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What Was the Vocabulary of Joseph Smith?

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Abstract: This article argues that any translation will reflect the vocabulary of the translator, and such was the case with Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. An average “fairly well-educated” person possesses an 8,000 word vocabulary. Joseph Smith as a youth would have had a substantially smaller vocabulary. Interestingly, the Book of Mormon has a total vocabulary (including person and place names) of 3,307 words.

What Was The Vocabulary Of Joseph Smith?

By John A. Widtsoe

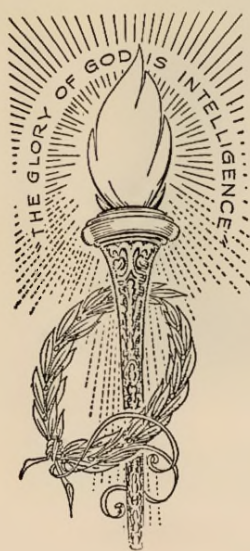
OF THE COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE

JOSEPH SMITH's mother wrote that of all her children he was the least inclined to give his time to the reading of books.¹ He was fond of outdoor life and physical games. His history mentions wrestling matches, jumping, and ball playing. Children grown to manhood related the story of games with the Prophet.²

He grew up used to hard work. His father was chiefly a farmer in the Palmyra days.³ Joseph had to take his share in the labors on the farm. When their farm labors permitted he sought employment elsewhere. Josiah Stool employed him to dig for a lost mine,⁴ Clark Chase to dig a well.⁵ He writes in his journal that he was obliged to earn a scant living by the toil of his hands.⁶

His school education was very meager. He could read, write an imperfect hand, and knew enough arithmetic for his needs. In the words of Orson Pratt who lived in his house and became his great defender,⁷ "His advantages for acquiring scientific knowledge were exceedingly small, being limited to a slight acquaintance with two or three of the common branches of learning. He could read without much difficulty and write a very imperfect hand; he had a very limited understanding of the elementary rules of arithmetic. These were his highest and only attainments; while the rest of those branches so universally taught in the common schools throughout the United States were entirely unknown to him." However, he had a fine mind. All who knew him, friend and foe, conceded that his mental ability was high. Under favorable circumstances he would have used educational opportunities to the full. In his later years he sought learning in many fields—languages, law, and others. From his earliest association with the Church, after the

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translation of the Book of Mormon, he urged education upon the people.

In short, Joseph Smith was not better educated than the average boy of his pioneer period from a family reduced to poverty, inured to toil with little chance for an education. His training came from his observance of nature about him and the people whom he met.

His was a Bible reading family. In those days on the frontier, the Bible was the chief book of the household. Joseph was a Bible reader. That of itself would aid much in the education of the boy. The writings that he left behind him show his fine Bible versatility from Genesis to Revelation. In that sense he grew up a well-educated man, but it would not be suspected that he had a large or technical vocabulary.

Enemies who have read the Book of Mormon have found its contents to be beyond the capacity of a boy with such meager training for writing. Therefore they have set up the theory that some competent person hiding behind Joseph Smith was the real author of the Book of Mormon.⁸ Sidney Rigdon, a man of some education, a reader, a student, and an orator was picked by many

defeated antagonists, but unsuccessfully, to be the unknown man who really wrote the Book of Mormon.⁹

If a man of superior learning wrote the Book of Mormon, it would be reflected in the extent and character of his vocabulary. If the vocabulary were small and simple, it would be another evidence for the truth of Joseph Smith's claim that he translated the book from engravings on golden plates. Every translator catches the idea in the old language and reports it in the new manner according to the nature of his own speech.

The English language has a multitude
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¹Lucy Mack Smith, *History of the Prophet Joseph*, 1902, p. 84.

²*Juvenile Instructor*; 27:172.

³Lucy Mack Smith, *Op. cit.*, 1902, p. 24.

⁴*Ibid.*, 1902, p. 91.

⁵B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 1:129.

⁶*History of the Church*, 1902, 1:28.

⁷Orson Pratt, *Remarkable Visions*, p. 1.

⁸E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 1834, p. 290.

⁹Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, 1947, p. 299.

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BUDGET YOUR WISHES, TOO

(Concluded from preceding page)

Fig. 3

Future Flexible Expenses

	Amt. Needed	Jan. 1-15		Jan. 15-30		Feb. 1-15		Feb. 15-28	
		Amt.	Amt. Saved	Amt.	Amt. Saved	Amt.	Amt. Saved	Amt.	Amt. Saved
Clothing,* general	\$60	\$5	\$5	\$5	\$4	\$5	\$4	\$5	\$6
Dental Exp.	20	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Emergency Reserve	35	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	3
Christmas Fund	40	2	2	2	0	2	1	2	3

*Clothing may be planned on a yearly basis, although some large items will likely have to be listed under "Wishes."

Fig. 4

Savings for Wishes

Wishes	Total Req.	Jan. 1-15		Jan. 15-30		Feb. 1-15		Feb. 15-28	
		Amt.	Total Saved	Amt.	Total Saved	Amt.	Total Saved	Amt.	Total Saved
Vacation	\$ 75	\$10	\$8	\$10	\$10	\$10	\$5	\$10	\$7
New Suit	45	6	8	6	4	6	6	6	3
Bicycle	75	5	3			5	2		

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of words borrowed from many tongues. So large is this collection that it has been estimated that in ordinary use, in speech and writing, not more than one-tenth or one-twentieth of English words are employed, even by the most learned. Many books and articles on this subject have been published. Recently a competent author declared that with one thousand English words all ordinary ideas could be expressed, and that the common man seldom uses more than five thousand words.¹⁰

Milton's vocabulary was between seven thousand and eight thousand words.¹¹ Some double this number. The translators of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, linguistic scholars, used about nine thousand words.¹² There are four thousand eight hundred in the New Testament; five thousand six hundred forty-two in the Old Testament. The varying number depends in part on whether inflected forms of words are included. There are those who think that the Bible has twenty thousand words, everything counted; and

Shakespeare following with eighteen thousand words. Any translation of any book depends, of course primarily upon the vocabulary of the translator, since a good translation deals with ideas not with words.

Many studies have been made to discover the number of words used by the average man. Naturally every man uses a number, depending on many factors such as the parental vocabulary, kind and amount of thinking, companions, and reading habits. It is pretty generally agreed, however, that on the average a fairly well-educated man uses about eight thousand words in his daily conversation.¹³

Joseph Smith used only between two thousand and three thousand words in his written publications. This smaller number would be expected from a knowledge of his educational opportunities.

An actual count shows (leaving out all inflected forms of words) the following vocabulary for the Book of Mormon:

General Words	2,896
Persons' Names	245
Place Names	166
Total	3,307

¹⁰Dictionary.

¹¹Mrs. Clark's Concordance.

¹²The Nation, September 12, 1912.

¹³H. L. Mencken, *The American Language*, p. 4.