

Podcast 127: Gospel Tangents, Part 1

This is the first part of an interview Denver did this past summer with Rick Bennett for his Gospel Tangents podcast, which is presented here in its entirety in this series.

Rick Bennett: Welcome to Gospel Tangents. I'm really excited to have a wonderful guest here in the Restoration movement. Could you go ahead and tell us who you are?

Denver Snuffer: Denver Snuffer, reluctant interviewee.

Rick: [laughter]

Denver: Been persuaded by the promises that you made of remuneration.

Rick: [laughter] Remuneration...

Denver: Yeah, yeah. No, I don't like doing interviews, but after the request was made, I watched a few of the interviews that you've done, and I communicated with Lindsay Hansen Park. And the style of interview that you have really doesn't seem to have an agenda. You're just interested in letting people talk. I watched her interview; I watched Michael Quinn's. So, yeah, this is one of those rare occasions where I'm willing to talk.

Rick: [laughter] Well, I feel really lucky. I'm excited to have you on, so this is fantastic. So, how would you introduce yourself? I mean, I think some people would call you a prophet. Is that a title you accept? Or how do you...? How does that...?

Denver: There's a whole lot of baggage that has accumulated around the idea of some title, some honorific title. And the trappings that go along with those kinds of things are unwanted, unwelcomed, and I just don't like it. I commented one time that in all of scripture, the use of the term *Beloved* is confined almost exclusively to the Savior. It's a sacred appellation—Beloved—and it gets used by the Lord on rare occasion when He is talking to an individual that is in the presence of the Lord, and He's being acknowledged or promised something by God. So, the appellation Beloved is, to me, inappropriate to use because of its sacred nature outside of talking about the Lord's Beloved, which is Christ.

Beloved prophet: Now you're also going one step further because my understanding of the role of a prophet— It's like Joseph said: A prophet is only a prophet when a prophet's doing something that fits within that framework. Anyone can have a revelation—anyone. It's not confined to Christians; it's not confined to denominational leaders. Revelations are available, generally, to the entirety of mankind in every culture, every religion everywhere in the world. A prophet is someone whose revelation was not intended for necessarily *that* person but was intended to be a public message.

Almost all revelation is individual, personal, and the property correctly belonging to the recipient of that revelation. A prophet's message really doesn't belong to him. In fact, on some occasions, the message a prophet receives is something that he doesn't even understand himself. He's gonna have to parse it through and try to untangle the content to understand it himself. So, the message to a prophet is not personal; it's not directed to merely him. It's a message to the world.

So, in that context, the term gets misused a lot and—in particular, in this culture, in this geography—implies status, control, deference, authority. And I make no claim to authority. I make no claim to preside over anyone. I make no claim to be anything other than a fellow sojourner here trying our best to follow God.

But you caught me at a fortuitous moment because I now have the culmination of years of work by hundreds of volunteers. And maybe the best way to put a context to me is for me to talk about *this* [holding up his RE Scriptures].

Rick: Okay.

Denver: These are prototypes. It'll go into production. But we now have a print copy of a new set of scriptures. There are three volumes. The Old Covenants volume is the Joseph Smith Translation of the Old Testament. It begins with Genesis that most LDS people would recognize as the Book of Moses in the The Pearl of Great Price.

Rick: Okay.

Denver: So, the Joseph Smith Translation-Genesis text begins with the Book of Moses, and then, it follows the Joseph Smith Translation version of the Old Testament to the end. That's all in the first volume called The Old Covenants.

Rick: So, that's basically the Old Testament plus the Book of Moses, basically? Is that it? And Joseph Smith's translation...

Denver: It's the Old Testament-Joseph Smith Translation version.

Rick: Mm-hmm.

Denver: And it's the most accurate version of what Joseph did that has ever found its way into print. The Reorganized Church, now the Community of Christ, published what they called the Joseph Smith Translation.

Rick: *Inspired Version* I think is what they call it.

Denver: The Inspired Version of the Bible.

Rick: Mm-hmm.

Denver: The problem with that is that it was not entirely complete in that they omitted dozens of things that Joseph had done, but the committee that was responsible for publishing it also inserted things that they thought ought be in there. Therefore, the Inspired Version in the RLDS is not what you'll find in this [tapping the RE volume]. The Inspired Version—we've had people compare with the available material, and all of the changes that were omitted are included. All of the additions that were made by others are deleted. And in addition, during talks Joseph Smith gave in the Nauvoo era, there were times when he was talking about a passage of scripture from the Bible, and he would comment that "a more correct translation..." or "a more correct reading..." And then, he would alter the text that he just read out of the Bible. He didn't always do that in the manuscript of the Joseph Smith Translation, but all of those Nauvoo-era comments that he made were picked up and were also added. So, it's the most complete set.

Rick: Wow.

Denver: Joseph Smith also always intended to publish both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon in a single volume. So, the second— The first volume is called The Old Covenants because those are the covenants (plural) that went with Adam and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Moses down to the time of Christ.

The second volume is called The New Covenants. It's the New Testament and the Book of Mormon. Again, it has the same Joseph Smith Translation version put into it with all of the corrections—most complete version. But, in addition, we have a different Book of Mormon text. Joseph Smith dictated the translation of the Book of Mormon, and it was written by various scribes beginning with Emma Smith's handwriting and ending with Oliver Cowdery's handwriting. That material was then used by Oliver Cowdery to make the printer's manuscript.

The printer's manuscript was intended to be a faithful copy of the original translation, but we know from a comparison between what has survived of the original and the printer's manuscript, that we have 100% of, that Oliver Cowdery made about one and a half copying mistakes per page of the printer's manuscript. That manuscript was then taken to the E. B. Grandin shop, and it was John Gilbert who got hired by E. B. Grandin to typeset the Book of Mormon. John Gilbert took the printer's manuscript, which has no punctuation on it, and then, he punctuated and typeset the Book of Mormon. John Gilbert did what he did in punctuating based upon his understanding of how the words that were on that page should be understood.

There's been this controversy that has existed in Mormonism (scholarly articles being written) about how Joseph Smith's understanding of God changed from, originally, a trinitarian view into, later, a different view where there's different personages who belong to the Godhead. And as evidence for Joseph Smith's earlier trinitarian understanding of the Godhead, they point to the original Book of Mormon text. Well, the punctuation that was put in by John Gilbert, if you repunctuate it, can change from a trinitarian view to the later doctrinal view that Joseph Smith would teach and preach and advocate. I've referred to John Gilbert's use of punctuation (I've coined the term the *trinitarian comma*) because if

you take out some commas, or you move them about, you can actually reach exactly the same doctrinal conclusion that Joseph would later teach simply by repunctuating what John Gilbert did.

So, in the second volume, what we've done is— I think I gave two talks in which I changed the punctuation and showed how you could conform to Joseph's later teachings. I think those got in here. But by and large, as much as possible, punctuation has been removed in order to allow the reader a more independent way of coming to grips with the content of the book and to deciding for yourself how best it ought to be understood.

Rick: Hmm.

Denver: It's also— Joseph made a revision, and he was revising again in the 1844 time period, but he revised the Book of Mormon a couple of times while he was still alive. It appears from comparisons that what Joseph was doing in the revisions he was making was trying to take the printed version that we had and make it conform more closely to the original translation, not the printer's manuscript. Errors crept in there. More errors crept in when John Gilbert worked with it. (The printed copy was after John Gilbert's fingerprints were on it.) He took that back to the original translation, and he tried to correct it to conform back to that.

We— Unfortunately, that original translation got put in the cornerstone of the building. It didn't get pulled out until it had rotted. We only have about 22% of the original left. We have 100% of the printer's copy but only 22% of the original. And so, we don't have the ability to go back and completely conform. But as near as it is possible at this point to recapture that, that's the Book of Mormon version that appears in the second volume.

Rick: Hmm.

Denver: Then, the third volume is something called the Teachings and Commandments. It's a chronological layout of the revelations given to Joseph Smith with the exception of the Joseph Smith History. Joseph Smith rewrote the history after ~~John Gilbert~~ [John Whitmer] left the Church and took the history with him. Joseph rewrote the history of the Church in 1838. Then, he published it in the *Times and Seasons* when he was the editor of the *Times and Seasons* (it being based upon the 1838 material) because the internal content of the *Times and Seasons* material is all referencing the 1838 time frame. We don't have that. We do have a copy that was made in 1839, and it was that copy in 1839 that was the basis for the *Times and Seasons* version.

While Joseph Smith was the editor of the *Times and Seasons*, his history began to roll out. It's significantly longer than what is in the Pearl of Great Price-Joseph Smith History that Latter-day Saints would be familiar with. But the entirety of this history, while it was written and published with him as the editor, appears as the first section of the Teachings and Commandments. Then, it follows a chronological layout through all of the revelations of Joseph Smith. And once again, we have access to the revelation as Joseph Smith dictated it.

The revelations of Joseph went through two iterations that altered the text. A copy was taken by Oliver Cowdery to Independence, Missouri, to be published as the Book of Commandments. Oliver Cowdery, in setting up the Book of Commandments, felt at liberty because there was a revelation about Oliver having the right to write for the Church but not by way of commandment; yet, he could write. He had the liberty, he thought, to alter some of the texts and to add to them. So, he did that in the Book of Commandments. And the press was overrun, and it was destroyed. Copies of that got salvaged in loose form. They later got gathered up and bound together as the Book of Commandments. But that publishing effort in Independence was abandoned because of the mobs and the destruction of the press. So, in 1835, they published the Doctrine and Covenants in Kirtland.

Well, the Doctrine and Covenants contained, as its very first section, the Lectures on Faith. A committee was appointed to deal with the revelations, the Book of Commandments material. Joseph Smith was part of that committee but apparently didn't contribute. His diaries say that he spent *his* time editing and correcting Lectures on Faith.

There are those who say that Lectures on Faith appear to be the product of Sidney Rigdon and not Joseph Smith because they did word comparisons. Joseph Smith, before the publication of Doctrine and Covenants, spent *his* time editing and correcting Lectures on Faith. When he finished with that, and that is apparently the only thing he worked on getting ready for the Doctrine and Covenants to be printed, he said he would vouch for the correctness of the doctrine that is contained in what he had done, that he would stand by every word of it. *That* portion in the front of the D&C is the *doctrine*. The *covenants* are the *revelations*.

Well, the committee that was working on the revelations included Sidney Rigdon, and he took even more liberties than had Oliver Cowdery with revelations that had come to Joseph. And so, what you have in the LDS version of the Doctrine and Covenants are two steps removed from the original revelation to Joseph. And what is in the Teachings and Commandments is a chronological layout that includes Lectures on Faith that, insofar as we are able to accurately do so, recaptures exactly what the original revelation was and states it, as near as we can get at present, comprehensively, chronologically, and accurately in the form that it came as a revelation to Joseph Smith.

Rick: So, you're telling me that you've recanonized Lectures on Faith because that was actually taken out?

Denver: Yes.

Rick: Yeah, so you recanonized it, huh?

Denver: Yeah, it's in here. Lectures on Faith is Section—the Teachings and Commandments Section 110. Yes, recanonized it. It was actually never— See, here's two interesting factoids: first is, Lectures on Faith were canonized by a vote of the Church. They were not removed. They remained, by vote of the Church in General Conference, canonized scripture.

They were deleted without a vote by a committee in 1921 that simply took the step of dropping it and saying, “We’re not sure it’s good material. We’re not gonna to keep it in the scriptures.” So, it was decanonized.

The second interesting fact is that no conference, until these scriptures, ever accepted and canonized the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon was simply accepted, but it was never accepted and canonized by a vote of conference until it was done so for these scriptures.

Rick: You mean in one of your conferences?

Denver: Yeah, it happened in Boise in 2017 as I recall.

So, let me tell you the whole reason behind all of this effort—because hundreds of volunteers, donating thousands of hours of effort, worked tirelessly for a long period of time to put this material together in a correct form.

There was a revelation that was given in September of 1832. The Church got organized in April of 1830. By the time you get to September of 1832, this is the sad news that the Church is getting:

Your minds in times past have been darkened because of unbelief, and because you have treated lightly the things you have received, which vanity and unbelief have brought the whole church under condemnation. And this condemnation rests upon the children of Zion, even all, and they shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon, and the former commandments which I have given them, not only to say but to do according to that which I have written, that they may bring forth fruit meet for their Father’s kingdom. Otherwise, there remains a scourge and a judgment to be poured out upon the children of Zion.... (T&C 82:20)

So, condemnation was brought, and the focus that most people have on those words is to *do*. But what became apparent is that the problem is not merely *doing*. It is also in the *saying*, meaning that the revelations were entrusted to them, but they weren’t accurately preserving or accurately saying, “What it was that I...” And the *I* in that statement is God—God saying, “I gave this to you, and you’re not saying what I said, and you’re not doing what I’ve required of you; and therefore, you’re condemned.” And this happens within what? eighteen months of the founding of the Church? The condemnation’s there?

Well, if they’d taken that seriously in September of 1832, you still had available to you the original translation manuscript that we don’t have. They would still have the original revelations to Joseph that we still don’t have (or we have not been able to preserve entirely intact), and the recovery effort could have been done by the time you got to the conference in 1835 where they adopt the Doctrine and Covenants with Lectures on Faith and the others. But they didn’t do it.

And so, today, when you say, “You're under condemnation because you failed both to say and to do what the Lord had done and said and required that you do,” if you're going to set about, at this late date, to try and make that right and to put it all back together again, what you find is that it is—it's an impossible undertaking. You can get close. You can get a whole lot closer than what you do in a traditional Latter-day Saint set of scriptures or a Community of Christ set of scriptures. You can get a whole lot closer, but you really would have needed to undertake this work while Joseph Smith was *alive* in order to actually accomplish what brought the Church under condemnation in September 1832 to emerge *out* from under that condemnation.

But this effort was undertaken as the best efforts that can be made with the available source material. And it was a labor of love intending to show, at least to the Lord, that although we may not be able to get all the way there, there is a group of people still left on the earth who take seriously the condemnation and would labor as hard and long as they can to try and bring it back into a restored, accurate state. And that was the scripture project which got presented to the Lord for His approval.

The Teachings and Commandments Section 156 is a *prayer* that was offered to try and get the scriptures accepted and acknowledged. That Section 156 then received an *answer*, and that's Section 157.

All of these scriptures are now being produced in a leather-bound set with a 100% cotton paper, leather-bound, gilded edging, finest leather, finest binding, finest printing, and finest materials that we can make. Unfortunately, we had to pay in advance to get them made, so...

Rick: Did you ask Martin Harris to mortgage the farm?

Denver: There were actually a couple people who stepped forward to help with that, individuals who contributed in order to get the minimum order made to satisfy the requirements. I think there— It's more than 2500 but less than 3000 copies of the leather-bound material that's gonna be put out. But they were pre-purchased. So, I think that Benchmark is gonna— I think they ordered 15 sets of the three volumes. I think they'll have 15 sets available for sale. But it will require another pre-order at some point in the future before there's ever a second printing. But they're really quite nice and quite accurate.

Rick: Well, it sounds interesting. When are these gonna be available? Can the public purchase these, then?

Denver: No, they would have had to have ordered at the time that the order went in.

Rick: Oh. So, you have to go to Benchmark to get them, huh?

Denver: Well, there will be 15 lucky souls that are able to get them through Benchmark. But all the copies that were printed were paid for in advance. I think I personally placed the

largest single order because I bought them for myself, my wife, all of my children, and if my children are married, for their spouse, also. So I bought a number of copies.

Rick: Wow. How much do they run?

Denver: This is what's interesting. The printer that we got for this wanted to get into the Bible-publishing business because the Bible is the largest-selling book in the world still, today. And he'd never printed a Bible. So, he competed with multiple printers around the world that we got bids for. The best Bible printers are not in the United States.

Rick: Hmm.

Denver: The very best is in the Netherlands: Royal Jongbloed. Well, we passed around a copy of the Royal Jongbloed among the committee, and everyone oohed and aahed, but to get them to put these together, it would've been about \$500 for this set. Okay? But we loved it.

It just so happens that a fellow was on the committee who builds books as a living. He restores books; he makes them, handmade. But he'll take a rare book— He's restored the majority of the existing prints of the original E. B. Grandin Book of Mormon that had been restored. He *did* it. He was on the committee. He went through, and he prepared the specs for the printer who wanted to get into the Bible-publishing business. And this set that I'm holding is based upon the Royal Jongbloed workmanship and specifications, and it was done at a fraction of the cost. I think each of these books is about \$34 apiece. The whole set is less than \$100.

Rick: Hmm.

Denver: And, I mean, they'll obviously all be sold out because you have to pay in advance. But I'm hoping that someday there'll be a second printing, maybe a third. Who knows?

Rick: I'll have to put my order in to Curt Bench.

Denver: Yeah, call Curt.

Rick: [laughter]

Denver: There's another effort that we've undertaken.

Rick: Oh.

Denver: The original purpose of the Book of Mormon was to try to recover two groups of people. One was a remnant in the Americas. Another was a remnant that is referred to as the Jews. There is— There was one Hebrew Book of Mormon that was made (I think it was in the 1940's), but it was taken out of print, taken off the shelf. And the LDS Church has signed a treaty with the nation of Israel that they won't do anything to proselytise. So, one

of the very target audiences that the Book of Mormon was intended for, the LDS Church has abandoned, by their commitment, in order to get the BYU Jerusalem Center on the north of the Mount of Olives. They agreed that they won't do anything to proselytise.

Well, we're under no such constraint. So, there are two things that are underway. The first is a separate, bound copy of the Book of Mormon which has been rendered into a Jewish-friendly version using Jewish spellings. The names in the Book of Mormon have been altered to Jewish spellings. The language has been— This is in English. I mean, the closest thing I can get in order for you to understand what we're talking about is: This is a Yiddish version of the Book of Mormon. It's been published and titled *The Stick of Joseph in the Hands of Ephraim*, and it has a Hebrew subtitle. That has been printed as part of this printing effort, also, and it will be given away. Several hundred copies of that book will be given away to Jewish people for them to consider the Book of Mormon in a more Jewish context.

And then, secondly, the Book of Mormon itself is currently being translated into Hebrew and will be published as a Hebrew text. The LDS Church, after they took the Hebrew Book of Mormon out of print, donated that translation to the Genealogical Society of Utah. The Genealogical Society of Utah microfilmed it, and we got a copy of it on microfilm. But as it turns out, it's not a particularly good Hebrew translation; so, it's being redone. A volunteer...

Rick: So, this is in Hebrew, then?

Denver: [holding the book] This is not. This is in English.

Rick: That's in English.

Denver: But it's in English with Hebrew spellings and Hebrew usages in it. But it's an English version.

Rick: So, instead of using *Jesus*, it's going to use *Yeshua*?

Denver: Yeah, it's—yes, exactly. And *Moshiyah* instead of *Mosiah*. I mean, it'll be Jewish-friendly.

The Hebrew-language version, which will be in Hebrew, is a work that's underway. Volunteers and then, some professionals are being compensated, and then, a PhD who— His specialty for his doctoral thesis was rendering into Hebrew, English material, taking English material and converting it into Old Testament Hebrew language. That was his PhD thesis. He's on the faculty of a major university. He's doing the final edit on the work that is being done to bring it into a Hebrew language. And when that's done and is published, it should withstand scrutiny from the most scrupulous rabbi of anywhere in the world—New York, Jerusalem, Amsterdam—doesn't matter. It will withstand scrutiny as a...

Rick: Are you sure? I've heard the saying, "Take two Jewish rabbis, and you get three opinions." [laughter]

Denver: Well, they may differ on what they do with the text, but they won't differ on the language that got used in order to bring it about. But we're doing an equally serious effort with Native Americans and the remnant there.

We don't necessarily want a lot of attention for the effort that's being made. In fact, there's a lot of disappointment, even bitterness, among Native American people because of what happened historically with the Indian placement program with that Indian School that's now abandoned. Much of it's been dismantled up in Brigham City.

Rick: The Intermountain High School.

Denver: Yeah, the Intermountain High School. There are children who were run through that program, who are now adults, who felt that they had been put upon, abused, belittled, discriminated against, mistreated at the hands of an institution. So, to say, "Hey, we're Mormons, kind of," or "We aren't Mormons, but we're bringing you the Book of Mormon," it's off-putting. You're gonna have an uphill battle to even get a fair hearing because the LDS effort has been disastrously off-putting. So, we're trying to deal with, cope with the trauma that has been inflicted by others in hoping to get a fair hearing for what the Restoration *could* mean to Native American peoples and getting them to respect what Joseph meant and what Joseph was attempting to do and what the Book of Mormon was really intended to accomplish. But we're not doing it with a lot of fanfare because the more fanfare that gets called to something, the more people will draw comparisons and analogies that just aren't true.

I mean, my personal view is that the LDS Church institutionally has pursued an institutional self-interest. A *byproduct* of their self-interest, fortunately, has been the preservation of the Book of Mormon, for which I'm grateful, the preservation of the Doctrine and Covenants, for which I'm grateful. I don't think that they were as interested in accuracy of the material or even in obedience to the material or trying to understand the material. But it served a self-interest, and that self-interest has been a blessing to me—because they may have profited; they may have built themselves a trillion dollar empire off of the back of these things. That doesn't matter to me. What matters to me is that they have gifted to me, generations later, the Book of Mormon text, and now, through *The Joseph Smith Papers*, enough material I can do something to recover it; and through the work of Royal Skousen, enough so that I can compare every edition in one volume side by side.

Rick: Royal Skousen was a big part of this. It sounds like he was.

Denver: His work product was. His work product was a phenomenal help. But he personally didn't participate in anything.

Rick: Right.

Denver: But *The Joseph Smith Papers*, which is also the product of the LDS Church, has been a marvelous aid. I buy *The Joseph Smith Papers* as they come off the press. I've got every volume. But I mark them up. Mine have interlineations, handwriting, cross-references. The editors will introduce material. In their introduction, they will absolutely contradict the document you're about to read. It's glaringly stupid how they've approached some of this material. They will footnote stuff to say, "There is more to this story, and this is the 'more to the story'" because they sincerely, devoutly believe that it stayed on the rails after Joseph died and that what they inherited (and the traditions require that they take this position)—what they inherited is, in fact, a preservation of the Restoration through Joseph Smith. But *The Joseph Smith Papers* demonstrate that it's anything *but* that. The editorial contributions, the footnotes, the headnotes, the descriptions that they give, and the arguments that they make— It just wouldn't withstand scrutiny if you were subjecting it to, for example, the rules of evidence to get a document admitted in a courtroom. But that's a whole nother story. Anyway, we're trying to fix that in *this*.

Rick: I understand that historians and lawyers have different rules.

Denver: Sure.

Rick: And I have to mention, you are a lawyer, right?

Denver: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Rick: I probably should've introduced that earlier.

Denver: Right.

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The foregoing was recorded on June 28, 2020 and is presented here with permission from Rick Bennett, who conducted the interview.