

1-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

Bushman, Richard. "The Little, Narrow, Prison of Language: The Rhetoric of Revelation," *The Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel*, 1 (Spring 2000): 90-104.

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

Richard Lyman Bushman

I want to raise an old question about Joseph Smith's revelations, one that came up early in Church history when plans were first being made to publish the compilation of revelations called the Book of Commandments.¹ The question is about the language of the revelations. Joseph noted in his history that at the November 1831 conference in Kirtland where publication was approved "some conversation was had concerning revelations and language." This was the occasion when William E. McLellin, apparently the leading critic of the language, was challenged to make a revelation himself, and failed. Joseph said the Elders at the conference all watched while McLellin made "this vain attempt of a man to imitate the language of Jesus Christ," noting that "it was an awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord."²

My interest in the language of the revelations differs from McLellin's who apparently thought the writing was unworthy of Jesus Christ. I do not want to open myself to the criticism, as Joseph said of McLellin, that he had "more learning than sense."³ I am less interested in the quality of the language than in its structure: how are these revelations put together? Rather than feeling they fall below a suitable rhetorical standard, I am impressed with how effective the revelations are and would like to know how they work rhetorically to achieve their impact on believing readers.

Consider section 4 of the current Doctrine and Covenants, (possibly the revelation McLellin tried to imitate). He had been challenged to "seek ye out of the Book of Commandments, even the least that is among them," and try to better it (D&C 67:6). Section 4 fills less than half a page and runs to

just seven verses, making it a logical choice. Yet in that brief space, the revelation interweaves phrases from eight scattered biblical passages—Isaiah, Mark, Corinthians, John, 2 Peter, Matthew, Luke, James—blending them together 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.” It is a piece of writing not easily tossed off even by an experienced hand.

The problem of language becomes more complex when we keep in mind that to some extent the revelatory language was confined to the vocabulary of Joseph Smith. Joseph’s comments in the history speak of the “language of Jesus Christ,” and writing “in the name of the Lord,” as if the revelations were transcripts from heaven. Yet at the same time, the preface to the Book of Commandments says 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. The vocabulary shows few signs of going beyond the diction of a nineteenth-century American common man. The revelations from heaven apparently shone through the mind of Joseph Smith and employed his language to express the messages.

The principle of working “after the manner of their language,” meaning the language of the Lord’s weak servants, put fairly severe limitations on the rhetoric of the revelations. Joseph had no grounds for claiming special powers of language. He lacked all formal training, of course, having attended school a few months at best. Emma said that he could scarcely write a coherent letter when she married him. Nor had he been exposed to literature—none of the classics of antiquity, no Shakespeare or Pope, likely no Jefferson or Franklin. We know he at least consulted the Bible, but his

mother said he had not read it through before he translated the Book of Mormon. We have no glimpses of him, like the young Abraham Lincoln, reading a book by firelight. Manchester did have a lending library, but the Smiths are not known to have patronized it. He is more likely to have read newspapers and almanacs than any other kind of writing. He doubtless heard sermons, though 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 the rich speech of societies with thin printed resources demonstrates; and the Smiths were a verbal family, if Lucy's later autobiography is any indication. But overall the sources within Joseph's reach were not plentiful. The plain language available for Joseph's revelatory rhetoric would necessarily ascend 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 eternity." Then 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."⁴ 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 our words" (Ether 12:25, see also vv. 23-24). 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,” not denying Joseph’s imperfections in writing, but only rebuking the elders for looking upon them (D&C 67:5).

Joseph Smith, then, was no Shakespeare or Dickens; he admitted his own limitations and section 67 implicitly acknowledges them too. 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.”⁵ Given the circumstances of their composition, the revelations are surprisingly effective down to this day, making the question of the revelations’ rhetorical structure all the more interesting.

The revelations compiled into the Doctrine and Covenants 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—an individual, a group of elders, or the Church and world at large—like the opening line of section 1, “Hearken, O ye people of my church, saith the voice of him who dwells on high.” Most of the early revelations before 1837 take this form of direct address from God to the people.

What I mean by the structure of these revelations, the center of my interest, can be understood by considering a physical analogy. The classic revelations can be thought of as constructing a rhetorical space comparable to the physical spaces where talk takes place. All writing implicitly organizes the source of the words—the writer—and the intended readers or listeners into a relationship, forming a kind of space that can be compared to actual physical spaces, as a way of identifying the character of the writing. We all know the difference between talking across the kitchen table and meeting around a table in a corporate board room. Sports

shirts and slacks are suitable for the kitchen versus blue suits in the board room; flowery wallpaper in one and walnut paneling in the other; gossip and personal stories compared to stock buy backs and downsizing. The circumstances set up quite different relationships among speakers and listeners in the two settings. The place where talk takes place always makes a difference. Think of the differences between a college class room or a bus stop, a dance floor or the coach's bench on a basketball floor. Each situation sets up roles for the speakers and listeners, prescribes modes of appropriate speech, and establishes relationships among the people in the space. Whoever we may be in other environments, these settings mold our conduct to suit the location.

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

Thinking in this vein, we can ask what kind of rhetorical space do the revelations construct? What relationship do they set up between reader, speaker, and the writer who is Joseph Smith? The striking feature of Joseph Smith'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 this entire revelation, the Lord alone is speaking, and all readers and hearers are called upon to give heed. Listen, hearken, hear are the words with which the classic revelations open, and then the voice of God comes right out of the heavens into our ears. From the first word, a relationship is put in place: God speaks to command or inform; we listen.

The voice is pure in that God alone is speaking; Joseph Smith whom we know actually dictated the revelation is totally absent from the rhetorical space. One relationship prevails in these revelations: God speaking to his people. In Isaiah or most of the other Old Testament prophets, the prophet himself keeps intervening to mediate between the Lord and the people. When we come to passages that begin “thus saith the Lord,” then we hear God Himself, but before long Isaiah comes back in as commentator and teacher, explaining to readers what the Lord implies. Isaiah is our companion and teacher, never far out of the picture. In the Book of Mormon and New Testament, God himself rarely speaks in a first person voice all by Himself. Most of the scriptures are sermons or letters by one of the prophets, with only occasional interjections of God’s own words spoken in his first-person voice. In the Book of Mormon we come closest to the unmediated word of God during Nephi’s lengthy revelations of world history; yet even here Nephi is reporting on what he sees. His person plus the attending angel do most of the talking rather than the Lord Himself.

These guides and mediators disappear in Joseph Smith’s revelations. The Lord speaks directly to His audience, whether one person or the whole world. “Hearken, my servant John,” is the message in section 15 to John Whitmer, “and listen to the words of Jesus Christ, your Lord and your

Redeemer” (D&C 15:1). That 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 16:1-2).

Joseph Smith’s authorship, his role as revelator, is obliterated entirely 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 of the word, the voice in the revelation is entirely separated from Prophet. In fact when Joseph figures in the revelation’s rhetorical space, he 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, so far as can be told, the current section 3 in the Doctrine and Covenants, was directed entirely against 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 for Joseph’s own 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 upon him (D&C 3:3-4).

I consider this revelation an extraordinary rhetorical performance. Joseph, probably alone, writes a revelation

spoken purely in the voice of God directed entirely at Joseph himself, rebuking him mercilessly for his weakness: “For thou hast suffered the counsel of thy director to be trampled upon from the beginning” (D&C 3:15). The prophet creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, a rhetorical space in which God addresses Joseph as an entirely separate being, and we can only imagine young Joseph, new and inexperienced in his calling, cowering before an angry voice, originating entirely outside of Joseph’s mind. All that happens inside the rhetorical space formed by the revelation.

This rhetorical construction of two distinct persons—the Lord and Joseph Smith—is so real we are inclined to think a Being must have 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 Gabriel before Mary announcing her calling as the mother of Jesus. In these scenes Gabriel speaks while beams of golden light radiate from heaven on Mary. Less common are representations of the Old Testament prophets or of the authors of the four Gospels which show them writing while an angel speaks in their ears. Angels are common mediators in all these scenes, or a stream of light pours out of heaven on the revelator.

Latter-day Saint artists are more likely to select scenes where another kind of revelation occurs. Although Joseph received most of his revelations through the Holy Ghost, Mormon artists most often choose the First Vision as their archetypical revelation. God and Christ are present in person

in these scenes, in radiant glory, heads turned toward a kneeling Joseph who hears the words directly from their mouths. They speak to him, not through him as the angels speak through the Gospel writers. There are no mediators working from God through the angels to the prophet and then to the people. In Latter-day Saint paintings, God personally does the speaking, and the prophet is the hearer. We favor this scene, I believe, because of the way rhetorical space is formed in all the classic revelations, where 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 his Prophet or his people in a pure first-person voice.

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 the exalted revelations on the doctrine and plans of God. Critical commentators, such as Fawn Brodie, have made fun of the way business details on the Nauvoo House mingle with high religious language about spreading the gospel to the four corners of the earth. In another example of this mixture, Section 93 offers a long meditation in the spirit of the first chapter of John, beginning "I am the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world," and going on to declare that "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be" (D&C 93:2, 29). These are among the most provocative and mysterious of Joseph Smith's teaching, and yet within a few verses the revelation rebukes Frederick Williams for letting his children get out of hand, and Sidney Rigdon and Joseph are admonished for not keeping their houses in order (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 (D&C 52). In many the Lord seems to micro-manage the everyday affairs of the Church with all sorts of specific instructions or admonitions to this brother or that, scarcely in keeping with the booming voice of the mighty God. We are tempted to ask: What is that exalted being doing in a revelation to John Whitmer on keeping a history (D&C 47:1), or to Edward Partridge on deeding land to the Saints (D&C 51:3)?

That rhetorical incongruity which offends some religious sensibilities is, in my view, one source of the revelations' effectiveness. The very ease with which the revelations sweep through time and space, forecasting calamities and revealing the depths of God's purposes, and then shedding light upon some named individual with a particular assignment makes the revelations work. Those humdrum, everyday details of managing the Church are absorbed right into the same rhetorical space where God is steering the world toward the Second Coming. In the revelations we go back in history to Adam, Enoch, Moses, we are carried into deep space where worlds are being created, and then we move forward in time to the descent of Enoch's city. Into this world where God rules and God speaks are brought John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, Lyman Wight, Jared Carter, Thomas Marsh, and all the other specific individuals who were being mobilized for the latter-day work. The lives of plain people were caught up in the same rhetorical space where God's voice spoke of coming calamities and the beginning of the marvelous work and a 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, has the power to change mundane existence into a sacred mission.

Considering that this space is merely constructed by words on a page, why should anyone believe the revelations? Besides 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 in the reality of the story, carry them off on fantastic adventures. The agricultural experts of the Prophet Joseph's day claimed they were reporting actual experiments in planting corn or working with improved plows, and urged their readers to try the new methods for themselves, making experimentation the basis of their credibility. Evangelical preachers proved their doctrines from the scriptures, relying on the authority of an accepted divine text. Out of all the possible means for establishing credibility, what reasons did the speaker in Joseph Smith's revelations give for believing in His voice?

The answer is the voice gave no reasons at all. In one unusual passage the Lord does speak about reasoning as a man, but then after a few verses returns to the usual declarative mode (D&C 50:10-22). From the pages of the revelation, the voice commands us to hearken and then proceeds to the message. Authority comes almost entirely from the force of the words themselves. Do they sound like the voice of God heard in the Bible? Is this the way we imagine God speaking? People who listened to the early Mormon missionaries may have measured the message against the standard of the New Testament and judged whether or not 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 a presentation of evidence. The Lord speaks and demands that people listen. They must then decide for themselves to believe or not, without reference to any outside authority—common sense, science, the opinions of the educated elite, tradition. Within the rhetorical space of the revelation, the hearer is left alone, facing the person behind the pure voice, with the choice to hearken or turn away.

Though forced to choose on their own, without the benefit of outside help, those who did believe and became Mormons granted great authority to the revelations. They called them commandments—hence the title *The Book of Commandments*—and depended on them for a lead 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.”⁶ He meant that he wanted a revelation from God to reassure him about the future success of the book. Whenever there was uncertainty, people came to Joseph with the same request: get a commandment, they said, meaning a revelation. The Prophet had to tell them, as he told Martin, that they should live by what they had 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 months sojourn as a Mormon, said the Church was governed by Joseph’s commandments—not his commands, but the

commandments, meaning the revelations he received about governance of the Church.⁷

That confidence attests to the power of the rhetorical space formed by the revelations. The people accepted the voice in the revelation as coming directly from God, investing the highest authority in the revelations, even above Joseph Smith's counsel. In the revelations, they believed, God himself spoke, not a man. Although the believers trusted and loved the Prophet, the request for a commandment shows 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. They had, in other words, accepted the terms of the rhetorical space formed by the revelation. Within that space God spoke directly and forcefully from the heavens with the Prophet himself absent from the space. The believers heard that voice and believed it; in times of stress they 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 reported sadly that though Joseph was giving counsel they had not received any revelations for a long time.⁸ They depended on those powerful words for sustenance and guidance 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. Whence 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? A few years ago, while visiting my daughter-in-law's family in England, the father of the house mentioned Charlotte Brontë's almost miraculous composition of *Jane*

Eyre without any prior training as a novelist, and I thought at once of the parallel to Joseph Smith. Could a young genius simply turn out an original and powerful literary production without preparation? I asked if I could look at a biography of Charlotte Bronte and fortunately their library had one. In the account, I learned that Charlotte, the daughter of a country cleric, began writing stories and essays when she was nine, and she and her sisters put on dramas of their own composition all through their teen-age years. Although untrained and certainly precocious, Charlotte had been writing for a decade before the publication of *Jane Eyre*. We find none of that runup to Joseph Smith's literary productions. At most we have Lucy Smith's report on a few weeks of storytelling in the fall of 1823 when Joseph amused the family with tales about 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 for the Book of Mormon and the early revelations at all. Like the Book of Mormon, the revelations came out of the blue.

The early revelations present a problem to cultural historians who want to understand Joseph Smith's works as historical productions. They present another kind of problem to today's readers who, like the first readers of the Book of Commandments, are asked to decide. Will we enter into the revelations' rhetorical space and hearken to the voice of God—or will we turn away and lead our lives in other spaces, heeding other voices than the God of the revelations?

Notes

1. This paper was first given at the Conference on Ancient Scriptures and Modern Revelations, Brigham Young University, 7 June 1997.

2. Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols., ed., B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957), 1:224, 226.

3. *Ibid.*, 226.

4. *Ibid.*, 299. The prayer echoed the regrets of Moroni that the Nephites were not “mighty in writing”; “when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words” (Ether 12:24-25; cf. 2 Nephi 33:1). Moroni spoke for every writer in every age, but most poignantly for the prophets who had to bridge the gulf between divine vision and human language.

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

6. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 111.

7. Ezra Booth in 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), 177, 181.

8. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:417.