

# Having More Learning Than Sense: William E. McLellin and the Book Of Commandments Revisited

*Mark R. Grandstaff*

IN NOVEMBER 1831, IN A SMALL out-of-the-way community in the Western Reserve of Ohio, known as Hiram, ten ordinary looking men met to discuss an extraordinary circumstance—the publication of a Book of Commandments. This book, however, was no mere compilation of Old and New Testament dictates, but a collection of allegedly “new” revelation. Their leader, and the revelator of these writings, Joseph Smith, Jr., called these men together to make some final decisions regarding the revelations’ impending publication.

Five of these men had been with Smith from the beginning of the Mormon movement in New York and were instrumental in prospering its causes. Oliver Cowdery, second elder of the Church of Christ and one of three special witnesses to the Book of Mormon, was Smith’s scribe and confidant. The Whitmer family—brothers David, John, and Peter—was also intimate with the young prophet. They provided Smith with a home and sustenance during his translation of the book. Like Cowdery, they along with their brother Christian were witnesses to the book and the unfolding Mormon drama.

Four of the remaining five men converted in Ohio. Sidney Rigdon, prominent ex-Campbellite minister, affiliated the previous year and successfully convinced Smith to move the Mormon group from New York to Kirtland, Ohio. Orson Hyde, a former Methodist, ex-Campbellite, and member of Rigdon’s Reformed Baptist group, had been baptized and ordained a Mormon elder by Rigdon a month earlier. Luke and Lyman Johnson were brothers who, with their family, had been baptized the

preceding spring and like Hyde were recently ordained. It was at the Johnson home in Hiram where part of Mormonism's early doctrinal foundation was laid.

The final convert, William E. McLellin, was introduced to the church by Samuel H. Smith and Reynolds Cahoon in Illinois sometime in July 1831.<sup>1</sup> Soon afterwards, he traveled over 450 miles to Independence, Missouri, to meet the Mormon prophet. He missed Joseph Smith but his exuberance for the new religion did not wane. Remaining in Independence in August, he was baptized and ordained an elder, and then set off with Hyrum Smith on a short mission back to Illinois. Finally, on 25 October 1831, after walking to Kirtland, he met Joseph Smith and like so many before asked for a revelation on his behalf.

Seven days later, these men met in what was for them "heady" times—the final dispensation of the fullness of times. Traditional LDS interpretations portray the November conference as a tumultuous affair: revelations were criticized, Smith's prophetic ability was challenged, and in a dramatic confrontation with Deity, the future apostate, William McLellin was humbled and rendered prostrate.

What interested me in this incident was a Gospel Doctrine lesson I heard in Detroit in the summer of 1989. The instructor informed us that he was qualified to teach this year's subject: besides serving in a number of leadership "callings," he had served a mission, had married in the temple, and perhaps more important had taken a class in LDS church history and the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C) at Brigham Young University. The D&C could be understood, he informed us, if studied in themes. Opening his official church manual, D&C, and other approved reference material, he began to explain the background to sections 66 and 67, revelations given to Joseph Smith on behalf of William McLellin. For the next forty minutes, McLellin was harangued, castigated, tried, convicted, and sentenced as an apostate "from the beginning."

From time to time I would raise my hand and ask questions about the instructor's source documentation, perspective, and insight into an event which few professional historians would claim. By this time, however, I could sense a general unrest among our group and perhaps from fear of being associated as one of McLellin's corroborators, I ceased my interrogations. I left that class, however, with a determination to understand the significance of what I had experienced along with a better conception of what happened that day in November 1831.

Much of the collective understanding we have about the November conference stems from late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latter-day

---

1. The name "McLellin" has several variations, M'Lellin, McLellan, and McLellen. In this essay I have standardized the usage to McLellin as per the period.

Saint authors who neither witnessed the event nor knew Smith or McLellin. The majority of this literature was conveyed to members through conference talks, church educational material, and Utah church-affiliated publishers such as Deseret Book.

The earliest secondary work to describe McLellin's role at the conference was a nineteenth-century biographical sketch of McLellin published in *The Deseret News* on 12 May 1858 as part of a history of the Quorum of the Twelve.<sup>2</sup> With the exceptions of dissidents McLellin, William Smith, and John F. Boynton, all sketches were either first-person accounts or gleaned from correspondence and journals. Wilford Woodruff, then serving as assistant church historian and author of the Twelve's history, found it difficult to piece together sketches of those who had left the church as many were "now out of the church & scarsly(sic) any record left whareby I can get a correct knowledge of their ministry or work."<sup>3</sup>

According to his journal entries, Woodruff wanted to write an "honest" history of the dissenters and was frustrated over the limited sources from which to draw.<sup>4</sup> Except for Luke Johnson, Orson Hyde, and Thomas B. Marsh, none of the Twelve available for interview in 1858 were members of the church prior to 1832, let alone present at the November 1831 conference.<sup>5</sup> Thus Woodruff had to rely on hearsay information and a few scattered sources. Knowing little about McLellin's role in the church in 1831 and 1832, he referred to the manuscript copy of the *History of the Church* to flesh out the period.<sup>6</sup> After incorrectly citing McLellin's birthplace and

2. It was also published later in *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 26 (1864): 807-809.

3. Wilford Woodruff's *Journal*, Volume 5, 1 January 1857 to 31 December 1861, Scott G. Kenny, ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Book, 1984), 38. For some insight into Woodruff's role as Church Historian, see Thomas G. Alexander's excellent biography, *Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 179.

4. *Woodruff's Journal*, 5:40. With the exception of Lyman Johnson, the sketches included all the original members of the Twelve. Of those eleven sketches, seven were written in first person, three in third person, and one, David Patten's, was taken from his journal. All of the third-person accounts were of dissidents McLellin, William Smith, and John F. Boynton. See all issues of the *Deseret News*, 24 Mar.-8 Sept. 1858. The original manuscript entitled "Biographies of the Twelve" is in archives, Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, UT; hereafter LDS archives.

5. Only Johnson mentions the 1831 conference in his history. He recalled that at this "conference, the eleven witnesses to the Book of Mormon, with uplifted hands, bore solemn testimony to the truth of that book, as did also the prophet Joseph." Nothing is said about McLellin's role. See "History of Luke Johnson," *Deseret News*, 19 May 1858, 1.

6. The manuscript copy of this history can be found in LDS archives as "History of the Church, 1839 to Circa 1882." The McLellin account is in Book A-1, 161-63. A copy can also be found in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings*, Vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1989), 367-68. See also *Times*

providing some background information in the first paragraph, Woodruff also cited several examples of McLellin's disobedience beginning with the incident at Hiram.

At his (McLellin's) request Joseph Smith inquired of the Lord concerning him, and received a revelation (see Doc. & Cov., Sec. 66.) Wm E. McLellin, as the wisest man in his own estimation, having more learning than sense, endeavored to write a commandment like unto one of the least of the Lord's, but failed: it was an awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord. The elders and all present that witnessed this vain attempt of a man to imitate the language of Jesus Christ, renewed their faith in the fullness of the gospel, and in the truth of the commandments and revelations which the Lord had given to the church through my instrumentality; and the Elders signified a willingness to bear testimony of their truth to all the world.

Woodruff further listed McLellin's disaffection as a member of the Twelve, his excommunication, and subsequent activities with the Missouri mobs as proof of his apostasy. His final conclusion regarding McLellin is interesting. "Bro. McLellin," Woodruff closed, "was a man of superficial education, though he had a good flow of language. He adopted the profession of medicine."<sup>7</sup> Woodruff's selection and ordering of the sources beginning with the 1831 conference portrayed an arrogant McLellin who allowed flaws in his personality and not in the church or its leaders to eventually lead him astray.

In 1888 George Q. Cannon published *The Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet* which relied heavily on the manuscript "History of the Church" in writing the story of McLellin and the November 1831 conference. Nevertheless, it contained some significant variations,

While at Orange (Ohio), William E. McLellin, one of the prominent elders, desired the Prophet to obtain the will of the Lord concerning him. Joseph complied, and through the word of the Lord which came as an answer to his prayer, William E. McLellin received much encouragement for what he had done; but he was commanded to repent of some things and was warned against adultery, a sin to which, he was inclined. He was promised great blessings if he should overcome. This instruction, direct from the Almighty, seemed to affect him for a time, but the words did not sink deep into his heart, because he soon rebelled and attempted to bring reproach upon the Church of Christ. He joined with other in whom the spirit of discontent was

---

and Seasons 5 (15 Apr. 1844): 496-97.

7. "History of William McLellin," *Deseret News*, 12 May 1858, 1.

brooding to find fault with the revelations of the Lord which Joseph received.

Specifically, about the conference, Cannon expounded,

When the Prophet returned to Hiram, the Lord condemned the folly and pride of McLellin and his sympathizers, and said to them that they might seek out of the Book of Commandments even the least of the revelations, and appoint the wisest among them to make one like unto it from his own knowledge. Filled with vanity and self-conceit, McLellin sacrilegiously essayed to write a commandment in rivalry of those bestowed direct from God upon the Church. But he failed miserably in his audacious effort to the chagrin and humiliation of himself and his fellows.<sup>8</sup>

While Cannon, like Woodruff, interpreted McLellin's behavior at the 1831 conference as leading to McLellin's later disaffection, he also added two key ideas which were recorded in neither the manuscript version of the "History of the Church" nor in Woodruff's biographical sketch. First, Cannon assumed that it was criticism of the revelations which elicited section 67. The manuscript, on the other hand, written in Willard Richards's hand presumably in 1842, recorded that it was after the reception of the "Preface" (sec. 1) that "some conversation was had concerning the revelation and language." As a result, section 67 was received. Nowhere in the revelations does it say specifically that there was criticism.

Second, Cannon inferred that this criticism was initiated by McLellin and other members. Because McLellin made the attempt to write a revelation, and Joseph Smith later chided him for his presumptuousness, Cannon assumed that McLellin must have been the chief antagonist. Again, the "History of the Church" does not make this clear. A causal connection can only be loosely inferred. Cannon's embellishment of the facts presented McLellin as rebellious, sacrilegious, and humiliated by his failure to successfully besmirch the revelations of the church.

At the turn of the twentieth century, church historian Andrew Jenson compiled *A Latter-Day Saints' Biographical Encyclopedia* which was primarily a collection of short sketches about prominent men and women of the church. In regards to McLellin, Jenson copied Woodruff's biographical sketch and added Cannon's part about McLellin's criticizing the revelations at the November conference.<sup>9</sup> Because McLellin had died since the writing of Woodruff's sketch, Jenson added "He [McLellin] finally died in

---

8. George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith, The Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1888), 123-24.

9. Andrew Jenson, *A Latter-Day Saints' Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: The Andrew Jenson History Co., 1901), 82-83.

obscurity at Independence, Jackson County, Mo., April 24, 1883." The line about dying an obscure death completed Woodruff's and Cannon's interpretation of McLellin as a modern-day Book of Mormon dissenter much like Nehor and Korihor as he resigned McLellin to a similar fate—an ignominious death.<sup>10</sup>

Though flawed and unsubstantiated, Woodruff's sketch, Cannon's conceptualization of McLellin's role at the conference, and Jenson's addition to and synthesis of the two works is the common theme in many secondary works. Of the thirty-seven works describing this event, the majority rely on Joseph Smith's history and the Woodruff-Cannon-Jenson synthesis to weave their narrative.<sup>11</sup> For instance, in 1917 Orson F. Whitney in the April general conference spoke on the subject of revelation and used the Woodruff-Cannon-Jenson synthesis as an interpretive theme from which to draw a spiritual lesson from the 1831 conference. Taking the synthesis one step further, Whitney interpreted the 1831 conference as a confrontation between the learned and the Lord. As a result, Whitney introduced a new theme—"The Lord's Challenge"—which had implica-

---

10. More work is needed to understand how groups form conceptions of organizational dissenters. My content analysis of the published *History of the Church* reveals a developing organizational paradigm which correlates dissent with biblical figures such as Satan and Judas or Book of Mormon characters such as Nehor and Korihor. Of the 105 references to apostates in Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Period I, History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet*, ed. B.H. Roberts, 6 vols., 2d ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1955), 9 percent compared dissenters to notorious scriptural persons. In the case of McLellin, 17 percent of the works refer to his ignominious or obscure death. The same wording applied to the death of Nephite apostate Nehor in the Book of Mormon (Alma 1:15). Additionally, the description of the McLellin incident is remarkably similar to that of Alma's confrontation with Korihor (Alma 30). After having challenged the head of the church, Korihor is struck dumb, and admits having been deceived by the devil. Reduced to poverty, Korihor is forced to beg for food and eventually is killed by a group of renegade Nephites. "And thus we see the end of him who perverteth the ways of the Lord," Alma cautions, "and thus we see that the devil will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell" (30:60). Two important works essential to an understanding of a society's need for developing such mythologies are Dan P. McAdams, *Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of Self* (New York: William and Morrow and Co., Inc., 1993), and Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Also useful is David Thelan, "Memory and American History," *Journal of American History* 75 (1989): 1117-29.

11. See the appendix for a list of secondary works used in this study. It should be noted that few publications of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) address McLellin's role at the conference. Nothing is mentioned in Inez Davis's *The Story of the Church*. Literature produced by the Temple School relies on the LDS interpretation of the McLellin episode. F. Henry Edwards's commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants, however, downplays the criticism and McLellin's role at the conference. He suggests that the elders were sincerely seeking spiritual reassurances.

tions for those who thought that they could second-guess or criticize church leaders. Questioning the brethren was similar to questioning the Lord.<sup>12</sup>

According to Whitney, McLellin and a group of members (no longer accorded the status of prominent elders) saw themselves as superior to Smith and his revelations. Deity perceived their intentions and challenged them to write a revelation equal to Smith's.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Elder Charles Hart, nine years later in general conference, told a "similar" story. This time, however, the challenge was interpreted as analogous to the biblical confrontation between Elijah and the priests of Baal.<sup>14</sup> By the late 1940s, the "challenge motif" continued with only minor variation. One novel interpretation described the conference as a show down between Smith and McLellin.

He (McLellin) proposed in a sarcastic attitude of criticism and ridicule that the revelations be rewritten and revised, to go forth to the world in perfect English. This was a severe rebuke to Joseph Smith and might have been a source of embarrassment, as a few friends of McLellin's and the apostates in that neighborhood were in full sympathy with his philosophy. The Lord answered the challenge, thereby exalting the Prophet in the eyes of his friends and dethroning the "brilliant" McLellin . . . McLellin gladly accepted the challenge and wrote a document for the group to consider. Upon reading it they pronounced a failure, agreeing that the revelations were certainly "of the Lord."<sup>15</sup>

This motif was further introduced into the 1954 work *Teachings of the Doctrine and Covenants* prepared for LDS Sunday schools and published by the Deseret Sunday School Union. One objective of this lesson was to warn LDS intellectuals who might question the revelatory process or church leaders' decisions.

---

12. Orson F. Whitney, in *Conference Reports* (7 Apr. 1917), 42.

13. Ibid. Whitney wrote, "In the early days of the Church certain of its members who thought they had made the Prophet Joseph Smith, because they had had a little more schooling than he, presumed to sit in judgement upon the revelations that he had received from the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord, by the Prophet told them the thoughts of their hearts in these searching words: (quotes D&C 67:5-8).

"Well, one of them, who thought himself the wisest, and who possessed some learning, took up the challenge and actually attempted to frame a revelation; but it was a flat failure. He could utter, of course certain words, and roll out a mass of rhetoric; but the divine spirit was lacking, and he had to acknowledge himself beaten."

14. Charles H. Hart, in *Conference Reports* (4 Apr. 1926), 132-33.

15. E. Cecil McGavin, *The Historical Background of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Paragon Printing Co., 1949), 174.



The intellectual who discovers in the scriptures, ancient or Modern, mistakes in grammar must beware lest the finding leads him to undermine the sure word of God and result in a loss of his own faith. . . . [Addressing the 1831 conference] It is not surprising that some still doubted that the various writings presented to them and the message delivered were revelations from the Almighty. Some of the revelations bore so patently the form of expression of the Prophet that William E. McLellin challenged the Prophet openly, charging that Joseph had written some of the so-called revelations entirely out of his own mind. McLellin's challenge, together with the feeling that others might be similarly skeptical, caused the Prophet to turn again to the Lord for aid . . . the result was another revelation (D&C 67).<sup>16</sup>

According to this interpretation, McLellin challenged Smith not only because of the poor grammar and style of the revelation, but because its content seemed contrived. McLellin was then challenged by the Lord to duplicate the least of the revelations. The author elaborated,

McLellin, perhaps under the urging of others, accepted the challenge. He retired from the conference and, in the solitude of his room, attempted to write that which might sound like a revelation from the Lord. On November 2nd he appeared again in the conference and with tears in his eyes begged the forgiveness of the Prophet, of his brethren, and of the Lord. He could not write a revelation. Try as he might, he could not write that which would sound as if it were a revelation from the Lord.<sup>17</sup>

The inference seems clear: To be learned is good, *if* they (intellectuals) hearken to the counsels of God (church authority).

Over the next thirty years few in the Utah church's leadership attempted further public interpretation. Sunday school courses, such as Gospel Doctrine, increasingly stressed the application of doctrine, not church history. Though some courses in the late 1970s and early 1980s did cover the Doctrine and Covenants from an historical perspective, William McLellin and the November 1831 conference were given little coverage.<sup>18</sup>

---

16. William E. Berrett, *Teachings of the Doctrine and Covenants, Course 27* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School General Board, 1954), 4-5.

17. *Ibid.*

18. In addition to the Sunday school material, other "official" media also continued to pursue the connection between McLellin, criticism of church leaders, and apostasy. In 1985, for instance, a *Church News* article was run on the alleged McLellin materials of Mark Hofmann. Tied in with this commentary was another article written by a professor of speech communications at Eastern Illinois University titled "McLellin became enemy of Church," which freely borrowed from Jenson's *Biographical Encyclopedia* complete with McLellin again dying in obscurity. See Calvin N. Smith, "McLellin Became Enemy to



According to a 1978 detailed lesson plan, a member of the class was to read out loud a paragraph entitled "The Critic's Failure."<sup>19</sup> In almost catechistic style, the teacher was then to ask the class, "What was the effect of William E. McLellin's failure upon the other brethren present?" According to the manual, the proper response was: "The brethren renewed their desire to bear witness of the Book of Commandments."<sup>20</sup>

In the 1989 Gospel Doctrine manual, all references to McLellin's criticism of the revelations were deleted. The lesson was aimed at doctrinal application to daily life. While in the past, scriptural applications were drawn from historical events and actors, this manual elicited experiences from class members to make these distinctions.<sup>21</sup> The latest 1993 Gospel Doctrine manual attempts a balance between lessons derived from the examination of church history and members' experience. During the lesson on D&C 66-70 members are cautioned not to find fault with church leaders. It further cited D&C 67 and McLellin's challenge of the revelations as proof of the 1839 Joseph Smith statement which said that those who found fault with church leaders were on the "high road to apostasy." Moreover, the text inferred that those "who question" like McLellin could lose their "crown of eternal life" (D&C 66:12).<sup>22</sup>

Although the image of the apostate McLellin challenging Smith at the 1831 conference seemed fixed in Mormon memory, the 1970s also saw some historians slowly challenge the accepted interpretation. Surprisingly, however, few discounted the Woodruff-Cannon-Jenson synthesis: (1) Criticism of the revelations led to the reception of D&C 67, which challenged the antagonists; (2) McLellin as one of the chief antagonists accepted the challenge and made the attempt to construct a revelation; and (3) he failed. General histories such as James Allen's and Glenn Leonard's *Story of the Latter-Day Saints*, Donna Hill's *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon*, Milton Backman's *The Heavens Resound*, and more specialized histories like Lyndon Cook's *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* or graduate studies such as Robert Woodford's dissertation on the Doctrine and Covenants and

---

Church," *Church News*, 27 Oct. 1985, 7, 13.

19. This passage was the incident described in the manuscript "History of the Church," 163.

20. *Doctrine and Covenants, Section 1 through Section 102*, Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Supplement (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978), 144-47.

21. *The Doctrine and Covenants and Church History, Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 17. Almost all references to church history had been edited and the entire manual was reduced at least 50 percent in size from the preceding edition.

22. *The Doctrine and Covenants, Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1991), 39-40.

Max Parkins's "Conflict at Kirtland" depend heavily on the "synthesis" to explain the event.<sup>23</sup>

Yet some of these works do offer some important variations. For instance, Donna Hill made it clear that McLellin was not the only follower of Smith who had tried to receive a revelation.<sup>24</sup> Milton Backman took a different approach. Elders (including McLellin) who attended the conference presumed the revelations were true. However, "some of them recommended that the language of certain revelations be improved prior to their publication."<sup>25</sup> This concept differs from the interpretations of George Q. Cannon or William Berrett where McLellin is sacrilegious and openly combative. Dan Vogel, in his work on religious seekers and early Mormonism, interpreted McLellin's criticism of the revelations as an objection to the codification of religious principles and authority.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Lyndon Cook in his narrative on the historical background of Doctrine and Covenants 67 suggested that it was time for a reinterpretation of the event. Cook wrote,

Care should be taken not to condemn McLellan unduly for his participation in this matter. McLellan had met Joseph Smith for the first time only seven days before this meeting. Because he later became a bitter enemy of the Prophet, it is easy to adopt a retroactive interpretation of this circumstance. Consider section 68, which refers to him as one of the faithful elders of my church.<sup>27</sup>

The first step in reevaluating the incident entails a review of the

---

23. See the appendix for citations.

24. Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1977), 141.

25. Milton V. Backman, Jr., *The Heavens Resound, A History of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio, 1830-1838* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983), 90-91. Backman, after reading an early draft copy of this essay, adopted the Jensen synthesis in his newest work on the Doctrine and Covenants. See his *Joseph Smith and the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992), 2-3.

26. Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 110. If there was any confrontation it may have been over this subject. For example, in spring 1832 (most likely 1831) David Whitmer said he objected to printing the revelations on the basis that it would form a creed from which to judge church members. He also objected to the changes made to the revelations as they were being prepared for publication as the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835 and strongly disagreed with the publication of such "sacred things" as it often enraged the non-members who read them. See David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Nauvoo, IL: New Nauvoo Neighbor Press, 1976), 51-55. It is the reprint of the 1887 original.

27. Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: Seventy's Mission Bookstore, 1981), 105-108.

primary sources. The manuscript "History of Church" is a logical place to start.<sup>28</sup> It does describe McLellin as a vain, self-conceited individual who, as the wisest man in his own estimation, took it upon himself to write a revelation in accordance with section 67's instructions.<sup>29</sup> There is reason, however, to question Joseph Smith's description of the November conference and McLellin in 1831.

For example, the account of this 1831 conference was not recorded until sometime in 1842 by Willard Richards who had joined the church in 1835. As it was the first event written by Richards, and since he was not present at the time, Joseph Smith or someone else helped with its writing. Assuming that Smith aided the new historian, his perception of McLellin was probably colored by McLellin's later dissent.<sup>30</sup>

Central to Smith's view of dissenters were events which transpired in Ohio and Missouri in the late 1830s. Within a period of two years over a third of church leaders had disaffiliated. With the exception of Smith, all nine elders who attended that November 1831 conference had been by 1842, at one time or another, disfellowshipped or excommunicated. Only two, Sidney Rigdon and Orson Hyde, would return during Smith's lifetime. McLellin, excommunicated in 1838, did little from that time on to endear himself to Smith. Indeed, Smith, like other Saints, began to classify dissenters (especially those who would openly confront Smith) as apos-

---

28. Thanks to Dean Jessee's and Howard Searle's work on Joseph Smith's history we know that its reliability is questionable. The sheer number of scribes, inadequate contemporary source material, many authors, breaks in actual writing all point to a document that must be seriously evaluated before basing conclusions about the past. See Dean Jessee's "The Reliability of Joseph Smith's History," *Journal of Mormon History* 3 (1976): 23-46; and Howard Searle, "Early Mormon Historiography: Writing the History of the Mormons, 1830-1858," Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1979.

29. Those who do not have access to the manuscript history can also find the McLellin incident in Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:224-26. Its narrative, with the exception of editor B. H. Roberts's marginalia, does not causally connect the reception of Doctrine and Covenants 67 with criticism of the revelations. Evidently Roberts relied on Cannon's input when editing the early volumes of the history. In fact, Roberts's own *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Century I*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1930) fails to make any mention of McLellin's role at the November 1831 conference. For an important analysis of Roberts's contribution to LDS church history, see Davis Bitton, "B. H. Roberts as an Historian," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3 (Winter 1968): 25-44; and more recently Bitton's and Leonard J. Arrington's *Mormons and Their Historians* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 69-86.

30. Joseph Smith desired Richards to accelerate the writing of the history during this period. Within six months of becoming the historian, Richards produce almost twice as much as the previous historians combined. Little time was spent in proof-reading and editing the document. See Howard C. Searle, "Willard Richards as Historian," *Brigham Young University Studies* 31 (Spring 1991): 45-46.

tates and judases.<sup>31</sup> By 1842 the expulsion of the Mormons from both Ohio and Missouri was increasingly interpreted as the doings of disaffiliates like McLellin. These events could certainly bias Smith's perception of McLellin's role at the November 1831 conference.

Though the published *History of the Church's* account may be biased, it still makes no connection between the alleged criticism and the receipt of section 67. In fact, no nineteenth-century primary source made that correlation. Of the sixteen contemporary journals which mention McLellin, none discusses his role at the 1831 conference—neither do the two Mormon newspapers, *The Evening and the Morning Star* and *The Messenger and Advocate*. Searches of John Whitmer's history, *The LDS Herald*, *The Deseret News*, *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, Sidney Rigdon's *Messenger and Advocate*, McLellin's own paper, *The Ensign of Liberty* (published at Kirtland, 1845–49), and the McLellin collection at both the LDS and RLDS archives reveal nothing about McLellin's presumptuous criticism and challenge.<sup>32</sup>

There are enough nineteenth-century sources, however, to reconstruct McLellin's attitude toward the church and Smith in 1831 and 1832. In an 1848 editorial in his paper *The Ensign of Liberty* McLellin discussed his conversion to Mormonism and subsequent meetings with Smith in late October and November 1831.

I united with the Church of Christ on the 20th day of August, 1831, in Jackson County, Mo., and I was administered to in baptism and confirmation by Elder Hyrum Smith, the brother of Joseph. I first heard his preaching in Paris, Edgar County, Ill. When I heard it, I made up my mind that there was more in it than any religion I have ever before heard advocated; consequently, I put myself to the trouble and expense of travelling about 450 miles, in order to examine the matter. And after all the examination I was capable of making, I was fully convinced and converted to the doctrine and practices of the church as they were then held and taught.<sup>33</sup>

Of the meeting with Smith, McLellin added,

---

31. See n10.

32. McLellin's letters to Joseph Smith III, however, do mention the November 1831 conference. In both cases, he says nothing about the alleged criticism of the revelation but attacks Smith's later alteration of the revelations' contents. See William E. McLellin to Joseph Smith III, 10 Jan. 1861, from Linden, Genesee County, Michigan, and McLellin to Smith, July 1872, from Independence, Missouri (originals in archives, the Auditorium, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Independence, MO; hereafter RLDS archives).

33. *Ensign of Liberty* 1 (Jan. 1848): 60–61.

We [McLellin and Hyrum Smith] reached Kirtland [from Independence] on the 18th day of Oct., and on the 25th I attended a general conference in the town of Orange, about 20 miles distant. Here I first met and formed an acquaintance with Joseph Smith Jr., Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, John Whitmer, &c. . . . Following this conference I went home with *The Prophet* and on Saturday, the 29th, I received through him, and wrote from his mouth a revelation concerning myself (D&C 66). I had expected and believed that when I saw Bro. Joseph, I should received one: and I went before the Lord in secret, and on my knees asked him to reveal the answer to five questions through his Prophet, and that too without his having any knowledge of my having made such request. I now testify in the fear of God, that every question which I had thus lodged in the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, were answered to my full and entire satisfaction. I desired it for a testimony of Joseph's inspiration. And to this day consider it to me an evidence which I cannot refute.<sup>34</sup>

The recent availability of McLellin's 1831 diary substantiates McLellin's later recollection. In diary entries dated 25-29 October 1831, McLellin wrote of his first meeting with Joseph, his ordination, Joseph healing his ankle, the reception of D&C 66, and his attendance at the Hiram conference. On 30 October 1831, two days before the alleged altercation between an arrogant McLellin and the prophet, he recorded,

This day the brethren and sisters collected at Bro. J. Johnson's. And the brethren called on me to preach. But it seemed to me as if I could not. Here was the church who had been instructed by the first elders in the church. Here was Brothers John, Sidney, Oliver, and Joseph and it did not seem to me as if I could instruct them or even entertain the Congregation; but with confidence in Enoch's God I arose and addressed them about one hour and a half.<sup>35</sup>

In this state of mind, it seems highly improbable that McLellin would challenge the revelations and Joseph Smith's prophetic ability. Moreover, diary entries through November 1831 exhibit no animosity toward Joseph, the church, or the revelations. McLellin related only that having received the word of the Lord from Joseph, he was "determined to obey it." He wrote nothing of the "confrontation" over the revelations.<sup>36</sup>

---

34. *Ibid.*, 61.

35. William E. McLellin journal, 30 Oct. 1831, McLellin papers, LDS archives.

36. Some may argue that journal writers often keep their own indiscretions out of their daily writing. I see no evidence of McLellin attempting to gloss over his own failings. In fact, on several occasions he is quite candid. For instance, his entry for 20 August 1831 discusses some of his fears and limitations. After a struggle with personal doubt about himself, he wrote, "I did not doubt the truth of the things which I had

Further supporting McLellin's attitude toward the church and Joseph during this period is a 4 August 1832 letter from McLellin to his brother Samuel in Carthage, Tennessee. In the letter, he explained the missionaries' teachings, the testimony of David Whitmer about the Book of Mormon, and his attendance at October-November 1831 conferences.

On the 25th Oct. I attended a conference, where I first saw and became acquainted with Joseph. About 40 Elders attended. General peace pervaded the conference and much instruction to me. From thence I went home with Jos. and lived with him about three weeks; and from my acquaintance then and until now I can truly say I believed him to be a man of God. A Prophet, a Seer and Revelator to the church of Christ . . . We [the Mormons] believe that Joseph Smith is a true Prophet or Seer of the Lord and that he *has* power and *does* receive revelations from god, and that these revelations when received are of divine authority in the church of christ.<sup>37</sup>

Contemporary sources demonstrate that in 1831 and 1832 McLellin was no dissenter and that the part McLellin played at the November 1831 conference has been greatly exaggerated, if not counter-factual.<sup>38</sup> From

---

embraced [Mormonism], but my fears were respecting my own salvation." His early journals give some intimate insights into his life.

37. William E. McLellin to Samuel McLelin, 4 Aug. 1832, 4, RLDS archives.

38. This does not mean that McLellin did not have other foibles which got him into trouble with church leaders. On 3 December 1832, Joseph Smith records in his diary that McLellin was excommunicated (in Dean C. Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984], 16-17). It is not clear why this happened unless it had to do with his failing to complete a mission the preceding spring and possibly committing adultery. According to McLellin, while on his mission in Ohio he became sick and decided to stay in the town of Middlebury and recuperate. While there he became a clerk in a country store, did not preach "in public," and returned in April to Hiram. At Hiram, he met Emiline Miller and after a four-day courtship was married (William McLellin to Samuel McLellin, 4 Aug. 1832). See also "The History of Luke Johnson," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 26 (1864): 835.

Joseph Smith in a letter to his wife, Emma, was not pleased with McLellin's decisions to return from his mission and marry. Joseph writes, "I am not pleased to hear that William McLelin has come back and disobeyed the voice of him who is altogether Lovely for a woman. I am astonished at Sister Emaline yet cannot belive she is not a worthy sister. I hope She will <find> him true and kind to her but have no reason to expect it his Conduct merits the disapprobation of every true follower of Christ but this is a painful subject . . ." (Joseph Smith, Jr., to Emma Smith, 6 June 1832, in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 238-39).

Besides returning from his mission early, McLellin may have failed to receive a divorce from his first wife, Cynthia Ann, who "deprived him of her most lovely endeavors to render him happy and agreeable." Emiline, on the other hand, "rendered him happy and filled him with hopes that he could spend the remainder of his days tranquilly as it respects matrimonial subjects" (William McLellin to Samuel McLellin, 4



the sources available, some churchmen embellished the events to teach specific lessons, and professional historians failed to seriously question the documents and their interpretation. Moreover, those who desired to make McLellin into an example of criticism, irreverence, and apostasy may have done their history a great disservice. They may have missed the significance of the occasion—the continued use of witnesses to verify the “truthfulness” of inspired documents. These nine men were to the Book of Commandments what the eleven witnesses were to the Book of Mormon.

The use of witnesses to verify “historical” documents has its roots in the Book of Mormon. While both the New and Old Testament use witnesses to identify misconduct or as a witness to Jesus and the early Christian movement, the Book of Mormon linked witnesses to verify the “truthfulness” of divinely inspired texts.<sup>39</sup> Speaking of Isaiah’s witness of Christ, Nephi records,

And my brother, Jacob, also has seen him [Christ] as I have seen him; wherefore, I will send their words forth unto my children to prove unto them that my words are true. Wherefore, by the words of three, God hath said, I will establish my word. Nevertheless, God sendeth more witnesses, and he proved all his words (2 Ne. 11:3).

About the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, Nephi explained,

at that day when the book shall be delivered unto the man of whom I have

---

Aug. 1832). By early 1833, McLellin evidently repented and was restored to fellowship in the church as he served missions to Illinois and Missouri during much of that year.

39. According to Mosaic law, for instance, it took two or more witnesses to condemn a person to death for murder (see Deut. 17:6; 19:15). Jesus, speaking to his disciples in the New Testament, explained how his followers should handle personal grievances: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him of his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or more witnesses every word may be established” (Matt. 18:16).

The apostolic church not only applied the concept, but institutionalized it. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians testifies of his witness of Christ, admonishes their unbelief, and exclaims, “This is the third time I am coming to you. In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established” (2 Cor. 13:1). Writing to Timothy about discipline procedures in the church, Paul cautions him not to receive accusations against elders, but rather before two or three witnesses. For background material, see David F. Freedman, et al., eds., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 114-15; *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 249. For a traditional Mormon perspective on the use of witnesses, see Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 436-37.



spoken [Joseph Smith, Jr.] the book shall be hid from the eyes of the world, that the eyes of none shall behold it save it be that the three witnesses shall behold it, by the power of God, besides him to whom the book shall be delivered; and they shall testify to the truth of the book and the things therein . . . wherefore, the Lord God will proceed to bring forth the words of the book; and in the mouth of as many witnesses as seemeth him good will he establish his word; and wo be unto him that rejecteth the word of God (2 Ne. 27:12, 14).

Soon after Joseph Smith finished dictating this portion of the Book of Mormon, he was importuned by Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris to have them be the three witnesses. In revelation Smith was told that they would see the plates as well as the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, and the Liahona. "And it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them," the revelation said, "even by that faith which was had by the prophets of old. And after that you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them by the power of God" (D&C 17:1-3).

A short time later, the three witnesses accompanied by Smith had a spiritual manifestation in which the plates were revealed by an angelic visitor. Following the visitation, all three drew up a document which bore testimony of the divine nature of the Nephite record. Eight other witnesses were shown the plates devoid of any spiritual or emotional displays. They likewise created a document testifying of the physical appearance of the plates. These "testimonies" were then published in the first edition of the Book of Mormon. Four of the eleven witnesses of the Book of Mormon were present at the November 1831 conference in Hiram, Ohio.

According to the Far West Record, dated 1 November 1831, ten elders gathered at the November conference at Hiram, Portage County, Ohio, to discuss publication of Joseph Smith's revelations. The fact that they were revelations was understood. McLellin, for instance, had already received assurances of Smith's prophetic ability seven days earlier. The focus for this meeting, however, was the number of copies to be published. Oliver Cowdery, second elder of the church and clerk of the conference, "made a request desiring the mind of the Lord through this conference of Elders to know 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 elders discussed the issue, pondered it, and then unanimously voted that 10,000 copies should be made. This completed, the conference adjourned till the afternoon.<sup>40</sup>

---

40. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983), 26-28.

Understanding the implications of the morning meeting is important to our reinterpretation. First, the revelations of Joseph Smith had been compiled and after publication could be distributed to members of the church. Until the establishment of a printing press, few members would know the content of these revelations. After their dissemination, these revelations would in time become the genesis of organizational structure and tradition—the basis from which Utah Mormonism would later construct a political state and a religious tradition.<sup>41</sup>

Second, the fact that Cowdery lead the meeting and specifically asked the elders present to discern the will of God rather than defer to Smith's guidance is not surprising. Mormonism during this period was more equalitarian and considerably less hierarchial than it would later become.<sup>42</sup> Gifts of the spirit, for example, whether revelation, speaking in tongues, or discerning spirits, were given to various members of the church. "For all have not every gift given unto them," Smith wrote, "for there are many gifts, and to every man is given another, that all may be profited thereby." Cowdery's earlier failure to translate, for instance, was not so much viewed as a divine rebuke as it was a misuse of talents. He had been given other gifts, including "the spirit of revelation" and the "gift of Aaron." While early sections of the Book of Commandments attest to Smith's ability to translate and receive revelation, it was a gift, not a divine right.<sup>43</sup>

---

41. See Vogel, 110.

42. See Thomas O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 156-60; and Vogel, 144.

43. The ten elders were representative of the transition which the movement was undergoing—the five New Yorkers were part of a small network of primitivist believers who aided Smith in his translation, the Ohioans had joined Smith's church. For the New Yorkers, nothing other than Smith's "gift" to translate the plates and receive revelations with the aid of a stone seemed to differentiate Smith from them. The Cowderys, the Whitmers, the Pages, the Smiths, who formed the early nucleus of the Mormon movement, all participated in the sharing of spiritual gifts from emotional rapture to heavenly visitations.

By 6 April 1830, however, the nature of Smith's role changed. In a revelation purportedly co-authored with Cowdery, known as the "Articles and Covenants of the Church," they were designated first and second elder of the church. This codification of membership standards and ecclesiastical structure would later be viewed as one of the first steps toward the centralization of Smith's religious and secular power.

For families who had been with Smith in New York the distinction was not so obvious. In September 1830 the Cowderys and Whitmers listened to a new seer, Hiram Page. While a significant number of revelations increasingly pointed toward Smith as leader of the church, it was section 28, a response to Page's revelations, which made it explicit. In referring to Smith as Moses and Cowdery as Aaron, the verses delineated their roles and placed Smith in a superior position: "... I say unto thee, no one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant

When the Hiram conference reconvened, Joseph Smith received a revelation known as the Preface to the Book of Commandments (later D&C). Though there is no specific record about how this revelation was received, McLellin provided insight into the process.

I, as scribe have written revelations from the mouth of both the Revelators, Joseph Smith and David Whitmer. And I have been present many times when others wrote for Joseph; therefore, I speak as one having experience. The scribe seats himself at a desk or table, with pen, ink, and paper. The subject of inquiry being understood, the Prophet and Revelator inquires of God. He spiritually sees, hears, and feels, and then speaks as he is moved upon by the Holy Ghost, the "thus saith the Lord," sentence after sentence, and waits for his amanuenses to write and then read aloud each sentence. Thus they proceed until the revelator says Amen, at the close of what is then communicated. I have known both those men mentioned above, to seat themselves, and without premeditation to thus deliver in broken sentences, some of the most sublime pieces of composition which I ever perused in any book.<sup>44</sup>

Following receipt of this revelation, Joseph Smith addressed perhaps the most important aspect of the conference. "Inasmuch as the Lord has bestowed a great blessing upon us in giving commandments and revelations," Smith queried, "what testimony should [we] attach to these commandments which should shortly be sent to the world?" Immediately, several of the elders stood up and said that "they were willing to testify to the world that they knew that they were of the Lord." Some who failed to obtain a spiritual manifestation as to the truthfulness of the revelations were hesitant to do so. Section 67 was then received.

Section 67 was *not* given because the elders criticized Smith's grammar. Rather, the section explained why they failed to receive a spiritual

---

Joseph Smith., Jun for he receiveth them even as Moses. And thou shalt be obedient unto 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 if thou art led at any time by the comforter to speak or teach, or at all times by the way of commandment unto the Church, thou mayest do it. But thou shalt not write by way of commandment, but by wisdom; and thou shalt not command him who is at thy head, and at the head of the church (D&C 28:2-6)."

As second elder Cowdery would speak and teach within the bounds established by Joseph who would receive commandments as head of the church. In Ohio Smith would receive additional challenges to his spiritual authority by others claiming revelations. The transition from "charismatic authority" to institutional hegemony, though in process, was far from complete. Nevertheless at the November 1831 conference Cowdery in his position of second elder and as an Aaron to a modern-day Moses directed this meeting. See Vogel, 104-13, 144 for a similar discussion.

44. *Ensign of Liberty* 1 (Aug. 1849): 98-99.

manifestation in regards to the Book of Commandments. It then provided definite instructions on how to "prove" the revelations. The elders were told in the revelation that the manifestation did not appear because "Ye endeavored to believe that ye should received the blessing which was offered unto you; but behold verily I say unto you there were fears in your heart, and verily this is the reason that ye did not receive" (D&C 67:3).<sup>45</sup>

Only seven days earlier at conference in Orange, Ohio, a similar discussion ensued over the elders' ability to discern the "will of God." Sidney Rigdon instructed the new elders,

When God works, all may know it, for he always answered the prayers of the Savior, he makes his children one by his holy spirit, he binds their hearts from earth to heaven . . . God always bears testimony by his presence in counsel to his Elders when they assemble in perfect faith and humble themselves before the Lord and their wills being swallowed up in the will of God.

Following Rigdon's remarks, Smith added, "It is the privilege of every Elder to Speak of the things of God &c, And could we all come together with one heart and one mind in perfect faith the vail might as well be rent today as next week or any other time . . ."<sup>46</sup>

In that instruction, novitiates were counselled to be unified in faith, humility, mind, and heart. If so, God would not only reveal his will, but himself. These teaching were reiterated in section 67:

And again, verily I say unto you that it is your privilege, and a promise I give unto you that have been ordained unto this ministry that inasmuch as you strip yourselves from jealousies and fears and humble yourselves before me, for ye are not sufficiently humble, the veil shall be rent and you shall see me and know that I am not with the carnal neither natural mind, but with the spiritual . . . Ye are not able to abide the presence of God now, neither the ministering of angels; wherefore continue in patience until ye are perfected. Let not your minds turn back; and when ye are worthy, in mine own due time, ye shall see and know that which was conferred upon you by the hands of my servant Joseph Smith, Jun. Amen (D&C 67:10-14).

---

45. See F. Henry Edwards, *The Edwards Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Independence, MO: Herald House Publishing, 1986), 256-59, for a similar interpretation regarding the reception of a spiritual manifestation. The concept of the heart and mind being receptive to revelation is central to Mormon theology. Oliver Cowdery, for instance, was instructed in April 1829 that spiritual insight is not a product of the "heart" only. The use of the intellect could not be ignored in seeking the revealed word (D&C 8 and 9).

46. Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record* (25 Oct. 1831), 20.

Though failing to receive a manifestation in connection with the Book of Commandments, the elders were told of an alternative means to gain such a witness. In verse 5, they were told what they already knew—Joseph Smith was neither learned nor perfect. His grammar was poor and undoubtedly Cowdery, Rigdon, David Whitmer, and McLellin were more eloquent. Keeping Smith's educational background in mind, the elders were told to choose the weakest of Smith's revelations, select the most learned among them, and then to produce one like it. If they could, the revelations were not divine. If a revelation could not be produced, then this test coupled with their knowledge of Smith's background testified to the revelations' truthfulness. They must "bear record" of the same.

In order to follow the revelation's instructions, William E. McLellin, a school teacher, the most recent convert, and a newly ordained elder, volunteered or was chosen to make the attempt.<sup>47</sup> He then failed to produce a revelation. With his failure, the conference adjourned for the night.

On the following day, 2 November, the conference opened with a prayer by Oliver Cowdery. Lyman Johnson was ordained an elder by Sidney Rigdon and Cowdery again read the revelation (D&C 1) to the group of elders. All then arose in turn and bore witness to the truthfulness of the Book of Commandments. During the meeting, a joint statement was prepared in which those present "testified" of the truthfulness of the revelations.<sup>48</sup>

With one exception, the Book of Commandments document was similar to those signed by the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. While

---

47. Prior to his joining the church, McLellin taught school in five different states. In Kirtland the church hired him to teach common school where he taught the subjects of penmanship, arithmetic, English grammar, and geography. He also taught grammar in the School of the Elders. For background on McLellin's teaching experience, see *Messenger and Advocate*, Feb. 1835, 80. For more about his work at the School of the Elders teaching grammar, see Heber C. Kimball, "Extract from Journal," *Times and Seasons* 6 (1845): 868; "The History of Heber C. Kimball," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 26 (1864): 568; and Benjamin F. Johnson to George S. Gibbs, 1903, in E. Dale Lebaron, "Benjamin Franklin Johnson: Colonizer, Public Servant, and Church Leader," M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1967, 325.

48. According to the Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:226, this document was to be published as a part of the Book of Commandments. The only existing statement, however, is an unsigned copy in the manuscript history. B. H. Roberts attributes the destruction of the printing press in Missouri as the reason why it was not published in the first edition of the Book of Commandments. Whether signed or not, the *Far West Record* indicates that each of the elders stood and "bore witness to the truth of the Book of Commandments (Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 28). Later in 1835 a similar testimony was printed in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants to which all members of the Quorum of the Twelve including McLellin had their names attached.

the document of the Three Witnesses proclaimed a personal angelic visitation, and the statement of the Eight Witnesses rationally described the character and nature of the gold plates, the wording of the Book of Commandments's testimony claimed a charismatic witness. Following McLellin's failure, the testimony of the Book of Commandments was given to the elders, "through the Holy Ghost, shed forth upon us, that these commandments were given by inspiration of God, and are profitable for all men, and are verily true."<sup>49</sup>

This third means of verifying the "truthfulness" of inspired documents, like its own predecessors, also had its basis in the Book of Mormon. The manuscript should be read, pondered upon, and then in a spirit of humility the seeker of truth should ask God if the work is "true." If the seeker asks, "with real intent, having faith in Christ, he [God] will manifest it unto you by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost, ye may know the truth of all things" (Moro. 10:3-5).

Was this pattern institutionalized for subsequent revelations? It seems likely, for in November 1835 at Kirtland, Ohio, a revelation pertaining to the Quorum of the Twelve was received. Of the event, Joseph records,

Thursday 5th [November 1835] attended School, Isaac Morley came in from the east this morning I was called to visit Thomas Burdick, I took my scribe with me and we prayed for and laid our hands on him in the <name> of the Lord Jesus and rebuked his affliction - Wm E. McLellen and Orson Hyde <both at the November 1831 conference> came in and desired to hear the revelation concerning the Twelve, my scribe read to them they expressed some little dissatisfaction but after examining their own hearts, they acknowledge it to be the word of the Lord and said they were satisfied; after School Brigham Young came in and desired also to hear it read. After hearing it he appeared perfectly satisfied; in the evening lectured on Grammar.<sup>50</sup>

Even as late as 1978, revelations were separately confirmed by prominent elders in the church (general authorities). In a stake conference of the Great Falls, Montana East Stake, in October 1985, Elder Richard G. Scott, then a president of the First Quorum of Seventy, explained the details surrounding the 1978 revelation extending the priesthood to all worthy males. Scott further explained that upon its reception, Mormon prophet Spencer W. Kimball contacted every general authority individually and asked him for his feelings, comments, and approval. Following

---

49. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:226.

50. Excerpt from Joseph Smith's 1835-38 diary in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 72.

their consent, the "revelation" was announced and then presented to the body of the church for its sustaining vote. While Scott saw this gesture to the general authorities as a measure of Kimball's humility, it was, in effect, a continuation of a policy established at the November conference in 1831.<sup>51</sup>

In conclusion, the distorted interpretation of McLellin's role at the 1831 conference obscured both the meaning of the event—witnesses to the Book of Commandments—and a third method of receiving spiritual inspiration as conveyed in the Book of Mormon and used by the young prophet—a charismatic witness.<sup>52</sup> The nine witnesses, like the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, found their doctrinal guidelines in "revealed" texts. In the case of the Book of Mormon, two tests, one spiritual and one rational, were prepared. Three witnesses allegedly saw and conversed with an angel, while the other eight handled the plates. A similar dialectic governed the witnesses to the Book of Commandments. On one hand, the elders were to rationally duplicate an inspired scripture and in the event of failure testify to the manuscript's "truthfulness." On the other hand, God manifested its truth by the charismatic dispensing of his holy spirit. This balance between rationalistic explanation and charismatic experience is at the core of Mormon theology and may well exemplify the differences in the LDS/RLDS traditions.<sup>53</sup>

---

51. Excerpts of Scott's remarks are recorded in my diary, 28 Oct. 1985.

52. The use of the Book of Mormon as a guide to early church organizational and doctrinal development needs more work. One important contribution to the recent scholarship is Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), who argued for a reinterpretation of the impact of the Book of Mormon on early church development. In this instance, Smith's use of witnesses was consistent with and developed within the context of the Book of Mormon.

53. Some may argue that my use of a charismatic typology is ahistorical. On the contrary, the emphasis on charismatic and rationalistic concepts when discussing antebellum religion and Mormonism is not new. The work of Vogel, 110-11, and RLDS historian, William Russell, "The Latter Day Saint Priesthood: A Reflection of 'Catholic' Tendencies in Nineteenth Century American Religion," *Restoration Studies* (Independence, MO: Temple School, 1980), 232-41, speak to this dialectic. In a broader scholarly setting, Anthony F. Wallace, Paul Johnson, William McGloughlin, Peter Berger, Paul Tillich, and Emile Durkhiem among others use similar categorization. Even the seminal work of political historian Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), used the categories of liturgical and pietists to describe those who were attracted to rational or "enthusiastic" religion. Certainly, Joseph Smith's own conversion experience (especially his 1832 narrative) portrays a young man torn between the universalism and rationalism of his father's beliefs and his mother's charismatic leanings. I see Joseph's own conversion as coming, not through a charismatic experience, but through a visitation with a supernatural being which rationally discourses with him. It is not an intellectual leap to assume that Mormon theological roots were steeped in the rationalism of the



During the last 162 years, rather than explore the theological implications of D&C 67, some church leaders developed an elaborate mythology describing the November 1831 conference. This interpretation explained to faithful the nature of apostasy and apostates. Significantly, the story of McLellin is typical of a genre which correlates dissent with biblical figures such as Satan, Cain, and Judas or with Book of Mormon characters such as Nehor and Korihor. The McLellin story establishes a paradigm from which an intellectual's dissatisfaction with the church or church leadership can be understood and rationalized by Mormon membership. One who questions, indeed, has "more learning than sense" and is a potential candidate for apostasy.

It is time for a reinterpretation of disaffiliation and organizational mythology through a cautious review of Mormonism's early beginnings "by study and by faith," "through the mind and through the heart."<sup>54</sup> It is time to stop fearing intellectual inquiry and go about the work of salvation remembering that all are sinners and that God's purposes cannot be frustrated. Ultimately, only truth will set us free. For now, however, when Mormons of any tradition raise their hands to sustain a revelation, from branch administrative action through general conference pronouncement, they like their leaders are participating in a ritual which extends back to the early decades of the Restoration. This procedure unites them with the original witnesses of the Mormon movement. In a sense, it says to all believers that their opinions, abilities, and spirituality are valued, that all of them from the most senior general authority to the youngest new born baby girl are co-equals in the work of building the church, the Kingdom of God, and Zion. It is something that the various Mormon traditions share. It is something with my own church's increasing size and growing bureaucracies I hope we never lose.

---

Enlightenment and the "enthusiasm" generated during the awakenings. The words "charismatic" and "rationalistic" may be ahistorical terms, but nevertheless capture the meaning of the events transpiring in Mormon theological development in 1820 as well as in 1993.

54. A profitable starting place may be to examine the dated but useful work of Meyer N. Zeld and Roberta Ash, "Social Movement Organizations: Growth, Decay, and Change," *Social Forces*, Mar. 1966, 327-41. More current is Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh's *Becoming an EX: The Process of Role Exit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). See also Roger D. Launius and W.B. Spillman, eds., *Let Contention Cease: The Dynamics of Dissent in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Independence, MO: Graceland/Park Press, 1991).

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF REFERENCES TO WILLIAM E. McLELLIN  
AND THE NOVEMBER 1831 CONFERENCE

1. George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith, The Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1888), 123-24.
2. Andrew Jenson, *A Latter-day Saint's Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Co., 1901), 82-83.
3. Orson F. Whitney, "Conference Talk," *Conference Reports* (Apr. 1917), 42-43.
4. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press Co., 1922), 140-41.
5. Charles H. Hart, "Conference Talk," *Conference Reports* (Apr. 1926), 132-33.
6. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Council of the Twelve Apostles, 1946), 1:246-50.
7. William E. Berrett, *The Restored Church*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1943), 131.
8. E. Cecil McGavin, *The Historical Background of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Paragon Printing Co., 1949), 173-74.
9. William E. Berrett, *Teachings of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School General Board, 1954), 2-5.
10. Roy Doxey, "The Doctrine and Covenants, Lesson 52," *Relief Society Magazine* 50 (Oct. 1963): 774-77.
11. Roy Doxey, *The Latter-day Prophets and the Doctrine and Covenants. Vol. II, Sections 42-76* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1964), 377-81.
12. Melvin R. Brooks, *LDS Reference Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 3:176-78.
13. William E. Berrett, *Teachings of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1968), 200-203.
14. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Doctrine and Covenants Teacher's Supplement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1971), 167-71.
15. Ivan J. Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1973), 200-03.
16. Max H. Parkin, "Kirtland, A Stronghold for the Kingdom," in F. Mark McKiernan et al., *The Restoration Movement* (Independence MO: Herald House, 1973), 63-98.
17. Robert J. Woodford, "The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants," Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1974.
18. James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 68.

19. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Doctrine and Covenants, Sections 1 Through 102, Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Supplement* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978), 144-47.
20. Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 103-105.
21. Richard O. Cowan, *Doctrine and Covenants: Our Modern Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 1:352-57.
22. Lyndon Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: Seventy's Mission Bookstore, 1981), 107-108.
23. L. G. Otten and C. M. Caldwell, *Sacred Truths of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Springville, UT: LEMB, Inc., 1982), 327-33.
24. Milton V. Backman, Jr., *The Heavens Resound* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983), 90-91.
25. Evan A. Fry, "The Language Problem in Revelation," in *Restoration Scriptures: Part Three. Doctrine and Covenants* (Independence, MO: Temple School General Leadership Program, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1983), 137-39.
26. Inez S. Davis, *The Story of the Church* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1983), 123.
27. Robert J. Woodford, "The Story of the Doctrine and Covenants," *Ensign* 14 (Dec. 1984): 32-37.
28. Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, *Hearken, O Ye People: Discourses on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Sandy, UT: Randall Book Co., 1984), 17-30.
29. Robert J. Woodford, "How the Revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants were Received and Compiled," *Ensign* 15 (Jan. 1985): 27-33.
30. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *The Doctrine and Covenants and Church History, Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Supplement* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 79-82.
31. Calvin N. Smith, "McLellin became enemy of Church," *Church News*, 27 Oct. 1985, 7, 13.
32. F. Henry Edwards, *The Edwards Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Independence, MO: Herald House Publishing, 1986), 256-59.
33. Michael J. Preece, *Learning to Love the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: MJP Press, 1988).
34. Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 110.
35. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *The Doctrine and Covenants, Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 17.

36. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Church History in the Fullness of Times: The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church Educational System, 1989), 119.

37. Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith and the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992), 2-3.