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INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF MORMON CRITICAL TEXT

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The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies is a non-profit organization that sponsors and disseminates a number of research projects regarding the Book of Mormon. One of the major projects it has sponsored in recent years is the preparation of a working edition of a Book of Mormon Critical Text (CT). That publication is the subject of comment and review in this session of this Conference. These brief comments serve to introduce the CT to this discussion.

The Book of Mormon Critical Text. The first printing of Volume 1, covering 1 Nephi to the Words of Mormon, occurred in June 1984. Volume 2, Mosiah to Alma, appeared in February 1986, and Volume 3, Helaman to Moroni, was finished last year, after about 5 years of work, in May 1987. The first printings had a yellow cover, but as corrections and additions were made, a second edition was published; the second edition has red covers and is currently available in looseleaf form from F.A.R.M.S. A sample page from the CT is attached. Most of the work on the CT was done by Robert F. Smith, in consultation with several others, including participants on this panel. Gordon Thomasson is currently working on making the CT available on computer.

In addition to presenting a reading of the text itself, the CT offers thousands of footnotes. They are most important; they inductively document the story of the text through variant readings and external references to similar phraseology. Several appendices list onomasticon variants, archaic spellings that appear in the early manuscripts and editions,¹ the surviving fragments of the Original Manuscript, the captions that appear in the Original Manuscript, the typographical errors in the 1830 edition, and chronological information regarding the years of the Nephites and Jaredites. While the CT offers a wealth of primary and secondary data in its present form, much work still remains to be done, many issues need yet to be analyzed, and dozens of details need to be improved and corrected.

¹ These have been preserved in the CT to show that even though the text has been modernized to conform with modern spelling conventions the archaic spellings were legitimate in earlier times.

The CT, as it now stands, has been released as a Preliminary Report or Working Paper, to be reviewed, critiqued and improved. Hopefully it will result someday in a published volume, with better typesetting and legibility,² but exactly how that book will be designed and what it shall contain is yet to be determined. Input from numerous people has been sought and is always welcomed. This conference affords a valuable forum in which to consider and evaluate the status of the project at this point in time.

What is a Critical Text? One of the first things to consider in working with any critical text is what a "critical text" is and what it is not. No critical text is capable of presenting the "original" of a text. Only the original author could give us that. For example, in presenting an excellent critical text of Aristotle's Prior and Posterior Analytics, W. D. Ross generates a synthesis of basically the five oldest Greek manuscripts, but must acknowledge that his synthesis comes from an "unusual array of old manuscripts" dating from ninth to the eleventh centuries A.D.,³ early Syriac (fifth century) and Latin commentators. But what did Aristotle actually write some fourteen centuries before those oldest surviving Greek manuscripts? Despite our best efforts, it is impossible to know the original text. Critical texts exist for most important works from antiquity. Most familiar are probably those of the New Testament, attempting to represent what appears to be the best reading of a given text. Textual variants and parallels are often also supplied.

With the Book of Mormon the needs for a critical text are similar. The Book of Mormon exists in two English manuscripts (that have themselves been emended and corrected), and it has gone through several printings, three of which were prepared during Joseph Smith's lifetime. Thus, there are textual variants to be aware of; there are also interesting parallel texts, both within and without the Book of Mormon, to be noticed. In presenting the English

2 The printing options for the CT were limited by several factors. The base text used was a computer tape generously made available to the project by the BYU Humanities Resource Center and John Hilton; the text, however, was typed entirely in upper case. Also, the computer word processor on which the project was begun in 1982 had limited fonts and symbols with which to work. A file as large as the CT in many ways pushed the computer software to its limits. Budget constraints limited printing alternatives.

3 W. D. Ross, Aristotle's Prior and Posterior Analytics (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), 87.

text of the Book of Mormon in its best but earliest form, one hopes to get a step closer to what Benjamin or Abinadi, the Brother of Jared or Ether, actually said.

A critical text is a tool to help us try to understand the state of the text, however shrouded in historical obscurity and however ultimately unrecoverable the original-original may be. Serious study of any text begins by ascertaining the text itself, to the extent that this is possible. This task requires us to push back as far as we can into the history of our text.

It should be noted, of course, that a critical text is not "critical." The purpose is not to "criticize" the text, or to point out problems, although some may misunderstand if they do not know what this term means to people who work with manuscripts. For example, in 1984, when F.A.R.M.S. announced the completion of Volume 1 of the Critical Text, a UPI stringer in the area put a story on the international wire service that a group at BYU had published a major study critical of the Book of Mormon. Needless to say, that is not what this (or any other) critical text is about.

A good definition of what a "critical text" is appeared in The Folio, the Newsletter of the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center for Preservation and Research at the School of Theology in Claremont, California (July-October 1985), and is quoted in the Preface to the Second Edition of the CT:

Critical text: the text of a piece of literature, whether biblical or otherwise, as it appears in a critical edition, which incorporates the results of a comparative survey of all (or many) available manuscripts containing the literary product. Alternative readings which occur in individual manuscripts or in manuscript families are recorded in an apparatus which accompanies the critical text, usually in a block of notes located at the base of the page. The critical text may either be diplomatic--carefully reproducing the exact text of a selected manuscript, or it may be eclectic--not precisely the same as the text in any extant manuscript but representing in each phrase the text which the editors deem to have been present in the document when it was first written. Critical texts of the Hebrew Bible are usually diplomatic; critical texts of the Greek New Testament are usually eclectic.

In these terms, the CT is eclectic in its choice of readings.

What features should the CT offer? In constructing a Book of Mormon critical text, choices must be made regarding what should be included and what should be excluded. There are several places where the designers of any critical text must make choices.

1. The most obvious issue is which manuscripts and editions should the CT cover. The textual apparatus at the bottom of each page will display differences from one manuscript or edition to the next. The CT compares O (the Original dictation copy), P (the Printer's copy), the 15 major LDS English editions from 1830 to 1981, and 5 RLDS editions. Of these, the most important for critical reference are O, P, 1830, 1837 and 1840, since they were produced during Joseph Smith's lifetime. But the later editions are important also for those studying the history of the text in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

2. Another major issue is which reading of the text should be presented in the body of the text. For example, it is difficult to know what punishment was originally prescribed for delinquent debtors under the law of Mosiah (Alma 11:2). Was the punishment "stripping (confiscation and humiliation)," or was it "striping (beating)"? How does one decide? O at this point is hard to read. P, 1830, and 1837 have "striped." The 1840 and other editions from 1879 to 1981 read "stripped." No solid textual basis exists upon which to settle this question.

3. To what extent, then, should the CT take other phrases into consideration? Although not dispositive, comparative studies may shed light on the question and tend to make certain alternatives more or less attractive. Concerning the problem seen above in Alma 11:2, a comparison to Deuteronomy 25:1-3 may be somewhat relevant. Like Alma 11:2, Deuteronomy 25:1-3 also sets forth a general legal instruction regarding the punishment of losing parties in civil disputes: "If the wicked man be worth to be beaten, the judge shall cause him to lie down, and to be beaten. . . . Forty stripes he may give him." This passage, thus, lends some weight to the idea that the text in Alma 11:2 originally prescribed "striping," not "stripping." But we cannot be sure.

To aid in deliberations of this sort, the CT gives numerous cross-references to expressions in the Old Testament, New Testament, Jewish Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Talmud, and elsewhere, that are related to passages in the Book of Mormon. Computer assistance was used to identify three-or-more word phrases in the Book of Mormon and in the King James Version of the Bible. By including these parallels, the CT follows the critical text of the Greek New Testament published by the United Bible Societies, which indicates many places where phrases in the New Testament parallel, for example, the Septuagint.

4. A further problem is deciding which variants to report. No critical text shows all of the jots and tittles as they appear in every relevant manuscript. Doing so is virtually prohibitive and rarely necessary. Decisions must and should be made about which textual differences are significant. Those decisions will often be reached subjectively. Thus, for example, a person interested in grammar and syntax will be inclined to select one set of variants, while others more interested in history or theology would be likely to include a different set.

5. Answering questions like the foregoing will turn ultimately on the intended purpose of the CT. What purposes should a Book of Mormon critical text serve? The aim of Robert Smith, as he states in his Introduction, was "to present as technically as possible the English translation of the original texts written by the Nephites." Thus, for example, it was decided to eliminate all punctuation, since punctuation probably did not appear in the original Nephite texts. Punctuation as we know it is not used generally in most ancient scripts, and there is none on the Anthon Transcript. Initial capitalization was also dropped, and the entire text printed in uncials, since in the Book of Mormon capitalization was added by scribes and typesetters to suit modern conventions. Undoubtedly, the lack of punctuation and upper and lower case letters detracts from the readability of the CT, but its purpose was not to become a reader's Book of Mormon, but a tool for scholarly reference. On the other hand, one component of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament textual apparatus deals with the possible ways to punctuate the Greek manuscripts; perhaps such a feature could be added to the CT.

Working assumptions? In preparing the CT, it seems to me that certain assumptions (sometimes explicitly and other times implicitly) were operative concerning the purpose of the CT and about the text it attempts to represent. By way of explanation, and to facilitate further planning and thinking about the CT, it seems useful to mention a few of those assumptions briefly in conclusion:

First, it is assumed throughout the CT that there was an ancient Nephite text, and that it was written in some mixture of Hebrew and Egyptian languages. Thus, the CT has not attempted alone to establish the text, for example, as it was dictated from the lips of Joseph Smith in the nineteenth century. Its goal is broader than that. While it works principally with the Original dictation and Printer's manuscripts, in the few places where textual choices need to be made it also considers subsequent English editions of the Book of Mormon and parallel materials where relevant to generate a text that brings together the best information available to us about the form and meaning of the ancient Nephite record and the earlier sources it abridges.

Second, it is assumed that Mormon's abridgment was translated into English in a way that Joseph Smith and his contemporaries could understand and that would convey the underlying meaning to them as well as possible, given the limitations of language. As D&C 1:24 states: "I am God and have spoken it . . . unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding." Accordingly, the CT does not take the English text to be "absolute" or "infallible." Its authors, abridgers and translators bend over backwards, far more than they needed to, in assuming full responsibility for any errors. It is "the most correct book" and the best anyone could do and therefore deserves extraordinary respect. Indeed, very, very few changes of any substance have occurred since the words

fell from the lips of Joseph Smith in 1829. Nevertheless, language is language; it is only a medium through which thoughts are conveyed, more or less imperfectly, even under the best of inspired circumstances. The CT implicitly assumes that knowledge of a range of information, such as textual comparisons and parallels, will help readers to fathom the essence of the English text of the Book of Mormon as a translation, and not as a frozen version of the text at any randomly selected stage in its transmission.

The ultimate purpose of any translation is to help us come to understanding. We need to seek understanding of the Book of Mormon. What was actually said?⁴ By Benjamin? By Mormon? By Joseph Smith? What do their words mean? Why do they say what they say the way they say it? Only through close scrutiny and reflective pondering about the words of this book and the spirit which they convey can we understand the book itself. Hopefully, the CT--already in its present working form, but even more so in future revisions--will be of assistance to readers in this important quest for understanding.

⁴ One of the next stages in the CT project would seem to be the production of a commentary volume, similar to Bruce M. Metzger's Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), explaining the evidence on each variant reading.

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AND THERE WAS²⁷⁵ BUS²⁷⁵ WHICH DENIED THE
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 BUT NOT SO MUCH SO WITH FEVERS
 BECAUSE OF THE EXCELLENT QUALITIES OF THE MANY PLANTS
 AND ROOTS WHICH GOD HAD PREPARED TO REMOVE THE CAUSE OF DISEASES
 WHICH WAS SUBSEQUENT TO MAN²⁷⁸
 BY THE NATURE OF THE CLIMATE
 BUT THERE WERE MANY WHO DIED WITH OLD AGE
 AND THOSE WHO DIED IN THE FAITH OF CHRIST
 ARE HAPPY IN HIM
 [[354]] AS WE MUST NEEDS SUPPOSE
 NOW I²⁷⁹ WILL RETURN IN OUR RECORD TO AMALECKIAH²⁸⁰
 AND THOSE WHICH HAD FLED WITH HIM INTO THE WILDERNESS
 FOR BEHOLD HE HAD TAKEN THOSE WHICH WENT WITH HIM

- 275. was O P 1830 thru 1911TCC, RLDS 1908; were 1920 1981.
- 276. cf vs 12-13, Lev 25:10, Jn 3:14-15, Wisdom of Solomon 15:6-7.
- 277. verry O? P; very 1830 thru 1981, RLDS 1908; was O P 1830 thru 1911TCC, RLDS 1908; were 1920 1981, RLDS 1874.
- 278. which was subsequent to ma(n) O; which was subsequent to man P 1830; subject P^C; to which men was subject 1837 1841; to which men were subject 1840 1852 thru 1981, RLDS 1874; to which man was subject RLDS 1908.
- 279. I P?; we P^C 1830 thru 1981, RLDS 1908.
- 280. Amaleckiah O; Amalickiah P^C 1830 thru 1981, RLDS 1908; Aalickiah P sp.

*ca Aug 76 B.C.