

Section 67

In November 1831 Joseph convened a council at the Johnson home in Hiram, Ohio, and laid the manuscript Book of Commandments before the Church leaders. It was the archive of dozens of his revelations. He felt that “the Lord has bestowed a great blessing upon us in giving commandments and revelations.”¹ He had testified that the contents of the book should “be prized by this Conference to be worth to the Church the riches of the whole Earth.” It was time to publish the revelations.²

Oliver Cowdery asked “how many copies of the Book of commandments it was the will of the Lord should be published in the first edition of that work.” The council voted for ten thousand.³ The Lord revealed a preface for the book in which he said, “These commandments are of me & were given unto my Servents in their weakness after the manner of their Language.”⁴

The question arose, “Was the simple language of Joseph Smith worthy of the voice of God?”⁵ Joseph’s history says that a discussion followed “concerning Revelations and

¹ “[Minutes, 1–2 November 1831](#),” p. 16, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

² “[Minutes, 12 November 1831](#),” p. 18, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020; Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, 30–36, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

³ “[Minute Book 2](#),” p. 15, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

⁴ “[Revelation, 1 November 1831–B \[D&C 1\]](#),” p. 126, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

⁵ Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 173–74.

language.”⁶ Other fears went unspoken during the discussion. After all, everyone in the room must have recognized that they were being asked to aid a poorly educated, twenty-six-year-old farmer who was planning to publish ten thousand copies of revelations that unequivocally declared themselves to be the words of Jesus Christ in a Protestant culture that widely believed the Bible to be all the word of God there ever would be. If that was not enough to make the elders consider carefully, the revelations Joseph proposed to publish called the Saints’ neighbors “idolatrous” and Missourians “enemies,” commanded them all to repent, and foretold calamities upon those who continued in wickedness. Finally, the revelations were not properly punctuated, the spelling was not standardized, and the grammar was inconsistent.

Though lacking confidence in his own literary skills, or perhaps even because of his limitations, Joseph was sure that his revelation texts were divine if imperfect productions. He promised the brethren present that they could know for themselves as well. Just a few days earlier, Joseph had predicted that if the Saints could all “come together with one heart and one mind in perfect faith the veil might as well be rent to day as next week or any other time.”⁷ Seeking confirmation of the revelations, the brethren tried to rend the veil like the Book of Mormon’s brother of Jared. They failed. Joseph asked why and received section 67.

The revelation challenges widespread but unfounded assumptions about what constitutes a revelation. Must it be literarily lovely? Some are, but not all. That or any other standard set by mortals will be subjective. The Lord will never satisfy all self-appointed editors. He does not seem worried about that. In contrast to the elders’ fears about that, the Lord seems utterly unconcerned. He does not ask whether Joseph dangled any of his participles or spelled everything just right. He asks whether the revelations are righteous. He thus sets a standard for truthfulness that involves observations and experiments but in the end can only be spiritually known for sure, for the things of God are known certainly only by communication from the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:10–14).

⁶ “[History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 \[23 December 1805–30 August 1834\]](#),” p. 161, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

⁷ “[Minutes, 25–26 October 1831](#),” p. 11, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

Section 67 does the work of giving the brethren a certain testimony of the revelations, even if it was not the dramatic one they hoped for. In section 67 the Lord reads their minds and provides them with a scientific, hands-on way of observing the properties of the revelations and using a sample from them as a control in an experiment. The Lord gives the kind of testimony the brethren were suited to receive and gently urges them to become humble and spiritual enough to part the veil between him and them completely. He invites them to touch, feel, hear, see, taste, and testify of the revelations. He invites them to know him insofar as they are able and to “continue in patience” until they know him face to face.

Joseph’s history and other sources tell us how the brethren acted out the instructions in the revelation and became willing to testify before the world. William McLellin, who had written as Joseph dictated section 66 the preceding week, “endeavored to write a commandment like unto one of the least of the Lord’s, but failed.”⁸ Joseph asked the men present “what testimony they were willing to attach to these commandments which should shortly be sent to the world. A number of the brethren arose and said that they were willing to testify to the world that they knew that they were of the Lord,” and Joseph received a revelation for them to sign as witnesses. McLellin signed along with four others, and John Whitmer copied the revelation and their signatures into the manuscript Book of Commandments.⁹

Twelve more elders signed the statement in Missouri when the book arrived there for printing. Joseph undoubtedly appreciated these witnesses. He knew he was no writer. He felt imprisoned by the “total darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.”¹⁰ He considered it “an awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord.”¹¹ Yet he knew the responsibility was his. The revelations said God had “called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from

⁸ “[History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 \[23 December 1805–30 August 1834\]](#),” p. 162, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020; Jan Shippo and John W. Welch, editors, *The Journals of William E. McLellin* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 251.

⁹ “[Revelation Book 1](#),” p. 121, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

¹⁰ “[Letter to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832](#),” p. 4, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

¹¹ “[History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 \[23 December 1805–30 August 1834\]](#),” p. 162, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.

heaven, and gave him commandments” and declared to him that “this generation shall have my word through you” (D&C 1:17; 5:10).

As section 67 acknowledged, these witnesses knew the limits of Joseph’s imperfect language. It was a striking vote of confidence in Joseph and his revelations for eighteen men who knew him to declare their testimonies that the revelations were true. The discussion about revelations and language concluded as “the brethren arose in turn and bore witness to the truth of the Book of Commandments. After which br. Joseph Smith Jr arose and expressed his feelings and gratitude.”¹² The bold project of publishing the revelations required fearless believers to sustain Joseph in his awesome responsibility.

¹² “[Minute Book 2](#),” p. 15, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2020.