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Reprove, Betimes, and Sharpness in the Vocabulary of Joseph Smith

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As a prisoner in the squalor of Liberty Jail in March 1839, the Prophet Joseph Smith gave us some of the most beautiful and inspiring words contained in the Doctrine and Covenants.¹ Among those is section 121, verse 43, which counsels the Saints of the necessity of “reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reprovèd, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy.” Much commentary has been written and spoken on this verse, admonishing us how to reprove betimes with sharpness. In this article, however, our interest lies in the words themselves. We will attempt to discover what the words *reprove*, *betimes*, and *sharpness* mean—more accurately, what they meant to Joseph Smith when he uttered them in the winter of 1839.

The context of Doctrine and Covenants 121, verse 43, makes it clear that the words are Joseph Smith’s and not the Lord’s. This section of the Doctrine and Covenants begins with the Prophet’s pleading to God on behalf of the Saints (verses 1–6). The Lord then provides counsel and comfort (verses 7–25). Then in verse 26 there is a subtle shift of speakers as the first person changes to the third, and Joseph Smith resumes his own speech.² This is an important observation for the analysis of the words because although Joseph Smith was inspired as he dictated this part of the text to his scribe, he apparently did so in his own language and his own vocabulary.

Dictionaries do not establish what words mean. Lexicographers collect examples of how words are used by speakers and writers, and they create definitions based on what they observe from that usage. Over time, the meaning of a word evolves, and many words today do not have the same meaning they had in the days of Joseph Smith. In a historical document, a word means not what it communicates to modern readers but what the historical speaker or writer thought it meant. Thus, the best way to understand the word is to see how the speaker or writer regularly used it.

To know best what Joseph Smith meant with *reprove*, *betimes*, and *sharpness*, we must examine his every known use of those words in their original contexts. Fortunately, we possess a tremendous record of the Prophet's sermons, statements, journals, letters, and other writings.³ We also have the scriptures that he produced. We do not view the Book of Mormon or the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants as the creations of Joseph Smith, yet because the Lord communicates with people "after the manner of their language" (D&C 1:24), we see in those books a manifestation of the English vocabulary and usage of the Prophet and others of his day. Sometimes we do not have a sufficient number of occurrences to allow us to tell with absolute confidence what Joseph Smith had in mind with a word. When that is the case, we turn to other documents contemporary with him and geographically and culturally proximate to him. The cultural and geographical proximity is significant because, for example, a learned treatise published in Cambridge, England, in 1839 will likely tell us much less about Joseph Smith's word usage than will an article published in a contemporary American newspaper.

We have found Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* to be an important tool that collects and preserves the English words of Joseph Smith's time and place. That work provides a view of the American English language as Noah Webster perceived it in 1828, the year before the Book of Mormon was translated. Thus, it is an unparalleled resource for the dialect of the Restoration. Webster's limitations include the fact that it records more formal than informal usage and relies on written sources (many of them old) rather than on speech. But those are the limitations of virtually all dictionaries.

The immediate context of Joseph Smith's religious language includes the King James translation of the Bible. Even though the language of early nineteenth-century America was significantly different from that of the King James translation, much of the religious vocabulary of Joseph Smith and his contemporaries derived from, or was

profoundly influenced by, the vocabulary of the English Bible. Thus, any examination of Joseph Smith's words must include an examination of how those words were employed by the King James translators. Frequently, the key to understanding King James Version words from the Old Testament is in the mirror-image vocabulary of parallel couplets.

An additional avenue for understanding what a word means is to learn its origin. Etymology, the study of the origin of words, is an important tool for understanding how language works and for narrowing the range of possible meanings of any given word. Etymological dictionaries, as well as dictionaries of the languages from which English words derive or are translated, contribute in significant ways to help us know what English words mean. The massive and magisterial *Oxford English Dictionary* preserves the most complete history in existence of words in our language.⁵ It provides not only detailed etymologies but also in-context citations of words from their earliest appearances to the twentieth century. For all we can learn from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, however, it relies to a very great degree on formal, upper-class writing, with less-than-needed representation of common speech. Moreover, the further chronologically a word is removed from its origin, the less meaningful its history is in determining what a writer or speaker has in mind when using it. Etymology tells us where a word came from, not necessarily what it means when any given person uses it.

The following brief discussions of *reprove*, *betimes*, and *sharpness* will make use of these tools. We acknowledge their limitations and the tentativeness of our conclusions. Yet we are convinced that to understand fully the thoughts of Joseph Smith, or of any other historical speaker or writer, we first must understand the words.

Reprove

The English word *reprove* is borrowed from the Old French *reprover*, which comes from the Latin *reprobāre*, meaning to disapprove or condemn.⁶ Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary observes *reprove* being used with the meanings "blame," "censure," "charge with a fault to the face," "convince of a fault," "refute," "disprove," and "excite a sense of guilt."⁷ Common definitions today include "chide as blameworthy" or "censure," yet the standard American English dictionary shows that the word's semantic range is broad enough to include "seek to correct esp. by mild rebuke."⁸

In the Old Testament, *reprove* is typically translated from the Hebrew verb *ykb*, which usually means "rebuke" or "chasten."⁹ The Lord said to Judah through Jeremiah: "Thine own wickedness shall

correct thee, and thy backslidings shall *reprove* thee” (Jeremiah 2:19; emphasis added), placing the verbs *correct* and *reprove* (*yk*) in synonymous parallelism. In the New Testament, *reprove* is translated from the Greek verb *elénchō*, which connotes a similar meaning of “convict,” “expose,” or “correct.”¹⁰ All of these definitions seem to fit generally within the range of the word as used by the Prophet in Doctrine and Covenants 121:43. Early Latter-day Saint periodicals show the word being used with the same meaning; for example, “It is also the privilege of the Melchisedec priesthood, to reprove, rebuke and admonish.”¹¹

Reprove is used only three times in the Book of Mormon, and all three are in quotations from Isaiah.¹² It is found in only three passages in Joseph Smith’s revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants.¹³ In Doctrine and Covenants 84:87, the Lord states: “Behold, I send you out to reprove the world of all their unrighteous deeds, and to teach them of a judgment which is to come.” The Lord appears to be sending His servants to reprimand, or more precisely to correct, those to whom they preach. The parallel word *teach*, however, may allow for an interpretation of “disprove,” meaning to disabuse the listeners of the misconceptions and false ways of the world. The attestations of *reprove* in Joseph Smith’s recorded sermons and writings also fit these definitions. The Prophet said: “If I did not love men I would not reprove them,”¹⁴ and “I have no enmity ag[ain]st any man. I love you all—I am their best friend & if persons miss their mark it is their own fault—if I reprove a man & he hate me he is a fool—for I love all men especially these my brethren & sisters.”¹⁵

Betimes

The word *betimes* is the most arcane word in Doctrine and Covenants 121:43 and is found only five times in the King James Bible, all in the Old Testament.¹⁶ Its only appearance in modern-day revelation is in the verse under consideration here, and Joseph Smith is not recorded as having used it elsewhere. By his day, the word was already uncommon. Despite its scarcity, however, the Prophet’s meaning of *betimes* in this verse presents less difficulty than either *reprove* or *sharpness*. *Betimes* comes from Old English and is derived from “by time” or “by the time.”¹⁷ The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides some illustrative definitions, including “at an early time,” “in good time, in due time, while there is yet time, before it is too late.” In the early nineteenth century, the word was generally understood to mean “seasonably,” “in good season or time,” and “soon,” as noted in Noah Webster’s 1828 dictionary.¹⁸

The translators of the King James Version used *betimes* as “early” in their translation of the Hebrew verb *škm*, which means to “do early,” “get up early.”¹⁹ In addition, they translated the verb *šḥr*, “search,” “be on the lookout for,” three times with the help of *betimes*.²⁰

When we take the evidence together, it appears that the Prophet’s counsel was to correct a person at an appropriate time, early, and before it was too late. Wisdom and experience, coupled with the history of the word itself, show that a timely correction—or a well-timed correction—will always be more successful than an immediate correction.

Sharpness

Of the three words we are examining in Doctrine and Covenants 121:43, *sharpness* may be the most difficult to apply an exact definition to. The *Oxford English Dictionary* observes *sharp* being used in a number of ways, ranging from “acute or penetrating in intellect or perception” to “severe, strict, harsh” or “cutting in rebuke.”²¹ Noah Webster’s 1828 dictionary includes such definitions as “acute of mind; quick to discern or distinguish” but also “severe; harsh; biting.” *Sharpness* is defined as “not obtuseness” but also as “acuteness of intellect; the power of . . . discernment; quickness of understanding” and “quickness of sense or perception.”²² “Discernment,” “understanding,” and “perception” are most interesting, considering that the reproof is to be given only “when moved upon by the Holy Ghost.”

A few passages from the Old and New Testaments add further insights. Almost all of the passages containing *sharp* refer to sharp objects like weapons or tools. However, the Hebrew noun *ḥozqâ*, usually meaning “strength” or “force,”²³ is once translated in conjunction with a preposition as “sharply” in the King James translation (Judges 8:1).²⁴ As in the Old Testament, most New Testament attestations of *sharp* refer to weapons. The Greek adverb *apotómōs* can mean “severely” or “rigorously,”²⁵ and a cognate noun is twice translated as “severity” in Romans 11:22. In 2 Corinthians 13:10, however, Paul writes that his sharpness was “to edification, and not to destruction,” which likely preserves the intent of Joseph Smith in using the same word.²⁶

The Book of Mormon gives us good examples of how Joseph Smith apparently understood *sharpness*. In 2 Nephi 1:26, the Prophet used it in his translation of Lehi’s words to his recalcitrant sons Laman and Lemuel. Lehi said: “Ye have murmured because [Nephi] hath been *plain* unto you. Ye say that he hath used *sharpness*; ye say that he hath been *angry* with you; but behold, his *sharpness* was the sharpness of the power of the word of God, which was in him; and that which ye

call *anger* was the truth” (emphasis added). Laman and Lemuel interpreted Nephi’s sharpness as anger, yet Nephi was likely neither “harsh” nor “cutting” in his dealings with his brothers. Verse 2 in 1 Nephi 16 teaches that “the guilty taketh the truth to be hard, for it *cutteth* them to the very center” (emphasis added). Lehi clarified that Nephi’s words were given in plainness, without anger, and that he possessed the Spirit of the Lord. In Moroni 9:4, Mormon wrote that he labored with the Nephites “continually” and that when he spoke, he spoke “the word of God with *sharpness* [that] they tremble[d] and anger[ed] against” him (emphasis added). But when he used no sharpness, “they harden[ed] their hearts against it.” In Doctrine and Covenants 15:2, the Lord said: “I speak unto you with sharpness and with power,” reflecting the intent of *hozqá* in the Hebrew Bible—strength. That seems to be the way in which Mormon also spoke to the Nephites. The scriptures commonly record the angry reactions from the wicked when they are admonished or “reproved” for their misdeeds, and the Nephites’ reaction to Mormon was no different as he spoke to them with plainness, strength, and truth, as did Nephi.²⁷

Finally, two examples from Church history help clarify the meaning. In 1835 Elders Orson Hyde and William E. McLellin recounted their dealing with a Church member who was teaching false doctrine: “He was shown his error and *reproved sharply*. He saw it and confessed his fault and made an humble acknowledgment.”²⁸ In an 1834 meeting, Joseph Smith expressed his displeasure with some Church members. The minutes record that the Spirit “rebuked” them and that the correction was given “in sharpness,” even “with great sharpness.” The result—perhaps surprising to us—was that the sharp rebuke “occasioned gladness and joy, and [they] were willing to repent and reform in every particular, according to the instruction given.”²⁹ The fact that these rebukes came from the Spirit, were specific in their instruction, and resulted in confession, humility, repentance, and “gladness and joy” once again leads to the conclusion that sharpness, in the vocabulary of Joseph Smith, meant plainness, truth, and clarity.³⁰

Although the definitions of *sharpness* are broad enough to allow for “harshness” and “cutting,” such caustic responses are unlikely to correct a wayward person and are devoid of the spirit in which the counsel is given. Joseph Smith was explicit when he added that we reprove “when moved upon by the Holy Ghost,” which is not present when harshness and anger are used. And the subsequent “*increase of love*” suggests that love must already be present when the reproving takes place. The Holy Ghost inspires a person to higher degrees of

intellectual power and discernment, quickness of understanding, and quickness of perception. These are among the qualities embodied in the word *sharpness*.

In summary, our reproof with sharpness needs to be done at an appropriate, early occasion, and the reproof must come with plainness and discernment—and only when the Holy Ghost so instructs. These definitions not only fit the semantic range of the words in 1839 but also fit the spirit of Joseph Smith’s inspired teaching. ■

Notes

1. Doctrine and Covenants 121–23; see Dean C. Jessee, comp. ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 429–47.

2. The Lord states that “mine eyes see and know” and “I have in reserve” (D&C 121:24). In verses 26–27, the Prophet writes that “God shall give” and “our forefathers.”

3. Joseph Smith’s recorded words are preserved in not-yet-published documentary sources and in published works such as Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, vols. 1 and 2 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–92); Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, and Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980). Early Latter-day Saint periodicals containing Joseph Smith’s words are *The Evening and the Morning Star*, *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, *Elders’ Journal*, and *Times and Seasons*. The Prophet’s words are preserved in edited form in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957); Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938); Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith’s Teachings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000); and Kent P. Jackson, comp. ed., *Joseph Smith’s Commentary on the Bible* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994). Some of these sources are available in commercial gospel database software. Because the discourses of Joseph Smith were preserved by others, often filtered through their own vocabulary, and because his journals and histories sometimes contain material written by others and attributed to him, each occurrence of a word needs to be analyzed on its own merits.

4. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828); this book has been reproduced in facsimile by the Foundation for American Christian Education, San Francisco, 1980.

5. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 20 vols. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

6. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “reprove.” The Latin *reprobare* means “to prove to be unworthy” and is derived from *probare*, “to prove.” See also *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), s.v. “reprobare.”

7. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “reprove.”

8. (Merriam) *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield, MA: G. and C. Merriam, 1966), s.v. “reprove.”

9. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, rev. Baumgartner and Johann J. Stamm (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), s.v. *ykh*. See also Genesis 20:16; 21:25; Job 6:25; Psalms 105:14; 141:5; Jeremiah 29:27; Ezekiel 3:26.

10. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, ed. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 248–49. See also Luke 3:19; John 3:20; 16:8; Ephesians 5:11, 13; 2 Timothy 3:16; 4:2.

11. *Messenger and Advocate*, April 1837, 487. “It certainly was pure charity that inspired Christ and his apostles to reprove the world for their sins, and corruptions; and why should it be considered an uncharitable act in the Latter-Day Saints to do the same[?]” (*Times and Seasons*, December 15, 1841, 629).

12. 2 Nephi 21:3 (= Isaiah 11:3); 2 Nephi 21:4 (= Isaiah 11:4); 2 Nephi 30:9 (= Isaiah 11:4). *Reprove* appears to have a somewhat different meaning in Isaiah 11:3–4, the source for all three Book of Mormon occurrences of *reprove*. There *ykh* is in parallel with a word that means “judge” or “dispense justice.” Isaiah’s intended meaning was probably something like “decide,” as in the New Revised Standard Version, or “give decisions,” as in the New International Version.

13. Doctrine and Covenants 84:87 (“reprove”); 84:117 (“reproving”); 121:43 (“reproving” and “reproved”).

14. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 322.

15. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 355. See also Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:104 (“reprove and rebuke sharply”); 114 (“it would be my duty to reprove whatever I esteemed to be wrong fondly hoping in my heart that all parties, would consider it right, and therefore humble themselves”); Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 337; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 121 (“chasten and reprove”); 324.

16. Genesis 26:31; 2 Chronicles 36:15; Job 8:5; 24:5; Proverbs 13:24.

17. This word is first attested in English in the early fourteenth century; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “betimes.”

18. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “betimes.” The only occurrence in an early Latter-day Saint periodical is in a quote from the King James Version of 1 Maccabees 4:52, in *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 7 (February 15, 1843): 104: “they rose up betimes in the morning.”

19. Koehler-Baumgartner, s.v. *skm*; see Genesis 26:31; 2 Chronicles 36:15.

20. Job 8:5; 24:5; Proverbs 13:24.

21. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “sharp.”

22. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “sharp.”

23. Koehler-Baumgartner, s.v. “*hozqá*”

24. Literally “with strength,” *bēhozqá*.

25. Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 101.

26. See also Titus 1:13, where it is translated as “sharply.”

27. See also Words of Mormon 1:17; Alma 1:7; 19:28; Doctrine and Covenants 16:2; 112:12.

28. *Messenger and Advocate*, May 1835, 116, emphasis added; see also Kirtland Council Minute Book, December 26, 1833; Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:470.

29. Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:176–77n.

30. See also Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:104; Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 334; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 61.