

## Thoughts about Joseph Smith

Excerpts from *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844* (Web Version, 2020)

it appears to me that Joseph Smith was motivated by a desire to present his experiences as a basis for others to obtain faith. Story telling became a way of life for him as he was able to explain to family and friends what was most dear to his heart. (iii)

This belief in visions and dreams formed a significant part of the Smith family's religious life. (27)

He [Joseph Smith Jr.] begins his narration by pointing out that his parents "spared no pains to instructing me in <the> christian religion." He then described his youthful religious questing: At about the age of twelve years my mind become seriously imprest [impressed] with regard to the all impotent [important] concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul, which led me to searching the scriptures, believeing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God. Thus applying myself to them and my intimate acquaintance with those of differant denominations led me to marvel exce[e]dingly, for I discovered that <they did not> adorn their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository, this was a grief to my Soul. Thus from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart . . . my mind become exce[e]dingly distressed for I become convicted of my sins and by searching the scriptures I found that <mankind> did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament. (32)

Joseph would have been eighteen years old when he heard [Rev. George] Lane preaching. (35)

From what we can learn about the religious background of the Smith family, Joseph Jr.'s parents taught religious values to their children. Though his father did not regularly attend church, he did sing and pray with his family. Joseph's religious instruction included hearing minister's sermons, revival homilies, private family worship, and personal Bible study. Joseph was not uninformed, ignorant, or illiterate. While the Smith family held Christian beliefs, they also believed in treasures supernaturally buried in the earth which could be obtained only through magical rituals. (36)

young Smith had for several years earned part of his livelihood by hiring out as a glass looker to locate hidden treasures by gazing into his seer stone. It is also evident that Joseph surrounded his activities with a religious atmosphere flavored with the supernatural, although he himself at this time made no profession of religion. (51)

early adherents of the Mormon faith claim that Joseph located the gold plates from which he dictated the Book of Mormon by gazing into his seer stone. He also used this stone to obtain the text of the book as well as to receive instructions from God for his early followers. (51)

In contrast to the account which was later told, the earliest versions linked the finding of the plates with the practice of searching for buried treasure. They also linked obtaining the plates with magical rituals traditionally associated with winning treasure from its guardian spirits. (54)

Joseph told the family about the plates and asked them not to discuss what he said outside their family. She [Lucy Mack Smith] then describes how in the evenings the Smith family would meet and listen to Joseph's religious teachings. They also heard Joseph tell stories of the continent's former civilizations. (60)

Surviving accounts of the translation process suggest that Smith worked without directly using the plates—this despite all of the difficulty in obtaining, hiding, and bringing the plates along. (68)

Many aspects of the story told in New York and Pennsylvania were later revised. This included Joseph Smith's looking into the stone and seeing that he should bring Emma Hale to the hill, and especially details that linked the gold plates and treasure hunting. (71)

The early story as Joseph Smith related was important since it established the belief that he had a record. His immediate family was also essential to him as they were among the first to believe him. (71)

Smith would dictate the contents of the gold plates without the plates being in his presence. The claim of having plates with ancient writing on them was to increase faith. It was not necessary for Joseph Smith to use plates to produce the story that was represented to be contained on them. To assist others in having religious faith in Jesus Christ was the overriding purpose in telling about plates. Some would believe by having a vision of the plates while others did not need to have such experience. For Smith the struggles and experiences he related necessitated maintaining that the writings of native peoples were from an ancient record whether or not he physically had them in his possession. The story contained on the record was presented to Joseph Smith in the form of revelation. (93)

Joseph Smith had had a keen interest in religious teachings for the last ten years. He was a married man twenty-two years old. He had been talking to his family about obtaining a special record for the last four years. Smith could dictate about three pages a day and produce a lengthy manuscript. For the period from October 1828 to March 1829, before Cowdery became a scribe, it would be possible to have written many pages. With three scribes helping, the only drawback would be if there were not enough paper to write on (a shortage that did occur, according to Joseph Knight Sr.) or not having a scribe available, and if this was the case Smith could do his own writing.

Joseph Smith continued to dictate the text of the Book of Mormon with Oliver Cowdery as scribe. Smith, for example, worked on what is known as the Sermon on the Mount preached by Jesus and printed in the King James Bible. A comparison with the text in the Book of Mormon shows that Joseph documented the visit of Jesus to a New World people using the New Testament Gospel of Matthew. (98)

When Joseph Smith was in the process of dictating the religious text of the Book of Mormon, he would at times read longer passages from the Old Testament to his scribe. A close examination indicates that chapters from Old Testament books were incorporated into the Book of Mormon. In these places, Smith was dependent upon the Bible with the meaning essentially the same. (120-21)

A more plausible explanation is that Joseph Smith copied these words from the King James Bible, in ignorance of the textual history, rather than having been spoken by Jesus in the New World. This then would be but another example of the late textual material anachronistically placed into an earlier time-frame in Third Nephi. (127)

These prayers of Jesus in Third Nephi seem clearly to be based upon the Gospel of John. The Jesus presented in Third Nephi is not unique to the Third Nephi text but is taken right out of the New Testament, even down to borrowing the gospel writers' words and phrases. This use of John evidences still another example of textual borrowing in the Third Nephi account. (131)

The clear conclusion of this examination is that the King James Version of the New Testament text was used extensively in the composition of Third Nephi in the Book of Mormon. The Sermon on the Mount given by Jesus during his ministry in the Old World was used to flesh out the idea that Christ had appeared to the ancient inhabitants of America. Other teachings of Jesus were adapted from different texts in the New Testament to provide content for an appearance of Jesus during the three-day period that Third Nephi claims for the visitation of the resurrected Jesus.

This documentation of extensive textual borrowing from the New Testament writings indicates a serious problem in accepting Third Nephi as an accurate account. If Jesus appeared in the New World as the Book of Mormon would have us believe, then the textual problems it contains would lead to the conclusion that it is not an accurate record of that event. (133)

The March 1829 revelation to Harris said of Joseph Smith, "He has a gift to translate the book, and I have commanded him that he shall pretend to no other gift, for I will grant him no other gift." Smith's only gift was to translate the Book of Mormon. Like the previous examples, this restriction was made part of the Book of Mormon text (144)

The story of the gold plates was the vehicle that Joseph Smith used as a minister to preach his new emphasis on Jesus. Smith taught that at one time he had in his possession an ancient record of peoples who lived on the American continent more than fifteen hundred years earlier. Believers had faith that Smith was able to recover a record or set of gold plates. The purpose of Smith's story was to make men and women believe as strongly as gold in his role as God's minister of salvation. Whether Smith had visions about the gold plates, whether he at one time had them in his possession, or whether anyone saw the physical plates was not important in what he was trying to accomplish. The message of the Book of Mormon, through the use of metal plates, was for others to believe in the Jesus who spoke to Native Americans and who was speaking at the time to Joseph Smith. (145)

One of the ideas relating to the text of the Book of Mormon is saying that it is impossible for Joseph Smith to have written the book since he was unlearned at the time. This is not an accurate assessment of the education of the young prophet. Learning in the Smith home included Bible reading in addition to family and individual prayer. Lucy Mack Smith was an important influence on her family as they conducted family worship. Joseph Sr. led the family in singing and prayer as the head of the household. His experience as a school teacher would help as he instructed especially the male children in transacting farm business.

It should be remembered that Joseph Smith received additional schooling when he was twenty years old. The narratives in the Book of Mormon are based upon how religion was reportedly practiced in ancient America. What is taught in the record is an indication of how Smith as a religious seer perceived the way the ancestors of Native Americans preached and battled. With the KJV Bible as his standard source text, Joseph Smith projected his own religious beliefs into the Book of Mormon. This is an important clue to its authenticity as a nineteenth-century work. It is what would be expected in a new book. (146)

In the early years of his life, Smith was a treasure seer who divined where precious things were hidden. As he acquired a prophetic mantle, he used the same methods, including seer-stone gazing, to produce his church's foundational scripture, the Book of Mormon, and his first fifteen revelations. (191)

While Smith did not comment on the manner in which he perceived God's mind, the linguistic idiosyncrasies are his own. Whether he believed that the ideas or the words themselves were God's is not completely known. Expressions that are borrowed from the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible seem to highlight the importance of the message.

Joseph Smith frequently revised the revelations in accordance with his developing theology. God's word, relayed through fallible prophets, was neither inerrant nor static in Smith's view—so as the need arose, he revised the Bible and his own autobiography as well as the revelations. (191)

Individual followers of Joseph Smith's revelations believe them to be God's word but are often ignorant of the original text. The originals are not only generally the most authentic and uncontaminated, but they also best represent the milieu of and open a window on human consciousness for that particular time and place. Yet so little thought is given today to the original texts because, in part, they are assumed to have been unchanged. They are considered sacrosanct—beyond scholarship. If church leaders made changes, they must have had good reason. (194)

The changes in many of the revelations reflected later theology, modifications in church government, recognition of former discrepancies, and sensitivity to criticism engendered by the originals. (201)

The belief of Joseph Smith was that the gospel of Jesus Christ contained in the New Testament consisted of the same essential beliefs and ordinances practiced since the beginning of humankind. The sacred texts revealed through Joseph Smith explained that if it was necessary to believe in Jesus now, then Adam and other Old Testament patriarchs would have believed like

the followers of Jesus in New Testament times. The same idea goes with the practice of the ordinances of Christian baptism, confirmation, and priesthood ordination. (224)

[Revision of the Bible (1830-1833) – the weakest link.]

The revision made by Joseph Smith attempts to make the wording of the KJV English clearer. The additions by Smith are a reflection of his encounter with the text in the context of revelatory messages as the latter-day gospel was being restored in 1830-33. Smith's revision of the Bible was produced as a church text for those who accept the restored gospel.

Since Joseph Smith did not have knowledge of Hebrew or Greek during this period of Bible revision, we should not expect his revision to contain readings in ancient biblical manuscripts. Nor should we think that his revision is any kind of restoration of what was in the Hebrew Scriptures or in the Greek New Testament. Joseph Smith's work is a revision rather than a translation, since church members knew that Joseph Smith had not studied Hebrew or Greek to produce his manuscript. But church members also thought that Joseph did not have to know Hebrew or Greek because he got his corrections via revelation. (225)

The majority of Christian concepts and ordinances added to the Old Testament of the Hebrew Scriptures occur in the first seventeen chapters of Genesis. This stops after chapter 17 and with no Christian material used for the remainder of Genesis or the rest of the Old Testaments with one exception. There is a brief mention of Christ in Isaiah 29:16 (JST). (227)

Joseph Smith perceived that the text he supplied would give a broader view of the teachings of Jesus. It appears that Smith himself intended his revision to be for the most part an accurate form of the original meaning of the text and perceived it as such. On March 8 Joseph Smith dictated to his scribe Sidney Rigdon the beginning of the gospel according to Matthew. The heading of the manuscript read: "A Translation of the New Testament translated by the power of God."

Like the Book of Mormon which was revealed "by the gift and power of God," the New Testament revision was a revealed text based upon the KJV Bible. Usually when working with the New Testament a person would use a standard text. In the case of revising Matthew 5 Smith used the KJV Bible and Third Nephi in the Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith would read from the Bible purchased by Oliver Cowdery in 1829. Besides the Book of Mormon, Smith's work on the Bible was his next largest project. (229)

The idea that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery would develop the story of the visions of heavenly personages appearing to them is in line with other early embellishments. Examples of historical development of texts, location, name, and documents are as follows: (1) *Evening and Morning Star* reprint in Kirtland, with Oliver Cowdery as editor; (2) the change in the name of the church and the place it was organized; (3) significant revisions in some of the sacred texts of Joseph Smith's revelations permitted by the four members of Presidency for the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants; and (4) the expansion of blessings given in December 1833 and their recording in the fall of 1835. (260)

Joseph Smith did not understand Egyptian, so he could not actually translate from that language. The symbols inspired him with ideas. He represented the text produced as an inspired revelatory interpretation (translation). The saints knew Joseph Smith had no knowledge of Egyptian and that the contents of the papyrus would have to be revealed by God. (271)

While dictating the Book of Abraham (what is now chapter 2) Joseph Smith used the KJV Genesis as a guide and text for part of his story. The actual wording in the story suggests the use of Genesis in composing this work. This would indicate that the wording dictated was basically a copying effort of a pre-established text. At times Smith revised the KJV text to make it an autobiographical account by Abraham. The wording as printed in the KJV was used as part of the text Abraham supposedly wrote by his own hand. It is clear that Joseph Smith had the Bible open to the book of Genesis as he dictated this section of the Book of Abraham. (276)

The Egyptian papers, including the Egyptian Alphabet, contain the record of Joseph Smith's efforts to work with ancient documents. One of the manuscripts of the "Egyptian alphabet" contains Joseph Smith's handwriting, together with the handwriting of his scribe Oliver Cowdery. These 1835 documents help us understand how Smith dictated the text of the Book of Mormon six years earlier. The Egyptian Alphabet and related papers are preserved manuscript texts that show how Joseph Smith produced the ideas prior to and in connection with the Book of Abraham. These records have serious implications for the dictation process of the text of the Book of Mormon. (277)

Joseph Smith's work on his Book of Abraham Egyptian alphabet, seven years later, shows that he could not understand or interpret documents written anciently. Examinations done by Egyptologists show that Smith had not the slightest idea what the Egyptian characters meant relating to names, places, and subject matter. These manuscript pages clearly show that Joseph Smith pretended to translate Egyptian records. The claim that they had been written by the biblical Abraham is without a solid foundation. (278)

None of Joseph Smith's scribes or witnesses to the plates of the Book of Mormon saw Joseph Smith consult the gold plates when he dictated the text. Just as no one said they saw Joseph Smith use the Bible when he dictated the Book of Mormon, no one said they saw him use the Bible as he dictated part of the text of the Book of Abraham. (279)

The earliest version of Smith's story about the plates of gold being buried in the ground was told in a treasure-seeking content with the plates or record being protected by a guardian. Joseph Smith's revision of how he first heard about the plates and that he received religious instructions from an angel show we are dealing with a faith story. By 1838 the recounting of the 1823 vision had acquired more impressive theological significance. (339)

Joseph Smith like other individuals developed in his ideas. Smith's recollection of events in his early life took on more of a theological nature than historical reality, and his story grew in the telling. The words that he said the angel spoke to him in 1823 about Elijah became of important

significance as he looked back to his early life. Placing the Garden of Eden and Adam-ondi-Ahman in Missouri was accepted by church members since it was spoken by Joseph. His theology about the nature of God became clear to him as he expounded the idea of a plurality of Gods. It was not an issue to him that some of his ideas changed or contradicted what he had said at an earlier time. Joseph was able to express his interpretation of events as he presented new ideas in a revelatory manner. As an oracle to his followers, Joseph's theological development became the word of God. (345)

Joseph Smith's view in the Book of Abraham is different in the context of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic belief in one God. One way to understand this is to know that Smith's religious beliefs changed over time. By this time (1842), he taught that there were many gods and that believers could become gods; also that there were Gods who had direction over the creation of this earth.

The monotheism in the Book of Mormon and Smith's corrections in the writings of Moses in Genesis made it clear his beliefs that there is only one God. The oneness of God was worked on in the lectures on theology (known as the Lectures on Faith). The ideas relating to God developed in the church and moved toward two separate members of the Godhead though there were varying degrees of this teaching. By 1839 Joseph Smith's idea of a governing council of Gods (polytheism) started to formulate. So when Smith worked on the latter portion of the text of the Book of Abraham in Nauvoo he already accepted polytheism, though in LDS terms it is known as the plurality of Gods.

The concept of a council of Gods of creation was incorporated into Latter-day Saint temple worship in Nauvoo. The endowment ceremony contained the idea of a council of Gods giving direction for the creation of the world. (358)