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Introduction

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Introduction

John W. Welch

This volume strives to bring together all the known contemporaneous documents relevant to the key events of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ that were accompanied by divine manifestations: Joseph Smith's First Vision; the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; the restoration of priesthood authority; the heavenly visions received by Joseph Smith and his companions; and the bestowal of keys and the outpouring of holy gifts in the Kirtland Temple. We also present all known testimonies of those who were present on August 8, 1844, and saw the mantle of the Prophet Joseph Smith passing to Brigham Young, whether contemporaneous or later. These events are the backbone of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹ If

1. "We declare without equivocation that God the Father and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, appeared in person to the boy Joseph Smith. . . . Our whole strength rests on the validity of that vision. It either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud. If it did, then it is the most important and wonderful work under the heavens. . . . But this glorious vision was but the beginning of a series of manifestations that constitute the early history of this work. . . . [T]here followed the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. . . . There followed the restoration of the priesthood—first, of the Aaronic under the hands of John the Baptist, who had baptized Jesus in Jordan. Then came Peter, James, and John, Apostles of the Lord, who conferred in this age that which they had received under the hands of the Master with whom they walked, even 'the keys of the kingdom of heaven,' with authority to bind in the heavens that which they bound on earth (see Matt. 16:19). Subsequently came the bestowal of further

these visions, revelations, miracles, and powers were, in fact, received as claimed, nothing surpasses the importance of knowing so.

The plan of this book is to allow the documents, as much as possible, to stand for themselves. Contemporaneous documents are critical in getting close to these key events. Firsthand accounts uniquely convey the spirit of these important occasions. Eyewitness reports provide precious details that help modern readers construct a vivid image of what transpired. Although only a verbal shadow of greater realities, and although inevitably some reporters were more observant, better informed, or more articulate than others, the words of close participants offer us the feeling of almost being there.

The impact of these documents is cumulative. As one reads account after account, the truth becomes clearer. Together these accounts reliably reveal the inside story of the rise, progress, and faith of the Latter-day Saints in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s. As an author and editor, I have enjoyed reading these documents over and over, word by word. As these accounts become more and more familiar to me, I notice especially their honesty, integrity, consistency, and forthrightness. In transcribing, proofreading, and typesetting these powerful declarations, all who have worked on this volume have come closer to hearing the individual voices of these original writers. I recommend reading these crucial accounts slowly, thoughtfully, and at times even out loud. Listen as these numerous witnesses offer their own testimonies.

Many new historical resources have become available since the first edition of *Opening the Heavens*. Newly discovered testimonies have been added to this second edition. Many hours have been spent in updating the footnotes, especially to the Joseph Smith Papers Project. This valuable collection offers remarkable access to the earliest historical sources. The ebook version of the second edition includes live links to online resources that contain images of original documents and information about their creation. Readers will be able to access many of the documents from which individual testimonies were taken to learn more about their context and history. Single chapters, which also contain live links to sources, are available on the BYU Studies website (byustudies.byu.edu) for a modest download fee.

priesthood keys under the hands of Moses, Elias, and Elijah.” Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith,” *Ensign* 31 (November 2002): 78.

Each document in this collection is presented unvarnished, according to the established standards of documentary editing. Several documents are published here for the first time. Four of the chapters in this book appeared initially in *BYU Studies*. Since 1959, this quarterly journal has been a premiere voice of the Latter-day Saint academic community, placing great emphasis on the technical editing and groundbreaking publication of scores of newly discovered documents from the founding years of the Restoration. These scholarly treatments of primary sources have earned acclaim for their accuracy, reliability, and objectivity. The previously published articles and chapters have been brought up to date in this new edition, particularly with assistance by Erick B. Carlson, Jed Woodworth, Jennifer Hurlbut, and Sandra A. Thorne.

The value of these documents is immeasurable. In the history of world religions, no other body of foundational documentation rivals it for its immediacy and size. Think, for example, how few documents have survived from the time of Mohammed. And what would New Testament scholars give for a single letter from Mary or Martha about the raising of Lazarus? Or a diary entry by someone who was present when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River? Or a brief report from Peter to the Twelve about what he had just seen and heard on the Mount of Transfiguration? In the case of Joseph Smith and the key events of the Restoration, we enjoy, by comparison, an overwhelming abundance.

The function of this book is inviting. Each of these historical documents beckons to be understood. In a literal sense, documents do not speak for themselves, for they have no tongues, lips, or vocal chords that cry from their fragile paper and faded ink. Instead, readers supply the determinative factors of seeing (or not seeing), of catching (or missing), of emphasizing (or ignoring). Readers are invited to evaluate these primary documents themselves, to know what they say (or do not say).

We start with Joseph Smith's First Vision. Dean Jessee presents an up-to-date collection of all the known accounts that come from the lifetime of Joseph Smith: ten accounts in thirteen documents,²

2. See slightly different groupings of the same accounts in the discussion in "First Vision Accounts," one of the Gospel Topics Essays, available on *The*

including his journal entries, his letters to newspapermen, and the recordings of others who heard Joseph Smith relate his experience. As James Allen and I then show, these accounts are coherent, credible, and more consistent than some people have surmised. With the full record in view, one sees that Joseph Smith shared his Vision experience with intimate groups, the general public, enquiring visitors, and newspapermen, and he did so spontaneously at their request. Distributed authentically throughout these documents from 1832 to 1844, the details supplied by each of these accounts add to our understanding and enhance the credibility of the Prophet's story, as he addressed the particular needs and interests of various audiences.

The second key event in the Restoration, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, stands as a monumental miracle. One biblical scholar under whom I studied once compared the dictation of the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith to Moses' parting of the Red Sea. And rightly so. Dictating to his scribes, Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon in less than three months, from April 7 to the end of June 1829. The historical documents corroborate this feat. The data they contain are organized here into an annotated chronology. Over two hundred accounts from participants and observers reveal that many people immediately sensed the importance of the work that was taking place. More than any other Restoration event, the story of the golden plates piqued the public's interest. Years later, all Joseph Smith's closest associates—especially his wife Emma and the three Book of Mormon witnesses Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer—continued to tell remarkably consistent stories and never wavered in their testimonies of the Book of Mormon.

A surprisingly large number of early Church documents record crucial details about the restoration of both the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods. Brian Cannon and the BYU Studies staff introduce the seventy extant documents that deal directly with priesthood restoration. Half of these documents come from Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, the key participants. Nearly thirty other people voiced

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.lds.org/topics/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng#1>; and Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 31–66.

their understanding of what they had heard, often from Joseph or Oliver themselves. While May 15, 1829, the date of the Aaronic Priesthood restoration, is well known, the timing of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood is less clear. Though Cannon acknowledges that the documentary record has a few gaps, the available sources support the traditional dating of the Melchizedek Priesthood restoration in May–June 1829. The sources further reveal that early Church members realized the necessity of priesthood authority and understood that it had been restored from heaven.

During his prophetic ministry, Joseph Smith enjoyed the gift of seeing visions and receiving visitations. From the time he was fourteen, he garnered strength and knowledge from his communions with the heavens, which allowed him to establish the Church. He enjoyed numerous visions, and each was unique. Students of LDS Church history will readily recognize Joseph Smith's most famous visions. But Alexander Baugh goes well beyond those well-known few and places them against the expansive backdrop of many additional heavenly manifestations, some of which were simultaneously shared by multiple recipients. The impressive total truly evinces the opening of the heavens.

Several Church members experienced some of these heavenly manifestations with Joseph Smith at the time of the dedication of the Kirtland Temple in early 1836. If only one isolated account existed of the great pentecostal outpouring that accompanied this spiritual season, one might wonder about that account's accuracy or credibility. As Steven Harper shows, however, several people went home and independently recorded what they had just seen, heard, felt, and experienced. The keys that were restored on April 3, 1836, by Moses, Elias, and Elijah, constitute the basis of divinely authorized temple building, temple sealings, and temple work for the dead among the Latter-day Saints. This set of six contemporaneous documents brings attentive readers into the sacred spheres of the temple.

Fortunately, one more divinely manifested key event in the Restoration assures that these priesthood powers were not lost when Joseph Smith died. Many Church members reported that they received a strong spiritual witness that convinced them that Joseph Smith's mantle of authority had fallen on Brigham Young. Long an integral

part of Mormon history, the story of Brigham Young appearing and speaking as Joseph Smith at a public meeting on August 8, 1844, had not been fully documented until the late 1990s. Lynne Jorgensen has exhaustively chronicled all known written testimonies of this singular event. These statements, now numbering more than 120, come from a great variety of individuals and document the mantle experience as an extraordinary collective spiritual experience. Men and women, old and young, attest to it in greater numbers than ever was previously suspected. Some wrote as early as fall 1844; others wrote of this indelible experience much later. Several witnesses bore their testimony orally to their descendants, who then recorded their words.

Here are the documentary exhibits of the Restoration. They are open for the world to read. They may be judged without hesitation.

The outlook for this book of documents is enduring. It may be one of the most important LDS Church history books you will ever read, for these original, eyewitness accounts will outlive us all. They will last. A generation from now, few people will care how various historians in our day have interpreted the past. Academic reputations are short-lived, and popular memories are even shorter. Voguish theories come and go; they offer their flash of light on certain corners and fade out of fashion. But the original documents convey testimonies that will always be of utmost interest.

In submitting his Wentworth letter to the publisher of the *Chicago Democrat*, Joseph Smith made only one request: “All that I shall ask at his hands, is, that he publish the account entire, ungarnished, and without misrepresentation.”³ In this book, we hope to have complied with this request. Here are six major collections of key Restoration documents, in their full authenticity and veracity.

3. Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 1, 1842): 706–7, available on Church History Library, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-1-march-1842/4>.