

# “Eternal Wisdom Engraven upon the Heavens”

## *Joseph Smith’s Pure Language Project*

DAVID GOLDING

About eight months after publishing the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith expanded the Genesis account to describe a primordial “book of rememb[r]ance” of Adam and Eve’s family written in a “pure & undefiled” language.<sup>1</sup> Though the Book of Mormon had narrated a Babel-era confounding of an original human language, this November 1830 Bible revision represents the first mention of “pure language” in Smith’s extant record. He did not, however, leave the concept dangling: evidence points to Smith endeavoring to divine pure language. On the surface, his process appears cryptic, his output scarce. Unlike the voluminous Book of Mormon that Smith produced through similar revelatory and “translation” methods, the essential content of his pure language specimens can be contained in this chapter. Beyond an 1832 “sample” and an 1835 “specimen,” only traces of pure language appear elsewhere in Smith’s other works. Nevertheless, these limited sources attest to more than a passing curiosity; they manifest an effort (what this chapter will call Smith’s “pure language project”) to address and overcome fundamental problems of the human condition. But questions remain: What exactly did Joseph Smith attempt in acting on a concept of pure language? How did the mechanics of his pure language project correspond to his overall theory of translation? What could pure language accomplish in Smith’s theology?

To answer these questions, this chapter examines the pure language project in its esoteric context. Western esotericism presented a worldview enjoying wide interest among Joseph Smith’s contemporaries while he and his associates

1. Old Testament Revision 1, 10–11, in Joseph Smith, *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts*, ed. Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 57 [Moses 6:6].



negotiated their own preoccupations with language. While Smith often left his specimens of pure language unexplained, he propounded a creative linguistic infused with Western esoteric terms and concepts. The method for divining pure words relied on a philosophical concern for language decay and a historical concern for primordial forms. Power resided in perfect language, and apparently names and other words carried potential energy. Such preoccupation with words as a medium for divine power appeared in many religious settings long before Smith's era.<sup>2</sup>

The term *esotericism* is used here to refer to a philosophy and worldview of intellectuals and pseudoscientists throughout Europe and colonial North America that treated absolute reality as elusive and hidden without intervention, be it divine revelation or some other mystical action. Ancient wisdom characterized a great deal of esoteric thought, since many concluded from biblical texts that the distant past included God; time was space, and the farther into the past a source went, the closer to God that source must have been. Figures like Moses, Abraham, and Adam loomed large as authorities on the deeper truths known to God and once known to mortals close to God. Searching out deeper truths through a combination of intellectual and mystical means placed one squarely within the Western esoteric tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Esoteric structure appears in one of Joseph Smith's most articulate descriptions of the problems of language. An 1832 letter addressed to William W. Phelps is particularly esoteric in how it treats the mundane as cosmic and renders the cosmic immediately powerful. Smith's followers had struggled to realize his vision for a holy society while gathering to Missouri that year. The system for managing "consecrations" (donated money and goods) and

2. See Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Jon Butler, "Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage, 1600–1760," *American Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (April 1979): 317–46; John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); April D. DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 187–92, 247–49. Recognizing the availability of esoteric traditions in Joseph Smith's cultural environment is not to run a genealogy of Smith's translation methods through European esoterica, but rather to posit the routine aspect of the philosophical preoccupation with language in Smith's time. See Mark Ashurst-McGee, "A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet" (master's thesis, Utah State University, 2000), 48.

3. Like Wouter J. Hanegraaff's definition and use of *esotericism*, this description of the esoteric is not theoretically universal or "an entirely satisfactory label," but it remains true that scholars have not yet proffered superior terminology. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), vi; see also Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, eds., *Contemporary Esotericism* (London: Routledge, 2014), 22–24. For an overview of Western esotericism, see also Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Textbooks and Introductions to Western Esotericism," *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 178–200.



"inheritances" (stewardships of property) had seemed to falter, with some who had already received inheritances of land neglecting their pledge to assist in common welfare.<sup>4</sup> Smith's letter replied to other church leaders who had raised the issue. Rather than a typical administrative reply, Smith waxed apocalyptic and theological. He instructed the leaders to keep careful records—not only for sound accounting purposes, but because such records should one day constitute the "Book of the Law of God," a judgment-day ledger the Almighty would consult in declaring *eternal* inheritances. Such vehemence over something so temporal as donation records signaled an esoteric logic: the very act of setting "in order the house of God" relied on God's pronouncement, God's word. Concentrating on the mechanics of God's power, Smith found language at work. Uttering "Eternal words" to "arrange the inheritances of the saints" amounted to a kind of singularity, the very moment in which God actualized salvation.<sup>5</sup>

Smith and his associates wanted to exercise such power and believed their limited language, however feeble, could nevertheless call down blessings and pronounce inheritances. But Smith's ambitions did not stop there. If one could attain a fullness of heavenly power, one would be calling forth the language of God Himself—a language capable of every possible and perfectly precise declaration. Smith pursued this pure language while also recognizing his inherent limitations. Near the conclusion of his 1832 letter, he broke into prayer: "Oh Lord God deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison almost as it were total darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language."<sup>6</sup>

This letter exemplifies Western esoteric thought in how Smith assumed there existed a pristine heavenly language. Though Smith never used the term "esoteric" to describe his methods—and though critics and scholars have relied on vocabularies of magic, occultism, hermeticism, and Freemasonry to describe Smith's translation milieu and frame of mind—the broader category of esotericism expands the palette of analytical tools and allows for the unique deviations Smith took.<sup>7</sup> Masonry, hermeticism, and other philosophies corresponded with Smith's thought for their shared esotericism. Critical perspectives treating Euro-American esotericism as a subculture within various

4. For one of Smith's foundational "Zion" revelations, see Revelation, 20 July 1831, in JSP-D2:343 [D&C 57].

5. Letter to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832, in JSP-D2:315–21.

6. Ibid., 320.

7. For an assessment of Mormon history research into hermeticism and categories here organized under the heading "esoteric," see the roundtable on John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire* (1994) in *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 4 (October 2015): 177–237.



religious, philosophical, and intellectual settings more precisely identify the innovations of Smith's translation work.

The esoteric background of Smith's creative linguistics informed his approach to the pure language project and surfaces strikingly in his 1832 letter to Phelps. He anticipated a day, he said, when he might stand and "gase upon Eternal wisdom engraven upon the heavens." Engraved wisdom—divine writing in a perfect language—had eluded humanity, as Smith explained, for "God holdeth up the dark curtain." But Smith hoped to part the curtain and "read the round of Eternity to the fullness and satisfaction" of his and Phelps's "immortal souls." As his translations of Egyptian would eventually manifest, the "round of Eternity" included a completeness of language, something capable of being read out loud and heard. Hidden knowledge, the kind held behind the curtain of God's mystery, could only come to light by those possessing the keys of the kingdom, keys Smith later endeavored to commit to others in esoteric ceremonies.<sup>8</sup> The pure language project proved a crucial step in Smith rendering the exoteric (the apparent and obvious reality), esoteric; the mundane, eternal.

In the sections that follow, this chapter further considers the esoteric context for Smith's religious philosophy and supernatural practice of translation, outlines the primary sources of his pure language project, and briefly considers its meager results. As Smith struggled against the "narrow prison" of "confounded" language in attempting to access the pure language of God, he relied on classic esoteric resources: the Hebrew and Egyptian languages, the Bible, direct revelation, and mystical secrets or "keys." Relative to pure language content, Smith ironically regressed, starting with larger explanations, text, and morphemes, and ending with quixotic pursuits of grammar study.

## ESOTERIC CONTEXT

The 1830s witnessed an upswing in popularity of alternative religious ideas in Europe and North America. Awakenings and revivals had recently surged

8. Joseph Smith invoked an esoteric tone during the first meetings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo in 1844. He admonished the women of the society to "move according to the ancient Priesthood" and indicated his desire to make them "a kingdom of priests as in Enoch's day." The "keys of the kingdom [were] about to be given to them, that they [might] be able to detect every thing false—as well as to the Elders." The Masonic context was not lost on Eliza R. Snow, who wrote "So mote it be" as part of the frontispiece to the Relief Society's minute book. Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, 4, 22, 37–38, in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History*, ed. Jill Mulvay Derr et al. (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 28, 28n94, 43, 56–57; see also Kathleen Flake, "Ordering Antinomy: An Analysis of Early Mormonism's Priestly Offices, Councils, and Kinship," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 26, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 159–63.



throughout denominational Protestantism in the United States, but also many formerly heterodox religiosities gained enough currency for cultural media to reproduce esoteric philosophies for the masses. The rise of the British Empire in the world occasioned foreign correspondence that American editors curated into newspaper and magazine reports. New pseudoscientific movements spread apace with fringe Christian theologies, and with momentum growing into the twentieth century, a broader New Age spirituality movement eventually attracted a global audience.<sup>9</sup> While mainline preachers of the 1820s and 1830s railed against heterodoxies, ordinary parishioners entertained diverse perspectives, among them an undercurrent philosophy that something profoundly real lay beneath the visible universe.<sup>10</sup> A metaphysical orientation informed a number of nondenominational and other religious communities, which taught that a higher or complete nature of reality had been obscured and required special knowledge to access. A hybrid pseudobiblical and pseudoscientific theology encouraged a worldview of the secret and a willingness to explore ancient wisdom for supernatural clues.<sup>11</sup>

Incantation lent a palatable bridge for some Protestant Christians between the orthoprax rituals of prayer and the mystical uncovering of spirit and nature. Invoking the name of Jesus Christ rendered prayer effectual, and while the vast majority of American Protestants hardly spoke of Christian prayer as a form of incantation, they still subscribed to the same principle of interpellation—speaking a name for effect—that esoteric thinkers followed in treating prayer, spells, omens, and oaths as media for channeling hidden or spiritual power. Many Protestants well versed in prayer traditions found blessing, cursing,

9. J. Jeffrey Franklin, *Spirit Matters: Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), xii–xvii.

10. Historians have commonly applied terms such as “folk magic,” “hermeticism,” “occultism,” “witchcraft,” and sometimes even “astrology” and “alchemy” to folk traditions and activities bearing this philosophy of a hidden, higher reality. Such terms arose in scholarly and clerical repudiations of each brand of esoteric activity, and usually so under the umbrella term “superstition,” which has carried a polemical and sometimes elitist agenda. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 156–91. Thus “esotericism” is favored here as a technical term that, in addition to its descriptive potential, should not invoke normative judgments toward the practices to which it refers.

11. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 2–3; Lee Irwin, *Reincarnation in America: An Esoteric History* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 128, 156. Historians have long argued that colonial North America imported a number of spiritualist practices from European esoteric traditions. See Herbert Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1976); Butler, “Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage,” 317–46; Arthur Versluis, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jane Williams-Hogan, “Emanuel Swedenborg’s Aesthetic Philosophy and Its Impact on Nineteenth-Century American Art,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 105–24.

spellcasting, séance, and other settings for interpellation and incantation agreeable and accessible within a Christian idiom.<sup>12</sup>

With interpellation as a mechanical premise of esoteric activity, language naturally attracted the attention of esoteric intellectuals. Renaissance Europeans speculated that Moses and God conversed in a perfect language, which had direct application to religious practice. Moses performed the grandest miracles of the Bible in speaking forth plagues on Egypt, parting the sea, and bringing God's holy presence to the tabernacle; believers could exercise that same power if they possessed Moses's knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Intellectuals figured that Hebrew and Egyptian carried divine vocabulary and therefore studied Afroasiatic word forms, grammar, and symbols for signs of pre-Hebraic linguistics. Kabbalism especially cultivated speculation in pristine languages, but some thought the system of expression hindered higher knowledge from being elegantly encoded—Hebrew lacked pictographic precision. Egyptian and Chinese characters teased language hunters for their obvious complexity, and a few determined only philosophical inference and deduction could lead one logically toward a perfect mode of writing. John Wilkins (1614–1672) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) both began constructing hypothetical improved languages of their own, Wilkins with a hypertext of open classification and Leibniz with an encyclopedia and alphabet of thought itself.<sup>14</sup>

Similar mechanics informed eighteenth- and nineteenth-century attempts to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs. Scholars of the age approached Egyptian with assumptions of ancient and hidden wisdom and the mystique of veiled secrets. The Bible persuaded these translators that the hieroglyph packed degrees of meaning intended to confound the unrighteous, and the more anciently one searched, the closer one approximated the primordial, hence the closest to the divine in human prehistory.<sup>15</sup> Without having yet discovered cuneiform artifacts of ancient Sumeria, they assumed that Egyptian epitomized the ancient language. It was Egyptian that appeared pictographic, verbose, and biblically validated. The hieroglyph carried the potential for a richer history that God intended only the intellectually and spiritually prepared, like Moses and Elijah, to learn. A process for deciphering the symbols that anyone could follow

12. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 73.

13. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 18–22, 61–68.

14. Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, trans. James Fentress (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 25–33, 258–60, 269–92; David Parry, "Umberto Eco and the Echoes of Adamic Language," *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich [The Problems of Literary Genres]* 58, no. 2 (2015): 20–25.

15. Samuel Brown, "Joseph (Smith) in Egypt: Babel, Hieroglyphs, and the Pure Language of Eden," *Church History* 78, no. 1 (March 2009): 40–51.





would not suffice—a more opaque and adventurous process forced translators to prove their righteous intentions and protected the truth from the ungodly.<sup>16</sup>

Joseph Smith displayed a deep concern for hidden knowledge and personal holiness at the same time he launched into pure language speculation. One of the earliest documents in Smith's handwriting (not including signatures) introduced his circa summer 1832 autobiography by mentioning "the Kees of the Kingdom of God" being "confered upon him [Smith] and the continuation of the blessings of God to him." Smith then narrated his discovery of God and described his initial distress at watching the Christian world depart from "a holy walk and Godly conversation" and at noticing the "darkness which pervaded [the] minds of mankind." Smith supposed that humankind, made in God's image, must possess "strength of beauty" and "power and intilgence in governing the things which are so exceding great and marvilous." And God, Smith continued, had decreed laws and bound all things. Concepts of the human condition, law, and divinity combined into a classic esoteric worldview: language was linked to binding all things and holding the universe together because law in this instance represented something decreed, a medium for God's power.<sup>17</sup> Smith could not fathom decoupling language from action, and the biblical phrase "keys of the kingdom" explained how some of the observable universe eluded human understanding.<sup>18</sup>

Later that year, Smith advanced a metaphysical scheme bringing this autobiographical prospectus into even deeper elaboration. A revelation Smith dictated in December 1832, which he called the "Olive Leaf," laid out his most detailed metaphysics, positing an opaque universe invisible to human comprehension. The revelation assured church members who worried about the impending calamities of the last days that they could trust in God's protection because God oversaw the destiny of numberless worlds. But the message went deeper, situating God's power not in raw force, but in his omnipresent *knowledge*. All action and reaction, even reality itself, relied on light emanating from God's presence and filling the immensity of space. An excursus on the nature

16. Richard Lyman Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Place in the Study of Antiquity in Antebellum America," in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 3–22; Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 107–15; Eco, *Search for the Perfect Language*, 124, 135, 154; JSP-R4:xvi–xvii.

17. Mie Inouye, "The Kingdom of God in Early Mormon Thought: Divine Governance in Heaven and on Earth," (working paper, Summer Seminar on Mormon Culture, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2013).

18. History, circa Summer 1832, in JSP-D2:279–82. See also Kathleen Flake, "'Not to Be Riten': The Mormon Temple Rite as Oral Canon," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 1–21.





of reality and the laws of resurrection rank as among the most esoteric of Smith's writings. In a few paragraphs, the Olive Leaf revelation cast all human knowledge as materially connected to light, and that light connected to God; God existed physically in plain view yet remained incomprehensible to mortal minds, only apparent through enlightenment.<sup>19</sup>

To comprehend the higher order of knowledge required having one's inhibited nature changed, and within the context of the Olive Leaf revelation, this meant transformation by laws of nature into higher orders of existence. Smith's terminology from his vision of the resurrection, experienced ten months prior,<sup>20</sup> described these orders: people moved upward through states of "telestial," "terrestrial," and "celestial" glory as they adhered to telestial, terrestrial, and celestial laws ordained by God. Light that "quickeneth" human understanding originated with God and had the power to work a change, to make one come alive as a higher order of being, so long as the person welcomed and observed God's word. Such a progressive concept pointed toward an eternal future blinding in its abundance of light and knowledge. The Olive Leaf revelation presented reality as materially luminous. But to unenlightened minds as yet incapable of comprehending the ultimate truth around them, the fullness of reality was invisible.<sup>21</sup>

Opaque symbolism presented tantalizing evidence of both an obfuscated reality and decrypted knowledge. One only needed to decipher the embedded meanings in a symbol to reach the hidden knowledge below. Smith treated all language as opaque and capable of decryption and glyphs as fundamental units of symbolic compression. A single glyph could pack immense quantities of knowledge, history, or narrative. And, ancient languages made liberal use of such symbolism, ostensibly to communicate on a level closer to God's infinite store of knowledge.

Glyphs evidently grounded both Egyptian and pure language. The finger of God had traced pure language for Enoch's fathers, and as suggested in a specimen of such language produced by Smith's close associate William W. Phelps in 1835, Smith may have sought such divine shapes. Presumably via a prophetic or revelatory method, Smith ascertained some of the ancient glyphs, and only keys could unlock their embedded meanings. The keys functioned in an entirely esoteric way: translations themselves represented primers, not complete texts,

19. Revelation, 27–28 December 1832, in *JSP-D2:336–38* [D&C 88:1–126, see especially 6–13, 45–50].

20. Vision, 16 February 1832, in *JSP-D2:179–92* [D&C 76].

21. Revelation, 27–28 December 1832, in *JSP-D2:337–39* [D&C 88:11–50].



and these led Smith and his associates toward keys.<sup>22</sup> With the keys, they could approach God directly to receive unadulterated illumination from the Source. The mind was quickened, the body changed; one endured the presence of God where all things might be opened to the mind.<sup>23</sup> On a mechanical level, the pure language project would show Smith taking one glyph at a time and unpacking it, exploring its depth of expression and what lay behind the symbol.



For Smith, the task of decoding Hebrew, Egyptian, "reformed Egyptian," or the pure language amounted ultimately to enlightening his fellows with saving knowledge of God—direct access to the one redeeming humankind and to the words of grace bringing initiates through the "veil" or "curtain" into celestial glory.<sup>24</sup> The keys of the kingdom could "not be riten [written]," Smith's associates discovered; they could only be performed in sacred ceremonies so guarded by religious codes, their details remain private and closed.<sup>25</sup> Smith mystified the world, an inexorable outcome of seeking the glory of a grander one.

#### SOURCES OF JOSEPH SMITH'S PURE LANGUAGE PROJECT

Joseph Smith's references to pure language almost entirely surface within larger translation and revelation projects. The Book of Mormon translation in 1829, the Bible revision in 1830, preparations to compile and publish revelations between 1832 and 1835, and the Book of Abraham and Egyptian project in 1835 offer the settings for the most explicit pure language material in Smith's

22. This dynamic had played out shortly after Oliver Cowdery followed up on the promise that he could "translate even as my servant Joseph." Revelation, April 1829-A, in *JSP*-D1:36 [D&C 6:25]. After attempting to translate and shortly abandoning the effort, Cowdery appealed for God to explain what had failed. Joseph Smith's ensuing revelation explained that translation depended on carefully studying the characters, putting forward a possible translation, and sensing a spiritual confirmation. The "keys" of the gift—the special knowledge of how to "apply unto it"—were now revealed to Cowdery. "Now if you had known this," he was told, "you could have translated." The revelation directed him to use this information to "assist" Smith, not to render any further translation of his own. Revelation, April 1829-D, in *JSP*-D1:48–50 [D&C 9].

23. Account of Meeting and Discourses, circa 9 March 1841, in *JSP*-D8:65; Jason Lindquist, "'Unlocking the Door of the Gospel': The Concept of 'Keys' in Mormonism and Early American Culture," in *Archive of Restoration Culture: Summer Fellows' Papers, 1997–1999* (Provo, UT: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, 2000), 31–32.

24. Devery S. Anderson and Gary James Bergera, eds., *Joseph Smith's Quorum of the Anointed, 1842–1845: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005), 1–49; Christopher James Blythe, "The Upper-Room Work: Esotericism in the Church of Jesus Christ (Cutlerite), 1853–1912," *Journal of Mormon History* 40, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 46–54; Fiona Givens, "'The Perfect Union of Man and Woman': Reclamation and Collaboration in Joseph Smith's Theology Making," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 1–26.

25. Heber C. Kimball to Parley and Mary Ann Pratt, 17 June 1842, Parley P. Pratt Correspondence, 1842–1855, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter Church History Library); see also Flake, "'Not to Be Riten,'" 1–2; Stanley B. Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 83–86.



extant corpus. Beyond these, other relevant sources in the historical record usually mention “Adamic” language in general without presenting examples.<sup>26</sup> The following sections examine the sources that most thoroughly manifest Smith’s developing concept of an undefiled language or that identify words or characters as specifically pure, Adamic, Edenic, or divine.

*Original and Confounded Languages in the Book of Mormon, 1829*

Joseph Smith’s first revelations directed him in the “knowledge concerning the engraveings of old Records which are ancient” and though his neighbors could not name the messenger bearing golden plates, they recognized Smith had purported to translate a record.<sup>27</sup> The resulting narrative wrestled with the shortcomings of corrupted languages.<sup>28</sup> In the book’s opening pages, the young prophet Nephi risks his life to retrieve a record written on brass plates to “preserve unto our children the language of our fathers.”<sup>29</sup> His family’s journey from the Old World to the New World attested to more than a didactic concern on Nephi’s part: without resisting a natural change to their language in a new land, their language would devolve and their people would lose knowledge of God as a result. Followers of Mulek, the narrative continued, departed Jerusalem for the Americas around the same time as Nephi’s family, but brought no records. They therefore lost their original language, and with it, knowledge of God. Samuel Brown has emphasized how the Book of Mormon on the whole contends against such linguistic disaster: “The concluding author Moroni compiled but did not need to translate the writings of the first author Nephi, despite ten centuries separating them, because the prophets taught the people in ‘all the language of [their] fathers.’ [The] emphasis on the intrinsic importance of comprehensible, unadulterated language is striking.”<sup>30</sup>

26. Brigham Young remembered a meeting in 1832 in which he offered a prayer in tongues that Smith identified as “pure Adamic language,” but neither Young nor Smith expounded on what Young had said in his prayer. J. Spencer Fluhrman, “The Joseph Smith Revelations and the Crisis of Early American Spirituality,” in *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhrman, and Alonzo A. Gaskill (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 86n23. See also Joseph Smith, Blessing to Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith, between circa 15 and 28 September 1835, in *JSP-D4*:488.

27. Joseph Smith, Revelation, April 1829-B, *JSP-D1*:44–47 [D&C 8]; *The Wayne Sentinel*, 26 June 1829, 3.

28. See Brown, “Joseph (Smith) in Egypt,” 32–34, for a careful review of Book of Mormon discussions of language. Key passages in the Book of Mormon treating “weakness in writing” and the confounding of languages include 2 Nephi 33:1, 11; Omni 1:17; Mosiah 1:2–4; 3 Nephi 5:18; Ether 1:33–37, and 12:23–40.

29. Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, circa August 1829–circa January 1830, in *JSP-R3*, part 1:29 [1 Nephi 3:19].

30. Brown, “Joseph (Smith) in Egypt,” 34.



According to the Book of Mormon, its writers had engraved characters on the plates in a combination of Egyptian and Hebrew, using characters in “reformed Egyptian” to express Hebrew language.<sup>31</sup> This linguistic premise departed from the educational norm of Smith’s time. Universities broadly required training in the classical languages of Greek and Latin, and cosmopolitan literature on ancient history often favored a Hellenistic over Hebraic concentration. Notwithstanding his apparent study of Bible commentaries and their presentation of Greek translations, Smith showed little interest in Greek, and conscientiously drew a shared Hebrew language, culture, and history between the Bible and Book of Mormon.<sup>32</sup> Hebrew and Egyptian conveyed sacred history, and Smith sought not just ancient wisdom, but spiritual enlightenment. He could value the expertise of a classically trained philologist like Charles Anthon, and even seek out such expertise to lend validity to his own translation abilities, but ultimately the “sealed” and effectively encrypted nature of the reformed Egyptian on the plates—which an exasperated Anthon dismissed—solidified the sacredness of Smith’s methods for both himself and his followers.<sup>33</sup>

Sacred history allowed Smith to peer past known languages and speculate on even more ancient systems than Hebrew and Egyptian. The Book of Mormon also hinted at a pristine language before the time of Babel. The history of the Nephites included a nested history of an earlier people, the Jaredites, who spoke an older language than the Lehite clan’s Hebrew.<sup>34</sup> According to Nephite chroniclers, the record of the Jaredites was engraved on twenty-four metal plates and was discovered among ruins.<sup>35</sup> The Nephite king Mosiah, possessed of “a gift from God, whereby he could interpret such engravings,” translated the twenty-four plates and found that they contained “an account of the people who were destroyed, from the time that they were destroyed back to the building of the great tower, at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people.”<sup>36</sup> The Jaredite language evinced in names and a few words, such as

31. Mormon 9:32–33.

32. Bushman, “Joseph Smith’s Place in the Study of Antiquity in Antebellum America,” 4–9; Seth Perry, “The Many Bibles of Joseph Smith: Textual, Prophetic, and Scholarly Authority in Early-National Bible Culture,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 3 (September 2016): 750–75; Thomas A. Wayment and Haley Wilson-Lemmon, “A Recovered Resource: The Use of Adam Clarke’s Bible Commentary in Joseph Smith’s Bible Translation,” Chapter 11 herein.

33. Bushman, “Joseph Smith’s Place in the Study of Antiquity in Antebellum America,” 4–5, 8; Introduction to Copies of Book of Mormon Characters, in *JSP-D1*:355–57. See also Michael Hubbard MacKay, “Performing the Translation: Character Transcripts and Joseph Smith’s Earliest Translating Practices,” Chapter 4 herein.

34. The Book of Mormon denominates this group of people “Jaredites” in Moroni 9:23.

35. Mosiah 8:8–9.

36. Mosiah 21:25–28, 28:17; compare Omni 1:22.

“deseret,” gave the Book of Mormon specimens of an unconfounded language. Nephite writers, however, never equated the Jaredite language with the pure language of God.<sup>37</sup>



*Old Testament Revisions, 1830*

Within a few months of publishing the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery applied their esoteric translation method to the Bible and composed revelatory revisions throughout the year. The new biblical accounts presented further allusions to a pre-Babel language. Details remained inchoate; only sounds and no appearance of letterforms or pictographs appear in a couple of references to a primordial language existing in Adam’s time.<sup>38</sup> Throughout the second half of 1830, Smith expanded the Genesis text, producing previously unattested visions of Moses and a new account of the antediluvian prophet Enoch. Where Genesis 5 refers to a “record of the generations of Adam,” Smith expounded: “A book of remembrance was kept in the which was recorded in the Language of Adam for it was given unto as many as called upon God to write with the finger of inspiration & by them their children were taught to read & write having a languag[e] which was pure & undefiled.”<sup>39</sup>

The Bible presented the cue, some kind of Adamic genealogy, and Smith shifted the context, recasting a mundane Genesis 5 as itself a translation of the first “book of remembrance,” written in what was originally pure language. “Adam spake as he was mooved upon,” Smith added, and “a genealogy was kept . . . & this was the Book of the generations of Adam Saying . . .” (followed by the contents of Genesis 5 with some minor expansions and slight emendations). The text that follows in Smith’s revision of Genesis offers no clear syntactical end to the translated Adamic book of remembrance. An “amen” appears where Smith likely left off a revision session on 30 November 1830, but this is followed immediately with further recording of the Adamic generations (particularly mentioning Cainan and Mahalaleel). The “amen” here may have functioned as a signal Smith commonly gave when dictating his other revelations, the word notifying the scribe that the revelation had closed.<sup>40</sup> If Smith

37. Ether 1:33–37.

38. Old Testament Revision 1, 11, 13, in *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible*, 97, 100 [Moses 6:5–6, 46–47].

39. Old Testament Revision 1, 11, in *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible*, 97 [Moses 6:5–6].

40. William E. McLellin, “Revelations,” *The Ensign of Liberty*, August 1849, 98–99. Compare uses of the terminal “Amen” in the earliest manuscript versions of revelations as listed in “Correlation of Current



had conceived of the Book of Remembrance as strictly a genealogy, then the translation may have ended with the last of the genealogical sequence—where the revision manuscript gives “this is the genealogy of the Sons of God which was the sons of Adam with whom God himself conversed.”<sup>41</sup> However, the narrative continues directly in describing the ministry of Enoch, with some scattered genealogical details thereafter.<sup>42</sup> Enough contextual information exists to posit that the Bible revision harked back to an Adamic urtext and presented a translation in some form. Still, the revision left out linguistic traces of the pure language, portraying no morphology, pictograph, or grammar.<sup>43</sup>

The ensuing account, a rich elaboration on the mysterious Enoch, augments pure language beyond a hypothetical primordial tongue. The revision associated pure language with a divine writing system, “given by the finger of God,” and capable of capturing words powerful enough when uttered to shake people to the ground. Again, the revision supposes an Edenic-Adamic urtext, as the pattern “given by the finger of God . . . is given in our own language,” Enoch declares, which the narrative follows with a “speech” given by Enoch. Editorial parentheses turn up throughout Enoch’s preaching, most importantly in a brief aside on the name of God: “For no unclean thing can dwell there or dwell in his presence for in the language of Adam man of holyness is his name & the name of his only begotten is the Son of man even Jesus Christ.”<sup>44</sup> In context, the scenario of Enoch explaining the meaning of words in pure language while speaking the same seems less likely than either the redactions of the Genesis narrator Smith was translating or Smith himself inserting a short exposition on word meanings. In any case, Smith’s earliest definitions of pure words emerge in the account of Enoch.

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Doctrine and Covenants with Earliest Sources on the Joseph Smith Papers Website” (accessible in the online edition of *The Joseph Smith Papers*).

41. Old Testament Revision 1, 12, in *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible*, 98 [Moses 6:22].

42. *Ibid.*, 98–113 [Moses 6:23–8:30].

43. In 1834, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery associated genealogical knowledge with the keys of the kingdom. Cowdery reported that Smith ordered the councils of the priesthood according to a pattern Smith had learned in a vision. “The apostle, Peter, was the president of the council in ancient days and held the Keys of the Kingdom of God, <on the earth>,” Smith taught. Cowdery later associated the keys of the kingdom with Smith’s 1834 vision: the “governing principles of the prophets” flowed from the “keys of the mysteries [of] heaven”—principles and rules of government so dense that knowing such might as well have required “search[ing] the archives of the generations of the world.” Minutes, 12 February 1834, in *JSP-D3*:427–31; Minutes, 17 February 1834, in *JSP-D3*:435–39; Minutes, 19 February 1834, in *JSP-D3*:444–48; Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, undated, published as “Letter IV,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, February 1835, 78–79; History, 1834–1836, 5 December 1834, in *JSP-H1*:17–19.

44. Old Testament Revision 1, 13–14, in *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible*, 100–102 [Moses 6:57].



Especially important for Smith's later samples of pure language, the account provides definitions, but not word forms, and the definitions correspond with the first words listed in the samples. The samples begin with questions about the name of God and the name of the Son of God in the pure language and proffer not only word forms for each, but also transliterations and original symbols. Smith continued his Bible revisions into 1832, at one point skipping the bulk of the Old Testament to start revising the New Testament. His forays into pure language were again spurred by Bible passages, though exactly which ones remains conjectural.

*Sample of Pure Language, 1832*

Sometime after April 1832, church clerk John Whitmer copied a "Sample of pure Language" into the book used for compiling Smith's revelations. Whitmer wrote in a headnote that the document came from "Joseph the Seer" and that it had been copied by "Br Johnson"—probably John Johnson Sr. (with whom Smith lived at the time).<sup>45</sup> A series of questions and answers followed, giving no additional detail about the circumstances surrounding the text's production.<sup>46</sup> A loose leaf in the handwriting of Frederick G. Williams, another scribe, contains another version of the text (as transcribed below), but with no contextual detail or account of provenance.<sup>47</sup>

First Question What is the name of God as taught in the pure Language[?]

Answer— A-man—

2<sup>d</sup> Q.s. " What is the meaning of the word—A-man[?]

Answer— it is the being who made all things in his parts

3<sup>d</sup> Q. " What is the name of the son of God[?]

Answer son- Aman

4<sup>th</sup> Q " What does the son Aman—mean[?]

Ans—" it means the greatest of all the parts of Aman— which is the Godhead—the first born

5<sup>th</sup> Q— Men[?]

45. Joseph Smith was living in the home of John and Alice (Elsa) Johnson in March 1832 when this revelation was most likely received. See *JSP-D2*:214.

46. Sample of Pure Language, between circa 4 and circa 20 March 1832, in *JSP-D2*:213–15.

47. Questions and Answers, circa 1832, handwriting of Frederick G. Williams, in "Historical Memoranda, Minutes, and Journal Entries," Thomas Bullock Collection 1830–1939, Church History Library.

- Ans            this word signifies sons Aman; the human family—the children of men—the greatest parts of A man save the son A-man
- 6 Q "        What are angels called in the pure Language[?]
- Ans. "        A man—Anglo-men
- 7 Q "        ~~the~~ What are the meaning of these words[?]
- Ans "        Amans ministring servants sanctified who are sent from heaven to minester ~~to~~ for or to sons Aman the greatest parts of A man save sons Aman sons- Aman Aman



The Williams version spells words of the pure language differently, appearing closer to a dictation transcript than a fair copy. For instance, the name of God “as taught in the pure language” is spelled “A-man” and “Aman,” whereas in the Whitmer version it is spelled “Awmen.” For Williams to have copied from either Whitmer as a source or Whitmer’s source, he would have had to subtract a letter and replace another letter to arrive at “A-man.”

The versions of the Sample of Pure Language demonstrate composite word forms, with some parts of the words seemingly derived from English and the other parts ostensibly from pure language. The name of the Son of God, as both Whitmer and Williams have it, is “son A[h]man,” and the angels are called “Anglo[-]men.” That Williams employed the hyphen, unlike Whitmer and other sources, suggests he may have consciously noted the syntactical separation of English and pure language derivatives.<sup>48</sup>

Orson Pratt remarked in 1855 that earlier Latter-day Saints had not known of an unpublished revelation giving the name of God in pure language. His description followed the sample words of pure language, mentioning the names “Ahman,” “Son Ahman,” “Sons Ahman,” and “Anglo-man.”<sup>49</sup> A notebook kept by Pratt in 1835 and 1836 contains yet another version of the Sample of Pure Language.<sup>50</sup> Pratt’s sample closely resembles Whitmer’s 1832 text, preserving “Awman” where a couple of insertions in Whitmer’s sample replace “Awmen” with “Awman.” Pratt very likely produced his copy from Whitmer or from Whitmer’s source.

48. Ibid.; compare with Sample of Pure Language, D2:215.

49. Orson Pratt, Discourse, 18 February 1855, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool and London: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1854–1886), 2:342–43.

50. This source was located by Brent Metcalfe, see Brent Metcalfe, “Newly Discovered Copies of JS’s Adamic Q&A,” <http://www.mormonstudiespodcast.org/newly-discovered-copies-of-jss-adamic-qa> (archived at: <https://perma.cc/MJ2Q-BPE5>); Orson Pratt, Notebook, 1835–1836, Church History Library.





However they ultimately relate to each other, the versions of the Sample of Pure Language correspond enough to give evidence of Smith exploring pure language questions in 1832, probably during his Bible revision sessions. In the revelation book he was keeping, Whitmer's version of the sample immediately follows another set of questions and answers, a text he titled "Revelation Explained," in reference to the book of Revelation in the New Testament.<sup>51</sup> These questions align with the timeline of the Bible revision, leading some scholars to infer that Smith's inquiries into pure language arose as a result of his work on the Apocalypse.<sup>52</sup> The first question listed in the Sample of Pure Language asks, "What is the name of God in pure Language[?]" Several passages in Revelation refer to God's name, any of which may have prompted the question. Or, Smith may have wondered at the reference to the pure names of God and the Son of God in the account of Enoch.<sup>53</sup>

The catechistic format to both Whitmer's sample of pure language and the text immediately preceding it in Whitmer's revelation book offers another possibility not only for what may have prompted Smith's inquiry into pure language, but also for the mechanics of how Smith divined the pure name of God. Catechisms presented a series of questions and answers arranged in a progression from basic to advanced concepts, and had gained popularity in the colonial period among clergy searching for improved preaching methods.<sup>54</sup> American Protestants in the 1820s and 1830s recognized that published catechisms enabled Sabbath Schools and missionaries to instruct children and foreign proselytes in the Bible and the English language.<sup>55</sup> The strategy aimed to render arcane biblical passages intelligible, deliver the word of God to illiterate students, help them commit the word to memory, and lead them to a complete understanding of scripture.<sup>56</sup> Missionaries especially wanted to reach

51. Revelation Book 1, in JSP-R1:258–59. This was Answers to Questions, between circa 4 March and circa 20 March 1832, in JSP-D2:208–13 [D&C 77].

52. See Historical Introduction to Sample of Pure Language, between circa 4 March and circa 20 March 1832, in JSP-D2:214.

53. Joseph Smith's New Testament revision manuscript covering the book of Revelation contains changes to Revelation 3:12, "and I will write upon him <this is> my new name." Other references in Revelation to God's name or a God-given new name were left unrevised (2:17, 14:1, 19:12).

54. Kenneth L. Alford, "A History of Mormon Catechisms," in *A Firm Foundation: Church Organization and Administration*, ed. David J. Whittaker and Arnold K. Garr (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 224–28.

55. Use of catechisms in Sabbath Schools and missions is widely attested in American missionary reports and periodicals of the 1830s. See "Missionary Periodicals of the Antebellum United States," Open Source History, <https://opensourcehistory.github.io/missionary-periodicals> (archived at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2575068>).

56. See James Hastie, "Madagascar," *Religious Intelligencer*, 1 July 1826, 68; "Thirtieth Report of the Religious Tract Society," *The Missionary Herald*, February 1830, 54–55; "Bombay: Review of a Year,"

those who had not heard of God or Christ before with catechisms, often when their presses had yet to translate the Bible into the local language. The contest against "pagan darkness" and "heathen ignorance" of God persuaded several prominent missionaries that catechistic pedagogy outclassed all other preaching methods. Catechism made sense to missionary editors as an apparatus of published Bibles.<sup>57</sup>



Curiously, Smith's own catechistically formatted texts surface in his Bible revision and scripture publication efforts. If Smith shared the pedagogical concern with his evangelist contemporaries, then preparing his "new translation" of the Bible, his revelations, and his lectures on theology for publication as *scriptural* texts and resources could have easily prompted an interest in a first-principle question on which to build a progression of questions and answers. The domain of the fundamental coincided with prime knowledge, the end and the beginning of esoteric solutions to abstruse knowledge.

Independently of format, the content at hand fell within classic esoterica. The antediluvian setting of Genesis combined with the apocryphal books of Enoch, the use of Enoch as an exemplar of faith in Hebrews 11:5, the enigmatic reference to Enoch in Jude 1:14, the cryptic book of Revelation, and secret names known only by revelation fascinated esoteric commentators. Few mysteries sparked esoteric interest as much as the real name of God.<sup>58</sup> Smith interpreted scripture with an esoteric apparatus. Between his revision sessions of 1 and 8 December 1830—sessions ending and beginning respectively with discussions of pure language—Smith dictated a revelation describing the Bible translation for a new acquaintance, Sidney Rigdon, given in the voice of God and with words dripping with esoteric import: "I have sent forth the fullness of [my] Gospel by the hand of my servant Joseph . . . & I have given unto him the Keys of the mystery of those things which have been sealed even things which was from the foundation of the world." The revelation told Rigdon to scribe for Smith, promising "the scriptures shall be given even as they are in mine

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*The Missionary Herald*, December 1830, 378–80; Thomas Simons, "Mr. Simons's Journal of His Return from Kyouk Phyou to Maulmein," *The Baptist Missionary Magazine*, October 1836, 243–44; and Carla Gardina Pestana, *Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 61.

57. See "Sunday School Catechism," *Religious Intelligencer*, 27 June 1818, 64; Pliny Fisk, "Palestine Mission: Extracts from Mr. Fisk's Communications," *Religious Intelligencer*, 17 May 1823, 802; and "Bombay," 378–80.

58. Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, "'The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah' Revisited," *Journal of Religion* 98, no. 1 (January 2018): 1–28; Guy G. Stroumsa, *The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 115–20; Robert J. Wilkinson, *Tetragrammaton: Western Christians and the Hebrew Name of God from the Beginnings to the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), esp. 483.



own bosom.” By “the keys which [would be] given” would a latter-day Zion and Israel “be led & no more be confounded at all.”<sup>59</sup> Ancient wisdom sealed up as mysteries waited to be unlocked through inspired, seer-like translation. The Sample of Pure Language, arranged as questions and answers with foreign sounds, offered compelling tokens of the reality outside of human reach.

*“Adam-ondi-Ahman” Toponym, 1835*

Joseph Smith reached peak activity in pure language study in 1835. Between March and August, he revealed his most well-known pure name, “Adam-ondi-Ahman”; cast code names in a pure veneer; presumably supplied a specimen of pure language characters to William W. Phelps; and developed an Egyptian alphabet, grammar, and translation carrying further specimens of potentially pure content. Two forces sparked this burst of interest: the revelation of the name “Adam-ondi-Ahman” and the arrival in Kirtland of Phelps, Smith’s closest compatriot in language study.

Exactly how William W. Phelps influenced and may have written pure language material remains blurry and only circumstantially supported by the historical record. Joining Smith’s church in 1831, Phelps lent his talents in editing and publishing materials for the church in Missouri, corresponding with Smith over the printing of revelations, and occasionally discussing a favorite topic—languages. Phelps admitted he had no formal training in linguistics, but prided himself a polyglot. After a mob ransacked the church press in Missouri, Phelps relocated to Kirtland in May 1835 and quickly gained Smith’s trust in joining esoteric projects.<sup>60</sup> Smith wrote to Phelps’s wife Sally that her husband would teach “hid[d]en things of old times” and “treasures hid in the sand.”<sup>61</sup> Immediately upon purchasing Egyptian mummies and papyri from a touring exhibitor in July, Smith employed Phelps to assist him in translating their contents. Phelps came prepared for the job, having written the year before how ancient Egyptians had concealed “their arts in mystical characters or hieroglyphics.”<sup>62</sup> Later, in 1843, Smith enlisted Phelps to counter public criticisms of the Book of Mormon translation. Phelps ghostwrote for Smith in describing an etymology

59. Revelation, 7 December 1830, in *JSP-D1*:219–23 [D&C 35].

60. Samuel Brown, “The Translator and the Ghostwriter: Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 31–35.

61. Letter to Sally Waterman Phelps, 20 July 1835, in *JSP-D4*:368–71.

62. Editor of the Star [Oliver Cowdery], “Reflections for the Fourth of July, 1834,” *Evening and the Morning Star*, July 1834, 173.

of the word "Mormon." In this and other responses, Phelps attempted a rarified rhetoric, exhibiting linguistic prowess in a wide mix of languages that ranged from Egyptian, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin; through European standards like German and French; to the impressively exotic Chaldean, Samaritan, and Lenape. Regardless of his overt excesses, Phelps shared Smith's vision for overcoming the confounding of languages and for comprehending, if possible, a fullness of language. His touch on Smith's Egyptian alphabet and grammar seems to scholars rather undeniable.<sup>63</sup>



Shortly before Phelps arrived in Kirtland, Smith instructed the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles on priesthood and church organization to prepare the group for regulating smaller congregations in the eastern United States. In the instruction, Smith described "Adam-ondi-Ahman," a valley where Adam gathered "the residue of his posterity" to bestow a final blessing. The name made a clear reference to the 1832 sample of pure language with "Ahman," but the instruction merely mentioned the name as part of a toponym and without delving into language themes. The earliest text for the instruction on priesthood appears as Section 3 in Part 2 of the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, and by its publication in 1835, Smith had merged it with previous revelations, associating it with a revelatory production. Brigham Young recalled that Smith spent two hours composing a "Revelation on Priesthood"—likely the 1835 instruction.<sup>64</sup> Sources challenge a tight dating of the instruction, however, leaving open the possibility that the instruction underwent revision between its initial delivery to the apostles and its publication in the Doctrine and Covenants. Regardless of the likelihood of revision, the proximity of this source to Phelps's arrival in May, the last preparations for the Doctrine and Covenants in April and May, Phelps's publication of his poem "Adam-ondi-Ahman" in June, and the exhibiting and purchase of Egyptian artifacts in July point to the instruction on priesthood as a key catalyst for renewed interest in pure language.<sup>65</sup>

But what triggered the sudden use of "Adam-ondi-Ahman" in the instruction on priesthood? Smith may have divined "Adam-ondi-Ahman" while in

63. See Brown, "The Translator and the Ghostwriter," 41–46, 61–62; Historical Introduction to Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language, circa July–circa November 1835, in *JSP*-R4:112–13.

64. Historical Introduction to Instruction on Priesthood, between circa 1 March and circa 4 May 1835, in *JSP*-D4:308–9 [D&C 107].

65. W. W. Phelps, "Adam-ondi-Ahman," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, June 1835, 144. The final preparations on the text for the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants—in which Joseph Smith introduced major emendations to several revelations and also added lectures on theology given in meetings of the Kirtland School of the Elders—likely occurred in April and/or May because of the production timeline evident in church periodical announcements about the book. See Historical Introduction to Doctrine and Covenants, 1835, in *JSP*-R2:304–7.



in his prophetic role, composing the instruction as a revelation; he may have arrived at the name while formulating a catechistic progression of priesthood doctrines based on the lineage of the ancient patriarchs in Genesis or the Book of Remembrance (or both); or he may have been influenced by Phelps while they were working out the final revisions for the text of the Doctrine and Covenants. Owing to a lack of direct information in primary sources, each of these scenarios relies on circumstantial evidence for plausibility. Perhaps true to style, it appears that Adam-ondi-Ahman—however it came to Smith—ignited the pure language content that followed, which holds significance for Smith’s methodology. The difference between a creative collaboration with Phelps, a direct revelation, a pedagogical approach to sacred history, or a combination of methods depends on the activities surrounding the emergence of the place-name “Adam-ondi-Ahman.”

The simplest scenario is a direct revelation of the instruction on priesthood, with Adam-ondi-Ahman emerging in the same way as other revelations composed in Smith’s direct style. This requires placing Smith in the context of integrating his prior November 1831 revelation on “Church business” with charging the Twelve Apostles to regulate the eastern branches of the church.<sup>66</sup> The setting of apostles gathering as early as March 1835 for their charge would suggest that Smith recognized priesthood as a feature of ordering loose congregations, and expected priesthood organization to involve a restoration of ancient covenants and orders (as in the first priesthood conferences in Kirtland).<sup>67</sup> In this reconstruction, Adam-ondi-Ahman would connote a linking of last days and the Ancient of Days via priesthood order, a concern Smith announced at the outset when declaring that the original name of priesthood included the “Order of the Son of God.”<sup>68</sup> Apostles needed to view their work as validating the church order by aligning theirs with that of the patriarchs. It is conceivable that the new toponym “Adam-ondi-Ahman,” which tied priesthood lineage to Adam and the true God (Ahman), could engender sufficient interest to spark Smith’s and Phelps’s creative energies.

For Phelps to have inspired or influenced the rendition of Adam-ondi-Ahman would seem to require his arrival before Smith’s instruction to the Twelve. Barring the discovery of a new source showing Phelps conveying the term “Adam-ondi-Ahman” from Missouri, this scenario would also require

66. Revelation, 11 November 1831-B, in *JSP*, D2:132–36 [D&C 107 (partial)].

67. Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith’s Ohio Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2009), 147–74.

68. Instruction on Priesthood, between circa 1 March and circa 4 May 1835, in *JSP*-D4:312 [D&C 107:3].



Smith to have prepared the original instruction in or after May. Since the apostles departed on 4 May and Phelps arrived in Kirtland on 16 May, Phelps could not have been present for the instruction, but could have learned about it sometime after its composition and before its publication.<sup>69</sup> Phelps could only have collaborated on the name "Adam-ondi-Ahman" if Smith had introduced the name in between giving the original instruction and preparing the instruction for publication in the Doctrine and Covenants. Given Phelps's involvement in printing the Doctrine and Covenants in May and June, this scenario is plausible.

That the instruction on priesthood shares strong structural similarities with the second of the lectures on theology lends support to another scenario. Within weeks of each other in early 1835, Smith prepared the lectures for publication and held meetings with the Twelve.<sup>70</sup> While the original lectures were delivered in sessions of the School of the Elders between 25 November and 1 December 1834, additional sections—catechisms designed to make the lectures accessible to the whole church—were likely composed in January 1835.<sup>71</sup> Several studies have called into question Smith's authorship of the lectures, which may have been largely the work of Sidney Rigdon,<sup>72</sup> but the second lecture stands out as the strongest candidate of the group for being Smith's. It is this lecture that takes the theme of faith, relates faith to knowledge, and argues for an accurate knowledge of God predicated on being able to trace an intellectual genealogy through the patriarchs back to God.<sup>73</sup> The lecture waxes tedious in explaining the lifespans and relations of the patriarchs, taking the patriarchal lineage in Genesis and the Book of Remembrance to a minute extreme. Catechizing this dense outline of patriarchal lineage served readers with an intelligible sequence of the abstract argument. In the instruction on priesthood, the same logic and abstraction of patriarchal lineage informs the doctrine of priesthood order, and instead of arranging the patriarchs by age, the instruction builds a sequence of ordination. Within this sequence, in the culminating moment of finally reaching the first patriarch, Adam, the

69. Historical Department Journal History of the Church, 16 May 1835, Church History Library.

70. Historical Introduction to First Theological Lecture on Faith, circa January–May 1835, in JSP-D4:457–60.

71. Editorial, *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, May 1835, 122; Historical Introduction to First Theological Lecture on Faith, circa January–May 1835, in JSP-D4:459.

72. Historical Introduction to First Theological Lecture on Faith, circa January–May 1835, in JSP-D4:458–59.

73. Larry E. Dahl, "Authorship and History of the Lectures on Faith," in *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, ed. Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990), 8.

genealogy stops, and Adam is placed in Adam-on-di-Ahman, there to bless his righteous posterity.<sup>74</sup>

Preparing this new work of scripture for publication, which included the lectures (“Doctrine”) and revelations (“Covenants”), could have elicited a pedagogical concern, not unlike the pedagogical concern Smith exhibited in training the Twelve Apostles in their duties.<sup>75</sup> The use of catechistic formats suggests a pedagogical context as well, which corresponds with the circa March 1832 sample of pure language. In breaking down lofty concepts such as priesthood, faith, knowledge, and primordial language, Smith may have proceeded from a design, still reliant on a revelatory query, but nevertheless answering instructional objectives. The impetus for pure language, in the sense of Smith’s translation mechanics, probably arose from scriptural hermeneutics, not (as in the case of the golden plates) from an artifact inviting the translation gifts of a seer.

### *Code Names, 1835*

After the instruction on priesthood and as part of Smith’s emendations to the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, he and fellow committee members replaced names in five revelations with pseudonyms. These code names were intended to obscure the identities of the members of a joint business enterprise among church leaders, the United Firm, against litigation or public knowledge of the firm’s debts. The publication committee had debated previously whether to publish these five revelations at all. The pseudonyms satisfied their concerns, but an unintended consequence emerged in later editions, as the code names persisted and later church members took the names as belonging to the original texts of the revelations.<sup>76</sup>

At first glance, the code names resemble biblical names and sounds, and Phelps later associated a Hebrew origin for them.<sup>77</sup> However, Phelps’s meanings betray a novice knowledge of Hebrew and nearly all the names match or strongly share phonemes with the anglicized Hebrew names of the King James Version of the Bible. Despite reports from Orson Pratt and Phelps, no principal

74. Lecture Second, in *JSP-R2*:322–45.

75. Historical Introduction to Doctrine and Covenants, 1835, in *JSP-R2*:304–7.

76. Christopher C. Smith, “The Inspired Fictionalization of the 1835 United Firm Revelations,” *Claremont Journal of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (April 2011): 15–31.

77. William W. Phelps to Brigham Young, 12 October 1863, Brigham Young Office Files, General Correspondence, Incoming, 1840–1877, Letters from Church Leaders and Others, 1840–1877, W. W. Phelps, 1860–1866, Church History Library.







observer mentioned pure language when explaining the pseudonyms. Christopher Smith has postulated that “Olihah,” “Zombre,” “Gazelam,” and “Shule” bore enough similarity to other pure language specimens that the substituting of code names in the United Firm revelations amounted to an “inspired fictionalization,” or another rendering of pure language.<sup>78</sup> “Olihah” did not likely correspond to “olach” in the specimen of pure language (produced around the same time as the United Firm pseudonyms). But a later 1838 revelation referenced the “mountains of Adam Ondi Awmen” and the “plains of Olaha Shinehah” as together “the land where Adam dwelt.” This lent a retrojected connection of “Olihah” to one of two toponyms associated with the Adamic era, the other (Adam-ondi-Ahman) already solidly asserted as a pure name.<sup>79</sup> As Christopher Smith has observed, “Gazelam” maps onto “Gazelem” in Alma 37:23 and “Shule” maps onto “Shule” in Ether 1:30, both names that the Book of Mormon placed in the pre-Babel context of Jaredite language. “Zombre” bears some resemblance to the pure language word “Zomar,” which Smith developed in his Egyptian Grammar, but *Zambres/Jambre* from the New Testament and apocryphal texts offer a stronger (and evidently esoteric) candidate match.<sup>80</sup>

In 2 Timothy 3:8, Paul identifies two who had contended against Moses: “Jannes and Jambres.” Christian readers most commonly considered Jannes and Jambres the unnamed magicians in Exodus who replicated Moses’s miracles in the court of Pharaoh, but Paul’s reference did not expound on the two names. The mystery of the two magicians fascinated esoteric thinkers and frustrated some Protestant theologians. Classic esoteric sources made Jannes and Jambres into famous magicians who had acquired deeper occult knowledge and, in some accounts, assisted rather than withstood Moses.<sup>81</sup> Lore and commentaries transliterated “Jambres” into various forms, including “Zambres,” which chaplain Thomas Godwyn used in his widely read *Moses and Aaron*. Godwyn’s treatise intended to outline the civil organization and ecclesiastical rites of the ancient Hebrews, but attracted esoteric readers for its deep analysis of Hebrew lore.<sup>82</sup>

78. Smith, “The Inspired Fictionalization of the 1835 United Firm Revelations,” 23.

79. Revelation, 8 July 1838-E, in Smith, Journal, in JSP-J1:289 [D&C 117:8].

80. Smith, “The Inspired Fictionalization of the 1835 United Firm Revelations,” 23.

81. Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments* (London: Joseph Butterworth and Son, 1825), 1:348–47 [Exodus 7:25].

82. Thomas Godwyn, *Moses and Aaron: Civil and Ecclesiastical Rites, Used by the Ancient Hebrews* [...], 12th ed. (London: R. Scot et al., 1685); William Britten, *Art Magic; or, Mundane, Sub-Mundane and Super-Mundane Spiritism* (New York: William Britten, 1876), 277, 280. Godwyn (circa 1587–1642) was sometimes confused with an earlier Thomas Godwin (1517–1590) who was bishop of Bath and Wells, England, from 1584 to 1590.



The full tale of Jambres was alleged to be in the book of Jasher, an apocryphal text that captured Smith's curiosity for its status as a "lost book" of the Bible. An English translation of Jasher circulated in Europe and North America, but Smith apparently had not obtained a copy until 1840.<sup>83</sup> In a letter to church leaders in 1833, Smith mentioned how their combined search for the book of Jasher had turned up empty, and despite their excitement over what this lost book might contain, they maintained some caution owing to a revelation directing Smith not to translate apocryphal writings.<sup>84</sup> The original 1833 letter mentioned the names of some United Firm members. These included John Johnson, for whom the code name "Zombre" was applied. Later, when the letter was reprinted in the church newspaper as part of the serialized "History of Joseph Smith," the pseudonym "Zombre" was used—the most proximate between Jasher and Jambres/Zambres in Smith's corpus.<sup>85</sup> In any event, the frequency of Jambres/Zambres in the contemporaneous soundscape of mystical apocryphal names and mainstream biblical commentaries lends as much support to a pseudobiblical etymology for the code name "Zombre" as do alternatives (like *Zomar*). The code names as a whole thus lean toward a biblical phonetic, and presented no new pure language specimens except for possibly "Olihah."<sup>86</sup>

### *Specimen of Pure Language, 1835*

Joseph Smith's next surviving reference to pure language indicates that he moved from a concept of undefiled language to the sounds of words and a writing system itself. A letter by William W. Phelps dated 26 May 1835 contains a "specimen of some of the 'pure language,'" a table listing six characters in rows with corresponding material in three adjoining columns.<sup>87</sup> This "specimen" is reproduced

83. Edward J. Brandt, "The Book of Jasher and the Latter-day Saints," chap. 15 in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986).

84. Letter to Church Leaders in Jackson County, Missouri, 25 June 1833, in *JSP-D3*:147–58. See also Gerrit Dirkmaat, "Lost Scripture and 'the Interpolations of Men': Joseph Smith's Revelation on the Apocrypha," Chapter 12 herein.

85. "History of Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons*, 15 February 1845, 800.

86. "Zombre" and "Zambre" appear more frequently in eighteenth-century literature as the name of a lake or river in the deep interior of Africa that fed the Nile. Notwithstanding the esoteric import of the Zombre—its hidden location and its being the source of water for Egypt—this etymology unlikely influenced Smith's composition of code names. Henry Curson, *A New Description of the World: Delineating Europe-Africa and Asia-America*, 2nd ed. (London: Benjamin Barker, 1715), 338.

87. William W. Phelps to Sally Waterman Phelps, 26–27 May 1835, William Wines Phelps Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.



as a photographic facsimile in Figure 14.1 and as a typographical facsimile in Table 14.1. The words match those given in the Sample of Pure Language, but with alternate spellings and two exceptions: Phelps distinguishes between “saunsahman” and “Sons ahman,” the one representing “sons of God” and the other “children of Men,” and the characters for each having the same simple form of right angles turned at opposite directions. The specimen’s characters iterate from a base symbol, the horizontal bar representing “olach”/“the Earth,” and work upward with extensions playing on the previous motif. The “olach” bar extends into a right angle for “Sons ahman”; then flips upward for “saunsahman” and “anglo”; then progresses with an ornament on “sonahman,” until finally terminating with a composite of the “anglo”/“angels,” “saunsahman”/“sons of God,” and “sonahman”/“Son of God,” all blending into the symbol for “ahman”/“God.”

Lacking any additional information, the specimen remains a puzzle. The characters receive no provenance from Phelps; the phonetic representations likewise appear without citation. Phelps lived in Missouri at the time Williams and Whitmer (re)produced their copies of the Sample of Pure Language.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, Phelps likely obtained words like “ahman,” “sonahman,” “Sons ahman,” and “anglo” from Smith.

The “Egyptian Alphabet” text produced some months later by Smith (and Cowdery) lists the same character forms (morphemes), among many others (mainly from the papyri), but with different interpretations than in the Sample or Specimen. Phelps’s symbol for “aine”/“anglo” is described in the alphabet by Smith as “Alchobeth ministers not ordained of God Sinful.” The Phelps specimen shares little correspondence with the alphabet, making an Egyptian context less likely. Smith or Phelps seem to have participated in a kind of constructive linguistics rather than developing word forms out of any other languages, modern or ancient.

### *Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar, 1835*

In early July 1835—within a few months of Phelps sharing the Specimen of Pure Language with his wife—Michael Chandler visited Kirtland, Ohio, with his travelling mummy show, and sold Egyptian mummies and papyri to Smith and others.<sup>89</sup> Smith’s 1838–1856 history noted that soon after the purchase,

88. Brown, “The Translator and the Ghostwriter,” 31–32.

89. Oliver Cowdery, “Egyptian Mummies—Ancient Records,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, December 1835, 235; see also Smith, History, 1838–1856, vol. B-1, 596, 6 July 1835 (accessible in the Histories series of the online edition of *The Joseph Smith Papers*).



FIGURE 14.1. Specimen of Pure Language. Joseph Smith's close associate, William W. Phelps, appended this "Specimen of some of the 'pure language'" at the end of a letter to his wife, Sally Waterman Phelps. Joseph Smith, William Phelps, and other early Latter-day Saints believed that Adam and Eve and their posterity had spoken a pure language that was later confounded at the Tower of Babel. Smith and Phelps apparently hoped to acquire this language through revelation, linguistic reconstruction, or some combination thereof. Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

TABLE 14.1. Phelps, Specimen of Pure Language, 1835

L	ah	ahman	—God
L	auz	sonahman	—Son of God
L	aintz	saunsahman	—sons of God [illegible]
L	aine	anglo	—angels
7	ainges	Sons ahman	—children of Men
7	oh	olach	the Earth

A specimen of some of the "pure language"



Smith "commenced . . . the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics."<sup>90</sup> After 19 July he spent the remainder of the month "continually engaged in translating an alphabet [and] arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language."<sup>91</sup> Two handmade notebooks containing hieratic characters and three loose copies of other hieratic characters likely predate the alphabet and grammar documents to which the history refers, since the alphabet and grammar draw from the copies in some places.<sup>92</sup>

Beginning in July 1835, Smith worked with Cowdery and Phelps in building a lexicon of Egyptian characters. The first draft, the only manuscript of Smith's Egyptian project papers containing his own handwriting, lists dozens of hieratic characters in sections labeled as "parts" of the "first degree." Smith and Cowdery apparently copied characters before rendering translations, as the list of characters runs out of translations on the second of five pages and the majority of copied characters never received any corresponding definition or explanation. The other two versions of the Egyptian alphabet text, in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery and William Phelps, are based on the first. Smith's alphabet manuscript also contains the most text of the three.<sup>93</sup>

Phelps's version of the Egyptian alphabet makes the tabular data explicit, lending each column a title.<sup>94</sup> Smith constructed his alphabet character by character, providing a "letter," a "sound," and an "explanation" for each. In only a couple of instances is a "letter" supplied, and Smith apparently worked out the sounds before writing a translation, as the column of character explanations did not get as far as the column of character sounds.<sup>95</sup>

In his "Grammar & A[l]phabet of the Egyptian Language," a bound volume based in part of the preceding Egyptian alphabet text, Smith employed Phelps and Warren Parrish, and anticipated a more elaborate system than what Smith and his scribes ultimately recorded: the grammar and alphabet book works from the "first degree" to the "fifth degree" but is inscribed in reverse order,

90. Joseph Smith, *History*, 1838–1856, vol. B-1, 596, 1 September 1834–2 November 1838.

91. *Ibid.*, 597.

92. *Ibid.*; JSP-R4:3–4. Three loose pages of Egyptian characters in unknown handwriting comprise the remaining copy sheets. The papers were manufactured in the nineteenth century, ruling out an ancient author for the inscriptions. No translations appear on the copies, though in some instances the ink changes to red, perhaps preserving changes in the papyri. Smith had announced the papyri contained writings of the patriarchs Abraham and Joseph, and Cowdery once mentioned the writings in red being those of Joseph. H. Michael Marquardt, "Joseph Smith's Egyptian Papers: A History," in *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition*, Robert K. Ritner, with contributions by Marc Coenen, H. Michael Marquardt, and Christopher Woods (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013), 17.

93. Egyptian Alphabet Documents, circa early July–circa November 1835, in JSP-R4:53–93.

94. Egyptian Alphabet, circa early July–circa November 1835-C, in JSP-R4:85–93.

95. Egyptian Alphabet, circa early July–circa November 1835-A, in JSP-R4:55–71.



interspersing blank pages between blocks of text.<sup>96</sup> Smith may have derived portions of the Book of Abraham narrative from the grammar book and earlier versions of the alphabet text. For instance, the explanations associated with “Ah-broam” in the first through fifth degrees describe “The father of the faithful, the first right”; “A follower of [righteousness]”; “One who possesses great Knowledge”; “A follower of righteousness, a possessor of greater knowledge”; “The father of many nations, a prince of peace, one who keeps the commandments of God, a patriarch, a rightful heir, a high priest.” The Book of Abraham opens with Abraham recounting how he had “been a follower of righteousness; desiring ~~one~~ <to be> one who possessed great Knowledge; a greater follower of righteousness; <a possessor of greater Knowledge> a father of many nations; a prince of peace; one who keeps the commandments of God; a rightful heir; a high priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers.” The passage in the earliest extant manuscript is keyed to an Egyptian character matching the character in the Egyptian alphabet with an explanation similar to the content of the passage.<sup>97</sup>

Sequentially, the primary sources by this point in 1835 only progressed as far as a basic lexicography with characters projected onto ancient Egypt and primordial Eden, and a translation agenda indicating a simple yet broad scheme. Smith’s interest in translating the writings of Abraham pulled him from overtly Edenic-Adamic language study and drove him toward mastering actual Egyptian and Hebrew. Language study widened Smith’s linguistic repertoire, and he soon incorporated grammatical conventions into his translations of Egyptian.

The Egyptian project stalled in August and September of 1835, but Smith, Cowdery, and Phelps resumed expanding the alphabet on 1 October, unfolding the “System of astronomy.”<sup>98</sup> The following week, Smith translated Egyptian and made irregular progress for the next month.<sup>99</sup> In November, Cowdery returned from New York with books about Hebrew, including a Hebrew Bible,

96. Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language, circa July–circa November 1835, 1–2, in *JSP-R4*:111–90. Smith had hired Parrish as a scribe in October 1835, see Smith, Journal, 29 October 1835, in *JSP-J1*:76.




97. Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July–circa November 1835-C, in *JSP-R4*:219 [Abraham 1:1–2:18]; Egyptian Alphabet, circa early July–circa November 1835-A, 5, in *JSP-R4*:70–71; Marquardt, “Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Papers,” 33–35; Christopher C. Smith, “The Dependence of Abraham 1:1–3 on the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 29 (2009): 38–54. See also Brian M. Hauglid, “‘Translating an Alphabet to the Book of Abraham’: Joseph Smith’s Study of the Egyptian Language and His Translation of the Book of Abraham,” Chapter 15 herein.

98. Smith, Journal, 1 October 1835, in *JSP-J1*:67.

99. Smith, Journal, 7 October 1835, in *JSP-J1*:71; Hauglid, “‘Translating an Alphabet to the Book of Abraham.’”



TABLE 14.2. Example of Character Degrees

No		When this character has a horizontal line under it, it reduces it into the fourth degree, consequently it has but four connecting parts of speech.
5		
6		When it has two horizontal lines, it is reduced into the third degree and has but three connecting parts of speech,
7		and when it has three horizontal lines, it is reduced into the second degree and has but two connecting parts of speech.



lexicon, and grammar.<sup>100</sup> The materials further stoked Smith's fascination with Hebrew, and he enlisted church leaders to solicit instruction from Jewish experts.<sup>101</sup> For several days throughout November and December, Smith studied his Hebrew grammar from which he likely derived new approaches to his Egyptian alphabet. The largest of the Egyptian papers, aside from his Book of Abraham, expands the title to include *grammar*, something readily available to Smith when Cowdery delivered the Hebrew grammar purchased in New York.

By "grammar," Smith meant morphology, the task of building from the simplest conceptual morphemes and transforming them into compound ideograms. The first line of the grammar introduces a character that functions "independent and arbitrary," but by "inserting a straight mark over it" the "signification" of the character increases, and by inserting a straight mark below it the signification decreases.<sup>102</sup> The presentation of this rule of grammar is reconstructed in Table 14.2. "By counting the numbers of st[r]aight lines," the grammar book continues, "or considering them as qualifying adjectives we have the degrees of comparison." Each character could be morphed by this system of degrees and connections. Because the base character already had the "five connecting parts of speech"—what the Grammar identifies as verbs, participles, prepositions, conjunctions, and adverbs—increasing, dissecting, and decreasing the character with these additional markings made possible some 5<sup>4</sup> (625) significations.<sup>103</sup> This grammatical rule compares with the esoteric idea

100. Smith, Journal, 20 November 1835, in JSP-J1:107.

101. Matthew J. Grey, "'The Word of the Lord in the Original': Joseph Smith's Study of Hebrew in Kirtland," in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 249–302; Matthew J. Grey, "Approaching Egyptian Papyri through Biblical Language: Joseph Smith's Use of Hebrew in His Translation of the Book of Abraham," Chapter 16 herein.

102. Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language, circa July–circa November 1835, 1–2, in JSP-R4:116–17.

103. Ibid., 2, in JSP-R4:118–19.



of Egyptian hieroglyphs as mystic symbols packed with meaning, and the idea in the Book of Mormon that Egyptian was more compact than Hebrew.<sup>104</sup>

The grammar book proceeds with morphemes grouped by degree and ventures a definition for each, usually about a paragraph in length. The character called “Ho-e-oop,” for instance, is defined as a “prince of the royal blood a true descendant from Ham, the son of Noah, and inheritor of the Kingly blessings from under the hand of Noah, but not according to the priestly blessing, because of the transgressions of Ham, which blessing fell upon Shem from under the hand of Noah.”<sup>105</sup> In some cases, Smith apparently treated morphemes as pictographs, symbols reflecting things in nature or behaviors of people and animals, which maintained the more common approach than the growing scholarly consensus of his time that treated Egyptian characters as phonetic symbols.<sup>106</sup>

The grammar book exhibits a baroque sensibility to Egyptian—Smith or Phelps (or both of them) projected a carefully ordered system of expression with compounding layers of meaning. Though vastly incomplete relative to its proposed scope, the grammar book amplified the mechanics of translation apparent in Smith’s version of the Egyptian alphabet and in the Sample of Pure Language before it. Because Smith regarded pure language as inherently capable of all possible expression, the more elaborate grammar book (as built upon the simpler Egyptian alphabet) still attempted a comparatively limited range. Smith, however, here realized a close study at the root level of written language—the morpheme—that further expanded his repertoire for esoteric thought.

In the grammar book, the strongest candidate for a word in the pure language appears under the definition for “Beth.” To uncover the hidden meaning of the symbol labeled “Beth,” Smith tapped into pure language: “The place appointed of God for the residence of Adam; Adam ondi= Ahman a fruit garden made to be fruitful, by blessing or promise; great valley or plain given by promise, fitted with fruit trees and precious flowers, made for the healing of Man. Good to the task pleasing to the eye; sweet and precious <deligh[t]ful> to the smell; place of happiness—purity, holiness, and rest: even Zomar—Zion.”<sup>107</sup>

104. Mormon 9:32–33.

105. Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language, circa July–circa November 1835, 4, in JSP-R4:122–23.

106. Brown, “Joseph (Smith) in Egypt,” 45; Bushman, “Joseph Smith’s Place in the Study of Antiquity in Antebellum America,” 17–19; Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134–38.

107. Comparison of Characters, in JSP-R4:360.





Ezra Booth had reported in 1831 that Joseph Smith marked the site for a temple in the land of Zion with "ZOM" for "Zomar," which Smith had said was "the original word for Zion."<sup>108</sup> Smith apparently arrived at this more developed definition of "Beth" similar to the Specimen of Pure Language. "Beth" had undergone a progression of inflections, through "an arbitrary sound or signification" to dozens of forms, like "Baethchu" and "Ebethchuaintrith." As with symbols in the specimen of pure language, the symbol "Beth" followed a progression of previous symbols to arrive at this more developed definition.<sup>109</sup>

Smith maintained the separation between Egyptian and pure language in his explanations of "Beth" and for other symbols as well. The sound "Ah" sharing the first syllable and definition of "Ahman" was expanded in the grammar book into "Ahlish" instead of being expanded into "Ahman."<sup>110</sup> Smith here evoked the confounding influences on pure language with a root form common to a pure word, yet devolved with sounds somewhat dissimilar to pure names. By working meanings along layers of degrees, Smith practiced in his creative linguistics what his concept of pure language had intimated: the further one delved into the etymology—the past history of a word form or symbol—the closer one arrived at a pure expression. Relics of post-Adamic languages ornamented the Egyptian and ostensibly the Hebrew and all that followed, requiring Smith to strip away morphological accretions to arrive at a divine sound.

## CONCLUSION

Even in the scant, pointillistic sources for Joseph Smith's pure language project, an image of a demanding exercise emerges. A seriousness appears, an earnest interest in approximating the first principles of language. Though the classical and Hellenistic school of ancient linguistics was certainly available for his study, especially its methodologies of translation and interpretation, it held little sway over Smith's more creative approach. Smith prioritized ancient languages in a typical esoteric direction, working back through biblical Hebrew to a more distant Egyptian through a pre-Babel Jaredite tongue and the primordial language of Adam and Eve. Basing all language, confounded or not, on the premise of a grand first principle—the very name of God in its purest

108. Ezra Booth to Ira Eddy, 14 November 1831, in "Mormonism—No. VI," *Ohio Star* (Ravenna, OH), 17 November 1831, 1.

109. Comparison of Characters, in *JSP-R4*:358–62.

110. *Ibid.*, 351.

form—demonstrated Smith’s theological concern, not just toward language, but toward the fundamental order all human activity derived from language. Smith aspired to be a kind of philosophical linguist, a proto-structuralist who could discern the relationships between language and the world.

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Proffering pure language as a celestial solution to the discordance in humanity at once called out language as a singular problem and proved the complexity of the theory. Smith’s method of accessing pure language through a synthesis of revelation, language study, and creative linguistics—what ideally should overcome the dark barriers to hidden knowledge—had the effect of further confronting him with the manifold constraints of language. The narrow prison of paper, pen, and ink emerges in the pure language sources; despite some brief moments of enlightenment, pure language remained elusive. The pure language sources diminished over time as the task proved more difficult.

And yet, Smith soldiered on, rallying the Latter-day Saints toward a “victory” of their dispensation, culminating in a “fullness of times.”<sup>111</sup> With a revelation of the names, signs, and tokens of priesthood associated with the ritual of the temple under construction in Nauvoo, Smith could finally render everything esoteric, the whole life project trapped within a veneer of mortality and the true nature always hidden from the world. All was spiritual to God, nothing temporal, and by invoking what little pure language one knew, an order of prayer could summon the angels.<sup>112</sup> When learned, pure language sounds like “Ahman” and “Son Ahman” invited the righteous initiated hearer further into the realm of the hidden sacred. In Joseph Smith’s final calculation, pure language could translate confounded people into joint heirs with Jesus Christ and members of the general assembly and Church of the Firstborn.

111. Joseph Smith to “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,” 6 September 1842, 7–8, [D&C 128] (accessible in the Documents series of the online edition of *The Joseph Smith Papers*).

112. D&C 29:34; William Clayton, Daily Account of Joseph Smith’s Activities, 15 June 1844, in JSP-J3:334.