

English Historical Dictionaries

When we do not know what a word means, we look up its definition in a dictionary. That is the most common use to which we put dictionaries. But they serve other purposes too. Sometimes we know one definition of a word, but the other meanings of the word can help us understand its nuances better. The etymology of a word—what word or words it comes from historically—can do the same thing. When we are reading a book that uses noncontemporary language, such as the scriptures, dictionaries are especially helpful. In ancient works like the scriptures, some words that were once common are now unfamiliar to us, or the meanings of some words may have changed over time. For example, when the KJV was made in 1611, the word *conversation* sometimes meant “behavior.”¹ That may change the way we read 1 Timothy 4:12. *Betimes* (see D&C 121:43) may mean something different than we expect.

A variety of dictionaries is available, but for scripture study, the standard desk dictionary is not as helpful as some historical dictionaries. Two are especially helpful: Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* and the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. Webster’s dictionary is available in a reprint edition from many bookstores, though it may have to be special ordered. The *OED* is large and expensive. It is available in a compact edition that most people need a magnifying glass to read (it comes with one). Even the compact edition, however, usually costs several hundred dollars. Most libraries have a copy of the *OED*, so buying one is not necessary.

Webster’s 1828 Dictionary

Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* is a reasonably accurate reflection of American English usage in 1828. It has limitations, however. Noah Webster’s gathering technique was not particularly scientific, and his dictionary generally represents educated usage and may thus overlook a good deal of common American usage, such as the usage that might appear in the Book of Mormon or Doctrine and Covenants. Nevertheless, Webster’s dictionary is a helpful tool for finding out what a word meant to Americans in the early nineteenth century. It is also a good tool for finding out the meaning of words that appear in the Book of Mormon, the Pearl of Great Price, and most of the Doctrine and Covenants.

Webster’s 1828 dictionary can be used just like an ordinary desk dictionary.

Oxford English Dictionary

The *OED* is not a standard desk dictionary. The fact that it comes in numerous volumes is the first clue. The *OED* is a historical dictionary. It gives not only the current meanings, but an etymology of the word and historical examples of each of its uses.

There are a number of reasons to use a historical dictionary. For example, the history of a word often reflects the nuances of meaning associated with it. Sometimes the history of a word also gives insight into new meanings or linguistic connections. German philosopher Martin Heidegger shares such an insight, noting that the English words *think* and *thank* share the same root and using that fact to make a point about what it means to think.² Of course, what to make of such connections is another question. Seeing them is the beginning of study, not the end. Finding such potential connections is one of many reasons to use a historical dictionary.

In scripture study, probably the most important aspect of the *OED* is that, because it is a historical dictionary, it explains what words meant when the scriptures we are studying were written or translated. The examples in each entry show whether a particular meaning was used during the time period from which a text comes. Thus the *OED* is especially useful for the King James Version of the Bible, though we should not overlook its potential to help us better understand words from other scriptures.

When using the *OED* to investigate words from latter-day scripture such as the Doctrine and Covenants, remember that a significant number of the examples are from British, rather than American, usage. Early-nineteenth-century American usage often reflects older British usage, so when looking up words in the Book of Mormon and other latter-day scriptures, we should look at examples from both the early nineteenth century and the mid to late eighteenth century.

There is a potential complication when using the *OED* to investigate words from the King James Version of the Bible. Because the KJV was published in 1611, it seems that we would want to look at seventeenth-century usage in the *OED*. However, despite the claim to the contrary in its dedication, the KJV was not really a completely new translation. The scholars who worked on it relied heavily on previous translations, including the Tyndale Bible (1526, 1530), the Coverdale Bible (circa 1535), the Geneva Bible (1557, 1560), and the so-called Bishop's Bible (1568). They made alterations where they felt it necessary, but for the most part they made the translation by incorporating the best of these previous Bibles, especially the Tyndale Bible, which is responsible for as much as 80 percent of the KJV New Testament and has had considerable influence on the KJV Old Testament.³ Thus when looking up words from the KJV, we must look at usage from both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd. ed., s.v. "conversation."
2. See Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 168–147.
3. See David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. "versions, English (pre-1960)."