume 1*, was a blockbuster. We sold tens of thousands of copies, over sixty thousand, which is an absurd number for documentary editing. It benefited from a lot of publicity for being the first one, right? The second one was [the] one Robin was talking about, the Book of Commandments and Revelations. It was beautiful and had this new information in it. That one sold quite well as well. As time has gone on, sales have dipped down to less astronomical numbers. But we sell, I'd say, two [to] three thousand of each volume in the Documents series, which again, in the field of documentary editing, is really, really good. But that's about all we end up printing—two to three thousand copies of each one—and we sell most of those. Then we'll see if there's a bump at the end of people trying to collect the whole thing.

36. For more information, see "Introduction to *City of Nauvoo v. Eastin*," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 30, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-city-of-nauvoo-v-eastin/1>.

There's also the fact they're available on the website, and we want that to be available, so people don't have to buy the volumes to get the content, including all the annotations.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: For comparison, the Jefferson papers, their print run was twelve hundred; Ben Franklin, eight hundred; and it kind of goes down from there. We're usually selling about three thousand. Which is the best volume? Which one sold most?

Nathan Waite: *Journals, Volume 1* for sure.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Oh, that one I worked on. Yes! [*audience laughter*]

Nathan Waite: Use in general conference or from the pulpit? Any thoughts on that?

Jeffrey Mahas: Elizabeth is not going to toot her own horn. We have a great example. Elder [Quentin L.] Cook was one of our apostolic advisors who reviewed *Documents, Volume 5*, the Kirtland volume that Elizabeth worked on. Elder Cook has cited that volume a couple of times in general conference as he has told stories from Church history in Kirtland.

Audience question: What have you learned about Joseph Smith that you didn't know before you started working on this project? Who is he to you now?

Elizabeth Kuehn: It's a great question, and it's not always easy to answer. But one of my favorite things that I've discovered in the financial records is that he is far more generous than we have any idea of.

Audience member: He gave away the store, right? Literally.

Elizabeth Kuehn: Yes. Brigham [Young] has a fun account in the *Journal of Discourses* that talks about that.³⁷ But now we see it in the ledger, right? One of my favorite entries is—and you can just feel the frustration that Newel K. Whitney is having as he is making this notation—ten dollars to Joseph for a stranger in the street.³⁸ Joseph runs into the store and grabs money, runs out again, and Newel's saying, Look, I'm trying to keep books here. That's not Joseph's focus, right? He's not thinking in those [financial] terms. He's thinking, What do people need? And it is a real testament.

37. See Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, 1855–86), 1:215 (October 9, 1852).

38. See "Joseph Smith's Store Daybook A, January–July 1842," [294], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 3, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/joseph-smiths-store-daybook-a-january-july-1842/298>.

One thing that became clear over the course of looking at Joseph's finances from Kirtland to Nauvoo is why he filed for bankruptcy in 1842. That's because he takes on all the debts of the Kirtland era, and especially the Kirtland Temple, which had been separate debts. Those debts had been the Kirtland Temple committee's, which Hyrum, his brother, was a part of. But Joseph had not signed any of those personally as principal. He was not liable for those debts. Yet by the early 1840s, he has taken those on personally, and they essentially sink him financially. So you see this willingness to injure himself financially for the good of others.

Jeffrey Mahas: Elizabeth and I worked closely together on another example like this in Nauvoo. There are several sermons that Joseph gives later in the Nauvoo experience where he's saying, You need to buy land from me. He comes off as really harsh, and you may think, Oh my goodness. Look at this Joseph Smith. He's a land speculator, out there trying to get money. But what happens is Henry Sherwood, his agent, does a review of all the property they purchased in Nauvoo, and he reports back to Joseph in 1840. He [essentially] says, Joseph, you have given away over forty percent of the lots in Nauvoo without any expectation of repayment.³⁹ You can see Joseph by 1842 thinking [essentially], Oh my goodness. I've got this huge debt, and I've been giving away so much of the city. I really need to work on trying to pay off the rest. But this is another example where you can see Joseph is this financial scapegoat, taking on himself the debts to provide for the Saints in Zion.

Elizabeth Kuehn: But that land was being given to widows, to orphans, and to impoverished British Saints who had come over and spent every dollar they had to get to Nauvoo and now had nothing, and they had to be provided for. A means had to be found.

Audience question: How about descriptions of Joseph Smith's personality or character?

Robin Scott Jensen: It's impossible to pin Joseph Smith down. That's the thing I learned. I love reading studies on Joseph Smith. I love seeing what scholars do with the Joseph Smith Papers. Maybe I'm revealing myself too much. Anytime I read something from my historian colleagues

39. See "Trustees Land Book A, 11 September 1839–30 April 1842," [44], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 3, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/trustees-land-book-a-11-september-1839-30-april-1842/54>. This record indicates that as of October 1840, the Church had sold about \$98,000 worth of land in Nauvoo (\$83,000 from the Hotchkiss purchase and \$15,000 from the Galland purchase), with \$40,000 of that having been sold to "widows and other poor of the church thus apparently will not be able to pay."

who want to say, “Oh, Joseph Smith did this,” or “Joseph Smith thought this,” or say, “This is what Joseph Smith was trying to do,” in the back of my mind, I’m thinking I can probably come up with a counterexample.

He’s not as systematic as you think. He’s kind of winging it, we might say. It’s not very possible to pin Joseph Smith down, except perhaps he was his first and staunchest believer of his revelations, his experiences. Maybe even in that, in the details, you can’t pin it down. But there really is this sense that he believed in himself. He believed the revelations he brought forth. So those are two counterexamples. That’s kind of my impression of Joseph Smith.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: We developed all kinds of ideas about Joseph Smith. But also, we totally see ourselves as producing a documentary edition for others to use to do that kind of work.

Jessica M. Nelson: I think by the end of his life, Joseph Smith had arrived. The type of correspondence he’d been receiving from random citizens around the country said, I heard that you were having this petition. You wanted to do these things. I want to join you. They are addressing it to General Smith. His political thinking has sort of evolved. The imagination that he had for what the world could be and could look like had drawn certain people to him, and it’s kind of sad there’s a cutoff point. But we see a culmination of his thinking, and I appreciate that and the nuances of that in a different way than I had before.

Nathan Waite: Please join me in thanking our panel. [*audience applause*]

How the Joseph Smith Papers Became a Project of Consequence

*Ronald O. Barney, Ronald K. Esplin, Elder Marlin K. Jensen,
and Gail Miller*

Moderated by Brent Rogers

The following is a transcript of a roundtable discussion on the origins of the Joseph Smith Papers. The September 15, 2023, roundtable, moderated by Brent Rogers and featuring Gail Miller, Ronald K. Esplin, Ronald O. Barney, and Elder Marlin K. Jensen, was held in the Conference Center Theater as part of the final Joseph Smith Papers Conference. In the conference program, this session was titled “Commencing the Project: Reflections on the Origin and Early Days of the Joseph Smith Papers.” The recorded remarks have been edited for clarity and readability.

Brent Rogers: Thank you all for being here this morning for this conference and for this gathering. And thank you to our panelists for being here for this opening roundtable. My name is Brent Rogers, and I am the managing historian for the Joseph Smith Papers [Project].¹ I wanted to start off by saying something. If I can be so bold as to say that the Joseph Smith Papers is an epic project; every epic has an origin story, and this roundtable will talk about that origin story. We'll have the privilege of discussing the origin and early days of the Joseph Smith Papers with some of the key figures who were there at the commencement of the project and who have blessed and benefited the work in the years and decades beyond that. I'll make a few brief introductions.

First is Gail Miller. Gail is the owner of the Larry H. Miller Company and a gracious and generous benefactor of the Joseph Smith Papers. She

1. Brent Rogers became the managing historian of the Joseph Smith Papers in December 2021.

has been with us almost from the project's beginning and has supported us all the way. Next to her is Ronald K. Esplin, who is a general editor of the Joseph Smith Papers and who served as the managing editor and historian of the project from its beginnings. He has been influential in the work of this project from its earliest stages. In the middle is Elder Marlin K. Jensen, a General Authority Seventy emeritus of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the former Church Historian and Recorder. Our guest next to me on the left is Ronald O. Barney, a former archivist and historian with the Joseph Smith Papers, who also served as the executive director of the Mormon History Association for a time and did a marvelous job of leading that organization and in contributing to the work of understanding Joseph Smith. If you haven't read his book on Joseph Smith,² I suggest that you do.

Let's start with a question that I would like to direct to our two Rons, Ron Esplin and Ron Barney. Why did you both see a need for this massive undertaking? Maybe you could talk about that need and the impetus for beginning this great work. Let's start with Ron Esplin.

Ron Esplin: I first became aware of the importance of documentary editing as a graduate student at the University of Virginia, where I did a thesis on Benjamin Franklin and had the happy coincidence of choosing a time period in his life that had already been covered by The Papers of Benjamin Franklin series.³ I did the obligatory trips to places where those great documents were stored. But I did most of my work in Alderman Library⁴ at the University of Virginia from the volumes of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*. Because they had covered the period that I needed, I was able to write a better thesis quicker than I could possibly have done otherwise. I realized that the work that had been done by these historians, gathering and contextualizing the documents, made history better and easier.

At that same period, Dean Jessee was working at the Church Historian's Office, as President [Dallin H.] Oaks mentioned.⁵ In 1970, the

2. Ronald O. Barney, *Joseph Smith: History, Methods, and Memory* (University of Utah Press, 2020).

3. The Papers of Benjamin Franklin series is a documentary editing project at Yale University that began in 1954 and has published forty-four volumes. The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, The American Philosophical Society and Yale University, accessed June 14, 2025, <https://franklinpapers.org>.

4. This library was renamed the Edgar Shannon Library in 2024.

5. President Oaks gave an address immediately before this roundtable session. For a summary of his remarks, see Trent Toone, "First Presidency Announces New Biography, 'Joseph the Prophet,' at Joseph Smith Papers Conference," *Church News*, September 15,



Panel at the September 2023 Joseph Smith Papers Conference. *Left to right:* Brent Rogers, Ron Barney, Elder Marlin K. Jensen, Ron Esplin, Gail Miller. Courtesy Brooke Jorges.

same year I was writing my thesis, Dean happened to be perusing the shelves of the University of Utah library and came upon *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* series. That had started in the 1940s. But this was 1970, and it was still only beginning.⁶ He said to himself, Joseph [Smith] needs something like this.

Within two or three years, Dean and I were working together. He worked mainly on Joseph and a little on Brigham [Young]. I worked mainly on Brigham and a little on Joseph. But we both realized that Dean's vision of doing something similar to what had been done for Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin needed to be done for Joseph Smith. Together, we laid some of the groundwork for that in the 1970s.

2023, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/history/2023/9/15/23871359/first-presidency-commissions-new-biography-joseph-the-prophet-joseph-smith-papers-conference/>.

6. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* is a documentary editing project at Princeton University that began in 1943 and has published forty-seven volumes. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Princeton University Library, accessed June 14, 2025, <https://jeffersonpapers.princeton.edu/>.

But at Brigham Young University with the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History, we were able to do much more. Because I understood intrinsically the value of this—that you could do better history quicker and that more people would be involved in good history if we got these papers out—I could enthusiastically support Dean’s effort. At the beginning, it was a one-man effort. But with the efforts of many people at the Smith Institute and, as President Oaks has outlined, the collaboration between the Smith Institute and the Church History Department, we were able to gradually bring more resources to bear and support Dean’s vision.

Brent Rogers: Great, thank you, Ron. Ron Barney, can I turn to you now and ask you about your involvement in joining Ron and Dean and how you saw the impetus and need for this massive project?

Ron Barney: Before the active involvement that captured my attention with the Joseph Smith Papers, I had been working for several years as a historical liaison with the curriculum writing committee, which was producing the Joseph Smith volume in the Presidents of the Church series developed for Priesthood and Relief Society instruction.⁷ My charge was to present to the writing committee everything that Joseph Smith had ever said. [audience laughter] We even created a system where we could determine for the committee whether something attributed to Joseph Smith could be considered reliable. That process, which was going on right up to the early part of the 2000s, just happened to coincide with when I was asked to be a resource for providing materials, other kinds of data, and information to the folks that were beginning the Joseph Smith Papers at Brigham Young University. It was primarily at Steven Sorensen’s request that I do this, just mainly to supplement what was happening at BYU.⁸ I’d always been an admirer of Ron and Dean, so when I was asked to participate at the entry level, I was very, very happy to do so.

Brent Rogers: Thanks, Ron. I think you point to a couple of things about collaboration between Church departments and between the

7. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007, 2011), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-joseph-smith>.

8. Steven Sorensen was an archivist at the Church History Department from 1980 to his death in 2009. He was appointed director of the Church archives in 1989. See Ronald O. Barney, “A Generation of Church History: A Personal View,” in *Preserving the History of the Latter-day Saints*, ed. Steven C. Harper and Richard E. Turley Jr. (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2010), 220.

Church History Department and BYU. Maybe we could take a moment to say thank you to all the collaborators that we've been able to work with on the Joseph Smith Papers, both at BYU over the years and various Church departments. It's truly a great effort that we've been able to make. We've had a lot of help along the way because of some of these cross-divisional and -departmental efforts, and that's wonderful.

Gail, I'd like to ask how you got involved with the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Maybe you could give us a little bit of insight into your thinking as some of these things started to happen and what brought you and your husband Larry into the circle.

Gail Miller: I often think that we got involved by accident, but I know now it wasn't an accident: It was orchestrated. Looking back on the path we took, Larry and I were both brought up in the Church but in our teenage years became inactive. We moved to Colorado after getting married, and during our life there, we had a bishop, David Brown, who was interested in reactivating us. A few years later, we moved back to Utah, went through the temple, and had our family sealed. Bishop Brown had, by then, become a stake president and then a mission president and then been called to be the first director at the new visitors' center at Kirtland. He said, "I don't know enough [about Kirtland history]; I need a crash course," and he called the Church History Department. He was connected with Ron Barney, who invited him to bring his family and learn about Kirtland. Ron told him he could bring some friends. So he invited Larry and me to come and listen to the lecture.

When we got there, our eyes were like saucers because on the table in front of us were all these original Church history documents, including many of Joseph Smith's journals and personal writings. We felt like that was a very special opportunity for us but didn't know what it would lead to. As we left that night, Larry said, "You know, there's a reason this happened; there's something I need to be doing." So he called Ron and asked if he could have a meeting with him. As he [Larry] told me, he went to Ron and said, "Ron, I think there's something you're involved with that I need to help. But I don't know what it is. Do you? I don't really know why I'm here, but I think that is what it is." Ron said, "I don't know what it would be. I don't know why you're here; you called the meeting." [*audience laughter*] So they talked about a lot of things, didn't come to any conclusion, and Larry left that meeting.

Larry thought about it for a few weeks and then called Ron back and said, "I figured out what it was." Ron said, "So did I." It happened to be the Joseph Smith Papers Project. We were at a point in our business

history where we could do some things in a financial way that we had not been able to before and decided that this was an area where we could focus some of our blessings and our wealth to help the project move along. So that's basically how we got started. I look at it as not an accident but a willingness to listen to the Spirit and to be moved and obedient to what Heavenly Father wants us to do.

Brent Rogers: Thank you, Gail. We have such a great beginning here. We have a need to understand Joseph Smith better. We have insight and inspiration and resources that are willing this into existence. Elder Jensen, I'll ask you to speak about your perspective, but you could also speak from the Church's institutional perspective. Why was it so important for the Church to see this vision of this history project, to invest in it, to support it, and to ultimately go through with publishing the papers?

Elder Marlin K. Jensen: I'd like to invoke a moment of personal privilege before I speak to your question. I'm sitting here between two Rons. Larry was fond of talking about the founders of this movement as "two Rons and a Steve." [*audience laughter*] Steve Sorensen, who was a historian of equal quality [to] these two Rons, was a big part of those initial discussions and the direction and momentum that was created at that time. Sadly, he passed away some years ago. But I wanted to add his name to our historical record. I would do the same just to support what President Oaks has said about Dean Jessee, who I don't think appears on the program but lives on in the twilight of an amazing career. I think but for Dean, there would probably be no papers project. I just want, as a past-tense Church Historian, to add these two significant but missing persons to the record of today's proceedings. [*audience applause*]

I came to the Church History Department a couple of times, actually. But as it's pertinent today, I came the final time in 2004. The activities that have been described here were well underway, and I was happy to ride that crest. It was a magical time, I thought, for Church history. The internet was just beginning to flourish. I'd been in Europe and had written my first email in 2001. Previously, I had my secretary print my emails off, and I had dictated responses to them for her to type. So I was a latecomer to the technology world. But I remember the buoyant feeling that existed at that time and the opportunities that were arising with the advent of digitization, the web browser, and the World Wide Web that would make the dissemination of this very important information possible.

I think from the Church's point of view (and again, President Oaks in his beautiful opening remarks has pretty much preempted what I might say here), the documentary history, Joseph Smith's *History of the*

Church,⁹ which had been the foundation of early Church history writing, had had its challenges. It was done to the standards of the day. It was, in essence, a chronological series of documents stitched together with commentary and was wonderful to have. It did fulfill, I think, the Lord's command that a record be kept. But as we got into the 1960s and people like Dean Jessee began to plumb the historical depths of Joseph Smith and the historical origins of the Church, it was obvious that we needed a firmer foundation. I think the papers project came as a response to that great need—that we would have something that could meet contemporary standards of biographical and historical researching and writing and would provide an accurate and reliable base of information that scholars then could access and produce the kinds of derivative products that we're now seeing come to light.

I think there was, though, a spiritual reason as well impelling the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Joseph Smith was not an ordinary man in any sense of that word. He ushered in the dispensation of the fullness of times. His life, I think, deserved a more complete, accurate, and nuanced treatment than it had ever had. I'm thrilled with the announcement that there will be a new biography written of him in the years to come that will largely be based on the work of the Joseph Smith Papers Project.¹⁰ I think the reason that Joseph is important isn't just because of his greatness as a prophet; it is because of what he stands for and the light that his life and teachings shine on the Savior of the world. I've always been intrigued by Alma's explanation to his son Helaman when he was trying to convince him to keep the record: that if he kept it, it would enlarge the memory of the people, it would correct error, and it would foster faith in God unto salvation [Alma 37:8]. I think Joseph might well have quoted John the Baptist as he [John] said of the Savior: "I must decrease"; "he must increase" [John 3:30]. So I think there was always that underlying doctrinal reason for highlighting Joseph's life more completely because no one in the history of mankind has brought greater truth to light or promoted faith in a greater way than he has in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Brent Rogers: Thank you for that, Elder Jensen.

9. *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., 7 vols. (Deseret Book, 1971).

10. In his earlier address at the conference, President Dallin H. Oaks announced that the First Presidency had commissioned Richard E. Turley Jr. to write a new biography of Joseph Smith. Trent Toone, "First Presidency Announces New Biography, 'Joseph the Prophet,' at Joseph Smith Papers Conference," *Church News*, September 15, 2023, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/history/2023/9/15/23871359/first-presidency-commissions-new-biography-joseph-the-prophet-joseph-smith-papers-conference/>.

Maybe we could talk a little bit about your [the panelists'] thinking about this: You had the Church's support. We had financial support and other support from Gail and Larry Miller. But the corpus of records, the amount of material—there's a veritable mountain to climb when it comes to getting the work started. Maybe each of you could take a minute or two and talk about your thoughts while you were standing at the base and how you started thinking about and conceiving this work and how it was to get done. Ron, would you start on that one?

Ron Esplin: At the beginning, we were not just optimistic; we were dreaming. We were working with part-time people who had full-time jobs. We assigned the volumes out to teams; we had everything assigned out. We hoped to get some things produced in a matter of several years. Max Evans, who had been director of the Utah State Historical Society and an archivist here [Church Historical Department] with Steve, Ron, and me in the early 1970s, was then director of the NHPRC, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.¹¹ We consulted a little bit about how this would go. He said, "Ron, you have no idea. Nobody ever gets anything done the first five years. It takes that long to just get your arms around the project." Max was right, and we were wrong. It did take the eight years that President Oaks mentioned to get that first volume out because we were trying to work at a scale that we hadn't done before. And we had to learn the task of documentary editing.

We were all trained historians and had written and published, but we had not done documentary editing. We were tutored by some of the best. On the board that President Oaks mentioned, we had Mary-Jo Kline, who had written the bible on documentary editing. She was on our advisory board. We had the tutoring of Barbara Oberg, who was then the director of the Thomas Jefferson papers. She came out here and helped get us trained. We also had a delegation go to her shop to see firsthand what they were doing. It took a long time to get real traction. Even then, we were faced with challenges that we hadn't anticipated and opportunities that we hadn't anticipated. They came together in a marvelous way, but it took a lot longer to get traction than we ever thought at the beginning.

Brent Rogers: Ron Barney, what would you add to that?

Ron Barney: When we were first invited to participate (and we were the passive part of the active group that was underway), the Church

11. See Ronald K. Esplin, "Modern Efforts to Preserve Church History," in Harper and Turley, *Preserving the History of the Latter-day Saints*, 191–93.

archives had a very different way of thinking about things. We had, I believe, elevated the status and abilities of the Church archives to a level that was equal to anybody in the United States. Steve Sorensen and I had traveled all over the country, from the Bancroft Library and Huntington Library in California to the Beinecke [Rare Book and Manuscript] Library on the East Coast. In every repository we visited, it was, in part, to find what was said about Mormonism there. So we collected a great deal while we were there. In all of this, we think we became a little bit better than what we had started as; we'd become more professional.

Coincidental to that, the archival profession itself had become more scholar-oriented and certainly more able to perform the duties that archivists are supposed to do. These were, first of all, the acquisition of records, preserving them, describing them, and then making that information available to the public. Then our good friends down at BYU asked for our support because the Church History Library is the most remarkable archive of any having to do with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It truly is a remarkable repository.

I remember one time I was asked to host James Hutson, who was the curator of the Library of Congress, when he came to Salt Lake City. I was asked to take him on a tour. After he explained the way they did business, I was kind of embarrassed. I didn't say, Well, you know, we do it a lot better. [*audience laughter*] I didn't say that. But it became very apparent that what had been started thirty years previously had really brought together a professional organization that could supply the kinds of information—the kind of understanding—that could effectively augment what was being done by the Joseph Smith Papers. So we were very glad to be involved. I don't think we were nearly as well-equipped as the folks down at BYU. They had in mind very clearly what they wanted to do and the precedent of Dean Jessee and his once-in-a-generation work on Joseph Smith. So we came in as a supporter, as a resource, for the Joseph Smith Papers at the outset.

Brent Rogers: Elder Jensen, what were some of the thoughts you had as you were starting to climb that veritable mountain?

Elder Marlin K. Jensen: Well, again, a little larger context: At the time, the Family History Department was combined with the Church History Department. So while these efforts were going on, we were also developing the new FamilySearch, which was a tremendous and very costly undertaking. There was always a discussion of the burn rate—how much money it was taking every month to keep Family History alive. And now we were looking at the possibility of having our own large

project on the Church History side. We needed to ramp up too because we were understaffed. At the time, the Church History Department was a collection of independent scholars pursuing their own agenda—under some control but not strategically employed. We were trying to think through what Church History ought to be all about and reorganize the department accordingly.

Happily, during those years, we came up with a very simple view, I think, of what the Church History Department is to do, which is to collect, preserve, and share Church history. Of course, all those activities are involved in the Joseph Smith Papers Project. But that insight gave us clarity to organize our department in a different way, which I think was an important development during that 2001 to 2005 time period. Eventually, Church History and Family History were separated. We took that proposition to the Brethren, and it was reported that President [Thomas S.] Monson said, “Well, sometimes marriages work out, and sometimes they don’t. Let’s grant them a divorce.” [*audience laughter*] So we split into two departments around 2008.

But one of the things that we definitely needed was more horsepower—more qualified scholars. And again, 2006, 2007, 2008—we remember those dark days of financial challenges. The Church was impacted too in its revenues and had, if not a hard, at least a soft hiring freeze on. I remember going hat in hand several times to . . . I think it was the Human Resources Committee to obtain permission for new FTEs [full-time equivalents]. We were very blessed, I thought, to have something like sixteen new PhDs approved for hiring. I think that was a significant event in the history of the papers project—to get the manpower to get up that mountain and to meet the kind of time constraints that obviously we wanted to honor.

Brent Rogers: Gail, what were some of your impressions of the work that the team needed to do and how they went about doing that work, especially as you got more involved in providing some of that funding and especially as those hard economic times came?

Gail Miller: Well, I remember early on, when we first became involved, Larry came at it from a business sense. He understood the importance of the project; he understood that it would go forward no matter what because it was something the Lord and Heavenly Father were planning on having happen. But I know there were discussions about, How much is this going to cost? How much do you need? How many scholars will you have to hire? Larry encouraged them to hire what

they needed, as I recall: “Do what you need to do to make this work happen.” They came back with a budget, and he said, “You need to double that.” He had an uncanny ability to be visionary about things, and he, I think, knew that it would take more than anybody thought it would. But he was prepared. Then the question was, How do we as a family fund this and keep it stable? We started with a donation to BYU in the form of stock, where they could use dividends from that. Well, the stock fell flat, so that didn’t work. We had to then plan on what it would take each year. And it worked out just fine.

But then, in 2009, Larry passed away. As I remember, it was a time of poor economy—2007, 2008, 2009. Those were the years when Larry was sick, and we were trying to keep afloat and still support our commitment. My son was the CEO of our company at the time. When Larry passed away, I said to him [her son], “Look, I know that we have to cut back. We have to cut back on inventory; we have to cut back on staff; we have to cut wherever we can, but the one area that we are not going to cut is giving. We have committed to the Joseph Smith Papers; we will continue that support.”

I remember Elder Jensen coming to visit me after Larry passed away with a little bit of worry in his heart about are you going to continue. I committed that we would, and thankfully, we have been able to continue to the end and tie it up with a nice big red bow. I know where my blessings come from, and I haven’t missed one dollar. So we’ve been very grateful to be able to be involved and to support the project and do what Heavenly Father wanted us to do. *[audience applause]*

Elder Marlin K. Jensen: Could I just say, Gail, I well remember that visit. Yes, we were anxious. That period of time—call it a recession, call it a depression, whatever it was—was as serious for you and your business entities as it was for the rest of the world. If the papers help us know Joseph’s heart, I think that moment—I’ll call it a hinge moment—when you decided to continue your financial commitment, shows us what was in Larry’s heart and in your heart as well. That applause, I think, is an indication of the great appreciation that’s felt really Churchwide for you and your family. *[audience applause]*

Gail Miller: Thank you. Thank you. I do want to add to that that I have never expected anything in return, but I have had blessings many-fold. So thank you for the opportunity. *[audience applause]*

Brent Rogers: I would just like to express my deepest gratitude (I know I have at previous functions and things like that) to everybody

on this stage, especially to you, Gail. Elder Jensen, thank you for going hat in hand to ask for more FTEs and those kinds of things. I owe my career to the people on this stage. And I know that I can speak for our staff members who feel and have a love for you, Gail, and for the work that you've allowed us to do. So thank you.

If I could start with you on the next question while we've got you here. What would you say were some of the defining moments of the early years of the Joseph Smith Papers Project?

Gail Miller: Well, I think for me personally, one of the exciting and memorable events that we had was creating a trip with the historians, where we took them on a trip back East to visit the sites that they were studying and researching and had a lecture in each of those places by the historian who was doing that work. That was very memorable to me. Marlin was on that trip. We had some really fun moments. This is really not spiritual, but I'm going to tell it anyway. We had a rainstorm one day, and we were on a big bus. The bus was going down a dirt road headed toward a cliff, and there was a big tree that would have stopped the bus. We stopped in time, but we couldn't back up. So everybody got off the bus and started trying to get the wheels shored up so we could turn. I [was] standing under a shelter in the rain, and Marlin [was] standing with me. He looked out and said, "Gee, that's great. Your sons are so helpful. Look what they're doing." I said, "No, it's not my sons doing the work. They're giving instructions."

But it was a very memorable experience. I still look back on that, on the pictures, with fondness about each experience that we had during that trip that defined it. It solidified and deepened that commitment for me and I think for the historians as well because they could see what they were doing and how impactful it was and where it came from and why it was important to research that area. So that was one of the defining moments for me.

Others would have been the dinners that we had every year, where we had reports about discoveries and research and learning. Getting acquainted with the people that were working on the project was very meaningful to me. Another is that, quite often, I would be invited to the quarterly meetings, where they discussed the Joseph Smith Papers Project and what was happening. Sometimes they even asked my advice, which was very flattering. So there were a lot of memorable times along the way, and I'm very grateful for them.

Brent Rogers: Wonderful. Thank you. Ron Barney, what would you say were some of the defining moments of the early years of the project?

Ron Barney: Very clearly for me, it was the initial visit, when David and MelRae Brown came to the second-floor conference room in the east wing of the Church Office Building to see material that was pertinent to their upcoming work in Kirtland. I know this story has been told many times; I'm not really sure if I've ever told it.

Gail Miller: I'd love to hear it.

Ron Barney: As I made the presentation (there were, I'd guess, a few dozen people there or something to that effect), I had documents surrounding this very lengthy table. And I presented these original documents beginning with the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon and original revelations, Joseph Smith's 1832 diary, etc. I lined the entire table with these documents and then began to tell, in story form, how they were all pertinent. Larry didn't say anything during the presentation or after it, but I invited everyone to come up afterward and walk around the table to look at the documents. At that time, Larry came up to me and handed me his card and asked for mine and said, "I'd like to talk to you about this." That event took place on January 30, 2001. I was really impressed with Larry at the time. Everybody came in their Sunday best, and Larry came in his Sunday best too: It was a golf shirt, tan khakis, and white sneakers. I loved Larry's lack of pretension. He was never pretentious. He so impressed me in that way. Afterward, we met several times and had the experience that Gail described, where we met each other in the hall and both said, "We think we've figured this out"—of what his purpose for being there was.

Then on March 9, 2001 (when it was actually "*three* Rons and a Steve"—Ron Walker was the director of publications at the Smith Institute, if I remember right), we were all sitting there, and Larry looked very anxious to help us. After explanations were given about the kinds of things that we were planning on doing (and I wasn't one of the masterminds at the time; I was just kind of sitting there because of the experience that I'd had with Larry), Larry was sitting there, calculating while we [were] talking. After seeing what was said, he kind of proposed the budget and said, "I'll give you X amount," which, as I recall, was about \$100,000 more than what had originally been envisioned to get this off the ground. Then it certainly multiplied thereafter. I think it was just a week after that that Larry brought all his executives from the Larry H. Miller enterprise, and I did another presentation. It started at 3:00 in the afternoon, and I don't think we got out of there until almost 6:30 that evening. It was just rich. Some of Larry's employees were not Latter-day Saints or active Latter-day Saints; other ones were. It was a very special time.

So, I'll just say this: that the scholars are really important in all of this, as you well know. By the way, you [Brent] were the one who replaced me when I left.

Brent Rogers: I wasn't going to say. [audience laughter] I said everybody on this stage had an impact [on] my hiring.

Ron Barney: You got my position, and they were so much better off thereafter. There have been some very thorny times, no question about it, with personalities involved. Yet, on this incredibly hastened schedule, the books came out, the first one in 2008 and then, just very recently, the last one. So my perspective on this has been, with the great scholars that have been around, that Larry Miller was plucked out of the universe to come and participate in this. This was no accident. Gail as his companion was no accident. She was always supportive, and it was quite wonderful to watch.

Brent Rogers: Thank you, Ron.

Ron Esplin: I used to catch Larry at the end of a business day and had the privilege a number of times to visit in his office for a while. He would kick up his feet on his desk, and we would chat for hours sometimes because he had so much interest in the history. I heard this story from Larry's point of view a number of times. One of the things Larry liked to say was, "How many coincidences does it take before you know it's not a coincidence?" And one of the coincidences was a failure to get something published. That fed into the story that Ron just told us.

Dean Jessee had published two volumes of *The Papers of Joseph Smith* as a one-man project beginning in the 1980s.¹² By the 1990s, he had a third volume finished, but we couldn't get the final approval. Elder [Neal A.] Maxwell wanted to have a discussion with the First Presidency where we could have a big piece on the agenda (and not just have a little item that could be easily turned down or approved and move on) because there were a lot of issues in that final volume of the Nauvoo journals that needed to be discussed. It had the temple in it; it had things about plural marriage in it; it had Nauvoo Legion tensions and lots of things that were issues that needed to be discussed so that the First Presidency knew its contents and could approve its publication. He finally got that on the agenda on one occasion, as I recall, when Elder Maxwell and Elder Oaks were the advisors. We discussed this in a meeting in Elder Maxwell's office. He was very pleased about that because it was going to be *the*

12. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Deseret Book, 1989–92).

discussion. When he told Elder Oaks about the meeting, as I recall, Elder Oaks said, “But Elder Maxwell, I’ll be gone then because I have to be in the Philippines for two weeks.” Elder Maxwell replied, “Well, I’m not going up without you on this one,” and they took it off the agenda.

It was not approved for publication. It was never disapproved. But there was a lot of discussion. It was discussion around that unpublished volume that eventually led to the approval by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve of a broader project that would include everything, including that volume.

Now, when Elder [Jeffrey R.] Holland got back from his time as an Area President in Chile, he was reappointed as an advisor, and he asked me to give him a copy of that third volume: “If I’m going to have that discussion and be part of it, I want to read it. And I need to know what I’m talking about so I can defend it.” So we hurriedly upgraded that volume with everything we could give it. Richard Jensen read every word. I read every word. We changed a number of footnotes. We proofed it the best we could. We printed out a new version, and we gave a copy to Elder Holland.

We also gave a copy to Steve Sorensen and said, “Steve, you’re the partner institution with us. You’ve got to read this and understand it so you can help explain it and defend it.” Steve gave it to Ron Barney. Steve didn’t read it. I don’t know if Ron ever read it, but it was on top of his filing cabinet when Larry came in to visit, saying, “There’s something about what you’re doing that I need to be involved in. Do you know what it is?” Well, Ron talked to him about this project of the department and then the work of Brother Jessee. “See that volume up there on my filing cabinet? That’s the work of Brother Jessee.” Ron then explained to [Larry] something about the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Larry went home still undecided, uncertain what the feelings in him were that he had to support something that was involved in these documents. Then he came to the realization: It’s the work of Brother Jessee.

Ron Barney: That was the trigger.

Ron Esplin: That was the trigger. And that was one of those coincidences: that Steve wouldn’t read it and you [Ron Barney] didn’t read it, but it was on the filing cabinet.

Ron Barney: You don’t know that I didn’t read it. [*audience laughter*]

Ron Esplin: I don’t know that you didn’t read it, but it was one of Larry’s coincidences. Had you not explained that volume to him that day, who knows what would have been?

Ron Barney: That’s right. You told that story much better than I could have.

Ron Esplin: I wasn't even there. Larry told me. [*audience laughter*]

Brent Rogers: Elder Jensen, is there anything that you would add—your perspective on defining moments of the early years of the Joseph Smith Papers?

Elder Marlin K. Jensen: Just two briefly. One, I think it wasn't clear from the beginning who the audience for the papers would be—whether it would be published for a general Church audience or pitched for scholars. We took that decision to the First Presidency, and President [Gordon B.] Hinckley, who had more interest in Church history than almost any other prophet we've ever had, felt like the papers should be directed to the scholarly world. That, I think, was a really crucial decision in determining how the papers would be written, the standards that we would adhere to, and the future value that the project would have.

Related to that was how we would publish them. The Church doesn't typically publish in its own name. We thought about the BYU entities that publish; we thought about Deseret Book; [we] finally ended up deciding that it would be prudent for the publication of the papers and for future high-quality historical products to create our own publisher's imprint—the Church Historian's Press. So we obtained permission to do that and then partnered with Deseret Book to be the printer.

Just a little sidenote: When the first volume of the papers came out, there was so much interest in it. Maybe we overhyped it slightly because it sold sixty thousand copies at fifty dollars apiece. I remember shortly thereafter receiving one of those early morning calls that President [Boyd K.] Packer was fond of making. Though he wasn't at that time one of the advisors to Church history, he nonetheless retained a very lively interest in what we were doing, and he had become aware of the high number of sales of that first volume. He said, "Marlin, I just called to tell you that not every LDS housewife in tennis shoes needs to own a copy of Joseph Smith's papers. There's a little too much," he said, "of Muhammad and not quite enough of Allah." Think about how profound that counsel is and was: to keep our eyes and the eyes of those working on the papers project on the Savior and on the ultimate goal that we all have to become like him—and not unduly emphasize those people along the way, great as they may be, who are instrumental in helping us walk that path.

Ron Esplin: I'd like to mention one other crucial time for the papers. Following Larry's death and without yet being recovered from the financial problems that he had dealt with the last years before his death (and that Gail and the companies were still dealing with), we had one of those quarterly board meetings in Elder Jensen's conference room on the

fourth floor of the Church History Library. Larry sometimes attended those. I remember one of those where you [Elder Jensen] said, “I’ve never been in a board meeting in this room where I’m sitting across from somebody in a blue shirt instead of a white”—that was me—“and a pink shirt”—that was Larry. Well, Gail was not in a pink shirt that day, but Gail was there, and Greg [Miller]¹³ was there.

The question was, What are we going to do? The Brethren are concerned that we have committed ourselves to a couple of dozen volumes, and we’ve only got two or three out. If we can’t get this done in ten years, we’re going to lose focus and lose support, and it’s just not going to work. We realized that we did not have what we called “the horses” to succeed; we did not have the horsepower on the scholarly side to get this done. There was no way to publish two volumes a year, which was our goal and our commitment and the reality if we were going to get it done in the timetable that had been agreed to with the Millers and the Brethren. So our proposal was, We cannot do it without more horses on the scholar side. It’s going to be expensive, and we need to hire a number of people. Brent was one of those hires.

We had that discussion that day. I remember Greg saying, “Are the people out there? Can you get people of the right quality and the caliber to get this done if you have the resources?” We said, “We think so,” and we found some wonderful people. Gail said, “If that’s what it takes, we’re going to do it.” That decision (I think it was in 2010, in a period of difficulty for the company), where the Millers stepped up and said, “Regardless, if that’s what it takes, we’re in it for the long haul, and we’re in it if it hurts, and we’re in it right now—go hire the people,”—that made all the difference. We never could have done two volumes a year without what happened at that board meeting that day.

Brent Rogers: Well, I wish that we could spend a lot more time up here because we are hearing some beautiful words and some great history. I have just one more question for the panel before we spend a few minutes with the audience. I want you to think about this and give the answer that you wish to give, starting with Gail. What have you learned from the Joseph Smith Papers that has influenced or changed your life?

Gail Miller: I don’t know that I can specify what I’ve learned from the papers. But from the experience, I’ve learned that we’re all here for a purpose. And we have to be in tune to learn what that is. It may be a

13. Greg Miller is Gail and Larry Miller’s son.

long road to that vision where we understand why we're here. But once we do, it's important to be all in; it's important to make a commitment and to keep your word and to keep your eye on the end goal, which is eternal. So for me, watching what's happened and the impact it will have on the world is quite marvelous because you see the hand of God in what he wants to have come about. And he will make it happen no matter what. If Larry and I hadn't stepped up, somebody else would have. I know that. We were not special in any way. We were an instrument and willing and able and obedient to recognize what needed to be done and then [be] able to commit and keep the commitment. There were times when I thought, How many more years is this going to go? But I didn't ever worry about the money because I knew it would be there. We had made the commitment, and I knew it would be there. I'm grateful to be in a position to see it from the beginning to the end. It's just a remarkable, remarkable experience for me and my family and a remarkable product for the world.

Brent Rogers: Beautifully said. Thank you, Gail. Ron Esplin.

Ron Esplin: We knew quite a bit about Joseph Smith when we started. We know a lot more now. But one of the things that I did not understand until well into the project was how foundational revelation was to everything that happened in the Restoration. Richard Bushman was once asked [something like], How is it that Joseph Smith could go from the ashes of defeat and have the courage to go forward and rise to a new level—and then experience a crushing defeat and again rise?¹⁴ He said it was because he [Joseph] had the revelations at his back and that no one believed the revelations more than Joseph.¹⁵ These revelations didn't ask a little of him or of the Church or the Latter-day Saints. It didn't lay out a program that you could take care of before breakfast or this month or next month. It was a program of years of effort and labor.

Every major initiative of the early Restoration was driven by revelation—the publication of the Book of Mormon, the movement from New York to Ohio, the gathering place in Ohio, the establishing of a second

14. See also Ronald K. Esplin, "Joseph Smith and the Kirtland Crisis, 1837," in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2010), 261; R. Scott Lloyd, "Prophet Joseph Smith Was Energized by Revelations," *Church News*, May 26, 2012, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/2012/5/26/23225529/prophet-joseph-smith-was-energized-by-revelations/>.

15. See also Richard Lyman Bushman, with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 173.

gathering place when there weren't even resources for one. All of those were driven by the revelations. In a document that Dean [Jessee] published early on in his *Papers of Joseph Smith, Volume 1*, an editor from Pittsburgh interviewed Joseph in Nauvoo and asked, "Isn't this rather presumptuous to be claiming to give revelations?" Joseph commented a little on revelations, and then said "that when he was in a 'quandary,' he asked the Lord for a revelation, and when he could not get it, he 'followed the dictates of his own judgment, which were as good as a revelation to him; but he never gave anything to his people as revelation, unless it was a revelation, and the Lord did reveal himself to him.'"¹⁶

One of the things that I've learned with the Joseph Smith Papers is that at the beginning, there was no story without the revelations. We don't have a minute of the first meeting of the Church on the 6th of April 1830—nothing. The Saints didn't keep [a] record of Joseph's sermons or feel it was very important until Nauvoo, where they really made an effort to try and gather his teachings. What they kept were the revelations, which were gathered from the summer of 1830 on—gathered and copied and prepared for publication. It drove the Restoration, and it drove Joseph Smith.

Brent Rogers: Great, thank you. Elder Jensen.

Elder Marlin K. Jensen: I think periodically of Joseph's statement in section 128 regarding the subject of baptism for the dead, which he said did "occupy my mind and press itself upon my feelings the strongest" [D&C 128:1]. That may well have been one of his ways of getting the revelations that he received. I've had a similar experience with a question in Alma 32 that has been occupying my mind and pressing itself on my feelings during these last ten or twelve years as the faith of many people in the restored gospel and in its history has been shaken. In that thirty-second chapter, Alma teaches what we must do to have our faith increase; describes tangible evidence of that increase, such as spiritual enlightenment and understanding; and then, of that experience, asks rhetorically, "O then, is not this real?" [Alma 32:35]. I can't imagine a more pertinent question at this moment in time than, What is real? I think what my limited (because I was just there in the beginning years) exposure to the papers project has done for me (and I've tried to keep up as subsequent volumes have appeared) is that it has made Joseph and

16. "Interview, 29 August 1843," in *Documents, Volume 13: August–December 1843*, ed. Christian K. Heimburger, Jeffrey D. Mahas, Brent M. Rogers, Mason K. Allred, J. Chase Kirkham, and Matthew S. McBride, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2022), 90.

his life and his work and his truth claims real in a way that my faith has become unshaken and well settled. It's my hope that the papers will do that for everyone who reads them or who reads things that other faithful people have written based on them.

Brent Rogers: Thank you, Elder Jensen. Ron Barney.

Ron Barney: I can't help myself because I have always had in the back of my mind the question, How is this going to look twenty years from now or fifty years from now or a hundred years from now? I don't remember the exact day that it dawned on me that history five hundred years from now will look back upon the Joseph Smith Papers Project as a turning point for us. You [Elder Jensen] have said as much: that in this generation, it's the most important thing in a historical way that the Church has done. I'm certain that we remain on the cusp of something enormous, something that will transcend what we individually can offer. But cumulatively, the work of everyone who worked on the project has brought about something where no one can say, Well, if you'd only done this, or, You've left out this. My view of this has been that it was done as it was supposed to be. It's a marvelous project.

And just a sidenote. I've said this to other people. I'll say it again. If there's no Ron Esplin, there is no Joseph Smith Papers Project. I think Ron was that essential and that critical, and he's *still* involved in it. I think it's pretty remarkable. *[audience applause]*

Brent Rogers: Thank you. Well, folks, I guess we are up on the time. We started early, hoping that we'd get to the point where we could have some interaction. Maybe if our guests are okay to stay up here for another few minutes and take one or two questions.

Audience Question: This was awesome. I can't believe listening to the history of the history could possibly be so fascinating. I was curious about the history of how we ended up getting the First Presidency to release the Council of Fifty minutes and the manuscript revelation book because that was stuff that all of us nerds thought would never see the light. We knew it existed, but none of us ever thought it'd see the light of day.

Brent Rogers: Elder Jensen or Ron, are there insights that you have?

Ron Esplin: Let me just say that I was asked a question for years. "But what about the Council of Fifty?" I said, "At the appropriate time, I'm confident we'll be able to get the Council of Fifty minutes and get them published." Indeed, it's the only true prophecy I ever made.¹⁷ *[audience*

17. See "The Genesis of the Joseph Smith Papers Project," herein, 100–103.

laughter] But it was true. And you [Elder Jensen] may tell us how that came to pass.

Elder Marlin K. Jensen: One must appreciate, I think, the way our Church operates at its highest levels. As a young General Authority, I probably felt that our administrative processes were quite conservative and laborious. The longer I served, however, the more I came to really appreciate our administrative and ecclesiastical processes and the great blessing we have to have a prophet leading our Church and to be assisted by his apostolic associates.

A number of access questions came up during the papers project and during the writing of the first Mountain Meadows Massacre book that was being written at the same time.¹⁸ These questions concerned documents that the Church held in its archives that had never been previously released for research or publication. Over the course of time, it became apparent that in this technologically advanced age, a policy of historical transparency needed to be pursued. As leaders of the Church History Department (and I must mention here that Richard E. Turley Jr. was an indispensable part of all that was done in those years), we worked under the direction of our apostolic advisors, President Nelson and President Oaks, who previewed our access requests to the Quorum of the Twelve. With their advice and direction, we could then take ripened, well-reasoned proposals to the First Presidency, which [they] always met, I think, with very careful consideration and inspired decisions. Gradually, over time, confidence in our work grew, and as knowledge of our Church's history expanded, it became a rather natural consequence for the Brethren to approve making the requested documents available. We live now in an age of transparency, and our Church is a part of it—and I think the better for it. We needed to own our history; we needed to own up to our history. I think, in this papers project, we've done that with Joseph Smith in the very best way we can.

Brent Rogers: Very well said, Elder Jensen. Thank you so much.

18. Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

Prayer School

Teach me to pray the Pied Piper prayer.
Calling up brigades of grandmothers
waving lemon silk banners and chanting
Come on people now, smile on your brother.

Teach me to pray the shockwave prayer.
Lay armies flat with a breath and send
them to time out until they can play nice,
growing sweet peas up arbors crafted from spears.

Teach me to pray the wolf suit prayer.
Enchanting the rumpusy wild things
by praying into all their yellow eyes
without blinking once.

I've finished all my first-level prayer theory lessons
but seem to be failing the real-world practice.

I'm longing to learn
the clean sweep confession,
the didgeridoo devotion,
the Tiffany lamp meditation,
the supernova intercession.

Teach me to pray like a prophetess
or at least a good plumber.
Like a pilot.
Like a piccolo.
Like a mama piranha.
I'll be in the front row taking notes.

—Vauna Davis

My Brother's Keeper

Name withheld

Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. (John 11:25)

The year I sang the part of Martha in Rob Gardner's *Lamb of God*¹ is also the year my younger brother James came and then nearly left us for good.

James arrived at our home on Christmas Day. He was always one for surprises, so he didn't announce his coming until two days beforehand. He had previously told us he would arrive in October. We prepped his room and waited. And waited. And waited.

We didn't know what to expect when James came to live with us. Of my five siblings, he was the one I knew the least. He kept his emotions and whereabouts closely guarded. The family took to calling him the International Man of Mystery. James worked in South America. He traveled all over the world—hiking through Patagonia, running marathons in Argentina, and skiing the Canadian Rockies.

But life had grown increasingly challenging for him. Because of past mental illness and the effects of long COVID, James had to take leave from his high-powered sales job. He needed a place to stay. We had an open bedroom.

1. *Lamb of God*, Rob Gardner Music, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://robgardnermusic.com/lamb>.

Immediately, James infused our house with energy. We were down to our last kid at home, and our son missed his older siblings. James became like a big brother. He organized a hot wings challenge on New Year's Day. He bought our son an incline bench for lifting and no fewer than seven new basketballs when he made the freshman team.

Every day was like Christmas. A cold plunge pool appeared in our courtyard. New nightlights illuminated the hallways. James bought clip-on reading lamps for every member of the family. Weighted vests. Blue light therapy. Red light therapy. Cases of sparkling water. Forty books on optimizing life. I, a minimalist, feared that our house could not absorb so many *things*.

James was a gatherer. He and our son watched the entire NBA season together; a platter of chips and salsa balanced between them. He invited me to watch masterclasses on writing. The quips he offered from his favorite seat in the dining room became a source of delight. We developed a dozen inside jokes.

The mental illness was also evident, but it hummed quietly in the background. James stayed in bed until the late afternoon. On the days he had energy, he took long walks across town to the grocery store. He bought unusual foods, and too much of it, filling our fridge to bursting.

We had one scare a few months in, when I came out of my room in the morning to find his door flung wide, his bed empty. I called his name. He was nowhere in the house. On a hunch, I pushed open the courtyard door and saw him floating, face-down, in the hot tub. I ran to touch his shoulder, to feel that he was still alive. He popped his head up out of the water.

"Couldn't sleep," was all he said, not realizing that finding him like that had nearly stopped my heart.

James ping-ponged from one therapy to another, trying to unearth a treatment that would heal him. Acupuncture. Massage. He spent hours on forums hunting for long COVID's elusive cure. One of the alternative medicines had dangerous consequences if taken with some of his mood stabilizers. I expressed my concern about him going off his medication, but he assured me it would be okay.

Our family returned from a sun-soaked spring break trip to find a changed James. It was evident during our first conversation. He had deep shadows under his eyes. Alone in our house for a week, he had barely eaten or slept.

James began to pull me aside and whisper his concerns about the government. They were after him, tracking his every move. Something

big was going to happen, and it was all his fault. He became suspicious of our parents. If I tried to reason with him, he became suspicious of me. His eyes would shift, and he would stare at me strangely.

"Is this real?" he would ask, touching his own face. "Am I here? Is this real?"

James had exhibited psychotic episodes before. I realized he was descending into one again. Then, like flipping a switch, he would go back to normal if my husband or son walked into the room.

I encouraged him to go back on his mood stabilizers. He had run out of pills but agreed. We tried to reach his doctors who practiced in another state, but they were slow to respond. I bought James black-out curtains and over-the-counter sleeping pills. Still, the conspiracies became more desperate and nonsensical.

His descent came during an intense time. Our entire family was involved in rehearsals for the annual tri-state production of Rob Gardner's *Lamb of God*. This year's Easter performance promised to be incredible, with professional singers and full orchestra. We were expected to fill the meetinghouse from the chapel to the back of the cultural hall.

I had been assigned the role of Martha, sister to Lazarus. The beginning of my solo started with the plea of a sibling, "Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick. Master, please, for our Lazarus is dying."

We had long rehearsals every evening of performance week, but James consumed my thoughts. On Thursday morning, I woke at 3 a.m. to the sound of retching.

I sat up in bed. "It's James," I told my husband. "Something is wrong."

He hadn't eaten in two days. I thought this must be his body reacting. I went to his room and put my ear to the door.

"James?" I asked. "James, is everything okay?"

He mumbled a response, zigzagging from one conspiracy to another. Nothing he said made sense. He was in full-blown psychosis. He would not open the door. With my heart racing, I tried to unlock it with a pin. I could feel him gripping the doorknob tightly on the other side.

We called in a crisis team to help coax him out of the room. Nothing worked. James wove in and out of coherency for more than an hour. Then, he mumbled that he had overdosed on sleeping pills to end his life. I sank to my knees and began to hyperventilate. James's life was in jeopardy, and I was stuck on the other side of the door.

We called in the fire department and an ambulance, expecting we might have to break down the door. My husband managed to crawl onto

James's balcony and slip into his room. James still had a death grip on the doorknob. My husband knelt down beside him. I could hear their conversation through the door.

"I'm here to help," my husband said. "Everything is going to be okay."

James became like a little child. He let go of the doorknob and stood. He followed the paramedics to the front porch, where they took his vitals and rushed him to the hospital. I followed close behind.

Sitting in the suicide unit of the hospital was a surreal experience. I felt like throwing James's question at every doctor I encountered. "Is this real? Am I here? Is this real?"

I was flooded with memories of James. This was the brother who, at five years old, spent hours in the bathroom fashioning presents for the entire family out of wet toilet paper. My gift was a telephone no bigger than my thumb.

This was the brother who wrote song parodies and concocted elaborate jokes. His comedic English essays garnered a cult following in high school. On a summer internship in Washington, D.C., he spent weeks tracking down Democratic Senator Harry Reid at church so that he could sit to the left of Reid in Sunday School, lean over and say, "Senator Reid, it's a pleasure to join you on the left."

When he started making real money, he became the uncle who gave all the best presents. Thumbing his nose at my strict parenting ways, he bought my kids an electric guitar and a Wii, thus cementing his favorite uncle status.

But now, this sweet and funny brother was in a hospital bed, hooked up to IVs. In between the parade of doctors and medics, he spoke in rapid-fire sentences about a mysterious white paper and the FBI.

James's lack of appetite had saved his life. He took the sleeping pills on an empty stomach. They had come right back up before they could be absorbed in his bloodstream.

When the doctors determined that James's vitals were stable, they transferred him to the psychiatric ward of the hospital. I had to exit the ER and lock away everything on my person—no cell phone, purse, or even a tube of lip balm—nothing that could be used as a weapon. A security guard ran a metal detector wand over me as I entered the unit.

I thought I'd experienced my fill of hard things that day, but when I saw James again, I had to choke back tears. He was sitting on a plastic mat on the floor of an empty white room. They had dressed him in green scrubs made from paper. It felt cold and terribly cruel.

I slid down the wall and sat beside James. I urged him to sleep, to rest his brain, but he was incapable of settling down. He rambled through his conspiracies, often growing testy and snapping at me. I tried to bring the conversation back to reality, dredging up every childhood and travel memory I could recall.

"Remember New Zealand? Tell me about it. How you swam with the otters below the waterfall?"

Hours passed. Our room had no door, which gave me a clear line of sight into the hallway. The police led in a man in handcuffs. He had on a black-and-red shirt with matching black-and-red shoes. He shouted that they were making a terrible mistake. Didn't they know that he owned the biggest record label in the country? The guards closed a curtain around him and made him change into the same green-paper scrubs. He sat cross-legged on his plastic mat, muttering. Occasionally, he caught my eye with a look that asked, *How did I get here?*

I watched as several homeless men were wheeled through the hallway, stripped of their drugs, and sent back out to the streets with a yogurt and an applesauce. Down the hall, a woman sang at the top of her lungs. A security guard shouted at another patient to calm down as she slapped at the bare walls. My heart broke and then broke again.

When I stepped out for a minute to get an update from the doctor on duty, she flipped through the papers on her clipboard, cocked her head, and told me, "Yours is really a golden situation."

I glanced back toward my brother, whose bloodshot eyes stared straight ahead. *A golden situation?*

"Your brother is one of the lucky ones," she said. "He has a family, a support system." She gestured down the hallway. "Most of these people have nobody."

James and I sat alone for hours. No one came to check on us or offer even a cup of water. I asked for food to fill James's empty stomach. They brought it on a flat cardboard tray with a paper spoon that disintegrated in my brother's hands. None of the food stayed down long. On my hands and knees, cleaning up the mess, a scriptural phrase ran like ticker tape through my mind. *I am my brother's keeper. I am my brother's keeper.*

As morning turned to afternoon, I remembered the *Lamb of God* rehearsal that evening. It was Thursday, the day before opening night. Someone would have to take my place and sing the part of Martha. I could not do it. The production did not matter as much as what was happening here in the hospital. Not only that, but Martha's solo, from

beginning to end, is nearly nine minutes long. I didn't have the emotional stamina to stand before an audience of hundreds. I feared that, like the paper spoon, I would disintegrate.

And yet, in that dismal room, with the sounds of despair all around me, I realized that *I was Martha*, a sister begging for Christ to bring her brother back to life. It was as if the song had been written for me, for that very moment on the plastic mat with James beside me. Through a series of miracles, my brother's life had been spared. How could I not stand and sing about that?

After almost eight hours in the psychiatric unit, James was put in a wheelchair and taken by secure transport to an in-patient facility, where he would be monitored for the next several weeks. It was where he needed to go, but saying goodbye was difficult. I didn't want to leave him.

I told the tri-stake music director I wouldn't be at rehearsal that evening, but at the last minute, I decided to go. I was still tentative on some of my entrances and wanted at least one more run-through. Making my way to the front of the chapel, I slumped into my chair as the choir warmed up. My spirit felt as if it had been scrubbed from the inside out with steel wool. The orchestra played their first notes, and the men began to sing.

Thou Hope and Deliverer promised of old,
For whom we have waited e'er long.
O come and redeem us from slavery's yoke,
And deliver thy people home.

I turned back to look at my husband. Hope. Deliverance. Yes. We hadn't just felt it. We had *seen* it, that very day.

Yea, Thou in whose presence our soul takes delight,
On whom in affliction we call.
Our comfort by day and our song in the night,
Our Hope, our Deliv'rer, our All.

It was my turn to sing. My whole body shook as I made my way to the microphone.

The Lazarus story is about a Savior who arrives too late. He comes after Martha has pled for him to quicken his pace. As Christ's friend and one of his most devoted disciples, Martha has seen his miracles. She knows that Christ can heal her brother. But he doesn't come, and he doesn't come. Lazarus dies. Martha and Mary, brokenhearted, place his body in a sepulchre. When Jesus arrives, Lazarus is *four days* dead.

In her agony, Martha tells the Lord, "If thou hadst been here, my brother then would not have died" (John 11:21).

The Savior comforts her with a reminder that his timing is exact. He asks Martha to believe. She tells him that she does believe—she knows she will see Lazarus in the Resurrection. But the pain of *now* is almost unbearable.

In the oratorio, she pleads in song:

Touch my eyes and bid them see
That my gaze might pierce the veil.

As I stood that night and sang those words, my mind was back outside my brother's bedroom door—kneeling for hours in the early morning, pleading for James' life.

Oh touch my heart and bid it know
That ev'ry sorrow here
Is but a moment's tear,
And Thou wilt make me whole again.

Even as I sang, I felt a change come over me. It was as if Christ's healing balm was being poured into me, not in measured drops but in a great gush. A few minutes in, the shaking stopped. My mind went quiet. With each stanza, I felt not depleted but stronger. The pain of my brother's suffering and the anguish of that long day gave way to a clarity that I was only beginning to understand. Christ's grace had saved my brother—not just now but for eternity. When we sit in a chasm of grief, Jesus weeps with us, as he did with Martha and Mary at the grave of his friend.

As I stood and sang out into the darkness, every evening of that long weekend, I felt a comfort I had never known before. Each night, I arrived at church in a shattered state. The lights dimmed, the orchestra began, and I pled with the Lord that I would have the strength to stand and perform. As we sang to crowds of hundreds about delivery, peril, distress, tribulation, and, most of all, hope, I felt myself getting pieced back together, just as Christ's miracle brought Lazarus and my brother back to life. I knew that the same Savior who healed *my* soul through song would someday heal the man with the red and black shoes and the woman down the hall who refused to be quiet, and all the broken people I saw at the hospital—all the broken people in the world.

As the weekend rolled into the following months, the miracle of modern medicine did its work to bring James out of his spiral of

conspiracies. I saw my beloved brother emerge from where the psychosis had taken him. His troubled brain began to heal, and the light returned to his eyes.

This was not the first time that James had tried to take his life. I'm not sure it will be the last. Sometimes I am overcome with a fear that I will once again find myself on the other side of a door that cannot be opened. In those moments, I recall the night the Savior met me in my grief and filled my soul through music.

It was then that I realized: Christ can arrive late because he never left in the first place. He is right there with us on the plastic mat in cold and empty rooms. He is continually calling us forth from dark places into his light.

How can I not stand and sing about that?

This essay won first place in the 2025 BYU Studies Personal Essay Contest. The author's name has been withheld at her request, and the brother's name has been changed to protect anonymity.

The Genesis Creation Account in Its Ancient Context

Avram R. Shannon

The Old Testament begins with the famous words “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). There is, in the Bible as it stands, no prelude to or explanation of this text, so this section immediately invites question and interpretation. Indeed, the famous Jewish biblical interpreter Rashi said, “This verse says nothing other than, ‘Interpret me!’”¹ Example questions that immediately arise include “Who is God?” “In the beginning of what?” and “What does it mean to create?” Further, the question of how creation informs our relationship with God and each other has underscored Jewish and Christian cosmologies for centuries, including the cosmology of Latter-day Saints.²

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not committed to a specific literal reading of much in the Genesis Creation accounts.³

1. Rashi, on Genesis 1:1 (author’s translation). There is an accessible Jewish Bible with English translations of the various medieval Jewish commentators in *The Commentators’ Bible: Genesis: The Rubin JPS Miqra’ot Gedolot*, ed. Michael Carasik (Jewish Publication Society, 2018). The citation from Rashi is on p. 3.

2. The first few chapters of Genesis have been the subject of myriads of studies and commentaries. Some that the present author found useful were the following: Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, (Augsburg Publishing House, 1984); E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Doubleday, 1964); Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part I from Adam to Noah*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Magnes Press, 1961); Ronald S. Hendel, *The Text of Genesis 1–11: Textual Studies and Critical Edition* (Oxford University Press, 1998); and Thomas Krüger, “Genesis 1:1–2:3 and the Development of the Pentateuch,” in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz (Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 125–38.

3. Although not quite as many as in the sphere of general biblical scholarship, there are numerous Latter-day Saint studies on Genesis as well. See Kevin L. Barney,

For example, in discussing the description of Eve's creation from the rib, President Spencer W. Kimball succinctly observed, "The story of the rib, of course, is figurative."⁴ In a similar vein, Elder Russell M. Nelson stated that "whether termed a *day*, a *time*, or an *age*, each phase was a period between two identifiable events—a division of eternity."⁵ These observations create space for understanding the Creation accounts in Genesis in a variety of ways, whether figuratively as President Kimball did or indefinitely as Elder Nelson did.⁶

The purpose of this paper is to explore the ancient context and cosmological worldview of the Creation account as presented in Genesis 1 and 2 as well as what that means for Latter-day Saints. It is also worth noting what this paper is *not* doing. This paper does not attempt a reconciliation between modern science and the Creation account in the biblical book of Genesis.⁷ Indeed, in this chapter, I take as a base assumption Nephi's statement that God speaks to people "according to

"Examining Six Key Concepts in Joseph Smith's Understanding of Genesis 1:1," *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 107–24; Daniel L. Belnap, "The Law of Moses: An Overview," in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society: A Background to the Texts of the New Testament*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2019), 19–34; Daniel L. Belnap, "In the Beginning: Genesis 1–3 and Its Significance to the Latter-day Saints," in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2021), 1–42; and David Rolph Seely, "We Believe the Bible as Far as It Is Translated Correctly": Latter-day Saints and Historical Biblical Criticism," in *Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses: Inspired Origins, Temple Contexts, and Literary Qualities*, ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and others (Interpreter Foundation, 2021), 137–62.

4. Spencer W. Kimball, "The Blessings and Responsibilities of Womanhood," *Ensign*, March 1976, 71.

5. Russell M. Nelson, "The Creation," *Ensign*, May 2000, 85, emphasis in original. Elder Nelson cited the textual difference in the book of Abraham as part of the rationale for this statement.

6. Philip L. Barlow describes this Latter-day Saint reading tendency as "selective literalism." See Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 33–35.

7. Others have attempted to make this connection, and the interested reader is directed in that direction. For a few Latter-day Saint examples, see R. Grant Athay, "And God Said, Let There Be Lights in the Firmament of Heaven," *BYU Studies* 30, no. 4 (1990): 39–53; Hollis R. Johnson, "Worlds Come and Pass Away: Evolution of Stars and Planets in the Pearl of Great Price?," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 46–64; and Michael D. Rhodes, "The Scriptural Accounts of the Creation: A Scientific Perspective," in *Converging Paths to Truth: The Summerhays Lectures on Science and Religion*, ed. Michael D. Rhodes and J. Ward Moody (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2011), 123–49.

their language, unto their understanding” (2 Ne. 31:3). The authors and editors of Genesis were not twenty-first-century scientists, and we do them and ourselves a disservice if we expect twenty-first-century science from them.⁸ In the dedication of the Life Sciences Building at BYU, President Russell M. Nelson stated, “There is no conflict between science and religion. Conflict only arises from an incomplete knowledge of either science or religion, or both.”⁹ Understanding what Genesis is and is not doing gives us a more complete knowledge of the scriptural perspective by showing its ancient perspective. This can then help us to reduce potential conflict in reading the scriptures by giving us a more complete knowledge of religion.

Moses and Authorship

In order to understand the ancient context of Genesis, it is important to consider who wrote it. Numerous Restoration scriptures, including the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible (JST), assume the existence of Moses as a historical figure associated with a law given by God.¹⁰ However, Moses can be a historical prophet, and the books in the Bible records can be of God’s doing, without Moses specifically having written those books as we now have them. Moreover, Restoration scriptures do not claim that Moses wrote every word in the “five books of Moses,” nor do the books themselves.¹¹ In fact, they make no claims about authorship at all and are all written in the third person,

8. T. Benjamin Spackman has been speaking and writing on this topic for long time. See his FairMormon presentations “Truth, Scripture, and Interpretation: Some Precursors for Reading Genesis,” <https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2017/truth-scripture-and-interpretation>; and “A Paradoxical Preservation of Faith: LDS Creation Accounts and the Composite Nature of Revelation,” <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/august-2019/a-paradoxical-preservation-of-faith>. Spackman is particularly good at articulating how our expectations feed into our readings of Genesis.

9. Marianne Holman Prescott, “Church Leaders Gather at BYU’s Life Sciences Building for Dedication,” Church News, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 17, 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/church-leaders-gather-at-byus-life-sciences-building-for-dedication>.

10. See, for example, 1 Nephi 4:2; 17:24–29; 2 Nephi 3:9–10; 25:20–24; Mosiah 13:5.

11. Belnap, “The Law of Moses,” 20. For some thoughts on the organization and composition of the law of Moses on the brass plates, see Avram R. Shannon, “The Documentary Hypothesis and the Book of Mormon,” in *They Shall Grow Together: The Bible in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Charles Swift and Nicholas J. Frederick (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2022), 249–76. Although the Church’s Bible Dictionary entry for “Pentateuch,” 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bd/pentateuch>, suggests that Moses was the principal author of the

suggesting that the record that we have is from someone else speaking about Moses.¹²

This is true even of the inspired changes made by Joseph Smith as part of his New Translation. Because the Creation accounts in Moses 2–3 are framed as direct discourse between the Lord and Moses, Latter-day Saints have occasionally assumed that the JST supports notions of Mosaic authorship.¹³ But a close examination of the Book of Moses, especially the prefatory vision published as Moses 1, shows that this is not the case (see the revelatory aside to Joseph Smith in Moses 1:42). Like the Book of Mormon, Genesis is an ancient record that draws on previous sources to produce an inspired record. The JST supports the theory that the Creation accounts are based on revelations given to Moses, but it also informs us that this is a third-person retelling of Moses's interaction with the Lord, rather than a first-person account of his experience. We see similar things happening with Mormon in the Book of Mormon and with certain sections of the Doctrine and Covenants.¹⁴

Although Latter-day Saints affirm the inspired nature of Genesis, it should not be troubling for Latter-day Saints to think of our scriptural books as revisions of various edited and redacted sources.¹⁵ This process

Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), it also suggests that he used sources and that the books were edited by later authors.

12. This is not to say that the scriptures claim that Moses did no writing. In fact, Moses 1:40 explicitly states Moses does write. It does not claim, however, that we have that writing, and Moses 1:41 implies that we do not have that writing.

13. Kent P. Jackson, *The Restored Gospel and the Book of Genesis* (Deseret Book, 2001), 55–65.

14. For the Book of Mormon, see Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 121–51. See also Hardy's earlier "Mormon as Editor," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), 15–28. For the Doctrine and Covenants, see Ryan J. Wessel, "The Textual Context of Doctrine and Covenants 121–23," *Religious Educator* 13, no. 1 (2012): 103–15. See the discussion on redaction in the scriptures in Avram R. Shannon, "The Bible Before and After: Interpretation and Translation in Antiquity and the Book of Moses," in Bradshaw and others, *Tracing Ancient Threads*, 257–92, discussion on 263.

15. For a Latter-day Saint discussion of the law of Moses, with a discussion of sources and redaction, see Belnap, "The Law of Moses." See also the historical overview in Shannon, "Bible Before and After," 261–63. A popular explanation of what is called the Documentary Hypothesis is available in Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Harper San Francisco, 1997). The first Creation is associated with the Priestly Source, while the second is associated with the Yahwistic Source. For a recent discussion of the composition of Genesis 1 and 2 from a scholarly perspective, see David M. Carr, *The Formation of Genesis 1–11: Biblical and Other Precursors* (Oxford University Press, 2020). On

of combining and updating the scriptures is an important part of how the scriptures remain relevant for the Lord's people in every dispensation.¹⁶ As we read the Book of Mormon, we see that Mormon's project was one of editing and compiling but also that Mormon felt comfortable including his interpretive glosses (see Alma 24:27). The Book of Mormon is explicit that the book of Alma in its present form was composed by Mormon from authentic material deriving from Alma. In a similar fashion, the five books of Moses, including Genesis, seem to have been composed and compiled from authentic material deriving from Moses and other earlier prophetic sources.¹⁷ All of this suggests that Latter-day Saints can take a strong stand on the inspired nature of the material in Genesis while still allowing for complexities in how it came together.

The Work of the Editor

The use of sources by the inspired editor of Genesis suggests that there is not a unified Creation account in Genesis. As scholars have studied Genesis, they have identified two Creation accounts woven together by a later editor or redactor.¹⁸ The first Creation account runs from Genesis 1:1 through 2:3. The second begins at 2:4. The two Creation accounts differ in several particulars. In the first Creation account, males and females are created at the same time (Gen. 1:26–27), while in the second account, the female is created after and from the male (Gen. 2:18–22). The splitting up of the Creation into days is a characteristic of the first Creation account, while the creation of the Garden of Eden is a characteristic of the second account.

the other side, David Fried has recently argued that Genesis 1 and 2 are integrally related to one another. See David Fried, "The Image of God and the Literary Interdependence of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2–3," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2019): 211–16.

16. The process of ongoing revelation is a vital part of how Latter-day Saints understand their religion and their relationship with Jesus Christ. This is evident in Joseph Smith's Articles of Faith 1:9. See the discussion in Richard Lyman Bushman with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 172–76. See also Shannon, "Bible Before and After," 266–74.

17. It is perhaps worth noting that we do not have evidence for Hebrew as a language until centuries after Moses. This means that Moses could not have written Genesis in its present form, since Genesis is written in Hebrew and Moses did not speak Hebrew. See Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, trans. John Elwolde (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 53–56, 64–65.

18. See Bradford A. Anderson, *An Introduction to the Study of the Pentateuch* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 78–79. Because Latter-day Saints "believe the Bible to be the word of God" (A of F 1:8), this implies that we believe this editor or redactor to be inspired. See Seely, "We Believe the Bible," 141–43.

It is also worth remembering that the authors and editors of Genesis were not writing for a future audience the way Mormon was. The immediate addressees of the Creation accounts were not modern Latter-day Saints; they were ancient Israelites, and the Creation accounts in Genesis contain cosmological and scientific perspectives that are derived from that audience's worldview. Although it can be valuable to read the Creation accounts as metaphorical and figurative (we will see clear examples of this, even anciently), they also had scientific value in the ancient world. The ancient Israelites simply had a different understanding of science than we do today. It appears the Lord was comfortable with that—as noted above, this is part of what Nephi seems to be referring to when he talks about God speaking to people “according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Ne. 31:3). This statement can include cosmological and scientific understandings.¹⁹

Cosmology in Genesis 1

The difference between ancient and modern understandings comes out even in translation. The King James translation of Genesis 1:1 is, in many ways, a reflection of how the seventeenth-century European cosmological perspective differed from that of the ancient Israelite-Judahite authors and editors of Genesis.²⁰ As it stands in the English of the KJV, “In the beginning” reflects a notion that this was where everything started, and there was nothing before.²¹ This is not the Latter-day Saint position, and it is not really the position of the book of Genesis.

In fact, the Hebrew here, *bereshit*, lacks the definite article and would be better translated as “in *a* beginning.”²² This certainly fits

19. See Doctrine and Covenants 1:24, where the Lord tells the Saints that he gave the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants to “[his] servants in their weakness.” The Lord acknowledges that we are not able to comprehend everything he is trying to tell us.

20. There is a useful discussion of the cosmological worldview of the ancient Israelites in Luis I. J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World: A Philological and Literary Study* (Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970). See also Louis Jacobs, “Jewish Cosmology,” in *Ancient Cosmologies*, ed. Carmen Blacker and Michael Loewe (George Allen and Unwin, 1975), 66–86. Although it is focused on the New Testament, Lincoln H. Blumell and Jan J. Martin’s article on the history and character of the KJV is instructive. See Lincoln H. Blumell and Jan J. Martin, “The King James Translation and the New Testament,” in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society*, 672–90.

21. For a discussion of the difficulties in translating Genesis 1:1, see Krüger, “Genesis 1:1–2:3,” 128–29. See also Barney, “Examining Six Key Concepts.”

22. To say “In the beginning,” it would need to read *bareshit*. There is some evidence of this reading in Origen’s Hexapla, but that is not how the Masoretes (the school of

Latter-day Saint understandings better. However, a closer examination of the Hebrew shows that even this does not quite explain what is happening grammatically.²³ *Bereshit* is best understood as a temporal adjunct explaining the situation that arises when God creates the earth. The New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) translation of Genesis 1 provides a translation that reflects this grammatical reading: “When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void” (Gen. 1:1–2a). Note here how this translation turns the term not into an absolute statement about beginnings but rather into a statement about the state of the earth when Creation begins.²⁴

The NJPS translation of Genesis 1:1 retains the very theological-sounding word “heaven.” Although this is fine, it does not really reflect the nuance of the Hebrew. “Heaven” is one possibility for the Hebrew word *shamayim*, which has “sky” as its core meaning.²⁵ Many languages do not differentiate between “sky” as a descriptive noun and “heaven” as a theological or cosmological concept.²⁶ Hebrew is no different. As far as Genesis is concerned, what is being created here is not the heavens in the specific sense of the grand cosmological worldview but the visible sky, which is understood as being in some sense where God will dwell, but he clearly does not at this point because the sky has not yet been created. There is a similar process going on with the Hebrew word *eret*, which does mean “earth,” but usually in the sense of land or ground²⁷ rather than in the sense of the entire planet (in part because, as we will see, the ancient Israelites did not view the world as a globe). Thus,

copyists who preserved the traditional reading of the Hebrew text) understood the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1. In the Middle Ages, Jewish scholar and exegete Rashi discussed the grammatical difficulties with this word, concluding that water must have already existed when the earth was created. See Rashi, on Genesis 1:1, in Carasik, *Commentators' Bible*, 4–5.

23. Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 19–20.

24. Barney, “Examining Six Key Concepts,” 110–12.

25. Stadelmann, *Hebrew Conception*, 37–39.

26. See, for example, *ciel* in French or *Himmel* in German.

27. Biblical scholar Scott B. Noegel has argued from Mesopotamian parallels that it means “underworld” in this context. Scott B. Noegel, “God of Heaven and Sheol: The ‘Unearthing’ of Creation,” *Hebrew Studies* 58 (2017): 119–44. Noegel is correct in his observation that there are numerous places in both the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and cognate literature where *eret* means “underworld.” He himself notes that the ordinary meaning of the word is “earth, land” (120). It does not materially affect the argument of this paper, however, which is that the ancient conception of Creation involves the organization of something that is already in place.

I would translate Genesis 1:1–2a as, “When God began to create sky and land, the land being empty and desolate.”²⁸

Creation in Genesis is not framed around the idea of creation out of nothing but is based on the organization of material that is already extant. The word “create” is translated from the Hebrew *bara*, a word that means something like “organize” rather than active creation out of nothing.²⁹ Therefore, the original Genesis 1 presumes that there is already something there when God begins his creative activity: “empty and desolate” land.

Genesis 1:2 (NJPS) goes on, “With darkness over the surface of the deep, and a wind from God sweeping over the water.” The KJV here has “And darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” There is here a key difference between “wind from God” and “the Spirit of God.” Once again, the difference lies in the translation. In Hebrew, the word for “spirit” and the word for “wind” are the same.³⁰ This makes it very difficult (if not impossible) to differentiate between the theological and the natural meaning of this word.³¹

The different cosmological perspective of Genesis is made very clear by the discussion of the “firmament.”³² This unusual English is translated from an unusual Hebrew word: *raqia*. This word comes from a Hebrew root that means “to beat out,” as in beating out a metal plate.³³ This is how Genesis understands the sky—a flat surface that separates

28. “Empty and desolate” translates *tohu vevohu*, which KJV has as “without form and void.” For the meaning and translation of this, see Speiser, *Genesis*, 5n2; David Toshio Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Investigation* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 41–43; and Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 21–23.

29. This verb was the subject to a specific exegesis by Joseph Smith in his famous King Follett discourse. See Barney, “Examining Six Key Concepts” 108–9. Barney correctly points out that Joseph Smith’s understanding of this particular verb is defensible from the Hebrew.

30. The idea is that it is breath or wind that animates people. For a discussion of the ancient ideas behind breath and wind and the Latter-day Saint use of this idea, see Dana M. Pike, “The Latter-day Saint Reimaging of ‘the Breath of Life’ (Genesis 2:7),” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2017): 71–104, especially 74–77.

31. For an attempt at this differentiation, see Lynn Hilton Wilson, “The Holy Spirit: Creating, Anointing, and Empowering throughout the Old Testament,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, ed. D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2009), 250–81.

32. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “firmament,” last modified March 2022, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/70586>.

33. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Hendrickson, 2008, reprinted from the 1906 edition), 955–6; Jacobs, “Jewish Cosmology,” 81–82n4.

the waters above from the waters below. Again, it is worth noting here that the ancient Israelites were not stupid—they based their different scientific perspective on the observational evidence of the world they saw. The ancient Israelites speak of waters above because of the clear example of falling rain. This idea is at play in the famous verse in Malachi about tithing, where the Lord promises to “open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing” (Mal. 3:10, author’s translation). The “windows of heaven” here are windows in the sky, and the blessing that the Lord is pouring out is rain.³⁴

Thus, Genesis describes the sky as a barrier that separates the “waters above” from the “waters below.” Retranslating Genesis 1:6–8 yields, “And God said, ‘Let there be a beaten dome³⁵ in the middle of the waters and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ God made the beaten dome, and it separated the waters that were under the beaten dome from the waters that were on top of the beaten dome, and it was so. And God called the beaten dome ‘sky’ and there was evening and there was morning—day two.” On day three, the Lord gathers the “waters below” into one place and all of the land into one place: “And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together to one place, and let the dry land be seen,’ and it was so. And God called the dry land ‘land’ and the gathering of the waters he called ‘seas,’ and God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:9–10, author’s translation). The cosmological picture presented within Genesis 1 is of a central land mass, floating on top of great waters, protected from waters above it with the sky acting as a kind of barrier.

The theological underpinning of Genesis 1 derives from the Hebrew word *hibdil*, meaning “to separate.” Creation in Genesis 1 is fundamentally a process of dividing in order to put things into their proper places.³⁶ Light is separated from darkness (1:4), the upper waters are divided from the lower waters (1:6–7), and day is divided from night (1:14, 18). Even when the specific sense of *hibdil* is not used, division is a major feature of creation in Genesis 1—a key example of this is the specification of plants

34. Stadelmann, *Hebrew Conception*, 46.

35. For *raqia*, which the KJV translates as “firmament.”

36. Anthropologist Mary Douglas, in explaining the dietary laws of Leviticus 11, articulated this idea. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge Classics, 2002), 51–71. Douglas’s theory has been generally accepted in biblical scholarship, with some individual disagreements about proper application. See the discussion in Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, “Creation and Classification in Judaism: From Priestly to Rabbinic Conceptions,” *History of Religions* 26, no. 4 (1987): 357–81, discussion of Douglas at 358–60. Eilberg-Schwartz points out that Mircea Eliade postulated a similar system before Douglas.

and animals “according to type” (1:11, 21, 24, author’s translation). Even within categories of creation, Genesis 1 presents subcategories. Thus, the category of land animals contains wild animals (KJV’s beasts “of the earth” [Gen. 1:24] or “of the field” [Gen. 2:19]), domesticated animals (KJV’s “cattle” [Gen. 1:25]), and a special category of ritually unclean animals (KJV’s “every creeping thing” [Gen. 1:26]).

Biblical scholarship ascribes the current form of Genesis 1 to a school of ancient authors who were associated with the ancient priesthood and the temple.³⁷ In Leviticus 10:10–11, the Lord commands certain behaviors of Aaron’s priest descendants, “that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean.” The verb that the KJV translates here as “put difference” is *hibdil*, the same verb that appears in the Creation account in Genesis 1. Genesis 1 teaches that Creation was an act of division and making differences, and Leviticus shows that when priests are making these kinds of distinctions, they are engaged in divine behavior.³⁸

The Creation of Humanity

The culmination of Creation in both Genesis 1 and 2 is the creation of humanity. For both of these Creation accounts, it is humanity and its role in the cosmos that take the center stage. The accounts take slightly different perspectives on the process, and so it is profitable to explore the similarities and the differences between the two accounts.

One of the first differences is the relationship between males and females. In the first Creation account, now recorded in Genesis

37. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, 162. Although Latter-day Saints are used to a concept of priesthood that is focused on Church service and administration, this is not the case in the ancient world. There, the priestly focus is on the temple, sacrifice, and the cosmic order. This is laid out nicely in terms of its relation to Creation in Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Fortress Press, 2010). For a Latter-day Saint discussion on priestly material in Genesis and Moses, see John W. Welch with Jackson Abbau, “The Priestly Interests of Moses the Levite,” in Bradshaw and others, *Tracing Ancient Threads*, 163–256, especially the discussion on 173–88. For a discussion of the priestly concern with temples and divine order, see the seminal John M. Lundquist, “What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology,” in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Deseret Book; Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1994), 83–117.

38. Eilberg-Schwartz, “Creation and Classification,” 362. Leviticus fundamentally understands this divine quality of being able to make distinctions to be holiness, as in Leviticus 11:44–45, where the Lord tells Israel to “be holy; for I am holy.” See the discussion in Warren Zev Harvey, “Holiness: A Command to *Imitatio Dei*,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 16, no. 3 (1977): 7–28.

1:26–27, males and females are created simultaneously, and both are called “human.” In the second Creation account, recorded in Genesis 2:18–22, the female is created not only after the male but after all of the rest of the animals as well. Females are the final living thing created, a helper equal to the male. Both of these accounts have things to teach about these scriptures’ views on humanity and on the male-female relationship.

For the account in Genesis 1, humans are fundamentally both female and male from the very beginning. Females are not a derivative form of males but are an independent part of Creation, and both are created in the image of God.³⁹ There has been, of course, much discussion in both Christianity and Judaism about the interpretation of these verses, but Latter-day Saints have traditionally read them as referring to humanity’s physical body being like God’s.⁴⁰ Because the ancient Israelites did not have the distinctive creedal position that their God was wholly other, in this case Latter-day Saint readings reflect something very similar to the likely ancient conception of these verses.⁴¹

As noted above, the creation of humanity is one of the distinctive elements between the two Creation accounts. In the first account, humanity is created, male and female, through God’s speech. In the second account, God first forms the male human from dirt and then breathes life into him (Gen. 2:7).⁴² All the animals are then considered as companions for the male human, but none of them are suitable, so the Lord puts the male human to sleep and builds a female human from the male human’s rib as a “helper appropriate to him” (Gen. 2:18, author’s translation).⁴³

39. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 160.

40. For a discussion of the various ways of reading this verse, see Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 147–61. On the Latter-day Saint side of discussion, the Guide to the Scriptures entry on “Body” glosses Genesis 9:6 as meaning, “God created male and female in the image of his own body.” See “Body,” Guide to the Scriptures, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/body>. BYU professor Larry Tucker gave a devotional dealing with the implications of this teaching for Latter-day Saints. See Larry Tucker, “The Human Body: A Gift and a Responsibility,” devotional address, Brigham Young University, May 28, 2013, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/larry-tucker/the-human-body-a-gift-and-a-responsibility/>.

41. Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 56; C. L. Crouch, “Genesis 1:26–7 as a Statement of Humanity’s Divine Parentage,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 61, no. 1 (2010): 1–15, discussion on 3–5.

42. Pike, “Reimaging of ‘the Breath of Life,’” 72–74.

43. KJV has the famous “help meet for him.” In its original English meaning and in Hebrew, “help meet” is not a single collocation but is instead using “meet” in the sense

Comparing these two Creation accounts, in both their similarities and their differences, shows that when we speak of the biblical perspective of Creation, we are not speaking of a single perspective with a single goal. Both of the Creation accounts present important viewpoints on the role of humanity in Creation, but neither presents a single authoritative statement on how humanity came into this world. These multiple perspectives reinforce to readers the importance of reading Genesis and the Creation in its ancient context, as an ancient Israelite would.⁴⁴ President Brigham Young once asked, “Do you read the Scriptures, my brethren and sisters, as though you were writing them a thousand, two thousand, or five thousand years ago? . . . If you do not feel thus, it is your privilege to do so.”⁴⁵ It also helps to remind us that, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, Latter-day Saints are not committed to a specific literal interpretation of Creation in Genesis.

Conclusion

In order to understand Creation in its ancient context, it is necessary to understand that the picture painted in Genesis 1 and 2 derives from cosmological and scientific perspectives different from modern ones. As we think about the relationship between scripture and science, it is useful for us to remember what the scriptures are and are not doing. The Creation accounts are not intended, either anciently or modernly, to serve as definitive scientific statements about the universe from our current perspective. This is not to say that everything in these chapters is to be understood in terms of metaphor or symbolism (although there are certainly symbolic aspects to the narratives)—it is likely the ancient authors and editors viewed their universe as it is described. However, that acknowledgement should not diminish our appreciation of the value Genesis brings to the table.

of “appropriate” for him. See Donald W. Parry, “Eve’s Role as a ‘Help’ (‘ezer) Revisited,” in *Seek Ye Words of Wisdom: Studies of the Book of Mormon, Bible, and Temple in Honor of Stephen D. Ricks*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Gaye Strathearn, and Shon D. Hopkin (Interpreter Foundation; Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020), 199–216. Parry correctly notes that this story of human creation does not place women in an inferior role but in an equal role. It is certain that God did not intend this story to signify inferiority, but that does not change the fact that many have read it that way and have used it to justify the oppression of women. See the discussion in Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 74–78.

44. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 74.

45. *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Deseret Book, 1954, reprinted numerous times), 128.

For the authors and editors of Genesis, Creation is fundamentally about humanity and its relationship to God. Both of the Creation accounts discussed in this paper show not only the centrality of humanity in God's creative plans but also his divine care for the other animals that share this world with us. The dominion described in Genesis is not an absolute or unrighteous dominion. Although humans are the culmination of Creation (see Gen. 2), they are still part of a broader creative process. The earth is not here for humans to despoil.

The ancient perspective on Creation provides another point of view in the inexhaustible world of interpreting scripture. It illustrates amply the importance of recognizing that the relationship between science and scripture is not an inherently adversarial one, especially if both sources of knowledge are placed in their proper contexts.

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The First Presidency, sculpted by Stan Watts in 2003, is featured prominently at the memorial. Photograph by Leslie Nilsson; courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Kanesville Memorial

A Fitting Companion to the Winter Quarters Memorial

Jacob W. Olmstead

The history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Missouri River Valley is remarkable. At a do-or-die time for many Latter-day Saints, the valley became a crossroads for a church that would become a global faith. Fleeing from religious persecution in Nauvoo, Illinois, the Saints and Church leadership were forced to take a step into the unknown in February 1846. After months of trudging across mud-laden Iowa prairies, they arrived in the Missouri River Valley in June 1846, friendless and penniless.

By the fall of that year, many were living in mud dugouts and cabins on the west side of the Missouri River, in a place dubbed Winter Quarters. Ill-prepared for the winter months, as many as five hundred Latter-day Saints died and were buried in several cemeteries.¹ In the depths of these difficulties, the Lord gave Brigham Young his will concerning the gathering of Latter-day Saints in the West—a revelation now canonized as Doctrine and Covenants section 136. In this revelation, the Lord provided the blueprint for a way forward.²

In July 1847, thousands of Saints began arriving in the Great Salt Lake Valley. With plans to build a new temple, the darkness of Winter

1. Jennifer L. Lund, “‘Pleasing to the Eyes of an Exile’: The Latter-day Saint Sojourn at Winter Quarters, 1846–1848,” *BYU Studies* 39, no. 2 (2000): 129.

2. For more about the revelation known as Doctrine and Covenants 136, see Chad Orton, “‘This Shall Be Our Covenant,’ D&C 136,” in *Revelations in Context: The Stories Behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/revelations-in-context/this-shall-be-our-covenant>.

Quarters shifted to the clarity of establishing Zion in the West. Significantly, events that would take place on the east side of the Missouri River helped make that shift possible. Many Saints, unable to make the journey West, established dozens of settlements on the east side of the river as they prepared for their eventual journey to Zion. Those already living in Winter Quarters were instructed to abandon the site and relocate to the east side of the Missouri by April 1848.³ By then there were more Saints in these settlements than in the Salt Lake Valley. Kanesville (known as Council Bluffs today) became the hub of those settlements. Originally identified as Miller's Hollow, after early Latter-day Saint settler and bishop Henry Miller, the settlement was renamed Kanesville in honor of Thomas L. Kane, who befriended and helped the Saints at a time of great difficulty.⁴

Today, many Latter-day Saints do not remember what occurred in Kanesville, instead focusing on the difficulties and tragedies at Winter Quarters. A new memorial at Kanesville has been established to help the current and future generations recognize its place in Latter-day Saint history. The following photo essay will outline the significant events that took place in or near Kanesville and the developments that led to a new memorial there. It will also bring into focus both the Winter Quarters and the Kanesville memorials as appropriate reminders of Latter-day Saints' history in the Missouri River Valley.

Winter Quarters Memorial

Monuments and memorials often play important roles in facilitating the longevity of a collective memory of a place. For Winter Quarters that process began for the Church in 1936 when President Heber J. Grant dedicated the Winter Quarters Memorial. The memorial is located on the west side of the river at one of the original Winter Quarters cemeteries, known previously as the Pioneer Mormon Cemetery, in Omaha, Nebraska. Avard Fairbanks's heroic-sized sculpture titled *Tragedy at Winter Quarters* is situated at the center of the memorial. Its depiction of a father and mother mourning the loss of a child captures the feeling and

3. Lund, "Pleasing to the Eyes of an Exile," 133.

4. Curtis Ashton, "Keeping Covenants in Kanesville," Church History, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, March 18, 2019, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/content/historic-sites/iowa/nebraska/keeping-covenants-in-kanesville>; William G. Hartley, "Pushing On to Zion: Kanesville, Iowa, 1846–1853," *Ensign*, August 2002, 14–23, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2002/08/pushing-on-to-zion-kanesville-iowa-1846-1853>.



Dedication party at the Winter Quarters Memorial, 1936. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

history of the events that took place there. Fairbanks, a Latter-day Saint sculptor and descendant of some of the people buried in the cemetery, created the sculpture and accompanying memorial to honor not only those buried at Winter Quarters but all who died in their journey to Zion.⁵ With the assistance of landscape architect Irvin T. Nelson, Fairbanks created a masterpiece in the art deco design and landscape architecture tradition of the time.⁶ Construction of the Mormon Trail Center across the street in 1997 and the 2001 dedication of the Winter Quarters Temple have increased the visibility of the memorial.

Reproductions and photographs of the central sculpture have made the image a familiar one among Latter-day Saints. Unfortunately, when disconnected from the surrounding memorial landscape, viewers are unable to appreciate its fuller meaning. Intentionally situated some distance away from the surrounding streets and nestled in an alcove of trees and bushes, the location of the memorial is meant to set it apart from the outside world.⁷

On one level, the memorial juxtaposes the death and suffering experienced at Winter Quarters, illustrated in the central sculpture, with the power of the Resurrection of the Savior Jesus Christ, depicted in the landscape. The reality of the suffering experienced by those who lost loved ones is made more dramatic by the demarcation of several grave locations, with at least one child on the floor of the monument.⁸ Embedded into the floor of the monument are also scriptures highlighting the power of the Savior to save as well as stanzas from William Clayton's pioneer anthem "Come, Come Ye Saints."

When facing the twelve-foot statue, visitors see a large bronze relief at their feet, listing the known names of many who were interred in the cemetery. The names surround a central figure representing eternal life. Radiating from the central figure are rays of light cast in bronze, which continue outward in the seams of the terrazzo floor of the monument—the seams intersecting with the demarcation of graves. Evergreen juniper

5. Cynthia Culver Prescott, "Representing the Ideal American Family: Avard Fairbanks and the Transformation of the Western Pioneer Monument," *Pacific Historical Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2016): 125.

6. Kent Ahrens, "Avard T. Fairbanks and the Winter Quarters Monument," *Nebraska History* 95 (2014): 181; Joy Nelson Hulme, *Hand in Hand with God: A Biography of Irvin T. Nelson* (Brigham Young University Print Services, 2009), 75–78.

7. Irvin Theodore Nelson, "The Pioneer Mormon Cemetery, 1937," 61, 63, 73, microfilm, MS 2454, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

8. Nelson, "Pioneer Mormon Cemetery," 69.



The Winter Quarters Memorial contrasts the sorrow and suffering experienced by those who buried loved ones at Winter Quarters with the hope of the Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. From 2020 to 2021, the memorial underwent a substantial restoration. Photograph by Leslie Nilsson; courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

bushes were planted in the identified grave locations. Alongside the juniper bushes, bronze pine boughs grace the floor of the monument, representing the hope of eternal life. The floor of the memorial, intentionally placed below grade, invites those visiting the grave sites and contemplating the story of Winter Quarters to take several steps up to ground level, symbolizing eternal progression upward.⁹

On another level, the material chosen to construct the monument and the selection of accompanying plantings and trees communicate yet another message. The *Tragedy at Winter Quarters* sculpture rests on a plinth composed of the quartz monzonite or granite from Little Cottonwood Canyon—the same variety used in the construction of the Salt Lake Temple. The twin cemetery entry pylons and steps, and surrounding the pathways, are composed of sandstone brought from Utah—sandstone being a material used in many Latter-day Saint pioneer buildings, including the Salt Lake Tabernacle. Colorado Blue Spruce (once the state tree of Utah), Rocky Mountain Juniper, and Douglas Fir (often called Red Pine by the pioneers) trees were planted in various locations around the cemetery representing offices of Church leadership, such as the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and Presiding Bishopric. They also planted trees representing the pioneer man and

9. Nelson, “Pioneer Mormon Cemetery,” 85, 87, 95.

pioneer woman.¹⁰ Selecting materials and vegetation for the memorial indicative of the Latter-day Saint Zion in the Great Basin represented an effort to symbolically bring Zion, the destination of the trek West, to those who were unable to join the Saints there. The eventual construction of a temple on adjoining land, once a part of the historic cemetery, completes the symbolic message.

Kanesville Tabernacle

For years, the Winter Quarters Memorial was the only monument commemorating the Saints' experience in the area. However, in the mid-1990s, several local members who appreciated the significant history of the Church in Kanesville pooled their resources to commemorate the events that took place there. They purchased land in downtown Council Bluffs to establish a site for sharing these events—chief among them the reorganization of the First Presidency in 1847.

Following the death of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the necessity of reorganizing the First Presidency remained unclear to Church leaders. As President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Brigham Young assumed primary leadership for the Church. Yet, without a First Presidency, all decisions required majority support of the Twelve. With the Church scattered along the 1,400 miles of trail between Nauvoo and the Salt Lake Valley, oversight of the emigration to and settlement of the Great Basin was onerous. And what of the Apostles' role to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to all nations of the earth? After pondering these issues, Brigham Young gathered all the available members of the Quorum of the Twelve to discuss the question in the area that would become known as Kanesville.¹¹

The Twelve Apostles soon came to a consensus that the First Presidency should be reorganized, with Brigham Young as President of the Church and Heber C. Kimball and Willard Richards as counselors. It was determined that the decision should be presented to the Church membership for a sustaining vote. Within a matter of weeks, a new log meetinghouse was constructed for the meeting. The Saints built the structure so quickly that they did not cure the cottonwood timbers. On December 27, 1847, the general membership sustained a new First Presidency in the

10. Nelson, "Pioneer Mormon Cemetery," 111, 129, 131, 133, 135, 139.

11. Miller's Hollow was renamed Kanesville in 1848, after the reorganization of the First Presidency. See Hartley, "Pushing On to Zion."

log structure they called a tabernacle.¹² This reconstitution enabled the Twelve to focus more on taking the gospel message across the globe in the years that followed and had a far-reaching impact on the effort to spread the Lord's kingdom that continues in the global Church today.

Damaged by spring runoffs in 1848 and 1849, the original Kanesville Tabernacle only survived for a brief period.¹³ Nearly 150 years later, a group of local members and nonmembers formed Kanesville Restoration, Inc. for the purpose of reconstructing the tabernacle to honor the events of 1847. The group purchased a parcel one block southeast of where the original tabernacle once stood.¹⁴ Drawing upon plans for the tabernacle sketched by Thomas Bullock in 1847, the organization, working with the Pottawattamie County Mormon Trails Association, funded and oversaw the reconstruction of the tabernacle.¹⁵ It was determined to use uncured cottonwood, just as the early Saints had done. The tabernacle was dedicated by President Gordon B. Hinckley on July 13, 1996, as part of a sesquicentennial celebration of the Saints' departure from Nauvoo.¹⁶ In 1999, ownership and operation of the site, including a gift shop that was later converted into a visitors' center, was turned over to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In the years that followed, exhibits and a film explaining priesthood leadership and the reorganization of the First Presidency were added. A sculpture of the First Presidency by Stan Watts, the most prominent additional feature, was added in 2003.¹⁷

12. Richard E. Bennett, "Finalizing Plans for the Trek West: Deliberations at Winter Quarters, 1846–1847," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 3 (1984): 301–20.

13. Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri: Winter Quarters, 1846–1852* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 309n67; Gail Geo. Holmes, "The First Mormon Tabernacle is Rebuilt in Kanesville, Iowa," *Nauvoo Journal* 8 (1996): 72.

14. R. Scott Lloyd, "Bronze Sculpture Honors 1847 Leaders," *Deseret News*, September 27, 2003, <https://www.deseret.com/2003/9/27/20783433/bronze-sculpture-honors-1847-leaders/>. See also William G. Hartley and A. Gary Anderson, *Sacred Places: A Comprehensive Guide to Early LDS Historical Sites*, vol. 5, *Iowa and Nebraska*, ed. LaMar C. Berrett (Deseret Book, 2006), 127.

15. Dell Van Orden, "Pres. Hinckley Dedicates Iowa Tabernacle Replica," *Deseret News*, July 14, 1996, <https://www.deseret.com/1996/7/14/19254318/pres-hinckley-dedicates-iowa-tabernacle-replica/>; Holmes, "First Mormon Tabernacle," 72.

16. Dell Van Orden, "Tabernacle of Log Replicated, Dedicated: 'Herculean Task' of First Building Done in 3 Weeks," *Church News*, published by *Deseret News*, July 20, 1996, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/1996/7/20/23253579/tabernacle-of-log-replicated-dedicated-herculean-task-of-first-building-done-in-3-weeks/>.

17. Lloyd, "Bronze Sculpture Honors 1847 Leaders."



Reconstructed Kanesville Tabernacle, Visitors' Center, and First Presidency Statue. Courtesy Valerie Anderson.

Because the tabernacle was reconstructed of uncured cottonwood, it was anticipated that the timbers would eventually shrink. By 2018, extensive twisting, shrinking, and weakening of the structure made it evident that the building had reached the end of its life. The tabernacle was formally closed in 2020 and removed in April 2022.¹⁸

Kanesville Significance

Replacing the razed tabernacle was a unique challenge for the historic sites program of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Because the reconstructed tabernacle was not located on the site of the original tabernacle and there were not any physical remains upon which to base a restoration, rebuilding the tabernacle did not align with the principles upon which other historic buildings and properties had been reconstructed or restored by the Church. Accurate locations, landscapes, and building restorations (and in a few instances reconstructions) are essential to maintaining authentic immersive settings that bear witness of the reality of the Restoration.

18. Christine Rappleye, "How Site of the Rebuilt Kanesville Tabernacle Is Changing to Include more Ways to Remember Notable Events There," *Church News*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/2022/4/21/23217755/kanesville-tabernacle-iowa-changing-memorial-garden-brigham-young-mormon-battalion-oliver-cowdery-wi/>.

When developing or refreshing sites or exhibits, the historic sites team of the Church History Department begins with defining the significant messages that must be shared for the site to fulfil its purpose.¹⁹ In considering what should be shared at this site, the team felt that three other key events that took place in or near Kanesville, in addition to the reorganization of the First Presidency, offered a profound witness of the Lord's hand in the ongoing restoration of his Church and the faith of the Saints.

One important story was about the settlement of the area itself. Although Kanesville served as the primary settlement in the Missouri River Valley and headquarters for the Church in the area, the Saints established dozens of other settlements in the valley. From 1846 to 1852, they developed farms and businesses and built homes, even though they knew their stay in the area would be temporary. These efforts played a vital role in supporting the Saints in their journey West.²⁰ As one scholar explained, these settlements functioned like a "springboard" for the migration West.²¹ The settlements, homes, farms, and businesses would all play a foundational role in the growth and establishment of Council Bluffs in years to come.²²

Another story which took place near the site is the mustering of the Mormon Battalion.²³ Prior to leaving Nauvoo, Church leaders sought federal financial support in exchange for establishing trails on their trek West.²⁴ With the encouragement of Thomas L. Kane, a social reformer and friend to the Latter-day Saints, U.S. President James K. Polk determined to ask the Church for military assistance to support the United States in the Mexican American War. Captain James Allen was dispatched to the prairies of Iowa to seek out and enlist Church members. Many Saints felt bitter about the call. They remembered that the United States government had not come to their aid in Missouri and Illinois.

19. The author of this article is a member of the Historic Sites Division of the Church History Department and project lead for the redevelopment of the Kanesville site.

20. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri*, 217, 221–23.

21. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri*, 167.

22. For more information about the faithful efforts of the Latter-day Saints in Kanesville, see Ashton, "Keeping Covenants in Kanesville."

23. The Mormon Battalion mustering site is located approximately three miles southeast of the site, on the campus of the Iowa School for the Deaf. For more information on the Mormon Battalion, see Brandon J. Metcalf, "Four Things to Know about the Journey of the Mormon Battalion," Church History, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, March 21, 2019, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/content/historic-sites/journey-of-the-mormon-battalion>.

24. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri*, 21–22.



Gateway sign at the parking entrance of the Kanesville Memorial. Photograph by Leslie Nilsson; courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Nevertheless, at the urging of Brigham Young, nearly five hundred volunteers joined the battalion and left behind family members, trusting that their sacrifice would support the Church's trek West. Ultimately, the soldiers' pay played an important role in the financial needs of the Church as it weathered migration costs.²⁵

Finally, Kanesville was the location in which Oliver Cowdery returned to fellowship with the Church.²⁶ Cowdery served as Joseph Smith's scribe for most of the translation of the Book of Mormon, was present at the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods, was designated as the second elder of the Church, and was a primary witness of the Restoration. When he had a falling out with the Prophet, he lost his membership in 1838. Several years later, Oliver desired to return. Friends and family ministering to Oliver over the years played

25. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri*, 51–62, 123–25.

26. Several locations related to Oliver Cowdery's return took place in or near Kanesville. Cowdery first arrived in Kanesville in October 1848 and shared his testimony of the Book of Mormon and restoration of the priesthood at an outdoor conference being held near Kanesville. The deliberations of the Pottawattamie High Council regarding Cowdery's readmittance to the Church took place in the Kanesville Tabernacle, and Cowdery was rebaptized in Corn Creek a few miles from Kanesville. Hartley, "Pushing On to Zion."

a vital role in his decision to come back. In October 1848, he declared once again his testimony of the restored gospel and priesthood to the earth and was rebaptized by Orson Hyde, whom he had ordained as an Apostle years earlier.²⁷ The return of Oliver Cowdery and his testimony of the restoration of the priesthood was an endorsement of the priesthood authority and leadership of the Twelve Apostles and the new First Presidency.

Kanesville Memorial

The significance of these events to the history of the Church necessitated sharing their messages at the site once occupied by the reconstructed tabernacle. But without any of these events taking place at this specific location or original buildings to restore, the Church History Department determined the messages could be shared most effectively in a landscape setting. Concept development for the Kanesville Memorial began in January 2021. While the project necessitated removing the tabernacle, as mentioned above, the historic sites team worked to retain as much of the former visitor experience as possible. Because the First Presidency and Henry Miller sculptures facilitated sharing the key messages of the site, they were incorporated into the new landscape designs. Construction formally began in June 2023, and on September 28, 2024, Elder Kyle S. McKay, Church Historian and Recorder, dedicated the Kanesville Memorial Historic Site. The dedication was attended by local members as well as ecclesiastical and civic leaders.

The memorial consists of historical waysides (interpretive signs), bronze sculptures and memorials, native landscaping, and a welcome center. The design of the walkways, spaces for waysides, and size of those spaces directly facilitate the sharing of the site's key messages. The Kanesville Memorial is a self-guided experience. Additional information about the Latter-day Saint settlement in the Missouri River Valley, the Mormon Battalion, and the reorganization of the First Presidency are available in the welcome center, which has received modest updates as part of the recent reinterpretation of the site. Below are photographs outlining the visitor experience at the new Kanesville Memorial.

27. See Scott H. Faulring, "The Return of Oliver Cowdery," in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 148–49.



Upon entry at the Kanesville Memorial, the first historical wayside describes the Saints' circumstances when they arrived in the Missouri River Valley, their efforts to establish communities in the area, and their religious motivations to support the poor and those emigrating West. To the right of the wayside is a sculpture by Robert Keiser, depicting Henry Miller, who was a bishop in the early settlement and who played a leading role in building the first tabernacle in the area. The settlement was originally known as Miller's Hollow but was subsequently renamed Kanesville in 1848, after Thomas L. Kane. The memorial's grasses, trees, and shrubs are varieties typical of the Iowa and Nebraska prairie. Photograph by Leslie Nilsson; courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



Moving down the pathway to the right of the statue of Henry Miller, visitors find a wayside that tells the story of the enlistment and mustering of the Mormon Battalion in 1847 near what would become Kanesville. The wayside features a bronze footprint, introducing a series of footprints embedded in the pathway. Because the story of the battalion's march and arrival in California is told at the Mormon Battalion Historic Site at San Diego, the Kanesville Memorial focuses on the departure of the battalion and the faith and sacrifice made by wives, mothers, and sisters who trusted that the Lord would preserve their loved ones and bless them to complete their own journey West.

Representing one of the five Mormon Battalion companies, composed of approximately one hundred members, one hundred bronze footprints move southeast in pairs, symbolic of the battalion's southeast march to Fort Leavenworth for fitting out before heading West. They come in small, medium, and large sizes, with five of the one hundred footprints representing women who served as laundresses. Omaha sculptor Matthew Placzek designed the footprints, recreating their sizes based on the soles from period shoes and boots on display in the Riser Boot and Shoe Shop in Historic Nauvoo in Illinois. Photograph by Leslie Nilsson; courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



The bronze footprints lead to waysides and accompanying memorials telling the stories of Fanny Taggart, Elizabeth Hyde, Sophronia Standage, Drusilla Hendricks, and Sarah Allen. These women and their families bade farewell to loved ones who departed with the Mormon Battalion. In doing so, they faced an unknown future with great faith. Photograph by Leslie Nilsson; courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



At the end of the footprints, a final wayside continues the stories of the five women and their families. As visitors look back at the footprints passing by the memorials, they might consider the courage and sacrifice of those women and the members of their families. The memorials are composed of painted stainless steel and were designed by Matthew Placzek. Photograph by Leslie Nilsson; courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



The sculpture of the First Presidency in December 1847—Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Willard Richards—is the centerpiece of the memorial, surrounded by a seat wall, prairie grass, and trees. A wayside tells the story of the reorganization of the First Presidency in 1847. A map shows where the Twelve Apostles went to preach the gospel in the years following the reorganization of the First Presidency. It is hoped that this will evolve into a solemn and enclosed space as the trees develop. Photograph by Leslie Nilsson; courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

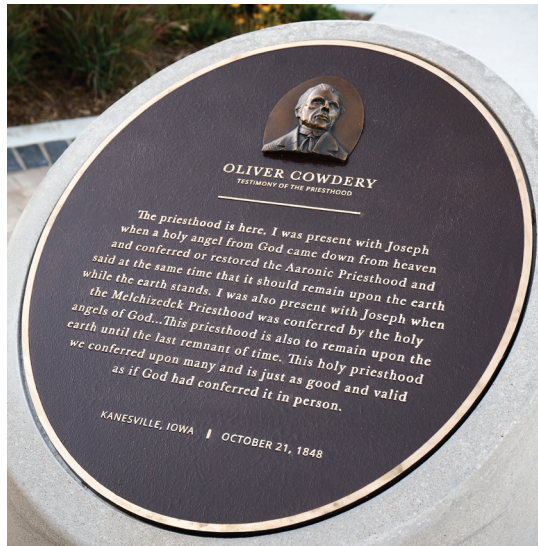


Close-up of the statue of the First Presidency. Photograph by Leslie Nilsson; courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



(above) A wayside shares the story of Oliver Cowdery's return to fellowship in the Church and his significant role and witness to the early days of the Restoration. The juxtaposition of a memorial with Oliver's testimony of the priesthood in view of the First Presidency sculpture is intended to evoke an appreciation for the continuation of priesthood authority, leadership, and revelation in the formation of a new First Presidency. Courtesy Julie West.

(below) Close-up on the testimony of the restoration of the priesthood shared by Oliver Cowdery in Kanesville in 1848. The story shared about Oliver Cowdery at the Kanesville Memorial focuses on his testimony of the priesthood rather than his return and rebaptism. Matthew Placzek created the bronze memorial. Photograph by Leslie Nils-son; courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.





Gathering at the dedication of the Kanesville Memorial on September 28, 2024. Photograph by Leslie Nilsson; courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Epilogue

Although the Latter-day Saints were in the Missouri River Valley for a short time, the significance of the events that took place there were pivotal to the future of the Church. Unfortunately, little historical fabric remains due to the transient nature of their time in the area. In 1936, when the Church took over management of the Pioneer Mormon Cemetery (now the Winter Quarters Cemetery), only a few headstones remained from the 1840s.²⁸ The 1936 addition of the Winter Quarters Memorial helps honor the memory of Latter-day Saint pioneer forebearers who sacrificed their lives to establish Zion in the West. The completion of the Kanesville Memorial in 2024 honors the other significant events of the Missouri River Valley. These two memorials are unique among the historic sites of the Church. They invite visitors to

28. "Winter Quarters Cemetery Now Owned by the Church," *Church News*, April 17, 1999, 3, 15. The Church began leasing and maintaining the property in 1936. Ownership was transferred to the Church on March 30, 1999.

symbolically stand with the pioneers burying their dead or walk in their footprints to an unknown future with only hope in the Savior that they will see their loved ones again, either in this life or the next. It is hoped visitors will come away with a deeper appreciation for the sacrifice of those pioneers and a fuller awareness of the great things the Lord has done and will do for his children.

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This Branch of the Church

The Early Development of Local Administration in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Part 3, Administering an Expanding Territory, 1852–1859

Brandon Plewe

A primary concern of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the spiritual and physical welfare of its members, and local congregations have always been the primary mechanism for that ministry. However, the structure and leadership of local administrative organizations has changed significantly over the history of the Church, most significantly under its first two presidents, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. During these years, the terms and structures that are familiar to us—wards, presidents, bishops, stakes, and so on—emerged, but so did many practices that did not survive the 1877 Priesthood Reorganization.¹

This is the third article in a series evaluating the evolution of local Church administration from 1830 to 1877. The first two articles covered the administration of Joseph Smith Jr., then the temporary sojourn along the Missouri River and the early settlement of Deseret.² This installment covers the period from 1852 to 1859, when the flavors of local and regional ecclesiastical organizations in Utah Territory multiply almost as rapidly as the settlements.

1. William G. Hartley, “The Priesthood Reorganization of 1877: Brigham Young’s Last Achievement,” in *My Fellow Servants: Essays on the History of the Priesthood* (BYU Studies, 2010), 227–64.

2. See Brandon Plewe, “This Branch of the Church: The Early Development of Local Administration in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Part 1, The Emergent Church, 1830–1845,” *BYU Studies* 64, no. 1 (BYU Studies, 2025): 45–80; Brandon Plewe, “This Branch of the Church: The Early Development of Local Administration in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Part 2, The Church in Flux, 1846–1851,” *BYU Studies* 64, no. 2 (BYU Studies, 2025): 139–69.

During the 1850s, settlement in Utah Territory followed several trends: the core settlements in each valley bred multiple satellite settlements; new cores were established; and several outlying settlements were abandoned or consolidated (temporarily or permanently) during the conflicts of the Walker War (1853–1855) and the Utah War (1857–1858). Over time, this resulted in a relatively consistent pattern of a series of settled valleys (typically corresponding to counties or stakes), each consisting of a core city surrounded by several smaller towns.

One would think that this consistent settlement pattern would also have a consistent ecclesiastical administration. However, this did not happen. Instead, several different practices took hold.

Terminology Varies and Evolves

The primary challenge with finding an underlying consistent administrative philosophy and practice from the available evidence is a seeming morass of inconsistent terminology, especially during the 1850s. William Hartley summarized this situation by writing that various terms were used “imprecisely and interchangeably.”³ However, this simplification ascribes a level of irrationality to the Saints of that day and their leaders—that they just used words without thinking about what they meant. Is it possible to find patterns in the evidence that suggest a logical set of definitions for the words they used, even if they are very different from our own meanings, and even if different people had different meanings?

A couple of these have already been discussed, including the general sense of *branch* as any organized subunit of the Church regardless of size or structure, and the general sense of *stake* as any significant, officially designated, permanent place of gathering regardless of size or structure. In the early 1850s, the meanings for these two terms were clearly still foundational, as discussed in the previous article in this series.

By the end of the 1850s, the alternative particular meanings of these terms had become dominant: the *branch* as only the smallest, simplest organized subunit of the Church, and the *stake* as only a large regional, multilayered subunit of the Church. The general meanings gradually declined over the decade. Someone calling a ward “this branch of the Church” would have sounded anachronistic by 1860, and the concept

3. William G. Hartley, “Brigham Young and Priesthood Work at the General and Local Levels,” in *Lion of the Lord: Essays on the Life and Service of Brigham Young*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter (Deseret Book, 1995), 358.

did not appear in the 1877 Circular.⁴ But during the decade before 1860, both sets of meanings were common, leading to our confusion.

The term *ward* went through a similar transition in the 1850s. As discussed in the previous article, to Joseph Smith, like many from the Eastern Seaboard, a ward (in what we might call a general sense) was a neighborhood or division of a city. In Nauvoo, Winter Quarters, and 1849 Salt Lake, this neighborhood concept doubled as a convenient way to organize the ministry of the bishops.⁵ The term *country ward* found in Salt Lake and Davis Counties was likely called that only because they were originally defined by a subdivision of the counties, not as distinct settlements.⁶ The meaning of *ward* first shifted in these country wards during 1849–1850, since they were the first wards that were led solely by a bishop and operated as distinct ecclesiastical congregations in every sense.

Beyond the Salt Lake Stake, the term *ward* appeared very rarely during the early 1850s. If a visiting authority formally organized a congregation, it was usually called a branch even if a bishop was being called.⁷ As discussed in the previous article, this was especially common in Utah Valley in 1850–1852, where distinct settlements were rapidly multiplying, but the county was not formally subdivided into wards with defined boundaries as in Salt Lake.⁸

That said, the most common phrasing at the time simply equated the settlement and the congregation; a leader was usually called the bishop or presiding elder of the settlement without specifically calling it a branch or a ward. As long as every resident was a Latter-day Saint and the settlement functioned as a single congregation, the differences appeared unimportant and the local residents rarely made any clear distinction.

4. Brigham Young, John W. Young, and Daniel H. Wells, “Circular of the First Presidency,” July 11, 1877, page 2, typescript, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://ia800800.us.archive.org/9/items/circularoffirstp00unse/circularoffirstp00unse.pdf>.

5. Plewe, “This Branch of the Church [. . .], Part 2,” 143–61.

6. See History of Brigham Young, February 14, 1849 [image 25], holograph, Historian’s Office History of the Church (draft), 1845–1867, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/d59029d8-79e7-4dc9-b345-467b8bacac50/0/24>.

7. For example, in 1851, Benjamin Cross was ordained “a bishop over Payson Branch.” Payson Branch, Meeting Minutes, March 23, 1851 [image 41], holograph, Historian’s Office General Church Minutes, 1839–1877, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/db67f77a-df95-407a-bbee-434c660d8870/0/40>.

8. See Plewe, “This Branch of the Church [. . .], Part 2,” 163–69.

The same pattern of ecclesiastical-civic equivalence was common at the regional level. Once the stake clearly included all the settlements in a valley (which usually coincided with a civil county), the terminological distinction became muddy. It was very common for stake presidents and presiding bishops to be referred to as “president in [X] county” or “bishop in [Y] valley.”⁹ It was not that residents were confused about the difference between the civil government and the ecclesiastical administration; it is just that the difference was not usually important enough for distinct terminology.

By the mid-1850s, the term *ward* had become accepted by the membership as the de facto standard term for any distinct congregation led by a bishop. Without evidence of official policy statements on local administration prior to 1877, it seems that the widespread adoption of the title of *ward* is as much a convenient accident as an intentional change. By early 1852, leaders in Great Salt Lake City,¹⁰ accustomed to the workings of the Salt Lake Stake, seemed to assume that if they were talking to bishops, they were talking about wards. Thus, the widespread use of *ward* for settlements beyond the Salt Lake Valley is initially found in collective reports, sermons, and epistles from Church headquarters—not in the records of individual congregations. An early example of this is an April 1852 statistical report produced by the Church that lists wards and bishops without making any distinction, even though the individual reports submitted by congregational leaders show a variety of terminology.¹¹ Within a year or two, these semiannual statistical reports show almost all bishop-led local congregations calling themselves wards.

While it remained common to refer to settlements (as discussed above) rather than wards, some of the outlying settlements used formal

9. For example, Isaac Morley is named “President of the church in Sanpete County.” “Record of Bishops Meetings, Reports of Wards, Ordinations, Instructions, and General Proceedings of the Bishops and Lesser Priesthood, 1851 to 1862,” 48 [image 64] (January 18, 1853), holograph, Presiding Bishopric Bishops Meeting Minutes, 1851–1884, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/d6ef2526-92a6-45f5-9906-6879ac3353b3/0/63>; T. W. Ellerbeck to Elder Abram Hatch, July 29, 1869, holograph, Letterbook 11:675 [image 1417], Brigham Young Office Files, 1832–1878, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/967db140-f060-437f-b583-794f7affa2d0/0/1416>.

10. As mentioned in part 2, this was the original name of Salt Lake City. See Plewe, “This Branch of the Church [. . .], Part 2,” 152.

11. Bishops’ Reports [compendium], 1852 April, images 1–6, holograph, Bishops’ Reports 1848–1866, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/f667e21d-c265-4247-af91-9d4fce693508/0/0>.

titles in reports they sent to Church headquarters as early as 1851.¹² Formal titles were more common where the name of the congregation differed significantly from the name of the city, with the congregation often retaining an earlier name after the city was renamed. The most persistent examples outside the Salt Lake Valley are Box Elder Ward at Brigham City, North Willow Creek Ward at Willard, Kays Ward at Kaysville, and North Canyon Ward at Bountiful, although even these were not used consistently.¹³

One aid to understanding the apparent lack of rigor in using categorical terms and titles is to look at how a settlement-congregation changed as it matured. There are some patterns to this process, although they are not always consistent. Throughout this period, new settlements tended to follow a similar trajectory.

Phase 1: Informal Settlement. A group of families arrived in a new place with one man taking the lead, having been called either informally (usually in the *ad hoc settlements* discussed in part 2 of this article series) or formally as presiding elder (usually in the *called settlements*). In part 2, I called this a *presided settlement*,¹⁴ but at the time, they would not have called it anything except an informal place name.¹⁵ They may or may not have held Sunday meetings in one of their cabins.

Phase 2: Branch. Eventually, a regional or General Authority might come and approve or replace the presiding elder, perhaps creating a more formal branch organization by assigning two counselors to the presiding elder. This was often when the settlement was officially given a name and a town site surveyed. Or this might not ever happen, and the *de facto* leader was eventually just assumed to be officially presiding as the town emerged organically. At this point, the settlement was usually (but not necessarily) called a branch.

12. For example, a set of reports in 1851 includes several variants: “Kays Ward,” “the branch at Provo City,” “Springville” (a branch), “Settlement West of Jordan,” “Stake of Zion at Ogden City,” and “Pleasant Grove Ward.” See Reports, 1851 September, images 1–13, holograph, Bishops’ Reports, 1848–1866, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/f384a527-25c9-4399-b9d9-770fcaad5caf/0/0>.

13. Bishops’ Reports, 1852 April, images 1–30, holograph, Bishops’ Reports, 1848–1866, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/f8e49375-cc4e-4fab-9ec7-1e7dfe8112ee/0/0>. This also includes several variants, such as “Springville Branch,” “Provo City Stake,” “Branch at Manti City,” and “Weeber [*sic*] Stake.”

14. Plewe, “This Branch of the Church [. . .], Part 2,” 161–62.

15. These initial names were usually a simple description, such as “Willow Creek.” Bishops’ Reports, 1852 April, image 27.

Phase 3: Acting Bishopric. Sometime later, the president (or a replacement) was given authority to collect tithing, after which he was commonly called a bishop (or more formally, an *acting bishop*).¹⁶ Again, someone may have visited to make a formal appointment, or a letter from Salt Lake was received with an appointment, or the title was gradually adopted without formal appointment. During this period, the place was occasionally called a ward, or a branch, or a town, or nothing.

Phase 4: Formal Ward. Eventually, the acting bishop (or a replacement) was formally ordained and set apart by a General Authority, including ordaining him a high priest if he was not already one. At this point, if the congregation was called anything, it was usually called a ward, at least after about 1854 as the general use of *branch* declined.

The details of this pattern varied widely from one settlement to another. North Ogden is a good example of a formal and quick transformation. The nascent settlement, which had been informally led by Thomas Dunn as presiding elder for its first few months, was formally organized as a branch with Dunn appointed as president by the stake president on December 22, 1852. Then Brigham Young ordained him the bishop of the “North Ward of Ogden City” on February 21, 1853.¹⁷ South Willow Creek (now Draper) took a few years (1851–1856) to make the transition, without any known organizational meetings. During these years, it is only occasionally called a ward or a branch, and William Draper Jr. is sometimes called “presiding elder” and sometimes called “bishop.”¹⁸ At the other extreme, many of the settlements in Bear Lake

16. For example, “Tithing Book Kept by Franklin J. Davis, Acting Bishop at Council Point Pottawattamie Co. for 1851 and /52”, image 4, holograph, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/3d9028d7-679d-477f-948d-21895668d8c8/0/3>.

17. Thomas J. Dunn, Journal, images 68–69, holograph, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/4981191f-e8e5-483c-9d38-3405546f870d/0/67>; Brigham Young, Certificate of ordination of Thomas Dunn, February 21, 1853 [image 3], holograph, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/eca6dd9d-a040-4111-a885-8e5b732b07aa/0/2>.

18. “Report of the Bishops,” in “Minutes of the General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [...] October 6, 1853 [...]”, *Deseret News*, October 15, 1853, page 3, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=2579576>; “Officers in Great Salt Lake County, October 1853,” in “Winter Quarters (Neb.) High Council Minutes 1847–1848, Also Norway Branch (Illinois) General Record 1844–1845, and Utah Territory Officers 1853,” image 85, holograph, Winter Quarters Municipal High Council Records 1846–1848, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/0ddc178b-8238-4ee7-aca4-b0dce74a6659/0/84>. Here, sixteen months later, the same settlement is

Valley languished in an informal semiorganized state (phase 2–3) for twelve years or more, with no known formal organizing meetings and very few ordained bishops prior to the 1877 Reorganization.

Therefore, in the many places where the transition was informal, like Draper and the Bear Lake settlements, it is impossible to assign a precise date when the presided settlement became a branch or when the branch became a ward or even when the presiding elder became an acting bishop.

The Salt Lake City Wards Become Wards

In the Salt Lake Stake, the semiorganized wards in Great Salt Lake City gradually evolved into modern-looking congregational wards by the mid-1850s. This evolution was not a centrally planned program. Instead, it appears that individual wards experimentally added activities and responsibilities. Ward records prior to 1856 are incomplete, so it is difficult to know when and where each new program was invented and implemented, but a few examples follow:

- Business meetings were held, often monthly, with the bishop and priesthood holders. These were focused on the physical needs of the ward in keeping with the scriptural responsibilities of the bishop and Aaronic Priesthood holders (D&C 107:68), such as fencing, road building, and water distribution. Early examples include the Seventh and Seventeenth Wards in Spring 1849.¹⁹
- Log schoolhouses were the first ward buildings, with a few built as early as 1849²⁰ and most others by 1852.²¹ These gave members the opportunity to meet in larger numbers for a wider variety of purposes. The schools themselves began around the same time. For example,

titled “South Willow Creek Branch or Ward” and Draper is called “presiding elder and bishop” in Bishops’ Reports, 1852 April, image 8, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/f8e49375-cc4e-4fab-9ec7-1e7dfe8112ee/0/7>.

19. Seventh Ward, Pioneer Stake, Seventh Ward General Minutes, 1849–1922, 1s:2, Church History Library; Seventeenth Ward, Salt Lake Stake, Seventeenth Ward General Minutes, 1849–1978, 12:3, Church History Library.

20. Mary Barraclough, ed., *15th Ward Memories* (Utah Printing Company, 1961), 9; *Book of Remembrance of Sixteenth Ward—Riverside Stake* (Sixteenth Ward Book of Remembrance Committee, 1945), 11.

21. For example, the Fourteenth Ward in January 1851. Wilford Woodruff, “Journal (January 1, 1847–December 31, 1853),” January 1, 1851, Wilford Woodruff Papers, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/zpN2>.

the First and Tenth Ward schools were organized in November and December 1850.²²

- Weekly prayer meetings occurred on Wednesday or Thursday evenings. For example, the Seventh Ward began in November 1849.²³
- Monthly meetings occurred for blessing children and confirming baptisms. Again, the Tenth and Seventh Wards were early adopters (September 1849 and January 1850, respectively).²⁴

These practices were soon adopted by the other wards; for example, the First Presidency reported that most wards had schools by November 1851.²⁵ Prayer meetings on Wednesday evenings also became common during 1851.²⁶ By 1853, most of the city wards were holding monthly fast meetings (usually the first Thursday evening) and priesthood quorum meetings.²⁷

Stake and general leaders soon endorsed and encouraged ward programs. On June 24, 1851, Brigham Young called for monthly meetings for the blessing of children.²⁸ In late 1851, Stake President Daniel Spencer and President Young suggested temporarily having Sunday meetings in the ward schools during the winter as opposed to the open-air bowery.²⁹

Most of the city wards began keeping regular minutes in the mid-1850s, coinciding with a wave of new bishops being called.³⁰ Their minutes document the organization of ward-level teachers quorums charged

22. Tenth Ward [Salt Lake Stake] General Minutes, 1849–1977, 6:46 [image 44], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/flb08c04-1269-4ea7-97ba-64ed4d2acdd9/0/43>; First Ward [Salt Lake Stake] Minutes and Record of Members, 1850–1851, 13, microfilm, Church History Library.

23. Seventh Ward [Pioneer Stake] General Minutes, 15:11, Church History Library.

24. Tenth Ward [Salt Lake Stake] General Minutes, 6:44–45 [images 42–43]; First Ward [Salt Lake Stake] Minutes and Record of Members, 1.

25. Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Willard Richard, “Sixth General Epistle of the First Presidency,” *Deseret News*, November 15, 1851, 2, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=2578143>.

26. Historical Department Office Journal, 1844–2023, 14:362 [image 193] (November 5, 1851), holograph, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/bc04fe2c-dc46-4e7d-8bfe-ab120057348/0/192>.

27. “Record of Bishops Meetings, Reports of Wards,” 66 [image 84] (August 2, 1853), holograph, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/d6ef2526-92a6-45f5-9906-6879ac3353b3/0/83>.

28. “Record of Bishops Meetings, Reports of Wards,” 4 [image 18] (June 24, 1851).

29. “Record of Bishops Meetings, Reports of Wards,” 19 [image 35] (November 30, 1851).

30. Half of the nineteen city bishops were replaced in 1856 alone. See Presiding Bishopric Bishops Meeting Minutes, 1851–1884, Church History Library.

with visiting the members,³¹ and the emergence of Sunday evening “worship meetings.”³² Only a few wards were meeting on Sundays in 1854, but most held weekly meetings by 1856, even though a citywide sacrament meeting was still held in the Tabernacle each Sunday morning.³³

These many new activities demanded more meeting space, and during the late 1850s, most of the wards built meetinghouses separate from the schoolhouses. A final step in the evolution of the city wards was the granting of authority to the bishops over all members and matters in their wards, including Melchizedek Priesthood holders. On November 25, 1857, Stake President David Fullmer, in reprimanding high priests who claimed that they answered only to their quorum president, stated that “the bishop presides over everything in his ward.”³⁴ The Melchizedek Priesthood quorums were still organized at the stake and general levels, but the bishop now had clear authority over individual priesthood holders.

The Dependent Congregation Is Born

The Salt Lake Stake pioneered an organizational structure called the dependent congregation, which was common for decades but does not exist today. The first instances of this were in the country wards of the Salt Lake Valley, where members were often scattered across their farmland rather than concentrated in towns. The West Jordan Ward, covering the entire west side of the valley, quickly became unmanageable, with members centered around three clusters: Fort Herriman, North Jordan (resettled at the abandoned New Wales settlement discussed in

31. The first that can be documented was the Third Ward in October 1856, but a few others appear by the end of the year. Third Ward, Liberty Stake, Teachers Quorum Minutes, Third Ward General Minutes, 5:1, Church History Library; Fifteenth Ward, Riverside Stake, Fifteenth Ward General Minutes, vol. 19 (1856), Church History Library.

32. Eighth Ward, Liberty Stake, Eighth Ward General Minutes, 5:1 [image 6]; Thirteenth Ward, Ensign Stake, Thirteenth Ward General Minutes, vol. 1 (1854–1859), Church History Library; Wilford Woodruff, “Journal (January 1, 1854–December 31, 1859),” January 27, 1856, Wilford Woodruff Papers, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/6ZL>.

33. The original tabernacle on Temple Square was built in 1852 and used until the current tabernacle was completed in 1875. Ronald O. Barney and W. Randall Dixon, “Church Headquarters,” in *Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History*, ed. Brandon Plewe, S. Kent Brown, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard H. Jackson, 2nd ed. (BYU Press, 2014), 114–15.

34. “Record of Bishops Meetings, Reports of Wards,” 178 [image 200] (November 25, 1856).

part 2,³⁵ now Taylorsville), and Archibald Gardner's Jordan Mill (now West Jordan). The bishop's solution was to hold Sunday meetings in each of these clusters and give them each subordinate leaders.³⁶ The first two bishops lived in the North Jordan area, so the other two settlements were organized as the "Herriman Branch of West Jordan Ward" and the "Mill Branch of West Jordan Ward" in late 1852.³⁷ In 1859, when Archibald Gardner became bishop, the mill area became the core of the ward, and the "North Jordan Branch of West Jordan Ward" was organized instead.³⁸

This approach was repeated for a short time in Mill Creek Ward in the early 1850s, when it had east and west branches in the main part of the ward, and some form of dependent organizations in the Sugar House area and on the eastern bench (the future East Millcreek Ward).³⁹ Gradually, the practice would spread in the coming years, wherever and whenever a settlement was too large to have no meetings or organization, too small to support a full ward organization, and near another ward that could provide assistance. It was even authorized and standardized in the 1877 Circular: "There are small settlements where only a few families reside—too few to be organized as a Ward. For such a settlement the bishop, to whose Ward it belongs, should appoint a priest to preside, if there is one; if there is not, a teacher can be appointed to take charge of the church affairs in the settlement . . . in every settlement, however small, meetings and Sunday schools should be strictly maintained."⁴⁰

At the extreme, the wards in the St. George Stake had twenty-three dependent branches after the stake was reorganized under the 1877 policy.⁴¹ For decades, they continued to be organized when the situation

35. Plewe, "This Branch of the Church [. . .], Part 2," 164–65.

36. "Record of Bishops Meetings, Reports of Wards," 45 [image 61] (December 21, 1852); Joseph Harker, *Reminiscences and journal, 1855–1895*, 44 [image 25] (1852), holograph, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a062efe6-35e2-4ad5-871d-1db64960f46f/0/0>.

37. Harker, *Reminiscences and journal*, 44 [image 25].

38. "John Bennion," in Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4 vols. (Andrew Jenson History, 1901–36), 3:597.

39. "Officers in Great Salt Lake County, October 1853," image 84; Charlene Miller and Alice Edvalson, comps., *150 Years of History of the L. D. S. Sugar House Ward, 1854 to 2004* (n.p., 2004), 1–2; *Autobiography of Julian Moses: Born 11 April 1810 Norfolk, Litchfield, Connecticut, Died 12 April 1892 Salt Lake City, Salt Lake, Utah* (n.p., n.d.), <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/832001>.

40. "Circular of the First Presidency," 2.

41. *Annals of the Southern Utah Mission, circa 1903–1906, 1877* (Book B Continuation), 163–65, holograph, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a062efe6-35e2-4ad5-871d-1db64960f46f/0/0>.

warranted. At the end of 1930, there were still about fifty to sixty dependent branches in the Church, and the practice did not fully end until the 1950s.

These smaller units were never called dependent branches during this period. Instead, the phrasing “[X] branch of [Y] ward” was used consistently; this conformed to the general branch metaphor (that is, it had to be a branch of something). Occasionally, they were referred to as “attached” to the neighboring ward; the term *dependent* did not become common until the 1900s.

Dependency was also commonly used as a temporary solution, even for wards. One situation was where a ward had been designated by Church leaders but was too small to be self-sufficient. Another was when a bishop moved away, died, or was called on a mission, and a replacement could not be found in the ward. In these cases, the smaller ward could be attached to an adjacent ward (or more precisely, to an adjacent bishop) until the situation improved. This happened in Canyon Creek Ward (Sugar House), alternatively attached to the First or Mill Creek Wards from 1849 to 1854;⁴² the Fifth Ward, attached to the Sixth Ward from 1849 to 1853 and 1860 to 1877;⁴³ Spanish Fork Ward, attached to Springville Ward in 1865–1866;⁴⁴ and Little Cottonwood Ward (Union), attached to South Cottonwood Ward (Murray) from 1865 to 1877.⁴⁵ Unlike later permanent mergers such as the Twelfth-Thirteenth Ward (1908) and the Sixth-Seventh Ward (1922), these were still considered two wards, just sharing leadership. For example, in 1860 Brigham Young instructed Sixth Ward bishop William Hickenlooper, “I wish you to take the oversight of

.org/assets/85a81abd-04ff-4221-91ad-0ef6587855ff/0/162; “St. George Stake Conference,” in “Correspondence,” *Deseret News*, January 2, 1878, 14, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=2629536>.

42. Miller and Edvalson, *History of the L. D. S. Sugarhouse Ward*, 1–3.

43. Brigham Young to T. W. Winters, July 9, 1860 [image 8], holograph, Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e075d080-0f07-4eef-b5d4-026b12c1d0cb/0/7>; “Registry of the Names of Persons Residing in the Various Wards, [. . .] 1852,” image 12, Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/f6a446c9-db6e-4f99-8da4-8ca12227b2b5/0/11>.

44. A. Johnson to Bishop E[dward] Hunter and council, May 15, 1866 [image 11], holograph, Captain A. H. Scott Outfit Reports, Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company Outfitting Reports, 1866, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a165f3f9-21fc-42fd-8a85-b6a9abf4b4f2/0/10>.

45. For example, in 1866, Brigham Young addresses “Bishop A. Cahoon, Little Cottonwood Ward,” even though he was primarily the bishop of South Cottonwood. Brigham Young to Andrew Cahoon, August 8, 1866, holograph, Letterbook 9:91 [image 184], Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/954ebbd5-0620-40f5-86f3-97fa7dbab8f6/0/183>.

that [Fifth] ward, as Bishop, in addition to your own, until wisdom shall dictate some other arrangement,” and thereafter his jurisdiction is consistently called “the Fifth and Sixth Wards.”⁴⁶

Congregational Stakes Become Regional Stakes

Beyond the Salt Lake core, the mother settlements in each valley, where congregational stakes were organized in 1851 (see part 2),⁴⁷ had many children during the 1850s. By 1860, there were nine settlements in Weber County (Ogden), thirteen in Utah County (Provo), eight in Sanpete County (Manti), and seven in Iron County (Parowan). In each of these areas, the same question quickly arose: Did the presiding authorities of the main settlement also have authority over its new children, or were the satellites independent units with autonomous leadership?

In each county, there was a period of some vagueness, but eventually, the first option held sway as each stake presidency, bishopric, and high council assumed regional jurisdiction and the four stakes (Ogden, Provo, Manti, and Parowan) operated much like Salt Lake. The stake in Ogden was calling itself the “Weber Stake” to include the first outlying branches (as far north as Willard and Brigham City) in early 1852.⁴⁸ The Parowan Stake was officially reorganized to include the new settlement of Cedar City on May 12, 1852.⁴⁹ The stake at Provo City was extended over the rest of the county during the temporary presidency of George A. Smith in the summer of 1852 (see below).⁵⁰ Even the stake at the San Bernardino, California, colony included a subsidiary ward nearby starting in 1853.⁵¹ Sanpete was probably the last congregational stake in Church history where the stake presidency and high council in Manti did not

46. Brigham Young to William Hickenlooper, July 9, 1860, holograph, Letterbook 5:564 [image 1169], Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/adcl14c8-073a-494e-98cf-c9d00a054123/0/1168>.

47. Plewe, “This Branch of the Church [. . .], Part 2,” 163–67.

48. Bishops’ Reports, 1852 October, image 3, holograph, Bishops’ Reports, 1848–1866, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/feeb487e-5e0e-468d-9c85-06c172bb0e24/0/0>.

49. Woodruff, “Journal (January 1, 1847–December 31, 1853),” May 12, 1852, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/M8xm>.

50. Compare the April 1852 statistical report of “Provo City Stake” covering only the city, with that of “Provo Stake” in October covering the entire county and its wards. See Bishops’ Reports, 1852 April, image 21 (April 4, 1852); Bishops’ Reports, 1852 October, image 27.

51. This was at the former mission about five miles from the main ranch. San Bernardino Branch Journal, 137 [image 142] (May 26, 1853), holograph, Church History



FIGURE 1. The St. Louis Stake, 1854–1858. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

consistently exert authority over neighboring Ephraim until 1855.⁵² That said, it was common for these stake authorities to focus much more attention on the central city, only occasionally exerting authority over the rest of their county settlements (further discussed in the next article).

These were soon joined by several other new regional stakes, organized for a variety of reasons but all sharing a very short life. The first was in St. Louis, Missouri, organized in November 1854.⁵³ This was the first

Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/12c1b4e9-61db-407b-8694-e612e9304bb2/0/141>.

52. For example, Elijah Averett to Brigham Young, January 29, 1855, holograph, Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=f61cfa18-2f5a-4ff4-a25d-450604a24160>.

53. Saint Louis Stake Historical Record, 1852–1856, 189 (November 4, 1854), holograph, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a627690d-69ef-4686-bc14-e90ac5a36c2b/0/0>.

stake that did not meet the primary criterion of a stake as a permanent place of gathering; throughout the stake's existence, its members were encouraged to emigrate to Utah. Perhaps this is the first evidence of the original general meaning of *stake* starting to drift. Instead, the St. Louis Stake appears to be a pragmatic reaction to the inability of thousands of local Saints to leave immediately. It had gathered many migrating converts who could not afford to continue West, but who could find work in the westernmost large city in the United States or the many coal mines in the surrounding area. By 1856, the city itself had seven wards with ordained bishops and several wards and branches nearby. In keeping with the pattern in the West, these began as semiorganized wards but were soon meeting and functioning on their own. In addition to hundreds of British Saints, St. Louis had enough speakers of Welsh, German, and Italian to have separate branches at times, and enough Danish immigrants for their own ward.⁵⁴ However, eventually most of the Saints were able to emigrate, and the St. Louis Stake was disorganized and returned to mission-style branches by 1859.⁵⁵

The second short-lived stake began in May 1855 when the Parowan Stake was divided by Brigham Young to form a stake headquartered in Cedar City with Isaac C. Haight as president.⁵⁶ It was to include all the territory from Johnson Springs (Enoch) south. This was not the result of Parowan Stake becoming too large to manage—it was left with only three settlements. Rather it was likely created with the intent of more directly overseeing the nascent missions to the Paiutes based in Fort Harmony and Santa Clara and the further settlement of the desert valleys of the Virgin River, including Washington in 1857 and Toquerville in 1858.⁵⁷

54. "St Louis Stake," *The Mormon*, May 3, 1856, 1; Saint Louis Stake Historical Record, 1852–1856, 130 (January 27, 1854).

55. Saint Louis Stake Historical Records, 1847–1862, 80 (August 3, 1859), holograph, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/2e90bfe7-6c3d-4dd1-b7a3-9b0b9b5677e3/0/0>.

56. Wilford Woodruff, Synopsis of journey of President Young and company while on their visit south, 5 [image 6] (May 20, 1855), holograph, Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/ea6dab4a-600f-4001-b105-050632a26592/0/5>.

57. William H. Crawford to Editor, *Deseret News*, May 7, 1857, holograph, Historian's Office Collected Historical Documents, circa 1851–1869, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/057efceb-1703-41e6-bbe8-90fb397ae66/0/0>; Annals of the Southern Utah Mission, 1847–1869 (Book A), 60 [image 63],



FIGURE 2. Congregations in Iron County, 1851–1877. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

After the tragic massacre at Mountain Meadows of passing pioneers by members of the Cedar City and Harmony Wards in September 1857,⁵⁸ most of the stake and ward leaders who had been involved went into hiding, and the stake was recombined with Parowan Stake in July 1859 with a new bishop in Cedar City.⁵⁹

The third new stake was in the Carson Valley at the western edge of Utah Territory near modern Reno, Nevada. Individual Saints had moved to the area in the early 1850s to set up resupply stations for migrants to California, which was successful enough for Brigham Young to decide to establish the area as a permanent western anchor point for this tent of latter-day Israel. Apostle Orson Hyde was sent to oversee the expansion in 1855, and in September 1856, he organized a stake with three branches before he returned to Salt Lake. However, the stake lasted only a year, as the area was largely abandoned in September 1857 in anticipation of the Utah War.⁶⁰

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/3faee6c9-545e-42fd-9c67-41745a5e3622/0/62>.

58. See Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

59. “History of Brigham Young for the Year of Our Lord 1859,” 618 [image 646] (July 31, 1859), holograph, Historian’s Office History of the Church, 1839–circa 1882, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a56f3efa-3e22-4d0f-94bd-06623694e03c/0/645>.

60. “Record of the High Council of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Organized in Carson Mission October the 4th 1856,” 1:23–24 [images 25–26] (August 1,

Dual Leadership Blossoms and Dies (Almost)

In early 1852, it looked like the practice of each ward having both a presidency and a bishopric was taking hold and could become the standard policy, at least beyond the Salt Lake Stake. Although there was no official policy statement issued during the 1850s, Brigham Young appears to have thought of this as the most doctrinally ideal form of leadership at both the stake and ward level.⁶¹

Dual-leader wards were especially popular in Utah County, where joint presidencies and bishoprics were called in 1851 and 1852 in Payson, Dry Creek (Lehi), Spanish Fork, Springville, Pleasant Grove, and Alpine. Most of these were called by Brigham Young or the Apostles, so the pattern had clear authorization. It was soon replicated in other settlements, including Fillmore (1851), Nephi (1852), Mt. Pleasant (1853), Ephraim (1855), Beaver (1856), and Willard (1856).

However, dual leadership was not practiced church-wide and never to our knowledge in Salt Lake Stake. Even in most wards with a single leader, he was often referred to as “the president and bishop” during the 1850s, suggesting that there were still two roles, just held by the same person. An extreme case of this dual role philosophy was in Nephi, where Jacob G. Bigler acquired both roles in 1855 and called different counselors for his presidency and his bishopric.⁶² Occasionally in a dual-leader situation, there were simultaneous references to the “president [or presiding elder] of the branch” and the “bishop of the ward” in the same place, suggesting that there were two coincident organizations of a branch and a ward in the same settlement,⁶³ but this was too rare to believe it was official policy.

In the earlier incarnations, especially in Iowa, it seems clear that the president was the primary authority, with the bishop serving in a specialized role. However, in Utah, the bishop usually had his own counselors

1857), holograph, Carson Valley Stake High Council Minutes, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/4cc4fc0b-8047-4f86-bcb0-b13fbb4d1500/0/0>.

61. Brigham Young, “Duties Connected with the Aaronic and Melchisedek Priesthood,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, Eng., 1855–86), 9:279–81 (April 7, 1862); Brigham Young, “Authority of Bishops—Branch Organizations—Assisting the Mail and Telegraph Companies,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:96–98 (April 7, 1862).

62. “Diary, Jacob G. Bigler, April, 1855, to October, 1855,” typescript by David L. Bigler, 22 (September 23, 1855), accessed June 24, 2025, FamilySearch.org, <https://familysearch.org/photos/artifacts/18668483>.

63. For example, Pleasant Grove in July 1852. See T. Bullock, “Visit of President Young and Suite to Utah County,” *Millennial Star* 14, no. 40 (November 27, 1852): 630–31.

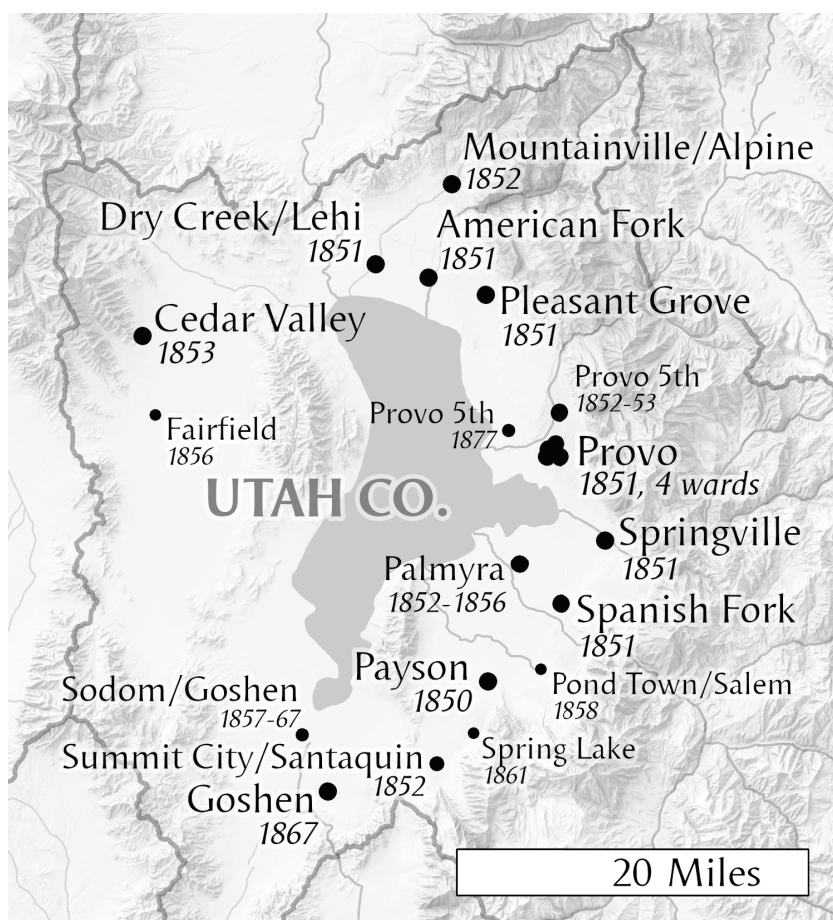


FIGURE 3. Congregations in Utah County, 1849–1877. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

and a quorum of teachers who continually visited the members (in the same role as future home teachers). The bishopric also commonly held “bishop’s courts,” judging civil disputes and disciplinary actions, while the ward president was often only visible when presiding over Sunday worship services.

This frequently led to confusion about who was really “in charge” of the ward or branch, both among the members and among the leaders themselves. A common dispute was whether the bishop had the authority to discipline the ward president, an elder, or another Melchizedek Priesthood holder; or whether each quorum should regulate itself, with the bishop having disciplinary authority only over Aaronic Priesthood holders, women, and children. As more issues came up to decide, the

confusion and rivalry grew, becoming a concern in almost every settlement that had two leaders.

A few cases nearly erupted into civil wars, usually fueled by some important decision on which the bishop and president disagreed. Members chose sides, requiring an Apostle to come adjudicate. Notable examples of this include Palmyra/Spanish Fork and Nephi, which each took almost two years to resolve (1853–1855).⁶⁴ Another lengthy feud was in Willard (1857–1859), where even a visit by Brigham Young and two Apostles could not produce a satisfactory resolution. However, the meeting did feature some fruitful policy discussion:

John Taylor asked who is the greatest the President of [or] the Bishop. President Young said the Bishop should attend to his own business & let the Presidents alone & the Presidents should attend to his Business & let the Bishops alone, but they should

The President should say to the Bishop can I do any thing for you & the Bishop should say to the Presidt can I do any thing for you & they should mutually help each other President Young asked can a Bishop try a President Answered yes. can a President try a Bishop John Taylor thought there might be cases where a President Might try a Bishop.⁶⁵

In most other cases, the issue was resolved more quietly when one of the leaders passed away or moved to a new settlement and the other assumed both roles.⁶⁶ Dual leadership largely disappeared by 1858, when the same person served both roles in almost every ward and was usually referred to only as bishop. By 1862, only Spanish Fork Ward and maybe Fillmore can be documented as still having a separate bishop and president, and even they appear to have been temporary situations.⁶⁷

64. For Nephi: Martha Spence Heywood, Journals, 1850–1856, images 120–26, Church History Library. Transcribed in Juanita Brooks, ed., *Not By Bread Alone: The Journal of Martha Spence Heywood, 1850–1856* (Utah State Historical Society, 1978); and W. Woodruff and T. Bullock, “Minutes of Meeting at Nephi to Investigate the Conduct of Bishop Heywood,” May 25, 1854, image 60, Historian’s Office General Church Minutes, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/435983e1-2d15-47b0-b35f-21328378bbc2/0/60>. For Spanish Fork: Brigham Young to Bishop John L. Butler and the Brethren of Palmyra and Spanish Fork, May 29, 1856, Letterbook 2:744, 746 [images 1521, 1523], Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/7a67fc61-ea19-4673-96d6-fd4d49d329ee/0/1522>.

65. Woodruff, “Journal (January 1, 1854–December 31, 1859),” November 2, 1858, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/mwMr>.

66. For example, George A. Smith, “Our Home Correspondence,” *Deseret News*, March 21, 1855, 4, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=2571140>.

67. Spanish Fork Ward, Utah Stake, Spanish Fork Ward Record, 1852–1864, Church History Library.

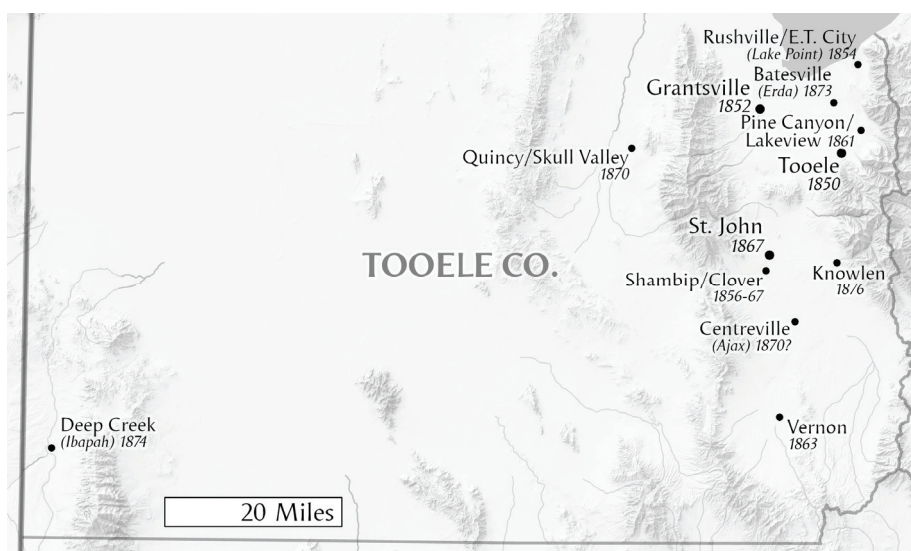


FIGURE 4. Congregations in Tooele County, 1851–1877. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

The Regional Bishopric Emerges

In addition to the continuation and evolution of the Nauvoo-era administrative structures, a unique situation in Tooele Valley led to a new innovation. Here, two significant settlements, Tooele and Grantsville, were founded, each large enough to warrant its own bishop by 1853.⁶⁸ However, these two settlements alone were insufficient to warrant a full stake structure, even after E.T. City (now Lake Point) was added, but they were too remote to be effectively managed by another stake.

The solution was that John Rowberry (already acting bishop of Tooele) was ordained in January 1853 as a bishop “to preside over the settlements in Tooele County, known as Tooele Ward.”⁶⁹ Though the specific organizational structure is unclear due to scant local records, Rowberry had direct authority over the settlements of Tooele and E.T. City and reported directly to the First Presidency and the Presiding Bishop. Grantsville had its own bishop at first, possibly reporting to Bishop Rowberry. Starting in

68. Woodruff, “Journal (January 1, 1854–December 31, 1859),” March 19, 1854, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/gwD>.

69. “Record of Bishops Meetings, Reports of Wards,” 50 [image 66] (January 18, 1853).

1864, Rowberry's authority would be extended over all of Tooele County,⁷⁰ which included at least eleven congregations by 1877.

Regional presiding bishops had existed in stakes since Kirtland, but in this case, Rowberry was the sole authority without any other stake organization. We will call this structure a *regional bishopric*, because it was not given a categorical name at the time. Occasionally Rowberry's jurisdiction was called his diocese, akin to the regional domain of a bishop in Catholicism and other churches, and the term was occasionally used for the domains of other bishops.⁷¹ However, *diocese* was used inconsistently and never by Church leaders, so the usage looks more like a colloquialism than an official term. Regional bishoprics proliferated during the 1860s before being eliminated in the 1877 Reorganization, so we will return to them in the next article.

New Apostolates Appear

As discussed in the previous article, what I named the regional *apostolate* had first appeared in 1846 when Orson Hyde presided over a stake-like organization in Iowa.⁷² It reappeared a few times during the 1850s when apostles were called to settle in outlying areas, but the exact organization structure took several different forms.

In areas outside the Utah core, the resident Apostle had a broader role than being a local leader. Both San Bernardino (presided by Amasa Lyman and Charles C. Rich, 1851–1857) and St. Louis (presided by Erastus Snow, 1854–1857) had a separate stake organization with a stake president, high council, and bishops. In these cases, the official role of the Apostle was to preside over the Church in a much larger area, similar to the mission president of later decades. Lyman and Rich were “Presidents of the Church in Southern California,”⁷³ while Snow was “President over

70. Brigham Young to John Rowberry, June 15, 1864, Letterbook 7:216 [image 457], Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/867b28d5-f5ea-44bb-b228-516179bc010a/0/456>.

71. “Correspondence,” *Deseret Evening News*, December 31, 1869, 4, <https://news.papers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=23155842>; “Presiding Elders and Bishops,” *Deseret Evening News*, September 16, 1873, 4, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=23161496>; “Insurrection at Tooele,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 26, 1874, 4, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=12954836>. Rowberry is also called the “Bishop and President of the Stake” once in 1853, but this is in a church-wide report and is likely an oversight. “Tooele County [Officers], Oct. 1853” in “Winter Quarters (Neb.) High Council Minutes 1847–1848,” image 90.

72. Plewe, “This Branch of the Church [. . .], Part 2,” 143.

73. Richard R. Hopkins, “Minutes,” *The Western Standard*, April 26, 1856, 2.

the Western, and Southern part of these United States.”⁷⁴ That said, these apostles attended local meetings and frequently involved themselves in local affairs, essentially rendering each stake president as a figurehead. Orson Hyde was in a similar situation in the Carson Valley once the stake there was organized in 1856,⁷⁵ although Hyde’s particular title and authority was never made clear before he left in 1857.

In Provo, some members were having difficulty with President Isaac Higbee, and the apostle George A. Smith (recently returned from presiding over the settlement of Parowan) was called to preside over the existing stake in July 1852 (with Higbee as a counselor).⁷⁶ Unlike the organization from the previous year, Smith called leaders and held conferences in several settlements, making it clear that his stake jurisdiction was over the entire county. In fact, he stated that September, “I was appointed by the Presidency of the Church to preside over the Saints in Utah County.”⁷⁷ At the next stake conference in October, Higbee was resustained as stake president, and Smith took on the unique title of “traveling presiding high councilor of this county” (with Higbee as a counselor).⁷⁸ The next year, in October 1853, it was again George A. Smith as president of the stake with Isaac Higbee as first counselor and “president of [Provo] branch,” with his own counselors.⁷⁹

Although Smith was fiddling with the terminology as he went along, the overall hierarchy appears to have been consistent: Smith presided over the entire county with Higbee as a counselor, while Higbee presided over Provo City (and its four wards) with his own counselors.

74. “St. Louis April 6th 1855,” in Saint Louis Stake Historical Record, 1852–1856, 244–45.

75. Carson Valley Conference Minutes, September 28, 1856, holograph, Historian’s Office Minutes and Reports (Local Units), 1840–1886, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/96c96437-a971-4bf8-8507-3fb580cd3fld/0/0>.

76. Thomas Bullock, Evansville (Lehi), Provo, and Battle Creek (Pleasant Grove), 1852 July 15–19, images 27–29, holograph, Historian’s Office General Church Minutes, 1839–1877, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/7e0a8a20-b217-49f7-a91e-85464412d924/0/26>; Thomas Bullock, “Visit of President Young and Suite to Utah County,” *Millennial Star* 14, no. 40 (November 27, 1852): 630–31.

77. George A. Smith, “Prosperity of Utah County, Utah Territory: Letter from Elder G. A. Smith,” *Millennial Star* 14, no. 42 (December 11, 1852): 668.

78. Provo Stake (Utah County) Conference Minutes, October 1–3, 1852, 3, holograph, Historian’s Office Minutes and Reports (Local Units), Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/34be37fe-aa7f-4f5a-be44-c0ac5b77f086/0/2>.

79. “Utah County [Officers] Oct. 1853,” in “Winter Quarters (Neb.) High Council Minutes 1847–1848,” image 91.

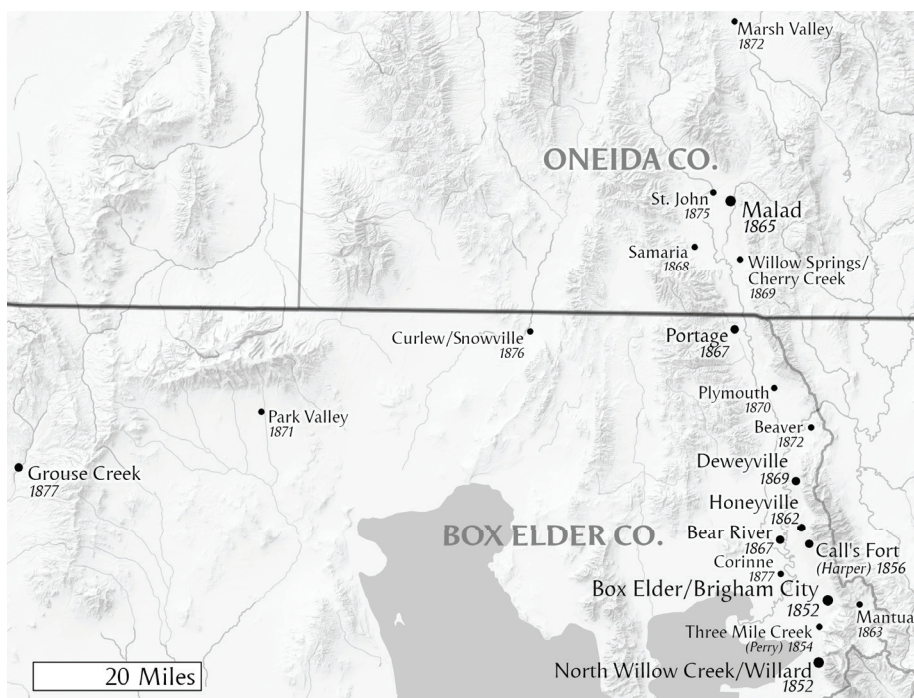


FIGURE 5. Congregations in Box Elder County, 1852–1877. Based on data from <https://monoplaces.byu.edu>.

Presiding Bishop Elias Blackburn and the high council may have also had jurisdiction beyond Provo, but this was rarely exercised.⁸⁰ This arrangement lasted less than two years; George A. Smith was called as Church Historian and Recorder in April 1854 and left Higbee as the sole president of the now county-wide stake.⁸¹

Box Elder County had a similar arrangement. The North Willow Creek (Willard) and Box Elder (Brigham City) Wards were organized

80. For example, in a dispute between the Provo High Council and the president of Payson in January 1852, Brigham Young recognizes the high council's authority. See Brigham Young to James Pace and others of Payson, January 26?, 1852, Letterbook 1:40 [image 135], Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/f7d18c09-51a0-42c6-8c73-10960c772d45/0/134>; Brigham Young to Asahel Perry, February 3, 1852, Letterbook 1:42 [image 139], <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/f7d18c09-51a0-42c6-8c73-10960c772d45/0/138>.

81. "Minutes of the General Conference," *Deseret News*, April 13, 1854, 2, <https://news.papers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=2580233>.

in 1852 under the jurisdiction of the stake in Ogden. Sometime after Apostle Lorenzo Snow arrived in May 1855, he organized a stake with himself as president, counselors, and a high council.⁸² References to this area as a stake are rare: In fact, stake conferences are not documented until June 1867.⁸³ The bishop of Box Elder Ward appears to have also served as a regional presiding bishop. Snow would remain as president until 1877, and there is little evidence that it functioned much beyond Snow's personal leadership.

The Unclear Jurisdiction of Salt Lake Stake

Many historians believe that during this time, the Salt Lake Stake had a higher authority or standing than the other stakes.⁸⁴ The most common evidence was that stake officers were sustained in general conference, along with (and often intermingled with) General Authorities and officers. Like Kirtland and Nauvoo, it appears that the distinction between general and local administration near the Church headquarters could be somewhat muddy. For example, Edward Hunter was both the Presiding Bishop over the entire Church and over Salt Lake Stake; his monthly bishops council meetings were almost always attended only by Salt Lake City bishops (even the bishops of the country wards in the valley were rarely in attendance), and the business was generally local.⁸⁵

Did the Salt Lake Stake (especially its high council) exercise practical authority over the wards and stakes beyond Salt Lake County? The evidence is very inconsistent, suggesting that it was not a settled matter,

82. Vaughn J. Nielsen, *The History of Box Elder Stake* (Pat's Print Shop, 1977), 1–2; Andrew Jensen, “Brigham City First [sic] Ward,” vol. 1, image 25, typescript, Brigham City Ward Manuscript History and Historical Reports, 1851–1888, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/02839e97-42f2-4b75-9754-f770d675bd8e/0/24>.

83. “Minutes of a Conference Held in Brigham City,” *Deseret News*, June 26, 1867, 1, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=2599658>; “Two-Days’ Meetings,” *Ogden Junction*, March 16, 1874, 3, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=23761839>.

84. Examples include Lynn M. Hilton, ed., *The Story of Salt Lake Stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: 125 Year History, 1847–1972* (Salt Lake Stake, 1972), 155; Morgan Utah North Stake, *Morgan Stake, 1877–1981: An Ecclesiastical History of Morgan County from the Inception of the Morgan Stake in 1887 to Its Division in 1981* (Publishers Press, 1988), 10; and Hartley, “Priesthood Reorganization of 1877,” 229.

85. See “Record of Bishops Meetings, Reports of Wards.” The bishops’ meetings coinciding with general conference were often attended by bishops coming in from all over Utah.

even in the mind of Brigham Young. The following cases suggest a broad jurisdiction for the high council, at least over Davis County:

- 1858, Tooele County: Brigham Young brought a charge against the bishop and some residents of Grantsville to the Salt Lake high council.⁸⁶ It is not clear whether this was because he considered the council as a general appellate court, or if he considered Tooele Valley as part of the Salt Lake Stake, or whether they were just the most convenient venue to consider an issue at the moment.
- 1859, Davis County: The Salt Lake high council was appealed to and decided a case involving the bishop from Centerville.⁸⁷
- 1863, Davis County: Brigham Young instructed Salt Lake Stake President Daniel Spencer to have the high council decide on a case appealed from the Farmington Bishop.⁸⁸
- 1868, Davis County: Brigham Young discussed a case from North Canyon Ward (Bountiful) that had been appealed to the Salt Lake high council, then to him.⁸⁹
- 1871, Weber County: Ogden Stake President Franklin D. Richards mentioned a case before the Salt Lake high council concerning the Ogden city council.⁹⁰

Conversely, these cases suggest that the Salt Lake high council did not have appellate authority:

- 1852, Utah County: a dispute in Payson involving Branch President James Pace was decided by the Provo high council then appealed directly to Brigham Young.⁹¹

86. Brigham Young to Heman Hyde, January 14, 1858, Letterbook 4:27 [image 111], Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/08168c23-bef7-41bb-90e4-446caa2cc86e/0/110>.

87. Woodruff, "Journal (January 1, 1854–December 31, 1859)," April 16, 1859, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/y877>.

88. Brigham Young to Daniel Spencer, December 11, 1863, Letterbook 6:724 [image 1493], Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/0c8e23c5-4d6a-446f-8d81-108a52bd39c4/0/1492>.

89. Brigham Young to John Stoker, January 28, 1868, Letterbook 10:617 [image 1302], Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/873e43de-f5b9-4a8a-bfaa-be07a5fd18f/0/1301>.

90. Franklin D. Richards, Journal, September 15, 1871, vol. 19, image 284, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/0e85f984-0c03-4385-a367-91431b6c0a30/0/283>.

91. Young to Pace and others of Payson.

- 1855, Davis County: A dispute between members and leaders in Farmington is appealed directly to Brigham Young rather than to stake authorities.⁹²
- 1859, Weber County: A case decided by the Ogden high council was appealed to, and decided by, the First Presidency.⁹³
- 1860, Weber County: A case appealed from the Ogden high council (or “High Council of the Weber Stake”) was decided by the First Presidency.⁹⁴
- 1860, Davis County: Brigham Young asked Ogden Stake President Lorin Farr to take care of a matter in South Weber, because “the distance to this place would put the parties to much inconvenience.”⁹⁵
- 1870, Utah County: Brigham Young visited Springville to decide a case involving the bishop, appealed from the Provo high council. After his decision, “President Young said a Bishop could not be tried only by a High Council & the first Presidency,” suggesting that the proper order was clear to him at the time.⁹⁶
- 1870, Sanpete County: The First Presidency agreed to hear a case appealed from the Manti high council.⁹⁷
- 1872, Davis County: Brigham Young decided a case in Farmington appealed directly to him from the bishop’s decision.⁹⁸

92. Gideon Brownell to Brigham Young, January 24, 1845 [1855?], holograph, General Correspondence, Incoming, 1840–1877, Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/ed548503-8af3-451b-8743-e8c0de74a0f6/0/0>.

93. Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Daniel N. Wells, Decision by the First Presidency, August 20, 1859, Letterbook 5:216–17 [image 487, 489], <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/adc114c8-073a-494e-98cf-c9d00a054123/0/486>.

94. First Presidency to Lorin Farr, August 6, 1860, Harold F. Nufer Collection of the Lorin Farr Papers (1820–1906), L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

95. Brigham Young to Lorin Farr, September 1, 1860, Letterbook 5:591 [image 1223], <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/adc114c8-073a-494e-98cf-c9d00a054123/0/1222>. This may just have been placing South Weber under the direct jurisdiction of the stake in Weber County.

96. Wilford Woodruff, “Journal (October 22, 1865–December 31, 1872),” October 25, 1870, Wilford Woodruff Papers, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/DkRy>.

97. Brigham Young to the President of the [Manti] High Council, May 27, 1870, Letterbook 12:152 [image 378], Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/c91a2db1-a2f0-470d-ac3a-324c44e06cd1/0/377>.

98. Woodruff, “Journal (October 22, 1865–December 31, 1872),” August 25, 1872, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/PN7W>. The narrative is crossed out; not clear why this happened.

- 1872, Utah County: Brigham Young told a Springville resident that the proper course of appeal for his bishop's decision is to the high council at Provo, then to the First Presidency.⁹⁹
- 1873, Millard County: When a visiting home missionary mentioned the concept of appealing a decision to the Salt Lake high council, Stake President Thomas Callister clarified, "This cannot be done. But we may appeal from any high council to the first presidency of the Church." This suggests that he may have been aware of a set policy that was not widely known.¹⁰⁰

Other cases show some confusion or inconsistency, even in the mind of Brigham Young, on the stake's authority.

- 1852, Utah County: A matter in Payson had been decided by the Provo high council, then appealed directly to Brigham Young, who agreed to decide the case at general conference, alluding to the conference itself having appellate authority. But then the case was heard by the Salt Lake high council.¹⁰¹
- 1866, Weber County: A man had appealed a ward decision to Salt Lake Stake President Daniel Spencer. The First Presidency advised him to return the case to the "High Council of the Stake where [he] resides, . . . and, until he appeals to that High Council, he cannot bring his case to the <general> High Council of this for a re-hearing."¹⁰² The emendations in the letter, replacing "of this" [stake?] with "general," are curious. Was this referring to the Salt Lake Stake high council acting as a general high council, the Quorum of the Twelve, or the First Presidency?

We can see that the policy was unclear. It is possible that the decision on whether a case was heard by the Salt Lake high council or the First Presidency was simply a matter of who was more available at the moment.

99. Brigham Young to Joseph S. Wing, June 12, 1872, Letterbook 13:102 [image 295], Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/d67ba765-d117-4513-aec2-2cdf8cbfd9/0/294>.

100. Meadow Ward General Minutes, 15:16, Church History Library.

101. Young to Pace and others of Payson; Young to Perry; Thomas Bullock to Benjamin Cross, February 4, 1852, Letterbook 1:43 [image 141], <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/f7d18c09-51a0-42c6-8c73-10960c772d45/0/140>.

102. Brigham Young to Daniel Spencer, February 26, 1866, Letterbook 8:135 [image 321], Brigham Young Office Files, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/b3c72fee-6f44-4ce6-8a9f-5cf38b6153d1/0/320>.

The dates of both types are interspersed, although the majority of cases beyond Davis County did not report to the Salt Lake high council, especially during the 1870s.

This confusion culminated in 1876 when Brigham Young concisely stated something like a general policy at one of Bishop Hunter's bishops council meetings: "Some have entertained the idea that the High Council in this [Salt Lake] Stake of Zion had jurisdiction over all other stakes. This is not so. The High Council of Weber Co., or any other stake would have just as much right to call in question the decisions of the High Council of this Stake of Zion, as this High Council theirs, both are equal in authority. . . . All these quorums and authorities are under the direction of the First Presidency."¹⁰³

In conclusion, at the close of 1859, the Church in Utah Territory included several modern-looking stakes (Ogden, Salt Lake, Provo, Sanpete, and Parowan) led by a presidency and high council. Each stake coincided more or less with a valley and county and consisted of several wards led by bishops. Three other similarly modern stakes had come and gone. But this did not mean that local administration had arrived at a permanently modern state; Box Elder County was an apostolate under Lorenzo Snow, and Tooele was a regional bishopric. As will be discussed in the final installment of this series, these and other novel structures would proliferate during the 1860s and 1870s before being eliminated by the standard practices installed in the 1877 Priesthood Reorganization.

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103. Presiding Bishopric, Minutes, 1862–1879, 397 (October 19, 1876), holograph, Presiding Bishopric Bishops Meeting Minutes, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e9b0c4cc-2d99-497a-b4ce-f5afe97ea098/0/0>.

Joseph Smith: A Life Lived in Crescendo, edited by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw (The Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2024)

Joseph Smith: A Life Lived in Crescendo, edited by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, is a collection of twenty-one articles by some of the leading scholars on the life and teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Because of the sheer size, coming in at slightly over 1,100 pages, the physical book is published in two volumes while the digital version is in a single file.

Editor Jeffrey M. Bradshaw frames the volume around the idea of a crescendo, suggesting that Joseph Smith's prophetic mission and teachings intensified and became more theologically rich in his final years, especially in Nauvoo. The volume's structure reflects this upward arc. The compilation examines a variety of topics and is organized into four general sections: "Doctrinal Developments in Nauvoo"; "Temple, Priesthood, and the Relief Society"; "The Martyrdom"; and "Succession in Church Leadership."

Some readers will note that a few articles have previously been published in other places, including in *BYU Studies*. However, much of the content is original to this publication. Having it all available in a single place is a helpful and welcome contribution to the field of Latter-day Saint studies and learning about the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Following a foreword by Richard E. Turley Jr., readers will find articles by Elder Kyle S. McKay (a General Authority Seventy and Church Historian and Recorder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, R. Devan Jensen, Michael A. Goodman, Barbara Morgan Gardner, Terryl L. Givens, Alexander L. Baugh, James E. Faulconer, John S. Thompson, Brian C. Hales, Rachel Cope, Lisa Olsen

Tait, Jacob D. Hawkins, Matthew J. Grow, Joseph I. Bentley, John W. Welch, R. Jean Addams, Ronald K. Esplin, and Hugh W. Nibley.

In the "Doctrinal Developments in Nauvoo" section there are seven chapters. Some of the topics covered here include the vocabulary and style of Joseph Smith's language and his teachings on premortality, salvific ordinances for the living and the dead, and the immortal destiny of humankind.

There are six chapters in the "Temple, Priesthood, and the Relief Society" section. They delve into some of the significant developments in Joseph Smith's understanding, his implementation of priesthood authority and temple ordinances, and the role of women in the Church during his Nauvoo ministry.

The third section, "The Martyrdom," has three chapters. It details the culminating events that lead to the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in Carthage Jail on June 27, 1844. This section presents comprehensive accounts of the Prophet's final legal battles and the tragic assassinations.

The final section, "Succession in Church Leadership," with its four chapters, focuses on the critical period following the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, detailing how leadership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints transitioned to Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. It also explores other claims to leadership that emerged from various individuals.

The articles in this book collectively illuminate the complexities of historical interpretation, the unfolding nature of revealed doctrine, and the foundational events that shaped The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Indeed, the information in each article adds to the last, allowing readers to see Joseph Smith's life lived in crescendo.

—Matthew B. Christensen