



1-1-2017

Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds.,  
*Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Parts 1 and 2:  
Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*

Reviewed by Paul Gutjahr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#)

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Gutjahr, Reviewed by Paul (2017) "Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Parts 1 and 2: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*," *Mormon Studies Review*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol4/iss1/19>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mormon Studies Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds. *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 1: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 1–Alma 35*. Facsimile edition. Part 1 of vol. 3 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow. Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015.

Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds. *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 2: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Alma 36–Moroni 10*. Facsimile edition. Part 2 of vol. 3 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow. Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015.

*Reviewed by Paul Gutjahr*

*Mormon Studies Review*, vol. 4, 2017, pp. 163–67

© 2016 Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/msr.2017.0118> Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/mimsr.21568030>

IN 2008 THE CHURCH HISTORIAN'S PRESS OF SALT LAKE CITY released the first volume of a projected thirty-volume project entitled *The Joseph Smith Papers* (JSP). The Church Historian's Press was established in that year to publish works related to the origins and development of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *The Joseph Smith Papers* were the press's inaugural project, and its self-identified goal "is to present verbatim transcripts of Joseph Smith's papers in their entirety, making available the most essential sources of Smith's life and work and preserving the content of aging manuscripts from damage or loss" (p. xxix). The general editors of this project's first series, the Journals series, are the eminent Latter-day Saint historians Dean Jessee, Ronald Esplin, and Richard Bushman. If a single phrase might be used to describe this series, it would be "state of the art." Each published volume stands as a model both in terms of scholarly workmanship and bibliographic nuance. The series' volumes stand as a marker of what might be accomplished

in publishing stunning reproductions of original archival documents accompanied by high-quality scholarly commentary.

The latest two volumes to arrive are edited by Royal Skousen and Robin Jensen and present facsimile editions of the printer's manuscript for the entire 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. Between 1827 and 1830, Joseph Smith dictated what would eventually become the Book of Mormon text to a series of scribes, principal among them a former schoolteacher named Oliver Cowdery. (Cowdery transcribed a larger portion of the Book of Mormon manuscript than the combined output of all of Smith's other scribes.) Cowdery also made a second copy of the entire manuscript, which has come to be known as the printer's manuscript. This copy was used by E. B. Grandin's Palmyra, New York, print shop between August 1829 and March 1830 to set the type for the first edition of the book. While less than 30 percent of the original manuscript survives, the printer's manuscript is extant except for only three lines of text (p. xii). It is this printer's manuscript that serves as the focal point for the careful and thorough bibliographic and historical contextualization work of Skousen and Jensen in volume 3, parts 1 and 2, of *The Joseph Smith Papers*.

Royal Skousen, a linguistics and English language professor at Brigham Young University, is widely recognized as perhaps the world's leading bibliographic expert on early editions of the Book of Mormon. Beginning in the 1990s, Skousen began his decades-long Critical Text Project to study the early Book of Mormon manuscripts. The resulting works by Skousen have proved to be foundational in textual studies of the Book of Mormon. They include *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001); *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts*, 2 vols. (FARMS, 2001); *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (FARMS, 2004–2009); *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Grammatical Variation*, parts 1 and 2 of 6 projected parts (FARMS, 2016); and *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (Yale University Press, 2009).

Much of Skousen's earlier work can be found in the two volumes being reviewed here, but the JSP's presentation and commentary on the printer's manuscript differs from Skousen's earlier work in how it seeks to represent "the manuscript more liberally" by giving preference to rendering "the scribe's final intent," rather than privileging notations on every errant dot and ambiguous letter stroke found in the earliest manuscripts (p. xxx). Skousen and Jensen also decided to trim down much of the editorial and scholarly apparatus that came to define much of Skousen's earlier work on early Book of Mormon manuscripts. Even with this sparser scholarly presentation style, however, it is critical to note that the transcription of the printer's manuscript contained in these two volumes is markedly conservative "by historical documentary editing standards" and employs "an even more rigorous approach than that guiding most [*Joseph Smith*] *Papers* volumes" (p. xxx). Skousen and Jensen seek to render "every word letter-by-letter, as accurately as possible, preserving the exact text of the manuscript" (p. xxx).

What perhaps most readily strikes any reader of these two volumes of *The Joseph Smith Papers* is their magisterial presentation and rich composition. These large 12" x 9.25" folio-size volumes photographically reproduce each page of the printer's manuscript in full color, and each manuscript page is accompanied by a facing page with the carefully transcribed text along with textual notes, including color-coded marginal annotations identifying which portions were recorded by which scribes. In addition, the reader is given information concerning significant variants between the printer's manuscript and the first three editions of the Book of Mormon (1830, 1837, and 1840).

Part 1 begins with an extensive introduction that includes a time line, map, and photographs. The introduction offers a succinct historical narrative of Joseph Smith's early angelic visitations, his recovery of the golden plates from which he would translate the Book of Mormon, and then his translation of these plates and the publication process of Mormonism's namesake sacred text. The quality of the scholarly endeavor is seen throughout this introduction as its careful presentation with copious footnotes offers readers an admirably comprehensive and clear

account of Smith and the emergence of the book that would define (and for many, name) the religious tradition he founded.

In facsimile endeavors such as these volumes, there are three central components to creating successful scholarly textual editions. The first, and perhaps most central, component involves obtaining the highest possible expertise on the part of the editors who understand the complicated nuances of bibliographic, textual recovery work. Skousen's long history in such textual work puts him in an unrivaled position to carry forward the work of these two volumes, and Jensen, although a much younger scholar, has also begun work on a scholarly career of textual recovery and analysis. Just as important is an awareness by the editors of the limitations of facsimile photographs. It can never be forgotten that such photographs can approximate the presentation of the actual archival material artifact, but they cannot replace it. Often such photographs are incapable of capturing small details or certain physical features of the manuscript page they seek to reproduce. Worn edges, curled pages, and other variant features can obscure lines of the text. In the end, these photographs can approximate the pages for the reader, but they can never truly replace the experience of looking at the original manuscript page.

The second component involves the basic financial resources that are used to mount and execute facsimile editions such as this one. In this regard, it is clear that the Church Historian's Press has spared absolutely no expense when financing every aspect of this project. The volumes themselves are indicative of the financial investment that underwrites this entire project. In an age when hardcover books are now simply cardboard covered with a thicker grade of paper, volumes found in *The Joseph Smith Papers* project are still covered in actual cloth and printed on heavy, high-gloss paper with color images throughout. These are expensive volumes, yet they have been priced in such a way that an initial press run of 12,500 for the project's first volume in 2008 quickly sold out, and now over 50,000 copies of that initial volume have been sold. Other volumes have enjoyed similar popular success.

The final component links the first two and concerns the project's ability to gather an accomplished and highly respected national advisory

board. A well-financed editorial project such as this one can attract the best scholars to shepherd its work, and the national advisory board of *The Joseph Smith Papers* reads like a veritable *Who's Who* in American religious and sacred textual scholarship in today's academy. Leading lights among Mormon scholars such as Richard Lyman Bushman, Terryl Givens, and Dean Jessee join equally distinguished non-Mormon religious studies scholars such as Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Stephen Stein, and Harry Stout to provide scholarly expertise and perspective to every volume in the project.

Skousen and Jensen's editorial work on these two facsimile volumes of the printer's manuscript offer both scholars and lay readers alike wonderfully researched and beautifully executed volumes that make accessible each page of the handwritten manuscript that served as the source text for the earliest printed volumes of the Book of Mormon. While expensive at nearly \$90 a volume, if one pauses to contemplate the books' level of expertise and high-quality production values, their price seems reasonable indeed. These two facsimile volumes stand as absolute models of what it means to be able to present with great scholarly precision manuscript pages in codex form. These types of scholarly volumes make such manuscript pages (with vitally informative marginal commentary) accessible to a wider readership, a readership that reaches far beyond the specialist scholars who most often have sole access to such delicate and treasured archival material. In this sense, facsimile editions such as these volumes are a move toward democratizing knowledge, and there are few textual projects that make this move as well as *The Joseph Smith Papers*.

**Paul Gutjahr** is Ruth Halls Professor of English, American Studies, and Religious Studies at Indiana University. He has been the author and editor of several books, including *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford University Press, 1999) and *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2012).