

Section 47

On the day the Savior restored his Church, he commanded the Saints to keep records (D&C 21:1). Oliver Cowdery assumed the responsibility to do so, then the Lord called him on a mission. John Whitmer, meanwhile, returned from a mission and “was appointed by the voice of the Elders to keep the Church record.” Joseph asked him to also write and preserve a history of the Church. John didn't want to. “I would rather not do it,” he explained, “but observed that the will of the Lord be done, and if he desires it, I desire that he would manifest it through Joseph the Seer.”¹

That's when Joseph asked and received section 47. It assigned John to preserve the Church's history and also to copy Joseph's revelations. John accepted his revealed assignments. He was sustained by the Church at a special conference in April 1831, a month after the revelation, and began writing in June.² “I shall proceed to continue this record,” his first sentence says, “being commanded of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to write the things that transpire in this church.”³ John was not nearly as good a historian as Oliver. His history is an important but sketchy source that became quite cynical when John apostatized in 1838. John was faithful to his calling as a

¹ “[John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847](#),” p. 24, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 28, 2020.

² “[Minute Book 2](#),” p. 3, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 28, 2020.

³ “[John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847](#),” p. 1, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 28, 2020.

transcriber, however. Many of the earliest revelation manuscripts that exist are copies in his handwriting.⁴

Joseph had lived in John's home. John had scribed part of the Book of Mormon as Joseph translated. What does it tell us about Joseph Smith and the restoration that someone who knew him as well as John did would resist obeying Joseph's personal counsel and then obey a revelation received through Joseph? The people who knew Joseph best "accepted the voice in the revelations as the voice of God, investing in the revelations the highest authority, even above Joseph Smith's counsel. In the revelations, they believed, god himself spoke, not a man."⁵

⁴ "[Revelation Book 1](#)," The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 28, 2020.

⁵ Richard L. Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, edited by Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 258–9.