



2002

Introduction

M. Gerald Bradford

Alison V. P. Coutts

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

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Bradford, M. Gerald and Coutts, Alison V. P. (2002) "Introduction," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 11 : No. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol11/iss2/2>

This Front Matter is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Introduction

Author(s) M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coutts

Reference M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coutts, eds.,
*Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon:
History and Findings of the Critical Text Project, 1-4*
(published in lieu of *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*
11/2 [2002]).

ISBN 0-934893-68-3

Abstract Introduction to the book.

Introduction

WHEN THE history of Book of Mormon scholarship is written, it is certain that 2001 will be singled out for special attention since in the spring of that year the first two volumes in Royal Skousen's ambitious Book of Mormon critical text project were published.¹ After thirteen years of careful research and writing and with the help of several of his colleagues and the cooperation of a number of organizations—in particular, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Brigham Young University, and the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints)—Skousen, a respected linguist and professor at BYU,² published a detailed, analytical transcription of the original manuscript (*The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text*) and the printer's manuscript (*The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts*).

Within the next few years, two additional companion volumes will appear: *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, which will deal with the transmission of the text through all of its major editions; and an *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, along with an electronic collation that will include a lined-up comparison of important textual sources and that will specify every textual variant found in the two manuscripts and in twenty

subsequent major editions. This collective endeavor is unparalleled in Book of Mormon scholarship. It will make available to researchers, scholars, teachers, and students the earliest primary sources needed for ongoing study of this foundational Latter-day Saint scripture.

In October 2001, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), along with a number of other units on the BYU campus,³ sponsored a symposium in celebration of this publication event. Entitled “The Original Text of the Book of Mormon: Findings from the Critical Text Project,” the event was well attended, reflecting widespread interest in the project. Skousen, in the first of two presentations, reviewed the history of the project and outlined his major findings and conclusions as well as his plans for future volumes. In his second presentation, he spelled out how systematic the original text of the Book of Mormon is.

The symposium also provided an occasion to hear reports from three colleagues who worked closely with Skousen on the project: Robert Espinosa, Digital Projects Librarian in Special Collections at Brigham Young University's Harold B. Lee Library; Ron Romig, Archivist for the Community of Christ in Independence, Missouri; and Larry Draper, Curator of Americana and Mormonism in Special Collections at the Harold B. Lee Library.

The program concluded with reflections on the implications of this work by two recognized Book of Mormon scholars: Richard L. Anderson, Emeritus Professor of Ancient Scripture, BYU; and Daniel C. Peterson, Associate Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies, BYU, and editor of the *FARMS Review of Books*.

In order to make these important and insightful presentations available to an even wider audience, we have decided to publish this special report. It contains edited versions of most of what was presented at the symposium.

In the first paper, “History of the Critical Text Project of the Book of Mormon,” Skousen specifies briefly what “critical textual studies” entail and how he employed this approach in his study of the English-language text of the Book of Mormon. He points out that the objective of the project is twofold: first, to determine the original English-language text (as reflected in the original manuscript, the printer’s manuscript, and the early editions of the Book of Mormon), and second, to establish a history of the text that will identify accidental errors as well as editorial changes the text has undergone from the manuscripts through its various editions, from 1830 to the present.

Skousen traces the key events in the history of the work he and his colleagues have done on the Book of Mormon critical text project—from the challenges facing them in gaining access to the manuscripts and analyzing the significant number of textual variants that were discovered, to researching, writing, and carefully preparing and publishing the transcriptions of the original manuscript and the printer’s manuscript.

Skousen concludes by summarizing some of the important findings that have emerged from his study. He observes that the original text shows examples of Hebraistic literalisms that are completely uncharacteristic of English; that the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon was directly used to revise the text of the book of Isaiah in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible; and that included in the loss of the 116 pages of the original manuscript was not only the book of Lehi, but also most of the first two original chapters of the book of Mosiah. He contends that while some conjectures about how the original text may have read are probably correct, the original text cannot be

fully recovered by human means, and that even if we had the entire original manuscript, there would still be some errors in the text mainly because the original manuscript itself contains some errors.

The next three selections (“Fragments of the Original Manuscript,” by Robert Espinosa; “The Printer’s Manuscript,” by Ron Romig; and “Book of Mormon Editions,” by Larry Draper) recount the role these authors played in collaborating with Skousen, particularly in the early stages of this project. Collectively they give the reader an insider view into the kind and range of meticulous, detailed work that was done on the manuscripts themselves, the corresponding efforts undertaken to ensure the long-term preservation of these priceless documents, and the careful review and analysis made not only of the publication of the 1830 edition but also of subsequent published editions of the Book of Mormon, all of which was needed to enable Skousen to bring the project to this point.

Based on his carefully prepared transcriptions of the original and printer’s manuscripts and on his study of the first and subsequent published editions of the Book of Mormon, Skousen has proposed a number of informed and carefully reasoned textual changes. This is the subject of his second paper, “The Systematic Text of the Book of Mormon.” He points out that while such proposed changes do not affect the message or doctrine of the Book of Mormon, many of them are grounded in what he has come to appreciate as the significant internal consistency of the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon.

Illustrating his observations with numerous examples, Skousen emphasizes that many of his proposed changes are based on such factors as semantically preferred readings found in the manuscripts, on instances where phraseology found in the original text is strongly supported by all other usage or where phraseology in the original text was perfectly consistent but has been altered over time due to printing errors or editing changes that have crept into subsequent editions, and on the need to further improve on punctuation—a feature not included in the original manuscript. In his paper, Skousen also deals with several what he terms “conjectural emendations”—proposed improvements in the text for which there is no direct evidence in the

manuscripts or early editions. He devises rather strict, conservative criteria on the basis of which such changes need to be assessed and argues for acceptance of a number of them. Skousen concludes by repeating one of the important points he made in his earlier paper, namely, because we only have approximately 28 percent of the original manuscript, and because textual errors generally cannot be found except in reference to correct readings in the earliest textual sources, “the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon is not fully recoverable by human effort.” He also points out that while conjecture, based on internal analysis of the Book of Mormon text, has proven to be largely unsuccessful in recovering the correct reading, nevertheless, some carefully reasoned conjectures are probably correct. According to Skousen, the systematic nature of the original text of the Book of Mormon supports the claim that the scripture was revealed to Joseph Smith word for word. And while there is clear evidence of some errors in the original manuscript, most mistakes can be traced to subsequent transmissions of the text, all of which have been subject to human error. The important point, however, is that none of these errors significantly interfere with the teachings of the book, nor have they “prevented readers of the book from receiving their own personal witness of its truth.”

Finally, the concluding paper in this special report focuses on one of the most significant findings to emerge from the Book of Mormon critical text project, namely, that a careful study of the original and printer’s manuscripts supports traditional accounts of how the Book of Mormon came about. Daniel C. Peterson, in “What the Manuscripts and the Eyewitnesses Tell Us about the Translation of the Book of Mormon,” builds on Skousen’s work⁴ to show that the evidence of the manuscripts themselves supports the long-held claim that the text of the scripture was revealed to Joseph Smith word for word, that he relied on the use of interpreting devices in the process, and that what he saw (possibly as many as twenty to thirty words at a time) was read off by him to his scribes. At the same time, this documentary evidence provides no support for alternative explanations that Joseph Smith composed the text himself or that he took it from some other existing manuscript.

As one Latter-day Saint writer recently put it, quoting Joseph Smith, “Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations and where is our religion? We have none.’ And why must *that* be so? It’s because the revealed witness of Jesus Christ, which the Holy Ghost confirms to anyone who has personal knowledge of the Book of Mormon and faith unto repentance, is the key to everything of worth in our religion. Without that witness, needless to say, the Book of Mormon is nothing but paper and ink; it’s only black marks on a white background unless the Spirit of the Lord brings it to life in the hearts and minds of its readers.”⁵

For a number of years now, Skousen and his colleagues have been, if you will, intensely dealing with the Book of Mormon as “black marks on a white background.” And look at what they have accomplished! We now have a definitive transcription of all that is extant of the manuscripts of the Book of Mormon; we have a solid linguistic, documentary foundation upon which to conduct further studies of this sacred scripture; and as a result of studies produced so far, we have, as Skousen testifies, “important evidence that the Book of Mormon is a revealed text from the Lord.” Such scholarship on the Book of Mormon can never claim to do more than add to our understanding of, and deepen our appreciation for, what the Lord has revealed. But for this we can be thankful indeed.

Several people helped produce this special report. The authors themselves worked tirelessly with us to ensure the details are presented as accurately as possible. The illustrations were created by Michael Lyon with graphic enhancements by Andrew Livingston and Nathan Allison in consultation with Louis Crandall. Indeed we are indebted to the Crandall Historical Printing Museum in Provo, Utah, and for Louis’s painstaking efforts to help us understand the physical details of printing the Book of Mormon. Louis and his museum are an invaluable resource, and we are grateful for his willingness to share his findings with us.

— THE EDITORS
July 2002

NOTES

1. The first two volumes in this series were published by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). The Foundation will also publish the subsequent volumes. To a growing list of significant work on the Book of Mormon published by FARMS since its founding in 1979 can now be added these volumes in the Book of Mormon critical text project. Those interested in the history of Book of Mormon scholarship should read Noel B. Reynolds, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century," *BYU Studies* 38/2 (1999): 6–47.

2. Royal Skousen is uniquely qualified to undertake such an ambitious, detailed study of the text of the Book of Mormon. A professor of linguistics and English language at BYU (since 1979), Skousen took his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, in 1972. Skousen is internationally recognized for his work in linguistics and related studies, having published three major books on the subject. During

the spring of 2001 he was a research fellow at the Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, doing research in quantum computing and analogical modeling of language.

3. In addition to FARMS, the following organizations sponsored this symposium: the Harold B. Lee Library, the College of Humanities, the English Department, the Linguistics Department, the Religious Studies Center, and the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for LDS History.

4. See Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 61–93; and "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 22–31.

5. H. Curtis Wright, *Things of Redeeming Worth* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2002), 66.