

A Brief Introduction to ጸ ለገጽጽጽጽ ገጽጽጽጽ

English is a difficult language to learn, and written English is particularly problematic. There are silent letters all over the place, and there are more sounds than there are letters to represent them. For example there is no letter in the standard alphabet (this is called the Latin or Roman Alphabet) for the /ch/ sound in words like *church* and *chair*, so we usually use a combination of letters, a "c" and an "h", to represent this sound. Now this alone would not be so confusing except that this /ch/ sound is not always written "ch". Sometimes it is written with just a "c" as in *cello*, or with a "t" as in *actual*, or with a "tch" as in *witch*. There are a number of other ways that this sound is written as well. To make things worse, the letters "ch" when written in a word don't always make the /ch/ sound. They could sound like *Charlotte*, or *Orchid*, or not make a sound at all like in *yacht*. There are numerous other examples like this in written English, and all these special rules for spelling and pronouncing words (along with their many exceptions) makes learning to read and write in English a difficult task that takes years to master.

"I have asked the Board of Regents to cast out from their system of education, the present orthography and written form of our language, that when my children are taught the graphic sign for A, it may always represent that individual sound only. But as it now is, the child is perplexed that the sign A should have one sound in mate, a second sound in father, a third sound in fall, a fourth sound in man, and a fifth sound in many, and in other combinations, sounding different from these, while in others, A is not sounded at all. I say let it have one sound all the time. And when P is introduced into a word, let it not be silent as in Phthisic or sound like F in Physic, and let two not be placed instead of one in apple." -Brigham Young, April 1852 (*Journal of Discourses* 1:70)

In the early days of the church there were converts streaming into Utah from many foreign countries. For many of these converts English was an unfamiliar language. These new members of the church needed to learn to communicate in English if they were going to be successful in their new home, and of course it would be better if they could learn it quickly. Mormonism is a very practical sort of religion. It is all about improvement, and not only spiritual improvement, but improvement of every temporal variety as well.

So Brigham Young boldly set out to improve the English language by reforming its orthography. After all, hadn't Joseph said, "If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things"? The problem was placed before the Board of Regents of the newly formed Deseret University (now the University of Utah). The Board held a series of meetings to seek a solution to the problem. In attendance were Parley and Orson Pratt, Heber C. Kimball, Wilford Woodruff, Erastus Snow, Brigham Young, Willard Richards and others. George D. Watt acted as reporter for these meetings, and was later responsible for designing much of the new alphabet. After much deliberation they completely abandoned the old Roman Alphabet characters and settled upon an entirely new alphabet. Their new alphabet was phonetic, so that words were spelt as they were pronounced.

"The advantages of this alphabet will soon be realized, especially by foreigners. Brethren who come here knowing nothing of the English language will find its acquisition greatly facilitated by means of this alphabet, by which all the sounds of the language can be represented and expressed with the greatest ease. As this is the grand difficulty foreigners experience in learning the English language, they will find a knowledge of this alphabet will greatly facilitate their efforts in acquiring at least a partial English education. It will also be very advantageous to our children. It will be the means of introducing uniformity in our orthography, and the years that are now required to learn to read and spell can be devoted to other studies."
-Brigham Young, October 1868 (*Journal of Discourses* 12:298)

They called it the Deseret Alphabet, and it was used, although sporadically, by the Mormon settlers from the mid- to late-1800s. Development and implementation of this new writing system was slow for various reasons; nevertheless, there were several books printed in the new alphabet. These included the Book of Mormon and some textbooks designed to teach children how to read in the new alphabet. Also there were several other books prepared in manuscript form, including the Bible, The Pearl of Great Price, and the Doctrine & Covenants, but which were never put into print. Additionally, there were scores of newspaper articles (printed in the Deseret News), church records, personal journals, election ballots, shop signs, and grave stones written in the Deseret Alphabet. They even put it on their money.

It is a common misconception that those early saints had developed a new language, and it is occasionally, and erroneously, referred to as the Deseret Language. Such is not the case. The Deseret Alphabet was intended, and used, to write English with standard English pronunciation, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation. It was read from left to right and top to bottom. It was only the spelling of

words that was modified. They were simply spelt phonetically, and with a different set of letters, but it was still the English Language.

Alas, the alphabet never gained the wide popularity it deserved, and eventually it fell into disuse. There were several factors contributing to its failure, including the oppressive cost of casting and setting new type, the Utah war, and some have cited problems with the design of the alphabet. However, the greatest factor by far was a general lack of interest among the saints of the day. All official church support for the project ended with the death of Brigham Young in 1877. Despite this, interest in the Alphabet has enjoyed a bit of a resurgence as of late, and those who have rediscovered this nearly forgotten chapter in Mormon History are eager to see its use become more widely spread. The Deseret Alphabet is a beautiful part of our heritage, and remains a shining example of Mormon innovation and ingenuity.

"The Deseret Alphabet represents a noble experiment, with a thoroughly worth-while objective...Latter Day Saints have reason to be proud of this episode in the history of their people. May the present Generation be as ready to exchange old and imperfect methods for new and better ones." -John A. Widsoe, *Improvement Era*, January 1944

I hope you will find the reading of these books (and articles) fascinating, and that you will appreciate the difficulty and lengths gone to by those who produced these literary works. As you read them you may notice that some words are not spelt (i.e., pronounced) the way you think they ought to be. This will most likely be due to differences between the dialects of English spoken by you and the author. One of the reasons these works are so fascinating is because they transmit not only the words, but also the spoken accent of the author. As you read you can almost hear the voice of Orson Pratt or Brigham Young. Also keep in mind that there are typos, some of which have not been included in the errata at the end of the books.

It is another common notion that the development of the Deseret Alphabet was for the purpose of secrecy. This is either a plainly errant notion, or the promoters of the alphabet were woefully inept secret keepers. Everything that was printed by the church in this new alphabet was made public and included a key that gave the names and sounds of each new letter. You will see such a table at the beginning of the books and in the newspaper articles.

The shapes and alphabetical ordering of the Deseret letters will of course be unfamiliar to you. To make reading in this unfamiliar alphabet a little smoother for the beginner I have made a table in which the letters are grouped according to their shapes rather than their standard canonical ordering. It is hoped that this will make it easier to look up the sounds of the unfamiliar letters as you read. Included in this table are the written names of the letters. You will notice I have taken the liberty of completely writing-out and clarifying some of the names of the letters in the shape-ordered table.

In addition to this I have included another table in which the letters are arranged by sound. In this table the sounds are arranged according to the Roman Alphabet which you are already familiar with (I first list the vowel and diphthong sounds and then the consonant sounds). The purpose of this sound-ordered table is to make writing with the Deseret Alphabet easier. You simply look up the sounds that you need as you are spelling out words.

One spelling convention you should be aware of is this: When a Deseret letter is written by itself you read it as the name of the letter rather than as the sound the letter makes. This spelling convention is much like those bumper stickers you have seen that say things like: R U L D S ? (Are You LDS?), or U R A Q T ! (You Are A Cutie!), or even the company name Toys 'R' Us. In these examples, when a letter is written by itself we simply say the name of the letter rather than the sound of the letter. Here is a Deseret Alphabet example, in the title of this article are these words: ᚯ ᑭᑭᑭᑭᑭ ᑭᑭᑭᑭᑭ (The Deseret Alphabet). The word 'The' is simply spelt 'ᚯ' because the name of this letter is 'thee'. Additionally, the words 'tea' and 'tee' would both be spelt in Deseret with the single letter 'ᑭ' (as opposed to being spelt 'ᑭᑭ') because the name of this letter is 'tee'. As you will discover when you are reading, there are a few more Deseret letters that can also be used to spell entire words.

I hope you will enjoy!

– Joshua Erickson