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# Reconstructing the Book of Mormon

John A. Tvedtnes

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**Author(s)** John A. Tvedtnes

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**Abstract** Review of *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text Project* (2002), edited by M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coutts.

# RECONSTRUCTING THE BOOK OF MORMON

John A. Tvedtnes

In October 2001, FARMS and other BYU entities sponsored a symposium marking the publication of the first volumes of Royal Skousen's critical text study of the original and printer's manuscripts of the Book of Mormon.<sup>1</sup> M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coutts prepared the symposium papers for publication in a seventy-four-page booklet sent to all FARMS subscribers and made available for purchase by others.

Skousen's introductory paper details the history of the critical text project of the Book of Mormon from its inception in 1988 until the present. Skousen describes how he was granted access to the manuscripts, including fragments in private collections. He illustrates the differences between the manuscripts and published editions, noting the kinds of errors that often occurred when taking dictation, hand copying from a manuscript, and typesetting in the nineteenth century.

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1. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001); and *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 2 parts (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002).

Review of 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*. Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002. vi + 74 pp. \$9.95.

The paper by Robert J. Espinosa of BYU's Harold B. Lee Library describes the fragments of the original manuscript and the process by which they were opened and photographed for study. His detailed explanation is accompanied by photos that bring the project to life for the reader.

Ron Romig, archivist for the Community of Christ (formerly Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), describes the printer's manuscript, which is owned by that church and was made available for photography and study for the critical text project. Larry W. Draper, curator in the Harold B. Lee Library, described various Book of Mormon editions. His article is accompanied by excellent drawings that illustrate the printing process used during the nineteenth century.

The next chapter in the booklet—and the one that most interested me—is Royal Skousen's "The Systematic Text of the Book of Mormon." In this paper, Skousen describes some of the apparent errors that appear in published editions of the Book of Mormon, comparing them with the text as found in the manuscripts and recommending various emendations as a preview of what will be included in subsequent volumes resulting from the critical text study. The article is very informative and should be read by every serious reader of the Book of Mormon.

I find myself disagreeing with one of Skousen's recommended emendations. In Mosiah 19:24, he suggests reading "after they had ended the sermon" instead of "after they had ended the ceremony." He writes, "The word *ceremony* does not make sense here, nor is there any older meaning of the word that might work" (p. 64). I assume that he has not read my chapter on "The Nephite Purification Ceremony," in which I explain that the Nephites mentioned in this passage had just killed King Noah, an act that would have called for purification under the law of Moses.<sup>2</sup> If Skousen has read that piece, perhaps he disagrees with my assessment, in which case he may give his reasons in one of his forthcoming volumes.

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2. See chapter 24 in John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 176–93.

I hope to see Skousen also deal with the expression “midst of dark(w|n)ess” in Alma 5:7, which I long have thought should read “mist of darkness,” as in 1 Nephi 8:23–24 and 1 Nephi 12:4.<sup>3</sup> Skousen reads the printer’s manuscript as “mi{d}st of darkness,” evidently suggesting that the *d* was added as an afterthought.<sup>4</sup> I suspect that this is an error.

The final article is Daniel C. Peterson’s “A Response: ‘What the Manuscripts and the Eyewitnesses Tell Us about the Translation of the Book of Mormon.’” Peterson explains the translation process as described by eyewitnesses, thus helping us envision what went on during the time the Prophet Joseph Smith dictated the English translation of the Nephite record to Oliver Cowdery.

Bradford and Coutts have done an excellent job in pulling together the various papers and associated photographs and artwork under the watchful eye of Royal Skousen. The layout and content of the booklet are excellent, and I highly recommend the volume to readers of the Book of Mormon and others interested in the study and preservation of manuscripts.

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3. This expression appears twice in the King James Version of the New Testament—in Acts 13:11 (“a mist and a darkness”) and in 2 Peter 2:17 (“the mist of darkness”).

4. Skousen, *Printer’s Manuscript*, 1:410.