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# Scholarship for the Ages

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**Title** Scholarship for the Ages

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**Abstract** Until now, nearly all commentaries on the Book of Mormon have focused mainly on issues of doctrine rather than beginning with the text itself. Royal Skousen's critical text project does the opposite by treating the text itself on the word and phrase level. Skousen weighs nearly all possible evidence to deduce the events that may have led to the variations seen in the texts and to draw conclusions about which readings are most likely original. Some conclusions may surprise readers, but Skousen is more interested in candidly documenting what the texts reveal than in interpreting all the implications. Several lengthy excerpts from Skousen's work show the scholarly depth and rigor of his analysis. In the end, Skousen may have produced the seminal work of Book of Mormon textual criticism that scholars and students will still be using hundreds of years from now.



Photo by Mark Philbrick

## Scholarship for the Ages

— Grant Hardy —

**E**NGLISH-SPEAKING LATTER-DAY SAINTS who desire a thorough understanding of the Book of Mormon face a considerable challenge—the text is written in English. As a result, it is too easy to read. That is to say, it is too easy to get the gist of what is being communicated without actually taking the time to analyze every verb form, every pronoun, and every conjunction to determine exactly how the words fit together and the ideas unfold. We grasp the general message, but we also miss many of the details. In fact, the people who know the Book of Mormon best may be those who have translated it into another language or who as nonnative speakers are trying to read it in English.

Latter-day Saints who have studied Greek or Hebrew know that it is not difficult to spend 20 minutes or more on a single verse of the Bible—working out the possible meanings of the words,

making sure all the grammatical parts fit together, and trying to figure out how a slightly different construction might change the meaning. This level of scrutiny is simply not possible for someone reading the Book of Mormon as if it were a sacrament meeting talk. (Another analogy would be the difference between listening to a piece of music and actually learning to play it.)

If you have not taken the opportunity before, look at the Anchor Bible commentary. There is usually one volume for each book in the Bible, and most public libraries have at least a few of these on their shelves. Each volume consists of new translations of short passages of scripture followed by two commentaries, one of which focuses on the actual words and the other on the main ideas. The level of attention to individual words in the notes section is often breathtaking, perhaps reflecting the



seriousness of religious traditions that view scripture rather than modern revelation as the primary avenue to understanding God's will. By contrast, most commentaries on the Book of Mormon move rather quickly from the details of the text to larger theological issues. We just assume that we have all the words we need and that we know what they mean.

That cavalier attitude is about to change. Royal Skousen, building on the foundation of his definitive work on the original and printer's manuscripts, called O and P, has begun to publish a commentary on the text of the Book of Mormon that will forever change the way Latter-day Saints approach modern scripture. Two hundred years from now—long after people have stopped reading anything on the Book of Mormon now in print—students of the Book of Mormon will still be poring over Skousen's

work. What he has accomplished is nothing short of phenomenal.

Royal Skousen's Book of Mormon critical text project, which has been ongoing for almost 20 years, will eventually consist of five volumes (most of which are divided into several book-length "parts"). The first volume is a typographic facsimile of the original manuscript, and the second—in two parts—is a reproduction of the printer's manuscript. These were both published in 2001. Still to come are volume 3, which will provide both a detailed grammar of the original Book of Mormon and Skousen's comments on what the manuscript evidence tells us about the translation process; and volume 5, a collation of the two manuscripts and 20 significant printed editions showing every difference among them. This volume will also include Skousen's reconstructed original version of the text.

The newest installment in the series is the first part of volume 4, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10*. This is a large book of 650 pages, but five more books of similar length will follow to complete the fourth volume. Strong opinions require strong arguments, and this is particularly the case with this book, which at first glance can seem both over-

#### VOLUME 1

transcript of O, the original manuscript  
(published in 2001)

#### VOLUME 2 (in two parts)

transcript of P, the printer's manuscript  
(published in 2001)

#### VOLUME 3\*

history of the text, including analysis of  
grammatical editing

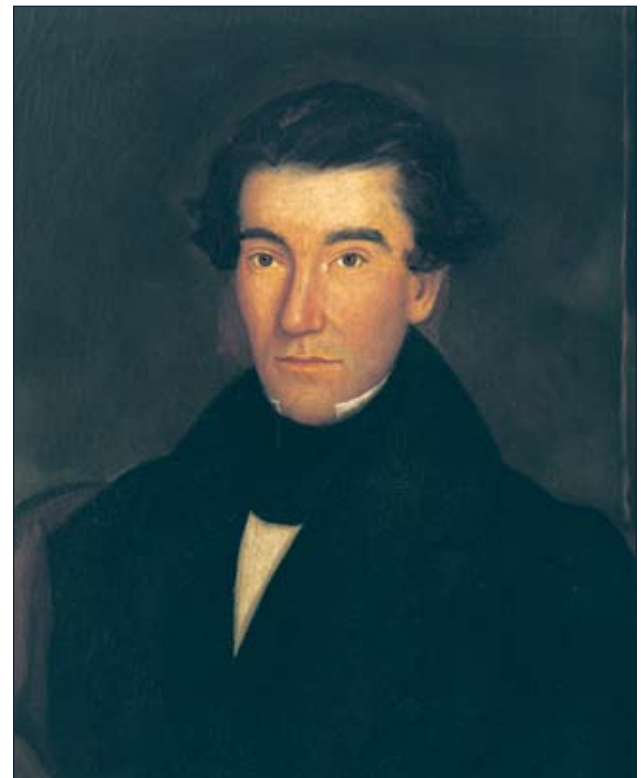
#### VOLUME 4 (in four or five parts)

analysis of textual variants  
(part 3 published in 2006)

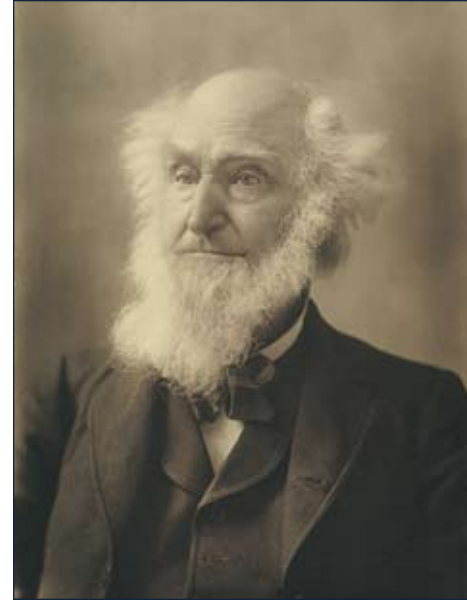
#### VOLUME 5\*

computerized collation of the two manuscripts  
and 20 printed editions

\* volumes 3 and 5 to succeed volume 4



Above: Publication plan for the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project. Right: Publisher Egbert B. Grandin (1806–1845), owner of the print shop where the first 5,000 copies of the Book of Mormon were printed. Image courtesy of IRI.



Above: Print room in the restored E. B. Grandin Building in Palmyra, New York. Photo by Nicholas J. Gasdik. Top right: John H. Gilbert (1802–1895), who set the type for the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. Photo taken in 1890. Photo courtesy of IRI. Right: Type trays in the Grandin Building's print room. Photo by Craig Dimond. © IRI.



whelmingly convoluted and impossibly focused on inconsequential minutia.

The accurate reproduction and transcription of the two key Book of Mormon manuscripts seem reasonable enough. Scholars will want to consult these books to make sure that their own analyses of particular passages are not based on copying errors or later editorial changes. By saving them the trouble of having to go to Church archives to examine the actual manuscripts, Skousen has contributed to the long-term preservation of these fragile documents. In addition, by using the latest scientific techniques—including multispectral imaging and new ultraviolet photographs—he has seen more in these pages than anyone ever has before. Volumes 1 and 2 are extremely useful as reference tools, but it is unlikely that many people would want to read them straight through. With volume 4, however, things get more interesting.

Skousen's goal has been to use recognized, proven methods of scholarly analysis to get as close as possible to the moment when Joseph Smith, translating the Book of Mormon through the Urim and Thummim, first spoke the words of the Nephite

record out loud so that his scribes could write them down. The evidence at hand includes fragments of the original manuscript, which was written directly from Joseph's dictation (28 percent still survives); the printer's manuscript, which Oliver Cowdery copied from the original manuscript for the use of E. B. Grandin and Co. (nearly all of this is extant); and 20 significant editions ranging from the first edition of 1830 to our current 1981 edition (including several editions published by the Community of Christ, formerly known as the RLDS Church). Skousen has painstakingly compared these manuscripts and editions and noted every single difference. His task, then, has been to reconstruct the sequence of events that resulted in variants he has identified. In so doing, he can work backwards toward the first moment of translation; that is,



toward the exact words that were revealed through Joseph Smith.

An example can clarify Skousen’s method. Before the first verse of 1 Nephi is a preface—set in italics—that was translated from the plates. One of Skousen’s entries on this preface reads as follows:

*they call [ 1ABDEFIJLMNOPQRS | the name of CGHKT] the place Bountiful*

This means that the printer’s manuscript (= 1) and most editions (1830 = A, 1837 = B, etc.) have “they call the place Bountiful,” while a few editions (including 1840 = C and 1981 = T) read “they call the name of the place Bountiful.” How did this difference come about? Skousen believes that Joseph Smith, in making revisions for the third (1840) edition, went back to the original manuscript and discovered that a phrase had been accidentally omitted when the printer’s copy was made. Consequently, it was also omitted from the first and second printed editions. Though Joseph restored it in 1840, the correction was lost in the next edition and most editions thereafter. It does, however, appear in our current official edition, which is noteworthy for the care with which the editorial committee tried to incorporate readings from the original manuscript and from Joseph Smith’s corrections.

At this point, a thoughtful reader might ask, “How does Skousen know the phrase *the name of* appeared in the original manuscript, especially since that part of the manuscript is no longer extant? Couldn’t Joseph Smith have added it as a clarification?” The answer is that Skousen doesn’t know for certain, but he is very careful (and very conservative) in his arguments. When faced with a variation among the editions, he first asks, “Does it make a difference in the meaning?” In this case, the answer is no, which makes it *less* likely that Joseph felt a need to add a clarification. Instead, he probably was simply bringing back an omitted phrase. This hypothesis is strengthened when Skousen offers three examples of Joseph Smith doing exactly this in the 1840 edition—that is, restoring phrases from the original manuscript—and in all three instances the original manuscript is still extant, so we can observe directly what has happened. Furthermore, Skousen notes that this same mistake, where the phrase *the name of* was accidentally left out, also occurred at Mosiah 24:20, and he speculates that this could have happened because the Book of Mormon, like the Bible, includes examples

of both “call the name of X Y” (six times) and “call X Y” (three times).

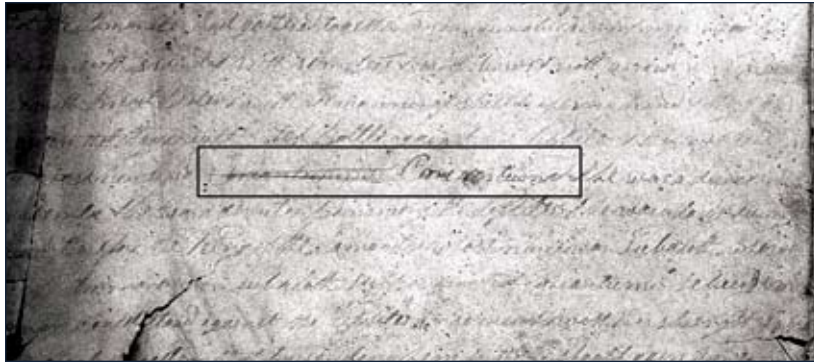
### Establishing the Original Text

Yet here another reader may ask, “Why bother? Why spend a page and a half analyzing a change that doesn’t make any difference in the meaning?” But this is to misunderstand Skousen’s intentions. His primary objective is to recover, as far as is humanly possible, the original text of the Book of Mormon as it was first revealed to Joseph Smith. To do so he eliminates all the accidental changes that were introduced by the processes of hearing dictation, transcribing, copying, and typesetting, as well as the later editorial modifications that made the book easier to read (these were mostly minor grammatical and stylistic revisions). Every word matters, and it is appropriate to treat a divinely revealed

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text—a gift from God—with such meticulous attention to detail. Indeed, this is scholarship as devotion in its purest form.

In part 1 of volume 4, which covers the title page through 2 Nephi 10, Skousen analyzes 774 variants. His proposed original text for these chapters differs from the current 1981 edition in 420 cases, though of these only 75 make any difference in meaning—and never in doctrine. Here we are simply speaking of slight changes in wording that would be reflected in a translation into another language. (Note that the 1981 edition was not attempt to reconstruct the original text with all of its gram-



The original manuscript at Helaman 1:15, where Oliver Cowdery initially misspelled the name *Coriantumr*. The immediate correction supports statements by witnesses of the translation that Joseph Smith sometimes spelled out unfamiliar names. Photo courtesy of the Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

matical peculiarities; our modern, official version needs to read smoothly, in addition to being doctrinally sound and true to Joseph’s translation.) Of the 420 cases, 263 have already appeared in earlier editions, and nearly all of the 157 new readings he proposes are based on his analysis of the original and printer’s manuscripts.

For readers with scholarly sensibilities, it is a delight to watch Skousen at work. (For those with less patience and interest, he conveniently summarizes his conclusions at the end of each discussion.) First, he identifies variants in the manuscripts and editions, including issues of tense, number, articles, prepositions, conjunctions, subject-verb agreement, capitalization, punctuation (where it affects meaning), spelling, and plurals. Next he scrupulously examines all the evidence available, including the ink flow on the manuscripts, cross-outs, additions, whether corrections are written above the line of the text or whether they are in the line itself (indicating an immediate correction), erasures, changes that were made in specific editions or even midway through a printing, and so forth. He then tries to imagine the sequence of physical events that would have led to what he sees in his sources—which changes were intentional or accidental, who made them, and when they were made (for instance, when he was making a copy for the printer, Oliver Cowdery sometimes corrected what he thought were mistakes in the original manuscript, though this assumption was not always accurate). Skousen then supports his hypotheses with rational arguments based on handwriting, comparisons with other passages elsewhere, statistics, biblical paral-

els, biblical languages, early English usage or dialects, the writing habits of particular scribes, pronunciation (some mistakes were made in dictation because words sounded alike), typical errors of the eye or hand in copying, or the fact that awkward, but intelligible readings are more likely than not to be original.

Forgive a lengthy quotation, but Skousen’s work has to be seen to be appreciated. In explaining what he observes in the two manuscripts for 1 Nephi 19:16, Skousen writes:

It appears that Oliver Cowdery first wrote “the prophets Zenos” in the original manuscript and then did not correct it until months later when he was copying from *O* [the original manuscript] into *P* [the printer’s manuscript]. The plural *s* was probably the result of Oliver misinterpreting Joseph Smith’s dictation of “the words of the prophet Zenos”. Oliver was probably expecting “the words of the prophets”, which occurs 14 times in the Book of Mormon. It would have been very difficult to hear the difference between “the prophet Zenos” and “the prophets Zenos”, so it would have been hard to catch this error when Oliver read back the text to Joseph. This kind of *s* addition sometimes occurs when the following word begins with a sibilant sound (such as /s/, /z/, or /ʒ/). Oliver made this same kind of mistake in Alma 41:14 when he took down Joseph’s dictation for “my son see” as “my sons see” (see the discussion under Alma 41:14).

When Oliver Cowdery copied the text for this passage from *O* into *P*, he initially wrote “the Prophets Zenos” in the printer’s manuscript. Realizing that the word *prophet* should be in the singular, he erased the *s* in the printer’s manuscript, then apparently turned to correct *O* so that it would agree with *P*. But for some reason he also crossed out *Zenos*, as if he were correcting *O* to read “according to the words of the prophets”, a distinct possibility but wrong in this case. Instead of rewriting the name *Zenos*, Oliver tried to erase the crossout lines, but only at the beginning of the name *Zenos*. He realized he had correctly copied the name into *P*, so it was unnecessary to fully correct *O*. In the end,

And it came to pass that the Lord did soften the heart of Ishmael, and also his household, insomuch that they took their journey with us down into the wilderness to the tent of our father. And it came to pass that as we journeyed in the wilderness, behold, Laman and Lemuel, and two of the daughters of Ishmael, and the two sons of Ishmael, and their families, did rebel against us; yea, against I, Nephi, and Sam, and their father, Ishmael, and his wife, and his three other daughters.

And it came to pass in the which rebellion, they were desirous to return unto the land of Jerusalem. And now I, Nephi, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, therefore I spake unto them, saying; yea, even unto Laman and unto Lemuel, behold, thou art mine elder brethren; and how is it that ye are so hard in your hearts, and so blind in your minds, that ye have need that I, your younger brother, should speak unto you, yea, and set an example for you? How is it that ye have not hearkened unto the word of the Lord? How is it that ye have forgotten that ye have seen an angel of the Lord? Yea, and how is it that ye have forgotten how great things the Lord hath done for us, in delivering us out of the hands of Laban, and also that ye should obtain the record? Yea, and how is it that ye have forgotten that the Lord is able to do all things, according to his will, for the children of men, if it so be that they exercise faith in him; wherefore, let us be faithful in him. And if it so be that we are faithful in him, we shall obtain the land of promise; and ye shall know at some future period, that the word of the Lord shall be fulfilled, concerning the destruction of Jerusalem; for all things which the Lord hath spoken concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, must be fulfilled. For, behold, the spirit of the Lord ceaseth soon to strive with them; for, behold, they have rejected the prophets, and Jeremiah have they cast into prison. And they have sought to take away the life of my father, insomuch that they have driven him out of the land.

Now, behold, I say unto you, that if ye will return unto Jerusalem, ye shall also perish with them. And now, if ye have choice, go up to the land, and remember the words which I speak unto you, that if ye go, ye will also perish; for thus the spirit of the Lord constraineth me that I should speak.

And it came to pass that when I, Nephi, had spoken these words unto my brethren, they were angry with me. And it came to pass that they did lay their hands upon me; for, behold, they were exceeding wroth; and they did bind me with cords;

Excerpt from the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon at 1 Nephi 7:5–16. Courtesy of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

he crossed out the plural *s* of *prophets* in *O* with a heavier ink flow. (He probably dipped his pen after having tried to erase the crossing out of *Zenos*.)

If Oliver Cowdery had crossed out *Zenos* originally when Joseph Smith was dictating the manuscript, he probably wouldn't have accidentally written it a second time when producing the printer's manuscript. It seems very likely that Joseph Smith read off the name *Zenos*; adding *Zenos* by accident seems highly unlikely since there is no nearby occurrence of this (or

any other) prophet's name. (The name *Zenos* last occurred in verse 12, on the previous manuscript page of *O*.) Moreover, nowhere else in either manuscript does Oliver Cowdery (or any other scribe) accidentally add a name after writing the word *prophet*.<sup>1</sup>

The discussion actually continues a bit longer, and all this for a reading that has been correct in every printed edition! But never before have we been taken so close to the actual physical and mental labor of those long days in 1829 when Joseph and Oliver were translating the Book of Mormon, writing out the text by hand, copying it, and getting it ready for publication. It's almost as if we were privileged to be looking over their shoulders as they work. (For another example, see pp. 581–86 [2 Nephi 7:2–6], where Skousen believes that Oliver became tired while copying from *O* into *P*—he made six mistakes in five verses.)

Skousen is a scholar's scholar. He examines everything, his arguments are meticulously reasoned, he uses all the available resources of modern academia, he is generous (often giving credit to students who came up with possible readings),<sup>2</sup> he always gives full consideration to alternative explanations and inconvenient evidence, and he seems willing to go wherever the evidence leads. He identifies some Hebraisms, for instance, but he also rejects a number of possible cases. He keeps the original grammar, even when it is not correct by the standards of modern English. Just as important, he doesn't go beyond what the evidence allows. He considers interesting possibilities—for example, devoting two and a half pages to whether the phrase “yielded himself” at 1 Nephi 19:10 should in fact be “yielded himself up”—only to reject them in the end if he does not believe there is enough evidence to warrant their inclusion in a final, critical text. (It is worth repeating that Skousen is very conservative in his judgments.) As a historian who has spent his professional life working with critical editions of ancient texts, my response to Skousen's book is awe and humility. For all Latter-day Saints who love the Book of Mormon, profound gratitude is in order.

Although it is customary in reviews to offer criticism as well as praise, I have been hard-pressed to find places where I can fault Skousen's methods or results (even typographical errors are very rare—something unusual in a book as complicated and detailed as this one). This will have to suffice:





Skousen does not always give adequate attention to biblical parallels. For instance, in his discussion of 2 Nephi 4:5, “for behold I know that if ye are brought up in the [right] way that ye should go ye will not depart from it,” he suggests that “Joseph Smith deleted the word *right* probably because it seemed obvious that ‘the way that ye should go’ is ‘the right way’”. It seems more likely to me that Joseph was influenced by the familiar parallel from Proverbs 22:6 (unmentioned by Skousen): “Train up a child in *the way* he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (emphasis added). Skousen goes on to list four similar instances of “the right way(s)” in the Book of Mormon:

and all this have they done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord (1 Nephi 13:27)

and that great whore which hath perverted the right ways of the Lord (1 Nephi 22:14)

and all they that commit whoredoms and pervert the right way of the Lord (2 Nephi 28:15)

and ye have led away much of this people that they pervert the right way of God (Jacob 7:7)

Skousen does not notice that all these examples are derived from Acts 13:10: “wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?” (which seems to have been a favorite phrase in the Book of Mormon). It would not be unusual for a critical text to include a list of direct quotations and allusions from the Bible; I hope that Skousen will include this in a later volume. The way the Book of Mormon uses particular phrases from the King James Bible is a significant element of its style.

### Documenting Changes

A by-product of Skousen’s scholarly reconstruction of the original Book of Mormon is conclusive evidence for the integrity of the text. Compared with most books, ancient or modern, the textual history of the Book of Mormon is crystal clear. It did not go through multiple drafts, and though there have been several thousand later changes in spelling and grammar—both inadvertent and deliberate—we generally know who made which changes when and why. We can also see that very, very few of the intentional alterations affected the meaning, and there were no revisions of the narrative. Aside from stylistic issues, the Book of Mor-

mon as it was first dictated by Joseph to Oliver is the same book we read today. “Several thousand changes” may sound like a lot, but I have easily made that many in trying to write this short review on my word processor. Anyone who is shocked or embarrassed by Skousen’s catalog of variants doesn’t know much about writing (or about what it means to copy manuscripts by hand).

Still, there may be some who expect a perfect text because it was revealed by God. The primary difficulty with the original version is the grammar, which for some reason is not in standard English. This is a complicated issue because much of what seems ungrammatical now has been acceptable at some times and places, though not necessarily in Joseph Smith’s New England. It is a puzzle, and Skousen at this point refrains from speculation; he simply documents what he finds in the manuscripts.

The textual scholarship so ably done by Skousen fully warrants a new edition of the Book of Mormon so that all Latter-day Saints can have access to the most accurate version possible, yet this raises some delicate issues. Although the Church will surely want to correct any accidental errors that have crept into the text over the years (and it is important to note that these errors are not really different in kind from those we see in other handwritten or printed documents, including those of the Bible), they will probably not want to adopt Skousen’s critical text as a whole, for two reasons. The first is that the original Book of Mormon included a great deal of grammar that seems strange to our ears. For example, 1 Nephi 4 (a chapter taken at random and for which the original manuscript is extant) originally included these constructions:

“the armies of Pharaoh did follow and were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea”

“now when I had spoken these words they was yet wroth”

“and after that I had smote off his head”

“and he supposing . . . that I was truly that Laban whom I had slew”

One might be tempted to attribute such cases to Joseph’s poor education, but the manuscripts show that the translation was revealed in a very precise manner. The Book of Mormon seems to have a unique, fairly consistent grammar of its own—not exactly King James English, not exactly

the English of Joseph Smith's time and place, and certainly not standard modern American English. We are not sure why this is the case—perhaps the grammar contains clues as to the origins of the text—but restoring all of the original wording would undoubtedly prove distracting to many. It would make it more difficult for ordinary readers to understand and appreciate the message of the book (which, of course, would defeat the missionary purposes of the scripture).

Joseph Smith himself updated much of the grammar for the 1837 edition—it apparently sounded strange to him as well—and eliminated repetitions that he thought were unnecessary (including more than three dozen occurrences of “and it came to pass”; see *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One*, p. 207). This process has continued through the 20 significant printed editions. There have been several thousand deliberate changes in the text over the years, though all but a handful were stylistic revisions of grammar rather than meaning. The few substantive changes—generally made by Joseph Smith himself in preparing the 1837 and 1840 edi-



1840 edition of the Book of Mormon. Photo by Mark Philbrick.

tions—constitute the second difficulty in adopting Skousen's critical text. The evidence is clear that Joseph's revisions were not revealed in the same way as the original text was. He modified particular grammatical forms in some places but not in others (pp. 93, 198, 255, 299, and 550), he sometimes changed his mind and revised passages more than once (pp. 213, 286, and 330–31), he added some clarifications that probably were not necessary (p. 161), he sometimes replaced awkward constructions with equally awkward constructions (p. 478), he seems to have misunderstood the text in places (pp. 542–43), and in at least one instance he corrected the wording so that it matched a mistake that Oliver had made in copying the printer's manuscript (p. 414). Skousen generally rejects Joseph's revisions in order to establish the original form of the text; but because Joseph Smith, as both prophet and translator, had a unique relationship to the Book of Mormon, the Church's Scriptures Committee will undoubtedly want to look at each of Joseph's revisions individually to make sure that we do not lose any authentic prophetic insights.

### Building to Last

At the risk of sounding like a fanatic, I believe that Skousen's work is perhaps the most important study of the Book of Mormon ever done. By this I do not mean to disparage the inspired teachings of Church leaders and faithful scholars, but the Book of Mormon is a rich, inexhaustible text, and prophets and teachers in generations to come will continue to discern new truths and applications in its pages. There is no single definitive interpretation of the Nephite scripture. Certainly the work of scholars like Hugh Nibley has been impressive, but Nibley produced a sort of self-consuming scholarship; that is to say, it carried within itself the seeds of its own obsolescence. The sources Nibley cited in his early works are by now quite dated; academics have advanced new and improved theories about the ancient world, new evidence has emerged, and Mormon scholars have followed Nibley's example in identifying new analytical tools and approaches that will yield better understandings of the Book of Mormon. In the 22nd century, people will read Nibley only for historical interest (much as we might today read George Reynolds's 1888 *Story of the Book of Mormon*) or perhaps for literary reasons (as many will attest, Nibley was a very engaging



writer). Nibley, of course, would have wanted it so—it is a wonderful thing when scholars inspire others to outdo them.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, it is hard to imagine Royal Skousen’s work ever being done better. Given his narrow focus on the text, the limited number of sources in existence, and the thoroughness of his treatment, the great-grandchildren of scholars yet unborn will consult his commentaries to get as close as possible to the Book of Mormon in its original form. Just as

*Just as Jewish readers still consult the work of the ancient Masorete scribes—who punctuated, pointed, and annotated the Hebrew Bible—so also Skousen’s critical text project will serve as the starting point for serious scholarship of the Book of Mormon for centuries.*

Jewish readers still consult the work of the ancient Masorete scribes—who punctuated, pointed, and annotated the Hebrew Bible—so also Skousen’s critical text project will serve as the starting point for serious scholarship of the Book of Mormon for centuries.

I should temper my enthusiasm by noting that *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* is not in a class all by itself. Rather, it belongs to the genre of textual criticism, whose exacting standards have been worked out by two centuries of scholars laboring to produce critical editions of ancient works like Homer, Sophocles, and the Bible.<sup>4</sup> For ancient books—copied by hand for centuries—it is necessary to compare all the known manuscripts, arrange them into families (since mistakes made once will appear in every subsequent copy made from that copy), and then analyze them to determine the most probable original reading. Thus there is really no such thing as *the* New Testament (except as we might imagine it was first written by its authors, and those particular manuscripts are gone forever). What we actually have are dozens of relatively full manuscripts and thousands of handwritten fragments, each a little different from the others.

Many scholars have spent their entire lives trying to make sense of the documents, attempting to get as close as possible to those hypothetical originals, and any serious study of the New Testament begins with a critical edition like that of the United Bible Society, which has alternative readings listed and evaluated in the notes. The text itself is a composite, based on the best guesses of scholars.

The situation facing Skousen, fortunately, is much simpler—for the Book of Mormon there are only two manuscripts and some 20 printed editions—and as a consequence his results are much more certain. As I mentioned above, we generally know who changed the text and when it was modified, and we have a good idea why specific variants appear. Over the course of several books, Skousen will identify and comment on a few thousand changes that have been made in the manuscripts and various editions. He will eventually develop a critical text that represents his best scholarly judgment as to exactly what Joseph Smith dictated to Oliver Cowdery and the other scribes. In doing so he will also point out passages where the current official text might be brought into closer alignment with the original dictation. This is very exciting stuff for scholars as well as for ordinary members of the Church; it is thrilling to be taken this close to the original revelation of our most distinctive Mormon scripture. But there is more.

### Teaching Us to Read

So far, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* may sound like a book for scholars, and even for them it may be something to put on the shelf and consult for specific passages as the need arises. But I would urge everyone to get a copy and read it straight through. It can be tough going, but the kinds of issues Skousen raises and addresses can help English-speaking readers understand the Book of Mormon more fully than ever before. What Skousen has to offer (besides the most accurate reconstruction of the original text ever produced) is a model for careful, nuanced, detailed reading. For each of the 774 variants analyzed in part 1 of volume 4, readers are invited to pause and focus closely on exact wording, asking themselves, “What difference might this make?”

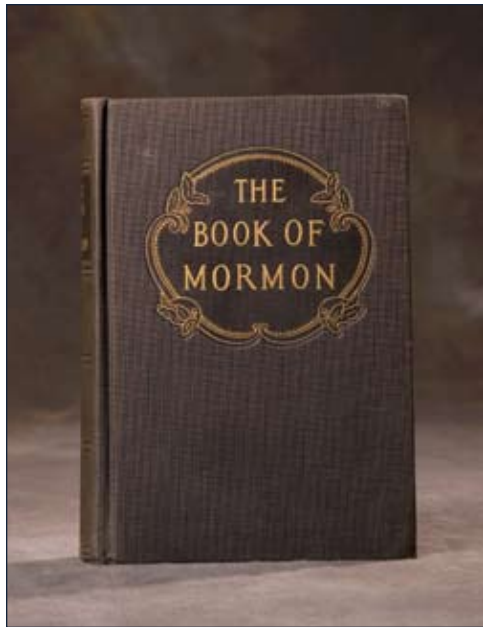
Let’s return to 1 Nephi, chapter 1, where Skousen notes these variants in verse 14:



when my father had read

and [saw 1ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPS | seen RT] many great and marvelous things

He observes that, grammatically, there are two ways to interpret this phrase: (1) as “a conjoining of the past perfect *had read* and the simple past-tense *saw*,” or (2) “as a conjunction of ‘had read’ and ‘had saw’, with ellipsis of the repeated *had*.” This second



1920 edition of the Book of Mormon.  
Photo by Mark Philbrick.

reading is implicit in the change in R (= 1920 edition) to the past participle *seen*, though Skousen does identify a specific case of the non-standard usage “had saw” in the printer’s manuscript. What difference does this make? The context makes it clear that Lehi saw a vision of God on his throne and then was handed a heavenly book in which he read of the impending destruction of Jerusalem. The

sequence of a past perfect tense followed by simple past suggests that after Lehi had finished reading he saw additional, unspecified events (“many great and marvelous things”) in vision, whereas a conjunction of two past perfect forms makes it sound as if the seeing and reading happened at about the same time; that is to say, the “great and marvelous things” were those that Nephi has just reported were contained in the heavenly book. If you are an average reader of the Book of Mormon (or even a way-above-average reader), I would imagine that you have never given a moment’s thought to how 1 Nephi 1:14 might be construed in different ways, unless perhaps you had translated a pre-1920 edition into a foreign language.<sup>5</sup>

This is a fairly nuanced, but not atypical, example. Indeed, working through Skousen’s

book is something like working through a math book—following his linguistic arguments is akin to following proofs. It takes time and attention, but when you are finished you will have a much greater understanding of the subject. In the case of the Book of Mormon, readers will become much more mindful of issues of translation, composition, and authorial intent at a higher level of detail than has ever been possible before. Sometimes the issues are relatively inconsequential—for example, whether a sentence should begin with *and*, if a *that* has been accidentally omitted, or whether the text should read *in* or *into* (though one might argue that in scripture that was dictated word for word, it is never safe to assume that anything is entirely insignificant). In other cases, the observations are subtle but insightful.

Another example of Skousen’s close analysis concerns 1 Nephi 3:16. The printer’s manuscript and all printed editions state that Lehi “left gold and silver and all manner of riches and all this he hath done because of the commandments of the Lord.” However, the original manuscript has the singular *commandment*. Skousen believes this is what Joseph Smith originally dictated, and he explains that “the language in 1 Nephi 3:16 implies a specific commandment for Lehi to leave his wealth behind.” This shifts our understanding of the narrative a bit because Nephi now appears to be telling his brothers that God had specifically commanded Lehi to leave behind his moveable property because God knew the brothers would need it later when they returned to Laban and tried to buy the brass plates.

In still other verses, Skousen’s reconstruction of the original dictation yields readings that are clearly superior to any that have been previously available to Latter-day Saints. The 1981 edition made several changes based on a reexamination of the original manuscript, but Skousen has studied that document more closely than anyone ever has before. For instance, in the original dictation of 1 Nephi 8:31, the multitudes are “pressing” rather than “feeling” their way toward the great and spacious building. And at 1 Nephi 15:35, the devil is the “proprietor” (original manuscript) of hell rather than its “preparator” or even its “father” or “foundation” (two later emendations made by Joseph Smith). These two suggested readings, along with several dozen others, can be found in *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon*,<sup>6</sup> but *Analysis of Textual Variants*



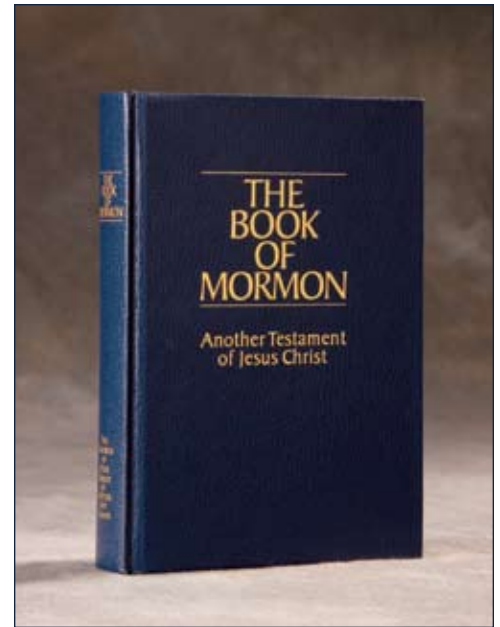
in the *Book of Mormon* has many more corrected readings, including 1 Nephi 22:8, where the Lamanites would be “nursed” (original manuscript) rather than “nourished” (printer’s manuscript and all printed editions) by the Gentiles and restored to the lands of their “first” inheritance (verse 12, though the printer’s manuscript and every edition has omitted that word). Similarly, at 2 Nephi 1:5 the original manuscript reads “the Lord hath consecrated this land unto me and to my children forever,” even though every version since then has followed Oliver Cowdery’s copying error in which he replaced *consecrated* with *covenanted*.

Skousen’s task is obviously more complicated when he is dealing with portions of the text for which the original manuscript is not extant, and he expends a great deal of effort in making the best guess possible as to the original wording. Yet even when we have the first written version of a particular passage, he is not automatically satisfied. There may have been inadvertent mistakes made when the scribes first wrote from Joseph’s original dictation. In other words, Skousen is willing to emend clear readings in the original manuscript when there seems to be sufficient cause. As an example, there are good reasons to think that the Lord promises to “shake” Nephi’s brothers at 1 Nephi 17:53 rather than “shock” them, though the latter is the clear reading of the original manuscript. Similarly, 1 Nephi 13:24 should probably read “the gospel of the Lamb” rather than “the gospel of the land” (later changed by Oliver Cowdery to “the gospel of the Lord”).

So once again we may ask, “Do these sorts of changes matter?” They certainly do if we want to understand the *Book of Mormon* as thoroughly and accurately as possible. In other words, we cannot afford to ignore Skousen’s critical text project. There are hidden treasures here, along with both the tools and incentive to read the *Book of Mormon* very, very closely. Skousen’s analysis is at the level of individual words and phrases. He is remarkably attentive to the textual evidence, and his eye and ear are finely attuned to elements that don’t quite fit. If we can follow his care and rigor, we may be led to similar kinds of scrupulous, observant readings at the next level up—that of paragraphs, thematic sections, and even chapters. This is where meaning becomes even more evident as we focus on the structure of the narrative, how ideas flow and

discourses are presented, the ways in which *Book of Mormon* authors differ from each other, how they respond to earlier writings, the manner in which they choose to convey their points, and how they explain doctrine, their characteristic themes, and recurring concerns. In reading Skousen, we realize that we have only begun to study seriously a text that has been in our possession for 175 years. Latter-day Saints have always loved the truths the *Book of Mormon* teaches and the testimonies it has made possible, but there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done in investigating how this miraculous text was put together and how its authors tried to communicate their understanding of the world.

At *Mormon* 8:14, Moroni observes that the value of the gold plates was nothing compared to the writings they contained: “but the record thereof is of great worth; and whoso shall bring it to light, him will the Lord bless.” This undoubtedly refers primarily to Joseph Smith, but I believe it could also apply to Skousen and his critical text project. May blessings be upon Royal Skousen, who has nearly single-handedly produced the *Mormon* equivalent of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* and the United Bible Societies’ *Greek New Testament*—both of them truly monumental achievements in the history of Judaism and Christianity. No one has ever read the *Book of Mormon* (including all the manuscripts and editions) more carefully than Skousen has. Get hold of a copy of *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* and read it through, laboriously and joyfully. We can each be the beneficiaries of this tremendous work of scholarship that will outlive us all. 📖



1981 edition of the *Book of Mormon*. Photo by Mark Philbrick.

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