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Richard L. Bushman

# The Rhetoric of Revelation

## Ancient and Modern Models

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### Summary

Richard Bushman compares the limitation of Joseph Smith's language with the striking linguistic features of the revelations he received that are now included in the Doctrine and Covenants. Of particular interest to Bushman are those sections in which the Lord is speaking directly to his people—revelations that mix sublime religious teachings with ordinary details of church business.

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## The Little, Narrow Prison of Language: The Rhetoric of Revelation

Richard Lyman Bushman

I would like to raise an old question about Joseph Smith's revelations, a question that arose early in church history, when plans were first being made to publish the compilation of revelations called the Book of Commandments. My question is about the language of the revelations, more particularly about how the words are put together to achieve their effects. Joseph noted in his history that at the November 1831 conference in Kirtland, where publication of the revelations was approved, "some conversation was had concerning revelations and language."<sup>1</sup> This was the same occasion on which William E. McLellin, apparently the leading critic of the language, was challenged to make a revelation himself and failed. The elders at the conference watched while McLellin made "this vain attempt of a man to imitate the language of Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup> Joseph noted afterwards in his history that "it was an awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord."<sup>3</sup>

My interest in the language of the revelations differs from that of McLellin, who apparently thought that the writing was unworthy of the Savior. I do not want to open myself to the criticism that Joseph made of McLellin, that he had "more learning than sense."<sup>4</sup> I am more interested in the structure of the language than in its quality; I want to look at how the revelations are put together as rhetorical constructions. I do not feel that they fall below a suitable rhetorical standard; in fact, I am impressed with how effective the revelations are and would like to know how they work rhetorically to achieve their impact.

Consider section 4 of the current Doctrine and Covenants, which is possibly the revelation that McLellin tried to imitate. He had been challenged to "seek ye out of the Book of Commandments, even the least that is among them," (D&C 67:6) and try to better it. Section 4 fills less than half a page and is just seven verses long, making it a logical choice. Yet in that brief space, the revelation interweaves phrases from eight scattered biblical passages—Mark, Corinthians, John, 2 Peter, Matthew, Luke, James—blending them into a single energetic call to the latter-day work, beginning with words from Isaiah: "Now behold a marvelous work is about to come forth among the children of men."<sup>5</sup> It is a piece of writing not easily tossed off by even an experienced hand.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 1:224.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 226. See Mark R. Grandstaff, "Having More Learning than Sense: William E McLellin and the Book of Commandments Revisited," *Dialogue* 26 (winter 1993): 23–48.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *History of the Church*, 226;

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of



The problem of language becomes more complex when we recall that to some extent the revelatory language was confined to the vocabulary of Joseph Smith. The revelations were couched in words he knew. We might think otherwise from some of Joseph's comments about the language of Jesus Christ and writing in the name of the Lord, as if the revelations were transcripts from heaven, but the preface to the Book of Commandments explicitly states that the commandments were given to the Lord's servants "in their weakness, after the manner of their language" (D&C 1:24). The revelations were given in English—not Hebrew or reformed Egyptian—and the vocabulary shows few signs of going beyond the diction of a nineteenth-century common man. The revelations from heaven came through the mind of Joseph Smith and were expressed in his language.

That the revelations were given "after the manner of their language" (D&C 1:24), meaning the language of the Lord's weak servants, resulted in fairly severe rhetorical limitations. Joseph had no grounds for claiming special powers of language: he lacked all formal training and attended school for a few months at most. In fact, Emma said that he could scarcely write a coherent letter when she married him.<sup>6</sup> He had never been exposed to literature—none of the classics of antiquity, no Shakespeare or Pope, and likely no Jefferson or Franklin. We know he consulted the Bible, but his mother said that he had not read it through before he translated the Book of Mormon. He was less bookish than her other children.<sup>7</sup> We have no glimpses of him, like the young Abraham Lincoln, reading a book by firelight. Manchester had a lending library, but the Smiths are not known to have patronized it.<sup>8</sup> He likely read newspapers and almanacs more than any other kind of writing, and he doubtless heard sermons, although the family did not attend church regularly. The dominant source of Joseph's language must have been the speech of family and neighbors. Speech is not a shallow well of language, as we know from the rich speech of societies with few printed resources, and the Smiths were a verbal family, if Lucy's later autobiography is any indication. But overall the written words within Joseph's reach were not plentiful. The plain language available for Joseph's revelatory rhetoric necessarily ascended to its greatest heights in the words of the English Bible.

Joseph recognized the limits of his language in a November 1832 letter to W. W. Phelps, the editor of the church newspaper in Missouri. Joseph ended the letter with a prayer for the time when the two of them should "gaze upon eternal wisdom engraven upon the heavens, while the majesty of our God holdeth up the dark curtain until we may read the round of

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Illinois Press, 1984), 221 n. 54.

<sup>6</sup> See *ibid.*, 96.

<sup>7</sup> See Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (New York: Arno, 1969), 73, 84.

<sup>8</sup> See Robert Paul, "Joseph Smith and the Manchester (New York) Public Library," *BYU Studies*

eternity.”<sup>9</sup> At last, he hoped, they might be delivered “from the little, narrow prison, almost as it were, total darkness of paper, pen and ink;—and a crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language.”<sup>10</sup> The words suggest that Joseph envisioned more than he could express and wanted language that was straight and whole rather than crooked and broken. He seemed to feel the same constraints as Moroni, who said the Nephites stumbled “because of the placing of [their] words” (Ether 12:23–25). The revelation to the elders at the November 1831 conference, when the question of Joseph’s language was raised, said, “His language you have known, and his imperfections you have known” (D&C 67:5). The Lord did not deny Joseph’s imperfections in writing, but he rebuked the elders for looking on them.

Joseph Smith never claimed to be Shakespeare or Dickens; he admitted his own limitations, which are acknowledged in Doctrine and Covenants section 67. Yet the revelations convinced the elders at the November 1831 conference that “these commandments were given by inspiration of God, and are profitable for all men, and are verily true.”<sup>11</sup> Given the circumstances of their composition, the revelations are surprisingly effective even in our day, making the question of their rhetoric all the more interesting.

Keeping in mind the limitations on Joseph’s language, we turn to what I call the rhetorical structure of the revelations. As compiled in the Doctrine and Covenants, the revelations take many forms: excerpts from letters, reports of visions, prayers, items of instruction, formal statements of the church. I wish to deal with only one type—the classic revelations that begin with an address from the Lord to a listening audience, such as an individual, a group of elders, or the church and world at large. One example is the opening line of section 1. The Lord begins by saying, “Hearken, O ye people of my church, saith the voice of him who dwells on high” (D&C 1:1). Most of the revelations before 1837 take this form of direct address from God to the people.

The structure of these revelations, the center of my interest this morning, can be explained with an analogy. These classic revelations can be thought of as constructing a rhetorical space comparable to the physical spaces where talk takes place. We all know the differences that space makes when people talk to one another. Think of talking across the kitchen table in contrast to an interview with the bishop in his office. The circumstances in kitchen and office create entirely different atmospheres: sports shirts and slacks versus Sunday clothes; flowered wallpaper versus a picture of the temple; gossip and personal stories versus personal

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22 (summer 1982), 333—56.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *History of the Church*, 299.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

worthiness interviews, spirituality, and callings. Where talk takes place always makes a difference. Think of the differences between a lecture in a college classroom versus a casual conversation at a bus stop, or a conversation on the dance floor compared to Jerry Sloan's talking to the players on the basketball floor. Each situation sets up roles for the speakers and listeners, prescribes certain ways of speaking, and establishes relationships among the people in that space. On the dance floor there are brief, perhaps sweet exchanges; on the basketball floor the coach barks directions at the players. Whoever we may be in other environments, we mold our conduct according to the setting.

In the same manner, writing sets up rhetorical spaces in which the relationship of the writer (or speaker) and the reader (or listener) is fixed by the writing itself. Although it is without such stage props as a bishop's desk or a blue suit, the writing assigns roles and establishes relationships. An IRS tax form establishes itself as the purveyor of rules that must be obeyed. An autobiography turns readers into intimate acquaintances who are to learn all the writer's secrets. A newspaper article brings us dispatches from the front, with the reporter assuming that readers want to know what is happening in the world.

Thinking in this vein, we can ask what kind of rhetorical space the revelations construct. What relationship do they set up between the reader, the speaker, and the writer, Joseph Smith? The striking feature of Joseph's classic revelations is the purity of God's voice coming out of the heavens and demanding our attention. The first verse of section 1 speaks with this crystalline clarity: "Hearken, O ye people of my church, saith the voice of him who dwells on high, and whose eyes are upon all men; yea, verily I say: Hearken ye people from afar; and ye that are upon the islands of the sea, listen together." In that passage and through the entire revelation, the Lord speaks and readers and hearers are called on to give heed. *Listen*, *hearken*, and *hear* are the words with which the classic revelations open, and the voice of God comes out of the heavens and into our ears. From the first word a relationship is put in place: God speaks to command or instruct, and we listen. The relationship is formal, demanding, and riveting. God is speaking.

The voice is pure because God alone speaks. Joseph Smith, who we know actually dictated the revelation, is absent from the rhetorical space. One relationship prevails in these revelations: God speaking to his people. Isaiah and most of the other Old Testament prophets intervene to mediate between the Lord and the people. When we read Old Testament passages that begin with the phrase *thus saith the Lord*, we hear God himself, but Isaiah often comes in as a commentator and a teacher, explaining to readers what the Lord implies. Isaiah is never far out of the picture. In the Book of Mormon and New Testament, God rarely speaks in the first person. Most of the scriptures are sermons or letters written by one of the prophets, or a narrative of events, with only occasional interjections of God's words spoken in the first person.



A typical example of this is Nephi's lengthy revelations of world history: Nephi generally reports on what he sees, and he and the attending angel—not the Lord—do most of the talking (see 1 Nephi 11–14).

These guides and mediators are absent in Joseph Smith's revelations. The Lord speaks directly to his audience, whether it be one person or the whole world. "Hearken, my servant John," the Lord says to John Whitmer, "and listen to the words of Jesus Christ, your Lord and your Redeemer" (D&C 15:1). Such is the interpersonal structure of the rhetoric: the Lord addresses the reader or listener without any intervening presence. "Hearken," the reader is told, and then the words come head-on: "For behold I speak unto you with sharpness and with power, for mine arm is over all the earth" (D&C 16:2).

Joseph Smith's authorship, his role as revelator, is obliterated from this rhetoric, even though the recipient of the revelation may have actually heard the words come from Joseph's mouth. Though Joseph was the author in the naturalistic sense, the voice in the revelation is separate from the voice of the Prophet. In fact, in the revelation's rhetorical space Joseph is placed among the listeners. When rebukes are handed out, he is as likely as anyone to be the target. The first revelation to be written down, as far as we know, was the current section 3 in the Doctrine and Covenants, and it is directed entirely at Joseph Smith. Given in July 1828 after the loss of the 116 pages of Book of Mormon manuscript, the revelation had no public venue at the time. There was no church and virtually no followers save Joseph's family members and Martin Harris. In section 3 he stands alone before the Lord to receive a severe tongue-lashing: "Remember, remember that it is not the work of God that is frustrated, but the work of men; for although a man may have many revelations, and have power to do many mighty works, yet if he boasts in his own strength, and sets at naught the counsels of God, and follows after the dictates of his own will and carnal desires, he must fall and incur the vengeance of a just God before him" (D&C 3:1). I consider this revelation an extraordinary rhetorical performance. Joseph, probably alone, writes a revelation spoken purely in the voice of God directed entirely against Joseph himself, rebuking him mercilessly for his weakness: "For thou has suffered the counsel of thy director to be trampled upon from the beginning" (D&C 3:15). The words of the revelation create a rhetorical space in which God addresses Joseph as a separate being, and reading it now we see young Joseph, new and inexperienced in his calling, cowering before an angry voice originating entirely outside his mind. All this happens inside the rhetorical space formed by the revelation.

This rhetorical construction of two distinct persons—the Lord and Joseph Smith—is so real that we are inclined to think that a being stood before Joseph Smith to deliver the scolding. In fact, the structure of rhetorical space in the Doctrine and Covenants has, I believe, affected the Latter-day Saint tradition of religious painting. When Latter-day Saint artists portray God

revealing himself to humanity, they choose different occasions than other Christian artists. The most commonly depicted revelation in the Christian tradition, judging from my informal survey of the art in a few of our major museums, is the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary about her calling as the mother of Jesus. In these scenes, Gabriel speaks as beams of golden light radiate from a distant heaven. Less commonly, Old Testament prophets or the authors of the four gospels are shown writing while angels speak in their ears. Angels are common mediators in all these scenes, as are streams of light pouring out of heaven and on to the revelator.

Latter-day Saint artists, on the other hand, are more likely to select scenes of another kind. Although Joseph received most of his revelations through the Holy Ghost, Mormon artists most often choose the first vision to represent his revelations. In radiant glory, God and Christ are present in person, their heads turned toward a kneeling Joseph, who hears the words coming from their mouths. They speak to him, not through him, a circumstance that is in contrast to other Christian paintings, which depict the angels speaking through the gospel writers. In Latter-day Saint paintings, the message does not pass from God through the angels to the prophet and then to the people; rather, God or Christ personally do the speaking, and the prophet is the hearer. We favor this scene, I believe, because of the way rhetorical space is formed in the classic revelations, in which God speaks directly to his people. Because of our familiarity with rhetorical space in the Doctrine and Covenants, Latter-day Saints imagine revelation as God addressing someone directly.

The purity of God's voice in the classic revelations makes a second feature of the revelations' rhetorical space all the more startling: the insertion of mundane matters into exalted revelations on the doctrine and plans of the Lord. The revelations mix sublime religious teachings with humdrum details of church business in a way that causes critical commentators, such as Fawn Brodie, to laugh.<sup>12</sup> Details about the Nauvoo House appear alongside high religious language about spreading the gospel to the four corners of the earth. Section 93, which offers a long meditation in the spirit of the first chapter of John, begins, "I am the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world," and goes on to declare, "Man was also in the beginning with God" (D&C 93:2, 29). Yet within a few verses the Lord takes Frederick Williams to task for letting his children get out of hand, and Sidney Rigdon and Joseph are admonished for not keeping their houses in order (see D&C 93:41–50). Some revelations are long lists of missionary assignments about who is to accompany whom and where they are to go (see D&C 52). The Lord often seems to micromanage the everyday affairs of the church through all sorts of specific instructions or admonitions to this brother or that, and this seems scarcely in keeping

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<sup>12</sup> See Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Knopf, 1957), 263.

with the booming voice of the mighty God who declared, "Hearken, O ye people of my church, to whom the kingdom has been given; hearken and give ear to him who laid the foundation of the earth, who made the heavens and all the hosts thereof, and by whom all things were made by which live, and move, and have a being" (D&C 45:1). How does that exalted being come to speak to John Whitmer about keeping a history (see D&C 47:1) or to Edward Partridge about deeding land to the Saints (see D&C 51:3; 57:7)?

That rhetorical incongruity, which offends some religious sensibilities, is, in my view, one reason the revelations are so effective. The very ease with which the revelations sweep through time and space, forecasting calamities and revealing the depths of God's purposes, then light upon some named individual with a particular assignment makes the revelations all the more powerful. Those everyday details of managing the church are absorbed into the same rhetorical space in which God is steering the world toward the second coming. The revelations go back in history to Adam, Enoch, and Moses; they take us to a deep space where worlds are created; and they move us forward in time to the descent of Enoch's city. Into this world where God speaks and acts are brought John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, Lyman Wight, Jared Carter, Thomas Marsh, and all the others who were enrolled in the latter-day work. The lives of ordinary people were encompassed in the same rhetorical space as God's word on the coming calamities and the opening of the marvelous work and wonder. The revelations create a rhetorical world in which the Almighty God and weak and faltering men work together to bring about the divine purposes. Such language, in my opinion, had the power to change mundane existence into a sacred mission.

Considering that this rhetorical space is constructed by mere words on a page, why should anyone believe the revelations? In addition to considering the purity of God's voice in the classic revelations and the mingling of the mundane with the sublime in these rhetorical spaces, we must ask about the authority of the heavenly voice. How does the speaker in the revelations persuade us to believe? Writers who create other types of rhetorical space use various devices to establish credibility. Novelists usually rely on the verisimilitude of their characters and scenes; they describe a believable world in concrete detail, and, after winning their readers' confidence, carry the readers off on fantastic adventures. In another literature of Joseph's time, agricultural experts claimed they were reporting actual experiments in planting corn or working with improved plows, and they based their authority on the principle of "try it." Readers were urged to employ the new methods themselves, and this made experimentation the basis for credibility. Evangelical preachers proved their doctrines from the scriptures, relying on the authority of an accepted divine text. Of all the possible means for establishing credibility, which did the speaker in Joseph's revelations use to urge readers to believe his voice?



The answer is that the voice gave no reasons at all. In one unusual passage the Lord speaks about reasoning as a man, but after a few verses he returns to the usual declarative mode. From the pages of the revelation, the voice commands us to hearken and then proceeds to the message. The authority comes almost entirely from the force of the words themselves. The reader is left alone to decide whether these words are from God.

Those who listened to the Mormon missionaries may have measured the message against the New Testament, judging whether the teachings conformed to scripture. Many conversions must have come only after rational evaluation and a comparison of Mormon doctrine with prior beliefs. But none of that reasoning comes from the revelations themselves. The voice of the Lord does not urge people to compare the words of the revelations with biblical teachings or to submit them to any rational test whatsoever. There are no proof texts, and only now and then is there a presentation of evidence. The Lord simply speaks and demands that people listen. Faced with that command, hearers must decide to believe or not to believe, without reference to any outside authority—not to common sense or science, the opinions of the educated elite, tradition, or anything else. Although a hundred considerations may have influenced the decision in the person's life, none of these considerations are taken into account within the revelations. Within the rhetorical space of the revelation, the hearer stands alone to face the person behind the voice and has the choice to either hearken or turn away. The hearer must make an unfettered existential decision.

Though forced to choose on their own, those who believed and became Mormons granted great authority to the revelations. They called them commandments—hence the title Book of Commandments—and depended on them for guidance whenever a decision was to be made. In March 1830, when Martin Harris was disillusioned by the slow sales of the Book of Mormon, he told Joseph in a panic, "I want a Commandment." Joseph tried to calm him, but Martin insisted, "I must have a Commandment."<sup>13</sup> He wanted a revelation from God to reassure him about the future success of the book. Whenever they felt uncertainty, people came to Joseph wanting a revelation. The Prophet told them, as he told Martin, that they should live by what they had already received; it was not a light matter to trouble the Lord for new revelations. Ezra Booth, the apostate who wrote in detail about his six-month sojourn as a Mormon, said that the church was governed by Joseph's commandments—the revelations he received about governance of the church.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>As cited in Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 111.

<sup>14</sup> See Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, From its Rise to the Present Time* (Painesville: printed and published by the author, 1834), 181.

Such confidence in the revelations speaks for their power. The people accepted the voice in the revelations as coming directly from God and invested the highest authority in them. They gave the revelations even more weight than Joseph Smith's counsel, for they believed that in them God himself spoke, not a man, not even Joseph. Although the believers trusted and loved the Prophet, they believed in the revelations even more. In them they heard the pure voice of God speaking, not just the voice of Joseph, their president and counselor. In other words, they accepted the terms of the rhetorical space formed by the revelation. Within that space God spoke from the heavens, and the Prophet himself stood to the side. Members believed in the voice and in times of stress wanted to hear it again. In the bleak fall of 1833, when news of the expulsion from Jackson County was filtering into Kirtland, Frederick G. Williams sadly reported that although Joseph was giving counsel, they had not received any revelations for a long time.<sup>15</sup> The Saints depended on those powerful words and during a drought longed for them to come again.

We can wonder how Joseph learned to write these revelations in the pure voice of God without pretending to give reasons or depend on outside authority. Note the certainty of attack in the opening words of the first written revelation: "The works, and the designs, and the purposes of God cannot be frustrated, neither can they come to naught" (D&C 3:1). How did Joseph learn to speak that way at age twenty-two?

This past year while visiting my daughter-in-law's family in England, the father in the house mentioned Charlotte Brontë's almost miraculous composition of *Jane Eyre* without any prior training or outside help. As he spoke, I thought of Joseph Smith. Could a young genius produce an original and powerful literary work without preparation? I asked for a biography of Charlotte Brontë and learned that Charlotte, the daughter of a country cleric, began writing stories and essays when she was nine. She and her sisters put on dramas of their own composition all through their teenage years. Although untrained and certainly precocious, Brontë had been writing privately for two decades before the publication of *Jane Eyre*, and thus the Brontë comparison fails. We find no such buildup to Joseph Smith's early writings. At most we have Lucy Smith's report of a few weeks of storytelling in the fall of 1823, when Joseph amused the family with tales of ancient America. None of the neighbors who later reported on Smith family character mentioned Joseph's writing or religious speech. In fact, they gave no explanation at all for the early revelations. Like the Book of Mormon, the revelations came out of the blue.

I think the revelations present a problem to cultural historians who try to explain Joseph Smith's works as historical productions, but the revelations are also a challenge to believing

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<sup>15</sup> See Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:417.

Latter-day Saints. The rhetorical spaces formed by the revelations compel a decision. Like the first readers of the Book of Commandments, we must choose: will we turn away in disbelief, or will we hearken to God's voice, purify our lives, and commit ourselves to the Lord's work?