

The Role of Continuing Revelation in the Early Latter Day Saint Church Under the Leadership
of Joseph Smith

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by

Robbie Wood

University of Washington Tacoma

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Advisor: Dr. Julie Nicoletta

Introduction

The first fourteen years of the Latter Day Saint¹ movement proved to be the most crucial time period for the religion and it was a crucible for the ideas and principles that shaped an emerging worldwide religion. Joseph Smith, the founder and shaper of this new American religion, came to be known by millions as a latter-day prophet. When the church was founded in rural upstate New York in April 1830, a small group of believers gathered around the 24-year-old Smith who had published a new addition to Christian scripture known as the Book of Mormon. Smith claimed he had a direct link to heaven, had received revelations from God, and had a mission to restore the primitive Christian church. This early period sanctioned Smith's unique authority as prophet and receiver of revelation for the church. In 1831, a growing number of converts in Kirtland, Ohio, convinced the founding prophet to move his church headquarters there. Once in Kirtland, Smith continued to receive revelations and edit previous ones. After a brief sojourn in Missouri, the community later moved to Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1839 and made it their new capital. At Nauvoo Smith developed the most peculiar and innovative theological concepts and religious practices of the movement. Before his death in 1844, he expanded his secret practice of polygamy, which had begun sometime in the 1830s, to privileged leaders, and preached new doctrines completely divorced from traditional Christianity.

The concept of Continuing Revelation, that God speaks to people in the modern age, was not completely new to Smith and the early Mormons, and was an outgrowth of nineteenth-century American religious culture. However, the way the concept was used to create a thriving community of believers and sanction drastic change in a short period of time is unique to the

¹ Using "Latter Day Saint" without the usual hyphen is more inclusive since the hyphen was not added until well into the Utah period of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The term is representative of the movement as a whole along with other denominations, such as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now Community of Christ).

early Mormon movement. It facilitated continuous theological development, and was codified in various volumes of scripture. The Saint's faith in Smith's prophetic authority and ability to receive revelation, his unique manifestation of Continuing Revelation, kept the movement together in the face of dissent and remains as a central tenet of the Restoration churches of today. By the time Smith was murdered in 1844, the church he founded had grown from a small peculiar Christian sect with a "prophet" to a community of several thousand members with completely unique doctrines and practices. Smith used his prophetic authority to receive revelations as a tool to shape, relocate, and direct the movement.

The concept of Continuing Revelation is that the Christian God can and does speak to people currently. While most Christians view the canon of scripture as closed and revelation as something which only occurred in the past, those sects that embrace the concept of Continuing Revelation see otherwise. In the case of early Mormon history, Joseph Smith claimed to be a prophet who could receive the word of God. This resulted in an open canon, where new scripture could be added, and facilitated the publication of several additional scriptures including the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, a new revelatory translation of the Bible, and the Book of Abraham. Continuing Revelation was also the driving force behind numerous unique theological developments produced by Smith, including polygamy and his later non-traditional views of God. Smith's church was originally founded as the Church of Christ in 1830, then it was later changed to Church of the Latter Day Saints, and at the time of his death in 1844 had become the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The two largest denominations which trace their roots back to Smith are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (known popularly as the Mormons or LDS church) in Utah and the smaller Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS, now named Community of Christ) in Independence, Missouri. Joseph

Smith's use of Continuing Revelation and his monopoly on receiving revelation from God inherently influenced the entire Latter Day Saint movement.

Literature Review

The field of Mormon Studies, a critical study of the religion, is a growing body of scholarship and literature beginning in the 1960s and continuing through to the present.² To understand the concept of Continuing Revelation and the role it played in the early Latter Day Saint movement, it is necessary to account for the historical and cultural context of the movement. The United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was filled with religious revivalism. Indeed, Joseph Smith founded his church during the Second Great Awakening in a part of New York known as the "burned over district" for its intense participation in religious revivalism. Scholars have drawn parallels between Mormonism and the intense revivalism which swept through the area. There is also extensive research on the early Latter Day Saint movement itself and how revelations were received, including the prominence of the Book of Mormon. Current scholarship explores how the concept of Continuing Revelation developed in the early movement and the Saints' reactions to the doctrine. Scholars recognize that the concept of Continuing Revelation became a crucial institution which codified the movement's beliefs and held the community together despite continuous movement and frequent doctrinal developments. The concept was one constant in fourteen years characterized by massive instability and defined Joseph Smith's role in the movement.

David Holland's 2011 book *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* specifically discusses the roots of Continuing Revelation in early

² Terry L. Givens, and Philip L. Barlow, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terry L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3-4.

American religion. For example, the Shakers (a religious movement emerging in the eighteenth century) embraced the concept of continuing revelation and began composing new scripture around 1820.³ The writing of a “Shaker Bible” in 1843 required the Shakers to develop a system of canonization while still allowing for open revelation.⁴ Discussing this confusing time in American religion, Holland writes, “only a fresh word from God, some claimed, could cut through the growing denominational chaos.”⁵ American religious scholarship also recognizes important textual influences on Joseph Smith emanating from the period following the American Revolution. Eran Shalev in his 2013 book *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* explains that “the Book of Mormon was published during the final efflorescence of a tradition of pseudo biblical writing in the United States.”⁶ Americans were familiar with reading political texts written in a biblical (King James Version) style and this may explain why the Book of Mormon was able to speak to early believers.⁷ Shalev’s argument situates the Book of Mormon as a piece of literature firmly rooted in an American pseudo biblical writing tradition. Shalev says the book’s King James language and structure consisting of multiple books, along with its unique focus on the Americas, provides an “interweaving [of] the Bible and America, America and the Bible.”⁸ Early Latter Day Saint concepts of Continuing

³ David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 130.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 137.

⁶ Eran Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 105.

⁷ Ibid., 105-106.

⁸ Ibid., 107-108.

Revelation, an open canon of scripture, and the Book of Mormon's place in the American pseudo biblical writing tradition situated the movement in a larger American cultural context.

The period of the early Latter Day Saint church officially began in 1830, with both the publication of the Book of Mormon and the founding of the Church of Christ. However, there are events of revelatory significance which happened before 1830 and which laid the foundation for the movement. These consisted of revelations of personal significance, heavenly visions, and the Book of Mormon's translation process. Richard P. Howard, a prominent RLDS historian, writes in the 1982 article "Themes in Latter Day Saint History" that the early followers of Smith in 1829 saw the imminent publication of the Book of Mormon as a completely new revelation from God brought about by the "gift and power of God."⁹ Howard explains, "One reason for that ready acceptance was the revelation of God that many of these people had experienced through Joseph Smith from their earliest contacts with him."¹⁰ These were personal revelations Smith had given to his earliest companions, like Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris, pertaining to their lives.¹¹ The second critical aspect of this period is Smith's claims of receiving heavenly visions and being chosen to locate and translate the Book of Mormon. This period has been one of contention amongst Mormon and non-Mormon scholars. David Persuitte in his 1985 book *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon* argues that the widely different accounts of these visions and late accounts given by Joseph Smith prove that they were his own creation and that this "demonstrates the evolutionary nature of early Mormonism..."¹² On the other hand, in

⁹ Richard P. Howard, "Themes in Latter Day Saint History," *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 2 (1982): 22-23, accessed January 27, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43200705>.

¹⁰ Howard, "Themes in Latter Day Saint History," 23.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹²David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1985), 21.

Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays, Richard Bushman argues that Smith remained largely quiet on his early visions and broke with the revivalist visionaries of his time (who published tracts of their own), by focusing his energy on forming a church.¹³ A shared consensus amongst these scholars, however, is that Smith was bringing something new to the religious scene by publishing an entire new volume of scripture.

Another category of scholarship in Mormon and Restoration Studies deals with published and canonized revelation which forms Latter Day Saint scripture. These are the Book of Mormon, Book of Commandments (later Doctrine and Covenants), Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible (which includes the LDS Book of Moses), and the Book of Abraham. An authoritative work on this topic is Richard P. Howard's 1995 book *Restoration Scriptures: A Study of their Textual Development*. Howard examines each volume of Latter Day Saint scripture through a historical and critical lens to place them in their historical context in regard to Latter Day Saint history and scripture. For example, Howard explores the Book of Mormon in three parts beginning with the manuscript forms in 1828 and its first publication in 1830, to further refinement by Joseph Smith, and traces its development in the RLDS church up to 1966.¹⁴ This close examination of the scriptures continues with each subsequent volume and provides an in-depth analysis of their development, different editions (with side-by-side comparison), cultural context, and their impacts on the church. Howard connects Latter Day Saint scripture with other Christian scriptures as they are both records of human experience of revelation and God.¹⁵

¹³ Richard L. Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 208-210.

¹⁴ Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures: A Study of Their Textual Development*, 2nd ed. (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1995), 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 211-215.

Howard says, “scriptures reflect the growth of the prophets and of the faith communities to which they minister. Couched in human language, they reflect patterns of thinking and life of the places and time in which they were written.”¹⁶ Discussing the purpose of his contextual and comparison work, he explains, “The primary task of this study has been to plumb the historical ground undergirding Restoration scriptures.”¹⁷

Scholarship on the Nauvoo period also examines the importance of Continuing Revelation on the development of the early Latter Day Saint movement. In this period, Joseph Smith solidified himself as prophet and brought drastic changes to the church, including polygamy and secret temple rituals. Merina Smith in her 2013 work *Revelation, Resistance, and Mormon Polygamy: The Introduction and Implementation of the Principle, 1830-1853* explores the interrelationship between these three topics. Smith provides background on the development of polygamy in the early Mormon community, dissent surrounding it, and why revelation aided its implementation.¹⁸ However, the focus of her work “is to trace the interplay between the public development of the Mormon theological narrative and the secret introduction and gradual acceptance of polygamy by taking a close look at the formative years for Mormon polygamy, 1841–1853.”¹⁹

Scholars notice that Smith’s theology also began to significantly change in this period, accompanied with public dissent. Kurt Widmer’s 2000 book *Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theological Evolution, 1830-1915* explores how the concept of God changed throughout

¹⁶ Ibid., 215.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Merina Smith, *Revelation, Resistance, and Mormon Polygamy: The Introduction and Implementation of the Principle, 1830-1853* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2013), 3-4.

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

Mormon history and uses the changing theology of God as the paramount way to track Mormon theological evolution.²⁰ For example, Widmer argues that the King Follett discourse, a sermon given by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo on April 7, 1844, marked a crucial turning point in Latter Day Saint theology and sparked dissent.²¹ Widmer explains that in this General Conference sermon Smith used previous “speculative” concepts of a plurality of gods and preached this concept as “revealed truth”.²² Widmer further argues, “as a Prophet of God, the pressure to reveal new, or previously unheard of, concepts becomes paramount to retaining his [Smith’s] status as Prophet.”²³ The King Follet Discourse began the dissent of some Latter Day Saints, led by Smith’s Second Counselor William Law and others. They published their reaction in the only edition of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, in which they labeled Smith a “fallen prophet”.²⁴ However, Widmer notes that many other members continued in the faith and believed the sermon to be another of Smith’s revelations.²⁵ Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher in their 1994 work *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History* provide a collection of essays that explore dissent in Mormon history. In the introduction, Launius and Thatcher also argue that William Law and his companions saw Joseph Smith as a wayward prophet, one that was mixing religion and politics and wielded too much control.²⁶ Launius and Thatcher write, “although accepting

²⁰ Kurt Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theological Evolution, 1830-1915* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), 14-15.

²¹ Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of God*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher, *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 10.

the purity of the movement at the beginning, these Saints asked Smith to function more democratically within the institution.”²⁷ Scholarship is clear that the King Follett discourse of 1844 marked an important theological development and was met with public dissent by some Saints.

This paper argues that Continuing Revelation, Joseph Smith’s early designation as the sole prophet, and his sanctioned authority to be the sole receiver of revelation were the driving forces behind the constant change of the first fourteen years of Latter Day Saint history. The theological foundation supporting Smith’s authority, specifically his ability to receive revelation, kept the movement intact throughout his constant theological innovation. This faith ultimately proved critical at keeping the vast majority of members in the religion through the most turbulent and peculiar developments in Nauvoo, even as a few expressed public dissent.

The Role of Continuing Revelation in early Latter Day Saint History

The Book of Mormon was the beginning of the Latter Day Saint movement and the first published scriptural volume showcasing Joseph Smith’s power to receive revelation. Smith referred to the book in 1841 as “the keystone of our religion.”²⁸ The Book of Mormon was published in 1830 and Smith would later say that an angel had appeared to him and led him to the golden plates from which he translated the book. From the first edition, all that can be gleaned is that a young man named Joseph Smith discovered a set of golden plates in upstate New York engraved with mysterious characters. From those plates, he translated a lengthy book between 1828-1829 by the “gift and power of God” and with the help of scribes. In fifteen

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, vol. 4 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1950), 461.

‘books’ written by ancient prophets, these plates recorded various groups of people who left the Middle East and traveled to the Americas centuries before Christ. Mormon is believed to be an ancient prophet who edited and abridged all of the plates. The most prominent group is a family who left Jerusalem around 600 BC and whose descendants are the main characters in most of the book. The Nephites, righteous descendants of Nephi, and the Lamanites, unrighteous descendants of Laman, are the main protagonists and antagonists of the book. The Book of Mormon also records various spiritual events, prophets, and a visitation from Jesus Christ. Eventually, the Lamanites defeat all of the Nephites and become the ancestors of modern Native Americans.

Mormonism is unique in that the church and community began around a new volume of scripture, the Book of Mormon, instead of scripture following the formation of the community. The title page of the Book of Mormon itself explains it is a record of various peoples written upon plates “by the spirit of prophecy and revelation” sealed and hid to “come forth by the gift and power of God.”²⁹ Further, in the preface referring to the first 116 pages which were later lost, Smith says of the work, “...I translated, by the gift and power of God...”³⁰ Smith also claims that the Lord referenced the work as “my words” and informs readers that the plates “were found in the township of Manchester, Ontario County, New-York.”³¹ At the end of the text there are two testimonies, one of the three witnesses and another of the eight witnesses. The three witnesses claim to have seen an angel with the plates and testify that the book has been

²⁹ Joseph Smith, Jr., *Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, Upon Plates Taken from the plates of Nephi* (Palmyra, NY: E. B. Grandin, 1830), p. i, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed Feb. 6, 2018, www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-mormon-1830.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, iii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, iv.

“translated by the gift and power of God” while the eight witnesses testify to seeing and handling the golden plates themselves.³² These supporting texts at the beginning and end of the Book of Mormon clarify how Smith and early believers viewed the book in 1830. To them, the Book of Mormon was an already written record containing the history of various peoples contained within golden plates and was a revelation from God. Joseph Smith found these plates and “translated” them into English with the “gift and power of God.” The Book of Mormon was then akin to the Christian Bible, complete with stories, multiple authors, miracles, prophets, and Jesus Christ, and Joseph Smith was the channel whereby God brought this record forward. The first edition of the Book of Mormon, thus, established Joseph Smith as an important man chosen by God to bring forth previously unknown scriptures and receive new revelations.

Joseph Smith’s role in bringing forth the Book of Mormon and his subsequent direct connection to God cannot be understated in regard to the theological foundation of the Latter Day Saint movement. In the text of the Book of Mormon itself, in 2 Nephi chapter 2 in the 1830 edition, Joseph in Egypt (a Biblical and Book of Mormon character) prophesies of a “seer” who would be called by God in the “latter days.”³³ According to this passage, the Lord speaks through the ancient Joseph and says, “And unto him [the seer] will I give commandment that he shall do a work for the fruit of thy [Joseph’s] loins, his brethren, which shall be of great worth unto them, even to the bringing of them to the knowledge of the covenants which I have made with thy fathers.”³⁴ In other words, the seer will help bring the other portion of Israel, Joseph’s descendants who will reside in the Americas, to salvation. After comparing this future seer to

³² Ibid., 589-590.

³³ Ibid., 66.

³⁴ Ibid.

Moses, the Lord through Joseph further says, “And his [the seer’s] name shall be called after me; and it shall be after the name of his father.”³⁵ This is a direct reference to Joseph Smith Jr. who called himself “seer.” Since this portion of the text was one of the last to be produced, there is an undeniable parallel with the language of the title page. The title page, when speaking of the Record of Jared contained in the Book of Mormon, says, “...which is to shew unto the remnant of the House of Israel how great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord...”³⁶ Thus, the first edition of the Book of Mormon established the concept that Joseph Smith was chosen by God to complete a unique and important work, one which would bring forth previously unknown knowledge. This work was to be achieved only through the “gift and power of God” and Smith was the sole person to do so.

Translating the Book of Mormon left Joseph Smith with the title of “translator” for the rest of his life and he would go on to translate various other supposedly ancient works by the “gift and power of God.” However, it was in response to a problem with the Book of Mormon’s translation process that Smith received his first recorded revelation from God in 1828. These early revelations, from 1828 to the founding of the church in 1830, confirmed his and his earliest followers’ views of Smith’s importance and divinely inspired work. Smith received the first revelation in July 1828 in Harmony, Pennsylvania. In the revelation, the Lord spoke to Smith concerning his sin of having lost the first 116 translated pages of the Book of Mormon to his early financial supporter and scribe, Martin Harris.³⁷ Harris had pestered Smith into loaning him

³⁵ Ibid., 67

³⁶ Ibid., i.

³⁷ *Revelation Book 1*, manuscript book, 1831-1835, 1, The Joseph Smith Papers, 1831, accessed Feb. 7, 2018, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/3#XD6C70AB1-9135-459A-8EC6-6746473E4323>.

the 116 pages to show his doubting family and Smith eventually agreed.³⁸ Harris lost the entire manuscript in his attempt to show people and Smith was distraught at the news.³⁹ Smith then sought guidance in prayer and received a revelation as his answer. According to the revelation, the Lord rebuked Smith for his transgression, re-affirmed Smith's duty to complete the work, repeated the need for repentance and God's mercy, and laid out Smith's punishment of losing the power of translation for a time.⁴⁰ Bushman notes the importance of this revelation in setting Smith's revelatory voice: "The speaker stands above and outside Joseph, sharply separated emotionally and intellectually, talking to the Prophet or his associates... The words flow directly from the messenger to Joseph and have the single purpose of setting Joseph straight."⁴¹

Every revelation between 1828 and 1829 dealt with problems or questions of Joseph Smith or those close to him. In addition to the July 1828 revelation (D&C 3) concerning the lost 116 pages, a February 1829 revelation (D&C 4) answers questions posed by Joseph Smith Sr. A spring 1829 revelation (D&C 10) again speaks of the lost 116 pages, allows Smith to begin translation once again but warns Smith not to re-translate the 116 pages. An April 1829 revelation (D&C 8) responded to Oliver Cowdery's inquiries on his ability to translate; a second April 1829 revelation (D&C 7) answered Smith's and Cowdery's questions about John the disciple, and another April 1829 revelation (D&C 9) explained why Cowdery could not translate.⁴² In the eyes of Latter Day Saints, these early revelations were the primary way for

³⁸ Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 90-91.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

⁴⁰ *Revelation Book I*, 1-2.

⁴¹ Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 93.

⁴² *Revelation Book I*, 1-14.

God to speak through Joseph Smith and intervene in human problems. These revelations set the tone for later revelations and formed Smith's role as a prophet. By 1830, the revelations began to focus on doctrine and organization with the formation of the church.

Joseph Smith and his small group of early followers formed the Church of Christ on April 6, 1830 based on the Book of Mormon and previously received revelations. It is in this organization of the church that Smith received his formal title within the movement. A revelation received by Smith on April 6, 1830 says, "... thou shalt be called a seer & translator & prophet an Apostle of Jesus Christ an Elder of the Church through the will of God the Father and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ being inspired of the Holy Ghost to lay the foundation thereof & to build it up unto the most holy faith..."⁴³ Further, the revelation states, "wherefore meaning the Church thou shalt give heed unto all his [Smith's] words & commandments which he shall give unto you as he receiveth them walking in all holiness before me for his word ye shall receive as if from mine own mouth..."⁴⁴ This revelation clearly states that from the first day of the church, Smith's revelations were to be considered the word of God. This set Smith up as the sole leader of the movement and imparted significant revelatory authority.

At this early stage of the church, it appears that others close to Smith also received revelations. Oliver Cowdery, a school teacher formerly acquainted with the Smith family, served as the principal scribe for the majority of the Book of Mormon's translation. A large number of Smith's earliest revelations involve Cowdery in some way. Cowdery received and wrote a revelation in June 1829 titled "Articles of the Church of Christ".⁴⁵ This revelation deals with

⁴³ *Ibid*, 28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ Oliver Cowdery, "Articles of the Church of Christ," (1829), The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 9, 2018, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-3-articles-of-the-church-of-christ-june-1829/1>.

various doctrines and organizational matters of the church based on the Book of Mormon and previous revelations from Smith, including baptism, ordinations, and a form of communion.⁴⁶ These articles served as guidance for the movement before the official founding of the church on April 6, 1830. Although Cowdery's 1829 revelation was never be accepted as official revelation and published as scripture, Bushman notes that it had an important impact on the 1830 (after the founding of the church) "Articles and Covenants" (LDS D&C 20) which was accepted by a church conference on June 9, 1830.⁴⁷ This revelation is unique because it is not solely directed at Smith and contains statements from the first two elders giving direction to the church.⁴⁸ Discussing the formation of the church on April 6, the revelation states, "Commandments were given to Joseph the seer who was called of God & ordained an Apostle of Jesus Christ an Elder of the Church & also Oliver [Cowdery] who was also called of God & ~~ordained~~ [sic] an Apostle of Jesus Christ an Elder of the Church...."⁴⁹ The revelation then discusses the general doctrines and practices of the church. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were the first two elders and apostles of the Church of Christ. While Smith was the first leader from the beginning, Cowdery appears to be a close second during this period.

Others claimed to have received revelations during this time and Joseph Smith's response to them helped further refine the doctrine of Continuing Revelation. The most important event of these revelations is known as the Page incident, which changed the revelatory power structure of the early church. Hiram Page wrote several revelations he claimed to have received through a

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 156.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 157.

⁴⁹ *Revelation Book 1*, 53.

seer stone. Joseph Smith chose to wait until a church conference in September 1830 to formally address their validity.⁵⁰ Cowdery, along with other Saints, had been influenced by Page and the September 1830 revelation dictated Cowdery's further position in the church and made him subordinate to Smith. In the revelation, the Lord says:

But behold, verily, verily, I say unto thee, no one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., for he receiveth them even as Moses. And thou [Cowdery] shalt be obedient unto the things which I shall give unto him, even as Aaron, to declare faithfully the commandments and the revelations, with power and authority unto the church... And thou shalt not command him who is at thy head, and at the head of the church.⁵¹

This revelation thus solidified a top-down structure for the church in which the prophet, Joseph Smith and subsequent leaders, received revelation from God and only God was above him.

Drawing on earlier revelations, Smith's revelations were the word of God. However, included in this revelation is the concept that the church accepts the revelation received by the sole prophet.

The revelation states, "Neither shall anything be appointed unto any of this Church contrary to the Church Articles & Covenants for all things must be done in order & by Common consent in the church by the prayer of faith..."⁵² In other words, while only the prophet is sanctioned to receive commandments and revelations for the church, all things are to be done with order and common consent. Page did not have authority to receive revelations and his writings were contrary to the church's order. The Page incident further defined the power of Smith, and his position as the head of the church, to receive Continuing Revelation for the church.

⁵⁰ Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 167.

⁵¹ *The Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Containing Revelations Given to Joseph Smith, the Prophet with Some Additions by his Successors in the Presidency of the Church* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 28: 2-3, 6. (Hereafter cited as LDS D&C).

⁵² *Revelation Book 1*, 41.

The church's momentum continued to build into the 1830s and the concept of Continuing Revelation continued to shape the community. Following a revelation received in December 1830, the church moved its headquarters to Kirtland, Ohio in February 1831 where it had made many converts.⁵³ The time in Kirtland further solidified Smith's role as receiver of revelation and leader of a growing movement. In Kirtland, Smith continued receiving divine revelations, editing and publishing previously received revelations, and working on a new revelatory translation of the Bible. Kirtland was also the first place where Smith received instruction through revelation to undertake the building of a temple to serve as the church's headquarters, another testament to his charismatic leadership and his revelatory authority.

The first publication of revelations received by Smith was accomplished in 1833 with the publication of *Book of Commandments*, which contained selected revelations up to that time. An expanded book of revelations along with lectures given by Smith was published in 1835 entitled *Doctrine and Covenants*, which became an important scriptural work for the movement. The first half of the book is composed of "Lectures of Faith," a lecture given by Smith, with questions and answers that detail the doctrines of the church. These lectures were removed in later LDS and RLDS editions, both undergoing other edits but retaining the same title. The second half of the 1835 book contained selected revelations and discussed church organization. The end of the 1835 *Doctrine and Covenants* explains how the book was produced and accepted by the church. In the section titled "General Assembly," it explains that in September 1834 a general assembly of the church appointed a committee "to arrange the items of the doctrine of Jesus Christ, for the government of his church of the Latter Day Saints...."⁵⁴ The section continues, "These items are

⁵³ LDS D&C 37.

⁵⁴ *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints: Carefully Selected from the Revelations of God*, compiled by Joseph Smith, Jr., Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams (Kirtland, OH:

to be taken from the bible, book of Mormon, and the revelations which have been given to said church up to this date....”⁵⁵ Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon (who composed the First Presidency of the church), and Frederick G. Williams were members of the committee.⁵⁶ A year later in August 1835, the book was presented to a general assembly of the church with all of the priesthood leaders present. The leaders of each priesthood body accepted the book as “the doctrine and covenants of their faith” with a unanimous vote.⁵⁷

Joseph Smith’s authority to receive revelations on behalf of the church also included his authority to edit those revelations. This power demonstrates the flexible and developmental nature of Continuing Revelation in the early Latter Day Saint church. Joseph Smith began to edit the first edition of the Book of Mormon in 1830 and continued until 1837, when a second edition was published in Kirtland, Ohio.⁵⁸ Howard notes that the printer’s manuscript of 1829 was used to make over 2,000 recorded corrections, with an additional 1,000 corrections not included in the manuscript which was then used for the 1837 Kirtland edition.⁵⁹ Most of these corrections had to do with grammar and punctuation.⁶⁰ The 1837 edition also included “clarifying words and phrases” to update the text along with deletions to make the reading smoother; Howard notes that some passages had significant theological changes.⁶¹ Four particular passages dramatically

F. G. Williams & Co., 1835), 255. The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed Feb. 20, 2018, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/263>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 256-257.

⁵⁸ Howard, *Restoration Scriptures*, 27.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 27-28.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 28-33.

changed (in regard to theology) from the 1830 to the 1837 edition, showing Smith's evolving theology of God. These four passages change the reference to Mary in 1 Nephi 11:18⁶² from "mother of God" to "mother of the Son of God,"⁶³ in 1 Nephi 13:40 from "eternal Father," to "Son of the eternal Father,"⁶⁴ in 1 Nephi 11:21 when referencing the Lamb of God from "Eternal Father," to "Son of the Eternal Father,"⁶⁵ and in 1 Nephi 11:32 from "Everlasting God," to "Son of the everlasting God."⁶⁶ Clearly these edits completed under the direction of Smith show his changing view of God from the Father and the Son being one entity to each being a separate person. Howard notes that these revisions brought the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon into greater theological conformity with the 1835 edition of Doctrine and Covenants, which included a passage explaining that the Godhead is composed of two personages, the Father and the Son.⁶⁷ The 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon thus demonstrates how Smith used Continuing Revelation to innovate his movement's theology and edit past scriptural works to further codify that theology. New revelation had the power to change past revelation.

The church moved its headquarters to Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1839 after a short period in Missouri and this period saw the introduction of Smith's most radical concepts, including the practice of polygamy. The church had publicly espoused monogamy since its founding and a general assembly of priesthood leaders in 1834 had even ratified a section titled "Marriage" in

⁶² All Book of Mormon references are the LDS chapters and verses.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

the 1835 edition of Doctrine and Covenants which states, “In as much as this church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy: we declare that we believe, that one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband....”⁶⁸ This passage contains two points: that the church had been accused of polygamy as early as 1834 and that the church denied the accusations at the time. Recent scholarship shows that Smith may have secretly practiced polygamy as early as 1831.⁶⁹ Once in Nauvoo, Smith began introducing a small number of high church officials to the practice and he also initiated them into secret priesthood ordinances, although the practice was not made officially public until 1851.⁷⁰ In 1843, Smith recorded a revelation concerning polygamy, its relationship to priesthood, marriage and exaltation (the concept that men can become gods), and laws for taking plural wives.⁷¹ The revelation explains that a marriage will continue into eternity only if a man and woman are married through the priesthood and “then shall they be gods....”⁷² An eternal continuation of the family unit, “a continuation of the seeds forever and ever...,” is central to the concept of eternal marriage.⁷³ The revelation continues with a recounting of biblical figures who engaged in polygamy or who took concubines, citing Abraham and David.⁷⁴ The revelation also tells Smith that he has the priesthood power so that whatever he seals, binds, and forgives on earth will

⁶⁸ *Doctrine and Covenants*, 1835, 251.

⁶⁹ Smith, *Revelation, Resistance, and Mormon Polygamy*, 9.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷¹ LDS D&C 132.

⁷² LDS D&C 132: 19-20.

⁷³ LDS D&C 132: 19.

⁷⁴ LDS D&C 132: 19-39.

likewise be done in heaven.⁷⁵ The revelation commands Emma Smith, Smith's first wife, to submit to Smith or else she will be destroyed.⁷⁶ It also sets out that a man may take multiple virgins as wives; however, if a plural wife has relations with another man, it is adultery. Finally, wives must accept their husband taking plural wives, and that plural marriage is "to multiply and replenish the earth...and for their exaltation in the eternal worlds, that they may bear the souls of men."⁷⁷ This revelation represents a high point in Smith's priesthood authority and power. Smith used Continuing Revelation to completely void his church's previous doctrine on marriage and instituted an entirely new marriage practice, complete with laws and after-life consequences.

Another turning point in Smith's theology manifested during the Nauvoo period was publicized in a sermon he gave at a funeral on April 7, 1844, now known as the "King Follett discourse." The sermon lays out Smith's evolving theology of God, how God became God, a plurality of gods, and humanity's relationship to God. In the beginning of the sermon, Smith reveals, "...God himself...is a man like unto one of yourselves, that is the great secret," and explains that Adam was created in the literal image of God.⁷⁸ This warranted further explanation from Smith on how exactly God became God. The sermon then explains "...the Father of us all dwelt on an earth the same as Jesus Christ did...."⁷⁹ Smith continues to preach that a grand God called a council of gods in the beginning of creation, that God organized matter instead of

⁷⁵ LDS D&C 132: 45-46.

⁷⁶ LDS D&C 132: 51-54.

⁷⁷ LDS D&C 132: 61-65.

⁷⁸ "Discourse, 7 April 1844," in *Times and Seasons*, 15 August 1844, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 21, 2018, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-times-and-seasons/3>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 614.

creating out of nothing, compares the eternal spirit of man to God, and discusses salvation for the dead.⁸⁰ These theological developments were significant breaks with historical Christianity, even though he cited biblical passages in the sermon to support them. The discourse outlines the idea that God was once a mortal man on another earth, who somehow ascended to godhood and that man can do the same (this is termed the concept of Exaltation). Smith says, “You have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves; to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done; by going from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you are able to sit in glory as doth those who sit enthroned in everlasting power....”⁸¹ Many Latter Day Saints saw the King Follett Discourse as more truths revealed to Joseph Smith by God.⁸² The King Follett discourse shows how Smith used the concept of Continuing Revelation, and the Latter Day Saints’ faith in his ability to receive revelation, to completely re-write traditional theology. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, currently the largest of the Latter Day Saint denominations and headquartered in Utah, still teaches this principle of Exaltation today. The endurance of Smith’s peculiar theological innovations is a testament to the strength of his followers’ belief in his authority as prophet and power to receive revelation directly from God.

While a minority of members, including some in leadership positions, saw these Nauvoo doctrinal developments as too much to bear, the vast majority of members remained in the church. Widmer explains that a small number of members, including William Law, the Second Counselor in the First Presidency, became disenfranchised with Smith in Nauvoo and that the

⁸⁰ Ibid., 614-617.

⁸¹ Ibid., 614.

⁸² Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of God*, 14, 109.

King Follett discourse proved to be their breaking point.⁸³ They believed Smith had become a “fallen prophet” and thought these doctrinal developments, including polygamy and a plurality of gods, were contrary to his earlier revelations, including the Book of Mormon.⁸⁴ In response to the sermon, Law founded a 200-300-member church in Nauvoo preaching Smith’s doctrines before 1839 and the dissenters publicized their disagreements in the *Nauvoo Expositor*. This was a newspaper designed for the purpose of publicizing these doctrinal disagreements, which was then ordered to be destroyed by Smith at a city council meeting after its first printing.⁸⁵ These dissenters appear to have employed the same line of belief as the later Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, that of returning to an earlier doctrinal period preceding Nauvoo. Even this public display of dissent, including a high church official, did not seem to sway the majority of the Saints’ belief in Smith’s prophetic authority. Thousands of Saints continued in the faith after Smith’s death; they participated in temple rites, practiced polygamy, and upheld the doctrine of Exaltation. The majority of Smith’s followers trusted in his prophetic authority and ability to receive revelation, even in the face of peculiar developments in Nauvoo. After Smith’s assassination, Brigham Young became the second prophet to the majority of Mormons, built upon Smith’s examples of prophetic leadership and Continuing Revelation, and led the Saints across the plains to Utah.

Conclusion

It was the faith in Joseph Smith’s prophetic and revelatory authority that kept the majority of Latter Day Saints together even through Nauvoo’s questionable developments. The

⁸³ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 110-111.

faith in Smith's example and use of Continuing Revelation also guided those who rejected the Nauvoo developments and formed the RLDS church. Both of these traditions that grew out of the first fourteen years have one major concept in common: prophetic leadership determined through Continuing Revelation. Continuing Revelation was the crucial tool Joseph Smith used to found his movement, sanction his authority, declare his position, produce Latter Day Saint scripture, innovate theology, and keep the church together. Smith used Continuing Revelation early on in the movement to address general theological questions, church organization, and personal inquiries of his close associates. These early revelations and scriptural works, the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants, were centered around the emergence of an ancient text inspired by God and Smith's revelations regarding faith and church organization, respectively. Smith's authority as the prophet and sole receiver of revelation was also consolidated during the early period of the church. As the movement continued to grow and move, Smith used his power to receive revelation to introduce theological innovations and introduce concepts completely detached from both traditional Christianity and the early Latter-Day Saint church. After Smith was murdered in 1844, his prophetic authority, the belief in Continuing Revelation, and sense of community gathered around a prophet remained as the hallmarks of the entire Restoration movement. In this way, Smith produced a unique manifestation of Continuing Revelation in the early Latter Day Saint movement by relying on his followers' faith in his authority to receive revelation as the catalyst to introduce theological innovations and direct his movement.

Epilogue

Continuing Revelation remained as a central tenet to all churches that can be traced back to Joseph Smith, including the two largest: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, now Community of Christ. The

vast majority of Saints trekked to Utah and continued in the Nauvoo-era belief system. However, those members who dissented from Smith's later developments, including the early Nauvoo dissenters and those who later founded the RLDS church, did not deny Smith's earlier revelations. They simply believed Smith had become a "fallen prophet" and hoped to return to his earlier pre-Nauvoo teachings. Both denominations have a President who is also their Prophet, filling the role Smith once held. Continuing Revelation has become stagnated in the LDS church, with the last addition to Doctrine and Covenants occurring in 1978. Community of Christ's Prophet-President still receives and presents revelations to the church, which must be accepted by a World Conference held every three years. The last addition to Community of Christ's Doctrine and Covenants was in 2016. This demonstrates the significant power of these followers' faith in Smith's prophetic power to manifest Continuing Revelation and the concept's importance in the movement, even if some believe it had become tainted in later years.

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