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# **“HAVING MANY THINGS TO WRITE TO YOU”: BIBLICAL INTERTEXTUALITY IN JOSEPH SMITH’S TWO COLESVILLE LETTERS**

*Nicholas J. Frederick*

IT IS DIFFICULT TO UNDERESTIMATE THE INFLUENCE of the Bible, in particular the King James Bible (1611), in American religious and political history. In the words of Mark A. Noll, “One of the strongest justification for a history of the Bible in America is the fact that the Authorized or King James Version (KJV) of 1611 achieved an overwhelmingly dominant position for almost all public purposes from early in the colonial period until deep into the twentieth century.”<sup>1</sup> This serious encounter with the Bible is particularly relevant when participating in discussions about Joseph Smith, whose lengthy corpus represents a deep and complicated engagement with the Bible.<sup>2</sup> The Book of Mormon, produced in 1830, includes lengthy quotations from Isaiah and Matthew, as well as hundreds, if not thousands, of shorter

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<sup>1</sup> Mark A. Noll, *In the Beginning Was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life, 1492–1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 17.

<sup>2</sup> The literature on this topic is quite lengthy. For a summary, see Nicholas J. Frederick, “The Bible and the Book of Mormon: A Review of Literature,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 28 (2019): 205–36.

phrases from nearly every biblical text.<sup>3</sup> Joseph Smith's revelations, canonized in 1833 as the Book of Commandments and in 1835 as the Doctrine and Covenants, likewise reveal a close kinship with the biblical text.<sup>4</sup> Smith's engagement with the Bible led him in 1830 to attempt a rewriting of it, an endeavor that led to new accounts from the lives of Abraham and Moses.<sup>5</sup> While there were certainly other works written during the nineteenth century that would qualify as what Eran Shalev has termed "pseudo-biblicism," Smith's works, in particular the Book of Mormon, set him apart from his contemporaries. As Shalev explains, while "few, if any other contemporary visionaries claimed the sacred authority of the biblical language, Smith was bold enough to publish his American bible in the sacred idiom."<sup>6</sup> This confidence in utilizing the biblical tongue would become one of Smith's defining characteristics.

A lot of fine work has been done over the last few decades by scholars who have closely studied Smith's works looking for the influence of the Bible, and it is likely that the debate over what this

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<sup>3</sup> Speaking specifically of Joseph Smith, Noll argues that "Smith promoted not a new and definitive interpretation of the scripture, but a new and definitive scripture." Noll, *In the Beginning*, 118. For more on the relationship between the Bible and the Book of Mormon, see Mark D. Thomas, "A Mosaic for a Religion Counterculture: The Bible in the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 4 (1996): 47–68.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Nicholas J. Frederick, "The New Testament in the Doctrine and Covenants," in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society: A Background to the Texts of the New Testament*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2019), 712–43.

<sup>5</sup> Seth Perry attributes this to "his [Smith's] era's enhanced propensity to imagine biblical figures as characters—at various points in his career, he reported that he had received information from God and Christ; John the Baptist; the apostles Peter, James, and John; Moses; Elias; Elijah; Adam; and Noah during personal, embodied visits." Seth Perry, *Bible Culture & Authority in the Early United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 124–25.

<sup>6</sup> Eran Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 106. Steven C. Harper has argued that it is this very similarity between the Book of Mormon and the Bible that proved convincing to many early Mormon converts. See Steven C. Harper, "'Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine': The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts," *Religion and American Culture* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 99–118.

biblical engagement means for the composition and overall purpose of his literary products will continue into the future.<sup>7</sup> A critical piece of this puzzle, however, remains inadequately explored. Dozens of Smith's letters are extant, many of which incorporate the language of the Bible in ways that are similar to his scriptural texts.<sup>8</sup> To explore biblical intertextuality in all of Smith's letters would represent a mammoth undertaking, so this article will focus on two of Smith's earliest extant letters, namely two letters he wrote to the Colesville Branch of his restoration movement shortly after the movement's organization in 1830.<sup>9</sup>

Over the course of this article, I argue that Joseph Smith's two Colesville letters display a remarkably complex intertextuality with the Bible that puts them, at the very least, on par with his canonized revelations. Due to these intertextual similarities, I will suggest that Smith's letters must become part of the conversation when we talk about Joseph Smith and his biblical projects, whether that means the

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<sup>7</sup> Recent work that has engaged this topic in an impressive fashion includes Samuel Morris Brown, *Joseph Smith's Translations: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); and the work done by contributors to the volume of essays entitled *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Mark Ashurst McGee et al. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020). For work specifically concerned with the composition of the Book of Mormon, see Brant Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> The best treatment of any of Smith's letters is likely David W. Grua's "Joseph Smith's Missouri Prison Letters," in *Foundational Texts of Mormonism: Examining Major Early Sources*, ed. Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Scott Jensen, and Sharalyn D. Howcroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 124–53. Grua devotes a few paragraphs specifically to Smith's use of the Bible in these later letters, writing "Like most of Smith's writings, these prison epistles included extensive intertextual echoes, allusions, and quotations from the Bible" (137).

<sup>9</sup> These two letters can be found in Michael Hubbard MacKay et al., eds. *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee et al. (Salt Lake City: Church Historians Press, 2013), 172–77 and 214–17 (hereafter *JSP*, D1). The *JSP* editors do an excellent job of noting some of the various quotations, allusions, and echoes in the footnotes. What I seek to do here is note a few that may have been missed as well as provide some intertextual analysis of the biblical phrases Smith uses.

Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, or Joseph Smith's Bible translation. Each of the next two sections begins with the text of the two Colesville letters, with the intertextual connections identified and cited. I follow with an analysis of the letters themselves—what biblical phrases are present and how they are being used. Finally, I consider the place of these two letters and their impact within Joseph Smith's scriptural corpus.

A note on methodology: intertextuality requires a clear methodology to be successful.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, for the purpose of this article, "quotation" will refer to a string of six or more consecutive (or near-consecutive) words drawn from a biblical source with the intent of directing the reader's attention to that source. Quotations can take two forms: a *formal* quotation is one where the author specifically mentions the source of the quote, and *informal* quotations where the author does not.<sup>11</sup> "Allusion" will refer to a string of three to five consecutive or near-consecutive strings of words drawn from the Bible with the intent of directing the attention of the reader back to that source. Finally, "echo" will refer to short, subtle uses of the Bible where the intent may or may not be to direct the attention of the reader back to the Bible. "Echo" would also cover those occurrences of language that primarily appear to be biblical for the sake of being biblical

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<sup>10</sup> As G. K. Beale has noted, the term "intertextuality" when used to refer to a method of biblical criticism is somewhat problematic, as "intertextuality" usually refers to two different texts that have a common point of interaction. Beale writes that in biblical studies "'intertextuality' is sometimes used merely to refer to the procedure by which a later biblical text refers to an earlier text, how that earlier text enhances the meaning of the later one, and how the later one creatively develops the earlier meaning. In this respect, 'intertextuality' may be seen as a procedure of inner-biblical or intrabiblical exegesis, which is crucial to doing biblical theology and for understanding the relation of the OT to the NT." Beale suggests that "inner-biblical exegesis" or "inner-biblical allusion" may be more appropriate terms, but the idea of "biblical intertextuality" has become common enough that it is unlikely to be changed in the near future. G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 40. For an intertextual methodology applied strictly to the Book of Mormon, see Nicholas J. Frederick, "Evaluating the Interaction between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon: A Proposed Methodology," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 2–31.

<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are "informal."

rather than because Smith had a specific verse or text in mind.<sup>12</sup> In places where a phrase appears multiple times in a way that does not point to one single place in the Bible as a source, I will list the one that appears first sequentially and place the rest in a footnote.

### THE FIRST COLESVILLE LETTER

Harmony Aug 20. [28] 1830

Dearly beloved in the Lord

We are under necessity to disappoint you this time for reasons which I shall mention hereafter, but trusting that your meeting may not be an unprofitable one May you all realize the necessity of getting together often to pray and supplicate at *the Throne of grace* [Allusion-Hebrews 4:16], that *the spirit of the Lord* may always *rest upon* you [Quotation-Isaiah 11:2]. Remember that without asking we can receive nothing, therefore *ask in faith* [Allusion-James 1:6], and ye shall receive such blessings as God sees fit to bestow upon you. Pray not with covetous hearts *that ye may consume it upon your lusts* [Quotation-James 4:3], but pray *earnestly* for *the best gifts* [Allusion-1 Corinthians 12:31]—*fight the good fight of faith* [Quotation-1 Timothy 6:12], that ye may gain the *Crown* which is *laid up for* [Allusion-2 Timothy 4:8] those that *endure* faithful *unto the end* [Allusion-Matthew 24:13; Mark 13:13] of their probation. Therefore *hold fast* that which ye have *received* [Echo-Revelation 3:3] so liberally from the hand of God so that *when the time of refreshing shall come* [Quotation-Acts 3:19] ye may not have *labored in vain* [Echo-Isaiah 49:4],<sup>13</sup> but *that ye may rest from* all your

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<sup>12</sup> The hierarchy of “quotation,” “allusion,” and “echo” has become standard in biblical studies when performing intertextual works. I rely primarily upon Christopher A. Beetham’s *Echoes of Scripture in Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2008) for much of my methodology described above. See, for example, Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989) and Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel’s Scripture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005); G. K. Beale’s and D. A. Carson’s massive work, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); as well as Michael Thompson’s *Clothed with Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12:1–15:13* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Also Phil. 2:16. Variations appear in Job 9:29, 39:16; Psalm 127:1; 65:23; Jer. 51:58; 1 Cor. 15:58; Gal. 4:11; 1 Thess. 3:5.

*labors* [Quotation-Revelation 14:13] and have *fulness of joy* [Echo-Psalms 16:11] *in the Kingdom of God* [Echo-Mark 14:25].<sup>14</sup>

“Dearly beloved brethren we are not ignorant of your tribulation, knowing that ye are placed among *ravening wolves* [Echo-Matthew 7:15], therefore we have the more *earnest desire* [Echo-2 Corinthians 7:7] to come to see you, but our friends from the west have not yet come, and we can get no horse and wagon, and we are not able to come afoot so far, therefore we cannot come this Saturday, but we look for our friends from the west every day and with safety we can promise to come next Saturday, if the Lord will; therefore our desire is that ye should assemble yourselves together next Saturday So that *all things* will *be in order* [Echo-1 Corinthians 14:40] when we come. Be careful that the *enemy of all righteousness* [Allusion-Acts 13:10] will not get the advantage over you in getting the news abroad. Were it not for the prayers of you few, the Almighty would have thundered down his wrath upon the inhabitants of that place;<sup>15</sup> but *be not faint* [Echo-Sirach 7:10; Isaiah 40:31],<sup>16</sup> the day of your deliverance is not far distant, for *the judgements of the Lord* [Allusion-Psalm 19:9] are already *abroad in the earth* [Echo-Genesis 11:4], and *the cold hand of death* [*Henry IV*, 5:4], will soon pass through your neighborhood, and sweep away some of your most bitter enemies, for you need *not* suppose that *God* will be *mocked* at [Allusion-Galatians 6:7], and his commandments be trampled under their feet in such a manner as your enemies do, without *visiting them in his wrath* [Ether 14:25] when they are *fully ripe, and behold the angel cries, thrust in your sickle for the harvest is fully ripe* [Quotation-Revelation 14:18]; and *the earth* will soon be *reaped* [Allusion-Revelation 14:16].— that is, the wicked must soon be *destroyed from off the face of the earth* [Allusion-Genesis 7:4]<sup>17</sup> *for the Lord hath spoken it* [Quotation-1 Kings 14:11]<sup>18</sup> and who can stay the hand of the Lord, or who is there that can *measure arms with the Almighty*, for at his commands the *heavens and the earth* must *pass away* [Quotation-Matthew 24:35; cf. Revelation 21:1]<sup>19</sup> for the day is fast hastening on when *the restoration of all things* shall be fulfilled

<sup>14</sup> Also Luke 7:28; 13:28; 13:29; 14:15; 22:16.

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps an allusion to the threats against Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 18:20–22.

<sup>16</sup> Sirach reads “Be not fainthearted,” which is perhaps the closest link textually, although Isaiah 40:31 is also a possibility, “they shall run, and not *be* weary; and they shall walk, and *not faint*.”

<sup>17</sup> Also Deut. 6:15; 1 Kgs. 13:34; Jer. 28:16; Amos 9:8.

<sup>18</sup> Also Isa. 22:25; 25:8; Joel 3:8; Ob. 1:18.

<sup>19</sup> Also Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33.



[D&C 27:6],<sup>20</sup> which all the Holy Prophets have prophecied of even unto the gathering in of the House of Israel. Then shall come to pass that the lion shall lie down with the lamb &c [Misquotation of Isaiah 11:6]. But brethren be not dis-couraged when we tell you of *perilous times*, for they must shortly *come* [Allusion-2 Timothy 3:1], for the *sword*, *famine*, and *pestilence* [Allusion-Leviticus 26]<sup>21</sup> *are* approaching, for there shall be great destructions upon the face of this land for ye need not suppose that *one jot or tittle* of the prophecies of all the Holy Prophets shall fail, and there are many that remain to *be fulfilled* [Quotation-Matthew 5:18] yet, and the Lord hath said that a *short work* will he *make* of it [Formal Quotation-Romans 9:28], and the righteous shall *be saved* if it be *as by fire* [Allusion-1 Corinthians 3:15] “May the grace of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost be and abide with you from henceforth and forever, Amen [Echo—Romans 1:7].<sup>22</sup>

John Whitmer  
Joseph Smith<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps an allusion to the prophecy in Acts 3:21.

<sup>21</sup> This one is a bit more complicated. I read this as an allusion to the “blessings and cursings” section of the Law of Moses as laid out in Leviticus 26. The three words, however, do not appear together in Leviticus 26. “Sword” and “pestilence” do (26:25), but “famine” is only described (26:26). The three do explicitly appear together in several other places after Leviticus 26: 1 Chr. 21:12; 2 Chr. 20:9; Jer. 14:12; 21:7, 9; 24:10; 27:8, 13; 29:17–18; 32:24, 36; 34:17; 38:2; 42:17, 22; 44:13; Ezek. 5:12, 17; 6:11–12; 7:15; 12:16; 14:21.

<sup>22</sup> Also 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; 2 John 1:3.

<sup>23</sup> The intertextual analysis of this letter (and the following one) is complicated by the attribution of authorship to both John Whitmer and Joseph Smith. *Documents, Volume 1* simply states that “JS and John Whitmer wrote this letter” (JSP, D1:172), while acknowledging, “most of his letters were dictated to scribes or written by assignment on his behalf” (xxii). The answer may be as simple as understanding that Whitmer served as one of Smith’s scribes as early as 1829, assisted Smith with portions of the Bible translation project during portions of 1830, and was the primary scribe for the Book of Commandments and Revelations. See Robin Scott Jensen, “From Manuscript to Printed Page: An Analysis of the History of the Book of Commandments and Revelations,” *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 24–25. However, if Whitmer’s role was closer to “written by assignment,” this obviously complicates discerning just how much of the language of these two letters can be attributable to Smith.



At some point before 1871, the circumstances of the reception of this first letter were described as:

Brother Joseph intended visiting the Saints at Colesville on Saturday the 21st of August, and on my return, arrangements were made for the brethren and sisters to meet on that day, if possible, without letting our enemies know anything about it. But Brother Joseph was prevented from keeping his engagement on this occasion, but wrote a letter in which he explained the cause of his not coming: the conveyance in which he intended to make the journey did not arrive from "the west;" and the distance was too great to walk. He exhorted the Saints, in a very excellent letter to remain faithful and true to God, and prophesied that the wrath of God should soon overtake their wicked persecutors."<sup>24</sup>

The description of the letter as one encouraging the Saints "to remain faithful and true to God" can be clearly seen in the first paragraph, where Smith weaves together several short (and a couple longer) phrases from the Bible. The majority of the phrases come from the New Testament, and the majority of those from the epistles of Paul and James. There is an inherent risk in borrowing from the language of the Bible; employ too much and there is a likelihood that the author's message may get lost amidst a jumble of lengthy quotations. Nevertheless, as a whole, this opening paragraph, with its combination of biblical phrases and Smith's own words, reads rather cohesively. Sentences flow well, with the biblical phrases supplementing Smith's overall message, rather than the other way around. Smith uses familiar biblical phrases to encourage his flock to "pray," "ask," "endure," "fight," and "hold fast." Perhaps the two key intertexts are the important quotations from Isaiah 11:2 and Acts 3:19. The first quotation, Isaiah 11:2, alludes to the idea that for those blessed with having the "spirit of the Lord" rest upon them, great things can be accomplished, perhaps even superhuman things, especially when it came to ethical behavior.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Newel Knight Autobiography, as cited in Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:11. For the complications involved with assessing the source of this introduction, see Michael Hubbard MacKay and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Rise of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2019), xx and 17.

<sup>25</sup> "Thus, to say that God's spirit was upon someone became almost a code phrase for saying that the person was acting out of a capacity which was more than merely human. This phrase came to be applied supremely

The second quotation, Acts 3:19, comes from Peter's discourse before the Sanhedrin, and hints at some form of eschatological renewal that was perhaps to be realized prior to the second coming.<sup>26</sup> By reminding his readers that they live at a time when "the spirit of the Lord" rests upon them and that the "time of refreshing" is imminent, Smith hints that those gathered at Colesville and elsewhere stand on the vanguard of something remarkable; a time when the divine will reach down and interact once more with the mundane. Things may be difficult now; the Saints will be tested and tried physical and emotionally, but what awaits them—the "Kingdom of God"—will grant them "rest" from their "labors" and prove that all they have worked for has not been "in vain" but instead rewards them with a "fulness of joy."

Notable as well is the manner in which Smith weaves his biblical references into the paragraph. While a few of the quotations are seven words or longer, the majority are shorter—two to four words in length—suggesting that Smith is using the Bible to accentuate his message, rather than using it to do all the heavy lifting. Additionally, while some of the phrases are consecutive strings of words, others have been adjusted (or, perhaps, misremembered) through the addition of one or two words. At times this is simply for convenience, to better align with his audience. So the quotation from Revelation 14:13, "that they may rest from all their labors" has been altered to read "that *ye* may rest from all *your* labors." At other times, he adds words to provide further emphasis to the scripture he is citing, such as the addition of *faithful* to "endure to the end," an allusion to Matthew 24:13 (Mark 13:13). Furthermore, Smith at times alters King James language that

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to capacity for ethical behavior." John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, 1–39* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 279.

<sup>26</sup> "The argument in vv. 19–21 is cumulative; implying that these seasons of refreshment occur in an intervening period, before Christ's return and the consummation of God's plan in a renewed creation. Even now, those who turn to him for forgiveness may enjoy in advance some of the blessings associated with the coming era. Perhaps these times of refreshment are more specifically 'moments of relief during the time men spend in waiting for that blessed day.' A comparison with Peter's promises in 2:38 suggests that the Holy Spirit may be the one who brings this refreshment. Peter may be describing the subjective effect of the gift of the Spirit for believers, whose presence anticipates and guarantees the full inheritance God promises his children." D. G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 180–81.

may have sounded strange to his nineteenth-century audience. In the King James Version, Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12:31 read: "But covet earnestly the best gifts." Smith replaces "covet" with "pray" and adds the appropriate preposition, rendering it "*pray earnestly for* the best gifts."<sup>27</sup> Multiple biblical texts are also present, as Isaiah, Psalms, Matthew, Luke, Acts, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Hebrews, James, and Revelation are all quoted from or alluded to in the letter. Finally, other than the very first sentence, every sentence contains at least one biblical quotation, allusion, or echo, with many of them containing more than one.

With the beginning of the second paragraph, Smith temporarily tempers the biblical language, as his focus shifts to the present tribulations, in particular his difficulty in making the trip to Colesville to appear in person. Although the opening sentence contains phrases such as "ravening wolves" (Echo of Matthew 7:15) and "earnest desire" (Echo of 2 Corinthians 7:7), the first several lines are largely devoid of biblical language. However, once he finishes describing the details of his inability to travel to Colesville, he again picks up the biblical language from the first paragraph, and the context pivots back-and-forth between ethical injunctions such as "be not faint" (Echo of Sirach 7:10; Isaiah 40:31) and eschatological warnings such as "the judgements of the Lord are already abroad in the earth" (Echo of Genesis 11:4). Smith even inserts, at this point, a quotation from *Henry IV* with the reference to "the cold hand of death"<sup>28</sup> that, in a sort of Passover fashion, "will soon pass through your neighborhood, and sweep away some of your most bitter enemies."

It is at this point that Smith elaborates on what will become the primary theme of the remainder of the letter, as he weaves together various phrases from the Bible to paint a somewhat alarming picture of what awaits those who resist the imminent restoration. "For you need not suppose," Smith writes, "that God will be mocked at" (Allusion to Galatians 6:7) and his "commandments be trampled under their feet" without God "visiting them in his wrath." Smith here relies heavily upon the imagery and language of Revelation 14 as he further illuminates the destruction that awaits the "wicked." Revelation 14:14–20, the *pericope* from which Smith draws his language, speaks particularly to two events: the gathering of the righteous (the reaping

<sup>27</sup> Although in D&C 46:8, the language is once again missing the preposition: "Seek ye earnestly the best gifts."

<sup>28</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, act 5, sc. 4.

of the earth with a sickle) and the judgment upon the wicked (the gathering and trampling of the clusters of grapes). One of Revelation's primary theological thrusts is to demonstrate to its readers the ineptitude of neutrality. The righteous will be vindicated, the wicked destroyed. There is no room for those who desire to "sit out" of the conflict.<sup>29</sup> These verses present a microcosm of that larger theological thread. In Smith's letter, however, he has used John's language of salvation for the righteous and judgment for the wicked and applied both to the wicked. The harvesting imagery of "thrusting" and "reaping" because the earth is "fully ripe" has now been limited in scope to "the wicked," who "must soon be destroyed from off the face of the earth." This latter statement itself is an allusion to the flood story in Genesis, positioning those who oppose the Saints in the latter-days as identical to those who, in the days of Noah, opposed a prophet and consequentially faced the vengeance of God. By implication, this quotation positions Joseph Smith's restoration as the ark of Noah, fashioned to carry those who believe to safety.

Through a series of biblical and pseudo-biblical statements, Smith drives home the surety of what must come to pass. Following quotations from Isaiah 22:25 and Matthew 24:35 (although Revelation again may be the intended source in the latter) concerning God's hand in what is to come, Smith makes three statements, all of which sound biblical but none of which are drawn from the Bible. The first, "who is there that can measure arms with the Almighty," is likely a reference to Job 40:9, "Hast thou an arm like God," but had over time become better known in the form Smith quotes here; perhaps because he had heard it in a sermon or encountered it in a religious text.<sup>30</sup> The second pseudo-biblical phrase, "the restoration of all things," is also non-biblical, but present in religious texts prior to Smith.<sup>31</sup> The third phrase, "then shall come to pass that the lion shall lie down with the lamb," is a misquotation of Isaiah 11:6, the

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<sup>29</sup> See Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 135–36.

<sup>30</sup> For example, the phrase "measure arms with the almighty" is found in Thomas Watson's *A Body of Practical Divinity* (Glasgow: John Hall, 1759), 404.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Jeremiah White, *The Restoration of All Things: or, a Vindication of the Goodness and Grace of God* (London: John Denis & Son, 1779); or John Dale, *The Restoration of all things; or, the State of a New World* (London: J. Norris, 1808). The same phrase reappears in Smith's revelations (D&C 27:6; 86:10).

“wolf also shall dwell with the lamb.” Smith probably did not know it was a misquotation, as the image of the lamb and the lion was and continues to be more familiar than the biblical wolf and lion, largely thanks to its use in the poems of William Blake and Percy Shelley where its usage is generally “in the context of a utopian or millenarian imagination.”<sup>32</sup> When you combine these three examples with earlier quotations from *Henry IV* and the Book of Mormon (Ether 14:25), it suggests that Smith was perhaps more interested in what *sounded* biblical than in what could actually be found in the Bible. Furthermore, these phrases suggest that Smith may not have actually used a Bible in the composition of this letter, relying more on what he had heard others say.<sup>33</sup>

The final phase of the letter begins with words of reassurance. Perhaps wary that he may have frightened his audience with all the talk of reaping in the previous section, Smith now offers hope and consolation in two ways. First, while it is true that “perilous times” are going to “come” (Allusion to 2 Timothy 3:1), Smith promises, through the voice of the Lord, that this will only occupy a small amount of time as it will be completed as a “short work” (Formal Quotation of Romans 9:28). Smith’s quotation of Romans is notable as the only formal quotation in the letter, but, interestingly enough, Smith misquotes it (and perhaps even misapplies it).<sup>34</sup> Romans 9:28 reads: “For he will finish the work, and cut it short in righteousness: because a *short work* will the Lord *make* upon the earth.” Smith specifically refers to the Lord as the source of this statement, but chooses not to cite it in the way that the text of Romans reads, offering instead something akin to a paraphrase. This may, again, suggest that Smith avoided using a Bible and relied upon his memory, or it may be that

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<sup>32</sup> See David Lyle Jeffery, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 456.

<sup>33</sup> One such approach is that of William L. Davis, who argues that Smith relied upon nineteenth-century sermon culture in his composition of the Book of Mormon. See William L. Davis, *Visions in a Seer Stone: Joseph Smith and the Making of the Book of Mormon* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> The Greek of Romans 9:28, especially the words translated here as “short work,” is the topic of much debate. Is Paul referring to the temporal frame in which the Lord will accomplish this act, or is he perhaps referring to the decisiveness with which the Lord will act? For a discussion, see T. R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 529.

the English construction was awkward enough for Smith to smooth it out. However, if there ever was a time to be true to the biblical text, it would seem that this occasion, with its unique formal quotation, would be preferred. The second way in which Smith offers a measure of consolation comes through the promise that the righteous, in typical New Testament fashion, will “be saved if it be as by fire” (Allusion to 1 Corinthians 3:15).

Sandwiched within this paragraph of consolation comes Smith’s claim that “the sword, famine, and pestilence are approaching,” key language that alludes to Leviticus 26’s “blessings” and “cursings.” Theologically, this is the more interesting intertext from this last phase of the letter. In Leviticus 26, Moses lays on the “blessings” and “cursings” of the Law of Moses. Three elements in particular make up the latter: “famine,” “pestilence,” and finally the “sword.” In other words, if and when the children of Israel violated the sacred covenant between them and Jehovah, he would first deprive them of their food. If they still continued to ignore the terms of the covenant, he would deprive them of their health. Finally, he would deprive them of their lives. Smith’s words here speak to nineteenth-century America envisioned as a modern-day Israelite nation, under the same terms and facing the same consequences as the original people of Moses. Just as Israel was scattered, first at the hands of Assyria (ca. 722 BCE) and then at the hands of the Babylonians (ca. 600 BCE), so here Smith prophesies a similar fate to his “wicked” contemporaries through his allusions to Leviticus 26.

In closing this analysis of Smith’s first Colesville letter, I want to make note of two notable stylistic occurrences. The first is his use of language from Matthew 5:18. In the King James, this verse reads: “For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, *one jot or one tittle* shall in no wise pass from the law, till all *be fulfilled*.” Smith renders it this way in his letter, “for ye need not suppose that *one jot or tittle* of the prophecies of all the Holy Prophets shall fail, and there are many that remain to *be fulfilled*.”

Whereas Jesus was speaking about the fulfillment of the Law of Moses, Smith has changed both the wording and the context. Now the fulfillment that is to happen concerns the prophecies Smith has been citing, such as the “great destructions upon the face of this land.” Jesus’s words would have been fulfilled in Matthew’s mind prior to his penning of the gospel, but for Joseph Smith it is future fulfillment, not past resolution, towards which he gazes. He achieves this shift in meaning by cleverly following the verbal pattern set out

in Matthew's text. Matthew has "one jot or one tittle" followed by ten words before he brings in "be fulfilled." Smith does something similar, appropriating "one jot or tittle" followed by seventeen words before he also brings in "be fulfilled." Here Smith shows an affinity not just for the language but the style or form of the authors upon whom he draws for his language. Additionally, his reorientation of Matthew 5:18 into his specific worldview and context provides additional evidence for the claim that it is the language, more than the specific context, that matters more to Smith in this letter.

A second stylistic feature worth noting is how Smith closes his letter. He ends his first Colesville letter with these words: "May the grace of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost be and abide with you from henceforth and forever, Amen." This type of language would not be out of place in a letter of Paul, as can be seen in these examples:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen (2 Corinthians 13:14).

Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen (Galatians 6:18).

Smith makes a conscious decision to close his letter in a way that clearly imitates the epistles of Paul and suggests that, at least here, Smith has studied New Testament letters in enough detail to know how Paul ends his own letters. Again, imitating the style and form of the biblical authors matters to Smith, as does preserving their language, even as he reappropriates that form and language to help himself and his followers make sense of their own contemporary circumstances. Smith's corpus often sees him carefully walking a tightrope as he produces texts that clarify and resolve the difficulties of the nineteenth century, while also maintaining textual links to the actual biblical text. The first Colesville letter continues that trajectory.

### THE SECOND COLESVILLE LETTER

Colesville 2 December 1830

Dearly beloved in the Lord

According to your prayers, the Lord hath called, chosen, ordained, sanctified and sent unto you, another *servant* and Apostle *separated unto his gospel* through *Jesus Christ* [Quotation-Romans 1:1] ~~his~~ our Redeemer, to whom be all honor & praise henceforth and forever—even our beloved brother Orson Pratt, the bearer of these lines.



Whom I recommend unto you as a *faithful Servant* [Echo-Matthew 25:21, 23] in the Lord, through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, Amen.

To the Church in Colesville—

Having many things to write to you, but being assured that ye are not ignorant of all that I can write to you, finally I would inform you that Zion is prospering here, there are many serious inquirers in this place, who are seeking the Lord. It gave us much joy to hear from you, to hear that God is *softening the hearts of* [Allusion-Helaman 12:2] the children of men in that place, it being the *seat* of *Satan* [Echo-Revelation 2:13]. But *blessed be the name of God* [Echo-Daniel 2:20], it also hath become the abode of our savior; and may you all be faithful and wait for the time of our Lord, for his appearing is *nigh at hand* [Echo-Joel 2:1].<sup>35</sup> But *the time*, and *the season* [Echo-Daniel 2:21],<sup>36</sup> Brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you, *for ye yourselves perfectly know that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night* [Quotation-1 Thessalonians 5:2]: *for when they shall say peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman, but they shall not escape* [Quotation-1 Thessalonians 5:3]. *But ye, brethren are not in darkness* [1 Thessalonians 5:4], *therefore let us not sleep as do others, but let us watch and be sober* [Quotation-1 Thessalonians 5:6], *for they that sleep, sleep in the night, and they that be drunken are drunken in the night* [Quotation-1 Thessalonians 5:7], *but let us who be of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and law, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation* [Quotation-1 Thessalonians 5:8]. *For God hath not appointed us unto wrath; but to obtain [sa]lvation through our Lord Jesus Christ* [Quotation-1 Thessalonians 5:9]. *Wherefore comfort one another, even as ye also do* [Quotation-1 Thessalonians 5:11]; for *perilous times* are at hand [Echo-2 Timothy 3:1], for behold the dethronement and deposition of the kings in the eastern continent,—the whirlwinds in the West India Islands, it has destroyed a number of vessels, uprooted buildings and strewed them in the air; the fields of spices have been destroyed, and the inhabitants have barely escaped with their lives, and many have been buried under the ruins. In Columbia, South America, they are at war and *peace is taken from the earth* in part [Quotation-Revelation. 6:4]. and it will soon be in whole, yea destructions are at our doors, and they soon will be *in the houses of the wicked* [Quotation-Proverbs 3:33;

<sup>35</sup> Also Luke 21:30, 31; John 11:55; 19:42.

<sup>36</sup> Also Eccl. 3:1; Dan. 7:12; Wis. 8:8; Acts 1:7; 1 Thess. 5:1.

Micah 6:10],<sup>37</sup> and they *that know not God* [Allusion-2 Thessalonians 1:8].<sup>38</sup> Yea *lift up your heads* and rejoice *for your redemption draweth nigh* [Quotation-Luke 21:28]. We are the most favored people that ever have been *from the foundation of the world* [Quotation-Matthew 25:34],<sup>39</sup> if we remain faithful in *keeping the commandments of our God* [Echo-1 Corinthians 7:19].<sup>40</sup> Yea, even *Enoch, the seventh from Adam* [Quotation-Jude 1:14] beheld our day and rejoiced, and the prophets from that day forth have prophesied of the second coming of our *Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* [Allusion-2 Peter 1:11],<sup>41</sup> and rejoiced at the day of rest of the Saints, Yea, and the Apostle of our Savior also did rejoice in his appear<sup>42</sup> in a cloud with *the host of Heaven* [Echo-1 Kings 22:19],<sup>43</sup> to dwell with man on the earth *a thousand years* [Allusion-Revelation 20:4]. Therefore we have reason to rejoice. Behold the prophecies of the Book of Mormon are fulfilling as fast as time can bring it about. *The Spirit of the Living God* [Allusion-2 Corinthians 3:3] is upon me therefore who will say that I *shall not prophecy* [Echo-Micah 2:6]. The time is soon at hand that we shall have to flee whithersoever the Lord will, for safety, Fear not those who are making you *an offender for a word* [Quotation-Isaiah 29:21] but be faithful in witnessing unto *a crooked and a perverse generation* [Quotation-Deuteronomy 32:5], that *the day of the coming of our Lord and Savior is at hand* [Quotation-Joel 2:1].<sup>44</sup> Yea, *prepare ye the way of the Lord, make strait his path* [Quotation-Matthew 3:3].<sup>45</sup> Who will shrink because of offences, for offences must come, but woe to

<sup>37</sup>In the Old Testament, the phrase “in the house of the wicked” always finds “house” in the singular. Smith uses it in the plural. There are places in the Old Testament where “in the houses of the. . .” appears, although not linked to “wicked.” See 2 Kings 17:29, 32 (“in the houses of the high places”) and Jeremiah 43:12 (“in the houses of the gods of Egypt”).

<sup>38</sup>Or 1 Thess. 4:5.

<sup>39</sup>Also Matt. 13:35; 25:34; Luke 11:50; Heb. 4:3; Rev. 13:8; 17:8.

<sup>40</sup>I choose to locate this echo with 1 Corinthians 7:19 due largely to the use of “keeping” rather than “keep.” However, “keep the commandments of God” also appears at Rev. 12:17; 14:12.

<sup>41</sup>Also 2 Pet. 2:20; 3:18

<sup>42</sup>The original text here is unclear. A superscript character is present after “appear” that is possibly an “s” or a “d” that is underlined. See <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-in-colesville-2-december-1830/7>.

<sup>43</sup>The phrase “the host of Heaven” appears nineteen times in the Bible.

<sup>44</sup>Also Isa. 13:6; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Zeph. 1:7.

<sup>45</sup>Also Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; cf. Isa. 40:3.

them by whom they come, for the *rock* must *fall* on them and *grind them* to *powder* [Allusion-Matthew 21:44],<sup>46</sup> for the *fulness of the gentiles* is *come in* [Quotation-Romans 11:25], and woe will be unto them if they do not *repent and be baptized in the name of* our Lord and Savior *Jesus Christ for the remission of their sins* [Quotation-Acts 2:38], and come *in at the strait gate* [Allusion-Matthew 7:13]<sup>47</sup> and be numbered with the House of Israel, for *God* will *not* always be *mocked* [Allusion-Galatians 6:7], and not *pour out his wrath* [Allusion-Revelation. 16:1] upon those that *blaspheme* his holy *name* [Allusion-Revelation 16:9], for the *sword, famines and destruction* [Allusion-Isaiah 51:19] will soon overtake them in their wild career, for *God* will *avenge* [Allusion-Luke 18:7], and *pour out his phials of wrath* [Allusion-Revelation 16:1], and save *his elect* [Second part of Luke 18:7]. And all those who will obey his commandments are *his elect*, and he will soon *gather* them *from the four winds of heaven, from one* quarter of the earth *to the other* [Quotation-Matthew 24:31], to a place *whithersoever he will* [Echo-Proverbs 21:1], therefore *in your patience possess ye your souls* [Quotation-Luke 21:19]. Amen.

Joseph Smith Junr.

John Whitmer.<sup>48</sup>

Approximately five months after the first letter sent to the fledgling Colesville Branch, Smith authored this second letter on December 2, 1830. The challenges facing the small branch had not abated, and may have even intensified, as Joseph refers to Colesville as “the seat of Satan” (Echo of Revelation 2:13). Likely in response to these challenges, he sent newly called apostle Orson Pratt to meet with Hyrum Smith and Newel Knight, who were both currently working in the area. The first part of the letter is a sort of brief “letter of recommendation” commending Pratt to Smith and Knight. In it Smith refers to Pratt as “another servant and Apostles separated unto his gospel through Jesus Christ,” a clear quotation of Romans 1:1 where Paul’s calling as an apostle is described in nearly the same language (“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God”). This second letter, once it properly begins, adopts the same apocalyptic position advocated by the first, as Smith

<sup>46</sup> Also Luke 20:18

<sup>47</sup> Also Luke 13:24.

<sup>48</sup> The letter also includes a brief postscript advising Joseph Smith’s brother Hyrum Smith to avoid the Freemasons. I have omitted it from discussion here due to its difference in audience and tone.

again turns to prophetic and eschatological language from the Bible to help orient and console his struggling audience.

In many ways, this second letter closely resembles the first in how it incorporates biblical language, with one major exception that I will deal with in the next paragraph. Like the first letter, the second finds Smith weaving biblical phrases of generally four or five words into a longer, apocalyptic tapestry. Once again, he draws heavily upon the New Testament, with the synoptic gospels, the letters of Paul, and the book of Revelation all represented. However, the second letter finds Smith extracting more language from the Old Testament than he did in the first, as here he includes language from Daniel, Proverbs, Job, and Joel in addition to allusions to Isaiah. Again, Smith does an admirable job of engaging with the language of the Bible but without letting that language overshadow his own message and voice. The Bible buttresses his message, but it does not overwhelm it. Phrases variously occur at the beginning, middle, or end of sentences. Some sentences have multiple intertexts, others have none. Some of the phrases are easy to recognize, such as the quotations from Acts 2:38 or Romans 11:25, while others are more subtle, such as the allusion to Daniel 2:21.

The largest difference between the two letters comes only a few lines into the letter as Smith engages in a discussion about the timing of the second coming. After alluding to Colesville as “the seat of Satan,” an echo of Revelation 2:13, Smith declares that the appearance of Jesus Christ is “nigh at hand” (Echo of Joel 2:1). At this point, Smith engages in what is one of the lengthiest biblical quotations in any of his letters, in this case a quotation from 1 Thessalonians. The decision to draw upon 1 Thessalonians is an obvious one, since this New Testament letter finds Paul dealing with a similar concern about the timing of the second coming amongst the first century church. Momentarily ceasing his tendency to weave biblical verse and his own words, Smith quotes, with hardly any differences, the entirety of 1 Thessalonians 5:1–4, 5:6–9, and 5:11. This sort of lengthy quotation is rare for Smith’s letters, and may indicate that he felt the situation to be dire enough that such a lengthy quote, almost completely unbroken by his own interjections, was necessary to drive home the message.

While the original context of 1 Thessalonians helps us understand its presence in a letter dealing with a similar theological crisis, what is interesting from an intertextual perspective is not so much what verses Smith quoted from 1 Thessalonians 5, but rather what verses he left out. It is hard to see Smith reproducing this lengthy of a quotation

from memory, and so one imagines him reading straight from the Bible for this section. If that is the case, then Smith intentionally omits from his quotation 1 Thessalonians 5:5 and 5:10:

Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness (1 Thess. 5:5).

Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him (1 Thess. 5:10).

While there is no obvious reason why these two verses were omitted by Smith, a likely reason is that they represent points in Paul's letter where he has brief theological tangents in the midst of his larger eschatological agenda. In the first case, 1 Thessalonians 5:5, Paul has just encouraged his congregation to be observant in the previous verse, at which point he inserts a comment about how his congregation, as "the children of light," stand at the inauguration of a new age. The second verse in question, 1 Thessalonians 5:10, is again something of a theological tangent. In 1 Thessalonians 5:9, Paul assures his audience that they can find reassurance in the idea that Jesus has been the instrument of their salvation. In 1 Thessalonians 5:10, he speaks to that idea a little more, elaborating on the reconciliation brought about through the death of Jesus on the cross. I would suggest that Smith's conscious decision to omit these verses was not due to any doctrinal issues with Paul, but more to a desire to adhere to his message of eschatological deliverance, and he sensed—correctly—that these two verses took that message—albeit temporarily—off topic. At the least, this awareness demonstrates that while Smith very much values biblical language and relies on it often, he does not necessarily do so indiscriminately.

Smith follows this lengthy engagement with Paul's epistle with something of a biblical respite. In similar fashion to the first Colesville letter, Smith pauses the biblical intertextuality partway through the letter to focus on temporal affairs. In the first letter that pause concerned his inability to travel to Colesville. Here he speaks of incidents in "the eastern continent" and in "Columbia, South America," interpreting these calamities as the fulfillment of 2 Timothy's warning about "perilous times" and Revelation's prediction that "peace is taken from the earth." Smith returns to biblical language once again as he begins a somewhat lengthy discussion of why the Colesville saints do not need to worry amidst this increasingly apocalyptic fervor. Here Smith repeats a stylistic move he made several times in the first letter, where he takes a lengthy biblical phrase and inserts his own language

in the middle of the quotation. In this case, Luke 21:28, which reads “lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh,” now reads in Smith’s letter “lift up your heads *and rejoice* for your redemption draweth nigh.” As opposed to the omission of certain verses from 1 Thessalonians, where Smith intentionally left out language that he did not seem to think was relevant, here we see the opposite, namely Smith adding his own language to reinforce an idea that he may have felt the author, in this case Luke, did not stress enough.

This insertion of “rejoice,” intentionally or not, colors the next section of the letter as Smith describes his own millennial vision. “We are the most favored people that have ever been,” he declares, “from the foundation of the world”; the latter being a popular biblical phrase that appears in Matthew 25:34, Revelation 13:8, among other places. Smith likely has Revelation 20 in mind here as he discusses Jesus’s arrival to “dwell with man on the earth for a thousand years. But Smith, as he often does, reaches far back into the past to find the future. Quoting Jude 1:14, he declares that “Enoch, the seventh from Adam beheld our day and rejoiced,” and that prophets since Enoch have “prophecied” and “rejoiced” in a similar fashion. Smith then links past and present by mentioning both “the prophecies of the Book of Mormon” and his belief that “the Spirit of the Living God (Allusion to 2 Corinthians 3:3) has come upon him and given rise to his own eschatological prophecies.

It is Smith’s prophecies of the end that provide the climax of this second letter. Here he collapses the terror and the hope that drive a text like the book of Revelation into a series of apocalyptic declarations. It is this section that, in my opinion, represents the intertextual peak of Smith’s Colesville letters. In an intense and unrestrained manner, he uncoils what he claims to be his own spirit-inspired prophecies, nearly every one of them textually linked with a biblical verse.<sup>49</sup> Smith begins with quotations from Isaiah 29:21, Deuteronomy 32:5, and Joel 2:1 as he encourages his congregation to ignore those who may criticize them for being “an offender for the word,” and instead

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<sup>49</sup> This part of the Colesville correspondences demonstrates well the issue behind Philip L. Barlow’s relevant question of Smith’s unique use of the Bible: “How is it that a sane and religiously sincere man living in antebellum America could intrude so radically upon the biblical text that he revered by presenting his own inspirations as though they had been spoken by ancient prophets?” Philip L. Barlow, “Joseph Smith’s Revision of the Bible: Fraudulent, Pathologic, or Prophetic,” *Harvard Theological Review* 83, no. 1 (1990): 61.

to testify to a “crooked and perverse generation” that Jesus’s second coming “is at hand.” Echoing the language of John the Baptist, he then instructs his flock to “prepare ye the way of the Lord, make strait his path” (Quotation of Matthew 3:3; Isaiah 40:3). Smith’s next statement is an allusion to Matthew 21:44, where Jesus predicts that the kingdom of God will emerge among another “nation” and will smash any who oppose it. He interprets this prophecy as applying to “the fulness of the gentiles” that has now “come in” (Quotation of Romans 11:25), and issues a warning to any who attempt to enter God’s kingdom by any other means than to “repent and be baptized in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ from the remission of their sins,” a quotation of Acts 2:38. Smith’s words make little sense here unless he intended to equate the “rock” and the “fulness of the gentiles” as being realized in his own restoration movement, which may be why he quotes from Acts 2 and its description of the formation of the “original” Christian church.

For those who refuse to enter in “at the strait gate” (Allusion to Matthew 7:13), presumably another reference to the nascent Mormon faith, Smith warns that they risk offending God with their decision, for “God will not always be mocked.” One senses in Smith’s reworking of Galatians 6:7 a perception or belief that while the Christian world has made a mockery of God for some time, that is about to dramatically change, as he goes on to assert that God will not always “not pour out his wrath” (Allusion to Revelation 16:1) upon those that “blaspheme his holy name” (Allusion to Revelation 16:9). Once again, turning to the “cursings” language he had utilized in the first letter, Smith warns of “the sword, famines, and destruction” that will overwhelm the gentiles who resist his message. At this point, he writes one of his more complex stylistic moves. He takes two New Testament verses, Luke 18:7 and Revelation 16:1, and constructs a rather complicated statement.

And shall not *God* *avenge* his *own elect*, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? (Luke 18:7).

And I heard a great voice out of the temple saying to the seven angels, Go your ways, and *pour out* the *vials of* the *wrath* of God upon the earth (Revelation 16:1).

Smith first takes the “God” and “avenge” from the first part of Luke 18:7, inserts a reworking of “pour out the vials of the wrath” from Revelation 16:1, and then returns again to Luke 18:7 to get this prophecy: for *God* will *avenge* and *pour out* his *phials of wrath* and save *his elect*. However if one wants to understand Smith’s use of the Bible in his



corpus of religious texts and his letters, this is a clever line, one that reads very straightforwardly, works in the context of the paragraph in which it's written, yet maintains the recognizable biblical sources upon which it draws. The following sentence attempts to define "his elect" as those who "obey his commandments" before closing with a clever riff on Jesus's Olivet discourse that combines a line from Matthew's version of the Olivet discourse

And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall *gather* together his elect *from the four winds, from one* end of heaven *to the other* (Matthew 24:31)

with a line from Luke's own version of the Olivet discourse

*In your patience possess ye your souls* (Luke 21:19)

to create the prophecy that

he will soon *gather* them *from the four winds of heaven, from one* quarter of the earth *to the other* to a place whithersoever he will, therefore *in your patience possess ye your souls*.

For whatever reason, Smith declines to conclude this second letter with the Pauline epistolary line that he had used in the first letter, perhaps feeling that the grand apocalyptic pastiche of the letter's final third was an appropriate way to end.

So what then should we say about the nature and construction of Joseph Smith's two intriguing Colesville letters? What light can they shed on Smith's other writings? One important insight was provided by Dan Vogel, who addressed the first Colesville correspondence in his 2004 biography of Joseph Smith. Vogel writes: "Besides confirming the belief that the Millennium was near, the letter draws upon Bible passages and weaves them together in a manner not unlike the Book of Mormon and revelations that were being compiled for publication."<sup>50</sup> Based upon this study of the two Colesville letters, I

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<sup>50</sup> Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 527. Observant readers may notice that I do not deal here with Vogel's claim about the Book of Mormon and Smith's letters. That is intentional as the Book of Mormon represents a more complex project than individual canonized revelations. While I do somewhat agree with Vogel, I also see some important distinctions. For those interested, I deal with the intertextual relationship between the Bible and Book of Mormon in a number of places. See especially Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, "John 11 in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of the Bible*

would argue that Vogel's statement is a salient one and bears further investigation. There are indeed some remarkable similarities between these two letters and Smith's early revelations. Take, for example, D&C 34, a revelation received by Joseph Smith on behalf of Orson Pratt in November 1830, placing it chronologically between the two Colesville letters:<sup>51</sup>

My son Orson hearken ye & and Behold what I the Lord God say unto you even Jesus Christ your Redeemer *the light* & the life *of the world* [Allusion-John 8:12] a *light* which *shineth in darkness & the darkness Comprehendeth it not* [Quotation-John 1:5] who *so loved the world that he gave his* [Quotation-John 3:16] own life that *as many as* would believe might *become the Sons* & daughter[s] *of God* [Allusion-John 1:12] Wherefore ye are my Son & *blessed are* ye because ye *have believed* [Allusion-John 20:29] & more blessed are ye because you are called of me to *Preach* my *Gospel* [Echo-2 Corinthians 2:12] to *lift up* your *voice* as with the sound of *a Trump* [Allusion-Isaiah 58:1] both long & loud & cry repentance to *a crooked & perverse generation* [Quotation-Deuteronomy 32:5], *preparing the way of the Lord* [Allusion-Matthew 3:3] for his second Coming for Behold, *Verily, Verily I say unto you* [Quotation-John 1:51] *the time is soon at hand* [Allusion-Revelation 1:3] that I will *come in a cloud with power & great glory* [Quotation-Luke 21:27] & it shall be a *great day* at the time of my *coming* [Allusion-Malachi 4:5] for all *nations* shall *tremble* [Allusion-Isaiah 64:2] but before that great day shall come the *sun* shall be *darkened & the moon be turned into blood* [Allusion-Joel 2:31] & the stars shall refuse their shineing & some shall fall & great destructions await the wicked [Echo-Revelation 6:13–16] Wherefore *lift up* thy *voice & spare not* [Quotation-Isaiah 58:1] for the Lord God hath spoken therefore Prophecy & it shall be given by *the power of the Holy Ghost* [Allusion-Romans 15:13] & if ye are faithful, behold *I am with you* until I come [Echo-Matthew 28:20] & *Verily Verily I say*

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and its Reception 5, no. 1 (2018): 81–106. See also Nicholas J. Frederick, *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016); and Nicholas J. Frederick, "The Book of Mormon and the Redaction of the King James New Testament," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 27 (2018): 44–87. On how I address these issues from a position of faith, see Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, "The Book of Mormon and the Academy," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 171–92.

<sup>51</sup> JSP, D1:210–11.

*unto you* [Quotation-John 1:51] *I come quickly* [Quotation-Revelation 22:20] even so your Lord & your redeemer amen.

Readers can easily see that the same stylistic trends familiar from the two Colesville letters are readily apparent here in the form of quotations, allusions and echoes. Some phrases are word for word, others slightly altered. There is even the same sandwiching of biblical phrases around words or phrases that are non-biblical. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are present, with a favoring of Isaiah and the Gospel of John as sources for many of the phrases. It is by no means a stretch to suggest that the two Colesville letters would fit nicely in today's modern Doctrine and Covenants next to revelations such as D&C 34. It could even be argued that it is only due to the letters' omission from the Book of Commandments and Revelations that they were not canonized in the first place, being preserved only through Newel Knight's journals and therefore likely forgotten when the earliest attempt was made to collect the revelations for publication.<sup>52</sup> While one could argue that the Pratt revelation is explicitly delivered through the voice of "I, the Lord God" while the Colesville letters are explicitly from "Joseph Smith," in respect to how the Bible is integrated into the text, there is little, if any, difference in the voice or the content between the two texts. And, I would argue, their insertion would serve to flesh out the context for some of the other apocalyptic language found in revelations such as D&C 27 and 29.

In sum, the importance of the Colesville letters and their resplendent intertextuality comes in understanding how the letters blur the lines among the different projects that make up Joseph Smith's corpus. Too often questions of Smith's intertextuality focus just on the Book of Mormon or the canonized revelations (although the latter is itself vastly understudied). Smith's letters must begin to become part of that conversation. Seth Perry has argued that "Smith made much of his access to direct revelation, but the bible culture of his time taught him that scriptural efficacy came from writing—from paper, pen, and ink; from styluses and metal plates."<sup>53</sup> Perry's notion

<sup>52</sup> As Grant Underwood explains, "The BCR [Book of Commandments and Revelations] appears to have been the primary source used in preparing the revelation texts for publication in the Book of Commandments." "Revelation, Text, and Revision: Insight from the Book of Commandments and Revelations," *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 67–84. See also MacKay and Hartley, *The Rise of the Latter-day Saints*, 17–19, 26–28.

<sup>53</sup> Perry, *Bible Culture & Authority*, 125.

of a written “scriptural efficacy” can clearly be observed in Smith’s letters. When we speak of the way in which he uses a short phrase to anchor a longer statement in the Bible; his ability to take a biblical phrase and sandwich it between two phrases from another biblical verse; his knack for taken small phrases and reworking them into part of a coherent, theological whole; or his seeming audacity in taking the language of a sacred text and reworking it in a way that presents him as the author, it is hard to arrive at any other conclusion than the Book of Mormon, the early canonized revelations, and the Colesville letters (and, I would argue, several others)<sup>54</sup> belong to the same family. We can argue, though, whether that family connection is best viewed as siblings or whether we are talking about a connection more akin to second cousins, at least from an intertextual perspective.<sup>55</sup> Whatever one may think of Smith and his claims, his adroit ability to mold biblical verse into “biblicized” verse remains an impressive accomplishment. To return again to Mark A. Noll, as far back as America’s foundation its colonists “even more frequently . . . drew on Scripture rhetorically—not exactly to *discern* the will of God but more to *enlist* God’s word on behalf of causes that may or may not have been directly taught from the sacred text.”<sup>56</sup> Joseph Smith’s Colesville letters find him engaging in something similar, utilizing the biblical word in a new way as he sought to prophetically guide his nascent church. Hopefully, this brief study has demonstrated that Smith’s extensive collection of letters deserve far greater attention in the ongoing search to understand the complexities of his literary corpus than has previously been recognized.

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<sup>54</sup>I have in mind here particularly the 1833 letters to Noah C. Saxton and Silas Smith, as well as the September 1, 1842, letter entitled “To all the Saints.” All demonstrate the same type of deep, stylistically rich intertextual engagement with the Bible. The exception to this rule seems to be the letters to Emma Smith, which rarely, if ever, engage the Bible.

<sup>55</sup>Philip L. Barlow, writing about Joseph Smith’s early revelations, states: “They are full of biblical phrases and images, and they echo KJV idiom. The biblicism is sometimes deliberate, with direct allusions to biblical prophecy or concepts, and sometimes (apparently) unconscious—biblical words woven into the fabric of a new narrative having its own coherence.” Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 25. I would argue, and I think this study has demonstrated, that Barlow’s words could just as easily be applied to Smith’s Colesville letters as well.

<sup>56</sup>Noll, *In the Beginning*, 327 (italics in original).