

Did the Young Joseph Smith Study the Bible?

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The internal evidence of the Book of Mormon, which draws heavily from whole chapters as well as hundreds of verses and phrases of the King James Bible, suggests that Joseph Smith knew the Bible very well when he produced the Book of Mormon and that he had committed large portions of it to memory.

Some Latter-day Saints question this conclusion. They contend that Joseph had little knowledge of the Bible before embarking on the translation of the Book of Mormon, and that as a nearly illiterate, poor young man raised on a farm, Joseph had no opportunity to study the Bible, let alone memorize large portions of it. The biographical information that we have about Joseph Smith, however, shows otherwise.

Joseph's Childhood Bible Study

William H. Kelley, a member of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, compiled notes based on interviews he did (or at least claimed he did) to counter the many negative reports of those who had known Joseph Smith as a young man. According to his notes, John Stafford, a member of a Palmyra family with some close association with the Smiths, commented that when Joseph Smith was a boy, the Smiths in Palmyra for some time “had school at their house and studied their Bible.”¹ Growing up, Joseph had plenty of exposure to the Bible in and out of his home. “Joseph Jr.’s religious instruction included hearing ministers’ sermons, revival homilies, private family worship, and personal Bible study. Joseph was not uninformed, ignorant, or illiterate.”²

Lucy Mack Smith explained why young Joseph Jr. would not attend a particular religious meeting with her during a revival that took place in 1824-1825, when Joseph was about nineteen years old: “But I will take my Bible and go out into the woods and learn more in two hours than you could if you were to go to meeting two years.”³ This statement, coming from Joseph’s own mother, suggests that young Joseph was in the habit of spending hours at a time with the Bible (whether reading, studying, or meditating on it).

Testimonies of Joseph's Biblical Ignorance

It is true that Lucy denied that Joseph had read the entire Bible as a youth, but this statement needs to be put in context:

¹William H. Kelley Papers, Library-Archives, Community of Christ, often cited; e.g., Rodger I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 171.

²H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 56.

³*Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 357 (quoting from Lucy's original draft). The later published version is essentially identical: “I can take my Bible, and go into the woods, and learn more in two hours than you can learn at meeting in two years, if you should go all the time” (ibid.). The editors of *Lucy's Book* identify this passage as referring to the 1824-25 revival associated with George Lane.

I presume our family presented an aspect as singular as any that ever lived upon the face of the earth—all seated in a circle, father, mother, sons, and daughters, and giving the most profound attention to a boy, eighteen years of age, who had never read the Bible through in his life; he seemed much less inclined to the perusal of books than any of the rest of our children, but far more given to meditation and deep study.⁴

What Lucy seems to be saying here is that while Joseph did not read *widely*, he did read more *deeply*—and one may presume that this “meditation and deep study” focused on the Bible. “Meditation” (or “reflection,” according to Lucy’s first draft) in the context of Bible study was and is an overlapping concept with memorization of Bible passages; the student would review biblical texts in his mind and think about their meaning and significance. Such meditation or reflection presupposes recollection of the texts on which the person is meditating or reflecting. Like many people, Joseph had not read through the Bible from cover to cover, but this does not mean he had not studied large portions of it intensely; the evidence from his mother rather suggests that he did.

Similarly, B. H. Roberts stated that “it is conceded, on all hands, that he [Joseph Smith] was not a reader of—much less a student of—books.”⁵ In context, though, Roberts is referring to books other than the Bible, not specifically to the Bible itself.⁶

Joseph’s father, Joseph Smith, Sr., confirmed that Joseph Jr. had spent a great deal of time from his childhood meditating on the Bible. “In a father’s blessing given to his son in 1834, Joseph Sr. remarked, ‘Thou hast sought to know his ways, and from thy childhood thou hast meditated much upon the great things of his law.’”⁷

Some Mormons refer to a statement made by Emma Smith, Joseph’s wife. The statement was given in testimony calculated to defend Joseph’s integrity as a prophet after he died. According to Emma’s statement, “Joseph Smith could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon.”⁸ Besides being clearly apologetic in nature, this statement, first published in 1879, comes too late and is not specific enough to overturn all of the evidence we have to the contrary. Given Emma’s willingness to insist, against all evidence, that her husband had ever practiced polygamy,⁹ one should be cautious in placing too much weight on her statements defending Joseph Smith. In any case, Emma’s statement pertains to how Joseph dictated the Book of Mormon, not whether he knew enough of the Bible to have used it in producing the Book of Mormon.

⁴*Lucy’s Book*, 344. Lucy’s draft states that Joseph “had never read the Bible through by course in his life,” making it clear that she was referring to a straight reading of the Bible from Genesis through to Revelation in canonical order.

⁵Roberts, *Studies*, 151.

⁶On the other hand, both Lucy Smith and B. H. Roberts were probably mistaken about Joseph Smith’s general reading habits outside the Bible. Smith evidently owned a sizable library, including books published before 1830, some of which he donated to a Nauvoo library a few months before his death. On Smith’s access to and interest in books, see D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 178-92.

⁷Quoted in Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 27.

⁸Quoted, e.g., in Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, 2d ed. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press), 26.

⁹See especially Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, 2d ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994). It should be acknowledged that members of the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) to this day accept Emma’s testimony and believe that Brigham Young, not Joseph Smith, instituted the practice of polygamy.

Joseph's Own Account

Joseph Smith's handwritten 1832 account of his first vision confirms that he had spent significant time studying the Bible. He states, "I was born...of goodly Parents who spared no pains to instructing me in the christian religion."¹⁰ This statement necessarily implies that they taught him to read and study the Bible. He reports having applied himself to search the Scriptures between the ages of 12 and 15, not just reading the Bible but spending considerable time "pondering" what it said. Note in the following extended quotation the frequent references to Smith's study of the Bible (shown in bold type):

At about the age of twelve years my mind became seriously imprest with regard to the all 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 excedingly far I discovered that [they did not {adorn}] {instead} Of adorning 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 concerning the situation of the world of mankind the contentions and divions the wickeness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the {of the} minds of mankind my mind become excedingly distressed for I became convicted of my Sins and **by Searching the Scriptures I found that {mand} [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** and I felt to mourn for my own Sins and for the Sins of the world **for I learned in the Scriptures** that God was the same yesterday to day and forever that he was no respecter to persons for he was God for I looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth and also the moon rolling in their magesty through the heavens and also the Stars Shining in their courses and the earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of heaven and the fish of the waters and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in magesty and in the Strength of beauty whose power and intilgence in governing the things which are so exceding great and marvilous even in the likeness of him who created {him} [them] and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man Said {the} [it is a] fool [that] Saith in his heart there is no God....

It is sometimes suggested that Joseph, growing up as part of a poor farming family, had no time for spending long hours studying or memorizing the Bible. Not only does Joseph's own testimony contradict this claim, but biographical information about his life prior to beginning work on the Book of Mormon shows that he had plenty of free time. Like many young men of his time and place, Joseph attended religious meetings and tried his hand at preaching. As a teenager he also attended a "juvenile debating club" in Palmyra.¹¹ If we accept the reports of his neighbors who took a dim view of his claims, Joseph was known not for industriousness on the

¹⁰For the texts of this and other accounts of the First Vision, see (for example) Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 155-57; or the following LDS web source: <http://www.boap.org/LDS/History/HTMLHistory/v1c1history.html>.

¹¹Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, with the assistance of Jed Woodworth (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 37.

farm but for his interest in magic and money-digging schemes. My point here is not to argue for (or against) their low opinion of Joseph Smith but merely that their testimonies, even shorn of any animus or bias against him, confirm that he had significant time to read and study the Bible.

How Well Did Joseph Know His Bible?

In a sermon preached in 1879, Orson Pratt argued that Joseph Smith so lacked knowledge of the Bible or Christian religion that he could not possibly have produced the Book of Mormon by his own lights:

This young man was not learned, like those educated in colleges and theological institutions; indeed, he was a farmer's boy, unacquainted with the arguments, and the tenets, and the creeds, and the institutions of religion that existed around him, except what he had heard from time to time, in the neighborhood where his father resided; a young man not versed in the Scriptures any more than most of the common lads of that age.¹²

As Philip Barlow comments, “young Joseph probably knew the Bible better than Pratt and others have guessed.”¹³ While he clearly did not have a college or seminary education, Smith's own testimony, written in his own hand in 1832, flatly contradicts Pratt's assertion that Joseph was unacquainted with the religious views of his day. Smith affirms rather that he had “intimate acquaintance with those of differant denominations.” Pratt's statement that Joseph was no more familiar with the Bible “than most of the common lads of that age” seems calculated, given that most young men of that time could recite quite a few biblical texts from memory. In any case, Joseph Smith claimed to have become so familiar with the Bible, and especially the New Testament, as to be able to conclude—before his first vision—that none of the denominations of his day were “built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

If we accept Joseph Smith's account of the visit of the angel Moroni to tell him about the Book of Mormon plates, we have further evidence of young Joseph's mastery of the words of the Bible. According to Smith, the angel “commenced quoting the prophecies of the Old Testament. He first quoted part of the third chapter of Malachi; and he quoted also the fourth or last chapter of the same prophecy, though with a little variation from the way it reads in our Bibles” (JS-H 1:36). For Joseph to have noticed this “little variation” and remembered it years later, when he wrote this “history,” presupposes that Joseph knew the texts of Malachi perfectly according to the KJV. LDS historian Richard Bushman agrees: “Joseph knew them well enough to note small departures from the words in the Bible.”¹⁴

Putting Joseph's Biblical Knowledge in Cultural Context

We do not seem to have any testimonies directly attesting that Joseph Smith had memorized large portions of the Bible, but religiously serious men in his day commonly did so. Indeed, some of Smith's closest associates claimed to have memorized virtually the entire Bible:

¹²Orson Pratt, “The Book of Mormon an Authentic Record,” in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Albert Carrington; London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1881), 21:168-69.

¹³Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 13.

¹⁴Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 44. Other explanations may be possible (e.g., that the angel told Joseph that his quotation deviated from the received text) but they would be *ad hoc*; that is, the only reason to prefer them would be to avoid the implication that Joseph Smith knew his Bible.

Pomeroy Tucker, who was acquainted with Martin Harris and seemed to like him, said Harris could “repeat from memory nearly every verse of the Bible from beginning to end, giving the chapter and verse in each case.” LDS apostle Orson Hyde claimed similar abilities. As a young man he “memorized the Bible, and when any one quoted one verse, I could quote the next. I have memorized it in English, German, and Hebrew.”¹⁵

Nearly two centuries later, it is difficult for many of us to believe that anyone could have memorized even a tenth of the Bible, let alone most or all of it, but we no longer live in the same culture as Joseph Smith. In his day, the Bible was the primary textbook or reader for children learning to read, and was the one book that almost every home had. There was no telephone, no radio, no film, no television, no computer, no Internet. Whereas today boys dream of becoming professional athletes, actors, or musicians, one of the most common professions to which male youths aspired in the early nineteenth century was the ministry. Boys did not memorize baseball cards, football statistics, or electronic gaming cheats; they memorized the Bible.

It is not surprising that Joseph Smith, after producing the Book of Mormon, would not make similar boasts about his prowess at recalling passages of the Bible that he had memorized, as such boasts would have severely undermined his claim to have received the text of the Book of Mormon by divine revelation. Nevertheless, what evidence that we have is quite consistent with the view that Joseph had memorized much of the Bible and could easily have drawn on his knowledge of the King James Version in producing the Book of Mormon. As Jan Shippis has argued, it is evident that “the Book of Mormon reflects knowledge of the Bible” and that Joseph Smith, as he said, “thoroughly searched the scriptures and came to know them well” prior to producing the Book of Mormon.¹⁶

It should also be noted that it would not have been necessary for Joseph to have retained a perfect memory of all of the biblical passages that he used in the Book of Mormon at any one moment. Assuming, based on the evidence already considered, that Joseph had excellent recall of many passages of the Bible, it would only have been necessary to review the chapter or chapters from which he was about to quote when dictating the Book of Mormon. We do not have enough information to know if this was exactly how he proceeded—Joseph Smith was notoriously secretive in the “translation” work—but the point is that there are plausible explanations for how he was able to dictate so much text that was nearly verbatim the same as the King James Bible.

When LDS scholars are not focused on minimizing Joseph Smith’s biblical acumen as an apologetic device, they often agree that he knew the Bible quite well. Stephen Robinson, for example, in one book review commented that “there is an ocean of evidence that Joseph Smith was influenced by the Bible.”¹⁷ Indeed. And once it is recognized that it was quite possible, and even likely, that Joseph had studied the Bible deeply and committed much of its content to memory, the use of the King James Bible in the Book of Mormon becomes “an ocean of evidence” that the Book of Mormon was also influenced by Joseph Smith’s knowledge of the Bible.

¹⁵Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 47.

¹⁶Jan Shippis, “The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith,” in *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith*, ed. Bryan Waterman (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 34.

¹⁷Stephen E. Robinson, review of D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (1st ed.), in *BYU Studies* 27, 4 (Fall 1987): 94.