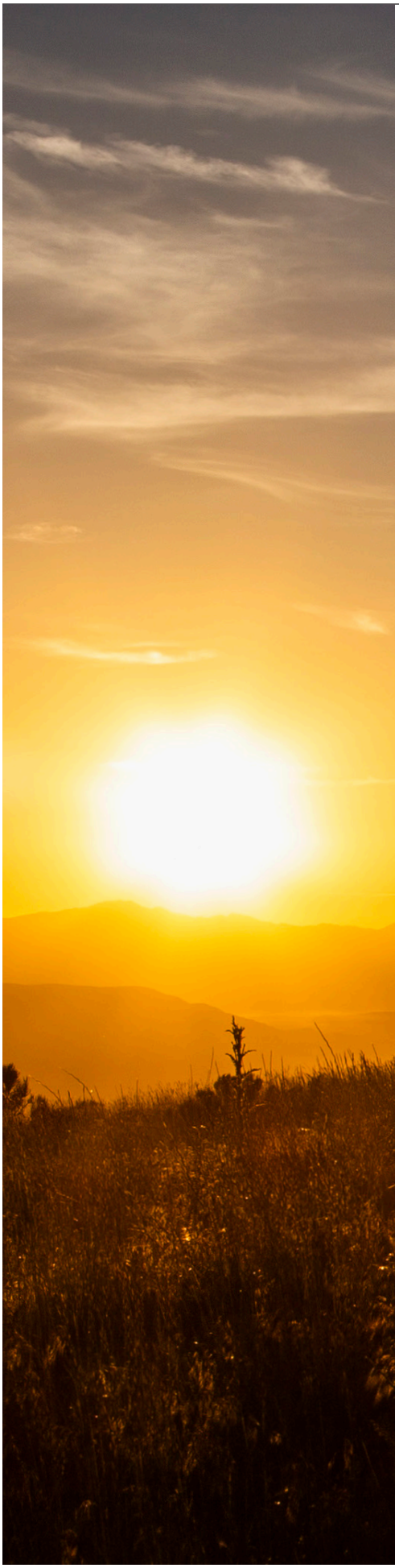


Photo by Mark A. Philbrick / BYU Photo

Enlighten

[in-ˈlī-tᵊn]

Verb. **To provide with information and understanding, to clarify. To illuminate, to instruct, to cheer, or to supply with light.**

by Matthew Wickman (Christian Spirituality and Literary Theory)

In our information-saturated world, it can be difficult to conceive of the BCG era: before ChatGPT. Where might one learn—quickly—about commerce, weather patterns, the solar system, the virtues and shortcomings of the latest geometrical theories, and virtually anything else? Well, during the 18th century in Britain and France, figures like Ephraim Chambers and Denis Diderot served as human (sometimes one-person) search engines, compiling entire encyclopedias. Their aim, Diderot professed, was "to assemble the knowledge scattered over the face of the earth . . . so that our descendants, by becoming better informed, may in consequence be happier and more virtuous."[1] This 18th-century era of knowledge gathering and dissemination became known as the Age of Enlightenment.

Samuel Johnson, one Enlightenment-era human search engine who compiled the first English dictionary, defined *enlighten* in both literal and figurative senses. To enlighten is "to illuminate," "to instruct," "to cheer," and "to supply with light."[2] These vibrant and hopeful associations attached themselves to science in both the traditional and emergent senses—that is, to knowledge generally considered and to a special kind of knowing consistent with empirical methods of inquiry. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes equated all knowledge with light-bestowing vision, including what he called "an audible being seen" (or knowing granted through hearing), "an intelligible being seen" (or knowing gained through thinking), and so on.[3] Isaac Newton, in his pioneering study *Opticks*, explored the nature of light and then concluded that light's marvelous properties lead us to discern "that there is a Being" who is "living" and "intelligent" and who "sees [all] things themselves intimately . . . and comprehends them wholly."[4] For Newton and his contemporaries, knowledge about the earth and the cosmos was tantamount to a deeper understanding of God. Light, instructive and cheerful per Johnson's definition, symbolized that belief.

The history of knowledge in the West, particularly in the centuries following the Enlightenment, has not always born a similar witness. From its inception, some proponents of the Enlightenment harnessed modern knowledge to bleak conclusions that we dwell alone in a godless universe. Others, however, concluded that an ever-more-capacious understanding enabled us to expand our vision of God and His creation. This was Joseph Smith's conviction; his vision, evocative of Newton's, is enlightening in all the senses Johnson lists. It's no coincidence that Doctrine and Covenants 88, the great Latter-day Saint manifesto on education, begins with an elaborate statement on the Light of Christ, a light that infuses the earth as well as the heavens and gives "life to all things" (verse 13). To "seek . . . out of the best books words of wisdom" and to "establish a house . . . even a house of God" (verses 118–19)—to circumscribe secular and sacred knowledge into one great whole—is to welcome and live into that light. And a humanities education exemplifies, perhaps better than any other, what it means to seek "words of wisdom" from these "best books." H

1. Frank T. Brechka, "Catherine the Great: The Books She Read," *The Journal of Library History* 4, no. 1 (January 1969): 42.
2. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd ed. (London, 1766).
3. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Hackett, 1994), 7.
4. Isaac Newton, *Opticks*, or, *A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections, and Colours of Light* (Dover, 1952), 370.