



1-31-2006

# The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Givens, Terryl L. (2006) "The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 15 : No. 1 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol15/iss1/6>

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**Title** The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

**Author(s)** Terryl L. Givens

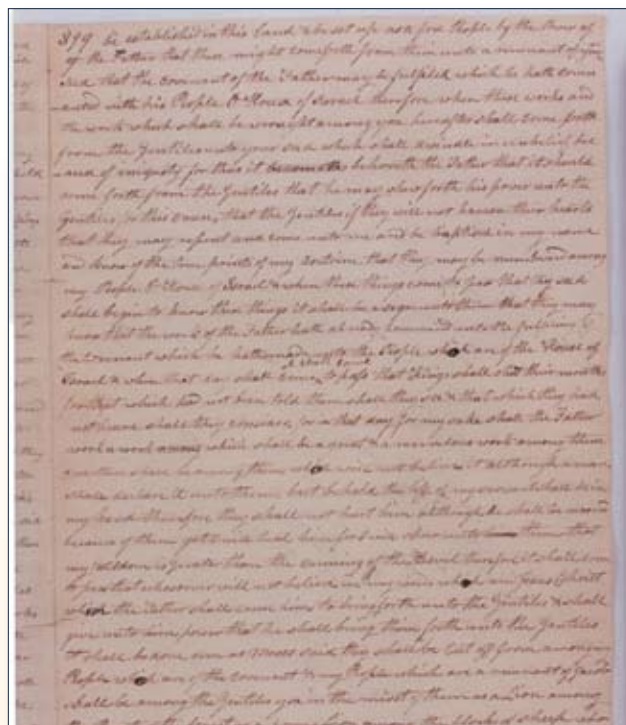
**Reference** *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (2006): 32-35, 71.

**ISSN** 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

**Abstract** Royal Skousen's endeavor to recover the original text of the Book of Mormon is more complicated than it seems because it involves more than simply reproducing the original manuscript. Rather, what Skousen means by "original text" is the very language that appeared on the Urim and Thummim. Every subsequent step, such as Joseph's reading, his scribes' understanding and transcribing of that utterance, and Oliver Cowdery's copying of the manuscript for the printer, exposed the text to the possibility of human subjectivity and error. This paper explains the nature and scope of Skousen's monumental undertaking and presents some of the methods and reasoning he employs to resolve disputed textual variants in search the Book of Mormon's original text.



...let the...  
...iniquity for thus it became the behoveth the Father that it should...



# The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

— Terryl L. Givens —

**A**LL THESE SCHOLARLY RESOURCES being brought to bear by Royal Skousen to sort out the *whosoever*s and *whomsoever*s may strike some as excessive. And indeed, if the principal purpose of the Book of Mormon is to bear witness of Christ and, secondarily, Joseph his prophet, it is doubtful that anything Skousen brings to light will substantially—or even moderately—affect those missions. On the other hand, it is a mark of how seriously a people and profession take their literature when they step back from merely affective engagement with it to lay more solid foundations for its study, interpretation, and appreciation. And in this case, there is something almost devotional in the painstaking care with which Skousen attempts to reconstruct the textual layers that constitute the Book of Mormon’s history and identity.

The poet, wrote Percy Shelley in an essay published the same year as the third edition of the Book

of Mormon, “apprehend[s] . . . the good which exists in the relation subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression.”<sup>1</sup> Coming at the height of the Romantic revolution, Shelley’s is an epochal recognition that what philosophers had for two millennia derided as the failure of art was actually its glory. Art, its mimetic impulse and aspirations notwithstanding, is never under any circumstances a successfully transparent reconstitution of a Platonic ideal. The subjectivity of personal perception, and the mediating materials through which the artist must render his or her vision, each intrude upon the representational process, leading to a product that is always ontologically and experientially distinct

Top left: The original manuscript of the Book of Mormon beginning at Alma 42:39. Photo courtesy of the Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Top right: The printer’s manuscript at 3 Nephi 21. Photo courtesy of the Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri.



from the original model. That, says Shelley, is what makes art, art. It is the source of its beauty, not its flawed insufficiency. Or, as Ortega will restate the case a century later, the particular (and inevitable) ways in which any aesthetic rendering distorts the original object is what constitutes that thing called style, which is the essential determinant of all art.<sup>2</sup>

The Romantic triumph over the straitjacket of classical conceptions of artistic imitation was possible only because in the new universe introduced by Immanuel Kant's epistemology, human subjectivity and human point of view became the center of gravity. In other words, neither philosophers nor artists continued to labor under the supposed burden of a fallen and distorting human perspective, which we strive to overcome in order to achieve some objective, impersonal, and absolute grasp of a transcendent reality. So our human perspective, since it is inseparable from our human condition, provides not a distortion of the real but the only avenue to the real that is humanly relevant.

In this same era, Horace Bushnell was applying similar insights to a revolutionary understanding of biblical inspiration. "Is there any hope for theological science left? None at all, I answer most unequivocally. Human language is a gift to the imagination so essentially metaphoric . . . that it has no exact blocks of meaning to build up a science of. Who would ever think of building up a science of Homer, Shakespeare, Milton? And the Bible is not a whit less poetic, or a whit less metaphoric, or a particle less difficult to be propositionalized in the terms of the understanding."<sup>3</sup>

The parallels between these issues and certain matters related to Book of Mormon translation seem striking. For in scriptural interpretation, the first question we must settle is how we sort out the meanings of and relationships among concepts like Truth, Meaning, Intention. Or to use Shelley's language, how do we understand the relationship between "existence and perception" and "perception and expression" when it comes to God's word?

I make this lengthy prologue in order to suggest that before we get to the work of establishing a critical text proper, a number of issues and definitions must first be resolved, and they turn out, upon close inspection, to be more complicated than they first appear. In this instance, the divine provenance, the uncertain working of translation, as well as the method of dictation all combine to vastly complicate this project and distinguish it, methodologically and

philosophically, from, say, the work of recuperating a Shakespeare original text. To do the latter, one need argue about little more than orthography. If Shakespeare wrote the manuscript, then we have his original manuscript as it flowed from his pen and as he, apparently, willed it in the form it took under his own act of writing and self-supervision.

If the objective of a Book of Mormon critical text were simply to reconstitute as accurately as possible the original manuscript, that would be a fairly straightforward task. And one could envision that as a sufficient aim. Let's get back, we could say, to the closest thing we have to the gold plates themselves,

*Since Skousen believes that the Book of Mormon was "revealed to Joseph Smith word for word," the original text would be the total flow of words discerned upon the surface of the seer stone. And in such a process of dictation—and this is important—the first opening for error or alteration would be the gap between Joseph's recitation and the scribe's transcription.*

which is the original manuscript as dictated by Joseph and recorded by his scribes. The problem with that approach is that there are cases in which the manuscript does not reflect what Joseph most probably pronounced (as in homophonic miscues that may not always have been corrected—as in the *straiten/straighten* instances). In his earlier report of 2002, Skousen defines the "original [English] text" a little more problematically as what Joseph "read off the text" he received through the instrumentality of the Urim and Thummim.<sup>4</sup> Since Skousen believes that the Book of Mormon was "revealed to Joseph Smith word for word,"<sup>5</sup> the original text would be the total flow of words discerned upon the surface of the seer stone. And in such a process of dictation—and this is important—the first opening for error or alteration would be the gap between Joseph's recitation and the scribe's transcription. Joseph dictates, Oliver mishears and/or miswrites. Questionable aspects of



the original manuscript would therefore have to be read against what it is more likely that Joseph actually spoke than what Oliver or another scribe wrote.

But in the published volume recently released, Skousen modifies—or perhaps merely clarifies—his definition of original text with significant implications. In his prefatory remarks, Skousen makes this very different point: “the term ‘original text’ refers to the English-language text that Joseph received by revelation, but not necessarily to what Joseph dictated.”<sup>6</sup> Now this is an important distinction. Notice that in this case the “original English text” acquires a kind of Platonic status, as an urtext that transcends and precedes even prophetic articulation. It is the immediate, fully determinate (“word by word” and even “letter by letter”), supernaturally communicated utterance that Skousen is not sure even survives Joseph’s own processing. Skousen even strikingly evokes Plato when he characterizes the 1830 edition as “thrice removed from the original text.”<sup>7</sup>

This long chain of transmission (the Urim and Thummim’s text, Joseph’s utterance, scribal transcription, printer’s copy) certainly expands the opportunities for error, idiosyncrasy, and subjectivity to creep into the occasion. But why stop with four layers? We also have, to use one example from the other end of the process, heaven-sent impressions, Isaiah’s understanding of those impressions, dictation or recording of Isaiah’s prophecies, copying/editing onto brass plates, editing/copying onto Nephite plates, Abinadi’s reading of the record to Noah, Alma’s recollection of Abinadi’s recitation, Alma’s understanding of Abinadi’s words, Alma’s transcription, Mormon’s editing of Alma, and so forth.

The resulting English text that we have is a curious prophetic patois that reflects human and historical influences across the spectrum of this convoluted process: Hebraisms that are inexplicable in Joseph Smith’s grammatical universe, elements that reflect “the biblical style from the 1500s,”<sup>8</sup> elements that are clearly “identical to the style of the King James Bible” (1611), and passages that “also show examples of Joseph Smith’s upstate New York English.”<sup>9</sup> The presence of both Hebraisms and Joseph’s belabored spellings suggest a prepackaged text that he “saw.” The presence of New York regional dialect would suggest that he sometimes took liberties in recasting what he saw in language more conformable to his speech patterns. The presence of 16th-century elements would suggest tantaliz-

ing possibilities too far in the realm of speculation to pursue. At least they would be if Joseph had not himself offered other hints that the Book of Mormon is here an axiomatic instance of the fact that revelation tends to be text-centered and text-based. It’s just a question of having access to the best texts available, transmitted and even translated in the least prejudicial way possible. Speaking of “the Vision,” for instance, he wrote:

Nothing could be more pleasing to the Saints upon the order of the kingdom of the Lord, than the light which burst upon the world through the foregoing vision. Every law, every commandment, every promise, every truth, and every point touching the destiny of man, from Genesis to Revelation, where the purity of the scriptures remains unsullied by the folly of men, go to show the perfection of the theory [of different degrees of glory in the future life] and witnesses the fact that that document is *a transcript from the records of the eternal world.*<sup>10</sup>

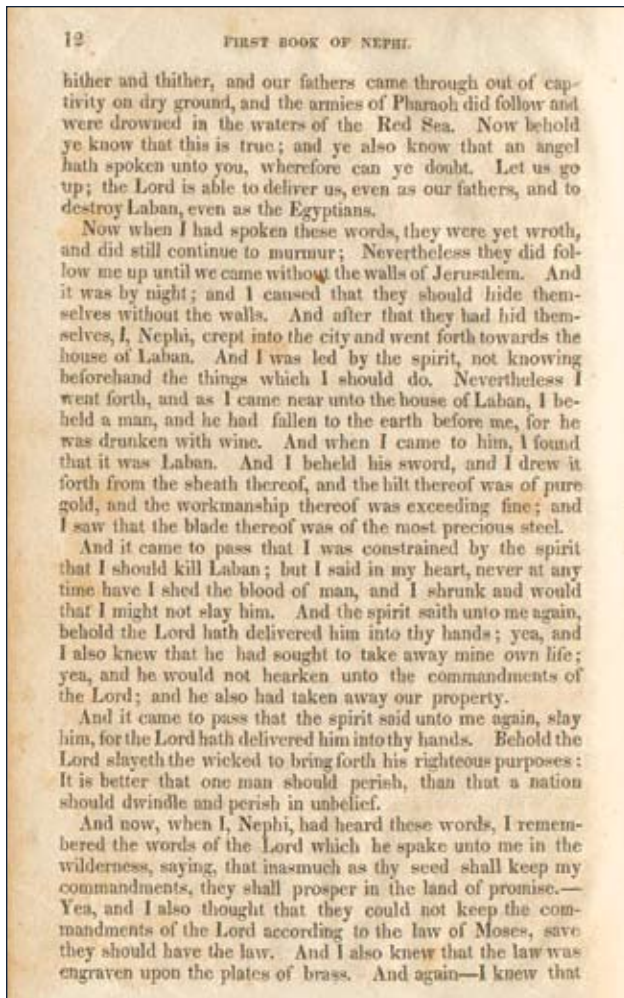
Now regardless of how far we want to push these tantalizing hints about texts that come closer to some heavenly, original fulness, the point is that in Skousen’s work, he finds a frame of ultimate reference in the text itself, thus skirting problems of intentionality and other layers of originality. Of course, all good textual criticism ultimately must appeal to the text as the only accessible arbiter of meaning: I simply want to indicate that Skousen presumes unusually complex levels of textual coherence and consistency, and brings them to bear on disputed readings in an extremely able and comprehensive fashion. I want to look closely at Skousen’s approach to resolving one disputed reading in particular as an example of this method.

In 1 Nephi 4:5, the current version reads “and I caused that they should hide themselves without the walls.” The original manuscript records *wall* in the singular. The printer’s manuscript and every edition adds an *s* to make it *walls*. There is no immediately compelling reason to dispute the original manuscript singular. Skousen even finds two subsequent, and proximate, instances where the singular form *wall* is repeated (see 1 Nephi 4:24; 4:27). Importantly, these three instances in O (original manuscript) are recorded in the hands of scribes 2 and 3. There is, in other words, no reason to dispute a grammatically acceptable form—the singular *wall*—that is consis-



tent both in terms of appearance and across varying scribal authorship. Skousen would at this point be justified in endorsing the reading of O and attributing all subsequent emendations to a following of scribe 1's (Oliver Cowdery's) change in P (printer's manuscript) introduced as stylistic preference.


But considering the dropping of a plural *s* a potential scribal error, Skousen in fact finds such a pattern of error in both scribe 2 and scribe 3. And looking for other appearances of the expression "without the wall(s)," Skousen finds two. First Nephi 4:4 records "without the walls of Jerusalem," and Mosiah 21:19 indicates "without the walls of the city." In this light, Skousen has a pattern of scribal error that would account for a dropped plural *s* and two readings that also support the likelihood of a dropped *s* in these particular contexts. The case seems tight.



Excerpt from the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon at 1 Nephi 4:2–16. Courtesy of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

It is therefore all the more impressive when Skousen notes that the supporting examples of plural *walls* are both followed by prepositional phrases starting with *of* ("of Jerusalem" and "of the city"). However, the disputed passages contain no such prepositional phrases. The bulk of evidence still suggests that the disputed passage of 1 Nephi 4:5 should contain the singular form *wall*, unless one can find evidence that the Book of Mormon sometimes omits to pluralize *wall* when it is followed by a prepositional phrase beginning with *of*. That is certainly not an exception that one could readily or intuitively associate with a grammatical rule transposed from English. And Skousen does not here choose to address the relevance of Hebrew constructions. What he can do is look for a comparable pattern in the translated text that would differentiate singular and plural nouns on the basis of following prepositional phrases. And that is precisely what he finds, in two very comparable passages (comparable because *gate* is a term so similar to *wall* and in both cases the passages describe the positional relationship of characters to those nouns). So what we have by way of analogy is "I myself was with my guards without the gate" and "the king having been without the *gates* of the city" (Mosiah 7:10 and 21:23). Because the Book of Mormon text is systematic in this regard, Skousen can make a compelling case for restoring the original singular *wall* to 1 Nephi 4.

This strikes me as more than just careful editorial work. This is a brilliantly fashioned argument that is carefully reasoned, meticulously argued, and reliant upon the best kind of intellectual effort: because he gives both readings the full benefit of the doubt, conceives hypotheses that substantiate both readings, and scours the text for corroborating evidence. And he repeats this procedure hundreds of times.

One may disagree with individual conclusions. But one cannot come away less than profoundly impressed by the efforts to which Skousen goes to analyze each and every disputed reading. He has provided us all with a model of the best textual scholarship we have seen, and it comes at a fortuitous juncture, when the Joseph Smith Papers Project is about to add further to the critical mass of scholarship that does not just make our sacred texts available to the world, but will testify to the world, by the way we hold them, that they are not accounted by us a light thing. 

the beginning of his abridgment of Nephi's large plates is not known since the initial portion of his narrative was among the 116 pages of translation lost when Martin Harris borrowed the manuscript from Joseph Smith to convince his wife of its authenticity. On the loss of the manuscript, see Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 66–69.

### Recovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: An Interim Review

#### Introduction

M. Gerald Bradford

1. About 28 percent of the original manuscript (dictated by Joseph Smith) is extant. The printer's manuscript (copied by Oliver Cowdery and two other scribes) is nearly fully extant (missing are about three lines of text at 1 Nephi 1:7–8, 20).
2. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001); *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001).
3. Recent studies of the Book of Moses began with work on the Joseph Smith Translation. See *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts*, edited by Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews and published by BYU's Religious Studies Center in 2004. Jackson subsequently prepared a critical edition of the Book of Moses entitled *The Book of Moses and the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts*, published by BYU's Religious Studies Center in 2005. A comparable study of the Book of Abraham is under way, known as *A Textual Study of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions*, edited by Brian M. Hauglid. It will result in a comprehensive study of the four sets of Abraham manuscripts, a detailed historical comparison of the extant Book of Abraham text with all available manuscripts and editions, an analysis of significant variants in the text

over time, and an analysis of the Egyptian characters in the Book of Abraham. The work will be published in the FARMS series Studies in the Book of Abraham.

4. One can already see the impact of Skousen's efforts in J. Christopher Conkling's recent article "Alma's Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites," *JBMS* 14/1 (2005): 108–17.

#### The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

Terryl L. Givens

1. Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry" (first published in 1840).
2. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art, and Other Writings on Art and Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 23.
3. Quoted in David J. Voelker, "The Apologetics of Theodore Parker and Horace Bushnell: New Evidences for Christianity," [http://history.hanover.edu/hhr/95/hhr95\\_4.html](http://history.hanover.edu/hhr/95/hhr95_4.html).
4. 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, UT: FARMS, 2002), 5.
5. *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon*, 18.
6. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 3.
7. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants, Part One*, 3.
8. *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon*, 18.
9. *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon*, 19.
10. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1946), 1:252.

#### Joseph Smith and the Text of the Book of Mormon

Robert J. Matthews

1. See the Wentworth Letter, in *History of the Church*, 4:537; Doctrine and Covenants 1:29; and "The Testimony of Three Witnesses," in the forepart of the Book of Mormon.
2. See *History of the Church*, 1:220.

3. Cited in J. Reuben Clark Jr., *Why the King James Version* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1956), xxxiv.
4. Minutes of the School of the Prophets, Salt Lake City, 14 January 1871, Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

#### Scholarship for the Ages

Grant Hardy

1. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 415–16.
2. Skousen's running dialogue in this volume with David Calabro, another close reader, is a pleasure to overhear.
3. I am a great fan of Hugh Nibley—he is often provocative and always entertaining—but Skousen's precision and rigor put him to shame. See, for example, Skousen's discussion of Nibley's explanation of the phrase "or out of the waters of baptism" at 1 Nephi 20:1.
4. A similar project, dealing with more modern materials, is the Joseph Smith Papers, a scholarly edition of documents associated with the Prophet that will be published jointly by Brigham Young University and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 26 volumes over the next decade.
5. Similarly, outside of translators, how many Latter-day Saints have read 2 Nephi 3:18 carefully enough to notice that there is a direct object missing: "I will raise up unto the fruit of thy loins [something or someone?] and I will make for him a spokesman"? Skousen not only notices this, but he devotes six pages to resolving the difficulty created by the grammatical lapse.
6. 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, UT: FARMS, 2002).

#### Seeking Joseph Smith's Voice

Kevin L. Barney

1. This difference in perspective can be seen by comparing on the one hand Royal Skousen, "Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quotations in the

Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 381–82, with David P. Wright, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 159–69. Skousen alludes to this issue on page 426 of *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004) but reserves full discussion for volume 3.

2. Skousen shows his age by using the letters DHC (p. 14) as an abbreviation for what used to be called the *Documentary History of the Church*. The contemporary practice is to use the abbreviation HC for *History of the Church*.
3. Noel B. Reynolds and Royal Skousen, "Was the Path Nephi Saw 'Strait and Narrow' or 'Straight and Narrow'?" *JBMS* 10/2 (2001): 30–33; and John W. Welch and Daniel McKinlay, "Getting Things Straight," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 260–62.
4. See James Muilenburg, "A Study in Hebrew Rhetoric: Repetition and Style," *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 1 (1953): 99.
5. See William R. Watters, *Formula Criticism and the Poetry of the Old Testament* (New York: de Gruyter, 1976); and Kevin L. Barney, "Poetic Diction and Parallel Word Pairs in the Book of Mormon," *JBMS* 4/2 (1995): 15–81. In the terminology of James T. Duke, "strait + narrow" would be a "synonymous conjoined pair" (James T. Duke, "Word Pairs and Distinctive Combinations in the Book of Mormon," *JBMS* 12/2 [2003]: 32–41).
6. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977).
7. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: United Bible Societies, 1975).
8. Royal Skousen, "Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of