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Insights

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Latest Findings in the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

These are the best of times for Book of Mormon studies. Since 2001, FARMS (now part of the Maxwell Institute) has been publishing the long-anticipated findings of Professor Royal Skousen's Book of Mormon Critical Text Project. Each massive volume in this landmark study, appearing on a yearly basis, averages nearly 670 oversize pages of research and analysis that reward careful examination with expanded views of the founding text of Mormonism.

In seeking to recover the original English-language text (i.e., precisely as the Prophet Joseph Smith received it), this ambitious project is identifying many variant readings and yielding paradigm-changing insights into the translation process and the systematic nature of the text. These findings will keep serious students of the Book of Mormon profitably engaged in assessing the ramifications for many

years to come. As an essential scholarly tool, the critical text promises to boost the professional rigor and overall quality of Book of Mormon scholarship to a new level.

The most recent publication by Skousen, an internationally known professor of linguistics and English language at Brigham Young University, is part 3 of volume 4 of *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, covering Mosiah 17 through Alma 20. Like its predecessors, this installment sheds light on numerous variant readings that have entered the text through scribal, typesetting, and editing errors and inconsistencies. Before Skousen began publishing his findings, readers of the Book of Mormon naturally assumed that unfamiliar or awkward phraseology in the text was due to a strictly literal translation from the ancient source language or to Joseph Smith's language habits and idiosyncrasies. Part 3 of Skousen's *Analysis of Textual Variants* continues to illuminate such questions. Although

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Lehi's Trek DVD Reissued to Target Broader Audience

Journey of Faith, a FARMS documentary about Lehi's travels through ancient Arabia, has been well received and has generated considerable interest since its release last summer (see report in *Insights* 25/3). Now steps are under way to produce a reissue of the DVD, this time with translations of the commentary into Spanish and Portuguese with English closed-captioning.

The translation and recording is under the direction of seasoned foreign language producer Omar Canals, who recently prepared the language versions for the Church's film *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration*. A team of experienced

translators prepared the foreign language scripts and checked them multiple times for accuracy. The voices of the narrators and interviewed scholars are being recorded in Colombia and São Paulo.

"The enthusiastic reaction to *Journey of Faith* has been truly gratifying," says Peter Johnson, director of the film. "It has been a way to take the research of scholars to an even broader audience, and that audience has been moved and inspired by their insights." Filmed in the lands that Lehi and his family are believed to have journeyed across, the documentary is a visual experience that brings to life Nephi's narrative in the Book of Mormon.

This documentary will also be published in book form in late August (stay tuned for a report in the next *Insights* newsletter). 

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efficient shape.⁵ He could not have known either of these facts in 1829 from the materials in his environment or from people who may have had greater familiarity with libraries or materials storage. Nor could he have been informed by the finds of other ancient records, as none were then known to be bound by rings. Perhaps it is not coincidental that the only other ancient metal record bound by rings so far known also has D-shaped rings and dates to about 600 BC.⁶

As with the simple, unadorned testimonies of those who witnessed the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, these new and quite unlikely incidental details give new meaning to the phrase “the ring of truth.” 📖 —Warren P. Aston, independent Book of Mormon researcher

Notes

1. John Whitmer interview by P. Wilhelm Poulson, reported in the *Deseret News* of 6 August 1878.
2. David Whitmer interview by Edward Stevenson, 22–23 December 1877, Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
3. Reported in the *Huron Reflector* (Norwalk, OH), 31 October 1831. See the discussion in Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Attempts to Redefine the Experiences of the

Eight Witnesses,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 30.

4. E-mail correspondence with M. Frankena, curator, Early Office Museum, London, February 2006. Any readers who are aware of D-ring technology in securing metal plates together in the early 1800s or earlier are encouraged to contact the Maxwell Institute.
5. The reported substantial size of the rings is also consistent with what common sense would require to secure a volume reported to weigh some 40 to 60 pounds. See Kirk B. Henrichsen, “How Witnesses Described the ‘Gold Plates,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/1 (2001): 16–21, which collects the accounts of those who saw the plates.
6. Six small gold plates unearthed over 60 years ago in Bulgaria feature D-shaped rings and have been dated to about 600 BC. See the report “Etruscan Gold Book from 600 B.C. Discovered” and the photograph in *Insights* 23/5 (2003): 1, 6. A gold book from Tehran, Iran, of seemingly ancient date but of uncertain authenticity comprises eight gold sheets bound by four small rings of indeterminate shape (efforts to date to verify the shape of the rings have been fruitless). See the report and photograph in “Another Gold Book Found,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/2 (2005): 65. Perhaps the closest archaeological match to the Book of Mormon plates is the Darius II plates, dating to fourth-century-BC Persia and housed in a stone box when discovered in 1933. While the size and composition of the metal leaves, as well as the stone box, closely match that of the Book of Mormon record, the inscribed plates of Darius were not bound by rings.

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the current Book of Mormon does preserve telltale aspects of ancient language (e.g., Hebraisms, chiasmus), the old assumptions of source-language carryover do not hold in every instance. The picture is more complicated.

For one thing, early production practices spawned more transcription errors than previously recognized. A case in point is Mosiah 17:13, where the description of Abinadi’s execution should, in order to correct a scribal mistake, read *scorched* instead of *scourged*: “they took him and bound him and **scorched** his skin with fagots.”¹ Further, the evidence increasingly supports the theory that the original vocabulary of the Book of Mormon dates from the 1500s and 1600s, not the

1800s of Joseph Smith’s time. That is, the vocabulary agrees with the language of Early Modern English yet is not identical to the vocabulary of the King James Bible. In the English of the 1500s the verb *scorch* (not *scourge*) was used to describe people being burned at the stake. So an odd phrasing long thought to describe a strange execution practice in ancient times turns out to be a simple scribal error that, once corrected, smooths out a “wrinkle” in the text.

Such findings support Skousen’s view that the translation process was tightly controlled—that is, the text was revealed to Joseph Smith word for word, and even letter by letter (he could see, for instance, the English spelling of the names), rather than interpreted solely through his own faculties and expressed exclusively in his own language. If accurate, this understanding intensifies the miraculous dimension implicit in Isaiah’s description of the coming forth of the Book of

1. Skousen follows the spelling *fagots* rather than *faggots* per modern practice, as set forth, for example, in *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed.

Mormon as a “marvelous work and a wonder” (Isaiah 29:14 // 2 Nephi 27:26).

Part 3 analyzes 898 cases of variation (or potential variation) in the history of the text, of which 360 warrant readings that differ from the standard text. Of the latter, 82 have never appeared in any standard printed edition of the Book of Mormon. The original manuscript is extant for only a few pages of this part of the text, so most of the newly proposed changes are found in the printer’s manuscript (61 of them, including 3 changes also found in the original manuscript). This part of the text entails a fairly large number of conjectural emendations (21 of them), probably because the original manuscript is generally missing here. However, only 24 of the 360 proposed changes make a difference in meaning that would show up when translating the English text of the Book of Mormon into another language. In addition, 17 changes make the text fully consistent in phraseology or usage, while 5 changes restore a unique phrase or word choice to the text.

Some of the interesting points discussed fully in part 3 of *Analysis of Textual Variants* include the following.

- The word *ceremony* in Mosiah 19:24 should probably read *sermon* (“after they had ended the sermon”), but not with today’s meaning for this word. Instead, it takes the original meaning of ‘talk, discourse’ that was prevalent in Early Modern English up to the 1600s.
- In Mosiah 21:28 the earliest text of the Book of Mormon refers to King Benjamin, not King Mosiah, as the one who had the gift of interpreting ancient languages. Textual evidence argues that the original text did in fact read that way.
- The name of King Zedekiah’s son (first mentioned in Mosiah 25:2) was *Muloch*, not *Mulek*. The name *Muloch* has very interesting implications regarding pagan worship in the land of Jerusalem at the time *Muloch* was born.
- In Alma 2:11 the name *Amlicites* is introduced to refer to the followers of the rebel Amlici. Later in the book of Alma (from Alma 21 on) this name for Amlici’s followers was mistakenly altered to *Amalekites*.
- In Alma 5:48 and Alma 13:9, the earliest extant reading refers to “the Son of the Only

Begotten of the Father.” Joseph Smith later removed the extra *of* here so that the text now reads “the Son, the Only Begotten of the Father.” Although this change has been criticized by opponents of the Book of Mormon, internal evidence argues that Joseph’s emendation is correct.

- In Alma 11:2 evidence suggests that the Nephite punishment was to “stripe” debtors, not to “strip” them. The verb *stripe*, meaning ‘to whip,’ is an archaic one that dates from Late Middle English up into the late 1800s.

- Alma 11:4–19 describes the Nephite monetary system. The earliest textual evidence argues that two of the names for units in this system should be altered: *ezrum* (instead of *ezrom*) and *shilum* (instead of *shiblum*). In addition, the text never refers to the various units of money as coins, as the 1981 chapter heading does.

- In Alma 17:31 the current text reads “and thus we will **preserve** the flocks unto the king,” while the earliest text reads “and thus we will **reserve** the flocks unto the king.” The verb *reserve* here may actually be an early mistake for the word *restore* (“and thus we will **restore** the flocks unto the king”).

Such important findings are the result of nearly two decades of preparatory work that is now making possible a thorough and systematic analysis of the Book of Mormon text. Professor Skousen has shown himself to be a master of organizing and processing large amounts of data in order to recover, where humanly possible, the original English text of the Book of Mormon. He goes wherever the evidence leads him, and to date the evidence makes a convincing case that the original text is more consistent in usage and phraseology than initially thought.

Those closest to Skousen’s work find his preparation, method, and excruciatingly thorough analyses to be of the highest scholarly order. His critical text is poised to make its mark as a seminal contribution to Mormon studies, one whose influence will be felt far into the future since no text-based study of the Book of Mormon will be complete without reference to it.

To order a copy of this essential research tool, go to the FARMS Web site and, at the bottom of the notice for this book, click on the link to the BYU Bookstore. 