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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 26 | 2006

Number 3

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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). 

Wordplay on the Name ‘Enos’

In his analysis of Mosiah 1:2–6 and 1 Nephi 1:1–4, John A. Tvedtnes notes that in many instances “Nephite writers relied on earlier records as they recorded their history.”¹ He makes a convincing argument that the description of King Benjamin teaching his sons “in all the language of his fathers” (Mosiah 1:2) is modeled on Nephi’s account.

An analysis of the writings of those who kept the small plates of Nephi indicates that Nephite writers consciously imitated the literary conventions of their predecessors.² Perhaps the earliest and best example of this practice is Enos’s autobiographical introduction, which closely follows Nephi’s introduction at the beginning of the small plates. It appears that this imitation is so scrupulous that Enos even adapts Nephi’s wordplay in explaining his naming and upbringing.³

The name *Enos* derives from a poetic Hebrew word for “man, mankind.”⁴ This raises the possibility of subtle wordplay in the opening phrase of Enos’s introduction: “Behold, it came to pass that I, *Enos*, knowing my father that he was a just *man*.” When we compare the introductory phrases of Enos and Nephi, the wordplay becomes more evident. The language and structure of the phrases are too similar to be happenstance, and require little elucidation:

I, Nephi,
having been born of *goodly* parents
therefore I was *taught* somewhat
in all the *learning of my father*

I, Enos,
knowing my *father* that he was a just *man*
for he *taught* me
in *his language*

The name *Nephi* apparently derived from a Middle Egyptian word, *nfr*, meaning “good, fine, goodly.”⁵ Where Nephi interplayed his name with an adjective that Joseph Smith translated as

“goodly,” Enos interplayed his own name with a repetition of “man.” Thus Enos adopted and then adapted Nephi’s rhetorical device, cleverly switching the wordplay from the adjective to noun. The parallelism of *goodly-just*, *parents-father*,⁶ *taught-taught*, and *language-learning*⁷ reveals the intricacy of Enos’s imitation.

This careful use of Nephi’s words as a literary model suggests the reverence that Enos and Mormon had for their common forefather and his words. Enos’s introduction, with its clever adaptation of Nephi’s wordplay, is a striking example of the subtleties of the Book of Mormon text and is additional evidence of its antiquity. 📖

By Matthew L. Bowen

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Notes

1. John A. Tvedtnes, “A Note on Benjamin and Lehi,” *Insights* 22/11 (2002): 3.
2. An excellent example of this imitation on the small plates is the convention of closing one’s writings with “I make an end.” This was done first by Nephi, “And now I, Nephi, make an end” (see, for example, 1 Nephi 22:29), and was later adopted by Chemish, Abinadom, and Amaleki (compare Omni 1:9, 11, 30).
3. See Matthew L. Bowen, “Internal Textual Evidence for the Egyptian Origin of Nephi’s Name,” *Insights* 22/11 (2002): 2.
4. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 60.
5. See Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1999), s.v. “nfr.”
6. As John Tvedtnes notes, Hebrew uses one word for “father/parents” (*Ab/Aboth*). See “A Note on Benjamin and Lehi,” 3. See also Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 3.
7. Compare 1 Nephi 1:2: “Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians.”

The Rings That Bound the Gold Plates Together

Eyewitnesses to the Book of Mormon plates described in consistent terms the rings that bound the gold plates into a single volume. The rings were three in number and apparently made of the same material as the plates themselves. While our attention naturally focuses on the plates and the translation of the text engraved upon them, the rings may offer another subtle but telling confirmation of the record's ancient origin.

Most of the people on record as having seen the gold plates referred to the rings without commenting on their shape. One exception is an 1878 interview with John Whitmer, one of the Eight Witnesses of the Book of Mormon. In confirming the physical reality of seeing and handling the gold plates, he stated that the plates were joined together “in three rings, each one in the shape of a D with the straight line towards the centre.”¹

This unusual detail was confirmed by his brother David Whitmer, who in 1877 at age 72 related that a heavenly messenger had granted his mother, Mary Musselman Whitmer, a view of the plates. In relating the incident, David mentioned to the reporter that his mother had observed how the plates were bound. His statement that “they were fastened with rings thus” was followed by a drawing of a D-shaped ring.² David Whitmer, of course, had also seen the plates himself in 1829 as one of the Three Witnesses and would surely have corrected or otherwise commented on his mother's description had it been different from his own experience. Thus casually and perhaps inadvertently, Mary and David Whitmer become second and third sources for clarifying the shape of the rings.

Finally, there is a confirmatory account from 1831 in which William E. McLellin repeats what

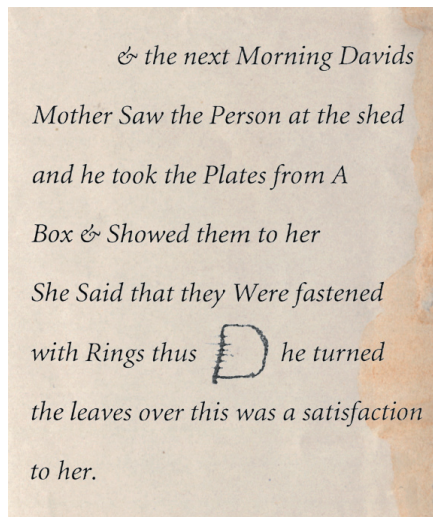
Hyrum Smith had told him: “The plates were . . . connected with rings in the shape of the letter D, which facilitated the opening and shutting of the book.”³

For many people the natural assumption, in 1830 as much as today, would easily be that the rings were a circular O shape, as suggested by the word *ring* itself. Indeed, many depictions of the gold plates over the years have shown them bound by circular rings. It is only from eyewitness testimony from a few of the small number of people privileged to see the plates that we know the rings were D-shaped. Why is that shape significant?

Simply this: the D shape offers stability by allowing the leaves to stack vertically against the straight side of the rings. Although it occupies much the same space, a D-shaped ring also offers a full 50 percent more storage capacity than a circular ring (and 20 to 25 percent more storage capacity than a slanted semicircular shape). To the Book of Mormon prophets who labored to inscribe their records on metal plates, space was clearly an important consideration. D-shaped rings offered them a means to keep the maximum number of plates together.

The same principle governs the loose-leaf binders used today. Their history is instructive. The first loose-leaf binder patent was not filed until 1854, with the first two-ring binders advertised for sale in 1899. Two improvements to the basic design followed. Within a few decades the use of three rings rather than two proved to be a more stable design and became standard. These early designs, however, used circular or oval-shaped rings. Only in the last few decades has the improved capacity of D-shaped rings been recognized and made available for loose-leaf binders.⁴

Joseph Smith displayed plates that were securely bound by *three rings* (not two or four) constructed in what we now know is the *most*



In an 1877 interview, David Whitmer related his mother's description of the rings that bound the gold plates.

Rings cont. from page 3

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.

Latest Findings cont. from page 1

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. 

Maxwell Institute Open House

The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship invites you to an open house from 7:00 to 9:00 PM in room 3215 of BYU's Wilkinson Center on Thursday, 24 August 2006, during Campus Education Week. This will be an occasion for you to meet authors, editors, directors, and friends and to celebrate the formation of this new BYU institute. We know you will enjoy greeting members of the Maxwell Institute family, learning about recent and upcoming projects, talking about the filming of *Journey of Faith*, and discussing many other engaging topics.

PUBLICATIONS

Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land

(Maxwell Institute, 2006), edited by S. Kent Brown and Peter Johnson, is a book version of the popular FARMS DVD documentary *Journey of Faith*. The book contains all of the commentary and artwork from the DVD plus commentary that was not included therein, movie stills from the DVD, and an appendix on the FARMS documentary *Golden Road: The Ancient Incense Trail*. As a bonus, the book includes a free DVD entitled *The Making of Journey of Faith*, parts of which aired on KSL TV in April 2006. Available in stores in September.

The Lost 500 Years: What Happened Between the Old and New Testaments

(Deseret Book, 2006), edited by S. Kent Brown and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, is a revised, illustrated version of the earlier *Between the Testaments* (2002) by the same authors. Brown and Holzapfel have captured the ebb and flow of political, social, and religious life during this remarkable period of crippling crises, brilliant inventiveness, cautious adaptation, and painful transitions. Available now.

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The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. The Maxwell Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at the Maxwell Institute include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

The Maxwell Institute makes reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer-reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications.

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