

Mastering 'King James English' in Hymns and Prayers

Latter-day Saints have been instructed to model their language used in prayer and in hymns which address God after the language of the Bible version the Church uses in their particular language - for English-speaking members, that means the King James Version. We've been encouraged to become familiar with this language and to use it when addressing Deity. Why should we do thi

As a child I learned that all adults were called Mister or Missus or Miss. At church everyone was Brother or Sister. I learned the Lord had appointed a priesthood holder to serve over the ward, and we addressed him as 'Bishop' to show respect to his holy calling *and* his efforts to fulfill it. Likewise I learned to call a missionary 'Elder' or 'Sister' as a sign of respect and to honor their duty and calling.

As I grew older I learned there were others whose positions garnered the respect a title gives: Mayor, Officer, Chief, Doctor, and Nurse were all terms of respect and often affection. Later I added 'Your Honor', 'Senator', and even 'Mr. President' and even 'Your Majesty'. For twenty years there were those who I addressed by their military rank or as 'Sir' or 'Ma'am', respecting at least their position and responsibility.

Again – why do we do this? Consider the words of one modern Apostle:

“The use of titles signifies respect for office and authority... The words we use in speaking to someone can identify the nature of our relationship to that person. They can also remind speaker and listener of the responsibilities they owe one another in that relationship. The form of address can also serve as a mark of respect or affection.

“So it is with the language of prayer. The Church... teaches its members to use special language in addressing prayers to our Father in Heaven.

“When we go to worship in a temple or a church, we put aside our working clothes and dress ourselves in something better. This change of clothing is a mark of respect. Similarly, when we address our Heavenly Father, we should put aside our working words and clothe our prayers in special language of reverence and respect. In offering prayers in the English language, members of our church do not address our Heavenly Father with the same words we use in speaking to a fellow worker, to an employee or employer, or to a merchant in the marketplace. We use special words that have been sanctified by use in inspired communications, words that have been recommended to us and modeled for us by those we sustain as prophets and inspired teachers...

“Modern English has no special verbs or pronouns that are intimate, familiar, or honorific. When we address prayers to our Heavenly Father in English, our only available alternatives are the common words of speech like you and your or the dignified but uncommon words like thee, thou, and thy that were used in the King James version of the Bible almost five hundred years ago. Latter-day Saints, of course, prefer the latter. In our prayers we use language that is dignified and different, even archaic.”¹

The question has often been asked: does the

1 - ('Language of Prayer', Elder Dallin H. Oaks, April 1993 General Conference; quoted here from the LDS Gospel Resource CD, copyright 2000 Intellectual Reserve INC)

Lord hear and accept prayers spoken in English but not in King James English?

*“Literary excellence is not our desire. We do not advocate flowery and wordy prayers... Our prayers should be simple, direct, and sincere... Heavenly Father... hears and answers all prayers, however phrased. If he is offended in connection with prayers, it is likely to be by their absence, not their phraseology.”*²

----- -- PRONOUNS – the Biggest Part of our Prayer Language Battle

Several general authorities have said that if we only used *Thee* and *Thy* correctly we’d have the majority of our prayer language mastered, so let’s start with these and other pronouns. Pronouns, as we learned in school, are words used in place of nouns. There are the three basic types of pronouns:

First-Person pronouns: used when referring to our self / ourselves

Second-Person pronouns: used when referring to the person or persons to whom we are speaking.

Third-Person pronouns: used when referring to a person or persons other than ourselves and those with whom we are speaking

----- -- “THOU” – The Subject

Thou is used in the place of *you* when Deity is the subject of the sentence or phrase. Consider this passage from the Book of Psalms:

"What is man, that *Thou* art mindful of him? and the son of man, that *Thou* visitest him? For *Thou* hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. *Thou* madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; *Thou* hast put all things under his feet..." (Psalms 8:4-6)

In prayer we might say such things as: "*Thou* art a

2 - *Ibid*

loving father"; "*Thou* hast been kind to Thy children"; "We thank Thee that *Thou* hast restored the Gospel."

----- -- "THEE" - The Object

Thee is used in the place of *you* when Deity is the object of the sentence. For instance - "We thank *Thee*"; "We ask *Thee*"; "We listen to *Thee*"; "We worship *Thee*". In all these examples, *we* is the subject, while *Thee* is the object *we* are thanking, asking, listening to, and worshipping.

----- -- Thy & Thine; My & Mine – The Possessives

Thy and *Thine* are used instead of *your* and *yours* when used as a singular – when speaking to a single person: "*Thy* kingdom come; *Thy* will be done..."; "*Thine* is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever...". *My* and *Mine* are the possessive form when speaking of ones self.

But when do we use *thy* and *my*, and when do we use *thine* and *mine*? In English we have two articles – ‘a’ and ‘an’ - that precede many nouns: a horse; a cow; an envelope; an airplane. We use ‘an’ when the very next word starts with a vowel (a, e, i, o, u) or an 'h' sound (with exceptions). We use ‘a’ when the very next word starts with a consonant. In King James English, we use *mine* and *thine* when the following word starts with a vowel or an 'h' sound (with exceptions), and we use *thy* and *my* when the following word starts with a consonant. Here are some examples from the scriptures: *Thy* Son; *Thine* Only Begotten Son; "one born in my house is *Mine* heir"; "For *Mine* eyes have seen thy salvation". And, from the Hymnal we sing: "*Mine* eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord". An English teacher once explained this usage: our brain and tongue can naturally handle a vowel-consonant-vowel-consonant change in creating and processing sounds, but they don't easily handle two vowel sounds one after the other. By changing 'a' to 'an',

'thy' to 'thine', and 'my' to 'mine', we give the tongue and brain that natural, comfortable vowel-consonant-vowel transition.

-- YE - the Plural of THOU

On the night of Christ's birth a multitude of angels appeared to the shepherds and proclaimed the birth of the Good Shepherd. If one of the shepherds had been brave enough to speak, he would have addressed the single angel who might have acted as mouthpiece by saying: "*Thou art an angel!*", because *thou* is the proper singular form of *you*. If he'd addressed the entire choir of angels, however, he might have said: "*Ye are angels!*", because *ye* is the plural form of *you*. Because Latter-Day Saints only address Heavenly Father in prayer, we won't use *ye* in prayer – but we do use it in our hymns, so we still need to know how to use it properly.

-- How to Use Verbs

If you're using King James pronouns correctly, you've nearly mastered this beautiful form of speech. But, there are still all those verbs to master!

-- 'Art' Replaces 'Are'

Art is the second-person singular ... 'Thou art' in the place of 'You are'.

"I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth." (Revelation 3:15-16)

"And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?" (Genesis 3:9)

In an electronic search of the scriptures I found over 800 uses of *art* and over 6,000 uses of *are*. *Art* is used when Deity is speaking or being spoken to; *are* is used all other times. Following

this example, *art* would be proper when addressing Heavenly Father.

-- -EST and -ETH

The suffix '-eth' is added to verbs attached mainly to third-person singular pronouns (he / she), but it is also used with first-person possessive pronouns (my, mine). The suffix 'est' is added to verbs attached to second person (thou). I cannot think of a single passage of King James English that shows the use of these two suffixes any better than Psalm 23 – notice the use of second- and third-person pronouns with these suffixes:

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He *maketh* me to lie down in green pastures:

He *leadeth* me beside the still waters.

He *restoreth* my soul:

He *leadeth* me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil: For thou art with me;

Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou *preparest* a table before me

in the presence of mine enemies:

Thou *anointest* my head with oil;

My cup *runneth* over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever."

-- Perfect Tenses

Perfect tenses are the verbs given a past, present, or future tense by using words such as could, would, should, will, was, and can before them. And here's the basic rule: add '-est' to the end of them - could becomes couldst; would becomes wouldest, etc. These are all simply second-person singular; they are used whenever

"art" would be used. It does not have to do with Deity speaking or using honorifics... it is anybody using second person singular pronouns.

-- How Can I Master All of This?

“Men and women who wish to show respect will take the time to learn the special language of prayer. Persons spend many hours mastering communication skills in other mediums, such as poetry or prose, vocal or instrumental music, and even the language of access to computers. My brothers and sisters, the manner of addressing our Heavenly Father in prayer is at least as important as these...

“Modern revelation commands parents to "teach their children to pray." (D&C 68:28.) This requires parents to learn and pray with the special language of prayer. We learn our native language simply by listening to those who speak it. This is also true of the language with which we address our Heavenly Father. The language of prayer is easier and sweeter to learn than any other tongue. We should give our children the privilege of learning this language by listening to their parents use it in the various prayers offered daily in our homes.”³

One way to make King James English a part of your language is through your scripture study. Read your Bible *aloud* so your mind and tongue can get both the feel of the usage and the beauty of the language. Listen to and recite hymns which address Deity. Listen to prayers offered in meetings such as General Conference, where those voicing the prayers are versed in this form of language. Listen to those in your local congregations who have mastered King James English as they pray and note how they use the language.

As we understand and use King James English in prayer we will not only be blessed for obeying

3 - *Ibid*

the prophets in this regard but we will also learn to appreciate and savor the spirit it brings into our prayers. As we teach our children at home and at church to use this language, we will bless their lives with a deeper love and appreciation for the power and majesty of prayer.