

Radically Revelatory:
Approaches to Extra-Biblical Revelation, from Qumran to Joseph Smith

Jacob Rennaker

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

These opening lines from Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* appropriately capture the tension that scholars presume to exist between what they call the “living word” and the “dead letter.” The fluidity of extra-textual revelation, according to such scholars, is halted in its tracks by the textualization of that revelation. Thus, the “living word” of revelation and the “dead letter” of sacred scripture constitute two distinct conceptual cities that stand diametrically opposed. Or do they? History has provided us with two case studies; two communities that successfully bridged the seemingly impassable chasm between extra-textual revelation and written scripture. This paper will examine the revolutionary approaches of the Qumran community and the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith regarding revelation and its embodiment in scripture.

The “Inspired Version” of the Bible¹ is the written result of Joseph Smith's reworking of certain passages in the King James Version.² The types of such modifications include the following categories: 1. Restoration of content that was believed to have been written at one point but had been deleted from the Bible, 2. The addition of events that were either not recorded or never included in the Biblical tradition, and 3. Inspired commentary

¹ This work is separate from the Book of Mormon, which claims to be a translation of an extra-biblical text. The Inspired Version of the Bible was first published in 1867, and contains all of the books in the King James Version of the Bible (with the exception of the Apocrypha), presented in the same order, with revisions made by Joseph Smith.

² In cataloging these modifications, Phillip Barlow found that “3,410 verses vary from their *KJV* equivalents. Of these, 1, 314 are in the Old Testament, 2, 096 in the New. In the Old testament, the bulk of changed verses occur in Genesis (687), Psalms (188), and Isaiah (178); in the New Testament, they are found in the Gospels (1,554), Romans (118), and Revelation (75).” Philip Barlow, “Joseph Smith's Revision of the Bible: Fraudulent, Pathologic, or Prophetic?” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 83 (1990), 54.

that elaborated on certain passages.³ Instead of delving into a detailed analysis of such textual revisions, this paper will compare a few points of contact between Joseph Smith's approach toward biblical passages and the Qumran community's approach to their sacred texts.

Before proceeding, the question may be raised: why did Joseph Smith feel it necessary to involve himself with a revision of biblical texts? His purposes appear twofold: recovery and revelation. He believed that the Bible in its present form was by no means perfect. He claimed that, "ignorant translators, careless transcribers or designing and corrupt priests committed many errors."⁴ This view is similar to the Muslim view that following God's revelation to previous communities, they "let [their] scripture be partially lost or its text changed and debased over time."⁵ The pristine form of God's revelation was believed to have been lost through centuries of compilation and transmission.

How could such corruption occur? William Schniedewind notes that "before the notion of the text as sacred and unchangeable had developed, editors or commentators would simply insert annotations into the text itself."⁶ Thus, the "scribe's judgment about what the author had meant... was legitimately included in the record."⁷ This adjustment to the text by scribes was not infrequent.

³ See Robert J. Matthews, "A Plainer Translation:" *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 43.

⁴ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957), 6:57.

⁵ William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 82.

⁶ William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 123.

⁷ Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE – 400 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 19.

According to George Brooke, “Part of the responsible scribe’s role seems to have been what might have been deemed as the steady improvement of the text.”⁸ Were these “improvements” noted as being distinct from the original text? Brooke explains that there were different types of such adjustments. In these cases of “improvement”:

The source [was] thoroughly embedded in its rewritten form not as explicit citation, but as a running text. This running text may resemble word for word that which may be deemed to be its source, or it may be more free in its handling of the supposed source- paraphrasing, abbreviating, omitting, glossing and expanding as may be deemed appropriate by its composer.⁹

In the instances where scribes were “more free” with their improvements, such alterations could be more easily detected. However, if the scribe stayed closer to the language and sequence of the text under consideration, those changes may have been harder to detect and subsequently transmitted.

What sorts of passages were prone to such improvement by the hands of scribes? Schniedewind states that the “more theologically or ideologically sensitive topics would attract even more attention as biblical texts were copied and transmitted.”¹⁰ It was these so-called “uninspired” explanatory glosses and textual modifications that Joseph Smith sought to correct in his revision of the Bible. In other words, he claimed to be recovering divinely inspired texts. During the process of restoring the diminished divine voice to its ancient clarity, Joseph also claimed to receive divine inspiration that allowed him to clarify and elaborate on certain biblical passages.

Here is where the approach of the Qumran community provides points for comparison. William Graham notes that over time, “there [was] something about the written

⁸ George J. Brooke, “The Rewritten Law, Prophets and Psalms: Issues for Understanding the Text of the Bible,” in Edward D. Herbert and Emanuel Tov, eds., *The Bible as Book: The Hebrew Bible and the Judean Desert Discoveries* (London: British Library ; New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2002), 32.

⁹ Brooke, “The Rewritten Law, Prophets and Psalms: Issues for Understanding the Text of the Bible,” 32.

¹⁰ Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 123.

word that be[spoke] authority and reliability in its very anonymity and independence of particular persons and individual memories.”¹¹ This was a change from earlier traditional cultures, where “the loci...of both truth and authority [was] primarily in persons and their utterances, not in documents and records.”¹² These opposing views were harmonized to a degree by the Qumran community. Martin Jaffee explains that in this community, “authorized knowledge may have circulated widely through oral means, but the decisive authority of that knowledge was linked inevitably to written texts.”¹³ Current revelation and previous scripture met in “the Book and the Ruling, where communal discipline was at stake, [and] the *pesharim* [a sort of contemporary commentary on biblical passages] and other texts, where collective self-understanding was the issue.”¹⁴ At Qumran, as with Joseph Smith, sacred texts were the starting point upon which revelation was added.

The process by which this additional revelation was received provides the next area of comparison. Graham argued that in regards to scripture, “an active relation between perceiver and perceived [was] essential to [a] meaningful experience.”¹⁵ Such an active relation was achieved by both Joseph Smith and the Qumran community through their inspired study of sacred texts.

As mentioned above, there were a set of such texts that served as the basis for the Qumran community’s study. It was in “the study session[s]” of those texts by the community that divine “knowledge [was] transmitted.”¹⁶ Similarly, the text of the King James Version was the “starting point” for Joseph Smith’s receiving of revelation in his

¹¹ Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 59.

¹² Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 68.

¹³ Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 37.

¹⁴ Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 37.

¹⁵ Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 160.

¹⁶ Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 34.

“Inspired Version” of the Bible. However, he did not feel limited by the present form of the text; “the spirit of revelation was always an additional source of information [for him].”¹⁷

Joseph was reported to have “read directly from the Bible and through the spirit of inspiration note[d] the need for a revision of a text.”¹⁸ For both parties, revelation was received through the use of traditional scriptures.

The “traditional” scriptures, however, were not viewed by either Joseph Smith or the Qumran community as being complete. The Genesis Apocryphon found at Qumran demonstrates this point. The document in question is “concerned with rewriting certain aspects of the Genesis narrative which their writers...considered important.”¹⁹ This “rewriting” involved “insert[ing] interpretative words into long passages of Biblical texts.”²⁰ Such an expansion of “traditional” biblical texts ranged from a single word to several paragraphs.

One example of this genre is the Enochic literature. Although the actions of this biblical figure appear in only four verses (Gen. 5:21-24), an elaborate tradition developed in his name. The Qumran community preserved an extensive body of literature attributed to Enoch. A number of fragments containing text from the work known as *1 Enoch* were found at Qumran [4Q201-2, 4Q204-12], suggesting that this work was important within their own community. This type of writing “is another example of rewriting and developing aspects of the Genesis tradition with an eye towards enhancing certain parts of it which were considered to be important.”²¹ While we cannot be certain how authoritative such texts were

¹⁷ Robert J. Matthews, *A Bible! A Bible!* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 110.

¹⁸ Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet, eds., *The Joseph Smith Translation* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1985), 30.

¹⁹ Robert G. Eisenman and Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* (Rockport, Mass.: Element, 1992), 76.

²⁰ Eisenman, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, 76.

²¹ Eisenman, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, 76.

among the community, the fact that these texts were preserved demonstrates their acceptance to at least a minimal degree.

Similarly, Joseph Smith recognized that the traditional biblical text, the King James Version, was missing some important narratives. He once stated, “From sundry revelations which have been received, it was apparent that many important points touching the salvation of men had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled.”²² Among those in his own religious community,

much conjecture...frequently occurred...concerning the books mentioned...in various places in the Old and New Testaments, which were now nowhere to be found...But it seems the Apostolic Church had some of these writings as Jude mentions...the Prophecy of Enoch, the seventh from Adam. To [their] joy...did the Lord reveal the following...from the prophecy of Enoch.²³

The subsequent inspired expansion of Enoch’s story grew from four verses (in the traditional Genesis account) to 119 verses (much like the expansion of Enoch’s story at Qumran). This lengthy addition of extra-biblical information was quite an aberration from the prevalent Protestant “*sola scriptura*” attitude held by the vast majority of Joseph Smith’s contemporaries.

The reception of revelation through study was not an event, however; it was a process. For those at Qumran, “the community’s collective life of regular...searching for and inquiring after God’s will through revealed scriptures...was the social and soteriological context in which they experienced or expected such revelation to continue.”²⁴ Revelation was not a passive experience; it required consistent, concentrated effort. Because the community believed it had to “earn” its right to revelation, laws were established that

²² Barlow, “Joseph Smith’s Revision of the Bible: Fraudulent, Pathologic, or Prophetic?” 58.

²³ Quoted in Barlow, “Joseph Smith’s Revision of the Bible: Fraudulent, Pathologic, or Prophetic?” 52.

²⁴ Steven Fraade, “Interpretive Authority in the Studying Community at Qumran,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 44 (1993), 76.

required at least some portion of the community be engaged in study at all times- even during the night.²⁵ The Qumran document known as the “Community Rule” states that:

And where the ten are, there shall never lack a man among them who shall study the Law continually, day and night, concerning the right conduct of a man with his companion. And the Congregation shall watch in community for a third of every night of the year, to read the Book and to study the Law and to bless together.²⁶

This constant effort was rewarded by the reception of frequent revelation. In short, “the Qumran community viewed itself as being doubly privileged: to be engaged in the search for God’s will **and** to have had it divinely revealed to them.”²⁷

The leaders of the Qumran community had a special responsibility to become versed in the sacred writings which contained their law. The “Community Rule” document outlines this requirement in the following:

In the Council of the Community there shall be twelve men and three Priests, **perfectly** versed in **all that is revealed** of the Law, whose works shall be in truth, righteousness, justice, loving-kindness, and humility... They shall walk with all men according to the standard of truth and the rule of the time.²⁸

In particular, the “Master,” or leader, of the community had a special responsibility not only to study the community’s expanding corpus of sacred texts, but also to serve as a conduit for additional sacred instruction:

He shall conceal the teaching of the Law from men of injustice, but shall impart **true knowledge** and righteous judgment to those who have chosen the Way. He shall guide them all in knowledge according to the spirit of each and according to the rule of the age, and shall thus **instruct** them in the mysteries of marvelous truth, so that in the midst of the men of the Community they may walk perfectly together in **all that has been revealed to them.**²⁹

²⁵ See Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 34.

²⁶ Geza Vermes, translator, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 105.

²⁷ Fraade, “Interpretive Authority in the Studying Community at Qumran,” 76.

²⁸ Vermes, *Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 108-109.

²⁹ Vermes, *Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 111.

The interplay between the study of sacred writings and the receipt of revelation is eloquently described at the conclusion of the “Community Rule” document:

All my life the engraved Precept shall be on my tounge / as the fruit of praise and the portion of my lips...

With the coming of day and night / I will enter the Covenant of God,
and when evening and morning depart / I will recite His decrees...

I will choose that which He teaches me / and will delight in His judgment of me...

I will impart [...] knowledge with discretion / and will prudently hedge it within a firm bound,
to preserve faith and strong judgment / in accordance with the justice of God...

For my light has sprung / from the source of His knowledge;
my eyes have beheld His marvelous deeds, / and the light of my heart, the mystery to come...

My eyes have gazed on that which is eternal / on wisdom concealed from men,
on knowledge and wise design / (hidden) from the sons of men;
on a fountain of righteousness / and on a storehouse of power,
on a spring of glory (hidden) from the assembly of flesh...

Blessed art Thou, my God / who openest the heart of Thy servant to knowledge!³⁰

To summarize, the Qumran community was confident that they would receive additional knowledge from God. This knowledge, however, could only be obtained at a price; by a continual process of study and reflection.

Joseph Smith’s “Inspired Version” of the Bible was also described as a process, and not as a single revelation. It was “a process of inquiry. It required effort, prayer, energy, desire, and serious contemplation.”³¹ Robert Matthews, an LDS Historian, described the process in the following:

³⁰ Vermes, *Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 111-116.

³¹ Matthews, *A Bible! A Bible!*, 92.

Not all of the textual revisions made by Joseph Smith in his Bible [revisions] were made at one time; later manuscripts of the [Inspired Version of the Bible] contain more revisions than do the earlier ones. This leads to the conclusion that the revisions were revealed to the mind of the Prophet somewhat gradually, not all at once in complete form.³²

Like the Qumran community, the process of divine revelation was a continuous one that required an intensive reflection upon both the base text and upon the most recently received revelations.

At Qumran, there was the expectation of “occasional disclosures of new implications in the text of Torah”³³ through divine means. Such revelatory information was “most likely transmitted in writing[s] that themselves became the subjects of further interpretive activity, rather than in oral traditions beyond the range of written preservation.”³⁴ Thus, the new revelation was added to the written corpus of community scripture and served as a means for receiving even further revelation.

In poring over previously received illumination, “additional revelations were received on some points over and beyond what had been done the first time.”³⁵ One specific example of this is the treatment of law at Qumran. In addition to the Torah, this group accepted a “divinely ordained set of ‘first rules,’ revealed to their founders.”³⁶ Both the Torah and these additional laws were studied, through which practice new laws were revealed. Steven Fraade explains this system of “circularity” in such a mode of revelation:

³² Matthews, *A Bible! A Bible!*, 110. Barlow explains that the documents left by Joseph Smith “reveal that the revision progressed in stages. Many passages contain not only revisions of the *KJV*, but revisions of revisions of still earlier revisions.” Barlow, “Joseph Smith’s Revision of the Bible: Fraudulent, Pathologic, or Prophetic?” 54, fn. 28.

³³ Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 35.

³⁴ Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 32.

³⁵ Matthews, *A Bible! A Bible!*, 90.

³⁶ Fraade, “Interpretive Authority in the Studying Community at Qumran,” 61.

This seeming circularity may be understood in terms of the *ongoing* revelatory quality of the community's life and self-understanding... Through [their] ongoing study, the Torah is more fully disclosed to them and new laws are revealed to them to suit their changing circumstances.³⁷

Though specifically writing about the Qumran community's use of law texts, these principles apply to the community's treatment of all their sacred texts.

For both those at Qumran and for Joseph Smith, revelation was a cyclical process. As sacred text was studied, revelation was received. That revelation was written down and treated as part of the scriptural corpus. After the incorporation of such revelation, those texts were studied, and additional revelation was received. In comparing this process to that of other religious institutions, the question may be asked: what principle provided both parties with such a radical outlook?

The primary characteristic of the Qumran community that set it apart from the other literary circles of its time was their belief in continuing **prophetic** revelation. While other Second Temple establishments appealed to previous prophets such as Moses and Enoch for additional revelation, the Qumran community “regarded itself as blessed to have such prophets in its very midst.”³⁸ There was not a perceived disconnect between the prophetic actions of the past and the revelatory capacity of the faithful in the present. Jaffee writes, “Delivered with prophetic authority, the living traditions of the [Qumran] community were perceived not as supplements to prophetic books, but as divine disclosures themselves.”³⁹

Such an approach demonstrates this community's view that the sacred texts were “living.” Graham notes that the “fixing of the holy word in writing always carries with it potential threats to the original spontaneity and living quality of the scriptural text, for it

³⁷ Fraade, “Interpretive Authority in the Studying Community at Qumran,” 61.

³⁸ Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 38.

³⁹ Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 38.

places it ever in danger of becoming only a ‘dead letter’ rather than the ‘living word.’”⁴⁰ In both the Qumran community and with Joseph Smith, this threat was not perceived. Their belief in continuous revelation prevented such prophetic paralysis. Instead, the corpus of scripture was seen as “the vehicle of the living, spoken word.”⁴¹

Neither the Qumran community nor Joseph Smith imagined a period where such revelation would not be available to the faithful. Joseph Smith’s “Inspired Version” of the Bible was not seen as a complete or ultimate revision of the biblical texts; rather, it was a work in progress. The more he diligently studied the Bible, the more revelation he received. Within the Qumran community, their “text-interpretive tradition- the cumulative results of multiple textual readings built up over time...- was received not as tradition transmitted from the past, but as ongoing revelation continuing into the present.”⁴² The continuing aspect of the divine word was ever-present in the minds of both parties.

Because of this mindset, both parties sought for revelation in interpreting the scriptures of the past for the community in the present. Fraade describes this approach in the following: “The Qumran interest [was] not in interpretively engaging the biblical narrative as scriptural text and past, but in appropriating a blend of scriptural language so as to extend and reenact scriptural covenantal language and practice within their own time and place.”⁴³ The texts were not examined from an “academically” distant standpoint, but were reinterpreted in light of the community’s present situation and understanding. This

⁴⁰ Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 59-60.

⁴¹ Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 65.

⁴² Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 37.

⁴³ Steven D. Fraade, “Looking for Narrative Midrash at Qumran,” in Steven D. Fraade, Aharon Shemesh and Ruth A. Clements, eds., *Rabbinic Perspectives: Rabbinic Literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Boston: Brill, 2006), 52.

community was not bound to the distant past, or even the immediate present, but “applie[d] prophetic texts to the past, present, and future of the sect.”⁴⁴

Likewise, in reworking biblical passages, Joseph Smith’s revelatory revisions served to “merge the sacred past with the Mormon present.”⁴⁵ According to Philip Barlow, “it was more important to conform an imperfect Bible to his more current and direct revelations than to tailor his revelations to biblical data...His belief that truth cannot conflict with itself led him to bring the Bible into harmony with the truths he felt he had received from God.”⁴⁶ Thus, for Joseph Smith the scriptures were seen in light of his community’s immediate circumstances as well as his present understanding of God’s revealed truth.

While there are a number of similarities between the approach of the Qumran community to their scriptures and Joseph Smith’s approach to the King James Version of the Bible, I am not arguing that the two were identical. One item in particular that differed was the involvement of their respective communities regarding the revealed texts. At Qumran, there was an imperative for the community to study their sacred texts in group settings, and it was “through that collective activity [that] God’s will [was] continually revealed to the community.”⁴⁷ This collaborative effort of study was the “medium for the collective disclosure of [revelation].”⁴⁸ Thus, the emphasis was on the community and their collective efforts to receive revelation. As a result of such efforts, pertinent information was revealed to the entire community.

On the other hand, Joseph Smith received illumination regarding the biblical texts in a much more isolated setting. W. D. Davies wrote: “Convinced that he was inspired by the

⁴⁴ Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 251.

⁴⁵ Barlow, “Joseph Smith’s Revision of the Bible: Fraudulent, Pathologic, or Prophetic?” 52.

⁴⁶ Barlow, “Joseph Smith’s Revision of the Bible: Fraudulent, Pathologic, or Prophetic?” 60-61.

⁴⁷ Fraade, “Interpretive Authority in the Studying Community at Qumran,” 52.

⁴⁸ Fraade, “Interpretive Authority in the Studying Community at Qumran,” 62.

spirit of the ancient prophets, Smith believed that he could seek to detect by the gift of discernment what was not in accordance with the Spirit of the Bible.”⁴⁹ Like those at Qumran, scripture study was the mechanism for receiving certain revelations, but for Joseph Smith, this was not accomplished in a group setting. During such study sessions, he would often sit with a scribe and dictate revisions while he read from the King James Version.⁵⁰ This approach differed substantively from the Qumran practice of group study and its correspondent group enlightenment.

As mentioned above, Joseph Smith’s professed revelations not only amplified the Biblical text, but also restored information that was lost through the centuries-long process of biblical composition and transmission. However, the core principle of receiving revelation through the use of sacred texts was very similar to that seen in the Qumran community. The idea that writing “freezes tradition”⁵¹ does not seem to apply to either party. Both saw themselves as custodians of sacred texts with the privilege of receiving additional revelation. However, with this privilege also came the responsibility of preserving and studying those added flashes of illumination. The conscious textualizing of extra-scriptural revelation was a characteristic that set apart both the Qumran community and Joseph Smith from the religious institutions of their day. Thus, the tale of these two communities is also the tale of two conceptual cities- the “living word” and the “dead letter.” For Joseph Smith and the community at Qumran these two concepts did not exist in a superlative state of separation; rather, they coexisted in a state of harmony. From a revelatory standpoint, it truly was “the best of times.”

⁴⁹ W. D. Davies, “Reflections on the Mormon ‘Canon,’” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 79 (1986), 46.

⁵⁰ Barlow, “Joseph Smith’s Revision of the Bible: Fraudulent, Pathologic, or Prophetic?” 54.

⁵¹ Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 187.