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# Insights Available as We Approach the Original Text

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**Abstract** In his effort to correct and preserve the original text of the Book of the Mormon, Royal Skousen has also increased our understanding of and appreciation for this volume of sacred scripture. Skousen's close examination of the use of words and phrases throughout the book highlights its intertextuality and demonstrates that Book of Mormon authors were aware of and influenced by the words of previous authors. Moreover, restoring the original text helps clarify some vague constructions and should also caution us against putting too much emphasis on the exact wording of the present Book of Mormon. Skousen's analysis of how such changes occurred during a relatively modern transmission process can also further the understanding of more ancient textual transmission. Finally, Skousen's work reveals that the original Book of Mormon may have been even more strikingly Semitic than the present text and that some characteristically Hebrew constructions have been edited out over the years, though many still remain.



## Insights Available as We Approach the Original Text

— Kerry Muhlestein —

**W**HAT EXCITES ME MOST about Royal Skousen's *Analysis of Textual Variants, Part One: 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10* (hereafter *Analysis*) is what it says about Latter-day Saints' commitment to the scriptures in general and to the Book of Mormon specifically. This volume, like others in the series published to date, bespeaks our desire to know, as accurately as possible, what the text actually says. We understand that even those with the best intentions sometimes introduce mistakes into the most sacred and important texts. Skousen demonstrates that he and others value the Book of Mormon so much that meticulous and intense efforts are under way to preserve the text in its most pristine state. Virtually every word is examined in an effort to preserve the words of God in the Book of Mormon in the form closest to that which flowed from the Prophet's revelatory experience. Latter-day Saints revere the Book of Mormon

as the most correct book on earth and are committed to keeping it as correct as possible so that future generations too may experience its sacred influence.

Skousen's *Analysis* highlights how the Lord works with imperfect people. The need for this study derives from mistakes that have crept into the text, starting from the moment the words were transmitted from the Prophet's mouth to a scribe's pen. Textual transmission problems have plagued scribes from the advent of writing, and every serious sacred record has had to deal with such problems. This is part and parcel of the transmission of sacred works by imperfect humans. Mistakes, such as writing *home* or *whome* for *whom* (see *Analysis*, p. 182), demonstrate why modern-day transcribers of the Book of Mormon text must have been as concerned as were their Nephite predecessors, who complained that "when we write we behold our



weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words” (Ether 12:25; see 2 Nephi 3:21 and 33:4).

Undoubtedly the Lord—by the power and influence of his Spirit—can compensate, and has compensated, for mistakes that have crept into the text during the dictation and transcription process. I believe that although those who read even mistakenly worded sacred texts can yet understand them as the Lord would have them understood, the Lord holds us responsible for maintaining, and even restoring, the purity of the Book of Mormon text.

Skousen deftly leads the reader inside a number of almost invisible features of the Book of Mormon text, illuminating its complexity, history, and antiquity. The closer a person comes to the words that Joseph Smith dictated, it seems, the more the text reveals its own depth and richness.

### Intertextuality

Skousen’s meticulous efforts to establish the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon make it possible to take a closer look at intertextuality in the book. By this I mean carefully looking at phrases and word orders, comparing them with similar phrases elsewhere in the book, and determining whether some uses are dependent on others. Intertextual comparisons can be performed with similar words, phraseology, semantics, imagery, poetic devices, and grammar. Intertextuality is particularly important when a work comprises a series of shorter parts created over a span of time, with the contents of the earlier portions being familiar to and used by the authors of the later portions. Intertextual studies have become important in biblical scholarship as well as in the study of other sacred texts. In recent decades, biblical studies have been greatly enhanced by an understanding of how certain scriptural themes and ideas developed throughout Israelite history as evidenced by intertextual studies.

Rarely has this type of work been applied to the Book of Mormon.<sup>1</sup> *Analysis* provides scores of examples of intertextual studies that attest to the Book of Mormon’s cohesion and thus, circumstantially, to its authenticity. This approach also helps us understand how much Book of Mormon prophets themselves relied on the sacred scripture given to them by previous Book of Mormon prophets. But perhaps the greatest value we gain from the intertextual studies presented in *Analysis* is the insight

each concise study gives us into the presence, unity, and meaning of themes in the Book of Mormon. For example, Skousen’s study on the theme of law and punishment (p. 510)—provided in an attempt to discover whether 2 Nephi 2:26 should read “punishment of the Law” or “punishment of the Lord”—illuminates the relationship of these paired concepts and attests to the Book of Mormon prophets’ unified understanding of them. This is just one of many examples of intertextuality in the Book of Mormon, a topic that deserves a more detailed study—something that is facilitated by *Analysis*—and that will undoubtedly aid us in understanding the Book of Mormon’s motifs as understood by its various prophetic authors.

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### Word Choices in the Text

One benefit of carefully reading *Analysis* is that it compels one to pay close attention to word choices in the Book of Mormon. The Church has been told that it is under condemnation for taking this book of scripture too lightly (see Doctrine and Covenants 84:54–58). Part of this neglect likely entails the minimal attention we have given to the actual wording of the Book of Mormon. Given the sacred nature of the text, I am often surprised at how little students and others pay attention to what the text actually says as opposed to what they think it says or what they heard in some class while growing up. Yet one cannot read Skousen’s work without paying very close attention to each word and its relationship to surrounding words. Because Skousen has taken the text so seriously, we find ourselves responding likewise.

An example of how *Analysis* encourages our own critical reading concerns words that suggest a causal relationship. In 2 Nephi 9:28 we read



(without accidentals, per the original text) that “their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not *and* they shall perish.” Skousen suggests restoring the original text here: “their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not *wherefore* they shall perish.” This reading makes transparent the idea that a vain and foolish “wisdom” that leads one away from God *causes* perishing. Second Nephi 10:3 furnishes another example: “and they shall crucify him for *thus* it behooveth our God.” Skousen suggests restoring the original reading, “and they shall crucify him *for* it behooveth our God.” The distinction in meaning is that the original text implies that Christ would be crucified simply because it

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behooved God, not because, as Skousen puts it, “somehow the crucifixion itself caused God to consider it necessary.” When trying to understand what the text really says, the clarification of causal relationships is crucial.

*Analysis* also reminds us of the dangers of making too much of certain words in the scriptures. While it is important to pay close attention to words in context, we need to be wary. I have often heard people make a certain word in the Book of Mormon the focal point of a lesson or talk. Doing so can be a helpful aid in learning, but we should remember that the Book of Mormon was most likely first written in a Semitic language (likely Hebrew with Egyptian script).<sup>2</sup> Consequently, we should be careful about making too much of the nuances of an English word when it may have been the best approximation that English could offer for an original Hebrew word with very different nuances. With the advent of *Analysis*, we can more easily avoid the fallacy of focusing unduly on a word in the Book of Mormon that may be an error of textual transmission. For example, I have heard small lessons or sermons centered on the word *word* in 1 Nephi 12:18: “a great and terrible gulf divideth them yea even

the *word* of the justice of the eternal God.” Skousen points out that the original manuscript reads “the *sword* of the justice . . .” Likewise with sermonettes highlighting the word *feeling* in 1 Nephi 8:31: “And he also saw other multitudes *feeling* their way towards that great and spacious building,” whereas it should read that the multitudes were “*pressing* their way . . .” Such corrections are well worth paying attention to. After reading through *Analysis*, I have vowed to learn the textual history of words in the Book of Mormon before pursuing word studies of them. Doing so is proper methodology for exegetical and word studies of ancient texts and should be so with the study of the English version of the ancient text of the Book of Mormon.

### The Textual Transmission Process

Another reason Skousen’s findings are exciting is that they provide a well-documented window on the textual transmission process. In my work I often deal with matters of ancient textual transmission and textual variants, an area of study frequently plagued by lack of knowledge as to which texts came first and which are related to others. Ignorance of the copying procedures is another problem. Even with these obstacles, we can usually determine something about the process that resulted in variations of the same text. For the Book of Mormon, Skousen has outlined quite well the chronological order of the texts, identified various scribes and their scribal tendencies, and demonstrated which texts have been relied upon by others in the transmission process. As a result, we see that some scribes engaged in practices that were difficult for other scribes (see the *pr/pe* discussion below), that some mistakes in some editions were perpetuated in later editions, and that some mistakes were not perpetuated because no one relied on those editions as they created new ones. Reading *Analysis* with this in mind is akin to the philological equivalent of ethnoarchaeology. Skousen’s findings regarding a relatively modern-day textual transmission process help us understand a great deal about related ancient processes. As I learn, for instance, that a particular scribe’s *pr* combinations consistently look like *pe* combinations and that later scribes read them as such, I better understand the difficulties behind our receiving ancient texts in a pristine form. Being able to follow such carefully documented changes over



Current and past editions of the Book of Mormon in chronological order, from a 1981 edition on top to an original 1830 edition on the bottom. Photo by Mark Philbrick.

time in this sacred text enables me to ask new questions about how other sacred texts were transmitted. Skousen’s work proves to be an excellent case study in sacred textual history and processes.

### Hebraisms

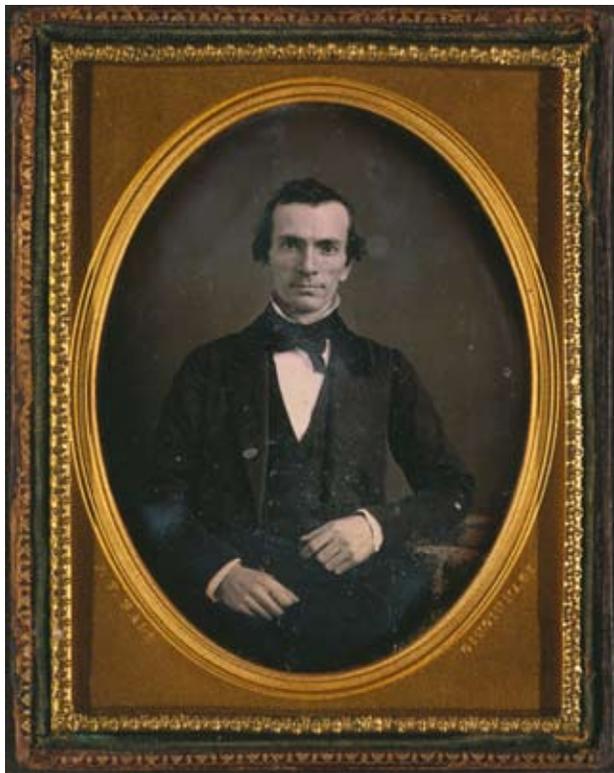
Another interesting aspect of *Analysis* is that it demonstrates that the Book of Mormon originally contained even more Hebraisms than those that have already been identified in the current text. Presumably because certain Semitic syntactic and semantic tendencies seemed either awkward or ungrammatical to various scribes and editors throughout the years, many such phrases and tendencies have, over time, been edited out. For example, 1 Nephi 2:7 originally read, “he built an

altar of stones and he made an offering unto the Lord.” The second *he* was present in the original manuscript, the printer’s manuscript, the 1830 edition, and two RLDS editions, yet it was edited out of all other editions. In English this second *he* certainly seems redundant and superfluous. Yet in Semitic languages, including Hebrew, most verbs contain an element marking which person performed the action and thus are often translated with these extra pronouns. A similar pronoun deletion occurred in 1 Nephi 2:4 and 2:11. Restoring these pronouns makes the text read even more like the Semitic document it is. Similarly, in many cases the word *and* was deleted, such as in 1 Nephi 2:11,

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where the phrase “and to perish in the wilderness” has lost the *and* since the 1830 edition. The conjunction typically translated as *and* is ubiquitous in Hebrew. Interestingly enough, this is not the case with Egyptian, which has a very different paradigm for conjunctive use. While the text of the Book of Mormon as it now reads already contains enough non-English appearances of *and* to support the idea that the text was indeed originally not English or Egyptian but Hebrew, the critical text intensifies this impression.

The book’s underlying Semitic character can also be seen in the use of the phrase “speak . . . saying.” In English we very seldom write that someone “spoke, saying . . .” Yet this is exactly the way Hebrew introduces direct quotations. The Book of Mormon still retains this Hebraic tendency, although some of the examples have been edited out over time. Skousen’s restorations of the deleted *saying* (as in 1 Nephi 2:10) further highlight the Hebraic tendencies of the text. The closer to the original we come, the more it appears to be a genuinely Semitic document. The text’s Semitic influence can also be seen when Oliver Cowdery added the word *saying* to the text. Probably because he had become



It is believed that Oliver Cowdery is the subject of this recently discovered daguerreotype. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

so accustomed to the use of the word pair “speak . . . saying,” Oliver, when preparing the printer’s manuscript, added the word to 1 Nephi 7:1, changing it from reading “it came to pass that the Lord spake unto him again that it was not meet for him” to “it came to pass that the Lord spake unto him again saying that it was not meet for him.” This change has been perpetuated in every version of the text

thereafter. While Oliver had probably become used to this word being employed more in Book of Mormon language than in English, it is clear that he did not understand the precise function of the “speak . . . saying” construction in Hebrew. As already noted, *saying* is used to indicate that the next phrase is a direct quotation. However, in this particular passage, a direct quotation is not being introduced. Skousen notes that there are 76 examples of “X spake . . . saying Y” in the Book of Mormon and that, when adhering to the earliest textual examples, in all 76 cases a direct quotation is introduced. This matches precisely the way the phrase was used in Hebrew. It is only in the changes made after the original translation that non-Hebrew language practices appear. Again, Skousen’s analysis strongly suggests that the original translation was much more Hebraic in its tendencies than the current, edited text is. The closer we adhere to the original text, the more Semitic the text becomes. We would be unaware of this striking detail without Skousen’s work.

These are only a few of the wonderful effects deriving from Skousen’s monumental project. Other reviewers in this issue of the *Journal* have highlighted different aspects of Skousen’s work, and certainly there are boons to be gained from the critical text project that none of us who have reviewed part 1 of *Analysis* have yet thought of. *Analysis* is a large step forward in the efforts of modern-day caretakers of the sacred scriptures. I look forward to a new generation of scholarship that is able to employ this valuable tool to help us come to a greater understanding of the most correct of all books. 📖

## Summary of Results for Part 1 Only

- 774 cases of variation (or potential variation) analyzed cases of grammatical variation discussed only once; full discussion to be in volume 3
- 420 differences between the critical text and the standard text
- 157 readings that have never appeared in any printed edition:
  - 95 in  $\mathcal{C}$ , the original manuscript, only
  - 6 in  $\mathcal{P}$ , the printer’s manuscript, only ( $\mathcal{C}$  is not extant)
- 38 in both  $\mathcal{C}$  and  $\mathcal{P}$
- 2 only in the two 1829 copyright certificates
- 16 conjectured readings
- 75 readings make a difference in meaning that would show up in any translation
- 52 readings make the text fully consistent in phraseology or usage
- 14 readings restore a unique phrase or word choice to the text



## A Sampling of Changes in the Text from Part 1 of Volume 4

	INCORRECT READING	CORRECTED READING
1 Nephi 7:5	Ishmael and also his household	Ishmael and also his <b>whole</b> household
1 Nephi 7:17	my faith which is in <b>thee</b>	my faith which is in <b>me</b>
1 Nephi 8:27	towards those which had came <b>at</b>	towards those which had came <b>up</b>
1 Nephi 8:31	multitudes <b>feeling</b> their way	multitudes <b>pressing</b> their way
1 Nephi 10:10	take away the <b>sins</b> of the world	take away the <b>sin</b> of the world [John 1:29]
1 Nephi 10:19	in <b>these times</b>	in <b>this time</b>
1 Nephi 11:36	the pride of the world <b>and it fell</b>	the pride of the world
1 Nephi 12:18	the <b>word</b> of the justice of the eternal God	the <b>sword</b> of the justice of the eternal God
1 Nephi 13:24	the gospel of the <b>Lord</b>	the gospel of the <b>Lamb</b>
1 Nephi 13:32	state of awful <b>woundedness</b>	state of awful <b>wickedness</b>
1 Nephi 14:13	did gather together multitudes	did gather together <b>in</b> multitudes
1 Nephi 14:28	the things which I saw <b>and heard</b>	the things which I saw
1 Nephi 15:16	they shall be <b>remembered</b> again	they shall be <b>numbered</b> again
1 Nephi 15:35	the devil is the <b>preparator</b> of hell	the devil is the <b>proprietor</b> of hell
1 Nephi 15:36	the wicked are <b>rejected</b> from the righteous	the wicked are <b>separated</b> from the righteous
1 Nephi 17:3	he did provide <b>means</b> for us	they did provide <b>ways and means</b> for us
1 Nephi 17:41	he sent <b>fiery flying</b> serpents	he sent <b>flying fiery</b> serpents
1 Nephi 17:53	I will <b>shock</b> them	I will <b>shake</b> them
1 Nephi 19:2	the genealogy of his <b>fathers</b>	the genealogy of his <b>forefathers</b>
1 Nephi 19:4	<b>what</b> they should do	<b>that</b> they should do
1 Nephi 19:10	<b>Zenock</b>	<b>Zenoch</b> [compare with <i>Enoch</i> ]
1 Nephi 20:1	<b>or out of the waters of baptism</b>	<delete>
1 Nephi 22:8	unto the being <b>nourished</b> by the Gentiles	unto the being <b>nursed</b> by the Gentiles
1 Nephi 22:12	the lands of their inheritance	the lands of their <b>first</b> inheritance
2 Nephi 1:5	the Lord hath <b>covenanted</b> this land unto me	the Lord hath <b>consecrated</b> this land unto me
2 Nephi 2:11	neither <b>holiness</b> nor misery	neither <b>happiness</b> nor misery
2 Nephi 3:18	I will raise up unto the fruit of thy loins	I will raise up <b>one</b> unto the fruit of thy loins
2 Nephi 3:20	their cry shall go	their cry shall go <b>forth</b>
2 Nephi 4:5	in the way that ye should go	in the <b>right</b> way that ye should go
2 Nephi 4:26	the Lord . . . hath visited <b>men</b>	the Lord . . . hath visited <b>me</b>
2 Nephi 7:11	all ye that <b>kindleth</b> fire	all ye that <b>kindle a fire</b> [Isaiah 50:11]
2 Nephi 9:13	deliver up the <b>body</b> of the righteous	deliver up the <b>bodies</b> of the righteous

Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30/1  
(1990): 42–69.

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1. For an example, see “Complete Text of Benjamin’s Speech with Notes and Comments,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 479–616.
2. See John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 23–24.