

Joseph Smith a Highly Intelligent Person

Compiled By Glen W. Chapman- March 2001

Although Joseph had limited formal educational opportunities, he took advantage of what was available and went beyond them. Many of his resources were of the heavenly kind. For example, when he couldn't find an answer to a question or problem through ample study, Joseph would go to the Lord and ask for help. He was not afraid to ask the Lord questions. Elder John A. Widtsoe tells us, "It is to be an eternal law that a question must precede a revelation" . Joseph indicates that often when he struggled with a problem and could not find the answer either in his thinking or that of his contemporaries, he went to the Lord in prayer. And when he prayed in faith, the answer "came into my mind, with such clarity and such sequence of thoughts that I knew it was of God and I dictated the answer to my scribe." On another occasion the Prophet said: "The best way to obtain truth and wisdom is not to ask it from books, but to go to God in prayer, and obtain divine teaching" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*)

Later when he organized the School of the Prophets in Kirtland for the instruction of the brethren, he impressed upon these future leaders of the Church the necessity and importance of knowledge. In his journal Joseph wrote, "At home. Continued my studies. Oh, may God give me learning, even language; and imbue me with qualifications to magnify his name while I live" (*History of the Church* 2:344;). For several years, Joseph studied grammar in an attempt to improve his capacity to express himself. His later writings reveal that both his spelling and style improved considerably . He was also interested in learning foreign languages. On one occasion he said, "I am determined to pursue the study of languages, until I shall become master of them, if I am permitted to live long enough" (*HC* 2:396). When the brethren had decided to study Greek and Hebrew, Joseph was an able and thirsty student. When asked how the prophet had progressed in his study of grammar, one of his teachers replied, "Joseph was the calf that sucked three cows. He acquired knowledge very rapidly"

The Prophet Joseph Smith had a great relish for languages, especially those which helped him understand the Bible: namely, Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. He spent more time learning Hebrew than any other language. Why he chose to concentrate on Hebrew over Greek, both being the original languages of the Bible, is not quite certain. Perhaps it was because Hebrew occurs first in the order of Bible literature, and he sensed that a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament would aid his study of the New Testament. We may suppose, however, that had Joseph lived to a ripe old age, he would have studied all three languages in depth. On February 17th, 1836, the Prophet, wrote in his journal,

"My soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original, and I am determined to pursue the study of the languages, until I shall be come master of them, if I am permitted to live long enough. At any rate, so long as I do live, I am determined to make this my object; and with the blessing of God, I shall succeed to my satisfaction."

In a letter from Professor Joshua Seixas to Joseph Smith on March 30, 1836, Seixas wrote the following:

Mr. Joseph Smith Junior has attended a full course of Hebrew lessons under my tuition; & has been indefatigable in acquiring the principles of the sacred language of the Old Testament Scriptures in their original tongue. He has so far accomplished a knowledge of it, that he is able to translate to my entire satisfaction; & by prosecuting the study he will be able to become a

proficient in Hebrew. I take this opportunity of thanking him for his industry, & his marked kindness towards me.

(Regional Studies in LDS History Series: Ohio, Kirtland Hebrew School by D. Kelly Ogden)

On another occasion Elder Orson Pratt said:

"Now, it does not seem likely to me, that a young man whose beard had scarcely grown, a youth untutored, untaught in the sectarian notions of the day, brought up to labor hard on his father's farm, should be able to make these great distinctions, to come out in opposition to all modern systems of religion, and establish the very fundamental principles that are necessary to the very existence of Christianity in the last days. But God was with that young man. He was not his own teacher; he was not left to his own judgment in regard to what Christianity should be and what it should not be." (*Journal of Discourses* 21:172)

Oliver Cowdery noted that on one of Joseph's visits Moroni told him, "Forget not to pray, that thy mind may become strong and when he shall manifest unto thee, thou mayest have power to escape the evil and obtain those precious things" (Cowdery, "Letter VIII, ').

One aspect of Joseph's tutoring involved an interesting approach. Oliver Cowdery reports that not only did Moroni deliver important messages to Joseph, but on occasions a vision would be opened simultaneously to Joseph so that he could see by the Spirit that which he needed to learn. Oliver wrote,

"You will understand, then, by this, that while those glorious things were being rehearsed, the vision was also opened so that our brother was permitted to see and understand much more fully and perfectly than I am able to communicate in writing. I know much may be conveyed to the understanding in writing and many marvelous truths set forth by the pen, but after all, it is but a shadow compared to an open vision of seeing, hearing, and realizing eternal things." (Cowdery, "Letter VI')

Joseph learned much of what he learned while translating the Book of Mormon, the Bible, and the book of Abraham. President John Taylor tells us,

"God chose this young man. He was ignorant of letters as the world has it, but the most profoundly learned and intelligent man that I ever met in my life, and I have traveled hundreds of thousands of miles, been on different continents and mingled among all classes and creeds of people, yet I have never met a man so intelligent as he was. And where did he get his intelligence from? Not from books, not from the logic or science or philosophy of the day, but he obtained it through the revelation of God made known to him through the medium of the everlasting gospel." (*JD* 21:163)

Wilford Woodruff also commented on Joseph's abilities:

"This man to whom the angel appeared obeyed the gospel, received it in meekness and humility and bowed down before the Lord and worshipped him, and did the best he could in his illiterate state; he was as it were but a mere plowboy. He laid hold of it with all his heart, though he saw he would have to wage war with sin, and wickedness, and abominations, and the opposition of the people." (*JD* 2:197)

Joseph F. Smith tells us,

"When he [Joseph Smith] had finished translating the Book of Mormon he was still only a boy, yet in producing this book he developed historical facts, prophecies, revelations, predictions, testimonies and doctrines, precepts and principles that are beyond the power and wisdom of the learned world to duplicate or refute. Joseph Smith was an unlearned youth, so

far as the learning of the world is concerned. He was taught by the angel Moroni. He received his education from above, from God Almighty, and not from man-made institutions; but to charge him with being ignorant would be both unjust and false; no man or combination of men possessed greater intelligence than he, nor could the combined wisdom and cunning of the age produce an equivalent for what he did. He was not ignorant, for he was taught by Him from whom all intelligence flows." Gospel Doctrine, p.483, Deseret Book, 1966)

George Q. Cannon tells us,

"When Joseph began translating the Book of Mormon he could not spell so well as an ordinary schoolboy of these days. His ignorance was not because he was dull or lazy. His energies were spent in the field and forest, and he did not live among people who wrote much or had much knowledge of books. Just as soon, though, as he began spending his time in the Lord's service, his learning grew very fast. In translating the Book of Mormon Joseph was in the best school a man could attend. The Holy Ghost, which is the spirit of intelligence, inspired his mind as he read and understood a strange language entirely different from his own. When he finished this work he probably had more knowledge of Egyptian writing than any other man living. The work on the Book of Mormon gave him also a better grasp and understanding of English, and caused within him a thirst for learning that was never quenched. His work in rewriting the Bible helped him very much and when he translated the books and writings of Abraham and Moses from the Egyptian found on the papyrus with the mummies he was a well educated man."

(George Q. Cannon, Young Peoples History of Joseph Smith pp.104-5, Salt Lake City , Utah, 1912)

Elder John Widtsoe defines a prophet as a teacher, one who expounds and teaches truth as revealed by the Lord to man. Elder Widtsoe further explains:

"To an astonishing degree, Joseph Smith was a teacher, revelator, and a predictor. He stands among the foremost in the company of historical prophets. He was a superb teacher. He had a frank and a kind manner. His followers flocked to hear him and hung upon his every word. His mind swept the horizons of eternity as he explained the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Strangers were caught by his simple oratory and were left to ponder if he were not indeed dealing with eternal truths." (Joseph Smith : Seeker After Truth , Prophet of God (288-89), Bookcraft, 1991, Salt Lake City, Utah)

With sincere love Joseph urged people to incorporate correct principles into their lives. He was sensitive to the Saints' need to learn principles of the gospel line upon line. One time he said, "I could explain a hundred-fold more than I ever have of the glories of the kingdoms manifested in the vision, were I permitted, and were the people prepared to receive them" (*HC 5:402*). On another occasion he said "It is my meditation all the day and more than my meat and drink, to know how I shall make the saints of God comprehend the visions that roll like an overflow-mg surge before my mind" (*HC 5:362*).

Brigham Young declared, "What a delight it was to hear Brother Joseph talk upon the great principles of eternity: he would bring them down to the capacity of a child, and he would unite heaven with earth" *JD 4:54*). On another occasion Brigham said, "In my experience I never did let an opportunity pass of getting with the Prophet Joseph and of hearing him speak in public or in private, so that I might draw understanding from the fountain from which he spoke, that I might have it and bring it forth when it was needed" (*JD 12:269*).

Parley P. Pratt stated of Joseph,

"His language abounding in original eloquence peculiar to himself-not polished-not studied-not smooth and softened by education and refined by art: but flowing forth in its own native simplicity, and profusely abounding in a variety of subject and manner. He interested and edified while, at the same time, he amused and entertained his audience: and none listened to

him that were ever weary with his discourse. I have known him to retain a congregation of willing and anxious listeners for many hours together, in the midst of cold or sunshine, rain or wind, while they were laughing at one moment and weeping the next. Even his most bitter enemies were generally overcome if he could once get their ears." (Autobiography of Parley Pratt, Deseret Book, 1938, p.p. 45~46)

Elder Neal A. Maxwell has shared this thought:

"From Joseph Smith, one unlearned and untrained in theology, more printed pages of scripture have come down to us than from any mortal, including Moses, Paul, Luke, and Mormon combined. But it is not only a matter of impressive quantity; it is also a qualitative matter.... What came through Joseph Smith was beyond Joseph Smith, and it did stretch him! In fact, the doctrines that came through that 'choice seer' by translation or revelation, are often so light intensive that, like radio-active materials, they must be handled with care!"
(Ensign, Aug. 1986. p. 6)

(from Joseph Smith: Gifted Learner, Master Teacher, Prophetic Seer, Joseph Smith the Prophet the Man, pp. 169-179, Religious Study Center Brigham Young University, Provo Utah, 1993)

Joseph Smith's mother wrote concerning her 23 year old son.

"During our evening conversations, Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined. He would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, mode of traveling, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare; and also their religious worship. This he would do with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life among them."

(The History of Joseph Smith by his Mother, p. 82, Deseret Book Company)