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Progress Report on the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

Royal Skousen

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PROGRESS REPORT
ON THE BOOK OF MORMON
CRITICAL TEXT PROJECT

Royal Skousen
English Department
Brigham Young University

(1) CURRENT STATUS OF THE 5-YEAR PROJECT (as of 7 July 1989)

Original Manuscript (O):

(only about 25% remains: 1 Nephi 2 → 2 Nephi 1 / Alma 22 → Helaman 3, with gaps; plus other fragments)

permission of First Presidency to make transcription of the original manuscript: photos on loan from historical department

fragment at University of Utah: photo purchased

work done:

preliminary first transcription by Royal Skousen
first transcription checked up to Alma 50
second transcription by Lyle Fletcher and Marcello Hunter
line-by-line comparison of two transcriptions through Alma 32

work to be done:

finish checking first transcription
finish line-by-line comparison of transcriptions
check transcriptions against actual manuscript
do remaining fragments
compare O against P and printed editions

Printer’s Manuscript (P):

(all extant except for 4 lines from 1 Nephi 1)

enlarged photographic reproduction on loan from RLDS Church Historian (Richard Howard)

work done:

first transcription by Royal Skousen through the small plates
second transcription by Lawrence Skousen
work to be done:

finish first transcription
make line-by-line comparison of two transcriptions
compare against O and printed editions
distinguish between the three correctors of P

Scanning of Important Editions of the Book of Mormon
(+ finished, - partially finished)

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Publication Plans:

transcripts of O and P
critical text:
original text as dictated by Joseph Smith
(to the extent that it can be determined)
dictated format: limited punctuation, but modern spelling and lexical capitalization
apparatus: all significant textual variants
(including all meaning differences and some spelling and punctuation differences)
LDS versification (left margin)
RLDS versification (right margin)
cross-references to explicitly quoted biblical passages
computer collation of all variants (including spelling and punctuation)

commentary on the Book of Mormon text

(2) SIGNIFICANT ERRORS BETWEEN THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT (O) AND THE PRINTER’S MANUSCRIPT (P)

The printer’s manuscript is a "copy" of the original manuscript, but as in all copying, errors enter in. In the printer’s manuscript, there is, on the average, one or two textual errors per manuscript page. Most of these errors do not make a difference in meaning, but about one in five errors do. In the following list of errors (based on a preliminary comparison between the two manuscripts), I provide an analysis of 39 significant copying errors (ones that make a difference in meaning), plus one interesting error made by the compositor for the 1830 edition. Of these 40 errors, 23 of them have been newly found in our critical text project (although RLDS researchers have independently found many of these). These newly found errors are marked with an asterisk.

In addition, I categorize the errors according to whether the reading in O is the harder or the easier reading. Most of the harder readings are found in P and are accidental copying errors:

h harder reading in O 6
e easier reading in O 23
= equivalent readings 11

Moreover, there are many more examples of where the copying led to a contracted text rather than an expanded one:

+ expanded text in P 1
- contracted text in P 11
= equivalent length 28

In the following list, the harder reading analysis is given first, followed by the text length analysis. The abbreviations ln and 2n stand for the books of First and Second Nephi, while aa stands for the book of Alma. The relevant item is underlined in the original manuscript reading and is separated from the printer’s manuscript reading by the symbol >. A caret ^ stands for an insertion; a null symbol Ø stands for a deletion.

=,= 1n3:10 when we had gone up to the land of Jerusalem > come

=,+ 1n7:1* but that his sons should take daughters to wife that ^ might raise up seed unto the Lord > they

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O Lord according to my faith which is in me, thee
and he also saw other multitudes pressing their way towards that great and spacious building, feeling
and it came to pass that I saw among the nations of the gentiles the formation of a great church and the angel said unto me behold the formation of a church, foundation,
and I looked and beheld a man among the gentiles which were separated from the seed of my brethren was
and when it proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew it contained the fulness of the gospel of the Lord, plainness.
of whom the twelve apostles bore record and they bore record according to the truth, bear
thou seest the formation of that great and abominable church, foundation
the house of Israel was compared unto an olive tree by the spirit of the Lord which was in our father, fathers
he doth nourish them and strengthen them and provide ways and means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he hath commanded them wherefore he did provide ways and means for us, ø
if he should command me that I should say unto this water be thou earth and it shall be earth, ø
and now my father had begat two sons in the wilderness the elder was called Jacob and the younger Joseph, eldest
wherefore the record of my father and the genealogy of his forefathers and the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness are engraven upon those first plates, ø
wherefore it is likened unto the being nursed by the gentiles, nourished
our father Lehi also spake many things unto them and rehearsed unto them how great things the Lord had done for them, ø
we have obtained a land of promise a land which is choice above all other lands a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a land for the inheritance of my seed yea the Lord hath consecrated this land unto me > covenanted

their brethren the Lamanites made preparations for war and came up to the land of Nephi for the purpose of dethroning the king and to place another in his stead and also of destroying the people of Anti Nephi Lehi out of the land > destroying

in the commencement of the seventeenth year >

for it was strictly contrary to the commandments of God > commands

and I always knew that there was a God > also

thanking their God that they were chosen of him and that he had not led them away > did, lead

how long wilt thou suffer that such wickedness and infidelity shall be among this people > iniquity

after much labor among them they began to have success among the poorer class of the people > poor, 

but Zenoch also spake of these things > Zenock

if ye could be healed by merely casting about your eyes that ye might behold would ye not behold quickly > be healed

yea I say unto you my son that there can be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as was my pains yea and again I say unto you my son that on the other hand there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy > could

even so I would that ye should continue to teach and I would that ye should be diligent > would

and he was only twenty and five years old when he was appointed chief commander over the armies of the Nephites > captain

there was now and then a man fell among the Nephites by their wounds and the loss of blood > swords
Moroni and his army met the army of the Lamanites.

Therefore he had power to do according to his will with the armies of the Nephites to establish and to exercise authority over them.

Amalickiah caused that his servants should go forth to meet the king and they went forth and bowed themselves before the king.

In the latter end of the nineteenth year notwithstanding their peace.

The people of Nephi did thank the Lord their God because of his miraculous power in delivering them.

And Pahoran retained the judgment seat which caused much rejoicing among the brethren of Pahoran and also among the people of liberty.

And now it came to pass in the commencement of the twenty and ninth year.

And thus were we favored of the Lord for had they come upon us in this our weakness they might have perhaps destroyed our little army but thus were we favored.

And it came to pass that I thus did send an embassy to the great governor of our land.

An error made by the printer:

He sent a petition with the voice of the people unto the governor of the land desiring that he should heed it and give him Moroni power to compel those dissenters.

A few observations:

(1) The error rate is fairly constant, with about one significant textual error every two or three manuscript pages; since we have only about 25% of the original manuscript, I would estimate there are at least 100 textually significant errors in the missing portions.
(2) The errors are relatively minor, thus explaining why these errors entered the text; conjecturing will probably not be very helpful in discovering the unknown errors.

(3) Where textual evidence does occur, we can usually determine which reading is the more difficult one — and surprisingly the errors that have crept in tend to introduce more difficult readings (contrary to the usual assumption in textual criticism); the harder readings in O are generally defensible, the harder readings in P are not.

(4) The text does not tend to grow; in fact, contractions are much more frequent than expansions.

(5) The original manuscript is clearly the better text.

(6) Oliver Cowdery and the other scribes tried to make a faithful copy; there is very little evidence that they consciously expanded or tried to explain the text; nearly all errors are natural transcriptional errors.

(7) Only conscious editing leads to an expansive and easier text (as is found in many printed editions of the Book of Mormon from 1837 on).

(8) These results have important implications for biblical textual criticism. There are striking similarities between the textual development of the Book of Mormon and the scriptures of the early Christian church: faithful members with some education (but not trained in manuscript production) make (imperfect) copies; errors enter in from the beginning and are not recoverable if the original is destroyed. In this regard, Kurt Aland’s claims (The Text of the New Testament 291) regarding the New Testament text seem incredibly naive:

"any reading ever occurring in the New Testament textual tradition, from the original reading onward, has been preserved in the tradition and needs only to be identified"